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AND
SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY

FEB. 24, '40

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REPPING FOR SATAN

A book length novel by **WALT COBURN**

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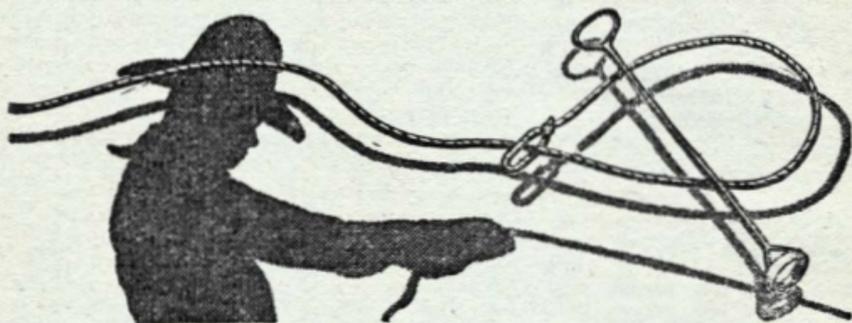
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The Roundup

"YOUR January 13th issue had a story, HUNGRY LOOPS SWING WIDE, by Walt Coburn, which I liked very much," writes Bob Pillow, of Mesa Rico, New Mexico, who has been a reader of Western Story since 1921. "I've always been a Coburn fan, but I also liked BOUNTY HUNTER'S BOOMERANG, by Frank Richardson Pierce, and SIDEWINDER'S SMOKE SCREEN, by Wayne D. Overholser, in that same issue," he continues. "You have other good writers, too, among whom I'd like to mention Bennett Foster and Jay Lucas. They know their West like Coburn—and that's saying a lot!"

Mighty glad to hear from you, Bob, and thanks a lot. During the coming year we're going to have some of the best yarns the boys you mention ever wrote, as well as plenty of other exciting tales by the many champion word wranglers in our cavy. And we sure hope you like Walt's REPPING FOR SATAN, which is featured in this issue.

Speaking of Walt brings to mind a letter we had from him around Christmastime, from which we judge that old Saint Nick sure did his stuff, far as Walt was concerned. "The sun is shining bright here this morning," he wrote from his home in Arizona, "and the door of my little adobe cabin is open. Lying on a tanned old cowhide on the porch is Dobe. Now Dobe is a Great Dane pup. Ten months old and as leggy as a colt. Fawn-colored with a black muzzle. He has one grand good-natured disposition and his devotion to me already is something that makes a man feel all warm inside. Nights when I sleep on the porch he beds down near me. And when I come down to the cabin to work he comes along. Spends the morning chewing on a big beef knuckle and woofing at anything he thinks might get a notion to trespass on his outfit.

"Patty gave him to me for Christmas. I've wanted a Dane pup for a long time, and he sure is the right answer to a feller's Santa Claus prayer. Will send you a snapshot of him soon.

"Sammy Skunk, the cat, is taking Dobe a lot easier than I dared hope. Sammy being nine years old and sot in his ways and the self-appointed boss of the house. Am using Sunday

and New Year's Day to further their acquaintance, which is now at the glaring stage on Sammy's part and Dobe sniffing and eager to make friends. All I need now is a Mexican goat and a burro and I'll feel like a family man—no foolin'!"

And by this time, under Walt's tutelage, we're sure Dobe and Sammy Skunk are siding each other like the best of partners.

"For many years I've read your magazine and it has helped me pass many enjoyable hours," our friend Buddy Pritchard, of Terre Haute, Indiana, informs us. "I have always wanted to go West but have never been able to do so. After reading Western Story so long I'm satisfied, for it has brought the West to me—" We consider this a right fine compliment, for it's one of the aims of this magazine to bring to its readers a bit of the life in the great open spaces which is denied so many of us. And if, through our pages, you find clean and wholesome entertainment, and can experience the thrilling life of the mountains and the plains, we're mighty proud and happy.

An expression of appreciation was recently sent to John North, who conducts our Where To Go department, by Oliver Goerman, secretary of the Las Vegas, Nevada, Chamber of Commerce. Mr. Goerman said: "A number of our members stated it was one of the best articles thus far written on Las Vegas and this area." Mr. North's story on Las Vegas appeared in our September 23, 1939, issue, one more proof that the information contained in our departments is both colorful and full of authentic and useful information.

Coming next week—

For months looted caches, murdered trappers, evidences of sabotage had been striking terror into the hearts of the men who wrested a living from the great fur lands of the Oregon Territory. How, when powerful nations pressed their claims to huge slices of land with hired mercenaries, and the bold and reckless Jules Scarletine made ready, with flashing knife and red vial of death, to carve himself a rich empire, could Yankee Dawson, single-handed, plead the cause of peace? In GUNS OF THE BUCKSKIN EMPIRE, Harry F. Olmsted writes a lusty, fast-paced novel of the days when men fought the wilderness—and sometimes each other—for fortune.

Lighter in mood is Hep Gallagher's newest adventure, as told by Glenn H. Wichman in GONE WITH THE WINDY. There's no doubt that the truth can be a powerful handicap sometimes, and Hep had no intention of putting himself under such a handicap when he lent his hand to a pard's courtship.

No man likes to think that he's the weak spot in a partnership, and Mart Suddreth knew that if he ever expected to prove he was worth his beans and java, he'd have to start soon. Seth Ranger writes a dramatic and heart-warming short story of a man whose greatest enemy was himself. HARD-LUCK HANDICAP is the tag on this one.

Also on the tally sheet are stories and features by Victor Kaufman, Charles L. McNichols, Harry Sinclair Drago, Gerard Delano, W. C. Tuttle and many other top Western writers.



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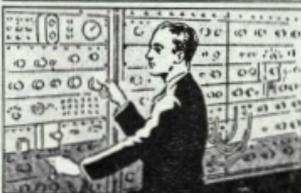
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REPPING FOR SATAN

by WALT COBURN

CHAPTER I

TOUGH TOP HAND

BILL RAMAGE sat back at an obscure corner table in the White Elephant Saloon playing cards with Whiskey Sid, the bleary-eyed old swamper and a broken-down tinhorn gambler, Dominoes. He was waiting for the ruckus to start. It was bound to come because the big, beefy-built cowpuncher in the black hat was getting drunker and more abusive as the night wore on toward daylight.

The other cowpunchers who belonged to the Half Moon trail-herd outfit that was lying over on the Canadian a few miles from this tough little cow town of Tascosa called the big cowpuncher Pete Loveless, and they were side-stepping his rough slapping and mauling. And the big, loud-mouthed cowboy had a leering grin on his face as he shouldered them aside at the bar, acting for all the world like a Brahma bull, horn-ing and crowding and swinging its ugly head and knocking the other cattle around.

The trail boss of the Half Moon outfit had ridden down the Canadian to the Tipton ranch to dicker with Colonel Hugh Tipton, who was offering to buy the Half Moon cattle. And until he returned, the cowpunchers working for the Half Moon were painting old Tascosa as red as they knew how. And this big Pete Loveless was traveling on his shape. The Half Moon cowboys were keeping out of his way and the sprinkling of Rail T cowboys from the Tipton ranch followed suit after they had seen Loveless whip two Rail T men and a couple of Half Moon cowboys with his big flailing fists.

But the cow country around Tascosa held some tough men, and if the Half Moon outfit stayed in town long enough, some of those cowhands

would be riding in and there would be some man among them who was tough enough to knock the horns off Pete Loveless.

So Bill Ramage played coon-can with Whiskey Sid and Dominoes. And he waited with a quiet sort of patience for Tascosa's tough cowboys to ride to town and take the paw and beller out of Pete Loveless. Bill Ramage had a lot of patience. He had been hanging around Tascosa for two weeks now, waiting. Waiting for something to happen that would put him onto the trail of the four men who had murdered a young Texas Ranger named Harry Avery. They would turn up here at Tascosa sooner or later. One of them would be called Jute and another would be wearing a black patch over one eye. And that was all Bill Ramage had to go on. Because Ranger Harry Avery had died before he could tell Bill any more than that.

IN the deep pocket of Bill Ramage's faded blue denim brush jacket was the Ranger badge and a blood-stained bench warrant with his own name on it. The warrant had been in the pocket of Harry Avery's coat when those four bushwhackers had shot him down just north of the Rio Grande on the trail to Bill Ramage's little ranch at the foot of the Van Horn Mountains. That put it up to Bill Ramage to hunt down the killers and turn them over to the Texas law in order to clear his own name.

"Here's the warrant, Ramage," Ranger Harry Avery had told him as he lay dying, with the buzzards circling with ugly curiosity above them, "and here's my badge. Bury me deep. So long and good luck."

So had died a game man. And his death had marked a turning

point in the reckless, headlong, devil-be-damned career of young Bill Ramage, cowman. Until then, cheating the Texas law had been a game with him. An exciting, blood-tinging, reckless game. Fetching Mexican cattle across the border, crossing the Rio Grande with stolen herds when the moon was right, thumbing his nose at the hard-riding Rangers, hoorawing men like Harry Avery when he met one of them at some little border cantina and they had a drink together. But Bill had never taken a shot at one of them, and they had never trapped him. It had just been a dangerous but clean-cut game of border hide and find. And Ranger Harry Avery had packed that bench warrant until its folded edges had become a little frayed.

Then four men had bushwhacked Avery. Bill Ramage had found him dying with the sandy ground under his bullet-ridden body sodden with blood. Bill had buried him there and marked the grave with rocks and then he had headed up the trail to the little cow town of Tascosa. The Ranger captain was probably wondering what had happened to Harry Avery, and it was only a matter of time, a short time that was shortening every hour, until the Rangers would be picking up the cold trail of Bill Ramage, who had quit that part of Texas, leaving his little ranch at the foot of the Van Horn Mountains in the care of an old Mexican he could trust to keep his mouth shut.

Bill Ramage had drifted into Tascosa like any other grub-line-riding cowboy on the drift. His own six-shooter was in its holster and Ranger Harry Avery's gun was shoved out of sight under his flannel shirt in a homemade shoulder holster. He had money in his pocket and spent it

sparingly for meals and an occasional round of drinks. He had made friends with Mike Quinn, who owned the White Elephant, and Dominoes, who tended bar at odd times when things were quiet. He was lying low, waiting, hoping to cut the trail of the four killers who had bushwhacked Harry Avery.

His better judgment had told him an hour or two ago to slip out of the White Elephant before he got tangled up in the ruckus that this big loud-mouthed Pete Loveless was bound to start. But he was playing a hunch that tonight would somehow, in some way, give him a line on the men he was hunting. So he sat at the obscure table with his two odd companions playing cards and watching from under his slanted, low-pulled hat brim. His back was to the wall. He had a good view of the men at the bar and anyone who came in through the door.

THEN he saw a half-filled whiskey bottle come hurtling through the air. It glanced off Whiskey Sid's thin shoulder and struck his white-bearded jaw. A second bottle flung by the burly Pete Loveless caught Bill Ramage a glancing blow on top of his bent head. Bill's chair went over sideways with a crash, and when Bill came up from the floor to face a hail of heavy whiskey glasses the big Half Moon top hand was throwing, he came up fighting.

"Come out o' your damned hole, you three lousy bums!" bellowed Loveless.

Bill Ramage was six feet tall, and his hundred and eighty-five pounds were hard, solid muscle, tough sinew and big bone. He was fast and quick-handed. In so many split seconds he overturned the round card table, upsetting cards, poker chips and glasses on the floor. The toe of

his boot caught a heavy, round brass cuspidor and sent it flying with a low kick. It struck Pete Loveless on the shins with a hard thud, and as the big Half Moon bully let out a howl of pain, Bill threw a heavy barroom chair at his head. The chair struck Loveless' shoulder and sent him staggering backward. Bill crossed the room in a flying leap and he charged the Half Moon man with his fists swinging like pistons.

Loveless had another whiskey bottle in his hand and was using it as a club. Bill jerked his head to one side and caught the blow with his left shoulder. Pain, then a numbing ache shot along his arm from shoulder to the tips of his fingers, and his left arm was for a few moments useless. He fought with his right hand as he bent low, hitting the big man with his left shoulder and chopping with his right fist at Loveless' beefy face. Loveless reeled backward, tripped as one of his spur shanks caught in the cuspidor. Then, as he went down, Bill was on top of him, hitting at his face with short, vicious right-hand blows that fetched a spurt of blood from his nose.

They rolled over and over, Bill at a disadvantage because his whole left arm was still numb. Loveless smashed at his head with the bottle and barely missed. The bottle struck the floor and smashed. And now, grabbing the neck of the broken bottle, Loveless had a wicked, nasty weapon. Teeth bared in a savage snarl, he tried to rip Bill's face with the sharp, jagged edges. Bill had to keep ducking and jerking his head and the sharp points of the glass sank into the back of his shoulders.

Then the little tinhorn called Dominoes kicked the ugly weapon from Loveless' hand. Bill's back was on the floor. He looked up at Domi-

noes and grinned his thanks. Then he heaved and twisted, throwing the big cowpuncher's weight off his chest and belly and rolling Loveless on his back. He drove his right fist into the puncher's face half a dozen times in short, hard, thudding blows. Loveless' face was a crimson, battered mask through which he bellowed and cursed. And Bill straddled the big man's belly and pounded at the rolling, blood-smearred head with his right fist.

Even as the Half Moon top hand was bellowing that he was through, Bill saw him jerk his gun. Bill tried to grab the iron, but his left arm was still too numb to move fast. He flung himself off sideways as the gun barrel clubbed down at his head with a short, chopping blow, spewing fire as it struck his head. He felt the burning powder sting his face and eyes. Then the heavy thudding blow that was followed by a blinding white flash. After that there was black oblivion.

CHAPTER II

ON THE RAIL T PAY ROLL

HE'S just another cowhand ridin' the grub line, colonel," Bill Ramage heard the voice of Mike Quinn, owner of the White Elephant, saying. "That big Half Moon feller had bin spoilin' for trouble since he took his first drink. He begun slingin' bottles and glasses around. One of them bottles knocked out o' Whiskey Sid, and this young Bill feller waded in like a Kansas twister. He had this big Loveless son whipped, and was doin' the whippin' one-armed at that because his shoulder was knocked out o' joint, when Loveless hauled out his hardware and cut loose. Dominoes tapped Loveless across the head with a chair to keep him from killin' Bill. And

about that time you git here with the Half Moon trail boss and enough Rail T cowboys to keep them Half Moon waddies from stringin' up Dominoes because the li'l' ol' tin-horn busted a chair over this Loveless feller's head."

"And just in time, Mike," sounded the soft Texas drawl of Colonel Tipton of the Rail T outfit, "to keep you from shootin' off the bellies of a few Half Moon men with that sawed-off scattergun of yours. And it damn near ruined the deal I'd made for the Half Moon cattle. Best deal I ever made and I come almighty near losin' it because a driftin' cowboy takes up a fight for a whiskey-soaked old spittoon cleaner. If me and this Half Moon trail boss hadn't poured oil in the shape of corn likker on the troubled waters, there would have bin a general gun slaughter, and it's a lucky break that I had the bill of sale drawn up at the ranch and Jute Ferguson's name signed on the dotted line—"

Bill Ramage tried to open his eyes, but couldn't because his whole head was swathed in a heavy, cold, wet turban of bandages made from bar towels. His head was splitting with dull pain, and when he tried to move, the flat, toneless voice of Dominoes sounded in his ear:

"Take it easy, Bill. The doc says to take 'er easy."

Bill struggled to a sitting position and pawed the wet bandage from his eyes. He was lying on a tarp-covered bed on the floor of the back room where Mike Quinn put drunks to sleep off the effects of too much forty-rod whiskey. His eyes felt like they were filled with hot sand, and in the gray light he made out the tall, gaunt figure of Colonel Tipton with his white bushy hair and droop-

ing white mustache and hawklike nose and piercing blue eyes. Bill had seen the owner of the Rail T once before about a week ago when Tipton was in town hiring men. He had offered Bill a job, but Bill had told him he wasn't broke yet and reckoned that he'd round-side here at Tascosa till his pockets got empty.

Tipton and the red-faced, paunchy Mike Quinn were looking at him, and Dominoes was gripping Bill's sore shoulder with a warning pressure.

JUTE?" Bill Ramage disregarded Dominoes' warning. "Did you mention *Jute*, colonel?"

"Jute Ferguson. Trail boss and owner of the Half Moon road iron. Know him?" Colonel's Tipton's sharp blue eyes stared from under ragged iron-gray brows, and his voice, in spite of its soft Texican drawl, had a sharp edge to it.

"I . . . I've heard tell of Jute, that's all," replied Bill, and he knew that he had spoken out of turn and that Colonel Tipton knew that he was holding back something.

Bill was suddenly remembering scattered bits of cowpuncher talk he had picked up here at Tascosa that concerned this gaunt, white-mustached owner of the Rail T outfit on the Canadian River. Colonel Tipton's cattle ranged on the Canadian from Tascosa on west into New Mexico as far as Tucumeari and the Blue Holes country and Mosquero. And rumor had it that Tipton's range was stocked with cattle that had been cut from the big trail herds moving north and that the manner of their cutting was close to the thin edge of being rustling. Moreover, Colonel Tipton was said to be a dangerous man to have for an enemy. And his men were hand picked for

their cowpunching ability and their toughness.

Bill Ramage's benumbed senses were clearing rapidly. He quit talking. Under a pretense of fishing for tobacco and cigarette papers, his right hand groped in his jacket pocket where he had put the Ranger star and the bloodstained bench warrant with his name on it. They were gone.

Dominoes' long-fingered hand pressed his injured shoulder and then pulled the sack of tobacco and papers from Bill's shirt pocket.

"Unless you're one of those trick one-handed cigarette builders, Bill," the little gambler said, "better let me roll your smoke for you. Have a drink." He handed Bill a half-emptied bottle of whiskey.

"Thanks, Dominoes." Bill was glad to pull his eyes from Tipton's sharp scrutiny. "How's Sid?"

"Sidney," Dominoes answered, "was able to sit up and partake of a little liquid nourishment. He killed half the bottle before he drifted back into what the poets call slumberland. Drink hearty, Bill. It's on the house."

Bill managed a grin. Dominoes had the Ranger badge and the bench warrant. The little tinhorn's eyes told him that much. Dominoes, for all his unsavory reputation as a card marker and cold-deck dealer, had a queer streak of loyalty in his make-up. During the past couple of weeks Bill had idled away the long hours with him and Whiskey Sid and Mike Quinn, playing coon-can and swapping yarns. And, like a pair of friendless, homeless dogs that had been kicked around, Whiskey Sid and Dominoes had claimed Bill for their friend. And because Mike Quinn's big heart was filled with Irish sentiment he had liked

Bill for treating the two outcasts like men instead of failures.

"Jute Ferguson and Pete Loveless and the other Half Moon cowhands," said Colonel Tipton, "are deliverin' the cattle at my ranch. They might come back to town to wash the dust out o' their gullets. Loveless might take a notion to pick 'er up where he left off. If I was you, mister, I'd do a little fadin'. And it might be healthy for this tinhorn if he went along with you." He paused, his eyes shrewd. "Or mebbeso Loveless heaved that bottle at you and hit old Whiskey Sid by mistake and the ruckus throws back to some sort of tangle you and Pete Loveless and mebbe Jute Ferguson had somewheres back along the trail?"

"In which case," said Bill Ramage, getting slowly to his feet and feeling better for the big drink of whiskey that was hitting the pit of his stomach and spreading a warm glow through his body, "I'd be some kind of a yellow-bellied coyote if I hauled freight out o' Tascosa before Loveless and Jute Ferguson got back."

He felt in his overalls pocket and pulled out a small roll of crumpled bank notes. He grinned at the owner of the Rail T outfit.

"When this is blowed in, I'll be hittin' the trail. I'll tackle you for a job if you've got one open. But if Loveless comes back here huntin' me, I won't be hard to find."

"You'd have the whole Half Moon outfit to whup, young feller."

"That still don't turn me into a rabbit, colonel."

COLONEL TIPTON stared hard at the tall young cowpuncher whose gray eyes met his without flinching.

"Young man," he said slowly,

"you're a damn fool. I don't know your name and I don't give a damn what it is or where you come from. I hired you while you was sleepin' 'er off here in Mike's snake room. I'm payin' you fightin' wages, but gittin' yourself killed off before you start to work is a poor way of earnin' good pay. You can't whup the whole Half Moon outfit. But if you got a bone to pick with Pete Loveless or Jute Ferguson, you'll git better than a fightin' chance to win if you take my orders from now on."

He rolled himself a cigarette, lit it and continued: "I just bought two thousand head of cattle branded in the Half Moon road iron. I got 'em cheap. Too cheap. Jute Ferguson wouldn't sell his cavvy of horses. Claims he's takin' his men and remuda back to where he started from, wherever that may be. I got a notion that Ferguson is lyin'. I have a hunch he aims to make some kind of a play to git back them Half Moon cattle and mebbeso a few hundred head of Rail T cattle for interest. Therefore, if you're any account at puttin' two and two together and makin' the right tally, you kin see where I've got a good top-hand job for a fightin' cowboy that don't like Pete Loveless and Jute Ferguson. And that's why I don't want a good Rail T man killed off before he gits a chance to earn his pay.

"Saddle your horse and pull out. Swing down the river to a line camp of mine. Stay there till I send for you to come to the ranch. And I'll guarantee you a fightin' break with Pete Loveless and Jute Ferguson and you'll have the backin' of every Rail T cowpuncher, includin' myself. Mike here will tell you without the word of a lie that Colonel Tipton never broke his word to any man, friend or enemy."

"Call the bet, Bill," said Dominoes flatly. And Mike Quinn grinned and nodded.

"Dominoes goes with me," said Bill, thinking fast.

"All right. All right. But git goin', young feller."

"And Whiskey Sid," added Bill, smiling a little grimly. "Loveless might take a notion to pick on him."

"Look here," snapped the old cowman, "I'm runnin' a cow outfit, not a home for broke-down drunks and card sharps and—"

"They go," Bill cut in bluntly, "or I don't. I didn't ask for this job."

"I don't allow booze or gamblin' at the Rail T Ranch—"

"And there won't be any," Bill interrupted him quickly. "I'll take along enough to keep Sid from gittin' the snakes. And Dominoes won't be bankin' ary poker games. A big outfit like the Rail T kin use a good saddle maker. As for Dominoes, he sided me in a tight and I don't dally on my friends."

"Take 'em along, then," Tipton said grudgingly. "Mike will tell you how to reach the line camp. I'll drop by there or send over a man in a few days with fu'ther orders."

WHEN Colonel Tipton went out with Mike Quinn, Dominoes took the Ranger badge and blood-stained bench warrant from his inside coat pocket and handed them over with a faint smile.

"I slipped 'em into my pocket before even Mike spotted 'em. If Tipton knew you were a Ranger, he'd let that Half Moon outfit massacre you. He don't like the law."

"Neither do I, Dominoes, speakin' plain. And neither do you. You're a white man. I've got you to thank for aplenty. Some day, mebbe—"

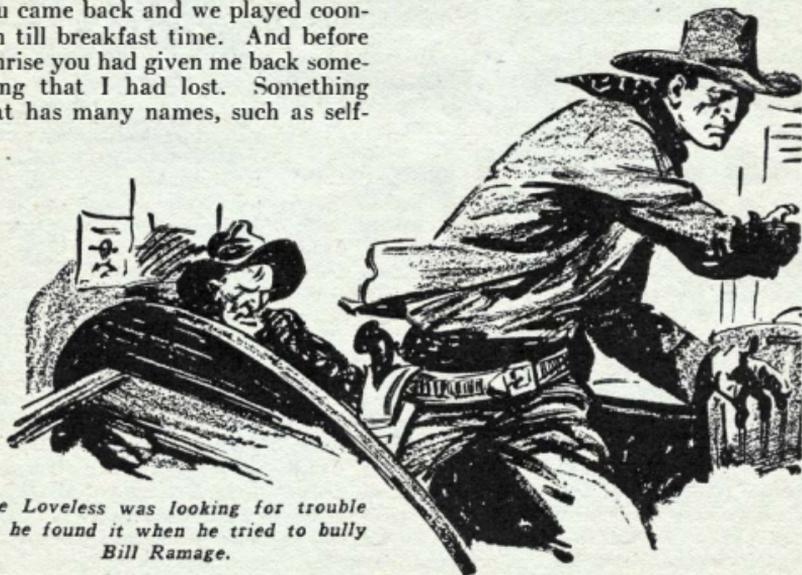
"Let's see if we can persuade Sidney to forsake the lure of the cus-

pidors to resume his former trade," Dominoes interrupted. "And quit trying to put yourself in debt to me. It's all on the other side of the big ledger. The night you came to Tascosa, Bill, I had just cleaned and loaded a little Derringer pistol that I've carried for years. I meant to use it to end a life that had become black and tarnished with bitter memories. Like Sidney, I was living on the charity of Mike Quinn. It had been a long, long time since any man had treated me as something of an equal. So I was pushing back my chair and quitting the game. I'd lost my last white chip." There was a brooding, somber look on the tin-horn's face.

"The hour was late and the place was empty," he continued. "Sidney was cleaning up the place and I was standing the graveyard shift for Mike by way of paying for my drinks and meals. You called Sidney to the bar and we drank together, and when you'd put your horses in the barn you came back and we played coon-can till breakfast time. And before sunrise you had given me back something that I had lost. Something that has many names, such as self-

respect, manhood, the desire to live, to begin again. It's the nameless something deep inside a man's heart that withers and becomes charred and black like a slow-dying fire that cannot burn without the comradeship of another man or the love of a good woman. There was still a tiny spark of it left here inside me, and your way of treating me fanned it into a warming flame. That's a hell of a long speech for me to make, Bill. Let's bring Sidney back to life."

Dominoes' voice had lost its flatness and his sallow, pock-marked face was tinged with color and his black eyes were bright with unshed tears. He had opened a secret door and given this tall young cowpuncher a glimpse of something almost sacred, and now they both felt a little uncomfortable. Bill handed the little gambler the bottle and they drank in silence. Then they went back to the little lean-to cabin where Whiskey Sid lived, and woke him.



Pete Loveless was looking for trouble and he found it when he tried to bully Bill Ramage.

The old swamper quit snoring. He blinked his bleared eyes and grabbed the bottle Bill held toward him.

"Sidney"—Dominoes was the only one in Tascosa who called him that—"rise and shine. Bill's about to shake the dust of Tascosa from his boots and he's handicapping himself with the burden of our company."

CHAPTER III

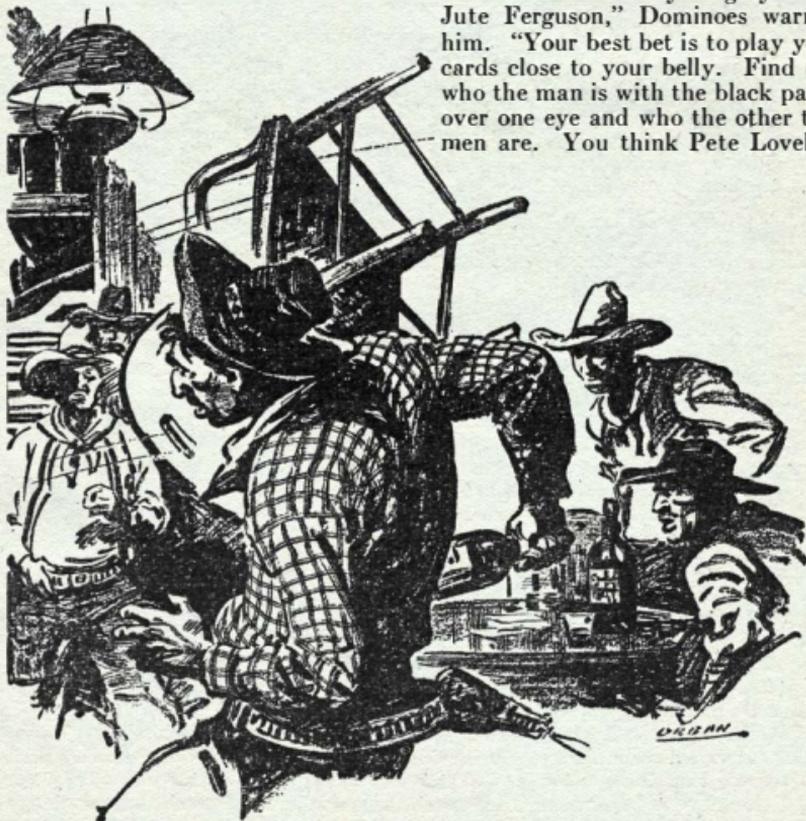
GUN-SMOKE TANGLE

WHEN they had got located at the line camp down the Canadian, Bill wanted to slip back to Tascosa and tackle Jute Ferguson.

He told the little white-haired gambler enough about the murder of Ranger Harry Avery to explain his purpose.

"Harry Avery was a square-shootin' gent, Dominoes, and four men bushwhacked him. It was cold-blooded murder. It's up to me to pick up Harry's hand and play 'er out. Because, in the first place, I've got to clean my slate with the Ranger captain an' wipe out any suspicion that I killed Harry Avery. And in the second place, I liked the feller and so far as I know he's got no kinfolks to play his string out for him."

"You can't win anything by killin' Jute Ferguson," Dominoes warned him. "Your best bet is to play your cards close to your belly. Find out who the man is with the black patch over one eye and who the other two men are. You think Pete Loveless



is one of 'em, but you can't be certain. You've got to play detective, Bill. Ridin' back to Tascosa while the Half Moon outfit is there is plain suicide and wins you nothin' but a three-by-six homestead in Tascosa's boothill. Play 'em close to your belly."

Bill reluctantly consented. "I'll hang and rattle with the Rail T spread till somethin' turns up. And there's no need to tell Sid the story about Harry Avery and how come I'm packin' a Ranger badge and a bench warrant with my own name on it. Sid talks when he's whiskey-located and don't know what he's doin' or sayin'."

They looked at the old derelict saddle maker who was sleeping on a bunk in the adobe cabin.

"What Sidney don't know," agreed Dominoes, "won't hurt him."

They had told Whiskey Sid that they were quitting town on account of 'last night's ruckus. That Bill aimed to lock horns later with Pete Loveless. Part of what they said filtered through the whiskey-fogged brain of the old swamper. He had taken a filled cartridge belt and cedar-handled, long-barreled six-shooter out of his war sack, and Mike Quinn gave him back the saddle and blanket and bridle he had hocked when he first came to Tascosa so many months ago that the date of his coming had long since been forgotten. With the saddle was a heavy, clumsy old .45-70 rifle and a ten-pound salt sack filled with rifle cartridges.

There was also a fleabitten old gray gelding that had once, so Whiskey Sid claimed, been as slick a cow pony as ever turned on a dime and gave a man back a nickel change. And Whiskey Sid, in spite of the fact that he was mumbling drunk, sat his horse as only an old cowhand

knows how. His saddle wore no maker's label. It was one he had made himself on a seasoned old Nelson saddle tree. Made of plain leather without fancy carving, it fulfilled the exacting specifications of a working cowhand who demanded the best. Its horn was deeply rope-marked. So Bill got the notion that Whiskey Sid was more than just a maker of saddles who had lost his job from booze. Whiskey Sid had been a cowpuncher, but for reasons of his own had never mentioned it even to Mike Quinn or Dominoes. There was some mystery in the old swamper's past, but even when he was maudlin drunk Whiskey Sid kept that secret.

"Sidney," Dominoes told Bill as they cleaned out the cabin and started getting themselves a hot meal, "hates Tipton's guts. He's never said so, but I know. He'll never go to work at the Rail T Ranch. It's hard to guess what he'll do when he gets sobered up and finds out he's at one of the colonel's line camps. Like as not, he'll rear up and paw the air like an outlaw horse."

DOMINOES had given Bill a pleasant surprise there at Tascosa when he showed up at the barn wearing cowpuncher boots and buckskin-foxed California pants and a black Stetson. His clothes, for all their one-time fanciness, had seen hard service. His fancy, stamped center-fire saddle had a rope-marked horn and the tapaderos that covered the ox-bow stirrups were badly scarred by thorny brush. His chaps bore similar marks of hard usage. His cartridge belt was a little ornate with Mexican carving, and the six-shooter in his carved holster had an ivory handle yellowed with age.

Saddle and gun had been in pawn

to Mike Quinn, and it was typical of the big Irish saloonkeeper that he refused the money Bill offered him to get the things out of hock. Dominoes and Whiskey Sid, Mike told Bill, were welcome to their outfits. And Dominoes had put his saddle on an unbranded Morgan bay gelding that was as fine a hunk of horse-flesh as ever Bill had seen.

The center-fire saddle and sixty-foot rawhide riata branded Dominoes as a California cowboy. The Morgan-bred bay was undoubtedly California-born and raised. Dominoes offered no explanation and Bill asked no questions. But up to then he would have taken oath that the little gambler in his frayed white linen and threadbare black broadcloth didn't know the Injun side of a horse from the left side that a white man uses when he mounts.

The few hours in the sunlight had already begun to color the indoor pallor of the little gambler's face, and as they had ridden across the open country Dominoes' careful grammar was spiced with occasional range idioms that dropped naturally into place in his talk. In his own quiet way Dominoes was letting Bill Ramage know that he was no pilgrim greenhorn. Moreover, it occurred to Bill for the first time that Dominoes was not a man past his prime. He could not have been more than thirty-seven or, at the most, forty. His thick snowy hair was prematurely white. And Dominoes, catching Bill looking at him as they rode along together in the bright sunlight, must have read Bill's thoughts. His poker face relaxed in a faint smile.

"My hair turned white twelve years ago on the Rail T range at Mosquero, New Mexico." That was all he said, and Bill knew better than to question him further. Fate had

given Bill Ramage two strange partners. Two men whose back trails were blotted out.

They camped there at the Rail T line camp three days and nights. Nobody came near the camp. Dominoes' face was tanned a healthy brown. The whiskey blur was gone from Sid's eyes and he tapered off on black coffee. Dominoes told him how they happened to be here at the line camp. That Bill had hired out to Colonel Tipton because it gave him a chance to get an even break with Jute Ferguson and Pete Loveless some day or night not too far in the future.

Whiskey Sid listened in thoughtful, brooding silence. His eyes, steely-blue now that the bleared film was gone from them, stared off into space as if he were watching the distant skyline. And when they had finished talking there followed a long silence. Whiskey Sid was the one who broke it.

He lifted the half-empty jug of whiskey Bill had fetched along to keep him from getting the snakes. He uncorked it and handed it to Bill.

"I'll be proud to throw in with yuh. We'll drink on 'er. Drink hearty."

And when Bill took a drink and passed the jug to Dominoes, the gambler drank and handed the jug back to Whiskey Sid.

"Here's good luck to the three of us," said Whiskey Sid, "and bad luck to our enemies!"

He tipped the jug up and took a long drink. Then he walked outside with the jug and smashed it on a rock. And that was the last drink Whiskey Sid ever took.

Colonel Tipton showed up that evening with a couple of his men and told Bill to go to the Rail T Ranch. Jute Ferguson and Pete Loveless had taken their tough cow-

hands and remuda and pulled out, he declared.

Tipton and his two riders did not get off their horses. Bill had come out of the cabin to meet them. Whiskey Sid and Dominoes had stayed inside the cabin, so Tipton got no sight of them.

"The three of us," Bill told Colonel Tipton, "will be at the Rail T Ranch by daybreak."

"You're still bound to fetch that whiskey-soaked old bum and that tinhorn dealer along?" the colonel demanded impatiently. "They'll just be underfoot and in the way."

"It's all three of us, colonel, or none. And if I was you I wouldn't worry none about my pardners gettin' underfoot. They'll do to take along anywheres."

Colonel Tipton snorted and rode off with his men into the dusk.

THERE was a round white moon and the country was open and rolling beyond the river on the north side so that Bill and Whiskey Sid and Dominoes spotted the big drive of moving cattle almost as soon as the walk bawl of the longhorns came downwind to where they rode along the river trail. But where the trail followed the Canadian there were trees and brush thickets.

The three of them were still twenty miles or more from the Rail T Ranch and the bunched cattle were headed north from what Whiskey Sid called a "sneak crossing" between Tascosa and the Dead Man's Crossing where the Goodnight Trail cut across the Canadian. That big drive of cattle had been shoved across the sneak crossing not more than an hour ago. The fresh sign was on the ground here on the north bank. And honest trail drivers don't move a trail herd off the bed ground till dawn.

"Looks like we've stumbled onto a—" The sharp crack of a rifle cut short Bill Ramage's words, and he felt the whine of a bullet over his head. He saw the flash of the gun from some brush not more than two hundred yards ahead. He whirled his horse and jerked his saddle gun. Dominoes' carbine roared and there was the sound of brush crashing and a man's sharp cry of pain. Then the three partners cast off the lead ropes of their bed horses and charged at the brush patches from where four or five guns were spitting fire. The men behind the brush were undoubtedly the rear guard for the others who were drifting that bunch of cattle northward.

Dominoes was riding the fastest horse and he was two lengths in the lead of Bill. The little white-haired gambler rode straight at a brush patch where a couple of guns were blazing. Whiskey Sid charged off at an angle, his big old .45-70 booming like a cannon as he stood in his stirrups with the reins dropped over his saddlehorn.

The fight was short and fast, and Dominoes wounded one of the men who tried to make a run for it to reach the moving cattle half a mile away. One of the bushed-up men got away, crossing back to the south side. But the others were caught. One of them had been killed. Three others were wounded. They threw away their guns and raised their hands in quick surrender when Bill yelled at them to claw for the moon.

One of the wounded punchers belonged to the Half Moon outfit, as did the dead man. The other two were identified by Whiskey Sid and Dominoes as renegades who sometimes drifted into Tascosa to get grub and whiskey and would then pull out for some not-too-distant hide-out. When they recognized

Whiskey Sid and Dominoes, they began cussing at the thought that they had been whipped by a whiskey-soaked saloon swamper and a down-and-out tinhorn. Bill told them to shut up or they'd get shot down where they stood.

"Set 'em afoot," Bill told Whiskey Sid. "Turn their horses loose. Now hit the river, you bushwhackin' sons. Neither of you is so badly hurt you can't swim. And if you drown it's a good riddance to the cow country. If you live to meet Jute Ferguson again, tell him that you ain't half as tough as you hired out to be. Hit the water!"

While Whiskey Sid unsaddled the rustlers' horses and turned them loose, Dominoes and Bill chased the men into the river with their saddle ropes. The sputtering and grunting and gasping and cussing of the two men sounded from the dark water. Whiskey Sid called out that riders were coming from out yonder where the cattle were moving north. The sound of shooting had carried to the men driving the cattle and some of them were loping back to see what was the trouble.

Bill and his two partners waited in the brush and held their fire until they counted four riders within a hundred yards. One of them sighted a couple of the horses Sid had turned loose.

"Yonder's the Half Moon horse Shorty was ridin'!" they heard him cry. "Saddle and bridle off 'im and turned loose! What the hell—"

STAND your hands, gents or we'll cut you down!" barked Dominoes, his voice popping like a whip-lash. His carbine roared as one of the men whirled his horse and started back for the herd.

The rider lurched sideways in his saddle and his left hand clawed at

his right shoulder. His horse stamped and the man was jerked off balance and thrown before he could grab the saddlehorn. The riderless horse kept running.

"There's enough of us to cut you all down before you get started!" Dominoes called out sharply. "We're just a little chicken-hearted so we're givin' you a chance for your taw. Ride back across the river and keep goin' south till sunrise or you'll git caught and cut down. You'll find some of your outfit afoot on the other side of the Canadian. Pick 'em up and take 'em along or they'll be stretchin' ropes with their necks, come sunrise. Pick up that lame duck that just got set afoot and take him along. Pronto, gents! Pronto!"

They were not cowards, but they were plain targets where they sat their horses in the open moonlight. They pulled the man with the bullet-smashed shoulder up behind one of their saddles and they crossed the Canadian as they were ordered. They had no way of knowing how many men were backing the gunplay of the hidden man who was snapping orders at them like a hard-bitten cavalry officer drilling rookie troopers. And when they were crossing, Bill and Whiskey Sid and Dominoes opened up with a prolonged hail of bullets that whistled above their lowered heads.

The sound of the shooting carried to the men who were moving the cattle. Bill rode up on a high point and watched. Dominoes and Whiskey Sid joined him. They watched for perhaps half an hour. They saw men riding away from the cattle, and when the bunched longhorns scattered out and quit moving in a northerly direction they knew that the rustlers had abandoned their stolen herd and were riding away to wherever their camp might be.

CHAPTER IV

NEWS FROM TASCOSA

LUCK had done Bill and his two pardners a mighty big favor and they weren't discounting it now or later. They might have been shot from their saddles if the men left along the river for a rear guard hadn't gotten excited and done a lot of bad shooting. As it was, none of the three had gotten so much as a bullet scratch out of it. They had gun-whipped nine men and bluffed the rest of the gang into turning loose a big drive of cattle. But they weren't crowding their luck any further. They waited until they were certain that the rustlers had high-tailed it for their hide-out. Then they got their bed horses and rode on. Bill led the way, heading for the cattle that were now scattered and grazing.

There was enough moonlight to show them the brands on the cattle, and Bill grinned mirthlessly as he spotted fifty or sixty steers that wore his own brand, a reversed BR connected on the left ribs. There were half a dozen other west-Texas brands he knew. And Dominoes was calling out brands and the names of the brand owners and the range owned by each brand. The little gambler seemed to know the identity of every brand in the herd save the more obscure and complicated Mexican brands from south of the border. But what puzzled Bill was the fact that none of the cattle were in the Half Moon road iron. They were nearly all branded in another road iron—an X on the right ribs. The road iron of some former trail drover, Bill guessed. Dominoes verified his surmise.

"This X trail herd was sold to Colonel Tipton about a month ago," he explained. "Who was the trail

boss, Sidney, who peddled this batch of mixed stuff to the colonel?"

"Dead-eye Dixon. And Chet Wilbur rode on the point all the way with Dead-eye. The same as Loveless rides the point with Jute Ferguson." Whiskey Sid's voice was a slow drawl, but his steel-blue eyes were cold slits in his weathered, seamed face. He had been riding alone through the herd, tallying all the cattle he found that wore a brand Bill read for a Bradded H on the left ribs.

"Forty-eight head," Whiskey Sid tallied aloud and repeated it to himself a couple of times as if stamping it in his memory. "Forty-eight head in the Bradded H iron."

A QUICK look from Dominoes stopped the question Bill had been on the point of asking the old white-bearded swamper.

"When Tipton buys a trail herd," Dominoes explained to Bill, "he pays half down and the cattle go into escrow. Them cattle is held separate from his Rail T cattle and don't go into the Rail T iron for thirty days. Thirty days lifts the escrow and he pays the other half of the agreed price and moves the cattle to his branding pens across the New Mexico line.

"Tipton's home ranch is across the New Mexico line at the Blue Holes. The ranch he has on the Texas side east of Dead Man's Crossing on the Canadian and all the range he claims in Texas is what he calls his escrow range. You'll find no Rail T cattle grazing this side of the New Mexico border, Bill. Colonel Tipton is smart. Even though this is a more or less lawless strip in around Tascosa, he has plenty of respect for Texas law as it is enforced by the Texas Rangers. But over in the Blue Holes country in New Mexico,

Colonel Tipton is his own law. And nobody but his own Rail T men ride his range. No outsider ever cuts a gathering of Rail T cattle in New Mexico. He has government beef contracts that absorb the steers he buys from men like Jute Ferguson and Dead-eye Dixon."

"And this Dead-eye Dixon"—Bill spoke directly to Whiskey Sid—"wears a black patch over one eye?"

"Over the socket where his left eye used to be before it was gouged out in a fight at Mike Quinn's saloon back at Tascosa," nodded the swamper.

"If my guess is correct, the thirty-day escrow on the X trail-herd cattle was lifted yesterday," said Dominoes, "and Tipton paid Dead-eye Dixon the last half of the money due him. The payoff would be made either at Tipton's ranch near Dead Man's Crossing or at Tascosa. And Jute Ferguson whittled off this bunch of five or six hundred head from the herd after Dixon had collected his money. It's close to midnight, and I'd say that the X herd was stampeded over on the south side of the river about first-guard time. Jute's men cut off this many cattle and hazed 'em across the river and headed north with 'em while Dead-eye Dixon's cowpunchers kept the Rail T cowpunchers occupied on the south side of the Canadian. If we can hold this little herd till morning, some of Tipton's cowpunchers will be showin' up to take 'em over. Do we see eye to eye there, Sidney?"

"Eye to eye, Dominoes," nodded Whiskey Sid. "We might as well bunch 'em and bed 'em down and sing to 'em till daybreak. And keep your saddle guns handy. It's what I heard a feller once call Winchester guard when we trailed 'em through the bad Injun country."

They unpacked their bed horses

and bedded down the cattle, which showed signs of having been run earlier in the night. The cattle were leg-weary and easy to bed down, and the three pardners rode together for safety around the bedded herd.

Dawn was streaking the sky when Colonel Tipton and half a dozen Rail T cowpunchers rode up out of the gray dawn. Dominoes identified them when they were a couple of hundred yards away and Bill rode to meet them.

"Put up your guns," Bill heard Tipton tell his men. "It's the Bill gent that whupped Pete Loveless and it looks like he's the nigger in the woodpile."

"Three niggers, just so's to keep your tally right," grinned Bill as he rode up to the white-mustached owner of the Rail T iron.

"The boys rode up on two, three sorry-lookin' hombres that had bin set afoot and shot up some," Colonel Tipton said. "They told 'er scary about bein' charged by a big bunch of my men. You three are the only Rail T hands I've got north of the Canadian. And it takes more than three men to make bunch quitters out of anyhow fifteen of Jute Ferguson's tough cowhands. It can't be done."

"That's what the country boy said at the county fair when he saw the feller pull the white rabbits out of his silk hat. Yonder's your cattle in the X road iron, colonel. Over six hundred head, as near as we could calculate from a rough range count when we gathered 'em and laid 'em down on the bed ground."

"Then you had help."

"I shore did have help—Whiskey Sid and Dominoes. And now if your men will take the herd, me and my pardners will rustle ourselves some breakfast."

"You had nobody but a lily-fin-

gered tinhorn and a bleary-eyed spittoon cleaner sidin' you?" the colonel demanded incredulously. "If that's your story, feller, stick to it. Three white rabbits is one thing. Six hundred head of cattle is another. What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't say," Bill retorted, "but my daddy's name was Bob Ramage and they called me William when the circuit-rider preacher sprinkled my tow head with crick water. My name is Bill Ramage."

"Then it's a lucky thing you quit Tascosa when you did," Tipton remarked, "because if Loveless hadn't killed you there's a Texas Ranger in town who would have done his damndest to take you, dead or alive. You're wanted down in the Van Horn country for the murder of a Ranger!"

THEY cooked a hasty breakfast and Colonel Tipton kept eying Whiskey Sid and Dominoes covertly from under the slanted brim of his hat as they ate jerky and bread and washed it down with strong black coffee. He seemed suspicious of the old white-bearded swamper who was now cold sober and clear-eyed and who bore all the earmarks of an old-time cowhand. And he distrusted Dominoes.

Colonel Tipton was naturally suspicious of any man whom he could not understand. The owner of the Rail T was playing a mighty high-handed and dangerous game. Buying cattle from men like Ferguson and Dead-eye Dixon was playing it close to the borderline of being a fence for stolen goods. That was why he was forever on the lookout for detectives hired by the newly organized Cattle Raisers' Association in Texas. He didn't want men like Whiskey Sid and Dominoes on his pay roll. He didn't want men he

didn't savvy riding his range and reading the brands on the cattle he bought from such trail drovers as Jute Ferguson and Dead-eye Dixon. And now he saw his chance of getting rid of them and this Bill Ramage who was just a little too fast-moving and quick-thinking to keep track of. Colonel Tipton hired men he could dominate and these three men who had just saved him six hundred head of cattle and had buffaloed fifteen or more hard-bitten rustlers were not going to be easy to keep track of. So he pulled a thick roll of bank notes from his pocket and held them in his hand as he sat cross-legged on the ground facing Bill and Whiskey Sid and Dominoes.

"You did a good night's work," he said, his cold eyes watching their faces. "And when any man does a job right I pay him accordin'. I'm payin' you three men off right now and I'll tell you why. There's a young Texas Ranger at Tascosa right now. His name is Tom Kerwin and he's big and tough and foxy. He's packin' a bench warrant for Bill Ramage, who's accused of murderin' a Texas Ranger named Harry Avery and— What ails you, old-timer?"

Whiskey Sid had dropped his tin cup of coffee and his gnarled old hand had slid to the cedar butt of his long-barreled six-shooter. His steel-blue eyes were slitted. He was staring hard at Tipton as his gun slid slowly from its old leather holster.

"Take it easy, Sidney," Dominoes said sharply. "Easy, pardner. Put back that gun."

"I . . . I fergot, Dominoes." Whiskey Sid's hand came away from his gun. Tipton took a deep breath.

"Sidney," said Dominoes, "gets notions. Better let me do the talk-

ing, colonel. I know what you're driving at. The law is accusing Bill Ramage here of killing a Ranger named Harry Avery. I happen to know that Bill is innocent, but I can't prove it. You're playing a dangerous game, colonel, and you can't have a man in your outfit who has a Ranger tromping on his boot heels. That's why you're firin' Bill Ramage. And where Bill goes, Sidney and I go with him. So lay our money on the barrel head and we'll call it quits."

"A hundred dollars apiece," said Colonel Tipton. He was scowling and there was an uneasy look in his eyes as he stared at the three partners.

"Better keep it." Dominoes smiled thinly. "You might need that three hundred some day for tobacco money when the long arm of the law collars you and locks you up and throws the key away. Our horses are saddled and our beds are loaded, so let's hit the trail, Bill. Come along, Sidney. We're leavin' you to count your chicken feed, Tipton. We don't play for small change."

THEY were all on their feet now, and Dominoes' voice was flat-toned, menacing. "You just got the X cattle out of what you call escrow, Tipton. And you've got two thousand head more in the Half Moon road iron. It's a long trail from here to the New Mexico line, and if those cattle are moved by Rail T cowpinchers takin' your orders and the law happens to stop that trail herd for stray inspection, you have your choice of two ways out and both of those ways are dangerous. If you claim those cattle, the law can grab you for havin' stolen cattle in your possession. If you don't claim 'em and they're not in the Rail T iron, then you're driving a

trail herd of stolen cattle and that's called rustling here in Texas. Adios, colonel. We'll leave you to your pleasant thoughts. And mebbeso the next time you won't try to buy three good men with a picayune hundred dollars."

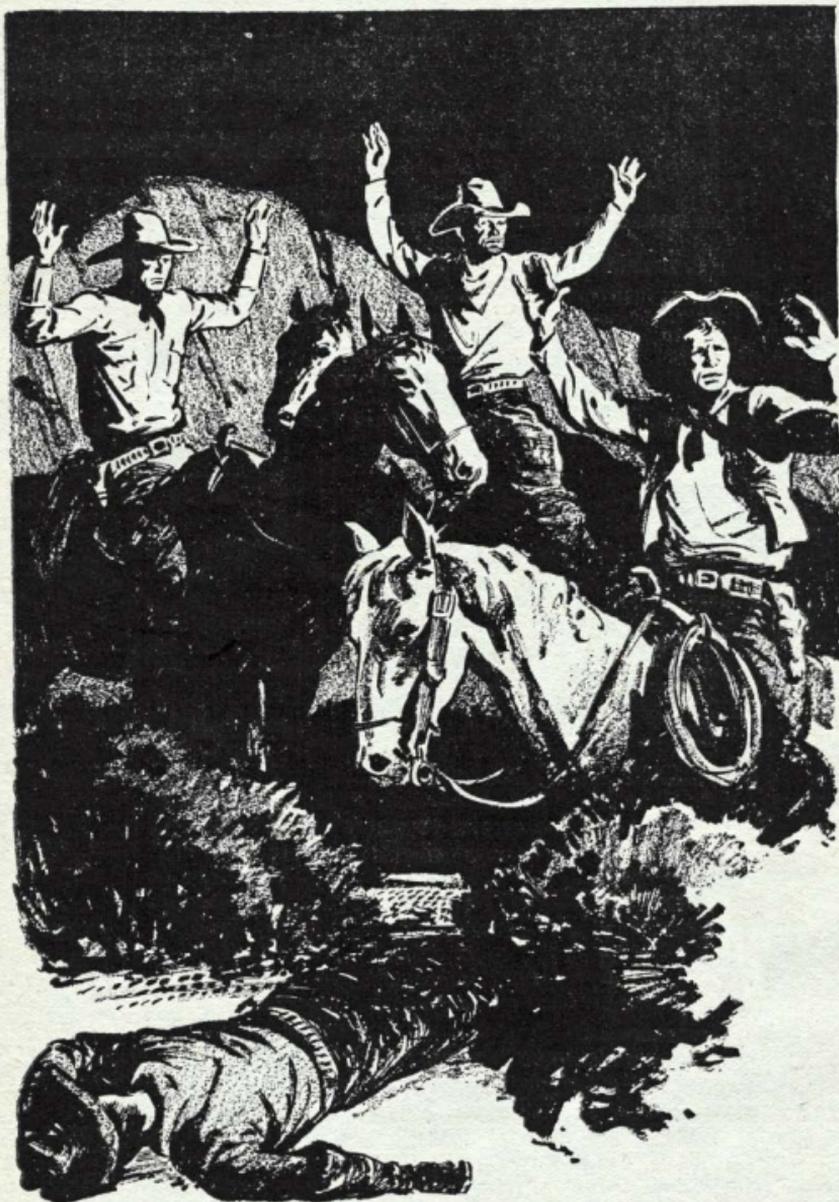
Tipton's men had started moving the cattle off the bed ground and the owner of the Rail T was alone when he faced Bill Ramage, Dominoes and Whiskey Sid. He faced them with cold eyes and steady nerves, and the grin of his thin-lipped mouth was ruthless. His voice was tinged with faint contempt.

"A hundred dollars is a lot of dinero to a broken-down tinhorn gambler and a stinking old spittoon cleaner. And I was dealin' with Bill Ramage, not you or Mike Quinn's swamper. I had a notion that you was man enough to do your own talkin', Ramage, but it looks like I was fooled."

Colonel Tipton hitched his slanted cartridge belt up across his lean flanks and his sharp blue eyes were merciless. "I take care of men who make threats. This is my range, Ramage. I'll give you one last chance. Git shut of this tinhorn and that white-whiskered old soak and I'll give you a job over in New Mexico where that Ranger can't swing a law loop without ketchin' it on a Rail T gun barrel. I kin use you."

Bill Ramage grinned mirthlessly and shook his head. "No kin do, Tipton. I don't slip my dallies on my friends."

"Then you're in a hell of a fix, because this range is lousy with tough hambres that take orders from Jute Ferguson and Dead-eye Dixon. And when you locked horns with Loveless you challenged 'em all. They'll kill you where they find you."



The rustlers' rear guard soon had enough of the savage fighting of Bill and his pards.

"You tryin' to throw a scare into me, Tipton?" Bill asked easily.

"I'm just tellin' you where you stand, mister. I've got a notion that Loveless wasn't just makin' a drunken play when he picked that ruckus with you in the White Elephant. He had a reason behind it. Jute Ferguson is almighty anxious to cut your trail, an' Ranger Tom Kerwin trailed you here from the Van Horn Mountains. He's got orders to camp on your trail till he ropes and hogties you. You can't go back to Tascosa, so your only bet is to quit the country and quit 'er fast. Now git off my range, the three of you—and stay off. My cowboys will have orders to shoot you on sight. You can thank your tinhorn friend for diggin' your grave, Ramage. Good day!"

Colonel Tipton mounted his horse and rode off toward the cattle. Whiskey Sid slid his six-shooter from its holster. Dominoes shook his head.

"Tuck in your shirt tail, Sidney. Killin' that old pirate won't get us anything. We've brought Bill nothing but bad luck, and killin' Colonel Hugh Tipton won't wipe off the jinx."

Whiskey Sid slid his gun back into the old holster, and his steely blue eyes looked squarely at Bill Ramage.

"Did you kill that Ranger?" he asked flatly.

"Harry Avery," said Bill, his voice edged with annoyance, "was bushwhacked by four men. One of 'em was called Jute. Another had a black patch over his eye. The two others, I have a notion, were Loveless and Chet Wilbur. Harry Avery must have been cold-trailin' 'em when they were fetchin' wet cattle out of Mexico to build up this Half Moon trail herd. And now let's make tracks before we git rounded

up and our horns knocked off. Tipton wasn't running any whizzer."

Bill wasn't in any mood to waste words. He had played the game wrong and the possibility of ever cleaning his slate seemed mighty dim. He was sore at Dominoes for having antagonized Tipton. He could not help but feel that Tipton had offered him his one chance of getting the four men who had murdered Ranger Harry Avery. And now Tipton had turned against him. Tipton was a power in this lawless strip of cow country along the Canadian, and Dominoes and Whiskey Sid had just defied him.

"The Cattle King of the Canadian"—Dominoes smiled thinly and his voice had a gritting sound of triumph that Bill Ramage had never before heard in it—"had better get a tight holt on his rawhide crown or it's going to get shot off his prideful head."

CHAPTER V

BLURRED BACK TRAILS

BILL and his two pardners holed up at a deserted cabin along the river and they sat around the campfire smoking and talking. Rather, Bill and Dominoes talked while Whiskey Sid silently cleaned his old .45-70 and his long-barreled six-shooter, staring into the fire with a brooding silence that was not quite sane. Sober for the first time in years, the white-whiskered old swamper was acting strangely.

"I'll slip back to Tascosa after dark," said Dominoes, "and feel out things. I aim to see how much real guts that Texas Ranger's got. Let's see if he has the nerve to cut the strays out of those two trail herds. I'll give him proof that the steers in your BR brand are stolen, Bill. And how many Bradded H steers did you count, Sidney?"

"Forty-eight head," said Whiskey Sid dully. Then his eyes looked at the gambler with hard tenseness. "What do yon know about them Bradded H cattle, Dominoes?"

"I know too much, Sidney. Too much for my own peace of mind. And by the same token, I know enough to make Colonel Hugh Tipton wish he'd never seen that iron. I was running a gambling house at Mosquero, in New Mexico, when Tipton stole that big trail herd of Bradded H steers twelve years ago. He worked the Bradded H into a brand that read Triangle H5 connected and sold the steers on an army beef contract at Fort Sumner. It was in my place that Tipton pokered the Bradded H trail boss out of that whole damn trail herd—"

Dominoes threw himself sideways as Whiskey Sid's six-shooter roared. The heavy lead slug grazed the little tinhorn's cheek. Then Bill had old Whiskey Sid's smoking gun and was standing between the two men.

"By damn!" Whiskey Sid's voice was harsh and dry as the scrape of rusted iron. "It was *your* crooked cards and your rotgut booze that done it! Gimme my gun, young feller! Gimme one chance to shoot that dirty card-markin' son in the briskit! Lemme fill his yaller belly full of lead an'—"

Whiskey Sid's old bowed legs sagged at the knees and his gnarled hands clutched at his heart. Bill caught him and lowered him gently to the ground. Then Dominoes worked over the old swamper, chafing the blood back into circulation and bathing the bearded face with a silk neck handkerchief soaked in water. In a few minutes Whiskey Sid's heart was beating strongly again and he lay there on the ground staring at the gambler with cold

hatred in his steel-blue eyes.

"Tipton broke you, Sidney," said Dominoes, his voice flat and toneless, "and he double-crossed me. He ran me out of Mosquero after that. I drifted around the country and finally I came to Tascosa. I found you there at Mike Quinn's. You'd changed. The last time I'd seen you, you were in your prime. I found a shambling old white-bearded saloon bum cleaning cuspidors for the booze he had to have to keep his memories dulled into stupidity. But your eyes hadn't changed, and after a few weeks I knew I'd found the Bradded H trail boss who had gotten drunk at Mosquero and gambled away the Bradded H trail herd and then shot Colonel Hugh Tipton and disappeared. Tipton was too tough to die, so you quit the country. Vanished. You'd gone away to hide from the black disgrace of gambling away cattle that you didn't own.

"Tipton worked the Bradded H into his Triangle H5 and held the cattle till the worked brands haired over," Dominoes continued. "He held 'em there on his Blue Holes range where no outsiders ever dared ride. Then he sold the steers on his army beef contract. When I tried to declare myself I was taken out and Tipton put a rope around my neck and threw the other end over the limb of a tree on the Rail T range. They hauled me up and lowered me to the ground a few times to let me know how it feels to be hanged by the neck till you're dead; then Tipton gave me till sunrise to get the hell out of New Mexico. My hair was as black as my hat, Sidney, when I owned the Last Chance at Mosquero. I didn't know that it had turned white till I went into a barber shop in Denver to get a badly needed shave and haircut two weeks later.

SO our trails crossed again at Tascosa," the gambler went on, talking in his measured tones. "You were swamping at the White Elephant. Mike Quinn called you Whiskey Sid, and only your eyes belonged to the spur-jingling trail boss who had lost three thousand head of two-year-old steers to the Cattle King of the Blue Holes Range. I'd changed, too. My hair wasn't coal-black and I'd shaved off the mustache I'd always worn. I'd lost my gambling nerve. Like you, I'd changed inside and outside. We'd both lost our guts. We'd both drifted back here to kill Tipton, but neither of us had enough guts left to do the job. Anyway, till Bill Ramage here came along and gave us our chance to be men again, we were living off the generosity of Mike Quinn. And taking the abuse of Tipton and his Rail T men when they blew into Tascosa to paint the town red.

"You had a third interest in the Bradded H iron, as I recollect. The company that owned the outfit sold out down on the Nueces and I think Jute Ferguson and Dead-eye Dixon claim the ramnants. But it's a rustler claim and won't hold water in Texas court.

"Bill Ramage has cattle in those two trail herds and you have a prior claim to an interest in the Bradded H iron. Bill can't come out into the open right now because that Ranger at Tascosa has a bench warrant for his arrest. But you can ride back to Tascosa with me and we'll make that Texas Ranger back your play when you claim the right to cut the Bradded H steers out of the X and Half Moon herds now in escrow on the Canadian. I know every stray iron in those two trail herds, and unless Jute Ferguson and Dead-eye Dixon can show bills of

sale for the strays in those two herds, they stand to lose every one of them. And Tipton will lose the cattle and what money he's paid over to Ferguson and Dixon. That Texas Ranger, if he's got the nerve that a Ranger is supposed to have, can call for a showdown right now, here on the Canadian. Tipton and his trail-boss rustlers will have to submit to arrest or fight. And unless I'm dead wrong about the colonel, he's going to fight like hell to keep from losing those cattle and the money he paid over to Jute Ferguson and Dead-eye Dixon."

"You was called California Jack at Mosquero," said Whiskey Sid. He got slowly to his feet, holding the cup of black coffee Bill had handed him.

"Alias Dominoes, which is the only game besides our sessions of coon-can that I ever play now. Dominoes. And I won't ask you to believe me when I say that I never dealt a crooked game of cards in my life, despite Tipton's word to the contrary. But a gambler needs nerve and Tipton robbed me of mine.

"But tonight, gentlemen, I'm riding to Tascosa to have a little talk with that Texas Ranger. I'm asking you, Sidney, to lay aside your grudge against California Jack. I'm after Colonel Hugh Tipton's scalp. Likewise the mangy hides of Jute Ferguson, Dead-eye Dixon, Pete Loveless and Chet Wilbur. Will you ride to town with me and put in your claim for the Bradded H cattle?"

"There's a twelve-year-old indictment against me," said Whiskey Sid. There was a whipped note in his voice. "I can't lick that."

"You can help lick Hugh Tipton and the men who killed Ranger Harry Avery and clear young Bill Ramage of that murder charge against him," Dominoes told him.

"The best I hope for is an even break against Tipton. Give me that and I'll die happy. You're getting that same chance to square the biggest debt you've ever had."

"When do we start?" Whiskey Sid gulped down the black coffee and hitched up his sagging cartridge belt. Bill handed the old trail boss his six-shooter, holding it by its long barrel. The gnarled hand closed over the cedar butt.

"As soon as we get saddled." Dominoes held the sodden black silk neck handkerchief against his bullet-ticked cheek and smiled thinly.

"Count me in on the deal," said Bill Ramage. "That Ranger don't know me by sight and nobody but you two and Tipton know me by name. I'm beginnin' to feel lucky. The three of us kin lick Tipton and those trail-boss rustlers. Sid, Dominoes has nursed you back to life more than a few times when the booze had you kickin' at the pearly gates. If I was you, I'd shake hands with him and we'll all feel better."

Whiskey Sid ejected the empty shell from his six-shooter, shoved a cartridge into the empty chamber of the cylinder and slid the gun back into its holster. He held out his hand toward the gambler. Dominoes gripped it and they shook hands silently.

Half an hour later the three of them rode toward Tascosa in the moonlight.

RANGER TOM KERWIN was six feet tall and weighed two hundred pounds. It was all hard bone and tough muscle and he had the fighting Texan heart to back his brawn. His hair was as straight and coarse as an Indian's, and his eyes were black and opaque. He was close to thirty years old. The wind and sun had colored his lean-jawed,

hawk-nosed face and lined the corners of his eyes and straight-lipped mouth so that he looked as if he never smiled. When he did grin and his big white teeth showed, it came as a sort of shock. And he was grinning widely now when Bill Ramage and Dominoes and Whiskey Sid saw him for the first time in the little office of Tascosa's one and only hotel.

Kerwin was sitting talking to a girl with soft brown hair and dark-blue eyes. The girl was wearing a divided riding skirt of soft leather that was colorless from hard usage. Her high-heeled boots needed shining and she wore a man's gray Stetson at a cowpuncher angle on her curly brown head. Her blue flannel blouse was a little faded and her short leather jacket was shabby. She and Tom Kerwin were both laughing at something the Ranger had just said.

Bill and Dominoes and Whiskey Sid stood outside and looked at the pair through the curtainless window. Whiskey Sid made some kind of a throaty sound and his hand gripped Bill's arm.

"I can't go in there," he said in a croaking whisper. "Go in with Dominoes, Bill. I'll stay out here in the shadder. I can't go in yonder."

"Then wait outside, Sidney," said Dominoes. "Come on, Bill. And let me do the talkin'. Your name is Bill Jones and you just got fired from the Rail T outfit. Say, that's the first real lady I ever saw in Tascosa. Get out your Sunday manners, Bill."

Dominoes led the way in. At sight of him and Bill, the grin was wiped from the Ranger's tanned face and he was on his feet with an easy, effortless movement that put him between the girl and the two men. His right hand was near his six-shooter and he looked ready to fight.

Bill felt the hard, suspicious scrutiny of Kerwin's black eyes.

Dominoes smiled thinly and shook his head. "We didn't horn in here to insult the lady," he assured the Ranger. "We heard there was a Texas Ranger in town and rode in to have a little powwow. Knowing the nature of your business here, I think we can be of valuable assistance. If the lady will excuse you. It's a man's talk and—"

"And I'm Harry Avery's sister." The girl stepped around the square-shouldered bulk of Ranger Tom Kerwin. "You know where this murderer, Bill Ramage, is?"

BILL winced. Dominoes removed his dust-powered black hat and Bill followed suit, feeling uncomfortable as the girl looked at him. His face still bore the marks of the fight he'd had with Loveless. He shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. He hadn't known that Avery had a sister. He was glad when Dominoes began talking again.

"What makes you so certain that Ramage killed your brother, ma'am?"

"Harry's grave was found near Bill Ramage's ranch at the foot of the Van Horn Mountains," she explained. "He'd been after Ramage for a long time, trying to catch him rustling. When Harry failed to report in ten days, the Ranger captain sent Tom down there. Tom found where Harry was buried, but Ramage had quit the country. His trail led to Tascosa. I came along with Tom and we're staying on Ramage's trail till we find him."

The girl's face was flushed and her dark-blue eyes were bright. The Ranger put a big tanned hand on her shoulder.

"Take it easy, Nona," he said in a lazy drawl. "Better let me handle

the job." He smiled grimly at Dominoes and Bill. "Lay your cards on the table, gents. We'll read 'em."

"We'll deliver Ramage to you when the time comes. But the sign ain't right," said Dominoes flatly. "You wear a Ranger badge and you've taken a solemn oath of office, Kerwin. Right here under your nose is happening one of the biggest cattle steals in Texas history. Four of the rustlers involved are men whose hands are red with the blood of Ranger Harry Avery. My two partners and I will back any play you make. I have a list of stray brands and the owners of those brands. You'll find four thousand head of cattle within half a day's ride of Tascosa, and when the stolen cattle are cut from that herd the cut will be a lot larger than the cattle left in it. I'm referring to the X and the Half Moon trail herds sold by Dead-eye Dixon and Jute Ferguson to Colonel Hugh Tipton and now bein' held on what Tipton calls his escrow range."

Dominoes paused and his eyes looked into the eyes of Ranger Tom Kerwin with a disconcerting coldness. "If you've got the nerve, mister, to cut those two trail herds, your name will go down in cow-country history as one of the bravest men that ever joined the Texas Rangers. Get that job done and we'll turn Bill Ramage over to you, either dead or alive!"

Tom Kerwin grinned widely, but his opaque eyes were black as agate in the lamplight.

"Just who do you mean by 'we, mister?'" he drawled, and there was a tinge of derision in his grin that was like a slap across Dominoes' face. Not a hard slap, but just a gesture that held contempt for a braggart. The grin included Bill Ramage, who had to use all his self-control to hold

down his temper.

"Who are you two gents, anyhow?" Kerwin was no longer grinning.

"We're just wastin' time talkin' to this big lady-killer," said Bill hotly, eying the Ranger's new flannel shirt and the buckskin-foxed, tight-fitting checked wool California pants and polished boots. "He don't warm up to the notion of cutting two trail herds that are lousy with stolen cattle. Mebbe it's Colonel Tipton that's got him buffaloed. Or he's heard too much about the toughness of Jute Ferguson and Dead-eye Dixon. No law officer has ever had enough sand in him to cut one of Tipton's escrow herds. This big un is too busy warmin' a safe chair and tellin' jokes to the lady here to be bothered. Can't you see he's on a man hunt? He's waitin' here for Bill Ramage to ride to town a-shiverin' and a-shakin', with his hands in the air, to give himself up. He sure took pains to git word to Bill Ramage that there was a tough gun-fannin' Ranger here at Tascosa. And if there was any coyote in Bill Ramage he'd be holed up right now across the New Mexico line, workin' brands for Colonel Hugh Tipton."

Tom Kerwin's hand dropped to his gun. The blood drained slowly from his face, leaving it white under its coating of tan. His black eyes were slitted and he spoke to the girl without taking them from Bill Ramage's face.

"Git to your room, Nona. Pronto."

CHAPTER VI

FOUR MEN RIDE

FROM outside came the sounds of running horses. Men shouting. Six-shooters popping. Whiskey Sid shoved his head through the doorway.

"The Half Moon tough hands are takin' the town! Git that gal out o' sight and under cover!"

A stray bullet smashed through the window. Dominoes stepped to the lamp that sat on the desk and blew out the light.

"Take care of the little lady, Ranger," he said flatly. "Those hoodlums don't call their shots!"

Whiskey Sid had fetched Bill and Dominoes' saddle guns and now the three were crouched in the darkness there in the little hotel office.

Riders spurred their horses down the street and were milling out in front of the little hotel that fronted the cow town's plaza. Their horses were rearing and whirling and lunging and their guns shot streaks of flame into the air. Above the confusion of sounds bellowed the blatant voice of big Pete Loveless.

"Where's that Texas Ranger? Where's that badge-totin' son that thinks he kin fetch the law to Tascosa? Where's that double-crossin' Tipton?" he was shouting drunkenly.

"Cause we're wild and woolly and full of fleas
And we never bin curried below the knees!
Yippie!"

"That," said Dominoes, "will be Chet Wilbur."

"Charge the hotel, boys!" bellowed Pete Loveless. "Drag out that Texas Ranger and we'll make him jig to six-shooter music! Git 'im, you curly wolves!"

Dominoes crouched below the ledge of the big window. His carbine cracked three times and from outside came a howl of pain and cussing. Then the hail of bullets from outside smashed what was left of the big bay window and Dominoes ducked back against the wall.

Whiskey Sid's big .45-70 roared like a cannon. Bill flattened himself



*Bill Ramage dived for
Ranger Kerwin just as a
storm of lead crashed
through the window.*

against the wall and his carbine spat streaks of fire through the open doorway. He shot low, taking snap-shot aim at the legs of the men who had quit their horses and were coming on foot across the plank sidewalk toward the open doorway of the hotel. Three men in the lead went down, crippled in the legs. They cursed and shouted at the men crowding behind them to get back. The men behind were trampling those who had fallen. Dominoes shifted his position and his carbine raked them with deadly swiftness.

BULLETS snarled around Bill's head like hornets as he kicked the front door shut and slid the steel bar across it to keep it closed.

"Git that damned Ranger!" bel-
lowed the voice of Pete Loveless out in the street. "Knock that door in. Set fire to the damn place! Smoke 'im out, you fightin' sons! Learn him that there ain't no law at Tascosa!"

"Then we'll git Tipton and string up that double-crossin' ol' devil! I'll learn him to break his word with Dead-eye Dixon! Holdin' up our money on them X cattle because one lousy Ranger is sniffin' aroun' like a hound that's lost the wolf trail. Take them men in yonder, you, Chet Wilbur, and drag out that damn Ranger or I'll whup you till you squall like a panther! You let that Ranger git away and he'll put a rope around that neck of yours some day. Take them men of yours in yonder!"

"I'm shot to hell a'ready, you one-eyed baboon! Take 'em in yourself! My laigs is busted!"

"Take 'em in, Loveless!" barked a nasal, high-pitched voice that had a Missouriian's twang. "Earn your fightin' pay, you big ox. You done got a taste of Ranger blood in the Van Horn country. All you done

so far at Tascosa is git licked! Drag out that Ranger!"

"The sweet voice of Jute Ferguson," Dominoes' voice came through the powder-smoke-filled darkness. He was crouched near the shattered window.

"Set fire to the damn place!" bel-
lowed Loveless. "Smoke 'im out, boys!"

Whiskey Sid's big gun roared and Loveless howled like a wolf. Then he cursed his men in a voice that was like the bellow of a bull on the prod.

"I never figgered," said Bill aloud, shoving fresh cartridges into the empty magazine of his carbine, "that I'd be throwin' lead to save the life of a Texas Ranger. It's a horse on me, Dominoes!"

"Shake 'em razzle-dazzle," said Dominoes, using a dice-shaking term, "and high man drops outa the game and the low man pays for the drinks. It's a horse on the Ranger if they ever get in that door. And quit callin' the little lady a Texas Ranger, Bill. It's her we're puttin' on the show for."

"Then it's up to you men to take care of her," Ranger Tom Kerwin's voice sounded right behind them. "They'll be settin' fire to the hotel directly and she'll be burned to death or shot down. I've got to trust you now. It's me that those drunken hombres want."

He stepped to the smashed window. He had a six-shooter in each hand and he made a plain target as he called out to the crowd outside:

"Quit shootin', men! I'm the Texas Ranger you want. I'm comin' out!"

"Drag 'im down, Bill!" said Dominoes.

Bill dove at the big Ranger's legs in the darkness. Dove with all his weight like a football tackler. Ker-

win was flattened on the floor with a heavy crash, and a volley of bullets tore through the window where he had been standing.

"You big, thick-skulled young idiot!" Dominoes cursed the Ranger with low-toned fervor. "Don't try any fool tricks like that again. Take a stand there with Bill and use your guns. No grandstand plays. A dead Ranger ain't doing us or the little lady any good. Fight, Tejano!"

The fall had jarred the big Ranger. He grunted something and then he was crouched beside Bill near the window and his two six-shooters were spitting staccato streaks of flame.

Four men with lighted torches ran toward the building. The Ranger got two of them. Bill shot down another. Dominoes picked off the fourth man. They crawled off into the nearest shelter, all four badly wounded. The torches made of kerosene-soaked rags tied to the end of long sticks lay there in the middle of the street, and the four flames lighted up the little plaza, making a plain target of every man out there. Bill saw them mounting their spooky horses and riding like hell to get out of the firelight.

The men out there thought they had killed the big Texas Ranger. Jute Ferguson and Dead-eye Dixon were barking orders to them to hit the trail for camp.

NEVER mind them Rail T men that was backin' the Ranger!" Jute Ferguson's nasal voice could be heard. "We'll git 'em later when we hang Tipton's mangy hide on his Rail T fence. No use settin' fire to the hotel if you got the Ranger!"

They left their dead and a couple of badly wounded men lying out in the street and rode off into the night.

Across the plaza at the White Elephant, Mike Quinn lit a lamp cau-

tiously and came to the door of his saloon. Dominoes hailed the saloon-keeper.

"Look 'em over, will you, Mike? I think one of 'em is Chet Wilbur. It ain't quite safe for me and Sidney and Bill to venture out in the open. Those men don't like us and a wounded man can sometimes hit a bull's-eye."

"That you, Dominoes?" called Mike Quinn. "When did you turn wolf?"

"The night that Bill trimmed me and Sidney playing coon-can. Better rustle the doc, Mike. Send him over to the hotel."

Dominoes had been shot in the thigh and Whiskey Sid was cussing a bullet rip in his left shoulder. A lead slug had grazed Bill's ribs without doing any damage. Ranger Tom Kerwin was unmarked by any of the bullets that had come within inches of riddling his big body.

"Better go back and see how the little lady is makin' out, Ranger," said Dominoes. "Don't strike any matches till we're certain those snakes out yonder have their fangs pulled. Mike will tend to 'em."

"I'm all right," sounded the girl's voice from the hallway that led back to the half dozen rooms of the one-storied adobe hotel. "I'm scared green, Tom, but I'm not hurt. Are you all right?"

"Nary a scratch. I don't know about the others. They did all the hard fightin'."

Mike Quinn came in with Tascosa's one and only doctor. He said that one of the dead men was Chet Wilbur, but that Jute and Dead-eye Dixon and Loveless had gotten away. He had taken the guns away from the dead and wounded men out yonder, he said, and it was safe enough to light a lamp in one of the bedrooms if the blinds were pulled.

"Tipton," Mike told them, "refused to pay Dead-eye Dixon the rest of his money due on them X steers day before yesterday. He told Dixon and Ferguson that he was holdin' them cattle in escrow till the Texas Ranger went back down the trail again with his prisoner. Tipton is makin' a strong p'lay to stay inside the law. But he's holdin' them X and Half Moon cattle, regardless. And he made a dicker with the Ranger."

Tom Kerwin's tanned face colored under the scrutiny of Bill's cold stare and Dominoes' faint smile of contempt.

They had gone into Nona Avery's room and she was helping the doc cleanse and bandage the bullet rip in Whiskey Sid's shoulder. The old trail boss sat on the edge of the bed, his eyes on the girl with a queer intent furtiveness.

"Colonel Tipton," said Ranger Tom Kerwin defensively, "offered to locate Bill Ramage for me. I wasn't sent out to inspect trail herds. That's a job for the men hired by the Texas Cattle Raisers' Association."

"Mebbeso," said Dominoes dryly, "it would have been wiser, Bill, if you'd let that bushwhacker outfit mow him down when he reared up on his hind legs and played brave. He still ain't takin' a stack of chips in our game. He's goin' to wait here at the hotel till Hugh Tipton delivers Bill Ramage to him nice and dead and harmless with a few Rail T bullets in his back. Patch us up quick, doc, and we'll be on our way. Bill and Sidney and I are cutting Tipton's two trail herds if we have to cut 'em with Winchesters."

"I got Chet Wilbur," said Whiskey Sid, pulling his faded blue flannel shirt over his head and easing his injured arm into the sleeve, "and I

put a slug in Loveless that's botherin' him right now."

His bloodshot eyes looked at the Ranger and he measured every word carefully.

"When I git Jute Ferguson and Dead-eye Dixon I've got that job done and you kin tell your Ranger captain that the four men that murdered Harry Avery are taken care of. Then I'll take Tipton's trail and I'll kill him where I find him. And you kin take back the report to your Ranger captain that the man that stole the Bradded H trail herd twelve years ago with a whiskey bottle and a deck of marked cards is paid off with a dose of lead poison. You got that all clear in your mind, young feller? Damn your thick hide, I asked you a question! You got that down in your skull? Or will I beat it in with a gun barrel?"

"Take 'er easy, Sidney." Dominoes stepped in between the irate old trail boss and the red-faced Texas Ranger.

"There's Bradded H steers in them two trail herds and they're in the X and Half Moon road irons! I'm reppin' fer the Bradded H outfit! Hear that, Ranger?" Whiskey Sid's voice was harsh with emotion. His shoulder was giving him a lot of pain and every fiber of his tough old body was craving the soothing, burning, nerve-easing whiskey that Mike Quinn was offering him. But he knocked aside the proffered bottle and picked up his long-barreled .45-70. He strode out of the room and Bill went with him.

DOMINOES stepped to the doorway, and the gun in his hand was carelessly pointed at the belly of Texas Ranger Tom Kerwin.

"Take 'er easy, Ranger. You've been doing a little guessing for yourself and I'm not saying you're alto-

gether wrong. But you're not going to do anything about it. That fightin' cowpuncher that saved your life tonight is Bill Ramage. But Bill Ramage didn't kill Harry Avery. The old gent with the white whiskers is the trail boss who lost the Bradded H trail herd to Hugh Tipton twelve years ago.

"The three of us are cutting Tipton's escrow herds tomorrow. If you want to lend us the backing of your law, ride out and throw in with us. But if you come out there to arrest Bill Ramage, come a-shootin', because you'll have a tinhorn called Dominoes and a tough old saloon swamper they call Whiskey Sid to kill before you get to our pardner. There's our bet, Ranger. She goes as she lays!" Dominoes began backing slowly through the doorway.

"Wait for me!" Nona Avery's voice was tight in her throat. "I'm going with you! I've got to. Who is that white-bearded man who just left? If he's—"

Dominoes nodded. The girl's hand was gripping his arm and his free hand closed over hers.

"He was traveling under the name of Sidney when he came to Tascosa a year or two ago. Around town he was called Sid. His name used to be Hank Avery and he was foreman and third owner of the old Bradded H outfit in Texas. Whiskey was his only weak trait, and Tipton got him drunk at Mosquero twelve years ago and poked him out of the Bradded H herd. Hank Avery sobered up and shot Tipton and was run out of New Mexico by Tipton's hired gun fighters."

"That man's my father!" cried Nona Avery. "All the time I was helping the doctor bandage his shoulder he was watching me. And there was something about his eyes that kept haunting me. I was ten

years old when I last saw him. He had black hair and a black mustache and he laughed a lot. And just now, when I bandaged his shoulder and talked to him, he seemed to forget the pain he was suffering and he'd smile at me, and his eyes were soft and sort of misty and he patted my head like I was a child. I've got to go to him—"

Dominoes shook his head. "He'll come back to you when he gets his chores done. Doc and Mike Quinn will look after you. And the Ranger will be—"

"The Ranger," said Tom Kerwin grimly, "is taking chips in your game, mister. You didn't notice any cattle in the Lazy K iron in that escrow herd of Tipton's?"

"We had a little bunch of cattle in the X road iron. There were some Lazy K steers in the bunch. The Lazy K brand belongs to the Kerwin brothers, somewhere on the Brazos River."

"Them's my two older brothers." Tom Kerwin grinned faintly. "You shore know brands and where they belong."

"It's a sort of hobby. Some men collect stamps. I memorize brands and I can cut those X and Half Moon trail herds and give you the name of the owner and the range of every stray brand in that four thousand head of steers."

"Then we'll cut Tipton's escrow herds and whittle 'em down to the last stray. You're deputized right now as brand inspector for the Cattle Raisers' Association of Texas."

Tom Kerwin put his big arm around Nona Avery's shoulders. "I'll do everything a human kin do, Nona, to fetch your daddy back to Tascosa alive and kickin'. So long."

"We'll fetch him back to you, lady," added Dominoes. "Let's ramble, Ranger."

CHAPTER VII

THE KING LOSES HIS CROWN

BILL RAMAGE was wearing the Texas Ranger badge that he had unpinned from the bloodstained shirt of Harry Avery. Tom Kerwin said that if Harry Avery's father believed in Bill Ramage, that was good enough for him. He rode with the three pardners out to where the Rail T cowpunchers were standing guard on the two trail herds that had been thrown together in one big herd. Colonel Hugh Tipton was in charge of the outfit himself.

Tipton recognized Tom Kerwin and told his men to shove their guns back into their holsters.

"It's the Texas Ranger and it looks like the law is on the prod. Take it and like it, boys, till I see a chance to outfox 'em. Bill Ramage is ridin' with the Ranger and that's a bad sign. And Dominoes and Whiskey Sid have turned out to be bad medicine. Stand your hands, boys. The colonel plays his cards close to his belly this mornin'. The man that fetched word from Tascosa that those renegades had killed the Ranger must have bin drunk. Stand your hands and let the Ranger do the bettin'." And Colonel Hugh Tipton rode out to meet the four riders in the gray dawn.

"The curly wolves trail with the wolfhound!" he greeted them, his eyes cold and hard and his drooping gray mustache only half hiding his grim-lipped, taunting grin.

"Bill Ramage is wanted for murder. Whiskey Sid is Hank Avery who gambled away the Bradded H trail herd ten years ago and never had the guts to go back to his home range to face the indictment the Fort Worth businessmen who owned two thirds of the Bradded H outfit filed agin' him. And the third gent is

Jack Sanders, a gamblin' man we called California Jack at Mosquero, who got run out of New Mexico for cold-deckin' Rail T cowhands. You shore pick strange company, Ranger!"

"We need fresh horses, Tipton," said Ranger Tom Kerwin grimly. "The best cow horses in your Rail T remuda and a couple or three fresh changes as the day goes on. Brand Inspector Jack Sanders is repping for the Cattle Raisers' Association and is cutting all strays from the X and Half Moon trail herds. I'm backing his play and with me is Ranger Bill Ramage. I swore him and Hank Avery in at Tascosa. Hank is reppin' for the Bradded H iron. Ramage has some BR cattle to cut. I think I'll find some of my brothers' Lazy K cattle in your escrow herd. Your men will hold the herd and the cut and you'll be welcome to all the steers we leave in the herd."

Tipton forced a smile, but his eyes were bleak. "That's the reason I haven't taken complete delivery on the X and Half Moon cattle. These steers are in escrow, Kerwin. Not one head of 'em is in the Rail T iron. If there are stolen cattle in the two trail herds, I'm the victim of two rascals named Ferguson and Dixon. Your law can't lay a finger on Colonel Hugh Tipton. I've got the best lawyers in Texas and New Mexico advisin' me."

"All the best lawyers this side of hell," said Whiskey Sid, "won't be able to help you when this herd is worked and you and me settle a twelve-year-old score, you damned cow thief!"

EASY, Sidney," said Dominoes. He addressed Tipton. "Ranger Kerwin swore me in and here's the warrant with my name signed to it. Going back twelve years to that

night in my Last Chance place at Mosquero, Tipton, you got some marked cards from one of my dealers, not from me. You paid me a thousand dollars that day to saddle my horse and take a long ride. Your gun-slingers later robbed me of the thousand and everything else I owned. And when I've finished whittling on this herd of stolen cattle, I'm collecting an old debt with twelve years' accumulated interest. Now let's saddle fresh cuttin' horses and get to our chores."

The Rail T remuda was inside the rope corral at the camp on the banks of the Canadian. They roped and saddled fresh horses and rode back to the herd. At Dominoes' suggestion they cut the herd in three sections to get a faster work on the cattle.

With Rail T men holding the cattle, Dominoes, Bill and Whiskey Sid commenced cutting out the stray brands, throwing them into one big cut. And as each longhorn steer was cut from the herd the brand was called out. Ranger Tom Kerwin had a tally book and pencil and kept tally of the cattle in the stray brands. When Bill or Whiskey Sid cut a steer with a brand they were not sure of, Dominoes would give Tom Kerwin the name of the owner of that brand.

Some of the brands had been worked and Dominoes read the worked brands like a bright scholar in school reads his spelling lesson. Even Tipton could not but express his reluctant admiration.

"The damned tinhorn is a human brand book," he told Tom Kerwin. "If I'd knowed he was that smart, I'd have given him a partnership in the Rail T instead of runnin' him off my Blue Holes range. I never seen him work cattle. At Mosquero he was a lily-fingered gambler in a black frock coat and patent-leather

shoes. He reads brands like he reads cards."

Bill and Whiskey Sid and Dominoes changed horses twice before they got the first third of the herd worked. And when they were done there was only a little over three hundred head of steers that Dominoes told Tipton he could claim to brand in his Rail T iron.

"Take 'em away, Tipton. They're all yours, so far as we're concerned. Head 'em for your Blue Holes range in New Mexico. Mebbeso they'll get there. Most mebbe, though, they'll be held up by Jute Ferguson and Dead-eye Dixon." Dominoes smiled thinly and wiped sweat from his forehead.

They worked the second and third holdups, and when the last stray steer had been cut Tom Kerwin tallied three thousand one hundred and twenty-eight head in the stray herd. There were less than a thousand head of steers that Ferguson and Dixon had legal claim to sell to Tipton.

Tipton's men took their sadly diminished herd and headed for the direction of the New Mexico line.

"You've cut your strays," Tipton told Dominoes in a dry voice. "You've got a herd that a man has to raise his carbine sights to shoot acrost. There's just four of you to take care of the herd, and unless Ferguson and Dixon have plumb lost their guts, they'll be makin' a Winchester bid for them cattle in the X and Half Moon road irons. Good luck, gambler. You'll need it aplenty."

"You're forgettin' a little debt," said Dominoes.

THEY were sitting their horses at the edge of the herd. Tipton and Dominoes and Bill Ramage. Tom Kerwin and Whiskey Sid had rid-

den around the herd and were a hundred yards away and riding toward them. Whiskey Sid was spurring his horse to a lope and the old trail boss had his hand on his six-shooter.

"Fill your hand, Tipton!" Dominoes spat the words at the owner of the Rail T outfit. His right hand was clear of his six-shooter.

Tipton had been expecting this showdown and his gun slid from its holster like a streak of blued steel.

Dominoes' right hand stayed clear of his six-shooter in its fancy carved holster. It was his left hand that moved. Moved in a swift, short jerk that slid a short, double-barreled Derringer pistol, fastened up his jacket sleeve by an elastic cord, into



his long-fingered hand. The Derringer roared a split second before Tipton's gun spat fire.

The long-barreled six-shooter dropped from Tipton's bullet-smashed hand. Dominoes had shot the cowman's hand through the palm. The heavy .44 Derringer slug had torn through the wooden handle of Tipton's gun and crippled the cattleman's gun hand, spoiling his aim.

"Sidney would have aimed at your belly," said Dominoes. "Like you aimed at mine. And you'd have killed him, because Sidney ain't as fast with a gun as Trail Boss Hank Avery used to be twelve years ago."

While Tipton, his face gray and his cold eyes seared with pain, held his bullet-mangled right hand in his other hand, Dominoes faced Whiskey Sid. There was a thin smile on the gambler's face.

"You can't fight a man whose gun hand has just been shot to pieces, Sidney. Tipton was on the prod and I dehorned him. Anyhow, he'd have shot the belly off you while you were stoppin' his clock. And you'd have been ruined for tonight's meeting with the men who murdered your son Harry. After all, Tipton's only a cow thief. The others are murderers. You'll get your gun exercise before sunrise. Easy does the trick, Sidney. Besides, you've got a daughter waitin' for you back yonder at Tascosa, and I gave her my word you'd be seein' her again. Now put up that smoke pole and tuck in your shirt tail."

"Damn you, Dominoes!" Whiskey Sid's voice was husky. "I mighta knowed you'd trick me!" But there was no real anger in the voice of the old trail boss.

Dominoes fastened the tourniquet around Tipton's wrist and told him to ride to Tascosa to the doctor.

"I could have killed you, Tipton," Dominoes told the crippled cowman. "But I didn't. I'm giving you a chance to save yourself from going to the pen for dealing in stolen cattle. And a chance to pay me for not killing the man who ruined me twelve years ago. We need those Rail T cowhands of yours to hold this stray herd and fight Ferguson and Dixon when they come with their renegades to wipe us out. String your bets with the law and you may live to buy this stray herd at a fair price and drive 'em across the New Mexico line to your Blue Holes range."

Tipton's hard eyes stared into those of the gambler. He grinned faintly and nodded. "It's a deal, Jack."

COLONEL HUGH TIPTON had called Dominoes by the name by which he had known him when the gambler was called California Jack and was in his prime. Thus, with one word, he gave the gambling man back what he had taken from him twelve years ago: his manhood and his old prestige and the pride that was worth all the money that had ever gone across the gambling table.

"Thanks, colonel." Dominoes' voice was low-toned, husky.

"You've got me over a barrel." Tipton's eyes swung to look squarely at Whiskey Sid now. "I wasn't exactly surprised to learn you was Hank Avery. I always had a hunch you'd show up some day. I got my start from the sale of them Bradded H steers. I'm in shape now to write you a check for them cattle and—"

"You damned thievin' snake!" The old trail boss' voice was harsh as a crow's. "You ain't got enough cattle on your stolen range ner

money enough in the bank to buy back what you stole from me with your rotgut booze and your marked cards! You made a damned tramp out o' me. You sunk me plumb to the botton. And when you heard that a Ranger named Harry Avery was comin' to git you, you hired Jute Ferguson and Dead-eye Dixon to murder him. It's a-comin' back to me now. The talk I heard you make with 'em one night months ago when I was sleepin' off a bad drunk in Mike Quinn's snake room. My mind's part gone, but it clears up sometimes and it's clear now and you still got a left hand to hold a gun. My gun is goin' to be in my left hand right now and by—"



Tipton's left hand had closed suddenly over the splintered butt of his gun. He and Whiskey Sid shot at the same moment and the roar of the two guns blended.

They were both standing on the ground facing one another. Tipton's long legs buckled at the knees and his head sagged forward as he fell. The old trail boss kept thumbing back the hammer of his six-shooter and pulling the trigger, and every lead slug was thudding into Tipton's falling body. Then Whiskey Sid's gun was empty and there was a thin spiral of bluish smoke curling from the long barrel of the six-shooter as he stood swaying on his bowed legs, his steel-blue eyes blazing, a widening red smear of blood staining his old flannel shirt just below his right shoulder.

"Bill," he said, his bearded lips twisting in a sort of grin, "you and Dominoes will have to play my hand out. But I done got the he-wolf like I always aimed to when the sign was right. Now you boys skin off my shirt and wrap a rag around this damn shoulder and I'll ride on to Tascosa and see that young un of mine. Wipe that scairt look off your face, Dominoes. That damn cow thief never could shoot as good as he bragged."

It was the only time Bill ever heard Dominoes laugh. He cursed the old trail boss affectionately as he and Bill bandaged the second bullet wound in Whiskey Sid's shoulder. It was a clean hole and had missed the old cowhand's lungs, but the slug had broken the collarbone.

Colonel Hugh Tipton was dead. Dominoes took off his jacket and covered the dead cowman's face.

"The Cattle King of the Canadian," he said softly, with a trace of something like regret in his voice, "died wearin' his rawhide crown!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE RAIL T RALLIES

SOME Rail T cowpunchers had heard the shooting and came riding up at a long lope. Ranger Tom Kerwin indicated Tipton's bullet-riddled body with a grim nod of his head.

"Colonel Tipton is dead, men. He would have gone over the road for a life stretch in the pen, lawyers or no lawyers, if he hadn't died with his boots on and his gun a-smokin'. The law has claimed this stray herd and I'm deputizin' the Rail T cowhands to hold it. You'll be wise if you string along with the law. I'm ramroddin' the Rail T outfit right now. Drift that drive of cattle you've got a few miles and turn 'em loose. The outfit stays camped on the Canadian. Ketch fresh horses and every man in the outfit goes on night guard. Take Tipton's dead body to camp and bury it there. If any Rail T man pulls out to throw in with Jute Ferguson or Dead-eye Dixon, that man is outlawed and will be shot on sight. That's all. Load Tipton's dead body on his horse."

The Rail T cowpunchers took it silently. They had remained loyal to Tipton while he was alive, and even now that the gaunt old cowman was dead they held their respect for a man who had worked lone-handed against all manner of odds to become Cattle King of the Canadian. They knew Colonel Tipton for just what he had always been—a hard, ruthless, treacherous cowman who stopped at nothing to gain his ends. He had ruled them with a six-shooter and Winchester, had paid them fighting wages, and he had stood between them and the law when they fought for the Rail T outfit.

They bore no love for this big, black-eyed Texas Ranger. They were resenting his authority. It would take more than threats or the glitter of a Ranger badge to change their fighting hearts. Every man in the Rail T outfit had, somewhere along his back trail, broken the laws of Texas. They had every reason in the world right now to distrust Ranger Tom Kerwin.

But Tom Kerwin was big and tough and sure of himself. He had been told that one Texas Ranger was better than a whole troop of U. S. cavalry. The man had no fear in his big make-up and he stood ready to fight any kind of odds that piled up against him. His Ranger badge was new and he lacked the quiet authority that grizzled veterans in the Texas Rangers acquired with long service.

Bill Ramage had ridden with men like these Rail T cowboys, and he felt the same sort of resentment that now made them hard-eyed and grimly silent. But there was nothing Bill could do or say to offset the sort of belligerent attitude Ranger Tom Kerwin was taking. The Rail T men were eying the Ranger badge he had pinned to his flannel shirt at Tom Kerwin's suggestion when Bill had started to hand Harry Avery's badge to Whiskey Sid. So Bill sat his horse uneasily and tried to think of something he could say or do to keep those half dozen Rail T men from starting a ruckus or from riding away and throwing in with Jute Ferguson and Dead-eye Dixon.

Whiskey Sid had ridden out of sight, headed for Tascosa. Tom Kerwin had given the Rail T men no explanation of Tipton's killing. The big Ranger was stubborn and high-handed and right now he was travel-

ing on his toughness and the authority of his badge.

It was Dominoes who eased the tension. The gambler savvied these men and they all knew by now that he was the California Jack of Mosquero whom Tipton had double-crossed. And every man of them had known before the herd was half worked for strays that Whiskey Sid was Hank Avery, the trail boss who had lost the Bradded H trail herd to Tipton twelve years ago. They savvied Whiskey Sid and Dominoes, and now, when the little white-haired gambler removed his shabby, blood-stained jacket from the dead man's face and spoke in a toneless voice, they listened.

HANK AVERY and the colonel fought 'er out fair and square, boys. I thought I had 'em ready to smoke the peace pipe, but there was too much between 'em to settle any other way. Tipton smashed me, but before he died we buried the hatchet. I made a dicker with him for you boys to hold these cattle and lend a hand if Ferguson and Dixon made a bid for 'em. I reckon Tipton would want it like that. But that's up to you. And somehow I think it would sort of ease the colonel's last crossin' if I went along with you boys now and said a word or two when we plant him. I knew Hugh Tipton better than any of you ever knew him. So if it's agreeable to you—

"Hell, yes," said one of the Rail T men who seemed to be a sort of straw boss. "Come along, Dominoes. I heard the colonel say this mornin', when you was cuttin' them strays, that you was the slickest cowhand he'd ever seen ride a cuttin' horse into a herd. It'd tickle the ol' he-wolf to know you feel thataway. You're welcome."

So the Cattle King of the Cana-

dian was buried at sunset on the banks of the river he claimed. The Rail T men stood by the grave with bared heads and a tightness in their throats as the gambler's flat-toned words fell on the silence that was broken by the faint sound of cattle bawling in the distance. And Dominoes' words found a way into the hearts of those tough cowhands whose sentiment is roughly garbed and deeply buried. And because Dominoes was one of them, he knew what to say at the grave of an enemy who had died according to his light and theirs.

Dusk was thickening into darkness when Dominoes rode back to the herd with every man in the Rail T outfit. They were riding fresh horses and they fetched fresh mounts for Bill Ramage and the Ranger.

"Take off that Ranger badge, Ramage," said the Rail T straw boss with a friendly grin. "It don't win you nothin'. Dominoes told us your record. We ain't takin' orders from that big hunk of Ranger meat, and if he takes Dominoes' advice he'll lope on back to Tascosa where he belongs. We've worked for Colonel Tipton too long to be horned around by ary badge polisher. But the colonel would be shore a-twistin' and a-turnin' in his grave if us boys let Jute Ferguson and Dead-eye Dixon steal back these longhorns. Shove that Ranger badge in your pocket, Bill. It shines in the moonlight and somebody might take a shot at it by mistake."

Bill nodded. He unpinned the badge. The Rail T straw boss rode on. Bill rode around the herd that was slowly and reluctantly bedding down. He met Tom Kerwin and halted.

"If I was you," Bill told the Ranger, "I'd hit the trail for town. Us fellers kin hold this herd."

"That's what your pardner, Dominoes, told me," said Tom Kerwin, his voice surly and harsh. "I'm beginnin' to wonder just how far a man kin trust either of you. This Dominoes is a smooth customer. And the records show that you've handled more than your share of wet cattle down in the Van Horn country. I'm pretty well convinced you didn't kill Harry Avery, but I wouldn't put it past you and Dominoes to drift this herd across the New Mexico line."

IF that's the way you feel about it, big un, polish that badge and flash 'er high, wide and handsome," Bill said flatly. "You don't set a horse like a cowpuncher and you handle cattle like a pilgrim. What did you do for a livin' before you joined the Rangers?"

"United States cavalry," Tom Kerwin answered proudly. "Second lieutenant. And I worked my way up from a buck private in the rear rank. I'd have stayed in if it hadn't been for the lousy way the West Pointers treat a man who's come up from the ranks. I don't claim to be bronc-ridin' cowboy. Man huntin' is my game, mister. And unless I'm deaf, dumb and blind there isn't a man in this whole outfit that couldn't be convicted for rustling if proper evidence could be brought into court."

"You're right, Ranger. We're a pack of law sinners. But the sign ain't right for a greenhorn Ranger to be tellin' us of our sins. You wouldn't understand it, but these Rail T cowhands are still workin' for Colonel Hugh Tipton. And if you've got a lick of sense in that hard skull of yours you'll head for Tascosa on a high lope."

Bill rode on. He met Dominoes and they rode around the herd together. Dominoes said that the

Rail T men wouldn't shoot the Ranger, but that the straw boss was spoiling to whip hell out of the big son.

The breeze had died down at sunset and the air was sultry. Thunderheads were piling up over the skyline that flashed with yellowish streaks of heat lightning. There was the distant roll of thunder that warned them of an electrical storm. The cattle sensed it and the herd was stubborn about bedding down. The cattle had been bunched all day and hadn't grazed and they had watered bad. The leaders were walk bawling and restless. Some of the big steers were hooking peevishly at those of more laggard nature that had lain down on the bed ground. The herd was going to be hell to hold, Bill told Dominoes, when the storm broke.

"And that stacks the cards in favor of Ferguson and Dixon and their renegades. Hell's goin' to pop before third-guard time at midnight."

CHAPTER IX RUSTLERS' FINISH

CHAIN lightning ripped apart the thick black cloud that shrouded the stars and moon. It struck the middle of the bedded herd and the thunder crashed with it, and it was that same split second that three thousand longhorn Texas steers were on their feet and running. The earth trembled as if caught in the gigantic grip of an earthquake. Black darkness was split by white, blinding light. The rain came in a solid sheet. Hell tore loose there on the banks of the Canadian. The stampede was on!

Jute Ferguson, Dead-eye Dixon and Pete Loveless had spent the day watching the two united trail herds being cut. A renegade Rail T man

had fetched them the news at sundown about the killing of Tipton and all that had happened during the day. And when darkness came the renegades had scattered in a circle and closed in slowly. Jute Ferguson and Dead-eye Dixon, counting on the storm, gave their men orders to lay back till it broke, then ride in pairs and kill Bill Ramage, Dominoes and the Ranger on sight and to kill any Rail T men that got in their way. They were to let the cattle drift and scatter. Cattle could be gathered again. But dead men couldn't come back to life. The law had come to the Canadian in spite of Colonel Tipton. It was up to the renegades to wipe out every damned man holding that herd of stolen stray steers.

Ferguson, Dixon and Loveless rode together. Three guns were better than one, Jute told them grimly. It was kill or be killed, and the devil grab the man who was slow on the trigger!

They were together when that lightning struck the herd. Luck gave them the breaks. The bulk of the herd stampeded away from them and headed away from the river. No man alive knows what makes a herd of cattle stampede in any one certain direction. And may God help the cowboy and his horse that are caught in the path of the stampede.

Bill and Dominoes spurred their horses to a dead run away from the herd. It was rushing past them, a swift-moving sea of tossing horns. Steers lost their footing and went down and were trampled to death beneath the cloven hoofs of other steers. The wild bawling of crippled cattle mingled with the thunder of the hoofs and the crash of lightning and the sickening cracking of clashing horns torn from their roots. Mud was underfoot and the

rain was dropping in a solid sheet, driven by a hard wind that swept the flat country with sudden fury.

"Ordered by Colonel Tipton!" yelled Dominoes. The storm whipped his voice into Bill's ears as they rode for their lives to get clear of the edge of the passing stampede.

Then the crack of guns sounded through the din. The renegades had timed their attack and the Rail T men were threatened by double danger.

Bill saw Tom Kerwin not more than a hundred feet behind him. Saw the man's white, set, scared face in the white glare of the lightning. The Ranger was shocked and bewildered, caught in his first stampede, and was fighting his horse. Steers that broke away from the edge of the running herd were passing in front and behind him. He was almost clear of the herd, but the steers running in front of him confused him and he was trying to head his horse back. But the horse was fighting to get its head and run.

BILL shouted something to Dominoes and reined his horse around. Dominoes cursed him for a fool and followed him back into that thundering hell trap.

Bill reached Tom Kerwin just in time to head him off. He shoved his horse alongside the Ranger's mount. Kerwin saw him and yelled something at him. Bill yelled at the man to give his horse its head, but Kerwin was too rattled to understand. Bill reached out and yanked the split-ear headstall from the horse and yanked the reins from Kerwin's grip. He slapped the horse across the rump with the bridle reins. Then Dominoes was flanking him and they hazed the Ranger and his horse clear of the edge of the stampede. A few scattered steers raced past them.

The crash of lightning and thunder dinned in their ears with deafening ferocity. The lightning flashes blinded their eyes.

Kerwin's horse, crazed with fear and fresher than the hard-ridden horses carrying Bill and Dominoes, tore off into the lightning-riven night. Bill and Dominoes, clear of the stampede, were pulling up a little. Then Dominoes yelled and pointed with his six-shooter.

Three riders were coming toward them at a long trot, guns in their hands. The glare of the lightning showed their faces. Bill recognized Pete Loveless. He saw a short, heavy-set man with a black patch over one eye. Flanking him was a tall, lanky man that he guessed was Jute Ferguson.

Ranger Tom Kerwin's spooked horse was headed straight for the three riders. Kerwin had no bridle reins to check the horse's mad run. He was hanging to the saddlehorn with both hands, too scared to let go. The lightning had struck so close to him that it had shocked his senses, numbed his brain. The man's one and only thought was to cling to the saddlehorn till his horse played out or fell with him.

The three renegades sighted Tom Kerwin. Perhaps they saw the glint on the metal badge the young Ranger wore so arrogantly pinned to his chest. Anyway, they all three shot at him. Tom Kerwin's horse caught one of the slugs between the eyes and somersaulted. The Ranger was thrown clear and lay in a motionless, shapeless bulk in the mud.

Bill and Dominoes jerked their carbines and opened up. The range was still about a hundred yards and too far for six-shooters. The three renegades shot at the Ranger's motionless hulk as they rode past. Then they charged at a dead run for Bill

and Dominoes, their guns spewing fire.

HERE comes our wolf meat, Dominoes!" Bill twisted his head sideways to yell at the little gambler. He saw Dominoes sway drunkenly in the saddle and pitch sideways to the ground.

A bullet struck Bill's horse in the chest and the game-hearted horse stumbled and went down. Bill kicked his feet clear of the stirrups and landed on his knees in the mud. He dropped his carbine and jerked his six-shooter. His dying horse Jay on its side, legs kicking. Bill rolled in behind the dead horse, and as the three rustlers rode him down he lay flat until they rode closer. Their bullets thudded into his dead horse. One tore through the saddle cantle and grazed his cheek. Then they were almost on top of him and he was shooting with swift desperation. His first bullet struck Jute Ferguson in the face. He shot at Dead-eye Dixon twice as the one-eyed renegade rode past him, his horse spurred to a run, his six-shooter spitting flame. Dixon reeled in his saddle and rode on.

Loveless lay low along his horse's neck. His gun streaked fire and a bullet thudded into Bill's shoulder. Bill shot twice and his gun hammer clicked down on an empty shell. He dropped his six-shooter and grabbed up his saddle gun again.

Loveless had ridden past and was having trouble pulling up his horse. Then he sighted Dominoes, who was sitting up and trying to hold his six-shooter in both hands. The white flashes of lightning showed Bill the vivid picture. Dominoes' face was a mask of bright-red blood and he was crouched on one knee, wiping the blood from his eyes with one hand. He was blinded by blood and

couldn't see Loveless riding at him, shooting wildly.

Bill rested the barrel of the carbine along the side of his dead horse, aimed it at Loveless, and pulled the trigger. He missed. He levered another cartridge into the breech and shot again. Loveless jerked backward in the saddle and reined his horse around and Bill shot again. This time his bullet hit a vital spot and Loveless let go the bridle reins and grabbed at his belly with both hands. His horse lunged forward and the big, tough top hand of the Half Moon was thrown. Bill saw him land heavily.

Then the lightning flash was gone and there was blackness and Bill's eyes seemed filled with a million jets of white fire. The thunder dinned in his ears. Then it rumbled into silence and Bill groped in the mud for his six-shooter and found it. He reloaded the gun with fumbling, muddy fingers. He had seen Dead-eye Dixon whirl his horse around and ride back like a drunken man and then slide from his saddle and lie on the ground. Dixon was badly wounded. Gotten off his horse to die, like as not, Bill reckoned.

Then in the darkness Bill thought he could hear a man's labored breathing, but he couldn't be sure. His ears ached from the rumble of thunder and crash of stampeding cattle. His eyes still were blinded by the white glare of lightning. His face was ripped and he tasted blood in his mouth and his left shoulder throbbed with pain.

He heard a man's rattling cough and it sounded almost in his ear. That, he knew, would be Dead-eye Dixon. Bill rolled over and kicked out with both feet. One of his feet struck something and a gun exploded almost in his face. He felt the sting of burning powder in his

face as he pulled the trigger, shooting blindly at the gun flash. He kept shooting and the man's gun flashed once, and then he heard the rattling cough and it died in a grisly death rattle.

Blood filled Bill's mouth and throat and he coughed and gagged and a weak wave of nausea swept over him as his senses reeled. He fought back that nausea and weak faintness that kept engulfing him like a black smothering wave. Then he was too weak to struggle against it. There was a humming, drumming, pulsing sound in his ears and a sort of paralysis came over him and he lay there senseless in the slimy mud that was mixed with spilling blood. The drizzling rain washed the blood and muck from his bruised, bullet-grazed face. The black cloud was breaking and the stars showed in patches, and the round white moon came out as Bill Ramage's head and shoulders lay pillowed on the neck of his dead horse.

OLD-TIMERS claim of Tascosa's Doc that he was the best sawbones that ever fished a bullet out of a cowboy's hide or set a busted bone. If Doc had a name they never learned it. Like Whiskey Sid and Dominoes, he had drifted out of nowhere to the tough little cow town of Tascosa and stayed there. He asked no fees and his office was the White Elephant. And he was the one man in Tascosa who had no enemies.

Doc belittled his own skill by saying that a tough cowhand needed no more than one chance in a thousand to recover from a bad dose of bullet-lead poisoning.

It was Doc who patched up Dominoes, Whiskey Sid and Bill Ramage. A bullet had creased Dominoes' scalp and temporarily paralyzed his

optic nerves. When the bandages were removed in a few weeks, the gambler's eyesight was as sharp as ever.

Whiskey Sid was left with a stiff shoulder that bothered him a bit when the weather changed.

Bill Ramage was given that one chance in a thousand. He had been shot through the cheek and shoulder and neck and it was weeks before he forked a horse again. But when he opened his eyes and saw Nona Avery's face and heard her say that she was going to ride herd on him till he was back in his saddle, he knew that he was going to live.

Ranger Tom Kerwin, he learned, when Dominoes was allowed to visit with him, had been shot in two or three places, but none of the bullet wounds had been dangerous. The big Ranger, Dominoes explained, must have been creased by the lightning bolt that struck the herd that night, because his hair had been singed and the soles of his boots burned as if they'd been on a bed of hot coals and the nails in the boot soles had left burned spots on the soles of Tom Kerwin's feet. The man had been dazed by lightning shock. He had gone back to San Angelo to clear Bill Ramage and to have Dominoes legally appointed chief brand inspector for the Cattle Raisers' Association.

The old indictment against Hank Avery was being marked off the records and the old trail boss and Bill Ramage were being appointed joint receivers of the Rail T outfit. They were buying the stray herd at present market price, the money to be sent to the owners of the stray brands. The Rail T straw boss had shaken hands with Ranger Tom Kerwin when the latter told him to ramrod the Rail T till Bill Ramage and

Hank Avery took it over. Kerwin had told him to keep his crew of fighting cowhands. There wasn't much danger of the law ever laying a hand on them, he said, because Bill Ramage was a sort of Texas Ranger. Bill was keeping the badge that had belonged to Harry Avery.

"The only Texas Ranger in the Lone Star State," Tom Kerwin had told Bill Ramage in a letter that inclosed his Ranger papers, "that packs his own bench warrant."

Bill Ramage owed his life to Doc and to the skillful nursing of Nona Avery. And he was not the first nor the last man to come back from the shadowed Valley of Death to marry the woman whose voice and gentle hand and love had kept him here on this earth.

On the day that the bandages were

removed from Dominoes' eyes and Bill was able to sit up in bed, Nona brought in a small table and moved the two beds of her patients close together with the table between. Whiskey Sid fetched a chair and Nona brought a deck of cards.

"One more chair," Bill told her. "Four kin play coon-can. And you kin learn—"

Nona shook her head. This game belonged only to the three partners, Bill and Whiskey Sid and Dominoes. Her eyes were a little misted with unshed tears as she backed out of the room and shut the door. She had the kind of savvy it takes to make a cowman's wife.

"Shuffle 'em, Sidney," said Dominoes. "You cut 'em, Bill. I'll deal 'em. Bet 'em high and sleep in the street!"

THE END.

THE 'POSSUM MOVES WEST

FOR some mysterious reason two undesirable denizens of the Far West, the coyote and the black widow spider, have been steadily moving east. Lately coyotes have been killed within twenty-five miles of Washington, D. C., and within a hundred miles of New York City—more than a thousand miles east of their original range. Black widow spiders have been reported from New Hampshire and Connecticut, far east and north of the land of their origin.

Equally mysterious is the unexplained appearance of the opossum on the Pacific Coast. The original habitat of this species is the South-east, and up until twenty-five or thirty years ago they were unknown west of the timber country of east Texas. It still can't be definitely determined whether there are any in the long stretch of plains, deserts, and mountains between the Texas woodland and the California Sierras, but they have become so numerous along the California coast that in some districts they are positively a nuisance.

A cowboy in the Salinas Valley recently reported that he saw fifty-two while riding twenty miles on a moonlight night. A housewife in Palo Alto complained to the police that there was a litter of "pigs" under her house. Officers came and routed out twelve 'possums. Just the other day one was found nestling in a packing box in a Van Nuys clothing store.

Their presence in such numbers seems to be due to the fact that they are not hunted in California, and the native trappers haven't learned to prey on them.



HOT-LEAD HARVEST

BY JOHN COLOHAN

A BAND was playing somewhere when Red Mike Devlin came out of Dr. Tibbee's office, and for an instant the big man from the Flattop range pulled up in the doorway between office and waiting room, listening to the music. At his back the doctor laid a hand lightly on his shoulder.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have spoken, Mike," the old physician said gently. "I thought you ought to know. Sometimes, when a man is forewarned—"

Red Mike Devlin nodded, and on his sun-scorched face the smile was

careless and serene. "Yes. I'm obliged to you, doctor. It's something I'm glad to know."

He turned then, hearing a sound behind him, and watched a lanky, red-headed youth in Levis and bright flannel shirt untangle himself from a chair in a corner of the waiting room. Erect, the boy was all arms and legs and freckles. Mike Devlin frowned at him.

"Ailing, Bub?"

"Just waiting for you, Mike," his son said.

Mike Devlin shook hands with the medico. "Ride out and take pot-

luck with us sometime, doc," he said. "And—I'm obliged to you."

Below, the long, dusty street was filled with people, the hitch racks lined with horses. This was Pioneer's Day in Encinas, and folks from a hundred miles around had come to town for the celebration. Red Mike Devlin and his son stood for a moment caught up in an eddy in the crowd. The boy spoke quietly, but there was purpose in his voice.

"I'm higher than you, Mike," he said. "I'm wider. I'll lay that yellow horse of mine against the sorriest jughead in your outfit that I outweigh you ten pounds on the hoof. I'm seventeen years old, and I shave regularly twice a week. And—you still call me *Bub!*"

Mike Devlin turned, stared at his son. And the big cowman saw, with some surprise, that this boy of his was dealing in simple truth. The kid was taller, broader, would outweigh him. For an instant, here in this crowd-packed street, the man's thoughts drifted. Only yesterday, it seemed, this gangling youth had been a baby in rompers, playing in dust in front of the log cabin Mike Devlin had built the year that he and Nellie had been married. The cabin was gone now, its place taken by a big ranchhouse. The baby was almost a man.

"I've always called you *Bub,*" Mike said. "Didn't know you objected. What would you suggest?"

The boy grinned sheepishly. "If you wanted, I reckon you could call me Mr. Devlin. Or Leonard, which happens to be my name, in case you've forgotten. Or Buck, which is the handle most folks around here use. Call me anything, Mike—anything but *Bub!*"

"I'll call you Buck, hereafter," his father said. "There's a fine, up-standing name."

"It's better," the boy said. He hesitated. "Bill Moline told me to find you. Told me to tell you that Mose Jurgen and his whole outfit's in town—and that Mose is drinking and making war talk. Said tell you to keep your eyes open."

Mike Devlin nodded. "I'll do that."

But the warning was unnecessary. For a long time now, in the matter of Mose Jurgen, he had been keeping his eyes wide open. Jurgen's Square S spread on the Flattop tied into the Devlin Four Bar.

Mose Jurgen operated a big outfit, an outfit top-heavy with tough hands, and over the years more than one of Jurgen's neighbors had suspected that stolen beef might furnish the payoff for the Square S crew. No one had ever dug up evidence to bolster the suspicion until, about three months ago, Red Mike Devlin of the Four Bar had lost twenty-odd head of yearling steers at a stroke. With blood in his eye, Mike had gone out for evidence. And he had got it.

"Jurgen's out on bail now," Buck remarked. "He comes up for trial next week. He's headed for the penitentiary. And he knows you're the man who's sending him. And he's a tough hand, Mike."

A strange thought touched Mike Devlin for a moment, so that he turned to study this tall youth who was his son. "By any chance," he inquired, "are you riding herd on me, Buck? Looking out for the old man, I mean—or something like that?"

Young Buck shifted his feet uneasily, face turning a darker red. "No. Only you're so blamed bull-headed, Mike—"

His father put a hand on the boy's arm. "Forget it, Buck. A few drinks won't make Mose Jurgen tougher

than he was before. I'll keep an eye out for him. Go find your mother and buy her an ice-cream soddy."

BUT it was with a little glow of pride that Red Mike watched his big son work through the crowd. Half the population of Park County seemed milling aimlessly on wooden sidewalks. Men in boots and spurs, women in holiday finery, kids with shining faces, all come to town for the festivities. Men were roping off a section of Main Street for the rodeo events of the afternoon. Red Mike Devlin, in no mood for a holiday, drifted aimlessly. He wanted a place where a man could do a quiet bit of thinking, and he knew he would find no such place here in this town today.

And, from the crowd, a hand reached out to touch Mike Devlin's shoulder. He turned and found himself looking into Mose Jurgen's jet-black eyes. They were in a crowd, and yet it was as though these two men who had been enemies so long stood alone on a desert island. Mose Jurgen was braced on big legs, and a man stood on either side of him as though ready to hold him erect if necessary. Jurgen's mouth sagged open, and when he spoke his voice was thick.

"Hi, Devlin," he said. "Hear we're going to have some neighbors on the Flattops."

Mike Devlin's hand had drifted gunward instinctively. Now it stayed there. Drunk or sober, Mose Jurgen was dangerous. And the two riders who flanked Jurgen were cold sober. Red Mike Devlin knew both of them—Link Larson, the gaunt gunhand who was Jurgen's second in command on the Square S and Joe Dodge, one of the riders.

"Neighbors?" Mike said. He couldn't figure out this play.

"Nesters," said Jurgen, his thick voice rasping. He rubbed a hand across the thin slit that was his mouth. "Nesters, b'gosh! Moving in under the Stockade! How do you like that, Devlin?"

Red Mike Devlin shrugged. Mose Jurgen might be drunk. The smell of liquor was on the man, and his mouth sagged, but there was no sign of drunkenness in the beady eyes looking out under the heavy brows. Those eyes were bright and intent and coldly sober.

"I don't know a damn thing about it, Jurgen," Mike said curtly. A little ring of spectators had grown around them. Mike broke through, to leave Mose Jurgen and his two riders standing in the center of the sidewalk.

The encounter left a bad taste in Mike's mouth. He had the feeling that, drunk or otherwise, Mose Jurgen had planned the meeting deliberately and for some purpose of his own. And Mike Devlin was wary. He had enough evidence to send Jurgen to the penitentiary. Mose Jurgen knew that.

"Nesters," Mike Devlin muttered. "There were no nesters under the Stockade two days ago."

But he made his mind up suddenly, turning toward the Red Horse Barn where he had left his horse. The town was full of his friends and most of them he seemed to meet along the way, so that it took the better part of an hour to cover the distance. But presently Mike Devlin reached the stable. While he waited for the hostler to bring forth his mount he saw Link Larson shove out through the swinging doors of a saloon across the street, snake a mount from the saloon hitch rack and quit town in a rolling cloud of dust.

The event made hardly a mark on

Mike Devlin's mind at the moment. Later, when the jaws of a trap were closing in on him, he was to have occasion to recall Link Larson's hasty departure from the town.

SO Red Mike Devlin turned his back on a celebrating town, and, some three hours later, pulled his mount down on a flat knoll of level land, with the blue-rock walls of the Stockade towering on either side of him and a straight line of new cedar posts laid out before his eyes. A lean, wasp-waisted man in Levis was stringing barb wire along the posts.

Beyond the wire a covered wagon stood at anchor. A few feet away three hobbled horses grazed in knee-deep bunch grass. The man in Levis had laid off work at Devlin's approach, and now he stood watching the big cowman with cool, appraising eyes. The scar of an old knife cut made a dirty, crescent-shaped mark through the stubble of beard upon one cheek. He didn't look like a nester.

Mike Devlin glanced at a cedar post planted solidly in the center of a well-marked road and climbed down from his horse. "Howdy," he said, and cut through formalities. "You'll have to change that fence, mister."

The scar-faced man scowled. "You're Red Mike Devlin?"

"I'm Devlin."

"Then listen to me, Devlin," the man said harshly. "I was warned of you. I'm homesteading this land. I filed on it plumb legal and paid my fee, and I'm holding it come hell or come high water! And damn the range-hog cowman that tires to stop me!"

And men who knew Mike Devlin best would have been amazed at the mildness of his reply. "You miss the point, my friend," he said. "You

can homestead from here to Canada for all of me, and welcome. But you're laying this fence across a public road, and you can't do that in this country, legal or otherwise. In another week I'll be moving beef onto summer range, which happens to be that mesa just behind you. Cows can't climb fences. If this road is blocked with barb wire then, somebody's going to get hurt."

"It'll be blocked."

Still Devlin's voice was soft. "You know, we might compromise this thing with a gate and a right of way."

"Damned if we will!" the nester said. "I'll have nobody's cows grazing across my land."

So there it was. There had been, before, a chance that the man was what he seemed to be, but now that chance was gone. Now, beyond all doubt, Mike Devlin knew that this lean jasper with the scarred face was a man with a gun for rent. And even had he not been warned beforehand he would have known that Mose Jurgen was the man behind the game.

And suddenly the gunman's hand flicked toward his Colt. "Mister," he said, "you climb on that bronc and drift. I'll feel safer when you're gone."

It was gasoline on flame. The nester's hand was on gun butt, but his iron was still in the leather when Devlin's Colt flipped upward in a draw that left Scar-face staring.

The gun hung level in Devlin's hand, and his voice was ice: "You asked for this," he said. "Throw that gun away!"

The nester's gun came out of holster, dropped in dust.

"Now," said Devlin, "we'll start tearing up some fence."

And a voice snapped like a whip-lash: "Drop the gun, Devlin!"

Mike Devlin recognized that voice immediately. Link Larson's voice!

And for a single moment nothing happened. The man with the scarred face was frozen in his tracks, his jaws still gaping wide. Mike Devlin stood still, feet braced widely, the scar-faced gunman before him, the voice behind him. And in that instant the pieces of the puzzle fell into place: Mose Jurgen stopping him in town today, Link Larson riding out ahead of him, this scar-faced gunman working on a barb-wire fence—all of the details of this trap into which he had walked with open eyes.

And now Link Larson was behind him, which meant that Larson must have been hiding in the covered wagon at his back. Mike Devlin made a picture in his mind of that wagon as he had noted it, with the rear end facing toward this knoll, with canvas flaps looped open.

"This is the last time, Devlin! Drop your gun!"

BUT Red Mike Devlin didn't drop his gun. He whirled instead, and he saw the picture as he had visioned it beforehand, saw gaunt Link Larson, head and shoulders leaning out of the back end of the covered wagon, saw the rifle in Larson's hand. Smoke spat at him as he whirled, and he heard the whining lead, and he flung himself aside in a long leap out of line with the roaring gun.

Mike Devlin had two ideas in his mind: The first, to make Larson miss; the second, to place the scar-faced gunman now at his back in the line of fire on the chance that Larson might hold his lead. But Larson, on his knees in the wagon, fired again before Devlin could get his gun around.

Devlin felt flame touch an arm and he fired twice at the man framed

in canvas. His gun was high for another shot when he saw the rifle slip from Link Larson's hand. The gunman pitched forward and dangled head down from the wagon. And, so swiftly had events unreeled, Mike Devlin whirled in time to catch the scar-faced gunman in the very act of diving for the gun in the white dust at his feet.

"Let it lie!" Devlin warned. He crossed the open space, picked up the gun and shoved it in his waistband. The nester was on hands and knees, staring up at him. Mike Devlin looked at him, and then beyond him, and his face broke in a twisted grin. The game wasn't over yet. The game was just beginning. Not two hundred yards away men were coming out of a wooded canyon backed up against the rock walls of the Stockade. Half a dozen men, on foot, with rifles in their hands!

"A trap!" Mike Devlin said. "So Mose Jurgen built a trap!"

Mose Jurgen had built a trap for him, and baited it with a nester, and even now, when the jaws of the trap were closing in, Mike Devlin could find time to admire the smooth handiwork of that murder plan. A drunken talk in town by a man quite sober, a gun-handy nester working on a barb-wire fence, Link Larson posted in a covered wagon to shoot him down from behind.

That part of the plan had missed. Rather, Link Larson had missed, had missed twice with a rifle at twenty feet, and now Link Larson was dangling face down from the back end of a wagon bed and blood was making a little dark pool beneath his head. But Mose Jurgen and his gunman crew were closing in to finish the job, with Red Mike Devlin hemmed in between the narrow Stockade walls and at their mercy.

So they thought. Mike Devlin

played it otherwise, taking the gambling chance. With not a glance at the scar-faced gunman still on his knees, Devlin leaped for his horse. He hit the saddle, whirled the big black horse, sent him catapulting straight toward that group of men closing in on him afoot. He picked Mose Jurgen for his meat and sent the great black horse straight at the Square S man in thundering charge.

Lead smashed at him; lead plucked at his clothing, sang around his head. He rode on, unscathed. Rode on, hell-bent, until the Square S crowd broke before the unexpected onslaught, before that vision of a red-headed fighting man charging down on them with guns flaming in his hands. They broke and raced for cover before that madman charge.

Mike Devlin had picked Mose Jurgen for a target and almost did succeed in riding down the Square S boss. Just in time did Jurgen leap clear of flying hoofs. And then Mike Devlin was through them and beyond, with the black horse running fast and free and bullets whining on all sides of him.

Ahead of Devlin a lone horseman was laying a straight line of dust across the flat. Minutes later Devlin saw sunlight gleaming on the yellow hide of a horse, and then he recognized the rider. They met between the towering Stockade walls, Mike Devlin and his son. Mike Devlin reined his horse down.

"Now what in hell?" he growled. "I thought I left you celebrating back in town?"

Young Buck Devlin grinned, whirled his palomino horse. He seemed to have gathered the facts of the situation at a glance. "I had a hunch, Mike," he said. "Mebbe we better ride. Those gents are coming on."

Mike Devlin glanced back over his

shoulder. Mose Jurgen's crowd were in saddle now. Devlin saw something else. He saw blood along his leg and on his boots, and then he saw the little spurting stream of blood staining through the dark hide of his horse. Mike Devlin had ridden the bullet gantlet unscathed, but his horse had not fared so well. Even as Devlin saw the bullet hole, the horse began to settle under him.

As the horse went down, Devlin hit the ground and jerked for the short gun in the saddle boot. The Square S men were coming on at gallop, and they were close enough so that he could see the rifles in their hands. He threw the short gun up, fired three shots as fast as he could lever shells into the chamber. Momentarily the charge was broken. Mike looked at his red-headed son.

"Turn that bronc and ride, kid. Ride for help."

"Get up behind me, Mike," the boy said. "This horse can carry both of us."

But Red Mike Devlin knew better. "Do it the way I say, Bub. Ride for Jim Yule's Ladder outfit; it's the closest." Then he shook his head. "No. Jim's in town, at the rodeo, and the whole damn crew with him. Ride for the Lazy L—"

"The L's in town," his son broke in.

"Then ride for town," Mike Devlin said. Bullets were singing around them now. The Square S men, pulled up, were firing from the saddle. "Get Sheriff Mason to come out here and wave his badge."

FOR an instant he thought the boy was going to refuse, but, with lead whining all around, young Buck whirled the yellow horse and turned at a gallop toward the banks of a dry wash some fifty yards away. Even in his preoccupation Mike

Devlin found time to approve the kid's choice of a path, for the gulch would furnish cover from flying bullets until he had ridden out of range. With the boy gone, Mike Devlin looked once at the gulch, and once at a piled-up heap of rocks on a slight eminence just in front of him. Choosing high ground rather than a hole to make his fight, he raced for the rocks.

And there, sprawled flat behind a boulder, Red Mike Devlin gave his whole mind to the business at hand, the grim business of holding off Mose Jurgen and his men long enough for his son to make the ride to town and return with help. Coolly, dispassionately, he weighed his chances. The town was twenty miles away and it was midafternoon now. Half a dozen killers out to lift his scalp. They had to get him to keep Mose Jurgen out of the penitentiary. The chances, Mike Devlin mused ruefully, were not too good.

He lined his six-gun on a rock, fired at a flash of color. Jurgen's crowd had quit their horses. They were coming down on him afoot, spreading out wide and wider, holding to the cover of rocks and brush along the way. Devlin watched with cold attention. Maybe he couldn't hold out. Maybe his number was up, but they'd pay the price before they tagged him with a bullet. Maybe help would come.

And then Mike Devlin heard a sound behind him, and he whirled to see his red-headed son loping across the flat, a rifle in one hand, a six-gun in the other. The boy hit the ground near Mike, slid rifle barrel across a rock, looked at his father, his eyes shining with excitement.

"Tied Pancho in the gulch," young Buck said. "I don't want that horse nicked with any bullets."

Mike Devlin stared at him. "You

tied him in the gulch?" he said. "I thought you were riding for help."

"Too far," Buck declared. "I shoved Pancho hard all the way out and he ain't got so much left. Time I got to town and back again those gents would have your hide pegged out to dry."

Red Mike Devlin struggled with his wrath. "You listen to me, youngster," he said. "You hightail back to that gulch before those gents get organized, and grab that bronc and ride to town. You do it like I say."

His son grinned cheerfully. "I'm sorry, Mike. The answer is no. I'm caught up with my riding for today."

"You listen to me—" began Mike Devlin furiously. But a rifle roared. A bullet dusted rock powder into Mike Devlin's eyes and he jerked his head down like a turtle retreating into its shell. He lifted his head, peered out across the sun-baked flat. Mose Jurgen's men were spreading out, circling for position, taking their time. Devlin threw a shot at a shadowy figure moving behind brush, missed it by feet.

It was a funny thing, Mike Devlin thought suddenly. You could watch a kid grow up; you could play with him and work for him and build all your plans around him; and all the time you might not know very much about the boy. And then, in a matter of minutes, of seconds, you could find out everything you had to know. Everything that really counted.

THE sun crawled across a cloudless sky. Sprawled behind a stony barricade Mike Devlin and his boy watched a killer crew build a ring of death around them. Few shots were fired. Mike Devlin spared lead because he and the boy had only a handful of .30-30 shells between them, and because the distance was

great for six-gun fire. Jurgen's crew held their fire for another reason.

Waiting, watching the ring tighten slowly, inexorably, Mike Devlin had time to admire the cold precision of this plan Mose Jurgen had built to destroy him. Even to day and hour selected—this day that was a holiday in town, when the range would be empty of riders. And he, warned beforehand, had walked blindly into the trap.

A deer fly hummed around his head and landed on his hand and Devlin mashed it into a shapeless blotch of blood. Six feet away, gun thrust out before him, his red-headed son was peering between rocks. The boy looked at his father.

"We can hold 'em off forever, Mike."

Mike Devlin nodded. "Almost."

He knew it wasn't true. This lull in action fooled Mike Devlin not at all; he knew that the Square S men were using the time to gain position, to encircle men already doomed and cut them down with a withering cross-fire of lead. He could follow the progress of the maneuver by chance glimpses of men moving between rocks. In another hour, at most, he and the kid would be surrounded.

A gun roared off to the left and the slug hit the rock about Devlin's head, the bullet whining off in a singing ricochet. Mike Devlin rolled over on his side, found pipe and tobacco, filled the bowl, touched match to the tobacco. Blue smoke rose overhead.

"Dropped in to see Doc Tibbee today," he remarked.

Young Buck glanced at him. "I know."

Devlin puffed at the pipe. "Been having some pains lately," he explained. "Nothing much, just sort o' twinges. I thought it might be

smart to have a talk with doc."

Buck rested his six-gun on a rock, squinted over the sights, squeezed the trigger. The roar of the gun sounded loud in the quiet afternoon. "Missed," he said.

"Doc told me," Mike Devlin continued imperturbably, "that I had heart trouble. Bad. Told me I was living on borrowed time—that I'd go out any day. Like a light."

He had Buck's attention now. The boy was staring at him incredulously. On one freckled cheek was a little patch of alkali dust, and it made the boy's face look gray. "Doc—told you that?" he said.

"It's not so bad as it might be," his father said. "I've lived quite a spell already. The outfit is in good shape, an' your mother will be all right. I was sort o' counting on you to look out for things."

Buck stared at him, said nothing at all. A bullet whined overhead. Mike Devlin rolled over on an elbow.

"I wasn't going to say anything," he said. "Wouldn't now, only this business kind o' complicates things. In a way it's a joke on Mose Jurgen. I mean, him going to all this trouble to kill me when all he had to do was wait. Only, now, we got to think about your mother, Bub. She's got a stake in this."

Buck nodded. "Yes."

His father drove the point home. "In another hour, mebber, those gents will have us surrounded. Nothing we can do then. Now there's that yellow horse of yours, still in the gulch. Still time to ride for help. Way I figure it, we ought to take that chance."

"I see what you're driving at," Buck said.

"Plain horse sense," declared Mike Devlin. "If it was just you and me it might be different. Don't seem

fair to your mother for both of us to stay, not with a horse ready and waiting. Don't make sense."

"No," Buck admitted.

"No," said his father. "And between an old jasper living on borrowed time and a kid just starting out—well, son, I guess there ain't much doubt who ought to do the riding. See what I mean?"

"I see what you mean," his son said harshly. "Only, I won't do it, Mike. I won't pull out and leave you here alone!"

Mike Devlin tapped his pipe against a rock. "You listen to me, Bub. What have I got to lose? What difference does it make to me? A few days, or a month. I'd rather have it this way."

"I won't do it, Mike."

"Mebbe," Mike Devlin said softly, "this is the last thing I'll ever ask of you."

The boy was staring at him. "You want it that way, Mike?"

"That's the way I want it, son."

"O. K." Buck spun in dust and came to his feet so suddenly as to take his father by surprise. Mike Devlin had meant to counsel caution, but the time for warning passed before he could speak. Rifle in hand, Buck Devlin broke from the shelter of the rocks, running like a frightened deer, to hit the edge of the dry wash and go over in a rolling cloud of dust. Not a shot had been fired at him.

And grimly Mike Devlin turned back to the task of fighting off a pack of killers as long as lead held out. The kid was out of it. He was on his way to town, and there would be no pursuit by the Square S crowd so long as Mike Devlin held the fort. He was gone the way Red Mike wanted him to go—swiftly, with no formality of farewell.

TIME crawled, after the boy was gone. It was, Mike Devlin thought, a weary way to die. He could trace the positions of the Square S men by telltale puffs of smoke. Three men spread out across the flat before him; three more working their way carefully along the rubble of rock at the base of the high-walled Stockade. At his right the dry wash swung off at an angle. From his position here in the rocks he had the gulch covered, so that he did not fear attack from that side; but presently the trio working along the Stockade wall would be behind him. Then it would be over.

Mike Devlin filled his pipe again, touched flame to the tobacco. Squinting between rocks he gained a moment's glimpse of a figure dead in front of him, no more than a hundred yards away; and he wasted a precious shot from the .30-30, recognizing the burly shape of Mose Jurgen. He missed, and Jurgen disappeared from sight behind a boulder. Mike Devlin laid the rifle sights in line with the boulder. Smoking placidly, he waited. If he could get one more shot at Mose Jurgen.

He forgot the rest of them, waiting for his chance at the Square S boss. He saw Jurgen's rifle thrust around the boulder, saw the glint of sunlight on the barrel, heard the ping of Jurgen's slug hitting rock beside his head. No sight of the man himself. Mike Devlin held his fire.

Over to his left, one of the trio skirting the Stockade wall opened up with a fusillade of rifle fire. Lead hit a rock at Devlin's side, whined off in a ricochet much too close for comfort. Flat on the ground Devlin held his sights steady, waited for his chance. A steel-jacketed slug exploded rock slivers in his face, started blood flowing in a little stream along one cheek. He wiped

the blood away, waited patiently.

He had Mose Jurgen spotted now. If he could just get one clean shot at Jurgen before he died.

And then Mike Devlin got his shot. It was sudden, surprising, altogether incomprehensible. One moment Mose Jurgen was safely hidden behind his boulder, blasting away at Red Mike Devlin. Then, abruptly, the Square S man was in the open. He had jumped away from his boulder, had leaped high in air as a man might leap who had seated himself on a rattlesnake. He came up squarely into the bead of Mike Devlin's rifle sight and Devlin squeezed the trigger. Mose Jurgen went down like a broken doll. He lay in sunshine, in plain sight, still and unmoving.

And then another of the killer pack, closing in on Mike Devlin, came up from shelter to race across the flat as though a prairie fire had broken out beneath him. Mike Devlin triggered a shot, missed, and watched the fleeing man disappear from sight in a headlong, sprawling dive.

Surprising happenings! More were to follow, one hard upon another. For even as Mike Devlin stared wondering, a head and a pair of shoulders showed at the edge of the dry wash fifty yards beyond that spot where Mose Jurgen lay in sunlight. A hand waved at Mike Devlin.

"My sainted Aunt Carrie!" Mike Devlin murmured in awe. "The kid! The kid outflanked them!"

Thirty seconds later, with lead flicking at his heels, big Mike Devlin hurled himself over the edge of the wash. Below, on the sandy bottom, Buck Devlin's yellow horse waited placidly. Two minutes later, racing up the gulch, Devlin saw a lone sorrel horse tied to a sagebrush root, and, above the horse, sprawled flat

against the bank, Buck Devlin had a rifle thrust out before him.

MIKE DEVLIN clambered up beside his son. "Well!" he said. And then he stopped. The race up there had left him panting, and, besides, he couldn't seem to find anything to say. His red-headed kid was grinning up at him.

"Did you see Mose Jurgen jump, Mike?"

"Did I see him?" Red Mike stared at his son. "I saw him, Bub. Didn't figure it then; don't yet, for the matter of that. I'm beginning to get an idea." He fixed Buck Devlin with an accusing eye. "I thought you started for town?"

"After the fairy tale, you mean, Mike?"

Mike Devlin's jaw dropped. "Fairy tale?"

"That fairy tale about your heart trouble," Buck said. "You see, Mike, I was in Doc Tibbee's waiting room all the time you was in his office. And the wall is pretty thin. Thin enough so I could hear everything doc was saying. He was warning you that Mose Jurgen was bringing in a gun-fighting crew of nesters. He told you to be careful, but he didn't say a thing about heart trouble."

He looked up at his father challengingly. Mike kept silence. Under the circumstances there seemed little else to do.

"You was bound to get rid of me," Buck went on. "I knew those jaspers had bunched their horses in the gulch, and I figured mebber there was a chance to sneak up the gulch and grab a bronc without them seeing me. Then we could ride away and leave them. That's what I did. I grabbed that sorrel down there and stampeded the rest of their horses."

He glanced up at his father then.

"Only, coming back, I happened to sneak a look over the edge of the gulch and I saw Mose Jurgen crawling around a rock. So I waited. I was behind them, and I had a clean shot at another jasper, but I figured Jurgen was my meat. Then Jurgen started to slide around the rock. I drew a bead on his hip pocket an'—"

"His hip pocket!" Mike Devlin said.

The boy nodded. "That was all I could see. So I pulled down on him and let go."

Devlin recalled Mose Jurgen's leap high in air. "You hit it," he said. His voice was soft, awed. Prone on the bank, he stared out across the sunlit flat, trying to strike a balance. Five men out there yet, five men with guns. And yet the thing was over. The picture had changed completely. He and the boy had

horses now, and those men were afoot. Young Buck had stamped their mounts. And Mose Jurgen was dead.

It was still a bit hard for Mike Devlin to realize. Ten minutes ago he had been fighting for his life. Now it was over. Mose Jurgen was dead, and all that remained for the boy and him was to mount and ride away.

All that had been accomplished by one red-headed boy. His boy!

And Mike Devlin shook his head. "It beats me," Mike Devlin said. "I never did see anything like it, Bub. I don't know how you figured—"

"I'll tell you, then," said young Buck Devlin. His voice was resigned. "I figured that mebber, if everything turned out all right, you might quit calling me *Bub*. And I guess I figured wrong!"

THE END.

WILD CATTLE

"WILD"—that is, ownerless—cattle do not get anything like the public attention accorded to wild horses, yet cattle that take to the brush and shake off the few restraints of civilization that ordinary range life imposes upon them become much wilder than wild horses—more crafty, fiercer, and more dangerous.

One wild herd roams the willow thickets along the Colorado River between Boulder Dam and the ghost town of Hardyville. These cattle were reported to have been seen along the river long before any ranches were established in the adjacent sections of Arizona and Nevada, and old-timers of twenty or thirty years ago claim that they are the descendants of some milk cows belonging to an emigrant train that was attacked by Mojave Indians while it was making a crossing at the Colorado in the 1850s. A few head escaped during the fight and got into the brush. Later their descendants were hunted by both the Mojaves and the Piutes. The survivors became so man-shy and clever about concealing themselves that no one has been able to get within rifle shot of any of them for years.

There are two different herds in the Santa Barbara forest in California that are reported "wilder than deer," and they are worrying the cowmen of the district who run their registered Herefords on summer range in this district and don't like the infusions of scrub blood from the wild herds. Two hunters have been sent into the mountains to attempt their extermination.



SQUAW-MAN SAVVY

BY FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

A BLACK fog swirled down from a distant draw, glazing everything it touched until the leafless trees in the entire valley were coated with thick ice. I knew it would be colder beyond the pass, so cold no man and beast should be out. Well, the wild creatures wouldn't be out. They weren't civilized, so they had sense enough to den up when it was fifty below and more.

I was careful about my breathing. I didn't hurry, because I didn't want to breathe rapidly and perhaps frost

my lungs. I kept the wolverine facing of my parka hood in front of my mouth as much as possible. Wolverine fur dissipates the moisture, turning it to frost. Any other fur gathers moisture and the first thing you know, your face is frozen to your parka facing.

I was sorry for Kenai, my Mackenzie River husky. He's a big, powerful brute, and thinks anything I do is O. K., but I knew he didn't like being out in this weather. Every instinct he had inherited from his

wolf forebears told him he should hole up. But he stuck. Dogs are that way. He carried my sleeping bag and some of my trail grub on his back. I carried grub, the ax and my rifle.

I don't believe in putting all my eggs in one basket when I'm on the trail. If Kenai should jump a caribou and go streaking off before I could stop him, then I'd be without grub. But if I had rifle, ax and matches and a small amount of food including tea, I could always make out.

We pushed on through the pass and struck the real cold country. Kenai began to whimper, but I didn't stop. I was afraid if I stopped I wouldn't want to go ahead again. And back there in the cabin I had left my partner, Joe Terry, in pretty bad shape. I had a hunch his appendix had gone bad on him.

I told Joe not to try any self-doctoring while I was away. Then I started out for Cold Deck to explain things to Doc Heller. If I had diagnosed Joe's symptoms correctly, Doc would pile into a plane, drop down on the creek that runs past the cabin, and a couple of hours later have Joe in the hospital. That's the way they do things in Alaska nowadays. But you'll notice man still depends on his dogs and his legs, too.

I was crowding myself plenty, cold or no cold, because if Joe's appendix let go, the chances were Doc wouldn't be able to do much. It was a race with death, but I didn't feel heroic. I just felt wretchedly cold.

I MADE camp that noon, swilled down plenty of hot tea and some thick stew. There was enough stew for Kenai, too. He didn't rate a feed until that night, but I knew hot stew would do him some good.

Then I got a hunch it might be worth while to take the Icy Pass short cut. The going would be colder and harder, but it would save me three hours.

When the Icy Pass wind hit me late that afternoon, I knew I'd made a serious mistake. My lungs began to burn, and my nose started to frost. I thawed it out, then got down on my hands and knees and crawled so the wind couldn't get such a crack at me. Kenai, wise dog that he was, got behind me and let me break trail.

Once through the pass I could see Placer River stretching out for miles. The wind had swept it clear of snow and I knew we could make time.

Maybe I shouldn't have risked night travel, but when a man has a sick pardner on his mind, he tries to crowd things a little because five minutes can be the margin between life and death.

The river ice screamed and groaned as the cold expanded it. Now and then it seemed to explode as cracks streaked up the river. One moment I was walking on solid ice, next, my footing dropped out from under me. Water swirled around my legs to some point above the knee, and I could see a film of ice form across the surface. I had broken through an overflow.

I broke through the overflow ice to the solid stuff, then hauled my body clear. I stood up, feeling the clothing around my knees git stiff. I stumbled along towards the bank and several times I almost went down. I didn't stop until I found a thicket and some driftwood. Then I knew I was done for. My legs were gone. They were solid blocks of ice below the knee and frost working slowly up. My first thought after that numbing realization

struck me was for Joe, helpless back there in the cabin.

I'd never had a hand or foot frozen, but I had helped thaw out those who have bumped into that kind of grief. One of the most agonizing things a man can endure is the drawing of frost from the marrow.

I shed my pack and opened it up to get a pile of shavings which I had wrapped in a cloth. I piled them carefully under some dead brush and touched a match. They burned slowly at first, then flared up. I clumped around on my frozen legs, adding dry fuel. I even managed to roll a couple of fair-sized logs onto the fire. What I wanted was something that would smolder and retain fire long after the main blaze had died out.

I got my sleeping bag off Kenai's back and spread it out. Then I took up the matter of help. Unless I got it, I knew I was done for. The nearest man was Al Lawton.

I wrote two notes and tied them to Kenai's collar. I sent duplicates in case one was torn loose. They read:

LAWTON:

Send messenger to Doc Heller, Cold Deck. Joe Terry bad appendix. He's in cabin. I broke through overflow. Legs frozen. I'm on north bank of Placer River.

DICK WALLEN.

I waved Kenai down the river. He didn't want to leave the fire and me, but he knew there was something wrong. Finally I had to roll over and cuff him to get him started.

After Kenai had gone, I began to thaw out my clothes, by rolling back and forth and turning, first one side, then the other toward the fire. When I got the clothing freed of ice I forced them off from the waist down and looked at my feet. They were

as hard as stone and whiter than some marble I've seen.

It made me almost physically sick to look at them. You don't appreciate your feet and legs until you're miles from the nearest cabin, and the cold is clutching the land, and you realize you can't walk. It's then, too, that you realize how much you depend on the other fellow.

ILL bet there wasn't a man in the north who would have backed my chances for life if he knew I was depending on Al Lawton. In the first place, Lawton was a squaw man. He hadn't any pride, and he was said to be a physical coward. I had heard men call him fighting names and seen him turn a sickly green and walk away. Except for his change in color you'd never have known he had heard.

Lawton was an occasional figure in Cold Deck. Usually he was followed by his solemn-eyed squaw who always seemed to carry a baby in the hood of her parka, Eskimo fashion.

There were times when he arrived in Cold Deck alone, as if he could no longer endure the company of his native wife and breed children. Then he would bridge the gap to his old life. He would be clean, shaved and his hair would be combed. There would be a wistful light in his blue eyes, as if he longed to take his place among his kind. As if, he would have liked to drink with white men on an equal footing and dance with their wives and daughters at the Saturday night dances.

He would keep his head high for a while, then he would start drinking and presently he would be going from saloon to saloon, falling into the knee-deep muck we called a street; getting up, going on, or sometimes falling again and staying there while passings dogs sniffed at him,

and men either walked around his sodden body or kicked him out of the way.

Usually his squaw would come for him. She would scrape off the muck with a stick, take him down to the river and sluice him off, then put him into a canoe and paddle away. Or if it was winter, she would put him on the sled, wrapped in blankets, and mush home.

A couple of weeks later he would come into camp for the mail. His face would be covered with stubble, his hair matted and reeking of sun-dured salmon, dogs and fur pelts.

It was on such occasions that he became the most dignified—and drunk. I had heard he would straighten up until he towered over most of those in the saloon, and with alcoholic dignity raise his glass and say, "There are times when the most lowly of us, under the lash of necessity will rise to great heights and achieve the dignity of marble. I drink to those moments which come to most men at some time or another."

Some of the more discerning insisted that on such occasions breeding and culture struggled through filth and dissolution. Then it wasn't hard for them to believe the legend that Lawton's father had stood high in the affairs of the nation, and that his mother was a woman of fine breeding and character.

Maybe so, I thought, but what about his fear of physical combat, and the way he sneaked off when men insulted him?

AL LAWTON was still on my mind when I drifted off into a sleep. And it was well I was in my sleeping bag, and logs burned on the fire or it would have been my last. When I awakened again the fire had died down and there was a ring of

eyes gleaming from the darkness. Wolves!

I picked up a rock near the fire and hurled it against a smoldering log. A shower of sparks swirled upward and the wolves tumbled over backward to retreat. It would have been funny at any other time.

I squirmed around until I found my rifle, then I dragged more fuel onto the fire. It blazed up and I saw the eyes again, sinister pools of flames in pairs. The wolves were hungry, all right, or they wouldn't have returned.

I stood this for an hour, then realized I was using up too much fuel. I levered a cartridge into the chamber and fired at a big dog wolf. It wasn't hard, aiming at the point between those twin pools of fire, though my position was awkward, and the recoil knocked me back again. The wolves scattered, but when they saw the dog wolf go down, the old pack law asserted itself and they tore into him. Within a half hour they were squatting about, partially fed, watching the greatest game of all—a man.

I didn't dare doze again. In the next three hours I killed two more wolves. The rest of the pack gorged themselves and then drifted off somewhere to sleep. Daylight came slowly, and brought with it a howling blizzard. Most of the time I couldn't see across the river.

The storm had a peculiar moaning sound that seemed to promise death to all living things. I thought of Joe Terry a lot, wondering if he was still doubled up with pain. I rather hoped he was, because if he wasn't, the chances were that the appendix had burst.

My breakfast and lunch consisted of cold grub. I didn't feel like getting out of the bag to do any cooking, but I did melt snow and make some tea. By mid-afternoon I was

pretty worried. Maybe Kenai hadn't gone to Al's place. I knew he had stopped there several times and been fed when I had loaned him to other mushers. And it's natural for a dog to turn into a familiar feeding spot. But perhaps the wolves had gotten him, or maybe Al was out on his trap line, or—

But what was the use? You can think of a thousand things when you're helpless. One worry after another keeps cropping up.

During the night I heard somebody's voice out in the storm. I fired my rifle and a few minutes later Al Lawton came out of the swirling flakes. He was dragging a light hand sled behind him.

Lawton looked like he'd taken quite a beating. His nose was frozen and it looked to me as if the frost was working into his cheek bones. He slumped down beside me without a word.

"I wasn't expecting you to come out, Al," I said. "I thought you might line up some man or—" I thought I'd better stop. I was getting on dangerous ground. "You can't expect a family man to come out on a night like this," I said lamely. "You might freeze a hand or foot."

He gave me a queer look. "A hand or foot," he said. "Yes, I know. It's funny, nothing is ever expected of me." Then he was all business. "Your dog got through, Wallen. I sent my two oldest boys and the dog team to Cold Deck. They're only kids, but they should make it if they stick to the river."

That news cheered me up. It was more important for the boys to get through to Doc Heller than it was to haul me to safety. Even if I lost my feet, I'd probably live.

"The wife wanted to come along," Lawton went on, "but I decided she

shouldn't leave the children alone. Anyway, if anything happened to her I'd be pretty helpless. She's a wonderful woman." He looked at me as if he expected me to contradict him. "I'd do anything for her."

Lawton got me onto the hand sled, and covered me with robes.

"Hadn't you better rest awhile?" I asked. "You've been through hell."

"Yes, I've been through hell," he admitted, "but there isn't time to rest. I'll have the wind at my back going down river." He hesitated and I knew there was something on his mind.

"I'm not much of a man, Wallen," he said finally, "as men go in this country. I'm a coward, yellow to the core, and a fifteen-year-old boy could slap me and I wouldn't fight back. Men call me some pretty tough names, and I take it because my fighting spirit was knocked out of my system long ago. But I'll carry on tonight, as long as I can. If I quit, it won't be because I want to."

WITH that, he slipped the harness around his shoulders, broke the sled free and commenced to drag me down river. I worried awhile over what he had said, and grew depressed when I realized my chance to live depended on him. Then I guess the cold began to get me. I felt comfortable and relaxed.

It wasn't long until I was on the bank of a lake. The sun was shining and I knew then why I was warm. People were swimming. Girls in bathing suits came from the water, shaking themselves and laughing as they sprawled on the hot sands. I saw a swan swimming off a mass of tules, and while I watched, a flock of mallards wheeled and landed, with the quick, thrill-

ing splash ducks make when they hit the water.

I was just getting acquainted with one of the girls when I heard bells ringing in the clear air—temple bells, they were, playing some kind of an anthem. Then a man came and began beating me up, slapping my face and shaking me. "Damn it," I snarled, "you can't do this to me."

Then the bells stopped ringing, but the man stayed. He was trying to pour molten lead down my throat. I fought him off, but some of it got down and began burning holes in my stomach. Molten lead! I could feel it, searing my throat, too.

I managed to spit it out, but this enraged the man and he slapped my face again. It was strange about my face, too. Part of it was paralyzed, and I only felt the impact of his hand on the other parts.

I opened my eyes and stared into Lawton's bloodshot eyes. There was a fire nearby and my tea pot was on the coals.

"You've got to quit fighting me, Wallen," Lawton was saying, "I can't fight back. You're freezing to death. I can't do more for you than I'm doing. I can't fight the storm, and fight for your life, too."

Well, I knew he was right. The warmth, the lake, the girls and all that, with ringing bells, goes with freezing to death. The molten lead was the tea Lawton was pouring into me. He gave me another drink, emptying the pot, holding the tin cup with his left hand. The right hand was curiously stiff, and I wondered if it was numb with the cold. It was heavily covered with a mitten.

I managed to stay awake. It was partly due to the hot tea, but mostly due, I think, to the narrow escape I had had from death by frost. Lawton's back swayed as he

tugged at the harness, and he had a trick of reaching around with his right hand and holding the harness in place.

Later I got to wondering why Lawton should lift a hand to help any white man. None of his race had ever done anything but insult him.

I watched him as he swayed in the harness, and I could see his steps growing shorter and shorter, the sure sign of exhaustion. He fell at last and I wadded up snowballs and hurled them at him, but that didn't arouse him. I crawled from the sled and began beating him with my fists.

"Don't hit me," he whimpered, "I can't stand it. It . . . it does things to me. I'll try to keep going."

"Listen," I said, "there's no sense in both of us dying. It can't be more than a couple of miles to your cabin. Save yourself. If there's anybody you can send back—"

"There's no one," he gasped. "Only the children and my wife. I couldn't risk them. I'll get you through."

He got up, and I picked up a stick, dug it into a rough place in the ice and helped him break the sled clear. He must have fallen twenty times in the next two hours. When he fell the next time, I knew he couldn't get up.

I FIRED my rifle three times, and I waited. The storm continued to moan down the river valley, lancing every living thing with its chill. Several minutes passed, and I was about to fire again, when I heard three shots. They couldn't have been more than a quarter mile distant. I waited fifteen minutes, then fired a single shot. I had to conserve ammunition. An answer came

and then I heard voices. I yelled, then I forced the sled alongside of Al Lawton. I shook him.

"Al. Somebody's coming!" I yelled almost in his ear. Then I grabbed the right hand that had rested on the harness and helped to pull me over the bad spots. It was as hard as marble—frozen solid. He'd lose it, of course. I was sorry about that. It didn't seem right that he should lose a hand and risk his life for a member of the race that had treated him like a Siwash mongrel dog.

Two boys, perhaps eleven and twelve years old, came out of the swirling storm. "It's pa and a man," one of them said. "Pa's down."

Those youngsters had fresh, healthy faces. One looked like an Indian, the other would have passed for a white boy, yet I knew they were full brothers, Al Lawton's sons.

They picked up their father and placed him on top of me. I wrapped my arms around him, and held him securely. The two boys dragged the sled at a fair pace, but when they struck rough stretches, Al's right arm bounced up and down, and that frozen hand knocked on my side like a hammer. A marble hammer. I found myself regretting that Lawton could not have done something like this for his squaw, or children. In-

stead he had to lose his hand for me, a white man.

Ahead there was a steady clatter. Someone was beating on a wash tub. The boys kept moving toward the sound, the only thing to guide them. Presently a cabin door opened and Lawton's squaw dashed out. She helped the boys snake the sled into the cabin.

•If you've knocked around the North you may have noticed that an Indian's cabin looks better than a white man's from the outside. The native goes in for exterior show, the white for interior comfort. But this cabin was native on the outside and white on the inside. The floor was spotless and everything was in order.

They carried me, sleeping bag and all, into a room that had been built onto the main structure. It was the room of an educated white man. There were books on a wall shelf, and a pile of magazines. There was a comfortable chair, and a pipe and tobacco on a nearby stand. Opposite, there was a second easy chair.

Al Lawton and his wife must have spent their evenings here, I realized. Probably he was trying the difficult task of lifting her to his cultural level.

As soon as they had placed me on a sort of davenport, obviously home-

CURTISS

Baby Ruth

**WHEN WERE
BUTTONS
FIRST USED?**



**IS RICH
IN PURE
DEXTROSE**
THE SUGAR
YOUR BODY USES
DIRECTLY
FOR ENERGY



**13TH CENTURY
IN EUROPE**

CANDY IS DELICIOUS FOOD.....ENJOY SOME EVERY DAY

made, they disappeared. I heard them working with Lawton. After awhile I heard him groaning.

"Don't hit me, boys," he muttered. Then, "You light out for Cold Deck and tell them to send a plane for Joe Terry. I'll go for Wal-len. Don't argue. I'll find him."

"Al, you're all right now," the squaw was saying. "I fix up Wal-len."

She came into the room, dragging a tub and a can of kerosene with her. Kerosene, you know, is one way of drawing frost from a man's marrow.

"How about Al's hand?" I asked her. "It was hard as marble. Can you save it? I hope so, I wouldn't want any man to give up that much for me. I—"

SHE gave me a queer look, and I sensed she didn't want to talk about the hand. She knew how white men had treated Al and she knew, too, the reason for it.

"You hit Al?" she demanded suddenly. Her dark eyes burned with something approaching hate.

"Once," I answered. "Not very hard. He was freezing to death."

She understood, and some of the hate left her face. "When Al, little boy, three, four, big boys beat him up," she explained haltingly. "He say, beat spirit out of him. I don't understand that, but if Al say it—" She indicated that if he said it, it was the truth.

In a way I could understand. The fears of men can often be traced to some forgotten incident of childhood, to something beyond their control. But Al hadn't forgotten. Well, there are certain things of which I'm afraid.

I could crawl into a burning building to save a man, or go about a mine in pitch darkness, but I

doubt if I could dive into the surf for my own mother. I don't know why, exactly. But I do know I was caught in the surf as a small boy and rolled about in an undertow and was rescued in the nick of time.

"Al afraid of fists and tough men," the squaw continued to explain. "But him brave man every other way. You understand?"

"Sure," I said.

"We find out if you brave man?" she said, as if hoping I would prove a weakling. Then she put my naked feet into the kerosene. Yes, I moaned, cursed and set my teeth when the frost began to leave the marrow. Maybe it was a good thing she tied me to the chair. I had never endured such pain before.

I had passed out completely when she finally put me to bed. Later I found she gave me sedatives under Al's orders. He kept quite a stock of medicines on hand, for he had a white man's dread of being caught without supplies if someone got sick or was hurt.

It must have been a couple of days before my head was really clear and I could take stock of things. One of the boys came in. "Yesterday storm stop," he said, "I hear plane comin' out. Doc Heller take Joe Terry to hospital."

"Good!" I exclaimed. "Now let me talk to your mother."

The squaw came in. She seemed friendly and I guessed I hadn't yelled too loud when the frost was coming out of my feet.

"Your feet be all right," she predicted. "You won't lose 'em. Al say so. He know all about frost."

"He should," I said. "He lost his good right hand to find out. I'm damn sorry about that."

The squaw shook her head. "He lost right hand year ago," she told me. "I get lost in storm. Break

through overflow. He find me. Bring me in like he do you. Hand freeze." Her eyes brightened, then a softness filled their depths. "He tell me I worth it. I happy. Him good man. I try be good wife."

"You're a fine wife in any man's language," I assured her. "Who took Al's hand off?"

"No time for doctor. Bad storm. Kids all sick. Al say, "You cut off hand, or I lose whole arm," she explained. "I don't want to. I don't know how. Al read a book and then tell me how. So I do and he watch. Then Al write letter Outside and man send machinery hand."

"Machinery hand?" Then I understood. "A mechanical hand?"

"Hand hard like iron," she said,

and I understood why Al's hand had seemed as hard as marble. "He say better hand than old. He pick things out of hot water or pull sled and frost can't touch him. 'Damn good hand!' Al say."

Well, what do you think of a man like that? A man who's got guts enough to tell his wife how to amputate his hand and watch her do it! I know what the gang down at Cold Deck will think about him when I tell the story. Al's not going to do his drinking alone next summer. Every man in camp is going to buy him a drink. And one dollar gets a hundred that you won't find him pushed off the sidewalk, or left lying in the mud if he has one too many.

THE END

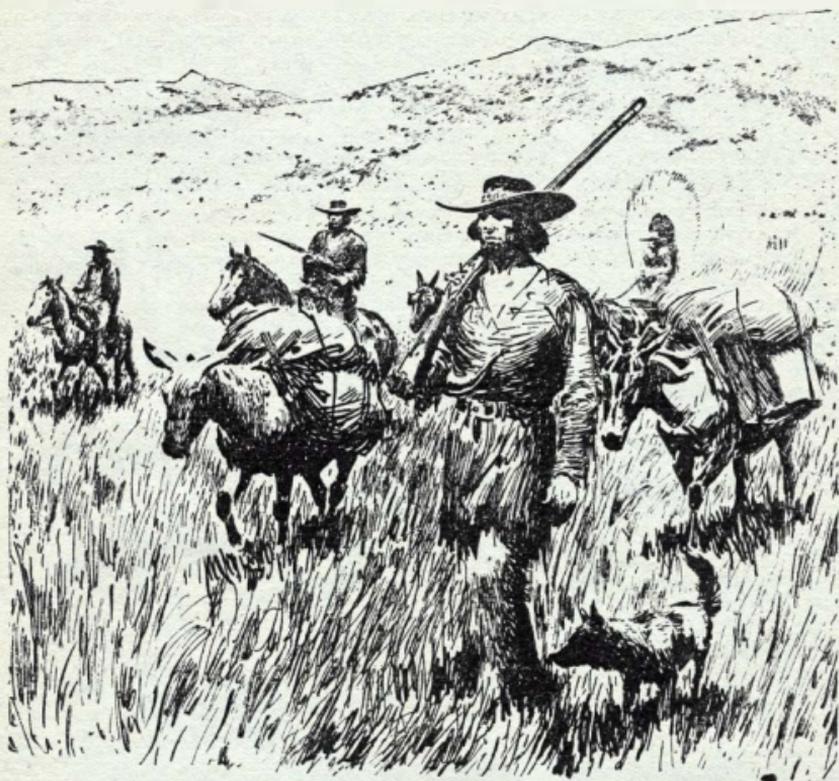
COWBOY PERSISTENCY

THE quality of "sticking," as applied to cowboys, means much more than the ability to ride a bad horse. No greater compliment can be paid a Western man than to say that "he'll stick," and as is usually the case with men of character, this virtue almost invariably goes with unpretentious modesty.

There is a well-authenticated case of an eighteen-year-old cowboy who left a camp near the San Luis Lakes before breakfast one morning to bring in the remuda. He struck the trail of the horses some distance from camp and followed it throughout the day. By daylight of the next morning he knew beyond a doubt that the horses had been stolen and were being driven south toward Mexico. His horse being played out, the cowboy traded him for another and stuck to the trail, following it on through Taos, where he traded for another horse and went on to Santa Fe. Finally he overtook the thieves in Albuquerque, where they were trying to sell the horses to an outfit that was driving a herd farther west.

The cowboy went quietly into the corrals where the buyers were looking at the horses. He began catching the ones he had come after and leading them into another corral. He said nothing and made no move to accuse the thieves until one of them demanded an explanation of such high-handed procedure. Then the cowboy flashed a gun, took the entire crowd, buyers and sellers alike, to the nearest justice of the peace and let them work out their own salvation.

A month from the morning he had left to wrangle the remuda he walked into the home-ranch kitchen and took a seat at the table. Someone remarked that he looked hungry. "Breakfast was a bit late," was the cowboy's terse reply.



THE STORY OF THE WEST

told in pictures and text by

GERARD DELANO

The Mormon migration was unique in that it was the only case in American history where westward expansion was mainly the result of religious motives.

Mormonism was founded by Joseph Smith, Jr., of Palmyra, New York, who announced that he had received revelations from Mormon the Seer telling of a tribe which had inhabited America from 600 B. C. to 420 A. D. when it had been destroyed by another faction of their people, the ancestors of the American Indians.

Young Smith soon gained followers and in 1830 organized at Fayette, New York, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Opposition to the new sect developed rapidly and the Mormons moved westward to Ohio where a temple was built.

The movements of the Mormons continued westward, a Zion being established near Independence, Missouri. Settlements were made by the sect in various other countries of Missouri, but the opposition of non-Mormon Missourians



was so relentless that the Mormons were again compelled to abandon their colonies and move on.

The last of the Mormons left Missouri for Illinois in the spring of 1839. Here, in Hancock County, they lived for a short time in comparative peace, still under the guidance of Joseph Smith. But hostilities again developed, violent anti-Mormon meetings were held and the governor called out the militia. Joseph Smith was arrested, and on June 27, 1845, he and his brother were slain by a mob which stormed the Carthage jail in which they were being held.

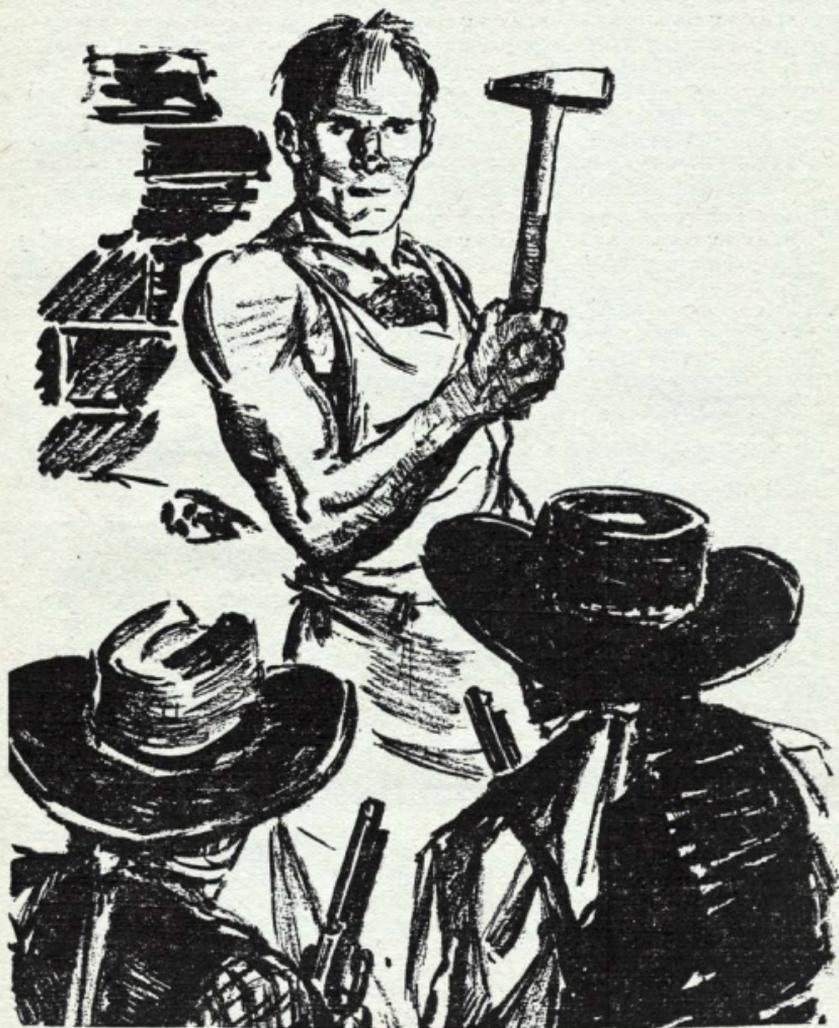
The Mormon leaders realized that they must go even farther west. In 1846, under the leadership of Brigham Young, Smith's successor and a man of energy, courage and sound common sense, the great migration to Utah was commenced.

The pilgrimage started in September and continued through the snow and ice of winter, the slush and floods of spring thaws. Travel was slow and perilous.

On July 28, 1847, the travelers reached the valley of the Great Salt Lake, where they laid out their prospective city, built fences and began the erection of a stockade. Undaunted by the warnings of other pioneers who said they could not raise crops in that country, the Mormons broke the hard, sun-baked ground, planted it to potatoes and other crops, and utilized irrigation to make them grow.

The Mormon migration and colonization of the Great American Desert in Utah may well be classed as one of the outstanding "All-American" pioneering achievements in the annals of the West.

NEXT WEEK:
THE FREMONT EXPEDITIONS



FORGE OF VENGEANCE

BY E. C. LINCOLN

THE C Lazy F dude ranch was as dead as a cemetery that afternoon. Only down at the blacksmith shop

across the creek was there any sound of life. And there the steady clang of hammer against anvil, beating

monotonously, dully, through the hot summer air, only served to accentuate the unnatural stillness.

In the half darkness of the shop Paddy Gleason dripped with perspiration as he shaped a white-hot number-one blank into a perfect fit for Butterball's off-rear hoof. Back in the deeper shadows the buckskin drowsed, one hip sunk comfortably, tail swishing sleepily at imaginary flies.

Clang. Clang. CLANG!

With a final stroke for emphasis, Paddy raised the shoe at the end of his tongs, squinted along its edge, grunted his satisfaction, and plunged it into the tub of water which stood by the forge. Steam rose in a hissing cloud. Butterball opened one eye and attempted a single half-hearted kick as Paddy tucked one rear hoof into his leather apron. Then settled down again in resignation.

Paddy chuckled deep in his throat and complimented Butterball on his good sense. No horse in his right mind would think to force the issue with a man who weighed slightly better than two hundred pounds, whose seventeen-inch biceps could hold the kick from anything but the wildest white-eyed outlaw. The job went forward quietly.

At last Paddy straightened up, wiped the perspiration from his eyes, and slapped Butterball companionably on the haunches. "There, feller," he grunted, "I reckon them slippers'll hold yo' feet together, spite of what them dudes kin do. Gosh, feller, it's hot, ain't it?"

In the open doorway a canvas water bag hung swinging in the slight current of air. Paddy raised it and drank deep, then sluiced half its contents over his head and neck. For the moment he stood relaxed in the sunshine. The wet shirt plas-

tered on the great shoulder muscles felt pleasantly cool. He had shod seven horses that morning. Butterball, starting the afternoon, made eight. Five more to come.

Paddy looked across the creek to the ranch buildings sleeping in the sun; the white ranchhouse, the half-hundred guest cabins nestled among the cottonwoods, the log post office and store. No sign of life in the whole place. On most afternoons at this time in the season the ranch would be humming with activity, chap-clad dudes and dudeens enjoying themselves to the limit under the expert guidance of the dude wranglers. Today—Paddy counted up—eight or ten old ladies, maybe napping, maybe playing bridge on the shady porch, out of sight from where he stood. Then the two chink cooks in the kitchen, and little Spike Powers, the bookkeeper, probably sleeping in the office. And the French nurse and her charge, the Millionaire Kid. Every other living soul was off at the Cow Creek rodeo.

Even Paddy's own particular side-partner, Pinky Moran, was away. Pinky was a blamed good scout, thought Paddy. He had decided to give up the show and stay home to keep Paddy company when he had learned that the latter had thirteen horses to shoe before the following day. But now even Pinky was gone. A wire had come that morning for the boss, Charlie Farrel, absent on the job of chaperoning a pack-train party twenty miles back in the Blues. Spike had insisted that it ought to be delivered at once, so Pinky had started at ten. He wouldn't return before the following morning. By dark the dudes would be back from the rodeo, hungry for supper. But in the meantime it sure was lonesome.

Paddy's wandering thoughts considered the Millionaire Kid. He'd sure be lonesome, too, when he grew up. The ranch knew all about him from the front pages of the Denver papers. Only grandson of old Peter Vorhees. Just a long yearling, coming two in the fall, and his income was said to be over eight thousand dollars every day. Paddy sighed at the thought; his own income rarely reached ninety a month. But the Kid, he'd have worries. Even now his mother and father were scrapping. She had brought the baby up here to be safe from kidnapers, Paddy had heard. Didn't seem to worry her much, though. Left the kid with that nurse all the time. Today she was at the rodeo. If she hadn't been there, she'd be wasting her time playing bridge.

The blacksmith, turning back to the darkness of the forge and his ninth horse, a gray named Silver, didn't know that he blamed the girl, —for she was little more than that—much. Hard, she was. But that kid was surely one nasty-tempered little hellion. Spoiled as all get-out and howling from dawn to night.

SO engrossed was Paddy in his reflections concerning the Millionaire Kid and the injustice of the world in general, that he missed the two drifting shadows that slipped suddenly into the bright square of the doorway. The clang of hammer on anvil muffled the sound of stealthy footsteps.

Only when the command came sharply: "Stick 'em 'way up, big boy!" and he whirled, blinking, from the anvil to face the light, was he aware of the presence of visitors.

The two figures crouching in the square of sunshine meant business, all right. Any time an automatic points steadily toward your belt

is a mighty poor time to lose your temper, Paddy knew. Two automatics make it twice as bad. His convulsive grip on the handle of the sledge relaxed suddenly. The heavy hammer thumped on the floor as he raised his massive arms high above his head.

"You got me," he announced cheerfully. "Fish m' pockets, an' git it over with. That shoe's gittin' plumb cold. I—"

"Shut up!" growled the larger of the two strangers as they entered the shop. "Step over in front of that anvil and squat down!"

Paddy obeyed. He studied the men with interest. Their faces were hidden by soiled handkerchiefs in which eyeholes had been torn. Their clothes were the usual garments of the range country: leather chaps, broad weather-worn felt hats, spike-heeled boots. But something, somewhere, was off key—just didn't fit the picture. And as Paddy, obedient to the command, squatted on his haunches with his back against the anvil he saw what the trouble was: The smaller of the two men had his spurs on with rowels up! Paddy wondered at that, but refrained from comment. After all, any gent who held his automatic as steady as this one did had a right to wear his spurs as he pleased. More to the point was the coiled saddle rope which the leader carried in his left hand.

Under the compelling stare of a blue-nosed automatic the strangers bound him tight, looped his feet together, cinched his hands beneath his knees, hogtied him with gruntings and strainings that forced the hard-twisted Manila deep into his flesh. Then they filled his mouth with a gag torn from a gunny sack, and bound him securely to the anvil. Helpless, he saw them slip through

the doorway as silently as they had come.

What was up, anyway? Paddy strained at his bonds, jerking, turning, striving for something that felt like a solid purchase on their elusive coils. At the sound of trampling hoofs on gravel he desisted for a moment, to watch the little group of five horsemen that passed at a walk. Of the gang, only one could really sit a horse, he saw. When the foremost wheeled his mount to peer into the blacksmith shop, Paddy lay motionless. The riders jogged on over the bridge across the creek toward the ranch buildings. Soon they had passed from his field of vision.

A minute passed. Then a shot barked out, tearing the hot silence of the afternoon into stabbing echoes that sent Paddy's heart pounding at their hint of death. A woman screamed, and screamed again in a terrified outburst of fear.

The drum of heavily galloping hoofs sounded, and the five riders swept past the doorway of the blacksmith shop at a high lope. But now one carried across his saddle a white bundle that kicked and squirmed; the Millionaire Kid!

Paddy cursed noiselessly as he fought the coils that held him helpless. One shot! That would be Spike Powers, down at the office. He'd be just fool enough to go for the gun in the desk drawer, when there wasn't one chance in a thousand of getting it. Spike had as much courage in his spindly little body as an army of men.

Again Paddy strained at the hard ropes, till his eyes blurred, and a red trickle of blood slipping down his bare arm warned him there was nothing to be gained by such means. Desperately he forced himself to relax, to think.

He stared with longing at the

trimming knife lying just beyond his feet. No chance there, even if he were free from the anvil. But the anvil? That gave him thought. It was bolted securely to the block, a cross section of cottonwood trunk thirty inches thick and as high as his knees. Paddy didn't know, but he suspected that the block was spiked to the floor. If he could tear it loose, there stood the hot forge, and liberty—perhaps.

He twisted his body, throwing his weight to one side as far as he could. Again! He heard the squeal of iron slipping in wood. Side to side now, lunging a half-inch farther each time. Once more!

And with that the block tore loose from the planking, carrying Paddy with it, grinding his face on the rough floor. He filled his barrel chest, rolled, strained, got his knees under him, and fought his way slowly to his feet, though his bonds still forced him to crouch half doubled, and on his broad back rested three hundred pounds of wood and iron.

Inch by inch, he worked his way to the forge, and his eyes gleamed with excitement when he found that he was able to rest the block on the iron lip. He had scant ankle play, but he felt for the pedal of the fan and drove it till he heard the forge fire roar behind him. Then, with a final effort that strained his sinews to the uttermost, he rolled backward, bearing the block and the rope turns that held him to it squarely into the fire. A moment later he was free.

PADDY left the blacksmith shop at a lumbering run. On the porch outside the office door Spike Powers lay in a crumpled heap, a dark crimson pool slowly spreading from under his chest. Paddy turned the unconscious man on his back,

felt the pulse, caught him up in his arms and sprinted for the ranch-house. He forced his way through a bevy of hysterical women and deposited his burden carefully on a leather couch in the spacious recreation room.

He turned and seized an elderly woman by the shoulders. "You look more sensible 'n' some," he growled. "Git to work! Put a pressure pack on if the blood starts ag'in. Spike'll likely live, if you watch him close."

The woman nodded, breathless, and Paddy bolted from the room.

In the hot bunkhouse he went down on his knees to fish with the skill of long practice among the debris under his bunk. Soon his groping fingers found what they sought, and he cinched about his hips a worn leather belt studded with blunt-nosed shells. Then he picked up the giant single-action .45, heavy as an ordinary sporting rifle, and spun the cylinder before he slipped the weapon into the oil-soaked holster at his thigh. He blessed his luck for the fact that his own rawboned sorrel—seventeen hands high, and the only horse he had ever owned that was up to his weight—was always kept up with the wranglers' private mounts in the little corral behind the stable.

Within ten minutes of his escape Paddy was pushing carefully along the shady trail familiarly known as the "Ridge Route," following clear sign which led toward the frowning flanks of the Blues. He moved cautiously along the trail which led up, and up, climbing to a rocky spur, then across a long, grassy park, fringed with pine growth, above which towered the majestic gray peaks, still streaked with snow.

He had no desire to overtake the kidnapers at once. In a running

fight their automatics would silence his pet six-gun with little difficulty. Furthermore, open gunplay would almost certainly reckon the Millionaire Kid among its victims. On the other hand, Paddy had little knowledge of this mountain country, in which, sooner or later, he must surely lose the clearly marked hoofprints which he had so far followed.

Again he wished his side-kick, Pinky, was riding by his side. Pinky had guided dudes through the wilderness of ridge and canyon until he knew it like his own backyard. Without Pinky, his best chance, it seemed to Paddy, lay in the fact that four of the five kidnapers were un-~~abated~~, tenderfeet; a city bunch, he reckoned. With tenderfeet in the mountains, anything might happen.

So the rawboned sorrel plodded on till wet sweat streaks plastered his sturdy haunches; on and on, till the blue dusk overspread the hills and only the highest summits were afire with the last flame of sunset. Soon, Paddy knew, he must camp for the night. In the morning his chances of success would be less than nothing. The raiders, he felt sure, were making for the railroad which paralleled the far slope of the range.

At last, when the first stars were coming out, he slipped the saddle off the weary sorrel, picketed the animal in the grass by a brawling creek, and climbed the neighboring hogback in the faint hope that the city bunch might be fool enough to light a fire. But though he watched for hour after hour, while the night wind of the mountains swept the bare ridge, chilling him to the bone, it was not till the faint gray of sunrise showed in the east that his patience was rewarded.

There, down below him and a mile away, a tiny spark of yellow light glowed in the darkness of the valley.

Paddy grunted his satisfaction. He guessed, with the certainty of one whose entire life had been passed in the open, that only a single member of the band would be awake. The renegade guide, insisting on a dark camp the night before, was now up early to prepare a hasty breakfast. The others, worn out by the unaccustomed labor of the trail and their hard earthen beds, would sleep the sleep of exhaustion till the guide aroused them for further flight. With a speed and silence astounding in one of his massive frame Paddy hurried on foot down the dark slope.

It was hard going. The brush through which he fought his way clutched at his clothes, slashed his face with stinging welts. He drew a breath of relief when he stumbled on a narrow trail, which he could follow, bending low, till he came to the edge of a grassy, open park beside a creek. Only in the yellow circle about the tiny squaw fire were objects dimly visible. There the shadowy figure of the guide, busy with frying pan and coffeepot, grew and dwindled against the flame as he threw together the morning meal.

PADDY sniffed the wind, trying to locate the horses that must be grazing somewhere close at hand. Failing, he lay flat on his face and slowly, with infinite caution, worked his way toward the fire. Inch by inch, he moved, toes and fingers digging into the damp earth. His heart beat like a mighty drum and the blood sang so loudly in his ears that he could hardly believe the busy guide did not hear it and take warning.

Finally he dared go no closer. About the edge of the firelight he thought he could make out the prone forms of the sleepers, deeper shadows in the darkness. Where the Million-

aire Kid might be, he could only guess. The youngster, too, must be sleeping, quiet for once in his life.

In that uncertainty of shifting lights Paddy dared not risk a shot. He crouched now, his great sinews alert, his every nerve strained and ready.

At last! The guide, perhaps by accident, shaded his eyes to peer into the surrounding blackness. When he turned back to the fire again, Paddy charged.

His was the mad rush of an angry grizzly. With an oath and a shout of warning, the guide leaped aside, whirling on his toes as he snatched for his gun.

A flash of flame seared Paddy's neck. The deafening concussion, almost against his ear, half stunned him with its impact. Then his fist shot out with all his weight behind it, and the guide crashed down like a stricken steer and lay twitching in the ashes.

From right and left men sprang from their blankets and leaped upon Paddy, cursing. He swept them aside, dodged into the black darkness at the sound of a child's voice raised in a shrill wail of fear. Catching up the Millionaire Kid under his left arm, he turned to face his assailants.

For a moment the advantage was his. The old six-gun roared once. Then he was on his knees under the weight of their rush, squirming, kicking, biting, swinging his one free arm like a flail. He felt a shoulder drive into his ribs, bending him double. Reaching down, he caught the man about the body in a crushing hold, bore him to earth, and stamped upon him as he struggled free. He felt no pain, only the breathless exultation of battle against great odds. Had both his hands been clear he would have laughed at the outcome. With

a baby to guard, things were different.

A gush of blood from a glancing blow that laid open his forehead filled Paddy's eyes with a strange red mist. He redoubled his efforts, and when his right hand struck something solid he heard the snap of a broken bone.

In the moment's respite which followed, Paddy made for the brush, lowering his head and smashing into the invisible undergrowth regardless of trail. In the sky above the trees night was fading to the sickly gray of a mountain dawn. He must fight his way up the slope down which he had come. He must reach timberline by daylight! There, on the rock-strewn face of the ridge, he might pit the old six-gun against the automatics with some chance of success.

Panting, laboring, straining till his legs throbbed with his efforts to drive them farther, and his heart seemed bursting from his chest, Paddy climbed toward that streak of gray, dimly visible among the trees.

Behind him—closer every minute, it seemed—he heard the shouts of his pursuers. As he struggled diagonally across an open space in the lodgepole growth a shot rang out, and the bullet clipped through the fronds above his head.

Then he was among the rocks, stumbling from boulder to boulder, scrambling over the slippery talus, till he knew the time had come. He dropped exhausted behind a fragment of rock, shifted the Millionaire Kid to a point of greater safety between his knees, and awaited the outcome.

It was almost daylight now, and the steady rain of nickel-jacketed bullets might start at any time. A chance hit, he knew, is just as deadly

as a shot well aimed. For the third time he wished with every nerve in his being that Pinky were there to keep him company. With the aid of that diminutive redhead he had come through tighter holes than this. Thus Paddy reflected, while his eyes searched the ragged line of timber for the first of his enemies. He had not long to wait.

A crouching form broke through the fringe of a brush thicket, raced upward among the pines, and climbed erect on a rock to scan the slope. Concealment was impossible. Paddy's .45 roared its challenge as the distant assailant sprang for cover.

At that range, well over a hundred yards, Paddy knew the ancient gun was far from a satisfactory weapon. Furthermore, the struggles of the Millionaire Kid, who since the beginnings of the fight had never ceased his lusty yells of protest, were anything but conducive to steadiness of aim. The weary blacksmith reached down a rough hand in an awkward attempt to pacify the child, failed ludicrously and grimly turned his attention to the task before him.

A fusillade from the automatics opened on his right. The bullets spat viciously against a rock face so close to his shelter that he could see the shining patch, hardly as large as a man's hat, made by their collective impact. He counted seven of the little gray blotches. Seven shots in a twelve-inch circle at eighty yards! Those city guys might be tenderfeet, but they sure knew how to handle their smoke wagons.

Paddy dug deeper behind his protecting boulder, showing the wailing two-year-old beneath him, and watched with wary eye for any threatening movement among the rocks.

Again and again the old single-

action roared its message when his living targets, relentlessly advancing, showed for an instant and were gone. Lead sprayed above him in a steady hail. Though Paddy had taken his chances with the best, never could he remember facing such a deadly fire as this. A bullet tore through the calf of his leg. As he flinched from the pain of it a stinging lash flicked across his back.

He knew, by now, that he had taken toll of the enemy. Of the five in the band that had raided the ranch, only four were making their way up the slope. But he knew, also, that they were flanking his position, that it was only a question of time—a time that could not be far distant—when that hail of death must seek him from all sides, and he must die like a trapped coyote when they closed in.

He heard the sound of a rolling stone on the hillside above him; and then, when he changed his cramped position to face this new danger, a geyser of pebbles stung in his bloody face.

Last chance. His great jaw set hard as he spun the cylinder of the .45, hot to his touch, and slipped in the shells. He caught the frantic child with his free hand, forcing it deep in the shelter of the rock rampart. Then he stood up, noticing that the morning sun was now high above the mountain crests.

FANNING the old gun with the speed of light, Paddy leaped from side to side in the storm of death which swept the slope. Moving figures seemed to be everywhere. Over the nose of the six-gun he saw one crumple, and he grinned.

But when he whirled to answer a fusillade from the ridge the single-action clicked twice, and went dead in his hand. The man crouching

there against the slope, hardly a stone's throw away, slipped home a fresh magazine. Paddy saw it, and waited for the end.

And then Paddy witnessed a strange thing, for his enemy, in the very act of fire, lifted slowly on his toes. The automatic dropped clattering from hands that rose above his head, clutching for something that Paddy could not see. He revolved on one heel, screaming, and fell on his face. Paddy gasped with the wonder of it.

Suddenly he realized that the barking pack cry of the automatics had ceased. Over all that rough mountain hung a silence as heavy as death itself, while a man's heart might beat twice; then a rifle cracked. Paddy saw a figure bounding down the slope toward the timber below; and he saw that figure leap into the air and somersault like a shot rabbit when the rifle spoke again. Then silence once more.

Ten seconds passed before Paddy caught sight of a battered gray Stetson rising as if by magic from among the rocks. Under that Stetson appeared a sinewy, red-headed cowpuncher, bristle-jowled, lean as a spring wolf. In the crook of his arm he held a rifle, and his right forefinger caressed the trigger gently as he came forward.

He looked Paddy over carefully, spat, and spoke disgustedly:

"Ain't I told you a hun'erd times to load yo' gun soon's she's empty? Don't wait for nothin'! What you standin' there for? Huh?"

It was Pinky.

Paddy grinned with delight. "Half-pint," he grinned, "you're sure welcome to my party. An' I'm right glad you didn't check your gun at the door."

"How many of 'em was there?" asked Pinky. "Five? That's two

for you, an' two for me. Got that last feller on th' wing, too. Not so bad."

Paddy sat down slowly. "My head's goin' round," he confessed. "Wisht I had a drink. How come you happened along, Pink?"

"I was driftin' home with the boss' answer t' that telegram," explained the puncher. "All of a sudden I hear shootin'. An' part of the shootin' is that old buffalo gun o' yours. I jest slipped over the ridge out o' curiosity. Wondered what in blazes brought you way up here."

The blacksmith jerked a weary thumb at the Millionaire Kid who, now that he had caught his breath and sized up the new turn of affairs, was standing on his own hind legs and yelling as lustily as ever.

"That brung me," Paddy said. "He's been yowlin' thataway pretty near all the time since two o'clock yesterday, I reckon. Them guys"—again the thumb jerked—"them guys raided the ranch an' kidnaped him. I jest strung along and got him back."

Pinky's mouth opened in astonishment. "Gosh sake!" he murmured. "What for?"

"Dunno." Paddy climbed slowly to his feet. "Dunno whether I kin make it to my horse, neither. Carry the Kid, will you, Pink?"

The redhead started as though a hornet had stung him. "Like heck I will!" he roared.

WHEN the C Lazy F, dudes and dudeens, wranglers, waitresses, and all, returned in the dusk of evening from a glorious day at the Cow Creek rodeo, terror and consternation broke loose. The Millionaire Kid was gone! Spike Powers, shot through the body, was hovering between life and death. Paddy Gleason had ridden off on

the trail of the kidnapers. That was all they could learn.

Throughout the long night, lights flashed about the ranch. Riders tore off into the darkness. The wires to distant towns and railroad stations hummed with the news. And a frantic mother, really concerned for once, offered ten thousand dollars—a hundred thousand—any amount, for the return of her son, alive.

It was almost noon when a wrangler flung his foaming horse on his haunches at the porch steps.

"I see 'em!" he shouted. "I seen 'em with my glasses, an' hightailed home t' tell you. Pink's one o' them kidnapers. Paddy's bringin' him an' the Kid. He's holdin' a gun on Pink!"

So an hour later when Pinky Moran, with the Millionaire Kid, still kicking, still squalling, held awkwardly before him on his saddle, pushed his way into the silent crowd that packed about the corral, and Paddy, his head bound with a crimson rag, followed him with drawn gun, there arose an ominous mutter of anger that bodied ill for someone.

The Millionaire Kid was lowered into the arms of his weeping mother. Pinky, red of face, looked stonily at the ground.

Jostling men pushed close to his horse, clenched fists upraised. Women glared and pointed. A hoarse voice, rising high like the hunting call of a timber wolf, expressed the sentiments of the crowd with the yell, "Lynch him!"

"Lynch the baby snatcher!"

In the twinkling of an eye a rope circled about Pinky's neck.

Then, and only then, did Paddy, reeling in his saddle, awake to what was going on. With a bellow, of rage he pushed his horse through the

press, up beside Pinky Moran and jerked off the rope.

"What's the matter with you folks?" he roared. "Pinky ain't done nothin'. What in blazes is all this?"

Angry faces took on a puzzled look. "Then what you holdin' a gun on him for?" growled one of the men.

Paddy grinned, a self-conscious

grin this time. "Aw, gee!" he protested, "I warn't goin' to pack that young wild cat no further. Pinky, he says he won't, neither. But by an' by I gits the drop on Pink an' he's ready to do like I asks him. See?"

And those who knew Paddy and Pinky well, they surely saw.

THE END.

WESTERN WAGONS

THE wagons used for hauling ore from the mining camps in the Western States are very different from the farm wagons of the East, or even the Western prairies. Besides these ore wagons, there were specially constructed vehicles, such as the huge wagons used for transporting borax from the mines in Death Valley across 165 miles of arid desert to the nearest railroad station. These became famous because of the big teams that pulled them—twenty mules in a long string, driven by one man.

The wheels on both the lead wagon and trailer were seven feet in diameter, the chilled-steel tires an inch thick and five inches in width. The hind wheels weighed something over five hundred pounds each. The whole vehicle weighed about seven thousand pounds, and the load carried by the two wagons was fifteen tons of borax.

Special coupling was used for the trailer, which differed radically from that of the ordinary "gooseneck and ring" of the prairie wagon teams that transported freight over the Santa Fe Trail. The regulation short tongue of the trailer is supported by an iron chain fastened to the hind axle of the front wagon. Two steel rods fastened close to the hub on the front axle of the trailer are connected with a "bull chain" that runs under the reach of the front wagon to the lighter chain, to which the spreader bars are attached. The brakes are of the heaviest possible construction and are the "California type," with the staff, or main lever, on the left side of the wagon directly behind the saddle of the driver, who handled the long team by means of a jerk-line running to the bit of the near leader.

The boxes, or wagon beds, are three times as deep as those of an ordinary ore wagon, and made of tough oak lumber well braced and ironed. Provision for carrying water between the infrequent streams or springs was made by placing two barrels on each wagon and fastening them solidly to the boxes by means of heavy strap iron.

The harness used on the mules was of the simplest manufacture, and except on the wheel team, consisted simply of a well-built Concord collar, hames, back band and chain tugs or traces. Bridles were unnecessary except on the leaders and wheel team, but since the mules could be handled more easily during the hitching-up process, most drivers used them. Drivers of the "twenty-mule teams" were self-reliant, resourceful men, capable of dealing with any teaming problem.



BUNKHOUSE FORUM

BY S. OMAR BARKER

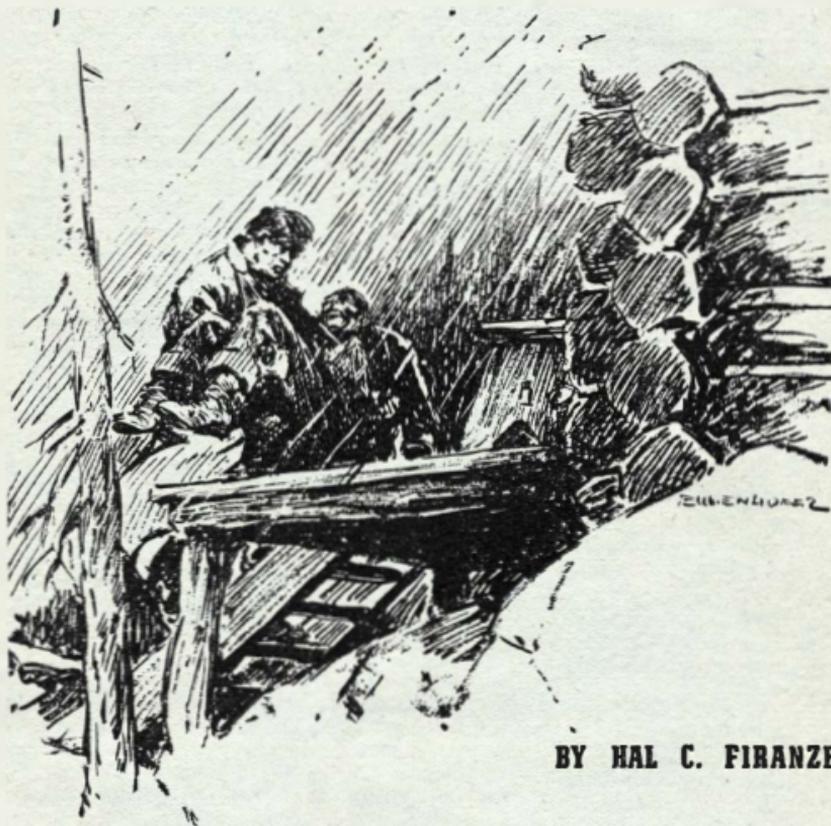
The bunkhouse is a forum where the cowboys air their views
 Upon most any subject that the mind of man could choose.
 From fishworms to philosophy, they shore can git it told,
 With the purest kind of logic fer opinions that they hold.
 You take, fer instance, music, an' what instrument's the best;
 Butch says he'll take pianners an' to hell with all the rest.
 "They give so many tunes at wunst an' ain't no trick to play;
 Jest poke your nickel in the slot an' hear 'em bang away!"

Jig claims that fiddle music is the kind that cain't be beat.
 "It goes in at your ears," he says, "an' comes out at your feet!"
 "The *gi-tarr*," argues Curly, "shore will do to take along;
 Jest twang it kind o' modest while you beller forth a song,
 An' if perchance your playin' isn't always up to snuff,
 Nobody ever knows it—if your singin's loud enough!"

Bud argues that the harp of gold must be the best of all,
 Because it's what the angels play. But Slim lets out a squall:
 "Now, Bud," he says, "you're dealin' in the realm of vain deceit.
 You'd better pick an instrument that's built to stand the heat!"
 "The jew's harp," growls ol' Durkin, who would sour a pot of tea,
 "That there's the only insterment I think I ever see
 That's got some claim to virtue. It's the one I'd shorely choose,
 Because it jest ain't big enough to make it hard to lose."

Ol' John, the cooksie, sucks his pipe, an' pops roomatic knees.
 "You ain't asked my opinion, boys; I'll give it if you please:
 The world is full of insterments"—he blinks his one good eye—
 "But mine's the ol' mouth organ, boys, an' now I'll tell you why:
 Most insterments takes brains to learn—we'd all be out of luck—
 But even cooks an' cowboys ain't too dumb to blow an' suck!
 Now toot horns may be wonderful, no doubt the zither's gay—
 But me, I'll choose the mouth harp, for it's all that I can play!"

HANGMAN'S GOLD



BY HAL C. FIRANZE

FROM up the mountain came a deep-toned, rumbling crash! It was heard above the heavy patter of rain which had fallen incessantly since three evenings ago. It sounded a good deal like thunder, yet the difference was readily distinguished by most of the employees of the Zenith Mining Co. And to them it instantly signified trouble and hard labor.

In an abandoned mucker's shack on a scrubby hillock, sitting at a

grimy table on which stood a smoky kerosene lamp, Leslie Rhyne tensed in every muscle of his gangling body at the reverberating crash. His lean, tanned face went grim and his brown eyes glared scornfully at the two men who sat opposite him.

Moose Hardeman, the uglier of the pair, shoved a cheap watch into a vest pocket and chuckled harshly. He was a tall, broad-shouldered brute with a craggy face, crooked nose, and a stubble of black beard

The slicker he wore was dripping wet, for he had entered the one-room hovel only a minute or two before.

"Well, she went off on the dot," he commented triumphantly. "Bet it blew the old dike to pieces, eh, Red?"

Red Craver grinned and nodded. He was half a head shorter than Hardeman, hatchet-faced, pock-marked, thick-lipped. He started to speak but paused to listen to a shrill whistle which echoed down from the mines.

"There's the distress signal!" he exclaimed. "Won't be long now 'fore the camp's clear of all men."

"Except us," chuckled Hardeman.

"An' Pop McCarthy," Craver reminded him. "That old sawed-off runt never goes far from the strong room."

"Pop?" Hardeman's eyes narrowed to thin slits. "I ran into him as I was slushin' back here. Guess he was out lookin' for you, Les."

Leslie Rhyme grasped the edge of the table, leaned forward a little and asked thickly, "What did he say?"

"He didn't see me," explained Hardeman. "But you needn't worry about him. He'll never bother us."

Rhyme noticed the wink which Hardeman gave Craver. Abruptly he sprang to his feet and blurted out, "I've done enough for you two! I'm through now!"

Hardeman rose leisurely from his battered chair. Craver promptly followed suit. A hideous sneer lent Hardeman an aspect of malignant ferocity.

"Don't be a fool! We're in on this together," he growled devilishly.

"But you can go ahead without me," persisted Rhyme. "I've packed the bullion in my trunk. More than fifty thousand dollars' worth. All that you can haul down—"

"Nothin' doin'! No one's backin' out now," rasped Hardeman. "C'mon, let's get goin'. We've got plenty to do before bustin' into the strong room."

Rhyme heaved a sigh of resignation. Both Hardeman and Craver were armed—he wasn't. For three hours they had kept him in the shack, virtually a prisoner, for fear he might betray their plans.

Reluctantly he donned his slouch hat and gray woolen topcoat, buttoning the collar high around his neck. Then he proceeded to the door where Craver, wrapped in a slicker, stood waiting. Moose Hardeman blew out the lamp and followed. In that order they slipped out into the storm. They pushed quietly through the driving rain and darkness, following a path along the top of the hillock.

Shouts reached down to them from above, indicating that the workers were rushing up the trails to the mines in response to the emergency call. There was plenty of work in store for them—repairing the dike blasted by Hardeman's time bomb, filling sacks with sand, and erecting a bulwark which would protect the mine properties. Enough work to last four or five hours, if not all night.

Rhyme knew that his companions would not be missed, for they had turned in their time that afternoon and collected the wages due them. Hardeman and Craver had worked as muckers for two months solely to find a way of looting the strong room and making a swift getaway with a fortune in gold.

RHYME cursed under his breath. It was an unlucky day for him when the pair of outlaws had shown up on Sentinel Mountain. For they represented what he had quit and

left behind—the owlhoot trail down Sonoma way.

His lawless career had been active but brief. A bank failure with a distinctly bad odor had precipitated him into it. His holdups had been directed only against the ones who had wrested away all he had possessed. He had not killed a single man, nor had he regained more than a small fraction of his losses. It had been, mainly, an outbreak of bitter resentment against certain law-protected thieves. After that, somewhat satisfied, he had escaped to this region and resumed a peaceful, law-abiding existence.

For two years he had enjoyed a spotless reputation in the mining camp. A reputation which he intended to protect at all costs. Hence he had submitted helplessly to Hardeman and Craver, whom he had run across several times during his lawless days. They could ruin him even with the little they knew about him!

He shivered involuntarily. Although he was wary of Craver, whom he followed closely, he strained his ears to catch every sound at his back. He suspected that Moose Hardeman would eliminate him, now that his usefulness to them was almost ended. Suddenly he heard a slight hiss of expelled breath and turned his head—*too late!*

He sensed rather than glimpsed the upraised arm descending with full force upon his head. He ducked instinctively. The pistol raked down the side of his head, sparsely protected by his hat brim and up-turned collar. A cry choked off in his throat as he crumpled limply to the wet ground and lay still!

Lights flashed before his blurred eyes. His head ached fiercely, and a dazing faintness swept over him.

He ground his teeth against the blackness, fighting it with all his will, so that he did not give way to complete unconsciousness.

Dully he realized he was unable to move a single muscle. He could only wait for a second blow which would shatter his skull, but strangely it was not delivered. He retained sufficient presence of mind to keep his eyes closed and remain limp, the while breathing as superficially as possible. Voices—faintly at first, then normally—sounded in his ears.

"Cripes, Moose!" came Craver's whispered exclamation. "You've killed him!"

"If I ain't, I don't know my own strength," Hardeman returned harshly.

That was why no second blow was struck. That was why not even a cursory examination was made.

"But—what for?" sputtered Craver.

"Did you think I'd risk lettin' him spoil our play now? Or split three ways? Hell, no!"

"S'pose we don't get clean away?"

"No one'll pin this on us. But we won't get caught," Hardeman assured him. "C'mon, Red. Shove him down the slope."

"What about the strong-room keys?"

"I've got 'em—Pop's."

Craver gasped: "Cripes! You've killed *him*, too?"

"Right at this spot," replied Hardeman cold-bloodedly. "Can't you figger it out, Red? Why, everyone will think Les an' Pop got into a fight here, tumbled down the hill an' bashed their heads on the rocks. Get it? Come on, grab hold!"

Leslie Rhyne held his breath as the two outlaws fumbled for holds and lifted him. The next moment, as they swung and released him, he

clamped his teeth together to keep from crying out as he crashed against the slope.

It jarred every bone in his body and knocked the breath out of him. The slope was so steep he couldn't stop his plunge toward the bottom. Wet branches and outjutting roots which he tried to grab scratched his hands and face. Shale and bark and mud trailed noisily after him. Then, at last, he struck joltingly against a boulder at the rock-littered bottom of the slope and lay there, battered, dazed, gasping.

He was on his back in mud, the rain dropping coldly on his face. There were darting pains in his left side. His head swam giddily. He tried to move, but groaned repeatedly as spasms of sickness coursed through him in waves of dreadful nausea.

He listened for sounds up the slope, but heard none. Hardeman and Craver undoubtedly had moved on.

IT seemed an eternity before Rhyne's throbbing head cleared a little and his muscles responded. Somehow he managed to struggle to his feet. He teetered weakly for several seconds, then stumbled about in the darkness.

He had taken only five or six steps when he bumped against something soft and yielding. He caught his breath, at once knowing what it was. Pop McCarthy!

For several seconds Rhyne stood undecided; then he knelt painfully beside the motionless form. Hope burned dimly within him. Perhaps McCarthy, like himself, was still alive. In the blackness he couldn't tell.

He got a good grip on the body and raised it from the ground. Dizziness swept over him anew. But he

clenched his teeth grimly; and determination lent strength to his arms and legs. It was slow, laborious progress that he made along the base of the hill. Rain and darkness impeded him. He could have carried his burden quite easily were it not for his weakened condition, for Pop McCarthy was scarcely five feet and weighed no more than a hundred pounds.

Off to the right stood a cluster of cabins, a score or more. He could not make out a single person, although lights were burning in a number of the dwellings. They were occupied by miners' wives, who could be depended upon to remain indoors on such a night. He skirted the cabins and cautiously plodded up a muddy, slippery incline.

The strong room stood on a high elevation from which, during the daylight hours, one could look down over tiny valleys, canyons, silvery streams and thousands of acres of forest. He had often enjoyed the picturesque, awe-inspiring view. On a clear, starry night he could have seen the pin point of light many miles below which marked Ranger Bruce West's cabin—but not on such a night as this.

The rain had abated a little by the time he managed to climb to the strong room. Placing Pop McCarthy on a crude bench outside, he drew out his keys and unlocked the door. The office, which contained the strong box itself, was always kept dimly lighted at night. He staggered with the limp shape through it to an adjoining room.

It was the bedroom which he and McCarthy, as guardians of the strong box, shared jointly. He deposited the body on a bunk, then stared at it with mingled rage and anguish.

Pop McCarthy was dead. Even

the faint illumination from the office was sufficient to reveal the smashed skull, gray hair matted with blood, the mud-spattered, wizened face and wiry, stunted body from which life had departed forever.

"Murdered!" Rhyne panted.

Gnawing misery assailed him. Pop McCarthy had not been a bad sort. Stern, fearless, uncommonly hard on the surface—probably on account of his diminutive size—he had been kind and just at heart. Rhyne had taken quite a liking to him, although at times they had exchanged harsh words and engaged in petty quarrels. Rhyne groaned bitterly. There had to be something he could do about this murder!

His gaze switched suddenly to a large trunk in a corner of the room. Brick upon brick of gold was stacked in that trunk. Gold that he had taken from the strong box and for which he had supplanted bricks of lead. He would never have gotten away with it if McCarthy had not trusted him so implicitly.

Any minute now Moose Hardeman and Red Craver would arrive for the trunk.

Rhyne knew the outlaws were not in a hurry, for they had planned on allowing all hands time to reach the mines. That had been the main object of blowing up the dike. In the meanwhile, they were to go to the cabin they had occupied, procure their knapsacks and rifles, and carry them down to the river. Rhyne hoped they wouldn't show up at the strong room until he found some way to outwit them.

He wondered if he should try to summon aid, but decided against it. The telephone line to the mines, as well as to the outside, had been broken in many places by the storm; it had been out of order for over twenty-four hours. Besides, help

would arrive too late. Nor was it advisable to spread an alarm among the women in camp. Some of them might get hysterical and endanger their lives.

He grabbed a six-gun and holster. Should he stave off the forthcoming raid? Hardly. Even if he succeeded in thwarting the robbery, there remained the killing of Pop McCarthy. Hardeman and Craver would deny it vehemently and perhaps divert suspicion to himself. Wasn't the gold in *his* trunk?

Suddenly a plan entered his mind and he immediately weighed its possibilities. If he had time to carry it out, he would not only frustrate the robbery, but definitely establish an iron-clad case of murder!

Rhyne moved quickly about the two rooms, working desperately against time. When at last he was through, he looked critically about, making sure everything was in order. Then he hastened to the door, slipped warily out and locked it.

He was but a dozen steps from the strong room when he jumped swiftly behind a bush beside the path. To his keen ears had come faint footsteps, and presently he saw two shadowy shapes trudging up the slope.

"Bet that trunk's heavy," came Craver's whisper as they passed close by.

"The heavier the better," Hardeman chuckled.

They passed on and Rhyne waited until they had unlocked the door and vanished inside the building before he sneaked out of hiding. Then he hurried away, taking the shortest cut to the river.

AT the only spot where the stream could be forded all year round, Leslie Rhyne noticed that the outlaws had reserved the largest and

strongest canoe for their flight. Luckily the others had not yet been sent spinning downstream, cutting off potential pursuit by the river route, as planned.

So Rhyme snatched off the ragged canvas from a smaller boat, pushed it into the swift current and grasped the paddle. She rode nicely from the very start.

The river flowed through a high-walled gorge. Ordinarily the water was not sufficiently deep to cover the boulders on the floor of the gorge, but now those dangerous fangs were many feet below the level of the current. It was the only logical route for a quick escape.

The outlaws had readily realized that the storm was their best ally. It had flooded the whole region, making footing insecure for man and animal. Pursuit on horseback was entirely out of the question. Even the pack train which brought up grub and took away the gold was not expected on the morrow as per schedule. And by the time anyone could descend the high mountain afoot, Hardeman and Craver would be safely out of the region.

The rushing water whisked Rhyme along at a dangerous, breathtaking speed. Though he considered himself an expert with a canoe, he was forced to employ all the skill he possessed. For the hazards about him were many.

From one wall to the other the gorge was in flood. Torrents of rain water had poured into it from every ravine and declivity for three days and nights. It was a roaring river; and on the flood's crest floated debris of the forest—stumps, bark, branches, clinging moss and trailing vines.

These things were not easily seen, much less avoided, in the darkness. Time and time again something

bumped heavily and grated against the craft. Each bump jarred him from head to foot, and soon he ached in every muscle.

With his declining strength he struggled to keep the canoe on an even keel in midstream. He dared not approach too close to the perpendicular granite walls of the gorge. Picturesque in the daytime, those cliffs seemed to tower threateningly above him now. A sudden crash against their jagged sides would splinter the craft and send him swiftly into eternity.

Mile after mile he sped down the gorge. At times when the canoe lurched perilously and the debris swirled and pounded against her, minutes were like hours. But by skillful paddling and grim defiance he managed to maneuver out of every grave danger. So occupied was he at the task that he scarcely realized the rain had ceased.

Finally he was through the worst of it. Exhausted and drenched, he moved into calmer waters and relaxed a little. The river was much broader now and the granite walls had given way to brush-covered banks.

"Made it!" he exulted.

After floating along for a while, he guided the canoe around a sharp bend in the river and sighted his destination—the cabin of Bruce West, forestry service. He paddled toward it.

Several minutes later he crawled out of the boat and stumbled weakly up to the door. He entered without knocking. Exclamations of surprise greeted him as he stopped and blinked about the room. There were nine or ten men present; some were sitting around a warm stove, the rest at a table playing cards. The pack train had holed up here!

"It's Les Rhyne," someone remarked.

"Quick—stop them!" panted Rhyne. "They're coming—down the river—"

Bruce West, a strapping man in a drab-colored uniform, came up to him and said, "You look all in. What happened?"

"Never mind about me. Two muckers, Hardeman and Craver, broke into the strong room," snapped Rhyne. "Don't lose any time, I tell you! They'll come by here any moment!"

The men leaped to their feet, grabbed for slickers, rifles and torches, then all rushed outside. On the bank of the river the torches were lighted and presently a bright glow reached out across the width of the stream. They waited with grim faces and cocked guns. Rhyne anxiously scanned the bend of the river. Eons seemed to drag by.

Then suddenly into sight swung a large canoe with Red Craver working the bow paddle and Moose Hardeman aft. The trunk, between them, must have acted as an excellent ballast during their rough voyage. Floating into the lighted area before they were aware of it, the grins on their faces melted quickly into expressions of mixed astonishment and uneasiness. They were too easy a target to change their course now.

"Hi, you two!" Ranger West shouted at them. "Paddle this way—*pronto!*"

Hardeman was seen muttering something to Craver, but after a brief hesitation they obeyed the command.

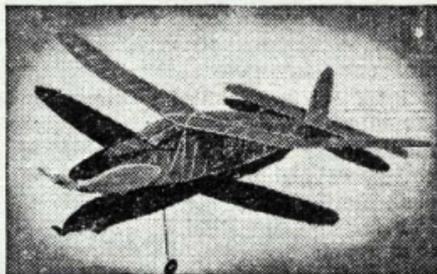
"What d'you jaspers want?" belted Hardeman.

"You'll find out," replied West brusquely.

The boat came in, struck the bank and lodged in the sand.

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"Say, I don't get this," Hardeman bluffed. "Me an' Red quit work today. We're on our way—"

"Step out—and bring that trunk with you," West ordered tersely.

Leslie Rhyne stepped forward. "Why, that's my trunk. They've stolen it!" he rasped.

Both outlaws started visibly and stared with bulging eyes and slack mouths. They seemed to have difficulty recognizing him in his disheveled, mud-covered, scratched condition. Red Craver gulped and fidgeted as if seeing a ghost, while Moose Hardeman wagged his head with baffled consternation.

Realizing they were trapped, there was nothing they could do but heave the trunk out on the bank. The men who surrounded them were hard and quick on the trigger.

Bruce West unbuckled the straps, slid open the catch and heaved up the lid of the trunk. Immediately he fell back aghast.

"God!" he gasped. "*It's . . . it's Pop McCarthy!*"

Hardeman and Craver stood rooted to the ground, unable to believe the testimony of their eyes as they stared into the trunk. Doubled up inside, minus hat and slicker, was the murdered strong-room guard!

"There are bars under Pop's body.

Not of gold—*lead*," went on West, puzzled. He glared at the outlaws. "I don't get it. If you wanted to dump the trunk and all into the river, why didn't you do it farther up? You may as well explain this killing."

Hardeman and Craver stiffened, blinked balefully at Rhyne. The hangman's rope dangled over their heads, a death infinitely more horrible than one by lead. Since they had not been disarmed, no odds were too great in their predicament—of a mutual impulse, they went for their guns!

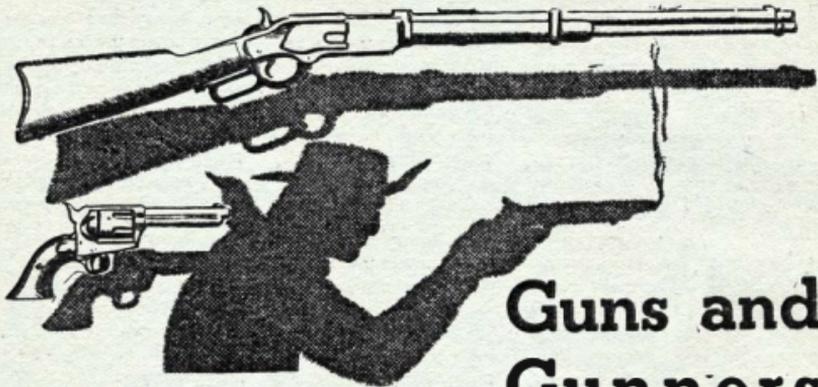
Only Rhyne was not taken by surprise. His gun seemed to leap into his hand and thundered twice. Red Craver slumped at once to the earth, but Moose Hardeman just folded halfway, staggered, and tried to bring up his weapon. Rhyne again squeezed the trigger. This time Hardeman went slack and flopped down grotesquely beside Craver.

"Fast shooting, Rhyne—and fast justice!" exclaimed Ranger West.

Leslie Rhyne had wanted it to be that fast. There was no longer any danger that the two outlaws would talk. Rhyne had a reputation as a solid, decent citizen, and for as long as he lived he meant to keep that reputation clean.

THE END.





Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

THERE'S plenty of discussion these days concerning the new army rifle. Some magazines have referred to this as the finest automatic rifle in the world. Others have indicated that when our army is equipped with these rifles, we will be the only nation to have a truly rapid-fire rifle. This is not quite accurate. Most foreign governments are well equipped with automatic rifles and have been for a number of years.

Officially known as the U. S. Rifle M1, the gun is commonly called the Garand, for John C. Garand, its inventor and the senior ordnance engineer at the United States Springfield Armory. We have been getting many letters of inquiry about this arm.

Your firearms editor is one of the few writers in the field who has been privileged to examine this rifle in detail *during the process of manufacture!* In these times of espionage and strict government regulations of visitors to manufacturing plants, forts, arsenals and military posts, he had the opportunity not only to look the gun over, but to photograph much of the manufacturing detail, under official permission from the war department at Washington.

Your firearms editor has been a regular visitor at Springfield Ar-

mory for more years than he cares to count. He has seen hundreds of experimental developments and knows that Uncle Sam was working for a suitable automatic rifle at the close of the World War.

When we entered the war in 1917, we had no automatic arm of sufficient portability to be satisfactory until Browning designed the Model 1917 light machine rifle which made history. These Brownings were made at Springfield Armory and under various commercial contracts, and are still standard equipment. The Model 1917 weighs around sixteen pounds empty, as I recall it.

To begin with, all army rifles, under normal conditions, are manufactured at the United States Springfield Armory, the oldest government armory in this country. It was founded under orders of George Washington back in the 1790s and, while back in Civil War times ammunition was made there, for more than eighty years the plant has been used only to manufacture arms and tools.

Springfield Armory is actually two factory plants, separated by half of

the city of Springfield, Massachusetts. One group of these is down around the river and is known as the "Water Shops," while the main buildings, experimental, assembly and wood-working plants are located uptown in what is known as the "Hill Shops."

The Garand rifle is not new. Uncle Sam began experimenting with it in various forms nearly twenty years ago, and the design of the present Garand was patented in December, 1932, although little was said about it in the public press until 1939. Official permission from Washington permits this discussion.

The present Garand rifle is about the same size as the standard service Springfield, and at present is intended to be an auxiliary arm rather than a replacement. Probably the service Springfield will be discarded eventually except for sniping and other super-accurate work, particularly at the longer ranges. The Garand is an 8-shot rifle designed for use at ranges up to five hundred yards, and while it is sufficiently accurate for military purposes, it will not equal the service Springfield.

At the present time, seventy-five thousand of these new Garand rifles are being made on a special contract by Winchester, and at this writing no other private contracts have been let. Springfield Armory is producing two hundred rifles per eight-hour day and plan to produce a thousand a

week—totaling fifty-two thousand during 1940.

Despite its auto-loading features, the Garand rifle is not complicated. It contains seventy-three parts and costs about twice as much as do the present standard service Springfields.

Each rifle is given a special test with proof cartridges and rapid-fire functioning rounds. Each individual gun is shot in test firing about eighty-five assorted rounds.

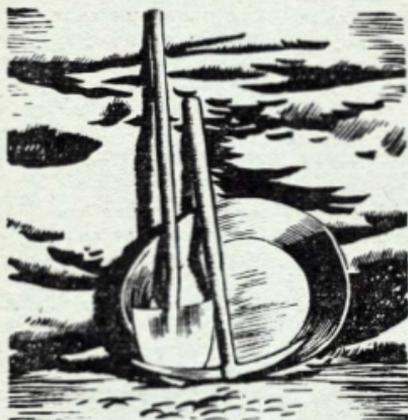
Mr. Garand told me that the gun is capable of being shot at the rate of one hundred rounds per minute, but the average soldier can shoot it accurately at about thirty-five rounds per minute. In rapid-fire shooting a barrel is good for about six thousand rounds and about eight thousand rounds when shot slow-fire.

The seventy-three parts of the Garand rifle require a total of two thousand one hundred different operations in the course of manufacture. This includes machining, bench operations, assembly, and inspection.

This is all the information that the war department permits us to release on the Garand rifle at the present time. We might add, however, that the rifles are not available for sale to individual members of the National Rifle Association and there is no intention of releasing them for sale for some time, or at least until the army is properly equipped.

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

ANTIMONY is one of the ten mineral products considered strategic by the Army and Navy Munitions Board. Heretofore, most of our supply of this important metal has come from foreign sources; China largely, although more recently Mexico and South America have been supplying the bulk of our country's antimony needs.

Today, in keeping with the United States' efforts to make itself self-sufficient wherever possible in the matter of these strategic metals, more and more attention is being paid the possibilities of increased domestic antimony production.

To the prospector, this means yet another metal to look for, another string to his bow in his earnest search for mineral wealth in the vast, still rich, mining regions of the West. That's both a general tip to you up-to-date ore hunters and a specific an-

swer to G. B. R., of Detroit, Michigan.

Said G. B. R., in a late letter: "Having enjoyed the Mines and Mining Department for a number of years, I would like to ask you a question; not about gold this time but about 'antimony.' I have a friend who says he has properly staked and registered a mining claim that shows a big deposit of almost pure antimony ore. Is antimony very valuable? Anything you can tell me about this metal will be welcome."

Well, for the reasons outlined in the introduction to this article, a good, workable antimony deposit in this country ought to have the possibilities of becoming a valuable property. Until just recently the bulk of our domestic antimony has come as a by-product from lead smelters handling certain types of lead ores. Smelters handling primary antimony ores have been few and far between. There has been one at Laredo, Texas, taking care of the Mexico ores shipped in from that country, but it is too far away from our own mining centers to make shipping United States antimony ore down there a paying proposition. However, about a year ago the Menardi Metals Co. in Los Angeles opened a plant to handle antimony and began producing that metal.

This was a fortunate occurrence for the antimony prospects in Inyo County, California. Aside from California, Idaho and Nevada are also mining States in which good showings of antimony have already been found. Other States which might profit by development of a domestic antimony mining industry are Arkansas, Montana and Washington, all of which have already produced small amounts of the metal, though production from the mines and pros-

pects there have been highly intermittent—emergency stuff rather than a steady flow of the metal. Alaska, too, has the possibilities of becoming an important antimony producer in the future.

Antimony finds its principal present-day use in the manufacture of storage batteries, and is also used extensively in making the alloys that constitute babbitt metal for bearings.

In the field, stibnite, the chief ore of antimony, occurs as a mineral readily recognizable both by its physical qualities, appearance and by easy auxiliary tests. The ore is most frequently found in quartz veins running through various rocks, usually limestone. Sometimes, in metallogically mineralized country, it is found in veins in granites.

Stibnite is a sulphide of antimony and carries about seventy percent pure metal. It is lead-gray, fairly heavy, and quite soft. A fresh fracture shows a definite, bright, silvery metal shine. One of its main distinguishing characteristics is its softness. Stibnite can be scratched with a fingernail. Another important feature is its low melting point. A thin splinter of the mineral will melt even in so little heat as afforded by the flame of a match.

This easy meltability and its extreme softness are handy identifying tests for stibnite. Another test, if you happen to be equipped in the field for making blowpipe examinations, lies in the fact that a small

piece of stibnite set on a square of charcoal and heated with a blowpipe will give off a dense, heavy white smoke that has no odor.

Sometimes gold is also present in conjunction with antimony ores, a situation that naturally and nicely adds to their value.

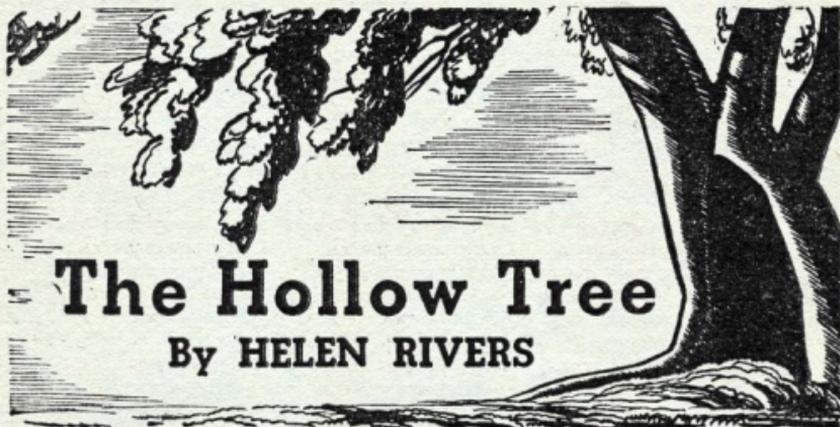
To B. K., Lincoln, Nebraska: Placer-gold mining is and has been carried on down in Guatemala in Central America along the Montagua River near Morales back in toward the center of the Republic. Placer gravels are also found at various points along the Srastoon River, which flows into the Gulf of Honduras up near the British Honduras border.

Mining laws are liberal down there. Gravel deposits containing gold, when on public domain (but not, of course, on privately owned land), can be worked freely by anyone without filing any kind of claim as long as merely small-scale individual gold-winning methods are used, such as sluice box, rocker, gold pan or batea. That also means that you can only hold the ground while you are actually working on it, panning or washing out the gravel. When you leave, the next fellow can come along and work the same stretch, carrying on where you left off.

For large-scale work, dredges, drag-line operations and such, involving the use of machinery, a special grant must be applied for and obtained before you can go ahead.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.



The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

This week we've corralled lots more friends for you to correspond with, and no matter what your preference, there's someone here for you. In fact, we recommend writing to everyone who has a letter in the Tree, so how about starting off with this English lad whose letter is directly below?

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young lad eighteen years old in training at a Royal Air Force college, and I would like to correspond with Pen Pals from all over the world. I promise to answer all letters and will exchange photographs. My favorite outdoor sports are football, cricket, swimming, shooting, climbing and skating, and my favorite indoor sports are table tennis, chess and billiards. My pet hobbies are the wireless and collecting Pen Pals.—574460 A/A David Kay, Hut 10—B Block, Squadron B—1 (A) Wing, R.A.F., Cosford, Albrighton, Staffs, England

From New Mexico comes this plea—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am nineteen years old and would like to hear from other boys and girls from everywhere. My hobbies are collecting snapshots, scenic post cards and souvenirs. Would someone like to exchange them with me? I will gladly tell you about my State and about places where I have traveled. I enjoy dancing, singing, skating, swimming and the movies. I'll be waiting to hear from you all soon.—Evelyn Moore, Box 482, Portales, New Mexico

Write to this shut-in—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I wonder if you would be so kind as to drop a letter in the Hollow Tree for an old cowhand who has been bedridden for the past seven years? I've been a reader of the Old Hollow for a long time and through it have made Pen Pals from a good many parts of the world. My hobbies are reading, collecting stamps and writing letters. I will enjoy hearing from everyone, everywhere, and will do my best to answer all letters. I will gladly exchange stamps, too.—Edgar White, St. John's Sanatorium, Springfield, Illinois

Clara wants lots of new friends—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely Italian miss, sixteen years old, and I'm looking for Pen Pals from all over the world. I like to write letters and make new friends. My hobby is collecting snapshots, and my favorite sports are horseback riding and bicycle riding. I would like to hear from boys and girls between sixteen and twenty-five years of age, so come on, boys and girls, and fill my mailbox.—Clara Carotta, Rt. No. 1, Rupert, Idaho

Calling all speed demons—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I'm a lonely boy from the Bay State hunting for a few Pen Pals. Could you find anyone interested in swapping information and pictures with me? If possible, those in Alaska, Canada and the West are preferred, but I'll answer any and all letters. In exchange for stories about the customs in those parts of the world and about wild life and the mountains, I'll write about New England and flying. I'm seventeen years old and enjoy all sports, writing, reading and flying. In fact anything with speed interests me greatly, so come on, you speed demons, and write to me.—Martin Rogers, 6 Beacon Avenue, Newburyport, Massachusetts

Joe and Henry can cook—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Here is another plea for Pen Pals from two lonely CCC boys who would appreciate corresponding with Pen Pals from all over the country. Henry is twenty years old, and Joe is eighteen, and we are first and second cook in a side camp twenty miles from the nearest town. We like all sports, dancing, movies and music and we promise to answer all letters.—Joe Marjinsky and Henry Schubert, CCC Company 3692, P 263, Lyman, Washington

Elsie is giving you a second chance—

I enjoy your page very much, so I am sending in my plea for Pen Pals and hope all who read it will answer. I have replied to lots of letters, but have not received any answers. I am sixteen years old and love all sports. I

promise to answer all letters and will exchange photos and postal cards with all who wish, so come on, everyone, and write to me.—Elsie Stump, Rt. No. 2, Brooklyn, Michigan

Sarah will answer all mail—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-five years old and would like some Pen Pals from all over the world. My favorite sports are hiking, riding and swimming, and I also enjoy dancing. Come on, all you folks, and write to me. I will answer all letters and exchange snapshots.—Sarah Conn, Morehead, Kentucky

Charles wants to gather friends—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Will you please let a rolling stone that has finally stopped enter a plea for Pen Pals? I am forty years old, live all alone and am very lonesome. I love the outdoors and have traveled all over western Canada and Mexico and can tell you about homesteading in Canada. I will do my best to answer all letters.—Charles Abbott, Ireston, Missouri

Dorothy is an athlete—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young working girl sixteen years old and I would like to hear from girls and boys between seventeen and twenty-five years of age. Stamp collecting and writing letters are my hobbies, and I play basketball and volleyball. So, come on, Pals, and write to me; I promise to answer all letters.—Dorothy Brown, 55 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Canada

American friends wanted here—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am eighteen years old and would like to find a Pen Pal. My profession is architecture, and my favorite sports are swimming and riding. I enjoy dancing, too. I would like to correspond with boys and girls in different parts of America, as I propose to continue my studies in that country later on. For that reason I would like to have some friends there who could give me information about America and show me around when I come over there.—Alan B. Nelson, Cartwright Street, Glenroy W9, Victoria, Australia

Make Florence's mailman work overtime—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Please print my plea for Pen Pals. I am thirty-six years old and would like to have some pals from all over the world, especially from the West and Northwest and foreign countries. My hobby is collecting match folders. I will try to answer all letters and hope you swap the mailman.—Florence Shearer, 808 Prairie Street, Elkhart, Indiana

Charles can tell you all about oil fields—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am thirty-five years old, work in the oil fields for a living and go to the races for di-

version. My hobby is tinkering with the radio. I would like to correspond with anyone who thinks I might be interesting. I can tell them all about the oil fields in most parts of the United States and about racetracks and the towns and cities where they are located.—Charles Edwards, P. O. Box 271, Sourlake, Texas

Billie will send gifts to the first five—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young girl fourteen years old and I would like to hear from girls from all over the world. I live on a farm fourteen miles from Troy, New York, and go to a one-room schoolhouse which is lots of fun. My favorite sports are skating, swimming, boating and fishing. I will send a gift to the first five people who write to me. My nickname is Billie, and I would like my Pen Pals to call me that. Here's hoping I get lots of letters.—Wilhelmina Tschumi, R. F. D. No. 2, Valley Falls, New York

Francis is another junior member of the Tree—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am fifteen years old and attend high school. My hobby is collecting book matches, which I will gladly exchange with other boys or girls who have the same hobby. I will answer all letters and post cards.—Francis Demagalski, 1546 Bilyard Street, Eugene, Oregon

Here's a new reason for wanting Pen Pals—

Dear Miss Rivers:

We are not lonely, but we wish to correspond with folks in different parts of the world to improve our penmanship. We would especially like to hear from sailors, musicians and people who have traveled a lot. Lois is fourteen, and Frances is seventeen years old. Here's hoping we get lots of Pen Pals.—Frances Johnese and Lois King, Hickman, Arkansas

Harry wants to hear from farm dwellers—

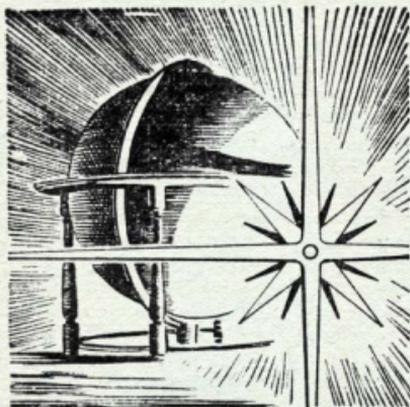
Dear Miss Rivers:

This is my first attempt to write you, and I hope I succeed in getting some Pen Pals my age. I am twenty-seven years old and would like to hear from boys and girls who live on farms in Western and Southern States. I enjoy riding, hiking, swimming and dancing and will exchange snapshots. I promise an interesting reply to all who are willing to become friends with me, and will reply without fail to all.—Harry Tardif, Box 46, Jefferson, New Hampshire

This Canadian pal is interested in your hobbies—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like to hear from Pen Pals from all over the world. I am twenty years old and fond of many sports. I am interested in other people's hobbies and in collecting pictures from different countries.—Florence Baxter, 830 Carlow Avenue, Toronto, Canada



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

A GREAT many folks, including C. E., of Grand Rapids, have been asking about the Lower Rio Grande Valley. "I hear that the land down along the Border is being developed into agricultural country," C. E. writes. "My impression had been that there was nothing down there except cactus, scrub oak and desert sand. Could you tell me if there's any chance for a man to make a living down there?"

The first thing to say about the valley is that it surely is worth looking into. You are right about the country once being pretty tough on man and beast, but you ought to see it now!

Starting at the mouth of the Rio Grande River, and extending west-

ward along the Border for some seventy miles lies the section that is commonly called the "Lower Rio Grande." The climate is mild the year round, and the soil is as rich as any you will find in the country.

Why, you might ask, wasn't it always a paradise then, if the soil is so rich? And the answer, of course, as it is everywhere—water! You don't find a lot of rainfall, and as a consequence garden vegetables wouldn't grow before.

But now all that is changed, and once again the hand of man has lifted the face of nature. Deep wells and irrigation systems have been put in so that the land doesn't have to depend on rainfall. And when you take a soil which hasn't been worked in the history of mankind, but has been accumulating humus, and then give it water, you've got very rich ground. That's what they did here.

Then they planted citrus-fruit orchards, and until these were reaching a bearing age they started growing vegetables in winter for the northern markets. They started coining money.

Northern farmers, limited by extremes of weather to various seasonal crops, heard of what irrigation was doing down here and they packed up and went down, bag and baggage. They set to work, and so fast did they arrive that new towns and cities sprang up overnight.

Being on the Border is really exciting, and it is pretty nice to jump into your car after the day's work is done and go abroad—into Mexico.

But a man has to make a living down there as well as play, so he will want to know about the agricultural activities. I have spoken of the

John North will supply addresses from which colored, illustrated literature on this section of the Rio Grande can be had to those sending stamped, self-addressed envelopes.

richness of the land, where they say that if you plant a pumpkin seed the vine will grow so fast it will wear the fruit out dragging it along the ground.

For quicker action than comes when an orchard is planted, farmers from the various other sections of the country will want to hear about the raising of vegetables and staple crops. Vegetables are extremely important down there, because they are ground in the winter, shipped north, and get top prices when most of the other sections of the country can't raise them.

So now where you used to see big dry cactus patches, you will see acre after acre of table vegetables, row on row, with water being fed to them through irrigation channels. Vast acreage is devoted to the more staple vegetables such as tomatoes, corn and cabbage.

While many of the farms down there raise assorted vegetables, a lot of specialists have sprung up, some of them raising nothing but acre after acre of onions, parsley, asparagus, celery, dandelions, escarole, anise, romaine, savoy, English peas, shallots, egg plant, et cetera.

And here's an addition to the farm income that can't be enjoyed everywhere. After the high-priced winter vegetable crop is gathered the land is not allowed to lie idle, even though it has made a good profit. It is put to the plow, and while other lands lie under snow, it is raising a crop of cotton. This cotton is ready to pick and market as early in the year

as June, being about the first on the national market.

And then there is another offshoot of this double-crop system which brings a profit to the valley. Because of the general practice of putting in cotton for this off-season extra money, there has naturally had to spring up in the locality cotton gins and compresses, and these, of course, offer a lot of town employment to wage earners.

And like the endless chain, it doesn't stop here. Because of the general practice which is spreading among manufacturers of locating their plants near the source of supply instead of near shipping centers, there has been an influx of manufacturers of cotton products into south Texas. So you plant cotton seed, and it doesn't leave your neighborhood until it is made into thread and shipped out on spools. There are several of these thread factories down there, and they are continually expanding.

For the man who prefers to concentrate on tree crops, the sub-tropical climate of southern Texas is excellent for the raising of dates, bananas, and similar fruits.

Getting back to more familiar crops, dairying, livestock and poultry raising are followed extensively on valley farms. Cattle of all types are bred, and a few longhorns are even raised down there.

In other words, whatever your inclination may be in farming, the lower Rio Grande Valley is an excellent place to pursue it.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.



Missing Department

CATES, THOMAS IRA—He is my father, whom I have never seen. I was born in 1917 and in that year he left for Texas. My mother's maiden name was Ida Lee Taylor. She died in 1917. If anyone knows my father's whereabouts, I wish they'd communicate with me. I am married now and my name is Mrs. Lois Riddle, Sonora, California.

McMILLAN, MRS. ADA—She is my mother, and when last heard of was in Payo, Georgia. "Mother, I lost the one I loved three months ago, but I am living up here among his people, who seem to care for me. I have a good home, and all I ask is to hear from you and dad. I am lonesome for a letter from you. Write to me at the following address: c/o Rob Mathis, R-1, Sandersville, Georgia."

CRAIG, ELLIS and WALTER—Ellis is my father. He is fifty-three years old, five feet eight inches tall, and has gray hair and eyes. Walter is my brother. He is twenty-one years old, five feet eight inches tall, and has brown hair and eyes. They were last heard of in 1934, at which time they were in Waterloo, Illinois. If anyone knows their whereabouts, please get in touch with me.—Eugene Craig, Nelafoney, Oklahoma.

YOUNGER, or BROWN, ALICE—She is my sister, and we believe she is living in or near Ionia, Michigan. She is thirty-four years old and I've been told that since I saw her, when she was twenty-one years old, she married and has since died. I do not believe it. Her last known address was 486 North Jackson Street, Ionia, Michigan. I have important news for her, and am very anxious to see or hear from her. Any information about her will be greatly appreciated.—Fred Younger, 114 North Loomis Street, Chicago, Illinois.

DEVOY, BLAINE (ED)—He is my father, and we are anxious to know whether he is still living. When we last heard from him he was living in San Francisco, had remarried, and had two little girls, Laverne and Ella Jean. I was only five years old then, I am eighteen now. My two older brothers and myself would like to hear from him if he is living or any of his children, or anyone else who has any information about him.—Albert M. DeVoy, c/o E. Wilson, P. O. Box 314, Folsom, California.

WIRES, IRA—He is my cousin, and the son of Gene Wires of Brockport, New York. He is about forty years old now, and I haven't seen him since we were children and he was visiting my mother and I in Batavia, New York. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please get in touch with me.—Mrs. Florence Herrington Harper, 415 Woodlawn Avenue, Clearwater, Florida.

LUTZO, HENRY and MRS. JOSEPH—They are my mother's sister and brother, and I am very anxious to get in touch with them. If anyone knows their whereabouts, please communicate with me.—Elliott Bockstodt, Middletown State Hospital, Middletown, New York.

LUCKINBILL, WILLARD—He was born in April, 1902, at Damar, Kansas. He is five feet seven inches tall and has sandy hair, gray eyes, and a strawberry birthmark in the middle of his back. His last known address was 1337 East Thirty-seventh Avenue, Denver, Colorado. If anyone knows his whereabouts, I wish they'd communicate with me.—Rose Luckinbill, 909 West Thirteenth Avenue, Denver, Colorado.

LOCKETT, EVANS—He is my son, from whom I have not heard since March, 1932, at which time he was living in Dover, New Jersey. His wife's name is Rosy, and he has two sons, Evans, three years old, and Richard, one year old. I would like any information about him whether he is dead or alive.—Mrs. Lulu Blockum, Social Circle, Georgia.

NOTICE—I am trying to find my daughter, Juanita Jordan. I haven't heard from her or seen her in ten years. She was living with her grandfather, Mr. E. E. Passmore, somewhere in Oklahoma. Her mother's name is Mrs. Ellen Jordan. If anyone knows her whereabouts, I wish they'd communicate with me.—Houston Jordan, 800 Louis Street, Little Rock, Arkansas.

NOTICE—I am trying to locate my parents. My foster parents, George and Ada Seymour, are deceased now. I was given to them when I was a few months old and was told that my birthday was January 3, 1905. They named me Ruth Alden Seymour, and it is believed that Alden is my real name. The Seymours were residents of Los Banos, California, when I was brought to them. Later they moved to Hollister, Hanford and then Los Angeles. "Mother and dad, the past is past. There will be no questions asked and no reproaches. Wherever you are, please trust me and communicate with me. I am willing to keep your identity a secret should you wish it.—Your loving daughter, Ruth Alden Seymour, 814 Woodlawn Avenue, Venice, California."

PARCUS—I would like to hear from anyone bearing that name. My great-grandfather was Jonathan Parcus and was supposed to have moved from New York State to Indiana in 1823, or thereabouts.—William Parcus, North Terre Haute, Indiana.

FISHER, THOMAS, JOHN and CLEM—They were last heard of about twenty-two years ago, at which time they were in Newport, Arkansas. "Please write to your half-sister who was Hadee Brumley." Or if anyone knows their whereabouts, please get in touch with me.—Mrs. Hadee Gardner, Clayton, Oklahoma.

BAUGHEN, MICHAEL—He is my father's brother, and when last heard of was somewhere in New York. He had two children, Robert and Michael. We would very much like to hear from him or his children.—Sheila Baughen, Main Street, Moate, Westmeath, Ireland.

COOK, VIRGINIA and IRIS—I would like to know the whereabouts of these two girls. They are nineteen and twenty years old, and have a brother who lives in Los Angeles, California. They lived with me for several years, and I am anxious to hear from them again.—Mrs. E. Ketchum, Box 88, Winslow, Arizona.

COURTS, PALMER—He is my son, and he left home several years ago to go out West. He is sixty-one years old, and I heard within the past year that he is still living. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please communicate with me.—Mrs. Margaret Hackett, Castine, Maine.

ELMORE, ZACK and KATHI—I would very much like to get in touch with these old friends of mine again. I lost track of them forty years ago. My name then was Julie Walker. If anyone knows their whereabouts, please communicate with me.—Mrs. H. L. Welch, 295 Rankin Road, Alcoa, Tennessee.

FISHMAN, ELIZABETH and ROSA—They are my daughters, whom I haven't seen for a number of years. Elizabeth is fifty-nine years old and Rosa is fifty-seven. I am very anxious to hear from them and would appreciate any information concerning their whereabouts. My name when they were at home was Mary Fishman. It is now Mary E. Kelly. My address is 3415 South Durland, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

NOTICE—I would like to locate Leodesha Bell and Francis Owens. They were both reared in an orphan's home in Dallas, Texas. They were last heard of in 1922 in Keesee, Texas. If anyone knows their whereabouts, please tell them to write to their half sister, Lonnie Sherman Collins, General Delivery, Iraan, Texas.

VARSE, JOHN—He is my father, and when last heard of was in Liverpool, Tennessee. My mother's name was Vornie Wagoner. If anyone knows my father's whereabouts, I would appreciate it if they would get in touch with me.—Clifford Moore, West Ninth Street, Jonesboro, Indiana.

FORD, MRS. IRIS GUTHRIE—In 1920 she lived in Castella, California, with her parents, Mr. and Mrs. A. A. Guthrie. She is about twenty-five years old. Will anyone who knows her please ask her to write to her childhood pal, Lola, who is now Mrs. E. M. Conley, Route No. 4, Box 22-92, Cupertino, California.

ENGLE, GEORGE and FRED, and FRED MAREON—They are three friends of mine, and I would very much like to get in touch with them again. They were all oil-well drillers. George Engle, when last heard from, was in Huntington, Indiana; Fred Engle in Blaine, Kentucky; and Fred Mareon was in Huntington, Indiana. If anyone knows their whereabouts, I would appreciate hearing from them.—S. K. Wedgworth, Wedgworth, Alabama.

FAUGHT, MRS. LILLIE—She is my mother, and I would like to find her. If anyone knows her whereabouts or the whereabouts of her children by a later marriage, I would appreciate hearing from them. "Mother, please write to your son."—Ottis Don Faught, General Delivery, Iraan, Texas.

NOTICE—I would like to learn the whereabouts of the following persons who are my cousins: Jimmie or Buddy Lipford and Pearl and Coleman Vest. When last heard from they were all in Corsicana, Texas. Pearl and Coleman have two children, Frances and Buddy. Mr. and Mrs. D. Anderson, who were last heard of in Enbouse, Texas. If anyone knows their present whereabouts, please get in touch with me. I would also like to hear from anyone who was in the State Orphan's Home from 1917 to 1924.—Mary E. Thompson, Box 795, Dale, Oklahoma.

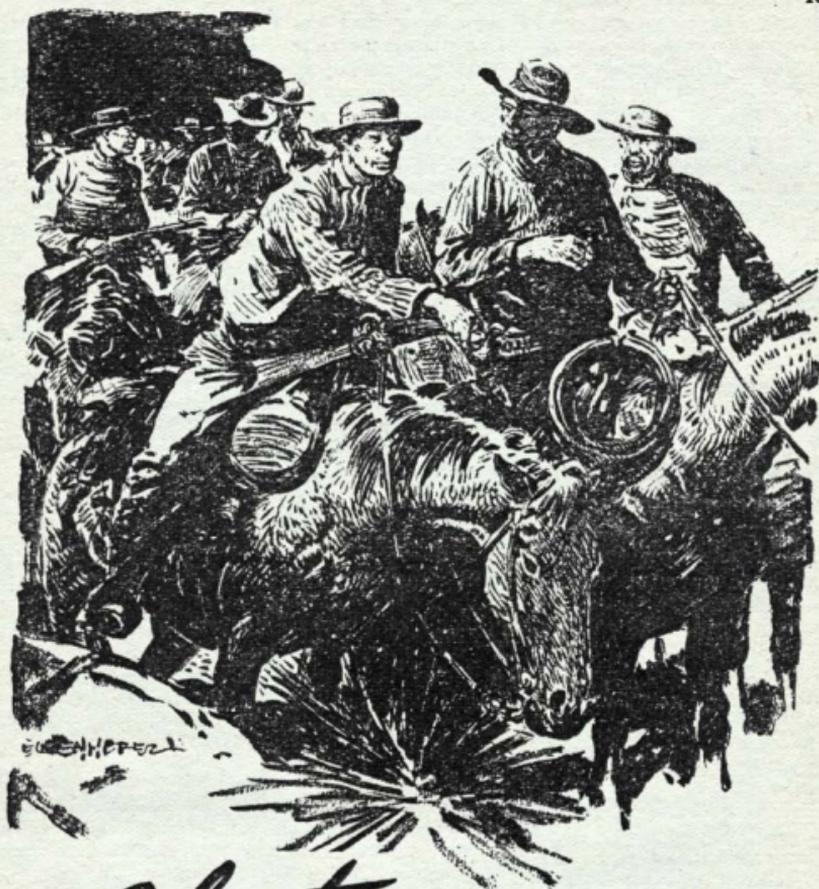
● There is no charge for the insertion of requests for information concerning missing relatives or friends.

While it will be better to use your name in the notices, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

WARNING—Do not forward money to anyone who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.



Ghosts OF THE RIMROCK

Part Three BY HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

The Story So Far:

The Flagler Expedition, a party of archæologists, heads for Pueblo Grande in Nevada to make a study of Indian ruins. Their work is secretly opposed by the Wutai-shan Company, a Chinese firm whose affairs are managed by Carlotta Soong, a beautiful half-caste.

Slade Salters, Carlotta's attorney, who

has learned something of the secret activities of the company, is convinced that the Chinese are working a gold mine somewhere near the Pueblo Grande ruins. He hires men to follow the expedition and investigate.

Jim Morningstar, the expedition's guide, runs into trouble from the very start—trouble which comes to a head when Jeu-

nifer Orme, the only woman in the expedition, disappears from her quarters. The party makes for Piute, the nearest town, to get aid in searching for the girl. There Jim is surprised to find Carlotta Soong, who tells him that she will take him to Jennifer, if he will promise not to seek the aid of the sheriff. He agrees, reluctantly, but next morning when they are to start, Carlotta, too, has disappeared.

Jim tells his story to Sheriff Mulhall who assembles a posse and starts a search for both girls. Little headway is made, however, and shortage of water compels the party to split. Jim's group runs into a party of Chinese who are searching for Carlotta. They make for an old Mormon fort, which is a hide-out for outlaws. There they find Carlotta in the hands of some of Slade Salters' men. Fortunately, only a few men are on guard, and the girl's release is effected without difficulty.

CHAPTER X CLASHING WILLS

SULPHUR RILEY had taken a look at the men streaming toward the fort. His face was longer than ever when he turned. "Jim, we're in a jackpot!" he cried, his voice hoarse with apprehension.

"Close the gate!" Jim jerked out. "Quick, before they notice anything!"

Sulphur complied without comment. But he gave Morningstar a questioning look as together they jammed the heavy bars in place.

"They'll expect the gate to be closed," Jim explained swiftly, "and it'll hold them up a few minutes longer. Even if they heard the shooting here in the fort, they can't be sure of what's going on—"

"What difference does that make?" Sulphur countered. "There ain't but one way out o' here—an' that's straight through them birds!"

"You're wrong," was Jim's prompt retort. "I didn't go all the way through this place without noticing a small gate in the rear stockade. It's double-barred and locked, and

it opens on the creek bed. We'll leave that way and make a break as soon as we get in the open. It doesn't seem possible that we can slip away without being spotted, but we'll have to take the chance!"

A few words sufficed to acquaint the Chinese with what was to be attempted. Even as they started for the rear gate, Slade Salters' men reached the main entrance. There was a banging on the outside with the butt of a gun, and then a voice bellowed:

"Hey, Tupper! Open up here!"

Jim motioned his party to hurry. Sulphur and Johnnie were already at the rear gate, working frantically to get it open. The lock delayed them. Quan Goon and his fierce desert riders stared back in the direction of the main gate, expressions of anger twisting their faces. Jim could see how ready they were to face Salters' force regardless of numbers or consequences. His eye caught Carlotta's appealing glance.

"Tell your friends we haven't a chance if we make the slightest mistake now," he said quickly. "I'd like to square things with Salters myself, but this simply isn't the time!"

Carlotta nodded almost coldly. He would have wondered about that, except for watching the effect of her words as she spoke to the Chinese in swift, rippling syllables. They scowled, but it was plain the girl's argument was having some effect. At length Quan Goon turned to Jim.

"All right," he muttered. "You lead the way—and make no mistakes!"

Sulphur got the gate open just as a louder uproar from across the compound warned that Salters and the others would not wait much longer; that already their suspicions were aroused.

"Git this gate open, Tupper, be-

fore we kick it down!" came the bull roar of a heavy, authoritative voice.

"Now, get through and go down the creek bed," Jim said quietly. "We'll have to move quick if we don't want to be closed off altogether—quick, and quietly!"

The gate had been cut low. It was necessary to lead the horses through before mounting. Sulphur was the last man outside. He turned to Jim.

"What about Cache Tupper?" he demanded. "He'll have the main gate open an' them buzzards told the truth in no time—"

"No matter," was the clipped response. "We couldn't hope for a delay of more than a few minutes. Fork your bronc and lead off!"

The course of their flight was clearly indicated to them. Only by following the winding bed of Furnace Creek could they hope for any cover whatever.

Sulphur led the way. Quan Goon's men followed, with Carlotta well shielded. Morningstar and the other punchers brought up the rear. Jim could hardly fail to notice that the dark, slanting glances of the Chinese were everywhere; nor was there ever a moment when they were not in full command of the situation.

What could it mean, he asked himself. He had helped them to free Carlotta—proof enough that he had had nothing to do with her abduction. And yet, would the matter end here? Bill Merriam rode up beside him before he found the answer.

"Just where does this leave us, Morningstar, and what about Miss Orne?" He jerked his chin toward the Chinese. "They'll never let Carlotta take us to her."

"I'm afraid you're right," Jim admitted frankly. "Our only hope is to get the jump on them if a chance offers."

ALMOST before he had ceased speaking, a noisy uproar from the direction of the fort whirled them around. And now Jim had reason to be thankful that the moon, almost at the full tonight, had already dropped low in the western sky. Around the corner of the post stockade came streaming a sharply silhouetted string of horsemen which seemed never to end. They circled sharply, until a harsh cry was raised from the creek bed. Sure of the scent then, they swept toward the quarry at a gallop.

"Here they come!" Jim heard Happy Failes' sharp exclamation. "Say, Bronc Yeager's gang is ridin' with 'em!"

Morningstar knew what that spelled, but for the moment all his attention was fastened on seeing that his party made the best possible speed. Even so, it was only a matter of moments before a slug whistled past his head, and another stung Johnnie's bronc on the flank. Landers whirled angrily, unlimbering his gun. It blazed toward the renegades without materially slackening their pursuit.

In another moment, the Chinese got into the fight. That they could shoot as well as ride, Jim soon learned. Rifles freckled the night with flame, and at least one owl-hooter was dumped unceremoniously when his bronc dropped out from under him.

Jim worked his way toward Carlotta. A glance told him the girl was all right. She, too, could ride when it became a necessity, and she was riding now.

"Try and keep between her and those lobos behind us," he called to the punchers. "Don't let a slug find her."

The pursuit was pressing close now. The renegades clearly out-

numbered Carlotta's rescuers, and were counting on that fact. Their bullets screamed closer and closer, until Bill Merriam, for one, was beginning to wonder where this affair would end.

He had not long to wait for his answer. For some moments he had noted that Morningstar seemed to be working toward some definite objective. Now Bill saw what it was. Ahead a sharp ridge rose, edging the sky blackly. Through it, Furnace Creek cut like a knife. Straight toward the gap the fugitives pressed their ponies. Merriam stared for a moment at the lofty granite walls of the gorge. Then he jerked a question:

"One man could hold that gap forever. But can we hope to make it, Morningstar?"

Jim didn't bother to answer. Only time could do that, and its answer would be conclusive.

"They're wise to what we're up to," Sulphur jerked out. "They'll cut us off if they can—"

"Don't let them," Jim jerked out sharply. He fired as he spoke, aiming at a man on the far right as the renegades sought to spread out and inclose them in a net. There wasn't much farther to go now. Within another three minutes, they were riding into the shadow of the rocky walls. A last fierce fusillade, and pursuit was left behind.

Jim nodded approval as Quan Goon spoke to two of his warriors and gestured backward. The Chinese drew in, turning their ponies. It was dark here in the gorge; Jim felt the pair would be reasonably secure even though no cover afforded save the broken walls. It was only a moment before the men dropped from sight as he and the others rode on at a steady, space-covering gait.

Less than five minutes had passed,

however, before a crash of shots broke out sharply, echoing weirdly from the rocks. Jim threw a glance at Quan Goon. The Oriental caught it.

"Don't worry," he assured with impregnable calm. "They will not get through."

That wasn't what was worrying Jim. "They'll swing around that ridge," he responded. "A matter of two hours or better. But their broncs are fresh."

Quan Goon nodded. "That'll be time enough."

THEY had not gone more than a mile or two through the rough, broken country beyond the ridge when, at a guttural word from Quan Goon, the party swerved away from the creek bed. Jim was about to protest this striking off into the deep sand, which would quickly wear down the ponies, when it occurred to him that daylight was not many hours off. This sandy plain was perhaps the one sure means at hand of effectually covering all trace of their passing. The dawn breeze would quickly obliterate their tracks.

It was a hope of safety not without its price, for only a matter of minutes had passed before the ponies began to flounder. The sand might stretch for miles. Morningstar set the example by dismounting and starting to lead his bronc. Sulphur, Merriam, Johnnie and Hap followed suit, and after a delay, Carlotta did likewise despite the protests of both Jim and Quan Goon. But the Chinese showed no evidence of any intention to favor their horses.

"Cold-blooded devils," Sulphur muttered to Jim in an undertone.

The latter shrugged. "It's their way," he said. "No use to argue with them."

Quan Goon drifted toward them

at that moment as if by accident. His suspicions of treachery were easily aroused. Jim said no more.

In moon-silvered desolation the party pressed southward toward distant serrated ridges which seemed never to draw nearer. At last the sand ended. Jim swung into the saddle with relief. As he was about to go on, Quan Goon and another Chinese closed in on him with calm and machinelike precision. No word was spoken, but Jim found himself relieved of his guns with an adeptness that would have done credit to many a lawman. The same thing was happening to Sulphur, Merriam and the rest of the whites. It was Jim's first intimation that their captors considered them safe from pursuit.

"Hold on," Jim protested. He faced Quan Goon. "You've got Miss Soong safe; that was our agreement. It's up to some of us to go back now and give the sheriff a hand. We wouldn't have got very far tonight except for him."

Quan Goon heard him out, but the flinty expression on his face did not change. He started to shake a cold negative, when Carlotta unexpectedly put in a word.

"The sheriff unwittingly did us a favor, but he will have to get out of his difficulties the best way he can," she said decisively.

Jim stared at her in surprise. "What do you mean?" he countered. "All that has been done was in your interests."

"And against my express wishes. Later in the day you will be at liberty to leave, and my advice would be to return to town."

Jim was dumfounded. Yet he understood well enough that Carlotta was incensed because she believed he had betrayed her confidence.

"Are you forgetting your promise to take me to Miss Orme?" he asked.

"We both made promises in Piute," she reminded him. "Yours is already broken."

Morningstar noticed that the Chinese were beginning to get excited. They stared at him, and then talked together in rapid-fire fashion. Carlotta listened for a moment and seemed to come to some decision. She turned to Quan Goon.

Jim didn't know what they were saying to each other, but judging from the flow of talk and the gestures, it was to the point. The girl could only be trying to persuade Quan Goon to let them go. It was not going so well with her, either. Jim had a feeling that there were forces at play here bigger than the girl or any of her companions.

It did not escape him that Carlotta might even be endangering her own life in doing what she was attempting. It was incomprehensible, coming on top of her distrust of him of a few minutes before; and yet, it did not conflict with the enigma of her strange personality.

Sulphur edged near to Jim while the latter waited. Lowering his voice, he muttered: "Damned if I like the looks o' this, Jim. We don't stand a ghost of a show, the way things stack up; but we never let that stop us before. Why not try to grab a gun an' make a break? We can take our chances of some of us gittin' through!"

Jim reflected briefly. He was dubious of their ability to get the upper hand of these yellow riders. He shook his head slowly.

"If it was only ourselves, it wouldn't matter so much. But Merriam and Carlotta would be over their heads," he answered guardedly. "And there's Miss Orme to consider, too. We'll string along for now."

Sulphur grunted disparagingly, but made no protest. The heated dis-

cussion between Quan Goon and the girl ended at that moment, and the latter turned to Jim.

"I've been trying to get permission for you all to leave and join the sheriff," she said. "I didn't succeed. But one of you may go. That will be you, Jim. You will be given your rifle and some canteens. When you find those men, take them out of the desert at once. Do not return here. Do you understand?"

Jim was not sure that he did, but for Quan Goon's benefit, he nodded as if in full approval. It was the signal for an immediate change of attitude toward him. One of the Chinese handed over his rifle and several canteens of water were hung on his saddlehorn.

"Don't try any tricks," was Quan Goon's parting warning, his look fierce and unrelenting. "You'll pay for it with your life if you do! Now go!"

JIM needed no urging to accept the hint. But first he turned to Sulphur and the others. "I'll find Mulhall," he told them. "Things may work out all right."

They could read what they chose into that. He took his pony's bridle and started to turn away. He was about to swing into the saddle when a voice stopped him.

"Jim—"

It was Carlotta. She had followed him. Reaching his side, she did not pause, but went on in calm silence. Together they drew away from the others, to stop only when they were alone, ringed in by the desolate wastes. The declining moon, huge and red as it neared the horizon, gazed at them as if with a wisdom older than theirs.

"What is it, Carlotta?" Jim asked, his tone grave.

"I . . . I couldn't let you go like

this—without a word," she murmured. Their glances held. "Jim, I overheard part of what you said to your man, Sulphur. I know you're brave. Please don't be foolish. Don't try to come back. I can't guarantee your safety if you do."

Looking at her, Morningstar saw that her lips were touched with sadness. The moonlight seemed to enhance her rare beauty.

"The boys—Dr. Merriam—what is to become of them?" he demanded. She hesitated over her answer and her magnificent poise seemed to break.

"I don't know. For the present, they will have to go with us. I shall try to convince Quan Goon that it would be the better part of wisdom to set them free. He's afraid they know too much."

He caught her hand and made her look at him.

"Carlotta, you'll never convince him, nor will he ever permit you to free Jennifer Orme. There's a pair of yellow devils in his eyes. He hates all whites. I've often heard of the Chinese bandit crew that terrorized central Nevada in the years that followed that miserable business at Union City. Quan Goon is a throwback to that bunch."

"Hardly a throwback," she said soberly. "He is one of them. He rode with those men. The abuses and injustice he and his countrymen endured in those old gold-camp days still burn like a white flame in his mind. There are times when some of us would forget. Always we have Quan to remind us."

Her tone was bitter again, and it carried a vague hostility even for him. She withdrew her hand. Regarding her closely, Morningstar realized that for the moment she was all Chinese.

"Carlotta, you told me in Piute

that yours was not the only voice in the Wu-tai-shan Company. Those other voices are speaking now. Aren't they? I believe you were sincere in your intention to return Miss Orme to Piute through me. For that reason, you are now in danger yourself."

"It is nothing," she declared.

"No, Carlotta, you can't deceive me," he insisted. "You are just as much a prisoner as Sulphur and the others." Thought of the fate that had befallen Doy Kee came to him and tightened his mouth. "You are helpless, maybe actually in danger."

She smiled at his earnestness. "Quan does only what he thinks is best," she murmured. "He, too, is responsible to the Wu-tai-shan Company." Morningstar found something in her tone that was far from being a note of resignation to the inevitable.

"Jim, you are risking your life in trying to find the sheriff and his men," Carlotta warned. "I think you understand Slade Salters' purpose as well as I do. Greed has turned him into a madman. There's no turning back for him now. He's risked everything on this toss of the dice. There's nothing he'll stop at."

"It isn't likely a man will stop at anything when he takes to running with renegades and outlaws. Obviously he is playing for a big stake."

"Obviously," Carlotta echoed without hesitation. Her dark eyes had a dangerous gleam. "He will pay for his treachery and stupidity. We shall know how—" She broke off abruptly. Morningstar felt her eyes questioning him. "Jim, I am a woman. I know that the hope that I would lead you to Jennifer Orme was not the least of the reasons why you stopped at nothing to find me. I think I understand your interest in her—perhaps better than you do yourself."

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He would have interrupted, but she had not finished.

"Jim, there's nothing you can do. You'll have to depend on me. If you really want to help her, see to it that the sheriff does nothing further."

Morningstar could only shake his head. "You are asking the impossible," he said. "Mulhall is no fool. You'll never keep the law out of the affairs of the Wu-tai-shan Company now."

"We shall find a way!" A voice swung him around. Quan Goon stood there, fierce, implacable. "Dead men make trouble for no one!"

CHAPTER XI

BEAR TRAP

STARTING back through the sand the way he had come, Jim Morningstar's first thought was of Slade Salters and his men. Thrown off the trail they might be, but that did not mean they were defeated. Somewhere ahead he could expect to run into them. Dealing with them single-handed would be a different matter from facing them in company with upward of a dozen seasoned fighting men.

Before he had gone a mile he had the dragging, unstable sand to fight. He fought it in the only way that held any chance of success; slowly, steadily, with endless patience. Before long he was once more on foot, leading the way, while his bronc plodded after, head swinging. The moon had dipped below the horizon, leaving black velvet darkness, star-shot, cold. There was nothing for it but to keep going. The events of the past twelve hours had left Jim with plenty to think about. The fact that Slade Salters had so recklessly burned his bridges behind him was less of a surprise than that the at-

torney had found reason to seek the support of a large force of fighting men. Jim knew Bronc Yeager well enough to understand that there must indeed be a big stake at issue to have interested the outlaw. All things considered, it was easy enough to believe in the existence of the mysterious gold mine of which Clay Masters had hinted. One thing was certain: there was either a fabulously rich mine somewhere in the rimrock flanking the Fortifications, or else some even richer prize.

The fact made it possible to understand at last what had happened to Jennifer Orme. She had not been the victim of some fantastic plot aimed at herself; rather, she had had the misfortune to become involved in this greater game.

He knew dawn could not be far off. Soon the sky began to brighten in the east. But, as with everything else about this night, not even its end was like the ending of other nights. Instead of bringing the bright promise of a new day, the sun rose red and sullen. And now Jim became aware of the breathless, almost suffocating stillness of the air, the dread waiting of a sinister something lying just below the skyline. He knew better than to attribute it to the appalling silence of this desert; it was more than that. Watching with apprehension the gradual thickening of the sky to the north, he realized that it was flying sand.

"She'll tear things loose when she hits!" he cried aloud. His patience snapped. "Damn such luck! I'm not going to get anywhere in this!"

Had cover of any kind afforded, he would have gotten his horse and himself under protection until the storm blew itself out, whatever the delay. But there was not even a broken ledge in sight. The line of desolate hills which a few moments

before had marched across the horizon to the north had already been blotted out.

There came to his ears a low and gloomy moaning. It was the wind. The moan rose in pitch to a wail; a scouring, gritty breeze brushed Jim's cheek. The air near at hand began to thicken. As if by force of suggestion, his lips suddenly felt dry. Wiping them, he found a few particles of sand clinging to them already.

HASTILY, Jim took his bearings before everything was blotted out by the descending pall. By some good fortune, he was able at a distance of a quarter mile to identify the straggling, dry bed of Furnace Creek. He thought: "I'll stick to it. It will take me to where I heard Mulhall's guns popping."

The storm closed down a moment later, lashing him with its gritty tongue. Dismounting and stumbling on, leading the bronc, he was afraid he had either overshot or swung away from the dry wash. He was on the point of halting where he was when his boots slid down a slight pitch and he realized he had reached Furnace Creek.

The flying sand had darkened the sky to a murky dusk. Half by luck, half by some sixth sense, he stuck to the shallow creek bed. Moving at a snail's pace, several hours passed before a looming shadow ahead presaged the break in the ridge not far from Mormon Fort. But if he had hoped for protection there, he was disappointed. The storm seemed to be swirling through the gorge with increased vigor. Head lowered against the blast, Jim fought his way through, his eyes red-rimmed above the raised neckerchief that protected his face.

He knew he was not far from

where Huck Mulhall and his deputies had made their stand. From the first Morningstar had asked himself exactly what the sheriff's movements could have been after being attacked by Salter's crowd. The agreement had been that he and Mulhall should meet at the headwaters of Furnace Creek, a matter of some miles to the north of this point. Though it was improbable that Mulhall knew anything of what had happened at the fort, it was only reasonable to suppose he surmised that the men who had attacked him had come from there. Outnumbered, some of his men undoubtedly wounded, if not killed, it was unlikely that he would drive on toward the upper reaches of the creek, though he still stood desperately in need of the water he could hope only to procure there.

"He's undoubtedly dropping back toward Piute this minute," Jim decided. "If I'm to find him, it will be off to the west somewhere."

He took it for granted that Salters' renegades had returned to the fort before the storm struck. When another hour had passed, with no sign of the storm slacking off, he felt that the time had come for him to pull up until he could get his bearings.

His pony turned tail to the blast when he stopped. It was like creating a little eddy in the bedlam of the elements. Even as he paused, Morningstar thought he caught the faint, wind-shredded sound of gunshots, and then hoarse shouting. He was about to dismiss it, believing it no more than the work of his imagination, when it came again.

"It's Mulhall!" he exclaimed. "He and his men must have become separated."

Pausing only long enough to make

certain of the direction, he started off. For a time faith drew him on. There was only the dismal moan of the storm to reward him. At last he halted in perplexity. Apparently the shots were not over this way at all.

Again he bent every faculty to catch that elusive sound of human making. As if the storm found delight in being contrary, the wailing of the wind rose in a screeching crescendo; he could have heard no other sound had it been there. Waiting for a lull, he started to work across the wind. Suddenly he drew his horse in with a jerk.

There it was again—the muffled, faint crack of a gun, followed by a hoarse call! This time he refused to listen to the suggestions of fancy, pressing squarely into the teeth of the wind. He had his reward in the infrequent repetition of those signals, still distant and baffling, but stronger than before.

Suddenly he caught the sound of two men crying out to each other. It was impossible to recognize the voices; but he felt certain that, by a miraculous chance, he had found Mulhall and his deputies. Raising his rifle, he fired it skyward three times, and then, after a pause, thrice more.

An answering shout reached him. And then the storm veil tore apart to show him a man not twenty yards away. What he saw was so unexpected that he could only sit tight and stare, while the truth hammered at his brain with the weight of blows from a sledge. This was not Huck Mulhall; it was Slade Salters!

Salters was no less startled. As Jim whirled his bronc to start away, Salters whipped up his gun and fired at almost point-blank range. The bullet droned close.

"Here's one of 'em, boys!" Salters

yelled. "It's Morningstar! Don't let him get away!"

There was an answering shout, a rush of hoofs. Jim did not hesitate for long. He prodded his horse ahead sharply, trusting to luck.

After that one swirling rent which afforded him a glimpse of Salters, the storm had dropped its impenetrable curtain again. Jim was beginning to believe he was making good his escape when, without warning, a horseman materialized before him, blocking his path. There was no time to swerve aside. Jim didn't try. At the moment of collision he rose in the stirrups and swung at the other man.

The rider managed to get out a short, sharp yelp of surprise before the blow caught him alongside the jaw and tumbled him out of the saddle as if roped. His frightened bronc started away and in three strides disappeared in the storm.

Jim changed course again slightly and drove on. The sand slashed at him, the wind roared in his ears. But twenty minutes later he drew up, safe in the knowledge that he had given Salters and his men the slip.

His whereabouts a mystery now, he knew there was nothing for it but to hole up somewhere and wait for the storm to blow itself out. The simplest course seemed to be to let himself drift with the wind, trying to keep track of how much ground he was covering. He came at length to a high, rocky ridge too steep and rugged to climb. But along its base lay a reef of rocks. In the lee of it, he stopped. Climbing stiffly out of the saddle, he raised a canteen to his lips and washed out his mouth. He settled himself to wait then. This storm might blow for another hour, or it might continue for several days. There was no telling how soon his release would come.

THINKING of Mulhall, Jim was surprised to find that he knew exactly what he wanted to tell him. His own course seemed just as surprisingly clear. He recalled what Carlotta had said concerning his interest in Jennifer. It was something he was reluctant to face. He even tried to deny that she meant anything to him. He told himself their lives lay a million miles apart.

"I won't let myself indulge in any foolish dreaming of that sort," he muttered. "Merriam is the man for her. They have a lot in common, their work—their background, too, I guess."

He wondered what had been in Carlotta's mind when she spoke. From the first, her attitude toward Jennifer had been one of mingled contempt and pity. He accepted it as the natural bitterness of a girl of mixed blood toward all white women. It completely escaped him that, in this instance, he himself figured importantly; that Carlotta recognized a dangerous rival for his affections in Jennifer Orme. Had he suspected the truth, he would have found fresh cause for anxiety.

A slight slackening in the fury of the gale aroused him from his abstraction. Twenty minutes later he was convinced that the storm was passing. As the wind fell, the sand began to sift earthward from the murky pall above him. Gradually the sky lightened. He could see about him again. His field of vision widened swiftly.

After a little reconnoitering, he was able to climb up on the ridge. From its crest he could command a wide view of the barren waste.

It lacked an hour of noon when he spotted a number of men ahead, on weary ponies. It was not long before he had satisfied himself that they were Mulhall and his deputies. A shot fired in the air served to turn them, and then bring them in his

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direction as he advanced.

"Waal, Morningstar, I was wonderin' what happened to yuh," was the sheriff's gruff greeting. "We had a gun fight that was a honey while she lasted." His eye sharpened as he noted the canteens swinging from Jim's saddlehorn. "Where's Merriam an' the others?"

"They're somewhere between here and Pueblo Grande," was Jim's sober response. "They're in a jackpot for sure, this time!" He handed over the canteens. Mulhall and his parched and exhausted men slaked their thirst.

"I suppose the bunch that jumped us picked 'em up," the sheriff growled. Anger boiled in him at thought of what he and his men had walked into. "Salters has got Bronc Yeager's bunch ridin' with him now. That's why he got off the stage an' headed north."

"I know," Morningstar nodded. "We had a running fight with them. But it's not them this time. A big war party of fighting Chinese is hustling my boys south across this desert."

"Chinese?" Mulhall exclaimed. "A big bunch of 'em, eh? By jabor, this desert seems to be crawlin' with men!" He beckoned Morningstar aside. "Now you talk fast an' tell me jest what happened since I saw yuh last. I want to get to the bottom of this."

Convinced that he must confide in Mulhall—for Carlotta's sake also, regardless of what she had said—Jim gave the sheriff a detailed account of the happenings of the night, from the moment that Quan Goon and his yellow riders had surprised them, through the attack on Mormon Fort, the releasing of Carlotta, the running fight down Furnace Creek and the circumstances that led to his turning back in search of the posse.

MULHALL was choking with surprise at the end. A few moments later, questions were popping off his tongue. "You say this girl Carlotta is in danger from her own crowd now?" he demanded.

Jim nodded. "She doesn't think so, but I do. I saw what happened to one member of the Wu-tai-shan Company who fell into disfavor." He told Mulhall about Doy Kee. "That may well be the fate that's awaiting her."

"I'm damned if it don't pass belief!" Huck Mulhall exploded. "Dead men—kidnapin'—armed renegades naggin' away at yuh! And yet they say nothin' happens in this county! Don't need a sheriff, they think!" He ripped out an oath that gave eloquent proof of the state of his feelings. "What's your answer to this, Morningstar?" he demanded. "You must have some idea of what it all means."

"A rich mine, maybe Indian treasure," Jim answered. "It's as near as I can come. It's only a guess."

Huck shook his head. "I don't know," he muttered. "Man can't git along without water and grub, whether they're yellow or white. Ain't no water in the Fortification Mountains. Ain't no game, not even a jack rabbit. Makes me think it must be somethin' else."

"Whatever it is, I aim to find out," Jim said soberly. "The best way to do it is to overtake that crowd before they reach Pueblo Grande and disappear, maybe forever. Why do you think they're holding Miss Orme, Mulhall? Certainly not because she can be of any use to them. She knows too much. That's all. They know if they release her, their secret goes with her. It'll be the same with Merriam and my boys—to say nothing of Carlotta. If we're going to do anything for them, we've

got to do it in a hurry."

"But take a look at my men, Morningstar!" Mulhall protested. "Jensen's got a slug in his shoulder. Bill Vettors has a smashed wrist. You can't go draggin' men around the desert in their condition— No," he continued in an even more decided tone, "my move is to head back to town at once. We'll git fresh horses and organize a big posse. We can do this thing right, then."

"But that'll be a matter of days, Mulhall!" Jim protested. "If it's got to be one man against a dozen, O. K. I'll be that man. I'm heading for Pueblo Grande."

"Morningstar, don't be a fool!" Mulhall snorted. "I won't let the grass grow under my feet, but it will be three, four days before I can git there. You'll need grub and water. I can give you a little grain for your hoss, but that's all."

"I'll make out," Jim told him. "I buried a keg of water against such an emergency as this when the expedition broke camp. As for the grub, I'll get along with what I've got."

A few minutes later, with Mulhall repeating his promise to reach the ruins at the earliest possible moment, Morningstar rode away. He wasn't interested in trying to read sign or pick up the trail of Quan Goon's party. His goal was the old pueblo, and with uncanny accuracy he held true to his course all that long day.

THE sun was low when the rimrock above Pueblo Grande hove into view. Nearing the old base camp, Jim purposely swung off to the west. He hobbled his pony in an arroyo and went on afoot. Believing he was well ahead of Quan Goon's party, he planned to take up a position on a rocky ledge that commanded a view of the mesquite-

dotted draw, down which anyone coming from the north must travel.

As he was in the act of dropping to his knees, preparatory to stretching out on the ledge, something struck him in the back and knocked him flat. Savage yellow hands grabbed him. His rifle was kicked beyond reach. A tangle of grunting Chinese swarmed over him as he fought furiously. From somewhere, a boot lashed out in a murderous kick which narrowly missed his head.

Morningstar knew no word of Chinese, but a cry was raised and repeated again and again; translated into good English, he knew it could be nothing less than "Kill the spy!"

The wicked glint of a knife at his throat convinced him that it was useless to struggle further. In no time, his wrists were lashed together and he was roughly dragged to his feet and ordered to march down the draw.

A matter of several hundred yards brought him and his captors into sight of the old base camp. There stood Bill Merriam and the boys. Their hands were being bound with as little ceremony as his had been. Plainly, his reappearance had enraged Quan Goon and brought this indignity down on the white prisoners.

While Morningstar stood there, soberly contemplating his wrecked plans, Carlotta Soong appeared. The reproach in her eyes was tempered by her concern for him.

"Why did you come back?" she exclaimed. "I warned you not to try it!"

He met her troubled gaze with a calmness he was far from feeling. "I had to play it this way," he told her simply. With Quan Goon's men ringing him in, watching him like hawks, their yellow faces inscrutable

and forbidding, he could offer no further explanation.

Carlotta gazed at him with something akin to awe in her dark eyes. "You are a brave, but foolish man!" she said. "Does your life mean so little to you?" The question, so pregnant with meaning, seemed wrenched from her lips. "Jim, this was madness!"

CHAPTER XII

HOSTAGE

A HUSKY, flat-faced Chinese stepped up beside Jim and laid a rough hand on him. "Come," he grunted. He thrust Jim in the direction of the pueblo. Carlotta followed.

At this sunset hour, the great ruin lay bathed in liquid amber light, almost unearthly in its somber grandeur. It was the citadel of a long-departed glory, but symbolized still the mystery and the sadness of life. There was an even deeper meaning in the scene for Jim Morningstar, for somewhere in the vast broken area of cracked and weathered cliffs, crags, and deep-shadowed canyons rising behind the ruin, Jennifer was being held prisoner, waiting, longing—perhaps daily expecting the belated arrival of help.

Jim was dragged back from his thoughts by the sound of Sulphur Riley's voice. The lanky cowboy had edged toward him. "What in hell are yuh doin' back here, Jim?" he muttered. His tone revealed the gravity with which he viewed the situation.

"Mulhall couldn't come with me and I couldn't leave you like this," Jim explained hurriedly. The Chinese thrust them apart before either could say more.

Mounting to the pueblo, the prisoners were led toward a large adobe

room on its edge. In its ancient entrance Morningstar saw a figure appear. It was Quan Goon. The Oriental's stern face twisted up with sudden fury at sight of him.

"You have come back—hoping to spy on us!" he threw at Jim flatly. His wrath rose in a red tide of hate. "Fooling dog of a white! You choose to throw your life away. Or perhaps you think you will be spared!" Fathom-deep contempt rang in his tone; his glare was one of unleashed ferocity.

Jim was taken back by the savagery of it. For once he found himself wordless. He had never seen a more sinister figure. Quan Goon personified the ageless Tartar hatred of the yellow blood for the white. Once his racial instincts were aroused, there would be no slightest impulse of humanity in him. The fate his crafty brain was even now preparing for Jim might well include Sulphur, Merriam and the others. It was an alarming thought.

Before Morningstar could collect his wits, Carlotta attempted to interpose hurriedly. Quan whirled on her.

"Silence!" he thundered, his scowl attesting to his change of attitude toward her. "There will be no more talk. You persuaded me before against my better judgment, Moy Quai. It will not happen again!"

"Morningstar, can't you do something to appease him?" Merriam demanded hoarsely. "He'll slit the throats of all of us if he isn't brought to his senses!"

"Pull yourself together," Jim advised, when Quan Goon's fierce eyes were fastened on him. They seemed to dart lightning. The flat, yellow lips parted and lashing words came.

"You were warned what the penalty would be if you disobeyed!" He was about to pass sentence now.

Unconsciously Jim stiffened.

"You can kill me, Quan," he made answer thinly. "I can't do anything to prevent it. But it will be your last mistake; I'll promise you that!"

THE Oriental appeared to grow in stature; the thick cords of his bronzed neck swelled with rage. His fingers worked convulsively on the haft of the knife at his waist. In this tense moment anything could happen. Jim had about given himself up for a dead man when a swift gust of muttering ran through Quan Goon's yellow followers which attracted the latter's attention. Wheeling sharply, he barked a harsh query in Chinese.

The answer came swiftly. Morningstar's gaze flashed to the man who gave it, a guard posted at the end of a gallery a score of yards away. Gesturing beyond, as though pointing at something, he let loose a stream of words. His obvious excitement was quickly communicated to the others. Morningstar understood in a flash that someone was coming.

A glance at Quan Goon confirmed it. Moreover, Quan's momentary expression of uncertainty said that the person who was coming was of considerable importance. A moment later several expressionless Chinese, armed to the teeth, put in an appearance. Quan's men greeted them gravely. But, scrutinizing each one keenly, Jim realized they were but the bodyguards of whoever was coming.

When the man appeared, dignified of bearing, shrewd-eyed, with an impassive yellow mask of a face, Jim knew he was right. It was Sui Chen, the bland importer who had brought so much weight to bear in the Wutai-shan Company's conferences in Reno. But beyond a vague feeling

of familiarity, which he failed to identify, Morningstar did not place him. There could be little question of his authority here, however. Quan Goon awaited his approach, obviously chafing at the interruption.

When Quan would have burst out in a torrent of hot words, Sui Chen cut him off with quiet decision. "Words spoken in haste are devoid of wisdom," he said in their own tongue, yet with the rebuke in his tone plain for all to read. "Hasty actions are no more to be commended."

Quan's visage was thunderous with baffled fury, but he did not say anything more. Sui Chen turned calmly to Jim.

"You are Jim Morningstar," he said, with no trace of accent. "I am sorry to find you in this position. There has been a series of mistakes here." And to one of his men, indicating Jim, Sulphur and the others, he said: "Release these people at once."

The tranquil dignity of this elderly Oriental as he took the situation in hand was genuine; Jim realized it afresh, watching the man's glance flick to Carlotta for the first time. Sui Chen might have fully expected to find her here for all the reaction he showed. Certainly he was not surprised, although he must have known of her abduction. The smile he gave her was gentle, kindly. Before he could speak, however, Quan Goon, unable to contain himself longer, fired off a blast that came like a thunderclap.

"It is you who make the mistake, Sui Chen, in striking the bonds from these dogs of whites!" he charged, hostility boiling into his arrogant face. "Freedom is not what they deserve at our hands!" He drove on with fierce energy, shooting a look of hatred and distrust at Morningstar

as he stated his grievance. He described how Jim had demanded his release on the pretext of aiding Sheriff Mulhall, how he had been given canteens of water and warned not to come back on pain of death. Anger running away with him, he whirled on Jim.

"But you came back!" he thundered. "You were spying on us, trying to learn our secrets! Why did you come? Who sent you? Was it Mulhall?" He threw the words like bullets. Jim sensed the gathering excitement of his listeners, read his design of carrying them with him. Suddenly, the harsh voice rose. "Vermin, jackal, son of turtles, you are working with that man!"

"I'm working neither for nor against Mulhall," Jim said flatly. "You can get that out of your head. It's the law that matters here! You have managed to keep it out of your calculations for years, but that's over and done with now. Secrecy is one thing; but plotting, abduction, murder!" He shook his head. "Even in this desert you can't cover up things like that."

Quan Goon would have retorted hotly, but Sui Chen silenced him with a word. Addressing the latter, Jim went on:

"I realize that you have every reason to hate me. In your eyes, my very name is against me. But I'm not interested in your secret. In trying to protect yourselves, you're standing in our own way! By now it's known that you people are here in the desert. These mysterious disappearances won't be passed over. Sooner or later they'll spell your finish."

Sui Chen nodded gravely. His broad face might have been carved from ivory, devoid of expression as it was. "You speak wisely, my friend," he said.

"Mr. Morningstar scarcely does himself justice," Carlotta broke in quietly. "Quan Goon has neglected to tell you what he did for me." She described Jim's share in the fight at Mormon Fort. Sui Chen listened attentively to the end. As near as his expression could be read, it was one of approval. He turned to Jim once more.

"You have more to say, I think," he suggested.

Morningstar had. He was only waiting to get it off his chest. "Turning back on your present course, undoing what harm you can, is your only chance," he declared. "You'll have to return Miss Orme, and let us all leave. The killing of Doy Kee is another matter, but you can go a long way toward squaring even that, I believe."

SUI CHEN glanced at Quan, and then at Carlotta. He seemed to be asking a silent question. Whatever the answers were, he was satisfied. "We will consider these things," he said.

At a sign from him, they started to move apart. Jim knew they meant to confer together. Quan Goon, still hot-tempered and suspicious, burst into vehement argument. Sui Chen and Carlotta reasoned with him firmly. It was not easy to tell which way the discussion was going.

Bill Merriam grew restless as the minutes dragged out. "I appreciate your concern for Miss Orme, Morningstar!" he burst out finally, his hostility apparent. "If it wasn't so absurd, I'd say your interest in her was personal. Or is it so absurd?"

Jim whirled on him. His nerves were strung tighter than he knew. But the same thing was true of them all. He checked the hot retort trembling on his tongue. "You don't know what you're saying, Merriam," he said. "You'd better consider your words more carefully."

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"I've had plenty of time to think them over!" Merriam threw back angrily. "It hasn't escaped me that you've been worrying more about her than about the rest of us!"

Jim stared at him for a moment. "What do you mean?" he demanded irritably. "Do you think I shouldn't?" But, listening as Merriam drifted off into evasive recriminations, he thought he knew what was bothering the man. It wasn't Jennifer's well-being at the moment, or even his interest in her, so much as the fact that Bill resented being relegated to the background in this discussion with the Chinese. A moment later the proof came of injured feelings.

"I don't know why I didn't take matters in my own hands from the beginning," he jerked out bitterly. "If I had, we might have got some results by this time; but, instead, here we are, still helpless, depending on the favor of this bunch of yellow cutthroats—"

"Keep your tongue between your teeth!" Jim cut him off partly. "How far do you think we'll get if one of these Chinese overhears that kind of talk?"

Merriam's answer was a wrathful glare. For a moment it looked as if he meant to swing on Jim. Then he wilted. "You got me into this and I suppose I'll have to string along," he muttered, turning away.

Sulphur exchanged glances with Jim, and shrugged. "The sand in that gent's craw is wearin' thin," he grunted.

At that moment Jim saw Sui Chen and the others turn his way. The stout Oriental was as inscrutable as ever, and Quan Goon still scowled blackly. Carlotta's beautiful face, in which Jim hoped to read his answer at once, was utterly expressionless.

"My friend, we have agreed that the course you suggest is the one to

follow." It was Sui Chen who spoke. "It will not be easy. But it is the only thing that will redeem us with your white law."

Jim's stern mouth softened in a smile of satisfaction at the words. "You are wise," he declared.

Bill Merriam broke in then. "Just where does this leave us?" he demanded bluntly.

"You will be given your guns," Sui Chen assured him. He transferred his attention to Morningstar. "You and your friends will remain here. Miss Orme will be brought to you. Then you will all return to Piute. As for Sheriff Mulhall—"

"I believe I can persuade Mulhall that Slade Salters is the gent who most requires his attention," Jim told him. He paused then. "But how do I know all this isn't a trick?"

Quan Goon glared at him, turned to Sui Chen, and burst out in a wrathful flow of Chinese. Sui Chen answered him quietly. Morningstar fastened his attention on the latter, realizing that this shrewd, far-seeing man was beginning to emerge as the most authoritative figure of them all. Carlotta was drawn into the discussion also. Presently they appeared to come to some decision. Carlotta turned to Jim.

"I have offered to remain here while you are waiting for Miss Orme," she said. "Quan Goon and several others will stay, too. Will that satisfy you, Jim?"

He did not hesitate over his answer. "You know it will, Carlotta," he assured her.

DARKNESS was creeping out of the gulches and canyons about the pueblo when Sui Chen and the Chinese made ready to leave. Morningstar's party was given their guns. The yellow men who were remaining eyed them warily. Jim read the

meaning of that quickly enough. The Orientals wished to assure themselves that the agreement was being carried out on both sides.

Sui Chen's party left a moment later. Jim watched them disappear in the maze of the ruins. He surprised Carlotta's gaze on him then. She knew he was asking himself why Quan Goon had elected to stay.

"You may put your mind at rest, Jim. Things will be all right," she told him quietly. Morningstar nodded.

They moved apart from the others, and for a time silence held them. Far in the west the last vestiges of the sunset burned, a dying coal, its light concentrated on Pueblo Grande, so that it stood out as if lit by some inner glow. But the rimrock and the nearby draws were all shadowy and vague. Overhead, the stars were coming out.

"I was afraid you would not take kindly to my return," Jim said at last. "I did what I thought was best for all of us, especially you."

"It is all right, Jim," she murmured. "Your way was the best. I can see it now." She gazed at him, her mysterious eyes dark pools that defied his reading. "A few hours more and we'll be saying good-by, this time for good."

He moved his broad shoulders uncomfortably. Was it wistful regret he found in her tone? He had always seen her in a romantic light. But somehow, the promise of Jennifer's return, her seeming nearness, left no room in his mind for any other woman.

"Don't say that. I'll be in Reno from time to time. We'll see each other," he asserted, secretly unable to decide whether this was a way of letting her down, or if he really meant it. And then: "Shall we join the others?"

Sulphur, Merriam, and the punchers had taken possession of the adobe before which so much had happened. Quan Goon watched, wooden-faced, as Merriam prowled the room restlessly, taking care not to get too close to the Chinese, but eying them from time to time as if he wanted only an excuse for some kind of an outbreak.

"Damn it, Merriam, yuh're givin' me the creeps!" Sulphur protested gruffly. "Calm down, can't yuh? There ain't nothin' to do but wait."

Merriam flung him a surly response and whirled toward Jim as he and Carlotta advanced.

"This is a nice fix, Morningstar!" he exclaimed tensely. "How do we know those yellow devils will do as they promised?" He gestured toward Carlotta. "This half-caste girl a hostage! Do you know how much or little she means to them? What can we do if they conveniently forget all about her?" He flung the questions as if they were unanswerable. "They're well aware that Mulhall will get here sooner or later with his posse! They know Jennifer will tell us everything if she is ever released—"

"Miss Orme knows nothing," Quan Goon growled sullenly. "She was blindfolded at the time she was taken away from your camp, and has been permitted to see only what we wanted her to."

Merriam would have made a sharp retort, but Morningstar halted him. "That attitude won't get us anywhere," he pointed out thinly. "The least you can do is to keep a civil tongue in your head!"

"I don't mind, Jim," Carlotta assured him, her tone steady. "Naturally Dr. Merriam is worried. We all are. But it will soon be over now."

MERRIAM chose to drop the matter there. It was just as well, for the nerves of all were frayed and worn thin. It was a hard night. Dawn whitened the east at last, and still Jennifer failed to put in an appearance. Jim could not help asking himself if something had gone wrong. He was on the point of approaching Carlotta in the matter, when a new thought struck him. Sui Chen and the others were far too shrewd to give them an accurate idea of how far it was to their desert stronghold by going straight to it and returning. A delay was no more than was to be expected.

But noon came and passed, and nothing happened. Even the punchers were beginning to get restless. Finally Sulphur approached Jim, his concern plain in his long-jawed homely face.

"This is gittin' to be mighty plain readin', Jim!" he declared soberly. "Them gents don't intend to bring Miss Orme back. I move we do somethin' about it!"

"What do you suggest?"

"Waal, we can figure on Mulhall's help. He oughta be gettin' here before long."

Jim shook his head. "Not a chance, Sulphur. Mulhall couldn't possibly make it inside of two or three more days."

"He couldn't huh?" the lanky one retorted. "The hell he couldn't. Here he comes, now!"

He was gazing through the window opening as he spoke. Jim shoved up beside him for a hasty look. What he saw made him catch his breath. His lips thinned in a straight line as the truth hit him. Down the draw, half a mile from the pueblo, a large band of horsemen came riding.

"That ain't Mulhall!" Jim cried, tension riding his tone. "It's Salters,

Bronc Yeager, the whole damned gang of them! They're coming here!"

Even as he spoke, it flashed in his brain that they could slip away undetected. There was still time. The Chinese had secret ways out of the pueblo. Quan Goon knew them. The next instant, a thought struck him that drained the blood from his face. If they stole away, and Jennifer were returned, what would happen to her? Salters would ruthlessly try to drag the secret of the rimrock from her. That she might not know it, they would never believe.

"Where can Sui Chen be keeping her?" he groaned. "Why don't they come?"

CHAPTER XIII BACKS TO THE WALL

SALTERS and his men drew near rapidly. Watching them, Morningstar realized that they knew what awaited them at the pueblo. Whatever the cost might be, they were obviously bent on retaking Carlotta!

Seeing his hand forced, Jim whirled to find Quan Goon at his back. The Oriental was watching him narrowly. Jim threw quick words at him.

"Those men will be here in a few minutes!" he exclaimed. "It's Salters and his crowd! You know what they want! We've got to get away from here in a hurry!"

Quan returned his look stolidly. If he was conscious of the imminent need for action, he failed to show it. His only answer was a shake of the head. Jim flung a look at Quan's men. They stared at him stubbornly, plainly intent on remaining where they were. One tapped his rifle significantly. "We flight!" he said.

"Something's got to be done, Morningstar!" Bill Merriam burst out, his tone taut. "We can't let Salters find us here. If it means blasting these chinks out of our way, all right!"

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“Hold on!” Jim cut him off sharply. “Salters hasn't got us licked yet. Don't do anything foolish—”

“Have you got to have grief rammed down your throat before you can see it?” Merriam hurled at him. “Man alive! Hell will be popping here—” He choked off the rest at a look from Jim.

Turning, Jim needed only a glance to see that the renegades were close to the base of the slope now, casting speculative eyes up toward the pueblo. A few minutes, and they would be starting up the trail.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jim saw Carlotta speak to Quan Goon hurriedly. She was trying to reason with him. But Quan listened to her rapid-fire Chinese without any sign of interest. At last she turned to Jim.

“He insists on standing his ground, Jim!” she told him. “I can't make him see the utter folly of it. What can be done?”

It was no surprise to Morningstar. He reflected swiftly. “There's only one thing we can do,” he answered. “We'll dig ourselves in and make a stab at standing Salters off!”

Sulphur heard him, as did Johnnie and Hap Failes. They nodded approval. Bill Merriam would have protested vehemently, but at a stare from Sulphur he changed his mind.

The next moment all caught a sound which froze them in their tracks. It was a rattle of loose stones from outside, at a distance of not more than a hundred yards.

“Don't make so damned much noise, Curly!” they heard Slade Salters exclaim harshly. “If they're here in the ruins, they won't want much warning to put them on their guard.”

Jim stepped to the window for a guarded look. What he saw held him motionless for a moment. Salters' men had reached the pueblo. They were poking about like beagles. Bronc Yeager, a giant of a man,

with a cruel, rudely carved face, was directing the search.

Had there been any hope of lying low and avoiding discovery, Jim would have approved the plan. But Slade's thugs were steadily working closer. Within a matter of minutes they would be here unless something was done to halt them. Answering to impulse, he stepped into plain sight.

"Salters!" he called.

THE nearness of the quarry plainly came as a surprise. Salters and his men whirled, venting exclamations. Slade flung up his gun. "Go back!" Jim cried. "We've got you covered, and we'll shoot to kill!"

They were brave words, but his answer was a burst of firing. Slugs thudded into the walls, bringing rills of crumbling adobe sifting down.

"It's them!" Bronc Yeager shouted. "I'm a hoss thief if we ain't got 'em now!"

Jim flung a shot at the owl-hooter and ducked back to cover just as half a dozen guns blazed. Even so, a bullet tore through his shirt at the collar. Another grazed his cheek.

Johnnie and Hap Failes had stationed themselves at one of the other windows. When the fusillade was directed at Jim they fired. One of Slade's men let out a yell and dived behind a sheltering wall. Another dropped his rifle and grabbed his shattered arm.

The rumble of the exchange echoed weirdly through the ruins before silence returned. Salters was obviously sizing up the situation. When Jim stole a look, he could see no one. But he knew that desperate crew was there—waiting.

There was this moment of delayed suspense, and then the attorney yelled: "Morningstar!"

Jim didn't answer. He had no de-

sire for a parley with the man. But that did not deter Salters. He raised his voice threateningly: "You know what we're here for, Morningstar! We want that girl and we mean to have her! If you want to get off with your hire, shove her through that door. We'll take her and leave without firing another shot!"

Jim still did not respond.

"You haven't got a chance if you try to stand us off!" Slade drove on persuasively. "You're outnumbered and you know it! Do the sensible thing while there's time, ten or fifteen minutes from now may be too late!"

Without warning, he received an answer to his ultimatum. It came in the form of a sudden shot which rang out as Sulphur's rifle barked. Salters had unconsciously relaxed his vigilance as he talked. The small portion of his hat which showed above the coping of the thick mud wall behind which he crouched with Yeager and several others, had been too much for Sulphur Riley.

The besieged were regaled with a savage outburst of cursing as Slade's hat was torn from his head and carried several feet away. "That settles it!" he cried. "Smoke 'em out of there, boys, and don't waste any time doing it! Rush them, and let them have what they're asking for!"

The renegades surged up from cover as if at a prearranged signal. But their charge stalled before it really got started. Morningstar and the others had been waiting for just such an opportunity. The instant the first attacker showed his head around the corner of a wall, they unleashed a blast which would have daunted an even larger force.

Bronc Yeager took charge then, the authoritative rasp of his voice bespeaking a callousness and drive unknown to the lawyer.

"Crawl up on 'em, boys!" he barked. "Work around the back of that place! We'll make duck soup of them birds in a hurry, if that's the way they want it!"

Jim, Merriam, and the punchers, as well as the Chinese with Quan Goon, had found a vantage point from which to fire whenever a fair target presented itself. It was not often. The renegades were sniping at them from three or four directions. Morningstar knew this grim struggle could end in only one way now. It was simply a matter of time. He flashed a glance at Carlotta. The girl's poise was amazing. Tense as she knew the situation to be, she showed no sign of cracking.

Catching his eye, she moved to his side, though he motioned her back.

"Jim, let me help!" she pleaded. "I've never fired a gun in my life, but at least I can try!"

"Keep back, Carlotta!" he ordered, his tone gruff and final. "We'll take care of this!"

His assurance was more for her peace of mind than anything else, however. Even Bill Merriam got that. "This can't last much longer at the rate it's going, Morningstar," he growled.

He was right. So complex was the construction of the pueblo that the attackers steadily drew in, narrowing the net, they were drawing about their quarry. Jim had no doubt about what would happen when Yeager decided the time was ripe for the deciding action. His gang would come pouring in, their guns blazing. In a minute or two it would be all over.

JIM determined to take matters into his own hands. Attracting Quan Goon's attention, he ordered the man by sharp gesture to fall

back toward the inner door. The Oriental hesitated. But realizing how desperate their plight was, he nodded woodenly and started to obey. Jim ordered:

"Follow him, all of you! We've got to squeeze out of this before the pinch gets any tighter! Carlotta, you go with Sulphur and Johnnie!"

She obeyed without demur. The remaining Chinese raised no objection to the move. Morningstar delayed at his window long enough to fire a last shot or two in the hope of deceiving Salters and his crowd for another precious moment. Then he turned and followed the others.

The door gave on a passage which opened into a tiny, dark cubicle lighted only by a faint glow of light from overhead. For an instant Jim was afraid they were trapped and could go no farther. Then he saw a crude ladder leading up through a hole in the roof.

"Get up there!" he urged. "And hurry!"

Sulphur went first, wary of ambush. After a moment he called back: "O. K." The others followed as quickly as possible, Carlotta first. Already there was a restless stir amongst the renegades outside. They had sensed a ruse and were determined to nip it in the bud. Their rush came just as Jim had mounted the ladder and was hauling it up after him. There was a stamp of boots, the crash of a gun in the confined space below, and a bellowing voice:

"They're gone! Dammit, they've give us the slip, boys! Clear out of here an' locate 'em!"

Sulphur found a way of retreat leading over the roofs of the hive-like pueblo. With Jim leading the way, the fugitives had won a hundred yards and were on the point of crossing a wide roof between crum-

bling adobe walls, when a burst of shots broke out from the rear. They were forced to fall back to the doubtful protection of one of the walls. Morningstar realized they would be safe there only a matter of minutes, for the advantage lay all with Salters' men. Yeager had thrown out several flanking parties which poured in a raking fire from the roofs as they steadily advanced.

Jim gave the word to fall back again. But this time it was not in the direction in which they wished to go. Slade's men had cut them off from any commanding position that might have given them an advantage sufficient to outweigh the odds against them. From one place of temporary protection to another they retreated, pushed back relentlessly. The blood-soaked rag that Sulphur had tied around his throat was proof that the enemy's slugs were not all going wide of their mark. One of the Chinese had stoically bound up a hand from which two fingers had been shot away. Merriam was injured, too. A welt on his head oozed blood.

"Jim, we're cornered!" Sulphur cried hoarsely, cut off by a lethal hail from reaching a thick wall that promised safer cover. "We're on the top of this dang mud pile! There



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Merriam saw it, too. He whirled on Jim. "I left things to you, Morningstar," he raged, "and this is the result! You'll get us all killed!"

"Get hold of yourself," was all the answer he got. "None of us have been killed yet! If I can prevent it, we won't be!"

He spoke too quickly, however. A minute later, directing the retreat to a crumbling, three-walled ruin where it seemed their final stand must be made, Morningstar saw to it that Carlotta reached the spot, shielded by Hap and Johnnie. Merriam followed. Jim turned to the Chinese then.

"Run for it, Quan," he directed the latter brusquely. "I'll try to cover you and your men."

THE Oriental was in a savage mood. Blood from a torn ear smeared his jacket, and there was murder in his flashing eyes. He hesitated, shooting a suspicious look at Morningstar. Then he jerked a nod. He started for the walls which sheltered Carlotta, his men at his heels. Salters' gang saw them and poured in a hot fire. Morningstar saw one of the Chinese stumble and go down. Starting to scramble up, he won to his knees, but slumped down again. That he was seriously, perhaps mortally, wounded, Jim didn't question.

Quan Goon saw what had happened. He had almost reached cover. Slugs from the renegade's rifles screamed about him, but he seemed

not to notice. Turning, he started for the wounded man, Jim waved him back.

"Get behind that wall, you fool!" he cried. "I'll get him!"

The broad expanse of the roof was a good score of yards in width. The man who had been hit lay near its center. It seemed to Morningstar that he would never reach the spot, yet it was only a few seconds before he was there. Laying hold of the Oriental, he heaved him up. Somehow he got the inert body over his shoulder. He started for cover.

He had nearly reached it when he felt a heavy blow from behind. He came within an inch of sprawling headlong, just managing to regain his balance and stagger into the protection of the adobe wall. Quan was at his side in a flash.

Together, they lowered the wounded man. Their examination was brief. "Afraid he's done for," Jim grunted. "A slug got him at the last minute out there—"

Quan Goon nodded. The blow which Jim had felt, thinking at first that he had been struck himself, had been a bullet which hit the man on his back. It had torn a fearful hole, ranging upward through the vitals. Quan didn't need to be told that the man was dead. And yet, there was a strange look in his eyes as they met Morningstar's.

"You do this, for one of us?" he got out wonderingly.

"Why not?" Jim countered. "All in the same fix, aren't we?" He couldn't fail to understand what was in Quan's mind. His action in going to the aid of Quan's countryman had come as a shock of surprise to Quan Goon. Plainly, some of his opinions of Morningstar were undergoing a change.

A savage blast from the guns hemming them in warned them that their

own troubles were far from ended. At Jim's direction they answered fiercely. The three walls of their refuge were reasonably secure, but the open side presented a constant threat. Sulphur and Johnnie were working feverishly, attempting to throw up a barrier out of the crumbled heaps of adobe strung about. At a word from Quan Goon, the Chinese pitched into help.

It was hopeless, however. Morningstar saw it even before the others did. A stolen glimpse over the wall showed him Bronc Yeager, waving his men around on that side. A bullet knocked Johnnie flat. He scrambled up with a surprised yell, more startled than hurt. A few seconds later, Merriam cried hoarsely: "Nothing can save us now!"

Apparently he was right. Salters' men had discovered the weak spot in their defense, and were concentrating their fire in that quarter. A second Chinese received a disabling slug in the shoulder. Quan Goon dragged him back. Sulphur and the other punchers crawled from their exposed positions.

"Jim, let me give myself up!" Carlotta burst out. "I can't stay here and see you shot down one after another! Perhaps if I speak to Salters, he'll let you go."

"Not a chance," he refused brusquely. "Slade is mighty sure to smoke us out of here in a few minutes more, but he'll have to finish the job before he gets you!"

It would not be long. The renegades were crawling closer every minute. They could be heard calling to one another triumphantly, sure of their conquest.

CARLOTTA turned to Quan Goon. The latter had overheard her exchange of words with Morningstar. Knowing how desperate

their case was, he yet approved Jim's stand. Carlotta spoke to him rapidly in his own tongue. He heard her out, attentive to the end. Then he shook a decisive negative. Carlotta had put some proposition up to him, Jim knew. Whatever it was, she persisted. It was several minutes before Quan weakened, and then it was only because a hoarse shout and a burst of firing warned of a rush by Salters' men.

They came on the run, their guns flaming. At a cry from Morningstar, the besieged poured in a fierce return. For a moment, it was hard to say what would happen. Then the renegades broke, scattering to find cover ever nearer to their objective.

Sulphur started to thumb fresh cartridges into his gun, only to stop. He turned a strained face to Morningstar. "Jim, I ain't got more'n half a dozen shells left!" he announced. "How are you fixed?"

Morningstar had only a few more himself. Before he could answer, however, Carlotta was at his side.

"Jim, I've been pleading with Quan Goon," she said quickly. "He knows how desperate things are with us! He has consented to take us to safety if only we can find a way back into the lower passages! Can it be done? Can't we fight our way through them—do something to break away?"

Even as Jim started to frame a regretful answer, there was a cry from Happy. The cowboy had been scraping away at the adobe in an attempt to pile up a breastwork, even after the others gave over. It was plain he had made a discovery of some kind. All stared at him.

Hap crawled over to where Morningstar was. "I uncovered a door or somethin', Jim!" he burst out. "There's a hole over there where I

was diggin'. It goes down into the room under us!"

Jim lost no time in investigating. What Hap had said was true. There was a hole leading down into darkness. It was not large, but a minute's digging remedies that. Soon it was big enough to crawl through. Carlotta's tone reflected the relief they felt at this sudden release from the grim predicament of a few moments before:



"This is what I was praying for! You will not forget your promise, Quan?"

Quan Goon hesitated only a moment. And yet, before he could find words for his answer, there came a fusillade from the enemy even more savage and determined than before. Morningstar heard Yeager directing another rush which they could not have hoped to stave off.

"Quick!" Quan exclaimed. "Down that hole, all of you!"

They obeyed hastily, Carlotta following Johnnie, who had gone first to make sure the drop was a safe one. Morningstar waited until the

last, with Sulphur. Both were fearful to behold, blackened with powder and smeared with blood and dirt. They took a last shot from cover at the renegades, advancing pell-mell across the near roof. Then Jim whirled.

"Down with you!" he flung at Sulphur. The lanky one dived for the hole and dropped through. Jim almost landed on him, he followed so closely.

"Jim! This way!" he heard Carlotta's urgent call. Stumbling through a dark passage, they wound this way and that, presently finding themselves in a second room. Here, a ladder running through a hole in the floor gave upon a still lower level. Morningstar kept his ear cocked constantly for the first sound of pursuit. It was not long in coming.

JIM was about to plan out a course of action when Carlotta turned to him, Quan Goon at her side. "You must allow yourself to be blind-folded, Jim," she told him. "You and the others."

He hesitated, but what he saw in her face assured him there was no trickery here. "Make it fast," he grunted. "Salters isn't so far behind."

He submitted to the kerchief that was slipped over his eyes and knotted at the back of his head. Evidently Sulphur, Merriam, and the others were similarly treated. A hand grasped Morningstar's arm and he was led forward.

He felt himself being led interminably through the devious passages of the great pueblo. In fact, he had no inkling of it when the way led out, though that must have been the case, for the party proceeded for what seemed miles without a halt. They had negotiated several ladders. From the silence and the musty smell in the air, Jim judged they were in an underground pas-

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sage of some kind. He could feel nothing but smooth stone underfoot, and the rough walls that he could touch. Then came a series of stone steps. It seemed endless. If Jim had even striven to preserve some idea of where he was being taken by the use of his sense of direction, he would long since have been hopelessly confused.

He could not have told when it was that he first began to sense the change. The stone steps had led up and up till his legs grew weary of climbing and he would have said there could be no point in all the rugged Fortifications as high as this. But at last a halt was made. Morningstar heard Carlotta's voice. She was speaking to someone. There was a measured colloquy in Chinese, then silence. In the midst of it, Jim was led forward.

He guessed that his friends were no longer with him. For the moment, that fact held its own significance. And then he realized that the air was fresher, keen with the unmistakable smell of water. From a distance came the call of a bird. Nearer, he caught the rustling of a tree.

A voice fell on his ear which he recognized instantly. It was that of Sui Chen. The Oriental said: "Welcome to Ping-an-shanku, my friend."

A hand whisked the covering from Jim's face. The glaring sunlight blinded him for a moment. Then his eyes focused. Speechless with amazement at what confronted him, he stopped in his tracks. The secret of Wu-tai-shan lay revealed before him. It was incredible! Beyond imagination! His eyes torn wide, staring, he stood there, transfixed and stunned.

What is Ping-an-shanku? Is the secret of Wu-tai-shan to be revealed to Jim Morningstar? Will he find Jennifer? Has Slade Selters' gang been outwitted? The fourth installment of this gripping and unusual story will appear in next week's issue.

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