

STREET  
AND  
SMITH'S

# WESTERN STORY IO¢

MAGAZINE  
DEC. 17, 1938



PIERCE • OLMSTEAD • McNICHOLS

# HOW SAFE IS



# YOUR JOB?

## CAN YOU CLASS YOURSELF AMONG THE "OK-MUST KEEP!" EMPLOYEES?

**NO** USE dodging facts! At times—in every company's history—the pay-roll goes onto the operating table for major surgery. And when such times come, certain employees are amputated—sometimes a few, sometimes many. Yet a certain few are always marked "OK-Must Keep!" And the many who are let out envy them—call them "lucky."

### What's Behind Job-Holding "Luck"?

It can be *proved*, however, that there's almost always something more than luck involved.

Even the fellow who seems to "have a drag" may actually have a lot more on the ball than is apparent to his fellow workers.

He may have hidden values that only his superiors see or know about.

After all, the "I-Gotta-Drag-Club" has taken a bad licking. In fact, it rather completely disbanded in 1932-1933.

Yet why is it that some employees hold their jobs at the very time when others of seemingly equal ability lose theirs?

If it's not luck, there *must* be some explanation. And there is one!

### How to Insure Your Job

The secret of holding your job in hard times is to be invaluable to your employer. And a man or woman who is invaluable is usually a well-trained one.

Training is of many kinds—stems from many sources. But the LaSalle kind has been unusually successful. Nearly a million members, in a score of subjects, over a thirty year period can testify to that—and many can prove it by their pay envelopes!

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### Why It Works

Put yourself at your own president's desk for a moment. You are faced with cutting the pay-roll. First of all, you certainly are going to do your best to hold on to those employees who really know their present jobs.

But among them—the very last to go will be those

few who are also wholly or partly trained for the job ahead—even for the job *ahead* of the job ahead!

### What You Should Do About It—

But true as these facts are, you probably will tend to do nothing about them.

"My job is safe," you think, "My company won't cut down—and even if it does, I won't suffer."

But doesn't the very fact that you have read this far indicate that there's some small doubt—a trifle of uneasiness in your mind?

Wouldn't you be more comfortable if right now your boss knew that you were taking LaSalle training—a piece of knowledge that upon request we take pains to bring to the personal attention of every LaSalle enrollee's superior?

What you *should* do about it is, therefore, as obvious as the coupon below.

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# WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

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# THE ROUNDUP

ALL you folks will remember that some time ago Charles L. McNichols, who writes such fine horse articles for us, inquired through The Roundup whether any of our readers could give him any information about the Colorado Rangers. He particularly wanted to learn whether colts of other breeds—especially the Apaluche—undergo the same color reversal which makes the Colorado Rangers so unusual.

We're sure not only Mr. McNichols but all our other readers will be interested in this letter from Mr. M. L. Buschlen, of Flint, Michigan:

"My dad had an Apaluche mare (called Arabian here in Michigan) which he crossed with a Percheron stallion. The result was a black colt with white spots which changed to a white colt with black spots. She also had a gray Apaluche with little or no mane and a rat or spike tail. We kept a stallion of this breeding and he left quite a number of spotted colts."

Your letter was mighty interesting, Mr. Buschlen, and we wish the old corral was big enough for us to publish all of it. Since we can't do that, we're turning it over to Mr. McNichols and we know he'll be glad to answer the questions you ask.

Incidentally, Mr. McNichols' article on Colorado Rangers on page 58 may clear up some of the problems which have been puzzling you.

There's nothing in the world of sports so essentially American as the Rodeo. Most of our country's sports had their origin in a foreign land. Football, for example, was evolved from English Rugby, and even our national game of baseball had its start in cricket. But when we watch the dangerous and thrilling contests of the cowboys and cowgirls, we have something which belongs to America alone.

For three hours we sat on tenterhooks the other night and watched the Thirteenth Annual Rodeo in Madison Square Garden. The contests were keen, and for skill, speed and endurance, we doubt if there's a more grueling competition in the world.

It was about seventy years ago that a group of ranchers around the Arkansas River got together and entered their best cowboys in competitions of cow-country feats. According to accounts, they wagered money, horses, bridles, and even their boots on the outcome of the events. But it was not until 1888 that the first Rodeo was given as a competitive show for the general public. The business men of Prescott, Territory of Arizona, planned a celebration for the Fourth of July, and thus it was that the Rodeo as we know it today, was born.

There were other famous early Rodeos—the one in Denver, Colorado, and the famous Frontier Days of Cheyenne, Wyoming. The Rodeo in Prescott ran for two days—the one in Madison Square Garden this year ran for twenty-four, and it was with a feeling of pride that we came

away from the Garden, knowing that the fine traditions of our great West were being kept alive with such splendid whole-hearted enthusiasm.

"My hat's off to Cherry Wilson, author of *THE WOLFER OF PHANTOM CREEK*," writes Mrs. M. C. Roberts, of El Paso, Texas. "It's one of the best horse stories I've ever read. I loved every character the author portrayed, Wild Jory best of all. I hope Cherry Wilson will soon be on your pages again."

We're mighty glad to know you liked Cherry Wilson's story so much, Mrs. Reed, and we know you, and all the members of The Roundup, will be glad to know that another of Cherry Wilson's stories will appear very shortly.

We're always glad to hear from people who enjoy our fact articles and features, for we believe this phase of Western Story Magazine puts it more or less in a class by itself. Mr. John Thompson, whose articles on Famous Lost Mines appear frequently in this magazine, sends us this interesting letter which he received from Dr. W. Ehrhardt, of Fairbanks, Texas:

"One of the best features of Western Story Magazine is the history of how mines were first located. I have looked for but failed to find the history of the Homestake gold mine. Have I missed it?"

"For people of high mental training who are confined to bed or are convalescing, I find Western Story Magazine a great help in transferring thoughts from brooding into action so much needed today."

Mr. Thompson tells us that he has already answered your letter,

Dr. Ehrhardt, and given you the information you asked for. We are glad you like our magazine and find it of value to your patients. We hope it will always come up to the standards you set for it; if it doesn't, we hope you'll let us know.

And in next week's issue—

Disgraced, branded a renegade, what does life hold for Clint Yancey, who would have given his life to uphold the traditions of the organization he was accused of betraying? Don't miss the first installment of Jay Lucas' dramatic serial, *ARIZONA RANGER*, the story of a man who refused to be defeated. Daisybell had the kind of spirit Jim Lambert and his pards liked to see in a cow critter, but the dry spell that hit Manana Mesa sure was working havoc with her girlish figure. Ray Nafziger packs plenty of laughs in *THE DROUGHT AND DAISYBELL*. Meet Tumbleweed Lowrie, the hombre who could stir up more excitement than any three men on Old Man Tanner's pay roll. Trouble stuck closer to Tumbleweed than a flea to a hound dog, but he proved he was worth his salt in *RUIN AT RIO PIEGRAS*, a whirlwind tale by L. Ron Hubbard. Can a man who has ridden the owl-hoot trail for more years than he can remember ever make peace with the law? Flash Cordall didn't know the answer, but he finds it in *BACK TRAIL SHADOW*, a gripping human-interest yarn by W. Ryerson Johnson. Chief, the wonder horse of Al Peak's mule string, is back again—with a pard. George Cory Franklin gives us an outstanding tale in *CHIEF MEETS BILLY THE KID*. *VALLEY OF THE STARS*, Stuart Hardy's absorbing serial, comes to a smashing conclusion; and of course there's a full cavvy of other stories, features and departments.

# HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED--THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!

MY RAISE DIDN'T COME THROUGH MARY-I MIGHT AS WELL GIVE UP. IT ALL LOOKS SO HOPELESS,



IT ISN'T HOPELESS EITHER BILL. WHY DON'T YOU TRY A NEW FIELD LIKE RADIO?

TOM GREEN WENT INTO RADIO AND HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY, TOO. I'LL SEE HIM RIGHT AWAY.



BILL, JUST MAILING THAT COUPON GAVE ME A QUICK START TO SUCCESS IN RADIO. MAIL THIS ONE TONIGHT



TOM'S RIGHT--AN UNTRAINED MAN HASN'T A CHANCE. I'M GOING TO TRAIN FOR RADIO TOO. IT'S TODAY'S FIELD OF GOOD PAY OPPORTUNITIES



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OH BILL, IT'S WONDERFUL YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO.



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J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. BND National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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# Deep Water Showdown



by

**Frank Richardson Pierce**

---



## Deep Water Showdown

### CHAPTER I

#### YOUNG BOSS

**B**UD JARRETT stood at the bridge rail of the steamer *Lucy Jarrett* and watched his salmon cannery crew come slowly over the side. Except for a scattering of whites, the crew was composed of Filipinos, with a few Japanese and Chinese.

Each yellow face lifted briefly, and Bud was increasingly conscious of their penetrating eyes—Oriental eyes, mysterious, inscrutable, keenly appraising. This was the first time in nearly fifty years, Old Boss, Warhorse Bill Jarrett, hadn't taken his crew North to pack salmon.

Rumor travels fast along water fronts and through Oriental quarters. Everyone knew Old Boss was lying at death's door in the hospital and that Young Boss, twenty-one and untested, was taking the crew to the Glacier Inlet cannery this year.

Whites and Orientals alike were searching for flaws and weakness of character; probing for signs that might indicate lack of decision or courage in a critical situation. Theirs was no idle curiosity. Some had served Old Boss fifty years. In lean years he had taken care of them somehow, and had promised pensions when they were too old to work. Already Warhorse Bill Jarrett's pension list was a heavy financial drain in these days of sharp competition.

Young Boss, they were afraid, might have different ideas. He might cut expenses to the bone; might lay off those whose hands and legs had slowed down, in a calling

that exacts speed. The fish pirates—the two-legged wolves infesting Coastal waters from the Columbia River to the Bering Sea—would be sure to raid Bud Jarrett's trap. If they stopped the flow of fish to the cannery, then a structure Old Boss had spent fifty years in building would crash. Those who bought the salvage wouldn't be interested in pensions.

And so they studied Bud Jarrett as they plodded up the gangplank, backs bent under the weight of tightly packed bags and suitcases. Rain, carried on the wings of a high wind, rattled like shot against Bud's black slicker and whipped his exposed face and hands to a ruddy glow. He stood six feet two inches and weighed two hundred pounds, but the sou'wester on his head and the bulging slicker lent him the proportions of a giant.

He seemed to belong to the scene. The whitecaps racing along the surface of the bay, the floating dunnage, the creak of straining hawsers, the smell of pitch, tar and cordage, and the almost imperceptible lift and fall of the vessel supplied a perfect background for the big fellow in the black slicker.

There were moments when the bright light of youth tasting adventure glittered in Bud's blue eyes and his rugged face carried the trace of a smile, but invariably he sobered and instinctively his eyes lifted to the hospital on the hill. Then those working under him saw the strong lines of his jaw.

**O**NE man left his gear on the wharf, crossed the gangplank, dropped out of the line moving forward, and climbed the ladder to the bridge.

"Hello, Bud," he said, and thrust

forth a hand as large as Jarrett's. It was a thick, strong, scarred hand.

"Hello, Al Trench!" Bud exclaimed cordially. "I've been expecting you. Why didn't you bring your gear aboard?"

"I wanted to ask you some questions first," Al Trench answered.

"Shoot!" Bud invited. Neither man was smiling now.

"Your dad and mine fought big money, big politicians and fish pirates for the Glacier Inlet cannery," Al said. "No man in the North was a better *salmon hunter* than my father, even if I do say it."

"No question about it," Bud agreed. "He could locate a school quicker'n any man I ever saw."

"He tried to pass his knowledge along to me," Al continued. "While you, in our kid days, played and worked about the cannery and learned operation from the ground up, I was out in every kind of sea, handling every type of salmon catching gear."

"Go on," Bud said.

"Last year for the first time dad and I didn't go North," Al said. "Ma was in a bad way. I chartered a purse seiner, went partners with some other fellows and fished here on Puget Sound. We tangled with a boat from one of the big outfits that was tryin' to run us offn the fishin' grounds. While tryin' to save our gear we stranded in closed waters. The other outfit landed just beyond the closed water boundary, came along the beach and tied into us. Solo Pete was killed. I wounded Mike Adams."

"You were in a jam," Bud nodded.

"Plenty," Al agreed. "The government confiscated boat and gear because it was found in closed water. The State tried me for shooting Mike Adams. First two juries disagreed on my self-defense plea.

Then the big outfit came through with newly discovered witnesses and I was convicted."

"Why didn't they try you for Solo Pete's death?" Bud asked.

"From the pile of empty cartridges found around Pete's body," Al explained, "it looked as if he had been attacking us. Anyway, when it was all over I was made to look pretty bad. They shoved me into the pen. This year when your dad was told he might not pull through his operation, he went before the parole board, told 'em you'd need plenty of help and I was the only man who could give it to you. He offered me a job if they'd parole me. Well . . . I was paroled."

"Where do I come in?" Bud asked, wondering.

"I'm startin' with two strikes against me," Al said bluntly. "I'm an ex-con. The Solo Pete angle is still a club over my head. My trials and payin' for the confiscated boat cleaned out dad's savin's. I don't mind admittin' I'm pretty desperate, but I'll never let you down. If you trust me, I'll go to hell for you. But if you can't feel the same about me because of what's happened, then the deal is off and I'm goin' back and finish my time."

Bud knew Al must be desperate or he wouldn't have gone into detail over his troubles. The old Al was a lumbering, good-natured rusty-headed giant, with gray eyes, lively with humor and a grin that made the toughest going easier. The man before him was nervous and suspicious of all men and their motives, intent on surrounding himself with protection. He looked much older than his twenty-three years. Less than a year in prison had changed him. Normally a hundred-and-ninety-pounder, he now weighed around one hundred and sixty.

"Al," Bud said, "you've got the wrong slant on things. I haven't lost faith in you. But you've lost faith in people. I'm going to need somebody to keep the wolves off my back when the fighting gets tough. You're elected. Have I made it clear?"

A heavy sigh came from Al's very depths, and something of the old grin returned. "You Jarretts are regular," he said simply.

"Then get your gear aboard," Bud ordered. "Move into the first empty cabin you find on the boat deck. Then join me and watch the men come aboard. There's a number of new faces and I want to toss trouble-makers back onto the wharf before we sail."

LATER when Al joined him, he said, "They're sure sizin' you up, Bud. Your dad was a holy terror handlin' cattle rustlers on the range and fish pirates in the North, but they don't know about you."

"You can fairly feel their doubt in the air," Bud admitted. "Al, who's that pasty-face man coming up the gangplank?"

"John Wing," Al answered. "Half white, half Chinese. With none of the good points and all of the bad of both races. He's Blackjack Laird's gamblin' pardner. Laird'll be along. Look, there he is now, tryin' to hide his face behind the bag on his shoulder."

Bud looked at John Wing and thought of a knife thrust in the darkness, but the powerfully built Laird suggested a bludgeon or dynamite until he looked at the man's hands. They were big, but there was the swiftness and grace of a woman's about them. They were hands made for the manipulation of cards.

Part of Bud's education had included traveling steerage when the

cannery crew came out in the fall. Men such as John Wing and Blackjack Laird magically appeared when the steamer headed south and started their crooked games. By the time the *Lucy Jarrett* docked in Seattle the gamblers often had taken the major portion of the season's pay roll.

"I'm going down and tell that pair they're not wanted," Bud said. "Might as well get the jump on the trouble they'll dish up."

"There's more trouble brewin' than you think, Bud," Al said. "You learn things in the pen. I learned there's a tie-up between Laird and Fish-trap Bullock."

Bud whistled. That was news to him, though he was familiar with Bullock's operations. The man had smashed several canneries by robbing their traps. A successful fish pirate must be skilled in the finer points of bribery and murder in dealing with the trap guard. Bullock was one of the best.

"A tie-up between Laird and Bullock has possibilities," Bud said grimly. "If Laird works on the crew and Bullock the fish trap, there won't be enough left of the Jarrett bank account to sweep up in a cigarette paper this fall." He shed his sou'wester and slicker and started for the ladder leading below.

"I might just as well start keepin' 'em offn your back right now," Al said, following him.

As they made their way through the narrow passage in the steerage, air heavy with cigarette smoke and body odors assailed their nostrils. Narrowed eyes peered from yellow faces almost obscured by the haze. There were soft rustlings as men suddenly changed position. Here a man vanished behind a bulkhead; there one, stretched out in a bunk, turned his face away. Music from

a guitar drifted up from one of the lower decks.

A hush suddenly settled on the steerage as Bud and Al approached. With no exchange of words there was mass agreement that Young Boss was facing his first test.

## CHAPTER II

### TROUBLE FORECAST

THERE were many places in which Blackjack Laird could have concealed himself, but to have done so would have involved loss of face. And face is of tremendous importance in Oriental eyes. Laird, sensing a change, looked over his shoulder to determine the cause. He saw Bud, then resumed his job of arranging his belongings.

"Pick up your gear and go ashore, Laird," Bud ordered. "Take John Wing with you."

"Why?" Laird asked insolently.

"You know why," Bud retorted. "It's none of my business what these boys do with their money after they get back to Seattle. But I'm going to see you don't clean them while they're aboard."

Laird's face set in stubborn lines. The take was so great he could afford to go north with a cannery crew, labor with the men during the salmon run, then make the return trip. Female relatives were usually on hand when a ship docked, often for the expressed purpose of circumventing gamblers. They not only took charge of their men, but the season's pay as well. Aboard ship it was different. Gambling is infectious. The best resolutions go overboard when there is mass excitement and the stakes are high.

"I shipped the usual way," Laird said. "You can't fire me."

"Get going!" Bud ordered. Al

Tench stood nearby almost unnoticed. There was no one to keep people off his back when trouble started and he kept it against the bulkhead. Sometimes he looked at Bud, but mostly his eyes roved the Orientals converging on the scene. "I said, get going, Laird," Bud repeated.

"Brother," the gambler warned, "You'd better think it over. Otherwise you'll lose face in more ways than one."

Bud reached for the gambler's arm, and Laird lashed out with a left hook that narrowly missed Bud's jaw. A murmur, like a deep sigh, ran through the Orientals. They were going to learn something of Young Boss.

Laird had the edge in weight and build. He was a swarthy brute, with the sloping shoulders of the dangerous fighter. His hair was thick and black, his eyebrows were thick and they met above his heavy nose. The bridge of that nose had been badly dented in some previous fight. He was five feet ten inches tall, and there were two hundred and twenty pounds of him.

The swiftness of Laird's incredible hands amazed Bud. Before he could strike a telling blow, the gambler had cut him over the eye and something resembling a darting snake was striking his lips. Bud got up a partial defense and began getting inside the punches. Minutes passed. There was no referee, no escape for either, as they moved back and forth in a small area.

Bud was conscious of the press of bodies on all sides, yet the press was fluid, yielding when he backed up. Never interfering. It would beman to man until the finish. He saw an opening at last and lashed out, leaving his own jaw exposed for a split sec-

ond. Laird's snakelike hand struck. Lights danced before Bud's eyes; and a roaring filled his ears. He shook his head and the fog dissipated.

He was sprawled on the deck and several blurring Lairds were rushing forward with the intention of kicking in his ribs.

Bud put everything he had in getting to his feet. He fell into a clinch, and Laird struggled so desperately to shake him off that Bud's feet cleared the deck and cut a path through the crowd. Laird rushed at a bulkhead, intent on smashing him against a steel girder. Bud broke clear and staggered back, guard down, head rolling. Laird, scenting the kill, lashed out with a left hook. Bud rolled clear of the punch just in time. He rolled again as Laird followed up with two vicious rights and a left.

Laird's guard lifted, a trifle too high, and Bud mustered his strength in a smashing blow to the stomach. He felt his hand go deep and heard Laird's startled grunt. Then he swung at the gambler's jaw, knowing the guard would be down. The bones in his hand almost cracked under the impact and he saw Laird's eyes glaze and heard him hit the deck. The gambler struck on his head and shoulders while his feet were still in the air. He lay like one dead.

**A** CONFUSED murmur of Oriental voices filled the steerage when Laird failed to move. A knife swished out of the smoke and yellowish light, cutting viciously at Bud's back. Al Tench's fist was a split second ahead. It caught John Wing's temple with such force that the half-breed appeared to melt and run down into his shoes. The knife clattered across

the deck and Bud scooped it up on the run. "He tried to knife you, Bud," said Al.

"You cooled him," Bud answered. He grasped Laird's collar. "Pick up Wing and we'll get out of here, Al."

"Grab yourself a club. Laird's men are blockin' the way ahead," Tench warned.

The only object that would serve as a club was a fire-hose nozzle. Bud unscrewed it, gripped the small end and started forward. He saw a skinny arm drawing a knife and swung the nozzle. A bone snapped sharply and a Filipino gambler howled. Bud kicked him up the passage ahead of him. Three others closed in and he swung the nozzle again. Two dropped, and the third melted into a shadow beyond a tier of bunks.

"Bring these men's gear," Bud shouted over his shoulder as he emerged from the steerage. He continued on, booting the Filipino gambler ahead of him and dragging Laird along. Al Tench followed and behind him came several Filipinos carrying the belongings of the beaten men.

Bud left Laird behind a pile of freight, called a cab and sent the Filipino gambler to the hospital to get his wrist fixed. When he returned, Al was leaning against a pile of freight.

"I'm going aboard and wash up," Bud told him.

Al nodded. "Sure," he said, "and a little raw beefsteak will go well on your right eye, Bud."

Then Al sat down, out of the way, to catch his breath. He watched the longshoremen truck lift boards loaded with freight to points within reach of the ship's tackle. There was a lot of freight. A cannery must



be self-contained during the operating season. Often it is located far from an Alaskan town. Food, clothing, first aid, fuel oil, machinery replacements, as well as hundreds of thousands of knocked down cans must be carried north.

"Come here, Tench," a voice said, "I want to talk to you."

**A**L turned, surprised, and found himself facing Fish-trap Bullock.

Bullock was a man of medium size, with a cadaverous face and coal-black eyes. He never smiled.

"So you and Bud Jarrett cleaned up on Laird and Wing?" Bullock observed coldly. "That's bad for you, Tench." He caught Al's sleeve and led him behind a pile of freight. "Laird and Wing have got long memories, Tench. Besides, each of us know your record."

"Anybody knows my record who read about my trial in the papers," Al said evenly.

"But the papers didn't tell anything about you killin' Solo Pete." Bullock's voice was low, confident.

"I didn't kill him," Al said hotly. "Or if I did, it was self-defense."

"I can send men to the district attorney who will swear you not only killed Pete, but you dropped empty cartridges around his body to make it look as if he'd done a lot of shootin'," Bullock said. "If I did that you'd prob'ly hang for murder. And it'd be a shame for a bright young man like you, who needs money, to stretch hemp in the State pen."

"Cut out the small talk," Al retorted, "and get to the point."

"You're a key man," Bullock said without emotion, "important to Bud Jarrett because you know salmon, fish traps and . . . pirates. But you're more important to yourself.

The trouble you got into cost you plenty. The salmon business owes you plenty for all the grief and expense you've been through. You won't get it back workin' for the Jarretts."

Al's face betrayed nothing. He watched a string of empty trucks rumble past; watched the rain pelt the steamer. "What've you got in mind, Bullock?" he asked. "You seem to have me hemmed in on all sides."

"Suppose you was fish-trap guard at Stormy Point?" Bullock said. "I come along with tug and scow. You turn your back while I brail twenty thousand salmon. If I gave you a cent apiece, that's two hundred dollars."

"A cent and a half is three hundred dollars," Al remarked.

"Three hundred dollars," Bullock agreed after a moment's thought. "Ten calls at the trap would net you three thousand dollars. If the run's a big one, you'd do better'n that. A hell of a lot better. And still you wouldn't get back what the salmon business has cost you and your old man."

"That's about the size of it," Al conceded.

"Don't you think you can make Bud Jarrett believe you're the man to guard the Stormy Point trap?" Bullock ventured.

"It's a pious idea," agreed Al. "Where can you sell twenty and thirty thousand salmon at a crack without attracting attention?"

"I know people who don't ask questions when they've got empty cans on hand," Bullock replied. Even now he didn't smile as he added, "I might sell 'em to Jarrett. It wouldn't be the first time a man bought his own fish."

Al nodded. He knew that was true.



*Bud saw that it was impossible for the strongest salmon to leap the falls—yet thousands of fish were up above!*

Bullock swung aggressively down the wharf to an expensive car. He waited several minutes, then John Wing and Blackjack Laird joined him. The pair walked uncertainly, like men in a fog.

**A**L walked slowly to the freight shed door and leaned against it, his mood thoughtful. Bud Jarrett emerged from the owner's cabin and hurried down the gang-

plank. Washing hadn't reduced the swelling of his lips and right eye very much.

"Where're you going in such a hurry, Bud?" Al asked.

"Up to the hospital to see my father," Bud answered.

"Looking like that?"

"Can't help it," Bud replied wryly.

The usual "no visitors" card was on the door of his father's room when Bud called. He opened the door and motioned the nurse on duty to step into the hall. The girl was amazed at his appearance.

"You look like a walking accident case," she said. "You can't let him see you in that condition. He's pretty low and—"

"It'll do him more good than a blood transfusion," Bud contradicted, and entered the room.

He looked down at his father's wasted body and said gently, "How're you doin', old-timer."

The big, white-haired man with the bony shoulders and pain-lined face stirred and opened his eyes. "Been fightin', eh?" he whispered weakly.

"Yeah," Bud answered. "Managed to knock out Laird. Al Tench kept the others offn my back."

"Laird, eh?" The significance wasn't lost on old Warhorse Bill. "Fish-trap Bullock won't be far off. Watch out for John Wing, too—bad one with a knife." He dozed a moment, and Bud noted, as he had often done, the deep lines time had chiseled in his face. He thought of granite on a very old peak.

"You had better leave now, Mr. Jarrett," the nurse urged. "He's very tired."

"Stick around," Warhorse Bill whispered, "there's things to be said." Another period of silence, then, "Al Tench kept 'em offn your back, eh? Good man, Al. I won't

worry so much now that I know he's goin' North with you. Reckless boy, but good. Bud, never forget the Jarrett code, take care of the loyal boys, and help the deservin'—as long as they're deservin'. Don't go, son. Wait!"

Again he appeared to be sleeping, but Bud knew he was trying to organize his poor, bewildered brain.

"Seems like I had a bad dream," the old man said at last. "Fish-trap Bullock was standin' by the bed. He was as near to laughin' as I ever saw him. 'So you thought you'd keep us from knowin' you had a stomach operation, Jarrett?' he says. 'Why, we've been watchin' you all winter. Knew it was comin'. It means Bud takes the crew North this year. We never licked you, but we'll beat him. And that'll hurt you more!' Then the nurse chased him away. Funny, Bud, how real dreams are. But he was right, blast him; if them two-legged wolves pulled you down, nothin' could hurt me more."

"I won't let 'em," Bud assured him.

"Fight 'em," Warhorse Bill urged, "and if you lose your shirt, I won't mind, just so long as you go down fightin'! Lordy! Lordy, boy, I'd like to see the fight. Come back this fall and tell me about it."

The doctor had told Warhorse Bill Jarrett he might not survive the operation, that the chances were all against a man who had abused his stomach almost a lifetime. After the operation he had told Bud his father had a chance in a hundred of pulling through. He had advised him against leaving Seattle.

But Bud knew his father would fret away what chance he did have if a Jarrett didn't go north to look after affairs.

Now Bud grasped his father's hand. "S'long, old-timer," he said gruffly to cover his emotion.

"S'long . . . cub," Warhorse Bill answered. His eyes followed his son through the door, as if for once he was admitting this might be the last time he would see him.

"How's he doing?" Bud asked the nurse when he saw her outside.

"Any other man would have been dead," she answered, "but your father thinks only of living."

"Some of the grub he ate out of tin cans in the early days was pretty terrible," he said.

**B**UD drove directly to the night nurse's home and aroused her. "Sorry to wake you up," he said, "but did a stranger enter my father's room last night? Or was it a dream?"

"Yes," she answered. "I saw him first in the sun room at the end of the hall. Several patients were very low and I thought he was a relative. He smoked and read and seemed to be nervous. I crossed the hall to the kitchen. When I returned he was standing near the bed, staring at your father and talking in a low voice. He was very polite. He explained he had just heard your father was in the hospital and had looked in to see how he was getting along. Of course I reported the matter to the doctor."

"Thanks," Bud said. "Dad thinks it was a dream. Let him think that."

Bud wasn't surprised Bullock had invaded the hospital to learn Warhorse Bill's true condition. The old man had pulled the family fortunes through many a storm. Both the salmon cannery in Alaska and the logging camp on Puget Sound were in critical condition financially. If the old man's condition was so low

others must take over his affairs, then it was an ideal time for the fish pirates to move in.

A real effort had been made to keep Jarrett's true condition from the public, but with Bud in charge of the office, as well as buying supplies and outfitting the steamer, people began to wonder. Fish-trap Bullcock had evidently learned the truth. His first move had been to plant Blackjack Laird and John Wing aboard the steamer. What would his next move be? When would he strike?

Long years of experience had taught Warhorse Bill Jarrett how to meet such attacks. He was always prepared and it was hard to surprise him because he usually anticipated the form the attack would take. Bud's experience lay ahead of him. And though his father had taught him much in cannery management, there hadn't been time to train him against surprise attack.

### CHAPTER III

#### INLAND PASSAGE

A TASTE of trouble was awaiting Bud when he returned to the steamer. The last of the cargo was going into the holds and the *Lucy Jarrett* was riding low in the water. Varnell, vice president of the bank which financed the Jarrett operations, was sitting in the owner's quarters. He lifted his brows in surprise as he noted Bud's black eye and bruised lips. Bud explained what had happened.

"Your father found guns, fists and clubs convenient in his time, but I thought that day was over," Varnell said. "Did you beat the other fellow or was it a draw?"

"I won," Bud admitted. "Does that help my credit?"

"It doesn't hurt it any," Varnell smiled. "I'm here to render a final report on your affairs," he continued. "First, we don't want to go into the logging camp or salmon business. We'll back you to the limit to avoid it. But your father's policy of caring for his men, particularly the older ones, has caused him quite a loss the past year. Usually when salmon canning was unprofitable he made money out of his logs. And when the price of logs was down, salmon was up. Last year the market on both salmon and logs was way off. I want to remind you it is going to take a tremendous pack, at high prices, to pull you out of the hole."

"Dad's policy of taking care of his men has won their loyalty," Bud said quietly. "I can depend on the old employes, and I've hopes the new men will listen to them. When the fish come, they'll hit the ball."

"I hope you're right," Varnell said. "But if the run fails, I'm afraid we're going to have to move in to protect ourselves."

"Any canner will tell you the run varies," Bud said. "This year we should have a big run, the other districts a smaller one, which means a big pack and high prices for us."

"We're banking on that," Varnell admitted. "We've checked on the expected run." He shook hands and departed.

As soon as he was clear of the gangplank it was swung aboard and the order given to cast off the mooring lines.

Deep within her, the old freighter throbbed with life. Slowly she backed out of her slip, and headed north. Bud Jarrett walked aft and looked up at the hospital. He counted the windows and located his father's room. Gray shadows lay

heavily about the window, but Bud never took his eyes from it. It seemed to him the darkness was an omen.

Then, just as the steamer changed her course, a light flashed on. It was clear and sharp, like a bright star. Bud turned to find Al Tench at his elbow.

"How'd you find him, Bud?" Al asked anxiously.

"I found him," Bud answered, his eyes on the fading light, "with his chin up as usual, and the doctors giving him one chance in a hundred."

Enchanting waters lay ahead. From Olympia, Washington, to Skagway, Alaska, there are a thousand miles of water protected from storms by a mountain range on the easterly side, and mountainous islands on the westerly. Twice the sea breaks through to remind the traveler that the Pacific is turbulent. The route is known as the Inland Passage, and there are spots where a man can stand on the deck and throw a stone to the shore.

**B**UD JARRETT had traveled the Inland Passage as long as he could remember. He never tired of the sight of the mighty cedars and firs of Washington and British Columbia stretching from water's edge far up the slopes of the brooding mountains.

After dinner Bud joined the captain on the bridge. He turned his overcoat up about his ears and stared intently ahead. The rain had stopped, the stars were out and it was growing colder. Lights of small settlements, and lone cabins, shone vaguely on either shore. Here people wrested a living from the timber or the sea. It was a land of few roads and vast areas of unexplored country—the last frontier.

"What's the weather ahead, captain?" Bud asked. He was afraid of fogs and delay. When fog got too thick the skipper proceeded as long as it was prudent, then dropped the hook and waited. They might ride at anchor for several days, and time was important.

"Weather's clear and cold," the skipper answered. "I'm driving her hard now, to make slack water in Seymour Narrows."

Bud watched awhile, then turned in. He was up early the following morning, eager to note the change in the timber. Already it was slightly smaller.

As the steamer approached Seymour Narrows, the cannery crew came on deck. The ship advanced under a slow bell, with the caution of something living fearing ambush. Ragged granite fangs awaited unwary hulls. There were swirls and overfalls around Ripple Rock. A floating log vanished, as if it were plucked under by some mighty unseen hand.

Suddenly the engine room gong sounded, the steamer shook and forged ahead. She skirted a rock and hurried to the safer water beyond like a frightened thing.

"That's over," the skipper muttered with relief. It was a ticklish spot with tides that ran better than twelve knots an hour at times. A skipper needed a stiff drink to take a steamer through, but if he took two drinks he might wreck her.

Bud paced the deck by the hour each day and watched the constantly changing scene. The channel narrowed until they were in the shadow of a mountain. On either side the land leaped abruptly from the sea. Spruces grew so close to the water's edge that the salt spray killed the lower branches. The



bright green of their massed tops was shot with splashes of silver, the naked trunks of long dead trees stretching twisted arms mutely forth. There was scant soil on some of the sheer ridges.

The snow line was slowly retreating, spilling numberless cascades and waterfalls through the green forest. High above brooded the eternal glaciers and snowfields, clinging precariously to granite peaks.

Bud caught brief flashes of nameless inlets and coves; of valleys shrouded in mystery. There were moments when the passage seemed like a land-locked lake high in the mountains; when it seemed as if she surely must crash onto the beach, a channel appeared and the way was open.

Al Tench, who was standing at his side, broke in on Bud's reflections. "What kind of a job have you in mind for me this year, Bud?" he asked.

"I'm going to use you as a pinch-hitter. Why?"

"I was thinking," Al said slowly, "if Bullock is out to get you he'll strike at the fish trap. I'd like to take a whirl at a trap guard's job."

"You're asking for a lot of trouble, Al," Bud warned.

"I know it," Al admitted. "Do I get the job?"

"You can have just about anything you want," Bud nodded.

**A** BLAST from the steamer's whistle, almost lifted Bud Jarrett from his bunk. He waited. It wasn't repeated immediately. This was no passing signal. It was fog. He rolled out of the bunk and got into his oilskins. Gray mists, pressed in on all sides. He could hear the wing-flapping of startled water birds. Land wasn't far away.

The blast came again and Bud began counting. One tenth of the elapsed time between whistle's blast and return of the echo was the distance, in nautical miles, that the steamer was from the land that had caused the echo.

"We're about a half mile off shore," Bud said tentatively as he stepped onto the bridge. The skipper nodded. He was leaning on the bridge rail, staring intently ahead. As the fog thinned momentarily, Bud saw the bow lookout—a gray ghost of a man, tense and alert. The steamer slowed until there was only a faint trickle around the bows.

Silently Bud cursed the fog. Glacier Inlet was an ideal location for a salmon cannery. But the vast ice sheet at the head of the inlet manufactured fogs on a large scale at times. Bud's restlessness increased. He wanted to say, "Go ahead, take a chance, skipper." But he was only the owner. The master was boss. And Bud knew if he were master he would proceed with the same caution and let the owner fret.

Al Tench appeared, yawning. "Same old stuff, eh?" he muttered. When the whistle sounded again, the echo returned in two seconds. It was followed a moment later by a second echo, then two more. Al computed their position and announced it.

The old skipper chuckled. "Maybe you'd like to take the bridge, Tench?" he suggested.

"Not me," Al said. "I brought a tug and scowload of salmon through here once when the skipper was sick. It took ten years offn my life."

They moved on a half mile, then the echo almost blended with the whistle blast. Deep within a gong sounded and water boiled astern.

"Backin' up," Al whispered to Bud. "I'll bet he anchors. He

didn't get the echo he wanted. This fog's goin' to hang on. We may be here a week."

Bud didn't answer. He was waiting for the skipper to order the hook dropped. The engines were going ahead again, now. Suddenly they stopped. The master's voice sounded unusually loud. Bud could hear a pump throbbing in the engine room.

The engines stirred cautiously, like a man who expected to get shot lifting his head from the brush. "He's decided to go," Al whispered.

"Knock on wood, Al," Bud warned. "Don't jinx everything."

Uncertainty got the upper hand, and Bud slipped back to the boat deck and paced back and forth for the better part of an hour. Each time the whistle blasted he started violently. Suddenly he felt the stern swing to starboard. The *Lucy Jarrett* fairly crawled for the next fifteen minutes. Water birds continued to get up under her bows. Their eerie, alarmed cries drifted back through the fog.

The whistle sounded, and then a curious thing happened. Echoes fairly leaped at them from port and starboard. There was a long delay then a third echo returned. Bud held his breath. A crash like thunder filled the air. It trailed into a series of faint booms. Then there was silence. They were squarely between the headlands that marked Glacier Inlet.

"Swell work, skipper," Bud said, "I thought sure we would anchor a couple of times."

"Luck," the skipper answered, "fisherman's luck. Sometimes fisherman's luck is bad, sometimes good, but in the end it balances." Then he dropped anchor. He wasn't afraid of fog now, but he was afraid of drifting icebergs.

## CHAPTER IV

### GLACIER INLET

BUD waited for daylight to penetrate the fog. The steamer moved up the inlet under slow bell, skirting wallowing bergs, and edging toward the wharf. Someone was hammering a triangle at intervals to mark the wharf's position.

It came out of the fog at last. Someone heaved a line and two men in oilskins caught it and hauled in a hawser hand over hand, then dropped it over a mooring post. Two more lines followed and slowly the heavily laden steamer drifted against the wharf. The gangplank dropped and one of the winter men—men who act as watchman when the plant is closed down—came aboard.

"Hello, Bud!" he exclaimed. "Where's Old Boss?"

"In the hospital," Bud answered, "in a pretty bad way, I'm afraid. I'm trying to run the show this year."

"Your dad won't go down without a fight," the other predicted. "Well, everything is ready. We've got the boats and tenders in the water, machinery has been overhauled and tested. Some replacements are needed. Here's a list of things that need to be done." He handed Bud several sheets of paper. "We overhauled the floating trap, of course. Whenever you say the word it's ready to be towed to Stormy Point and moored. A little work needs to be done on the scows. We thought the crew could do that while we're waiting for the run to start."

Bud went ashore and looked around. The crew was filing down the gangplank, each back bent low under the weight of personal belong-

ings. A number of cabins and bunk-houses swallowed them with a few minutes. Smoke lifted uncertainly from chimneys filled with cold, dead air. Life began to stir in the various buildings.

Everything looked well enough on the surface. The buildings had been painted white and would stand out sharply against the background of green. A brawling stream supplied unlimited quantities of clear icy water. Like many other small creeks in the North it was known locally as Salmon Creek because it was a favorite spawning stream.

THE fog lifted three days later, revealing an enchanted spot. The bay was long and narrow and the inlet had obviously been carved out of the surrounding mountains by the glacier. As it retreated a few feet annually, it increased the length of the inlet. It was a live glacier, constantly discharging ice. Today the sunlight flashed rare tints of green and blue to break the blinding white. It was a complaining monster, constantly growling and roaring as the mass shifted and tons of ice fell from a face over a mile in width and one hundred feet high.

Ravens flapped about on black wings and voiced gloomy complaints in harsh voices. A totem pole leered from the center of the Indian village. Swarthy, bright-eyed youngsters, followed by dispirited dogs, played about. Several of the older natives probed the stream with gaff hooks fixed to long poles. Habit is strong, and the creek that had supplied their ancestors with winter's food still served them.

Bud had often seen the creek so choked with salmon that those below forced the ones above partly out

of the water. The run was smaller now, but ample, and important to white men because it heralded the main run off Stormy Point.

Tenders and tugs sent toelines aboard the floating trap several days later and the unwieldy structure, followed by scows carrying anchors and gear moved slowly down the Inlet. As they neared Stormy Point they could feel the lift and fall of the sea. The water was too deep for a pile trap. It was at times almost too rough for a floating trap, but the site was one of the best in the North.

Salmon swim against the current, and as there was an eddy off Stormy Point it was possible to trap fish when the tide was both rising and falling. Al Tench's father had superintended the anchoring of the trap until he had been pensioned and Al had helped him since he was twelve years old. Now Al took charge.

Scows dropped heavy anchors at the designated angles to keep the trap in position regardless of wind, tide and weather. Logs two feet in diameter were bolted and braced until they formed a solid frame. Two-and-a-half-inch lead pipes, driven through the logs extended thirty feet into the water. The pipes supported the netting which trapped the salmon. A lead, constructed of logs, pipes and netting, extended from the trap like a pointing finger several hundred feet long. It was set at right angles to the beach and salmon encountering the lead moved gradually into the trap.

A watchman's shack, containing stove, bunk, food and cooking utensils was built on the trap. This year's supplies, as usual, included a rifle, shotgun, revolver and plenty of ammunition. There was also a skiff which permitted the watchman to

escape should a storm threaten the trap's destruction.

"I guess you're all set, Al," Bud said when the work was completed. "You know your business. Make suspicious craft keep their distance."

"I won't let you down, Bud," Al promised.

**B**UD returned to Glacier Inlet to endure the hardest part of a canner's life—the period of uncertainty until the run begins. The days dragged and Bud looked into Salmon Creek, flowing past the cannery, every hour hoping to see it alive with fish. But all he saw was a few indolent members of the advance guard.

When he could stand it no longer he boarded a small tender and headed for the Dawn Bay cannery. They were rivals, but friendly, and misery loves company. Many a canneryman had dried another's eyes, and in turn had his own dried while waiting for the run.

Five miles from the cannery he saw one of their tugs dragging a wallowing scow filled with salmon. He drew alongside the tug and hailed the skipper, an old acquaintance.

"When did the run start, Gus?" he asked.

"A week ago," Gus answered. Then a look of surprise flashed across his face. Glacier Inlet was usually packing several days before Dawn Bay. "Ain't you gettin' no fish?"

"Not a one!"

"Somethin' queer." Gus shook his head. "This is the biggest run in years. Big fish, too. That scow usually holds forty thousand ordinary salmon. This year thirty-five thousand nearly fills her. And you ain't gettin' no fish? Maybe somebody cleaned out your trap?" He hesi-

tated, then spilled what was on his mind. "Fish-trap Bullock offered us fifty thousand fish yesterday, wanted eight cents for 'em. The boss just laughed and said he wouldn't take 'em at any price."

"What'd Bullock do with 'em?" Bud demanded. Government regulations require that fish be packed within forty-eight hours after they're caught. That didn't leave much time for a pirate to peddle his fish, particularly when the cannery was often some distance from the scene of his operations.

"I don't know what Bullock done with 'em," Gus answered. "Saw a big flock of gulls offn Target Bay," he added significantly.

Bud headed for Target Bay. Bullock could have towed his fish to Glacier Inlet in ample time. As much as he hated the Jarretts, he would have sold fish to them rather than take a loss. On the other hand, Bud thought, if the man was playing for big stakes, the cannery itself, he could afford to take such a loss.

A cloud of gulls, ravens and eagles lifted into the air as the tender sped into Target Bay. The beach was lined with dead salmon left by the receding tide. Bullock had dumped at least fifty thousand! But it would be difficult to make a case against the fish pirate unless one of his men confessed.

**B**UD returned to Glacier Inlet and called Poker Jim, the local native chief, to his office. "You've got a fast boat, Jim," he said, "go out and find our salmon. Begin at Stormy Point trap. If they're coming in there, you return. If not, keep going."

"I send my boy, Coho Charley," Poker Jim said. "Him good fish hunter."

Coho Charley, an alert native of twenty-five, left a half hour later in a fast launch. He carried a .30-30 rifle and a full ammunition magazine. Charley evidently had his own misgivings about what had happened.

Bud spread out a chart on his desk to refresh his memory of the contour of the shore. Because salmon are creatures of habit there were certain possibilities he could eliminate. Salmon returned to the stream of their birth to spawn and die. They didn't go visiting around. And as a general rule they didn't get lost, but unerringly returned.

The run passed the mouth of Deep River first. This would have been an ideal spawning stream, but a waterfall stopped the fish from getting upstream. So they continued on toward Bear River, their spawning grounds. To reach Bear River they passed Stormy Point—and ended up in the Jarrett floating trap. To perpetuate the supply, the government required the trap be lifted at stated intervals and the fish permitted to continue on to Bear River. They had never had trouble with the trap before.

Bud dropped the chart into a drawer. "I'm going to have a look at Bear River," he told the cannery superintendent.

"Maybe you'd better look at Al Tench, too," the superintendent suggested.

"Al wouldn't let me down," Bud answered. "You know he's a square fellow."

"I was in Seattle when he was tried," the superintendent said. "He's on parole now, but he can still be hauled up and tried for Solo Pete's death. That's a big club to hold over any man's head."

"If I didn't have faith in my men,"

Bud said, "I'd be a nervous wreck. Dad told me to depend on Al. I have confidence in him."

"I hope you're right," the superintendent said. "I know if we don't get fish soon you'll pull out this fall dead broke."

## CHAPTER V

### DEEP RIVER

BUD'S mind was confused when he started for Bear River. In spite of his determination to retain faith in Al, the superintendent had filled him with uneasiness. Maybe Bullock had forced Al to give him fish from the Stormy Point trap.

He saw salmon jumping as he entered the little bay off the mouth of Bear River and felt a surge of hope, mixed with disappointment. If they were passing Stormy Point in such numbers, why wasn't the trap filled?

He dropped anchor, jumped overboard and waded ashore. He followed a game trail to the first creek and stopped at the first pool. It was alive with salmon. The grass along the creek bank was crimson with blood in places where bears had been fishing. Bud proceeded with caution, having no desire to encounter a she-bear with cubs. Each pool contained its quota of spawning fish. Bud followed the creek a mile before returning. The run was on with a vengeance, as far as spawning was concerned.

He returned to the cannery after an absence of twenty-four hours, hopeful of activity. There wasn't a salmon in the fish house.

"Any word from Coho Charley?" Bud asked the superintendent anxiously.

"No. You better get some sleep. I'll wake you up when he comes," the superintendent promised.



"I'm disgusted with myself," Bud grumbled. "Dad would have figured out the trouble long ago. He never missed."

"No, he never missed," the other admitted. "But he had experience behind him. We don't know how many mistakes he made when he was your age."

Bud turned in, but it seemed almost no time before the superintendent was shaking him. "Charley's boat is coming up the inlet," he said. "But there's no sign of Charley."

Bud dressed and ran down to the wharf where a curious group had gathered. Usually Charley stood at the wheel, but now the swift craft streaked toward them on its own. Bud saw that it was going to miss the wharf by two hundred yards. He raced along the beach, pushing through the brush, splashing through stretches of the rising tide until he reached a partly exposed sandbar. The boat hit it at full speed and ran almost out of the water. The propeller sheared off, the engine raced, then died.

**T**HEY found Charley in the bottom of the boat, bleeding from a bad wound. A bullet had passed completely through him. He had made a crude effort at first aid, had managed to keep the boat headed for the inlet, but when he realized he was going to pass out he had lashed the wheel.

His rifle lay beside him, with a crimson hand print on the butt.

"He fought back after he was shot," Bud said soberly.

They lifted the native to the sand, and Bud partially stopped the flow of blood. The wounded man's bewildered eyes opened.

"You're all right now," Bud said. "You're home, Charley."

"I find out about salmon," the native said faintly. "Then John Wing shoot. I shoot three times, then I try . . . Al Tench. Al Tench!" He made a desperate effort to finish what he was saying.

"What about Al?"

Coho Charley's eyelids flickered. "I tired . . . can't think. I sleep, then . . . I—"

"He's gone to sleep," a native boy said.

"Yes," the superintendent said quietly, "a long one. He's dead."

Bud sent a cannery tender to pick up the nearest deputy United States marshal. Then he warmed up the motor of his own boat.

"When the marshal comes," he said, "give him details. I'm lighting out for Stormy Point and elsewhere as soon as I measure the gas remaining in Charley's tank."

"What good will that do?" the superintendent asked curiously.

"The gas consumed might tell us how far Charley traveled and give us a rough idea of where the shooting took place. He was looking for salmon and naturally followed the route they take when coming to Bear River. We know he was near Stormy Point because he mentioned Al Tench."

"You may be on the right track, at that," the superintendent admitted. "Better take someone along with you."

Bud shook his head. In a sense he was making a live decoy of himself, inviting the force that had attacked Charley to attack him. But in his case he would be expecting it. If he started out with a boatload of armed men, the enemy would hunt cover.

A check on Charley's gasoline indicated he could have gone as far as Deep River, unless he made side

trips. Bud planned to head directly for that point, stopping only at Stormy Point.

"I still think another man should go along," the superintendent said when Bud was ready. "They killed Charley and they won't hesitate to let you have it. They can't be hanged twice for murder."

"I'll scrawl a report of my movements," Bud promised, "and leave it under the stern thwart. Look for it if the boat shows up without me."

WITH the superintendent watching his departure dubiously, Bud went directly to Stormy Point. Al Tench was waiting for him.

"I've got something in the trap, Bud," he said as soon as he saw Jarrett.

"Thank God for that," Bud answered fervently. "How many thousand?"

"It ain't fish," Al explained. "It's John Wing's body. It just drifted in." The body, supported by a life-jacket that fitted like a vest, had fouled in the lead webbing. The half-breed had been shot between the eyes by a .30-30 rifle.

"Coho Charley and Wing shot it out," Bud told Al. "Charley is dead, too." He hadn't forgotten the dying native had mentioned Al's name. Now he waited for an explanation.

Al nodded thoughtfully. "That must've been his boat I saw a mile off the point. It was coming down from Deep River way. It ran around in a circle, headed toward the trap, then turned and sped toward Glacier Inlet. It zigzagged. I thought the man at the wheel was drunk."

"Charley mentioned your name as he died," Bud said significantly.

"Did, eh?" Al looked serious. "I

suppose the mob at the cannery think I had a hand in it," he added bitterly.

"I'll straighten that out," Bud promised. "But I need your help on this, Al. Bear River is full of spawning salmon. How'd they get by the trap?"

"Maybe Bullock mentioned Solo Pete, and I let the salmon through to save my skin. Maybe he promised me a few thousand to do it." Al answered, shrugging his shoulders.

"There's no sense in talking like that, Al," Bud said angrily. "If I thought you were crooked, I'd yank you out of here. I asked you for help, and I didn't get it."

"I don't know what to think," Al said hopelessly. "It looks like the damned fish come along on the days when regulations require the trap lifted. Plenty go through; then, when I lower the trap I catch a few hundred—not enough to pay towin' 'em to the cannery." He swore explosively. "I've gone nuts tryin' to figger it out. I know it looks damned suspicious, but what can I do?"

"Stay here as trap guard," Bud said.

"I'd sooner be relieved," Al answered wearily.

"That'd be running," Bud pointed out.

"If pirates would come into the open," Al rasped, "I'd go to the mat with 'em, but things happenin' all around, nothin' to shoot at . . . well, it gets me down."

"You stay here on the job," Bud urged, "and forget things you can't control."

"What're we goin' to do with John Wing's remains?" Al asked. "A parolee can't afford to be caught with a murdered man on his hands."

"Tie him up to the webbing," Bud directed, "and when you see our ten-

der coming through Narrow Straits, hang an outboard onto the skiff and head off the tender. The marshal will be aboard, on his way to investigate Coho Charley's death. S'long."

And before Al could protest, Bud was casting off.

**J**OHNS WING'S body in the trap convinced Bud the trouble had taken place near Deep River. Coho Charley might possibly have zigzagged in his power boat, but a body drifted with the tide. And the tide had run from Deep River to Stormy Point immediately following the shooting.

Bud kept his body sheltered as much as possible as he neared the mouth of Deep River. At any moment a rifle shot might crash out on the still air. As he rounded a low headland a stirring scene greeted his eyes.

Hundreds of leaping salmon were in the air, proof that hundreds of thousands swam below the surface. It was incredible that the Bear River salmon would attempt to go up Deep River. Countless generations had passed Stormy Point and fought their way up Bear River to spawn. And yet, if Bud could believe his eyes, the fish had suddenly decided to change age-old habits.

He had never seen such a concentration of salmon off the mouth of a river. As he drove slowly toward the beach he could feel the propeller slice through silvery bodies, and when he looked back the foam of his wake was flecked with crimson. There were hundreds of dead and dying fish on the beach, and flocks of seagulls and land birds were gorging themselves.

Bud went immediately to the falls. Salmon were leaping from the choked pool, striking the water and

falling back. They kept at it until exhausted, then the current rolled them over belly up and carried them off. But there were others to take their place.

"It's crazy," Bud muttered, "but I'm going to have a look above, just for luck."

It was a stiff, dangerous climb over slippery rocks, but he gained the crest and stumbled on to the first pool. He shook his head, puzzled, as he watched salmon swimming about. "Nobody carried 'em up here," he mused, "but there they are."

He crossed the stream and worked his way down the opposite bank. Several salmon shot through the swift, clear water. It seemed to Bud that they emerged from brush overhanging the bank. He crawled over the brush and looked down.

Several short flumes connected wooden tanks supported on rods driven into the solid rock. Tanks and flumes were cleverly concealed by the brush, but salmon rushed up the flumes, rested briefly in the tanks, then continued on.

It was an improvised fish ladder permitting fish to get around the falls, but it was one of the most effective Bud had ever seen. There was only one flaw. This was the year of a big run, and the volume was so great the ladder couldn't handle it. This explained the congestion below.

Bullock and Laird were killing two birds with one stone. They were not only preventing fish from reaching Bud's trap, which spelled ruin for him, but they were creating a new spawning grounds.

Bud made no effort to disturb the fish ladder. Deep River might prove valuable to him at some future time. But the most important

question still remained unanswered. What was diverting the salmon from Bear River to Deep River?

He was convinced now John Wing had been the only guard in the region, otherwise his investigations would have been stopped. He proceeded now with less caution and more speed. He boarded the boat and drove it slowly through the massed salmon, then stopped and studied the scene.

Water from a nearby glacial stream clouded the area and obscured everything a foot or two below the surface. But it seemed to him that the area of leaping fish ended very abruptly. Too abruptly, as if something turned them back, as a fence turns back cattle. He cruised along the outer edge of the area. Except for casual fish leaping, it was well defined.

**A** LI E of piles driven out from the shore," Bud reflected, "and strung with webbing would turn the fish into Deep River. If they cut the tops off below the surface nobody would ever guess piling existed."

He drove the boat into the fish area, turned around, lowered an anchor fifteen feet and headed outward. As he crossed the line the anchor fouled in something. Bud got the anchor line around a windlass and hauled it up tight. After that he couldn't budge it.

The tide was rising, so he sat down and waited to see what would happen. Either the anchor would give way, or the stern of the boat would go under.

The stern settled nearly a half hour before the anchor broke clear. Bud hauled it up and found strands of webbing fouled on the flukes.

There was no time to be lost. He

had to clear away the obstruction and release the imprisoned fish. Salmon don't wait, and Bud couldn't delay until he could get a coast guard investigation. He headed for Glacier Inlet at top speed and found that that was a mistake. There had been too much top speed lately, and the engine broke down.

Rather grimly, he set about making repairs. There was some comfort in the thought that things might have been worse. The motor could have quit off the mouth of Deep River and left him at Bullock's mercy. The current now carried him along toward Glacier Inlet, then stranded him on a spit.

At twilight he saw the tug with the marshal aboard coming out of Glacier Inlet. Bud signaled with a flashlight, but those aboard failed to see him. It wasn't until noon the next day that the motor responded to his efforts.

A short while later Bud turned in to the Stormy Point trap. Al Tench wasn't back yet, but John Wing's body was gone.

## CHAPTER VI

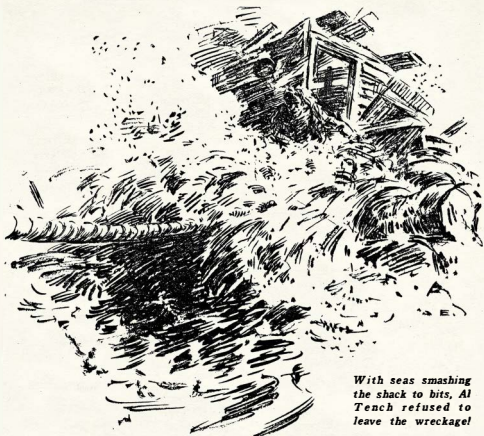
### FLOATING DEATH TRAP

**E**VERYONE was on hand when Bud arrived at the cannery. The superintendent appeared to have put in a hectic time.

"I'm glad you're alive, Bud," he said. "Everything else has gone to hell and I've been fearing the worst."

"Come along with me to the machine shop," Bud directed, "and tell me about it." He sketched a design for the blacksmith and scribbled dimensions. "Make me some hooks like that as soon as you can," he directed.

Again he was conscious of Oriental scrutiny as he hurried back to



*With seas smashing the shack to bits, Al Tench refused to leave the wreckage!*

the office. They doubted his ability to handle the situation, and there was unrest among them. The superintendent's voice poured more trouble into his ears.

"They want to go back to Seattle, Bud," he said gloomily. "Bullock's got trouble-makers planted among them. "They're sure you're going broke and they won't get their pay."

"Tell 'em we'll have fish inside forty-eight hours," Bud said briskly. "Now what else?"

"When Al Tench met the marshal's tug and told him about John Wing's body," the superintendent said, "he put him under arrest."

"For Wing's death?" Bud asked.

"No. A Bullock man got drunk

and said Al had agreed with Bullock that he was the man for the job on the Stormy Point trap. He heard Al and Bullock talking on the wharf in Seattle," the superintendent explained. "The marshal got the man to admit Bullock was paying Al plenty to take orders from him this summer." The superintendent was a gloomy man. "I warned you Tench would crack under pressure."

"Now I suppose I'll have to waste time getting him out of jail," Bud said wearily.

"Get him out of jail?" the superintendent yelled. "Let him rot there!"

"No," Bud answered with a wry grim. "I'm going to have Bullock's

men on all sides of me, and I'll need Al to keep 'em offn by back."

Bud turned in while the blacksmith made the hooks for him, and other members of the crew gathered the gear he would need. Everyone was finding it difficult to relax. In the very nature of the situation events must move swiftly to either victory or defeat.

Bud rolled and tossed on his bed and when he finally did fall asleep it was time to get up again. He dressed and ate a good meal, then called together the sons of men who had fought many a battle with his father. Briefly he explained what was ahead.

"I'm not asking any man to go along," he concluded. "Someone may get hurt, or even killed. I don't want any married men, or men who are taking care of their families. The tug skipper is sick and I'll be in command, both at sea and during the fight. You don't need to be afraid of your jobs if you don't go along. They're secure. Is that plain?"

"Plain and damned fair if you ask me," one of the men said. "I'm into it to the ears."

**E**VERYONE wanted to be in on the showdown and Bud selected a dozen of the best—men he had reason to believe would prove quick thinkers and who could handle themselves in a rough-and-tumble fight. One of them, a husky youngster called Mike, was the grandson of one of Warhorse Bill Jarrett's associates. The third generation was getting in on this fight.

"Maybe there won't be no fight," Mike said gloomily.

"There'll be one, all right," Bud assured him. "Everybody in the region knows John Wing and Coho Charley killed each other. That's a warning to Bullock that the show-

down has come. You men pile onto the tug."

Bud ran to the superintendent's office. "Sen 'a couple of tenders and scows over to Deep River," he ordered. "You take the speed boat and light out for Talbot Cove. There're some purse seiners starving to death because the traps are choked with fish. Charter 'em for a week and send 'em to Deep River. We're going to have fish."

Bud calculated if all went well his tug would arrive first, followed by the purse seiners. The scows would come limping along last. When he cast off the lines, he saw the superintendent roar away in the speed boat. The man was glad to find relief in sheer speed.

As the speed boat vanished through the inlet entrance, another boat rounded the point, throwing spray from her sharp bows.

"Here comes the marshal's boat," Bud groaned. "Now what does he want?"

He slowed down and waited for the officer to come alongside. "Al Tench broke jail last night," the marshal shouted. "I've been told he had help from a white cruiser. We're looking for Al and that boat."

"Neither one of 'em are here," Bud shouted back. "Al shouldn't be in jail anyway. Why don't you pinch Bullock and Laird?"

"We will when we get a case against 'em," the marshal promised. "Why the hell don't you get some evidence? It's you they're after."

"You're telling me," Bud said gloomily.

**T**HEY dropped anchor near the submarine fence and lowered 'two boats. He was afraid to steam across the area with the tug. There was too much chance

of hitting a pile and knocking a hole in the hull.

As the boats, carrying men and hooks, moved away from the tug, those aboard paid out heavy lines attached to the hooks. The process was simple. The hooks were dropped beyond the fence. The tug pulled them through the webbing and ripped open wide holes. This process would be repeated until the channel was clear.

Bud had a pretty definite idea that Bullock had built a gate somewhere in the fence, which could be opened so the fish could be permitted to go on. The man had timed everything so the fish would arrive at Stormy Point on the days the government required that the trap be lifted.

The men had almost finished placing the anchors when two fast boats loaded with men streaked out from shore.

"Here they come!" Bud yelled. "Let the anchors go and come back to the tug."

As soon as the anchors settled the tug moved ahead, taking up the slack. Bud saw Bullock and Laird in the leading boat. A quarter of a mile off a white cruiser, obviously a pleasure craft, slowed down, as if sensing trouble.

The first of Bud's boats came alongside the tug. He jumped aboard. "They're going to cut the anchor lines!" he shouted. "Pile into 'em."

A moment later four boats met with a terrible clatter and the fight was on.

As Bullock slashed at the nearest line with his knife, Bud smashed his fist against the man's jaw and sent him headlong into the icy water. Laird hauled him out, dripping and cursing. Someone broke an oar

over Bud's head and he went down heavily. Mike, dazed himself from a blow, scooped up several handfuls of icy water and dashed it into his face. Bud shook off the fog, picked up the handle portion of the oar and waded in.

A Bullock man, with another broken oar, was knocking Jarrett men right and left. Bud watched his chance and smashed the oar-wielder across the Adam's apple. The man howled like a wolf, hurled his oar into the air, and howled some more.

The Bullock men were burly fellows, picked for rough-and-tumble fighting, but, nevertheless, the fight was going against the fish pirate. Bullock, sensing this, pulled an automatic from a shoulder holster.

"That gun's full of water," Bud yelled, "watch out, boys, it may explode."

As Bullock, tricked by Bud's excited shout, shook the weapon, Bud hurled an oar as a man would throw a spear. The end struck Bullock's chest and for the second time the man went into the water. Laird turned to rescue him, but a Jarrett man knocked him cold with a punch to the jaw.

With the two leaders down, Bud was about to mop up when he heard a shout from his second boat. Bullock men had swarmed over it and his men were taking a beating.

"Come on, Mike," yelled Bud, "if you can't make it in one jump, make it in two." He leaped, struck the water, but grasped the second boat's stern as he started to sink. Mike landed behind him and boosted him aboard. Then he turned and dragged Mike aboard. They struck from behind, and sent two Bullock men over the side before they realized what was up.

Mike and Bud stood shoulder to

shoulder, slugging it out with the enemy. As Bud fought, he heard the roar of a motor behind him. He dared not look around, but he knew Bullock and Laird were making a getaway. Deserted, the remainder of the enemy sullenly surrendered.

"Tie 'em hand and foot," Bud ordered, "and dump 'em aboard the tug. They've a date with the marshal."

"We've got 'em licked," Mike shouted enthusiastically.

"No, we haven't. We haven't got 'em licked until Bullock and Laird are finished," Bud answered. "Now let's finish tearing out this fence."

**B**UD felt a strong impulse to follow the pair as they headed toward the beach, but the fence was more important. The man got the hooks set again and the tug was turning on the power when a rifle bullet kicked up a geyser of water inches away from one boat.

"They're firing on us from the beach," Bud warned. "Keep under cover, you men."

"Practice what you preach, Bud," Mike advised, "and get under cover yourself. You almost got it." A second bullet thudded against the boat.

The men worked desperately. Finally they got the hooks in place again, and the tug tore another big gash in the fence.

From another point on the bluff Bud caught the flash of a rifle, and saw a man for a split second. To his amazement no bullet droned overhead. But the sight seemed to have a marked effect on the fleeing Bullock and Laird. They suddenly broke from cover and, half running, half swimming, boarded their boat and sped away.

"Now what do you make of that?"

Bud muttered, "didn't know we had a friend over there."

They worked slowly toward the shore, tearing away the webbing. Below them, they knew, the salmon were moving toward Stormy Point.

As they finished, the white cruiser continued on her course, as if its captain had decided the excitement was over.

Bud went to the wheelhouse and scanned the nearby waters. Two purse seiners were chugging toward him. In the distance he saw a tender and scows. He yelled at the seiners as they passed, then pointed. The two boats spread their nets in the center of the salmon off Deep River. They circled, brought the ends of the net together, hauled away until the bottom closed, then waited until the scow came alongside.

"Now you can ease up, Bud," said Mike, "salmon are going aboard the scow."

"Can't let down yet, Mike," Bud said. "It looks like we're in for a storm. We've got to get every fish we can before it breaks."

He watched the thunderheads gather in the north and roll toward them, then he looked at the purse seiners. They were making the most of their opportunity. As soon as a scow was filled, Bud sent a line aboard.

"I'll take this to the cannery," he shouted. "You fellows follow with every fish you can carry."

Bud wasn't surprised to find everybody on hand when he arrived. They had seen the scow riding low in the water and read the signs. As he pushed it under the conveyor, the machinery commenced to turn. Into the fish room and on into the iron chink which cut each fish into the proper size, after cleaning and finning it.



When the first cans went into the oven to be cooked, Bud sighed with relief. "I think," he said to the superintendent, "I'll cut myself a big slice of sleep."

"I think," the other agreed dryly, "it's about time."

## CHAPTER VII

### FISH PIRATES' PAYOFF

**B**UD was stretched out in his bed five minutes later. The hum of machinery was music to his ears. The run was on.

Two things continued to worry him. Al was still missing, and Bullock and Laird were at large. They had run, it is true, but it was for the purpose of continuing the fight. It was no confession of defeat. And they might have driven Bud's men away from Deep River but for the mysterious rifleman.

The machinery was humming when he awakened and his cabin was rocking under a gale. He dressed in oilskins and stepped outside. The superintendent and Mike were watching a motorboat driving through the frothing sea. The boatman cupped his hands to his mouth and bellowed, "They're cuttin' your Stormy Point trap loose."

"Wasn't there a guard on it?" Bud asked the superintendent.

"Sure," the other answered. "They must have got him."

"Where's the tug?"

"Towin' salmon," the superintendent told him.

Bud got out the men who had fought the Deep River battle. They tumbled aboard a small tender and headed down the Inlet. There they found the tug struggling with a load of salmon which insisted on going with the storm.

"Take the tender," Bud bellowed

as he came alongside. "We need the tug."

The crew made the exchange, and Bud left them getting a line to the scow. He took a couple of short cuts over reefs smothered in water and saved an hour. As they drove through the last narrow strait, they came face to face with Bullock's boat. The tug was the last thing the fish pirate expected to see in shallow waters. Bud put the wheel hard over and drove the rival craft to the beach.

His own boat grounded a moment later. He leaped to the other craft's slanting deck. Bullock's mouth was a wicked slit as he whipped out an automatic pistol.

"This has been long in coming, Jarrett," he said, tight-lipped.

Bud tensed under the menace of the steady barrel. He felt the impact of a wave against the grounded vessel. It was the moment he had been waiting for. A sheet of spray filled the air and struck Bullock squarely.

Bud struck at the same time, sending the man to the deck and twisting the weapon from his hand. Behind him he heard Mike and Laird engaged in a rough-and-tumble fight. Bud finished Bullock, then turned to give Mike a hand. The youth was grinning as he applied a wrestler's grip to Laird's arm, and the gambler howled in agony.

Bullock's crew sensed the futility of resistance, and not a man lifted a hand as the two prisoners were dumped aboard the tug.

"You haven't a thing on us," Bullock fumed. "This is piracy."

"Call it any name you want to," Bud answered as the tug struggled to free itself, "but we've got all we need. Some of your men are sore because you ran off and left them at Deep River the other day. They're

going to talk about it . . . in court. We're going to prove you ordered John Wing to kill Coho Charley."

"Where're you going now?" Bullock asked.

"After the trap you turned loose."

"She's on the rocks right now," Jarrett," Bullock jeered.

"Then you're going on the rocks after it," Bud said cheerfully.

Bullock didn't believe it then. Nor did he believe it when the tug buried her nose in the sea off Stormy Point. Bud stood on the wheelhouse and looked at the trap through binoculars. It was drifting steadily toward a reef smothered in surf. Waves were smashing against the watchman's house and much of the time the trap was completely submerged.

"You can't get a line aboard that in a thousand years," Bullock shouted. "It's madness. If the tug strikes we'll all be lost."

"If I don't get a line aboard, the Jarretts will be lost," Bud retorted. "What did you use to cut the anchor chains?"

"Acetylene torches," Mike gave answer. "I saw 'em aboard their boat."

**A** BIG sea struck the tug and she wallowed heavily. There was a rattle of cooking gear and dishes in the galley. The cook's voice, cursing roundly, drifted up. Bud sent everyone to cover and took the wheel himself. He put about and approached the trap stern first, taking the sea over his bow. The trap was under water with the exception of the tops of the logs and the watchman's shack. As a result the water couldn't do much smashing. If, however, the trap was struck, it would go to pieces in a hurry.

The wind took on a higher pitch,

screaming fiendishly through the rigging. A green sea roared at them, foam from the breaking crest falling away, like white hair blowing in the breeze. It struck, smothered the wheelhouse and thundered on. Bud looked aft and saw part of the watchman's shack vanish. Then the sea struck the reef. Water and spray leaped a hundred feet into the air and fell back.

"You'll never get a line aboard," Bullock snarled. His face was ashen. "No line will hold. You're a damned fool kid or you'd know you're licked."

Bud called a man to take the wheel. He put on a life belt and handed Mike one. He found himself wishing Al Tench was around. Experienced men were needed in the wheelhouse and aft at the same time. Another big sea lifted them, and as they wallowed on its crest, Bud saw the white cruiser standing off. It was a fifty-footer, and it bounced around like a cork.

"All right, Mike!" Bud shouted. "This is our chance." They raced aft, and lashed themselves securely. Water boiled about them waist-high when the next sea hit. The lashings cut deep.

Suddenly, like an eerie ghost, Al Tench rose from the wreckage of the watchman's shack.

"What the hell're you doin' out there?" Bud yelled. At the same time he sent a heaving line through the air. Al caught it and began hauling in hand over hand. The tow line followed. Al made it secure, then hunted cover as the next sea struck.

When he emerged again, Bud ordered him aboard. Al shook his head. "You're liable to wreck the whole works if you come any closer," he warned. "I'll ride her out. Besides, if this line breaks, you'll need

me here to take another." He said something else but the wind whipped his voice away.

Bud signaled the tug to go ahead. When sufficient rope was paid out, he made the line secure. He worked his way to the wheelhouse, took a couple of bearings and checked on the result. Though the engines were going full speed, ahead, wind, tide and trap were slowly pulling the tug backward.

"Get the anchor down!" Bud ordered. They ran out plenty of chain to reduce the possibility of the links snapping under a sudden jerk. With anchor and engines going, the trap held, no longer giving when the seas broke over her. But tons of water tugged at her with a thousand fingers trying to drag her under.

**A**L TENCH had vanished again. Two hours passed, then the strain lessened as the tide turned. Presently there was slack in the anchor chain. Under full speed the tug moved ahead. The anchor was lifted and they drove on, slowly, stubbornly pulling clear of the reef.

Twilight descended and the storm roared on, but with the break of a new day it eased somewhat. Bud dropped back to the trap and jumped aboard. He found Al Tench half conscious, blue with the cold, and lashed to the wreckage of the watchman's shack. He got him aboard the tug, and followed him.

They stripped off Al's sodden clothing, wrapped him in hot blankets, and poured whiskey into him. Then they anxiously awaited the result.

Finally Al opened his eyes and muttered, "Tell 'em all to go to hell for me, Bud," he said thickly, "I didn't let you down."

"You sure keep 'em offn my back, Al," Bud answered.

Al slept most of the day, while Bud shifted the trap into position, and held it until tenders from Glacier Inlet could bring in more anchors and chain.

Late that afternoon Al appeared at his side. He was black and blue and limping from the beating the sea had given him, but his old-time cheerfulness had returned.

The sea was calming down and Bud pointed out the white cruiser edging toward the tug.

The water beyond the trap was stirring and frothing with leaping salmon. Flashes of silver met the eye on every side. The run was on. Glacier Inlet was belatedly coming into its own.

Bullock and Laird came on deck, too. "You're a lucky rat, Tench," sneered Bullock. "You not only know which way to jump, but you know when to jump. Are you denying Tench, that I bought you out?"

"Hell, no," Al drawled. "I figured if you were buyin' fish trap guards, then it would be a fine thing if I took over Stormy Point—because Bud couldn't afford to have a bought guard there. You were the sucker to think I'd sell him out."

"I ain't a sucker when I tell you you're going to swing for Solo Pete's death," Bullock said bleakly. "I'm going over the road myself, but I'm taking you along with me."

Al shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe it was worth it."

Meanwhile the white cruiser came alongside, and two sailors carried a smiling, blanketed gentleman from below and placed him in a comfortable chair.

**B**UD JARRETT stared in disbelief. "Dad!" he shouted, "what in hell are you doing up here?" Then he was leaping to the cruiser's deck.

"That last stomach operation turned the trick, Warhorse Bill Jarret chuckled. "And when I finally got the notion into my fool head you'd grown up and could take care of everything, I began to get better. The cussed doctors make me eat baby food, though," he growled, "and I'm hungry for a man-sized steak."

"When did you come up here?"

"Heard you was havin' your troubles and I smelled a fight. So I flew up, and chartered this cruiser for a ringside seat," Warhorse Bill explained. "I learned Al was in jail and helped him make a break. I've squared myself with the authorities for that. I landed him on the beach near Deep River and when Bullock and Laird began snipin' your men, Al sniped them."

"Then I took Al aboard again and headed for the Stormy Point trap. I had a hunch that'd be the next point of attack. But I was a little late. Bullock and Laird had already chased the guard off and cut the anchor chains. Al said you'd be along and would need somebody to handle the lines, so I left him on the trap. Then the storm come up and you know the rest." He grinned happily. "What're your plans?"

"Complete a pack that'll take us out of the red," Bud answered. "Then go South and clear Al of this Solo Pete business."

"He's cleared," Warhorse Bill answered. "Had a man workin' on the case right along. We proved it was self-defense from the beginning, and the governor's pardoned him."

Al's face lit up, and Bud grasped his hand."

"Now that Al's in the clear," Bud said to his father, "I guess I might as well fire him."

"Fire him?" Warhorse Bill roared.

"Yes, fire him and all the others who stood by me in this fight, Bud answered. "I think it would be a fine thing if they started a little cannery of their own over on Deep River. With Jarrett money behind them, and Bullock's fish ladder idea, Deep River can develop a nice business in a few years."

Warhorse Bill's old eyes glowed. "It's a cinch Bullock would have run us out of the cannery business if it weren't for Al and the other boys. Son, you've figured out a way to show our men the Jarretts never forget. We'll always take care of the deservin', and I guess they'll always take care of us."

THE END.



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# VAQUERO CODE



by **L. L. FOREMAN**



## Vaquero Code

**I**T made things look sort of bad for Rance York. He had come to the Cotero brush country from Texas not long before, and nobody knew much about him. They were polite enough about it.

"After all," remarked Dad Peniston, who owned the Slash B, "a wrong brand could mebbly get burned over the right one by mistake."

So they chased the red steer back to the herd and went on with the calf-branding. The brand on that steer had been altered by some reprobate's running iron from a Slash P to a Circle B. And Rance York owned the Circle B.

Half an hour later Luby Smith roped a bawling calf and stretched it out ready for the hot iron. Big Bill Hockaday, calling out brands and earmarks, took a second long squint at the mother cow. He turned slowly, and his voice sounded clear and ominous across the *parada* ground.

"By hell's toot, here's another'n!" He looked at Dad Peniston by the fire. "I know that ol' twisty horn. She's your cow, Dad. But looka that brand!"

The brand was a Rance York Circle B, recently burned over from the original Peniston Slash P. It was a good job, calculated to fool the casual eye. But everybody knew that twisty-horned cow.

Practically every man here, for that matter, knew most of his own cows as well as some of his neighbors', or could make a close guess. Dad Peniston was the only exception, his being a fairly big outfit. The ranchers of Cotero Wash held their roundups here on the Peniston

place, and everyone turned out for the branding.

Things grew ominously quiet after that, but the work went on. Rance York, his face stiff and white, worked by the fire, helping Dad Peniston, who had been elected roundup boss as he was every year. They did not exchange a word. Dad asked for no explanations, and Rance couldn't give any.

After five more misbranded Slash P cows came to light, Bill Hockaday very deliberately walked over to his horse and took his gun belt from the horn. He buckled it on, with a meaning eye on Rance. Three or four other Slash P hands followed his example, and a feeling of tenseness gathered over the camp. But Dad gave no sign of starting anything. He was getting old, and liked to choose his own time.

By late afternoon Rance knew how it felt to be tried and found guilty without a word spoken. To protest, he knew, would do no good. There were the cows, and there was his brand on them. Besides, nobody made even a hint of an accusation. Not in words.

Everybody in Cotero Wash knew he was trying to get a start in the cattle business. He had drifted in with his two old vaqueros from Texas, and bought the remnant of the old Circle B brand. Everybody knew he hoped to build up a real outfit in time. And most folks knew why.

Dad Peniston spoke to his daughter that night, and touched on the matter. "I'd just as soon you didn't see that Texas man any more, Anne," he said in his deceptively mild way.

"Texas man?" Anne could be just as deceptively mild as her father. And a lot more innocent.

"That feller York," nodded Dad,

not fooled a bit. "There's good reasons why I don't want you gittin' mixed—"

"I know," interrupted Anne. There was a glint in her usually quiet dark eyes, and a growing color in her face. "I heard big Hock saying something about it. Dad, don't you think if a man had an enemy who—"

"I thought o' that." Dad shook his head. "It's been done, runnin' a man's brand on another man's stock just to get him in trouble. But not here. I know every man on Cotero Wash, an' so do you. Can you name one Cotero man who would do that?"

"No, but I just can't believe—"

"You'll see no more of him," said Dad flatly. "Understand?"

Anne, being a dutiful daughter, said nothing more, but made her own decision as she generally did.

**N**EXT morning, nine more misbranded Slash P cows turned up during the branding.

"Somebody," remarked big Hockaday, anger in his heavy voice, "sure knows how to handle a pretty runnin' iron in these parts. Musta learned it elsewhere."

Rance York, bent over the fire with the irons, jerked up his sandy head. There were sudden danger signals in his wide-set gray eyes, and an explosive look about the way he rose lithely on his long legs. He had stood enough of condemning silence, and here was something definite he could hook onto.

"Have you," he queried, "got anythin' to add to that?"

His two old vaqueros, Quiro and Quero, immediately came shuffling together across the *parada*, their wrinkled, coffee-colored faces impassive. They were unarmed, and old as bald parrots, but ready to go to war for Rance York, just as they

had done for his father and his grandfather. They still called him *El Rancito*—the Little Rance—from his boyhood days, and their loyalty was something wonderful and weird.

Big Hockaday said nothing more. He was a blunt man with a hatred of brand-burners and no great liking for Texans. He came striding over to the fire, and the smashing blow of his fist would have opened a locked door. Rance hit the dirt. Luby Smith made a swift, sliding movement, and his drawn gun covered Quiro and Quero, who eyed it thoughtfully and paused.

Rance bounded up like a cat-amount, blood streaming down his face, and struck three times, fast and hard. Hockaday grunted, stumbled, but his great weight saved him. He came plunging on, to catch a straight jarring drive in the mouth that sent him down on one knee. He was rearing up, cursing, when Dad Peniston stepped between them. Dad had hold of a smoking hot branding iron, and right now he looked very much the boss.

"I reckon," said Dad, twirling the iron, "that'll be 'bout enough o' that. Hock, you'll 'blige me by gettin' back over to the herd. Luby, put up that gun. Mr. York"—he tacked on the "Mr." with a chilly politeness—"I understand you're aimin' to try catchin' some o' them wild critters up on the Ridge. Right now might be a good time to start, huh?"

Rance met his cold eye, and nodded. He got the full sense of the suggestion. Rather than let things clash to a show-down, Dad was offering him a chance to clear out of the country. In a dead silence he mounted his horse and gave the nod to Quiro and Quero. Those two ancient warriors looked both relieved and worried as they rode after him out of camp.

Condemned—disgraced—ordered out. Rance York stared bleakly ahead, too low in mind even to bother about wiping the blood from his cut lip. He had stored up so many high and shining hopes, too, on getting a solid start here. He had sunk his last dollar into buying up that Circle B remnant. It seemed like luck had turned forever against the Yorks, ever since it had forgotten to rain in Texas and the once prosperous York ranch had been just about dried off the map.

He tried not to think about Anne. Maybe she would side with the rest of the Cotero Wash folks, and believe he really had been attempting to build up his herd with a running iron at the expense of her father.

Behind him, Quiro murmured, "Where we go, Rancito?"

The question jerked Rance's mind back from its black wanderings. Where? He was branded as a thief. Some low-down scalawag of a brush-buster had framed him, no doubt of it. Where did cattle thieves go? Why, they went up north of the Mogollon Rim and stole from the big land and cattle companies of the plains country.

But not a York. The Yorks won fairly whatever they got, and hung onto it. Ride off and abandon his little bunch of Circle B cows? Like hell he would!

"Rancito, where we—"

"The Ridge," declared Rance. "We're goin' to catch some o' those outlaw mavericks an' slap our iron on 'em. Be dang-burned if I let anybody run me out o' this country or any other!"

The two aged vaqueros gazed in solemn bewilderment at each other, entirely unaware of any good reason for running in the first place. Had someone, then, foolishly suggested

such a move? And had their Rancito actually considered it? So droll a thought! When had their *El Rancito*—or his *padre* or the *padre* before him, of hallowed memory—ever run away from mere mortals and a trifle of trouble? They shrugged and thought no more of such foolishness.

THERE was a man in Caminel, a cattle buyer, buying steers to drive north. He had a contract to furnish beef for a northern railroad builder, and was buying anything on hoofs. Rance York had that in mind when he went up onto Orinoco Ridge. Up in the Ridge roughs were wild *ladinos* that had never felt a rope or branding iron. They belonged to anybody tough enough to catch them. Most of them would never tame down enough to stay with any herd, but they would fetch fifteen dollars a head in Caminel.

Rance and his old *Tejanos* held their catch in a walled-in box canyon, and after three days they and their horses were gaunted down. But they had collected a choice assortment of outlaw moss horns.

On the fourth morning Rance sent both old men down to Caminel to notify the buyer to come up to the Ridge. He did that mainly to give them both a much needed rest. When they were gone he rode on the trail of a monstrous big brockle-faced cow that he had spotted the evening before. It took him all morning.

He cut its trail, followed it until it broke cover, and went after it on a dead run. When he got near enough, he slashed out his rope and settled its loop at the first try. His pony heaved back, knowing its job, and the cow crashed. Rance left his saddle quick and ran down his taut



rope, but about that time the cow scrambled up.

Brockle-face was mad, full of fight, and as dangerous as fifteen mountain lions on the hunt. She came charging up the rope, scattering earth, with all hell in her red eyes and murder on her mind. She was afraid of no man and detested all of them.

Rance dropped the rope and his feet touched only the high spots on his way back to his pony. It was a toss-up as to who would reach the pony first, he or the cow. Brockle-face had long, pointed horns, and a healthy desire to use them on the man-thing that was pestering her.

Rance's rope was a sixty-foot length. Had it been forty foot, the cow would have come closer to her heart's desire, for she was gaining fast. Rance had taken only a dally with the rope around the horn, having learned to give up his Texas habit of tying, here in the brush country. To the credit of the pony, it stood fast until Rance swerved off his course.

There wasn't a chance of making it to the saddle. Brockle-face was a jump behind Rance as he swerved and headed for a rock scatter. The pony got the same notion of dodging death on the hoof, and made off fast in the opposite direction. Brockle-face, confronted with a choice of victims, stubbornly kept right on after the high heels of El Rancito York.

Then a voice let out a high screaming yell. A horse and rider clattered recklessly close to the cow, confusing the issue. Brockle-face made a side lunge, missed, and fear entered her soul as the screaming yell came again. She suddenly decided she was outnumbered and went thundering off into the thickets, her trailing rope yanking out brush in her wake.

RANCE sat down on the ground, getting his wind back, and looked after the capering *ladino*.

"There," he said without much regret, "goes a pretty good rope. 'Lo, Anne. Thanks. She'd have got me, sure."

"Not the way you were traveling," said Anne Peniston. She looked down at him from the saddle of her hard-breathing horse, and her bantering voice did not match the look on her face. "I never," she added, trying to sound light and casual, "saw anybody cover ground so fast."

Rance grinned and their eyes met, and for a moment they forgot recent happenings. When memory came, Rance's grin faded. "How'd you happen to come up here?" he asked, for want of something better to say.

"Trailed your pony." Anne dismounted, and no longer tried to be casual. "Rance, there's trouble! I came up to tell you. They've found over fifty more of our steers burned over with your brand, and more turning up all the time! Word of it got to the sheriff, and he rode up from Caminel to look into it. Rance, you should have left!"

"I don't see it that way," Rance replied quietly. "What else has happened?"

"They know you're up here. It got them all stirred up that you didn't leave. Dad went back to Caminel with the sheriff, and swore out a warrant against you! Quiro and Quero were in town, and somebody told them you would be hanged as a cattle thief. So both of them walked right up to the sheriff and the crowd, and said it was *they* who changed those brands!"

"What?" Rance shot to his feet. "Say that again!"

"They both confessed, right there on the street," repeated Anne.

"Maybe they didn't quite understand. You know how like children they are. The crowd didn't give them a chance to finish, but began mobbing them and—"

Rance's eyes were gunman-hard. "Are they hurt?" he said evenly.

Anne shook her head. "No. The sheriff hustled them both into the jail and locked them up. The whole country is roused, and the sheriff is heading a party up this way to look for you! Everybody says Quiro and Quero were working under your orders. I heard all about it from Luby Smith who'd just got back, so I rode up to find you. Rance, you've got to go! If they catch you—"

"Sure." Rance whistled, and his pony, looking coy and self-conscious now that the excitement was over, came trotting to him out of the brush.

Rance mounted. "Thanks again, Anne." He reached down and touched her hand. "I . . . I wish things hadn't come out this way."

"So do I, Rance," said Anne frankly. There was a hurt in her eyes she could not conceal. "Where will you go?"

"Go?" Rance gave her a wondering look. "Why to Caminel, o' course! Where else?"

"But . . . Rance, you can't!" Her hand caught at him. "Don't you understand? They'll mob you, lynch you!"

"Mebby they'll try." Rance took up the lines. "But d'you think I'd leave those two behind without makin' a try at gettin' 'em out? They lied to save my neck. It wasn't smart, but then they ain't very smart, an' it was the best they could think of to do."

"Rance, it's suicide!"

Rance didn't deny that. Nor could he explain fully about old Quiro and Quero. They were the

last of the York vaqueros. They had spent their lives in the service of the Yorks, fighting droughts, bandidos, floods, fires and sheepmen. They had shared good times and bad. They had been his tutors, his guardians and his nurses from earliest memory. And he was their lord, their *padrone* who could perform miracles when necessary, who would always stand by them.

The thing was simple, as Rance saw it. The look in his eyes, perhaps, gave Anne the explanation. She had grown fond of the old *Tejanos*, talked, laughed, and exchanged confidences with them as she would have done with children. Their naïve, childlike simplicity had fascinated her.

So she tried no more to dissuade him. She just stood there, her arms straight at her sides, and watched him ride off down the slopes of the Ridge, his swinging figure appearing and disappearing in the thickets until he was gone from her sight.

THE sheriff's deputy, holding the fort in the Caminel jail, looked shocked and confused when he stared into the unwinking eye of Rance York's gun muzzle. He had been taking his ease over a cigar and a week-old newspaper, with some sympathy at the back of his mind for Sheriff McAllister, who had to be out riding the roughs with a posse this fine hot morning.

The town had quieted, most of those men able to ride being off with the sheriff. The rest were congregated in the Black Saddle Saloon, discussing over cool drinks the desirable affinity between brand-blotters, ropes, and a strong cottonwood limb. Peace, preceding storm, reigned over Caminel.

So the deputy was upset enough to cease chewing on his cigar, when

with the warm breeze through the open doorway came Rance York, stepping quietly and swiftly, gun in hand.

"Sit still an' don't holler," remarked the Texan, "an' you won't get hurt!"

Deputy Sheriff Bruno Crandle was not making any bets on that. He jumped to his feet with a grunt, started his hand hipward, and abruptly changed his mind when he caught the look in his visitor's eyes.

Rance backed him against a wall and took his gun. From the cells in the shadowy rear, two rusty voices croaked in fond and scolding unison. "Rancito! What you do here?"

Rance threw a hasty look around for keys. His pony waited in the alley back of the jail. At any minute some wandering citizen might discover it and raise the alarm. Too, horses would have to be borrowed from somebody's hitching post for Quiro and Quero. Time was precious.

It was just bad luck that little Billy Deakin, over in the Black Saddle, happened to remember about the bottle of liniment old Colonel Estaver had asked him to get from the general store. Billy regretfully tore himself away from the saloon crowd, and his bantam figure broke the emptiness of the sunlit street. He bandy-walked across the street, and cast an idle glance through the jailhouse door when abreast of it. Next instant his whooping holler woke the town.

Rance's first instinct was to duck, and the bullet that came shortly after the whoop whispered past to ricochet off an iron bar in the rear. It made a terrific clang that almost drowned out the flat echo of Billy Deakin's gun report.

Rance flopped, and so did the dep-

uty, who knew something about Billy's bad shooting. So did Quiro and Quero. The Black Saddle crowd came swarming out into the street, saw Billy scuttling backward with his gun smoking, and that was all the explanation they needed. They promptly opened fire on the jailhouse, and the shattered silence fled before the thunder of battle.

"It looks," opined Deputy Crandle from where he hugged the floor, "like you're holed up pretty good, York!"

El Rancito shared the opinion, especially when somebody poked a gun through a rear cell window and began blazing away with a reckless promiscuity that brought up some nervous swearing from the deputy. But Rance saw no point in giving up.

He slung a shot that carried a cautioning message to the rear window, then concentrated all his attention on the street. Entirely too many citizens were crowding up to the jail, and by some quirk of mob madness they seemed to think they stood in no danger. Rance fired, fast and accurately, around the lower part of the door frame.

A bartender from the Black Saddle; who admitted to being something of a fighting man, found himself hanging onto the wreck of his shotgun with one numbed hand. He dropped it and briskly returned to his bottles.

The general storekeeper, ordinarily an amiable man, felt an unseen finger pluck at his bushy hair. It put serious thoughts into his head. Hastily, he tracked back to business. This was a cattleman's fight, anyway.

In their cell, Quiro and Quero waited patiently for El Rancito to jerk this town apart and pitch the remains in the creek. They were a

little puzzled that he should waste so much time about getting started. York *padre*, of blessed memory, would have been out there with his vaqueros by now, mopping up with the enemy remnants. With their simple old minds buried in the golden past, they overlooked the fact that the last of the Yorks had no reckless crew of fighting vaqueros to lead.

Rance York was in a bad tight, and he knew it. The crowd now had scattered along the street, covered behind store fronts, water butts and anything else handy and thick. They kept up a spasmodic sniping at the jailhouse, and there wasn't a chance of getting clear.

When, along in the afternoon, a clattering of horses sounded through the town, Rance built a smoke and decided he should have stayed in Texas, drought or no drought.

"Smoke?" He tossed the tobacco sack over to Crandle.

The deputy shook his head and pulled out two cigars. He was grateful he hadn't been killed so far.

"Have one o' these," he offered.

"Thanks; save it." Rance lit his quiry. "I wouldn't have time to smoke that much, I reckon. Your boss just got back with the posse."

**T**HE sheriff, Hank McAllister, dismounted, waved a silencing hand at various excited citizens around him, and spoke to his possemen.

"Bad man, this Texan. It don't look like he'll let himself be took alive, so watch y'selves. We'll have to kill him, I guess. Anybody got any ideas?"

A few had, and gave them. Split and rush, said Hockaday. Crawl up behind the jailhouse and set it afire, offered Skin Peele, who had a dis-

like for the place arising from unfortunate personal experience.

The sheriff listened mostly to Dad Peniston, who thought the besieged fugitive might possibly see the light if some of the boys got up on over-looking roofs with rifles.

They were still talking when Anne came tearing into town on a lathered horse. She pulled up, and Dad's talk took a different turn.

"Anne, what the devil are you doing here?" he rapped. "You hear that shootin'? This is no place for women. That danged cow thief has run hog wild an' he's standin' off the town from in the jailhouse! Git on backhome, or by gravy I'll forget you're grown an'—"

But Anne was already riding on straight down the street for the jailhouse, and swinging out of the saddle. The firing stopped and everybody cussed. Women sure could mess things up. They'd never get that vinegaroo out of there now, as long as he could hold her hostage.

Rance rolled over and stared up at Anne as she came running in. "For gosh sakes, Anne!" he began. "You hadn't ought to come—"

"Oh, hush!" she dismissed his protest. "You're as bad as Dad. I came to talk to Quiro and Quero. I happened to think of something."

She hurried on through to the rear. The two old vaqueros greeted her with much courtesy. Rance heard the murmur of their voices and Anne's. She came back to him.

"Rance"—her voice was low and a little shaky—"I want you to surrender to the sheriff. Will you do it . . . for me?"

Rance looked down at his gun, and up at her. He rose to his feet, shrugged and gave her the gun. "All right, Anne. They had me tight, anyway. You can call 'em in."

With the crowd at his back, the

sheriff came in. He gave Anne a long, queer look, and spoke almost kindly to Rance.

"Just step on ahead to the cells, York, will you? Boys, keep that mob out o' here. Nobody's been killed, so let's cool off, everybody."

At the cells, Anne spoke up. "Mr. McAllister, on what charge are you arresting him?"

The sheriff blinked twice. "Why," he answered dryly, "they do say he's been puttin' his brand on some cattle belongin'—"

"He never did!" declared Anne. "You've already got the men locked up who did that. Why don't you ask them if Rance ordered them to do it?"

"Ask 'em nothin'!" put in Hockaday. "Them spics'd lie to—"

"I'm speaking to the sheriff," said Anne, and Hockaday went red. "Ask them, Mr. McAllister."

The sheriff felt he owed her something for persuading his prisoner to surrender, though he felt a little irritated about it, too. But it wouldn't do any harm to humor her. So he turned his sternest face upon Quiro and Quero, who were peering through their cell bars, trying to follow what was going on.

"Did you two hombres," inquired the sheriff loudly, "use a runnin' iron on a lot o' Slash P cows?"

**Q**UIRO looked at Quero. They shrugged, turned their mutual gaze back to the sheriff. "Si, we do that. We . . . what you say, Rancito? But it is truth! *Es verdad*, Rancito!"

Rance stared at them, and suddenly felt chill and strange. They were telling the truth. He knew it.

The sheriff cast a side glance at him, pursed his lips, and asked another question. "Did York, here—your boss—tell you to do it?"

Quiro and Quero again exchanged a gravely puzzled look. Again they raised high and bony shoulders, and regarded the sheriff. "No. Not Rancito. No!"

A restless mutter and a few mocking laughs came from the listening mob, inside and outside.

"Señor Sheriff," murmured Quiro with gentle kindness, "you no *sabe*—"

"I guess not." The sheriff was growing a little impatient. "You're not goin' to claim you two old coots did it without orders, are you?"

They shook their heads modestly and a little pityingly. "No-no."

"Then," demanded the sheriff, louder still, "who in blazes *did* tell you to burn those brands if York didn't?"

Slowly, their wrinkled brown faces broke into beams. Here at last was an intelligent question from this somewhat stupid and bad-mannered man of law. They beamed at Anne, as at one in a position to share their appreciation of a little secret that now was to be divulged. They gestured to her, gracefully and grandly and spoke in duet.

"Anacita!"

A dead silence descended on the crowd before the storm broke. Dad Peniston stamped forward, wrath on his face.

The sheriff lost the remnants of his patience. "Why, you crazy pair o' lying—"

"Please!" Anne's tremulous young voice cut through the roar. "Mr. McAllister, please be quiet! Dad, if you're dead set on jailing somebody over those cows, I . . . I guess you'll just have to jail me!"

By some kind of inner magic, Dad got control of himself. "Are you," he asked in a voice not his own, "entirely out of your head, Anne?"

"No." His daughter shook the maligned head, which was tousled and curly, and good to the eye. High color flooded her face, and her eyes held a bright sparkle. "It was all my fault . . . it really was. But I didn't know, I never dreamed . . . oh, dear! Must I explain?"

"I think," said Dad ominously, "you better!"

"You couldn't just take my word for it, and . . . and forget all about it?"

"Like—hem! No!"

"Very well." Anne had a slightly martyred look about her. "You see, a few weeks ago I was talking to Quiro and Quero about . . . about Rance."

"Always," threw in Quiro helpfully, "we talk about Rancito. "Si!"

ANNE'S color went even higher. She gazed steadily down at the floor, and her voice was small. "Well, I just sort of said it was a pity, seeing we had so many cows, that some of them couldn't be Circle B instead of Slash P stock. I . . . I said if some kind fairy would just come along and wave her wand . . . And then I said, not thinking, that the fairy could use a running iron about as well as a wand, and . . . and—"

"And then," helped out Quero, "Rancito, he would own so much cattle he can marry Anacita! *Sabe?* So Quiro, he say to me, 'What is this fairy what have wand and no running iron?' And I say, 'He is foolish fellow. We no wait for him. Anacita, she want the cattle branded that way. Anacita, she want our Rancito. Our Rancito, he want Anacita. We want our Rancito and our Anacita to marry and have—'"

Rance coughed very explosively. So did the sheriff, and his deputy,

and several others. Dad Peniston said, "Yes-yes, of course—ah—hum!"

The listening crowd dispersed, many of them having great trouble with their throats. Anne stood crimson, her head down. Quiro and Quero beamed in complete tranquillity through their bars, happy in the knowledge that they had done the only proper and logical thing under the circumstances.

Riding back to Cotero Wash, Dad Peniston broke a long and thoughtful silence. "How many o' my cows," he asked mildly, "were over-branded?"

Rance relayed the question to his two vaqueros, riding in the rear. They spread their hands helplessly. They hadn't thought to keep count. Anne, riding beside Rance, ducked to hide a smile.

"Them two . . . hum . . . fairies o' yours," remarked Dad, "sure did a job! Well, nev' mind. I was goin' to say, I always planned to settle somethin' on Anne when she got married. Say, five hundred head. Them misbranded critters can be counted in so—"

"Now, look here—" began Rance.

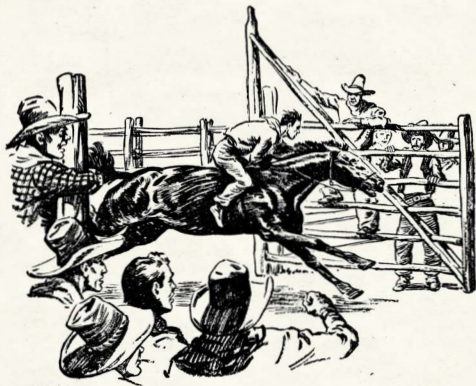
"So," Dad Peniston went on, "after what's happened an' all, I don't see how you can get out o' marryin' Anne! No, an' I don't want no argument, either!" He spurred and rode on ahead, being a man of sense.

After awhile, Quiro and Quero rode on after him. They, too, were men of sense—of a kind. There were certain times when even they could think of no way to help their *padrone*, and right now he was somewhat tardily but very efficiently asking a certain bright-eyed girl to consider becoming Mrs. El Rancito York.

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# **Death Runs**

## **A Sandy**



**by Ben Jones**

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## Death Runs A Sandy

**S**AM CRANE was proud of the kid. He liked to tell the kid's meager story, had told it over and over during the five years since the kid had come to the Boxed X to work for Sam.

"I found him sitting on the cook-shack steps at dawn one morning. It was cold and cloudy enough to make me shiver in my leathers. But the kid sat there on the steps, bright-eyed, wide awake, not even seeming to notice the cold, even though the only thing between his skin and that high mesa air was a thin, worn cotton shirt and a pair of ragged Levis.

"He stood up when I stopped beside him. Bright-blue eyes lighted out of his hard, stern face, a face too stern and too old for a kid of sixteen."

"I'm lookin' for a job," he said abruptly. "Any kind of job."

"I didn't need no hands right then," Sam said. "But there was something about the kid that wouldn't let me say I didn't. I told him to come on in and put on the feed bag. I talked to him while he et. His story was mighty simple."

"I don't know much about myself," the kid said. "Last five years I been livin' in a Cherokee village. Chief Blue Eagle found me after my folks was killed by outlaws on the Arizony trail. The chief treated me like a son, but when he died I hit the trail."

Well, Sam always figured there was more to it than that. But that's all the kid ever told him, and Sam didn't believe he was a bad hombre, so didn't press him for any more.

But the story about living with the Indians the kid soon proved. For the kid was a wonder with horses

—wild horses especially. The Boxed X made a nice side profit catching, taming and selling some of the horses that ran wild in New Mex. But until the kid showed up there wasn't no rider who could break more than a dozen of the critters a year so they would be any use.

Sam kept the kid at odd jobs around the house for about a month. "He looked so dog-gone skinny and starved," Sam said, "that I figured we ought to fatten him up before we give him a hoss. And as for puttin' him to ridin' wild hosses—well, it never entered my head. I'd got right fond of the kid that very first day. Found myself wantin' to look after him."

The only name the kid ever gave Sam was Ladd. "His pa must have called him lad," Sam said. "But it was as good a name as any, so it stuck."

Two or three times during that first month Sam caught the kid, in his spare time, hangin' on the fence of the corral where they kept the wild horses. The kid didn't ask for a horse, but after a while Sam got to know that he wanted one mighty bad. And when he got around to it Sam didn't have no idea of giving the kid a wild horse.

One morning after Ladd had been there a month and had performed perfect all the odd jobs anybody around the place had give him to do, Sam told him: "It's time you got yoreself a hoss, kid. Get used to the feel of leather, for we'll shore be needin' you come spring and we start roundin' up."

Well, that was all Sam said, except to tell the kid to pick himself out a horse and get hisself fixed up with a saddle and all. And he shore didn't expect Ladd to go to the wild-horse corral for a mount.

But that's just what the kid did.



**T**HE boys had just rounded up a nice lot of wild ones. They didn't expect to keep more'n the two or three that could be broken, then the rest of the hell raisers would be turned loose.

About an hour after Sam told the kid to get hisself a horse there was an awful uproar over at the wild-horse corral. When Sam got there finally, most of the Boxed X boys were crowded around the fence, shoutin' theirselves hoarse, jumpin' around excited as kids at a circus.

When Sam saw what they was lookin' at he nearly died. First he started cussing the boys for lettin' the kid in the wild-horse corral. Then he cussed them for not gettin' in there and pullin' Ladd out. Then he got so fascinated that he forgot to cuss and began to yell as loud as the rest of them.

For the kid sat atop the biggest, blackest, wildest horse of the lot. He didn't wear no spurs, and no shoes, even. He didn't have nothing on that horse but a rope. Sam said afterward that he wouldn't never have believed it if he hadn't seen it with his own eyes.

The kid looked even skinnier up there on that big horse than he looked on the ground, but he rode her and he didn't fall apart or break any bones doin' it. The kid looked as if he might have been a hump growed under the skin of that wild horse, the way he stuck.

Somebody finally opened the gate when the kid got close to it and the rest of the wild critters had moved down to one end of the corral. And when the gate opened the kid turned the black horse toward that opening. The horse gave a snort, and the wind couldn't have been no faster goin' through it. Sam said he screamed at the kid to slide off the critter and let her go, but Ladd just

stuck to the back of that hoss and kept going.

The hoss headed for the hills like they all knew she would. The kid let her go—maybe he couldn't have stopped her even if he'd wanted to. They were out of sight in a minute, and Sam began to cuss again, and to worry.

He sent a couple of boys to trail the kid, but they come back around dinner time sayin' they lost the trail when she hit the rocks. That day was when Sam Crane realized just how the kid had grown on him. Sam just about worried himself sick. He was close to collapse late that evening when the kid showed up.

**A**ND he showed up ridin' that black mare. They both looked all tuckered out, but the kid didn't look as tired as the horse. Sam swears that big black critter looked as meek as a house cat.

And she stayed that way from then on—as far as the kid was concerned. He could do anything with that black mare, but there wasn't nobody else could lay a finger on her. Ladd called her Wild Beauty. Well, after that the kid's job around the Boxed X was a settled issue. He was put to tamin' wild horses. He refused to wear spurs or to use a biting bit on 'em. Yet he tamed more of them critters than the rest of the gang had ever hoped to.

"It's that Indian upbringing' of his," Sam always said. "Ladd jest talks to them horses and they tame up for him."

It was after the kid got Wild Beauty that he started ridin' off by himself and stayin' three or four days at a time. And he didn't tell nobody, even Sam, where he went. Between times Ladd did his work about the place, so Sam didn't complain, but he knew the kid had some-

thing on his mind.

As I said, the kid didn't talk about hisself. And he didn't ask nobody else questions about their business, either. But he did get interested in the Box X boys' guns, wantin' to know what sort of irons they all carried and how they handled them in a fight. He was interested in their saddles and equipment, too, but he wasn't nosey. They all liked the kid, and there were some fine demonstrations of their prowess with weapons for the kid's benefit.

But after a while he lost interest in their guns. After that he'd just sit around listening to them talk, but never joining in.

There was just one other thing he did ask about, Sam recalled later. He asked about the outlaw bands that hid out in the New Mex hills. Had any of the Boxed X boys ever run afoul of any of the outlaws? How they fought? Was there any famous knife killers among the outlaws? Well, Sam just figured those questions natural with a boy of Ladd's age, and that's about the only time Sam ever did underestimate the kid.

Every year at roundup Sam always took on a lot of extra waddies. Among the rovin' punchers that showed up that year was a rider called Duke Lazarus. Duke rode up with four other hombres the day before we began to round up. Sam needed hands bad. Duke and his pals could ride, and they looked tough enough, so they got the job.

Duke Lazarus began to pick on the kid from the first minute he laid eyes on him. Nobody around the Boxed X ever remembered seein' anybody as skinny as the kid before, but nobody said anything about it—until Duke showed up.

The minute the kid walked into the mess shack that night Duke be-

gan on him. First off, Duke laughed uproariously at sight of the kid, pointed out, between guffaws, the knobby elbows, and the Adam's apple that jutted out like a saddlehorn.

The kid turned red and looked a little surprised when Duke began, but he didn't say anything. He just ate his supper and let the Duke keep on. Sam wasn't around, or else he might have stopped it all right there.

Well, Duke showed right off that he was a bragger, and swaggering bully. And he didn't overcome the handicap with the Boxed X outfit by starting out picking on Ladd. They were all right fond of the kid.

But nobody tried to stop the Duke. It would have reflected on the kid's manhood if any of the boys had tried to fight his battles for him. Ladd understood that, but it was a cinch the boys wouldn't stand for less than fair play for the kid.

At first it was just the bully in Duke Lazarus that made him pick at the kid. Later it became something more than that. The real trouble began when the Duke saw Wild Beauty.

The pintos Duke and his four buddies had rode up to the Boxed X on were pretty tuckered out. Sam Crane is a horseman, so the first thing he did was to tell Duke and his pals to put their horses in the pasture for a rest and take themselves a ranch horse for the job. Duke sees the kid's wild black mare off in its own corral on the way to the big corral. And without a by your leave from anybody, Duke Lazarus tried to take Ladd's black horse.

**I**F the kid hadn't been handy that day Duke would sure have been killed then and there by that black horse. Sam said he hadn't ever seen the kid get mad until that

morning. But after getting Duke out of Wild Beauty's corral, Ladd was white and shaking with anger. Sam thought at first it was fear—fear for the man's life when he saw Lazarus in with the wild horse. But when Ladd faced Duke outside Wild Beauty's corral, white-faced, tense, Sam saw that it was anger. The kid told Duke that the next time he tried to touch the black horse he'd let the critter kill him.

Duke was pretty much shook up right then, and didn't say any more. But later he went back to the mare's corral and stood looking at the wild horse a long time. And it wasn't long before the whole outfit knew that Duke wanted the kid's horse. First Lazarus had the gall to go to Sam Crane and ask for Wild Beauty. Sam nearly exploded, but managed to control himself.

"Being a stranger in these parts," he said shortly, "you wouldn't know, Lazarus. But that black mare is the kid's property, exclusive. Ladd broke the black horse. Nobody else could ride her even if they got a chance. Which they won't while the kid lives. There's plenty of good mounts in the big corral. Get yourself a hoss from there."

Well, that should have ended the matter, but it didn't. Wanting that black became an obsession with Duke. The kid didn't say anything, but he kept his eyes on Duke and that horse.

Then, a few weeks before roundup was over, Duke offered the kid a fancy price for Wild Beauty. The kid turned it down, of course. The Duke began to raise the ante. He finally got up to offering Ladd all the money due him at the end of roundup, then threw in a fancy Mex saddle and a pair of silver spurs that he pulled out of his pack. The kid eyed that saddle and them spurs a

long time that night. His thin little face looked even more pinched and harder than usual when he finally turned down Lazarus' last offer. The Duke was cussin' mad when the kid turned and walked out of the bunkhouse.

The whole outfit seemed to sense that the kid's refusal of Duke's final offer wouldn't end the matter. A sort of tenseness settled over the Boxed X then, and everybody but Sam seemed to feel it. Sam was just too busy bargaining with buyers and keepin' the outfit on the job to be in on anything else.

And every man jack of the Boxed X outfit was on the lookout for foul play from Duke Lazarus. Nobody doubted by now that the Duke was a ruthless hombre who aimed to get what he wanted any way he could manage it.

The kid kept cool through it all, but he took to beddin' down nights in the black mare's corral. And he went around looking grimmer and grimmer—too grim for a kid like him.

THE end of roundup each spring was celebrated by a big shindig. Sam did it right, with barbecue, a dance, and hard liquor for the boys before he paid them off. He put up extra money for prizes for roping contests, steer throwing, wild-horse riding, and anything the boys could think up.

Two things happened about the time the boys began dusting off their saddles for the contests. The first thing was when Duke Lazarus asked Sam Crane for one of the half-broken wild horses, offering his own pinto and some cash on the deal. The wild critter was only half broke, and looked as if it never would go the other half, so Sam let the Duke have him. It looked like a bargain for

Sam, although he felt honor bound to warn Lazarus about the critter being only half broke.

Lazarus laughed. "She'll be whole broke when I get through riding her," he said. So they closed the deal.

Then, the next thing we knew, Duke had challenged the kid to a race—his wild mare against the kid's—to be put on the day of the big shindig. And the kid accepted the challenge. Nobody heard about it until the Duke was training the wild horse for the race and bragging how he'd soon be showing the boys some bones the kid had been hiding from them.

"We got a bet," Lazarus bragged one night in the bunkhouse, "me and the kid. I'm puttin' everything I own against everything he owns, includin' his shirt and pants. If my wild hoss wins that race, I get Wild Beauty along with everything else. You boys can place yore bets right now on how many goose eggs is showin' down the kid's spinal column." He guffawed loudly at his own joke, but nobody else joined in.

But as the boys watched Lazarus train the wild horse he'd bought off Sam they began to doubt the kid had a chance, even though Wild Beauty was far the best horse. Then they all began to argue with the kid.

"It ain't going to be a fair race, kid," one of 'em summed it up. "Duke is usin' spurs. Lessen you begin usin' spurs on Wild Beauty you won't have a chance."

For everyone in the outfit knew the kid never used spurs even when breaking in wild ponies. He just talked to the horses soothin' like, hangin' out over their necks, his mouth close to their laid-back ears. And little by little they'd quiet down. But nobody could see how the kid was going to get a horse to

win a race just talkin' to it. Not with Lazarus usin' spurs.

While the Duke trained his horse right near the house where all the boys could watch, the kid took the black mare off into the hills. We all suspected he was training her, but nobody knew how, and there never was any signs of spur marks on her.

Just a couple of days before the race the boys began to make bets. They were mighty quiet about it and a little sheepish, them that bet against the kid. And them that bet on him expected to lose, but figgered somebody ought to back the kid.

Then Sam got wind of the race. He roared like a stuck steer at the outfit for not telling him before. Then he put his foot down and said the race couldn't take place.

"Duke Lazarus just wants yore hoss, kid," he told Ladd. "And what he's puttin' up against losin' ain't equal to Wild Beauty in value. Also, with him usin' spurs and you ridin' without them, you ain't got a chance to win such a race. I ain't goin' to let you be made a fool of, kid."

But that night the kid had a long talk with Sam alone up to the house. And when the kid came out he said Sam had changed his mind—the race would be run.

**W**HEN Sam scheduled the race between Duke and the kid last on the day's program everybody knew why. Lazarus was a heavy drinker and a hard player. The kid always took things easy and didn't drink. With the odds against the kid like they were, Sam figured Duke would maybe tire himself down some by heavy eatin' and drinkin'.

Lazarus just laughed when he heard about the schedule. He didn't

seem worried, and his confidence was something disgustin' to witness.

It was a big day, and one of the finest shindigs Sam ever put on. Neighbors traveled for two days to get to it and we pitched camps all around the spread to take care of the overflow. The air was filled with the mouth-watering smell of barbecue from dawn right through the day, and the fiddles and banjos kept up a grind from noon until midnight.

By the time the race between Duke and the kid was due to be run, every man jack was ridin' high. And just like this race was the climax to the day's entertainment, so was that crowd approachin' a climax in their good-timing.

Duke swaggered out to his wild brown horse, and it was plain to see that he had been drinkin'. But it didn't seem to have weakened him any, for he leaped into that saddle like a two-year-old.

The kid came out quietlike, leadin' his big black mare. She was some nervous, and he kept a hand on her neck and talked to her softly.

Well, I was standin' next to Sam, right in the center of the track we'd picked for the race to be run. We was using the big corral fence for a grand stand, and every man jack lined up on the side lines for the race. Sam was worried, and he didn't mind showing it. I tried to console him some, but I felt pretty low myself. That black horse meant more to the kid than his life, and he stood a good chance to lose her.

Well, they started off. They was to race around the big corral for six laps. They started with the Duke in front right off, putting the spurs from the first onto his brown horse. The critter reared high at the first cruel dig, then settled down to a run that took her way ahead of the kid.

Wild Beauty got off to a slow,

even start. The kid settled low over her neck and we could see him talking to her gentlelike. For three laps the kid kept well behind Duke. Then on the fourth lap Wild Beauty began to come up, slow but sure. The crowd began to wake up then. They'd been silent after that start, all of them feelin' kind of low when the kid started right off losing. But when he began to crawl up on the Duke, even the men who had bet against the kid began to pull for him.

But Sam didn't cheer up any. He just kept saying: "He can't win. That hoss loves the kid, but talkin' gentle to her ain't enough in a race like this. He needs spurs."

On the fifth lap, to everybody's surprise, the kid nosed up beside Duke. Me and Sam could see the startled look on the Duke's face as he turned and saw the kid. We became conscious of something else then. It was the kid's voice.

Never before had any of the outfit heard what the kid said to them wild horses when he trained them down. He talked soft and low, and right into their ears. Well, now he was talking into Wild Beauty's ear, but his voice wasn't soft and low. It was suddenly high and shrill and pleading. And with the change in the kid's voice there was a change in Wild Beauty. Where she had been soothed before, she seemed to go suddenly wild. With the kid's shrill, high pleading for more speed, for her to win that race, the black mare became a different horse. Her nostrils flared angrily, her ears flattened back, and she straightened out and she went over that mesa land like she had that first day the kid had rode her.

Sam and I broke and run for the end of the corral where they would circle for the last lap. We couldn't wait to see the end of this race. The

kid's scream was easy to hear now. Every man clinging to the corral fence had quieted down, listening. And there was something terribly urgent, something fearful in that cry of the kid's as he pleaded with his horse.

The kid's mouth was close to the black mare's head, but his eyes were on Duke Lazarus. We could see that as they came around the corner of the corral. The kid was beginning to nose ahead of Duke's mare, which was dripping blood from her side where he'd dug in the Mex spurs. And she was sure winded, no doubt about that.

Then the kid's voice changed. The high plea was still in it, but now he wasn't just talking to the horse. He yelled: "Sam, look! *The knife!*"

To me this meant just one thing. Duke reached down suddenly. I saw the move, saw his hand go to his boot. And even as the kid cried out to Sam I saw the sunlight glint on the knife in Duke's hand.

**S**AM started to cuss in a funny way before I started. I always do when I see a horse spurred unmercifully. But I ain't never seen nothing like this. For Duke Lazarus began to dig that knife into the side of that brown horse. He picked a spot the spurs couldn't reach and he began to dig like a madman.

Sam and I were running back before they passed us, but they passed fast, and what we saw was all in a flash. But for the first time in my life I knew what it felt like to want to murder a man. Right then and there I would have given my life to have killed Duke Lazarus for what he was doing to that brown horse.

Well, there's them that believe in retribution. And from that day on I joined the ranks. Halfway to the finish line the kid rode past the

Duke, making a clean win of a hundred feet. And just as the kid flew past the brown horse the retribution part came in.

Duke had cowed that wild horse good. The whole outfit had agreed that though his methods of breaking a wild critter were different from the kid's, they were almost as effective. The difference was that Duke would break their spirits, too, with the cruelty of his treatment.

But now something happened I don't never hope to see again. Just as the kid passed the Duke that brown horse seemed to put her front feet about a foot down into that hard sand. She was going fast, too, and the Lord knows how she ever bucked momentum like that. But she stopped dead in her tracks.

Duke Lazarus kept going. The leather thongs beneath that brown mare's belly let go with a snap and the saddle went right along with him. He landed about the mare's length in front of the wild horse. Ain't no doubt but that the Duke was stunned, but I doubt if he could have moved fast enough anyway to have got away from that horse. No sooner did Duke hit the ground than that brown mare was on him.

She hit right in the middle of man and saddle. She reared high and come down on all four feet, the whole weight of her burying those feet right into Duke Lazarus's body.

It was a horrible sight to see. I've seen men killed, but I ain't never seen anything like that. It made me sick. When I was able to turn around again and start for where the crowd was gathering around the thing on the ground, the kid had come back, leading his horse. The brown mare I could just barely see by then, heading for the hills.

Sam was covering what was left of Duke Lazarus with a blanket one

of the boys handed him. The crowd began moving back, some of them feeling, no doubt, like I had a moment ago. But the kid just stood there, looking down at the mess on the ground, his face knife-sharp, granite-hard. Sam stood up, moved over to stand beside the kid.

"You were right, kid," he said. "When did you find out about the knife?"

"I wasn't sure he had a knife at first," the kid said slowly. "But when I saw those spurs and that saddle—well, the man who killed my mother and father had a Mex saddle and silver spurs. And he used a knife on his horse to get away fast when Blue Eagle and his Indians come up on the wagon train while they was lootin' it. I been lookin' ever since for a man who used a knife like that. I've run across other hombra's with Mex saddles and spurs, but I stuck to them until I found out they didn't use knives and proved that they weren't in Arizona five years ago.

"I didn't know that Duke had a knife. But I did learn from one of the men who came to the Boxed X with him that Lazarus was in Arizona five years ago. When I saw that saddle and spurs I was suspicious and Duke was brutal enough to lead a gang into a wagon train and kill women and children for the sake of looting and stealing. But I didn't want to kill an innocent man, eve if he was a dog like Lazarus. I had to make him show that knife, use it as he had used it the morning he led the attack and killed my folks. When Duke suggested that race I knew it was my chance."

"You see," Sam explained to me, "the kid come and told me this after I'd stopped the race. He told me how his dad had shoved him down

behind a wagon wheel and barricaded him in when the outlaws attacked the train. The kid had watched the fight, seen the masked man kill his father, then his mother when she ran to her husband. And as the killer mounted his horse the kid could see the saddle, the spurs—and he saw the rider reach down and dig a knife in the side of the horse to get him going."

"But without spurs, kid," I put in, "I don't see how you ever figured to win that race. An' I still don't see how the heck you made Wild Beauty run like that just talkin' to her."

"I didn't know I could win," Ladd told me. "But I did know this about horses—it isn't what you say to them that controls them. It's the tone of voice you use. Talking quietlike soothes and quiets them. But raise your voice, make it shrill, fearful, and a horse gets nervous. A wild horse will get the change even quicker than a tame one. I'd always talked soothinglike to Wild Beauty. But I trained her to run like a fury when I raised my voice. And she did it natural because she was frightened."

After Ladd was sure Duke was the man who had murdered his parents he meant to kill Lazarus. But the wild horse kept the kid from being a murderer. And I don't think the kid cared that the horse beat him to the job. He just wanted to see Lazarus die for what he'd done—and after all, the horse had a grudge against the Duke, too.

Ladd changed some after that, seemed like he quit bein' so grim and learned to laugh more. He's been just like a son to Sam for a long time now. And mounted on Wild Beauty there's not a better tophand in the country. Or so Sam says, and he ought to know.

# The Story of the West

*Told in pictures and text by*

**GERARD DELANO**

**L**EAVING the Grand Osage Village in September, 1806, Pike and his men encountered and overcame all kinds of hardships in crossing the plains toward what is now the State of Colorado. Game was scarce, and hunger and near starvation frequently faced them.

On the 25th of September, Pike reached a village of the Pawnees, having crossed the well-beaten trail made by Malgares' expedition which was at that very time searching for him. At the Pawnee village Pike observed one of the flags left by the Spaniards. This he ordered taken down and the United States flag hoisted in its place. After considerable hesitation, his order was sullenly obeyed.

From the Pawnee town on the Kansas River, Pike traveled through barren, hilly country to the Arkansas River, killing an occasional elk or buffalo for food. At this point he split the party, sending some of the men down the river by canoe with letters to his commanding officer, General Wilkinson.

Following the course of the Arkansas upward, Pike and his men had their first view of the Rockies on November 15th. A week later they encountered a war party of Grand Pawnees who were returning from an unsuccessful raid on the Comanches. Such unsuccessful war parties were extremely dangerous

since they were always ready to wreak their vengeance on the first persons they met. What made the situation even more hazardous was the fact that the Pawnees numbered sixty, while Pike's party was now only sixteen.

Pike arranged a council, distributed presents and took all possible precautions. The redskins, however, appeared discontented with the offerings and began to steal everything they could lay hands on. Pike mounted, ordered his men to be ready to fire and told the Pawnees he would kill the first Indian who laid hands on their baggage. At this warning the redskins retreated and finally continued on their way.

On November 24th Pike erected a log breastwork as a possible refuge from the Indians. Here he left most of his force while he proceeded toward the mountains accompanied by three men. Several days later they began to ascend what is now known as Cheyenne Mountain. Climbing through waist-deep snow, they reached the summit and from there surveyed the "Grand Peak," which Pike estimated to be some sixteen miles distant.

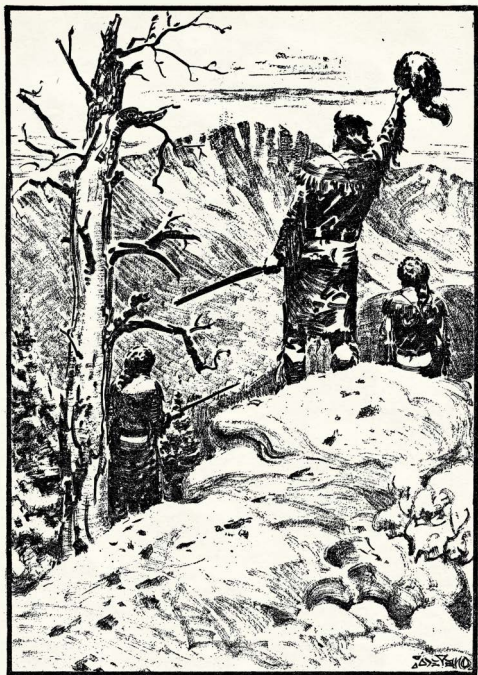
Realizing the impracticability of proceeding farther, Pike and his men descended and returned to their breastwork camp. The "Grand Peak" which they had viewed now bears Pike's name—the most fitting monument to his heroic exploits that could have been chosen.

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**NEXT WEEK: PIKE CROSSES THE SANGRÉ DE CRISTO RANGE**

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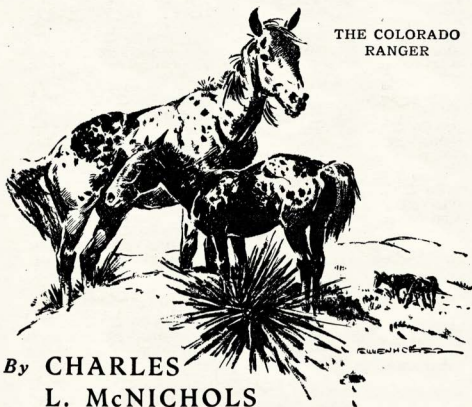




*Climbing through waist-deep snow, the three men reached the summit of Cheyenne Mountain, and surveyed the "Grand Peak" which now bears Pike's name.*

# Cow Horses

THE COLORADO  
RANGER



By CHARLES  
L. McNICHOLS

**T**HIS cow business is full of surprises. The more you learn about it, the more surprising details you turn up. The story of the Colorado Ranger, for example, is an eye opener.

When I was inquiring around among cowmen and horse owners, collecting material for the article on Apaluche horses, I heard several references to similar horses called Colorado Rangers. No one seemed to know a whole lot about them, and the reference was usually a question. Did I think the Colorado Ranger and the Apaluche was the same kind

of horse? Most of the time the man who asked the question had never seen a Ranger, for they are still very rare west of the Rockies, but he had heard that they had the same coloration and the same embossed spots that are common to the Apaluche.

Well, I had never seen or heard of a Ranger up till then, but from the description I figured that the Ranger and the Apaluche was the same horse. History and geography seemed to be on the side of that supposition. The Apaluche first appeared among the Nez Perce Indians in Idaho and southwestern Washington. The Nez Perce got the horses

from the Snakes, who got them from the Comanches, who stole them from the Spaniards in New Mexico.

Naturally, these horses had had to travel through practically the whole length and breadth of Colorado to reach the Nez Perce, and it seemed to be a cinch that some of them, including some of the uniquely spotted ancestors of the Apaluche, fell into the hands of the Colorado Indians and became the ancestors of the Rangers.

It was sure a swell theory, but it was all wrong. The Colorado Ranger never was an Indian horse!

After more inquiry I got in touch with Mrs. Hunter Meriwether, of Guthrie, Kentucky, who has a farm famous for its show horses. She has several Rangers, and she gave me the first surprising fact about the horses. A certain number of the colts are born black with white spots. By the time they are six months old they shed this black coat and get a white one with black spots! In other words, they go through a complete color reversal.

**F**ROM K. K. Parsons of the Wineglass Ranch of Boulder, Colorado, top breeder of Rangers, I got the rest of their story. The Colorado Rangers are descended from Spanish and Moroccan Barbs, and from one Arabian sire, all of which were imported since the Civil War. They have some Hambletonian blood in them, but as far as I can discover, they have no mustang ancestry, and therefore there can't be any direct connection between them and the spotted horses of the Nez Perce.

Rangers get their peculiar embossed spots from their Barb ancestors. They belong to what is known in Africa and Spain as the "leopard-spotted" strain.

I have in my possession a picture of a yearling Ranger colt. He's black except for a big patch of white that covers his hips. On this white patch are a couple dozen black spots that range from the size of a dime to the size of an old-fashioned Mexican dollar. I have another picture of a Ranger filly that belongs to Mrs. Meriwether. The filly has the same blood lines as the colt. When she was born she was exactly his color, but she went through that mysterious color change, and now she is pure white, except for about a hundred black spots on her back.

Both of these horses have a coloration that is typical of the Apaluche, and horsemen who didn't know their breeding would pass them as such.

Now is it just happenstance that these offspring of African Barbs should duplicate the coloration of the Nez Perce horses?

Don't you believe it! While there is no connection between the two strains since they have been in America, that's no sign there wasn't one back in the old country.

The so-called "leopard-spotted" Barb is a strain or color phase that has been known both in Spain and in north Africa since ancient times. We know all about the ancestors of the Rangers because of their recent importation. One of them was a gift from the Sultan of Turkey to General Grant when he was president. Another was imported by a former governor of Colorado. We don't know anything about the ancestors of the Apaluches except that they originally came from New Mexico, a couple of hundred years ago.

We also know that all Mexican horses were imported from Spain, and the biggest part of them were of Barb ancestry. Some of these

Barbs must have been of that unique leopard-spot strain. A few of them fell into the hands of the thieving Comanches and were traded to the Nez Perce, who liked their color and made a special effort to perpetuate it.

That is the only way to account for the remarkable resemblance between the Apaluche and the Ranger.

About the only differences between the two breeds are certain minor characteristics that the Apaluche picked up from years of mustang cross-breeding while in the Comanche, Nez Perce and Palouse camps.

Mustangs, while they were running wild on the plains, developed a tendency to have mule noses and scanty manes and tails. This "rat tail" and mule nose shows up in the Apaluches all too often, although present-day breeders are getting rid of them by selection and elimination.

The Rangers, having no Indian-pony ancestors, have no rat tails among them, according to Mr. Parsons. They have very full manes and tails, as have all pure-blood Barbs and Arabs.

Another point of similarity between the Ranger and the Apaluche is that both have more of a white rim around the eye than any other breed.

**T**HE ancestors of the present Ranger horses came to Colorado back in the '90s, several of them from a famous stock ranch near Beatrice, Nebraska. In Colorado they were raised under range conditions, particularly for stock work. That's how the name "Rangers" originated. They became strictly range horses.

The Colorado Rangers Association states in their specifications that a colt has to have the makings of a

good working cow horse to be qualified for registration.

Mr. Parsons himself says, "As an old Wyoming cowman told me, 'You can't ride color.' So to us who breed these horses, their ability to go out and do a day's work on the range is of far more value than their peculiar leopard coloration. As youngsters, the Rangers take readily to cow-horse routine and excel at rope work, since they show no fear of a rope or a swinging object, save in very rare instances.

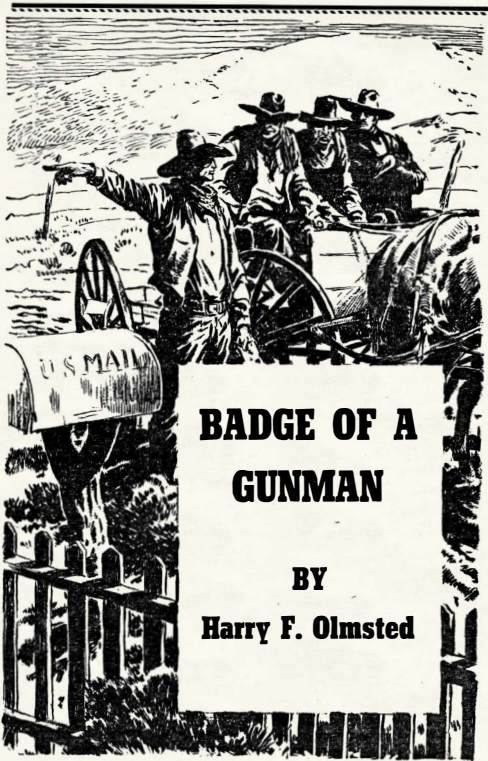
"However, when one can obtain all the prime attributes of the top cow horse and in addition have a striking color pattern that makes everyone who views it turn back for that second and third glance which, after all, is the delight of every horseman, he has a mount of which he can be justly proud."

According to the association data, a mature Ranger stallion will weigh up to thirteen hundred pounds. Rangers stand from fifteen and two tenths to sixteen and one tenth hands, which is plenty big for a stock horse, and much larger than the average run of imported Arabs and Barbs. Evidently Colorado range conditions have been good for the breed.

When it comes to color, Rangers show quite a bit of variety. Dark-bodied types with the white hips may be black, bay, sorrel or roan. Roans do not seem to be as common among them as among the Apaluches. White Rangers are of two types. Those with dark skins that undergo that mysterious color change, and the pink-skinned colts that are true albino except for the spot markings. These colts do not change. Their spots may be either "red" (bay or sorrel) or black.

And while we are on the subject,

*Continued on page 129*



**BADGE OF A  
GUNMAN**

**BY  
Harry F. Olmsted**

## Badge Of A Gunman

### CHAPTER I

#### MURDER CHARGE

**T**HE downbearing heat lay heavily on the wind and it was hard to endure, even underneath the vine-laden wooden awning of the porch. But the discomfort of the unseasonable hot spell was not what drew down the corners of Chart Cutting's wide mouth and filled his eyes with dull fire. During past meetings of the Bearpaw Grange, he had listened with detached interest to some member's plaint about the persecutions of the arrogant Walking M cattle outfit. He had even lifted his voice in a plea for patience and restraint. That had been easy enough when the shoe was pinching another's foot. But he was wearing it now and the agony of it made his veins a battleground of warring emotions.

The rattle of buggy wheels and the clang of his mail box door roused him from his bitterness. He answered the mail carrier's hail with a half-hearted toss of his hand and watched the man drive away, poignantly aware of the extended appraisal he made of Chart's fields.

Chart drew his gaunt form upward then and walked out to the road. Tall, straight and wide of shoulders, he moved with the quiet dignity that bids the world beware unless it leans toward legitimate business. From the mailbox he drew a letter, grimacing as he tore it open. And for long moments he stood reading the missive, staring through the smoke of his cigarette with fixed and speculative absorption.

The letter was from a big cattle buyer, making Chart a nice offer to

pasture range beef and fatten them on his grain prior to shipping. It was the connection Chart had built toward. It meant money in his pocket and means of developing his four quarter sections to a state where he could buy and fatten cattle on his own. But now—

His eyes lifted from the sheet to sweep his fields. Wheat and oats, heads filled and almost ready for thrashing, lay crushed and beaten to the ground. Indian corn, tall and lush and earing big in the sticky heat, was broken down and trampled. Wire fence had been cut at either end of his holding to permit the ingress and egress of stampeded cattle. The promise of yesterday, brightly glowing, was but loose ash today, blown by the hot wind.

Into Chart's brooding struck the rattle of wheels. Out of a drifting pall of dust flashed a buckboard, drawn by a spanking team of zebra duns. It was a familiar rig in Bearpaw Valley, belonging to Matt Huffaker, district deputy sheriff, and seen when any lawlessness was afoot. Huffaker was driving. On the high side sat a square faced stranger. Between the two was Elija Hayes, master of the Bearpaw Grange.

As he stepped into the roadway to intercept the buckboard, Chart couldn't help wondering what Hayes was doing with Huffaker—an admitted tool of the Walking M. But, more particularly, he couldn't resist loosing his spleen upon this hiring of the cattle interests before the grange master.

"Whoa! Whoa, boys!" Huffaker reined the swinging team down, scowling. "What is it, Cutting? We're in a hurry and—"

"So were your friends who went through me last night," broke in

Chart, and swept his arm to indicate his vandalized fields.

The three men in the rig glanced at the destruction, Elija Hayes muttering a curse into his beard, Huffaker flushing to the roots of his hair.

"I take that unkindly, Cutting," said the deputy, bristling. "In the first place no night rider who takes the law into his own hands is my friend. If the truth is known, you're probably like a lot of farmers who skimp your fencin'. Squawkin' because cattle bust down your wire to get at the grain. You should have thought of that before you lit in a cattle country to bust sod."

"That as near to the truth as you aim to get, Huffaker?" demanded Chart quietly.

"I haven't time to take up with you!" snapped the deputy, and kicked off the brake. "Get out of the road. I've a prisoner to deliver to the jailhouse!"

Chart started, his eyes flashing to Elija Hayes. Not until that moment had he noticed the steel handcuffs about the grange master's wrists. Hayes, trying vainly to hide his shame between his knees, jerked his head toward the man at his left and blurted: "High Sheriff, Chart, from the county seat. Name of John Champion. He's arresting me for—murder."

**J**OHAN CHAMPION! After mention of that name, Elija Hayes' words seemed to run together in Chart's mind, to lose significance. For the first time he let his eyes rest appraisingly upon the slumped, rotund body, the round, bland face, gentle mouth and pale eyes almost hidden behind colorless lashes. The man might have been a drummer, for all the menace there was in that ex-

terior, yet Chart Cutting felt himself going cold inside.

His mind went back across those days and nights that were still a terror in his dreams. Days of running, dodging, hiding from questing posses. Nights of carrying conflict to the hirelings of a soulless railroad company which had cheated and robbed him with the full sanction of the local law. Waging a campaign of terrorism that might have brought victory and a breakdown in the crooked political setup if it hadn't been for a mail-stage holdup, done in his name, and the arrival of a U. S. Deputy Marshal—John Champion. A canny, indefatigable lawman he was who fell for no tricks, who refused to be thrown off the trail. Five hundred miles separated Chart from those scenes, yet here was John Champion, his nemesis. Chart tried to swallow over a sudden aching lump in his throat. He had known peace here. And now, just as that peace was shattered by the persecution of new ruthlessness, here was John Champion again, the new sheriff of Custer County.

Champion, staring at Chart with unwinking eyes, was thinking: "Cutting! Chart Cutting! Our trails cross again. Should take him in with Hayes, but it might not be as easy as that. He's not wearing a gun, but it's inconceivable that he hasn't one on him. His kind is always heeled."

Emerging from the shock of the meeting, Chart was all at once conscious of the full meaning of Elija Hayes' words.

"Arresting you for murder?" he echoed. "Who did you murder?"

"He's accused," said Matt Huffaker, formally, "of killing Rufe Binnick, foreman of the Walking M cattle outfit."

"Rufe Binnick. Humph!" Chart

found a certain grim humor in the thought. "So Rufe's dead, eh? That's the best news this range has had in many a day, gents. Elija, did you do us that favor?"

The grange master shrugged. "What difference does it make?" he asked bitterly. "I'm accused of it by the Walking M's hand-picked law. You know what chance I'll have of getting a fair trial in Bearpaw."

"What makes you think he did it, Huffaker?" demanded Chart.

"You're not trying the case, Cutting." John Champion's rebuke crackled. "But if it will help your peace of mind, Hayes has been heard to threaten Binnick many times, openly, and—"

"So have I," broke in Chart. "So has every farmer in the valley—and for good cause."

"Maybe so," conceded the high sheriff. "But the last time Binnick was seen alive, he was riding from town with Hayes, arguing violently."

"When was that?"

"Day before yesterday afternoon, about four o'clock."

"Don't mean a thing," said Chart. "Rufe Binnick led the raid on my fields, night before last at somewhere about midnight. Him and three of his men were chasing Walking M cattle through my farm after cutting my fences. I stood on yonder porch in my shirt tail, throwing .30-30 slugs at 'em. If anybody killed Rufe, it was me. And he had it coming."

Matt Huffaker broke into guffaws of laughter. "There's a sodbuster for you," he chortled. "One will tell a lie an' all the rest will swear to it. It may interest you to know, Cutting, that Binnick was found in a dry gulch about a half mile from the Hayes farm, with three .44 slugs in his back. That was yesterday

noon. We've wasted enough time on you. Stand aside! And, between now and the trial, try to think up a better lie."

He slacked the reins, flicked the whip over the team. Chart leaped aside. The buckboard flashed past, the wheels just missing him. And, through the lifting dust, Chart had a flashing glimpse into two pairs of eyes—John Champion's enigmatic save for some vaguely troubling question, Elija Hayes' heavy with hopelessness.

## CHAPTER II

### DOUBTFUL WARRIOR

CHART CUTTING was staring after the buckboard, prey to a conflict of emotions, when the swift beat of hoofs struck through the dust settling about him. He whirled to the rider curbing cruelly at his gate. The dust fell away. The strong sun filled the day, lending an added touch of desolation to the destroyed fields. Moreover, it lent a metallic glint to the ebon hair of Elfie Hayes, who made up the rest of the grange master's family. Her face was bleak, her eyes chill, her slimly rounded form very stiff in the saddle as she ran her eyes over the wreckage of one of the finest crops in the Bearpaw.

She seemed to be thinking aloud as she murmured, "So-o-o, they've been at you too, Chart?"

She continued to look over the fields and Chart kept his eyes on her as breath gusted from his lungs. He had met her many times. He had danced with her at the Grange parties. But she had never spoken his first name and each time he had seen her, he had carried away an impression of becoming dignity and poised sweetness. He saw another Elfie Hayes now. Dignity had given



way to a sense of repressed danger surprising in one so small. Sweetness and womanly charm were replaced by a Spartan promise that was accentuated by the grim mold of her lips and by the rifle riding across the saddle fork.

"Me, too," he conceded wearily. "What you doing with the rifle, girl? Hunting night riders or trying to throw a bluff at the law?"

She turned her head slowly, brought her eyes to him. A rush of blood to her face belied her attempt at composure and her voice, when she spoke, dripped scorn.

"What are you doing *without* a gun, Chart Cutting? Playing the sheep, that's what! Look at your place. Look what they've done to you! And here you stand sulking, like a spanked child. Why don't you do something about it? Why don't you do something about my father? Are you all going to stand by and see him hung on a trumped-up charge of murder?"

Few people had ever made Chart feel small and ashamed. It was a new and unpleasant experience. He fought back the devils of resentment and in his most courteous voice said, "What would you have a man do, ma'am?"

"Do?" Elfie's color mounted higher. "A real man would know what to do. Go in and strap on a gun. Take the reins of leadership and organize the farmers. Put guns in their hands. Show them how to fight fire with fire and then carry war to this godless Walking M—"

"Wait a minute, ma'am," he protested. "You're talking range war—about the cruellest thing in the world."

"Is it any crueler than that?" she demanded, indicating his cut fence and trampled crops. "Is it any crueler than fastening an innocent

man with the stigma of an awful crime and sending him to the gal-lows for it?"

"The Bearpaw will hear the cries of widows and orphans," he warned her.

"And won't it anyway?" she cried, close to tears. "You forget I stayed with poor Mrs. Harney and her four children after her man was killed. Is range war mourning any worse than her carrying on? The Walking M riders killed Harney, that's as sure as tomorrow's sun. Don't you think they will kill others, and for the same reason? Does it lessen the horror of range war or make it something else just because one side won't fight? I say no! We've got to fight and destroy the Walking M or they will destroy us. Folks won't listen to me, because I've got a father in jail, an ax to grind. But you—"

A sob caught in her throat and she paused for breath, staring at him with eyes that swam with tears. Then, as she read the shadows of old lessons in his eyes, she cried, "Oh, what's the use talking to you," cut her pony with her quirt and galloped after the sheriff's buckboard.

Standing there in the road, watching the brave figure she made as she raced toward Bearpaw, Chart rehearsed the words that had been spoken.

"She really told me off," he muttered. "And the worst part of it is, she's right. Dead right. A girl like her . . . well, it's a temptation to know the taste of blood again. The primrose path—humph! The Walking M will be a pretty big critter to swing by the tail, but—" His head came up and his eyes were suddenly very wide. "Hell, what am I talking about? John Champion! A man in my shoes would be a fool to hang around here. And nobody

ever rightly called Chart Cutting a fool."

HE turned abruptly, strode to the porch where he caught up coat and hat, and hurried to the barn where his fast steeldust was stalled. He went in one door, came out another, returned to the porch and sat down.

Giving himself to deep thought, Chart conceded that in returning to the house he had committed himself. And he knew regret. He had known peace here, peace that mayhap he hadn't earned. He had fought for peace before, only to harvest bitterness. All his hopes, all his energy had been bent toward casting off inhibitions colored by the turbulent violence he had lived through in the past. Now he was faced with the alternative of resuming that violence or retreating. His mind toyed fairly and impartially with the problem of what the habit of retreating would do to a man's self-respect. God knew they had given him cause—

Throughout that hot day, Chart fought the thing out with himself. It was by all odds the hardest decision he had ever been forced to make. There was so much of logic on both sides of the argument. By temper, experience and native reaction, he was for accepting the gage of battle. But the weight of added maturity, long days of savoring the softening influence of peace and vague hopes and plans he had built around the image of Elfie Hayes, all of these things stirred in him the temptation to change.

"I'll sleep on it," he muttered wearily, when night came without a decision.

But there was little sleep for him. His mind went round and round. He thought of Elija Hayes in jail, of

Elfie at home weeping that fate made her a woman, of the warriors of the Walking M laughing up their sleeves. Those thoughts fired him toward getting out the guns that had not been out of their holsters since his arrival on the Bearpaw. Then he would think of the chill eyes, the expressionless round face of John Champion, the manhunter, and he was right back where he had started.

Heavy-eyed and depressed, he rose next morning to prepare a little-wanted breakfast. Later he tended his stock and, when he emerged from the barn, was hailed from the road by a neighboring farmer and his two stalwart sons.

"They've got old Elija in jail," the farmer shouted. "They claim he murdered the Walking M foreman and if they railroad him on that, we'll all move out or wind up behind the bars. There's snakes crawlin' across our trails, Cutting, and it's up to each man in the Bearpaw to tromp his share. Better get into town with something that will squirt lead."

He spoke to his team then and the big wagon lumbered on toward town. As if the argument had brought conviction, Chart walked into the house to stand over a small locked chest. From his pocket he drew a key, with which he toyed for many moments. But he didn't unlock the container. Finally, as if vastly displeased with himself, he pocketed the key again and walked outside for his horse.

On his way to Bearpaw City, Chart caught the little spirals of dust converging on the town by the radiating roads. Farmers, quitting their small farms, their crops, their stock and families, in answer to a grim summons that seemed to lie like a curse on the very air.

Outwardly, Bearpaw droned on its casual business way with a calmness

and detachment that were, to Chart Cutting, graver symptoms than openly acknowledged fear. Every man in the town had his own convictions regarding the guilt of Eliza Hayes, yet from open behavior no one could have told that it was on the public mind—unless he were old to the ways of frontier folk. Men seemed to shrink from forming in groups. The jailing of the grange master had seemed to throw a wall of reserve between friends who had suddenly become partisans, who were sure of nothing save their own grim secrets. As Chart came into town, he was acutely conscious of a singing tension, a hush that hinted of men going about their affairs on tiptoe. As he rode down the street, every door and every window had its grave-eyed watcher.

Along the street, buggies and wagons narrowed the way as they jutted from the racks. More were coming in, to put up their teams and file soberly into Dutch Louie's Saloon, the wonted gathering place for farmers when they came to Bearpaw. Dutch, who made his own beer and stressed it over the harder liquors favored by the cowboys, was an openly avowed friend of the farmers. It had cost him all other patronage and had made his row a hard one to hoe.

Chart rode into the feed barn and turned his mount over to the toothless hostler.

"Fork him some hay about noon," he said, without marked courtesy. "I'll be after him some time before night. What's new on the Hayes case?"

The hostler's eyes writhed and he lifted a protesting palm. "Ain't heard nothin', feller. Don't know nothin' an' I'm too busy to find out. If you want to find out anything

about Eliza Hayes, you better see Sheriff Huffaker—"

"That's right," said a voice from the doorway. "What was it you wanted to know, Cutting?" Matt Huffaker came sliding into the barn, a scornful smile on his lips, his eyes aflame with antagonism.

"What are you doing about Hayes, Huffaker?" Chart asked.

"Holding him tight an' fast," grinned the deputy. "Coroner's jury found against him yesterday. Circuit judge gets in some time today. Tomorrow is court day an' the case of the people against Eliza Hayes will be first on the docket. An' while we're talkin' about it, I'm watchin' the gathering of the farmers down at the Dutchman's saloon. I don't like it, Cutting!"

"I judge not," said Chart drily. "Did you have some special reason for bellyachin' to me?"

"Just this!" The deputy's scornful smile was gone and his face muscles jerked. "You'll see that rabble an', when you do, tell 'em that if they make a play at my jail they'll be committin' suicide. The law is going to be served if it means the death of every farmer in the Bearpaw."

"I think," said Chart, "that the farmers have too much sense to give you the chance you're hungering for. I'll tell them what you say."

He stepped around the lawman and moved outside, where the sun lay strong along the ground. Stepping off the walk, in an angular course toward Dutch Louie's place, he felt the spine tickling impact of a hard glance. He looked over his shoulder and saw John Champion sitting on the hotel porch, fanning himself with his hat. The man's eyes, fixed upon him with singular intentness, were dull as tarnished brass and totally unreadable. There

was something coldly impersonal there, however, and from that one fact alone, Chart drew what little comfort there was to be had from the situation. Had John Champion forgotten the name of Chart Cutting? Why else would he make no move to tip his hand? But more likely he was just waiting for the proper time to make his play.

### CHAPTER III

#### GATHERING STORM

IT was a silent, brooding, dangerous lot of men gathered inside Dutch Louie's beer saloon. Leaderless men recalling past wrongs and resurrecting them now to stand with this last and greatest wrong. It was not surprising that their eyes should light when Chart Cutting walked in among them. Nobody in the Bearpaw had forgotten nor could forget that day when Chart had laughed at the Walking M cowboys who had once set forth to haze him, how he had dragged their champion off his horse, thrashed him and dared the rest to try their luck with guns, knives or fists—with no takers.

They hailed him with a show of enthusiasm. Someone thrust a foaming glass of beer into his hand. A grizzled farmer, with the marks of long struggle like a brand upon him, said: "Cutting, the boys have been talking about having you lead us until Elija is well out of this."

"Lead you?" Chart scowled. "Lead you where?"

"To take Elija out of that jailhouse!" raged one of them. "You know as well as we do that he won't have the ghost of a chance in a trial."

Chart looked them over half-pityingly. Actually he was a little startled to note that every man was armed, some with ancient pistols,

some with rifles, a few with smooth-bore muskets and fowling pieces. His lips curled scornfully.

"Lead you?" he mocked. "Lead you to your deaths, with wives and families waiting for you at home? Not on your life. Even if I was ready to die, I wouldn't want it that way—with the wails of your widows and orphans, with the laughter of the Walking M following me into the shadows. You're off on the wrong foot. I don't see now how we can be of help to Elija Hayes, but maybe—"

A sudden wave of sound struck through the saloon walls—ponies racing, wild, ribald yells beating high against scattered gunshots. The faces of the assembled farmers darkened and a sullen muttering swept the room. Behind the bar, fat Dutch Louie spat.

"It's dot *verdampft* Foss Manners," he growled, "und his Walking M *schweinhunds!*"

Chart's eyes darted to the door—and saw the swift withdrawal of a full face from the opening above the louvered panels. That face belonged to John Champion.

Profoundly disturbed, Chart walked outside, followed to the door by the Bearpaw farmers. The high sheriff stood before a doorway, a couple of buildings down, watching the entry of the Walking M men and talking dispassionately with a townsman.

The cowboy contingent was led in at full gallop by Foss Manners, Walking M boss. He was a big man, deep burned with the brand of arbitrary and impatient authority. Under the brim of his white Stetson, his restless eyes came to Chart and those banked behind him. And in the glance was a dull fire that quite belied the smile hovering on the wide lips beneath the trim mustache.

Chart's eyes never wavered from the man's glare, and it was Manners who turned his eyes elsewhere as he reined to the rack before the Cattleman's Saloon across the street. The cowman, lean and lithe and somewhere in his thirties, hit the ground with a rare show of horsemanship, his men aping him. Dust boiled up. Then spurs were filling the street with their belled music as the even dozen horse-and-rope men moved to the walk. At the saloon door, Manners paused to fling a last scornful glance along the street, then led the way inside.

But the rear four of that cowboy group, their attention attracted by a sudden strident tapping of hoofbeats, paused to regard the lone rider swinging into town. It was the girl, Elfie Hayes, her body very rigid, her eyes burning with a dull glow and her face deeply graven with the lines of suffering. She was directly between Dutch Louie's and the Cattleman's Saloon when one of the cowboys made an audible remark that sent blood rushing to the girl's cheeks. Chart couldn't glean the words, but the raucous laughter of the four Walking M men was like a blow.

With a movement electrical in its suddenness, Elfie Hayes reined her pony hard left, stung it with the spurs and raced right onto the walk beneath the awning of the Cattleman's Saloon.

"You dirty dogs!" she cried, her voice trembling with rage. "You lawless coyotes!" The quirt looped to her wrist began to cut vicious circles, backing the four cowboys through the swing doors. Then she was off the walk, spurring hard toward the jailhouse.

The four startled cowpunchers emerged to stare after her, and others came out to stand with them. Again a remark was passed and again

their laughter flung echoes between the fronts. Chart Cutting, holding himself under stiff check rein, noted a number of things then. He saw John Champion staring idly across at the offending punchers, stroking his chin. He saw passion stain the faces of the farmers beside him and knew their feelings were akin to his own. But he was quite unprepared for the madness that suddenly gathered in the eyes of one.

"The rotten skunks," the man muttered savagely, "they ain't even got respect for a good woman. They ain't fit to live!"

He strode purposefully across the walk, stepped into the roadway and started for the Walking M group, his shotgun held as one might hold a pitchfork. But if the enraged man had moved fast, Chart moved faster. There was no time to think, to weigh, to placate. Here was the fuse to ignite the powder of men's baser selves and set one half of the range against the other half. The fuse was sputtering, racing toward the explosion.

CHART shouted, "Wait!" cleared the walk in two strides, hit the street running. As he overhauled the irate farmer, he was conscious of the cowboys spreading out, dropping their hands to their belted hardware. It would be close, with the cowboys secure in their sacred right of self-defense and the farmer past the point of reason.

Desperation propelled Chart across the interval. His hand caught the farmer's shoulder, spun him around. He caught the barrel of the cocked gun, wrenched it from the man's grip. His voice seemed to thunder through the sudden hush.

"You crazy damn fool! Get back! You want to start a slaughter—"

"Here! You can't do that!" The farmer grappled with him, reaching for the weapon. "Gimme that gun!"

Chart's right hand doubled and swung in a short arc. Clipped on the chin, the berserk hoeman spun and crashed. Pausing only to let down the hammers of the piece, Chart leaped upon him, wrapping his fingers in the slack of the man's faded coat and jerking him to his feet. Half dazed, the fellow put up no further struggle as Chart rushed him back to the walk and booted him inside.

Laughter soared again from the Cattleman's Saloon. But Chart's eyes went instead to John Champion. And thus he saw a flashing of the man's right hand that might have been related to the sudden, pouching of a pistol. As Chart wondered, laughter died across the street. Turning to determine the cause, he saw that the cowboys had gone inside and in their place stood Foss Manners. The man stood like a graven image, his smoldering glance turned across at Chart and the farmers. Chart met that gaze unflinchingly, growing hot under the sting of it until the man turned his eyes, lifting hand and voice.

"Sheriff Champion!" His tone was insultingly patronizing. "I call your attention to the provocation offered by these nesters. Except for there being one craven who won't fight, these streets would be running blood right now."

The whole town, watching John Champion, saw some nervous humor touch his lips, saw his head incline gravely, heard his succinct answer, "Yes, Manners. I saw it all." Then they were following with their eyes the solemn, almost mechanical way he moved along the walk to disappear inside the hotel.

There was a noticeable falling

away of tension. A murmur of subdued talk ran along the street. One of the farmers caught Chart by the arm.

"You see, Cutting," he whispered hoarsely. "Did you hear that sheriff! Fallin' in with Manners, body, soul, guts an' feathers. 'An' he'll pick a jury tomorrow to try old Elija. It ain't right. Somethin's gotta be done."

"Anything that's done," said Chart, still frightened by the closeness of tragedy, "must be done right. Four of you come along with me. We'll go up and have a talk with Sheriff John Champion. Holmes, Killian, Boller—"

He called off four, led them along the walk to the hotel. And as he entered the lobby, where the sheriff sat behind an opened newspaper, Chart knew all the fear a man feels when he puts his head in the lion's mouth.

## CHAPTER IV

### FLAME OF TREACHERY

JOHN CHAMPION lowered his paper to turn coldly quizzical eyes upon the five who paused before him. He looked at each in turn, his appraisals so keen and direct as to cause each recipient of his glance to drop his eyes. Finally his gaze came to Chart and, finding no wavering there, he accepted him as the leader.

"You men wish to see me?"

"About Elija Hayes," said Chart. "We want to know what you, the sheriff of the county, think about hanging him without a trial."

The lawman's paper slid to the floor and his heavy shoulders moved with slight irritation. A definite cloudiness touched his smooth-shaven face.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, and his slurred drawl might have meant anything. "I'm here to see that Hayes does get a trial."

"A fair trial?" demanded Chart, faintly ironical.

"As fair as any man can expect who is too stubborn to lay his case in the hands of a good lawyer."

"We may as well get this straight, Champion!" Chart's voice was bluntly intolerant. "I take it you don't know that, good or bad, every lawyer in this town wears a Walking M collar."

"That's a broad statement, sir."

"Foss Manners casts a broad shadow, sheriff."

Champion clamped down savagely on his unlighted cigar but his changeless face remained impassive. "Foss Manners will have no more to say about the trial of Eliza Hayes than you will. Hayes will be given every chance to present his case; the prosecutor will present the case for the people. The evidence will then be weighed by an unprejudiced jury that—"

"In Bearpaw City?" Grim amusement played over Chart's face. "Where and how will you select an unprejudiced jury here? Outside of Dutch Louie and a small handful of persecuted men who believe the farmer is here to stay, there's not a man in Bearpaw who would find against Manners' wishes. It would be as much as a man's life was worth to vote for Hayes' acquittal tomorrow."

"So-o-o?" Champion stared at Chart until the silence grew oppressive. Then said, "There is a remedy for every ill, gentlemen. On the rare chance that you may be right, I will name four cattlemen, four townsmen and four farmers to the jury—"

"You'll what!" A challenge, loud and peremptory, filled the lobby and Foss Manners came in with a chime of spurs and an arrogant swagger. He paused to flash a look of scorn at the farmers and then hard fury at the lawman. "What object could you possibly have, Champion," he continued nastily, "to pack the jury so as to insure a hung verdict? What the people of this valley want is a jury that will hang Hayes."

John Champion's eyes flickered and he rose, a short, rough gust of breath coming from his throat. "Very well," he said frigidly. "It seems that I am to be eucherated at every turn of the cards. You leave me but the one alternative, gentlemen. Change of venue. I shall move for that tomorrow and take the trial to the county seat. Good day to you."

He turned abruptly and very leisurely took himself upstairs. One of the farmers snickered behind his palm. Foss Manners flung him a savage glance, muttered a curse and stomped outside.

**W**ORD of the sheriff's judgment swept like wildfire through the town. It caused the townsmen to gather in knots as they excitedly discussed it. It filled the cattle contingent with a sullen rage and drew them into the dark coolness of the Cattleman's Saloon, where they fed their wrath upon hard, red liquor.

The farmers went insane with joy. It was like a deluge after a long drought, this first sweet taste of victory. Dutch Louie served free beer and it remained for Chart to warn him to draw plenty of foam. A little victory and a lot of beer can react to cause a lot of hell. As they grew mellow with the golden brew, the hoemen's minds turned naturally to





*Suddenly Elfe Hayes spurred her pony onto the boardwalk and cut viciously with her quirt into the group of Walking M men.*

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consolidating their advantage. Wild projects were voiced and enthusiastically hailed. But each of them was promptly vetoed by Chart Cutting. He had intended to leave the town in midafternoon, for there were animals corralled at home that must be fed. But when the time came for departure, he was constrained to let his stock suffer. There was need of a strong hand here if war was to be averted.

So he stayed on, watching, counseling, striving to get the aroused farmers started homeward. Night fell and his arguments began to bear fruit. Wagons commenced to rumble out of town on their way to the scattered farms. By nine o'clock enough of the grangers were gone to give some assurance that the imminence of trouble had passed. So, weary, hungry and with thoughts of home, Chart left Dutch Louie's.

Lights blazed in the Cattleman's Saloon and the place was jammed with a strangely subdued throng of horse-and-rope men. It was as if they sulked there while they waited for some call.

A little disturbed that the cowboys were remaining doggedly in town, Chart started for the restaurant for a bite to eat. It was then that he saw the two men whirled along the main stem in a buckboard drawn by two spanking buckskins. A murmur came from the hotel porch.

"There's the judge now!" a low voice called.

Chart paused before the Chinese eating place to watch the rig swerve into the feed barn. Then, silhouetted against the light splashing from the lobby windows, the compact form of John Champion was rising from a chair on the hotel porch, moving unhurriedly down the steps toward the stable. Following the man

with his eyes and speculating upon the words that might pass between lawman and the newly arrived Circuit Judge, Chart saw the thinly penciled flash of muzzle flame whip from a black vault between buildings, heard the sheriff cry out faintly. A detonating crash swelled like a wave along the fronts and Chart, from old instinct, drove his hand to where his gun should have been. Finding nothing to draw, Chart ripped out a curse and flung himself headlong to where John Champion had stumbled and fallen.

**D**OORS were slamming, boots pounding the walks and voices calling back and forth as Chart knelt at the sheriff's side. The man was cursing softly through clenched teeth as he struggled to free his pistol.

"You're a mite slow for that, sheriff," Chart said. "Your man will be well away by now, makin' tracks for the back of the Cattleman's Saloon if my guess is worth anything."

"Walking M?" groaned Champion. "But why?"

"Change of venue," rapped Chart. "The first break the farmers have had in this valley. Manners is all set to see our grange master drop from the scaffold." He slid one hand beneath the man's thick shoulder, the other under his knees. "Hand about my neck, sheriff. That's the ticket. Now , , , easy does it."

He lifted the lawman, marveling at the solid weight of him, and moved toward the hotel. The crowd of men who had suddenly filled the street made way before him and a crossfire of question and conjectures flew like missiles.

"Who is it?"

"It's the high sheriff, you fool. He's shot!"

"Now who'd do that! And what for?"

"Give you three guesses," sang out some wag. "And you can throw out the two that ain't concerned with who's to pick the jury tomorrow!"

Lively arguments ensued, the clamor falling behind Chart as he carried Champion into the lobby. The frightened clerk preceded him up the staircase, opened the door to the lawman's room, then helped Chart remove the groaning man's clothes and get him into bed. Deputy Mat Huffaker, visibly excited, rushed in with the doctor.

"You were first to him, eh, farmer?" Huffaker shot out. "You couldn't have had a hand in it, by any chance?"

"Sure." Chart grinned mirthlessly. "I shot him with my pocket-knife."

"Don't be a fool, Huffaker!" gritted Champion from the bed. "Go on outside and let me be."

The deputy seemed startled. He bent a keen look upon the sheriff, his glittering black eyes taking stock of the man's pallor, his obvious pain and the blood revealed by the medico's examination. Smiling thinly, he said: "If that's the way you want it, sir," and walked out.

Chart shut the door behind him and waited patiently for the doctor to finish his bandaging. When it was done and the medical man had given terse directions for taking sleeping tablets against the pain, Champion said, "If anyone should ask, doc, you don't know whether I will live or die."

"I don't," said the medico. "One thing sure, you'll not attend the trial."

"Good," said Champion with obvious satisfaction. "Come back and see me in the morning."

When the doctor had repacked his bag and taken his leave, the sheriff turned a heavy glance upon Chart. It held a crouched savagery, an almost inhuman disregard for personality. Tonelessly he said, "Well, Cutting?"

Surprised to see me standing there in the road yesterday?"

Champion's reply was tinged with contempt. "Nothing surprises me, Cutting. You have turned farmer. Whether for policy or profit doesn't matter. All that counts is how long you intend to stay with it."

"Just as long as they'll let me," answered Chart, with the faintest hint of plaintiveness behind his wall of resentment.

Champion, seemingly easy, nodded as if it were an old, old story. "We both know what we know, Cutting. You are magnetized to trouble and this is a difficult range. Now hand me my revolver, please, and good night."

Chart left him, got his horse and rode home, his mind a battleground of bewilderment and conjecture. It was plain to him that Champion had purposely withheld revealing his intentions regarding Chart—mayhap because of his helplessness. But, and this was the most important point, the doctor had made it very plain that Champion was a sicker man than he believed, that he could not be in court to make his plea for a change of venue. That meant Elija Hayes would stand trial before a Bearpaw jury.

When Chart got home, he fed his clamoring stock and then went directly to that chest in the house. Unlocking it, he took out a pair of matcher 45s with mother-of-pearl handles. He oiled them, worked with the actions until they suited him, loaded them fully and hung

them over a chair back. His attitude continued increasingly bleak and thoughtful as he prepared for bed.

## CHAPTER V

### DEAL IN MURDER

**T**HOUGH it was still early when Chart rode into town next morning, he found himself behind the last arrivals. The street was lined with rigs. Groups held forth on the walks, every man armed and attentive as he waited for court to convene at ten.

From the ponies tethered at the rear and sides of the Cattleman's saloon, Chart knew that the cowboys were on hand in force. Across the street, the grangers seemed to be standing guard as they strung along the walk. And, because there was not one of them unarmed, because only a few of them tossed him a half-sullen salute, he sensed their tempers perfectly.

Chart put up his horse, smiling grimly to himself as the hostler eyed his two guns askance. The man's lips curled to voice a sneer. Then, as it struck him how easily this tall man wore his guns, he said, "You wear that hardware like you might be expectin' to use it, feller."

"I ain't wearin' guns to hold me down to the walks," rapped Chart, and walked outside. He was passing the general store on his way to Dutch Louie's, when his name was called. Elfie Hayes came running from the emporium, her smiling lips going far to dispel the tragedy in her eyes. She came tripping down the steps and paused before him, a little breathless. For a moment she didn't speak, just stared up into his face with twin spots of color burning at the points of her pale cheeks.

Chart forced himself to hold her

eyes, and surprise ran deeply through him. For an invisible fire ran between them, a flame that seemed to burn away all the smoldering hatred, distrust and fear that stalked the town. It was the silent call of youth to its kind and Chart felt a twinge of regret for his belted guns.

Elfie said, "I have heard what . . . what you tried to do, what you came so close to doing for Dad, Chart. It was fine of you."

"Well," he said morosely, "I failed."

"You succeeded," she corrected. "A coward's bullet cheated us. It was taken out of your hands."

"What do you hear?" he inquired. "About . . . him?"

The girl shook her head. "Bad, Chart. Dangerously hurt and quite unable to be at the trial. There is now but the one hope. I met the doctor on his way to attend John Champion and gave him a message. I have just received my answer. Champion has instructed Deputy Huffaker to ask for the change of venue. If he obeys orders and the judge grants it, Dad will have a chance. It's our last hope."

"Not the last," countered Chart, and his face was so grim it stirred a sympathetic bleakness in her.

For a long moment she continued to look into his eyes. Then, as if she read his meaning there, she turned her eyes down to the big guns at his thighs. All blood drained from her cheeks and she drew a hand across her face in sudden bewilderment.

"I don't understand," she murmured. "I guess it isn't given to women to understand such things as—"

"Or men either," he confessed. "A man seeks peace until he is crowded into war. I—" he paused, groping. "Well, no matter what happens,

Elfie, you will know that I have never forgotten that your father's rights are my rights, and the rights of every honest farmer in the Bearpaw."

There was an implication behind the words that made her catch her breath. Then, as hope was renewed in her, she managed a smile and gave him her hand.

"I will remember, Chart, to pray. God bless you. You're a man."

She turned back into the store, Chart staring after her as if awed. Then, when she was gone from his sight, he turned along the walk to be greeted by the grangers. By the guns he wore, they sensed a new temper in him and were buoyed. Indeed, they were almost a jovial lot as they moved en masse to the town hall, where the trial was to be held.

Chart sat clear through that morning session, though at times he was tempted almost beyond his strength to get up and stalk out in disgust. The affair was a mockery. The jury, hand picked by Matt Huffaker, was comprised of nine cowboys, cowmen or ex-cowmen, a gambler who leased a spot in the Cattleman's Saloon, a stock inspector whose tenure of office depended entirely upon his getting along with the cattle interests, and the local saddlemaker, whose livelihood was grounded upon the leather needs of the cowboys.

Matt Huffaker's memory must have been short, for he made no mention of a change of venue. And, when one of the grangers rose to call the omission to the attention of the judge, that worthy had him summarily evicted from the courtroom.

**M**OST of the morning was taken up by the opening remarks of the Bearpaw lawyer, acting as special prosecutor, in which he demanded the death pen-

alty for what he termed "the brutal dry-gulching of poor Rufe Binnick." He followed then with a long procession of witnesses who testified to the bad blood existing between Binnick and Elija Hayes, and to threats Hayes was purported to have uttered against the ramrod of the Walking M. This array of damning testimony was unfinished when court was adjourned at noon.

Grinning contentedly, and with a great show of authority, Matt Huffaker herded the jury down to the American Kitchen, where lunch had been prepared for them in a private dining room. The grangers stood banked about the door of the courtroom, staring dumbly at one another as if stunned by the completeness of the pending disaster. They were subjected to covert gibes and laughter by the cowboy spectators, as those booted, spurred and gun-hung worthies repaired to the Cattleman's Saloon for midday refreshment.

Moving dejectedly across the street, feeling the need of a drink which he idly decided to get at Dutch Louie's, Chart was almost immune to what went on around him until a sudden warning bell pealed deep in his consciousness, causing him to pause with a strange abruptness. His eyes shuttled across the street to where Foss Manners matched strides with a tall, loose-limbed Texan who, it was said, had succeeded Rufe Binnick as ramrod of the Walking M.

The two were grinning, passing low comments back and forth. That there was nothing about them to have excited Chart's attention drew a frown to the young granger's brow. He watched them, puzzled. And thus, of all the people on the street, he alone took stock of a sudden electric movement by those two.

With a movement swift and vaguely furtive, Foss Manners stepped sideways off the walk and into a slot between two buildings. The Texan followed suit. Chart, with a puzzled frown strode toward the point where they had vanished.

A glance showed him they were not in the slot, so he too followed that drafty corridor. At the rear, he caught the flash of the Texan's back as he disappeared through the door of a small barn on the alley, where Manners and his cowboys kept their horses while in town.

Drawn after them in spite of his better judgment, Chart swerved to avoid the possibility of being seen through the open door. Treading lightly, he drew alongside the barn and paused with his ear to the board.

"—and despite what the doctor says," came Manners' voice, "I have my own idea that he's going to live. That won't do."

"John Champion ain't no softie," grunted the Texan. "What's on your mind?"

"Today," Manners answered in clipped tones, "today you earn this job you took from Binnick. It's noon now. Men are concerned mostly with their throats, their bellies and arguments about the trial. Champion will be alone. Slip around to the back of the hotel, up the stairs an' shove into his room. I'll enter the lobby to head off anybody goin' up to Champion. You'll profit handsome for whatever you do up there."

"How much?" demanded the killer.

Chart didn't wait to learn the details of that deal in murder. Moving like a wraith, he slipped down the alley, cut swiftly to the street, then crossed with purposeful strides to the hotel.

"Anybody with the sheriff?" he fired at the clerk, as he crossed the lobby.

"No, but he left orders not to be dis—"

But Chart was gone. Taking the stairs three at a time, he gained the upper hall, sped to the door of Champion's room and barged in. Champion, his florid face flushed with fever, reared to one elbow to glare at him out of pain-dulled eyes.

"What you mean, busting into a man's room like this, Cutting?" he demanded. "Get out!"

"Listen, Champion—"

"Get out!" The sheriff was fumbling under his pillow for his gun. "Are you stone deaf? Get out of here!"

Chart's face hardened. His hand moved and his gun flashed out. "Sit tight, Mr. Champion. If you don't listen to me, you're going to die. Now lie back there an' skin back your ears. I haven't much time to waste."

## CHAPTER VI

### PEACE COMES TO THE BEARPAW

CHART didn't talk long. He didn't have to. Five short minutes after his unceremonious entry, Champion nodded grimly, motioned him into a curtained clothes corner and lay back with closed eyes upon the bed. Bootsteps leisurely approached down the hall. There was a guarded knock on the door. John Champion croaked a weak, "Come in," and Chart's pistol clicked to full cock behind the drape.

The door opened and the tall Texan came slouching in, grinning boyishly as he carefully shut the panel behind him. His hat came off and he was the picture of embarrassed consideration as he beamed

down the the sheriff's half lidded glance.

"Name uh Jud Hatcher, sheriff," he murmured. "Came up to see how you was. My boss, Foss Manners, says if there's anything he can do—"

"Is that all you've got to say, Hatcher?" Champion interrupted.

The Texan's face changed. With a flashing movement of the hand, he palmed his gun and snarled, "One thing more, sheriff. I'm going to kill you! Not with a bullet. That would raise too much of a ruckus. A nice little love tap between the horns will turn the trick."

"Why do you want to kill me?" asked Champion, unmoved.

"Because," grinned the killer, "you and Manners are too much alike. There's not room enough on the earth for both of you at the same time."

"Manners, eh?" The lawman smiled thinly. "Why didn't he come up to do it?"

"Because he hires me to do his killing. Anything else before—"

"Then Manners didn't kill Rufe Binnick?"

"Hell, no. I killed him. He got chicken-hearted about pluggin' Elija Hayes. So I finished him, took down a hundred simoleons and his job for my pains an' taken care of Hayes—all at one time." His gun lifted and his dark eyes were like gimlets. "Now, I'll just get you out of the way and everything will be—"

"Hatcher!" Chart followed his low call through the curtains.

The Texan stiffened, held his pose for one clock-tick, then ducked, whirled and swung his weapon around toward this new menace. Instantly the silence of the hotel was torn apart and shuddering explosions slammed through the clapboard

walls to go rocketing through the town. Two shots piled on top of one another, but it was Chart's lead that struck home, catching the Texan's swaying figure. Jud Hatcher said no more. He coughed, spun and crashed, his body clumping soddenly on the floor.

"Pretty work, Cutting!" It was as near to enthusiasm as Champion ever came. He laid his fully drawn gun aside and swung his feet nimbly to the floor. "That set my blood to running and I'm damned if I don't take a hand in this business myself. A sheriff can't afford to be sick."

"You get back in there!" ordered Chart, pouching his pistol. "And keep that gun where you can get at it—quick."

He darted outside, closing the door softly. As he tiptoed down to the dead end of the hall, he noted that the town was emerging from its startled inertia. Voices were lifting from the lobby, excited voices and a growing beat of boots along the walk. Now Chart swung about, ran noisily back, opened the sheriff's door, slammed it shut, cried, "My God!" at the top of his lungs and ran for the stairs. A knot of men clustered in the lobby, staring upward. Foss Manners, his eyes a little wild, was a pace in front of the others.

"Cutting!" he gasped, when he saw Chart descending. "What is it . . . the sheriff?" Chart nodded and Manners barked, "Who did it?"

This time Chart shook his head and a load seemed lifted from the range boss. Very humbly, he lifted his hat from his head and assumed a look of woe.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," he murmured sadly. "I must go out and break the bad news to the town."

He hurried to the door, the rest following until the lobby was emptied. On the porch, Manners faced a throng who eyed him expectantly. He held up his hand, and when he had silence shouted, "Gents, there is death among us. Some human devil has murdered Sheriff Champion, in cold blood. Cutting was first to the scene, maybe he can tell you all about it."

He turned about, his eyes going to Chart who, knowing what was coming, hadn't wanted to be too close. In an aching silence, with the whole town hanging on his words, Chart said:

"Manners, you are slightly mistaken. The sheriff is very much alive. The shot you heard killed the man who was *trying* to murder Sheriff Champion."

Manners' poise dropped away and his face grew white. Someone in the crowd hollered: "Who is the dead man? Who tried to get Champion?"

"Jud Hatcher!" roared Chart, and the demons of fury were riding him. "Ramrod of the Walking M. Self-confessed murderer of Rufe Binnick. A killer being paid by Foss Manners to destroy those who dare to cross him!"

CHART was prepared for a fighting move from Foss Manners, but not for his swift try at escape. From stunned inaction, he became a human dynamo. His eyes suddenly ablaze and his lips curled in a snarl, he darted through the group before the hotel door, baring his Colt's gun as he ran. Through the roar of the suddenly enraged crowd, a shrill scream struck. Elfie Hayes, emerging from the hotel dining room into the lobby, was in the grip of the panicky Walk-

ing M boss, who held her before him as he backed up the stairs.

"Keep back, damn you!" he roared at Chart, who darted after him. "Keep back or I'll put a slug right through her." He blasted a wild shot at Chart, drove him back out the portal.

The town was in an uproar now. Led by the aroused grangers, a howling mob poured like a flood along the street and between buildings toward the alley, to encircle the Cattleman's Saloon and the hirelings of Manners. The enraged crowd was roaring a hate hymn that promised to wipe out those whose gun sway had backfired.

The uproar, striking into the American Kitchen where the jury sat at lunch, fetched Matt Huffaker to the street. For one brief moment he stared, and listened. Then, leaping to the center of the street, he threw up his hands, bawling for them to stop. When they roared at him, unchecked, he whipped out his gun. A shotgun boomed from the front rank of the charging mob. Huffaker spun wildly, his cry of terror lost in the chaos. Then his body fell into the cushioning dust to be trampled under a hundred feet.

Somewhere a woman screamed, peal upon peal, and the Walking M warriors, suddenly alarmed, streamed from the door of the Cattleman's Saloon in a mad dash for their horses. A few guns blared, then the grangers drove forward—a great wave of bitter, cursing men breaking terribly over the panicked punchers.

All this and more Chart saw as he tore down the hotel steps, whirled about the corner of the building and raced to the rear. He was halfway up the back, outside staircase when he heard a single shot muffled by the

hotel walls. Awful pictures tortured him as he leaped upward toward the landing. Elfie, struggling with the renegade rancher, taking his shot, and falling. What a cowardly fool he had been not to have dared the man's lead, not to have waited for the smallest opening to shoot it out with him. In that moment he realized that he loved Elfie more than his own life. And thought of going on without her brought a sinking to his heart and a bleakness to his spirit.

Gasping out his agony through clenched teeth, Chart hit the platform, lunged through the door and into the gloom of the long upper hall. And there, as if stricken, he plowed to a stop. In the center of the corridor a man held Elfie Hayes crushed against him. At their feet lay the still form of a dead man. And while Chart wondered that it was Foss Manners on the floor, that it was Sheriff John Champion whom the girl clung to, Elfie saw him, and gasped, "Chart—thank God!" She came running to him and he took her into his arms, humbly, gratefully. Then he kissed her—and his kiss was more eloquent than words.

They were alone in the world, just those two, when Champion's faltering tread sounded beside them. Chart's eyes, suddenly a little fearful, met those of the lawman.

"Now," he said, filling his chest, "do you want these guns of mine, sheriff?"

"You bet I want them, Cutting." Champion's stern face seemed almost likable in that moment. "And so does Bearpaw. From yonder front window, I saw them pay off Matt Huffaker for his treachery. I will need a new deputy here. The job is yours if you want it." His eyes sparkled. "A hundred dollars a

month is not to be sneezed at, Cutting. And don't let anybody tell you that two can live cheaper than one."

Suddenly moved, Chart put the girl from him. "No!" he cried. "It ain't fair, Champion. It ain't fair to her. Tell her. Tell her what I am, what I have been!"

The lawman grinned. "Gladly, ma'am. Cutting is one of these free souls that can't tolerate injustice. He's brave and reckless and invites a lot of killing when his rights, or those of his friends, are trespassed. I confess with some pride that he has saved me, your father and . . . and Bearpaw. He thinks I want him for robbing a stage some years ago, and I would, only the guilty man was found out and is now paying for his crime. You'll find him a bit difficult, but with careful handling you should soon have him eating out of your hand, if I'm any judge. Well, Chart, how about that job? The day's violence, the defeat of evil domination and the quashing of the case against Elija Hayes will be eloquent testimonial that the wild days are gone. But I will need someone here to keep it fresh in people's minds. Will you take it?"

Chart looked at Elfie. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright, her lips parted in a smile. Slyly, she nodded. "I'll take it, sir," Chart said then, "and thank you most kindly."

With a rare show of enthusiasm for a very reticent man with a bad wound, John Champion cried, "Good boy, and the best of luck to you both." He grasped Chart's hand and wrung it.

And Elfie, weeping and laughing all at once, stepped up to lay her face against Chart's breast, where she could listen to the beating of his stout heart.



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# Lead Throwing Pilgrim



by Von Cort

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## Lead Throwing Pilgrim

**T**HE angry voice of the man in the sheriff's office was getting so loud that Dan Carty, hitching his claybank mare at the next-door rail, could not help over-hearing the somewhat one-sided argument.

"My fences are being run down and my beef stampeded off by thieves, but do you do anything about it? I'll answer it for you: No, not a damned thing!"

A deep voice, obviously struggling to keep calm, rose in sharp protest, "That's enough out of you, Henderson. Get out of my office, you're drunk!"

"Listen, badge toter, it ain't half enough. When I drive a herd of steers to town today for shipping, a bunch of gunmen ride up at Willow Bend and stampede them to the four winds." The voice became of a sudden acidly insinuating. "Now you wouldn't know a thing about that, would you, Nielsen?"

The answer was the click of a gun-hammer. "If you weren't so plastered, Henderson, I'd plug you where you stand. It don't go with my office to take insults. Can I help it if you ain't got any friends, if you always refuse to get along with people? Now get out before I lose my patience."

But the intoxicated rancher was not easily browbeaten. He had an ax to grind, and it was obvious to Dan Carty that he was intent on grinding it to a very fine edge. There was now quite a crowd in the street outside the sheriff's office, listening to the altercation. Mostly rough-looking, hard-appearing men who seemed to enjoy the show immensely. One of them threw at Dan,

indicating the quarrel, "Yeah, he's an ornery cuss, can't get along with nobody—"

"Friends, did you say?" Henderson was mocking as he appeared backing out the door, a huge broad-shouldered giant with a mop of flaming red hair. "I wouldn't brag too much about my friends if I was you. Everybody knows you're nothing but a dummy for Simmons—" He waved a hand drunkenly and managed to snap his fingers, "Say, mebbe that's why we can't get any law around here—"

"Get out!"

This time the sheriff's tone brooked no delay, as even Henderson realized. "All right, all right," he growled and swayed from the door. "Anybody can pick up a gun from a table and get the draw. Next time you'll have to pull from the holster, Nielsen."

He turned and faced the crowd outside and Dan Carty was surprised at the youth of the man. He was half a head taller than the rest and he presented a wild picture, his face reddened by drink and his hair hanging unkempt over his strange green-gray eyes with which he seemed to search for some sort of recognition as they wandered over the mob. Watching him, Dan was reminded of a buffalo bull surrounded by wolves. There was something grand about the latent power in this man as he leaned on the hitchrail and the crowd instinctively shrank back in respect.

Dan, looking at the man, knew that he sure was in trouble—trouble that was close to licking him. It was written in his face, marked by the fact that he was trying to fight his trouble and drink himself away from it at the same time. Involuntarily Dan's sympathy took sides with Henderson, a man evidently against

overwhelming odds, and getting a raw deal.

"Damned handy, ain't it," called Henderson, his eyes still raking the crowd, which now was brazenly standing up to him, "for some hombers to tie a bandanna across their faces when they do their riding."

This brought a snicker from somewhere and the rancher whirled instantly in the direction. "But don't forget, I clipped two of those skunks at Willow Bend this mornin'," he called, "an' mebbe I'll get a couple more before I'm through!"

That brought a silence and he turned to go down the boardwalk when suddenly his glance struck Dan Carty.

"You!" he roared, lurching forward, "I remember you! You were there!"

Though taken by utter surprise, Dan held his ground. "Just what do you mean?" he demanded.

"Damned innocent, aren't you?" Henderson was ready to pounce upon him. "You were at Willow Bend. I saw you!"

"Look," said Dan as calmly as he could. "You're making a mistake, mister. I never saw you before in my life."

"You don't say! You're under arrest!"

But there was something about Dan's determined coolness that made the other hesitate just a little bit. "Go on," said Dan, "who are you to arrest me—and for what? You're drunk."

He was becoming annoyed. The crowd was grinning and it was obvious that nothing would suit them better than a fight between him and Henderson. That was all the more reason why he wanted to avoid it.

"Beat it," he said. "We all make mistakes. You don't want any trouble with me."

But there was no way out. The idea of recognition had taken solid possession of the rancher's brain; nothing could dislodge it. His hand went toward his gun.

**I**N the very instant Dan sprang forward, nearly past him, planting a vicious left hook under the man's heart. Henderson's shot went wild, crashing a store window farther down the street; and as Dan turned, deftly clipping the man under the ear, the big fellow went to his knees, the gun falling from his grip. Dan kicked it away and stepped back.

"All right, big noise. Let's see how good you are without a hogleg."

He caught a glimpse of the sheriff over the heads of the crowd. The shot had called him to the door but he seemed pleased at the spectacle and Dan decided that he did not like his face. On the ground Henderson was shaking his head and gathering his feet under him.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Dan called.

The rancher made a rush, stopped and fainted and Dan felt a crushing blow graze his cheek as he ducked. They sparred around for awhile before either of them got in another solid punch and Dan realized quickly that he had a job on his hands. Dancing about the giant he threw rights and lefts to the body and head and got in about four blows to each of Henderson's. And when the rancher did connect it counted. Dan realized what it would be to fight this man when sober. The crowd was roaring now and Dan wished he could get in a haymaker and leave. Here he was fighting a stranger who had mistaken him for someone else. It was a stupid situation and it irritated him.

Henderson caught Dan under the

heart and sent him staggering against the hitchrail. His pertinacity was maddening. Was there no downing this stubborn idiot? Anger flooded Dan and he waded into the other to get it over with. The rancher ducked a vicious right to the chin but it caught him on the shoulder and spun him halfway around. He was still on his feet, but one of the crowd stuck out his foot and tripped him. In the next instant he tumbled to the ground. At once Dan jumped on the interloper and grabbed him by the collar.

"Who's fighting this scrap? You or me!" In a sudden fit of rage he swung and sent the man spinning over the rail and into the arms of the crowd. Then his attention was again on Henderson, who had risen once more and was charging madly. In a spurt of fury Dan, ducked, feinted with his left and, straightening up, landed a clean uppercut. The big man staggered backward and fell against a porch post where he remained.

Ignoring the crowd's acclaim, Dan stepped over to the fallen man, all his animosity gone. Kneeling down he shook the other, but he was out cold. A gentle slapping of his cheeks brought him to.

"I told you you were wrong, pardner," said Dan. "No hard feelings, though. When you've cooled off a bit I'll buy you a drink."

But hatred and the bitterness of defeat added to a wealth of untold troubles looked up at Dan from those curious green-gray eyes.

"I'll get even with you, you dirty son. I'll get even with you if it's the last thing I do." He glanced about him. "Where's . . . where's my gun?"

Dan gave up then and made his way through the crowd. "When that dumb cluck gets on his feet and if he

still wants more trouble," he said curtly, "tell him I'm over in the Silver Spur."

As Dan swung up on the claybank, he saw the sheriff and another man watching him. The man with the law officer was trim and well-dressed, a touch of silver in the dark hair under the sombrero giving him a distinguished appearance. There was an unmistakable air of authority about him and Dan guessed that this must be Simmons. He nodded to Dan as the latter swung into the saddle.

"A nice piece of work," he commented in a voice that Dan found distinctly patronizing, as a pair of hard black eyes at the same time subjected him to an intense scrutiny. "A good job, cowboy."

"Was it?" Dan threw back at him and reined the horse out into the street. So that was Simmons, the man he had come to Twin Forks to outwit. The man who was after the same thing that he was. He hoped that the little incident with Henderson would not interfere with his plans.

At the Silver Spur he hired a room and washed up before coming down to the bar for a drink. Bonnie, the claybank, he had left at the hitchrail outside as he intended taking a ride later in the evening to look over the territory about the town. Several of the men who had witnessed the fight were at the bar and a couple came up to him and started talking it up. He quickly stopped them.

"He was drunk and he made a mistake. That's all there is to it."

"He's a trouble maker," one of them persisted in warning him. "He ain't never taken a licking in this town. You better watch that hombre."

Dan turned to the bar and ordered rye. "Thanks," he said po-

lity, "but suppose you let *me* worry about that."

Then he was left alone and, after a casual conversation with the bartender, stood ruminating over his drink. Simmons had called him cowboy. That was good! If he only knew what Dan was after. If he could just have known what was in the saddlebags of the claybank—soil samples in leathed pouches, chemicals and instruments. When he closed his eyes he saw before him the silhouette of derricks against the sky, heard the *chug-chug* of the engines and the rattle of the drill bits as they slithered down through the pipe on the cable. Cowboy, huh—well, it was a good thing that they thought he was.

**T**HERE was oil in Apache County. Old George Decker, his partner in their small Southwest Oil Company, knew it. With a sixth sense he had guessed, smelled that this was oil country. He had traveled through it and made some sketchy maps of the territory with points marked where he thought it might be prospective. But Decker was too well known as an oil man to go scouting himself, so Dan had been the one to traipse all over the territory, pretending to be a waddy looking for a job, riding the grub line now and then; taking samples and making tests, marking off the map; forever in danger of getting into trouble with Simmons' men or for trespassing. The little Southwest Oil Company needed fresh wells, and their capital was fast shrinking.

George Decker's surest sign had been Simmons' attitude. "Simmons knows there's oil," he had said. "He's trying to buy up all the prospective land he can before starting to drill. The minute he drills the cat's out

of the bag and prices go up. He wants the spots at his own price. We've got to beat him to it as far as finding the oil is concerned."

It was quite possible that Henderson might have seen Dan near his property and now in his drunkenness connected him with the rustlers that were riding down his fences and deprecating his property. Damn Henderson anyway. Bringing Dan into the public eye like this might throw a monkey wrench into the whole works.

Someone touched his elbow and he turned unwillingly, prepared to ward off another admirer of his fighting ability, but found himself looking instead into the face of Sheriff Nielsen.

"Thought I'd warn you about that Henderson hombre," he said, taking the drink that Dan offered him. "He's a bad number, and he ain't the kind that takes a licking at all. He won't get over it till he's even."

"That hombre sure likes trouble," grinned Dan. "I should think he'd have enough without coming to me for more. Say, what's the matter with him, anyway?"

"Oh, nothing much," Nielsen said as he emptied his glass, "but plain ornery cussedness. Never did get along with anybody. Got a couple of good waterholes on his place that his neighbors would like to use. Plenty for everybody, but, no, he keeps his fences tight and won't let anybody in. So somebody gets a notion to run a few of his fences down and stampede a few cows." The sheriff shrugged elaborately and winked. "Well, what can you do about it? It don't mean anything. He'll get his beef back but he'll have to hunt for it."

"Have another drink," said Dan, and thought, "I believe you're a liar."

"On me," protested Nielsen and called the barkeep. "You're a stranger in these parts, ain't you?" he added casually.

Dan nodded, "Spent the summer in Montana—just travelin' thru here on my way Southwest for the winter."

"Oklahoma and Texas," said the sheriff dreamily. "I been there. Lots of oil down that way."

"Not where I go," said Dan quickly. "Them derricks all over the landscape look like hell. Oil, oil, oil—stinks like the devil! You give me cows and horses every time."

Ye Gods! If he could only smell oil right here in Apache County. He'd change the looks of this little one horse town quick, and the fortune of Southwest Oil Company, too.

They had another drink and the sheriff departed with another admonition to look out for Henderson. Dan would have given anything to know just how innocent his bringing up of the oil subject had been.

It was later in the evening, when he was having his dinner in the adjoining dining room, that someone again touched his elbow. He looked up and saw a stranger at his side.

"Just wanted to tell you," said the man, "that Henderson's been filling up on bravemaker and is coming down the street looking in every saloon and bar for you. Keep your eyes peeled, he's sure got blood in his eye this time."

Dan looked up at the man calculating and shrugged, "Why should he come looking in every bar when my claybank is right out in front here. There ain't another claybank in town with a white blaze, that I know of."

The man grinned a little. "Sure are a cool number, mister," he said with admiration and left.

But the other diners had heard the warning and the noisy atmosphere gave way to one of tense quietude. People kept on eating and gambling and talking, but softly, and many glances strayed to Dan's table, until eventually the tables nearest him were unoccupied. He continued eating his meal with apparent calm. It annoyed him no little that this stupid affair was not over yet. He thought of the possibility of having to kill Henderson in self-defense and did not relish it. He had no desire to; furthermore it might spoil his plans altogether. It was as though the people about him almost looked forward to a show, and he had suddenly a great aversion toward giving it to them. He even considered getting on his horse and leaving town for a couple of days, but when it came right down to that he would not back out.

There was a sudden hush through which heavy footsteps could be heard outside on the boardwalk. Many eyes went from the two doors to Dan's table and back again. Already several people were edging toward the exits. Drinking his coffee, Dan kept watch in the large wall mirrors. Otherwise he did not stir. All right, if Henderson wanted it he'd give it to him, so long as there'd be an end to the business.

The swing door out in the bar creaked and someone trod heavily and steadily on the floor coming toward the dining room. Dan's hand crept off the edge of the table.

The man was suddenly in the room and somebody gasped. In the mirror Dan saw Sheriff Nielsen come toward him, his face utterly grave. He stopped at the table.

"What is it now?" demanded Dan.

"That your claybank mare with the white blaze?"

"Yes, why?"

Nielsen nodded toward the door, "Come on outside."

"Why, what's the matter?"

The sheriff was already moving and repeated, "Come on."

There was a bunch of horses at each end of the hitchrail, straining on their reins, the whites of their eyes rolling against the night as they sniffed the air with nervous excitement. In the middle Dan's horse was down on her front feet, her head in the dust. She sank down completely as he ran up, fell to his knees and took her head in his lap.

"Bonnie! Bonnie!" he cried.

The claybank mare opened her eyes and tried to look at him. Then a huge shiver shook her flanks and with a hoarse blow in her throat she suddenly went limp.

"Bonnie!"

Dan, bewildered and numb, looked up at the silent ring of on-lookers. Then he all at once smelled the sickening sweet odor of blood. Under Bonnie's left side spread a huge dark pool. Someone had sneaked up and stuck a knife in her heart right behind the shoulder blade. Henderson!

He got to his feet and stood long in silence while sorrow, anger and chill rage shook him. Bonnie had been his favorite horse, had carried him far and through much trouble and many narrow escapes. That she should end like this—the instrument of vengeance of a drunkard. He'd have to kill Henderson now. A man who could do this to an animal, no matter how drunk he was, was no good. He didn't deserve to live.

In a daze he stripped off saddle and gear, carried it into the hotel, then crossed the street to the livery stable where he heard his own strange voice make arrangements for having Bonnie taken away. He

walked stiffly out of there like an automaton and headed back for the Silver Spur.

In the door away of the bar stood Nielsen and Simmons. Simmons was the only one to attempt a word of sympathy. "Too bad, cowboy," he said, "too bad."

"Yes," said Dan, curtly shouldering his way through the swing door, "too bad for the hombre who knifed my horse. He won't live long."

He called for a drink at the bar. "The way to Henderson's ranch?" he asked as he poured out three fingers.

The barkeep told him, then reached out and laid a hand on Dan's arm as he was about to turn away to go. "Look," he said, "take a piece of good advice and wait till morning. Henderson can't escape you now. But if you trail him in the dark he may waylay and dry-gulch you."

Dan stopped and thought this over. The man was right, it didn't matter when he went after Henderson, today, tomorrow or the day after. He could not escape such wrath as Dan's.

"I guess you're right," he said. "Thanks." He turned away from the bar just as Nielsen and Simmons came up and ordered.

**I**T was close to noon the next day when Dan reached the Henderson ranch. Topping a low ridge he looked down into a longish valley, bordered on either side by forested slope. In the center lay a group of huge, old weatherbeaten ranch buildings and corrals, stanchly built, but somewhat in disrepair. An air of peace lay over the place and he thought with mingled feelings that he had rarely seen a spot as beautiful as this. It did not make the sinister task before

him easier to realize that this was just the kind of place he had always dreamed of setting down in, once he got finished with "travelin' thru" the country.

It was with dark thoughts in his mind that he spurred his hired horse off the ridge and eventually drew rein in the yard. The place seemed deserted. Reining right side to, up to the porch, his hand on his gun, he hailed the house and waited tensely.

The girl who heeded his second call was definitely pretty. She stepped out on the porch, tall and straight, with a graceful ease of being the lady of the house. Something tightened his throat and he quickly doffed his hat.

"Please, ma'am, where do I find Mr. Henderson?" he asked.

A pair of frank gray eyes searched his. "Step out of the leather," she said courteously. "I guess I can tell you what you want to know."

He dismounted, but shook his head uncomfortably, "I reckon not, ma'am."

"The answer is no," she said firmly.

He frowned. "I reckon I don't understand."

"Yes, you do," she insisted firmly. "The ranch is not for sale."

He was standing close to her now and feeling very ill at ease. There was something brave about her, something very disturbing about her small determined chin and firm mouth. The odd smile she gave him was wistful because a sea of trouble lurked behind her eyes. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to harm anyone that was near to her.

"I'm not here to buy the ranch," he said.

The smile suddenly widened as though a sunray had broken through clouds. "Oh, I know! You're the

man who gave Ralph a licking in town yesterday. He told me about it." She glanced at his slightly swollen lip and a bruise over his left eye. "And now you've come to give him a chance to get even?"

He was puzzled and bewildered at this attitude. He wanted to get on his horse and ride away then and there. But when he thought of Bonnie lying dead in the street, something hardened within him and he knew he had to see Henderson no matter what.

"Yes," he said almost harshly.

"I'm so used to refusing people the sale of the ranch," she explained. "Almost twice a week we have a new visitor coming in and offering a lower price." Her mouth became a hard line and her eyes blazed. "But we won't sell out—ever. This country was opened up by Hendersons and has been three generations in the family. God knows, we're having our share of troubles, but we'll make out, even if I don't quite know how."

She stopped abruptly. "I guess I'm peddling my troubles too much," she said apologetically. "I didn't mean—"

"Why, that's all right, ma'am," cut in Dan.

"If you still want to see Ralph," she told him, "he's over by the north boundary at Willow Creek fixing a fence." She pointed. "Follow that trail north for about three miles and then go west."

Feeling very awkward he swung into the saddle and touched his hat brim. "You better make friends with Ralph, though," she called to him. "He's a hard man to lick when he's sober and, besides, I don't think the man is born that can take him twice in succession. We could use some friends," she added. "Three of our men quit this morning."



She wouldn't have made that last remark, Dan judged, unless it had been desperately on her mind. He turned in the saddle after a while and looked back. She was still standing on the porch where he had left her, looking after him. He did not recall when he had met anyone whom he had liked so instantaneously. He saw her raise her hand a little bit as though to wave at him and he turned quickly in the saddle and spurred his mount northward.

**W**HERE a shallow sandy arroyo dipped the fence he found Henderson sweating with pole digger, hammer and pliers. The big man had his back toward Dan and did not hear him coming as the latter dismounted a distance away and, leaving his horse, came up on foot. He stopped some distance away, hooked his thumb in his belt and watched the man work. There was something very serious and intent about the huge rancher today. The wildness had left him and Dan suddenly could not connect him with the death of his claybank.

"Henderson!" he called, tensing himself.

The man whirled instantly, his hand flying in readiness to his hip, then the faint shadow of a somewhat sheepish grin flitted across his countenance. "You!" he said in surprise. "Now what—"

Dan felt a strange relief flooding him at that moment. "Henderson," he called. "Answer me a question. Are you a liar, or are you man enough to stand back of your deeds?"

Henderson frowned and an annoyed look crept into his eyes. "What you raving about?" he demanded in irritation. "Talk a lingo that a man can understand."

"Did or did you not," said Dan Carty slowly, "sneak up and knife my claybank mare to death last night outside the Silver Spur?"

It took a moment for the significance of the words to sink in, then Henderson went purple and his hand gripped his gun belt as a rancid oath tore from his throat. "You say that again, mister, an' pull your gun when you do!"

Dan looked at that rage and his arm relaxed. He felt suddenly warm and glad. A grin sneaked into his features. "I should have known better," he said. "That's all I wanted to—"

He got no further. Henderson had suddenly spun halfway around, then staggered forward. At the same time the report of a shot reached them from up the arroyo a distance. Another bullet kicked up a fountain of sand between the two men.

"Duck!" cried Dan and sprang forward, knocked Henderson to the ground, then pulled him into the shelter of a boulder as a couple of bullets slapped against the stones and ricocheted whiningly on their way down the wash. "Are you hurt?" Dan asked anxiously. "Where did they get you?"

Henderson got to his knees and felt of his left arm, cursing. "Nothing but a scratch," he growled, at the same time pulling his gun and throwing a snapshot in the direction of the firing. "What the hell is going on now?"

Dan took aim just to windward of a small cloud of powder smoke above a clump of rocks and answered, "I should have figured this out before. Somebody made a neat set-up for you an' me to kill each other off. Now they want to make sure that we *are* killed anyway."

He pulled the trigger and heard the bullet zing on its way. An an-

swering shot fanned his cheek and a hole suddenly appeared in the crown of Henderson's Stetson.

"They're using rifles," said Henderson. "They'll get us if we stay here long enough. It's either them or us." He put his fingers in his mouth and whistled for his horse. The animal came trotting up nervously from the opposite direction, hesitating because of the gunfire. Dan tried a couple more shots which were promptly answered.

"I get you," he said. "We'll make a rush for them or we'll never know who they are. But don't call your cayuse too close. Those rats have no regard for good horseflesh."

"I have a good idea who they are," grated Henderson. "Let's run for our horses at the same time. You take this side of the arroyo an' I'll take the other."

Dan nodded and they waited a few seconds and then dashed down the drywash with the bullets raking up the dust around them. As Dan swung into the saddle and spurred his mount up the embankment he saw Henderson out of the corner of his eye racing up along the other side, leaning over the horse's head, his gun blazing away at the hidden enemy.

Lying low in the saddle it was Dan's object to get up as close as he could and then dismount and use his rifle. Suddenly a couple of horsemen detached themselves from the clump of rocks ahead, roweling their mounts viciously as they raced away. They kept throwing shots as they fled.

"Yellow scum," growled Dan. Another few seconds and a small arm of the forest would swallow them. He snapped a shot but missed. His horse stumbled in a badger hole and he was thrown headlong to the ground. He was up in

an instant, dashing back to the fallen animal and snatching his Winchester from its scabbard. Putting his foot on a rock he rested his elbow on one knee, took aim at one of the bobbing figures ahead, and pulled the trigger.

When the smoke drifted from his eyes he saw a riderless horse canter to a halt. Jerking the lever he tried another shot, but the second horseman remained in the saddle. He hesitated, however, drew rein and appeared undecided as to whether he should ride back to succor his fallen companion. At this moment Henderson, rushing up on the opposite side of the arroyo, drew rein sharply, lifted his six-gun high and brought it down with a sweeping momentum. The second rider toppled from his saddle.

They looked down upon the dead bodies of Sheriff Nielsen and a man whom Dan remembered seeing in the crowd the day before. "Simmons is behind this," said Dan, "Simmons has been behind all your trouble. And I think I know, now, why Bonnie was killed."

"I had a hunch about Simmons," agreed Henderson. "But no proof. What I can't figure out is why he wants to run me off my ranch."

"I'll tell that when I've had a chance to look over your property a little more closely," said Dan. "Simmons wanted a safe way to get rid of you. Me coming into town yesterday and getting into a scrap with you fitted neatly into his scheme. The men who have been coming and bidding low on your property were all sent by him." He snapped his fingers. "Well, my good Mr. Simmons, I think you're gonna get fooled pretty bad. We'll get to you later."

"What I still don't get," persisted

*Continued on page 100*

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# Desert Doom



**by Gunnison Steele**

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## Desert Doom

**T**HE desert is like a panther . . . or a siren," old Pecos Lund had once said. "Beautiful, but dangerous. She'll lure you on and on with her golden promises. Then, if you're not careful, she'll kill you!"

Bart Lash grinned contemptuously, and with callous indifference kicked aside the sun-bleached skeleton and knelt at the edge of the small waterhole. Unslinging one of the four empty canteens that dangled from his massive shoulders, he submerged the can and watched with cunning satisfaction as the green-scummed water filled the container.

That full canteen, the big, hook-nosed gold hunter knew, held quick death for whoever drank of it. The human skeleton, and the rotting bones of small animals and birds bordering this tiny pocket of water lying at the bottom of a cuplike sink in the desert, testified to its deadliness. That was why Bart Lash's dull little eyes held greedy triumph as he screwed the top onto the can.

Soon Pecos Lund would drink from that can—and die.

"The desert is good to them who play straight with her," Pecos had said. "She kills them who try to double-cross her!"

Lash grinned again, slung the canteen on his shoulder and strode across the desert. Thirty minutes later he came to a second waterhole, a deep, clear hole cradled by granite boulders. Here Lash drank deep, and slowly filled the other three cans. With a knife he marked the poisoned can with a tiny X. Then he set out toward the camp he shared with old Pecos Lund, four miles away.

The sun had set and purple shadows were racing across the desert

when he reached camp. Wiry, gray-bearded Pecos Lund had everything packed, ready for their departure for the outside just as soon as a moon came up. Bacon, almost their last, was frying on a campfire of mesquite roots.

"I'm danged glad you offered to go after that water," Pecos said. "Ain't as spry as I used to be. Ol' desert's 'bout got me."

"Yuh got to use your brains to lick the desert," Lash boasted. "If you can't do it one way, try another."

"Just one way," old Pecos said earnestly. "You got to play the game straight. We played straight, and what happened? We've got enough gold to last us till we die!"

"You have, mebbe," his partner murmured. "But I expect to live longer than you do!"

"Enough," Pecos went on, a satisfied glow in his squinty eyes, "to buy me that little cow outfit over on the edge of the green hills. With plenty left over to fix up a certain little tyke's busted leg. . . . I told you 'bout that, didn't I?"

"Seems like you did," Lash said, hiding a grin behind his hand. "Your grandson, ain't he?"

Old Pecos nodded proudly. "Fell off a pony last year, Johnny did. The bones in his leg got all twisted. A medico back East could fix him up good as new, but it'd take a lot of money. Now that we made this strike, the button'll ride and run and play again, just like other kids. Won't that be fine?"

"Swell," Lash agreed, glancing at the cross-marked canteen on the ground nearby. "Lucky we made this strike so close to a hole of good water."

"Yeah! Them four cans'll last us till we reach Tule Springs. We'll start soon as the moon comes up."

SOON, like a huge yellow torch, the moon soared into the sky, bathing the Sunol Desert in a silvery spray of light. Old Pecos and Bart Lash started the trek as soon as it was light enough. A shaggy, long-eared burro carried their equipment and the gold they'd dug from the desert.

Slung over their shoulders, each of the men carried two canteens of water. One of the cans Pecos Lund carried was marked with a tiny X. Without arousing suspicion, Lash had seen that the oldster got the poisoned can.

A cooling wind blew over the moon-painted desert. But they'd gone only a couple of miles when Lash stopped and tilted one of his canteens. He watched furtively, fierce triumph rioting through him, as old Pecos followed his example. Then, gradually, the triumph died, and Lash cursed under his breath.

Lund had swigged from the can of good water!

That meant that the old prospector wouldn't drink from the other can till the first one was empty. Then Lash shrugged. It only meant delay. He could afford to wait.

They went on across the desert. The wind-rustled sand whispered weirdly about them, the only sound in that vast world of barbaric beauty. Like the sleek panther, Pecos had compared it to. For underneath that mysterious beauty lurked death.

The sun rolled into the sky, bringing with it a sudden flare of furnace-like heat. The wind died, and the blazing sun literally sucked the moisture from their bodies. Although they drank freely from their canteens, thirst was always with them.

Bart Lash drank more often than

old Pecos, hoping the oldster would follow his example. For impatience gnawed like a hungry rat at the big gold hunter. Gloatingly he thought of the moment when the oldster would tilt that cross-marked can and drink. Then Pecos Lund would die quickly, horribly—and a small fortune in raw gold would be his.

From the first, he had planned to kill the mild-eyed old prospector. Slowly his mind went back over the last six months. Broke, and wanting desperately to make a last try for the big strike, old Pecos had offered his knowledge of the desert in return for a grubstake.

Bart Lash had supplied the money and they struck into the heat-lashed Sunol Desert. Finally, deep in the waste lands, they'd found gold.

In an old dry stream bed, Pecos had run his pick into a rich deposit of virgin nuggets. The gravelly sand had yielded a small fortune before the colors petered out. But by that time their provisions were almost gone. Fortunately the find had been made only a short piece from one of the few good waterholes in the desert. Every couple of days one of them had trudged with the canteens to the waterhole and brought water back to camp.

One day, quite by accident, Lash had stumbled upon the arsenic-polluted waterhole a few miles to the north. And then he'd known how he would kill Pecos Lund. Bullets tell a story, but when a man dies of poison water in the desert, who can say it wasn't an accident?

It had been very simple. Last night, as they were making ready for the trek back to town, Bart Lash had offered to go for the water supply that was to last them till they reached Tule Springs, many miles to the east. Pecos Lund would never

suspect that his own doom was bottled in one of the canteens.

With ill-concealed impatience, Lash watched the slow lightening of Pecos Lund's canteen. By noon his own first canteen was almost empty, for he had drunk more often than was necessary. He was savagely resentful that old Pecos drank so sparingly.

"Don't be such a miser with that water," he grinned once. "We got plenty and to spare to get us to Tule Springs. You don't see me goin' thirsty!"

"Cain't ever tell," Pecos declared. "This water's worth more'n all the gold on that burro. You got to have water to beat the desert."

"And brains," added Lash.

"Mebbe," Pecos admitted. "See that sun?"

**A**LL day the fiery red ball had blazed in a sullen sky. There was no wind. And now a grayish pall lay along the eastern horizon.

"A blow's comin'," Pecos declared. "Sand blizzards in this desert sometimes last a coupla days. Better go a mite easy on that water."

The gray pall along the horizon crept closer. There was no wind yet, but the sand seemed agitated by hundreds of miniature whirlwinds. In the vast distance could be heard a moaning, restless sound, like the flapping of giant unseen wings.

"Sand," Pecos grunted. "One of your cans already empty?"

"Yeah! But we got plenty."

"Hope so," the oldster nodded. "I'd hate for anything to happen now. All my life I've fought the desert, hopin' to find enough mineral to buy me a little cow outfit where I could spend my old age. Then

there's little Johnny; he's got to have that operation. His daddy works hard, but a cowpoke could never save up enough money for an operation like that. We just got to get out with this gold."

It struck an hour before sunset. At first it was a tiny breeze. Then a moaning gust of hot wind rolled across the sink, bringing a bellowing, swirling wall of sand so thick that it almost instantly hid the sun.

Lash and old Pecos were lucky. For the last hour they'd been angling toward a mass of sandstone cliffs that reared out of the desert. They reached the cliffs just before the sand storm struck. And, as Pecos had hoped, they found a cave back in one of the walls.

The entrance to the cave was at the bottom of a shallow but steep-walled ravine. And the shaggy burro, after the manner of its kind, chose a crucial moment to balk. When they tried to prod it over the broken wall, the pack animal stubbornly planted its feet in the sand and refused to budge.

"Dang-fool critter," old Pecos sputtered. "We'll just have to unpack the gold and the equipment and tote everything down to the cave. Then I'll tether this fool pack ass up here and let him inhale a few barrels of this grit!"

They unstrapped the pack from the burro, and Bart Lash, with instinctive greed, seized the two heavy canvas bags of gold and started clambering down the broken wall toward the cave. He was halfway down the side of the ravine when an outjutting knob of sandstone upon which he had stepped suddenly crumbled under his weight.

The hook-nosed prospector let out a yell, and his arms flailed the air wildly. He leaped wildly for another

ledge, but this, too, crumbled, and he lost his balance. He struck heavily, and rolled in a confused flurry of legs and arms to the bottom of the ravine, where he brought up with a thud.

Anxious-eyed, old Pecos tumbled down into the ravine. Lash was writhing and groaning like he was half dead; but Pecos quickly saw that he wasn't seriously injured. But when Lash tried to stand he winced and cursed with pain.

"Ankle feels like its busted," he whimpered.

Quickly Pecos stripped off the heavy boot. "Not busted," he said after a brief examination. "Just sprained a little, I reckon. Here, let me help yuh into the cave, then I'll pack the stuff in and tend to that jack."

With Pecos supporting him, Lash hobbled into the big dank sandstone cavern and slumped to the floor. He watched, bitter-eyed, as old Pecos scurried outside again to bring the rest of the stuff in and tend to the stubborn pack mule. Uneasiness was in Lash's heart. When he'd planned to do away with old Pecos, he hadn't counted on anything like this happening.

But the big prospector quickly recovered from his momentary panic. His fall had merely bruised him. His ankle was swollen a little, but he found that he could bear his weight on it without much pain. By the time Pecos came back to the cave a few moments later his cunning brain was devising a plan.

"Tied that pack ass to a mesquite," Pecos said. "He'll just tuck his tail to the wind and ride 'er through. Dang good thing we got that jack, too. 'Less I'm mistaken, you won't be able to walk on that ankle for several days. You'll have

to ride that mule out. Which means we may have to leave the gold here and come back for it later. When this storm lets up, we'll have to make good time. How much water you got left?"

"Almost a full can," Lash grunted. "That can of yours almost empty?"

"Coupla drinks left," Pecos said, shaking the canteen.

By now the sun had set, and the grayish pall deepened to gloom. The wind and sand howled like a monstrous pack of hungry wolves about their rocky haven. Its hollow, ghostly bellowing seemed to fill the whole world.

Philosophically, old Pecos accepted the breaks of the game. After seeing that his partner was comfortable, the oldster lay down on the sand floor of the cavern and went to sleep. The desert was his friend, and he never worried about her freak whims and pranks.

But Bart Lash didn't sleep, not for a long time. He lay in the inky darkness, listening to the wind, and planning his next move. Out of that fall, which at first had threatened utter disaster, was born another scheme. Pecos Lund's death must appear purely accidental, no suspicion must rest upon him, Bart Lash, should the oldster's body ever be found.

Again Lash tested his ankle and found that he could walk on it. Then, reassured by the old prospector's deep breathing, he crept from the cave mouth into the screaming sand blizzard. It took him several minutes to find the tethered burro in the driving sand; it took him less time to break in two the small mesquite bush to which the animal was tied, and with the bushy end of the plant flail the shaggy burro into a lazy trot away across the desert.

THE sand storm raged all that night and most of the next day. Awhile before night the wind died, the air cleared, and the lowering sun sparkled on a world of rippling sand dunes. Pecos drained the last of the water from his first canteen, got up and went outside to see about the burro.

But five minutes later he was back, a worried look on his seamed, bearded face. "That damn fool jack's done broke that mesquite and wandered away," he told Lash worriedly.

"The burro's gone?" Lash feigned dismay.

"Plumb gone," Pecos growled. "No use lookin' for the critter, either. He's probably been followin' his nose toward the nearest water for the last ten hours."

"Then what'll we do?" Lash asked anxiously. "This ankle . . . I can't walk on it."

The old desert rat scratched his grizzled head thoughtfully.

"Don't you worry, pard," he said reassuringly. "There's more'n one way of skinnin' a skunk. Here's how we'll do it: I got enough water to take me out to Twin Buttes. You got plenty to keep you alive till I can get back with more water and help to pack you out. Won't take more'n a coupla days to make the trip there and back. How does that sound?"

Bart Lash lowered his eyes, pretending deep thought, but in reality hiding the sudden triumph in them. "Reckon that's the best way," he muttered. "How about the gold?"

"Have to leave the gold and equipment here with you, till I get back with more burros," Pecos declared.

"Sure," Lash agreed, vastly relieved. "When you startin'?"

Pecos eyed the setting sun. "Soon be night," he mused. "Then, in a coupla hours the moon'll be up. I'll wait for the moon."

Pecos went outside to make a circle in the desert on the long chance that the burro hadn't wandered far.

Back in the cave, Lash grinned. The oldster hadn't the slightest suspicion that he had driven the burro away into the desert, hoping Pecos would suggest the very plan he'd just outlined. That way, Pecos would drink the poison water and die out in the desert alone. Then he, Lash, would make his way out and say that the old man had become lost in the desert. Maybe he'd have to make another trip back for the gold, but that wouldn't matter.

A satisfied smile twisted Lash's thin lips as he lay there on his blanket and thought about how simple it had been to fool Pecos Lund. The old coot hadn't any idea that he was about to die. He thought Bart Lash was a fine, honest gent. When he struck out in a couple of hours he'd think he was hurrying on an errand of mercy, when really he'd be walking out to meet Death.

His pleasant pictures of the future, and the light in the cave mouth made Lash drowsy. "Brains," he muttered sleepily. "You gotta have brains to beat the desert—"

He awoke with a start. Swift alarm rushed over him. It was quiet there in the cave, and dark. A thin shaft of light speared in through the cave mouth. But not sunlight—moonlight. He must have fallen asleep, been sleeping for several hours.

"Pecos! Pecos!" he shouted.

When no answer came, he laughed shakily. Hell, the old goat had already started on his trek to Twin



Buttes! Finding Lash asleep, he'd set out without awakening him. Maybe, by now—

A thought struck across Lash's mind, and hurriedly he scratched a match. As the light flared, he sighed with relief. The two gold-filled bags lay nearby on the sand. And there on his blanket beside him, where he had carefully placed it before going to sleep, was his canteen.

The match winked out, and Lash laughed again, sneeringly. Suddenly aware of thirst, his hand found the canteen, unscrewed the top, lifted the can and drank deeply. With just such eagerness would Pecos Lund drink from his full canteen—

Again, like a red flash of light, a thought stabbed at Bart Lash's brain. The canteen in his hands

seemed strangely heavy to be only half full. He lifted the can and sloshed it. And sudden fear rolled in an icy wave over him.

With frantic, trembling fingers he found another match and scratched it. And in that instant before the match winked out, Bart Lash realized that, by some irony of fate, he'd been caught in the death trap he'd baited for somebody else.

Old Pecos Lund, following his unselfish creed of giving his friends the best of things, had quietly traded his own full canteen for his partner's half-empty one before leaving.

Whining with quick terror, Lash lifted the canteen and smashed it savagely against the cavern wall. But even the inky darkness couldn't hide from his wide-staring eyes the tiny cross on the side of the can.

THE END.

### FIREPLACES

THE heart of the pioneer home has always been the open fire. Naturally the fireplaces have been varied to suit the kind of fuel most readily obtained in that particular locality. So we find in the sod-house of the prairie, iron grates to support the sticks of slow burning cottonwood and hackberry that grew along the sluggish streams. Farther west was the corner fireplace in which a piece of fat piñon could be set up and the lower end ignited. This type is still found throughout the foothill country and especially in the Mexican adobes along the Rio Grande, and even in the modern hotels of Taos and Santa Fe.

A scrubby cedar is found in the same country where the piñon grows, but it too requires a support of some kind so that a draft of air can circulate between the sticks. Mixed with pieces of piñon, cedar makes a glorious fire, and when charred it supplies the fuel for the shallow braziers over which primitive people cook their food.

It is in the high mountain country that the fireplace really comes into its own. Here is an abundance of clear burning pine, spruce, fir and aspen, all ideal fuel, needing no wire screen to protect against flying sparks. These fireplaces, usually made of rough stone, are huge affairs four or five feet wide and about three feet high, into which a back log eighteen inches in diameter may be rolled. If there was no material from which firedogs or andirons could be made, the Western pioneer simply placed a couple of small rocks in front of the back log and rested a piece of green aspen or spruce on them, this supported the dry wood and provided sufficient draft for a satisfactory fire.

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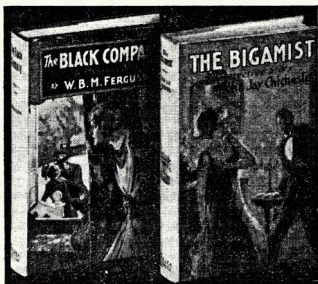
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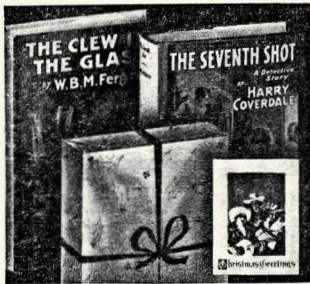
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### Lead Throwing Pilgrim

*Continued from page 90*

Henderson, "is just where *you* fit into the picture."

"I never count my chickens before the eggs are hatched," said Dan, "but I have a hunch you'll know very soon."

On the way back to the ranch they were crossing a large low flat in the middle of which a small bunch of cows were lying in a wallow in the shadow of a curiously table-shaped rock formation. Dan Carty reined in and squinted. "Just for luck," he said, "just for luck." He rode in and hazed the cattle out of a sticky black quagmire.

"What're you up to?" Henderson called. "Watch out for that messy place. We all steer clear of that."

Dan had dismounted and was standing ankle-deep in the mud, picking up a fistful and smelling of it. Under the wondering eyes of the rancher he went back to his horse and got out his test chemicals.

"Say, what—" began Henderson, again, impatiently mystified.

Dan grinned up at him. "Oil," he said. "Oil! Do you hear, man? Oil! This is what Simmons was after. And it's what I'm after and now I've found it. Do you realize that for all I know you may take a million dollars right out of this hole!"

Henderson was out of the saddle in a flash and on his knees, scooping up the black, sticky stuff with both hands. He was shaking and speechless.

"I'm half owner of Southwest Oil Company. If we make a deal we'll come in and operate this thing for you. We've got some capital and all the equipment needed. Or," he went on, "we could make you a third partner if you like."

Henderson still could find no words. He looked from one black hand to the other. "Oil," he said at last. "Petroleum!"

"Well," asked Dan after a pause, "are we partners or what?"

At last Henderson came back to earth. "Hell, yes," he said.

"Your wife," Dan said then, "will sure be glad to hear this."

Henderson gave him a quick glance. "My wife?" he said. "Why, I'm not married. That was my sister you saw back at the ranch."

He watched Dan's expression, and something made him add, "And by the way, she isn't married either."

It was Dan who suddenly turned toward his horse, wiping his hands on his breeches before he reached for the horn. "Hell," he demanded, "what are we standing here for—let's get home and tell her the news!"

THE END.





# WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

By JOHN NORTH

Have you got the camp cooking recipes filed in your handbook? If not, they're yours for the asking. Simply send a stamped, self-addressed envelope along with your request, and the leaflet will be mailed promptly.

**R**AY BAKER, of Chicago, wants to settle out in some Western State that is still pretty wild. He says, "I've got a good rifle that needs exercise, and a lot of fishing tackle. I crave some wild country where I can be close enough to a lot of game and fish to grab off some of it. I've heard that Idaho is a little-known hunter's and fisherman's paradise, and is still pretty wild and woolly. Could you tell me something about it?"

Well, Ray, if you want the wilds you couldn't have selected a better State to look over. Idaho has more undeveloped natural resources along those lines than any other State in the Union, bar none. When you stop to think that the greatest part of the State is mountainous and that almost half of its area is in forests and game preserves, you must admit that it offers what you are looking for.

As for fishing, the State is full of mountain lakes, mountain streams,

waterfalls, disappearing rivers, frozen rivers in caves and gigantic man-made reservoirs. In the Stanley Basin alone there are over a thousand lakes! And in the whole State there are more lakes than have ever been counted, lakes that have never been seen by man, except from an airplane.

Once you get off the main traveled roads you will find the streams and lakes teeming with fish. There are rainbow trout, steelheads, cutthroat, speckled, bull trout, bass, catfish and perch. Salmon, up to twenty pounds in weight, are speared in the Salmon River.

As for the big game, a recent census indicates that the State has a hundred thousand deer, fifteen thousand antelope, twenty thousand elk, two thousand bears, fifteen hundred moose, five thousand mountain goats, two thousand mountain sheep, and over a thousand mountain lions. This doesn't take into account other predatory animals, such as wolves, coyotes, bobcats, et cetera.

The two big-game hunting areas, the Chamberlain Basin and Selway are perhaps the finest of their kind in the country. Here you will find deer, as well as on the Salmon River and up the headwaters of the Payette and Boise Rivers, and still farther north in the Priest River and the Kaniksu section. In some of the national parks the deer are protected all year, and in others there are open seasons.

There are two great—and well-

publicized—herds of fine antelope. You've undoubtedly seen them fed in the newsreels. They range in the Pahsimeroi Valley and in the southwest corner of Owyhee County. You can shoot them during a short season in the Pahsimeroi Valley. They are getting too thick and are eating fenced crops, and the government wants to scatter the herd.

Idaho also has smaller game which you can exercise your guns and traps on. You will find the beaver, otter, fisher, weasel, badger, skunk, porcupine, packrat, gopher and woodchuck.

You can get plenty of exercise for your shotgun on the wealth of game birds in Idaho. The State's most famous bird is the Chinese, or ring-necked, pheasant. This is a beautiful and very game bird, and its numbers are increasing in the State. Also there are several varieties of grouse.

There are tens of thousands of ducks, many of which stay on the countless lakes the year round instead of migrating.

The ducks favor the Lake Lowell country where they can be seen in mile-long masses. They also haunt the lakes in the northern parts of the State around the Hoodoo region. In the southwestern territory they may be found around Gray's Lake and Mud Lake and on the Snake River.

You can see that you picked a hunter's and fisherman's paradise when you decided to try your luck in Idaho, Ray Baker. Good luck to you!

We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North supplies accurate information about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains, and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to enclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

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

# MINES AND MINING

By

J. A.

THOMPSON



**D**ON'T let Death Valley fool you. You can catch winter snow flurries in the upper reaches of the Panamint Range, those lonely, precipitous mountains that form the towering west wall of the salt-caked valley bottom. Nevertheless the Panamints are a good winter prospecting bet for anyone looking for an interesting off-the-trail mineralized terrain in which to search for paying deposits of gold, silver, or other metal ores.

Just be sure you have plenty of blankets along and some warm clothing. Nights are cold, but the days crisp and bracing. Ideal for outdoor work.

"I would like to try prospecting in the Panamints on the western edge of Death Valley this winter," writes J. King, from Portland, Oregon. "Is it hot down there all year round? What about gold chances? How big is the range? I imagine there ought to be some back country left in those mountains where a fellow could get out and do some virtually pioneer prospecting. Am I right? In short, the lowdown on the Panamints, please, and particularly answers to the questions I have asked."

We have already explained about

the climate, King. It is altitude that makes it chilly in the Panamints, that spectacular crested ridge of mountains averaging about nine thousand five hundred feet above sea level. Down at Furnace Creek Ranch in Death Valley itself mean winter temperature is about sixty degrees Fahrenheit.

Gold? Oh, yes. You might make another find like the old O. B. Joyful Mine, discovered in the south fork of Tuber Canyon, which had a reported production of between two hundred thousand dollars and three hundred thousand dollars when it was first worked just prior to the turn of the century. High-grade ore, that was. Or a mine like the Cecil R., about four miles south of Ballarat, and a mile east of the main road in Panamint Valley. The Cecil R. showed narrow veins, and not too long ago a shipment of two tons of selected, hand-picked ore was made which is said to have yielded two hundred and fifty dollars a ton in gold.

There are plenty of other mines scattered about the extensive terrain which marks the Panamint Range, a huge mountain block roughly a hundred miles long.

Incidentally, most of the mines

and prospects seem to have been located along the western slopes of the range, possibly because the mountains are well-nigh inaccessible from the east, or Death Valley side. Even the west face is no picnic. Only a few canyon roads, and some high rough trails traverse the range. Down towards the southern end of the mountains, Ballarat, once a booming silver center, is about the only regular settlement in the area. For awhile Ballarat was almost deserted, but it has been picking up again lately. About two million dollars in silver has come from this section.

Quite a few large canyons cut into the range, and most of them are steep and rugged. In some places the canyon walls rise vertically hundreds of feet.

Though you can't expect much rainfall in an arid part of the country such as southeastern California where the Panamints uprear themselves above the desert floor, remember that such rain as does come, comes in bunches. Winter or summer you are apt to encounter a terrific cloudburst in the mountains. Therefore watch your camp sites. Don't set up a tent, or go to desert mountain housekeeping in a canyon bottom where a sudden, roaring, avalanche of water, rolling boulders before it as if they were pebbles, can sweep your belongings away like so much matchwood—and you too, should you be trapped between rock walls that can't be scaled.

J. B., of Little Rock, Arkansas, asks us about the likelihood of prospecting for placer gold in sections where the mountains have undergone glacial action in prehistoric times.

Glaciers, J. B., play hob with the usual rules of stream concentration. As a matter of fact, since their slow movement, accompanied by intense pressure tends to scrape off all loose débris and soil without sorting it at all, just pushing it along, glaciers are a poor agency for the concentration of placer gold. Such gold as might be derived from the outcrops of small veins is simply mixed in with large masses of earth, rather than sorted and concentrated as it is by the action of running water in a stream bed.

Glaciers may even do worse. Sometimes those gigantic tongues of ice pushing down a narrow valley which already contained gold-bearing gravel have gouged out the entire mass clear to bedrock and later deposited it all mixed up with its own rock and dirt, the previous paying concentration being scattered practically to the four corners of the earth in the process.

On the other hand streams formed by melting glaciers running through the material they have carried before them may form placer deposits of their own from the gold particles contained in the débris. But it is the glacial stream that does it—not the glacier itself.

We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.



# The HOLLOW TREE

Conducted by HELEN RIVERS



**T**HIS week our first letter is from a mother who has profited from her daughter's example—instead of the other way 'round. We published Wanda's letter some time ago and she made so many nice friends through the Hollow Tree that her mother has decided to see what Miss Rivers could do for her. We're tickled to death to hear from you, Mrs. Moore, and we're mighty sure you'll catch up to Wanda in no time. Here is her letter—and a chance for all you mothers to get acquainted.

Dear Miss Rivers:

My daughter wrote to the Hollow Tree some time ago asking for Pen Pals. She has had letters from all over the world and is quite pleased, so I thought there might be a few older folks who would care to strike up a "letter acquaintance" with her "Ma"! Nothing like trying anyway, and I love to write letters as well as receive them. My girls are grown up now and though I'm working, I still have time to write letters. I've lived in California for thirty of my forty-four years and will answer all questions about it. I love the mountains and we go camping some place every few weeks. Well, here's hoping I get lots of letters so I can catch up

with Wanda.—Mrs. Marguerite Moore, 712 Baruch Street, San Gabriel, California

*This isn't any "blarney" either—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

Won't you please help me get in touch with Pen Pals in any country by publishing this letter in the Hollow Tree? I am a young Irishman at present living in England, and I find it very lonely at times. I am twenty-eight years old and have dark hair and a fresh complexion. Won't someone please write to me?—Andrew Wilson, 1 Liversidge Road, Higher Traunere, Birkenhead, England

*Merle promises to answer all letters—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely miss of fourteen years and am in the eighth grade in school. I would like to hear from boys and girls all over the world, so come on and write to me. I promise to answer all letters.—Merle Goodson, Prairie, Mississippi

*Don't let this lonely hombre down—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am thirty-eight years old and an old reader of Western Story and when I buy a copy I always turn to the Old Holla first. This is my first attempt at writing to you and I'm hoping to hear from anybody who cares to write to this lonesome hombre. I promise to answer all letters and since I have traveled through thirty-nine of our States, I'm sure I can write some interesting letters. I enjoy outdoor life and would especially like to hear from ranchmen in Idaho or Nevada who would be interested in a man to work on a ranch while doing a little trapping as a side line. Please don't let this Texan down now—let me hear from you coppers and cowgirls.—Bill Bailey, 324 N. Ervay Street, Dallas, Texas

*Only those living in Africa need write to this Scotch lassie—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

You have helped me get some Pen Pals before, and I was very pleased with them. Now I would like some more about twenty-two years old who live in Africa.—Helen Mackintosh, 6 Clarendon Street, Glasgow, N. W., Scotland

*Bill is back to renew acquaintances—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have not written to the Tree in several years and am wondering if I could edge my way back in. I am a lonesome CCC boy three thousand miles away from home. I have been in thirty-five of the forty-eight States and in two foreign countries. My favorite hobby is writing letters and collecting snapshots. I promise to answer all letters and exchange snaps with those who send them to me. I would like to hear from all pals between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five. I'll be waiting patiently to hear from you.—Bill Compton, Company Clerk, Camp Alkali Lake, DG-91, Valley Falls, Oregon

***There's always room here for a pal with a happy-go-lucky disposition—***

Dear Miss Rivers:

Is there room in your club for a happy-go-lucky Canadian girl who is just craving Pen Pals? I am five feet, two inches tall, have brown hair and eyes and am interested in all sports. I promise to answer all letters and will exchange snapshots. So come on, girls and boys, sling a little ink my way.—Delphine Refuse, New Ross, Lun County, Nova Scotia

***Fort Ethan Allen sends us another recruit—***

Dear Miss Rivers:

Please help me out by publishing this plea for Pen Pals. My hobby is writing letters and my favorite sports are hunting and fishing. I will write to everyone who answers me and will also exchange snapshots providing I receive one first. Don't let me down.—Thomas J. DeCosta, 2nd Bn, Hq. Btry., Seventh F. A., Forth Ethan Allen, Vermont

***This "Aussie" will exchange pictures and stamps—***

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am writing you in the hope that some boys and girls will drop me a line. I am twenty-one years old and live on a farm although I work in a shop. My hobby is collecting stamps and coins and I am also interested in amateur photography. Now then, pals, I'm expecting letters from all over the world, so don't disappoint me. I'll send you lots of pictures, stamps, et cetera.—Nan Bond, "Landevier," Heywood, Victoria, Australia

***Her heart is in the West—***

Dear Miss Rivers:

I wonder if you can spare a little space in the Old Hollow Tree for a Pennsylvania Dutch girl? I am thirteen years old and writing letters is my hobby. I would especially like to hear from girls living in Western States and foreign countries. You see, I traveled through the Western States and enjoyed it so much that I want to have Pen Pals living in them. I will exchange snapshots with anyone who wishes.—Virginia Shaw, R. F. D. No. 2, Allentown, Pennsylvania

***Young or old, write to Paul—***

Dear Miss Rivers:

Here I am knocking at your door with an appeal for Pen Pals. I am twenty-five years old and would like to receive letters from all over the United States, so come along, young or old, and fill my mailbox full. I can tell you many interesting things about Canada.—Paul Burke, Foundry Street, P. O. Box 83, Sackville, New Brunswick, West. County, Canada

***Nancy's letter wastes no words—***

Dear Miss Rivers:

I'm fifteen years old and would love to hear from Pen Pals from everywhere. I will exchange snapshots, postcards and souvenirs, and guar-

antee prompt replies to all your letters, so come on, boys and girls, sling some ink my way. I'll be waiting!—Nancy Quattone, 250 Newton Street, Salamanca, New York

***Introducing the first jockey we've ever had in the Old Holla—***

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am thirty years old and a jockey by profession although at the present time I am here on a farm in Washington, convalescing from an accident I had while riding in a race at Santa Anita. I am five feet, two inches tall and would like to hear from people about my height, because like most small people, I am sensitive about it. My first and last loves are thoroughbred horses. I have been riding since 1922 and anyone who loves horses will understand how I feel about them. I enjoy traveling and have circled the globe once and may start again next year—it depends on how well I do at the track. Here's hoping I receive lots and lots of letters.—Larry Kelly, Box 154, Route No. 2, Ridgefield, Washington

***Better remedy this situation—***

Dear Miss Rivers:

I'm a young soldier with lots of time for letter writing and nobody to write to. I've answered many letters in the Old Holla without success, so how about putting me on the receiving end for awhile? I am twenty-four years old and my hobby is stamp collecting. I am also interested in nature study and the Spanish language. Softball, swimming, hiking and roller skating are my favorite sports. I can tell you all many interesting things about army life, and about San Francisco and Texas, which is my native State.—William Raitley, Company B, Thirtieth Infantry, Presidio of San Francisco, California

***Here's an outdoor girl from Wisconsin—***

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am seventeen years old, go to high school, and would like to hear from anyone—anywhere. I enjoy outdoor sports more than anything—especially swimming, and also like dancing and reading. Come on, boys and girls, write to me.—Irene Matheson, South Alameda Street, Marinette, Wisconsin

***These two CCC boys have plenty of time to write letters—***

Dear Miss Rivers:

We are two lonely CCC boys eighteen years old and would sure like to have our plea for Pen Pals published. We are both night guards at a park fifteen miles from nowhere, so we have lots of time to write letters and read Western Story Magazine. Come on, boys and girls, don't be afraid to write.—Frank Leach and Clifford Grote, Company 3604, Camp Gibbs, Iron River, Michigan

***Delilah collects songs—***

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am fifteen years old and live on the edge of a small town and would like to hear from people in the Western States—especially California. I like to read and write letters. Also sing and as a hobby collect songs.—Delilah Buckwalter, Rout No. 3, Mount Carroll, Illinois

# MISSING DEPARTMENT

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.

**COLLIER, FLORENCE and CALVIN**—They are eighteen and twelve years old respectively, and when last heard of about eight years ago they were at the Riverview Home in Omaha, Nebraska. Any information concerning their whereabouts will be appreciated by their aunt, Nettie A. Arnold, Box 442, Cezard, Nebraska.

**THOMPSON, MARGARET**—When last heard from in 1909 she was doing housework in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Information concerning her or her family will be appreciated. I have good news for her. I believe she was living in Rhylander, Wisconsin, in 1909. Send all information to Mrs. Jessie Duffield, Box 395, Baker, Montana.

**HUNDLEY, ALBERT MYLES**—He is five feet, five inches tall, weighs about one hundred and fifty pounds and has brown eyes and hair. He was last heard from in July, 1936, when he was in Detroit, Michigan. Any information will be greatly appreciated. Write to Miss Lorraine Ethel Brooks, Afton, Michigan.

**HALL, FRED M.**—Last heard from in Tampico, Mexico, in December, 1923 or 1924. He was drilling an oil well. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please tell him to write to his pal, "L. P." in care of the Missing Department, Western Story Magazine.

**MASSEY, MARY**—She is about forty-three years old, five feet eight inches tall, weighs two hundred and twenty-five pounds, and has dark-blond hair, blue eyes and a fair complexion. She was last heard from three years ago in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Anyone knowing her whereabouts, please write to me. Oscar Nolen, Route No. 2, Waterloo, Alabama.

**ATTENTION, OLD-TIMERS**—Please turn back to 1890. I would like to hear from any of the following who were all riding for the U T 7 Ranch, which was owned by the Liggett & Myers Company. The home ranch was located near the Custer Battlefield and the Crow Indian Agency, Montana. Desk Smith, general foreman; Bob Majors, John Mabury; Dave Denslow, bed-wagon driver; Harry Arnold, roundup cook; Billy Votough, horse wrangler; Dunk McDonald; Fred Mobly; Billy Buzzard; Ike Patton; Jim Burnett and Charles W. Fleming, who won the Montana State Championship at Billings for bronco riding. Write to Walter E. Palmer, 4425 North Figueroa Street, Los Angeles, California.

**WIDDICOMB, JOHN**—His nickname was Shrimp, and he was last heard of in 1918 in Muskegon, Michigan. He may have some relatives living in Marinette, Wisconsin. If anyone knows his whereabouts, will they please tell him to write to an old friend, Myrtle Barrett, in care of the Missing Department, Western Story Magazine.

**HOLT, DREW**—He is my father, whom I have never seen. He is about sixty or sixty-five years old and was last heard of in 1919 or 1920. He has twin daughters living in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. If anyone knows his whereabouts, tell him to get in touch with his daughter, Bertha Louise. Or if any of his relatives see this, write to me. Mrs. Bertha Martin, Ames, Oklahoma.

**ESTEVEZ, JOSEPH MARIA**—He is about fifty-nine years old and was born in Silva, Valencia County, N. M., Portugal. He came to the United States in 1907 and worked in Rome, New York, for a while, and then in Pennsylvania. About 1909 he was reported to have started for California. Anyone having any information concerning his whereabouts, please get in touch with his brother, Alfred Stevens, 303 Hubbell Street, Utica, New York.

**MAHON, BOB or JIMMIE DRANE**—Last Christmas he was somewhere in Nebraska. "Bob, who don't you write to Sam and Sylvia?" Anyone knowing his whereabouts, please write to Mrs. Sam Sayre, Box 660, Enid, Oklahoma.

**SANTINI, LOUIS**—He left Italy forty years ago, and when last heard from was somewhere in South America. He is seventy-six years old now. His brother, Virgilio, would like to get in touch with him. Anyone having any information concerning his whereabouts, please get in touch with his nephew, Victor Santini, Box 343, Hancock, Ohio.

**NOTICE**—My brother Olivius, who used either Elson, Evenson, or Grefson as a last name, left home in 1884 for the Black Hills in South Dakota. I think he homesteaded there. He also operated a saloon in Aberdeen for a short time. I would like to know what has become of him, so if anyone has any information concerning his whereabouts, please communicate with me. Mrs. John Haney, 1802 Weeks Avenue, Superior, Wisconsin.

**FRANCIS, HARRY.**—After the War, he and his wife took up government land in the northern part of Alberta. He is about forty-eight years old. Anyone knowing his whereabouts, please communicate with me, or anyone whose last name is Francis, write to me. Mrs. Clyde Riggle, El Cajon, California.

**LEACH, JESSE LEON.**—He is my father, and I haven't seen him since I was six years old. He is about thirty-five years old, six feet tall, and has blue eyes and blond hair. If anyone knows his whereabouts, tell him to write to his daughter, Frances Leach, Box 107, Mill City, Oregon.

**STEPHENSON, CLARENCE H.**—He was last heard from in January, 1930, at which time he was working at the Columbian Club in Dallas, Texas. He is forty-three years old and served in the World War. If anyone knows his whereabouts, tell him to write to Ida M. White, 1214 W. Norris Street, Topeka, Kansas.

**WASHINGTON, ED.**—When last heard from he was in Fullerton, California. If anyone has any information concerning his whereabouts, please write to his sister, Mrs. Sally Robbins, Route No. 2, Box 232, Chouchilla, California.

**MILLSAP, STAYTON FRANK.**—He is my brother and was last heard of in Lodge Grass, Montana, in 1923. He is forty years old and has worked as a cowboy all his life. He has light hair, only one eye, which is blue, and his nose is decidedly crooked. Anyone having any information, please communicate with me, William T. Millsap, 78 East Second South, Salt Lake, Utah.

**MANSEAU, WILMER O.**—He is thirty years old, five feet ten inches tall, has brown eyes and hair, a fair complexion, and small mustache. I have not heard from him since February 24, 1938, at which time he was in Chicago, looking for a job. He wrote that if he didn't find one there he'd go elsewhere. He was ill at that time, having almost frozen to death and lost three toes from his right foot. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please tell him to come home or write to his mother. He has a good position awaiting him. Mrs. G. Manseau, 940 Union Street, San Diego, California.

**MEAGER, JACK.**—He left the CCC Camp at Marienville, Pennsylvania, the week after Labor Day for Chicago, Illinois, where he had taken a job. He is about five feet eight inches tall, weighs a hundred and fifty-five pounds, has black hair and dark eyes. He is of slender build and has some fingers missing from his right hand. He is about twenty years old. If anyone knows his address, please let me know at once, as it is important for me to get in touch with him. Write to Aravelia Hartzell, Box 357, Oil City, Pennsylvania.

**KELLY, PERRY.**—He was last heard of in 1927. He and a son, R. H. Kelly, made a trip to Moxmouh, Illinois, to see another brother who was ill. He used to work on a silver-fox farm in Denver, Colorado. He also has a married daughter, Mrs. Glen Davis, whose husband was a Piggly-Wiggly store manager in Denver. Anyone having any information, please write to his sister, Mrs. E. S. Perrine, Route No. 1, Effingham, Kansas.



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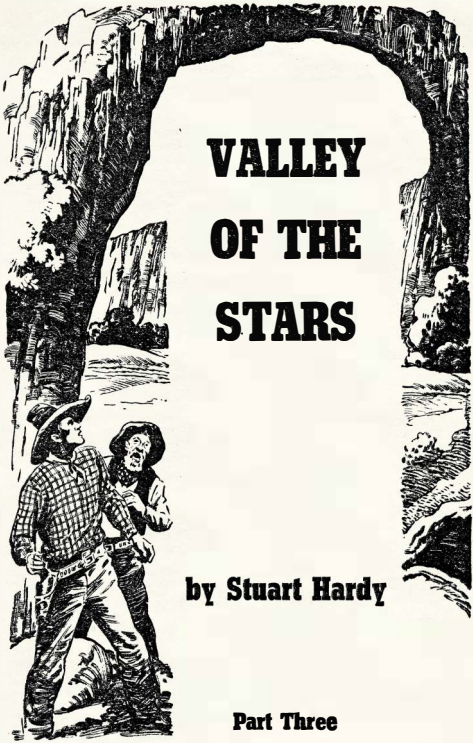
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Address.....Dec. 17th issue

Here are the names of the stories I liked best in this issue:

First..... Third.....

Second..... Fourth.....



# **VALLEY OF THE STARS**

**by Stuart Hardy**

**Part Three**

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## Valley Of The Stars

### *The Story So Far:*

**A**FTER serving a ten-year sentence for a crime of which he was innocent, Rick Cardigan is released from prison. He is on his way home when a girl stops him on the road and tells him to go to a livery stable in the next town. He does so, and to his bewilderment, the owner gives him a fine horse, saddled and completely outfitted, and tells him the girl left it for him. Rick's only clue to the identity of his benefactor is the brand on the horse.

At home Rick discovers that his family's fortunes are tragically changed. His father has been a fugitive from justice since he killed a sheriff in a range dispute years before. His mother, unable to make their ranch pay, has long since sold it and gone to work in a restaurant.

Rick finds an old prospector, Crazy Joe Pyke, waiting for him with a strange story. Eight years before, when he was prospecting in the Sierra Nevadas, Pyke had found a valley, rich with cached gold. Before he could touch the gold, however, a mysterious voice ordered him to find Rick Cardigan and bring him back to the valley. Cardigan, believing that his father might have taken this means to get in touch with him, promises to go with Crazy Joe.

They start off soon after, their immediate destination Los Padres, where Rick has traced the girl who gave him his horse. He confronts the girl, Connie Brace, and demands an explanation. Reluctantly she explains that her father had committed the crime for which he was imprisoned, and that she had wanted to make some kind of restitution.

As they are about to leave Los Padres, Rick and Crazy Joe suddenly learn that they are being trailed by two men, Red Ely and Hackamore Castro, who also know about the Valley of the Stars.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE ROAD TO MYSTERY

**S**OMETHING was wrong. What it was, Rick Cardigan couldn't define, but he suffered a sense of uneasiness that writhed in him wherever he went. It persisted even the day after the rodeo, while he bought

a horse and saddle in the Los Padres livery stable. It was like a black premonition of danger.

The horse he bought was a good one—a sorrel cayuse with a sturdy chest and strong legs. The sight of it brought joy to Crazy Joe's eyes. And Rick himself should have been happy. Particularly since, after making the purchase, he still had enough funds left to buy a good stock of food.

Yet the strange, indefinable conviction that something was wrong continued to torment him.

The crowds had already drifted out of Los Padres. Oppressed by terrific heat, the little town was sinking into its usual summer lethargy. Hackamore Castro and Red Ely had departed, too, but doubts about them lingered with Rick.

"They were lying about huntin' mustangs," he told Crazy Joe bluntly.

"Think so? They're sure a queer couple," Joe admitted, brows contracted. "Been hangin' close as burs to me ever since I met up with 'em in Montana last winter."

"You told them all about the gold?"

"Well—yes."

"That explains it," Rick said tersely. "They been trailin' you. Waitin' for the day when you'd lead the way to that valley. We got to watch for those hombres, Joe—got to watch for them every second, day an' night!"

They were loading their saddlebags in the road while they talked. When at last Rick finished, he turned to his companion.

"Look, Joe," he said, "will you wait for me in town a spell?"

"What for?"

"I—" Rick faltered. "I hanker to go out to talk to Connie Brace again."

"What in tarnation you got to say to her now?" the old man demanded. "I thought your business with her was plumb settled."

"I thought so, too," Rick muttered, peering away at the mountains. "I can't explain it, Joe. I just got to go talk to her again before we leave."

Joe Pyke accepted the inevitable philosophically. Shrugging, he turned back to his horse.

"All right. But there ain't no sense to me waitin' here in Los Padres, so's you'll have to come back five miles. I'll mosey along with you. If you figure to be alone with Miss Brace, I'll wait a mile or so from her ranch."

So they sent a farewell glance over Los Padres and started slowly through the heavy heat toward the Bent Fork Ranch. If Rick displayed no wish to hurry, it was because he wasn't altogether sure of what he wanted to say to Connie Brace. He knew only that he couldn't leave this country—perhaps forever—without seeing her once again.

He tried, as they rode across dry brown range, to rehearse what he meant to say to her. But the attempt was futile. In the end he gave it up with a snort of disgust.

Half a mile from the Bent Fork ranchhouse a few cottonwoods ringed a hollow. They offered the only shade in miles. Joe Pyke pulled up his horse.

"Reckon this is as cool a spot as I can find to wait in," he said. "Go ahead. An' don't be long. I'm itchin' to get up into those mountains again!"

Rick rode on alone, a thoughtful expression on his set face. Here and there he saw cowpunchers riding lazily among cows. He squinted through the heat haze, wondering

if Gil Potter was one of them. He had no wish to encounter the man again. Every meeting resulted in a fight, and he'd had enough of that.

There was no sign of Potter, however. When Rick finally dismounted at the ranchhouse, the storm in his chest had nothing to do with any feeling of physical danger. It was concerned only with the girl who rose from her chair on the porch and quickly came down the steps.

**R**ICK drew off his sombrero as he walked toward her. He thought she looked lovelier than ever. Her coppery hair shone in the sunshine, and her ivory skin was smooth and faintly rosy.

"Howdy, ma'am," he began.

Connie Brace stood still before him. "Well?" she asked.

Rick scowled down into the brim of his dusty sombrero. "I'm leavin' Los Padres," he said. "Probably forever. I hankered to say a word before I left."

She was silent, waiting. He could sense the tension that gripped the girl—a tension almost as compelling as his own.

"Miss Brace"—he looked at her levelly—"I reckon I owe you an apology."

"I don't see why."

"For the way I acted the other night. Returning your horse, I mean, an' seemin'—well, unappreciative. Believe me, it wasn't that I didn't appreciate everything you tried to do. But when you said your father knew I was in jail those ten years, an'—an' never did anything about it, reckon I plumb lost my temper. I didn't want any gift from his family. I still don't. But I've cooled down a bit other ways." A crooked grin tugged at

his lips. "I didn't want you to feel there was anything personal against you in the way I acted."

"That's all right," she said quietly. "I understand."

"It was mighty decent o' you to ride up to Oklahoma to give me a horse. That part of it I'll never forget."

Connie Brace looked away to the mountains. She was silent so long that the silence became awkward. Finally she turned back to him.

"You're heading back for Oklahoma?"

Rick shook his head. "No. My partner an' me, we're pushin' up into the Sierra Nevadas, huntin' gold."

"Oh? I thought you said something the other day about aiming to be a rancher."

"If I find gold up there," he said, "I figure there'll be enough of it to help me buy a spread. I'd sort o' like to see my mother back on her own outfit, after years o' bein' without a home."

"Your mother?" The girl's eyes were puzzled. "I didn't know you had a mother. I'd never heard—"

"Folks generally do have mothers," he said with a wry grin.

"What I mean is—why, I never even knew your name!" Connie Brace sounded confused. "Believe me, if I'd realized you had a mother somewhere, I—I'd have tried to do something for her while you were in jail." She stopped, then cried, "Who are you, anyhow? So far, I've known you only as John Doe and Oklahoma Bill."

"Name's Rick Cardigan," he said gently. And then an idea came to him like a flash of inspiration. It made him step closer to the girl, and his gaze became even more earnest. "Listen, Miss Brace, you really mean you'd have done some-

thing for my ma if you'd known about her?"

"Of course!"

"Maybe I'll take advantage o' that offer now"

"How—how do you mean?"

Again Rick indicated the mountains. "I don't know how long I'll be up there. A few weeks if all goes well. But there's trouble trailin' me, an' I may never come out alive."

"You don't mean this Gil Potter who's workin' for me—" she gasped, alarmed.

"No, not him," Rick said dryly. "But two other buzzards have a notion my partner an' me are goin' to lead them plumb into a bonanza. All they've got to do to get their hands on gold is foller us into the Sierra Nevadas. These two polecats are probably bringin' plenty friends along to help them do some shooting, if it comes to a showdown. Maybe my partner an' me will be lucky an' come out with the gold. Maybe we won't. If I'm plugged up there, I'd kind of like to know my ma is being looked after by somebody. She's getting mighty old."

With a rush of sympathy Connie Brace blurted, "You know you can count on me to do anything—"

"I sure appreciate that," he told her gravely. "There's nothing you can do *now*. But I'll make this bargain with you: When I come out of the mountains I'll write you a note to tell you I'm safe. If you hear from me you can forget all about my ma. But if you don't hear from me within the next—well, say, the next six weeks—then you'll know something's gone wrong. In that case, I—" He faltered, and a hot flush burned in his cheeks. "If you still feel you'd like to do something for me, you



might switch the favor to my ma. Just see that—that she gets along. She's in Armadillo Flats."

Impulsively, Connie Brace thrust out her hand and he found himself clasping it. Her grip was warm and reassuring.

"You can count on me—Rick."

"Thanks."

"If I don't hear from you within six weeks I'll get in touch with your mother. That's a bargain. But"—her hand fell away from his, and she shook her head anxiously—"I hope nothing's going to happen to you up there!"

"Don't worry, ma'am," he said with a grin. "I'm a pretty fair shot with a six-gun. I may have to use a few slugs before I'm through, but I got a hunch I'll come out all right. Meanwhile, adios and thanks again."

**W**HEN he rejoined Crazy Joe Pyke in the hollow, Rick's mood was completely changed. He seemed buoyant and carefree. The rollicking grin on his features mystified the old prospector.

"What's happened?" demanded Crazy Joe. "You look like you had a good drink."

"No. I just feel fine. How about it? Do we start?"

"Do we start!" Crazy Joe scrambled to his feet and hurried to his horse. "I been waitin' eight years to start! We can't move any too soon to suit me."

So they loped off together in the direction of the distant Sierra Nevadas, hanging like dark storm clouds on the horizon. Strangely enough, Rick's thoughts were not on the Valley of the Stars. Instead they went back to Connie Brace—and the sensation of having her hand clasped warm within his own.

"A while ago I spotted Hacka-

more Castro and Red Ely," Crazy Joe Pyke said suddenly.

"Eh?" Rick, snatched out of reverie, blinked at him. "Where?"

"I heard horses pounding, so I climbed out o' the holler for a look-see. They were about half a mile away. But I recognized them, all right."

"Goin' which way?"

"Toward the Sierras," the old man said grimly.

"Just the two o' them?"

"Yep. Reckon if they figure to hitch up with others, they're meetin' them ahead, like they said."

"Maybe we better take a round-about way," Rick said thoughtfully. "If we can shake them off our trail now, at the outset, we'll probably save a lot o' trouble later."

"Suits me fine," Crazy Joe agreed. "The less I see o' these tarantulas from now on, the happier I'll be. I always figured they was stickin' a little too close to me for comfort. From now on we'll be better off alone."

Instead of proceeding straight toward the Sierra Nevadas, therefore, they swung right. By nightfall, Crazy Joe argued, they could change their direction again. A zigzag course would be their wisest precaution.

Rick glanced at the old man searchingly. "You sure you can find this Valley o' the Stars after eight years?"

"Find it?" Crazy Joe lifted his eyes to white-hot skies. "Son, when I came away from it eight years ago, I blazed a trail. I left my mark on trees. But even without that I could find it again. I remember every foot o' the way. So would you if—if you'd come from a spot where you'd heard the voice o' God!"

The words sent a curious chill

through Rick. "You really believe that, don't you?" he said quietly.

"You'll believe it, too, when you hear the voice."

"I don't know—"

"I tell you I was standing there plumb in the middle o' nowhere! There wasn't a man within a hundred miles. Couldn't have been. An' yet that voice was right in my ear!"

"You—you hadn't had a sunstroke or anything like that?"

"I was as sane then as I am today." Crazy Joe laughed bitterly. "Oh, I know folks think I'm loco. But you wait an' see, Rick. You wait till you get your eyes on that gold! Maybe you'll hear the voice, too. I ain't crazy!"

They rode in silence after that. What they couldn't know was that a mile behind another man—one who had agreed to ride with Castro and Red Ely—was following them. This man rode cautiously, always managing to keep a ridge or two between himself and the two ahead. He was satisfied to keep his eye on their dust rather than on their figures.

He was a young man with a knife scar distorting the left side of his face. It lifted one corner of his mouth, so that he seemed perpetually to be sneering. His name was Rance Turner, and his orders were to trail these two into the Sierras before coming to summon Ely and Hackamore Castro.

"Once we know what trail they take through the mountains," Castro had muttered, "we don't have to worry. We can follow them easy. An' there ain't much chance o' their spottin' us in them badlands."

So Rance Turner rode with great caution.

And a mile ahead Crazy Joe Pyke led Rick Cardigan closer and closer to the Valley of the Stars.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE TRUEBERRYS

**E**XACTLY how many miles lay between Los Padres and the Valley of the Stars, Crazy Joe Pyke didn't know. He estimated that the trip would take close to three weeks each way.

"We better make as much distance a day as we can at the start," he counseled. "After a while, when we get up into them mountains, it's goin' to be hard goin'. We'll be lucky to make five miles a day some places. Toward the end—when we get near the valley itself—we won't be able to take the horses at all. We'll have to leave 'em staked and climb on foot."

On the second day they left the range and a strip of broiling desert behind and penetrated a region of badlands which, Crazy Joe asserted, bordered Death Valley.

The badlands, where only cactus and junipers grew, carried them up into the Sierra foothills. There they penetrated a region of scrub oak and sycamores, with occasional clumps of cottonwoods; and enjoyed two days of fairly quick travel.

During all that time they never had a glimpse of the men who were trailing them. A dozen times a day Rick Cardigan, still upset by that sense of unease, would pause on some ridge, shade his eyes, and peer back over the boulder-strewn country they had crossed. Once or twice he imagined he saw a distant speck of dust which might indicate a rider. But he never could be sure. He never actually saw any other men.

With Los Padres a week behind,

Rick and Crazy Joe found themselves in the heart of the Sierra Nevadas.

The country was rugged and beautiful. When Rick looked upward at peaks that were purple and green and brown, he had a sense of majesty that could not be expressed. For Rick Cardigan the vastness of this region was awe-inspiring. After ten years in the confines of a prison cell he had a feeling of being in a realm that was unreal and inconceivable.

Not that he hadn't ever traveled through mountains before. But ten years of imprisonment, he discovered, made a considerable difference in his attitude toward them.

"If I remember right," Crazy Joe said late one afternoon, while they washed their sweat-soaked clothes at a stream, "we'll be hittin' an abandoned cabin an' corrals pretty soon. I spent the night there last time I passed."

"Don't tell me there was once a ranch in this wilderness!"

"Not a ranch. I don't know who built the place, but there was corrals around it, all right. Reckon horse hunters used to make it their headquarters."

Twice during the past week they had actually seen bands of wild horses, both times in distant valleys. Once Joe Pyke had chuckled, "Watch." Though he'd been almost half a mile from the horses, he lifted his six-gun and fired a single shot.

A couple of seconds later, when the mustangs caught the sound, they darted away in a mad stampede. From the heights of a cliff on which Joe and Rick sat, the horses far below seemed to develop the speed and the panic of jackrabbits. They kept going until they plunged into oblivion beyond a far bend in the valley.

WS—8B

IT seemed to Rick Cardigan, as they pressed on, ever upward, that he was thousands of miles from civilization. It was cool here in the timber, and he heard the songs of birds he had never known before. There were myriads of gayly colored wildflowers on mountain slopes, and when the wind poured across them, it brought a scent that intoxicated him with its sweetness.

Just before sundown Crazy Joe reined in his bony mare, leaned forward over the saddlehorn, and pointed.

"See? There's the cabin I told you about."

Rick saw it then. Made of rough logs, it was almost concealed by the cottonwoods that grew around it. There were a couple of corrals with tumbledown fences, and as Rick squinted, two horses appeared in one of those corrals, venturing out from behind the branches of a low tree.

"Doggone," gasped Joe Pyke, rising in his stirrups. "There's somebody in the place!"

Rick scowled with a quick premonition of danger.

"Wonder if our horse-huntin' friends have got here ahead of us," he muttered. "Come on, Joe! We got to have a look. I don't hanker to have those hombres so close to us. Wouldn't trust 'em farther than I could shoot."

There was a feeling of strain upon them as they proceeded toward the ramshackle cabin. They watched the windows of the shack with narrowed eyes.

Of a sudden, when they were within fifty feet of the cabin, its door creaked open. Two tall men stepped out with rifles resting on their arms.

They were lanky and lean-bodied,

one old, one young. Both looked tight-lipped and forbidding. They stood silent, waiting for the visitors to advance. Rick saw that their left hands rested close to their rifles' trigger guards.

"Hi," he called and lifted his hand in greeting.

The older man, whose face had a shaggy black beard, nodded curtly. "Hi," he answered.

"Kind o' wondered," Rick went on, stopping his horse, "who might be livin' here. My partner tells me that a few years ago this place was deserted."

"My boys an' me," the older man replied in a voice that seemed to rumble out of the depths of his stomach, "been livin' here two-three years. Reckon that makes the place ours as much as anybody's."

"Nobody's doubtin' you," laughed Rick. "Or tryin' to drive you out." He swung from his saddle easily. "Notice you got a nice stream runnin' behind the cabin. Mind if we water our horses an' fill our canteens?"

"Go ahead."

The younger man, clean-shaven, but just as rawboned as his father, spoke out bluntly. "What you hombres huntin'?"

"Just prospectin'," Joe Pyke said.

"For horses?"

"No. For—gold."

The mountaineers glanced at each other. Then the older man, hitching up the shoulder strap of his overalls, grunted and spat tobacco juice from a corner of his mouth.

"Ain't no gold up in these Sierras," he said flatly.

"Maybe we'll find that out for ourselves," Rick conceded. "Meanwhile, we're huntin'."

Still suspicious and frowning, the boy snapped, "You sure you ain't out for horses?"

"Absolutely. If we was huntin' horses we'd be here with a bigger party."

That seemed to ease the tension. The men at the cabin relaxed visibly. They said nothing more until the horses had been watered. Then the man with the beard surprised Rick by saying:

"If you're just prospectin' through these hills, you're welcome to spend the night. We'll have supper in half an hour."

"That's mighty nice o' you," Rick answered. "We'd appreciate stayin'."

The bearded man nodded. "Name o' Dan'l C. Trueberry," he announced. "This is my son Enoch." As he spoke he put down the stock of his rifle. It was, manifestly, a sign of peace.

They shook hands, and Rick introduced himself and Crazy Joe.

"You can unsaddle them brons and put 'em in one o' the corrals," said Dan'l C. Trueberry. Something in his bearded face softened. "We don't get visitors often. When we do, we like to make the most of 'em. Hear what's goin' on in the world. Only we got to be sure"—his voice hardened—"sure they ain't huntin' mustangs. Those damn hunters—we ain't got no use for 'em."

WHAT these two mountaineers objected to in mustang hunters, Rick and Crazy Joe didn't discover until they sat at a supper of rabbit stew in the cabin. It was then that they learned Trueberry and his three sons—he had two more who were out hunting mustangs—had been gathering horses, which they sold down in the cow country. Twice during the past few years their traps had been raided by horse thieves. On one occasion they'd had to shoot



*"Keep still, hom-  
bre," Trueberry  
warned. "You  
ain't goin' into  
that valley!"*

it out with the raiders, and two of the Trueberrys had been wounded. So it was that they regarded all strangers with suspicion.

"But you two," Dan'l C. Trueberry declared, "look all right. We'll be right glad to have you stay."

There were several things in the cabin that astonished Rick. For one thing, he saw a shelf of books. When he glanced at them after supper he found two copies of the Bible. Trueberry, noticing his surprise, gave him a thin-lipped smile.

"We're God-fearin' folks," he explained. "I tried to bring my sons up right."

It might have been a pleasant visit were it not for the fact that Crazy Joe got drunk that night. Trueberry had produced a jug of something he called cider. He had

made it himself. And after Crazy Joe had sampled the jug several times, with delighted smackings of his lips, he became a bit tipsy.

He became garrulous, too. In fact, he was so intent on talking with the gaunt Dan'l C. Trueberry that, when Rick decided to go to sleep, the gray-bearded old man chuckled and said, "Me, I'm havin' too good a time. Go ahead. Snooze, if you like. I'll turn in after a spell."

So Rick Cardigan, grinning, went to sleep—and was roused a couple of hours later by the hard, vicious jab of a rifle against his ribs.

He sat up with a wild start. The cabin was dark. Black-bearded Dan'l C. Trueberry stood in front of him, an ominous figure with a rifle in his hands. The man's ex-



pression, even in the darkness, was dangerous. Now he kept the barrel pressed against Rick's pounding heart.

"Don't get any fancy notions about movin'!" he gritted. "Just put your hands behind your back, hombre. Enoch is goin' to bind them up proper!"

Rick sat dumfounded. The only light in the cabin was that of moonbeams falling through the small windows. Yet it was sufficient for him to see that both Dan'l C. Trueberry and his lanky son were in deadly earnest. Enoch stepped behind Rick and began binding his wrists.

"What the devil!" Cardigan blurted as anger rushed into his voice. "What's the idea? I thought you two were plumb friendly!"

"We *were*," Dan'l C. Trueberry corrected grimly. "An' maybe we'll still be friendly if you act like I tell you."

"What's all this mean?"

"While you was asleep your partner got to talkin'. Reckon likker oiled up his tongue plenty. He told us where you two was headin'—to the valley that has the—the voice o' God ringin' through it. The place I call Haunted Valley."

Rick blinked at him. For the moment he forgot that Enoch was tightly securing his wrists.

"You've been there?" he whispered.

"Yes. My boys an' me, we were there."

"And you heard the—the voice?"

"Clear as I'm hearin' yours now. That's why I'm keepin' you out o' the valley!"

Rick shot a sharp glance at the holster he had slung over a peg in the wall. It still hung there, but his six-gun had disappeared.

"I got it," Dan'l C. Trueberry assured him. "When we part com-

pany, I'll return it to you—without slugs."

"You got no right to do this. Can't a man meander where he likes in these mountains?"

TRUEBERRY smiled mysteriously. The moonlight, striking his black-bearded face, showed strange lights in his eyes.

"Maybe so," he whispered. "A man can go most any place he has a mind to—except where the voice o' God tells him he ain't got no business! Your partner told me all about the valley. He said as how there wasn't nothin' could keep you an' him from goin' there. I tried to reason with him last night, while you was asleep. But it didn't do any good. He was stubborn an' drunk. Said you'd be just as stubborn as him, too. You was bound to get there in spite o' hell an' high water. That's why I'm tyin' you up."

"Where's Crazy Joe now?" Rick demanded sharply.

"I got him hamstrung outside. Me an' Enoch, we're goin' to march you two gents some ten-fifteen miles back into the badlands an' leave you there. What's more, we're leavin' you with the warnin' not to come up this way again, that is, if you're headin' for what your partner calls the Valley o' the Stars."

"I got him tied, pa," Enoch said.

What happened during the next few minutes Rick was in no position to prevent. With a rifle jabbing into his ribs again, and his hands helpless behind him, he was marched out of the cabin into cool moonlight. He saw Joe Pyke, bound hand and foot, lying on the ground and cursing violently. Joe was sober now, and his bloodshot eyes were full of rage.



"Doggone you!" he screamed at Trueberry. "If you think you can keep us out o' that valley *this* way, you're loco!"

"Maybe I'm loco," Dan'l C. Trueberry replied in a low voice. "But if you try to go up there again, an' I know about it, may Heaven have mercy on your soul!"

## CHAPTER XVI

### "FRIENDS"

**T**HERE was something mad and implausible about the whole business; something that infuriated Rick Cardigan; but against which he could do nothing.

Prodded by the Trueberry rifles, he and Crazy Joe were forced to straddle their horses. The Trueberrys mounted their own mustangs. In silence the four men moved down the dark trail which would eventually lead out of the mountains.

For more than a mile they rode without talking. Sometimes they crossed patches of moonlight. At such moments Rick looked back, only to see that the black-bearded face of Dan'l C. Trueberry remained grim and uncompromising. The man's rifle, tucked under his arm, still had its barrel pointed straight at Rick's back.

"Mind," Trueberry said at last, "I got nothin' against you two hombres. But I can't let you get up into the valley. An' I reckon I better explain why, so's you won't hold this too much against me."

They continued riding downhill while the old man spoke.

"Three years ago my boys an' I got lost up in the mountains. We hit a stretch o' country we'd never seen before. I don't know how we wandered into that valley, but we did—just by plumb luck. Whether it was good or bad, I can't say

to this day. We camped at the entrance o' the valley and durin' the day we went in to see what it was like. If you've seen it yourself, Pyke, I don't have to tell you it's one o' the most beautiful spots on all God's earth."

"It is that," Crazy Joe agreed devoutly.

"That great natural bridge spreadin' over it, big as a rainbow—I never see anything like it before or since."

"Was that," Rick asked quickly, "where you heard the voice?"

"Uh-huh. Right under the bridge. We all heard it. It spoke clear as I'm talkin' to you now."

Dan'l C. Trueberry's voice became strained and tense.

"I remember every word it said. The words was this: '*Dan'l C. Trueberry, take your boys and go away!*'"

Rick stared at him. "Actually called you by name?"

"By name," the horse hunter avowed solemnly. "Dan'l C. Trueberry, plain as day."

They were silent, and the stillness held a quality of mystery that sent a little shiver through Rick.

"You—you didn't *see* anybody?" he whispered.

"Not a soul."

"An' what happened then?"

"Never was so scared in my life. The boys an' me, we wanted to high-tail right out o' that valley. But just as we got started, the voice said, '*Wait, Dan'l C. Trueberry. Wait. Get down on your knees.*'"

The old man's Adam's apple rose and fell as he gulped.

"We got down on our knees, all right. Doggone quick, too. We couldn't talk. Then the voice went on, '*Dan'l C. Trueberry, where're you from?*' I told him. I said I had a cabin down in the mountains,



just a few miles from the valley. Then the voice said, *'You can stay there, Dan'l. But with this I charge you—that you keep all other men out of this valley. Long as you remain in the mountains, you're not to let anybody else come here.'*

"You just imagined all that!" Rick said with a touch of savage impatience.

"Yeah? My boys heard it, too. We couldn't all four of us have been wrong. We couldn't all have been crazy."

"An' you been keepin' everybody out of the valley since then?"

"You're the first ever tried to get up there. I wouldn't have pulled my rifle on you only Crazy Joe said last night as how nothin' could keep you back. Well, me—I got to keep you back! It's like —like I got an order straight from Heaven. You savvy, don't you?"

**Y**ES, they understood. There was nothing they could say to the old man. They couldn't even hate him for what he was doing. Rick supposed that in his place he might have done the same thing. Yet, despite the shakiness that assailed his nerves, he couldn't help asking:

"Did you have another look-see around the valley before you left it?"

"No."

"So you didn't find any signs o' human beings?"

"None. Except we found a queer kind o' tomahawk. Looked like it had been lyin' there for years an' years. There was some figures carved in the stone head. We couldn't make 'em out. Maybe Indians had been there centuries ago."

Again, for almost a mile, they rode without talking. Finally, with rage in his voice, Crazy Joe flung

out, "Trueberry, you ain't got any right to keep me out o' that valley! I got orders same as you—orders to bring Rick Cardigan there!"

"It sure looks," said Trueberry, "like our orders conflict, don't it?"

"I can't help that!"

Trueberry rode on thoughtfully. He sighed. "Course, after we let you go, you two probably can high-tail through the hills by some round-about way an' find yourselves up near the valley. If you do—"

He didn't finish. At that instant two guns crashed out of brush.

Rick saw the flashes. He cried out in alarm. Though his hands were bound behind his back, he rose high in the stirrups.

Behind him he heard a groan. He turned, wild-eyed, to see Dan'l C. Trueberry topple sideward out of his saddle. The bearded man had pressed both hands to his face. Blood dribbled through his distended fingers. He crashed heavily on stones and lay still.

Enoch, his face dead-white in the moonlight, snapped his rifle to his shoulder. He aimed at the brush and fired.

But as he squeezed his trigger, the two hidden guns blazed again. One of them cracked three times in quick succession.

Enoch caught the slugs in his chest. He screamed and dropped his rifle. His head jerked back and his eyes stared, bulging, at the stars. Then, stiff as a log, he pitched out of the saddle to fall grotesquely across the body of his father.

Rick and Crazy Joe Pyke were stunned and speechless as two figures rose out of the brush. At first they were blurred and indistinct. But as they came out of the shadows of trees, where moonlight splashed full on their faces, Rick gasped.



Red Ely and Hackamore Castro, with six-guns still smoking in their hands, came walking up the trail.

## CHAPTER XVII

### WHAT PRICE RESCUE?

As he came close to the staring men, Red Ely scowled down at the prostrate bodies. Grim of countenance, he turned to look from Crazy Joe to Rick Cardigan.

"Doggone lucky for you," he muttered, "that Hack an' me was camped along this trail."

At last Rick found he could talk. Though his whole being blazed and shook with a sense of outrage, he managed to fling out, "What the devil did you do that for?"

Ely gaped at him.

"What else did you expect us to do? We're friends o' Joe Pyke, ain't we?"

"You had no call to kill those hombraes!"

Hackamore Castro was already loosening the bonds that held Rick and Crazy Joe helpless.

"Seems to me," he declared as he worked, "you ought to be thankful instead o' complainin'. Here was Red an' me, sound asleep, when we heard somebody pokin' along the trail. We wake up an' what do we see? You an' Joe Pyke, hamstrung like mavericks, with two strangers shovin' rifles into your backs. It sure looked like you was bound



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straight for hell. We couldn't stand by an' do *nothin'*, could we? How'd we know these gents wasn't aimin' to pump you full o' lead? We had to shoot."

Rick's wrists were free now. He swung shakily out of the saddle. He stood still, legs parted, and rubbed his bruised hands. In the moonlight his face looked gaunt and haggard.

"Castro—" he began hoarsely, but there was no use going on. His emotions were too stormy and confused.

To be rescued by men he distrusted—it was a situation he hardly knew how to cope with. He had respected the Trueberrys. Their motives had been understandable. What they did, though hostile, had been marked by rugged honesty of purpose.

He fell to his knees beside the sprawled figures. In the moonlight he examined them. There was nothing he could do. They were dead, both of them.

Paradoxically, he found himself hating Hackamore Castro and Red Ely with a venom beyond expression. He couldn't avoid the feeling that he had witnessed deliberate murder; that he had, in a sense, been the cause of it.

He rose stiffly to face them. "You shouldn't have done it!" he rasped. "You could have poked your six-guns at their heads an' forced 'em to shove up their arms! There were any number o' ways o' freein' us."

"I'll be damned!" Castro said indignantly. "This is a fine way to show thanks!"

Old Crazy Joe Pyke, coming close to Rick, patted his shoulder. "No use arguin'," he muttered thickly. "Reckon they meant well, these two. I hate the way things came out much as you do, Rick. But it's too late to do anything about it."

Rick Cardigan was still glaring at Castro and Red Ely. "How come

you two were around here?" he demanded.

"Huntin' horses," Ely replied. "Reckon we told you back in Los Padres we figured to come up into these mountains, didn't we?"

"Yes. With other hombres!"

"We split forces yesterday. They're huntin' one way, we're lookin' in another."

**C**ARDIGAN realized bitterly that it was futile to talk.

During the next half hour, with the assistance of Ely and his partner, they rode the Trueberrys back to the cabin in the mountains. Before dawn both bodies were buried beside one of the corrals. And as the sun finally flamed out of the east, highlighting the crags about them, Rick Cardigan slowly put on his sombrero and went into the cabin.

From one of the books on the shelf he tore a fly leaf—a page on which was written: DANIEL C. TRUEBERRY. He took the paper to the light of a window. There, with the stub of a pencil he'd found on the shelf, he wrote a note to Daniel C. Trueberry's other sons—the two who would return some day soon to find their father and their brother dead.

What he wrote, with bitterness in his heart, was:

Your father and your brother died in defense of Heaven. We gave them a decent burial.

He didn't set down the fact that they had been murdered by Castro and Ely. What was the use? After all, the motives of those two men might have been sincere.

He put the note on the table, weighted it down with a tin cup, and went out to rejoin the others, waiting in the hazy dawn light.

"I'm sure sorry you're takin' this the way you are," Castro was saying to Crazy Joe. "We meant well. Reckon you know that, don't you?"

"Yes," the old man muttered. "Maybe you did."

"To bad your partner feels so down-in-the-mouth. Howsomever"—Castro swung into his saddle—"we won't be pesterin' you any more." He grinned twistedly. "Red an' me, we're sashayin' along to find mustangs."

"Adios," Joe said heavily.

"Adios—an' good luck to your gold hunt!"

Rick and Crazy Joe stood still, watching their two rescuers lope down the trail until they vanished beyond boulders. Rick had found his six-gun and Joe's in the cabin.

"Here," he said, offering the weapon. "We may as well go on. Far as I can see, there's no more trouble between us and the Valley of the Stars now."

"No," Joe agreed huskily. "Nothing between us an' the valley—but I sure don't feel happy about what lies between us an' the cow country! I'd feel lots easier if I knew Ely an' Castro won't be hangin' around these mountains when we come out with that gold!"

**M**EANWHILE, riding down the rocky trail with his partner, Red Ely snarled, "The whole doggone thing worked out wrong! Maybe we shouldn't have done it."

"We had to," snapped Castro.

"Look at the way they took it. They're sore as the devil. Ever hear anything as loco as that? Sore at us for savin' them from those two jaspers with the rifles!"

"We hanker to see them get into the valley, don't we?" Hackamore argued.

"Sure, but—"

"Well, that's all there is to it! Far as we're concerned, Cardigan is the goose that's goin' to lay the golden egg. Why should we let anybody shoo away our goose? Dog-gone it, Red, we sure couldn't let those two mountaineers bust up our plans!"

For a few moments Ely didn't reply. When he did speak, it was to ask, "You think they believe that story about our just bein' camped on this trail by luck?"

"It don't matter what they believe. They must be close to the valley. They won't turn back now, even knowin' we're around."

After that they traveled in silence for more than an hour, until they came to a small sandy hollow where three other men awaited them. One, lean and dark of face, bore a startling resemblance to Hackamore Castro. It was his brother, Tim.

"Did you locate 'em?" Tim Castro demanded, leaping up from the campfire.

"Yes," said Hack dryly. "Found 'em, all right. If you three hombres hadn't lost track o' them yesterday, we wouldn't have had to go out an' hunt—an' meet up with 'em."

Tim stared. "You mean you ran smack into 'em?"

"Yeah," answered Red. "An' we did somethin' that may turn out to be dumb. The next few days'll tell."

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE LADY OF LOS PADRES

THAT morning, eighty miles away, Connie Brace climbed into the saddle of her black gelding and started through the hot sunshine toward Los Padres. She didn't ride alone. At her side loped young Tex Manning, the cattleman

who had been devoting every spare hour of his life to Connie in the past few months. This was Sunday. Invariably on Sunday mornings Manning came to ride into the Los Padres church with her.

For some time he studied the girl in perplexity. She was squinting against the sun glare, her narrowed eyes fixed straight ahead. Ordinarily, when they crossed her range, it was her habit to gaze at her cows; to comment on their condition. Today, however, Connie seemed unaware of the cattle. Her smooth young face was drawn and anxious.

"Listen, Connie," Manning protested after fifteen minutes of silence, "why can't you quit worryin' about that hombre? Nothing's goin' to happen to him."

"I'm afraid he's run into trouble in the mountains. He told me that if I didn't hear from him in six weeks—"

"But he's been gone only three. No use worryin' now. Besides, what could you possibly do for him?"

"I don't know." A hint of despair crept into her voice. "I wish there were *something!*"

"Believe me," he assured her dryly, "you did plenty when you rode up into Oklahoma and gave him a horse."

"Oh, that was nothing." She sounded bitter. "Do you think a horse was any kind of payment for the ten years dad took out of his life?"

She could talk frankly to Tex Manning. He was one of the few men to whom she had confided the truth of her father's life. When first Manning had asked her to marry him, after Saddlehorn Brace's death, the story had exploded from her. She had been in desperate need of someone's advice, and Tex had been closest. Moreover, she had always

known she could trust his discretion. And if he really wanted to marry her, she felt he was entitled to know her family history. So there was no need to pretend with him now.

"Just a few days after Rick went away," she admitted, "I thought that—that I ought to get some of the boys to go after him, to trail him into the Sierra Nevada's. If he needed help, they'd be on hand. I even spoke to one or two."

"Yes, I know," snapped Manning. "They laughed at you. I didn't blame 'em any."

"Why?" She sounded surprised.

"Rick had been gone for days then. How'd you expect your boys to find him? The Sierra Nevada's are a mighty big range. It would have been like hunting the old needle in the haystack, only harder."

She shook her head helplessly. "It was just an idea. It—it came too late."

Tex Manning considered awhile. As he remembered his encounters with Rick Cardigan, a tight grin came to his lips.

"Reckon you don't have to worry much about this Cardigan hombre," he chuckled. "Any man who can fight the way he does has the upper hand to start with."

To that she made no reply. The only sounds about them as they neared the outskirts of Los Padres

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were the rhythmic thuds of hoof-beats.

As they passed the rodeo grounds Connie Brace's eyes were irresistibly drawn to the tree on which once, a few weeks ago, a placard had proclaimed the prowess of "Oklahoma Bill," wrestler.

A sad little smile came to her face as she recalled Cardigan under that tree, stripped to the waist, challenging all comers. She could hear the yells of the crowd, the applause, the amazed outcries when he sent huge men hurtling over his shoulders to land, stunned and breathless, in a corner of the improvised arena.

Maybe Tex Manning was right. Maybe there was no need to worry about a man like Rick Cardigan.

Well, she had done one thing for him, anyhow. She had told Gil Potter the truth about her father. He had listened to her in a kind of stupor. The news had seemed to blast his young, rocklike determination to bits.

Then Connie thought of Rick's mother. A week ago she had written Mrs. Cardigan at Armadillo Flats:

Rick asked me to be sure to get in touch with you. So please, if there is anything I can do, any way I can serve you, won't you let me know? It would make me happier than I can possibly tell you.

There hadn't yet been an answer from Mrs. Cardigan. Connie bit into her lip. She wondered if Rick had sent a letter to his mother before going into the mountains. Perhaps he had told her the story of Saddlehorn Brace. In that case she hardly blamed Mrs. Cardigan for refusing to answer her note. Wasn't it asking too much, this invitation to correspond with the daughter of a man who had sent her son to prison for ten years?

Ahead in the hot stillness the bell of the little church was clanging.

People were drifting toward the churchyard. They waved to Connie and called greetings. She responded mechanically.

But she didn't see the men and women about her. Her mind was miles away, in the high Sierra Nevadas, seeing Rick Cardigan on the sorrel cayuse he had bought with the profits of his wrestling bouts.

And riding home after the church service, when Tex asked her again to marry him, she stunned him by crying despairingly, "I can't, Tex—oh, I can't!"

**T**HERE came a morning when Rick Cardigan and Crazy Joe Pyke, now thousands of feet above the cattle country which they had left weeks before, could ride their horses no farther.

It was cool here. A constant wind flowed through the mountains. They were in a canyon through which a small stream splashed gayly, its surface as iridescent as quicksilver. Here and there along its banks were patches of grass and occasional trees.

Rick was looking upward. The lofty dark crags no longer seemed as inaccessible as they had days before.

"Reckon I've never been closer to heaven," he chuckled.

Crazy Joe, his voice strained, said, "You're dead right. But you'll be plenty closer when we reach the Valley o' the Stars."

"How much farther is it, Joe?"

"We'll be in it this afternoon!"

Something strange had happened to Crazy Joe during the last few days. He'd become tense, jittery. The skin of his seamed old face was as gray as the hairs of his beard. Fires, either of fear or of fanaticism, burned in his eyes. His movements were jerky; his voice was shrill. It

was as if he were approaching some fantastic climax that lured him on irresistibly, even while it filled him with terror.

He dismounted and indicated a patch of grass under trees.

"This is where we'll have to leave the horses," he announced. "From here on we just climb. There're spots where it'll be lots easier to get around rocks an' over ledges if we don't take the broncs along."

Rick Cardigan heaved himself out of his saddle. Crazy Joe's tension was contagious.

The more he considered the uncanny voice in the valley, the more it bewildered him. He might once have been inclined to doubt the testimony of Crazy Joe. But after hearing Dan'l C. Trueberry report his experience, Rick felt totally baffled. What *was* this voice men heard? If it was the result of some human trickery, how had the name of Dan'l C. Trueberry been known to the speaker? That part was as inexplicable as everything else he had heard.

Rick was impatient to start climbing. Joe, however, shook his head.

"We may not get another chance to eat for quite a spell," he said. "Better get a fire started an' cook some grub before we head out for the valley. It'll only take a few minutes."

The few minutes dragged into a half hour.

Then at last, leaving the horses staked in grass under shading trees, they began the long, difficult climb toward a crevice high above them.

"Up there!" whispered Crazy Joe. "See that black space between rocks, about two miles over that-away?"

"Yes."

"That's the entrance to the Valley o' the Stars!"



Rick squinted upward. "Is that the *only* way to get in?"

"The only way in—or out."

"How come?"

"Wait till you get up there. You'll see. The place is surrounded by high limestone cliffs that even a mountain goat couldn't climb. They're dotted with caves, but above the caves there's solid, smooth rock."

**T**HEY climbed for an hour before, breathless and spent, they stopped to rest. Rick drew off his sombrero and wiped a sleeve across his perspiring forehead. From this lofty crag, where they perched like eagles, they could see across vast stretches of rocky country below them. Suddenly Rick seized the old man's arm.

"Look, Joe!"

Joe Pyke turned his head to follow the direction of Rick's finger.

"Doggone!" he muttered.

"How many do you count?"

"Five hombres!"

"Followin' the trail we took?"

"Yep! We must have left a mighty clear spoor."

They glanced at each other, their eyes full of ominous understanding. After awhile Rick muttered, "Joe, it might not be a bad idea for us to go back and ride our horses somewhere else. Just to lead those jaspers off the track. Then we can come back here on foot."

"No use in doin' that." Crazy Joe shook his head emphatically. "They may trail us as far as the spot where we got our horses staked, but after that they'll have their troubles. We been comin' over solid rock ever since. They'll never know which way we climbed. Besides, now that we're this close, I—I want to get up into that valley soon as we can."

Rick offered no further objections.

But this he knew: if those men did not succeed in trailing him and Joe Pyke beyond the horses, they would wait near the mounts. Eventually he and Joe would have to return to that spot, perhaps laden with gold. And when they did—

"I got a hunch," he muttered, "that these old mountains are goin' to hear many a shot!"

When they had rested, they resumed the climb. It was arduous and back-straining, and Rick couldn't help marveling at the courage that carried a man as old as Crazy Joe over some of those ledges. Now and then he had to help Joe; had to boost him over some particularly difficult rise. For the most part, however, the old-timer took excellent care of himself.

One thing neither of them realized. The sun was at their backs. It blazed on the nickel of the six-guns that jutted from their holsters. Seen from a distance, those reflections were like flashes thrown by a heliograph—bright sparks that might easily attract searching eyes.

They did. Five men, peering toward massive heights above them, spied those flashes. They pointed upward in excitement. But of this, neither Rick Cardigan nor Joe Pyke was aware.

**A**T two o'clock in the afternoon Rick and Joe stopped at the mouth of a deep fissure between cliffs. The crevice was hardly two yards wide and it stretched for several hundred yards ahead of them. Joe Pyke indicated its shadowy depths with a shaking finger.

"This," he whispered, "is the entrance to the Valley o' the Stars!"

They moved into the narrow arroyo with a tension they couldn't hide. Instinctively they proceeded

*Continued on page 130*



## Cow Horses

Continued from page 60

let's make it clear that these spots must be "embossed." That is, the hair on them must be longer and of a different consistency than the rest of the coat, so that they have the effect of embroidered designs.

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### Valley Of The Stars

*Continued from page 128*

on tiptoe, as if it were sacrilegious to make any sounds here. And as he looked around, a significant thing occurred to Rick Cardigan.

A man could stand alone in this narrow passageway and defend the valley against an army, if he had sufficient ammunition. There were plenty of boulders to afford him protection.

They went on around a bend—and suddenly looked out upon the valley itself.

Rick Cardigan caught his breath. He stood utterly still and gaped.

"Was I wrong?" whispered Crazy Joe, his voice shrill and cracked. "Did—did you ever see anything like it in your whole life?"

"No!" gasped Rick.

The valley, stretching a few miles before him, was surrounded by high, sheer limestone cliffs. Even now, in early afternoon, they reflected brilliant streaks of red and copper and yellow. Most magnificent of all, however, was the incredible natural bridge that arched across the place, from one cliff to another—a vast stone arc larger than any Rick Cardigan had ever seen in his life. It was awe-inspiring. The very beauty of it caught at his throat.

Something like hysteria had seized Crazy Joe Pyke now.

"I swore if I ever came back it would be with Rick Cardigan," he rasped. "An', by Heaven, I've done it! I've done it!"

He led Rick on into the valley. They proceeded slowly, gazing about in awe. Nothing stirred. There was not even animal life to attract

their glances.

Advancing into that great space, Rick knew a crushing sense of his own puniness. Yet there was something more, too—a feeling of greatness that came of experiencing such magnificence. They went on and on until he said to Joe Pyke:

"Where was it you heard the voice?"

"Over yonder, under the bridge!"

"That was where you saw the gold, too?"

"Yes!"

"Then let's go there."

Joe Pyke gave a jerky nod. They walked on quickly. The bridge seemed very near, yet Rick discovered it was more than half a mile from the entrance to the valley.

At last, however, they stood under its sweep in deep purple shadows.

"The place where I heard the voice," whispered Crazy Joe, "is over yonder, near the cliff."

In silence they went to the spot. Whether or not he would see gold, Rick couldn't guess. He didn't even venture a speculation. Seen from under the bridge, the cliffs seemed higher and more colorful than ever. When presently they reached the rock wall, Rick looked about with searching intensity.

He saw no gold. There were only stones strewn here and there. He wanted to say something, but the words were strangled in his throat.

For at that instant Rick Cardigan heard the voice.

It was clear and calm and unmistakable. It sounded immediately above him, within a foot of his head. And it said:

"Go back from where you came."

*Has Rick come to the Valley of the Stars only to be rebuffed by the mysterious voice that summoned him? What will Ely and Castro do now that they have reached the end of their trail? Next week brings the thrill-packed conclusion of this gripping serial. Don't miss it!*

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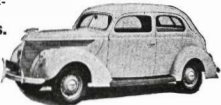
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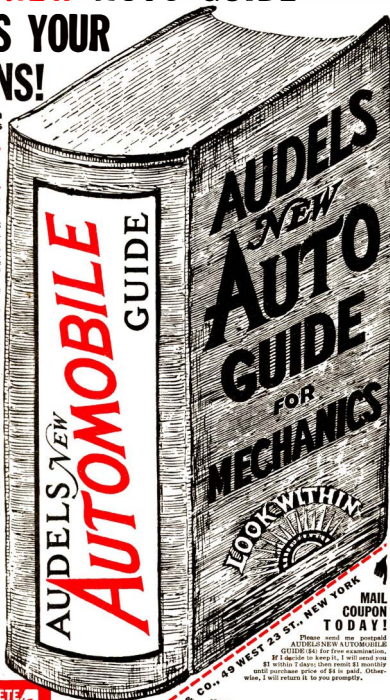
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