


STREET
AND
SMITH'S

WESTERN

STORY

MAGAZINE

NOV. 18, 1939



starting
DEAD FREIGHT FOR PIUTE
by LUKE SHORT



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STREET & SMITH'S
WESTERN
STORY MAGAZINE

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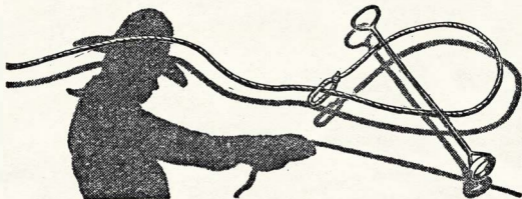
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The Roundup

WE'VE heard plenty in our time concerning the trials and tribulations of writers, but we think we have a new "add to the list of troubles" as far as yarn spinners are concerned. So add under the "M's"—mouse trouble! Yes, sir, friends, we have it straight from Walt Coburn and it all happened this summer shortly after he had arrived at his summer home in California. Walt was working on a yarn for Western Story at the time when the near-catastrophe took place. Well, with some delay, the story finally arrived, accompanied by the following letter:

"Believe it or not, I'm having mouse trouble. My good old L. C. Smith mill has just been overhauled and cleaned and a new silk ribbon put on and there's not a trace of Arizona dust left on her. She shines like a mirror and works like a charm. BUT! Mammy and Pappy Mouse have jumped my claim!

"They're locating up in the rounded dip where the key arms are. And they're bound and determined

to build their nest and raise the family that's due most any night now. They just won't locate anywhere else.

"You see I work in a little one-room whitewashed board-and-batten cabin down the slope from the house. It hangs over the little barranca and it's reached by a plank bridge. The shack has a porch, and inside are my work table and chair, an old air-tight wood stove, and a double bunk. There's a plank floor and a sandbox around the stove to catch the burned matches (the cord-wood type that come in a box), and the short butts of brown paper cigarettes. There's a couple of little paper yellowjacket nests on the ceiling, a few spider webs in the corners, and the floor gets swept mebbeso once every six months. And that's the shack that is known locally as the Bucket of Blood workshop of yrs. truly. I lock it at night and it's closed from Saturday noon till Monday morning. And this is Monday morning.

"It was on a Monday morning two weeks ago that I opened up the joint and took the hood off the old mill. And there in the rounded hoodus of the keybars was a mouse nest. It had been made over the week end from nice soft stuff chewed off the thick felt pad under the type-

writer. And about a yard of the ribbon had been pulled from the spools and tromped down on top of the shredded felt. As purty a nest as ever you saw.

"I hated to disturb it, but I had your story to finish and I needed the machine. So I took the nest out onto the porch and put it in the empty wood box out there. Then I spent an hour hunting down Mammy Mouse. I finally located her and Pappy on the top bunk that the missus now uses for a sort of ketch-all for the things that a thrifty housewife just won't throw away. She was fat, but Pappy had a lean look like he was gaunted by this night work of house hunting and bed making. They were crouched back in a corner of an old empty carton. Their whiskers and noses quivered with fear, and they watched me with beady little eyes. A man who would have killed that little pair of claim jumpers would have to have a harder, stonier heart than I've got. I hazed 'em outside the shack where their bedding was fixed in the wood box, and when I was done with my daily chore that noon I locked the shack up good and tight.

"Next morning when I came down to work I found they'd gnawed a little hole in the cabin door. They'd fetched their bedding back and laid 'er in the typewriter. And they'd used up another hunk of the felt pad. I put their bed back out on the porch and rigged a roof on the wood box for 'em. Made 'em a first-class house.

"But they don't like it. They want the L. C. and nothing but. And for two weeks this has been going on. They're homesteading here in this typewriter. They've gnawed the felt pad till it has a mangy look. The new silk ribbon

has wrinkles in it from where Mammy Mouse has lain on its coils that Pappy has pulled out and spread for her. Right now, up on the top bunk, somewhere in the stuff piled there, Ma and Pa Mouse are listening to the click of the keys and she's heartbusted and he's cussing me out in mouse talk because I've moved their outfit back outside to the wood box . . ."

Phil Sharpe, our firearms editor, has been visiting in Potter County, Pennsylvania, one of the greatest deer-producing countries in the United States. While there he was the guest of Honorable Robert R. Lewis, president judge of the First Judicial District, and Sheriff Shiel B. Sawyer, at Coudersport.

Judge Lewis and Sheriff Sawyer had promised to show Phil plenty of deer if he could spare time to stay over for a few days on one of his annual visits with them. Phil spent four days with the boys this year and attended a couple of sportsmen's field days as an official guest.

He spent two nights deer hunting with Sheriff Sawyer and saw twenty-six deer one night and thirty-four the following night. With his ever-present camera and flashlight equipment, Phil managed to photograph a total of thirty deer, often getting as many as four in one picture. None of the pictures were taken in a game preserve.

Phil says that he had two particular thrills during that trip. One night the auto spotlight picked up a deer at the edge of the woods. Phil set forth to photograph the deer through dense underbrush, and after hiking two hundred yards in the darkness, keeping his flashlight trained on the deer, he spotted an additional one and maneuvered to

get the two deer in position for a picture.

While trying to focus his camera, the flashlight slipped and he spotted several other pairs of eyes. Swinging the camera in a semicircle, he was able to locate ten deer, all within a hundred feet of him.

Phil has downed many a deer and during his many years of hunting experience has trailed a large number of these fleet-footed animals, but he admits it was quite a thrill to be trailed by a deer instead of trailing one.

Spotting two of the animals in a large field near the road, he left the car in charge of Sheriff Sawyer, who operated a large spotlight, and set forth across the field maneuvering the deer into position for proper pictures.

Deer are not afraid of flashlight pictures and will stand for several flash bulbs being fired at close range without leaving the scene. Phil fired two or three shots maneuvering for positions. Snorts and whistles seemed to indicate that he had the two deer ahead of him a little bit worried.

Finally, after moving the deer a quarter of a mile, with Sheriff Sawyer driving the car up the road to keep the deer in the spotlight, Phil heard one extra large snort, and a deer trotted along fifteen feet to one side of him to join the two some sixty feet ahead where the three of them posed together for a picture.

Sheriff Sawyer insists that it would have been worth a fortune had he been able to get a moving picture of Phil endeavoring to sneak up on the deer with another less than twenty-five feet behind closely following his every move and gradually decreasing the range from one hundred feet to less than twenty feet before he decided that the photog-

rapher no longer held any interest for him. If Phil had turned around he might have got an even closer picture.

Phil says that hunting deer with a camera is more fun than hunting them with a gun. Well, he ought to know. He's done both.

In the next issue of Western Story—

Men who seek their fortunes in the white, desolate wastes of the Far North soon learn to obey the unwritten law that holds for chechako and old-timer alike. When they break it, even in carelessness, the penalty is often death. In WOLF LAW, the full-length novel we've scheduled for next week, Seth Ranger writes the fascinating and compelling story of a fugitive who gambled his hard-won freedom on a venture that was almost certain to bring him the doom he escaped when he cheated the hangman's rope.

No man wants to be the one to judge his best friend, especially when the charge is murder, so Brent Logan decided to let the desert supply the test that would either vindicate or damn Kim Roberts. Harry Sinclair Drago is on hand with a gripping, vivid story of a duel of wits fought out in the desert. Look for FOOL'S GOLD.

Also in next week's issue are stories and features by L. L. Foreman, Harry Ohmsted, Luke Short, Gerard Delano, and many other Western writers who are tops in their field, plus, of course, a full list of interesting and informative departments. We'll be seein' you at the campfire.

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ATHLETE
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ALL-STAR
MAGAZINE

★ In its December number, Athlete presents a star-studded issue, including:

WHAT ALL-AMERICA?—H. O. (Fritz) Crisler, University of Michigan's head coach, speaks out on the benefits and evils in the present system of picking All-Americans.

HOLD 'EM, PITTSBURGH—The inside story of the Pitt Panther football situation by a famous sports writer who lived through it.

MAKER OF CHAMPIONS—Coach Wm. Foley gives the formula he has used in turning out grid, court and diamond champions in profusion at Bloomfield High School, N. J.

Also articles by **Kingsley Moses** who finds two million forgotten athletes; **Fred Keeling** who discusses the only real amateurs left in America and top-notch stories by **Jack Kofoed**, **Richard McCann** and others.



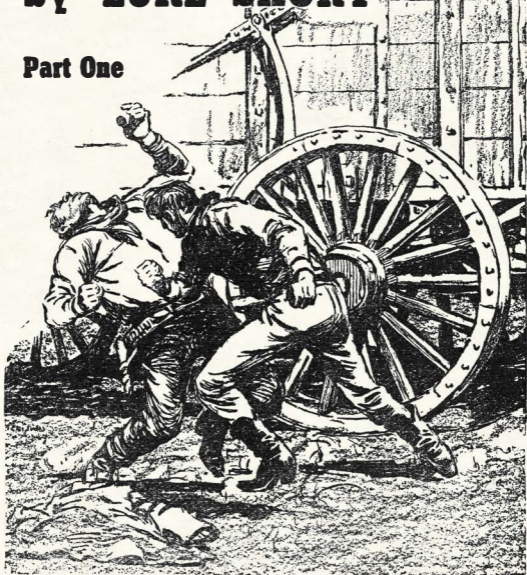
Athlete

ON SALE NOVEMBER 11th

DEAD FREIGHT FOR PIUTE

by **LUKE SHORT**

Part One



CHAPTER I

THE HOLDUP

COLE ARMIN used that last fifteen minutes of daylight, because it would have to last him until morning. He used it to look at the girl in the seat opposite him, and to wonder at her again.

Two days and two nights on a stage climbing from the desert country to the high country was a great breaker of conventions. The tedium, the jolting, the noise, the lurching, the dust and the heat usually made passengers forget disparity in wealth and opinions, and leveled them into one suffering mass of humanity. But not this girl. Two days and two nights had stiffened her already straight back, closed her full mouth and steeled the reserve in her green eyes.

Dust had powdered her maroon silk traveling dress and bonnet, and had laid its gray film on her blond hair. It even sifted onto her long eyelashes, making her blink with discomfort. But not once did her reserve crack, and not once had she spoken unless spoken to by Cole or the only other passenger, a mild-looking little man in puncher's dirty clothes.

Right now, she was looking out the window at the first of the pines that sprang up above the canyon country, and her expression was one of utter weariness. Cole suddenly made up his mind.

He leaned forward, elbows on knees, and because the stage was going slow on the uphill pull, he did not have to speak loudly.

"Look, miss. How long since you slept?"

Her attention was yanked around to him immediately, the sound of his voice seeming to surprise her.

"Why . . . I don't know."

"I do. You didn't sleep last night. You haven't slept today."

"I'm not sleepy."

Cole ignored that, smiling faintly. "We've got an uphill haul until long after midnight," he said. "It'll be slow and easy and cool. You lie down on the seat and wrap up, and me and this other gent will put our feet up on the seat so's you won't roll off. You get some sleep."

The girl just looked at him for a moment. Now, Cole knew he hadn't had a shave for two days, and black beard stubble shadowed his cheeks and maybe gave him a lean and ferocious look, but he was also aware that he had an easy smile, blue and steady eyes that were amiable most of the time, and an open manner that could be considered friendly.

He figured that the latter would cancel the former and that if further proof of innocence were needed, he was dressed in a decent black suit whose trousers were tucked into half-boots, black hat and a fresh checked gingham shirt that he had changed into at the last stop. Barring the lack of a shave, it didn't seem to him that he was a person who would frighten anyone.

It didn't take long for him to see he was wrong. The girl was frightened, and had been since he spoke. A kind of defiant anger was in her face as she said: "Is there any rule that says I have to sleep?"

"Why, no; not that I know of."

"There's none that I know of, either. So, if you don't mind, I won't."

Cole stared at her a moment, feeling the color flush up into his face. He felt a quick resentment, and, while still feeling it, he leaned back, lifted a long leg to the seat beside the girl, and said in a voice that was unmistakably Texas: "Then I don't reckon you'll mind if I put my feet

up there, because I aim to sleep."

"Not at all," the girl said coldly.

"Obliged," Cole remarked, just as coldly.

He put both feet up on the opposite seat, pulled his Stetson down over his forehead and closed his eyes. He opened them again presently to study the girl, who was looking out the window again. He had seen shy girls before, but this girl was not shy. She was from the East, likely a schoolma'am, from her correct speech; and she was pretty and proud—and scared. Of him. He closed his eyes to consider any number of reasons why she should be afraid of him, but before he did much thinking he was asleep.

SOMETIME later, Cole was roused by a hand on his shoulder. It was a rough hand, so that he came awake with a rush, noting before he opened his eyes that the stage had stopped. He thumb-prodded his Stetson off his forehead and found himself looking into the barrel of a Colt .44 pointed at him through the window. Behind it was a masked face, and behind the mask a voice said roughly: "Just hold onto that hat with both hands and come out a-jumpin'."

Cole Armin came out, but very leisurely. His fellow passenger was standing off to one side, both hands above his head. The girl was standing just below the step and, in the thin chill moonlight, Cole could see she was excited. Two men, one big and thickset, the other of medium build, and both masked, stood before them with guns drawn. A third bandit had the driver covered.

"We'll start with you," the big man said gruffly, and walked over to the puncher. He flipped a gun from the puncher's shoulder holster, whirled him around with one shove

of his big hand, and pulled his pockets inside out. He found, besides a couple of horseshoe nails and a plug of tobacco, exactly fifty cents.

With a growl, he placed his big boot in the seat of the puncher's pants and shoved, and the puncher dived into the dust and lay there.

Cole was next. When the big man was in front of him, Cole said mildly: "Don't do that to me, mister. I remember things like that."

The big bandit paused, as if astonished. Then he chuckled. "Turn around," he said.

"Hunh-unh. I've got a gun in a hip holster, and you can take that. You can take everything else, too, but I'll watch you do it."

"Tough, eh?" the bandit asked pleasantly.

"Not right now, no," Cole answered softly, "but I'm apt to wind up tough."

The bandit chuckled again and took Cole's gun. He scorned his money, which was little, and his watch, which didn't run anyway, and then raised a hand in mock salute to him. "I like 'em salty, mister. You can keep your money."

Then he moved on to the girl. He stopped in front of her, and, without turning around, spoke to the second bandit: "You go put your gun in the back of that Texas hero's neck, and if he makes a move let him have it."

He waited until his companion has his gun in Cole's neck, and then he turned to the girl. "Well, missy, what you got?"

"Nothing," the girl said firmly.

"Goin' to Piute?" he asked pleasantly.

"Yes."

The big bandit scrubbed his chin under his black handkerchief. "Well, lady, you don't look like the kind of a gal who aims to make any money

in a boom camp. You ain't that kind. So if you don't aim to make any, you must have some." He put out his hand. "Lemme look in your pocketbook."

The girl hesitated, and the bandit snapped his fingers impatiently. Cole could see an anchor tattooed on the back of the man's hand. He wanted to remember that, because he was afraid for what was going to happen to this stubborn girl.

The bandit looked in the pocketbook, snorted, and then handed it back. He spoke over his shoulder to the second bandit: "Remember what I said. And you, Texas, watch yourself."

And, with that, he advanced a step, put both hands around the girl's waist, and then dodged back as she lashed out at him with her hand.

He chuckled again. "Money belt, eh, miss? Well, you'll have to take it off."

"It is not!" the girl said furiously.

"Take your choice," the bandit told her amiably. "Either you take it off or I do."

"Watch your tongue!" Cole said sharply. "You ain't talkin' to a honkatonk girl, you fool!"

"I never said I was. Still, I aim to get the money."

"If you expect me to undress in front of you," the girl said scornfully, "then you'd better shoot!"

The big bandit seemed to be embarrassed. He shifted his feet in the dust, and then said in a reasonable voice: "I'm goin' to git that money, lady. It depends on you how I git it. I don't aim to shame you, but if you won't string along with me I reckon I'll have to."

He pointed his gun off toward the side of the road. "There's bushes out there. You hustle off there and take off that money belt in private

and git back here. Now git!"

The girl stood there, breathing hard, fear and irresolution in her face. The very stance of the big bandit was implacable, and she glanced over at Cole, her eyes imploring.

"I reckon you'd better do it," Cole said shortly. "That scum means what he says."

THE girl turned and walked off the road into the brush. Scrub oak and pine saplings grew up to the very edge of the road, and beyond them was the black depth of pine timber. As the sound of the girl's footsteps died away, the driver atop the stage spat over the side and remarked to nobody in particular: "A hell of a way to make a livin'. I'd rather suck eggs, if you ask me."

"Nobody ast you," the big bandit said testily. "Any more talk out of you and you won't have no teeth left to suck eggs with, neither."

The driver spat again, and was silent. Cole studied the bandit leader, trying to pick out something by which he could remember him. There was nothing out of the ordinary about the man except his bigness and the tattooed anchor on his left hand.

The bandit was getting impatient now. He raised his voice and bawled: "Hurry up, lady!"

There was no answer. They all listened for a brief moment, and then the man behind Cole said: "Why don't she answer?"

"Hey, miss!" the big man bawled.

No answer.

"I bet she's run out!" said the third bandit up by the driver.

"Go look for her!" the big man ordered curtly.

One of the bandits ran behind the stage and crashed out into the brush.

They could hear him thrashing around in the scrub oak, and presently the noise died.

"She ain't in this brush!" he bawled. "She's went into the timber."

"Any tracks?" the big bandit called.

A match was struck; there was a moment of silence, and then a howl of rage lifted into the night. "She's runnin', and right into the timber!"

The big man started to curse. The other bandit lunged off the other side of the road. "I'll git the horses!" he yelled.

The big robber rammed a gun into Cole's midriff. "Git that other gent in the stage, and make it fast!"

The puncher who had been lying in the dust didn't need an invitation. He streaked for the stage door and dived inside. Cole was just reaching for the door when the big bandit lifted his gun into the air and let go a wild, bloodcurdling yell, followed by four swift shots.

The stage horses, half broken at best, lunged into their collars and the driver started to curse. Cole grabbed the rear boot as it passed him and swung up, and the stage was off on a wild careening ride down the mountain road.

Cole climbed up on the top, holding onto the guard rails, and dropped into the seat beside the driver.

"Pull 'em up!" he yelled in the driver's ear.

"I got to wait for an upgrade!" the driver shouted. They came to a turn, the horses at a dead gallop, and swung around it, the wheels kicking rock fragments off into the drop of a stream bed at their right.

And then they were on a long downhill slope that hugged the shoulder of a hill. The horses had used the breather to gather strength, and now they raced down the slope

with the wild abandon of panic. The road dropped more steeply, and then the stage hit the stream ford with a heavy crash that strained every timber. The water curtained up and drenched Cole and the driver.



But the teams were on an uphill pull now, and it soon broke the gallop of the horses. The driver fought them to a standstill, locked his brake, and wiped the water from his eyes.

"What do you aim to do?" he demanded.

Cole swung to the ground. "Cut out a horse for me," he ordered. "I got a saddle and bridle here on the load. I'm goin' back after that girl."

While the driver unhitched one of the lead horses, Cole found his sacked saddle and bridle. Then the driver eared down the horse he had cut out while Cole saddled him. Cole stepped into the saddle, the driver leaped back, and the horse started to pitch.

It took a good three minutes for the bronc to spend his temper, and then Cole put him up the long slope to where the hold-up had happened. A hot anger worked at him as he rode. He had no fear of the bandits doing the girl any real harm, but they might manhandle her and, if necessary, take the money belt away from her forcibly. The thought of it made his blood boil.

It was about two miles uphill to the spot where the stage had stopped. When Cole got there he found it deserted. He reckoned, and rightly, that in their haste the three bandits would forget the guns they had thrown on the ground. He found his own, scooping it up out of the dust without dismounting, and then he put his horse into the scrub oak.

At first the trail was plain to follow, for the three of them had crashed through the brush on each other's heels. But, once in the timber, they had split up. There was nothing to do then but follow one of the tracks. He was certain they would lead him to the girl eventually, for there was little chance of her escaping. The deep carpet of rotting pine needles was scarred heavily by the passage of the horse, but even at best it was difficult trailing with the aid of the thin trickle of moonlight that sifted down through the timber. Occasionally, Cole would stop to listen, but he had the sense of precious time being wasted, and anyway he could not keep his blood from hammering in his ears until it was all that was audible.

The trail of this horseman sloped down the side of the ridge, following it at the same angle, and then, after perhaps ten minutes of slow riding, the direction suddenly changed, and headed uphill. Cole knew that was where the rider had got the signal that the girl was found.

The tracks doubled back now, and went over the ridge; and then, in a spot of cleared rocky ground among the jackpines, Cole caught sight of the girl. She was lying face down among the boulders.

His heart almost stopped beating as he spurred his horse on. What had they done to her? He slipped out of the saddle and ran toward

her, and then, a few feet from her, he caught the sounds of her sobbing.

He knelt by her and put a hand on her shoulder. "You all right?"

She looked up then at the sound of his voice, and her face was wet with tears. She didn't answer him, only put the back of her hand to her mouth and tried to choke back the sobs.

"Did they hurt you?" Cole asked with swift anger.

She shook her head. Then, when she spoke, her voice was low and more bitter than Cole had ever known a woman's voice could be.

"Hurt me? I wish they had! I wish they'd killed me!" She raised her eyes to him now, and he could see the despair in them. "Are you satisfied now with what you've done?" she asked harshly.

Cole came erect then, frowning. He was a big leggy figure, standing there, with the wide shoulders and careless grace of a man bred to the saddle. His lean face was bewildered as he placed his hands on his hips.

"Am I satisfied?" he echoed. Then he smiled tolerantly. "Look, miss, I ain't one of the robbers. I'm the man on the stage. Remember?"

The girl sat up, and Cole put out a hand to assist her. She ignored it, looking at him instead. "I know, you're Cole Armin. Are you satisfied, I say? Did it all work out the way you hoped it would?"

Cole looked blankly at her, and then knelt slowly, so that he faced her. "I don't know what you're talkin' about, miss. I don't think you do, either. Maybe it's the shock."

"Shock!" the girl said bitterly. "It wasn't a shock. I knew it would happen, and so did you. I just hoped I could bluff it out!"

"Talk sense!" Cole said impa-

tiently. He put his hands on her shoulders and shook her. "You're hysterical, I reckon."

The girl laughed then, and her laugh was almost hysterical. "You admit who you are, and then try to make me believe you're innocent?"

"I'm Cole Armin. I'm hanged if I know how you knew it. Also, I'm innocent."

"And you'll claim, of course, that you don't know who I am?"

"I don't. No, ma'am."

THEY stared angrily at each other for a full moment. Finally, the girl murmured: "Maybe they didn't tell you. Maybe they told you just to watch this certain girl on this certain stage."

"Who told me?"

"I'm Celia Wallace," the girl said, watching him closely.

Cole's face didn't register anything except mild puzzlement. "Is that 'sposed to mean somethin' to me, outside of the pleasure in knowin' you?"

"And you're Cole Armin. You must be a relation—the son, or something—of Craig Armin, in Piute."

"I am," Cole admitted. "His nephew. Why?"

"And he hasn't told you anything . . . you don't know anything about Ted Wallace?"

"Nothin'," Cole said, shaking his head. "I haven't seen my Uncle Craig since I was four. I don't know anything about him—or about the Wallaces."

"I see," the girl said softly. There was a look of calculation in her eyes now. "And why are you going to Piute?"

"To work for him. I got fevered out down in Texas. Lost everything I had. My uncle offered me a job."

"Doing what?"

"Freightin', I think. Drivin' mules for ore freightin'."

The girl rose now, and Cole rose with her. She didn't say anything, and when Cole saw she wasn't going to, he said: "Maybe you better tell me what this is all about."

The girl turned on him. "I'll tell you!" she said in a fierce low voice. "You can take it back to him, so he'll share his laugh with those thugs of his! Craig Armin had all the ore freightin' in Piute to himself once upon a time, until my brother Ted started to buck him. You'd think with twenty mines around Piute, a man wouldn't mind sharing some of the hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of freight business. But Craig Armin did mind. Ted fought him every inch of the way, until he got a few wagons and some business. All he needed was money—money for more wagons and mules and men. And I was bringing him that money. It was in that money belt that your thugs took from me tonight!"

"Not my thugs," Cole corrected mildly.

"His, then! He knew we could beat him if we had the money for equipment, so he had his men steal it from me!"

"How much money?"

"Ten thousand dollars!" the girl cried. Her lower lip started to tremble, and then she buried her face in her hands. "All the money from the farm in Illinois, every cent the Wallaces ever had."

Cole didn't speak for a moment. Then he said: "So that's why you were scared? You figured I'd been planted on the stage to keep an eye on you?"

"Weren't you? When I saw your name on the passenger list, I was sure."

"No."

Celia Wallace's arms fell to her

side. "Well, I guess it doesn't matter," she said bitterly. "Ted warned me. He said Craig Armin wouldn't stop at robbery, or opening mail, or even shooting me to keep the money from being delivered."

"He wouldn't do that," Cole said sharply. "Not a man!"

Celia lifted her gaze to his. "I guess you have a lot to learn about this country, and about people. Almost as much as I have. Well, I hope it won't cost you as much."

Cole didn't answer for a moment. "It won't cost you anything, Miss Wallace," he said then. "You'll get that money back."

"Very likely," she answered tonelessly.

"That's just a promise," Cole said quietly. He walked up the hill with her to the horse. "You take the saddle, Miss Wallace, and I'll ride behind," he said. "We'll catch up with the stage in an hour, if he's waited for us."

CHAPTER II

A TEN-THOUSAND-DOLLAR SCRAP

PIUTE was a hell's broth of a town that left Cole stunned at first sight. Entering it, the stage driver had literally to fight and curse his way through the traffic of the main street, which was jammed with big ore wagons on their way from the mines scattered on the mountain slopes above the town to the reduction mills down on the flats.

The sidewalks overflowed with miners of all nationalities; and buckboards, spring wagons, carriages and saddle horses jammed the tie rails of the four long blocks of the main street. There was a carnival air here, for Piute was a boom camp on the upswing, and all the footloose trash and hangers-on from all over the West were here to provide the inevitable swindling and the drinking

and rioting that gold and silver attract.

It seemed to Cole that every other building—starting with the canvas tents on the outskirts of the town and ending with the core of big solid buildings at the main four-corners—was a saloon and gambling dive, and that from all of them issued a din of drunken shouting and hell raising.

The town was at a fever pitch—its normal late-afternoon tempo—and the long rank of false-front stores and an occasional brick building all held gaudy signs that reached out into the street to proclaim wares in glaring letters. Nobody paid any attention to the sidewalks. The road was jammed with people who walked in and out among the teams, oblivious to the perpetual cursing of the rough freighters. It was bedlam for a man used to the solitudes, and Cole felt his nerves getting raw before the stage even reached the express office.

As it swung up to the boardwalk, a young man yanked the door open, and Celia Wallace flew into his arms. Cole stepped down behind her, but before he had a chance to get a look at the man, the swirl of the crowd was around him. He saw only a tall tow-headed, strong-jawed young fellow in rough clothes who was listening to his sister with a grave expression on his face. Cole knew then that Celia was telling him what had happened. Suddenly Ted Wallace's head swiveled around and his hot glance searched out the crowd. It was plain enough that he was seeking out Cole, but the crowd had come between them.

Cole sought the nearest hotel, put out five of his last ten dollars for a room, washed, ate and then hit the street again. He was in a boom town now, he remembered, where there were boom-town prices. He'd have to get work and get it soon; and

that, of course, reminded him of his uncle.

He inquired where he could find the Monarch Freighting Co. buildings, and then set out for them in the thick swirl of people on the street. He wondered what his uncle was going to be like. He had been four years old the only time Craig Armin had visited the family in Texas. When he tried to recall his uncle's looks or anything about him, he couldn't. Even the half-remembered stories his mother had told him about Craig Armin were not clear. It would be like meeting a stranger who bore your own name. Not quite a stranger, Cole reflected; there was this incident of the stage robbery and what Celia Wallace had said of it to bother him. He didn't know what to think about that, or what to expect from his uncle.

THE MONARCH FREIGHTING CO. was back off Piute's main street at the first side street north of the principal four-corners. It was easily identified by the high board fence that closed in its huge wagon yard. Its office, a clapboard affair with the company's name painted across its face, fronted the street beyond the big arch of the compound. Cole paused there to look into the wagon yard, which just now was almost empty of the big ore-freighting wagons.

Three sides of the compound contained sheds for the wagons and a blacksmith shop, while the rear opened into a huge feed corral that ran through onto the next block. There were fifty or so mules in the corral now, Cole noticed. It was a big outfit, with its own blacksmith and harness shop. Craig Armin had evidently done pretty well for himself.

Cole stepped into the office. It

was a big room, with doors in three walls. A man sat at a roll-top desk near the window where he could shout orders to the teamsters. He was a dyspeptic-looking man in shirt sleeves, and he eyed Cole sourly as he entered.

"I want to see Craig Armin," Cole said, standing by the railing.

"No can do," the man said, with a yawn.

"Why not?"

"He ain't seein' anyone."

"He's here, though?" Cole asked quietly.

"Might be. Might not."

"I'll take a look," Cole murmured.

He walked over to the first door and threw it open. "Hey, get out of there!" the clerk yelled.

Cole looked into a bare and dirty room. At a rough desk, whose top was scarred by spurs, sat a burly, thick-bodied man who was in the act of raising a whiskey bottle to his lips. He glowered when Cole asked: "You Craig Armin?"

"Get the hell out of here," the man said mildly.

Cole folded his arms and leaned against the door jamb, a light of stubborn anger in his eyes. The clerk by this time had come out from behind the railing and was crossing the room. His pace was not fast, because Cole was a tall man and the expression on his face now wasn't particularly friendly.

The clerk looked inside. "Sorry, Keen," he said. "He got the wrong office."

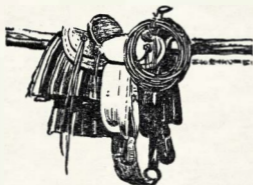
"I didn't get any office," Cole corrected. "That's what I'm after."

Keen set the bottle down on the desk, carefully corked it, and came to his feet. He was dressed carelessly, and he smelled strongly of the stable. His half boots were covered with stable litter, and the gun belt strapped at his waist looked

worn and used. There was something about his face, the small pig eyes, the muscular jowls, and the way his hands swung at his side, that warned Cole of trouble.

"You want Armin? I'm Armin," he growled, confronting Cole.

Cole regarded him coolly, and then



said: "Not by ten years; you couldn't be."

"You ever seen him?"

"A long time ago."

"Then how do you know I ain't?" the man said.

This was a foolish conversation, Cole concluded. It didn't make sense, and he was suddenly aware that it was a stall. He was erect in the doorway now, and he felt the clerk move behind him. Then a tell-tale flick of the heavy man's eyes gave him away. He raised both hands toward Cole, and lunged toward him, a smile already on his face. Cole ducked, at the same time kicking out behind him. His boot drove into flesh, and he heard the clerk grunt. And then Keen plowed into him. Cole caught him in the midriff with his shoulder, raised abruptly, and sent him flying over his shoulder. He turned just in time to see Keen light on the sprawled clerk with a great timber-shaking thud. Keen scrambled to his feet, his face

livid with surprise and anger at this crude roughhouse trick being turned against him.

"That's fun for a couple of kids," Cole said quietly. "You looked growed up, at first sight."

JUST then the other door in the side wall opened and a quiet-looking man of medium build, dressed in an expensively tailored black suit, stepped out. He glared at the three of them with wicked, impersonal anger, and then spoke to Keen: "What's the racket out here?"

Keen, however, was regaining his composure. He said, his voice thick with fury: "Watch me throw that ranny out of here, chief. Open the door, Trimble."

"Stop it!" Craig Armin said harshly. He stepped out into the room. Keen subsided a little as his chief came to a halt in front of Cole. He was a slight man, with neatly combed graying hair. His face was sharp, rather handsome, with a slight pallor which deepened the blackness of his eyes by contrast. There was a surface sleekness about him that was deceptive, for his voice when he spoke to Keen had some force in it.

"What happened here?" he said brusquely.

"I was lookin' for you," Cole drawled. "These boys thought they'd muss me up a little and throw me out." His lazy gaze shuttled to Keen. "It kicked back, I reckon."

"You told us not to disturb you," the clerk said sullenly to Armin.

"I meant it," Armin remarked. "What's your business with me?" he said to Cole.

"I came to take that job you offered me," Cole drawled.

Armin scowled. "I haven't offered anybody a job, not that I recollect. What's your name?"

"I was wonderin' when somebody would get to that," said Cole. "It's Cole Armin."

Craig Armin's face changed immediately. It softened and lighted up with pleasure. He smiled and put out his hand.

"Well, welcome, boy, welcome. I'm delighted to see you. But why didn't you give Trimble your name?"

"I told you," Cole drawled. "Nobody asked."

Keen Billings came forward then, a forced smile on his face. He put out his hand. "Sorry about that, Armin," he said. "It was just a little horseplay. Glad you're here. I'm Keen Billings."

"Forget it," Cole murmured, not very heartily. He shook hands with Billings.

Craig Armin led his nephew into his office. This was a different affair from Keen Billings' office. In the first place, it was large and spacious and was located on the other side of the building from the stables. It held a rich, deep-piled red rug, and the most ornate desk that Cole had ever seen. On the papered walls were a dozen framed pictures of the big mines and reduction mills in Piute.

Craig Armin offered Cole a cigar and a drink and a chair, all of which were accepted, and then he settled into the deep chair behind his desk.

"You're a tough-looking customer," he observed, regarding Cole closely. "Not much like the little tyke you were the last time I saw you. Don't you ever shave?"

Cole grinned at that. "I just got off the stage. Took time out to eat, and that's about all."

Craig nodded. "You don't look very prosperous," he said shrewdly.

"I got five dollars left," Cole said, and shook his head. "That's cuttin'

it pretty thin, I reckon, comin' all the way from Texas."

Craig Armin grunted and sucked at his cigar. Cole took a good look at him then, studying his face, to see if it would strike any familiar chord of memory. It didn't, but that wasn't surprising. Twenty-odd years can blot out a childhood memory completely. He tried once more to remember what his mother had said about Uncle Craig, but again it wouldn't come. Craig Armin might as well have been a stranger—any handsome, immaculately dressed and affable man of about fifty years.

"Well, it's lucky I still take a Texas paper, for sentiment's sake," Craig said suddenly. "Or I wouldn't have read where you'd lost the place. What happened?"

"Cattle fever."

Craig Armin smiled faintly. "You are a long ways from cattle now, son. You've got to learn a new business."

"I reckon I can drive mules all right," Cole murmured.

CRAIG ARMIN laughed at that. "Drive mules? Nonsense! You are stepping into a manager's job here, Cole. You'll need some good clothes and linen, a haircut, a shave, a new hat and new boots, and you'll have to learn to smoke a good cigar."

Cole blinked. He had thought, from his uncle's letter, that he was being offered a job as a teamster. This was news.

Craig Armin smiled at his nephew's surprise and nodded. "I've got a pretty good thing here, Cole. Looks like a glorified stable to you, I suppose, but it represents a transportation outfit that moves about eighty-five per cent of the ore in Piute. I've made money—big money—but I'm getting fed up on

the business. I want to pull out and live on the coast, and I need a man I can trust to take over the business. It's a cut-throat one."

"You mean, you aim to have me run it?" Cole said slowly.

Craig Armin nodded. "As soon as you learn the ropes. It won't be hard, because I've done the spade work. When I came here there was one big freighting outfit, the Acme. It's on its last legs now. There's another one springin' up, but we'll put them out of business in short order." He smiled faintly. "It takes a nice combination of brains and brawn, Cole. In the first place you're over the toughest kind of hard-case alive—the professional teamster. He respects nobody he can't lick, and that's a large order. When I started this outfit I had to lick my best teamster first. I did it with an ax."

He smiled grimly at the memory and went on. "In the second place, it takes brains. We're in a queer position here in Piute. The mines are high, and in rugged mountains, so a railroad is out of the question. The ore isn't rich, but there's a lot of it, and it's a long distance to the reduction mills below town. Mines can't afford their own freighting outfits, because it takes so many wagons and mules. For that reason the private freighters get the contracts to haul the ore from mines to reduction mills. We have to fight for the contracts, and just about anything goes. I can hire teamsters, men like Billings, without any brains. But what I want is a man with brains who can drive Billings." He paused, and added drily: "You didn't make a bad start."

"Thanks," Cole answered.

"Once you learn the business, Cole, I'm turning it over to you. I never knew an Armin who was a

fool. The business will be yours to run. You send me fifty per cent of the profits and keep fifty per cent for yourself." Craig Armin leaned forward and tapped his finger on the desk. "There are lots of things you'll have to pick up, son, things I can teach you. There are millionaires here, Cole. The mine owners, the bankers, the market riggers, the promoters, the big lawyers, the shipping men from Frisco—they're all here milking these mines with their stockholders' money. They're the men to know, and I know them. They're the men who give you the business. Never forget that. During the day, you can work on the business of feed contracts for a couple of thousand mules, pasture, vet service, wagon purchase and repair, blacksmithing and freighting schedules. But at night you'll swing your business with the monied men. Dress well, eat well, drink well, entertain, spend money—and you'll earn more money."

Cole felt uncomfortable, but he said nothing. He was aware of the fact that he was a rough man, blunt-spoken, a hard-luck cowman who knew nothing except cattle and horses and nights under the stars and dust and sun and rain. But he supposed, with a quiet confidence, that if other men liked this life, there must be something to it, and that he could live it.

"How does it sound?" Craig Armin asked suddenly.

"Fine," Cole said promptly. And it did, to a man who was broke.

A racket outside in the wagon yard came dimly through the door. Craig Armin got to his feet. "The mine shifts change at six and so do my men," he said. "This shift is just hitching up. Come out and see a sight."

COLE followed him out a side door, across a corridor, through another door, and out onto a short loading platform. They could look out into the broad and crowded wagon yard, and it was truly a sight.

In front of them was a rig all ready to go out. Ten spans of mules, their stretchers hitched to a heavy chain, were lined out in front of a huge, high-sided wagon. And behind this wagon, hitched by a short tongue, was another, smaller wagon. The near mule on the wheel team, next to the wagon, was saddled, and a man was mounted on him. A single line, tied to his saddlehorn, ran through rings on the hames of each near horse to the bit of the lead horse. A stick ran from the bit of this horse to its mate.

In one hand the rider held the reins to the pair of mules ahead of the wheel team. Buckled to his saddlehorn was a heavy leather strap that reached back to the stout brake lever of the first wagon. Cole looked at it all with interest. The teamster drove only the swing team with the reins, the lead team with the jerk line. As for the rest of the spans, they were ignored. It seemed a precarious business to Cole, and he was studying it when it pulled out the huge arched gate. Another rig, identical to that one, was led into place by a cursing hostler.

"Risky, eh?" Craig Armin grunted. "It isn't as bad as it looks, though. We only use it on a long grade and wide road. The other wagons don't take such a big hitch. But it takes some driving, though."

Cole nodded. A big heavy-booted man came up to the hostler, conferred with him a moment, then strode over to the near wheeler. He put his hand up to the horn and swung into the saddle. But in that one brief moment Cole had seen

something. There was an anchor tattooed on the big man's hand!

Cole leaped down from the loading platform, and ran toward the teams, coming up behind the wheelers. He half vaulted onto the saddled mule, grabbed the big man's collar, and then let himself fall back. He dragged the man out of the saddle and into the dust.

The big teamster lunged up and turned around. There was recognition as well as anger in his eyes as he saw Cole.

"Well, well," Cole drawled, stepping back and surveying him. "The big brave bandit. I figured I'd run across you."

The big man's eyes flicked to Craig Armin, who had come up beside Cole.

"What's this, Juck?" Craig Armin snapped.

"Search me," the big man said warily. "He's lookin' for a fight."

"I'm gettin' one," Cole retorted. He shucked off his coat into the dust, threw his hat after it, and spoke to Craig Armin without looking at him. "This moose stuck up the stage I was on last night and took ten thousand dollars from a girl passenger."

"Wait a minute!" Craig said quickly. "That can be explained and—"

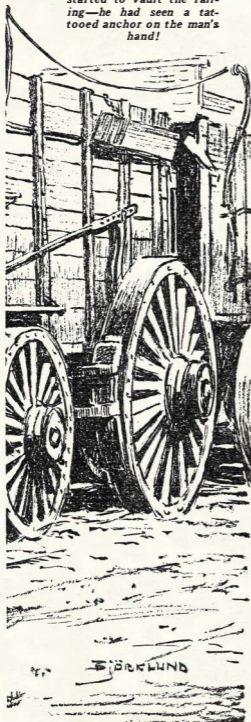
"Too late," said Cole. He swung a hook deep into Juck's belly, and, when the big man folded, he smashed a right into his jaw that sent him skidding in the dust on his back.

"Wait!" Craig Armin cried.

But Juck was up. The teamsters, used to and enjoying fights, came running from all directions, forming a loose circle around the three of them. Juck rushed then, a growl in his throat, and Craig Armin fell back, cursing softly. The drive of Juck's rush drove Cole back into the crowd, but he kept his feet, smash-



Cole was studying the rig when the driver swung to saddle. - Instantly Cole started to vault the railing—he had seen a tattooed anchor on the man's hand!



ing down on Juck's exposed neck. He twisted then and Juck lost his balance and fell. The crowd backed up.

COLE waited until Juck was barely erect, and then he waded in, his arms pumping great slashing blows into Juck's face. He had the choice of staying away from his opponent and cutting him up, or never letting him get set. He chose the latter.

Juck's nose was pumping blood now, and he looked dazed. His powerful arms flailed, but he couldn't get set for a blow. Time and again, feet stomping into the hard-packed dirt, Cole drove blow after blow into Juck's face, forcing him off balance. When Juck raised his thick arms to guard his face, Cole smashed his fist wrist-deep into his big belly.

One of Juck's blows caught Cole on the ear, and he went down. Juck was alert enough to make his rush then. Cole rolled sideways and tripped him, and they both came up at the same time, facing each other. Juck swung wildly, and Cole ducked, planting his feet. Juck swung again, and again Cole ducked; but when Juck's last blow went sizzling by, Cole hit him. There was every ounce of well-balanced weight that Cole could muster behind that blow, and when it landed on Juck's shelving jaw Cole felt the shock of it past his shoulder and in his backbone.

Juck's knees buckled and he fell flat on his face, lying immobile. Some good-humored cheers lifted from the men, and then Cole caught sight of Craig Armin and Keen Billings. Their faces were grave, watchful. Craig Armin walked up to him.

"A good start," he said approvingly. "Come in the office, now, and clean up."

"Oh, no." Cole shook his head. He didn't say anything more for a moment while he got his breath. "That gunnie is comin' to the sheriff's office with me."

Keen Billings quickly lifted his voice into a harsh bawl.

"Back to work, every man-jack of you! Step lively, boys! Break it up!"

Craig Armin waited until the men had drifted off out of earshot, and then he said in a low, impatient voice: "Don't be a damned fool, boy. What's it to you if Juck is jailed?"

"Nothin' to me," Cole said. "It's somethin' to that girl."

"What girl?"

"Celia Wallace."

Craig Armin looked steadily at his nephew. "Don't be simple! That girl is the sister of your competitor, Ted Wallace. If she gets that ten thousand back, they'll worry the very hell out of you!"

"So you did have her robbed?" Cole murmured softly.

Craig Armin's gaze held for a long moment, then he said: "I did. What of it?"

Cole stooped over Juck, and quickly drew the teamster's gun and held it slack in his hand, his eyes on Keen Billings, who had been watching.

"What of it?" Cole said gently. "Nothin'. It just happens to be robbery, that's all. I'm takin' Juck to jail. The whole story will get out then, and we'll see what of it."

"You won't do that," Craig Armin said quietly.

"Back off, Billings!" Cole said sharply. "But before you do, shuck that gun. I'm goin' to pick Juck up and if a man makes a move to stop me, I'll shoot him!"

"Wait!" commanded Craig Armin.

"I've waited too damn long!" Cole answered savagely. "This out-

fit stinks! I thought so when I first came in. Now I'm sure of it!"

He pointed his gun at Keen Billings, and Billings flipped his gun into the dust and backed off. Craig Armin's face was a study. His eyes were bright with fury, his lean face pale. He was calculating his chances, and when Cole grabbed Juck by the shirt collar and started to drag him toward the gate, Craig Armin said quietly: "All right. You can stop."

"What for?" asked Cole, pausing. "What's your price? The ten thousand?"

Cole straightened up, his gun in front of him. He thought a moment, then nodded slowly. "That's it, right to the penny. Go get it, or I take Juck to the sheriff."

WITHOUT another word, Craig Armin turned and went back into the office. Keen Billings stared at Cole a long moment, and then smiled crookedly. "You're goin' to be awful sorry for this—awful sorry."

"Who'll make me sorry?" Cole asked.

Billings' face was dark with anger, but he controlled it. "He'll have your hide nailed on the wall in damn short order, mister. You'd better light a shuck tonight, while you still can."

Cole smiled faintly, and dug Juck with his toe. "I got a hunch we'll tangle pretty quick, Billings. I'm goin' to do a better job on you."

Craig Armin came out of the office then and stalked up to them. He extended a sack to Cole.

"Have Billings count it out," ordered Cole.

Craig made a sign and Billings came over. He counted the money out in the dust. There was five thousand in fifty-dollar gold pieces, and the rest was in big bank notes.

Craig Armin, his face impassive, watched until Billings had finished and handed the sack to Cole. Then he looked at his nephew, and said softly: "I'm afraid you've made a mistake, Cole. You'll live to regret it, regret it bitterly."

Cole shrugged. "I'll live. That's one thing. And that's more than I can say for the first one of your hard cases that gets in my way, Craig. Remember that, when you start feelin' salty."

He nodded, and backed off toward the gate under the curious eyes of the indifferent teamsters. Billings and Craig Armin watched him disappear quickly behind the high board fence.

Then Craig Armin said softly, wickedly, not even looking at Billings. "The fool. Get him, Keen. And no holds barred. Run him out of the country!"

CHAPTER III

A PROMISE KEPT

SINCE there were over a million ounces of gold and silver taken from some twenty mines stretched along the bare shoulders of the Sierra Negras above Piute each year, it was reasonable to suppose that the mine managers would demand adequate protection from the law. They had, and they got it in the form of Sheriff Ed Linton. Aside from the mine operators and their employees, however, there were several thousand miners and the hangers-on of a boom camp that made up Piute. There were Mexicans, Welshmen, the Irish, Germans, Poles and Swedes, and nobody could expect them to mix without trouble. Consequently, the sheriff's office was a large affair, and its active work was done by three hard-working deputies.

Sheriff Linton himself was not a peace officer in the true sense of the word. He was a politician, alert to the fact that the man who administered the law in Piute to the satisfaction of a handful of millionaires was a man who might go far.

Linton's office was nominally a twelve-by-fourteen cubbyhole in the busiest block of the main street. In reality, it was the lobby of the Cosmopolitan House, the big four-story brick hotel that loomed above the rest of the town in elegant snobbishness. In its suites, in its barroom, in its dining room, or in the sumptuous offices of the reduction mills and mines, Sheriff Linton could generally be found drinking, scheming, back-slapping, promising and fawning. He was well-dressed, dapper, and discreet. Nowhere on his well-tailored person could be found a gun or a star. He was indistinguishable from the many rich men—mine promoters, stock riggers, mine managers, mine lawyers, reduction mill superintendents and mine supply men—who lined the elegant mahogany bar of the Cosmopolitan House.

It was quiet in the barroom, for there was no music, no girls and no crowd. The gambling—for the highest stakes in Piute—was done in an adjoining room. This barroom, with its deep leather cushions on the seats that lined the walls, was for drinking only, drinking and scheming. Men moved about slowly, talked in low voices, smoked excellent cigars, drank the best liquor, and devised ways to take more money from the patient Sierra Negras and their own stockholders.

Sheriff Ed Linton was at a table for four, listening politely to a very uninteresting story being told by a newly arrived lawyer from Frisco, when a porter stopped at his shoulder.

"Yes?" Sheriff Linton said. He had a thin, alert face that was bisected by a full and well-kept black mustache. He was forty-five, perhaps, and affected an oversize ascot tie. He was as neat as new stove pipe, and fully aware of it.

"Gempmun to see you, suh," the porter told him.

"Send him in."

"They's a lady with him, suh. Out in the lobby."

Now Sheriff Ed Linton had learned the politician's first lesson: see everybody, listen to everybody, and then use horse sense. He rose, excused himself and followed the boy out into the spacious, red-carpeted lobby. It was more noisy out here, for mere glass windows could not shut out the brawling racket of the town's night life that flowed by on the streets outside.

The porter led Linton under the big crystal chandelier and across the lobby to a lounge in a corner where Ted Wallace and a rather beautiful girl rose to greet him. The disappointment over Wallace, who was a relatively unimportant person in Piute, was cancelled out by the presence of the girl. Sheriff Linton put on his best smile, shook hands with Wallace, and then was introduced to the latter's sister, Celia.

ERECT, Ted Wallace was a carelessly dressed man in corduroy coat and Levis. He was inches taller than his sister, and in his hair was the same blond color. Only it was carelessly combed and wild, like the look on his face. He might have been thirty, but the anger on his tanned face was the anger of a twelve-year-old.

"I've been trying to get you for two hours!" Wallace said brusquely. "I want to report a robbery!"

Sheriff Linton nodded politely.

"Take it to my chief deputy, Wallace. He's done some remarkable recovery of stolen articles."

"I'm not takin' this to any deputy," Wallace said grimly. "I'm bringin' it to you, Linton. Layin' it on your lap. My sister was robbed of ten thousand dollars up in the pass last night. The stage was held up. I also know who did the job!"

The sheriff's eyes widened. "Too bad," he said, glancing at Celia. Her face was flushed with excitement as she watched her brother. "Now, you say you know the robber?"

"Not the robber. The man who set him up to it." Wallace paused. "It was Craig Armin who planned it and paid men to do it."

"Nonsense!" Sheriff Linton said immediately.

"That money," Ted went on harshly, "was for my freightin' business. It meant the difference between success and failure. I wrote to my sister for the money, and she answered, saying she was going to bring it out. She named the day and the amount."

"How do you suppose Armin knew that?" Sheriff Linton asked, polite derision in his voice.

"I'm comin' to that. Those thug teamsters of his know every driver that carries mail into this town. My guess is that they bribed the mail drivers to open the sacks and run through the mail and read everything that was addressed to me. I know that"—Wallace's voice was really angry now—"because that letter from sis had been opened. But when I got it it was too late to tell her to change her plans. She was robbed—and by Armin's men!"

"Prove it."

"Craig Armin's nephew, Cole Armin, was on the stage!"

"Proving exactly what?"

"That he was keeping an eye on

her, pointing her out to the gunnies his uncle sent!"

"It's a neat theory," Linton admitted. "Proof's a different matter."

"Then get it!"

Linton smiled faintly. "Wallace, Craig Armin is a big name in this town. I can't accuse him of something like that without proof."

"Then get proof!" said Wallace.

Linton inclined his head politely. "I'll try, I'll promise you that. It's only fair to state, however, that I don't believe Armin did it. Even if he did you couldn't get a jury to convict him. And chances are he'd turn around and sue you for false arrest and win his suit and ruin you." He shook his head. "Just between us, you'd better forget it. Don't ever fight a buzz saw."

"You mean you won't do anything about it?" Celia asked, amazed.

Linton bowed. "On the contrary, I'll have my men work on it. I'm merely telling you what will happen. It's unfortunate, but it's so."

Ted Wallace glared at him, the anger of impotence in his face. Then he said thickly: "I'm not going to let you forget this, Linton. I'll be in your office three times a day. I'll turn this town upside down and shake it before I'll take that! Tell Craig Armin that! I'll get that money back if I have to blow up Monarch's safe!"

Linton bowed again. Ted Wallace took Celia by the arm and stalked out of the lobby. Behind them, the sheriff smiled crookedly, shrugged, and reached in his pocket for a cigar on the way back to the bar.

OUT in the street, jammed in the river of humanity that flowed down the sidewalk, Ted Wallace strode protectingly beside his sister. He said suddenly: "I'll give him a week, and then I'll hold up the Mon-

arch office and blow the safe!"

"Ted!" Celia cried. She looked up at him, and his face was grim. "They'd know!"

"Sure they'd know. Let 'em prove it, though."

"But they could! Sheriff Linton



was amused, tonight. But if you hold up the Monarch, he won't be amused any longer. He'd arrest you and the business would fall away and you'd lose everything you've done while you rotted in jail!"

"I lose everything anyway," her brother pointed out bitterly.

"Oh, Ted. Isn't there any other way?"

"Not when you're fightin' pirates."

They didn't talk after that. The office of the Western Freight Co.—Ted Wallace's young and lusty freighting outfit—was on the main street, wedged between two stores. It was a narrow single room, originally built for an assay office. Behind it, pushed up tight against the back wall between it and the alley, was the wagon yard. It wasn't much, and when all the wagons were in—six in number—it was jammed.

Across the alley in a fenced-in lot were the stables, the corral, and the blacksmith shop. Above the office were three small rooms that were Ted Wallace's quarters. To get to them, it was necessary to walk down the alley and through the wagon yard and climb a shaky set of stairs.

It all looked mean and shoestring to Celia as she threaded her way through the high wagons in the yard,

holding her skirts against her to keep the grease of the wheel hubs from smearing them. She knew it represented more money than was evident, but it was disheartening. Ted lived like an Indian, slept little and when he did kept one eye cocked to the safety of his wagons below his window. Given money, the money she had brought out with her, it might have been another story. But now it was hopeless. "Don't fight a buzz saw," Sheriff Linton had said. It was true, but she mustn't let Ted know. He must find that out for himself, find it out the hard way, by taking his licking. In the meantime, she'd try to make these three inadequate rooms into a home of sorts for him.

WHEN she mounted the stairs, Celia found she was weary. Too much had happened, and it was all bewildering. Nothing counted here but violence and threats. Everything here was as harsh as the desert that started below the town and stretched out into a terrible infinity.

Celia opened the door, her head drooping with weariness and disappointment. She had taken only a few steps into the room when a pair of boots came suddenly into her circle of vision. She started a little, and looked up.

Cole Armin, still unshaven, with a livid bruise showing on his cheek beneath the beard stubble, was standing there with his hat in his hand.

"What are you— Ted, that's the man! Cole Armin!"

"I see him," Ted Wallace said softly. He shut the door behind him, and the three of them looked at each other. There was amusement in Cole Armin's face, but he said nothing.

Ted Wallace moved around the table in the middle of the room,

pulling off his battered hat. "I'm goin' to have the pleasure of unscrewing the head of one of these Armins, anyway," he declared.

Cole Armin smiled then. He made a gesture with his hat toward the table, on which lay the canvas sack Craig Armin had given him. "Look that over before you swarm," he said mildly.

Celia went up to it, hefted it, realized what was in it and then swiftly untied the neck of the sack and dumped out its contents.

She stared at it, motionless, and Ted Wallace came over slowly to gaze at it.

"The money," Celia whispered. "My money." She looked up at Cole Armin. "You . . . you're giving it back?"

Cole nodded. Celia stared at him, and then at Ted, and then she ran around the table into her brother's arms. "Ted! Ted! It's our money! Don't you understand? Our money!" She shook him by the shoulders in her excitement and joy.

"I understand," Ted said slowly. He looked over her shoulder at Cole, his gaze puzzled. "I understand that part of it. I still don't understand why you brought it back." There was the faintest suggestion of suspicion in his tone.

"I promised your sister I would," Cole said simply.

Celia turned to him then, her eyes still bright with excitement. "Did . . . did your uncle do it for you?"

Cole shook his head. He told them of his meeting with Juck and recognizing the anchor tattooed on his hand. He skipped any mention of the fight, merely saying that he used his recognition of Juck to get the money out of his uncle.

When he was finished, Celia said swiftly: "But you had a job! Will he give it to you now?"

"He couldn't give it to me," Cole replied. "I wouldn't take it from a coyote like him."

"Tell us the rest of it," Ted Wallace said suddenly. "You've been in a fight."

"I had an argument with Juck."

Neither Ted nor his sister spoke, and Cole shifted his feet. "Well, I'll be goin'," he said.

"Wait a minute," Wallace said. "You're through with that outfit of your uncle's, then?"

Cole nodded.

"What are you going to do?" Celia asked.

"Find a job."

CELIA looked at Ted, and he looked at her. Something passed between them, something that didn't need speech to be understood. And then Ted Wallace smiled, and it was the first time Celia had seen him smile since she got into Piute.

"You aren't goin' to have to look very far for a job, Armin," Ted said. "How would you like to throw in with Western Freight?"

Celia was watching Cole, a deep pleasure in her green eyes. Cole's face was a study; surprise and bewilderment were there, and embarrassment, too.

"You don't understand," Cole stammered. "This money ain't mine. It's yours. I just—"

"—returned it," Ted Wallace supplied. "You threw over a good job, rowed with your uncle, licked his plug-uglies and returned the money. That's enough for me. It'll save my life. I can get four more wagons now and more mules and steamsters, and move into a new wagon yard and whip Craig Armin. I can use a man like you, and you can use a man like me. What about it? I mean it!"

Cole looked over at Celia and sur-

prised an expression of eagerness on her face. She flushed a little and her glance dropped, but Cole knew she wanted him to say yes. But was it sensible? They were grateful to him now, this moment. Tomorrow, they might regret their impulse. He didn't know anything about freighting. He was a cowman. He wasn't bringing anything, not even knowledge, to the business.

"But you don't know me, Wallace," he said slowly to Ted. "And I reckon I don't savvy much about the business. I—"

"Forget it. I'll take a chance on the partnership if you will. What about it?"

Cole's unshaven face broke into a slow smile then, and his eyes were warm. He liked Ted and Celia Wallace—and he needed a job. He was a stranger in a strange land, and these were his kind of people. He put out his hand and Ted shook it steadily.

"Partners, then?" Ted asked.

"I reckon we are," Cole said quietly. "If you want it that way."

There came a heavy knock on the door then, and Celia glanced at the money. Cole put his hand inside his coat and pulled out a gun, and then looked over at Ted.

"Come in," Ted called.

The door opened, and a towering hulk of a man entered the room. It was Juck, hat in hand. His nose was swollen, his big mouth cut and one eye was purple and closed. With the other, he glanced at them.

"Friend Juck," Cole said dryly, "come in and meet the girl you robbed."

Celia started in surprise and Juck came into the room, closing the door sheepishly after him. He was dusty and his shirt was stiff with dried blood, but there was no belligerence in his manner.

"I don't rightly know how to say this," he began, looking at Cole, and then at Wallace. "I'm after a job, Wallace."

"Well, I'm damned!" Ted Wallace exploded. "You've got more gall than the mules you drive!"

"I know," Juck said. "Still, I'm a good teamster. I been fired from Monarch, kicked out. I . . . I can tell you, too, how I come to pull that robbery, if you'll let me talk."

"Let him talk, Ted," Celia urged. "After all, he was nice to me, as nice as a robber can be, I suppose. He let me go into the bushes and take off my money belt when he found me after I'd run away."

"All right, talk!" Wallace said curtly. Cole looked on silently.

Juck shifted his feet. "Ain't much to say, I reckon. Armin told me if I'd do this hold-up he'd give me Billings' job. Told me it was just a joke he was playin' on a woman friend of his. Said it didn't mean nothin' and that it was just for fun. When I told him I didn't like the idee, he threatened to fire me. I got to figurin' if it was just for fun, then there wasn't no sense in losin' my job over it. When I done it and give him the money, he never fired that coyote Billings. He give me a bottle of whiskey and told me to forget it." He glanced at Cole, and fumbled with his hat. "I never knowed what it was all about until this here Texas man jumped me today. When I come to, Billings kicked me out."

TED glanced over at Cole, and Cole knew that already, as his duty in a partnership less than ten minutes old, he was being consulted and had to give his advice. He thought of something, then, and said: "Juck, you've got to have work, haven't you?"

"I sure do. I can work," Juck said.

"There's another freightin' outfit in town, I heard Craig Armin say. Name of Acme. Why don't you hit them for work?"

Juck fumbled with his hat some more. "I . . . well, I wanted to work for Western."

"But why? If Miss Wallace wanted to, she could get you tossed into jail for months."

"I know that. Still . . . well, I just want to work for Western. Acme is done for. They'll fold up. Western kin fight Monarch. Ted Wallace, well, he don't take it like Acme does. He fights. And I'm honin' to get a crack at Monarch," Juck added grimly.

Cole looked over at Ted, and Juck, seeing that look, shook his head. "Well, thanks for listenin', anyway. I don't suppose I can do nothin' if you want to arrest me."

"Wait a minute, Juck," Cole said. To Ted he said: "I think you've got a good teamster, if you can use him."

Ted nodded. "Juck," he said, "can you drive a ten-team hitch down from the Glory Hole mine? Remember the road, now, before you answer."

"I know the road. I'll do it in the dark. Better'n that, I'll take a ten-team hitch with an eighteen-ton load down from the China Boy."

Ted Wallace laughed. "You're braggin', Juck."

"All right, call my bluff, then, to prove it. From the China Boy."

Ted looked over at Cole, who was grinning; then came around the table and put out his hand. "Juck, you're hired. And you'll get the toughest trick in Piute to drive, too, for that hold-up."

"Suits me," Juck said. He grinned through swollen lips, and glanced

over at Cole. "I know mules, mister. And them roads don't come too tough for me. I'll be at work at six and you'll git that ore hauled from me, never you worry."

He turned to the door and opened it. Going out, he paused and looked back at Celia. "I'm right sorry about that rough handlin', Miss Wallace. You want any mountains moved, or mines dug, or armies licked, you just call on me."

Celia laughed, and Cole could see that she wasn't the kind of a girl who could ever harbor vindictiveness. "All right, Juck. I'll remember. Good night."

Juck gone, Ted came over to the table and looked at the money. Then he glanced up at Cole and Celia, and his eyes were excited.

"Think of it," he said softly. "We can get contracts now that we couldn't get before, because we'll have the wagons. Cole, we're goin' to take the tough ones, the high mines like the Glory Hole and Swampscott and the toughest of all, the China Boy. Armin won't touch 'em with a big wagon and he doubles his rates when the going gets tough. We'll haul those mines with the big wagons and underbid him by a third. And when the rest of these mines hear about it, they'll change outfits. Money is money, and they'll save it if they can."

"There'll be a fight," Cole said quietly. "I only met Craig Armin, but he hates like an Indian."

Ted Wallace's face sobered, and he nodded. "So do I." He looked at Cole and his gaze was level. "And so do you, partner, unless I'm blind."

Celia smiled at the two of them. "Then you two Indians put that

money in the bag and sleep on it. I'm going to bed." She came up to Cole and put out her hand. "Thanks . . . for everything. If I'd known you better last night, I would have known that your promise is really a promise, and not talk."

Cole blushed and murmured something, and Celia turned to Ted. "You and Cole can sleep in the middle room on the cots. I'll sleep here on the couch. We can talk all this over in the morning."

Cole accepted the invitation and Celia, the bag of money still in her hand, showed him into his and Ted's bedroom. It was a tiny affair partitioned off the corridor that connected the kitchen and the living room. She lighted the lamp and he saw two rough cots with clean blankets on them and a battered old dresser by the open window.

"And you can sleep on the money," Celia said, handing him the sack and smiling up at him. "You earned it."

He was just going to protest, when there was a loud knock on the outside door and a voice shouted: "Open up!"

Celia stood motionless. She and Cole stared at each other. They heard Ted unlock the door, and the heavy scuffle of boots.

Then a voice said: "Put 'em up, Wallace! You're arrested! You'd better not make a move!"

On the heel of that rough order, came Sheriff Linton's silky drawl.

"You made a mistake, Wallace—a bad mistake. If you wanted to blow the Monarch's safe and steal ten thousand dollars, you shouldn't have announced your plans to me. Where's the loot you got?"

What new double-cross has Craig Armin rigged up? Is the new partnership between Cole and Ted Wallace doomed to failure? Will Cole, too, find himself wanted by the law? The second installment of DEAD FREIGHT FOR PIUTE teems with thrills, suspense and action. Don't miss it!

THE STORY OF THE WEST

told in pictures and text by

GERARD DELANO

It is a rather ironical fact that the Spaniards of "old" New Mexico themselves furnished the Indians with the means of their own harassment.

Prior to the Spaniards' introduction of the horse in this country in the sixteenth century, the Indians made war on foot and in fact conducted all transportation in like manner. It was customary for such war parties to carry a store of extra moccasins (for such expeditions wore out many pairs) lashed to the backs of their dogs, probably on some form of pack saddle.

From the hilltops, the Indians of the plains watched Coronado's conquering columns file past in 1540, his troops resplendent in shining armor and mounted on gayly prancing ponies. In the night some bolder spirits among them stole into the camp of these strange super beings, cut the tethers of a few feeding horses and made away with them. So were the Indians provided with their first horses, later to prove such effective aids to war and raids on these same Spaniards and their descendants, the settlers in New Mexico.

It was now much easier for the Indians to follow the great buffalo herds and furnish their lodges with meat and robes.

Soon, because of its great value to them, the horse became both a form of capital and a medium of exchange. A young bride, for instance, cost her prospective husband so many horses, the fee being collected by her father.

So when, as the years passed, the Spaniards or the Anglo-Americans drove herds of horses or mules along the Santa Fe Trail, the horses provided both an object of theft and the means of carrying it out.

During the early days of the Trail many isolated families, both Spanish and American, were raided and the adults left scapless in pools of their own blood while their children were made captives. It was not until about 1842 that a distinct effort was made by representatives of the United States to ransom these captives. At this time Edward's Settlement, about five miles south of the present Holdenville, Oklahoma, became a sort of clear-

ing house for white prisoners captured in the Southwest and they were brought there for barter by the wily Indians, many of whom were too wise to venture nearer to Fort Gibson.

At this time General Taylor, commanding troops in Indian territory, took steps, through a huge council of various Indian tribes, to bring about the ransom of all white prisoners among the Indians. On August 23, 1842, a party of Kickapoo brought to Fort Gibson a white boy ten or eleven years old whom they claimed they had bought from the Comanches for four hundred dollars, and on September 28, a Delaware brought in a fourteen-year-old boy named Frederick Parker.

In this same year the Wichitas made a plundering raid in Texas and returned with seven or eight white children whose parents they had killed. Meanwhile along the Trail similar raids were of frequent occurrence. Ute, Comanche, Kiowa and Pawnee alike combined to menace the caravans and travelers.

In 1829 an American caravan pulled into camp near a detachment of Mexican troops under Colonel Vizcarra. A party of one hundred and twenty Indians approached, but the Americans motioned them to keep out of camp and backed up their sign language with leveled rifles.

Despite the warnings of the Americans the Indians were allowed to enter the camp of the Mexicans. At first they appeared friendly, but at a signal from their leader all the reds jumped to their feet and fired on the unsuspecting Mexicans. For some reason their aim seemed to be to kill the Mexican commander. It is said that a loyal Taos Indian in the party, seeing a gun leveled at Vizcarra, leaped forward and received the ball in his own heart. He died instantly. A captain of the Mexican dragoons and several privates also fell to the fire of the redskins.

The sharpshooting Americans pursued the Indians for several miles into the hills, killing and wounding a considerable number and returned without so much as one of their number receiving the slightest injury.

NEXT WEEK: THE FORMATION OF A CARAVAN



At first the Indians seemed friendly, then at a signal from their leader, they suddenly began a fierce attack on the unsuspecting Mexican soldiers.



SADDLEFUL O' POISON

by E. C. LINCOLN

THE long, flat shadow of the grandstand extended across the arena almost to the bucking chutes and was outlined by the late afternoon sun of a Montana June. Judges, hazers, and pick-up men, reinforced for the occasion, circled slowly, eyes riveted on the gate of Chute 3, their sweat-streaked mounts gathered and ready.

Meanwhile the packed stands were silent, breathless, tense with anticipation of what the next minute might bring. For Cloudburst was coming out, Cloudburst, for three

years the one unconquered bucking horse of the Inland Empire. And only yesterday Cloudburst had killed his fifth man!

On the topmost rail of the arena fence, close to the swing side of the chute gate, sat a giant cowpuncher. His shoulders, so massive they stretched his brown checked shirt almost to bursting, were hunched forward, his broad, good-humored face now set and hard as he watched through the planking of the narrow chute. The tiny atom of a man who perched beside him swore nervously

and kicked with a spurred heel against the giant's shin until his friend said "Huh?"

"Tommy's gittin' down in the saddle," piped the little man in a treble whisper. "Bet he ain't so happy winnin' day money's he might be. Looks sort o' white, don't he? Watch close, Big."

The giant nodded. Inside the heavily timbered chute Tom Driscoll was easing gently in the ring stirrups, testing the leathers. Cloudburst, a great black stallion, grain-fed and brushed to a shine, stood quietly, his owner, Jake Benteen, at his head. A streak of hot blood, somewhere far back in Cloudburst's doubtful ancestry, had given him the fine lines and steel muscles of the thoroughbred; had given him, too, that flash of brains which had made him more feared than the worst bur-coated cayuse that ever came off the range. Three years of contest bucking had taught him much. For one thing, that there was no use wasting energy till the real battle should begin.

"Judges and timers ready? Gate-men ready?" called the starter. "All set, Tommy?"

The young rider measured his hold on the halter rope, said, "O. K., folks," and set his heels firmly in the black shoulders. Jake Benteen stepped away from the outlaw's head and climbed the chute. "He'll get yuh, but stay with him, kid," he encountered, slapping Tom heartily on the back. "Ride 'im, cowboy!"

The gate flew open. Out into the arena in one sky-scraping bound lunged Cloudburst. The crowded stands burst into a roaring tumult of sound. Bawling, the black horse fought like a wild thing as he came to earth stiff-legged, battering his rider with pile-driver blows that followed with incredible rapidity. Sud-

denly he changed tactics, whirling to the left and spinning dizzily. But Tommy's taped spurs still raked his black coat from shoulder to haunch, and Tommy's breathless yelps of defiance still assaulted his ears.

Cloudburst threw up his head and paused an instant as if studying the situation; then with no hint of warning he left the ground in a splendid, twisting explosion that bent Tommy's back and stopped the rhythm of the swinging rowels. In a flash Cloudburst had swapped ends and resumed that stiff-kneed battering.

The rider's head was snapping now, his shoulders sagging with each murderous impact of horn or cantle. The thunder of the stands took on a note of warning. Across the arena came the shrill scream of a frightened woman.

On the fence by the chute gate the giant cowpuncher strained his great muscles and rolled from side to side as though he himself were taking that deadly hammering.

"He's a-goin', Willie!" he bellowed as his left arm, swinging wildly, almost knocked his little companion from his perch. "I seen daylight that time. Look there! Tommy can't even choke leather no more. *Willie, come a-runnin'!*"

For out in the arena, with ten thousand eyes upon him, Tommy Driscoll had left the saddle like a man already dead. He struck the earth heavily on head and shoulders, and lay still. The screaming of the frightened woman went on and on in growing hysteria.

Then pick-up men spurred in. Ropes circled. Contestants dropped from the fence, sprinting heavily through the dust, milling close about the fallen rider to screen him from the stands. And first of them all was the giant from the chute gate.

With his diminutive partner close at his heels, he reached his goal before even the nearest pick-up man had swung from his mount.

His great arm slid under the boy's shoulders and he raised the lids of the closed eyes. Then he lowered Tommy's Driscoll's head gently. Cloudburst had killed his sixth rider.

UP in the stands a tourist from Philadelphia turned to his dude wrangler with a question. He could sense death in the air, only a minute earlier the air of carnival, but he was still not wholly convinced. Perhaps, after all, this was only part of the show.

"That big chap who came running out—the one that got to him first. Why didn't *he* ride that horse?" he demanded. "Looks to me as if he could ride almost anything."

The dude wrangler glanced at the tourist to see if the question were asked in seriousness, remembered his job, and toned down his answer to moderate politeness. "That big feller," he said, "that's Big George Griffin. Any everybody knows he don't ride the brones no more 'cause the committees won't let him. Broncs won't buck enough when Big rides 'em. He squeezes in with them big legs and any ordinary contest buckler jest turns good horse."

He warmed to his subject. Here was a chance to get his mind off the gruesome accident that had happened there before their very eyes. "Say," he went on, "it ain't likely you'd know, but that big feller's pretty famous around these parts—him and that little bald-headed shrimp of a partner you seen runnin' out with him, Willie Joe Cummings. That's a team, them two. Willie's got the brains, Big's got the muscle. Millionaire's they are. Yes, sir. Wouldn't think it to look at

'em, them worn-out Levis an' all. Fact, though."

The tourist, incredulous, said "Th' hell!" almost like a native.

"Yes, sir. Six years back there warn't two broker cow nurses west of Denver. Then they hits oil on a scrubby two-bit quarter-section horse ranch down in Oklahoma an' money starts comin' at 'em faster 'n they can count. Now they got a ten-thousand-acre spread down in New Mexico, with every kind o' horse a man ever heard of. String o' big-time runners, even.

"But summers they turn puncher again, for the fun of it. Load a couple o' their pet horses in their own private car, stick a thousand bucks in their pants, an' start lookin' for trouble all up an' down the West. Rodeos, roundups, anywhere there's things goin' on. Chances are they won't head south till snow flies, or the thousand's gone; but that don't happen often. They take plenty chances, but that Willie Joe, he's smarter'n a she-coyote. Yes, sir, millionaires, them two; an' they act jest as common as . . . as any cow-hand." And the dude wrangler, pleased with the interest he had evoked, forced a laugh to show the visitor that a little thing like an arena accident couldn't depress for very long.

But out behind the corrals, where Big and Willie were plodding through the dust over to a hitch rack beside which an enormous rawboned black gelding and a pinto pony stood dozing, there was no need for anybody to keep up appearances before strangers.

Big George growled deep in his throat, mumbling to himself. The weather-seamed face of his diminutive partner was puckered with thought, and he scuffed the toes of his boots in the litter, making no

attempt to keep step with his friend's lumbering stride.

"Hear what the boys is sayin', Big?" Willie asked as he loosened the pinto's reins from the rack.

"Yeah," Big answered moodily. "They got enough o' that Cloudburst horse. Myself, I don't blame 'em."

Willie Joe nodded, and thought his voice was careless, his eyes narrowed to thin slits of blue light as he framed his next question: "Anythin' strike you funny about that ride, Big?"

The giant, already in the saddle, checked his rawboned mount and pondered. Thinking was hard work for Big George. For a full minute he devoted himself to the task, then he shook his head.

"Not one thing," he admitted slowly. "Not unless— Well, Willie, yuh know Tommy was a plenty good bronc scratcher. That Cloudburst hoss was shakin' out the kinks, all right, but he didn't look quite bad enough to unload Tommy like he did. No, sir, Willie, he didn't look near as bad to me as he did last season. Nor yesterday, neither."

The little man glanced about him at the crowd moving silently toward the exit gates. Scattering contestants were beyond earshot. He pushed the pinto close up to the black and lowered his piping voice.

"You know what I'm thinkin', Big? Tommy Driscoll, he's plenty dead afore he ever hits the ground. Mebbeso Slate was yesterday, too. An' I don't think Cloudburst looked that bad, neither. It don't do no good to ask you to do much thinkin', Big, but I want to know why. An' I sure aims to find out."

HHEADQUARTERS of the Indian Fork rodeo association was packed to the doors that evening. Color and light and the steady un-

dertone of many voices filled the long room where bright-shirted riders forced their way through a milling crowd that coughed and grumbled and swore into the blue clouds of cigarette smoke that eddied thinly from floor to ceiling. There was little laughter. At the far end, where the press was thickest, the harassed secretary of the association was busy checking figures with the clerk who handed out the yellow slips that meant day money for the lucky winners. Soon the drawings for tomorrow would be held, and the group of hard-boiled, bowlegged survivors would learn the best or worst of their luck for closing day, when new champions would be crowned.

And yet, on this particular night, there was something undefinable in the air, something far different from the usual hilarity of such occasions, something strained and electric and portentous of trouble; and the sudden hush which fell on the long room as the clerk slapped his check book shut and slipped it into the drawer hinted that the moment had arrived when the trouble was coming to light.

As the secretary rose and produced the two black boxes which held respectively the number of the contestants and the names of the worst buckers, a gray-haired, scarlet-shirted rider forced his way to the table and leaned his rope-scarred fists upon it.

"Mr. Secretary," he said earnestly, "there's somethin' us fellers want to take up afore you start pullin' out them slips. We been talkin'. Mebbe you've heard about it. I know some of us has contracts that says the day-money winner gets to ride that Cloudburst hoss."

"That's right, Pete," acknowledged the secretary.

"Well," said the spokesman, wip-

ing the sweat of embarrassment from his bony face with the back of his hand, "us fellers claim we got as much guts as any bunch in the game, but we ain't ridin' Cloudburst tomorrow—none of us, none whatever. Slats yesterday, an' today Tommy. That's too much."

The muttered assent of the crowd gave weight to his words. The secretary looked about him. "Jake Benteen here?" he asked. "We got a contract with him, too. We pay him a hundred a day for the only horse in this part of the country that never's been ridden. If he'll let us off, we'll let you off— Hey there, Jake! Pass him through, boys."

The owner of the outlaw horse reached the table. His face was red with anger, his mouth pinched tight in a thin, obstinate line. He signaled for silence, holding up a hand on which a broad silver ring shone dully.

"If you fellers want to pass up a chance to make a rep by bein' the first t' ride my hoss, that's up to you," he snapped. "Course, there's been accidents. This ain't no sissy game. But I make my livin' rentin' that horse to the shows. Some day he'll be rode; then where'll I be? I ain't lettin' the association out of no contract. I need the money."

The secretary looked unhappy. "We're losing money on this show, as it is," he protested. "If we pay you, and the boys won't ride—"

At the far end of the room a disturbance was starting. The secretary blinked the smoke from his eyes as he waited for it to subside. Then, instead of subsiding, it came closer. A giant contestant was forcing his way through the crowd like a dreadnaught plunging through a bad sea. Men called his name as he passed. He reached the front rank, grinned, and thrust out with his elbows to

clear the way for the little man who ducked under his arm.

Willie Joe, tiny and gnarled and bald-headed, removed his hat, and his high thin voice cut through the smoke like the squeal of a fife. "Big 'n' me—" he began.

"Louder!" cried someone in the back.

Big chuckled, caught his diminutive partner by the slack of his Levis, and swung him up on the table top. The crowd lost its tensity, breaking into a ripple of friendly laughter as Willie Joe Cummings mopped his shining head and grinned down at them.

"Folks an' Mr. Secretary," he announced formally, when the room had hushed for his words, "me an' Big's been hearin' the talk, an' we got somethin' to say. First place, we don't blame you fellers none. A horse that's killed six good riders ain't no joke. But we feel right sorry for Jake Benteen, too. It's tough luck to own a buckner so durn good that there ain't nobody'll take a chance on him. So after me an' Big wins the steer ropin' tomorrow afternoon, my pard here, he'd admire to take a shot at forkin' this Cloudburst horse, jest to see how his luck's runnin'. How about it, Mr. Secretary?"

The listening crowd broke into a shout of delight as the official nodded his agreement. Only Jake Benteen raised any objection.

"See here!" he roared. "Big George, he can't ride my horse. He's been barred from contest ridin' fer years back, an' you know it."

But the secretary, relieved at the turn which things had taken, decided otherwise. "Reckon you're wrong, Jake," he pronounced. "This isn't a contest, it's an exhibition. And since you're wanting us to stick to your contract, well there's not one

single word in it says who's to do the riding. We're paying you for one ride a day. So I reckon if Big wants the job, it's his own funeral."

So there, to the evident disgust of Cloudburst's owner but the complete satisfaction of all others involved, the matter was left.

IT was almost an hour before Willie and Big finished hearing the congratulations of friend and stranger alike and escaped into the cooler air of a Main Street that flared with lighted store fronts, and rang with the hoarse cries of carnival barkers and the discordant strains of competing harmonies from a dozen busy saloons. Big filled his barrel chest with the night air, then emitted a deep *woosh* of satisfaction.

"Come on, Willie," he pleaded. "This here's our night to howl, 'n' I been gettin' drier every minute. Let's go get us a lot of nice cold beer."

Somewhat sadly, the little man shook his birdlike head. "Nope, Big," he insisted. "We got work to do a-plenty' an' we'll jest have to put off the howlin'. We got to talk this thing over more; then you're goin' back to the car an' get plenty shut-eye. We'll jest slip in the back door of the Silver Dollar an' see can Mike fix us up with a booth."

A little while later, when they were comfortably settled in the hot privacy of Mike's own office, Willie Joe came to the point.

"You ain't nervous about that Cloudburst horse, are yuh, Big?"

His glass halfway to his thirsty lips, the giant started in amazement. "Heck, no," he said. "I done told yuh that when yuh asked me first back in rodeo headquarters. What yuh askin' again for? He's got to be a lot worse horse than he looked today to worry me none."

"Jest the same, Big, he killed Slats

an' Tommy. An' last summer we seen him get Joe Parsons an' Skeet Sivers without doin' much worse." The little man frowned. "Big, what'd yuh know about Jake Benteen, anyways?"

Again Big George looked astonished. "Nothin' that you don't, I reckon," he said. "Used to work on the S Up-an'-Down in th' Panhandle. Got in a mess over some cows an' beat it across th' border. Stays down in Yucatan, or some place like that, till things get quiet again. Was jest as dead broke as we used to be till he gets hold of this Cloudburst horse. Reckon he's picked up two-three thousand a year out o' that buckler. Why?"

Willie Joe shoved his glass from him and rose from the table. "Jest 'cause," he answered enigmatically. "An' now, Big, you hightail down to the car. Me, I'm goin' to circulate a little, an' I don't want you hangin' round an' askin' questions at the wrong time. Six men, that horse has killed. Four of 'em we seen ourselves. I got to find some of the boys that seen the other two."

SATURDAY afternoon was ideal rodeo weather. From the farthest valley of the county they came, young ranchers and graybeards of the frontier generation; women and children by droves; bucks and squaws from the reservation; even Frenchy Lamotte from his trappers cabin high up in the Blues; all drawn in by the grapevine report that Big George Griffin, of New Mexico and points north, east, south, and west, would tangle with Cloudburst to close the show. Betting, and there was plenty of it, was even. If anybody could ride that horse, the wise ones said, Big could do it. But was even Big good enough?

So the afternoon wore on. Calves

bawled and leaped on the taut ropes, saddle buckers spilled their men, or quit, worn out and disgusted, the stock ponies swirled down to the finish line, and the wild horse race cluttered up the track; and through it all every perspiring contestant, every cheering spectator in the mass of humanity that overflowed the stands and packed deep about the arena rails in a triple line of gay color, knew in his heart that this was all nothing but a prelude to the one battle that they had come to see.

So when, well after five o'clock, the loud-speaker blared for attention, a hush settled over the crowd.

"And now, folks," came the metallic voice, "we've come to the last event of rodeo week, the event I know you've all been waitin' for: The outlaw horse, Cloudburst, which in three years has never been ridden, against Big George Griffin, the man that's so good he's been barred from regular contest riding. They're coming out of Chute 1, folks, right where you can watch every move. Keep your eyes on the gate, folks. They're saddlin' that killer horse right now!"

The silent thousands bent forward. Over in Chute 1, the great black horse showing gleaming patches of sweat on shoulder and loin, let himself be saddled. Only the nervous play of the fine black ears showed that Cloudburst was keyed to the limit of his nerves and ready to go.

About him Willie Joe moved expertly, easing on Big's own pet saddle—the association tree had proved far too small—rocking it into place, testing latigo and chinch and halter rope with his gnarled brown fingers. From his post at Cloudburst's head, Jake Benteen watched with a half-concealed sneer on his full lips. Once, when a strap swung free, he stepped forward to help. Willie Joe's bark of warning stopped him short.

"You jest tend to your horse, Jake. I'll do th' saddlin'," Willie ordered.

Jake Benteen, hiding his anger by an ironic shrug of the shoulders, stepped hastily back. "What's eatin' yuh, little feller?" he demanded. "Don't think I'd try any funny stuff with the riggin', do yuh?"

Willie Joe paused in his work. "Nope, Jake, I don't reckon yuh would, not with me watchin'," he said in a voice so low that even Jake barely caught the words. "I don't reckon yuh would, but I'm takin' no chances. Mebbe Big gets unloaded, mebbe not. But there won't be no accidents. Six is plenty, Jake. From now on Cloudburst better watch out."

Big George Griffin, his great frame perched awkwardly on the top rail of the narrow pen, heard but little of this byplay. His broad face, wreathed by a grin of pleasant anticipation, showed only eagerness for the fun to start as he exchanged comments with the throng that pressed close to the chute walls.

A pick-up man loped up to the gate with a question. "Jest waitin' till Willie gits through foolin' round," Big told him. "But, say, feller, if you see me hit the dirt, mebbe you better jest leave me lay an' rest. I'm likely to be plumb worn out, k'ckin' that poor horse along on a hot day like this."

Then Willie signaled his readiness. Big George dragged deep on his half-burned makings, snapped the butt into the dust, and, moving slowly, straddled the chute from side to side.

"Mebbe yuh better prop him up, Jake," he suggested as he eased down into the leather. "This horse o' yours feels kinder sway-backed."

"When he puts the hump in, yun won't be there to see it," Jake Benteen retorted acidly.

"And Big George is in the saddle,"

roared the loud-speaker. "He's in the saddle an' they're ready to go. Watch the gate, folks! Watch—" The rest was lost as the waiting thousands caught their breath.

TWO helpers loosened the rope hitch that held the chute gate. Cloudburst crouched as Big George swept off his battered Stetson. Jake Benteen took his hand from the halter and slid back on the off side almost to the killer's haunches. He climbed to the third plank of the chute and clung there by his crooked elbow, scowling across at Willie Joe, who had scuttled like a cat to the top rail on the other side.

Then Jake Benteen said something almost in Big's ear. "S'long, fourflusher," he muttered. "Start yore ride. An' till I see yuh in hell—good luck!" And he lifted his free hand to slap Big George on his mighty thigh.

Willie Joe, watching from across the chute, saw the movement and his shrill voice squealed a warning as he dove headfirst over the crouching black haunches. His sinewy arms closed tight about Jake Benteen. Then the gate flung open, and the two men, still locked in deadly embrace, went down under almost Cloudburst's flying hoofs as the outlaw broke from the chute.

They still boast of that ride back in Indian Fork, the lucky ones who saw Big George Griffin and Cloudburst fight it out. Men and women leaped to their feet screaming incoherences of encouragement, delirious with the thrill of the battle.

Today Cloudburst was doing his best. For the first few instants of time, Big George felt only the unconquered strength of the horse beneath him, the racking pains that almost tore his sinews from the bone. The back-breaking fence corners seemed

endless. Lights flamed and wheeled before his eyes, exploding into torrents of vanishing stars each time that Cloudburst struck the ground. Then Big caught the rhythm.

Now he could see the straining withers between his knees. He shook the taste of blood from his mouth and closed in with his mighty thighs. The frantic bawling of the outlaw broke off, changed to a squeal of rage. Cloudburst reared high and straight, then flung over in the murderous back fall.

Big George swung clear by inches. He stood waiting till the desperate animal had struggled almost up, then with a yell that only two white men west of the Mississippi could ever equal, he hit the saddle, and Cloudburst felt again the insult of those blunt spurs raking steadily from shoulder to flank.

Once more Big's thighs closed viselike on Cloudburst's ribs, shutting off the outlaw's breath. Once more the bronc tried his battering crow hops, but now each was weaker than the last. Then Cloudburst's head came up, his tense ears loosened, and, as the whistle shrilled, he broke into an aimless lope.

Big, grinning happily, passed over the halter rope as the pick-up men came in beside him. He slid off, dodging a last half-hearted kick from the disgusted outlaw, and waved his hat in response to the thunderous acclaim of the delighted stands.

Then, because somewhere far back in his mind was the faint recollection that something had happened at the chute just as Cloudburst exploded under him, Big glanced in that direction.

He rubbed the dust from his eyes to see better, swore, and forced his aching legs into action, lumbering with all his might toward the milling press of riders that hid Chuee I

from his view. He reached the edge of the throng, hurling men and animals from his path. Shouting Willie's name anxiously, he plunged on till he came to the chute intself. There men hung from the planking, wide-eyed, as Willie Joe rose from his knees and brushed at his Levis thoughtfully. He looked up, and his seamed little face came alive again as the giant burst through the crowd.

"Did yuh ride him, Big?" he piped.

"Did I?" shouted Big George as he swept Willie up in a mighty bear hug of sheer joy. "Did I— Say, didn't yuh see me?"

"Too durn busy," said Willie Joe. Then for the first time, Big saw something that looked like a heap of old clothes lying in the chute at Willie's feet. That something was Jake Benteen. He was sprawled in the litter, face up, and there was not the shadow of a doubt that he was dead.

"Fer gosh sake!" breathed Big.

Willie Joe looked about him. "Sheriff'll be there in a minute," he said. "Reckon you boys want to know about this. Leastwise, you pulled me offn him like you was right interested. Jake here"—he touched the body with the toe of his boot—"he had a mighty good buckler in Cloudburst, but he couldn't let well enough alone. Even the worst outlaws git old, an' sooner or later they git rode. Jake made a lot o' money out o' that horse an' he hated to let go. Last year he sees Cloudburst's beginnin' to weaken. It's then that his horse starts in killin' folks. Know why? 'Cause Jake wants to make sure nobody'll spoil his record."

Big George heard it with open mouth, not understanding. A hundred listeners waited breathless.

Willie Joe wiped the beads of moisture from his face and went on.

"Six men was Cloudburst's score, and every one of 'em a top hand. I git thinkin' about that. I think mebbe Jake don't bother a feller that's sure to git unloaded, but when a good man comes along—like Tommy or Slats, or Big today—then Jake, he makes certain. So I watch right careful that he don't do nothin' to Big, an' when I seen him start to slap Big on the laig, I go for him. Look here!"

Willie Joe bent down, lifted Jake Benteen's lifeless right hand and opened the clenched fingers cautiously. In the palm of the hand close to the ball of the thumb, showed a tiny puncture rimmed with blood. And from the ring on Jake's finger projected a half inch silver thorn like the fang of a rattler. Its tip was stained a yellow brown.

Willie pointed to it. "Reckon he picked that thing up when he was down in Yucatan, or some such place, never thinkin' he'd use it. Folds back into the ring, I reckon, that point does. Poison. Jake jest gives a feller a friendly slap on the back when he's leavin' the chute—when it's too late t' holler—an' Cloudburst gits another killin' to his credit. Reckon Jake forgot, an' closed his fist to swing on me when I tackled him. He didn't last long."

From the awed contestants and helpers came a storm of questions, but Big George caught the little man by the arms. "Yuh mean I'd be another one Cloudburst killed, if yuh hadn't grabbed Jake?" he demanded.

Willie Joe looked a little embarrassed. "Sort o' guess so."

"Well," rumbled Big George, "well—thanks, Willie. But doggone it, feller, I'm sure sorry yuh didn't see me make that ride!"

**THE THREE
Ds**



GREAT CATTLE RANCHES

by **CHARLES L. McNICHOLS**

THE Three Ds, or Waggoner & Son, or The Zacaquista—all names for the same outfit—is typical of the middle or trail-drive period of cow-ranch history. It began back in the old days before the Civil War when Daniel Waggoner, with two hundred and forty-two cows and six horses, located on the Trinity River in Texas, near a place called Cactus Hill, and it spread west, and south, and then north, until it became one of the great cattle empires of all

time. It remains today one of the largest.

The Waggoners were not the first to go up the trail. As early as 1866 their friend and neighbor, Burk Burnett of the famous Four Sixes, went up with Wiley Robin's herd to an unnamed shipping point on the railroad that was later known as the Kansas Pacific. In 1867 Burnett took his father's herd of seventeen hundred head to the town of Abilene, on a new extension of the same

line. The Waggoner outfit did not hit the railroad with their first herd until early in 1870, but when they did it was with a big one, and they sold it for fifty thousand dollars!

It was the story that Dan Waggoner and his son Tom had actually brought back all that money in hard Yankee cash that really started the trail-drive period going for fair. Times were still hard in Texas. The Civil War had ruined many of the self-sufficient ranches of the earlier period. The able men had gone off to war, and the old men, young boys and the courageous frontier women had been hard put to protect themselves against the Indians and border gangs. By the end of the war most people had nothing left but their shooting irons and a lot of cattle that were too wild for the Indians and outlaws to catch.

Folks lived on beef and spent most of their time trying to raise enough corn and "garden sass" down in the creek bottoms to stave off a straight meat diet. Nobody had any cash, and the cattle were practically valueless. The small profits that the trail herds returned brought some hope for better days to the cowmen.

But when the Waggoner outfit brought back that fifty thousand dollars! That meant the end of puttering around with garden sass. Ranchers knew for sure that cattle was now a cash crop. And for cash they could buy everything they needed; so they turned their attention to cow raising, to the exclusion of everything else.

ONE of the first things Dan Waggoner did when his son came back from that epic-making drive was to change his brand. He had been using a single D, but he found to his sorrow that it was too

easy for thieves to doctor. So he changed to three Ds in reverse, the brand that is famous today.

Next he sent his son, Tom, down through the southern part of Texas to buy steers. This was still in 1870. Tom was eighteen, but the outfit was already "Waggoner & Son," and he was a full partner. His instructions were to buy the best steers he could pick up at eight dollars a head, and he carried a big part of that fifty thousand along with him.

Down there in the South, hundreds of miles from the railroad, where no one had seen "hard" money for years, eight dollars a head was a wonderful price for cattle, and young Tom got the pick of the country. Those fighting longhorns had to be roped, thrown, and branded before they were driven off to the Three D holding up in Wise County, not far south of the Indian Territory line. The next spring they were pushed on over that long, rough, dangerous trail through the Territory and into Kansas.

But when they reached the Kansas railhead, each eight-dollar steer brought the Waggoners thirty dollars! The great beef boom was on.

There was some loss on the trail. Every big ford took a few steers. Indian raids accounted for others. But the worst losses were from the thefts of the professional cow thieves that haunted the trail.

It was on account of this gentry that the trail drivers had to be prepared to fight a running gun battle from the Red River to the railroad. Some of the cash that came from the first drives went to buy two Colt six-shooters for every man, and from then on they became the standard equipment for all trail-drive hands. The old single-shot

Sharps rifles men carried when they first went up the trail were soon discarded for Henry and Winchester repeaters that wouldn't shoot so far, but would shoot many times faster. Fast shooting was what was needed to repel the lightning swift raids of the rustlers, and whenever the cowhands were not actually sleeping or working the cattle, they'd be out away from the herd, practicing with their new guns.

The Territory in those days was the West at its toughest. It was tougher than old Texas had been during the worst of the Mexican and Indian troubles and it was tougher than the worst boom town in the newer West. It was a land where no man dared to trust a stranger because every outfit looked much alike, whether its members were honest men or professional murderers.

Once a light-haired kid stopped at the Three D camp. He was lonesome and wanted some companionship, but at the same time he knew that any man who trusted strangers might be throwing his life away. So when he walked in he not only had two six-shooters hanging loose in his holsters, but he had a scatter gun cocked and ready in his hands. His rifle was in a scabbard on his saddle.

He talked two hours with the Three D hands before he was persuaded that he'd found an honest outfit. Then he laid aside his shotgun and ate with them. Before night he was on the pay roll.

This boy—he was about eighteen—became one of the best hands the Waggoners ever had. Later he took on the difficult and dangerous job of patrolling the trail for the Three Ds, checking all passing herds and cutting out all the Three D cattle that had gotten in, accidentally

or on purpose, where they didn't belong.

THE Waggoner operations spread out so fast that they had to have more range immediately both for breeding and for holding the south Texas cattle until time was right to trail north. The State of Texas was selling range for two-bits an acre in those days and in the early 70s Waggoner senior took some of his cow profits and headed west from his Cactus Hill home ranch in Wise County and began buying range all over Wilbarger, Foard, Wichita and Baylor Counties and the country adjacent.

Just north was the open land of the Comanche tribes from which the buffalo had lately been killed. In the early eighties Waggoner & Son made a dicker with the Comanches and the United States government for grazing rights on six hundred thousand acres of land, and the Three D cows rolled north to stay—until the end of the century. Of course, part of the outfit moved with them.

The end of the period of rapid expansion for the cattle business came late in 1885 with the crash of the beef market. However, this didn't hurt the Waggoner outfit a whole lot and didn't cause them to change their way of operating, except that they began to buy Hereford bulls and to produce fewer and much better cattle.

For them the big change came about fifteen years later when the government closed out the Oklahoma range, and the Three Ds and the other big outfits were given two years to clean out their ranges and get their cattle back across the Red River onto their own land in Texas.

Thus the beginning of this century marked the dead end of the

trail-drive epoch, the middle period of cattle ranching.

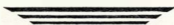
As for the Waggoner & Son outfit, it's still owned by a descendant of the original partners, and is now a thoroughly modern ranch with pure-bred Herefords, fenced ranges, and fine buildings and equipment.

In his late years, Tom Waggoner, who died in December of 1936, had one of the leading race stables in Texas. Most of his horses had cowboy names like Chuckwagon, Stride-away, Cowpuncher, and such. In 1931 he spent two million dollars

building the famous Arlington Downs track halfway between Fort Worth and Dallas.

It was a magnificent gamble on his part, for horse-racing had been outlawed in Texas since 1909, and Waggoner built the track on the chance the State legislature would again legalize horse-racing. In 1933 the legislature did pass a racing bill, so Tom Waggoner won. Then in 1937, the year after his death, the Texas legislature again outlawed racing and the Waggoner track was shut down.

THE END.



THE HACKAMORE

THIS bridle is, to the casual observer, nothing more than a halter, since there is no bit in the mouth of the horse. The whole possibility of discipline lies in the manner in which the knots are placed beneath the jaw.

They came into use largely because a wild horse is less likely to rear up and fall over backward with a pressure on the outside of his jaw than with a piece of steel in his mouth. Nothing that a fractious horse can do is as dangerous to the rider as the backward fall, and most men will sacrifice the better control they might have over an animal for the greater safety.

The hackamore nose piece, which is most popular on the upper Rio Grande, is of heavy strands of rawhide braided into a solid piece one inch square and long enough to pass around the nose and extend four inches back of the jaw; this is held in place just above the nostrils of the animal by means of a very light headstall, which is also used to support a leather blind. A rope is tied around the horse's neck and carried to part of the hackamore that extends back of the jaw, where it is fastened by two half hitches. The rope is then passed over the neck of the animal and brought back again, making a suitable length for bridle reins. It is now double half hitched to the remaining part of the nose piece, crowded in lightly behind a knot, so that the nose piece presses gently against the muscles on the side of the jaw.

At first the horse will pay little attention to the efforts of the rider to guide him, but after a few pulls he begins to yield. Next day his jaws will be tender and he will yield more readily. Then, as he learns that obedience to the pull lessens his suffering, he turns quickly and the hackamore has served its purpose.



**TOO TOUGH
TO KILL**

by HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

CHAPTER I

GUN GHOST ON GUARD

PANS were sizzling in the Broken Arrow ranchhouse kitchen, and a pleasing odor of hot food drifted out at the open windows as Smoky Williams, the cook, put the finishing touches to a big dinner. Flipping the steaks onto a platter with an expert twist, Smoky set it aside. A moment later the rest of the food was ready.

"She's all set, Tex." He nodded to the old man who stood by, waiting for his word. "Guess yuh can take it in. We got the sheriff fer dinner today," he added with a touch of pride.

"Sheriff?" In the act of reaching for the dishes, Tex Jackson, swamper, cook's helper, and all-around handy man for the Broken Arrow, arrested his movement to stare. "What's his name?"

"Jube Drumm. Know 'im?"

Tex only shook his head. And yet, glancing at him sharply, Smoky noted that he had gone white to the lips. "What's the trouble? Ain't yuh feelin' good?"

"I'm feelin' well enough," was the muttered answer.

Smoky nodded, his attention already elsewhere. "Waal, git that stuff inside while it's hot."

Filling his hands, Tex started for the dining room. One of his legs had a drag that had taken his name off the bunkhouse pay rolls after years of riding. There was a slug in that thigh which he could still feel in stormy weather. Nor was that his only mark. Runt that he was, his sharp glance and the set of his traplike mouth said he had been a wolf in his day. Battered and unlovely, he bore the scars of a dozen fierce encounters. None had downed him. His thinning hair was streaked

with gray now, and his hand was slower. But he was still hard.

Never in the few weeks which had passed since he had caught on at the Broken Arrow had Tex Jackson been warier than he was now. The folks were ready and waiting in the dining room. Wooden-faced, Tex pushed in. His slow look reached out and touched Jube Drumm, and he waited for some sign of recognition. But none came. Drumm gave him a level glance, then turned to Lynn Bonstell as the girl made a remark.

Slim, dark-haired and erect, with a face of pride and fearless gray eyes, Lynn was young; but not too young to run the Broken Arrow, which had been in her name since Cole Bonstell had passed away a few seasons back. She had made the spread pay.

Cross Painton, her foreman—big and brawny in a bullet-headed, beefy-faced way—was here this noon. Tex set a steaming dish at Painton's elbow and shuffled around to place the steaks within Lynn's reach. Turning to go, out of the corner of his eye once more he caught Jube Drumm's thoughtful glance fixed on himself. There was something speculative in it now.

"He's spotted me all right," Tex mused grimly. "Changed as I am, he's got a flash of somethin' familiar."

Turning as he reached the door, Tex looked the lawman full in the face. Jube Drumm was watching him. Quick as a flash, Tex put a finger to his lips and shook his head, warning the other to silence. They had been friends once, years ago. He tried to tell himself the sheriff would understand. But if Jube chose to fall in with his game he gave no sign, turning away as if he had noticed nothing.

THE little man brought in the coffee next. Despite his colorless appearance, he couldn't help taking sharp note of the talk going on at this table.

"It's hard to tell what's the trouble," Cross Painton was saying doggedly. "It's true the steers ain't fattenin' up like they ought to. But why they should begin showin' their ribs I dunno. You're dead right, ma'am." He shook his bullet head. "Somethin's wrong!"

"In the case of a few head of the runty stuff, I wouldn't mind," Lynn said. "But it seems to run all through the herd. If it continues, I shall begin to worry."

They went on to discuss the poor condition of the Broken Arrow stock. Already it was plain that the books would show loss rather than profit for this year. Lynn said as much.

"Well," Painton remarked in his heavy voice, "you can always sell the place. You're well off now." A critical ear might have found a trace of jealous envy in his tone. Tex Jackson caught it.

"Who'd buy, at the price I would ask?" said Lynn.

"Hard to say," Painton shrugged. And then: "I was thinkin' mebber I could get the bank to take it over fer me—"

"I think not," she decided crisply. "Father loved the ranch, and I feel the same way about it. He wouldn't want me to get rid of it. I shall hang on until I am forced to let go." Her tone said that she thought the possibility remote for the present.

Tex poured Lynn's coffee for her and started to draw back. "Thank you, Tex," she smiled.

Jackson said nothing. He bent to fill the sheriff's cup. For the moment, their heads were close together. "So it's Tex now," Jube

murmured in a speculative tone.

No one but Tex heard his remark. There was time for no more than a warning glance. A message was given and answered in the brief moment that their eyes met. Straightening up, Tex limped back to the kitchen.

It was a long half-hour for him before the meal was over. Watching the front of the house, then, till Smoky wondered what had got into him, Tex saw Jube Drumm step out onto the gallery, lighting a cigar. He followed as soon as he could.

As he expected, Jube was there waiting. Pausing only to make sure they were alone, the sheriff moved forward with outstretched hand. "Teton Smith—after fifteen years!" he exclaimed gruffly. And then, with tightening mouth: "This 'Tex' stuff tells me plenty about why you're here—"

Shaking his head, Teton smiled soberly. "Ike Painton's son, you mean? I've been here on the Broken Arrow for six weeks. Guess again, Jube."

"It ain't like yuh at all to hold off," Jube admitted. "But you've changed in other ways."

TETON'S smile grew grim. There was more than a touch of bitterness in it. His faded eyes ran out over the peaceful Wyoming range, dreaming in the sun. He didn't even see it, for he was gazing deep into the past.

"The warden at Laramie said I was a model prisoner, Jube. I was — Twenty years! After the way Ike Painton swore me into the pen, I'd've done anything to clip five minutes off my sentence! I got five years off fer good behavior. When I got out, I made tracks fer this Crazy Woman country. I was after

Painton. I went first to Jerry Glanton's place."

Jube nodded. Glanton's ranch, fifty miles west, was where Teton had been working at the time he got mixed up in the range brawl which had sent him away.

"Jerry told me the story," Teton went on. "It was a bitter dose. Ike Painton wiped out in a drunken fight, Lynn's father killed by a locoed bronc! That's what the years did to me—my worst enemy, and the man I cared for the most—both gone!" Of a sudden his tone had become fierce. Then the fire went out of him. His voice dropped. "It left me at a loose end. I didn't know where to turn. I was ready to drift on when I learned Cross Painton was roddin' the Broken Arrow."

Jube's eyes narrowed swiftly. "So yuh decided to square accounts with him. Is that it?"

Teton shook a prompt denial. "No, but there's somethin' phony goin' on here, Jube!" he said. "I aim to find out what it is. I ain't told Lynn who I am. She was jest a youngster when I went away. But if somethin' ain't done about it in a hurry, she's goin' to wind up in a hell of a jam!"

"Jest where does Cross Painton fit into this?" the sheriff grunted.

"I dunno." Teton's tone was dogged. "But Ike Painton was a dirty, double-crossin' skunk, an' his son's likewise a skunk! That's more'n enough for me!"

"I wouldn't build too much on it," Jube advised thoughtfully. And yet, his opinion of the little man had changed considerably in the past few minutes. Despite himself, he was convinced there was something in what Teton had said. Years ago, at Teton's trial, Jube had firmly believed Ike Painton's testimony to be perjured; that his friend was being

sent to prison for a crime he did not commit. But there had been nothing he could do about it.

"Jest what is it yo're figgerin' to do?" Jube asked now.

"I'm keepin' my eyes open," Teton assured him. "There ain't a thing to be done till I've got somethin' to go on."

They talked it over, and when Jube at length made ready to leave, it was in the knowledge that as good a man as himself would be on the spot.

CHAPTER II

TRUBLE ON THE BROKEN ARROW

TETON'S statement that something was radically wrong on the Broken Arrow proved to be no exaggeration. Whatever was causing the steers to lose weight so alarmingly did not relax its grip during the days which followed. Before long the situation was grave.

During the years of prosperity, Cole Bonstell had built up the Broken Arrow Ranch bit by bit until it became huge and far flung. The ranchhouse, standing amidst cottonwoods beside the silver ribbon of Ox-bow Creek, with the Wind River Range hovering blue and gauzy in the distance, was an imposing place. The Broken Arrow herd, one of the largest that country had ever known, ranged over many square miles of rolling grassy hills and well-watered coulees. Anything that could threaten the security of this great spread was not to be taken lightly.

Of the dozen men in the bunkhouse who watched Lynn Bonstell for some sign of cracking, only Teton Smith knew how deeply the girl's secret worry ran. Self-reliant as she was, Lynn had had no previous experience with anything like this. Noting the steady increase of the brood-

ing shadow lying across her face, it woke him to sober admiration.

"She's takin' it like a man," he told himself. "It's a dang shame there ain't nothin' she can do about it."

Plainly, however, Lynn was far from any intention of allowing matters to ride. Emerging from the house one afternoon a week after Sheriff Drumm's visit, she found Teton pottering about the yard. "Will you get up my horse for me, Tex?" she requested.

"Yes'm. Shore thing!"

He lost no time in complying, at the same time saddling a bronc for himself. Lynn often expected him to accompany her on these jaunts about the ranch, and he had no intention of being left behind today.

The sight which met their eyes when they reached the hills was a melancholy one. Everywhere steers stood about, listless and poorly, their heads hanging. Some were so thin it was possible to count their ribs plainly at a distance of several score yards. Twenty minutes later Lynn and Teton came across a cow on its side. Dead only a few hours, it was already beginning to bloat.

"What can possibly be the cause of it?" Lynn voiced her perplexity. "Is it some disease?"

Teton was no wiser than she. "Whatever it is, it's gittin' into 'em all. Might be a good plan to cut out the worst ones," he added, "an' run the rest onto the north pasture."

Cross Painton, joining them a few minutes later, a furrow of concern marking his blunt brow, found the girl considering Teton's suggestion. She repeated it for his benefit. Watching the foreman narrowly, Teton waited to hear a prompt veto.

To his surprise, Painton said thoughtfully: "That's a good idea, Jackson. It's well worth a try, any-

way." And to Lynn: "You want I should put the boys at it right off?"

"Do it at once," the girl assented. Painton waited only to receive her few added instructions before jogging away to start the crew at the work. Gazing after him, Teton found it difficult to credit what he



had heard. Never before had the younger man shown the slightest respect for his opinions. In fact, Painton ordinarily disdained to so much as notice him.

"Have I got that gent doped out all wrong?" Teton asked himself.

THE plan of segregating the steers whose condition was the worst was put into effect without delay. Some time was required to determine whether this would do any good. One afternoon three days later, Cross Painton jogged into the yard, sober-faced. He had just come from the north pasture.

Lynn waited for him on the gallery and Teton saw to it that he found something near at hand to occupy him. "Is there any improvement?" Lynn asked her foreman anxiously. Unnoticed, Teton hung on the reply.

"Just the other way around, ma'am," Painton said heavily. It wasn't necessary for him to add more. Lynn's face fell.

They talked it over, long periods of silence spacing their words. Staring at Painton disgustedly, Teton was as thoroughly disappointed as

the girl. "Dang him, he don't look so worried," he muttered under his breath. All his suspicions of Painton were aroused afresh. A thought came to him which began to grow. Had the foreman so readily approved his plan with the steers because he knew it would make no difference?

"His hand's in this some'eres," Teton fretted, gnawing his mustache worriedly. "What's his game?"

"I ran into Rufe Lytton today," Painton told Lynn. He seemed reluctant to go on. "It's beginnin' to get around that hoof-and-mouth disease has broke out amongst our stuff. Rufe says the cowmen adjoinin' our range are gettin' worried. I know for a fact they're ridin' the line, keepin' a mighty close watch on—"

"Hoof-and-mouth?" Lynn faltered. Even Teton limped forward at mention of that dread name.

"Yeah," Painton nodded. "I reckon it'd be sense to get a vet out here for an examination, if for no other reason than to put a stop to such talk."

Unable to remain silent longer, Teton thrust in: "Yuh better go easy about draggin' a vet into this. It don't look to me like them steers've got no hoof-an'-mouth. I'll admit it ain't always easy to tell. But callin' a vet in at a time like this is a swell way of askin' for an embargo on the spread that may tie yuh up fer six months!"

He met Painton's eye squarely as he finished, asking himself whether he had hit on the other's hidden object at last. Such an embargo as he mentioned was far from a myth. Moreover, it would go far toward discouraging Lynn. Pressure of this kind might even persuade her to sell the ranch, as Painton all too plainly hoped she would do.

THE latter stared at him, giving no sign that the warning had taken effect. But Teton could read the fierce retort trembling on his tongue. Before Painton could put it into words, Lynn said quickly and firmly, "If there's the slightest possibility of hoof-and-mouth disease, we must find out, if only for our own protection."

Still glowering at Teton, Painton found in this whatever encouragement he needed to speak his mind. "Suppose you keep yore nose out of what don't concern you, Jackson," he advised thinly. "We ain't payin' you for yore advice!"

"O. K.," Teton grumbled, his hostility not relaxing in the slightest. "Jest remember that if anythin' goes haywire, you're the gent who'll be held responsible. Miz Bonstell means well, but she don't savvy the meanin' of this!"

"That will do, Tex," Lynn told him quietly. And to Painton: "We'll have the veterinary out here at once, of course."

The foreman shifted his attention to her so completely that Teton knew at once he had something in his mind. "That's the sensible move, ma'am. I'll ride in town an' get him myself." He started for his horse.

"Never mind," she stopped him. "I'll take care of it."

Watching sharply, Teton would have sworn he caught a glint of chagrin in Painton's eyes. It was gone in an instant. Shrugging, the foreman let his bronc off to the corrals.

"Wanted to bring his own choice of a man out here, like as not," Teton mused grimly. "I wouldn't put it past him to have dealin's with a crooked vet."

Lynn rode to town the following day. A veterinary accompanied her on her return. He rode out at once for a look at the cattle. Painton

and the girl went with him, but Teton could find no excuse, however flimsy, for going along. It left him on tenterhooks until, late in the afternoon he spotted Lynn and the vet returning together. They pulled up in the yard. Anxious to catch a word or two, Teton lost no time in moving out to care for the girl's pony.

"Maybe it's a mistake, tellin' you you're lucky, Miss Bonstell," the vet was saying. "Whatever is pullin' your stock down is a mystery to me. But as I say, you can put out of your mind any fears about it's bein' hoof-and-mouth. The swollen joints and the inflammation are completely missin'." He shook his head. "Whatever it is, it isn't that."

Teton tugged at his mustache to cover the swift gratification playing about his mouth. He lingered, fingering the headstall of the girl's mount.

Lynn attempted to elicit some suggestion from the vet as to what could be causing their trouble. He had nothing to offer. "Perhaps it's the alkali boiling up through the soil," she said. "That has been known to kill cattle."

"Might be, at that," was the doubtful answer. "The symptoms are pretty much those of some slow poison. I can't go beyond that for certain."

CHAPTER III

TETON RIDES ON

LYNN was overlooking no chance whatever. Under her direction, samples of the soil from various parts of the Broken Arrow range were packed up and shipped off to the State agricultural school for analysis. The report came back within a week. Such traces of alkali as had been found in the soil

were not enough to injure grazing stock in the slightest.

Meanwhile, steers were dying at the rate of one every two or three days. Sometimes two or more carcasses were found in a single day. Not a steer wearing the Broken Arrow brand could be said to be in prime, A-1 condition.

Lynn no longer made any pretense of hiding her worry. It would have been useless in any case. Teton's own puzzlement was deep. The unsatisfactory watch he tried to keep on Cross Painton's movements in no way enabled him to hook the foreman up with what was happening to the cattle, but at least it told him all he needed to know of the other side of the man's activities.

It was Painton who brought word to the ranch that the other cowmen on the range were clamoring for some action by a stock inspector. Teton bristled the instant he heard the news.

"So it's a stock inspector now, huh?" he muttered fiercely. "Painton knows he's the gent who kin slap an embargo on this ranch in a hurry!"

He was not surprised when, toward the end of the week, Painton arrived at the ranch from the direction of town accompanied by a stranger. It was the expected stock official. At sight of him, Lynn's manner showed plainly that she feared what he might say. She had reason for alarm. Seldom did an inspector put in his appearance on such occasions without serious cause. Although Painton gave it out that the inspector himself had declared the necessity for his visit, Teton had little doubt the foreman had been talking to the man in town, cunningly urging action of some kind.

This time the inspector, at his own request, pushed off by himself to make his investigation into existing conditions. Hours passed while they waited for his verdict. At last he came back to the ranchhouse.

"It's a peculiar situation you have here, Miss Bonstell," he opened up at once. "I don't pretend to understand it. There's no evidence of a contagion that I can trace."

"Then what does that mean?" Lynn asked, concealing the nervousness she must undoubtedly have felt. Teton, listening near at hand, noted that Painton's anxiety over the inspector's answer was no less real than the girl's. But, he told himself, Painton was uneasy for a different reason.

"I find no sufficient cause to place an embargo on the ranch," the inspector informed her. "Your stock is certainly sick, but with no disease we can recognize. But I've got to have your promise that you'll ship no beef till this is cleared up."

Observed by Teton alone, the foreman's face, which had begun to darken with the inspector's first words, cleared at the end.

"But I have several notes on the ranch which will fall due in a week or two," Lynn objected quickly. "What am I to do? I was depending on my fall shipments to cover them."

The inspector had no suggestions to make as to that. "All I can say," he declared firmly, "is that a distinct improvement will have to be reported in conditions here before I can consent to your placing these Broken Arrow steers on the market."

It was his proposal, since everything else had been tried in an effort to get to the bottom of the trouble, that some of the water from Ox-bow Creek might be sent away for

analysis. Shortly afterward he headed for town.

"So it's no embargo—but meanwhile Lynn ain't allowed to sell none of her steers," Teton growled disgustedly, watching the inspector ride away. He snorted his indignation. "What in hell's that, if it ain't an embargo?" And, after a longer pause, in a savage tone: "As usual, it's Painton Lynn's got to thank for some more of her grief!"

THE water sample was sent away to the State agricultural school to be analyzed, with no different result than before. It was pronounced blameless.

But proving that such things as the water and soil were innocent did nothing whatever to help matters. The steers were dropping so regularly that Teton realized a leveler head than Lynn's might be justified in experiencing panic. As for Teton himself, his wrath against Painton threatened to blaze into open revolt. His hawklike vigilance only succeeded in plunging him into deeper perplexity. Under his watching eyes, the foreman was guilty of no act which fell under the slightest shadow of suspicion.

No change in conditions had occurred when, one day almost a week after the stock inspector's visit, Lynn made a trip to town. Teton went along, his deep concern for her making him forgetful of what he was doing. The girl's first call was at the bank; and while Teton did not go in with her, he knew well enough what her errand was.

"She's askin' old Kertin for an extension," he reflected bleakly. Unless the banker had changed a good deal in fifteen years, Teton told himself gloomily, she would have no luck.

A new thought crashed in on him

a moment later, and one which made him regret he had not fabricated some excuse that would have relieved him from visiting Bad Water. It was occasioned by the sight of a man coming along the plank sidewalk. Teton knew him. They had been well acquainted at one time. Starting to duck down behind the horses, Teton froze as the man looked his way. Their glances crossed. Not till the other passed on, with no sign of recognition, did Teton sigh his relief.

The incident put him in a sweat to get out of town, and it was with only half his attention that he noted the expression of keen disappointment on Lynn's face as she emerged from the bank. Its meaning came to him quickly enough when they had put Bad Water a mile behind them.

"Reckon you had no luck, ma'am," he ventured then.

"I'm afraid not, Tex."

Her smile was so wistful that Teton failed to realize she was only partially aroused from her despondent thoughts. Nor did he ask himself why she had framed her response in just that manner, for he took it for granted that she had applied at the bank for an extension on her notes, only to be refused.

He learned of his mistake several days later. Hearing someone pull up in the Broken Arrow yard, he hurried out to find himself face to face with Mark Kertin, the Bad Water banker. They had been acquaintances in the past, if not friends, and Kertin was the last man Teton wanted to meet now.

He returned Kertin's deliberate stare woodenly, and for a moment the silence held. Kertin's habitually sour expression appeared to grow more marked. But whatever he had been on the point of saying was cut

off by the sound of steps on the gallery as Lynn emerged from the house. The banker swept off his flat-brimmed hat.

"Miss Bonstell, I've come to give you an answer to your proposal of a few days ago," he opened up at once. "I'm afraid the answer is no."

Lynn's distress was plain. "Come in, Mr. Kertin," she said bravely. "Perhaps by talking it over we can reach some satisfactory arrangement."

Kertin's assent gave no encouragement of such a possibility. Cross Painton put in an appearance from the direction of the corrals, where Teton had no doubt he had been waiting for this moment. At the girl's suggestion the three entered the ranchhouse together.

LLEFT standing there, a furious scowl riding his homely features, Teton's thoughts fastened unerringly on Kertin. "Prolongin' the agony, wasn't he? It can't last much longer. It'll be quite a feather in his cap when he tells her he's takin' the ranch away from her!" And after a pause, his mouth hardened. "Wonder if the old buzzard spotted me?"

He had his answer to that about twenty minutes later. Smoky Williams stuck his head out of the kitchen door and called to him. "Yo're wanted inside, Jackson."

Pretending a surprise he was far from feeling, Teton only nodded. Lynn, Painton, and the banker were facing the door when he stepped in the big front room. The men stared at him sharply. For a moment the silence was heavy with tension. "Mr. Kertin tells us you are not Tex Jackson, but Teton Smith." The girl spoke without preamble. Her tone said that the name meant something to her. "Is that so?"

Teton's eyes narrowed to mere slits in his scarred, inscrutable face. His glance shifted to Painton and the other man. He nodded then. "Yes, I'm Teton Smith. Mebbe that interests you gents—" Something



in his even-toned voice cried a warning.

He saw the blaze of confirmed suspicion in Cross Painton's pupils. Hatred and fear were there, too. The foreman's hand hovered near his gun. Breaking the electric tension, Kertin snorted wrathfully, "It interests Miss Bonstell to know she's got a jailbird and a killer working for her under an alias!"

Teton stabbed him with a look of scorn and loathing. "Yo're a fine picture of a man to tell me where to git off, you low-down, ranch-stealin' penny pincher! That's a laugh! You ain't even worth botherin' about, if I wasn't mighty shore Painton brought yuh here to do his dirty work. Neither one of yuh is foolin' me for a minute!"

Painton found his voice then. His words came with an infuriated rush. "So that's what you've been doin' all day, slouchin' around the ranch. Watchin' your chance at me, eh?" he snarled. "I know all I need to about you—"

"Mr. Painton! Please let me handle this," Lynn broke in with quiet firmness. She turned to Teton. "I know something about you, too,

Teton. Father often mentioned your punching cattle together as young men. His good opinion often made me remember you. Is . . . is it true you were sent away for a crime you didn't commit?"

"Charge of homicide," he nodded curtly. "Sworn into the pen by the man who did the killin'—Ike Painton, the father of yore foreman!"

But for Lynn's stepping in between them swiftly, Painton would have gone into action in a flash. As it was, he delivered himself of a blistering opinion of Teton.

"Take it easy, Painton!" Teton warned him at last with a thin smile. "Yo're walkin' a ragged edge here, whether yuh know it or not!"

"What are you talkin' about?" was the fiercely contemptuous retort. "You haven't a thing on me!" That Painton thought he had plenty on Teton was plain from what followed. He wound up by rounding sharply on the girl. "He's a wolf, ma'am! I'm warnin' you! It's my word against the word of a liar and a killer. Either get rid of him or look for a new foreman!"

From that moment Teton knew what the verdict would be. Nor was he mistaken. Plainly distressed at the necessity for discharging a man whom her father had sworn by, and whom in any event she believed to be a harmless old man, Lynn found no choice but to give him his time.

Painton watched with baleful persistence while Teton waited for Lynn to make out his check. Stuffing it in his pocket, he started to limp toward the door. Only then did Painton fire the parting shot that was boiling up in him.

"You may be leavin' the Broken Arrow, Smith," he jerked out, "but I'm keepin' my eye on you, so just watch your step!"

CHAPTER IV
THE "RUSTLERS"

IT was not until late afternoon of the second day after he left the Broken Arrow that, keeping to the hills, Teton was able to get in touch with Jube Drumm. They met on one of the back trails west of town.

"I was warned to watch out fer you as a dangerous character," the sheriff grinned. "Jest what happened?"

Teton told him the whole story. They compared notes. Jube's face reddened toward the last. "Pain-ton's game is shore plain readin'" he burst out gruffly.

What could be done about it was another matter. Teton, however, had been doing some thinking since pulling away from the Broken Arrow. He said as much.

"I want to try somethin', Jube," he declared. "I dunno whether you'll consent to it or not."

His plan, stated briefly, was simple. It was to rustle a couple of head of Broken Arrow stock, take the steers to some hidden corner of the range, and under favorable conditions learn whether they would proceed to improve, or continue to go downhill as they were doing now. Jube asked a couple of shrewd questions. Teton's answers were prompt. At last the sheriff was satisfied.

"Consent to that?" he exclaimed. "Hell, I'll help yuh!"

Since there was no point in delay, they decided to put the plan into effect at once. They were not over a dozen miles from the Broken Arrow range. Two hours after dark saw them riding cautiously toward the upper reaches of Ox-bow Creek. Both knew they were risking a slug in the ribs. They saw no one, however, and before long they found

themselves amongst bedded Broken Arrow stuff.

Teton selected a gaunt yearling steer, seemingly in the last stages of starvation, and a brindled three-year-old that was not too far gone to be able to travel a few miles. "These'll do," he murmured.

Getting the stuff off the Broken Arrow range without detection was not going to be so simple, they knew. They took their time, keeping a close watch. It was well they did so, for scarcely had they reached the edges of the range when without any warning a shot rang out near at hand.

At that moment they were in a little brushy hollow from which it was impossible to see anything. Reining toward Jube and lowering his voice, Teton growled, "Some of the Broken Arrow crew—"

Jube's nod was curt. "Dunno whether they've spotted us yet or not. They know somethin's goin' on!"

The hope that they had not been seen was so slim that Teton tossed it aside in a moment. "We gotta git these steers outta here somehow!" he jerked out. "I ain't leavin' 'em now."

IT soon became clear that they would have little chance of doing even that. While they were still testing the night, asking themselves from which direction danger threatened, a second gunshot sounded. Teton spotted the flash as the slug tore the brush not far away. He whirled.

"Come on!" he rasped. "We're pullin' out in a hurry!" With Jube helping him, he began to prod the steers into a lumbering run.

The Broken Arrow punchers were calling directions to one another now. There were at least three or

four of them. Plainly they had hoped to draw a net around the men they had caught rustling their steers, but there had been a slip-up somewhere.

"Here they are!" a man called. "Over this way!"

A flash of fire went over Teton's nerves as he recognized Cross Painton's bull voice.

"That's Painton with them gents!" he exclaimed. "They're figgerin' to make a job of this!" He whirled to the sheriff. "Hell, Jube, I'm sure sorry I dragged yuh into this! It'll mean yore star if yore nabbed now!"

"We ain't gettin' nabbed," Jube shot back grimly. "If it means slugs, O. K.! There can't be no killin' here, but we'll throw a scare into them birds an' slip away!"

It rapidly became apparent that they would have to follow this course whether they liked it or not. They had been spotted at last. The steers they were hazing along made so much noise that it would have given them away in any event.

Whirling in the saddle, Teton unlimbered his Colt and sent several warning shots in the general direction of their pursuers. He dared not make his aim too close. A moment later he realized that it had not been close enough, so far as any deterrent effect was concerned. Firing hotly, the punchers came right on. Their slugs whipped the brush wickedly.

"Turn the steers!" Teton flung at Jube. "We're makin' for high ground! We ain't got a chance here in the open!"

Jube had followed his thought so closely that he had already begun to edge the steers up the slope of the ridge they were flanking. It was no easy task keeping the weakened animals in motion. Again and again they made an attempt to break back

or lose themselves in the thick brush on either side. Jube prodded them along while Teton covered the rear.

As a fusillade from behind rustled the brush like hail, Teton suddenly reeled in the saddle. Even as Jube reached his side, the old man caught himself.

"Are yuh hurt bad, Teton?" the sheriff demanded.

"I'm O. K.," Teton grunted, gritting his teeth. "It was jest a graze and—"

"It'll be more'n that if we don't do somethin' in a hurry!" Jube exclaimed grimly. "I can't push the steers no faster, Teton! To hell with 'em! We can pick up some more later!"

"Not by a damn sight!" Teton gritted. "We got 'em an' we'll hang on to 'em, even if it means some blood spilled! Why don't yuh pull away, Jube?" he urged. "I'll stick it out alone, an' pull through or go down fightin'! Nobody'd think it was strange if I was picked up with a slug in my ribs!"

"Save yore breath," Jube advised tersely. Peering into the sheriff's weathered face, Teton knew Jube meant to stick to the end. The knowledge sent a warm glow over him.

So close was the pursuit now that they could hear the hard pound of horses' hoofs. Emptying his six-gun, Teton thumbed fresh cartridges into the cylinder. He was beginning to wonder himself what the end of this would be. The bullets were singing around them with a lethal whine.

THEY had almost reached the crest of this wooded ridge when suddenly Jube began to crowd the two steers to the left. For a second Teton failed to understand his object. Then he saw. Ahead lay a

narrow rocky defile splitting the crown of the ridge. If they could reach that in time, it might be possible to slow up pursuit for a space. The gully made a perfect death trap for anyone crowding a determined man too closely.

Flinging a brace of shots over his shoulder, Teton gave his attention to helping with the steers. They were badly winded. A mile more at this pace and they would have reached the limit of their endurance. He thrust the thought out of his mind. It would be time enough for extra troubles when they got to them.

Somehow they managed to reach the gully ahead of the punchers. The steers clattered in, bellowing their torment. The rough going underfoot speedily slowed them to a walk.

"Shove right ahead!" Teton called to Jube. "I'll cover yuh!"

He was as good as his word. A dozen yards inside the mouth of the gully, a huge rock which had broken off and tumbled down from above, lay beside the trail. Teton took cover behind it and fell to watching. He had not long to wait. Almost before Jube disappeared around a bend with the steers, four riders thrashed out of the brush and raced forward on the dead run.

Painton was in the lead. Teton recognized that blocky form with a cold thrill of hatred along his nerves. If Teton had wanted to, it would have been easy to down Painton now. Bullheaded as always, he was running right into the trap.

Well aware the men they were following had turned into the defile, the punchers pounded up, firing. A stray slug chipped the rock beside Teton's head, a flying sliver cutting his cheek. So taut was he strung that while his gun covered Painton, his finger jerked the trigger spas-

modically. The gun exploded with hollow thunder.

The effect of the shot was instantaneous. Painton jerked backward in the hull, only catching himself by a desperate effort. His bronc wheeled to one side, crowding the punchers. In a flash they hauled in, bunching around the foreman.

"Did they get yuh, Cross?" one of them jerked out. Teton's heart stood still while he waited for an answer, for he well knew a dead man did not always crash out of the saddle at the moment of being hit. Then, with a feeling of relief, he heard Painton's gusty curse.

"Hell, no. It's just a scratch," was the latter's rapped-out response. "Damn good thing it happened as it did. We're ridin' plumb into an ambush here!"

Teton congratulated himself on having persuaded them, even if by accident, that he meant business.

"Spread out an' hunt fer a way around!" Painton was directing sharply. "Them hombres ain't gettin' away if I know it!"

CHAPTER V

TETON MAKES A TEST

FLINGING another shot to further deter immediate pursuit, Teton whirled his bronc and began to pick his way in the direction Jube had gone. The sound of the steers had faded out and he no longer had that to guide him. But the narrow confines of the defile dictated his course.

Once having rounded the bend which had quickly screened Jube from sight, Teton made better time. The gully was long, and before he reached its end he heard the rasp of a shod hoof on rock. It came from a point a dozen yards ahead.

"Jube," he called guardedly.

The sheriff's answer came back from the shadows. Teton was at his side in a moment.

"What in hell've we got into now?" Jube growled. He was staring down the other slope of the ridge. It was a broken and cluttered maze of rock, even the open spaces being littered with rubble. "The steers won't go a dozen yards over that stuff," he said disappointedly. "If they do, like as not they'll break a leg!"

Teton, however, was of another mind about it. "Couldn't be better," he exulted tersely. "We've got some time, not much, but a little. Once we lose ourselves in that Chinese puzzle down there, it'll be a cinch to slip away!"

Jube wasted no time thinking about it. "It's a chance," he agreed. "Let's get the steers started."

They had scarcely worked their way a few hundred yards along the rocky slope before a cry sounded from behind and above. It was Painton. He and his men had succeeded in reaching the edge of the *malpais* and he was directing the attempt to pick up the trail of the rustled steers.

"If one of these steers bellers, it spells our finish!" Jube murmured to Teton. The latter grunted. He had run so many similar chances in the course of a hard life that the fact seemed hardly worth a mention.

Steadily they worked away from the area whence arose the sounds of Painton's crew beating up the night. Their luck held and they were not detected. Half an hour later Teton realized exultantly that they were going to get away. Yet they put several more miles behind them before there was any thought of rest.

Pulling up sometime before dawn,

they bedded down for an hour. Sunrise saw them on their way again.

The spot they selected for holding the steers was the old line camp in Cottonwood Basin, deep in the hills. Abandoned years ago, it afforded cover, abundant water, and plenty of excellent forage. Jube took a look around on their arrival.

"Yuh won't be bothered here none," he predicted. "Ought to be an easy matter to keep out of the way of any stray rider driftin' by."

Teton agreed. A frugal eater, he had plenty of food to see him through for two weeks at least. That should be more time than they needed.

"I'll try an' show up in a week or so," Jube promised. "By then we'll know what's what." After a few more words, he jogged away.

Easy in mind as the sheriff professed to be, Teton confessed to himself that he entertained no such sanguine hopes of remaining unmolested. He had had ample opportunity during the time he had spent on the Broken Arrow to become thoroughly acquainted with Cross Painton's bulldog nature. It would be just like the foreman to spend more time and effort combing these hills in the hope of recovering a couple of steers than he would ordinarily use on a worthier cause.

NOT on the first day at Cottonwood Basin, nor the second, did Teton see anything to cause him the slightest alarm. And yet, the feeling persisted that under no circumstances should he relax his vigilance. On the third day, from a high butte which he had selected as a point of vantage, he spotted distant riders combing the hills with the thoroughness and efficiency of bird dogs. They were far enough from the old line camp in the basin, however, so

that for the time being Teton was content merely to watch.

On the following day he saw nothing of them whatever and dared to hope the hunt had been discontinued. Unsatisfied though, he prowled the edges of the basin all day long, unable to shake off the gnawing feeling that all was not as it should be.

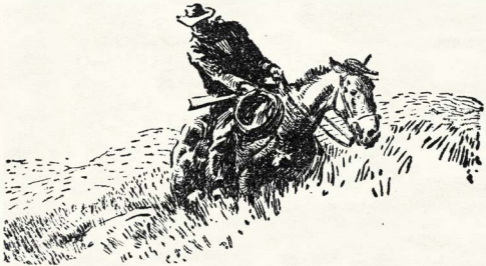
Meanwhile, he did not neglect to keep a close watch on the two steers. Grim satisfaction deepened the creases about his mouth as he noted their gradual but definite improvement. To his relief they did not graze far from the old cabin. The best grass was there, and the creek was near at hand. They bedded down near the rickety peeled-pole corral as if anxious to remain near the only tangible evidences of their own kind.

shrug the feeling away.

"Must be gittin' old," he grumbled as he settled himself for the night. "But this business is enough to make anybody jumpy."

The next morning Teton made ready as usual to scout the basin and the adjoining country. He could scarcely expect Jube Drumm to show up for another day or two, but already he had seen enough to assure him that his test had verified his suspicions. Once removed from the Broken Arrow range, the steers which had been going steadily downhill as long as they remained there, were picking up weight, and their stamina had increased by leaps and bounds.

"Makes it plain 'nough fer me that whatever's draggin' Lynn's steers down is right there on the



Another day passed, and Teton neither saw nor heard anything suspicious. Before rolling in his soogan that night, he spent an hour limping about at a little distance from the cabin. With increasing insistence, some deep instinct of wariness told him that something was wrong. What it could be he was at a loss to determine. At last he strove to

ranch," Teton muttered. "I'd give a lot to lay hands on Cross Painton right now—an' wring it out of him what he's been doin' to 'em!"

He was yanking his saddle cinch home with a grunt, preparatory to swinging astride, when a movement beyond the corner of the cabin, which he caught in the tail of his eye, swung him around with a jerk.

Before he could make a move a man rode into view. It was Cross Painton, his mouth hard, a wicked gleam in his eye as he took in Teton and then the two Broken Arrow steers near at hand. His glance narrowed as he noted their sleek, healthy condition. Teton shrewdly surmised the thoughts that were passing through his mind.

Painton swung back to him and for a moment their eyes clashed in the heavy silence.

"Rustlin', eh?" the foreman rasped. He nodded as if to himself. "Reckon it's no more'n was to be expected."

As for Teton, wary as his scrutiny had become, he was scarcely following the other's words. All his faculties were concentrated on the single question of where Painton's companions might be at the moment. It was hardly reasonable to assume that the other had ridden here by himself. The rest must be combing the basin somewhere near at hand. The fact that Painton had been caught flatfooted, with nothing better than an even break on his hands, was further indication of this. It warned Teton that if he was to get out of this situation with a whole skin, his time was short. It might even be measured in minutes.

It could not, however, prevent the grim little oldster from taking his own time. His gaze bit into the foreman wickedly.

"Jest what are yuh aimin' to do about it, Painton?" he asked casually.

A child could have told that the foreman ached to go for his gun. He wanted to finish this, wipe out his enemy with a single blast of gunfire. He knew Teton had discovered what was wrong with the steers. To let the man get away now would be to endanger his own

game, perhaps even cost him his life and liberty.

Still he sat there, hands frozen to the saddlehorn. Beads of perspiration stood out on his brow at the intensity of his thinking. Like his father before him, he was never one to welcome an even chance, and he had heard too much of Teton Smith's prowess in the past to risk his all on anything but a full house.

Painton spoke at last, his voice hoarse with tension which had him strung wire-tight. "I ought to turn you in for this, Smith," he got out. "If I'm lettin' yuh go, it's more'n yuh deserve. But these steers are goin' back to the Double Arrow where they belong, an' goin' now!"

"Yeah, them steers," Teton echoed with mocking gravity. "Take a good look at 'em, Painton. Show 'em to Lynn Bonstell while yo're about it. She oughta find some food fer thought there!"

Painton went white to the lips at the taunt. If ever he was close to trying conclusions with this contemptuous, blazing-eyed little man, it was now. But something in the other's eyes warned him in time. Somehow he checked the flood of profanity trembling on his lips. The next moment he kicked his bronc into movement and started to herd the steers away.

Teton made no attempt to stop him. Instead, he watched in silence, a bleak smile hovering about his mouth. But the instant that Painton disappeared in the brush on the edge of the clearing, glaring back over his shoulder balefully and muttering threats, Teton flung himself in the hull and kicked his pony into a dead run in the other direction.

Painton's every move, every word he had uttered, even the tame way in which he pretended to back down

before the man he hated so intensely, all this cried its own shrill warning. Teton no longer had any doubt that a cordon of grimly determined men had been drawn about the basin. Nor would they be interested in capturing him. Probably they had orders to shoot him down on sight. The reputation he bore on this range, plus the exertions of Mark Kertin, Painton, and others, would be sufficient to excuse such a man hunt on the grounds of "necessity."

CHAPTER VI

THE MAN HUNT

SCARCELY had Teton reached cover before he drew in to a more circumspect pace. His unconcerned smile, put on solely for Painton's benefit, was gone now. It was replaced by an inscrutable alertness which Jube Drumm would have been quick to recognize as his fighting face.

Save for open patches here and there, Cottonwood Basin was largely grown up to sagebrush and scattered mottes of the trees for which it was named. There were a few scattered outcrop ledges. For a man who might have to fight for his life it was far from an ideal setup, yet it might serve in a pinch. That hundred-to-one chance was all Teton had to count on.

Swiftly and silently he slipped from cover to cover, watching narrowly for the first sign of the man hunters. He had not long to wait. Drawing up on an outcropping, he gazed from that height over an apparently deserted stretch of brushy range. But even as he was about to push down there, a man broke cover on the far side of a little open space and crossed quickly. He was working this way. Nor did the rifle

across his saddlebow escape Teton's notice.

Dropping down from the outcrop, the latter swung west and shoved on. Within half a mile he was forced to yank his bronc back into a clump of brush as a trio of armed men jogged across his path. He waited for ten minutes and then pushed on. But he allowed the horse to travel at little more than a walk, and always his sharp gaze roved the country ahead.

Almost an hour passed and nothing happened. Teton had almost succeeded in convincing himself that he had broken through the cordon when, without any warning, a gunshot clapped at a distance of a hundred yards and Teton heard the angry whine of the slug past his face. In a purely muscular reflex, he jammed spurs home and crouched over his pony's withers as it raced away. His gun had not so much as left the leather, nor did he draw it now. It would be folly to hope to do more than discourage immediate pursuit by the use of lead.

He was one against a score, and the whole point of this grim business was not to outshoot his pursuers, but to outrun them. Only thus could he hope to save his skin.

More shots were fired in an attempt to cut him down, but none came any closer than the first, even when the flat bang of six-guns was replaced by the deeper, far-reaching crack of rifles. Teton gave his full attention to the going underfoot, knowing his safety depended quite as much on the condition of his mount as on his own quick thinking.

Gradually he drew away from the man hunters once more; and none too soon, for his bronc was beginning to whistle. A mile farther on he risked a ten-minute rest, loosening

ing the cinches. While he waited with iron nerves, he rolled himself a smoke which he demolished with three deep-reaching drags.

"Time's up, old feller," he murmured regretfully, grinding the butt into the ground under his heel and turning toward the horse. He allowed the compact little roan a few more gusty snorts before cinching up, then he went on. The secret of successfully evading such a man hunt as this lay in keeping constantly on the move; never allowing oneself more than a few minutes' relaxation at a time.

It had been mid-morning when Teton pulled away from the old line camp in the basin. It was sundown when he swung back west again because the distant sight of a horseman warned of danger ahead. He was worried. Five or six times he had striven to break through in the direction of the wild land stretching away for miles into the north. Always he had been turned back. The only open country remaining was back toward Bad Water and the ranches along Ox-bow Creek, and he distrusted that section. If Painton was making such a determined effort to corner him here in the sparsely settled basin country, the Crazy Woman country would be alive with men.

Nightfall found Teton working up through the coulees and draws west of the War Bonnet Hills. He was worn down, exhausted, his eyes heavy. His bronc was in little better condition.

An hour after dark Teton came on a hidden spring. He watered the roan sparingly, and himself drank all he could hold. There was no sleep for him that night. He cared nothing for that, wanting only to escape the feeling of being hemmed in by an inexorable ring of steel.

WHEN the rising sun touched the west with color, Teton had the satisfaction of looking back and down from the ramparts of the War Bonnets in the knowledge that he had given Painton's man hunters the slip at last.

The first thing to be done, now, was to get in touch with Jube Drumm. With Painton aware that his game had been seen through, time became precious. Nothing else would have driven Teton back toward Bad Water. Early afternoon found him watching the trails north of town in the hope that he would spot the sheriff.

One hour, then another, passed without any luck. Teton had about reconciled himself to waiting till dark would allow him to sneak into town and reach the sheriff's little office without detection, when a horseman far down the trail he was watching caught his attention. He shaded his eyes with a horny palm.

"Can that be Jube?" he wondered.

But it was merely someone riding home to one of the ranches along the creek. Muttering his disappointment, Teton was about to give over until night when a quiet voice, coming from behind him, shocked along his nerves.

"Lookin' fer somebody?" it asked.

Teton whirled. The tension went out of him abruptly then. His face looked suddenly old and weary.

"Fer Pete's sake, Jube, don't ever do that again!" he exclaimed. "I came so close to nailin' yuh that time it ain't even funny."

"Been havin' some trouble, eh?" Jube said, eying him shrewdly.

"Trouble's no name fer it," Teton assured him. "Painton not only found the steers, an' damn near gathered me in along with 'em, but he found out what I know now—

that they picked up an' was growin' butter-fat there in the basin!"

Jube took in the significance swiftly. Yet he failed to reply directly for the moment.

"If yuh think that's news," he said coolly, "how'd yuh like to know that I'm carryin' a warrant for yuh?"

Teton stared at him for a long time, all warmth running out of the lines of his face. "In that case," he said woodenly, "I reckon there ain't nothin' for yuh to do but take me in—"

Jube grunted. "Listen, feller. Cross Painton can mebbe shove a warrant down my throat an' make me like it, but when it comes to how soon I serve it, that's strictly my own affair." The skin around his eyes crinkled.

"You mean you'll hold off till this business is settled?" Teton exclaimed. "By grab, Jube, I knowed I could depend on yuh! We got to work fast as it is. Let's fog over there to the Broken Arrow fer a look around!"

Nothing better offering, they set off through the hills in that direction, swinging wide as they neared the ranch to come in from the south. There was no clearly defined range boundary on this side. They were beginning to spot scattered bunches of gaunt-ribbed Broken Arrow stuff when Teton, riding in the lead, reined in suddenly and held up his hand for silence.

"Somebody comin'," he muttered tensely.

BREAKING away from the trail, they pushed a hundred yards into the trees and waited. Presently the crack of a shod hoof on the stones in the trail came to their ears. A moment later a man broke into view. Every nerve in Teton's

body whipped taut as he recognized Cross Painton. The foreman was alone. Jube saw him, too. In another minute he had passed out of sight.

"What's that gent up to?" Teton rasped suspiciously. "He generally hunts with his pack."

"Mebbe he's expectin' yuh to come back fer some more of his steers," Jube hazarded. "He's carryin' his rifle stuck in the boot. That shows how unwelcome strangers are around here."

"Yuh may be right," was the dubious answer. "But we'll jest follow him an' make shore!"

Jube had no objections to that. Leaving the trees, they pushed on in the direction Painton had gone. They soon located him.

To the casual observer, Cross Painton's course might have appeared aimless. He rode without any apparent objective. Half an hour later the two men following saw him pull up on the crest of a ridge. For a full minute he sat there, staring down the slope at something below in the valley. Edging forward cautiously, Teton and Jube soon learned what it was that claimed his attention.

A dozen Broken Arrow steers stood in the brush in attitudes of dejection, droop-headed, their ribs showing plainly. Standing with them were the two animals Teton had grazed at the line camp. These, also, though they were still fat and healthy, appeared listless.

"Why, the poor devils are plumb groggy," Jube exclaimed under his breath.

Teton's nod was grim. "There's a dead steer down there, too."

It was true. The carcass, already bloated and the feet jutting into the air, lay a little apart from the others. Even as Teton and Jube stared at

it, Painton set his horse forward and started down there. It was toward the dead steer that he headed. They saw him dismount and walk forward. He lifted one of the jutting legs, examining the steer closely, then let the leg drop.

When Painton turned toward his



horse again they thought he meant to mount and ride on. Instead, he took down the coiled rope on his saddlehorn and began to shake out the loops.

"Now what?" Jube queried in a puzzled tone. "He's aimin' to do somethin' with that steer!"

Teton only grunted. Not for an instant did he allow his gaze to stray from the man below. Painton looped his rope over the hind legs of the dead steer and jerked it tight. Stepping to his bronc, he swung up. He paused then for a quick glance around. Apparently he was reassured, for the next moment he began dragging the carcass away from the spot where it had fallen.

They watched him haul it a distance of twenty-five or thirty yards, when he again stopped and dismounted. This time it was to twitch his loop free. The next moment the rope was back on his saddlehorn again.

The sheriff stared his bewilderment. "Now what in hell is the meanin' of that?" he growled, watching Painton head back into the hills. Teton was asking himself the same thing when a sudden thought struck him.

"Why, it's plain as the nose on yore face!" he jerked out. "That steer died by the salt block down there. Jube, them salt blocks are doctored! Shore's yore born, you'll find 'em loaded with arsenic! Lay hands on a piece of the stuff, an' we'll have that gent dead to rights!"

CHAPTER VII

GUNFIRE SHOWDOWN

IT took only a twinkling for Jube to see that Teton's reasoning fit the facts. But he did not allow himself to be carried away by the implications of the situation.

"Where yuh headin' now?" he demanded, as Teton turned to his horse and started to swing aboard.

"I'm goin' down there fer the evidence!"

"No, yuh don't!" Jube said flatly. "Yuh want to get the head blowed plumb off of yuh? Hold on, now." And when Teton's resolve had cooled somewhat: "There ain't no use goin' off the handle about this. That salt block'll keep. We'll wait for an hour."

Teton grumbled at the length of the wait, yet he, too, saw the good sense of it. Painton had long since passed out of sight. They made no attempt to learn where he had gone.

"He kin be picked up easy when the time comes," Jube pointed out.

At the end of forty-five minutes Teton refused to wait longer. "I'll go down alone," he said, "an' you can cover me. That way, if Painton's got any argument to put up, it'll be keno."

Jube assented. A moment later Teton started down the slope. While he felt reasonably secure, he was careful not to expose himself unnecessarily as he won to the valley's floor and made for the point at which the steer had died, and where

the incriminating salt block lay.

Swinging out of the saddle, he limped over and gazed down at it. There was nothing to differentiate it from the hundreds of other salt blocks he had looked at in the past. A sense of Cross Painton's malign cunning stole over him as he drew out his pocketknife and opened the blade.

"He may be a clever gent," he muttered fiercely, "but a chunk of this stuff put up as evidence will land him where he belongs an' no mistake!"

Then, even as he bent down to chip a piece from the salt block, something slapped him a sudden light blow on the shoulder. A second later the distant crack of a high-powered rifle came to his ears. Teton's thoughts worked with lightning swiftness. He didn't have to ask himself who was behind the attempt to kill him. Cross Painton had come here, done his work, and apparently pulled away; but, wolf that he was, he had remained to watch the spot. It looked right now as though he held a full house.

In the instant that these thoughts flashed in his mind, Teton staggered to his feet. Whirling desperately, he made as if to turn toward his horse. He couldn't make it. Before he had taken two steps his legs sagged. He knew what the fall of a mortally wounded man looked like. He was realistic in the extreme as he reeled and sprawled headlong on the ground. But a careful observer might have noted that his drop landed him in the cover of a clump of sagebrush.

There was a rock near at hand. It wasn't big, but it would have to do. Slowly, Teton inched himself toward it. Before he stopped, it stood between him and the direction from which the shot had come.

Lying there, Teton's mind worked with lightning speed. Something told him to remain where he was, without moving a muscle, and as he thought of Cross Painton's unrelenting wariness, the deadly patience and stalking that was like that of a wolf, he knew it was the only way to draw the man to this spot. Painton would come to make sure of his job.

It was exactly what Teton wanted. With his rifle beyond reach in the boot of his saddle, he had only his six-gun to depend on. He told himself grimly it was all he needed.

And yet, the beads of perspiration broke out on his scarred face as he waited. Would Painton come forward openly as he hoped, or would the foreman work around at one side and send in a finishing shot from the brush? Many times in the past the little man had been in a tight spot; never in a tighter one than now.

Suddenly Teton tensed. He had caught a sound. A moment later it came again. A horse was racing forward through the brush. Teton steeled himself to wait. He had his gun ready. The temptation to leap to his feet and go into action was almost too much.

HE shot a look out of keen, slitted eyes as the bronc came close. What he saw froze him with momentary surprise. It was not Painton who flung out of the saddle and came running toward him, but Lynn Bonstell! The girl had been riding the range near at hand. She must have seen Teton ride down into this hollow, heard the shot, and watched him stagger up and then fall. Her face was bloodless as she dropped to her knees beside him.

"Teton!" she cried. "Can you hear me? Are you hurt badly?"

It was nearly as great a shock to

her as his dropping had been, when one of his eyes opened and he deliberately winked at her.

"I . . . I was ridin' to find you," she explained uncertainly. "I couldn't believe it when Painton told me he caught you rustling our stock. Teton, who shot you? Are you—"

"I'm O. K., Lynn. But this play ain't over yet!" he murmured warningly. "Jest play up a minute or two longer—"

She gasped. "What? But I don't understand!"

"You will," he assured her. "Jest hang on fer a spell, like I was plumb finished."

She would have pressed him further, but at that moment the sound of crackling brush nearby whirled her around. Cross Painton came forward, hard-faced, a determined glint in his eyes. The girl sprang to her feet. The rifle in Painton's hands, still ready for instant action, did not escape her.

"You've shot Teton!" she exclaimed, her eyes blazing. "What's the meaning of this?"

"Yuh didn't believe it when I told yuh I caught this gent rustlin' our stuff yesterday," Painton rasped curtly. "But I knowed he'd be back, and I watched for him. He came, all right—and this time I got him dead to rights!"

Lynn stared at him, speechless. She could scarcely believe her ears. And yet, the tone of Painton's voice said that he was absolutely sure of himself. What did it mean?

As for Teton, it was the hardest job he had ever been called on to do to lay there, defenseless, with Painton standing within a dozen feet of him. Watching through the fringe of his lashes, he saw the man edging around for a clearer look at him. Painton would sink a slug in his enemy with ruthless promptness

the instant he realized that Teton was still alive.

Before anything could happen, Jube Drumm's voice sliced through the tense quiet. "Drop that gun, Painton!" he droned, stepping into view.

A look of surprise swept across the foreman's swarthy countenance. But he had known Jube by reputation too long to make a mistake. Slowly the rifle slipped from his fingers and thudded on the ground.

It was the signal for Teton to struggle to his feet. The sheriff stared at him, jaw dropping. "Are yuh O. K., Teton?" he asked anxiously. "Tough as yuh are, I thought he'd done for yuh that time!"

"It wa'n't nothin' but a scratch," was the answer. Sharply Teton took in the expression of blank amazement and chagrin still lingering on Cross Painton's features. "Yore number is up, Painton! I'm wise to yore game now. Yore father was a skunk, but no more o' a one than you."

NONE of them was more surprised by the developments of the last few moments than Lynn. "But what is this all about?" she broke in. "What have you against Cross Painton? I don't understand."

"It ain't so hard," Teton assured her. He pointed at Painton. "This low-down, miserable imitation of a man has been poisonin' yore steers and—"

"How could he do that?"

"By puttin' it in the salt blocks, ma'am." Taking out his knife, and opening it, Teton approached the block. "I'll bet there's enough arsenic in this salt to throw a man into convulsions! If there is," he added grimly, "here's where I give

Painton a dose of his own medicine!" He dug off a chunk.

Lynn still looked bewildered. "I can't believe Painton would do a thing like that. How did you find out all this, Teton?"

It was Jube who answered. "I'll tell you how, ma'am. You take a look at those two steers—the ones Teton's supposed to have rustled." He pointed to the two steers who stood out in the bunch because of their healthy appearance. "Ask Painton how come they've fattened up when Teton grazed them in Cottonwood Basin."

Lynn whirled on Painton. "Is it true?" she shot at him. "Have you been putting arsenic in the salt for the steers to eat?" Even as she spoke, his reaction made her sure of the answer.

Painton's eyes were flaming with baffled rage. "There ain't a word of truth in it, ma'am!" he protested loudly. "Why would I wanta do a thing like that?"

Teton advanced on him, the piece of salt in his hand. "Open yore mouth!" he commanded. "If this salt's pure as yuh claim it is, yuh won't mind eatin' some of it."

Painton shoved him away roughly. Even when Teton tried again, the former persisted in fending him off. It was proof enough. Teton stepped back.

"Thought so. What's in it?" he demanded. Painton knew that he was trapped.

"White arsenic," he muttered, avoiding their eyes.

"You low-down snake!" Teton snorted his wrath and contempt. "Feedin' arsenic to cattle! Take 'im away, Jube, before I ventilate him."

Desperation had come into Painton's face as he saw that things were

going against him. With his customary wariness he had been watching his chance. As Teton finished speaking, he decided the moment had arrived.

The only man with a gun in his hands was Jube. He was holding his rifle. Lynn stood near him. Grabbing her suddenly, Painton whirled her violently against the sheriff, knocking Jube's rifle aside. The girl gave an involuntary cry. Even as she fell, her balance lost, Painton sprang.

The six-gun in Jube's holster was what he was after. There was a wolfish look on his face as his hand closed over its butt. But before he could yank it out of the leather, Teton's hand moved with lightning swiftness. His gun roared. Painton stumbled and went headlong as if hit with an ax.

Jube whirled to stare down at him. But Teton's one thought was of Lynn. Reaching her side, he helped her up. Her eyes, dark pools in her white face, thanked him.

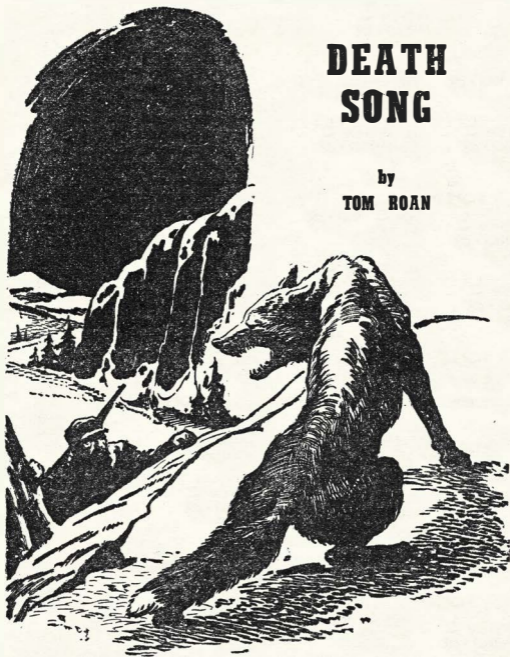
"Are yuh all right, Lynn?" Teton demanded anxiously. And at her assurance that she was: "Reckon I stopped that mad dog jest in time!"

Kneeling beside Painton, Jube was making a swift examination. "He ain't hurt bad," he grunted. "There'll be plenty of time fer him to get well in jail. Yuh better get back to the spread," he told Lynn, "and send a wagon out. I'll wait here."

The girl nodded. She turned to Teton, her usual self-confidence evident once more. "Come along, Teton," she commanded. "That shoulder of yours needs looking after. From now on, you're going to get the attention you're entitled to around this ranch."

DEATH SONG

by
TOM ROAN



DOWN on their bellies in the snow, ears flattened against the sides of their heads and eyes glittering, they faced each other across three yards of snow and frozen ground. It was Kelee, the fighting black timber wolf, and old Crooked Eye, the poaching she-devil lynx with razor-sharp

claws, whom Kelee had caught red-handed in the attempt to raid a wolf den there under the rim of the cliffs and carry away a pair of half-starved cubs.

Kelee had come home just in time. Rounding the foot of the cliffs from southward with a pair of fat jack-

rabbits slung across broad shoulders, she had caught the scent of danger ahead. Now, with hurried leaps and frantic bounds, she shot herself forward, barring the way between the crouching lynx and the hole in the rocks behind her.

There would be no quarter. Quarter in these high Rockies when wolf and lynx met was unthinkable. For seconds, silence held them. Not yet had the slightest sound come from either one of them, not the mere hint of a stirring muscle or tendon since they had set themselves. But they were perfectly placed and perfectly ready for the unavoidable death that would surely strike one of them down here in the snow before the battle of tooth and fang, claw and blood came to its hot end.

Even the wind seemed to have let up for the fight. No breath of air now whispered across the high Rockies. Only the dawn light kept brightening in the east, and the cold held still, leaving a barren land all around them, the cliffs thrust against the westward sky there at Kelee's back.

Death was ever rampant up here. Kelee could feel it all around her now. It was in the slit-eyed cat face in front of her. It was there in those powerful muscles corded into lumps, into bands and strings beneath that mottled brown cat fur hunched into the snow with fangs bared and un-sheathed claws ready to make the first spring or meet it in midair.

As a last bid to drive the cat away and on about her business, Kelee bared her fangs in her fiercest snarl. And, just to show that she had no thought of turning away, Crooked Eye returned the compliment. It was a low and rumbly sound, that wound on upward, and then, from a mere whisper, soared into a fierce scream that rolled up and down the

valley with a nerve-racking noise that should have frozen the blood in any fighting wolf.

INSTINCTIVELY, Kelee felt like giving ground. Her hind feet moved ever so slightly. The bristles along her shoulders stirred. Crooked Eye must have thought it the signal for the first pass, for she was suddenly off the ground, a screaming, grayish-brown thing flinging forward with a lightning play of muscles.

Desperation weathered the first charge. Kelee side-leaped just in time. The cat shot past her, wheeled in the air like a fighting eagle, and came down a yard from Kelee's flank. Kelee plunged in then, black death a blur of movement across the snow. But Crooked Eye avoided her with a straight leap away from her furious charge.

Crooked Eye did it neatly, and with expert thoroughness. She made a long leap, a movement that was as quickly done as flashing light. She went far to the left, wheeled herself in the air again like a desperately fighting eagle as Kelee turned to follow her. Now the cat caught herself stiff-leggedly, and arched her back. Her mouth snarled open, and a cry of her fury seemed to fill the valley; a cry so fierce it stopped Kelee in her tracks. There was something about that yell that sent a chill of warning down Kelee's spine, but she did not yet suspect what Crooked Eye was up to.

The lynx had been cunning enough about it. She had shifted their positions until now they flanked the mouth of the wolf den, both at an almost equal distance from the mouth of that narrow, low-roofed hole in the rocks. A quick spring could carry either to it, and once backed into that close-quartered den mouth, one big fighting lynx could

stand at bay no less than five full-grown black timber wolves.

But Crooked Eye made one mistake. She was in too much of a hurry and overplayed her move. She tried to cut herself directly in between Kelee and the mouth of the den, and it was there that her eagerness spoiled it, for she was only half the required distance when Kelee's fighting brains grasped what she intended to do.

Kelee plunged herself straight to a position in front of the mouth of the den. In any other fight with such a foe, it would have been foolhardy. Crooked Eye cut in on her like a lightning flash of brown. Before Kelee could whirl and set herself, the cat had ripped open her shoulder with a long clawing stroke, and had leaped clear.

Again now Kelee was between the furious cat and the den. But she did not back her rump into it as the lynx would have done. A wolf had no razor-sharp claws on her feet. She could not sit back on her rump and fight off an enemy with knifelike thrusts. Her defense was only a long black mouth and four big fangs. Her real salvation lay in a place to fight where there would be space to wheel, parry and thrust. Backed here in this crevice in the rocks she could only snap and snarl while the cat came in with those long claw strokes to rip her face and muzzle to shreds, weakening her bit by bit by the loss of blood until the death blow could be quickly made.

Crooked Eye seemed to know that; she seemed to know that the wolf had made her first great mistake. She shifted back after a few wild stops and starts, and paused in a twitching bundle of taut nerves as if to study the situation. Suddenly she was darting in again, the flashing forefeet striking out.

It was desperation for Kelee. Hot blood welled and ran down her face from the ribs and tears. She snapped furiously to the right and left, trying to get those ripping paws in her mouth, but the cat was in and out like a wicked brown flash.

At the risk of having both eyes clawed out of their sockets, Kelee finally charged. She gave no warning. When the time came for the move, it was like a black streak ripping forward, all bone and muscle in flying action.

It must have been a great surprise to Crooked Eye. Kelee was far heavier and actually much the stronger of the two, and where the cat had been depending on her own sheer agility, she was suddenly faced with a huge wolf instantly smashing into her without warning and bowling her backward.

Crooked Eye's feet were thrown into the air, but she instantly knew what to do with herself. Pressing in, Kelee caught one of the cat's hind feet in her mouth and—with a sudden snap of her powerful jaws—crushed it into splintering bones before the hurt and startled lynx could break away and go leaping and floundering to one side on three legs.

Kelee followed, intent upon getting this thing done as quickly as possible, now that the prospect of a kill stared her in the face. She forced the cat to face her, and plunged straight in again. Then, with those three sets of claws still ripping at her like countless razors slashing through the air, Kelee cut through the cat's belly, ripped open her side from shoulder to flank and broke her back just above the hips before the cat could drag herself a yard away.

The rest should have been simple enough. Crooked Eye must have wondered what had gone wrong to

delay the death stroke when she saw Kelee suddenly leave off the attack and whirl back to the mouth of the den with every bristle standing on end as if the devil himself had popped upon the scene to frighten the wits out of her. Then, out of the corner of her eyes, the cat saw the wicked brown shadow that had noiselessly appeared on a snow-mounded rock three yards away to her right, and even as she saw that brown shadow she heard the growl of another—and saw a second big lynx to her left, a crouching thing with stub-tailed body flat-bellied on a rock and little tufted ears flattened against a snarling cat head whose slitted eyes were glowing like evil streaks of fire in the morning light.

LOOKS like all hell takin' advantage of the devil now, don't it, Zunk?" Luke Bloodsoe's lean, reddish-bearded face twisted into a one-sided grin as he turned his shaggy head to the left and his glance met his burly companion's black eyes. "Nary wolf born could break through an' whip itself clear of that set-up now. Cats are smart. Heap smarter'n some men I know, bad as I hate to say it to yuh, 'specially atter the way yuh let that fine cougar pelt slip through yore fingers this mornin' when yuh had the critter on the muzzle of yore gun an' then had to miss yore shot."

Zunk Frizzly ignored the taunt by wiggling his barrel-shaped body a little deeper in the snowdrift at the edge of the pine thicket. A man could not argue with Luke Bloodsoe and expect him to see a speck of reason. Bloodsoe was a know-it-all. Once he got a chance to ride a feller he never let up.

The two men had come up quietly, working their way across the valley by plodding wearily through the

snow-choked ravines on snowshoes. With no wind to carry their scent, they had eased themselves into a position where it would be almost impossible for even Zunk Frizzly to miss his shot when the time came for it.

They had watched the fight start. They were now about to see it end. The wolf had whipped the first lynx. In a few seconds more the wolf would have made her kill, but the second lynx had appeared, a cunning shadow of mottled brown slipping through the dead-still cold and getting into position, and then the third had lifted its head from nowhere, a big devil of a cat with the smell of hot blood in his nose.

"First cat's bad wounded," ventured Frizzly, speaking in a whisper and without turning his head. "Wolf fixed it a-plenty. Given time now an' the two extra cats are gonna kill 'emselves a wolf. I reckon about all we've got to do is to lie quiet an' shoot what's left of the ruction, an' then go in for their pelts?"

"We don't lie quiet," Bloodsoe growled. "We're trappers, Zunk. Leastwise, I am even if yo'll never learn. A good pelt's worth money. One torn all to hell ain't worth so much. Yuh take the cat to our left. I'll take the other. Draw a good bead an' don't miss. Yuh oughtn't at this distance, unless yuh get buck fever. When the two cats are down, we'll get the wolf, then finish off the wounded critter."

AS the first bullet screamed from the jack pine thicket the big lynx to Kelee's right rose in the air like a bird taking wing. There was a cry of agony that drowned out the report of the second shot, and the big cat came down in the snow, a spinning and twisting, blood-spouting thing falling across the snarling

and squirming figure of old Crooked Eye.

The second cat died quickly. It leaped and in midair writhed violently and tilted over on its right side. There was one painfully fierce, short-lived snarl, and it was down, floundering weakly near Crooked Eye and the other cat who had turned upon each other with all their lynx fury, unable to understand what was happening.

Kelee leaped backward, quite aware of the new danger, her rump colliding with the mouth of the den. And then she was plunging forward. For an instant she did not know what to do, but here was death from the unexpected! She well knew the meaning of a rifle's crash. Every wild animal of the hills knew that unholy danger walked the land when hunters stalked the hills.

She started to turn into her den where the cubs were anxiously waiting for her, but a third bullet slapping the rocks above her head changed her mind.

To go on inside the den would be to expose the cubs. She whirled away from it. The thing to do was to get away from the den—and to draw the men away with her. Instinct seemed to shriek that in her ears. She had done such things before, just as the wild duck and geese did it in the spring and summer down along the river under the now leafless and frozen cottonwoods and willows.

She moved forward with a zigzagging start. Another bullet cried close to her and smashed into the rocks behind her. Kelee foundered over in the snow as if she had received a death wound and then slowly stumbled to her feet. She ran a few yards, and deliberately fell again, doing her desperate best to fool the hunters. She got up a second time

and then another bullet came.

Kelee felt the hot lead skim through the hair across her shoulders, and again she was down. Not yet had a bullet even scraped her skin, but this time she floundered as if barely able to rise. Once up, she pitched herself with an awkward lunge into a little wash, a move that took her out of sight for the moment.

When she came out of the wash she was several rods from the den, but she was still playing her game. This was no mere business of trickling old Crooked Eye now. This game was far more desperate, one that would take all the skill and daring a wolf could muster.

Another bullet tore at her. It passed just under her throat with a wild shriek. Kelee kept going this time, but she stumbled at the next shot, and then started taking her most desperate chances when she saw a tall man and a short, fat one suddenly plunge out of the edge of the pine thicket.

Both men dropped to their knees. They were taking careful aim. Both fired, but only one bullet whistled over Kelee, and something told her that the second bullet had sped to the den mouth to finish the writhing and twisting old Crooked Eye.

The bullet that whistled over Kelee was a miss by a wide margin, but she foundered in the snow just the same. She wanted those men to believe that she was sorely wounded! If they thought that they would keep on after her, and that would take them away from the den!

But only one man followed her. It was the short, fat one, and he looked as if he was some great bundle of tumbleweed bobbing along through the snow on stumpy, duck-like legs and enormous feet. Kelee tolled him on down the valley, hop-

ing against hope that the second man would turn and follow.

It ended all too suddenly for Kelee. Looking back over her shoulder, she saw that the tall man was heading straight toward the dead cats and the mouth of the den. The fat man was still stumbling down the valley and stopping now and then to take quick aim and fire, but a yell soon halted that.

"Come back here, you fool!" The voice came from the tall man, and meant only a series of sounds to Kelee, but they halted the fat man. "That wolf ain't hurt. She's only a-teasin' yuh away. Hell an' high water, Zunk, here's a den in the rocks. Yuh can bet she's got cubs it, an' she's tryin' to lead yuh away from it. Come back here. We'll take the cubs, an' then get her shore!"

Kelee stopped in her tracks when she saw the fat man turn back. She turned around wistfully and sat down, watching all her hopes die. A long minute passed. The fat man, once turned about, was ignoring her. A terrible fury came over her, but it faded, changing to a ripple of cold fear racing down her back. She lifted her nose, pointing in the general direction of the rising sun. A sound gathered in her throat. It was a whimper, a whine, and suddenly it was soaring up and out, spreading far up and down the valley and out across the snow-locked hills in a fierce wail of despair.

ILL make a wolf hunter out o' yuh in spite of the bum way nature treated yuh in the way o' brains," growled Bloodsoe when they had finished the business of skinning the dead cats. "But I'll tell yuh it's a job a heap harder'n learnin' a tom-cat not to yowl when he meets a gal friend. You take these pelts an'

go to the cabin. Get that box cage on the sled we fixed up. Fetch with it some of that heavy wire I cut off them telephone poles down the valley. I aim to show yuh somethin', Zunk."

"But . . . but," stammered the fat man, "how do you know there's cubs in there, Luke?"

"How do I know pa had hair on his chest!" retorted Bloodsoe. "Hell, man, didn't yul. see me throwin' cat meat in that hole? Don't yuh hear 'em growlin'? They're eatin' in there. Nigh starved, I reckon. If it was old uns they wouldn't eat for a devil of a spell, but wolf cubs are a heap like yuh. They don't know any better'n to fill their bellies when they get a chance. Hurry up an' get that sled!"

Frizzby stumbled away with his rifle slung across one shoulder and the lynx pelts across the other. He did not like this business of trapping. His first winter in the game was just passing. It was the second winter for Luke Bloodsoe, but Bloodsoe liked it. There was too much work about it for Frizzby, though all the fur-buying circulars had said it was as easy as get-out!

"Danged little them slick-tongued jaspers in Chicago know 'bout it!" he grumbled, giving relief to his ire when he was away from Bloodsoe. "I've a durned good notion to keep a-goin' when I reach the shack an' just let Luke lump it up here all by his lonesome."

But he was back within an hour. And when Bloodsoe saw Frizzby returning, he stared. The man was actually moving in a hurry, drawing along a sledlike contraption mounted on an old pair of skis. On the sled was an old packing case one side of which was covered with wooden slats for bars, and Frizzby was dragging the makeshift contrap-

tion along behind him with a rope pulled across his shoulder.

"Must o' pepped yoreself up with a snort or two from the jug," grinned the ever-taunting Bloodsue when Frizzby brought the sled up in front of the den and threw the rope into the snow with an explosive sigh of relief. "How'd yuh even get such a hustle on yoreself?"

"I took me four drinks out o' that jug," admitted Frizzby, still staring back along the way. "Maybe yuh would o' took six. Maybe wouldn't 'a' come back in spite of all yore big brags 'bout not bein' afraid of anything what walks or flies. That damn big she-wolf went with me."

"Went with yuh?" Bloodsue's eyes widened. "What'n hell are yuh sayin', Zunk?"

"That that big she-wolf went with me, an' she come back with me!" Frizzby affirmed grimly. "All the way, ever' step of it. I felt funny goin' an' comin', Luke. Felt exactly like somethin' was followin' me—"

"Yuh allus feel that way!"

"And when I get to the cabin I'm still feelin' that way," Frizzby went on doggedly. "I went inside atter that wire. I heard somethin'. Wasn't no pipe dream, an' it wasn't what yo're allus callin' a happyculucination. It was real. I heard somethin'. I turn 'round. Shoot me for the worst hoss thief liar unhung if yuh want, but there was that Mrs. Wolf a-lookin' in at the window at me. Yes, sir, she was. Forefeet on the sill, face right up to that place where yuh had me scrape the frost off the glass—"

"Yo're drunk!" Bloodsue interrupted impatiently. "Drunk as a fool, Zunk!"

"An' yo're a liar!" exploded Frizzby, the worm turning at last. "I know what yuh aim to do. Yuh aim to take live cubs back to the

shack. Yuh promised that feller down in Hamilton you'd fetch him a fine pair."

"At thirty dollars a pair, why wouldn't I?"

"Just like yuh said we'd fetch 'im a grizzly cub for forty dollars!" Frizzby pulled a pint bottle from under his heavy Mackinaw. He took a drink, and passed it to the angry Bloodsue. "An' we got the grizzly cub all right. Got 'im right atter comin' up here. Yuh didn't figure, I reckon, that he had a mammy hangin' round somewhere close. I got the rope over it, an' I'm fightin' to beat hell when I see yuh goin' up a tree out o' the corner of my eye. The next thing I know I'm wakin' up on my bunk back in the cabin with my ribs busted wide open an' the seat missin' out o' my best pants. Damn it all, Luke, yuh didn't even yell to tell me the mammy bear was a-comin' up behind me!"

"She sort o' picked on yuh!" Bloodsue muttered.

"Picked on me!" Frizzby's eyes were like big, black marbles. "Hell, she damn nigh ruined me! But yuh picked on me, too. Yuh allus pick on me! Yuh make me do all the cockin' an' totin', all the splittin' wood an' makin' fires. An' now yuh aim to take live wolf cubs back to the shack."

"Somebody's got to be the boss, Zunk." Bloodsue caught him firmly by the shoulder. "Even if it's just two men diggin' a ditch, one has to boss. There's a heap of work up here—"

"Yeah, I know," snapped Frizzby. "There's work an' more work. I reckon it never does get done on a trap line. Still, Luke, there's a wear-out to some things. I ain't a-kickin' but what . . . what yuh really aimed to bring, I reckon, must 'a' been a mule."

"Oh, hell!" Bloodsue whirled away from him. "I still say yo're drunk, but come on. We can't stand an' argue all day. We're goin' to get some cubs out o' here. Gimme that wire an' stand back to take 'em when I pull 'em."

IT was a heavy wire that Frizzby took off the sled, a solid guy line. Bloodsue waited, taking it easy, until Frizzby uncoiled the wire. He took the end of it then, and bent it into a wide-pronged hook. Then he slid the hook into the hole, foot after foot of it until he heard puppy snarls. After ten minutes of turning and twisting the wire, he felt it jerk.

"Hooked me a leg, shore!" He chuckled with satisfaction and glanced up at Frizzby. "Get ever'-thing set, pardner. The first half of that thirty dollars is on its way!"

A wolf wail came at that moment. It was up there on top of the cliffs, a far-reaching, mournful sound that sent a tremor down Frizzby's back as if icy water had been poured along his spine. He looked up, shaking his head, the memory of a fighting grizzly cub floating quickly through his thoughts.

"It's the mammy, an' she knows what we're a-doin', Luke." There was a half-whimpering sound in his voice. "Them critters are powerful knowin' in their ways. She knows we're a-takin' her little uns away from her."

"A lot yuh know 'bout it!" sneered Bloodsue, slowly drawing on his wire. "Forget that mammy mouth wash an' be set to take the little un. We'll get that mammy in a trap yet. It's what I'm aimin' for, an' what I aim at, I get. We'll put out our cage an' set traps 'round it. Get ready. Here he comes!"

It was the first cub, a little, half starved, dingy gray thing with

scared shoe-button eyes. It whimpered as if afraid of the light. The hook on the end of the wire had caught it by the right hind leg, just above the hock, and for once since they had been together, Bloodsue finished a job without calling for Frizzby's help. He carried the cub to the cage, holding it away from him, and eased it through the leather-hinged lid.

"Slick as a whistle!" grinned Bloodsue when he worked the wire off the cub's leg and turned back to the hole. "Don't think there's but one more. Well, we'll soon tell."

But the second cub fought the wire. Twice Bloodsue hooked it, and twice it broke away as long-drawn cries from the mother wolf came down the cliffs like mournful wails of agony in the cold. Then, with the wolf still wailing on the cliffs as if she could feel and see that wire gouging and pulling at the cub, Bloodsue hooked the little fellow for the third time.

"Biggern' the other'n!" he grunted. "He's a-fightin' like a wild cat, Zunk. Must be half grown. Anyhow, big or little, it ought to make yuh feel better, 'cause this ends the job."

But it was even smaller than the first when Bloodsue dragged it into the light. It looked almost starved, so weak and frail it did not seem that there was enough strength in it even to growl. Yet it was a fighting little fellow. It all but escaped, and as they were getting it into the cage it opened the side of Frizzby's right wrist to the bone with a sudden snap.

"Damn!" howled the man. "The little devil done 'er slick as a monkey with a razor, Luke!"

"Things shorely seem to pick on yuh mighty, mighty bad up here," sympathized Bloodsue with a half wicked leer on the side of his mouth.

"Sometimes I think yuh oughta kept yore job a-washin' dishes in Sloppy Charlie's place."

FRIZZBY was the first to hear her at midnight. The wind had come up, and her call came down through the wind and snowy darkness from the tall hills at the northern end of the valley. It started as a moan, mounting swiftly to a long, sad wail that held painfully keen for all of five seconds before it pitched reelingly away into an echoing whisper dying in the scattered fir around the one-room cabin of logs with its rough-poled lean-to.

"Luke! Luke!" Frizzby, wide awake in an instant, sat up in his rumpled blankets on the lean-to bunk against the western wall of the room. "Wake up over there! That critter's back ag'in. She's howlin' for them cubs, dammit!"

There was a grunt, a yawn. Stupid from a long, sound sleep, Bloodsoe lifted himself to his left elbow, hung there groggily for a few moments on the side of the bunk, then shoved his feet from under his blankets.

Enough light to outline objects in the room yet came from the glowing embers of the charred logs in the rough fireplace at the north end of the room. The light showed it a rude hut, large enough for a couple of trappers during the cold and fierce winter of the high Rockies. There was but one door and one window, the latter a single pane of frosted glass set in a square hole in the wall of the south end of the room and now glowing like pale shining silver from the light of the heavy snow outside. A frost-proof hole covered with boards in the center of the earthen floor held the cabin's supply of food. Rifles and six-shooters hung on pegs above the door in the east wall of the room, and there were

smoke-blackened cooking utensils on the rough hearth, while on a table to the left of the fireplace stood pots and cooking pans.

"What's the matter now?" demanded Bloodsoe with a tired yawn. "I thought I heard yuh yowlin' ag'in, Zunk."

"It's . . . it's that wolf ag'in," Frizzby explained. "She's back. She's been a-comin' an' a-goin' ever since we put them cubs out there in the lean-to. She keeps a-comin'. She wants her little uns back. She wants 'em bad, Luke."

"Is that all!" Bloodsoe yawned again, and pulled his feet back under his blankets. "I thought maybe the cabin was afire. Go to sleep an' shut up so's I can get some rest. I wish to hell I'd left yuh in Sloppy Charlie's a-shootin' cigar butts an' a-washin' dishes."

"An' I wish to hell I'd stayed!" Frizzby was suddenly half out of his bunk, a powerful, barrel-shaped figure there in the darkness. "Yuh lis'en to that she-wolf sing. It ain't no regular wail. It means somethin', Luke. That wolf's a-singin' to them cubs. She's a-tellin' 'em somethin'. Every once in awhile I hear the cubs a-stirrin', a-stirrin' like they understand." His voice suddenly lowered to whisper softness, "Like they know somethin' bad's gonna happen, Luke."

"Yo're drunk!" snorted Bloodsoe, sitting up wildly in his bunk again. "As drunk as a fool, Zunk! Yo've been in that jug ag'in. I can smell whiskey all over this room!"

"Shore, I been a-drinkin' some, maybe too much!" Frizzby admitted. "Maybe I'm aimin' to drink some more. Anyhow, I've got a human streak of feelin' left in me, an' I wish yuh had left me at Charlie's. Down there I didn't know as much

as I know now. I'd see a woman comin' by in a stone marten coat an' think it's mighty fine. I'd never seen a stone marten alive, much less one a-dyin' in a trap with its eyes a-callin' out to you. I didn't know a woman walked the streets with four hundred hours of the worst death in the world on her back! I'd never seen a marten swingin' by one leg in a jump trap. I didn't know how trustin' some animals could be!"

"Yo're a fool— A damned fool!"

Bloodsoe swung his feet off the side of his bunk. "I'll take my rifle an' go out there an' kill that wolf in the moonlight."

"No, yuh don't, Luke!" Frizzby was suddenly across the room and appearing to tower like a giant above him. "Yuh ain't a-goin' out that door. Somethin' tells me yuh wouldn't come back. I— *Lis'en!*"

He caught half of it in spite of the noise they had been making. It was that long-drawn-out cry again, that soft and yet fierce wail, that mournful moan coming out of the wind and the night. Now it was from westward, as if the wolf was daring to come closer, and something stirred out there in the lean-to; something whimpered softly.

"Git out o' my way!" Bloodsoe gave Frizzby a sudden, brutal push in the stomach that carried the man back across the room and threw him onto his bunk. "I'm goin' to kill a wolf by night light. If yuh try botherin' or stoppin' me I'll smash yore head."

"An' if yuh don't come back," shrieked Frizzby, "I'll turn them cubs loose as shore as shootin'!"

"I'll come back." Bloodsoe growled as he went out the door. "I'm comin' back, an' in the mornin' yo're headin' for Sloppy Charlie's. I'll have no coward like yuh in these hills with me."

LUKE BLOODSOE was a fool. He knew it the moment the cabin door closed behind him and a harder gust of wind picked up a cloud of the loose snow of the drifts under the firs and sent it barrel-reeling around him. A man's place at night was in his cabin, and yet he had more than once shot wolves at night. Given half a chance, he would get the big female, and her pelt would far more than pay him for his trouble.

Yet he had a notion to turn back. There was something in the wind and snow-whipped darkness that mocked him. Something cold and sickening kept biting at the pit of his stomach. But he could not go back. Bull-headedness saw to that. When he started a thing, he carried it through. Besides, he could not stand any more of that infernal wolf's howling. He knew that she had watched them rob the den. He knew that she had followed them to the cabin. Damn 'er, she would not go away! She was just a-lookin' to get killed!

He knew just where to go—to a towering pinnacle of rock west of the cabin. From the top of it he could see all around, and if it took until dawn he would wait, warmly clothed and lying as still as a shadow up there until his chance came to get a good bead on the wolf and bring her down with one shot.

But he was cautious about it. He moved from shadow to shadow, halting here and there for long intervals until he reached the foot of the pinnacle. He found the narrow, knife-like trail of snow and ice leading upward, a dangerous slope on which a man had to use the greatest of care. But it was the only one leading to the top of the rocks.

It was all of ninety feet to the pinnacle, and when he was fifteen feet

from the top he halted, planted astride the icy trail as if it were a slippery log. He had seen something in the thin snow ahead of him. First it was one, then two, then three, and they were the tracks of a wolf—tracks leading upward and not one coming down!

Fear swept over him. Both hands were gripping the sides of the icy trail, his rifle was on his back—and there was a big black timber wolf waiting for him no more than fifteen feet away! With a sudden chill shaking him, he tried to brace himself. A low, fierce growl shook every nerve in his body, and suddenly a screech of terror burst from him, a wild, terrible yell that rocked up and down the valley in a lull in the wind.

A lightning black shadow had appeared, moving like a flash from behind a rock. A pair of bright copper eyes was looking at him. It was man and wolf facing each other, the man with nothing but his hands to fight with, the wolf all crouched and ready to spring—a figure of destruction.

"Go 'way, wolf!" commanded Bloodsue frantically. "Go 'way!"

The eyes in that lowered, flattened-eared head only mocked him. It did not occur to Bloodsue that there was no place for the wolf to go, even if it were to obey. It did not come to him that he barred the only way down from the pinnacle. He saw the snarling head appear to get larger and larger. It had not moved, but he did not know that his fear and his eyes were playing tricks

on him. He thought the head was getting closer and closer.

With a wild screech, he thrust out his hand to push it back, and the quick move unbalanced him. He felt himself lurch to the right. He clawed desperately, and then he fell, going down and down. Suddenly he was bouncing out into space, striking shaggy crags of snow and ice here and there—a spinning, plunging figure, death bound with countless tons of dislodged white following him in a rumbling and roaring mass.

DAWN came, then daylight, cold, still, and gray. Zunk Frizzby was pacing the floor between the fire and the five-gallon whiskey jug in the corner, and the wolf wails were still sounding with eerie monotony.

"She's killed Luke out there," whispered Frizzby, feeling shaky on his legs from too many trips to the jug. "Killed 'im an' et 'im, hair an' hide. She wants her cubs. I reckon she can still hear 'em whimperin'."

He got up courage enough at last for what he had to do. He took the ax from the woodpile in the corner. Quickly, he slipped out the door, rounded the cabin to the lean-to, and started knocking the cage apart. He saw the first cub dart out, then the other; watched them go scurrying away across the snow as another long-drawn wail came from northward. Then he hurried back in the cabin, and took another drink.

After that there were no more wolf wails. It was so still a man could hear his own heart beating.

THE END



JACKPOT OF GOLD



By B. BRISTOW GREEN

Two men lost themselves in the darkness at the end of Pautana's main street as Steve Carlin rode on across the railroad tracks. Without looking back, Carlin swung down, went into the station, closed the door and put his broad shoulders against it.

From under his eyeshade Sparks McCann looked up, blinking. "I was just calling Sue at Sonoita to see if you were there. Hardrock wants you." He nodded toward a gray-whiskered little man whose clothes were thick with alkali.

Carlin glanced at Hardrock Whipple with a half smile on his wide mouth. He stepped up, pulled the gun from the old prospector's holster and smelled the muzzle. His smile broadened.

"So it was you, eh?" he grinned.

The old man's eyes widened. "How th' devil did you know?"

The tall cowboy shoved the gun back into the holster. "I came into the Maverick Saloon just as you went out the side door. Bart Connors sent two of his coyotes to follow you. There was a shot. When the bunch in the saloon got outside, them two said a drunk puncher took a shot at 'em. I had a hunch it was a locoed desert rat. How come?"

Hardrock's bushy brows pulled together. "Connors! Mighta guessed he was back of this. I knowed that wolf in the Tombstone country. He got rich by jumpin' claims, and generally he made sure the owners couldn't squeal. I been dodgin' them two snakes of his for a week."

"You mean you found something?" McCann demanded.

"If it ain't the daddy of all the gold veins in the Santa Rita mountains, it's shore the biggest pup in the litter," Hardrock declared. "But I dasn't locate it or them skunks would've drygulched me. That's

why I come in. Thought I'd shook 'em, but three miles out of town two hombres with their faces covered jumped me and stole seventy-odd pounds of the richest float I ever seen." Whipple pulled a chunk of rock from his pocket. "This here's all I got left to show you."

Even the cowboy and the telegraph operator, who knew little about ore, could see that the quartz was laced with wire gold. McCann yelped excitedly. "You had more like this?"

"This ain't no better than what them cusses stole. You fellows durn near starved to keep me going. Now we're rich—if we can locate our claims and get 'em recorded."

"And you figure Connors set his wolves on you to jump the claims?" Carlin asked.

"Ain't no doubt of it. If they'd been prospectors they could've traced that float to the vein easy, but they hung around waitin' for me to stake it." Hardrock looked up at the big puncher. "A year ago Connors wanted to grubstake me, but I knew if I found anything I wouldn't live long."

"Does Connors know McCann and I are backing you?"

"Nope. I ain't told nobody."

Carlin stepped to McCann's desk and pushed him aside. "I've been around here most every night listening to this ticker. Now I'm showing you I can work it myself."

McCANN listened to the ticking of the instrument and laughed as Carlin got up. "You stutter some, but I got it."

Carlin got up. "Sue will send word to my outfit that I'll be away for a few days. I saw her in Sonoita at noon and she said to tell you the operator there is still sick and she won't be home for a while.

Hardrock, Sue just sent you her love."

The old man grinned. "If I was younger, I'd beat your time with Sue McCann. She's a fine gal, Steve." His face went serious again. "I figured you'd go back with me. If we slip out of town tonight maybe we can dodge Connors' coyotes."

Carlin stepped to the door and threw it open. Two men leaped away and disappeared in the night. "I take it they ain't losing track of you," he said dryly. "How far is it to this mint you found?"

"About twenty-five miles from here; maybe ten from Sonoita. In daytime you can see the sun shining on the water tank there."

Carlin rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "We'll take McCann's horse for you to ride, stop at the store for grub and then"—his lips thinned—"we'll go to the Maverick for a drink."

He read disapproval in Hardrock's face and went on: "It ain't my way to look for trouble but when you know it's coming, it's a good idea to meet it head-on. If Connors savvies you ain't alone in this, maybe he'll lay off."

"You don't know Bart Connors. He'll have half a dozen gunnies on us instead of two."

"Reckon not. He won't want so many to know about this strike."

"Dang it," McCann grumbled. "If Sue was here to handle my job I'd go with you. Well, you'll find my horse in the shed."

Ten minutes later Carlin and Hardrock were in the alley behind the general store. "Stay with the horses," Carlin told Hardrock. "I'll buy what we need."

There was another customer in the store and Carlin had to wait. Finally, with his stuff in a gunny sack, he went out the back way. He

stopped abruptly. His own horse was there but Hardrock Whipple had disappeared.

Carlin's alarm deepened when, a few minutes later, he dismounted at the saloon. Hardrock's horse wasn't among the ponies at the hitch rack, but Carlin recognized a bay gelding that belonged to Bart Connors.

His fears were confirmed when he stepped through the swing doors. Connors was at the bar but his two henchmen were not in evidence. They would have had time to report and then go back and waylay Hardrock in the dark alley. But was the old prospector being held in town or had they taken him into the desert?

Carlin hesitated, then walked up to Connors. "I'm looking for Hardrock Whipple," he said casually. "You happen to have seen him recent?"

Bart Connors lounged back against the bar. He was a tall, flat-hipped man, his lean face deeply tanned from the years he had spent riding the desert for gold. He had discarded the expensive black broadcloth town clothes he usually wore and was dressed to ride: spurred boots, overalls, wide-brimmed hat and a gun at his hip. He took his time answering Carlin's question. When he did speak his voice was an uninterested drawl.

"Whipple? He was in here maybe about an hour ago. Might be he come back while I was in the office." He rolled sideways to the bar. "Mike," he called, "you seen old man Whipple recent?"

The bartender looked up at Carlin. "Oh, it's you! The old gent was in five minutes ago. Left a note for you." He turned to the back bar. "Here 'tis."

Puzzled, Carlin walked down the bar. Mike was unfolding a paper.

"Nope, that ain't it," he said, crumpling the paper and throwing it away. He looked at Carlin and drawled, "I recollect now. Whipple was goin' to leave a note and changed his mind. Said to tell you to meet him at the railroad station."

Anger flushed Carlin's cheeks. He was about to tell Mike he was a damned liar, when he realized who was back of this. He wheeled sharply, but Connors was gone. The thunderous tattoo of hoofs sent Carlin running for the street. Connors' bay gelding was not at the rack.

Carlin leaped for his own horse and stopped with one foot in the stirrup. His rifle was gone from the saddle.

The meaning of the play in the saloon was clear; it was a ruse to gain time for the men who had abducted Hardrock. Stealing the rifle would further delay him. He could not take the trail without one.

BY the time Carlin had persuaded the owner of the general store to sell him a rifle on credit and had left the town behind, he figured Hardrock's captors must have a three-mile start. Nor could he hope to overtake Connors. There was no better horse in the county than the gelding the saloon owner was riding.

Five miles out, Carlin swung down on the bank of a creek. Beyond was a stretch of desert out of which the mountains rose. A man would have to know those hills as well as Hardrock Whipple to find the few springs there. Carlin took time only to repack his outfit and fill the two canteens he had bought.

With his thirst satisfied and his horse watered, he headed into the desert night, holding the tough roan to a wolf trot that covered the miles with the least effort. It was useless to burn his mount out in a twenty-

mile race across tough country. Besides, he would need daylight to follow the trail in the mountains.

What bothered him most was that he had little idea where to look for Hardrock and his captors. Connors' men knew where that float had been found but his own knowledge was vague: Twenty-five miles from Pautana and ten from Sonoita. That would be somewhere in the middle of the range; rough country and plenty big.

It was near midnight when Carlin halted the leg-weary roan in a canyon that cut back into the mountains. To find a trail in the dark was impossible. He was about to dismount and make camp when he recalled what Hardrock had said about being able to see the sun shining on the water tank at Sonoita. That could only be from the top of the range. He was familiar enough with the Santa Rita mountains to know that this gorge would take him to the crest. It was better to get that far under cover of night.

Carlin rode on, letting the horse pick his way, without attempting to guide the animal. It was so dark, he himself could see only the bobbing head and the stars above. Twice the roan's ears pricked forward, though Carlin heard nothing. It might have been merely the scent of a wolf or coyote, but Carlin suddenly had the feeling that he was not alone in the canyon.

Presently, a sharper pitch to the ground told him that he was on the steep slope at the head of the canyon. Above and beyond, he made out the crest of the range against the night sky. Ten minutes would take him out of the gorge. Abruptly his horse stopped, head lifted, ears pointing.

Carlin slid from the saddle and moved cautiously ahead. The faint

glow of firelight beyond a jutting shoulder of rock halted him. Suddenly there came a voice, cold savage—Bart Connors' voice!

"Spike, get that iron hot. We'll take the stubbornness out of this old coot tonight. By morning he'll listen to reason."

Rage pounded in Carlin's brain. He had realized that Connors would resort to torture to make Hardrock talk, but to begin hours before it was possible to locate the vein seemed unthinkable brutal. He edged around the shoulder of rock.

The light was coming from beyond a big pile of boulders about thirty feet ahead. Again Connors' voice reached him. "Let's have it. We'll put a brand on his chest. I don't want his feet burned. He's got to be able to walk."

GUN ready, Carlin had crossed the thirty-foot space on tiptoe. He went around the boulders with a rush. "Connors, damn you, hold—" He broke off, as a gun muzzle was jammed in his belly. Behind the gun was a lean, narrow-eyed face and from beside the fire Bart Connors was laughing at him.

The lean-faced man suddenly slashed his pistol barrel across Carlin's wrist, knocked the gun from his hand, kicked it toward Connors and stepped back.

Connors picked up the gun. "So you fell for it," he jeered. "Spike was ahead of you in the canyon. When he made sure you were coming on he brought me word and I put on a little act for your benefit."

Carlin's eyes swept over the camp. There were four horses but Connors and Spike were the only men in evidence. There was no sign of Hardrock. Connors grinned.

"No, Whipple ain't here," he said. "He thinks he escaped."

"What devil's trick have you played on Whipple?" Carlin asked furiously.

"Just let him slip away—without his horse and gun, of course. I figure he'll locate his claims soon as it's daylight, then try to find you and make it back to town. It'll save me working on somebody with a hot iron like you thought I was doing."

Carlin thought that was probably just what Hardrock would do, only it seemed quite a gamble for Connors to take. But Bart Connors laughed.

"Don't think Whipple can run out on me. Injun Joe followed him, and that half-breed Apache is a wolf on the trail. It'll be better for you if Whipple locates those claims but whatever he does, the Apache will bring him back." In the firelight Connors' eyes went hard. "Spike, tie this fellow up and make a good job of it."

With Connors' gun covering him, Carlin knew there was no sense in resisting. When he was bound hand and foot, Spike dragged him to a boulder and sat him down with his back against it.

"Now bring up his horse," Connors ordered.

Carlin wasted no strength fighting his bonds. The ropes were so tight his hands were already growing numb. Spike brought up the horse and Connors pulled the rifle from the scabbard and smashed the stock. Then he broke the hammer of Carlin's six-gun. Lifting the canteens from the saddle he took a long drink from one and held it toward Carlin. "Have a drink?"

Thirsty as he was, Carlin wouldn't give his captor the satisfaction of accepting. "No," he said, "but you might water my horse."

Instead Connors emptied the canteen and battered it on a rock. He

was unscrewing the top of the other one when some thought made him smile. Hanging the canteen on his own saddle, he and Spike sat down beyond the fire and lit cigarettes.

Looking across at Connors, Carlin said, "When Whipple has located his claims and you've jumped 'em, I take it Spike and Injun Joe will have a little killing to do—a double murder."

Connors shrugged. "I do my own killing, but it wouldn't be smart to gun you two when McCann and his sister both know you came out here. You're dying a natural death, both of you—and not with your boots on."

After that there was no talk. Hours dragged on in unending agony for Carlin. The ropes cut into his arms and legs so that they swelled painfully. Thirst bothered him and his mind turned constantly to the water Connors had spilled on the ground. Sleep was impossible and he welcomed daylight although it brought no relief.

At dawn Spike got breakfast for himself and Connors. Hunger had not yet begun to distress Carlin, but the smell of boiling coffee was maddening. He understood something of what was in store for him.

When the sun was an hour high he began really to suffer. He tried to edge around into the shade. Connors hauled him out into the open. "Better get used to it," he advised mockingly.

CARLIN judged it was about eight o'clock when Hardrock and Injun Joe came down the head of the canyon.

He knew the half-breed. His father had been a man of some education who had gone bad, taken to drink and married a squaw. Injun

Joe was a devil, but he was proud of the fact that he talked better English than the white scoundrels he trailed with. He herded Hardrock into camp and grinned at Connors.

"Whipple went straight to a basin a mile south of here," Injun Joe reported. "Soon as it was daylight he found the vein. I was watching from a ledge fifty feet above him. If Spike and I knew anything about prospecting we could have found it ourselves. All Whipple had to do was scratch down a little slide rock that covered it."

"Did he make his locations?" Connors demanded eagerly.

"Sure, and the rock's lousy with gold."

Connors' eyes lighted. "Saddle the horses. Put the grub Carlin brought in our saddlebags."

Hardrock had looked only once toward Carlin. There was utter discouragement and weariness in his weathered face. His slight frame seemed shrunken and his shoulders sagged. Connors picked up a canteen and held it toward him.

"Have a drink, Whipple," he invited. "You look like you need it."

The old man reached for the canteen eagerly. Connors laughed and handed it to Spike. "Hang it on my saddle. I'll have use for that water."

Carlin's blood boiled. "You mangy coyote! You've got our claims. If you wasn't lower than that half-breed killer, you'd give Hardrock a drink." Connors only grinned.

He had the ropes taken from Carlin's legs and gave him time to get in shape to stand. Then, with Injun Joe leading, they headed for the basin where the claims lay. When they were in it, Connors left the pris-

oners in charge of Spike while he and the half-breed tore down Hardrock's location notices and set up others.

Carlin could see how easy it would be for a prospector who found float in the basin to locate the vein. It was a flat ledge between a fifty-foot capping of quartzite and the underlying granite. It had been scantily concealed by slide rock from the quartzite bluff.

Carlin sat down on a rock to take the weight off his swollen feet. His arms were still bound. Spike stood a few feet away with a gun in his hand.

"We're licked, Steve," Hardrock murmured dejectedly. "Connors will shoot us, bury us in the slide rock and ride into Pautana and record the claims in his own name."

"Why would he go to Pautana when Sonoita is closer?"

"Sonoita's in Santa Cruz County. The claims are just north of the line in Pima County. They've got to be recorded in Pautana."

That killed Carlin's last hope of outwitting these claim jumpers. He knew how Connors meant to dispose of them and had figured there was a bare chance that they might make it to Sonoita unless— Then he remembered what Connors had said about not dying with their boots on.

There was an avaricious glitter in Bart Connor's eyes when he and the half-breed came back. "Nice stuff, Whipple," he said. "You sure found something."

"You dirty, claim-jumpin' crook!" Hardrock bellowed. "Thirty years I've starved and sweated over a thousand miles of mountains and desert, and the first good thing I find is stole by a murderin' wolf."

"Sure," Connors admitted coolly. "I'd commit murder any time for a

strike like this. I can get a hundred thousand for those claims and never blast a pound of rock."

Spike stepped forward. "Let's get this over with. The sooner we get the claims on record the better."

"Not so fast, Spike." Connors' eyes ran over his two prisoners. "Thirsty?" he asked.

STEVE CARLIN'S mouth was dry and his tongue thick. His voice was hardly articulate as he cursed the saloon owner. Bart connors glanced at the sun. It was not much past nine o'clock but the basin was already shimmering with heat. Connors went to his horse and came back with a shaving outfit and Carlin's canteen.

He shook the canteen tantalizingly before his prisoners. "Nice of you to bring water twenty miles for me to shave with," he mocked.

He set the mirror on a big rock about ten feet from them and made his shaving preparation deliberately. "Spike," he said as he began to shave, "tie Whipple's arms behind him." When he had one side of his face shaved he looked around. "Oh yes, and take off their boots and hats."

Carlin's worst fears were confirmed, but he said nothing while Spike pulled off his and Hardrock's boots.

Connors finished shaving his face. "Spike," he drawled, "you might take off their shirts too. You'll have to rip them up the backs and cut the sleeves out to get them off." He came over and stood in front of Carlin and Hardrock, grinning while Spike cut their shirts off.

Rage more than thirst choked Carlin's bitter invective into unintelligible words. Spike looked up at Connors. "Hear what he's saying?"

Sounds as if he don't like this."

Connors shook his head in mock sadness. "A touch of the sun, Spike. Just sun-talk. It gets some men that way."

Steve Carlin stiffened. He sat perfectly still while Spike tore his shirt off and backed away. A few steps, then Steve Carlin seemed suddenly to go hog-wild. His arms were still bound but he managed to lunge to his feet.

"Damn you, Connors!" he shouted hoarsely. "I'm having one drink from that canteen before you kill me!"

He lurched to the rock, swept his face across the top of it, knocking the mug and mirror into the cactus behind. He had the spout of the canteen in his mouth when Connors snatched it away. The saloon owner knocked Carlin flat and stood over him laughing.

"So the sun's got you already. You haven't as much nerve as this old desert rat." He spilled water into his hand and washed the lather from his face. Then, tilting the canteen, he let the balance drain slowly into the sand.

"The last water you'll ever see," he snarled, and smashed the canteen against the rock. "I've a notion to make you fish my mug and mirror out of the cactus with your bare feet but let 'em go. I've no more time to waste on you."

He turned to the half-breed. "Take their horses up on the bluff, blindfold 'em and run 'em over the edge," he ordered. "Leave the saddles on. If the carcasses are ever found it'll look like an accident."

The two prisoners watched in grim silence while the helpless animals plunged to their death and Connors took the bandages from the horses' eyes. Five minutes later the

claim-jumpers rode off, leaving behind them two barefooted, half-naked men with their arms bound and the desert sun beating down on them.

Hardrock cursed huskily. "The dirty devils, killin' horses thataway!"

"Back up against me and see if you can work these knots loose," Carlin said. "My fingers are too numb to help any."

SURPRISE showed in Hardock's face. "You ain't as far gone as you sounded."

"Maybe I acted worse than I was so Connors wouldn't strip us plumb naked," Carlin said.

"That was good thinkin'," Hardrock declared approvingly. "I was sure scared those low-down killers would find the knife I had cached inside my denims."

Carlin's face brightened at the news that the old prospector had managed to hold out a knife. Maybe they had a chance after all. Hardrock found it tough work to untie the knots that Spike had put in. It was nearly noon when the ropes finally fell from Carlin's body. When he could use his arms he got the knife which Hardrock had sewn under his pants pocket.

"Know of any water around here?" Carlin asked as he cut the old prospector's bonds.

"Two miles north, but it's pretty tough country."

Carlin looked down at their bare feet. "That's out then. It would only be that much farther to walk and no way to pack water." He handed Hardrock the knife. "See if you can cut sandals out of the saddle leather and two round pieces for our heads. Punch holes so we can tie 'em on with the tie straps. I'll be back soon."

"What're you figurin' on, Steve?"

"No time to explain. We're getting thirstier every minute."

Watching Hardrock shuffle dejectedly toward the dead horses Carlin could see that the loss of the claims had taken the heart out of the old fellow. But there was no sense in telling what he had in mind. Probably it wouldn't work, anyway.

Carlin stepped behind the rock where Connors had shaved, stopped there a moment and then worked his way up the side of the basin. Fifteen minutes later he stood on top of the quartzite bluff. His bare feet had taken plenty of punishment.

By the time he got back to Hardrock Carlin's head throbbed and his naked shoulders burned from an hour in the sun. The old man had the headpieces and sandals ready. They fastened them on and tied the slashed shirts around their shoulders. Hardrock looked up to where four location notices showed on stakes set in the sliderock.

"I took down Connors' and set up our own again, one for each of us includin' Sue," he explained. "Reckon it won't do no good even if we pull through. Connors will have the claims recorded and it would be just our word against his and his two men." Hardrock looked at Carlin grimly. "Our chances ain't none too good. It's twenty miles to the crick this side of Pautana. Don't sound like an awful lot but we're startin' in bad shape." Carlin nodded. "I know. It's fifteen hours since we had food or water. An hour on the desert and our tongues will be hanging out. I'd say wait till night only we'd be in worse shape by then. Let's get going."

THE agony of the next few hours lived long in Steve Carlin's memory. He suffered more than Hardrock. The old desert man's slight frame was tough as rawhide. He was accustomed to walking, used to the desert heat and scant rations of food and water.

Carlin's hundred and ninety pounds were a drag. Tireless in the saddle, he had never walked a mile if there was a horse to ride. By midafternoon he was able to keep moving only by the drive of a stubborn will. An hour later, when they came to an outcrop of rock higher than his head, he sank down in the shade.

Hardrock looked at him out of red-veined, red-lidded eyes set in a face haggard with exhaustion. But he wasn't as completely leg-weary as the heavier man. "You ain't quit- tin', Steve?" He mouthed the words with a thick tongue. "Six miles will put us to the crick; eight at most."

"No, I ain't quitting," Carlin answered hoarsely. "I still figure to have a little argument with Bart Connors for running them horses off the cliff." He grinned through cracked lips. "That's one job I can handle better than you, old-timer, but out here you're a better man than I am."

Hardrock shrugged. "Size don't count in the desert, except maybe agin' you."

Carlin's feet were cut and bleeding from sand that had worked into his sandals. He began to untie the thongs. "You go ahead, Hardrock. You can travel faster alone and I want you to get to town soon as you can."

"Why?"

Carlin kept his eyes on his sandals. "You could start somebody

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- Whistlin' Waddy..... D. Bayne Hobart
- Senor Red Mask..... Guy L. Maynard
- Jerry Peyton's Notched Inheritance
David Manning
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Continued from page 89

back with a wagon in case I play out. Besides, I want you to see McCann. He's pretty smart and might know something to do about those claims."

"Reckon there's nothin' to be done about them claims, Steve, but I can send somebody back to meet you. You sure you'll be all right?"

"Sure," Carlin. "Be careful not to run into Connors."

Doubt stung him as he watched Hardrock shuffle off. The old man's condition wasn't much better than his own, but to send help back for his partner, he'd keep going until he dropped.

Carlin bandaged his feet with cloth cut from his pants legs and put the sandals on again. He sat looking out across the desert. A deep dry wash extended in the direction of Sonoita and his thoughts turned to Sue McCann. Every dollar he could save had been used to back Hardrock. With the claims lost, it would be a long time before they could get married.

His eyes turned toward Pautana and he was shocked to see how short a distance the old man had covered—not more than three hundred yards. The next second Carlin came to his feet with a hoarse cry of alarm. Hardrock had suddenly pitched on his face and rolled into a deep gully.

Carlin started toward him in a staggering run, then he halted abruptly, his hand going to where his six-gun should have been. Not a quarter of a mile away two horsemen were coming at a trot, Bart Connors and Injun Joe! A shout lifted. Carlin knew he had been seen.

He ran for the ledge of rock that was his only hope of shelter. A shot cracked, and looking back, he saw the riders pass the spot where Hard-

rock had disappeared. At least they hadn't seen the old man.

Carlin dived behind the rock, realizing that this was the finish. Connors and the half-breed knew he was unarmed. There was nothing to prevent them riding straight on and shooting him down.

FIFTY yards away Connors and Injun Joe pulled up. A shot smacked against the rock. That was to make sure Carlin couldn't return the fire. He was peering around the rock when another shot crashed. The half-breed jerked and rolled limply from the saddle.

Dumfounded, Carlin stared. He saw Connors whirl his horse and look wildly around. Again that hidden gun blasted. Connors wheeled and raced for the shelter of the ledge.

Somehow, Carlin found strength to snatch up a stone and let it fly as the horse rounded the ledge. There wasn't force enough behind the missile to unseat Connors, but he reeled. Carlin lurched in, wrenched the rifle away and brought the stock down on Connors' head. The man pitched from the saddle and lay still.

It had been a last desperate effort. Brain whirling, Carlin had barely sense enough to drag Connors' six-gun from the holster and back against the ledge to keep from falling. Out of the dry wash that led toward Sonoita a rider raced toward him.

"Steve! Steve!"

Carlin's blurring eyes focused on the rider. "Sue!"

Sue McCann sprang from the saddle and put an arm around him. She pointed. "Look, Steve! The sheriff and a posse from Pautana! I got your message through to Sparks, but I was afraid they wouldn't find you in time."

Half a dozen horsemen were coming at a run and behind them rolled a buckboard. But they wouldn't have been in time to save him from Connors and Injun Joe; Carlin realized that. It was Sue McCann who had saved him.

"It was you shot the half-breed, Sue?" he asked.

Sue's pretty face was white, but she answered bravely. "Yes, but I don't think I killed him. I sighted them ten minutes ago and took to the dry wash so they couldn't see me."

Then the posse was swarming around them and one man was holding a canteen to Carlin's lips. The sheriff swung down and bent over Bart Connors. "He's coming out of it," he said, and snapped handcuffs on the claim-jumper's wrists.

The lawman grinned at Carlin. "Sparks McCann couldn't leave his job, but he said to tell you he got Sue's message and had the claims recorded before Connors reached town. That whelp, Spike, saw the game was up and pulled out, but Connors was coming back to kill you."

Old Hardrock Whipple reared up in the buckboard. "Got the claims recorded! What'd you mean? What message?"

"Sun talk, old-timer," Carlin said. "Connors overplayed his hand when he shaved just to aggravate us by wasting water. That and what he said about sun-talk gave me an idea. I used the mirror I knocked into the cactus to flash a message to Sue and she telegraphed a description of the claims to Sparks."

"You mean you could send a message to Sonoita with that glass?" Hardrock demanded unbelievably.

"Sure. Heliographing, it's called. I used the code I learned listening to Sparks."

Carlin put his arm around Sue. "Gents, meet the future Mrs. Carlin, president of the Hardrock Mining Co."

Sue McCann laughed. "I'll have enough to do looking after one cattleman. We better leave the mining business to Hardrock."

Hardrock Whipple grinned at his partner. "If Sue can see anything in you worth having right now, she must love you plenty. You look like somethin' the devil kicked out of hell." He looked down at Bart Connors. "So you threw away a hundred-thousand-dollar jackpot on one shave. At that, I dunno but you'd look less like a snake if you growed whiskers."

THE END.

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

(yes, I did—actually and literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank. I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

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Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

DESPITE the fact that fall has arrived, it's pleasant to look back on the events of the summer months, and as I consider some of the matches I have watched this season, I'd like to pass along a few highlights to our readers.

One of the interesting matches was the muzzle-loading shoot staged by Maine muzzle-loading fans. The old muzzle loaders have long since fallen into the discard, but in recent years, through the efforts of a few individuals who formed the National Muzzle-Loading Rifle Association, interest in these old-timers is being rapidly revived. Old guns long since relegated to the discard are being taken down from their racks. Shooters are spending money having new barrels made or having old ones re-lined. They are going after matches with the same precision that riflemen of one hundred years ago undertook—and are receiving mighty good scores.

It's quite a thrill to watch some

of these people playing with old muzzle loaders. I saw an ancient flintlock in service as well as a percussion type. I saw large-caliber rifles with 48-inch barrels being put through their paces. I saw small-bore long-barrel Kentucky rifles doing their stuff, and I saw the boys playing around with flintlock horse pistols and percussion revolvers.

Another interesting shoot that I attended was at the old Walnut Hill Rifle Range down in Massachusetts. This, as you know, is one of the oldest rifle clubs in the United States, having been in continuous operation for some sixty-five years.

The particular match that I witnessed was the annual Schuetzen Match, covering a two-day period. Shooters from all over the country attended and brought with them a miscellaneous assortment of guns.

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Most of the shooting was at two hundred yards offhand; in other words, no rest was permitted. Any type of gun could be used, and this included precision match .22 rifles as well as Pope muzzle loaders.

I saw no percussion guns in this match, but plenty of the old-timers used hand-loaded ammunition of the so-called black-powder variety, with the bullet seated in the barrel in front of the shell.

The muzzle-loading system, frequently called the Pope system, consists of a false muzzle properly rifled to match the barrel and fitting on pins into the muzzle of the gun, acting as a barrel continuation. A carefully selected hand-cast bullet, usually paper patched or wrapped in light paper, is started with the fingers in this false muzzle, pressed out of the muzzle and into the barrel by means of a plunger and then, with a special ramrod, is forced the full length of the barrel until it reaches a position just in front of the shell. The same type of "blank" cartridge is then inserted in the breech and the boys are ready to touch off the charge.

This Schuetzen Match shooting is done on the German ring target with a scoring center of twenty-five points instead of the customary five or ten points.

Then, again, not long ago, I served as chief range officer at the New England Regional Pistol Matches with thirty-six targets in continuous

operation. The matches covered two full days of continuous shooting at twenty-five and fifty yards, slow fire, timed fire, and rapid fire. Under National Rifle Association rules, slow fire permits five minutes for five shots. A time allowance of twenty seconds for five shots timed fire and ten seconds in rapid fire is given.

Shooters who desire to go in for match shooting should be members of the three national associations—the National Muzzle-Loading Rifle Association with headquarters at Portsmouth, Ohio, the National Rifle Association at 1600 Rhode Island Avenue, Washington, D. C., and the United States Revolver Association at Springfield, Massachusetts.

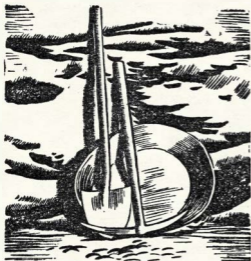
Suppose you are not an expert shot but still are capable of shooting a pretty fair score. If you belong to the National Rifle Association, you can shoot in the various rifle and pistol matches according to your classification.

Whether you live in the city or country, you can get going on shooting. There should be a club in your vicinity. If not, organize one.

You may be surprised to know that considerably more than half the ammunition loaded in this country is consumed in target shooting. A great deal of the remainder, by all means the majority, is used for sporting purposes such as hunting. Very little of it is manufactured with the intent to shoot down your fellow man.

If you are interested in making a cartridge collection and would like to hear from other collectors, write to this department, inclosing a three-cent stamp for a list of names which will be sent to you as soon as it is compiled. In this way you may be able to trade some of your duplicates with others for something you really need for your collection.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure you inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.



Mines and Mining

BY J. A. THOMPSON

"WHERE does placer-gold come from?" asks Bernie Royce, of Chicago, Illinois.

That's a good question, and Bernie adds that since he is planning a prospecting trip to Nevada shortly he is particularly interested in the origin of the gravel gold of that State.

In Nevada, or elsewhere, Bernie, the placer-gold deposits that mean beans and buns, and occasionally a bonanza to the prospector, have been produced by the disintegration and breaking down of gold-bearing veins and mineralized rocks. Such rocks and veins were the first source of the gold. The breaking down process is something that it has taken countless ages to accomplish.

Natural forces such as rain, flowing streams, sharp temperature changes, chemical action, and even movements of the earth's crust have gradually, bit by bit, reduced solid rock into gravel, sand and clay, and

in the process freed the particles of gold the rock originally contained. Next, running water has transported the loosened rock particles, and much of the gold down into the stream beds. Since gold, size for size, is roughly seven times as heavy as a piece of quartz, the rock with which the native metal is usually associated, it tends to work down to the bottom of the stream-carried material and under favorable conditions becomes concentrated on the bed-rock in sufficient quantities to make mining it pay.

Sometimes such concentrations can become incredibly rich, as they were in California when the '49ers first stampeded to the gold-fields discovered by John Marshall at Sutter's mill, or the subsequent bonanzas opened up in Arizona, in Colorado, in Montana, and Idaho, and other Western States. Don't forget either the multimillion-dollar concentrations of placer-gold that made the rush to the Klondike in '98 perhaps the greatest and most spectacular of all gold stampedes.

However, fortunately for the thousands of prospectors and small-scale placer miners earning a fair livelihood, and sometimes doing considerably better in the gold camps of the West today, bonanzas are not necessary for the fellow willing to be satisfied with a modest success, and to carry on in the hope of some day making that better than average strike which will put him on Easy Street for the rest of his life.

Even fairly good concentrations of gold in placer gravel can be made to pay by small-scale, or moderately small-scale methods. Lean gravel, if there is enough of it to warrant cost and installation of machinery and equipment, can be dredged, or worked by hydraulicking and successful operations of this sort, be-

cause they handle such tremendous yardages at extremely low cost, have paid millions of dollars in dividends in the past, and in many instances are still paying them.

Here is something else to keep in mind concerning placer-gold deposits, Bernie. As a rule such deposits are found in districts where lode gold also occurs. But the lode gold, which was the source of the placer may be too lean to be mined profitably. Stream action concentrated the yellow metal particles so that the placer may be many times richer than the gold vein that was its source.

Moreover, where the weathering and wearing down of the original gold-bearing rock has been extreme, and the vein not deep or extensive, the entire vein has sometimes been worn down and disintegrated. In such cases stream gold may be found, perhaps in readily minable quantities, even though no sign or trace of the original vein rock remains on the slopes or hillside of the stream's watershed. So just because no gold veins are found in a deeply eroded gulch in mineralized country, don't, without first testing the creek bed gravels themselves, jump to the conclusion that no placer-gold can possibly exist there.

Quite frequently placer gravels have been reconcentrated; that is, the older gravel formed by the wearing away of the original rock has, due to earth movements, been upheaved and new streams have gradually cut fresh channels through the old gravel

beds sorting out and re-entering their gold content along new pay streaks or areas of fresh deposition. Many of the richest bonanza placer-gold discoveries have been of this type.

In arid country such as the desert sections of Nevada because rains are both infrequent and severe, often veritable cloudbursts when they do occur, placer-gold concentrations are apt to be erratic. Whenever such violent rains fall, they produce a huge rush of water that tears down the canyons to the lowlands, carrying with it sand, gravel, and gold helter-skelter. These periodic on-rushes of water play hob with the the calmer concentration of steady-flowing streams so that desert gold found in the foothill slopes, or alluvial fans is likely to be found mixed, coarse and fine together, in irregular, narrow pay streaks of disjointed, short length, and usually shallow depth.

Frequently the rules of placer-gold deposition that apply in steady stream country are out in such desert gold areas, and it takes the luck of the Irish plus plenty of persistence to locate the brief, but often rich in coarse gold, placers that abound in the mineralized sections of the arid Southwest.

To T. Y., Tulsa, Oklahoma: Eolian placers are placer-gold deposits that have been formed in desert country by action of the wind in blowing away the lighter portions of weathered rock. They are surface deposits of dry-gold particles.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.



The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

Another old friend of the Hollow Tree is back with us this week. His name is C. F. Kinney, and he wants to know what has happened to the middle-aged pals and old-timers who used to be with us from time to time. That's a query we receive quite often and we really don't know the answer. We have three letters in the Tree this week, including Mr. Kinney's, asking for middle-aged or older pals; so, how about it, all you for whom life is just beginning, suppose you come out of hiding and write to these members of the Tree who want to hear from you? Here's Mr. Kinney's letter:

Dear Miss Rivers:

I wish you would help me again to get some Pen Pals. I have been a member of the Hollow Tree Gang for a long time and still have my membership badge which I value highly. But what has become of the middle-aged pals and the old-timers who used to appear from time to time? I am a Southerner nearly forty years old and have several hobbies which I'm sure will interest all you folks. I would like both old and new members to assist me in collecting samples of native wood lore, mineral rock specimens, stamps or coins. In return I will send you fruit from my orchard or will exchange samples of wood lore from Florida, Texas, old Mexico, New Mexico and other sections. We each pay the express charges on what is exchanged. For those who are interested in pictures, I have a nice collection taken mostly in the West while I've been on hunting, trapping, fishing and exploring trips. My reason for appealing to you folks is because I need not only your assistance, but a tonic of something besides horse liniment to keep this lonely person from going to seed. So, folks, if you want to brighten up the dark spots or are seeking information, I will be glad to assist you.—C. F. Kinney, Box No. 12, Waverly, Florida

Lucille lives on an Indian reservation—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am nineteen years old and live on a two-hundred-acre farm on the Shoshone Indian Reservation, although I am not Indian. I love to

ride horse-back, cook, sew, read and go to the movies. I would like to hear from boys and girls between nineteen and twenty-four years of age, so come on and fill my mailbox.—Lucille Salin, JF' Ranch, Lander, Wyoming

Diana has an expensive hobby—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Could you please find room for me in your Hollow Tree column? I am twenty-one years old and would like to hear from people from all over the world, especially England, India, Canada, Scotland and anywhere in America. I collect rare things like old glass, and china, carved stone, jade, onyx, ivory and mother of pearl. I also collect old books and poetry. I love horses, dogs, good music and the fine arts. If anyone writes to me from England, I would appreciate it if they would send me a pressed spray of heather and in return I will send something they would like from the United States. I promise to answer all letters.—Diana Atwater, West Seventh Street, Crisfield, Maryland

This Texan will answer all letters—

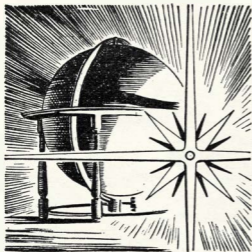
Dear Miss Rivers:

I have made some very good friends through the Hollow Tree, but they are all getting married and leaving me out in the cold, so I'd like to make a new bunch of pals. I have traveled some through the United States and have been told a number of times that I wrote an interesting letter, so come on and drop me a few lines, as I'm lonely as all get out. I'll try to make my letters interesting and will answer promptly. I am not one of those who ask you to write and then fail to answer your letters.—J. L. Lewis, R. R. No. 2, Box 171, Corpus Christi, Texas

Alene wants to talk things over—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely girl of twenty-one seeking Pen Pals from anywhere, especially England. My favorite sports are basketball and baseball, and I am interested in photography, reading, collecting poems and writing letters. I like the movies and prefer costume pictures. I would enjoy exchanging opinions on poetry, books and



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

THERE is no question but what the irrigation projects being opened up in the arid sections of the West are completely changing the face of the United States.

Literally millions of acres had lain idle under a broiling sun, receiving less than a foot of rain water a year for thousands of years, grown up in cactus and sagebrush and scrub undergrowth, avoided by man and beast. These lands were rich, but no matter how rich it is, land won't grow lush crops without water, and lots of it.

Then engineers began to study the topography of this land, trying to find ways to reclaim it. They blasted away mountains, built storage lakes and drained other lakes, they built

canals, and changed the course of rivers. They made lush farms grow where only the cactus and the rattlesnake grew before.

One of these dry areas where cowboys used to ride, and where a steer had to cover a square mile to get a decent breakfast, was the Snake River plains district in Southern Idaho. This section now is in the heart of the Minidoka Irrigation Project.

This area, known as the South Side Pumping and Gravity Divisions of the Minidoka project, is located in Minidoka and Cassia Counties in southern Idaho, covering the whole of those Snake River plains. These divisions of the project cover an area of about two hundred square miles.

Close to the southern edge of the area is a range of mountains rising about ten thousand feet, the project itself being at an altitude of about four thousand feet.

The water that feeds these acres comes from the natural flow of the Snake River, amply supplemented by Lake Walcott near Minidoka, Idaho, Jackson Lake near the Yellowstone Park in Wyoming, and American Falls Reservoir, about sixty miles above the diversion points. Owners of land in the Minidoka Project are entitled to water in these three reservoirs in quantities sufficient to cover their land four feet deep per year if they need it, and in addition there is the natural flow water from the river. In short, a farmer there has all the water he needs, and has it under control, for use when he needs it instead of when the clouds decide to let him have a little.

The bulk of the acreage is used for

If you are interested in learning more about this irrigation project, write to John North, inclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope, and he will send you additional information.

producing alfalfa, grains, potatoes and sugar beets. Idaho potatoes are famous throughout the nation, and will yield from a hundred and fifty to three hundred and fifty bushels to the acre, depending on the ability of the grower. It is not an exceptional fruit country, but most of the farms raise enough fruit for their own use.

But it is a great livestock country, and dairying and poultry raising are coming industries there. There is a good summer range in the forest reserves in the surrounding mountains for sheep and cattle which furnishes a convenient supply of feeder stock for project farmers. Many of the farmers keep small flocks of sheep on their farms, and hogs do very well here.

The marketing facilities of the project are a big factor in its success. A great deal of the produce raised here is sent directly to the large western seacoast cities. There are two sugar factories located on the project itself to take care of the sugar beets as they come from the fields, and there is a mill for making alfalfa meal.

Also, there are large local warehouses for storing potatoes, and several large flour mills, a cheese factory, a large creamery, and two casein plants which take care of the market for milk and butter fat.

These activities make it certain that when a farmer raises a crop with his year's labor, he will find a nearby place where he can immediately get cash for it—a most vital factor in making a farm pay.

The Snake River cuts the project into two parts. At the head of the project the diversion dam forms a lake known as Lake Walcott, covering over twelve thousand acres. The river and this lake are stocked with fish. In addition to the mountains close to the project on the south, the Sawtooth Mountains, about eighty miles to the north, are accessible over well-surfaced roads, and Sun Valley is not far away.

These mountains are very rugged and are becoming more popular as a vacation resort, which means additional markets and increased prices for the farmers close by. Also the Jackson Lake country and the Yellowstone National Park are convenient and are visited annually by many of the settlers around here.

Transportation throughout the project is well taken care of by one railroad which has a number of branches running through it to supply loading stations for the produce. The famous old "Oregon Trail" which was followed by immigrants in the overland route to the Northwest goes through the project and is now a fine automobile route filled with tourists. Most of the feeder roads have been graveled at least, and are kept in good condition.

A number of little towns have sprung up here on what was formerly just a sagebrush desert a few years ago. They are Burley, Rupert, Paul, Declo, Hayburn and Acequia, with a total of about ten thousand people, all dependent on the farming in the project. This growth indicates how well the project is coming along.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

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



IRON MALEMUTE

PART SIX

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

The Story So Far:

CAL JESSUP is in charge of the construction of a railroad in Alaska, a difficult feat of engineering because of the ice-covered terrain and freezing temperatures. As the work gets underway, he has much trouble with Tuck Gorst, who does everything in his power to prevent completion of the railroad on schedule in the hope he himself will be able to step in and take over when Cal fails.

Most of Gorst's schemes fall through, but he pulls his trump card by producing an old sourdough who claims to have found gold on nearby Ruby River. The gold fever spreads rapidly and soon Cal is left practically without a crew as the deadline for the completion of the railroad approaches.

Rumors that Cal's boss, old Gid Riley, has gone broke make it impossible to hire more men. Cal spikes the rumors by getting a loan big enough to complete the railroad. He also forms a mining company to develop Bear Creek, property which is owned by the Riley Construction Co. With the backing of Gid Riley, shares in the new company sell like hot cakes.

Again, however, Cal receives a serious setback. A miner owning property through which the railroad must pass refuses his consent to the right of way on the grounds that he has uncovered a gold mine. Cal, knowing this is merely another of Gorst's tricks, decides to go through anyway and fight it out in court. At Gorst's instigation several other miners file suit ahead of Cal's. Since these will all have to be tried before Cal's case is reached, there is little hope of getting a decision in time to complete the railroad.

To make matters worse, Cal is served with a warrant charging him with fraud. An investigation has proved that the Bear Creek ground is practically worthless!

CHAPTER XXV

A JURY OF STOCKHOLDERS

THE deputy marshal, who arrested Cal Jessup on the charge of defrauding the stockholders of the Bear Creek Co., did not accompany his prisoner south. He knew that Cal wouldn't attempt to leave the country, and, as a matter of fact, escape would be rather difficult even if he were so inclined. John Law would

be waiting for Cal when he arrived in Seattle. If he left the steamer at any other Alaskan town, he would be picked up by the local authorities.

Cal enjoyed the trip south on the *Narada*. It gave him a chance to relax and think out his problems logically. Marcia was going East in February for her big chance on Broadway. That meant she was stepping out of his life. He didn't want that at all, but he wasn't selfish, and he certainly would not try to keep her.

The snowplow he would need desperately to keep the line clear in winter had been held up. Caboose had been arrested for Herb Wise's murder, and last and by no means least, Dan Riley had jammed the court calendar with so many suits, his own action against Monte Zumdick would be delayed which would prevent the section on Icy Lake from being completed in time.

Dan Riley was aboard now. He had offered to sell Cal the disputed interest which would allow Cal to kill all suits and clear the calendar. Cal had said bluntly that he wasn't interested. And Dan, believing he was bluffing, was following him south.

An angry mob of Bear Creek stockholders, probably inspired by Sharon, was on hand to meet the *Narada*. Several policemen pushed the crowd back, and John Law hurried to the gangway.

"Here I am, Cal said cheerfully. "First, I want bail, then a hearing."

"What's the hurry?" John Law asked.

"Got a railroad to build," answered Cal.

"Oh, so you're still building a railroad, eh?" John Law asked derisively. "That one may be finished, but you won't be there to see it. I'm getting damned sick of you slippery birds."

"There's only one of me," Cal protested.

"There's Caboose," the marshal told him. "I arrest him and he seems as fit as a fiddle. Then he blocks me by getting a lawyer to say he's a mental case and needs more hospital treatment. Stalling for time, that's what he is."

"Then I should think you'd appreciate the fact I'm not stalling for time," said Cal.

He put up bail an hour later, then hurried out to see Gid Riley. He found the old-timer excited and raring to go.

"I'm eatin' meat again, even if the doctor don't know it, and I'm my old two-fisted self almost," said Gid. "What's the program? I hear you're in a mess as usual."

"I want you to back my hand on the Bear Creek business," Cal explained. "I've asked for a preliminary hearing. I've asked all stockholders to be present. They can't all be, of course, but a lot will be there. Today I'm leaving town to buy a snowplow. I'll need a pair of drive wheels for the locomotive, too. One of them is in bad shape."

"I'll have a lawyer fix the trial," Gid promised. "Now what about Caboose? He wants action again, and I don't blame him."

"We'll figure out something," Cal promised. "The charge against him has been reduced to second-degree murder. He can get bail, but that might not help much. If they got a conviction he'd go to McNeil Island Pen for a long time."

Cal didn't wait to visit Caboose. As important as were many angles to the various problems, the snowplow was the most pressing. The work couldn't be completed without it. And you couldn't buy a snowplow in a department store.

A DAYS hunt produced the needed locomotive drive wheels, but Cal lost nearly a week and spent a small fortune in telegrams before he located a snowplow. A mountain branch line had one in fair condition. Cal ordered it delivered in Seattle. This accomplished, he consulted the steamship sailing schedules, only to discover steamship deck space had been well sold out. Heavy machinery bound for Poor Man's Hell was moving North with every sailing.

"December's the best we can do," he was told at the shipping office. "Our *Taku* can carry everything on her fore'd deck. We've got the tackle to handle heavy pieces, too. The drive wheels will weigh around nine tons. We'll carry them below decks."

"I guess I might as well take it," said Cal, "and pray for late snows." He booked passage for himself on the same trip, then went out to the hospital where Caboose was confined, a virtual prisoner.

Caboose jumped to his feet when Cal came into the room. "You old renegade, I'm glad to see you," he shouted. "I hear they've been trimming you since I left. Uncle Gid says you're cornered once more in a rock fight and you're battered and bleeding. How about it?"

"There's some truth to what they're saying, I guess," Cal admitted. "But the wound that hurts most is the murder charge hanging over you."

"I've made a decision on that," Caboose said soberly. "To testify in court I must be of sound mind and all that. Well, I'm going to testify, so that means facing the music on the murder charge."

"What case are you going to testify to?" Cal asked.

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"I told you there were moments when I heard Shultz and Gorst talking while they held me prisoner," Caboose replied. "I heard Gorst tell Shultz to show Monte Zumdiek the outcropping they had salted and sell him the mining claim. Their argument was to be that if the claim didn't turn out well, he could block the railroad and either shake you down for a big bunch of money or force you into court. In which case they would pay him plenty if he delayed you long enough. He was supposed to be doing this on his own, of course. I'm ready to go to the mat on this, Cal," Caboose added seriously. "That will automatically mean I stand trial. I've hopes of clearing myself some way."

"Suppose you forget testifying against Monte Zumdiek and play safe until we can go into the evidence against you and really fight the case?" Cal suggested.

"No, I'm tired of being out of the fight," Caboose said obstinately. "I've already told John Law I'd stop fighting his efforts to take me North. That stands. How about sailing with you?"

"All right, if that's the way you want it," Cal agreed. "We'll put up the bonds so you can work on the job and not be cooped up in jail."

"What's next on the program?"

"I'm facing the stockholders of the Bear Creek mining outfit next week," Cal answered. "Sharon has stirred them up, I imagine."

"I know he has," said Caboose. "Three different stockholders told me so. I advised them to stick and have faith in you. When they still wanted to get out from under, I dug up friends who bought their stock."

"So your friends are in it, too, eh?" Cal said. "Tell 'em to be on hand for my preliminary hearing. You'll see your Uncle Gid in action, too."

THE day of Cal's preliminary hearing found the courtroom packed with stockholders. Cal was surprised to see Bull Shultz, Sharon, and Tuck Gorst among them. Shultz and Gorst had come down from Glacier Inlet on the last boat, either to take advantage of any points the hearing might develop or to attend to business of their own.

Cal, sitting at the defendant's table with Gid Riley, was conscious of the hostile atmosphere. His lawyer put him on the stand immediately.

"Mr. Jessup wishes to make a statement," the lawyer announced.

Cal was sworn in and took the witness stand. "Without mentioning names," he said, "I'll outline some of the opposition we have been up against." Then he sketched briefly what had transpired since he had begun the building of the railroad. "We needed money," he continued, "and needed it in a hurry. I had sampled the Bear Creek bench and knew what it contained. As a mining venture, without a railroad, it would be an expensive proposition. Building a railroad along there without the help of a gold yield would also be expensive. I was turning the situation over in my mind when the need of money hit us."

"And you sandbagged my clients for the needed money," the stockholders' lawyer suggested.

"Your attempt to sandbag a fat fee out of *them* is the real story here," Cal retorted. "To continue: We sold you stockholders the property for a million dollars, subject to right of way, and taking needed dirt along the bench. That dirt contained the gold. We moved the dirt by an expensive method. The fine gravel, including the gold, was spilled into gulches and holes along the right of way, the coarse gravel and rocks were used for crib work, ballasting

and so on. The gold is there whenever the company wants to install sluice box and put the dirt through. I would say it will run between one and one half and two million dollars. In conclusion, your gold helped us build our railroad, and our road has reduced your mining costs to a whisper."

"And you expect my clients to take your word for it?" the lawyer demanded.

"Not at all. But here's what we will do. We'll buy back every share of stock we've sold, at a dollar ten cents a share," Cal told him. "That's ten percent profit for a few months' use of money. Not bad in itself. But those who speculated and want to profit accordingly will be smart to hang onto their stock. The Riley Construction Co., of course, doesn't care what decision is made."

"Do I understand," the judge inquired, "that Mr. Riley confirms this offer?"

Gid stood up. "You bet your bottom dollar I do," he answered. "I've no quarrel with the stockholders who remained calm. I hope they hang onto their stock, though I'll buy it if they want me to. As to the ones this slick lawyer stampeded, I don't care what they do. If they don't want to sell to me, I hope they'll unload on somebody with red blood in their veins."

Some of the lawyer's clients booed, but the others howled them down. The judge looked stern and rapped for order. "As yet," he ruled, "I can't see where fraud has been done, nor how I can hold the defendant for trial."

"If the mine doesn't yield at least twenty-five percent on the investment," Cal offered. "I'll plead guilty to any charge short of murder and treason that these people wish to bring."

The opposition was at a loss to know how to handle these new developments. Therefore, the judge dismissed the case.

"And the Riley Construction Co. office is open from nine in the morning until five in the afternoon," Gid announced. "Cash will be on hand for you."

Several people shook hands with Cal and expressed their confidence in the company. Driving back home, Gid asked, "What'll we do if a lot of those folks decide to cash in? How much money will we have left?"

"Not enough to finish construction," Cal answered. "But I don't think they'll cash in. In the first place a man who'll buy mining stock is a gambler at heart. The way I put the proposition, they'll reason that they can't lose."

CHAPTER XXVI

TERROR UNLEASHED

DAN RILEY was waiting at Gid's home. "Well! Well!" Gid cried, "the lion lies down amongst the lambs, or something like that."

"I've been up to my neck in business," Dan answered. "Now that it's cleared up, I thought I'd remind you of an offer you once made."

"I know. I said when you licked a man in my organization you could have his job if you wanted it. The proposition still goes."

"Well," Dan said triumphantly, "I've beaten Cal Jessup. Monte Zumdick has a mine across his right of way and I've got the court calendar so jammed he can't put through his condemnation suit."

"I'm proud of you, Dan," Gid said. "But does Cal know he's licked?"

"He should," Dan answered. "He can't lay rails on thin air."

"You hold power of attorney," Gid said, "why not give him an extension of time? Why don't you boys get together now?"

"Not me," Cal said quickly.

"Nor me," Dan echoed. "I'm protecting the miners who gave me this power of attorney."

"That's the spirit, boys," the old man chuckled, "don't concede a damned thing. As for you, Dan, come around February 1st and take over—if trains aren't running from Glacier Inlet to Poor Man's Hell."

Dan departed and Caboose turned to his uncle, chuckling. "Poor old Dan, he's having such a tough time to win even a skirmish. And he thinks he's got Cal sewed up."

"Well, hasn't he?" Gid countered. "I'm just asking for information."

"No," Caboose said with confidence. "Watch old Cal get his case against Monte Zumdick set ahead. And that's where Caboose moves in with his testimony."

"If you're free, my boy," Gid reminded him.

Cal Jessup was on the wharf when the next southbound steamer docked in Seattle. The mail clerk handed him a packet of letters. Mostly they were reports or requests for supplies. A letter from the Poor Man's Hell women asked him to check on their broom order. They wanted brooms to arrive on the first train. "I guess they've gone crazy using their homemade kind," he reflected as he opened a letter from Nathan Land and read it:

DEAR CAL:

If Gid Riley knew how unimportant you are to this organization he'd fire you. Things are going along fine without your alleged guiding hand. Stay down there as long as you want to. Snow is flying, so don't forget the plow. Steel is laid halfway

Continued on page 108

GOING BALD?

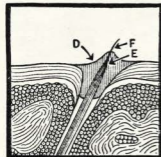
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ME TO HAVE HAIR
ON MY HEAD
AGAIN?**

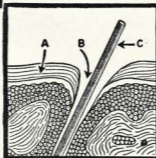


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Continued from page 106

to Poor Man's Hell. I think we've beat the frost. Grading is just about completed. Hope everything is going as well with you.

Yours,

NATHAN.

P. S. Marcia has been practicing some pieces some New York musical showman sent her. What a voice. Damned if I didn't fall in love with her myself.

"So you fell in love with her," Cal mused half seriously. "Well, damn you and double-damn that down-easter." He read it again, and grumbled. "As if I'd forget the plow."

The plow had arrived the day previous, but it was in such poor shape Cal ordered a complete overhauling. That would probably fill in the long period until the *Taku* sailed.

In the meantime Caboose stalled off doctors who wanted to pronounce him either fully recovered or still in danger of a relapse. This gave him a freedom he might not otherwise have enjoyed.

"Twenty-four hours before sailing, Caboose appeared before an examining board and convinced them that he was a hundred percent recovered. "Now I'll submit myself to your tender mercies, John," he told John Law. "You've been patient, but don't try to fool me. You've had a hell of a time all these weeks you've been waiting for me."

A few hours later a switch engine shunted the snowplow to the wharf and everyone, including Gid, gathered to watch the loading.

Specially rigged tackles creaked and groaned as the slack was taken up. Hoisting engines growled, and lines grew as tight as fiddle strings. Masts bent slightly and still the mass failed to move. The steamer listed a bit, then the wheels cleared. Higher and higher the plow was lifted until it cleared the rail, then slowly it was swung inboard and onto a track laid on the deck. A loud cheer went up as the lines grew slack.

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"Now if we don't get into a storm," Cal reflected, "we'll be all right. If they can lift that thing here, they can lower it at Warm Creek." He turned to Gid and shook hands. "We'll expect you up when we drive the golden spike," he said. "We're having one made of Poor Man's Hell gold. All the miners in the region chipped in a nugget."

"I'll be there with bells on," Gid promised.

ON the fringe of the crowd stood Shultz, Dan Riley, and Tuck Gorst. "Everything points to their finishing that line without a stop," Gorst growled. "Has Jessup got to Zumdick and reached a right of way agreement?"

"Not a chance," Shultz answered. "We've paid him his price and he'll stay by his word. He knows what'll happen if he don't."

"What?" Dan asked. Shultz didn't answer.

"How about you, Dan?" Gorst inquired. "Have you given him hope?"

"You know better than that," Dan snapped. "I'm playing for big stakes, too. The minute I'm in the saddle and Jessup is out, we're enemies. But until then, Mr. Gorst, you can rely on me to the limit."

"I can't understand Jessup's confidence," Gorst said. "Either he knows his case will be set ahead, or he's bluffing. He's too confident."

"In public, yes," Dan agreed. "But we know nothing of his private worries. He may be desperate right now. I hope so. I . . . I believe so." He left them to return to his hotel.

But Gorst and Shultz still lingered. "I'm afraid of an eleventh hour trick," Gorst admitted. "I'm sure I've covered everything, but I might have missed a point."

"What can you've missed?" Shultz asked.

"That's it. What can I have missed?" Gorst muttered. "Anyway, I know how to set him back on his heels, regardless of what he plans to do about Zu.dick."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. It's your job, Shultz. You know what's on that steamer?" Gorst asked softly.

"Sure. Snowplow, pair of locomotive drive wheels, cases of Christmas presents, mail, machinery—" Shultz answered.

"You should have stopped with the first two items," Gorst interrupted sharply.

Shultz whistled softly. "I'm dumb. I should've caught on right away. Do you remember that time on the old *City of Sequim*, when the storm struck and there was a locomotive on—"

"I'm not remembering anything else," Gorst answered. "Get busy. Have someone buy you a steerage ticket."

"Yeah, under a different name." Shultz didn't relish the idea and his face betrayed his feelings. "I wonder if maybe somebody else couldn't do—"

"Nobody else will do," Gorst said crisply. "Manage this better than you did the crownsheet plug affair. It should be easier."

SHULTZ boarded the *Taku* early, tossed a bag on a steerage bunk and made his way to a porthole. From this point he could observe everyone boarding the ship. Other steerage passengers came aboard in small groups, but none disputed his complete possession of the porthole. Here size and bulk counted, unless someone of another color used a knife.

Gorst stood on the wharf talking

to friends, but it was evident he wasn't going North. Gid Riley appeared a half-hour before sailing time, walking between Cal Jessup and Caboose. Caboose grinning happily, was followed by the deputy marshal, John Law.

Gid shook hands with Caboose and Cal, then watched them go up the gangplank. There was talk of a golden spike and February 1st. Shultz listened with a cynical expression on his hard face. Finally the gangplank was hauled clear, the steamer whistled and a gong sounded deep in the engine room. The *Taku* moved slowly astern, people keeping apace on the wharf, waving and shouting.

Gorst strode along with his military precision, talking to one of the ship's officers whom he knew. "Cool cuss," Shultz thought, "he could send a ship, crew and passenger to their death, and never bat an eye."

The ship turned, cutting out the view of the wharf. Shultz crawled into his bunk and slept. Hours later he awakened to feel the rise and fall of a ship in the open sea. The ship was creaking and groaning under the strain, and Shultz looked out to find a film of ice over the porthole. It must be cold, he thought, for spray to freeze.

Some of the other steerage passengers had become seasick. Their groaning and heaving filled the air. Shultz slept off and on for the next eighteen hours, getting up only to eat. The time wasn't ripe yet for what he had in mind.

When the time came, it was night and the ship was rolling heavily. Shultz dressed, made his way to a ladder and dropped down a deck. He followed a passage to a water-tight door. It was dogged tight. He got an iron bar and banged at the dogs until they released. Opening the

door, he followed a short passage, then entered one of the holds.

Shultz had lighted his way with a candle, which he now stuck on a convenient piece of machinery. He lit another to give him more light and looked around. The locomotive drive wheels were well secured against the pitch and roll of the ship. He could hear them strain against the chain lashings, but there was no slack. The longshoremen had done a good job. Shultz set to work on the lashings. It was a long, hard job, but he got all except one clear.

There was a lot of strain on this now, but when the ship rolled the weight against the steel plates, there was a little slack. Shultz worked feverishly. He got it clear at last. The drivers rolled against the freight jammed around them, then back against the steel plates. Then against the freight again. Each time the space was widened, and as it widened the momentum increased.

Shultz counted on this. He picked up the nearest candle and started for the ladder. Then an unusually heavy roll gave the deck a steep slant. The impact of the drivers, plus their nine tons, shifted the adjoining freight. When they rolled back to the ship's plates and steel frames, they had a good five feet of room. The next roll increased that measurably.

Shultz began to hurry. This thing was happening faster than he had figured. Under the next impact of the drivers, a machine shattered, the momentum carried the wheels onto adjoining freight, then with the next roll they fell back to the hull with a deafening boom. Panic-stricken, Shultz raced for the ladder, stumbled and fell. His candle went out, but there was another lighting the way.

Shultz got to his feet, the sweat of stark fear pouring from his face.

The ship heaved upward and the drivers smashed almost to the watertight bulkhead. A flying object struck near the candle and it toppled over and went out. Shultz groped desperately for the ladder. He couldn't locate it now. Then he heard the drivers coming again.


He crouched and waited in the darkness, whimpering with fear. The drivers smashed against the bulkhead above him, the wheels passing on either side of his body. He felt flying bits of wreckage strike his shoulders. Then the wheels rolled away. He heard them strike the opposite side of the hold with shattering force, and as the vessel rolled, he knew they were coming back again. He tried to strike a match, but in his haste broke it in two. The lighted end spluttered briefly and died. He heard the shattering of crated machinery as the hurtling drivers rolled the width of the hold again. Nine tons of destruction struck the steel sides of the ship and fell back, gathered speed and struck the opposite side. The air was filled with flying wreckage. Something smashed against Shultz's chest. He was conscious of a sharp, stabbing pain, then all sense of feeling vanished.

ABOVE him the impact of the drivers shook the vessel from bow to stern. Shultz didn't feel nor hear it. But on the bridge the officer on watch knew that something was wrong.

"What the hell was that?" he asked the wheelman.

"Something below decks adrift, sir," the man commented.

The skipper appeared in the doorway. He was shoving his pajama tail into his pants, and asking questions. The mate appeared magically. As long as the sea crashes and the ship rolls sailors can sleep, but any out of the ordinary sound awakens them.



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The mate hurried below and encountered Cal and Caboose on his way down. "What's the uproar?" Cal asked, wondering if the snowplow was adrift.

"I'm trying to find out," the mate answered. "Sounds like the locomotive drivers." He recalled that once a pair of drive wheels had broken loose on the *City of Sequim*. There was no way of stopping them, and before a method could be devised, the drivers had smashed through the ship's side. Water had poured into the hole and the steamer had almost gone down.

The mate tried the water-tight door and found it open. "Somebody's been prowling around," he said grimly. "No crew member would leave this door open. It should be dogged down." He went on to the next door. It was jammed. He hurled his weight against it, but it wouldn't give. "The drivers are adrift!" he said. "Nothing else could make that uproar."

He hurried to the bridge to report. The skipper's face didn't change expression, but Cal knew he was badly worried. He looked hard at the snowplow and Cal sensed his decision. Unless the drivers could be secured they would smash a hole near the water line. The sea would roll the hole under and the vessel would ship great quantities of water. To lift the bow higher, and save the ship, the snowplow would have to go overboard, along with other heavy objects carried on the fore'deck.

Mey began breaking the ice over the hatch and rigging sheets of canvas to keep out flying spray. They got the hatch open and turned powerful lights into the hold. Everything, except in the corners, had been reduced to junk. The drive wheels' steel flanges knifed through the strongest material, the impact of nine tons crushing anything that resisted. A trickle of water was coming through a plate where the rivets

had loosened under the constant beating.

"There's a man in that mess," a sailor shouted hoarsely. "He's alive. In that for'd corner, sta'board side."

"It's Shultz," Cal said. "I saw his face!"

"Shultz!" exclaimed Caboose. "We've got to get him out." Before anyone could stop him, he had caught a loose rope end and slid into the hold. He swung back and forth like a pendulum, checking his descent just above the rolling drivers. The captain roared a protest including descriptive and insulting words, the mildest of which was "damned fool."

"It didn't take Caboose long to get into action," Cal mused, "once he had the chance."

Caboose waited until there was a lull, then dropped. There were a thousand shifting objects to trip him, but he had what Shultz had lacked, plenty of light. "Gimme a hand!" he bellowed up.

"Come out of there!" the skipper roared.

Cal grasped the line and slid down. He yelled for slack and got it. Rigging a loop for his feet, he planted them firmly, then picked up Shultz and got him over his shoulder. It was no way to handle an injured man, and yet it was the only way. In the matter of a few minutes the drivers would have rolled into Shultz's corner and crushed the life from him.

Those on deck hauled Cal up, a ring of hands preventing him from smashing against the hatch. "Now get that young damned fool out of there," the skipper ordered.

"Come out of there," Cal yelled down to Caboose. He was pretty desperate himself. A fair-sized stream of water squirted through the

opening seam as the plates rolled under. Men were knocking the ice from the blocks and the lashings holding the snowplow. The skipper was preparing to rid himself of the plow the moment it became necessary to do so.

CABOOSE had taken refuge on a steel ladder and was safe enough unless the drivers smashed down the supporting wall. Steam was turned into the winches and they were left turning over slowly to keep the cold from condensing the steam. Everything was ready for quick action. Booms and blocks carried extra rigging to keep them from swinging. Even the fall lines were secured.

"Guns used to get adrift on the old-time frigates," Cal said, "and they harnessed them."

"But they didn't have wheels like this," the mate pointed out. "Hell, what a mess down there! Iron machinery ground up like hamburger."

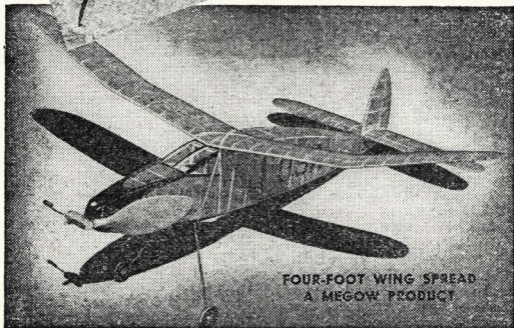
The drivers rolled again, filling the air with fragments, crushing, smashing, shattering. They bent out steel plates, loosened more rivets, and settled slowly into the débris. Then as the ship rolled and that side lifted, the drivers hurtled to the other side again.

Cal thought he knew the answer to harnessing the drivers, but he was positive no shipmaster would give him the chance to try it out. It would take two men to do the job, two who were pretty desperate. And it would be worse than any rock battle. A long chain, to which was attached a heavy hook, had been spread out on deck. Cal rolled the hook into the hold and the weight of the hook dragged the chain after it until the fall to which it was attached stopped it. Cal slid down a

Continued on page 116

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Continued from page 113

rope into the hold, ran over the débris and joined Caboose on the ladder.

"Got it figured out, kid?" he inquired.

"Yeah, when you dropped the hook over I knew what you were planning," Caboose answered. "Do you think we can get away with it?"

"If someone doesn't tie up that pair of drivers," Cal said, "they'll dump the plow over the side."

Skipper and mate were bellowing at them, but they ignored the commands. As the drivers rolled past, they jumped down, caught up the chain and followed. They dropped the chain and raced to the ladder as the drivers started back again. The chain was laid out now to the starboard side, with plenty of slack. They would follow the drivers and hope to attach the chain during the brief moment the drivers were against the starboard plates, and relatively still.

"Come on!" Cal suddenly shouted. He jumped to the débris and followed the wheels, Caboose right behind him. The skipper, sensing what was going on, ordered the winchman to stand by to take up the slack.

"We'll be between the wheels when they start to roll back," Cal yelled to Caboose. "Don't attempt to get clear by running around them. You might fall and be cut in two."

They grasped the heavy hook, heaved it over the axle and wrapped the chain around twice. They could see the wheels sinking into the débris and hear them grinding against the leaky plates. "Now," Cal gasped, "get the running end of the chain through the hook. Quick! Ship's rolling again."

"Fingers are numb," Caboose grunted. "There she goes!" They made one final effort to get the chain

through the hook and it caught. They flattened out and the drivers rolled past them, the flanges biting deep into the débris.

Once the drivers were past, the two men jumped up and ran for cover. Overhead the winchman took up the slack. The chain tightened and helped the drivers begin the return trip. The winchman picked up the slack, the chain slid along with the axis and tightened. The boom rattled under the strain, then the wheels were clear.

For a moment a nine-ton battering-ram was swinging from the end of a long chain. The chain snapped against the hatch and Cal held his breath, expecting it to break. The winchman turned on the power and lifted the upper wheel above the hatch combing, then slacked away. It hung for a moment and the mate took a quick turn around the hook with a smaller chain and lashed it against that side of the hatch.

"On deck, you two!" the skipper bellowed. "And move smartly."

A line was sent down to haul Cal and Caboose to the deck. "I'll see you two later," the skipper growled. "You don't seem to realize that passengers as well as crew are supposed to obey orders."

CHAPTER XXVII

VERDICT RETURNED

CAL and Caboose caught their breath, then found a steward and asked to be taken to Bull Shultz.

"You see," Caboose explained, "I've always felt Shultz knew something about Herb Wise's murder that he never told. Maybe if he's dying, he'll get scared and loosen up."

The chief steward had had Shultz put to bed in a roomy cabin where a doctor who happened to be among the passengers was working on him.

"The drivers didn't run over him," the doctor informed Cal, "but they did run over something he was under. He's pretty badly smashed up. A broken leg, left arm broken and, no doubt, plenty of internal injuries."

"If he regains consciousness and wants to talk, let us know," Cal said. "Caboose, suppose we go down in the dining room and get a cup of coffee? I don't think I'll sleep any more tonight."

The skipper joined them a few minutes later. "Everything is secured again," he reported. "Any opinion what started it?"

"Yes," Cal answered, "Bull Shultz, who is probably down on the passenger list under another name, turned the drivers loose expecting to wreck things so badly, you'd have to dump the plov overboard."

"That's what I'd have done, though Lord knows how much damage it would have caused before we got rid of it," the skipper answered. "Passengers have no business doing what you did, but sometimes a man has his back to the wall, and I know you gentlemen were desperate. I don't hold it against you. I'd have done the same myself. After all, even remembering the traditions of the sea, you could hardly expect sailors to take the chances you did. When you crouched under the axle and let the drivers roll by you, it showed the coldest nerve I've ever seen."

"It was the only thing we could do," Cal argued.

"You knew exactly what you were up against when you went into it," the skipper stated. "Well, I think I'll turn in."

Cal and Caboose remained up until noon, then, the storm increasing, they turned in. They slept until the steamer moved through the calm waters of Glacier Inlet. Looking out, they saw snow swirling so thickly objects twenty feet away weren't



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visible. The steamer whistled frequently, steering by the echo. With coats buttoned around their ears, Cal and Caboose listened for the beat of the triangle on the Warm Creek wharf.

Presently it came two points off the starboard bow. Inch by inch, the *Taku* steamed toward the sound. Slowly they made out objects, the white of the snow-covered wharf, the black of the massed people responding to the old call of the North: "Steamboat!"

Marcia, Nathan Land and Doc Hill were waiting at the foot of the gangway. "How're things?" Cal asked as they gathered around him.

"That snowplow is the best thing I've seen in years," Nathan answered. "Windy Gap is choked with snow. We had a slide at Bald Mountain, and I've a gang of men clearing the track. Steel's laid all the way to Poor Man's Hell, except the stretch along the lake. Have you done anything about that, Cal?"

"Couldn't do a thing," Cal answered. "Calendar is choked tighter than Windy Gap."

"The judge is holding court here," Nathan informed him. "We got word John Law was bringing Caboose back."

"I'm here," Caboose answered. "John is aboard somewhere, arranging to bring off another prisoner, Bull Shultz."

"Shultz is in bad shape, doc," Cal explained. "You'd better take charge." He turned to Marcia. "Nathan wrote that you're working on some musical comedy rôles sent out from New York."

"She is," Nathan said before the girl could speak, "and the boys very nearly tore off the roof when she tried them out one night."

A red-headed woman pushed her way through the crowd. "Mr. Jessup," she said, "I'm Mrs. Kelly from Poor Man's Hell. Did you or-

der those brooms I wrote you about?"

"You bet," Cal assured her. "They'll come North soon. I've never heard so much talk of brooms in my life," Cal said.

"There's only one broom in the whole country. They're hard to back pack, and the men won't do it," Mrs. Kelly explained. "Mrs. Thatcher, who owns the broom, paid seven dollars for it. She rents it fifty cents a day, and a woman has to mush five miles to get it. It seems like we want brooms worse than we do our husbands or a good book to read. And goodness knows they're hard to get in that country, what with the men so worried over the railroad. You will finish the road on time, won't you?"

"Yes," Cal answered.

"There's the world's champion optimist," a miner observed. "He must believe in fairies and magic wands."

As they walked down to the Blue Moon together, Cal handed Marcia a package. "Here's a little present for you. No, it isn't flowers or candy. Hothouse fruit and tomatoes. I guess tomatoes are a hell of a thing to bring a girl who may get more of her share on the stage."

"But I'll love them here," she told him. "I just get starved for fresh things at times."

FROM Marcia Cal learned that the judge was going to handle as many mining claim cases as he could, and sandwich Caboose's trial in somewhere. As soon as he could, Cal called on the man. Judge Hanley was ponderous, friendly and strictly fair. He listened gravely to Cal's plea that his case be set for trial as soon as possible.

"My time is limited, Jessup," was his answer. "I'll handle as many

cases as I can while I'm here. And if your case comes before me I'll stay and render a decision. Privately I don't think the Zumdick mining claim is a real one. But I can't go behind the evidence."

"I know that," Cal said.

"There'll be an array of witnesses for Zumdick," Judge Hanley continued. "I may have to appoint someone to examine the site and report back to me. That all takes time. Can't you get an extension from the miners?"

"No, Dan Riley holds that club over me," Cal explained. "Besides they have to have their heavy machinery on the ground and moved to their claims before the thaw."

"I'll hurry things as much as I can," the judge promised.

Caboose offered to let the Zumdick case be heard instead of his, but the government attorney assigned to prosecute him objected to that.

A week after the *Taku* arrived, the *Narada* docked, and Gorst and Dan Riley were the first passengers ashore. The former hurried to Doc Hill's hospital to see Bull Shultz.

"You haven't talked when you were out of your head?" Gorst asked the sick man sharply.

"How would I know?" Shultz answered wearily. "But I don't think I have."

"You've got to pull yourself together and testify against Caboose Riley," Gorst said. "I want him convicted. Otherwise he's going to be a thorn in our side in future years. He's developing fast. He's another Gid Riley, even if he doesn't know it yet."

"Well, Cal Jessup does. He's givin' the kid every chance in the world," Shultz said. "Now go 'way, I'm damned sick, in case you don't know it."

BULL SHULTZ was brought into the courtroom on a stretcher the second day of Caboose's trial and he repeated the same story he had told the coroner's jury. Caboose's attorney was at a disadvantage in the cross-examination since he couldn't be too rough on a sick and injured man.

When he was gone, Dan Riley surprised the government and the defense by asking to testify. He was sworn in. "I was present at the inquest," he said. "I saw the bullets taken from the breast wounds. There was no evidence that blood had flowed after they entered the body. This proves the bullets were fired after Wise was dead. Granting they came from my brother's rifle—which he denies—a man can't murder a dead man. That's all."

"Now I'll call Dr. Hill," the defense attorney said.

Doc Hill took the stand. "I'm glad Dan Riley noticed that," he said. "I removed the bullets and I know they entered the body some time after death ensued."

"Why didn't you testify to that effect at the inquest?" the government attorney demanded sharply.

"I wasn't asked," Doc Hill retorted. "I wasn't a government doctor."

"But you are a friend of the defendant?" the attorney said shrewdly.

"Yes, a very close friend. But friendship has nothing to do with facts in my professional work. I would testify to things as I found them even though it meant conviction," Doc answered.

Caboose put in a hard afternoon on the stand on cross-examination. Again and again he had to answer, "I don't know. I know Herb Wise fired the last shot. I know I didn't kill him, but I don't know how bul-

lets from my rifle got into his body."

"Well I do," the attorney shouted at him. "You shot Wise. Then you thought he might have survived to testify against you so you came back and fired two more shots into the poor fellow's dead body. Isn't that a fact? Isn't it?" He thundered the words.

"It's a damned lie!" Cal shouted. "The testimony Dan Riley and Doc Hill offered, surprised you and you're twisting things."

The attorney ignored the interruption. "You grant the bullets came from your rifle, Riley," he thundered. "Then explain who fired them into Wise's body. How? Explain, and I'll ask the court for a direct verdict of not guilty."

"I can't explain," Caboose answered for, it seemed to him, the hundredth time.

Later he watched the jury file into the jury room. And he put in hours walking around Warm Creek while waiting for the verdict. Dan stayed with him.

"In this we're brothers," Dan said. "In everything else we're rivals fighting to the finish."

"Thanks," said Caboose. "Maybe we'll really get to know each other some of these days."

"The atmosphere will be cleared after February 1st," Dan predicted. "I'll be in command. I'd like you to work for me or rather *with* me."

"I'm still counting on Cal to pull the iron out of the fire," Caboose answered. "The plow has cleared the way through to Icy Lake. Freight's gone through to the lake, two train loads of it, and it's on sidings. He did that in case a blizzard blocked Windy Gap or slides wiped out the road."

Marcia, who had also been in the courtroom, hurriedly located the two when it was announced a verdict was

reached. Then she found Cal and returned with him to the courtroom.

"Chin up, kid," Cal heard Dan say as they sat down at the defendant's table.

"His chin's never been down," Cal retorted. But he noticed that Caboose was tense and white when the jury filed in. Caboose was eighteen years old when Herb Wise died. Now he was nineteen, young to have gone through what he had experienced since Cal started building the road.

The foreman handed the clerk the verdict, which was then passed to the judge. The latter read it and gave it back to the clerk who droned:

"We, the undersigned jury, find the defendant guilty of second-degree murder. We further recommend, because of his age and inexperience, the mercy of the court."

"Have you anything to say?" the judge asked Caboose.

"I'm not guilty," the boy said steadfastly. "I want no mercy shown, because if I'm guilty of that crime I should be hanged for first-degree murder. I want a new trial."

The judge sentenced Caboose to twenty years' imprisonment, and the defense attorney served notice of appeal. "The defendant is at liberty on bond," he said. "We request that the bond be continued and he be permitted his liberty. He wants the opportunity of a personal investigation into one angle of the crime, what became of the bullet that entered the deceased's back and was removed."

"The defendant may remain at liberty under bail," the judge decreed. He thanked the jury, then added, "I regret to say this closes court session at Warm Creek until next spring. Because of the crowded docket all cases must go over until then." He was looking at Cal Jessup as he spoke and there was real regret in his eyes. He was finding it hard not to go behind the evidence.

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Dan Riley breathed a sigh of relief. This, he reflected, was a day of great victory, and bitter defeat. He had kept the Zumdick case from being tried, but he had also heard his brother convicted of second-degree murder.

CHAPTER XXVIII TORCHLIGHT PARADE

ON Christmas Eve, Cal Jessup sat in the Blue Moon and watched Marcia put on a program that was so festive it aroused a nostalgia for childhood and home. But Christmas day the atmosphere was brisk and businesslike. A steam schooner docked with a heavy deck load of timber. She carried similar timbers below decks. The deck load was iced over, and the vessel had to smash a lane through the ice to reach the wharf.

Cal ordered a string of flat cars to receive the timbers and as soon as they were loaded, the most powerful locomotive was hooked on and headed for Icy Lake. Somewhere up the line the snowplow was keeping the track open.

Cal sent up portable bunkhouses and food supplies. The man in charge of the West Beach yards protested. "Mr. Jessup, I can't take care of anything more. The rails we was goin' to lay along the lake shore are here. So are the ties. And all the freight we're supposed to deliver to Poor Man's Hell by February 1st is here, too. Now you send the damndest pile of timbers I ever did see, bunkhouses and grub. Where'll I put all this?"

"Just find a place," Cal told him cheerfully.

Shortly after Christmas Cal loaded a train with his best track layers. He rode with them to Icy Lake and found a committee of the Poor Man's Hell miners to meet him.

"We're just wonderin' if there ain't some way of portagin' this

freight over the lake," their spokesman explained.

"There is," Cal answered. "I've had it in mind since I portaged houses over the Glacier Inlet ice. I'm laying tracks over the ice!"

A stunned silence greeted this announcement. "You ain't takin' my machinery over no icy portage," a miner announced finally.

"I'm responsible," Cal said.

"That's a terrible gamble," Nathan Land observed. "I've had a sneaking hunch you'd have to do something desperate to get out of the jackpot you're in. Train, freight and the whole business may go through the ice."

"I'll be at the throttle when it happens," said Cal.

"And I'll be right there firing the boiler for you," Caboose declared. "And if we sink, well, anyway, I won't have to go to the McNeil Island Pen. What does Uncle Gid think about this? Have you told him?"

"Yes," Cal answered. "He said my job was to make good on the contract and he didn't care what methods I used just so they were legal. He said he'd probably use the ice if he were in my place."

"You may get away with it," Caboose said thoughtfully. "The timbers will run lengthwise, the ties spiked to them. The rails spiked to the ties. That distributes the weight."

"Something like a man, with a board under his belly working his way over thin ice to a man who's gone through," Cal explained. "If it works, then Zumdiek will quit and we can build the permanent road along the shore."

"Lay your tracks close to the shore," Caboose suggested. "Then when you want to take 'em up, all you have to do is toss 'em onto the

beach. Say, if this works, it won't cost such a hell of a lot more."

But most men lacked Cal and Caboose's confidence. Many bets were laid on the outcome. They shoved track over the ice as fast as weather would permit. Their light cars carrying rails were in no danger of going through. Horses hauled ties and steel over the rails as fast as they were laid.

Late in January, Gid Riley arrived in Warm Creek. Cal, learning of his arrival, came back to town in a locomotive. At last the end was in sight. The line was ready for the golden spike Gid would drive in at the end of steel.

Gid was at the station when Cal arrived, but it was late in the afternoon and snowing so it was decided to make the trip over the line the following morning. So many applications came in that evening for passes that Cal ordered several flat cars hooked onto the locomotive.

WEARING parkas, stamping their feet and waving arms to keep warm, the flat-car passengers found little time to sit down. Gid and Cal rode in the cab. Cal pointed out the various places of interest. As they rode slowly up Bear Creek Canyon, he said, "Under that snow is nearly two million dollars in gold. They're going to take it out next summer." They crawled past Bald Mountain and Cal pointed out the slide area. "Gorst and Shultz started it, but we can't prove it. Here's Tunnel." Then later, "And here's Windy Gap."

"Lord, what a cut through the snow," Gid exclaimed, almost awed. "But I guess the plow can handle the material."

It was cloudy when they arrived at Icy Lake, but there was no sign of snow falling. "When're you go-

ing to take the first train load over the ice, Cal?" Caboose asked.

"Right now, I guess," Cal answered.

The flat cars were dropped and the locomotive backed into a siding and hooked into a long line of freight cars loaded with machinery. "I'll take over," Cal said to the engineer. "Caboose will stoke the boiler."

"By Jupiter," Gid Riley exclaimed, "I'm going along and toot the whistle. What the hell if we do break through. I can't live forever anyway."

As far as Cal could see, people were hurrying over the ice to await what might happen. He opened the throttle and the train began to move. It left solid, frozen ground and the locomotive tested clear ice. Cracks streaked through the ice with the report of rifles, but nothing happened. "Huff! Huff! Huff!" Steam plumed steadily from the exhaust and rolled behind in great white clouds.

On down the lake, the locomotive went past the Zumdick claim. "You can blow the whistle now," Cal shouted to Gid. "Blow it a lot! There're Zumdick, Gorst and Dan Riley, all waiting for the Roman holiday to start."

The whistle stirred the echoes along Icy Lake. The answer came from Hanging Glacier as it dropped an ice mass as big as the entire train, to prove that nature could still do bigger things than man. People on the shore to watch what happened, began jumping aboard the train, clinging to anything that would support them. In triumph the locomotive rolled onto a long siding. A volunteer brakeman uncoupled and the locomotive went back for the second train.

It was black with people when Cal backed up to it. This load was

lighter and he moved faster across the three-mile portage.

Doc Hill had climbed onto the cab. "Might as well go along and see Gid drive the golden spike," he said. "In a professional capacity, of course. Can't let him overdo."

"Bunk!" Cal snorted. "You want to see the fun, too?"

They moved slowly past the first train, then backed to the siding and coupled on. It was a gravity haul and Cal reasoned the locomotive could handle the entire string.

The short day ended and darkness descended a mile from Poor Man's Hell. Presently the headlight picked up an improvised sign strung over the tracks. It read:

GID RILEY CAL JESSUP
WELCOME
TO
POOR MAN'S HEAVEN

Cal acknowledged the tribute with a long blast. Someone started a huge bonfire, and as the train came to a slow stop with groaning brakes and hissing air, a loud cheer went up. Cal jumped down from the cab and helped Gid Riley to the ground. He ran to the nearest car and dragged off several crates.

"Hey Mrs. Kelly, here's a hundred brooms," he grinned. "To the ladies of the region with the Riley Construction Co.'s compliments. Now you girls can have a real housecleaning." A shrill cheer came from the ladies.

"Stand back!" Cal shouted, "and give Gid Riley room. He's going to drive the golden spike. Marcia will hold it."

"Got your life insured, Marcia," Caboose asked.

"None of your lip, young fellow," his uncle warned tartly, "or I'll turn you over my knee right before all these people."

Climbing on anything that would support them, the crowd watched old Gid drive the golden spike. They listened and applauded his short speech paying tribute to Cal. Then Cal spoke of the backing he had had from Gid. When at last the cheering crowd drifted away, Dan Riley came forward.

"I've never won a fight yet, Cal," he said, "but at least I can be a good loser. Congratulations and here's my hand on it. I've been wrong on you, wrong on Caboose here. He needed what you gave him, the acid test. I needed it, too, and I got it."

"Any damned fool can win gracefully," Cal told him, shaking hands, "but it takes a fellow who is man-sized to lose like you've done."

Old Gid threw his arm around Dan. "I'm proud of you, kid. As I've often said, if I'd've caught you younger—"

"I'm not too old," Dan began, but he was interrupted by someone belowing, "Let's have a torchlight parade!"

Men caught up burning brands for improvised torches. Then someone raised a lusty shout of triumph and led the procession with a real torch. Soon, despite the protest of the women, other men swarmed about the fire and ran into line with blazing brooms.

"Will you look at that," cried Cal. "The boys are using the ladies' brooms for torches!"

Through the clamor, the faint ringing of the telephone bell in the station was heard. Someone answered it and a moment later yelled, "It is for Doc Hill."

"Never seen it, fail," the doctor said resignedly. "I always get a call when things are happening." He picked up the instrument and said, "Doc Hill speaking! Huh! Yes, I'll get there right away." He hung up and turned to Cal. "Can you run me back to Warm Creek? Bull

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Shultz has taken a turn for the worse."

As Cal nodded, he heard Gid Riley yell, "Everybody give us a hand un-loadin' cars. We're all goin' back to town to celebrate at the Blue Moon. Marcia will sing the songs she's goin' to sing on Broadway. Free drinks, free meals, free everything! Gid Riley is buyin' again. And he can damned well afford it."

CHAPTER XXIX

FAREWELL APPEARANCE

EVERYTHING that could be readily unloaded was shunted to the ground and the empty cars hooked up. They stopped at West Beach to pick up a few more construction men.

"How about me?" Monte Zumdiek yelled to Cal. "I'll trade you a right of way across my property for a ride to town. I know when I'm licked."

"Pile on," Cal invited. "It's a deal. No hard feelings."

Cal doubted if there was a man or woman left in Poor Man's Heaven, nor along the line, when the train pulled into Warm Creek. Doc Hill hurried to the hospital and everyone else hunted places to sleep. They filled bunkhouses, occupied floors and store buildings—anything that was warm. Some even boarded the *Narada* and occupied cabins. As soon as they arranged for a night's shelter, they trooped to the Blue Moon.

Cal knocked on Marcia's dressing-room door shortly before she was to go on. They tell me you're going out on the *Narada*," he said.

"Yes," Marcia answered. Her eyes were glowing with excitement.

"I'm glad. I've had my big moment today—when Gid drove the golden spike," Cal said. "You were there, Marcia. Well, your moment is ahead. I'll be there on Broadway when you have it, although I don't know where I'll start from. Maybe

from here, maybe from somewhere in Mexico like Rio Paloma. But no matter where it is, I'll join you." He was holding her hand. His voice was very earnest as he went on, "Then sometime when you've had your greatest success, when you feel anything else will content you, let me know. I love you, Marcia, you know. When that time comes, will you marry me?"

"Yes, Cal," she answered gently. "Funny about us, isn't it? No wild, hectic romance. Just a growing realization of how much we mean to each other. It's been perfect—all of it." She kissed him impulsively, then hurried to go on the stage.

Cal stood in the wings and listened, remembering Marcia's first night. She was a hit then, but this was different. These people loved her; she was one of them. When Marcia sang, the packed crowd was silent, hanging on every note. When she finished, the applause was like the beat of surf, punctuated by cheers and shouts.

She had made them forget the cold and wet, the dreary hours when the wind howled down from the North. She had made them forget the many hardships they had to endure. She had kept the picture of their homes always before them.

When the applause subsided a little, Marcia tried in a few faltering words to express her own feelings, but she was too touched almost to talk. With happy tears in her eyes, she sang her farewell song, finishing it in a burst of applause that was thunderous. After countless curtain calls, she ran to her dressing room and into Cal's arms. "Oh, my darling," she cried, her face radiant, "what have I ever done to merit such appreciation?"

"Just about everything, I guess," he answered. "I'll be down at the

boat in the morning to see you off." He kissed her again, then went to his office.

Caboose, Nathan Land and Gid Riley were just entering. They, too, had heard Marcia's farewell song.

"No matter how great she may be," said Gid, "she'll never get a reception like that. I've been around the world a lot, but I've never seen anything that came so truly from the heart."

Dan Riley joined them. It was evident that there was something on his mind. He plunged right into it.

"Cal, there's enough here to keep you busy for a long time to come, a job to finish," he said earnestly. "I mean developing mines, pushing the road on to new country and all that. I'd like to take Caboose and Nathan Land and have a try at that Rio Paloma proposition. I'll do it on a speculative basis, no results, no pay."

"Why not let him, Cal?" Gid asked. "I'm giving you a whacking big interest in this railroad. And there's plenty to keep you busy."

"All right," Cal agreed. "On one condition, though—that I get in on the last battle."

"That's agreed," Dan said. "And you, Nathan."

Nathan blinked behind his thick lenses. "The engineering problems certain to develop appeal to me. Yes, Dan, I'll go along. I'd like to battle a bit and develop into—well, not exactly a fighter, but a man who can take care of himself."

"You and me both, brother," Dan said fervently. Then a disappointed expression passed over his face. "Damn it, Caboose, I'd forgotten. You haven't been acquitted. Everything is off. We stay right here and see the kid through his trouble."

They were sitting around talking about Caboose's predicament when a man hurried in. "Doc Hill wants Cal

and Caboose. He says Shultz is dying."

THEY hurried to Bull Shultz's room. He might live several days and eventually get well or he might die any moment, Doc Hill told them. "But he's close to death now," doc concluded, "and there're things on his mind."

"Yes, I'm cashin' in," Shultz muttered. "I turned them drivers loose and they caught me. I—" He hesitated. "Where's Gorst? Gorst kills a man if he talks. He ain't around, is he?"

"I saw him a little while ago at the Blue Moon bar, drinking," Cal

he takes one big one. He drinks it slow and thinks."

"About Herb Wise," Caboose said. "What about him."

"I—" The dying man's voice was broken off as a rifle cracked flatly. Glass shattered and the sickening impact of lead against soft flesh filled the room. He got . . . me," Shultz gasped. "The roof across the street. Could see the bed from there."

Cal caught up his six-gun and raced into the night. He climbed to the roof of a house across the street and studied the track. A drygulcher, he realized, could shoot at the curtained window and be certain of hitting the man on the bed. Gorst had probably studied it all out in advance. He must have known that Shultz had sent for himself and Caboose. And he would know the reason for the summons.

Cal circled the camp and picked up the same tracks leading out of town. Gorst was putting as much country between himself and town as possible. He would need an alibi. He'd want to be able to say he had taken a drink, then cleared out of town to think things over.

Cal studied the trail. He knew Gorst was traveling fast, trying to cross the inlet to the few shacks remaining in Cold Creek. He, too, crossed and waited, eyes trying to pierce the half light created by reflecting snow.

The hours dragged. Daylight came and Cal worked along the north shore of the inlet. He found the tracks again. For once wind and snow were with him. The tracks remained clear and distinct. He guessed now where Gorst was going—to the cabin where he had kept Sluice-box Charley.

Cal took short cuts of his own,



answered. "He looked as if he were going to make a night of it."

"About . . . Herb Wise," Shultz said weakly, "he wouldn't sell to Gorst, wouldn't let us lay rails, so Gorst ordered me—Cal, did you say he was drinkin'?" Cal nodded. Fear came over Shultz's face. "He don't drink when he's taken a lickin' unless he's goin' to kill somebody. Then

then waited. The thought of Charley reminded him that he would have to see that the old man was sent to a home and cared for. Let the poor old fellow die thinking he had made a big strike in the Ruby River country.

As he waited, Cal heard the *Narada's* whistle. Two blasts. That meant she was sailing in a half-hour. Fifteen minutes passed and another blast came. "Marcia would wonder why he wasn't down at the boat to see her off. Then, with a heavy heart, he heard the long whistles as the steamer headed down the inlet.

He heard something else, too, the approach of a cautious man. Gorst was on him almost before Cal realized it. "Put 'em up, Gorst!" he ordered as soon as he was sure.

Gorst dropped behind a thicket and blazed away. Cal's being here could mean but one thing, Shultz had confessed and implicated him. The shot through the window should have killed Shultz, but maybe it had come too late. Gorst grew desperate and tried every trick he knew to get in a shot at Cal.

Suddenly Cal leaped up and charged. His gun blazed three times and bullets droned around Gorst's shoulders. Gorst steadied himself, knowing Cal's charge was designed to disconcert him. Then Cal stopped and took careful aim. Gorst pulled the trigger a split second before Cal's lead struck him. He saw Cal go down, then get up again. He tried to fire once more, but things blurred, then grew black. Men and women trooped past Gorst's eyes—men he had fought, tricked and killed on many frontiers, women who had amused him for a time. The last one passed. Gorst strained his eyes hard to see what would come next, but all he saw was blackness. All he heard was the *Narada's* whistle far down the inlet. And he didn't hear quite all of that.

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 Gentlemen: With no obligation on my part, send me Confidential Reports of Operator No. 38, also illustrated "Blue Book of Crime," complete list of bureaus employing your graduates, together with your low prices and Easy Terms offer. (Literature will be sent ONLY to persons stating their age.)

Name

Address

Age

Cal examined the fallen man to make sure he was dead. Then he started over the inlet ice. He saw the *Narada's* smoke in the distance and his heart grew heavy. He had wanted one more precious moment with Marcia. He was halfway to Warm Creek when he saw Dan, Nathan Land, John Law, and Caboose coming over the ice to meet him.

Caboose reached him first. "Shultz got the confession out before he died," the boy exclaimed excitedly. "He killed Wise. Then he stole my rifle while I was hunting mules, fired two shots into Wise's body and returned the rifle to my camp. Where's Gorst?"

"The tracks will tell the story," Cal said slowly. "Follow my tracks and you'll find him. We . . . we shot it out."

An overwhelming weariness seemed to have come over Cal. While the others went on to find Gorst's body, he continued to walk toward the town. He was in the timber on the south side of the inlet when he saw Marcia. She was coming toward him, running, breathless and frightened. She threw herself into his arms.

"They told me you were hunting Gorst, and I've been crazy ever since," she sobbed. "Cal, you're hurt."

"Just a nick," he said reassuringly. "I'm all right, honey. But you missed your boat."

"I cancelled my reservation last night, Cal, after you left," Marcia said. "I realized that I reached the peak of my success when I sang my farewell song. There could never be another moment like that. Now I'm going along with you and help you reach your triumphs."

"You already helped me to one," he answered. "But knowing you'll be at my side is the greatest triumph of all."

THE END.

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*A. O., Minn.

*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

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