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A book length novel by T. T. FLYNN

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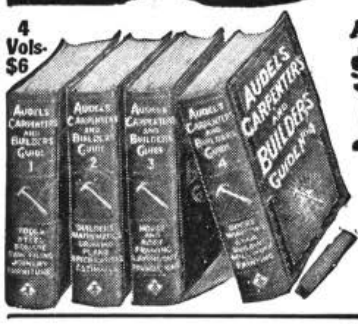

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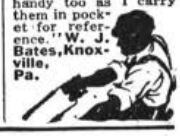

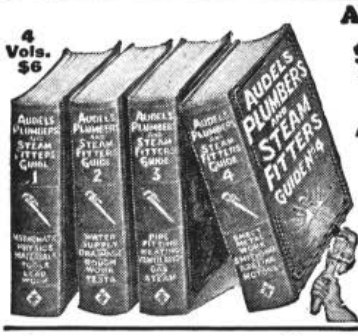

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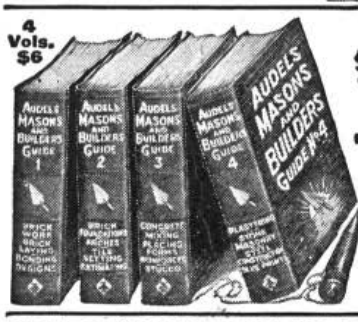

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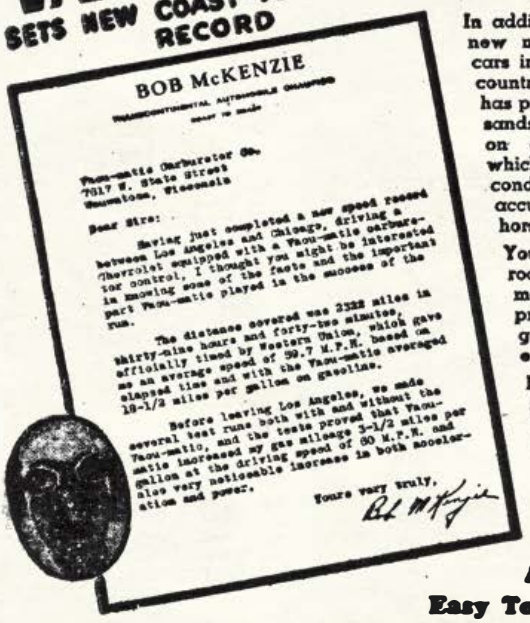

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WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

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CONTENTS FOR JANUARY 20, 1940 VOL. CLXXIX NO. 5

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A SERIAL

SHORT STORIES

WESTERN STORY FEATURE

DEPARTMENTS

COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

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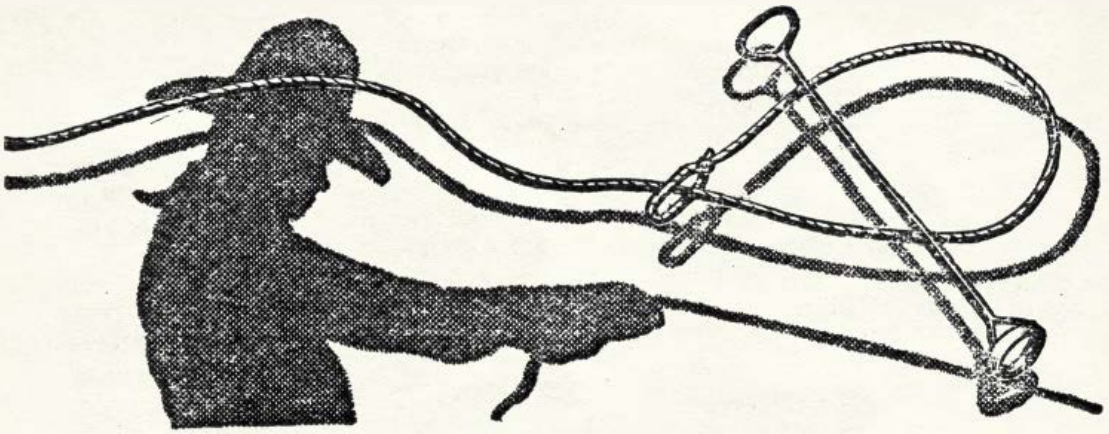


The Roundup

IF it hadn't been for a miracle down Ruidoso way, we think besides a mighty sick rodeo judge we could also tally a pretty bunged-up writin' hombre, and then we might never have had Wilfred McCormick's RODEO REBELLION (page 56 of this issue). But we'll let Mac tell you all about it in his own words:

"If you readin' waddies will edge over, I'd like squattin' room atop the old corral for a little how-come on my yarn, RODEO REBELLION. It's sort o' like Topsy—just growed up—but the little story germ got its start recently when a batch of cowpoke neighbors out here got my tail in a crack, an' for a long thirty seconds I was about as fidgety as a worm in hot ashes.

"It happened at a rodeo. I was one of the judges that afternoon, and during a slack time between events two bull-shouldered gents rode over to our stand above the chutes and announced a private wager. They were betting twenty-five dollars on a one-calf roping. Now, that isn't big money for lots of folks, but to this pair of genuine, whang-skinned cowboys it meant long hours in the saddle and all that goes with those hours. They weren't fooling. They were out to win. And besides the money, you could tell from their glinty eyes that there was plenty of pride at stake, too.

"Well, I was to be timekeeper. The first one went out and wrapped up his calf in nineteen seconds flat—good time, considering the fact that he'd drawn a critter that was both big and fast. His rival rode slowly over to the chutes. He threw me a grin as he came close.

"'You an' this other feller's folks are thick as ten men on one saddle,' he said, 'but I'm trustin' you. Just be dang sure, Mac, that you stop your watch when I get done with this calf!'

"I started to kid this second hombre about needing a calendar to compute his time, when somebody caught hold of my bootheel from behind. I turned, looking down to see that a third cowboy had climbed part way up to our stand. He was holding a five-dollar bill, wanting to enter the bronc-riding event scheduled for a few minutes later. Before signing him up, however, I looked over into the roper's chute. The rider up wasn't ready, and by

the way his nervous horse was storming around, it promised to be some little time before he was.

"Opening our cigar-box cash register, I knelt down and started making change for the third cowboy's five-dollar bill—the entry that afternoon was two dollars, as I remember it.

"Suddenly there was a yell from below. The clatter of rushing hoofs! Through the slats supporting our stand, I saw a rider rush from the chutes.

"Gosh-a-mighty! It was friend number two after his calf! I hadn't caught his start, of course—the watch was in my pocket.

"He made a peach of a catch. He was out of the saddle, had the calf down, and was tying furiously in less time than it takes to tell this.

"Meanwhile, what of me? I saw that he'd gotten the breaks with an easy calf, and was a cinch to beat the first man's time of nineteen seconds. Everybody around the arena would surmise that. But it couldn't count because I hadn't timed him! The rules would call for a re-rope—a doggone shame, because his next calf would almost certainly be a lot tougher and his time much slower. This cowboy would be a raging madman when I announced 'no time!' for his speedy catch. He'd remember my friendship, too, with contestant number one. Yes, there'd be the devil to pay—give a cowboy a just cause, and he'll fight you as long as he can stand and see. And this lad, with plenty of reason, would figure his cause worthy!

"Raised here in the West, I've been in my share of tough spots, but I'll swear that never before had I faced a brawl with less heart in the outcome. Win or lose, ninety percent of the folks there that afternoon would always figure I'd cheated the fellow.

"But a miracle saved the day! We discovered he'd hurried too much in making his tie, and the calf got up!

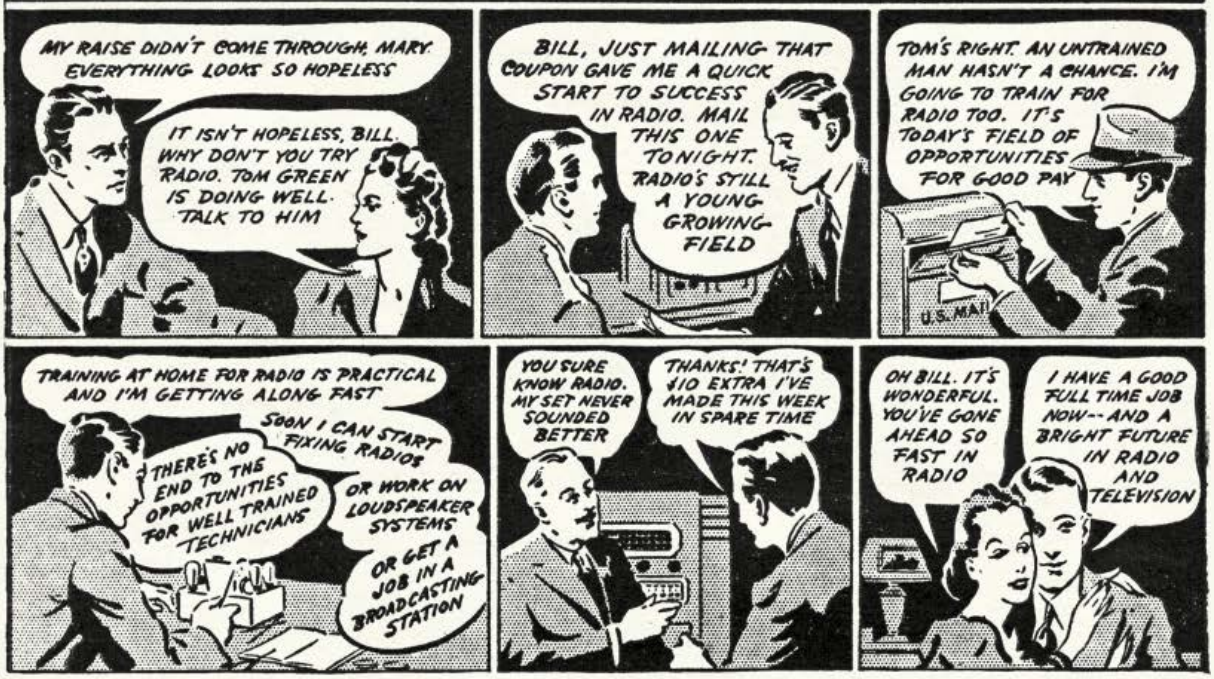
"His time would have been disqualified, anyhow, so nobody ever asked me what it was. I can joke about the incident now, and how it furnished me the germ for RODEO REBELLION. But, confidentially, readers of W. S., I'm telling you there was a mighty sick rodeo judge for a few seconds that day in Ruidoso, New Mexico."

Highlights in next week's issue—

Mystery, inexplicable and terrifying, had cast a pall over the once-peaceful little town of Crossroads when the Gun-cat, town tamer extraordinary, came riding in to investigate a strange chain of murders. But would even the Gun-cat's skill with a six-shooter weigh against the power of the Unholy Four and the phantom killer who left a crimson mark of death on his victims? For an eerie, pulse-quickening tale that will keep you guessing to the very last page, read W. Ryerson Johnson's full-length novel, THE RED X BRAND.

Harry Sinclair Drago contributes a story of hair-raising action and adventure during the covered-wagon days, Joseph Hook an unusual yarn about salmon trapping, and those old favorites, Gunnison Steele and George Cory Franklin, are on hand with notable short stories. All in all, folks, we think the next Western Story has plenty of what it takes—and we hope you'll think so, too.

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



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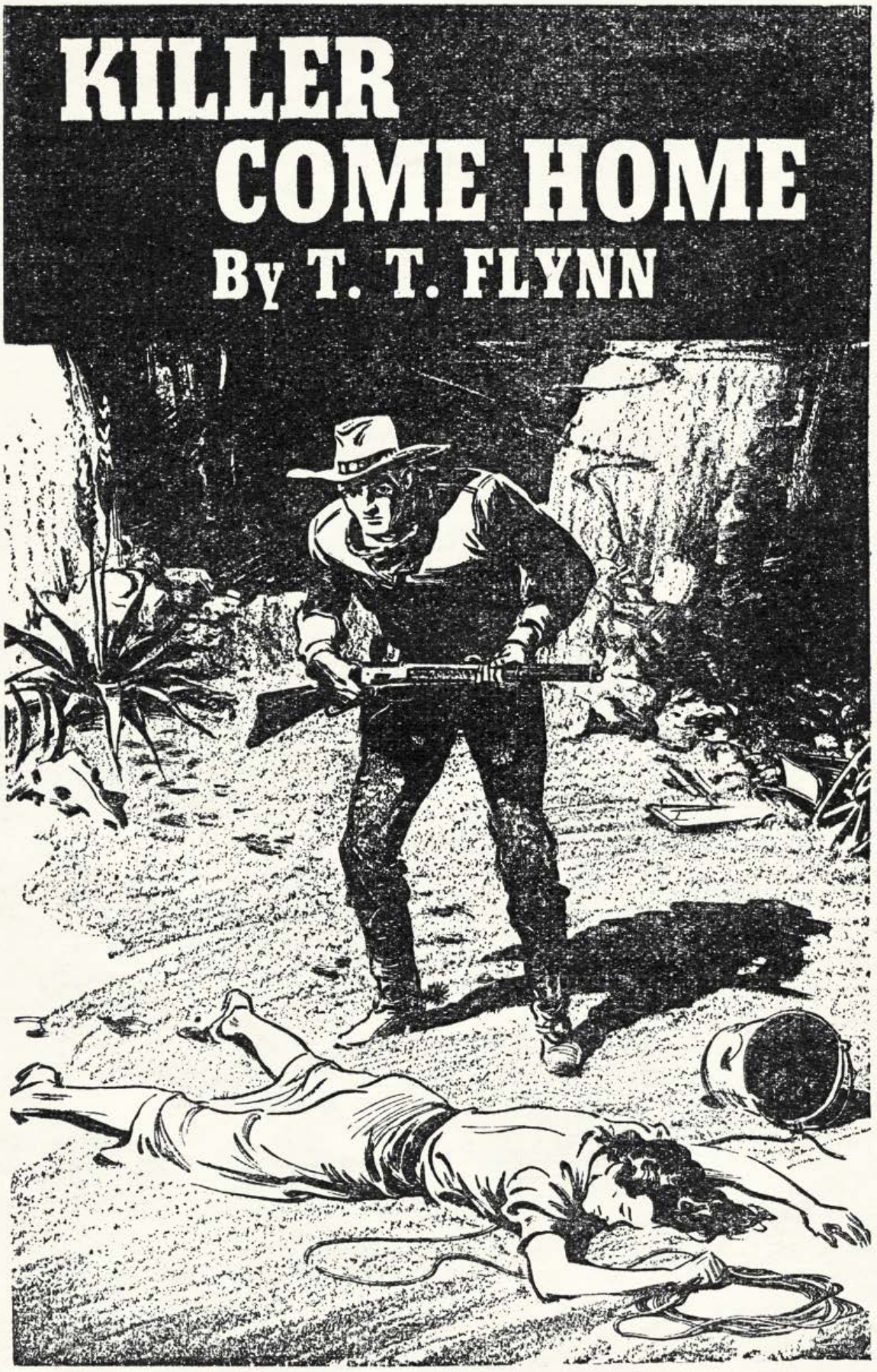


CHAPTER I

FLIGHT FROM STINKING ROCKS

THE RENO KID had been riding across that harsh sun-baked country for hours, and every time he looked back the yellow dust cloud hung in the distance.

This had been bunch-grass land, with scattered sagebrush and prickly pear. Never too good, it was worthless now under the searing blight of drought.

Overhead not a cloud marred the blue sky. The afternoon sun was a copper blaze. Heat shimmered above the baked soil. The wind was a breath from an open furnace, and when it blew, dust swirled and spiraling dust devils wandered across the landscape.

The Reno Kid's horse was crusted with white dried sweat. Dust layers were yellowish-white against the black hide. Two hours back the horse had stopped sweating. The Reno Kid was drying out fast, too, and the reason was the untouched canteen that hung from the saddle-horn.

There had been two canteens. A bullet had punctured the largest. There had been a pack horse; a bullet had left it stretched back there at the Stinking Rocks, which was Strickland King's outer waterhole to the west.

Two King gunmen had been guarding that fenced-in skim of water and circle of cracked mud. The man who had recognized the Reno Kid and opened fire wouldn't be doing any more shooting for a while. The other had dived for his horse and fled through the hot, dry morning.

The Reno Kid's pack horse had been shot down, two bullet-holes put through his hat, his best canteen punctured. But when the shooting was over, he was free to cut the wire and lead his saddle horse across the cracking mud to water.

The big sign at the Stinking Rocks had said: KEEP OUTSIDE THIS WIRE. Unwittingly, the Reno Kid had ridden out of the North into a drought-parched land and a water war.

Strickland King's country—Strickland King's water—Strickland King's gunmen! Maybe the King gunman who had recognized him had thought him still too young to be much of a threat. Maybe the reward had made the man reckless. Guns had been crashing before the two King men realized they were fighting for lives.

NOW when the Reno Kid looked back, the faint yellow dust cloud was there behind him. His cracked lips hurt a little as he smiled grimly. He hadn't thought other King riders would be so near. They'd been after him in less than an hour. He'd had to start pushing his horse.

The canteen of water might have kept him and the horse going through the night and into the next day if they could have taken things easy. But the horse would be finished by night now if he didn't get water and rest. And it was all of a hundred miles from the Stinking Rocks to the next waterhole—unless there was water at a place called Murphy's Well. The Reno Kid had heard about Murphy's Well but had never been past the spot.

"A short day's ride southwest of the Stinkin' Rocks," an old border rat had told him years back. "Most folks don't know about it, but if yuh ever get dry over in there, son, don't fergit it. Yuh lay a line from the Stinkin' Rocks past Horn Butte, which brings yuh off the trail an' down acrost Dry Bone Flat. An' right where yuh'd never expect to

find any water, there's three big jaggedy rocks a couple hundred feet high with a old dug well between 'em."

When the Reno Kid wanted to know more about it, the prospector had explained:

"I knowed Pat Murphy who found water there back in the late '60s Pat was a water witch an' witched hisself water sign there. He dug down an' derned if he didn't strike wet. The Apaches got Pat that same year over on the Gila. But the sojers had heard about the water find, and after they rounded the Injuns up, they sent men over to Pat's rocks an' timbered 'em in a well, jest to have water handy around that dry stretch. Ain't been used hardly since, but I was past there last year an' the timbers was still good an' there was water at the bottom. Jest remember it, son. They's times when yuh find wet water mighty handy."

Horn Butte was behind, off in the northeast now, thrusting its rocky horn toward the brassy sky. There was a slight haze low down, far off against the northern horizon. That would be the high crests of the mountains where timber was parched and fire-dry, and springs and streams were trickles at best and dry for the most part.

The Reno Kid swore softly through his parched lips. The land was breaking into raw gullies and ridges, and far beyond the breaks lay a vast flat reaching thirty miles and more to low hills, just as dry and barren as the rest of the country.

Here and there on that flat were great fantastically shaped rocks. In the shimmering, hazy distance, dwarfed by the miles of space, three saw-toothed rocks jutted toward the sky.

The Reno Kid narrowed his dust-rimmed eyes and stared at the rocks a long time as he rode forward. And finally he shook his head.

"It's them, but if there's water there now, I'm a lizard."

STIFFLY the Reno Kid turned in the saddle and looked back. For a few moments the sweep of space back there seemed clear—and then the faint telltale haze drifted up into visibility.

"Blood in their eyes an' hell in their hearts! They're gonna get me or know why! Strickland King must be payin' plenty to keep 'em on a dry trail like this!"

The Reno Kid grinned faintly. "Ain't any easier on them than it is on me. Maybe the end'll be harder if we get to that water witch's hole."

He dismounted, untied the canteen and dribbled some of the warm water into his mouth. He had to elbow the horse's head aside as he stood with his head back, washing the water around in his dry mouth and letting it trickle drop by drop down his throat.

He lifted the canteen for another swallow, then stared at the dried froth on the horse's jaw.

"That swaller sure was sweet. But you got work to do, hoss. Here goes —an' I hope I'm right."

The crown of his hat was punctured. Not enough water to do much good in the hat, anyway. The Reno Kid shrugged. He forced the horse's head up, shoved the canteen back in the jaws and let the horse have moisture by trickles. Half the water was wasted and the animal was trembling for more when the last drop was gone.

"Now we'll see," said the Reno Kid huskily as he hooked the empty canteen back over the saddlehorn and mounted.

The dust cloud had moved nearer.

But those riders back there weren't killing their horses. They seemed to know that if they followed grimly, steadily, they'd run the man and horse ahead of them out of water.

The Reno Kid fumbled back in a saddlepocket, brought out a fresh box of cartridges and filled the empty loops in his belt. The saddlepockets bulged with cartridges for his hand gun and the Winchester in the leather saddleboot.

He made a lonely speck against the parched vastness of Dry Bone Flat as he rode on. The sun was growing in size as it slid down toward the jagged line of hills that formed the western horizon. Stunted tar-bush plants cast thin twisted shadows toward the east, and when the Reno Kid turned his head the big, fantastic shadow he and the horse made seemed to be stalking their heels.

"Hell of a place to end up in," he muttered.

The water hadn't done him much good. His mouth felt too small for his tongue. The horse, too, was almost done. When the sun had slid far down toward those western hills, the Reno Kid halted on a slight rise of ground and studied the back trail.

Miles back, tiny black dots crawled relentlessly across the baked earth after him. But the three saw-toothed rocks were not far ahead now. They grew rapidly in size as the Reno Kid rode toward them.

THE sun had vanished in a final blaze of light; the quick coolness of twilight was shutting down when the Reno Kid reached the rocks.

Red and sheer the saw-tooths towered two hundred feet and more from the dry plain. Weathered rubble formed little mounds around the outside base.

Seen close, the rocks proved to be one mass that formed the sides of a triangle, boxing in a crooked V-shaped, sandy inclosure some twenty yards across and opening to the south. His horse bolted the last few hundred yards and followed wagon tracks and hoof marks into the V-opening, and came to halt, blowing and trembling.

Back in the V was the well opening. The Reno Kid had known it would be there when he saw the wagon tracks. He stopped the horse's rush to the well curb and swung down. As eager as the horse, he stumbled in his effort to reach the gnarled cedar trunks that formed the well curb.

The Reno Kid bent over the edge. Down in the damp cool shadows that filled the timbered shaft the motionless sheen of water lay thirty feet and more below.

The shaft timbers had not rotted. The old windlass was still there, still serviceable, with rotted strands of rope around the drum. But there was no rope, no bucket.

The Reno Kid grinned, shook out his well-stretched saddle rope. Hurriedly he dumped the boxed cartridges out of the saddlebags and tied the rope to the leather band that connected the bags. The deep leather pockets would hold water in plenty.

The Reno Kid had to elbow the snorting horse aside as he lowered the bags into the well.

"Comin' quick, old-timer," he promised huskily.

He could see marks on the well timbers where the water level usually stayed much nearer the surface. But it didn't matter, as long as there was water in the bottom.

The saddle rope he carried was short. Only a foot or two was left in his hand when the leather bags splashed hollowly below, and lost

air with sudden gurgles as they went under.

The Reno Kid was weak, feverish with the terrible water hunger that gnawed at every parched pore. He was leaning over the well curb with the last of the short rope paid out when the bags sank from sight. He sloshed the bags up and down to let the last of the air gurgle out of the pockets.

And when he pulled up, the bags came into sight glistening, heavy with the water filling the pockets. The sound of the drops cascading off was like music.

The black horse, half-maddened by thirst, thrust close, nosing down toward the sound of falling water. His shoulder pushed the Reno Kid off balance, set his feet slipping in the sand. The man swore, grabbed frantically to keep from falling down into the well. The taut rope slipped in his fingers and was gone before he realized what was happening.

The saddlebags chunked heavily back into the water. The rope snaked down on top of them and sank from sight!

THE water was already smoothing back into a mocking, glassy surface as the Reno Kid pushed himself upright and began to curse in a dry, terrible monotone.

"I oughta throw you down after it!" he cried furiously to the horse. "You fixed us now!"

He caught the reins and pulled the animal back lest it stagger into the well in its frantic eagerness to get at the water.

Then he stood for a moment, forcing himself to be calm. He rolled a cigarette with unsteady fingers, lighted it, put it in his mouth. But he threw it aside with a grimace as the hot acrid smoke burned against his swollen tongue.

He looked down in the well again. The small cedar tree trunks that formed the sides might give a man footing to climb down to the water. But if the man was too weak to get back up, or something about the well siding gave way, he'd stay down there at the bottom—cold meat for any gunmen hanging around to get him.

Clothes might be cut into strips to make a weak line that would lower the small canteen down and bring it up. But that would take time.

The Reno Kid hauled himself heavily into the saddle and spurred the unwilling horse away from the well, out of the enclosed V to where he could look through the twilight to the back trail.

The pursuit was in view now, out there across the flat—four of them as near as he could judge.

CHAPTER II

TWO AT THE WELL

CALCULATING the distance his pursuers had to travel, the Reno Kid knew there wasn't time to get that small canteen down to water. Not now, and probably not through the night. He'd never have a chance while those bunched riders were anywhere close.

Sand had drifted over the bones of two dead burros at his left. Other bones were in sight. The broken frame of an old wagon had been abandoned at one side of the V-opening. Outside and inside the V you could see sign where men had camped, thrown away their gear, where animals had died. And if the Reno Kid wasn't mistaken, off there a couple of hundred yards were low mounds with wooden headboards that marked graves.

You could see where the dry years

of the past had brought men and animals face to face with death and thirst here at Murphy's Well. And as the last shadows of the day stretched dark and purple across the dry earth, death seemed to crawl in with the coming night.

The Reno Kid rode around the saw-toothed rocks, taking stock of his position. And what he saw plastered a grim smile on his face as he rode back to the opening.

He rode inside, dismounted and tied the horse to a pinnacle of rock back in the V. Here and there split-off pieces of rock lay half-buried in the sand, and more were outside.

The Reno Kid began to carry rocks to the opening, working fast. He was staggering with exhaustion by the time he had a small breastwork three feet across and less than two feet high. He ran to the old wagon, wrenched off a seat board, used it as a shovel to scoop a small trench in the sand behind the rocks.

The horsemen were not half a mile away when the Reno Kid threw the board aside and lurched, sobbing for breath, to the horse. He caught his rifle from the saddleboot, dumped boxes of cartridges into the trench, and collapsed on the rocks, panting, trembling with weakness.

Four riders. The light had faded until they were only dark blurs out there on the plain. They were scattering out now, rifles ready. Steady again, the Reno Kid put a shot over their heads.

They stopped. The Reno Kid could hear them calling to one another. One figure rode cautiously forward.

"We're gonna take you back, feller! Dead or alive! Which'll it be?"

"Got a sheriff or a deputy or a warrant along?"

"We got all we need!"

The Reno Kid answered through his cupped hands. "Ride back an' tell Strickland King I've staked out this waterhole. I got food, plenty of water, an' enough cartridges to hold out a week. You'll be dried to jerky meat before you gun me out of here. Ride back while you can make it an' I'll move on across the Border."

He fired another shot high, and the man yelled something and galloped back to his companions. They talked a little and turned on the back trail. They were heading back toward the Stinking Rocks when night swallowed them.

THE RENO KID grinned coldly. They'd be back under cover of darkness, Indian-style, rushing the low makeshift barricade fronting the shallow trench. Reward money was easy money, and they had not ridden all day and cornered their man to turn back so meekly now.

Maybe they'd get him, too. Four guns against one had a good chance.

But if they didn't, if he could hold them off until daybreak and no other King men arrived, they were whipped. They couldn't have brought much water along. They'd have to turn back fast to the Stinking Rocks water.

Daybreak was a long time away, though—a lifetime away to a man who was dried out to the bones. The Reno Kid's tongue was larger. Thought of the cool, clear water so near was maddening. And he couldn't make a try at it until he knew the pursuit was turned back.

No moon tonight. Stars were popping out against the sable sky; but the stars didn't do much to the dark murky mass of night close to the ground.

Hours passed. The Reno Kid's ears hurt with the strain of listening. Once he heard the mocking babble of

coyotes whispering through space. Coyotes had to live, even when it meant hunting meat on the baked hopeless expanse of Dry Bone Flat.

"I ain't as good as a damned coyote," he growled. "They can hunt and hooraw while I've got to sit here by that damn water an' wait! God! For one big swaller of it— Shut up, damn you!"

The Reno Kid had caught himself talking aloud. Dreaming. He began to think of a white-water stream in the Jackson Hole country where he'd once camped. Shade and green grass. Fresh fish broiling over the fire. Cool water to drink and splash around in during the heat of the day.

"Ain't you got any sense?" the Reno Kid croaked to himself. "You'll be hollerin' an' singin' an' runnin' out there scoopin' water off the sand! And them damn gun toters of King's'll ride up behind an' blast you right over into that deep Jordan River that parsons preach about!"

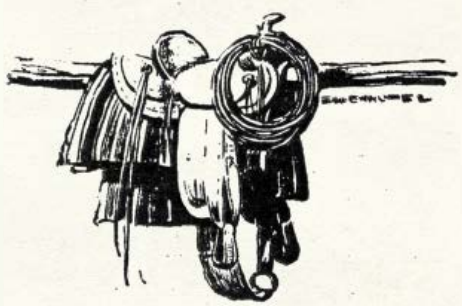
The sounds out there in the night were incessant! None of them meant anything. Time after time the Reno Kid came to a tense crouch, gun ready, at some slight night sound or movement out there in the dark. And each time he was mistaken.

But those damned bounty hunters were out there. They were out there somewhere closing in on foot. No use to think they'd ridden through the long scorching day to let a few words turn them back. Not four to one, with night to help them.

Waiting, nerves on edge, finger crooked by the rifle trigger, was worse than a roaring gun fight. Better be dead or free to get at that cool water down the well shaft. Just one swallow—

The Reno Kid muttered another curse at himself for thinking of the water, and began to pad back and forth on the sand. Maybe the King men were near enough to hear his steps. Maybe this would draw their fire. Get it over with.

Suddenly the Reno Kid stopped short, peering into the night. Smoothly he brought the Winchester



up, finger crooked on the trigger. Somebody was moving out there. Feet were whispering across the sand.

He had a moment of doubt. The sound was too plain. Ears must be tricking him again. But the sounds continued. Soft steps were coming from the right. Probably there were more out to the left also as the other three King men closed in.

THE RENO KID loosened the six-gun in the holster, crept to the low rock barricade and poised for the first visible movement.

He did not have to wait. A fragment of the night moved out there where the feet whispered on the sand.

If he waited a moment, it would be a sure shot. If he fired now, he'd spook the rest of their guns out and know where they were. The Reno Kid sighted on the uncertain target and squeezed the trigger.

The shot crashed on the night. A scream cut through the desert quiet. The Reno Kid leaped back of the low barricade and pumped another shell ready.

Then as his mind separated that scream from the sound of the shot,

he froze, staring into the blackness. That had been a woman's scream!

No guns had answered his shot. No other sound was out there in the night. The Reno Kid croaked: "Who's there?"

There was no reply. He felt sick. Must have killed a woman. *Killed a woman.* He couldn't wait and think about it. Had to go out there and see.

Weak from the dread of what he was going to find, the Reno Kid made a crouching run to the spot, knowing that if the King men were out there they'd gun him down sure.

Then he heard her moan. A moment later he was beside her. His groping hand touched soft hair. A small shoulder moved convulsively under his fingers.

His foot caught in a coil of rope and there was a metallic rattle as he kicked the foot free. Sounded like a metal bucket. Then the woman was moaning: "No! No!" She fought off his hand and tried to sit up.

"I didn't know you was a woman!" the Reno Kid gulped. "Where'd it hit you? I . . . I'll make a light an' see what I can do!"

"Who are you?" she gasped.

"It don't matter," said the Reno Kid. "I'd rather been hung than do a thing like this! Lady, where'd it hit you?"

She stood up, made little movements in the dark. "You must have missed me!" she said in a shaking voice. "It frightened me so bad that I . . . I fainted."

"Oh, my gosh!" the Reno Kid exploded in relief. And then, manlike, he was irritated. "What'd you want to sneak up like this in the middle of the night an' almost make me kill you? Away out here from nowheres where a woman ain't got any call to be in the first place!"

Her voice, when she answered him, was cold:

"This is free Government land! What right did you have to shoot at me? Has Strickland King dared to close up this water, too?"

"I ain't a King man," the Reno Kid told her. "I'm campin' here waitin' for King's gunnies to come shootin'. I thought you was one of them. What's this rope on the ground?"

"It's a rope and a bucket. I walked on ahead of the wagon to draw some fresh water."

"I thought it was. Lemme draw some water!" the Reno Kid said thickly. "I ain't had any way to draw water out o' that well!"

He was already groping on the ground for the rope. He broke into a stumbling run toward the well, heedless of any King men who might be closing in through the dark.

This time the rope did not slip. The bucket came up dripping and half full. The Reno Kid slopped water over his face, chin, shirt and vest as he tried to hold that terrible water hunger down to sparing sips.

He was panting when he forced himself to put the bucket at his feet and wait a little.

The girl spoke at his elbow.

"You . . . you said the King men were trying to shoot you?"

"Seen any of 'em out there anywhere?"

"No."

"Four of 'em trailed me all day. I had a little gun trouble with 'em at the Stinking Rocks."

SHE misunderstood. "Strickland King's keeping his water!" she said bitterly. "Not a drop for dying sheep, cattle and horses. No water even for women and children. The only water Strickland King is giving away these days is a barrelful to men

who'll give up their homesteads and drive out of South Valley for good."

"Nesters in South Valley, huh?" the Reno Kid muttered.

"So you're a cowman, too!" she flared back at him. "I can tell by the way you talk! You're one of the kind who like to see desperate, hard-working people lose everything! You make families go hungry and children cry for water while hired gunmen keep them thirsty! If the King men are hunting you, it's one wolf breed after another of the same kind!"

The Reno Kid lifted the bucket and drank again. He was smiling grimly in the darkness.

"Spunky, ain't you, ma'am? But don't blame me for King's tricks. I never made any woman go hungry or kept water from kids. I'm goin' to water my horse out o' this bucket."

She seemed to have no objection, but her voice was still bitter. "I wouldn't keep water from any living thing. I know what it means to be thirsty. First let me drink. I've walked a long way ahead of the wagon without water."

"Here," said the Reno Kid hastily, and as she took the wet bucket, he groped for a match. When he heard her put the bucket down, he snapped the match into flame and held it up so he could see what manner of woman he had shot at.

The Reno Kid swallowed as her dark eyes looked into the match flame and her hand pushed back hair black as the night around them.

He had guessed her to be not too old. Now he saw that she was as young as himself. Clearly, she was tired, and her face had traces of work, worry and scanty food. But she was standing straight, fearless, with a sort of wild, proud defiance. Maybe she wasn't exactly pretty, but as the match burned down and out, the Reno Kid thought she was the loveliest girl he had ever seen. Something about the proud independence of her caught at him.

"Some folks call me Slim," he said gruffly. "What's your name?"

"Nancy Willis," she answered. "And if you're afraid that King's men are going to shoot you, a light won't help you, will it?"

The Reno Kid laughed softly.

"It helped me see the prettiest girl I ever run across, ma'am. That's worth plenty of risk."

"Not to me," said Nancy Willis coolly.

The Reno Kid was lowering the bucket into the well again. "You got a wagon coming out there, ma'am?"

"Yes."

"Did King give you folks a barrel of water to leave on?"

"He'd like to," Nancy Willis said scornfully. "He'd like to burn us out and shoot us out. He'd like to dry us out and starve us out. But there are some things even Strickland King doesn't dare do. Old Tobe Barrett, the sheriff, isn't afraid of King, and there are others who will back Tobe up if he's trying to carry out the law. Strickland King tries to make everything legal."

The Reno Kid couldn't see her face, but he knew it must be reflecting the sorrow in her voice.

"Last year his gunmen killed my father—and they made it look like the right was on their side. They'd like an excuse to kill Bud, my younger brother. I won't even let Bud carry a gun any more. He wouldn't have a chance if they caught him out alone and started a quarrel. We're going to stay on our land and outlast Strickland King. Some day the rains will come again, and when they do we'll be waiting on our own land."

"Sounds like you will," the Reno Kid agreed. "But you're haulin' water a long way, ma'am."

"Almost forty miles," said Nancy Willis. "South Creek is dry. The spring that feeds the east fork is still flowing, but it's on Strickland King's land and he's dammed the water back and fenced everyone out."

"Since when did Strickland King own land around that spring, ma'am?" the Reno Kid asked quickly.

"He doesn't," said Nancy Willis. "But he leases it from a lawyer named Jackson in Canfield. Oh, it's legal enough. We've tried everything. There's nothing we can do but look at the dry sand in South Creek and wait for rain."

The bucket came up dripping full. The Reno Kid rested it on the well curb for a minute and muttered: "Forty miles out an' forty miles back! How long does a load of water last?"

"Not long," Nancy said. "Our wagon doesn't do much else but haul water these days. We have about the only animals left in the valley that can stand the trip. We give some of the water away, and trade some of it for feed to keep the oxen going."

SILENTLY the Reno Kid carried the water over to his horse, and went back for more. "Where's your wagon?" he asked.

"Coming," she said. "We used our last water before dark. I rode all afternoon and felt like walking ahead. Bud and Jerry and Mr. Meeks stayed with the wagon."

"Who's Meeks?"

"Our nearest neighbor. I've been trying to keep him and his family from moving away by giving them water." Her voice took on that fierce, stubborn note again. "It will rain. If I can keep Strickland King from driving people out, they'll have water one of these days and be strong again."

The Reno Kid carried the second bucket to his horse, and under his breath muttered again: "Forty miles out an' forty back for water. An' then givin' the water away to make 'em wait out King!"

When he turned back to the well, he said:

"I was goin' to hold this well for myself. But I reckon your wagon can come in an' fill up. If there's trouble tell your brothers to keep back out of it."

"This is free water," Nancy said coldly. "If you and King's men want to kill each other off, it's no concern of ours."

The Reno Kid chuckled. "I'll take a heap of killing after that cold drink. Better stay back in here while I keep watch. It's a wonder them skunks ain't jumped us by now. They're up to something an' takin' their time about it."

Beyond the low rock barricade the night was still empty of sound. Watching intently, rifle ready, the Reno Kid thought of Nancy Willis and the nester trouble.

It was the old story. The crop men came in like the plague, put up their fences, multiplied like grasshoppers, and twice as destructive. For grasshoppers moved on and the land came back. Nesters dug in and the range was ruined for good. And these people who grubbed and worked in the dirt hung on like grim death. Look at this wagon coming for water. Sensible settlers would have given up long ago and moved on.

After a little the Reno Kid heard the wagon coming in. A bull whip cracked like a pistol shot. A voice

urged the oxen. Axles creaked. And then someone shouted: *"Oh-h-h, Nancy! Nancy!"*

"Here, Bud!" the girl called back. She had moved up close to the Reno Kid.

"Are you all right, Nancy?" the voice demanded.

"Yes."

The wagon came on. Bud's voice spoke anxiously. "We thought we heard a shot."

The Reno Kid answered.

"You did. But the lady's all right. Drive in here an' get your water. An' keep away from me. I'm watchin' for a bunch of buzzards that are around somewhere."

Bud made no reply to that. The lumbering wagon loomed up out of the night with the wagon sheet looking like a small ghostly cloud.

"I got some rocks piled up here," the Reno Kid warned. "Swing your teams around them."

"Where?" a husky voice answered, and two figures strode forward.

The Reno Kid bit off his answer as he caught the soft jingle of spur chains. Nesters driving oxen didn't wear spurs.

"Keep still!" the Reno Kid rapped as a crouching jump carried him to one side.

CHAPTER III

GUNHANDS' TRAP

A GUN roared a flaming answer. A second gun joined in as the Reno Kid fired the rifle and dodged again, palming his side gun.

Two men and a third appeared at the heads of the lead oxen and opened fire. A bullet burned the Reno Kid's left arm as one of the dark figures collapsed. The streaking flame of his hand gun flipped at the muzzle flashes marking the next man.

And suddenly there was only one gun left, firing fast, wildly, as the six-shooter in the Reno Kid's hand clicked empty. He shoved the empty gun under his belt and cocked the Winchester as he sprawled to the ground. With no light to aim by, he threw the rifle sights instinctively like a pistol, waited for a muzzle flash before firing. And then his man was floundering and gasping on the ground.

The Reno Kid backed away from the spot, reloading the hand gun. An ox was threshing on the ground, the other oxen plunging, floundering in fright. And in shot-echoing ears the Reno Kid heard a voice warning: "Keep down, Nancy! Stay here!"

"You're hurt, Bud!" Nancy Willis cried out. "Oh, you're shot!"

Out in the night horses came running and a man shouted: "Get him all right, boys?"

The Reno Kid walked out with the rifle ready. The horses boiled up to the wagon and the man leaped from the saddle with the reins of the other men's mounts.

"That was the trick to get him quick an' safe!" he burst out jubilantly. "Two thousand reward to divvy up fer no work a-tall!"

"Slick trick," answered the Reno Kid. "Here's a slicker one! Reach high!"

A muffled oath came as the man froze before the rifle muzzle. His lifting hands carried up the reins of three led horses.

"Three to one ought to have done it," the Reno Kid told him. "But it didn't. Want a chance for your gun an' a try at gettin' all that reward money for yourself?"

The man sullenly refused. "I know when I ain't got a chance. Them damn farmers must've helped yuh get the boys! Strickland King'll have something to say about that!"

"Strickland King been elected sheriff?" the Reno Kid inquired.

"Hell, no!"

"Then it ain't his business an' you coyotes on his pay roll yapped your way after the wrong deer. Turn around." He took the man's gun-belt and called: "Break a light out o' the wagon there!"

A match flared under the wagon sheet, a lantern glowed out, swung to the ground and bobbed toward them.

The light showed two bodies motionless on the sand and a third man holding his middle and groaning. The floundering ox lay with neck twisted in the heavy wooden yoke and blood coming from its mouth.

A LANKY, rawboned man with a stubble of beard stood staring at the oxen. "Thet Baldy ox's got blood on his laig," he said tremulously. "He won't be no good, neither."

"And you damn dirt scratchers won't be no good when Strickland King hears how you helped this damn outlaw kill his men!" the prisoner snarled.

"King can't blame us fer this," the lanky man protested apprehensively. "You men took over the wagon back there an' said you was huntin' an outlaw. We didn't have no part in it."

"If I'd had me a gun I'd poured lead into 'em so fast they'd 'a' splattered!" the lantern holder shrilled furiously. "Wasn't no call for you damn King gun toters to use us fer a blind while you throwed lead all around my sister!"

He was short, scrawny and ragged, with hot anger on his face. Not more than twelve or thirteen, the Reno Kid guessed, and looking a lot like his sister.

Nancy Willis came forward and snatched the lantern. "That's enough, Jerry!" she said sternly. "Another word and I'll send you in the wagon!"

Jerry faced his sister hotly, fists clenched.

"Ain't menfolks got a right to talk up when maybe their sister's been hurt? I've took all I aim to take from this damn King bunch! Treatin' us like dogs an' runnin' over us every chance they get! An' now fannin' their damn guns like it didn't matter whether you was kilt or not! I tell you—"

"*Jerry!* Get in that wagon! Isn't it bad enough without you swearing disgracefully and making more trouble?"

The youngster choked on helpless fury as he darted to the wagon and scrambled inside.

"Spunky," said the Reno Kid with a faint smile.

"The little pup'll button his mouth when King evens up fer this!" the prisoner growled.

"King ain't here now," the Reno Kid said. "Next word out o' you will rile me."

The prisoner glared from a thin hard face roughened by a week's growth of black beard. He was the man who had fled from the Stinking Rocks.

"If he worries you again, ma'am," the Reno Kid spoke to Nancy Willis, "I'll gag him or part his hair with a gun barrel."

The lantern light showed her pale face strained and bitter.

"What do I care how any killer feels?" she choked. "I'm thinking about what you've done to us!"

"Me, ma'am?"

"*You!*" Nancy blazed. "If you hadn't been here with blood on your hands and outlaw money on your head this wouldn't have happened! Look at us! One of our oxen dead

and another crippled! And Bud over there with his knee torn by a bullet so he can't walk!"

"I'm sorry, ma'am."

"Do you know how to be sorry for anything?" she demanded. "How will we get the wagon back, much less take home any water? You've killed men and wounded others, but you'll ride on with your neck safe! And we'll get back some way without any hope left! And then you egg Jerry on and threaten this man, so there won't be any doubt that Strickland King will find a way to blame us for all this! He's been waiting for such a chance! Every homesteading family left in South Valley will pay for this!"

"You bet they will!" the prisoner snapped.

The Reno Kid was grinning as he turned on the man, and in the lantern light his face made the man step back involuntarily and lift a shielding arm.

The nearest horse moved uneasily as the Reno Kid stepped to him, watching the prisoner. The Reno Kid shook out the coiled saddlerope, flipped a small loop over the prisoner's head and yanked it tight.

"For that," he said, "you get hogtied like a dirty hoss thief. Which maybe wouldn't be far wrong, at that. Git down on the ground!"

"You're making it harder for us!" Nancy protested hotly.

SILENTLY the Reno Kid tied the prisoner's elbows and legs behind the back, so that the noose stayed taut on the man's neck.

"Strokin' a rattler's back never milked the poison out o' his fangs, ma'am. Tell your brother Jerry to hold these hosses, and look to your other brother while I help this long-legged plowman!"

"We don't want any help!"

"You're gettin' it," said the Reno Kid unsmilingly. "Lemme have that lantern." He took it from her hand. Jerry was already scrambling out of the wagon.

"Gosh, m-mister," the youngster stuttered as he grabbed the reins. "You sure showed 'em how to shoot! Some day I'll be like that!"

"Not if your sister can help it."

"Shucks, women don't understand!" Jerry said scornfully. "Didja kill them skunks clean?"

The Reno Kid examined the two bodies. Hard-looking men, one bearded, one with only a reddish stubble. The Kid had seen a thousand like them along the Border, East on the Texas cattle trails and skulking around Indian Territory. Any man could buy them if the pay was right.

The third man was the same type, older, with a black mustache. He was shot through the side and hip, and groaning and holding his side.

"I cain't move, hardly! I got to have water!"

"You'll get it," said the Reno Kid. "Move that hand away so I can see this hole in your side. Bleedin' some, but I've seen worse. Here's where it comes out in back with some rib. Clean-lookin' blood. No air bubbles. Stop that bellering and crawling and we'll tie you up."

When he had done so, the Reno Kid added the wounded man's gunbelt to the others he had collected.

"Your name Meeks?" he said to the lanky, apprehensive nester.

"Uh-huh."

"Stop sweatin' about what'll happen to you some day an' get that ox out o' the yoke an' the wagon up to the well. Start some fire and heat up some water and then fix grub."

"We ain't got a chance now," Meeks complained.

"A rabbit like you never had a

chance!" the Reno Kid said impatiently. "Here, button! Hold the lantern for him."

Beyond the oxen Nancy Willis was kneeling by a sitting figure. When the Reno Kid stepped there and struck a match, he saw a slim young man of about eighteen who had slit his overalls up above the right knee and had torn his shirt into strips that he was tying on a bloody knee.

A second match showed blood oozing rather than spurting from the knee.

"Have you fixed up in no time," the Reno Kid decided. "Too bad you got messed up like this in my private feuding."

Bud Willis shrugged as the match went out. His voice was calm.

"King would have tripped us up one way or another, I guess. I'll be obliged if you help Nancy get straightened out before you ride on."

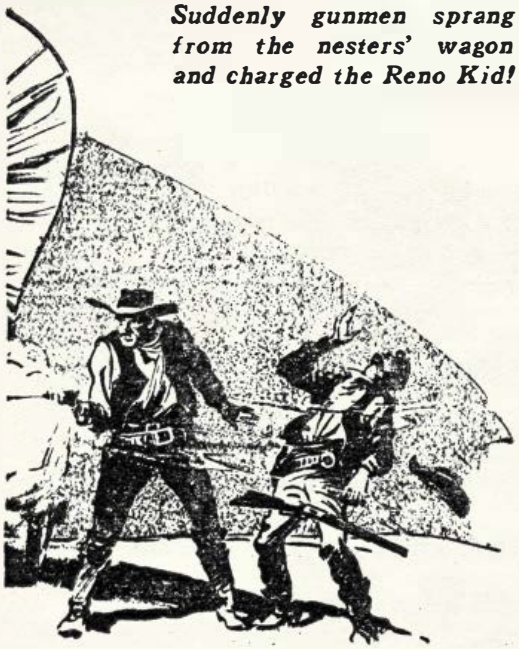
"I don't want his help, Bud!" the girl flared.

"That's temper," Bud told her. "We won't make it back to the Valley on temper, sis. If this man'll help us some, we'll do better."

The Reno Kid walked away before she could reply. He rolled a cigarette on his way to the well, and was smoking when he brought back water for the wounded men.

Meeks and Jerry got the lead oxen unyoked and the wagon dragged to the well. The Reno Kid took the lantern, examined the wounded ox and regretfully shot it.

Next, the wounded gunman had to be bandaged and the torn bloody



Suddenly gunmen sprang from the nesters' wagon and charged the Reno Kid!

hole in the Reno Kid's arm tied up. Meeks reluctantly admitted to having a pint of whiskey in the wagon. The Reno Kid poured whiskey on all the wounds and saved a drink for each wounded man.

AFTER the dead were buried in shallow graves Meeks, at the Reno Kid's orders, carried the wounded men and prisoner to a small cook fire near the well where Nancy Willis had coffee boiling, bacon and beans hot on tin plates.

The Reno Kid drank three cups of black coffee, ate a plate of beans and bread and then lifted the lantern and looked at the dust-covered water barrels in the wagon.

Five barrels. Filling them a bucket at a time would take hours, although a second bucket and rope were in the back of the wagon.

"Better start yankin' water into them barrels," the Reno Kid decided.

Nancy challenged him across the glowing coals of the cook fire:

"What good will it do? One yoke of oxen can't pull the wagon and the water back!"

"Water these King horses an' give them some of that fodder you brought, an' they'll help pull you back, ma'am."

"And what will Strickland King do?"

"Might be he'd thank you for bringing two of his men back."

"You're making fun of us!" she cried unsteadily. "Oh, I hate people like you and everything you stand for!"

The Reno Kid lit another cigarette. His unsmiling face was somber.

"I never said what I stood for, ma'am. You've got to get back. King's men have got to get back. Might as well use the hosses an' take all the water you can."

Bud Willis raised up from the sand where he was lying. "He's right, sis. Whatever happens is going to happen anyway. We'll get back the best way and take water."

"And Strickland King will accuse us of murder, horse stealing and anything else he can think of," Nancy said bitterly, "while this . . . this man rides away laughing to himself."

"What he does ain't any business of ours," Bud Willis declared solidly. "King would have got us sooner or later anyway. Maybe I can sit up there in the wagon an' pour the water in the barrels."

"I'll help all I can," the Reno Kid offered. "This arm ain't too bad."

"We're not asking you for help!" Nancy flashed.

"I'll just do it without being asked," the Reno Kid replied gravely.

And that was the way it was done, hour after hour of backbreaking labor dragging dripping buckets of water out of the deep well and emptying them into the wagon barrels.

The Reno Kid's hands grew raw from holding rough wet ropes. Back and arms protested painfully at the unaccustomed exercise, sleep and weariness dragged at his eyes, and feverish pain throbbed in the wounded arm.

Three barrels were full and the fourth was partly full when the Reno Kid called a halt. "You can't haul any more," he declared. "I've got to catch some sleep an' be riding after sunup. Jerry, how'd you like to buckle on a gun an' watch this hombre I tied up?"

"By golly, I'll watch him!" Jerry exclaimed delightedly. "Want me to shoot him if he gets dangerous?"

"You better call me if it gets to that," the Reno Kid decided gravely. "Shootin' is serious business. Never touch a gun until there ain't any other way out."

Nancy flushed. "You should be ashamed putting such ideas in a boy's head! I've tried to teach Jerry to live decently and keep away from guns—and now you're making cowardly killers seem like heroes to him!"

"Tell King that, ma'am," said the Reno Kid. "I ain't fenced in any waterholes—and I ain't goin' to get loose while you're asleep an' grab for a gun."

"An' this skunk ain't either," Jerry Willis said stoutly as he buckled on a gunbelt too big for his thin middle. "You git to sleep, sis. I aim to stay decent, but no damn skunk is gonna get a whack at you while you're asleep tonight."

"Jerry, I won't have you talking like that," Nancy said helplessly. "Swearing and . . . and—"

"I'll stop swearin'," Jerry muttered. "But I'm gonna watch this skunk plenty. I won't kill him. Cross my heart!"

Bud Willis was in pain, but he chuckled. "Jerry's growed up, sis. Better let him help out. We need it."

Nancy looked helpless and angry as she turned back to the fire. The Reno Kid was smiling faintly as he looked at her, and then, sober again, he carried more fodder to his horse, and another bucket of water. When he was finished he threw himself down with his saddle for a pillow and was asleep in a minute or two despite the pain in his arm.

CHAPTER IV

A MESSAGE FOR STRICKLAND KING

A GOLD and crimson sunrise was bursting over the gray dawn when the Reno Kid awoke, got stiffly to his feet and grimaced at the hurt in his wounded arm. Then he grinned at the sleepy youngster plodding wearily back and forth with the heavy gunbelt sagging at his leg.

"Turn in, button," the Reno Kid said.

"I watched him close," Jerry said huskily. "He cussed a little an' then went to sleep. That wounded feller had to have water plenty. He ain't been asleep long. You going to leave us, mister?"

"Got to, button."

"I'd like to go along," Jerry murmured.

"Your sister'd have something to say about that."

"I reckon so," Jerry said glumly, and then he squinted. "Are you a sure-enough outlaw?"

"Reward and everything," the Reno Kid said, losing his smile. "Most likely I'll get shot any day now. Folks like your sister are right in not havin' much use for me. Don't ever get in my shoes, button."

"I ain't a button no more," Jerry

told him. "An' I like you. What's your name?"

"Slim," said the Reno Kid. "Better go to sleep. I'll wake this other King man an' we'll be gone before you know it." He shook the prisoner, waited for him to open his eyes. "I'm goin' to untie you. Water your hoss and mine, saddle 'em and we'll be going."

Red-eyed and unbelieving, the man stared at him, first sullenly, then with a fearful expression. "Where we going?"

"I'll tell you later. Roll over while I get at these ropes. I'll be watchin' you close. Don't get careless."

The others woke up while the horses were being saddled. Bud Willis rolled a cigarette and silently watched the preparations for leaving.

"Both of you going?" he inquired.

The prisoner swung on him. "You know I ain't got a chance with him! He'll put a bullet in my back out there somewhere an' jump across the Border laughin' up his sleeve! What'll you say to Strickland King when he asks why you didn't stop it?"

Bud Willis touched his wounded knee.

"I'll tell him we couldn't stop it any more than we could stop you men from dragging us into this."

Nancy Willis confronted the Reno Kid. "You can't do this!" she cried fiercely. "Hasn't there been enough killing? Let the man stay here!"

"He'd just make more trouble for you folks," said the Reno Kid. "With him out of the way you'll get back all right."

Dark shadows were under her eyes and her face was pale. "I wish I were a man and had a gun!"

The Reno Kid smiled faintly. "I'm glad you're purty and sweet and what you are, ma'am. It'll give me something to think about."

She was angry and helpless as Jerry's shrill warning drew her startled look.

"Keep away from them gunbelts! I'm watchin' you!"

The prisoner snarled at him.

The Reno Kid chuckled. "I had a bead on him with one eye, *compañero.*"

"Take that gunbelt off, Jerry, and keep away from this outlaw," Nancy Willis blazed.

JERRY sulkily unbuckled the gunbelt and tossed it with the others. But while the prisoner and the Reno Kid were eating cold beans and bread, the youngster edged close to the Reno Kid and spoke under his breath.

"Where you headin', Slim?"

"Wouldn't do to tell," the Reno Kid said from the corner of his mouth. "But after you get back to South Valley, tell your sister I'm sure sorry I worried the sweetest girl I ever seen. She wouldn't believe me now."

"Bet you're in love with her like all the rest of the young fellers," Jerry said hopefully.

"Maybe that's what's makin' me feel so bad about her," the Reno Kid decided gravely.

"Gosh!" Jerry whispered with shining eyes. "Whyn't you come home with us an' marry her, Slim? I'd sure like it. Havin' an outlaw in the family'd be more fun than all the trouble we been havin'."

"Better not tell her that," the Reno Kid warned. "Bein' an outlaw is pretty bad, button. It ain't any fun. Remember that. An' if you ever hear of me gettin' shot, remember it some more."

"You ain't gonna get shot. You'll be over the Border an' safe by to-

morrow," Jerry said with conviction. "Say, Slim, you gonna kill that skunk?"

"Nope."

"I knowed sis was wrong," Jerry said with relief. "Maybe she'll listen to me now."

"Jerry!" Nancy called sharply. "Come over here!"

Jerry grinned understandingly at the Reno Kid as he went over to the wagon and joined his sister.

The food was down a few minutes later. The Reno Kid and his prisoner mounted.

"Them horses and ropes to the saddles will help pull you folks in," the Reno Kid said. "*Adios*, folks."

"So long, Slim," Jerry called. The others were silent.

The Reno Kid and his prisoner rode away from the loaded wagon in silence, away from Murphy's Well and the high raw rocks, southeast over the vast dry flats toward the Border. The prisoner rode ahead sullenly, apprehensively, and only showed his surprise miles away when they turned east, and northeast toward South Valley where the homesteaders had settled.

"Where we going?" he demanded over his shoulder.

"I'll do the talkin' when it's time," the Reno Kid said shortly. "Keep ridin'."

South Valley was some ten miles wide. Low barren hills on the west, low mountains on the east were covered with cedar, piñon and scattered larger timber. There had been good grass in South Valley, grass in the timbered hills and mountains to the east, water in South Creek the year around. And not a fence between Canfield and the Border.

Now barbed wire was strung on gnarled fence posts. Windmills topped wells. Plows had gashed the brown earth. Small adobe houses could be seen huddling near the cottonwoods that fringed the bends of South Creek, where a road north to Canfield had been rutted out by travel.

The homesteaders had worked hard to make the land fertile and crop-yielding, and the drought had struck back hard. Plowed furrows had baked to dust under the burned-out remnants of the last crop that hadn't been worth gathering.

A few crowbait horses, bony cows and listless sheep were visible as the two riders angled across the valley toward the road ruts and the creek. Doors were open, windows gaped, life was gone from the first two houses he passed. And when he reached the road ruts, dry white sand lay on South Creek where water had always run.

Two unshaven men in patched overalls sat listlessly on boxes before the next adobe house. They stared with hostility at the Reno Kid called: "Got a little water to spare?"

"Nope," was the surly reply.

"Where's the Willis place?"

"Dunno."

Children's heads peered fearfully out the front door as the Reno Kid and his prisoner rode on. You could almost feel the hate for cowmen, for any gun-toting riders who might be Strickland King's men.

THERE were other abandoned shacks, and other families clinging, stubbornly to the land. All of these people stared silently as the two riders passed north up the Valley. The afternoon heat was about them. The white dry sands of South Creek might have been the ghostly bones of wasted labor and dead hopes.

By legally fencing all his waterholes and damming back the big spring that was the source of the

East Fork, Strickland King had whipped the settlers. But not all of them. Somewhere back there in the west, on the sun-scorched road through Dry Bone Flat, would be a lumbering wagon carrying fierce courage with its load of water. Carrying Nancy Willis, young and lovely in her defiance.

At the north end of the Valley, the Reno Kid drew rein.

"We fork here," he told his prisoner without emotion. "Tell Strickland King that Slim Considine is back. He'll be waiting to hear what luck you men had."

The sullen prisoner had been more puzzled each hour of the long day. Now he sat for a moment in scowling unbelief.

"Sure you ain't saving a bullet for my back when I start?" he wanted to know.

"It'd be a pleasure. But I ain't. Don't sit there temptin' me."

The King man spurred his jaded horse toward the north, looking back over his shoulder apprehensively until he was out of gunshot range.

The Reno Kid followed the road ruts to the northeast out of the Valley, through the rocky Bottleneck and the broken hills beyond, to Canfield, where the adobe houses pressed close on narrow little streets and tall cottonwoods stood around the little brick courthouse and its dusty plaza.

Canfield had not changed. Dogs barked, windows showed lights in the evening darkness, horses stood at the plaza hitch racks. In the country beyond Canfield were cattle and mines, lumber and trade. Water, too, and reserves and strength against drought.

The Reno Kid's horse could not have traveled much farther when his rider dismounted before a small dark building on the north side of the plaza and stopped a passing man. "Know where Lawyer Jackson might be?" he asked.

"Jupe's havin' a few drinks at the Owlhead, I reckon. He mostly is this time of the evening."

"Mind stoppin' at the Owlhead an' tellin' him he's got a customer?"

The door of Jupe Jackson's office was unlocked. The Reno Kid stepped to the back corner of the front room and grinned when he encountered a tin bucket of drinking water and a long-handled dipper. It felt like the same old battered bucket and dipper. He drank thirstily, rolled a cigarette and was seated on a table edge holding his Winchester when a short man smelling of cloves and rye came in, struck a match to light a lamp and said briskly: "Want to see me?"

"Sort of," the Reno Kid replied without moving. "I'm Slim Considine. How in hell do you come to be leasing the Cold Spring land to Strickland King?"

The lamp chimney shattered on the floor as the small man jumped around. "Great Jupiter! Young Considine!"

CHAPTER V

BAIT FOR A BOUNTY HUNTER

JUPE JACKSON hurriedly blew out the smoking lampwick. The light had shown his white hair, alert face, wiry frame in a neat black suit.

"The back room'll be better," he suggested nervously. "There are men in town who know you."

"And could use a reward," the Reno Kid added, rising.

"Two thousand, dead or alive. Never been withdrawn. But that isn't all," Jupe Jackson said nervously. "Long Tom Simms, who ramrods for King, was in town yesterday. He said one of their old men just rode in from Dakota, sayin' he recognized you up North using an-

other name and handy with your guns."

"The Reno Kid?"

"Well . . . yes." Jupe Jackson cleared his throat. "The man said you left there on the run, after a fight with peace officers."

"I guessed it was someone from around here who read my sign to them Dakota lawmen," the Reno Kid said thoughtfully. "Two thousand reward made 'em reckless. There was shootin' before I got away. What about this Strickland King lease?"

"Come in the back room," Jupe Jackson urged. He pulled the back-room window shades down, turned a key in the back door and locked the other door before he lighted another lamp.

The Reno Kid squinted unsmilingly at the older man's face. Jupe Jackson opened a desk drawer and set out a bottle and glasses. "Drink?"

"Thanks."

Jupe Jackson gulped a drink at the same time and smiled wryly as he sat in an old high-back desk chair which seemed to swallow him.

"You gave me a turn, Considine, speaking out in the dark that way. Now about Cold Spring: Your father had just died and you and your brothers were the heirs. Then your brother was shot and you took it on the run out of here."

"With a posse of Strickland King's men after me and Strickland King's money guaranteeing the reward he got plastered on me for being a kid with guts enough to shoot back when him an' his men gunned Dave down."

"King's witnesses had a story about that which put you and your brother in the wrong," Jupe Jackson said. "Doubtless you have another. The law would have to pass on both stories and any proof. You were under age at the time. Your father's estate hadn't been settled and turned over to you and your brother. So when you vanished there was nothing for the court to do but appoint a trustee. Judge Maxon appointed me. And, as trustee, I sold your cattle at a good price and leased the property to Strickland King at the highest price I could get out of him." The lawyer reached for the bottle again. "I made a good trade. King was expanding and needed your water rights."

"A hell of a trade," the Reno Kid said curtly. "You leased my land to the skunk who gunned my brother and lied about it an' slapped a dead-or-alive reward on me."

"THAT'S right," agreed Jupe Jackson briskly. "I don't mix my feelings in other folk's trouble. Never have and never will. It's bad enough to be their lawyer. I was your trustee with a duty to make the best out of your land. I took the highest offer I could get. King wanted to buy the place. He's ranted and raised hell ever since to make me sell the place instead of lease. Said you'd never be back here and if you did come back you'd be hung for killing one of his men and he might as well buy the place now as later. I even went so far as to put a clause in the lease, that if and when you came back and disapproved of the lease, it was void on your say-so. And there's a large sum of money in the bank to your credit. Outlaw or no outlaw, the ranch and the money are yours. Court isn't sitting now, but all the papers can be signed quickly. The rest is up to you."

"I was too hasty," the Reno Kid admitted. "I thought maybe you were playing King's game."

Jupe Jackson clasped his hands behind his head and spoke tolerantly.

"I can't stop any man from being a damn fool."

"King's lease is busted from now on," the Reno Kid said. "I want his stock off the land quick. Pull out your pen and draw up a lease turning the land over to a lady named Nancy Willis, who lives in South Valley. An' then write a will giving her the land to keep if I'm killed, hung, shot or don't get word back for two years. The lease to run until I stop it. Dollar a year rent."

Jupe Jackson poured a big drink of whiskey and gulped it down.

"Son, you got any idea how much hell all this will turn loose around here?" he asked finally.

"It's legal, isn't it?"

"Great Jupiter, it's too legal!" Jackson said in almost a groan. "Strickland King won't be able to law about it. He'll have to take matters into his own hands. You must know this Willis girl is one of the homesteaders in South Valley. There's been trouble enough about them—an' this will blow everything up. Strickland King won't take it lying down."

"He likes his legal rights. This'll be something legal for him to chew on."

"You like the lady, I gather?" said Jackson.

"I didn't say so."

The lawyer reached for a handkerchief and mopped his forehead.

"Bound to like her or you wouldn't be doing all this. But, son, you ain't doing her any favor. Strickland King's caught with too many cattle in a drought year and short on water anyway. With you outlawed and a reward on your head, you won't be around. But Miss Willis will be, an' what do you suppose King will do about her when he finds she's got his lease? Not to speak of what he might do if he found out she was due to inherit the land? After the homesteaders are run out, King intends to throw cattle in South Valley again. He's said so. This will cut him off to the south for good. You're making bad trouble for that girl."

"She's got trouble enough already, hauling water forty miles each way with ox teams," the Reno Kid said doggedly. "Ever since I left here I've been getting ready to come back and prove it was Long Tom Simms and those other King men who picked a quarrel with Dave that day. Dave and I shot in self-defense. I don't know which one of us killed the King man. When the lawmen up in Dakota tried to arrest me, I knew the reward was still on me and I might as well come back and find out the truth."

"Not much chance of ever doing that," Jackson stated. "You and your brother killed one of those King men. Brady Mahon, the other man who signed the charge against you, is dead. That means Long Tom Simms is the only one left who knows whether or not it was self-defense."

"I figured someone knew the truth," the Reno Kid said. "So I came back. I stopped at the Stinking Rocks for water an' two King riders came along. One of them rec-

ognized me and started shooting. I crippled him. The other got away. I decided to drop down across the Border and wait until things quieted down. But the man who got away met three other King men and they rode after me. Followed me all day yesterday out across Dry Bone Flat to Murphy's Well. And last night

they snuck up on me under cover of the wagon the Willis girl and her brothers had driven out there to load with water. It was dark and every man for himself when they opened fire on me. I killed two of them, shot another up pretty bad and tied the fourth man up. He's gonna swear Miss Willis and her bunch helped me. King will back him up."

"Great Jupiter! Homesteaders, too! They'd better head out of these parts!"

"They're bringing the wounded man back in the wagon," the Reno Kid told him. "I rode ahead with the other one and turned him loose to tell King I was back. He'll be after me before he takes time to bother with those homsteaders. What kind of a sheriff is Tobe Barrett?"

"A good one in a hard job," Jackson said. "Strickland King wants a bootlicking sheriff and Tobe won't lick. I'm looking for King to try to get another man elected next year."

"Can your law protect Miss Willis?"

THE lawyer shrugged. "Judge Meachem will back up Tobe Barrett. No one wanted those homesteaders over in South Valley; not the cattle folks, anyway. But the way Strickland King has barred 'em from water has made folks sorry for them. Part of the town wells are dry. Not enough water around here to help them. Who's going to help you, Considine, when Strickland King comes roaring in with his gunmen to make sure you're arrested and shot or hung? Which he'll do. He furnished the reward money in the first place. It's still on deposit."

"I'll take my chances with King and his gunmen."

Jackson drummed lightly on the chair arm as he frowned thoughtfully. "Tobe Barrett might lock you up until you stand trial legally."

"Hell of a chance I'd have cooped up in jail with Strickland King on the outside dead set to have me shot or hanged."

"Speaking as a lawyer, I'd give you about an even chance," conceded Jackson. "But as a man who's watched Strickland King for more than twenty years, I wouldn't give you one damn bit of a chance. He talks law when it suits him and he'd have a friend shot in the back if it fitted his plans. My advice to you is to leave until things quiet down. Maybe I can do something for you later on."

The Reno Kid smiled. "Good advice. Worth every cent you charge. And while I have my hide, King wipes out those homesteaders. I'm not a homesteader starving for water, or a kid on a range road not sure what to do when King's men pull guns. I'm back. I'll stay. I need a bite to eat and a fresh horse. Does a trustee's duties take in that much service?"

"The court doesn't authorize a trustee to help a man defy the law," said Jupe Jackson briefly. "I'll make out the necessary papers while you're here and you can sign them."

The dry little lawyer selected a clean pen, fresh paper, and began to write rapidly. When papers were made out and signed, he swung his chair around.

"I never did think Dave Considine and his kid brother opened fire on three King men, no matter what was sworn to," he said unemotionally. "Other people didn't either. But the law is the law. You rode off and stayed away. That may hang you yet."

"I rode to keep from bein' left there in the road with Dave. Then

I heard of the reward. I stayed away until I was man enough to meet it."

Jackson peered up, muttering under his breath. "You're young, reckless . . . other folks' troubles on your mind, too. You'll stay here now an' get shot. Jupiter!" He stood up hastily. "Can't help you as a trustee, son. But I can take your case as a lawyer."

The Reno Kid smiled faintly and patted the Winchester cradled in his arm and the holstered gun at his side. "I brought two lawyers along."

"Strickland King will match you five to one and raise you," Jackson said dryly. "He'd like it that way. A good lawyer won't get you shot any quicker than making a hot-headed stand against King."

"All right, you're hired. Now what?"

Jupe Jackson tossed down another drink and considered.

"I'll take your horse to the livery stable and buy you another in case you have to leave town quick. Wait here. And put out that light." The Reno Kid obeyed and Jackson closed the door behind him.

The dark office was quiet. The Reno Kid went into the front room for more water. Through the window he could see two horsemen cantering toward the plaza. King's gunmen would be riding the night now. And out there west of the Valley Nancy Willis would be coming home with her precious water. The lawyer was right. King would destroy the Willises if necessary.

Once a passing man looked into the dark office and went on. He'd hurry to the sheriff if he knew who stood in the dark room. A two-thousand-dollar reward was a mighty big incentive to a man to play bounty hunter. Crafty of Strickland King to keep the reward in force. Dead or alive! No man was safe with that over his head.

A rider dismounted outside. The Reno Kid waited, hand on his gun. Jupe Jackson came quickly into the dark office.

"There's your horse out there," the lawyer said. "Ride over to my house and eat while we plan what to do."

"Should have hired you years ago," the Reno Kid chuckled as he preceded Jackson out the front door. Then he stopped short.

Two men jumped him from the sides of the doorway where they had been waiting. The Kid tried to dodge back and reach his gun. Jupe Jackson blocked him. The lawyer caught his arms from behind, hampered him for the second it took the others to seize his arms.

CHAPTER VI

BAIL FOR THE RENO KID

"YO'RE arrested, Considine," Jackson warned. "Don't make me shoot you! Hold him, Perea!"

"*Caramba!* He's damn wil' cat!"

"I've got his Colt!" Jupe Jackson panted.

"I mighta known a crooked lawyer would trick me!" the Reno Kid raged as a gun muzzle dug in his left side. "Easy with that left arm. It's wounded!"

Handcuffs locked his wrists. The Winchester was snatched away.

"Bring him inside!" Jackson ordered. "I want a receipt for him, Barrett."

"Yuh'll get the reward all right, I guess, Jackson."

"I'll make sure. King is tricky."

"Not as tricky as a dirty lawyer who takes a man's case an' then turns him over to the sheriff!" the Reno Kid growled as they hustled him in the back room.

Jupe Jackson lighted the lamp again and hurriedly scrawled a few lines on a sheet of paper.

Tobe Barrett, the sheriff, was a leathery old-timer with a black mustache, calfskin vest and weathered Stetson. Blue eyes were cold in his seamed face as he turned the prisoner over to his Mexican deputy.

Barrett's voice, too, was cold as he signed the paper.

"The law wants him an' I'm takin' him. But damned if I like the way I got him."

Jupe Jackson's white hair was bristling, his smile was satisfied as he pocketed the receipt for the prisoner.

"It was my duty to have him arrested. He'd have been shot anyway, sooner or later."

"An' you wouldn't have had two thousand in yore britches," Tobe Barrett reminded coldly. "Come along, Considine. Watch him close, Ricardo. He won't take this kindly."

"Don't shoot unless you have to, Perea," Jupe Jackson urged piously.

Ricardo Perea eyed the brisk little lawyer. "Reward ees dead or alive, no? W'at you care? Come, hombre."

Jupe Jackson walked briskly ahead of them.

"Makin' damn sure of his reward!" Tobe Barrett muttered. "It's gettin' so a man can trust nobody any more. Considine, I knowed yore brother. I'm sorry about this."

"Thanks, sheriff."

A PASSING man stopped, stared, turned back to follow them. Two more men fell in to see what was happening. They came to the Owlhead Saloon, a deep, low-roofed adobe building with a long bar, the most popular drinking place in Canfield. Horses were at the Owlhead rack, voices and laughter inside, as Jupe Jackson pushed one of the swinging doors and looked inside.

"Judge Meachem's in here, sheriff. I'd like him to see the prisoner. My treat, too, I guess."

"Someone else'll drink up yore dirty reward money," Tobe Barrett said shortly. "The judge oughta see the prisoner an' hear what you done. Next time court sits he'll know what kind of a lawyer he's got in front of him."

A dozen or more men at the bar and tables turned to stare as the sheriff and his deputy brought the handcuffed prisoner in behind Jupe Jackson.

The Reno Kid remembered something of the white-haired, pink-faced shrewdness of old Judge Meachem, who ran his terms of court with an iron hand. Now the judge turned from the bar with a glass of whiskey in his hand.

"Good evening, Jackson. Evening, sheriff. What's this?"

"Young feller named Considine, judge," Tobe Barrett said. "Charge of shootin' one of Strickland King's men five, six years ago. King put up a reward."

"Hm-m-m. Yes, I remember," Judge Meachem nodded. "Two thousand dollars reward, wasn't it? I believe the money is still on deposit." The judge tossed off his drink and wiped his white mustache. "Good work, Barrett. A tidy little nest egg for you and your deputy."

Jupe Jackson took a folded paper from his coat pocket.

"Here's the sheriff's receipt for the prisoner, judge—made out to me. I get the reward. The sheriff acted on my information."

A grizzled cowman spoke from among the spectators. "You oughta get a bull whip on yore back, Jackson. I knowed his father and

brother an' him. Anybody they ever kilt had it comin' to him!"

That was old Pete Morrison, who had punched cows on the home ranch long years back.

"Thanks, Pete," the Reno Kid said. "But this is the law now. Jackson's kind of law. Strickland King's law."

Judge Meachem nodded as he returned the paper to Jupe Jackson.

"You're entitled to the reward, Jackson. And, gentlemen, the law deserves respect. I'll not hear otherwise."

The Reno Kid grinned mirthlessly. "Tell it to Strickland King. When I hear law after this, I'll look for a smooth-talkin' hypocrite."

Jackson cleared his throat. "Judge, I'm counsel for this prisoner."

"Like hell you are!" the Reno Kid exploded.

"And," Jackson continued calmly, "I'd like to ask the court to order the prisoner released on bail. Evidence of murder isn't conclusive. The prisoner's return shows good faith. The hard-pressed taxpayers shouldn't support the prisoner in idleness until the next term of court. In my opinion a large cash bail, which we are prepared to furnish, will meet the legal requirements."

"A very convincing argument, Mr. Jackson," Judge Meachem said solemnly. He poured another drink and cleared his throat. "I'll have to insist on a large cash bail, Mr. Jackson. Nothing under two thousand dollars would be satisfactory."

"I suggest, judge, that the court take over the two thousand reward, which is on deposit anyway, and hold the money as bail."

"Hm-m-m," said Judge Meachem. "Well, Mr. Jackson, since the money is on deposit, I don't see why it won't serve. Sheriff, the prisoner is admitted to bail. The court orders you to see that no one hinders the prisoner from presenting his person to the court on order."

Pete Morrison let out a whoop.

"Drinks on me, gentlemen!" Jupe Jackson called.

Tobe Barrett looked dazed as he unlocked the handcuffs. "It don't sound right, but I reckon it is if the judge says so. Usin' Strickland King's reward money to set yuh free! Might have knowed Jupe had somethin' bseides a dirty trick up his sleeve."

THE RENO KID caught Jupe Jackson's arm. "You had this all figured out," he accused huskily.

Jupe Jackson winked and answered from the corner of his mouth.

"All you needed was a good lawyer. I had to get you arrested to keep the sheriff from helpin' Strickland King hunt you down tonight. I saw the judge while I was buyin' you a horse and he allowed I was right. Now all you've got to do is keep away from Strickland King's gunmen while we figure a way to meet that murder charge. We—"

"Horses!" the Reno Kid said, and turned, listening, the smile fading from his face.

"Here comes some more to hear the news!" Pete Morrison yelled gleefully. "I'd shore like to see the look on Strickland King's face when he hears what his damn reward done!"

One of the men had stepped to the swinging doors and looked out as riders stopped at the hitch rack out front. He spoke dryly over his shoulder:

"You're gonna see, Morrison. These are King men—an', by Jupiter, King an' his segundo, Tom Simms, are along!"

Jupe Jackson caught the Reno

The Reno Kid burst out of the flame trap to meet killer guns.

Kid's right wrist. "Slip out the back way! This isn't any place for you now!"

"You've made it as good a place as any." The Reno Kid put his back to the bar. His face went bleak and without expression as he waited.

Hurried and dusty, they surged in through the swinging doors, eight of them, carrying rifles and side guns. The first were noisy for drinks as they made for the bar. The two last men in through the swinging doors were Long Tom Simms and Strickland King.

Simms looked the same as he always had to the Reno Kid's narrowed eyes. Long and lean, with corded neck muscles, a hard tight mouth and drooping eyelids that made him look deceptive and slow. And a way of smiling that was friendly at times—until a man learned that Long Tom Simms had no friend but himself.

Strickland King was taller by an inch, gray in his black hair now, eyes cold and bleak in a face that was as arrogant as the set of his shoulders and the walk of him in expensive riding boots into which gray trousers were tucked. His gray coat, open in front, showed the pearl-handled revolver underneath, and the gray silk neckerchief was held by a massive gold tie ring. His eyes were watchful on the room as Long Tom Simms called:

"Sheriff, we want you! There's an outlaw loose around here! That young Considine, who shot Joey Byers six years ago. He killed some more of our men last night and we're out to get him this time."

"Don't know anything about all that," Tobe Barrett drawled. "The man's been arrested on that old charge. Jupe Jackson here gets the reward."

"Jackson gets the reward?" Strickland King broke in, elbowing past his men. A sneer broke over his face. "Know how to look out for yourself, eh, Jackson? Well, you'll get the money."

"He'd better," Judge Meachem said blandly. "The court's accepted the reward money as bail for young Considine. We'll hear all the evidence at the trial."

THE sheriff was standing in front of the Reno Kid, half hiding him from King and his men. But past Barrett's shoulder there was no trouble in seeing the quick flush of rage on King's face.

"Meachem, did you take *my* reward money and let that damn young killer go free?"

Judge Meachem was cold in his answer. "The prisoner's lawyer prevailed on the court to admit the prisoner to bail."

"Who's the lawyer who argued you into a fool move like that?" Strickland King raged.

"Jackson represented the prisoner. You're pretty close to contempt of court in your language." Judge Meachem poured himself another drink.

Strickland King sounded as if he were near to choking. "Jackson just admitted having him arrested!"

Jupe Jackson regarded the bigger man solemnly. "I did my lawful duty and had Considine arrested. And then, as Considine's lawyer, I argued bail. Everything's legal. No need for you to worry."

"Legal!" Strickland King said violently. "You want everything legal, do you? What about those other two men of mine that that young gunman killed last night?"

"Two sides to that," said Jupe Jackson. "I'll demand witnesses."

"You'll get 'em!"

"Don't bother the lady and her brothers," the Reno Kid said softly past the sheriff's shoulder.

Strickland King looked to see who had spoken. Tobe Barrett moved and Long Tom Simms yelled: "*That's him standin' there all the time!* He's growed up, but that's him!"

Simms was streaking for his gun as he spoke. But the Reno Kid's rifle muzzle had already tipped forward ready for a shot and the sheriff drew fast also.

"None of that!" Barrett warned. "The young feller's out on bail an' protected by the law! Ricardo, watch those men!"

"I watch heem," the deputy said stolidly over his gun.

The other King men hadn't recognized the Reno Kid until it was too late to draw. They shuffled uneasily, waiting for a command.

Judge Meachem set his empty glass down carefully as Long Tom Simms slowly held his hands waist high. The other men had hastily moved away from the guns and were watching tensely to see what would happen.

In the moment of quiet the Reno Kid spoke softly:

"I'm back, King. Tear up that lease on my land, an' get your cattle off."

Strickland King had gone immobile again. Angry fires were blazing in his eyes, but he was calm and icy.

"You seem to have all the law on your side, Considine. But I'm a law-abiding man. Simms, I don't want any more trouble over this. Bring the men over to the Buckhorn Bar. We'll let the law handle everything."

Strickland King walked out of the saloon, a tall, gray, icy man with hellfire still glowing in his eyes. Long Tom Simms gave the Reno Kid a scowl and led the other King men out.

"Barkeep, gimme a double rye!" one of the spectators said explosively. "That was too close for comfort."

Jupe Jackson plucked at the Reno Kid's sleeve.

"Come over to my house and let the doctor fix that arm, and get some sleep while you can. And it isn't too late to ride like hell and hide out until I send you word."

"Everything's legal and settled, ain't it?"

"Everything but killing you off," Jupe Jackson told him. "That'll take just as long as King needs to make plans. He knows where he stands now, and what he's got to do."

"I thought so," the Reno Kid nodded. "He's not gunning for me right under the sheriff's and the judge's noses, but he knew what he was goin' to do when he went out of here."

"What?"

"I don't know," said the Reno Kid. "And I don't aim to sit around until King shows me. I'll take it kindly if you'll send the doctor to South Valley to meet the Willis wagon. My arm stopped bleedin' long ago. It can wait a little. I'll take a bite of the free lunch an' go about my business."

"Don't do anything foolish," the white-haired little lawyer pleaded. "I did the best I could, but you're only out on bail, son. Don't give King a chance to say you set out looking for trouble right away. It'll look bad."

"I'll look worse if I let King snap a trap on me, mister."

CHAPTER VII

ULTIMATUM

THE RENO KID slipped out of the back door of the Owlhead and once more became a part of the dark night. Only now it was different. He had found men who weren't after blood money, men who wouldn't jump at Strickland King's bidding.

But there was still Strickland King to reckon with, and the men he *had* been able to buy.

Jupe Jackson had procured a long-legged, powerful sorrel. The Reno Kid rode the horse to a hitch rack at the end of the plaza. Here he was a stranger in the shadows as he skirted on around the plaza on foot.

King and his men were in the Buckhorn Bar just ahead. Long Tom Simms was in there. Simms, who had cold-bloodedly triggered Dave Considine to death six years back and would as callously swear on the witness stand that Dave and his kid brother had started the trouble.

The Reno Kid stepped into a dark doorway as men came out of the Buckhorn and forked horses at the rack.

"Bring the doctor to Big Spring by sunrise," Strickland King's voice said. "If Tex is still alive when the boys get him there, I want him pulled through if we have to light a fire under the devil. And keep away from Considine."

They left the plaza fast, riding west out of town. The two men left behind went back into the Buckhorn. The Reno Kid stepped out of the doorway and saw the two in the door light. Long Tom Simms had ridden off with King.

Over near the Owlhead a Chinese served meals. The Reno Kid crossed there and ordered ham and eggs and black coffee. He felt better as he followed the Chinaman's directions to the doctor's house.

Old Doc Thomas, he found, was dead. The new doctor was a young man from the East, earnest and concerned about a man who had been shot.

"I'll put your arm in a sling and you'd better go to bed for a day or so," he said briskly as he finished dressing the arm.

"Sure, doc," the Reno Kid assented amiably, and when he was outside on the fresh horse, he threw the sling away and rode west out of

town. West, toward the Big Spring ranch, through country the night could not hide. As a boy, Slim Considine had known every mile of this country. And now the Reno Kid, branded as a killer by Strickland King, had come back and was riding home.

The ranchhouse had been adobe, with a bunkhouse and corrals. The low ridges around the spot were studded with rock outcrops, patches of brush and gnarled trees.

The Big Spring boiled from the ledges at the foot of a rocky ridge. Some said it was a natural spring, some said it was the water of Blind Creek that vanished twenty-odd miles to the north after rushing out of the mountains.

But the Big Spring water had never failed. Tonight there was water in the Big Spring, and water backed up in the draws half a mile below the Spring.

Strickland King had thrown a dam between two rocky ridges that pinched together where the water channel passed toward South Creek. The area behind the dam he had fenced in. The night outside the fence was uneasy with hundreds of restless cattle that waited to be admitted to the water.

A match flared off to the left about where the dam would be. King had guards there. The dry hoof-packed ground, the fence and water beyond, and the number of cattle told the story.

King was using the Big Spring flow for his main water, moving cattle in from his own drought-afflicted range. Take the Big Spring away now at the height of the drought and Strickland King would be close to ruin.

But if the Big Spring water was kept from the homesteaders, they would be driven out of South Valley, and no man between the mountains and the Border would be as strong as Strickland King.

LOOKING back now, it was possible to see how Strickland King had planned all this through twenty years and more. Buying a man out here, crowding a man out there, coldbloodedly moving step by step toward his goal.

Dave Considine's murder had been one step. Dave's kid brother had not mattered much in King's plans. The reward should have taken care of him.

But the reward hadn't worked. Judge Meachem and Jupe Jackson had kept the law straight in the matter of the Big Spring ownership.

Government law had let the homesteaders in South Valley. Drought and Strickland King had almost settled that problem. Only the courage of Nancy Willis and a few others like her held out now against King.

The Reno Kid was thoughtful as he rode back from the fenced-in water. King would lose half a lifetime of planning if he lost the Big Spring now. He'd fight to hold it. Killing wouldn't matter. King's face had told that when he stalked out of the Owlhead back there in Canfield.

King was up to something tonight. The wounded man he wanted doctored must be the man Nancy Willis was bringing in. That meant King had sent men riding fast to meet the homesteader's wagon.

They were bringing the man here, the nearest point to South Valley. King wanted him to live at all costs. Some trick King was planning suited him better than ordering his men out on a gun hunt after the Reno Kid.

Midnight was long past. The Reno Kid had ridden leisurely from

Canfield, favoring his horse, fighting to keep awake and stand the pain in his swollen, feverish arm. Fatigue made each movement an effort. Bloodshot eyes closed and smarted even in the dark. But while night masked his movements, there was time to find out what King was up to. The doctor wasn't due yet and they wouldn't be expecting the Reno Kid out here tonight.

A yellow patch of light marked a window of the old ranchhouse. The Reno Kid rode easily beyond the next ridge, tied the reins to a cedar branch and crossed the ridge on foot toward the back of the house.

His pockets still bulged with the cartridges he had brought from Murphy's Well, the smooth barrel of the Winchester was cool in his hand. The night wind whispering in the cedars and brush covered the slight sound of his advance.

Off in the south a gunshot snapped thin and clear on the night. A moment later a rider galloped south from the house. There were no more shots.

Puzzled, the Reno Kid sat on the ground and waited. In a little while he heard several other riders returning. Then the rattle of wheels that came to the front of the house had stopped.

That would be the wounded man Nancy Willis had been bringing home. Men were talking at the front of the house when the Reno Kid reached the back.

"Put him on the floor," Strickland King's voice said impatiently. "He'll be all right. Bring those damned nesters in."

Then a man swore out in front. "I'll break yore neck if yuh bite me again, yuh little rattler!"

Jerry Willis' shrill reply trembled with anger. "If I had me a gun I'd show you! Leggo my sister's arm!"

"Jerry! Please be quiet!"

That was Nancy Willis, weary, close to tears, if the sound of her voice was any indication.

Jerry was close to tears, too. "Callin' us horse thieves an' killers an' takin' us away from our wagon like we was headed for a lynchin'! If Slim'd been there we'd 'a' kilt a couple more!"

Bud Willis spoke curtly. "Shut up, Jerry!"

The old adobe ranchhouse had weathered badly. Glass in the back windows was broken. Light gleamed through a partly opened door into the front room and Strickland King's cold voice was clear.

THE boy isn't telling us anything we don't know. My men tell me you were caught using two of our horses, which makes you horse thieves in any cow country. You sided with an outlaw and helped kill two of my men."

"They oughta all been kilt!" Jerry gulped.

"Jerry!" Nancy said angrily. And she answered King as angrily: "You know that isn't so! Your men took possession of our wagon and slipped up to Murphy's Well in the dark pretending to be our party! They started shooting without warning. Everything that happened to them was their own fault. Two of our oxen were shot at the same time. We *had* to use your horses. We were bringing them back to you."

"Thieving homesteaders weren't wanted in these parts in the first place," Strickland King continued in the same cold voice. "Those that had good sense moved out. You there, by the wall. What's your name?"

"Name of Meeks," was the mumbled reply.

"A hang rope will stretch that

scrawny neck longer if I don't get the truth out of you."

The Reno Kid could almost see the hard-faced gunmen standing in there, and the gray threat of Strickland King's face. Like death itself to a drought-whipped homesteader more used to plow reins than to guns.

"Ain't any reason why I wouldn't tell the truth," Meeks answered huskily.

"I want the truth that you'll swear to in court against that young killer who's under arrest in Canfield!" King said metallically. "And if I get the truth, I'll see that you're on your feet again with an outfit and money to get out of these parts and start over in better shape somewhere else. That goes for all of you. This outlaw shot my men as soon as he learned who they were. Shot them down in cold blood!"

"No!" Nancy cried. "Your men shot first!"

Strickland King ignored her. "Meeks, you were there. What's the truth, damn you?"

CHAPTER VIII

THE END OF A RANGE HOG

THE nester was silent for a moment. Then he faltered: "Hit was dark. A man couldn't see much. Mighta been the way you say."

"You'd swear that in court?"

"I reckon so."

"You're a worse coward than I thought, Meeks!" Nancy Willis said fiercely.

"I've got kids an' the old woman waitin' with no water much nor food," the nester mumbled. "All I aim to do is get home an' mind my business. If I seen somethin', I seen it."

"You won't regret it, mister," Strickland King promised. "Tex here will swear the same. So will his partner who got away before Considine could kill him."

"You're a liar!" Jerry cried shrilly. "Slim promised he wasn't goin' to kill that skunk! I wisht—"

There was a slap and the sound of someone falling. "Keep your mouth shut or yuh'll get worse!" growled a voice that sounded like Long Tom Simms.

"Brave men!" Nancy blazed. "What else can you think of?"

"Horsethieves and killers," Strickland King told her, unmoved. "You've got your last chance to tell the truth about that young killer."

"You heard us," drawled Bud.

"I heard you," said Strickland King. "And I'm wondering what your sister will do if something happens to you tonight. Men in these parts make short work of nesters who steal horses and mix in gun trouble. After I leave you, I can't stop anything that may happen."

"Bud, he means it!" Nancy gasped.

"Nesters find plenty o' trouble in cow country," Long Tom Simms sneered.

"A doctor is coming here," King informed them. "That leg could be fixed and you'd have no more worries."

"Listening to a skunk like you worries me," Bud Willis assured him calmly.

Baffled rage colored Strickland King's voice for the first time.

"Simms, I'm riding back to the ranch. I don't want any trouble with the law. We've got proof that'll hang Considine. Let the lady and her brothers go."

"We'll give 'em hosses to ride home," Simms told him stolidly. "What happens after that ain't any of our business."

The Reno Kid was skirting the house when he heard Strickland King's reply. "The law will handle

everything. I wash my hands of the matter."

A four-horse team, a light wagon and half a dozen saddle horses were standing in front of the house as Strickland King strode out to the big bay he had ridden from Canfield. There was a gun pressing into King's back before he knew what was happening.

"Reach!" said the Reno Kid.

KING dropped the reins and obeyed. The Reno Kid shoved him around for a shield as Simms came out of the house.

"What the hell!" Simms exclaimed loudly as he saw King facing him with lifted arms. Then Simms clawed for his gun and yelled as he dodged back against the man following him out of the doorway. "Trouble out here! Git out the back way!"

"Stop them, King!" the Reno Kid ordered.

"Considine's got a gun in my back!" Strickland King said in a strangled voice. "Wait, men!"

Simms had dodged over to one side of the doorway. The man behind him had ducked back into the house. Through the window the Reno Kid glimpsed several others breaking for the back door. King's shout brought quiet for a moment, and in that moment the Reno Kid's harsh words carried.

"You cut bait for a killer an' got him! King an' I are taking the homesteaders to Canfield in the wagon! Better warn 'em to keep out of it, King. Tell 'em to hand their guns an' belts over an' keep outta this!"

"Slim!" Jerry Willis shrieked.

"Simms, he'll do it!" Strickland King cried in a strangled voice. "Handle your men!"

"Boys, you heard it!" Simms called harshly. "Shuck yore guns out here!"

"There's only one feller got King!" a man yelled incredulously from the corner of the house.

"One's enough," the Reno Kid said. "Move fast!"

Long Tom Simms sounded baffled. "Come out, men, an' get it over with!"

Two of them came scowling and unwilling out the front door. The Reno Kid couldn't see the men who had dashed out the back way. He looked for them while he kept a watchful eye on King and the men by the doorway.

There were seven or eight around at least, and others down by the dam. Hard men, gun-hungry for a chance at the lone stranger who had tricked them. Chances were they'd try something before the wagon got to Canfield. The Reno Kid knew he'd been a fool to try this, but there hadn't been anything else to do.

"Back toward the wagon," he told his prisoner—and, as they moved, a rifle shot crashed out beyond the end of the house where one of King's men had circled.

A shock on the right shoulder made the Reno Kid lurch. They'd tricked him, after all. And now not even King's death would do much to help Nancy and her brothers.

King was shrinking away as the Reno Kid started to squeeze the trigger. And then the scream that came from Strickland King froze the Kid's finger before he could shoot. Like nothing human, that scream. And King wasn't shrinking away; he was falling like a log of wood with the scream trailing off as he landed heavily and groveled.

"King's shot!" Simms bawled as the Reno Kid dived past the body toward the lighted door.

The rifle spoke again and missed.

A gun licked fire from the spot where Simm's voice still echoed, and the Reno Kid's six-gun was already crashing at the spot.

Death had caught Simms and the two men out front by surprise. They scattered from the Reno Kid's blasting gun. Other guns out in the night opened up and the Reno Kid ran a gauntlet of screaming lead to the door. A bullet wrenched the brim of his sombrero, another grazed the back of his shoulder, and the last shot roared from the Colt as he hurled himself through the doorway, calling: "Put out the light!"

He glimpsed the wounded man on the floor. Meeks, Bud Willis and Jerry; and Nancy Willis darting to the oil lamp in the wall bracket. He slammed the door as the light went out, and the back room door banged shut an instant later.

Jerry's voice broke with excitement from the back of the room. "I closed this door, Slim! Gimme a gun!"

The Reno Kid jumped aside as lead splintered through the front-door planks.

"Jerry, get your sister down on the floor!" he ordered.

"What happened out there?" asked Bud Willis.

"They tried to gun me in the dark an' hit King in the back instead," the Reno Kid panted as he finished reloading the six-gun. "Can you stand an' use this rifle?"

Nancy Willis spoke beside him. "Bud can't. Give me that gun."

"They aim to get us now," the Reno Kid said as he gave her the gun. "You should 'a' done what King wanted. Like you said, this ain't any of your business. Maybe it ain't too late to make a bargain with 'em."

Guns were blasting outside, lead smashed through the door, screamed in the windows as Nancy Willis answered unsteadily: "Of course we won't."

BLOOD from his wounded shoulder was wet on the Reno Kid's wrist as he caught her hand and pleaded with her. "It'll get you out of this! I'm done for anyway if they can get me! I'm Slim Considine. This is my land. I'm taking it back from King. They'll gun me down for that. I made a will tonight givin' you this land. Don't mix up in my business an' lose everything!"

"You're wounded!" Nancy cried.

"It ain't much. Keep flat against the wall here. Will you tell Simms out there that you'll go into court like Meeks?"

"No!" said Nancy, and she was crying. "You willed your land to *me?*"

"Jupe Jackson's got the paper."

"Why?"

"I don't know," said the Reno Kid, and his throat grew tight as he realized she was still holding his bloody hand while they crouched against the thick adobe wall. "I'm a liar!" he gulped. "I couldn't get you out o' my mind. I guess I started lovin' you when I lit a match out there at Murphy's Well an' saw your face!"

"I thought Jerry was making it up."

"I told him," said the Reno Kid. "Now will you make a deal with King's men an' get out of here safe?"

"Not when it means putting a rope around the neck of someone I love!"

"Oh, my gosh!" the Reno Kid gasped. "Say it again!"

She was clinging to his hand, and the pain in his swollen left arm didn't matter as he caught her close for a moment. Her lips were there, yielding and sweet, until ricocheting lead screamed across the room and

knocked adobe plaster down on them.

"I've *got* to get you outta this!" the Reno Kid groaned as he released her.

"Someone's in the back of the house, Slim!" Jerry blurted.

"Stay down close to the wall," the Reno Kid told Nancy. "Never mind usin' that rifle unless they bust in."

In this house the Reno Kid could move with his eyes closed and know each foot. Beyond that back wall was the kitchen and the small back porch that was built like a shed.

A gush of red flame and black oily smoke filled the kitchen as he jerked open the door. A gun roared at him across the flames. Long Tom Simms had emptied the kerosene can, lighted the fire, and was lingering in the porch doorway for the chance to get Dave Considine's kid brother himself.

The Reno Kid ducked as a bullet drove splinters from the doorway into his cheek. No need to wonder about the end now. This fire couldn't be stopped. The old house would burn fiercely inside the adobe walls, the heavy dirt-covered roof would fall in, the flames would drive them out into the open to be cut down by the waiting guns. Not even Nancy would be spared.

Long Tom Simms had done this—Long Tom Simms, who had gunned Dave down without a chance and cold-bloodedly backed every move of Strickland King.

The Reno Kid was plunging into the fire before he realized what he was doing. The flames licked up about him, the stench of burning oil seared his nostrils, the bucking Colt was slippery inside his bloody hand.

Simms' sleepy eyes had gone wide, the corded neck looked longer and the tight mouth loose in the leaping red light as the Reno Kid came through the fire. Spurting flame from Simms' gun clubbed the Reno Kid in the side—and then the Kid's gun spun Long Tom Simms half around in the doorway and sprawled him back on the porch. There was light to see the black hole open up between his eyes.

THE KID caught the six-gun from beside Simms' sprawled body and plunged on through the shed porch into the night. Each breath was suddenly a gasping agony, but he could move, could shoot, could still hunt the King gunmen down in the night while they were close around the burning house.

He saw a lurking shadow to the left and went at it with blasting guns. The man weaved back into the night, running from the fury that had burst out of the flames. Sobbing for breath, the Reno Kid staggered against the house, reloaded the guns and lurched on around the end of the house.

"You fellers need help?" a voice called in front of him, and the Reno Kid's spurting guns cut off the words. In ears deafened by the gunfire he heard a shout of alarm. "He kilt Simms an' now he's out gunnin' in the open!"

In front of the house, the Reno Kid lurched with cocked Colts, and realized suddenly that the other guns had gone silent. The wagon teams had bolted away, saddle horses had moved.

North of the house one shot lashed sharply. Another answered. A man yelled: "Yuh got me!"

"Hell, Latigo! I didn't know who yuh was!"

Lurching toward the voices, the Reno Kid tripped over a body. Strickland King's body. The rancher hadn't moved after his own man had shot him down.

Well out from the house a man shouted: "King's dead an' Simms is dead! This ain't no fight of mine no more! I'm leavin'!"

The drum of a running horse broke away from the spot.

"Me, too, boys!" A second horse followed a moment later. And then another.

The Reno Kid stood gasping and heard them catch horses out there in the night and ride away from a fight that had no profit now that King and his segundo were dead and death was loose from the burning house and stalking them in the darkness.

The dancing, crackling flames were gleaming red behind the house when the Reno Kid lurched to the door and called: "I'm comin' in, Nancy. They're gone!"

Nancy's arms went about him as he staggered into the doorway. "Slim! What did they do to you? When you went out through that fire I thought I'd never see you again!"

The Reno Kid leaned against the doorway, trying to forget the waves of weakness and the fire in his side as he held her.

"Had to come back and see you once more, anyway," he said huskily. He heard Nancy cry out as his legs buckled—and then there was no more life or sound in the darkness about him.

THE clear bright dawn was flooding the sky, smoke was swirling lazily above the gutted house when the Reno Kid heard Nancy say: "Doctor! His eyes are open!"

He was lying on a blanket a short distance from the house. Nancy was kneeling by him. Horses and men were there. Coffee was boiling over a fire. Tobe Barrett, the sheriff, and Jupe Jackson were coming from the cook fire.

"You're getting stronger," the young doctor said encouragingly, as he felt the Kid's pulse.

The Reno Kid grinned weakly. "Sheriff, I'll be handy for that trial and hangin' yet."

"What trial?" Tobe Barrett said.

Jupe Jackson was grinning as he brought a bottle out of his hip pocket.

"Simms is dead," he said. "There isn't any witness against you, young man. Strickland King is dead and no one else has got much interest in seeing you tried for anything. When the doctor told me he couldn't meet Miss Willis' wagon because King's men were bringing him out here to treat a wounded man, I got the sheriff to ride out this way with some men. I had an idea King was up to something. We've got the whole story. If I could get King into court for this, I'd pin him cold. But he's dead and, as your lawyer, I'd say stop worrying and get well."

Nancy was holding the Reno Kid's hand again as she knelt there. "I'll take him home and nurse him there," she told them happily.

"Probably be good for him," the young doctor approved. "He'll need care."

Jerry Willis spoke excitedly at the Reno Kid's head: "Slim, are you really comin' to stay with us?"

The thin youngster was flushed and excited as the Reno Kid turned his head and grinned up from the blanket.

"I'm comin' to stay with you—and marry Nancy. Think it'll be all right?"

"Gosh!" Jerry gulped. His eyes were shining. "It'll be swell! We're gonna have an outlaw in the family! *Gosh!*"

THE END.

As Carson reached out to take the Ute warrior's extended hand, the treacherous Indian suddenly grasped his rifle and tried to take it from him.

THE STORY OF THE WEST

told in pictures and text by

GERARD DELANO

In 1840 there was a growing desire among the leading spirits in Texas to extend its borders westward to the Rio Grande and to include the city of Santa Fe. It was believed New Mexico was ripe for revolt and that the acquisition of its territory would be a simple matter.

In 1841 the first Texas-Santa Fe expedition was launched. This expedition met with nothing but disaster. A traitor among the Texans revealed their plans to Governor Armijo, who not only clapped the members of the expedition into prison, but subjected many of them to torture.

All this, of course, fanned the hatred of the Texans for Armijo into hotter flame. The republic was too small and weak to fight a war with Mexico, so a policy of general harassment of the Mexicans was put into effect.

In 1843 a large caravan left Independence bound for Santa Fe. This unusually rich wagon train belonged to Governor Armijo and several other wealthy Mexicans.

At Walnut Creek it was learned that a large body of Texans under Colonel Snively was waiting to attack the caravan as soon as it reached Mexican territory. The plight of the caravan was desperate for they knew they had no chance against the rifles of the Texans.

At this time, to the joy of the Mexicans, a lone rider rode into their midst. This was the famous Kit Carson, whose fearless reputation was already well established. Here was their savior!

They promptly offered Carson three hundred dollars to take a message through urging Armijo to rush troops to the border to insure their safe passage to Santa Fe. Carson accepted.

Stopping at Bents' Fort, he learned that the bloodthirsty Utes were in war paint against the whites and were camped on the Trail to the south. He had to make a wide circle of the encampment.

At Taos, Carson learned that already a hundred soldiers had been sent along the Cimarron route of the trail to meet the caravan, and that Governor Armijo planned to leave at once with six hundred more. From Armijo, Kit received an answer which he was to take back as swiftly as possible to the waiting caravan.

Carson set out on the return journey with one Mexican boy as company. Since he now knew the size and exact location of the Ute camp, he felt perfectly confident of giving the Indians the go-by. Possibly this caused him to relax some of his habitual caution, for, as he and the boy, both walking and leading their mounts, rounded a bend in the Trail, four dangerous-looking Ute warriors sprung out from behind a huge boulder and started toward them. One, advancing with a smile, held out his band. As Carson reached out to take it, however, the Ute made a quick grab at his rifle.

There was a brief struggle for possession of the gun, while with rifle raised, the Mexican boy covered the other three Utes. With a sudden wrench and twist, the wiry Carson tore his rifle free from the clutch of the Indian.

For the next half hour the Utes circled and maneuvered for position, trying by every means to frighten the whites or to make them change position so they could kill them without risking the loss of two of their own number. But all their ruses failed. At last, seeing their efforts were useless, the Utes, grunting their disgust and disappointment, took themselves off.

A few days later, after traveling fast and hard, Carson and his companion safely reached Bents' Fort where they learned it was unnecessary to proceed farther as the Texans had been overtaken and disarmed by Captain Cooke of the United States army, and had agreed to return quietly to their homes.

This, and other similar incidents, led to Mexico's closing the Santa Fe Trail by decree of 1843 to all commerce from the United States. But within a year the order was rescinded due to the storm of protest which had risen, and by the spring of 1844 the long lines of covered wagons were again rolling along the Trail.

NEXT WEEK: RANGERS ON THE WARPATH

RINGERS IS FIVE!

BY S. OMAR BARKER

FUNNY what a little thing it takes, sometimes, to fracture a friendship. I recollect a case when I was dough wranglin' for the Bar X B up on the Vermejo, where the cause of a bust-up between two fellers that was *muy compadres*, as the Mex say, wasn't nothin' but a foolish little ol' game o' pitchin' horseshoes.

Ever since they got big enough to climb a horse without leadin' him up to a stump, Clabe Twitchell and Spike Bassett had been saddle sidekicks. They'd drunk out o' the same cow tracks, washed in the same bucket, lit from the same match and been bit by the same bedbugs as far back as anybody that knowed 'em could remember.

Even sparkin' the same gal hadn't put no undue strain on their bonds of buckaroo buddyhood. The gal married a third party, anyway. You'd 've thought Clabe's takin'

on a deputy sheriff's commission would split the trail wide open between 'em, for it was the nester vote that had elected Sheriff Locker, and Spike Bassett was red-hot on the side of the big owners. But nope. Not bein' a regular paid deputy, Clabe figgered on continuin' his job punchin' Bar X B cows jest the same, but the ramrod figgered different.

"I hate to do it, Clabe," he says, "for I not only got no kick on your saddle work, but I also been countin' on you to help us beat them 5 Slash peg bumpers in the fall horseshoe pitchin' toornament. Nevertheless an' to wit, I'll be dingbusted if I'll put up with ary man wearin' one of Sam Locker's tin badges on my pay roll. You're fired!"

To which Spike Bassett announces that if Clabe Twitchell is fired, ditto for him; with the results that the ramrod changes his mind an' decides not to fire either of 'em just at present, on the grounds that two cowboys which savvy both cow work and horseshoe pitchin' are just too dingbusted many to lose at one crack.

ONE Sunday evenin' Clabe and Spike are pitchin' a friendly game out in the lee of the bunkhouse when a stranger with acorn-shaped eyes and a fade-away chin comes ridin' up on a jiggle-footed bay pony. He's got a snug-tied roll on back of his saddle and he reins up and sidle-sets the kak as familiar as a brand inspector arrivin' at the shippin' pens.

Ol' Clabe has just throwed a "leaner"—meanin' a shoe which is standin' tilted up against the stake. Also, his other shoe is closer to the stake than either of Spike's.

"Four onto seventeen—twenty-one. Your game, Clabe," says Spike, pickin' up his shoes.

"How in the devil you figger that?" inquires the stranger, not even waitin' to be howdied.

Bein' a civil sort of a cuss, Clabe pauses long enough to answer him.

"Why, one point for close," he explains, "an' three for the leaner."

"Accordin' to the official rules," says the stranger, as full of authority as a yearlin' bull in a bunch of calves, "a leanin' shoe ain't got no special value except for bein' close to the stake. The correct score on that last pitch is two. An' twenty-one ain't game, neither. Accordin' to the official rules, it's fifty. Them stakes ain't set right, neither. Accordin' to—"

"Your game an' your pitch, Clabe," says Spike, plumb turnin' his back on the babblin' stranger.

"But if leaners don't count but one, Spike," says Clabe, kind o' doubtful, "then it wasn't my game. An' if—"

"If my Aunt Jenny had wheels she'd be a bicycle," busts in Spike. "Anybody but a damn fool knows leaners is three. Shoot!"

"Well, you don't need to git quirty about it," replies Clabe. "After all, if we ain't been playin' this game accordin' to the official rules, looks like it's time we was findin' it out. Now if a game is sure 'nough fifty instid of twenty-one like this feller says, then—"

"Then Christmas comes on the Fourth of July, rattlesnakes wear mittens an' hell ain't but a yard wide!" snorts ol' Spike. "What you kickin' about? You won this last game, didn't you?"

"That's jest it," Clabe insists. "Either I win it fair, or I don't want it. An' if leaners don't count but one, then—"

"How much you fellers count a ringer?" inquires the stranger.

"Five. An' what's it to yuh?" Spike's kind o' got his neck bowed.

"It ain't a dang thing to me," shrugs the stranger. "Only, if I was goin' to play a game, I'd want to play it right. Accordin' to the official rules, a ringer only tallies three."

"Is that a fack?" Clabe sounds plumb interested. "By golly, Spike, it looks like there's a number of things about this game we been doin' wrong."

"I wouldn't doubt it," says the stranger. "Where's the boss of this outfit? I'm lookin' for a job, an' if he puts me on, I'll git you fellers straightened out on these horseshoe rules."

"Fine!" Clabe exclaims. "You'll find Taylor up at the big house. Explain to him that you're a horseshoe expert an' he'll hire you sure as little calves have got big ears. Lemme see, now, if a leaner—"

"Clabe," busts in Spike Bassett, plenty edgy, as the stranger jogs on, "a leaner is three points, an' it's your pitch!"

Clabe looks at him kind o' funny, then pitches his first shoe, and it's a ringer.

"By golly, *there's* three points anyhow," he says, "unless—"

"Five," interrupts Spike.

"But accordin' to the official rules, it's only—" begins Clabe.

"Official rules!" Spike busts in on him plumb snorty, "I growed up countin' a ringer five and I aim to die thataway!"

"Dammit, Spike," says Clabe, kind o' reproachful, "you got no call to git your bristles up! You know we ain't never seen no printed copy of the official rules. The way I figger, this gentleman has, an'—"

"Five," busts in Spike again. "Take it or leave it!"

There's somethin' about the saw-toothed way he says it that puts the bow into ol' Clabe's neck right now.

"All right, shorthorn," he says, mighty cold and quiet, "if that's the way you feel about it, I'll leave it!"

So sayin', he throws down his horseshoes an' stalks off as stiff-tailed as a tomcat passin' a bulldog.

An' beginnin' right then them two former *compadres* plumb quit even speakin' to each other.

JUST like Clabe prophesied, when the stranger drops a delicate hint that he ain't wholly unfamiliar with the art of heavin' horseshoes, Taylor, the ramrod, puts him on. Next mornin' it ain't good daylight yet—in fact I'm just rollin' out the biskits for breakfast—when I hear a lot of thuddadud outside and dang if it ain't this new hand out there wieldin' a pick and a spade.

"What you diggin' fer, bug-eye?" I inquires. "Fishworms or buried treasure?"

"I'm fixin' up this horseshoe-pitchin' court so's it'll be official," he says. "The rules say it's got to be more or less loose clay around the stakes. Hard-packed like you fellers had it, a shoe'll bounce around like a beheaded chicken, no matter how good you throw it. An' don't call me Bug-eye. My name's Bill Smith."

"Them fancy names is too hard to remember," I says. "I'll stick to Bug-eye. Couldn't that there job have waited anyways till daylight? Maybe Clabe or some of the boys would've helped you."

"A little work before breakfast won't hurt me, I reckon," he says. "I was talkin' to this Clabe Twitchell last night. He's a deputy sheriff, ain't he?"

"Well, he's got a badge," I says, and limps back to my cookin'.

It happens the crew is mostly

workin' out from ranch headquarters at the time, which often leaves time for a round or two of horseshoe pitchin' before dark of evenin's. All of us does some flingin' of the hoof irons when the notion strikes us, but as it's only Clabe Twitchell and Spike Bassett's that's in the champeenship class, the rest of us are more in the habit of squattin' around watchin' them. That ain't only because it's a pleasure to watch somebody that can toss ringers purty near whenever they've a mind to, but also so as to give them the main chance to practice. For it's them two we'll be bettin' on against the 5 Slash when the work's all done, come fall.

That first evenin' after the arrival of Mr. Bug-eye Bill Smith, Spike Bassett takes one look at the new court, then goes and picks up the old iron pins that the stranger has throwed aside in favor of longer ones, paces off twelve yards on the hard-packed ground a few feet to one side an' drives 'em in. Clabe Twitchell, who is takin' a few practice tosses on the new court, acts like he don't even know Spike is around, but Bug-eye Bill speaks right up.

"Accordin' to the official rules," he says, "them stakes are supposed to be forty feet apart."

"Maybe you'd like to try movin' 'em," suggests Spike, chilly as frost on a wagon wheel.

"And accordin' to the rules—" Bug-eye is all set to continue with his free advice, but Clabe Twitchell pulls him by the arm.

"Don't waste breath arguin' with a mule, Bill," he says. "Is there anything in the rules about how a man is supposened to hold his shoe?"

"No," says Bug-eye, "but here's the way *I* hold 'em."

He picks up a horseshoe to demonstrate, and they all crowd around to see how the expert does it—that is, all except me and ol' Spike Bassett. Spike jest stands off to hisself, lookin' as lonesome as an old surly that's been whipped out o' the herd; an' me, I'm settin' on the wood pile.

"Well, Sidewinder," Spike grins kind o' rueful at me, "looks like ever'body's gone to church but you an' me. Want to pitch a game?"

"Plain," I inquires, "or official?"

So that's the line-up: Clabe and the other boys earnestly pitchin' rules; and right alongside of 'em, me and Spike jest pitchin' horseshoes. But seems like it's hard for Spike to keep his eyes off the other court. He makes his comments plenty loud for everybody to hear, mostly hoorawin' Clabe.

Purty soon he picks up an old termater can, flattens out the top and fastens it onto his shirt. Then ever' time he starts to pitch he spits on it and polishes it with his sleeve.

"I can't decide which helps a man the most, Sidewinder," he observes plumb solemn, "one of these here deputy sheriff badges or a set of rules."

EVEN the back of Clabe's neck shows how mad he's gittin', but he seems determined that Spike ain't goin' to git no raise out of him. It's plain, too, that his pitchin' ain't by no means up to par, maybe due to the wrothy state of his mind, or maybe to the extra distance or the new way he's holdin' the horseshoes.

For a feller that claims to know the rules like a range boss knows his brand book, this Bug-eye Bill ain't doin' so good, neither. In fact, it's gittin' on towards dark before anybody on the "official" court makes a ringer. Finally Clabe drops one over with the open end so near past the peg that it's goin' to require a straightedge to see if it's a ringer

or not. Him and Bug-eye are jest stoopin' over to measure it when another horseshoe comes zizzin' right under their noses, knocks Clabe's shoe to hell and gone and settles for a good snug ringer its own self.

Clabe straightens up, stiff as a ramrod.

"Wh'o threw that?" he inquires, mighty edgy.

"Gosh! Excuse *me!*" I says, foresmellin' a ruckus if Clabe is allowed to blame Spike Bassett for it. "It's gittin' so dark, I must of throwed at the wrong stake!"

"Yeah?" says Clabe. He knows there ain't nobody on the place that could make a pitch like that except Spike. For a second it looks like he's goin' to jump him for it, too, but Spike beats him to it by inquirin' of Mr. Smith what the official rules have got to say in a case like that.

"Well, I'll tell yuh," says Bug-eye. "Accordin' to the rules these here courts is too close together. You got to move your stakes over about a—"

"Maybe you'd like to try movin' 'em for me," drawls Spike.

"Not me," says Smith. "I done wore blisters on my hands fixin' *one* official court. If you want another one, make it yourself."

The further possibilities of fight is interrupted by the arrival of the ramrod.

"How you makin' out under the official rules, boys?" he inquires.

"Why, purty good," says Clabe. "Only—"

"You better be," says the ramrod. "I just been over an' notified them 5 Slash yoodlums that any matches they play hereafter with this outfit, is goin' to be accordin' to Hoyle."

"You mean accordin' to Smith, don't you?" drawls Spike. "How in tarnation do we know this wanderin' whifflebird ain't makin' up all these newfangled rules out of his own head?"

"Because he ain't," says Clabe, plumb stubborn. "He's got a copy of the rules in his duffle bag."

"Anybody here seen 'em?" inquires Spike.

"Well . . . no, they ain't," Bug-eye admits. "Y'see, I figgered I'd better digest 'em an' git 'em straight in my own mind first so's to kind o' save argument."

"So as you could play Mr. Smart over a bunch of iggerunits, you mean," I observes. "I've knowed preachers that didn't want folks readin' the Bible fer fear they'd find out they knowed as much about what it meant as the preacher."

"Course I ain't no preacher," begins Bug-eye. "I'm jest—"

"A hoss thief, most likely," Spike says dryly. "But the point is, if there's horseshoe rules in black and white that says a ringer don't count but three, why don't you trot 'em out?"

"All right," says Bug-eye. "Come inside an' light a lamp!"

"Wait!" says Clabe Twitchell, but as him an' Spike ain't on speakin' terms, he addresses his remarks to me.

"SIDEWINDER," he says, "I call you to witness that once he sees the official rules in print, a certain party here present agrees to quit bein' a mullethead an' abide by 'em."

"Sidewinder," says ol' Spike, kind o' mockin' him, "I call on you to inform a certain party here present that totin' a tin badge for a nester sheriff don't give him no license to lay down the law to cowhands on horseshoe pitchin' nor nothin' else. If I knowed how to speak jackass language, I'd tell him myself."

"Boys," I says, "both of you are

a couple of childish chuckleheads, fallin' out thisaway over nothin'."

But it don't do no good.

As for Bug-eye Smith, he's sure 'nough got a copy of them rules.

Spike, however, seems more interested in a lot of scrawly pen marks around the margins than he is in the rules—little snaky-wavy dinguses like a feller might make to git his pen to flowin' good.

"What's them?" he inquires. "Ringer tracks?"

Bug-eye looks at him kind o' funny, but don't say nothin'. Clabe Twitchell takes the booklet then, and starts readin' them rules out loud:

". . . Section D: One ringer scores three points." He gives Spike a triumphant look.

"Goose milk!" Spike says, and meanders out.

So that's how it stands between them two fellers that's been thicker'n bees' wax most of their lives. A stranger callin' hisself Bill Smith throws a little ol' booklet of printed words between 'em, they git their necks bowed over it, and go around hatin' each other's guts—or actin' like it, anyways. I talk like a Dutch uncle to both of 'em, private and separate, of course, but you might as well lecture a couple of feudin' range bulls on the language of flowers.

"Playin' the game by the rules is jest like obeyin' the law, the way I figger," says Clabe, fingerin' his badge. "You wouldn't blame me for bustin' off with Spike if I learnt he was a thief, would you?"

It don't sound like the same thing to me, but there ain't no use sayin' so.

"Clabe an' his two-bit badge," snorts Spike. "Gittin' so high an' mighty all of a sudden. Does printin' rules on paper make 'em any better than the ones folks has been usin' ever since the rabbits wore long tails? It's Clabe that's jumped the track, Sidewinder, not me! An' to hell with him!"

That's the way it rocks along for purty near a week. Main trouble is, Spike insists on me an' him pitchin' horseshoes the old way every evenin', right alongside the "official" court, an' the way he keeps hoorawin' Clabe with sourcastic remarks to the world in general, I can see it's buildin' towards a blow-up that jest might call for gunpowder.

Spike even gits my old shotgun from behind the wood box, brings it out to the horseshoe courts with him and makes a great show of leanin' it ag'inst a sawbuck where it'll be handy.

"No tellin' about these tin-badge deputies," he remarks, plenty loud for Clabe to hear. "They'd as soon arrest a man as look at him. Me, I aim to be prepared!"

Course the shotgun ain't got no shells in it and I realize Spike's bringin' it out is jest his idee of a joke with which to hooraw ol' Clabe. But that kind of jokin' is as dangerous as loose dynamite caps in a nail keg. Clabe don't say nothin', but I notice the next evenin' that he's pitchin' shoes with his six-gun on. I tell you what, it looks touchy.

What the ramrod gits frothy about mostly, however, is Spike's refusin' to recognize the official rules. He even threatens to fire him and blackball him as a cowhand if he don't unstiffen his neck and agree to pitch accordin' to 'em.

"Fire away," says Spike.

"But we got to have you in there pitchin' against them 5 Slash fellers, Spike!"

"Range rules," Spike tells him, "an' I'll be there."

So Taylor tries workin' on Clabe

to change back to the old rules his own self if the 5 Slash will agree to it; but no soap there, either.

"The way Spike's made an issue of it," Clabe insists, "makes it a point o' honor with me. Official rules or count me out!"

ON one of them evenin's, when Spike's hoorawin' and hossplay has got Clabe so riled that he's purty near to swaller his cud, there comes an interruption.

Sheriff Sam Locker and four of his nester deputies come ridin' up. Sam's a little fat man that's been in politics so long he can't open his mouth without makin' a speech.

"Gentlemen," he orates, "as duly elected sheriff of this here county, and in accordance with the law, with justice for all and favors for none, me and these duly appointed deputies, we're combing the country for an unidentified malefactor, to wit, one John Doe, same being charged with assault and robbery."

"Comb ahead," grunts our ramrod. "But don't curry too brisk amongst cow folks or you might hit a tangle. Who'd this John Doe rob?"

"As you are perhaps aware," continues Sheriff Locker, "a certain eccentric cattleman named Ed Winby, better knowed as Old Scratch, being untrustful of banks, has for years been in the careless habit of keeping large sums of money in a desk drawer at his ranch. A week ago last Sunday night he was slugged over the head with an iron pin—a horseshoe stake, in fact—by some person unknown, and a sum of money totaling several hundred dollars, including some papers of no particular value, was stolen. Now, in behalf of the law, as I say, we are combing the—"

"A week ago last Sunday?" busts in Clabe Twitchell. "That's nearly two weeks ago! Why didn't you let me know, sheriff, so I could of been workin' on it? Doesn't Winby know who hit him?"

"Mr. Winby," explains Sheriff Locker, "was alone at the time. He had dozed off at his desk and was struck from behind. He had not recovered sufficiently to talk until yesterday. No, he did not catch no view of his assailant, but he says there was a feller there earlier in the evenin'—a cowboy named Spike Bassett!"

"A week ago Sunday night?" says Spike. "That's right. I come by there on my way back from the Low Crick roundup. Pitched a coupla rounds of shoes with Old Scratch, stayed for supper, 'tended to a little business I had with him, an'—"

"Hah!" busts in Sheriff Locker. "You don't deny you were there, eh? And this business of yours had something to do with money, eh? So you saw all that cash, and—"

"Wup, here!" says Spike, kind o' grim. "You tryin' to lay this onto me?"

"Sheriff," Clabe busts in. "I happen to know that Bassett had borrowed money from Old Scr—Mr. Winby—aimin' to buy some land. What he stopped by for was to pay the last fifty on a note, and done so, for I've seen the canceled note. He told me he did see a drawer full of money and warned Winby of the danger of robbery. In fact, it looks to me like—"

"Well, Clabe!" Spike kind o' misanticipates him. "If that's how you look at it, why don't you try arrestin' me? You got a badge, ain't you?"

It's funny what gittin' mad does to a man. Instead of keepin' calm and talking this thing out, ol' Spike, before anybody realizes he's even considerin' it, has got that old empty shotgun wavin' in their faces, and

there ain't a man in the posse with the guts to tackle him.

"Hand me that sorrel horse, Sidewinder," he says, noddin' towards the sheriff's nag.

"Wait a minute, Spike!" busts out Clabe Twitchell. "There ain't no sense in—"

"You keep your nose out o' this, Clabe!" From the tone of his voice, Spike means it, too.

In half a jiffy I hand him the horse, he swings up, backs past the corner of the bunkhouse, whirls out of sight and goes yonder.

Quick as he's gone, Sheriff Locker and his boys start comin' to life, but this time there's two pistol noses coverin' 'em.

"Never mind, sheriff," says Clabe. "If Spike Bassett's got to be arrested, I'll see to it personal!"

"At least," says the ramrod, who is back of the other drawed gun, "no bunch of damn nesters ain't goin' man-huntin' on my cow range, guilty or not! Git a basket for their guns, Sidewinder!"

When I've took the collection he points 'em south and tells 'em to git. Not havin' much choice left in the matter, they do so.

"If this ain't a hell of a note," groans the ramrod after they're gone, "to happen right when we're tunin' up for the toornament!"

IT'S a worse note, though, when Clabe starts lookin' through Spike's warbag just to sort o' satisfy his mind, and finds not only Spike's canceled note, but better'n forty dollars in bills.

"Dammit, Sidewinder," he groans, "payin' up that note has taken the last dollar Spike had. It looks kind o' bad, don't it?"

"Must have the rest of it on him," volunteers Bug-eye Smith. "I sized Bassett up for that kind of an hombre quick as I laid eyes on him."

"You keep your nose out of this, Smith," says Clabe, plenty sharp.

Clabe comes out to the kitchen the next mornin', lookin' as down in the mouth as a dead fish.

"Sidewinder," he says, "I jest cain't believe it."

"Don't, then," I advises him. "He got away, didn't he?"

"That's the hell of it," he says. "As a sworn officer of the law, it's my duty to bring him back."

"Reckon you can wait till after breakfast, cain't you?" I says, sourcastic.

I don't know when I was ever so slow chousin' up a meal. Seems like there's somethin' jest off the edge of my mind that I can't quite ketch aholt of, and the way it pesters me, it's gray daylight by the time I'm ready to holler chuck.

There ain't nobody much inclined to conversation at the table that morning. Clabe jest sets there quiet, sippin' his coffee. Bug-eye Smith acts kind o' nervous. As quick as he's washed down a couple of biskits with a cup of my brown tonsil paint, he gits up and strolls to the door.

"If you gents'll excuse me," he says, "as long as I'm done saddled, I believe I'll go spade up the clay around them stakes a little. Seemed to me last night like it was gittin' a little too packed."

"You got them rules on you?" inquires Clabe. "I'd like to study 'em a little."

Bug-eye hands the booklet to him and hurries out. The sight of Clabe Twitchell studyin' horseshoe pitchin' rules at the breakfast table after what all has happened kind o' stirs my bile.

"I wish them horseshoe rules and whoever wrote 'em was all in hell where they belong," I says.

Clabe don't even seem to hear me. He gits up all of a sudden and goes cat-leggin' out, stuffin' the booklet in his pocket as he goes.

He ain't much more'n through the door till I hear a shot. I know it ain't him, because he'd come to breakfast as usual, without his six-gun on.

Bein' already on my feet, I'm the first out the door, and what I see ain't purty to look at. It's a man with a gun drawing down deliberate aim on another man that ain't got one. The one with the gun is Bug-eye Smith, who's down on one knee beside a fresh-dug hole next to the near stake of his "official" horseshoe court. In his left hand he's got a bulky little canvas sack all covered with dirt. In his right is a six-gun, drawin' a deliberate bead on Clabe Twitchell who, for want of a better weapon, is reachin' for a cluster of horseshoes hangin' on the bunkhouse wall.

"I'm arrestin' you for that Winby robbery, Smith!" Clabe calls out. "Don't make 'em hang you for murder, too!"

"Git back, you snooper!" snarls Bug-eye. "I won't miss you next time!"

Don't look like he will, neither, the deliberate way he's takin' aim. It's a right terrible thing to see a man about to git shot down and nothing you can do quick enough to stop it.

THEN, suddener and more unexpected than a wild cat can spit, a horseshoe comes flyin' from around the other corner of the bunkhouse, zizzes through the air and clangs onto Bug-eye's upraised six-shooter barrel, a dead ringer if there ever was one.

It must've hit jest a split hair before the gun goes off, for the shot flies wild, and before Bug-eye can recover his grip another horseshoe hits him where it would've made a ringer on his chin if he'd of had any, follered by such a hailstorm of flyin' hoof irons from *both* corners of the bunkhouse that he ain't got a chance except to drop his gun and run.

While Clabe is chasin' him, out from around the other corner of the bunkhouse strolls Spike Bassett.

"Looks like our deputy's goin' to ketch him a thief, don't it?" he drawls.

"Howdy, Spike," I greets him. "That sorrel must not have been much of a horse if he didn't carry you no farther than this."

"Oh, the pony was all right," he grins. "But I turned him loose. Figgered somebody ought to be keepin' an eye on friend Smith till he give hisself away, at the same time keepin' kind o' out o' the picture so as not to interfere with our fair-haired badge toter's chance to demonstrate a deputy's duty all by his own little self. He's doin' all right, ain't he?"

"You mean you knowed all the time this Smith was the feller that robbed Winby?"

"Well," says Spike with a shrug, "I've had too many dealin's with Old Scratch Winby not to have noticed how he's always scratchin' them funny snake kinks on whatever paper is handy when he's talkin' to you. They're on the margins of that booklet of horseshoe rules just like they're on my canceled note. Smith must've picked it up from Old Scratch's desk when he was takin' the money. Comin' here pertendin' to be a cowhand out o' work wasn't the first time a thief ever figgered playin' it bold and innocent was the best way to fox his trail, an' usin'

them rules as an excuse to make us an 'official' court give him his chance to bury his loot where least suspected—right under our noses. Once he got suspicion pointed strong enough towards me—the polecat even planted money in my warbag—he figgered it was a good time to grab an' git. He picked mornin' ridin' time so as to git an all-day start before he'd be missed. Well, it looks like Clabe has outrun him."

Clabe comes marchin' back with his prisoner. "Well, you sure throwed a ringer that time, Spike," he says.

"Kind o' throwed one yourself, didn't you, ketchin' this thief so purty?" inquires Spike with a grin.

"Purty, hell," Clabe snorts. "Taken me plumb till breakfast this mornin' to git wise to the significance of them pen scratchin's. An' then I was so dumb I come out lookin' for this gazoonk without gittin' my gun first. Must've had somethin' else on my mind, I reckon." He busts off plumb abrupt and puts out his hand.

"What? Horseshoe rules?" inquires Spike with a grin as he grips it.

"Yeah," Clabe grins back at him. "I just been figgerin'. Three points for a ringer don't hardly pay a man for the pitch, Spike."

"But accordin' to the official rules—" begins this acorn-eyed thief that calls hisself Bill Smith, battered prisoner though he is.

"You keep your nose out o' this," Clabe says, pullin' them official rules from his pocket and tearin' 'em to bits. "Hereafter, ringers is *five!*"

THE END.

THE WILD COW OF TEXAS

Now that the famous Texas long-horned cattle are only a memory—there are probably less than a hundred and fifty real longhorns left—they are remembered as "plenty tough." But when the first Americans arrived in Texas, the longhorns were the "tame" cows, as opposed to the real wild cows of Texas.

These latter were smaller, and their horns were much shorter. Their horns curved up over their heads instead of spreading out wide, as with the longhorns. They had been brought into the country by the priests who established the first Spanish missions in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Those missions, which were located in southern Texas and in what is now southern Arizona, suffered greatly from Indian attacks, and many of them were abandoned, their cattle running wild in the river bottoms and prickly-pear thickets.

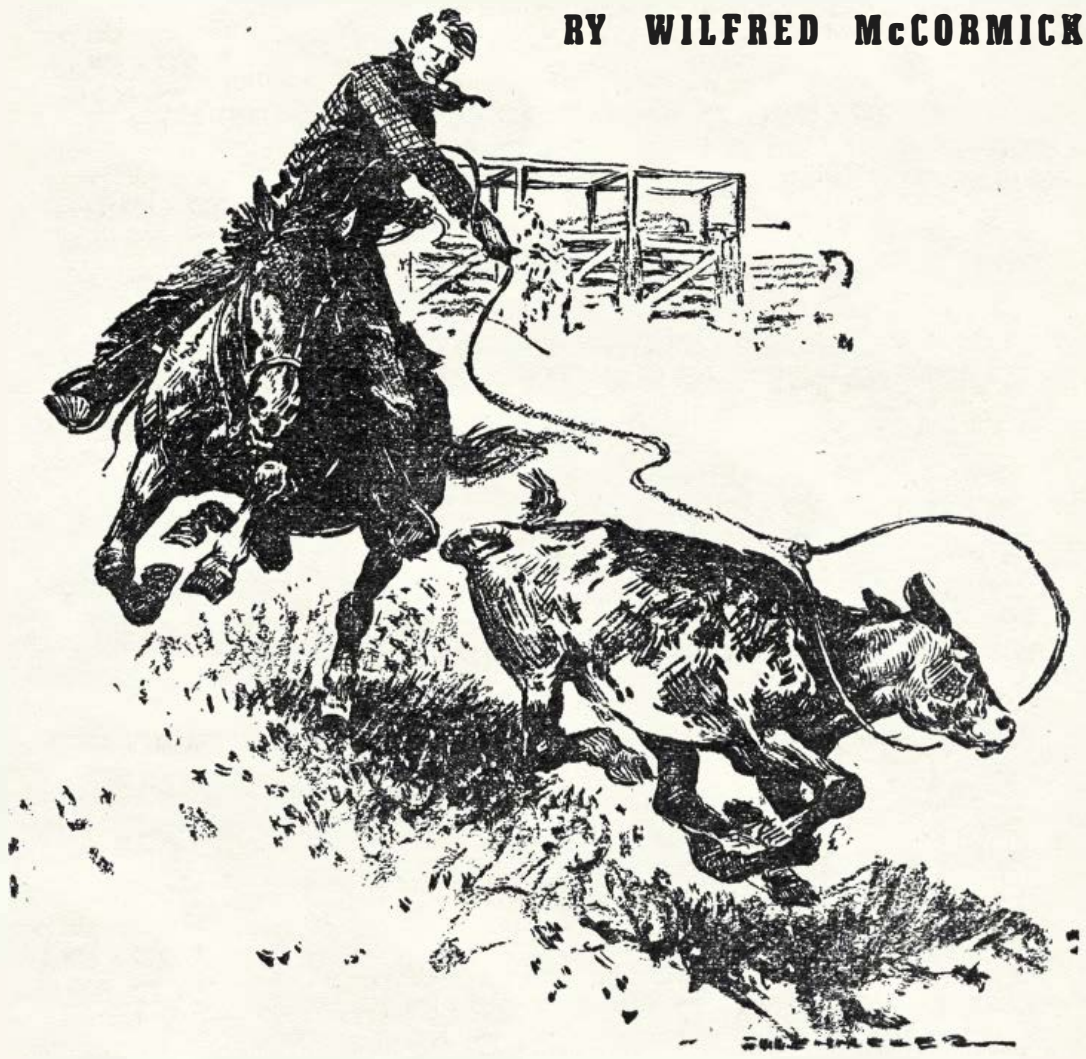
A generation or so later, the Spanish ranchers and missionaries again pushed their way into Texas, this time bringing with them long-horned cattle—a breed that originated in Spain, as had the earlier type, but in a different province.

An early American traveler in Texas reported that while the "tame" longhorn cattle were bad, those that ran wild in the brush, the short-horned variety, were "tigers for ferocity and foxes for cunning." Buffalo and bear were reported to be much easier and safer to kill.

The wild cows were hunted like any wild game, the last being killed in the brakes of the lower Pecos about 1875.

RODEO REBELLION

BY WILFRED McCORMICK



SAM TULK sat on the edge of his jail cot, chin cupped moodily in his hands, and his strong young shoulders for the first time in his life drooped with real despondency.

An eighteen-inch square of sunlight, slanting down from the lone cell window behind Sam indicated that it was nearing two o'clock. The Federal Land Commissioner, who had come to Sonora that morning, would be leaving town at four. And with him would go Sam's last chance of proving up on his little homestead in Burro Canyon.

For the hundredth time, Sam jerked to his feet at the thought. He stood an instant, fists clenched savagely, his lean frame as tense and rigid as an oak sapling. Four o'clock—and already it was two! And he had no more chance of getting out than a grasshopper in an ant hill!

Sam hadn't even tried to argue his case in court. He had admitted

readily enough that he had threatened to knock "Don Pruett's damned head off if he didn't stay out of Burro Canyon;" so the judge had fined him ninety dollars for "Verbal Assault." With only two lonesome bucks in his pocket, and no chance to borrow from the bank, which the Pruetts owned, Sam had been thrown in jail that morning to work out the fine. The whole thing had seemed pretty much a joke—until the Federal Land Commissioner unexpectedly came to town.

That made a difference. Sam positively *had* to see the official. The time limit was up on his homestead, and, according to law, he needed to complete the final papers or the entire deal would fall through. And if it did, Sam knew what would happen. The Pruetts would promptly file a contest on his land entry. They'd been wanting it for months, anyhow.

Sam had asked Sheriff Matt Hinton for a loan to pay his fine, but the lawman had had to turn him down. He had just lifted a mortgage from his ranch back in the hills, he told Sam, and the transaction had left him without a stray dollar. Sam had sent word to some of the merchants. They, also, had refused, with vague reasons that he recognized as fear of antagonizing the powerful Pruetts.

So Sam had sweated through the morning—sick at heart, one moment; ready to kill, the next.

A noisy crowd had been milling the streets through the noon hour, but now things had quieted outside. It was the first day of the "Range Hands Jubilee," an annual event in Sonora, and just about everybody in town had gone out to the rodeo. Sam had hoped to enter the calf roping himself, but a man cooped up in jail, helplessly seeing his homestead eased away a minute at a time, had other worries than missing a rodeo.

SAM sucked in a deep breath of the musty jail air, turning disconsolately to stare upward through the barred window. He couldn't see anything save the top branches of a cottonwood nearby, and the gaudily painted roof of the Pruett bank across the block to the south.

He glanced around as he heard the unexpected creak of a door. The sound seemed to have come from the corridor up near the sheriff's office. Sam heard footsteps coming, not the usual heavy clump of booted heels, but the stealthy approach of a man walking very lightly. Presently a burly figure appeared in the hallway, just outside the cell door. It was Sheriff Matt Hinton, his reddish, square-jawed face even more stern than usual.

"Come here!" he said, the words little above a whisper.

Sam walked over to the door, grasped hold of the bars, stood looking through. "Somethin' wrong?" he asked curiously.

"Listen!" said the sheriff. "Can you win the potluck ropin' event?"

"Not cooped up in here," Sam growled sourly.

"But if I let you out?"

Sam's eyes widened with sudden hope. "You mean—"

"Yeah," nodded the sheriff. "I've got half a mind to gamble on you. There's a hundred-dollar pot on the event. Enough to pay your fine. You can slip me the money right after you win it, an' nobody will know it hasn't been paid to me beforehand."

Sam stared at the big officer. "But why do you want to do it?" he asked, puzzled. "It's a pretty big risk to take just to help me out."

"I know it's risky," the sheriff said

heatedly. "I feel the same way you do about that damned Don Pruett, but he's purty nigh a cinch to win that special ropin' event. You're the only puncher, accordin' to my notion, that can pin his ears back!"

"An' supposin' I lost?" Sam suggested. "Where would that put you?"

"A private citizen again, I reckon," the sheriff admitted uneasily. "And with a wife and two kids I sure need my job. But it's worth the risk, if you'll only beat that struttin', purty-faced, high-and-mighty Don. I figure you can do it, lad, or I wouldn't make the offer. What do you say?"

"It's a swap!" Sam said fervently. "Theres' time to enter the event, an' then hustle over to see the Land Commissioner afterwards. If I win."

"If you win!" snorted the sheriff. "Dammit, if you *don't* win, I'll chase you plumb out o' the State, whangin' you across the rump with a wet rope every step!" But the sheriff's words were belied by the friendly, confident grin that he flashed Sam. Fumbling in his pocket, he produced a key and unlocked the cell.

THIRTY-SEVEN range-hardened and leathery-faced cowboys had paid two dollars apiece to enter the "potluck" event, bringing the purse to seventy-four dollars. The Jubilee Association, however, had donated another twenty-six to bring it up to an even one hundred dollars for the winner.

In contrast to the regular roping event, where each man roped daily with as many loops as he cared to take, this "potluck" affair had been planned to speed up the usual method. The punchers were to draw for calves, some of them big, husky yearlings, and some quite small and tame. That was part of the contest, a "blind" draw, and only one loop allowed each man. The poorest roper in the bunch might be lucky enough to draw the slowest calf. Or Don Pruett, generally rated the man to beat in any roping event, might draw the wildest and strongest animal in the pen. It gave each puncher, on paper, a chance to win.

Sam pulled number thirty-seven from the hat. Last turn! After noting it, he withdrew from the crowd and went off to one side by himself. It would be an hour and a half at least before they got to him. An hour and a half! He squirmed uneasily at the thought. That would make it dangerously near the four o'clock deadline when the Federal Land Commissioner would be leaving town on the stage.

Would there be time to go now? Sam glanced toward the sheriff, and noted that the big officer had an eye on him also. So the sheriff was watching him! Well, that meant only one thing: Sheriff Hinton was taking no chances on his making a dash for freedom! He was "at liberty," only so long as he stayed here. Sam weighed the idea of asking the sheriff to go along with him to see the Commissioner, but decided against it. After all, he should have time enough. The rodeo was well organized and events usually went along smoothly. Besides, the sheriff had already helped him mightily. Sam didn't want to ask for any more favors now if he could possibly help it.

A commotion in the chutes announced that they were getting ready to turn the first calf loose. A roper was reining his excited horse into the box.

The cowboys had all nodded to Sam when he put in appearance with the sheriff; all but Don Pruett, who had stared at him in flushed, hostile silence. It was evident that Don

still remembered the afternoon before when Sam had caught him snipping a barbed-wire fence in Burro Canyon and hotly threatened to knock his "damned head off" if he didn't get out. Don had shrugged his shoulders impudently, ridden off, and sworn out the complaint which had put Sam into jail.

The contestants, now awaiting their turns to rope, were togged out in their Sunday best—boots gleaming like black metal, multi-colored silk shirts, and fresh shaves that made their sun-bronzed faces fairly glisten in the strong afternoon light.

Shorty Praether was the first roper. He drew a small calf, but in his eagerness to make a quick catch he overshot his mark. The calf darted around his loop and a chorus of raucous yells broke from the huge crowd packed around the oblong-shaped arena.

"Hey!" shouted somebody. "You couldn't catch a cold in January!"

Shorty grinned good-naturedly, waving his hat. He coiled in his rope, turning to ride back out of the way.

Boots Gallavan was next. He caught his calf in fair time, but the animal was big and he had a terrific struggle to get it tied.

"Thirty-eight seconds!" the timer announced.

SAM'S eyes jerked up to the officials' platform. A pang shot through him as he recognized the timer. It was Caleb Pruett, young Don's father. Sam threw a swift glance over toward Sheriff Hinton. He saw that the sheriff, also, had recognized Pruett and was frowning.

Nice prospect, Sam thought sourly. With Cal Pruett as timekeeper, he wouldn't have any more chance of winning than a wax cat in hell! But he couldn't back out now. He'd have to go through with it.

"Don Pruett, the next calf roper!" came the announcer's booming voice.

Don Pruett, resplendent in a scarlet silk shirt and white beaver hat, rode over to the box. His face broke into a satisfied grin when he noted that the calf he had drawn was small, undoubtedly one that wouldn't be too fast to catch nor too hard to tie.

"I'll bet two to one I crack twenty seconds!" he challenged a bystander.

The man shook his head. "I'd bet the same way," he said.

An arena helper opened the chute and a white-faced calf trotted across the chalk line. Down went the flag, signaling the roper! Don Pruett hooked spurs to his buckskin. It was all over quickly.

"Nineteen seconds!" the timer announced. The crowd roared approval.

"Don's got the prize money all wrapped up!" a spectator surmised admiringly.

"I wouldn't be too sure," another replied. "They say Sam Tulk is faster than a greased echo, an' he ain't roped yet!"

Sam, hearing the words, grinned wryly. What this man didn't realize, was that a hostile Pruett stood up there with the timer's watch. His catch would have to be made in nothing flat, and what was more, they'd better be hurrying on to his turn. If they hadn't gotten to him by the four o'clock deadline, when the Federal Land Commissioner would be leaving, Sam was grimly bent on making a run for it. The sheriff might follow him; he probably would. It would be a coyote trick on Sam's part, running out on the sheriff that way after the man had befriended him, but Sam couldn't see

himself sitting quietly by to lose his little homestead by default.

Another speeding calf and rider interrupted his thoughts. This event and the succeeding ones went off in fine shape.

SAM'S turn came at a quarter to four. One of the punchers had turned in a time of twenty-two seconds, and another a twenty-three, but Don Pruett's nineteen had begun to look pretty imposing—especially, when folks got a glimpse of the calf Sam Tulk, as the last roper, had drawn. It was a solidly built, over-sized brute, spotted along the neck and sides with splashes of white. It looked as though it would not only be fast on its feet but would be certain to put up a terrific fight before being tied.

Sam knew that his job was cut out for him. His tanned face was set in craggy lines as he rode slowly over to the box. He was riding Midnight. He'd owned many good roping horses, but Midnight was the only one he had left. Also, the best of the lot, a slim-chested, sleek little black with more calf sense than most humans.

From the corner of his eye, as he sat ready in the box, Sam noted that Don Pruett had climbed up into the officials' stand beside his father. Ordinarily, it was against the rules for a contestant to view the proceedings from there, but Don was a Pruett. That, Sam thought sourly, made a difference!

Midnight had been calm up to this point, but now he was fired with energy. He quivered all over, champing excitedly from side to side, making restless little crow hops back and forth. Sam held the reins taut in his left hand, while his right dangled the looped rope far out beside him. He carried the piggin' string, to tie the calf, in his teeth.

Sam wasn't dressed flashily like the other cowboys, but he wore the best he had. The half day in jail, however, had sadly wrinkled his corduroys, and there was a tear down the right shoulder of his gingham shirt. He had forgotten to bring his hat from the jail, and his long, copper-glinted hair, becoming more tousled with each jerk of the nervous horse, was already bothering his eyes.

"Are you ready, Tulk?" the arena director called.

"Ready!" answered Sam.

The chute hinges squeaked and the big spotted calf trotted out. Midnight reared excitedly on his hind legs, frantic to give chase, but Sam held the pony back until he saw the calf cross the fair line. Then he leaned forward. It wasn't necessary to use his spurs. Midnight had quit the box like hurled from a giant slingshot.

Sam stood forward in his stirrups, leaning tensely above the pony's flying mane. He counted to himself. "Three seconds . . . four . . . five . . . a little to the left, Midnight . . . that's it . . . seven . . . eight! The distance had narrowed to throwing range, but the racing calf had suddenly darted sharply to the left. There wasn't time for Midnight to swerve. His rushing speed would have carried him past. It was a desperate, foolhardy chance, but Sam suddenly whipped his rope across the pony's neck, and down. He saw the loop encircle its target. He jerked expertly, felt the loop draw tight, then hurled himself from the saddle as Midnight came to a stiff-legged stop, yanking the calf in mid-air.

Sam rushed along the rope, caught the struggling calf in his arms, lifted

it high, planted it on the ground with a thud. He snatched the piggin' string from his teeth, reached furiously for a front leg. The calf fought to get up, but Midnight was now backing away slowly, keeping the rope taut. "Eleven . . . twelve . . . thirteen . . ." Sam was counting. One half hitch! Another! He dropped the calf, jumped to his feet, threw both hands high above his head to signal the judges the tie was complete.

"Sixteen seconds, I'll guess!" he thought jubilantly. "Man, was I lucky!"

Thunderous applause fairly rocked the arena. Then, as if hushed by some magic signal, the crowd went silent, waiting breathlessly for the official time. All eyes swung toward the platform above the chutes. They saw the judges in a hurried consultation. Then Caleb Pruitt reached for a megaphone. He put it to his lips.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he droned. "I'm sorry to announce 'No Time' for Tulk. He will be given another chance to rope, however, as the fault was mine. Unfortunately, I dropped the watch. The re-roping will take place immediately."

SAM, who had been standing straddle-legged in the middle of the arena, took the news like a blow on the chin. It was several seconds before his stunned brain grasped the full significance of what had happened. Then a wild look came into his eyes. He whirled, striding rapidly for Midnight. To hell with the dirty crooks! He wouldn't rope again, not for a chance at ten million dollars, so long as Caleb Pruett had anything to do with it! He'd mount Midnight, and ride through the exit gate. Before anybody could stop him, he'd be at the Land Commissioner's office. There was still time. These crooked hellions might cheat him out of his prize, but he could still be able to save his homestead. They'd never be able to steal that, once he reached the Commissioner. And when the sheriff finally did catch him—

The sheriff! Sam felt a shock go through his entire body. He had never double-crossed anybody before. The sheriff had played fair with *him*. He'd save his homestead all right, but it would mean the sheriff would lose his job. There would be no holding the Pruetts when they learned that Sheriff Hinton had let his prisoner go free without paying his fine. They would demand, and get, his resignation. The sheriff's wife and his two youngsters would be the real losers.

"Hurry up, Tulk!" boomed from the megaphone. "You're delayin' the show!"

"Comin'!" called Sam.

He rode slowly back to the chutes. He would have one last try at roping. Maybe, by some miracle, he could again beat Don Pruett's time. If not, he'd have to sell Midnight—Caleb Pruett had once made him an offer for the horse—and pay Sheriff Hinton the money for his fine. As for the homestead, his hope of proving on it was as good as gone. By the time he got away, the stage, with the Land Commissioner aboard, would be well out of town.

As Sam glanced into the chute, his heart sank. He knew, then, that there wasn't one chance in a million of his beating Don Pruett's nineteen seconds. The calf, penned there in readiness, was a husky steer weighing every bit of six hundred pounds. It was a wild one, too. Sam could see the whites of its eyes as the brute threshed nervously to get out. He shrugged and uncoiled his rope. He'd have a try, anyway.

"Hard luck, Jailbird!" he heard a voice call down to him. Sam jerked to a halt, glaring upward.

"You did a fair job of roping and tying there," Don Pruett taunted. "If I was guessing, I'd say about twenty-five seconds."

"*Twenty-five!*" yelled Sam. He swallowed hard. "Why, you low-down polecat, it wasn't one tick more than sixteen, an' you know it!"

"The watch didn't say so," Don reminded gloatingly.

"Maybe not, but— Say!" Sam suddenly shifted his gaze to Caleb Pruett. "Did Don cause you to drop that watch?" he demanded sharply of the older man. "Did he bump into you, or somethin'?"

The banker's full, pale face colored angrily. "Yes. It was accidental, of course," he replied.

"But Don did bump into you?"

"Well, yes. Are you insinuating that a Pruett would deliberately— Look out!" the banker yelled shrilly.

He was too late. Sam had flipped his rope upward. The move was fast, and sure. As the noose encircled Don Pruett's shoulders, Sam gave it a quick jerk. Young Pruett lost his balance, toppling down from the platform. The fall didn't hurt him, as he landed on his feet, but by the time he had hurled the rope from his shoulders Sam was out of the saddle and starting for him like a prodded wildcat.

Sam Tulk's mad rush left him wide open. Don Pruett sidestepped neatly, crossing with a stiff right that caught Sam flush on the chin. Sam went down in a heap. As he started up, Don kicked him viciously in the face, sending him down again. Sam let out a grunt, spat blood, and came to his feet with the rush of a mad buffalo.

Don Pruett tried again to sidestep, but this time he was a split second too slow. One of Sam's wild fists nailed him on the nose. Don cried out like a whipped puppy, backing away, both hands clutching the spot where Sam had hit him. But there was no escaping Sam, now. With the pent-up fury of months, he sailed into Don Pruett with both fists a blur of action. One caught Don in the stomach and he dropped his guard. Instantly Sam crossed him with a right uppercut, a blow that packed every ounce of his riled one-eighty behind it. Don Pruett crumpled. He didn't make a sound as he fell limp on his face.

Powerful arms grabbed Sam from behind. He knew without looking it was the sheriff.

SAM'S heart sank. He'd bungled things, now, worse than they were before. Aside from the personal satisfaction of giving Don Pruett a needed beating, he had accomplished nothing. He wouldn't be able to sell the horse to Caleb Pruett now, and that would mean he couldn't pay his fine. Then something the sheriff said caught his attention.

"Steady there, Mr. Pruett! If you're thinking of pressing any charges against Sam Tulk, I'd forget it if I were you. Your son only got what he deserved."

"What do you mean?" Caleb Pruett roared.

"I mean," the sheriff said quietly, "that Don deliberately spoiled Sam Tulk's ropin' time. But what's more, we've caught it, anyhow!"

"It won't be official!" Pruett retorted, but his tone was less assured.

The sheriff turned to the tall, lean-faced man who stood beside him.

"This gentleman," he explained, half to the crowd and half to Caleb Pruett, "happened to have a stop

watch with him. It seems that rodeos are a hobby of his, an' he likes to keep time himself. Anyhow, realizin' that you was time judge today, an' that you Pruetts have been throwin' dirt at Sam Tulk for some weeks, I just asked him to catch the time on Sam's calf. Well, he did. It was the fastest ever showed here in Sonora—fifteen an' three-tenths seconds, to be exact."

"You can't make that stick!" Caleb Pruett stormed furiously. "I'm the official timer! Who is this meddler, anyhow?"

"This *gentleman,*" explained the sheriff," happens to be the Federal Land Commissioner for New Mexico. An' what's more, his ability an' honesty are such that he is official timekeeper for the five biggest rodeos in America, as a hobby. So I reckon when he says Sam Tulk tied his calf in fifteen-three, it will stand."

From an angry red, Caleb Pruett's face turned white with humiliation. Sam, watching him, was almost sorry for the man. To have his son's poor sportsmanship shown up publicly would be a blow to any father. Pruett made several attempts to speak, then turned to Sam resolutely.

"Nothing like this will ever happen again," he said apologetically. "I never realized until now that I've been too lenient with Don. I guess it's about time I woke up to quite a few things." He held out his hand a little uncertainly.

With a vague, bewildered feeling that he was going to wake up and find himself back in jail, Sam shook hands, then walked off with the Federal Land Commissioner. The official's friendly words convinced him he wasn't dreaming. There was plenty of time to go over the homestead papers, he told Sam; he had arranged with the stage company to hold the afternoon stage until the rodeo was over.

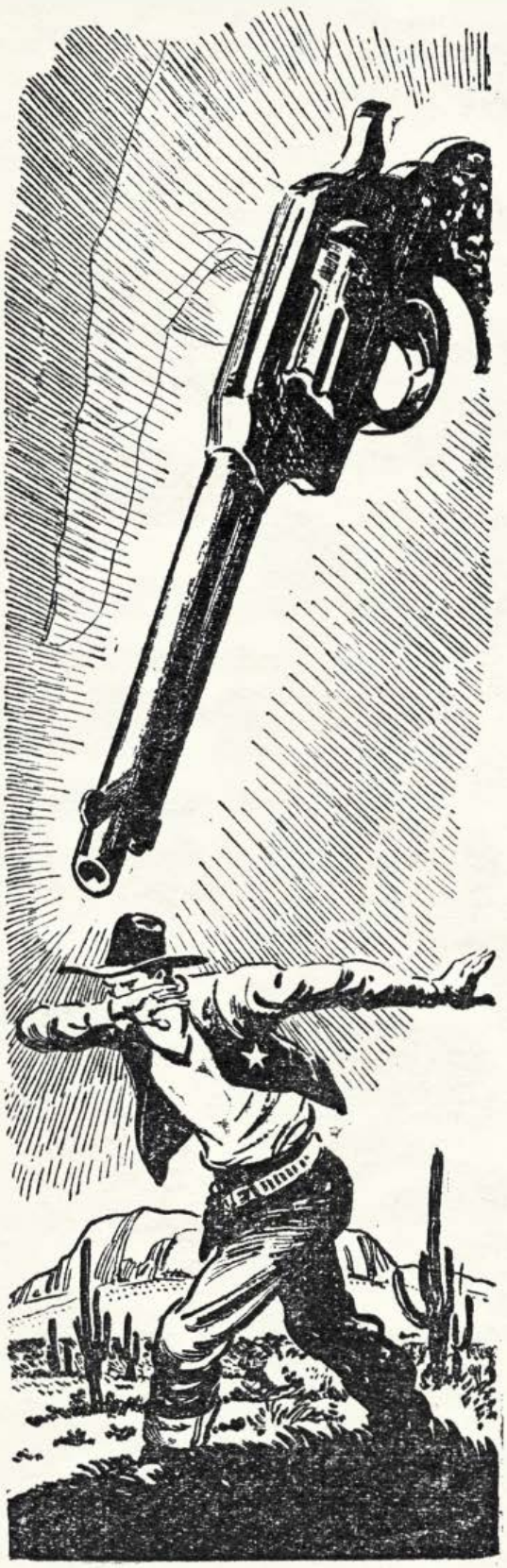
As the little group walked out of the fair grounds, a thunderous roar broke from the crowd. The winner of the "potluck" roping event had been announced!

THE END.

WOODEN CANTEENS

THE hide water bags used by the Mexicans and Indians were not quite acceptable to white men, and the old iron jugs were too heavy to be carried on a saddle conveniently. At last someone discovered that he could make a fairly light canteen that would hold water by digging out the heart of a small aspen log and then plugging up the ends with pieces of board cut to fit the holes exactly. The ends of the log were then bound tightly with rawhide thongs to prevent the wood from splitting when it swelled. A hole was bored in the side and a cork fitted to it.

A strap to go over the shoulder supported the canteen, and the contraption was ready for use. Sometimes the whole wooden receptacle was covered with wet rawhide. When dry, this contrivance made a very satisfactory canteen, since the water carried in it did not taste of rawhide, and was actually cooler and tasted better than the water from the lighter tin or galvanized-iron canteens which came into general use later.



THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN GUN

BY NORMAN A. FOX

WITH his seventh drink, Windy Dow really warmed to his recital. Elbows hooked on the bar, the garrulous little oldster saw the half awe, half skepticism in the eyes of the few cowpokes in the saloon. He had chained their attention. So Windy Dow proceeded to build drama with words; utterly oblivious to the real drama shaping before him.

"No buck-toothed runt was stampedin' me," he proclaimed. " 'Billy,' I says, 'I ain't takin' cards in this two-bit Lincoln County war. If yuh don't like it, make yore play.' "

Swaying, Windy turned, studied the reflection of his wizened face in the bar mirror. "Billy the Kid had nerve," he concluded reflectively. "But he wasn't no damn fool."

Now was the moment when gasps of astonishment should have lowered the curtain on his yarn. Instead, a spiked silence suddenly gripped the saloon and Windy, cheated of his due applause, swung to seek the strange spell. He found it soon enough.

Three men, range garbed, had pushed through the bat wings. They were big men, all of them, and the

one in the center, lantern-jawed and beak-nosed, was unmistakably the leader. There was a studied cruelty about him that overshadowed the same characteristic in the faces of the other two—a lean, bony man and a swarthy one whose features bespoke mixed blood. Beak-nose did the talking.

"Now ain't it hell," he said loudly, "when a saloon has to be all cluttered up with Y-Cross carrion. Reckon you better make yourself scarce, Yaffe."

Curiosity shifted Windy's bleary gaze. A stranger in this Bitterroot country where the Montana border gouged into Idaho, he had ridden in only an hour before. But he had no trouble recognizing Yaffe of the Y-Cross. The cowman was rigid, his face the color of wet putty as the insult echoed in the room.

Yaffe was a little man, scarcely topping Windy by an inch. A seamed face and stooped shoulders spoke of age and adversity. But the brooding sadness in his eyes was veiled by a thin flame of defiance.

"I ain't leavin', Karpus," he declared. "You wouldn't dare show your face in Mulehide if the law was in town. You got a heap o' guts orderin' folks around."

Karpus grinned. "You figger on stayin'?" he jeered. "Then maybe you'll pervide entertainment. Git to dancin'!"

Striding forward as he spoke, he palmed a gun. Two cowpokes flanked Yaffe. One, a mere boy, tow-headed and freckled, clawed at a gun; the other, a dour man of indefinite age, made the same play reluctantly. Both forgot their intention as Karpus covered them and their unarmed boss. Then Karpus fired, the lead thudding into the floor at Yaffe's feet.

It was no affair of Windy Dow's. Roamer of many ranges, he had long since learned to mind his own business. But this Yaffe had listened attentively to Windy's yarn, paid him the compliment of attention. And Yaffe, unarmed, didn't deserve an indignity usually reserved for pilgrims. It wasn't right. So Windy Dow, clawing beneath his shirt front, swung a gun barrel just as Karpus was abreast of him. It was a vicious, chopping blow, and it sent Karpus pitching face forward.

Sobered by his own act, Windy was alert enough to swing the gun toward the bony man and the breed. "Don't make me spoil a cap," he warned. "Drag yore pard out o' here!"

AT that instant Windy Dow held every man in the barroom spellbound. It was his gun that riveted them, for that gun, gold-inlaid and jewel-studded, looked as out of place in his gnarled fist as a saddle on a steer. Misty sunlight, slanting through a window, danced along the plated barrel. Eyes popped in astonishment as everyone stared at the elegant weapon.

Then, scowling, the two men who had come in with Karpus lifted him and toted him from the saloon. Windy watched them go, thrusting the golden gun into his shirt again. Stepping to the street, he shuffled to his racked horse. He was swinging into the saddle when Yaffe and his hands pulled up beside him.

"I'm Ezra Yaffe," the cowman announced. "We want to thank you for buyin' in on Zwing Karpus' play. This young sprout is Otto Weeks, and the other gent is Funeral Parks."

Windy acknowledged the introductions with a nod. "No bother," he said. "But I'd wear me a gun if I was yuh, Yaffe."

Funeral Parks, stone-faced and somber as his nickname, spoke up. "Speakin' of guns," he said, "I'd shore admire a second look at that fancy cutter yuh pack."

If Windy hesitated, it was only for a second. He passed over the gun, and Funeral Parks, examining it carefully, found an inscription plate set in the butt. " 'To Marshal Reno McShane,' " he read aloud. " 'Presented by the citizens of Nimrod, Nevada, for courageous service.' "

His eyes weighed Windy. "Yuh spun a pretty wild yarn in the saloon," he said pointedly. "Yuh also claimin' to be Reno McShane, that town-tamin' marshal from way back?"

Windy shrugged. "Folks call me Windy Dow, which I reckon is good enough."

"Makes no difference," Ezra Yaffe interjected. "I'm wonderin' if you'd come to the Y-Cross, talk over a job?"

Windy puckered his wizened face. Here in Mulehide the breeze held an icy reminder of winter's nearness. Windy didn't like cold country. With money in his pocket from the sale of cayuses he'd combed out of Idaho hills he thought of Arizona, where the sun worked overtime.

"I figger on travelin'," he said.

"This chore'll only take a day," Yaffe assured him. "It's a job for a gent who can talk fast and has got guts. I figger you fit."

"Fightin' and talkin' don't generally go together," Funeral Palmer observed acidly.

Windy frowned. Twice now the gloomy-faced rider had insinuated that he was a bluff. And Windy remembered how almighty slow Parks had been in his effort to draw on Karpus. There was a mystery behind the dour man's actions and animosity. It was a challenge that appealed to Windy Dow.

"Reckon I'll take that job," the oldster said. "Couldn't be no worse'n the time Wild Bill Hickock was laid up in Abilene. Folks asked me to keep his badge shined till that curly wolf was off his back. Now, speakin' o' trouble—"

His spring of garrulity undammed, he talked on as the trio fetched horses, joined him. He built his yarn with glowing details as they followed an uptilting trail back into the Bitterroots. Young Otto Weeks, riding at Windy's side, clung to every word, his eyes shining with open hero worship. But Funeral Parks' glance was scorn-sheathed and Ezra Yaffe soon lost himself in thoughts of his own.

They reached the Y-Cross at sundown. The sprawling buildings of the ranch, sheltered by frowning hills, were a drab blotch against a green background. Dismounting, Yaffe motioned toward the cook house.

"Have yourself a bite with the boys," he told Windy. "Afterward I'll tell you about my proposition."

Windy followed Otto Weeks into the shack. Fully a score of riders filled the long table to overflowing. When the late arrivals had found places the youngster introduced Windy and told of the fracas in Mulehide.

"This gent is plenty salty," he said excitedly. "Tell 'em how you called Billy the Kid's hand, Windy."

Windy speared a potato. "Shucks, now," he said, "that weren't nothin'. Now yuh take the time I got in a beef with Doc Holliday down in Tombstone—"

A noise, loud and uncomplimentary, came from the direction of

Funeral Parks. Otto Weeks, wrath in his eyes, turned on the dour man. "You let Windy spin his yarn!" he flared. "A gent who's usually missin' when the powder's burnin' ain't got no right to hooraw him. You saw the gun he packs."

"Yeah, I saw it," Funeral Parks admitted sourly. "And I'm thinkin' he's got a helluva lot of gall packin' it. Even if he is Reno McShane—which same I'm doubtin'—he's got no call to be braggin'. Any oldtimer'll tell yuh Reno McShane turned out yellow. He was a howlin' town tamer till the Hassayampa Kid come along. When McShane had to face a real gunhand he snuck out of town. And he had the crust to take his golden gun with him, the gun folks give him for courage."

THERE was thunderous silence after that, and Windy Dow didn't break it. Little use to deny the story of Reno McShane's cowardice when that story had been frontier legend. And what did it matter what Funeral Parks thought? Windy Dow, spinner of yarns, was used to disbelief, invulnerable to scorn.

Yet he finished his meal before the others. Shuffling out of the cook shack, he went up to the big gray ranchhouse where Ezra Yaffe lived. The cowman was waiting for him, and he ushered Windy into an office, motioning toward a chair.

"The job I've got for you is a hard one," the rancher said without prelude. "It has to do with the jaspers you met today—Zwing Karpus and them others, Colorado Claine and Mex Seelig. Them three is the biggest half of as tricky a bunch of rustlers as ever scourged a range. Ten, twelve years, now, I've been battlin' them. And every year at roundup time they've outfoxed the Y-Cross and made a haul."

"And yuh aim to smoke 'em out?" Windy asked.

"I aim to buy 'em off," Yaffe countered. "I aim to offer Karpus five thousand dollars if he'll leave my beef alone this year. He hates cattlemen, but I figger he's smart enough to lay off for a price. I figger you can talk him into it."

Windy stared. He had pegged Ezra Yaffe as a queer one, a man who wore no gun, yet who was not short on nerve. He'd cottoned to the cattleman from the first. But this was unbelievable.

"Hell," he said almost contemptuously. "I had yuh stacked up as a man!"

Ezra Yaffe pointed through an

open window. Night had blanketed the Bitterroots, but in the light of the rising moon five white headboards glistened on a nearby slope.

"Yaffe's boothill, they call it," the cowman said bitterly. "Five buried there. Five boys that's stopped lead defendin' Y-Cross cows. I'm a man of peace, Dow; a man that's tried livin' without a gun. I've built a ranch and made it prosper. But I've built it on the blood of boys that drew forty a month and chow. Sometimes I ain't so proud of my success."

It was a simple speech, but Windy, reading sincerity in Yaffe's brooding eyes, was suddenly quite ashamed of the thing he'd insinuated. "I'm plumb sorry," he apologized. "Reckon a man can get a heap tired of killin's and guns. Yuh figger Karpus'll listen to me?"

"He won't be forgettin' today," said Yaffe. "But I figger if you can get in a word or two he'll listen. Dinero can make his kind forget a lot of things. And he'll have to let you come back, since you won't pack no money. Your chore is to get him to agree."

"And supposin' he takes the money an' then runs off yore critters anyway?"

Yaffe sighed. "I've gotta gamble he won't. We've dusted a man or two of his in the past. I'm thinkin' he'll figger it's easier to take the money than to take the chances. Maybe a rustler gets sick of war, too."

Ezra Yaffe had spoken his piece. Afterward there were details to discuss, a map to draw for Windy, who was unfamiliar with the section, and a price to set on the job. And Windy, listening attentively, wondered at the quirk within himself that was making him take this task. He knew why Yaffe had picked him. He knew the sight of that golden gun had profoundly affected the Y-Cross owner. Yet the mission bulked big and awesome.

Windy thought about it as he headed for the bunkhouse, silent and shadow-swathed. As he tumbled into an empty bunk he saw a pinpoint of fire as someone smoked in silence. When the smoker lit a match Windy recognized the stony face of Funeral Parks. And the oldster was conscious of the man's stare until sleep claimed him.

He was up with the others. Breakfast over, Windy snagged his own mount and sat the horse beside Ezra Yaffe while the cowman issued the day's orders. Then, his hand still warm from Yaffe's parting grip, Windy took a solitary trail back among the mountains.

His way led along canyons whose bottoms the sun seldom touched. Sometimes the trail climbed upward to look down on a jungle of pine tops. And Windy Dow, surveying that tangled country, realized how Zwing Karpus, with a mere handful of men, was able to harass the mighty Y-Cross.

And he knew full well that danger was his saddlemate on this task. He had made an implacable enemy of Zwing Karpus, and his one hope was that greed would weigh heavier than revenge with the rustler chief. And Windy wondered again if he was being a fool to take cards in such a game. Yet he rode onward, for within him was a welling admiration for Ezra Yaffe, who wanted to protect his men.

AS the sun arced toward the west, the trail faded to nothing where a rift split the face of a mighty cliff. Windy's map was useless now, but,

acting on impulse, he headed into the rift. It led into a walled, grassy bowl as cliffs within a cliff reared to the sky. He was riding into that hidden pocket when a rifle barrel angled around a boulder and a strident voice challenged him.

"Where yuh reckon yuh're goin', hombre?" it asked.

Windy forced a grin as he raised his hands. "I'm lookin' for Zwing Karpus," he said.

A shifty-eyed, slouching figure edged into view. The rifle barrel never wavered as the man, suspicion naked in his eyes, studied Windy. "Move along," he ordered. "Yuh can do yore talkin' to the chief."

A clump of trees centered the bowl, and the sentry goaded Windy toward them. There a half dozen men hunkered around a small fire. They were of the sentry's cut, men with the owlhoot stamped on them. Windy recognized three, Zwing Karpus, Colorado Claine, and Mex Seelig. And triumph was naked and menacing in Karpus' eyes as he recognized the prisoner.

Windy hurried into his spiel. "Yuh're sore about yesterday," he said quickly. "But don't let yore peeve cost yuh five thousand dollars. That's just what I can put in yore hand."

"Five thousand?" Karpus echoed. "Just what the hell you talkin' about?"

Windy told him. And Windy Dow, spinner of yarns, talked that day as he'd never talked before, for he was talking for his life and he knew it. He sketched Yaffe's proposal in colorful words, added arguments of his own. And as he talked he saw the eyes of Zwing Karpus narrow with thought.

"It sounds like a good proposition," Karpus finally said. "I'll give it a think. Light and set a spell, mister."

His obvious cordiality warned Windy. This was too easy. But in any case, the oldster had no choice but to accept the invitation, and he did. Easing from the saddle, he hunkered near the fire, watching Karpus as the rustler chief strode back and forth, apparently weighing the proposition. Finally he paused before Windy.

"Colorado tells me you pack a right fancy cutter," he said affably. "Mind lettin' a gent have a look at it?"

Windy stiffened with suspicion. He had no desire to part with the gun, yet he hardly dared refuse. Still, what did it matter? Words, and words alone, were his only real weapons here. Ringed by Karpus' men, the gun gave him no advantage. He produced it, passed it over.

Karpus turned it in his hands, whistled softly as he read the inscription plate. "Hell-roarin' Reno McShane, eh?" he remarked. "You ain't claimin' this gun as yours, oldtimer?"

"Possession," pointed out Windy Dow, "is supposed to have more points 'n a cactus."

"I figgered McShane'd be a younger gent than you," Karpus said, soft-voiced. "I was just a button when I last set eyes on him, so I might be wrong. But me, I've been almighty anxious to see the gent that packed the golden gun. Maybe you've heard of a galoot they called the Texas Terror, a jasper McShane gunned in Dodge. The Terror was my pard. I've always hankered to gut-shoot the gent that downed him. *Grab him, boys!*"

The softness faded from the rustler's voice. Then men were hurling themselves on Windy, bearing him

to the ground, mauling him mercilessly. Windy struck out, biting and clawing, but any one of them would have been his match. Bloody and disheveled, he lay panting on the ground when they had finished with him.

"You sun-baked old fool," Karpus jeered. "Do you figger Yaffe's deal meant anything to me? I'll clean out his herd when the time comes. But now talk, damn you! How come you're carryin' that golden gun?"

And that was the moment when a man emerged from the trees, strode toward the fire. The sentry, still hovering near, gaped in surprise. Windy, twisting, gaped, too, for he recognized the man. It was the Y-Cross rider, Funeral Parks.

"Karpus, I come to talk," Parks announced in an even voice. "Once yuh told me there'd be dinero for me if I fetched the right kind of news from the Y-Cross. I've been thinkin' it over. I know when the roundup's startin', and I know where Yaffe'll move the gather."

His news was as startling as his entry, but Zwing Karpus, recovering from both, grinned.

"Figgered you'd come to me sooner or later," he said. "I'll talk business with you pronto. Right now I'm aimin' to make this old coot tell where I can find the gent that used to own the golden gun."

Windy cursed viciously, but his tirade was directed at Funeral Parks. "Yuh damn turncoat," the oldster bellowed. "Yuh got a boss that's willin' to spend money to save yore carcass. And yuh turn Judas on him!"

Karpus planted a boot in Windy's ribs. "Never mind that," the rustler snarled. "Talk up! It's Reno McShane I want to hear about."

WINDY clamped his jaw. It would be simple to say he'd bought the gun in a little Idaho town just across the line. It would be easy to say he'd carried the gun merely to bolster the wild yarns he loved to spin, the yarns nobody believed. But Windy Dow didn't say those things.

They'd make no difference, for Karpus would kill him anyway. Zwing Karpus hadn't forgotten Windy's play in Mulehide the day before. Karpus had played a cat-and-mouse game from the moment of Windy's appearance in the pocket, and it was clear that he intended to have his revenge. It was trail's end for Windy Dow in either case, an ending doubly tragic be cause he had failed Ezra Yaffe. So Windy maintained his stubborn silence as Karpus kicked him again.

Funeral Parks grinned wryly. "Let's see that damned gun that's causin' all the fuss," he said.

Karpus, intent upon his bullying, passed it over. And once again Funeral Parks fondled it, spun it in his hand. Then, suddenly, the barrel was pressing into the side of Zwing Karpus.

"Keep yore hands away from yore holsters, gents," Funeral Parks warned. "I'm takin' Windy Dow with me, and if anybody makes a play I'll blow Zwing's brisket through his backbone!"

It happened too suddenly for anyone to be prepared; least of all Windy Dow. But there was no doubting Funeral Parks' action, no doubting the menace in his tone. Windy tottered to his feet.

"Pile on yore cayuse, Windy," Parks ordered. And with the oldster in the saddle, the Y-Cross man, his eyes spiking the petrified rustlers, slowly backed toward his own

mount among the trees. Then he was astride and he and Windy were plunging into the descending darkness.

Instantly the rustlers were triggering their guns, churning the twilight with gun flame. Side by side, the amazed Windy Dow and Funeral Parks raced along while hoofs thundered in hastily organized pursuit. Bullets were whizzing as the face of the inner cliff drew near. Then, with escape in sight, Windy's horse screamed, buckled at the knees, catapulted the oldster over its head.

Funeral Parks was onto the ground almost as quickly as Windy. Grasping the stunned oldster's arm, he propelled Windy toward a nest of rocks. "Gotta stand and fight," Parks panted. "That cayuse o' mine goes crazy with two on his back."

They dove into the rocks. But Karpus and his crew were almost upon them. The rustlers, scurrying for cover, tossed lead as they ran. And Windy Dow, hunkering out of sight, watched the last light slowly fade from the sky and knew he and Funeral Parks were doomed. With darkness, Karpus could rush them and the odds would be too great.

But because Karpus realized that very fact, the battle was intermittent now. During a lull, Funeral Parks turned to Windy. "Where'd yuh get this golden gun?" he asked.

"Bought it in Idaho," Windy replied. "It was such a plumb purty cutter I sort o' hankered for it."

Funeral nodded. "I know the place," he said. "I sold it to grain my hoss. That was years back."

"I'm beginnin' to savvy," Windy said slowly. "But why did yuh start spoutin' last night about Reno McShane bein' yellow?"

"After I heard yuh spinnin' that yarn in the saloon and showin' off that cutter, I hated yore guts," Funeral Parks told him. "I figgered yuh was a windbag, tradin' on the reputation of Reno McShane. An' since that reputation sort o' went haywire when the Hassayampa Kid scared McShane out o' Nevada, I wanted yuh to know yuh'd picked a helluva hoss to ride."

"Maybe I had it comin'," Windy said ruefully. "Nothin' much ever happened in my whole doggone life. That's why I got to inventin' yarns, makin' believe I was an uncurried catamount. And when I started packin' that golden gun it sort o' tickled me to have folks presumin' I was Reno McShane. When Yaffe took it for granted and offered me a job, I figgered I'd try my hand. I wasn't meanin' no offense."

"I know that—now," said the other. "The boss told me yuh'd gone to tackle this job. It sort o' made me ashamed of myself. I tagged along, made a play to get into Karpus' camp. When I saw yuh was aimin' to die without squawkin' out the truth, I figgered maybe yuh was entitled to the lie."

THE swift dusk of the high country had descended as they talked. The scrape of a boot sole on rock awoke them to danger.

"Here they come!" the Y-Cross man whispered, and handed Windy a scarred gun.

"So long, McShane," said Windy Dow. "Here's hopin' our trails cross where the harps is gold 'stead o' the guns."

The night trembled with noise as Karpus and his crew charged forward. And even as Windy, triggering, saw Karpus sprawl, the oldster knew that he and his partner in peril were as good as dead. But he blazed away, saw a rustler drop, saw an-

other topple over the body. And suddenly Windy Dow knew this fight could be won!

And why not? Reno McShane, the golden gun bucking in his hand, was the Reno McShane of old. And Windy Dow? All his frustrated life he had spun yarns of exploits he'd never experienced. He'd accepted a mission because he wanted to be the sort of hombre he'd pretended to be. Now he was proving himself, for his fury matched Reno McShane's as they fought.

Bullets found them as they exposed themselves. Yet, fighting grimly, they lessened the odds, made them even. Then Windy, dragging himself over the rocks, brought the fight to the enemy. A form reared in the night, gargantuan in its nearness. Windy thumbed a shot and the form collapsed. The last rustler sprawled with McShane's lead in him and the fight was over.

Weak and trembling, the two supported each other, reeling toward a pair of horses. When they had succeeded in getting into the saddles, McShane spoke.

"That fixes things for the squarest boss that ever lived," he said. "Maybe if I'd been the man folks thought I was it would've happened long ago."

"Yuh've had yore say," Windy remarked grimly. "But if yuh ever speak of Reno McShane bein' yellow again, I'll bust a gun over yore head. This Hassayampa Kid was lucky he never caught up with yuh, I'm thinkin'."

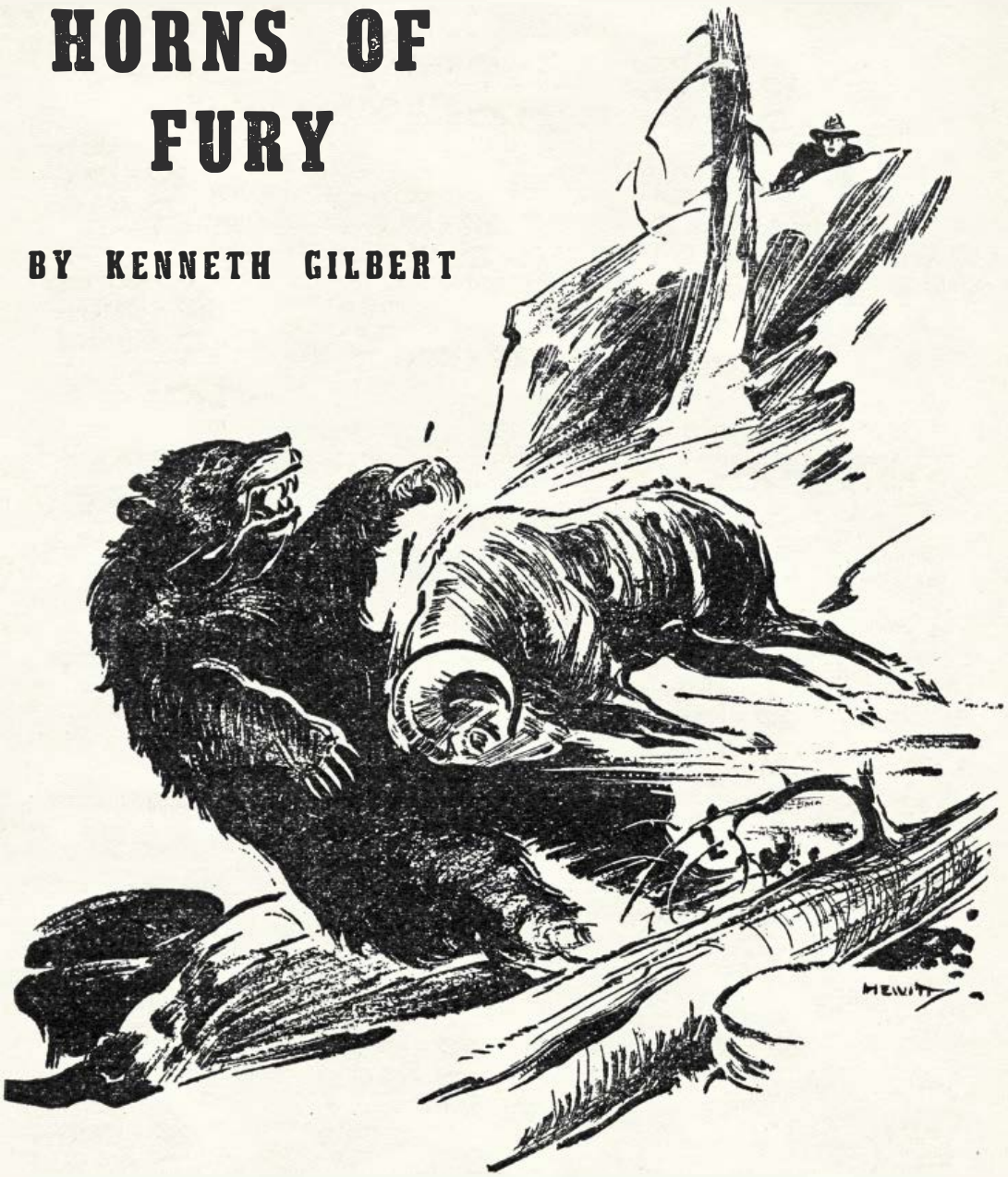
The other's eyes were weary and brooding. "I had to run from him in Nevada," he explained. "I had to change my name, cover my backtrail. It was a choice of wearin' the yellow brand or wearin' the brand of Cain. He was my stepbrother, and he hadn't seen me since we was buttons. But I knowed him—knowed him all along. The Hassayampa Kid was Zwing Karpus, rest his kill-crazy soul! Now maybe yuh'll savvy why my draw was slow in the saloon."

They rode in silence, for Windy, who had looked into the secret soul of a brave man, for once, had no words to say. Yet he knew a savage pride, because he had sided that man through gun flame. And the satisfaction in Windy Dow was unsullied even though at long last he had a true yarn to spin, yet would forever keep it locked within himself.

THE END.

HORNS OF FURY

BY KENNETH GILBERT



HANK CHANDLER closed his left eye, lined his right along the rifle barrel until front sight and buckhorn rear were in perfect alignment. His forefinger tightened slowly on the trigger—and then he stopped. For it seemed as though at that instant a voice spoke sharp warning.

Yet there appeared to be no danger. Two hundred yards away on a rock edge stood the king of the crags, Ol' Curlyhorn himself, the biggest mountain sheep Chandler had ever seen, the finest trophy in all the wild Selkirks. The bighorn was even larger than Chandler had expected, despite the many stories he had been told concerning the giant. Ol' Curlyhorn would weigh close to four hundred pounds, and the symmetrical sweep of those heavy horns would make his a record head. Chandler's

pulse quickened in anticipation, but still he did not fire.

He was watching the bighorn. Ol' Curlyhorn stood with ash-gray face turned across the valley, ears perked forward as though listening. Either he was not aware of the man's presence, or he sensed some unpredictable danger more terrifying which even Chandler felt.

But only for a moment. Hank Chadler had traveled many miles in the hope of taking such a trophy as this. His finger squeezed the trigger suddenly, his shoulder jerked to the recoil of the gun, and the bitter, clapping report fled across the valley, to be caught up and hurled back in staccato echoes from cliff sides and peaks. The bighorn went down as though blasted by lightning, and Chandler leaped to his feet with a grunt of triumph. But before he could take a step there were devastating consequences of his shot.

The earth quaked beneath his feet with strange uneasiness. From the right there came slithering, tearing sounds, and half a mountainside started down the slope. It roared past within a few feet of Chandler, and its ground-shaking passage stirred other slides into action. It was as though the ancient peaks, wrapped in the slumbering silence of early spring, resented the man's act in shattering the brooding peace of that moment. Holding his breath, Chadler waited. But the unseen wilderness gods apparently had decided to spare him.

Avalanches started by the concussion of the gunshot died away. There was one final, thunderous roar at the mouth of the valley where a river, already at flood stage by reason of melting snow, poured through a narrow rock gap. Then awesome silence again.

Chandler let go a gusty sigh of relief and started for the ledge where he had seen the bighorn fall. He remembered now what his halfbreed guide, Johnny Buck, had told him about the danger of snow slides at this season.

"But a head like Ol' Curlyhorn's is worth a risk!" Chandler told himself. "That bighorn was smart enough to know those slides were coming. Anyway, the danger is past." He started for the ledge where he had seen the game go down.

But the great mountain sheep was not there. There was a patch of blood on the rocks, a wisp of bristly hair from Ol' Curlyhorn's grayish-brown coat—and a wavering line of tracks that went down through the snow toward the pocket valley which lay just below.

CHANDLER was disappointed. He felt sudden resentment at the prey which had escaped him and the wilderness gods who had mocked him. Yet the bighorn must be hard hit. He couldn't go far. Then Chandler chuckled in appreciation.

"Why," he reflected, "that ram's doing me a favor. He's going straight for camp! Makes it all the easier to pack in his head when I do get him!"

For this, incredible as it seemed at first, was fact. On the other side of that curious little valley, probably an old volcano crater, was Johnny Buck and the outfit. Just beyond the river. The stream itself would stop Ol' Curlyhorn. Chandler was sure of that, because it was deep and swift, and he'd only managed to get across it that morning on a driftwood jam. Cheered again, he started off on the trail.

Yet still that feeling of uneasiness persisted and Chandler wondered

why. Probably, he decided at last, his nerves were playing him tricks. Those slides had given him a scare. No reason, though, why he should be afraid. But he made sure that his gun was reloaded.

When Chandler got down into the pocket valley he noticed that the tracks still led on. Now he understood why the bighorn had chosen this route. In the center of the dish-shaped depression was what appeared to be a rocky island in a sea of snow, a flattened cone that jutted above the center of the old crater. It was such a place that the bighorn would seek. By climbing to its top he could look around in all directions to mark the approach of an enemy. But Chadler's long-range gun would wipe out that advantage when the time came.

Yet a curious thing was happening, as Chandler discovered just before he reached the rock. "Must be a heavy thaw today," he decided, for he had observed that the tracks of the bighorn were slushy. Suddenly he stepped into a hidden hole beside the trail and sank above his knees into icy water! With a gasp he dragged himself out, and stared around the plain. What he saw brought a swift return of the uneasiness he had experienced before.

The valley was rapidly becoming a lake!

He could see that the snow, so immaculately white until then, was now backened ominously. That meant it had become slushy with water. Abruptly he realized that the last slide, the one which had occurred at the mouth of the valley, had actually blocked the river, already running full. The shallow crater of the long-extinct volcano was almost circular and less than half a mile in width, and it would not take long for that swollen stream, emptying at a tremendous rate into the place, to fill it to overflowing. Alarmed, Chandler turned to retreat to the high ground he had just left.

But he saw at once that his decision had come too late. There were pools rapidly deepening between himself and the shore. A widening wave, a line of muddy water, was sweeping toward him from the lower end of the valley as the frustrated river found itself turned back by the slide. Turning, he plunged toward the rocky island, knowing that his only hope of escape lay there. There was nó chance that the river would rise high enough to submerge the rock, for the chopped-off cone reared itself fully two hundred feet above the valley floor, and covered several acres. Sanctuary for Ol' Curlyhorn had become sanctuary for the human being who only a few minutes before had sought his life.

AS Chandler reached solid footing at last and drew himself out of the flood, he saw the water creeping upward about the trunks of spruce trees growing at the base of the rock. "Might be it will flood the island," he thought. But that hardly seemed possible; the rock was too lofty. Yet his predicament was serious enough anyway. How was he going to get ashore?

Johnny Buck had an ax and might build a raft, but first he had to learn that Chandler was marooned. The camp site was well above the waterline beyond where the river had been and therefore was safe enough, but there was no certainty that Johnny was about the place. He might not return before dark. It would take him hours to build a raft and work it out here. The situation appeared more serious to Chadler than it had at the beginning.

"Johnny will see a fire and know

I'm here," he decided on sudden inspiration. "Question is, where can I get wood? This place looks as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard!" There were no trees on the rock mass, not even moss or lichens. But he had to find something that would burn. He put down his gun that he might get a better hand grip on the broken rocks as he climbed over them; he *had* to find wood!

Something moved along a shelf a few hundred yards ahead. Ol' Curlyhorn was still there and alive, but the killing urge had gone out of Chandler now. Almost he felt compassion for the king of crags who was marooned here with him. He turned back toward the lower part of the island. And at that moment he made out an uprooted tree that was being carried slowly by the current.

Something alive crouched among the branches upthrust on the upper side. Chandler made out two gray forms. Wolves! Probably a pair of the gray marauders had been crossing the valley when the rising water had trapped them. They had started swimming until they came to the windfall, then climbed aboard it. Even as Chandler watched he saw the drifting tree swing closer to shore, and the wolves stand up in anticipation. Suddenly the nearest one plunged in and began swimming. A moment later its mate followed.

Again Chandler had that feeling of uneasiness. He was not afraid of wolves ordinarily, but these circumstances were not to his liking. The beasts might become dangerous. He was glad that he had his gun. He decided to get it and began retracing his steps to where he had laid down the weapon.

But something had happened. The rocky surface of the island looked much the same from any angle. At the end of ten minutes he had still failed to locate the spot where he had laid down the gun. He cursed himsef for his carelessness, yet at the time it had not seemed important. He had needed his hands free to climb and to get wood.

"I've *got* to find that gun before dark!" he told himself. "Those wolves will have me figured out before morning, and they'll be hungry and mean enough then to attack!" But the gun might have been in camp, for all the good that it did him. Inch by inch, he combed the higher reaches where he had been, but there was no sign of the weapon.

The wolves apparently had disappeared. But Chandler was sure that they knew by this time he was on the island. Almost he could figure out the workings of their cunning minds. They would be alarmed at first, then curious. By and by they would wonder why he did not try to kill them. Eventually they would decide that he was helpless. And when they grew hungry enough, and night gave them courage— Chandler shuddered and kept glancing behind him while he searched.

Higher and higher rose the water. Chandler was reminded of a queer lake he had heard about in Alaska—a lake which is created each summer by melting snow pouring into a valley whose outlet has been blocked by ice jams. When the water reaches a certain height, the natural dam goes out with a rush and a roar and the lake disappears within a few hours.

"It *could* happen here," he reflected. "But why would it? That slide at the mouth of the valley is likely to stay there for years!" He looked down and saw the water climbing foot by foot up the trunks of trees. One of those spruce trees had attracted his attention at the beginning. It had a crooked branch

at the top. The water was nearly up to that branch now. That meant at least twenty feet of water over the trail he had followed.

Too late now he recalled that if he had his gun he might have fired it, trusting to Johnny Buck to hear the sound of the shots. Again he cursed himself for pulling a *chechahco* trick, forgetting the inflexible wilderness rule which forbids a man to part company with his gun. Still, he knew he'd find the thing eventually. The only question was, would he find it in time?

He looked up sharply as he heard a light, rattling sound on the rocks above him.

Ol' Curlyhorn stood up there, less than a hundred paces distant. Chandler could make out every detail of the bighorn now. He could even see where the bullet had struck, high on the shaggy neck. There was a matted streak where the blood had dried. Ol' Curlyhorn had a bad wound, but he might recover if given a chance.

"But," Chandler reflected grimly, "there'll be no chance! Those gray devils will see to that. They'll round him up, and when they've finished with him and grown hungry again, *my* turn will come—if I don't find that gun!"

Already Ol' Curlyhorn was uneasy. He knew of the wolves, probably had seen them come ashore. And he knew that for once there was no opoprtunity for him to retreat.to high levels from which he might look down on his enemies with scorn. As Chandler watched him, the bighorn did a curious thing.

UNTIL that moment he had been peering down at the lower reaches of the island, at the point where the wolves had come ashore. But now he wheeled, startled, and snorted fiercely as his sensitive nostrils brought him warning of new danger. Something below and behind him was even more alarming than the presence of the wolves.

Chandler likewise caught that feeling of alarm. He stared down in the direction the bighorn was now facing. Suddenly the man gave a startled cry. He had detected something huge and dark moving slowly among the rocks down there.

"A grizzly!" he exclaimed involuntarily. It seemed incredible at first, then the probable explanation of the phenomenon came to him. It might have been flooded out of its cave down below. At this season the great bears of the Selkirks were still hibernating. Possibly this giant had been sleeping peacefully in his cavern down near the base of the rocky island, and had aroused to find the place filling with muddy water. Such a thing would serve to whet an edge on his ordinarily savage temper. He would be dangerous on this tiny refuge because there was no way of escaping him, short of plunging into the icy flood, which would be sure death in itself. Chandler could feel his heart pounding as he waited.

But apparently the bear had not yet winded him. Maybe he had not even discovered the presence of the bighorn or the wolves. All he wanted at the moment, it seemed, was to get to ground high enough to be out of reach of the flood. It was Ol' Curlyhorn himself who broke the spell. He made out the grizzly clearly, and his whistling snort of challenge was far reaching.

The huge bear stopped in astonishment, peering this way and that, trying to locate the maker of the sound. Chandler could see the hackles rise along its neck. But the eyesight of all bears is poor, and the grizzly,

although getting more and more angry every moment, could not define the motionless bighorn from the rocks above. Suddenly the bear roared in triumph. His unfailing nose had at last told him where the challenger stood. He began working upward.

Other movement caught Chandler's eye. Twin gray ghosts flitted among the rocks below. The wolves had likewise heard that challenge of the wounded bighorn and, because they were yet unaware of the bear's presence, they instantly decided that here was an opportunity to make an easy kill. It would be simple to trap the bighorn among those rocks where he had little or no chance to retreat. They paused only to locate him more clearly, then went darting upward among the rocks, their movements so light and soundless that they might have been wisps of vapor swirled along by the wind.

Ol' Curlyhorn saw them coming and lowered his powerful, curved horns. For an instant Chandler forgot his own predicament as the dramatic quality of the scene smote him—the statuesque figure of the mighty bighorn, standing there as though hewn from gray-brown granite, muscles set, poised gracefully on the lip of rock as those wraithlike figures flashed toward him. He seemed calm and collected, but this, Chandler knew, was the craft of an old battler. The wolves wanted to terrify him into stampeding, but he seemed to sense their desires, so they broke apart almost at the moment of reaching him, striking for each side in the deadly in-and-out fighting leap of their kind. They were quick as light, but Ol' Curlyhorn moved even more quickly.

Accurate timing and split-second judgment was part of his life among the crags. He pivoted suddenly and lunged at one of the wolves. It was a short charge that seemed almost futile, yet Chandler heard the impact of those curved horns as they struck the wolf's side. The gray killer rolled over twice before regaining his feet. When he got up, he was still murderously intent, but the blow had dazed him slightly. Even as he recovered there came that stiff-legged charge again, and this time one curved point laid open his shoulder. Ol' Curlyhorn would have killed him the next moment if the second wolf hadn't driven in for the throat hold.

WITH a bawling sound the bighorn reared, throwing off his attacker. The wolf sprawled momentarily on the rocks, and the heavy forefeet of the bighorn came down with the weight of four hundred pounds upon them. There was a yelping snarl from the crippled wolf as it sought to escape, but it was too late. The hoofs hammered like twin pile drivers until the wolf was only a mass of gray fur that scarcely resembled anything which had ever moved and breathed. Ol' Curlyhorn, snorting fiercely, left off only when the remaining wolf courageously attacked for the last time.

The other wolf probably was so crazed by pain and the killing lust that it did not realize the odds lay against it, for it leaped straight for Ol' Curlyhorn's throat, even as the first had done. But its fangs met only in coarse, bristly hair, thick enough to turn the bitter wind which howls among the high peaks. Ol' Curlyhorn flung him aside even as he had dislodged the other. But this time the bighorn did not follow up his advantage, for the wolf landed almost in the path of the oncoming grizzly.

It was only a moment of distrac-

tion. With the hated wolf scent strong in his nostrils the grizzly struck once with a mighty forepaw, and left the wolf lying there with legs twitching in the death agony. The sight and sound of battle had stirred the bear into fury already awakened by being driven from the hibernating cave. The grizzly saw the bighorn only as an enemy, even as everything in the world was an enemy at this moment. It gave a blood-chilling roar and charged.

If Ol' Curlyhorn had been given decent opportunity to retreat, he might have done so, for he was old and wise. But as it was, he stood there trapped on the rock shelf, and his fighting instincts were aroused anyway. Likewise a marked advantage lay with him. He was above the grizzly. Just as the bear was in the act of closing with him the bighorn struck again with that brief but terrible lunge of the tremendous battering-ram he carried on his head. Chandler heard the thud of bone on bone, a sickening sound. And he saw the grizzly actually backed up by the weight of that impact.

Again the monster bellowed, but it was clear that the shock had partially stunned him. He swung a huge paw at the bighorn, but the latter evaded it as deftly as a skilled fencer. He sprang back, then ahead. And the weight of his muscled body drove the bear back on haunches.

Now Ol' Curlyhorn pressed the attack. The bear's left paw whistled at him, but too soon. Again he struck, thudding blows against which no flesh or bone could stand. The bear sprawled, bawling, then began to back off. But still the crazed bighorn kept driving in. He knew he was killing the grizzly—due to that lucky first blow which had caught the bear at a disadvantage—and in his rage he would be satisfied with nothing short of stamping life from the huge form even as he had crushed it from the wolves.

In his eagerness, though, he threw caution aside—and it might have been the moment for which the battered grizzly was waiting. As Ol' Curlyhorn drove in for the killing stroke, the grizzly gauged his own timing better. This time the left forepaw swung with terrific force and the bighorn, despite his weight, was literally hurled through the air, to land on rocks below and lie there without moving.

SLOWLY shaking its head as though to clear away the fog that must have clouded its brain, the grizzly peered about, then turned and began moving away, while Chandler watched breathlessly. This was a sight such as few human beings have seen in the wilderness, and he felt a queer sense of gratification that he had been vouchsafed the opportunity of witnessing it. He had heard Indian tales of battles between grizzlies and bighorns, but he had always discounted them. They were of such rare occurrence that he believed most such stories were imaginary. But now he knew the truth; he had seen.

"*Now*, if I only had my gun!" he thought suddenly. And yet he knew that at the moment he felt less a killer than he had ever been.

The grizzly, he saw, was thoroughly whipped, and for a long while, until the soreness had gone out of its hammered body, would ask only to be left alone. Already the monster was retreating to the lower levels, probably seeking to return to its cave. Yet it had fought a good fight and deserved to live, Chandler decided. Ol' Curlyhorn was probably dead. If there was any killing

urge left in the shaken man it was due to a desire for revenge for the bighorn's death. For Chandler realized now that Ol' Curlyhorn, by his own courage and prowess, had repaid good for evil by saving his own life, not merely sparing it for a time. Yet Chandler had the strange feeling that the settlement of this ancient feud between the bighorn and its natural enemies was something which belonged to the wilderness and its unseen gods, and not to man.

But at least he wanted a closer look at the bighorn. He took two steps forward and stopped as his eyes fell upon his gun lying in a shallow crevice, just where he had left it. At the feel of the smooth stock and the cold steel barrel in his hands once more, he had a sense of exultation that made him want to shout.

The black hour had passed! And with that comforting realization came another: the water was going down. Chandler made out the tree with the peculiar, forked limb. Even while he had been absorbed by the battle on the shelf the ancient crater was being drained. Probably the water, rising high enough, had cut away the slide which jammed the outlet of the river, for the water level was now a good ten feet below the spot on the tree where Chandler had marked it before.

He heard a faint yell, and turned. On the far shore he saw Johnny Buck standing there, waving encouragement to him. Chandler, grinning, waved back. It would only be the matter of a short while now before the floor of the crater would be dry enough so he could travel. Things were beginning to break his way once more. Why, he even had his trophy—the majestic head of Ol' Curlyhorn!

But even before he swung back for another look at the bighorn, Chandler had made up his mind otherwise. He knew that this record head would never occupy a place of honor in his trophy room. Ol' Curlyhorn deserved a better fate than that, even in death. Nobody would gloat over him if he were left here in the wilderness where he belonged. It was only a half-formed decision at the beginning, but it became fact when Chandler turned.

For Ol' Curlyhorn was far from dead. At the moment Chandler saw him, the bighorn had raised to forefeet and sat there rather awkwardly, blinking and apparently trying to recall what had happened. That grizzly blow which would have broken the neck of an ox had only dazed the old battler whom bitter life among the high crags had toughened and given a tenacious hold on existence that could not be so easily shaken off.

Ol' Curlyhorn saw the man and got stiffly to all four feet. He eyed Chandler quizzically, apparently without fear. Perhaps he knew at that moment the philosophy which characterizes the wild kindred, that if this was death at the hands of the man against whom no wilderness creature could prevail, there was no use meeting it without dignity. He stood there for a long moment, staring at Chandler with that queer expression in eyes which were mild and no longer reddened by the fires of battle.

He was still standing there, seemingly puzzled, as the man waved a hand to him in what was at once a salute and a farewell, before starting down the rocks and toward the camp where Johnny Buck was waiting.

THE END

STRAIGHT SHOOTER FROM CROOKED CREEK

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

THE bitterly cold wind struck cruelly into Lang Cardigan and the growing darkness threatened to blot out the trail he was following. There was every reason for him to turn back, but U. S. Deputy Marshal Cardigan wasn't called The Weasel for nothing. He kept doggedly on, up Crooked Creek Valley, following those huge horse tracks in the snow. Those marks, he was convinced, would lead him to the road agent who, a week before, had stopped the Pineboro-Gentryville stage, callously killed driver and guard and looted the box.

According to the lone passenger, a whiskey drummer, the robber had been a giant, riding an enormous horse and flourishing a pistol like a cannon. Because the man could not remember the horse's color or markings, the Gentryville sheriff put the whole yarn down as hysteria. And Cardigan, working under cover, had felt the same until he found those gigantic hoof tracks taking out across the snow.

Not much to go on, surely, but numbers of badmen were behind bars or dead because the Weasel had followed seemingly barren sign. Now, with new flurries of white spitting out of the north, Cardigan fought to keep his pony from turning back. And vainly, too, for after a few minutes, darkness hid the trail

Cardigan dismounted, trying to follow the tracks by touch. A covering of fresh snow baffled him. Torn with the feeling that even the elements were favoring the bandit, the bitterly disappointed U. S. lawman mounted once more. Not until then did he take stock of himself.

The wind was striking through his clothing like the slicing of knife edges and he could feel it sap his vitality, stiffen his muscles, dull his reactions. Already he could sense the dread creeping of drowsiness into his brain—the call to sleep, and freeze. It was miles back to the nearest ranch and he was not at all sure that he could find the place even if he could last that long. His best bet seemed up in the timber where would be shelter from the wind and fuel for a fire. He turned his pony across the blizzard blast.

Swinging his arms to maintain circulation, Lang Cardigan rode along. His natural disappointment, his sense of being cheated, he put behind him. His fight now was for life. After a while, when he failed to reach the sloping ground marking the toe of the hills, he halted his pony, wondering if he could have become confused by a gradual shifting of the wind. And it was while pondering the belief that he was hopelessly lost that he heard, faint but unmistakable, the shrill neigh of a horse.

"Yonder's my fine-feathered road agent," he muttered, feeling a swift resurgence of his man-hunting instinct. He put his mount toward the blast that had carried the sound. He hadn't gone far when he felt the footing go out from under the pony. The brute screamed, heaved convulsively as it fell through space.

Lang Cardigan was thrown into hard-packed snow, lightly covered with the new skift. A brief satisfaction shot through his mind as he sensed that he was unhurt. Then the full weight of the threshing pony was upon him, rolling over him, crushing him down upon jutting rocks, filling him with stabbing pain.

The damning weight of the horse was off him then and Cardigan struggled to hold onto the tag ends of his consciousness. Agony ran through him in sickening waves. Red flames danced before his vision and, like a figment of a nightmare,

he could hear the screaming of the pony and its frantic efforts to rise.

He tried to roll to a sitting posture and, failing that, realized that his left arm was broken. His right leg throbbed torturously; it was quite useless. Paroxysms of distress racked his whole left side, making every breath an excruciating agony. Lang Cardigan was at trail's end. The Weasel had overreached himself. What outlaws and killers had failed to do, a night-shrouded cut bank had taken care of. Lang Cardigan was done.

The wind howl grew, like taunting renegade laughter. Driven snow curled over the cut bank, drifting over Cardigan. He groaned helplessly. When the chinook ate away the drifts in the spring, someone would find his bones, his rotting clothes and a golden star.

The faint explosion of a gun roused him. Then, blacker than the blackness of the night, a giant shadow hovered over him. It was like the coming of death, and Cardigan found himself listening for the rustle of wings. The shape bent toward him and great mittened paws ran over his body. A voice like the hollow reverberation from some great cavern spoke to him.

"Hurt bad, eh, mister? You're broke up some, but I'll take care of you. Grit yore teeth now!"

Strong arms lifted him. Hot blades of pain surged through his being, weakening his frail hold on consciousness. Then blessed oblivion claimed him.

WHEN Cardigan revived, he found himself bobbing head down across the spreading shoulders of a giant. He felt no pain; just a deathlike numbness that defied pain. He could hear the low muttering of the man who held him and he could make out the form of a huge horse following. Lang knew then that his quarry had been closer than he had thought. And now the giant bandit had the Weasel in his trap. If he ever found the badge—

With his one good arm, Cardigan somehow managed to get inside his shirt, work the star loose and drop it in the snow. Then the giant was lowering him, bringing a return of that agony in his side. Again Cardigan went out like a snuffed light.

For untold ages, he lived in a roaring void of torture and conflict. He heard strange voices, saw strange sights. Sometimes light seemed to blind him; again he groped in blackness. There was numbing cold, seering heat.

Fanged vises screwed down on his legs and arms, rending them. Monsters bound him with endless lengths of steel wire that defied movement. Demons jabbed at his heart with white-hot gimlets. And though he fought back, he could not dispel them.

Then he battled with a dozen fiendish men who plagued him endlessly. Taunting him as the Weasel while they prepared to kill him, little by little. One was a giant, a towering monster with a crooked face. Another was like an ox, enormously shouldered, with long arms and hands that could break a man's neck. One had a full-moon face, a flowing red mane of hair and the wide solemn eyes of a woman.

Suddenly the marshal was rushing toward a roaring vortex of light. Hammers beat cruelly in his brain, filling him with nausea. The light grew, widened, washing over him like a wave. Then, all at once, things were calm. He lay in a bunk, in a lamp-lit cabin. And all the tormentors of his dreams had merged into one. A giant, warming his

hands at the stove, stood watching. A very familiar giant towering toward the ceiling, his enormous shoulders hunched, his round red face marked by a mane of red hair, sad eyes and a toothy grin.

For a long time, Cardigan met his stare. Then the giant heaved his bulk to the bunk.

"You wake up, huh?" he rumbled in a pleased tone. "By golly I'm glad, 'cause I'm afraid you die. Yo're smashed pretty damn good, but Goliath Huber he fix you up."

The giant beamed, pride lighting his oxlike face. But Cardigan could only shudder as he studied the great chest, mighty biceps and enormous hands. Here was the cold killer who had robbed the stage. And yonder, on the wall, hung the horse pistol that had looked like a cannon to the whiskey drummer. The marshal steeled himself, expressing his thanks.

"Yeah, Huber," he murmured, shocked at the weakness of his voice. "You did all right an' I owe you six bits or so."

"You don't owe me anythin', mister!" The giant took it dead serious. "I'm glad I hear your horse scream an' find you. To get you home not so hard as set your arm an' leg."

"Sure you got the bones straight?"

"You bet your life, yeah. I fix plenty broken bones when I work in the mines."

The giant stood there, grinning dumbly. Cardigan took stock of his hurts. His head was skinned and pounding dully and his leg throbbed in its sheath of willow splints. His aching left arm was bound tightly to his side. It would be weeks before he could move from this bunk. Resigning himself, he drew a long breath. Pain shot through him, sickening him. He gave way to a paroxysm and coughed till it seemed he was breaking in two. Goliath Huber looked worried. He laid his great palm on the lawman's forehead.

"Humph!" he grunted. "Fever! That's bad, mister. Lung fever."

Cardigan shuddered as the cough gave way to chill. "Reckon you . . . you're right," he chattered. "Maybe you better put on mustard."

The giant's big hands fumbled with the covers, tucking them more snugly in. Then he stared at his patient, like a bewildered dog trying to understand its master.

"Lung fever!" he rumbled. "No mustard. Bad. Awful bad."

Shivering and shaking, Cardigan knew the bitterness of doom. Bullets he had faced with a sense of fatalism, because often bullets missed their mark. But lung fever—pneumonia! Few lived through that burning, freezing, choking scourge. It was a case for skilled treatment and profound knowledge. And all he had was a dumb, oxlike creature with an empty smile and strength as futile as weakness.

"You're right, Huber," he choked. "It is bad—damn bad. But you've done all a man can do—without a doctor."

The giant brooded. "A doctor, yeah," he muttered. "Long way to a doctor."

He crossed the room ponderously, threw open the door. An icy blast snarled into the room, sweeping snow to the far corners of the shack. Growling, he slammed the panel shut.

"Three feet on the level," he mumbled, as if to himself. "And storm just started. Man a fool to try bucking blizzard. Lose way and freeze." He reached down a heavy sheepskin coat, eased his great torso into it.

"What you going to do?" demanded Cardigan.

"I guess I go to Pineboro, mister. Get doctor."

"Don't talk like a fool, Huber."

The giant smiled. "Sure, I'm a fool. If I wasn't, I'd stay here by the fire." As he spoke, he placed bread, meat and water on a chair beside Cardigan's bed. "You be all right till I fetch doctor. You try to sleep."

"Wait!" Cardigan reached for him. "Don't go out there. You'll die. And no doctor will come in a blizzard like this."

Goliath's eyes showed dull fire. "Doctor come, sure enough. Maybe I have to carry him."

Sensing a stubbornness beyond his power of argument, Cardigan said, "But Pineboro, man. If you must make such a damn-fool try, head for Gentryville. You've got a road most of the way and—"

Goliath shook his head, pulled a fur cap down over his ears. "Gentryville no good," he said flatly. "Goliath can't go to Gentryville."

"Why not?" Lang Cardigan shot that question, knowing the answer beforehand. Goliath Huber's head tipped down, deep furrows creasing his brow as he struggled for words. Finally he shook his great head.

"Can't tell you, mister. Just can't go to Gentryville, that's all." He drew on heavy mittens, then whipped a bearskin over Cardigan's bed. "Fire go out soon," he rumbled. "This robe keep you warm." He reached down, patted Cardigan's cheek with doglike affection. Then he was gone.

FOR a long time, Cardigan lay in that lonely cabin, listening to the wail of the storm and trying not to think. The fire died in the stove and the marshal's breath steamed from his nostrils. He burned with fever, then shook with the chills. After a while he slept.

When he awoke, the lamp had burned itself out. The room was black and bitterly cold. A gale shrieked about the eaves, as mournful as Cardigan's spirits. His lungs burned and he coughed rackingly.

Cardigan's mind projected itself through the fury of the blizzard. Somewhere out there, Goliath Huber was battling icy blasts, hurling himself into the storm with all the power of his great body. A cold-hearted killer risking his life to save a stranger. What manner of a man was this giant?

"Maybe I'm wrong," Cardigan groaned. "Maybe he's not the one."

But he knew differently. Those horse tracks, the same as those left at the scene of the stage holdup, were damning. It was unlikely that there were two such giant animals on any one range—especially two that left the same mark. Goliath fitted the drummer's description. And yonder hung the gun that looked like a cannon.

Cardigan's mind wandered. He shouted, raved, begging the absent Goliath not to leave him alone to die, bawling charges, threatening the giant with the gallows. And Goliath, leering at him, always laughed his slow laugh, standing unmoved, as stalwart and unbending as a granite wall.

In rational moments, Cardigan worried. Goliath was surely done for. Big and strong as he was, he could still only stand so much punishment. Already weary after a protracted joust with the storm, he would face the blizzard with sapped energy. He would stumble and fall, rise and stagger on. Cardigan could see him struggling, fighting out his heart. And the time would come

when he no longer could rise. The thought sickened the lawman. It was grim justice, yet it left him shaken. It is one thing to run down a man, face him with smoking guns, kill him and perhaps be killed. Here the results were the same, but—

"God's will or the devil's jest?" he wondered. "Goliath's luck an' mine are buried in deep snow, an' us with it. It's justice mebbe, but likewise hell!"

Gray daylight came seeping through the frosted panes, hung around awhile to torment a raving, coughing, burning man. Then it was dark again. Sometimes, wedded to utter exhaustion, sanity would come briefly to Lang Cardigan, dispelling the tormenting shades of men he had brought to justice, punishing him with an awful thirst. Once he fumbled for the water Goliath had left for him, found it frozen solid and knocked it off the chair in an eruption of rage. It took him a long time then to get his good hand under cover again, he was so weak. His breath was coming with the greatest difficulty.

WHEN Cardigan awoke again the stove crackled and roared, and light from the grate was driving back the shadows in the gloomy room. The sharp odor of medicines stung his nostrils and he made out the watchful shape of a small, bearded man hovering over him.

"Hullo," the lawman croaked weakly. "Goliath? He make it back?"

"He made it all right," growled the little medico. "The stubborn devil. Why, he took me right out of my house and lugged me most of the way here through a howling blizzard." He felt for the sick man's pulse. "That man's a horse. Likewise a fool for crossing the mountains to me when he could have followed the valley right down to Doc Harper at Gentryville so much easier. Big body, small brain."

"I ain't so sure about that last," said Cardigan, then swiveled his eyes as Goliath came in from outside, stamping and whooshing, shaking snow like a spaniel. Vast pleasure lit the giant's broad face when he noticed that his patient was awake. He came over at once, to lay his palm on the lawman's hot forehead.

"Good!" he boomed. "You wake up and do fine, hey? Pretty soon we get you up on your feet, I betcha. Now I make you some strong soup. Me an' the doctor eat the fresh meat I fetch from town. I like meat."

And Cardigan opined that such must surely be the case, marveling at a man who, bucking a blizzard and burdened by a man too small and weak to be much good to himself, would carry fresh meat from the village. They'd sure need a strong rope to stretch Goliath Huber's great bole of a neck.

The medico stayed a week, cursing his confinement but giving his patient the best of care. When the storm blew itself out and the sun came again, he bade Cardigan goodby and started for home, riding in the saddle before Goliath, on the giant horse. Before leaving, Goliath went outdoors somewhere and then fetched in gold money to pay the doctor. Cardigan found himself wondering where the man had the stage loot cached.

Goliath returned late that night. And then for a month he waited on Cardigan hand and foot. His gentleness and consideration were amazing. No woman could have been more thoughtful. The lawman's strength came slowly back. After about six weeks had passed, Goliath removed the splints and fashioned a pair of

rude crutches. Cardigan began to hobble around.

More and more the lawman had to fight back a growing regard for this man who put his guest's comfort and desires before his own. That was not too hard for him, because with Lang Cardigan, the Weasel, the law came first. Goliath affected a cheeriness as storm followed storm, as deepening snow made greater demands upon him. But at times when the big man forgot that he was not alone, his face would settle into woebegone lines and his eyes would become tragic.

To Cardigan, these symptoms pointed only to a burdening sense of guilt. And that, coupled with Goliath's determined unwillingness to show himself in Gentryville, convinced Cardigan that the man was the killer he sought. And the time was drawing near when he must take the fellow in—to hang. The thought brought Cardigan none of the usual joy of accomplishment.

ONE day Goliath came in with a downbearing attitude of dejection. His great broad shoulders were slumped; his lips were curved down at the corners and there was suffering in his wide eyes. He brooded as he warmed himself at the fire, then made a chair groan as he gave it his weight.

"You got enough troubles, Mr. Cardigan," he said apologetically. "I know I shouldn't bother you with mine. But—"

"What's on your chest, Goliath?" Cardigan asked him, feeling certain that the giant had broken under his burden and that the moment was at hand.

Goliath fiddled with his hands, his gaze on the floor. "My hay," he muttered, sadly. "Cattle eat him all up. Now I got no more to feed. Cattle starve. What I goin' to do now?"

"Is that . . . is that all that's worryin' you?" demanded the marshal.

Goliath flung up his head, his eyes suddenly edged with the cold flames of suspicion. "Sure," he said, with indrawn breath. "What you think Goliath worry about, eh?"

Had he been fully himself, Cardigan would have charged the giant then, thrown down on him and started him toward town. But he was far from being normal. And, looking into those suddenly changed eyes, he felt serious doubt that a .45 slug would stop the giant before he could deal out death. He shrugged, realizing he had roused Goliath's suspicions too soon.

"How would I know?" he veered off the dangerous subject. "But anyway, work is always better'n worry, feller. Your hay's gone and your cattle will starve unless you work hard."

"Goliath work hard," the big man said gloomily. "You tell what I do, eh?"

"Go out and make a drag—a plow, savvy?" Cardigan suggested.

The giant's eyes lit as he caught the idea. Chortling with almost childish glee, he drew on his heavy coat, mittens and overshoes. A wide smile was on his face as he barged out into the clear cold of outdoors.

Later, braced on his crutches at the window, Cardigan watched Goliath hitch a team to his crude snow plow and buck it into the pack, in the open where the snow was most thin. He saw the giant examine the furrow, throw his hands aloft, heard the great bellow burst from his lungs and saw him dash toward his barn and corral. Later, hungry, bawling cattle fell in behind him, cropping eagerly at the sere grass beneath.

Goliath was wet with sweat, exuberant, when he came in. In an ecstasy of emotion, he caught the lawman's cheeks between his great, horny palms and planted a moist kiss on his forehead.

"Goliath like it fine to have you here, Mr. Cardigan," he said. "You see, I very lonesome here. Now you make Goliath more happy by showing him how to do things—great things. Listen." He picked the marshal up as if he were a baby, carried him to the bed. "You sit here while Goliath talk. You very smart man. Goliath very strong. We be partners, what you say? Ten years we have big outfit, many cattle, lots of money. You figure things out; Goliath do the hard work. I have three hundred acres bottom land, good for alfalfa. Fine range for cattle to graze—"

He talked and talked, drawing brave pictures that flushed his simple face, that made his breath come gaspingly. Then he was through, and holding out his hands to the lawman, pleading.

"What you say, Lang? Huh? Goliath needs man like you to make big, fine ranch. Goliath very strong for heavy work, but not think so fast. I need partner like you. Say you do it, friend."

CARDIGAN was moved, profoundly so. There was something so fervent, so terribly desperate in the man's plea. He felt himself giving way to it, putting himself into the pattern of the giant's dream. And quite naturally so. For it was his dream, also. Then he thought of the riddled bodies on the undertaker's slab. The old driver and the shotgun messenger, crew of the looted stage. The picture dulled the glint in his eyes. He shrugged, his face hardening.

"I've always wanted something like that, Goliath," he confessed. "And I've saved my money against the day when I could buy into something like you've got here. But taking a partner is like taking a wife—a serious step that can make or break a man. Before I went partners with an hombre, I'd have to know that he was honest, decent, that he never do a mean, dirty or unlawful thing. Think you can measure up to that?"

He had expected the man to protest his eligibility. And was amazed to see pain register on Goliath's broad face, to see the eyes flick away from his, to hear the giant's mournful answer.

"You are smart, Mr. Cardigan. You see it in Goliath's eyes, eh? I am a bad man. I do a very bad thing. That is why I don't go to Gentryville for the doctor. Maybe if I go tell sheriff and go to jail it make me good man again. You think?"

"Depends on what you've done, Goliath," murmured the marshal cannily. "What was it?"

The giant's wild thatch of hair wagged. "Goliath ashamed," he muttered. "Me go in and tell sheriff maybe."

He was plainly worried about something and Cardigan grasped at the straw. It offered an easy avenue for getting the powerful man into town, into the sheriff's office. In his weakened state, he had looked forward with growing horror to the day when he must arrest the giant. Now—

"That's best, Goliath," he said, patting the man's broad shoulder. "And when you go, I'll go with you."

The offer seemed to bring little cheer to Goliath. His eyes were dull and spiritless during supper. He ate little, staring into space and brood-

ing. The lawman respected his mood and was careful to say nothing to change the man's will toward penance.

Later the giant got out his dog-eared Bible and, settled beside the fire, read to Cardigan, with his slow, halting delivery, as he had done every night for weeks. Afterward he turned to the fly leaf where a faded daguerreotype was pasted—the picture of gray-haired woman, with a rather stern look.

"My mother," he said, as he had said many times before. "She was a good woman, Mr. Cardigan. She very mad if she know what Goliath do."

"You'll have to make it up to her some way," said the marshal.

The giant nodded solemnly and put the Bible away. But, though Cardigan waited half fearfully for it, Goliath did not change heart during the weary weeks that followed one another in stormy procession. Snow flew and piled. The wind howled endlessly.

Goliath worked frantically at the plow, baring the sparse feed for his hungry animals. The horses grew bony and weak. The cattle lost flesh. Goliath worried, too, his inner stress making him gaunt, sulky and without zest. Only once did he bring up the matter that was foremost in their minds.

"If Goliath go to jail and pay up for being bad man, you think then you could be partner and build big ranch here, huh?" he asked pleadingly. "Maybe you hate Goliath, yes?"

Cardigan shook his head. "No, I don't hate you, feller. I pity you. Maybe when you've paid back the money—"

"Money?" the giant started. "You think Goliath better pay sheriff his money? That money buy cattle for big ranch, Mr. Cardigan."

"I think you better let the sheriff have it, Goliath."

The edict depressed the big man, but he made no protest.

IT was snowing when they went to bed that night. Next morning the wind still blew, but there was a different sound to it, as if some unseen hand plucked on the harpstrings in the leafless trees. In the air was an electric tension, strong and impelling, that drew the two men from their bunks and to the door.

The wind that fanned their faces was strangely warm. Water cascaded from the eaves of the cabin in trickling streams. The cattle, feeling a restless urge, lifted their heads and bawled plaintively. From the barn came the insistent whickering of the horses. A magpie fluttered magically out of the sky, screaming hungrily as it hopped across the softening snow before the door. It was the chinook. Spring had come!

The spell of the cosmic miracle touched the two men. Cardigan felt a swelling in his throat and, when he looked at Goliath, he was amazed to see tears streaking the bearded, frost-bitten cheeks.

"Spring come," Goliath announced. "Tomorrow, I think, we ride to Gentryville maybe. You think you take care of our ranch while Goliath stay in jail?"

"Maybe I'll do that, Goliath. We'll take care of it somehow."

They didn't start to town next day, nor the one following, for the creek roared with full banks of melting snow water. Each day larger patches of bare ground showed here and there on high points. The cattle ranged across the slushy flats, catching up on their grazing.

Finally the morning came when they closed the door behind them, threw saddles on the giant roan horse and another for Cardigan. When they were ready, Goliath moved apart to stare mournfully at this familiar scene. It was as if he never expected to see it again, and Cardigan had no doubt that such was the case. The man seemed rooted to the spot and Cardigan went over to rouse him at last.

"Come on, Goliath. We better get started."

The giant started. "Sure. Yeah. Goliath go pay up now, Mr. Cardigan."

The lawman felt so sorry for him in that moment and for an hour afterward that he quite forgot to bring up the matter of the buried loot. At first thought, he was for returning. Then it occurred to him that the delay might mean the difference between docility and violence in this giant, so he made no mention of the matter. Later, probably, Goliath would tell the sheriff where to find the money.

They came cantering into town about noon, Goliath sitting very straight and unhappy on his huge mount; the marshal suffering for him. Suddenly, opposite the Gentryville Stables, Goliath reined down, reaching for Cardigan's bridle.

"Come in here," he ordered glumly. "Goliath do right thing before we go see sheriff."

"What you going to do?" Cardigan asked curiously.

"Come, you see."

He led the way through the wide barn portal, stepped down. Cardigan dismounted. A heavy-bodied man with a glowering expression in his face, stepped from the barn office to confront them. His piggish eyes darted from one to the other

and came to rest scowlingly upon the giant.

"Hello, Huber," he growled. "What you want now?"

The giant's face twisted. "I do bad thing, Mr. Agnew," he said humbly. "Now I come to do right thing. You mind last time I see you. I spent too much money and couldn't pay my barn bill. You pull out cards and tell me it's my horse or nothing—"

"You're crazy!" Danzil Agnew cut him off angrily. "You're makin' that up."

"No, that's true," Goliath insisted. "You just forget. I cut the cards with you. You win and take my big horse. I walk home, walk all day. Pretty mad, too, 'cause I think you cheat me with those cards."

"Listen, you big monkey," raged the stableman. "Don't give me none of that. What's the idea—" His eyes went to Cardigan suspiciously. "Who's this gent?"

"That Mr. Cardigan. Maybe he be my partner when I do honest thing. Well, day after Christmas, my big horse come home. I decide to keep him, 'cause you cheat me. But now I want to be honest. I bring him back to you."

"What the hell's the idea of a story like this, you dumb ox?" demanded the livery man. His face was flushed and there was a frightened look in his small eyes. "I never cut cards with you an' you—"

CARDIGAN hardly heard the man's tirade. His mind was racing. Christmas, Goliath had said. The stage had been held up on Christmas Eve. Someone had used the big horse in that job, then had turned it loose to go home, its purpose served. In the lawman's mind there was still a doubt regarding the giant's sense of guilt and the hidden money at the ranch, but he was never one to close his brain to any bit of evidence, no matter how immaterial it might seem. He fixed the stableman with grim eyes.

"Agnew," he said sternly. "I am Lang Cardigan, U. S. deputy marshal. Huber charges you with having the horse used in the stage stick-up last Christmas Eve. You better come over to the sheriff's office with us and—"

Agnew didn't wait to hear him out. His face suddenly contorted and his hand flashed. It came away from his hip, gun-filled. Caught short, Cardigan started a belated draw, whirling to escape that flashing gun. The barn shuddered with gun concussion.

Bullet shock ran like an electric current through the marshal's body. Blindness seized him for an instant and he knew he was falling. He went to his knees and then his vision cleared. He heard Goliath bellow, saw him rush Agnew. Again the gun spoke, the bullet driving a gust of wind from the giant's lungs. But it failed to stop him, failed apparently to check his charge.

Agnew had whirled now and was sprinting toward the rear of the barn, Goliath after him. Cardigan brought up his gun, but he couldn't shoot. Goliath's swaying body was between him and his target. Agnew flung a wild shot behind him, swerved hard to the left, between buggies. With Goliath hard on his heels, he darted to a cupboard of shelves where axle grease, saddle soap, harness tools and gadgets were kept. He was making a wild reach for a tall canister when Goliath caught him, bore him down. The canister fell, banging him on the head.

The action was hidden from Cardigan then, so he lurched to his feet and went reeling down the long corridor of the barn. Striving to turn toward the spot where the two men struggled, he lost balance and fell. But not before he had seen the profusion of golden coins spilled from the canister when it fell. That would be the stage loot. Then he heard Agnew scream, saw Goliath lift him in his great arms, kneel and bring him down violently over his outstretched knee. There was an ominous *snap*, a gurgling cry from the stableman. Then Goliath was staggering over to drop at Cardigan's side, lifting him gently in his arms.

"That devil!" he gasped, and his face was gray with pain. "That bad man he shoot you. Goliath gotta get you to the doctor—"

"I'm all right," insisted Cardigan, putting his hand over the widening bloodstain on the giant's front. "Bullet busted some ribs, I think, and glanced off. But you . . . you're hurt, pardner."

"Pardner!" The giant grinned. "I like to hear you say that, Mr. Cardigan. You think if I go to jail for stealing horse, you come build big ranch with Goliath?"

"What about that money at the ranch?" demanded Lang Cardigan. "Where'd you get that, Goliath?"

"Me save him," Goliath told him. "Few months ago I sell good grain crop and a few cattle. Not much money, but enough to buy good bull and some heifers—"

Drawn by the firing, a score of townsmen came rushing into the barn, led by the sheriff. The lawman halted, taking in the scene scowlingly.

"Agnew!" he growled. "He's dead. Get up out o' that, you two! What's the meanin' of this?"

"Sheriff," said Cardigan. "I'm Lang Cardigan—U. S. deputy marshal from Cheyenne. Agnew is the man who pulled the stage job, Christmas Eve, and yonder lies the loot. Agnew resisted arrest and put lead into us. You take charge of him."

"Agnew— Well, I'll be damned!" The sheriff scratched his head. "But this big nester, Huber? What's his stake in this?"

"He's acting as my deputy," explained Cardigan. "And has for over two months. Don't stand there gaping. Take charge of the case and collect that money before somebody else does."

Spurred, the sheriff moved to obey. Cardigan sheathed his gun, gathered his shaken forces and rose. Goliath, lying on the ground, stared dumbly up at him.

"You . . . you think you come home to be my pardner, Mr. Cardigan?" he asked pleadingly.

Cardigan nodded slowly. "I think I will," he muttered, a great distaste for his job shaking him as he considered how close he had come to hanging an innocent man. "But if I'm to have a pardner, I better be getting you to the doctor. Hey, some of you boys, lend a hand here, will you? The slug in my pardner's brisket is a job for the medico."

And Goliath, very drowsily and very happily, murmured: "Me very strong man, you very smart. We build up great outfit, Mr. Cardigan, get very rich."

And they did, there on Crooked Creek, where horse tracks led to destiny.

THE END

Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

This week, in answer to numerous inquiries, we undertake to straighten out for a few of our friends the problem of firearms silencers.

First of all, it is well to know that you cannot use a silencer today on any type of firearm. It is prohibited by Federal regulations. This regulation is quite in order since during the past twenty years State after State has made the use of silencers illegal.

In the first place, let us understand the firearms silencer problem. No greater fraud was ever developed. These do not silence either the sound of the gun or the sound of the bullet. They do reduce the racket to a certain extent, and that is about all.

In going through my old files I found a letter some six or seven years old from Clyde Baker, noted author of "Modern Gunsmithing." We were discussing the silencer problem. Baker writes:

"I have fitted and attached Maxim silencers to various rifles from .22 to .45 calibers. I've tested, delivered, and collected for them, but I've yet to see a silencer that did much of anything in the way of silencing.

"I remember when I first opened up my shop on the fifth floor of a large building in Kansas City, Missouri. A silencer was fitted to a .22 caliber cat rifle and tested out by firing about half the length of the shop. There wasn't any noticeable difference in the sound of the explosion with the silencer on than with it off.

"The plain facts about silencers on rifles are: the silencer will, if the gun is fired in wide open spaces such as over the water or in a field, reduce the report somewhat but not very much. The reduction is somewhat greater on high power guns than on low power numbers. Fired against a nearby hillside or in thick timber or brush, there is little if any reduction of noise. The obstructions act as a sounding board and throw the sound right back at you. But even in the open, any gun equipped with a silencer gives a good honest report, not the 'click of the firing pin' or a 'dull plop' such as fiction writers love to describe.

"Regarding this matter of silencers on hand guns. Honestly, a single shot pistol with a locked breech is

the only hand gun on which a silencer could have the slightest effect. Automatic pistols operate by force of recoil. The silencer functions by retarding and slowing up the gases which cause the recoil. If you change the recoil or back pressure in any automatic, the gun won't work. That's all there is to it. If your silencer creates enough back pressure, noise will come right out through the action instead of through the muzzle. Also, you cannot attach silencers to the Colt or similar style automatics having a slide outside of the barrel."

Mr. Baker offers some interesting suggestions which follow along the research and results of my own experiments. I have even corresponded with the designers of the silencer, the Maxim people, and they had very little to say in its favor. They discontinued its manufacture before the beginning of the World War.

Why don't silencers work?

It might be well to understand the reason for the noise we hear when a gun is fired. There are two distinct noises originating when a firearm is fired; one, the sound of the explosion, and the other, the sound of the speeding bullet. On some guns the first can be silenced with bulky equipment. The second cannot be silenced since it is beyond control.

When a cartridge is discharged, a primer or cap ignites the powder charge causing it to burn rapidly, generally in about one ten-thousandth of a second. This builds up a huge volume of gas under pressure running from 25,000 to 50,000 pounds per square inch, depending upon the cartridge. That gas pushes the bullet out through the muzzle and after it has done its work, the speed and velocity with which it smashes against the air causes the noise.

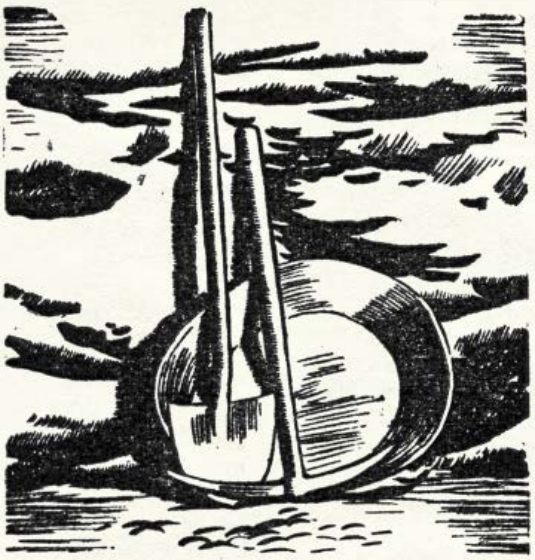
The silencer is nothing but a muffler built on the general principle of an auto muffler. It is a round tube, having a series of cup-shaped disks inside and a hole through the center to permit passage of the bullet. The gas, of course, expands as it leaves the muzzle, drops into these pockets, turning on itself and checking its velocity.

The bullet itself makes no noise provided it travels below approximately 1,075 feet per second, the velocity of sound. If it travels faster, a vacuum is created in back of the bullet, making a "crack" like a whip. The majority of bullets travel faster than 1,075 feet per second. Thus, they create a loud report.

Don't worry about silencers. You can't buy them today. If you could, you'd have to have a license from the Federal Government which would cost you $200. Even then, that license would not permit you to use a silenced gun in States having State laws prohibiting them.

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, Nw 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

MODERN gold hunters who do much of their prospecting with a car, or even car and trailer to house and haul their mining and camping equipment, are apt to forget the hardships the old-timers were up against. Yet those pioneer yellow metal seekers penetrated almost incredible country when the wild, untraveled, untamed regions in which they operated is considered. And they found gold, frequently in bonanza quantities.

As an example of what some of those early day prospectors had to put up with, and what they won as a reward for the hardships they suffered we are going to let a friend of ours from California have the floor this week. Our friend and his brother discovered and opened up the rich Thunder Mountain district in Idaho more than forty years ago.

Retired and now living in California, this gentleman is an old Western Story reader, and one of the friends of this Department. "I am seventy-two years old," he writes, "and have been prospecting since I was twenty. My brother Ben and I were the finders and founders of the Thunder Mountain district in north-central Idaho, a district from which nearly a million dollars' worth of gold has been taken out of the ground. If you take the trouble to look up the mining records of Idaho, you will find our names listed as the first discoverers of that rich camp.

"I wonder if your readers are posted on the kind of placer-gold that fools many prospectors. I was fooled once on it myself. But only once. That was in 1894 when we established the first claims on Thunder Mountain. All the indications had us trying to find pay along the creeks. We found the first pay that, two years later, led us to the big deposit fifty miles below the main ground on Big Creek. The main stuff lay on a gravel ridge near the top of the mountain. We worked our heads off hunting for that bonanza, too, during all the time the short summer seasons of little more than two months' duration would permit.

"Finally when we traced our gold to the ridge we built dams, flumes and ditches until we were just about exhausted in strength and patience. The only water available for working the high ridge was in two little lakes on the other side of a big slide a quarter mile away and nearly level with the best paying gold streak. I pulled my end of a whipsaw for better than twenty thousand feet of lumber cut from virgin timber. We called two hundred feet a good days' work for two men, putting in twelve to sixteen hours a day.

"None of the ground would hold a ditch, and the pesky slide kept moving all the time. After building over four hundred feet of flume we found it wouldn't hold. The earth movements kept breaking the flume joints. Anyhow, we managed meantime to take out enough gold to buy sufficient pipe to run the water through fourteen hundred feet of it, and then we were set.

"In the best ground our pay dirt was so rich it ran from five to fifty dollars a pan. The gold was high in silver content, bright, light yellow and for that reason only brought in twelve dollars an ounce. Pure gold was worth twenty then, not thirty-five dollars as it is today. Our elevation was seven thousand four hundred feet; the top of Thunder Mountain over eight thousand which will give you an idea of how high up we were for placer.

"I didn't really intend to go into all of this. But it gives an idea of what we old-timers were up against fighting the elements and local ground conditions. Besides getting the water to the ground was only a scratch of our troubles. We were sixty-five miles of wild, trailless country from the nearest post office. When we went down for mail and supplies we had to get enough to last a year at a time. During our long stays back at the placer ground we never saw a soul other than ourselves.

"What I was getting at is that placer gravel is not always found only down in stream beds. The old gold-bearing gravels may sometimes also be located way up, high and dry on ridges or mountainsides. I know because that is where my brother and I found ours in Thunder Mountain, and it doesn't pay to give up too soon or quit just because the going is rough and conditions for working your ground may at times seem impossible, like the job we were up against of getting water to wash our rich ridge gravel in Idaho.

"In closing, I'd like to say that I think you are doing a good job with the mining articles both for new prospectors and those in the field with some experience behind them. If you think this letter will be of interest to your readers I will be glad that I have written it."

We sure thank the author for his intensely interesting letter, and we're mighty glad to pass it along to all you readers.

To L. P., Mobile, Alabama: The famous Yukon gold country in the Canadian Northwest Territory has produced its millions from placer-gold in the past. However, I have just heard that it may also open up as a lode gold sector, since the Laforma mine in the Carmack district sometime ago shipped an eighty-four ounce brick of crude gold out—the first lode gold output recorded for this particular district, and the first to come from lode property in the Yukon in many years.

● 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

This week we begin the Old Holla with a letter from a long-time friend who wonders whether we'll remember him from way back fourteen years ago. All we can say is, that's a powerful long time, but even if we don't remember exactly what you wrote us then, old "moss back," we're mighty glad to welcome you back again now and sure hope you'll have to buy another pack of typing paper before long.

Dear Miss Rivers:

I don't suppose you will remember this old "moss back" because it has been fourteen years since I last wrote you. But I'm still reading the old Western Story Magazine and decided to drop you a few lines again. I was down in the high Sierras trapping the last time I wrote you and I sure received lots of answers and made quite a few friends. Since then I have been many places and seen and done lots of things. I did make a very profitable trip away up into Canada, invested my profits wisely, and now I'm retired and have a fair income for the rest of my days. The only setback is loneliness, and I surely do crave some Pen Pals. I have lots of time to write letters and have laid in a good supply of paper just waiting to be used in telling them all about my experiences in California, Oregon, Alaska and the Far North. I can also tell them plenty about Seattle, as I certainly know the town.—Harvey Gustavus, Orpheum Hotel, 1516½ 5th Avenue, Seattle, Washington

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Doris is a talented young miss—

Dear Miss Rivers:

For the past few months I have been reading the letters on your Hollow Tree page and am very interested. I suddenly realized that I, too, would like to find new friends through the medium of writing letters. I am eighteen years old, a senior in high school, and my hobby is writing stories and acting in plays. I prefer the mountains to the seashore, and my favorite sports are swimming, tennis, roller skating, and I can cut a neat figure on ice skates. I also collect post cards and would like to hear from anyone who also finds pleasure in this pastime. I'll be waiting patiently for some letters.—Doris Clement, 29 McDuffie Street, Manchester, New Hampshire

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A partner is wanted here for a trip—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been a reader of Western Story for years and am eager to contact a pal or two who would like to make a pack horse trip around Yellowstone Park leaving Billings around the beginning of June, 1940. I will gladly answer any and all letters.—Thomas Farish, 2708 Minnesota Avenue, Billings, Montana

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Helen would like real friends—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely girl of twenty-five and more than anything else I want to make some real friends. My hobbies are doing fancywork and collecting hankies. I will exchange songs and snapshots, too, so won't all you folks of all ages write to me, please?—Helen Tatro, Rt. No. 4, Warren, Minnesota

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Ralph wants to hear from every State—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young boy seventeen years old and am very much interested in getting Pen Pals. I would like to hear from girls and boys from all forty-eight States. My hobbies are writing letters and collecting snapshots and football pennants. My favorite sports are football and swimming. I also enjoy dancing. All letters will be answered promptly, especially those with snapshots.—Ralph Donovan, CCC Company 297, Camp F-80, Red Lodge, Montana

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This girl is a music lover—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a twenty-two-year-old girl who thinks music is practically everything. I have the words to hundreds of popular and classical songs, both old and new, which I would like to swap

with someone. I'm wondering if there is anyone as crazy about music as I am. Besides being a fanatic about music, I like the movies, musicals preferred, poetry, rainy nights and hamburgers. I dislike carnivals, beer, swing and formality.—Ellis Adams, 2300 Arlington Street, E. Bakersfield, California

Fred shines in sport—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am nineteen years old and would like lots of letters from Pen Pals living in the northern part of Canada and the United States. I am a good athlete and play baseball, hockey and basketball. My hobbies are collecting stamps and pictures. I'll answer all letters, so hurry and write.—Fred Muise, Yarmouth, Nova Scotia

Write to this lonely pal—

Dear Miss Rivers:

My husband died two years ago and left me all alone. I am the last of eighteen children and have no relations. I am very lonesome and would love to have three or four women to correspond with me. It would give me something to do and give me a lot of pleasure, too, so please take me under your wing and get me some Pen Pals.—Mrs. James Seaver, 514 Overland Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio

Adrian will tell you some exciting things—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a sailor twenty-two years old serving on the Asiatic Station and I've seen many exciting things happen along the Yangtze River in the two years I've been out here. I promise to answer all letters and will exchange photographs with anyone, so come on, Pen Pals, from everywhere, let me hear from you.—Adrian Grey Jones, Radioman Second Class, U. S. S. *Luzon*, Shanghai, China

Christina is very obliging—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a constant reader of your Hollow Tree column and although I have several Pen Pals, I have time to correspond with plenty of others. Hobbies? I have too many to count, but will take an interest in any hobby that a pal wants me to. I'll welcome letters from everyone, young or old, and promise replies to all.—Christina Schoeman, 13 Chapel Street, Grahamstown, South Africa

This Canadian friend excludes nobody—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-seven years old and am looking for some pen friends of every race and profession—miners, ranchers, lawyers, doctors, teachers, and especially those in the army and navy of any nation. I can be a friend to all; age does not matter. My hobby is collecting snapshots of anything, view cards, view folders, stamps, postmarks, newspapers and maps. I have snaps of twenty State capitols and cards of eight. I would like to have cards and snaps of all capitols and government buildings of every country in the world. I'll be a true Pen Pal—I have some now of nine years' standing—so let's become acquainted.—A. Warren Matheson, Turtle Creek, R. R., Albert County, New Brunswick, Canada

Jewell will answer everyone—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am sixteen years old and would like to hear from girls and boys between fourteen and twenty-one years of age. Won't some of you members of the Tree drop me a line? I promise to answer all who write and will exchange snapshots with all who want to.—Jewell Gandy, R. F. D. No. 1, Hilliard, Florida

Richard collects minerals—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am nineteen years old and hope to make lots of new friends through the Hollow Tree. My hobby is collecting minerals and my favorite sport is ice skating. I will exchange snapshots and answer all letters, so come on everybody, young and old, and sling a little ink my way.—Richard Nims, 302 Cleveland Street, Orange, New Jersey

Mabel knows all about the West—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-eight years old and would very much like to correspond with boys and girls in foreign lands. I can tell them many interesting things about the cowboys and cowgirls of the West.—Mabel Harrison, Arvada, Wyoming

Billie will send you souvenirs—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a thirty-one-year-old girl and would like to hear from everyone, everywhere. I collect incense burners as a hobby and will send a souvenir of my home town to everyone who sends me one. I enjoy traveling although I have not had a chance to do much of it. I do not smoke and dislike drinking. I get very lonely and blue sometimes, so please, Pals, write to me. Even a picture post card will do.—Billie Rand, 211 W. Hall Street, Carterville, Missouri

Dorothy will try to answer all letters—

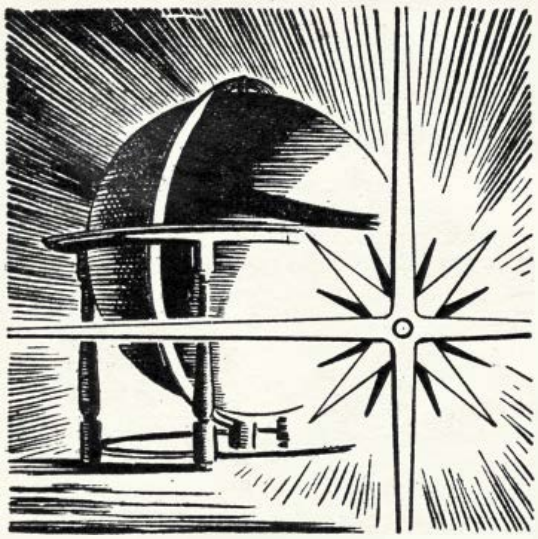
Dear Miss Rivers:

I am nineteen years old and am interested in hearing from boys and girls from all over the world. I have been trying to get Pen Pals by answering letters which appeared in this department, but finally decided that I would get much better results by writing to the Hollow Tree myself. I'd like to exchange snapshots with all who write and I'll try to answer all letters that come my way.—Dorothy Randall, 8 White Parkway, Woonsocket, Rhode Island

Joseph deserves some action, fellers—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Will you please print my request for pen friends? The writers of the letters I have answered have failed to keep their word, so I am writing to you. I am twenty years old and prefer male pals only. I will do my best to maintain a good friendship with those who write to me and will exchange snaps with those who are interested.—Joseph Rudawsk, P. O. Box 28, White Haven, Pennsylvania



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

One of our readers who chafes at being kept inside during the winter for the first time in his experience writes: "I am a newcomer to the Northern States, and have just heard about ice fishing. I've fished down South all my life, but chopping a hole through the ice to fish is a new one on me. Will you give me some information on the subject, Mr. North?"

Yes, sir, I will. And you'll find it lots of fun. Up in the Great Lakes district, and all along the northern border of the States where the ice is thick and stays late in the year, you can get some very good sport fishing through the ice. You can catch pickerel, perch, smelt and lake trout this way. The trout are perhaps the favorites, where there is a supply of them.

In that section you'll find lake fishing through the ice carried on to such an extent that the boys build little houses on runners to take out on the lake with them. They will have a trap door in the shack and a stove to make things snug for them. It's pretty nice to sit in a warm house, fish through the ice, and then cook your catch right on the spot.

But generally, however, ice fishing is an open-air job, and as such in cold weather, needs the proper preparation. You should build your camp on the shore, where you can keep a roaring fire going, and be equipped with a good pair of skates on which to make your rounds.

You go out and dig round holes in the ice at your favorite spots, and at each you set a line with a "tilt." The tilt or tip-up is a gadget that you lay across the hole in the ice with your fishing line attached to it. Some of them have bell signals, but the best signal is a flag arrangement on a trigger. When your fish bites, the trigger is released and the flag goes up into the air so you can see it from shore.

As to bait, you should use live minnows if you can get them, but otherwise pork rind or other preserved bait will do very well. If you use the latter it is best to add a nickel spinner to attract the attention of the fish.

Another hombre, L. D., of Mis-

For those who want to make their own trailers, John North will supply a list of companies selling plans and parts. For a descriptive itinerary of the Pan-American Highway, or for further information about Arizona, its ranches and activities, write Mr. North, inclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope with your inquiry.

souri, also wants to do some vacationing before summer. He is in the process of building his own trailer from information we sent him, and he's planning a trip to Mexico City. He asks for directions.

You can get the Pan-American Highway from Laredo, Texas. This fine new road is 760 miles long and is in fine shape all the way. You will find plenty of eating places, but it is well to take a thermos jug of water along, since you might have to travel a long way sometimes to find good drinking water.

You can get maps at the Border where you have your inspection, and these maps will tell you all the places of interest to see. It would be well not to try to drive too fast, but to make the trip in three days, making your first stop at Monterey and the second somewhere around Tamazunchale. That will make it possible for you to do all your real mountain driving the third day during daylight hours, and will bring you into Mexico City late in the afternoon in plenty of time to find your accommodations.

Another of our friends has an itching foot, and he wants to go after lions—no less. He asks about mountain-lion hunting in the Southwest, and wants me to suggest a place where he is likely to find one or more. Fortunately, he says he's an experienced hunter.

I say fortunately, because lion hunting in America takes plenty of experience and stamina; but, having that, you can get your lions in several parts of the country. I'd suggest that Douglas, Arizona, would be as good a place as any.

In the Chiricahua Mountains near Douglas there are plenty of lions and panthers, or "painters," as they are frequently called. Going into such a country, however, it would be necessary for you to get yourself a good guide who knows the mountains, and get some local dogs. There are plenty of guides in that section who have packs of hounds and pack outfits which can be hired for the hunt at reasonable prices.

While around Douglas, one should not miss visiting the historical and the scenic places of interest. The town is located in the beautiful Sulphur Springs Valley, in a setting of desert splendor. It is encircled by mountains, and you will find mines and ranches where life is lived almost as it was in the old West.

Some of the places of interest around Douglas are Wonderland of Rocks, Faraway Ranch, Pinery Canyon, Rustlers' Park, Turkey Creek, Cave Creek Canyon, Sierra Linda Ranch, Paradise, Chiricahua Lodge and Agua Prieta.

This last-named little city in Sonora, Mexico, is unusually interesting and picturesque, since it has retained the language and customs of old Spain. The streets are narrow and crooked, yet for all its color and Old World atmosphere, Agua Prieta is famous as one of the cleanest, quietest and most orderly of the Mexican towns on the Border. You'll like it.

● 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.

HARDROCK MEN

by SETH RANGER

Part Two

The Story So Far:

As superintendent of the Old Glory, a gold mine extending under the Deception Straits in Alaska, Jess Reagan had built up an impressive reputation in the field of low-grade mining. Realizing that he is nearing retirement age, he has trained Tim Bradford to take his place, although he knows that Kirk Turner, president of the company, has set his heart on his son Ray becoming the next superintendent.

Reagan discharges Sam Pelton, a miner, for drunkenness, and Pelton decides to retaliate. By concealing himself in a tram car, he enters the mine without being seen and waits on a deserted platform until Reagan, who has been making a tour of inspection, comes along. Then Pelton hurls down several loose pieces of rock on the head of the unsuspecting superintendent who loses his footing and falls to a level several hundred feet below.

CHAPTER V

THE DEATH OF A HARDROCK MAN

AFTER Sam Pelton dropped the rock that sent Jess Reagan tumbling down the mine shaft, he was gripped with a nervous chill that lingered even after he took a drink from his flask. He descended the ladder slowly, pausing at each landing to rest and recover his nerve. Temperamentally, he wasn't a cold-blooded killer who could forget a killing once it was accomplished. He was a man who had never done a decent or generous thing in his life.

When Jess Reagan had fired him, his first impulse had been to get even. Now he had gotten even, to his way of thinking. Not only that, but he had opened the avenue to the best job he had ever had in his life. Certainly Kirk Turner would appoint his son superintendent. Ray Turner, needing someone's help, would remember Pelton and give him a good job in return for advice on running the Old Glory at a profit.

Pelton's nerve almost cracked as he reached the place Reagan had occupied when the rock struck him. Coward that he was, he couldn't help but feel it would be poetic justice if a rock broke away from the wall and crashed down on him. He hurried his descent and nearly slipped at one point. When he reached the tram level he was shaking violently.

Several minutes passed before an ore train came along. He climbed into a car half filled with steel drills on their way to the blacksmith shop to be sharpened. Some of the long drills extended from the bottom of the front end of the car, and protruded over the rear end. In the space immediately beneath, Pelton found a hiding place. He crowded in, and redistributed the steel so that if anyone passed when light fell on the steel he wouldn't be observed.

A little switching was necessary as the cars were rearranged for hoisting. A few minutes later the cars were at the mine-mouth level. An electric locomotive dragged them into daylight. Pelton cautiously shifted the steel and looked out. The cars were moving along the mountainside above the mill. When they came to a thicket Pelton unloaded and waited for the train to pass. He made his way into the brush, picked up the switchback leading down to tide water, and fifteen minutes later was sauntering over the camp's main street.

The waters of Deception Straits, rippled by a gentle breeze, were an intense blue now, broken only by a silvery gleam as an occasional salmon leaped. Pelton gazed at the water with a strange fascination. It was hard to believe that a man had driven a mine under those waters, and that that man now lay dead in the works that he had created. It seemed like a dream to Pelton, but at moments the entire affair was very real. So real he took frequent

drinks from his bottle. But he was cautious. He took enough liquor to stimulate his nerve, but not sufficient to loosen his tongue. He hung around, keeping a watch on the cottages occupied by the Turners and Ann Sloan.

Time passed. Ann came from the mine, changed her clothing, and joined Ray Turner and his father.

"Ready to sail, Ann?" the elder Turner asked. "Or do you want to see more of Old Glory and Tim Bradford?"

Kirk Turner had deliberately included Tim in his query for the purpose of determining just how much of an impression the assistant superintendent had made on the girl during their long stay underground.

"I'm ready to go," she answered. "I told Mr. Bradford we were sailing this evening, and said good-by to him. I imagine some of the questions I asked him about mining were pretty stupid, but he was very patient. I looked into the superintendent's office as I passed, but Mr. Reagan wasn't there. I wanted to tell him good-by."

"I think he's below ground," Kirk Turner told her. "He said something about blocking out ore that could be dropped instead of hoisted. We might as well sail. I've nothing more to discuss with him."

SAM PELTON waited until the conversation lagged, then he approached Ray Turner.

"Any chance of you takin' me along to the nearest port?" he asked. "I'm fired, you know, and I may be here a week before a Seattle steamer puts in."

"How about it, Ann?" Ray asked immediately. "Shall we take him along? Frankly, I think he was given a rotten deal here and the least we can do is offer him a lift."

"Of course," the girl agreed readily. "Tell him to bring his bag aboard."

Pelton almost broke down as he expressed his gratitude. He was greatly relieved at being able to leave the mining camp. He didn't want to be around when Jess Reagan's remains were brought to the surface. He was afraid he might betray himself by some word or gesture. Nor did he bother to say farewell to his Aunt Tess, or her husband, Daylight Lee.

A half hour later the *Aurora* backed away from the wharf, turned, and headed south. Tim Bradford stood on the wharf and waved. Ann waved back, but Ray Turner and Sam Pelton stood apart, hands in their pockets, eyes on the roaring mill, saying nothing.

"And that's that," Tim Bradford grunted, as the cruiser disappeared down the Straits. "I could sure enjoy seeing a lot of that girl, but chances are I won't lay eyes on her again for years."

He climbed the stairs to the superintendent's office and looked in. Mary Malloy, the stenographer who did the office work, was at the filing cabinet. She looked around when Tim entered.

"Hello, Mary," Tim said. "Where is the boss?"

"Underground," the girl answered. "He said he expected to be back before the *Aurora* sailed, but I haven't seen anything of him. Maybe he went directly to the wharf."

"No, I was down there. Oh, well, he'll be along soon. You know he has a hunch there's some better-paying ore—a lost vein—and he's been going over the walls with a fine-tooth comb."

"Well, I hope he finds it," she said. "This low-grade stuff we're running now gives me the willies. If I break

a pencil point I feel as if I'd cost the company the profit on a ton of ore."

Tim walked to the window and saw Daylight Lee hurrying along the sidewalk far below. Unerringly the blind man turned up the stairs, which he took two at a time. In spite of his sixty-five years he wasn't breathing hard when he came into the office.

"Tim," he asked, when the latter greeted him, "did Sam Pelton go out on the *Aurora?*"

"I'm afraid he did, Daylight," Tim admitted. "The boss fired him this morning for being drunk on the job again, and Sam talked Ray Turner into letting him go out with them."

"Blast that whelp!" Daylight's rage astonished Tim, who knew him to get angry on occasion, but never violent. "The wife just heard he'd gone an' she's cryin' her eyes out. The coyote never even told her good-by. I can't figger Sam's kind of people. Here his only aunt has helped him along hundreds of times, treated him like she'd have treated her own son if she'd had one, and he ups and pulls a trick like this."

"It's a dirty shame," Mary Malloy said, when Daylight was gone. "Tess Lee isn't the crying kind. She's brave as they make them. But maybe it's a good thing Sam Pelton's gone."

"Why?"

"Well, Tim, I happen to know Daylight and Tess have planned a trip for a long time," Mary explained. "She's never seen much of the world, you know, and they thought some of buying a cheap car in Seattle and taking a year or so to tour the continent."

"Seems as though that would be tough on Daylight," Tim said. "But I suppose he'd be happy if Tess were enjoying herself. What has Sam Pelton got to do with it, though?"

"I'm coming to that," the girl answered. "Whenever they've got a little trip fund together, Sam would get into a mess, or would pull some stunt to get his fingers on it. One time he told them he was going to a school of mines. Tess was tickled to death, but it turned out he was loafing on the money they sent him every month. Of course, they have their Old Glory stock, but that's a nest egg for their old age."

"Why is it," Tim complained, "the nice people so often have it tough, and the so-an-so's live on the fat of the land?" He walked to the window again and watched a shift come off duty. "The boss isn't among them, Mary. I'm going to do a little checking. He's careful, but rocks fall, you know."

TIM hurried to the man who operated the big cage the miners used. Joe Scully had been on the job twenty years, and during that time had learned to remember the faces of the men who passed him, although often more than a hundred went by at a time.

"Is the boss underground, Joe?" Tim asked.

"Yes, unless he came up with an ore train, which he never does," Joe answered. "Come to think of it, he's been down there a mighty long time."

"By the way, Joe, Sam Pelton didn't go below after he was fired, did he?"

"No. He wasn't around. I wouldn't have taken him down, anyway."

Tim got into the cage and Joe took him down to the level Jess had been frequenting recently. There was no sign of the superintendent. Tim walked some two miles inspecting drifts, crosscuts, inclines and stopes. He had a five-cell flashlight which lighted up everything within the range of its beam and drove the shadows from the gloomy spots where a body might have fallen.

He was returning to take the cage to another level when he heard the clump of hurrying boots. He saw no bobbing miner's lamp, so he knew Daylight was coming.

"Wait a minute, Tim," Daylight called. "I'd just got home when Mary telephoned you was worried about Jess. I thought I'd come and help hunt."

He led the way, turning into crosscuts and hurrying on with a speed that amazed Tim. Frequently he paused to listen. The sounds were easily identified, the distant rumble of ore cars, and an occasional blast, or the drip of seepage.

Daylight paused at the foot of a ladder before climbing up. "He mentioned an old vein above," he remarked. "Maybe— Listen!" Seconds passed, then Daylight exclaimed: "Hear it? Someone's havin' a hard time breathin'."

"Can't hear a thing," Tim answered, after a long pause during which he held his own breath. "Are you sure?"

"No, I ain't sure, but let's look. It's right down below us."

Tim climbed out on an iron ladder, swung his body as far outward as possible and turned the light beam down. "Daylight, he's down there," he exclaimed. "Thirty feet down."

"I know the place," Daylight said. "There's a wooden platform built on iron bars cemented into the wall. We used to store steel and powder on it. There's a hole in the wall to shove machine drills when they're blastin'."

"That's it!" Tim was already descending the ladder.

Daylight followed, paused a moment at the foot of the ladder, judged the man's position by sound, then dropped to his knees. The plat-

form had kept Jess Reagan from dropping three hundred feet.

Tim noticed that Reagan's helmet and lamp were missing. They had probably gone on down. The man himself was dangerously close to the edge. Tim propped up the flashlight and indirect lighting flooded Reagan's face. He was dying, but his eyes opened and recognition came.

"Tim," he whispered. "Bend lower."

Tim bent low, but Reagan's voice was so weak he couldn't catch the words. Reagan's eyes moved toward Daylight and Tim understood. "Your hearing is better than mine, Daylight," he said. "See if you can catch what he's trying to tell me."

Daylight's head bent until it was a couple of inches from Reagan's lips. The lips continued to move between gasps and from time to time Daylight said: "Yes, Jess. Yes. That's right. Tim will do that. Sure! Sure!" Daylight turned to Tim. "He's told me everything. I'll pass it along to you later. Now he wants to say something to you."

Again Tim bent low over the dying man, and Jess Reagan put the last of his strength into his words. "In a few seconds, Tim . . . you'll be the best damned man in . . . the hard-rock game," he gasped.

"But I'll never be the best damned man that ever went before the face of a stone, boss," Tim said sorrowfully. "That's your title, and no one will ever take it from you."

He looked into Jess Reagan's eyes and saw the clouds gathering, but there still lingered an intense brightness, like the sun gleaming through a break in thunderheads. A faint smile played around the old man's lips. "Good luck . . . son!" he whispered.

Tim Bradford saluted, and the smile on Reagan's lips deepened. He understood. His eyes held a moment, then the brightness vanished.

"He's gone, Daylight," Tim said brokenly. "The best friend I ever had is gone. And there was so much he wanted to do. So much unfinished business."

"That's the way it is when a *man* dies," Daylight said gently. "The best men leave so much unfinished business. I guess, for the first time, I realize what Jess had stored away in that brain of his; plans for the mine, plans for you. He poured 'em into my ear like he was fightin'. And I guess he *was* fightin'. He was fightin' the Turners for you. He wanted you to be the only man who could successfully run the Old Glory mine, as he was."

Tim Bradford picked up Jess Reagan's battered body and arranged it across his shoulders. Then he began climbing up, a step at a time, on iron ladders that were loosely hung to iron bars. Hundreds of feet below on the mine floor lay the dead man's crushed lamp and battered helmet.

CHAPTER VI

JESS REAGAN'S SUCCESSOR

TIM BRADFORD didn't stop until he reached the tram level, then he rested a moment and made his way to the nearest track. Daylight had already gone ahead and located an ore car. The small, electric locomotive working on this level hooked onto the car and brought it to where Tim waited. Jess Reagan's body was placed aboard. The engineer stood with his cap in his hands and sorrow on his sweat-grimed face.

"Meanin' no disrespect to you, Tim," he said, "we'll never have a better boss."

"Right!" Tim said huskily.

Daylight had already telephoned

the news up to the operator who handled the ore skips. The man was grave when they reached the surface. He tried to talk, but his voice failed him. He had seen men go below on many occasions, full of life and with a carefree smile on their lips. And he had seen them come to the surface again, broken, and with lips like wax. But this seemed different. It was impossible to believe old Jess Reagan was dead.

Tim notified the necessary officials so that they might hold an inquest, then he returned to the office. He sat down at his own desk and stared at the battered chair Jess Reagan had used. It was hard to believe that Jess would never sit there again. He was still gazing at it when the office door open. Raw Meat Riley, one of Jess Reagan's most trusted men, stood there.

"The day-shift boys sent me," he announced. "As soon as we heard, we called a meetin'. We wondered if you'd decided on Reagan's grave?"

"Riley, I haven't decided on anything," Tim admitted. "This thing came so sudden. What do you boys think?"

"We'd like to drill a tomb in hard rock on Mineral Mountain," Riley said. "None of these fancy power drills, you understand, but hand drills, so that we have to work and sweat for old Jess. We'll take turns. We all want a hand in it. On our own time, of course."

"Riley, that's a fine idea," said Tim. "Jess wasn't much for ceremony, but I know he'd like his last resting place to be in hard rock. Have you any special place in mind?"

"Do you remember the Fightin' Irishman?"

Tim nodded. Riley was referring to a profile on the mountain which from a distance resembled a fighting Irishman's expression.

"We thought we'd drill a tomb on the chin," Riley said. "All we want is your O. K. to go ahead."

"You've got it," Tim told him. "And Daylight and I'll take our turn some time tomorrow."

TIM sent off the cablegram to Kirk Turner, arranged details for Jess Reagan's funeral, then went to bed. Sleeping wasn't easy, but he dropped off about midnight and was awakened at dawn by a blast. He opened his eyes and looked around.

"No," he said dejectedly, "it isn't all a dream. They're blasting out Jess' grave on Mineral Mountain."

He joined Daylight after breakfast, and together they climbed the mountain, packing sharpened steel and powder with them. A half hour's drilling was all they were permitted. Every man in the mine wanted a chance, even the white-collar men who didn't know how to swing a hammer. The miner who held the drill for such inexperienced men took his life in his hands, but he didn't complain. Everyone was given his chance to show his respect for Jess Reagan.

The minister who later conducted the services was a man who had once packed steel and powder himself. He knew hardrock men, and felt himself one of them.

"Most men never hear the good things of themselves," he said, "because their friends keep them locked up in their hearts. Jess Reagan's friends waited too long to speak. But perhaps the spoken word wasn't necessary, because Jess Reagan *knew*. He knew his place in the hearts of all men by their unselfish devotion and loyalty."

When the minister's brief sermon was finished, men filed past Jess

Reagan for a last view of the man who had meant so much to the Old Glory mine.

The miners' band led the procession, playing the funeral march. Above it all was the deep roar of the stamps. It had seemed to Tim that the roar of the stamps was properly part of Jess' requiem, so he did not order them shut down. Relays of men, carrying the heavy coffin up the steep mountain, were conscious of the rumble as they climbed. It grew fainter and fainter, and became an undertone when they lowered their burden into a tomb of hard rock and the minister spoke the final prayer.

DAYLIGHT LEE came into Tim's office three days after the funeral. "Since takin' over the job, Tim, you've made two important decisions," he said, "and they're right ones. When Jess was dyin' he told me to tell you to start workin' on that new vein. He said it might lead to better-grade ore if a man was willin' to gamble on it." Daylight chuckled. "He said, 'Don't tell Tim right offn the bat. Wait and see if he'll do it.' And you did. He advised pullin' the men off the number six level, and you did that, too."

"Values were petering out on six," Tim explained. "What else did he say?"

"This ain't goin' to be easy to tell you, Tim," Daylight answered slowly. "Jess said, 'Daylight, somebody dropped a rock on me.'"

Tim started. "What?" he said hoarsely.

"That's God's truth," Daylight told him solemnly. "Jess said, 'Rocks droppin' down from above would've missed me because they'd've hit one of the landin's and bounced off. The first one did miss me. I was swingin' 'round to get in a safe spot, and the second got me. I don't know who

done it. Didn't think I had an enemy in the mine unless it was Pelton.' He wanted to talk some more, but he was too weak."

"I checked on Pelton," said Tim. "He didn't enter the mine after he was fired."

"Sam's no good," Daylight declared. "But I don't think he'd go that far. By the way, Tim, have you anything from Kirk Turner yet?"

"Not a word," Tim answered. "I'm marking time, naturally. But it won't take me long to pack my bag."

"It won't come to that," Daylight said positively. "Turner may get tough and nasty. It may hurt him to have to deal with you, but he loves profits more'n he loves hisself or his hates, and in the end he'll let you run the mine."

Tim shook his head. "I don't think so, Daylight."

"Then there'll be a strike," Daylight predicted. "The men know the situation. They've been talkin' things over. They figger they might as well have the showdown and get it over with than to go through a long period of bein' laid off and of havin' wages cut while the mine gradually goes busted."

"Don't encourage that kind of talk," Tim warned. "That's the last thing I want to happen."

"I'll tell 'em," Daylight promised. "But it won't do no good."

Ten days passed without word from Kirk Turner. Tim, by working twenty hours a day, managed to keep his desk clear and take care of the supervision below ground as well. He watched the clean-up each day and was relieved to find it was holding up as well as ever. A considerable amount of dead work was ahead, and dead work always eats into profits. Tim decided to postpone this work as long as possible. It was a measure of self-protection, because he knew Kirk Turner would examine the daily reports with an overcritical eye.

Two weeks after Jess Reagan's funeral, the regular mail steamer docked, and a few minutes later her cargo net dropped several sacks of mail and some baggage to the wharf.

Tim picked up a pair of binoculars and scanned the baggage. He could make out the initials on one of the trunks.

"R. T.," he said to Daylight. "That stands for Ray Turner."

"It's a good thing he didn't put in his middle initial, too," Daylight growled. "His middle name is Alexander."

Tim grinned, but kept looking through the binoculars. "There he is," he exclaimed. "I don't see Kirk Turner nor Ann, though."

"Too bad," Daylight observed. "A little sunshine is kinda nice along with black clouds. Ann's a sweet girl. I'll bet she's pretty, too."

"As pretty as they come," Tim agreed. "But she's got something that counts more than beauty—character." He continued to watch the gangplank. "Well, well, the bad penny returns! Sam Pelton is right at Ray's heels."

RAY TURNER came immediately to Tim's office. He shook hands perfunctorily.

"Sorry to hear about Jess Reagan," he said. "We got the word at Juneau. How have things been going?"

"I've kept things going, Turner," Tim said. "Naturally, I've been waiting for orders."

"Here they are," Turner said, handing Tim a long envelope. "While you're reading them, I'll go unpack." He hurried off and Tim tore open the envelope.

Tim unfolded the single sheet of paper within and read it aloud so that Daylight could hear.

"DEAR MR. BRADFORD:

I was deeply shocked on arriving at Juneau to receive word of Mr. Reagan's death. I discussed the situation with Miss Sloan and advised the following action be taken. You will please govern yourself accordingly.

You are to become acting superintendent as of date of Mr. Reagan's death, with his salary. Mr. Ray Turner will assume your assistant superintendent's duties. Mr. Sam Pelton is to be employed as shift boss, and if this cannot be arranged, the position of second assistant superintendent is herewith created and Mr. Pelton assigned to such duties as you see fit.

Very truly yours,
KIRK TURNER,
President and General Manager
Mineral Mountain Mining Company"

"Well, I'll be damned!" Daylight exploded. "Sam Pelton must have soft-soaped Ray Turner into thinkin' he draws a lot of water."

"That's the setup," Tim said. "We can take it or leave it. I'm taking it, but the plot is simple. Kirk Turner is making a beautiful gesture toward my promotion. But that's all it is. He's counting on me teaching Ray Turner what I learned from Jess Reagan. And that, plus what he's learned in a school of mines, plus the practical experience that he'll get under me, will fit him—in his father's opinion—to hold down the superintendent's job."

"You've called the turn, son," Daylight declared. "You'll be offered your old job back again, and, being a proud young rooster, you'll tell 'em what they can do with it."

"That's it," Tim admitted. "But I'm playing my hand out, the way Jess Reagan would have wanted me to play it out. But this Sam Pelton business—that's hard to stomach. There isn't a shift-boss spot open, and I won't fire one of the boys. So the stockholders will have to afford the luxury of a second assistant superintendent."

"A luxury Kirk Turner won't put up with for long," Daylight predicted. "That's all the proof you need that Ray Turner's headed for the superintendent's job."

CHAPTER VII

SHAREHOLDERS' SHOWDOWN

SAM PELTON, obviously nervous and uncertain, presented himself in the superintendent's office.

"I hear I have a job comin' up," he said.

"Yes," Tim answered. "Second assistant superintendent."

If Pelton was surprised, he didn't show it. "I'd like to work under Ray," he said. "We kind o' hit it off well together."

"For the present," Tim told him, "you can take over the party exploring the mine and checking over possible new veins. The price of gold jumped a while back, you know. And some of the ore that wasn't worth working may bring in a good profit now. Jess Reagan was working along that line when he was killed. You pick up where he left off."

"Where was he killed?"

Tim related what had happened. He was watching Pelton closely. "What's the matter? Superstitious?" he asked. "Don't you want to work where a man lost his life?"

"It makes me feel queer," Sam confessed. "They claim things happen in threes. But I'm here to take orders." He seemed quite humble. Too humble, Tim Bradford thought. It didn't quite ring true. When he had left, Tim sent for Ray Turner.

"We might as well get organized," Tim said, when Turner appeared. "How about an inspection below

ground the first thing tomorrow morning? Or aren't you settled yet?"

"I got everything unpacked. I brought my man Togo along, of course," Turner explained.

"Yes?" Tim's face did not betray his amusement. The thought of a hardrock man with a valet was almost more than he could endure. Inwardly he was roaring with laughter. "Then tomorrow morning it is, Turner."

The inspection Tim made the following day was thorough. He introduced Turner to the men and made it plain in no uncertain manner that he expected them to give the new assistant full co-operation. "I'm acting superintendent," he concluded in each instance. "I'll be above ground and around the mill a lot of the time. Mr. Turner has my old job."

"As long as you're superintendent," Pete Collins, an old hardrock man, said, "we'll keep things movin'. *You* know what it's all about."

"That wasn't necessary, Collins," Tim said when he found himself alone with the man. "Even though I thank you for the compliment."

"I weren't peddlin' you no compliment, Tim," Collins told him. "I'm just tellin' the truth, and warnin' that upstart that he'd better not knife you in the back. Things," he darkly concluded, "happen in mines."

"None of that," Tim said sharply.

"I'm just talkin' about accidents," the miner drawled.

"And I'm talking about accidents," Tim reminded him pointedly. "I want Turner to have every break in the world. That's the way Jess Reagan ran the mine."

When Tim and Turner reached the spot where Jess Reagan had lost his life, the former explained what had happened, keeping his suspicion of murder to himself. Turner lis-

tened with interest and made few comments.

Then they climbed several hundred feet to a stage, clinging precariously to sheer walls. A crew of hand drillers was at work, with Sam Pelton pretending to supervise them. Wisely, Sam was letting the men follow their own impulses. Tim explained what was going on, and started to descend.

"If you don't mind, Bradford," Turner said, "I'll stay here and watch this operation. I'm sure I know what it's all about, but I'd like to check on myself. Don't want to stick my neck out."

"Sure," Tim answered. "Hang around." He thought as he descended: "If Turner only meant that, he'd get along fine. But it was a grandstand play for the men's benefit."

Turner hung around until it was time to knock off, and the drillers went below. Pelton remained.

"I don't like loose rock," Turner said, pointing to a slab knocked from the vein. "According to Bradford, it's handy to drop on a man you don't like."

SAM PELTON'S blood froze in his veins. He was cold sober, and there was no bottle handy to fortify his courage. He started to speak, but his lips were dry and his mouth full of cotton. Did Bradford suspect something?—he wondered. Or had his statement to Turner been merely a casual observation?

Fear drove him to hit back. "Bradford's afraid you're goin' to get his job," he said, "and he's tryin' to throw a scare into you."

"Perhaps," Turner admitted, "but I'm not going to take any chances. I'm giving my first order: No loose rocks are to be left around."

They climbed down to the lowest level and pushed through great areas where the ore had been removed. Pelton stopped at last.

"Here's the trick I promised you the day I was fired," he said. "The one that'll let you make a big showin' when you want to prove what you can do as superintendent."

"Go ahead."

Pelton turned a flashlight on the huge ore pillars that remained when the operation had ended and the miners had followed the vein downward. "The stuff in them pillars runs as high as three and four dollars a ton," he said. "O. K. Rob 'em. Trim 'em down. You could take fifty thousand tons of this ore out if you want to. At three dollars a ton, figger what kind of a showin' that would make dividend time."

"Why didn't Jess Reagan trim the pillars?" Ray Turner asked skeptically. He was selfish, arrogant and greedy, but he was no fool.

"What do you think?" A knowing tone crept into Pelton's voice. "Jess was smart. It was his boast that he showed a little profit every month. He had an ace in the hole like these pillars, ore blocked out that he could throw into the mill when the values on the mine run fell off."

"Fat that a bear lays up before hibernating?" Turner suggested.

"That's it!" Pelton agreed. "Well, here it is, ready for you when you take over and want to make a big showing."

Pelton showed similar pillars elsewhere in the mine, but the big ones, that jutted from the walls like partitions in a house, were on the lowest level. Turner recalled that Tim had taken him by those same pillars earlier in the day, but had made no comment on them.

"Smart guy!" Turner exclaimed in sudden wrath. "Holding something back on me. Well, thanks to you, Pelton, we've spiked that little game."

He didn't mention the matter to Tim until nearly a month later. They were on the lowest level, studying an ore body and Tim had asked Turner for an opinion. The latter was guarded in the matter of expressing himself and then finding himself out on a limb. He usually managed to catch the drift of Tim's thinking, then go along with him.

"I know what I think," Tim said on this occasion. "But what do you think? I'm not too sure of my ground, but I believe we should cross-cut and gamble."

"I'd gamble," Turner agreed. "But it seems you'll lose lots of values by leaving such big pillars. Over on the one they call the Submarine Vein the pillars are huge."

"You bet they're huge," Tim answered. "Do you realize what would happen if those pillars should collapse under the strain? I'll tell you. There might be a fault, or an outright break in the rock between the mine and the bottom of Deception Straits. The Straits are hundreds of feet deep over the mine. The water pressure is terrific. If anything ever lets loose, all hell can't stop it. The mine would be flooded to sea-level depth, and that would take in all of our present workings, except a few stopes above sea level, and there isn't enough ore to make large-scale operation worth while."

Turner made no further comment, but he wondered if Tim was telling the truth, or was smarter than most people realized and was holding the pillars as an ace in the hole. He decided to take soundings, compare them with figures obtained in a survey of the mine and calculate the pressure per square inch on each pillar. It would be an easy matter to determine whether the pillars were too large.

He could do this quietly and with-

out outside help. The government had charts of the depth of Deception Straits, and he could doubtless find statistics covering the mine. "No hurry," he reflected. "I'll take my time, and move in my chips when I've got the cards."

THE weeks went swiftly, turned into months, and the months began passing. The operation of the mine was going smoothly—too smoothly to suit Tim Bradford. There seemed to be no satisfying Turner's appetite for knowledge. He asked countless questions and tried to cash in on things Tim had learned the hard way. Sam Pelton worked hard, remained sober, and continued to treat Tim with great respect.

Working hard and remaining sober were strictly out of character for Pelton, and Tim knew it. Gradually he saw the handwriting on the wall. He gave himself three more months at the mine at the outside.

His guess was wrong by three days, and this was because the mail steamer had sailed ahead of schedule. In due time he picked another long, thin envelope out of the mail. It was marked personal, which was unusual in company mail. It read:

DEAR MR. BRADFORD:

From time to time I have received reports of friction at the mine. You are too clever to declare open war against our Mr. Ray Turner. In fact, his reports speak of your full co-operation. Rather, the friction is caused by the men themselves, who either refuse to carry out Mr. Turner's orders, or fail to co-operate with him.

For the best interests of all concerned, I feel your field of endeavor is elsewhere, and that you owe it to yourself to commence your new work. I shall expect your resignation by return mail.

Very truly yours,
KIRK TURNER.

The steamer blew two blasts while Tim was reading the letter. That indicated she was leaving within a half hour. He sat down to the typewriter and tapped out an answer:

DEAR MR. TURNER:

I disagree with your contention that my field of endeavor is elsewhere. I haven't the slightest intention of resigning.

Very truly yours,
TIM BRADFORD,
Acting Superintendent.

He hurried down to the steamer and handed the letter to the mail clerk.

Ray Turner came from the mine several minutes later and promptly ran through his own mail. There was the usual letter from his father. He read it, then walked over to the superintendent's office. Tim wasn't in, and Turner sat down in his chair.

"Might as well find out how it fits," he reflected. "I'm going to be in it soon, and I'm going to stay in it a long time."

Tim came in and Turner hastily jumped up. "Reading some letters," he said. "The light's better in your chair."

He hung around expectantly. He knew his father had asked for Bradford's resignation, and he expected the latter to say something, but he didn't.

Nor did Tim say anything during the following two weeks. He waited and, with some amusement, watched the puzzled expression on the faces of Turner and Pelton.

The next steamer brought no company mail for Tim Bradford, but a registered letter came for Ray Turner. He hurried over to the deputy United States marshal's office. Presently Tim saw him and Sam Pelton coming up the stairs, with a deputy at their heels. The trio entered the superintendent's office.

"You're fired, Bradford," Turner

said bluntly. "Here's my authority. My father gave you a chance to resign and you turned it down."

"So I'm fired?" Tim said cheerfully. "Well, I guess that's that. But what's the deputy marshal for?"

Ray Turner flushed. "Well, you hardrock men are pretty tough customers and—"

"Sure! Sure!" Tim interrupted. "You were just a little nervous around the edges. We've had your courage pegged pretty well ever since you blew a chance to get into the battle royal on the Fourth of July." He got up. "There's the chair, already warmed for you. I wish I could say as much for the mine. I'm packed and ready to go. Good luck. Just one friendly word, although you haven't asked for it. Don't lean too much on your friend Pelton. He's a broken reed."

With that Tim went to his own quarters. When he had received the acting superintendent's appointment he hadn't moved into the superintendent's cottage. Time enough for that, he had reasoned, when he was actually the superintendent. Now, he didn't have to go through the unpleasant process of moving out so another man could move in.

TIM could have caught the steamer before she sailed, and that was his first impulse. He hadn't had a vacation in three years, except for a few days' hunting and fishing. A trip outside looked inviting. But he decided to remain and get the men's reaction to his removal.

Evening brought Daylight Lee and his worried wife. "I just heard, Tim," Daylight said. "I was underground when you was fired, but it didn't take long for the news to reach me. I wasn't surprised because you'd told me you wouldn't resign. The others were surprised and many of the boys are pretty hot

under the collar. There's talk of a strike."

"Tell them to forget it," Tim advised.

"I did. But Faro Mansfield who runs the Pastime Pool Hall is goin' into action," Daylight said. "He's a stockholder, you know. And he's hired Judge Thatcher to take it into court. He claims the stockholders have a say in this."

"I appreciate his faith in me," said Tim, "but Turner is the biggest stockholder. What he says goes."

"He's got forty-five per cent, Ann Sloan has thirty. If we can win Ann over to our side, and line up the little fellows, we can outvote him," Daylight argued. "I'll give Judge Thatcher my proxy, and I want you to give him yours, Tim."

"See if he can't get along without mine," Tim urged. "He can have it if it's needed, but I'd like to keep out of a legal fight. I don't want to get the reputation among mining men as a poor loser."

"O. K.," Daylight agreed. "But stick around. We'll need your advice before this business is over."

Tim moved out of company quarters the following day, and took a room at the hotel. He was very much aware of the uproar his discharge had caused. Several miners offered to chase Ray Turner out of the mine, if he just said the word. Some even suggested they were handy at dropping rocks when the right man was underneath them.

Tim checked such suggestions with determination. He knew this breed of men and appreciated that they weren't talking to hear themselves talk when they voiced threats. With some difficulty he persuaded them to work just as hard under Turner as they had under him, and to give their new superintendent the same loyalty.

"We can work as hard," one of them answered, "but givin' loyalty is something' else. You can hire a driller, but you can't hire his loyalty."

Judge Thatcher got out an injunction when he had lined up sufficient stockholders to make an effective appearance in court. Ray Turner, on behalf of the company, hired Lucian Pratt, one of the best lawyers in Seattle, and brought him in by plane.

THE courtroom was packed the day the hearing began. It looked as if almost everyone in the mining camp had turned out.

"Is Tim Bradford present?" the judge inquired.

Tim got up and walked to the bench. "I'm present, but only as an interested spectator, your honor," he said. "I've known proceedings were going ahead, but I've had no part in them. In fact, I've refused to join with the plaintiffs."

Lucian Pratt, a leather-lunged man of great dignity, began the proceedings.

"We charge, first, that the president of the company has the right to hire and discharge the superintendent," he said pompously. "Secondly, that the said Tim Bradford was incompetent in that he has refused to mill large bodies of ore; that he held this ore in reserve to make a good showing at his own convenient time—"

"Now I *am* in this fight," Tim interrupted. "I deny—"

"Order!" the judge said sharply.

"I apologize, your honor." Tim sat down.

Before the hearing was over, Tim was in the fight up to his ears. Lucian Pratt tried to give him a tough time on the witness stand, but Tim

had turned the tables on the suave lawyer. He was armed with facts and figures.

"I'm not defending myself," he maintained. "I don't care what you think of me, but I *am* defending Jess Reagan's record. I'm not going to let any tinhorn shyster—"

"Order!" The judge bellowed the command, and Tim apologized.

When the hearing was concluded, the judge informed all interested parties that he would take the case under advisement for a few days. There were certain decisions he wished to look up. "Until that time," he said, "the plant will continue to operate under Mr. Ray Turner."

There was nothing left but to mark time. Lucian Pratt let it be known if the decision was against him, he would appeal and keep appealing until he stood before the United States Supreme Court, if needbe. The judge burned midnight oil, as well as considerable sunlight, then wrote his decision.

He pointed out that the law protects the minority stockholders' interest if it can be proven that interest is in jeopardy by the actions of the majority. In this instance, he held, the stockholders might well hold an election and vote on the matter of the superintendent. If not, then he ordered an election of officers, who, when duly qualified, should appoint a superintendent.

"That will be entirely satisfactory to my people," Lucian Pratt announced. "We'll vote on the superintendent." He felt, and with reason, that any such election could have only one outcome.

"My clients agree also," Judge

Thatcher said. "Will the court please set a date for the election?"

"Thirty days from today," the trial judge answered.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DECIDING VOTE

A WEEK before the election Judge Thatcher sent for Tim Bradford. "I've got to have your proxy, Tim," he said. "The Turners have bought up the stock of some of the little fellows. It wasn't hard to persuade them to sell. They felt Old Glory was a good mine as long as Jess Reagan or you were in charge. They believe it's a poor one with a Turner running it."

"I didn't want my proxy to appear in court proceedings," Tim explained. "But an election is something else, of course." He signed the sheet of paper Thatcher extended.

"Ann Sloan's stock is the key to the situation, I suppose?" he asked.

"Yes. Without it, we're lost," the judge admitted. "With it we have a chance. The very fact that the Turners are going after the small blocks convinces me they're not too sure of Ann. She takes after her father, you know, and has a mind of her own."

Tim's spirits lifted. Perhaps he did have a chance, after all.

A steamer arrived two days before the election and Ann Sloan was the first one down the gangplank. Kirk Turner was directly behind her, and they seemed on friendly terms.

Tim, who was standing on the wharf with everyone else in camp who wasn't occupied, walked over and shook hands with the girl, who seemed pleased to see him.

"I want to talk to you, Mr. Bradford," she said. "When will it be convenient?"

"Any time you say," Tim answered. As she turned to go, he

spoke to Kirk Turner. "Sorry to have bowed my neck, Mr. Turner. But I wanted to force you to fire me."

"Aren't you proving a hard loser?" Kirk Turner asked coldly.

"I'm not being as unpleasant as I could be," Tim retorted. "It's largely your mine. If you want to ease your son into the top job, that's your business—and the other stockholders'. But when you charge me with incompetence and hint at dishonesty, that's something else. Then I'm a hard loser. I resent that part of your attitude and resent it like hell."

"What're you going to do about it?"

"If we lose this election, Mr. Turner, I may have a little fun with Old Glory stock in the stock market. The price may drop in the long run. And you're business man enough to realize that's likely to happen."

He turned away, conscious that Kirk Turner's angry glance followed him. When he returned to his hotel, he found a call waiting from Ann Sloan. He called her immediately.

"If I had known of Jess Reagan's death in time," the girl said, "I would have flown to the funeral. As it is, I brought along a wreath. I'd like to place it on his grave."

"His tomb is almost on the top of Mineral Mountain," Tim explained.

She seemed surprised, but she said: "Very well, can you take me up this afternoon? The flowers were kept cool in the ship's refrigerator on the way up, but I'm afraid they'll wilt quickly."

"Shall we start at two o'clock?"

"That will be fine," she answered.

Tim hung up the receiver and sat down, sprawling his long legs in front of him, eyes staring at the ceiling. There was a quality in Ann Sloan's voice that stirred him deeply.

"If we were both dead broke," he mused, "I'd like to start from scratch with her. A man would be bound to get somewhere. If he started to fold up, she'd build a fire under his tail. And if he got into a fight, with the odds all against him, she'd be into it in a hurry. But what's wrong with me? Sitting here dreaming!"

He got up and dressed for the trail, then killed time until two o'clock. Ann was ready on time, dressed in worn, well-calked boots and rough clothing that had seen service.

When they started up the mountain Tim let her set the pace. Often she had to stop to catch her breath.

"Really," she gasped, when they were above timberline, "I should do more of this. City life is making a sissy out of me. Imagine not getting my second wind until now."

"Let me know whenever you feel like climbing a mountain," he said lightly, "and I'll be around."

When they reached the top, Ann looked at the tomb with silent awe. At last her gaze drifted to the breath-taking scene below.

"This is wonderful, Mr. Bradford," she said finally. "When I came up, I thought, 'Poor old Jess Reagan!' I don't think that now. Shall we sit a while and talk?"

"Nothing would suit me better," Tim answered.

"You know, Jess and dad had it all figured out that I was going to be a boy. 'When he's old enough turn him over to me,' Jess said, 'and I'll make a hardrock man out of him.' And dad said he would. Well, I showed up."

"And Jess was disappointed, but he never batted an eye," Tim ventured. "I know him."

"Jess never batted an eye, and dad, the blessed liar, told mother

he had been praying for a girl right along," she said. "He used to take me fishing and hunting with him. I went along on prospecting trips, too."

"I'll bet you can crimp a fuse in your teeth, thaw dynamite and load a hole," Tim said.

"I crimped a fuse once, when dad wasn't looking," Ann admitted. "I was fourteen then. And was it a thrill!"

"I'll bet. Did you thaw your powder in the oven, or before an open fire?" Tim inquired.

"You know darn well I didn't," Ann said indignantly. "I thawed powder in hot water. That was Jess Reagan's way." She stopped, suddenly serious. "But this isn't right, talking so lightly, when only a few weeks ago Jess Reagan was living and breathing and saying nice things to me."

"I don't agree with you," Tim said seriously. "If Jess could speak to us, he'd say: 'Don't mind me, you two. Go right along enjoying yourselves."

"I guess you're right," she said. "He always loved young people. Well, let's take one more good long look, then go back down."

RAY TURNER was waiting for Ann when she returned.

"I suppose that bird worked on you plenty," he grumbled. "Did he talk you out of your votes?"

"Ray, at times you're a trial," Ann said. "We just went up to place a wreath on Jess Reagan's tomb. Business wasn't mentioned by either of us."

"Let us talk business, then," he suggested. "Frankly, you've surprised father. He naturally supposed he'd have your proxy and when you told him you hadn't made up your mind, he didn't know what to think."

"I haven't made up my mind," the girl answered. "That's why I came North. I wanted to talk with you again, and with Tim Bradford."

"You're not really thinking of throwing me over for him?" Ray demanded in astonishment. "That's unthinkable! Where's your loyalty to me? We're supposed to be married next June, and this is my big chance to prove my worth and—"

"Just a minute, Ray, please," Ann begged. She was hurt by his outburst. "You know this is business. My feeling for you has nothing to do with it. If I owned every share of stock in the mine, it might be different. I'd have no responsibility except to myself. But as it is I must decide what's best for the little fellows, the employees, and others, who can't afford to take a loss."

"You look and talk like your father used to," Ray accused, and there was no admiration in his voice. "I can run this mine as well as Tim Bradford."

"Ray," she said, "there's no use continuing the discussion. I'll give my decision at the board meeting."

Ray Turner returned to his office in a depressed and uncertain frame of mind. He had met a new Ann, one who wouldn't be easy to handle now, or ever, and he didn't like her. He was sitting there moodily when Sam Pelton appeared.

"This election's in the bag," Pelton predicted.

"It isn't in the bag, and I'll tell you why," Turner reported.

Sam Pelton listened gravely as Turner related his talk with Ann. "So that's all that's worryin' you?" he said. "What'll you give me if I swing her stock your way?"

"What do you want?"

"Assistant superintendent's job,"

Sam answered promptly, "and the right to fire certain people."

"What people?"

"The miners who vote their stock for Tim Bradford," Sam answered. "That's reasonable enough, ain't it? It's a cinch that if they're for Bradford, they're not for you. Is it a deal?"

"Yes, it's a deal," Ray Turner agreed.

THE next day Ann Sloan invited Tim Bradford to go for a walk. "I want to hear your qualifications for the superintendent's job," she said, as soon as they were alone. She was different than she had been on the climb to Jess Reagan's grave. She was quiet, impersonal, and strangely cool in her attitude.

"Boiled down," she said when Tim had answered her questions, "it amounts to this: Jess Reagan trained you, but in a sense you are untested. The mine, while you were superintendent, moved along under its own momentum. It could have produced under anyone who followed out Reagan's plans."

"That's right," Tim admitted. "I carried out his plans because I thought them right."

"Exactly," she continued. "Then if you faced a new problem, you would have to draw on your own experience to meet it?"

"Yes."

"And Mr. Turner would have to draw on his experience, also, to meet it?" she insisted.

"That's right. We're on the same footing in that respect," he said. "My edge, if any, is knowledge of this particular mine." He was respectful, curious, and more than a little annoyed. It looked as if she planned to give Turner her vote and was trying to justify the act in her own eyes.

"Well, here we are," Ann said.

"This is my cottage. And thank you so much, Mr. Bradford, for your frankness." There was a concealed barb in her words, but he didn't understand the impulse behind it.

Tim returned to his hotel room, deeply puzzled. He didn't see Ann Sloan again until the meeting. Then he sat with the minority stockholders and heard Judge Thatcher vote most of the minority stock for him. The block of Turner and his associates went to Ray Turner.

"Miss Sloan," Kirk Turner said, in his capacity as chairman of the board of directors, "how do you vote?"

"Gentlemen," Ann said quietly, "I've tried to be impersonal in this matter, and weigh both men on their merits. My decision, whether it is right or wrong, is an honest one. I didn't sleep on it. It kept me awake most of the night."

"She's alibying herself," Ray Turner muttered. "Then she'll vote for Bradford."

"You're wrong," Sam Pelton whispered. "It's in the bag for you. I fixed it. Wait and see."

"On the face of things," the girl continued, "the merits of the two men are equal. Mr. Bradford excels in experience at this particular mine, Mr. Turner has had broader experience. It became necessary for me to go deeper, to weigh the methods of the two men. And, chiefly, to be influenced by little things."

"Straws tell which way the wind blows," Lucian Pratt said ponderously.

"Yes," she said. "And so I vote for—Mr. Turner."

CHAPTER IX

ROBBED PILLARS

TIM BRADFORD heard the decision in silence. He speculated on what was back of the girl's words, but could not figure it out. Daylight Lee joined him in the street below.

"It went agin' you," he said. "Well, what're your plans?"

"I think I'll take a trip outside," Tim answered. "There's nothing for me to do here."

"*She'll* be going out on that steamer, too. So will Kirk Turner," Daylight said. "Nothing to keep them here now."

"I was thinking she would be going out," Tim said. "Daylight, I like that girl."

"After what she just done to you?" Daylight asked incredulously.

"She did what she thought was the best," Tim answered. "I admire her for it."

"But it was a mistake."

"An honest one," Tim insisted. "I've made 'em, so have you. Anyone who hasn't, has never taken a chance."

"Well, I've got to go to work," Daylight said, unconvinced. "I'll see you later. Don't go off without sayin' good-by."

"Not a chance of that," Tim answered.

Daylight went below, worked his shift, and came up again. He was informed that he was wanted in the office.

Daylight's heart stood still for a moment, then something leaden settled in the pit of his stomach. He made his way to the office door and knocked.

"Come in," a voice invited.

"Oh, it's you, Sam," Daylight said. He wasn't surprised. Sam Pelton was in the saddle these days and would ride high, wide and handsome as long as Ray Turner was superintendent.

"Yes, it's me," Sam said. "Me and Ray have been talking things over, Daylight. Your name came up, and I mentioned the fact that you'd been working pretty hard, and that you and Aunt Tess have been plannin' a vacation outside for a long time. He said it'd be nice if you could take one. So I've fixed it up. You and Aunt Tess can spend the next hundred years seein' the forty-eight States if you want to."

"Fired, eh?"

"Fired," Sam said with satisfaction. "Me and Ray went over the list of stockholder-employees who voted against us. We've decided they'll get along better elsewhere."

"I see," Daylight said softly.

"No, you don't *see*," Pelton told him brutally. "You're blind in more ways than one, and so are the rest who bucked Ray. Get your time at the office. Send in the next man."

"Good-by, Sam," Daylight said quietly. "And don't get under any fallin' rocks."

Pelton half leaped from the chair, then settled back again. "Fallin' rocks," he muttered when Daylight was gone. "I wonder if he knows. No, he couldn't know. If I thought he did—"

He broke off abruptly as the next man came in.

When the last man who had voted for Bradford was gone, Ray Turner came into the office. "You've had a swell time, Sam," he said, "I can see that. But they had it coming to them. No sense in carrying along men who are against us. Sam, sometimes you surprise me. You seemed to know just what to do to swing Ann Sloan into line."

Pelton expanded under his praise. "I know most of the answers around this man's mine," he boasted. "Daylight often said no man could get tough with Ann Sloan's father and get away with it. He said, too, she was a chip offn the old block, so I told her Tim Bradford was ready to pull a strike if he wasn't made permanent superintendent. That made her mad as hell."

"I imagine it did," Ray Turner said. "It is a wonder she didn't demand proof."

"She did, but I was all set for that, too," Sam said smugly. "Raw Meat Riley, one of the toughest hardrock men in the North, and a great Bradford admirer, was drunk and had been soundin' off to the effect that the men would strike if Bradford was voted out. I took your girl friend down where she could hear Riley and some of his pals talk. She figgered if Tim had to use such methods to hold down the job, he wasn't the man for the place."

"I thought you said Bradford was against a strike on his account?"

"He is," Sam replied. "But I made her believe he was secretly engineerin' one through friends in key spots in the mine and mill." He got up and stretched himself. "I guess I'm earnin' my pay around here."

"Sam," Ray Turner answered, "it certainly looks that way."

TIM BRADFORD heard, with increasing indignation, stories of men discharged because they had voted for him. He was almost in a mood to organize a strike, but resisted the impulse. It was Daylight Lee who calmed him down.

"True, there's dirty work at the crossroads," Daylight admitted, "but you've been on the frontier long enough to know every dog has his day, and so does every coyote. But here's something else. I told Sam he'd better watch out for fallin' rocks, and he almost jumped out of his chair. Of course, I couldn't see him, nor catch his expression, but I heard him gasp, and jump. It set me to thinkin'."

"What about?"

"Damn it, Tim, I'm between the devil and the deep sea. Women are queer, and Tess is still fond of Sam. I wouldn't do anything in the world to hurt her, and I'd cover up a lot Sam done on her account, but— I wouldn't mention this to a soul except you."

"Wait," Tim interrupted. "Don't say it, then you can swear you never did. I'll say it for you. There's a chance Sam got into the mine and dropped a rock on Reagan."

"I'm glad I can swear I never said it," said Daylight. "And it wouldn't surprise me if the time comes when I'll have to swear it."

They were talking when suddenly a great silence settled on Deception Straits. When they began to notice sounds they hadn't heard before— the lapping of waves against the tailings piles, the rumble of automobile wheels on the planked side streets, voices.

"The mill's down!" Tim exclaimed. Instinctively he jumped from his chair and started for the door. Then he turned away slowly. "I forgot, I'm not a part of Old Glory any more. Wonder what's wrong? Doggone it, it's so quiet you can hear the sounds inside your head."

Half an hour passed. Tim and Daylight discussed the details of Jess Reagan's death.

"He told me no end of things you'd have to do to keep the mine on a payin' basis," Daylight said. "And now it don't do me any good to tell you."

"You might, anyway," Tim said. "I'd like to hear them. Who knows, I may land a good job somewhere and need everything to hold it down. Damn it, I wish I knew what was wrong at the mill."

An hour passed, then two, and Tim and Daylight continued to talk shop. The telephone rang, unnecessarily loud it seemed to both. Tim picked up the receiver.

"Hello!" he said.

"This is Ann Sloan speaking." The girl's voice was cold and formal. "You'll never know how nearly I came to voting you into the superintendent's place, Mr. Bradford. When I heard you planned to call a strike if Mr. Turner got the job, I made up my mind to call your bluff. Well, you called your strike and the mill's down, and it can stay down as far as we're concerned. You don't need to send a committee of miners to talk terms, because we'll not meet them."

"You wait a minute, you little buzz saw," Tim bellowed. "Now, I'll talk! If you were any judge of character you'd know I wouldn't stoop to dirty work. Sure, the men were loyal to me, and some of the hotheads wanted to show it by calling a strike. Both Daylight and I stopped that talk whenever we heard it. But you had it coming, at that. Men have been discharged for no reason except that they voted for me. Some of the best hardrock men in the world were among them. Think that over. Blast it, I wish you were a man, I'd give you a working over or take one hell of a beating." He hung up.

"I heard both sides of that conversation," Daylight observed, "on account of my ears bein' so keen. You two ought to get married. You'd be happy, because you'd have such grand fights."

"Married? Huh!" Tim snorted. He walked to the window and looked at the mill building. A new sound came while he was standing there—the sound of angry men swarming toward the mill.

"Trouble ahead," said Daylight.

"I'm going up there," Tim declared. He made his way around the mob, through the mill and came into the superintendent's office without warning. It was evident that he had intruded on an important conference.

Ann Sloan, angry and flushed, seemed to be running things. Sam Pelton seemed nervous, and the Turners were grim and stubborn.

"Who the hell invited you, Bradford?" Ray demanded.

"I crashed the gate," Tim said curtly. He started for the door leading to the mob.

"Don't open that door," Pelton begged him. "They'll swarm in."

"You can tell them they're discharged," Kirk Turner said. "We want nothing to do with any of them. "We'll get a new crew in here and start from scratch."

"And I thought you were a business man," Tim said disgustedly.

HE flung open the door and was met with a cheer. "I'm not here to defend the Turners and Miss Sloan," he shouted. "I'm here to ask how many friends I've got among you."

A roar was his answer.

"O. K.," Tim yelled. "As a personal favor, I'm asking my friends to go back to the job. I'm young. I'll get along. I've only got myself to take care of. But plenty of you have others depending on your pay check. Think of them and go back to work!"

"You're talking for Tim Bradford," Raw Meat Riley bellowed. "What about the small stockholders that were fired? That was dirty work. We'll think about going back to work when they're taken care of."

"Wait a minute," Tim said. He went inside. "Put everyone back but me and they'll go to work," he told Kirk Turner.

"I told you we won't deal with the tramps," Turner fumed.

Tim whirled savagely on Ray Turner. "You're a hell of a superintendent, Turner. No stockholder would take over my decisions on dealing with men, even if he happened to be my own father. I'm talking to you. Either you're boss until you're re-

moved, or you're a ventriloquist's dummy and your father is talking for both of you."

"I'm superintendent," Ray Turner said, stung by Tim's words. "Tell 'em to come in here and we'll talk terms."

Tim stepped outside again. "Raw Meat Riley! Daylight Lee! Skid-road Barton! You're a committee. Come up here. The rest of you go back to work. Get those stamps roaring."

He started out the way he came, and met Ann's gaze with lingering resentment in his eyes. "Treat 'em fair and you won't have any trouble with them. See if you can get that message across," he said tersely.

The girl started to speak, but Tim was already closing the door.

Tim didn't see Daylight Lee or the others again that day. They had all returned to work, and the stamps were roaring. He slept soundly enough, but awakened early from force of habit, dressed, and walked down to the water front.

Ships are associated with storm and turbulence, but there is nothing more soothing to the nerves than sun shining on calm water and vessels tugging lazily at their lines. Tim perched himself on a piling and relaxed. Seaweed drifted slowly by, here and there a salmon broke water. Gulls wheeled slowly overhead. A raven squawked hoarsely in the timber, then flapped across the Straits.

The exhaust of a powerboat broke the peace of the morning and Tim saw a halibut schooner coming down the Straits. "The *Wayfayer*," he exclaimed. "An' she's headed for Seattle." He noticed that she rode low in the water. Nordstrom, her master and part owner, must have made a good catch.

Tim stood up on the piling as the steamer drew near, crooked his thumb, and jerked it south. A man in oilskins pressed binoculars to his eyes, gazed briefly. Seconds later, the schooner changed her course, slowed down, then reversed her engine.

"Tim Bradford," Captain Nordstrom bellowed, "are you kiddin', or are you thumbin' your way to Seattle?"

"I'm serious," Tim assured him. "Got room for me?"

"Yep! Can't take passengers, but I can sign you on as cabin boy." Nordstrom roared with laughter as he thought it over. "By Harry, I've always wanted to get you under my thumb!"

"Give me ten minutes to pack and put in one telephone call," Tim answered.

"Shake a leg," Nordstrom said.

Tim packed his bag in five minutes, then called the Lee home. "Hello, Aunt Tess, this is Tim," he said. "I'm going south on the *Wayfarer*—just thumbed a ride. Ask Daylight to tell the boys good-by for me. I'll let 'em know what I'm doing. For a while, at least, I'm going to loaf."

"It'll do you good," Tess Lee agreed. "You've worked hard for years. But— Never mind." She had almost told him that the boys wanted him to hang around, that they were afraid a situation might develop in the mine that only he could meet. But she choked back the words. Tim needed this vacation. She was not going to spoil it for him. "Daylight and I will let you know how things go. Listen, get yourself a sweet girl while you're in Seattle. It's about time you settled down."

"I'll look over the girl situation as soon as I arrive," he promised. "Good-by."

TIM loafed the first two days out, but on the third he turned to with the others and helped keep the schooner moving. There were evening card games with the skipper and one of the mates, a little drinking, and a lot of, "Do you remember that time on the Skidroad in Seattle when we got into the free-for-all?" Or, "You haven't forgotten the time we dived together on that barge and our air lines fouled?" Altogether, it was a pleasant trip.

There was a letter waiting for Tim when he arrived in Seattle. A Coast Guard cutter, southbound, had put in at the mine and picked up the mail. Tim opened the envelope eagerly.

DEAR TIM:

Guess it'll seem kind of funny having a letter waiting for you that was written after you left. The Turners and Miss Sloan were amazed at your sudden departure. I don't know why they should be. You owe them nothing. My precious nephew didn't like the idea of taking back Daylight and the others that he fired, but he's making the best of it. Here's the real news. They're robbing the pillars. Daylight says that should mean plenty to you.

Drop us a line when you have time and don't take any wooden money from the city slickers.

Love from,
AUNT TESS AND DAYLIGHT.

"So they're robbing the pillars," Tim growled. "They might stand a little robbing, and again they might not. Bad business, but Ray Turner wants to make an immediate showing."

Tim made a beeline for his broker's office. "I want to buy Old Glory on margin," he announced. "It's going up. I wouldn't be surprised if some of the big boys started playing with it again."

"If it shows signs of rising, they'll do just that," the broker answered. "Say, this is an interesting angle—the discharged superintendent buying stock. The big boys will hop on that one in a hurry. Say, where's Kirk Turner? Usually he's in the front rank when there's money to be picked up."

"He's coming south on the steamer *Kodiak*," Tim explained. "She's due tomorrow afternoon. Listen, buy all my account will stand, then let it leak out that I've bought."

"That'll increase the value of Turner's holdings, of course," the broker pointed out.

"Sure, but there won't be a loose share left for him to buy when he arrives," Tim explained. "And that'll burn him up."

When Tim checked prices that night, Old Glory had taken a big jump. He called his broker at his home.

"Sell my stock," he ordered, "and credit the profit to my account."

"Hadn't we better reinvest?"

"No," Tim answered, "I've taken a little cream from Turner and killed his chance for a clean-up. I may be out of a job a long time and I'm saving my money."

"What do you plan to do on your vacation?"

"Visit mines in the West," Tim replied. "And learn how the low grade boys are making ends meet."

"A mail carrier's holiday, eh?" the broker said.

Tim looked up Seattle friends the next few days. Then he bought a ticket for Idaho to look over some silver mines. He was talked into making a prospecting trip into the back country that lasted ten weeks. When he came out and made his report, a syndicate indicated he might be hired to develop a new mine.

"If Jess Reagan trained you," one

of the members said, "that's good enough for us. We'll let you have our decision later on."

Starting from scratch, as Jess had done years ago, sounded attractive to Tim. He decided to stay in the region a while and wired his broker to forward his mail. The broker responded with a telegram urging him to return.

"Now what the devil can that mean?" Tim asked himself. He packed his belongings and caught the first train for Seattle. It was night when he arrived, but he called the broker on the telephone.

"What's all the excitement?" he asked curiously.

"A man named Daylight Lee wrote me to locate you if possible," the broker answered. "He wants you to arrive secretly at the mine. Indicated it might be a matter of life and death. I booked passage for you under the name of Jerry Jessup."

TIM caught the steamer the following morning. He remained aboard at all Alaskan towns, and when the boat docked at the Mineral Mountain wharf, he waited until darkness before going ashore. Then, sticking to back streets, he made his way to Daylight Lee's home.

Daylight opened the door before he could knock. "Recognized your step, Tim," he said. "Boy, I'm glad

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to see you. Here, get into some minin' duds right away. The boys want you to inspect the mine."

"They do, eh? What about Ray Turner and Sam Pelton?"

"They won't know nothin' about it. The night shift will sneak you underground," Daylight explained.

A few minutes later the blind man was leading the way over the board walk and climbing the familiar stairs. The cage operator shook hands warmly, then took Tim down to the tram level. They followed the track some distance, then descended in an ore skip to the lowest level.

"We're goin' to the old Submarine Vein," Daylight explained.

A few minutes later he stopped. "Well, what do you think of it?" he asked.

Tim played his flashlight about the pillars. "They've robbed those pillars of thousands of tons," he exclaimed. "Is Ray Turner crazy?"

"The boys want to know if it's safe to work down here, or is Deception Straits likely to tumble in on us?" Daylight said bluntly. "They'll take your word for it, one way or another."

It was a tremendous responsibility. Tim examined what remained of the pillars. There was no doubt of it, the roof was lower, and the surface of the pillars showed signs of crumbling. A tiny drainage stream trickled down a pillar and seeped into a sump where the pumps gathered it up. Tim scooped up a handful of water, tasted it and spit it out.

"Daylight!" he exclaimed. "That's salt water coming into the mine!"

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