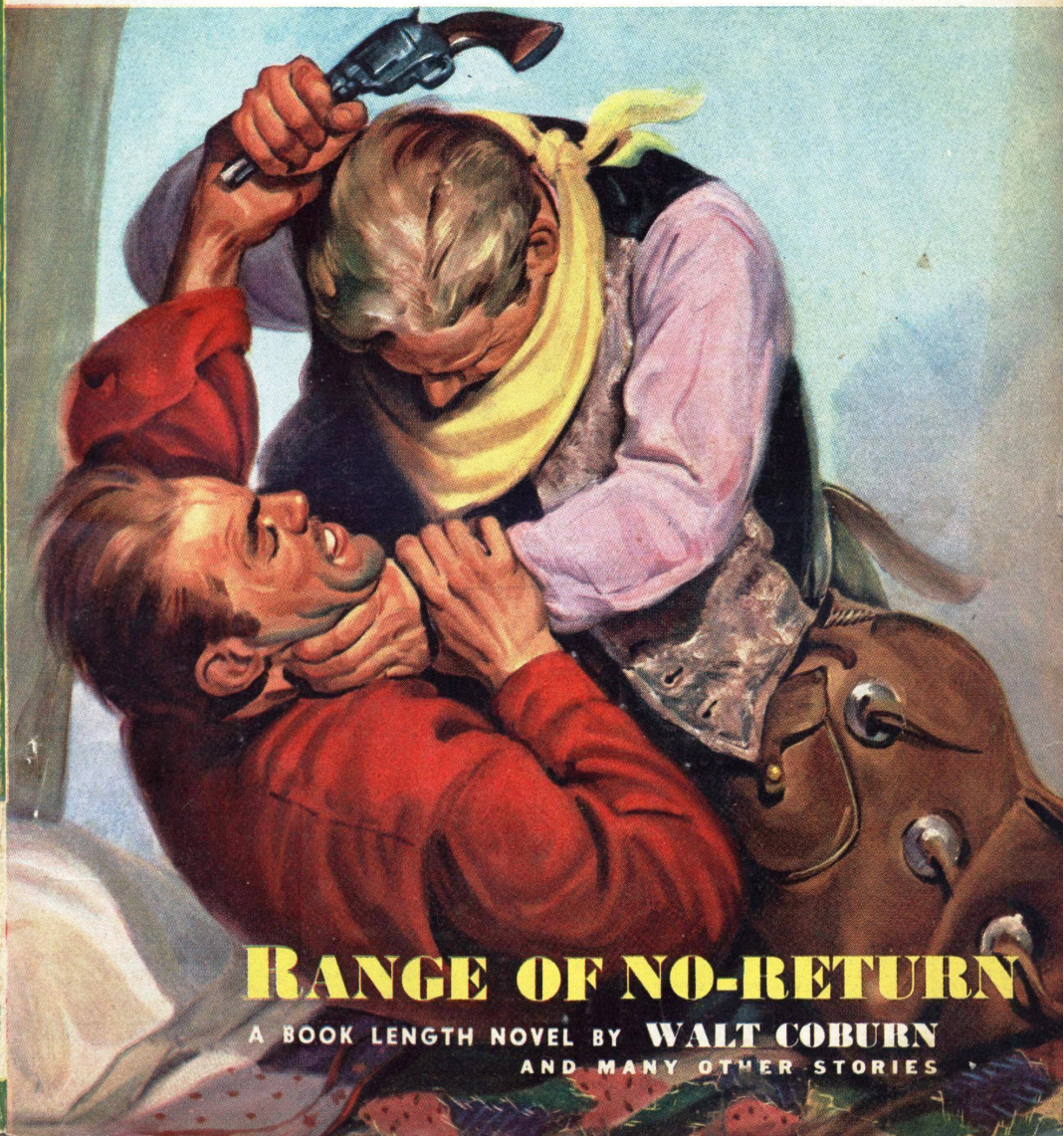
STREET AND SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY

10 CENTS

VOL. 183 · No. 2

JUNE 15, 1940



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CONTENTS FOR JUNE 15, 1940 VOL. CLXXXIII NO. 2

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BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

SERIAL

SHORT STORIES

WESTERN STORY FEATURE

DEPARTMENTS

COVER BY ROBERT STANLEY

All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

Publication issued every week by Street & Smith Publications, Incorporated, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Allen L. Grammer, President; Ormond V. Gould, Vice President; Henry W. Ralston, Vice President; Gerald H. Smith, Treasurer and Secretary. Copyright, 1940, in U. S. A. and Great Britain by Street & Smith Publications, Inc. Entered as Second-class Matter, September 4, 1917, at the Post Office at New York, under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions to Canada and Countries in Pan American Union, $5.00 per year; elsewhere, $7.00 per year. We cannot accept responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts or artwork. Any material submitted must include return postage.

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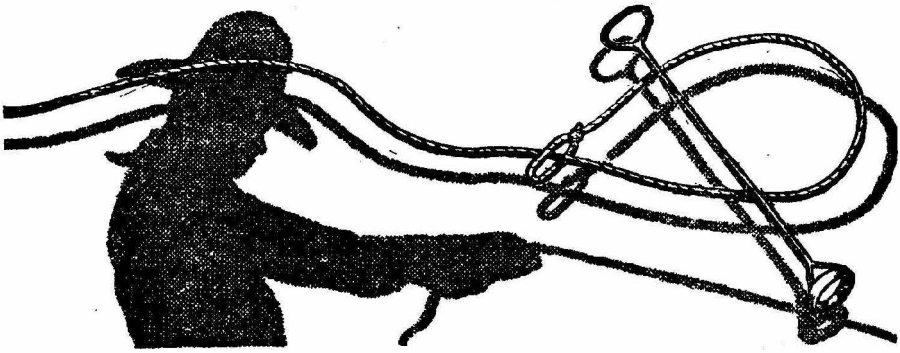
$2 Six Months
$4 per YEAR

Printed in the U. S. A.

STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC. • 79 7th AVE., NEW YORK



The Roundup

ONE of the newer writers to Western Story, whose stories have been mighty popular lately, is Wayne D. Overholser, author of POWDER-SMOKE PURGE (page 62 of this issue). We like the homey touch of Wayne's reply to our query for a screed about himself. We give you his story as he wrote it, and here's hoping that the future will bring many more yarns by this man who is Western born and bred and has the faculty of writing Westerns which are truly "different" and have the color and drama of the high country.

The boss of W. S. asked me to climb out of my valley here along the Pacific and tell something about myself, so here goes. I was born up in Pomeroy, Washington, where my father and mother had come in the early '90s, when it was plenty wild, and took up a homestead. As a matter of fact, my father had been raised in that country, which was long enough ago for them to still have an occasional Indian scare.

When I was six my folks moved to the Willamette Valley and bought a dairy farm near Albany. I lived there until I was twelve, and went to a one-room school that stood square on top of a hill called Hardscrabble. A fitting name, I always thought, for it really rains out here in western Oregon, and many was the time that I had to do some hard-scrabbling to get up that hill.

I was twelve when we moved to Eugene, and lived in town for a year; then we moved out on a farm twelve miles east of town. I went to high school there, and it was then I first had an ambition to write. I knocked out my first story when I was about sixteen, wrote it in pencil, and believe me, it was a bloodthirsty affair. I think I killed off most of the population of Eugene before I was done.

We had two houses on that farm, and my grandfather and grandmother came to live in one of them. My granddad had a noble white beard, a stiff leg that was bent at the knee so that he had to wear a cork shoe, and he was chock-full of yarns of the old days. He and my grandmother had crossed the plains in covered wagons in the early '50s, and came out to Oregon before it was a State.

After I had finished high school we came back to the farm near Albany, and that winter I went to Albany College. I made ten dollars that year with an essay on Lincoln that won a local contest. It was the first time my pen had ever made anything for me, and it was one of the biggest thrills of my life.

The next year I transferred to Oregon Normal, received my teaching certificate, and since then I've been teaching in Tillamook.

After I got my school debts paid off I bought a car, and a friend and I took a trip through California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, and back through Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming and Idaho.

One summer I went to the University of Montana at Missoula, and I'll say that's a

great country with much of the feeling and appearance of the old West. I heard one of the profs tell the story of the clean-up of the Plummer gang around Hellgate. He was an old-timer in the State and knew several of the original vigilantes who played their part in ridding Montana of one of the smoothest badmen who ever terrorized the West. It's a part of a story that to my knowledge has never been in print.

By that time I was able to take up writing seriously, and in 1936 sold my first story. Along the way I accumulated a wife who is a lot of help, and a little button who isn't so much help. When school is out in May we pile into our jellopy and pull out for other parts of the West.

For all the knocking around that I've done, I'll still take Oregon. West of the Cascades it's an old State as Western States go, but it's the real old West the instant you drop across the Cascades. Klamath Falls, Lakeview, Burns, Canyon City, Pendleton and many other towns in eastern Oregon are the real thing. There is still a lot of the open range, and the Wagontire waterhole between Lakeview and Burns is still the cause of range wars and an occasional killing. Canyon City was the scene of a lot of gold mining in the '60s, and they're still at it.

When it comes to scenery and opportunities for sportsmen, my own Tillamook country doesn't have to bow to any part of the State. It's a dairy country mainly, but also has lots of commercial fishing and logging. Up until 1933 we had along the Wilson River one of the finest, perhaps the finest, body of standing timber anywhere in the nation. That summer a fire swept through it, and again last summer, and now it's a graveyard of snags. Both fires brought untold damage to wild life besides ruining a marvelous stand of fir, spruce, and hemlock. Believe it or not, last summer the smoke was so thick that by four o'clock in the afternoon it was as dark as night. The street lights were on, and it was a mighty awesome sight with the only sign of day being the red glow of the sun along the western horizon. Ashes were falling in Tillamook like rain. I run a temperature whenever I think of the stupidity and carelessness of logging outfits that cause such tragedies.

Tillamook County is famous for a number of fine fishing streams, notably the Trask and Wilson. It's a country full of historical lore and legends. North of here, near Seaside, was where Lewis and Clark spent their second winter at Camp Clatsop. In the north end of the county, Mt. Neah-Kah-nie juts 1,500 feet square above the sea, and is famous for its treasure legend. The yarn is that an old pirate ship landed a crew there, buried a chest of gold, killed a Negro, and buried his body with the gold so that the Indians wouldn't touch it. Since then many an hour of labor has been spent trying to find it, and several lives have been lost.

It's a great country out here for a fiction writer, this western edge of a great empire that these pioneer forefathers of ours built, and there's a lot that none of the artificial living of modern America can destroy. Some day I plan to do some yarns of this coast region, not the cattle country that we so often think of when we say the West, but the hardships of pioneer living in a magnificent land with the Indians, the wild things, and the glorious timber, a land that makes a man realize just how small he really is.

Adios, folks, and may you enjoy reading about a great country as well as we Western writers like to write about it.

In next week's issue—

Allan Vaughan Elston is another newcomer to Western Story, but his first story for us is sure to rate him a return invitation. It's an action-packed full-length novel entitled MUTINY ON THE BOX CROSS, and we know you're going to find it tops.

C. K. Shaw is back with another hilarious yarn about the Bar H boys, Tom Roan writes GUNSMOKE GENTLEMEN, a tale about a pair of pards who couldn't forsake a friend, even when he turned respectable on them, and George Cory Franklin, Seth Ranger, W. Ryerson Johnson and many others contribute outstanding stories. And don't forget, there's always a full cavvy of departments and features.

No one ever noticed Bill,—until.....

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For a moment no one answered. Then suddenly Bill rose and strode to the piano. "Do you mind if I fill in?" he said. Everyone burst out laughing. But Bill pretended not to hear.

As he struck the first few chords, everyone leaned forward spellbound. For Bill was playing as Dave Gordon had never played, playing with the fire and soul of an inspired musician. In a moment Bill was the center of an admiring throng. In answer to their eager questions, he told them how he had always wanted to play, but never had the time or the money to realize his ambition. And then one day he read about the wonderful U. S. School of Music course, and how almost anyone could learn, at home, without a teacher, and at a fraction of the cost of ordinary old-fashioned methods. "That day," said Bill, "was a lucky day for me. I sent for the course, and when it arrived, I was amazed! The course was as much fun as a game, and in a few short months I had mastered some of the most popular pieces. There's no mystery about it. Learning to play is actually as easy as A B C, this 'Short-Cut' way."

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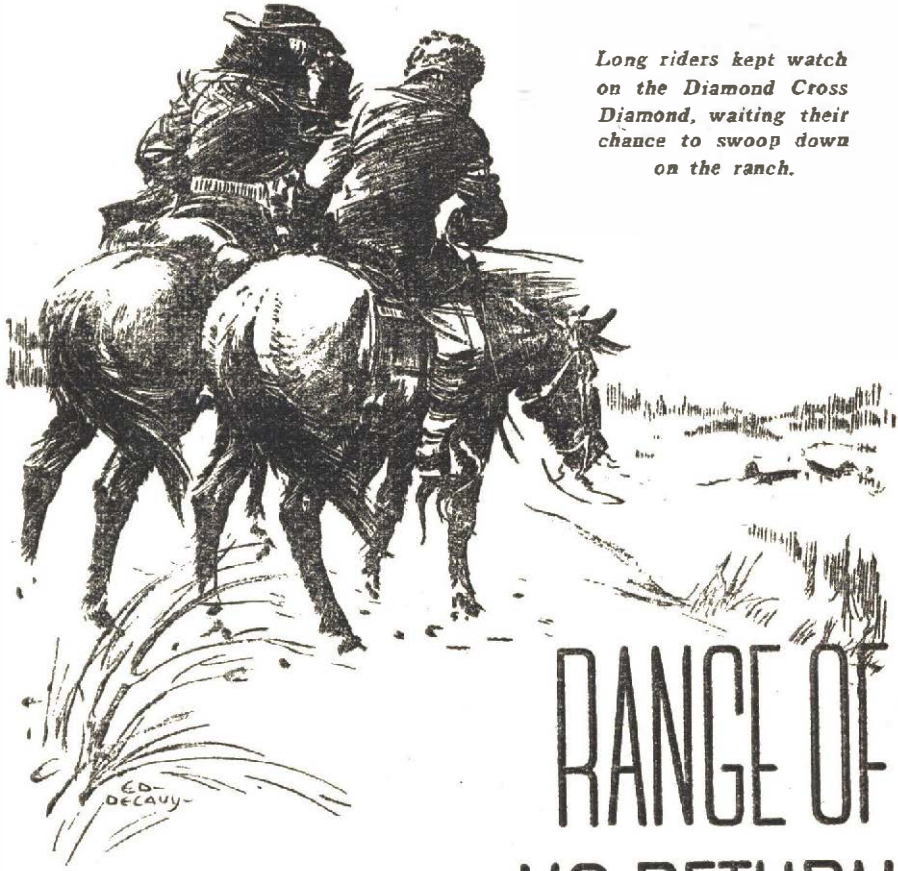


Long riders kept watch on the Diamond Cross Diamond, waiting their chance to swoop down on the ranch.

RANGE OF NO-RETURN

BY WALT COBURN

CHAPTER I

A SHERIFF DISAPPEARS

WHEN a peace officer backs down and lets a big loud-mouthed spur-jingling would-be outlaw run a whizzer on him, there is only one thing left for that peace officer to do—turn in his badge and quit.

Barney Lusk, who owned the First and Last Chance Saloon at Chinook, Montana, was working behind his bar and he saw the play from start to finish and heard every dirty, fighting name that Long Bob Blackburn called Sheriff Jim West. And Barney said it made him feel all cold inside to watch big Jim West just stand there, his face the color of something gray and dead, and his blue eyes looking sort of sick. He made no move at all to go for his gun, though Long Bob's rasping voice kept getting louder and uglier and the names he was calling Jim

West were names that no man could stand hearing without making some kind of a fight.

Long Bob Blackburn's bellowing was so loud that it fetched in a crowd of listeners from out on the sidewalk. A crowd of leering, grinning, loose-mouthed poolroom bums who never failed to show up at the wrong time. And they made just the right kind of an audience for Long Bob to play up to, because they had a picayune contempt for law and decency, and a hardcase like Long Bob Blackburn who had shot a man or two and was out to make a tough rep for himself was just the kind of a loud-mouthed tough hand they looked up to as a big hero. They bunched up there in the saloon and backed Long Bob's play. And they saw Sheriff Jim West take it.

"Montana's a shore big country," Long Bob Blackburn was saying, spinning his silver-mounted, ivory-handled six-shooter, "but she's too damned small to hold the both of us, West. One of us is goin' to quit 'er before sunrise tomorrow and it won't be me. I'm makin' a bunch quitter out o' you, West. Now git out o' my sight. Tuck your yaller tail between your laigs and git for home!"

Jim West turned and walked out the back door because the crowd was packed around the front door. Though he was only in his early fifties, he walked like an old man, bent over a little and with his head down like he was too stunned and bewildered to know what was going on or what was happening to him. Jim West walked with a limp he'd gotten from an old bullet wound in his knee ten years ago when he went out single-handed and killed four road agents. His boots shuffled now and the noise of their shuffling sounded loud in the silence.

That was about nine o'clock in the evening. Jim West stopped at the little log cabin down the street that he used for an office. He left the jail keys and his sheriff's badge on his desk there. Then he saddled his big brown horse at the feed barn and rode away. The little cow town of Chinook never saw him again.

LONG BOB BLACKBURN got drunk that night and painted the town red. There was no law officer in Chinook to stop him from shooting out the lights as he bucked his horse down the street and out of town, headed for the badlands along the Missouri River where he and half a dozen more horse thieves and would-be outlaws were holed up.

The next week Blackburn and his men held up a Miles City bank and got away with a bunch of money. And that marked his real beginning as a sure-enough tough outlaw. Running that gun whizzer on Sheriff Jim West had given Long Bob Blackburn the sort of send-off he wanted to take him along the outlaw trail.

As for Jim West, he vanished as completely as if the earth had opened up and swallowed him. Some said he had killed himself somewhere in the badlands. Others claimed he was drowned trying to cross the big, wide Missouri River. But Jim West left no trail that any man could pick up and follow.

Not that there was any man around that part of the cow country who would have tried to follow Jim West. Theirs was a code that sternly decreed that a man mind his own business. Not even Barney Lusk, who was as good a friend as big Jim West had around Chinook, had any intention of trying to locate the lawman who had pulled out with the black mark of cowardice written against his reputation. But Barney

declared himself in no uncertain terms whenever the story came up, and that was all too often during the next few months.

"I'm tellin' you men"—Barney would pound his bar with a heavy broken-knuckled prize-fighter fist—"Jim wasn't scared. He wasn't yellow. He'd gun-whipped and fist-licked plenty of men that was tougher than Long Bob Blackburn ever was or will be. I'm tellin' you Jim West wasn't scared. An' don't be askin' me what the devil it was then, that made him take what he did offn a loud-mouthed drunken false alarm like Long Bob. Because I'm not one of them fancy-priced brain doctors.

"But I've fought in the ring," he continued. "I've seen champs when they went stale and didn't have the fightin' heart to make 'em git in there and stand up and take as good as they give. I've seen third-raters make clowns of some of the best men that ever had a glove laced on their mitts. And the thick-headed mob called 'em yellow. And all the time they was wrong. And the next day that same champ could have stepped into the ring and with one hand tied behind his back he could have slapped the same man that beat him punch drunk in less time than it would take one of your bar flies to kill half a pint of whiskey."

And then he would tell his version of the story: "Jim West come in here first. And the place is empty. And when he tells me he wants whiskey I think he's makin' a joke wid me because for a fact I've never seen Jim West take a drink in the fifteen years I've knowed him.

"'Whiskey, Barney,' says Jim, when I start to make a comical crack out of it. 'A whole bottle of whiskey.'

"I looks across the bar at the man and into his eyes, and it's like he ain't even seein' me at all. And there's a gray color to his face that don't look like anything but the skin of somethin' that's got no life and is dead. And when he picks up a beer glass and fills it, his hand shakes so that the neck of the bottle rattles against the rim of the glass like teeth a-chatterin'. Then he drinks the stuff down like it's that much water and no bite at all. And he's not so much as passin' the time of day wid me. And him the same Jim West that never fails to have a word or a joke on his lips.

"Jim's killed a quart of the best whiskey in the house and he stands there sayin' not a word. And him that same Jim West that's never too busy to tell a joke or pass the time of day. Only he ain't really the same Jim West. Not by a jugful. There's somethin' wrong.

"The man's sick and that's as plain as the beak on the face of Big-nose George yonder. But I keep polishin' the same glass over and over and not knowin' it till afterward, and for the life o' me I can't ask him what's ailin' him, because there's somethin' about the look on Jim West's face that chokes the question back in me throat.

"And it's like that when Long Bob Blackburn comes bustin' into the place with his spurs let out to the town hole and his fancy gun in his hand. Drunk on Injun whiskey and blood in his eye.

"'Fill your hand with a gun!' he bellers. 'I'm shootin' that tin star off your vest!'

"Jim West just looks at him and past him like he ain't there, even though he's got a bench warrant for Long Bob and has told me not a week before that he aims to go down into the badlands and fetch him and

his rustlers back or leave 'em buried down there.

I'VE seen tougher men than Long Bob Blackburn pull a gun on Jim West," Barney went on. "And I've watched Jim make 'em throw their guns away. Or I've seen him draw and shoot before they could pull the trigger, and shoot straight enough to hit. Jim West is the fastest man with a gun I've ever seen and I've knowed the best of 'em.

"Long Bob, though, thinks he's got the drop on Jim West and that his loud talk has chilled Jim's nerve and he commences cussin' Jim out.

"Jim West just stands there like he don't actually see nor hear that long-geared son. And he don't pay no more attention to that bunch of grinnin', snickerin' pool-ball wranglers than he would to the clouds in the sky. Jim had this big beer glass full of whiskey in his gun hand and he keeps swallerin' the stuff like it's water or mebbe some kind of flat-tastin' medicine that should be curin' what ails him but ain't takin' the proper holt.

"No, sirs, Jim West wasn't scared. Git that straight on your records for all time. Jim West was a dead man. Whatever it is that makes a man tick was dead inside him. He was like a man that's bin hit so hard his brain is jarred loose. He's knocked out and still on his feet.

"Jim's hair was more black than it was gray early that mornin' when he was standin' around the post office gittin' his mail that'd come on the stagecoach. He was laughin' and joshin' with the rest of us and standin' there with his hat in his hand polite as a deacon when he talked with the wimmen. He gits his letters and his copy of the Helena *Record*, and it's while he's standin' there with his hat off that I notice how Jim's hair is still thick and bushy as a boy's and the sprinklin' of gray hair don't make him look old.

"Now, mebbe it's the light in here that night, but as Jim West stood there with that long drink of whiskey I'd swear his hair was snow-white and he looks closer to sixty-five than fifty.

"Long Bob told him to git for home. Jim finishes his whiskey and shuffles out the back door like some old broke-down sheepherder. And when he's gone I tells Long Bob Blackburn to take his trade and his pool-shark friends down the street where his talents would be appreciated."

Barney Lusk gripped the handle of the heavy wooden mallet, known to the saloon business as a bung starter, and his eyes glared fiercely from under battered brows.

"I kin still lick the man or the pack of men that says Jim West is a coward!" he finished.

Plenty of other men shared Barney Lusk's sentiments. They were cowpunchers and cowmen who had worked with Jim West when he was wagon boss for the Bear Paw Pool, men who had stood night guard with him and ridden long circles with him on the roundups, who had shared the hard work and lonesomeness of winter line camps with him. Those men were Jim West's friends and nothing could alter their high opinion of the man who had as brave a record as any peace officer in Montana.

But now that Jim West had gone they never mentioned his name except among themselves when they tried to puzzle out Jim's strange behavior as it was related to them by Barney Lusk. And when they spoke of Jim West they used the past tense —as if they were talking about a friend who had died.

Barney Lusk had a chance to sell his First and Last Chance Saloon at a big profit, and did so. He left with the first blizzard that began the hard winter of '86, the long hard snowbound and blizzard-swept winter of '86 that broke two thirds of the cattlemen in the Northwest. Cowmen and their cowhands bucked the piled drifts and fought their losing battle in a desperate effort to save cattle that were dying by the thousands. And they were too engrossed in their own struggle for existence to remember Jim West. When, at rare intervals, they did come to town it was to make a dicker for a bank loan to buy hay and grub. And because the First and Last Chance now belonged to a stranger and Barney was no longer behind the bar to listen to their talk and tell his own yarns in return, men from the snowbound cattle range pulled out of town again without more than a drink or two and a jug to take back to the boys. They had no whiskey money to spend that long, hard winter, no time to waste swapping yarns at the bar. So the name of Jim West was seldom mentioned. It was as if Sheriff Jim West was buried in the deep snowdrifts of that winter of '86.

CHAPTER II

A MAN WITHOUT A NAME

WHEN Jim West left Chinook in the night, he let his big brown gelding pick its own trail and travel it at the long, easy fox trot that ate up the miles between Chinook and an unknown destination. Jim rode with bowed head and eyes that were covered with a glaze that the whiskey could not eat away. He looked like a man riding in his sleep, and his brain and body were numb. He rode all night, and the next morning he crossed the Missouri River at a crossing that seemed only vaguely familiar, though he had been there at the Cow Island roundup crossing countless times.

He felt no hunger or fatigue. The whiskey had given him no sort of reaction and, though its potent chemical effect on his stomach should have left him nauseated, he felt no such illness. The nerve centers inside him had been numbed, paralyzed. He moved like something not human but mechanical when he pulled up in the badlands and unsaddled and put rawhide hobbles on the front legs of his horse. He washed his head and face in the waters of a creek whose name he should have remembered but did not. He rolled and smoked a brown-paper cigarette, then, taking off his old chaps, he sat down on the ground that was carpeted with thick buffalo grass. But he did not rest. He took the copy of the Helena *Record* from his chaps pocket and stared at the heavy black headlines:

TRAIN WRECK IN EAST

His puckered blue eyes fastened on the list, that was labeled, "List of Dead and Injured," moved down until they came to the name:

DR. MALCOLM WEST, of Johns Hopkins University. DEAD.

Malcolm West. Dr. Malcolm West. Then Mac had gotten his doctor's degree. He had made the grade, after six long, hard-working years. Winters at the university. Summer vacations spent working as some kind of helper in a big hospital in New York City. Mac had written at long and irregular intervals and Sheriff Jim West had written brief letters when he got around to it, which was about once every year. Young Mac had been too busy study-

ing and working at the hospital to spend much time writing about things his father wouldn't understand. And Jim West, whose schooling had been almighty limited, had never, as he told Mac, been much of a hand at letter writing. Anyhow, the father and son had no need of letters to keep them remembering one another; the bond between them was far too strong for need of that.

They were alike in a good many respects, Jim West and his son. Both were quiet and soft-spoken and not much given to outward show of sentiment. Jim West had been a range orphan and had kicked around cow camps all his life and had come up the long cattle trail from Texas with the first CCC herd. Cowpuncher-raised, he had always been ashamed to show any outward sort of expression of sentiment. When he was elated it showed in the blue twinkle of his eyes and his slow, easy grin. When things broke bad he kept his grief hidden deep inside and covered it with some sort of careless remark or gesture. And his son had been brought up like that after his mother's death when Malcolm was about ten years old.

JIM WEST had wanted his son to be something besides a cowhand. So he sent the boy through grammar school at Chinook and to high school at Helena. When, after the boy's graduation, Jim West asked him what he wanted to be and Mac said he wanted to be a doctor, Jim was mighty tickled. A doctor was somebody. Dr. Malcolm West. Like as not Chinook would be calling him Dr. Mac or Doc West. Jim West's eyes had brightened and his slow grin spread across his weather-stained face.

"Pick out the best college on the map, Mac. Have at 'er. You'll be a top hand some day."

Malcolm told him that Johns Hopkins University was the school he had picked. Jim West promptly sold his little ranch with its cattle and horses. He banked the money at Helena and told Malcolm it was his college money and if it played out he'd rustle more. Mac grinned back at him and said that fifty thousand dollars was enough to send a whole herd of kids through college. He said that anyhow he aimed to work his passage and that Jim should have hung onto the ranch on Milk River. But Jim had been elected sheriff and claimed he couldn't do the job justice and run a ranch to boot. A sheriff and a doctor didn't have no need for a two-bit cow spread, he reckoned. Jim was proud of his sheriff's badge. It made him feel like he was somebody and that by bringing law and order to that part of the cow country he was helping build up Montana.

Sheriff Jim West. Dr. Malcolm West. Jim said those names would go down in Montana pioneer history.

Jim had taken Mac's six-year separation with his usual stoical and philosophical calm. He told Barney Lusk that Mac would be coming back home some day to hang out his shingle in the new brick building that was going to be built by the bank.

DR. MALCOLM WEST, of Johns Hopkins University. DEAD.

Something inside Sheriff Jim West had suddenly died when he read that in cold, ugly black print. And after that he had moved like a walking dead man. Something inside his brain had snapped like a light being shot out.

He sat there on the ground for a long time, dry-eyed, numb and cold

inside where his heart was a heavy leaden lump. After a time his eyes closed and he lay down and sheer exhaustion claimed him.

It was getting dusk when Jim awoke. He took the rawhide hobbles off his horse, saddled him and rode on into the coming darkness. He rode all night. The next day he stopped at a prospector's camp and ate some grub and slept till dusk. The prospector was a foreigner who spoke and understood little English. He figured, perhaps, that the white-haired stranger was an outlaw on the dodge. Or that the man was mildly insane.

Jim West was following the old cattle trail he had come up years ago with the CCC herd. Though there were ranches and roundup camps established now at the old trail crossings on the creeks and rivers, Jim avoided them. He rode mostly by night when there was a full moon to light his way. He traveled no faster than the shuffling fox-trot road gait that the big brown gelding could keep up indefinitely. He made camp where the feed was good and there was water. And he ate when he got hungry and could find some lonely line camp where there would be no crowd of men to talk to. Jim West didn't know why he was avoiding the ranches and roundup camps except that he had no wish to talk to anybody. He wanted to be alone. The moonlight was easy on his eyes and he liked the stars up yonder in the sky. The mournful howl of a wolf, the yapping of coyotes, the boom of a horned owl, the slap of a beaver tail in the water of some mountain stream or along a river bank—those were sounds that brought him a sort of peace. And when he found a place he liked, some old camp where the ground showed the burned black mark of old campfires, he would stay there until he got restless again.

He had bought some supplies—flour, beans, salt and coffee—from a trapper. He killed fresh meat with his saddle gun. September nights were mild, and the only bedding he needed was his saddle blanket. The mountains and plains, the bigness and silence were good medicine. Jim West no longer read the black lettering on the newspaper which he had folded into a square and wrapped in a piece of canvas and stored in the pocket of his chaps. The real meaning of the words had dimmed and were being forgotten, and he carried the newspaper because he knew it meant something to him but he was not quite certain in his mind just what that real meaning might be. Jim West's past had become a sort of gray blank wall that he had no desire to penetrate. Vaguely he knew that it had to do with some sort of catastrophe. Some wrong he had done, he thought. Some sort of disgrace. And connected with it was a sorrow of some sort that now troubled him no longer. He did not try to puzzle it out. He lived each day as it came and welcomed the darkness of the star-filled nights.

BARNEY LUSK had not exaggerated much about Jim West's hair turning white. The man had aged in a few hours' time. His face had been etched with new lines around his puckered blue eyes and the corners of his straight-lipped mouth under the drooping mustache. And he let his beard grow. It came out thick and iron gray and he whetted the big blade of his jackknife and trimmed it.

Jim West had always been a man of clean habits. He bathed and washed his shirt and underclothes and socks and, when they were worn,

Long Bob Blackburn called Sheriff Jim West names no man would take—and the sheriff only turned his back and walked away!

he bought more from prospectors or trappers he camped with along the trail south. He had found money in his pockets. About eight hundred dollars. He did not know how it had gotten there. Barney Lusk could have told him it was money from his quarterly pay check which he had cashed at the First and Last Chance a few days before he left Chinook. Jim wondered now with a faintly puzzled grin if he had been

some kind of an outlaw and had robbed somebody to get that money. And he wondered who owned the Flying W brand on the left shoulder of his big brown horse. The horse, he somehow realized, belonged to him. It might be, he speculated, and rightly, that it could be his own brand. And one day it struck him all of a sudden that he did not know his own name. This was a couple of weeks or more after he had quit Chinook. It had taken his brain that long to regain something of its normal functioning. But even now he had no real curiosity, no special concern regarding his identity. His brain was too utterly weary to wrestle with any sort of problem.

"If I have done somethin' unlawful," he argued briefly with himself, "I'll be picked up and fetched to trial and mebbeso jailed or hung. Best stay away from towns. Keep clear of big ranches or roundup outfits. Drift on south like I seem to be headed. I've traveled this trail before, because the landmarks are ones I've remembered, sort of. I'd best keep a-driftin' to where the climate fits my clothes."

And Jim West let it go at that—until the big brown gelding needed its old shoes jerked off and new ones tacked on. Then Jim took a long chance and rode up to a cow ranch in a valley that seemed familiar.

The cowpunchers were off on a roundup. There was nobody at the ranch but a breed hay crew, a Chinaman cook, and a girl about twenty who had just ridden in on a sweat-marked blue roan horse branded Lazy Y on the left thigh. At first Jim West took her for a young cowboy, in her worn leather wing chaps, old hat, short canvas jacket and faded blue flannel shirt. Then she took off her hat and shook her head and a mass of chestnut-brown hair tumbled down.

"I've got a mind to cut it off," she laughed. "It's nothing but a bother to a girl that's ramrodding a cow outfit. Light and put up your horse, mister. I'm Patty Yarbury. You probably knew my dad, Hank Yarbury. Lazy Hank Yarbury. He started up the trail to Montana with the CCC herd and slept late one morning when the outfit camped here on Cottonwood. When he woke up the sun was noon-high and the outfit had moved on without him. He was too lazy to overtake 'em and so he located here. He did have ambition enough to claim the valley and hold it and put his Lazy Y brand on what stray stock he could find. Everybody knew Lazy Hank Yarbury."

I REMEMBER Lazy Hank Yarbury," Jim West said slowly. For a moment his blue eyes lighted up and he grinned slowly and the girl who was watching him smiled back into his eyes and they were friends. It was as simple and quick as that.

"He's around somewheres?" Jim West asked a little cautiously. He vaguely remembered the Cottonwood Crossing and Lazy Hank Yarbury and the CCC trail herd.

"Dad was killed five years ago when he rode up on some horse rustlers," the girl told him. "They shot him and drifted north. I've been running the outfit since. I've probably heard him talk about you."

Patty Yarbury didn't come right out and ask Jim his name. Which showed her true cow-country breeding, and made him like her all the more. The smile of her wide mouth wrinkled her short, freckled, tanned nose and partly crinkled her gray-brown eyes until they were slits of laughing light. You could tell this

youngster things and she'd keep 'em secret.

"I wish I could tell you who I am," Jim said, a faint scowl of puzzlement knitting his ragged iron-gray brows, "but somethin' has happened to my brain. I can't remember things. Can't even recollect my own name or where I come from or why I'm driftin'. The name of Lazy Hank Yarbury and the CCC outfit and Cottonwood sound familiar. I think it was a long time ago. I'm tryin' to remember. Seems like I was goin' up the trail with the CCC herd."

Patty Yarbury's smile softened. She nodded gravely, dividing her thick chestnut hair and plaiting it into twin braids.

"I'll call you uncle and tonight we'll sit around the fire and I'll try to remember the names of all the men I've heard my dad mention who were with the CCC trail herd. And if you're just drifting, you might as well stay on here as long as you feel like making it your home."

She had a notion that he was broke and she was offering him a home, and it awakened something that had been numbed like death in Jim's heart. A lump came into his throat and he thanked her with his eyes. He swung off his horse and unsaddled.

That night after supper Patty Yarbury got pencil and paper and wrote down all the names she could remember having heard her father mention. He kept repeating aloud each name she read off to him. Among the names was that of Jim West.

"I think that's it," he said. "Jim West. Jim West. That shore sounds more familiar than the others."

"Then you're Uncle Jim," Patty told him. "And just in case there's something we'd just as soon not have brought up by anybody that remembers the name Jim West, just forget the last name for the present till we find out ourselves about your past. Uncle Jim will do for a handle."

CHAPTER III

THE LAZY Y'S NEW HAND

JUST about every cow outfit in the West had its "Uncle" or "Dad" —some white-haired old-timer who was half pensioned and told the younger cowhands how it used to be done and done right when he was their age. So when the Lazy Y roundup outfit pulled in at the home ranch a week or so later, the stranger was accepted without question.

"Boys," Patty Yarbury told them, "this is Uncle Jim."

That was about all the introduction a man ever got around a cow outfit. Somehow the men got the notion that Uncle Jim was some kin to the late Hank Yarbury and they took it for granted that Uncle Jim's last name was Yarbury. And Patty smiled secretly to herself at the subtle way that she had gone about this business of conveying the impression, without ever mentioning names, that the white-haired, gray-bearded stranger was her Uncle Jim Yarbury.

Patty no longer tried to awaken Jim West's dormant memory regarding his past when she sensed that he was more content to drift along without trying to back-trail and cut for sign that would perhaps uncover something unpleasant that had best be left forgotten.

Uncle Jim was more than making a hand around the ranch by the time the roundup outfit, ramrodded by a tall, grizzled old Texan named Brad Carver, finished their work and showed up at the ranch to pay off the cowboys and store the roundup equipment until it was needed again

next spring for the calf roundup.

Uncle Jim had, for instance, without seeming in any way officious, pointed out to Patty that the breed hay crew was overlooking a lot of good wild hay that grew stirrup-high in the coulees. He rode out with her and showed her where they could cut and stack the hay and fence off the haystacks.

"I taken notice along the trail," he told her, "an' read sign the way the Injuns tell when there's goin' to be a hard winter. This un that's a-comin' is goin' to be a warthawg. You'll need every ton of hay you kin git into stacks afore the chinook wind cuts the drifts in the spring."

Uncle Jim bought a new tarpaulin and blankets and soogans and cleaned out the bunkhouse as it had never before been cleaned. He borrowed a sheet of writing paper and with pen and ink he wrote out a set of rules. When he tacked the rules to the log wall he called Patty Yarbury in and showed them to her with a sort of apologetic but firm-lipped smile. She read the set of rules and nodded a quiet approval.

No booze allowed on this ranch.
No gambling allowed on this ranch.
And if you have to cuss don't cuss loud or where any woman is likely to hear you.
Them as can't abide by these rules had better quit.

"Not," Uncle Jim told Patty, "that I got religion. But booze and gamblin' don't go good anywheres but in town. And cussin' is just a careless habit that men git into. Young fellers like to cuss because it makes 'em feel tough. Older hands kin git along without it."

"Those were the rules," said Patty, "laid down by the CCC outfit at their headquarters ranch in Texas and likewise on the trail. Remember?"

"Must be," nodded Jim West slowly, "that I kind o' recollected."

Patty told him that her father had made the same rules here and that the cowpunchers, for the most part, obeyed them. When a man got ornery about it, Brad Carver fired him. Brad was an old-timer like her dad had been. Like Uncle Jim himself. The breed hay crew were too ignorant for the most part to understand rules. Their cussing was clean and harmless and they had their own camp down the creek and when they got a jug they got a fiddler and had a dance and went to work the next morning none the worse for it.

"I didn't aim to be hornin' in," Uncle Jim assured her. "Want me to pull the notice down?"

"I should say not, Uncle Jim. It'll please Brad to know you take an interest in me and the outfit—though he'll never believe but what I ribbed you into it. Whiskey is Brad's only weakness. It's kept him from owning an outfit of his own. But when he gets on a drunk he expects me to fire him. If I forget, he fires himself. Saddles up and pulls out. He shows up again in a week. Hires himself again as ramrod. Brad Carver has fired and hired himself on an average of twice a year since I can remember. No, leave the notice tacked up, Uncle Jim. It'll give him and the boys a chuckle or two."

THE day before the roundup outfit pulled in Uncle Jim snagged the back of his old vest that he always wore unbuttoned, and tore it almost in half. Patty made him take it off and she carried it into the house to mend it.

Time had been when the woven material of the vest had been deep black in color, but the sun had faded it until now it was more green than black—save for one spot where Jim

West had always worn his silver sheriff's star. And now that the badge was gone, there remained the holes where it had been pinned and outlined against the faded green, still plain to be seen if a person scrutinized the vest closely, was the star pattern of unfaded black.

Patty Yarbury's hazel eyes were dark with puzzlement. Her fingers passed across the unfaded star pattern with something like a caressing touch. Jim West, then, had been a peace officer somewhere. And only recently had he discarded his badge of office.

She folded the torn vest and put it away in an old trunk. Bringing out a gray vest that had belonged to her father, she gave it to Uncle Jim.

"Your vest was too badly torn to be worth the mending, Uncle Jim," she explained. "Here's one of dad's that I'd like you to wear in its stead."

"And proud to wear 'er," said Uncle Jim. "That old un of mine was about fit for the rag pile."

Patty lay awake a long time that night, disturbed by the persistent notion that Jim West was a law officer on the trail of some man he wanted, that he had taken off his law star and had it in his pocket and had overlooked the telltale mark left on the front of his vest where it had been worn. The thought that Jim West might be playing detective was upsetting and somehow ugly to Patty Yarbury, who hated anything that was not open and aboveboard.

But she felt ashamed of her thoughts before she finally went to sleep. She told herself that she would come right out and ask Uncle Jim about it. But she didn't get a chance to talk to him alone the next day or for several days afterward and by then she had changed her mind about questioning him. He had made it so plain in many little ways that he dreaded any talk that might bring up something that concerned his past. That, he told her, smiling frankly with his puckered blue eyes, he would rather let stay buried as long as it would.

"There's no tellin', Patty," he said quietly, "what kind of a man I've bin. I keep havin' that feelin' of dread that I've done somethin' I'd shore not be proud to recollect. I'd ruther start out from scratch once more. This is like—well, it's like home. I'd shore hate to have to haul freight and quit this place and you. You're like a daughter of my own—if ever I had one. I'd just like to sort o' stay on here, peaceful."

Jim West found the folded newspaper in its canvas wrapping. He held it in his hands without taking off the wrapping, debating with himself. He hadn't read the newspaper for weeks, but he recalled that it told about a train wreck. That it was a copy of the Helena, Montana, *Daily Record*, dated August 13, 1886. He had a notion to give it to Patty Yarbury, but thinking hard like that made his brain numb again and his thoughts got sort of vague and confused. He ended up by putting the newspaper in his bed between the bottom blanket and the tarp. With it he put his wallet with the eight hundred dollars. A little over eight hundred dollars, actual count. After that he felt better, as if his mind were freed of a heavy burden. He went about his work whistling softly between his strong white teeth.

Patty Yarbury let all but a couple of the older cowpunchers go when she paid the men their fall wages. They all went to town to cut loose and celebrate. Brad Carver went with them. He and the other two men would be back in a couple of

days. The Lazy Y had two line camps where two men would winter, feeding what weak cattle needed it, keeping open the waterholes along the creeks and fetching in cows with late calves they dropped. Rawhiding, it was called.

JIM WEST had never taken the trouble to ask where the Lazy Y ranch was located. He was incurious about it. He heard Patty mention Wyoming and something about the nearest town being Sundance. The mountain range beyond Sundance Butte, he learned, was the Black Hills. Brad Carver and the other cowpunchers often swapped range gossip about the outlaws who were holed-up in the Black Hills.

"—feller they call Long Bob Blackburn," Jim West heard Brad Carver telling Patty. "Him and half a dozen more Montana renegades held up a Miles City bank. Then they robbed a train in Nebraska and cut back into the Black Hills. They are plumb safe there. No law officer could ever git a posse to foller him into the Black Hills. No, ma'am. Long Bob and his gang must've passed within ten miles of where we was camped on Sundance Crick last week. But they must've had relay horses planted along the route because they never bothered our remuda."

Then Brad's voice tightened. "This Long Bob fits the description of one of them horse thieves that killed your daddy, Miss Patty. A deputy and some men stayed at camp long enough to eat dinner and change horses. He gimme the description of Long Bob Blackburn. Tall feller about six foot three and rawboned. Straight black hair and long black mustache. Black-eyed and dark-skinned like he might be part Injun. He's a killer and a ornery un. Killed a bank teller at Miles City and shot down two men in the express car and winged the brakeman when they held up the M. K. & T. train in Nebraska. And the horse thief leader that killed Hank Yarbury fits that same description accordin' to the deputy sheriff from Sundance. He used that argument to git the loan of fresh horses, but he didn't go into the Black Hills after Long Bob Blackburn. Him and his men come by yesterday and got their own horses and rode back to town. Said the trail crossed the South Dakota line and that's where his authority stopped."

Uncle Jim West turned the name Long Bob Blackburn over and over in his mind until his brain grew weary again. The name and the description of the hunted outlaw stirred something in his dormant memory. He finally gave up thinking about it.

Uncle Jim sent some breeds to the two line camps to chink and daub the log cabins and barns and cattle sheds and get them ready for the coming winter. He smelled a storm coming and he guessed right. Brad Carver and his two men got back to the ranch just ahead of the storm. October was early for the first snow and it began to look as though Uncle Jim had called the turn right when he said they were due for a hard winter.

CHAPTER IV

BUNKHOUSE CONFERENCE

JIM WEST and Patty were at the barn when Brad Carver and his two men rode in from town. Brad was a little drunk. The neck of a sealed and unopened whiskey bottle was sticking out of his saddle pocket. Patty saw it, and her lips tightened.

"You saw the rules tacked to the bunkhouse wall, Brad. You'll have

to smash that bottle." She tried to sound severe.

Uncle Jim liked the lanky, grizzled old Texan. Brad Carver was a good man. He had a hangover from his town jag and he was breaking the rules tacked up on the bunkhouse wall. But Jim felt more sorrow now than anger toward the Lazy Y ramrod because Patty was a woman and Brad couldn't say a word back to her and he had to take that humiliation in front of his men or quit. But Brad Carver did neither. He looked at Jim West and solemnly winked. Then he took the sealed bottle from his saddle pocket and with his weight in one stirrup he held it aloft. In a funereal Texas drawl he read aloud the bright-green words printed on the gold, shamrock-bordered label: "Bottled in bond and every drop guaranteed to be ten years old. The compliments of Barney Lusk and his First and Last Chance Saloon at Sundance, Wyoming.' Drink hearty, cowboys!"

Brad Carver leaned from his saddle and handed the bottle to Patty Yarbury, whose cheeks colored. Her short little freckled nose started to wrinkle across its middle and her eyes crinkled almost shut at the corners.

"Me 'n' the boys," drawled Brad, "killed our town bottle a mile back on the trail. The new saloon man at Sundance sent this un to you to ward off chillblains and cure frostbite and snakebite. I know it's breakin' the rules, Little Boss, but Barney Lusk said to deliver it and I'd shore hate to annoy the hospitality of that open-handed gent who just opened the best saloon in Sundance. When I told him you'd fire me he offered me a winter's job tendin' bar for him. And when a cowhand gits a chance to winter his saddle he's gittin' somewheres in the world. I'll leave it to Uncle Jim."

"He's got a black eye," Patty said to Uncle Jim, ignoring Brad. "Shorty looks like something had been chewing his ear off, and Judd looks like he'd stopped a few rights and lefts with his nose and one side of his jaw. But there's nothing wrong with 'em that black coffee and a good night's sleep won't cure. And the Texican fetches home the Boss Lady a bottle of whiskey for a peace offering. Should we fire 'em, Uncle Jim? Or let 'em hang around and brood over what became of their summer's wages?"

"Uh?" Jim West only half heard what they had been saying. He had heard a name. The name of Barney Lusk. That name had started thoughts along his back trail cutting for sign that would make him recollect who Barney Lusk might be. Barney Lusk and his First and Last Chance Saloon. Jim couldn't remember ever having been to Sundance, Wyoming, in his life. Barney Lusk. The First and Last Chance Saloon. He'd known the man and the saloon.

PATTY saw the vague look in the blue eyes of Uncle Jim and she turned her smile on Brad Carver and his two grizzled cowhands.

"Who licked?"

"Brad," volunteered the lanky, rawboned Judd, "taken Red Mitchell's gun away from him in Barney's place and he give that cattle-rustlin' hombre the damnedest whuppin' a man ever got. Me 'n' Shorty kep' Red Mitchell's Black Hills tough hands from pullin' Brad offn his bear meat."

Brad fished in his other saddle pocket and brought out a box wrapped in fancy red paper. He swung from his saddle and handed it to Patty with a sheepish grin.

"Store candy, Boss Lady."

Brad always called Patty the Boss Lady or the Little Boss. When they were on good terms she was the Little Boss. But when he was a little tipsy or in disgrace or was arguing out something serious with her he called her the Boss Lady. And there would be a sly twinkle in his gray eyes.

"The boxes of apples," put in Shorty, "and the or'nges from Californy is comin' on the chuck wagon if the cook don't git lost afore he gits here."

"And there's the purtiest doggone set of curtains you ever seen, Little Boss." Judd's battered face spread in a wide grin. "We got Sadie from the Casino to pick 'em out at the store."

"You're each fined a dollar for cussin'," Patty Yarbury smiled at them, "and the fines remitted. If you whipped Red Mitchell's outfit I reckon you've still got your jobs. And now that you're back home you might as well put up your horses. Thanks for the presents, boys. We'll open the bottle Christmas."

"We sort o' figured," said Brad, "that Uncle Jim might be 'titled to a nip. He didn't go to town with us—"

"I never use 'er," grinned Uncle Jim. "But I'm sure obliged to you boys, just the same."

When Patty had taken the candy and gift bottle and gone to the house Jim asked Brad Carver about Barney Lusk.

"Seems like I might o' knowed him somewhere, Brad."

"He sold out a saloon he had up in Chinook, Montana."

"That's where I knowed him," said Jim West slowly. "Barney Lusk had the First and Last Chance Saloon at Chinook."

He was smiling a little and his blue eyes lost their dimness. He was almost remembering something. Something that was almighty important. Then that haunting dread wiped the smile from his face. Better not try to think too hard, he told himself. Better let 'er go as she laid. Quiet and peaceful. Winter was comin' on. A man didn't want to cut loose and drift of a cold winter. Let 'er go as she laid.

JIM finished his barn chores and went on to the bunkhouse with Brad and Shorty and Judd. They joshed one another as they washed the dried blood from their skinned faces. And Brad told Jim that Red Mitchell had an outfit at the edge of the Black Hills, the best winter range in Wyoming. He had plenty of good shelter and enough hay stacked and left over from last year and the year before to feed all the poor weak cows on the Lazy Y range as well as his own.

But Red Mitchell was ornery and tough. His place was a way station for outlaws. He furnished them with horses, cartridges, food and anything else they needed. He dealt with horse thieves and cattle rustlers and was smart and foxy enough never to get trapped by the law. His cattle brand was Diamond Cross Diamond (connected). Brad took a piece of paper and stub of a pencil.

He drew the Lazy Y brand on the paper. Then slowly he added lines to it, making it into Red Mitchell's Diamond Cross Diamond brand.

"And that," he said grimly, his heavy brows knit in a scowl, "is where a lot of the Lazy Y cattle go. Storms drift 'em south every winter in spite of the line riders. They drift into the Black Hills. The renegades in the Hills gather 'em, work the brand, and sell 'em to Red Mitchell. But nobody ever ketches Red with

a runnin' iron on his saddle. He won't change a brand himself and he don't buy 'em till the worked brand is scabbed or haired over and will stand examination by ary brand inspector who comes along. Red Mitchell is the biggest, orneriest rustler that ever went unhung—and the slickest."

Brad rolled himself a cigarette and lit it. "The law had him over at the Sundance jail tryin' to sweat it out o' him that he was in cahoots with Long Bob Blackburn, but they was wastin' their time. They done the sweatin' and Red Mitchell just laughed at 'em. He was braggin' about it in this new First and Last Chance Saloon till I couldn't stand no more of it. Because while there's no actual proof that Long Bob Blackburn is the man that killed Hank Yarbury, all the evidence points to him. He was driftin' north with a bunch of stolen horses about the time Lazy Hank got murdered. And when a man rears up on his hind laigs and brags that he's a friend of Long Bob Blackburn's, it's more than I kin stand."

"Brad taken his gun and throwed it acrost the bar to Barney Lusk," chuckled Shorty. "Then he tore into that big red-maned son and the show was on. And when four, five of them

No man could turn the cattle before that blizzard, so Jim West drifted with them, straight toward the Black Hills and Red Mitchell's killers.

Black Hills renegades tried to take 'er up for Red Mitchell me 'n' Judd bought chips in the game. But we mighta got trimmed at that if Barney hadn't come over the bar swingin' his bung starter, tappin' 'em on the head like a man drivin' tent stakes. And when we'd throwed 'em out in the street Barney Lusk set up drinks till our bind teeth floated in ten-year-old likker. Seems like he knowed Long Bob Blackburn up in Montana, and he's puttin' all of Blackburn's friends on the Injun list. Won't sell 'em a drink."

"Seems like Long Bob Blackburn give an old friend of Barney's a dirty deal." Brad Carver dabbed cold water on his swollen, discolored eye. "A law sheriff named Jim West. Long Bob claims he run a whizzer on Sheriff Jim West. Run him plumb out o' Montana. And Barney Lusk claims that Sheriff Jim West never backed down to no man in his life and that nobody knows—"

"Dry up, Brad."

Patty Yarbury was standing in the bunkhouse doorway. None of them knew how long she had been standing there listening. Her face was so white that the freckles on her small nose stood out in the lamplight as she came in out of the gathering dusk.

"Dry your hands and face, Brad. Supper's ready. Come on, Uncle Jim. Grub pile!"

JIM'S eyes were glazed as he went out the door. But Brad and Shorty and Judd hadn't noticed because Patty Yarbury was covering for Jim. It took quick thinking and a little acting, but they did not notice that her smile went no farther than her lips and eyes were wide and dark with pity and something like fear.

"You warriors of the First and Last Chance let that grub get cold on the table and Chinky John will start a one-man war that will make that scrap with Red Mitchell look like a schoolboy snowball fight," she warned. "Chinky John says 'Come and catchee glub!' and you gladiators had better come catchee or you'll catchee trouble."

She caught up with Jim and he felt the tight grip of her hand on his arm.

"Don't try to think about it, Uncle Jim. Don't let it throw you, oldtimer."

"That's a part of it," he said, his voice husky and dry in his corded throat. "I let Long Bob Blackburn run some kind of a bad whizzer on me in Barney Lusk's First and Last Chance Saloon in Chinook. I must have turned yaller."

"Don't try to think about it now, Uncle Jim. Later on we'll talk it over. But this man Barney Lusk claims you never backed down to any man. You're no more yellow than Brad Carver is. And Brad would tackle all the outlaws in the Black Hills if he had to. You've got to

believe in yourself. You've *got* to!"

The grip on Jim's arm tightened and in the dusk that was now filled with falling snow, Patty pulled him around and looked up at him and he saw that there were tears in her eyes. He grinned down at her and with a gnarled thumb he gently wiped a tear from her cheek. His eyes were clear and blue and he put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her gently.

"We'll look this Long Bob feller up sometime and see how bad he actually is, Little Boss."

"We'll hang his tough hide on the fence, Uncle Jim. And that's a deal. But let's keep it a secret between you and me. No need for Brad and the others to know that your name is Jim West. Not till the sign is right, and we find out what really happened to you up in Montana. Your memory will clear up completely one of these days and we'll know all the facts. I know you're fine and brave and you're my Uncle Jim and we're pardners."

"You're all them things, Patty," he grinned down at her, "and plenty more." But Jim West's blue eyes were hard and bright as they went in to supper.

This was their last meal together. Shorty and Judd were pulling out in the morning for their line camps. The Chinese cook, Chinky John, was doing himself proud. Fried prairie chicken and that suet pudding so dear to the cowhands' heart called a "son of a gun in the sack."

Outside, the wind howled and moaned and the snow drifted against the log cabin walls. It was the first of the many blizzards that were to make the winter of '86-'87 the worst in the history of the northwest cattle country.

Their last meal together was a festive one. They laughed and joked and when supper was over they sat around the bunkhouse stove and swapped yarns, while Patty Yarbury sang songs for them in a voice that was as clear and sweet as a silver bell. Jim West had that evening's memory to carry with him through all the cold and bitter hardship that was to be his lot. And the memory of that girl's song was to be the one sweet thing in days to come when he had to fight out things alone as, bit by bit, his memory picked up the trail of his forgotten past until he knew it all, and there was nobody there to salve the terrible hurt in his heart.

This was to be his last supper at the Lazy Y Ranch, shared with Patty Yarbury and Brad Carver and Shorty and Judd. The last meal they would ever eat together.

But they had no way of knowing what that bleak snowbound winter was to hold for them. So tonight they laughed and talked and listened to the song of the girl they called their Little Boss.

CHAPTER V

BLIZZARD IN THE BLACK HILLS

NEXT morning, the bitter wind from the north drove a blast of snow that was as hard and dry and brittle as frozen sand. Not even buffalo-hide overcoats and leather chaps could keep out the cold that bit through hair and leather and numbed the marrow of a man's bones. Men rode humped over their saddlehorns and horses traveled with lowered heads. And thousands of cattle drifted with the storm that swept the plains and rolling hills with nothing to stop it. It was like a white scourge. And it would not be known until the warm chinook wind cut away the high-banked drifts next spring how many men and

horses and cattle were caught in that first blizzard of '86 and were buried beneath the snow.

Cattle by the hundreds and thousands walk-bawled. They were stopped by the drift fences and stood humped in the storm. In time the weaker cattle went down and the others trampled them and stumbled and shuffled on over the dead carcasses that piled high against the drift fences and bridged the barbed-wire barriers.

Jim West jerked down the drift fence beyond Cottonwood Creek, where the five-wire fence crossed the cut coulees. Snow filled his whiskers and bushy eyebrows, and his cheeks were bone-white from frostbite.

Shorty and Judd rode together and spent the short daylight hours filling their sheds and feed yards with cattle.

Brad Carver had talked to Jim as they saddled their horses inside the barn before daybreak.

"You're an old hand, Uncle Jim," he said. "You give the orders and us boys take 'em."

Patty Yarbury was the only one to disobey. When Jim West told her to stay at the ranch she balked.

"It's my outfit, Uncle Jim. My cattle. I wouldn't ask any man to go out into a storm I wouldn't tackle myself. I'll hang and rattle along with the rest of you. Chinky John will look after the ranch."

There was, Brad Carver told Jim West, no use in arguing with the Boss Lady when she got that set to her chin and that glint in her eye. She was as determined in her ways as her father, Hank Yarbury, had been in his day.

Visibility in the thick blizzard was bad. You couldn't see beyond a hundred yards, and when the snow drifted across the draws and coulees the country all looked alike. And if a man got lost his only chance was to drop his bridle reins over the saddlehorn or take the bridle off his horse and trust to his animal's instinct for direction to take him back to the home ranch.

Men got lost in a blizzard and froze to death within a mile of their camp or ranch. A lost man would get panicky and travel in a circle till he and his horse were played out and froze to death. And there was another thing to guard against. When the first sting and bite of freezing cold left a man's body and he began to get drowsy, it was a bad sign and he'd better fight all hell to keep awake, because if he ever lay down and went to sleep in the shelter of a cutbank he'd freeze to death and the drifting snow would bury him.

Patty Yarbury had bucked blizzards before. She knew what to do and what not to do. She was wearing a beaverskin cap and coat, and bearskin chaps and fur-lined moccasins. She reminded Brad Carver and her Uncle Jim that the outfit was mighty short-handed, and until they got some breeds to help Shorty and Judd shovel hay and open waterholes, and another breed crew at the ranch to help Chinky John feed the stock there, it was her job to get out and take a hand. Anyhow, she told them, her lips twitching in a provocative smile, a woman could stand twice the cold that a man could. It had been proven, she declared, by scientists who made a business of studying such statistics.

So she went along. And the best that Jim West could do was to tell Brad not to lose sight of her till they got back to the ranch or to one of the line camps.

The roundup cook, driving his

four-horse team hooked to the laden mess wagon, had got caught in last night's storm and had pulled in at Shorty's line camp. He had spent half the night, he told them, carting boxes of apples and California oranges and fancy canned truck into the line-camp vegetable cellar dug in the side of a hill where such stuff would not freeze. Jim West told him to load a hayrack and scatter hay to the cattle and quit bellyaching. Then they rode on. And when they found cattle piling up against the drift fence where it crossed the coulees Jim West told them that the only thing to do was to tear down the fence and let 'em drift.

IT was past noon then and the Little Boss rubbed snow on her frostbitten face and told Jim West and Brad to go ahead and cuss if it would warm 'em up any. There must have been five or six hundred head of cattle drifting ahead of them. Nothing on earth could turn those steers and cows back against the blizzard. Let 'em drift. The Black Hills lay to the south, and that was their only hope of survival. The feed was belly deep to a cow brute there and the timber and rough hills would break the force of the wind. Cattle could paw down to feed in the soft snow. The weak cattle might lie down and die, but there were hundreds of cows and steers that would rustle and live.

"You and the Little Boss"—Jim West's voice was muffled a little by the blizzard—"kin foller the drift fence and make the ranch by dark. Take good care of her, Brad. I'll see you when the storm breaks up. Drag it!"

"Where are you going, Uncle Jim?" Patty's voice was sharp with alarm. "What are you trying to do? If Brad and I go back to the ranch, you go with us."

"Me 'n' Brad done talked 'er over when we tore down the drift fence," Jim told her. "I'm driftin' with them cattle. I'm makin' a dicker with Red Mitchell when I shove them Lazy Y cattle in on his winter range. And you ain't arguin' me out of it. Red Mitchell never seen me in his life. He don't know but what I'm just another rustler hidin' out for a spell in the Black Hills. Mebbeso some of these cattle will be wearin' his Diamond Cross Diamond iron when the chinook comes in the spring. But they'll be on the hoof and their ribs will have taller on 'em put there by Red Mitchell's hay. Patty, I wouldn't miss this bet for all the likker in Barney Lusk's First and Last Chance Saloon if I was a drinkin' man, which I ain't. Fact is, I had it schemed out afore I left the ranch. That's why I saddled my brown horse that wears the Flyin' W brand."

When Patty continued to protest, he said, "Supposin' I make this dicker with Red Mitchell for these Lazy Y cattle. I'll have a thousand head in the Black Hills by the time this storm quits. Supposin' me 'n' him puts 'em all in his Diamond Cross Diamond iron. I'm throwin' in with him and I'm a pardner to the rustlin' deal. But when the sign is right we kin haul Red Mitchell up before a law court and send him over the road for the rest of his natural life. This blizzard is made to order for the job, Little Boss. And if you don't see me till the snow melts a few months from now don't lose no sleep a-worryin'. This kind of a job is what you'd call duck soup for your uncle Jim.

"Keep a-rubbin' that snow on your purty cheeks and that nose of

yourn that's so doggoned white now them freckles stand out like black warts. Brad, you foller that drift fence, and you'll be eatin' one of Chinky John's mulligans fer supper. Take care of yourselves. Hoist a drink fer me Christmas Day, Brad. If I need you I'll git word back to the ranch somehow. But unless you hear from me just let on like Uncle Jim got snowed under in the blizzard. Because it's a one-man job I'm tacklin'. So long."

Jim West rode through a gap in the broken drift fence. He heard Patty Yarbury's choked sob, her plaintive "So long, Uncle Jim!" Heard Brad Carver call out "So long and good luck, Uncle Jim!"

THEN Jim West and the drifting cattle were lost to sight in the blizzard. He knew, as Patty Yarbury knew, that it was the way he wanted it. Because during the night Jim West had begun thinking back along his back trail, cutting for sign, recollecting things. And he had to drift on to work out his own destiny in his own way. The safety and shelter of the Lazy Y home ranch were not for him. The dread thing that his awakening memory had uncovered was driving him on. He was forking the horse he had ridden there. His saddle gun was in its scabbard and there was a loaded six-shooter hanging in the holster fastened to the filled cartridge belt buckled around his lean flanks and hidden by the big buffalo coat that had once belonged to Lazy Hank Yarbury.

There was nothing between the broken drift fence and the Black Hills to stop the drifting cattle. Jim West rode humped in the saddle and his big brown gelding plowed through the drifting snow. The blizzard was at his back and Red Mitchell's ranch lay somewhere ahead. And mixed with the sadness in his heart was a desperate hope of redemption beyond that blinding curtain of snow. The Black Hills were hiding Long Bob Blackburn. The Black Hills, where no law posse had dared follow the outlaw, he, Sheriff Jim West, was duty-bound to track down and take back to Chinook for hanging. No longer did dimness mar the brightness of Jim West's deep-set eyes under shaggy snow-powdered brows. His bearded lips were pulled tight in a grim smile.

When it was too late to tell Patty Yarbury about the newspaper and wallet with eight hundred dollars in it, Jim West remembered. But he wasted no worry on it. He had his job cut out for him and the blizzard was giving him his big chance.

Jim West had told Brad Carver nothing about his real identity. He had simply told him that this was their one chance to hang Red Mitchell's hide on the fence. That he was drifting this Lazy Y herd straight to Red Mitchell's back yard and was throwing in with the red-headed rustler for the winter. And come spring they'd have Red Mitchell roped and hogtied, and the law brand burned deep on his tough red hide.

Now and then the storm would slack up for half an hour or so, and Jim West would ride off at an angle and gather more cattle and throw them into the drag end of his drifting herd. It was as if every steer in the cow country was being drifted into the Black Hills. And just before dusk he guessed a count of a thousand head of steers and cows and big calves. He let the weak stuff drop behind, trying not to feel too badly about it. He would have shot

them, but he needed every cartridge he had. Time and time again he took his feet out of his stirrups and kicked his toes against the stirrups to quicken the circulation. He dropped his knotted bridle reins over the saddlehorn and flapped his arms and mittened hands across his chest. His face was numb and stiff. His nose was no longer tingling and he knew it was frozen. Well, if he survived the winter it would be frozen many more times. He had toughed out plenty of cold winters in Montana and this was all a part of the job.

Jim was certain that he could throw in with Red Mitchell and play the game so as to get back all the cattle that slick rustler had ever stolen from the Lazy Y outfit—with compound interest. He was glad that he could pay back the girl who had taken him in and called him her Uncle Jim and treated him like he was one of her family. And Brad had told him that she'd been having a tough time of it. Her father had been a good-enough cowman, but too easygoing to get ahead like he should have. Hank Yarbury had let things take care of themselves. When he died he had left the outfit in debt and the ranch mortgaged to the hilt. And Patty was only a fifteen-year-old kid. Brad had dug in and Shorty and Judd had worked more than a year without wages, living on beans and beef. The outfit had been too short-handed to get a clean work on the country so that the Black Hills renegades had whittled on the Lazy Y cattle and sold them to Red Mitchell.

The bank at Sundance had tried to take the outfit away from Patty Yarbury, by foreclosing on the mortgage they held. She and Brad had argued and fought and begged and finally won an extension. But they had had to sell a lot of cattle at dirt-cheap prices to keep going. And it was only the past year that they had been able to hire enough cowboys to run a regular roundup wagon instead of a three-man-and-a-girl-pack spread when they worked the Lazy Y range to brand the calves in the spring and gather beef steers in the fall.

"DON'T talk hard winter, Uncle Jim," Brad had told him last night after Patty at gone to bed. "One hard winter and the Little Boss is busted flat. Man, me 'n' Shorty and Judd has talked more than a few times about slippin' off somewheres and robbin' a bank or a train and gittin' enough money thataway to keep this outfit from goin' bust. And it's only the chance we'd be takin' of goin' to the pen and leavin' her shore enough alone that's kep' us from turnin' outlaw."

So back yonder when he and Brad had tied their ropes to the wires of the drift fence and the wires had sung like bullets when the saddle ropes dallied around their saddlehorns jerked taut and the barbed wire snapped and the cattle poured through like a torrent of red water through a broken dam, Jim West had used the Texan's own argument against him.

"You boys was willin' to risk your lives and honor and freedom for the Little Boss. You can't deal me out. I'm handin' her the Diamond Cross Diamond outfit for a Christmas present some time about next April when the chinook lays the cow country bare again. It's a one-man job. And my chances are better than even."

Jim West's cold-stiffened lips spread in a grin when he followed the

drag end of his drifting herd into broken country that was timbered with scrub pine and the draws and cut coulees were thick with buck brush and the rimrock ledges broke the snow-filled wind. He had reached the edge of the Black Hills. Dusk was gathering when the cattle slowed up and quit traveling and he rode around them to see what was blocking the herd and rode into a barbed-wire fence. He took down his saddle rope and spent the next half hour tearing down the fence. His frost-cracked lips spread in a grin when he came to a padlocked wire gate and, scraping the snow from a sign tacked to the gate post, he read the black lettering painted on the weather-stained board.

KEEP OUT. THIS IS THE DIAMOND CROSS DIAMOND RANCH AND ANYBODY I DON'T LIKE WHO COMES ON MY RANGE WILL BE TREATED ACCORDIN. RED MITCHELL.

Jim West slipped the fur mitten from his right hand. His stiff fingers pulled his six-shooter from its old holster beneath the fur coat. He shot off the padlock, jerked the wire gate open and flung it aside, then rode through. And the drag end of his drifting herd went through the broken gaps in the fence and spread out to graze, pawing through the soft snow to the high grass beneath.

Jim left the cattle and, figuring out as best he could where the wagon road went, headed for Red Mitchell's home ranch. His six-shooter was now in the deep pocket of his buffalo-hide coat and all six chambers were loaded. His right hand gripped the gun as he rode up to the little cluster of log buildings and pole corrals in a sort of valley pocket in the timber-spotted Black Hills.

CHAPTER VI

DEAD MAN'S TESTAMENT

ALTHOUGH it was almost dark, no light showed inside the log cabin. No smoke came from the rock chimney. But the blizzard had not yet covered tracks made in the snowdrifts between the cabin and the big log barn fifty yards or so distant—man tracks and horse sign made within the past hour. The heavy door of the cabin was closed and the uncurtained, frost-covered windows were black in the dusk. Jim West stared at the closed door and the windows, then rode on to the barn. He had the feeling that he was being watched, that somebody inside those windows had seen him ride up, had stared at him as he sat his horse sizing up the cabin and the tracks in the snow. Those eyes, he knew, were watching him now as he deliberately reined his big brown horse and rode toward the barn.

Abruptly Jim West's hand gripped the cedar butt of his six-shooter inside the deep pocket of the buffalo coat and his pulse pounded hard in his throat. On the snow-covered flat slab of rock in front of the closed door his puckered eyes had seen bright-red bloodstains in the white snow.

Any real cowhand's first thought is to care for the horse that packs him. Jim West meant to look after his big brown horse before anything happened to him here at the Diamond Cross Diamond Ranch.

He lit a lantern he found hanging from a wooden peg just inside the barn door. The barn was empty. The horses had been turned out in a big feed yard where there was plenty of hay, and a warm spring that did not freeze over in winter. Jim West watered his horse and put him in a stall with a filled manger

and bedding. Then he headed for the cabin. He carried the lighted lantern in his right hand, his saddle gun cradled in the bend of his left arm.

He had two reasons for taking the lighted lantern. Primarily he needed its light to guide him through that snow-choked, wind-swept blackness outside. His second motive was this: That whoever was watching from the cabin would be less apt to shoot a man who moved boldly in the lantern light.

Jim lifted the latch and shoved open the heavy plank door. He stepped across the blood-spattered threshold and closed the door behind him, his puckered eyes blinking under frost-covered brows until they focused.

There had been a fire in the sheet-iron roundup stove, but it had been allowed to die out for some reason. The air inside the log cabin was stale and fouled by the conglomerate odors of tobacco smoke, spilled whiskey, old sweat-odored clothes and cooked food. And through those odors was the faint but acrid smell of gunpowder smoke that still clung in the dead air.

"STAND your hand, stranger!" The voice, harsh and strained to a croaking whisper, came from the gray-black shadows beyond the range of the lantern light.

"H'ist that light up agin' your face so's a man kin read your brand. And put down that carbine or I'll shoot the belly off yuh!"

"Take 'er easy, mister," Jim West said quietly. He leaned his saddle gun against the closed door and raised the lantern to the level of his shoulder. His free hand rubbed the frost and powdered snow from his bushy eyebrows and beard.

"I'm peaceful as all get-out," he added, grinning stiffly, "and half froze to boot."

He could make out the man now, a bulky figure stretched out full length on a bunk in the far corner. The light was too dim to make out the man's face, but Jim could see the movement of the long-barreled six-shooter that was covering him.

There was an overturned chair and a broken whiskey bottle on the floor which was spattered with dried blood. One pool of blood was still wet on the scrubbed pine-board floor underneath one of the frost-covered windows and the frost on the glass had been scraped away to make a peephole.

"If you're hurt," said Jim West flatly, "you're wastin' time makin' this gunplay." He held the lantern a little higher so that its light showed him the man on the bunk. "Better let me lend you a hand."

"Just stand your hand, I tell yuh!" the man snarled. "Who are you and where'd you come from and what fetches you here? I heard a shot just afore you rode up."

"I shot the lock off your gate. And I let down your fence and fetched you some cattle. My name don't matter. Ner where I come from. I've bin told that a man's name and pedigree don't count here in the Black Hills."

"You ain't one of Long Bob's sneakin' coyotes," the man decided finally. "You ain't anybody I ever seen before. And if you're a Johnny Law you got here too late to git Red Mitchell. Long Bob Blackburn done beat you to it. Him and his bushwhackin', double-crossin' coyotes. I'm a-dyin'."

Jim West deliberately put the lantern down on the table. He unfastened the wooden frogs of his buffalo coat and shed its heavy snow-covered weight. The wounded man

on the bunk watched him through pain-seared bloodshot green eyes. The six-shooter covered Jim West's belly with unwavering steadiness.

"No man," said Jim, "is dead till he's plumb dead. You don't need to keep that thing pointed at me. Lemme have a look at you." His voice was matter-of-fact. He rubbed his cold-stiffened hands together to put some circulation into their frost-bitten fingertips.

"Lay your hawg-laig on the table then," gritted Red Mitchell, "and have at 'er. No tricks or I'll gut-shoot yuh."

Jim West took his six-shooter from the pocket of the buffalo coat and put it on the table.

"Bar the door and drop the blinds over the winders or we might both git shot from outside," Mitchell ordered. "Though them sneakin' sons left me fer dead when they pulled out."

Jim West obeyed. Then he examined the wounded man. He had to take his jackknife and cut away Red Mitchell's shirt and undershirt after he'd removed the man's blood-soaked coonskin overcoat and his chaps.

"They got me as I come into the cabin." Red Mitchell's voice came from behind gritted teeth. "Long Bob always figgered I had a lot of money cached here. You kin see how they tore the place apart a-huntin' fer it."

"Where's your likker?" demanded Jim.

"There's a jug behind the wood box. Help yourself."

Jim uncorked the jug and poured a tin cup full. He told Red Mitchell to drink it.

"You got a bullet lodged in your shoulder. I got to cut 'er out. You'll need all your toughness, Mitchell. The other two bullets went on through. You've got a fightin' chance. That's all a tough man needs."

Jim plied the wounded man with whiskey. He made a fire in the stove and heated water to the boiling point. Red Mitchell groaned some and gritted his teeth a lot, but made no outcry as the crude surgery went on.

Finally, he lay back half unconscious and Jim finished the dressing and bandaging of the wounds. He wasn't giving Red Mitchell much of a chance to live, but he told the man to hang and rattle and that a man wasn't dead till he was plumb dead all over.

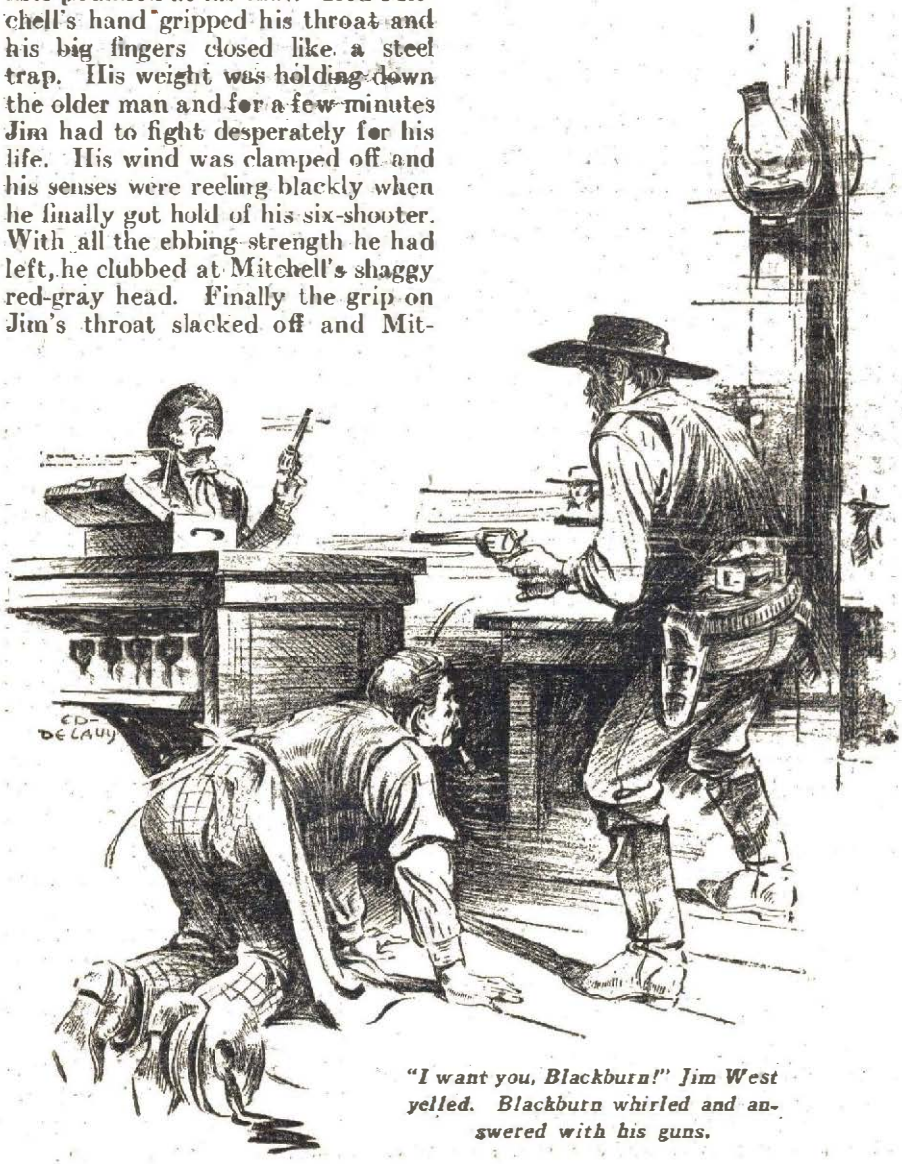
Red Mitchell dropped into a drunken, exhausted oblivion. Jim washed the blood from his hands and bare arms and set the cabin in some sort of order. Long Bob Blackburn had, as Red Mitchell said, torn the cabin apart. They had even ripped up the floor in several places.

Jim West grinned faintly at Red Mitchell's battered face. Brad Carver had done a thorough job of beating the big red-headed, red-mustached cattle rustler into submission. Then Long Bob had waylaid and shot him up. It had been a luckless twenty-four hours for Red Mitchell.

THE grizzled, bearded ex-sheriff cooked himself steak and potatoes and biscuits, and drank almost a whole pot of strong black coffee. He hid Red Mitchell's six-shooter and carbine and a sawed-off shotgun. He was wearing his own gun again and he kept listening for any man-made sounds outside. But there was only the low moan of the blizzard out there in the night. And his better judgment told him that neither Long Bob Blackburn nor any other man would be out on a night like this.

Red Mitchell stirred fretfully. Suddenly he opened his bloodshot green eyes and quit his bunk with a clumsy leap, snarling curses and swinging his fists like clubs. He was delirious. Caught off guard, Jim was knocked down by the maniacal rush. Heavy fists pounded at his face. Red Mitchell's hand gripped his throat and his big fingers closed like a steel trap. His weight was holding down the older man and for a few minutes Jim had to fight desperately for his life. His wind was clamped off and his senses were reeling blackly when he finally got hold of his six-shooter. With all the ebbing strength he had left, he clubbed at Mitchell's shaggy red-gray head. Finally the grip on Jim's throat slacked off and Mitchell's head sagged under the blows of the gun barrel and he fell across the exhausted ex-sheriff like a dead weight.

Jim West got the big inert body back on the bunk and roped Mitchell's feet together and tied him-



"I want you, Blackburn!" Jim West yelled. Blackburn whirled and answered with his guns.

down. He had to readjust the man's bandages. Then he washed the blood from his own battered face and told himself he didn't much care whether Red Mitchell ever came alive.

But Red Mitchell was tough. He kept on living. Jim unrolled a tarp-covered bedroll he found and got what sleep he could during the intermittent periods when Red Mitchell was not fighting his ropes and cursing and babbling in wild delirium.

The night was long and Jim West was thankful when the frost-covered windows showed gray, and he pulled away the blinds and took a look outside. It was still storming and the snow was drifted nearly to the low sod roof of the log cabin.

Mitchell was rational enough when he came awake. Jim told the man that he had gone locoed and tried to kill him. The wounded man lay there quietly enough. Beneath the stubble of red whiskers his bruised face was gray. Jim West spiked some black coffee with whiskey. He had to help him hold the cup to the rustler's mouth.

"I'm dyin'," Mitchell said weakly.

Jim nodded and untied his arms and legs. The dying man wanted straight whiskey and Jim gave it to him.

"All I ask is one shot at Long Bob Blackburn," Mitchell said broodingly. "Then I'd be willin' to die and to hell with it."

"I'll tend to Long Bob when I cut his sign," promised Jim. "That's what fetched me to the Black Hills. My name is Jim West. I used to be a sheriff up in Montana."

"You're the sheriff Long Bob run out o' Montana?" the rustler asked shrewdly.

Jim West flinched inside, but he grinned slowly. "I'm that same Jim West. When I cut Blackburn's sign I'll square my debt with him. Yourn to boot."

"Barney Lusk, the saloon feller, claims you was sick or somethin'. He says that Long Bob just thinks he run a bluff on you an' that you got more guts than a corral full of would-be tough hands like Blackburn. That right?"

"That's what I'm hopin' to prove, Mitchell."

The dying man's bloodshot eyes stared hard into the icy-blue eyes of the former sheriff of Chinook, Montana. He seemed satisfied with what he read there.

"You ain't a coward. You'll hang Long Bob's hide on the fence. You'll be playin' my hand out. Gimme another drink."

He asked how long Jim West figured he could live and answered his own question.

"Not more'n an hour at the most. You won't quit me?"

"I won't quit you," Jim West told him quietly.

"Not that I'm scairt to die alone, understand. But—"

"No man wants to die alone, Red."

"I reckon you're right. You said you shot the lock off my gate."

JIM told him he'd drifted here with almost a thousand head of cattle. That he had aimed to play a game on Red Mitchell. Throw in with him. And in the end get back what cattle Red had stolen from the Lazy Y outfit. And to get Long Bob Blackburn sooner or later, according to how the play came up.

Red Mitchell's bloodless lips twisted in a mirthless grin. "You'd never have got away with it, Jim West. Red Mitchell's too hard to fool thataway. I'd have ketched onto your game and you'd have bin just one more Johnny Law that never got back home from the Black

Hills. But I'll let you in on somethin' nobody knowed. I aimed to pay the little Yarbury gal fer what cattle of hers I got. But first I wanted to git even with Lazy Hank and that young Texican, Brad Carver. Bust the Lazy Y outfit. Then give the young un cash fer what cattle she'd lost. She's a game little thing. And Red Mitchell don't rob orphaned gals. I ain't that ornery. Tell her that when you see her."

"I shore will, Red."

"Long Bob never found my cache. There's over eighty thousand dollars in it."

Red Mitchell motioned with his hand, and Jim West gave him another drink.

"If this ain't a hell of a joke on Red Mitchell," grinned the dying man. "Bushwhacked by a damned two-bit outlaw he'd give shelter to. And sided at the end by a Johnny Law. You swear to kill Long Bob Blackburn?"

"I'll kill Blackburn or hang him fer murder, Mitchell."

"Find me pen and ink and paper. Write out a bill of sale for the Diamond Cross Diamond. Lock, stock and barrel. Make 'er out to Jim West. I'll sign 'er."

Jim found a pen and a bottle of ink and a sheet of paper. He made out the bill of sale and Red Mitchell signed it.

"My cache is buried about three foot deep in the last stall on the left as you go in the barn," Mitchell said, his voice very weak now. "Don't lift 'er till you know you kin git out o' the Black Hills safe with it. Take good care of my saddle horses. Give 'em to the little Yarbury gal. Tell her to pension 'em. She'll do it. Don't leave me, Jim West."

"I won't quit you, Red."

Outside, the blizzard piled the snow high against the cabin. Jim could hear the bawling of hungry cattle. The horses in the barn would be needing water. But he sat on the side of Red Mitchell's bunk and fed him whiskey out of a tin cup and talked to him about outlaws and their ways, old gun fights and the long cattle trail from Texas to Montana. And about noon Red Mitchell gripped Jim West's hand and tried to grin. His pain-seared glazing eyes closed. Red Mitchell was dead.

Jim West pulled the canvas tarp up over the dead man's face. Then he shoveled his way to the barn and cared for the horses. He hooked a team to a hayrack and spent the short daylight hours feeding hungry cattle and chopping holes in the ice in the creek to water them. He did the work of three men that afternoon and it was past dark when he went back to the cabin.

That night he wrapped Mitchell's body in a blanket and tarp and lugged it through the heavy snow to an empty tool shed. The dirt floor of the shed was not frozen, so Jim dug a grave and buried Red Mitchell. Then he took the lantern and shovel and plodded back through the piled drifts to the cabin. The wind was slacking, but the snow was falling in heavy flakes that threatened to bury the cow country deep until spring. If the storm kept up another twelve hours the Black Hills country would be snowed in for the winter.

Jim West knew that if he were snowbound here at the Diamond Cross Diamond then he was safe from unwelcome visitors. Men weren't bucking ten-foot snowdrifts to pay him a visit. Long Bob didn't aim to come back. He had turned

Red's saddle horse and work team in the feed yard, where they could get hay and water from the warm spring. Long Bob would murder a man, but he was too much of a cowhand to let that man's horses stand in the barn and starve for feed and water.

Red Mitchell had, he had told Jim West, played a hell of a joke on Long Bob and the two men who had been working for the Diamond Cross Diamond, but had double-crossed their boss by throwing in with Blackburn. Red Mitchell had protected his real cache in the barn. He had about ten thousand dollars in counterfeit currency and new currency that had been stolen within the past year. The serial numbers of that new currency were posted on every bank list in the country, and it and the counterfeit money was too dangerous to pass for at least a year. The wily Red had hidden it all in the cabin in a place where Long Bob and the two renegades, who had a notion about where the money was hidden, would find it.

"Long Bob and them two double-crossin' sons lifted that cache in the cabin," he had told Jim with grim satisfaction. "'Ten thousand dollars ain't chicken feed. But it'll land 'em behind the bars if they try to pass it. They think they lifted my real cache. They was layin' here for me when I got home from town. They let me put up my horse. As I stepped into the cabin Long Bob shot me down without warnin'. They got their horses and hightailed it for their hide-out deep in the Black Hills. They left me fer dead. They won't come back here. And they won't brag about killin' me, neither, because ornery as I might be I still got friends in these here Black Hills. And this here sayin' about a killer comin' back to where he done his murderin' is a fool lie."

JIM was too utterly exhausted now to do anything but bar the door and shed his heavy buffalo coat and pull off his overshoes. He rolled into his blankets without supper and with most of his clothes on, too weary to cook a meal or bother about undressing. But his hard blue eyes were bright and he grinned slowly to himself as he blew out the lantern light. He owned the Diamond Cross Diamond outfit, a rustler outfit in the Black Hills. He thought of the hard-bitten grizzled Brad Carver and the Little Boss. He had gotten what he'd set out to get for her. All he had to do now was hold it against the Black Hills renegades who might find out that Red Mitchell was dead and come here like a lot of wolves to claim the outfit. His best bet was to keep on playing the game close to his belly, pretend he was some nameless outlaw who claimed the outfit by right of possession. Show that bill of sale signed over to Jim West by Red Mitchell to nobody until next spring when the snowdrifts were gone and the cattle in the Diamond Cross Diamond and Lazy Y irons could be moved out of here and onto the Lazy Y range. Then and not until then could Jim West declare himself in the open. He had the winter ahead of him. Long months of short days and black nights when anything could and might happen here.

But that night Jim's slumber was deep and untroubled. He was up and had breakfast eaten and his team harnessed before daybreak. And the storm had not yet quit entirely. The sky was as gray as lead, and the air filled with powdery snow. Yesterday's tracks were buried under three feet of snow.

CHAPTER VII

SNOWBOUND!

IT was nearly a month before Jim West saw another human being. The storm had lasted five days and nights, and then the skies had cleared and the thermometer outside the cabin door told him that it was twenty below zero. But luck had given him a moon that shed enough light to work by and he had, by working eighteen hours out of every twenty-four, succeeded in caring for the cattle and horses that he never got time to count. He cut the throats of the weaker cattle and left their unskinned carcasses to freeze in the drifts. He was gambling on a long, hard winter and was not wasting precious hay on stock that was not stout to begin with.

He kept track of the days on the calendar in the cabin. He had been there twenty-five days when he finally sighted a couple of riders on a snow-covered, elevated ridge a couple or three miles distant. They sat their horses up there for almost an hour and Jim West figured they were watching him through field glasses or a telescope.

He never left the cabin without buckling on his cartridge belt and six-shooter and taking his carbine with him. He was on the watch day and night for unwelcome visitors. Now, sighting the two riders who were hardly more than two black specks in the snowbound distance, he wondered if they could be Long Bob Blackburn and one of his men, and if they would try to buck the heavy drifts to reach the Diamond Cross Diamond Ranch. The ranch was in a deep basin surrounded by rough, timbered hills. Drifts were ten, twenty and thirty feet in the coulees. A man on horseback had to keep to the ridges. The snow had settled and packed hard enough to hold a man's weight if he wore snowshoes, or a dog team and sled might make it. But the ranch was cut off from the outside world by miles of such drifts that no horse could ever break trail through. Any enemy who came here would have to come afoot with wide webbed snowshoes strapped to his feet. And to safeguard the cabin against any night attack, Jim had set a bear trap outside each window and one on the trail that passed through snowbanks as high as a man's head in places between the barn and cabin. The bear traps were concealed by a light covering of snow. Thus Jim secured his nights' sleep against a bushwhacker attack.

But nobody came. Nearly every day Jim would sight a rider or two on that high distant ridge. And sometimes for an hour or two at a stretch his movements would be watched. But he had no visitors.

Red Mitchell had laid in a winter's supply of grub. Jim West ate and slept and labored, doing the work of several men in those daylight and moonlit hours from early breakfast until late supper time. Only on rare occasions did he take the time to cook a meal in between. He wolfed cold grub and coffee without taking off his fur cap or the fur-lined boots he had made of tanned beaver pelts he had found in Red Mitchell's big log storehouse.

A fur coat was far too heavy and cumbersome to work in. Jim went coatless, wearing the bright-red flannel shirts he had found in the cabin. Red Mitchell seemingly had had a liking for these double-breasted red flannel shirts. He had been of the same build as Jim West, and the latter found that the shirts fit him well.

Jim had a special reason for wearing the red flannel shirts. If those men who watched every day mistook him for Red Mitchell, so much the better. He figured that sooner or later the news that Mitchell had been shot would spread throughout the country. Long Bob Blackburn was too loud-mouthed, too much of a braggart, to keep even a dangerous secret. The long-geared outlaw was bound to drop some hint that Red Mitchell had been shot.

And now, if chance watchers saw a man moving around the place and mistook him for Red Mitchell, the Black Hills country would have a mystery to argue about of a long evening. And Long Bob Blackburn would be puzzled and worried and scared. Those renegades might not believe in ghosts, but they did know that many a tough man had been shot to pieces and recovered. And Jim knew that if one of those distant watchers was Long Bob Blackburn then that cold-blooded killer was having some mighty uneasy nights. And that sure pleased Jim West mightily.

On the other hand, it might mean that Long Bob Blackburn would sooner or later come back here some night and try to finish the killing job he fancied he had bungled. Then let him come. Let him step in one of those steel-jawed bear traps. Sheriff Jim West would have his man.

"I'm all set," he told himself grimly, "to ketch my bear meat." And he let it go at that.

Any man who came to kill would come at night. Because if he came by daylight he would be visible for a mile, and that mile would be slow going and would have to be traveled under the cover of Jim West's carbine.

SO it was not any thought of being bushwhacked that tormented Jim West. It was the awakened memory of his past. And the most poignant of all was the heart-twisting grief of his son's death. His boy, Malcolm, killed in a train wreck. Now he could recall almost word for word the Helena *Record's* vivid description of the train wreck as relayed by telegraph from the scene of the accident that had taken the lives of a score or more of passengers. Many of the bodies had been maimed and burned until identification was well nigh impossible and the list of dead among the passengers riding first class had been compiled from the record book of the train conductor and verified by the railroad authorities. Dr. Malcolm West of Johns Hopkins was among those wreck victims whose bodies had been mutilated and charred beyond all recognition.

"If only my brain hadn't cracked," Jim West kept blaming himself, "I'd have ketched a train and gone East and at least given the boy a decent burial. But I went to pieces like an old woman. Don't recollect what I said or done except that Long Bob Blackburn run some kind of a whizzer on me and I stood there at Barney Lusk's bar and seems to me I was drinkin' whiskey. And it was the first time I ever touched likker in my life, because my daddy died of the drunken horrors."

His mind was hazy about the trail from Chinook to the Lazy Y Ranch, where Patty Yarbury had taken him in and thawed that hard, bitter lump inside of his heart with her understanding and loyalty and comradeship. The Little Boss had cured his mind, but she was not here now go soften his grief. That was a thing he had to fight out alone. He would have to forget all the high hopes and the tremendous pride he had nursed

along about Malcolm coming back to Chinook and hanging out his shingle. Dr. Malcolm West. His own big husky son Mac who loved life and even as a kid had a way of doctoring a sick man or tying up a bullet wound or knife cut, or setting a busted bone. They had been pardners. Mac had always called him Jim. Treated him like a pal. Laughing at the same kind of things that struck them funny. Sharing long silences when they camped together on an elk or deer hunt after the first snowfall. Pardners. They'd planned on always being pardners and never for an instant had they ever let any kind of a shadow of doubt about their future together mar their dreaming.

Sheriff Jim West had gotten his mail that morning, as he always did. He had stood there with the crowd at the post office, taking his few letters and his copy of the Helena *Record*. A few minutes later he had sat down in his big easy-chair at the office and ripped off the cover of the newspaper. The first thing his eyes had fastened on were the big headlines telling of the train wreck back East.

THEN the heavy black print had jumped into his eyes, like a coiled black diamond rattlesnake striking at him. The name of his own son there among the dead. The list was made out in alphabetical order and the name of Dr. Malcolm West was the last one on the list. The last name. Right there at the bottom. Dr. Malcolm West.

It was like being struck between the eyes by a coiled rattler. That's how it had hit Jim West. And the horrible poison of it had sunk deep into his brain as he sat there for hours in his big easy-chair with that newspaper in his hand. And part of Jim West had died there in that chair. The part of him that let in the sunshine and the song of the meadow larks in the cottonwood trees outside. The part of him that wanted to live and could never live again.

Snowbound now and all alone, Jim West had to fight it out for himself. He had no desire to keep on living, now that his boy, Mac, was dead. Mac was the part of his life that counted. The world was bleak and empty. It no longer held anything that a man wanted to live for. And the easiest way out would be to get tanked up on the whiskey Red Mitchell had left behind. Wander out into a snowbank and go to sleep and never wake up again. That was the easiest way out. That was the way Jim West wanted to go. It was the thing he had to fight off like an exhausted man fights off sleep.

But he had Red Mitchell's remuda of a hundred head of horses to feed and water, nearly two thousand head of bawling cattle to keep alive. And he had to live long enough to give those horses and cattle and this Diamond Cross Diamond Ranch to the Little Boss. He owed that much to the Little Boss. He remembered her songs, and the way her voice sounded when she sang "Annie Laurie" and "Old Black Joe" and "Bring Back My Bonnie To Me." The way her little nose crinkled and her warm gray-brown hazel eyes squinted almost shut when she laughed.

So Jim West shoveled snow and pitched hay and chopped open waterholes and sanded the ice to keep the cattle and horses from slipping when they drank at the long troughs cut in the thick ice of the creek. He rigged a big snow plow and hooked four horses to it and cleared the snow off the flat pasture land around the ranch. And at night he was too

tired to think, and when his thoughts got too black and morbid and brooding he would remember the Little Boss.

CHAPTER VIII

TROUBLE AT THE LAZY Y

JIM WEST continued to wear the red shirts that had belonged to Red Mitchell, and he discouraged daytime visitors by shooting over their heads when they came within carbine range. He repaired the fence and wired the gate shut, and with some red paint he found in the storehouse he repainted the weather-dimmed lettering on Red Mitchell's sign. He viewed the repainted sign with a faint grin. He had added:

I GOT SHOT BY MEN I TRUSTED. FROM NOW ON I DON'T TRUST NOBODY. THIS MEANS YOU. KEEP OUT OR GET SHOT!

Jim West backed it up with his carbine. Riders who came within gun range felt the warning whine of bullets above their heads. They carried back to their renegade hide-outs the story that Red Mitchell was plenty alive and had gone plumb locoed. And throughout the Black Hills the rumor spread that Long Bob Blackburn and the two renegades he had hired away from Red Mitchell had tried to murder the owner of the Diamond Cross Diamond outfit and had bungled the job. Now Red had turned hermit and the hospitality he had once extended was changed to a distrust that made it dangerous to get within gun range of his place. They cussed out Long Bob to his face and behind his back, calling him the man who had tried to kill the goose that had laid for them many a golden egg. Red Mitchell had supplied the renegades with grub and clothes and cartridges and whiskey at fair prices, and he had given them a market for stolen horses and cattle and acted as a "fence" when they had money from bank or train holdups to trade for safe money.

Those renegades turned on Long Bob Blackburn and he quit the Black Hills before they killed him. With him went the two men who had sided him when he had robbed and bushwhacked Red Mitchell.

They were the riders Jim West had sighted that day, weeks after the big storm had cleared away. They had scouted the ranch and watched the red-shirted man feeding there. Long Bob didn't believe in ghosts. Red Mitchell, he decided, must have been too tough to die, because down yonder he was feeding cattle. And Long Bob and his two pardners would have taken oath that no human being on earth could have lived through that storm and made it to Red's ranch. That red-shirted man just had to be Red Mitchell.

The Black Hills were no longer a safe hide-out for them, Long Bob told his two companions. Red Mitchell would hunt them down when he got around to it and he'd kill them where he cut their sign. Long Bob had gotten drunk and done some loud-mouthed bragging. Hinting that he had rubbed out Red Mitchell in fair fight. Now men called him a liar. Some of them had been warned off by bullets that sang a death song close to their ears. They had read the newly lettered sign and they called Long Bob Blackburn some hard names. He was quitting the Black Hills before some of Red Mitchell's renegade friends took a notion to string him up.

Long Bob got drunk again on his way out of the Black Hills. He tried to talk his two companions into paying a night visit to the Diamond Cross Diamond Ranch. He got them as far as the wired gate. He got off

to tear down the gate and stepped into a bear trap Jim West had set in the snow beneath the newly painted sign. He let out a howl of pain as the heavy steel jaws snapped his leg. Luck and the fact that his leg was protected by heavy fur chaps saved him from a fractured leg bone. His two companions freed him from the bear trap. The leg was not broken, but the muscles and nerves were badly bruised and the pain of it was nauseating. All three of them were glad enough to get away from there before they were caught and shot down.

The next day Jim West found the sprung bear trap and the tracks of three men. He drew his own conclusions. He reckoned that Long Bob and his two renegades would not be repeating their nocturnal prowling.

So the Black Hills said that Red Mitchell was too tough and ornery to kill and that he had turned hermit and called all men his enemies. They gave the Diamond Cross Diamond Ranch a wide berth.

MEANWHILE at the Lazy Y Ranch Patty Yarbury and Brad Carver believed that their uncle Jim was dead. After the first blizzard had spent itself, searching parties from Sundance had gone out after some deer hunters who had been caught in the blizzard. They found the deer hunters half frozen and half starved in a deserted cabin near the Black Hills, and they had also found the remains of a man and a brown horse that had died in the storm. Wolves had gotten there first and the result was grisly and horrible. Man and horse had been badly torn. A grave was gouged out of the frozen ground, and the mangled remains were buried. They said the man's hair and beard were white and he had been wearing a buffalo coat. Their description had fitted Uncle Jim and his big brown gelding.

"But we won't know for sure till spring, Little Boss," Brad did his best to console Patty. "Like as not Uncle Jim is huggin' Red Mitchell's stove right now. When the snow gits packed so I kin make the trip I'll take a pasear to Red Mitchell's place and see if Uncle Jim is there."

Brad Carver kept his promise. He was turned back by the red-shirted man, who did not let him get within shouting distance. Brad read the new sign nailed to the wired gate and he heard the story in town that Red Mitchell was wintering alone and letting no man, friend or enemy, within rifle range of the place. Brad rode back to the Lazy Y Ranch with the bad news.

The Lazy Y only had two men now. Judd had gotten lost the third day of the blizzard and had frozen to death.

It was a bitter Christmas at the Lazy Y Ranch. Hay was running short. They were killing off all the weak cattle at the line camps and at the home ranch, and saving the feed for the horses. The bulk of the Lazy Y cattle had drifted into the Black Hills. Even Brad had to admit that the Lazy Y outfit was broke. They would be lucky if they could save the remuda of saddle horses and work teams.

"I'll apply for a schoolteacher job," Patty told Brad. "You can tackle your friend, Barney Lusk, for that job tending bar. It looks like Shorty will have to wait for his winter's wages."

The chinook wind cut away the snowdrifts too late to save what starving cattle still remained alive on the Lazy Y range. They had saved the horses and that was about all that was left of the outfit.

Patty Yarbury got ready to quit

"I've done the best I can," the doctor said, "but Jim's got one chance in a thousand."

the ranch and move to Sundance to take a job teaching school. Brad helped her pack. They packed the belongings she would want to take. Then they started cleaning out the bunkhouse.

Uncle Jim West's tarp-covered blankets were just as he had left them on his bunk. The bed neatly made and the metal snaps of the heavy tarp hooked in their rings. Neither of them spoke as Brad unsnapped the rings and set about the job of folding the blankets and soogans narrower to make a more compact bedroll.

"Look here, Little Boss," he said suddenly. "Uncle Jim's wallet and somethin' wrapped in a chunk of canvas. You better take a look at 'em."

They stared at one another in blank silence as Patty Yarbury counted the eight hundred dollars in the wallet. The Lazy Y bank ac-

count had been used up a month ago. This looked like all the money in the world.

"Uncle Jim," Brad said huskily, "would shore want you to have that money, Little Boss. It'll pay your board and room in town till school opens in September."

"It will buy hay for the horses, Brad," Patty contradicted. "It will run the outfit another few months. I'll make every dollar count for ten. We'll hang and rattle. Uncle Jim would want it that way."

She untied the canvas wrapping and unfolded the newspaper. It took her half an hour or more to discover the name of Dr. Malcolm West on the list of the dead victims of the train wreck.

"Dr. Malcolm West," she said aloud. "He must have been some kin to Uncle Jim."

"Was Uncle Jim's last name West?" asked Brad.

HIS name was Jim West," Patty said quietly. "He used to be a sheriff up in Montana. He didn't want me to tell you or anybody who he was. I've kept that promise. You see, Brad, he left Montana under a black cloud. It had to do with an outlaw named Long Bob Blackburn. That was one reason he was so determined to drift with those cattle into the Black Hills. He hoped to trail down this Long Bob Blackburn and clear the stain of cowardice from his name. But now Jim West is dead. And he didn't get his chance to clear his name. And this Dr. Malcolm West is—"

"Is in Sundance right now!" Brad Carver interrupted her, his voice quickened with excitement. "He wasn't killed in that train wreck. His face is scarred and marked from the cuts and burns he got, and he walks with a limp. He was six months in a hospital. Doc West is practicin' right now at Sundance. He come back to Chinook and started to pick up his father's trail. He got in touch with Barney Lusk. You know why Barney Lusk sold out at Chinook and finally come to Sundance? Because he heard Long Bob Blackburn was makin' the Black Hills his hide-out.

"Barney hoped to cut Jim West's sign by cold-trailin' Long Bob. And Doc West is in Sundance for the same reason. Jumpin' Jehoshophat! And all the time Jim West was your Uncle Jim! And me thinkin' his name was Uncle Jim Yarbury!

"Me 'n' you are goin' to town right now," he told the bewildered girl. "Chinky John kin feed the horses. You've bin here on this ranch all winter. It's time you went to town, anyhow. I want you to meet Barney. And Mac West is the finest feller you ever shook hands with. When he makes calls in the country he packs a saddle gun. He's the only sawbones I ever seen that wears a ca'tridge belt and six-shooter. He's packin' that gun for Long Bob Blackburn. Barney calls him Mac, but Sundance calls him the doc that wiped out that smallpox that was killin' men and women and kids like the blizzard wiped out the Lazy Y cattle. He hit town when the smallpox had 'em prayin' and panicky, and the town doctor down with it. Doc West is a hero in Sundance. Let's git saddled, Little Boss, and head for town."

Patty Yarbury nodded and shoved the money-filled wallet into the pocket of her heavy wool riding pants. She folded the newspaper and put it in its canvas wrapping and shoved it into her coat pocket.

As they headed for Sundance,

Patty told Brad that the money belonged to Dr. Malcolm West, and that he would have to take it. Brad Carver shrugged his shoulders and said that it looked like the Lazy Y was sure enough busted and that the Little Boss would be riding herd on a bunch of school kids when it was beef roundup time. He didn't tell her that he and Shorty had it made up between them to ride into the Black Hills and gather every head of Lazy Y stuff they found on the Diamond Cross Diamond range, even if they had to kill Red Mitchell to get the job done. And if Red Mitchell tried to head them off with hot lead they'd throw a few hunks of lead on their own accord and they wouldn't shoot to miss.

CHAPTER IX

A SHERIFF'S COMEBACK

THE warm chinook wind hit the Diamond Cross Diamond Ranch sometime during the night. Jim West heard the low moan of it and heard the *drip-drip* of snow melting from the sod roof of the log cabin. He quit his bunk and flung open the cabin door and stood there in his long heavy red flannel underwear and grinned as the warm wind struck his face. He wanted to sing or yell for joy, but he had forgotten how. The best he could manage was that slow grin.

He cooked and ate breakfast, and by the time he got out to the barn the melting snow was slush under his feet. By daybreak there was water running down the creek on top of the ice.

The long hard winter of '86-'87 was over. The chinook was cutting away the packed drifts. Coulees were running water and by noon the ridges were bare of snow and the sun was warm in the cloudless sky.

Jim West's long isolation was at an end. He felt like a man who has served a long prison term and was now free. Cattle and horses were pawing through the slush to the feed that had been buried for months. The haystacks were just about gone, one stack was all that was left. Jim scattered a couple of loads of hay in the horse pasture and unhooked the team and turned them loose.

He took a pick and shovel and spent an hour digging in the last stall on the left. He dug up tin cans and tin boxes filled with gold and currency, a whole flock of them. Then he dumped the money into two canvas sacks and tied the sacks together.

Jim West saddled his big brown gelding, tied the sacks of money on his saddle, and hit the trail for Sundance. He pulled down the wire gate with his saddle rope and rode on. But in spite of his great impatient haste to reach town and bank that money in Patty Yarbury's name, then ride with his good news to the Lazy Y Ranch, Jim West had taken time to treat himself to a hot sponge bath. He had trimmed his beard to a respectable length and dressed himself in Red Mitchell's best red flannel shirt and a new pair of heavy woolen California pants and new boots and hat.

That winter of hard labor had toughened his muscles and made him look years younger than the haggard, beaten white-haired man the Little Boss had called Uncle Jim. He rode straight-backed, and his puckered blue eyes were as bright as the sunny sky overhead.

He had eighty thousand dollars in gold and currency tied to his saddle, a bill of sale to the Diamond Cross Diamond Ranch in his pocket, two

thousand head of Lazy Y and Diamond Cross Diamond cattle marked down in the tally book he carried in the pocket of his bright-red flannel shirt. He was giving it all to the girl he called the Little Boss. Then he was hunting down Long Bob Blackburn. He'd take him back to Chinook for hanging. Or if Long Bob showed fight, he'd kill him. Fetch his dead carcass to Sundance to show Barney Lusk. Then take it to Chinook to show them that Jim West had cleaned his slate.

Beyond that, Jim West dared not think. His calculations ended there. His boy Mac was dead. There wasn't much else to live for.

The coulees were swimming, so Jim rode the ridges, the big brown gelding splashing through the slush and melted snow and mud. It was dark before Jim reached Sundance. He saw the lights of the town in the distance. His first stop would be Barney Lusk's First and Last Chance Saloon. He'd put his sacks of money in Barney's safe. Take on a restaurant-cooked meal. Smoke a cigar. Swap yarns with Barney, get all the range news. Tonight he'd ride on to the Lazy Y Ranch and surprise Brad Carver and the Little Boss. Hand her the biggest Christmas present a game little girl ever got.

He'd seen hundreds of carcasses strewn over the part of the Lazy Y range he had crossed that afternoon. Piles of shriveled hides and bones and hoofs and horns. All that was left of Patty Yarbury's cattle. He had passed a pile of rocks and knew that a man lay buried there. The grave bore no name. Jim West had no way of knowing that Brad Carver was planning to dig up the bones of the man buried there and move them to the Lazy Y Ranch and mark the grave "Uncle Jim."

Barney Lusk's saloon, Jim knew, would be at the edge of town. The First and Last Chance Saloon. Where the cowboy got his first drink on entering town and his last town drink as he headed back for ranch or roundup camp.

Jim West rode along in the moonlight. Along the wagon road that was fetlock-deep in melting snow and mud. At last the lights of the First and Last Chance Saloon showed. Three saddled horses stood at the long hitch rack, their reins over the long pole, but not tied. Range horses were broken to stand for hours without tying.

EVEN as Jim West pulled up he sensed that something was wrong inside the saloon. No tipsy songs or loud voices came from within. And above the short swinging half-doors he could see Barney Lusk standing behind the bar. Barney's big hands were raised above the level of his heavy shoulders. His battered-looking red face was mottled with rage and he was cussing through clamped teeth.

Three men stood there in the middle of the floor. They had six-shooters in their hands. They had a dozen or more customers lined up facing the wall, their hands arised over their heads.

The tallest of the three holdup men was cussing Barney Lusk, calling him every foul name he could think of. The other two men were helping themselves now to currency piled up on a couple of poker tables and the money they had made Barney take out of his till.

The voice of that tall holdup man struck Jim West's ears and made his heart quicken. That was Long Bob Blackburn's voice! That was Long

Bob standing there cussing Barney Lusk.

"I hear you made the brag, Barney, that you'd come to Wyoming to git me," Long Bob was taunting. "That you was playin' out the hand that yellow-bellied Sheriff Jim West dropped when he coyoted up at Chinook. Well, here I am. I come to give you your chance. I'm gut-shootin' you as quick as the boys here take up the collection."

One of the men lined up facing the wall turned his head part way around, showing a badly scarred cheek. His right hand started to lower a little.

"Don't, Mac!" Barney Lusk's voice boomed like a gun. "Keep 'em up, you young fool! They got you covered! You'll git shot in the back!"

Jim West quit his saddle and slid his six-shooter from its old holster. He stepped through the swinging half-doors, and his voice, hard, flat-toned, brought Long Bob Blackburn and his two men around with a jerk.

"I'm Sheriff Jim West from Chinook! I want you, Blackburn!"

Three guns were blazing at him in the same split second. Jim West felt the burning thudding impact of the heavy lead slugs. His own six-shooter was spewing fire, sending bullet after bullet into Long Bob Blackburn's lanky body. Long Bob's knees were buckling. Blood was spilling from his slack-jawed ugly mouth. He was dead before his knees gave way and he lurched forward and sprawled face downward on the floor. There was a smoking gun in the hand of the man with the scarred face.

Jim West swayed like a drunken man. Barney Lusk vaulted the bar and caught him before he fell. Then Jim reckoned that he was dead and gone to wherever the dead go because that man with the scarred face was his boy Mac. Changed. Scarred. Wearing a mustache and a short pointed beard to hide a scarred jaw. Limping. But it was Mac's voice.

"*Jim! Jim!*"

"Mac! It *is* you, Mac!"

Barney Lusk lifted Jim West in his arms and carried him, like he'd carry a baby, outside and down the street. Dr. Malcolm West went sprinting ahead to get things ready in his office.

THEN Jim was lying on a long white table and Mac had his sleeves rolled up and was cutting away Jim's clothing. The young doctor's face with that pointed black beard was white as chalk.

"Take 'er easy, Mac," grinned Jim West. "Nothin' this side of hell kin kill me now." His voice was steady and his eyes were bright as blue lights and that slow grin was on his mouth.

"Dr. Malcolm West," said Jim softly. "You got a sign over your door, Mac?"

"The sign I found in your office at Chinook. The same one you had made and ready for me, Jim. Don't try to talk. Save your strength. I have to operate right now, Jimmer. This is chloroform."

"I can't die now, Mac. Not now. Hold off with that chloroform a minute. Barney, git them sacks off my saddle. Bill of sale in my pocket. Tally book. Give 'em to the Little Boss. It's her outfit. Damned if you didn't look shore comical with your hands in the air, you ol' wart-hawg. Sputterin' and cussin'. Mac, I ain't got time right now to ask you how come you ain't dead, but you shore look like a real doctor with that beard. Have at 'er, doc. But

don't brag later about savin' my life. The Lord done that when he give you back to me just now. I ain't got a chance to die now. Me 'n' you'll go huntin' once more . . . pardners . . . Doc West—"

"You sure saved our bacon, Sheriff Jim West." Malcolm West talked as he held the chloroform-saturated sponge against his father's bearded face.

"Long Bob and his two renegades walked into the saloon and had the drop on us before we knew what it was all about," he was explaining. "Broke up two big poker games and an argument I was having with Barney about who was the greatest heavyweight prize fighter. Then you stepped into the place and, in spite of those whiskers, I recognized you, Jim. That grin of yours. Your eyes. And then you told that long-complected son of a snake who you were and it was 'Kitty, bar the door.' You got 'im, Jim. You got the big-mouthed liar that bragged he had made a bunch quitter out o' you!

"I . . . got 'im . . . Mac . . . Doc West—"

"Take 'er easy, Jim—"

Dr. Malcolm West gave his father one chance in a thousand. And he said a silent prayer up to God that his years at Johns Hopkins and his vacations spent as ambulance man for Bellevue Hospital in New York had given his hands the delicate skill they now needed. Had given his surgeon's brain its cunning, his nerves their steady courage. He would need them now as he never had and never would again need them. Because this was his father. His pardner.

Barney Lusk came in. With him was the tall, grizzled Texan Mac knew ramrodded the Lazy Y outfit. With them was a girl in cowpuncher clothes. Her face was white under its tan. But her eyes were shining and her lips pulled in a tight line.

"Boiling water. Clean bandages," Mac hurled at her. "Scrub your hands and arms. Put on one of those surgical gowns. Fast, girl. Split seconds count. Don't lose your nerve. Tie your head up. Scrub your hands."

Somehow Patty Yarbury managed. She had quick wits and plenty of courage, and her hands moved quickly and steadily. She had cleansed and dressed and bandaged all sorts of injuries men got around cattle and broncs and in fights. The sight of blood did not make her faint. And whenever she looked at her uncle Jim lying there as though he was asleep with that faint grin still on his bearded mouth she felt her heart singing with happiness. Patty Yarbury wasn't fainting. But she did have to fight back the impulse to smooth back the thick silvery hair from the forehead that was so white above the rest of a face that was scarred black with the repeated frostbite of the long winter.

Dr. Malcolm West gave orders in a crisp, brittle voice. Patty obeyed with an alacrity that was all that any surgeon could ask of a nurse assisting at a fast and dangerous and delicate operation. She watched his rubber-gloved hands work. Shining, razor-edged instruments turned red and were dropped into the boiling water. Clamps. Sponges. Three blood-dripping leaden slugs dropped on the metal tray. Needle and surgical thread closed the incisions. Bandages were fastened. Then Patty Yarbury got clean linen and made the bed in the room behind the office. Malcolm West's bed. And when Jim West lay between clean white sheets, his head on the clean

pillow, Mac West looked across the bed and into the tear-dimmed eyes of the girl they called the Little Boss. His blue eyes seemed to see her for the first time, and he smiled gravely.

"I've done the best job I know how to do," he said quietly. "The rest is up to God."

Mac West had his father's eyes. The same slow grin. And the same quiet, soft-toned voice. The Little Boss nodded and smiled.

BARNEY LUSK had taken Brad Carver back to the First and Last Chance Saloon. He told Brad that one of Long Bob's renegade pardners was still alive, and was talking. He wanted to get some things off his chest before he died, and Brad had better listen because it had to do with the killing five years ago of Hank Yarbury.

It was half an hour before Barney and Brad returned. They found Patty Yarbury and Mac West sitting side by side close to the bed. And Jim West was awake, and his bright blue eyes were watching them.

"You two young uns," grinned Jim West, "needn't worry about me. I'll live to dance at your weddin'."

Then Jim West closed his eyes. Mac West found Patty Yarbury's hand and her fingers tightened in his. She was blushing, and Mac West grinned faintly. She smiled the answer to the question in his eyes.

"Sheriff Jim West," Mac remarked, "never broke a promise in his life."

"Neither did the Little Boss," said Brad Carver softly, and he and Barney slipped out of the room and headed for the First and Last Chance Saloon.

The Little Boss and Mac West had not seen Brad Carver and Barney Lusk. Nor had they heard Brad's almost whispered remark. They sat there looking into each other's eyes and something happened inside their hearts and it was as if they had always known one another and had been waiting all their lives for this moment. Later they were to sit by the hour and talk and Jim West would lie propped up in bed by pillows and listen and sometimes get in a few words. God and his boy Mac and the Little Boss, he told Barney and Brad Carver later, were a combination that nothing could beat.

But right now Mac and the Little Boss had no need of words. The man they both loved was going to live. He had promised to dance at their wedding. He had done all the talking in those brief moments that brought them together.

In the back room of the saloon Barney Lusk and Brad Carver counted the money and read the bill of sale signed by Red Mitchell and read the figures in Jim West's brand tally book.

"Jim West killed the bushwhacker that murdered Hank Yarbury," said Brad. "He got the Diamond Cross Diamond outfit and saved the Lazy Y.

"He was wearin' one of Mitchell's red shirts," declared Barney. "It was Jim West, not Red Mitchell, that played the locoed hermit all winter at the Diamond Cross Diamond Ranch. This money is Red's cache. The money we took off Long Bob and them two other dead killers is counterfeit and stolen money. Wait till Chinook hears the story of Sheriff Jim West's comeback. They'll give him the town."

"Uncle Jim kin hand Chinook back to 'em when they do," said Brad Carver. "He's stayin' with the Lazy Y outfit. You seen how Mac

and the Little Boss was lookin' at one another. Mac's job is here. Sundance won't never let him move away. And the outfit belongs to Jim West. Sundance needs a sheriff like Uncle Jim to clean out the Black Hills."

Barney Lusk took a silver sheriff's star from the pocket of his vest. "This is Jim West's badge. I fetched it with me when I left Chinook. We'll pin it on him when Mac says he's well enough to stand the excitement. And that'll be before long. Did you see what I seen after Jim told 'em he'd live to dance at their weddin'?"

"I seen 'em look at one another and Mac was holdin' the Little Boss' hand—"

"Yeah," chuckled Barney Lusk, filling two small glasses from a bottle of his private-stock whiskey. "And I was watchin' Jim West. Jim opened his right eye and grinned at me and then shut his eye again. They never even noticed."

Barney Lusk and Brad Carver touched their filled glasses.

"To the gamest peace officer that ever lived, bar none!"

"To the man that saved the outfit for the Little Boss!"

"Jim West," said Barney Lusk.

"Uncle Jim!" Brad Carver's voice was husky.

THE Lazy Y's one other rider, Shorty, had just ridden to town to drown his sorrow. The bartender pointed to the tarp-covered bodies of Long Bob and the other two outlaws. Then motioned toward the back room.

"You'll find Barney and Brad Carver in back. I think they're about to git on a rip-snortin' drunk. They'll tell you why."

Shorty headed for the back room, his spurs jingling. He heard the crash of two broken glasses flung in a corner. As he opened the door, Barney was reaching into a cupboard for two more glasses.

"Make it three," said Shorty. "It's bin a long winter. No more Lazy Y cattle. No more hay. Ol' Judd dead and the outfit gone bust. I'm gonna git drunk an' howl like a wolf. What right you got to be grinnin' like a Texican ape, you Brad?"

"We'll drink solemn to Judd," said Brad Carver, the grin wiped from his face. "And bust the glasses. Then we'll drink to all the money in the world you see stacked on this poker table. And to the bill of sale to the Diamond Cross Diamond Ranch that now belongs to the outfit. And we'll bust them glasses. Then we'll drink to the health, happiness and marriage of Mac West and the Little Boss. And bust them three glasses. And then we'll fill three more glasses and drink to Uncle Jim West, the next Sheriff of Sundance, and the real Big Boss of the Lazy Y and Diamond Cross Diamond outfits. And them glasses we'll save to fill again and once more and a few more times after that. And ol' Judd a-ridin' high on the Big Range will be with us in speerit."

"You'll ketch up with the latest news directly, Shorty," chuckled Barney Lusk. "Drink hearty. The winter of '86-'87 is over!"

And in the room back of Mac West's office the Little Boss was talking in a soft whisper, telling Mac West about an old vest with a mended back. A vest that she was going to get out of her trunk. Mac would find the sheriff's star that had left its unfaded imprint on that old vest, and they would make Jim West wear it at the wedding.

THE END.

RANGE SAVVY

by H. FREDRIC YOUNG

The lightning gun wranglers of the West used flawless judgment not only in choosing the right gun, which had to have the necessary shortness of barrel, and not over a four-pound trigger pull, but in the design of a holster as well.

But it remained for an Indian to design the belt holster which was considered the best in its field. The Threepersons belt holster was invented by the famous Cherokee Indian peace officer, Tom Threepersons. It was mechanically perfect for the quick draw, having the three vital qualifications for this use: 1. Holding a six-gun no tighter than by friction itself. 2. Exposing to the exact degree, butt, hammer and trigger of the gun. 3. Slanting on the belt so as to offer the least possible distance for the gun to travel to become horizontal, and to offer the least resistance to the barrel sticking or dragging when drawn.

"Pulling leather" is one of those expressions of pure invention fostered by the American puncher. It was probably first voiced in some bronc-stomping pen with, for an audience, but two or three whooping punchers. But it has found its way into the big-time rodeos, and means certain disqualification for those who partake of its measures of safety. "Pulling leather" simply means that a cowboy has more than met his equal in the way of a bucker, and is hanging on to every available item of saddle leather his clawing fingers can touch to retain his seat on the storm deck.

The excellent butchering ability of a mountain lion is well attested by those familiar with the habits of these beasts. When they make a kill, they drag it into a thicket and dress it in a neat and thorough manner. After satisfying their hunger, they carefully cover the carcass with leaves, no doubt to keep off flies and the rays of the sun. Porcupine hides have often been found turned completely wrong side out, just as if the porky had been skinned by man's expert hand. No one knows just how the lion manages to do this without being stuck with the quills, but apparently he has no difficulty, for many of the sharp-quilled animals are devoured by lions.

Behind the naming of the giant California redwood tree, there is an interesting character. Long years ago there lived a Cherokee Indian named Sequo Yah. It was he who invented the Cherokee alphabet, and he taught it to other Cherokees by writing it out on leaves and helped them develop a form of writing long before the white man knew of its existence. In 1828 the missionaries adopted it and used it in a magazine published for the Indians. For some reason which is not known, Sequo Yah was banished from Alabama with the other members of his tribe. He died in 1843. In 1846, when Endlicher was preparing his catalogue of the cone-bearing trees, he named the great California redwood trees sequoias in honor of Sequo Yah, who invented the Cherokee alphabet.

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

KILLER BAIT

BY HOMER KING GORDON

Two black-winged birds were swinging high over head in the blue haze above the clearing when Sheriff Ed Flannagan and his deputy, Park Hanson, drove up to old Dad Burbeck's cabin. Hanson was driving. He stopped the team and cramped the wheels of the buckboard so that Flannagan could get out.

One of the sheriff's ankles was bandaged and he had a crutch and a cane beside him. He looked at the cabin a moment before making any attempt to get out of the buckboard.

A man was sitting on a bench along the cabin wall and beside the half-open cabin door. An old hound lay under the bench. When the buckboard stopped, the dog whined uneasily and sidled off around the cabin.

"Lester Mack," muttered Hanson.

"I got eyes," the sheriff said shortly. "Come here, Mack, an' help me down. Damn this ankle, anyway."

The man on the bench came over. Thin, middle-aged, his Levis were clean but shabby and his old leather jacket was frayed and worn at the armholes and cuffs.

"Where's Dad?" Flannagan asked. "Some kid came in an' said to burn leather gettin' up here."

"Dad's in there." Mack's voice was toneless. "I reckon a few hours more or less won't matter any to him now. When I rode over this morning I found his door open. I looked in. Saw right away there wasn't any use goin' in and messin' things up. One of the neighbor kids come by and I told him to ride down and get you up here quick."

Sheriff Flannagan took his cane and pushed the door open and looked inside. The room was a shambles.

Chairs were overturned. Drawers and shelves were ripped out of place and clothes, provisions, and old newspapers and magazines, littered the floor. Old Dad Burbeck lay sprawled across the kitchen table, his glassy eyes half open, and a bloody flap of hair and skin showing where a bullet had all but torn off one side of his head.

The sheriff sighed and turned around to his deputy who was still sitting in the buckboard holding the team.

"Go down and round up Doc Crocker," Flannagan ordered. "This is a coroner's job."

"But—" Hanson gave a meaning glance at Lester Mack, and the sheriff scowled at him impatiently.

"Git started. I don't aim to stay up here all night."

Hanson snapped the lines. After nearly upsetting the light buckboard, he headed the team of buckskin ponies out of the clearing. Out behind the cabin the old dog howled mournfully.

"Go see if you can't shut that dog up," the sheriff told Lester Mack. "I want to look around inside here an' I don't want to be bothered."

"Sure," Mack agreed.

He walked off around the cabin whistling softly. When he had gone Flannagan took a soiled envelope from his jacket pocket and reread the scrap of paper it con-

tained. The message was written on the torn back of a brown paper sack. It read:

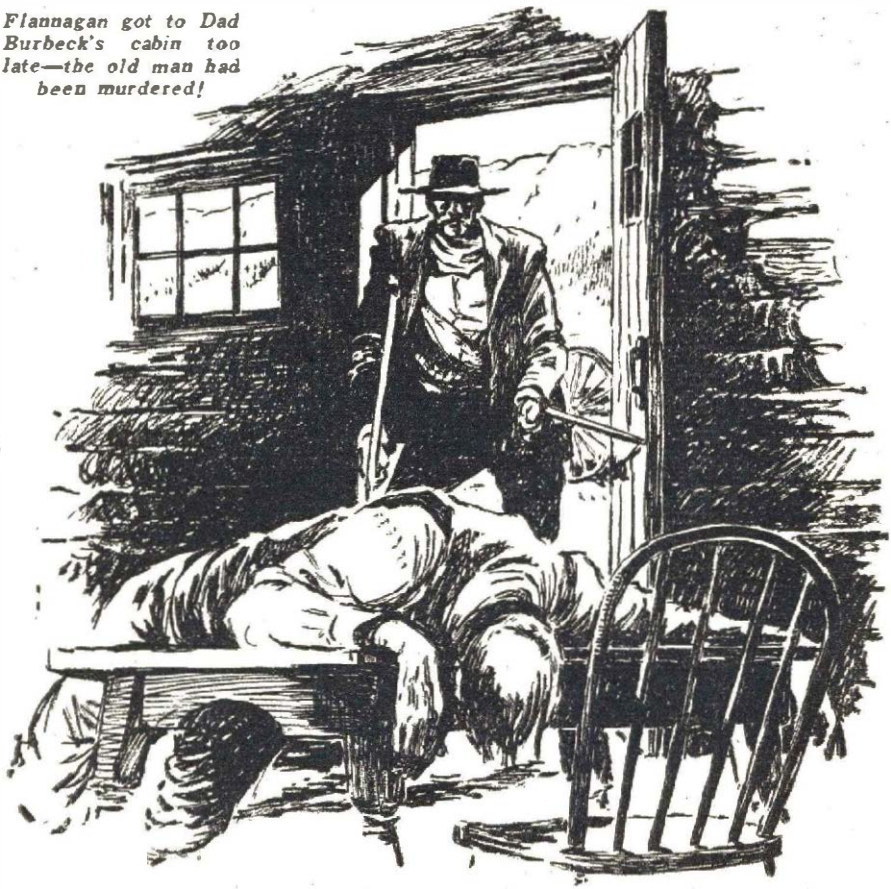
Ed—

I found a package of money in a old tree stump. I reckon it's from that N. Arizoney train holdup a few years back. Come get it. I shore hopes there's some reward. B. Burbeck

There was no stamp on the envelope, nor was it sealed, although it showed signs of having been licked vigorously. Some kid had left it at the jail with Park Hanson, who had turned it over to Flannagan. While he was getting ready to ride up, Flannagan had sprained his ankle and had to postpone his trip.

PUTTING the letter back in his pocket, Flannagan hobbled slowly into the cabin. He did not need a doctor to tell him that Dad Burbeck had been dead about twenty-four hours. Without touching the old man's body, he saw that Burbeck had been shot at close range and from behind.

An old rifle was leaned up against the wall near the door. Flannagan examined it. The gun was loaded



Flannagan got to Dad Burbeck's cabin too late—the old man had been murdered!

and cocked but had not been fired. A roll of dingy green caught the sheriff's eye next. It was in a cardboard box of oatmeal, lying among the scattered cans on the floor. Flannagan dug it out and found thirty one-dollar bills held together with a rubber band.

He put the money in his pocket and continued poking about the room. Over in one corner lay several potatoes and a pile of dirt. It looked as though someone had dumped out a potato sack there.

Flannagan rolled a cigarette, absently tucked it between his lips, then forgot to light it. It certainly looked like robbery with everything scattered around, but that package of stolen railroad money was the only thing of value which seemed to be gone. The killer had evidently been in such a hurry he had missed this roll of dollar bills which probably represented Burbeck's own cache of money.

The old hound came to the door and whined. Flannagan saw a few scraps of food on the floor by the kitchen table. He gathered them up and threw them outside for the dog.

"Too bad you can't talk," he observed. "I reckon you know the answer."

The dog bolted down the food and sidled away from the door. Flannagan turned back to the cabin. He swore as he put too much weight on his sprained ankle.

No use looking for signs around the cabin when there hadn't been a rain for weeks. Anyway, the signs he usually found were not written on dirt. There were signs aplenty inside the cabin if he only knew how to read them.

His ankle kept hurting. Lucky he had not broken his leg when he went through that rotten step at the side of the jail. He had known for a long time that it needed repairing, but that sudden collapse had been unexpected.

But for that, he would have come right up to old Dad's cabin and this killing would never have happened. Maybe folks were right about him. Lately he had been hearing rumors that some folks thought he was getting too old for his job. There had never been an unsolved murder in the county since he had been elected sheriff, but it looked as though he was going to have plenty of trouble figuring this one out.

HOBBLING to the door, he stepped outside. Lester Mack was sitting quietly on the bench. A small square package, wrapped in a sack, lay on the bench beside him. The old dog was at his feet.

Flannagan pointed to the package. "What's that?"

"My clock. That's what I came over to see Dad about this morning."

The sheriff picked up the package and smelled the sack.

"Onion sack," he commented.

"Why, yes," Mack admitted.

"Suppose you tell me all you know about this," the sheriff invited.

"Well, I was pretty friendly with Dad. Used to drop over here once or twice a month. I knew he liked to tinker with clocks and when mine broke down on me a couple weeks or so ago, I brought it over for him to fix." Mack spoke slowly as if he wanted to figure each word out.

"Go on."

"Yesterday about noon or maybe a little after, I rode over and got the clock," Mack continued.

"Yesterday?" asked the sheriff, surprised.

Mack nodded. "Your deputy, Hanson, saw me riding away with

the clock tied on behind my saddle. I was across the valley, but I reckon he knew I'd been up here."

"Tell your own story," Flannagan urged. "I got some questions but we'll save them."

"Dad was alive and in good spirits when I left," Mack declared. "When I got home I wound the clock and it started off fine. Then the striker went crazy. It would strike two and three times an hour. So I brought it back this morning. You know the rest."

"Did you notice anything unusual when you were over here yesterday?" Flannagan asked.

"One thing," Mack admitted. "When I rode up and yelled, Dad came to the door with his rifle in his hands. He was a little nearsighted, you know. When I got close enough for him to recognize me, he put his gun down and laughed."

"Did he tell you why he had the gun?"

Mack hesitated.

"Sheriff," he said reluctantly. "You know I served a spell in the penitentiary for forgery, so tellin' you this may be putting a rope around my neck, although I had nothing to do with Dad's death. He told me about finding that box of stolen money."

"Show it to you?"

Mack shook his head. "No, but I got the impression it was hidden inside the cabin. He said he was expecting you along any minute. When I saw Hanson yesterday I supposed he was on his way up here."

"Did Dad say how many other people he had told?"

"I don't think he'd told anyone else," Mack answered.

"I reckon you realize what a spot you're in," Flannagan said gravely. "If I let you go home, will you stay there?"

"Yes. I'm not running away from something I didn't do," Mack assured him.

"Well, get started then," Flannagan ordered. "I'll have enough to do when Hanson and Doc Crocker get here without worryin' about you."

Mack left immediately and for an hour or more the sheriff sat outside the cabin. At last Hanson drove back into the clearing. The buckskins were steaming. Doc Crocker, a thin stringy old man with a faded mustache and snapping blue eyes, jumped out of the buckboard, his teeth clicking.

"It's not your fault I got here in one piece," he told the deputy sourly.

"At least the sheriff won't ask now why the hell I didn't hurry," Hanson grunted.

"The wagon's coming up," doc told the sheriff. "Either you drive me back or I ride with the wagon. Where is this dead man?"

He pushed past Flannagan and went into the cabin. Hanson was looking inquiringly around the clearing.

"I sent Mack home," the sheriff explained. "Why didn't you say you saw him up here yesterday? What were you doing up this way, anyhow?"

"It's a short cut from the Beck ranch where I served that subpoena yesterday an' I ain't yet had a chance to do any talkin'," Hanson retorted. "I guess Mack was too smart to try and lie about being up here. Did he say what it was he had tied up in that potato sack he had tied on behind his saddle?"

"Yes," the sheriff grunted.

He went into the cabin, leaving Hanson to take care of the team.

Doc Crocker made his examination with brisk efficiency. He pulled the dead man across the table and examined the bullet hole.

"Murderer was less'n three feet away. Used a .38, I'd say, although it might've been a .44. Dead about twenty-four hours."

"Look in his pockets," Flannagan suggested.

DOC CROCKER ran a hand through the dead man's pockets and brought out several silver coins, a knife and some tobacco crumbs.

"I got this out of a tin can on the floor," the sheriff explained, handing the coroner the roll of dollar bills he had picked up.

Doc Crocker took the money and looked hard at Flannagan.

"I figured from what Hanson said it was robbery," he commented.

Flannagan handed him the letter Dad Burbeck had written.

"I got this night before last. I was startin' up here yesterday mornin' when I went through that step in my office and busted my ankle."

Doc Crocker read the letter and laid it on the table. His next remark was irrelevant.

"Looks like you might've had that step fixed a long time ago."

"I guess I should have," Flannagan admitted.

"Lucky you didn't break your leg."

"I know. Come on, let's go back to town," Flannagan said impatiently.

"Say, if you think I'll drive back with that fool Hanson drivin' an' over these roads—" Doc Crocker began indignantly.

"He can stay here an' come back with the body," Flannagan said. "I'll drive the buckboard."

The doctor had gathered up what he wanted and they went out to the buckboard. Flannagan told his deputy to stay and come down with the body.

"Look around an' see if there's any signs," he directed. "No use of us both stayin' here."

About a mile from the cabin Doc Crocker prodded the sheriff in the ribs.

"What's that dog doin' followin' us?" he demanded.

Flannagan looked back just in time to see Dad Burbeck's old hound dodge into the brush alongside the road.

"Burbeck's," he explained.

"You fed 'im, I suppose," the coroner commented acidly.

"Somebody had to. Now shut up, will you? I'm thinkin'," Flannagan said impatiently.

"So am I," Doc Crocker exploded. "I'm thinkin' it's a damn shame an old man like Dad Burbeck without a meanness in the world, had to have the back of his head shot off by someone he trusted. I'm thinkin' the same thing might happen to me, or you, with a lot more cause. I'm thinkin' if he gets away with it—"

"Shut up, Doc," Flannagan said quietly.

Doc Crocker looked at him a moment and then grunted. "Maybe you ain't so old an' pot-bellied an' useless as some folks think," he grunted.

Flannagan looked up. The black birds had disappeared from the sky. "Them birds," he remarked vaguely. "They were up there when I come up the mountain. They're gone now. Instinct, maybe. Those birds have gone because they know it's no use hangin' around. Sometimes, killers git trapped for the same reason."

"You mean to say a sheriff catches

a killer because his instinct smells him out?" Doc Crocker asked derisively.

"I mean when heads like mine takes a short cut an' I can't explain why, I call it instinct," Flannagan declared. "I wish yourn would take one now and make you shut up."

"If I had a fortuneteller like that I could trust, it would sure save me a lot of pills," Doc Crocker chuckled.

"An' patients," the sheriff remarked. "Now will you shut up?"

IT was several hours later and after dark when Park Hanson came back to the jail office where the sheriff was waiting. A tall, rawboned serious-faced man about forty, the deputy looked nervous and jumpy.

"I stopped an' got something to eat over at the restaurant," he explained. "Looks like you're makin' a mistake, Ed, giving that Lester Mack a chance to get away—and with all that money."

"If I am, then I'm the one who'll get blamed," the sheriff growled. "I ain't so sure Mack's guilty."

"You know his record," Hanson reminded.

"Forgin' and killin' are two different crimes," Flannagan pointed out.

"Sometimes money's the motive for both," Hanson argued. "Besides, if you don't send me up to bring Mack in, there's liable to be a neck-tie posse take over the job themselves."

"You must've been doin' some talkin' if anyone knows Mack was over there yesterday," the sheriff commented.

"When I'm asked point-blank questions I don't lie," Hanson retorted. "It sure looked to me like he had that tin money box tied on behind his saddle, an' if I'm asked, I'll say so."

"You'll get a chance. At the inquest," the sheriff declared. "We'll bring Mack down tomorrow morning. Tonight I want you to go out and see if you can't round up the kid that brought Dad's note in here."

"Well, you're giving the orders," Hanson said sourly. "But I'll bet Mack's a long way off by now."

"Don't worry," Flannagan said. "Mack'll be here at the inquest. I'm givin' this killer enough bait to let him hang hisself."

He watched Hanson leave the office. A few minutes later, he hobbled across the jail yard to the house the county furnished him.

He stayed there just long enough to leave word that he was going down the street to see the coroner. He found Doc Crocker in his office.

"Come in," the doctor urged. "Say, I've found it was a .38 that killed Dad."

"That so?" asked Flannagan. He looked tired.

Doc Crocker took a shrewd look at him. "You ought to be off that foot," he growled. "Why don't you go to bed? I've set the inquest for ten o'clock tomorrow morning."

"I'll git off my foot if you'll saddle me that old mare you ride and help me git up in the saddle," the sheriff offered.

"You're crazy as well as crippled," Doc Crocker snorted.

"I want to git out of town without bein' seen," the sheriff explained. And in case anyone comes down here lookin' for me—anyone, mind you—tell 'em you've given me a sleepin' powder an' put me to bed in your spare room."

"I'm to help you make a cripple out of yourself for the rest of your life maybe, and then commit per-

jury with some fancy lyin'. Anything else you want?"

"Yeah. Guess maybe you better loan me that .38 you carry when you go out bill collectin'. Might as well take the belt along too."

The two old men exchanged a sober look.

"I could go along," Crocker suggested.

"You'll be more important here," the sheriff assured him. "An' I'm in kind of a hurry."

LESS than an hour later the sheriff rode out of an alley and cut across an unfenced field to hit the highway leading into the hills. Doc Crocker's gun slapped against his leg. His crutch was tied scabbard fashion to the saddle and while his bandaged foot would not fit a stirrup, he pushed Doc Crocker's horse along at a steady jog. Accustomed to the doctor's bags and instrument cases, the old mare made no complaint against her crippled rider and his equipment.

The sheriff did not have to avoid anyone on the highway. As far as he was able to judge, he had escaped from town unobserved and no one saw him enter the mountains. A little-used old road branched off the main highway soon after it left the foothills, and the trail to Lester Mack's cabin, which was high on the mountainside, forked from this.

The cabin was set back in a small meadow about a hundred yards from the main trail. The place was dark when Flannagan stopped his mare at the edge of the clearing. In the thin moonlight he could see a small streamer of smoke drifting out of the chimney.

He rode directly toward the front door, making no effort to stay concealed.

"Hi . . . Mack!" he called. He reined up and waited.

In a moment there was an answering call from within the cabin. A match sputtered and a lamp was lighted. A few seconds later the cabin door opened and Lester Mack was outlined in the lighted doorway.

He was in his socks with a pair of pants drawn over his undershirt. His hair was rumpled.

"That you, sheriff?" he asked uncertainly. "You want to come in, or had I better get dressed?"

"Hold this danged mare while I git off," Flannagan ordered. "With this sprained ankle I'm helpless as a baby."

Mack came out to the mare's head while the sherriff unfastened his crutch and lowered himself to the ground.

"Take her back to your stable, Mack, and bed her down for the night. I'm waitin' for the morning sun before I do any more riding."

"Maybe I'd better help you inside first," Mack suggested.

"I'll manage," the sheriff declared. "You fix up old Bess."

He hobbled into the cabin and lowered himself into an old splint-bottomed chair before the banked ashes in the fireplace. It was the first time he had ever been in Lester Mack's cabin. It was certainly a neat little place, even if the furnishings were scanty and poor. A clean bunk, clean bedding, clean dishes and a clean floor indicated that Mack was not a lazy man.

An old-fashioned square clock stood on the mantel above the fireplace. The sheriff was looking at it absently when Mack returned.

"She's unsaddled and has her head in the manger," Mack reported. "Here's how that clock works."

He opened the clock and started

it ticking with a twist of the winding key. It struck three times almost immediately.

The sheriff nodded and Mack stopped the pendulum with his hand. He bent to stir up the fire, but the sheriff stopped him.

"Never mind the fire. Set down an' let's talk a spell. Better blow out that lamp first, though."

MACK stared at him soberly a few seconds and then walked over to the table, turned the wick down and blew out the lamp. There was enough moonlight filtering through the window to outline his body as he drew up a chair by the fireplace and sat down.

"You got a gun?" the sheriff asked him.

"An old .44 rifle. Was Dad killed with a .44?"

"No," Flannagan said slowly. "It was a .38."

Mack's sigh of relief was audible.

"I don't own a .38," he declared.

"How'd you happen to know that railroad money was in a tin box?" the sheriff demanded abruptly.

"Dad said it was a tin box."

"How big?"

"I don't know," Mack answered. "He didn't say and I didn't see the box."

The sheriff grunted.

"Didn't talk to anyone about it, did you?"

"Only to you this afternoon," Mack answered. "I haven't seen anyone else to talk to."

"Sure a lot of circumstantial evidence piled up on you," the sheriff observed.

"Well, I'm innocent," Mack said quietly. "Though I don't know how I can prove it."

"I know you're innocent," the sheriff declared impatiently. "That's not why I'm up here."

"You mean you got the killer?" Mack asked excitedly.

"I'll get him," Flannagan assured him. "But I had to come up here tonight or you'd be dead by morning with a .38 lead slug through your head and maybe a few bills hid around to make you look like the man that killed and robbed Dad Burbeck."

"I don't understand." Mack was bewildered.

"You will," the sheriff said. "What's that? My ears ain't what they used to be."

"Sounds like a horse coming up the trail."

"Then go over there and lay down in your bed—and stay there too. I'll do the talkin'. You keep quiet."

Mack went slowly across the cabin and crawled into his bunk. The sheriff could hear him breathing heavily as a horse came up to the cabin door. Boots scraped over the hard ground toward the door and a fist rapped heavily on it.

"Who's there?" The sheriff talked against the back of his hand to muffle and disguise his voice.

"Come on, open the door!" the voice outside ordered.

"I can't," the sheriff protested. "I'm laid up in bed. Door's unlocked. Come on in."

AFTER a pause the cabin door was suddenly kicked open. Only sky showed behind it. Then suddenly a man's form filled the doorway for an instant and was inside.

"No tricks," a heavy voice warned. "My gun's out."

"So's mine, Hanson," the sheriff said quietly, using his natural voice. "You're between me and the light too. Git up, Mack, an' light the lamp. Git that gun back, Hanson!"

There was steel in the sheriff's

voice. He could see his big deputy hastily holster his gun and stand uncertainly as Mack moved from his bunk and scratched a match. The lamplight revealed Hanson backed up against the wall by the door.

"Close the door," the sheriff ordered.

Hanson obeyed silently.

"Now suppose you explain why you're here," Flannagan invited.

"You know well enough," Hanson answered in a surly tone. "I found that kid who brought the note, but I couldn't find you. I knowed this bird would be gone if he wasn't caught quick. You said yourself to git him in the morning. Well, it's morning now."

He stood by the door, his hands dangling by his sides. He was watching both Mack and the sheriff with a furtive expression.

"There're several reasons why I know Mack didn't kill Dad Burbeck, an' why I know you did, Hanson," the sheriff said quietly. "You were about the only one who had a chance to read that note Dad wrote me. I was too careless and trustin' there. Then them steps. It was a miracle I didn't bust my leg. They was rotten all right, but I looked 'em over tonight. They'd been hammered loose. You knew I was about the only man that used 'em. Even Burbeck's old hound gave you away when he wouldn't stay up there with you an' the body. Another thing: you knew right off that money was in a tin box an' left the cabin wrapped in a potato sack. Mack was there an' you saw him take a package away. You figured you wouldn't have much trouble putting the blame on him."

"You're crazy," Hanson said hoarsely.

"Greed's a dangerous thing," the sheriff continued. "I reckon it happened this way. You read that note, fixed the steps so I'd fall, then went to the cabin. Dad was standin' guard with a cocked rifle, but he let you in. Probably he was glad you'd got there, thinkin' I'd sent you. You shot him behind the ear—shot him

with my own gun. Oh, I know my gun's been cleaned recent an' I ain't touched it for weeks. I left it back there tonight so you'd bring it along. Looks right familiar in your holster. You figured things out purty smart. I had a hunch you'd come up here to shoot Mack an' plant some evidence."

Hanson's hands were swinging slightly, his eyes bulging.

"You hurried when you couldn't locate me. I reckon we'll find the tin box tied to your saddle," the sheriff said. "Want to talk?"

"I'll talk plenty—when the time comes," Hanson growled.

"Course, I know you've been spreadin' the word I'm slippin'," Flannagan continued. Holding his gun carelessly, he reached in his shirt pocket and drew out the makings and began to build a cigarette, using one hand.

Hanson was watching him closely, his fingers tightening to fists.

"With a little money to put on a campaign next election time, you figgered I could be beat." Flannagan seemed to be having trouble getting the sack open. "Trouble is, you killers think too much. It was too perfect. All I had to do was add things up."

The cigarette he was making spilled open. He made a grab toward the falling paper and Hanson chose that moment to grab for his gun.

It was half raised when the sheriff's gun roared. Hanson stumbled. His gun fell from listless fingers. His eyes unbelieving and wide, he slumped slowly and then fell in a heap.

Flannagan put down his borrowed gun and wiped his face with his shirt sleeve.

"Trap a coward an' he shows it," he murmured. He turned to Mack who stood blinking and speechless against the cabin wall at his back.

He was still standing there when Doc Crocker rushed into the cabin, several men crowding in behind him. The doc took one look around, saw Hanson on the floor and relaxed.

"You old idiot!" he yelled at the sheriff. "You mighta bin killed. When Hanson told me he was on his way up here to grab Mack for the Burbeck killin', I thought I'd best come up too."

"Is there anything tied on Hanson's horse?" the sheriff demanded.

One of the men came in with a bundle in a potato sack. Inside it was a tin box wrapped in a mail bag. The tin box was full of bank notes, done up in bundles.

"Take the body to town," Crocker told the posse, indicating the dead man he had been examining while the sheriff was busy with the bundle of money. "And you," he turned on Flannagan, "get into that bunk and stay there until I send a rig after you tomorrow."

In about an hour Crocker and the posse and Hanson's body were gone from the cabin. The floor had been cleaned where Hanson had fallen and Flannagan was in Mack's bunk, sipping a cup of hot coffee.

"Guess I am slippin'," Flannagan grumbled. Imagine Doc Crocker figgerin' out what was happenin' an' gettin' a posse up here."

"I'll bet he doesn't know that cigarette trick," Mack commented.

"Maybe not," the sheriff agreed. "I wasn't showin' off. Hanson needed killin' but I wanted to give him an even break. A better break than he gave old Dad Burbeck. A better break than he aimed to give you. I'd hate to think I killed him in a trap."

"He was caught in the trap he set himself," Mack declared.

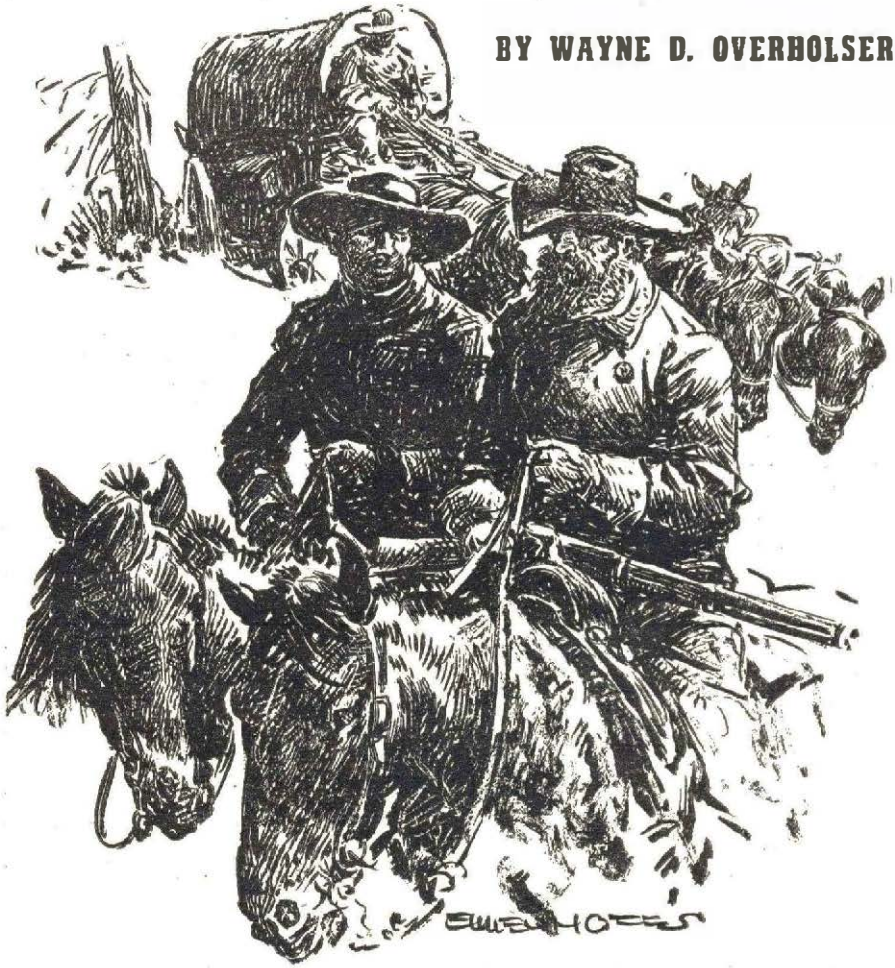
The sheriff set his cup down and turned his face to the wall, pulling a blanket over his head.

I'll sleep better now," he promised. "I hate killers. Even when they get caught on bait they set themselves."

THE END.

POWDERSMOKE PURGE

BY WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER



THE McCays came into Roaring River Basin when the snow was still a foot deep in Eagle Pass, and wheeled down the long grade into Wagontire. Out in front on his chestnut was big Rory McCay, a huge, ruddy-faced man with a frame as massive and solid as the trunk of a giant fir. He had a fiery-red beard and a booming laugh, and there was about him the strength and firmness of a man who has spent his life in the granite ruggedness of high mountains.

His brother Dave rode beside him, a stubby man who looked to Rory for leadership, and behind them came the three creaking, canvas-covered wagons that held the wealth of the McCays, a sawmill that somewhere was to find a place here among the Big Blues. Jeff, Rory's oldest boy, drove the first wagon. Zack, the sec-

ond son, was in the seat of the next, and in the last wagon was the youngest boy, Pink.

It was midafternoon when they rolled into Wagontire, a warm afternoon with a gentle breeze and a promise of spring that brought the swollen buds of the cottonwoods close to the bursting point.

Rory swung out of the saddle, tied his mount to the rack, threw back his mighty shoulders and turned his gaze toward the jagged peaks of the Big Blues that lifted their pine-clad slopes above the valley, so close, it seemed, that if Rory were to stretch out his big arms he could almost touch them. Last fall he had ridden into the Basin and bought two sections of timber on the West Fork, where they were to settle.

"There's water up there," he declared in his rumbling voice, "and all the pine we'll ever saw. It's a great country, and a hundred miles to the nearest railroad."

"We'll make money," Dave said in his mild voice. "Looks like you had the right hunch."

Pink climbed down from his seat and stretched. Unlike Jeff and Zack, he had little of his father's size, but where they were inclined to be easy-going like Dave, Pink had the same determined chin and hair-trigger temper that was so much a part of big Rory.

Men had gathered on the porch of the Two-bit Saloon across the street, looking curiously at the three giant wagons. As Rory stepped up on the sidewalk, one of the men left the crowd and crossed the street. He was a rawboned, sharp-featured man, dressed in a woolen shirt, with faded jeans tucked into cow boots.

"This range," he said with harsh arrogance, "is closed to nesters. In case you pilgrims are aiming to stop hereabouts, you better change your minds."

RORY whipped around and started to speak, but it was Pink who answered the man, his face going red under his freckles.

"Advice," he drawled in a deceptively mild tone, "don't cost much and is worth about the same."

"I'm Clay Adler," said the man. "I own the C 6. I got twenty cowpokes on my pay roll that know how to deal with sod busters. Now, turn them valley schooners around and start rolling back to the Pass."

"In case you're interested, we ain't sod busters and we don't give a damn how many tough cowpokes you got on your spread."

"Then what are you if you ain't sod busters?" Adler bellowed. "I'll take a look into your wagons."

Zack and Jeff were on the ground now, and Dave had turned in his saddle, his fingers brushing gun butt. Rory hadn't moved from where he stood, but his face was as dark as a brewing storm.

Adler took a step toward the back of Pink's wagon.

"You ain't looking into no wagon," the youngest McCay said. "Get to hell back over to the saloon and finish your drink!"

Adler stopped. "You're kind o' proddy for a hoeman's whelp," he declared, and took another step.

Pink's right hand blurred down in a draw as lightning-fast as a gleam of light, and the cowman was caught flat-footed.

"Move," Pink grated, and Adler, mouthing a string of curses, shambled back across the street.

"Good work, boy!" big Rory rumbled. "What kind of a burg is this, taking us for a bunch of grangers?"

He spat into the dirt, and went into Mahoney's store.

Zack and Jeff climbed back into their seats, but Pink kept his feet on the ground, his eyes on the knot of men that still stood in front of the saloon, their hostile stares on the McCays. In a few minutes Rory came back.

"All right, boys," he said, climbing aboard his chestnut. "Let's get rolling."

The road was hardly more than two ruts cut into the sod by an occasional wagon or rig. It followed the swiftly rushing Roaring River, a crystal-clear stream that glistened with the sheen of the westering sun upon it. The lines hung loosely in Pink's fingers as his stone-gray eyes ranged from one side of the valley to the other. It was a good range, and not overstocked. A few cows and some young stuff were grazing along the river bank, and Pink saw that most of them carried the C 6 brand.

Pink shook his head. No use thinking about how good this range was, for the way of the McCays was not the way of cattlemen. They belonged to the high timberlands, not the grass-covered flats. The whir of a saw instead of the bellowing of thirsty cattle should be in their ears. Their hands belonged on an ax handle and not a branding iron. There were thousands of men in this land who could punch steers, but few who could saw the lumber so badly needed. These were the words of big Rory, and Pink was a McCay.

His gaze turned to the green, pine-studded shoulders of the Big Blues, and he hummed a tune, for here was to be their home, somewhere in the cleft made by the West Fork. It seemed pleasant and peaceful with the cool of early evening upon his face, and the calmness of this valley gave no hint of the death that waited there among the pines.

They camped where the West Fork came into the main river, and after the horses had been watered and hobbled, and the men had eaten supper, Dave took his guitar and sang. Presently he laid it aside, and they sat in silence, looking into the flames of the campfire, a tiny spark of light in the deep darkness that had come to the valley. Then Jeff gave tongue to the thought that was in all their minds.

"If we're gonna make money, we gotta sell our lumber, and you can't sell lumber to folks that hate you," he said quietly. "Seems like Pink kind o' flew off the handle back there, and it ain't goin' to help us none if this Adler gent's as big as he thinks he is."

"Sure, he flew off the handle," big Rory thundered, "and he'd 've plugged that damned cowman if he hadn't backed up."

"Reckon Adler knew that," Dave said dryly. "But Jeff's right. To my way of thinking, tain't a good idea to make an enemy of the biggest cowman in the valley. Adler ain't gonna take that."

Rory gave a booming laugh. "Dunno what he can do. We can sell lumber for half what anybody can freight it in for. If that cussed steer herder had any sense, it wouldn't have happened. I'd 've done the same thing Pink done if I'd been a little closer."

Pink didn't say anything. He knew what his brothers and Dave would think. That was the way they were made, good-natured and easy-going. They'd never minded a little pushing around, but he was too much his dad's son to take it. Let the whole damned valley know

the McCays stood on their rights, and they'd be let alone!

"Well," Dave said with a shrug, "it's done now. Hey, what's that?"

The thud of a horse's hoofs came to their ears. Pink loosened his gun in its casing, and Rory reached for the Winchester that lay under the seat in Jeff's wagon.

"Hello." A man pulled his mount up in the circle of light and swung down.

"Hello," Rory called, and dropped the rifle back under the seat.

THE stranger strode up to the fire, and looked around. He was a squat man with the shoulders and neck of a wrestler. His face was smooth and round, and it seemed to Pink that he was a man hard to read. Then young McCay saw the star that glittered on the man's open vest.

"I'm Sheriff Rhodes," the stranger said. "I wasn't in town when you came through, but I heard about it when I got back. Sounds like you had a little trouble with Clay Adler."

"Yeah," Rory growled. "He got kind o' nosy."

"I don't blame you none," the sheriff said. "Clay's damned tough with sod busters. He's lost a lot of cattle lately, and he's proddy as hell. Of course the land here is open to homesteading, but anybody that comes in has to figger on trouble with Clay, and a lot of it."

"We ain't sod busters," Rory told him. "We got a couple of sections of timber in the Big Blues and figger on building a sawmill. Don't see what business that is of Adler's."

"It ain't," Rhodes agreed. "If you'd told Clay that, you'd have saved some trouble. Now he's madder'n an upended dogie, and he claims your younker's too handy with his hogleg."

"Pink can take care of himself," Rory grinned, "but Adler wasn't askin'."

Rhodes turned back to his mount and swung aboard. "Just thought I'd tell you gents. Clay's a bad man to buck, but I reckon he'll calm down when he hears what you're aiming to do. This valley needs a sawmill. Reckon you might do pretty well. So long."

The McCays stood around the fire in silence until the sound of his horse faded, then Zack said: "That Rhodes seemed like a square jigger. Reckon the law's on our side, whatever Mr. Big Gun Adler's got in his bean."

"Yeah." Rory thundered his laugh and slapped Pink on the back. "And he figures you're pretty handy with your hogleg. Maybe he'll let you alone, son."

"And maybe," Dave said somberly, "he'll do anything but that."

The next day they turned their course up the West Fork. There was no sign of a road here, but they needed none, for the land lifted gently toward the foothills and even the lower slopes were bare. It was late afternoon that they came to a log house and barn with a pole corral in front. A man came out and hailed them.

"Howdy, strangers," he called cordially. "Light and rest."

"I reckon not," Rory answered. "We got quite a ways to go yet."

The man's green eyes passed from one of the McCays to another, and for a moment he didn't speak. He was tall and a little stooped, with a weather-bronzed face and a pair of guns on his hips. Pink met his gaze squarely, and the man's eyes turned

away. The boy frowned, for he sensed a false note in the stranger's attempt at friendliness.

"I'm Sim Akins," the man said. "Me and my two hands run this spread. It gets purty damned lonesome, off here by ourselves. I reckon you gents are figuring on settling hereabouts."

"Yeah," Rory nodded, "we're gonna set up a sawmill. Oughtta be a good market for lumber in this valley."

"Sure," Akins declared. "Fine timber up here."

"So long," Rory called, and signaled the wagons on.

The early mountain dusk was upon them by the time they reached the spot Rory had picked out as a building site.

HERE she is, boys," he bellowed and swung out of the saddle. "If this ain't closer to Paradise than any place you ever saw, I'll eat my peavy handle. Up there a ways"—he jerked his thumb upstream—"is a twenty-foot falls. We'll flume the water out there, and put our mill down here." He nodded toward the bank. "Back there on the slope we'll build a house, just a shack this spring, and finish her up when we get more time. And there"—his hand swung a big circle toward the hills that rose around them—"is the best stand of pine ready for the cutting I ever saw."

"It's all we could ask for, Rory," Dave said. "I reckon I'll be content to live and die right along this here West Fork."

They set up the mill, and threw a log cabin together that would do until snow fell. Rory sent Pink and Zack into the woods to fell while Dave and Jeff bucked the logs. He himself puttered around the mill and finished the flume with lumber that he had hauled in from Wagontire at an exorbitant price.

For weeks there was no hint of trouble, nor did anyone speak about the row with Clay Adler in town. The quiet lulled the suspicion of all the McCays except Pink. The job of furnishing fresh meat fell to him, and once a week he took long pasears back into the hills and never failed to return with a buck. Then one day he made a discovery more than a mile above the mill, the unmistakable hoofprints of a herd of steers. It was under the shelter of an overhanging bluff so they hadn't been washed out by the spring rains. They were old tracks, certainly made before the McCays had come into the valley.

That night Pink drew Rory away from the others.

"How far up this canyon have you gone, dad?" he asked.

"Why"—Rory looked somewhat surprised—"not very far. No need to. It's all virgin timber. I reckon no one's ever been up here except maybe some deer hunters."

"That's where you're wrong." And Pink told him what he'd found.

Rory laughed. "Reckon you're getting spooky, son. We've seen a few old tracks around, probably some strays. Who in tarnation would want to chouse a whole herd up here?"

"That's what I'm aiming to find out," Pink declared. "Remember the sheriff said some rustling had been going on? I was thinking maybe they drove the cattle out of the valley through this canyon."

"It won't do, son." Rory shook his head. "It's three hundred miles to the nearest railroad out that way, and the mountains are too rough to put a herd through. You best for-

get it." And he walked away, chuckling.

That night Rory said: "Zack, you can drive into town tomorrow and get some grub. I got a couple of orders the last time I was in. Mahoney's gonna build a shed on behind his store, and Doc Click's gonna build a house. You can tell 'em we'll have the saw to turning by next week."

Before daylight, Pink dressed, picked up his rifle and stole out of the cabin. He saddled his father's chestnut, and rode upstream. A mile or so above where he had seen the cattle spoor, he found fresh horse tracks in the soft earth beside the stream. The canyon narrowed rapidly, and the slope steepened.

Pink rode up a sharp pitch and came out into a wide meadow, bare of trees and deep in grass. His breath blew out in a low whistle, for ahead of him was a herd of steers, prime stuff that would be ready to ship in the fall. He guessed there was over two hundred of them, and as he came closer he saw that they bore the 08 Bar brand. Pink surveyed the scene intently.

Maybe there was nothing wrong with this; yet, since the McCays had moved into the valley, they had never seen a rider come up the canyon. Nor had they heard of any stock being run this high above the basin floor. Slowly Pink turned his mount toward home, and he felt a strange stirring of impending trouble. If this was rustled stock, the only way to get them back into the valley was down the canyon where the McCays had their mill.

Then something whined past Pink's ear, and from the canyon wall across the stream came the dry crack of a rifle. Pink dug in his spurs and gained the protection of the pines as another slug snarled inches from his head. That settled it, thought Pink grimly. No honest cowpuncher was going to start pitching lead at him just because he'd stumbled upon a herd of grazing cattle.

FOR a time he sat motionless in the cover of the pines. If he rode back the way he'd come, he'd make an easy target the second he came out of the trees. The rustlers had been in no immediate danger so long as none of the McCays had found the herd. Now Pink swore under his breath for, by stumbling upon the hidden cattle, he'd put them all in danger. He had to get back and tell his dad, and get the sheriff.

Whatever happened, he couldn't sit here. Leaning low over the pommel, he fed the chestnut steel and went thundering down the slope. The instant he came into the open, bullets snarled all around him. His hat was picked off his head with hot, invisible fingers, and a slug burned a path across the back of his neck; then he was around a turn in the canyon and out of range.

Hell had broken loose! Pink wasn't kidding himself. He'd have one devil of a time getting out of the canyon and into Wagontire. He rode recklessly with but one thought in his mind, to get to the mill and tell his father what he had found.

The sun was square overhead when he thundered into the clearing before the cabin.

"Dad!" he yelled, and ran into the cabin. Then he stopped dead still, and dread tugged at his heart. Rory was standing beside the fireplace, his head down, and on the floor were two blanket-covered figures.

Rory looked up, and in his face was more misery than Pink had ever seen there before.

"Dave and Jeff," Rory said tonelessly. "Drygulched when he was coming in at noon."

He held out a ragged strip of paper. Pink took it and read:

Be out of here by noon if you want to keep your hides whole, nesters!

"That was on the door when we got up," Rory said dully. "Did you see it when you pulled out, son?"

Pink shook his head. "No." Then he told what he had found.

"Every one of them," he went on, "is wearing an 08 Bar brand. It looks to me like—"

"Hello," a man called from outside.

Pink whirled toward the open door, his gun hand driving toward his holstered Colt. Then he stiffened.

"It's Akins," he said, "and he's got Zack across his saddle."

"Wait!" Rory caught Pink's arm as he started through the door. "They're probably just waiting to put a slug through your middle."

Pink shook off Rory's hand. "Akins is out there now," and went outside.

"I found him down the creek a ways," Akins said grimly. "Heard some shooting and come up there. The horses had run away and smashed the wagon all to hell an' gone. Your brother was lying there on the ground with a mess of lead in him. Looks like some of Adler's work to me."

Pink took Zack's body in his arms and tenderly laid it on the grass. Big Rory had come out of the cabin, and for long minutes he and Pink stood looking down. No words came from their lips. For Rory it was the end of a dream, the dream that the McCays would find a home where peace and wealth would be theirs. For Pink it was the smashing of the world he had known, the brothers he had grown up with, the uncle he had known and loved as well as his own father.

"Five of us came up here this spring," big Rory said slowly, "and now two of us are left."

"You probably found a note on your door," Akins said. "That's the way Adler does. He's hated you since you drove into Wagontire. He ain't one to forget. If he's told you to go, you'd better."

"We ain't going," Rory growled. "They can kill Pink and me, too, but we ain't going."

"Funny Adler would wait this long," Pink said, meeting Akins' green eyes squarely. "We ain't hurt him."

Akins shrugged. "Dunno why he waited," he admitted. "But you can bet Clay Adler ain't forgetting anybody that gets the best of him."

Pink went into the cabin and came back with a shovel.

"They'd want to be buried up here," he muttered to Rory.

Akins climbed down and trailed his reins. "I'll help you," he offered. "Then I'll hightail into town and get Rhodes. This is one dirty killing Adler ain't gonna find it so easy to get out of."

They dug the graves beneath the shadow of a giant pine that stood above the cabin. When they had mounded up the earth, Pink fashioned three rude crosses and placed them at the heads of the graves. Then they stood bare-headed under the late afternoon sun, Akins a little behind the two McCays, and big Rory reverently breathed a prayer. Slowly they went back to the cabin and Akins swung to his saddle.

"Dunno as Rhodes'll get here be-

fore morning," he said. "But I'll ride into town tonight."

"Thanks," Rory said.

AKINS swung his arm, waved a farewell, and disappeared into the trees. Pink drew his father inside the cabin.

"This ain't all of it," he said, "and I don't figure Akins' gonna get the sheriff. If it was Adler, he'd have stayed around and salivated us when we was outside."

"Then who would it be?" growled Rory. "Sure, it's Adler. Soon as it gets dark, I'm gonna hit for Adler's ranch. He ain't getting away with this."

"Look, dad," Pink said slowly, "we been so busy getting this mill set up we never even found out what Akins' brand is. The way I figure it, Akins probably rustled some of Adler's C 6 stock, run 'em up here into this valley early in the spring and burned the brands into the 08 Bar. That wouldn't be hard to do. I figure Akins aimed to drive them back into the Basin this spring after the brands all got healed good, but we moved in and he can't get 'em out without us seeing 'em, so he's trying to get rid of us. You'll notice he was damned anxious to get us to pull out."

"Then why in tunket didn't he salivate us just now?" Rory demanded.

"He got three of us from ambush," Pink said, "and a man that'll do that wouldn't try a face-to-face gun fight. Maybe he figures we'll take the fight to Adler now, and he probably wouldn't mind getting Adler out of the way, too. If we ain't gone by dark, we'll hear from him again."

"We ain't running," Rory rumbled.

"Our only chance is to pull him into the open, then maybe—" Pink's voice trailed off.

"Then maybe we can kind o' pay up," Rory finished. He stroked his beard, and his eyes lost a little of their grimness. "You're the last of the McCays, son. We'll play it your way."

"They won't rush us long as it's light. We'll stay in here until it gets dusk enough to make bad shooting, then we'll bait the trap with me."

"I don't like it." Rory shook his big head.

"We can't make a run for it," Pink insisted, "and we sure can't figure on any help. It's the only way we got a chance." He glanced outside. Already the light was thinning, for the sun had disappeared behind the western rim of the canyon. "It won't be long, dad," he said.

The long minutes dragged by in an endless procession. There was no sound from outside except the sighing among the pines as the evening breeze stirred their branches, no sign that hidden killers were out there waiting to finish the job they had started; yet Pink McCay knew the minute he stepped through the door a rain of leaden death would fall around him.

Dusk ran its silent path down the canyon and on past the cabin. Pink gripped his Colt.

"I'm going out, dad," he said. "Keep the door open and shut it behind me when I come back in."

The light was too poor now for accurate shooting, but for all that, Pink McCay knew he was playing a ten-to-one chance, a wild gamble that might leave him a lifeless corpse to be buried alongside his brothers and uncle. Still, it might work and bring the ambushers into the open.

Pink swung the door open, paused a moment, his eyes scanning the timber in one swiftly moving look, then took two steps toward the corner of the cabin. Suddenly the rifles snarled, and slugs made the air hideous with their whistling search for human flesh. Pink gave voice to a blood-curdling, anguished cry of pain, and clutched at his chest. Reeling, he staggered back into the cabin as bullets ripped into the logs beside him. He stumbled into the room and the door swung shut.

"I knew they'd get you," Rory bellowed frantically. "Where you hit, son?"

Pink laughed triumphantly. "Not a scratch, dad. Reckon if I fooled you, I musta fooled them coyotes. Now we'll just lie low until it's really dark. In another hour or so the moon's gonna come up, and I'm thinking they'll be nosing around after you, since they'll be figuring you're the only McCay left alive."

Weakly Rory sank down on a bunk. "You're playing a crazy game, son."

"Sure," Pink nodded. "Plumb crazy, but they don't know that. Now I'll warm 'em up a little."

He picked up the Winchester, poked it through a window, and emptied it wildly at the direction of the drygulchers' shots. Rory stepped up beside him, his Colt in his hand.

"Wait a minute, dad," Pink caught his arm. "They're supposed to think I'm dead."

Rory stroked his beard and looked at his son thoughtfully. "Maybe this game ain't so crazy, after all."

The blackness of night came quickly, the shred of light from the stars blotted out by the tall pines.

"I'm going out again, dad," Pink said. "This time I'm staying outside. Unless I'm wrong, there'll be more fireworks pretty quick. I'm gonna play Injun. Just don't let 'em get near enough to the cabin to fire it, and when I open up you get into the scrap, too."

PINK took off his boots, opened the door wide enough to slip by, and noiselessly stepped around the building and into the pines beside the graves. He picked up the shovel and mounded up a pile of earth as if it held another body, then he dropped back into the trees.

He could hear men moving off to his right, and talking in low tones. He guessed there were three, maybe four, and they were closing in. If only the moon would get high enough that he could make them out. Presently one of the men passed close in front, so close Pink could have reached out and slugged him with a Colt butt, but he didn't dare give himself away. The drygulcher stumbled over the pile of earth Pink had heaped up, swore under his breath, and kept on. Then the others circled the cabin and met the man who had passed in front of Pink.

"The old man musta come out and planted the kid," Pink heard him say. "There's another grave."

"Jest like the old cuss," and Pink's heart hammered when he heard the voice. It was Sim Akins.

"Let's get at it," another man said harshly. "We oughtta be able to handle the old goat."

"Come on out, McCay!" Akins yelled. "Come out, or we're coming after you!"

"Come ahead, you blasted, yellow-livered sidewinders!" Rory thundered.

The Winchester spoke from the cabin. Akins and his men scattered back into the pines.

"We'll rush him," Akins said. "We'll work around to the side."

"Hell, the moon's coming up now," one of them muttered.

Pink turned his head, saw the yellow orb showing above the eastern rim, and his heart leaped. His wild scheme was working! All he needed was to get them into the clearing, and see them through his gun sights.

Pink didn't move as he heard them pass behind him, dry twigs crackling under their feet. They were moving slowly and carefully for their surprise rush. Every second that they waited gave the moon more time to roll higher into the sky. Pink tensed, the hammer back on his Colt; then they came, four of them, bending low and running toward the cabin.

Pink stepped out of the trees and triggered a shot as he caught the black bulk of the first man in his sights. The fellow stumbled, fell, and Pink fired again. Rory had come into action from the cabin. One of Akins' men was shooting at Pink. Death cries shrilled into the night, mingling with the crash of guns. Lead snarled by Pink and ripped into a pine trunk behind him. The canyon became a thundering inferno of blasting guns as orange flame lashed the darkness.

His chin set in determination, Pink moved his position and made every shot good. Then something hit him in the middle and he went down. He struggled up, heard big Rory's battle bellow, and saw that one of the killers was still on his feet, running back toward the cover of the pines. Once more Pink's hammer dropped, and through fading eyes he saw the man stagger and drop, and silence came to the canyon. Pink didn't know that, for he was down, his face pressed hard against the floor of needles.

THE next hours were a red haze. He had a faint remembrance of big Rory carrying him into the cabin, dressing his wound, and saying something about a doctor. Then other men were in the cabin, talking excitedly, and a black-bearded man was bending over him, a shiny instrument in his hand.

It was daylight when Pink's mind cleared, and he saw Rory, Sheriff Rhodes, and a rawboned man who looked vaguely familiar.

"Don't talk, son," Rory said in a voice that sounded far away. "It's all over, and you had it figured right down to a gnat's eyebrow. It was Akins that did the killing, and them 08 Bar cattle are some of Adler's C 6 all right. Akins and two of his men are dead, and the third one was shot up. I took him into town when I went for Doc Click, and the heller talked."

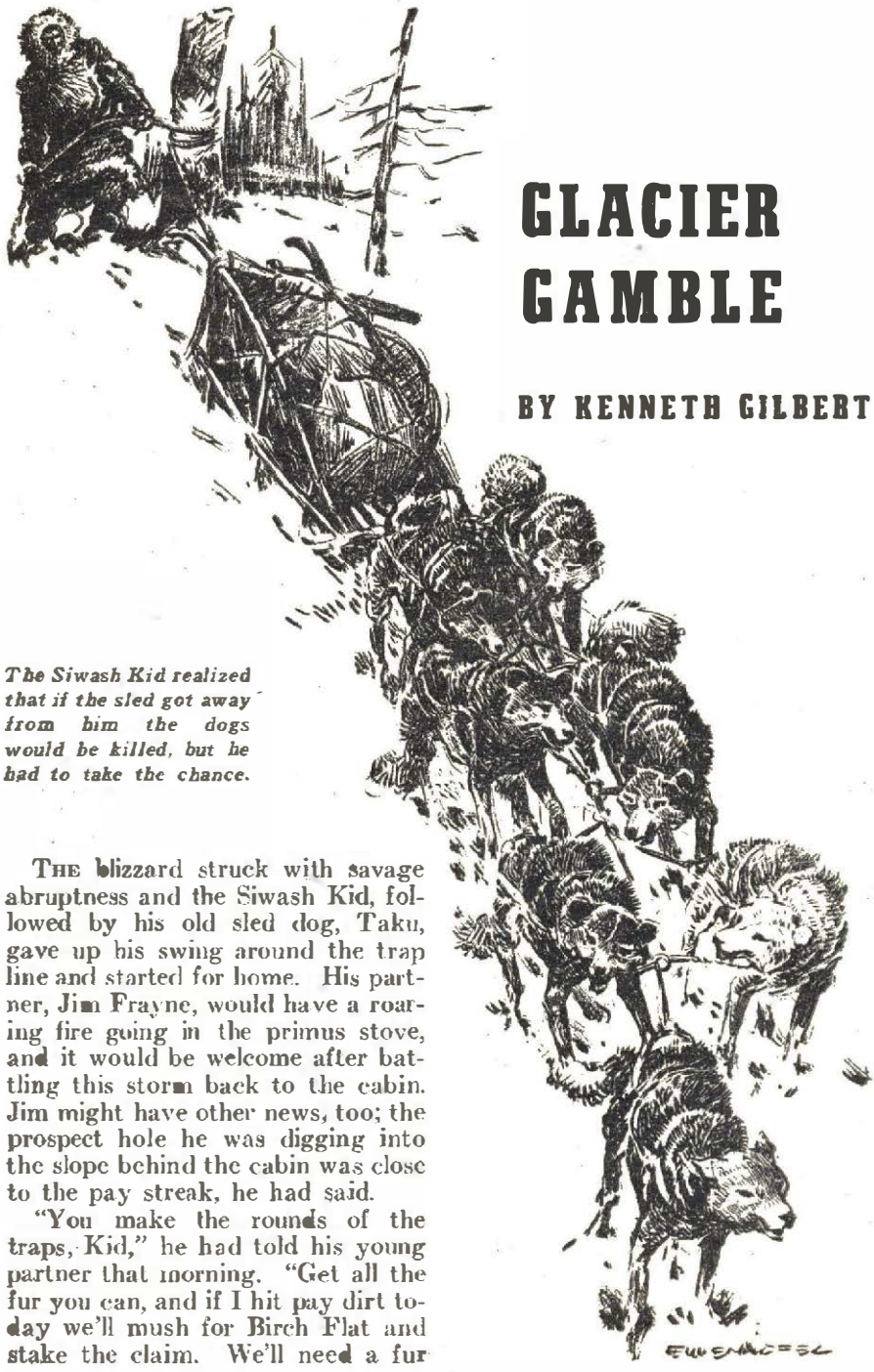
The rawboned man came up to the bunk. Pink saw that it was Clay Adler. "You did a purty job tonight, young feller," Adler declared. "I'm gonna see that you get a nice cut out of them steers when we ship this fall." He turned to Rory. "I mighta knowed Akins wouldn't want you moving in here above him. I'd suspected the hombre for a long time, but I couldn't never prove anything. Soon as you're ready to start sawing, I'll see you get some men."

Pink closed his eyes. Jeff and Zack and Dave would rest easy there under the pine, and it wouldn't be long until he and Rory would hear the whine of the saw again. He was glad Adler was friendly, but they wouldn't need his help. The McCays would get along.

THE END

GLACIER GAMBLE

BY KENNETH GILBERT



The Siwash Kid realized that if the sled got away from him the dogs would be killed, but he had to take the chance.

THE blizzard struck with savage abruptness and the Siwash Kid, followed by his old sled dog, Taku, gave up his swing around the trap line and started for home. His partner, Jim Frayne, would have a roaring fire going in the primus stove, and it would be welcome after battling this storm back to the cabin. Jim might have other news, too; the prospect hole he was digging into the slope behind the cabin was close to the pay streak, he had said.

"You make the rounds of the traps, Kid," he had told his young partner that morning. "Get all the fur you can, and if I hit pay dirt today we'll mush for Birch Flat and stake the claim. We'll need a fur

catch to outfit ourselves so that we can work the mine. This may be one of the biggest quartz finds since the old days!"

With Jim's words in mind, the Kid almost welcomed the arrival of the blizzard, so that he could turn back and learn what his partner had found.

There was another reason why he was anxious to return. Twice that day he and Taku had come upon a strange snowshoe track, and the discovery made him vaguely uneasy. He had believed that he and Frayne were the only human beings in the region. It was wild, almost inaccessible country, this tiny valley hidden behind Cultus Glacier. Birch Flat, the nearest settlement, could be reached only by a rough trail which led eighty miles around the glacier, although in a direct line from the cabin, Birch Flat was only fifty miles away. But that direct route was considered virtually impossible because it led across the great ice river, with its treacherous snow bridges and terrifying crevasses.

The track was that of a white man, the Kid decided. The way the stranger set down his mukluks in the snow proved that. The tracks, in the center of the webbed snowshoe pattern, were pointed outward; an Indian invariably toed inward.

Birch Flat during the winter months harbored an unsavory clan. Claim jumpers and other outlaws holed up there until spring came and the country opened so that they could vanish again in the wilderness. During the winter there was no law at Birch Flat, nothing for them to fear. If Jim Frayne made a gold strike and Birch Flat learned about it before the claim could be recorded and protected, trouble was sure to come. The presence of an outlaw in the vicinity at this crucial moment worried the Kid.

So, as he fought head down against the blizzard, he kept his carbine ready. He told himself there was nothing to fear, but he had lived long enough in the wilds to realize that it is foolish to be too trustful. Old Taku also seemed to be uneasy, for as he plodded on, the blizzard matting his furry coat thickly, he turned his head from side to side and sniffed deeply, as though trying to analyze warnings which seemed to come down the wind. They were almost at the cabin when Taku bristled suddenly and growled.

THE Kid stopped instantly, lifting his gun and shifting the small sack of marten pelts which he carried on his back, all the fur that the trap line had yielded that day. He stood there peering about and listening. The wind veered and he heard a long-drawn wolfish howl from ahead. The sound rose and fell in the chill air, and then it became a full-throated chorus of weird wailings. Taku whined in understanding.

"Sled dogs!" the Kid decided. "They're our dogs, too. Something's wrong!"

He pushed on again, but more cautiously, gun ready. Presently the white bulk of the cabin loomed before him. He stopped once more, staring at the thing and wondering what there was about it which stirred his suspicions. Then he saw. *There was no smoke coming from the chimney!*

True, it might have been that Jim Frayne was still busy in the prospect hole and had permitted the fire to die. But with the coming of the storm, Jim would expect the Kid to turn back at once. He knew the boy would be cold, would need a fire and warm grub. It would be like

him to have such a welcome waiting. But—Jim Frayne was not there!

Or was he? That was a dread possibility, too. Jim might be inside, dead, for some reason which the Kid could not fathom at the moment. Or he might be in the mine shaft, hurt by a cave-in or other accident.

The sled dogs, chained apart to keep them from fighting, wailed again from behind the cabin. They knew something was wrong and were telling the world of it. The Kid went swiftly forward. If Jim Frayne were not in the cabin, then he must be in the mine. But when the Kid pushed open the door he knew that his search was ended. Jim Frayne was there.

He lay sprawled half in and half out of his bunk, and the Kid gave a sharp cry of dismay, for Frayne seemed to be dead. There was a pool of blood beside the bunk, and Frayne's rifle lay on the floor, empty cartridges scattered about.

Old Taku lifted his nose and made the lugubrious sound which many sled dogs do in the presence of death. But the Kid was already at Jim Frayne's side, lifting his feet into the bunk and trying to find out if there was any life left in his partner's limp body.

As the boy worked hurriedly he felt Frayne's muscles tense, a shudder go through him. There was an ugly bullet wound high in his chest, and Frayne had evidently stripped his own shirt away as though trying to stanch the flow of blood. But he was not dead—not yet, anyway.

Suddenly Frayne's eyes opened. He stared at the Kid unbelievingly at first. Then recognition came. He mumbled incoherently.

"Jim!" the boy cried. "What happened? Who did it?"

The wounded man stirred and groaned and closed his eyes again. The Kid got up and began building a fire. Whatever had happened was less important right now than was the need of trying to save Frayne. Soon there was hot water, and the Kid bathed the wound and bandaged it as best he could.

"Jim!" the Kid whispered at last. "You feel better? Can you talk now? Who did it?"

Frayne stirred again. When he did speak his voice was so low that the boy could scarcely hear what he was saying. At times his voice ended in a choking cough that racked his weakened body.

"Kid," he whispered, "this is the end! I . . . I'm cashin' in. Pete Segal did it. Claim jumped . . . from Birch Flat. Caught me in the mine . . . just after . . . I found the gold!" He was silent a moment, as though summoning the last of his waning strength. "We scrapped . . . he got away . . . laid for me when I started for the cabin. Aimed to kill me . . . jump the claim. I fought him off until storm came. He tried to turn dogs loose. Shot it out with him . . . he got away. Maybe he figured he'd finished me. He'll stake claim . . . say he shot me because I tried to jump it. Look . . . under pack . . . corner—"

Frayne's face when whiter than before and for an instant the boy thought he was dead. But the pulse still beat faintly.

Torn between grief and an almost overpowering feeling of fury, the Kid stood there in helpless indecision. What Frayne had said about dying was apparently true. His lips were turning bluish and there was an ashen hue creeping into his cheeks.

Outside, the blizzard roared loudly as it struck into full stride. Somewhere in it, bound for Birch Flat,

no doubt, was the murderous Segal. The Kid had heard of the man. Segal had been linked with tales of violence along the gold creeks, stories of prospectors found dead, their nuggets gone. But nothing had ever been proved against the man, and the law had still to catch up with him.

The Kid bathed Jim Frayne's face with a cold cloth, rubbed his wrists, and presently saw color spill into the pale cheeks. Then, out of curiosity, he went to the corner which Frayne had indicated, and lifted the pack there. What he saw was a small pile of quartz fragments. The fragments were extraordinarily heavy and veined with metal which, when scratched, shone yellow. Gold! And the richest ore the Kid had ever seen! For an instant the meaning of it struck him hard, all the things this find would buy. They were rich, he and Jim Frayne! Yet immediately came realization that it was an empty victory after all.

Jim Frayne was dying. Pete Segal was already mushing for Birch Flat to stake the claim. Only the fact that he had been fought off had prevented him from finishing Frayne and hiding his body in the rocks. Maybe Segal didn't know that Frayne had a partner. But once the claim was staked he would be back, ready to kill in defense of the potential fortune he had stolen. Anyway, with Jim Frayne dead, even this gold wouldn't mean so much to the Kid.

FRAYNE was moving restlessly. Evidently the wound was deep and painful.

Suddenly the boy heard the man speaking in a low, hardly audible voice.

"Kid," whispered Frayne, "you forget about me. I'm a goner! You hit for Birch Flat as fast as you can. Maybe you can beat Segal. The mine belongs to you, anyway. Stake it for yourself. Won't do me any good where I'm goin'."

The Kid shook his head, tears in his eyes. "Think I'd leave you here alone?" he demanded reproachfully. "I'd rather lose the mine than do that!"

"Kid," Frayne protested weakly, "you're a dumb fool! Stayin' here won't help me none. Nothin' you can do about this bullet hole in me. If you was a doctor—but you're not! There's a doc at Birch Flat, but I'll be dead long before you can make it there and back. You take the dogs and hit out, like I told you!"

The Kid started to answer but stopped as a sudden thought came. The song of the blizzard rose and fell, but it seemed to him to be losing some of its savagery. A few hours more and it would be over, perhaps.

"Jim," he said abruptly, "I'm hitching the dogs and taking you to Birch Flat. If you can stand the trip it'll save half the time that it would take for me to go for the doc and return."

"Crazy!" muttered Frayne. "Whether I could stand the trip or not doesn't make much difference. Got nothin' to lose. But you'll slow yourself down so that Segal will get there ahead of you and stake the claim. You're crazy, Kid!"

The boy shook his head. "Crazy? Maybe so, Jim. But, here's a crazier idea still. I'm taking you across Cultus Glacier! That'll give me a thirty-mile jump on Segal and get you there quicker, if we make it. If we *don't* make it—" He left the sentence unfinished.

Frayne stirred and forced himself to a sitting position. "Kid," he com-

manded, "I won't do it! I don't mind dyin' myself, but I won't let you kill yourself just for me! I won't go, I tell you!"

The Kid, now that determination had come, seemed not to hear his partner's protests. He hurried outside, broke loose the dog sled from where it stood upended against the side of the cabin. He began loading it with layers of blankets, so that Frayne would ride as comfortably as possible. A thick wolf robe went on last. Then he went to the bunk and caught hold of Frayne's shoulders.

"Kid," the man protested again, "you're crazy! I'm not goin'—" But the boy paid no attention, and Frayne was too weak to struggle. He was half dragged and half carried to the sled after a parka had been pulled on over his head. There he was stretched out, and over him was thrown another wolf robe, which was lashed to the sled in such fashion that Frayne was not visible at all.

By this time the dogs were whining eagerly, for they understood that they were taking the trail. Six of them were harnessed, and then the Kid put Taku in the leader's position. The old wolf-dog could not work as hard as the others—probably he couldn't pull much more than his own weight—but the Kid made him leader because of the cunning which lay in the dog's brain. They were going to attempt something which, to the boy's knowledge, had not been attempted before. Probably others who had tried to cross Cultus Glacier had not lived to tell the story of their adventures. A smart lead dog would make all the difference between possible success and certain failure.

At last all was ready. "You all right, Jim?" the boy asked finally. He heard a muffled reply from beneath the wolf robe; there was an opening on one side through which Frayne might breathe, but that was all. "Taku!" called the Kid sharply. "*Mush!*"

The dogs surged against the traces as they broke the sled loose. Then they were under way, while the storm still whipped powdery snow into swirling gusts. Yet the Kid sensed that the blizzard was fading. It might be over before the actual crossing of the glacier began.

On a long slant they fought out of the valley until at last they stood on the edge of the steep pitch which dropped down to the glacier itself. Here the Kid paused in momentary uncertainty. The dogs were working well, but Taku stared down through the lessening storm and seemed to understand that descent would be difficult. The Kid did not stop to weigh chances; what lay ahead of him was something which didn't encourage thinking. He'd take one situation after another as it arose and not worry too much about what was coming next. The immediate problem was how to get down to the broken, uneven expanse of the glacier. It was a dog-sled maneuver which he had never attempted before, yet a solution of the problem suggested itself.

There was an extra lashing of *babiege*, dried caribou hide, on the sled, and this the Kid unfastened, then tied to the cross brace at the rear. He took two turns of the line around a stump which had been broken off during some old snowslide.

"*Mush!*" he yelled at Taku. The old sled dog stared at him doubtfully for an instant, then down the steep pitch ahead. "*Mush!*" cried the boy again, more loudly this time, and the dog obeyed.

INCH by inch the boy eased off the line while Taku and the other dogs tried to hold the weight of the sled and its load from overrunning them. They came to a narrow ledge and stopped at the Kid's command.

Hoping that the sled would not start on of its own accord again, the boy unfastened the snubbing line and hastened down to where they were waiting. As though he understood what was required, Taku braced his furry legs against further descent and the other dogs did likewise. Only when the Kid again wound the line around another stump and again eased off did they let go. But this time Taku was more confident, and the boy grinned in appreciation.

"Taku figures that for once I know what I'm doing," he decided. At last there were no more drops and the terrifying aspect of the glacier, with its hummocks and deep drifts that were whipped by the wind, lay before them. "So far so good," the boy told himself. But he knew well that the real hazard lay just ahead.

He paused only long enough to make certain that Frayne was still alive. The man was sleeping now, but his pulse was less erratic. The Kid's hopes rose. Beyond the glacier was Birch Flat, still a long way off but nearer by thirty miles than the route Pete Segal would have to take. Anyway, the mine wasn't important now, not nearly so important as saving Jim Frayne's life. Somehow they'd make it—or else both of them would die out there.

"Taku," the boy spoke earnestly to the old leader, "I'm counting on you. You know more about this than I do, more than any human being could."

Taku looked at him as though trying to understand. Perhaps the dog sensed the approval in his master's voice. The boy eyed him as another thought came.

Taku was the leader of the dog team, but the other dogs could really handle the sled. Why not use him as a sort of scout to guide them across the dangerous snow and ice fields ahead? The *babiege* line in the Kid's hands, after he had unfastened it from the sled, gave him the idea. He unharnessed Taku, secured one end of the line to his collar and the other to the harness of the dog immediately behind. The line was easily fifty feet long; this gave Taku a chance to range ahead and discover danger before the rest of the outfit came up.

Taku wagged his curled tail and started off in advance when the Kid again gave the command to "mush." So they went on, slowly and warily, while the storm thinned out. But the Kid realized that darkness was not far off; it would overtake them long before they could cross the glacier. If the storm clouds cleared away there would be a moon, but he also realized that Pete Segal likewise would be taking advantage of the blizzard's end and would be pushing hard toward Birch Flat.

But the plan seemed to be working well so far. Taku kept ahead, sniffing the snow now and then as though seeking to detect hidden hazards. Sometimes he swung far to the left and the other dogs followed him; again he would veer in the opposite direction. The Kid knew that the shrewd old dog was avoiding death traps—thinly covered crevasses whose snow was not strong enough to support the weight even of a dog. It was slow progress, and yet so far it was safe. The glacier itself could not be more than two miles wide. The Kid judged that they were halfway across when Taku stopped at last in uncertainty and whined.

The boy spoke to the dog encouragingly, but still Taku refused to go on. The storm had died out of the sky, and the leaden snow clouds were breaking away, but the low-swinging Northern sun was dipping below the horizon. The Kid was in a hurry to go on now, realizing that if they were trapped out here when night fell and before the moon rose, they would be helpless. Jim Frayne seemed barely alive, muttering now and then in delirium, but there was still a chance for him if they were not delayed long.

"Mush!" the Kid yelled impatiently. "Mush, you old coward!"

Taku swung around and looked at the boy in surprise; seldom had his master used that tone in addressing him. But he would not go on. He cowered, head down and tail drooping. Suddenly the Kid realized that the dog was afraid of some real danger and that he was telling his master as plainly as he could that it would be risky to go on.

In swift strides the Kid swung around the sled and started toward the dog. Perhaps he could make out what it was that Taku feared. The snow looked innocently unbroken. Then, just as the Kid was passing the waiting dog team, he felt the world drop from beneath his feet.

There was a slithering, whispering sound—and the Kid was plunging downward in a smothering mass of new snow that fell about him. His shoulder struck something hard, there was a stunning blow on his head, and then oblivion came.

WHEN consciousness returned, the Kid had a feeling that he had not been knocked out for long. He had the sensation of being squeezed. He looked up and saw a narrow slot perhaps twenty feet above him, and beyond this a strip of the darkest blue sky he had ever seen. Taku had been right, after all. He had sensed this crevasse, and the Kid, blunderingly trying to correct him, had fallen into it.

There was a furry head up there at the edge of the crevasse; the dog was staring down anxiously at him. When the dog saw his master stir he whined.

"Taku!" the boy cried desperately, yet realizing that there was nothing the dog could do to help him. He tried to turn himself, but found he couldn't. In falling, his body had been wedged between the ice walls where the crevasse narrowed. That was what gave him the feeling of being squeezed. Breathing was difficult. Likewise, the chill of the ice on either side of his body was already beginning to penetrate through his clothing, thick and warm though it was.

But the Kid still saw a ray of hope. On one side of the crevasse was a narrow shelf which slanted upward to the rim of the great ice crack. If he could only get loose he might be able to work his way upward.

"Jim!" he called in sudden anxiety. "Jim!"

Frayne was probably close to death, and yet he *might* have enough strength to help in some way. But there was no response from above. Perhaps his partner was already dead. Within an hour at most he himself would be dead, frozen solidly in the heart of this glacier, which was probably old long before either white men or red had come to this land. Thought of it struck terror into the boy's heart. If there was only some way he could make Taku understand! Maybe Frayne was still alive, but had not realized what had happened. If Taku could rouse

him sufficiently so that he could crawl off the sled— But it was a wild, forlorn hope and the Kid knew it. What could Jim Frayne do if he did waken long enough to come? Certainly he was too weak to get down into this crevasse and free his partner. The boy shivered as the cold went deeper into his body.

"Taku!" he called again, a hopeless cry.

The dog whined, then lifted his muzzle and mourned in wolfish fashion. Then he was gone, vanished as though pulled from the edge of the crevasse. It looked queer to the Kid, but he could not understand the significance of it, if there was any meaning to it. But a moment later the dog appeared, this time farther along the crevasse.

"Taku!" the Kid cried weakly, then saw a strange thing.

The dog was coming down! His cunning old wolf brain had seen that slanting ledge which reached down to where the Kid lay. He was determined to get to the boy's side, even though he could not help. Whining fearfully, taking each step with infinite caution, the old dog came nearer and nearer. A lump rose in the Kid's throat at this evidence of devotion. Taku was willing to die down here just so he could be by the side of the man-god he loved. A moment later and he was nuzzling the boy's face.

The Kid patted the shaggy head while his eyes grew misty. His hand slid around the furry neck—and then stopped as the fingers groped the *babiege* line fastened to the dog's collar. That was strange! Taku must have gnawed the rawhide in two or else dragged the other dogs to the very lip of the crevasse.

The astonishing thing was that the line was not only loose, but evidently had been severed close to where it had been tied to the harness of the other dogs, for Taku had dragged practically its entire length down into the crevasse with him. Suddenly the Kid's heart thumped in response to a reckless, fantastic idea which offered the faintest ray of hope.

He was held between the walls of the crevasse largely because he could not get leverage enough to drag himself out. Was it possible that Taku could be made to help after all? With trembling hands the Kid began fashioning a loop of the strong line. He got it over his head and under his shoulders. Then he did a cruel thing. He struck the old dog a sharp blow in the face!

"Mush!" he commanded harshly. "Get out of here! Mush!"

BEWILDERED, old Taku drew back. Never had he been treated thus by the Kid. He whined again and cowered, but the boy seemed beside himself with anger.

"Mush!" he yelled again. "Mush out of here!" He lifted his hand as though to strike the dog again.

The threat was sufficient. Old Taku knew now that the end of everything had come. For some reason his master hated him, was driving Taku away. Whimpering, the old dog turned and started slowly up the incline again. Once he stopped and looked back, as though hoping the Kid would relent, but again the boy shouted at him.

On and on Taku went, up and out of the crevasse, and the Kid felt the *babiege* line grow taut. Again he called out the command to "Mush!" but there was a different ring in his words. Perhaps Taku realized that the man-god was no longer angry. Years of training in harness, with the pull of a sled against his collar, had taught him to act instinctively

under such circumstances. There was a load to be drawn; he had heard the command "Mush!" And he *did* mush!

The Kid felt the line tighten under his arms. Working frantically with his hands, he felt himself move slightly. In sudden frenzy he shouted louder at the old dog. There was a stronger surge—and then, abruptly, the boy knew he was free! Even then Taku would not have quit pulling unless the boy had commanded him to stop. But it was no longer necessary. The Kid was clear at last and, slowly and painfully, he began climbing along the ledge, out of the crevasse.

He came out at last into the frozen night and saw the moon lifting above the peaks. But his eyes fell next on the figure of Jim Frayne lying in the snow beside the sled. The man was stretched out and there was a knife in his hand. As the Kid bent over and shook him, Frayne muttered unintelligibly.

But the boy needed no explanation. He knew that Frayne had heard him, had managed to crawl off the sled and cut Taku's lead line, perhaps intending to drop one end of the line into the crevasse. But Frayne's strength had failed him before he could accomplish it. It was Taku, and his loyalty to the Kid who had made rescue possible from there on.

"Jim!" cried the boy joyfully. "We're going to make it now! We've licked the worst of it. Nothing can stop us from here on!"

He dragged the barely conscious Frayne back on the sled and tucked him in once more. Then he stooped to hug old Taku who, in the way of a faithful dog, had already forgiven the strange actions of his master. Then, with Taku once more in the lead, they set out again. An hour later they were across the glacier, and on their way to Birch Flat.

When they reached the tiny settlement nearly twenty-four hours later, the Kid was almost as near death as was his partner. The dogs, likewise, were virtually finished; yet somehow the Kid, with the aid of old Taku in the lead, had managed to keep them going. They came dragging down the single street of Birch Flat and the boy seemed unaware that the end of the trail had come, for he kept shouting at the dogs even while men were removing Jim Frayne from the sled. The next thing he remembered was that he was lying in a bunk and some bearded prospector was holding a cup of soup to his lips.

The Kid pushed the cup away and sat up. "How's Jim?" he demanded anxiously.

"He'll live, the doc says," the prospector replied. "But what's all this you've been blabbin' about while you've been asleep? About crossin' Cultus Glacier, and about Pete Segal pluggin' Jim Frayne?" The man looked at him queerly. "If Jim wasn't really wounded, I'd say you've been havin' a dream."

The Kid nodded and grinned with wind-blackened lips.

"Jim Frayne roused up long enough to send word for you to record the claim," the prospector went on. "Segal hasn't come in yet, but when he does he'll find the wrong kind of a welcome waitin' for him. There's a few honest miners left in this camp, even if there ain't no law. You want me to take you to the recorder's office now?"

The Siwash Kid shook his head. "Time enough for that," he replied, "when I've taken care of my dogs—especially Taku!"

THE END.

BY GEORGE MICHENER

BRAND OF HONOR

FRED CORY and Harry Princemps had ridden over to Piney that morning to collect on a note. Now they were on their way home, and Cory had a thousand dollars stuffed in his shirt. The money belonged to Princemps.

It always gave Cory a strange feeling of elation to be allowed to carry money for Princemps. It was

proof afresh that his employer trusted him. Most men wouldn't have trusted Cory with a plugged nickel.

Appearances were against Fred Cory. He was ugly as only brute force can be ugly. He was burly-shouldered and bull-necked. His face was squarely and harshly molded, and not improved by a knife scar across the bridge of his flat nose. When he spoke, his voice was a sort of subdued growl. Generally, though, Cory didn't do much talking; he kept his steel-trap jaw shut.

Even in thought Cory couldn't define clearly his feeling toward Harry Princemps. So long as Cory could remember, honest men had shunned him. Yet Princemps trusted him. At times, puzzling over this, the savage, primordial line of Cory's features would soften. When he looked at Harry Princemps his bleak gaze would warm, become almost doglike in its devotion.

Harry Princemps was all that the much younger Fred Cory was not. He was small-boned, and had thin, aristocratic features. Behind him was a long line of blueblood ancestors. He was sixty-five years old, Harry Princemps, and pride was a ramrod down his back—pride of family, pride of wealth.

Princemps was the overlord of Dancing Creek. He owned range, cattle and water. He owned most of the town of Crown Point and he also owned the sheriff. This was wealth and power, and since Princemps handled it justly, perhaps it merited pride. His greatest pride, though, was his only son, young Tom Princemps.

Among Princemps' lesser prides was his ability to judge men. One glance, and he could say: "This man is good." Or of another: "This man is bad. Trust him under no circumstances."

These pronouncements were final; Princemps would allow no argument. Nevertheless, he did make mistakes. Fred Cory was one of them. Sheriff Mark Breton was sure of it. So was Cory himself.

There was a possibility, of course, that when Princemps hired Cory his judgment was swayed by the fact that Cory had just saved his son's life.

Tom Princemps, riding alone, had slid over a bluff edge. His horse went on to the bottom, but Tom, getting his hands twined in a bit of brush, was left dangling halfway 'twixt sky and eternity. Fred Cory happened along at the time and managed, at no little risk to himself, to get young Princemps back on solid footing. As a reward for the feat, Harry Princemps offered Cory a job.

Cory had no use for work. He would have preferred to take his reward in money and the liberty to travel with no questions asked. He started to mention this when something in the way Princemps was watching him stopped him. Unaccountably, he heard himself accepting a job.

Princemps nodded his satisfaction. "Name?"

"Cory—" He caught himself in time and broke it off short. Princemps, writing in a pay-roll ledger, didn't notice.

"Cory," Princemps repeated. "First name?"

The big man had had a chance to gather his wits. "Fred," he answered.

So that was his name now, Fred Cory. Occasionally, so he would be sure to remember, he would say it under his breath.

Cory's job was that of body-

guard. When Princemps rode, Cory went along. When Princemps worked in his office, Cory snoozed in the bunkhouse. All in all, Cory found honest toil not unpleasant.

Cory had another duty when he was with Princemps. He was a listening post. That is to say he remained quiet while Princemps talked at him. This was convenient for Princemps. He could think aloud without risking the imputation that he was talking to himself. When an answer was needed, Cory grunted. This, too, was convenient since Princemps could interpret a grunt as he pleased.

MOSTLY when Harry Princemps thought aloud it was in terms of cattle or finance. Today, though, as he and Cory jogged home from Piney, he was thinking of his son. Cory was thinking of nothing. Lulled by the sun and the easy motion of his horse, the big man was half asleep.

"He's wild, too wild," Princemps was musing in a worried tone. "Well, I guess that's to be expected. Tom is young yet. He'll change as he gets older. I've seen it happen before—often! He's a Princemps, and there's never yet been rotten fruit on that bough. *Never!*"

So explosive was this last that Cory was jarred to attention.

Princemps drilled him with blue-steel eyes. "Never!" he said again. "The boy's a little wild, that's all. The Princemps men have always had spirit. He'll tame down."

Cory was startled. He'd never before seen the old man look so fierce. It was almost as if Princemps were challenging contradiction. Plainly the occasion demanded more than a grunt. Cory groped for adequate answer.

"Sure," he growled. He tried to pump up conviction. "Sure, the kid's all right."

Princemps lifted his gaze. He swept his arm in a semicircle, indicating the far benches, the long, green-stippled valley of the Dancing Creek. "Princemps land," he proclaimed proudly. "All of it! I've been adding to it for forty years. Tom will take up where I leave off. A hundred years from now a Princemps will still own this land. There'll be enough for all the Princemps that are ever born. My son and I will see to that."

Cory said nothing but a vague sense of pity stirred in the big man.

Two riders came down from the timber beyond the benches and halted by the intersection of the Piney and Crown Point trails. The strangers were dusty, ill-kempt. They looked mangy, like winter-lean coyotes. They waited, staring at Cory, holding whispered side-mouth conference.

Cory scowled ferociously. He dropped his hand to his gun.

The strangers were unimpressed. They grinned. One flicked his eyelid in an almost imperceptible wink. They spoke as Princemps and Cory came abreast, and Princemps answered their greeting with a curt nod and a cold, passing scrutiny.

The foremost of the two men pointed. "This the trail to Crown Point?"

"Yes," Princemps said briefly. He and Cory went on. Cory lagged a bit and stole a quick glance over his shoulder.

The strangers were still at the trail crossing. The one who had winked to him waved his hand. He pantomimed, showing his teeth to Cory and holding his sides in silent guffaws.

When Cory glanced back again, the two were pushing on toward

Crown Point. Cory pulled up alongside Princemps.

Princemps was occupied in lighting a cheroot. "Ever see those two before?" he asked.

Cory reflectively shut his eyes. "No," he replied.

Princemps nodded. "I'd thought for a minute," he confessed, "that they seemed to know you. Just my imagination, I guess." He flipped away his match. "I'll tell the sheriff to be on the lookout for them," he decided. "Whatever their business here, those two mean no good."

"Um-m-m," grunted Cory.

Princemps waved his cheroot expansively. "The evil man," he said oratorically, "placards himself. He warns of his intentions by the shiftiness of his gaze, by his furtiveness."

"Um-m-m," agreed Cory.

Princemps warmed to his favorite subject. "The observant man," he continued, "is not deceived by subterfuge, an over-bold stare, a certain brazenness of manner."

Princemps had a weakness for the pedantic phrase. Fred Cory often didn't know what he was talking about. His boss orated, and Cory drowsed. At intervals he grunted.

MARK BRETON was sunning himself on the bench before Princemps' ranch office when Princemps and Cory rode up. Breton was sheriff.

Princemps had put Breton in office ten years ago and was satisfied to keep him there. Twice a week Breton conferred with the ranch owner on the running of the county. In effect, Mark Breton served two masters—Harry Princemps and the law. If ever the interests of the one should clash with the edicts of the other, Breton would unhesitatingly decide in favor of the law. He was that kind of lawman.

Cory left Princemps with the sheriff and took the horses to the corral. He returned to find Princemps and Breton both sunning themselves upon the bench before the office.

"You can put the money in the top drawer of my desk, Fred," Princemps said to Cory.

Cory pulled the packet of money from his shirt front and plodded toward the office doorway. At sight of all that money in Cory's big hands, the sheriff sat bolt upright.

Mark Breton, with or without his star, was a formidable man. He had fists like rocks and a solid barrel of a figure. His head sprouted directly from his shoulders. Princemps could spot the evildoer at a glance. The sheriff went him one better. His own words were "I can smell an owlhooter a mile off!"

Now the sheriff's glacial eye lifted from the money packet, and he nodded. The nod was in confirmation of a thought. It said plain as words that he, Mark Breton, was right on the job, that his smeller was still working, and Cory wasn't a mile off.

Cory's granite features remained impassive. He went into the office and put the money in the drawer.

Mark Breton's harsh voice carried in through the open doorway: "That jasper," he said, "has a record somewhere or I'll swallow my hat! You're makin' a mistake, Mr. Princemps. Just because he pulled Tom—"

"And I tell you again, Mark, you're wrong!" interrupted Princemps. "Fred's not so handsome and maybe he's not so long on brains, but he's loyal and honest."

At this praise Cory's heart swelled. He waited, breathless, hoping to hear more.

Princemps changed the subject to the two suspicious strangers he and

Cory had met on the trail. "You'd better look them up when you get in town," he instructed Breton. "We don't want men like that hanging around."

"Friends of Cory's most likely," the sheriff commented.

"No," replied Princemps, "he never saw them before. He told me."

Breton chuckled grimly. "Now I'm practically sure of it!"

Cory moved out of the office. He paused to glare at Breton.

Breton didn't notice. He and Princemps were looking at the young man who had sauntered around the corner of the building.

"Hey!" exclaimed Breton. "It's Tom! I'd heard you were away again."

"I got back last night," Tom Princemps said.

"Your father was worried. I told him only last Wednesday that you could take care of yourself. That's three times you've been away in the past two months."

"I'm a busy man," Tom commented, with a sly smile.

Breton got the meaning of that smile instantly. "A girl or I'll swallow my hat! Well, we were all young once—eh, Mr. Princemps?"

Princemps' lips were set in stern disapproval. "From now on," he said coldly, "you'll do less courting, Tom. You're getting old enough to assume your responsibilities."

Tom, still faintly smiling, made no comment. He flopped down on the bench and reached for the sheriff's tobacco and papers. "And how's crime these days?" he asked familiarly.

Princemps had forgotten Cory. Everybody seemed to have forgotten him. He strolled around to the small bunkhouse in the afterpart of the office building. The cowpunchers all stayed in the big bunkhouse beyond the corrals. Here Cory was the sole occupant. He stretched out on his bunk.

Presently Cory heard hoofbeats as the sheriff departed for town. A step sounded outside, and Tom Princemps slipped into the bunkhouse. The young man leaned against the wall and stared fixedly at the reclining Cory. "Hiya, Beautiful," he said softly.

Tom was his father's son, a Princemps, a blueblood. In Tom's case the blood was, perhaps, a shade too blue. His lips were inclined to pout. His lashes were long and his eyes were large and expressive, unusually so for a man. He looked like an extraordinarily handsome boy of about seventeen. Actually, he was twenty-one.

Cory hadn't answered Tom's flippant greeting. The youth crossed the room to his side. "Who were the drifters you and the old man met this mornin'?" he asked.

"I don't know," growled Cory.

"Headin' for town, were they?"

"That's what they said."

Tom nodded in the manner of a man who has made his point. "I just wondered," he murmured. He reached into Cory's pocket and took out tobacco and papers.

Cory's brow was furrowed as Tom rolled a cigarette. Never an articulate man, now Cory found difficulty in marshaling words for what he wanted to say. Tom tossed the tobacco sack in Cory's general direction and struck a match.

"Keep away from them two hooters!" Cory blurted suddenly.

"What?"

"I said to keep away from 'em. And everybody like 'em."

Tom peered at Cory with incredulous eyes. "Handsome, are you tellin' *me* what to do?"

"It ain't right," Cory continued stubbornly. "Your old man thinks the sun rises and sets on your stern. If he knew—"

"Shut up, you!" Tom's eyes had narrowed. His lips were raked back from his teeth. "Now *you* listen to me! You fell into something soft when you pulled me out of Sedley Canyon. If my old man is fool enough to keep you around, that's his—"

The big man uttered a strangled cry. "He ain't a fool!" He sat up in the bunk, caught Tom's wrist and jerked him to him.

"You worthless young fool!" he roared. "I ought to twist your arm off and club you with it! Where you been all the past week? Where d'you go when you pull out o' here for a week at a time?"

Tom's face had turned an angry red. He whipped out his gun and jammed the muzzle under Cory's chin. "Let go," he said.

Cory released Tom's wrist. The gun muzzle forced him back in the bunk, forced his head back till his neck cords were straining.

"Handsome," Tom spoke through thin, compressed lips, "don't you ever put your hands on me again."

That was all he said. His voice was hushed, but there was a cold, demoniac fury in it that chilled Cory. The big man remained very still. He knew that he had never been closer to death than he was at that minute.

Abruptly Tom holstered his gun and walked to the door. He paused and smiled at Cory. "I think," he said, "that now we understand each other." Then he went out.

THAT night Cory rode into Crown Point. He left his horse in front of the Palace and continued on foot as far as Humbolt Ed's.

Humbolt Ed's was on the wrong end of town and it wasn't much of a place. The barkeep was leaning on his empty bar and studying his nails. A one-legged man was asleep on a bench by the wall. A few men sat at tables drinking.

Cory approached the barkeep. "Where's Cab and Herb?"

The barkeep's eyes were stony. "Never heard of 'em."

Cory pushed his face close. "They got in today. They'd stop here. I know what kind of a joint this is."

The bartender's gaze wavered. "You can try No. 1, upstairs," he muttered reluctantly. "They might be the ones."

Cory went up a creaking flight of stairs. He turned the first knob he came to, kicked open the door and shouldered into a little room. Two men eyed him watchfully. One lay on the bed with his hat tilted over his eyes and his hand under the blankets. His companion squatted cross-leg on the floor with a deck of cards spread in front of him. They were the two men Cory and Princemps had met earlier in the day.

Cory kicked the door shut behind him, and the man on the bed slid the hat from his face and grinned. "Why, it's Tug!" he cried. "Herb, here's our old pal Tug!"

Herb scowled at the cards. "Yeah," he commented sourly, "I heard him. Tell him to put his horse outside."

Cory was watching the man on the bed. "Cab," he growled, "take your hand off that gun."

Cab grinned more widely. "Still the same old Tug! Always jokin'." Nevertheless, he took his hand from under the blanket.

Herb scattered the cards and sprang upright. "All right!" he

snarled. "Spit it out, Tug! What d'you want?"

"Get out o' here!" Cory said briefly. "Stay out! Keep travelin'!"

Herb swore luridly. "By damn, this is too much! First it was the sheriff, now it's you!"

"The sheriff," explained Cab, "paid us a call this afternoon. Herb and me don't seem to fit."

"You don't," said Cory. "What're you doin' here?"

"We got connections, Tug," Cab said slyly. "We was broke and needed money, and I remembered we had a friend on Dancin' Creek."

"Me?"

Cab shook his head. "No, Tug, not you. But we had heard you was doin' right well by yourself. When we seen you this mornin', trailin' along behind old man Princemps gentle as a woolly sheep dog, I like to split a gut. What a laugh *that* was!"

"Forget the laughs!" snapped Herb. "I'll make it plain. We don't know what kind of a lay you're onto, Tug, and we don't give a damn! We ain't tryin' to cut in on your game, and you ain't cuttin' in on ours! Right, Cab?"

"Right! Live and let live, that's our motto, Tug. And in case you're worryin'—we're pullin' stakes tomorrow."

Cory nodded grimly. "And after you pull 'em, there better not be nothin' with Princemps' brand on it turn up missin'."

"Tug, the watchdog," mocked Cab. "Nice old Tuggy. Want a bone, Tuggy?"

"You heard me."

"Yeah," said Herb, "we heard you. And you heard us. That makes it even. Now get out o' here!"

Cab put the hat back over his eyes. "And when you go out, Tug," he murmured sleepily, "take your face with you. I keep thinkin' it's a nightmare."

Cory plodded down the stairs and out through the barroom. He turned left toward the Palace, where his horse was. Mark Breton stepped from a darkened doorway to intercept him.

"I thought," said the sheriff, "that you told Princemps that you didn't know those two hardcases."

Breton's sudden appearance gave Cory a bad jolt. "I don't," he answered wildly. "I happened to meet 'em and—" He clamped shut his jaw. He had been surprised into volubility. Now he took refuge in silence.

Breton chuckled harshly. "Just happened to meet 'em, eh? Well, you had to go upstairs to their room to do it. You didn't know I was standin' outside, did you?"

Cory glared at the sheriff and said nothing.

Young Tom Princemps emerged from the Palace bar and swung along the walk toward them. He stopped to peer through the night gloom at the two motionless forms.

"Hiya, Mark," he called gayly. "Hiya, Handsome. What's this—a pinch?"

"We're talkin'," Breton said in an annoyed tone.

Tom laughed lightly. "And I'm sowin' a wild oat. A drink in every place in town, and then I start over again. Good night, gentlemen." He waved airily and went on.

Breton returned his hostile attention to Cory. "Who are they?" he asked. "Why'd you send for 'em?"

"I didn't," Cory growled.

"I figured," said Breton, "that all I had to do was to keep my eye on 'em and someone would come along. You walked right into the trap.

What're you three guns plannin'?"

Cory watched Tom Princemps push through the swinging doors of Humbolt Ed's. "I ain't plannin' nothin'," he answered. "I ain't smart like you."

Cory moved forward again, and Breton kept pace beside him. At the Palace, Cory untied his horse. Breton stood on the walk and spoke quietly: "Somewhere, big fella, I've seen that face of yours before. After a while I'll remember."

Cory made no reply. He mounted and started home.

THE next evening at dusk Breton paid another visit to Harry Princemps. Cory was summoned into the office with the two men.

"Close the door and sit down, Fred," said Princemps.

Cory shivered and sat down.

"Fred," said Princemps, "I'll stand for no man lying to me. A liar can't be trusted. Did you ever lie to me?"

Cory stared at the floor. "No," he mumbled.

"The sheriff," Princemps continued, "thinks you know the two drifters we met yesterday. You told me once that you had been a cowpuncher all your life. You said you never yet left a place that you couldn't go back to it."

"That's true!" Cory lifted his head defiantly. "So help me, Mr. Princemps, it *is* true! And there ain't a lawman in the country I'm scared to look in the face!" There was an earnestness, a ring of verity in the hoarse words.

Princemps' stern features relaxed. "Perhaps—" he began.

And then the tiger sprang. "He can go back to the pen," said the sheriff. He was unfolding a yellowed old reward dodger.

Cory's chair went over with a clatter as he came to his feet. "I done time for that!" he cried out. "Blast you, you can't pin that on —" His jaw closed with a snap.

The sheriff smiled. "No," he agreed, "we can't pin this on you again. You done your time. In a way, Mr. Princemps, I guess he told the truth. Near as I can find out, he's in the clear right now. That's what fooled me. I kept lookin' through the wrong pile of dodgers. Well, here's your cowpuncher, Mr. Princemps. Honest Fred Cory, the man who wouldn't tell a lie!"

The sheriff laid the dodger on Princemps' desk.

Cory stood on spread legs, his big fists clenched, his eyes wide and unfocused. He knew what was on that dodger: *Adam (Tug) Coryblan—wanted—robbery—dangerous man.*

The paper rustled as Princemps refolded it. "You can go now, Fred," he said wearily. "That's all."

Cory didn't move.

Breton was set for trouble. "You hear?" he asked sharply.

Cory sighed and opened his fists. He went out and quietly shut the door.

Presently the sheriff left the office. He mounted his horse and jogged off in the direction of Crown Point. He didn't notice the big form waiting so silently in the night shadows. Neither did Harry Princemps when he came out.

Cory took a step forward. "Mr. Princemps," he whispered.

Princemps hadn't heard. He locked the office door and went on briskly to the house.

Cory watched with wrinkled brow till Princemps was gone. Then the big man turned and plodded toward the corrals. There was a look of misery in his eyes.

The *clip-clop* of Cory's horse beat

a solemn rhythm in the night stillness. Cory was leaving as Princemps had told him to. He had no idea where he was going, no plan, no destination.

The ranch lights faded behind him. The rhythm of the hoofs slowed, became uncertain. The horse found itself in a brush maze and stopped. Cory sat unmoving, infolded by darkness, his head bowed in an attitude of profound meditation.

Three riders passed on a trail below Cory, their voices filtering dimly into his consciousness: "A man is one thing," one of the riders was saying, "but when it comes to a ten-year-old-kid, that's bad luck! We're pullin' out o' here!"

There was a cynical answering laugh. "I'll be seein' you two again sometime. As for me, my luck's always good. I got a stake now, and tonight I crave action. Lights, music—"

A moment later the riders were lost in the shadows. Their voices died.

Cory aroused himself. He noticed that his horse had halted. He shook the reins. "Go on," he growled impatiently.

The horse threaded its way through the brush. It struck the trail and set out again at a steady pace. The trail wound along the base of the foothills. It dipped suddenly to meet the wagon trail from Brent. Cory's horse snorted and stopped again.

Cory peered into the darkness. Muttering to himself, he dismounted and went ahead on foot. A buckboard was entangled in a piñon clump to one side of the trail. The dash had been kicked to splinters, and the team was gone. The body of a man was doubled over the tailboard. It was Abe Kermit, Princemps' foreman. A bullet hole was drilled through his head.

It was not unusual for Kermit to make trips to Brent. Sometimes, on his return, he carried considerable sums of money for Princemps. Tonight, Cory guessed, had been one of the times.

Cory's first impulse was to ride, to get as far from here as possible. Then he remembered the three shadowy riders who had passed him. He tried to recall their voices. At once he remembered something else. Frequently, on his trips, Abe Kermit took with him his ten-year-old son!

Cory began running along the trail, tripping and stumbling in his haste. "Bobby!" he shouted hoarsely. *"Bobby!"*

He found Bobby Kermit a hundred yards from the buckboard. The boy must have been trying to escape when he was ridden down. The bullet in him had drilled the spine just at the base of the soft thin neck.

Cory placed little Bobby Kermit in the buckboard beside his dead father. He laid out the bodies in a semblance of repose and stood there quietly, viewing them.

The big man's gaze was melancholy. Beyond that, his scowling features revealed no particular emotion. There was, though, a new set to his shoulders, a stiffening, as if he had made a decision. As if, perhaps, now at loose ends, he had suddenly bethought him of a destination.

He left the buckboard and went to his horse. Mounting, he turned toward the town of Crown Point.

THE Palace was the most pretentious bar in Crown Point. It catered, so to speak, to the carriage trade. The inducements it offered

were a paid piano player, a modest dance floor, three percentage girls, whiskey and a minimum of violence. Also, there was, in the rear, a small partition-built room where a card player could lose his money in semi-privacy.

Tonight, when Cory entered the place, the piano player was playing and the percentage girls were dancing. A dozen or more men were propped congenially against the bar. Cory cast a quick glance around and went on to the cardroom. He pushed aside the door curtain and dropped into a seat at the poker table.

This was the first time Cory had played at the Palace. No one greeted him—no one but Tom Princemps. "Gents," introduced Tom, "this is Handsome."

Tom was winning, and his cheeks were flushed. "Handsome," he said, "this is my night to howl. Do you feel lucky?"

Cory looked at him steadily. "My luck's always good," he replied clearly. "Tonight I crave action. Lights, music—"

Tom paled, and then his cheeks flamed afresh. A feral glitter came into his eyes. "So that's it," he murmured. "So *that's* it!" He had the cards. He dealt swiftly, his burning gaze never leaving Cory.

Cory didn't bother to pick up his hand. "Slicker," he roared at Tom. "I seen you pull that ace off the bottom!"

Tom was laughing. The breath of danger was always a heady draft for young Tom Princemps. "Handsome," he answered softly, "you're a liar. The ace is in your hand—the ace o' spades. Take a look!" And his hand flashed to his holster.

Gun sound jarred the room—Cory's gun. Tom Princemps half arose and plunged forward, his head striking the table, his spent body sliding to the floor. Cory kicked back his chair.

So swiftly had the thing been done that those about the table were transfixed with horror. In this moment of shock Cory burst from the room and ran to the rear door of the place. He shot back the bolt and emerged in the alley where he had left his horse. Swinging into the saddle, he spurred away.

At the edge of town he looked over his shoulder. The street was a turmoil of activity. Doors had been flung open, lamplight shedding a glow upon a scene of rising dust, wheeling horses, cursing riders. In a minute the chase was on.

Fred Cory rode for his life. The night was his friend. Instinctively he kept to the deepest shadows. He thundered by the dim outline of a stalled buckboard and headed south.

The buckboard and the bodies of the two Kermits created a diversion, temporarily halted the chase. Cory took full advantage of it. When he finally pulled up his horse for a breather the clamor of the mob was faint in the distance.

BY noon the next day Cory had reached the fringes of outlaw country. He paused on a wooded bench and gazed intently about him. As far as he could see, the harsh, sun-drenched land was empty of movement. He glanced downward, gave a start.

A solitary rider had appeared, toiling across a canyon bed below. The rider was Mark Breton, and he did not lift his eyes. He came on steadily, inexorably, head down like a hound dog snuffing on a hot scent. Cory spurred his horse into a gallop.

For a pursued man, Cory's prog-

ress became erratic. He cast about in circles. He examined the ground, following, for a time, each chance trail. Almost it seemed that Cory, as well as being pursued, also was pursuing. This, in fact, was the case.

Late that afternoon he spotted his quarry, a pair of riders quartering a slope ahead and somewhat below him. The riders entered a patch of scraggly timber—and didn't come out again.

When Cory reached the timber he dismounted, drew his gun and proceeded on foot. Presently he heard a voice. He wormed his way through the brush, cautiously lifted his head.

Directly before Cory, at ease under a jackpine, were the two owlhooters Herb and Cab. Herb had his boots off and was complaining bitterly of a sore bunion joint. Cab, flat on his back, hat over eyes, appeared to be sleeping.

Abruptly Herb ceased his lamentations. He stared at the brush clump where Cory was, then let his gaze wander on. But his hand moved, apparently idly, to his gun.

"Cab!" he yelled, and on the instant his gun was out and throwing lead into the brush clump.

A bullet zinged by Cory's ear. He squeezed the trigger and Herb stopped firing.

Cab had whirled to his knees in time to see his companion die. He remained in that position, gun half cleared, his eyes gradually distending.

"Tug!" he cried, and then his voice began to rise: "Tug, wait a minute! *Tug!*"

Cory had come erect in the brush and now was plodding forward, his beetling brows knit in a look of the utmost concentration.

The color left Cab's sharp face. His mouth opened silently. Suddenly he flung himself sidewise, whipped up his gun. Again Cory squeezed the trigger.

Cab stretched out, face down, burying both hands deep into the pine needles. Cory went to him and turned him on his back. He squatted by the wounded man, somberly waiting.

Cab's breathing was becoming labored. All at once he spoke: "Tug," he gasped. "Listen, Tug. I . . . I been thinkin'. It's a funny business, isn't it? A young fellow like Princemps . . . has everything an' yet he turns out bad. Tug . . . when I seen him gun the kid I . . . I—" Then Cab's jaw sagged and he was dead.

Cory got to his feet. He turned—and was face to face with Sheriff Mark Breton. There was a look on Breton's face which showed that he had overheard Cab's last words. No longer was he hostile. Instead, his expression was one of bewilderment, the acute embarrassment of the indefatigable law dog who finds he has been running a false scent.

"So-o," he murmured dismally, "it was Tom Princemps who killed the Kermits. Tom and these two. You knew it all the time."

CORY kept his hand on his gun. "They passed me that night right afterward," he growled. "The three of 'em. I heard 'em talkin'. It wasn't a girl Tom went to see on those trips of his. It was men like them two. Well, they've cashed in!"

"And Tom's cashed in, too." Breton spoke somberly. "It'll be hell on the old man when he finds out what kind of a son he—"

"Who's to tell him?" Cory spread out his hand. "Now look here, sheriff. That young one was bad, real bad, but the way I figured, if the kid was to get a nice clean grave-

stone now, it would be easier on the old man an' it wouldn't hurt no one. If I shut up Cab and Herb, no one but me would know. The old man never would know what kind of a young one he'd raised."

The sheriff fixed him with glacial eyes. "You knew the old man would hunt you through hell for killin' Tom, didn't you? You know you get the blame along with these two guns for the Kermit killin'?"

Cory shrugged. "I been hunted before."

Breton folded his arms. "If you want to be a damn fool," he said harshly, "why should I stop you? I'll keep my head shut and the old man never will know about Tom. If you talk—"

"I ain't goin' to talk. Never!"

Breton studied Cory minutely. His gaze was peculiar. He said wonderingly, "Man, why are you doin' it? Runnin' your neck into a noose just to keep the old man from knowin' the kind of son he raised. What's Princemps to you?"

Cory hesitated, shook his head. "I don't know," he replied. "He . . . he was so proudlike and . . . and I guess I sort o' liked him. Besides, he trusted me. He's the only one that ever—"

A voice spoke quietly from among the trees: "Yes, Fred, I trusted you. Mark, do you say now that I was wrong?"

Mark Breton uttered a startled exclamation and whirled.

The slight figure of Harry Princemps emerged from the shadows and came on steadily. He halted directly before Cory. "I was going to kill you, Fred," he said. "I was following right behind the sheriff. But I stopped a minute in the brush to listen while you two were talking."

Cory was shivering. Could this be the proud boss of Dancing Creek? Those wearily slumped shoulders! That pallid face! That hopeless, bitterly drawn smile!

Princemps was still speaking, his voice rooting Cory with the sheer whispering despair of it: "Proudlike? Was that what you called me, Fred? What's left to be proud of now? When a man learns his son is better dead? When he learns his son was a—"

Princemps' voice didn't falter, it merely paused. Suddenly he straightened his shoulders. "Perhaps, Fred"—and some of the bitterness was gone now; only gentleness and an infinite humility remained—"perhaps, Fred, one pride still remains—pride that I had faith in you; pride that in one man I saw that which other men failed to see —" He hesitated, then went on as though it was difficult for him to find the right words. "Fred, my own flesh and blood disgraced a name I've done my best to make an honored one. I'm an old man and I don't want that name to die out. Could . . . could you find it in your heart to take that name? It would be an honor you'd be doing me, and a favor I'd do all in my power to repay. Will you do it, Fred?"

Cory wanted to speak, but he could not. Nor could he believe his ears. But one thing he knew—unbelievable as it seemed, Harry Princemps was actually asking a favor of him—of Fred Cory, who knew nothing but blood and guns! Slowly Cory's hand went out to meet Princemps' and without words their pact was sealed. And watching, with his stern face illuminated by a smile, was Sheriff Mark Breton, the man who could smell an owlhooter a mile off.

THE END.

Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

So you want to do a little bit of indoor target practice with your newly acquired .22 rifle or pistol?

Many target shooters are of the opinion that they have to spend from twenty-five to one hundred dollars to build a range so that they may shoot their fifteen-dollar rifle indoors. Naturally, they become discouraged. However, it really isn't necessary to spend a great deal of money to build a suitable and safe rifle or pistol range.

For an indoor range the very first element to consider is that of safety. In other words, after the bullet has passed through the paper target you have got to make certain that it can do no damage and that it is promptly and efficiently stopped so that fragments of the bullet are not tossed all over the community. The second consideration is the matter of illumination on the target.

A good indoor target range has an elaborate system of lighting together with miscellaneous forms of steel backstops—all of which cost a great deal of money. The backstops may be of the permanently mounted sheet-steel style designed to deflect the bullet downward into a trough of sand, or they may be some of these professional "bullet traps" in which the bullet enters the mouth of the funnel-shaped object and is brought to rest in some sort of receptacle after its energy has been expended.

You can make a very satisfactory bullet backstop, however, with a sheet of quarter-inch boiler plate steel at least two feet square. This should be mounted at an angle of forty-five degrees to deflect the bullet downward. A trough of sand beneath this steel plate can be made of boards and should be at least two feet long, one foot wide, and three inches deep. The trouble with this type of backstop is that it is somewhat dirty. The bullets deflected into the sand will scatter the sand a little bit, and after every fifty shots or so, therefore, you should level the sand to keep the box completely filled. However, it is an inexpensive and entirely satisfactory system.

Another type of backstop may be made by getting yourself a large pasteboard shipping carton and packing it full of old magazines. Be

sure that the magazines face toward the shooter and are not tossed in loosely. Pack them as tightly as possible. Then close up the carton with a piece of wire or rope and thumbtack your target to the face of it. Be sure you shoot your bullets into backstop against the faces of the magazines rather than against the ends and be certain that you have from eight to ten inches minimum thickness of these old magazines. Be certain that the backstop is large enough so that you have no possible chance of missing it.

The chief objections to this type of backstop are that after one hundred rounds or so of .22 bullets have been shot into it, it will begin to bulge due to the tiny bullets chewing up the bundles of magazines. When this bulge becomes too severe, remove the chewed-up magazines and destroy them by burning. Replace them with others and you can continue to fire practically indefinitely at this type backstop.

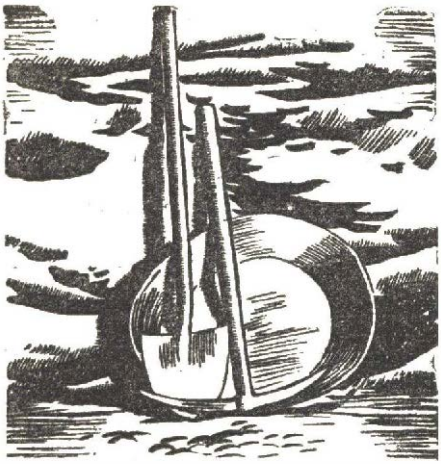
The secret of the stopping powers of this type of backstop is to make certain that the magazines are packed in tightly and keep inspecting the bundle at frequent intervals to make sure that the bullets have not chewed their way through the entire bundle.

Another good system of backstop is to get a large wood box and fill it with old tire chains. A nearby garage man will gladly save you all of the broken cross links he takes off tire chains during the winter. The chains should be thrown in loosely until the box is completely filled and the thickness offered to the path of the bullet should be at least ten to twelve inches. These chains, if properly packed in a box, will chew bullets to pieces with perfect safety, and they do not require replacement.

Now about lighting your indoor range. If you have room in the cellar of your home you may be able to get a standard fifty-foot range in a large house. In some cases you may be able to get only twenty-five feet. Regardless of this, be certain that you illuminate your target properly. This merely means that you illuminate not according to a definite formula but be certain that the bull's-eye stands out clearly and distinctly when looking at it *through the sights.*

If you pick up a couple of inexpensive goose-neck desk lamps with metal shades and a couple of sixty-watt lamp bulbs, this will illuminate the average indoor target in a satisfactory manner. You'll have to experiment with the placing of the lamps, but the flexible goose-necks can be bent easily to any desired position. Use them as close to the target as is possible without creating glare and set them one on each side just out of range from stray bullets. As you can see from these suggestions, building an indoor range does not necessarily mean the expenditure of a great deal of time or money.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. *Be sure you inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

THERE is nothing difficult or complicated about staking a mining claim. Just a few simple regulations to observe that have been formulated primarily for the protection of the claim holder himself. Since the mineral was the prospector's discovery, the regulations insure his title to it, and his enjoyment of the profits therefrom.

W. R. S. of New Bedford, Massachusetts, who says he is heading West on a gold-placer prospecting trip this summer has asked, as have many others, for the step-by-step procedure in staking a placer claim.

All right, here goes. First of all, remember that a placer claim is a twenty-acre tract. An acre is a square of ground roughly two hundred and nine feet on each side, and you are allowed twenty such squares, but they must be contiguous, or adjoining each other. Initial measurements can be paced off. They do not have to be too accurate. If a later survey shows you have taken in too much territory, the excess will be lopped off. But that does not invalidate the whole claim.

You actually have to find gold, or the mineral claimed on the ground you stake. That is the first and most important step. Then, at the place where the mineral was really discovered, erect your discovery post. In country where wood and timber is available this, as well as the corner markers, are usually real posts. They should stand about five feet above the ground, be four inches across the squared off tops, and braced if necessary to insure their standing erect and conspicuously visible.

In place of posts, stone monuments at least four feet high and two feet across at the base may be used. In an upturned can nailed to the post or buried in the monument put your written notice of location. Printed forms for location notice conforming to local State regulations can be obtained in mining country towns for a few cents each. They are neat, handy but not necessary to the validity of your claim. Write your location notice out in pencil. The pencil (graphite) script will stand exposure to the weather infinitely better than ink.

Sometimes, where posts are used, a board is nailed to the head of them, and the location notice either attached to the board, or written directly on it in soft pencil, or even burned into it with a hot iron.

The discovery notice must include the following information: Date of discovery, name or names of locations, name of claim, the number of acres claimed. Three notices should be made out. One to be placed at the post, one to be filed with the proper authorities, usually

at the county seat, or the recorder's office for the mining district in which the claim lies. And one to be kept yourself.

The two latter copies should have on them, in addition to the essential data mentioned above, the general compass direction of the end and side lines of the claim which must be parallel, and should tie up the discovery post by approximate distance and compass direction from some fixed, known and easily recognizable feature of the local geography. For instance distance and direction from some prominent mountain peak, the mouth of a gulch, the confluence of two streams —anything that will aid in making the actual location of the claim permanently establishable.

Besides your discovery post, corner posts or monuments similar to that erected where the mineral was first found should be set up at the four corners of the claim. If posts are used, the proper corner designation should be burned into them. For instance, SE COR., SW COR., et cetera, and the date. Frequently in timber country corner designations are cut into a blazed tree. Aside from the risk of forest fire (which would destroy smaller posts anyhow), or the chance of lightning striking, such trees make excellent corner markers.

Claim side lines must be straight and parallel, but they may jag to conform to a bend in the stream or so forth. When they do additional posts should be erected where the lines change direction.

In unsurveyed land, placer claims may be laid out to include both banks and the shoulders of a gold-bearing stream, or one bank only. So even after you have made your discovery, test all the likely ground to find out where the richest pay is going to occur before you decide on the final layout of your claim. It is a good idea to rough out your claim boundaries on paper on a hand-drawn map before pacing off the actual land and setting up your corner posts.

Should you be prospecting on land that has already been government surveyed, and much of the West has these days, staking a placer claim is in a measure simplified because in such cases it must conform, as closely as possible to the regular section and quarter section lines as plotted on the map. The allowance, tweney acres, a rectangle thirteen hundred twenty feet, by six hundred and sixty feet, is exactly an eighth quarter section. In surveyed land it is not necessary to tie in the claim with some natural geographical feature, or stake the corners. Its location on county plats and identification by township, range and section will sufficiently establish its situation.

However, whether the land is surveyed or not, mineral must be found and the regular discovery post erected.

● **We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.**

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

Private Henderson starts the ball rolling this week with his letter from an air base in California. He'd like to make lots of friends out there on the West coast and we think it's a fine idea. We have lots of air-minded members here at the ol' Holla and this looks like a fine chance for them to hear from one who knows all about the activities at an honest-to-goodness air base. Sit down and write to him today. Here's his letter:

Dear Miss Rivers:
Will you help me find a few sincere Pals to whom I can write? I am twenty-one years old and stationed here in California with the United States air corps. I would like to get to know some nice Pals living here on the West coast. I'm an outdoor man and like to go riding on my motorcycle through the country and explore out-of-the-way places. If you like, we can exchange souvenirs and pictures and I will answer all letters promptly and give anyone who is interested the "dope" on the air corps. Don't be bashful—I'll be waiting for your letters.—Private A. W. Henderson, 9th Bombardment Squadron, GHQ Air Force, Hamilton Field, California

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Marjorlee can handle a .22—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I would like to have Pen Pals from any city, State or country of any age. I am sixteen years old and like hunting, skiing and horseback riding. I am also fond of taking pictures and often practice shooting with my .22 rifle. I live in the mountains and get very lonely so I'm counting on you to cheer me up. I'll gladly exchange snapshots and will do my best to make my letters interesting. Every letter will be answered.—Marjorlee Cantwell, c/o of Cantwell Mines, Bates, Oregon

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Roy will add to your stamp collection—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a lad nine-teen years old and am seeking Pen Pals from all over the world. My favorite hobby is collecting stamps which I will exchange with anyone. I have a fair collection and would like to help others with theirs and enlarge my own. I can tell you lots of interesting things about Oklahoma.—Roy L. Klein, Rt. No. 2, Box 58, Shattuck, Oklahoma

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Marilyn is a jitterbug—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I would like to have some Pen Pals. I am an Irish girl fifteen years old and a sophomore in high school. I love swimming, basketball and football, and am a jitterbug. I will answer all letters and please send pictures along with them. Come on and fill up my mailbox, boys and girls. —Marilyn McGuire, 1121 South La Jolla Avenue, Los Angeles, California

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Calling all W. S. readers—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a new but very interested reader of the clean-cut action stories in Western Story, and I'd like to contact others who read it. I am twenty-two years old, an ex-CCC boy and have hitchhiked and otherwise traveled through about thirty-three of the forty-eight States. My favorite hobby is collecting odd bits of inexpensive jewelry. I would like to hear from boys and girls, young or old, and promise to write and exchange photos with all.—John E. Neetz, Rt. No. 2, Allentown, Pennsylvania

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From New Zealand comes this plea—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I would like to correspond with girls and boys between sixteen and twenty-five years old. I am sixteen and live on a farm. I like most sports and reading, and my hobby is stamp collecting. I will answer all letters, so don't hesitate to write to me.—Marion Harvey, Frontier Road, Te Awamute, Waikato, New Zealand

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Ralph wants to travel—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am twenty-two years old and have lived in the oil fields of the San Joaquin Valley all

my life. My ambition is to travel some day, and I would like to correspond with people all over the world and exchange snapshots with them.—Ralph Anderson, Box 423, Fellows, California

Lots of friends wanted here—

Dear Miss Rivers:

We are two gals from the Northwest, right on Puget Sound. I am twenty-two, and Genevieve is thirty-five. We will answer all letters from anyone, anywhere and will make ours interesting, too. We're willing and anxious to make a lot of new friends, so be neighborly, girls and boys, and write to us.—June Glidewell and Genevieve Baird, 2096 Rainier Avenue, Everett, Washington

Howard is waiting for letters—

Dear Miss Rivers:

May I ride into the old Hollow Tree? I am a boy of eighteen years and I like to write letters. My favorite sport is fishing and my hobbies are drawing, stamp collecting, model airplane building and reading. I will exchange snapshots with anyone. Here's hoping you let your letters drift my way.—Howard MacNutt, 1160 Prince Street, Truro, Nova Scotia, Canada

This Irish colleen will welcome all girls—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Will you kindly include my letter in your department? I am sixteen years old and am fond of reading, cycling, outdoor sports and the movies. Will welcome letters from girls all over the world no matter what age.—Mary Madden, 6 Carrick Terrace, S. Cir. Road, Dublin, Ireland

Henna will answer all letters—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have read and enjoyed Western Story for quite a while now, but have only recently got up courage enough to write for Pen Pals. I am eighteen years old and am fond of all sports. I would like to hear from boys and girls everywhere and I promise to answer all letters and will send my photo to the first fifteen who send theirs.—Henna Fae Lynn, Rt. No. 1, Box 31, New Boston, Texas

Write to these two CCC boys—

Dear Miss Rivers:

We are two CCC boys who would like to break into the Hollow Tree. Jack is eighteen years old and I am twenty-one. Jack has lived in the Black Hills all his life, can tell lots about wild life and will exchange scenic post cards. I have traveled a lot and can tell you lots about North Dakota and the West in general. So, come on, all you letter writers, and let's get acquainted!—Philip Joos and Jack Whyte, Camp Belle Fourche, Company 2750 CCC, Fruitdale, South Dakota

Frank will tell you all about Chicago—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-eight years old and would like to hear from Pen Pals from all over the world. I was born and raised in Chicago and can tell you all you want to know about the big city. I am interested in all outdoor sports and play the Hawaiian guitar. Send me your picture and I will send you mine. Come on, pals, and let's get acquainted. Write soon.—Frank G. Brown, 3331 So. Parkway, Chicago, Illinois

Mrs. Andre loves the outdoors—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Please may I come in? I am a widow past middle age and I'd love to hear from other lonesome Pals. I love the great outdoors—fishing, camping, and I also enjoy traveling. Come on, Pals, and let's become friends.—Mrs. Margaret Andres, 3124 Campbell, Kansas City, Missouri

Joyce will answer promptly—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am seventeen years old and would like to have Pen Pals from all over the world. Reading, writing letters and dancing are my favorite pastimes and I also go in for photography. I'll answer all letters promptly, so write soon.—Joyce Allen, 911 W. Shannon, Spokane, Washington

Cowgirls, write to this South African miss—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a South African girl sixteen years old and I love writing, reading, traveling and all kinds of sports, especially tennis and swimming. I would like to hear from those living in America, especially cowboys and cowgirls living out West. I will send a snapshot of myself to all who answer and will tell you about South Africa. All letters will be welcomed, and I promise prompt replies. Come on, pals, and fill my mailbox!—Ivona May Smith, 21 Oakhill Road, Vincent, East London, South Africa

Here are two more adventurous pals—

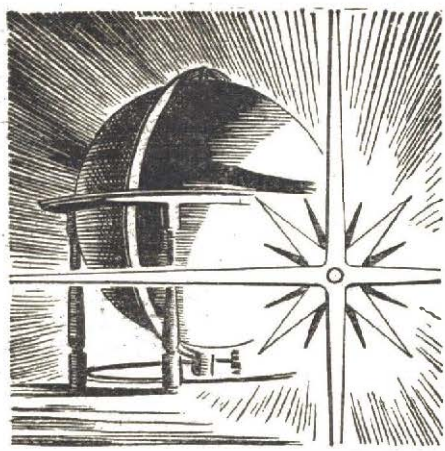
Dear Miss Rivers:

How about letting two adventurers join your Hollow Tree club? We are thirty and thirty-two years old and would like lots of Pen Pals. We promise to answer all letters and exchange snapshots.—Lawrence Pyles and Earl Vogel, 727 N. Pearl Street, Havana, Illinois

Foreign countries are Ethelyn's primary interest—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Quite a number of years back I entered a plea for Pen Pals in the Hollow Tree and received a great response for which I was most grateful. Now may I enter another plea for Pen Pals living in foreign countries and on island possessions of foreign countries? I'm very interested in far-away countries which I'll probably never be fortunate enough to visit. I'd like to hear all about the natives' mode of living, their customs, histories, and places of interest. I am twenty-four years old, an average girl, lover of the wide open spaces, and participate in every kind of sport. As a hobby I collect stamps and do a bit of amateur photography. I shall appreciate any and all letters pertaining to this request of mine.—Ethelyn Hopper, 80 Davis Street, Rehoboth, Massachusetts



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

ALMOST everyone has heard of the Suwanee River. Stephen Foster's song made it famous. Yet surprisingly few people are actually familiar with this fascinating, woods-fringed stream, literally made to order for the canoe camp tripper, particularly if he wants a chance to bag a "gator" hide or two en route.

G. B. K., of Cincinnati, Ohio, is laying out a mighty interesting trip for himself when he plans to travel by canoe along the entire length of the Suwanee.

"Perhaps it is because I live on the Ohio, a pretty big river itself, that river canoe trips are a hobby of mine," he writes. "How about the Suwanee? Is it feasible to go from source to mouth of that river by canoe? What sort of country does it flow through, and would a person have an opportunity to hunt alligators on the trip?"

In choosing the Suwanee, G. B. K., you are picking one of the most glamorous and picturesque rivers in the South, and a wonderful trip clear from the stream's beginning in the Okefinokee swamp-land wilderness of southern Georgia and northern Florida right down to the spot where the broad, slow-flowing reaches of river finally melt into the blue salt water of the Gulf of Mexico just above Cedar Keys, Florida.

The river itself starts from Billie's Lake in the Okefinokee country. You can almost step across it, so narrow is the dignified baby stream at its source. As it twists and winds through aisles of deep forest, it gradually widens and forms the border of three sides of Suwanee County, Florida. However, canoeing down the Suwanee is by no means an all-swamp-country trip. There are long miles where the river curls through open, sunny stretches. There is even one length of rocky shoal above White Springs over which the river foams like any turbulent mountain stream. This by the way is the only portage you will have to make on the entire journey. Then, too, there are places where the Suwanee runs between low, queer-formationed limestone bluffs.

And you will get a genuine thrill out of the numerous old abandoned plantation homes and empty little settlements—ghost towns of the Florida wilderness—that you encounter scattered along the river's edge. Many of these settlements were built by Southern refugees from Georgia and Tennessee fleeing the ravages of the Civil War that devastated so much of their original homeland. They fled to the empty, hide-out country of northern Florida, and started in anew. Times and circumstances eventually saw most of these

people moving onto more favorable locations. Many of them left Florida altogether, preferring to make the long trek clear to Texas and the then new country in the Southwest. Only the lone dwellings remain, or the clustered settlements, groups of rotting, tumble-down buildings flanked by gaunt trees dripping strands of gloomy, gray Spanish moss over their crumbling ruins.

You will be able to spend many of your nights on the trip in open camp with nothing but the stars overhead. But take a good-sized tarp along for nights that may be rainy. It can be spread, or hung between trees on such occasions and will afford a dry shelter you will be glad you didn't try to do without. Bear in mind, too, that the country is hot in the summertime with a dank, almost tropical heat. Therefore late fall is one of the best times to make the trip. At that season you can expect glorious, invigorating weather.

It is almost inevitable that you will see alligators, provided you have sharp eyes, and you are gliding your canoe along the quiet river with a minimum of noise. But if the huge Saurians spot you first, and the chances are they will, a splash and a hurried view of a disappearing scaly tail is all you will get.

For all their clumsy, sluggish appearance, alligators can move quickly when they are startled, and they have remarkably acute eyes and ears. The slightest unnatural sound or movement along the river will send them plunging to the safety of the river bottom in one of the swiftest vanishing acts you ever witnessed. Still six-foot 'gators have been shot and killed along the banks of the Suwanee. Four and five-footers are much more common.

Moreover, alligators are hard to shoot. As a rule the professional hunters, men who make a business of getting alligator hides for market, hunt them with a light at night. Night seems to give the big reptiles a false sense of security. If you can pick up a pair of their bright, beady red eyes at night, you can usually steal up to within ten or fifteen feet of them. Some hunters even get closer, and this almost point-blank range makes for an accurate first shot.

To T. Y., Greenfield, Massachusetts: Get all-wool blankets for outdoor camp use. The original cost is more, but they are well worth it. The part-cotton, part-wool blanket is not very satisfactory for outdoor use. Such blankets absorb too much moisture from the damp night air which makes them clammy, uncomfortable and much colder to sleep in than wool ones. There is a practical reason why dark colors are considered best, aside from the fact that they don't show dirt so easily. Many experienced woodsmen claim that dark or neutral-colored blankets will not draw insects nearly as much as light-colored ones will.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

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

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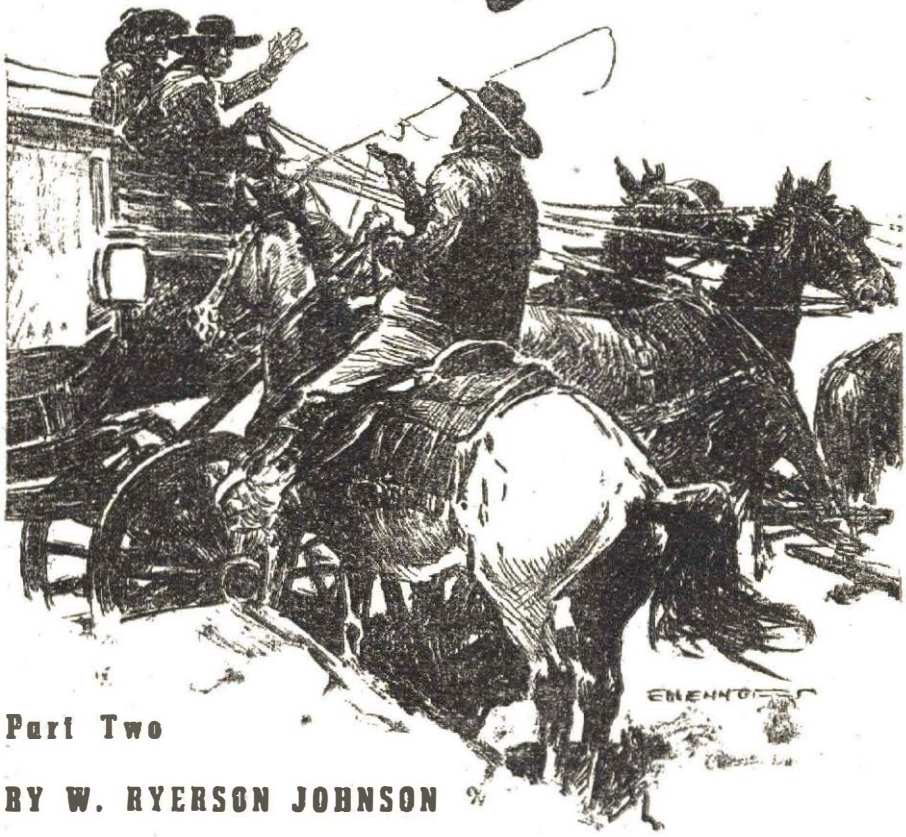

Part Two

BY W. RYERSON JOHNSON

The Story So Far:

Roy Lanterman and Red Haw, United States deputy marshals, are in El Paso, enjoying a breathing spell between jobs. As they are running for the stage which is to take them to Albuquerque, someone hurls a knife at them from an alleyway. It misses and the would-be assassin escapes. At the stage station Roy receives a telegram from the attorney general's office ordering him and Red to await further orders and informing them that their next assignment will be to track down a border guerrilla bandit known as El Lagarto—the Lizard The two Federal agents realize immediately that the Lizard is on *their* trail, for the knife thrown at them had a lizard carved on its handle, and the knife wielder left a dried lizard as his calling card.

Another attempt is made to kill Roy and Red in an El Paso saloon. They track down the two men who made the try and

learn from them that the Lizard is holding a meeting that night in an abandoned warehouse in El Paso. As Roy and Red approach the warehouse, which is located on the Rio Grande, they are challenged by a voice which they recognize as that of the Lizard's "hatchet man."

CHAPTER V

GUERRILLA GUNS

RED HAW and Roy Lanterman knew better than to waste time in gunplay. Guns weren't any good—not when a man couldn't see anyone to shoot. Not when a murderer, who had killed three times already with a hatchet, stood in near-black shadows, and his two prospective victims stood obscurely revealed under the stars.

Close together there in the shallow, shore-edge water, Roy moved his hand behind Red's back and jerked down on his coat tail. Red telegraphed back with a downward pull on Roy's long cowhide vest. Then, with perfect timing, they exploded sideways, splashing water at full length, burrowing under and mud-crawling toward the open river.

If a hatchet came driving at them they never knew it. They were concerned solely with keeping their backs under water and making distance. The Rio Grande is a shallow river. To Red and Roy it seemed as though they had banged knees, chins, and elbows on every rock in the river bed before they reached water deep enough for free swimming.

But they got away. Ashore there was no outcry at their escape. No lead came furrowing the water to seek them out.

"They don't want to kick up a noise, I reckon," Red said.

"The question is, why don't they?"

"One more thing for us to find out," declared Red.

Downriver, under cover of low-branched willows, they eased ashore. Moving fast through the night, holding to every bit of natural shelter, they made their way back to the warehouse.

"Our chances ought to be even better now than before," Red remarked. "After rootin' us out once, they won't be lookin' for us to try it again."

It seemed that Red was right. At least, they didn't have any great trouble getting inside the building. At one point in back, a gravelly bank had been cut away to make room for the warehouse. It wasn't too difficult a feat to swing across and enter on the second floor between gaping boards of the ramshackle structure.

Inside they crouched and listened. From somewhere they could hear the muffled drone of voices. They started feeling around.

"Dark as the inside of a cow's stomach," Red complained.

They didn't feel far before their hands came against a rough wood wall.

"Boxes," Roy whispered.

"Rifle and ammunition cases, from the weight and feel of 'em," Red added.

They explored some more. Everywhere they found the stacked cases, with narrow walk ways between.

"Man, did we bong into somethin'," Red said jubilantly. "There's enough stuff here to blow up all Mexico."

"Or maybe the United States," Roy said thoughtfully. "I have a hunch that there's somethin' about this business that's bigger'n gun-runnin'."

"Look!" Red whispered.

They had felt their way into an-

other dark corridor. Ahead, light made yellow streaks in the darkness where it shone between cracks in the floor boards. The drone of voices was louder now.

ROY and Red crept silently closer, glued their eyes to a crack, looked and listened. Within their short range of vision they could see a dozen men, Mexicans, garbed in the traditional hats of peaked straw, loaded down with shoulder bandoleers and wearing new badly-fitting uniforms. Some of them were bare-footed, but they all had the new uniforms. Their rifles leaned, ready at hand, against what appeared to be more of the ammunition cases.

"We can only see a small floor space down there," Red said guardedly. "Could be a hundred of them hay-stack hats."

"It's not the hats that's got me guessin'," Roy declared, "it's the uniforms. All that gold braid and the red inserts. They aren't Mexican regulars. And guerrillas go in rags. Who are they?"

"We been hearin' a lot tonight about American money-bag backers," Red reminded.

In another moment they were hearing more. Cutting through the low drone of talk, a voice chopped harshly. It wasn't actually loud, but it was so heavy and guttural that it had the effect of a subdued roar.

Roy started at the first words. It was almost as though the voice were answering him. "So, señor," he heard, "for guerrillas you sugges' rags are good enough. But we are no longer guerrillas, is it not so? Men of destiny, my Little Lizards are now. Soon to be the lords of Mexico, and"—echoing the strange prediction, Roy and Red had heard twice already that night—"per'aps more, much more."

The answer came in hard, precise English. "It takes more than comic-opera uniforms to win a war! I am instructed to say that we are prepared to back you to the limit. But we do not want our money wasted on—"

"Wasted! What is it to you, thees money for uniforms—a pinch, a nothing."

"It isn't even good sense," the voice whipped back. Roy and Red screwed their heads in every direction, trying to see the speaker. Beyond doubt, he was American, with a self-contained, cultivated voice that savored of the East. They couldn't bring him within their range of vision, but they could hear plainly enough as he continued, "Look at yourself. Enough gold braid to weight down a gunboat. A walking target for every sniper in the hills. I am instructed to say—"

"*You* are instruct'! Listen, gringo, to what El Lagarto instructs. Keep your Yankee nose on this side the Rio Grande! This is not my fighting uniform. No. It is my ceremony uniform. The one I wear for great occasions. And this, gringo, is not such an occasion. I was inform' the old money bags himself would be here. But per'aps he does not consider it of such great importance to meet El Lagarto personally, hah? He sends in his place a man who is only instruct'! What you say for that, hah?"

There was a trace of annoyance in the American's voice. "I say nothing except that the 'old money bags' as you so eloquently put it, was unable to make the trip, due to the press of business at the last moment. He sent me, with full instructions to carry on the negotiations. We've lived up to our bar-

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gain. Here's our token shipment of guns and ammunition. Now stop acting like an old woman and let's get down to brass tacks."

In the darkness above, Roy nudged Red. "He calls this a token shipment! What in the name of glory are we runnin' into here?"

"I dunno. But I could enjoy it more if I could swap some of these clammy wet clothes for one of those uniforms."

Roy grabbed him by the wrist, cautioning silence. Below, an incredible figure had strutted into their line of sight. A big man with gold braid festooned over him like Spanish moss on a live oak tree.

"El Lagarto himself!" Red muttered.

In spite of his absurd get-up, the man wasn't laughable. He was too big, too hard for that. His bulky shoulders threatened with every move to break through his oversized uniform and send the tinsel pelting. His huge chest was like a drum overhanging his belly. His legs were like tree stumps, his face a chunk of oiled mahogany.

With one great fist he thumped his drumlike chest, and the sound of it reverberated over the whole warehouse. "Swallow your words, gringo," he bellowed. "No man has say that El Lagarto is like old woman, and lived."

"All right, all right," the American's voice had more than a trace of annoyance now. "Only let's get down to business. It's nearly daylight—"

ROY tightened his grip on Red's wrist as another figure moved onto their floor-crack stage. He was a tall man with gimlet eyes under shaggy brows. Across his face was a fierce sweep of mustache and a beard cut off square below his chin. He wore a shabby poncho.

"It's the hatchet man!" Red breathed.

"Yeah—anyhow the one who stuck up our stagecoach, the only one of the four who didn't die with a hatchet to the head."

The bearded man said something to El Lagarto, and the guerrilla chief raised his hand for silence.

"Gringo, this ees wan of my executioners come to report. With three others I have set him on the trail of those two Americanos of the Federal p'lice w'ich you have been so kind to, w'at you say, poot the finger on."

"With three others?" the American said skeptically. "Where are they?"

El Lagarto turned to the hatchet man. "Pancho, Carlos, and José—where they are?"

"Dead!"

"*Caramba!* Who killed them?"

"I killed them, *jefe*," the hatchet man said imperturbably.

"Why have you done this?"

"You yourself would have ordered it, *jefe*. High like clouds with marihuana they were, and they would not follow your instructions to bring the gringos here for questioning and to have their fingers and their toes cut off one by one. But, no, they would have killed them instantly." He shrugged. "With my hatchet I prevented it."

"But what has happen to the gringos?"

"Mos' unfortunate, they have got away. But have no slightest worry. I will find them, or use the hatchet on my own head."

"You blundering fool!" the American cried. "Those are two of the smartest men in the service. And I happen to know that they are the only ones at the moment assigned to investigate us from this end. Plenty of them are working in the East, but with these two out of the way we'd have had the whole border clear for as long as it would take us to do what we have to do." He broke off, spoke again in acute irritation, "What's dripping on me? What have you got stored upstairs?"

Upstairs, Red whispered hoarsely in Roy's ear, "I'm a ring-tailed dingbat! That's *me* drippin'! I cut my boot in the river, and I reckon water's been squishin' out and drippin' down through a crack. Let's be gettin' out of here."

His suggestion was all right, but the timing was wrong. Even as he spoke, they could look through the crack and see El Lagarto shake his head like a lion. His coarse black hair fell over his low forehead as he looked upward to locate the source of the dripping water. The light of a near candle fell across his face. His mouth was a cruel slash; and animal cruelty glowed nakedly in those eyes, too small and set too close together.

"Lagartijos," he commanded his men, raising his voice this time to a full-toned bellow, "we have visitors. Vamoose, some of you, outside, and guard everywhere. The rest of you scatter; search the building! And you, hatchet man, get ready to chop!"

Upstairs, Roy and Red moved swiftly through the darkness.

"Our best bet's the same way we came in, I reckon," Roy said.

They groped back between the stacked cases the way they had come. Too late! Outside, recognizable in the first faint flush of morning, the Little Lizards with their long rifles and big hats, swarmed everywhere, forming a tight cordon about the warehouse.

"Our best bet's a bust," Red said resignedly.

They turned back, but already now a glow of pale wavering yellow showed above the cases from the other side of the vast room.

"They've come up the steps carryin' candles," Roy warned. He turned into a narrow runway to the left. "Down here. Maybe we can find a back stairway."

They scuffed along, with Red muttering with pain as his outflung hands caught splinters from the wall of cases. They reached the far left side of the building.

"Careful," Roy cautioned, "here's a ladder hole."

There was just enough candlelight oozing up from below to make out the opening. They were feeling out the top ladder rungs when death, in the form that had become so gruesomely familiar tonight, breathed close.

The wavering candle glow had been showing closer from over the tops of the gun cases, and now a detail of the Little Lizards burst around a stack of cases into a corridor that gave onto the ladder well. Sighting their quarry, they set up a yell. Rifle barrels banged cases—and heads—as, in the confined space, they sought to level and fire.

"Let's forget about the ladder," Red cried. "Drop through and take our chances—"

THE words stuck in his throat as, from the floor below, something brushed his leg and chopped with a dull nerve-tremoring *pung* into the wood back of the ladder.

"The hatchet man!" Red drew his leg back up from the ladder well.

None too soon. Rifles blazed from below, splintering the wood at the same place the hatchet had chopped. Rifles started banging from the top floor, too. Close in. But the riflemen, wedged in the narrow corridor, were in each other's way. Their first shots were wild.

Roy and Red blasted back with their six-shooters, and leaped clear, into another runway. They pushed along, and took the first turn that offered. Behind them they could hear the Little Lizards slam into the alleyway they had just vacated. From all over the big room now flickering candlelight shone against the raftered ceiling as details of the Little Lizards scurried through the passages on their death search. Dawn light was seeping in through gaps in the weathered roof, turning the blackness into a ghostly gray—and shaving whatever slim chance Roy and Red had for escaping detection.

Hemmed in front and back, right and left, Roy cried, "Quick—on top!"

Red boosted, then Roy pulled, and they lay flat on top of the gun cases while the nearest Lizard detail swept into the runway. Another group of searchers butted into the runway from the other direction. Geared to trigger tension, in that first startled moment of sighting each other they raised rifles and fired. The howls and curses that went up from each side put them straight on their mistake.

They came together, jabbering fiercely in Sonoran Spanish. Already Roy and Red were creeping away, knowing that a few moments parley would acquaint the searchers with their escape and send them, gunning, to the case tops.

Their fears were realized more quickly even than they had anticipated. From behind them sounded a scuffling, and one of the peaked straw hats pushed into dim view. The man under the hat let out a yell. Other hats bobbed up to each

side of his, and rifles were lined across the tops.

Lead came blasting with a vibrating roar. Snug behind a rifle-case barricade, Red and Roy replied with their six-shooters. One after another the straw hats dropped out of sight. But for every hat that dropped, two others bobbed into range!

"This can't go on indefinite," Red jerked. "There's enough lead and wood splinters in the air to make a curtain to hide behind."

"We got to move," Roy agreed. "They're shootin' these cases right out from in front of us."

The roaring voice of El Lagarto gave them an unexpected breathing spell.

"Fools with no brains," he raged. "Mad dogs shooting at the moon! Stop the shooting! Do you want to have all of El Paso swarming down on us? Stop the noise and the shooting. Come in, everybody, from wherever you are. Come to my voice."

The gun roar ceased. There was only the shuffling of feet, the knocking of rifle barrels against the wood cases as the Little Lizards converged toward El Lagarto.

"What do we do now?" Red wanted to know.

"First thing is to get away from where they know we are."

"Yeah, but then what?"

They were bellying away over the case tops while they whispered. But they didn't go far until they could look out onto a cleared area into which the Lizard's men were congregating. With daylight filtering more strongly into the warehouse Roy and Red made a disturbing discovery. The pile of rifle cases on which they were mounted, occupied a narrow el of the building.

The only way they could move from the el was to climb down and cross the central open space—and

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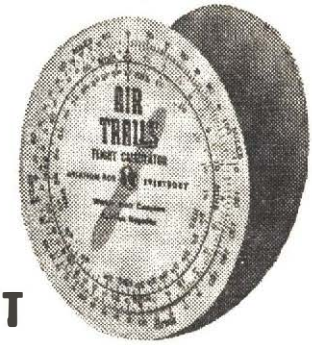

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that was teeming with El Lagarto's Little Lizards, restlessly fingering their rifles, smarting under their failure to capture the spies, and tingling for a kill.

CHAPTER VI

THE GIRL FROM ARIZONA

IN the cleared space against the opposite wall of stacked ammunition cases, barely out of sight from Roy and Red, El Lagarto was already addressing his Little Lizards.

"Lagartijos, there is no hurry," he admonished them. "Outside we surround the warehouse. Inside we are many. We have only to conduct a careful search, and then two bullets will be enough. Two bullets only, instead of this battle roar which may bring men investigating from El Paso. And if the two bullets do not quite kill, then so much the better." There was a gloating, vicious note in his voice. "We will pin their eyes open with cactus spines, these miserable spies who are so anxious to see El Lagarto. We will pin their ears back and—"

"*El gringo!*" one of the Little Lizards shouted.

He had spotted Red, peering down from the rifle cases. Acting purely on impulse, he raised his rifle and fired. His action inflamed the others. Forgotten was El Lagarto's admonition against mass firing. Rifles sprang to shoulder. Pale flame leaped from the muzzles in the eerie morning light. Gun thunder rolled deafeningly; gun lead bit and chewed through the rifle cases as Red and Roy ducked for cover.

"They'll hear this in town," Roy said desperately, "but it'll be a double-distilled miracle if we can hold out till anyone can get here."

"We don't have to," Red slashed. "I scratched myself an idea. Those boxes behind the Lizards. They aren't rifle cases like these. They're ammunition boxes—"

"I get it, pardner," Roy cut in. "Come on; both together. Stick your head into it."

Together they reared up far enough to take sight, risking the pelting of lead and saw of flying splinters. Together their six-guns leveled out; together they blasted, triggering the cylinders around, firing six shots apiece, not at the Little Lizards, but at the boxes behind them. They were sinking their lead into the ammunition boxes, trusting that some of the twelve shots would go to work for them.

Some of the twelve shots did. Cartridges exploded in all directions. Roy and Red ducked and reloaded their sixes. El Lagarto and his men ducked too and set up an outcry that rivaled the bullet roar, as they became targets for stray lead all over the room.

"That's makin' our bullets chase 'em around corners," Red shouted. "Pour it into 'em again, Roy."

Another time they emptied their guns into the close-packed ammunition boxes, and ducked as exploding cartridges snarled and whined, and streaked their smoke in every direction.

Behind their barricade of gun cases, Red sniffed the air thoughtfully. "All of it don't smell like bullet smoke." He poked up his head. "No, by whang! Some of them poppers have set the place on fire!"

El Lagarto's bellowing voice sounded, ordering his men to beat out the fire. But the heat set off more cartridges, beating the fire fighters back. The fire fed into the dry wood of the warehouse, a localized inferno belching smoke and

flame, and exploding cartridges in all directions.

El Lagarto still bellowed, and the Little Lizards, yelling, made darting half-hearted efforts to get close enough to the fire to do some good. But as the fire gained headway and the seething crackle of the flames half drowned out the reports of exploding cartridges, it became apparent to the bandit leader that their fight was lost almost before it had begun.

When a section of the rotten flooring, inadequately reinforced to sustain the weight of the contraband boxes, gave way under the rasp of the flames and precipitated a hundred cases to the floor below in a splintering seething roar which shook the whole building, El Lagarto bellowed an order to abandon the place.

The order was hardly necessary. Most of the Little Lizards had already scurried away. So had the American whom Roy and Red had heard but had not been able to see.

"Reckon we're the last of the Mohicans, pardner," Red said grimly.

CUT off in front by the blanket of flame and criss-crossing lead from exploding cartridges, they had backed away to the farthest end of the el, and there, half-parched by the fiery heat, half-smothered by the backward bank of smoke, they were frantically trying to tear their way through the side of the building.

They pounded with their six-guns, they rammed with their shoulders, they strove prodigiously to loosen one of the gun cases with the intention of using it for a battering-ram. But the list of the burning building had wedged the cases as tightly as bricks in mortar, and the warehouse boards, sheltered on this side from the severe weathering suffered by the greater part of the building, resisted their mightiest efforts.

"Looks like we really shot ourselves into a bale of trouble this time, pardner."

"The boards are loosened . . . wouldn't take much more— Smoke's burnin' my eyes. Can't see."

But if Roy couldn't see, he could still hear—and the sound which assailed his ears was one which under any other circumstances would have been hideous, but which now was sweeter than music.

The sound was the chopping *pung* of a hatchet blade burying itself in the wooden wall. Close!

Red heard it, too. "I'm a ring-tailed monkey! Come hell or high water, that hatchet-pitchin' fiend is on the job tryin' to hack our gizzards out! Can you find the hatchet, Roy?"

"I'm feelin'. I got it!"

Gripping the handle strongly, wrenching the blade from the wood, Roy fell to and made the chips fly. Sparks from the inferno behind them were showering around now. Their throats were seared from the hot smoke. They felt as though they were breathing pure flame.

"Chop for your life!" Red croaked. "Here, leave me spell you."

Boards splintered under their furious assault, fell away in ragged fragments. Daylight poured in through the hole they chopped. Smoke poured out—and at the last, Roy and Red wriggled through, to hang briefly by their fingers and drop to the ground.

The warehouse was flaming to the sky now, a lurid holocaust, consuming the evidence of that "token" shipment of guns and ammunition to be run over the border. Through the wind-whipped smoke men were running toward the burning build-

ing. But not all of them were moving toward the building. Making for shore on the other side of the Rio Grande was a broad-beamed boat overflowing with Little Lizards. And straw hats bobbed above the water as still more of El Lagarto's revolutionists swam frantically in the same direction.

Taking their time, in order not to attract attention, Roy and Red also moved away from the building.

Red breathed a sigh of relief. Then, looking at Roy, he howled with laughter. "You look like a boiled lobster!"

"What do you think you look like? Your clothes are still steamin'."

"All jokin' aside, we played in luck on that, didn't we? Our wet clothes were probably all that saved us."

"That, and the hatchet man's short miss on his throw. I could love that gimlet-eyed ghoul. He hair-shaved us twice in the warehouse, and both times it was a break for us. You know," Roy said thoughtfully, "that hombre seems to have a hatchet-throwin' mania. Kill-crazy, more'n like, with a single-track brain that won't let him quit till he gets us—"

"Or we get him."

"Or we get him," Roy echoed.

"I anyhow ain't gonna worry about it for twelve hours," Red stated. "I'm checkin' in at a sleep factory and catchin' me some shuteye."

"Sounds plumb logical to me," Roy said.

ON their way to the hotel the two stopped off at the stage depot. Red groaned as the station master said, "Yep, telegram's come in fer Ezra Wire."

"I got a feelin'," Red said, "I'm gonna do my sleepin' sittin' up in a jouncin' stagecoach."

Roy tore open the envelope, ran his eyes over the brief message. "You called it."

"Let me see." Red took the telegram and read:

REPORT IMMEDIATELY TO GREGOR DUNCAN AT ALBUQUERQUE. SAME DESPERATE URGENCY.

"Who's Gregor Duncan?" Red said grumpily.

"Someone sent out from Washington, I reckon, to see we don't get any sleep."

Roy yawned, stretched, and moved out on the platform. Red followed him in a few moments. "You know what? We got just time to go pry them two derby-hat gunnies out of the rock cave where we left 'em, before the next stage heads out."

Roy nodded. "We'll take 'em along as exhibits number one and two."

"Ain't hardly far enough to rent a horse," Red said grumblingly. "More's the pity."

Roy grinned, and stepped off the platform. "Come on. Nothin' like a brisk walk before breakfast to give you an appetite."

"Appetite! I could wrap my chops around a lizard right now, and swallow him alive and kickin'—without salt. No, I got a better idea. It won't take both of us to herd them city gunslicks. You go, and I'll stay here at the station and keep the stagecoach from leavin' before you get back."

"Listen, pardner," Roy said flatly, "if there's only one of us goin', I got a still better idea—"

"I know." Red fished his hatchet-chopped beer token from his pocket, held it between the flat of his hands.

"What's up, the printin' or the horseshoe?"

"Horseshoe."

Red opened his hands. His face fell. "The horseshoe," he said disgustedly. "I've heard it said them things were lucky—but not for me."

While Roy settled comfortably for a nap in a willow-caned chair in the waiting room, Red plodded out of town. A half-hour later he reached the base of the cliff where he and Roy had questioned their prisoners. Torpedo's derby, with the top crushed in, was still crammed between two rocks.

Wearily, Red made the climb to the top of the cliff. He approached the slit in the rock which he and Roy had plugged with boulders to make a temporary jail cell for their prisoners.

Suddenly he stopped short. The rocks had been wedged in such a manner that they couldn't have been moved from inside. Yet they *had* been moved. The rocks were rolled away. The prisoners were gone!

"I'm a ring-tailed spavined shag-eared dub," he muttered, and his fingers pushed under the crown of his sombrero to scratch earnestly at the old bullet scar.

HE was still scratching when, from beyond a near ridge of rock, he heard the approaching clop of hoofs. He moved swiftly, freezing in against the wall, six-gun snapping to hand. The hoofbeats sounded closer, then from around a shoulder of weathered limestone a horse and rider came into view.

Red holstered the six again and took up his perplexed scratching where he had left off. The rider was a girl! And no ordinary girl, either, but just about the prettiest thing Red had ever seen astride a horse.

She came close and stopped. For a long moment they stared at each other. Red sighed audibly and started cataloging aloud. "Eyes the blue of mountain vistas. The hair —no hair is really golden, but this comes the nearest to it of any I ever saw. The complexion, peaches and cream. The lips—"

She leaned slightly forward in saddle, lips curved in a friendly smile. "Cupid's bow, I've been told— Are you looking for your friends?"

"And voice like an angel's," Red said dreamily.

The smile became an outright impish grin. "Did you ever hear one?"

"Huh? One what?"

"An angel's voice."

Red sighed again. "I'm hearin' one now."

"That's what your friend said: 'Like an angel from heaven.' He's a foreigner, isn't he? He didn't talk like a Westerner."

"Hey, wait a minute. The only friend I've got around here's no foreigner. He's from Texas."

"Since when did they start wearing brown derbies and patent-leather shoes in Texas?"

"I'm beginnin' to get it," Red said. "You—" His hand waved out in the direction of the rock crypt.

"Yes," the girl nodded. "I was riding by and your friends called to me. It appears they were investigating a gold prospect and some rocks fell down behind them somehow or other and sealed them up. I managed to pry one rock loose from the outside, then they pushed the rest of them away easy enough."

"Like that, huh," Red said dryly. "Very obliging of you, ma'am. Which way did my . . . er . . . friends go?"

"Toward town. They seemed in quite a hurry."

"They would be. Anything else you can tell me about them?"

"No. Except I think you'd better ride closer herd on them. A couple of pilgrims so baby-innocent that they get themselves locked up in the side of a cliff looking for gold where even a blind man would know there wasn't any—well, somebody'll be selling them a piece of paper with a gold seal on it that says they've bought Arizona Territory."

"Nobody'll be selling them Arizona," Red assured her. "But they might take it before they're through."

"You sound halfway serious."

"I'm all the way serious, ma'am."

She looked at a tiny gold watch which was pinned on her white ruffled shirtwaist. "Goodness, it's late!" She tightened her grip on the reins. Her horse tossed its head, started moving.

"Hey, wait," Red called. "Where can I see you—in case I have some more friends who need to be turned loose? Or something."

She looked back and Red caught the flash of pearly teeth against red lips as she laughed. "Arizona," she answered.

Red watched as she galloped out of sight, riding with the easy swinging grace of a girl born to the saddle.

"Darn it!" he muttered. "Why couldn't I have been forkin' a horse? Now I'll never get to see her again."

He started plodding back to town. He took his time, grumbling at the lot of a government agent who never got to stay in one place long enough to get acquainted.

The first person he saw when he reached the station platform was the girl from Arizona!

The second person he noticed was Roy Lanterman. The girl was laughing gayly, looking up into Roy's face. Roy had one hand full of her luggage and bundles. The other hand gripped her elbow in a thoroughly proprietory manner as he steered her toward the waiting stagecoach.

CHAPTER VII

THE MAN WHO GOT LEFT

RED quickened his pace. Roy sighted him and said, genially, "Hiya, pardner. Meet Miss Helen Blane."

"The lady and me are old friends," Red told him shortly. But his face brightened as he looked at the girl and she smiled. He spoke again to Roy, "Did she tell you about bein' an angel from heaven to our derby-domed friends on the cliff?"

"She told me," Roy said.

In the bustle attendant upon boarding the coach and getting the baggage stowed, Red managed to divert Roy's attention for a moment.

"Listen, you long drink of molasses, I saw her first." He fished the half beer token from his pocket. "We'll leave fate decide who sits next to her, see?"

"I thought you didn't go for blondes," Roy countered.

"I go for this one," Red whispered. He shook the half-moon piece of copper in his hands, and smacked it flat between his fingers. "Call it, brother. I can't lose all the time. Horseshoe or printin'?"

"I say the horseshoe's up."

Red opened his fingers. They looked. The horseshoe *was* up.

Red sighed with resignation. "Horseshoe's brought me nothin' but bad luck. Say, listen, be a sport," he appealed. "This is only a fleetin' fancy to you, but it's my very life to me."

"It's my life, too, chipmunk," Roy assured him. "So you spread out on the seat across the way and watch how a Texas gentleman works."

A jangle of chain traces, and a grinding of gravel under the iron-shod wheels announced that the stagecoach for Albuquerque was under way. With a long trip ahead of them, and everyone packed in close quarters, there was little time lost in formalities. Before the stage was ten miles out the passengers were chatting like life-long friends.

Roy had seen to it that Helen Blane got a seat in the corner. He sat next to her. Close against him on the other side was a bright-eyed Mexican who smoked corn-husk cigarettes, and who showed more excitement by the minute as the stage wheeled farther and farther north from the border. There was a girl in Socorro waiting to marry him, he had blithely announced in his eager stumbling English.

Next to the Mexican in the long seat was a lantern-jawed, cadaverous-looking man, a cigar drummer from Pittsburgh. Before the coach had quite cleared town he had passed out cigars from his sample case to all who would accept them, then with a "by your leave, ma'am," to each of the ladies, he had accepted one of the Mexican's corn husks and smoked it with evident enjoyment.

"Fella likes a change once in a while," he had explained. On the seat opposite, facing Roy and his three companions, were a rancher and his wife from the upper valley; Red Haw, who sat glaring across from Roy Lanterman, and in the corner across from Helen Blane, a rabbit-faced little man whose mouth kept moving as though he were in the act of masticating a piece of lettuce, and who from time to time volunteered informational bits about Deep Lift windmills.

"I sell 'em," he explained.

"You ain't sellin' me none," the dour-faced rancher declared.

THE windmill salesman looked a little frightened. But he perked up and swung into his practiced talk. "A Deep Lift for every ranch, is our slogan, sir. The windmill is the greatest boon that's come the rancher's way since Colonel Colt perfected his six-shooter. The six-shooter, barbed wire, and the Deep Lift windmill will go down in frontier history—"

"Especially the windmill," the rancher broke in sarcastically. "It goes down with the first ten-mile wind that fans across the prairie."

The salesman looked so crestfallen that Helen Blane came to his rescue. "Dad's installed a Deep Lift on our place in Arizona, and it works fine," she told him.

The salesman perked up. "What's your spread, may I ask, ma'am?"

"The Cross Bar, out from Flatpan. It straddles the line in Arizona Territory and Mexico."

"I know it well! I sold your father that windmill." The little man beamed with pleasure. "Fancy meeting you here. Your father spoke of you. You were away at school, I believe. Well, well, it's a small world, after all."

Helen smiled. "Yes, isn't it?"

It made Roy feel like smiling, too, just to look at her. Her warm vivid presence seemed to be affecting the others also, he noticed. But not, he hoped, in quite the same devastating way. He wasn't ready yet to admit it to anyone but himself, but it wouldn't be very hard to mean what he had jokingly told Red: "She's my life."

From the moment Helen Blane

had stepped up on the station platform this morning, and he had seen the sun firing her hair in a kind of golden halo about her lovely head, he had been aware that something had changed inside him. He had heard about it happening this way, but he had never put much stock in it. Now that it had happened to him, he counciled himself, if he was smart he wouldn't question. He'd keep his fingers crossed and see what happened from here on out.

What actually happened there in the stagecoach cleared his mind for a while of all romantic speculation, and brought it starkly back to consideration of the kind of death meted out by the Lizard.

Roy was sitting there, wondering, somewhat moodily, where this was going to get him anyway. What kind of security could he offer a girl? A man with his kind of job, gunning for the government—and with the death brand of the Lizard on him—hadn't much room in his life for love. Not the solid enduring kind that Helen Blane would want and had a right to expect.

He became aware all at once that she was speaking to him.

"What did you say?" he asked, flushing.

There was amusement in the flash of her lovely eyes. "Where were you?"

Red Haw, sitting opposite, wasn't missing a trick. "He was home on the range, Miss Blane, ma'am," he said dryly. "Pushin' his pure bloods to market, while the little woman and kiddies watched and waved to him from the ranchhouse door."

She stared. "Why . . . why you didn't tell me you were married, Mr. Lanterman."

"He's not," Red assured her. "Yet. But he can dream, can't he?"

"You were saying somethin', Miss Blane," Roy encouraged, "before we had this interruption from the galleries."

"Why, yes. I said I had some pencil sketches of the Cross Bar. I wondered if you might enjoy seeing them."

"I'd mighty admire to see 'em, Miss Blane."

She leaned forward, reaching out. "My handbag," she murmured.

"Let me get it for you," Roy said.

"I'll get it," the cadaverous cigar drummer cut in.

"Permit me, señorita," the Mexican gallantly insisted.

The drummer and the Mexican were the closest to it. Their hands reached it at the same time, lifting it from on top of the pile of baggage against the door. For a moment they juggled it between them. The Mexican was the more dexterous. But the drummer had more brute strength.

Helen viewed their efforts a little worriedly. "Oh, please be careful," she cautioned. "The clasp isn't very tight— Oh, dear!"

Before her dismayed eyes the bag had fallen from their hands and spilled open on the floor.

"Oh!" she said, face flaming scarlet, as virtually every hand in the stagecoach reached down to help her gather her personal possessions and return them to the bag. Greenback money, silver dollars, jewelry trinkets, a few loose Mexican fire opals, calling cards, address book, pencil, handkerchief, perfume vial, powder box, the Cross Bar pencil sketches—and one thing more—came under the interested scrutiny of the passengers.

This last article was of absorbing interest to Helen herself. "What's that?" she demanded. "That's not mine." Her hand darted inside the bag and came out with something

which she dropped quickly to the floor of the stagecoach. "Where'd that horrid thing come from?" she said with a little shudder.

THEY all looked at the object she had dropped. It was a small dead lizard, flattened out and dried in the sun.

Roy's hand snagged down and picked up the lizard. He held it where all could continue looking.

"Where in the world could such a thing have come from?" Helen Blane repeated her question. "It wasn't in my bag before I got in the coach. I know because I emptied everything out in my lap, looking for an address card."

The hoof cadence of the six-horse team, the rhythmic grind of the coach wheels on the rocky trail permeated the compartment, and to at least two of the passengers—to Roy Lanterman and Red Haw—it was a sound of black foreboding. It was like evil laughter, sinister, mocking, rolling up all the way from Sonora in Old Mexico.

For Roy and Red knew—and it was a wet-thong cinch that at least one other in the stagecoach knew—that Helen Blane had been marked by the Lizard for a kill!

Perhaps the romantic young Mexican knew. At least he cried out in a voice of consternation, "Lagarto! Permit me, señor." His hand reached out. Roy let him take the lizard and examine it.

"Lagarto?" The cigar drummer smudged a thumb against his hawkish nose. "That's Mex for lizard, ain't it?"

The man who sold windmills said, "Yes," and questioned at large, "haven't I been hearin' some stuff lately about a guerrilla leader—"

"That they call the Lizard?" the rancher broke in. "Yeah, you have. Been runnin' cattle and horses both ways over the border. That fire they had in El Paso this mornin' they're sayin' it was guns in that old warehouse. Guns and ammunition that was meant for the Lizard. Uncle Sam ought to do somethin' about it."

"It is true," the Mexican said nervously, "there is in my country a guerrilla butcher, El Lagarto, known on this side the Rio Grande as the Lizard. With his lagartijos, his Little Lizards, he has been plundering the border country in Sonora." He tapped the sun-dried lizard with his restless fingers. "It is said he uses these for a sign. But this one, doubtless, is only some stupid joke, some trick, some accident."

"He uses the lizards for a sign?" Helen Blane questioned, with a sharp little inrush of breath. "A sign of what?"

The Mexican shrugged. "Who knows. It is nothing." But to Roy he leaned close a little later and muttered, "I have something for your ears when we arrive at Las Cruces. Is mos' important."

At Las Cruces there was a stopover. Against his better judgment Roy let Red usher Helen Blane into the dining room while he stayed outside on the platform to talk with the Mexican.

"You have, shall we say," the impressionable Mexican began, "sympathetic interest in the señorita, no? Then, señor, guard her well. I did not say it before her ears, not wishing to frighten her, but, señor"—he bent closer—"that lizard which she had discover in her handbag, it is a sign of death! She has been marked by El Lagarto for death!"

"How do you know?" Roy asked sharply.

The Mexican shrugged. "Believe

me, there are many in my country who know."

"It must have been put in her bag by someone in the stagecoach," Roy suggested.

"But naturally."

"Then one of our fellow passengers is an agent of El Lagarto."

"But naturally. That is why I have say to guard the señorita well. Shall we join the others at dinner, no?"

"We shall join them, yes," Roy said shortly. He opened the door. "After you, amigo."

INSIDE, Roy walked over to the chair Red had saved for him at the long table. He sat down. While he waited for his steak, he spoke to Red under his breath. Red listened. After a while he said in a low voice, "You called the Mex friend, but I noticed you didn't let him get in behind you, comin' through the door. Anything hot there?"

"In the stagecoach," Roy reviewed, "with their hands reachin' down helpin' Miss Blane pick up her things, they all had a chance to slip the lizard inside. But the Mex and the cigar drummer held the bag in the first place. They had the best chance. We can't afford to overlook any of 'em, though." Roy transferred his attentions to Helen Blane, talking around Red. "He's a nice feller." He slapped his hand on Red's shoulder. "Got awful pretty hair. But don't believe a word he says."

"Listen," Red exploded, "keep out of this. You had your opportunity with Miss Blane and she wasn't impressed."

"Why," Helen Blane protested laughingly, "I didn't say I wasn't."

"Point is," Red insisted, "you didn't say you was."

Roy's steak came. He was hungry and he tied into it. At intervals he tried to work up a conversation with Helen Blane. But Red was sitting closer, and he had been born with an agile tongue. Roy didn't get very far. He couldn't help showing his annoyance, much to the amusement of the passengers, who long before this had become aware of the rivalry springing up between the two.

Red waited until Roy had finished his steak, then he said, "Listen, you long drink of water, why don't you go far away? Can't you see the lady and I want to be alone? Listen, you been yammerin' all your life about how you want to settle down on a ranch of your own. And you said you knew a fellow in Las Cruces who would sell cheap. Why don't you go see him?"

"It ain't a bad idea at that," Roy declared. "But I wouldn't have time."

"Sure you would. We ain't pullin' out for an hour yet. The driver announced it before you came in."

"On the level?"

"Would I fool you, pard? And us with important business farther north?"

"Why won't we be leavin' for an hour?" questioned Roy who still seemed suspicious.

"One of the horses had a colt. Two colts, I guess, it was. Maybe three. I don't know. Point is we got an hour to kill in Las Cruces—"

"Point is, you've plumb convinced me, pardner." Roy pushed back quickly and got up from his chair. "You'll be some surprised if I come back with a ranch in my pocket, won't you?"

"Yeah, by heck, I will. Don't forget to stop and rob a bank on the way."

Roy made a pass at pushing Red's face in his plate, and while he was

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leaning close he said, "Remember, the lucky horseshoe says I sit with the lady—all the way to Albuquerque." He looked at Helen Blane. "Be seein' you sudden," he said. Then he turned away, strode quickly across the room and out the door.

The passengers at table watched with suppressed mirth as, through the window, they saw Roy's lean shoulders bend into the freshening wind as he strode away.

"Why, Mr. Haw," Helen reproved, "I've a good notion to go call him back."

"Aw, I wouldn't do that," Red protested. "He don't like to be disturbed right after eatin'."

"But you told him a lie! What if he shouldn't get back before the stage started?"

"Gosh!" Red said seriously. "Gosh, Miss Blane, I never thought of that!"

"You never thought of anything else, you mean. Your face looks as guilty as a little boy's who's been in the jam jar." She started to push her chair back from table. "I'm going to tell him."

Red reached out to hold her. "No, wait. It's all right. Honest. He won't take my word for it. Look." He pointed out the window. "He's talkin' to the driver, checkin' on it now."

She relaxed, and laughed. "I bet you boys have fun," she said.

But ten minutes later when the stage driver thrust his head inside the door and announced that the stage was leaving, Helen looked at Red uncertainly. The passengers got in and distributed themselves as before, except that now Red was sitting in Roy's seat, and Red's seat was empty.

The driver looked in at the opened door. "Where's that other feller?"

"Hold her up a minute, friend," Red said. "He'll be right along."

The driver gave him a dour look and glanced at his watch. "I'll wait five minutes and that's all. I told him we were headin' right out when he asked me a while ago."

"Couldn't we send someone after him?" Helen Blane inquired.

"Where'd he go?"

Helen looked at Red severely. "Tell him."

"Yeah," Red said quickly, "he ought to be easy to find. He went to talk to someone about buyin' a ranch. I don't know what ranch, but—"

"Young feller," the stage driver said shortly, "that ain't even a hint. The whole danged southwest territory's fer sale."

He turned away, muttering. In five minutes sharp he was back. "Last call," he said with finality. "We're wheelin'."

Red reached out and grabbed the driver's hand with both of his. "Be a sport," he pleaded. "Give him ten minutes more."

THE driver pulled his hand away with his fist closed. "I'm a plaster saint if I give him another second. He had his warnin'. I'm runnin' late as it is. Teach him a good lesson. He can lay over here in the shadders of the Organ Mountains and speculate on the sins of impromptitude—and catch the next stage through tomorrer."

That was the driver's last word. He slammed the door, climbed to his high box seat, cracked his whip, and cut loose with the stream of strenuous profanity that drivers everywhere considered of first importance in getting a six-horse team started.

With the leather thorough-braces

creaking, and the stage settling into its swaying rhythm, Helen Blane turned accusingly to Red. "Mr. Haw, I'm surprised at you," she said indignantly. "I distinctly saw you place a piece of paper money in that driver's hand!"

"Huh?" Red questioned sheepishly. "Not *distinctly*, did you?"

"Well, I saw you anyway!"

Red grinned weakly. "Since you saw it anyway, I plead guilty, Miss Blane, ma'am, to tryin' to bribe the driver to wait a while longer for my friend."

"To bribe him to go on without your friend, you mean! I notice the driver didn't return your money. You both ought to be reported—"

"Aw now, you don't really think I'd try to make Roy miss his stage, do you? When we got important business waitin'!"

She did think it, and nothing that he could say could quite make her believe otherwise. The other passengers, judging from their sly grins, thought so, too. All except the Mexican, perhaps. He didn't seem to think it was a joking matter. He kept watching Helen Blane out of the corner of his eyes as though, apprehensively, expecting her to vanish—or die. And he couldn't quite rid himself of that appearance of self-conscious importance that a man shows who knows something no one else does.

Red didn't seem to be aware of any tragic undercurrents. He devoted himself exclusively to Helen Blane, and under his expert attention, she relaxed and laughed with him finally. After all, it wasn't such a serious crime to make a man miss a stagecoach, and it *was* flattering to a girl to have a man go to all that trouble to be with her.

But there was one thing Red, try as he might, couldn't control: Helen kept shifting the conversation to Roy Lanterman. She wanted to know everything about him from the time he was knee-high to nothing.

Before Red had answered many questions, though, something happened which focused Helen Blane's thoughts acutely on herself. It was the same with all but one passenger in the stagecoach. They felt with Helen a clubbing moment of alarm, because, although there was peril but for one person, there was only one among them who could know this.

CHAPTER VIII

STRANGE HOLDUP

THE holdup occurred but a short distance out from Las Cruces. The stage driver had settled down to routine prodding of his team, and the shotgun guard had already started to doze. The stagecoach was rolling along between high-heaped hills of crumbling stone, hills carved by the winds of the ages from naked rock, pocked now with Mexican bayonet, tiny-leafed mesquite, and greasewood.

To the left of the trail lay the narrow fertile valley of the Rio Grande. The hills which humped down to the river had been combed with iron, plowed and cultivated and put to growing things that folks could eat. Between the hills the stage passengers could catch glimpses of the river. It gleamed in the sun like a band of metal. It flowed due south now, entirely within the confines of United States territory.

To the east of the trail the Organ Mountains reared their flutted columns. Of fantastic, almost mystical beauty, the stately peaks, veiled in rose and purple shadow, were well-named Organ Mountains.

They looked infinitely capable of sending a peal of music crashing to the sky.

But it wasn't music which the stagecoach passengers heard. The peace and solemnity of the day was shattered from close outside the coach—by six-gun thunder!

Close on the heels of the six-gun roar sounded the deep-mouthed bellow of the guard's sawed-off shotgun. The passengers stared fixedly at each other, waiting to hear the outcome of the lead swap.

They weren't long in learning. With the stage bucking to a stop, a harsh voice cut through the echoes of the gun thunder, "Drop that lead spreader overboard and maybe, jus' maybe, I'll leave you live."

There was the sound of the shotgun clattering to the ground, and the frightened voice of the guard, "She jus' went off in the air, hombre, unconsciouslike."

"That's why maybe I'm leavin' you live," the holdup man said coldly. "It's nothin' you're carryin' in the boot that I'm after anyway. It's the passengers. Get on down here and order 'em all outside."

The passengers, crowding the windows, could see the lone bandit now. A tall and sinister figure on a black horse. With his sombrero pulled low over his forehead, and a bandanna concealing his face, only his slitted eyes were revealed. He was wearing an oilskin slicker and brandishing a six-gun.

The guard came around and opened the stagecoach door. "Reckon you all heard what he said." He stood there, nervously shifting his feet, waiting for them to get out, and refusing to meet anyone's eye.

Helen Blane looked at Red Haw in silent white-faced appeal.

"Don't worry," he said reassuringly. Then to the cadaverous cigar drummer who had opened his sample case and was rummaging around for a derringer he carried there, "Don't be a fool. I'm a fightin' man myself, but there's no percentage in buckin' a man who's got a gun on you. What have any of us got to lose important enough to risk out lives?"

Red's words carried weight. One by one the passengers climbed out of the stage and lined up with their hands in the air. The bandit eased out of saddle and went down the line searching them deftly, thoroughly.

When he had finished he stood back. "That's all," he said. "You may proceed." He had a strange voice, barely understandable. It issued through the bandanna unpleasantly thick and his words were muffled.

The passengers looked at one another uncertainly.

THE bandit waved his gun. "I say you may proceed." To give point to his utterance, he mounted his own horse, and without another word or a look behind him, put the horse to a gallop that carried him almost at once out of sight in the gravelly hills.

The rabbity little windmill salesman was gnawing excitedly on his lips. "I got a good watch and a roll of bills," he sputtered. "And he never took either of 'em!"

"Craziest holdup I ever see," the rancher seconded. "Never took nothin' of mine either!"

And in the excited talk of the next few seconds it was learned that the bandit *hadn't taken anything from anybody!*

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with everyone still excitedly speculating upon the strange holdup, the windmill man said, "Only one way to explain it. He was lookin' for somethin' special and he didn't find it."

"What could he been lookin' for?" the cigar drummer wanted to know.

No one had an answer for that. Something else happened then to shift the interest momentarily. The passengers were just getting well settled again when from behind, approaching on the trail, sounded the hoofbeats of horses hard ridden; and a challenging voice rang out, "Ha-llo, the stage!"

"Another holdup?" Helen gasped.

"Bandits don't come from behind," Red Haw said. "I got a hunch this is somethin' worse'n bandits."

The driver was pulling in the horses. The men who had come from behind were close now. Close enough to identify. There were two of them.

"Why, it's Mr. Lanterman!" Helen cried.

"I knew this was too good to last," Red muttered.

It was Lanterman and a livery man from Las Cruces. Lanterman swung out of saddle and boarded the stagecoach, and the livery man headed back to town, riding his horse and leading the other.

The passengers looked on with some apprehension as Lanterman entered the coach, glared at Red who made no attempt to give up his position next to Helen Blane, and finally plopped down in the vacant seat opposite.

"Nice trick to play on a pard," he said bitterly.

"How'd I know," Red argued, "that you'd be dumb enough not to check on my story with the stage driver?"

Roy unlimbered lean arms and legs in a restless stirring. "I did check with the driver! How much

did you pay him to back up your story?"

The toe of one of Helen Blane's trim traveling shoes tapped on the stagecoach floor. "So—" she said, looking at Red accusingly.

"I'm sore," Roy said, "and I got a right to be. I've stood for a lot of your stunts, but this is too much. For a Mex copper I'd open the door and boot you out into the road—and don't think I can't do it."

They were all looking at Red to see how he would take it. That's why they all missed it when Roy gave Red a broad wink and a quick grin.

They looked back at Roy when he started feeling in his pocket. They didn't know what to expect. Certainly they didn't expect what they saw. Roy took from his pocket a tiny brown lizard. Not a dead sun-dried one. A lizard very much alive. It's bright pin-point eyes shone out as he held it securely, but gently, in his hand, with the lizard's tail curved over one finger.

"FOUND him under a rock," Roy said. "They're like some humans; they like dark places when anyone else is around. Amazin' critters. Some of 'em can even change their color. They can look like a leaf if they're on a leaf, or a rock if they're on a rock. The same way a man can pretend to be someone else." He paused, went on. "The same way an agent for El Lagarto, for instance, could pretend to be a young man going to Socorro to see his sweetheart—"

"*Caramba!*" the young Mexican ejaculated.

"Or a man selling cigars," Roy continued calmly.

The cigar drummer started, leaned forward, opened his mouth to talk. But Roy beat him to it.

"Or a man traveling with his wife to his ranch—"

"Now look here—" the rancher started violent protest.

"Or," Roy concluded, "a man selling windmills."

"This is an outrageous insinuation!" the Deep Lift salesman sputtered.

Roy didn't seem to be hearing any of them. He just looked at his pet and kept on talking. "Sensitive critters," he claimed. "They can spot their own kind, penetrate any disguise." His voice grew suddenly taut. "All right, little lizard, point out the one in the stagecoach who is an agent for El Lagarto!"

Roy opened his hand and the lizard darted out—in the direction Roy's hand was inclined—and fell into the lap of the rabbity little man who chewed on his lips and sold Deep Lift windmills.

The face of the Deep Lift man froze in sudden fury. His hand struck down, ostensibly to brush the lizard from his lap, but in reality to reach the ivory-handled six-gun he carried in a specially constructed holster under his coat. He brushed off the lizard, and in the same sweeping motion filled his hand with the gun butt. He started leveling out. But he only started, that was all; because when he looked up, there was Roy Lanterman's hand filled before his.

"I'll take the gun," Roy said flatly. "And I'll take those sun-dried lizards you've got in your pocket."

The Deep Lift man passed them over. With the snout of Roy's gun glaring at him, there was little else he could do.

Roy flashed his Federal badge. "You're under arrest," he said. "You've got a lot of questions to answer, and not about Deep Lift

windmills. As a starter, why did you plant El Lagarto's little warning ticket on Miss Blane?"

"I have nothing to say." The rabbity jaws clamped shut.

Roy shrugged. "No hurry." He smiled across at Red. "What do you say, pardner, shall we put a brown derby on him and push him off a cliff?"

"It never fails." Red seemed to be considering. "Tell you what, though, he's a more complex personality than some. Let's don't be hasty about it. We got all the way to Albuquerque to think of somethin'."

Helen Blane's trimly shod toe was tapping again. She looked from Red to Roy. "This business of missing the stage—is it just possible there's something more to it than meets the eye?"

"Huh?" Roy said, startled. "How you mean?"

"Pull your sombrero low and hold your hand over your face—or maybe you have a red bandanna that would serve. Go on, do it. Now squint your eyes— I thought so! It was you who held up our stage! And pretending it was a contest, as to which of you would sit by me—that was part of it, too, wasn't it?"

Roy's face was red. "Well, you see, Miss Blane, we did want to sit by you, I mean—" He broke off and laughed as he read the laughter in her eyes.

"How did you make your voice sound so horrible?"

"Try talkin' with a mouthful of rocks some time. Yeah, since you guessed, there's no harm tellin' it now, I reckon. We didn't have any authority to search the stage, you see, so Red and I cooked up the whole business at Las Cruces. The driver, the guard, the liveryman—they were all in on it. All I hoped to accomplish by the holdup was to learn who among us was on El Lagarto's pay roll. When I searched everybody I found the gun and the quantity of dried lizards on Mr. Deep Lift here. That was all I needed to know. I rode my horse around back of the hills where the liveryman was waitin', then together we came gallopin' after the stage, as you know."

CHAPTER IX

THE WORLD'S TOUGHEST JOB

RED and Roy rode night-and-day herd on their prisoner, and on the morning they reached Albuquerque they took him with them when they went to meet Gregor Duncan. The Atlantic and Pacific Railroad had nosed as far west as Albuquerque, and was making strenuous preparations to extend its line farther. In the meantime mule-team freighters did a land-office business from railhead to points west. The town was on the boom, with muleskinners, ranchers, and trainmen crowding streets and saloons; and with new adobes, some of them the natural sun-dried mud and some gleaming white under the sun with a coat of wash or stucco, pushing up like mushrooms from the flat plain.

With their prisoner hemmed in between them, Roy and Red stopped at the railroad station and inquired, as they had done in El Paso, if there was a telegram for Ezra Wire. There was. Roy opened the envelope. As he had anticipated, the wire instructed them where they were to meet Gregor Duncan.

The man wasn't hard to find. At the Coronado Hotel, a short way down the street from the railroad station, a man in the lobby, who appeared to be dozing, moved casually to his feet as Roy and Red en-

tered with their prisoner. The man was an acquaintance of long standing, Tarp Carron, permanently attached to the United States marshal's office in this district.

"Hiya, boys," he greeted cordially. "I'm watch-doggin' for Gregor Duncan. He's expectin' you. Go on up."

"Who's hidin' behind that phony name?" Red demanded.

"On the level, don't you know?" Tarp Carron grinned. "Boy, are you gonna be surprised."

Upstairs a man in a faultlessly tailored business suit, a man alert, gray-eyed, with hair graying at the temples, gripped their hands strongly.

"I'm Gregor Duncan," he said briskly, with his back to the closing door. "Credentials waived, gentlemen; I recognize you, of course, from your pictures in departmental records. But this other gentleman—"

"Maybe somebody'll recognize him from his picture, too," Red suggested. "In some rogue's gallery."

Gregor Duncan raised inquiring eyebrows.

"One of El Lagarto's own," Roy said. "Since the attorney general's office is dippin' its fingers personal in this case, we thought we'd better bring him along here for official disposition."

"You did quite right."

"He hasn't talked—yet."

"He will." Gregor Duncan's voice was hard, incisive, his eyes flinty as they flicked over the sullen Deep Lift salesman.

Gregor Duncan himself turned the key in the door to the inside room behind their prisoner, after Red and Roy had looked the place over and prove to their own satisfaction that it was escape proof.

ALONE with the two agents in the outer room, Gregor Duncan said, "We'll get to our prisoner

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later. Time is pressing and I have much to say. First—my own credentials." He extracted papers from his inside coat pocket, spread them open on the table and invited inspection.

Red and Roy stepped close and examined them. They were official. The seal was right, the signatures were right, and the code words in the reading matter were right. There was, in fact, nothing wrong anywhere. Nothing a man could put his finger on. Yet, undeniably, a curious tension lay over the place. From the moment they had stepped inside the room and Gregor Duncan had welcomed them, Roy and Red had felt it.

Duncan's next words were a surprise. They were quiet words, but charged with suppressed vitality. "Do you feel it, too?"

"Feel what?" Red asked.

"A brooding evil force weighing upon the room." Duncan laughed shortly. "Perhaps it's my imagination. Do I appear nervous? I should! I've been under a strain I can tell you, gentlemen. Time! There hasn't been enough time. Time to save America, gentlemen!" He paused, his gray eyes flashing. "Not even time for you to come to Washington. So Washington has come to you. I have my orders from the attorney general himself. I am instructed to acquaint you with the full details of this appalling case, and assign your immediate duties. As you know, the office puts great trust in you. How great that trust is you will presently realize. But first, your report."

Red moved the toe of his boot to touch casually against Roy's, and Roy said to Gregor Duncan. "Before we begin could I ask one question. I was just wonderin'—I've been out of touch with things, you know—has a court decision been

handed down in the Bultman Trust case?"

"Bultman Trust?" Gregor Duncan repeated thoughtfully, then threw up his hands. "This El Lagarto affair has sidetracked everything. I don't even keep track of my meals any more." He smiled wearily. "Or my hat or my wife. Now, please, the report."

Roy nodded. Between the two of them, he and Red brought Gregor Duncan up to date on their activities in El Paso. But behind all their talk the same question burned. Who was Gregor Duncan? They had a conviction he was someone they should know. To each, there was something stirringly familiar about the man. But whatever it was, it remained elusive. Downstairs Tarp Carron had led them to expect a startling surprise. He had given the impression that Gregor Duncan was a man high in official Washington. Obviously the man was capable, cultivated. But who was he?

Roy put the last touches to their report, then added, "So with the warehouse destroyed, I should have judged the whole business to be settled, except for the fact that the girl in the stagecoach was marked with the Lizard's death sign. That was after the mix-up in El Paso, in which she had no part. I've talked to her. She knows nothing. Then why is she being brought into it? That's one of the first things I want screwed out of our Deep Lift friend in there."

GREGOR DUNCAN nodding, dropped into a chair. His fingers drummed on the table. He hunched forward confidentially. "I can tell you positively that the destruction of the warehouse was not the finish. It was only the beginning. This thing is like a prairie fire burning. Stamped out in one place, it flares up in another. As you have already gleaned, this reaches beyond a mere border upstart's bloody-fingered ambitions. It reaches all the way to Washington and financial New York. Although El Lagarto himself is no more than a strutting butcher, he is dangerous because he is backed by dangerous men. The dying words of your Little Lizard are true: 'On El Lagarto's side are some of the most rich men of your own country.' Gold-mad ghouls, they are, who in return for trade concession, are backing this irresponsible guerrilla with unlimited financial power; enough, as you have seen, to hire armies, and American agents in swarms."

Gregor Duncan paused, eyes smoldering. "By the way, this American agent of El Lagarto's financial backer—would you know him if you saw him again?"

"We didn't see him."

"We only heard his voice."

"Would you remember that voice?"

"Yeah," Red said, "sure. It was somethin' like yours. Eastern. Packin' a kind of controlled drive. Like a man used to givin' orders—big orders."

Gregor Duncan smiled faintly. "I'm afraid that's not much help." He leaned forward again. "To continue, and summing up, Eastern Federal agents have uncovered enough to know that American money maniacs plan to furnish guns and supplies to El Lagarto in quantities sufficient for a revolutionary overthrow of the Mexican government and—"

"But that was tried from Europe," Roy protested. "Doesn't the fate of Maximilian mean anything to these present plotters?"

"Not a thing. They have learned from Maximilian's tragic failure. They propose to keep their identity with this revolution strictly under cover. It is to be, in effect, a spontaneous uprising of the common people under the leadership of the Savior El Lagarto. Insidious lies already are being circulated in the United States with the view to influencing public opinion in El Lagarto's favor. As an instance of this, one well-known periodical recently carried an article terming him 'The Lincoln of Mexico.'"

"Then after the war, the plunder?"

"They would call it 'trade concessions.' If the whole thing seems fantastic, only consider that this is an era of pressure games and speculation such as this country has never before seen. After the recent attempt at cornering the gold market, I think you will agree anything is possible."

"That wasn't—quite."

"This will be—quite! *Unless you stop it!*"

"Who, me?"

"You and Mr. Hawk. I told you that before this interview was concluded you would realize how great a trust your office puts in you."

"You mean we're to go East—?"

"No, we have men working to uncover the American connections in the East. Capable men. But they are working against time, and it is our opinion that the killing blow must be struck out here. You are to remain in the West." Gregor Duncan stood up. His body was stiff, almost like a soldier's at attention. "Permit me, gentlemen, to assign you the world's toughest job—to stop a revolution."

"Just the two of us?" Red said skeptically.

"Two men"—Gregor Duncan nodded stiffly—"to stop a revolution."

"A certain procedure has been worked out?" Roy suggested.

"To begin with, yes. But beyond the beginning you are on your own." He lowered his voice, stepped closer. "Now then, here it is: we expect the bulk of the gun running across the border to be shifted farther west. This much we have learned positively: that a wagon train leaves from steel-end here in Albuquerque in the morning. It will be loaded to capacity with war materials!"

"And you want us to stop it?" Red asked.

"No, no. We could have stopped it before this. But that would only have the effect of shifting their operations as undoubtedly it will in the case of your El Paso triumph. The plan is for you to go with the wagons. Undercover arrangements have already been completed for the two of you to go as drivers—mule-skinners, I believe the term is. We have reason to believe that this train load will be joined with loads that have gone out before, and the whole at a propitious moment, will be run over the border. Precisely where, and by whose conniving, it will be your job to find out."

"About these mule-skinnin' arrangements that have been made for us," Red began.

"That part of it," Gregor Duncan assured him, "is simplicity itself. Look in at the Dust and Cinders Saloon, and ask for Hawk Lind."

"He one of our men?"

"One of theirs! Wagon boss. He has your description. He's expecting you. He doesn't, of course, know of your government connections. You're just a couple of mule-skinners to him who'll take a double-pay job without asking questions."

"That's all there is to it?"

"Every bit. The rest is up to you."

"So the rest is up to us," Roy said softly. "All right, we'll get goin'. Take a look out in the hall, Red."

Red moved to the door, looked out. "All clear. The rest is up to you, pardner."

ROY'S hand came up from his holster. Came up filled. He held the six close in to his side, with the black muzzle covering Gregor Duncan. His blue eyes were like quartz; his voice was chilled steel.

"Don't make any wrong moves, Duncan," he warned.

Gregor Duncan, at that moment, looked rather like a fish. His eyes were popping wide, and his mouth, in his sudden consternation, had fallen open in the shape of an "O." He swallowed finally, and pried out words.

"What . . . what is the meaning of this?"

"That's what you're gonna tell us," Red told him, moving in from the door.

"We knew there was somethin' off-center here the minute we came in," Roy said. "But we couldn't either one of us figure what it was. So I asked you that question about what was the court decision in the Bultman Trust case. You knew all the other answers, but you didn't know that one. It was a catch question. If you had been sent out from the attorney general's office to contact us on official business, you would have answered, simply, that the case had been taken to a higher court. But you didn't answer it that way, and we knew for sure there was somethin' wrong. We still couldn't put our finger on it, so we let you keep on talkin'. I got it at last and I think Red did, too. It was your voice that was familiar. *Last time we heard it was in a warehouse in El Paso.* Close up, in a closed room like this, it was just

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enough different that it took us a while too catch on. Especially since there hasn't been any other stagecoach in from El Paso before ours that you could have taken. You came in saddle, I reckon, and you came fast. All right, Gregor Duncan—talk fast."

At the slightest creaking noise behind, Red swiveled his head around. Too late! The door to the inner room was swinging open. Framed in the doorway, wearing a look of fierce, almost fanatical satisfaction on his rabbity face, was the Deep Lift windmill man. He had a six-shooter holding full on Red.

"Talk fast yourselves, you prairie-grass detectives!" he snarled.

Gregor Duncan's lips were showing a thin tense smile. "Nice work," he told the rabbit-faced man. "I was confident you'd find the gun in there and discover the door wasn't actually locked, and use both to advantage if the occasion arose. Now what do you suggest we do about this pair? They're hard to kill. Hawk Lind on the wagon train would have taken care of them, and nothing messy about it. Everything clean and no worry afterward to anyone. But now— Shall we take a chance and kill them here? Or would it be safer to take them with us and dispose of them outside somewhere?"

"You're talkin' about a lot of slaughter, mister," Red said savagely. "We got as many guns hung on you fellas as you have us."

"As many guns, yes." Gregor Duncan smiled again, his lips tight across his teeth. "As many guns, but not as many bullets. *No bullets at all, in fact!*"

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