

STREET
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WESTERN STORY

DEC. 23, '39

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MAGAZINE • DEC. 23, 1939



beginning

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by Stuart Hardy



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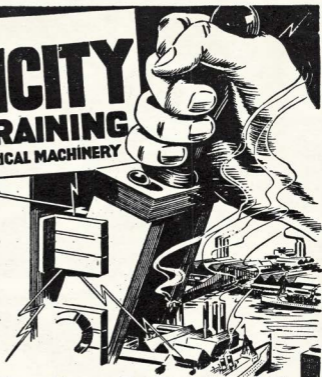
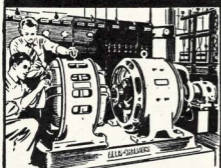
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WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

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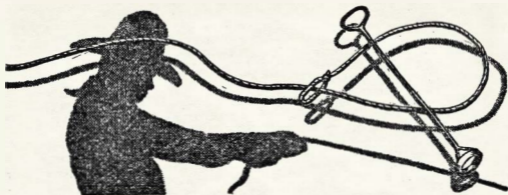


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The Roundup

"Dear Boss, Old Hands and Straymen," writes Jay Lucas from down Arizona way, "Seeing that you all listen to some of my yarns, how about letting me peep up about this cougar business you all were discussing some time ago?" Jay, you will remember, wrote that fine serial, RANGE OF HUNTED MEN, which we published some time ago. And besides being a tophand writer, Jay, as we told you in our July 22nd Round-up, has been a professional lion hunter in his time, and we think his letter on the subject well worthy of passing on to our readers.

"I've seen a lot of discussions about mountain lions in magazines, and I never knew there were so many fellers who savvyed the brutes.

"Now, about lions screaming—Everybody knows that any bird or animal extending over a very wide range usually grades gradually into local varieties—take, for example, bluebirds which, here in Arizona, have a duller color than in the East. There's no distinct line where they meet—just change gradually.

"Now, I've hunted lions from the

Big Bend country of Texas to western Arizona, and they all look exactly alike, and have exactly the same habits—and it doesn't make any difference whether one calls them mountain lions, cougars, panthers, catamounts, pumas, or anything else. I've run across them up in Canada, too, and still there was no difference to be seen.

"But to be *heard*, that's different. The lions in west Texas sure could tune up regularly; everybody hears them there. And I understand that when there were "panthers" in the East, they screamed still more. But as we go West, we find them growing into strong, silent men—excuse me, I mean strong, silent mountain lions, and I think the biggest in the world are right here along the Mogollon Rim.

"And they do scream here, and most old cowboys have heard them at least a few times. I have heard that they do not scream at all in parts of California. As to what their cry is like, well, it does sound like a woman screaming, and it's pretty blood-curdling, but, of course, one soon learns to recognize it. So I believe that those who say they scream and those who say they don't, are both right, depending on where they live.

"I've heard of several authentic

cases of mountain lions' killing men, and a good many more tales of their killing and eating children. Still, it's a comparatively rare thing. Of course, one could do it easily; these around here can pull down the biggest horse without the slightest trouble.

At to the friend who says that a burro will warn one of the presence of lions—well, I'm a cowpuncher and wouldn't know about them long-eared canaries, but as a lion hunter I do know this—or to be more modest, I'll put it forward as my own personal opinion, which may be wrong—a lion's favorite meat is burro, and then come mule, colt, deer, and nice fat calf. Hold on there! Put porcupine up about the top of the list. In porcupine country, I never got a lion without quills in his paws. A lion can flip one over on his back, kill him, and skin him out the neatest you ever saw—you'd think a good trapper had skinned him and stretched the skin quills down on the ground.

"As I say, I wouldn't know about burros—or sheep! But a lion very rarely catches a mule, because a mule is just too clever for him. I've known of two lions hunting a mule all night in a small, brushy horse pasture and not being able to catch him—and next morning the mule was frisky enough to buck me off, and the lions so tired and disgusted that I killed both within a mile of the cabin.

"So if one judged by the number of mules killed, one would say that lions did not like them. Fat colts are pie for them. And I remember a good professional lion hunter who had his ancient horse killed and eaten within two hundred yards of his camp one night. Did we kid *him!* The poor devil never lived it down."

We know that folks who enjoy the fine animal stories printed in this magazine from time to time, will be glad to learn of a recently published book devoted to this type of fiction. Frances E. Clarke has assembled a noteworthy collection of stories and articles written by many of the foremost authors in this field and called the volume "Wild Animals" (published by the Macmillan Company). Among our favorites were two outstanding stories by Kenneth Gilbert, whose work is familiar to Western Story readers.

Don't miss next week's big Christmas issue—

Harry F. Olmsted writes a stirring novel of the tempestuous days when this young country, struggling to achieve power and greatness, was at last girdled by a trans-continental railroad. It took an army of fearless men to accomplish the epic feat—men, who often hungry, had to be ever ready to lay down pick and shovels and reach for the rifles that were their only protection against marauding redskins. Read their gripping story in **WARRIORS OF THE STEEL TRAILS**.

One roll of the dice and the Gamblin' Kid usually took the jackpot, but he knew that sooner or later, there'd come a wager he'd have to settle with his six-gun. In **DEUCES WILD**, Eric Howard writes another exciting story of one of your favorite Western characters.

Also on the tally book for next week are stories and features by John Colohan, B. Bristow Green, Frank Richardson Pierce, Stuart Hardy, S. Omar Barker and many others, plus a full list of your favorite departments.



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MURDERS AT MESQUITE FLATS

by **STUART HARDY**

Part One



CHAPTER I

THE COWS ARE COMING

THERE was a single shot—a streak of red flame out of brush—and it caught old Ab Krassel in the heart. He pitched out of the saddle stiffly, like a figure turned to stone, and his mustang, writhing free of him, galloped away in terror.

For a time after its hoofbeats had dwindled into silence, the trail was hushed. Somewhere in the night, far up in the hills, a coyote barked once, angrily, as if to answer the sound of the shot. But that was all.

Then, slowly, a man crawled out of the brush. When he reached Ab Krassel's body on the dark trail he squatted down beside it. He raised Ab's head in his hand as though he were lifting a stone, and over it he slipped the noose of a rope. It wasn't a long rope. No more than four or five feet, and to its end was pinned a slip of white paper.

The man, lowering Ab's head, peered about in the darkness. He heard nothing. There was not even a breeze tonight to rustle the branches above him. Then, as cautiously as he had come, he backed away into the brush.

For a few seconds there were the furtive sounds of his movements. When they ended, the night was still again.

Nothing had changed. Nothing, save that an open-mouthed old man lay dead on his back, with a rope around his neck.

IN the morning, big Soapy Dolan led half a dozen of his cowpunchers into the hills. The owner of the Bar U Bar rode grimly, with a scowl on his powerful face, and his eyes squinted at the distant valley, halfway up the mountain, where Mrs. Lenroot's sheep ranch lay.

"Once they know we mean business," he said, "mebbe they'll have the sense not to fight!" And after some bitter reflection he added, "Doggone sheep ranchers, anyhow! Never knew 'em to bring anything but trouble!"

Slop Jeffers, the tall man who rode beside him, nodded in agreement. "What you figurin' to tell 'em?" he asked.

"Plenty!"

"Yeah, I know. But what?"

"Looka here," snapped Soapy Dolan, "do I have to rehearse it for you? Just listen when we get there an' you'll hear."

Slop Jeffers chuckled. He was not an old man, but there were deep creases in his scrawny neck and lines etched in his bony face. It was said—when he wasn't listening, of course—that nobody had ever known him to take a bath since he came to Arizona. The creases in his skin, like the pores, appeared to hold the accumulated dust and grime of countless seasons.

Riding behind Slop, a lanky red-haired rider ventured uneasily, "One thing we got to remember, though. When you get right down to it, even sheep ranchers got some rights on open range."

"Rights?" Soapy Dolan turned in his saddle to glare at the man. "Anybody askin' you, Red?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Then shut up! I got cows to winter, an' I don't aim to let any woman sheep rancher keep my cows away from grass!"

For a long time after that nobody spoke. The men who worked for Soapy Dolan had learned to keep quiet when his temper flared. They rode uphill, studying the mountain-side ahead, and their lips were tight. Only Slop Jeffers grinned. He always grinned at the scent of trouble.

In the end it was he who cracked the strained silence. "It ain't Mrs. Lenroot you got to worry about, Soapy," he remarked. "The way I see it, it's her foreman."

"She's the one who gives the orders," Soapy Dolan argued.

"Uh-huh. Mebbe so. Just the same, though," drawled Slop, "Sam Squam's a funny sort of hombre. Runs the outfit to suit himself, mostly, from what I hear tell."

For a moment Soapy was silent. Then he said flatly, "Well, I ain't figurin' to lose any sleep over Sam Squam. It don't matter who we talk to up there—long as they get their sheep off that range!"

Slop nodded lazily, dropped the reins over the saddlehorn, and began to roll himself a cigarette. There was something tantalizing in his casual manner. His grin persisted, but now it touched only the corners of his lips, giving them a mocking expression. He said nothing until he had lit the cigarette. Then, watching a puff of smoke drift over his shoulder, he remarked:

"I got a hunch you'll run up against some mighty serious opposition when you tackle Sam Squam."

"Why?"

Slop Jeffers shrugged. "You know how it is, Soapy. Why are folks callin' Sam 'Mrs. Lenroot's man'? Why do you figure he's stickin' to a mountain sheep ranch when he could get a job on any cattle outfit around here?"

"What Sam Squam may have in mind don't mean a thing to me," Soapy Dolan retorted.

"Don't kid yourself. It means plenty. That hombre is makin' a play for the Widder Lenroot. Sabe? She's young an' she's good-lookin'. Wouldn't mind takin' on a woman like that myself if I was huntin' a wife. An' neither would you." Slop

tossed a taunting laugh into the words. "The way I see it, Sam Squam is sure figurin' to marry her some day. An' why not? He'd get a good sheep ranch with the bargain. So it stands to reason he's goin' to stick up strong for her interests. Besides, he's got to make a show in front of her—if you see what I mean."

"I see, all right," muttered Dolan, "but Sam Squam don't interest me, I tell you. All I want is winter grass without any damn sheep spoilin' it, an', by damn, I'm goin' to get it! Sam Squam or no Sam Squam, I'm goin' to get it!"

There was a finality in the rancher's voice. It stilled them all, even Slop Jeffers. And they rode up the trail without further discussion.

IT was almost noon when they reached the narrow entrance to the valley that sheltered Mrs. Lenroot's ranch. Far across its stretch of grass they could see grazing sheep; and off to the right, near the mountain's steep, dark rise, stood the white ranchhouse, backed by its barns and bunkhouse.

As a matter of record—and it was on this fact that Soapy Dolan based his visit—the widow of Nevada Bill Lenroot owned only one section of the valley. Hers were the hundred and sixty acres, homesteaded by her husband, that lay about the mountain stream close to the house. The farther expanse of grass, some four hundred acres of it, still constituted open range. Since there was no fence to mark the division of land, the Lenroot sheep generally wandered where they chose. It was probably this—the prior presence of sheep—which had up to now discouraged cattlemen from settling here.

It didn't, however, discourage

Soapy Dolan. He had just led his party into the bottle neck that formed the valley's door when he saw two riders at his left. At the sight of them he instantly drew rein, and the men behind him stopped, too. For the two who were herding lost sheep back toward the flock were Sam Squam and Mrs. Katherine Lenroot.

Soapy's eyes, extraordinarily small for so large a face, became bright and keen, even eager. "Well, now," he said softly, "looks like we can have our powwow right here." And he called aloud, "Hi, there!"

His shout startled Sam Squam and the tall woman. They turned to stare. Then, after a quick consultation, they abandoned the sheep and sent their horses loping toward the visitors.

Soapy spoke a few sharp words of caution to his men. "From now on keep quiet, all of you! Let me do the talkin'."

He had the grace to take off his sombrero while he led the men to meet Mrs. Lenroot and Sam Squam. His thin hair, of a peculiar rusty color, lay pasted down by perspiration, revealing strips of his scalp. His enormous face, set on his heavy body, looked red and puffed.

While they advanced, Soapy narrowly appraised these dusty sheep folk. He had to concede that Mrs. Lenroot was, in her way, a beautiful woman. Tall, dark-haired, composed, she had a quiet dignity that left some men uncomfortable. "Makes you feel," they muttered, "like mebbe you're talkin' to the governor's lady." She had been Nevada Bill Lenroot's second wife; and though he had been in his fifties when the lynching party caught him a year ago, Katherine Lenroot could be no more than thirty now. Probably less. Her pale, aloof beauty

made her age a difficult thing to estimate.

Curiously, however, it was at her foreman that Soapy Dolan directed most of his scrutiny. An incalculable sort of man, this Sam Squam. He was neither very tall nor very heavy, and yet his compact figure suggested hard muscles. His shoulders and his chest predicted that in middle age he would be as solid as a bull. Now, at twenty-six, Sam was still lean. His face was molded in decisive lines—a straight mouth, a rugged jaw, serious gray eyes set wide apart in the shade of a floppy sombrero. Some thought it was a hard face, but when he grinned, all the hardness vanished, and you saw a brown-haired young man who loved to laugh.

"Howdy," he said a bit guardedly, stopping his palomino.

Soapy grunted a reply and turned to Katherine Lenroot. "Rode up to see you, ma'am," he said without preliminaries. "About winter range for my cows."

Her brows arched slightly, but she betrayed no emotion. Her voice, too, remained calm. "You mean," she said, "you want to bring your herd up here?"

"Part of it, yes."

Mrs. Lenroot thoughtfully regarded her saddlehorn. "There's open range out there, of course," she said after a pause. "I suppose you have every right to use it."

"Exactly. Only thing is, though, I'll have to drive my cows across your spread to get to that range. You won't mind?"

"Not at all. Why should I?"

Soapy Dolan, studying the inside of his sombrero after this first exchange, cleared his throat. So far things had gone with surprising ease. But he was approaching trouble now, and his eyes narrowed a little.

"I figure," he said, "to bring in about two hundred head."

That made Mrs. Lenroot jerk up her head and stare at him in surprise. Sam Squam, too, stiffened.

"That's a big herd, Mr. Dolan!" Katherine Lenroot said.

"Not for a spread that size, it ain't."

"You've got to figure at least two acres to each cow for wintering," she protested. "That's four hundred acres—about all the open range there is."

"Yes, ma'am." Soapy Dolan spoke firmly.

"But . . . but what about my sheep? *They've* got to be wintered, too, you know. They've got a right to some of that grass. They've been getting it every year—"

"Which is why I figure it's about time cows had their day in this valley," Dolan interrupted. "I don't aim to be unreasonable, Mrs. Lenroot. But I got to find grass for my cows. I'm runnin' more than two thousand head right now. Winterin' all them critters is a mighty big problem. Every acre counts."

Sam Squam seemed about to say something. But he frowned slightly and silenced himself. His lips became taut, and his fingers drummed on his saddlehorn. He watched Dolan with an intensity that made the rancher shift his weight uneasily in his saddle.

LOOK here, Mr. Dolan," said Mrs. Lenroot, her voice low. "That open range is the only place I can send my sheep in the winter. You know that. All the cattlemen around Mesquite Flats know it. I wouldn't object at all if you planned to drive a hundred head up in here. But two hundred! There just isn't enough grass."

"Sorry, ma'am," Dolan said

evenly. "I'm figurin' on two hundred."

"But surely you must see—"

"It's goin' to be two hundred, Mrs. Lenroot."

Now her voice rose a little. "What about my sheep?"

Dolan shrugged. "When your husband settled here," he told her dryly, "we warned him Arizona was a cow State. He knew the chances he was takin', bringin' in sheep."

"You mean you'll simply ignore my rights?"

"I don't know as I'd put it that way, exactly. All I aim to do is assert my own rights—the rights of cows up here."

"Do you think the Cattlemen's Association will back you in doing a thing like that?" Her challenge carried a tremor of anger. "Deliberately coming up here to starve out my sheep?" She knew, of course—they all knew—that Dolan would send enough men with his cows to see that no sheep grazed on their domain; enough men to outnumber the Lenroot herders five to one.

"As to the Cattlemen's Association," Soapy Dolan said confidently, "we'll be meetin' down in Mesquite Flats in the next day or two. I'm pretty sure those gents'll see it my way, ma'am—that in a cow country cows are entitled to prime consideration."

For the first time Sam Squam spoke. His voice was quiet, yet it held a cutting quality.

"Dolan," he said, "seems to me you came up here in a pretty tough mood."

"Hey?" Dolan turned to him, frowning. "Tough? Why?"

"We offer a compromise on a hundred cows, an' you turn us down flat. In other words, you're here to give warnin' that you aim to freeze

us out complete this winter. Is that it?"

"I was talkin' to Mrs. Lenroot," Dolan said stiffly.

"You're talkin' to me now. If I got you figured right, you ain't in any compromisin' mood. It's two hundred cows or nothing. Right?"

"Well? Suppose it is?"



"Because if that's what you mean," Sam Squam said deliberately, "it's going to be nothing."

Dolan stared at him. He drew in a sharp breath. But Sam Squam went on:

"To get to that open range yonder you got to cross our spread with your herd. Mrs. Lenroot said as how she wouldn't object to a reasonable herd. But two hundred head ain't reasonable. We won't let two hundred head cross."

For a moment Dolan was silent. Then he couldn't help laughing. "How many hands you got workin' up here?" he asked.

"Besides Mrs. Lenroot an' me, just two. Reckon you know that."

"Sure I know it! You got Demijohn Walker an' Abe Stutz. But are you forgettin' I hire forty men?"

Sam smiled thinly. "No, I ain't forgettin'. An' I'll admit it sure seems like forty men ought to be able to wipe three hombres an' a lady out of their way, specially if they come with blazin' six-guns. Only thing is, Dolan, I got a feelin' some o' your boys are goin' to balk at fightin' that kind of battle against a lady. I got a feelin' they're pretty decent hombres."

As he stroked the palomino's neck, Sam's glance traveled over the men behind Dolan. They frowned and looked away from him and made an uncomfortable fuss about steadying their mounts. Only one, Slop Jeffers, continued to grin as if the situation were amusing.

Soapy Dolan suddenly gathered up his reins. "I didn't come to get into any arguments," he said. "I just figured I'd let you folks know what to expect so there wouldn't be any unnecessary trouble when I come. Fifteenth of October, Mrs. Lenroot, I'm drivin' two hundred cows up here!"

"Fifteenth of October," said Sam Squam, "you'll be drivin' two hundred cows back again."

The cattleman glared. "What in blazes you tryin' to do, scare me?"

"Why, no." And with a touch of sarcasm he couldn't suppress, Sam echoed the rancher's words: "Just figured I'd let you folks know what to expect so there wouldn't be any unnecessary trouble when you come."

CHAPTER II

"REMEMBER LENROOT?"

WHEN the men from Mesquite Flats were gone, with only a brown dust cloud beyond the valley's rim to mark their position on the trail, Sam Squam pushed his sombrero to the back of his head, rubbed a hand over his mouth, and grunted. He glanced obliquely at Katherine Lenroot, and his eyes were troubled. Without immediately speaking, both of them rode back toward the sheep.

Presently Mrs. Lenroot spoke in a hopeless tone. "Looks like trouble, Sam."

"Maybe." Sam's voice was non-committal. He lifted his eyes to squint at the sun-drenched moun-

tains ahead. "I wouldn't worry too soon, Mrs. Lenroot."

"I don't see what we can hope to do if Dolan does come up with two hundred cows and twenty or thirty men to poke them into the valley."

"Whatever we did, the law would still be on our side," Sam pointed out. "He's got no right to cross our spread without permission."

"Dolan," she said with sudden bitterness, "won't pay much attention to law—unless it suits him! And the worst of it is he's got enough friends in this cow country to back him. They'll claim we have no right to stand between hungry cows and good open range. I know those men!"

Yes, Sam reflected grimly, she had good cause to know those men. It was hardly more than a year since a group of them had hoisted her husband to the branch of an oak, leaving him dangling by the neck for a couple of prospectors to find. Who the lynchers had been, she had never learned; nor, apparently, had old Sheriff Ingersol, though he had promised to ride through heaven and hell in his search.

The story around Mesquite Flats was that Nevada Bill Lenroot, having fallen into an argument with Howie Davis, a cattleman, over the matter of sheepherders' rights, had drawn a six-gun and deliberately shot Davis through the head. Well, maybe. Sam Squam, who had known Lenroot well, doubted the story. So did scores of others. Those felt that in all probability Howie Davis, the cattleman, had pulled a gun, too. It must have been a fair fight in which luck and speed had favored Nevada Bill.

But the lynching party hadn't admitted such a possibility. All that had mattered to them was that a sheepman had shot a cowman; and

so the sheepman, overtaken in the foothills on his way home, had been strung up to an oak without benefit of trial or hearing.

SAM reached the stray sheep and began herding them along. After a time he looked again at Mrs. Lenroot.

"Think you could spare me for a day or two?"

That startled her. "Why, Sam?"

"I'd sort of like to ride down to Mesquite Flats. Attend that cattlemen's meetin' Dolan mentioned."

"What for?"

"Well, chances are Dolan will make a fine, indignant speech an' give 'em one side of the story—his own side. He'll make it look like we're an ornery, mule-headed outfit set on keepin' cows from their legitimate grazin' grounds. Most of those ranchers, though, are fair-minded men. If I can tell 'em our side of the story, how we're willin' to let a reasonable-sized herd cross our spread, why, maybe they won't be in such a hurry to back Dolan."

She considered this with growing unease. "Think they'll let you speak up at their meeting, Sam? You—a sheepman?"

"Don't see what they got to be afraid of."

"But Dolan, with all his friends down there—"

"Can't stop a man from talkin'," Sam assured her. "Even if it turns out to be a closed meetin'—closed against sheepmen, I mean—I can talk to those ranchers individually on the outside. It's worth tryin', Mrs. Lenroot. May save us a heap o' trouble, come October fifteenth."

They rode on slowly in silence, herding the baaing sheep ahead of them. Once or twice, while she pondered, Katherine Lenroot sent a nervous glance at her foreman. His

confidence should have reassured her, but it didn't. She could never feel at ease when contemplating a clash with cattlemen—not since that group of them had left her husband's gaunt body swinging from an oak.

Still, Sam's plan seemed wise. Certainly it offered more hope than merely waiting, inactive, for the fifteenth of October and Soapy Dolan's armed men.

"All right, Sam," she said slowly. "Try it."

"I'll leave this afternoon."

"I . . . I wish, though, you wouldn't go alone."

That brought a light laugh from Sam Squam. "Think I'll lose my way?"

She bit her lip, then confessed, "It's like seeing you walk deliberately into a hostile camp! I'll feel much better, Sam, if you take one of the boys along. Take Demijohn. I'll manage things all right with Abe for a day or two."

Sam consented readily enough, though his smile hinted that he was merely humoring her. The truth was that in moments of stress there was no man he liked better to find at his side than Demijohn Walker—small, barrel-chested, often testy, but the most reliable partner anyone could want. He and Demijohn had come to work together on the Lenroot ranch four years ago; and Sam had long ago learned to respect the little man's indomitable spirit.

"Between Demijohn an' me," he declared almost gayly, "we'll sure get somethin' accomplished!"

IF you didn't mind two hours of hard riding through rocky badlands, where the trail sometimes led you sliding down graveled slopes into draws or climbing steep rises to the tops of bluffs, you could lop

quite a few miles off the easier but roundabout route to Mesquite Flats. It was this short cut that Sam and Demijohn Walker took when, late in the afternoon, they loped off toward town.

Demijohn, with a large head and torso that appeared strangely top-heavy on his bowed legs, rode behind Sam. Whenever the going was easy he whistled—he seemed to know every range tune in existence—and surveyed the surrounding country with a kind of proprietary interest. Once, when Sam had chided him about his baronial manner when riding in the wilds, Demijohn had retorted, "Shucks! Just look at all them mountains! They belong to me as much as to any man alive, don't they? Why shouldn't I be proud of 'em?" And he added with a chuckle, "They're the only property I got."

After two hours they were riding through a dry gully, with only occasional clumps of cactus and chaparral sprouting out of the arid ground, when Demijohn remarked, "I got a hunch, Sam, this trip ain't goin' to do much good."

"Just guessin'?" Sam asked equally. "Or you got somethin' to base the hunch on?"

"Seems to me Soapy Dolan wouldn't have come to us with so much cockiness unless he knew he had the other cattlemen pretty solid behind him. Chances are he's already talked to most of 'em, pointin' out how ornery, stubborn, an' pecky us sheep folk are, hoggin' open range."

Sam considered the words, then shrugged. "Well, if we don't get a hearin' from the cattlemen, I got another idea in mind, Demijohn. One way or another, we'll get somethin' done."

The small man frowned. "What sort of idea?"

"If we fail in Mesquite Flats we'll ride down the Border to Sunbeam. There's plenty ranchers around Sunbeam who'd likely welcome an invitation to winter a hundred cows in our valley."

"But looka here—" Demijohn began to protest, half rising in the saddle.

"Specially," Sam calmly continued, "if we offered to help care for their cows an' lodge as well as feed the cowpunchers who come up with the critters."

Demijohn stared in astonishment. "Say, what in thunder you tryin' to do? Double our troubles? Where would all that get us?"

Sam grinned. "Might get us pretty far, old-timer. Suppose we get a hundred Sunbeam cows up by October first. When Dolan arrives with his herd two weeks later what does he find? Finds another cattleman got into the open range ahead of him, an' there's no room for *his* two hundred head! He sure couldn't get the association to back him if he tried to drive out another cow rancher, could he?"

Demijohn, his eyes wide in amazement, whispered, "Well, I'll be doggoned! That *is* an idea, Sam!"

"So," went on Sam Squam, "we'd still have plenty grass for our sheep at our end of the valley. And if Dolan did take it into his head to fight, why, there wouldn't be just us. He'd have to face the Sunbeam cowpunchers, too. They'd naturally have to line up with us to protect their rights in the valley. Sabe?"

"I sabe plenty!" chuckled Demijohn, his eyes beaming. "Yes, sir, plenty!"

"Only thing is," finished Sam, "I wouldn't like to undertake housin' an' feedin' a bunch o' Sunbeam cow-

punchers unless we fail complete with the Mesquite Flats ranchers. We got to go try Mesquite Flats first. We'll — What's the matter?"

DEMIJOHN WALKER had abruptly stopped his horse. He was staring at the dusty ground at the side of the trail, and his eyes, losing their merriment, were suddenly narrowed in perplexity.

The trail was almost out of the badlands, ready to wind across a sea of brown sage on its way to the wider road into Mesquite Flats. But here there were still great boulders, and the ground was barren and dusty, and to the right a high bluff threw a long, blue shadow over the two men.

Demijohn sounded awed as he pointed. "What in the name o' sense an' reason ever left tracks like that?"

Sam, fifteen feet ahead, had to turn his palomino back to see the tracks. And when he saw them his own brows rose in surprise.

Clearly enough, another horse had recently passed along this trail. But that wasn't startling; there were marks of many mounts in the dust. The spoor at the side of the trail, however—the one which had halted Demijohn—had definitely *not* been left by a horse.

The marks were at least sixteen inches long, eight inches wide, and generally shapeless. Paced at three-foot intervals, they might have been made by some nameless prehistoric creature beyond all description, a gigantic beast with fur about its feet that, brushing along, obliterated all definite outlines.

"Doggoned if I ever saw anything like that before," whispered Demijohn. "Hang on to Pete a minute, will you?" He tossed his pinto's reins to Sam and, almost in the same

instant, swung himself out of the saddle. "Me, I sort o' hanker to see where they lead. Maybe we can spot the thing that made 'em."

Tugging up his belt, Demijohn started off among the boulders, his eyes following the strange spoor. Sam, who was just as puzzled, also dismounted. He saw the marks go up a rise toward the foot of the bluff; and then, with a start, he saw that they led into the dark maw of a cavern under overhanging rocks.

"Take it easy, Demijohn!" he called, for he had lived in this country long enough to distrust anything he couldn't understand. He started hurriedly after the smaller man, leading the horses.

When Demijohn Walker reached the mouth of the cave he paused. He glanced over his shoulder uncertainly, then looked again into the darkness ahead. Slowly his hand rose to the six-gun in his holster.

"Got a funny feelin' creepin' over me," he mumbled, "that there's something sort o' loco in there. Never even heard tell o' tracks like these."

"Hold on a minute," Sam said. "We'll poke in together."

He threw the horses' reins over a pinnacle of stone that jutted from a boulder. Instinctively touching his own six-gun, he walked on to Demijohn, and together they crouched to enter the cavern.

Ten feet in there was a bend in the cave, and beyond the bend the darkness was intense. Demijohn hesitated. He called a cautious "Hi, there!" hoping his hollow voice would cause a stirring if anything alive were in that blackness.

But there was no sound.

Sam took matches from his breast pocket. He scratched one on the cave's wall, and as the light flared, he and Demijohn advanced again.

But only a few feet. The cave ended abruptly against a wall of rock; and on its floor lay something that made Demijohn mutter, "What in blazes!"

The match's light went out, and Sam quickly lit another. He, too, looked at the things coiled on the floor.

Pieces of noosed rope. There were at least a dozen of them, each no more than four or five feet long; and to the end of each rope was pinned a slip of white paper.

Holding the match low, Sam Squam bent in perplexity to read the indistinct words printed in pencil on each bit of paper. And when he read them he caught his breath. He squatted an instant, stunned. Then he gaped up at Demijohn and found his amazement reflected in the smaller man's eyes.

Suddenly Sam gathered all the ropes close to him, studied each slip of paper. The printing was identical on every one. Just two words—but they were words that left Sam Squam too astounded to utter a sound. They were:

"Remember Lenroot?"

CHAPTER III

MURDER AT MESQUITE FLATS

THE match flame died in Sam's hand. When the first shock of surprise had passed he dragged the ropes—fourteen of them—out into the sunshine. Demijohn, standing over them with parted legs, scratched his head in bewilderment.

"I don't get it, Sam," he muttered. "I don't get it at all. Does it make any sense to you?"

Sam, still kneeling, merely frowned.

"Far as I know," Demijohn continued, "Nevada Bill Lenroot was the only Lenroot the country here-

abouts ever knew. So it stands to reason these doggone things must concern *him*, don't it?" He hesitated, his brow furrowed. "D'you reckon maybe we ought to take 'em along? On the chance somebody in Mesquite Flats can explain 'em?"

"Ye-es," Sam said slowly, "reckon maybe we ought to." He paused, indecisive, then added, "Though we could, of course, leave 'em here an' see who comes to get 'em."

"An' maybe have to sit around like tree stumps for a week or a month, just waitin'?" Demijohn protested. "No, sirree! Not us! We got too much Dolan trouble on our hands to wastetime. I say take 'em along an' ask questions in Mesquite Flats."

Sam had to concede, as he straightened, that this was the most sensible thing to do. They draped the noosed ropes over their saddle-horns, spent a few lingering moments in studying the monsterlike spoor, and finally mounted.

"What gets me is this," growled Demijohn as they rode on. "Who the devil would want folks around here to remember Nevada Bill Lenroot? Seems to me that after lynchin' him the way they did, most hombres'd be mighty anxious to forget him!"

Sam answered quietly: "Not those that like him, Demijohn. They'll want to remember him. They'll never forget."

Demijohn was about to reply, but he suddenly had a new inspiration. It jolted him upright in the saddle. It widened his eyes in alarm. It parted his lips, and he whispered hoarsely: "Holy cactus!"

Sam looked at him. "What is it?"

"Sam! Look! Suppose . . . suppose them nooses is intended to make folks remember Lenroot in a different way! As a . . . warnin'!

Suppose somebody is figurin' to distribute 'em to us sheepmen, maybe to remind us that Lenroot, who was a sheepman himself, got hanged for putting up a fight against cow ranchers! See what I mean?"

Sam Squam's face hardened, and his lips thinned. "Maybe you got your hands on an idea there, Demijohn," he said grimly. For a while he rode in silence, and within him something stiffened in anger.

But as they swished through brush, the stiffness in him subsided. He began to feel a growing premonition that Demijohn's explanation was too simple. For no reason that he could define he began to suspect that he and his companion had stumbled over something weird, something confusing, something as incredible as the shapeless prints in the dust. And the feeling vaguely frightened him.

IT was dark when they reached Mesquite Flats. Sam had no intention of starting his visit by crashing a fist on anybody's jaw. He simply couldn't help it.

It happened as a result of several things. In the first place, when Sam and Demijohn rode into the town's only street, loping through the lights of store windows, Sam noticed that men halted to gape. Not so much at him as at the ropes dangling from his saddlehorn. The expressions he saw were so stunned that he finally stopped to speak to fat Jeff Larkin.

"What's up, Jeff?" he asked the harness maker. "What you blinkin' at?"

Larkin snapped astounded eyes to Sam's face. "Them . . . them ropes!" he gasped.

"What about 'em?"

"Where in tarnation did you g-get the things, Sam?"

"Found 'em. Why?"

"Maybe forty hombres can wipe out three men and a lady," Sam said to Dolan, "but I'm warnin' you— Don't try it!"



"Why? My gosh, hombre, ain't you heard?"

"I ain't heard anything. Just gettin' here."

"Why, Ab Krassel o' the Hooked Bar spread . . . he was found plugged this afternoon! Dry-gulched! Shot smack through the heart! Couple rannies picked his carcass up on a mountain trail. An' —" The fat man, gulping audibly, pointed at the ropes. "Krassel had one o' them things noosed around his neck, Sam! With 'Remember Len-root?' writ on a paper!"

Sam Squam abruptly turned in his saddle to stare at Demijohn

Walker. Then he gaped down at the ropes again as if he had never really seen them before.

"Hombre," Jeff Larkin advised, "if you found them ropes, better tote 'em over to the saloon pronto! Sheriff's in there with a whole crowd, includin' Foster o' the Border Patrol. They brought Krassel's body in just about an hour ago!"

Prodding their mounts, they loped the length of the street to the Mesquite Flats Saloon. A sense of wonder gripped them both. So many horses were already hitched to the rail that they had to leave their own ponies at the hitch rack of the gen-



eral store across the road. Then, with the noosed ropes in their hands, Sam and Demijohn started for the lamplit saloon.

From the street they could hear the noise within the place: A dozen men were talking at once. But Sheriff Ingersol's deep tones sounded a demand for order. When the talking died down, one heavy voice spoke alone. It spoke with harsh emphasis. Sam recognized it instantly. The voice of Soapy Dolan. And Dolan was saying things that

halted both sheepmen in the road, held them astounded.

"I tell you, sheriff, if anybody killed Ab Krassel to avenge the lynchin' o' Nevada Bill Lenroot, like you say, it must've been somebody from that Lenroot sheep ranch! Who else'd get an idea like that?"

"But you saw no signs of excitement when you were up there this mornin'?"

"Sheriff," Dolan jeered, "you

don't expect 'em to advertise what they did, do you? Course there was no excitement! Just plain orneriness, that's all. They said as how they wouldn't allow cows to cross their spread to the open range up there. They seem to figure they own the whole doggone—"

"Never mind that now. Who'd you see?"

"Mrs. Lenroot an' that hombre who's up there makin' a play for her—Sam Squam!"

There was a sudden murmur in the saloon. Sam, standing in the road, went cold with anger. Eyes flaring, he started toward the door. But Demijohn seized his arm.

"Hold it!" the small man whispered. "Let's get some more o' this!"

"I've got plenty right now!" Sam tried violently to wrench himself away from Demijohn's grip. But a new voice inside the saloon checked the movement. He listened. He couldn't immediately recognize that voice. Demijohn, however, identified it quickly enough.

"That's Len Foster o' the Border Patrol," he said. "Gosh, they sure got everybody in there!"

"Where'd you get that information, Dolan?" Foster was saying sharply. "How d'you know Sam Squam is makin' a play for her?"

"Hell," Dolan answered with contempt, "everybody knows it!"

"I'm askin' how *you* know it."

"I . . . I heard tell."

The weakness of the reply roused another murmur in the saloon, but this time it was almost a jeer directed against Soapy Dolan. As if to justify his charge, he began to argue loudly:

"Ask anybody who's been up there! They'll tell you! As for the woman herself, doggone it, wasn't Nevada Bill Lenroot twice her age

when she married him? What d'you figure she married old Lenroot for, anyhow—his looks? Hell, he looked like a scarecrow! But he had plenty money once, an' now *she's* got it. She's smart, all right. You mark my words. She's just waitin' for a decent amount o' time to pass. Then you'll see her pick herself a young feller like this Sam Squam, an'—"

SAM could endure no more of it. Something throbbed in his throat. He jerked away from Demijohn and, white of face, strode into the saloon.

When he entered, with his bow-legged partner behind him, the silence was immediate and stunned. It became even more apparent when men saw the noosed ropes trailing from his hands. But Sam himself momentarily forgot those ropes. He dropped them and went forward quickly, eyes afire, straight toward Soapy Dolan at the bar.

"Dolan," he said, his voice low and harsh, "I'm bringin' you this on behalf o' Mrs. Lenroot an' myself."

He swung his fist with all the power in his back and shoulder. It crashed squarely against Soapy Dolan's jaw. The big man, caught unprepared, went staggering back along the bar. He took four stumbling steps before his two hundred and twenty pounds crashed on the floor.

Dolan didn't lose consciousness. He floundered up to a sitting position, stared at Sam. His big face was bloated, mottled, the eyes amazed. Then a wild oath burst from him. He scrambled to his feet with elephantine clumsiness. His right hand half dragged the six-gun from its holster.

By that time, however, Sheriff Ingersol, Len Foster, and half a dozen others had charged between

the two men. Ingersol seized Dolan's arms, and the lean, sharp-featured man from the Border Patrol appropriated his gun. Two others gripped Sam Squam and pushed him back along the bar, away from Dolan.

Everybody was talking now in high, excited voices. For eager hands had already snatched up the noosed ropes and they were being passed around for inspection.

White-haired Sheriff Dan Ingersol, tall and straight and bronzed as an Indian brave, suddenly raised a bottle and pounded its bottom on the bar.

"Quiet!" he roared. "Doggone you all, quiet!"

As the din subsided, he glared from Sam to Soapy Dolan, who was still breathing hard, his eyes furious.

"You two wild cats hang on to your tempers!" the sheriff warned. "We got troubles enough without havin' to butt into private fights tonight! First one o' you who cuts loose again gets marched off to the lock-up! That clear?" Nobody could doubt that he meant it. His words pounded the stillness like the blows of a hammer. "Now, then!" He turned to glare across the saloon. "Bring those ropes over here, somebody, an' we'll find out what they mean!"

They were gathered up by a gray-bearded old rancher, Cal Gordon, who handled them as if they scorched his fingers.

CHAPTER IV

THE PIANO TEACHER

A SLIM, tense girl stood in a room directly above the saloon, listening. She was pallid. Her eyes, wide and brown, held terror that increased with every word she heard. She stood beside the door, keeping it open a few inches.

When she heard Sam Squam explain how he and his companion had found the noosed ropes, she bit hard into her lip. The back of her hand brushed up wisps of copper-tinted hair. She started to turn toward the table where a kerosene lamp burned, but when she heard Sheriff Ingersol and Len Foster begin to ask more questions, she swung quickly back to the door.

There was no hotel in Mesquite Flats. That was why Ed Moulton, who owned the saloon, had converted its upper floor into four bedrooms that would bring in a few extra dollars. The girl had rented one of the two front rooms—a dingy place. Somehow she didn't fit into such surroundings. The smoothness of her skin, the good quality of her shirtwaist and riding skirt, the expensive piece of pigskin baggage in a corner, all suggested she was accustomed to something far less crude than Ed Moulton had to offer.

She heard Sheriff Ingersol snap: "These marks in the dust, Squam—they run only from the trail to the cave?"

"That's right."

"None on the trail itself?"

"Didn't notice any."

"Same kind o' marks we found around the carcass of old Ab Krasel," the sheriff announced. "Smudges—nothin' but smudges!"

"How far's that there cave, Sam?" a man asked.

"I'd say about twelve miles."

From Len Foster of the Border Patrol came: "Suppose you lead us back to it."

"Don't know what good that'll do now," Sam objected. "Can't see much at night out there."

"All the same, I'd like to have a look-see," Foster insisted. "Reckon you would, too, sheriff."

The girl upstairs suddenly jerked

herself away from the door. She seemed more harassed than ever as she crossed the room, pacing back and forth, rubbing her hands together. A strand of coppery hair fell over her eye, and she pushed it back with an impatient movement.

Abruptly an idea halted her pacings. She rushed to the open window. Leaning over the sill, she could look down at the horses crowding the saloon's hitch rack. More than twenty of them. Her eager gaze sought one, remained fixed on its saddle. After a time her eyes brightened.

She turned back into the room. From the top drawer of the chest she snatched a purse. She worked hurriedly now, in a kind of frenzy, her hands shaky. She found a small silver pencil, screwing its tip to produce the lead. The purse yielded a tiny notebook, too, bound in tooled leather, and from it she tore a slip of paper.

When she sat down to write, it seemed that she poured all her panic, all her excitement, into a few simple words. Her hand trembled. Her head was bent beside the lamp, and its yellow light accentuated her pallor.

"You've got to let me talk to you!" she wrote, the pencil racing over the little slip of paper. "I'm going to visit the Kerrigan ranch at two tomorrow. You know the trail. Meet me on it."

She did not sign the message. Folding the paper, she rose, listened a moment at the door, then stepped out softly. The dark stairs led down to a side door of the building, so that you did not have to go through the saloon.

She ran down lightly, stepped out of the door into darkness, and started cautiously toward the hitch rack in the street. You could con-

ceal a slip of paper somewhere in or under a saddle—

BUT when she reached the street she stopped, stifling a cry of dismay. She stepped back quickly behind the corner of the saloon. The men were already emerging. Most of them were going to their horses, but a few were gathering to talk. She knew, in agony, that she was a few seconds too late to conceal anything in a saddle.

She saw Soapy Dolan, still glowering and infuriated, straddle his bay mare. She saw the rancher's scrawny companion, Slop Jeffers, mount a bony cayuse, and Slop was, as always, grinning his secret, tantalizing grin.

While these two rode off alone, other men mounted. The girl edged back slowly, frustration in her eyes. Yes, a dozen men were congregating on the saloon steps. They'd probably stay there an hour at least.

She slipped back into the side door, feeling miserable and uncertain. As she stood there, looking out at the few departing men who followed Sam Squam and Demijohn, her fingers crumpled the slip of paper into a ball.

She turned hopelessly and climbed the stairs, her head bent. Again her teeth pressed into her lip. Down in the saloon she could hear Bubblehead Cray, the bartender, talking gently to a blind little Texan who spent most of his time sitting and drinking in a rear corner.

"Might as well get goin', Hopi," Bubblehead was saying. "I'll lead you out to your hoss, an' somebody out there'll see you get home."

"Couldn't I stick around awhile longer?" a quavery voice asked. "I . . . I sort o' hanker to hear what's happened when those men come back."

"They won't be back for hours," said Bubblehead. "I'm closin' up."

The girl reached her room. As she closed the door behind her she heard the blind man mumble:

"All right. All right then. Just lead me to my horse."

She crossed the room and sat down haggardly on the bed. For a long time she stared at the floor. Then she looked at the crumpled paper in her hand. Turning, she let her head sink face down into the pillow and lay sobbing.

IT was after four in the morning when the party headed by Sheriff Ingersol and Len Foster returned from the badlands. The trip to the cave had added little to their knowledge. It had merely irritated their tempers.

Sam Squam and Demijohn, weary and dispirited, took one of the rooms above Ed Moulton's saloon.

"Tomorrow," Sam said gloomily as they undressed, "we got to forget this Krassel killin' awhile an' tend to our own business!"

Tired as he was from so many hours in the saddle he intended to sleep late in the morning. But he couldn't. Shortly after nine he awoke with a start. Demijohn, too, was awake. Both men propped themselves up on elbows and listened, amazed, to the most miraculous music that had ever been heard in Mesquite Flats.

True, it came from the same old piano that had been standing for years in the back room of Moulton's saloon. Sam had often thought it toneless, especially when Hopi Painter, the blind man, sent his fingers over its yellowed keys. Now it was giving forth a swift, rippling melody that made your whole being sing and brought a kind of surprised happiness into you.

"Who in thunder is that?" whispered Demijohn, awed. And then: "Wonder what he's playin'?" He himself could whistle any range tune ever conceived, but this thing was new to him; this was a different kind of music. 'This was the magic of a gaily running mountain stream expressed in music.

They heard somebody clumping up the stairs. Sam swung out of bed, opened the door a little, and saw Bubblehead Cray. The bartender was carrying a pitcher of water in a basin to one of the rooms.

"Say, Bubblehead!" Sam called softly. "Who's that playin'?"

The bartender leaned against the banister and grinned. "Purty, ain't it? I asked her what it was, an' she says it's called Minute Waltz, or somethin' like that."

"She?"

"Uh-huh. Gal came into town couple days ago. She's took that front bedroom over there."

The waltz ended. From the room behind the saloon rose the muted sounds of women's voices.

"Name's Duke," added Bubblehead. "Gail Duke."

"Gosh, she sure can play!" Demijohn whispered over Sam's shoulder. "Wish she'd do another."

"She's a piano teacher," Bubblehead said, "as if that explained the mystery of the girl's magic touch. They listened awhile, hoping there would be more music. But when they caught only the murmur of voices, Bubblehead Cray sighed.

"Kind o' changes the whole smell o' Mesquite Flats when she plays," he said.

"What's she doin' here?" asked Demijohn.

"Why, seems like the doctors told her to come to Arizona for her health. Tried Phoenix for a while, but her money was givin' out, an'

she couldn't find piano pupils fast enough to make a go of it there. Too many other teachers in town who knew the folks around Phoenix. A stranger didn't stand much chance cuttin' in on that herd o' home-towners, seems like."

"Shucks, she ain't figurin' on findin' piano pupils in Mesquite Flats, is she?" Demijohn asked.

Bubblehead shrugged. "Never can tell. The way she sees it, there's no competition hereabouts. She's been ridin' around to this ranch an' that, offerin' to teach the kids. She's got two pupils already, from what I hear. Got 'em yestiddy. An' right now she's palaverin' with Mrs. Randall downstairs. Mrs. Randall brought her two girls in to listen to Miss Duke play."

"Folks hereabouts ain't got pianos," Demijohn persisted.

At that Bubblehead leaned his bulk against the wall and laughed. "Listen, hombre. When this Miss Duke spoke to Ed Moulton, he took one look at her an' says, 'Sure, miss, you just go ahead an' use my piano mornin's an' afternoons all you like. It's in the room back o' the saloon, an' none o' the boys ever get drunk enough to pound her fore nightfall, anyhow. She's yours all day. Give all the lessons you like on her, an' you can let the kids come practice, too.' That's what Ed says to her, gettin' all fidgety when she smiled at him. She's a looker, that gal! So she's in the piano-teachin' business now an' I'll bet she gets plenty kids to come an' learn."

Suddenly the piano was giving forth music again. Singing something slow and stirring and full of hidden pain. You listened, and after a time you felt like swallowing.

"I heard her play that one yestiddy," confided Bubblehead. "Called it *Liebestraum*."

They stood unmoving, the three of them, until it was finished and its spell had vanished. Then Bubblehead, with another sigh, went on with the water pitcher, and the two sheepmen hurriedly dressed.

When they were going down the stairs they met Gail Duke. She was on her way up, a slim girl with wide brown eyes and copper-tinted hair. The sight of her made Sam Squam pause, sombrero in hand, and stare. It struck him, in that first instant, that in all his twenty-six years he had seen no one half as lovely as Gail Duke.

"Gosh, ma'am," Demijohn said heartily, shifting from foot to foot, "that sure was the nicest music I ever heard played!"

The girl smiled as she passed them. "Thank you!" she said.

Sam didn't speak at all. For a second his gaze caught the girl's, held it. Then she was past him, hurrying up the stairs, and he looked after her with the queer sense of being tongue-tied. He was motionless until her door closed and Demijohn nudged him.

"Come on," the little man chuckled, "you got ranchers to worry about today. Remember?"

THEY walked through brilliant sunshine to Ned Castle's restaurant. And they had just finished breakfast when Demijohn, who sat facing the door, jerked up straight in his chair. A startled expression caught his face.

"Take a squint behind you, Sam!"

Sam Squam turned far enough to look over his shoulder. Then he put down his coffee cup.

Soapy Dolan was across the street. The burly rancher stood hitching his horse to the post-office rack. Slop Jeffers was beside him, grin-

ning as he talked to the few men who lounged in the shade of the building. Dolan, however, didn't speak to anyone. He was scowling.

When his horse was hitched he turned to peer into the window of the restaurant. Then he hooked his thumbs in his gun belt and leaned back against the rack.

"Doggoned if he ain't waitin' for you to come out!" Demijohn exclaimed.

"Sure looks that way, don't it?" grunted Sam.

"What . . . what you goin' to do?"

"Do? Go out, of course. We're through eatin', ain't we?"

"But—"

"Come on, Demijohn." Sam rose easily. He went to the counter, dropped some money before Ned Castle, and proceeded to the door. The round-faced Castle, having seen Dolan across the street, was so bug-eyed he forgot to pick up the money.

At the door Demijohn anxiously caught his companion's sleeve. "Listen, Sam! We're in town on business! Sabe? We got things to tend to! Don't go gettin' into more trouble with Dolan!"

"Me?" Sam asked evenly. "I ain't huntin' trouble."

He stepped out into the street, squinting from the morning sun. He paused to send a disinterested glance at Soapy Dolan and the half dozen loungers who were tensely rising behind him. Slop Jeffers leaned against a corner of the post office and picked his teeth. The whole crowd was silent—too silent.

Sam's lips twitched wryly. Turning away, he started up the road toward the livery stable where he'd left his palomino. He had taken scarcely four strides when Soapy Dolan's voice, sharp and arresting, cracked across the street.

"Just a second there, Squam!"

Sam halted and looked around. He saw Dolan straighten his massive figure from the hitch rack. The man's thumbs remained in his belt. He came slowly across the road. And nobody followed him.



"Squam," Dolan said heavily, "last night you took a crack at my jaw. I'd have smashed the head clear off your shoulders if the sheriff an' them others hadn't butted in!"

"That so?" said Sam in the manner of one vaguely astonished. "With a slug, you mean?"

"With my fist!"

"Fist? Why, seems to me you was pulling iron when the sheriff grabbed you."

Dolan's countenance began to bloat with rage. His little eyes flamed. He stopped short in the middle of the road.

"Nobody ever got away with takin' a slam at me!" he said tightly. "You ain't goin' to, either! If you got the guts, I'm askin' you to take a walk behind the livery stable."

"Reason bein'?"

"To fight it out!"

Sam stood silent, as if considering. For a time he studied Dolan's flaring eyes. Then he looked past the rancher to the men around the post office. There were more than a dozen now. They were gathering uneasily from all directions. Sam had no particular desire to fight Soapy Dolan; there were too many other things on his mind right now. But you couldn't ignore a challenge

like this without having men sneer at you for the rest of your days.

"How about it?" Dolan demanded. A jeer came into his voice: "Or don't you fight when you ain't got a sheriff an' the Border Patrol to butt in for you?"

Sam glanced in the direction of the livery stable. He shrugged, tightened his belt. "I was just headin' for the stable, anyhow, Dolan," he said easily. "Come on, if you figure this is goin' to make you any happier."

They walked down the road, several feet apart. Behind them more than twenty men followed, some uneasy and all excited.

"Where in hell is Sheriff Ingersol?" somebody whispered.

"Him an' Len Foster," another voice answered, "rode out to Ab Krassel's ranch awhile back. Don't you worry none about the law, son. This mornin' it ain't around to interfere!"

CHAPTER V

KNUCKLE ARGUMENT

THIS, Sam Squam savagely told himself behind the stable, was a fight which could serve no purpose. It angered him to realize he had let himself in for it. Still, how could he have ignored Dolan without earning the contempt of the town?

"Looka here, gents!" Jeff Larkin, the fat harness maker, spoke nervously to both Dolan and Sam. "How about yankin' off them gun belts fore you start?"

"What for?" Dolan demanded.

"Well . . . shucks," Jeff said uncomfortably, "we don't want to see nobody lose his temper and start slingin' lead. See? I mean—"

"He's right," somebody called from the crowd. "This is a fist fight! Ain't no call for iron!"

While he removed his spurs, a

concert of voices assured Soapy Dolan that the crowd favored the unbuckling of holsters. So he shrugged, gave his to Slop Jeffers, and watched Sam hand his weapon to Demijohn Walker.

Dolan rolled his sleeves up over forearms that might have done credit to a blacksmith. They were huge and hairy. His muscular face showed a mocking expression, almost a grin. It was as if he had been waiting a long time for this opportunity.

Hovering anxiously beside Sam Squam, Demijohn whispered, "Watch him close! He's about sixty pounds heavier'n you!"

"Sure. I'm countin' on that."

"Huh? Countin' on it?"

"Reckon maybe I'm a bit faster on my feet. Quit worryin', Demijohn."

"But, gee, Sam—"

"Well?" Dolan called harshly. "What we waitin' for?"

Looking around at him, Sam smiled almost cordially. "Nothin' at all that I can see," he replied. "Start swingin' any time you've a mind to. I'm set."

Having tossed his sombrero away, Dolan advanced. He looked eager. The crowd, silent now, formed a gaping circle. Here was Dolan, weighing about two hundred and twenty pounds, bearing down on the comparatively slight Sam Squam.

Sam's chin came down and his fists balled at his sides. His narrowed eyes met Dolan's glare, studying the man's movements. "Only one way to fight this hombre," he told himself tightly. "Hit fast an' step aside fast."

Dolan swung first. He aimed a vicious blow at Sam's jaw. Sam dodged, but he could feel the fist graze his head.

Still bent, he drove a hard jab

into the middle of Dolan's stomach. The grunt it evoked reassured him. He managed to pound the stomach again before he leaped back from a whizzing uppercut.

Curiously, the crowd, which ordinarily would have yelled and cheered at a fight, remained hushed. So silent were they that the hard breathings of Dolan and Sam Squam were distinctly audible. Other men were arriving behind the livery stable now. They came running.

Suddenly the crowd gasped. They saw Sam stumble as he sprang back to dodge a fist. His heel caught in something, perhaps a depression in the ground, and he lost his balance, his arms spreading out.

INSTANTLY Dolan was on him. His big face was twisted with satisfaction as he smashed one blow squarely against the side of Sam's head, another deep into his abdomen, a third on the jaw. A fourth missed only because Sam collapsed in the dust.

"Get up, damn you!" Dolan panted. "You got more comin'?"

He stood breathing heavily while Sam rolled over on his side. Perspiration dribbled down Dolan's powerful face. He watched Sam rise to his knees, shake his head as if to throw off a daze. Then the smaller man looked up at Dolan, and a grin came to his face which was stained with the blood of a cut lip.

"Pretty near had me that time!"

Before Dolan could reply, Sam lurched to his feet. He made no immediate charge. Instead he danced a little, as if to regain the use of his legs. He waited for Dolan's advance, fists ready and swinging.

Dolan knew that another punch like the last might finish this man.

He hunched his shoulders and his expression became ugly in its determination. He watched cautiously for an opportunity, then charged in like a bull.

But this time Sam didn't stumble. He leaped aside, feeling the wind of Dolan's blow fan his cheek as it whizzed by. His own right fist, starting from far behind him, swung. It passed under Dolan's arm and crashed into the very center of his face.

Whether the cattleman's nose actually broke, Sam couldn't know. He knew only that a scarlet geyser gushed from Dolan's nostrils. It streamed down over his mouth, over his chin. It splotted his shirt. Dazed, Dolan paused to wipe and spit it aside.

Sam could have hit him again easily then. But he didn't. He waited as he might if Dolan were stretched on the ground. He saw the rancher spit again.

Then Dolan's mind cleared. He winced. Pain brought something like madness to his eyes. He spun around to Sam, glaring crazily. He flung out a hoarse oath. Again he hunched his shoulders and again he charged.

His fist found Sam's chest, rocking the smaller man. And Sam staggered back a few paces. But he rebounded. He sprang to Dolan's left and pounded a furious blow into the cattleman's stomach. He could hear the air explode in Dolan's choked throat. The big man bent, crossed his arms as though to shield his abdomen from another punch.

That was when Sam, seeing a clear target, flung two fists into Dolan's face, a left to the mouth, a right to the bleeding nose.

Dolan cried out. It was a hoarse, unintelligible cry. Then he squealed like a branded calf. He shut his eyes

in pain, tilted back his head, pressed both hands to his face. And the blood oozed out between his fingers.

"You got him!" screamed Demijohn. "Finish him, Sam! Finish him!"

Yes, it would have been easy to finish Soapy Dolan then. He was on his feet, but he wasn't fighting. The pain of his nose paralyzed his brain. He stood half conscious, swaying, covering his face with broad hands. A child could have pushed him over.

Sam, dazed himself, watched with puzzled eyes. He had never seen a man in this condition, out on his feet, an open, unguarded target. And as he watched, hardly knowing what to do, Soapy Dolan slowly sank to his knees. It was as if his legs could no longer support his great weight. He knelt there, his face bent into his hands, and the blood continued to run freely between his fingers.

He remained that way so long that Slop Jeffers, scowling in perplexity, came out of the crowd. He squatted beside Dolan and put a hand on the rancher's shoulder.

"What's the matter, Soapy?"

Dolan groaned something.

"Aw, come on," urged Slop. He patted the massive shoulder gently. "Get up, Soapy! You ain't licked!"

But Dolan's groans continued.

A faint hint of contempt crept into Slop's voice. "You ain't quit-ting, are you? Come on, Soapy. You can lick the buzzard!"

Dolan, however, didn't hear. His face still buried in his hands, he swayed in agony. He made no effort to rise.

Sam, brushing wet hair out of his eyes, felt Jeff Larkin tug at his arm.

"All right," said Larkin.

"Reckon he's *through*?" Sam asked wonderingly.

"Yeah." Larkin spoke dryly. "Looks like he's had all the satisfaction he's gonna get out o' you today."

TWO hours later, Soapy Dolan, assisted by Slop, walked unsteadily out of Doc Benner's house at the end of the street. Soapy's face was swathed in bandages. Strips of adhesive tape crossed his jaws and forehead like the legs of a spider.

"It's broken, all right," Doc Benner had announced when he made his examination. "You'll have to take it easy for a spell, Dolan. Keep the bandage in place."

Dolan allowed Jeffers to help him climb into his saddle. He was still shaken. His small eyes, peering out guardedly between strips of tape, saw very few people near the doctor's house; and for that he felt grateful.

"We headin' for home?" Jeffers asked wryly, swinging into his own saddle.

"Where in thunder d'you think I'm headin'?" Dolan flung back raspily through muffling bandages. "Course we're goin' home!"

They started slowly out of town, and presently Jeffers permitted himself a dry grin. "What about Bridger?" he inquired.

"Bridger?"

"Seems to me you promised to meet half a dozen gents at his place. Wasn't you aimin' to powwow over plans for the cattlemen's meetin'?"

In the agitation of the past few hours Dolan had forgotten the appointment. He rode in silence, his eyes stormy.

"You get me home," he decided at last. "Then hightail over to Bridger an' tell him I can't make it." He paused to glare back at Mesquite Flats over his shoulder. "Where's that Squam tarantula gone?"

Slop shrugged as he dropped the reins over the saddlehorn and began rolling himself a cigarette. "Quién sabe? I asked Jeff Larkin while the doc was fiddlin' with your nose. Jeff said as how Sam an' his side-kick had moseyed out o' town on some business o' their own. Chances are he's out tryin' to work up sentiment against your hoggin' that valley o' his."

"Sentiment," snarled Dolan, "don't stop bullets!"

CHAPTER VI

THE BADLANDS TRAIL

LUCKY HANK BRIDGER, owner of the Tilted Chair Ranch, sat on his porch, one bandaged foot propped up on a keg. A giant of a man, badly in need of a shave, he glowered from Sam Squam to Demijohn Walker.

"What in blazes did you come to me for?" he demanded. "I got no interest in your sheep!"

Bridger was in a tempestuous mood. Two days ago, when he had tried to break a wild bronco, the horse had thrown him. One of the flying hoofs had caught his ankle and it was badly swollen.

"We came here 'cause you happen to be pretty influential in the Cattlemen's Association," Sam explained quietly.

"What of it?"

"I hanker to know how you stand on a man's drivin' two hundred cows onto open range that ain't big enough to hold 'em. That is, not unless they shove off sheep that's been grazin' there every year since the sheep ranch began."

"Soapy Dolan, hey?" Bridger said. "Well, as to his winterin' stock in your valley, I'm with him. A man's got a right to any grass he finds on open range."

Sam drew a long breath. "There's open range *you* drive to every winter, ain't there?"

"Sure."

"What would you do if some other hombre drove into it with a herd so big he didn't leave room for you?"

"Do? I'd fight him to hell an' blazes for my rights!"

"Suppose he had more men than you could hire. Suppose he blasted lead at your boys when they tried to block him. Would you figure he was right?"

Lucky Hank Bridger straightened in his chair. He glared at Sam Squam, pointing a long finger.

"Listen, hombre, in about half an hour I'm expectin' Soapy Dolan himself here. Cal Gordon o' the Box Cross an' a couple others are comin', too. Just to palaver about that valley o' yours. I'm tellin' you straight—we never wanted sheep in this part o' the country, an' you know it. We warned Lenroot plenty!"

Sam's face was grim. "An' you're all figurin' to back Dolan?"

"I can't talk for the others. I'm talkin' for myself."

Sam looked searchingly at the rancher. Then he nodded and went back to his horse.

"Damn square o' you, Bridger," he said as he mounted. "You sure make a man respect your Cattlemen's Association. Sounds like an outfit dedicated to justice, all right."

"It's an outfit dedicated to justice—for cows!" Bridger said with brutal frankness.

It was useless to talk to the man. Maybe his swollen ankle was responsible for the belligerence of his mood.

SAM and Demijohn rode off in disgust. If every rancher around Mesquite Flats felt like Lucky Hank Bridger did, Sam told himself, there

was no point in trying to talk to them. Still, he couldn't stop. There must be a few men who'd condemn Dolan's tactics, perhaps enough of them to sway the association.

So they left Bridger's spread and crossed an outcropping of barren hills, taking a trail toward the Ker-rigan ranch, the Circle K. The sunshine was hot. Yuccas grew along the trail, and there were a few scattered oak. It was rugged country.

They had gone almost a mile across it when they heard a shot.

Both reined in, startled. They looked around, and Demijohn, with an uneasy expression, pointed. "Over thataway, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," grunted Sam. He frowned.

With forced hope Demijohn said, "Might be some cowpuncher takin' a pot shot at a wild cat or something."

They looked at each other. Neither spoke, yet both had the same thought. Since the killing of Ab Krassel a shot might mean anything in this country.

"Reckon we better ride over for a look-see," Sam said slowly.

They turned off the trail in the direction of the shot. A dozen rises ahead of them blocked their view. As they rode, however, they glanced constantly from left to right, seeking some sign of the man who had fired.

And suddenly they caught sight of a man. They saw him prod his sorrel horse to the top of a rise at their left, hardly fifty yards away. He sat there between two large clumps of cactus. It was Slop Jeffers!

Jeffers seemed as surprised to see Sam and Demijohn as they were to see him. Pulling in his reins, he called, "Hi, there! You fellers fire that shot?"

"No!"

"She came from over thisaway!" Slop declared.

"Ahead somewhere," said Sam.

Clearly, Slop Jeffers wasn't convinced that they were telling the truth. He frowned from one to the other suspiciously. Then he turned his horse.

"All right. We'll have a look-see," he snapped.

They converged toward each other, riding slowly. As far as they could see, there seemed to be nobody else about them in those badlands. Certainly they saw no one—until they climbed the next rise.

Below them ran another narrow trail, one that crossed their own. And at the sight of it Demijohn pulled his reins so hard that his pinto reared angrily.

"Holy cactus!" he gasped.

Both Sam and Slop Jeffers were still below him. His outcry made them use rowels, and their horses bounded up the rise. At the top they stopped. Sam's lips parted when he gaped at the trail below.

"Gordon!" he whispered. "That's Cal Gordon o' the Box Cross!"

Old Cal Gordon lay on his back. His gray beard held an ugly red stain, showing where blood had spurted into it from his throat. He lay rigid, arms spread wide, eyes fixed on the sun.

And around his neck was a short, noosed rope—a rope with a slip of white paper pinned to its end!

What is the meaning of the fourteen nooses and their strange notes? Are other men marked for death? Will Sam Squam succeed in gaining the backing of some of the cattlemen, and if he does, will he be able to halt Soapy Dolan? Follow this absorbing range country mystery in next week's issue.

THREE C MULE



By **SETH RANGER**

THE army sergeant who has charge of the new recruits at the Indian River CCC camp came into my ranger cabin and flopped down in the nearest chair. With a deep sigh, he lit a cigarette and unbuttoned his coat.

"Just got another bunch from the East," he remarked. "There's one of 'em, a kid named Jack Jenner, who'll give you a laugh, Dave."

"A laugh?" I asked. "Some of these lads from the East make you laugh out of the other side of your mouth after they learn what it's all about. What's so funny about Jenner?"

"I asked him what he wanted to be," the sergeant explained with a grin, "and he said he wanted to be a mountain climber. Now isn't that a hell of an ambition? What's there in it but a lot of hard work? And what do you get but a fine view after you've got to the top?"

"Some people like it," I pointed out. "I like it myself at times."

"But there's no money in it," the sergeant argued. "Most of the Three C boys are looking around for work that will train them to hold steady jobs. Mountain climbing is an expensive sport."

"It isn't if you're a professional guide," Shorty Barton commented. "There aren't enough *good* guides in the business."

The government was making a survey of certain mountain peaks in a national monument and Shorty, a professional guide, was in charge of the gang that was mapping the most dangerous peaks. We're old friends, so he bunked with me whenever he was around.

"You're a good guide," I said, "and you should know the qualifications."

"The sergeant's a good sergeant," Shorty said reflectively. "You're a

good ranger, Dave. But I'm not a good mountain climber. I might make one in a thousand years, if I kept at it." He cleared his throat. "Tell this Jack Jenner to forget it, sergeant."

"He won't forget it," the sergeant said. "I tried to discourage him. I told him it took more than nerve."

"Yes," Shorty grunted, "it takes strength, a cool head, and fast thinking. You'd better make Jenner forget it before he breaks his neck. Better still, tell him to come up here and I'll talk to him."

Young Jenner showed up at the cabin a few minutes later. He turned out to be a medium-sized lad, a little underweight. He had blue eyes, an impudent grin and sandy hair. He looked as if he would just as soon take a punch at you as not, and he had a rugged, well-formed jaw. But I could see he wasn't the cocky type. He might try to bluff his way through a situation, but he wouldn't make the attempt unless he felt he had some cards to back his hand.

Shorty gave Jack Jenner a long, hard look when I introduced them. "So you want to be a guide, eh?" Shorty growled, "and take green-horns up pinnacle peaks?"

"I have that in mind," Jenner answered. He flushed a little under Shorty's critical gaze.

"Can you do this?" Shorty asked. "You're climbin' a chimney, see. That's a space like a house chimney with part of the side torn out. Maybe you've got to go up it to get to the top. There isn't anything you can get hold of. But a little distance overhead there's a ledge. If you can get on that, the rest is easy. It's maybe a hundred feet straight down to a ledge, which is narrow. Under that ledge yawns a thousand feet of clear air."

"A tough spot," Jenner remarked. Shorty continued. "But you see a little crack in the rock two feet above your head. You stick the two fingers of your left hand into the crack. There isn't room for three fingers. And you only get the two into the first joint."

With that, Shorty hooks the first joint of two fingers over a stringer. "You draw yourself up like this," he said. He pulled himself up until his chin was even with his fingers. "Then you take your ax and hook over the ledge," he continued, going through the motion of hooking an imaginary ax on an upper rafter. "And you climb hand over hand up the handle, and land on the ledge."

Jenner's eyes almost popped from his head. "That took strength," he managed to say.

"Exactly," Shorty answered. "I'm glad you get the point—you need strength to be a guide."

"And so," Jenner murmured, as if to himself, "I'll have to develop the strength."

Shorty snorted. "Stubborn fool," he said impatiently. "After all I've told you, can't you see you'll never make a mountain climber?"

"That's what I want to be," Jenner said quietly, "and I should succeed better at that, than doing something I don't want to do."

Well, I make it a point to train Three C boys in the work they like best, whenever possible. Several days later I detailed Jenner to pack supplies to Shorty's advance camp. The base camp was above timberline—a small cabin once occupied by a fire lookout. It was an easy matter to bring supplies up to this point as there was a good horse trail all the way.

But from the cabin on to the tent Shorty had pitched at the seven-thousand-foot level it was a different

story. The trail was little more than a path among boulders one minute and wallowing hip-deep in snow the next. The gulches were choked with snow and there was no avoiding them. The packer might crawl out of a gulch, climb an almost sheer wall, and then continue along a narrow granite ridge with the wind picking at him constantly. From there he might be forced to worm his way along a lofty ledge.

I went along with Jenner on his first trip. I wanted to be sure he didn't get giddy the first time he walked along the ragged edge of nothing. Pride ran strong within him. Shorty's contempt had stung him deeply, and I didn't want him to take foolish chances.

Three times I noticed he stopped at dangerous points and I wasn't sure whether he was building up his courage to continue or trying to figure out the logical crossing. He was all in when we arrived at Shorty's tent.

Shorty was waiting for us. "You're a stubborn mule, Jenner," he said caustically. "I told you you wouldn't make a mountain guide in a thousand years. I watched you coming up the trail. Had my binoculars right on you all the way. Figured to give you a chance. You haven't got what it takes. You stopped at Hurricane Point."

"Hold on, Shorty," I interrupted. "He stopped at Hurricane Point to study the best way of getting around that shoulder of rock without being blown into the gulch two hundred feet below."

"That wasn't it," said Shorty. "Jenner was scared. I could tell by his face. You were scared stiff, weren't you Jenner?"

"Yes," Jenner answered savagely. "That's all that need be said," Shorty observed triumphantly.

He didn't say much the rest of the afternoon. I showed Jenner how to cache the grub. I knew if Shorty did it, he'd find fault with the way Jenner did the job.

When he was finished Jenner sat down with his back against a slab of rock and gazed speculatively at the highest peak in the region. It fairly leaped from a base that in itself would be difficult to climb. Shorty had tentatively named it the Turret because of its sheer, cylindrical formation. It would challenge any mountain climber.

Shorty wasn't worried about the experienced man who climbed peak after peak. He would approach the Turret, take sufficient precautions, and climb it or not. He would risk his life, naturally, but he wouldn't take undue risk. It was the inexperienced climber who worried Shorty. For that reason he had determined to scale the peak, outline the safe routes and formulate rules under which ambitious mountaineers would be permitted to make the climb. All this he explained to Jenner and me as we sat resting before we made the trip back to camp.

"You're going to need help on that job, Mr. Barton," Jenner said. "I've got six months to qualify for the job. If Dave Logg will let me, I'll put in that time keeping you in supplies. Any time I can't make it to your base camp—wherever it is—I'll quit."

"You're a damn stubborn mule," Shorty said resignedly. "I've warned you, and you won't take my warning. I suppose you'll keep at it until you fall over a cliff and are killed. Then I'll have to go to a lot of trouble to get your remains. We can't leave these fine mountains cluttered up with the bleaching bones of fools, you know."

"One more thing," Jenner added,

"I'm putting in my application for your assistant when you climb the Turret."

"Hah!" Shorty exclaimed. "That's one job I have the say-so on. Dave Logg or anybody else can't choose my assistant for me."

For the next three months the rest of us didn't see much of Jenner, except on week ends. Once in a while the boys clearing trails and burning snags close to timberline would see him, a tiny speck against the hard, blue sky, bent under the weight of a pack. They called him the CCC Mule.

Week ends he came down to the Indian River camp. I supplied him with mountain-climbing gear, such as an ax, rope and pitons. There was a sheer wall in Indian River canyon, not far from camp, and it wasn't long before Jenner was crawling along the wall, driving in pitons, handling his rope, and learning the fundamentals of climbing. He fell several times and landed in the pool below.

"I picked this spot," he explained to me, "because I expected to fall a few times. As soon as I get the hang of the thing, I'll try some real mountains."

When Jenner had been in the CCC about four months, he met Lassie Adams at a dance in Mill City. Lassie's folks had a small cabin in a clearing fronting on salt water. The family spent the summer there, Lassie's father running up from Seattle on week ends.

Lassie was something of a mountain climber, and it wasn't long until she and Jenner quit dancing on Saturday nights so they could get an early start Sunday morning and put in the day in the high country. Once I asked Jenner if he didn't think he was taking a summer romance too seriously.

"We're going to be married, Dave," was his answer. "That is, if I can get a steady ranger's job. I'd like to work in Rainier National Park. As long as people have red blood there'll be a certain number who'll want to climb Mount Rainier, and that means guide service."

It wasn't hard for me to see his line of reasoning. A ranger's job would enable him to marry. After putting in time in the park, he could ease himself into the guide service.

"It looks as if Shorty Barton is the answer," I said. "His recommendation would go a long way. How're you getting along with Shorty?"

"As soon as he sees me coming up the mountain with a pack," Jenner answered gloomily, "he sits down and watches every move I make. Then he puts in several minutes bawling me out while I'm catching my breath. I thought you told me he was a man of few words."

"He was until you came along," I answered. "Does he ever praise you?"

"Hell, no," said Jenner. "He tells me I'll never make a mountain climber in a thousand years. My pack brushed an outcropping the other day. He saw it and spent five minutes telling me how a little thing like that will throw a man off balance to his death."

"Well, he was right about that," I commented.

Two weeks later Shorty Barton came into the Indian River camp. "Dave," he declared, "I'm going to climb the Turret."

"And you're going to need some additional equipment and a helper," I suggested. "What's the matter with Jenner?"

"Jenner's a damned good mule," Shorty answered. "Let him pack in the grub. I'll do the climbing alone."

"Now listen, Shorty," I argued, "Jenner's almost through his enrollment. He needs a steady job. If you'll let him put in a few months with you on the mountain, that's all the recommendation he needs. He can walk up to the head guide at either Mount Rainier or Baker and land a job. He won't even have to work his way through the park ranger outfit."

"Naw!" Shorty grunted.

"O. K., then," I said, getting mad. "I'll take him off of the mountain and somebody else can be your pack mule."

"Naw!" Shorty didn't grunt this time. He roared his protest. "At least Jenner can pack a couple of pounds over a bad trail without falling off. If you send up a new man—"

"Sure, sure, I understand," I interrupted, "but Jenner is thinking of getting married, and it's time he lined up something with a future."

"Future," Shorty snorted, "how much of a future do you suppose he'd have as a mountain guide? His wife would be a widow before the smell of fresh paint had left their new home."

There was no use arguing with a man like that. I kept Jenner on the job.

I don't think any of us really realized what steady packing had done for Jenner. His arms and legs had hardened and he had filled out. In a pinch he could pack a hundred pounds up a pretty steep slope. Fifty and sixty-pound packs were no trouble at all to him. He had developed a marvelous sense of balance, too.

I told Shorty to notify me when he scaled the Turret and he said he would give me a twenty-four-hour warning. But good weather tempted him one morning and Jenner telephoned from the base camp that the climb was under way.

Three hours later Jenner called in again. "Shorty's fallen," he reported worriedly.

"Keep your shirt on, son," I warned. "Let's have details."

"I stayed at the base of the Turret as he ordered," Jenner said. "He was climbing up a straight wall and came to a bad place. He roped a knob of rock and rested. Then, seeing he couldn't get much higher the way he was going, he worked along at the same level and disappeared around a column of rock. Five minutes later a section of rock toppled from the Turret. I knew Shorty went with it because I saw his ax fly through space. It looked as if he'd tried to hook it onto something and missed. I thought I saw his hand, but wasn't sure. Things happened too fast."

"How far did the rock fall?" I asked.

"Some of it hit within a second," he answered. "Some a few seconds later, but the most dropped about a thousand feet. A shoulder of rock prevented me from seeing anything. I yelled to him several times, but got no answer. I'm going back now and see what can be done about his body."

"Hold on," I warned, "don't attempt anything until we get up there. It'll take three or four hours at best."

"O. K.," he answered.

I gave the necessary orders, then mounted the fastest horse in the string, and headed for the scene. I left the horse at the base camp and dog-trotted over the trail Jenner had made to the advance camp, which was now located at the base of the Turret. I was badly winded when I got there.

Jenner was perched on a ledge almost at the top of the Turret. The rock above didn't look good to me.

It seemed loose—blocks as big as houses piled carelessly one on top of the other. Erosion was doing its treacherous work. Jenner had used all the rope in camp to make a crude rope ladder to the ledge.

"Come on up," Jenner called when he saw me.

I joined him. It was pretty nerve-shattering business. I'm not a peak-scaler by trade. Jenner was pale, and he had cut himself in several places on the sharp rock.

"Shorty climbed to this ledge," he explained, "then worked along and went around that shoulder. A hundred feet beyond and about ten feet above us, he loosened a stone. It dropped and shattered another directly below. That went out and dropped hundreds of tons of rock. It was ready to go anyway. The shelf Shorty was hanging to was the last to go. Shorty landed on a shelving ledge about fifty feet below us."

"How do you know?"

He pointed to a rope held by pitons driven deep into a crack. By hanging onto the rope you could swing around the shoulder, though there was nothing below you at that point but the tops of stunted trees a thousand feet almost straight down.

I took a deep breath, grabbed the rope, and swung around the shoulder. I only caught a glimpse before the weight of my body pulled me back again. It was like swinging on a pendulum—a pendulum that banged against hard rock and followed its contour. I tried again, hooked the back of my boot against an outcropping and managed to stay there three or four seconds.

Shorty was alive and in pain. He was twisting slowly, and each move shifted a few of the shattered pieces of rock between him and the edge of the shelf. It was only a question of

time until the rocks went over the edge and he followed them. I doubted if he had regained consciousness, because if he had been conscious he would have appreciated the danger he was in.

As I swung back to Jenner's ledge I explained the situation. "Moving, eh?" he said. "He must be coming out of it. He never moved a finger when I looked at him. I've got to get over to him or he'll slide off."

"How?"

"I don't know," he admitted. He couldn't work along the face of the Turret as Shorty had done. The face was littered with thin, vertical slabs, ready to break off at the slightest touch. Shorty had had several seconds in which to race over crumbling rock to a point above his present ledge. Feeling the rock giving way under him, he had leaped at the ledge. He must have known his body would strike on the way down and the rebound might hurl him clear of the ledge. He must have known, too, if the fall didn't kill him, the momentum might shoot his body into space a moment after he struck the sloping ledge. But it had been his only chance and he had grasped it.

Jenner and I took turns swinging around the shoulder, sizing up the situation. The actual distance between our rocky shoulder and the ledge where he lay was a good hundred and fifty feet. There was no way of bridging it, no way of following along the great gash in the Turret and reaching Shorty.

We looked upward. The Turret crest was solid rock overhanging the sloping ledge. A rope dropped straight down would miss the ledge by twelve feet, while climbing down from the top of the Turret would be something like a fly crawling down the inside of a dome; the climber's

body would be against curving rock, and gravity would be pulling at his back. If he fell, he would drop a thousand feet.

"There's only one way," Jenner said. "Climb down to him."

"That's right," I admitted.

"And we can't wait until the others get here," he added.

Jenner couldn't thrust two fingers into a crack and pull his body upward, and I doubt if he'll ever be that good, but he climbed the remaining distance up the Turret, hooked his ax over the last block of rock and went up, hand over hand. He didn't stop to catch his breath, but sent down a light line to me. I had rigged up a makeshift rope ladder, which he hauled up. I was puffing when I joined him, but he had caught his breath again.

He slipped the piton hammer cord around his wrist, drove in three pitons, and made the rope secure. Then, drawing the rope between his legs and over his shoulder, he began sliding down, paying out a little at a time. For some distance he was visible, then he shouted up that he was ready for the swing to the ledge.

I saw him drive in three pitons, then he rove a rope through the eyes and made it secure. My flesh seemed to creep as I looked down and saw him roped to the face of the rock. He changed ropes and secured himself to the new rope, then he worked straight away from the three pitons. The rope between Jenner and the pitons wasn't quite horizontal, but it looked like it from where I lay. In effect, he was like a pendulum that had been lifted until it was almost horizontal.

Suddenly I saw him kick into space. The second rope supported his weight, the first rope had plenty of slack to allow for it fouling on obstructions. He shot downward in a

beautiful arc and vanished under the overhang.

I couldn't see him, but I watched the slack in the first rope. If it grew taut with a snap I would know he had missed the ledge and was in trouble. But it remained slack for several seconds, then slowly tightened. I knew he had landed on the ledge and was hauling in the slack.

Presently his voice came up to me. "I'm O. K., Dave. Shorty's conscious. A broken left leg, several ribs caved in, and he's badly bruised. He's just passed out again. He keeps throwing himself around and it's hard to hold him on the ledge. I'm roping him. I'm afraid to move him much. A broken rib might puncture a lung."

"Do the best you can," I yelled. "If I can help, I'll come down the first rope." I'll admit I was relieved when he said there wasn't room.

In time I saw the Three C fellows coming up from base camp. They looked like brown dots, and two of them were carrying a stretcher. Others carried coils of rope, axes and such items as might be needed.

One of them climbed up my improvised ladder and dragged a line after him. Others came up, clinging to ladder and line, and finally they sent up the stretcher. We roped the stretcher, attached it to the first line and lowered it.

It disappeared from view and presently Jenner yelled it was on the ledge and to give him plenty of slack. I knew that getting Shorty onto the stretcher was something of a problem. Jenner would place the stretcher alongside the injured man, then gradually work it under him without moving any part of his body more than necessary.

This done, he would have to strap him tight enough to keep him on the stretcher, even if it turned upside

down. And yet, if he made the straps too tight, the pressure might snap a shattered bone, or drive a broken bone into a vital organ.

The process required so much time I began to worry. It seemed a year before Jenner shouted: "Take up the slack, but no more!"

I had the boys take up the slack and snub the running end of the rope onto a rock. A couple of minutes later Jenner followed the rope over the edge. There was considerable strain on the rope, but he found places at intervals where he could thrust his hands in between the rock and the rope. He stopped on the ragged edge of nothing, drove in several pitons and roped himself to the face of the Turret.

"Haul away easy!" he yelled.

Jenner's face, as he was drawn up, was tense with nerve strain. I knew he wasn't thinking of himself and the chances he had taken. He knew as soon as the stretcher lifted it would swing from the ledge and into space. Then it would swing back again, and he was afraid it might hit some outcropping.

"Hold 'er!" he yelled suddenly. I could tell by the rope that the stretcher was swinging back and forth. I suppose it stopped swinging in a minute or two, but it seemed an hour before he said: "Haul away. Easy!"

And easy it was. There was a fair chance that the stretcher might hook onto a rock as it passed the overhang, and turn over. Jenner caught the side with his foot and held it clear. When it was as high as his hips he halted the boys again. Slowly he unlashd himself, leaving the pitons in the rock, then stood on the stretcher. Hanging on with one hand, he kept the stretcher clear of outcroppings as we hauled it the remaining distance.

There were plenty of hands to lift Jenner over the edge and swing the stretcher gently to the ground. The doctor had joined us by now, and he got busy with first-aid measures.

Jenner unconsciously had taken command of the situation. And that was all right with me. If a boy shows ability to handle men, give him a chance. We took orders, and hopped to obey them. I knew Jenner was tired and going on his nerve, but if he stuck with his mountain guide ambition, there would be many occasions when he would be just as exhausted.

We lowered Shorty down the Turret and carried him to base camp without resting. Then the doctor ordered a few minutes' delay for the patient's sake. Jenner sat down on a rock, and the doctor cleaned and bandaged several bad gashes.

Shorty, meanwhile, had opened his eyes and regarded Jenner with an unreadable expression. "Damned CCC mule," he said thickly. "Guess you learned a mite."

He stopped, and a great light dawned on me. Shorty had liked Jenner from the first. Teaching him in the school of experience, he had made the going as tough as possible, knowing if Jenner faltered it would be a sign the high places weren't for him.

Shorty rested a moment, then he rasped: "And after all I told you, what did you do? You made several mistakes while I was conscious and could watch you. And no telling how many when I was out."

"Name the mistakes," Jenner challenged.

"Not now," the doctor warned. "The patient needs quiet."

"The patient can't have quiet when he's got a lot on his mind," Shorty said. "Here's one mistake:

You left your pitons in the rock up there. Don't you know they cost money? But that isn't the important thing. Pitons don't grow on rocks, like moss. They have to be brought up here on a man's back, when every ounce counts. And you leave 'em sticking in rocks."

"My thought was to get you down here as soon as possible," Jenner answered.

"That's another mistake. Why risk your neck saving mine?" Shorty said. "I'm not worth it."

"I know it," Jenner retorted. "But I remembered something you once said—about bones cluttering up the beautiful mountain scenery. If climbers had looked down on your bleaching bones it might've spoiled their day."

"Maybe you're right at that," Shorty muttered, then he flared up. "But your rope work was terrible. As I've said many times before, you won't make a mountain guide in a thousand years. But—I guess until a better man comes along you'll do, Jenner."

It warmed my heart to see the smile break over Jenner's face. It was the kind of a smile you see on a young fellow's face when he knows he's found his calling at last and has made good.

"Then you'll give me a recommendation to either the park service or the chief guide at Mount Rainier?" Jenner asked eagerly.

"Naw," Shorty answered. "Somebody's got to finish mapping the Turret. Then, when I get back on my feet, I'm going to start a guide service. Plenty of unclimbed peaks in this region, and more mountain climbers coming every year. I'm going to need you right here. But get this, if you even so much as peep your thanks, you're fired."

THE STORY OF THE WEST

told in pictures and text by

GERARD DELANO

On November 3, 1835, a delegation of Texans held a consultation. Fifteen of the delegates were in favor of a declaration of independence. Thirty-three opposed such an extreme step and favored declaring for the Mexican Constitution of 1824. So the declaration finally adopted asserted that the Texans had "taken up arms in defense of their rights and liberties, which were threatened by the encroachment of military despots and in defense of the republican principles of the federal constitution of Mexico 1824."

Before adjournment the delegates elected B. T. Archer, William H. Wharton and Stephen F. Austin as agents to seek aid from the people of the United States.

Austin was at this time in command of the Texas troops in the vicinity of Bexar, but relinquished that post to act with the commission. The consultation drew up a plan for a provisional government and elected Henry Smith as governor, James W. Robinson as lieutenant governor and Sam Houston as commander-in-chief of the army that was to be raised.

The council adjourned November 14th to convene again in March, 1836, and public affairs were left in the control of Governor Smith and the council. While the consultation was in progress a force of some six hundred volunteers were besieging the Mexican troops under General Cós near San Antonio. Many American trappers were among the numbers of the Texas revolutionists and by their superior marksmanship and experience as Indian fighters were proving formidable foes to the Mexicans.

On December 11, 1835, General Cós capitulated and most of the volunteers at San Antonio disbanded. Meanwhile the council was preparing a comprehensive plan for a permanent military organization. There was to be a regular army of eleven hundred and twenty men, consisting partly of men enlisted for the duration of the war. Also the militia, made up of all able-bodied men between

the ages of sixteen and fifty, was to be organized. But the plan was never carried out. The militia was never organized and the regular army never exceeded (before the battle of San Jacinto in April, 1836) a total of one hundred men.

Dissension now developed between the governor and the council and by the middle of January, 1836, the civil government of Texas had become powerless. But affairs in the field had been progressing more favorably. The fighting Texans had captured Goliad and had driven the enemy across the Rio Grande. They had won their first point: the country was now free of Mexican soldiers.

In taking San Antonio, a comparative handful of Texans under the leadership of Ben Milam, who fell in the assault, had whipped a much larger Mexican force. This victory caused them to underrate the fighting qualities of the Mexicans. For the next three months the tides of war went against the Texans.

A small force of about a hundred and fifty men started to invade Mexico, and about four hundred and fifty men under J. W. Fannier gathered at Goliad. These forces with few exceptions were cut to pieces or captured and shot by the Mexicans. General José Urrea was sent by Santa Anna through Matamoras north in the direction of Goliad. Urrea had a small force of infantry and an excellent contingent of dragoons. Operating in open country, where cavalry strength was the determining factor, he struck the scattered American forces and destroyed them one at a time. Later he overtook Fannier, who had abandoned Goliad, and surrounded and captured his entire force on March 20th. The next week thirty-seven Texan prisoners were led out and shot.

Meanwhile Santa Anna with a large force moved on San Antonio, took the town and swept on to the Alamo where heroes' deaths awaited its defenders.

NEXT WEEK: THE FALL OF THE ALAMO



Many of the Texan revolutionists had made their living as trappers, and their outstanding marksmanship and experience as Indian fighters stood them in good stead when they met the Mexican dragoons.



RENEGADE REBELLION

by PETER DAWSON

FROM the margin of the trees above the moon-lit clearing, Ed Joslyn looked down on the ruin of the line shack and ship-shot paint horse standing in plain sight a few feet out from one crumbling wall. For the space of a full min-

ute he sat motionless, the straightness of his tall body and the Winchester cradled across the saddle cantle plain signs of the wariness that was in him.

During the interval he paused there, his glance picking out each

minute detail below, the only sounds that broke the night's stillness were the far off eerie laugh of a coyote and the metallic jingle of a bridle chain as his roan once nervously tossed his head.

At length, Ed Joslyn whistled softly. Two shadows moved out of the blackness beneath the stand of tall cedars behind him and presently a pair of riders came alongside. He said in a soft drawl, "Looks like he's kept his word. But we'll play it safe. I'll work in from the back. You two wait here. Be ready for anything."

He swung off to the left, following the line of the trees in a half circle that put him behind the shack at a point where a bare ten yards of open ground lay between him and the cabin. He thrust the Winchester in its leather scabbard, palmed a short-barreled .45 Colt's from the low-slung holster at his right thigh, and sloped effortlessly out of the saddle, ground-haltering the roan. He spent ten seconds removing his spurs. Then he moved out across the open space in line with the first of three stunted and bushy piñons that grew between him and the shack. In a half minute he had moved soundlessly in to the thick-shadowed near wall and was crouching below the opening of a sashless window.

He took off his wide-brimmed Stetson. Six-gun ready, he inched erect so that finally he was looking in through the window at a point halfway up along its frame.

Outlined clearly against the moonlight as he leaned indolently against the door-frame, side to the window, stood a short thickset man with thumbs hooked in a pair of double shell-belts.

Ed Joslyn said tonelessly, "Sheriff!" and stepped back a pace from

the window, still able to see the other clearly.

The man in the doorway turned slowly. His voice grated in uncertainty, "That you Ed? Where are you?"

"Shuck out the irons, Hagan," Ed said. He watched as Sheriff Ben Hagan first hesitated then obeyed. "Step out this back window," he added curtly.

As the lawman moved across the littered floor of the shack, he swore feelingly. He came out the window awkwardly, in the manner of a man unused to much exertion, saying as he turned to face Joslyn, "You're damned spooky about it, Ed."

"Not spooky. Just careful," Ed drawled. "Stay where you are." He backed away toward the trees, keeping the sheriff between him and the window. Once he stood under the spreading branches of the nearest tall cedar within two steps of his roan, he whistled in a tone that carried clearly into the stillness, then said, "All right, Ben. Walk over here."

The sheriff and Ed's two men arrived simultaneously. Ed said to his companions, "Watch the shack while we go back into the brush and have our talk." He jerked the six-gun toward the deeper cobalt shadows beneath the trees.

Sheriff Hagan exploded, "What the hell is this? I ask you to come here and talk. There's no call for all this damn proddiness!"

Ed smiled thinly. "No? Not after your mob tried to hang me?"

There was a quality of leashed anger in his tone that prompted the lawman to shrug his thick shoulders and turn without a word and trudge deeper into the timber. "This'll do," Ed said after they had gone twenty yards and were in a

small clearing the moonlight penetrated brightly. He added tersely, "Let's have it, Hagan. It must be good or you wouldn't bother comin' alone to meet a man you're offerin' a thousand dollars for. Or did you come alone?"

"I swear I did, Ed," Hagan said. His loosely-jowled face was set seriously. His honest brown eyes met Ed's evenly. "I'm here to try and make up for what I've done."

Ed Joslyn laughed and said in a sarcastic tone, "Go on, Ben. It's started better'n I thought it would."

The moonlight mirrored faint anger from Ben Hagan's face. He made a visible effort to control that anger. "All right" he said, "you want it straight, I'll give it straight. I need your help."

"I needed yours once. I didn't get it."

"That was different. I thought you'd murdered Tom Rains."

"Meanin' you don't think so now?"

"Meanin' I'm not sure now, not after what I've found out."

A subtle curiosity blended with Ed's anger toward this man he hated more than he'd known he could hate anyone. He fought the curiosity down, saying, "What you think doesn't count now, Hagan. It might have counted six months ago, before you and the bank took everything I owned."

"That's why I'm here—to talk about the bank. About Bob Trask."

The lawman's clipped, direct words reminded Ed of the feeling he'd once had toward Hagan, that the man was as thoroughly honest as he looked, that he could be trusted above all others. Yet he had the unmistakable proof furnished by his present circumstances

that denied all this. So he queried warily, "What about Bob Trask?"

Hagan let out a laugh devoid of all amusement. "I reckon the joke's on me this time. He's tryin' the same stunt on me and a few others that he tried on you. Only this time he's got a dry summer and our empty pockets to help him instead of the frame-up he used on you."

Over Ed's surprise at this startling statement, he sensed what was coming and asked quickly, "Have you talked to Barney White?"

Hagan nodded. "Barney showed me your letter. Him and Fred McMahan and Jerry Quinn and me got together and decided what to do."

That's why I'm here. But first I want to be sure. How do you know what the railroad's goin' to do?"

ED was having to rearrange things in his mind. Hagan, the man he violently hated was here working on behalf of his best friends, White, McMahan and Quinn. The bitter irony of the thing stared him in the face too directly to be denied.

But his deep-rooted suspicions of Hagan made him say tonelessly, "You'll have to do some talkin' before I answer that, Ben. Where do you stand in this?"

"I'm like Barney and the rest, carryin' a heavy note with the bank. Poor grass and low cattle prices have got us all cornered. Two weeks ago I got a letter from Bob Trask sayin' he expected a payment of half the principal of the note or he was closin' me out. He can do it legally, too, the same as he'll foreclose on the others after warnin' them. None of us knew what to do until Barney got your letter. I want to know what's in back of it."

Ed decided all at once that noth-

ing could be lost by telling Hagan the truth. "I've spent half a year wonderin' why anyone would go to the trouble of framin' me with murder, what they'd get out of it," he said. "The only one to get anything out of my leavin' the country was Bob Trask, when he foreclosed on my layout. When I began askin' myself why he wanted the outfit, I bogged down. Then, a couple weeks ago in a town north o' here, I heard talk about the railroad comin' through. I worked on a hunch, went down to their division office at Gap one night and busted in. Lookin' over one of their survey maps I found the answer. The new right of way cuts clean through the middle of my old place, through White's and Quinns and McMahon's."

"And mine," Hagan put in.

Ed nodded. "And yours. So it's all pretty plain now. Trask knew about this long ago. Framin' me with murder was his first step toward gettin' the land for the new right of way. Once he's got all those layouts, he'll sell to the railroad for ten times what he has in it and likely form a cattle company with what's left over."

Peering intently at Hagan, Ed could detect nothing but righteous anger in the other's sun-blackened, mustached face. The lawman said acidly, "And I helped hang that murder on you, run you out of the country!" He shrugged his thick shoulders and let out a gusty sigh of helplessness. "Well, it's done now and I can't take it back. That's what comes of havin' to do a sworn duty. It looked to me like you were guilty as hell, Ed."

Sudden anger flared alive in Ed Joslyn. His anger wasn't directed toward Hagan now—not with this indisputable proof that the lawman

had been an innocent tool for the shaping of the circumstances that had so changed his life—but against Bob Trask and the law that would back him in the crushing of small ranchers who had once trusted him.

He spoke his thoughts aloud: "The next thing's to find a way to stop Trask."

"There is one. That's why I'm here. You can help."

Ed's lean face took on a quizzical look. "How?"

"This is goin' to sound plenty forked, Ed," the sheriff said. "We've decided that the only way out is to rob the bank. We're askin' you to do it."

"Rob the bank!" Ed breathed incredulously. "Ben, are you—"

"I know, I know," Hagan cut in. "I ought to have my tongue cut out for even thinkin' it. But, Ed, we've got the proof against Trask. The hell of it is it's proof that won't hold water in a court o' law! I'm eatin' crow because I helped Trask get you out of the way. But that don't change things. Trask still has us tied legally. Holdin' up the bank is the only way Barney and the rest see as a sure way out. I agree with 'em."

"A way out? How do you figure it?"

"First, it's one way for me to pay back a debt I owe you, Ed. I'll clear the way for you. Me and my deputy will be halfway across the county when it happens. You'll make a clean getaway. Second we're splitting even with you on everything you take out of that vault. It'll be something like twenty thousand. Half for you, half for us. The bank carries insurance, so it won't lose and drag under the men who hold bank stock. We take our half, Barney and Fred and Jerry and me, and pay

off most of our loans. Then when it comes to dealin' with the railroad for right of way, it'll be us and not Trask that gets paid in hard cash."

Point by point, Hagan's argument was reasonable. His manner, the way he'd explained things, made it plain that he was an honest man driven to the wall, driven to taking this extreme measure of righting a wrong.

Ed was convinced. He no longer hated Ben Hagan but pitied him. Some of his former respect for the lawman was returning. But there were still questions in his mind, and with the wariness bred in him these past months he wanted those questions answered. He put the first one: "How come you're so hard up, Ben? I've always heard you were well off, didn't even know you carried a mortgage on your place."

Hagan laughed hollowly: "How could I be well off on my eighty a month? I did have some money, a thousand dollars saved up. This summer I loaned it to my brother down near Flint. He's in about the same shape now as I am, without a prayer o' payin' it back. Of course I carry a mortgage. Who don't in these hard times?"

"Why didn't you bring along one of the others, Jerry or Fred? They'd have stood a better chance of gettin' this across to me than you did."

"How could I, Ed? I say we talked this thing over. But you don't think I'd be damn fool enough to agree to it in front of them, do you? If it comes off, they'll know who to thank. But they'll keep it to themselves. It ain't in a sheriff's line of duty to plan the robbin' of a bank."

So Hagan was doing this on his own! Ed all at once admired the man for the steely nerve it had taken

to make the decision to come up here, to come without letting on to the others that he was taking their salvation along with his, into his own hands. Sheriff Ben Hagan would stand or fall as a result of his own efforts. He wasn't asking his friends to come in with him in breaking the law.

"I'll do it, Ben," Ed said on the impulse of the moment. "Name the day."

Hagan's middle-aged face took on a relieved smile. He said flatly, "Might as well make it tomorrow night, about midnight. Tomorrow's Sunday."

One more doubt remained with Ed. He asked, "What do I get out of this, Ben? I'll have money, plenty of it. But I wasn't cut out to spend my life ridin' the dark trails. I'd like to have a place of my own, to settle down and not be spooked by every stranger I run across.

"That's a thing I should have mentioned," Hagan said. "There's a chance, a slim one I'll admit, that we can hang this job on Trask himself. Supposin' he had his own bank robbed to collect insurance? If I can work it, you'll be cleared. Trask doesn't have much guts. If we scare him bad enough, he's goin' to break down and confess how he framed you. Can you trust me to swing it, Ed?"

"I reckon there isn't much choice. I'll have to."

Ben Hagan thrust out his hand. "Then it's a deal. Half a keg o' powder will blow in that vault door. The three of you can be away before anyone knows what's happened. I'll be up here Monday night to get our share of the money."

Answering the pressure of the lawman's firm grip, Ed Joslyn was thankful for one thing. Tonight had

proved his bitterest enemy to be perhaps his best friend.

RED WALLS, the man riding on Ed's left, said in a low voice, "I don't like this! You're mighty trustin' of that law dog, Ed."

"I've got a right to be," Ed answered.

The three of them were walking their horses down the town's single deserted street, flanked now by the first false-fronted stores. The thin sickle of the moon, low to the western horizon, cast eerie and elongated shadows across the gleaming tar-paper roofs of the buildings and deepened the gloom beneath the board awnings that covered the walks.

Ed, his glance studying the shadows under the awnings warily, tried to shake off his own feeling that was much like Red's. He was going against that uneasiness in riding openly down the center of the street. But he had his faith in Ben Hagan to rely on and that was all he needed. He'd even gone so far as to dismiss the thought of approaching the bank from the alley behind the street. He knew that on a Sunday night, with the saloons closed, the town was asleep before nine. The getaway would be easier down this broad street than along the narrow limits of the alley, hemmed in as it was by outbuildings and fences.

"This is it," he said as he swung the roan in toward the brick bank building sitting back twenty feet from the walk.

Red and Bill reined their ponies close in alongside. Ed lifted his left boot from the stirrup and swung aground at the hitch rail.

Crack! The sharp explosion of a rifle from a window directly opposite

rang into the stillness. It marked the exact instant a hard blow took Ed behind his left shoulder and drove him forward off his feet.

As he fell, his hand dropping instinctively to streak out his six-gun, other guns burst in a staccato chant of rising sound. Ed lit hard on his right shoulder, rolled over once and came to his feet in time to see Bill clutch his chest and slope stiffly sideways from his saddle into the dust. He lay motionless, rigid in death, as Ed dived behind the protection of his rearing roan.

Red Walls' .45 spoke loudly twice, its burst sounding above the rifle-shots. He was trying to wheel his bay horse clear of the ponies to either side of him. Ed stooped to send three answering shots at the targets made by the winking powder flashes from beneath the awning opposite, calling to Red, "Run for it!"

But all at once Red swayed in the saddle. The next frantic lunge of his pony unseated him. He fell awkwardly to the ground, made a crippled effort to rise and then slumped back onto one elbow and emptied his Colt's in a quick burst of sound that slapped sharply down the canyon of the street.

Ed saw that he was trapped. The next burst of shots from across the way brought the roan to his knees. Ed jumped clear of the animal's convulsively slashing hoofs and across to where Red lay. He took Red's hand and heaved him across his shoulders. Then, keeping in line with Red's wildly pitching pony, he crossed the walk and the bare yard to the bank's plate-glass doors. A bullet burned a stab of pain along his right thigh as he thrust a booted foot through the glass panel. He reached inside, found the door's latch, and tripped the lock. As he

edged through the open door, a burst of shots shattered the other door's glass. He felt Red's body jerk convulsively, then go limp.

He kicked the door shut behind him stepped in behind the protecting brick wall to one side, laying Red gently on the floor. As the rifle bullets whipped in through the door's opening, knocking plaster from the rear wall far in the darkness behind him, Ed felt Red's wrist. There was pulse. Red's square face was set with teeth clenched, eyes fixed in a mad stare. He was dead.

Ed gently closed his friend's eyes, choking back his grief. Then a white-hot blaze of anger shook him. He took Red's two guns, rammed one in his belt and stepped close to the door. Two seconds later, when the firing across the street slacked off, he stepped spraddle legged into the door's opening and fanned empty all three guns in a burst of prolonged sound that welled thunderously out into the night.

Wheeling back into cover again, he reloaded, his hurt shoulder throbbing with a pain so intense that it made him faint. He tore the sleeve of that arm away. Using it and his bandanna, he made a crude sling for the arm. As he worked, the rifle-fire on the opposite wall slacked off abruptly and a voice called: "Come out reachin', Ed, and we'll let you live long enough to hang!"

The voice was Ben Hagan's! Ed's blind rage made him step to the doorway again. Once more he triggered his three guns empty, having the satisfaction of hearing a man's muted scream above the sound of his shots. Then he was crouched behind the protecting brick wall again, reloading his .45s and listening to the bullets chop into the back wall of the room as before. No

living thing could have stood in the hail of lead that was streaming through the bank's double doors.

Kneeling with his back to the wall, his guns finally lying loaded beside him, Ed looked down into Red's face and had the sobering thought that he'd led two men to their deaths tonight through a misplaced trust. A surge of bitterness rose up in him, and on the heel of it his reason crowded out his anger and he gravely considered his chances.

There plainly weren't any, for as he sat there trying to find one, a bullet slanted in from the alley, knocking out a small back window in a spray of glass, and kicking plaster dust into his face from a point barely two feet to one side of him. Ben Hagan had planned this nicely, first the double-cross to bring him here and now the trap no man could break clear of.

A few seconds later, as he made his decision to make a last stand behind the row of teller's cages barely visible in the gloom, the firing from the street slacked off once more and Ben Hagan's voice boomed again: "One more chance, Ed! Throw out your guns and come out. You'll stand fair trial."

Ed answered derisively, "What's your idea of fair, Ben? Shootin' down a man without his guns?"

"Barney White's across here," the lawman answered. "Will you take his word for it?"

Ed was a long time in answering. In the interval he looked down once at the sling on his arm, then to the double belts around Red Walls' waist. A thin smile etched itself on his lean face and with a sudden new hope alive in him he called, "Barney, if I throw down my guns and come out will they cut down on me?"

"Not unless they get me first,"

came Barney White's low-toned answer. "Me and a few others want the straight of this, Ed. We don't get it with you dead."

There were questions that came to Ed's mind, questions that he put down at once before the thought of what he had to do. He reached out and quickly unbuckled one of Red's twin belts. He pulled it from beneath the body and walked soundlessly across to the nearest counter and dropped belt and holster in behind it. Coming back to the doors, he lifted his wounded arm and spread the sling out wide, so that it broadly covered his forearm from the point of his elbow almost to his wrist.

He took the .45 from the holster he had hidden and thrust it out of sight into the arm-sling so that he hugged it tightly between forearm and body. Then, stepping into plain sight in the doorway, he tossed his own weapon and the other of Red's far out onto the boardwalk, calling, "There's the irons. I'm comin' out!"

"Reach!" came Ben Hagan's sharp command.

ED thrust his one good arm above his head and stepped out through the jagged opening of the glassless door. He was halfway to the walk out front when a broken line of figures stepped from beneath the opposite awning and came toward him.

He counted seven men all with rifles. As the group advanced across the street, Barney White's voice sounded a strident warning, "Keep your gun down, Ben! We'll hear what he has to say."

The pain in his shoulder brought on a nausea and a dizziness that dimmed Ed's senses for the next minute and half. He was vaguely aware that the men closed in on him,

that Ben Hagan took him roughly by his wounded arm and spun him around as a second man felt the length of his body for a concealed weapon, saying finally, "He's clean, Ben! The one in there was packin' only one hogleg. They're both here."

Ed knew that they led him up the walk, striding close beside him, and in through the door to the sheriff's jail office. He blinked uncertainly in the glow of an unshaded lamp and knew that he would once have fallen from weakness if it hadn't been for Barney White's arm supporting him.

He heard Barney say curtly: "He's bad hurt. Anybody got a bottle handy?"

Someone produced a bottle and Barney tilted it to Ed's lips. Ed downed three full swallows of the fiery liquor. It cleared his muddled senses instantly.

The first thing he thought of was the six-gun he'd thrust into his sling in the bank. He pressed his bad arm to his stomach. The weapon miraculously was still there!

Staring at the bleak-faced men who lined the walls, Ed recognized Jerry Quinn and Fred McMahon along with Barney White and the sheriff. Their presence here was the best evidence of how slim his chances were.

Ben Hagan, standing with his broad back to his roll-top desk, said solemnly, "Well, what are we waitin' on? Let's hang the two of 'em!"

"Not until he's talked first," Barney White said insistently. He turned to face Ed, asking, "Why did you do it, Ed?"

Ed's anger made him blurt out the truth, the story of Hagan's meeting him at the line shack, their agreement to rob the bank.

When he had finished two or three men laughed mockingly. One of

them, Jerry Quinn, said "That's a plenty tall story! Imagine Ben here carryin' a mortgage on his layout? I happen to know that Ben has ten thousand salted away in some damned good bonds." He focused on Ed a glance full of hatred. "Why don't you admit it was Trask you met up there in the hills, Joslyn? What good's it doin' you to try to hang this on Ben Hagan, a man we know is as honest as they come? Why don't you own up to throwin' in with Trask to rob his own bank and collect on the insurance."

Ed turned helplessly to Barney White, reading his defeat in the rancher's somber stare of loathing even before he said, "Tell 'em the truth, Barney. Tell 'em about the letter I wrote you last week."

"Sure," Barney drawled caustically. "They know about the letter. A bunch of us took it to Trask the other day and showed it to him. He wouldn't admit a thing. But he looked guilty as hell so Ben took it into his own hands to keep a watch on Trask. Last night Trask left town on the sly. Ben thought it was queer and followed him. Followed him up to that line shack you mention. Ben got close enough to hear part of what you and Trask talked about. It was like you say, you planned to rob the bank. Only it was Trask you were sidin', not Ben Hagan. Ben let Trask ride out o' there and took him as he was stablin' his horse here in town at three o' clock this mornin'. Trask tried to shoot his way clear. Ben's bullet took him in the leg. He's here in jail now, hurt bad but not too bad to know a rope when it's—"

Jerry Quinn's voice cut in coldly, "Get Trask and we'll hang 'em from the same tree."

As Hagan walked across to the nail-studded wood door leading

from the office into the jail, Ed was aware of angry voices that came from outside on the walk. A crowd was gathering out there, attracted by the shooting of several minutes ago and doubtless by the news that there would be a double hanging. Hagan opened the jail door and was gone inside a quarter-minute. The clank of a cell door being opened came out to them. Then Hagan reappeared holding erect the stooped figure of Bob Trask, the banker.

Trask's face was a sickly white. His two hands clutched his thigh, where a broad stain of faded brown blood spread across his dust-smearred trousers. His face was dirty with a two-day growth of beard. His eyes, fever-ridden, took in Ed and he started to say something when suddenly Ben Hagan cuffed him as open-handed blow across the mouth and said savagely, "You've had your chance to talk, Trask! Keep your lip buttoned." Hagan nodded toward his desk. "There's a rope in that bottom drawer, Jerry. Get it."

As Quinn was stepping across to the desk, Ed let his right hand slide into the sling from which his left arm hung. He brought out the short-barreled .45 in a lazy gesture, taking a backward step and putting his back to the side wall of the room, out of reach of Barney White, the nearest man.

They all saw him, even Ben Hagan at the far end of the room. They turned instantly rigid, hands clawed to snatch guns from holsters their eyes bulging incredulously.

Ed drawled, "Who's first?" He let the subtle threat of his two words carry its weight as he thumbed back the .45's hammer. Then he said curtly, "Ben, bring Trask across here and put him in this chair."

The sheriff didn't move. His

glance roved the circle of faces, came back to meet Ed's. A beady perspiration made his brow glisten. He said in a low voice, "One of you make a try at him! I'll kill him before he can trigger that iron the second time!" His hands hung at his sides now, within finger-spread of his guns.

Jerry Quinn laughed mirthlessly and said, "Yeah, a few more of us could stop him before he could get off the second bullet. The question is, who's goin' to stop the first?" He nodded to the sheriff. "Better do as he says, Ben. Take Trask over there."

Hagan didn't move. The man standing closest to Trask, Fred McMahon, reached out and took the banker's arm and led him limping across to the chair close to Ed. The banker dropped into it exhausted, looking up at Ed with an unspoken gratitude mixed with the pain in his eyes. He mumbled. "I'll talk. What do you want to know?"

Fred McMahon made his mistake then. Stepping away from the chair, he crossed between Ed and Ben Hagan.

Ed saw the sheriff's shoulders move suddenly. He yelled, "Drop, Fred!" McMahon spun around, saw the sheriff's up-swinging six-gun, and left his feet in a dive that carried him out of the way.

A split-second later two six-guns exploded in a welling burst of sound that rattled the office's one window. Ed's tall body jerked back hard against the wall. Hagan stumbled backward, into the open doorway to his jail. Bewilderment and rage was blended on his loose face. He staggered drunkenly as Ed's .45 arced to cover the rest of the men.

Hagan thumbed back the hammer of his .45 but his arm was already

falling out of line. He made a vain effort to raise the weapon again, and it exploded finally to send its bullet into the floor at his feet. The lawman coughed, blood welled from his mouth, and he slumped loosely to the floor. As he rolled onto his back his eyes were staring in the glassed fixity of death.

Jerry Quinn looked at Ed in dull hatred and said flatly, "The first one that gets a chance cut him down!"

Ed ignored the remark, said, "Talk, Trask. Tell it all if you want to live!"

Bob Trask's glance went around the circle of tense faces. A slight flush momentarily wiped out his pallor. When he spoke his voice was weak, barely above a whisper. "It was Hagan, not me, that went up to see Joslyn last night. I know because I saw Ben leave town . . . Followed . . . He caught me on the way back . . . shot me . . . He . . . he's been blackmailin' me this past year . . . found out I'd served time in the penitentiary at Sante Fé . . . made me sign over all my bank stock to him." Trask's head slumped to his flat chest that was rising and falling rapidly to drag in air.

The faces of the eight men in the room had undergone a gradual change. Hands that had strayed close to gun handles now relaxed. Incredulity and mute surprise was etched on those faces.

It was Barney White who first moved across to Trask's. He had the whiskey bottle in his hand and forced the banker to take a swallow. The others, Jerry Quinn and Fred McMahon and the rest, crowded in closer about the chair, unmindful of the six-gun Ed still held lined at them.

Barney White knelt before Trask's

chair and said urgently, "What's the rest, Bob? Ben found out about your record and blackmailed you? You were goin' straight until then?"

Trask nodded weakly, a thin smile on his bloodless lips now. "I'd gone straight for ten years," he said in a stronger voice than before. "Then Hagan told me what he knew about me. At first he wanted a little money. Then some of my bank stock. Finally he had me sign it all over to him. I was to stay as bank president and draw my salary."

"But what about the railroad deal?" Ed asked. He had lowered his weapon and was listening as intently as the rest.

"Hagan was in my office when the buyer for the railroad first called, nearly a year ago. He heard the whole thing, where the new right of way was to be. He—he killed Tom Rains himself and framed it on you, Joslyn. It was his idea to fore-close on the other outfits."

"Includin' his own, so it would look right?" Jerry Quinn cut in.

Trask nodded. All at once he

straightened, his face blanched and his head slumped again. Barney White reached out and felt his pulse, saying finally with relief, "Fainted, I reckon. We'd better get him back on that cot in his cell and get Doc Adams in here."

"I'm hopin' he pulls through," Fred McMahon said, as Barney White and two others carried the banker back into jail. He glanced at Ed with embarrassment. Then for the first time he became aware of the weariness and pain written on Ed's face. He let out a crisp oath and said tartly, "Forget about Trask and get that sawbones across here to doctor up Ed's arm! What the hell's the matter with us, lettin' the man that's cleaned up this town stand around bleedin' like a stuck pig?"

He was smiling as he came across the room to take Ed's hand and wring it. And he turned belligerent when the rest wanted to do the same. "Save it for later," he told them gruffly, "until after he's well and we've elected him sheriff."

THE END.

SHOT-LOADED QUIRTS

THE popularity of the short, flexible saddle whip on the Western range resulted in an attempt to pattern a saddle whip after the shot-loaded black-snake whips used by the freighters. The core of the quirt is a slender, tapering sack or tube from a foot to fourteen inches in length, made of carefully tanned deerskin, into which bird shot is poured until the sack is full. The shot is worked down into position, but is not tightly packed. Over this core a protective covering of deerskin is braided; then one, sometimes two, layers of rawhide are braided fancifully or plainly, according to the taste or skill of the braider.

A loop is braided into the small end of the quirt, and into that the tail is looped with a place left at the large end through which the wrist loop may be pushed before the finishing knots are braided around the little whip. Calling this loop a "wrist loop" is a misnomer, for the experienced rider seldom, if ever, grips the whip in his hand. Usually he swings it on his finger or by the loop, which is slipped over the horn of the saddle when the quirt is not in use.

PASEAR TO MESALINA



By **WALT COBURN**

CHAPTER I

SENTENCED

THE law gave Tex Doyle ten years for cattle rustling. Tex was big and tougher than twenty-three years generally makes a man. He had hard muscles and a fighting heart. He knew what the next ten years could do to him.

A ten-year sentence at Arizona's old Territorial Prison generally meant death for a white man. Even a Mexican accustomed to the terrific heat and humidity and brought up in the filth and squalor of a peon life had to be more than tough to live through half of a ten-year stretch inside the four-foot cell walls.

"I should have killed that ranger," Tex told the white-haired judge who sentenced him. "Then you'd have hung me and got it over with. If I had a gun—"

But Tex Doyle had no gun. He had thrown it away rather than shoot it out with the ranger captain, Bill Fox. Not because there was any coward or quit in him. But because, when he was a kid down on the Pecos River in Texas, Bill Fox had saved Mike Doyle, his father, in a stand-off fight against a bunch of renegade Mexican horse thieves.

Captain Bill Fox of the Arizona Rangers took it almighty hard. His seamed, leathery face looked gray there in the courtroom when he heard sentence pronounced.

"I didn't know they'd do this to you, Tex," he said, when the courtroom was cleared and the deputies unlocked Tex's leg irons to lead him off to prison. "I'll swear, son, I didn't know they was goin' to throw the book at you thataway. I figured when I fetched you in that you'd git off light. I'll see the governor."

Captain Fox didn't make the mis-

take of offering to shake hands. Two big, burly deputies were holding Tex Doyle's arms and the prisoner was handcuffed. But Tex Doyle was a fighting fool and there was a desperate look in the blue-gray eyes under their heavy, beetling black brows.

Tex stared hard at the gray-haired, lanky ranger captain. Then the guards led him away. They were putting him in a windowless cell with a Negro dying of tuberculosis and a half-breed Mexican who had gone crazy and was on his knees on the floor, praying to his Señor Dios for death. The stench in the cell was nauseating. Outside, in the shade of the porch of the warden's house, the thermometer registered one hundred and thirty. The prison cells were even hotter, more humid.

A week ago Tex Doyle had spread his tarp-covered blankets on a mesa with the star-filled sky for a roof. He had gone to sleep to the weird music of distant coyotes yapping at the rising moon.

The guards led Tex past the prison cemetery where four convicts were lowering a pine-board box into an open grave. The bigger of the two guards had a cauliflower ear and a smashed nose. He grinned faintly and pointed.

"They're plantin' a tinhorn gambler that killed a deputy sheriff at Tucson over a dance-hall girl. Feller they called Dude on account of the fancy clothes he wore. They gave him twenty-five years, but he went crazy with the heat last night and chawed on his wrists till he bled to death. We're givin' you his cell."

TEX DOYLE remembered Dude. He had played poker with the immaculate, soft-fingered gambler not more than six months ago; just

before Dude shot that big, swaggering, bull-dozing deputy with the little twin-barréled, pearl-handled derringer pistol he carried in the pocket of his fancy vest.

Tex remembered Dude's girl. She was a little Mexican dancer they called Chacha, short for Muchacha, meaning "Little Girl." It also meant the stake in the Mexican game of Ombre. The story was that Dude had gambled for Chacha at Ombre and so won her from the big deputy sheriff who had turned out to be a bad loser.

Chacha, according to the story Tex had heard along the border where he was running wet cattle out of Sonora, had vanished. Run away and hidden somewhere among her own people. They couldn't locate her for a witness at Dude's trial, although her testimony might have cleared him.

Now Chacha was dancing and playing her guitar and singing her songs in some Mexican cantina below the border. And last night Dude had sat in a corner of this dark, stinking prison cell and bitten at his wrists until he severed the blood vessels.

The burly guard with the cauliflower ear unlocked Tex's handcuffs and shoved him into the cell. The cell door, made of heavy strap iron, clanged shut. The other guard had set down a red clay olla filled with warmish, muddy water. The Negro, a tall, skinny man, naked save for a pair of filthy cotton pants, lay exhausted after a coughing spell. The Mexican prayed in a creaking voice.

The Negro died that night, but the guards did not get around to removing his body for burial until the following evening after sundown. Before he died, he had told Tex things about the gambler, Dude. How the dapper card dealer had died.

All night the Mexican alternated his praying with fits of violence. Finally he had taken to butting his head against the steel door until he battered himself unconscious.

In the morning Tex Doyle wasn't hungry enough yet to stomach the grub they shoved into the cell. The guard with the cauliflower ear taunted him for having a squeamish stomach.

"The black man's dead and the greaser's knocked out," he jeered. "You got three men's rations there, cowboy. Hell, you're playin' in luck. Sure, there was weavils in the flour and the meat had got a little ripe and maggoty, but the cookin' killed the worms, so what the hell? Cowpunchers brag about their toughness. Take to it. Or do you want to put in your order for a T-bone steak and French-fried spuds and ice cream?"

The guard exhaled a tantalizing cloud of cigarette smoke. Tex, who would have swapped anything for a smoke to take the stench of the cell out of his nostrils, could cheerfully have murdered the guard, a bull-necked man named Yuma Bull, who picked up occasional side money wrestling.

It was another guard, a tall man with a scarred face and one eye gouged out, who unlocked the cell door the following day and put handcuffs on Tex Doyle's wrists. He led Tex to a trough of water and told him to clean himself up, then gave him a clean pair of faded-blue cotton pants to replace the soiled pair he was wearing. When he was presentable he was led to the warden's office.

CAPTAIN BILL FOX was waiting to see Tex. The tall ranger tugged at his drooping gray mustache and grinned faintly.

"I rode plumb to Prescott and talked to the governor there, Tex," he announced. "Talked him into a proposition I come back here to make you. It's a chance to git you out of the pen."

"You mean I'm pardoned?"

"Paroled. I'm to be held responsible. You know the Mexican border better than most men and you know the men on both sides of the line. I want to stop the gap at Frijoles Pass. I don't monkey with the little fellers that are runnin' two-bit bunches of dogie cattle out of Sonora. I'm after one man. The man that runs everything from Chinamen to guns and dope. The man that's responsible for the death of at least four of my men. Do you know who I'm talkin' about?"

"Pablo Pierce?" Tex Doyle's grin was mirthless, his blue-gray eyes hard as chilled steel.

"Pablo Pierce. Know him?"

"No man knows Pablo Pierce," Tex said flatly. "It's like askin' a man does he know a three-toed wolf that chawed his way out of a trap. I've heard men swear there was no such a livin' man as Pablo Pierce, but I've rode up on dead men with a P cut with a knife on their forehead. There's the story about how he went into Nogales wearin' a brown monk's outfit over his clothes to hide his guns. Guitar players in cantinas sing songs they make up about Pablo Pierce. And that's all that any man I ever met knows about him. He's a trap-marked, bullet-scarred wolf that hides out in the hills and waters at night. No man knows him."

The ranger nodded. He had a folded paper in one hand and kept slapping it absent-mindedly against the palm of the other. His narrowed eyes studied Tex Doyle as the latter was talking.

"No man knows Pablo Pierce," agreed Bill Fox. "But some woman might know him. Who wrote that Mexican song about him? The one called 'Don Pablo?'"

"Who," asked Tex Doyle with a faint grin, "writes any of those Mexican ranchero songs? Some drunken guitar player, like as not, with a load of pulque under his belt, a marijuana cigarette in his mouth, and his brain on fire with a lot of damn fool romantic nonsense."

"Ever hear it sung?"

Tex Doyle nodded. "I heard Chacha sing it one night at a Mexican fiesta."

"Chacha," said the ranger captain, "sang the Don Pablo song a lot. They say she made it up. It tells how handsome and brave Don Pablo is. It tells about his gold spurs. The gold spurs of Don Pablo. How they were made from an old Spanish mission bell and covered with gold that is carved with pictures. Those spurs that chime like golden bells. This gold is melted from watch cases he took from dead men's pockets. Any man can wear silver spurs in Mexico where silver is cheaper than good brass. But Don Pablo wears gold spurs. And the song goes on about a duel this Don Pablo fought with a Mexican general. Each man had an end of Chacha's sash in his teeth and a knife in his hand. And Don Pablo walks away from that duel in the moonlight with his spurs jingling like bells, to take his señorita Chacha in his arms. Tex, have you seen anything of Chacha below the border since Dude killed that drunken, love-sick deputy at Tucson?"

"No. But I saw 'em buryin' Dude. The man Dude killed wasn't fit to wear a law badge. He had a wife and two kids. And he was fightin' over that black-eyed little

cantina dancer who could have cleared Dude if she hadn't coyoted!"

"Reckon you could play detective, Tex?" Bill Fox asked. "Locate this Chacha and her Don Pablo? Findin' Pablo Pierce is about as ticklish and dangerous a job as ever a man tackled. Four of my men have been found murdered with the letter P cut on their forehead between their eyes. It's a job that I can't ask any more of my rangers to tackle. Down south of the border a law badge ain't worth the price of a handful of frijole beans. It'll take a man with a cool head and plenty of fighting nerve. Dude would have had a crack at it if he hadn't gotten fed up on prison life, and—"

Tex Doyle's gray eyes were like chunks of ice. "You mean you had Dude locked up so he'd git to hate Chacha bad enough to trail her and kill her and this Pablo? Of all the inhuman, damned, cold-blooded tricks I ever saw pulled that wins the jackpot. Dude was a square gambler, but you locked him up in that damned—"

"The jury did that," Captain Fox broke in icily. "Keep your shirt on, young feller, or you'll talk yourself out of your one and only chance to get out of this prison. Dude wasn't framed. He killed a man, an' the law caught up with him. Now, will you keep your trap shut and listen or do you want to git locked up again?"

Tex's fists unclenched and the color came back into his tanned, unshaved cheeks.

"Name your game, ranger."

"You'll escape at lockin' up time this evenin'," Captain Fox told him. "The guards will have orders to shoot to miss. That's to prevent

any possible leak that the law is backin' your play. You'll find a saddled horse, guns, and cartridges in a belt tied to the saddlehorn. The Mexican border is only a few miles south of here. Your job is to locate Pablo Pierce and fetch him back to Yuma dead or alive. This paper I have is signed by the governor. It goes on file here at the warden's office. When you fetch back Pablo Pierce you'll git an absolute pardon. If you let me down and go back to your old game of shovin' stolen cattle across the border, it will be up to me to turn in my badge and tell the governor that I'm a bad judge of men, that I guessed wrong about the son of old Mike Doyle. That's the proposition, Tex. Want it?"

"So this is why that trap was laid for me to ride into?" Tex asked bleakly. "You took the risk of me shootin' you instead of surrenderin' to the man who once saved my dad's life. You framed me!"

"Call it by any name you want, young feller. The job's done. I'm givin' you this chance. Do you want it?"

Tex nodded. "I'll take it. I thought a heap of Dude. I'm your huckleberry, ranger. And I'll play the game level with you."

Captain Fox smiled grimly at the warden. The latter shifted his cold, soggy cigar to the other side of his grim-lipped mouth. He nodded to the one-eyed, scar-faced guard.

"Take the prisoner back. Tell Bull I want to see him here in my office."

"Good luck, son," said Captain Fox. He did not offer to shake hands.

"Thanks." Tex Doyle was grinning faintly, but his eyes were hard and cold.

CHAPTER II

THE GETAWAY

THE guard led him back to his cell. Two prisoners were dragging out the dead body of the Mexican. The Yuma Bull, standing nearby, his shot-loaded blackjack sticking out of his hip pocket, his hand on the big six-shooter he carried in an army holster, leered at the one-eyed guard. Tex saw them exchange meaning glances.



"Takin' one of the zoo pets for a walk, Missouri?"

"The Big Dog with the Brass Collar sent fer im," the guard explained. "That Ranger Fox is stackin' the cards to cold-deck Pablo Pierce. This Tejano is goin' to play copper for the ranger. We're to let him make a getaway this evenin'. The best way to pull it is to put the Tejano on a graveyard detail. So put that greaser stiff back in the cell till sundown. The Tejano kin bury his cellmate. Why in hell couldn't him and that black buck croak the same day? Save diggin' an extra hole." There was genuine annoyance in the one-eyed man's nasal twanging voice.

The Yuma Bull twisted his battered face in a one-sided, broken-toothed grin. "What difference does it make? We don't do the shovel work, Missou'."

"But we gotta stand on our weary laigs a-guardin' the job."

"Just a-sweatin' in sweet sympathy, like as not," put in Tex.

The Yuma Bull stepped toward him. The flat of his huge hand caught Tex across the mouth. The blow had the swift weight of a grizzly's slap. Tex raised his manacled hands. Missouri's blackjack, a weapon made of soft leather loaded with buckshot, swung by a leather wrist loop, caught Tex behind the ear, sending him, dazed, to his knees. The two guards threw him into his cell with the dead Mexican.

"The next time you start anything," the Yuma Bull warned, "we'll give you a workin' over you'll remember."

"The Tejano," leered the guard called Missou', "is goin' over the hill this evenin'. We'll have orders to shoot high." His one eye, greenish in color, winked.

"We give him the *Ley del Fuego*?" grinned the Yuma, Bull.

The Missourian nodded. "It was a border cowpuncher that gouged my eye out. I ain't fergot. Whenever one of these spur jinglers land here, I remember how I lost that eye. We'll git orders to shoot to miss, but one of my bullets is goin' to ketch this Tejano where his suspenders would cross if he was wearin' suspenders. The Old Man wants to see you at his office, Bull."

THE cell door clanged shut and Tex was left with the cumbersome handcuffs binding his two wrists. He squatted on his heels and wiped the blood from his

bruised mouth onto the sweat-soaked sleeve of his cotton shirt. His bloodshot eyes stared at the huddled, bloody heap of the dead Mexican.

Tex knew all about that Mexican punishment called the *Ley del Fuego*—the law of escape. A prisoner was given a short head start and told to run. Then he was shot in the back, killed while attempting to escape. The brutal mockery of it made Tex quiver with blazing anger. This was the United States, not Mexico. This was what the law did to a man who got caught with a little bunch of Mexican cattle! Missou' and the Yuma Bull—as black-hearted a pair of murderers as ever drew breath.

Tex got to his feet and walked over to the door. By shoving his face close to the scrap iron bars that were blistering hot from the sun's slanting rays he could breathe fresh air from the outside. That rap on the head had left him dizzy. He pulled deep breaths of the hot, humid air into his lungs, then squatted cowboy fashion on his boot heels, in a corner of the cell.

Soon he heard the muffled, subdued sound of the guards' voices outside. Then they unlocked the cell door and told him to drag out the dead Mexican.

Another prisoner, a half-breed, helped him put the dead man in a rough pine-board box. The half-breed was what they called a trusty, a prisoner who smirked and called the guards "Sir," fawning for their favors. A marijuana cigarette hung limply from his thick-lipped mouth.

They lugged the pine box with its gruesome contents to the graveyard on the slope above the Colorado River. There Tex was handed a short-handled shovel. He still wore

the heavy steel handcuffs and they were rubbing his wrists raw.

"Dig, cowboy," ordered Missou'. "Dig hard and fast!"

The sun was a brassy ball sinking reluctantly behind a skyline that shimmered in the heat waves. Below, not more than a hundred yards down, flowed the muddy river between banks that were covered with a rank growth of willows, tall arrow weeds, giant cottonwoods. Down yonder in the shade of one of those big cottonwoods was Tex Doyle's saddled horse. Missou' pointed out the tree.

"Your ranger pal left a horse and guns down yonder, Tejano," he said mockingly. "Ain't it too damn bad you'll never make it to the foot of the hill?"

"Shoot to miss," the Old Man told us, grinned the Yuma Bull. "But it'll be dusk and the light won't be so good. A man can't tell where his bullets is goin' to go. Kin he, Missou'?"

"Especially," Missou' agreed, "when a man's got only one eye."

They sat on the slope and drank lukewarm beer. They had given the trusty a blacksnake with a piece of barbed wire twisted in the end.

"Whenever the Tejano slows down, Pedro, crack the whip," Missou' told him. "Nick his Texican hide so's the gnats and flies will have some blood to fat 'em."

HIS wrists raw and bleeding from the hot metal of the handcuffs, Tex Doyle spaded the red clay. The half-breed's blacksnake with its barbed end had flicked stinging cuts in his back and torn the rotten fabric of his sweat-soaked shirt to shreds. Sweat beaded on his forehead and trickled into his eyes.

Missou' and the Yuma Bull lazed on the ground, taking bottle after

bottle of the warm beer from the wet gunny sack between them. As the shadows of dusk gathered, the grave was nearly waist-deep. The trusty, Pedro, worn out from wielding his blacksnake, sat on his hunkers, his back against a wooden slab that marked the grave of some nameless convict.

Tex had grown almost immune to pain by now. He was tough and hard-muscled and the sweating was doing more good than harm, washing his skin clean of prison filth. A desperate plan had formed itself in his mind. He had worked it out to the last little detail and was biding his time until dusk.

The light was just about right now. The grave was deep enough to suit his purpose. He looked furtively up over the side of the pine-board box and saw Pedro watching him drowsily. Gripping his short-handled shovel in his steel-bound hands, he straightened up for Pedro to see him. Then he swayed dizzily, leaning on his shovel weakly, his head sagging. Slowly he dropped to one knee, gripping the shovel in his manacled hands.

Pedro, cursing softly so as not to disturb the two drowsy guards, got to his feet and came over to the open grave. Standing at its edge, he lashed down at the kneeling figure of the prisoner.

Tex's left hand grabbed the whip-lash and yanked quickly. Pedro, jerked off balance, toppled into the grave. Tex swung the short-handled shovel in a vicious arc and Pedro went limp without making a sound.

Tex peered cautiously above the edge of the grave. When he saw Missou' and the Yuma Bull lay sprawled on their backs, their hats over their faces, he climbed out of the grave slowly. The two dozing

guards were about a dozen paces away. He started toward them, the shovel gripped tightly in his hand-cuffed hands.

The Yuma Bull was pawing sleepily at the flies that had gotten beneath the big hat that covered his face. Suddenly Tex threw all caution aside. Before the Yuma Bull's eyes had cleared of their half-drunken stupor, the shovel in Tex's hands crashed down on his close-cropped, bull-necked head. The guard grunted and fell back, blood oozing from the gash above his cauliflower ear.

Tex yanked the six-shooter from the Yuma Bull's holster. He palmed it just as Missou', waking swiftly, jerked his gun.

The roar of the two big-calibered six-shooters blended. A lead slug burned Tex's ribs. He sent a second bullet into the writhing, twisting, lanky body of the one-eyed guard, then whirled and ran.

No man ever ran faster than Tex Doyle as he went down the slope toward the river. He reached the foot of the slope and fought his way through the brush toward the tall cottonwood. The big alarm bell was ringing up at the prison as he jerked loose the hackamore rope that tied the saddled horse to the tree. There was a lot of shooting as he swung into the saddle and rode away at a run.

The horse was Tex's own top cow horse, a sunburned sorrel he called Twister. His cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter were tied to the saddlehorn. He did not bother now to buckle on the belt, for he still had the Yuma Bull's big white-handled six-shooter. The only thing that now hindered him was the bloodstained steel handcuffs that fastened his swollen, lacerated wrists together with a five-inch

chain. The bullet gash along his ribs was no more painful than the numerous cuts in his back made by Pedro's blacksnake.

Now the stars were beginning to show. The air was clean and sweet and beginning to cool. He would have liked to stop long enough to lie awhile in the river, but he had to keep moving. He had cracked the skull of the Yuma Bull and shot the one-eyed Missou' twice. Killed them both, he reckoned, besides beefing the trusty. He hoped they were all three dead.

Tex wondered how the warden and Captain Bill Fox were going to take it. The killing of a couple of guards and a prison trusty was not exactly in accordance with the agreement regarding his law-sanctioned "escape."

But Tex Doyle, with a horse between his legs and a gun in his hand, did not have to worry about that. He had a job cut out for himself. If the law caught up with him again, he'd never be taken alive.

TEX rode with the night breeze fanning the sweat and blood dry on his skin. His brain was clearing of the red film that had covered it when he split the Yuma Bull's thick skull open with a shovel and shot bullets into Missou's belly. He was thinking more clearly now.

Captain Fox of the Arizona Rangers had given him his chance to escape. But, on the other hand, the law that Bill Fox stood for had tried to double-cross him. The law had tried to kill him by the Mexican *Ley del Fuego*. And going back a week or so to the night of his capture, Bill Fox had set a trap for him and captured him by a trick so that he could send him after Pablo Pierce. Dude had been railroaded to Yuma for killing a no-good dep-

uty. The law had planned to give him this same chance that Tex Doyle had been offered. Somehow it smelled bad in Tex's nostrils. If this was the law that honest men preached about, then those honest men were a short-sighted pack of fools. Why should Tex Doyle keep his promise to a law that had tried to kill him by the *Ley del Fuego*?

"I'd sooner throw in with Pablo Pierce!" he muttered aloud, his voice blotting out the last echoes of the prison's big alarm bell.

But he only half meant it. Because now that his brain was clearing and the heat inside his head was cooling in the night breeze, he was remembering bits of talk that had passed between the Yuma Bull and the one-eyed Missou' as they watched Pedro's whiplash flick bits of flesh from Tex's back.

Nothing that he could actually recall word for word. But the scattered bits of talk had woven a vague, ugly pattern that included Pablo Pierce in their own dealings. Half-hidden references to smuggling. Prisoners who had died at the prison after being sent there to rot and die slowly because Pablo Pierce had ordered it that way. They had spoken of Pablo Pierce as men speak of a big boss who gives them secret orders. The one-eyed Missou' had as much as said outright that they intended killing Tex because Captain Fox aimed to send him below the border to get Pablo Pierce. Missou' and the Yuma Bull had planned on disobeying the warden's orders about shooting to miss, not because they hated Tex Doyle, but because Tex was going after Pablo Pierce.

"The Tejano," Missou' had told the Yuma Bull, "ain't goin' to git down to Mesalina."

Mesalina! Tex had stopped only once at the little Mexican town at

the foot of the mountains at the edge of the Pinto Desert. Its population was a mixture of Indians, Mexicans and a few renegade Americans who hid out there in the hills. Strangers were not welcomed.

The mountainside was honey-combed with big caves that had been inhabited for hundreds of years by the descendants of the original dwellers whose relics of pottery and stone implements were still to be found with little seeking. There had been a mission established there once by some Franciscan padre. It had long ago been abandoned and its adobe walls were badly in need of repair. A renegade padre who had years ago been ex-communicated by his church was living there in the old ruins.

Tex had seen the man once—a tall, skeleton figure with a fleshless, leather-colored face and hairless skull. His brown robe was faded and patched and, instead of a crucifix, he carried a keen-bladed machete shoved in the mended cord that held his brown, cowled robe around his thin middle. Bare shanks and feet shoved in rawhide huarache sandals. He called himself Padre Juan, but the natives called him Padre Pelon—Pelon meaning bald.

This Padre Pelon ruled Mesalina. Ruled it with a skinny, knuckled hand that had the strength of a steel claw. He was said to be mad. Indians, mongrel Mexicans, and white men feared him, hated him, but obeyed him with a mixture of superstitious fear and sullen submissiveness that thinly masked their bitter hatred.

Padre Pelon knew how to play upon peon superstitions and ancient Indian beliefs, even as he had a way of handling the renegade white men who came to Mesalina. The so-called masses that he chanted were

a weird and barbaric rite of his own insane invention. He practiced a black magic voodoo witchcraft mixed with bits of Maya and Aztec rites and the crucifixion ceremonies of the Penitentes, sprinkling his chanting with a more or less meaningless jargon of Latin, Aztec, Mayan and Mexican words. His torture devices were copied after the rack and wheel of the Spanish Inquisition. His greed for gold was like the hunger of a starving man or the black-tongued thirst of one stranded in the Pinto Desert. Padre Pelon held a tyrant's sway over Mesalina. And Missou' had hinted that Pablo Pierce was to be found there.

TEX DOYLE wondered if there could be any sort of connection between Padre Pelon and Don Pablo. Mesalina would be the ideal hide-out for such a man as Pablo Pierce. There was no law at that hellish town except the laws made and enforced by Padre Pelon. Tex had been there only once and that was at night. He and half a dozen cowpunchers had sighted the lights of the town and had ridden there to rest their horses and get water and some warm grub for a change. They were drifting south to pick up a bunch of Mexican cattle.

Padre Pelon had come into the cantina where they were drinking tequila and eating Mexican food. Tex remembered the man's eyes. Yellow as the eyes of a goat, sunken deep in dark sockets in a skull-like face. The voice that came from the twisting, thin-lipped mouth had been as deep-toned as an old bell.

"Finish your supper quickly," Padre Pelon had told them, standing there with the candlelight throwing ghostly shadows across his evil-looking face. "Then ride on. Be

gone inside of an hour or you'll find your last resting place in the graveyard. Be on your way, gringos. Return no more to Mesalina unless you are tired of life!"

He had turned and walked out, his huaraches scuffling on the worn tiles of the cantina floor. Tex remembered that after the man had left there had been a pungent odor left in his wake. The odor reminded him of a ranchhouse that had been fumigated after a smallpox scare. The doctor had closed the doors and windows and burned a lot of sulphur in a dishpan.

Tex and his men had not taken the warning seriously until they heard the tolling of a bell. They had heard the muffled sounds of a crowd gathering outside in the night. Bolting their food, they had gone out, their hands on their guns. There was a little moonlight that night and it seemed that every patch of shadow in the town was alive.

They could catch furtive movements in the black shadows and they heard vague noises. The bell at the old mission had kept tolling slowly. Tex and his men had mounted their horses and ridden out of Mesalina, their nerves on edge. They were hard-bitten cowpunchers who were not easy to scare, but there had been something about the whole thing that had chilled their blood that night. They had ridden past the ruins of old buildings that had huge pillars and arcades and queer statues of stone. There was a river that ran through the town and they could make out huge palm trees and other trees. They had passed one old place that no doubt dated back to the civilization of the Aztecs. From the neglected old gardens came the heavy odor of gardenias.

The natives of Mesalina, Indians, Mexicans, the sprinkling of gringo

whites, let the magnificent old palaces stand empty, monuments to a mysterious, heroic past their ignorant brains could not comprehend. They had built squalid little adobe huts where they ate and drank and slept. Patches of corn and chili grew alongside the neglected gardens of gardenias and orchids.

A huge old Spanish bell, hundreds of years old, had tolled its warning and Tex Doyle and his men had ridden across the Pinto Desert and out from under the strange, forbidding shadow of Mesalina's mountains.

Now Tex Doyle was going back to Mesalina. Even though he felt under no special obligation to Captain Bill Fox, he had an almost overwhelming craving to meet this Pablo Pierce face to face. And he wanted to tell the black-eyed, red-lipped Chacha how Dude had died at Yuma Prison.

CHAPTER III

A MESSAGE FROM PADRE PELON

THERE was a ranch a few miles north of the Mexican border. It belonged to a man called Greasy Smith. Tex Doyle rode up just before dawn broke. A light showed at the adobe cabin where Greasy lived alone. When the man inside heard the sound of Tex's horse he came to the door, a six-shooter in his hand. "Drop it!" barked Tex. "Drop it, Greasy, or I'll shoot your belly full of holes!"

Greasy Smith was a lanky, shifty-eyed man with a wart on his big, ugly nose. The wart twitched and the gun dropped from his hand.

"Tex!" Fear made the rancher's voice a whining whisper. "I thought you was—"

"You thought I was rottin' to death at Yuma, you double-crossin' son," said Tex. "You sold me out



The Aztec temple of Padre Pelon was a death trap, but Tex walked into it alone!

to Ranger Bill Fox. Fetch your lantern to the blacksmith shop. Act pert, Greasy, or I'll kill you."

Tex kept his six-shooter shoved against the man's ribs while Greasy filed and sawed off the handcuffs. The job took nearly an hour. Greasy was dripping with sweat, shaking with fear, when the broken handcuffs dropped to the dirt floor beside the anvil.

"Don't kill me, Tex," he pleaded. "That Ranger had somethin' on me! He made me git you here that night! So help me, Tex, he crowded me into trickin' yuh! Don't kill me! Don't kill—"

Tex Doyle's fist crashed into the man's face. Greasy, blood spurting from his smashed nose, reeled backward, tripped and went down as heavily as a felled ox. Then Tex mounted his horse and rode off into the darkness that was showing the first gray streak of dawn in the east.

An hour later he rode into a box canyon horse camp just below the border. Half a dozen cowpunchers were squatted on their boot heels eating breakfast. Their hands came away from their guns when they recognized Tex.

"You look like somethin' the plow-pushers set up in a cornfield to scare off the crows?" one of them told him. "We was just tryin' to figger how we'd work it to blast you out o' Yuma. What's them law sons done to yuh, Tex?"

"They initiated me into their lodge, is all," Tex grinned. "Don't git too close, fellers. I'm as lousy as a sheepherder. Is there a drink in camp?"

Tex could josh about it now. But his cowpunchers did not laugh at his jokes. They eyed his swollen, blood-caked wrist, his back that was a mass of cuts. He wolfed his food and washed it down with cups of

strong black coffee. They waited, smoking cigarettes, grim-lipped, hard-eyed, for him to tell his story and give them their orders.

"Never knowed a smoke could feel so good in a man's lungs," he told them. "I'm goin' to soak my hide in the crick, then sleep a week. Then we're takin' a little pasear down into Sonora. Down deep into the middle of 'er. Remember Mesalina?"

"Ol' skull face and the fire bell ringin'?"

"Church bell," Tex corrected. "Made in Spain way back in twelve, fourteen hundred. Pablo Pierce is down yonder at Mesalina. Remember Chacha?"

"Man, oh, mister! That night in ol' Tucson when she sang songs at you till that tinhorn called Dude got so jealous he couldn't read the backs of his marked cards. That little señorita shore made a strong play for you and you just set there like a cigar-store Injun instead of dancin' with her."

"I liked the little Dude feller," said Tex, his face reddening under their joshing. "I seen 'em bury him at Yuma. He chawed his wrists till he bled to death. He got sent up for killin' that big deputy, remember? I got a notion we'll be watchin' Chacha dance down at Mesalina."

"You ain't gone a little locoed there at Yuma, have you, boss?"

"Mebbeso I have. I'm goin' to Mesalina to play an old Spanish card game called Ombre. I'm playin' it with Pablo Pierce and mebbe that Padre Pelon. The stake is called Chacha!"

IT was a week later and the sun and wind had colored Tex Doyle's face once more. His thick black hair was no longer matted with sweat and dust. Only healed scars

marked his wrists and back. The old gay, reckless little lights danced in the depths of his gray eyes when he grinned. He was bathed and shaved and decked out in a new flannel shirt and buckskin foxed pants. A gray Stetson was slanted on his head and he wore new boots, his pants legs shoved inside the ornately stitched tops. In addition to his own six-shooter he carried the ivory-handled gun he had taken from the Yuma Bull.

He and his men had camped the night before at a waterhole out on the Pinto Desert. Two days ago he had learned that news had already gone ahead of him that Tex Doyle was headed for Mesalina to hunt down Pablo Pierce. Tex reckoned that Missou' must have lived long enough to send that warning. So yesterday he had written a note and sent it to Padre Pelon at Mesalina. He had written in bold letters:

FOR PABLO PIERCE,

In care of Padre Pelon at Mesalina:

I understand you play an old three-man Spanish card game called Ombre. The stake you play for is called Chacha. A gambler named Dude once played your Ombre game and won. His Chacha went back to Mesalina. I am coming to Mesalina to play Ombre.

TEX DOYLE.

It was partly guesswork, partly the piecing together the mumbling talk of the Negro prisoner who had died at the prison. The Negro had talked about Dude and the old Spanish game of Ombre and the stake they called Chacha which he had won, only to lose again. Ombre was a game Tex had heard of vaguely in connection with the evil name of Padre Pelon. It was supposed to be as old in Mexico as the date of the first Spanish invasion and the steel-helmeted conquistadores. Padre Pelon had introduced

it in Mesalina. It was a pool jackpot game. The stake, ordinarily money, was called Chacha.

Dude had been to Mesalina once, lured there by his gambler's restless hunt for new fields. The dancing girl Chacha was said to have come from Mesalina and some of her dances were the ancient Maya dances that had an Asiatic rather than Spanish origin. Some of her songs were the almost forgotten chants of the Maya Indians. But her song about Don Pablo was said to be one of her own making.

So it had all added up and Tex Doyle was fitting the parts of the scattered puzzle together with bits of shrewd guesswork.

Last night an Indian from Mesalina had brought him a small package. When Tex had asked him who had sent it the Indian mozo had shaken his head and made inarticulate sounds. Then he had opened his mouth and pointed with a grimy forefinger. He was tongueless. Tex had shivered a little inside and let him go. Then he undid the black cloth that the messenger had handed him. Inside the cloth was a deck of Spanish cards, containing only forty cards. The eights, nines, and tens had been taken out. Ombre is played with such a forty-card deck.

With the deck of cards had come a small pen-and-ink sketch no larger than one of the playing cards. It was painstakingly, skillfully done, the handiwork of a true artist. The sketch depicted a card game. A round table with a candle fitted in an ornate candlestick was set in the middle of the table. There were three players, a skull-visaged, cowed padre, a Mexican *charro* with a short mask covering the upper part of his face, and an American cowpuncher whose face bore a startling resem-

blance to Tex Doyle. Standing off to one side of the card game stood a Mexican dancing girl with a guitar. It was a clever likeness of Chacha.

So Padre Pelon and Pablo Pierce had sent an answer to Tex Doyle's challenge.

The artist who had drawn that sketch must, Tex reckoned, be Padre Pelon. The renegade priest's yellow, black-socketed goat eyes had stared hard at Tex that one time they had met. Those eyes had missed no detail of the cowpuncher's face.

He showed the picture to his half dozen men. They were a reckless, fearless, hard-bitten crew, hand-picked for their cool-headedness and proven courage. They had been spoiling for the chance to visit Padre Pelon's town again. They had heard it told many times that Mesalina had the most beautiful dancing girls and the best tequila, mescal, and pulque in Mexico.

BUT Mesalina meant more than that to Tex Doyle and his cowpuncher crew. They made a dangerous living gathering Mexican cattle and drifting their herds across the border to a ready Arizona market without the legal formality of inspection and duty payments. Mesalina had water and a wealth of feed for cattle and horses, back in its broken hills. Hundreds of wild cattle could be gathered there. And it would be an ideal stopping place along the way north for the herds they fetched up from lower Sonora. With Mesalina for their headquarters, Tex Doyle and his crew could afford to buy their Mexican cattle and cross them legally at the border, making a decent profit and living an honest existence. Padre Pelon had kept out men like Tex Doyle. He would not allow any roundup crews

to work the Mesalina hills for unbranded cattle. Pable Pierce claimed those cattle. His vaqueros were the only riders allowed in the hills. Those vaqueros were sent out to raid the big ranchos and drive off cattle and horses. Pablo Pierce claimed the Mesalina hills for his range. The mad Padre Pelon protected him.

"If we had Mesalina," Tex had often told his men, "we could turn honest and have the world by the tail."

He repeated it now as he showed them the pen sketch of Padre Pelon, Pablo Pierce, and Tex Doyle playing Ombre to the dancing girl, Chacha.

"We can't count the odds against us because we've never had the chance up till now to look over the layout," he warned them. "But the odds will be plenty big and like as not they'll be plenty tough. There's a big chance that we'll all git killed. That's why I'm givin' you boys a chance to bunch it, right now. I'm not askin' any of you to ride with me to Mesalina tonight."

"Try and keep us from trailin' along," grinned a lanky Texan. "We got nothin' to lose but our hides an' there's a bounty on mine in the States. I'm thinkin' of hookin' up with some purty little señorita that will patch my britches, cook my grub, and sing purty songs of a long evenin'. Hell, ain't we bin talkin' about takin' over Mesalina fer years? We'll kick that Padre Pelon in the pants and—"

"He don't wear no pants," put in a tow-headed young cowboy about Tex's age. "And it'll take more'n a kick to settle that hombre's hash. We'll git that fake padre on the wrong end of a smoke pole and pull the trigger six times. Remember how them flowers smelled that night? They shore smell purtier

than the wild roses in Montana. I sighted the purtiest-lookin' little lady I ever hope to see, peekin' through the cantina door that night before that ga'nt-lookin' padre told us he didn't like us. Just gimme a girl like that to learn me how to talk Mex and I'll never cross the border no more to see if the Montana law is close trailin' me. Just lead me to Mesalina, Tex, and I'll fight for my chances down here."

"They claim," said a small, gray-mustached cowhand, licking his sun-cracked lips, "that there's likker there at Mesalina so old that a thimble full will give a man a jag. And if there's a woman down yonder that kin cook, I'll not be givin' a damn if she's as fat and homely as an Apache squaw. And I'm rearin' to swing a loop at some of them wild cattle back in the Mesalina hills."

"That Padre Pelon," put in the tall, fine-looking Mexican they knew as Sonora, "ees an evil man. He ees no padre, that hombre. He speet on the church and make a mock of the Señor Dios and the Lady of Guadalupe, the *Santo* of my people. I tell you, Tejano, when that *cabron*, that Padre Pelon, ees dead, then there weel be a beeg fiesta at Mesalina. There are good people at Mesalina. Good men, good womens. They weel make you like a keeng. *Viva Tejano!* But I make for you right now a warning, compadre. Ees not the game of Ombre they weel play tonight at Mesalina. Ees a game they weel play weeth the gon and the knife. Shoot first that Padre Pelon een the middle of the belly. Or eef you weel geeve to me that honors, compadre, I weel get the jobs done. I was born at Mesalina. My father was keel' by that Padre Pelon."

It was the longest speech any of

them had ever heard him make. The soft-spoken Sonora was an enigma to them. They had seen his headlong, reckless courage tested. They had heard him laugh like a child at some little thing. They had seen him go off alone to pray at some remote little shrine in the mountains; he always carried candles to light at the little peon shrines where a crudely carved image of Mexico's Lady of Guadalupe set in a sheltered, rocky niche. Sonora was the only Mexican in the crew. Until right now no man of them had known that he came from Mesalina. He had not been with them that night when they had paid their reckless, daring visit to the forbidden town.

"The job of handlin' Padre Pelon belongs to me," Tex Doyle told Sonora now. "I'm playin' the Ombre game with him and Pablo Pierce—if there is a Pablo Pierce. If I don't win the jackpot, you and the boys kin pick up my hand and play it out. It's time we hit the trail. *Andale!* Let's go!"

CHAPTER IV

A TEXICAN TAKES A TRIP

AN orange-colored moon was rising above the ragged skyline as Tex Doyle rode into Mesalina with his six heavily-armed cowpunchers. Sonora rode in the lead with Tex. They talked in subdued tones. The others kept a wary silence, their hands on their guns, their eyes watching the shadows.

They rode past the scattered adobe huts that were showing candlelights in the windows, past the ancient Aztec ruins with the sound of running water in the canals and the scent of gardenias heavy in the soft night air. Then the tolling of the ancient Spanish bell announced

their coming. Hidden eyes watched them from the shadows that flanked the wide, winding, moonlit street.

Sonora pointed to the candles lighting the interior of what had once been some sort of Aztec temple. Stone statues guarded the wide entrance. Above the open door was carved the great Aztec calendar, the central face of the sun god Tonatiuh, its pointed tongue sticking out. It was surrounded by four squares that represent the four destructions of the world by jaguars, wind, rain, and water. Ringed around the four squares is a band representing the twenty days in the Aztec month. The rays of the sun and two plumed monsters, replicas of the stone statues on either side of the huge-pillared doorway, stood at the foot of the circular calendar.

Standing in the entrance, the candlelight at his back, was the tall, skeleton, skull-visaged Padre Pelon. His big machete was shoved in the cord of his faded-brown cowed monk's robe. He was alone. His deep, cavernous voice sounded through the echoes of the tolling bell in the distance.

"Leave your men outside. Unless you are afraid to come in alone."

"Take me with you, compadre," whispered Sonora.

Tex shook his head. "Stay out here with the others. But if you hear shootin' in there, don't let anything stop you."

Tex Doyle swung from his horse, handing his bridle reins to the Mexican cowpuncher. He hitched up the two gun belts that slanted across his middle. His spurs jingling with a true Texan defiance and contempt for all the renegade priest's stage setting, he strode toward the gaunt figure. Padre Pelon's eyes were spots of yellow fire set in black sockets.

From inside somewhere came the strumming of a guitar and a woman's soft voice singing in a language Tex reckoned was the old Aztec tongue. That was Chacha's voice. No other woman had that



untamed, birdlike clarity and beauty that pulled at a man's heart. Heartless she-devil Chacha might be, but she had the voice of an angel.

Padre Pelon turned without a word and led the way through the ancient hallway. At the end of a stone corridor, its walls covered with carvings, was a room that was lighted by a single candle that was the span of a man's two hands in circumference. It was set in a massive gold, exquisitely carved candlestick and stood in the center of a large onyx table.

Chacha stood in a corner at the edge of the candlelight. Her face had the pallor of ivory save for her carmine lips. Her eyes were deep pools of shadowed black. Her voice came from behind her red lips with an almost unearthly clarity. Her expression was set, unchanging. The sorrows of the world seemed to be mirrored in her dark eyes. She

might have been under some weird, devilish, black magic spell. Never before had Tex Doyle seen such un-touchable beauty. His arrogance was gone. He removed his hat with an unconscious gesture and stood there staring at her like a man hypnotized.

Then the skeleton figure in the faded-brown monk's robe passed before her like a ghoulish shadow, blotting out the sight of her beauty.

PADRE PELON'S skeleton forefinger pointed to one of the two high-backed carved Spanish chairs that were upholstered in scarlet plush, the wood covered with heavy gold paint. He sat down in the chair opposite. The high-backed chair hid the girl completely. Only her voice and the scent of gardenias told Tex that she was still in the room.

"You are a bold man, Tejano," said the deep-voiced padre. "You are also a fool. Unless you want death. What sent you here on this suicidal visit to Mesalina?"

"It was better than dying in prison. I made a deal with the ranger captain to get Pablo Pierce."

"In return for your freedom," said the skull face, its yellow eyes staring. "What other reason?"

"A gambler named Dude died at the prison. He killed himself. Dude was my friend. I wanted to find Chacha and tell her how he died."

"You're wasting breath, Tejano. She can't hear you. She's under a hypnotic spell. Blame me, not her, if she did not appear at that damned gringo court. I sent for her and she came. She came because she could not help but come. I could fetch her back from the far end of China if I so willed it." Padre Pelon leaned a little forward in his chair. His almost lipless mouth spread

away from bone-white teeth. The yellow eyes glittered savagely.

"What else fetched you to Mesalina?"

Tex Doyle felt the strange power of the yellow eyes that seemed slowly to grow larger until they were the only thing he could see in the bare room. The girl's song filled his brain. He did not even hear his own voice as he sat there, unable to move, unable to give any other answer than the one that came from his dry throat.

"Chacha!"

The yellow eyes shrank back to their normal size. But try as he did, Tex Doyle could see nothing else. Just that pair of yellow eyes. It might have been split seconds, or it might have been hours. The girl's song was in his ears. The yellow eyes were the only reality in the room. He was powerless to move or speak. He wondered if he was dead and this was part of death.

Then he heard spurs. Spurs that sounded like the tinkling of bells. And in the flickering candlelight the owner of the yellow eyes took shape once more. But now the eyes looked at him through holes cut in a short black mask. The owner of the eyes wore a charro suit of black glove leather heavily embroidered with gold thread. A gold-cruled black sombrero. Black boots and a pair of huge-roweled gold spurs.

The girl was singing her song about Don Pablo. And the voice of the man in the charro suit was the deep, cavernous voice that matched the yellow eyes of Padre Pelon. The head that wore the gold-cruled sombrero was covered with a tightly pulled black silk handkerchief.

"So you came to Mesalina to play a silly game of cards called Ombre for your Chacha" taunted the man in black. "Cards are for women, for

musty padres. I give you another game, gringo! A game that caballeros play! The stake that goes to the winner is that same Chacha. But it takes a man with red blood, not milk, in his veins to play it. You came to Mesalina to kill Pablo Pierce! I am that man! I am Pablo Pierce!"

TEX DOYLE'S brain was trying to grasp all that this man with the yellow eyes was telling him in that deep, sepulchral voice. The old Spanish bell was tolling over at the ruined mission that had been so defiled and malformed and changed by this charlatan who had been outlawed by his church and in revenge had distorted and twisted its rites into a black witchcraft and superstitious devil worship. This human thing of skin and bone and tough sinew who had perfected the practice of hypnotism until he had not only the girl Chacha but countless others under the spell of his yellow stare. Padre Pelon and Pablo Pierce were the same man, a man with a streak of insane genius who had cunningly built up both characters into legendary proportions.

Padre Pelon, Tex saw, had shed his faded old brown monk's robe and huaraches. He stood there now, white teeth bared below the short black mask, dressed in the black charro clothes of a Mexican caballero. Of the ragged padre there remained only the yellow eyes and the deep-toned voice. A pair of gold-handled, gold-inlaid six-shooters hung in ornately carved and gold-embroidered holsters on his lean thighs.

The man was a superb actor with a genius for melodrama. His yellow eyes held Tex Doyle with their devilish spell that let the hypnotized man realize with crystal clarity all

that there was to know about Pablo Pierce and Padre Pelon. Helpless as a rabbit under the conjuring spell of a coiled rattler, Tex had his hand on his six-shooter but was absolutely powerless to draw it, thumb back the hammer and pull the trigger.

Chacha was still singing her song that boasted the brave deeds of Don Pablo. She was as deep or even deeper under the mesmeric spell of this insane man.

Pablo Pierce had composed the words and tune, even as he had drawn that pen sketch. Chacha's singing of it fed and intoxicated his vanity. For what woman on earth or beyond this earth could look upon him with any emotion save loathing and disgust and fear.

"Listen, Tejano!" he cried exultantly. "Hear her! The sweetest voice ever put in a human throat. The purest, most beautiful woman on earth. No man has ever touched her lips. No man ever will. She is the goddess of this old temple. She was born here. She will die on that old Aztec altar when I so will it. When I am about to die, then she dies. I have the knife ready for her white throat. But as long as the Padre Pelon lives, she shall live to sing the songs he and Pablo Pierce teach her. Padre Pelon teaches her the songs of the Mayas and Aztecs. Don Pablo teaches her the songs of Mexico."

His yellow eyes glittered as he spoke. "She ran away once. That gambler, Dude, who came here to play Ombre with Padre Pelon got her away. He was the only man who ever came into this room and left it alive. The only man who would not come under the power of my eyes. We played Ombre in this room. He was lucky. Perhaps he cheated. But he did more than that. We had wine to drink and he slipped

something into my goblet. When I woke up he was gone. Chacha was gone with him. I sent a man to bring her back. He got there the same night that the gambler killed a deputy sheriff who tried to paw her. That Dude wanted her to marry him. That card sharper married to the goddess of this Aztec temple! That goddess of beauty and song marry a cheap card player! May his soul rot in hell! Boasting that he won her at Ombre! That she was the stake, the chacha at a card game! May the devil poke red-hot needles in his eyes and peel the hide from his flesh with a white-hot blade! No man has touched her! Not even I! I, least of all! Did I not find her at the foot of the Aztec altar after an earthquake had razed every building in Mesalina to the ground? She lay there, a beautiful white child. The only unsoiled thing in Mesalina that red dawn. I raised her. Schooled her. Reared her as the Aztec and Maya priests reared their chosen goddess a thousand years ago!"

The renegade's eyes blazed with fanatic fire. The sepulchral voice echoed against the stone walls.

"You lie! You lie, you blasphemer!"

The voice spoke the Mexican tongue. It was harsh, taut, its owner invisible.

"You lie! She is my sister! *Cabron!*"

CHAPTER V

DEATH TRYST FOR A TYRANT

LIKE a man gripped by a horrible nightmare, Tex Doyle recognized the voice of the Mexican they called Sonora. He saw the black-clad charro Pablo Pierce jerk his gold-embellished guns. But his own hand was as though paralyzed. The

gold-barreled guns roared. Chacha's shrill scream and the crash of the guns broke the spell that gripped Tex Doyle.

The next split second he and Pablo Pierce were shooting at one another at point-blank range.

Outside there was the rattle of gunfire. Shouts. The old Spanish bell was clanging loudly, rapidly. Filling the Mesalina hills with its deep-toned echoes. The stone walls sent back the crashing, ear-deafening echoes of the blazing guns.

Tex Doyle leaned heavily against the green onyx table, a gun in each hand. Shooting until both weapons were empty. The man called Pablo Pierce lay on the stone floor, a widening pool of blood under his grinning, skull-like face.

At the entrance to the room the Mexican they knew only as Sonora was lying on his side, holding his hand against the bullet hole in his chest. There was a smile on his lips and his eyes were bright with tiny sparks of light. He was watching the girl known as Chacha as she went toward the onyx table where Tex, wounded in the leg and one shoulder, was propping himself to keep from falling.

"You remember me, Chacha?" Tex spoke to her as she stepped around the bullet-riddled body of the man who had held her these years under his diabolic hypnotic spell.

She nodded slowly. "At a place called Tucson, where that man Dude took me. There was a fiesta. I sang you a song. I asked you to take me away and hide me where nobody could find me. You had eyes that were kind and not like those of an animal that wants to grab me. But you made fun of me. You told me I was a she-devil that made eyes at every man she saw. That

night when I was alone I cried tears. Who is that man bleeding and dead on the floor? He has only a dead skull covered with yellow skin for a face but he bleeds. Who is he? What is he?"

She had come to Tex as easily and readily as some small child. She was holding to his hand with a child's trusting grip.

"You don't recognize him?" asked Tex. "Don Pablo? Pablo Pierce? Padre Pelon?"

"No. Who are those people? Who am I? Who are you?"

"*Madre de Dios* be thanked," cried Sonora, his lips twisting in a smile. "She does not remember, compadre! Your name is Dolores de la Vaca and you're my sister. That is my compadre Tex Doyle whose hand you are hanging onto. But unless something is done about stopping us from bleeding like two bulls just finished by the matador, then you'll be talking to a pair as dead as that evil black skeleton on the floor. *Dios* be thanked, Tejano, here come our compadres!"

Tex Doyle's men came clattering down the stone corridor. Tex shoved his empty guns back in their holsters and put his arm around the waist of the girl who flushed and smiled up at him in a sort of childish embarrassment. All the boldness, the gay coquetry of Chacha was gone. She was Dolores de la Vaca. She spoke her new name softly. Tex grinned down at her.

"We'll be changin' that when we locate a real padre," he told her.

"Why? But it is a nice name. Dolores de la Vaca." Plainly she did not understand. Sonora was laughing softly at Tex. The cow-punchers had halted and were staring uncertainly at Tex and the girl and the dead Pablo Pierce.

OUTSIDE there was wild shouting and laughter and the hysterical weeping of women. The old Spanish bell was ringing louder than ever.

"Before I came in," Sonora explained to Tex, "I sent the word out that their damned Padre Pelon was dead. That he had been killed by a great caballero called Tejano Doyle. But unless somebody stops the blood that is running out of us like wine from a barrel with the spigot broken, you and I, my compadre, will not be alive to enjoy that fiesta they are making."

It was the girl Dolores who did a skillful, thorough job of dressing and bandaging their wounds. No bones had been broken. The bullet wound in Sonora was a flesh wound in the muscle of his chest and shoulder. Tex's wounds were merely flesh wounds.

The dead body of the man who for so many years had ruled the people of Mesalina was taken away and burned on a huge pyre. The blaze mounted in the sky. Indians came down from their caves to dance and chant around the burning pyre. It was a dance of thanksgiving and deliverance. Their brown bodies, young and old, stripped save for a breech clout, gyrated in barbaric unison.

The Mexicans were drinking and singing gay songs. The few renegade whites who belonged to that secret organization of which the prison guards Missou' and the Yuma Bull were members had fled. Those who lingered and tried to put up a fight had been shot down by the Mexicans and Tex Doyle's men.

Tonight, Mesalina belonged to Tex Doyle. In a few weeks he was to get a lifelong grant from the Presidente of Mexico to the Mesa-

lina hills. Sonora, whose real name was Ramon de la Vaca, was destined to bring that about. For all this land had once been a part of the vast de la Vaca grant that dated back to the days of the conquistadores.

Tonight, while the town of Mesalina celebrated their great fiesta of deliverance, while the Mexicans burned the ugly heathen images Padre Pelon had carved of wood, fashioning them from his insane dreamings, Mexican women brought out long-hidden *santos* and altar cloths and blessed candles and set them up in the old mission. Relays of small boys pulled all night long on the heavy rawhide pull rope that swung the ancient bell of the Franciscan padres. There was dancing in the street. Tex's cowpunchers were made welcome. They were given wine and tequila to drink, fresh fruit and all kinds of Mexican food to eat. They danced with the prettiest señoritas at Mesalina.

Tex Doyle and Dolores sat in a moonlight patio and talked. Tex did not tell her how the gambler, Dude, had died. He and her brother had made their agreement to shield her from the ugly things that had happened before the death of Padre Pelon. She must be told gradually, and by the man she had come to love with such childish simplicity and naïve trust. Chacha was as dead as the evil thing called Padre Pelon.

Some day Tex Doyle would send word to Ranger Captain Bill Fox that Pablo Pierce was dead and his outlaw gang broken up. It would be stale news to the ranger captain by then. Tex hoped that the law in Arizona Territory would whitewash his record. He had no way of knowing that it would be done sooner than he hoped.

For in the prison hospital under ranger guard, were Missou' and the Yuma Bull. Both were, as the warden grimly stated, too tough to kill with six-shooter slugs or a shovel, but not tough enough to survive a hanging. The trusty, Pedro, whose skull had also been thick enough to survive the rap on the head Tex had given him, had made a long confession that linked Missou' and the Yuma Bull and other men with Pablo Pierce. Missou' and the Yuma Bull were slated to be hanged.

But tonight belonged to Tex Doyle and Dolores. There was the heavy scent of gardenias in the soft night air and a round, orange-colored moon. They sat on an ancient Aztec stone bench and their voices blended softly in the shelter of the ruins of an ancient civilization. The soft shadows were friendly, perfumed with the gardenias. Perhaps a thousand years ago other lovers had sat on this same old stone seat. If they did, probably their words were much the same as the words of Tex Doyle tonight as he whispered in the girl's dark hair.

THE END.



FANGS OF FURY

by GEORGE CORY FRANKLIN



WHEN the aspens on the hillside turn red and yellow, and our smooth coats begin to get rough, we know winter is not far away. Not that I care much about that, because Peak

Brothers take good care of all their stock; and Toby, Ginger and I are fed the best of timothy and clean, white oats. We each of us have a stall, at the end of a long manger that separates the three strings of mules.

Mules that work together get fond of one another, and don't like to be separated in the stable, so Al and Jumbo Peak had the mangers built down the middle, and one for Ginger's string across the end farthest from where I stand. Toby is tied right across from me, which suits us fine, and the mules like it that way, too.

One evening, when we pulled in beside the platform where the ore sacks are taken off the backs of the mules, there were two strange men waiting. I didn't care for their scent and turned away, so that Al couldn't get Topsy up to the platform to be unloaded.

"What ails you, Chief?" Al scolded. "I never knew you to do that trick before." He took hold of my bit and made me back up, but I turned my head away and wouldn't look toward the strangers, though I couldn't help but hear their voices.

"Is your name Peak?" one of them asked:

"That's the one I've been answering to for thirty-five years," Al replied.

"We want to hire a packer and about five mules to take us bear and lion hunting over on Pole Creek," the man explained. "My name is Patton." He jerked his head toward the other stranger. "And this is Mr. Snyder."

"I can spare the mules," Al said. "How about horses?"

"We hired two from a rancher and figured you would furnish one for the packer," Patton said.

Jumbo had come up now, and he spoke to Al. "Why don't you go yourself?" he suggested. "Humpy and I can handle what ore will be coming out, and it will be a vacation for you."

So, that's how it came about that next day Al rode me out on a trail I'd never been over. I led Topsy and four other mules, loaded with camp stuff. The two men rode behind the string of mules, which suited me all right. This trail we were on led up a narrow rocky gulch to timberline, then over some pretty grassy flats and down into a wide valley, with spruce forests on both sides. Al stopped me and waited for the men to come up.

"This is South Pole Creek," he told them. "That's good bear country off there to the right."

Patton wanted to go right over there and camp among the trees, but Al talked him out of it. "If you want to get a bear, you'd better hide your camp lower down and walk back to the hunting ground." Snyder agreed, so we went on down the valley until we came to some cliffs, where Al decided to make camp.

Two or three times I caught scent of bear—it's like that of a dog that's been in swimming—and I didn't like it, but so long as Al was with me, I wasn't going to show that I was nervous. Topsy crowded close to me, and the other mules got so touchy that they shied at every little bush and shadow. The horses Patton and Snyder rode were cow ponies from a ranch farther down on the Lake Fork, and because they felt strange to us, they were very nervous.

Al had never hobbled me before

in all the years I'd worked for him, and it made me feel bad to think that he didn't trust me to stay near camp. I put my nose down and smelled of him when he was buckling the leather cuffs around my legs, and I was surprised to get a scent that told me Al wasn't happy. I knew he was anxious and worried, and that made everything seem strange and unfriendly to me. I looked up toward the high peaks, but the rocks seemed to scold me, and I couldn't get any comfort from the other stock. I was homesick for the stable, and wished I was back there across the manger from Toby eating my supper of oats and timothy.

AL hobbled all the mules, too, and staked the cow ponies, before he made a fire between some big rocks and started to cook a meal. But that didn't keep the bear smell from coming down from the rocks above the camp. Topsy kept so close to me that I could hardly move enough to graze, and the other mules would jerk their heads up every little bit, look up the valley and snort. There was no use denying it, the whole outfit was bear-scared, and the least little thing would stampede them.

It wasn't just smell alone that scared us. There were lions in the cliffs above the camp, and every little while the booming howl of a lobo wolf would float across the valley. It seemed to me like the whole place was as dangerous as the gulch below Big Casino snowslide after a heavy storm. The hunting calls of gray wolves and the squalling of big cats made the *yip-yip-yipping* of coyotes sound like sweet music. They were the only animals I heard that I wasn't afraid of.

I didn't sleep any that night, and when daylight came I was a short

distance from camp. I called to Al as soon as I saw his roll out of his blankets, and he came out and took off the hobbles. He comforted me with a slap on the rump, and said, "I'd ought to have known you wouldn't quit me, Chief, even if things did look queer. Now you go and eat."

Pretty soon the sun shone warm and made us all feel better. There was no bear smell to scare us now, and the mules grazed off in the open, though they still kept an ear cocked toward the cliffs.

Before long, Al and the two men went away toward the forest, all of them carrying their guns. I watched as long as I could see them, then, since everything seemed peaceful, I stretched out for a nap.

The sun was high when Topsy waked me. She came up close and nudged me with her nose, and when I raised my head she pointed up the valley with her long ears and snorted gently. I got up and looked, but couldn't see anything. There was no wind and no bear smell. I couldn't figure out what was the matter with Topsy. I listened, but couldn't hear anything. Pretty soon the other mules came up close to where we stood, and I saw that Al had taken off their hobbles, too. He knew that nothing would make them leave me in the daytime, and he trusted me to keep the outfit there until he came back.

I hadn't drunk since the day before, so I walked slowly down to the creek, the mules following close. I had just taken a swallow of water when I heard a gun not far away. The sound seemed to come from up the valley. Topsy jumped and ran up onto a little knoll, snorting and stamping nervously. Then she ran back to me and hugged up close. She was shaking all over, like it was

cold, and right off after that, here came Patton and Snyder, running as hard as they could. They rushed up to their ponies, threw the saddles on them, and then began catching and saddling the mules. They strung them together as quickly as they could; then Snyder picked up my bridle and started toward me.

Of course I wouldn't stand for that, so I turned and trotted out into the park. Patton jumped on his horse and shook out a loop.

"I'll catch him, Bill," he yelled.

I hadn't had a rope thrown at me since the day five years before when Al had caught me, but I'd seen them thrown aplenty. This pony Patton was riding was quick as a cat, and a real rope horse. He made a foxy play, as if he was going to run past me, then stopped, whirled on one foot and dashed in close enough so that Patton had an easy throw. I ducked my head as the rope hissed over me, and did a little fast footwork, that carried me to the edge of the trees. Then I ran up the valley in the direction I had seen Al go in the morning. Snyder shot at me with his rifle several times, but the bullets only cut the branches of some trees and none of them hit me.

I SOON found Al's tracks and followed them, until they turned out of the main valley of Pole Creek and up a narrow canyon. The air here was moist and loaded with lion smell. I'd never been so scared in my life. Last night had been a bad night, but then I had known that Al was only a short distance from me. Now I was on my own, with myself to look out for, and every step taking me farther into a place that smelled of death, and made me think of sharp claws and long, white teeth. Once I saw a long, yellow body skulk behind a rock on the

side of the canyon, but I wasn't as much afraid of the cats I could see, as I was of those I couldn't.

The overhanging branches were more dangerous to me now than snowslides or forest fires, and there was no way to avoid them. I didn't know how far it was through this awful place, nor what I would find at the end of the canyon, but I couldn't stop here; so I hurried under the first tree and then turned to see what happened. There was a lion in that tree, and I knew it, but evidently he wasn't quite ready to spring, or else I came past him too fast, because nothing happened.

Again I saw a lion running along the cliffs above me, trying to get to a tree I could see quite a little distance up the canyon. No range horse likes to be headed off, especially on a strange trail, so I squealed with fear and plunged up a steep place, and ran on beneath the trees. I escaped that time. But now there were several lions all going in the same direction. I decided that if I ever got out into the open country again, nothing would ever tempt me into a narrow place between rock cliffs again.

Once the canyon widened out into a little park, and I breathed freer, but right beyond the open place there was a heavy forest; somehow I knew that this was the place the lions had been headed for. I squealed again, held my head low, and ran, dodging from side to side, leaping logs and dashing through the water of a little stream. I had a glimpse of open country ahead, and had just begun to feel a little bit more comfortable when a great yellow, snarling beast dropped down from a tree above the trail. I dodged sharply to one side and he missed landing on my back, but one claw raked across my shoulder. It hurt

worse than a branding iron, and I could feel the blood from the cuts running down my leg in streams.

The open space I had seen ahead proved to be timberline, and I was glad of that, because at least I wouldn't have to go under any more trees, and that made me feel better. I was still pretty shaky and couldn't seem to figure out what to do next. When I had rested a while and could think, instinct told me that the way to go to our home camp on the Lake Fork, was to keep on to the top of the range.

It was about midday when I came to a place that I remembered crossing the day before. It was a small stream with high banks, and when I got there and had a chance to look around, I knew that I had come down onto Pole Creek, not so very far above the place where Al had made camp. There was only one thing to do. I had never quit Al in my life and wasn't going to do it now. Instead of going up the creek, the way I had been heading, I turned down toward the camp. Perhaps Al might have come back; anyway, that was where he had left me, and I knew he'd come back sometime, because he always does.

I went on down to the park where we had stayed the night before. All the camp stuff was gone, even my saddle and blanket. I walked around, smelling the place and feeling terribly lonesome and homesick. I squealed several times as loud as I could, then I heard a faint "Oh-hoo" way up the valley. No doubt about it, Al had heard me. I kicked up my heels like a colt and ran to meet him as he came out of the forest.

"What happened, Chief?" he asked. "Where are your donkeys?"

I turned and pointed with my ears in the direction their tracks showed.

Al jumped on my back and guided me with his hand to the place where the camp had been. His face got hard, and the anger smell came strong from his body.

"Well, I'm a son of a gun, if those birds didn't play this trick on me, so's to get an outfit," he said. "They're heading for the Hunchback Gold stampede."

He got off and took a rawhide thong from his pocket which he made into a loop to fit around my lower jaw in place of a bridle. Then he got on, laid his rifle across my shoulders and nudged me with his heels. "Go to it, Chief, follow the mules," he ordered. "Go find Topsy!"

IT was easy to understand what Al meant. Time and again he had said those words to me when we were out after the mules in the morning. I trotted down the valley a short distance, sniffing at the ground until I smelled Topsy's tracks, and then broke into a canter following them. Before long we came to a hillside where the ground was soft and the tracks showed plain. Al patted me on the neck.

"Good work, boy," he said. "You sure found the trail."

I was just as keen to overtake the mules as Al was, and we made good time through a narrow gulch and down through a wider valley. Horses can't see as far as men can, so Al saw the outfit long before I did, but I knew why he turned me into the willows and kept out of sight until we came to open ground on the other side of the creek. Here he let me run, and pretty soon I caught the scent of the mules over in the timber across the creek, but Al wouldn't let me stop. He made me run faster than ever until we came to a cross-gulch. Here he got

off and tied me with the thong to a bush. Then he squatted down with his rifle over a log and waited.

It was no trouble to tell where the mules were now. They had smelled me and all of them were braying and making an awful fuss. Patton was riding ahead, and Snyder was next to him leading the mules. Al stood up, his rifle held ready to shoot.

"Drop your bridle reins and get off with your hands up!" he ordered.

Patton did as he was told, but quick as a flash, Snyder whirled his pony and spurred him over a bank. Al let him go until he had tied Patton up, then he came for me, and away we went chasing Snyder down through the timber. We came out into an open place and Snyder turned in the saddle and shot at us as fast as he could work the lever on his gun. I heard Al groan, then I smelled his blood and felt it trickle down over my shoulder. That made me so mad I fairly flew across that open space, trying to catch Snyder's horse before he got to the timber on the other side.

I could feel Al slipping down lower and lower on my side, and pretty soon he slid off on the grass, but now I was only a few jumps behind Snyder, and I kept on until I could reach the pony's neck. I was about to grab him with my teeth when Snyder hit me a terrible whack over the head with his gun, and the pain made me go wild. I caught Snyder by the shoulder, jerked him from the saddle and tossed him high in the air. He fell on some rocks and lay still. I was just about to run back and jump on him, when two men spurred their horses out of the trees, and one of them roped me around the neck.

The other man rode up and looked

me over. "Why, that's Chief, Al Peak's pet horse. How in the world did he get over here?"

I recognized this man. It was Jim Wood, a packer, who sometimes came to visit Al and Jumbo.

The man who was with him, said, "Well, he don't look like a pet now." He went over to where Snyder lay. Then Jim saw Al lying stretched out on the grass and rode to him, leading me. I put my nose down and touched Al's cheek. He opened his eyes and looked at me. Then he saw Jim.

"Glad to see you, Jim," he said. "How come you're here?"

"We're packing a lot of stuff in to the Hunchback country. My outfit is camped over yonder. Are you hurt bad?"

Al sat up. "I got a slug through my shoulder," he explained. "I guess the shock knocked me out. What happened to Snyder?"

"I think Chief finished him. Any-

how, he's out of circulation just now."

Jim brought water in his hat, washed the wound on Al's shoulder and tied a rag around it. Then they went back and brought Patton and the mules down, and we all stayed in Jim's camp the rest of the day.

Snyder wasn't badly hurt. He got well enough to ride after a while, and Jim sent two men to take him and Patton in to Hunchback.

"You'd better bring those two ponies back with you," Al told Jim's men. "The chances are they were stolen, too." And that's the way it turned out, because after we got back to our camp on the Lake Fork, some men came after the ponies.

Al was only laid up about a week with his bad shoulder. And it certainly was a happy day for me when I finally pulled my string up beside the platform of the mine for Al and Jumbo to load the mules with ore. I had had enough lion hunting.

THE END

"WILD" PARTIES

THE so-called "wild" parties staged in night clubs or roadhouses today would have been pink-tea affairs in the hilarious days of Dodge City or Abilene. When the Western cowboys came to celebrate, they really went to town. Their ribaldry was caused by the reaction from extreme loneliness and days of nerve-racking danger and sleepless nights, when a moment's relaxation might mean the loss of a fortune to the man who owned the herd. At the best, a cowboy rides with possible death beside him, a hidden dog hole, a treacherous shelf covered with slippery clay, the sharp horns of an angry steer, to mention but a few of the most common dangers.

Men who ride the range become outwardly immune to fear, but the threat of death is always there, and when for even a short period a feeling of safety comes to one, it is as intoxicating as alcohol.

To such men only big stakes appeal. If they play poker it must be for blue and gold chips. If they gamble at roulette, nothing short of silver dollars straight up on a number has any interest for them. A fight is tame unless the place is wrecked. So well do the men who follow the frontiers know this that they buy furniture with this very end in view. They expect to make a profit out of such scenes, and they do, in spite of the fact that bar, tables and chairs are often destroyed.



GUN GHOST OF '49

by TOM ROAN

HE WAS a gone old gander! He could feel it in the hushed air of the big, hopelessly drab room. A specter out of the past, he stood there, an old, old man in tattered gray buckskins and Indian moccasins of the kind worn by plainsmen and

scouts of the early frontier days. His sunken eyes were burned colorless by the desert suns of the Mojave, and at times he caught himself cupping a gnarled hand to his ear as if listening for something. He had done that many times while the

dark-faced, black-eyed detective who had come from some big town, had lied his dad-burndest to swear his life away.

Now the trial was over. At least he reckoned it was over. The jury had filed out, booted feet shuffling noisily and spurred heels dragging down the aisle of the unswept floor to a door in the end of the room that had closed on them with a mournful groan of its hinges. He himself had had no lawyer. A man didn't need one, he reckoned. But old Fiddle was still with him, a shaggy, wolfish dog leaning there wearily against his knee. Old Fiddle was never far away. There was somethin' mighty comfortin' for a man to have old Fiddle around when he was in trouble, Gloomy Hank thought.

In the fiery summation, the prosecuting attorney had called him a ghost of the past who still believed men carried their own laws of greed and hate on their hips, an old blister no longer worth his salt to civilization, old and mean as the desert to boot!

Old Fiddle looked as old as the desert, too. When he yawned a man could see that two of his fangs were missing and his teeth had worn smooth through the years. He was blind in the right eye where the scars of a desperate fight with a wolf in the long ago still showed how the killer fangs had ripped down his fuzzy face, and his muzzle was as gray as his master's beard.

Altogether it looked pretty bad. At first Gloomy Hank had not thought it worth worrying about, but now with every eye in Desert Rim's courtroom upon him, he was inclined to wonder. Maybe he should have hired one of those shyster lawyer fellas.

"I don't need no lawyer. I ain't no thief," he had growled out when

one had ask to be allowed to take his case, "an' I was never a hand to stoop to murder."

THE case had been strong meat for Mark Lang, Desert Rim's relentless prosecuting attorney. Even Gloomy Hank saw that. Rope Gawn, the detective, had plugged all the loopholes with his ruthless efficiency. Gloomy Hank's conviction would make eight men doomed for the rope by Mark Lang. Eight men in eight years; a record any prosecuting attorney would have been proud to have behind him. Some said Mark Lang was driving hard to be governor of the State of California some fine day.

"Shore, I once knowed Billy the Kid," Gloomy Hank had admitted. "I knowed the James boys, Jesse an' Frank. I knowed the Dalton boys, too. Never rid with ary one to rob no train nor bank, but I knowed 'em all. Knowed the law folks on their trail, too. Nobody bothered me, I bothered no man."

"Now look at these things." Lang had picked up a pair of old cap-an'-ball revolvers from the prosecutor's table. "Has anybody ever seen you that you weren't carrying these old-fashioned revolvers there at your hips?"

"I reckon I wasn't born with 'em on, mister."

"Ever kill a man with them?" the lawyer demanded.

"Several." Gloomy Hank's head wagged. "Not countin' Indians an' hoss an' cattle thieves. The others, well, dang it all, they were a-tryin' to kill me—bullies an' bad men. Happened I shot a shade faster on the draw."

"Like you did"—Lang came to his feet with a roar—"when you slipped up to Jeff Redcliff's shack out there in the desert and shot him through

the back of the head from outside the window."

"Nary word of that's true!" Fire blazed in the old man's faded gray eyes. "It's a thievin' lie in the dirty mouth of that shyster lawyer, the one standin' here backed by the sheriff an' them deputies! A polecat whose guts would be water out facin' a man over the barrel of a gun!"

"Order in the court!" old Judge Brent roared. "You're not out in the desert cursing a burro now!"

"I'd be in a sight better company if I was!" the old man growled, and his eyes had turned toward the windows, looking at the dying sunlight streaming through them with a wistful smile moving his lips. "The desert's a heap friendlier than men. I know. I been livin' in it for nigh fifty years, lookin' for gold. It's sometime hotter'n all get-out by day, but there ain't nary friendlier place by night when a man's lyin' on his back lookin' up at the stars."

"But you'll admit," Lang insisted, "that you hated Jeff Redcliff like poison?"

"Shore I did! Do yit! A man what's punched cows from Texas to Montan' ain't no han' to like a sheep-eatin' son of a gun what'd git drunk to the gills an' stob the eyes out of his hoss with his thumbs. Jeff done that right here in Desert Rim. I ain't liked 'im since we lived out yonder in the sand an' sage for more'n thirty year. Side by side, hit 'twas. I never spoke to him, an' he never spoke to me. That was our way, but I never killed him!"

It was just after that that the jury filed out to consider their verdict.

THE twelve men were coming back now. The courtroom seemed to be holding its breath. Suddenly old Fiddle sat up stiffly straight. He

pointed his gray muzzle toward the ceiling. He filled the room with a long howl. Men stiffened in their seats at the mournful howl.

Sheriff Big Tom Blunt arose behind the judge with a double-barrel shotgun in his hands.

"There's to be no disorder!" he called out. "Sit down, everybody. I have men stationed all around this room with orders to shoot if they have to and ask questions afterward."

The sudden hush was broken by the court clerk saying something in a thin, nervous voice. The foreman of the jury answered him with a nod and passed over a scrap of yellow paper. The clerk unfolded it, glanced at it, then looked uncertainly at Judge Brent, the sheriff, and the crowd in the room. He cleared his throat. A dropped pin could have been heard in the silence of the room.

"Read it!" Judge Brent ordered impatiently.

"We, the jury," the clerk read solemnly, "'find the defendant not guilty!'"

Four big men in the rear seats of the room snarled something. Their coats bulged at their hips as they got up hastily and left the room. It seemed to Gloomy Hank that they were in a devil of a hurry about something, and he wondered what it could be.

Mark Lang was up, staring his amazement at the jury. Judge Brent was as pale as a ghost. Somebody laughed nervously. The foreman of the jury, a tall, lean-faced old man of the desert, cleared his throat. He stepped forward a pace.

"We've got somethin' to say!" He held up his hand. "Law was made in the beginnin' to protect men, not to make goats out of 'em. It wasn't made as a game for shyster lawyers

to cheat human bein's o' their rights. That's all this court has done in the past eight years."

"A miscarriage of justice!" howled Mark Lang.

"Yo're a liar!" the foreman retorted. "We just ain't damned fools enough to believe what a prosecutin' attorney says. We've knowed Gloomy Hank for years. We ain't knowed that feller you brought in from Los Angeles but a day or two, just since the trial started. We ain't fools enough not to know that he's hired to swear a man's life away for this shyster court. If you don't like it, you can go to hell!"

A cheer went up. The judge banged for order, his dignity shattered, his eyes looking as though they were about to pop out of his head from his surprise.

"The jury is dismissed!" bawled the judge. "You will report—"

Like a sudden crash of lightning, the report of a six-shooter in the doorway cut him off. There was a gasp, a grunt of pain. Sam Smith, the foreman of the jury, staggered. He took a pace forward, blundered against a chair, and seemed to crumple to the floor.

IT was bedlam after that. Another gun thundered in the courtroom, then another, and another. Men bawled like frightened animals. There was a wild rush in every direction.

Big Tom Blunt's double-barreled shotgun entered the picture, the muzzles of the twin tubes bursting out with two ragged gashes of flame as he downed the man who had killed Sam Smith.

But that was only the beginning. Other gunmen bobbed into the doorway, appeared at the windows. A second juryman sobbed out a wail of agony, and pitched forward to his

knees. The others were throwing themselves back, taking shelter where they could find it, their hands flying to the butts of guns beneath their coats.

Big Tom Blunt's shotgun roared again and again. A gunman went down in the doorway, sprawling across the first man who had been killed. Another pitched backward from a window with the side of his head torn off by the terrific charge of shot. Into the raging fight then came the shrieking voice of Judge Brent.

"Order! Order!" he was crying. But he was doing nothing himself to bring it about; he expected other men to do that for him. All he seemed to be thinking of was getting himself out of the way. Gloomy Hank saw him crawl behind the bench like some cowardly varmint, then make one wild scoot that carried him out a rear window.

"Get down, Hank!" The old prospector heard Sheriff Blunt bellow that at him. "Quick! *Get down! They'll kill you.*"

Gloomy Hank dropped to his knees. He could have gone into hiding there behind the bench, but he moved on across the room to the deserted prosecutor's table. He reached up, dragging down his old belts and guns to buckle them around him.

The whole courtroom was fighting by this time. It looked as though every man in the room was blazing away at someone. Bursts of smoke rolled together, becoming an acrid cloud weaving against the ceiling and working its way down the walls. A man could not hear himself think, but Gloomy Hank understood the meaning of all the guns bristling about now. For some reason the outcome of his trial had been awaited with breathless anticipation. Just

why it was so all-fired important he did not know, but it had certainly created one unholy mess. Still, courtrooms were beyond him, anyhow! He had never bothered with the cussed things.

Keeping to his knees, he moved toward Blunt, but the sheriff did not want him to take part in this fight. That was evident when Big Tom caught him by the shoulder and gave him a push out the little window behind the judge's bench.

"Get out, Hank!" the sheriff belted again. "You're a free man, and you can go where you please. Go home! Go anywhere! You're too damned old to get into this mess."

Too old to fight, huh? It angered Gloomy Hank for a moment. Thunderation, it took only a steady eye and a couple of good trigger fingers to set a man in anybody's dadburned row. But once outside he had no choice in the matter. He stood there for a moment listening to the crashing of the shots, the cursing and yelling of the men inside, and then turned away with Fiddle at his heels.

He plodded away wearily toward the old adobe jail, the sheds and whitewashed stables behind the courthouse. Before he reached the corner of the jail he heard the shooting die away. He heard the noise of running feet, and then the sounds of hoofs hastily beating away from in front of the courthouse. It was all beyond him and he decided not to try to make any sense of it.

But he was free. He moved on inside the empty jail, and started gathering his belongings. A man, he reckoned, was better off mindin' his own business. He was never no hand, nohow, to bother with the affairs of others. Besides, he was going home, up yonder in the desert where a man could sit and think.

MARY BLUNT gave him his supper at the jail when the worst of the excitement was over, but she did not seem anxious to talk to him about the shooting. He did not press her. After all, ruddy-faced Sheriff Tom Blunt and his wife had both been kind to him. They had taken care of Judy, his burro, and they had let him keep Fiddle. The weeks he had been with them, they had treated him more like one of the family than like a prisoner, and standing alone out there in the darkness of the adobe stables and sheds behind the jail, a feeling of regret stole over the old desert rat. Out there at the waterhole it was going to be kind o' lonesome. Jeff Redcliff had been some mite of company. He reckoned he himself had been some company to Jeff even if they had never spoken to each other during all their years of living together.

Darkness was settling by the time Gloomy Hank started placing the sawbuck on Judy. Big Tom had let him bring in about everything he wanted. Hadn't hurried him a mite that day he came out alone in a buckboard to arrest him. Gloomy Hank had a warmish feeling for Big Tom for that. Big Tom didn't just throw a gun on a man and treat him like a wild animal. He hadn't touched a gun. Didn't bring out any fancy handcuffs, either. Just said he was sorry and asked him to come along.

With ingrained caution being a part of him, Gloomy Hank slipped away noiselessly in the shadows with the old dog keeping a pace to his left and the laden burro at his heels. The stars broke through the clouds when he was a mile north of the town, so he did not follow the trail which led a man too hang-fired far out of the way. Fifteen miles and more by it to the waterhole, while

it was only nine by the short cuts. The stars were his guides. All a man needed was to know where he was going and have a star to lead him thar!

No thought came to him that he might be watched or followed. The incident behind him was a closed book as far as he was concerned.

Overhead the stars were brightening. The Milky Way was up there, and the desert was calm, cool, and still. Something mighty friendly about it. Something mighty friendly about the *crunch, crunch* of sand underfoot, until, when he was six miles out of town, the sound of a shot came to him.

It was faint and far away, yet it halted him. The sound, he reckoned, had come from the direction of the trail. He thought he heard a distant clatter of hoofs, and found himself pondering about it as he plodded on.

Finally he came to a high bench of sandhills that overlooked an oasis below. Now he could see the oasis. A late moon was beginning to lift its bars of light in the east. He could see the big trees surrounding the waterhole and the dark blob of shadow that marked Jeff Redcliff's shack of unpainted boards perched among the big gray rocks just north of the water. For a moment he could have sworn that he saw a blinking eye of light appear from the little window at the end of the shack. But that was impossible. Jeff was dead, and there wasn't a desert rat in forty miles who would lodge himself in Jeff's shack overnight. Not after the way Jeff had always turned an' cussed 'em away from his door!

But he saw light again a few moments later. This time he knew he was not imagining things. It did not come from Jeff's shack. It came

from the south window of his own little hut down there in the rocks under the trees at the lower side of the waterhole. It lasted for only an instant, just as if someone had brushed aside the old burlap sacks hanging over the window, and then it was gone.

"Somebody," he grunted, "must be kind o' stopping over at my place for the night."

There was nothing out of the way in that. The door was never locked. Folks, Gloomy Hank reckoned, knew that they were always welcome. He did not think anything more about it until he reached the end of the long slope and was turning in through the rocks to Judy's make-shift shed. It was then that a man suddenly stepped out of the darkness and thrust the muzzle of a rifle hard against the pit of the desert rat's stomach.

"Get 'em up, grandpappy!" he ordered gruffly. "Don't reach for no smoke pole or I'll blow a hole in your belly big enough for that she-jackass to jump in!"

Old Fiddle had growled, but his warning had not been given soon enough. The man who had been waiting there in the darkness had kept as still and silent as one of the rocks themselves. He was a big man, broad-shouldered, beefy. He looked like a cowboy. His clothing was black. Everything about him was black except for the rows of cartridges in the heavy belts around his waist and a pair of ivory-buffed sixshooters buckled snugly at each hip. Gloomy Hank recognized him after a moment. Thunderation, the feller was a man he had seen talking to Rope Gawn and Mark Lang several times during the trial.

Fiddle growled a second time. Gloomy Hank saw the ruddy-faced man give the dog a swift kick, but

he did not see the second man rise out of the shadows behind him. The second man did not speak at all. He simply lifted a blackjack, quickly bringing it down on the back of the old man's head with a sickening smack. Gloomy Hank felt himself pitch forward. He heard old Fiddle break out in a fit of alarmed barking, and then everything was dark and still.

THERE was a taste of blood in his mouth when he came to his senses. His thoughts were muddled and a splintering pain kept going through his head. A rumble of angry voices came to him. A light gradually grew into being. It was a small, smoky splinter of flame burning on a dusty table only a few feet away. It took a moment for Gloomy Hank to recognize it as light from his own little brass lamp, and then it dawned upon him that he was backed into a chair.

He tried to move his hands, and found that his arms were bound down along the sides of the back of the chair. A cold and damp muzzle touched the back of his left hand. He felt a warm tongue lick his fingers, and knew that old Fiddle was there beside him.

Things cleared more rapidly after that. He found himself staring beyond the light at the bowed head and bloody face of a man sitting bound in a chair at the opposite end of the table. There was something about the big, ruddy face that was familiar in spite of the blood. He studied it for what seemed a long time. As if the man were in terrible pain, he rolled his head back on his shoulders and then Gloomy Hank recognized him. It was Sheriff Big Tom Blunt!

Now what the devil did that mean? Why was Big Tom sittin'

in that chair with his head and face all bloody? How did he get here? Then it came to Gloomy Hank that Big Tom had left town with four deputies, and a string of carefully picked possemen riding hard on the trail of the men who had started the courthouse fight.

"The old blister is coming out of it!" a voice rasped. Gloomy Hank knew he had heard that husky voice before. There was something familiar about that quickness of speech, the short, clipped-out words. Rope Gawn, the big detective, he suddenly decided. "Pour a little cold water on his head," he heard. "You had no business to hit him in the first place, Caleb."

"I ain't needin' no water poured on my head." Gloomy Hank shook himself, trying to clear away the hazelike film that seemed to have settled over his old eyes. "I'm all right, but I wanta know what yuh men are a-doin' with me. This is my shack, ain't it?"

"Was your shack!" snapped back the big detective's husky voice. "In a little while longer it won't even be a memory. Shove him closer to the table. We haven't all night for this thing. Here, Mark, give me those papers."

Gloomy Hank didn't see Mark Lang, but he heard papers rustle. He felt himself shoved closer to the table. The papers were thrust in front of him, and one of the men bent beside him to unfasten his right arm from the chair.

Then Rope Gawn suddenly loomed above him. He caught up Gloomy Hank's right hand, placed a pen between the knotty fingers, and moved the hand to the papers.

"Sign your name, right there!" he ordered. "Don't keep us waiting, you old blister!"

"What am I signin'?" Gloomy

Hank's voice was vibrant with anger now. He threw down the pen and jerked his hand from the table. "Yuh ain't bossin' me around, even if yuh are a big detective from a big town."

"Let him sample the works," ordered the detective with a low chuckle. "He'll come to turn."

Somebody jerked the old man's free arm behind him. He heard Fiddle growl, then yelp as somebody kicked him out of the way. Gloomy Hank's free arm was drawn back of the chair, the elbow bent, and the forearm shoved upward until he groaned. Sharp agony made him yell as the burning end of a cigar was thrust against the bare back of his neck.

"What're yuh doin'?" he yelled. "Yuh damn two-legged polecats!"

"Release his arm," ordered Gawn. "Here, old blister, maybe you'll sign your name now. That was only a sample of what you'll get. Blunt can damn soon tell you that." He slapped the hand back on the table, and thrust the heavy pen into it again. "Right here, on the dotted line!"

GLOOMY HANK signed. He didn't know what he was signing nor why. There was no use trying to stand up to these men. The moment the scrawled signature was finished, his hand was lifted from the papers and the pen taken away from it. His arm was dragged backward and downward then. A pair of hands roped it again to the back of the chair. Somebody laughed. Gloomy Hank saw Tom Blunt lift his head, saw him shake it, and then heard the sheriff burst into a fit of swearing.

"I knew it all along, Lang." Blunt seemed to have to gasp for breath. "You haven't fooled me. You've fooled damned few people. There's

gold in this waterhole. The two poor old devils who've lived here so long have been hunting it all over the desert and neither dreamed that it was right here in front of them. You murdered Redcliff or had it done, thinking you'd be able to put Gloomy Hank out of the way for the job. You thought you could get him to sign over everything he owned to that lawyer squirt you brought out from Los Angeles on the pretense of wanting to defend him, but the old man didn't fall for it. He stood his ground. He's a man, damn you!"

"Shut up!" growled Lang, but the sheriff was not to be stopped.

"From the first, I've watched you," he continued bitterly. "I saw you the day you came to Desert Rim, a long-haired shag with the seat of your pants out. You started business on a cracker-box desk, a shyster rat of a collection agent. You grew like your kind usually grow. People said you were honest in your way. They said you always threw the money you collected against the ceiling. That what stuck and didn't come down went to your clients! The rest went to your pockets! But you were out to grow rich. You've robbed this country blind. But I say you won't get away with this. You won't take Gloomy's gold. Your—"

"That will be enough of that, Blunt!" Lang said coldly. "I hinted once that I'd cut you in on the game, but you were too damned honest! You got next to a few things. You just didn't have the proof necessary to put me under, but you did file on this gold in Gloomy's name while he was in jail. Gloomy's signed that over tonight, and now I'll show you what I think of your loud mouth!"

Mark Lang appeared then, moving out of the shadows. Gloomy

Hank saw the lawyer reach over and slap the sheriff a ringing blow across the mouth. He saw Blunt's head rock back from the force of the blow. Blood came from the officer's nose and mouth, but the sheriff kept talking.

"You cut me out of my posse," he gasped. "A neat trick, Lang, but I still say you won't get away with this."

"Keep away from him!" Gloomy Hank saw Rope Gawn shove the prosecuting attorney back as he was about to strike the sheriff again. "We've got what we want. Set this dump afire and let's get the hell out of here."

"Afire she is!" exclaimed the voice behind Gloomy Hank. "Caleb's just dropped a match on that bale of hay in the corner."

FOR a few moments the growing warmth behind the old man was almost comforting. He had watched Gawn, Lang, and the three gunmen hastily leave the shack. They had carefully closed the door and fastened it from the outside. A clatter of hoofs had followed and a tragedy in the desert was on its way to completion.

"I'm sorry, Gloomy!" The sheriff lifted his head, looking down the table with his face white and grim where it was unstreaked by blood. "We're as good as through. When the last of the smoke dies away from this shack, there'll be no sign of us left, but I've told my wife about the gold; I've told her a lot of things. Lang won't hog it all without trouble."

The smoke was thickening. The heat was becoming terrific. Gloomy Hank sat there scowling. There was something he wanted to say. Something in the back of his thoughts that

wanted to come out. He heard old Fiddle whine, and saw the dog move closer to the door. It was a good door. Fastened properly, it would hold a dad-burned charging bull, but it had one weakness, something he had intended to fix fifteen or twenty year ago, but had never just got around to.

He started to rock his chair by throwing himself from side to side. With a little help from his toes he could guide the chair toward his goal. He inched his way back from the table and then down the side of it by violent jerks and sways from right to left.

The sheriff caught the idea. They were soon rocking together. The old man knew what he was going to do now, if the heat did not get him first. The wall of the shack there to the right of the door was weak, always had been. He told the sheriff about it, but Blunt seemed in a daze. Heat was getting them fast!

Banging the chair against the wall, Gloomy Hank heard a rusty nail give away. He kept rocking and pounding. Suddenly there was a rip. Three planks gave away suddenly, and the old man felt himself tumbled out in the cool night air.

For a moment he was in a daze, and then it came to him that he could wiggle about a little. The old chair had cracked up. He started working desperately. With Fiddle beside him, he freed his right arm, then his left. As he stood up, shaking himself loose from the wreckage of the chair, he heard the distant pound of hoofs returning to the waterhole.

There was no time to spare. In a weaving, rocking run, he scurried back to the shack and found the sheriff half unconscious from the

heat. Fortunately Gloomy's old knife was still in his pocket. He hastily cut the officer free and dragged him out in the air.

"They're a-comin' back, Tom!" he growled. "We gotta hunt cover mighty fast!"

He thought of Judy's stable, of the rocks and brush around it. Half carrying the sheriff, he started around the end of the shack. The whole desert seemed ablaze with light by this time, for the fire had gone through the south end of the shack and the flames were making a quick job of it.

A yell came to him, followed by a shot. The bullet slapped into the burning wall of wood above him. It seemed to jerk the sheriff back to his senses.

"There's a hole back here in the rocks!" Gloomy told him. "Maybe I can find it. We gotta be quick. They've come back on a hunch, I reckon. Wanta make shore the job's done right an' proper, maybe."

But he found something before they had gone another six yards. Without the light of the blazing shack, he would have never seen it, for it was only a bit of old black leather hanging out of a crack in the rocks. He seized it, recognized it for one of his belts, and then he was dragging forth another. His cap-an'-balls, by jingo! Lang's crew hadn't thought much of the guns after they knocked him down with the blackjack. They had just snaked the belts and old weapons from him and tossed them back among the rocks.

"We got fightin' tools now!" A pleased grin spread across the old man's face. "Ain't as good, maybe, as some of the fine guns yuh got, but I can snuff a candle with either one at seventy feet."

Another shot tore at them before the sheriff could answer. Gloomy Hank felt the wind of a bullet as it whizzed across his left shoulder. A hail of bullets followed. He heard the sheriff groan, and suddenly realized that Blunt was down, pitching forward on his face. He stopped then, dropping beside the officer, the cap-an'-balls cocked and ready, a wicked glint shining in his old eyes.

"There they are!" yelled a voice. "I told yu something might happen! Finish them off! There—"

A roaring ribbon of fire cut the yelling man short. A horse reared, lunged, and the man spilled backward out of his saddle. Before the others could turn, another man yelled, stood up stiffly in his stirrups, and went reeling backward to crash heavily on the ground.

Gloomy Hank moved backward now, dragging the sheriff with him while the growling and snarling Fiddle kept behind him. He came to an opening in the rocks. It was merely a hole, not very deep nor very wide, but it offered some protection. With a final lift and a surge, he dragged the sheriff inside, and rolled him over against the wall just as a groan came from the officer to tell that he was still alive.

JUST grazed across the shoulder," grunted Gloomy when he examined the sheriff briefly in the darkness. "Like we usta crease wild horses an' knock 'em out down in Arizony. But yuh keep still." He shoved Blunt back when the sheriff showed signs of trying to sit up. "Yuh ain't got no fightin' tools, an' likely yuh wouldn't know how to handle my guns, anyhow. They're plumb hair-triggered an' needle-fine on the bead. Takes an old han' to get the best out o' them."

He crept back to the mouth of the hole. The horsemen beyond the burning shack had dismounted. The two men who had been shot were now dragged away among the rocks. Save for the noise of the crackling flames rapidly devouring the dry old wood, there was no sound out there in the shadows now.

But there were more of the men than Gloomy had reckoned upon. He had thought that there were five or six of them at the most, but others had evidently been waiting in the darkness beyond the shack or hiding up there on the hills above the waterhole to keep a sharp lookout over the desert. A horse showing here and there told him there were at least ten of the men now. Here two of them were down, and there was but little to be feared from them.

Moving shadows among the rocks to his right caught his eye. With rocks in front of the hole making a heavy blob of darkness over the mouth of it, he stole forward on his hands and knees. Like a ghost in the darkness, he crept on for twenty yards and then stopped as he heard whispered voices ahead of him.

"I told you," whispered a voice he recognized as that of Mark Lang, "that we should have put them out of the way before you set fire to the damned shack."

"And I told you," Rope Gawn rasped back, "that I'm a detective. Sometimes a fire doesn't destroy bones and plenty of questions would be asked if a couple of skulls with bullet holes in them were found. If you're scared, you can drag it out o' here and get back to Desert Rim."

"I'm no more scared than you are," growled Lang, "but I've got a hell of a lot at stake here, and the light of this fire can be seen for miles."

Gloomy Hank waited to hear no more of the quarrel. He eased on. He had learned how to move about noiselessly during his days of Indian scouting. He came up behind the detective and the attorney, and was within arm's length of them before they realized it.

Gawn probably never realized it at all. The old guns in Gloomy's hands simply lifted. He brought them downward, almost together, in a quick double blow. The heavy weapon in his right hand struck Gawn on the side of the head an instant before the one in his left hand drove a furious smack to the back of the lawyer's neck. Gawn pitched forward without a sound. Only a short, startled grunt came from Lang, then he, too, was down. The two of them sprawled there side by side with the old man nimbly stepping forward quickly to holster his weapons and jerk their hands behind their backs.

It took scarcely more than a minute for him to bind their hands behind them with their own belts and to place gags in their mouths made from their own handkerchiefs. So far everything had gone well. From a holster at the detective's right hip, he removed a big black .45 and thrust it into his bosom. A shoulder holster swinging below the lawyer's left armpit provided a stubby-barreled .41 Colt.

As noiselessly as he had come, Gloomy Hank started back. In a few moments he was again inside the hole, finding Tom Blunt sitting there in the darkness and cursing in whispers as he rubbed his bloody right shoulder.

"Here's somethin' that'll come in handy, I reckon." Gloomy Hank thrust the .41 and the heavy .45 into the sheriff's hands. "I hated to think

of yuh being left out o' it complete, Tom, yuh bein' the law an'—"

A splatter of shots, and an outburst of yells cut him off. More men were coming. It sounded now like a dad-burned army out there. Gloomy darted back to the mouth of the hole, and caught a glimpse of the running shadow of a man who seemed to be trying frantically to escape from something among the rocks. He fired a low shot and heard a screech of agony as the running shadow of a man went down with a crash in the brush.

OTHER shots rang out then. Men seemed to be popping up from everywhere. Horsemen tore down the slopes, hastily surrounding the waterholes and the rocks, and then suddenly, as if the right moment had come for it, Sheriff Tom Blunt's loud voice started bellowing orders from the mouth of the hole.

"Don't let anybody get away, boys!" The voice rolled out in every direction in the darkness. "Look out for Gloomy Hank! Come back here, Gloomy! I told Lang he wouldn't get away with this! My men knew enough to watch him when he got me to leave my posse! The only trouble was, the boys would have got here too late if it hadn't been for you."

Gloomy Hank stopped, staring around him in the darkness. It was a heap like the courthouse fight now. All hell and damnation bustin' things wide open, and then a sudden quiet falling. He didn't quite understand it. Things moved too dad-burned fast for an old feller like him. He waited there until Blunt came up beside him and took hold of his arm.

"Without you, Gloomy, I'd be a heap of ashes now!" The sheriff's

voice was jokingly rueful, but Gloomy Hank caught a note of deep sincerity in it. "It's something I'll never forget, Gloomy. These buzzards who are left are going to jail, and a couple of them to the rope. Me and my wife'll be mighty proud if you make your home with us, old-timer."

"But . . . but," stammered the old desert rat, "I got a home. I'll live in Jeff's shack. I own all this land around the waterhole anyhow, though I never said nothin' to Jeff about it. Just let him build his shack there and stay on. In a day or two I'll rig up Judy, an' me and her an' ol' Fiddle will go on a-lookin' for gold. It's bound to be found somewhere."

"Gold!" The sheriff's eyes widened. "Gloomy, you're rich, don't you savvy? The gold ore in that waterhole is worth three hundred and fifty dollars a ton!"

"I know that," the old man admitted matter-of-factly. "It's where the rub comes in. Lang and the detective gent would've been powerful, powerful disapp'inted in the end, Tom. At the most they ain't more'n two ton of ore in that dangd waterhole. Now an' then a hoss wadin' through the water picks up a chunk of it in his shoe. It was dumped in there 'way 'fore they was born, I reckon. Back yonder more'n fifty year' ago, it was. Indians got atter a pack train crossin' the desert once. The white men dumped their ore in that water, and turned their stock loose to escape. It'd take more'n its worth to git what gold there is out o' there. That's why nobody ever bothered about it. Ain't it a shame that all these fellers are goin' to get hanged or go to the penitentiary for dabblin' round with such a fool notion?"

QUICKSAND TREACHERY



By W. D. HOFFMAN

CHAPARRAL crackled and snapped as two riders fought their way through a bosque thicket on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande. Thorn-ripped and conscience-torn, Lem McCarty brush-popped a trail in the lead, his muscular body twisting and dodging from side to side. His big brasada hat only partly protected his sweaty, lacerated face as he hit snaggy vine, branches and spiny paloverde.

Behind him Cass Morgan let out a howl for a halt. Morgan, wealthy office-chair ranch owner, wasn't used to so much rough riding. He could stand the gaff no longer.

"You get him!" he bawled at Lem, his darkly handsome face streaming with perspiration. "It's yore doin's. You let him get away, damn you! I reckoned you'd do it. I suspicioned you when you joined us vigilantes. I've got a hunch you're hooked up with the Lassiter gang yoreself—"

"Easy, Cass," warned Lem McCarty, a dangerous glint in his granite eyes. He had not let Big Jess Eylar escape, though he had been sorely tempted to do that very thing. And now he was tempted even more. Though Big Jess had been caught with the horse thieves and doomed with the others to pay the death penalty, Lem could not forget that he and the big fugitive had once been pals.

"Get him! Fetch him in!" The cattleman's sharp lips trembled in rage. "You took the oath. I let you join because of Linda, but I misdoubted you from the beginnin'. If Big Jess gets away, we'll know it was you planned it."

The charge was two thirds false. Lem McCarty had become a vigilante because every man who refused was suspected of being a sympathizer of the raiders, if not actually involved. At the time Lem had had

no idea Big Jess was mixed up with the outlaws, or he wouldn't have joined the man hunters and taken the oath to hang every raider caught.

He held his temper, making some allowances for the vigilante leader. Morgan was no longer a young man. Today he was under strain, his plans frustrated. This was to have been his wedding day—the day he was to have married Lem's sister, Linda. The Lassiter raid had upset his plans, his duty under oath holding him to the chase since daylight.

"Catch him," Morgan roared, "or by Hades the vigilantes will hunt you down and hang you, too, as a confederate. I can't save you, even for Linda!" He wheeled his mount back into the timber to rejoin the main body of avengers.

Lem McCarty did not move. Anger tore at him. He was in it to his neck now. It was a blood oath he had been forced to take—to carry out the vigilante verdict against every member of Drag Lassiter's gang, even though a neighbor or friend were caught. Until this last raid, nobody had known just who Lassiter's confederates were, raiding, burning, killing.

Mechanically Lem started through the thicket once more. He hadn't the faintest idea what he would do if he overtook the fleeing Big Jess. Friendship was an iron-banded tie between cowpunchers in Texas. Often it was higher than the law—more binding certainly than vigilante law.

Lem paused at the edge of the strip of river timber. The Rio Grande was before him, red tinged from the fiery ball of the sinking sun. This was the quicksands area, five miles wide, with the shifty bottom most dangerous on the Texas side. Lem's eyes searched the gray gravel benches beyond the emerald bosque.

Suddenly his mouth went hard as he saw a lone rider moving toward the American benches, black, battered hat giving away his identity. Big Jess Eylar!

LEM skirted the sandy embankment looking for the narrow rock crossing. Maybe he'd propose to Jess that they both hit the long trail away from the wrath of the stockmen. He didn't quite know even yet. But one thing was sure; he wasn't going to take Big Jess back to be swung from a rope with Drag Lassiter, Cuchara and Hooker Bill.

In a moment he saw the sign carved on a wood slab, the ancient marker in the quicksand area, warning of the dreaded *Arenal de Muerte*—Sands of Death. "Rock Reef Here," it said in Spanish. A like legend in English hung on a cedar post on the Texas side. Lem put his roan into the stream.

The summer-low river was belly-high to his horse. Lem forded it and reached the shallower water toward the American bank. The bottom seemed oddly shifty for the rock-reef crossing. Suddenly he gave a violent start and gripped the saddlehorn. His roan was lurching downward, its slender legs sinking into the yellowish mass.

Lem's body tensed and a tight feeling of doom came over him. The roan was still sinking, legs sucking up and down in the hidden bottom. The cowboy glanced in bafflement at the markers before and behind him. He had followed a perfectly straight line. Then his gray eyes went cold. Someone had moved both of those signs! He was in the treacherous *Arenal de Muerte*.

As the struggling animal plunged deeper, Lem left the saddle to lighten its load and give it a chance to save

itself. He flattened in the four-foot depth and began to swim.

Weighted down with boots and heavy chaps, he could hardly breast the stream, but fought his way until his feet dragged on the spongy bottom. Then he tried to walk out, while the plucky roping horse thrashed and struggled behind him.

The swift yellow current swirled into the sandy embankment. Lem had barely dragged two steps through the pulpy mass when a terrible sucking sensation gripped his feet. He strained to lift out one leg, but could not. He tried the other; it, too, was stuck and sinking deeper. Behind him the roan was whistling, fighting frantically.

The cowboy's rugged face went gray under the tan. He tried to face his predicament coolly. Cass Morgan and the others of the vigilantes had got across. Lem McCarty sighted them now, eight riders with their three doomed prisoners and the recovered herd of horses moving out of the bosque on the Texas side.

Battling his panic as his feet sank inch by inch, Lem threw all his great strength into a tremendous wrench and managed to pull his right foot out of the boot. But when he placed the sock-clad foot in the quicksands to get anchorage to free the other, both went several inches deeper. He was in almost to the knees now. The more he churned the jellylike mass the farther he sank. The Sands of Death had him.

Then he had a horrifying thought. No one but Big Jess would have moved the signs pointing to the safety crossing. A man facing the hang rope would do anything to save himself, even take the life of a friend.

Lem raised his gun and fired three shots, the range call for help. Off in the red benches, Cass Morgan's men

had followed Big Jess out of sight. Lem knew they might not hear the shots at that distance. He threw himself sideways, then forward and back, trying to tear his entrapped legs free. The quicksands reached above his knees now and he was sinking, sinking, each struggle tightening the terrible grip of the *Arenal de Muerte* beneath the silty current.

Lem's hands flailed the water wildly as the current surged over his face. With an effort he fought upright once more, choking with the acrid liquid. He jerked forth his wet Colt, fired three more shots.

Another muscular tussle sucked him deeper, his legs sand-gripped to the thighs, the surface water to his shoulders, the Sands of Death seeming to beckon with steady, irresistible mockery. Vaquero, cowpuncher, rustler had died in these treacherous quicksands, as well as bogged cattle and horses. Lem's wiry roan was almost out of sight now, head tossing high to breathe, heaving and snorting pitifully.

Abruptly the cowboy stopped all struggling, for he realized every movement only speeded his end. A great Mexican condor, king of the buzzards, flopped out of the bosque, circled around him in the red sunset. Wise to the ways of the Sands of Death, it wheeled indolently away; there would be no meal for bird of prey from either horse or man swallowed by the quicksands. Lem tried to figure things out and knew he was up against a dead end.

The mockery of events appalled him. Only an hour ago Big Jess was doomed to die, with Lem an unwilling member of the vigilantes about to hang him. Now Big Jess was free and Lem himself was facing terrible death in the sucking sands, due to the shifted markers.

AS his strong but powerless body sank lower and lower, he lived over that hectic day: the raid, the capture of Big Jess in Morgan's Circle Box corral, the successful pursuit of the three others who had driven off the horse herd, Big Jess break for liberty. It didn't make sense that Jess would set the sign trap when he had seen his best friend start in pursuit with Morgan. But there was no doubt that Jess Eylar had changed a lot lately. Since Linda had turned him down for Cass Morgan he had gone from bad to worse, drinking more than he should have. Yet Jess couldn't have condemned his pal to the terrible Sands of Death at the very time Lem was planning to get Big Jess to safety at the risk of his own neck. Or could he? Seeing his friend trying to run him down could change any man; turning his trust to the hate of hell.

Well, the vigilantes would hang neither Big Jess nor Lem now, from the looks of things!

Then Lem's heart gave a jump. He saw several riders moving over the benches, turning back. The vigilantes had heard his shots; four of Cass Morgan's men were coming to investigate. Neck-high, the muddy current swept around the trapped cowboy. His fingers dug frantically through the mushy sand for more shells in his half-buried cartridge belt.

Straightening, he reached his gun above the current, shoved the three gritty cases into the chambers, fired the wet gun once more. Stooping under the surface, he tried to recover more shells, but could not. Choking and gagging, he thrust his head up once more.

He could do nothing now but wait and shout, as he sank lower and lower. His legs felt like lead, his lower torso as if it were held in a

viselike grip. It would be over quickly unless those riders hurried.

As the water swirled high on his chin, Lem bent back his head to keep the fluid from mouth and nostrils. Then he had a bitter foretaste of what was in store for him. Exhausted and limp, the roan's long neck and head swayed weakly a moment, then slowly sank from sight.

Out from the bosque timber Lem saw a rider dash in the fading daylight. The entrapped man called out hoarsely, waving his arms. His shouts were a gurgle now, the water surging into his mouth. He held his nostrils above the surface, head back, trying to lengthen the last few minutes before he was sucked under, out of the rider's view. His eyes buffeted the growing gloom cast over the river by the dense woodland. Then, to his astonishment, he saw the man on the bank was not one of the vigilantes, but Big Jess Eylar.

The fugitive was glancing behind him furtively. Faintly Lem could hear the man hunters entering the bosque, brush snapping.

"Lem!" Big Jess called cautiously. "I thought I heard yuh holler. Where are yuh?"

Lem could not answer now. The bitter water creeping into his nose was stifling him. He held his hat

above his head and waved it in the gloom.

Cass Morgan's vigilantes would have Big Jess in a moment now, would take him back and hang him, unless he abandoned his attempt to find Lem. Only the hangrope would be his reward for trying to save a pal.

With these thoughts swirling wildly in his tortured mind, Lem was choking to death, lungs filling with water, the quicksands pulling him under the surface. He summoned the last of his seeping strength to keep the hat waving feebly over his sinking head. The current blotted out everything.

SUDDENLY something slashed his wrist. There was a sudden yank, a powerful, sinewy tentacle tightening over his forearm. It began to pull, and Lem's arm felt as though it were being torn out of his body. Big Jess' saddle rope had snared him, he realized dully.

He felt himself being dragged through the shallow water. For a few minutes everything was a blur. Voices of possemen came hollowly to his water-logged ears. Now he knew he was lying prone, mouth disgorging the gritty water. Slowly his head cleared. Sitting up, he saw

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

(yes, I did—actually and literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You too may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 8, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 8, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

Cass Morgan's men, and over beside his horse stood Big Jess, hands now tied behind his back.

"Well, Lem, you fooled us," Morgan declared. "Got him after all, even if he did nigh drown yuh. Boys, take Big Jess away and finish the business."

Lem McCarty gagged when he tried to speak. He gestured desperately. At last he got out a protest. "I didn't get Jess! He got me! Pulled me out of the quicksands!" Lem got up. "You can't hang Jess Eylar!"

Cass Morgan's dark eyes glittered in the semigloom. "So?" he asked softly.

"Cass, you've got to stop 'em! You can't hang a feller that would give himself up to save a man he thought was goin' to kill him!"

"You don't know what you're sayin', Lem." The Circle Box cattleman glared at the soaked cowboy. "Or do you? I figured for a minute you was on the level, runnin' that outlaw down. Now you come right out and take sides with him against yore neighbors and yore oath. That shore brands you. The boys will likely hang you, too. They gave me hell for ever trustin' you. Figured if Big Jess was a Lassiter rustler, so was you—"

"I'll shoot the man that says so," Lem McCarty vowed.

"I'll take it up with the members," Morgan said, moving toward his horse. "You come along. Get up behind me, this horse'll carry double."

LEM McCARTY'S haggard eyes were on the shadowy hulks of the four men sitting against the mud wall of the hut that served as a prison for the rustlers. His hands spilled the tobacco as he tried to roll a cigarette.

Outside in the clearing, grazing horses tramped about their picket pins. Lem's eyes shifted through the moonlit doorway to the dark outline of the river bosque. It was like a black shroud now, hiding in its depths the Sands of Death. Lem shuddered. His clothes had dried in the hot, sultry hut, but one of his feet remained bootless. He glanced toward Big Jess, sitting with head low over his knees, dozing.

Big Jess could sleep a little, even on his last night on earth. If sleep was a matter of conscience, then Big Jess' had less on his mind than the guard watching him. Jess had proved true to the rangeland code of loyalty to a friend. Stealing horses wasn't as bad as taking the blood of an old saddle mate.

Lem could hear Cass Morgan's vigilante's tossing restlessly on their soogans outside, some sleeping fitfully, some snoring. But Cass Morgan himself was awake out there. Lem knew Morgan had given him the job of guard for a purpose—to make a final test. That was why all the others were outside. He was sure the vigilante leader was watching the doorway with eagle eyes for the expected break. Morgan would shoot down both Lem and Big Jess if either made a break. Lem felt hate for Morgan burn through him. Those others might have given Lem the benefit of a doubt, but not the implacable Morgan.

Big Jess continued to sleep, unlike those other three against the wall, hard and bitter men who had long followed the dark trails along the Great River. Those three were restless, wide awake, with much on their consciences. Big Jess at least was new at this game, without a history of pillage and murder behind him.

Lem shifted uneasily as a great horned owl hooted dismally in the

bosque. Again the tobacco spilled over the paper to the earthen floor. He let the unfinished smoke drop from his fingers, bowed his head and fought back an overwhelming desire to sob.

A hot wind was rising, whistling about the line-camp hut. Lem gave a sudden start, hearing the cowmen astir outside. It was still dark, a full hour before daybreak. In low voices the vigilantes conferred about the grim business in hand. The approaching sandstorm had speeded them to get their job over with and be on their way home, leaving the outlaws dangling on a limb as a warning. Horses were moving toward the door of the hut.

"Awake in there, Lem?" called old Sawbuck Honeywell of Cross Slash, chief victim of the Lassiter gang's raids.

"Yeah," Lem answered reluctantly.

"Cass says yuh won't have to go out there, bein' yuh stood guard," Sawbuck offered. "And considerin' you and Jess was . . . was kind o' close."

"Damn nice of him," Lem said bleakly.

Three of the cowmen silently entered the hut. Cass Morgan was not among them. "We start at this side," Sawbuck said huskily.

Lem McCarty did not move as he watched the cowmen walk to the first of the four horse thieves, Drag Lassiter.

The notorious raider got up, a lean, gaunt figure darkly visible in the reflected moonlight. He was a salty, hardened offender and deserved what was coming, in the code of frontier justice. Lem could see he was steady as he stood there with hands tied behind his back.

"Any little request yuh want to make, Drag?" Sawbuck asked.

"What the hell?" Drag Lassiter growled. "Gimme a good clean fall's all I'm askin'."

"No nearest of kin yuh want to send a message to?" the Cross Slash cowman persisted.

"Naw. Git it over with." Lassiter tilted his head as a flask was lifted to his lips. He took a long pull at the gurgling bottle.

"Hell, I kin walk." Drag Lassiter shoved off the hands of his guards and moved out to the waiting horse. Because his hands were tied he had to be boosted into the saddle. The moon was just dropping behind the bosque, but Lem, looking through the open door, could see the little party of seven ride away in the gloom with the prisoner. He cursed under his breath. That meant Cass Morgan remained behind.

LEM flinched, watching Jess, who was now awake and staring through the doorway. The sound of receding hoofbeats grew fainter, then ceased. They'd be under the big cottonwood at the clearing's edge by now.

Again Lem tried to build a cigarette. "Smoke, Jess?" he asked thickly.

The big fellow shook his head. He seemed to be grinning sardonically in the vague starlight that entered the open door.

Lem McCarty jerked upright as the screeching sound of a rope scraping a tree limb came to his ears. He averted his eyes from Big Jess. It was bad enough to see Drag Lassiter, Hooker Bill and the vaquero Cuchara go, but it was terrifying to think of Big Jess ending up this way. Big Jess, who had been raised here, as close to Lem McCarty as a brother.

The riders were at the door again. Three of them, headed by Sawbuck,

came in. Hooker Bill was next. He got to his feet, whimpering and pleading with them to let him off. As Sawbuck touched his shoulder he swayed, fell heavily to the dirt floor. They lifted him up, steadied him and gave him whiskey. Then they helped him out to the waiting horse.

Lem McCarty wet his dry lips and his parched throat, swallowing. He heard Hooker Bill's whining as the hoofbeats receded. Cuchara, the Tejano Mexican, sat there shuddering and cursing by turns. He was the worst of the lot, had killed cruelly and often. He would be next.

Then Big Jess' turn would come. It was strange that Lem could say nothing. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth when he tried to tell how he had pleaded for Jess, how the members had outvoted him on the penalty, but he could not get the words out. In his mind he raged at Cass Morgan. Lem had determined to make a break with Jess if given half a chance, but Morgan had balked him. And Lem could not kill a law-abiding cowman even to save a friend.

His spine chilled to ice as he heard the wind-driven cries of Hooker Bill out there in the darkness, then the sudden horrible silence that cut them off. He sat rigid, afraid to look at Jess. Now the riders were returning for Cuchara.

The victim got up, bellowing a Spanish oath. Then he crossed himself and prayed in a low voice. He took a long draft from the whiskey Sawbuck held at his lips, then walked out unaided, muttering. The sandstorm hissed weirdly about the hut.

Big Jess suddenly leaned forward. "Well, compadre," he whispered. "You and me're alone. Better cut me loose—quick."

Lem McCarty jumped up, crept to the door and looked out. Cass Mor-

gan was standing twenty feet away, gun in hand. He saw the movement in the hut. "Don't try anything, Lem, or I'll have to kill you both," he warned grimly.

Lem backed inside. His throat was tight and scorching. "Morgan is out there watchin' for it," he choked. "I'd rather take yore place than face the livin' hell of bein' hated by sis for killin' Morgan. I'm—"

Big Jess looked as if he could not believe his ears. "I expected Linda to throw me over, but not you."

Lem groaned in agony. He could not get the drop on Morgan at that distance. It would be a fight; he would have to hold the cowman or let the verdict be carried out. And Big Jess had not denied his guilt.

"God knows I'd change places with you if I could—" He tensed, hearing the awful snap of the rope as Cuchara plunged. As if he could not hold himself back, Lem sprang toward the bound cowboy. With his jackknife he slashed the rawhide that held Jess Eylar's wrists.

QUICK, amigo, I've got it!" he whispered. "Pull off yore right boot, like you was me, with one sock foot. Set over there where I was settin'. Gimme yore hat."

"But what in blazes—"

"I'm takin' yore place," Lem cut in. "We're about the same build. In the dark they won't notice. You stay there till they go. Then take my roan outside. The way will be clear. Morgan will go along to the hang tree this time to be shore Jess Eylar cashes in. Gimme yore boot—hurry!" Lem dragged at it, yanked it off and pulled it on his own foot. He shoved Big Jess to the opposite side of the hut, where he himself had been sitting.

"Set there till I'm at the hang tree. And here's my gun if you'll

swear you won't kill Morgan or any of the men—"

"Hell, Lem, I can't let yuh do that—not that!" Jess protested.

"They won't hang me. Not when they see who I am," Lem declared, although he knew different. The rage of those men would be violent when they found Lem had thus tricked them to save a horse thief.

"Tie my wrists, Jess, quick—like yores was. But knot 'em loose so I c'n slip out my hands."

With his arms behind his back, Lem McCarty sat in the condemned cowboy's place as Sawbuck and his executioners dismounted and came for the fourth and final victim of border-line justice.

"Yore turn, Jess," said the veteran sorrowfully. "You knowed the consequences, with that notice posted plain. Lassiter and Cuchara died game, but Hooker Bill caved in. I reckon you won't make it tough. Drink?" In the gloom of the hut he lifted the bottle to the lips of the supposed Jess Eylar.

Lem had pulled the black hat low, though that was hardly necessary in the dark. He took the whisky without Sawbuck or the others perceiving anything amiss. Now the group moved out together.

Here Cass Morgan joined the hangmen for the first time. Before swinging to the saddle he called out to the occupant of the hut, "You don't need to wait, Lem, if you don't want to. Reckon you done yore duty, and that's all any man could ask."

Wrists loosely thonged with rawhide, the substitute prisoner was hoisted to his horse. The riders started with him across the wind-swept clearing.

Lem kept his head low, feigning sullen dejection that was not wholly make-believe. avoiding a direct look

at any of the vigilantes in the gloom. He shuddered at sight of the three ghoulish figures dangling from the cottonwood limb.

Cass Morgan spurted forward. "My deal now, Sawbuck," he said. "I'll officiate at the finals. There's a few things I want to ask Jess in private."

The others fell behind in the sand-storm, neckerchiefs lifted over mouths and nostrils to keep out the flying grit. Morgan edged his horse close and muttered through clenched teeth, "Eylar, where did you have Linda till four o'clock in the mornin' Wednesday?"

Startled, Lem McCarty stiffened in the saddle. That was the hour when the horses were jumped in the Circle Box corral. Lem did not reply, for good reasons.

"Won't talk, eh?" jeered Morgan. "Didn't even tell her brother, did you? Lem would have busted through hell to save you if you had. Protectin' her, eh?" A brittle laugh escaped him. "You must have been drunk, bringin' her to the ranch at four o'clock in the mornin' on the weddin' day to make her call it off. And she wouldn't do it! She took pity on me because I'm an old man." He cursed the supposed Jess Eylar. "She was willin' to go out with you all night for a farewell ride in the moonlight, but she balked at leavin' me waitin' at the church. She wanted to marry you, but she couldn't break an old man's heart!"

Cass Morgan stiffened with rage. "You didn't know Lassiter's bunch was hidin' by the horse shed and overheard you two. Well, Lassiter spilled it, even if you did manage to get Linda out of there before we grabbed you. You hackanored your tongue to keep her out of it when she wouldn't go through and elope. Tell me where you had her all night.

*
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 * *
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 * *
 * FOR *
 * *
 * CHRISTMAS?" *
 * *

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or by hell I'll put that rope three times around so you'll strangle slow and horrible. Out with it!"

LEM McCARTY'S blood was seething, but his lips remained tight. He saw it clearly now. Linda actually loved Big Jess. Morgan's lies about Jess trailing with Lassiter had finally won her over, but she had wavered that night, probably had agreed to elope. She had gone to the Circle Box with Jess to call off the wedding, but at the last minute could not do it for Morgan's sake. And Big Jess had kept silent because a girl who had gone out all night with another on the eve of the wedding would have been disgraced in the cow country. Meantime Cass Morgan was determined to hang his rival on a horse-theft charge which Big Jess could not disprove without dragging Linda into it.

"She was going to fly the coop with you, wasn't she?" gritted Morgan.

Lem dared not speak just yet. Excitement rioting in him, he glanced back through the dull cloud of flying grit and dust toward the hut. A faint streak of gray told of approaching dawn. Big Jess was due to make his break for liberty now. Lem murmured a prayer of thanks that Jess at least would not be hanged for a crime he did not commit. His pulse quickened when he saw the shadowy figure of the big fellow rush from the adobe, spring to the saddle and ride south toward old Mexico.

"Lem will be followin' you before long, Jess," Cass Morgan muttered in his ear. "It was him and you both that turned Linda. I'll get him, too. I'd have fixed him at the quicksands if you hadn't horned in."

They were under the hang tree by now. The fourth rope was waiting

on the high limb; all had been placed in order the night before, double-length riatas tied together.

Lem had become cool and deadly. He must act quickly. The rage of the vigilantes would be violent when they found they had been tricked. Without a gun—he had made a mistake in giving it to Jess—he must extricate himself by some sudden, desperate move.

As Cass Morgan took hold of the rope to fix it about the unresisting "Jess Eylar," Lem slipped his hands out of the rawhide thongs. Morgan's hands were raised to the cowboy's neck. With a quick reach Lem snatched out the other's .45 close up. The dust fog in the semigloom and the position of the waiting line of horsemen enabled him to get away with it. "Don't make a move," he whispered, with the gun jammed into Cass Morgan's side.

He tilted back his hat and thrust his face nearer the Circle Box man. "You know who's talkin' to you now, don't you, Morgan?"

The vigilante chief gasped, his breath rattling as he stared dumfounded at Lem McCarty.

"Take off yore hat," Lem ordered.

As Morgan obeyed, the cowboy quickly slipped the rope about the other's neck. The cattleman let out a yell of horror. "Help—he's hangin' me!"

Lem gave the noose a swift jerk and kicked Morgan's horse as the bewildered vigilantes surged forward. Even now they did not know what was happening. Morgan seized the rope overhead, his untied hands saving him. Lem lashed his horse back into the fringe of the timber before the first roar of six-shooters told that the vigilantes had got things halfway straight.

His eyes strained through the murk and the faint dawn light.

Vaguely he made out the knot of riders gathered about Morgan.

"Get him! Kill that spy!" came the infuriated shout of the Circle Box owner as the riders wheeled their mounts and broke for the bosque.

"Compadre!" Big Jess dashed alongside. He had circled back to make sure Lem McCarty suffered no punishment over the escape. Together they galloped away. Though both were now armed, they were unwilling to return the fire for fear of hitting the well-meaning cowmen.

BY sunup the fugitives had reached the Rio Grande. "Shore yuh can't go back, amigo?" asked Big Jess anxiously. "Me, I've got to hit the long trail."

"It's good-by to Texas, Jess, for us both," Lem said. He motioned to the misplaced sign. "But we can't ford here—the quicksands. Wind's even wiped out the trail sign."

"Foller me." Big Jess loped to the signpost, snatched it from the sand. He carried it a hundred yards and thrust the staff into the original post-hole. "I watched Morgan make the shift," he explained. "Come on!"

"That's mighty white of you, Jess, considerin' the boys are shore to follow," Lem declared. Snapping, crackling chaparral told that the vigilantes were not far behind.

On the Mexican side the outcasts replaced the Spanish sign. Screened by the timber, they looked back. "Comin'?" Jess muttered.

With Cass Morgan in the lead, the vigilantes poured from the Texas bosque. Swiftly Morgan turned his men away from the wood-slab marker, yelling a warning. He dashed upstream a hundred yards. Here he plunged his horse into the river.

"The quickies!" blurted Big-Jess.

"His own trap and he couldn't take it straight." Cupping his hands, Jess shouted across the river to Sawbuck and the others not to follow. But the warning was not needed. The men halted, drew back when they saw Cass Morgan struggling in the *Arenal de Muerte*, the Sands of Death.

"Let's be driftin', amigo," Lem said, shuddering. "Morgan asked for it—his own deadfall. And there ain't a riata in that party to pull him out; they left 'em tied double on the hang tree."

"Shucks, he shore made a mistake ridin' so crooked," Big Jess said, winking.

"Yuh figured it?" asked Lem, surprised.

"Nope. Heck, next you'll be accusin' me of tippin' Lassiter off to make that raid to halt the weddin'. But I didn't. Jest didn't have the brains to think of it, I reckon."

They rode on. Climbing a barren mesa, they glanced back, saw a pair

of arms waving feebly above the yellow current, with the helpless cowmen unable to lift a finger.

But Morgan's end did not change the situation for the outcasts, whose only alibi involved a girl. They traveled on.

It was three nights later when a visitor rode into the light of the campfire Lem and Jess had made on the llanos of Chihuahua.

"Better be comin' back along in the mornin', rannies," Sawbuck Honeywell said dryly. "Miss Linda, she wants to see yuh. Why'n sin didn't yuh tell us Morgan was takin' blood bounty to settle a woman grudge?"

The pals exchanged glances.

"Shucks, Sawbuck, we was only waitin' for yuh to cool down," lied Lem McCarty.

"Yeah," Big Jess assented. "But it's been gettin' pesky takin' turns with one sock foot. Light and have some prime goat lamb, won't yuh, Sawbuck?"

THE END.

THE LAW IN THE WEST

IN the West, if a man brags that he can ride anything that wears hair he is supposed to make good—not only by the general public, but by the courts of law.

There are any number of cases where individuals have gone to court to recover damages for injuries inflicted by the horses of "notoriously wild, vicious, and ferocious dispositions"—the parties sued being the ones from whom the defendants either purchased, rented, or borrowed the aforesaid vicious animals. But where the defendant showed—as in one specific case in California—that the plaintiff boasted repeatedly that he "could ride any damn horse in the State," the court returned a verdict in favor of the defendant.

"The plaintiff has, in effect, challenged the community to produce a horse that can throw him," said one learned judge, "and he must abide by the consequences."

However, if a man says, "Gimme a horse that won't rip up the middle and jump apart, because I crawl onto a saddle by myself and I like to come down the same way," and he is furnished with a horse that is a man-killer, he can recover full damages for injuries if he gets thrown.

The ablest buckaroos in the West, incidentally, are very modest about their horsemanship.



Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

It was with considerable pleasure that I attended the National Matches this year for my fourteenth time at the big annual shoot at Camp Perry, Ohio, and met so many of my good friends who have been regular followers of this department.

To those who attended Camp Perry's big shoot, this issue will probably mean very little. To others who did not have the opportunity to go we'd like to call to your attention that this National Shoot is growing every year, and in 1939 was the biggest ever with some seven thousand shooters from all over the United States, Canada, Canal Zone, Hawaii, the Philippines, Alaska, and every State in the Union taking part in the three weeks of active shooting.

I've watched Camp Perry grow from a mud hole in the early '20s to a modern temporary city in itself. I've seen ramshackle, deserted farm buildings torn down and in their place modern concrete and brick shops, offices, administration buildings and theaters rise up to take their place.

I have watched the shooting game grow as well. In the early '20's when I first attended Camp Perry,

women were taboo. They had to keep to the Squaw Camp and they were not permitted to take part in the shooting. Today, shooters attend with their wives and families, and women take part in the shooting, both in small bore and pistol matches and in the large .30-caliber service rifle matches. They receive no handicap because of sex. They shoot along with the men on equal terms, frequently beating them.

Looking back, I also see major improvements in shooting clothing.

When I first began to attend the National Matches, shooting clothing consisted of the oldest rags we could locate. Shooting jackets were anything a chap happened to have. Many wore old-time army uniform jackets split up the back and laced together with adjustable buckle to allow the proper arm freedom. On the elbows and shoulders ragged pieces of sheepskin were sewed for padding so that the shooter might have some hide left on his elbows and a little bit of white flesh remaining on his shoulder after running off

hundred rounds of service rifle ammunition in a single day.

Today, all of this has changed. In place of ragged, patched, and worn-out trousers; the shooters wear tan shirts and slacks or wash trousers. The battered and scarred headgear of yesteryear is being replaced by light helmets made of pressed paper and cloth, helmets that are comfortable to wear and extremely cool in the broiling sun. The old makeshift shooting jacket has been replaced with a modern one designed particularly for the shooter with built-in elbow and shoulder pads, special pockets for shooting accessories, and other such devices.

The drab color of these jackets is today a thing of the past. The standard jacket color for riflemen still runs pretty close to the tan but extremely colorful insignia is used. All of the boys—and the girls, too—wear various kinds of emblems. You can watch shooters hiking around camp and immediately tell just what major matches they have attended, what teams they belong to and even, in some cases, the honors they have won.

Shooting equipment has also changed during these past fifteen years. Telescopes on the rifle range were quite uncommon in 1924 and their use was not fully understood by shooters. There were very few scopes on the market, chief of which

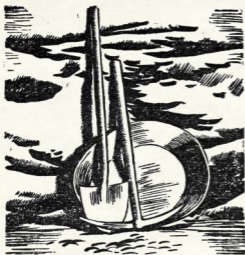
was the ancient, obsolete, but very honorable English "Lord Burry." These scopes were about thirty-five to fifty power which is today considered useless. Modern rifle range scopes average about twenty power but the improved vision and low magnification are essential requirements in the analysis of mirage at long range and spotting of bullet holes at short range.

Back in the old days a few of the boys used shooting kits, mostly converted small tool kits or some other kind of homemade affair. Today riflemen turn up on the firing line with large custombuilt shooting kits, of which there are many on the market. These kits are well filled with all kinds of accessories, including shooting gloves, sling pads, sight blacking gadgets, and other things unknown to the average shooter of only fifteen years ago.

When I first began to attend the National Matches, the total consumption of ammunition for the three weeks was around one million cartridges of all kinds. The 1939 matches saw the firing of approximately eight million assorted rifle cartridges, revolver and automatic pistol types and .22 caliber numbers. In 1925 there was no small-bore shooting at Camp Perry. In 1939 nearly one million long rifle cartridges were shot in the various matches by more than nine hundred competitors in this field alone.

If you are interested in making a cartridge collection and would like to hear from other collectors, write to this department, inclosing a three-cent stamp for a list of names which will be sent to you as soon as it is compiled. In this way you may be able to trade some of your duplicates with others for something you really need for your collection.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns And Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. *Be sure you inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

THERE is a whale of a lot of arid and semiarid desert country that offers likely gold prospecting terrain down in Imperial County in the southeastern corner of southern California. Roads are few and towns even scarcer, but one or two trunk highways, new and graded, are making this mineralized strip of desert along the California side of the Colorado River more and more accessible.

This section is apt to be a sun-baked oven in midsummer. Conversely it offers a swell gold-bearing refuge from the icy blasts of winter for a prospector anxious to duck snow and ice. J. F., of Oak Park, Illinois, is one of the latter. At least so he says in his recent letter.

"I am a prospecting nut of long standing and prefer a region where there is a fighting chance to get onto some gold-placer ground. Have worked both sluice boxes and dry washers, so if the yellow metal is

there the desert or a dry washing district doesn't disturb me. In fact, I prefer it for the trip I am planning this winter, some place where I can get away from snow and blizzards and bask in the warm sunshine of the Southwest. How about the lower corner of southern California near the Colorado River? What placer regions are down there? Can you reach them with a car? Any action been going on there lately?

"I realize that's a lot of questions to ask, but your answers will be much appreciated and a help in planning my winter trip. I have a car, good camping equipment and can take care of myself anywhere in the great outdoors."

Don't worry about the questions, J. F. We are always glad to answer them to the best of our ability, and we like to see you fellows shoot them in.

The desert rats have been busy around the country you have in mind. Even over in the Chocolate Mountains mining has been getting quite a result-producing play lately. That is an extra item to stick in the back of your head and remember for possible future reference.

As to placers the most productive to date have been the Mesquite, Picacho and Potholes. Dry, of course, because they are in desert country even though the Picacho field about thirty miles north of Yuma (but on the California side of the river) stretches almost from the Colorado itself back two to five miles southward into the country.

Farther down is the Potholes placer area, from which some two million dollars' worth of fairly coarse gold has already been won by individual, small-scale effort mostly with homemade dry washers. At one time as many as five hundred Mexicans worked the Potholes according

to estimate. They are close to Yuma, just about ten miles north and east, and lie a couple of miles or so west of Laguna Dam. You can reach them by turning north off highway 80 onto a dirt road just across the Colorado River bridge at Yuma. During recent seasons a few persistent dry washers have still been operating in the more favorable spots around this section.

Back into the desert farther north from Ogilvy toward the Chocolate range are the Mesquite placers. Dry washers have been set up around here during past seasons, too. Recently a group of Seattle placer operators has been getting underway to tackle the gold-bearing gravels here on a larger scale than has before been attempted. Large scale dry washing has always been a bugbear to placer people, but this outfit in question has apparently solved it.

And not with a new-fangled dry washer either. They simply took the trouble to drill into the desert sand at carefully selected spots and brought in ample wells of water. So when pipe and pumping equipment is in they will be able to handle dry placer ground by wet washing methods, which ought to make a darn good combination.

In general, it might be good idea for anyone contemplating prospecting for gold-placer in these Imperial County desert-placer-gold districts to bear in mind the following: The origin of the gold that has been found in these sections lies back in

the old eroded quartz stringers and veinlets that occur in the rock formations of both the Chocolate and Cargo Muchacho Mountains. The gold itself was brought down over a long geological period of years and settled in the various gulches and broader washes as weathering and erosion wore the mountains down. The result, as is customary in desert country, is apt to be fairly coarse gold, but spotty and irregular in concentration.

To Jim S., Waterbury, Connecticut: Yes, important new mining finds continue to be made right along in the United States itself. For instance, reports have recently come in concerning a new gold discovery believed to be of major consequence that has just been made in Nevada in the Mount Tallac district a few miles west of Lake Tahoe. The find which has been made there reportedly contains high-grade streaks of rich quartz running up to a thousand dollars a ton in gold values, and a solid mass of low-grade, yet minable ore six hundred feet wide. Development of this mine will probably open up a new mineral territory in Nevada.

To T. R., of Waco, Texas: Mercury, or quicksilver, is mined in eight Western states, namely: California, Oregon, Nevada, Utah, Arkansas, Texas, Arizona, and Washington. Prospecting for it might be timely.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.



The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

We begin the Hollow Tree this week with a "mother-daughter act," and mighty pleased we are about it, too. The first letter is from Sally Spitznas and the second from Evelyn, her daughter. It seems that Evelyn has been writing to a pal from South Africa whose plea appeared in the Tree and she's been enjoying the correspondence so much that not only does she want some more pals, but she has gotten her mother interested, too. Here they are, mother and daughter, and we ask you to "do yourselves proud" by both of them.

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been reading the letters in the Hollow Tree for some time now and have finally decided to enter my bid for some Pen Pals. As I shall never realize my fondest hope, which is to travel, the next best thing is to learn firsthand by writing letters, how the rest of the world lives and thinks. I had reading foreign and out-of-town American newspapers very fascinating and would be delighted to receive them from anyone, anywhere, regardless of age. I will do my best to reciprocate with all who do so by sending them local papers, news items, snapshots, post cards or anything else they would be interested in. I hope a lot of you will hear my plea and let me hear the news in your corner of the world.—Sally Spitznas, 144 Sterling Avenue, Jersey City, New Jersey

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a high-school student, fifteen years old and am very anxious to have Pen Pals around my age from all corners of the globe. I love all outdoor sports, movies and reading, and my hobby is receiving letters. I will answer all who write to me, so pick up your pens, pals, and let's get acquainted.—Evelyn Spitznas, 144 Sterling Avenue, Jersey City, New Jersey

Don gets his mail a unique way—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young Canadian lad of nineteen and have been a Western Story reader for the past

three years. I am at present employed as a Fire Ranger, and am an observer on a lookout tower which is equipped with a two-way radio. I am stationed about twenty-two miles from the railway and get my mail and supplies by airplane once a week. I will send snaps of the tower and myself to the first five who write. Here's hoping I have a full mailbag.—Don Martin, Fire Ranger, c/o Ontario Forestry Branch, White River, Ontario, Canada

Barbara won't disappoint you—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a Southern belle seventeen years old and would like some Pen Pals between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five from anywhere in the United States, Canada or Hawaii. I promise prompt replies and will be glad to exchange snapshots. My hobby is photography. I'm sure anyone who writes will not be disappointed in my letters, so come on, boys and girls, drop me a line.—Barbara Byrd, 1440 East 12th Street, Jacksonville, Florida

Anyone need a caretaker?

Dear Miss Rivers:

Will you please publish this request for me? I am a carpenter by trade and am all alone in the world. I am in very good health and would like to find a property owner in Colorado who needs a good man as caretaker. I can do any repair work that is needed and can build anything in wood, but I understand concrete work, too. I am more interested in a place that would be homelike than I am in wages. I can furnish good references.—J. H. Yates, Center, Colorado

Anna wants to make lots of friends—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am an eighteen-year-old girl and, after successfully answering some of the letters in the Hollow Tree, I am here to make my plea for Pen Pals. I enjoy sports of all kinds, reading, making friends and having fun, so come on, everyone, and help me pass the time with letters from the four corners of the world.—Anna Scott, General Delivery, Belmont, California

Write to Kenneth in far-off India—

Dear Miss Rivers:

A few years ago you did me the favor of finding me some Pen Pals. I wonder if you would be so kind as to renew that favor? I still write to a few of my old pals, but have lots of spare time on my hands between issues of Western Story so I can take care of a lot more pals between the ages of eighteen and thirty. I am a Canadian serving in the British army in India, and am interested in all sports and outdoor life. I promise to send a photo of the Taj Mahal to the first six people who write, so come on, some of you lonely souls, and let's see what we can do toward cheering each other up.—Private Kenneth B. Shaw, 5670550, Signal Section, Headquarters Company, 1st Bn, Somerset, Light Infantry, Ghorpuri Barracks, Poona, India

Adventure seekers, here's a pal for you—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Please help me find foreign Pen Pals. I can't travel as extensively as I would like, so the next best thing is corresponding with those who live in other countries. I think I can satisfy the demand for thrills and adventure of those interested in the West, as I was reared in Oklahoma and now live in Arkansas. I only have one stipulation to make, I'd like my pals to be twenty-five years old or over.—Margaret Whiteside, Rt. No. 1, Box 52, Des Arc, Arkansas

This request comes all the way from Egypt—

Dear Miss Rivers:

We are two lonely R. A. F. boys, at present stationed in Egypt. We would be very pleased to correspond with Pen Pals from all parts of the globe. We are twenty and twenty-two years old and enjoy swimming, motoring and photography, and our hobby is collecting interesting souvenirs. Here's hoping we receive plenty of letters from boys and girls in the near future.—Aircraftsmen P'cock and Perks, Bungalow 164, 113 (B) Squadron, R. A. F., Heliopolis, Egypt

A partner is wanted here—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like to hear from men who have a car to travel in and are interested in prospecting for gold in California, either next winter or the following summer. I prefer the southern part of the State for winter and the mountains in summer. I will furnish good references and do my part to make it pleasant for us both.—Alonzo T. Bailey, 915 South Purdum Street, Kokomo, Indiana

This New Zealander loves animals—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been reading your column for many months and, since I haven't much to do with my time, I was wondering if you could help me find some Pen Pals. I am seventeen years old and love animals, especially horses and dogs, and am very keen on all outdoor sports. I take special interest in hockey and track. I would like friends in Canada and Texas, but promise to answer all letters and will exchange photographs with anyone who wishes to do so.—Winnie Ryan, Main Road, Green Island, Via Dunedin, South Island, New Zealand

Charles has no end of interests—

Dear Miss Rivers:

May I drop a letter in the Hollow Tree, which I'm hoping will bring me lots of Pen Pals and perhaps a partner. I am twenty-four years old and have many interests—photography, sketching, painting, music, opera, poetry, hiking, bicycling, boating, horseback riding, swimming, collecting autographs and writing stories and letters. My greatest desire is to travel, vagabonding it, and I hope some day to combine travel, photography and writing into a career, but at present I am out of work and very lonely; so come on, everybody, and write to me. I am especially interested in receiving letters from Canada, Alaska, Mexico and Central and South America, not to mention the countries and islands beyond the blue horizon. I promise to answer promptly, so again I say, come on and write.—Charles Vintoue, Northfield, Vermont

Marguerite wants foreign pals—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Could you find me some Pen Pals in the Orient and South Sea Islands? I have a few in the United States, but have not been successful in finding foreign Pen Pals. I am sixteen, and my hobby is writing letters. My favorite sports are swimming and tennis, and I also enjoy music, the movies and reading. I will exchange pictures, post cards of the United States and souvenirs with those who wish them.—Marguerite Ryan, 209 West Martin, Del Rio, Texas

And here's a lonely veteran—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely World War soldier forty years old and I would like to have Pen Pals around my age from all over the country. I am interested in all sports and farming.—Regan Williams, Veterans Facility, Roanoke, Virginia

Introducing Mrs. Hamilton—

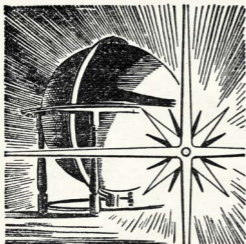
Dear Miss Rivers:

I think corresponding and learning about different countries and people is a good way to broaden one's mind, as well as a nice way to pass some lonely hours. So won't you introduce me to the Hollow Tree? I am a widow near sixty, have no near relatives, and get pretty lonely at times. I would welcome and appreciate letters from anyone.—Mrs. Estella Hamilton, 33 Walnut Street, Manchester, New Hampshire

Beth sure wants lots of Pals—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am seventeen years old and it has been my ambition to have a Pen Pal in each of the United States and from as many foreign countries as well. I have a map and in each State I place a red star if I have written to a pal in that State. If I receive an answer, I place a gold star in that State. I haven't many gold stars yet so I thought that through the Hollow Tree I might get them. Please, Pals, answer my plea and help me fill my map. This also goes for boys and girls living in other countries. Since I live out here in the West, I will be able to write interesting letters and will swap pictures and post cards and help other Pals with their hobbies. Here's hoping you won't let me down.—Beth Johnson, 2516 Cleinent Avenue, Alameda, California



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

H. J., of Trenton, New Jersey, like many more of us, would like to take a winter trip to Florida. He would like to see something of the central portion of the State and asks me to mention some of the points of interest.

I would suggest that you enter Florida over the Old Spanish Trail, crossing the famous Suwannee River. This brings you to that ridge of land which runs from the Georgia border south to Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades, and which lies between the east and west coast counties.

If you do not enter by the Old Spanish Trail, then go in by way of Route 2, from Valdosta, Georgia, crossing the Suwannee farther up-

stream. In the former case, your first town in Florida will be Live Oak, and in the latter case White Springs, a little health resort near the river.

Going on down on either of these roads your next stop will be Lake City, the junction of the two roads. This is the main gateway to the central part of the State, and vies with Jacksonville as a point of entry, being only sixty-two miles west of it. You will pass through some beautiful pecan groves around here, this being a big center for the commercial growth of these nuts.

Outside of this town, on the Jacksonville road, is the famous Olustee Battlefield of Civil War days. This is also good fresh-water fishing ground for those who are interested.

About twenty-six miles south is the town of High Springs, where Route 5 leads off to the west coast and Route 2 continues on down the central ridge. Going on down, you hit Gainesville, which is the county seat of Alachua County.

The State university and agricultural college are at Gainesville, and in the early days the town played an important part in the State's history. It was a trading center during the days of the Indian wars, and the site of a bloody battle during the Civil War.

One thing you want to be sure not to miss here is the Alachua, from which the county takes its name. It means "water jug," and is applied to a large sink south of town where the waters of Newnan's Lake and Prairie Creek disappear underground, and, so far as any man knows, never reappear.

Readers who would like to obtain tourist information or travel maps on Florida may write John North, inclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope, and particulars will be mailed promptly.

This whole section around Gainesville is interesting from many points of view, and some time should be spent in exploring it. Just west of town, about fifteen miles, are rich phosphate mines. There are also some peculiar rock formations. One of them is the group of natural wells sunk in limestone. They are about two to three feet in diameter and average about thirty feet deep, and their walls are as smooth as though carved by the hand of man. Most of them furnish a supply of pure cold water, but there are some dry ones. In one of the dry ones it is possible to descend thirty-nine feet, travel in an underground tunnel cut by water, and come up out of another dry well a mile away.

Another one of these strange natural wonders to see is the "Devil's Millhopper." This is a great bowl a hundred feet deep, into which twenty streams pour continuously without raising the level of the pool in the bottom of it. No outlet for the water has ever been discovered.

Ocala is farther on down in Marion County. This is the "Kingdom of the Sun," of the Timuquan Indians, whose robust physique stimulated the Spaniards into their belief in the legendary "Fountain of Youth." This section is a region of fine agricultural possibilities, and the farms there are famous for various winter vegetables and fruit. There is also some phosphate mining and a group of limestone quarries.

Silver Springs, near Ocala, is a

marvel that is already famous all over the United States, and it is difficult to do justice to its beauty. It is a great punch bowl of rock three hundred feet in diameter, and has gushing up from its springs in the bottom streams of water which fill the bowl and flow away as the famed Silver River.

Orlando is the chief city of central Florida, and is in the heart of Orange County. When you get down to this semitropical part of the State you will find the beauty outdoors beyond anything you might have expected.

For the outdoorsman on vacation, it is a fine place to fish and hunt. There is plenty of game, both big and small, and there are thirty-one lakes around Orlando to furnish fish for the fisherman.

Winter Park is another fine Orange County community, the home of Rollins College, and is located on Route 3.

On down in De Soto County is Arcadia, and then the traveler can go east to Okeechobee. This town is at the upper edge of the great lake of that name. This lake is a great body of water, and is a mystery to the white man. It is so shallow that wading birds can be seen a mile out from shore, but apparently only the Indians can find their way through it and the Everglades which start here. It is a good place to stop, before you get lost in the swamps, on this tour of the central part of Florida.

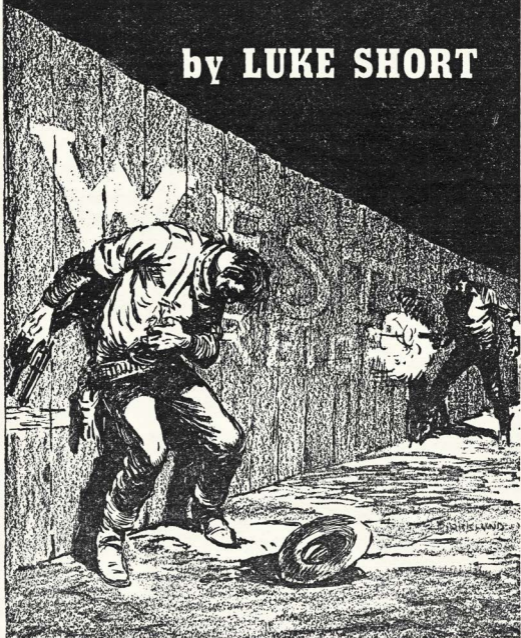
● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. 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.

DEAD FREIGHT FOR PIUTE

Part Six

by LUKE SHORT



The Story So Far:

Although he had come to Piute to see his uncle, Craig Armin, about a job with the Monarch Co., the latter's freighting outfit, Cole Armin turns down a partnership when he discovers that his uncle is using cutthroat methods to force a competitor, Ted Wallace, out of business.

Cole accepts a job with the Western Freighting Co., Ted Wallace's outfit. They realize that they face the open and relentless enmity of Cole's uncle, but they do not know that there is another and more subtle plot being built up against them. Keen Billings, who works for but hates Craig Armin, and Sheriff Ed Linton, a corrupt law officer, plan between them to ruin both Monarch and Western and take over the remains.

From the outset, bad luck dogs the new partnership. Ted is mysteriously pushed down a stairway and breaks his leg, which forces Cole, in spite of lack of experience, to take one of the ore wagons in a test haul from the China Boy Mine. Coming down, Cole's brake lever snaps and he narrowly escapes death. Next, fire breaks out in Monarch's yards and Cole is blamed. When he gives an alibi, Sheriff Linton releases him, but puts him under a five-thousand-dollar peace bond.

News that the China Boy Mine has been dynamited and that it will be months before any more ore can be shipped shakes Cole's determination to keep out of trouble. As he sees it, only one man, Keen Billings, could have done the dynamiting, and he decides to face Billings and have it out with him.

Before he meets Billings, however, Cole gets into a dispute with a deputy and is thrown into jail. At the same time, Billings, acting under Linton's orders, fires a shotgun from ambush, creasing Craig Armin. As Billings and Linton figure it, Craig will leap to the conclusion that his nephew is trying to kill him and will give orders for Cole and Ted Wallace to be murdered. Then, with evidence that Craig has ordered two murders committed, Linton will be able to force the Monarch owner out of Piute and take over his outfit.

Craig, having given Billings his orders, sends Letty Burns to tell Cole and Ted that he is ready to declare a truce. Letty, however, becomes suspicious when Craig tells her that she is to get Celia Wallace, Ted's sister, out of the way. She explains her suspicions to Cole, mentioning that Craig, while he was speaking to her, pulled his right ear as if he were embarrassed.

Cole, who, before he came to Piute, had not seen his uncle since childhood, suddenly remembers that Craig Armin had had the lobe of his right ear shot off in the Mexican War.

So, as the minute fly and the time approaches for the death trap to spring, it dawns on Cole that the man who calls himself Craig Armin is an impostor.

CHAPTER XXII

GUN SMOKE RENDEZVOUS

COLE's abrupt declaration that Craig Armin was an impostor, left the kind of pregnant, uneasy quiet that follows the sudden crash of thunder. Silent amazement was mirrored in the eyes of Ted, Celia and Letty Burns as they stared at him. At last the tension was snapped by Cole himself.

"How long did they say, Letty, before Billings is to come?"

"Ten minutes," she answered.

"And he was to come alone?"

"Craig Armin said so."

Cole looked at Ted. "He won't be alone. He'll have men with him. And we're trapped here, Ted, like they want us! That's why they wanted the women out—so they could shoot me, and then come in and get you!"

"That's right!" Letty cried. "That must be it!"

Cole looked around the room. "Celia, you and Letty get out of here! Quick!"

"But what about Ted?" Celia asked.

"I'm goin' to carry him over to the new yard and fort up in a wagon over there!" He spoke swiftly to Ted. "You got a gun?"

Ted pulled one out from under the blankets.

"Go on, Celia!" Cole urged. "You and Letty go!" To Ted he said, "I'll try and make it easy, fella, but it will hurt!"

"Go ahead," Ted said quietly.

Celia and Letty went into the other room. Cole picked Ted up, blankets and all, slung him over his shoulder, pulled his gun and went out into the corridor.

Celia was standing in the doorway, looking over her shoulder at Cole.

"Get on!" Cole said.

"I'll get help, Cole," Celia said.

"You hide!" he cried miserably.

"Don't show your head. Hide in the office!"

But Celia was gone down the steps.

Cole rounded the table and said to Ted, "I'll take it easy, boy," and went out the door.

AS soon as Cole hit the platform, a crash of gunfire broke out. The slugs rapped in the wood of the door frame, and Cole counted four different reports. A window, somewhere in the other rooms, crashed in and a man yelled, "They're out in back. Get the steps!"

Swiftly, then, Cole made his decision. To go back would invite death, because Billings' men had come in on the roof of the adjoining building. Safety lay down there and in the new wagon yard. Celia and Letty were already in the office below.

He palmed up his gun and shot once, and the lantern on the gate went out. Then he lunged down the steps, the sound racketing out into the night.

Five rifles, now, opened up at them. Cole could hear the slugs slapping into the wood of the building in front and behind him.

He hit the ground below, staggered, fell to his knees, caught himself and came erect. Ted, slung over his shoulder, opened up now at the two riflemen along the side fence of the compound.

Cole ran, glancing to the nearest

side fence. A gun went off almost in his face, but he did not change his stride. Ted raised his gun and shot, and a man screamed. Then the other two riflemen, beaten to cover by Ted's fire, opened up again. And Ted couldn't shoot any more, for his gun was empty.

They were nearing the alley now, the rifle shots raking the darkness about them and slapping into the board fence. They were almost at the gate when a man loomed up there in the middle of it, his body framed by the dim light in the wagon yard across the way. He raised a rifle, and Cole frantically whipped up his gun, running still. He shot and the man bent over. Cole slashed out with his gun as he reached him. The man sprawled backward and the alley was now clear.

As Cole was running, someone from far down the alley cut loose with a shot that geysered up the dust ahead of him. That would be Billings. Cole couldn't shoot now, for his gun was empty, too. He heard Ted say softly, "Run for it, boy."

There was one big ore wagon back against the corner of the stable and the rear fence, and Cole could barely make it out in the lantern light. But he ran for it, knowing that it would take these men a few seconds to climb over the compound fence and follow him.

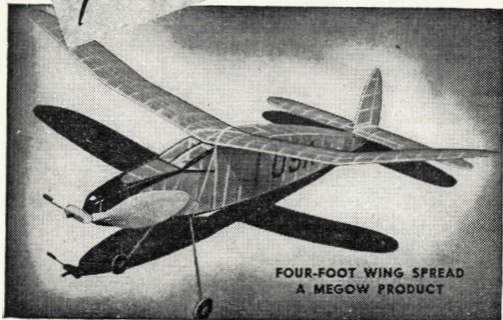
His legs were giving out, for Ted was heavy, and the sweat was pouring off his forehead. His back crawled, as he waited for the first shot that would catch him in the back and knock him flat on his face.

And then he heard Ted shoot. Ted, hanging over his back, had fumbled out some shells from Cole's belt and reloaded, and now he shot at

Continued on page 120

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Continued from page 117

the first man who charged through the gate. The wagon was only yards away now, and Cole drove his buckling knees to make it. He reached the shelter just as two riflemen opened up on them from the compound gate.

Mercifully, the tail gate of the wagon was down. Cole rolled Ted off his shoulder into the wagon bed, and then dived in alongside him, just as the whole chorus of rifle fire opened in concert and the heavy plank sides of the wagon drummed with the slugs.

"All right?" he asked Ted.

"Not hit," Ted answered through clenched teeth. "Here's my gun. Gimme yours and I'll load."

Cole poked his head out the rear of the ore wagon, and saw a man streaking for a bale of hay that lay on the ground by the trough. He shot and the man dived behind the hay. But while he was trying, three more men had sought shelter in the wagon yard, forting up behind the trough, another ore wagon and the corner of the stable.

And then Keen Billings' voice, hoarse with wrath, yelled, "Rush him, boys!"

Cole emptied his gun in the direction of the voice and he heard Billings laugh. While he traded guns with Ted, he saw the men move closer. They were like Indians, drifting from cover to cover until they were close enough to attack.

"We're in a spot, Cole," Ted said grimly.

"I can't see a damn thing!" Cole raged. "I'm goin' to stand up. But when they shoot that light out, they'll rush. Be ready for it."

"Cole," Ted spoke quietly. "In case you pull out of this and I don't, you'll watch out for Celia?"

"If you go I go," Cole said simply.

"No. I want you to clear out. On her account."

"Nothin' doin'," Cole said flatly. "I'm not clearin' out."

"Please, for—"

"No!" Cole said harshly. "I got us into most of this, Ted. I'm sellin' out the hard way!"

He rose, then, and caught sight of a man drifting in to the cover of the stable door. He snapped a shot at him, but the man didn't duck. It was Billings. Very carefully, Billings took sight at the lantern, hanging on a nail outside the stable, and shot it out.

There was a utter blackness then, and Cole felt cold despair grip him. They were trapped now, trapped for fair. He wouldn't leave Ted, and Keen Billings knew he wouldn't.

Keen's voice lifted again in a bawl, "The lantern's out, boys! Rush him!"

COLE shot blindly at anything that moved, but he could not be certain of any sight in that pitch dark. When a shot bloomed into an orange flare he shot at it, but each time the shots were getting closer. And back where it was safe, at the head of the stable, Keen Billings was yelling: "Get 'em, boys! A hundred dollars a scalp!"

Ted, close by the end of the wagon was shooting now, and Cole heard a man curse. And then the others opened up. They were a tight little half circle now, only yards away, and they were running.

Cole fanned his gun empty, and as the hammer clicked on the last empty, he heard a great bawling voice call:

"Hold 'em, Cole! Here we come!"

It was Juck. He and other men were pouring out of the back door of the office across the alley.

"Come on, Juck," Cole yelled, and

Ted opened up with the last of his load.

Frantically, Cole reloaded. For about one second there were no shots from Billings' men. And in that silence, up at the front of the yard, they could hear the heavy steps of a man running toward the gate.

It was Billings. And his men heard it, too.

"He's running out," one man called. "Let's light a shuck."

Cole ran to the front of the wagon, climbed it, and leaped to the stable roof. He went over it, dropped on the other side into the new yard, and then ran in a blind, weaving diagonally across it, leaping piles of lumber and dodging what he couldn't leap. Ted was safe, he knew. And Billings would make the gate long before Juck would get out of the compound. Once Billings was out of the gate, what would he do? Run down the alley away from town.

And Cole staked everything on that guess.

He approached the alley fence far down toward the side street, and he heard Billings pounding down the alley on the other side. Cole leaped for the fence, hauled himself up, then dropped into the alley.

Billings, his back to him, was almost at the street, his body silhouetted against the faint lights of the town.

Cole dropped to the ground, rolled to his knees, and then called sharply, "Billings!"

Billings hauled up, then turned slowly around.

"Make your play, Keen. This is it!" Cole's voice was mild, but it had the ring of iron in it.

Billings peered into the dark alley. He could make out Cole's form, as the latter came to his knees. He had an impulse to surrender, and then in one blinding flash, he knew that

he couldn't. His one chance was the slight possibility that he might be able to catch Cole off balance and winded if he acted now. His hand slapped down at his gun, wrapped around the butt and hauled it out.

Cole saw it come, just as his cleared leather. Billings shot hurriedly, then, from the hip. Shot twice. And Cole swung the black shape of Billings in his sights, and when his gunsight blacked out, pulled the trigger. He shot three times, and at the third shot Billings slacked below the sight and fell on his back.

Slowly, Cole lowered his gun and walked over to him. He stood above him, looking down. Two of his shots had caught Billings in the face.

Behind him, he could hear the ruckus in the alley, the shouting and the talk and excitement. But he only listened to it absently. Hadn't Letty said that Craig Armin was waiting at her house? She had. Cole headed for the street then and Letty's house, his gun still in his hand. When Girard caught up with him as he rounded the corner of the alley, Cole didn't look at him.

"Stay out of my way," he warned the man at his side.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE FINISH FIGHT

CRAIG ARMIN had heard the prolonged gunfire. To him, it meant only one thing; that Cole Armin and Wallace were dead and Monarch was supreme in Piute. He smiled with pleasure at the thought, pleased with the success of his plan, altogether certain of its outcome. Presently someone would be here to tell him about it, and he must have his face composed. He was planning how to assume just the right expression of regret for the sudden

Continued on page 123

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David Manning
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Continued from page 121

death of a bitter and hated rival, when he heard the footsteps outside.

He went to the door, thinking maybe it was Keen Billings already, and started to open it.

Cole Armin shoved the door in and stepped into the room. There was a man behind him, but Craig Armin did not even see that man.

He backed away from Cole Armin as if he had seen the dead, and before he could get his wits together, Cole said slowly, "It didn't work, Craig. They missed me."

Craig tried to speak and couldn't. Girard came over to him, slapped his pockets to see whether he carried a gun or not, then stepped back.

"Sit down!" Cole ordered.

Girard shoved Craig backward into the nearest chair. Then Cole stalked over to him and stood above him. "Before I kill you, Armin, just tell me who you are. You're not my uncle."

"I . . . I'm Craig Armin," Armin said weakly.

Cole reached over, grabbed Armin's lapels and hauled him out of his seat.

"You lie!" he said. "Damn your black soul! You lie! Now talk!" And he threw him back into the chair with such violence that the chair creaked.

When Craig Armin hit the chair seat, he sat on something hard as rock, and the pain of it jarred him. And then through his fright, he remembered. He had sat on the gun that Billings had taken away from Letty Burns that evening. And neither Cole Armin nor Girard had a gun out! Slowly, he put his hand around behind him, and the gun slipped into his fingers. Then he lunged to his feet, whipping the gun out in front of him, and kicking back at the chair at the same time.

There was a smile of cruel elation on his face as he said, "What did you ask me?"

Girard, dismay in his face, shoved his hands to the ceiling. Cole was looking at the gun in Craig's hand, and he remembered it. He also remembered what was in it. Slowly, then, he put up his hands, and stepped back.

"You're goin' to . . . to shoot us?" Cole asked slowly.

"I have to. You've forced me," Craig answered.

Cole didn't speak for a moment. This was Craig Armin's minute of triumph, and he was making the best of it. With cruel and sadistic delight, he was enjoying this, savoring it.

COLE spoke in a voice that sounded as though he had given up hope. "I'm not beggin' you for anything, Armin. When a man's time comes, it comes. But I'd like to ask some questions before you let that thing off in my face."

"If that's a stall, Armin, it won't work," Craig Armin said coldly. "The first person I hear outside, I'll shoot you."

"Then I can talk?"

"As long as I want you to. Go ahead."

Cole looked at the gun and then at the man holding it. "You're not Craig Armin."

"No. How did you know?"

"I didn't, until tonight. I haven't seen my uncle since I was a baby. But tonight I remembered something. Letty and Celia said when you get cornered, you pull your ear—your right ear lobe."

"I may have. I don't remember."

"My dad told me that my Uncle Craig had the lobe of his right ear shot off in the Mexican War. It

took me a hell of a while to remember it."

"That's right. The real Craig Armin did have part of his ear missing. I didn't think you'd remember."

"And where is he?"

Craig Armin smiled. "In a jail in Missouri, where I put him. I framed him for murder. And because I looked like him, I took his name so I could get his money out of a St. Louis bank." He gave a wolfish grin. "I've built it into quite a little stake."

"Is he alive?"

"He's alive, and he'll be on my trail in another three months," Craig Armin said slowly. "That's why I got you out here."

Cole grunted. "I don't get it."

"I'll have to talk fast," Craig Armin said quickly, still smiling. "I knew the real Craig Armin would track me down when he got out of jail. He'd told me about you, so I wrote you to come here. I planned to leave this business to you and go to the coast. With you here, believing I was your uncle, you'd send me half the money from the Monarch. When the real Craig Armin arrived, you'd arrest him as an impostor, and I'd still get my money. But if he convinced you I was a fraud, I had time to get away. It was clever, wasn't it? Only you proved to be a little too chivalrous. You fought with me and made me return the money to the Wallaces. I even counted on you fighting them to a standstill." He shrugged. "It didn't work. You've put me to considerable trouble. But I've won, you see. I always win."

"It's cagy, all right," Cole admitted. "Have I got any more time?"

"A little. I don't hear anyone coming."

"Who set fire to the Monarch?"

Craig Armin laughed, then. "I did."

Cole stared at him. "Your own outfit?"

"That's right. You see, I wanted you in jail, out of the way. First, when Billings hired Letty Burns, we counted on her to tell us how to ruin you. The first chance we got was when we put you on to Jim Rough. But Billings is timid. After that beating, he didn't want to touch the wagon. He was afraid of what you'd do. I sawed the brake lever myself. I hoped, if the accident didn't kill you, you'd kill Billings." He shook his head. "Billings, you see, had too much on me. I hoped you'd kill him and Linton would jail you. You didn't kill him. Then I hoped, by setting the fire and putting the blame on you, that Linton would jail you for that. Letty Burns ruined that."

"So you were tryin' to put Billings out of the way, too?"

"Exactly. Clever, but it didn't work." Craig paused. "Your time is up, I think."

"One more question," Cole said calmly. "Who shoved Ted Wallace down the stairs?"

Craig bowed mockingly. "I did."

"Let's get it over with!" Girard put in hoarsely.

"Wait!" Cole said swiftly. "You shoved Ted, you sawed the brake lever and you burned the Monarch. Did you blow up the China Boy?"

THIS time Craig Armin bowed in Girard's direction, but the gun still remained trained on Cole. "I did. I figured surely that you would kill Billings then for spoiling your contract. And I was just as sure Linton would arrest you and hang you for the killing. That didn't work either, so I was driven to this." He glanced at Cole. "Partly, by your

shot at me last night. It stamped me to a decision."

Cole ignored that. "And now you'll do what, Armin?" he asked slowly.

"When I get this explained," Armin answered, "I'm putting the Monarch and its freighting contracts up for sale. I should realize a nice tidy sum. Then I'll be well out of the country before the real Craig Armin gets here." His face changed, and he stopped talking. There was the faint sound of someone running. "Time's up," he said crisply. "I'll get you out of the way first, Cole. Back up, Girard!"

Girard obeyed, his face bathed in sweat.

When Craig Armin looked at Cole, the younger man was smiling faintly.

"It's funny?" Craig asked icily.

Cole didn't answer for a moment. "I'm comin' for you, Armin," he said at last. "I'm comin' slow."

And he started to walk. Craig Armin's face set and he pulled the trigger. There was an explosion, but Cole was still walking afterward.

"Thanks for confessin', and in front of a witness," Cole murmured.

Craig Armin stepped backward in panic and shot again. And Cole still walked toward him.

Then Craig Armin took one quick step forward, placed the gun two feet from Cole and emptied it into him.

Cole laughed. "They're blanks." And he knocked Craig Armin over the table with a smashing blow in the face.

At that moment Celia ran into the open doorway. Cole didn't see her. Girard reached over, took Celia by the arm, hauled her against the wall and said, "Quiet, girl. Can you watch it?" Celia nodded mutely.

COLE put the lamp on the cabinet behind him, then turned the table over against the wall. Craig Armin was backed against the stove

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now. His face was green, and all his false courage had left him.

He fumbled around the stove and found the poker as Cole came at him. He raised it high over his head, his face twisted with rage just as Cole's big fist smashed into his face again. He caromed into the stove, overturned it and landed in a heap in the corner. Cole pounced on him, pulled him up kicking and fighting, and again he smashed him in the face. This time Craig sprawled clear across the room and was brought up against the far wall with a crash. The iron-framed mirror crashed to the floor at his feet and the glass broke.

His mouth running blood, Craig staggered to his feet, brandishing the mirror frame.

Celia gasped. "Cole, watch out!" she cried.

But Cole was deaf. He came at Craig, and the latter swung the frame savagely. Cole half broke the force of the blow with his elbow. Then he tackled Craig and they went down together.

They rolled over and over on the floor, and when they came to a stop, Cole on the bottom, Craig Armin had his hands around Cole's throat.

Cole pulled them away as if they were straw, and then he gripped Armin by the throat and rolled over on top of him.

He straddled him then, and choked him. Craig thrashed around on the floor and tore at Cole's big hands, while his face turned red and then purple. Cole's eyes were hot. He seemed powerless to take his hands from Craig's neck.

"Stop him!" Celia moaned.

She and Girard lunged for Cole and tried to pull him off. Just then Linton burst into the room, several townspeople, Letty Burns and Juck behind him. Half a dozen teamsters crowded the hall.

"Pull him off," Linton ordered brusquely.

"Leave him be!" said Juck.

Celia turned. "Juck, help me!" she pleaded.

Juck softened then. He and Linton and Girard and another man tried to pull Cole off. But Cole seemed to have gone berserk with rage.

As they pulled Cole to his feet, Craig Armin, locked in those big hands, came, too. They fought Cole and tried to break his hold. And they couldn't. Then Cole suddenly dropped Craig Armin and stood there, breathing hard, his arms held by the other men.

Linton bent down over Craig Armin and felt his pulse. Then he picked up a shard of the mirror and held it to the man's black lips.

Turning, Linton looked at Cole. "Well, you've killed him, my boy. Plain, damned murder!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE LAST DOUBLE-CROSSER.

GIRARD was the first man in the room to recover his composure. "Murder, hell!" he roared. "He tried to kill us!"

"Nevertheless, it's murder," Linton said calmly. He stroked his mustache and looked at Cole who was still breathing deeply, his eyes wild and uncontrolled.

"Careful, sheriff," Cole warned. "Be damned careful!"

"That man wasn't even Craig Armin," Girard said. He pushed his way through the crowd and stood facing Linton. And there, while Cole listened quietly, Girard told the story of Armin disclosing his real identity. As he talked, Linton who had watched the fight at the compound and had even taken shots at Cole and Ted Wallace, knew that

his scheme had met with abysmal failure. Western had won out, and Billings and Craig Armin were dead. And like the true politician he was, Ed Linton knew that he had to get on the winning side and do it fast. The best way was by pretending ignorance of all that had happened.

At the finish of Girard's speech, his face cleared and he said, "Well, that's different. A man has a right to kill in self-defense." He looked around at the crowd. "Anyone see this ruckus at the compound?"

"I did," Juck said.

"What happened?"

Juck told him. Celia put in what she had seen. When they were finished, Linton said, "And where's Billings?"

"He's dead," a teamster answered.

"Dead, eh?" murmured Linton. "Both of them dead—Armin and Billings?"

Letty Burns spoke up quietly. "Didn't you see it, sheriff?"

"Why, no," Linton said easily. "I came up the street and somebody told me Craig Armin and Cole were having it out, so I ran for the house here."

"You didn't know Billings was dead?" Letty insisted.

"Not till about ten seconds ago," said Linton.

Letty pushed through to face him, her eyes flashing. Abruptly, she reached in the top pocket of his vest and pulled out a piece of paper. "How do you explain that check?" she asked.

Linton had already looked at it. "Armin gave me that check this morning," he explained.

"That's not true," Letty said. "I was standing in the shadow of those buildings when you took it from Keen Billings' pocket."

"You're lyin'!" Linton said hotly. Letty wheeled to face Cole.

"Maybe this will prove I'm not a traitor, Mr. Armin! I saw Sheriff Linton take that from Billings' pocket! I saw Billings put it there earlier in the evening." She pointed an accusing finger at Linton. "How did he know enough to look in Billings' pocket for the check if he didn't know Billings would have it? Answer me that!"

"That money was paid to Billings for gulchin' Ted and me, Linton," Cole said slowly. "How come you knew he'd have it?"

"I forgot," Linton said weakly. "I did see Billings. I searched him. Part of my job, you know."

"Then why did you say you didn't?" Cole demanded.

"I . . . well, I don't know."

"You mean, you didn't want to be associated with Billings, Mr. Linton?" Celia asked coldly.

Linton wheeled to face her. "Why shouldn't I want to be? I tell you I forgot!"

Celia's voice was sharp with scorn. "I'll tell you why you didn't want to be associated with Billings. You were there and watched him try to kill Ted and Cole! You stood there and let them do it!"

"You lie!" Linton shouted.

"You admit you took the check?" Celia said swiftly.

"Yes."

"Then you're the man," said Celia. "Because I followed a man out of the wagon yard and down the alley when I was hunting for Cole. And I saw this man take a paper from Billings' pocket. If you admit taking it, you admit that you watched Billings try and kill them."

There was a long silence which Juck suddenly broke by asking, "Any rope around here?"

"No! No!" Linton cried. "You're all lying. You're framing me!"

Cole walked up to him and

grabbed him by the coat and twisted him to his knees.

"Juck, get that rope," Cole said. "This man can't tell the difference between hangin', and talkin' and goin' free."

"Wh-what?" Linton asked weakly.

"I said, you're goin' to hang if you keep your mouth shut. There's no law here to stop us, because we'll lynch you and you're the law. But if you talk, you'll only get run out of town. You didn't kill anybody, did you?"

"Lynch him anyway!" Juck growled.

"I'll talk!" Linton cried. "But I want your promise first."

Cole held out his hand. "Give me a gun."

Somebody slipped him a gun. "The first man that makes a move toward Linton gets shot," he announced. "Now get up and talk!"

Linton scrambled to his feet. "Billings and me were in it together," he explained in a hurried, scared voice. "We figured to whittle down both the Western and Monarch until Craig Armin paid Billings to kill you and Ted Wallace! Last night Billings shot at Craig Armin, and that swung it. Armin told Keen to kill you. We planned, after you was dead, to blackmail Armin, to throw him out of Monarch and take it over. With you and Wallace dead, and not many freightin' contracts, we figured to get all the contracts for Monarch. And I could hush it up, being sheriff." He looked wildly at Cole. "Are you goin' to keep your word an' free me?"

Cole shoved him toward the door. Then he lifted his booted foot and kicked Linton savagely out the door. They heard him scramble to his feet and run as fast as he could through the night.

"I aim to make sure he gets out," Juck announced, and headed for the door.

"Remember what I said, Juck," Cole called.

"I ain't goin' to hurt him," Juck growled, and then he grinned. "I'm just goin' to make almighty sure he leaves town."

The other teamsters and townspeople followed Juck out. There was only Girard and Letty and Celia left, besides Cole.

"Letty, I take back everything I said about you," Cole said gently.

Letty smiled. "You were right, Cole." She put out her hand. "Terribly right—except when you thought I'd sell you out the last time." She looked at Celia. "I have such a lot to make up to you."

"Try making it up to Ted," Celia said in a kindly voice. "I'm sure Mr. Girard will take you back to him, Letty."

Girard and Letty went out into the night. Celia looked over at Cole, who was watching her.

"Let's get out of here, Seely," he said. He turned her away from the sight of Craig Armin dead on the floor. They stepped out into the street and walked along a ways.

"Cole," Celia said abruptly, as they neared the main street, "no man ever told as big a lie as you did when you said you were leaving town because you were afraid. I know that now. Why did you do it?"

Cole stopped and Celia did, too.

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He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him. "I had to, Seely. Haven't you guessed why?"

"No, Cole. I've tried, and I can't."

"It was on account of somethin' I thought I saw in your eyes."

"In my eyes? What?"

Cole hesitated a moment. "If I'm wrong, Seely, I'm sorry," he said quietly. "You really want me to tell you?"

"I asked, didn't I?" Celia said in a soft voice.

"You were rawhidin' me last night, Celia, because you didn't want me to go. Did you?"

"No, I didn't," she confessed.

"That's what I saw in your eyes," Cole murmured. "And I had to say I was scared, because I was sinkin' you and Ted, Seely. I . . . I—" His voice died away.

"You what, Cole?"

"I loved you so much, I couldn't drag you down with me, I reckon."

"Oh, Cole," Celia said softly. "And I loved you so much that I didn't want to live if you weren't near me!"

"That's really what I saw in your eyes," Cole told her.

"Of course you did!" Celia cried. "Are you blind, dear?"

"Only as blind as you, I reckon," he declared. "Because I've looked the same way a mighty long time."

"Too long," Celia said. "Way too long, Cole."

Then Cole kissed her. And though they were almost in the center of the crowds that always thronged Piute's main street at night, neither realized it, for there was no mistaking the friendliness of these people, and Cole Armin could never again have any doubts that he had earned a place for himself among them.

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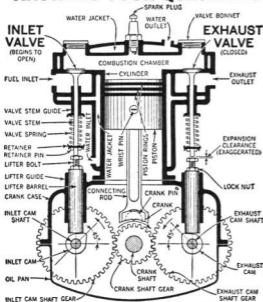
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Above are shown just a few of the many delicious appetizing foods—puddings, pie fillings, cake icings, gelatine desserts—that can be made in a jiffy with the ready prepared products in this nationally famous line. This big line of Pure Food Products and over 100 other Home Necessities, is manufactured in our own Pure Food Kitchens and Laboratories, under the supervision of skilled chefs, chemists and dieticians. Every single product is of uniform high quality and carries with it our absolute guarantee of satisfaction or money back. Below is shown our huge, modern daylight plant. Each year millions of packages leave this big plant to be delivered, "factory fresh," direct to waiting customer's throughout the United States.

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for
FREE OFFER**

MR. E. J. MILLS,
8055 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio.
Please send me at once full particulars about your Free Outfit Offer and how you will help me make big cash profits as a Local Distributor for your nationally famous products.
Name
Address

**E. J. MILLS, President,
8055 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, O.**



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