



STREET
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SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

DEC. 16, '39

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GOLDEN MUKLUKS
a book-length novel by
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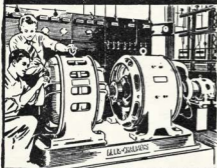
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CONTENTS FOR DECEMBER 16, 1939 VOL. CLXXXVIII NO. 6

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BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

- GOLDEN MUKLUKS** Kenneth Gilbert 9

Smoke Huzje knew his pumpkin-seed nuggets would start a stampede along his backtrail, but he never expected to keep his rendezvous with death on the white wall of a yawning crevasse!

SERIAL

- DEAD FREIGHT FOR PIUTE** Luke Short 107
Fifth of Six Parts

With the jaws of a death trap closing around him, it didn't look as though Cole Armin would be able to make use of a discovery that might save Western Freight from defeat. . . .

SHORT STORIES

- RUSTLERS AIN'T GOT NO FOLKS** S. Omar Barker 53
How could young Ed Ulickenstiff throw a wild loop when his rope kept getting tangled up with that brindle yearling?

- BULLET BRAND** John Colahan 64
Folks wondered whether Riley Spain would ever forget it was a bullet from his six-gun that had cut down his pard. . . .

- A LOT OF HOT HEIR** Glenn H. Wichman 75
After being a lord for a day, Hen was ready to become a fugitive from his family tree!

- GUN BAIT** Eugene R. Dutcher 85
Had Jay Keuz escaped a mob's fury only to be gunned down by the man who had ruined him?

WESTERN STORY FEATURE

- THE STORY OF THE WEST** Gerard Delano 62
Episode LXXXIV in the making of the cattle country. . . .

DEPARTMENTS

- | | | |
|---------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|-----|
| THE ROUNDUP | The Editor | 5 |
| GUNS AND GUNNERS | Phil Sharpe | 97 |
| MINES AND MINING | John A. Thompson | 99 |
| THE HOLLOW TREE | Helen Rivers | 101 |
| WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE | John North | 103 |
| MISSING | | 105 |

COVER BY DAVID BERGER

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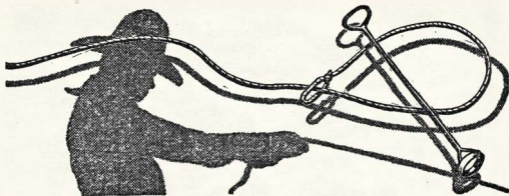


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The Roundup

THIS seems to be "Potluck Jones and his pal, Too-bad Tommy" week, and we take pleasure in reprinting a couple of letters from two of their many admirers. C. H. Davis, who lives in Girard, California, and who describes himself as "an honest-to-gosh Potluck fan," wonders "whether I am criticizing or giving enough praise." Well, Mr. Davis, your letter was mighty gratefully received and the best we can do is chouse out our friend Geer and find out just where Potluck and Too-bad are these days. We're mighty keen to meet up with them again, too, for such hombres don't turn up every day. And we're right pleased you thought so highly of Jay Lucas' RANGE OF HUNTED MEN. Thanks heaps for your letter.

"It isn't often that I find time to write a letter of either criticism or of commendation, but it has come high time for this individual to say something," writes Mr. Davis.

"Mr. Editor, it has been a long time since I've been able to find in the pages of your most Westernie Western Story, those two lovable,

fightin', rootin'-tootin' characters, Potluck Jones and Tommy O'Neil.

"I want to tell you, Mr. Editor, that once, not so long ago, I happened by chance to buy a Western Story Magazine. It contained a most interesting story by Ney N. Geer. Whoever that hombre is, he certainly knows his West. I, myself, don't claim to be a chuck-wagon pot wrangler, horse doctor, or a he-man cowboy, but I do claim that I've traveled around our old globe and lived in the beautiful West, traveling the West's wide-open spaces via horseback enough to know what that guy is talking about when he writes such a swell yarn as POTLUCK PLAYS A HAND. Now there was a yarn! I've read many others since, but they seem to have lessened in number, so all I can say is the only fault I find with both the stories and the magazine is, there ain't enough of 'em, gol dang it. Somebody's to blame, but it ain't fer me to say. The only thing I can do is holler like blazes and mebbe more will appear, huh?

"You see, it was this way, Mr. Editor. I used to read Western Story several years ago, and as time marched on, I gave up reading it altogether until as I say, I bought the issue mentioned, and I've been a constant reader ever since. Now, listen, Mr. Editor, I'm giving you

fair warnin'. I'm gonna quit readin' it again, too, if I don't see some more of those stories.

"Oh, no, don't misunderstand me. Sure I like the other stories. They're all good, especially that serial that's been runnin', RANGE OF HUNTED MEN, by Jay Lucas. A swell yarn, well woven, by a tophand. I tell yuh, the gol-durn mag keeps me up half the night 'fore I can get it read cover to cover. But that ain't the idee. I want Potluck. So whatcha say, Ed, let's see some more of Geer and Potluck. An' don' forget, I give Lucas a slap on the back for a fine yarn.

"P. S. I guess I hollered too soon. What do I do but go up to mail my letter to you and I see the October 7th issue with a Potluck novel startin' at me on the very front page—SIDEWINDER SYNDICATE. Well, dadblast it, I had to bring my letter home and steam it open and put in this P. S., but I can't take time to write another now. I want to get into that story. So long, Editor. Thanks again for always havin' such a bunch of good stories by a bunch of top writers."

And, as proof that Potluck and Tommy are known and loved from coast to coast, we have this letter from the Atlantic seaboard.

"How come we don't have more stories from the pen of Ney N. Geer?" queries Arthur Williams, of Locust Valley, Long Island, New York. "I am sure everybody likes Potluck Jones, and you will have to admit that Geer is a topnotch writer, so why not have more yarns about him?"

"I have just finished the first part of Frank Richardson Pierce's IRON MALEMUTE and if the other parts are as good as the first, it sure is

some story. Mr. Pierce's stories are always good."

We agree on all points with you, Mr. Williams, and, as noted above, we're going to corral these two side pards as soon as ever we can. We hope Frank Richardson Pierce's IRON MALEMUTE lived up to your expectations, and we know the fans of F. R. P. will be happy to know that we just bought another serial which we think is his finest yet—and that's saying plenty!

Coming next week—

With DEAD FREIGHT FOR PIUTE winding up to a smashing finish, we felt that our next serial selection had to meet its high standard of thrills and drama. We know you'll agree that MURDERS AT MESQUITE FLATS, a four-parter by Stuart Hardy, is a very good choice. This strange story of a murder epidemic that threatened to wipe out an entire range is absorbing reading. Don't miss the first installment in next week's big issue!

When the law dabbled a loop on Tex Doyle, the toughest Tejano ever raised, it didn't keep him behind prison bars very long; it gave him a six-gun and told him to keep a date with the renegade boss of a Border hell hole. Meet this salty trouble-shooter in Walt Coburn's PASEAR TO MESALINA.

Also lined up for you in next week's all-star issue are stories by Peter Dawson, Tom Roan, W. D. Hoffman, Seth Ranger, George Cory Franklin and other outstanding Western fictioneers, plus a full string of features and departments.



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GOLDEN MUKLUKS

By KENNETH GILBERT

CHAPTER I

THE TALISMAN

SAVE for light that sprayed thinly through frosty windowpanes, the clink of chips and glasses and now and then a fragment of conversation that came from the Pay Dirt Bar, the tiny settlement of Three Below looked dead or at least wrapped in slumber, as though it was part of the long Alaskan night when all life seems to be stilled.

The runners of Smoke Hardy's sled made creaky sounds in the dry snow as he "whoaed" his dog outfit to a stop before the log-walled building, on one side of which drifts ran to the roof. The nine Mackenzie River huskies, ghostly in their winter fur, dropped gratefully in harness and lay there with tongues lolling, clouds of vapor swirling about their heads. Smoke set the sprag on the sled, hitched the six-gun under his parka, and went inside.

He stood there for a long instant with the door closed softly behind him, eyes squinted at lights that were glaring despite the smoke of many pipes. Young, tall and trail-lean, there was a growth of whisker on his chin and lips that was not so much stubble as downy fuzz, proclaiming his youth. Yet his entrance had a peculiar, seemingly unwaranted, effect.

Everyone in the saloon knew he was a stranger—and knew he had something on his mind! There was a hidden, bristling challenge in his manner that could be felt, and they did feel it.

The stud game in the corner stopped abruptly, the dealer holding a card poised between long, supple fingers. The hawk-faced man at the faro layout let his hand lie idly on

the case. Behind the bar the aproned bartender stopped polishing a glass.

Smoke Hardy seemed to ignore all in the room, yet somehow they knew that his swift glance had missed no detail. A few pinches of powdery snow fell from his mukluks and made white patches on the floor as he moved to the bar.

"*Hoochino*," he ordered, "and about as high as a mad cat's back!" The bartender understood that, and set out a brown bottle and long glass. Smoke's lean fingers spilled the contents of a small moose-hide poke on the bar—a tiny cascade of yellow nuggets of varying sizes.

Like the dawn wind that breathes in the spruce before a storm, a muted whispering ran around the room. But the watchers scarcely stirred.

One of the nuggets was of peculiar shape. It was oddly flat, nearly the size of a half dollar and perhaps three times as thick, and smoothed and polished as though it had been carried inside that poke for a long while.

The very size of it drew the bartender's attention. He turned it over. On the underside was a queer design, the outline of a pair of mukluks, or native moccasins, evidently scratched into the soft gold by means of a sharp-pointed tool, perhaps a knife.

"Not that one," declared Hardy. "Help yourself to any of the rest."

But the bartender shook his head uneasily. "This one's on the house," he said. "There's four men waitin' back there," he added, indicating a door at the far end of the room, "and that marker of yours tells me that maybe they're waitin' for you!"

Smoke nodded. He gulped the last of the drink, slipped the poke out of sight and crossed to the back-room door. Almost at once life resumed in the Pay Dirt.

CHAIRS scraped as the stud dealer spoke softly: "Ace bets!" There was a sudden rise of conversation like the wash of a wave at the foot of a rock cliff. Smoke Hardy was gone.

A squatty man got up quickly from the faro layout and came to the bar. His seamed, dark face was alive with a sort of feline eagerness. "You know that lad?" he asked the bartender.

The latter shrugged. "Never saw him before, Sloan. But I've heard that old No-camp Hardy had a son. This lad had a poke of punkin-seed gold!" He rubbed thoughtfully at the bar. "Give you two, three guesses what that could mean. There's only one creek outside of Goldstream where nuggets of that shape come from. And there was one marked with the Sign! That *could* be—"

"Wait!" Sloan held up a hand quickly and looked around the room. "You know, we can't take chances." There was a cunning light in his eyes. From inside his shirt he drew a small but heavy poke and laid it on the bar.

"Pay attention now!" Sloan's voice was sharp and commanding. He spoke rapidly. The bartender listened, sighed uneasily at last and began setting out bottles and glasses. But he could not help shooting a furtive look at the door where Smoke Hardy had vanished. Sloan saw the look and sneered: "Don't worry! There'll be no slip!"

The bartender raised his voice. "Everybody up!" he called. "Sloan is buyin' a round for the crowd! Hump yourselves, now! The bar's dusty and I'm wipin' her off!"

The crowd needed no second invitation. There was a sudden stirring, an orderly rush. Bottles tipped, glasses clinked. But Sloan, as host,

ignored their expressions of appreciation.

He swallowed his drink, poured another and swallowed that also. Then, leaving the poke of gold lying prominently on the bar, he wheeled and went swiftly outside and into the night.

And at that moment Smoke Hardy was facing four grim old men in the back room. His voice had a curious catch in it, his trail-tired eyes were misty.

"The reason I'm here tonight instead of my father is that he's dead," he announced. "I found No-camp Hardy on the Kelak Trail two days ago. Murdered! And the sled load of nuggets he had for you—close to eighty thousand in punkin-seed gold—was gone. So was his dogs and outfit—everything! Whoever did it"—and his voice shook—"tried to make him talk, tell where the Golden Mukluks mine is located. They stuck lighted splinters between his fingers to try to make him talk. I buried him in a crevasse and came on to tell you!"

FOR a long moment after Smoke Hardy finished speaking there was silence in the little room. The old men sat about a table which was covered by worn, stained oil-cloth, on which stood a dark bottle and glasses. At the entrance of Smoke Hardy the old men had had their filled glasses raised as though they might have been proposing a toast—but they had lowered the liquor untouched.

And in that drawn-out instant the impact of their incredulous stares hit Smoke, played upon him, while he stood tall and quiet. Then the nearest man, after that intent inspection, got to his feet.

"I make out the sign of No-camp in your face," he told the young man.

"I've always been good at readin' sign. But this wild yarn of yours flabbergasts us in more ways than one. We don't aim to make a mistake—again. You got any credentials to prove you're No-camp's boy?"

Smoke fished out the poke once more. He spilled a cone of yellow on the table. All four old men bent forward eagerly.

"That marker," declared Smoke, indicating the largest of the nuggets, "is one of a pair and was given me by No-camp. He carried the other, but it was taken from him, along with the rest of the gold!"

"All punkin-seed nuggets, sure enough!" exclaimed the first old man softly, stirring the nuggets with his forefinger. But he looked as though still unconvinced. "If you're Smoke Hardy," he went on, "you'll know the rest of the story!"

Smoke nodded. "I should! Heard it a hundred times!" he replied. "The four of you sunk everything you owned or could borrow on in a grubstake for No-camp because you believed his yarn that the Injuns knew of a creek rich with punkin-seed nuggets. No-camp was friendly with the Injuns—he'd saved some of 'em from starvin' to death durin' hard winters—and they trusted him. When my mother died, a squaw took and raised me until I was old enough to tag along after No-camp. But he cared more for the wilds than he did for the settlements; he even got the nickname of No-camp because he'd rather siwash it in the hills than bother to fix up a cabin and such like the average white man would. Even taught me to keep away from civilization!"

One of the old men nodded. "You're doin' fine so far!"

"Well, now," Smoke went on swiftly, "No-camp was willin' to

share half the mine with you—if he found it—in return for the grubstake. But he knew he'd be doin' his Injun friends a wrong if he started a stampede into their country. So it was agreed that the location of the mine was to be kept secret. He hunted nearly a year before he stumbled onto it. He'd wounded a grizzly that had just come out of its den in early spring. No-camp was still wearin' mukluks, and in tryin' to get away from the bear he slipped and slid down a gravel bank. When he got his jammed gun cleared and went back and killed the grizzly, he found out that the holes he'd dug in the gravel bank with his mukluks had turned up punkin-seed nuggets. So he named the strike the Golden Mukluks!"

Smoke took a deep breath and continued: "He worked the claim and sent word durin' the summer that as soon as snow came, so he could haul a load on the sled, he'd bring out your share. That amounted to about eighty thousand. He was on his way here to keep his word with you when he was robbed and murdered. And tortured! I'm not forgettin' that!"

A GAIN came that long, ominous silence during which their stares played upon him like heat lightning on a summer night sky. Then the first old man stood up.

"I'm Mort Tomlinson," he announced. "This is Bill Preece. Next is Pete Jennings. Yonder is Sam Jackson. Boys, we can't think straight until we finish this drink!"

They drank swiftly, pushed a glass toward Smoke, but he shook his head, face grim. As yet nobody had so much as smiled; there was a tautness in the room like that of a thrumming babiege line on the bow of a

canoe being hauled upstream against white water. All five stood there, and light from the smoky kerosene lamp above traced their faces with somber shadows.

"Boys," Mort went on quietly, "we're cleaned! No-camp is dead, and we bet our last chip on him! We're worse than busted. We're too old to prospect for ourselves. But it comes to me," he added meaningly, looking at Smoke, "that there's a way out. If No-camp is dead, then we've a right to know where the Golden Mukluks is located, because it's half ours, anyway! That right, boys?"

Smoke's face was granite-hard in its determination. "No-camp found the mine because he had information from the Injuns that no other white man could have got. He always played square with everybody who trusted him, and it wasn't his idea to spoil trappin' and huntin' for his Injun friends so that they'd have a hard time gettin' along. Sorry, but the Golden Mukluks stays secret!"

Old Mort's fist thumped the table angrily. "I guessed it, boys! It's a frame-up of some kind—"

"Easy!" cut in Smoke. "You're so all-fired suspicious," he added witheringly, "that I'm wonderin' how you come to trust No-camp with a grubstake at all! I said he was robbed of the share he was bringin' to you. But *his* share—mine now—is still at the Golden Mukluks. Eighty thousand more in punkin-seed nuggets. What I'm goin' to do, what I've planned to do all along, is to go back to the mine and haul the rest of the gold out and deliver it to you. So No-camp's word will be kept. So far, you haven't lost a thing except a friend who gave his life tryin' to keep faith with you!"

Their jaws sagged a little at that. Smoke went on rapidly: "I've got

just two chores to do—get your gold and get the man or men who killed and tortured No-camp. I'm leavin' Three Below tonight because I don't like the sight or smell of this camp. No-camp always traveled in a blizzard to hide his tracks, an' there'll be a change in weather, so nobody can follow me. I'm bringin' out your sledload of gold—"

"Hist!" Pete Jennings broke in warningly. "Somebody's at the door, listenin'!"

CHAPTER II

THE BAITED TRAP

SMOKE HARDY'S reflexes were almost as instinctive as those of a wild animal. On the instant Pete Jennings finished speaking, the younger man was at the door, had flung it open. But nobody appeared to be lingering near.

Part of the crowd was still at the bar. The stud dealer sat alone at his table, deck in hand. His lifted gaze caught and held Smoke's, then dropped as he flipped over a card deliberately.

At the faro layout the dealer shuffled with such beautiful precision that the cards scarcely whispered. Only one man, the case keeper, sat there with him. The dealer did not look up, but Smoke considered him long and searchingly, and more particularly the faro box into which the thin-edged cards would be placed when ready.

Smoke closed the door and turned back to the others. "When I found No-camp, the trail of the killers had been wiped out by a storm. I saw no sign anywhere. That hidden trail could have led to Three Below! You know everybody out there?"

Sam Jackson spoke up. "By sight and name," he answered. "But strangers have been tricklin' into

camp. There's been more killin' and robberies on the creeks this winter than there was in Skagway in Soapy Smith's day!

"But we've word that the law will be in Three Below before spring. Some of those strangers out there might even be a gun-slingin' deputy marshal or so stayin' under cover until the play is sized up!"

"Law!" Smoke looked unimpressed. Then he asked: "How about that faro dealer?"

"Gamblers come and go," was the reply. "Zabor is his name. Quiet sort but he's got a solid way that makas a feller wonder. He might be able to handle that gun he carries under his armpit. Anyway, he's a good faro dealer. Since he's handled the layout he hasn't turned over the box once, because nobody's been lucky enough to break him. Falk, who deals stud, is his pal. They came to Three Below together. Nothin' showy about 'em but sort o' sound for gamblers. Course there's a bunch of tenderfeet, like the Dude, waitin' to tail onto the next stam-pede!"

"The Dude?" Smoke queried.

Pete Jennings chuckled. "One right out of a book! Come up here with the craziest outfit anybody ever saw. Even brung a bathtub, the foldin' kind! Got a gun with peep sight's. And there's a half-breed named Gervais with him. This Gervais looks and acts plenty mean. He sort of takes care of the Dude. What you might call a bodyguard. A gun-slinger!"

"You say," questioned Smoke, "that this faro dealer has never had to turn over the box—that nobody has broken him?"

"That's right," was the reply. "Why'd you ask that?"

Smoke did not answer. When he had opened the door the faro box

was turned over! Knocked over accidentally, perhaps, by somebody hurrying back to his seat after listening outside the door! But Zabor had not looked up.

Smoke Hardy had lived too long in the wilds not to notice small things and realize the importance of them. He stepped out of the room, and the old men, sensing drama, crowded behind him.

SMOKE moved leisurely toward the bar and at that moment, as though at a signal, the outer door opened and Sloan stood there. The man appeared slightly nervous, but there was a truculent set to his jaw as he sent an appraising glance at Smoke and then beckoned the bar-keep.

"My poke," he ordered loudly. "Forgot it when I stepped out!"

The barkeep's face looked a little strained as he pushed over the partly emptied leather sack. "The boys," he said apologetically, "trampled her a little on that round. Not much left!"

"S'all right," Sloan assured him. "All I want—"

"Wait!" Smoke interrupted him mildly. He took two quick steps and snatched the poke out of the bar-keep's hand. He even grinned at Sloan. "Stranger, if you don't mind!"

Sloan's lips tightened and went white as he moved back involuntarily. But Smoke ignored him, examining the poke. He even opened it and spilled some of the contents on the bar.

"Punkin-seed nuggets!" he exclaimed softly.

Sloan, tense, eyed him warily. But Smoke merely scraped the nuggets together, put them back in the poke and handed it over to Sloan.

"Far as I know, there's only one

tribe of Injuns in the North whose squaws use that kind of stitch in sewin' moosehide," he explained. "An' only one creek outside of Goldstream that ever produced that kind of nuggets. Me, I'm always curious about such things!"

Sloan pocketed the gold dourly. "Curiosity," he observed, "is a risky habit, if you don't mind my sayin' so!"

The younger man nodded amiably. "So I've heard! I've got a lot more bad habits, I've been told. If you've got time I might tell you about some of 'em!"

The silence that fell in the room was more startling than a thunder-clap would have been. Smoke Hardy stood with thumbs hooked in his belt under his parka, his tired eyes as cold as the gray-blue façade of a glacier. The bartender stood stiffly at attention, waiting; and behind Smoke there were four old men who suddenly appeared grimly competent despite their years. They wore Mackinaws, but the right hand of each was hidden.

Sloan licked dry lips. What would have happened if there had not been an unexpected interruption was unpredictable yet certain; but the squeak of frost-dry hinges as the front door opened and closed was a tremendous sound that played havoc with overtaut nerves.

"Hell!" muttered old Mort Tomlinson, "it's the Dude!"

TWO men were entering the bar-room. The man who closed the door was short, swarthy and saturnine. Not hard, thought Smoke Hardy, to identify the breed called Gervais, of whom the old men had spoken. He fitted their description in that he was catlike, watchful and suspicious. But the other was seem-

ingly his opposite in all respects.

The Dude was a middle-sized man, slender, slight in build. There was a bland, innocent manner about him that bordered on the ludicrous. His blue eyes regarded those in the room with a sort of childlike astonishment, but he had the confident friendliness of a half-grown pup.

He grinned at the roomful of men a little self-consciously. "Boys," he said, in an effort at good-fellowship, "it's great to see so many of you here tonight. Would it be out of line, as you say, if I bought a drink for the house? You'd do as much for me, I'm sure, if you felt as lucky as I do!"

As men drifted up to the bar, he continued: "Gentlemen, I'm warning you that there's going to be a stampede next spring, the biggest this camp has ever known! And I'm going to lead it! I've just had a tip of a rich strike!"

They regarded him amazedly for a second. Probably Smoke Hardy was the most amazed of all, yet he did not show it. His keen eyes missed no detail, and they were drawn to this chechahco in a compelling way that could not be readily explained.

Perhaps, too, his wilderness sense caught the reaction of the others. Sloan was looking at the Dude queerly, something questioning in the glance. He did not appear disgusted at the appearance of the greenhorn; maybe he was relieved that the other's timely arrival had saved him from a rather awkward predicament. Gervais stood there behind the Dude, stolid yet alert.

The chechahco's eyes lighted as they fell upon Smoke Hardy. "Why," he exclaimed, "I believe we have a stranger in Three Below! Surely you'll join me!" He indicated the bar.



Smoke grinned bleakly. "You'll always have friends," he pointed out, "so long as you can buy drinks!"

"Ha!" The Dude chuckled appreciatively. "Now, there's a bit of philosophy that is worth remembering! I'm sorry we haven't met sooner. My name, now. What does it matter? The boys"—and he smiled at them benevolently—"have been kind enough to call me the Dude! I like it, gentlemen. Colorful, and all that. Let it ride, as you say. And you?"

"Smoke Hardy," was the reply. "The son," he added after a moment, "of an old-timer named No-camp Hardy, who was robbed and murdered on the Kelak Trail!"

The Dude blinked in apparent concern. "Why, now, that's too bad! I mean, of course, about your father. But do you mind telling me about it?"

Smoke laughed thinly. "Not much of a yarn. There's versions of it, I reckon, that can be had right here in Three Below! Anyway, maybe it hasn't been finished yet. Why tell a story until you've got the end of it?"

The Dude looked puzzled. "I think," he said after a moment, "that I understand what you mean. Yes, of course. Mr. Sloan, are you leaving?"

"Me?" Sloan jerked around, as though surprised. "Yeah. I'm pull-

"The reason I'm here instead of No-camp Hardy," Smoke told the four men, "is that he's dead—murdered!"



in' out. Got all the drinks I need tonight. S'long!" He moved swiftly to the door and was gone.

The Dude wagged his head ruefully. "That," he told Smoke, "is the way it happens here in Three Below. This is a strange land. It is hard even to get men to drink with you when you're a newcomer up here. Some day," he added thoughtfully, "I hope all that will be changed! I intend to stay up here, Mr. Hardy, until I am accepted as one of you!"

The bartender moved closer. "Dude," he said confidentially, "that faro layout might not be so hard to buck tonight! Zabor is feelin' kind of soft. Maybe you can beat him!"

THE Dude looked pleased. "Why, thank you! Thank you! A splendid suggestion. I'll attend to it directly. Well, is everybody served?"

"Everybody," replied the bartender, "but Smoke Hardy!"

Hardy nodded. "That's right, but thanks just the same. One drink is enough for me, and I've had it. Got a long mush ahead of me to-night."

"Very well," the Dude said courteously. "A man should know his own business." He moved away toward the faro layout, but not before he had waved his hand in friendly farewell to Hardy.

"Smoke!" Old Mort Tomlinson spoke in a whisper. "The boys and

me want a word with you!"

"Gather around," Smoke murmured, settling his shoulders into his parka. "I want to pull out as soon as I can. I've told you once what was what. Now what's on your mind?"

"It's this, son," explained Mort. "You may not see it, but you've asked for more trouble than any one man can handle. In plain words, your life this minute ain't worth a rubbed muskrat pelt!" He added meaningly: "Sloan was lookin' for gunplay!"

Smoke opened his eyes and closed them. "I'm feelin' healthy!"

"You won't feel that way long!" retorted the other irascibly. "Three Below is a wolverine den. Never have I seen it until now. It comes to me that all the killin's and robberies this winter must've been the work of some unorganized gang!"

"The law," said Smoke, "can take care of that. I've only two chores, as I said. I'm goin' to get the gold that belongs to you as your share of No-camp's find; and I'm either goin' to get the killers who put lighted splinters between his fingers, or they'll have the chance to do worse to me!"

"That," declared Mort, "is the thing that worries us! You're the only one livin' who knows the location of the Golden Mukluks. Supposin' these killers get you and try to make you talk. If you don't talk—assumin' that No-camp didn't talk, and I don't believe he did—then they'll rub you out and the Golden Mukluks becomes another lost mine!"

"But," pointed out Smoke, "there is somethin' here that hasn't been explained. What did the Dude mean when he said he was goin' to head a new stampede in the spring? Maybe No-camp *did* talk, and the

Dude somehow heard what these killers had learned!"

"The Dude," replied old Mort shortly, is—well, the Dude. A chechahco, first and last. Just soundin' off. Maybe No-camp didn't talk, but these killers are goin' to try to make *you* talk, when they get hold of you. It's only fair to let us know the location of the mine. That means five will know the secret!"

"And pretty soon five hundred will know. No, it was No-camp's idea to keep it dark, and I'm playin' his hand as he laid it down!"

"Then," insisted Mort, "we'll go along and help you bring in the gold!" But Smoke turned in such sudden fury that they stepped back.

Yet he checked himself and threw open the door. The bitter chill of the Alaskan night touched all of them with its icy breath. The panel closed behind him—and suddenly those in the room jumped to the jarring sound of a gunshot!

CHAPTER III

A GATHERING STORM

EVERYBODY tried to get through the door at once. Smoke Hardy stood just outside, six-shooter in hand, looking up and down the street. The acrid smell of burned powder hung in the frosty air.

"You all right?" Mort demanded.

Smoke nodded. "Somebody took a pot shot at me from the corner, there. But when he missed he ducked back and got away among the cabins. "Well," he shrugged, "he's gone!"

Mort started forward. "Come on, let's search—" But Smoke touched his arm.

"No," declared Hardy. "It was a mistake and isn't likely to happen again. They got their signals crossed, but they'll have 'em all

straightened out next time. Right now, knowin' what I do, my life is the safest in Three Below!"

"Damme!" exclaimed Mort suddenly. "I believe you're right, at that. But I'll bet I know—"

He fell silent as Smoke looked at him sharply. "It seems," remarked the younger man coldly, "there's a lot of fussin' that should concern only me! I reckon I could twist Three Below's nose right now—I don't include you four old-timers—and nobody would be insulted." He laughed again and slid his gun out of sight.

He turned to his dogs, mute witnesses of what had happened. He spoke a word to the leader, a grayish-white veteran, and the dog appeared to understand, although what Smoke had used was in the Indian tongue. The leader looked around the circle of men and bared its fangs in a warning snarl.

"Old Pilchuck is smart," declared Hardy. "He smells bushwhackers and says Three Below is full of 'em. Well, that's my sentiments, too! Won't anybody get insulted?"

The men who had crowded out of the Pay Dirt looked at him dourly and then looked at one another, but they kept silent. Some subtle, compelling force had laid restraint on them.

Smoke nodded understandingly. Until the time was ripe he was as safe as he could possibly be.

He threw the sprag off the sled and the dogs stiffened in anticipation. Mort and the other old sourdoughs moved closer to him. "Smoke," said the old man in a low voice, "we string with what you say of Three Below. But you're crazy to go through with this alone! Already they're smackin' their lips over what they're goin' to do to you.

Cut us in on the secret of the mine and we'll whack up the gold. There'll be five of us then and we can hold the place. If you don't, can't you see what's goin' to happen?"

BUT Smoke was already breaking the sled loose of the frosty grip fastened upon the runners. "Maybe," he retorted, "I'd like to have it happen. Maybe that's what I'm askin' for!"

The team was lined out at last. "Mush!" he yelled at the dogs and, sled frame creaking and runners whining, they were gone down the slippery, ice-packed street.

"Crazy!" muttered Mort, but Bill Preece shook his head.

"Comes to me," Preece said reflectively, "that he's got a powerful plan in mind. Got plenty of cold nerve, for one thing, and he seems to know his way around. He was willin' to crowd that play with Sloan, win or lose!"

"Old No-camp Hardy was a two-fisted lad himself in the old days. Reckon he raised this boy right. Somethin' tells me that if I was the killer of No-camp Hardy I'd be makin' tracks twenty feet apart gettin' out of the country!"

The crowd was already scattering, as though at a command.

"See that?" went on Preece. "They know what Smoke intends to do. There *was* somebody listenin' outside the door! They're goin' to foller him—and he'll lead 'em straight to the Golden Mukluks!"

The door of the Pay Dirt opened and shut again. Zabor and Falk stood there, and it was evident that they were in a hurry. They had already donned parkas and mukluks for the trail.

"Goin' to be a stampede," declared Sam Jackson. "Now, what in

hell can we do about it?" he demanded.

Old Mort squinted a weather-wise eye at the sky. The air was still but the cold stars were being slowly, inexorably quenched by a thin haze spreading across the zenith. He shivered and wagged his head.

"A rip-snorter comin'," he predicted. "Time to hole up instead of hittin' the trail. But, twenty years ago, I'd be goin' just the same. There won't be an outfit left in town. Fifty men will be tryin' to dog his trail in the storm. Hell's bells!" he roared suddenly, "somethin' else just come to me!"

"What is it?" demanded Jackson.

"That claim was never recorded! No-camp didn't dare give the location of it. These stampeders are goin' to run Smoke down and jump that ground, sure as shootin'! Even if he gets there first and loads the gold, they'll grab him later and make him talk! Then they'll stake the Golden Mukluks and the country for miles around. Nobody will ever know what happened to Smoke."

"Well," groaned another, "we can't do anything about it! Or," he added in excitement, "can we? Listen, now! If there's still a r'ar in you broken-down mushers—" He drew them together, talking rapidly.

Meanwhile, the street was filling with dog outfits and stampeders. One by one they started off in the direction Smoke Hardy had taken. Just before the last stars were washed from the heavens by the coming storm, a native dog musher and team drew up before the Pay Dirt. Hurriedly the two gamblers piled aboard the sled. Then they, too, were gone. The old men, too, had vanished.

SMOKE HARDY traveled swiftly despite the fact that his team had already gone a long way. Maybe they realized they were going home and were eager to get back to familiar surroundings. As he kept going he looked behind him often, but the night had darkened and he could not see if he was being followed. Yet something told him his plan so far had not failed.

Miles had flowed under the runners of his sled. He looked at the sky and muttered. There was the ominous threat of a blizzard in the air but, with the contrariness of northern weather sometimes, it held off just when he wanted it to strike.

"Dogs are gettin' tuckered," he told himself. "If that blow doesn't come soon, we'll be overhauled." And that wasn't the way he wanted things at all.

Slower and slower went his team. He felt sympathy for the tired dogs, but there was nothing else to do save keep on. Now they were traveling solely by instinct, for they knew the way. The snow was firm, the trail easy, but even the light load he carried on the sled was a tremendous drag for the team. Moreover, he was dead tired himself—but determination kept him buoyed up.

At last the still air awoke to life. There was a warmish puff of breeze in his face, and he knew that the temperature was rising. Full well, too, the dogs understood that a storm was at hand, and maybe they were puzzled that he should keep hazing them on instead of sensibly finding cover where they could hole up until the blow was over.

Once old Pilchuck stopped outright, looked back questioningly at Smoke, and whined. "H'ya, Pilchuck!" called Smoke. "Mush!" Obediently the leader took up his task again. But as they topped a

rise half a mile farther and the wind changed until it blew from behind—it might veer all around the compass before it settled down—Pilchuck stopped again, and this time he looked rebellious. He lifted his sharp nose until it pointed at the drear heavens and voiced a cry which came from the wolfish side of his nature.

"Mush!" Smoke ordered again. Yet he was puzzled by the dog's actions. Even the other members of the team seemed uneasy. And suddenly Smoke understood!

He was being followed! The stampede from Three Below had started just as he had hoped, and at least one team, probably a string of strong, fresh dogs, had been overtaking him.

"Whoa!" he commanded the dogs, and they halted instantly. A whimsical thought leaped to his mind, a fragmentary snatch of conversation came back to him.

"Curiosity," Sloan had said back there in the Pay Dirt, "is a risky habit!"

Smoke nodded as though agreeing with this. Curiosity might be as disastrous as Sloan had proclaimed it, yet Smoke knew that he wanted to learn the identity of that stampeder who was pressing him so closely.

The trail had led to Three Below after the killing of No-camp. Sloan even carried a poke of the stolen pumpkin-seed nuggets. The gold camp was crawling with men who knew the story of what had happened, and temptation was great to get at the truth then and there.

But such a move wouldn't tie in with his plan, the grim plan of revenge he had worked out. Besides, there was another chore equally important—the delivery of gold to the old sourdoughs so that No-camp

Hardy might rest more easily in his nichelike grave in the chill crevasse.

"Mush, Pilchuck!" commanded Smoke suddenly, and as the string obeyed mechanically, he added another order: "Haw, there! Haw!" The team swung toward a stand of spruce which loomed darkly beside the hardly distinguishable trail they had been following.

Within the quiet gloom of the spirelike trees Smoke stopped the team again. Here was seclusion and an ambush, if necessary. The animals dropped to the snow, panting and grateful. They expected he would start making camp, but instead he crouched there with them, waiting and listening.

The breeze came now in erratic puffs. Smoke stiffened in anticipation as, faintly, he heard the sharply encouraging cries of a dog musher. "Sounds like a Siwash," he reasoned. Well, that discovery meant nothing as yet; there were a number of native dog outfits in Three Below, and nothing would be more natural than that every one of them would be pressed into service for this stampede. Suddenly he felt a prickly, eerie feeling run along his spine as, from the darkness near at hand, old Pilchuck howled again, this time with an eager insistence which even an untrained ear could recognize.

Smoke swung around on the dog in surprise. Again Pilchuck gave a yearning wail. *And this time he was answered!*

From somewhere in the darkness far back on the trail they had come along there was a wolfish ululation which twanged upon Smoke's recollection. Between Pilchuck and the unknown dog there was understanding! Pilchuck, characteristic of his wolfish nature, had ever remained steadfast to one mate, a sleek little

husky named Atlik. Pilehuck had a morose nature little given to friendliness, but between him and Atlik there existed a bond of real affection. So they spoke to each other through the night.

And Atlik, Smoke remembered with a catch in his breath, had been the leader of No-camp's dog team, which had vanished with eighty thousand dollars in nuggets from the Golden Mukluks!

There was a fresh puff of wind, a spattering of wet snow on Smoke's face. Then a ghoulish howl of wind swept through the trees. The blizzard had struck at last!

CHAPTER IV

HIDE AND SEEK

THE storm was the thing for which Smoke had been waiting. It would successfully cover his trail, and the stampedees from Three Below would be helpless. Yet the discovery that little Atlik was back there among the men following him had created a new situation fraught with possibilities he could not have foreseen.

"She knows the way back home," he reasoned. "Even if she didn't, she could follow our trail after snow has fallen. She'd pick Pilehuck's scent out from that of a thousand dogs!"

It was an unexpected development that presented a problem not easily and immediately solved. But at least he might learn the identity of the men driving the missing team, and that would be worth something to him.

What would they do when the storm struck? He asked himself that question as he tried to put himself in their place. "They'll hole up," he argued. "No sense of 'em tryin' to go on so long as this blow lasts." That

deduction was reasonable and sound. What, then, was he to do?

It was easier to answer that one. The first move was to see that his dogs stayed where they were. To make certain he tipped the sled on its side. True, they might chew the harness and get away, but in the past they had always been well behaved. Yet Pilehuck might not be trusted, now that he could scent Atlik. On second thought Smoke unharnessed the leader, slipped a length of babiege over the furry neck. Pilehuck would not only be useful, but he would also be where Smoke could watch him.

Then, with the husky leading, Smoke pushed his way through the gathering storm in the direction whence he had heard the call of Pilehuck's mate.

Gusts of wind swirled the snow thickly about Smoke, but he had a sense of direction that was infallible, and, besides, there was the eager Pilehuck to guide him; the leader understood full well where the man was going. They kept on for several minutes, and at last Smoke descried a dot of red in the blackness ahead. True to his prediction, they had holed up.

Caution was necessary now. Smoke would have preferred to leave Pilehuck behind, but that was impossible. The dog would have promptly chewed the babiege in two. At the same time there was the danger that Pilehuck would betray his presence, and Smoke did not want that. But he held on, knowing that the sound of the wind would drown out any noises he made; and at last he came to a point where he could overlook the camp, hidden among the trees. Immediately he saw that his problem was not so easy of solution as he had hoped.

For the stampedees, after building

up a roaring fire, had crawled into their sleeping bags. Their sled dogs, true to instinct, had burrowed into the drifts, seeking the warmth which lay under the snow. Atlik was hidden with the rest. Smoke, holding Pilchuck by the scruff of the neck, huddled in the depths of a saskatoon thicket, and watched.

Snow fell more thickly, and there were times when the fire was blotted out by the slanting curtain of flakes. The character of the storm likewise was changing. The snow had a more brittle quality, and the icy particles cut at Smoke's exposed cheeks like tiny knives. His weather sense told him that this blow might last for days.

If it did, he was lucky. Before it ended he would be so far ahead that it would be a long time before they overtook him. Yet he likewise felt that he could not leave just yet until he had learned what he wanted to know.

A figure swathed in furs got up and put more wood on the fire. Smoke could not make out whether it was a white man or a native, but he surmised it was the latter. As the fire crackled the figure returned to its sleeping bag, but the sudden activity had an awakening effect on the buried sled dogs.

Furry heads popped out here and there in the drifts. For the most part they were merely satisfying curiosity, and after one look they likewise went back to their dreams. Yet one of them shook off the snow, lifted a sharp nose toward the sky, and howled wolfishly.

Atlik, Smoke guessed! The female husky looked forlorn and beaten in the cruel wind, yet she was voicing a summons to the mate whom she knew was nearby. And the effect on Pilchuck was electric!

WITH a grunting sound he charged the length of the baggage leash and almost got away. Smoke jerked him end over end in the snow and spoke a sharp word of caution. Pilchuck cowered at the threat in Smoke's voice, but whined uneasily, crazy to bridge distance and reach the side of the mate whom he had not seen in weeks.

One by one, figures stirred about the campfire. The stampeders had heard that wolf cry of Atlik's; maybe, too, they had heard Pilchuck's response. The average white man would not understand the meaning of it, but it would be clear to a native. And there was at least one Indian in the party. Smoke had heard him.

There came a sudden gust of icy snow so thick that it wiped out Smoke's view of the camp. When the flurry had disappeared it seemed to him that the men who had been aroused had gone back to their slumbers. Either that or they had discovered his nearness and were stalking him. And the actions of Atlik who, although tethered, had been lunging at her leash, were a give-away as to Smoke's location!

But Smoke's mind had suddenly come to grips with a grim alternative. Atlik was the stumbling block to his plans. Either the stampeders knew she would lead them home to the mine, or the native driver would quickly deduce as much. So long as she lived and remained with them the whole scheme was imperiled.

"Damn," he told himself regretfully, "I'm afraid I've got to do it!" He drew his six-gun. The little husky was less than forty yards distant, not a hard shot despite the uncertain light. Had Smoke had time to think, he would never have believed that any circumstance would have forced him to do such a grievous thing.

But human lives depended on the outcome. His own, perhaps, and the lives of such men as the four old-timers who had grubstaked No-camp. The killers had proved too cunning; they would play this card, of one dog's loyalty to another, against him to the bitter end.

Even old Pilchuck seemed to understand what Smoke was about to do, for he moved away from the man as though in fear and loathing. He was a wise old dog and he understood guns. In his way, he must have figured that Smoke intended to kill Atlik, the only living thing in sight at that moment.

"Sorry, old-timer," Smoke muttered regretfully. "And it's got to be one shot or nothin'! If I miss, these woods are likely to be too hot to live in—"

He broke off as Pilchuck did a frantic, crazy thing. In a single lunge the dog sprang the length of the babiege leash and was gone straight toward the leaping Atlik.

Smoke felt his throat tighten as he saw it, and he lowered his gun. He felt a sudden loathing of the thing he had been about to do, and wondered if he could have done it; for the determined Pilchuck had solved the problem in his own way!

The dog's tearing rush through the storm carried him to the captive Atlik. Simultaneously, the camp came to life with yells. The men might have figured that some famine-crazed wolf had attacked the tethered dog. Flashes of gunshots stabbed the murk. Other sled dogs leaped out of the snow with snarls of surprise.

Guns crashed out again, but in the blizzard it was impossible to take clear aim at the ghostly gray intruder without running the risk of hitting Atlik. Then, abruptly, there was nothing more to shoot at, for

both Pilchuck and Atlik were gone, racing away into the night!

It might have been Pilchuck's sharp teeth which slashed the thong which held her, or perhaps her terrified plungings had broken it. In any event she was clear, while the other dogs, wildly excited by the commotion, likewise attempted to get free. And Smoke himself, amazed at the unexpectedness of the outcome, was pulling back and making his way to his own outfit. But not before he had identified at least one of the men in the camp. He had made out very clearly the startled face of the Dude!

THE discovery was at first astounding, yet logic quickly supplied a reason. "He's a chechahco," Smoke argued. "He grabbed the first team he could find; he wouldn't know that those huskies belonged to No-camp!" But at the same time he could not shake off recollection of what the greenhorn had said back in Three Below—that he would lead the next stampede. But that could have meant one of a dozen things. Maybe somebody had told him this team would lead him straight to a strike, which wouldn't have been far from the truth. But if the devils who killed No-camp figured it out that far, surely they'd have kept the dogs themselves.

Quickly Smoke made his way back to camp. Pilchuck and Atlik were already there. The little female husky whined delightedly at sight of him, fawned on him. Smoke's trail-hardened fingers explored the soft fur behind her ears with a knowing touch. He felt a lump in his throat at the remembrance that he had been nearly compelled to kill her.

He felt himself almost dead on his feet, yet there was no way of telling how long the storm would last, and he must take advantage of it.

Smoke didn't know who it was stalking him but he piled into the man regardless.



Though the dogs had rested a little, it seemed to them to be their right and privilege to stay here in this sheltered spot until the blizzard blew itself out. Yet Smoke roused them out, righted the sled and, after harnessing Pilchuck in place once more, grimly forced them on.

Atlik trotted at Smoke's heels because there was no place for her in the team. Pilchuck would have resented being displaced, as would

any of the other dogs. Anyway, Atlik was content enough to trail along, knowing that she was going home.

"Anyway," he reasoned, "the Dude will have a hard time gettin' his team to work with Atlik gone. If he's got the rest of No-camp's team, there isn't a leader among them. They're good enough dogs,

but they'll be lucky to make their own way!" And that thought queerly enough raised a new doubt in his mind.

Why hadn't he figured it out before? The dogs might not work well with Atlik gone, but their homing instinct at least would take them back to the mine. The Dude might not be smart enough to see that—no chechahco would—but the native dog musher would understand, particularly if he knew that these dogs actually belonged to old No-camp. Smoke's only chance was to reach the mine and begin the return trip before the stampede struck his trail.

Endurance was the all-important thing now. So long as the blizzard held he must keep moving. Once it began to break he could find a place to rest while the pursuers worked out the puzzle of where he had gone. But the blizzard was now becoming so fierce that it was almost impossible to travel.

WITH daylight not far off, Smoke made another stop to rest the dogs, for the faithful team had been working harder than ever in the new fall of snow. While they milled around to get settled and the grayness of weak dawn broke over the land, there happened a thing which did not seem significant at the time but which, later, Smoke knew was a kindly nod from fortune.

Beneath the screening spruce the dogs sought shelter. There was sudden, whining protest from old Pilchuck, and he dropped in the snow, biting anxiously at his paws. Another dog did the same thing. In an instant Smoke was among them, suspecting the truth.

By main strength he dragged them a short distance away from the spot, then began inspecting their paws. In

the soft pads were embedded curious black-and-white splinters. Smoke swore and fell to work. Porcupine quills!

Not many hours before tragedy had stalked in this thicket. Some prowling wolverine had discovered a porcupine making a journey from one tree to another and had promptly killed the bristly little creature. But the wolverine, tough though he was, could scarcely eat the quill-studded skin of its victim, and the tiny spears had been scattered about in the snow, a cruel ambush for the feet of unwary dogs.

Luckily, Smoke was there to extract the needlelike spines before they broke off in the flesh and caused real damage later. When he was ready to go on he cut a wide circle around the place.

But he knew now that he could not go much farther. The storm seemed to be thinning out, and besides that fact he realized that he had drawn heavily upon his last reserve of strength. So long as clear weather endured he'd have to lie low, waiting for the next blizzard.

A mile beyond the place Smoke came to a dense swamp. There was still enough snow falling to hide his trail. This, he decided, was the place. He broke trail for the team into the deepest part of the frozen morass, unhitched and tethered the dogs and then fed them some frozen fish, snatched a few mouthfuls of cold food himself, and crawled into his sleeping bag.

He slept profoundly, a slumber akin to death. When he awakened, gloom was deepening in the thickets and he knew the end of the short sub-arctic day was at hand. But it was the uneasy whining of the dogs which had awakened him.

Then, faintly, he heard men's voices.

CHAPTER V

COMPLICATIONS

THERE was a lull in the storm and the air was quiet. But Smoke's weather sense told him that the blizzard was not yet finished, for the sharp cold which invariably follows such a blow in early winter had not come. It was a good sign, for he need not remain holed up here long before resuming the trail to the mine.

He sat up in his sleeping bag and listened. He could not hear the voices now, but he knew that the sound had come from the ridge over which he had crossed in reaching this swamp, and he knew that, under such atmospheric conditions as the present, sounds carry far.

Nearer to him was a sudden, grunting snort. "Moose!" he interpreted. "Some old bull and his herd must have caught the scent of those stampedeers and are movin' out of their yard to get away from 'em." He made out a number of grizzled forms which came to a stop in the brush some fifty yards away. There were whistling sounds as the moose detected the presence of himself and the dogs. And then Smoke heard the voices of the men again.

"Trail? Hell, there ain't none! These dogs are crazy! There's a bunch of moose goin' down through that swamp!"

Smoke saw movement on the ridge and made out the figures of two white men and an Indian. A sled outfit was halted there.

The voices were strange to him. He was convinced he had never heard them before. And that, curiously enough, raised a question in his mind. Quickly, he ran through his recollection.

Sloan, the Dude, the bartender, even the four old-timers—his keen ear would have been able to identify

them. It came to him now that of all the men whom he had seen and heard in the Pay Dirt at Three Below, only two had not spoken so that he could hear them—the stud dealer, Falk, and the man at the faro layout. Zabor was his name. Both gamblers. They, too, had joined the stampede. But that was no more than natural. It might have been one of them who had listened at the door in the Pay Dirt.

The storm was picking up once more. A curtain of wind-driven flakes passed between Smoke and the men on the ridge, and when the air cleared again the men were gone. Smoke grunted satisfaction at realizing that they had turned away. Probably they were using their dogs to trail his own team, but it wouldn't work.

The real danger lay in the outfit which the Dude possessed. Those dogs would hunt down Atlik, and they likewise knew the scent of Pilchuck and the others. They'd keep coming on so long as the scent lingered in the snow. Yet somehow the Dude's outfit was delayed. Smoke didn't understand why.

Snow was blowing in the thickets again. Darkness was near and the blizzard was resuming where it had left off. Even the herd of moose, after that careful survey, had quietly vanished.

His dogs were rested, and he likewise felt refreshed. He turned back to the team and began harnessing them. "Time to be movin'," he told them, as though they could understand him. "If we're lucky we'll be home before the weather clears again!" They whined with eagerness at the assurance in his voice.

In the gathering gloom, while the storm gods bestirred themselves and scourged the earth with stronger blasts, Smoke broke trail for his dogs

in leading them out of the swamp.

And, twenty-four hours later, with the blizzard ended at last, he topped a rise which looked upon the twisted meanderings of a gulch and a frozen creek. In the darkness of that second day it was difficult to make out objects down there, but all was familiar.

Snow had covered everything. He made out the irregular bulk of a cabin, drifted to the eaves. It looked like nothing so much as the deserted camp of some trapper. But Smoke Hardy chuckled when he reflected that this was ground which Three Below would have paid a high price to discover. The dogs looked downward, sniffed the wind, and whined eagerly.

He sent them hazing down the slope, coming to a stop before the door of the cabin, which the wind had kept free of snow. His wariness was gone now; he had beaten the stampede. But he was in the act of unharnessing the team when something caused him to straighten suddenly while his right hand sought the six-gun under his parka.

The smell of wood smoke assailed his nostrils! His quick eye saw that which he should have noted before—a thin spiral drifting lazily from the cabin chimney!

He stood there uncertainly a moment, debating the matter. Then, gun in hand, he moved toward the door, kicked it open.

IT was probably a foolhardy thing to do, yet Smoke was in no mood for caution. Everything seemed suddenly to have gone awry.

"Who's here?" he demanded from the darkness just inside the door. "Talk fast, but don't move!" His eyes reached around the room, trying to pick out the intruder.

But there was no reply and noth-

ing stirred. As his eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom he saw that the place was empty. Yet somebody had been here recently, for there were smoldering coals in the crude rock fireplace. The fire looked as though it had been burning for some time, an hour or more.

He took a candle from the shelf and lighted it. Carefully he went over the cabin, but everything seemed in order, just as he had left it days before. There was no sign that anybody had even eaten there, and had it not been for the fire he would never have suspected that the place had been visited.

Puzzling mystery! He went outside again and scanned the snow. The storm had ended less than twenty minutes ago but the wind still held strongly and the powdery stuff was still drifting. But as he explored in a widening circle he discovered tracks—the trail of another dog team!

"Must have reached here durin' the blizzard," he reasoned. "Didn't stay only long enough to build a fire, get warm maybe, then light out again." But who it was he hadn't the slightest inkling.

Yet the trail seemed to lead southward, and in that direction lay Three Below. Night was at hand now, but he could not be satisfied until he had learned as much as possible. Leaving his dogs where they were, he began following the tracks of the strange outfit.

Southward still, and now the trail led along the creek bottom. He saw where the sled had paused; there were wind-blown tracks all about. Then he caught sight of a pyramid of small boulders which had evidently been pried out of a bare ledge and piled in a heap. What looked like a piece of paper stuck out from beneath the topmost stone.

Lifting the rock, he extracted the paper, unfolded it and saw writing in pencil. In the fading light he could just make out words here and there, but he saw enough to be thoroughly stunned.

It was a claim notice! This was the monument of one corner, it said, and the limits and directions were defined—east along the bench, north across the creek, and so on. At the bottom were signed two names—J. Falk and P. Zabor.

Smoke took a long breath. "Why, those damned tinhorns have jumped the claim!" Even now they were probably making their way at top speed for Three Below and the recorder's office.

Rage shook him for an instant; then came reaction. He chuckled. True, the claim which they had defined did not cover the placer workings of the Golden Mukluks exactly, but it took in most of the ground. Weeks had passed since the last of the pumpkin-seed nuggets had been taken out before the freeze-up, but even the drifted snow had failed to hide the evidence of activity where Smoke and old No-camp had labored. This much Falk and Zabor had seen.

Somehow the two gamblers had found the cabin and had reasoned the thing out for themselves. The Indian dog musher who had been handling their outfit when he caught sight of them from the depths of the swamp must have known, through that inexplicable means of communication which exists among natives in the wilderness, that old No-camp Hardy had worked this creek during the summer. If he had passed that word to Falk and Zabor, it would be enough for them.

So they had "jumped" the claim. Were they likewise the killers of No-camp? They were in flight now, but

he could overtake them. What was the hook-up, if any, between them and Sloan? How had the latter obtained the poke of gold which came from this very ground? Sloan might have won it from either of them at stud or faro! Grimly, Smoke put the notice back under the rock as more possibilities crowded his mind. They had to wait, however, as he turned swiftly back to the cabin with determination fairly settled. There was at least *one* secret which they hadn't discovered.

THE interior of the cabin was pitifully bare of comfort; typical of old No-camp, to whom even this rude habitation was a concession to civilization's luxuries. Now Smoke fell upon the place in a seeming berserk determination to wreck it.

The rude table and stools were piled in a corner, and on top of them went everything else inflammable. Lastly, he seized one of the logs which formed the side walls and wrenched it loose.

Another followed, and then was revealed a cunningly contrived chamber within the wood, for only half logs came loose and the wall on one side was of double thickness.

Stacked in this niche was row upon row of moosehide pokes, each so heavy that it fell with a thud upon the bare earth floor when Smoke tossed them out. A line of pokes stretched out on the dirt. Then he began carrying them outside and loading them on the sled while the dogs waited patiently in the deepening gloom.

No need to count the pokes; old No-camp had made the division accurately. Half for his grubstakers, half for himself. The latter was to be a bulwark against old age when he could no longer prospect, a starter for his son. When Smoke finished his

work at least he knew that this load weighed to the ounce the load of pumpkin-seed nuggets old No-camp had set out with for Three Below. And that was the end of that, for Zabor and Falk had jumped the claim. The legal right to it was theirs henceforth because they would probably be driving hard to reach Three Below and record it.

Only one more task remained now. Smoke went back to the cabin, raked the embers out of the fireplace, scuffed them under the pile of things in the corner, then piled dry wood on the mass. It roared up crackling, hungry, filling the place with smoke. His eyes smarting, he backed out.

With no further look at the cabin whose interior was becoming an inferno, he yelled "Mush!" at the dogs so savagely that they surged in their harness, startled at his tone. But they picked up the load and walked off with it.

Down the creek, down the trail which the gamblers' outfit had taken, southward toward Three Below. He turned aside at last and began climbing a rise. At the top finally he paused to let the dogs rest.

He looked back and saw the night-filled valley lighted redly by the flaming cabin. That glow on the still-overcast sky would be seen from afar. Stampeders would be bound to spot it and head that way. At the moment he was directly between the stampeders and the blaze; if he kept on he would meet them. But he was not yet ready to turn aside.

At his heels, as usual, trotted little Atlik. She and the other dogs stared at that fire in the valley and seemed to understand what it meant. Atlik lifted her nose and gave a mournful wail.

And, like an echo of her wolfish call, came reply from a ridge just ahead.

CHAPTER VI

PURSUIT

THE other dogs listened, hackles raised in excitement. Smoke had to call to them sharply to get them going. He swung them off to the left, in a direction that would take him sweeping around the stampeders. It occurred to him that this must be the outfit with the Dude and Gervais, for the reply to Atlik's call probably had been given by one of her own team.

He made a guess, too, as to why the Dude had been delayed. That covert where the porcupine had been killed! Undoubtedly the chechahco's string of dogs, holding to the trail of Smoke's team by picking up the familiar scent, had fallen into the trap which had nearly caught Pilchuck and the others. There was no other reason for the Dude's taking so long to get this far. Smoke kept his dogs traveling at a rapid clip, hoping to get well around the Dude's outfit before discovery came.

Yet, what was there to fear? The Dude undoubtedly wanted nothing more than the claim; he was a stamper pure and simple. Nevertheless, Smoke determined that he was not going to let any chance meeting interfere with getting the gold through.

They moved on for a mile, two miles, and Smoke was convinced that he had given the other outfit the slip. As the night grew blacker, he let the dogs take it easier, for they were none too rested and now they were pulling a heavy load. He was traveling now solely by his own instinct and that of the dogs.

He knew, too, that he was leaving a plain trail which would be easy to follow when daylight came. But when dawn arrived he would be well

on the way to Three Below, if nothing happened.

An hour passed, and then Smoke discovered that Atlik, still trotting at his heels, had grown uneasy. She paused frequently to look back, and once he saw her lift her nose as though to wail, but he spoke sharply to her and she cowered in silence.

"They're comin'!" he guessed. "They've picked up the trail after all, and they're not waitin' for daylight!" It would be comparatively simple for the pursuing team to hold to the fresh trail his own outfit had made. He couldn't get away from them, he decided; not with all this load.

"But why should the Dude be chasin' me?" Smoke wondered. "He couldn't know that I've got the gold. Anyway, what if he did? He's only interested in the ground. How does he know that this is my outfit? It might be any one of the others; he's never had a peek at it since we left Three Below."

Yet there was the fact that unquestionably the Dude's dogs were mightily interested in his own team; a fact which would be understood by the shrewd native handling the chechaho's outfit. *Somehow they knew that Smoke had the gold!* There were more in the party than the dog musher and the chechaho; some of the killers might be along as well. The realization sent a tingly thrill of anticipation through Smoke. But he held to his course.

THE sky was clearing rapidly; here and there the stars came out, and he knew that tonight there would be a moon. That had its advantages and also its disadvantages. The whining of Atlik grew more insistent, and Smoke knew that the pursuers, whoever they were, were coming on rapidly. He saw a stand

of spruce ahead and he swung the team into it, halting them and setting the sprag so that they would not be stampeded. It was time, he decided, to have a look-see at the outfit following him.

He had always carried a rifle on the sled, on the chance of picking up game from time to time along the trail. But now he dragged out the rifle, a short-barreled carbine, and made sure that it was loaded. It might come in handy!

To his ears came faintly the creaking of a sled moving swiftly, and the encouraging shouts of a native musher urging on his dogs. Then, as the haze drew away from the night sky and the immaculate whiteness of the snow threw objects into silhouette, Smoke saw a moving string coming toward him.

There was one man ahead, breaking trail. Another clung to the geepole, guiding the sled over or around bumps in the snow. A third came behind. A hundred yards from the stand of spruce they stopped, partly screened by a thicket.

"Hold up!" came the order from the man in front. Smoke did not identify the voice. Could it be Zabor or Falk? But there was a peculiar accent to it. It sounded as though it might be the guttural English of a native! Suddenly Smoke thought of Gervais. He recalled now that he had never heard the half-breed's voice.

The men parleyed among themselves in low tones and Smoke could not make out what they were saying. Minutes passed and he could no longer see them, for they had drawn more and more behind the thicket, but he could still hear the mumble of their talk. Then abruptly old Pilchuck snarled warning.

Smoke turned to the dog in surprise. He saw that Pilchuck's

pointed ears were tipped toward a point behind which Smoke himself lay! The other dogs were looking in that direction, too, tense and watchful.

Smoke heard the faint crunch of snow. Somebody was coming up from behind to make certain that he was still in the spruce, that he had not merely passed through the place. It came to Smoke that from the depths of the thicket the watcher could look out upon the lightening snow of the clearing beyond and possibly make out whoever was hiding there.

"I can play that game myself," he reflected. He motioned the dogs to stay where they were and to keep quiet, then slid off into the gloom.

Step by step, the man came closer. Smoke could hear his breathing now; he could make him out, gun ready, possibly looking for a shot. Just as the stranger lowered his head to duck under a drooping, snow-laden branch, Smoke called out a sharp: "Hi!"

Involuntarily, the other straightened up with a jerk, with results Smoke had counted upon. His head struck the branch, there was a shower of snow which blinded him, and in that instant Smoke had closed the gap between them.

His rush carried the man off his feet. Disdaining to use his gun, Smoke struck twice with his fist, and felt his foe sag and grow limp.

Picking up the man's gun, Smoke caught him by the fold of his parka hood and dragged him into the open. Gervais! Just as Smoke had expected.

Well, that partly cleared the situation. The Dude was waiting out there in the thicket, and there was one man with him who must be accounted for. But with Gervais in his hands, Smoke believed that he

had suddenly discovered a potential ace among his ordinary cards.

A breed could be made to talk, he reasoned. Usually a half-Siwash had a yellow streak. All he had to do was to uncover that and he might learn the identity of the man or men who had tortured and killed his father.

GERVAIS, dazed by the unexpected knock-out punches, was stirring as though awakening when Smoke dragged him to the sled. There was no sympathy in Smoke Hardy now; this man deserved none. But this was neither the time nor place for the thing which Smoke Hardy had in mind.

With a length of babiege he skilfully bound the breed's hands behind his back, and the remainder of the tough cord of dried caribou hide was secured to old Pilchuck's harness collar.

The dog looked astounded and snarled hatred of Gervais, now struggling to his feet. Like most northern dogs raised by white men, Pilchuck did not like Indians. When Gervais stood up at last, Pilchuck looked as though he was ready to leap upon the man and bear him down. But Smoke's voice was sharply commanding.

"Easy, Pilchuck! It's all right. Leave him alone!"

Gervais stared at Smoke with basilisk eyes that were clearing of fog. He twisted his arms, trying to get free, but the knot was tight.

"One more thing, Gervais," Smoke told him in a low voice that did not carry beyond the spruce depths, "you let one yelp out of you and I'll let that dog go! When he finishes with you I won't need to use this gun. Now, turn around and mush! We're gettin' out of here, and you're goin' along to break trail. And mind

you don't make a sound!"

The breed looked rebellious, but he was also cunning enough to understand that if he struggled to get free from the babiege thongs, the lead dog might become excited enough to attack. He could yell for help, but that would only precipitate matters. Smoke Hardy had a manner with him that said he meant business. Sullenly the breed turned and led off until the line was stretched as far as possible between him and Pilchuck.

The outfit started once more through the spruce. Now the depths of it lay between Smoke and the hidden outfit to which Gervais belonged. And while the grim procession, with the breed leading, the ghostly huskies strung out behind, and Smoke Hardy trailing the sled, crossed a little clearing and vanished into a thicket which lay at the mouth of a steep-walled canyon, the silence was broken by a man's call.

"Gervais!" came the cry. "You all right? Answer me!"

The breed hesitated and half turned. The menace of Smoke's gun and a warning snarl from Pilchuck discouraged him. He plodded on. But Smoke, at least, had learned something.

Unquestionably, the man who had called was Sloan! There could be no mistake about it. What, then, was the connection here? The Dude was back there with the other outfit also. But again there came to Smoke the explanation that had satisfied him at first.

The Dude was no more than a greenhorn dupe. Sloan and Gervais were undoubtedly mixed up in the robbery and murder of No-camp, but the Dude, probably, didn't know it.

"Sloan knows who killed No-camp, same as this breed does," rea-

soned Smoke. "Wish I had him on that babiege line, too!"

Now they were following the bed of the canyon, passing in and out of sparse clumps of snow-laden trees, and the world grew lighter as the moon lifted above the chill peaks. Far ahead was the summit—and beyond that was the Kelak Trail! On that trail old No-camp Hardy had died. Well, thought Smoke, things seemed to be working out. If only—

HE broke off his thoughts as the canyon echoed and re-echoed to the sudden chatter of gunshots. Bullets zoomed around him like angered hornets, and he yelled a command to the dogs. "Haw, there! Haw!" Gervais understood, too, and probably he was likewise terrified by the gunfire, for he obeyed even as did old Pilchuck and the others. With the breed pulling the babiege line out to full length, the outfit raced for a sheltering overcrop of rock.

The firing was still going on when they reached it. The shots came from a shelf a hundred and fifty yards up the slope. Only the fairly long range and the uncertain light had spared them, for they must be clearly visible in the white glare of the moon which lay upon the snow.

"Gervais," Smoke declared suddenly, "we stay here for a spell. Looks like your friends would just as soon kill you as they would me. And I need you! Comes to me that I can't be watchin' you every second while we wait. You might have a gun or a knife tucked about you. So I'm takin' no chances on you slippin' that leash while my back is turned!"

Rapidly he searched the breed, but Gervais was unarmed save for that rifle which he had carried and which was now buried back there in the

Smoke stopped the men before him but suddenly old Pilchuck snarled warning of a rear attack!



snow of the spruce thicket where Smoke had tossed it after capturing the man.

There was a half-empty poke of nuggets in the breed's upper shirt pocket. Curiosity aroused, Smoke opened the poke, spilled some of the nuggets in his hand. As he expected, they were pumpkin-seeds, part of the loot taken from old No-camp Hardy. Well, that merely clinched what Smoke had already believed. But as he was in the act of pouring the nuggets back into the poke, his eyes fell upon one larger than the others.

His breath sucked inward sharply as he fingered it, turned it over. Even in the moonlight he could make out that curious design etched on one side, the outlines of a pair of mukluks!

Only two of those nuggets existed. The other was in his own pocket. This one had been carried by No-camp!

As though it was yesterday, Smoke heard his father saying: "These, Smoke, are the biggest pumpkin-seed nuggets I've ever seen! We'll mark 'em, and you take one and I'll take the other. Not to be spent or squandered, Smoke, but kept until we die!"

"This one," Smoke demanded hoarsely, lifting the nugget so the breed could see, "tell me how you got it. You're goin' to talk later, understand, but maybe I'll be easier on you if you tell me this much now!"

The breed eyed him with the malvolence of a trapped lynx. Suddenly his white teeth showed in a savage grin.

"Sure! I tell you zat! Me, I know nossing about where dees gold come from. But zat beeg nugget—"

He hesitated, as though consider-

ing or maybe framing a reply to suit his own ends.

"Talk!" commanded Smoke. "Or I'll feed you to the dogs before those other devils can get down here! Who gave it to you?"

The breed licked his lips. "I work for ze Dude. He gave it to me!"

CHAPTER VII

THE ENEMY GATHERS

SMOKE blinked at the unexpected answer. Then the absurdity of it struck him. "Why, you damned liar!" he raged. "You're tryin' to get out of it! You probably stole it from No-camp himself—after he was dead!" He was angry enough to strike the breed, but got hold of himself before he did it. It didn't matter much, anyhow.

"I think you're lyin, but I'll put the Dude on my list as number three!" Smoke declared. "And there's two others—Falk and Zabor. Numbers four and five. They're part of your gang?"

"Sure!" Gervais agreed with alacrity. "Falk and Zabor, sure!"

The way he said it left doubt in Smoke's mind. The breed was a born liar; there was no way of knowing when he was telling the truth. "Until," thought Smoke grimly, "he feels the *'cole chuck wawa.'* He's Injun enough to appreciate *that!*"

Smoke turned his attention to the gunners on the shelf above. Finding their quarry under cover, they would come down presently. The lee of this rock outcrop would presently become too hot for anybody to remain.

"We're pullin' out, Gervais," Smoke announced suddenly. "We're hittin' for the summit, then the Kelak Trail. That's where I want this thing settled, on the same trail where they got No-camp. Win or lose! All right, Gervais! Mush! And



don't let Pilchuck get within reach. All that's holdin' him back is my say-so!"

They moved away from the outcropping, and any moment Smoke expected to hear again the clatter of rifles. But no shots came. As for himself, he hadn't unlimbered his gun.

"They're probably comin' down to find out what happened," he reasoned. "Maybe they think we're down!"

Hugging the side of the canyon as best he could, Gervais moved away, the dog team behind him. The moon climbed, spilling its pale, unearthly light into the gorge, and Smoke Hardy's strange outfit—a captive killer leading the way for dogs who hauled a fortune in flat nuggets—slowly went on. There was a notch against the night sky like the buckhorn sights of a carbine, and beyond that lay Kelak Trail and the way to Three Below. Daylight was all Smoke Hardy feared now, daylight and an enforced stand before he was ready to make it.

Once more there was the rattle of gunshots. Suddenly Pilchuck gave a doggish yelp that could not have come from the wolfish side of his nature, and sprawled in the snow.

Smoke hurried forward, warning Gervais to keep clear. Fortunately, the old leader was not dead. He sat now on haunches, lifting a paw. Smoke took a quick look and saw where a bullet had ripped through the flesh. Not a serious wound, but Pilchuck was finished as a leader for the time being.

"You, Atlik!" Smoke called, and the little female came to him. She seemed to understand what he had in mind, for she whined eagerly as he began unharnessing Pilchuck. The old leader looked forlorn but he, too, appeared to recognize the need.

Only one dog would have been permitted to take his place, and that was Atlik. Pilchuck, limping about, seemed to accept the inevitable.

THERE was a dark ridge against the sky two hundred yards away. Smoke lifted his carbine from the load and took deliberate aim. His shoulder jerked to the recoil, and there was a yell from above.

"Hope I didn't hit any of the dogs," he muttered, lowering the gun. "Well, maybe that'll hold 'em for a spell." There were no more shots, and instantly the dark ridge above was gone.

"Figured me for only a six-gun," he reasoned. "Now maybe they won't crowd the play next time." All the while he struggled with two impulses—to have it out here, or to wait. But he *had* to make the Kelak Trail! Once more he gave the order: "Mush!"

The crisis seemed to lie just ahead, at the moment when they broke out of the canyon, crossed the divide and started downward. It may have been, too, that the men on the ridge understood the situation, for they held their fire.

They were trying to beat him to the point where he must cross the summit of the divide! Not all the advantage lay on their side, for the lip of the cliff they had been following was seamed with many breaks and faults. Most of these crevasses would now be filled by the blizzard, but it would be rough going.

"Gervais!" Smoke called sharply. "You lead out on that line for all you've got! Put your back into it and pull. Because if they crowd us up there, you're goin' to be the first one to die!"

The breed was frightened. Perhaps there lingered in his mind some hope that this grim Smoke Hardy

would relent, or that a break would come; Sloan and the Dude might give him a chance to escape. But there would be no escape if he balked now or refused to help the dogs with the heavy load. He bent his head and started pulling while Smoke, at the rear, laid the rifle on the sled and put his shoulder against the load.

"Atlik!" he yelled at the little leader. "Take 'em out now! *Mush!*" The dogs whined eagerly, catching the excitement in his voice. Even the wheel dog next to the sled, the oldest and biggest of the team, knew what was wanted, for he not only bent low as his strong legs stiffened, but he also took a savage snap at the heels of the dog just ahead. There was a surge as the impulse communicated itself to the rest of the team and, with Smoke yelling and hazing them on, they went roaring to the summit—and over!

But all the while Smoke's physical strength went into this effort, his mind was at grips with possibilities just ahead. Sloan and the Dude were somewhere near, probably organizing a hasty ambush. Somewhere near, too, were the gamblers, Falk and Zabor. The latter must have traveled fast since staking the claim, but Smoke had also been coming along at a good clip, and the pair could not be far ahead. If they joined with Sloan and the Dude, the situation suddenly would grow tight.

But now they were over the hump, and the grade fell away; they were dipping into the Kelak Trail. Gervais was running to keep ahead of the dogs, while Smoke was holding back to avoid letting the sled and its precious load get away down the steep slope.

A sudden blaze of gunfire broke out on the left, and another on the right. Smoke staggered as a stray

bullet ripped through his parka and numbed his side. But he knew that he was not hard hit although he felt sharp pain each time he breathed. More than a twinge of agony was the startling realization that he was now between a crossfire.

Smoke barked an order at the terrified Gervais, and once more dogs and sled swung aside until an out-thrust lip of granite sheltered them. Bullets spattered against the rock and went ricocheting off into nothingness with wailing sounds of disappointment. The dogs raced on and swung into the clear at last.

"Whoa!" Smoke called to the panting dogs and they obeyed gladly. He moved toward Gervais. "Remember this place?" he asked. "*This is where I found old No-camp after your gang had left him!*"

IN the light of the risen moon the spot presented an eerie appearance. It was such a place as a trailer might select to hole up in during a storm. Probably the killers of No-camp had chosen it for that very reason. It offered protection from the elements and it likewise offered ambushade against anybody coming down the trail off the mountain.

It was a level stretch in the trail, with a rock wall surrounding all sides except one. The open side was covered with brush and a sparse scattering of spruce. It would need to be watched, but the cliffs behind were so lofty that nobody would dare venture close enough to the edge to look over and spy upon an outfit hidden below.

The snout of an ancient glacier, seamed by age, thrust itself into one side of the picture. Within a crevasse of that eternal ice was the human being who had meant most to Smoke Hardy. Almost it seemed to him that old No-camp was watching

now to see what his son would do. Not alone exact vengeance; there was something intangible yet more important.

No-camp was beyond desire for vengeance, an earthly thing, yet the spiritual quality of honor does not die with the flesh. Would Smoke prove capable of fulfilling the paramount desire which had been denied old No-camp?

Smoke turned the sled around until it formed a bulwark. Gervais backed off in alarm as his captor approached. Smoke set the sprag. There would be no further flight; so far all had worked out as he had planned and hoped.

"Gervais," he said grimly, "it's time to talk!"

The breed eyed him sullenly. Perhaps he was shrewd enough to understand that Smoke, determined though he might be, would not commit murder in cold blood, particularly when the victim was helpless. Gervais could afford to wait. He shrugged his shoulders and kept silent.

"There's no time to lose," Smoke warned. "Pretty soon those killers are goin' to start crowdin' this place. There's a lot of things that have to be cleared up before the showdown comes. Who killed No-camp Hardy? Who tortured him?"

Still Gervais remained silent. He was waiting, watching, confident that he could outguess this white man. The moment had a sinister aspect that was not lost on the sled dogs, accustomed to sensing moods in friend or foe. They eyed the breed with hatred. At a word from Smoke they would have attacked, but the cunning Gervais understood full well that such word would not be given.

Smoke turned away abruptly and walked to the glacier. When he came back he carried a splinter of ice in

his hands. "Gervais," he asked softly, "there's enough Indian in you to appreciate such things? You savvy the *cole chuck wawa*?"

Gervais' eyes glistened as the whites of them showed, but still he kept silent. Smoke watched him shrewdly.

"You *might* not understand! It's probably been a long while since you had anything to do with Injuns, you've been hangin' around white killers too long. So, in case you *don't* understand, I'll tell you this much. Eskimos know the trick, and so do most northern Injuns. I tie you up so you can't move; then I rub this piece of ice back and forth across your forehead. At first you don't mind it, but after a time it feels as though a red-hot iron is burnin' into your skull! Now do you want to talk? *Who killed No-camp Hardy? Who tortured him?*"

STRUGGLE was going on within the breed. Fear had kept his lips closed so far, fear as well as crafty belief that he could read this white man aright. But never had he counted on the *cole chuck wawa*! He knew what it meant. And suddenly the dam of speech was loosened, and he began to chatter in terror.

Smoke Hardy listened, his face growing more and more grim. At last Gervais stopped, and Smoke stood up and tossed the fragment of ice away. The yellow streak in the breed had showed at last. The bluff had worked. For Smoke knew full well that, no matter how much he would have liked to visit agony upon the men who had tortured old No-camp, he was a white man and could not have done the thing which Gervais feared he would do.

Smoke looked up toward the glacier, in a crevasse of which old No-

camp Hardy kept vigil with eternity, and nodded. It was as though he asked approval of what he had done—and received it. Fire may be fought with fire, but Smoke Hardy had not broken the white man's creed. Yet he had achieved one step of his goal.

"I know who they are now, No-camp," he confided silently. "You keep pullin' for me as you have so far, and I'll make good!"

He whirled suddenly as old Pilchuck snarled in warning.

Just what happened was not immediately apparent, but somehow Gervais had broken free at last and was streaking it for the fringing spruce. Pilchuck was up, hobbling forward as though to give pursuit, but his wounded leg made him helpless. Instinctively, Smoke reached for the carbine lying on the sled. Then he lowered it ruefully. Smoke Hardy, hard-boiled though he might be, could not shoot an unarmed man from behind.

Smoke sighed. "Hell!" he told himself scornfully. "I must be gettin' soft! He'll go help the others now!" But fate, which always has the last word, had yet to speak her piece.

There were many sudden staccato sounds from the spruce—harsh, clapping sounds which beat upon the cliff walls and were flung back as dread echoes, startling in their loudness. Gervais threw up his arms and pitched face downward in the snow.

Smoke's eyes widened and narrowed. The killers must have mistaken the breed for him. But, mistake or otherwise, the manner in which Gervais had gone down indicated that he was no longer a factor that need be considered.

A figure stirred in the spruce gloom ahead and again Smoke's carbine came up. But for some rea-

son which he could not have defined at the moment, he held his fire. It was curious, after all, the way Gervais had been blasted down. It gave Smoke a little twinge of apprehension that maybe *he* might have ventured out there too far, out into the deadly zone of moonlight which washed down over the edge of the cliff. This spot on which he had elected to battle it out with his foes was ringed with death.

The figure vanished even before Smoke could pull trigger. Lowering the carbine, he backed up against the face of the cliff so that he could not be seen so clearly.

He glanced at the east. It seemed to him that the serrated peaks in that direction werelighter than they should have been in the effulgence of the moon. Daylight was not far off! And daylight would increase his hazard a hundredfold.

When the sun lifted he would be marked against the base of the cliff by gunners lurking in the spruce. And the stark figure of Gervais, lying out there in the snow, was proof that death was in ambush, awaiting only the propitious moment to strike.

"Either I get out of here before dawn, or I settle things now," he told himself. But seemingly there was no way he could hasten the climax.

Again Pilchuck snarled warningly. Smoke involuntarily threw up his gun and turned toward a point farther down the foot of the cliff, toward the glacier.

"Hold her!" came a hoarse, anxious voice. "It's *me*, Smoke!"

For an instant Smoke stood there dumfounded. "Mort Tomlinson?" he called softly.

"Yep," came the reply. "The other boys are here with me, too! We come along to give you a hand!"

CHAPTER VIII

A DECISION

SMOKE made out the figure of the old sourdough wriggling toward him along the fringe of loose rock which had broken off from the cliff. "Don't dare to stand up yet," declared the oldster. "Hell, the woods is full of killers out there!"

Smoke saw other figures following Tomlinson. By and by the four old-timers were close. Smoke lowered his gun.

"You—" he began.

"No time for questions now," broke in Mort. "This is a piece of luck, but it's just as we figured. We came all the way from Three Below on foot. We knew there was no use tryin' to foller you to the Golden Mukluks, knew you'd be there and back before we could get far. But we also knew you'd come back along the Kelak Trail, and we figured you'd need help. Seems like we got here just in time!"

Smoke stared curiously at the faces of the old men who were now gathered in the protection of the cliff. He indicated the still form of Gervais lying out in the snow. "You saw what happened?"

"Hell!" was the rejoinder. "We made it happen! We spotted that breed. When he made a break we figured he was gettin' away from you, so we dropped him before he could get to the others. He'd be out there now, gettin' ready to pot you—"

"I know!" Smoke nodded. "Well, thanks! Maybe I didn't have enough nerve—"

"Pleasure for us!" declared old Mort. "Sort of squared things for No-camp. We know what that breed did!"

It occurred to Smoke to ask them how they knew, but at the moment

such a question seemed trivial, of no consequence. "Gervais told me the truth," he declared. "I'd put him at the head of my list, but what he said sort of ranked him down the line. Well, he's gone, and it makes no difference how!"

Mort Tomlinson was eying the sled. "Looks heavy," he ventured. "You mean to tell me, son, that you've got a load of nuggets there, just like you promised!"

Smoke nodded. "The load that No-camp promised to deliver but couldn't!"

The old man shook his head incredulously. "Boys," he said to his companions, "it's the craziest thing I've ever heard, and I've spent forty-two years in the North! Well, now, what're we waitin' for? Time to get out is now! Be daylight soon and we'll be easier to shoot at!"

"Smoke," declared old Pete Jennings, "we never aimed to hold you to this bargain. This gold is yours, not ours! No-camp tried to make good but failed. Wasn't his fault. We—"

"We're wastin' time, as Tomlinson says," broke in the younger man. "There's the gold, and I'm deliverin' it now. What you do with it hereafter is none of my business!"

"But it was only a grubstake," protested Bill Preece. "All the rules of a grubstake are that it's a split. Half of that gold is yours!"

Smoke gestured impatiently. "There's the load and a team of dogs to haul it! If you light out now, before dawn, maybe you can make it down the Kelak Trail to Three Below before they can see to shoot. They can't get onto the trail without comin' into the clearin' here, an' I'll take care of that!"

"How about yourself?" demanded Mort Tomlinson. "Five of us can shoot our way through!"

"Four," corrected Smoke. "I'm stayin'!"

"Why—" began the other, but Smoke cut him short.

"Go on!" he commanded. "Get t' hell out of here! I've made good on one of my chores; I've delivered to you as much gold as they stole. I've still got one more job to do!"

"We stick," declared Sam Jackson positively, "unless you go with us, Smoke! We don't aim to leave you behind to stand off those killers while we get away!"

Smoke waved his gun impatiently. "Go on! Get movin'. Those dogs will take you through. This lame one, Pilchuck, stays with me. Can't you understand that I've got a chore to do?"

OLD MORT stared at him a moment, then sighed. "Boys," he said, turning to the others, "he's right, and we're wastin' time chewin' the rag about it. I know how he feels. Twenty, thirty years ago I'd have done the same thing."

They nodded reluctantly and he said: "Well, here we go! Line out those dogs, somebody. What you call your leader, Smoke? We're strangers to 'em, and they know it!"

"Atlik," Smoke answered, "and she's plenty smart. Only one thing more. If you get in a jam and see you're goin' to lose the gold, I'd rather have you kill the dogs than let 'em fall into the hands of those killers! I think No-camp would want it that way. Atlik was *his* leader!"

The sled was freed, the sprag lifted and the dogs ready. Smoke stepped forward and patted Atlik's head.

"She'll take you through," he assured the old sourdoughs. "Let her do her own thinkin'. H'ya, Atlik! *Mush!*"

The husky surged into her collar and the other dogs obediently dug their toes into the snow. The load of gold moved, gained momentum; then, in a gathering rush, was gone around a shoulder of rock and on down the trail which led to Three Below.

Smoke stared around at the gloomy woods expectantly, but no shots came. He swung back toward the glacier where old No-camp seemed to be broodingly considering what had happened. And apparently Smoke found there the approbation he wanted, for he smiled contentedly, cradled the carbine in his arms and stared again into the woods, which were ominous with silence.

The moon was gone now, and that darkest hour of the night, the one just before dawn, was at hand. Then came the first flush of the new day, fingers of pale-gray light poking their way across the heavens in an exploring manner and touching the higher peaks with cheerful promise that seemed to belie the dread menace which still lurked in the shadowy spruce.

An unearthly cry broke the awesome hush, and Smoke jerked around nervously. Old Pilchuck sat there on haunches, nose pointed to the unresponsive heavens, and poured out the woe in his soul.

Maybe he was merely lonesome for the vanished Atlik, his mate. But dogs, as Smoke Hardy knew, have a strangely vibrant sense of foreboding. Old Pilchuck might have smelled death from afar.

And at that very moment there was a grumbling, whispering sound from the slope above.

UNTIL that moment Smoke had deemed himself safe so far as attack from the snow-covered cliff was concerned. He had believed that

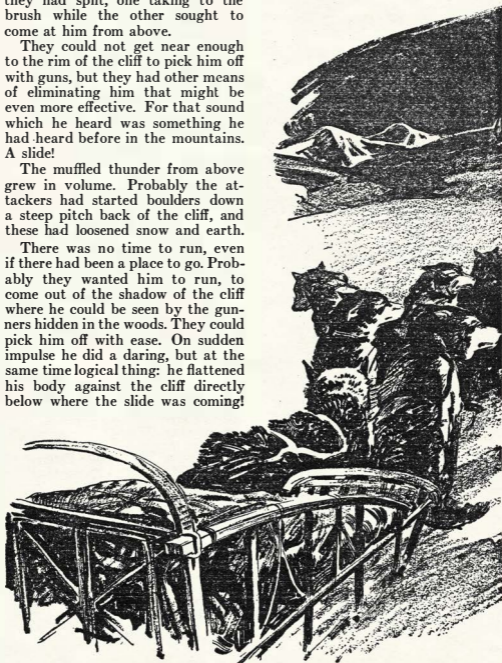
Sloan and the others were scattered somewhere out in the woods which guarded the upper side of the trail, where the old sourdoughs had gathered. But there were at least two outfits after him now, and maybe they had split, one taking to the brush while the other sought to come at him from above.

They could not get near enough to the rim of the cliff to pick him off with guns, but they had other means of eliminating him that might be even more effective. For that sound which he heard was something he had heard before in the mountains. A slide!

The muffled thunder from above grew in volume. Probably the attackers had started boulders down a steep pitch back of the cliff, and these had loosened snow and earth.

There was no time to run, even if there had been a place to go. Probably they wanted him to run, to come out of the shadow of the cliff where he could be seen by the gunners hidden in the woods. They could pick him off with ease. On sudden impulse he did a daring, but at the same time logical thing: he flattened his body against the cliff directly below where the slide was coming!

There was deafening thunder, concussive blasts of wind and suction that threatened to pull the breath out of his lungs. The earth quaked and shuddered to fearful impacts. Uprooted trees, snags and





The breed covered back—he knew the trick of torture with splinters of ice!

boulders roared through the air. But the mass of it, gaining momentum from the first rush that carried it off the cliff, went cleanly *over* him! Like a giant waterfall the débris poured for several seconds but, save for snow flurries that blinded him, Smoke was untouched.

"Lucky the dogs and sled got out there when they did," he reflected. "They'd have been buried!" For, where he and his outfit had been met by the old men was now a mountainous pile; yet behind it, next to the cliff, was a clear space where he had stood fast.

When the roar of the avalanche died away there was a long moment of sepulchral silence. Then he heard voices! They were calling back and forth between the top of the cliff and the covert of the woods. Asking questions. Doubtful. He knew that he could not be seen by those above, and the wall of snow in front likewise blocked the view of attackers who had been waiting in the woods.

"Must have got him!" declared a voice which he identified as Sloan's. "Hell, she's forty feet deep there!"

But there came another voice, sharp and commanding: "Take a look and make sure!" Smoke identified that voice, too, and hot anger came and went, leaving him with a grim determination. He settled himself back against the cliff, carbine cocked and ready across his knees. Time for settlement was drawing near.

Daylight! That was the thing he feared. But daylight was already spreading over the eastern sky, and

he could see that the loftiest dog-tooth summits, immaculate with new snow, had been touched by a golden outline from the hidden sun.

There were crunching sounds in the snow along the edge of the cliff where the old men had approached. Someone stumbled and swore softly. The root of a half-buried tree snapped as feet trod upon it. But they were coming cautiously. He was dead, they believed, yet they were taking no chances. When they did appear it was simultaneously. One moment the ridge of piled-up snow he was looking out upon was empty, the next there were four furred figures outlined against the lightning sky.

THEY saw him at the instant he saw them, and guns leaped to their shoulders. Reddish-yellow flame stabbed at him, like converging rays of sunlight through a burning glass. Bullets spat about him, and flying fragments of lead broken against the rock face behind, stung his flesh. But he was shooting now, as accurately as though he were picking off a file of running caribou.

A head disappeared with a yell. Another vanished. The two remaining gunners dropped from sight. Old Pilchuck, who had stood fast at Smoke's knee during all the terrifying moments of the avalanche and the attack, whimpered as though the wolfish side of his nature had been stirred by savage impulse. He had smelled blood, and the pungent taint of powder smoke stung his sensitive nostrils.

"Two down," Smoke told himself. He refilled the magazine of the carbine and turned to look over his shoulder at the new noise. What he saw backed him farther down against the rock face, for he realized that the slide—first turned to his ad-

vantage by chance—now had unexpectedly been turned against him.

Although the bulk of snow and debris had passed over him, at one point it had piled up against the cliff. Now he saw figures from above come zigzagging down the steep ladder the slide had created. They were gone before he could fire, yet he knew that they had joined those below and that presently the attack would mass against him once more.

Could he hold them off? He had a filled magazine and a few cartridges in his pockets, not too much ammunition if it became a siege. But evidently the killers were determined that the battle would not be prolonged. All the while they remained here to fight it out, the gold-laden sled was moving farther and farther away. And Smoke was blocking the trail. They wanted his life, but at the moment he was merely an obstacle that stood in the way of their objective.

Beyond that bulwark of snow they had joined forces for the final rush. They poured suddenly over the crest, shooting as fast as they could, but in doing so they had to expose themselves fully in order to take aim.

The little carbine barked sharply and steadily. Two men, three, sprawled in the snow, and so fierce was the blast of gunfire with which he greeted all of them that the survivors dropped back again out of sight.

"Five gone, anyway," Smoke told himself. Then there was a stunning impact against the side of his head and the world seemed to whirl crazily in a blaze of cold red light. A bullet ricocheted from the wall with an ominous *spang!* He knew he was hit, but he was miraculously still alive and he had not fallen. The missile had merely flicked his scalp above the left ear.

Something warm and red trickled down inside his parka hood. But he marked whence the shot had come, a narrow lane along the foot of the cliff which the slide had not filled. So eager was the gunner and so certain that Smoke was wounded, that for an instant he stood outlined against the sky. The carbine spoke with a clapping report, and the figure sank, rolling over and over.

"Six down! Hell, how many more are there?" Two outfits had joined; there couldn't have been more than eight men in all. Six of them were gone, and maybe the two whom he wanted most were among them.

Now was the time to make sure! Time to carry the fight to them. He stood up. At that moment old Pilchuck snarled sudden warning as a man charged over the ridge of snow and down into the pit where Smoke crouched.

He came with a blazing gun that threw lead so swiftly Smoke had no time to defend himself.

CHAPTER IX

DEATH IN THE CREVASSE

THE swiftness and savagery of the attack had an element of surprise in it that all but caught Smoke Hardy napping. Something had gone wrong with his gun—possibly a swelled shell which had jammed in the chamber—for when he pulled trigger there was no report and, try as he would, he could not force another cartridge up from the magazine.

As though sensing Smoke's helplessness, the newcomer's gun steadied for more deliberate aim. Things happened in split-second intervals. Smoke tried to dodge, tried to swing his useless gun as a club to distract the other's aim. But it was an ally which saved him.

Old Pilchuck had come to life! He was crippled and cornered, and there is no more redoubtable fighter than a wolf under such circumstances. There was not much Pilchuck could do, injured as he was, but he did hurl his bulk courageously at the foe.

The man tripped over him and sprawled in the snow, and his rifle discharged with a thudding report. At that instant Smoke dived for him.

They came to grips, slugging. The parkas both wore hampered their movements, but it was a disadvantage which the fury of Smoke's attack overcame. For the contorted face of his adversary was that of Sloan—and Sloan was number two on the list of men who had killed No-camp!

The right fist of Smoke Hardy thudded into the bearded features, but Sloan seemed to have a tenacity on life like that of a wolverine. Blows did not stun him, his own powerful fist exacted terrible tribute. Once he freed his left hand to reach for the six-gun under his parka, but Smoke's knee crushed his fingers into the icy snow.

In and out around the fighting pair raged old Pilchuck, battle instincts aroused by the wolfish prospect of a kill, but the struggling men changed position so quickly that the dog could not strike. Time after time his jaws clicked within inches of Smoke's face as he sought to get at the hated Sloan, but Smoke could not spare breath to order him away, even if Pilchuck would have obeyed. The wounded leader's bestial snarlings were no more savage than those of the embattled humans who, in one atavistic moment, had recrossed the bridge of time by five thousand, ten thousand years, back to the misty past when man lived by the law of "kill or be killed."

But that tumult of animal sounds was sliced through by a gun shot. A bullet went chattering off from the rock face.

The unexpectedness of it created a fractional part of a second's diversion to both men despite their blind fury. Sloan was the first to recover. His stiffened fingers jabbed straight for Smoke's eyes. But the snap of Smoke's reflexes was too quick. He ducked just in time, and the claw-like hand raked flesh from his forehead.

Again came that jarring report. But now Smoke, risking a glance upward, made out the newcomer. Less than a hundred yards away a parka-clad man stood on that ridge of snow which ran down from the face of the cliff. Shooting deliberately, yet badly—and at both men *struggling!*

Smoke caught a glimpse of the man's face as the latter raised it to see more clearly the effect of his shots. The Dude!

The chechahco leveled the gun once more, and again the muzzle spat vanishing flame in the growing light of dawn. But now old Pilchuck, aroused by the attack, swung around and saw the new foe. With a whining, snarling sound like that of a saw biting through green timber, the leader starting a hobbling charge, fur standing on end until he seemed bigger and more terrifying than ever. Hastily the Dude shot again, and Sloan, with a choked cry, twisted his body and let go!

Now the gun was chattering at top speed as the Dude sought to stop the rush of the half-crazed husky. But the light was bad, Pilchuck presented a shifting, varying target, and panic had seized the murderous chechahco. He fired the last shot, tried to fire again, but the empty chamber merely gave off a dull click. In sud-

den terror he flung the rifle straight at the nearing dog, turned and started up the slope again.

And fate guided his aim better with the thrown gun than it had with bullets. The weapon, whirling end for end, struck old Pilchuck, and he went down. But the Dude never paused to see the effect of his blow. He went hurrying toward the top of the cliff as rapidly as he could climb the steep drift caused by the slide.

SMOKE leaped to his feet, with only a glance at Sloan necessary to see that the man was dying. Probably the bullet had been intended for Smoke; yet it might have been directed at Sloan as well. With the confession which he had forced from Gervais still ringing in his ears, it was easy enough for Smoke to believe that the Dude would be well content to wipe the slate clean and leave no witnesses.

Sloan, Gervais, the others, all had served their purpose. There was no further need of them; hence they were gone. "Number one was Gervais," Smoke reminded himself. "Sloan was number two. Dude, you are number three!" He broke away from the spot, charging up the steep pitch of the slide.

He might have dropped the Dude with a shot from the six-gun under his parka, but for the moment he had forgotten it. Greater than mere desire to inflict death was the wish to come to grips with this man above all others; nothing less than to feel his hands upon the other would satisfy Smoke now. Old Pilchuck sprawled grotesquely in the snow, and Smoke went past him with only a look, for there was nothing he could do for the faithful dog now.

Up and up the two men, hunter and hunted, went against the morn-

ing sky; there was no other life in sight. In the shadow of the cliff below was death, men lying here and there, unstirring. The rising sun glinted on a rifle whose muzzle had been buried in the snow when its owner fell, so that the stock and half of the barrel were upright. A man lay on his back with one arm held loosely across his eyes as though to ward off the glare of daylight. The far woods where deserted dogs waited beside upset sleds were dismal with the muted wailings of huskies who winded death in the still air.

The Dude reached the top, turned for a moment as he looked back, then resumed flight. Apparently the man had no firearm since he had flung his gun at the dog. Smoke never hesitated, but kept climbing swiftly. When he gained the lip of the cliff at last the Dude was two hundred yards away, stumbling and staggering in a broken run over the uneven surface of the snowfield.

That six-gun Smoke carried was still forgotten; probably he would not have used it anyway. Forgotten, too, were his wounds, the torn flesh over his ribs, the bullet furrow along his scalp. For he knew that the Dude was weakening; that, before long, the man would turn and make a stand.

And suddenly, as Smoke hurried on, it came to him that this was the most fitting of climaxes, for the Dude had veered and was making his way out over the glacier, in the icy heart of which old No-camp's mortal self slept the sleep of forever.

Rougher grew the terrain, but Smoke was gaining. The Dude could not go much farther. As though sensing this, he turned for a moment, leaning against an outcropping of rock which had been thrust up from the depths of the glacier by the tre-

mendous pressure of ice. He let Smoke come fifty yards nearer before he wheeled again and started off. This time he swung more to the left where the surface of the glacier, seamed and old by the melting action of suns for centuries, was terrifying in its ruggedness.

Clrechahco that he was, the Dude did not understand what was instantly apparent to the experienced eyes of Smoke Hardy. The fleeing man had unconsciously chosen the most hazardous route of all. Below the blizzard-drifted snow were crevasses of blue-green ice which had never seen the light of day. Realizing this, Smoke involuntarily slackened pace for a moment, instinct warning him.

Yet the next instant he took up the chase at top speed again. The killer might be lucky enough to get across and, if he did, he'd hit the Kelak Trail beyond and reach Three Below! Smoke raced on with a blind disregard for what might happen to himself. The Dude was number three, and if he escaped old No-camp would not rest, though his sleep in this icy tomb stretched into ten thousand centuries.

But when the thing happened, Smoke was almost unprepared for it.

LIKE all such ice rivers this glacier was a living, moving thing that was articulate; it grumbled often as it inched its way out of the hills. In summer it would talk more loudly, but when frost gripped the land its speech was hushed to a mere infrequent muttering. Yet now, as though it sensed the tragedy being enacted by these flylike humans crawling across its mighty surface, it bestirred itself indignantly as though determined to take a hand.

Off to the left a half mile there was a splitting sound as though a gigan-

tic wedge was being driven into the heart of the glacier. With astonishing speed the rending, shattering noise traveled, and Smoke felt it pass beneath his feet! As he hesitated involuntarily there was an ominous whispering, and hundreds of square feet of snow vanished in the maw of a tremendous crevasse which appeared magically a short distance to one side.

Smoke took off with a flying leap for a slab of ice just ahead, and as he did so the snow upon which he had been standing disappeared into another abyss.

But, less than fifty yards in advance now, the Dude was still going, and once more Smoke started off in pursuit. No glacier was going to cheat him now by scaring him off. As he charged on, the glacier shuddered again and he saw other crevasses opening. Yet somehow his flying feet carried him over just in time. And, suddenly, he knew that the moment which he had sought was close at hand.

For the Dude was clearly terrified! Fearful though he was of the man grimly pursuing him, there was greater fear of this awesome force of nature whose mighty spirit had been awakened and disturbed. He whimpered now as he ran, and always he kept watching the snow just ahead, as though he hoped to read the secret of a hidden trap before it could be sprung. Only once he threw a look over his shoulder at Smoke Hardy, and what he saw was not reassuring.

Abruptly, then, he screamed and flung his arms around an ice pinnacle jutting up through the drifts, just as the snow behind him crumbled and fell into nothingness. As he hung there he turned his head for another look at Smoke, and as he did so he laughed in an outburst of insane

hysteria. His pursuer was likewise trapped!

The crevasse had opened between the two men when Smoke was scarcely more than ten yards away. On the verge of the icy chasm Smoke caught himself just in time. To left and right as far as could be seen the fissure yawned as an insurmountable barrier. But the Dude dare not go on because his footing was insecure, and if his grip relaxed on the pinnacle he would slide off into the frigid darkness below. If he could work around the pinnacle until he could reach the opposite side there was comparatively solid ice from there to the next snowfield.

This much he must have seen and understood; but it would require courage to take the risk of working around the icy needle. Courage which, at the moment, the Dude did not possess. But he could laugh at Smoke Hardy.

"Dude," the latter yelled hoarsely, "*I'm comin' over!*"

NO sane man of calm judgment could have made that decision. The Dude knew that. Maybe Smoke himself realized it—and didn't care. Suffering destroys the balance of reason, and he had suffered much. The values of life fluctuate under stress and sometimes sink. Events which had forged his determination from the moment he had found Nocamp Hardy dead had annealed and hardened it further until it might be shattered, but not bent or turned aside. On the trail, in that saloon at Three Below, in his embattled stand at the foot of the cliff, he had heard that great rushing of wings—and always it had passed him by. Death lost in terror in the face of desire.

"Dude," he repeated, "*I'm comin' over there and kill you with my bare hands!*"

Clinging there, the Dude shrieked in triumph: "You can't! You can't make it! You can't scare me! I'll get away from you!"

Smoke crouched, took a short run, and leaped!

And all the time the Dude had known that Smoke would do this very thing. He had seen decision in the man's haggard, blood-streaked face, in his eyes which had the burning intensity of a wolf about to make its kill.

The distance was not far, probably not more than ten feet from where Smoke had leaped. The crevasse was narrowed at that point by an icy projection which might not have strength enough to support the weight of a child. And that narrow shelf where the Dude clung to the ice pinnacle was scarcely wide enough for him alone to stand.

The Dude knew what would happen. Both would be dislodged, to go sliding down into the crevasse. He dare not wait now; he must attempt to reach more solid footing on the opposite side. In desperation he lurched his body around the pinnacle, grabbing for a hold which should be there.

But his hand clutched convulsively on empty space and he lost balance. He screamed piercingly as he slithered away from the pinnacle, and fell. And at that instant Smoke struck the spot where the killer had been a fractional part of a second before.

His feet sought traction on the slippery surface as he threw out his hands to check himself. But his fingers merely raked over the icy smoothness without getting a grip. He teetered precariously, trying frantically to hang on.

Yet one foothold slid away, and he knew that he was going—he was

falling even as the Dude had fallen. Nobody could lick a glacier which had lived since the earth first cooled. But as Smoke went down there was a curiously whimsical thought whirling through his brain.

"No-camp, you reached right up and grabbed the Dude at last! But why did you grab *me*?"

Then there was a stunning shock, bringing a rush of velvety blackness that overwhelmed him.

CHAPTER X

THE LONG CHANCE

SMOKE HARDY came awake with the fixed impression that he had just come through one of the most horrible nightmares he had ever experienced. For a long while he had been running the gantlet of death, only to drop before the end was reached.

He stirred uneasily and found that he had lost nearly all sensation in arms and legs. He opened his eyes in a world of greenish, shimmering light. Then it came to his clearing brain that he was looking upon walls of ice, smoothly fractured ice that was ancient when hairy mammoths and other prehistoric monsters moved about the earth.

Ice! A crevasse! He stared upward and perceived an irregular line of daylight which twisted across the arc of his vision. And suddenly there came awareness as recollection came back with a rush.

He stirred his numbed body again and his right hand reached out, groping for something solid. But there was nothing there—nothing but space. He understood then that he lay on a ledge, an ice shelf perhaps two feet wide, smooth and even as though cut with a chisel. And it seemed to him that he was not more

than fifteen feet below the top of the crevasse.

There was a dull throbbing in his head that seemed to make it impossible for him to think. But it came to him now that he must think as he had never thought before.

Crazy thoughts persisted. He was still dizzy, and he knew that when he slid off the ice pinnacle, he must have struck this ledge with head and shoulders, for the upper part of his body ached, save where the penetrating cold had already put the nerves to sleep.

He managed to get up, weaving there unsteadily, while the retarded blood resumed its flow once more and he felt red-hot needles stabbing him all over. His head thumped with excruciating pain, but already his resourcefulness, trained by years in the wilderness, was asserting itself.

At a point farther down the crevasse, but near enough so that he could reach it by sidling along the ledge, the glacial fissure drew together until the ice walls were no more than three feet apart. An idea came to Smoke and he felt under his parka for the belt knife.

It was still there. So was his six-shooter, but he had no need for that now. He drew the knife and cautiously moved down to the narrower point of the crevasse. Now with the knife he began attacking the ice.

The idea was not original with him. Twice he had heard of prospectors who, having fallen into a crevasse, had managed to chop steps in the ice until they could climb out. All that was necessary was to have the fissure narrow enough so that a man could brace his back against one side wall while he set his feet into the steps he carved on the other, and thus slowly work his way to the top.

HE worked quickly, realizing that he needed exercise to keep from freezing, for the chill down here was already beginning to penetrate to his bones. Soon he had cut two niches, the second a foot above the first. Then bracing himself between the two walls of the crevasse, he twisted around and worked himself upward so that he could begin a third step.

Now it became a matter of sheer endurance. If his strength lasted, if he did not slip, he would make it. But even old No-camp couldn't save him if he made one misstep, or if he should weaken.

Time passed as he worked rapidly with a growing frenzy, inching his way slowly to the top. Now he was no longer cold. Sweat streamed from his forehead, got into his eyes. Again he had a feeling of delirium. It seemed that he had been in this crevasse all his life, that he had been hacking away at brittle, greenish ice ever since he could remember. And then, as he cut one more step and squirmed upward, back braced against the opposite wall, he was dazzled by a glare of sunlight in his face.

It was so astonishing at first that the significance of it did not dawn on him. He braced and twisted upward for a better look. Then, half-sobbing with gratitude, he clawed around until he got a grip on a ridge of ice, and drew himself out.

For fully a minute he lay there, reaction paralyzing him. But as breath no longer sucked into his lungs in choking gasps, he managed to get to his feet. He heard a clatter behind him as he moved, but did not look. He knew that it was his knife, dropping into the chasm from which he had just escaped. It must have gone deeply for he did not even hear it strike.

Well, that was the way things sometimes happened! You fell into a crevasse and you landed on a ledge. But the Dude had missed that ledge. And so had the knife.

Smoke got up and moved mechanically, feet and legs carrying him ahead at a plodding pace, guiding him about newly opened crevasses, bearing him straight toward some point which he could not have readily identified. And his mind was still troubled. Something remained to be done. What could it be, when the job was already finished, the chores completed?

With some surprise he discovered himself at last on top of the cliff overlooking the scene of battle. There was the slide which the Dude and the others had started in an effort to wipe him out. There should be dead men strewn all over the snow down there, but for some reason he could not make them out. Old Pilchuck was down there, too—Pilchuck, who had not hesitated an instant when it came time to toss his life into the balance as the scales tipped against the man-god he loved. The slope down there was strangely clear, save for what appeared to be a group of men. But that, decided Smoke, was merely another trick his eyes were playing him. Dead men don't stir around and get together.

HE went on down, not knowing why he did so. And then he saw dogs, a number of them. And one of them broke away and came hobbling toward him on three legs, whining and making peculiar sounds of happiness.

"Pilchuck!" Smoke said softly, amazed. Pilchuck was dead—and yet here he was, head bruised, a flesh wound in his leg, but still alive.

Voices! Smoke heard his name called. And then men were moving toward him. Mort Tomlinson, Jennings, the other old sourdoughs.

The sight irritated Smoke. "Didn't I tell you to get t' hell out of here? I delivered the nuggets. Why didn't you take 'em to Three Below? What do you want now? I've made No-camp's word good—"

Old Mort Tomlinson's voice quavered. His seamed cheeks were wet. "Smoke! We'll never forgive ourselves for pullin' out on you. But we didn't go far. Falk and Zabor met us and we came hustlin' back. But even then we were too late. We came on this." He indicated the stiffening forms of Sloan and the others. "We didn't know what happened to you, figured you'd been killed somehow. We were just ready to pull out when we spotted you comin' off the ridge up there!"

"The Dude," Smoke explained unsteadily. "Had to get him above all the rest. Gervais told me the Dude was the leader, that he'd organized this gang. What's more, he told me that it was the Dude who was the one that tortured No-camp.

"But I didn't get him. No-camp did. I—"

Suddenly his brain fastened on a single, compelling thought. The job! The job that was not yet finished!

His right hand went under his parka and reappeared with the six-gun. "Falk and Zabor? I'd nearly forgotten! I'm takin' them, too!"

For his focused eyes had just then picked out the two men standing behind the old sourdoughs.

"No!" yelled old Mort, leaping toward Smoke. "No! You don't understand! Falk and Zabor have been with us from the start. I told you way back in Three Below that they *might* be deputy marshals workin' under cover. That's as much as I

dared tip you off, then, because I'd promised 'em to keep quiet. They've been after the Dude's gang for months. Sent into this district because they were strangers. The Dude took 'em into his gang right after he'd robbed and murdered No-camp. Hell, since they've been dealin' at the Pay Dirt most of the punkin-seed gold has passed through their hands. They knew where the Dude had it cached. They tell me they can get hold of *all* of it now!"

"But," demanded Smoke suspiciously, "why did they jump the claim?"

"To save it for you," was the reply. "Zabor knew this fight was comin' off. He overheard what you told us about bringin' out the gold. But he wanted to trap the Dude, so he passed the word to him. Took a risk, maybe, but it was the only way. So they staked the claim—they'll transfer it back to you when we get to Three Below—in order to keep the Dude from jumpin' it. Then they hustled back to the Kelak Trail, figurin' the battle would start farther down. But the Dude overtook you here, and by the time they got back the scrap was over!"

Smoke slid back the gun. Well, the job *was* done, after all! But suddenly he laughed.

"Jumped the claim to save me? Why, the thing is worked out! There was only one big pocket, and No-camp and I stripped it. That's why I burned the cabin; so that no fool

prospector would go in there and spoil the country for the Injuns who were No-camp's friends!"

"Well, anyway," insisted Mort, "there's still the split on the gold. The load you brought out and the stuff the Dude stole, which we'll recover at Three Below!"

Smoke shook his head. "What good would it do me? I'd have to hang around civilization in order to enjoy it. No-camp only wanted it to buy another grubstake for himself, so he could keep movin'. The bigger the grubstake, the farther he'd go."

He smiled at the expressions on the faces of the old sourdoughs.

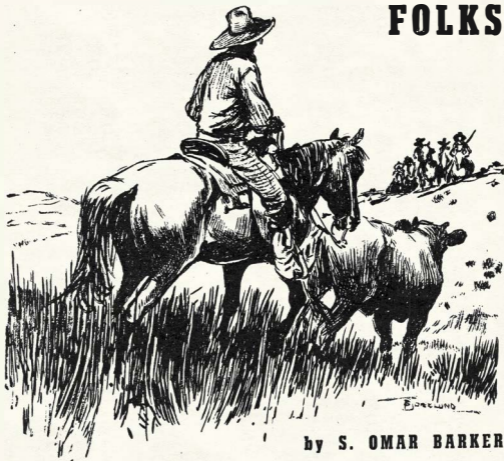
"Maybe you think I'm crazy. Maybe I am. But gold is no good unless you can spend it. And I can't spend it where I'm goin'! All I want now is as much grub as my team and No-camp's can haul! I can go plenty far on that. And I won't linger long in one place. No-camp taught me what that means. Maybe he was crazy. Maybe I am. But, crazy or not, that's the way I'll spend my share of what came out of the Golden Mukluks!"

Old Mort sighed and wagged his head. "Crazy? Hell, Smoke Hardy, you're smarter than any of us! Reckon these other old mud turtles think so too. We're only sorry we can't hit the trail, too. But, if it was thirty or forty years ago, son, you'd have to kill us off to keep us from joinin' you!"

THE END.



RUSTLERS AIN'T GOT NO FOLKS



by S. OMAR BARKER

THE brindled yearling ran through the cedar brakes, high-tailed and bellowing. He didn't seem to care where he was going, so long as he got there fast. As a specimen of young steerhood he wasn't much to look at, but he had four long, bony legs and plenty of urge to use them. Milk-pen raised, son of settler Blickenstaff's red Durham cow, the speed of his gangling shanks was an inheritance from the wild dun long-horn that had been his sire.

The present urge to make full use of that speed, however, arose from

a source much more immediate and painful than mere heredity. It was the result of a Comanche arrowhead, sunk to the barb in his rump. At every jump the feathered arrow shaft bobbed like a chaparral bird's tail. The more it bobbed, the worse it hurt, and the worse it hurt, the more the brindled yearling ran. Without benefit of compass, he laid his course southward.

The seven painted Comanches laid theirs a little west of north, driving before them all of Louis Blickenstaff's livestock except the brindled

yearling, the red Durham cow and one old pet workhorse. The cow's carcass, festooned with arrows, lay under a spreading oak. Ma Blickenstaff had saved the horse by bringing him with them into the one-room cabin. There, with their three little girls, she and her husband had fortified up in time to save themselves. But the stable, the neat sheds, along with the hard-earned equipment they housed, were now but smoldering embers.

"Now, I reckon," said Blickenstaff, coughing the acrid stench of powder smoke from his lungs, "we'd as well go back to the settlements. The land is good here. If the boy hadn't quit me—but I got no heart for building up again, alone."

"I wisht Eddie *was* here," spoke up one of the little girls. "He'd chase them ol' C'manches so hard they jist wouldn't never git back again!"

"I'm mighty glad he wasn't," said the woman. "He'd of been out some place an' got killed, sure."

"Better killed honest, fightin' Indians, than at the end of a rope, woman!"

"Now you listen to me, Louis Blickenstaff!" The woman's gaunt face lighted with an emotion stronger than mere anger. "Just because he run off to be a cowboy, you got no right to lay your own son by for a thief an' outlaw!"

"I wish I had cause to misdoubt it, wife. If he's livin' honest, why aint' we heard from him? Wild ways—bad companions—but never mind that now. We'd best be fixin' to pull out."

At next dawning, with what few belongings the old horse could carry besides the two smaller girls, they pulled out southeastward. Like many another Texas settler of that day, Louis Blickenstaff had chosen

his land too far beyond that thin line of armed protection called the frontier. It was in his mind that if the boy had stayed at home, they might have stuck it out. But the dust of cattle herds in the Texas air and the lure of the saddle were too much for a boy of sixteen to resist.

Outlawry, particularly cattle stealing, was rampant, too. Blickenstaff had heard it said that many of the wanted men on the Rangers' list were boys in their teens—colts run wild—but the penalties of law and lynch were no less severe because of that. This, even more than the forced abandonment of his home, lay heavy on his mind.

For Mrs. Blickenstaff there was at least one bright side to their retreat to the safer settlements. Among people again, they might hear news of their son. But Blickenstaff dreaded what sort of news it might be.

THOUGH the brindled yearling was a milk-pen pet, he did not return to the ruined farmstead whence the Comanche raid had driven him in such terror. There was enough wild longhorn blood in him so that a sojourn in the wilderness did not daunt him, and the arrow in his rump kept him traveling. It was about the fourth day of his southward drift that he smelled cattle. He snuffed the grass where a small bunch had been driven by men on horseback, then followed, pausing now and then to bawl with hoarse and raucous anxiety.

Because he had been practically raised at the kitchen door, it was the smell of cooking and other things human that swerved him first to the wagon instead of the herd. Peg-leg Melcoe looked up from stirring a pot of stewing beef and saw the yearling, a little wary but unafraid, nos-

ing at scattered potato peelings on the ground not two yards from the tailboard.

"Sooch!" he shouted, and threw a chunk of wood at him. The brindle dodged, batting his eyes. He backed away a few steps. A rider came dragging up a jag of firewood with his lass' rope. While the peg-legged cook was busy showing him where to put it and cursing him for the dust he raised, the brindle got his nose into a dishpan and knocked it off the tailboard. At the clatter, Peg Melcoe whirled, yanking a big six-gun from the holster sagging at his thigh. From where he stood coiling his rope, the wood hustler stepped quickly over beside him and tugged at his arm. He was a gangling youngster with greenish-blue eyes and fuzz on his slightly under-slung chin.

"Shucks, Peg!" he exclaimed. "What you want to shoot a little ol' stray yearlin' for?"

"You mind your own business, button," said Peg-leg. But he reholstered his gun. The men on guard with the herd might misinterpret the sound of a shot to mean trouble.

"Lookit," said the kid, "ain't that an arrow stuck in his rump?"

"Or else he's growin' feathers. If he don't die of it, he'll be one more steer to cross the Pecos with. Git on your hoss an' chouse him out to the herd—pronto!"

Eddie Blickenstaff stepped across his battered old dish-horn kack. He sat the saddle well enough, but in the clumsiness with which he shook the kinks out of his rope and built a loop there was evidence that as yet he was no expert cowboy.

If the brindled steer had tried to run away, the kid's loop would never have snagged him. But the yearling showed no inclination to leave the

wagon. Heretofore he had found people kind and gentle. The kid yanked the line tight and swung down out of the saddle, aiming to go down the rope, bulldog the calf, hogtie him and pull the arrow out of his rump. But Peg-leg hobbled briskly in ahead of him with a butcher knife and cut the rope.

"Hey, Peg! That there's the only rope I've got!"

"Which is one more'n a roust-about's got any use for," snorted the cook. "Maybe it'll learn you better'n to raise a dust at the cook wagon. When I said chouse him, I meant chouse him—or have I got to bust my spare leg acrost your britchin'?"

For an instant Eddie Blickenstaff stood squared off facing the cook, his blond face flared red with anger. Then, without speaking, he turned and climbed his horse. After some dodging back and forth, during which Peg-leg continued to curse him for the dust he raised, he finally managed to get the brindled yearling headed away from the wagon.

Once out of sight beyond a mesquite-clumped rise, he built a loop in what was left of his rope and snagged the steer again. While he was trying to bulldog it down, the cowboy posted as a lookout on a nearby knoll saw him and came riding down. He was a small, dark man, perhaps around thirty years old, with eyes as sharply black as chipped obsidian. His thin-lipped grin was brief but friendly. With casual ease he jerked a small loop onto the brindle's heels and stretched him out. The kid whetted his knife on the sole of his boot, then cut the hide around the arrow's barbs and yanked it out. Though not deep, the sore was badly festered.

"Here's my runnin' iron," said the little dark man. "Git it red hot an'

you can burn all that rot out. An' while you're at it, slap your own brand on him. I notice he ain't wearin' none."

"I ain't got a brand, Blackie," said the kid.

"Then now's a good time to git one. To pay you for doctorin' him. Where you reckon he run into that arrow?"

"I been wonderin'," said Eddie Blickenstaff soberly. "He's gentle—like he was some settler's calf. Blackie, my folks has got a claim up on the North Concho. If them Comanches has been raidin' again—Blackie, this brindle showin' up at the wagon with this arrow in him, it's got me to figgerin' maybe I ort to pull out for home an' see if they're needin' me."

"I ain't advisin' you, kid," said Blackie Orr with a shrug. "But I will say you've picked one hell of a time to git the notion."

Eddie had the calf hogtied now. Deftly the little dark man flipped loose his lass' rope and rode back to his outpost without explaining what he meant.

That night after supper the kid found out.

IN the more than a year since he had left home, Eddie Blickenstaff had discovered that it was not as easy to become a cowboy as he had imagined. Jobs had not been hard to find. That most of them paid little more than food and lodging, he did not mind. But everywhere it was the same old story: chores around a ranch headquarters, roustabout for a cranky cook, wood to chop while other men, some of them no older than himself, rode after cattle. But they were cowmen's sons, bred to the saddle. The horseback skill that they had grown up knowing as if by instinct, a granger's boy

would have to learn. He did not realize that if he had the patience to stick to one job long enough, riding a little, wrangling horses a little, gradually the chance would be given him to become a hired man on horseback instead of a chore boy. Therefore, he drifted from job to job.

When he had first struck this wagon he had not suspected that it was an outfit of rustlers. Even after he found it out, it didn't bother him much, for now, despite the chores he had to do for Peg-leg, he was learning to be a cowhand, and here was his chance to follow a herd on the long drive westward to that fabulous river of adventure, the Pecos.

It was a hard-bitten outfit, and a strange one in that its cook was also its boss.

"An' don't you fergit it, button," Peg-leg had advised him. "This stump of mine ruins me for a rider, but it don't hinder my shootin' none!"

Finding Blackie Orr friendly, Eddie had ventured to ask him how come six bold riding men let themselves be bossed by a one-legged cook.

"He's got the whiskers, kid," Blackie had said with a grin. "He's dodged more nooses than all the rustlers in Texas. Bog him down in hell, an' ol' Peg would hop out of it some way without a scorch. An' besides bein' a damn tough jigger, he's a damn good cook."

Thus, when the Comanche arrow had reminded him of Indian raids and got him worried about his folks, it was with some misgivings that Eddie Blickenstaff spoke up that night after supper. He tried to sound casual.

"Well, Peg," he said, "come mornin', I reckon I'll be quittin' you for a spell. I got to ride up on the

Concho an' see how my folks is makin' out with the Injuns. If they ain't needin' me, I'll overtake you somewheres on the trail. "Y'see, I—"

"You're an unweaned idiot," Peg Melcoe broke in on him bluntly. "By stickin' to wild country an' keepin' our heads down we've gathered close to a thousand cattle without nobody even smellin' our dust. You think I'm goin' to turn a big-mouthed button loose to gallop all over the country blabbin' his guts out right when we're about ready to shove out to the Pecos?"

"But shucks! I won't say nothin' to nobody! I'll jest—"

"You'll jest stick around an' be a cow thief like the rest of us," laughed a big, blunt-nosed puncher called Snub Johnson. "Once you've joined ol' Peg, you're with him plumb to the hangin'—or else?"

"Or else what, Snub?" drawled Baldy McHenry.

"Or else you git to the hangin' first!"

"But my folks— I got to—"

"Rustlers ain't got no folks, kid," said Baldy McHenry dryly.

In the shadows over at the wagon a trace chain rattled. Eddie saw the faces of the men suddenly tense. For an instant the hands of several of them rested on the grips of their guns. Blackie Orr quietly laid down the quirt he was braiding, then picked it up again as old Peg-leg snorted and began to swear. It was the brindled yearling, placidly salting himself by chewing at the sweaty harness, that had rattled the traces.

"Got you a new pet, Peg?" Blackie grinned as all of them except Peg himself relaxed.

"Looky here, button," he snorted, "didn't I tell you to chouse that damn yearlin' out with the cattle?"

"I did chouse him, Peg, but—"

"Then chouse him again before I bust my spare leg across your britchin'! An' mind you chouse him good! I won't have no damn dough-gut messin' around my wagon!"

"What gits me," observed Baldy McHenry, as the kid went to chase the brindle away, "if a doggone little ol' steer can walk up on us that close without us hearin' him, I hate to think what easy meat we'd be for a coupla Rangers!"

"Fade-eye's on guard. He must've knowed it was jest a calf or he'd 've give us the signal," said Snub Johnson. "You reckon that kid'll take a notion to make a bust for it an' quit us, after all? You ortn't never to 've took him on in the first place, Peg."

"Once he run onto us," said Peg-leg through a cloud of pipe smoke, "it was either hire him or hang him, else the next feller he run onto, he'd 've made mention of havin' saw us hereabouts—an' you know how molasses spreads once it's outa the jug. I'm bossin' this outfit, boys. When I need wagon help, I'll hire whoever I damn please. Let him try to quit us if he wants to. He won't git far."

"That's right," said Blackie Orr. "Right now he seems to be havin' some trouble chousin' that yearlin'. I believe I'll go give him a hand."

It was more than a hand that Blackie gave the kid, once they had gotten the yearling well away from the wagon. It was a little sober advice.

"I ain't no preacher, kid," Blackie said, "but do your pa an' ma know you're runnin' with thieves?"

"It ain't none of their business!" There was a sort of sullen defiance in the youngster's voice. It was easy enough to say it that way here in the darkness. But inside of him there rose a fear that seemed to

choke in his throat—not fear of becoming an outlaw, ultimately, perhaps, to hang; but fear that some day *they* must know of it. “An’ what’s it to you?”

“Not a thing, kid,” said Blackie Orr dryly. “You’re big enough to get around. Only if you’re figgerin’ to quit this outfit, wait till we’re four, five days on the trail an’ Peg’s in a hurry. Try it now an’ you’ll be follered up an’ hung.”

PEG-LEG MELCOE had been mistaken when he said that nobody had even smelled their dust. A Tonkaway Indian, scouting the country for Comanche sign, had spotted the rustler outfit and spent a whole day spying on its operations, his presence wholly unsuspected. Southward along the border a Ranger company was on patrol against cattle thieves. Farther northeast a detachment, far too small for the vast territory it had to cover, did what it could to protect a far-flung line of isolated settlers from raiding Indians. Between lay wild cattle range, guarded only by a few scattered riders except at roundup time. Of the three riders supposed to cover the country where Peg-leg Melcoe was operating, the honest one had been shot. Having thus disposed of him, Fade-eye Frank and Long Jack Sproul had thrown in with the rustlers. It was a perfect set-up for a wholesale drive of stolen cattle westward to the Pecos and into New Mexico.

But the Tonkaway Indian knew that the news of what he had seen would be well rewarded.

Thus it was that when Louis Blickenstaff pulled wearily into the safety of the settlements with his family, a posse was already forming to go after Peg-leg Melcoe and his rustlers. A rancher named Stevens,

gun-belted and grim of face, called him aside.

“Louis,” he asked bluntly, “where’s your boy?”

Something about his manner made Louis Blickenstaff hesitate. “The Comanches,” he began, “they raided us, an’—”

“Yes, I know. But where’s Ed?”

Probably Louis Blickenstaff had never lied before in his life, but now, on sudden impulse, he said: “Why, he follered them Comanches, Stevens. Figgered maybe he could git back some of the livestock. You know how reckless a young feller is thataway.”

“Reckless is right,” said Stevens dryly. “The Tonkaway says he seen him with this rustler outfit.”

“The Tonkaway lies,” said Blickenstaff evenly. “My boy may be kinder wild—but he ain’t a thief!”

“I hope you’re right. But I figgered it only fair to tell you. We’re goin’ after them rustlers to shoot on sight an’ a prompt hangin’ for them we ketch alive. I’ll be mighty sorry if your Ed’s among ‘em.”

Blickenstaff looked off down the dusty street where a score or more horsemen were gathering.

“Can you furnish me a mount, Stevens?” he said quietly. “I’m goin’ with the posse.”

“Every honest man’s welcome,” said the rancher. “I’ll see that you get a horse.” He started away, then turned back briefly. “You understand your bein’ along won’t be no help to Ed—if he’s among ‘em? Nor you won’t get no chance to bust away from us in the hopes of warnin’ him.”

“I understand.” He hesitated again. “I’d hate for any word like this to git to his mother, Stevens.”

“Nobody but me an’ Rainbolt an’ the Tonkaway knows of it. It won’t git no further, unless it turns out to

be true. In that case—" He shrugged and walked away.

Blickenstaff went at once to the hospitable house where his family had already been taken in. There, for the second time, he lied. "I'm goin' with the posse, Lucy," he announced. "I hear Ed's ridin' for the Walking T's. Like as not he'll join us on the way."

Mrs. Blickenstaff had been too long on the frontier to protest. What men like her husband—and her boy—must do, they would do, whatever the cost to their women.

As for her husband, riding his borrowed bay in the dusty midst of the posse, it was in the worried workings of his mind that, despite what Stevens had said, his boy could not be a thief. If it turned out that he was—what could an honest man like Louis Blickenstaff do about it? Heaviness and dread rode in his mind.

Among these men of the horseback breed who rode with him there was a frequent exchange of dryly humorous banter:

"Whichaway you aim to run when the shootin' starts, Rupe?"

"Sideways," grinned Rupe, who was, as one cowboy put it, "so skinny he could use a double-barrel shotgun for long underwear."

But back of it all there was a quiet grimness—and they rode fast.

WHILE the rustler outfit lingered on Big Jim Creek, greedily increasing their herd by a few more head, the brindled yearling furnished Peg-leg Melcoe's crew with some amusement—and Peg-leg himself with considerable annoyance. It took up with the wagon like a homeless dog. Once or twice when Peg-leg was out looking over the herd, the roustabout kid fed the calf a little corn or some cold biscuits.

Thereafter, no matter how much he was choused, the brindle kept coming back. Old Peg whammed him with the neck yoke when he could hobble close enough, but always the calf returned. Only the fact that he did not want to risk the sound of a shot kept the cook-boss from shooting the animal. He would have cut its throat with a butcher knife, but his crew, respecting his orders in most matters, looked upon old Peg's feud with the bridle as too good a joke to spoil by catching it for him.

Besides, as Snub Johnson wag-gishly pointed out, it was the kid's calf. It would be a shame to discourage the makin's of a first-class rustler by slaughtering the first critter he'd ever slapped his brand on. Actually it was not Eddie Blickenstaff's brand. Having figured out none of his own, he had burned on the BSF iron that his father owned but was negligent about using on milk-pen stock. Eddie was proud of the way he had cured up the arrow wound. Though he choused the calf away when Peg-leg ordered, he continued to make a pet of it when the boss was not looking.

As for quitting the outfit, he did not mention it again. Now that they were about to pull out, the crew was in high spirits that the kid could not help sharing. The adventure of the trail lay ahead.

On the morning set for starting the long drive, Peg-leg sent the kid out with final orders to Snub Johnson, his *segundo*, and was alone at the wagon, hitching up, when the brindle yearling came moseying around, stuck his nose in a pot of cold beans and upset it.

Peg-leg cursed, but for once he did not chousing. Instead, he got some corn from the wagon and poured a little of it on the ground beside a rear wheel. When the brin-

dle put his head down to eat it, Peg dropped a stage-rope noose on his horns and anchored him to the wagon wheel. Into several tomato cans and a ten-pound lard bucket he put a little gravel, squeezed the tops shut, then fastened them with wire to an old, half-dry beef hide. With more of the same he attached the beef hide securely to the hairy, bur-infested bush of the brindle's tail. Out of the medicine box he got a bottle of turpentine.

"Now, you brindled lug-head," he observed with a snort of vicious satisfaction, "I'll bet you don't come back no more!"

As he poured a generous sluice of turpentine where it would do the most good, he cut the yearling loose. With a bawl of surprise and pain the brindle took out, the can-festooned cowhide banging at his heels. As a cowman Peg-leg should have known better, but as a cook he'd had his belly full of brindled nuisance and ached to get even for it.

Eddie Blickenstaff saw his pet yearling hit the herd like a hurricane out of hell. Instantly nearly a thousand wild longhorns threw up their heads and broke in a crashing stampede that not even a hundred riders could have stopped. The kid saw Snub Johnson and his mount go down, heels over head, into an arroyo as the surge of cattle struck them. Yet it was neither this nor the spectacle of the running herd that stirred him most. Farm raised, used to seeing animals petted, kindly treated, the kid's first thought was of the brindled yearling, fleeing thus wildly, tortured by the banging, clattering terror at his heels.

WITH their herd scattered to the winds, the rustler crew were gathered at the wagon in angry council when the citizens' posse hit

them. Peg-leg Melcoe got his gun out for one futile shot before he went down cursing, a bullet through his middle. Heedless of orders to halt, Fade-eye Frank and Long Jack Sproul leaped to their saddles, only to go down in a hail of bullets as they sped across the clearing.

Baldy McHenry and Blackie Orr calmly stayed to fight. But it was against long odds and the righteous fury of honest men that they could not hope to match. As suddenly as it had started, the roar of shooting ceased. With Baldy McHenry dead beside him, Blackie Orr threw down his empty gun. He stood on one leg, blood reddening the pants at his boot top on the other.

"Loan me a gun, boys," he called out calmly, "an' let the show go on!"

But instead, one of the possemen grimly dropped a rope over his neck. As the others gathered closer, Louis Blickenstaff, his round face white with anxiety, clutched at Rancher Stevens' arm.

"My boy," he said unsteadily, "he ain't here!"

"Wait," said Stevens, and strode forward. "Howdy, Blackie," he greeted the surrendered rustler. "I guess you know what's got to be done."

"At least, I won't live to be a damn peg-leg!" Blackie looked wryly down at the blood dripping into his boot. "But don't take all day at it."

"There won't be no unneedful delay, Blackie. But first—is this here all of your crew? The Tonkaway said there was a boy—"

"A boy?" Blackie Orr looked completely surprised.

Stevens nodded.

"Snub Johnson's layin' back yonder where the stampede run over him," said Blackie Orr evenly. "That makes the tally, Stevens."

"My boy, Eddie," broke in Blickenstaff. "They said—"

"Then they must've lied, mister, for there sure as hell ain't been no kid around this outfit. Listen, you fellers aimin' for me to hang or bleed to death? Yonder's a tree. What are you waitin' on?"

It was settler Louis Blickenstaff, with tightly set lips in a pity-whitened face, who loaned the condemned cow thief the strength of his arm to hop over to the tree that was to be his gallows.

ONCE out of the stampeding herd, the brindled yearling had run northward. With only a short piece of the rope that Peg-leg had cut for a lasso, it took the kid several hours of hard, determined riding finally to catch him and cut what remained of the cowhide-and-tin-can scare booger from his tail. Then, driving the calf before him, he laid his course, as best he could figure it, toward the Concho, heading for home. Except for the loss of Blackie Orr's friendship, quitting the rustlers gave him no regrets.

Swinging wide on their return course to scout for Indian or other rustler sign, it was thus that part of the posse topped a rise and saw him.

"Why, it's Eddie!" shouted Louis

Blickenstaff in a queer, gutting voice as they drew rein to look. "An' he's got my brindled yearlin' that them Comanches druv off!"

They rode down to him.

"Howdy, son," Louis Blickenstaff greeted him, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice. "I see you got our calf back, anyways. Your ma'll be mighty proud of you, takin' him away from a bunch of Comanches all by yourself thataway! Why, you've even branded him!"

"Howdy, pa," said the kid. "I jest—"

That seemed to be all he could say. He just sat there, staring at the brindled yearling and blinking hard lest the tears come, a prodigal son who had had his bellyful of the husks of adventure outside the law.

There were a number of things about this providential restoration of his son that puzzled Louis Blickenstaff, but there was no hint of possible doubt in his voice as he turned to Rancher Stevens.

"You see, Stevens!" he said. "I told you my boy wasn't no cow thief!"

If any of the posse suspected the real truth they gave no sign of it. One lank cowboy among them grinned broadly.

"Course he ain't!" he drawled. "He's carryin' too short of a rope!"

THE END.





THE STORY OF THE WEST

told in pictures and text by

GERARD DELANO

On May 31, 1834, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, the new revolutionary head of the Mexican government, denounced liberalism and federalism, disbanded the Texas State legislatures, deposed governors and councils and virtually destroyed the free institutions in the country. Renewed efforts were also made by Mexico at this time to collect customs duties at Texas ports and to put an end to the smuggling of goods through Texas to the interior. These efforts necessitated troops and in January, 1835, Cap-

tain Antonio Tenorio arrived in Texas.

The arrest of a Texas merchant for some purported violation of the law linked with news of even more serious import caused considerable excitement among the American colonists. Santa Anna had sent his troops against the State government of Texas and Coahuila at Monclova and had seized the governor. Through letters seized from a courier bound for Anahuac, the colonists learned that Santa Anna planned to send a large force into Texas.



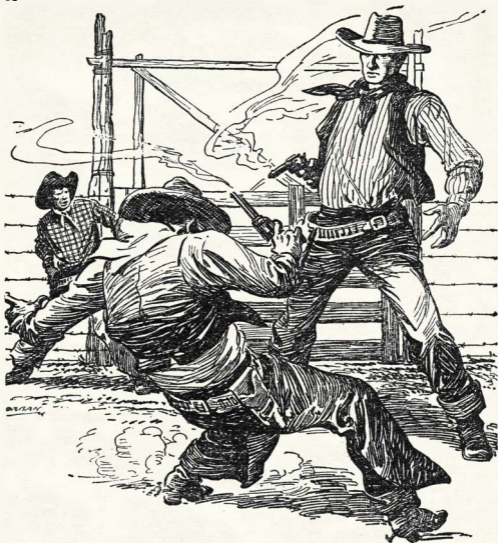
With this ominous news the Texans saw their last liberties crumbling. Meetings were hurriedly called, speeches were made, fists pounded tables! W. B. Travis, a prominent Texan, enlisted a hot-headed volunteer force, moved on Anahuac and on June 29 compelled Tenorio to agree to withdraw his troops from Texas. The majority of the people did not, however, want war and it was felt that Travis' action had been hasty and ill-advised.

The colonists therefore sent a peace delegation to the Mexican officials to make amends as far as possible for the conduct of the war party. The Mexicans, however, would not make peace except on condition that Travis and several other agitators be delivered into hands of the authorities. This the colonists refused to do and the last hope of reconciliation vanished.

While the colonists under the leadership of Austin were planning a further consultation, the Mexican general Martin Perfecto de Cós, brother-in-law of Santa Anna, moved on San Antonio with some four hundred men.

Meanwhile the colonists had received reinforcements and were ready to fight. A cannon which had been buried to prevent its being taken by the Mexicans was dug up and made ready for service, and a flag, on which was drawn the picture of a cannon over the challenge "Come And Take It!" was designed. The Texans did not wait longer for the attack but moved against the Mexican cavalry and dispersed it. So was begun the War of the Texas Revolution on October 2nd, 1835.

NEXT WEEK: FROM VICTORY TO DEFEAT



BULLET BRAND

by JOHN COLOHAN

WIND funneling down El Morro Pass laid rain in flat sheets against the Chicosa railway station. Inside the station office, buried deep in his slicker, Riley Spain watched the play of lamplight on shining rails beyond a rain-washed window while he waited gloomily for Gus Darien to join him for the long ride back

to their Four Bar Ranch.

The night operator, scribbling on yellow paper, turned his glance momentarily toward the big puncher sprawled in the chair. "Glad I'm not in your boots, Spain," he said. "Hate to have your ride ahead of me tonight."

Riley Spain shifted his long body

awkwardly, fumbling for a cigarette. "After so much time you get to like it," he said mildly. He shoved his Stetson back and shadows disappeared from his square-cut, square-jawed face. "You get so you're not comfortable unless you're settin' in the middle of a jug-headed bronc, with rain running down your neck and—"

He stopped suddenly, half-rolled cigarette between his fingers. Above the tattoo of rain beating on the roof, above the howl of the wind, there had come another sound, the muffled report of a shot. Then another shot, and another, and after that three more so closely spaced that they sounded almost as one report.

The operator stared at Riley Spain, hands flat on the top of the telegraph table. "That's trouble," he said sharply. His thin face looked worried under his green eyeshade. "I heard someone screaming—sounded like a woman—"

Riley Spain lurched toward the door, jerked it aside, stood in the doorway looking toward the town. Rain poured from the eaves, stood in pools in the road beyond the station. In the storm this end of town was deserted, dark save for the faint radiance of corner street lights glimpsed dimly through driving rain. The operator grabbed Riley Spain's arm.

"There," he said. "Hear that? That's a woman—"

Riley Spain heard it then, a thin wail lifting above wind and rain, like a woman screaming in agony or desperate fear. The little operator's fingers were biting into his arm.

"There's a light in Henry Brand's office," he cried. "Maybe it's a robbery!"

Across lots, more than a block away, Spain could see the oblong

pattern of light framed by an open doorway in the office of Henry Brand, the land promoter. Just a little while ago Gus Darien had headed toward Brand's office to make final payment on a loan which he and Riley, partners in ownership of the little Four Bar outfit, had made from the real-estate man a year before. Riley Spain had kept on to the railway station to arrange for a car in which he and Gus meant to ship some beef the following week.

"A hell of a night for a robbery!" Riley Spain muttered disgustedly. He bent his head and plowed grimly into driving rain. Wind pinned the slicker tighter around his big frame as he turned across lots toward Brand's office. Rain pounded at him as he slipped and slithered through mud in high-heeled boots. He kept on doggedly.

Somewhere ahead of him a gun barked twice. He came to the edge of Dugan's feed lot and the big barn broke the force of the wind, although the rain still fell in sheets. He stumbled through darkness along the edge of the feed corral, and ahead of him he saw something moving through shadows in front of the barn. He turned that way, and then, quite clearly, heard the screaming voice again:

"Help! Help! Oh, help!"

Something was moving in shadows before the barn. Spain, gun in hand now, stopped in his tracks. His voice lifted.

"Wait! Stand where you are!"

Orange flame stabbed out at him. He felt something like a tugging finger pluck at his slicker and he knew that death had reached out for him. He triggered fast, two shots, straight toward that vague shadow in the gloom. The shadow faded, seemed to dissolve in darkness.

RILEY moved in slowly, gun ready. On his right he could see light shining out through the open door of Brand's office, and then he heard another scream, and he knew now surely that it came from the office of the real-estate man. He moved toward Brand's office, gun ready in his hand, the slicker sloshing awkwardly around his long legs.

He pulled up in the doorway. Inside, a man was sprawled face down on the floor and a frightened, middle-aged woman in black was huddled back against the low railing which divided the office in two parts. Beyond the railing Spain saw a safe door swinging wide. The woman stared at him and seemed about to scream again.

Riley Spain put out a hand. She was Henry Brand's wife. "No need of that, ma'am. I'm here to help you. What happened?"

"They've killed Henry," she cried. "They robbed the safe and . . . and killed Henry. Two men in masks!"

Riley went down on his knees and turned the prone man on his back. Blood was running down the little real-estate man's face and there was a jagged gash on his head just above the sparse line of his hair. Riley Spain felt for his pulse.

"He's stunned," he said. "No need to worry, Mrs. Brand. He'll be all right."

"They hit him with a gun," the woman said dully. "They knocked him down. I thought they killed him."

Running feet sounded on the boardwalk beyond the open door, and Joe Lever and Barney Woods came into the office. Both men wore slickers. Joe Lever looked at Riley Spain, still kneeling above the unconscious man.

"What happened, Spain?"

"Robbery," answered Riley. "They knocked Brand cold. Cleaned his safe, I reckon."

The little Chain Links man rubbed his jaw. "Thought it was a massacre," he said. "Me and—"

More men came on, with Sheriff Lafe Johnson in the lead. The room filled up with men. The sheriff, long and gaunt and melancholy, questioned Brand's wife.

"We were just closing up," she explained wearily. "Gus Darien had stopped in to pay a loan. Then Gus left, and Henry was just closing the safe when the men came in. They knocked Henry down with a gun—"

"There was some shooting," the sheriff broke in.

"I don't know. That was afterward," the woman said.

Riley Spain spoke across silence. "I was at the depot, Lafe. I heard shots, and I started this way across lots. I saw someone moving in front of Dugan's fed barn. I hollered at him and the jasper took a shot at me, so I aimed some lead his way. I think maybe I tagged him, Lafe."

"Show me," said Sheriff Lafe.

The crowd followed the sheriff and Riley Spain through mud across the street to the feed barn where Riley had traded shots with someone in the darkness.

"It was right here," said Riley.

The rain dripped dismally. In darkness the sheriff stumbled. "Wait," he said. He struck a match and light from the tiny flame fell across a sprawled and shapeless figure in the mud. The sheriff went down on his knees. He said, "Great God!" and the match flame flickered out.

He didn't light another match. In the darkness his voice sounded funny. "Riley," he said, "this is Gus Darien. Gus Darien . . . and he's dead!"

Somehow, the rest of that night blurred for Riley Spain. There were parts that he remembered later, after they had carried Gus Darien across the muddy street and laid him on a sofa in Brand's office. He remembered bearded little Doc Farley lending official confirmation to a fact already evident beyond all doubt.

And Riley Spain remembered kneeling above this dead man who had been his partner and wiping the soft mud from Gus Darien's face. He remembered voices in the background, friendly voices, explaining voices that absolved him of all blame:

"The holdup gents must have ducked out through the barn. And Gus had just left. He must have heard the ruckus and trailed after them. So Gus came around the barn one way and Riley the other. Each thought the other was one of the bandits and they traded lead."

That was how it had happened. No doubt of it. Gus Darien had just left the real-estate office, and Mrs. Brand's screams had called him back. He had trailed the holdup men toward the barn through the darkness of the feed lot. And Riley Spain had come cross lots and cut around the barn.

And Riley Spain remembered how gaunt Sheriff Lafe Johnson had put an arm across his shoulder. "You've got to forget this, kid," the old sheriff had said. "It was an accident and everybody knows it. Everybody knows how it was with you and Gus. It's hell all right, but you've got to forget it."

FORGET it! Riley Spain could have laughed at the idea of taking seriously that well-meant advice.

Forget that your bullet had stopped life for the man who had

been your partner for five years, your closest friend ever since you had been kids together. Forget all of it, the night and the rain and the woman's voice screaming above the wind, while you and Gus Darien were trading lead before Gus Darien died. Forget that perhaps you had acted too hastily—forget that maybe, if you had just called out once again, Gus would have recognized your voice and known that you were Riley Spain, his partner, and not a bandit fleeing from a crime. And maybe, then, Gus would be still alive.

In the murky dawn light Riley Spain sat in the neat living room of the log house which he and Gus Darien had built together, trying to figure things out. Sheriff Lafe Johnson had told him that he would have to forget it all—kindly old Sheriff Lafe, who had known him and Gus Darien both ever since they had been babies.

Only there was a catch to that, because if you forgot last night, you had to forget that Gus was dead. You had to keep thinking that pretty soon he would be coming in through the door, shuffling his feet the way he did sometimes when he was tired—and all the time you knew that old Gus would never come through that door again.

Maybe, thought Riley, a drink would help a man forget a thing like that. He had never been a drinking man, nor had Gus Darien, but Gus had liked a drink after a hard day's work and so there was always whiskey in the cabin. There was a full quart in the kitchen cupboard now. Riley got the bottle and spilled liquor into a water glass and came back to sit down again in the long living room.

But whiskey didn't seem to help. Presently the glass was empty, and

filled again, and still it didn't seem to work. Maybe it was because there were so many things in this room that made a man remember Gus: the fancy Miles City saddle that Gus had won in the rodeo last year, the braided rawhide rope that he had made, the cowhide easy-chair that he had built the week when they had been snowed in, two winters back. Things like that.

And then Riley Spain's musing glance stopped on a picture on the mantelpiece above the rough stone fireplace, and from the picture a girl looked back at him. She had grave eyes and a smile, and her dark hair flowed back in soft waves from the smooth, sweet line of her forehead. But the picture didn't help, either, for the girl was Mary Shenley, and Gus Darien had been in love with her. Riley had been in love with her, too, so far as that was concerned, but he had never mentioned it because he had always figured that Mary was Gus Darien's girl.

But Sheriff Lafe was a pretty wise old hombre, and by the time Riley Spain went to bed that night he had decided to take the lawman's advice. Forget it; forget all of it; that was the thing. That was what Riley set out to do.

It meant longer hours in the saddle, because when a man was doing his work from the back of a half-wild bronc he didn't have too much time to think of anything. It meant more trips to town, for there was a certain virtue in the black bottle, as Riley found out, and when a man's skin was full of whiskey he could forget a lot of things. It meant poker playing in the back room of the Silver Dollar in Chicosa, because when a man was gambling he didn't have to go to bed, and when he didn't go to bed he couldn't

lie awake remembering that a bullet from his gun had killed his partner and his best friend.

AND so the days went by somehow. Until that morning when Riley met Mary Shenley in the road. The girl was out for an early morning gallop and Riley was jogging homeward after a night at the poker table. Riley Spain touched his hat and would have kept on, but the girl set her pony before him squarely in the road.

"Long time no see, Riley," she said. "Have you forgotten the way to Jim Shenley's Seven Up Ranch?"

Riley pulled in his horse. It was the first time he had talked to Mary since Gus Darien's death, and Gus was three months underground.

"I've been . . . sort o' busy," he said uncomfortably. "I've been meaning to ride that way, Mary."

He was aware of his red-rimmed, sleepless eyes, of the stubble of beard across his face, of the dead fumes of whiskey on his breath. Devils were driving Riley Spain, and he knew that some part of it must be showing in his face. He wanted to get away.

Mary was studying him gravely. "Dad and I were talking about you just last night, Riley. Dad would like to have you drive over for dinner sometime. So would I."

Riley nodded. "I'll get over that way, Mary, first chance I get."

He rode on, cursing the chance which had caused him to meet Mary Shenley today. His mind drifted back to last night's poker game. He had lost more money than he had planned, more money than he could afford to lose. Now he would have to get a loan from the bank to carry him through the winter.

He found out about the loan three

days later. He stood in the inner office of the Chicosa bank and watched Milt Beales, the president of the bank, carefully straighten half a dozen pens lined up along his desk, and he knew what the answer would be even before the old banker lifted his frosty eyes.

"I'm sorry, Riley," Milt Beales said. "You've got a note running at the bank now, the money you and Gus Darien borrowed to feed you through last winter. It's not too large, but when a man lets his business go to hell for drink and poker it's time for his banker to pull in his horns."

"I see your point," admitted Riley.

He put his shoulders back and walked out of the bank. He went across to the Silver Dollar and had a drink, and then he had another drink. He sat down in a cool corner of the barroom to do a bit of thinking. Without a loan from the bank, he knew that he was through.

"Finished," he said aloud.

And then he remembered the letter which he had received that morning. He had stopped at the post office on the way to the bank, and the postmaster had handed him a single letter which he had shoved unopened into a pocket. Now he brought the letter forth, slit the envelope.

Riley Spain was more than a little drunk when he opened the envelope, but he was cold sober when he finished with the message. It was a note, curtly phrased:

You are a damn fool, Riley Spain. You took the blame for killing Gus Darien. Didn't you ever think to ask the coroner to let you see the chunk of lead that killed Darien?

There was no signature.

Five minutes later Riley Spain stood in Doc Farley's office. The

medico, little and bearded and old, was the county coroner.

"Maybe this is a damn-fool question, doc," said Riley. "Would it be that you've still got the piece of lead that killed Gus Darien?"

The little medico studied him thoughtfully. "I think so, Riley. Yes, I'm sure of it."

"I wonder if I could see it, doc."

They went back into Doc Farley's cluttered, makeshift laboratory. On a shelf in a small glass case were a dozen or more chunks of twisted lead, each bearing a paper tag and a name. Doc Farley brought one forth, and Spain saw that the paper carried the name of his dead partner. He balanced the tiny pellet in his hand, staring at it, trying to keep the excitement from his voice.

"This is it, doc? This is the bullet that killed Gus?"

"That's it," said Dr. Farley.

"You're sure?"

"Of course, Riley. I remember fixing the tag on it."

"Then," Riley said harshly, "I never killed Gus, after all. Because this is a .38 lead, and I never packed a .38 gun in my life. I was wearing a .45 Colt the night that Gus was killed!"

RILEY walked out into sunlight. He sat down on a bench before the Maverick barn and thought he knew now how men sentenced to death must feel when they are suddenly pardoned. He hadn't killed Gus Darien, after all. Someone else had killed his partner—someone who toted a .38 gun.

The robbery itself had never been cleared up. The pair of bandits who had stuck up little Henry Brand that night had escaped with more than two thousand dollars in cash, making a clear getaway. General opinion held that they must have been

men familiar with the town, but rain and the excitement caused by Gus Darien's death had combined to blot out all trace of them.

Now, sitting in sunshine, big Riley Spain mused over this late development. The man who had killed Gus Darien had carried a .38 revolver. Who among the men he knew in this district carried such guns? Not too many; most men favored a larger gun. Names turned over in his head: Dow Thurston of the Hourglass, Jim Eisenstadt, Clay Turner, these men wore .38 guns. Who else?

Dust stirred along the wide road as three riders jogged into town. Joe Lever, of the Chain Links outfit; Barney Woods, and Sim Anderson, who worked for Lever. Something clicked in Riley's brain. Joe Lever and Barney Woods had been the first two men to show up on the scene after he had reached Brand's office on the night of the robbery. And Joe Lever packed a .38!

Riley Spain sat still, considering the facts. Joe Lever carried a special gun, a .38 mounted on a .45 frame. More than once Spain had heard the little Chain Links man bragging about the shooting qualities of the gun. Could Joe Lever be the killer?

Other facts seemed to fall into place. The men who had robbed Henry Brand had both been masked. One had been small, slightly built; the other had been a large man. Joe Lever was a little wasp of a man, and the other bandit could have been Barney Woods. Riley Spain began to get excited.

The hazy beginning of an idea was already forming in his brain as he watched the three riders stake their mounts at the hitch rack before the Silver Dollar Bar. Joe Lever might be the man. He had to know. He pushed himself erect

and walked toward the Silver Dollar.

The three men were lined up at the bar. Riley went past them and called for a drink of whiskey. He drank the drink and called for a second one. He didn't down the second drink; just looked at it. Then he glanced at Joe Lever, standing at the far end of the bar.

"Heard you bragging once about that gun of yours, Lever," he said.

Joe Lever had a narrow, pointed, weasel face. His voice was soft. "It's a good gun."

"I'll shoot you for the drinks," offered Riley.

Lever studied him speculatively. Riley Spain knew that the Chain Links man thought that he was drunk. It was just as well. "The drinks and a ten-dollar bill," Joe Lever said. "To make it sort o' worth while."

"It's a bet," agreed Riley.

The town was dead in mid-afternoon. They went out behind the saloon, the bartender with them. Riley crossed the alley and lined five beer bottles on a plank against the side of Dave Sheely's ice house.

"Five shots," he said. "Top score wins."

Joe Lever nodded. He fired five fast, deliberate shots. He broke all five beer bottles. It was good shooting. "Beat that," he said.

Riley lined up five more bottles on the plank. He fired one shot. It went high, and the five bottles still stood intact on the plank. He slid his gun back in holster.

"That seems to settle it," he said mournfully. "I couldn't beat you now."

Back in the saloon he paid Lever ten dollars and bought a round of drinks before he wandered out. He had the air of a man drifting aimlessly, but presently he had circled the block and he was back again at

the ice house where he had matched his shooting skill against that of weasel-faced Joe Lever.

AN hour later Riley pulled up in the shade of the awning in front of Herman Wald's gunsmith shop. The little gunsmith was seated on a bench, an unlit pipe between his teeth. Riley sat down beside him.

"One time, Herman," Riley said, "you told me that every gun left its mark on bullets fired from it. Sort of a brand, you might say. You told me you could tell if a certain gun fired a bullet just by looking at the spent lead."

The squatly built, bald-headed little gunsmith nodded placidly. "Ja, that is right." Herman Wald was Swiss, and he was an artist in his line.

Riley laid two misshapen pellets of lead on the bench beside the gunsmith. One piece of lead he had borrowed from Doc Farley; the other he had dug with a pocketknife from the thick walls of Dave Sheely's ice house.

"Those two bullets, now," he said. "Could you tell me if both of them were fired from the same gun?"

The little gunsmith picked up the chunks of lead. "Wait," he said, and disappeared within his shop. Riley rolled a cigarette. Herman Wald came out and passed the two pieces of lead back to him.

"The same gun fired both bullets," he declared.

Muscle made a little lump on Riley's bronzed jaw. "You're sure?"

"Ja. You understand, Riley, there are certain matching characteristics that—"

Riley shook his head. "I'm just a cow nurse, Herman; you're talking Greek to me. But I'd want to

be sure of this. Almighty sure."

"There is no doubt," the little gunsmith said. "No doubt at all."

So there it was. Riley Spain had roped a hunch and pulled it down and put his brand on it. He felt spent, all done, like a man at the end of a long and tiring race. But it wasn't over yet.

Joe Lever was the man. Now, with the facts assembled, Riley could remember other things. He could remember that Lever, who didn't have much of an outfit, always seemed to have plenty of money. He could remember a list of unsolved robberies stretching back across the years since Joe Lever had first showed in this country. Joe Lever and Barney Woods—they were the pair who had robbed Henry Brand that night. Joe Lever had killed Gus Darien!

The three horses were gone from the hitch rack in front of the Silver Dollar. Inside, the fat bartender spread elbows on the mahogany and shook his head at Riley's question. "Joe and the others pulled out half an hour ago. Said they were heading home."

Riley's mount was at the livery stable. He threw a saddle on the horse and pointed him out of town. He wasn't planning very far ahead and he had no very definite idea of what he meant to do when he caught up with Joe Lever. He knew that Lever had killed Gus Darien, and he knew he was going to throw the charge in Lever's teeth. It would be pay day for somebody.

IT was six miles or so to Lever's Chain Links outfit at the bottom of Gray Creek. Holding his horse to a steady jog, Riley had covered half the distance before it occurred to him that he should have told Sheriff Lafe of the discovery he had

made. In the event that he didn't ride back to town again, the knowledge might have been useful to the sheriff.

It was too late then. Dust was stirring far ahead of him, and the big cowboy kicked his bronc into a faster gait. Another mile and he had gained enough to see that three men rode ahead of him. He knew they were the men he was trailing.

He caught them at the big wooden gate before the lane leading to the Chain Links. Barney Woods was just opening the gate when Riley pulled his plunging bronc down a dozen feet away.

Riley swung from saddle and went toward them through soft dust. Joe Lever's horse was fidgety, dancing and curvetting in the road. Riley Spain looked at Lever.

"Better climb outa that saddle, Joe," he said softly.

"What?" Joe Lever demanded. But the weasel-faced little rider must have had a premonition then, for he slipped from the saddle in one swift movement to stand straddle-legged in the dust, letting his pony go. "What's that you said, Spain?"

Barney Woods was at the open gate, his big shoulders bunched and his head shoved forward. Lanky Sim Anderson was still in saddle, but Riley saw the skinny rider's right hand drop from sight behind the body of his horse. Riley had a hunch that maybe he had overmatched himself, but it was too late now. It didn't make much difference.

"You and me, Joe," Riley said, "we had a shooting match a little while ago. This is another one. But this time it's for keeps."

A little flame glinted in Lever's eyes. "What in hell you trying to say, Spain?"

"This," said Riley. "You robbed Henry Brand three months ago, you

and Barney Woods. You killed Gus Darien that night."

"You're crazy!" Joe Lever scoffed. "You're plumb crazy, man!"

But Riley knew he wasn't crazy. Partly he was dealing in guesswork, but Joe Lever couldn't know that, and Riley could tell by the strained whiteness of Lever's face that he had hit pay dirt.

"Not crazy, Joe," he said softly. "I've got all the proof I need—proof enough to put the rope around your neck."

"You have?" Joe Lever said. His voice was soft, a whisper. "Then—"

He drew. Swiftly, with no warning. His arm struck down and up and shining metal made an arc in sunlight. Then the gun was roaring in his hand. It fired once, and again. What happened was strange enough. At thirty paces Joe Lever could pick off beer bottles in a row, but he couldn't hit a man at point-blank range. He fired twice, and twice his shots went wild, and Riley Spain had him before he could trigger lead again. Riley's slug smashed into him and drove him backward and sent him spinning into dust.

The rest was dust, confusion, the blasting roar of guns. Sim Anderson was in it now, firing wildly from the back of a rearing, plunging horse. Barney Woods was a chunk of ice beside the gate. He was taking deliberate aim when Riley Spain whirled on him, but Riley flung himself aside just as Woods' gun roared. He stumbled and went down, and by that narrow margin he saved his life. He had felt the bullet burn like flame across his side.

Sprawled in soft dust in the road, Riley saw Woods lining his gun coolly for a second shot. Riley spun like a cat and brought his gun around and snapped a shot toward that iceberg of a man braced on

pillared legs beside the gate. And luck was riding with him, for the slug knocked Woods off balance and made him grab at the gatepost with his free hand for support. Barney Woods shot twice wildly, all of his coolness suddenly gone. His gun was roaring in his hand when Riley's second slug crashed into him. Barney Woods let go all holds then. He stood up for a second, shoulders straight, before the slug slipped from his fingers. He seemed to take forever to fall to the ground.

Riley Spain lurched to his feet. Under his shirt he could feel the warm blood running down his side. He had lost track of Sim Anderson, but the rider should still be in the fight. Then he saw the Chain Links man.

Sim Anderson was out of it. Something, a bullet burn or the roaring of the guns, had frightened the lanky rider's mount, and the horse was turning out as fine a job of plain and fancy bucking as Riley Spain had ever seen. It was twisting, pitching, sunfishing, going high and coming down in a series of stiff-legged jolts that kept Anderson's head snapping back and forth. Lanky Sim Anderson was fighting the horse like some star performer in a rodeo.

The pitching horse and the rider went around Riley Spain in a tight little circle. Riley loaded his gun again, watching it out. He watched Sim Anderson saw the horse's head around until the animal's muzzle was almost in his lap, watched Anderson drop from the saddle. Riley went toward the lanky man.

"That was nice riding, Sim," he said. "Your gun's there on the ground. I'll wait for you."

Sim Anderson stared at him. "No," the rider said hoarsely. "I never had no part in that killing,

Riley. I stayed with the horses that night. I never knew Lever killed Gus Darien until he told me about it at breakfast next morning."

Riley Spain nodded. "We'll go in and tell it to Sheriff Lafe," he said.

WHEN it was all over they sat in Sheriff Lafe Johnson's office, the sheriff, little Doc Farley and Riley Spain. Riley told them how he had traced the killing of Gus Darien back to Joe Lever. At the end of the story Sheriff Lafe shook his head gloomily.

"It beats me," he said. "I been wearing a badge of one sort or another for twenty years and I never heard nothing like it." He found a bottle and glasses stacked in a drawer and lined them up on his desk. "It makes Sherlock Holmes look like a shorthorn," he declared.

He poured drinks. Riley Spain lifted a hand. "Deal me out. I'm pretty well caught up with my drinking." He watched the gaunt-faced sheriff fill two glasses. "It was plumb luck, Lafe. Running down that bullet, I mean."

Sheriff Lafe looked at him pityingly. "Luck!" he said. "Well, it panned out, anyway. I got the whole yarn from Sim. Seems like Gus Darien must have seen the tail-end of that robbery, must have seen Lever and Barney Woods running across the street afterwards. So Gus came loping back, throwing lead all the way. The barn was locked, and he had the pair of them cornered for a minute. Only Gus got impatient. So he went charging in, gun spouting, and Joe Lever killed him."

The sheriff shoved a glass toward Doc Farley. "Then Lever and Barney started around the feed corral toward their horses. They saw you coming and it drove them back to

the barn again. And Lever took a shot at you. You threw some lead at him, and then you ran across the street to see what was happening. When we went back afterwards, there was Gus dead in front of the barn. We figured you'd killed him."

The lawman downed his drink. "So everything is fine," he said heavily. "Joe Lever and Barney Woods are dead, and Sim's in jail. Only I never heard nothing like it. Mebbe you better tell him, doc. He's got a right to know."

Little Doc Farley cleared his throat. "You see, Riley, Mary Shenley came in a couple of days ago. Lafe and me were just having a drink. Mary's a pretty smart girl, you know. Your name came up. Mary went on to say how you were brooding because you'd killed Gus Darien. She said you were drinking too much, gambling too much—"

"She said," interposed Sheriff Lafe, "that you was going to hell, in a ladylike way—"

Riley Spain blinked his eyes. "Me? Going to hell in a ladylike way?"

"She said it in a ladylike way," the little medico explained. "So Mary said we ought to do something about it, figure out some way to

make you believe that maybe you hadn't killed Gus, after all. Then Lafe got his idea—"

"Best idea I ever had," the sheriff put in.

Doc Farley ignored the interruption. "So I sat down and wrote you a letter," he said. "Wrote it in a fine, large hand and didn't sign it. You see, Riley, we'd decided to try to persuade you that somebody else's lead had killed Gus. You packed a .45 Colt, so a .38 bullet was indicated. Not having a .38 handy, Lafe went out and borrowed one. He fired a bullet into the ground and then we dug the lead up and put it in a glass case with Gus Darien's name on it."

Riley sat up straight in his chair and stared at the little medico.

"You mean . . . you mean, Doc, that bullet you showed me the other day wasn't the one that killed Gus?"

Doc Farley shook his head. "The slug that killed Gus went plumb through," he said. "We never found it."

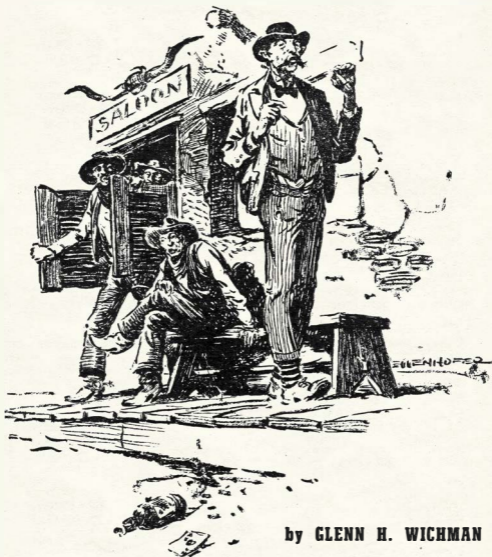
"Then . . . then—"

"That's what we're trying to tell you, son," Sheriff Lafe Johnson said. "It makes a man ponder somewhat. Because I went across to the Silver Dollar to borrow a gun that day—and Joe Lever was the first gent I met who was packing a .38."

THE END.



A LOT OF HOT HEIR



by **GLENN H. WICHMAN**

HEP GALLEGHER and I were making a violent assault on some brush in Sawbone Wash with our brush hooks when Harry Jones, the Rafter O boss, came ridin' up. Harry was smiling out of the corner of his mouth and looked to be considerably amused.

"Hep," Jones said to my partner,

"there's a guy out from San Raphael waitin' at the house to see you. He's got some news that'll knock you plumb off your feet. I reckon you won't ever be cuttin' brush again."

"Sheriff?" I asked.

The boss shook his head. "Nope. Hep's about to become a well-known public character."

"I ain't too much surprised," Gallegher said importantly. "The other day when I was in town a fortune-tellin' gypsy lady told me that I was goin' to amount to somethin'."

Harry Jones wouldn't tell what it was that happened but all the way back to the ranch he kept grinning as if something struck him funny. We left our horses in the corral and walked up to the ranchhouse. A very fine-lookin' man dressed in store clothes was on the veranda. He came down off the veranda to meet us.

"Mr. John Bradford," the boss said to the stranger, "this is Hepburn C. Gallegher." He pointed at Hep. Then he pointed at me. "An' this is Gallegher's partner, George Armstrong. Both are very fine gents though sometimes they get a little soft in the head."

John Bradford looked hard at Hep and made a deep bow. "Your lordship," he said. "This is a great pleasure." He put a lot of emphasis on the word "lordship."

The boss chuckled. "Hep, you didn't know you were a lord, did you?"

Of course Hep didn't. And neither did I. And I couldn't imagine anybody else knowing it, either. So far as I knew, Gallegher had been chasin' dogies ever since he was big enough to sit a horse, and his pa had done likewise before him.

Gallegher was completely dumfounded when he heard the news; just as dumfounded as though somebody had suddenly hit him on the head with a bale of alfalfa.

"Lord—" he repeated, and forgot to close his mouth. He stood there looking as if he were trying to trap flies.

"Yes, indeed," Bradford told him. "Your late great-uncle, Lord Algeron Tweedy-Catchbull, has passed

away. You are next in line. So now you are Lord Hepburn Tweedy-Catch-Bull. Congratulations, your lordship."

John Bradford looked to be sober enough and not at all pie-eyed. And he was as serious as a judge and as pious-lookin' as a parson. He certainly gave the appearance of tellin' the truth.

"Lord!" Gallegher repeated again, and gulped. "I can hardly believe it."

"Neither can I," I chimed in. "Hep, this guy must think you're somebody else. He's got you mixed up with a Johnny Bull. Or with two other guys. Tell him he's crazy."

Hep didn't like this too well and anyway by now his mind was starting to work. He was a great hand at believing what folks told him, especially if it was something foolish that nobody else would believe.

"I come from an old English family," he lied with dignity. "I haven't mentioned it before, because there was no reason why I should. After all, a man is naturally backward about mentioning such things."

"Your lordship," Mr. Bradford suggested, "may I speak with you in private?"

THIS was all right with Gallegher. The two of 'em wandered off into the sycamores and left me and Harry Jones standin' there.

"Did you ever hear of the like?" the boss exclaimed. "But it ain't impossible. All of us have ancestors that came from Europe at one time or another. That's the place where the lords an' dukes live, so why shouldn't some of us be related to 'em. Bradford was tellin' me all about it."

"Yeah," I had to admit, "anything along that line's possible. But it ain't very probable. Gallegher's

a nice enough guy, but he ain't any more a lord than he is an antelope. And you know it as well as I do."

"Now I wouldn't be too sure of that," Harry argued. "Bradford oughta know. He's come all the way out here from New York just to look Hep up. He's representing some firm of British lawyers."

Gallegher and John Bradford talked for some time and then Bradford climbed up onto the buckboard he'd come out from San Raphael in and started back toward town. Hep came up to the veranda where me and the boss were sitting on the steps. He looked mighty important and his chest was swole out so that his shirt looked likely to bust.

"You fellers haven't heard nothin' yet," he said. "Did you know that when I've come into my estate, I'll be part owner of the Box Bar C?"

Of course, neither of us did. This was even more astonishing than the news about him being Lord Tweedy-Catchbull. The Box Bar C was the biggest prime-beef outfit around and was generally referred to as the "syndicate." Everybody had always known that there was a lot of English money in it.

"By now," I told him sarcastically, "I expect you remember your great-uncle Lord Algernon Tweedy-Catchbull. It would be just like you to remember him, even if you never heard of him."

"Now don't try an' be funny," said Hep. "I don't remember him. But I do know that my pa used to say that the Galleghers were famous people in the old country. And hereafter it'd be more polite if you gents'd refer to me as your lordship."

"Certainly, your lordship," Harry Jones said.

With that Hep turned around and started for the bunkhouse. I fol-

lowed him, and when I got there he was looking in a mirror.

"For the first time in my life," Gallegher said, "I'm lookin' at a live lord. Remember, George, the lord we saw in the wax works at the circus?"

"If I remember rightly," I informed him, "the lord we saw was hung for bein' a pirate. That's practically the same as bein' a horse thief. Only it ain't even as respectable as bein' a horse thief."

Hep wasn't paying any attention. "I'm a pretty good-lookin' lord," he observed. "Take a good look at me. You wait until I get some store clothes on an' I'll look even better. I'll sure cut a figger in San Raphael. Lord Hepburn Tweedy-Catchbull!"

I asked him why he hadn't gone into town with Bradford.

"I'm goin' in tomorrow," he explained. "I'm goin' to live there for a few weeks until the estate's settled. I reckon I'll cut quite a figger there."

"It may not be a bull you'll catch," said I. "You watch yourself or you'll catch some bullets. Gents in San Raphael won't stand for much nonsense. Not even from a lord."

When the rest of the Rafter O ranch hands came in from work and heard the news they had quite a time with Hep. If it hadn't been for me and Harry Jones they'd have tossed him in the horse trough and mebbe drowned him.

"No rough stuff," the boss ordered. "You boys go easy on his lordship. You might go pullin' somethin' that would have international complications."

Next mornin' Harry Jones said that me an' him would go to town with Hep so as to kind of look after him.

"A lord," Harry said, "should

have a retinue and not be wanderin' around the country all alone like a common saddle tramp or a sheepherder. It wouldn't be decent."

Neither me nor Hep knew what a retinue was but that was O. K. At nine o'clock the three of us rode off for San Raphael.

"Lord Tweedy-Catchbull," Hep announced, "will ride out ahead. You men may follow behind him."

"All right, your lordship," the boss agreed. "Lead off."

ME an' Harry Jones ate Hep's dust all the way into San Raphael. When we got there we found John Bradford standing on the plank walk in front of the hotel. As we came up to the tie rack and dismounted, Bradford took off his hat and doubled himself up like a jackknife.

"Good morning, your lordship," he said to Hep. Then he straightened up and reached in his pocket for a roll of bills that was big enough to have choked a team of horses. "Your lordship," he continued, "here's a thousand dollars for your current expenses. May I suggest that your lordship go to the local haberdashery and be attired suitably to your changed position?"

Neither me nor Hep knew what a "haberdashery" was, but it turned out to be the general store. All of us went over there and got together with Nate Goodwin, the proprietor.

"Some new Levis, Hep?" Nate asked helpfully. "An' I've got some swell sateen shirts in assorted colors."

"Levis, my eyes!" snorted Gallegher. "I think I'll have me a derby hat, a silk shirt, a pair of pants—"

"And a coat and vest," John Bradford interrupted, "together with a

pair of patent leather shoes with buttons."

"How about some spats?" the boss suggests.

"I doubt very much," Bradford said haughtily, "that they have any spats here. But it'd be a fine thing if they did, because Lord Tweedy-Catchbull should certainly wear spats."

"Lord Tweedy-Catchbull," Nate Goodwin, who was kind of an outspoken guy, repeated. "Who in Hades is he? What are you guys talkin' about?"

John Bradford pointed to Hep. Harry Jones pointed to Hep. And so did I.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Nate exclaimed. "When did all this happen?"

"Kindly attend to your business," Bradford advised him shortly. "Hep Gallegher is now Lord Tweedy-Catchbull. Please don't delay his lordship."

Nate Goodwin apparently didn't know whether to laugh or bust Bradford one, but when he saw the size of the roll of bills that Hep carried, he didn't do either. He dusted off all his fancy clothes and carried them into the back room. Here we shucked Gallegher down to his red flannels and began trying on pants and coats and other items.

Immediately difficulties developed. The only pair of pants that would fit at all, were too short. They ended midway between Gallegher's knees and ankles.

"Pants always lengthen with age," Nate said, so we took them.

The coat couldn't be buttoned in front because Gallegher had too large a chest.

"It's too warm to button a coat, anyway," the boss remarked, so we took the coat.

Nate only had two derby hats in

stock. One was too small, the other too big. Hep took the large one, although it made his ears sag. Then Nate pulled out a pair of shoes with white tops. They were so big Hep could have worn both feet in one shoe.

"O. K.," Hep said, and put on the shoes. "I'm certainly not goin' to wear boots now that I'm in the peer-age."

Me and Jones and John Bradford followed Hep out of the store. Gallegher was certainly a sight. I'd never seen a queerer-lookin' guy in my life.

"We must be patient with his lordship," Bradford said to us. "Of course, when he gets some clothes that fit, he'll look better."

By now, Hep had developed a thirst and he led the way across the street and over into the saloon. Of course, he attracted a lot of attention. Men stood in awe and wonder and gaped at him with their mouths open. The general opinion seemed to be that he was out of his head.

"Whiskey," Hep ordered. When the glasses were filled he held his up to the light. "To my great-uncle Lord Algernon Tweedy-Catchbull, who made me what I am today."

"Down the hatch!" Harry Jones said enthusiastically.

John Bradford took charge of the toasts from then on. Under his prompting we drank to one lord, two dukes, one and one-half earls and some other guys with whom I wasn't personally acquainted.

By this time a lot of loafers had gathered in the barroom to watch us. Hep turned to them.

GENTS," he announced, "I'm Lord Hepburn C. Gallegher Tweedy-Catchbull. I own quite a slice of the Box Bar C. I'm a very

famous guy. Belly up, gents! We'll have a few on an ex-dogie chaser who's now been turned into a noble."

This was fine with everybody. The bartender did a land-office business.

About this time a fellow with whiskers horned in on me and Hep and Harry Jones and John Bradford. I knew him in a left-handed way. His name was Doug Laskey and he rode for the Box Bar C. Doug, I judged, wasn't as old as his whiskers made him look.

"Gallegher," Doug Laskey said, "are you sure that you're Lord Catchbull?"

"He isn't even sure he's alive," I answered. "But don't let that give you a headache."

Laskey promptly backed water. "No hard feelin's, gents," he said quickly. "I was only joking. The next one's on me."

We had the snort and then Laskey backed off and talked with some hard-lookin' guys that he seemed to be with. Personally, it appeared to me that Gallegher was being let in for something.

From then on the goings on in the saloon got kind of dizzy. There wasn't much sense to anything because everybody was thirsty and Hep had a barrel of money. After a while I found myself over in a corner of the barroom with Harry Jones.

"Harry, old pal," I said, "you know good an' darn well that Hep isn't any more Lord Catchbull than he is the Emperor of Japan. What's the meaning of this hogwash?"

Harry Jones only shrugged and walked away. I went over to John Bradford.

"Bradford," I said, "why in the name of heaven have you gone to all the trouble to make a fine cow-

hand like Gallagher into Lord Tweedy-Catchbull when you know he isn't Lord Tweedy-Catchbull?"

Bradford shook his head. "If Gallagher isn't Tweedy-Catchbull," he said, "then who is he?"

"How should I know!" I demanded.

Things didn't get any more sensible. A lot of looney guys had taken to carrying Hep around on their shoulders while they sang songs. The only trouble was that no two men sang the same song. It sounded like a riot in a boiler factory.

After a time Harry Jones began to get worried.

"George," he said to me, "I think we all oughta get out o' here before his lordship falls apart."

"That's a fine idea," I agreed. "We'll take him an' Bradford over to the roomin' house."

"It's a bargain," the boss said, and we shook hands on it.

A big difficulty developed almost immediately. When we went to get Hep and John Bradford, we couldn't find 'em. A moment before they had been in the barroom. Now they weren't.

"Mebbe it's my eyes," Jones suggested.

But it wasn't his eyes because

neither Gallagher nor Bradford were anywhere in sight. We consulted the bartender. He didn't know what had become of 'em. We consulted a lot of other gents. Nobody could give us any help. They had dropped from sight.

WE went over to the general store and Gallagher's horse was still tied at the hitch rack where he had left it. We began looking around and about, but there was no Lord Tweedy-Catchbull.

"By the way," the boss said finally, "unless I disremember entirely, this bird Doug Laskey was the only gent who publicly doubted that Hep was Lord Tweedy-Catchbull. It seemed to make him kind o' mad."

"Let's find Mr. Laskey," I suggested.

So we started on the look for Doug Laskey, but he wasn't anywhere around, either. After a while me an' Harry Jones got so sleepy we stretched out on some hay in the livery barn.

The boss yawned. "George," he said to me, "something must be done immediately. Here only yesterday Hep was an honest cowboy cuttin' brush in Sawbone Wash. He didn't have a care in the world because I

NO EXTRA COST FOR VITAMIN A

(CAROTENE)



**SMITH BROS.
COUGH DROPS**

(BLACK OR MENTHOL-5¢)



was payin' his wages regular. Now just look at him!"

"I wish I could," I told Harry. "That's what's troublin' me. I can't look at him. He's nowhere around to look at."

"He's now a lord," Harry Jones said. "A lord behind the eight ball. Lords haven't any business bein' hoof loose out in this country."

"That don't help Gallegher none," I said.

"No," the boss admitted. "It don't. Well, let's go to sleep now an' mebbe when we wake up we'll have thought of somethin'."

So me an' him went to sleep and we didn't wake up until the sun was settin'.

"Have you thought of anything?" I asked the boss.

"No," Jones said, "I haven't thought of anything but this: We've gotta find Gallegher before somethin' happens to him."

"What could happen to him?" I wanted to know. "Except that he should get rolled for the money he's carryin'?"

"Shucks!" the boss said.

Our conversation didn't hold together very well.

"Besides," Harry added, "we've gotta keep an eye on this man Bradford."

We washed our faces in the horse trough and went up to the saloon. The barroom was deserted except for a collection of guys sleepin' in the far corner. San Raphael had had a hard day and the citizens were tuckered out. The town was as quiet as a church after the audience had deserted it by goin' to a fire.

Me and Harry had a little something to wake us up.

"It's about time," I said, "that we got down to doing some reasoning.

Why not start out with this: John Bradford come out here to find the heir to old Lord Tweedy-Catchbull. It's nothing unusual for heirs to disappear. But Bradford knows that Gallegher isn't any Englishman. Anybody could tell that. John Bradford ain't an idiot so he must have had a reason for picking Gallegher. He knows that Hep isn't the new Lord Tweedy-Catchbull. Now why would he have selected him?"

"George," the boss told me, "you have a remarkable mind. I shouldn't wonder if you weren't right. And now poor Hep's got himself in a jam. It ain't fair to cowboys. Let's be up and doing. We ain't yet looked hard enough. We must rescue the poor guy."

So me an' Harry Jones constituted ourselves into a posse of two to search for Gallegher. And the odd thing about it was that we found him! *He was in jail!* We looked through some cracks in the hoosegow and there was Gallegher, derby and all.

"How is your lordship?" I asked.

"Pretty low," Lord Tweedy-Catchbull moaned. "I've got a pain in my head."

"It's a wonder," said I, "that you got a head left to have a pain in."

"This is an insult to the nobility," the boss put in. "We'll get your lordship out of this booby hatch or bust."

Me and Harry went up to see Sheriff Bill Peterson.

"He's in jail," the sheriff explained, "for impersonatin' a noble. Hep's no more a noble than he is a ham sandwich. An', by the way, I'm gettin' kind of tired of this horseplay. And also Hep's held for embezzlement. That means spendin' money that wasn't hisn."

"How much bail," Jones wanted

to know, "will it take to get him out of hock?"

"Two thousand," the sheriff said.

"I always stand by my hired hands," the boss replied generously. And darned if he didn't write a check for two thousand.

"Who was it in particular," Harry Jones asked, "that accused Gallegher of not being Lord Tweedy-Catchbull?"

"Doug Laskey," Peterson answered. "Doug claims that he's the real and genuine lord and that Gallegher's just a ringer. Doug's probably right."

"And where might Mr. Laskey be now?" the boss asked.

"The last I saw of him he was goin' into the roomin' house with this fellow Bradford."

"I feel like fightin'," Hep said when he was let out of the jug. "I've never been more insulted in my life. How in the world can I prove that I'm Lord Tweedy-Catchbull so's to keep from goin' to the penitentiary for havin' spent money that didn't belong to me?"

"This is a fine time to be thinkin' of that," I told him. "You oughta have thought of it yesterday."

We went up to the street and found Sheriff Bill Peterson, looking very disconsolate, standin' on the plank walk.

"Gallegher," the sheriff warned, "don't try an' run away just because you're out on bail. If you was to vamoose I'd chase you to Siberia and back. Any man who spends other folks' money in these parts is due for the rock pile."

Hep groaned and looked very worried.

Just then there came a sound from the distance. It was faint, but you could tell it had been made by a human being. In fact, it sounded like a man who was scared to death.

PETERSON started across the street and the rest of us followed him. We went in behind the rooming house. The sound came again. Louder, this time. It seemed to come from an old adobe that was down among the cottonwoods by a bend in the creek. Yellow light came from one of the windows.

This adobe didn't belong to anybody in particular. It was used mostly by cowhands who didn't have the price of a room in the roomin' house. With long and determined strides the sheriff set off for the place. Me an' Hep an' the boss trailed him.

"Quiet, you birds," the sheriff warned, as he came nearer. "You make more noise'n a stampede. We'll see what's goin' on here."

We came up to a dirty window and saw what was inside. Two men were there. Doug Laskey and the fancy John Bradford. Only Bradford wasn't very fancy any more. One eye was swole entirely shut and he was dust from head to foot. It was pretty evident that he'd had a good workin' over. Doug Laskey stood in front of him, his fists clenched.

"You've gotta get it through your thick head, Bradford," Laskey was saying, "that I'm Lord Tweedy-Catchbull! If that idea don't take lodgment in your dome, I'm goin' to knock your head plumb off your shoulders."

"But you're too young," John Bradford objected. "You could never get by in London as the heir. There's not a chance of it!"

"Who said anything about London!" Doug Laskey yelled. "What I want is the part of the estate that's owned here—his lordship's slice of the Box Bar C! That's the only thing he owned that I give a damn about!"

Bradford made a hopeless movement with his hands.

"It'll be a cinch," Laskey continued. "Gallegher'll go to the penitentiary for pretending to be what he wasn't. That'll get him out of the way. There's nobody else to argue with."

Bradford looked as though he wished he was somewhere else.

"I've made an awful mess of this," he moaned. "You want to remember that the real heir to Lord Tweedy-Catchbull is probably livin' around here somewhere."

"If he shows up," Laskey said, "he'll be a fake. I'll fight him. It'll be just another gent to end up in boothill."

"Oh, oh, oh," Bradford groaned. "I should have stayed in New York."

Harry Jones shoved his elbow into my ribs and whispered: "You were right, George. I'm sorry that things are workin' out the way you thought they would."

Personally I didn't know what he meant.

Then Doug Laskey seemed to lose his patience. "Bradley!" he roared, "I'm through stallin' around with you any longer! I'm takin' you up into the hills! After you've starved a week you'll be darned glad to admit that I'm Lord Tweedy-Catchbull! Then we'll come back here and we'll attend to Gallegher! I'll take over my estate an' you'll do exactly as I say!"

"There seems to be very little sense to anything," the sheriff murmured. "I can't make head or tail of it. I think I'll start shootin'. Just on general principles." He started for the door, but the boss stopped him.

"It's time I drew cards," Jones said. "I'm sorry to have to do this, but it's necessary. I'll go in first."

He shoved open the door and jumped into the room, his hand on his gun. The rest of us followed.

Doug Laskey spun around, drawing his hardware. But the boss was a lot too fast for him. One blast of the boss' .45 and Laskey's gun was all the way across the room.

"Hoist 'em!" the sheriff hollered, and Doug Laskey, after some fancy cursing, put up his hands.

John Bradford still looked as though he wished he was somewhere else.

"Listen!" Doug Laskey growled at us from between his teeth. "You men are makin' a bad mistake! You're holdin' up Lord Tweedy-Catchbull. And Lord Tweedy-Catchbull ain't anybody to monkey with! I'll have the law on you if I have to call out the army! You've tried to put one over by robbin' me of my heritage an' givin' it to this fathead, Gallegher!"

"Shut up!" the boss put in. "Let's all be as calm as possible and get the straight of this. Bradford, lay your cards on the table. You've got some aces up your sleeve. Let's have a look at 'em. Tell us the whole truth."

BRADFORD seemed willing to have it over with. He unwound his larynx and got started. "Twenty years ago Lord Algernon Tweedy-Catchbull quarreled violently in London with his only heir, a young man named Reginald Terwillinger. Reginald Terwillinger swore he would never have anything more to do with his lordship and ran away to this country. Before he left he managed to destroy all pictures of himself that could be found. He changed his name and came West. We think that he settled in this part of the country. A year or so after

Reginald had gone, his lordship forgave him and wanted him back. He tried for years to locate him, but never could.

"Well, finally Lord Algernon died a few months ago, and the heir had to be found. We hired detectives. They thought that Reginald Terwillinger had maybe settled in this valley but they couldn't locate him. I had an idea how to find him. I came here and looked for some man who I thought could be flattered into posing as Lord Tweedy-Catchbull. Inquiry revealed that Mr. Gallegher could be counted on to do practically anything. I hoped in this way to get the real heir to reveal himself—"

"You did!" Doug Laskey cut in. "I'm him!"

"You're too young," Bradford objected. "You must have been in knee pants when Lord Algernon and Reginald Terwillinger quarreled." "You're a liar!" Laskey hollered. "I'll have the law on all of you!"

The boss sighed. "Shucks!" he said. "I guess I'll have to confess. I, myself, am Lord Reginald Terwillinger Tweedy-Catchbull. An'

here all the time I was hopin' that my past would never catch up with me. That I could always be just Harry Jones, the owner of the Rafter O. But the truth will out. I thought I could make Hep into Lord Tweedy-Catchbull! But unfortunately, I guess I can't."

Right then the riot started because the boss' words had the ring of truth in 'em. Doug Laskey tried to get away but the sheriff knocked him down and sat on him. And Hep took a swing at Bradford, but missed.

"Come! Come!" the boss said. "Let's have a little peace for a change. Hep isn't going to any penitentiary. It was my money he spent. By now the town must have recovered enough so that it can stand another drink. But dammit, the first bird who calls me 'your lordship,' gets a sock on the puss!"

The sun was just coming up next morning when we got back to the Rafter O. But Gallegher and the boss and John Bradford seemed to be under the impression that it was the moon. In fact, Gallegher thought that it was two moons.

THE END.

BIT MAKERS

THE most popular bridle bit among Western stockmen has always been the hand-forged spade bit. Formerly these were beaten out of selected steel by men who were handy with blacksmith tools, and on whose hands time hung heavily. Many of them were made in the workshops of a State prison.

The Navaho Indians, who have what amounts to a hereditary genius in the working of metals, learned at an early date to make very satisfactory bits and were among the first bit makers to inlay their work with silver. The pattern in some of these very old bits is worked into the steel so skillfully that the line between the silver and the steel cannot be detected except under a glass.

The short chains once seen on all spade bits have, for the most part, disappeared. Today the bridle rein is buckled or looped directly into the ring at the lower end of the bit. There were many reasons given for the use of these chains. One was that they protected the leather of the rein from water, and therefore decay, when the horse drank with the bit in his mouth. The most likely answer is that cowboys liked to hear them jingle.

GUN BAIT



By **EUGENE R. DUTCHER**

By standing tall on a three-legged stool, Jay Benz could just see over the sill of the high, barred window. Behind him the dimly lit jail was quiet except for the sound of closing shutters as Sheriff John Tolliver moved from window to window.

But outside on the street men were milling about like restless cattle. Their voices were whiskey shrill and more than one hand held a rope. Jay Benz's fingers kept rubbing his throat. Hanging wasn't a good way to die. Bitterly his young eyes fastened on the big barns and office of the Fairview Stage and Freight lines directly across the street. Two years ago that had all belonged to him, and how proud he had been of it! That was before burly Harry Olmen had shown up with a string of wagons.

"I want your outfit," Olmen had told Jay bluntly. "I'll freight at a loss and carry passengers for nothing until you're broke."

Six months later Jay had been forced to sell out to his rival at five cents on the dollar. "But I'm not through, Olmen," he had declared. "I'll get back what's mine if I have to steal it back."

But now at last Jay was ready to admit that he was through. Through the window he could see Harry Olmen sitting comfortably before the stage office. Olmen was taking no part in the excitement, but two of his boss drivers, Tom Potter and Limpy Tex were in the thick of things. Potter, standing head and shoulders above the milling mob like a gaunt, hungry, timber wolf, was rehashing a story he had already told.

"I was driving the stage," he was saying, "when Benz stuck it up. He had got the strong box when old Pop Hillford started to get out of the stage. Pop wasn't reaching for

a gun, but Benz let him have it. He'd've got me, too, only the horses bolted."

Limpy Tex hopped about the edge of the crowd on his club foot, waving a flask. "What we waiting for, boys?" he shouted. "Let's go get the devil!"

Men swarmed forward, their bellies hot with liquor, their minds inflamed with rage. Pop Hillford had been a grand old fellow. He had carried many a busted cow-puncher on his books when he didn't stand a chance of being paid. Now Pop was dead—murdered.

Jay watched them coming. A strange, bitter smile held his lips. Eighteen months ago those same men had sympathized with him when Olmen had taken his freight line. They had smiled knowingly as the months passed and Jay Benz started holding up Olmen's freight wagons. Nothing was ever taken but the mules and gear. Stage stock vanished mysteriously from the pastures. And those same men who now were demanding Jay's life had turned their backs when he had driven stolen horses across their range toward the border. The whole range had felt that Jay Benz was only taking back what was rightly his; it was a private fight between Olmen and Benz, as long as Benz kept his head and didn't turn real outlaw.

Outside, Tom Potter was howling, "When Benz took the money he said he was through stealing mules, that he'd found out how easy it was to stick up a stage and he was going in for the big dinero."

JAY stepped down from the stool. "They're coming for me, John," he said. "Are you givin' me a gun?"

Sheriff John Tolliver closed the last heavy shutter over the windows.

"No, J. B." Tolliver had always called Benz that ever since they had barefooted it along the creek together. "If I gave you a gun I'd expect you to use it, and those fools are drunk. Sober, most of 'em are respectable men with families. They're sounding off now because they've got some liquor in 'em, but I can hold them, J. B. They'll listen to me."

Jay didn't argue. He glanced through the bars to the battered desk top. There, a framed photograph of his sister smiled at him. Mary's arm encircled the shoulders of a little boy, and the lamplight seemed to give life to their faces. It didn't seem like five years since Mary had married John Tolliver.

"How is sis taking it?" Jay asked softly.

"Hard," Tolliver answered. It was the first real chance they had had to speak together since a posse of cattlemen had brought Jay in thirty minutes earlier. For an instant they stood there, watching each other through the bars, their young faces gray in the lamplight. Perhaps both were remembering those other days when they had played sheriff and robber. Even as a youngster, John always had wanted to be the sheriff. They had built jails of thin willow limbs. But Mary never wanted them to play that game. Tears streaming down her cheeks, she would knock down the willow bars. She hadn't wanted her big brother in jail, not even a play jail.

Jay Benz felt fingernails biting at his palms. In the little white house at the edge of town Mary would be crying now for that same big brother, but these bars were of steel.

"Mary says she won't believe you killed Pop Hillford," said John Tol-

liver as if he had read his brother-in-law's thoughts. A few freckles stood out brown against the young sheriff's gray cheeks. "I don't, either, J. B., but deciding guilt is a jury's job, not mine. I'd have brought you in long ago for stealing Harry Olmen's stock if I'd been able to catch you."

"That's just it," Jay declared. "Don't you see I just about had Olmen busted, buying new stock and gear. He hasn't paid his drivers in three months. He knew you'd never catch me without the cattlemen's help, so somehow he had to turn the whole territory against me. The killing of Pop Hillford did that, John. Tom Potter lied about seeing me. It would have been easy for Potter, driving the stage, to do the job. Pop was his only passenger. Or maybe Tex helped Potter."

A bottle crashed against the high barred window and glass tinkled on the floor. Gun butts beat against the office door with merciless purpose.

Tolliver paid no heed. "I believe you, J. B.," he said. "Your trial won't be for a week. That gives me seven days to prove Olmen framed you."

Jay heard the splintering of wood as eager hands tore the top from a hitch rack. "I think," he answered, "you've only got about five minutes, John. Harry Olmen doesn't want me to come to trial."

His words were lost in the crash of the battering-ram against door. Fists pounded the rear door as shouting men encircled the jail, cutting off all chance of escape.

"We're coming in, Tolliver." That was Tom Potter. "You make any trouble and we'll take you along with Benz. All right, boys, bust her down!"

Again the door shook dangerously

under the blow of the battering-ram.

"They mean it, John," Benz said urgently. "Don't be a fool! You've got sis to think about."

BUT Tolliver was fitting a key into the cell lock. He was realizing now, when it was too late, that these men no longer were the respectable cattlemen he knew, but a mob goaded beyond all reason by Olmen's hirelings.

As Jay stepped into the office, Tolliver pushed him toward the cot. "Get under it," he said, "and don't move no matter what happens. I'm going to let them in."

"It won't work," Jay warned, but Tolliver was already at the front door. Quickly Jay rolled under the cot where a Navaho blanket hanging nearly to the floor concealed him from view. Hardly had he stopped moving when he heard the bolt slide back. His cheek pressed the rough boards. By turning his head slightly he found he could peer through a tiny hole in the blanket. He saw Tolliver jerk the door wide and step back. Angry faces jammed the opening and men shoved and pushed their way in.

Tom Potter in the lead saw the empty cell. He was a scarecrow of a man; six foot six tall, with clothes that hung loosely on his frame.

"You turned him loose, Tolliver," Potter pointed a long, accusing finger at the sheriff. "You let that devil get away!"

Someone opened the back door, and Limpy Tex shoved his small body through the muttering crowd. "Tolliver must have snuck him out the back door before me and the boys covered it," he said. "Well, men, what we going to do with that kind of sheriff?"

They sounded like a snarling pack

of dogs, fighting over a bone. From under the cot, Benz saw someone snatch the star from Tolliver's chest and part of the shirt tore away with it. A rope dropped about the young sheriff's neck and was jerked so fiercely it brought him to his knees.

Jay fought down a desire to roll into the open. Getting himself killed would do no good. Anyway, he knew the mob would do no physical violence to Tolliver.

The sheriff had risen to his feet. "Listen, men," he called, "you're wrong. Jay says—"

Tom Potter's long arm shot out. He drove a balled fist into Tolliver's face. "We want none of your lies!" the stage driver rasped. A moment later they were dragging the helpless sheriff toward the street.

Muscles aching, Benz waited for the office to clear. But one man remained behind after the others had stamped out.

Harry Olmen leaned against the wall like a huge toad. His little eyes peered straight at the cot.

Jay was not even conscious of the splinters that were biting into his palms. He was only aware that a gun lay on the desk between him and Olmen. If he came out rolling—with that thought Jay's strong young body started tightening up. Then he realized Olmen was deep in thought and that his eyes weren't seeing the cot at all.

Anger reddened Olmen's big jowls. His belly, bulging below and above a hand-tooled belt, quivered a little with a rage that must have been caused by the supposed escape of the prisoner.

The room grew deathly quiet. It seemed to Benz that he lay there for hours, while the sounds of the mob died away.

Suddenly Olmen's lips lost their

angry set and twisted into a grin. His huge stomach shook to chuckles as he left the jail to follow the mob.

Swiftly Jay rolled clear of the cot. He didn't try to figure what had caused Olmen to smile. The man had some new devilment in mind, but this was no time to worry about that. Jay scooped the .45 from the table, unaware that Sheriff Tolliver had been about to take it to a gunsmith to have the hammer, which was jammed by a piece of broken spring, repaired when the posse had brought in his brother-in-law.

JAY left the jail by the rear door, running swiftly along the backs of buildings. Faint shouts far ahead guided his footsteps. He kept telling himself the mob would never harm the sheriff, but he knew better. Pop Hillford had been loved by all, and now those hot-headed, half-drunken fools felt that John had let Pop's murderer go free. They wouldn't listen to the truth.

Jay had reached the outskirts of the town when orange tongues of fire reached up and licked the black night apart. That was John Tolliver's home going up in flames! The distorted shapes of men leaped about in the red light.

Jay's young eyes seemed to take heat from the fire. He started circling, keeping well beyond the reach of the jumpy light, hunting sight of John and Mary. With the gun thrust before him, he crossed the street under tall cottonwoods and slid forward, hugging the shadows.

He saw them then; three figures standing alone out there in the center of the dusty street. John, Mary and little Bobby. The child, frightened by the blaze, whimpered and clung to his mother's dress. Mary's right arm encircled her husband's bare waist, for John had been badly mauled. Neither spoke, just stood there watching, black silhouettes against the firelight.

Jay sank to a knee in his scant shelter. He was remembering how proud Mary had been of the new, white house and its flower beds. How John had put every penny he could spare into it. Why, only a year ago they had held a housewarming. These very people who were burning their home had been their guests.

Suddenly Jay heard the crunch of boots. Two men were coming toward him under the cottonwoods. He recognized Tom Potter's long, loose figure and the quick, limpy step of Tex. Then he saw Harry

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

(yes, I did—actually and literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 45 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You too may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 8, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 8, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

Olmen coming from town. The three met directly before Jay's hiding place, so near he could have reached out and touched their boots.

"How are things going, Tom?" Olmen grunted around his cigar.

Potter reached for the makings. "Tolliver tried to do some talking," he replied, "but everybody figured he was lying. Them cattlemen didn't want Tolliver hung, but they gave him twenty-four hours to get himself and his family clear out of town. We won't have to worry about him, but it's too bad Benz got away."

"Not so bad," Olmen said thoughtfully.

"But, listen, boss," Tex put in. "Our freighters and stage drivers want their back pay. That stick-up we framed on Benz got us just enough dinero to settle the feed bill, but hay ain't going to do us no good without drivers. We got to have more money, and quick, too."

Olmen's blunt finger knocked ash from his cigar. "Come on down to the office," he said, "and we'll talk over ways of getting that money."

Jay waited only until the three were lost in shadows, then he crawled back from the street and ran for the stage office. Soon he was hurrying along the backs of buildings in the lead of Olmen and the other two. He ducked low to avoid light shafting through the rear window of a café rear window and nearly fell as his boot skidded on a wet spot where the cook had thrown out dish water.

Reaching the freight office, Jay opened the door on a crack. A lamp burned low on the table. He stood there uncertainly. The only hiding place inside was a curtained corner—a mighty bad place to be trapped in if he were discovered. But the peeled-log walls were thick. He

wouldn't be able to hear Olmen's plans from the outside. The picture of Mary and John and Bobby standing forlornly in the street sprang to his mind. Perhaps he had a chance to show the ranchers what fools they had been, a chance to get John back to his star.

Quickly Jay made sure his boot held no mud from the dish water that might leave tracks on the floor, then slid inside. His left hand was reaching to lift the curtain when something stirred in a shadowy corner.

Jay pivoted, swinging his gun up. But it was only Ratter, the old gray tomcat who haunted the freight office. Ratter's yellow eyes glared at Jay for a moment, then he went back to licking a paw. From outside came the thump of boots on the boardwalk. Quickly Jay pushed in among the hanging coats and drew the curtains together as the front door opened.

The swivel chair before the desk squeaked as Olmen eased his big hams into it. Tex squatted on the edge of the desk, one of his boots nervously thumping its side. From the tiny slit between the curtains, Jay watched Tom Potter finish drawing the heavy drapes over the windows, then come to stand before Olmen, his long arms dangling awkwardly.

"What's the dope, boss?" he asked.

Olmen was facing the curtained corner, but his gaze was fixed on his big thumbs which were pressed together over his heavy paunch.

"Tomorrow," he said slowly, "the bank is sending out a big slug of money on our morning stage. With Jay Benz running loose, who do you figure would get blamed if the stage was held up?"

Over in the corner Ratter was the

only one not paying keen attention to Olmen. Ratter's nose wrinkled. He sniffed. There was a mighty good smell coming from behind those drawn curtains; the smell of good, greasy fat. Ratter made a beeline for the corner, mewing plaintively as he approached. The men, used to the cat's presence in the freight office, paid no attention to him.

Tex's short leg stopped its bumping of the desk. He squinted down at Olmen. "You want Potter and me to hold up the stage?" he asked. "That's no good. We'd be recognized. Me with a limp and Potter standing four inches taller than any other gent in the country."

"That's right," Olmen agreed, "but you're not leaving anybody alive on that stage to talk."

JAY hardly took in what they were saying. Fascinated, he watched Ratter stalking toward his hiding place. The gray head and shoulders pushed through the curtains. Then Ratter squatted down and, purring loudly, commenced licking the particles of fat, left on Benz's boots from the dish water behind the café. Squatted there, the cat held the curtains slightly apart at the bottom, revealing the boots to anyone who might glance that way.

Jay tried desperately to move deeper but found his body already pressed tightly into the corner. Slowly his fingers fastened hard about the butt of his gun, for Olmen was staring directly at Ratter. But Olmen's eyes were smoky with thought.

"You'd better lay your trap in Slade Canyon," he told Tex. "There's good cover where the stage stops to water at Trout—"

Now Olmen was vaguely aware of

the cat. His dark eyes were recording the fact that Ratter was licking the sole of an old boot in the curtained closet, but then Ratter was always licking something. Suddenly Olmen reared up as he remembered that he had left no boots behind the curtain.

In that instant Jay knew he had been detected. His thumb hooked on the hammer of his useless gun and a sinking feeling struck the pit of his stomach as it refused to lift.

Olmen was plunging forward, Tex spinning. Potter's hands drilled down toward hips as Jay came out from behind the curtain, the useless .45 held high for a club. Jay struck at Tex, who was nearest him. The killer spun full into the lashing gun barrel and kept on spinning until he struck the floor.

At the same time, Ratter, badly frightened, and looking for the tallest thing in the room to climb, spied Potter's long frame. Squalling lustily, the yellow-eyed cat sprang, striking Potter full in the chest, and hung on, claws sunk deep in flesh.

But Olmen's square body was driving in, cutting Jay off from the rear door. Quickly Potter got rid of the squalling cat and was coming at him from the rear.

Jay hurled his gun at the table lamp, hoping to plunge the room into darkness. But it missed its mark. Desperately Jay side-stepped Olmen's bullish charge. His fist clipped the square chin as it passed, but the move carried him close to where Tex lay half dazed on the floor. The killer grasped Jay's ankle and held on as Potter's long arms closed in from behind, pinioning Jay's arms. While they held him, Olmen, his legs spread wide, drove savage blows into the prisoner's unprotected face and body.

Jay never knew when those blows

stopped falling. When his head cleared and he could see straight again, he found himself on the floor, back braced against the wall. His three captors knelt in a ring before him.

Olmen was grinning through bleeding lips. "Glad you dropped in, Benz," he said. "Mighty glad, 'cause tomorrow you're going to join us in a stick-up. When we're done, you're staying behind—dead—and everybody is going to figure you had a pal that got away with the money." Olmen stood up. "Get some horses," he ordered. "Bring them out back."

Tex, still holding the side of his head, limped from the office, and Olmen turned to Potter.

"You'll stick around here, Tom," he snapped, "and get the stage started in the morning. Then head for the hide-out. We'll be waiting for you."

JAY watched the dawn come, and its gray light reflected the pallor of his cheeks. All night he had lain, bound hand and foot, on the floor of Olmen's tumble-down cabin far back in the Elkhorn Mountains. Now Olmen stood in the doorway, drinking hot coffee and watching for Potter's arrival. The stage would have started with the fading of the stars, so as to complete the long run to Deerfly before dark.

Outside, Tex was saddling the horses and Jay knew he was about to make his last ride. He wondered what John and Mary were doing. It was pretty awful, this thing he had let happen to them. But those two had courage; they could take it. They'd go away and start all over. Perhaps build a new white house in a new town. A shout came from the timber, broke into Jay's musing, and Tom Potter spurred into view.

He dropped from the saddle and loped toward Olmen.

"Hell's to pay now," Potter told his boss. "The stage is on its way and John Tolliver and his wife and kid are aboard!"

Olmen threw his tin cup on the ground. "You fool!" he raged. "You knew our plans. I told you to take care of things."

"Yeah," Potter gulped, "but I couldn't do nothing about it. The ranchers give the Tollivers twenty-four hours to get out of town, and there was a dozen gents to see they caught the stage. When they missed me they got Hank Lucas to drive the stage and they sent along a shotgun guard, too!"

Tex spit the butt of a cigarette to the ground. "There goes our holdup," he grunted. "Nobody would believe Benz would shoot it out with his brother-in-law, especially with his sister aboard."

"No," Olmen agreed, pacing back and forth. "No, they wouldn't. But I've got to have that money! The drivers will quit if they don't get paid. An' that would break me." Suddenly he pulled up short. "Everybody knows Tolliver let Benz get out of jail," he said thoughtfully. "They know him and his family are on the stage. Suppose the Tolliver family disappears. Wouldn't folks figure John Tolliver helped Benz pull off the stick-up, then took the bank's money and beat it?"

"Sure," Tex agreed. "But how you going to make the Tollivers disappear. I'll go to guns with John, but when it comes to his wife and kid, count me out."

"Me, too," Potter added. "I done for Pop Hillford, but killin' women an' kids ain't in my line."

Jay was listening in stunned silence.

"You fools," Olmen's voice rasped through the stillness. "If we take the Tollivers into Mexico they won't come back, 'cause we'll bury John Tolliver and tell Mary her and the kid will go the same way if she ever shows up again. Get Benz into a saddle. We got to hurry!"

Jay was forced to ride with his hands tied behind him. A dirty gag had been shoved into his mouth and bound tightly.

With Tex and Potter in the lead and Olmen and Jay bringing up the rear, they dropped swiftly down the mountainside toward Slade Canyon and the stage road. An hour's riding brought the morning sun slanting through pine boughs. The air was still chill, but sweat ran in the drawn lines of Jay's face as he saw the road below; a brown line running in the bottom of Slade Canyon.

Soon Olmen called a halt in a bull-pine thicket. Jay was yanked down the saddle and sent stumbling down a game trail ahead of the others.

HARDLY had they taken cover a thirty yards above the road on a ridge top when the stage rocked into view around a bend a half mile away. A shotgun guard sat beside the driver, who was sending his double span forward at an easy trot. Jay felt Olmen's blunt fingers bite into his arm as the man snapped final orders at Tex and Potter.

"Wait till the stage stops to water at Trout Creek," Olmen ordered. "Get the driver and guard first. If Tolliver puts up a fight, drop him. It'll be easier packing him off dead anyhow. I'll take care of Benz."

Tex dropped to a knee and leveled his .30-30 over a boulder top as Potter took cover behind a tree.

Now Jay could just about see the figures through the coach windows.

It was futile to try to shout a warning, for no sound would pass the gag. He strained against the ropes, but they cut deeper into his wrists. Off on his left Trout Creek bubbled down a small canyon to bisect the road below them, and the sound seemed to roar inside Jay's head. He became aware of the brush-choked gulch below him on his right. It cut away from the ridge where he stood and joined Slade Canyon and the stage road sixty yards above the ford. If he could only dive into the brush and reach the road before the stage passed that spot!

But Olmen was so close Jay could feel his hot breath on his neck. The man was holding a gun against Jay's ribs. Jay gathered muscles, feeling the futility of what he was going to attempt. With all his might he drove an elbow into Olmen's middle. There was a startled grunt, and Olmen staggered back as Jay catapulted his body out into space, striking on a shoulder yards above the shielding brush.

From above, Olmen's .45 leveled on Jay's rolling form, but he did not fire. A shot would warn the stage. As Olmen came plunging down the steep canyon in pursuit, the brush closed about Jay. He fought to his feet and, with tree limbs lashing his unprotected face, stumbled down the canyon.

Behind him Olmen was beating through the brush like a charging bull. It was a crazy race, the two of them floundering, falling, crashing on, neither gaining ground; while on the road the stage rolled forward, the rumble of its wheels and the pound of hoofs drowning out those sounds that might have warned of danger. And on the ridge, Tex and Potter waited, cheeks against rifle stocks, for the coach to enter their trap.

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To Jay it seemed that hours passed before the brush thinned in front of him. Then he was on the road and running hard as the coach rolled into view. The driver reared back on the reins. The guard's sawed-off shotgun jumped to his shoulder at sight of the wild-looking figure charging at the stage, arms bound behind him, a dirty cloth over his mouth.

Then Olmen broke from the canyon. His .45 roared as it became impossible to maintain the deception. Jay stumbled under the drive of lead, but he kept going. While the stage drew to a halt, the door swung open and John Tolliver came out shooting.

Under the assault Olmen dropped sideways behind a boulder. Rifles cracked from the ridge and the driver slumped down in the seat. The guard, too, took a bullet in his chest. He jerked upright, then plunged from the coach, dead.

It was Mary's arms that helped drag Jay inside the stage. John backed in after him as the panicky horses plunged forward. The stage lurched crazily from the road. Then as a wheel struck a tree, leather parted and the horses bolted, leaving the coach behind.

Mary's quick fingers had already freed Jay's wrists and he jerked the gag from his mouth. Potter and Tex were running down the ridge, pausing to trigger their rifles into the stage as they closed in. From behind the rock Olmen added the thunder of his six-gun to the attack. John was answering him slug for slug.

"Get Mary out of here," John yelled over his shoulder, but already Benz had opened the door on the far side.

Jump, sis," he called. The white-faced girl, holding Bobby close, obeyed. Jay followed, and John Tolliver dived after them. They

lay in the tall ferns at the roadside between two fallen trees while steel-jacketed bullets splintered the thin walls of the stage.

"Save that lead, you fools," Olmen bellowed at his killers from across the road. "They've jumped and are laying low the other side of the stage. Circle them and close in fast. There are posses out hunting Benz, and if they heard the shooting we ain't got much time. It's them or us now!"

With only one gun among them the little party from the stage waited in their nest of ferns. Jay was bleeding badly from a flesh wound in his left arm, but he was scarcely conscious of it. Peering through the ferns he saw Potter and Tex dart across the road. It was evident that they no longer felt any compunctions about killing a woman; now Mary was just another witness who must be removed.

"Better give me that gun, John," Jay said. "I always was a bit better shot than you."

But John Tolliver shook his head as he shoved fresh loads into the gun.

"I'm still the sheriff," he answered, "even if they did take my star; and this is a holdup! When—if I go down the gun's yours."

Mary had placed Bobby behind one of the fallen logs for protection. "Lay still, dear," she whispered. "No matter what happens, you mustn't move." Gently she loosened the clutching fingers from her arm. "You must be brave like . . . like your daddy." Her voice broke, but her face was strong and composed as she crept back to her husband's side.

Tex was advancing toward them, hopping from tree to tree along the road's edge. And Jay heard the snapping of tree branches as Potter

circled through the timber to take them from the rear. Abruptly the sounds ceased and he knew Potter was slipping stealthily forward, lost in the maze of tree trunks and ferns. He knew, too, that it was suicide to crouch here waiting for the moment when the .45 fell from John's lifeless fingers. He could see the guard sprawled back there in the open road, shotgun lying beside him. Not a chance to reach it. His only hope was the stage where the driver lay, one hand hanging limply over the edge of the seat. If he could only get the driver's gun—

At that moment Olmen lifted head and shoulders above the rock and fired. "Give it to 'em, boys!" he yelled. "Give it to 'em!"

Tex leaped into the road. He had discarded his rifle for a pair of six-guns and came limping forward, firing with each step.

Jay reared up, determined to take a chance. Two quick steps and his boot lifted toward the hub of the big wheel. His fingers caught the edge of the seat. The coach was still between him and Olmen, but Tex was pouring lead at him, shooting for speed, not accuracy.

Only Mary saw Potter's cautious advance from the rear. For an instant her lips were frozen as Potter's rifle rose to cover her husband's broad back.

"Behind you, John!"

With her scream John Tolliver wheeled from Tex, and Jay, aboard the coach, snatched the driver's gun from its holster. The reports rolled together. John's .45 bucked a slug into Potter's chest. The man's rifle cracked in answer, but Potter was pitching backward. It was Tex who drove lead into John's side and in turn was sent sprawling as Jay blasted him from atop the coach. Then Jay, too, went down to a knee.

Only one man came out of that flurry of fighting without lead biting at his flesh. Harry Olmen safely held his cover behind the rock. It was just the two of them now, Jay and the man who had done his best to ruin him.

Again Olmen fired across the rock's top and again Jay sank lower. His left side was numb, his leg giving away. He knew he could not hold on much longer. He felt himself going over backward and was powerless to help himself. Then, surprisingly, his shoulders found support.

"Fight, Jay, fight!" Mary's lips were close to his ear. She had sprung to the wheel hub. Her right hand gripped the seat edge, her left arm encircled Benz's waist as he leaned heavily back against her. "Fight," Mary whispered fiercely.

As if in a fog, Jay saw Olmen's red-jowled face over the rock. Holding the .45 with both hands, Jay leveled it and squeezed trigger. Black smoke belched from the barrel, and when it drifted away Harry Olmen had pitched forward and lay sprawled across the top of the stone. There was no life in the finger that still held the dangling .45 by the trigger guard.

Mary lost her grip on the seat edge and the two of them toppled from the coach. Jay didn't remember striking the ground, didn't hear the beat of hoofs as riders came four abreast down the stage road.

COUGHING and sputtering as someone tried to force a drink of whiskey down his throat, Jay opened his eyes and looked up into a ring of solemn, anxious faces. John lay at his side, with Mary kneeling between them, rocking Bobby in her arms.

"Limpy Tex talked before he died," Mary said happily. "He cleared you, Jay, and told how Potter killed Pop Hillford."

Jay turned his head and looked into his brother-in-law's smiling eyes. John's left side was stained red where a slug had grooved his ribs, but he did not seem to be badly injured.

"Reckon Sheriff Tolliver will have to sell the Fairview Stage line with Olmen dead," a gray-haired cattleman was saying. "You ought to get it cheap, Jay, 'cause we mean to see there ain't nobody but you bid on it."

"Yeah," another rancher chimed in, "and your first freight is going to be a load of lumber from Deerfly. Me and the boys are building a new house where some drunken fools burned one down. The whole territory owes you plenty, Jay, for clearing out Olmen and them two killers of his."

Tears of happiness were streaming down Mary's face as she looked from her husband to her brother. Jay's hand groped out and found John's.

"I want to stand trial for stealing Olmen's stock, John," he said. "I always meant to do that once I'd broke him."

"Sure, sure," his brother-in-law grinned, "and a cattleman's jury will give you about ninety days in bed until those wounds of yours are healed up. Everybody always figured you was just taking what was really yours."

Cowpunchers were bringing back the runaway horses. "That gray mare," Jay said drowsily, "needs a shoe on the left forefoot. She'll be going lame." It was grand to be the owner of the Fairview Stage and Freight Line again, he thought, as he closed his eyes.



Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

DURING the past year your fire-arms editor has received a number of inquiries about sun glasses. This subject comes up at regular intervals. It covers primarily "shooting" glasses, but branches out into a much larger field of sport.

There are more problems in connection with this so-called shooting glass than one would generally realize. It is because of this that we are devoting the department this week to a subject vitally affecting everyone.

Why do shooters wear glasses?

In the first place, they desire one hundred percent eye protection. In using a gun, there is always a possibility that gas will leak back through the action and strike the eyeball. This is bound to be disastrous. No one has invented a glass eye through which you can see. Always bear that in mind.

Moreover, there is the problem of the practical use of shooting glasses other than for safety. Shooters prefer glasses because they more clearly

define the target, whether it be a tiny bull's-eye or elusive game. They do not desire glare which might cause them to miss a shot, whether the glare be from sun on snow or from bright-yellow sunlight on water or on deep-green shrubbery. And so they wear glasses.

Does it really matter what you wear for glasses, provided they reduce glare?

It most certainly does. The majority of glasses are essentially "colored." Colored glass in itself is extremely cheap.

If you were to go into the business of bottling soft drinks, you would find any of the glass manufacturers ready to supply you with several gross of bottles with any label you wish blown on them, any size, any shape, at a tremendously low price. Quart bottles would probably cost

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you in quantity three cents apiece, and if you were to weigh one of these quart bottles you would find it weighed very close to two pounds. Thus you can get two pounds of colored glass, any color you choose, for three cents, or one and a half cents per pound.

When you buy sun glasses that cost around a half dollar, that is the type of glass you get. It's merely the cheapest possible grade of glass with a little bit of dye stirred in to secure a color.

Do you wish to test it? That's also simple. If someone tells you that a pair of glasses is not harmful to your eyes, try them on. Sit down in your home under reasonable illumination and pick up your evening paper. If you can read two columns of type in that paper without having the type become blurry and without getting a headache, there is probably nothing the matter with your glasses. Usually, before you read a half column, you'll notice the eyestrain.

If glasses have that effect in reading a paper, they are not the proper kind to wear under any conditions. True, you may wear them all day without noticeable ill effects. Cheap glasses are pressed out, not optically perfect and not ground on their surfaces. The manufacturer can't afford to grind them at the price. Result will invariably be damaged eyesight. It isn't worth the price.

Do not purchase any shooting or

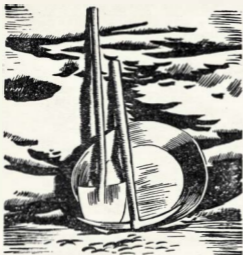
sun glasses which cost less than a dollar. If you do, you take a chance with one of your most priceless possessions, your eyesight. Optical glass is a careful blend, entirely different from bottle glass. It costs money to prepare. Suitable lenses begin life three eighths of an inch thick. They are ground down to slightly more than one sixteenth of an inch, using only the perfect center of the glass blank. This costs money, but it does insure perfect eyesight. Bear that in mind when you pick your optical equipment to wear this winter.

Lots of readers want to know about removing dents from shotgun barrels. Many seem to feel that a dent can do no harm and can quickly be shot out with standard ammunition. Don't do it! You may get a blown-up gun even with a small dent. A barrel dent that can be seen by looking through the barrel affects the forward movement of the wad sealing the powder charge, even if for only a fraction of a second, and can build extremely high pressure in the form of a sudden blow. This may take the side out of the barrel.

How to remove dents? Don't try it yourself. You may weaken the steel and spoil your barrel. The Ithaca Gun Co., Ithaca, N. Y., has an expert who has specialized in this work for a lifetime. The charge is \$2.50 on any make of barrel.

If you are interested in making a cartridge collection and would like to hear from other collectors, write to this department, inclosing a three-cent stamp for a list of names which will be sent to you as soon as it is compiled. In this way you may be able to trade some of your duplicates with others for something you really need for your collection.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns And Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure you inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

GOLD in Texas has been the general theme of many inquiries. Thomas M.'s recently received letter from Little Rock, Arkansas, is typical of the questions asked.

"How come," he writes, "that there isn't more about Texas gold prospecting in your columns? Texas is a big State, mountainous in the western part, and it looks to me like there ought to be gold there. What's the answer? Has gold ever been found in Texas?"

Yes, Tom, gold has been found and mined in Texas. But the total value of all the yellow metal produced there is only somewhere between one hundred thousand dollars as tops, and fifty thousand dollars

for low guess. Moreover, the bulk of this yellow metal has come not from gold mines, but as a by-product in ores that have been mined because of their main values in other metals—silver and copper. There is one outstanding exception to this. The Heath Mine in Llano County is a Texas gold mine that has produced some real Texas gold.

But that's just one side of the picture—the gloomy side. Texas has not been prospected as thoroughly as perhaps it should have been. In the early days this may have been due in part to the wildness, the size, remoteness, and general desolation of the western mountain segment of the State. In fact, there is plenty of country in the Big Bend sector today down around the Santiago Mountains south of Alpine virtually as wild and lacking in trails, let alone roads passable for cars, as it was in the days of the Spanish conquistadores.

Aside from the roughness of much of the Texas possible prospecting terrain is the fact that in Texas there are no Federal public lands, the kind of land on which prospecting may be carried on freely, and claims staked upon discovery of ore or metal. Texas was an independent republic before it entered the Union, and part of the bargain was that the new State retain all the lands it then possessed, without turning over an acre to the general Federal public domain which even today comprises such a large part of the territory of the other Western States.

In Texas, all mineral rights belong to the owners of the land surface.

For further detailed data on the possibilities of Texas gold write Mr Thompson, in care of this magazine, inclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope and he will tell you where to obtain an official leaflet covering the entire subject.

Without exception, a prospector discovering gold or other valuable mineral deposits there would have to pay royalties on his find and output—unless, of course, he himself owned the land—either to the private owners of the property or to the State of Texas, which holds all land not otherwise owned or deeded.

Such a law is expressly contrary to the old-established mining tenets of this country under which finders are keepers. It has had a great deal to do in the past with prospectors going somewhere else in their search for gold, and has been a factor of no small consequence in the resultant comparatively sketchy prospecting that has been carried on in the State, even in regions known to contain mineral-bearing formations, or formations likely to be mineral bearing.

Still, for those who want to try Texas for gold, around the Llano uplift in Mason and Llano Counties west and somewhat north of Austin, gold has been found in quartz veins and stringers in many of the country rocks of this section. Placer gold in paying quantities resulting from long-time erosion and earlier wearing away of these tiny veins is problematical. The Llano River, Sandy Creek and its tributaries, both of which major streams empty into the Colorado, might afford colors at various places, or even small patches of richer concentration in certain of the more favorable locations.

Another Texas possibility appears

to be west of Pecos in the vicinity of Van Horn. Also—although to date, as far as this writer knows, no really profitable gold deposits have been discovered in the mountains of the Big Bend country in Brewster and Presidio Counties—they do contain numerous areas where the country rock is geologically suited for the deposition of gold and other metallic ores. So far the Shafter silver mines and the quicksilver mines of the Terlingua district represent the sum total of profitable metallic mineral discoveries made down there.

However, the Big Bend is a whale of a big country. Certainly in view of the scant prospecting attention it has so far received, it should not be labeled as no go for gold until it has been more adequately and systematically searched. It may hold a rich surprise in store for some lucky off-the-trail prospector willing to take on some of the little-known sections of this vast and rugged area.

To B. K., Chicago, Illinois: Aside from gold, the mineral resources of Inyo County in southern California include antimony, lead, zinc, copper, molybdenum, tungsten and quicksilver in the metallic mineral category.

J. N. H., of San Jose, California, asks us if all veins contain ore in them somewhere. They don't, J. N. H., as many a prospector has found out to his sorrow. A vein may or may not contain a payable ore body, and unfortunately a lot of them don't.

● 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

We're just beginning to realize how dull the life we lead really is! First, we have Donald MacClaren telling us how he was held captive by a band of head hunters. Then, last week, Molleen O'Day promising tall tales about the Australian jungles; and, now, a letter from Ruth Orchison who's very much at home in Africa and will tell us all about the wild native tribes there and anything else we want to know about that country. But here's what she has to say, and you'd better get busy and write her pronto before she gets so many letters she can't answer them all.

Dear Miss Rivers:

Please consider this letter all the way from sunny South Africa. I have traveled a lot in this country and Central Africa and have had a lot of interesting experiences. I will tell you all about the wild native tribes of Africa and all the other wonders of this part of the world. I am twenty years old and enjoy outdoor life and any kind of sports. I will answer all letters, so boys and girls from everywhere, let me send you snaps, stamps, and news of our country—you will hear some interesting tales.—Ruth Orchison, Melrose House, 440 Nair Street, Belgravia, Johannesburg, Transvaal, South Africa

Write to this Bonnie Scotch lassie—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am seventeen years old and would like some Pen Pals, particularly American and Canadian ones. I am very fond of music and dancing, and photography is my hobby. Get busy, pals, and write to this Scots girl.—Moirra Scott, 38 Silverdale Street, Glasgow, E.L., Scotland

If you're around forty, answer this S O S—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I'm in need of Pen Pals, so please see if you can't send out an S O S for me. I've traveled

through Florida and can tell of some interesting places there from a recreational viewpoint. I'm forty-two years old and would enjoy hearing from people about my age who have traveled some and would like to swap experiences.—Alfred C. Moore, Company 2450 CCC, Lumpkin, Georgia

John will answer all letters—

Dear Miss Rivers:

After following your column in Western Story for a few issues, I decided it would be exciting to correspond with girls and boys from all over the world. Although I am not a native "Arizonian," nor even a real Westerner, I pride myself upon the knowledge that I have gained during my stay in this country. I am twenty-one years old and am interested in all sports, especially broncobusting. I promise to answer all letters and will exchange snapshots and souvenirs.—John J. Gross, A. E. C. Department of the Interior, Division of Grazing, Pound Valley, Kingman, Arizona

Vonnie wants to swap souvenirs—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am looking for Pen Pals who would enjoy exchanging souvenirs from their native State. As a hobby I collect handkerchiefs, small souvenir cedar chests, ash trays of all kinds and small china cats, dogs and elephants. Pals living in the Hawaiian Islands are especially welcome. I have souvenirs of my State which I will send to the first ten who write to me and inclose a souvenir hanky in their letter. Here's hoping my mailbox will fill up soon.—Vonnie Couture, R. F. D. No. 1, Pownal, Maine

Merle can tell you about ranch life—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-three years old, live alone and if anyone wants to know what kind of life a young fellow and his horses lead, I'll be glad to tell them—man, woman or child. I spent two years in a newspaper office and then took to the hills of sunny California. I've lived on ranches in the North and South, so I think I

can add my bit concerning that kind of life.—
Merle W. Sanderson, R. R. No. 1, Box 129, Fall-
brook, California

Arlene collects in a big way—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely girl twenty-eight years old living in the Texas Panhandle and I would like some Pen Pals from every State in the Union. I like all outdoor sports and my hobbies are collecting cactus plants, pictures of moving-picture stars, sets of quintuplet dolls, and last, but not least, writing letters. I will answer all letters and exchange snaps and would especially like pals in California, Arizona, Arkansas, Mississippi, Florida and Louisiana.—Arlene Reeves, Hartley, Texas

Send Harold match covers—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been reading the Hollow Tree for some time and find it very interesting and now I'm going to call on Pen Pals all over the country who would be interested in helping my hobby grow. I collect paper match covers and will exchange them with those interested. I'll be waiting for replies to my call.—Harold Bradley, 1124 Weiss Street, Saginaw, Michigan

Stamp collectors, this is for you—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Here hails a gal from the windy city of Chicago. I'm a home girl twenty-six years old seeking Pen Pals from all corners of the earth. My hobbies are writing letters and collecting Indian-head pennies. Those who collect stamps may have some by writing to me.—Eddie Overman, 523 E. 89th Street, Chicago, Illinois

This is a plea to other CCCs—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have long been a reader of Western Story Magazine and wonder if you have room for me in the Hollow Tree. I am a twenty-one-year-old CCC boy and would like to hear from anyone who will write to me, especially boys in other CCC camps. I like all sports, both indoor and outdoor, and will exchange snapshots with you and tell you all about camp life, so come on and drop me a line.—Fred Milburne, Company 1237, CCC Camp, S. C. S-8, Whitney Point, New York, New York

Beulah is studying Spanish—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am seventeen years old and would like some Pen Pals between eighteen and twenty-five from Canada and Hawaii. My hobby is studying and speaking Spanish. I enjoy all sports and will exchange snaps, so come on and write to me.—Beulah Smythe, 1115 Dyal Street, Jacksonville, Florida

This Argentine boy is studying English—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am an Argentine boy just learning English and would like to correspond with anyone who is studying Spanish. We could write our letters half in English and half in Spanish. I enjoy all sports, especially swimming, basketball and riding wild horses. I will tell all you boys and

girls whatever you want to know about this "gaucho's" country.—V. Silva, Calle Piedras 692, Buenos Aires, Argentina, South America

Age doesn't matter to Dorothy—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am nineteen years old and would like to hear from some members of the Tree—age doesn't matter. I like all sports, especially basketball and roller skating. My hobby is collecting picture post cards and snapshots which I will gladly exchange, so come on and write to me.—Dorothy Hufford, 1231 Liberty Street, East Toledo, Ohio

From Samoa comes this letter—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely youth eighteen years old and would be glad to receive letters from any part of the world. I am interested in all sports and will exchange curios from Samoa for any souvenirs. I promise to answer all letters, so come on, folks, and drop me a line or two.—Jack Jessop, P. O. Box 170, Apla, Western Samoa

Jane has an unusual pet—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am sixteen years old and a member of the class of '41 in the Westfield High School. I play the banjo as a hobby and have a gray squirrel as a pet. I would like to have Pen Pals all over the world and sure hope a cowboy or cowgirl is among them. I will exchange snaps, so please write everyone.—Jane Singer, 565 Shackamaxou Drive, Westfield, New Jersey

Layton likes sports—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-two years old and would like Pen Pals from all over the globe. My favorite sports are football and basketball, although I enjoy most others. My hobby is collecting picture post cards and match covers. I will exchange snapshots with all who care to.—Layton Gray, 317 South Chestnut Street, Lafayette, Louisiana

Hear all about the Island of Jamaica—

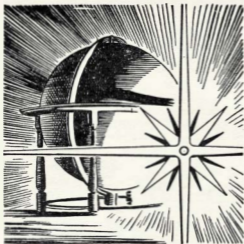
Dear Miss Rivers:

I am an eighteen-year-old girl living on the island of Jamaica. I am very fond of horseback riding, dancing, table tennis and gardening. There is a lot of beautiful scenery in Jamaica which I will describe as clearly as possible with the aid of snapshots to all of you who are interested.—G. E. Holmes, The Gladene, Guy's Hill, Kingston, Jamaica

Lawrence is in the market for a "buddy"—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a healthy, good-looking, amiable young man and, although at twenty-eight I have no more financial worries, I find that there's little fun in doing things alone. If any of you fellows who read this think I sound like someone you'd like to know, please get in touch with me. Maybe you're just the buddy I'm looking for. I'm in the market for one.—Lawrence Waite, Auditorium Hotel, Michigan Boulevard, Chicago, Illinois



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

JAMES G., of Chicago, is interested in South Dakota. He writes, "I should like to know if there is any desirable land for farming in the section around Deadwood and the Black Hills, or the Belle Fourche region. I had thought that was pretty barren land, but I have recently heard that things are picking up out there. Can you tell me something of what that section is like now? I don't suppose conditions are what they were when they used to sing that old song about 'The Dreary Black Hills,' are they?"

No, James, conditions are not dreary there any more. A big irrigation project known as the Belle Fourche Project, has been organized

there, and farmers are raising bumper crops where they once saw only cactus and sagebrush growing.

The Belle Fourche project is located within thirty miles of those famous old hills in the western part of the State. It covers an area of what was old prairie country approximately twelve miles long by twenty-five miles wide, beginning just below the town of Belle Fourche and extending easterly along the valley of the Belle Fourche River and northerly across the valleys of tributary streams. Nearly all the area lies in Butte County, and the remainder in Meade County.

This section now raises some of the finest sheep in the country. It is also a great dairying section, and farmers get from ten to twenty tons of sugar beets an acre and plenty of alfalfa.

In order to appreciate what this water system has brought to this part of the country, it is necessary to travel only a few miles out of it to find the open range where sheep and cattle now pasture at low cost. Out on the native sod you will find the old wheat grass, buffalo grass, grama grass, cactus and sagebrush just as it was in the old days, while the domestic crops under cultivation are rich and protected by fully grown trees planted years ago as windbreaks. The contrast between such domesticated, watered fields on the one hand and the sagebrush and cactus on the other is something to make you appreciate what water means to a country.

While there are extremes of temperature in summer and winter, and

For those interested in the possibilities of locating in this historic part of the West, John North can supply a list of descriptive literature which will give all details. Just send him your request, inclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

a lot of wind in the spring, the summers and falls are settled as to weather, and there is an abundance of sunshine which contributes to very rapid growth for farm crops. Most of the rainfall is in April, May and June.

The crops now raised principally in the district are alfalfa, sugar beets, corn and small grains. Alfalfa is the basic crop which not only supplies the feed needed in fattening animals, but also supplies nitrogen for the soil, thus enriching it as the crop is grown. Crops are rotated in this manner, using alfalfa as a re-builder.

There is a sugar-beet factory at Belle Fourche which handles the beets from a large area given over to private irrigation projects, as well as from a great deal of the land in the government project which is devoted to raising beets. The farmers get from ten to twenty tons of beets to the acre, and the crop can be grown on practically the whole project, although if the settler is going in for beet raising he should select the more sandy of the land rather than the heavier gumbo land.

Dairying is another major activity on many of the farms located on the project, and many farmers keep from ten to thirty cows to insure a steady, year-round income to meet the grocery bills every month.

On a well-balanced farm in this section sheep should play a big part, and one reason for the success of this branch of the industry is the fact that there is a lot of open range

of very cheap land surrounding the project where sheep may be grazed in the summer for as little as five to ten cents an acre rental. Another reason is the availability of bi-products from the beet fields which may be used as feed. The beet tops and the pulp, after the sugar is extracted, are used as winter feed for the sheep. Most of the farmers have sheep as their main livestock line, some giving attention to fattening of lambs, and others specialize in wool production. Farmers usually throw their sheep together under a herder who takes them out to the summer pasture and holds them there until fall, when they are brought in for feeding and to clean up the roughage in the irrigated fields before winter sets in.

Hog raising is another important industry out here, and the man who knows the business will do well at it here. The green alfalfa pasturage and the grain crops will produce the animals at a very low cost, with a good margin of profit for the raiser.

Poultry and bees also do well, and should be represented on every farm there where there is someone who can handle them, as they bring in a very welcome addition to the family income.

Considering the amount of money expended to get this land watered, farms are very reasonable in this section. The amount of money a farm is worth here depends upon the value of the improvements. Some of the land can be bought for as little as fifteen percent down.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

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



Missing Department

ELKINS, ORAN CLYDE—He is my brother, and he disappeared three years ago from Dallas, Texas. He is thirty-four years old, five feet seven inches tall, and has blue eyes and blond hair. He is a good salesman, neat dresser and wears glasses. His wife and children need him, so if anyone knows his whereabouts, will they please get in touch with his sister, Mrs. Toby Harper, 1115 West 19th Street, West Tulsa, Oklahoma.

KING or KOUGER, ALBERT—He is my brother, and when last heard from he was in Renault, Illinois. He is a World War veteran. "Albert, if you see this please write to your sister." Or if anyone knows his whereabouts, please communicate with me, Mrs. Eunice M. Addison, c/o Walter Crigar, Asbeerys, Tazewell County, Virginia.

SLAUGHTER, ROY—He is my half-brother and has black hair and eyes and is five feet four inches tall. He plays the Hawaiian guitar and is traveling with a road show. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please write to Mrs. Eunice M. Addison, c/o Walter Crigar, Asbeerys, Tazewell County, Virginia.

NOTICE—I would like to hear from my parents or any of my relatives. I was put in St. Vincent's Orphans' Home when I was about two weeks old. Later I was transferred to St. John's Home, and when I was about twelve I went to St. Francis' Home. When I was fifteen years old I was taken out of the Home and put to work on a farm and I've been on my own ever since. I am twenty-six years old now, married and have a son four months old. If anyone knows anything about my parents, will they please get in touch with me, Vincent Jenkins, c/o Curtis Tebyold, R. D. No. 4, Ashland, Ohio.

HARTSOCK, THEODORE C.—He is my son, and in 1927, the last time I saw him, he was in Colorado. In 1926 I received a letter from him mailed in Juneau, Alaska, and later found out that he had left there and gone to Baker City, Oregon. That is the last word I've had about him. He is thirty-five years old, married, is near six feet tall and has blond hair and blue eyes. If anyone knows his whereabouts will they please notify me, Mrs. Bessie Harrel Clark, Eloy, Arizona.

MILLER, DUDDLEY—He is my father and has been missing for nine years. He is thirty-four years old, six feet tall, has dark-brown hair, blue eyes, a scar on one of his arms and a little mole on his lower lip. When last heard of he was in Ventura, California. If anyone has any information about him, whether dead or alive, my mother and I would appreciate it.—Eleanor Miller, 1136 N. Jefferson, Casper, Wyoming.

NOTICE—I would like some information about my son. He was last heard from in 1927, at which time he got his mail in care of General Delivery, Baltimore, Maryland. "Dear boy, if you see this please come home to your dear old pop. Your mother is dead. I am getting old and worry about you."—A. A. Pack, Box 552, Rt. No. 2, Cape Girardeau, Missouri.

BRACKETT, CARL—He is my brother and he left his home in Salisbury Vermont, in July, 1939, to go to Rutland on an errand. We think he may be a victim of amnesia, for he had no reason to leave home unless financial worries were bothering him. They are cleared up now. He is thirty-nine years old, six feet two inches tall, long, thin face, sandy hair, gray eyes, and his left leg is slightly lame from a wound received in the World War. He was driving a 1938 Ford sedan, Vermont registration 16171, and was wearing work clothes—gray trousers, black oxfords, brown suede jacket. "Carl, mother, Eunice, Eloise, your daughters and Muggins beg you to come home." Or if anyone knows his whereabouts, please wire collect to Miss Eloise Magoon, 216 South Prospect, Burlington, Vermont.

CHAMBERLAIN, JOHN—He left home eleven years ago, and when last heard from was in Peru, Clinton County, New York. He is thirty-five years old, about five feet tall, and has dark-brown hair and gray eyes. His mother is very ill and worried about him. If anyone has any information, write to Edward Chamberlain, Cascade Road, Keens, New York.

RECOMPENCE, ELIJAH COX (REX COX)—He left home in July, 1926. Three years ago we heard he was driving a taxi in Chicago, Illinois. He is thirty-nine years old and was a soldier in the World War. "Rex, if you read this, please write to your cousin." Or if anyone knows his whereabouts, write to Gladys Shinn Thompson, Edmond, Kansas.

NOTICE—Will the woman who wrote a letter of inquiry to Mrs. Allen Arlington, relative to the death of my mother, please send me her present address?—L. M. Hood, Box 73c, Hendersonville, North Carolina.

CARLSON, CARL CLARENCE—When last heard from he was in Durango, Colorado. We later heard he had gone East. He had a sister and a niece, Betty Snyder, in Waterloo, Iowa. Carl was employed by me and was a good friend of mine. "Carl, if you see this, please write to me." Or if anyone knows his whereabouts, please notify me, Nicolas McLearn, Rifle, Colorado.

FUSCO, TONY—He is my brother, and he left home fifteen years ago. About seven years ago I heard he was in New York. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please notify me, or tell him to write to his married sister, Michlena Ferrara, 132 Union Street, Lawrence, Massachusetts.

RICE, WILLIAM B.—He is my husband, and I have no idea where he is except that he had to go out West because he could not stand this climate. He is past sixty-one years old, has blue eyes and not much hair, and is an old-time cowboy. He may be dead, but if anyone has any information about him whether dead or alive, I would like to know for his daughter's sake. He would be so proud of her and his little granddaughter. Write to Mrs. W. B. Rice, 6310 Kenwood Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

FARTHING, R. H. and C. A.—They are my brothers and I have not seen either of them for many, many years. When I last heard of R. H., he was employed by a woolen mill in Lindsay, Ontario, Canada, and in 1917 had joined up with the Canadian Infantry. C. A. left Natal, South Africa, for England and Canada in 1904. "I am sixty-seven years old and would like to hear from either of you if anyone knows their whereabouts, please write to O. T. Farthing, 94 Tramway Street, Turfontein, Johannesburg, South Africa.

TUSON, EVA—She is my sister, and when last heard of two years ago she was in Michigan. If anyone knows her whereabouts, write to Melvin Crockett, Company 3840, CCC Camp, Benson, Arizona, or to Joe Crockett, Honey Grove, Texas.

CANTRALL, HARRY A.—He is my son and was last seen five years ago in Kansas City, Missouri. He is thirty-two years old, five feet ten inches tall, and has reddish-brown curly hair and brown eyes. Any information will be greatly appreciated by his mother, Mrs. H. A. Cantrall, 917½ East 15th Street, Kansas City, Missouri.

CLAPP, FRED, CHARLES, BLANCHE and BESSIE—They are my brothers and sisters, and I have had no word from them in thirty years. I am their sister, Elsie, and was twelve years old when they left to go to Canada. I am married and have been living in New Zealand for about eighteen years, and our other sisters, Rose, Ada and Annie are in Devonshire, England. The only address I ever had for them was Mr. Fred Clapp, Vancouver, Canada. If anyone knows their whereabouts, please notify me, Mrs. David Rusk, Tirau P. O., Piarere, Waikato, New Zealand.

GROVES, HAROLD and PATRICIA—He is thirty-nine years old, five feet nine inches tall, dark hair, turning gray, hazel eyes. He left Portland, Oregon, sometime in August, 1938. Patricia is only five years old, and has blond hair and brown eyes. His wife is in a sanitarium in a very critical condition. If anyone knows their whereabouts will they please get in touch with me, Thelma Patton, 6125 S. E. Harold Street, Portland, Oregon.

ANDREA, RUDIE and PAUL, FRITTS—Rudie was last heard from in 1928 at which time he was in Richmond, California. Paul, when last heard of in 1929, was in Broadalbin, New York. "Paul, I want you to write to me. I miss you and Rudie very much. I am now living on a farm and want all my old pals to come and see me." Or if anyone knows their whereabouts, please write to me, Joe Mahar, Box 314, Broadalbin, New York.

NOTICE—In January, 1888, a newborn baby was taken to the Indianapolis Orphan Asylum, in Indianapolis, Indiana. The baby was ill and was taken to the City Hospital where brought back to the asylum for adoption. If anyone can throw any light on the family or relatives of this baby, please write to Jenny Brockley, 114 W. Annie, Fort Worth, Texas.

SCROGGINS, GEORGE; ERTHIA and TOM RED—George is my uncle and Erthia is his daughter. If anyone knows their whereabouts, I would appreciate it if they would get in touch with me.—Mrs. Minnie Schaefer Oliver, Ulysses, Kansas.

NOTICE—I would like to hear from anyone by the name of Milsted or anyone related to it was kept for thirty days before being brought back to the asylum for adoption. If anyone can throw any light on the family or relatives of this baby, please write to Jenny Brockley, 114 W. Annie, Fort Worth, Texas.

NOTICE—I would like to hear from anyone by the name of Milsted or anyone related to it was raised near Pensacola, Florida. Any information would be greatly appreciated.—Mrs. Lydia Waltman, 6451 Ira Avenue, Bell Garden, California.

● There is no charge for the insertion of requests for information concerning missing relatives or friends.

While it will be better to use your name in the notices, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to anyone who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

DEAD FREIGHT FOR PIUTE



Part Five
by **LUKE SHORT**

The Story So Far:

Although he had come to Piute to see his uncle, Craig Armin, about a job with the latter's freighting outfit, Cole Armin turns down a partnership in the company when he discovers that his uncle is using dishonest, cutthroat methods to force a competitor, Ted Wallace, out of business.

When Cole is offered a job with the Western Freighting Co., Ted Wallace's outfit, he accepts. Cole and Ted make arrangements to try for the business of the China Boy Mine, a freighting proposition that has so far proved too difficult for even Monarch, Craig Armin's company, to handle. They realize that they face the open and relentless enmity of Craig Armin, but they do not know that there is another and more subtle plot being built up against them. Keen Billings, who works for but hates Craig Armin, and Sheriff Ed Linton, a corrupt law officer, plan between them to ruin both Monarch and Western and to take over the remains when they have been wiped out.

As Cole and Ted are leaving the office of the China Boy superintendent after making arrangements for a trial the next day, Ted is pushed down a stairway and breaks his leg, which leaves Western without enough teamsters to handle the new job. Cole, although he lacks experience, takes one of the wagons. On the way down his brake lever snaps. By quick-witted action and luck, he manages to bring his wagon down safely, but when the brake lever is examined it is found that it has been tampered with. Suspicion points toward Keen Billings.

That night a fire breaks out in Monarch's yards, and Cole is arrested on suspicion of starting it. He is released when he gives an alibi, but Sheriff Linton puts him under a five-thousand-dollar bond which will be forfeited if Cole does anything to break the peace.

News that the China Boy Mine has been mysteriously dynamited and that it will be several months before any more ore can be shipped shakes Cole's determination to keep out of trouble. As he sees it, only one man, Keen Billings, could have done the dynamiting, and he determines to face Billings and have it out with him, although he knows that by so doing he will lose not only his peace bond, but probably his life as well.

Before he meets Billings, however, Cole gets into a dispute with a deputy and is thrown into jail. At the same time, Bill-

ings, acting under Linton's orders, fires a shotgun from ambush, creasing Craig Armin. As Billings and Linton figure it, Craig will leap to the conclusion that his nephew is trying to kill him and will give orders for Cole and Ted Wallace to be killed. Then, with evidence that Craig has ordered murders committed, Linton will be able to force the Monarch owner out of Piute and, with Billings, buy up both ruined freighting outfits for almost nothing.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BLASTING OF A SHOTGUN

AFTER Cole Armin and Sheriff Linton had finished prowling in his room and gone, Keen Billings sat down weakly on the bed and waited for his heart to stop hammering. He didn't even like to be that close to Cole Armin. He was sore and hurt all over from the beating he had received that afternoon, and the whiskey wasn't helping much now. But he kept on drinking until it was dark, lying on the bed, a water glass of whiskey in his big hand, his legs spread wide. His mind was a confused tangle of thoughts and memories, but the one that recurred most often and nagged at him was the one he hated most: Who blew up the China Boy? He wished desperately that he could answer that and regain a certain peace of mind.

Patiently, then, because he had the time, he thought about this. As he saw it, the sawing of the brake lever was the key to the enigma.

Four people knew about Jim Rough being hired—himself, Linton, Letty Burns, and Craig Armin. When he said Craig Armin's name to himself he cursed him with cold hate. His pay check would come tomorrow—half pay this time, less than his best teamster earned. The memory of Craig Armin's face was enough to make Billings mad. But it wouldn't be long now. Just a short wait, and then Craig Armin would have the

dirty end of the stick. And how he would squirm!

Billings put this from his mind and returned to considering the four people who knew about Jim Rough. He knew that he himself didn't saw the brake lever, so one possibility was out. Linton, working through someone else, might have done it. But why would Linton risk getting Cole Armin mad enough to kill a man he needed for this future job? No, Linton was out, too. Now Letty. She could have done it through somebody else, too. But how did she stand to profit by it? She didn't, so he could count her out.

That left Craig Armin, damn him! And he wouldn't do it because he always left those dirty, stinking jobs for Billings to do. He was too finemannered, too delicate, too damn superior for a job like that! So he was out, too. And Billings was right back where he started then. He didn't know.

He heaved himself to his feet, now that it was really dark, and found that he was pretty drunk—too drunk. Pouring out a basin of water, he washed his face in it and then soaked his head. When he had dried himself he found it had helped. But he was still too drunk. He'd have to take extra care tonight.

HE put on a shirt, vest, hat, and his gun belt, and slipped out of the room. From the top of the stairs he could see that few people were in the lobby. He hurried down the stairs, turned and walked down the corridor past the dining room and out the rear entrance that led onto an alley.

Out there in the night, somewhere, Cole Armin was hunting him, and that meant he couldn't show himself. He had a pretty accurate

knowledge of Piute, and using that and his instinct, he kept to the alleys and within half an hour was at the rear of the sheriff's office. He had met none who knew him.

There was a rain barrel under the down spout back of the jail, and Billings walked up to it and stuck his hand inside. He found the sawed-off shotgun just where Linton had said it would be. He pulled it out, broke it, and pocketed the shell. Then he took the gun part, stuck the barrel inside one trousers leg, the stock inside the other, tightened his belt to hold them, pulled the points of his vest over his belt and walked down the alley.

He paused at the rear entrance of the Cosmopolitan House, fixing it in his mind. Opening the door cautiously, he peered inside. There was a big storage room immediately inside the door, and beyond that a closed door that led into a corridor that ran straight through into the lobby. He wasn't concerned with that corridor, however, for there were service stairs opening off this storeroom that led to the floor above.

A lamp in a wall bracket was turned down low in the storeroom, and Billings slipped inside the door. He walked softly to the service stairs, opened the door, saw nothing but a dark well and closed the door after him.

He was a third of the way up the stairs when the door at the top opened and a maid, sheets under her arm, started down the stairs, after closing the door behind her. Billings froze against the wall, held his breath, sucked in his chest and waited. The maid passed him, the cloth of her sleeve touching him, and went downstairs.

She opened the door, then looked back up the stairs, curiosity on her

face. She had smelled a distinct odor of whiskey. But the lamp in the storeroom threw no light up the stairs, and Keen remained immobile.

When she shut the door he let out his breath. "I'm lucky tonight," he thought.

He went up the stairs and stepped out into the carpeted corridor. He was safe here, he knew. He walked toward the front of the building and climbed the stairs to the next story. Craig Armin's suite was in the rear corner, a big living room on the end, then the study, and then the bedroom running along the side of the building. Craig would probably be in the living room.

Keen walked to the end of the corridor and looked out the open window. Just below him was the lighted window of Craig Armin's study. Below it was a wide ledge of limestone which formed the sill of all the windows on the first story. But Billings wasn't counting on that. There was a heavy coil of knotted rope by this window, the fire escape for the third floor. That was all he'd need.

HE took the rope, and threw it out into the night. It snaked down, uncoiling, and touched the ground. When he heard footsteps coming down the corridor, he calmly leaned out the window, as if watching the night, until the sound of steps turned into a room and the door closed.

Then he brought the shotgun out, put it together and loaded it. He swung a leg over the sill, then both legs, and silently lowered himself to the ledge below. Coming to a rest, he squatted down, holding the rope. He peered through the curtains, hoping that the room was empty.

But what he saw brought a gloat-

ing smile to his face. Craig Armin sat at his study desk, and in a chair before him was Celia Wallace. The window was closed, so that Billings could not hear what they were saying. But through the gauzy curtains he could see them very plainly. Craig Armin was embarrassed. He was pulling his ear as he listened to Celia Wallace. Suddenly the girl stood up, still talking. Craig Armin came to his feet, said something very firmly, then rapped the desk with his hand.

Celia Wallace turned, walked a few steps toward the door, then paused and spoke again.

Billings, holding onto the rope with one hand to brace himself, raised the shotgun to his shoulder and sighted it. He drew a bead on Craig Armin, and the impulse to pull the trigger then was almost overpowering. But he lifted the sights and waited. Craig bowed, and sat down. Billings, to make sure he followed Linton's orders only to scare Craig, raised the sights a little higher and pulled the trigger.

There was a smashing roar and the gun kicked back, knocking him off balance. But the rope was there and he held on to it, looking inside. There was a ragged hole in the curtains. On the paneling behind and the ceiling above Craig Armin was a wide circle of scarred wood. But Craig Armin was what Billings was looking at.

Slowly, his terrified gaze on the window, Craig raised a hand to his cheek where a tiny smear of blood had appeared. And then, he dived under his desk.

Billings was satisfied. He dropped his gun, lowered himself down the rope, walked into the alley and down it, whistling slightly off key as he disappeared in the darkness.

WHEN the crash of the shot pounded through the room, Celia had her hand on the doorknob. She cried out involuntarily with fright, then wheeled in time to see Craig Armin, his face like a death mask, put a hand to his face, then dive under the desk.

The door was opened in her face, then, by the Chinese servant. He took one look at the empty desk and Craig Armin's hand showing beneath it, and then he ran into the foyer, threw open the door and screamed.

After that, men—a crowd of them—poured into the study, racing past Celia. Slowly Craig Armin came up from behind the desk and pointed to the window.

"Some . . . somebody tried to kill me," he announced in a faint voice. A man poked his head through the paneless window, saw the rope, and yelled, "He's got away! Down the fire escape!"

There was pandemonium then. Celia never realized how helpless men like these, not used to blood or emergencies, were. Craig Armin's face was bleeding a little, but no more than from a razor cut during his morning shave. Yet men were bawling for a doctor, shouting at each other, giving contradictory orders and making a general mess of things when two deputies from Sheriff Linton's office entered.

The mob parted at their entrance, and Craig Armin announced dramatically: "I was shot at!"

And then his glance fell on Celia, by the door. He raised his hand and pointed. "Arrest that woman!"

There was utter silence for a moment, and then one of the deputies, looking from Celia to Craig Armin, said, "She shoot you, Mr. Armin?"

"No. But I know who did. And she was sent here as a decoy!"

The deputy looked politely doubtful. "You say you know who shot you?" he said.

"I do. Cole Armin."

The deputy shook his head. "I'm afraid you're wrong, Mr. Armin. Cole Armin is in jail."

Craig Armin's face sagged, but Celia didn't see that. "Then . . . he got Billings?" she said to the deputy in a choked, faint voice.

"No, ma'am," the deputy said. "He made the mistake of thinkin' he could lick two deputies and the sheriff."

"Thank God!" Celia whispered. "Thank God!"

CHAPTER XX

AN ORDER FOR A MURDER

SHERIFF LINTON was an early caller at Craig Armin's suite next morning. He was in an immaculate black suit, his linen was white and starched, he was freshly barbered, and all in all, looked elegant.

He was shown into the big living room of the suite, where Armin was just finishing breakfast.

"Good morning, Armin," he said in a pleasant tone. "You sent for me?"

"Sit down," Craig Armin said curtly. He didn't bother to offer the sheriff a cup of coffee, but told the servant to take his breakfast away. As soon as the man was gone, Armin took out a cigar, lighted it, and rose. There was a fresh neat bandage on his cheek where a buck-shot pellet had nicked him.

"Linton," he began, "I understand you've got my nephew in jail."

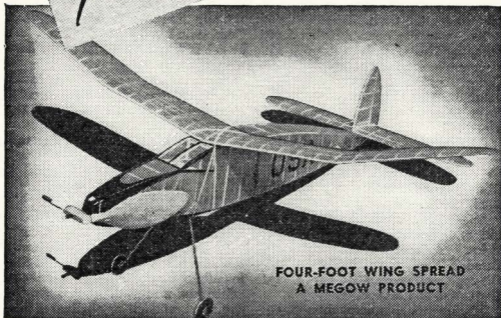
"That's right," Linton said easily. "On what grounds?"

"For breaking peace bond. He

Continued on page 114

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Continued from page 111

tried to beat up one of my deputies."

Armin, standing at the window that overlooked the street, now turned to regard the sheriff. "Will you keep him there?" he demanded.

Linton shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't, Mr. Armin."

"Why not?"

"What's his crime? He'll be haled before the judge this morning, fined twenty-five dollars and freed. Of course, he'll forfeit his peace bond."

Craig Armin puffed nervously at his cigar. "You're sure you arrested him last night before that shot was fired at me?"

"Positive." A faint trace of a smile was playing around the corners of Linton's mouth, which Craig Armin, with his back turned, did not see. "I was standing over him in the cell when I heard the shot and sent my deputies."

Armin grunted. "I want him kept in jail, Linton," he said quietly. "His men shot at me, you know."

Linton smiled then, a secret, wise smile. "But *he* didn't," he pointed out. "I can't do it, Mr. Armin. I'd like to oblige you, but I can't."

"For, say, a thousand dollars," Craig Armin murmured, and turned to look at him.

Linton shook his head. "If I held him past noon some jack-leg lawyer would be in court with a writ. I'd be on the pan for fair."

"I see," Armin said. He looked out the window, musing. "There isn't any other charge against him you could bring up?"

Linton pretended to think, although he was quite certain what he would say.

"None," he said presently. "No matter what I suspect him of, I have to get proof. Personally, I think he set the fire at your place, but there was that girl to alibi him. I couldn't

arrest him, so I did the next best thing, put him on peace bond. No, I can't hold him for anything else."

"He destroyed a buckboard of mine," Armin insisted. "Can't he be held for that?"

Linton smiled pleasantly. "Between us, Mr. Armin, Billings asked for that beating. He didn't obey the flag signal."

"Yes, yes," Armin said hurriedly.

LINTON settled back in his chair. He was enjoying this. Slowly, thread by thread, he was weaving his web around Craig Armin. He could almost see Armin's decision slowly crystallize. He could follow the man's every thought. Right now, Craig Armin was sounding him out to see if there wasn't some possibility of keeping Cole Armin in jail, figuring this move, for once and all, would break Cole Armin and Western. Failing that, Linton was sure enough of what would follow. Craig Armin was scared to death, and when a man like that is scared, he does reckless things.

"Well, if you can't, you can't," Craig admitted gloomily.

"I'd like to oblige," Linton said smoothly, "but it can't be done." He paused, for he wanted what he was going to say next to sink in. "I know your position, Armin. You're fighting a bunch of lawless bully boys. Personally, I think if you give them enough rope they'll hang themselves. I've got my eye on them and the first chance I get I'm going to jail them." He shrugged. "Of course, you're not in a pleasant position," he said slyly. "They may get you before I get them."

Craig Armin's face drained of color. "Exactly," he said.

"But that's a chance we have to take on the frontier," Linton went on. "A lawman is helpless. Every

man is innocent until proven guilty. It's only after the crime is done that I can act. Before, even though I can see it coming, I can do nothing. The law doesn't back me up." He rose, watching Armin's tortured face. He couldn't resist the last turn of the screw. "I'd certainly be careful from now on, Armin. Keep a man with you all the time."

Armin wiped the sweat from his forehead with a fine linen handkerchief. His hand shook slightly.

"I will," he said. "That reminds me. Have you seen Keen Billings this morning?"

"I'll run into him, I suspect," Linton said. "I'll send him up."

"Thanks," Armin murmured. He got a hold on himself and managed a smile. "Well . . . I can raise that ante to five thousand," he said abruptly.

Linton shook his head and smiled. "I'd like to, Mr. Armin, but it can't be done. No, sir, it can't be done."

They shook hands and Linton noticed that Craig Armin's palm was wet. That shot last night had scared him plenty. Linton chuckled with anticipation as he went downstairs and out onto the street.

He could free Cole Armin now. No, on the other hand, he had better give Keen time enough to get to Craig Armin before he did that. Cole Armin would still be on the pro; more so than ever, he supposed.

At the Piute, Linton waved a cheery good morning to the clerk and went upstairs. Keen Billings, still in his new room, opened the door.

"Well?" he asked eagerly.

Linton closed the door behind him and then laughed out loud. Billings' worried face yielded a grin. "Come on. What did he say?"

"He's so scared he can't talk,"

Linton chuckled. "I warned him to be careful and hire a bodyguard and he almost fainted."

"The hell he did," Billings said, laughing.

"He offered me five thousand dollars to keep Cole Armin in jail, just like I knew he would."

"Then he is scared," Billings said dryly. "If he puts out that much money, he's damn scared."

"He wants you," Linton went on.

"Already, huh? Then you must have did a good job, Ed."

"You'll see," Linton said. "Now get along. I'll give you time to get to the hotel before I turn Cole Armin loose."

Billings' smile suddenly faded. "Yeah. Cole Armin." He hitched up his pants. "Well, I only got to worry about that rannihan a few hours more," he said with heavy satisfaction.

"That's right," Linton agreed. "When you see Armin, you know how to play it. We've talked that over. Afterward, after dark, you can tell me how it's goin' to come off."

"Yeah," Billings said. His mouth curled in a cruel smile. "Now I can watch that coyote squirm. But tonight, after it's over, is what I been waitin' to see. I been thinkin' about it all the time, dreamin' about it, waitin' for it." He looked at Linton. "You let me handle him tonight, after it's over, Ed. I've earned that!"

"Sure, sure," Linton said. "Now get along."

Billings picked up his Stetson, put it on and walked toward the door.

"Don't forget to get his check, Keen," Linton reminded him. "That's important. That's evidence that will help cinch the deal."

"I know, I know, sure," Billings said. "Gimme fifteen minutes."

He went down the stairs and headed for the Cosmopolitan House, whistling tunelessly. It was a perfect Piute day, with the air still, the sun already hot, the smell of dust and manure and hot boards in the air. Passing the saloons, there was the cool sweet smell of beer and freshly wet sawdust. Life was pretty good, Keen Billings decided. And what made it good was that Craig Armin, damn his soul, was about to be put on a skewer and barbecued.

CRAIG ARMIN'S attitude, when Keen was shown into the living room of his suite, was haughty and cold. That was a good sign, Keen reflected as he sat down. It meant Armin wasn't sure of himself.

"You've been making yourself pretty scarce lately," Armin observed, letting himself down into the most comfortable chair in the room.

"Damn right I have," Keen said bluntly. "I don't hone for a bellyful of lead from Cole Armin."

Craig Armin smiled faintly. "And I don't either, Keen. You heard about last night?"

Keen nodded. "That was pretty close, chief."

"I didn't like it," Armin said wryly. "The more I think of it, the less I like it."

"They're startin' to play rough, all right," Billings conceded grimly. "What the hell use is a freightin' business if you're scared to show your face to run it?"

"Keen, I'm going to put an end to this," Craig Armin said quietly.

"You are?" Keen said inquiringly.

"How?"

"I should have said 'we' are," Armin corrected himself. "You and I—both of us. We're both afraid of that outfit, if we tell the truth, aren't we?"

"I sure as hell am," Billings admitted with utter sincerity.

"Then let's wipe them out."

Billings looked at Armin for a long moment. Then he said, "You mean, let's 'me' wipe them out, don't you, boss?"

"I'll pay you."

"No, thanks," Billings said promptly.

"Losin' your guts, Keen?"

"I've already lost 'em," Billings grunted placidly.

"You're gettin' pretty coy, all of a sudden, Keen," said Armin.

"You would be, too."

"But I think you'll take this job," Armin said slowly.

"And I don't reckon I will."

They stared at each other levelly, and for a moment there was hatred in both their eyes. Finally, Craig Armin smiled. "You didn't take that seriously, the other night—what I said about cutting your pay."

"How else could I take it?"

"I was angry," Armin said, with a gesture of dismissal. "Forget it, Keen. You and I have gone through enough together that we can quarrel without hard feelings, haven't we?"

"Have we?" Billings said sulkily.

"Look here," Armin argued persuasively. "I'll pay you. It's something you'll have to do anyway, sooner or later, if you want to live. Why not take pay for it?"

Billings pretended to consider this, his heavy face set in a scowl. If Craig Armin had been a little more observant, he would have seen that Keen Billings' eyes were not quite so puzzled as he wanted them to appear.

"That's a fact," Billings admitted at last.

"A thousand dollars, then?"

"No," Keen said quickly. "I'm

riskin' my neck, chief—and I mean riskin'."

"Two thousand."

"Not for twice that."

"All right," Craig Armin said grimly. "I'll make it five. And I'll also give you the closest thing to an air-tight alibi you can find."

Billings knew he didn't need any alibi, but the five thousand was satisfactory, so he exhibited interest. Why fight over a little money when he would get half of all Craig Armin had in the end? He leaned forward.

"That sounds good."

"You'll take it?"

"If I like the alibi."

CRAIG ARMIN hitched forward in his chair. "Tonight," he began, "this girl of ours—Letty Burns—is going to Cole Armin with an offer of a truce from Monarch. She'll tell Cole Armin and Ted Wallace that you met her on the street and made the proposition. You were afraid to make it to Armin yourself, because you knew he'd kill you. You want to talk to Armin and Wallace alone, with none of these women around, in Ted Wallace's rooms. Cole Armin might not want to accept. He's a hothead. But Ted Wallace will make him." He paused. "Do you follow me so far?"

"Sure. Letty takes the word that I'm comin' for a parley and to clear Celia Wallace out."

"That's it. Now, do you have five of your bully boys you can trust?"

"More than that," Billings said.

"Good. Put them around that compound behind the Western office. Tell them to shoot Cole Armin on sight if he tries to get out of the house. I don't think he'll try, but we can't take a chance. He'll be up there waiting for you, with the

women out of harm's way. You walk up the stairs, knock on the door, and when it opens let him have it. If he's waiting in the doorway for you with a gun, give the boys the signal to cut down on him. Ted Wallace is in bed. He'll be easy to take care of."

He leaned back. "Afterward, you can tell Linton and have your five witnesses to back it up, that he started shooting at you when you came in the compound. The men you had brought with you for protection killed Cole Armin in self-defense. The same applies to Ted Wallace. You have me to testify that I sent you to make a truce, and you have Letty Burns to testify that she told Cole Armin that." He spread his hands in a graceful gesture. "What's safer, more air-tight than that?"

Billings considered a minute. "Nothin', I reckon."

"It suits you?"

Billings nodded. "All except the money."

"What about that?"

"I want it now," Billings said.

Craig Armin leaned back and smiled. "No, Keen. Afterward."

"Now," Billings said.

Craig Armin was a shrewd judge of men, and he saw how stubborn Keen Billings looked. On the other hand, he didn't want Billings jumping town, once he had the money.

"Not now," he said quietly and firmly. "Tonight, just before you start, you'll have the check." His voice dropped a little. "And just in case you have any ideas about shoving the blame for this on me if you gum it up, Keen, that check will be made out to 'cash,' not to Keen Billings." He smiled slightly. "I make dozens of checks out that way,

Continued on page 119

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Continued from page 117

so I have no idea who cashes them, you see."

"I see," Billings said, smiling crookedly. "Money's money, just so's I git it."

"Then come up here after dark."

"All right, boss. You can count on me."

He went out, and Craig Armin smiled and lit a cigar. Now that he had made the decision he was glad of it. He felt better.

And when Keen Billings got out into the corridor he leaned against the wall and laughed heartily.

CHAPTER XXI

COLE'S DECISION

COLE was freed at noon. He paid his twenty-five-dollar fine for assaulting an officer and received the news that his peace bond was forfeited with a stolid and expressionless face. When Linton escorted him over from the courthouse back to the sheriff's office and gave him his gun, he was troubled by Cole's silence. There was no protest, no sneer, no gibes and no threats, only a complete and indifferent silence.

"Don't get me wrong, Armin," Linton said, handing him his gun belt. "We've got nothin' against you in this town, so long's you keep in line. I hope you've learned a lesson from this. It cost you quite some money; you should have learned something."

Cole said nothing. He accepted the gun, strapped it on and went out into the street. Linton, his face troubled, followed him for a block. At last, when he saw him turn into the alley behind Western Freight, he concluded that nothing would happen immediately. But he still had his doubts. Armin's eyes were pretty ugly this morning and he

looked as if somebody had lit his fuse.

He was never further from being right. The night before, in the dark hours when Cole regained consciousness and realized what had happened, he had spent the bitterest moments of his life. This had been the final ignominy. He had had one blue chip to spend—the losing of his peace bond in a way that would count, by killing Keen Billings. Instead, he had spent it in a barroom scuffle with a deputy sheriff, and had been rapped across the skull for his pains.

He didn't falter as he went up the stairs to the rooms. He had reached the final depths of shame last night. All this wouldn't be as bad as confronting his own conscience.

Celia was in the kitchen when Cole came in. From the bedroom door he could hear Ted's regular breathing, and he guessed he was asleep.

He walked into the kitchen, and Celia turned from the sink. "Hello, Cole," she said quietly.

"Hello, Seely," Cole said, and she looked sharply at him when he said it. He wasn't even aware he had called her by the affectionate nickname Ted used for her; he had been calling her that to himself for a long time now. He sank into a kitchen chair and tilted it against the wall. His long legs sprawled out in front of him. He was unshaven, and there was a fresh cut across his right cheek which overlaid the livid welt of the blacksnake whip Keen Billings had wielded.

Celia dried her hands and came over and sat down at the table where she could watch him. "I tried to make them let me see you last night, Cole, but they wouldn't. They wouldn't this morning, either."

Cole turned his head slowly and

smiled at her. "You've been pretty good to me, Celia," he said in a low, bitter voice. "I'm thankful."

Celia laughed shakily. "Cole, that sounds so formal. Almost as if you were saying good-by, or something."

"I reckon I meant it to."

Celia hesitated just a moment. "You're going, then?" she said.

Cole only nodded. His smoky-gray eyes were veiled and bitter, and they seemed to pierce Celia's brain and read her very thoughts.

"There's no stopping you," she said. "I can see that."

"I come back to explain," Cole said miserably. "I don't want you to think I'm runnin' away, Celia."

HERE was a ray of hope, and it blossomed suddenly in Celia's mind. His pride was his vulnerable point. If she accused him of running away, maybe he wouldn't go. Desperately, she grasped at it, and wondered how she could make it sound convincing. She made her first try then.

"It's pretty hard to think anything else, Cole."

He looked distressed, and Celia felt ashamed of herself, but her face didn't show it.

"No," Cole said slowly. "It ain't that, Celia. I thought it all out last night, layin' there in jail." He looked at his boots now, his smoky eyes musing. His legs were sprawled out in front of him, his hands were in his pockets, and his voice was even, contained. "I never belonged with you and Ted, anyway, Seely. I'm a cowman." He smiled crookedly at his boots. "Lord love me, but I'd like to see a cow critter again. I'm sick of lookin' at mules, Seely."

"You're leaving just because you

want to see cows again?" Celia taunted.

But Cole was going to have his say. "No, I don't reckon that's it. It's hard to say, Seely." He was still addressing himself to his boots. "A man has got so much in him—so much luck to run out, so many fights to win, so much money to earn, so much liquor to drink, and so many friends to make. Usually, he's an old man before he works it all out." He shook his head. "But not me. I run my luck out here, Seely. I won every fight except the one with myself. Last night showed it. I let a little runt of a dude sheriff and a couple of his hard-case deputies rawhide me into losin' my temper again. The slug I was goin' to spend on Keen Billings never got spent. I wasn't man enough to keep my temper."

"You're pitying yourself," Celia goaded.

Cole looked up at her, his eyes blazing, and then the anger died. He looked back at his boots. "No, you wouldn't understand that. I don't pity myself; I just know what's wrong with me. I'll tell you what it is, too, Seely. I've shot my wad, and it wasn't enough. From now on there's just one thing left for me in this man's town."

"What?"

"Hangin'."

He looked up at Celia to see if she understood that. If she did her face didn't show it. Her mouth twisted up with some expression he could not understand.

"Are you afraid, Cole?"

Cole looked at her. In one blinding moment he knew why she was jeering at him. She didn't want him to go! In that second he knew that she loved him. He wanted to get up and take her in his arms and tell her what had been in his mind and

his heart all these days. Then he relaxed. No, he couldn't do that. Last night, before he even suspected that she loved him, he had made up his mind to do what was best. This didn't change it; it only made it the more bitter. Last night he had known beyond any doubt that he could never help Ted or Celia Wallace again. His last chance to help them by killing Keen Billings had been muffed, and it had cost them five thousand dollars they could not afford. His business now was to get out of here. He had tried to help them and failed, and if they were to survive he must walk out. Craig Armin would make some sort of a deal with them, so that everything wouldn't be lost. It was he, Cole, that Craig Armin hated, not Ted Wallace.

And then he thought of what Celia had just said. Was he afraid? Maybe it would be easier to leave if he could make her think he was. So he said mildly, "Yes, Seely. That's what I've been tryin' to tell you. I'm afraid."

"I don't believe it!" Celia spoke sharply, instantly.

Cole didn't smile. He must make this stick if it was the last thing he ever did. It was the least thing he could do for her. He must play the coward, the man who has lost his nerve, and play it convincingly.

"I knew you wouldn't, Seely," he said. "You've kind of built me up into a hero, haven't you?" And he looked at her.

Celia was taken aback. It was the truth, but she wasn't going to admit it under these circumstances.

"I got your money for you from Craig Armin," Cole went on. "I licked Billings up there on the road. I pulled through with the China Boy wagon." He said bitterly, his voice suddenly harsh: "Can't you under-

stand I did that out of fear, from just bein' plain yellow? When a rat is cornered, he'll fight. Juck was goin' to beat me up. I fought, and got in a lucky swipe that knocked him out. And because Craig Armin knew why I was fightin', he offered to give me the money. And that fight with Billings. I dropped a lighted cigarette on my pony's neck. He reared and pitched me off into Billings. The gunnies with him shot at me. I crawled against Billings for protection and I bumped his nose, so he couldn't see me. I held to him to keep from bein' killed, and the gunny was afraid to shoot. I just bluffed it out."

Celia's mouth was sagging open and Cole went on relentlessly.

"There's your hero, Celia. Take that brake lever on the wagon breakin'. What would you do with twenty tons of ore behind you and a five-hundred-foot drop on one side of you and a straight-up cliff on the other? You'd run, because you couldn't jump. That's what I done. And I got away with it." He looked at her. "There's your hero, Seely. How do you like him?"

Celia came slowly to her feet. There was hurt in her eyes that made Cole's heart ache. "I don't like him," she whispered.

"You still want me to stay?" Cole asked.

"No. No, I . . . I think you better go."

She put her face in her hands and turned her back to Cole. He rose, said, "I'll take the night stage out, Celia. I'll be back to talk with Ted tonight. Then I'll slip out of town tonight, quietlike."

IT was ten minutes after Cole was gone, and Celia was sitting at the kitchen table, crying quietly, when she heard the knock at the front

door. Quickly, she dried her eyes and answered the door. Juck and Bill Gurney stood there. Both of them had their hats in their hands.

"Cole around, Miss Celia?" Juck asked.

"No. You'll probably find him at the express office, Juck."

Juck frowned. "He ain't leavin'?" he asked immediately.

"I'm afraid he is, Juck," Celia said in a dead voice. She went back into the house then and left Juck and Bill Gurney standing there.

Slowly Juck tramped down the stairs. At the foot of them he sat down on the bottom step. Bill Gurney, about half his size, sat down beside him and both of them stared at the fence.

"He hadn't ought to do a thing like that," Juck said. "What's Western goin' to do without him?"

"Fold up," Bill Gurney predicted gloomily.

"What's he doin' it for?" protested Juck.

Bill spat. "What would you do, if you was him? That damn sheriff has hogtied him and strapped him. He's just smart. He's pullin' out, before they carry him out."

"But she don't want him to go!" Juck said plaintively. "She's been cryin'!"

Bill Gurney shrugged. "Maybe he don't like her," he suggested. "He can be a right tough hombre in some ways."

"The hell he don't!" Juck said softly. He was quiet a long moment, shifting a wad of tobacco around in his cheek. This was the same thing as quitting, Juck concluded, and that didn't sound like Cole Armin, whatever Bill Gurney said. If Cole was the quitting kind, he would have quit long since. No, there was something behind it all. Maybe Cole was just discouraged.

A man got like that, sometimes. When nothing went right and everybody ganged up on him, a man had moments of wanting to quit. Every man did, and Cole wasn't any different from other men. The thing to do was to keep him here until he got over it and was all right again. It was all that easy to Juck, for he was a simple man.

He let loose with a stream of tobacco juice and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "We ought to keep him here, Bill."

"How you figure to? Hit him over the head and lock him up somewhere?"

"I ain't hittin' him over the head," Juck answered grimly. "I'd git my jaw broke and you'd git your head unscrewed. No, sir, that's out."

"Have him arrested, then. That's the next best thing, I reckon."

"He ain't done anything to be arrested for. What could—" Juck's voice died and he stared at the ground. All of a sudden he snapped his fingers loudly. "Well, I'm damned!" he said softly to himself. He stood up. "Come along with me, Bill. I got a idee."

The two of them tramped out of the compound and down the alley to the main street and along it to the sheriff's office.

When Juck, bending his head to get under the lintel, stepped into the sheriff's office, there was only a deputy there.

"Where's Linton?" Juck asked.

"I dunno," the deputy answered idly.

"Make a guess," said Juck.

The deputy looked irritated. "What do you want of him?"

"I got some questions to ast him. A lot of questions."

"Ask me," the deputy said.

Bill Gurney, who had the average teamster's contempt for the law,

snorted. "I'll ask you," he said. "What's two and two? Tomorrow, when you got it figured out, lemme know. Come on, Juck."

"Wait a minute," Juck said. "Mebbe he'll do. How much law you know, mister?"

"More'n both you jugheads put together," the deputy said angrily, glaring at Bill Gurney, who glared right back at him.

"All right," Juck said. "Me 'n' Bill was havin' an argument. Bill aims to hold up a stage."

BILL GURNEY jerked his head around to look up at Juck. Juck eyed him placidly, and Bill understood that his friend was up to something.

"That's right," Bill said.

The deputy sat up in his chair, glancing from one to the other, curiosity stirring in his eyes. "Well, thanks for tellin' me," he said sarcastically. "Want the loan of a gun?"

"I can't tell yet," Bill countered calmly. "Wait'll Juck's through."

Juck went on: "When Bill holds up this stage, s'pose there's two people on it—a old man and a old lady. All right, s'pose Bill spends the money he robs of 'em, and loses his job. He's got to have another. So he gets a job workin' for the old lady. She knows he's the fella that held her up, but on account of Bill's sweet temper and winnin' ways, she don't say nothin' to the sheriff. But the old man knows him, too. He goes to the sheriff and tells him. Then Bill is arrested. But the old lady, she won't testify agin' him. She wants to leave town so's she won't have to." Juck paused. "That's what I want to know. Can you hold the old lady and lock her up until Bill's trial?"

The deputy just stared at him.

"What kind of hammer-headed talk is this?"

"I knowed he couldn't answer us," Bill prodded. "That's why he's a deputy."

"Wait a minute!" the deputy said hotly. "I can answer it. Any fool could. Sure, the sheriff could hold her as a material witness."

"How long?" Juck said.

"Until the trial."

"And how long you figure that would be?"

"I dunno. Month, maybe more."

Juck looked at Bill. "Well, it don't look like you should ought to work for her, Bill," he said seriously.

The deputy lunged to his feet, the veins standing out on his thick neck. "So you've held up the stage already, Gurney?" he bawled. "You're under arrest!"

"What stage?" Bill asked blankly.

"Why . . . Juck just said it."

"No. I just aim to hold up the stage this old lady rides on," Bill said calmly. "She's comin' in next week some time. Got lots of money, I hear. I was goin' to take the money, and then get a job workin' for her." He shook his head. "Don't look like I should ought to now, though."

"It don't, for a fact," Juck agreed.

"Listen," the deputy said in a thick voice. "I don't know whether you're loco, or I am! It's the damndest thing I ever heard! But if there's a stage held up, Gurney, I'll get a posse out after you and they'll hang you!"

"Much obliged," Bill said, his face serious. "I'll let you know when I do. I aim to take up that offer of the loan of a gun, too. Well, so long, mister."

And he and Juck walked out under the bewildered gaze of the angry deputy. The deputy stared at their backs for a long moment, then sat

down and scratched his head. He had the conviction that a trick was being played on him.

Out on the street, Bill said to Juck, "All right, now try and make some sense out of that." He looked at Juck, who was grinning. "What's it all about?"

"You wait and see," Juck said. "Let's go back to the yard."

THEY turned into the compound, climbed the stairs, and again knocked on Celia's door. When she opened it and saw them, she said, "Haven't you found him yet, Juck?"

"No, ma'am," Juck said, fingering his hat. "I . . . I'd like to talk to you."

"Come in," Celia invited.

"No, this will do," Juck said uncomfortably. He tongued his cud of tobacco to the rear of his cheek before he started speaking. "You know, Miss Celia, about me holdin' up the stage that time."

"Of course. Is there any trouble comin' up?"

"No, ma'am." He cleared his throat. "But you see, ma'am, if I was to give myself up, Sheriff Linton would want you and Cole for witnesses at my trial."

Celia looked puzzled. "I don't understand, Juck."

"Well, Cole, he can't leave town if the sheriff serves a paper on him as a witness. If he wants to leave town and says he aims to, then they can even lock him up till my trial's over. It'll take a month before I'm tried."

And then Celia understood. Juck was willing to go to jail to keep Cole in Piute, by force, if necessary. A swift pity caught at Celia's throat and her eyes misted with tears.

"You'd even go to jail to keep him here, would you, Juck?" she asked softly.

"I reckon," Juck agreed quietly. "He don't know what he's doin'. He'll change his mind. Trouble is, when he does, he'll be gone."

Celia shook her head. "That's a fine thing to do, Juck. You're a real friend. Only . . . I doubt if Cole's worth it."

Juck's gaze whipped up to her. "What?"

"He told me today, Juck, that he was afraid—scared. He wants to leave Piute because he fears for his life."

"He told you that?" Juck said slowly.

Celia nodded. "So I don't think he's worth going to jail for, Juck. I wouldn't give myself up, if I were you. I'd let him go."

Juck looked at his hat and then put it on. "Well, good-by, Miss Celia," he said evenly.

He and Bill went downstairs and crossed the compound in silence. At the gate, Juck turned and looked back at the door. "Scared," he growled. "Cole Armin told her he was scared."

Bill Gurney's mind worked a little quicker than Juck's, and his intuition was a little keener. He said: "Juck, you and me are buttin' in on somethin' that ain't our business at all. We better keep clear."

"It looks that way," Juck agreed, and then he swore. "But scared? That don't make sense!"

CHAPTER XXII

LETTY'S CONFESSION

LETTY BURNS had just finished drying her few supper dishes when the knock came on her door. She took off her apron, brushed the hair from her eyes, straightened her dress and went to the door.

Keen Billings and Craig Armin stood there on the step.

"We'd like to talk with you, Miss Burns," Armin said.

Here it was, Letty thought frantically. Craig Armin's tone was a command, not a request.

"I was going over to call on a neighbor, Mr. Armin. What is it?" she asked with a faint hope of discouraging him.

"You won't call on your neighbor tonight," Craig Armin said coldly. "May we come in?"

Wordlessly, Letty Burns stood aside and let the two men enter the room, closing the door after them.

Craig Armin put his hat on the table, then gestured toward a chair. "Sit down, Miss Burns. This will take some time."

Silently, Letty sank onto the bench, while Armin and Billings, their faces grave, seated themselves.

Craig Armin lighted a cigar, carefully waved out the match, then lifted his cold gaze to hers. "Miss Burns, you've been in Monarch's pay now for some time. And I'm forced to say that you haven't been much help to us."

"I've tried," Letty said quickly. "Not very hard," Armin corrected. "The other night, by one simple statement, you could have saved me doing what I'm having to do tonight."

Letty sat motionless, waiting for it, holding her breath.

"I'm forced to come to a truce with Western," Craig Armin said.

Letty almost fainted with relief, but she managed to say, "I'm sorry, Mr. Armin. But I suppose it would be best in the end."

"You've been talking to Celia Wallace, I suppose?" Armin said dryly.

"No, sir. It just . . . well, nobody's winning, and you'll both be destroyed."

"So she said." Armin puffed on his cigar. "Well, there's no help for it. We'll make a deal of some kind. I need your help again." He smiled

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his cold, smug little smile. "You've nothing to fear, my dear. It's all very simple."

"What do you want of me?"

"You know that Cole Armin has threatened to kill both Billings and myself on sight?"

"I heard he was after Mr. Billings."

"And me, too," Armin said. "Naturally, I can't send Billings over to Wallace's without some warning, or my hotheaded nephew would kill him. You can see that?"

"Why . . . yes."

"You'll carry the message that Billings is coming, then. I want you to go to Wallace's place and tell him that I'm sending Billings over to call a truce and settle this. Armin, since he's a partner, will have to be there, too. You must tell them not to attack Billings when he comes. That's simple enough, isn't it?"

"Yes," Letty said, with relief.

"Then run along," Armin told her. "We'll wait here for you." Letty rose, and Armin said suddenly, "Another thing, Miss Burns. And this is important. I don't want Celia Wallace around the house during the conference. I'll expect you two women to go out calling somewhere until it's over."

Letty didn't know why she thought so, but that was the first false note that had been struck this evening.

"Why?" she asked bluntly.

ARMIN was disconcerted. Color crept into his pale face and his eyes shifted away from Letty. Finally he crossed his arms, and pulled at the lobe of his right ear with his left hand.

"Because I said so!" he rasped out.

"Of course," Letty said, surprised at his embarrassment. "I just wondered why."

"You do what you're told and don't ask no questions," Billings said quickly.

"It's all very simple, and nothing to get upset about," Armin said smoothly. "I happen to know, because I've been told, that Celia Wallace hates me. Twice she's tried to talk me into a truce, and twice I've refused her. If she's with Ted Wallace tonight, she'll try to get him to hold out for a better offer. I don't want her around because, well, naturally, I want the best of this deal, if Billings can get it."

"I see," Letty said. But she didn't. Craig Armin was watching her closely.

"So I want it understood," he went on firmly, "that you'll take her away from there, Miss Burns."

"I'll do it," Letty said. She went over to the wardrobe, opened it and got out her hat. Then she reached up on the top shelf for her pocket-book. As she lifted it down, the flap opened and her gun clattered to the floor.

Billings lunged for it, going to his knees, and when he got it he came to his feet, his face ugly.

"What are you tryin' to pull?" he asked thickly.

Letty was surprised at the vehemence of his question. "Why, I always carry it," she said. "I'm a single woman, Mr. Billings, and this town is pretty rough. I carry it in case I'm molested."

Billings was still eying her suspiciously. "Well, you won't carry it tonight," he said. He turned and tossed the small gun into the chair where he had been sitting. It landed on the pillow, clattered against the back, then slid down, half hidden by the pillow.

"Get goin'," Billings said harshly.

Meekly and swiftly, Letty put on her hat and a jacket. It was strange how jumpy and nervous they were, she thought. There was nothing to be nervous about in what they were

planning. And they didn't even trust her. She touched her small hat, turned away from the mirror and faced Craig Armin.

"How soon will Mr. Billings be along?" Letty asked.

"Ten minutes after you, my dear," Armin said. "Just so you tell them he's on his way, and clear Celia Wallace out. I'll wait here, if I may."

"Certainly," Letty said. She went to the door, said good-by, and stepped out into the night. Slowly, she walked up toward the dark street, and the farther she went the slower became her pace. This was all so very queer, their actions so suspicious. They didn't seem like two men who were relieved that at last their long fight was going to be settled. She stopped in the darkness of the yard and half turned to look back at her lamplit window. They hadn't saved her for this—an errand any little boy could do for a quarter.

Her mind made up, she went softly back to the door and put her ear against it. She could hear a rumble of voices, but no words. Still not satisfied, she moved over to the window and looked in. Craig Armin was standing up, writing something at the table. They had found her pen and ink and were using it. Then Armin straightened up and handed what he had been writing to Keen Billings. It was a check. Billings nodded approvingly, put the check in his vest pocket and sat down.

Letty faded away into the night and hurried on her way. Why would Armin be giving Keen Billings a check now? She didn't know, but she had a premonition. It was unreasonable and illogical, but it was there, nevertheless. The whole thing didn't seem right, and she felt a cold and sudden fear.

A FEW minutes later, when she walked into the empty compound behind Western's office, Letty had come to a momentous decision. And now that she had, she could scarcely contain herself.

She raced up the steps, knocked on the door, and waited impatiently.

Celia answered the door, saw who it was and opened it wide. "Come in, Letty."

"Celia, is Cole here?" Letty asked breathlessly.

"Yes. He's in with Ted. Why?"

Letty didn't answer. She hurried around the table and into the corridor and then into Ted's room. Cole was hunkered down against the wall by the window. Both he and Ted looked at her and saw the alarm on her face.

Ted pulled himself up in bed as Celia came in behind Letty.

"Letty, what's happened?" he demanded.

"I haven't got much time to tell you!" Letty said swiftly. "Craig Armin and Keen Billings came over to my house! They told me to come over here and tell you that Keen Billings was coming over in ten minutes to talk with you. Monarch wants to come to a truce!"

Ted looked at Cole and grinned. "There you are, boy! Hear that?"

"No, no, Ted!" Letty cried. "I don't think they mean it!"

"Why don't you?" Cole drawled quietly.

"They're nervous, both of them. And more than that, they told me to get Celia out of the house before Keen Billings came!"

"Why?" Ted asked.

"Oh, does it matter?" Letty cried. "I know there's something behind it! I don't know what they're planning, but it didn't ring true, Ted!"

Cole came to his feet. Ted was looking at him, and so was Celia,

but Cole's smoky eyes were on Letty.

"Is this another trick, Letty?" Cole asked quietly.

"Trick?" Ted asked.

Cole spoke to Ted, but he was watching Letty. "I can't prove it, Ted," he said quietly, "but I think Letty is workin' for Monarch."

"You're a liar!" Ted said furiously.

Letty's face was pale.

Cole went on stubbornly. "It's no business of mine, Ted. I'm out of this. But it's my hunch. And I think she's tryin' to trick us again."

"Damn you!" Ted shouted. "You can't say that about her!"

"Wait!" Letty said harshly. They all looked at her. "It's true! Cole's right. I *am* being paid by Keen Billings and Craig Armin! Oh, they told me that Ted was the one who killed Pete, my brother." She looked at Ted. "Maybe you did, Ted. Only I can't hate you for it, can't see these terrible things happen to you any longer! I'm telling the truth now!"

"But I didn't kill your brother, Letty!" Ted cried. "I never killed a man in my life! I didn't even know him!"

LETTY looked searchingly at him. "He was a Monarch teamster," she said slowly. "You didn't loosen the king bolt on his wagon that time? He broke—"

"I know he broke his legs and died of gangrene," Ted said fiercely. "But I didn't do it, Letty. I'll swear by all that's holy that I'd kill a man who'd do a thing like that!"

"But Billings said you did!"

"He lies, damn him!"

Letty shook her head and buried her face in her hands for a moment. She wasn't going to cry. She

couldn't cry now, when all of them depended on her.

"Then you must listen to me now!" she said swiftly. "Something awful is going to happen, I know!"

"You lied once, Letty," Cole said coldly. "You tried to sell us out. How do we know you aren't doin' it again?"

"You've got to believe me!" Letty cried.

"Cole, she's telling the truth," Celia said.

"Maybe," Cole said tonelessly, watching Letty. "Now tell it again. Tell the truth, Letty. What did they say?"

"They said for me to go over and tell both of you that they wanted to come to terms. You'd threatened to kill Billings when you saw him again, and they were afraid you'd shoot him when he came if I didn't warn you."

"Billings?" Cole echoed. "Why doesn't Craig Armin come?"

"I don't know. He's waiting at my place!" Letty said desperately. "I'm just telling you."

"Go on."

"Then Craig Armin said I was to get Celia out of the house and go somewhere with her."

"Why did he say that?" Cole insisted.

"That's what I wondered! I asked him why. He got embarrassed then. His face got red and he pulled his ear, like an embarrassed man will. He told me that I—"

She stopped talking. A change

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had come over Cole Armin's face. A look of utter, blank astonishment. Celia and Ted looked at him. Cole's face was drawn, tense.

Slowly, he walked over to Letty, put both hands on her shoulders and shook her. "Letty, what did you say just then?" he asked in a thick voice.

"When?"

"What did Craig Armin do when you asked him why?"

"He got red. The color came—"

"I don't mean that!" Cole said savagely. "What else?"

"He . . . he pulled his ear, the lobe of his ear, like a man does when he's embarrassed."

"Are you sure?"

"Why . . . yes," Letty faltered.

"Which ear?" Cole's hands were squeezing Letty's shoulders until she winced.

Letty thought before she answered. "His right ear, I think."

"Are you sure it was his right ear?" Cole demanded.

"I am," Celia put in swiftly.

"You noticed it, too," Cole asked.

Celia nodded. "I'm sure it's his right ear. He's left-handed and he crosses his arms." She stared at him. "Why, Cole?"

Cole's hands slipped from Letty's shoulders. He looked at them blankly, his lips barely moving.

And then he said slowly, "Because my uncle, Craig Armin, lost half of his right ear in the Mexican War! It was shot away! I remember my dad tellin' me!"

Cole looked steadily at Celia. "This man is not Craig Armin," he said slowly.

What will Cole's next move be, now that he has reason to believe the man who calls himself Craig Armin is an impostor? Has Letty's warning come in time to save Cole and Ted from a death trap? What will be the outcome of the tug of war between Monarch and Western? If you want to be in on the breathtaking finish to this pulsing and dramatic serial, don't miss the concluding installment in next week's issue.

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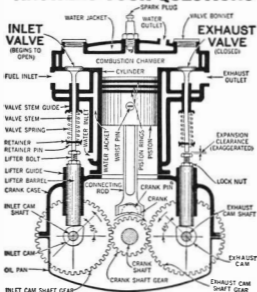
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You owe it to yourself to write and see what wonderful success so many other men and women have enjoyed with this simple, money-making Plan. No experience is required. Let me mail you full particulars—then you can judge whether you want to start right in making money at once. In addition to your fine cash earnings, you can get food products and other household necessities for your own use at wholesale prices—so you can save money as well as make money. This is a sincere offer by an old reliable company. Mail the coupon or a postcard at once for my complete, amazingly interesting Plan and my Free Outfit Offer. Do it TODAY!

E. J. MILLS, President,

8055 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, O.

MAIL COUPON
for
FREE OFFER

Mr. E. J. MILLS, Cincinnati, Ohio.
8055 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio.
Please send me at once full particulars about your Free Outfit Offer and how you will help me make big cash profits as a Local Distributor for your nationally famous products.

Name _____
Address _____

Above are shown just a few of the many delicious appetizing foods—puddings, pie fillings, cake icings, gelatin desserts—that can be made in a jiffy with the ready prepared products in this nationally famous line.

This big line of Pure Food Products and over 100 other Home Necessities, is manufactured in our own Pure Food Kitchens and Laboratories, under the supervision of skilled chefs, chemists and dietitians. Every single product is of uniform high quality and carries with it our absolute guarantee of satisfaction or money back.

Below is shown our huge, modern daylight plant. Each year millions of packages leave this big plant to be delivered, "factory fresh" direct to waiting customer's throughout the United States.



(Please Print or Write Plainly)