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# WESTERN STORY

MAGAZINE

JULY 25,  
1936

15¢

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By CHERRY WILSON



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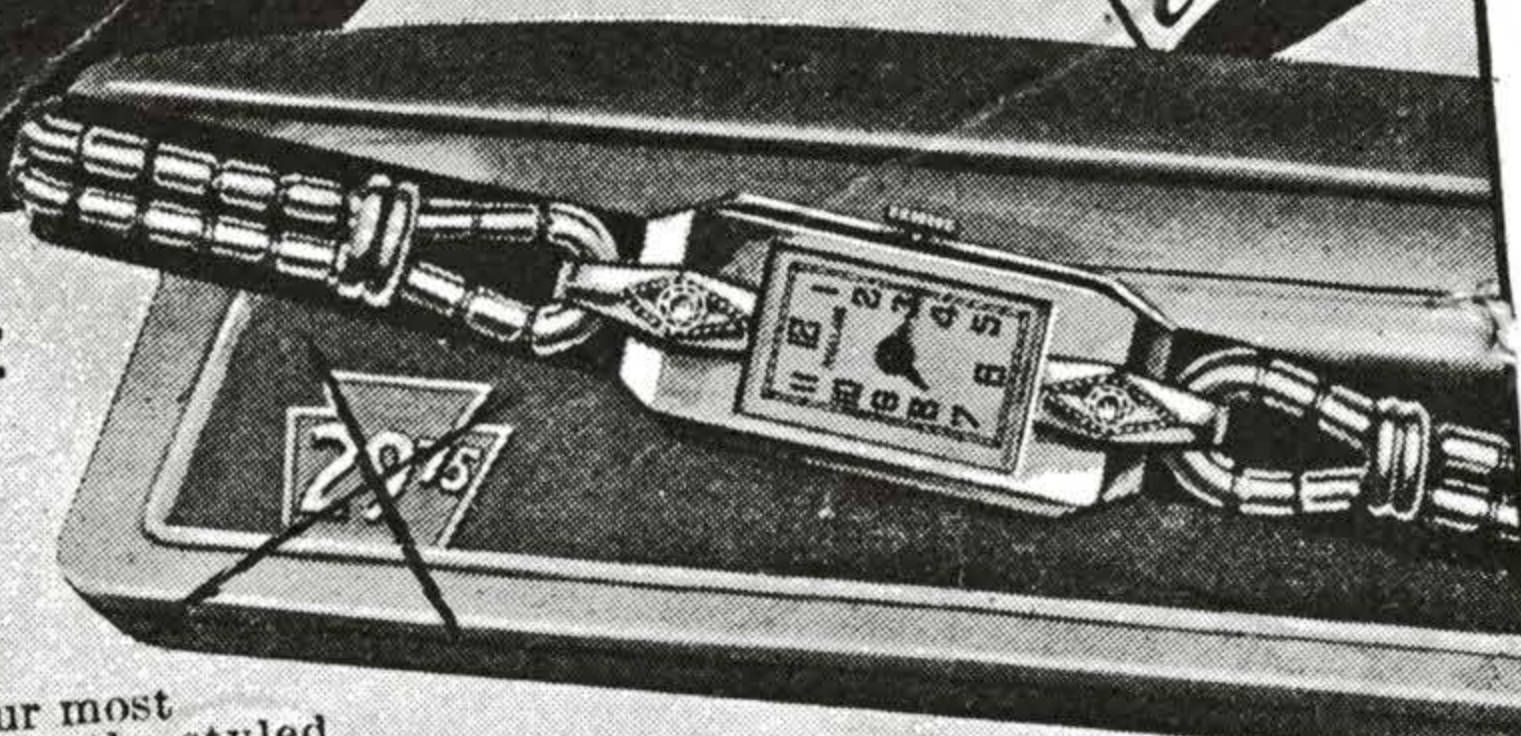
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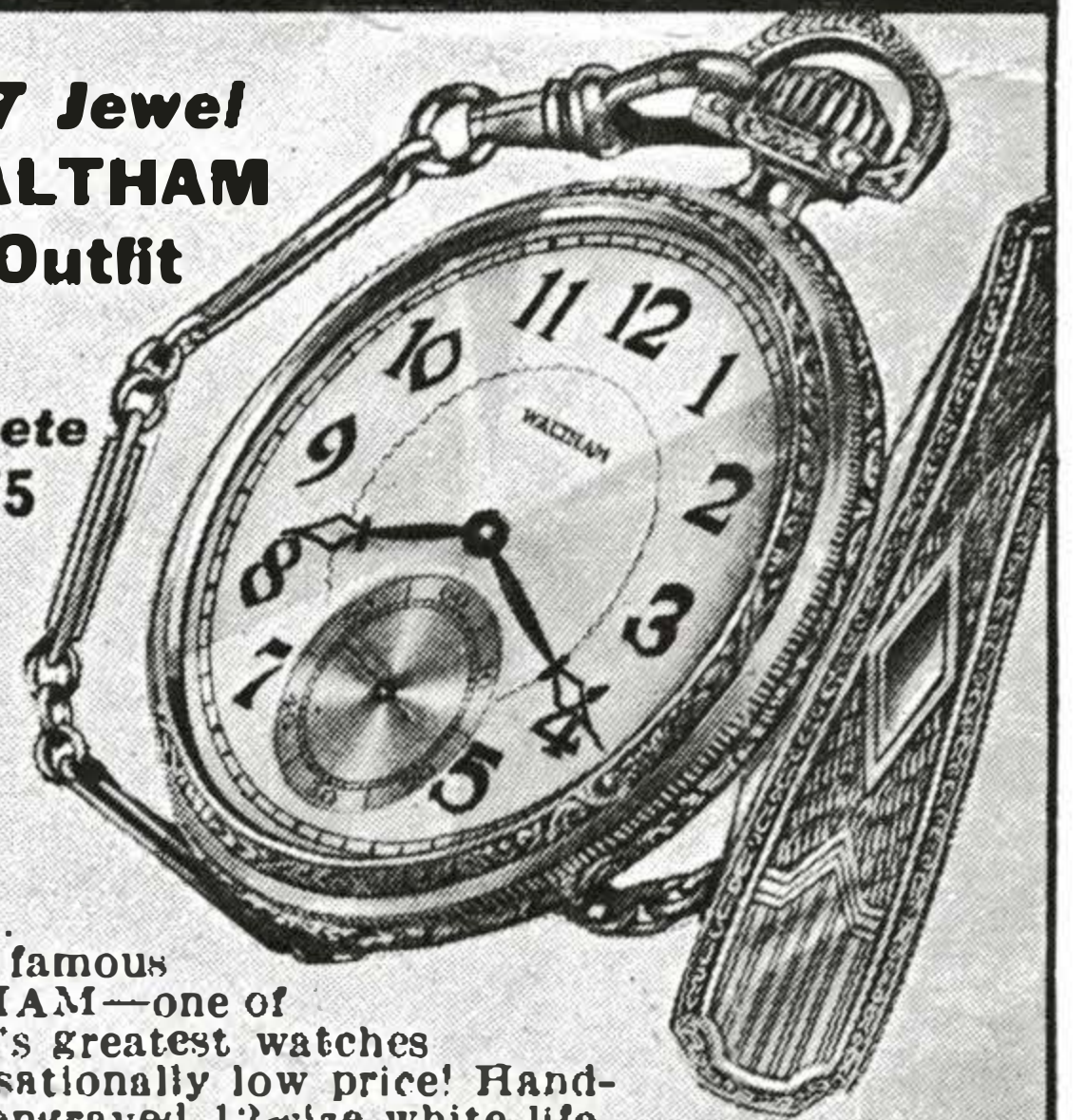


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Vol. CXLIX

Contents for July 25, 1936

No. 3

## A COMPLETE NOVEL

**Brushpopper** . . . . . *Bennett Foster* . . . . . 37  
It was only a small chore that took the rancher north, but he met trouble aplenty.

## TWO SERIALS

**Starr of the Southwest** . . . . . *Cherry Wilson* . . . . . 6  
**Part One**  
An old sombrero bearing many brands leads its owner close to death.

**Square Outlaw** . . . . . *Frank Richardson Pierce* . . . . . 104  
**Part Three**  
Guns blaze and knives flash in a desperate struggle for treasure.

## SHORT STORIES

**The Last Ride (Poem)** . . . . . *Harry R. Keller* . . . . . 5  
Old Tobias Gunn thought his race was run.

**A Right To Freedom** . . . . . *Guthrie Brown* . . . . . 28  
Only a gentle hand could lead this wild stallion.

**One Ranger Ran** . . . . . *John Briggs* . . . . . 82  
He started something, and he had to continue to dish it out.

**Danger Fighter** . . . . . *H. C. Wire* . . . . . 93  
He was ready for anything that looked like trouble.

**Master Of Men** . . . . . *Dabney Otis Collins* . . . . . 123  
He lived by the sword.

## MISCELLANEOUS

**Chicken Thieves** . . . . . 26 *Mt. Ranier Breathes* . . . . . 36  
**The Same Old Cry** . . . . . 92

## DEPARTMENTS

**Interesting And True** . . . . . *H. Fredric Young* . . . . . 27

**The Round-up** . . . . . *The Editor* . . . . . 131

**Mines And Mining** . . . . . *J. A. Thompson* . . . . . 133

**The Hollow Tree** . . . . . *Helen Rivers* . . . . . 135

**Where To Go And How To Get There** . . . . . *John North* . . . . . 138

**Guns And Gunners** . . . . . *Lieut. Charles E. Chapel* . . . . . 141

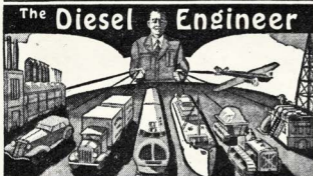
**Missing** . . . . . 143

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20x58 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x59	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x59 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x60	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x60 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15

**HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES**

Size Tires Tubes	Size Tires Tubes	Size Tires Tubes	Size Tires Tubes
20x3 1/2	\$2.35	\$4.75	\$3.45 \$3.15
20x4	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x4 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x5	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x5 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x6	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x6 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x7	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x7 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x8	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x8 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x9	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x9 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x10	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x10 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x11	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x11 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x12	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x12 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x13	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x13 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x14	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x14 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x15	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x15 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x16	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x16 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x17	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x17 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x18	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x18 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x19	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x19 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x20	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x20 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x21	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x21 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x22	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x22 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x23	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x23 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x24	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x24 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x25	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x25 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x26	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x26 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x27	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x27 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x28	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x28 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x29	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x29 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x30	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x30 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x31	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x31 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x32	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x32 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x33	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x33 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x34	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x34 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x35	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x35 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x36	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x36 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x37	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x37 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x38	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x38 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x39	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x39 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x40	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x40 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x41	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x41 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x42	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x42 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x43	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x43 1/2	2.35	4.75	3.45 3.15
20x44	2.35	4.75</	



# THE LAST RIDE

By HARRY R. KELLER

I PULLED my pinto to a stop  
In sunny Pendleton,  
Before the shabby harness shop  
Of old Tobias Gunn.

Now, Tobe had been a ranching  
man

Ere old age cut him down,  
The fiercest of the cattle clan  
In Oregon—and now he ran  
This quiet shop in town.

He met me with a pallid face;

He heaved a feeble sigh.  
Said he: "I'm done. I'm going,  
son—

Back to my ranch to die!"

I trailed him out. He locked the  
door.

He crawled aboard his dun.  
I sadly thought: "We'll see no  
more  
Of old Tobias Gunn.

He's starting on his last, long ride  
Across the open range,  
An old man doomed. He cannot  
hide,

For death is riding at his side,  
A comrade grim and strange."  
I watched until he rode from sight,  
Resigned and calmly brave.

Ten years slipped past. I went at  
last

To seek the old man's grave.

Whom should I meet upon the  
range

But old Tobias Gunn,  
Alive and well! I gasped: "How  
strange!

I thought your race was run  
Ten years ago!" And Tobe agreed:  
"I came back here to croak.

I found four thousand steers to  
feed.

I found my foreman foul with  
greed.

I found a sorry mess, indeed—  
The ranch was going broke!

I had to take things over then."  
He heaved a hearty sigh.

"And to this day, I'm here to say,  
I ain't had time to die!"

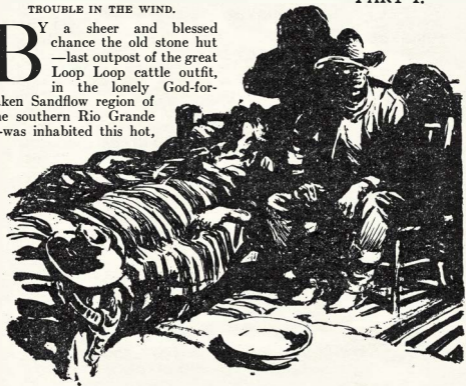
# STARR OF THE SOUTHWEST

## CHAPTER I.

### TROUBLE IN THE WIND.

## PART I.

**B**Y a sheer and blessed chance the old stone hut—last outpost of the great Loop Loop cattle outfit, in the lonely God-forsaken Sandflow region of the southern Rio Grande—was inhabited this hot,



starlit September night. Eleven months of the year it was deserted. Eleven months of every year nothing crossed its unbarred threshold but the hissing sand, the fiery wind, the slow-moving rattler. And so it would be to-morrow. For then the Loop Loop men, quartered here the two weeks past, scouring these wastes of sand and cactus for far-straying stock, would have left.

Already their work was done. The brush corrals before the crumbling, one-room structure were filled with

cattle. At dawn, the trio limned by lantern light inside the hut would hit the trail. Just now the lanky, grave-faced Texan draped over the rough plank table was playing solitaire; the slim, olive-skinned, white-haired old Mexican, kneeling in the red and fitful flare, laced a broken stirrup leather in his saddle; and the big, hard-eyed, disagreeable border drifter, Quayle—latest recruit to the outfit—paced the floor, grumbling, as he always was, about his wages, now two months in arrears.



By **CHERRY  
WILSON**

Author of "Hardpan's Christmas Deal," etc.



"I earned that money! I earned it by the sweat of my brow. I earned a million, if sweat means anything, poundin' leather in this Sandflow! But I ain't askin' a million. I'm just askin' what's comin' to me. An' by the Lord Harry, I——"

"It's been a tough year on cow-

men." Wearily the Texan looked up from his game. "A mighty tough year, what with the banks closin', and receivers callin' in loans they'd expected to renew and let run for years yet."

"Am I to blame for that?" Quayle snapped, finding here the argument he'd been looking for. "I didn't break the bank, did I? I didn't even borrow from it. I ain't goin' to be beat out of two months' pay just be-

cause a bank went flooey! An' I'm tellin' you, Tex!"

"Not just one bank"—the Texan's patience was wearing thin—"but seven of them. The whole Valle chain! It's a lucky cowman who can pay his help this year."

"So what?" snarled Quayle. "So the help can whistle! Is that it? Help can whistle because cowmen trusted Jord Valle's banks, an' when they asked for their money, it wasn't there. An' neither was Jord Valle! Where's he gone? Nobody knows. But I ain't hidin' him. I never even seen the man! I wouldn't know him from——"

The old Mexican, whose hands had been for seconds idle over his lacing, his white head bent, listening, suddenly sprang to his feet, and threw a hand up.

"*Que es?*" he cried sharply. "What is that?"

They all heard it then. Startling as rifle shots in the dead quiet of that wild spot—the pound of hoofbeats at mad gallop!

"What is that?" the old Mexican cried again.

"Trouble!" swore Quayle, and reached for the six-gun at his belt.

"I reckon so," agreed "Tex," but his tone was quiet. "No man rides like that unless he's in trouble, or runnin' from it."

An instant later, all three stood outside the door, straining their eyes into the darkness. By the increasing pounding they could follow the approach of the horse—a horse, indiscernible at first, but rapidly taking form as it broke through the gloom—a trim-limbed sorrel covered with foam. Reeling, swaying on the trim-limbed sorrel's back, hands gripping the saddle horn was a white-faced rider, whose years could not exceed twoscore.

AS the spent and quivering horse stopped full in the glare from the open door the cowpunchers saw that the boy's dark shirt was much darker on the side toward them. The wide belt was saturated and blood ran down his winged chaps, dripping onto the ground! His fine eyes—so tragically black, in his drained-white face—burned on them in some desperate appeal that his gray lips vainly tried to form.

The Texan sprang to him. "Boy, you're hurt!"

"Shot through——" he gasped, with awful effort. "Bullet here——" His hand trailed toward his side, but couldn't make it. Furious at his weakness, he panted imperiously, "Don't want it there! Somebody got—razor—knife? Cut it out!" Coming from one in his plight it was astounding. "Don't need—no—sinker!" he assured them, with a grin of ghastly humor that haunted them long after his meaning was clear. Then he pitched into the Texan's outstretched arms.

His hat, an ancient, Spanish sombrero, with wide, cupped, silver-conchoed brim, and high, peaked crown, toppled to the ground. It was a hat to draw the eye, even at such a time, but hardly one to draw such a cry as burst from the throat of Florencio, the Mexican, as he caught it up, and stood staring at it, as if it were a live thing. No! A dead thing one had known long before. The ghost of a friend!

With no thought to Florencio, following like a sleepwalker, still staring at the old sombrero, the Texan carried the wounded lad into the hut and laid him down upon a bunk. Quayle led the foaming horse around and tied it in the brush behind, for trouble was in the wind. No telling where it was blowing from, and it al-

ways paid to take precautions in the lonely Sandflow of the southern Rio Grande!

Regardless of borrowing trouble, the Texan tore the boy's stained shirt away, dropped his belt, and bared the wound—a ghastly hole in his left side, just above the waistline. Feeling around, he found the lump on the other side, where the bullet had lodged deep under the skin.

"Boy, who done it?" he asked, his lean, bronzed face hard-set.

There was pain in the black eyes staring up—pain not wholly physical.

"No matter." The boy's hand tossed in a feeble gesture. "I've been riding—toward that bullet! Now, it's done—its work. Cut it out!"

But the Texan dared not take such a responsibility upon himself.

"Boy, you don't know what you ask. An incision there—it's dangerous. I'll patch you up the best I can, and send—"

"No!" the boy protested fiercely, starting up. "You do it!"

"But I ain't no doc—"

"You don't have to be! You got a knife, ain't you? You—can cut!"

"But there's nothin' to give you to ease the pain."

"I can stand it, if you can!" the lad insisted, with a gameness that thrilled the Texan. Suddenly, all his bravado gone, his white face quivering, and looking very helpless, very young, he moaned piteously, "I can't die—with the—danged thing—in me!"

Though shaken by the anguish in that plea, the Texan dared not give in. He was still groping for words to say so, when there was no longer any necessity. The boy was gone—or so the Texan thought. But, no—his heart still beat! Slowly—faintly! It could not beat long.

SITTING on the edge of the bunk, fingers pressed to that failing pulse, Tex gazed into the boyish face with interest. It was a fine, passionate young face, that had in it—though the boy was unconscious and his fiery eyes shut—something headlong, willful, tameless. Who was he, this nervy lad? Who had fired that shot he'd been riding toward? That "sinker" he didn't need!

The Texan's gaze rested on the table where Florencio sat bowed over that hat, Quayle leaning over his shoulder, his hard eyes agleam with curiosity. Instantly, Tex was on his feet and bending over the hat, hoping it might hold some clew to the boy's identity. One look at the hat here in the light, and he all but forgot its owner. It seemed imbued with a personality peculiarly its own, one that dominated everything else. He saw then, what had escaped him outside—brand on brand, of every conceivable size and description, burned deep on every inch of that old sombrero!

"What do you make of them?" he asked Quayle.

"Show-off!" sneered the big rider. "Show-off, pure an' simple. Just a fool kid with a big head, tryin' to draw notice to hisself by messin' up his headgear with the brands of outfits he's worked for, Tex."

"He's a sight too young to have worked for so many," remarked Tex dryly.

Which was undeniable even for Quayle. The hat looked like the tally sheet of every round-up held since Lot had his range dispute with Abram and drove his flock over the Jordan! The Seven Up, the Dagger Hilt, the Broken Bell, the Y Lightning! Half the old outfits in the State!

"An' them other hieroglyphics?"

Quayle's interest was blazing. "That line burned deep through every brand? An' them little dots around each one? What do they mean?"

Memory dogged the Texan's mind. He could almost grasp it, but never quite. He said soberly, "That hat's got a history."

"Si," murmured the Mexican, "a sad and sinister history!"

"You know it?" cried Tex eagerly. "You know that history, Florencio?"

A shrug like a shudder convulsed Florencio's taut frame. "It is written," he said, strangely.

"What? Where?" insisted Quayle. "You mean them brands?" Harshly he commanded, "Read it then!"

## CHAPTER II.

### BRANDED HISTORY.

LIKE a man in sleep, or deep in a hypnotic spell, wholly subservient to another's will, his eyes frozen on the old sombrero, as if what he recited actually were written there, Florencio began, in a queer, strained, disembodied tone that rang weirdly through the room:

"Long ago, when the State was young, this hat was seen on the Black Plains Range. Even then men ask, as you, 'What means the symbols on that sombrero?' And no man knew that the proud old cattleman who wore it, had in his rash youth, been a rustler; that his vast herds were built on stolen cattle; that those brands were the record of his crimes! But always his conscience had troubled him, and when ever he stole cattle, he burned the owner's brand upon his hat—with dots around to indicate how many—meaning to pay them back some day." Slowly, like a record run down, his voice died away.

There was no sound but the la-

bored breathing of the unconscious boy on the bunk beside them and the soft hiss of wind-flung sand on the windowpane.

"But that mark through every brand?" prompted the Texan.

"Yeah?" Quayle challenged. "How do you account for them?"

"That," said the old man—and every word seemed wrung from him—"is the history of the second generation, on whom the sins of the father descended, for he was never to make restitution. Death overtook him. There was only time to summon his sons and tell them the true and terrible meaning of the brands; to pray they make good every theft—that his soul might rest! But——"

A start ran through him. The Texan thought he was going to stop. After a moment, he went on, dazed still, revealing things no power on earth could have made him tell in circumstances other than here.

"Of his two sons, the younger—wild and lawless like his father—refused to use his inheritance to pay debts nobody knew existed; debts contracted before he was born. He squandered his share over bars and gambling tables, while the other nobly shouldered the full burden. One by one, he hunted up the outfits branded on the hat, and secretly made good his father's thefts. As he cleared each brand, he burned a line through it—to keep his record straight. But the money from his heritage did not go far, and he slaved to make more. By the labor of his hands, his wits—every possible way! Yet strive as he did, there was one he could not pay."

"This"—pointing to it, branded black in the gray nap, on the very peak of the old hat—"the Broken Bell! This—left until the last, lest he be tempted to pay it, and forget the rest. This one, which *must* be

paid! For it showed his father had stolen many cows from the father of the girl, who was all of earth—aye, and heaven—to him. Until that debt was paid, life held no meaning. But he was never to mark out that brand."

"Yet it's canceled!" cried the Texan.

"Si, by a dying hand!" was the tragic answer. "By the hand of the black-sheep brother. Too sad, that is, for tongue to tell! With his life's blood, he paid the debt to the Broken Bell. Thus honoring"—a light almost of personal pride broke the still surface of Florencio's dark face—"the last debt recorded on the old sombrero of many brands."

Close on the hush that followed this, the wind 'soughed in, as if the very night had caught its breath. With it, through the open door, came the lowing of corralled cattle, the shrill, sweet whinny of a horse in the brush back there. A moan broke from the unconscious figure, and the lantern flame flared and fell, with a brighter glow, on those fresh, red stains on the ancient sombrero."

**J**ARRINGLY, Quayle's laugh broke in. "That's quite a story, Florencio. Did you make it up as you went along?"

"It's no story, Quayle!" the Texan cried, memory no longer eluding him. "It's true! Every syllable! That hat belongs to the Hallet family, over in the Black Plains country. Why, it's as much a part of New Mexico, as the longhorn is to Texas, or the Alamo!"

Blind to the look Florencio shot at him—Florencio, alert—the Texan continued: "I've heard that story before, but Florencio didn't tell it all. There's still another chapter! A third generation of Hallets. Two brothers again, Starr and Lane.

Starr, the elder, is a square-shooter like his father, who canceled these brands. The other is wild as the grandfather who contracted that fatal debt; as the uncle he was named for, who gave his life to square the Broken Bell!"

"But from what I gather, Lane Hallet hasn't the redeeming grace of his uncle. They say he's plumb bad. Always has been! At the rodeo in Lasco last spring, he got into a shooting scrape and killed the sheriff—Pat Donovan, a mighty popular man. The county got out a reward for him. A thousand dollars, dead or alive! But last I heard—"

"A thousand dollars!" Quayle's greedy soul took fire. A thousand days of slaving at thirty per—and not getting it, what was more! If he had half, a third that sum—

"Last I heard," heedlessly, the Texan rushed on, "he was still a fugitive, with every officer in the State hunting him; with his brother, Starr, moving heaven and earth to find him. They say Starr Hallet has a blind, stubborn, fanatical faith in his brother—refuses to believe him guilty of murder. He hunts Lane to hear from his own lips what did happen, that he may find the real killer."

"Then this kid"—Quayle's hot eyes slid toward the bed—"is one of the Hallet boys?"

"He must be," admitted the Texan.

Hoarsely, Quayle demanded, "Which one?"

But the Texan didn't know.

Quayle whirled on Florencio. "You knew the Hallets?"

"Si," was the silken, soft response—dangerous as a panther's pur. "I work for the father of these boys when he marked out the brands on that sombrero. One time"—slowly the old Mexican's eyes narrowed on

the smile in them—"when he fight to take his brother from a gambling den, I kill a man with my knife to save a Hallet's life! Even yet"—softly, and with a smile, he stated—"I would kill a man to save a Hallet!"

There was that in his voice which made the Texan shiver.

Quayle seemed not to notice. "Tell us," he insisted, "which is this—Starr or Lane? The Hallet worth a thousand dollars, or the blind fool huntin' him?"

Like a panther Florencio was around the table, between Quayle and the helpless figure on the bunk, his hand slipping beneath his shirt to close on the knife that he always carried there.

"It is Lane," he said softly.

"Are you sure?" cried Quayle. "Would he be apt to wear a hat as well known as that? One that would make him a marked man?"

"It is Lane," said the Mexican.

"Dead or alive!" Quayle licked his lips. Again his hard eyes sought the bunk. *Dead or alive?* Hard to tell which. But no matter which! Either way he was worth the same. He stepped toward the bunk as if the still form on it were a roll that he could pocket!

Death hovered in that hut—closer to another than the wounded boy on the bunk! The Texan watched in smothering horror. Was Quayle crazy? Hadn't he understood that threat? Didn't he know the loyalty of Florencio's race? That once they have worked for a family, they are as loyal as if they'd been born in it! Couldn't he see the only way he could collect that reward would be over Florencio's dead body? As that deadly knife was about to flash into action, Quayle froze in his step, his hand dropping to his gun.

But it was never drawn. The thud of galloping hoofs cut in; of many horses this time. To Quayle their coming was a threat of the prize snatched from him, or whittled down by many sharings. He sprang toward the door, the Texan but a step behind.

A dozen riders were galloping up, their horses lunging, snorting, the wet coats evidencing a mad race through heavy sands. The men jerked and swore, trying to get them in hand. All was wild confusion. Faces and forms were indistinguishable in the night. Only one stood out—a rider framed full in the shaft of light from the open door. A tall, sinewy, young rider, on a cream-colored horse of striking size and beauty. He leaned tensely forward in the saddle, his smoldering eyes fixed beyond the two in the doorway to the Mexican inside, holding up, as in the act of donning it, an old sombrero, brands invisible in the gloom, but with contours as familiar as the face of a brother!

It was only a flashing glimpse, then Quayle slammed the door behind him. There was a thousand dollars in that hut, and you couldn't be too careful in the lonely Sandflow—or any man's land—playing for a stake like that!

### CHAPTER III.

AN I O U.

**F**LASHING as that glimpse had been, the Texan had noticed it. He fixed his eyes on the young rider. Certainly, he'd never seen him before, yet he had no doubt as to his identity, so strong was the resemblance to that other tense, young face the Texan had looked into this night!

In pity and horror that this rider must see that bullet-riddled form in

the hut, he scarcely gave a thought to the other men; scarcely a glance at the man who, as Quayle jerked the door shut, shouldered aside the cream-colored horse and came up, firing questions like a Gatling gun. The newcomer was a stocky, grizzled man, whose features were lost in the star's wan light. His voice had the ring of authority, and on his broad breast gleamed an official badge to back it!

"What outfit is this?" he—Tom Garret, Lasco sheriff—demanded.

With no thought of any one, or anything, but that stake and how he could hold it, Quayle retorted, "Loop Loop."

"Had a caller recent?"

"Yeah. The boss was out to check up on us a coupla days ago."

"You call that recent?" flared the officer.

"Mighty recent—in the Sandflow."

"I mean *plumb* recent," explained the sheriff, obviously nettled. "An hour ago—or less. An' I ain't concerned with folks on legitimate business here. A young hellhoun' on a sorrel—that's the man we're after."

"What's he wanted for?" asked Quayle, cautiously.

"Murder!" came the chilling, the terse answer.

It was like a lash in the face of the young rider. The Texan, whose eyes had never left him, saw him flinch and whiten. Then, as the sheriff went hotly on, the youth slowly backed his horse out of the jam, unobtrusively slid into the deeper shadow at the corner of the hut, and disappeared.

"Murder!" flamed the officer. "The murder of my friend an' predecessor! The whitest man that ever wore a star. Shot him down like a coyote! But he'll swing for it!" he said sharply.

"You don't mean young Hallet?" asked Quayle. "The kid who killed Pat Donovan?"

"That's who I mean! He's managed to hide out half a year. But we're on his trail. Sighted him a dozen times this afternoon. Right on his heels at Skull Crossing! I'd 'a' swore I winged him!"

"A bounty on him, ain't there?" Quayle was playing *mighty* careful. "A thousand bucks, I hear."

"That's right!" said the sheriff shortly. Dang a hombre who thought of money, when it came to doing what was the bounden duty of every citizen! "A thousand dollars to the man who produces him."

"Produces him where?" Quayle pressed, like a man just talking to hear himself. "To the Law? You, for instance? Or lands him in jail? Say we'd been lucky, an' he'd come here, an' we turned him over to you, right side up an' handled with care? Would we get the reward?"

"You sure would."

"Dead, or——"

COME on, Tom!" an impatient voice from the posse cut in. "We're wastin' time here. I told you that wasn't the sorrel's trail. We lost it in the wash, where the cattle crossed. Likely the same cattle these boys is drivin'. That yearlin's doubled back on us, an' is hittin' out of the country. Gittin' farther away, every——"

"Reckon you're right, Joe." Garret was wheeling his horse to direct the man hunt away from that hut, out of the Sandflow, when Quayle seized his bridle.

"Wait!" he cried, with a savage exultance that made the Texan's blood boil. "I'm claimin' that thousand! Your man's here!"

They stared, stunned, not believing.

"He's in there"—Quayle pointed toward the door—"dead or dyin'!"

All was a tangle again. An uproar of men, piling out of the saddle and into the hut. Between their shutting forms, the Texan saw the sheriff approach the bunk, and stop; his square figure stiffened.

"What's the big idea?" he cried wrathily. "Tryin' to make a fool of me?"

Tex saw Quayle go up to the bunk—stop—and his jaw drop! Fighting through the clamoring posse, the Texan, too, went up to it, halting dumfoundedly. The bunk was empty!

The bunk was empty! And Quayle was like a man gone suddenly crazy.

"He *was* here!" he swore. "He was here when we went to the door! He come rampin' in on a winded sorrel. Shot up! Bleedin' all over the place! The blankets— Here's where he was layin'! Look!"

The sheriff stooped to examine it, but his eyes fell on something just under the bunk, and he snatched it up. "He was here, all right. Here's his hat!"

He held it out to the lantern light. Eagerly, the men crowded about, a strange awe stealing over them. The old sombrero of many brands! Relic of the wild frontier, and familiar, then, on every cattle trail from the San Juan hills to the Rio Grande. Its story was whispered in many a version, until, with passing time, everything pertaining to those first years and characters took on glamour and interest. Like the first stagecoach—the great white-topped schooner of the plains—the old sombrero was brought forth to appear at frontier celebrations, and help revive some gleam of the virile days that had been. The last such time was six months ago, at the Lasco Rodeo.

"He was wearin' it!" Tightly, the sheriff gripped that scarred and storied old sombrero. "He had it on when he killed Pat! Lost it makin' his get-away. We've been holdin' it since for evidence, but last night he come out of hidin, broke into jail, an' stole it. Game! Give him credit for that! But this hat will put the noose on his neck! For it give us his trail." He dropped the sombrero on the table, his eyes raking the dim interior. "How did he get out of here?"

Even as he asked, he saw.

Quayle tremblingly pointed to the one window, tall and narrow, in the stone wall opposite. "It was shut! Now—it's open. He opened it!"

"Energetic for a dyin' man!" suggested some one.

"Mebbe he was playin' possum," another added. "But"—eyes looking shudderingly from that blanket—"that don't look like it!"

"He had help! That Mexican"—Quayle glared wildly about him—"where's he?"

"What Mexican?" asked Garret. "Was there another man here?"

"Florencio! He works with us. But he used to work for the Hallets! Said he'd kill for a Hallet! He was goin' to knife me when—"

Breaking through the confusion, seeming to come from right under the window they looked from, was the sound of a horse thundering off!

"He's gone!" Quayle screamed. "That greaser! Dang him! Got him on the sorrel, an'—" The mad rush for the door drowned the rest of his words.

THE hut was empty of every one but Quayle and the Texan. They stood together at the table, while the posse mounted and galloped away, hoofbeats growing fainter—fainter—



"Right through my hands!" Quayle was storming. "A thousand bucks—right through my hands!"

But the Texan was thinking of that young rider he'd seen vanish around the hut. He hadn't shown up again. Where was he? Only one horse had galloped away.

"That greaser won't get a mile!" moaned Quayle. "But it might as well be a million! We'll never collect! The posse'll get the——" He stopped, staring at the window, his jaw dropping farther than when he'd found the boy gone.

Between him and the outdoors, two booted feet swung! He stared, speechless. The Texan, bewildered, stared at two legs incased in chaps descending into view. Then a man dropped to the ground, and, climbing back on the ridge of earth that banked the hut, reached up with the utmost care and effort, and lowered a heavy object. Tenderly clasping his awkward burden, he looked straight in at them. It was the same rider they'd seen in that shaft of light, but haggard now, as if years had elapsed—years spent on the rack!

"Help me fetch him in," he said, in a tortured tone.

The Texan sprang to aid him. Together they bore the unconscious youth back into the hut, gently depositing him on the bunk he had been snatched from so recently, so mysteriously. The Texan stepped back, but the other bent silently over the inert form. His shoulders shook, and his cheek gleamed wet, but he was tensed like a man whose hardest task still lies before him, and dares not give up.

Unable to wait longer for an explanation, the Texan asked earnestly, "How in the world did you do it, Hallet?"

Slowly the tired eyes looked up. "You know?"

"Sure. I'd know you were his brother anywhere."

Any one would have known. Though Starr was older, taller, with gray eyes instead of black, and dark-brown hair, the resemblance was unmistakable. He had the same finely cut, spirited face. There was the same high-bred stamp on it. Only there was a steadiness, a gravity not in the other face, and tragic in a youth of twenty-four, so deeply the experiences of life had bitten there. Experiences not his own, but those of the erring, younger brother—hunted like an animal—dying like one!

"I didn't do it alone," he told them gravely. "The instant I rode in, I saw Florencio holding the old sombrero, so I knew Lane was here. I slipped around the cabin, and Florencio was trying to get him out the window. Between us, we got him on the roof. Then Florencio lit out on my horse. Pancho's fast. Nothing in the posse can touch him. Florencio's tryin' to toll them off, till I take Lane——"

There was a snarl across the table, the flash of a gun in Quayle's hand. "You'll take him nowhere!"

Starr Hallet stared at that six-gun, completely dazed by such an action. Because they had been with Florencio, because he had seen Quayle close the door and parley with the sheriff, and heard nothing since, in the excitement of getting his brother onto the roof and helping Florencio get away because of what he believed he'd seen in the eyes of the Texan—he had thought them friends.

"You'll take him nowhere," Quayle was vowing over that gun, "till I collect the bounty on him!"

"I'm takin' no more chances on that killer!"

Another lash in the face of the brother! A lash that made him flinch, whiten, and storm madly back:

"Don't call him that!"

"Why not? He's earned the title! Why not call him a killer? He is one. He killed Pat Donovan! He killed Donovan, an' he's goin' to swing!"

"He may—swing," Starr flashed whitely, "but he's not guilty!"

"That's up to the jury."

"But"—voicing the awful fear that had haunted him all this summer when he'd been moving heaven and earth to find his brother—"they may not wait for jury trial!"

"That ain't my responsibility."

"You'd see an innocent man hung for a thousand dollars!" cried Starr, incredulously.

"What they do with him," was the devilish reply, "ain't my concern."

Sick with horror, Starr turned to the Texan, "Where do you stand?"

Tex wasn't sure.

HE had no sympathy with murder, but a man wasn't necessarily guilty of murder just because he was accused of it. Suddenly he knew that whether Lane Hallet was guilty or not, he stood with this gray-eyed rider! He said, shortly, "Count me on your side."

"Thanks," said Starr. "That's what I thought."

And it seemed to buck him up, give him courage to fight. Despite the bitter defeat sealed by that gun, he meant to fight—and win! Quick! Before the posse got back.

"Listen!" he swung to Quayle again. "Nobody saw Lane kill

Donovan. The evidence is all against him, I'll admit. He ran; that looks black. But he had some reason. I've got to talk to him—find out why he ran. But first we must get him away from here."

"You don't move him one step!"

Starr threw a hand up. "If it's money you want," he promised Quayle, "you'll get it. Only give me time—a month—two weeks—to find the real killer. I'll pay that thousand."

"Not a min——"

"Fifteen hundred then!"

The gun wavered in Quayle's hand. Every fiber of his avaricious soul yearning to reach out and seize this greater sum, but he dared not, lest he lose the thousand already in his grip.

"Two thousand!" Starr raised desperately. "Twice as much as the law will pay. *Six times as much!* For you're not the only one entitled to that reward. There's Florencio! And my friend here! You'd have to split with them. But wait two weeks, and you'll get two thousand for yourself!"

Quayle was dripping cold perspiration. "If he dies——"

"Then"—Starr's eyes went to the bunk, and came back wet—"collect!"

The gun was down, but Quayle was protesting, almost whimpering, "How do I know you'd pay? I'd have to have some guarantee."

Some guarantee! Desperately, the gray eyes swept the hut, as if seeking some guarantee in it. By chance, or Fate's grim design, his eyes fell on that old sombrero. He picked it up. His grandfather's hat! Ledger of his youthful crimes! In remorseful years, his crown of thorns, to which he had clung as his

only hope of expiation. Sins expiated by the bitter sacrifice of one son, and the lifeblood of the other!

Gray eyes dark with the pain of his thoughts, Starr looked at Quayle. "You know the story of this hat?"

"Florencio was tellin' some cock-an'-bull——"

"You know a debt on it is sacred to a Hallet?"

In the face of that deadly sincerity, in the almost living, awesome presence of that old sombrero, Quayle could only nod that he knew.

Quickly, Starr Hallet reached into the pocket of his black flannel shirt for a cigarette, lighted it, and rapidly smoked it a quarter down. Then, as they mutely watched him with a thrilling glimmer of what he was about, he bent over that hat, seeking a space free of brands. Finding one—beside the fateful Broken Bell, on the high crown—he applied to it the glowing tip of his cigarette.

Not a sound, not even a breath was drawn. The odor of burning felt—the very essence of all the tragedy that had been, and was to be—permeated the hut as the old hat knew again the searing pressure of a new brand furrowed on its aged nap in an awful pact!

Nobody saw the wounded boy's eyes open on the grim act. Nobody saw him start in horror from the blanket.

As Starr turned the fresh brand to Quayle—Q2000, flanked by the dollar sign, beside the Broken Bell—he said, "There's my I O U—my promise to pay two thousand, in two weeks' time, if you keep quiet about Lane, and give me a chance to find the murderer."

"Two weeks, an' not a day more," Quayle answered hoarsely. "If you ain't here then, I'll turn him in!"

A wild cry filled the hut, echoing back from those walls of rock, seeming to voice the horror of all the dead Hallets:

"Don't do it, Starr! Don't make a deal like that!"

## CHAPTER IV.

FOX AND GEESE.

THE history of two generations was on that hat, and the third was in the writing. Most sad, most sinister, it would be when written; beautiful, the story of faith unalterable—a brother's fight to save a brother, against the world, against time, against even that brother's will!

While the hut still echoed with that cry of protest, Starr Hallet dropped beside the bunk. Throwing his arms about his brother, he tenderly supported him as Lane panted a wild confession:

"Let him turn me in! I killed Donovan!"

The Texan looked with regret and deep compassion on Starr, who showed no feeling of any kind. There was not the slightest tremor in the hand gently brushing Lane's black hair back, nor in his low-toned, "Hush! You're excited, Lane. You don't know what you're sayin'."

"I do!" fiercely, the boy insisted. "I was at the dance. Been drinking—all day. Was leaving, when the sheriff cornered me. He—got tough. An' I—I let him have it! I was seeing red, Starr."

Wasting time, when there wasn't a second to spare! Wasting strength, when he shouldn't be talking at all.

"Lane," Starr cut in, "you're lying to me! I was at the dance, too. I went there hunting you. I was right

over the wall, when— You weren't alone, you and Donovan! I heard a man singing. There was a woman— You're shielding some one. Who is it, Lane?"

Starr's heart sank as the boy strained away from him, black eyes flashing through all their frightful pain, the stubborn defiance always in them when any one took issue with him. It wasn't safe to antagonize Lane in his condition, but Starr had to know.

"Lane"—gray eyes probed the very soul of his brother—"who was with you there?"

"Oh, stop quizzing me, Starr!" the boy groaned. "I told you I did it!"

"Who was that man singing, Lane?"

The white lips locked.

"That woman—" pressed Starr. "Was that Rose of Lost Canada?"

Instantly, Lane was like a wild cat, struggling to get free, shrilling with hot ferocity, "You keep her out! Do you hear? She— You don't know anything about her!"

"Nobody does." There were tears in Starr's eyes, but his grip was like steel. "Nobody knows anything about her—except she's a rodeo rider and comes from some place called Lost Canada. But I know you were seen with her at every rodeo last spring. I know she was in Lasco the night Donovan was—"

"You know"—said the distracted youth bitterly, falling back in exhaustion—"a heck—of a lot!"

But Starr didn't. Not much! Just a few facts, which constant thought had worn to the bone. They stood out in his mind, sharp, glistening as the bones of a desert victim through which white sands stream endlessly. Endlessly, a thousand

hopes, fears and conjectures, flashed through his mind.

There on his knees, his arms about Lane, tensely watched by Quayle and the Texan, Starr's thoughts swept over the network of fancy and fact, which he must fill out—quicken—with the living truth that would save his brother.

That April night when he'd come home from work to find the old sombrero gone, and a note from Lane saying he'd taken it to wear to the Lasco Rodeo, he was hurt because Lane hadn't waited to see him. Somehow he had a feeling that all wasn't well. Whispers and hints that folks had let drop strengthened his apprehensions. Lane had slipped his bridle—was running wild. Mixing in bad company! Crazy over Rose of Lost Canada—a girl without a regular name or habitation that anybody could discover! A girl who appeared out of nowhere to ride in rodeos, then disappeared into nowhere again! Whose beauty was like mescal on men! A dangerous girl for a kid like Lane.

**F**EELING that he must see Lane—talk to him, he hurried to Lasco. Somehow, he learned that Lane was at the dance, and went there—whipped by a nameless fear. Bursting into the hall, he glimpsed the old sombrero vanishing through a door in the rear. Struggling through the jam of dancers, he found Lane gone. He was groping around the lot in back—dark, for a high wall shadowed it—and trying to get around the wall. He heard that song! The song had haunted him ever since. It was an undertone to all the miles he had hunted Lane. The voice, of deep, rich, musical timbre, had held—strangely, for a refrain so tender—a

warning note! A man sang—with a warning note—just over the wall:

"If I should die and o'er oceans foam,  
Softly a white dove on a fair eve should  
come,  
Open thy lattice, dearest, for it will be,  
My faithful soul——"

The song broke there, and almost on the same spot, with a scrape of feet on gravel, a sharp command to halt came an answering cry, inarticulate, scarcely human, then a woman's scream—and a shot!

He stood rooted to the spot, while people rushed from the hall, from among horses and rigs tied in the lot. Plunging after them, he found Lane standing over the dead body of Pat Donovan, holding the crowd at bay with a gun! Saw his brother, still menacing them, dart swiftly back to his horse and gallop off. The old sombrero, swept from his head by heavy shrubs along the wall, was caught and held as if it were the murderer!

Two people must know who was guilty. The man who sang, and the woman who screamed. Why hadn't they spoken up for him? Why hadn't the girl—— He'd stake his soul that was Rose of Lost Canada! Why hadn't she——

"Don't try to pin it on somebody else," Lane begged piteously, his voice bringing his brother's wandering thoughts back. "I done it."

Donovan shot down, as Garret had put it, like a coyote! Starr thought bitterly, "You couldn't do that!" he insisted huskily.

"You don't know me!" retorted the boy. "Folks don't know each other when they're kin. They don't see each other like——"

"You're a Hallet!"

Terribly, Lane reminded him, "Hallets—do things! Look at that

hat!" His eyes widened on it there, full in the lantern light on the table. "It shows what the Hallets are! Rustlers—worse! Uncle Lane——"

"He wiped all that out when he canceled the Broken Bell!" said Starr.

"But now"—it was a mere whisper of horror—"my mark's on it!"

"You've got to help me wipe it out!" cried Starr. "You've got to tell me who's been hiding you? Who were those people over the wall?"

There was no answer, only a fading light in the black eyes, a laxity in the slight figure like a slow parting of flesh and spirit, for all Starr's grip of steel. In an agony of fear for his brother, with no hope but to clear his name of a charge so horrible, he cried wildly, "Lane, where's Lost Canada?"

The weight in his arms lay impassive, voiceless. In tones that might have reached a heart long worn away by streaming sand, he cried, "I know you didn't do it! Pat Donovan was killed by a .38 bullet. I found your .44 in the brush under the wall, where you threw it!"

Sympathetically, the Texan bent over him. "Better put him down. He's fainted again."

"It's worse than a faint!" protested Starr. "He won't get well!"

"I'd 'a' said not, an hour ago," the Texan admitted huskily. "But now—— Well, he's stood so much——"

"He's got to stand more!" his brother said vehemently. "I've got to get him away from here."

Instantly, Quayle was wary. "Where you takin' him? Wherever it is, I'm goin'!"

WHERE was he taking Lane? Starr didn't know. He didn't know the Sandflow. In helpless appeal he looked at the Texan, an hour ago a stranger to

him, but one he'd known instinctively he could tie to. With what justification, he was to learn later. Now he looked to the Texan for help, and Tex didn't fail him.

"There's an old dugout not far from here," he told Starr. "I run across it hunting cattle. It's drifted over. Nobody'd find it who didn't know it was there before. He'll be safe there."

Quayle making no objection, they set immediately about transferring the desperately wounded boy to the old dugout situated in a deep depression about a mile north of the hut, and further hidden by great, wind-sculptured dunes. Sand had drifted over the roof, and only a door was in sight.

"Like an igloo," Tex put it, halting the procession there in the starlight.

"Like a tomb!" Starr thought, but he believed Lane would be safe here. He felt a vast relief when they laid Lane on blankets spread on the dugout floor. The Texan and Quayle returned to the hut for what supplies they had left there, and such camp equipment as was necessary to maintain Lane in the hut. Florencio came back with them.

The old Mexican was coated with sand, and tired from his hard run, but his white teeth flashed in a victorious grin.

"Fox and geese," he described the chase to Starr. "Lost them in the dunes easy, but they'll find their way out at daylight. Maybe they come back. Better they find nothing at the hut. You boys——" addressing Quayle and the Texan—"take the cattle home, like we plan. I will stay with Lane."

"No, you don't!" strongly Quayle objected there. "I ain't leavin' here. You two take the cattle."

"I stay with Lane," said Florencio, uncompromisingly.

"I'll take the cattle." Tex settled the question, though it would be a tough job for one man. "I can tell the boss you boys are hunting stock farther on."

"Better, then," Florencio warned, "we cover every track up here. So if the posse comes back to the hut, the only trail they find will lead out of the Sandflow. But we must work fast. Day breaks soon."

While Starr gave Pancho a quick rubdown, turning him loose to forage on the meager grass in the vicinity of the dugout, Tex and Florencio went over the ground, carefully obliterating the trail. When all was done, dawn was streaking the eastern horizon.

## CHAPTER V.

### A WILD PLAN.

I FEEL better about leaving, with Florencio here," Starr told Tex, as they stepped out of the dugout for a last look around. "He'll do everything for Lane that can be done."

"And as quick as I deliver them cows," Tex promised him, "I'll be back to do what I can. I'm seein' this through."

Starr's eyes filled. "You're a prince, Tex."

"No, just ordinary," the Texan denied smilingly. "And ornery enough to have a little curiosity. How come you to be with the posse?"

Unhesitatingly, Starr told him. "I'd been hanging around Lasco off and on, thinking Lane might come back after that hat. It means a lot to a Hallet. I knew he'd stop at nothing to get it. And he didn't!

He slipped into town, held up the jailer, and got away with it. Sheriff Garret was swearing in men. He didn't know me. Lucky none of the others did. And he swore me in."

"Then," Tex said thoughtfully, "you're a deputy. You got a legal right to hold Lane in your custody."

"And arrest Pat Donovan's murderer, when I find him," Starr added grimly.

The Texan looked at him admiringly. Black as the case was against the lad in there, he half believed with Starr that he was innocent, and prayed that he was.

"Any plans?" he asked.

"Not now," Starr said, with a hopeless shrug. "I hoped Lane would tell me something, but he never will. There's two other people who know what happened that night. I haven't been able to locate them in the months I've been searching. Now, with just two weeks— But"—his face was resolute in the sunrise—"folks can't live on this earth and not leave tracks! And with Lane dependin' on me—"

A loud whinny broke in. They turned. It was the sorrel, left to trail reins beside the dugout, when they carried Lane in. A dead giveaway if, by some miracle of ill luck, the posse should return and decide to have a look in this pocket. It was too well known to them to be mistaken for an unused Loop Loop horse escaped from the little pasture down at the hut, where Quayle's and Florencio's mounts would be kept along with others from the remuda to serve as a blind.

"We'll have to turn him loose," said the Texan, "saddle and all. Then if they see him, they'll think he's dropped his rider. He'll make for home as fast as he can kite."

He was rising to do this, when Starr caught his arm.

"Wait!" he cried eagerly—no longer without a plan, if such a wild, fantastic idea could be dignified by the name. "That's not Lane's horse. He must belong to a friend—some one who's helped him. Maybe one of the very people I've got to find. He might lead me to them. I'm going to follow him!"

"By juniper," cried Tex, after the first startled gasp, "it might work at that! You can depend on a horse to light out for his home range, and there's a chance he might lead you right."

A chance was all Starr asked. Infused with this hope, he hurriedly saddled Pancho, then went into the dugout and ate the cold bite that Tex set out for him. Alone in the room, he knelt over the unconscious form of his brother.

"You're holdin' out on me, Lane," he whispered in trembling tone, "but I'm goin' to save you in spite of yourself. When I come back, we'll take your mark off the old hat." All the unnatural steadiness of his young face breaking, he implored, "Be here then!"

Rising, he picked up the old sombrero with its fresh brand. The hat his father had worn to pay his father's debt. Until this debt was paid, he would wear it.

Out again in the dawn, now luminous, rosy, his good-by said to Florencio, he mounted Pancho and waited while Tex broke the snap in the sorrel's bridle, letting the bit fall free, so that the horse could eat and drink on the journey, but making it appear—should the posse pick him up—that it had been done by accident. Then Tex threw the reins over the saddle horn, and gave the animal a slap on the flank.

It moved away, but stopped within a few steps, looking back

uncertainly. Tex threw a stone, frightening the horse into a run that carried it far down the sun-flushed swale, where it tossed up its head, sniffed the breeze, then swerved suddenly to the left, and struck off in a westerly direction.

WITH a warm handclasp, and a husky, "so long," to Tex, Starr Hallet rode after the sorrel. His one frail hope in all the world was that the sorrel might lead him to the nameless singer of a song heard over a starlit adobe wall, or a girl, who was only a name—Rose of Lost Canada!

"The wildest goose chase ever man rode on!" thought Tex, watching him recede in the rosy distance, gradually growing smaller and smaller, a tiny, toiling, ineffectual figure, lost in the wild welter of dunes that rolled away like the waves of a storm-tossed sea. Pausing, a mere speck, Starr rose in his stirrups and waved back with the old sombrero.

Turning back to the dugout for a last look at Lane, ere leaving to take the cattle home, Tex was riveted in the doorway by the tableau in the room.

Quayle was furiously pacing up and down, cursing his bargain. The old Mexican, his eyes slits, his lips set in a grim smile, one brown hand twitching at his shirt front where his knife was hidden, was poised between Quayle and that pallet on the earthen floor.

"A fool! That's what I've been!" Quayle raved. "Seven kinds, an' then some! A thousand in the hand's worth a mint on a hat. He won't come back! Or suppose he does? Suppose—he's got two weeks to do it in—he hatches up some scheme to clear his brother? He'll let me whistle! No, by thunder, I ain't waitin'! I'm turnin' him in!"

In one stride the Texan was across the floor.

"Listen, you!" he told Quayle, in a dangerously quiet drawl. "You're not turning him in. You made your bargain, and you'll stick to it."

"Yeah?" was the wolfish snarl. "Who'll make me?"

"I will," said the Texan coolly.

"And me," said old Florencio.

"I'll be back the minute I deliver the cattle," Tex warned grimly, "and you'd better be here."

As surely as ever he knew it afterward, he knew right then that he shouldn't go. But failure to take the cows in, would bring Loop Loop men to see what was wrong. They couldn't risk that.

"I'll be back as quick as God will let me," he promised Florencio, who followed him out. "Don't let him out of your sight. Watch him every minute."

"Like a hawk!"

## CHAPTER VI.

LANE HALLET!

IN the Sandflow! In that devil's pasture of dust and heat and glare, where nothing comes to flower but a modicum of spine-festering, sun-blasted things; where the sinister coiling diamond-back stands out against white sand, flecked by the circling black shadow of the buzzard's wing; where life's frustration is expressed by the ceaseless churn of mighty dunes, crawling before the fiery wind, seeking, futilely, surcease from their purgatory. In the Sandflow, rode Starr Hallet, in the wake of a ranging horse that wandered hither and yon, pausing to crop this clump of brush, that tuft of grass, as if time were nothing.

Hither and yon, time everything, Starr followed the horse. For he



knew that his brother's life might depend on the course this horse was taking. Starr knew, too, that, while a horse could be relied on to return to its home range, the sorrel's home range might not be the place Lane had ridden it from, and he would be thus led farther from the people he had to find. With ever-mounting despair, he realized that he had only two weeks to solve the murder, and possessed no clew any sane man would follow.

Yet, doggedly, he clung to the trail over crumbling alkali flats, where Pancho sank to the fetlocks, and white dust came rolling up to plaster his wet, golden skin like alabaster; down arroyos, choked with mesquite and prickly pear, that caught at his chaps like a million talons holding him back, the dense chaparral swallowing the sorrel for hours together; up endless ridges, red with iron stain, black with piñon, and across high mesas, yellowed with low, curling buffalo grass, where sight of a fence would fill him with terror, lest the horse he was trailing heed the call of pastured horses and tarry there.

It was heartbreaking to follow that trail; hard to hold back far enough so the horse wouldn't suspect it was being followed, and be diverted from whatever destination it had in mind; more difficult still to mark its course when dark came on, and trust to luck to pick it up in the morning. Many times it seemed to Starr that the quest was hopeless; that the horse was as lost as he was. Often it would depart from its original course, leading him miles to north or south, that seemingly led back to the Sandflow. But always, just as he decided this was a wild-goose chase, and was on the verge of calling it off, the horse would resume its journey west.

Five days he followed the sorrel. Five days of the precious fourteen that numbered all of time to Starr! Five wasted days, he feared. Nine more, and Quayle would collect—either from the State or Starr. He had no illusions about the man. Quayle would play straight, only so long as it benefited himself to do it. Once convinced otherwise, he'd play into the sheriff's hands. Time was the very essence of their contract, and time was passing. Anything that reminded Starr of its passage was torture. The sun's crimson set meant a day gone! The rosy sunrise was yet another day on its way! Bird's matutinal songs, slanting shadows, the gathering amethyst of dusk—all, torturingly, pressed in on him. And always the cold fear lay on his heart that Lane had passed beyond his help.

But when, for hours together, the sorrel forged steadily toward the higher ranges west, his heart would lift, and he was sure the solution lay in the purple distance. But where—to whom—was this trail taking him?

In the saddle, or broiling a rabbit or quail over his lonely camp fire, or blanketed on the hard ground, stars blazing over him—he relived over and over, the moment when he had stood under the wall, hearing that song. Constantly, it rang in his mind. Would he recognize that voice in speech? Or would he meet the singer—perchance had already met him—and know him not? He could hear that song warning—whom? Donovan? Lane? Hear that command from Donovan to halt! Who was he halting? Starr tried to separate fancy from fact. How many people were on the other side of that wall? Four—sure. Donovan, Lane, a woman, and the singer. But that queer cry, preceding the woman's scream? Had she

uttered it, too? He didn't know. It hadn't sounded like a woman, nor yet like a man. It didn't sound—he thought with a shudder—like anything human! And the woman's cry—what had been in it? Surprise? Anger? The passion to murder? He couldn't tell. But he knew what had been in that shot. Death, for Donovan! Death, almost certain, for Lane!

THEN followed the hour when, the confusion over, he had gone back to search the scene. He had found Lane's gun—the .44 he always carried—thrown in the brush. Donovan had been slain with a .38. Undoubtedly it was the gun with which Lane had held the crowd at bay. Whose hand had he taken it from? For he must have taken it from some one, and discarded his own, to make it appear that he had done the killing. Lane couldn't have done the killing! Wild—he was! Wild as the wild blood in him, but—not a killer.

By lonely camp fires Starr would take off the old hat and read the record again, see what the Halletts had done, but find nothing like that! No record of a Hallett shooting a man like a coyote! He saw his I O U, due in a few days' time, and which must be paid whatever the outcome, and wondered where the money was coming from.

At no time in his life, till this last year, would it have been any trick to raise two thousand. But the collapse of the Zuni Creek Branch of the Valle chain, had not only taken what money he had, but also the ranch that he and Lane had inherited from their father and had been running together. Yet he hadn't meant to deceive Quayle. It had seemed easy when he made the deal. He had a few horses he could

sell, a few hundred dollars saved since the failure, and there was the thousand-dollar reward for finding the real murderer. Now—now he was sure of nothing, but that Lane was innocent, and he must find the guilty man. After that he'd find a way to cancel that brand.

Always he wondered whom Lane was shielding—and why? Some enemy who held a club over him? Or perhaps a friend? Lane was loyal. He'd die for a pal. That singer? The girl— Here fancy became fact! He was sure—but had no proof of it—that the girl was Rose of Lost Canada. Lane loved her. "Keep her out!" the boy's cry came back in all its fury of fear. "Keep her out—do you hear?" If Lane would die for a pal, what wouldn't he do for the woman he loved! Was Lane shielding her? Why was she hiding secure in that mysterious nowhere, letting him go to his death for Donovan's murder?

"Where's Lost Canada?" he'd asked a thousand people this summer. Not one could tell him.

"On Mars," was the oft, joking assertion.

They were as vague about the girl. What was she like? Dark, fair, big or little?

"Gee," one romantic waddy had countered helplessly, "how can you describe the perfume of a flower—the shine of a star—electricity?"

Older, more prosaic men as utterly failed to describe her.

But Starr knew what she was like. Beautiful—he had to concede that—but hard, cruel, unfeeling! Like that *Lorelei* who sat on a rock, combing her hair, luring men to their doom. And because he was sure that Lane had gotten into this terrible trouble through her, and she hadn't opened

her lips to save him, Starr's soul burned with a fierce hatred for Rose of Lost Canada!

"If she's in this," he told Pancho, his tired eyes, under the battered old hat, black with brooding, "I'll show her no more mercy than she's showing Lane!"

Mid-afternoon of the sixth day, Starr rode out on a high promontory overlooking a grassy valley, thickly dotted with ranches and grazing cattle. Far off, at the valley's end, nestling in the shadow of a mighty, cloud-capped mountain range lay a town! What valley, what town, Starr had no idea, but he knew those mountains, visible almost at the Sandflow, must be the Confusions, wildest of New Mexico's wild ranges. And he had the strangest conviction that he was nearing some definite milestone, if not—the thought struck sharp as pain—then the end of the trail!

What would he find here? It was impossible for Lane to have hidden in a town all those months when the State had been ransacked for him. Wherever he had ridden from to steal back the old hat, it must have been some remote hide-out. Starr had hoped and prayed that it was Lost Canada, and that the sorrel would take him there, where he might find the girl, and, through her, the singer whom he had heard that night.

Sitting there in the saddle, watching the horse trot out in the valley below him, he still hoped and prayed. He tried to believe that the new interest and life the sorrel evinced was due merely to the presence of other horses ranging the valley, and its eagerness for company. That in itself constituted a problem, for the horse would mix in with them, and loiter to graze at the cost

of time increasingly precious; or it might be sighted by riders, who, seeing a saddled horse running loose, would catch it up to hold for the owner. The last fear that was realized almost as soon as Starr rode out on the valley floor!

**T**RAILING along, half a mile behind the sorrel, screened by the chaparral bordering a wide wash, he saw the horse suddenly start and swerve. Saw, at the same instant, the cause—a cowboy, emerging from the brush in its path, and who, after one quick look, took after it, full-tilt, with swinging rope! With no ready explanation as to how he came to be in possession of *two* saddled horses, Starr pulled Pancho into the brush, and leaving him there, ran toward the scene of the chase, in terror lest the horse be lost, or turned definitely from its course!

Quickly overhauling the sorrel, the cowboy's rope snaked out, jerking it to a stop. Seeing a stranger hurrying up on foot, he turned and led the sorrel back to Starr, grinning happily, as one who has done another a favor.

"Figured he broke loose from somebody," he said, tossing Starr the reins, "so I picked him up. Might be hard to catch, if he got in with some of the wild stock in this valley."

"Thanks," said Starr, shortly—almost curtly—in his fear.

Sensing Starr's displeasure, the waddy's grin faded. With a curious glance at the old sombrero and an abrupt "so long," he wheeled and was gone.

"Acted like I was tryin' to steal his hoss," he was telling his bunk mate a few moments later. "Acted—plumb hostile!"

"What for lookin' hombre, Pink?"

"Regular enough. Good hoss! Good outfit! But topped with a funny ol' Mex hat, plastered with brands."

"Brands!" His bunk mate gave a violent start. "Say, what color hoss was that you caught?"

"Blood sorrel, with a white fore-foot. But what——"

"Why, you poor, plain, pitiful, blind idiot!" The bunkie was dancing on one foot. "I'll bet he didn't thank you a bit! I'll bet he acted plumb hostile. That's Lane Hallet! The hombre what killed the Lasco sheriff!"

"Gosh!" gasped Pink, and lunged for his horse. "The sheriff better know about this!"

To be continued in next week's issue.

### CHICKEN THIEVES

**M**ANY people think that hawks are chicken thieves, but the error lies in the fact that there was seventeen species of the hawk, and at least six of these are valuable friends to the farmer, and probably half of them do more good than harm.

In a recent government biological survey, the stomachs of more than five thousand hawks were examined and found to contain rodents, grasshoppers and many other insects.

The red-tailed hawk and the golden eagle are considered by observers to be more beneficial than injurious. The bald eagle and the osprey have their good and bad traits about equally divided, as have the marsh hawk and prairie falcon. Pigeon hawks, goshawks, Cooper's and duck hawks apparently do more harm than good, as their stomachs were found to contain remainders of poultry and some useful birds.

As for the red-tailed or hen hawk, one out of every twelve meals undoubtedly consists of chicken, but the other meals consist of mice. Any one who wants to discriminate in their warfare against hawks may find out methods of control by writing to the Superintendent of Documents, Washington, D. C., and asking for Circular No. 370. These cost five cents each.

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# Interesting And True

By H. FREDRIC YOUNG

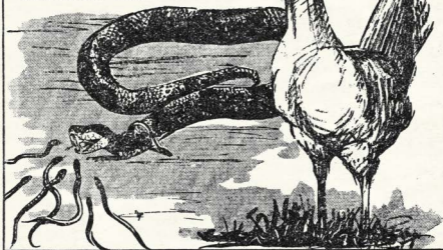


THERE WAS NO SEMINOLE INDIAN TRIBE PRIOR TO 1775. DURING THIS YEAR A SMALL BAND OF CREEK INDIANS DESERTED THEIR TRIBE AND MOVED TO FLORIDA. THIS WAS THE BEGINNING OF THE SEMINOLE TRIBE.



IT IS ESTIMATED THAT TWENTY SQUIRRELS WILL DESTROY ENOUGH GRAIN FORAGE TO SUPPORT A COW THROUGHOUT THE YEAR.

CONTRARY TO WIDESPREAD BELIEF A SNAKE DOES NOT SWALLOW ITS YOUNG AT THE APPROACH OF DANGER.



A CHICKEN WITH ONE GREEN LEG AND ONE RED LEG OWNED BY MRS. FRANK DUNNER, HIGH RIVER, ALBERTA, CANADA.

Mr. Young will pay one dollar for any usable Western "Interesting And True" features which readers may send him in care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Return postage must be included for suggestions found unsuitable.

# A RIGHT TO

**K**ENSHALL had sent Det Manx up on the range to ride the drift fence before the fall round-up that year. By keeping a man on the fence for three weeks or so before the big ride began, a good deal of time was saved on the final work.

Most cowboys were not partial to this job, but Det didn't mind. He was a rather nondescript-looking puncher, with mouse-colored hair and faded eyes, and the rolling gait of a man practically born to the saddle. He neither chewed, smoked nor drank, not from motive but from distaste. As Case Burton put it, "A dim sorta guy, that you'd never hardly know was around, except that his jobs have a way of getting done."

Case himself was a colorful person, handsome and upstanding, with voice a little harsh and eyes a little hard. He was rather spectacular, but not a bad sort. At least, Det thought that. He admired Case immensely. Sometimes he dreamed wistfully of how nice it would be to have folks notice you, and ask your opinion about things, and hunt you up to join a card game. Not that Det was so fond of cards. They seemed to him a rather futile way of spending time. His own off hours were engaged on leather work. Not a man on the Kenshall ranch but possessed a bridle or a belt or a pair of cuffs or spur straps that Det had made and given him.

The cowboy had no leisure for his hobby while on the range, however. He worked every minute of daylight, then came back to the line cabin and cooked his supper. After that, he would sit on the door stone for a lit-

tle while in the short mountain dusk and watch the stars, and listen to the night wind in the pines or the silver tumult of a distant waterfall. Then he would roll in and sleep soundly until he got up to eat breakfast by lamplight.

It was a mild, open Indian summer that year, warm though the day, crisp and cool at night. Det was lying face down by a stream side, taking his nooning one day, when he heard a twig snap on the bank below him. He turned his head—and lay perfectly still, eyes wide with astonishment.

Thirty feet away stood a wild horse, clean limbs braced, neck arched, nostrils distended, every muscle and nerve poised for flight at the cowboy's slight movement. The stallion weighed twelve hundred pounds or better, Det guessed. He was a tawny dun in color, with some buckskin markings, and just one spot of white on him, a star no bigger than a half dollar between his eyes. On his left hip he wore Kenshall's Cross K brand.

Det didn't move so much as an eyelash, but his face lighted up like a lamp! Gringo! Gringo hadn't been seen on this range for two years. What had brought the wild stallion back to his birthplace, the cowboy wondered, and recalled all in a moment the bronco's history.

Gringo had been caught at his mother's side and branded when he was only six months old. After that, he was never even sighted again until he was a-coming four year old. Kenshall himself was the first to see him, and the eyes of the rancher lighted with anticipation.

"Catch that colt," he told his

# FREEDOM

By  
**GUTHRIE  
BROWN**

Author of  
"A Man Like That," etc.



men, "and bring him to me—without a scratch on him, you jaspers, or it'll go hard with you."

That initiated a year-long chase that got exactly nowhere. The colt outguessed and outmaneuvered his would-be captors at every turn. They saw him occasionally. They found his spoor a few times and that of the little band of mares he had collected. They rode in relays once, for three days and two nights, but all they got for their pains was the worn-out band of mares. The leader had vanished like mist on the hills. Though they never got within good rifle range of him, Case Burton tried one day to see what lead could do. He peppered the face of a rim toward

which the stallion was headed, in an effort to turn him. But the wild horse seemed to know how far a bullet could carry. He found a crack in the rim and shot up it like a goat.

**T**HE cowboys called him the Brown Fox, and other things less complimentary, and Ken-shall announced, "I like a good horse, but I have plenty of them. Any of you boys that is smart enough to catch and ride that broomtail can have him."

But the brown horse had vanished

from the country. The rifle seemed to have clinched the argument for him. However, the name he came to be known by was not the Fox. He had crossed the border, and got himself run in on a Mexican ranch the next year. The vaqueros, who were no mean judges of horseflesh themselves, and who possessed a scant respect for "Americano" brands, finally corralled the stallion and roped him. That was as far as they got. He chased seven of them out of the corral, shook off the rope, and soared over the fence like a buck pursued by hounds. The disappointed Mexicans named him the "Gringo," and chased him until he recrossed the border.

When Det saw him, the wild stallion seemed to be ranging alone. Possibly he had concluded that that was the only safety there was for him.

The cowboy lay very still on the grass in the warm sunshine. Finally Gringo lowered his head to drink, then flung it up sharply again, eyeing the prone figure with a vast distrust. But he was also puzzled and curious. He had never seen that shape of animal in just that position before. It was alive, for he had seen it move. But it did not move any more, not even when he stamped his foot and snorted and took two mincing steps toward it.

Det didn't know anything about psychology, or influence, or the radiation of personality. What he did know was horses. He knew that if you were quiet and easy with them, and never startled or hurt them at the beginning of acquaintance, you might win over the wildest or worst spoiled. Also, the more intelligent the animal, the surer your chances of success.

So he lay as still as any frightened

quail, while Gringo gulped a mouthful of water and dashed away, only to cat-step back again, to see what effect the maneuver had had. Det permitted himself a smile now. Gringo eyed him a moment, then took two swallows of water. He finally finished his drink, rolling one eye at the man meanwhile. Then he munched warily at the thick sweet grass along the creek bank. Det said softly and clearly, "Gringo!"

The horse stiffened for a moment, head to the ground, then went on eating. Det called again, with exactly the same inflection. He repeated at intervals until the stallion paid no attention, taking the sound as part of the forest overtones of wind and water and bird calls.

For seventeen consecutive days, Det made that spot at noon. After the third day Gringo was as regular, for the good reason that the cowboy had scattered a little salt over a stone where the wild horse drank. Each day Det lay a little nearer to the stone. Each day he called the horse repeatedly by name, then began to talk to him, in low-voiced cajolery. Gringo would cock an ear back to listen, getting used to Det's slow change of position, even to his sitting up, near the stone.

Then the cowboy put some oats beside the salt. The stallion didn't quite know what to think about the grain at first. But a second trial decided him. He approved of oats. He learned to take them from Det's hand, to tolerate fingers on his nose, then his jaw, then his neck. The cowboy never made a quick move, never raised his voice. He lifted himself to his knees, then to his feet, Gringo backing a step or two but still reaching for the oat-filled hand.



Det kept on talking to him all the time.

"This grain was hauled up here for the use of my own broncs, you robber. You're fat and slick as a corn-fed hog already, and beggin' your head off for more. No, sir, that's the last dog-gone oat in my pocket. Huh, taggin' me are you, you no-account broom tail! Gosh!" The puncher's voice caught in his throat. It was sort of frightening to have a wild thing trust you like that. It made Det think for the first time of the future.

FROM now on, things moved more quickly. Det stood with his arm across the unscarred back one day, deep in thought, while Gringo grazed. The stallion nudged him. The man had been silent too long. Gringo had grown used to conversation.

"I thought I wanted you," Det told him. "I don't, not for myself. I don't want you ever to know a bit or a saddle. You're something fine, like a big, lonesome tree, that it'd be a rotten shame to cut down and make into shacks. No. You stay out on the range, Gringo, and keep away from men, the way you always have. And I'll go on down to the round-up camp to-morrow and get things ready for the boys. It's gonna be lonesome without you, but it'll be great to think of you, running free up here. There won't be any more oats and salt, but you'll forget about that pretty soon. And don't you go buddyin' up with these broncs of mine you've got acquainted with. You might get run in with the cavy some morning, and that'd be a mess."

Det didn't look back as he rode away, that day. That was something he couldn't do.

KENSHALL, with the idea of relieving the puncher by a change of scene, sent Det down country, while the round-up proceeded, to bring in to the ranch a herd of feeders which Kenshall had bought in a neighboring county. Det and the two riders with him got back to camp a few days before the work on the range was finished. They rode in late one afternoon, to meet a scene that froze Det in his saddle.

Gringo had been captured. He had been caught by Case Burton that morning. Det didn't need the recital of the tale that was told him later to know what had happened. The stallion had hung around the spot where Det had gentled him, waiting for his friend to show up again. Case, by the sheerest chance, had ridden across a section entirely cleaned of cattle and seen the horse. He had lain in wait for him and caught him. True, it had taken half the round-up crew to get the stallion to camp and into a corral, but he was Case's horse. Or he would be, as soon as the cowboy rode him.

Det, white to the lips, saw the sweating and foam-streaked Gringo swaying in the middle of the corral, blindfolded, held by a half dozen taut ropes while Case's saddle was being cinched on his back. Case was not unnecessarily rough. This was just business with him. He wasn't angry because Gringo had given him such a terrific battle thus far. Case liked a good fighter.

Det recognized that. He wasn't blaming Case. But that didn't lessen his own horror at what was happening. By luck, everybody was too engrossed with the scene in the corral to notice Det.

Case was firmly in the saddle. The ropes were loosened and taken

away. The blindfold was removed, and the last man sprang for the safety of the fence.

Still the brown horse did not move. He stood with drooping head and heaving flank, seeming not to realize that his fetters were gone. Case Burton settled himself a little more firmly in the saddle.

There, in that fraction of a second before the rider was fully set again, Gringo acted. He made only one jump. It had the explosive and unexpected force of a back-firing engine. Case was not thrown into the air. He shot from the saddle to the ground as straight as a bullet and with nearly the force of one.

There was a moment's scared and astonished pause. Gringo made no further move. He stood with neck straight out, watching the man. He didn't try to buck the saddle off. He didn't try to jump the eight-foot fence. He wasted no time on futile effort. His attitude was not even threatening. He just waited.

**M**EN started to clamber into the corral. From the ground, Case ordered harshly:

"Stay out!" The cowboy rolled over, got on hands and knees and raised himself slowly to his feet. He started toward the horse. But he couldn't walk well. His hip was hurt. He stood a minute, then turned toward the corral gate. He hobbled through, fastened the gate behind him, and ordered:

"Leave the saddle on him. And don't give him any water or feed. I'll ride him to-morrow." The puncher's grim determination was the plainer because he used no extra emphasis.

Some of the men helped him to the bunk house.

Kenshall still sat on the top pole of the corral after they had gone, watching the horse. The rancher's brows were drawn together, his hands gripped between his knees. Det looked at him. Maybe Kenshall was thinking, too, that there were some things it wasn't right to do, no matter what a man's "rights" might be.

The next morning Gringo was gone, saddle, hackamore and all. Case Burton swore with chagrin and amazement—and admiration.

"The devil jumped that fence after all! What a brute!" Case was more determined than ever to have him.

Kenshall hid his relief from all but Det's discerning glower. However, there was a little frown of perplexity in the rancher's eyes. He didn't see how any horse, saddled and trailing a hackamore rope, could have gotten over that fence, clean. But nobody suspected the "dim sorta guy," who had gone to bed with the rest of them the night before, and who was sleeping so soundly the next morning that he had to be forcibly ejected from his bunk.

It was some five hours before that when Det had rolled silently from bed, felt about for his clothes in the dark, and tiptoed out of the house.

An hour later, Gringo, leading as docilely as a hand-raised colt, was allowed to drink half of what he wanted at a spring. A half mile farther on, he grazed in a grassy bottom while Det removed the saddle and hackamore and curried the stallion thoroughly with a stiff brush he had brought along. Gringo wriggled happily under this novel treatment, asking for special attention to shoulder and flank and the base of his ears. Soon Det had the tawny coat glimmering in the starlight, as silky and soft as ever.

The cowboy now disposed carefully of Case Burton's saddle and rope, rolled the brush in the slicker behind his own cante, tightened the cinch on his saddle horse, and went back for a last word with the stallion.

"Gringo"—he took hold of the horse's nose and looked him in the eye—"you get outta this country and stay out of it. You've had a lesson now that you oughtn't to forget. Don't let any man ever get a hand or a rope on you again as long as you live. That's orders, bronc."

He stood for a minute with his arm across the stallion's back, then turned and walked quickly away. Putting off this final parting didn't make it any easier.

Gringo lifted his head to nicker softly, once. Then he went on grazing.

As far as any one could discover, the stallion obeyed orders. Diligent search by the Kenshall men during the winter failed to reveal any trace of him on the range. By this time the ranch hands had all gotten acquainted with the track of that well-shaped hoof, smaller than usual for a horse of Gringo's weight.

But one March night, at supper time, Case Burton burst into the dining room with a yell, swinging his hat, his face aglow.

"Boys, I found him! I've found that damn brown rascal! You'd never guess where." Case threw his hat on the floor and jerked a chair up to a table. "And have I got his majesty dead to rights this time! I'll tell the world I have!"

**K**ENSHALL and Det were the only men who didn't say anything. The others clamored for an explanation. Case filled his plate and took the first edge off his appetite before he told.

"You all know the little bench that lies in against the north shoulder of Horsefly Peak. Seven head of horses took shelter in there, out of the wind, when we had that big snowstorm week before last. Gringo is one of them. The mutt came back on this range for some reason or other. Well, boys, those broncs got away from the wind, all right, in the grove of trees there against the mountain, but the snow drifted around the grove twenty feet deep. They're caught in the neatest, tightest corral you ever laid eyes on, between the hill and the snow bank. They've pawed and stamped the snow away, and run around and around, trying to find a way out, till the bank is smooth as a board wall. We'll have to shovel in from the east side to get them out. The snow has settled and packed till it's nearly ice. I figure it'll take three of us a good half day or more to do it. That O. K. with you, boss?"

Kenshall nodded slowly. "What shape are the horses in?" he asked.

"Pretty poor," Case answered cheerfully. "It'll be no trick at all to get Gringo," he said, laughing. "I'll gamble there's not much fight left in the old boy now. They've eaten into the grass roots, and taken the leaves off the trees as high as they can reach. They're even chewing on the bark. And, of course, all the water they get is snow, which don't help 'em much."

Kenshall asked quietly, "You figure on riding the stallion right away?"

Case began, "I hadn't thought about that—" He stopped and looked up quickly, suddenly catching the rancher's tone. "I—see," he said. After a pause: "Maybe I'm rough with 'em sometimes, boss, but I don't short-change 'em. No, I'll

let the horse get good and husky, before I start riding." The eyes of the puncher gleamed with anticipation. "He won't catch me napping again. It'll be a grand battle."

The others agreed that it would be a grand battle indeed, and there were plenty of volunteers to help with the job of digging the imprisoned horses out in the morning.

"I don't suppose," said one man, "that he's still packin' your saddle."

Case shook his head with a grin. "It beats me how he ever got it off. But I should worry about a little thing like a saddle, once I'm straddle of the best dog-gone bronc that ever set foot on this range."

After supper Det came to Kenshall.

"Boss, if you don't mind, I'd like to go into town to-night."

The rancher stared at him. "To-night!" he repeated. "Why, Det, what's come over you? You don't go to town once in a blue moon."

Det's stiff face essayed a grin. "You never can tell when one of these seizures is gonna hit a guy."

Kenshall looked closely at him. "Aren't you feeling well, boy?"

"Sure I am! Feelin' fine! It'll be all right, then, for me to go?"

Kenshall assented and looked after him with puzzled eyes. What had come over the boy? The rancher remembered now that he had seen that strained look on Det's face once before. When was that, anyhow?

THE thing looked mad and impossible. But Det accomplished it. The cowboy was not in the least romantic, but some instinct deeper than reason told him that Gringo had come back to find him, at the first hint of spring.

When he called from the edge of the snowdrift, the stallion answered with a joyous neigh of recognition.

Det chose as his place of operation the point where the snow bank was highest but least thick. He worked furiously but methodically, hour after grilling hour. He worked far beyond what he had believed to be the limits of his own endurance. But in the middle of his labors came a thought that suddenly stopped him dead.

Gringo would not be free, when Det had freed him. The horse wasn't strong enough to make his escape good this time. Det leaned a moment on his shovel, looking down at the ears pointed at him in the starlight.

"Bronc, we're trapped. We're both of us trapped. And I'm the one that put us here. It's all my fault." He went on shoveling. He saw the thing that he must do, but he shrank from it, hating it. His mind raced over every other possibility, the wildest and most improbable, and was driven back each time to the one solution. He worked on.

Dawn broke gray across the hills. There was the threat of snow in the air. Spring promised another month of raw and blustery weather. The Cross K men stood about the roaring dining-room stove, waiting for breakfast to be put on the table. One cowboy went to the window to look out.

"Looks like we gotta hustle, Case, if we——"

His voice halted, hanging in the air. Some of them looked at him, then walked to the window, to follow his fixed gaze. They looked at each other, and outside again, all comment failing them. The rest

joined them. Kenshall opened the door.

In unspoken agreement they walked outside, bareheaded, and down to the barns.

Det was turning seven skinny horses into the feed corral. The little band had followed Gringo. The cowboy saw the men coming, but he didn't look their way at once. He pulled the saddle from his own horse and turned it in with the rest.

Bridle in hand, he raised his head at last to meet those watching eyes. The men stood grouped in the gateway, looking at him. They saw the dropped shovel on the ground, and the raw palms of his hands, and his face, drawn with fatigue. They looked from him to Gringo and back, but said nothing, waiting for his explanation. Case Burton stepped a little ahead of the rest of them, frowning.

Gringo threw up his head and turned away from the feed rack to trot over to Det. The cowboy put a hand on his shoulder.

"Sall right, bronc. Go eat your hay."

But Gringo stood still, ears twitching, eying the man who had tried to ride him.

Some of the spectators gasped a little. This was the tameless Gringo, acting like a devoted dog with its master. They were stopped, not getting a bit of it, their wits all at a loose end. No one had dreamed of any connection between the self-effacing Det and the wild stallion. Case was the worst bewildered among them. If there had been any triumph, any possessiveness in Det's manner, Case could have burst into furious speech. But there was none. There was only an intense weariness. The cowboy's voice was low as he at last began:

"It's all my fault, you see. I gentled him, up there on the mountain last fall, before the round-up. I hadn't any right to do that. It really wasn't giving him a fair break."

DET stopped, as if that explained everything. They only stared at him. Kenshall got the first glimmer of understanding. He asked:

"Did you ride him?"

Det shook his head. "No, I'd intended to. But when he—when he trusted me so, it looked like a cheap thing to do. He had—well, it sorta seemed he had a right to his freedom." Det made a helpless gesture, finding no words for what he was trying to express. "I thought he'd go away, when I left. But he didn't. He still hung around. And—and so Case got him."

Det looked directly at Case. "I didn't do right by you. But it was you or him. And it looked like I had more call to be square with him." Det added: "Your saddle and rope are safe. I'll get them for you now."

Kenshall remarked softly: "I *knew* he didn't jump that fence."

Case was frowning again. "How in the devil did you ever get them out, alone?"

Det answered simply, "I used five sticks of dynamite, altogether, and shoveled like hell. Then I realized that he could never get away, weak as he was."

"You led him down?"

"No. He followed me."

There was a strange expression on the handsome face of Case. Standing with legs spread, hands in his belt, he asked:

"What now?"

Gringo went back to the feed rack. Det's glance followed him. The cowboy's bruised hand moved in a tired gesture.

"He's not my horse."

"Whose is he, then?"

Det's eyes turned back quickly, questioning. No, Det didn't know psychology. He didn't know how one man's selfishness could sometimes dry up the selfishness in other men. Case was smiling. He looked at Kenshall.

"Whose would you say, boss?"

Kenshall nodded, more pleased than he let Case see.

"I'd say he's Det's, all right."

Det looked from one to the other, scarcely able to believe what he

heard. His gaze turned to the busy Gringo. His face began to glow.

"Then, when he gets strong again, we can let him go—"

"Think a little," Kenshall interrupted. "He's got into trouble twice, coming back to you. You can't let him in for any more of that, can you?"

"You mean"—it was Det who was frowning now—"you mean, break him and use him?"

"We-ell," drawled the rancher, "from what I've seen, I'd say that Gringo will just consider being broken as part of the game you began with him last fall."

Then the tension broke, and every one laughed.

### MT. RANIER BREATHE

WHILE Mt. Ranier still slumbers in that sleep from which there is no awakening, its breath can be seen as slowly rising steam. It is in reality a volcano, although it is considered extinct and is at all times covered with snow. Over its summit and down the sides is the largest single-peak glacier system in the United States. The steam melts holes through the snow at the top, which in turn pours down its sides in twenty-eight named glaciers and many others still unnamed. These glaciers are rivers of ice. There are many ice caves of unparalleled beauty. One of the "stunts" to do on some of the lower glaciers is to sit on the ice, feet straight ahead, and, propelled by a guide, slide downward at a great rate of speed.

**FRIED-POTATOES AND STEAK GET ME SQUASH UP-SET!**

**ALKA-SELTZER, MY BOY, LETS YOU EAT AND FORGET!**

**YOU NEVER CATCH COLD, ARE YOU LUCKY OR WISE?**

**I THINK IN BOTH, I ALKALIZE!**

**MY HEAD ACHE'S SO, I CAN HARDLY SEE!**

**TWO ALKA-SELTZERS DID WONDERS FOR ME.**

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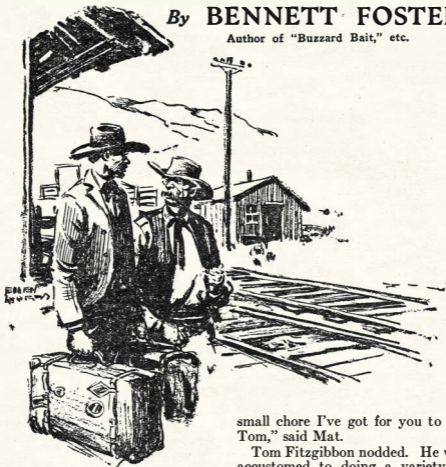
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# BRUSHPOPPER

By BENNETT FOSTER

Author of "Buzzard Bait," etc.



## CHAPTER I.

### A PERSONAL FAVOR.

**B**ECAUSE Mat Antsley had been his mentor, his friend, and his backer, Tom Fitzgibbon walked into the bank at Lotus in response to the message that Mat had sent to the ranch. In the banker's small office, after they had shaken hands and smiled at each other, the two came to business.

"I wanted to see you about a

small chore I've got for you to do, Tom," said Mat.

Tom Fitzgibbon nodded. He was accustomed to doing a variety of small chores for Mat—everything from making inspections for the bank, to running Mat's shopping errands in Hebronville.

"What is it?" he asked.

Sitting behind the desk in his bank had failed to take all the brown from Mat Antsley's skin, or remove the sun wrinkles from the corners of his eyes. Cowman, not banker, was written plainly on the man behind the desk. Mat pursed his lips in a noiseless whistle while he rolled a slim brown cigarette, and Tom,

knowing Mat's ways, waited patiently.

"A small chore," Mat said again. "I want you to buy some calves for me. You're goin' to need some yourself. I'd like for you to go north an' get about four carloads."

Tom took off his Stetson and surveyed it. "It's a poor time to leave," he said.

Antsley grinned suddenly. "Might look like you was runnin' out, huh?" he queried dryly.

"Well——" drawled Tom.

"Them Matamorases will wait," said Antsley. "They'll be right here when you get back."

"I know it." Tom returned his hat to the back of his head. "Thing is, if I stay there ain't apt to be so many of 'em. I been shot at a couple of times since that business across the river. I reckon Amadeo ain't here. He's a better shot than to have missed me. I ain't goin' to run away from no Matamorases."

"Nobody's askin' you to run away." Antsley leaned forward over the desk. "Thing is, I need some calves an' so do you. Are you runnin' a ranch or are you runnin' a war? Just because you followed Juan Matamorases across the Rio an' gunned him for stealin' your cows, is no sign you got to neglect your business. Besides, I got somethin' else for you to do."

"What?" Tom was blunt.

Mat leaned back. "You heard me speak of Joe Archibald?" he said.

"Yeah." Tom nodded.

He had indeed heard Mat speak of Archibald. Whenever the old man got to yarning he was wont to tell of the lusty days when he and Joe Archibald had gone north with the trail herds. Joe Archibald had stayed in the north.

"Well," said Mat, "Joe is dead. Died two months ago. I been get-

tin' letters from S. A. Archibald—Joe's kid, I reckon."

"An'——" suggested Tom.

"Two, three years ago Joe was in a tight place," Antsley continued. "He needed some money an' he couldn't get it up there. He wrote me an' I let him have it. Joe sent me a mortgage although I didn't ask for it. Shucks! Joe could have had my shirt. Anyhow, Joe's dead. I wasn't told, or I'd 'a' gone north for the funeral. Now what I want is that you go an' buy us some calves an' while you're there you look into things for me—kind of protect me. You see, I never recorded that mortgage."

"Yeah?" said Tom.

"Never seen no need of it," said Antsley. "Joe an' me——" His voice trailed off.

"Well"—Tom found papers and tobacco—"I reckon I *could* go. There ain't much work at the place, an' Bill Davis could look after what there is. Like you say, the Matamorases will be here when I come back."

"It'd be a personal favor to me." Antsley stared at his friend through the smoke that trailed up from Tom's cigarette. "Joe's kid has been writin' like there might be a little trouble up there. Seems like the kid don't know nothin' about this mortgage I got, neither. I'd just like to give you full powers an' have you act for me. Would you do that?"

Tom scratched his head. "I wish you'd go, Uncle Mat," he said. "You could buy them calves an' then——"

"I got two things here I cain't leave," interrupted Antsley. "How about it? You goin' to go for me?"

"I reckon I'll have to." Tom grinned ruefully. "You'll keep an eye on things here for me, won't you?"



"I allus have," granted Antsley. "When you goin' to leave?"

"Two, three days," said Tom. "I'll pull out about Friday."

Mat leaned forward again on the desk. "Now about them calves," he said. "You——"

**F**RIDAY morning Tom Fitzgibbon boarded the train at Lotus. Mat Antsley bade him good-by at the depot. In Tom's pocket a letter of introduction cracked against other papers. Tom was well equipped. He had money; he had the unrecorded mortgage, and he had a letter from Mat Antsley to S. A. Archibald. At his feet, under the red plush seat, were two grips, bulging, for Tom, being practical, had taken his working clothes with him. There was a grin on Tom's square, brown face as he looked out the window and waved a farewell to Antsley. When the train started, he placed his booted feet on the seat opposite him, moved his hand to his waistband and shifted the short-barreled gun that nestled there in a holster sewed into his trousers. He was not yet out of the brush country, and the Matamoras were after his hide. The engine wailed and the train jerked convulsively. Tom Fitzgibbon was on his way. As the last car of the train diminished, Mat Antsley, on the depot platform, breathed a sigh of relief. Tom Fitzgibbon was away, safely away. Mat Antsley turned and started back toward town and the bank. Now, while Tom was gone, was the time to set certain machinery in motion. Mat Antsley, who controlled the bank, who ran cattle over half a million acres, whose word was law, and whose prestige was enormous, intended to do something about the Matamoras. Send some Rangers say, or special officers, or else just a

concerted drive among the ranchmen against the family of brothers who lived across the Rio Grande and who preyed on other men's cattle. Certainly something would be done—something definite.

Tom Fitzgibbon, riding north, got a drink of water from the cooler at the end of the car and sought the smoker. It would be good to get away from the brush country; good to get away from the responsibility of his own ranch for a time; good to be foot-loose and carefree again. After all, Tom Fitzgibbon was only twenty-eight years old. He carried a weight of responsibility at a time when the usual youngster was popping cattle out of the brush and thinking no further ahead than the usual Saturday-night dance. He really had a vacation coming to him. Maybe he'd just take a vacation before going north. Tom grinned and spoke to a fat traveling man in the smoker.

"What's goin' on in Fort Worth?" asked Tom Fitzgibbon.

## CHAPTER II.

### AN ENEMY MADE.

**T**HREE weeks from the day of his departure from Lotus, Tom Fitzgibbon got off the Union Pacific train at Reunion, Wyoming. The June sun, hot in Wyoming, beat down upon him. Warm June breezes fanned his rusty hair when he took off his hat to mop his forehead. At the stockyards, a quarter of a mile from the depot, a bull bellowed. Tom Fitzgibbon grinned. Back in the cow business again! Vacation over! Time to go to work! Calves to buy and a little chore to do for Mat Antsley back in the Texas brush country.

"What's the best hotel here?"

asked Tom Fitzgibbon of a station loafer.

"The Barstow House," answered the loafer, grinning. "It's the only one, too."

Tom bent and picked up his two grips.

At the Barstow House he cleaned up and then, being too late for dinner in the dining room adjacent to the hotel, went out on the street and sought a restaurant. A sandwich, coffee, and pie staved off the assaults of his appetite, and he strolled out to view the town. Reunion was a county seat. It wasn't large. About five hundred people would cover the number of its inhabitants and take care of the birth rate for the year, too, Tom shrewdly suspected. Still there were stores and houses, a courthouse, two churches, and three saloons. Tom went to a saloon. He had never obtained much information pertinent to the cow business in a church. Besides it wasn't Sunday and the churches weren't open.

At the Exchange Saloon he had a glass of beer and talked with the bartender. Tom did not mention cattle, but in some manner the conversation came around to that subject, and Tom learned that there were good calves in the country. From the Exchange he walked down the street until he came to the largest store, Arnberg's General Merchandise, and entered the place. Arnberg's looked like the place where the big cowmen would do their buying.

Arnberg's store was dim. There was the smell of food mixed with the indefinable odor that comes from slickers, saddles, tarps, and piece goods. Tom nodded to a clerk and headed back through the store toward the glass-enclosed office. With a bartender—a professional gossip—one gossiped; with a storekeeper—

a business man—one did business. Tom reached the office.

The office door was open and at a desk sat a small, dark man, whom Tom took to be Arnberg himself, talking to a girl. A mighty pretty girl, Tom noticed, with the quick perception of unmarried twenty-eight. The girl's face was troubled. Tom hovered outside the door, politely closing his ears to the conversation within the inclosure.

As he waited there, a heavy-set, black-haired man with a florid face, came back along the counters, passed Tom, and without hesitancy went into the office. The heavy-set man was a rancher, from his dress. Not a cow-puncher but a cowman. His face was already showing some signs of dissipation, despite the fact that he was not much older than Tom Fitzgibbon. As he entered the office Arnberg looked up, and the girl, displeasure evident on her face, stepped back from the desk. Tom listened unabashed.

"I come in to see about that mower," said the heavy-set man. "Stuff got in yet?"

Arnberg shook his head. "Not yet, Guy," he answered.

"Time it was gettin' here!" announced the heavy-set man. "I got hay to cut right away."

"It ought to be in in a few days," returned the storekeeper in an evident effort to dismiss his visitor.

**T**HE man refused to be dismissed. He turned to the girl. "What you chinnin' with Arnberg about?" he asked. There was a possessive tone in his voice that somehow ruffled Tom. "Tryin' to get some more credit?"

The girl flared suddenly. Her face, oval beneath her fair hair, colored vividly, her blue eyes flashed, her lips were tight, and her firm,

rounded chin set defiantly. "That's none of your business, Guy Van Slect!" she snapped.

"Oh, I dunno." Van Slect moved a little closer to the desk, coming up beside the girl. "Come on! I'll take you to Maken's. You can get all the credit you want there. I'll stand good for it."

"I don't need you to stand good for anything," the girl flared. "I'm talking business with Mr. Arnberg. If you will go, we can finish."

Van Slect, so Tom surmised, had imbibed too freely.

Van Slect reached out a heavy hand and clamped it on the girl's wrist. "When you marry me you won't be so high an' mighty!" he growled. "Come on, now——"

Arnberg had half risen from his desk. The merchant was a little man, slight and thin. Furious, his black beard quivered.

"You get out!" he shrilled to Van Slect. "Get out, now!"

Van Slect laughed. Arnberg's anger amused him.

"Come on, Stella," he ordered, and pulled the girl's arm. She wrenched at his hand but failed to loosen his grip.

Tom Fitzgibbon took a step forward and stood in the doorway. There was a faint grin on Tom's square face. Not so large as Van Slect, he stood in the doorway, compact shoulders making his coat snug, his brown hands hanging easily. There was an air of competency, a smooth compactness, a surety, that seemed to emanate from him as he stood there. The grin widened a trifle.

"Mr. Arnberg?" said Tom, and took a step into the office, his hand held out.

Van Slect half turned to face this intruder. Arnberg lifted his hand to take Tom's, but Tom disregarded

it. His faintly amused hazel eyes were centered on Van Slect. Van Slect held the girl's wrist with his left hand. Tom, leaning forward slightly, took Van Slect's right hand. The man was not expecting the move, nor was he expecting the sudden, bone-crushing pressure that shut down upon his hand like a vise. He took a half step back, releasing his hold on the girl, and his face darkened as he winced under that grip.

"I'm sure glad to meet you," said Tom heartily. From the corner of his eye he noted the red circle on the girl's wrist where Van Slect had gripped. Tom's right hand shut down a little harder.

"I ain't Arnberg," blurted Van Slect. "Leggo! You're——"

Tom released his grip. "Excuse me," he apologized. "I thought you was Mr. Arnberg. Am I buttin' into somethin'?" His voice was innocent.

Van Slect was scowling. There was no feeling whatever in his right hand, and he raised it, staring at it curiously. The hand was white. The girl moved from the desk.

"Thank you," she said, and Tom was not sure whether she was speaking to him or Arnberg. The girl was at the door. One hand caressed the wrist that had been held. She looked at Arnberg, nodded, and stepped out of the office. Van Slect, lowering his hand, started to follow. Tom Fitzgibbon was in the way.

"Excuse me a heap," drawled Tom. "I sure thought you was Mr. Arnberg. I'm Tom Fitzgibbon. Shake hands again. I didn't get your name."

Van Slect stopped. He could go no farther without walking over Tom. "You—you——" he spluttered.

Tom grinned lazily. The girl had left the store. Looking through the

glass of the office Tom could not see her. He moved from Van Slect's path.

"I'll see you later," he said, as though to an old and warm friend. He turned to Arnberg, his hand going out again. "I reckon *you* must be Mr. Arnberg."

Van Slect had a view of a broad back. The muscles rippled through the light coat as Tom shook hands with the surprised merchant. Smooth, long muscles they were.

Tom released the merchant's hand. "I'll sure see you later," he said again to Van Slect, over his shoulder. "Don't let us keep you."

VAN SLECT, his face red, hesitated a moment, then moved to the door, his boot heels ringing on the floor. At the door he paused again, hesitated, then went out into the store. Arnberg let go a pent-up breath, sat down and hurriedly produced a handkerchief with which he mopped his forehead.

"That was Guy Van Slect!" he said. "That was——"

"Kind of a disagreeable gent," said Tom. "My name's Fitzgibbon, Mr. Arnberg. They tell me that you do whatever bankin' business is done in Reunion, an' that you run the biggest store. I'm up here after three, four carloads of calves. Reckon you can steer me on to any?"

"But that was Guy Van Slect," Arnberg insisted, not quite recovered from the recent occurrence. "That was——"

"I know." Tom was tolerant. "That was Guy Van Slect. Is he gold plated or somethin'? About these calves now——"

Arnberg settled down. A grin spread over his slender, Semitic face. "Van Slect has some calves," he said.

Tom grinned, too. "I reckon mebber I won't buy 'em from him,"

he announced. "You know of anybody else that might have a few?"

Arnberg continued to smile. "Stella Archibald," he said.

"Who's Stella Archibald?" questioned Tom, hiding his eagerness.

"That girl that was in here just now," returned Arnberg. "She's the heir to old Joe Archibald's H Bar. She's got some calves."

"Her?" Tom could scarcely believe what he was hearing.

"She's running the H Bar since Joe was killed." Arnberg leaned back in his desk chair. "I happen to know that she has some calves that she'd be glad to sell."

So that girl, that oval-faced, entirely desirable girl, was S. A. Archibald—the S. A. Archibald he had come to see!

"Well," said Tom, "where do you think I can find her?"

"She was going out to the ranch." Arnberg rocked in his chair. "Where are you from, Mr. Fitzgibbon?"

"Texas," Tom said absently. "Down around Lotus."

Arnberg nodded. He had recovered his poise. "Miss Archibald is carrying on her father's business," he said. "It happens that I am interested. Now if you——"

Tom knew just how Arnberg was interested. The merchant had been carrying the H Bar, and he wanted to know if the H Bar was going to have any money. Tom set his mind at rest.

"If I do business it will be for cash," Tom announced. "I'm buyin' for myself an' for the Eighty-eight out of Lotus. You heard of the Eighty-eight?"

Arnberg nodded. Almost every man in the cattle country knew of the Eighty-eight—Mat Antsley's brand. It was legendary, like the SMS or the THS, the Terrazas brand in Mexico.

"Now, Mr. Arnberg," said Tom Fitzgibbon, "I'd take it kindly if you wouldn't say nothin' about my callin' on you, or my business. I reckon you want to be protected in any business I might have with the H Bar. I'll see that you are, but I don't want every man that owns a few scrub calves in this country raisin' his prices because I'm here."

Arnberg nodded. His keen, black eyes studied Tom Fitzgibbon, and his keen brain made an estimate of the younger man. "I'll not say what you are here for," he agreed. "I'll see if I can think of anybody else that might have calves for sale, too."

"Thanks," said Tom. "I'll drop in again."

He shook hands with Arnberg and left the office. Walking through the store he grinned to himself. Mat Antsley would be surprised if he knew that Joe Archibald's kid was a girl. Tom started suddenly. Maybe Mat *did* know that Joe Archibald's kid was a girl. Sure! He must have known it. The darned old schemer! Tom's grin widened.

He left Arnberg's and strolled down the street. So Guy Van Slect had calves to sell, had he? Guy Van Slect must be somebody in this country. Arnberg had talked as if the man were the big auger. But even if he were, he sure had a sore hand and wrist, and he was sure a bully. Tom flexed the fingers of his right hand. Suddenly he laughed. What would happen to Van Slect if he locked horns with "Babe" Tremaine or "Bosco" Jordan or some of the boys from the Eighty-eight who really had a grip?

**A**T the Exchange Saloon Tom paused. Strange water and rich food had done their part, and Tom decided that he would take a little drink for his stomach's sake.

Ordinarily he chose beer, but this called for something special. He pushed through the swinging half doors.

There were half a dozen men in the Exchange. Tom walked up to the bar. "Rye," he said and waited for the bottle. His eyes had not quite adjusted themselves to the dimmer light of the room, so he had not particularly noticed the men in the place. The bartender set out a bottle and a glass. Tom, his eyes intent on his business, poured his drink and lifted his glass. Suddenly, his elbow was jostled, and the drink splashed on the top of the bar. Tom turned his head. Guy Van Slect was standing beside him.

Tom set down his glass. "You're a clumsy ox," he said mildly. "When you want to start a fight or finish one, you don't want to go spillin' good liquor."

Van Slect said never a word. Behind the man there were three others, forming a compact little group. Tom had no doubts as to who they were, or why they were there. They were Van Slect men, and they were there to help their boss. Tom moved a little, sliding away from Van Slect to give himself room, and lifted the bottle again to refill his glass. Van Slect followed him. The man was dark with anger, trembling with it. Tom poured out the drink.

Tom Fitzgibbon knew that in a fight of any kind the first move is to attack; the man who waits is at a disadvantage. Still, there were odds against him, plenty of odds, four to one. He was loath to begin a thing that might not end as he wished. For a moment he wished that his gun were not in the grip at the hotel. Colonel Colt had made an equalizer for just such occasions as this. Still regrets were not in order. The gun

was at the hotel, and Tom was here in the Exchange Saloon.

"Get out!" said Van Slect thickly. "Get out of here! I'm goin' to take you out and beat the devil out of you. I'm goin'—"

Tom, cradling the glass he had poured, interrupted. "Is that a promise?" he asked. "Are you goin' to do all this by yourself, or are you goin' to have a little help?" He waved the glass toward the men behind Van Slect.

"Neither," said a dry voice down the bar. "You two game cocks pull in yore necks."

Tom looked at the speaker, a little, rubicund man, blond and sunburned. A star decorated his unbuttoned vest. He was plump as a quail, and his face was cheerful, but there was that about him which caused Tom to grin suddenly. There was to be no fight in the Exchange Saloon. Tom wouldn't need to save that whisky now, wouldn't need to slash the contents of his glass into a man's face as he went into action, so, still grinning, Tom drank his liquor and put the glass back on the bar.

"Keep out of this, Campbell!" snarled Van Slect.

Campbell, the man with the star, spoke again. "The Hogpen is callin' you, Guy," he observed. "Yore cook has the wagon loaded, an' you can make the ranch before dark. Outside of Reunion, you can fight if you want. In Reunion, you'll keep the peace."

"Town marshal," thought Tom. "A salty little gent for all his fat."

Van Slect, his play spoiled, wheeled to face Campbell. "You think you're the Almighty around here," he said thickly. "You think that—"

"I know I'm marshal!" Campbell's voice did not raise. "Was you

goin' down to Maken's? I'll just side yuh."

The small man put his hand on Van Slect's arm. Van Slect, under the impetus of that arm hold, took a step toward the door. One of the men behind Van Slect said:

"You can settle later, Guy."

Campbell eyed the speaker, and the Van Slect man relapsed into silence. Van Slect reached the door and went out. Campbell, having stepped back, now followed Van Slect. The other three Van Slect men, looking back into the barroom, trailed after their boss.

"Damn!" muttered the barman.

"That's good whisky," said Tom Fitzgibbon. "Will you have a drink with me?"

"Take a cigar," muttered the barman. "Damn!"

Tom did not know whether the barkeeper referred to Van Slect or to the marshal. The young cowman poured his whisky glass half full, lifted it and tossed it down.

WHEN he had paid for his drinks and for the barkeeper's cigar, Tom left the Exchange Saloon. He walked up the street, passing Arnberg's, and, farther on, Maken's Merchandise Store. Beyond Maken's he turned and walking up a short side street came to the courthouse. There was the usual collection of handbills and notices on the bulletin board in front of the courthouse door, and an idler or two stood reading these. Tom Fitzgibbon passed them by and went into the building. The county clerk's office was directly in front of the door. There were short corridors to left and right, one leading to the assessor's office and the other to the sheriff's office. Beyond the sheriff's office there was a barred door, evidently leading to the jail. Tom

went into the domain presided over by the county clerk.

After a little time, one of the two men in the office came to the desk and asked Tom what he required. Tom asked briefly if there was a mortgage recorded against the H Bar. He thought that Joe Archibald might have recorded the mortgage before he sent it to Antsley. The clerk searched his file and returning to the desk with a piece of paper, answered that there was a record of mortgage against the Archibald property.

"How long ago was it recorded?" asked Tom.

"About two months ago," answered the clerk.

This might be a second mortgage, thought Tom. He asked to see the record and the clerk, nothing loath, handed over the paper. Tom, reading the record, saw that a first mortgage for the sum of fifteen thousand dollars had been made out by Joe Archibald to one Lenn East. The date was, as the clerk had said, some two months ago. Thanking the clerk and mentioning that he intended to see East, Tom left the office and the courthouse. He walked slowly back toward the hotel, his mind whirling.

Mat Antsley had always said that Joe Archibald was the salt of the earth and yet, apparently, Joe Archibald had double-crossed Mat Antsley. From the evidence it looked as if Joe Archibald had disregarded the mortgage that Antsley held and had mortgaged the property to Lenn East. Some one was bound to lose, either East or Antsley, and the East mortgage was recorded. Tom went up to his room in the Barstow House, still puzzling over the matter. Two things were certain: He must look up Lenn East at the first opportunity and find out what he could, and he was not going

to tell East why he was interested. Having so decided, he cleaned up and went to supper.

After the meal Tom wandered to the Exchange Saloon and there killed some time watching a poker game and talking to the bartender. One thing only did he learn and that was that Lenn East was a lawyer with an office in town, and that he lived at a boarding house. Tom asked directions as to the office and the boarding house and went out. The office was dark, and inquiry of the woman who owned the house where East boarded divulged no information save that her roomer was out. Tom went back to the hotel and turned in.

With morning Tom was up and out. He called at Arnberg's, but the merchant had not yet come down to the store, and Tom went up the street and stopped at a small building where a shingle announced that "L. W. East, Attorney at Law," had his office there. Tom stopped a moment, collecting his thoughts, then knocked on the door. A voice bade him enter.

Behind the desk sat a bald-headed man, his head running up to a sort of peak. His eyes, set in a flat face, were blue and expressionless, and his lips were thin and firm beneath a small nose.

Tom took off his hat. "Mr. East?" he asked.

The man behind the desk nodded. "I'm Tom Fitzgibbon," Tom continued. "I'm from Texas." There was no use concealing his identity or his home. Both were plain on the hotel register for all to see.

**E**AST rose from his chair and extended a large, well-kept hand. Tom took it.

"Sit down," invited East. "What can I do for you, Mr. Fitzgibbon?"

Tom was of no mind to blurt out his business. He preferred to spar and get information if that were possible. If East held a mortgage on the H Bar, then a man asking for a place to locate might get all the information that the lawyer had.

"I'm up here lookin' for a place to locate," said Tom Fitzgibbon. "I was told that you handled a little real estate. Maybe you could help me out."

East pursed his lips and looked toward the ceiling. "What sort of place did you have in mind?" he asked.

Tom appeared to think a moment and then gave a description of what he desired. As he talked he described the H Bar as nearly as his memory of the description in the mortgage would permit.

East listened carefully. When Tom had finished, East shook his head.

"I don't know of such a place as that," he said slowly. "I have several ranches in mind, and one of them might suit you. Suppose you come back, say this afternoon, and I'll have something lined up by then."

Tom agreed to that, saying that he would return either in the afternoon or that evening, and bidding the lawyer good-by, he went out of the office. As he left, he wondered if he had made a mistake. East was a mighty keen-looking fellow. Perhaps Tom had overplayed his hand. Tom went on down the street and stopped at Arnberg's.

Arnberg was in. He took Tom back to his office and there they discussed cattle for a short time. Arnberg had heard of Tom's trouble with Van Slect at the Exchange Saloon and mentioned it. Tom made no comment. Having finished with Arnberg and promised that he would

ride out to the H Bar and look at the calves there, Tom left the store. It was noon, and he sought the dining room of the hotel. After his meal he went to the livery barn, arranged for a horse and saddle and went back to the hotel to change his clothes. Wearing his brush jacket, heavy, unornamented leather leggings and his full length boots with small, neat spurs, Tom went back to the livery, got his horse, and set out toward the east.

There were clouds over the hills, and on Cow Mountain and Sixty-six Mountain toward which Tom rode, the mist hung heavily. Tom rolled a cigarette and sent his livery stable horse along the road.

If he had but known it, Tom Fitzgibbon was following the exact path taken by Lenn East some two hours before. East had waited until Tom disappeared into Arnberg's, and then, locking his office, he had made his way to the courthouse. Soon after he had gone to the livery barn and hired a team and buggy. Within thirty minutes from Tom's departure from his office, Lenn East was whirling along the east road, bound for the Hogpen Ranch.

WHEN he arrived at the Hogpen, East turned his team over to a cowboy at the corrals and went directly into the house. He found Guy Van Slect there, and the two repaired to the ranch office. There, with the door closed, they sat down on either side of Van Slect's desk, and East went at once to business.

"It's showed up, Guy," he said. "The trouble we been expectin' has come."

Van Slect grunted. "Well?" he challenged.

"A man was in my office this



morning asking about a place to locate," said East. "Tom Fitzgibbon, from Texas. When I asked him what sort of place he wanted, he described the H Bar almost word for word."

"Well?" Van Slect said again.

"When I tried to buy Archibald out, he said that he wouldn't sell." East talked nervously. "He told me that his place was mortgaged to a man named Antsley, in Texas. Remember? I told you."

"Yeah, I remember," said Van Slect.

"This Fitzgibbon had been to the county clerk's office," pursued East. "He had seen the record of the mortgage that I hold on the H Bar. He was sounding me out."

"What of it?" grunted Van Slect. "Your mortgage is recorded an' this other ain't. All it means is a little law. Blame it! You're a lawyer! You oughtn't to care."

East leaned forward in his chair. "In this case," he said slowly, "it *doesn't* mean a little law. This man Fitzgibbon will have that other mortgage with him. I want it."

"Wantin' an' gettin' are different," said Van Slect.

"We've got to have it." East was very earnest. "Listen, Guy, I happen to know how Joe Archibald was killed. Remember that a rock slide fell on Joe when he was riding Sixty-six Mountain? Well, I know that Joe had killed and skinned two Hogpen steers that day, and I know what he found on their hides. A rebrand never is the same as the original brand, Guy."

Van Slect swore. His face turned suddenly pallid, and his black eyes were narrow. "An' what are you goin' to do about it?" he asked finally.

"You can take your hand off your

gun and bring it up above the desk," said East. "You fool! Do you think I'd tell you that without having you covered? I'm not going to do anything about what I've told you. You and I are partners in this deal. We stand to make too much money out of the sale of your ranch after the dam is built and the Greer company has come in, for me to cross with you. I'm telling you what I know, so that it will be safe to tell you what you don't know. The mortgage I hold on the H Bar was forged."

A slow gleam of malicious triumph spread over Van Slect's face.

East spoke quickly. "Don't get ideas!" he snapped. "Don't forget that I know about Archibald, and don't forget that I know about the Archibald cattle."

"That ain't what I was thinkin'." Van Slect looked at the lawyer. "What I was thinkin' of was Lacey. Lacey signed that mortgage. Don't tell me *his* signature was forged, too."

"It wasn't," East replied.

Van Slect laughed. "Then Lacey is right over a barrel," he announced.

"I have another hold on Lacey," East pursued. "There was that matter of prisoner transportation and feeding that he overlooked last year. I didn't overlook it."

"The whole thing is right in your hands," crowed Van Slect. "An' nothin' to stop us. What do you hear from the Greer people?"

"They want to go ahead with the project," answered East. "I've written them that we can handle the land end for them. I also have a tentative agreement to act as their representative here. What we have to have, Guy, is that piece of land between Cow Mountain and the Sixty-six."

Van Sleet's face darkened. "The land that Lucky Finn is on," he said. "Exactly." East leaned forward. "Now——"

### CHAPTER III.

#### SUSPICIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES.

**T**OM FITZGIBBON, riding along the road toward the east, watched the country. The hostler at the livery barn had pointed out certain natural features to Tom before his departure from Reunion. There was, in the east at a distance of about thirty miles, a low-lying line of hills, now hidden by clouds. These were the Pasamontes. A line of green to Tom's left traced the course of the Pasamonte Creek which, so the hostler had said, headed in those hills, the two forks of the creek, north fork and east fork, roughly delineated the boundaries of the H Bar. Pasamonte Creek ran through the gap between Cow Mountain and Sixty-six Mountain. Not a very wide gap, Tom judged, as he rode toward it. This side of Sixty-six, which was to the north of the road, there was some rough country, "The Breaks," the hostler had called it. Tom, watching the clouds which hovered over the hills, felt a chill blast of air coming from the threatening storm. Hail in those clouds, he thought, and looked about for shelter.

There was none. The road forked immediately ahead, and the livery horse, sensing the approaching storm, turned toward the left, but Tom swung his mount back into the road. That fork leading north went to the Hogpen. Tom did not want to go to the Hogpen.

Now, hurrying his gait, Tom began to pass cattle drifting with the wind. These were branded Hogpen on the left side. Tom glanced at

them and rode on. They were good cattle, heavy cows, bright colored, smooth-coated calves, and big, slick steers. The country on either side narrowed swiftly into a little valley, and Tom found himself riding along the creek. He crossed the creek, came to a comparatively new fence, and going through the gate rode on again. Now Sixty-six Mountain towered to his left and Cow Mountain sloped sharply up to his right. The spurs of the hills fell away, and the valley widened. Smoke, whipped flat by the wind, carried to Tom's nostrils, and he knew that he was close to a habitation. Riding over a little knoll, he came upon it—a sod house set in the wind-swept prairie, a sod barn behind the house, and a pole corral. Two big hailstones rattled against Tom's saddle. Another struck and stung his horse and a fourth hit his shoulders. The storm was marching toward him, the even line of hail and rain beating down the grass, the wind whipping it flat. The livery horse struck into a run, and from the house came a bellow that carried over the roar of the storm.

"Make for the barn, stranger!"

The livery horse swept down the incline that led to the low door of the barn. Tom dropped from the saddle. The horse went on through the doorway, and at a run Tom made for the sod house and the bellowing voice that had given directions.

He reached the house before the storm struck in its full fury. As he pulled up, panting, just within the door, the hail hit outside, beating down roarily. Tom, his breathing quick, shook a little water from his hat and looked around.

The low roof almost touched his head, but it was well above the head of the man who stood in the middle

of the little room. The place was neat, and the floor clean, so clean that the rough pine was almost white. About the walls hung cooking utensils and the various appurtenances of living. There was a bunk in one corner, the bedding spread evenly over it, and covered by a tarp. But these things did not interest Tom Fitzgibbon. The center of his attention was the man who evidently owned the place.

Though the man was much shorter than Tom Fitzgibbon, he made up in width what he lacked in height. His shoulders were inordinately broad, and his arms were long. His face was burned red by sun and wind, and his eyes were a bright blue. There was a fringe of jutting gray beard about his face, and as he moved forward, he limped. Looking down Tom saw that one leg was off just at the knee and that a wooden peg had taken the place of the missing member.

"Blowin' a gale," bellowed the short man. "You was lucky to make port before it struck."

"I was lucky to get here, and that's a fact," replied Tom. "I'm Tom Fitzgibbon, Mr.—"

"Finn—Lucky Finn. 'Mister' is for mates an' foremen an' such," said the man with the wooden leg. "Put up your hat. You're here till the blow is over."

Tom removed his hat and looked about for a place to put it. From a corner of the little room came a screech. A rising, "Awwwwwk," and then, shrilly: "Lucky! Lucky! Lucky!"

Tom jumped as though a shot had been fired. Finn, laughing, took the hat that Tom held in his hand.

"That's Calamity," Finn explained. "Don't mind her. She's callin' me. Wants her mess, likely."

LOOKING in the direction of the scream, Tom saw a homemade perch standing in the corner, and sidling back and forth on the perch was a small gray parrot. The parrot whetted her bill against the wood, ruffled her plumage and screamed again:

"Lucky! Lucky! Lucky!"

Laughing, Tom walked across the room and stopped. "You like to scare me to death," he said to the parrot.

Calamity cocked a yellow-rimmed eye at Tom, flapped her wings and changed her call. "Mess gear," screamed the parrot. "Pipe mess gear!"

Finn stumped across the room, got a handful of seed from a box, and returning, put the seed in a battered tin cup nailed to the perch. The parrot dipped into the cup, cracked a seed between the bright yellow beak and cocked an eye at Tom Fitzgibbon. Tom took a box and sat down. Finn, the peg leg rapping on the floor, also found a seat. The hail and rain beat soddenly on the roof of the house.

"What might your business be?" questioned Finn, stuffing and lighting his pipe. "You a cowboy?"

"I am an' I ain't." Tom was rolling a cigarette, surveying his handiwork critically. "Right now I'm lookin' for calves to buy."

"You'll find 'em at the H Bar," said Finn. "Stella, she's got a lot of calves."

"You work for the H Bar?" asked Tom, his cigarette between his lips.

"I did." Finn puffed his pipe. "You see, in a manner of speaking, I still work for Archibald."

"Uh-huh." Tom let the smoke curl out, and waited. Finn was a talker, he could see that.

Finn let go a puff of smoke. "When I lost my leg," he said, "I

was laid up at Galveston. I'd been to sea all my life an' I didn't know nothin' but ships. Joe Archibald picked me up an' brought me here. I cooked for him. Then, me wantin' a port of my own to dock in when I was old, Joe fixed it up for me to homestead here. He was to buy the place from me, an' I was to take the money an' start me a little restaurant in Reunion."

"I see," said Tom.

"Poor Joe's dead." Finn shook his gray head sorrowfully. "Joe's dead, an' his girl is in trouble, an' here I am, with my homestead all proved an' nowhere to go."

"Won't the girl buy it?" asked Tom.

"She would if she could," answered Finn.

"Got it all proved up on, huh?" Tom looked around for a place to drop his cigarette.

Finn got up, stumped across the room and brought back a bucket. "Here," he said, "put it in this. Yeah, I got it all proved on." He put the pail down, moved to a wall, and from a chink between the sods brought out a folded paper and passed it to Tom.

Glancing at the paper, Tom saw that it was a land patent. The claim was Lucky Finn's.

"Yes, sir, she's all yours now," said Tom.

"There's others been wantin' to buy this place," said Finn, portentously, "but I won't sell it to 'em. I'm savin' it for Stella."

Tom nodded. "I see," he said.

"Offered me good money, too." Finn returned the patent to its hiding place. "Nope, I won't sell, not me, Lucky Finn. I'm a man of my word, I am, an' the Archibalds put me here. I'll sell to Stella."

"Maybe if I buy her calves she can

go through with the deal," Tom hazarded.

Finn's face brightened. "That's so," he agreed.

WHAT sort of trouble is the girl in?" Tom tried to make the question appear idle.

"Money trouble," answered Finn. "That, an' other kinds of trouble, too. She can't keep a crew. Her foreman, Harvey Mullens, is right enough, I'd judge, but the youngsters she hires try to make love to her, an' she has to give 'em their discharge papers."

Tom laughed briefly. "I'd think she'd marry and stop that," he said.

"She ain't met the man yet," grunted Finn. "Say, this storm is goin' to last. It won't blow itself out till to-night. You better figure on berthin' with me."

Tom protested against that but Finn overrode his protests. The old man was glad to have some one with him, glad to have some one to talk with, and he was so plainly disappointed when Tom said that he must go on, that at length Tom agreed to stay.

The talk from then on was inconsequential. Finn was a story-teller. He had tales to relate of the various ports at which he had called in his younger days. Wild tales, recalling a lusty youth and a strange, fascinating occupation. Tom listened. The parrot, having eaten from the cup, dozed, with her head under her wing. Finn lighted a lamp. The storm abated slightly and, in a borrowed slicker, Tom went out to the sod stable and cared for his horse. When he came back there was a fire crackling in the stove, and Calamity was awake. As Tom came in, doffing the dripping slicker, the parrot squawked and shrilled again:

"Matar! Matar!"

Tom walked over to the bird. "*Hable Espanol?*" he said, grinning.

"I picked her up in Bluefields," said Finn. "She talks Spanish good."

"She just said, 'murder,'" said Tom.

"An' she's likely seen it," agreed Finn, turning eggs in a skillet. "She's a hard old case, Calamity is. I'll bet that she's a hundred years old."

"That's the man!" croaked the parrot. "Where's the knife?"

"She'll ask that a huridred times a day," said Finn. "That is, when she's talkin'. She'll squall, '*Matar, matar,*' an' then ask that. Likely she heard it one time."

Tom looked at the parrot. Calamity shrouded a beady eye with a drooping lid.

"I wish she could tell what she's seen," said Tom.

"So do I," agreed Finn.

The two ate supper at the clean, bare table. When the meal was finished they washed their dishes, and sat with pipe and cigarette while Finn talked. Finally they went to bed, Tom refusing Finn's offer of the bunk and contenting himself with tarp and blankets on the floor.

In the morning, with the sun bright, they got up and ate again. After the meal they went outside and looked at the country washed fresh by the rain. Tom took his horse from the barn and watered the animal. At the trough were two mules. Finn called them Port and Sta'board, and was inordinately proud of their slick hides. There was some further talk, then Tom announced that he must depart. Finn was loath to see him go.

"Come back an' eat with me," he urged. "I'll make plum duff. I ain't made a kettle of duff in years."

"I ought to go to the H Bar," Tom told him.

"Stella's got her calves in a pasture

south of here," said Finn. "Why don't you ride over there an' see 'em? Then when you come back, stop here an' scoff with me."

The old man so plainly wanted Tom's company, was so insistent, that at length Tom agreed. It would be just as well, he thought, to see the calves before he went to the H Bar, and, too, he could look over some of the land without being shown its more favorable aspects. He could see the cattle, view the condition of the range and have some first-hand knowledge before he went to the ranch and talked with Stella Archibald about calves and the mortgage that Mat Antsley held.

TOM rode on east, following the creek. At the far end of "Lucky" Finn's homestead he crossed a fence and then still farther along, came to a three-wire pasture fence. He rode along till he found a gate, then let himself into the pasture. Near the creek he came upon a few calves and rode slowly, looking them over. The calves were branded H Bar, the H above the bar. The brand was on the left side and, as he inspected the animals, a thought popped into Tom's mind. That H Bar could be changed, and easily changed, into a Hogpen. All that was necessary was to lengthen the legs of the H and run the crossbar of the H farther, and extend the bar out a little at each end. Tom wondered which had come into the country first, the H Bar or the Hogpen. He scowled to himself as he thought of Guy Van Slect. Van Slect was of just the caliber to take advantage of anything that came across his fence, and run his own iron on it. No wonder, thought Tom riding along the creek, that Joe Archibald wanted the homestead in the gap. It would prove an effective

barrier between the H Bar and the Hogpen.

The range was good, and the pasture seemed to be in first-class shape. Tom found more calves and looked them over. There were enough in this pasture to furnish at least two carloads and Tom, having made his survey, knew that he would buy them. Perhaps a little ready cash would help Stella Archibald out of her difficulties. Then he thought of the two mortgages and scowled again. Still, he could not blame the girl for something that her father had done. Tom liked the appearance of Stella Archibald, and he knew that regardless of what had happened, Mat Antsley would want him to protect the girl. Thinking of Mat made Tom wince. He had not written to Mat since he left Lotus, and he knew that the old man must be a little worried. The interlude in Fort Worth and other points—his vacation—had not been part of his itinerary when Tom left Lotus.

The sun climbed overhead and, turning, Tom rode back toward the gap. He recrossed the fences, fastening the gates behind him, and swung down between the long ridges. As he came to the bottom of the niche between the ridges, he heard what sounded like a shot and pushed his horse along a little.

Riding up over the last rise before he came to the sod hut, he was reassured. Things were just as he had left them. He raised his voice in a hail, and before his astonished eyes a man came from the house and ran to the barn. Another followed, and then, mounted, the two men swept out from behind the barn and rode away, their horses at a dead run. Tom put spurs to his own mount and swept down upon the house. At the door he flung himself from his horse and ran in. Lucky Finn lay upon

the floor. There was blood under the man, seeping out into a little pool. The place had been ransacked, turned upside down and inside out. Tom spent barely a moment in the house. Outside again, he mounted, and put his horse to a dead run after the men who had left so hurriedly.

He caught sight of them as he crowned the rise in the gap, caught sight of them, and with the short-barreled Colt at his waistband, sent two shots hurtling after them. Only a miracle could have helped him hit the riders, and miracles do not happen ordinarily. The riders were three hundred yards away and going fast. Tom had a flashing view of bay horses and blue-shirted, blue-overalled men, then he lost them as they crossed the ridge. It was useless to pursue farther. Besides, there was Lucky Finn, face down on his cabin floor, bleeding. Tom swung his horse and rode back the way he had come.

**A** GAIN Tom reached the cabin and again he dropped from his horse. Entering hurriedly, he bent down over Finn. The old man had been seriously wounded. There was a knife slash in his shoulder and a bullet had gone through his chest lower down. The knife wound bled profusely, as did a gash along Finn's temple where some one had struck with the barrel of a gun. Tom swore gently to himself and set about checking the bleeding. Finn would be "Lucky" indeed if he reached a doctor, or if he lived long enough for a doctor to reach him. Tom stanchd the bleeding with strips torn from a clean towel and bound pads in place over the knife cut and the head wound. The old man had not opened his eyes, but lay inert, breathing stertorously.

The bullet wound was bad. The

blood that seeped from it was bright red. It seemed to Tom that the wound was deep enough to have touched a lung. He placed pads over the two holes, for the slug had gone through, and then bound the pads in place. That was all that he could do. The next step was to summon assistance. Tom started for the door and then stopped short.

Why had these men come down on Lucky Finn? Why had they searched the cabin? What was it that Finn had that they wanted? The answer flashed into Tom's mind. With a quick step, he reached the wall and, thrusting his fingers into the crack between the sods, touched paper. He pulled out the patent and held it in his hand, staring at it. If this patent was what the men had searched for, then they had been disappointed. Tom looked at the paper and then down at Lucky Finn where he lay on the bunk to which Tom had lifted him. A step sounded at the door and Tom whirled, his hand flying to the Colt at his waistband. The gun snapped out, fully cocked. Then the tense thumb let the hammer down gently. A girl stood in the door, a girl whose wide, horror-stricken eyes swept over the room, taking in every detail. It was Stella Archibald! The girl's hand shot up to her mouth. A half scream came from her lips and then was stifled. Tom Fitzgibbon took a half step forward and stopped. A man's face appeared behind the girl's shoulder, a bearded, stern face. The girl was thrust aside. Tom found himself confronted by the bearded man. There was a gun, held steadily in a competent hand pointed squarely at his midriff.

"Drop it!" snapped the bearded man.

Tom released his hold on the gun he held, and it crashed on the floor.

The man with the beard came farther into the room. Another man appeared, his scowling face faintly familiar.

"Get his gun, Mullens," snapped the man with the beard.

Mullens moved forward. Tom recognized him then. He was one of the three men who had been with Van Slect in the saloon. Mullens scooped up the gun that Tom had dropped.

"I got it, Lacey," he said.

Tom had held his hands stiff and rigid at his sides. His left hand crumpled the patent that was Lucky Finn's proof of ownership to the homestead. He watched Lacey and Mullens with steady, unfearing eyes.

"Well?" growled Lacey.

"I stopped here with Finn last night," said Tom steadily. "I was caught by the storm. This mornin' I rode out a piece. Comin' back I thought I heard a shot. I rode in an' found this." He gestured stiffly toward the ransacked cabin.

"An' then?" queried Lacey.

"Then I patched Finn up the best I could," returned Tom.

Mullens, hovering close by the sheriff said something, his lips barely moving, his whisper too low for Tom to hear.

Lacey's frown deepened. "What were you lookin' for?" he growled.

"I'm buyin' calves," said Tom. "I went to look over the H Bar stuff."

"Without comin' to the ranch?" questioned Mullens. "That's funny."

"It's so funny that I'm just goin' to take you along, mister," snarled Lacey. "We had a report of rustlin' out here. I come out to investigate. If you don't know nothin' about Finn, then mebbe you can tell us somethin' about the calves that are missin'."

Tom's jaw squared. He had seen the star on Lacey's coat when the

man entered. He knew that he was dealing with the sheriff's office. "I rode up over the ridge after I'd got here," he said quietly. "There were two men here when I come back, an' they took their horses an' made a ride for it. I saw 'em an' followed."

Stella Archibald appeared at the door. "Have you—— Is Lucky—— dead?" she queried, her face white. "I've caught his mules. I thought that we could take him to the ranch if he isn't—— If he can be moved."

Mullens went across the room. His hands turned the inert Finn. He turned back to Lacey. "Finn's breathin'," he said.

"Then we'll load him in his wagon an' take him to the H Bar," decided Lacey. "Did you hitch the team?" he asked the girl.

"They are in the corral," she answered.

"Hitch 'em up, Mullens," directed the sheriff. Mullens and Stella went out, and Lacey turned again to Tom. "You say you saw two men," he snapped. "What did they look like?"

"I couldn't see their faces," Tom replied. "They were too far off, but they rode bay horses an' wore blue shirts an' Levis."

The sheriff sniffed. "Follow 'em?" he asked.

"I shot twice," said Tom. "Did you hear?"

"We heard a shot," admitted the sheriff cautiously. "Let's go outside."

They went out the door. The sheriff, Lacey, the girl, and Tom had obliterated any tracks that might have been in the soft earth of the yard. There were horse tracks behind the barn, fresh tracks, and these led away toward the ridge west of the homestead. The tracks of Tom's horse, coming and going, also

showed. The sheriff seemed friendlier.

"I wish you'd got closer to 'em," he said.

## CHAPTER IV.

### A ROUNDABOUT TRIP.

MULLENS and Stella Archibald came from the corral, driving the mules hitched to a wagon. They stopped the wagon before the door, and Mullens got down. Tom went into the house with Mullens and the sheriff followed. Tom had managed, while he talked to the officer, to put the crumpled patent in his pocket. Now, as he aided Mullens to lift Finn and carry him to the wagon, he placed the folded paper in Finn's shirt. It would never do, he knew, for that patent to be found in his possession. They loaded Finn into the wagon, placing him on bedding that Stella carried out. Mullens had put away his gun, but he had not returned Tom's weapon. When Finn was in the wagon, Lacey turned and spoke to Stella.

"Can you drive on with him?" he asked. "I want to look around here. We'll catch you before you reach the ranch."

Stella nodded. Her eyes were still wide with fright, and she looked questioningly at Tom. Tom returned the look. He admired this girl. She had nerve. The girl picked up the lines, and the mules moved off. Lacey watched the wagon go, then turned to Mullens.

"We'll look around inside, Harvey."

The three went into the house. Lacey surveyed the place, examining it carefully. Tom stood close to the door, watching the men. He noted that Lacey was busy with the cabin, but that Mullens watched him. The



sheriff finished his examination and spoke.

"Might as well go along," he said.

They trooped outside, mounted their horses and set off toward the north. Lacey rode to Tom's left and a little behind him. Mullens stayed to his right and rode wide. Tom might have tried to ride away, but he knew that it would not be healthful. There was a rifle in a boot under Lacey's saddle fender, and Mullens had a gun on his hip. Within fifteen minutes they caught up with the wagon. Lacey dropped back and rode beside the girl, and Mullens, switching over, took Lacey's place behind Tom. Lacey and the girl talked, but Tom could not hear what was said.

Twenty minutes more brought them to a low-lying collection of buildings and corrals. The girl expertly turned the team in front of the house. A man came running from the cookshack. Tom, the sheriff, and Mullens dismounted.

"I'll send Art for a doctor," said Stella. She spoke briefly to the man who had run from the cookshack, and he turned and at an awkward, high-heeled run, made for the corrals. Mullens and Tom lifted the unconscious Finn and, following the girl, carried him into the house. They put Finn on a bed.

"He ought to be undressed," said Tom, and moved forward. Mullens and Lacey stood back, talking together, while Tom removed Finn's clothing. Stella had left the room. Finn was undressed and covered with a sheet when the girl returned carrying a basin of hot water and towels over her arm. More important, Tom had removed the tell-tale patent once more. It was now under Finn's pillow.

Stella did not attempt to change the bandages that Tom had applied.

Tom had done a good job and, wisely, the girl left them alone. She bathed the injured man's face in warm water, but he did not open his eyes. Finn's breathing rasped in his throat, every breath an effort, and from beneath his slitted eyelids his eyes showed, white and fearful.

Stella had worked over the old man for some minutes when there was a new arrival at the H Bar. A horse stopped outside, and Mullens went out to see who had come. Within a few moments he called to Lacey, and the sheriff went out. Tom stayed in the room where Finn lay. He watched the girl as she worked over the old man. Presently Mullens came in and spoke to the girl.

"Lacey wants to see you," he said.

Stella put down her basin and cloth and went out.

MULLENS stood, watching Tom narrowly. Under that scrutiny Tom grew uneasy. He had believed that Lacey had accepted his story, but now he was doubtful. Within a few moments his doubts were justified. Lacey thrust his head through the door and spoke.

"You an' Mullens come out here," he ordered.

The two men went out. In the living room of the house stood Lenn East and Guy Van Slect. Van Slect was scowling, but nothing could be told from East's face.

"Stella says that when she come in the door of Finn's shack you was standin' over the old man with a gun in your hand," Lacey began without preamble.

"I was," agreed Tom. "I pulled the gun when I heard her. I thought mebbe the men I'd seen had come back. You saw my gun when

you come in an' threw down on me."

Lacey nodded decisively. "It won't wash," he said. "You say that you shot twice. How many shots did you hear, Mullens?"

"Only one," Mullens answered promptly, "kind of muffled like it was inside."

"I heard one," said the sheriff. "How many, Stella?"

"I'm not sure," answered the girl. "I thought that there were two shots, but there might have been one."

"How do you carry your gun?" Lacey asked Tom. "Do you keep the hammer on an empty or a spent shell or do you carry it full?"

"On an empty," answered Tom.

"Let's see his gun, Mullens," ordered Lacey.

Mullens brought out Tom's short-barreled Colt from his pocket and held it out to Lacey. Taking the weapon Lacey put it on half cock, swung open the loading gate and turned the cylinder. He turned the steel very slowly, once, twice, three times. Then, with his eyebrows drawn down into a straight line he looked at Tom.

"There's one shot been fired out of here," he announced slowly. "One empty chamber, one spent shell an' four loads. Fitzgibbon, I'm arrestin' you for shootin' Lucky Finn!"

With those last words the sheriff swung Tom's gun in line, loading gate shut and hammer back. Mullens, too, pulled a gun from his holster, and Van Slect had his hand resting on the butt of his weapon.

Tom stood motionless.

"Well?" queried Lacey, "what you got to say?"

"Nothin'," Tom answered levelly.

"Hold out your hands," ordered Lacey, reaching back to a hip pocket.

Tom extended his hands. Steel

clicked on his wrists. Lacey slowly put Tom's gun in his pocket.

"I'll take him to town," he said heavily. "Guy, you an' East can help me in with him."

East nodded.

Guy Van Slect, lowering his hand from his gun butt, stepped close to Tom. "You damn' murderer!" he snarled. "You won't live an hour after you reach Reunion!"

Tom said nothing. Under the level stare of his hazel eyes Van Slect gradually lowered his gaze.

It was, by now, past three o'clock. There was twenty-five miles—a three hours' ride—between the H Bar and Reunion. Lacey, now that he had acted, seemed anxious to get to town. He ordered Van Slect and East to get their horses. Tom was put on the livery horse that he had hired in Reunion. The horse had been well ridden that day, having covered about twenty or more miles during the course of the morning, but the riding had not been continuous. It was still good for more than the distance to town. Lacey decided not to wait for the arrival of the doctor who had been sent for, and the whole party left the house, mounted, and started toward the south, Tom with his feet tied under the belly of his horse.

The trip to town was not hastened particularly. Lacey's attempts to question Tom were greeted with a clamlike silence, and finally all conversation lapsed. Tom wondered, as they rode, why Lacey had at first acted as though he believed Tom's story of the two men, and then, after the advent of East and Van Slect, had changed his mind. Van Slect, Tom surmised, was at the bottom of it. Van Slect would not have forgotten the trouble in the Exchange Saloon.

When the little party was still five

miles from Reunion, Lacey swung out of the road. Lacey spoke briefly when Van Slect questioned the move. "Hammer come in for the doctor," said Lacey. "Hammer's a talker. I don't intend to have no trouble gettin' this fellow in jail."

Van Slect argued over the detour, but Lacey was adamant and so they rode a circle around the town, adding miles to their distance. It was six o'clock when they began the circle and it was fully seven when they completed it and, by dark streets and little-used alleys, reached the courthouse and the jail.

There was apparently no excitement in Reunion. There was no crowd at the jail, no one but a lanky, sad-faced man whom Lacey hailed as "Coontz." In the sheriff's office Lacey searched his prisoner, making a little pile of Tom's possessions and putting them in a big envelope. This he placed in the safe, and then, with Coontz as an escort, the sheriff conducted Tom to the jail.

There were two cells in the jail proper and these were shut off from the sheriff's office by an iron-grated door. The iron grating was not locked, for Coontz pushed it open without using a key. The first cell was occupied, the man in it lying on a bunk. The second cell Coontz unlocked and opened. Lacey removed the handcuffs and Tom, unbidden, went in. The door clanged behind him, and Lacey spoke through the bars.

"I'll be back to question you, Fitzgibbon," he said. "You might as well make up your mind to tell what you done an' why."

Tom made no answer, and the sheriff, accompanied by his jailer, went on down the corridor. At the far end of the corridor, Coontz stopped and lit a lamp hanging from a bracket on the wall.

## CHAPTER V.

### A HANDY ROPE.

THE sheriff and the jailer had hardly gone before the man in the other cell came to his feet and moved to the bars that separated the two cages. There was not enough light to see clearly, and Tom, sitting on his bunk, was in no mood to answer questions from a fellow prisoner. He did not want to be asked why he was there or what he had done. But the expected did not happen. The man in the other cell spoke two words, and Tom was instantly alive.

"Señor Tomaso!"

"My good gosh!" exclaimed Tom, surprised, but still managing to keep his voice lowered. "Amadeo!"

"Seguro," said the man in the other cell, with evident satisfaction.

Tom was silent for a moment. So Amadeo Matamoras had followed him north. There could be but one reason for that. Amadeo was out to avenge the killing of his brother Juan. The next words of Tom's neighbor confirmed that belief.

"I have followed you," said Amadeo. "About Juan, you know."

Tom, to whom Spanish was a second mother tongue, asked a question.

"Why are you in jail?"

"Because I am a fool. I got drunk," said Amadeo bitterly.

Again there was silence for a moment then, in his turn, Amadeo asked a question. "Why are you here?"

"Murder," said Tom briefly. "It looks like you might have your job done for you, Amadeo."

Amadeo thought that over. Suddenly he spoke. "Look," said Amadeo, "I am in jail, you are in jail. Why don't we get out?"

Tom had to grin in spite of his predicament. Here was the man whose brother he had killed, killed

in fair fight to be sure, but killed nevertheless, proposing that they pool their resources and escape.

"And then what?" asked Tom.

Amadeo shrugged. "¿Quién sabe?" he said. "Maybe I shoot you, maybe you shoot me. Maybe we just go away from here. I do not like Juan too well. Juan and Ninita, they —" He broke off his speech. Tom, recollection flooding his mind, recalled some talk that he had heard of trouble between the Matamoras brothers, trouble over a girl. If Amadeo meant what he said, here was an unexpected ally. Tom knew the Matamoras, none better. He knew that Amadeo was a fighting man, a man to be relied upon save in the matter of other people's cattle. It was said, too, that the Matamoras would never have engaged in the gentle business of wet cattle save for the overweening cupidity of Juan.

"You mean you want to throw in with me an' get out of here?" asked Tom.

"Seguro," said Amadeo.

That was enough for Tom.

It was a strange partnership but — Tom grinned appreciatively — it might be an effective one. He bore in mind the threat that Guy Van Slect had made. Van Slect, even now was probably out arousing sentiment, encouraging wild talk. What would come of it? Tom did not know.

"How will we get out?" he asked, practically.

Amadeo thought that over. "They take all the things I have except my tobacco and matches," he said at length, "but one side of my bed is fastened up with a rope. Would that help?"

"It might," answered Tom. "Get it."

Amadeo moved away and bent over his bunk. Tom could hear the

iron pipe rattle and the wire springs clattered a little. Amadeo came back across the cell. He passed a piece of rope through the bars to Tom.

It was an old piece of lariat, about ten feet long. There was still some stiffness in the rope, and it was kinked as it had been twisted to lash the springs to the pipe of the bed. Tom, working the rope into pliability with strong, brown hands, was struck by an idea.

"Listen, Amadeo!" he commanded.

Amadeo bent his head attentively toward the bars, and Tom unfolded a plan.

It took some time to get the rope into usable shape. When the kinks had been partially worked out Tom tied a honda in one end. He stood close against the bars of the cell, the rope dangling from his hands. Now was the time.

Amadeo rattled the door of his cell, and Tom lifted his voice.

"Hey! Hey you in there!"

It took much rattling and several calls, but at length Coontz appeared at the door that led to the corridor. A good deal hinged on whether or not Coontz was alone in the office. Apparently he was, for no one came with him to the door.

"Cut out that racket!" snarled Coontz.

"I want a smoke!" Tom shook the bars again. "You got my papers an' tobacco."

"An' I'm goin' to keep 'em, you blamed murderer!"

Tom was getting nowhere fast. He tried a last, desperate resort. "I'll tell you about Finn," he said. "If you'll give me a smoke, I'll tell you. There's *marijuana* in that sack of mine that you got. I got to have some."

Coontz knew what *marijuana* was. He knew that an addict of the drug

must have it. He believed that Tom was desperate, craving a smoke of *marijuana*. Coontz opened the grating and stepped into the corridor.

"You tell me first, then I'll give you your sack," he promised.

"Come back here," said Tom. "Come back where I won't have to yell at you."

Coontz moved back along the cells, staying well out of arm's reach, holding to the wall. He came slowly, as though he suspected something. Suddenly he stopped. "This is close enough," said the jailer. "Now go ahead."

It was close enough. A brushpopper does not need to circle a big loop, nor does he need a pasture to rope in. The little loop in Tom's hand shot out as his wrist flicked. The loop opened, dropped true, and Tom, both hands on the rope, leaped back into his cell. A band like iron constricted about Coontz's throat, cutting off the yell of terror that started from his throat. His hands shot up to free the rope as he was dragged across the corridor. As his hands touched the rope he came against Amadeo's cell. Other hands, strong, clamped like steel traps on Coontz's arm and on the butt of the gun that hung at his hip. The gun was jerked out and dropped to the floor. Coontz still struggled with the rope. Tom came up it as a man would go up a rope to a horse. He reached through the bars and caught at Coontz's belt. Amadeo added his other hand to aid the hold he already had.

**W**ITH quick fingers Tom searched for keys. He found them. Coontz was sagging against the bars now, the rope strangling him. Amadeo held the jailer up. The third key that Tom tried opened the cell. In an instant

he was in the corridor. The key that had opened his cell also opened Amadeo's. Amadeo released Coontz, and the jailer dropped to the floor. Tom bent over him, loosening the rope. Coontz's breath came with a rasping gasp.

The two worked swiftly. They bound Coontz with the rope and carried him into Tom's cell. By the time that was done, the jailer was breathing again, trying to shout. A piece of dirty blanket thrust into his mouth forestalled that and a strip torn from the same blanket lashed the gag in place. They put Coontz on the bunk, went into the corridor again and closed the doors of both cells. Fortune had been with them. The first step of their escape was accomplished.

There had been no one in the sheriff's office with the jailer, that was certain. If there had been, the noise would have brought him out. Coontz's gun was in Amadeo's possession. In the office there would be arms and other things that they could use, Tom reasoned.

With Amadeo following, he went along the corridor, passed through the barred grating and closing that behind him, advanced cautiously on the office. Peering around the edge of the door, Tom saw that the office was deserted. A lamp burned on a desk, and there was a paper sack lying beside the lamp. Tom slipped along the wall, reached the window and drew the shade. When he turned, Amadeo was at the desk, holding out the paper sack. Tom took a long step and reached Amadeo's side. Amadeo was eating, his jaws crunching rhythmically. Tom looked into the sack and then dipped in his hand, bringing out a large piece of peanut brittle.

"*Bueno, no?*" questioned Amadeo, taking another piece.

Tom, investigating the possibilities of the office, was not interested in the merits of peanut brittle. There was a cupboard that evidently contained arms, but it was locked. No use fooling with that. In one corner of the room was the safe. That also was locked. Above the safe were two two-by-fours nailed to the wall with cross pieces fastened to them. This ladder led to a trapdoor in the ceiling. As Tom glanced up at the trapdoor there was a scrape of feet in the corridor. Tom spoke one word to Amadeo: "*Arriba!*" and went up the ladder like a squirrel.

Amadeo was at his heels, so literally at his heels that Tom's convulsive kick and wriggle as he went through the trapdoor almost knocked Amadeo from the ladder. Turning, Tom hauled Amadeo up, got him into the attic and shoved the trapdoor in place. He was barely in time to avoid the men who entered the office. Beside Tom, Amadeo calmly crunched a piece of the brittle from the sack which he still held. To Tom's startled ears the noise he made was almost deafening. He thrust out his hand to stop Amadeo and struck the paper sack which rattled loudly.

"*Quiere dulce?*" softly whispered Amadeo.

In a situation like that, with a partner like that, what was there to do? Tom took a piece of candy.

"Suck it!" Tom whispered fiercely.

Amadeo's teeth ground on a peanut.

Tom recognized the voices of both of the men who were talking in the office below. One was the heavy bass of Lacey, the sheriff; the other was the drawing whine of the town marshal, Bob Campbell.

"You seem to be mighty sure he done it," said Campbell. "Why, Ben?"

"The shots," answered Lacey. "He claimed that he shot twice, an' when I looked at his gun there was only one spent shell. Finn was shot once an' cut with a knife. He was hit on the head, too. Doc Brann has gone to the ranch. Goin' to operate, I reckon."

"Whoever done it was thorough," commented Campbell thoughtfully. "Shot, carved, an' slugged. It's a wonder he didn't burn a little to boot. You say Brann's goin' to operate?"

"All swelled up about it," agreed Lacey. "Goin' to trepan, he says. Says Lucky's got a bone pressin' on his brain, an' it's got to come off."

"Doc Brann," drawled Campbell, "wouldn't pass up a chance like that for a fortune. He's been wantin' to operate on somebody for the last five years. Tried to get me to have my appendix taken out. Would you let me see that gun, Ben?"

"Sure," said the sheriff.

Tom heard the rattle as the sheriff worked the combination of the safe.

There was a pause, and then Campbell said, "Hm-m-m," thoughtfully.

"Well?" asked Lacey.

"Here's the gun." Campbell made no other comment.

Amadeo crushed another piece of peanut brittle, and Tom swore under his breath.

"There's quite a little talk downtown," said Campbell. "Yore friend Van Slect is settin' 'em up to all who'll drink with him, an' tellin' about what a good fellow old Lucky was. He's got quite an audience. I wouldn't be surprised if you had company, Ben."

"They won't get Fitzgibbon," vowed Lacey stoutly. "I ain't never lost a prisoner, an' I ain't goin' to start."

"I come up on that idea," vouch-

safed Campbell. "Mebbe I could be a little help."

"I don't need no help," said Lacey. "I wonder where that fool Coontz is."

"No tellin'," Campbell answered. "East is doin' quite a little talkin', too. Seems like to me you have bad luck on yore posses. Fitzgibbon says that the men he saw was wearin' blue shirts an' Levis?"

"That's what he said."

"Van Slect has got on a blue shirt an' a pair of Levis."

"Next thing you know you'll be sayin' Van Slect done this!"

"Mebbe he did!"

"He was with East, all the time. East ain't wearin' Levis." The sheriff seemed to be on the defense.

"There's no law against a man changin' his clothes, is there?" Campbell moved across the room. To Tom's straining ears there came another sound, a muffled rumble as of many voices and many feet.

Campbell spoke sharply. "Here's yore company, Ben!"

The door of the sheriff's office burst open. Voices filled the room, angry voices. Over the tumult Tom could make out words:

"Lucky's dead! Where is that dirty killer?"

So old Lucky Finn had died? Tom was sorry about that. He had liked the old man; liked Calamity, too. Tom crouched tense by the trapdoor. Lacey was offering resistance, arguing futilely. It was Campbell who made the play. His voice came sharp, snatched out of its customary drawl.

"Hold it! I've got my gun on you!"

There was a flurry after that and then a deeper voice spoke.

"Go ahead! I've got Campbell. Drag the dirty killer out."

The grating between the office and

the jail clanged sharply. There was more noise in the office. Tom half turned, reaching his hand out toward Amadeo. Amadeo was gone! From the office below sound welled up, disappointed voices cursing, crying out.

"Coontz! Tied up! They got away!"

## CHAPTER VI.

### A LONG WALK.

SOMEWHERE in the dark attic Amadeo was fooling around. Where? Tom would have given a good deal to know just where. He did not leave the trapdoor but stayed, listening to the excitement below. Lacey had apparently established some semblance of order. Coontz was telling what had happened, embroidering the tale. According to Coontz, Tom was a *marijuana* fiend on the loose.

"You better shoot when you see him," warned Coontz.

Another voice, one that Tom had never heard before, reverberated in the office. The owner of that voice was furious.

"Who said Finn was dead?" roared the voice. "Who said that? It's a blamed lie. I cut a piece of bone out of his head an' he's going to be all right. Here's the bone. Who said Finn was dead?"

Apparently Doc Brann had come and was resenting the aspersions on his skill. A hand tugged at Tom's elbow. A voice whispered in his ear.

"There is another door," said Amadeo. "Come, while they are all inside down there."

Under the guiding pressure of that hand, Tom moved. He followed Amadeo across the ceiling rafters, fearful that at any moment he would step through on the laths and go crashing down. Amadeo, seemingly certain of his direction, moved with-

out hesitation. The two came to a place where a gray square showed in the blackness below them. Tom bent over the square and peered down. Below him was a ladder, the counterpart of the one in the sheriff's office. Tom lowered himself cautiously. Down he went into dimmer blackness, and stood on the floor. Amadeo followed. They were in an office. The county clerk's office or that of the assessor. Amadeo was working at a desk, opening drawers. Suddenly he gave a satisfied grunt. Tom went to him.

Something smooth and cold and hard was pressed into Tom's hand. "*Un pistola,*" said Amadeo, pleased with himself.

Tom lifted the weapon. By its feel it was either a .45 or a .44, and loaded. Fortune smiled. Tom moved away from the desk. His groping hands found a window. He tugged at it. It slid up suddenly with a screech. No time to wait to see if that sound had been heard! Tom put his legs over the sill and dropped, striking on the soft earth. A thud behind him told of Amadeo's arrival. They were free!

But this was only the first step. They had yet to get out of Reunion, to perfect their escape. Amadeo, coming to his feet, advanced an idea.

"Now," said Amadeo, "we get to the railroad and take a train. I have ridden under a train and in empty cars coming here. We will go back as I came."

Tom Fitzgibbon had other ideas. "I'm going to stay," he announced. "There are things here to clean up. I want to know who shot Finn, and I want to know why they tried to hang it on me."

"Then," said Amadeo, "we don't go?"

"You go," returned Tom.

Amadeo sighed. "How are we going to find this out?" he asked.

That "we" was inclusive. Tom realized that, for better or worse, he had Amadeo with him. There in the dark he shook his head.

"I don't know," Tom answered. "We'll keep circulatin' around and we're bound to pop somethin' out of the brush."

"We leave here," said Amadeo. "We will steal some horses, then we get out of this town. I do not like the jail in this town."

"Me, either," said Tom. "If we steal horses though they'll know we've pulled out, an' they will trail us."

Amadeo thought that over. There was a lot of truth in what Tom said. Amadeo sighed again. "We walk," he said. "We walk until we get to a ranch. Then we steal the horses."

Walking would not be a snap. Tom realized that. He had not walked ten miles one after another in the last ten years. Still there was nothing for it but to try. If they took horses from the town the theft would be detected and their trail followed. If they walked out of town, waited their opportunity and took horses from some pasture or corral their chances were better.

There was the matter of saddles also to be considered. Tom knew that he was a fool to stay, that he would be better off if he went with Amadeo to the railroad yards and hopped a freight, departing only to return with old Mat Antsley and the law at his back. Still he wanted to stay, wanted to be right on the scene and see the thing through. Deciding on valor rather than sense, he made up his mind to remain. With a start Tom realized that Antsley's mortgage was in the safe in the sheriff's office, together with his other possessions. There was nothing he could



do about that. Amadeo plucked at his arm and together the two set off through the night.

As they stole from the courthouse Tom determined their immediate destination. He did not know the country about Reunion. He had traveled from the town in only one direction. Still, where better could they go than to Finn's shack. There was food there. There might be an old saddle in the barn, although Tom had seen none. There would surely be the opportunity of getting horses from the Hogpen or the H Bar and, more important, the cabin had been ransacked. Tom knew why. He knew that the one thing of value that Finn possessed was the patent showing that he had proved on his homestead. Whoever had searched for that patent had attacked Lucky Finn. Whoever had done that had not found the patent. The men who wanted that patent would come back to search again, and Tom intended to be there when they came. With Amadeo following him, Tom set out toward the east.

Twenty miles is a long walk. For a man unaccustomed to walking and shod in high-heeled boots, twenty miles is not a long walk, but it is eternity. Twice the two dropped to the ground as riders passed them. Once they crouched, silent, while men dismounted and talked not fifty yards away. Gray was streaking the east, and the scent of morning was in the air when they crawled through Finn's fence, well away from the gate, and, hugging the shoulder of Cow Mountain, began their last traverse. The gray had changed to rose when at long last they reached Finn's place and cautiously reconnoitered.

There was no one inside. Assured of that, Tom entered. There were cold biscuits in the pan in the oven.

There was a quantity of jerky in the meat safe. There was cold coffee in a pot on the stove, and cold steak in the frying pan. This was the meal that Tom was to have eaten, with Lucky Finn. He lifted the lid from a kettle and saw a gray, black-specked mass inside. A finger brought out a prune. True to his word, Lucky had boiled a kettle of plum duff for the meal.

Tom fed Calamity, who squawked raucously on her perch, then with the food, Lucky's tobacco, and some cigarette papers the two went to the barn. In the little, low building, they found hay. They pushed it forward and behind that barricade they made themselves at home. With food lining their empty stomachs, and a cigarette stilling their craving for tobacco, they talked a little, then weariness overcame them. Amadeo, utterly exhausted, lay back on the hay. Tom took his partner's still smoldering cigarette from his mouth and crushed it out. He put out his own cigarette and lay back. His eyes closed instantly, and he slept.

When Tom wakened he could hear the regular, heavy breathing of Amadeo. Then another sound came to his ears: The stamp of a horse outside the barn. Without waking Amadeo, Tom slid from his waistband the gun that he had taken from the courthouse. Time enough to rouse Amadeo later, if need be. First Tom would reconnoiter. Peering out of the barn door, he saw that the sun was high—about ten o'clock, he judged. His rest had been brief. Tom saw a horse, saddled, standing by the door of the shack and, without going back for his friend, Tom walked out of the barn toward the house. The man, one of the men who had assaulted Lucky Finn, had returned, or so Tom reasoned. He went past the horse, reached the

door, then stopped short, his gun half raised. It was Stella Archibald. The girl stood just within the door, Calamity perched on her wrist, the parrot's perch in her other hand. Her eyes were wide with fright as Tom stepped through the door.

For a moment neither moved, then the girl put down the perch, and the parrot sidled up and down her forearm. "I'd forgotten Calamity," the girl said.

"I fed her when I got in."

Neither was thinking of what was being said. Tom was looking into Stella Archibald's eyes, searching her face.

"But you——" Stella said suddenly. "Lacey took you to jail. You——"

"I got out," Tom interrupted. "Last night! Where were you?"

"I stayed with Lucky. Doctor Brann operated soon after he reached the ranch. I've been with Lucky since then."

"Is Lucky all right?" Tom's voice was anxious.

"He is unconscious." The girl's face turned suddenly cold. "If you are afraid of what he will say when he can talk, you needn't be. He won't be able to talk for a long time yet, if he ever does. Doctor Brann cut a piece of bone out of his head. It was pressing on the brain. You are——"

"Look here!" Tom snapped the words. "I had nothin' to do with Lucky's gettin' hurt. I wasn't here. You heard what I said at the ranch! That was every bit of it true. I——"

"Han's up!" drawled a voice from the doorway.

Very slowly Tom raised his hands. He felt the gun he held snatched from his grasp, and he turned slowly. Bob Campbell stood in the doorway, a gun in his hands and a grin on his face.

"I was just smart enough to figure that you'd come back here," said Campbell, stepping through the door. "What are you doin' down here, Stella?"

"I came for Lucky's parrot," answered the girl. "I rode in——"

"An' found this fellow lookin' around for what he'd missed yesterday," completed Campbell. "Lacey is goin' to be glad to see you, Fitzgibbon. You kept him ridin' most of the night." The town marshal was gruff enough, but still there seemed to be something in his voice, some undercurrent that gave Tom hope.

"Look here, Campbell," said Tom, "I wasn't the man that hit Finn. I wasn't here. I'll come clean with you. I'm from Texas. Mat Antsley, of the Eighty-eight, sent me up here to buy calves. That's my business."

"Uh-huh." Campbell's voice was noncommittal. "What did you break out of jail for if you wasn't guilty? Coontz's neck will be sore for a year. Why did you come back here? There's several things that you got to answer, mister."

"I'll answer 'em," said Tom. "I broke out of jail because I had an idea that there was goin' to be a necktie party for me. I wasn't wrong either. You know that! You was in the sheriff's office when that bunch come swarmin' in, ready to hang me."

"So you was up in the attic!" said Campbell. "I thought so!"

Tom was watching Stella's face from the corners of his eyes. He had seen that face go white as he mentioned the attempt at lynching.

"I was in the attic," he agreed, looking back at Campbell. "I heard what happened."

"Yeah," Campbell said dryly, "but why'd you come back here?"

"Because the fellows that jumped

Finn didn't get what they were after! Because I knew they'd come back to try it again."

"An' what was they after?"

"The patent showin' Lucky had proved his claim, that's what!"

Campbell leaned a little forward.

"Where is that patent?" he snapped. "Where'd you put it?"

"Under Finn's pillow at the H Bar!"

Stella Archibald gasped suddenly. Her eyes were wide as she stared past Campbell at the door. Campbell started to turn. He was too late. A somewhat sleepy and very irascible voice issued a command.

"*Manos alta, amigo!*" Amadeo Matamoras had awakened and come out from behind the hay.

## CHAPTER VII.

### AT THE H BAR.

CAMPBELL lifted his hands. He did so slowly, a sheepish expression stealing over his face. "I'd plumb forgot about yore pardner," he apologized to Tom. "I reckon I'm gettin' childish in my old age."

Tom was not worried about that. He moved on Campbell, staying out of the line of Amadeo's gun. He took the marshal's weapon and his own back again and then stepped away. Amadeo asked a question in Spanish.

"What shall we do with this man? Kill him?"

"No!" Tom said shortly. What Tom wanted was to convince Campbell, if possible, of his own innocence. Campbell could be made into a valuable ally, and Tom had felt, ever since the marshal's appearance, that Campbell was not entirely against him.

"Thanks," said Campbell shortly. Apparently he understood Spanish.

Amadeo asked another question. "What then?"

"*Quién saber?*" said Tom.

"Tie him up and go," said Amadeo. "There are two horses, two saddles, and there is food here. We could easily——"

Tom was watching Stella Archibald.

Amadeo, following Tom's eyes, seemed suddenly appraised of something. He grinned. "You love her," he challenged. "*Bien.* We will take her, too."

"Shut up!" ordered Tom.

Campbell grinned. "Yore friend's romantic," he drawled.

Stella Archibald blushed suddenly.

"Listen," said Campbell, "suppose I told you that I know you didn't jump Finn? Then what? Would you come clean with me?"

"I have come clean with you," replied Tom. "I told you what I was up here for. I told you——"

"But you ain't told me all of it," Campbell said shrewdly. "Listen to me, now. I was a friend of Joe Archibald's. I know a lot of things about him. I know that him an' Mat Antsley thought the world of each other. I——"

The girl looked up eagerly. "Father and Mr. Antsley were like brothers," she said. "I know that some time ago, before he was killed, father wrote to Texas. He needed some money, and he couldn't get it from the bank here. Mr. Antsley sent him what he needed. Father told me that if I ever was in trouble, and he wasn't here to help me, to write to Mr. Antsley. I've written to him——"

"An' that's why I'm here," snapped Tom. "Mat Antsley raised me. Everything I got I owe him. He sent me up here——" Again Tom flushed. Darn Mat Antsley! He had known all along that S. A.

Archibald was a girl. He had sent Tom up here hoping that he would fall in love with her and—darn Mat Antsley—that was just what he was doing.

"Seems like we're havin' a regular old-time testifyin' meetin'," drawled Campbell. "What's the rest of the story, Fitzgibbon?"

Tom shook his head. He wouldn't tell, couldn't tell before this girl, that her father had cheated his old friend, had given a mortgage when there was already a mortgage on the place.

"All right," Campbell seemed cheerful. "If you won't show yore hole card, I'll show mine. I know you didn't shoot Finn, Fitzgibbon."

Tom half turned, eagerly. "How?" he snapped. "What can you prove that by? If you can prove that, I'll go into Retnion an'—"

"An' get hung," concluded Campbell. "Nope, that won't do. The reason I know you didn't shoot Finn is because of yore gun. I seen it in Lacey's office. Remember, you said you fired two shots? Lacey claims that one shot was fired, the one that downed Finn."

"An' there's two spent shells in my gun," exclaimed Tom.

"Nope," returned the marshal, "there's one spent shell, but there's a shell that don't belong there. Three of the loads in the gun are UMC shells. That's the kind you use, I take it. The other is a Winchester shell. It was put there by somebody. Who took yore gun off you, Fitzgibbon?"

Tom thought a moment. He was recalling exactly what had happened when Lacey and the girl had come in. It was Stella Archibald who answered the question.

"Harvey," she said. "Harvey Mullens. He came up right after Mr. Lacey."

Tom nodded. "That's right," he said.

Campbell grunted. "Mullens, huh?" he commented. "I been wonderin' about Mullens."

AMADEO was not enjoying the conversation. He wanted a smoke, and it was wearisome to keep a gun pointed at the marshal and long for the solace of tobacco. "We better go," he said finally.

"You can put up your gun," answered Tom.

Amadeo's eyebrows shot up. That was a strange statement.

Campbell spoke swiftly in Spanish. "We are friends," he said. "I will do nothing."

Amadeo looked the plump speaker over, grunted, and putting his gun in his trousers, fished for papers and tobacco.

"But Harvey Mullens was father's foreman," expostulated Stella, her mind not taken from the subject by this byplay. "Father trusted him."

"An' yore dad was killed by a rockslide," snapped Campbell, every word like a blow. "He was found by Mullens an' Van Slect. I never been satisfied with their report. You been runnin' short on calves on the H Bar for two years. Joe told me so."

Stella's face was white. "But who would jump Finn?" asked Tom. "Who would want this place? I'll tell you, Campbell, I can't figure it out."

"When you tell me the rest of what you know, mebber I can figure it," retorted Campbell. "We're doin' no good here. We better go to the H Bar. The patent is there, ain't it, Stella?"

"I don't know," answered Stella. "I haven't looked."

"Let's go," said Campbell. "Amadeo an' me got no horses," said Tom.

Campbell scowled. "That's so," he agreed. "I'd forgot that. How'd you get here?"

"Walked!" snapped Tom. "More walkin' than I've done in ten years. My feet are sore yet."

Campbell grinned. It was Stella who offered a solution. "There are some horses running along the creek," she said doubtfully. "I could run them in. Of course there aren't any saddles——"

"I could ride Beelzebub bare-back," Tom said fervently. "Will you get them?"

The girl put Calamity back on the perch and went out. She smiled over her shoulder as she went through the door. When she was gone, Campbell walked over to a box and sat down.

"Now she's gone," he said, "tell me the rest of it."

Tom, too, found a box. Amadeo leaned against the jamb of the door. He did not entirely trust this man, and, too, it was natural to him to be on the alert constantly.

"It's a mortgage," said Tom. "I'll tell you."

Rapidly he unfolded what he knew, told Campbell of the mortgage that Mat Antsley had held. Of the mortgage on record at the courthouse made out to Lenn East. Campbell listened and nodded.

"So that's it," he said when Tom finished. "Listen, if I was you, I'd think no more of that. I knew Joe Archibald, and a squarer shooter never lived. If he made out a mortgage to East there's a reason for it, an' you can bet on that. If we could clear up this business of Finn, I'd be satisfied. That's what's got you in bad. I can see why Van Slect would jump you, you got plenty salty with him, but I can't figure East and Lacey. I sure can't."

"That patent was what they wanted off Finn," said Tom. "It's

the only thing he had that was worth a cent. But why did they want it, an' who were they?"

Campbell scowled and shook his head. "Listen," he commanded, "you go on to the ranch with Stella, you an' yore amigo, here. That patent's there. You watch like hawks. I'm goin' back to town an' scout around, an' I might do a little talkin'."

Tom nodded. He knew what Campbell meant. Campbell would talk in the places where he thought it would do the most good.

"There's one thing you got to watch, Campbell," Tom said. "That's about Finn. Finn must've seen the fellows that jumped him. He'd know 'em."

"That's what you got to watch," said Campbell. "That's why I'm goin' to town. Now, here comes Stella with the horses!"

"Don't say nothin' about Antsley's mortgage," warned Tom.

Campbell laughed. "Antsley ain't got a mortgage by now," he said cheerfully. "All yore papers an' stuff was in the sheriff's safe. Think that mortgage is still with 'em?"

Tom was about to reply and then thought better of it.

"The horses are penned!" Stella Archibald called from just outside the door.

The three men went out to the little pole corral where Stella had penned up five or six horses. Tom borrowed the rope from Stella's saddle while Amadeo took the rope that Campbell proffered. They selected horses, roped them out and twisted hackamores on their mounts' noses. Amadeo opened the gate of the corral and let the other horses out. Then, gingerly, he slid up on the back of his mount. The horse promptly bucked him off and Stella, loping out, led the horse back.

Amadeo tried again, this time with better success. Tom had no trouble mounting.

"I'm goin' to town," said Campbell. "You head for the H Bar an' stay close. I'm leavin' it to you to figure out what to do if anythin' shows up. So long!"

When he had gone, Tom, Amadeo, and Stella Archibald rode slowly together toward the north.

As they rode, Tom revolved ideas in his mind. He knew that he and Amadeo were part of the bait for a trap, but the more important part of the bait was Lucky Finn and the crumpled patent beneath Finn's pillow. If Bob Campbell got to town and talked in the right places, things were due to happen and happen shortly. Revolving in his mind what he knew and what had been said, Tom came to certain conclusions.

East held a mortgage on the H Bar, therefore East was implicated in some way. Either he was an innocent victim of circumstances or else he was in the thing up to his neck. Tom, recalling East's appearance, thought that the latter was probable. East had been with Van Slect, and Van Slect certainly was making a good thing out of the H Bar. That Hogpen brand was too crude, too apparent. Tom wondered why the Stockmen's Association and Joe Archibald had stood for the registration of a brand like that. Campbell had made a crack about the sheriff. He had said that Tom's papers were in the safe in the sheriff's office, and that Tom wouldn't have any mortgage by now. Evidently Campbell suspected Lacey of being in some way connected with East or Van Slect. Then there was Mullens. Mullens had stuffed a shell in Tom's gun—a shell that

didn't belong there. Lacey and Mullens and Van Slect and East! Quite a quartet! Tom grinned sardonically. A quartet, were they? Given the opportunity, he would make them all sing bass.

Stella Archibald had been thinking, also. "What are you going to do after you get to the ranch?" she asked suddenly.

"I been thinkin' about that," answered Tom. "We got to get some place where we can watch. You got any ideas?"

"I thought that one of you could hide in the barn," Stella told him. "Lucky's room is in the back of the house. Then I'll get rid of whoever is there, and the other one can come inside."

Tom vetoed that idea. "We're both pretty tired," he said. "We ought to be together. Then one of us could rest some an' the other one watch."

The girl nodded. "Is there anything that you'll need?" she asked.

Tom thought a moment and then replied. "We'll need some shells, .45s, an' we could do with some grub. We ate when we got to Finn's, but that was a while back."

"I can get you some shells and something to eat," said Stella. "How are you going to get to the barn? That's where you'll go, isn't it?"

"I hadn't thought of that," replied Tom.

"You can ride around the ranch and come in behind the barn," said Stella, after a moment's thought. "There is a draw that runs up by the corrals. You branch off here and go about half a mile. Then you'll hit the north fork of Pasamonte Creek. Cross that and go on north. The first draw you come to, turn west and follow it. When you get down in the draw you had better let the horses go and come on on foot."

Tom nodded. He asked another question or two and then with Amadeo following him, started toward the east. Stella Archibald watched them go and then, when they had a good start, rode on toward the ranch.

Tom had no trouble following directions. As he rode, he told Amadeo what they were supposed to do. Amadeo, listening, nodded from time to time. Amadeo maintained a stolid silence, and Tom wondered if the man regretted his bargain. He did not ask, however. They reached Pasamonte Creek, crossed it, and were shortly at a draw—a deep crack in the ground. The two rode west along the draw until it widened and then they descended it. After another quarter of a mile, they saw smoke, going straight into the sky. The men dismounted, removed the hackamores from the horses and turned them loose.

**C**AUTIOUSLY they proceeded on foot until presently they came to a corral abutting against the bank of the draw. They stopped, and Tom, removing his hat, lifted a cautious head. He could see Stella Archibald at the back door of the house. She was talking to a man who shortly went into the barn and then reappeared carrying a saddle. Tom and Amadeo crouched in the draw while the rider entered a corral next the one beside the draw. They heard him swearing casually, at a horse, and then came the quick, *clop-clop* of a horse's feet. Tom, peering over the bank again, saw the rider stop by the back door and speak to Stella, then turn and ride around the house. The girl stood on the back stoop for a moment, listening, then waved a towel which she held in her hands. Tom recognized the signal that all was clear.

He scrambled up out of the draw and at a run made for the open back door of the barn, Amadeo at his heels. As the two came through the door, Stella Archibald appeared at the front.

"Go up in the loft," she directed softly. "I've sent Art Hammer down to Lucky's for the parrot. We forgot Calamity again. I'll bring you some shells and something to eat, right away."

Tom and Amadeo made use of the ladder that led to the loft. There, on the scanty covering of hay, they stopped by the front window and looked out. They could see Stella Archibald in the kitchen as she moved back and forth before the window. By moving a little they could see through the window into Lucky Finn's room and make out the bottom of the bed upon which he lay. Disposing themselves as comfortably as they could, they settled down to wait for the girl's return.

She came back after a short interval, and Tom, warning Amadeo to keep his eyes on the house, went down the ladder to meet her. Stella had brought a pot of hot coffee, meat, bread and butter, and beans. All except the coffee was cold, but it was very welcome. In addition the girl had brought a box of shells, .45s. The box had been opened, and some of the shells used, but there were thirty or more left. Tom carried the food and shells to the loft and Stella returned to the house. The two men ate, then Amadeo offered to watch while Tom slept. Tom accepted gratefully and lay down on the hay while Amadeo crouched by the loft window.

The waiting was wearisome for Señor Matamoras. Noon had long since passed. Amadeo, squatted by the window, watched the house periodically and sought about for

methods of amusement. These were few and far between. Presently he saw a spider in a web that covered a corner of the barn. A wasp flew through the window, buzzed busily, and investigating the corner became entangled in the web. Amadeo made a small bet with himself concerning the fate of the wasp.

The spider sallied forth to take his captive and found that he had netted a tartar. The wasp was all for business. Amadeo became engrossed in the battle that took place. He bet, alternately on the spider and then on the wasp. So busy was he watching the fight that he totally forgot his duty of watching the house. He failed to see a horseman arrive from the road and stop in the yard in front of the house. He failed, too, to see this new arrival enter the house. The spider was throwing loops of web about the wasp, working from a safe distance, and Amadeo had bet himself a hundred dollars that the spider would make those tenuous loops stick. Just as the busy spider anchored one wing, a scream, shrill and piercing, came from the house. Tom Fitzgibbon jumped to the loft window, bumping into the now watchful Amadeo.

Tom saw the horse in the yard. Another scream echoed from the house. There was no time to reproach Amadeo. It was fifteen feet from the loft window to the ground. Tom leaped. He struck the earth and rolled, then came dizzily to his feet, and ran, staggered rather, toward the house. Amadeo played follow the leader. Amadeo jumped from the window, missed his footing and fell backward, striking his head against the side of the barn door. All the stars that shine at night shone for Amadeo in mid-afternoon. He lay still for an instant, then recovering himself, came to his feet

and made a staggering run for the back door. Tom had already disappeared through that door.

**B**ARGING through the kitchen Tom found himself in a big living room. The door that led to Lucky Finn's room was open, and through that door came the third scream. Tom lurched toward the door, gun out. As he reached it a man charged through. They met, bounced back, and Tom half fell. His gun was knocked from his hand and went clattering on the floor. The man coming through the door reeled back. As he recovered his balance Stella Archibald threw herself at him from the rear. For a moment they struggled, while Tom groped for his weapon. He failed to find it and came to his feet just as Stella was thrown back into the bedroom. Tom recognized the man in the doorway. It was Harvey Mullens. Mullens, a bigger man than Tom, charged forward. Mullens's eyes widened suddenly with fear. He gave a queer, half articulate squawk, ducked his head and jumped. One heavy fist, swung, striking Tom Fitzgibbon a glancing blow on the head, and throwing him aside. A shot roared in the room, reverberating, beating back and forth between the walls. Tom, recovering his balance, heard Amadeo curse in Spanish, and then went on into Lucky Finn's room.

Stella Archibald was on the floor, one hand clutching a crumpled paper. Tom bent and helped the girl to her feet. For a moment she leaned against him, warm and pliant. Then, with a gasp, she recovered herself and pushed away. Tom, seeing that Stella was unharmed, wheeled and dashed back through the door into the living room. The living room was empty. Outside another



shot crashed and then another and another. Scooping up his gun from the floor, Tom ran to the front door and out onto the porch. Amadeo stood in the yard before the house, feet widespread, head thrust forward, right arm half extended. Beyond the gate Harvey Mullens rode, bent forward in the saddle, his horse stretched out to a full run. Amadeo slowly lowered his gun. Mullens was too far away for accurate work with a pistol.

Tom took the porch steps with a leap and joined Amadeo. Amadeo was swearing steadily and sibilantly. He had missed with every shot. Mullens's horse seemed to swoop over a little rise in the road, then disappeared. Horse and rider were gone! From the porch Stella's voice came, excited, raised.

"He was after the patent."

Tom wheeled. "Did he get it?" he snapped.

"He had it, but I got it back," answered the girl. "I was looking at it when he came in. He snatched it from my hand. I struggled with him and screamed. He threw me against the wall and started out the door. I called again, then you came and——"

"Amadeo!" Tom said sternly.

Amadeo was contrite. "I was watching a fight," he explained. "A spider and a wasp. I did not see him come, amigo. If I had a rifle——"

Tom turned away from Amadeo. He looked at Stella Archibald. "Are you all right?" he asked.

A slow flood of color swept up over the girl's face. She, like Tom, was remembering that instant in Lucky Finn's room when Tom held her in his arms.

"I'm all right," she said. "I wonder how Lucky is? I——" She did not complete her sentence but turned and went into the house. Tom fol-

lowed her, and after Tom came Amadeo, casting regretful glances at the road down which Harvey Mullens had disappeared.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### LUCKY SPEAKS.

**L**UCKY FINN still lay on the bed, his eyes closed, and his breath coming evenly. From his appearance the old man might have been asleep had it not been for the bandage about his head and the pallor on his waxen face. Stella bent over him, listening to his breathing, her hand on his wrist at the pulse. She looked at Tom and nodded.

"He is just the same," she said.

Tom sat down on a chair. "Mullens," he said slowly. "So he's one of 'em."

"I can't understand it," said Stella. "Harvey Mullens worked for father for five years. He was father's foreman. We trusted him."

"You can't trust anybody when it comes to money," said Tom. "Nobody at all."

"But what could this patent be worth?" asked Stella. "The claim is just good range land. We've used it for years. I know father put Lucky down on that homestead. I know father intended to buy it from Lucky when he had his patent. Father had used his own homestead rights and couldn't make the entry himself."

"Finn said that somebody had tried to buy it from him," said Tom. "He was holdin' it for you. He said that if I bought your calves, you might go through with the deal."

"Of course I would." Stella was definite. "Father put Lucky down there. Of course I will complete the bargain. Still I wonder——"

"Somebody wants it mighty bad," interrupted Tom grimly. "I got

ideas who. Mullens was with Van Slect in Reunion. I reckon Van Slect is the man."

"But his ranch is away below Lucky's claim," argued Stella. "He wouldn't want land that was so far away. What could he do with it?"

Tom grunted and arose from his chair. "We're apt to find out," he commented grimly. "Mullens got away. I wouldn't doubt but that he'd be back an' have company with him. We'll find out all right if Amadeo don't get to watchin' too many spider fights."

Amadeo hearing his name mentioned, looked up. On the bed Finn stirred and mumbled something. Instantly the three in the room were beside him.

"Duff——" muttered Finn. "Pot of duff!"

"He said he'd cook some plum duff for me," grated Tom. "He was doin' it when these fellows jumped him."

"He's regaining consciousness." Stella Archibald's voice trembled a little. "I wish that Doctor Brann were here!"

"Ain't he comin' back?" asked Tom.

"To-night." Stella's voice showed her agitation. "I ought to send for him. I——"

"Amadeo or me might go," suggested Tom. "Where would we find him?"

"No!" Stella instantly rejected that idea. "Art Hammer will be here any minute now. He should be back with the parrot by now. I'll send him."

"Then me an' Amadeo——" began Tom.

Stella held up her hand. Tom stopped. The sounds of a horse arriving came from the yard.

"Art," said the girl.

"We'll duck out," snapped Tom. "Vengase, Amadeo!"

**H**ASTILY the two men went through the door and into the kitchen. They were in that room when they heard Hammer's boots clumping on the living-room floor and his voice, roughly cheerful, raised in greeting.

"Here's that parrot, Miss Stella. How's Lucky?"

"He just spoke," Stella said. "I wish Doctor Brann were here. He said that he wanted to be here when Lucky came to. Did you have any trouble, Art?"

"Dang bird bit me twict," answered Hammer. "She's sure a biter. Lucky talked, did he? Say who hit him?"

"No, he didn't. He just mumbled."

"I'd like to string that Fitzgibbon up higher'n a kite," stated Hammer. "Jumpin' an old duck like Lucky! You reckon it would do any good if I rode in an' got Doc, Miss Stella?"

"I hate to ask you to do that," Stella answered. "It's a long ride to town and back. You——"

"Shucks," Art Hammer brushed the objection aside. "Likely I'll meet Doc on the road. I'll just saddle me a fresh horse an' light out. Sure you're all right, Miss Stella?"

Tom did not hear the answer. He nudged Amadeo, and the two, on tip-toe, made for the door. Outside, moving cautiously but swiftly, they went into the barn. There in the dark interior Tom breathed easily again. The two crouched down in a stall when they heard Hammer coming around the house leading his horse. Hammer walked past the barn and on to the corrals.

Mentally, Tom took his hat off to Art Hammer. Hammer was cheerfully undertaking a fifty mile ride, in order to bring Doctor Brann to Lucky's side.

The two stayed in the stall until

they heard Hammer leave the corral. They heard his voice again at the back door of the house.

"Sure you'll be all right while I'm gone, Miss Stella?" Hammer asked.

The girl's reply was inaudible.

"Well, I'll push right along," Hammer promised. "I'll leave my gun with you, too, Miss Stella."

Again the reply was inaudible and again Hammer spoke.

"I'd sure love to meet them two on the road," he said. "You sit tight an' keep the place closed up. Harvey ought to be back pretty soon an' you'll be all right when he comes."

Tom muttered under his breath. If Art Hammer knew what Harvey Mullens had done he would not feel so secure in leaving.

Leather creaked, and Hammer said, "I won't be any longer than I can help, Miss Stella." Then the horse started, its hoofbeats dwindling rapidly.

Amadeo and Tom Fitzgibbon came out of the barn. Stella Archibald was in the kitchen, and they went in.

"That Hammer's a pretty good boy," Tom said. "I'd say a plenty good boy."

Stella nodded agreement. "He is," she said. "I like him a lot."

Momentarily Tom was not so sure that Art Hammer was a good boy. Then he grinned, recognizing the symptoms of jealousy.

"Has Finn talked any more?" Tom questioned.

The girl shook her head. "Just mumbled," she answered.

"I reckon one of us better stay with him," said Tom.

"I was just going in," Stella said. "I'll stay with him."

"An' Amadeo an' me will keep a lookout," announced Tom. "I'll do

the watchin' this time. Amadeo's too apt to see spiders an' such."

He turned to his companion and spoke briefly and to the point in Spanish. Amadeo's face colored with a sudden rush of blood.

"Si," Amadeo said resentfully, and went on out of the house.

After a moment Tom followed him. Each found a vantage point and settled down for a long vigil.

Time wore on. The sun passed the meridian and dropped toward the west, sending long shadows sliding over the range. Occasionally Tom's head nodded. Amadeo moved now and again. Tom heard the girl stirring inside the house. Calamity, the parrot, squawked and cried "*Matar! Matar!*" several times. Presently the rattle of pans in the kitchen indicated that Stella Archibald was preparing supper. Tom left his lookout at the corner of the porch, went around the house to where Amadeo stood guard, cautioned his friend to keep a watch, and then went in to see if he could help Stella.

THEY ate the meal, Tom and Stella together, Amadeo after he had been relieved by Tom. Dusk settled as Tom kept his vigil. Amadeo came out and joined him. They smoked cigarettes together reflectively, while the dusk deepened into dark.

"We'll have to split this up," announced Tom. "We got to stay on the job all night or till Campbell gets out here again. You go take a little siesta, Amadeo. I'll wake you pretty soon."

Amadeo nodded his agreement and moved away. He had taken but three steps when Stella's voice came from the house.

"Tom! Tom! Come in here! Lucky is trying to say something!" Together Tom Fitzgibbon and

Amadeo Matamoras ran to the door and into the house.

Stella had lighted a lamp in Lucky's room. The lamp cast a dim light over the bed upon which the old man now moved fitfully. Lucky's lips moved. The two men and the girl drew close to the bed. Tom bent forward to catch the muttered whisper that came from Lucky's lips. Finn's eyes rolled wildly beneath his turban bandage. Tom laid his hand on Lucky's shoulder, holding the man to the bed as he tried to sit up.

"I won't sell," said Lucky Finn. "I promised Archibald I'd let him have it. I won't sell to you."

Across the bed Tom saw Stella Archibald's frightened eyes. He shook his head, warning the girl to say nothing. On her perch Calamity sidled back and forth, muttering to herself, excited by the tension in the room and by the hoarse whisper of Lucky Finn's voice. "*Matar! Matar!*" she muttered.

Tom leaned closer to the bed again. Lucky Finn's lips were moving.

"Don't!" whispered the old man hoarsely. "Don't, Van Slect! I tell you I won't sell to you." Then suddenly his voice rose, clear. "You can't find it! You can't find my patent. Put up your knife!"

## CHAPTER IX.

### A MISSING PATENT.

WHEN Harvey Mullens rode from the H Bar he kept his horse at a dead run all the way to Van Slect's Hogpen Ranch. There he stopped. Van Slect was not at the ranch and Van Slect's cook, his eyes curious, told Mullens that the boss was in town. Mullens again mounted his horse and rode away, wasting no time on the cook.

Going into town Mullens made the

best possible speed, keeping up almost the speed that he had taken to reach the Hogpen. A little outside of town he slackened his gait, for it would occasion too much comment for him to be seen riding so swiftly through the streets of Reunion. So it was at a more sedate gait that he rode up in front of Lenn East's office, stopped his blown horse and dismounted. Tying his horse to a hitch rack he went into the office. Guy Van Slect sat on one side of East's desk. East occupied a swivel chair behind the desk, and Lacey, the sheriff, leaned against the wall. East held a paper in his hands and looked up from it as Mullens entered.

"Well, Harvey?" he asked.

"That patent is at the H Bar," Mullens said. "Stella had it. I tried to get it away from her, but them two fellows that was in jail, jumped me an' I had to run." He blurted the sentence, all in a breath.

East waved a hand toward a chair. "Sit down, Harvey," he said quietly. "Tell us about it."

East's coolness calmed Mullens. He took the chair that the lawyer indicated, and with the other three paying strict attention, told what had occurred at the H Bar. Now and again East asked a question, and Mullens answered, but for the most part the H Bar foreman was not interrupted. When he finished the three were leaning forward.

"I stopped at yore ranch, Guy," Mullens concluded. "The cook told me you was in town, so I come on in."

East, Van Slect, and Lacey exchanged significant glances.

"So the patent is at the H Bar," said East, slowly. "The patent and Fitzgibbon. I don't know of anything that could fit better."

"What do you mean, Lenn?" flared Van Slect. "If Stella Archi-

bald has that patent and if Fitzgibbon is there——”

A little smile hovered on East's lips. At the sight of that smile Lacey blanched suddenly.

“I mean that we have everything that we need at the H Bar,” East explained. “We know why Fitzgibbon came up here.” He tapped the paper he had been reading and which now lay on his desk. “Here is the mortgage that Archibald sent Antsley. It has never been recorded. That is why Fitzgibbon came.”

“But——” Lacey began.

“Listen to me!” East snapped. “The Greer representative will be in town to-morrow. If we are ever going to have this sewed up, it's got to be by then. Now! Fitzgibbon and that Mexican are at the H Bar. So are Finn and the girl. The patent on the claim is there too. There's just one thing that we can do. We've got to go out there and get that patent!”

“What about Fitzgibbon?” asked Lacey. “He's there! He——”

“Fitzgibbon will be found dead,” East said coldly. “You'll find him, Lacey. He is your prisoner and he escaped.”

“But what about——”

“You fool!” East lost his patience. “You, Guy, and Harvey are going out there. You are going to settle the thing. You'll kill Fitzgibbon and the Mexican. Guy and Harvey will be your posse, Lacey. You'll be perfectly within the law.”

“But what about Stella Archibald and Finn? What about Art Hammer, if he's there?” interjected Van Slect.

“It will look as though Fitzgibbon and the Mexican came back to finish what was started in Finn's shack,” said East ruthlessly. “None of those

people must ever have a chance to talk. Lacey, you are the sheriff. You will find these desperadoes at the H Bar. They will have killed Stella Archibald and Finn. Hammer, too, if he is there. They will resist you, of course. You will kill them when they resist arrest. Then bring that patent to me. There is too much involved in this thing for us to stop now!”

Guy Van Slect's voice was hoarse when he spoke. “It's all we can do,” he said. “One thing you overlooked though, East. We don't do the dirty work alone. You're comin' with us!”

“But——” interjected East.

“Either you come, or we don't go,” rasped Van Slect.

East looked at his other two companions. Mullens was sitting on the edge of his chair, his eyes wide and bright. Lacey still leaned against the wall. As East searched their faces, the sheriff nodded slowly.

“You got to come, Lenn,” he said.

There was a snarl on East's lips. “All right, you spineless wonders!” he rasped. “I'll go with you. I'll show you how it ought to be done! Get me a horse at the livery, Mullens. You'll have to have a fresh one, too. Guy, you and Lacey start out. We'll meet you at the edge of town. We'll ride out together!”

Mullens rose from his chair and moved to the door. He looked back at the three in the office and then stepped out. After a moment Lacey followed him. Van Slect stood, his eyes hard and adamant, close to East.

“Well, Lenn?” said Van Slect.

East opened a drawer of the desk. From the drawer he took a heavy six-shooter and thrusting it in the waistband of his trousers walked across the office and took his hat from the rack.

“Come on then!” he snarled.

WITH Van Sleet following he left the office, closing the door behind him and locking it. They went on down the street, walking toward the livery barn, each so engrossed in his own thoughts and in watching the other that he failed to see Bob Campbell where he stood on the porch of Arnberg's store. Nor did the two see Campbell when later, side by side, they rode slowly along the length of Reunion's street toward the east.

Bob Campbell watched them go. When they had disappeared behind the last buildings he moved quickly. Leaving the porch of Arnberg's store he walked to East's office. Bob Campbell brought his stockman's knife from his pocket. The long blade of that knife slid in and touched the lock. Campbell worked patiently. The lock clicked. Campbell turned the knob and walked into the office. For a moment he stood looking the place over. Down by the depot a train whistled, a long wailing blast. Campbell walked over to East's desk. One by one he scrutinized the papers that lay there. Suddenly he grunted, folded a paper and put it in his pocket. He turned to leave, was struck by a thought, and crossing the office again opened a closet door. There hanging from hooks were a pair of blue Levi overalls and a blue shirt. A big gray hat lay on the shelf and on the floor was a pair of boots. Bob Campbell looked at these things, then turned and walked out of the office, closing the door behind him.

As he hurried down the street toward the livery barn where he kept his horse, Campbell saw two men, arrivals on the train which had just come in they were, as evinced by the grips they carried. One was a giant who strode gingerly on his high heels. The other was small and

white-haired, with alert blue eyes that sparkled in his face. Those blue eyes spied the star that glinted on Bob Campbell's vest, and their owner stepped quickly in Campbell's path.

"You the marshal here?" questioned the man with the blue eyes.

Campbell nodded and moved to step aside for he was in a hurry, but the wiry little man caught his coat sleeve.

"My name's Antsley," said the blue-eyed man. "I'm from Texas. This here is Bosco Jordan. We're up here lookin' for a fellow named Fitzgibbon—Tom Fitzgibbon. You seen anythin' of him?"

Bob Campbell's eyes glittered as he looked at the two men. In his coat pocket a paper crackled as he moved his arm, thrusting out his hand.

"I'm Bob Campbell," he said. "So you're lookin' for Tom Fitzgibbon, eh? You come with me!"

AS Lucky Finn cried: "Put up that knife," Tom Fitzgibbon looked at Stella Archibald. The girl's face was horror-stricken. Her eyes showed her fright, but as she caught Tom's eyes her face changed, and the fright gradually gave way to calmness and assurance. She spoke, and for the first time since Tom had seen her, the reserve was gone from her voice.

"I know you didn't do this," she said impetuously. "I know it now."

So that was what had worried Stella Archibald! Somewhere in her mind there had been a lurking suspicion that even Bob Campbell's belief in Tom had been unable to erase. Tom's face colored under his tan. He was about to speak, but Lucky Finn forestalled him. As though to cement the girl's reassurance, Lucky Finn spoke again.

"I won't do it, Van Slect," croaked Lucky. "You can beat my head off, but I won't give you my claim. You or East either!"

"East!" snapped Tom. "He's got a mortgage——"

Stella Archibald screamed. A shot thudded in the room, drowning the cry and the babble of Lucky Finn's voice. Tom came to his feet from where he knelt beside the bed, half wheeling. Amadeo rocked on wide-spread feet. Amadeo's gun was in his hand. As Tom turned, Amadeo dropped the gun and pitched down, full length. In the doorway of the bedroom stood Lenn East, a snarl on his face and a gun in his hand. A little curl of smoke trickled up from the muzzle of the gun. Behind East was Guy Van Slect, his eyes scowling over East's shoulder, and beyond Van Slect were Harvey Mullens and Lacey, the sheriff's face white with the realization of what he was about to do.

Tom Fitzgibbon made no move for the gun in his waistband. If he had moved, if he had shifted his balance or lifted his hand, East would have fired. East's eyes were those of a rabid dog. There was no reason, no light of sanity in them. The man came into the room, moving stiff-legged like an automaton. Van Slect pushed past East and went sidling along the wall. Lacey, as though fascinated, moved slowly through the door. Mullens stepped in quickly, nervously, then stopped. The three in the room, Amadeo, Tom, and Stella had been so engrossed in listening to Lucky Finn, that they had failed to hear the horses that had brought these men, had failed to hear their stealthy footsteps as they slipped across the big living room. They were trapped! Amadeo had already paid the penalty for their carelessness.

IT was Van Slect who broke the tense quiet that followed the reverberations of the shot. Van Slect spoke to Stella Archibald. "Where's that patent?" he snapped.

Tom played for time. "Don't tell him," he ordered. "Don't tell him, Stella. I hid it, Van Slect!"

"You lie!" Van Slect rasped the words. "The girl's got it. Give it to him, East!"

But Lenn East was regaining control of himself. The cunning lawyer's mind was functioning again. He shook his head impatiently.

"Give us the patent from the land office," he said quietly. "That's all we want. Give it to us, and we'll go."

"No!" Stella Archibald choked out the word.

"What do you want it for?" snapped Tom Fitzgibbon. "It's no use to you. You can't get the claim. The claim's no good anyhow!"

Guy Van Slect laughed. "No good?" he rasped. "It means half a million dollars, that's all. No good, and it's the only dam site on the creek."

Tom was watching Lenn East. Something stirred against his foot. Tom did not glance down, but he knew that Amadeo had moved, Amadeo whom he had supposed killed by that first treacherous shot. Was Amadeo trying to take a hand or was that just the final convulsion of a man fatally wounded? Tom did not know. He did know that this was a show-down, that these men meant to kill him, and he had no doubt as to what they likewise intended for Stella Archibald and Lucky Finn. With Tom out of the way what would happen to Stella?

Van Slect answered that question. "Go on, East," ordered Van Slect.

"Put him down! I'll take the girl. Before I get done with her, she'll be glad to give us that patent."

East's eyes narrowed. It was coming, Tom knew. He bunched his muscles. He would have to draw against a gun that was already out, but Tom knew that unless East's first shot found his brain, he would kill Lenn East. That much was sure. Lenn East, and then if he could, Guy Van Slect. East's gun tilted a trifle. Tom could see the man's eyes, slits now. From a corner of the room, rasping and raucous, Calamity screamed:

"*Awwwwwwk!* There's the man! Where's the knife? *Matar! Matar!*"

In that instant's distraction caused by the parrot's scream, Tom went into action. Smooth, compact muscles moved. Sure hand flashed up to his waistband. Sure fingers snatched at a rough checkered gun butt, a sure thumb brought the hammer back as the gun lifted smoothly. Two shots roared in the little bedroom, and then another. Tom staggered under the shock of East's bullet, but East, struck in the abdomen and in the chest, reeled back, tripped his heels over an unseen object and pitched back on his head.

Tom Fitzgibbon, left leg buckling, swung his gun to Guy Van Slect. He was going to the floor, Tom Fitzgibbon, but as he went down, he fired twice. His first slug tore splinters from the door casing. His next shot was more accurate. Guy Van Slect's mouth was open, as though he were about to speak. Guy Van Slect's gun was in his hand, lifting into line. The movement was never completed. Blood took the place of the words Van Slect had been about to utter. Van Slect's eyes widened, and he put his empty right hand on his chest. He tried to speak, but choked and slid down

along the wall, his back against it. Very slowly he went down. Tom, his left leg numb and unanswering, lurched on down to the floor.

AND now a strange apparition appeared even as he swung his gun, with one shot left, toward Lacey. Lacey was shooting. Legs spread out, gun up, Lacey stood by the wall. Between Lacey and Tom Fitzgibbon, Amadeo, who had been dropped by East's first shot, was struggling to his knees. Another gun exploded, thundered in Tom's ears. Lacey kept his gun up, but his knees sagged. Something white-hot tore into Tom's chest. He pulled the trigger of his gun, and Lacey wavered. Amadeo, at Tom's right, grunted oddly and went down again, down to stay it seemed for he did not move. Still Lacey miraculously kept his feet, and Tom's gun was empty. Then, as a man ran for the door, he brushed against Lacey. Harvey Mullens, unable to stand the pressure, was fleeing. That touch seemed to finish Lacey. He went down, pitching forward so that he lay across Amadeo, and at the door Mullens checked and recoiled.

Tom's eyes were hazy. He could not see things clearly. He tried to lift the empty gun, tried to force his legs to function, but he could do neither. His eyes were playing tricks. So were his ears. His eyes told him that in the door stood the great bulk of Bosco Jordan; Bosco, whom he had left down on the Rio, and his ears said that Mat Antsley was cursing somewhere close by. Tom closed his eyes and opened them again. Surely his senses were lying when they said that Bosco Jordan was in the room, a gun in one great fist, the collar of Harvey Mullens's coat in the other, and that bending over Tom was Mat Antsley. Tom closed his eyes again.



Blood pounded in his ears. Red swam in his vision, and then came blackness.

Tom fought that blackness away. Mat Antsley, bending over him, was asking questions, or rather asking one question over and over.

"You all right, Tom? You all right?"

Tom made no answer to that but he asked a question of his own.

"Stella?"

Mat Antsley was pushed aside. Stella Archibald's white face and big eyes swam into Tom's vision, came closer, closer. Something smooth and soft touched Tom's cheek, a fleeting, transitory touch. Then the girl's face was gone.

A big booming voice, seeming strangely familiar, sounded in the room.

"What's goin' on here? Get that fellow up on a bed an' let me have him."

Tom heard Bob Campbell's thin voice say: "For gosh sake, Doc! How did you get out here?"

Then hands shifted under him, pulling him up from the floor. Tom was laid on something soft, and then a rough hand pulled at his coat. Tom lay inert while the hands worked back and forth, unbuttoning his shirt.

The booming voice said, "High in the chest. I'll have to probe!" A newer, sharper, pain burned in Tom's shoulder seared through and went on up to his head. The blackness came again, and this time Tom did not fight it.

When Tom Fitzgibbon wakened, it was daylight. He saw a rough bearded face and felt rough hands lift him up. A glass was thrust against his mouth and the booming voice he had last heard said:

"Drink this!"

Tom swallowed convulsively. A thought flashed into his mind, a vagary. Just so, he might have drenched a horse. There were questions he wanted to ask, things he had to know about. He tried to ask them. The man with the beard peering benevolently over his glasses, grinned at Tom's efforts.

"You'll be all right," said the man with the beard. "Just take it easy."

It was a simple matter to take it easy. A delicious lassitude stole up over Tom Fitzgibbon, swept him away.

WHEN Tom wakened again he saw Mat Antsley's white hair and blue eyes. Mat was perched on a chair. Tom, moving his eyes and then turning his head, was aware of a leg that was on fire, and a shoulder that burned all the way from waist to neck. He quit moving his head. Mat Antsley had come off his chair, moved his perch to the edge of Tom's bed.

"You all right, boy?" questioned Mat Antsley.

It seemed to Tom that Antsley would never quit asking that. He managed to grin. It didn't hurt his shoulder to grin.

"Did you know that Archibald's kid was a girl?" Tom asked, his voice coming strong. He had put a great deal of effort into saying the words, more effort than was necessary perhaps. His voice sounded loud in his ears.

Mat Antsley bent forward. "What did you say?" he demanded.

Maybe his voice was not so loud as he thought, Tom concluded. He summoned strength and tried again.

"Did you know that Archibald's kid was a girl?"

Antsley grinned. "Sure," he chirruped. "Knew it all the time. Time you was settlin' down an' quit hellin' around. Now you lie still. I'm goin' out an' get Brann. Him an' Amadeo an' Bosco are out playin' pitch. Dang 'em! Want to play pitch all the time."

Antsley flitted away from the bed. Tom, badly puzzled, stared at the ceiling. Amadeo was dead! Tom had seen him go down and crawl up, then go down again. This thing was getting too deep.

Voices rumbled, and Antsley returned. Behind Mat was the bearded stranger with the bull voice, and behind the bearded man was Amadeo, grinning, and with a bandage around his head and one arm in a sling. The bearded man took Tom's lax arm, felt professionally of his pulse and rumbled.

"All right. He's comin' all right. Nothin' the matter with him but a hole in his chest an' another in his leg. These dang kids can't take it like us old-timers, Antsley."

Amadeo edged forward. He grinned. "*Esta bueno?*" he inquired.

It seemed to Tom as if every one wanted to know if he was all right. He closed his eyes. Footsteps sounded on the floor. When Tom opened his eyes again Brann and Amadeo were gone, but Mat Antsley was left.

"Where's Stella?" Tom managed.

"In bed," said Antsley. "No! You lie still now! She's all right, I tell you. Just tuckered out. She'll be up an' in here after a while."

Tom lay back. Mat never lied, and Tom knew it.

"I'll tell you," said Antsley. "I didn't have no idea that I was sendin' you into any such ruckus. I just wanted you to come up here an'

get me some calves, an' I wanted to have you see Joe's girl."

Tom moved again, and Antsley, putting his hand on Tom's arm, held him back.

"I'll tell you all about it," promised the white-haired man. "Now you just lie still."

"How'd you get here?" demanded Tom. His voice had gained strength, and he was stronger, too.

Antsley chuckled. "You hadn't wrote since you left," he chided. "Me an' Bosco come up here to find out if you'd ever made it. We hadn't no more than got off the train in Reunion till we run into your friend Campbell. He brought us right on out here, an' we come in at the end of your little party."

"Van Slect?" asked Tom.

"I reckon," Mat Antsley's voice was grave, "they'll bury Van Slect. Him an' that man, East. Seems like you done their business, Tom."

There was silence for a moment. Antsley spoke again, his voice cheerful.

"Lacey's goin' to get well, though," said Antsley. "Him an' Mullens! Mullens wasn't hurt none to speak of. Bosco just slapped him a little in the excitement after we got here. Seems like everybody is comin' along all right."

Tom's eyes were on Mat Antsley's face, questioning him. Mat Antsley answered that question. He knew that it was better for him to talk, to tell all that he knew, than it was to have Tom worrying or asking questions. Mat Antsley had the full story. He retailed it to the man on the bed.

Harvey Mullens and Ben Lacey had told the details of the plot. They had talked freely and fully before Campbell and Antsley. They had

told of the forged mortgage that East had recorded, and of how East and Van Slect had hoped to profit by selling Finn's claim as a dam site to the Greer Development Co., and later selling Van Slect's ranch. He told of how East and Van Slect had attempted to buy the claim, and when Lucky Finn refused to sell, had attacked the old man. Tom's arrival had driven them off before they had found the thing they wanted.

**L**UCKY is comin' all right," announced Mat Antsley. "It's goin' to take time, but he'll come out of it. Brann is a dang good doctor in spite of him wantin' to operate all the time. I reckon I'll take care of Finn. He's pretty good people."

From there Mat Antsley continued. He told Tom how Campbell had found the mortgage in East's office, told of how Campbell after meeting him and Bosco had hurriedly told them what was taking place, and of the mad ride that the three had made to the H Bar. He told, too, how Lacey had confessed his part in the plot, and of how Harvey Mullens had cleared up the death of Joe Archibald. Guy Van Slect, riding the rim above Archibald, had started the slide that had taken the life of the H Bar owner.

"Damn him!" said Mat Antsley, referring to Van Slect. "Tom, I was never so glad of anythin' in my life as that you'd—" He stopped short.

"I'm goin' to dicker with the Greer people," he said, after a pause. "I reckon that I can do business with 'em, an' Lucky's willin' to sell. There ain't much more, Tom. Amadeo got his head barked at the first shot. It put him down. He stopped a slug in his arm but it didn't put him clear out of the fight. I reckon Amadeo's reformed. I'm goin' to put him down on the Tesuque place with Bosco. I believe they'll do all right. It'll take a week or ten days before I can clean things up here, an' you ought to be ready to travel by that time."

Mat Antsley got up. He heard sounds outside the door, and he went to investigate. Tom heard Mat's voice, then a softer murmur. He had closed his eyes when Mat ceased talking to him. Now he opened them again. Stella Archibald was coming across the room toward the bed. The girl stopped beside the bed and looked down. Her eyes were wide and there was still sleep in them, but there was something else also, something that caused Tom to say, "Stella!" and half lift his uninjured arm. In another instant the girl was kneeling beside the bed. This time that soft touch was not on Tom Fitzgibbon's cheek. Stella Archibald's lips against his own, stopped all speech.

At the door Mat Antsley grinned, then chuckled audibly. "An' I sent him up here to buy calves," said Mat Antsley, successful schemer. "Yeah, I did!" He turned from the door and went on through the living room.

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*A Complete Novel, "IRON GOLD," by JOHN DUDLEY PHELPS,  
in Next Week's Issue.*

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# ONE RANGER RAN

By

JOHN BRIGGS

Author of "Cowboy's Union," etc.

**A** GAINST the glare of the lowering sun, Lon Carew squinted down into a rock-bound gully. From his lofty point of observation, he could see far beyond a bend in the dust—dry water channel. He could look down upon the desert floor which spread out from the base of the mountains, five thousand feet below. A far-flung glare of sand reflected against the raw young Ranger's smarting eyeballs. A heat-hazed desert gulf extended unbrokenly to the purple-shadowed benches of the Copas Range, fifty miles away. The sun-parched basin was streaked and crisscrossed by black, irregular lines, making it look like a tremendous jig-saw map. Those dark zigzag lines were the shadow markings of dry coulees and arroyos.

There was depth to the shadow-traced arroyos, depth which was not apparent to a man looking down upon them from a five-thousand-foot elevation. But Lon Carew had seen thin smudges of dust rising along one of the shadow lines. During the afternoon, he had watched the faint dust column crawling forward to-



ward the foot of the bluffs below him. He had watched it for so long that his eyes had begun to ache and burn. He had not been able to see the riders whose progress the dust cloud betrayed. Finally he had lost track of them. They had vanished into a maze of canyons threading the low hillocks that huddled up to the crags which he was overlooking. But somewhere below, the riders were ascending, or else they were awaiting nightfall before attempting

to cross the divide. They might choose another pass like the one that Lon Carew and his companion were guarding. There were nine breaks through the bluffs from which Larado's band of raiders could select a route. But men of the border patrol were stationed at each avenue of escape. The Rangers were out to get Larado. The bandit's latest plundering expedition had been the worst outrage in years.

Heat billowing up from the baked-out basin became stifling as the last whisper of a breeze died out. Lon crouched down in his nest of rocks to find shade. He glanced across the narrow, steep-walled gap at his fellow sentry. A shallow chasm, twenty yards wide, separated him from Vern Tucker, who was called "Tuck" for short. Tuck was squatting in the shade of a granite boulder, his face obscured by a wide hat brim as he rolled a cigarette.

"Tuck, it's kinda risky to be smokin' now!" Lon blurted out nervously. "Smoke rises straight up in this kinda air. They could sight it from quite a piece down the gulch, if they was to be on the lookout."

The other jerked up his heat-flushed face and grinned.

"Get a holt on yourself, kid, or you'll have the jumpin' jitters," he advised gruffly. "They can't ride up this draw without us hearin' 'em a mile away."

Slowly raking a match across the rock beside him, Tuck added: "You'll get over such feelin's after you've been on this job a while."

Fingering his rifle, Lon frowned. "I sure hope so," he replied humbly.

**T**ENSE-LIPPED, Lon tried to suppress an outward show of his turbulent emotions. It was his first day of active duty as a Ranger. For years, he had hoped

and planned for this day. Fear that he might fail in his first test kept cropping up in his mind. The suspense of waiting had begun to wear on his nerves.

Biting his lower lip, he watched the smoke spiraling up from his companion's cigarette. He wished that he could take it as calmly as Tuck appeared to be taking it. But Tuck had the advantage over him, the advantage of nearly a year's service.

There were other advantages which gave Vern Tucker the appearance of a hero in Lon Carew's eyes. To be a nephew of "Fighting Jack" Tucker was enough in itself, to supply Tuck with an uncommon background. Backed by a family legend of heroic frontiersmen, it had been easy for Tuck to get on the border patrol. And his influence had helped to make an opening for Lon.

Lon's increasing nervous tension made it hard for him to return the gaze of Tuck's hat-shaded eyes. He forced a grin to his tight lips.

"I wish they'd show up soon, if they're a-headin' this way," he said. "I never knowed till now there could be so much misery in jest waitin' round for hell to break loose!"

A slow, tolerating smile broke across Tuck's handsome tanned face.

"The odds are nine to one against Larado headin' out this way, Lon," he replied. "This would probably be the last route he'd pick on, anyhow. It's the tightest trap of the lot. I reckon Larado knows he'd have a tight squeeze to get through here. Besides, the sarge figured it out as a safe spot to break in a raw recruit. He's only aimin' to ease you in, Lon. If we hear shootin' in one of the other draws, we're expected to show up there pronto. We might run into the tail end of some action."

Hot blood rushed to Lon's face. Honestly he tried to agree with Ser-

giant Cullem's policy in posting him at the least important position. It was impossible for him to imagine that Tuck might be sharing his post for the same reason.

Fiercely his grip tightened on the rifle barrel. Inching himself up cautiously, he looked down over the rim of the ledge, shading his eyes against the sun. Suddenly, he tensed, grew rigid, watching a tenuous wraith of dust rising down beyond the turn in the draw, to the right. It was possible that a whirlwind had gathered the dust, but it was becoming late in the day for whirlwinds. The yellow smudge was lazing upward, elongated, as though a number of horsemen were ascending the canyon at a very slow pace. Slowly the dust thinned and settled. No more appeared. He scanned the barren slopes of the gorge for several minutes. Finally he looked across at his comrade, meeting Tuck's amused, nonchalant gaze.

"Imagine you're seein' somethin', Lon?" Tuck quizzed.

"I saw dust down yonder," Lon replied shortly. "Mebbe you ken sight 'em from where you are. You ken see further down the draw than I ken."

"I've got my ear to the ground," drawled Tuck. "I can hear 'em before they'll come into sight."

"Mebbe!" Lon grated back. "And mebbe you ken count how many they are by the sound! They made dust enough for twenty!"

A tiny exclamation of disbelief reached his ears as he turned once more to watch. He failed to see his companion climbing noiselessly. Abruptly he heard the other's in-drawn gasp.

Turning his face, Lon saw Tuck clinging hand and toe to the shelving side of the big rock, bareheaded and peering over the top of his nat-

ural breastwork. But Tuck's gaze was not directed down the draw. He was looking toward a towering pinnacle of rock whose steeped summit was visible from Lon's position. The crag stood more than half a mile away. Rising from a lower elevation, it reared to a height which compelled them to look at it.

TUCK'S expression was enigmatic. Slowly he was flattening himself down on the boulder, as if to prevent his movement from attracting attention. Then quickly he slid to the ground.

Looking across at Lon, he spoke in a warning whisper.

"Flatten down in the shadow! They're sendin' a lookout to the top of that peak. He can spot us, if we don't lay quiet!"

Tuck continued speaking in a low-voiced, grumbling tone as Lon flattened down into a thin strip of shade.

"The top of that peak, yonder, is where we'd ought to have been watchin' from," he argued. "We could 'a' sighted 'em when they started up this gulch—"

"But we wouldn't 'a' been in no position to stop 'em from there," Lon objected.

"Fat chance we'll have to stop 'em, if they outnumber us eight to one!" growled Tuck. "Let 'em get into this gap between us, and we'll be cooned proper. The sarge wasn't usin' his head when he put us into this kind of a trap!"

Lon wagged his head. He didn't doubt that Tuck was right. It wasn't customary for any one to doubt the judgment and courage of a Tucker. But Lon did not feel qualified to criticize Sergeant Cullem's orders.

"But we couldn't hold 'em back from up yonder on that peak," he re-

peated doggedly. "Here's where we've gotta stop 'em. We've gotta keep 'em backed down this chute till we get help."

They waited, sweltering, their nerves on edge, using only their ears to inform them of the Larado gang's movements. The sun slipped behind the purpled range in the distance.

"Mebbe they're a-waitin' till it gets dark," Lon wheezed at last from his strained position.

He was silenced by the other's warning hiss. Presently he heard the muffled thudding of hoofs that were steadily approaching up the draw. He lifted his head and peered down over his low barrier of rocks. Two hundred yards distant, a bend in the draw cut off his view.

"Tuck, I wish you'd see if you ken ketch sight of 'em," he entreated nervously.

Then he perceived that his comrade was already climbing up to look.

For only an instant, Tuck clung to the sloping side of the large boulder, gazing down over it, then he gave a coughing gasp and dropped back to the ledge just as the crackling report of a rifle echoed down the bald mountainside from their rear. A puff of rock dust had spurted in Tuck's face. From up behind them somewhere, a second rifle shot barked spitefully as the harassed Ranger squirmed along a narrow shelf. Tuck was trying to get under cover.

Evidently the rear attackers had climbed along the backbone of the ridge, in advance of Larado's party. The cunning bandit leader had sent scouts ahead on foot to clear the pass, if possible. It accounted for the long delay in the gang's advance. Desperate riders were now charging up the draw to sweep its rock walls with a searching spray of lead.

A cold, paralyzing chill gripped Lon's muscles. For seconds that seemed minutes, he struggled to break the shock that held him powerless to move. He looked down at Tucker who had dropped into the bottom of the narrow chute from the opposite bank. Tuck was trying to climb the wall directly beneath him. Lon inched forward, reached down over the ledge, and finally got hold of his partner's wrist. Making a desperate heave, the climber gained the ledge, unstrapped the rifle from his back and stretched out, panting.

With a calculating glance up the gulch, Tuck remarked:

"Reckon them two hornets up yonder can't reach us here—without they cross over to that bald slope. They're on this side, but we're too close under the bluff for 'em——"

"Here comes the band!" chattered Lon. He was thrusting his rifle over a saddle in rim rock.

Larado's raiders were rounding the bend, two abreast. Lon was counting instinctively, counting as he had counted cattle a thousand times.

**F**OURTEEN horsemen were in sight, and more were following. With the gun butt against his shoulder, Lon felt as if he were being crushed by a dead weight. Cold perspiration moistened his palms. With a shudder of desperation, he drew the gun sights down on one of the advancing leaders. An involuntary impulse made him jerk the rifle muzzle up just as his tensed finger pulled the trigger.

Then his shoulder was violently yanked by Vern Tucker.

"You blasted fool!" Tuck hissed in his ear. "We're in for it now! We could 'a' ducked into this side draw and let 'em get by. Now they'll smoke us out."

As the advancing column of horsemen halted abruptly, Lon faced his companion. With a sinking shock, he stared into Tuck's pale twisting features. Something oozed out of Lon, leaving him limp, as he read the stark fright in the other's eyes. Crashing rifle shots drowned out his hoarse groan of dismay.

Rock dust stung his face as bullets glanced and whined.

"Tuck!" he shrieked, in hysterical entreaty.

Suddenly his comrade released his shoulder. After glancing frantically from side to side, Vern Tucker commenced crawling up the narrow water gash which cut back into the bluffs. The deep crevice terminated—or appeared to lose itself—among ranks of wind-sculptured pillars and fluted ledges.

"T-u-c-k!" Lon moaned, in a last hopeless entreaty.

Vern Tucker paused only long enough to bestow on him a wrath-provoked, panic-ridden glance. "It's your funeral!" he chattered back. "You started it. See if you can dish it out!"

Choked with a sense of utter loss and futility, Lon acted mechanically. Again he found himself looking over his rifle at the suddenly charging file of riders. A hopeless sort of apathy displaced his despair. A numbing sense of fatality steadied him. Nothing mattered. Dulled, emotionless, he brought his sights down on the near leader of the mounted column. For all he felt, he might have been aiming at a wooden target.

He saw his first victim lurch from the saddle. He repeated without pause. His next shot registered. He was cutting them down. A retaliating barrage crashed and roared in his ears. Horses and riders were lunging together, becoming embroiled in the narrow chute between

the steep rock walls. Lon went on pumping lead, listlessly and without a tremor as rock splinters lacerated his face, his hands and shoulders. Fragments of smattered-out bullets ripped his shirt, seared his flesh, and still his eyes, his hands and his arms continued to serve him.

An embroiled mêlée went on down in the gorge. Riders ceased firing back while they strove to untangle their horses and to subdue several riderless mounts that were wildly plunging. They were crowding each other back.

A lull in the crescendoing barrage was abruptly punctuated by a shrill yell from Vern Tucker.

Lon jerked his head around to see his deserting comrade clinging to a rocky shelf. As he watched, he saw Tuck drop limply to a lower ledge and roll out of sight. Lon wheeled about and faced directly across the gulch. He saw a rifle barrel resting over a small boulder and part of the gunman's anatomy behind it. He ducked just before the rifle belched forth its message to him.

One of the rear attackers had crossed the gulch during the mêlée. Evidently he had picked Tuck off the background, supposing that the latter had been climbing into a better position for sniping at the riders. Lon answered the sharpshooter with his revolver. The man could not entirely conceal himself.

**F**IERCELY the duel raged until the fellow across the gulch made a dash for cover. Then Lon slipped down and started scrambling up the crevice to look for Tuck.

Where his companion had started to climb, he found the other rifle. Seizing the gun, he turned to face the bald slope across which his recent ambusher was still running. His shot fell low. It caught the runner's



underpinning. The man stumbled, plunged, and commenced rolling down into the gulch. His rifle remained lodged in the rocks.

Lon saw that Tuck had fallen into a pocket, wounded apparently, or hurt by the fall he had taken. Dismayed, Lon perceived that there was no way for Tuck to climb out of the deep hole. The only exit was by way of another small, narrow spillway which led down into the main gulch. The outlet of that crevice was about thirty yards closer to the bend around which Larado's outfit had temporarily retreated. During the brief pause, Lon was reloading his own rifle. Tuck, who was kneeling on the sand floor of the pocket, heard the shells clicking into the chamber. Suddenly he looked up. With a bloodstained hand, he was gripping his left wrist.

For a startled second, he met Lon's eyes, then lowered his gaze. An agony of shame and self-reproach was written in his pain-racked face.

Stung by his pal's mental suffering, Lon announced quietly: "Tuck, I'll drop your rifle down, if you ken still use your right hand to shoot with."

Without looking up, the other replied gruffly: "I can do better one-handed shootin' with the .45. You'll need both rifles, mebbe."

Still without glancing up, Tuck got unsteadily to his feet and started clambering down the narrow cut. His clumsy actions gave Lon the impression of watching a drunken man, staggering heedlessly into the path of certain destruction.

Hugging both rifles, Lon rushed back to his nest of boulders overlooking the floor of the gulch. He knew that the threatening calm presaged some new strategy on the part of Larado. The bandit leader was not fool enough to hold back much

longer, since the first flurry of shooting had probably carried a message of distress to the ears of other Ranger outposts.

The delay was crushingly explained to Lon almost as soon as he had crawled back into his former position. A long, knife-edged spur slanted down into the gorge from the opposite side, terminating beyond the bend behind which the raiders had taken refuge. The rib-spur sloped steeply up to the summit of the divide. Directly opposite Lon, the slanted lava dike frowned down from a height which obliged him to crane his neck and look up sharply when a bullet fanned his head and a rifle barked down from that elevation. Another bullet burned his back as he huffed forward against the rocks. The range was murderous. He couldn't sight the riflemen who continued to fire in quick succession.

Death whined close to him as he squirmed down into the crevice and backed up it, bullets feeling for him inch by inch to the spiteful tune of rifles. They had him bottled up. It was only a matter of seconds. The crevice furnished scant shelter. He was forced back until he could not see into the main gulch at all. And he heard a yell from one of his hidden assailants. It was a signal to the riders meaning that the pass was cleared.

**S**OMETHING like a sledgehammer blow hit Lon's chest. He spun into a dizzy, backward fall. The sky appeared to be falling down on him as he stared upward. Convulsively he turned over onto his face and clawed his way along the partly sheltering bank.

Dully his ears picked up a new storm of gunfire that seemed to be

centering down the gulch. He had forgotten that Tuck was down there. And now a grim, silent grin of applause stretched his bloodless lips apart. In another instant, he remembered that his recent assailants were in a position to shoot down at Tuck from their high perch.

Tuck had gotten back his nerve—had crawled down there to die fighting. A terrible urge to do something took hold of Lon. Maybe he could sight the sharpshooters up there. Their attention was withdrawn from him now. They had seen him fall like a dead man. With a terrible effort, he dragged himself around, reached his rifle, worked his sagging back up against the higher side of the crevice. Up on the lava rib, he saw something move—a man's head and shoulders. Then he perceived two men. In his swimming gaze, they seemed to be suspended from the sky. He drew his knees up and rested the rifle over them. Then he braced his elbow and raised the gun. It seemed to weigh a hundred pounds. Under the tremendous exertion, his sight cleared.

The sharpshooters were concentrating on Tuck now. To Lon, it seemed as if it was taking him an hour to get his sights—to pull a bead on one of the snipers. Finally he pressed the trigger. He blinked to clear his eyes, and then he could see only one man up on the lava spur. The remaining rifleman hadn't seen his companion fall, and the blaring gun thunder from the gorge had drowned the sound of the shot. Stonily, Lon drew down on the survivor. The fellow's head and shoulders slipped out of sight.

Still the chattering bursts of gunfire echoed up the draw. Lon's dulling ears picked up the noise as from a great distance. Hazily he wondered how long it would take the

bandit crew to clear the pass of its lone defender. His tired brain lapsed into a blank.

He was brought out of his coma by a sudden pandemonium of yells and shooting. He didn't know how long he had been out of it all, but he did know that the new medley of noise indicated the arrival of Ranger reinforcements. The racket abated as abruptly as it had begun. Again Lon slipped off into a semidream—a half world in which the external impression of men's voices and hoofbeats receding into the distance were mingled with strange hallucinations.

He did not become clearly aware of his surroundings until the crazily dancing stars began to attract his attention. He was staring up at the sky. It was dark, and he was being carried with a painful swaying and jerking motion. Presently he realized that he was riding on an improvised blanket stretcher. The unsteady clumping of boots over rough ground, the rattle of rolling rocks, the low-voiced orders exchanged between his carriers, and the conversation between others, apprised him that a considerable number of his companions were on foot, others riding and leading horses.

He recognized the voice of Corporal Crane, speaking to a trooper who was between the poles of the stretcher, in front.

"Yep, it's sure breakin' Larado's heart," came the corporal's short, clipped words between intervals of rough going. "He figures there was only one lone Ranger a-holdin' off his whole crew durin' the whole mess."

"It's plumb puzzlin' why Tuck and Lon didn't stick together," chimed in a second speaker whom Lon recognized as Private Lew Manning. "They must 'a' stood turns at fightin' the gang single-handed."

CONVERSATION halted while Lon was carefully conveyed across a narrow barranca. Then Corporal Crane remarked.

"Reckon it must be that one of them didn't join into the fracas till the other got disabled."

"Sure looks that way," Manning replied. "Question is, which one of 'em held back at the start?"

"Aw, what the devil!" grunted the corporal. "They'll probably neither of 'em tell—even if they do both pull through. If one of 'em fell down at the start, he made a good showin' in the end, anyhow!"

As weak as he was, Lon felt a surge of gratitude on hearing the corporal's last remark. But Private Manning's next comment filled him with dismay.

"Mebbe so," said Manning, "but Captain Laramie will sure wanta get to the bottom of it. If both the lads pull through, one of 'em'll be put on the promotion list, most likely. The Old Man'll wanta know which one of 'em stuck to his guns at the start."

Lon choked with a strangling cough. His bearers stopped. Somebody held him up so that he could breathe. He was given a few sips of water with a weak portion of whisky.

"T-u-c-k?" he finally managed to gasp. "Is—he—bad?"

"Probably better off than you are, lad," Corporal Crane answered kindly. "The boys are carryin' him just ahead of us. Take it easy now. We'll strike the road pretty pronto. Then we'll get you both to headquarters in a hurry. We've sent on ahead for a rig."

"Larado?" Lon queried.

"Him and the remains of his crew are bein' escorted to the barracks," said Crane. "And he's one loco

hombre. You two rookies sure had him buffaloe'd. This has been a great day for Captain Laramie's Rangers!"

Lon could make no reply. The trip to headquarters was accomplished after repeated delays, torturing jolts and stretches of slow travel of which Lon was only semiconscious between periods of forgetfulness.

Lying in the barrack's dispensary, clinging hard to life during the weeks that followed, he often relived in imagination the encounter with Larado's raiders. He didn't know that in his delirious ravings, he called out repeatedly to his comrade, and that there was always a beseeching quality in the tone he used when calling for Tuck.

Word of his delirious talk leaped out to members of his company. The Rangers gave it an interpretation which was damaging to Vern Tucker. When Lon began to get a grip on his faculties, he had no knowledge of what he had revealed.

Tuck, who had received a severe head wound, was up and walking about while Lon was still a worn shadow of his former self. He was allowed to visit Lon frequently, and he talked a good deal about the experiences they had shared before joining the Rangers. He seemed to avoid any reference to their stand against Larado's gang. Lon often noticed a puzzled, strained look about his eyes. And Lon was not aware that Tuck was receiving cool treatment by the other troopers. Frequently he gained the impression that Tuck wanted to say something, but could not quite reach the point.

It was two weeks after first noticing his friend's strained behavior that Lon discovered the cause of the trouble. Tuck couldn't remember—

couldn't remember a single event of that day, nor of several days prior to it.

Lon sat up abruptly when he heard that. He was getting his strength back now.

"What did happen that day, Lon?" Tuck begged, his expression miserable with doubt. "I can't get hardly a word out of any of the men. They only say that one of us must have held off the Larado outfit single-handed. What makes 'em say that we couldn't 'a' been together at the start?" Tuck entreated, eying Lon with a shade of distrust.

Lon sensed that Tuck was helplessly placing him upon his honor to tell the truth. He could see that Tuck believed that one of them had lost his nerve at the outset of the encounter with Larado. Throbbing in Lon's chest was a shielding pity for the pal whom he had idolized. Wanly, he grinned.

"Tuck, I was scared plumb stiff when that whole army charged up the draw at us," he said. "You'd already crossed to my side of the gulch, 'cuz they had you spotted from the rear. Seein' I was plain paralyzed, Tuck, you took a long chance on makin' me come to life. You left me both rifles and went down to meet 'em, so's to divide their fire. That was how you plumb forced me to cover you till you got down to where you could make another stand—"

"Lon, did I do that?" the other broke in, brightening eagerly.

Lon snorted as though provoked. "I don't see how any of the Rangers can't figure it out!" he declared. "I jest had to turn the gang back for you, of course. Lucky the draw was so narrow that they got all mixed up.

"But a couple of 'em climbed the

ridge and began smokin' me out in the meantime," Lon added thoughtfully. "They backed me away and figured they had the pass cleared. Only, you was waitin' for the others when they charged again. That's why Larado figured that one man held him off by changin' positions. Only the pair that climbed the spur saw the two of us. And I reckon I finished both of them, finally, while they was tryin' to drill you."

"Lon, is that straight?" the other demanded gladly.

"I'm telling you what happened!" Lon replied gruffly. "I'll tell it to Captain Laramie, too. Though I ain't very proud of my side of it."

Tuck reached out and grasped his bony hand. Lon returned the warm grip, looking squarely into his pal's glad eyes.

And yet Lon's knees were wobbly from other causes than weakness when, one bright morning, he was ordered to report at the captain's office. The rugged campaigner was seated behind the flat, unvarnished desk. His bristling, iron-gray mane, with its short pompadour in front and snuggling tightly over his prominent cheek bones gave his seasoned oak-brown face a fiercer look than when he wore a hat. Lon saluted and stood uneasily at attention. Aware that he was still on the invalid list, his commander considerably gestured him toward a chair.

"Before I commend your action at Brightstone Gap, I want to ask you a few questions, Private Carew," Captain Laramie began. "Sergeant Cullem gave me the particulars as far as he could. He indicated the positions that you and Tucker were stationed to hold. I went out and looked over the ground myself.

First, I want to know why Tucker crossed over to your side of the gulch."

**T**HOUGH determined to shield his friend, Lon felt that he was safe in truthfully explaining how Tuck's first position had been under an attack from the rear. Straightforwardly, he outlined events up until Larado's riders had made their first advance. Grim-faced but firmly, he confessed that he had been scared helpless when confronted by fourteen desperate gunmen.

"You were left with both rifles when Tucker went to make his stand farther down the gulch," the captain broke in. "Why did he let you keep his rifle?"

"So's I could fire more rounds without stoppin' to reload," Lon declared, unconsciously frowning.

"Wasn't Tucker careless to take chances on revolver range when the attackers were using rifles?" Laramie demanded.

"Well, no, sir," Lon hesitated. "He figured he could do better one-handed shootin' with his .45s."

"That's possible," his superior agreed. "The back of his wrist was shattered by a bullet. Did that happen before he climbed up to your position?"

"No, sir," replied Lon, suspecting that the captain realized Tuck's inability to make the climb, thus crippled.

"And you've already said that your position was safe from rear attack," the chief reminded him. "When was Tucker shot in the wrist?"

"After he left me, sir," Lon answered, perceiving that he had hit a snag. "You see, he had to climb up first, before he could get down the

lower gully. By that time, one of the pair in back of us had climbed across to the opposite slope. The buzzard took a crack at Tuck. I brushed him out before I went up to see if Tuck was bad hurt. Tuck was makin' out all right. And he told me to use his rifle."

Lon felt his props weakening dangerously.

"Carew," the captain demanded, stony-eyed, "are you sure you hadn't already found his rifle, right where he started to climb? Remember, I've seen the ledge he fell from. And I don't think he tossed his rifle up to you from the twenty-foot hole he landed in!"

"Yes, sir," Lon admitted, "he left the rifle where he started to climb. I reckon he'd unslung it, trying to sight the feller that was poppin' at him from across the main gulch. But he was short of time, so he must 'a' dropped the rifle and climbed."

Captain Laramie's lips tightened suspiciously. "Yes, that should explain his droppin' the gun," he agreed, regarding Lon without a flicker. "But there's a slantin' gully in the bluffs, just above the ledge that Tucker fell from. It leads to the top. Do you think he might 'a' had an idea of climbin' out that way?"

When Lon had faced fourteen armed assailants, panic had seized him, then desperation had made him steady as rock. Now his gaze was as firm as rock while he faced his superior and replied:

"No, sir, I ain't thinkin' that! You went over the ground afterwards, sir. You had time to figure out plenty of moves we might 'a' made. But Tuck and me didn't have time to do no such fine figurin'!"

Under Captain Laramie's penetrating stare, Lon maintained his frozen visage.

**F**INALLY the captain gave a short snort of agreement. You've given me to understand that you were scared stiff," the veteran commander acknowledged. "And that Private Tucker forced you into action by taking a double risk upon himself. Is that right?"

"Yes, sir," Lon admitted, dropping his gaze. "Tuck could see that I was plumb paralyzed."

He couldn't bring himself to look up again as Captain Laramie went on: "All right, Carew, you force me to open your service record with a black mark. You're guilty of next to the worst offense that a Ranger can commit. I'm sorry, but a second one of its kind will mean your discharge. That's all now."

Lon rose unsteadily to his feet. He felt the blood draining from his

pinched face. Confronting the captain, he saluted.

"I'm right sure it won't happen again, sir," he said, looking straight into Laramie's steel-gray eyes. "Reckon I won't be so scared the next time."

"Scared?" the old campaigner quizzed, lifting his bushy brows. "Carew, you're not being reprimanded for cowardice. I'm chalking you up as the poorest liar on the force! Mind you, that's my private opinion."

"S-sir?" Lon stammered.

A hint of keen understanding and sympathy twinkled in the "Old Man's" stern eyes as he added: "Just consider yourself and Private Tucker both lucky that I can't prove you're a liar! Now, vamose! Before you report to me the next time, be sure you've rehearsed your lines better!"



#### THE SAME OLD CRY

**I**F it isn't land, it is something else. Always the glutton tries to outeat the weaker one. Somehow, there seems to be no end of things to complain about, if that is the way you look at life. Why back in 1885, the small ranch owner had his wail which is expressed in the following, taken from a paper of that date:

"The cattlemen are becoming arrogant. They seem to think they own the land on which their herds are feeding and that they have a right to drive out those whom they do not desire. Many cattlemen do not own a foot of ground in Montana. Others own just a few acres along some water-course. They do not pay rent for the land they use. And yet they crowd small settlers to the wall with their few cattle and sheep. They conceal the true agricultural value of the land. They do not provide employment for any considerable number of people. They try to control politics and escape their fair share of taxation. They are intolerant of opposition and take the law in their own hands. It is time they were made to understand that the home builders are the real developers of this country and entitled to rights which the railways and the cowboys must respect."

# DANGER FIGHTER



By H. C. WIRE  
Author of "The Gold Bonanza," etc.

**T**HE little mountain school had been dismissed for the day. There were no children in the yard and the flag had been hauled down from the white pole in front of the square log building. It was late, and whoever taught here should have been gone by this time. But the door was still open.

These things Art Lane considered as he pulled his dun cow pony to a halt in the pine trees and stared across the circular clearing. He had come upon the school unexpectedly—the first habitation he had approached in three days' riding

through this high forest of the Sabino Range.

He had been told to avoid all towns and ranches if possible, and get deep into the Sabino country before any one saw from what direction he had come; for in Art Lane's shirt pocket beneath his leather windbreaker was a year-old John Doe warrant, and the outlaw he was looking for was a killer, ruthless and cold-blooded.

Aside from this, there was little that he knew about the man who had so craftily evaded the law for a solid year. He would be using a saddle familiar to the border, per-

haps—double-cinched and with a snub horn. Witnesses to the bank robbery and killing for which he was wanted said he was not old, and that he had grabbed his leg once as if wounded. It was little enough, yet Art Lane had followed his clues with a quiet, steady confidence. "It's like this," he said sometimes. "The arm of the law is mighty long. A man thinks he gets away. But sooner or later it'll reach him."

In looks Art Lane himself would pass as a youngster, a drifting cowboy, lean and saddle-toughened, with hair and skin and eyes all of the same dark-brown color. But in experience he had already lived a lifetime. Danger and trouble were things he had been born into, and whether he wanted it or not, trouble had filled his years ever since. He knew the ins and outs of range wars and the constant intrigues of the border strip. Along with this he knew horses and cattle, and most important of all, in his job just now, he knew men.

His dun pony shifted on tired feet.

"All right, boy," Art told him. "We'll camp. Maybe that door has only blown open."

His first thought on seeing the school had been that it would be a good stopping place for the night. There was a stable between himself and the building where he'd find hay for his pony. Water trickled into a trough at one end.

He gave pressure with his knees and moved out soundlessly into the clearing. As he approached behind the shed, the schoolhouse was hidden from his sight—and likewise he could not be seen if any one happened to be in there. Long habit made him suspicious of anything not quite as it should be, even so small a thing as an open door with the room behind it unlighted.

Slipping off the bridle, he said quietly, "Drink, boy." But the dun stood with its head up, ears fixed. It was then that Art realized there was another animal in the shed. Sound of a horse tonguing the rowel of a bit came faintly through the log wall.

He slipped his bridle back on again, buckled it, and then with one hand resting on the ivory butt of a .38, he stepped close to the logs.

**A**T a crack, he peered through. On the side toward the schoolhouse, the stable was open, letting in plenty of light for him to see the stalls. Two horses, saddled and bridled, stood inside!

His squinting gaze had hardly covered them—a little smoky roan and a tall black—when a movement up toward the school building jerked his eyes that way. A man and a girl were in the entrance. The girl turned, closed the door, locked it; then they came on side by side, and instantly Art Lane knew there was nothing companionable in their walking together.

The man towered above the girl, huge in comparison to her small figure. He leaned over her, his mouth working. There was argument and threat in every move he made.

She came on, marching like a little soldier, Art thought, hearing the fellow but outwardly paying no attention. She wore brown riding breeches and brown boots. A gay orange-colored sweater shaped the neat lines of her body, and, as she came nearer, he saw fair hair running softly beneath the wide brim of her hat. She could not be more than twenty.

As they reached the shed, the man's rumbling voice ceased. In the twilight his tanned face looked almost black, and was covered with a thick stubble of dark beard. The girl's lips parted. Without looking



at him, she said, "You don't dare! Now that's all I've got to say."

She lifted one hand to her saddle horn. The man grabbed it—and just then the dun horse at Art Lane's back nudged him impatiently. The bit chain rattled. Inside the shed the man's voice snapped, "What's that?"

Promptly Art dropped his reins and stepped around to the open front side. "Howdy, folks?" His voice was easy, casual. "School out? I was just giving my nag a drink."

With a heavy lunging step the man came toward him. "And what else, huh? Who the devil are you?"

Art eyed him. "That's tough talk in the presence of a lady, brother." He gave the girl a glance. "If you'll ride off a little, I'll answer in his own language."

She didn't speak. Her right hand still gripped the saddle horn, the knuckles white from the tension of her fingers. Fear had widened her blue eyes and had made her face into a set bloodless mask.

Without fully seeing it, Art knew the man's fist had doubled. Next instant the blow came smashing upward, a drive that had started far down and would have the effect of a sledge hammer if it had connected. Art twisted only his shoulders. The blow fanned past. Then his own two fists shot out in lightning jabs. One doubled the man forward, the other caught the point of his jaw and rammed him upright again.

It had happened in a split second. The man staggered, grabbing himself around the middle. Art gripped one heavy shoulder and spun him to the black horse.

"Get up there! Then get out!" He helped him with a savage shove against the saddle. His free hand dropped to the .38, for now he was taking no chances. Then he stepped

back as the man mounted, and passed a quick look over the rider's gear. Yet it was not what he had hoped to see. The saddle was single-cinched, and the rope tied at the high horn was the long one of this mountain country.

Mounted, the man turned. His left side was toward Art; his right hand and gun were hidden.

With his thin-lipped mouth suddenly curling, he snarled. "You——"

That was as far as he got. Art slapped the horse's flank. The rider's head snapped back and he bit the words off. Both his hands grabbed leather to hold himself in the saddle as the animal took one tremendous lunge and went bucking across the clearing.

WHEN they vanished in the pines, Art faced the girl. She was standing slack against her roan pony. Her lips were parted and her breath was as quick as if she herself had been fighting.

"Friend of yours?" he asked. "If he is, I'm sorry. But I didn't like him much."

She straightened. "He is not a friend of mine! How did you happen to be here?"

"That's it," Art said. "Just happened. I was watering my horse, as I said, and heard talk that sounded like trouble." His eyes held her blue ones. "Was it?"

Before she answered, her gaze swept him from cow-puncher's hat down past his windbreaker, blue jeans and boots, and he was glad that those blue eyes could not probe through leather and see his deputy sheriff's badge—for a quick suspicion had come into them.

When she spoke, it was not in answer to his question. "Who are you?" she demanded. "I've never

seen you before. What is it you want, work?"

Art grinned. "If that's an offer for a job, I'll accept! And I think it's a bodyguard you need."

Color deepened in her tanned cheeks, and for an instant her eyes brightened. Then sternly she shook her head, as if to put down any emotion. "Thanks." She turned to her roan pony.

Art took a step toward her and touched her arm. "Wait a minute. I had figured on camping here tonight, but if there's a ranch close I'll go on and get my horse a good feed and myself a meal. Will you show me?"

Her hand dropped from the saddle horn as she faced him. "Jeff Morgan's place isn't far. I live there. But you'd better not go. If you really are a stranger and don't know what you're doing, take my advice and stay out of sight. Then to-morrow get clear out of the Sabino range."

"Why?"

"Because," she said, "any unknown rider in this country isn't safe a minute." Again she turned from him and this time swung up lightly into her saddle.

Art went to his dun, mounted, and was back beside the girl as she left the shed.

"I told you——" she began.

"Dangerous country," he broke in, "always did make me curious."

They moved into the dim park of the forest and rode for a time without speaking. The girl kept her face straight to the front, and sat with her whole body too tense and rigid. Riding along close to her stirrup, Art Lane knew well enough that it was not curiosity that made him want to go with her—it was the girl herself.

His eyes were fixed upon her when

she turned suddenly and stared at him. "What is your name?"

"Art Lane," he told her. It was safe to tell that much. He had not been in the sheriff's office a year ago when the bank robbery and killing had happened. "And are you a Morgan?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No; Lee. Caroline Lee. I only live at Jeff Morgan's place because it's nearest the school. Her glance touched his equipment expertly—the blanket rolled in a black slicker behind his saddle, the .38 in his holster, the well-worn spurs on his scuffed boots. When her eyes came back to his, he saw again the narrowed look of suspicion. "You've either come far," she said, "or you have been hiding here in the Sabino Mountains. I don't think you are as ignorant as you pretend."

FOR a moment Art said nothing. He wanted to feel his way slowly. It was still not too late to turn back. But the vague clues he had been following all led into this high, isolated range, and he felt now that whatever had happened here, might be laid to the man he wanted. Crime becomes a habit; or one crime breeds another. The best thing seemed for him to ride on to the ranch and look Jeff Morgan's men over.

Abruptly he said, "I'm not pretending anything. What's wrong?"

"You mean," she asked, "you don't know that Morgan's foreman was killed last week, bringing a pay roll for the round-up crew? You aren't an officer of some kind?"

So that was it! Art met her stare levelly. "Do I look like one? But suppose I was, I'd think if a murder and robbery had been committed up here, you'd be glad to have the law come in. Why not?"

She looked away from him. Her face was set, frozen. "There are times," she said, "when the law only makes things worse—even in times of murder."

Riding on in silence, Art tried to figure it out. Jeff Morgan's foreman had been robbed of a pay roll and killed. Yet the law wasn't wanted. It came to him suddenly that it was this girl who didn't want the law. She was protecting some one.

The canyon sides flanking them narrowed into a short throat, swung apart abruptly, and an oval meadow lay beyond. Darkness had deepened. Off on his left Art saw lighted windows, then he made out the blocklike shapes of buildings, and, touching spurs to his dun as the girl started forward, he loped into the sprawling headquarters of a great ranch.

A dozen or more horses were in the corrals, and up toward the house he saw the forms of as many men.

At the open doorway of a stable, Caroline swung off. When he rolled down beside her, she handed him her reins, asking, "Will you unsaddle for me? Then come on up. Supper's ready, I suppose, but I'll warn you it will be no better than your own cooking. Jeff Morgan isn't here. The cowhands have been taking turns in the kitchen."

"Looks like a sizable crew," Art offered, nodding toward the dim gathering of figures.

"Yes; they've just finished beef round-up. They're waiting——" The break in her sentence was very short, yet Art Lane caught it. "They're waiting," she finished, "for Morgan to come back."

Then she moved away quickly, and, as he watched her melt into the ranch-house group, he knew why she had asked him to unsaddle. She

wanted to talk to some of them, or one of them, before he got there.

He was glad she did. A dozen saddles would be racked inside this stable. Swiftly he pulled the gear from his dun and the roan pony, tied the animals in vacant stalls, then groped back to the equipment that made a solid line on a log horse.

His hands passed over the horns of each saddle, felt under the skirts for the rings and straps of each cinch. It was the last one in the row that stopped him dead still. He rubbed his palm over a flat snub horn, reached and found the double cinch and the hog-snout guards on the stirrups. This saddle was from the brush country of the border strip.

Satisfied, and with a slow steady tension coming into every nerve of his body, he started toward the house. He would eat supper to-night with a killer!

THE meal was already in progress. Entering a door that had been left open, he stood in a huge, low-ceilinged room, lighted only by one lamp in the middle of a long rectangular table. His hat, gun belt and holsters were in the shed with his saddle. But the .38 was shoved into the top of his blue jeans against his body, out of sight beneath the leather jacket.

Quick stares from men on the opposite side of the table covered him as he entered. Some of the men nearest him turned their heads. The business of eating went on without interruption.

From the far end Caroline Lee said, "The name is Art Lane."

Again quick stares lifted, and one or two of the cowhands muttered, "Howdy?" A few nodded. Most of them did nothing about it.

There was a vacant place at the end nearest Art, with a plate turned

upside down. That would be the owner's seat, waiting for Jeff Morgan to return. Art avoided it, stepped to another vacancy cornering this one on the left, and pulled out the chair. As he sat down he realized that this had once been occupied by a man who would sit here no more—the murdered top hand.

Mechanically an arm farther down the table reached out and skidded a platter of fried meat and fried potatoes along the smooth oil-cloth toward him. Filling his plate, Art managed at the same time to sweep a glance over the opposite row of faces. Upon entering he had picked out the dark-bearded fellow of the schoolhouse meeting. He sat second from the girl. Between this man and Caroline was a good-looking redhead who caught Art's shifting glance in a sudden stab of smoldering blue eyes. The look was as direct and hard as a blow, and in that moment Art Lane had an answer to one question.

He was sure of it when the girl stood up, went to the kitchen, and came back behind his chair with a pot of coffee—for the red-headed cowboy had jerked his eyes away and followed her out and back again. They were upon her now as she reached over Art's shoulder and filled his cup. That boy was in love with her. Then he was the one she was shielding!

She left the pot on the table. The meal continued, tense, wordless, until the jangle of a telephone sounded in the charged air of the room.

Before any one else could move, Caroline Lee again rose and turned quickly to an instrument on the wall. "Yes," she said. "Yes, all right."

Every man had looked up. A dozen pairs of eyes questioned her when she came back.

"He has just left Sanford's," she announced. "He'll be here around midnight."

An odd sense of relief came into the room, Art thought, at this news. Men relaxed a little—all except the dark one and the redhead down at the girl's end of the table. Cautiously he watched them.

Both seemed intent upon finishing the meal and sat bent over their plates, eating rapidly. But once Art caught a side twist of the lips in the bearded face and he knew a whispered word had been passed to the boy. The youngster's hand stopped dead still above his plate. His mouth tightened. For an instant, his whole body went rigid. And now his eyes no longer met the girl's. They avoided her.

She sat looking at him, trying to make him look up. She had put down her knife and fork, and her right hand was doubled into a solid little fist on the table top.

In a moment the man pushed back his chair, casually drew tobacco from his coat pocket and strolled along the table, making a cigarette. Art appeared to pay no attention. The man came behind him, paused. Down the table, the boy's eyes lifted, dropped quickly, and Art Lane did not need to look around to know that the fellow behind him had given some kind of signal.

**T**HE screen door opened and slammed shut. Very soon the boy rose and followed outside. He still had not looked at the girl.

None of the other men seemed aware of the secret game that was being played here. After the telephone news, low-voiced talk had sprung up. Now one by one the crew finished eating, rolled their smokes, and sauntered out into the

night until only Art Lane and Caroline Lee were left in the room.

Art stood up and began to gather the plates. "Grub liner," he said, "always does the dishes."

"No, don't bother." Caroline rose quickly. "Please! I'd rather you wouldn't."

He faced her, the stacked plates in his hands. "Tell me," he said, and his voice was as casual as if he were asking the time of day. "Which of those two fellows at your end of the table killed the ranch foreman?"

"Which——" The words choked off. She stood with lips parted, staring at him, her cheeks drained white. "You mean," she gasped, "you know that——"

"I know now," Art answered.

Suddenly she came toward him. It was like the leap of an aroused mountain cat. Her hands were clenched. For an instant, he thought she was going to strike him.

Her eyes blazed. "Then you *are* an officer! You lied to me! You, you——"

"Suppose," Art said quietly, "we go on with the dishes."

He turned, carrying the plates. The kitchen was dark. Only the glow reflected from the dining-room lamp showed him the position of a stove, table, and sink. Over the sink was an open window, and, reaching it, he looked out toward the shapes of bunk houses, sheds and corrals across the ranch yard.

Next instant he put the plates down on the drainboard and thrust his head into the opening. Light came from three windows in one long bunk shack. Close to this were two others, unlighted; beyond these the edge of timber curved in until there was left only a short space of cleared ground. He was sure a mounted man had just passed out of sight at that spot.

Squinting, bringing the shapes into sharper outline, he shifted his eyes toward the saddle shed. And now there was no doubt about what he saw.

In slow, stealthy movement a rider left the stable, vanished behind the dark bunk houses, appeared again, and melted into the deep forest.

"What are you watching?"

Art pivoted. Caroline was behind him. Before she could say more, he reached out and grabbed both her wrists.

He kept his voice low. "Look here. I didn't lie to you. I didn't say I was not an officer. I am. Now listen. This is straight talk—and you're going to be wide open with me. I don't think you know what you're doing. If that young redhead is guilty——"

"Bob isn't guilty!" She jerked at his grip, but he held her. "He isn't!" she gasped. "And if you try to take my brother, I'll——"

"Your brother!" Art echoed. He let her hands drop. "So that's why you are shielding him!" Suddenly he asked, "How long has he been on this ranch?"

"Two years."

"Never been away from it in that time?"

"No! Not farther than to town."

With a wave of relief running through him, Art looked down at the girl. She was not in love with the redhead—not the way he had thought! And if Bob Lee had worked here in the Sabino Mountains for two years, he was not the border outlaw!

CAROLINE," he asked, "what is it you are afraid of? What has your brother done, and where has he and that dark fellow gone just now?"

"Gone? You mean Bob and Jake Rath have left the ranch?" Stricken terror was in her voice.

"Two riders did," Art answered. "I couldn't make them out from here, but I'd bet on who they were."

With a gasp she spun from him, darted into the dining room. She was cranking a long ring on the telephone when he reached her. "Sanford?" she asked into the mouthpiece. "This is Caroline. Is Jimmy there? . . . No? Oh, dear. . . . No. . . . Nothing. Thanks."

She hung up, turned, and sagged against the wall. "Art Lane, you asked me to be wide open. I'm going to be. Morgan has got to be headed off! Sanford is crippled and can't ride. His boy, Jimmy, isn't home. But Morgan has got to be stopped. He's carrying four thousand dollars from his beef sale—and I know Rath is going to kill him!" Her hands darted out. Her eyes were pleading. "Art Lane, you've got to believe me! My brother has nothing to do with what has happened here, except in a little way. Rath has that on him. Bob isn't bad—only young and was taken in by Jake Rath's talk."

Art moved his hands and clasped the girl's. "What did he do, Caroline?"

"Miscounted at the calf round-up last spring, to cover the fact that Rath had rustled a bunch of Morgan calves. They planned something—I don't know what. It was crazy! I don't see what made Bob do it. Then this week the foreman was ambushed. Rath did that. Bob was nowhere around. But Rath has a hold on him, and now to-night —" Her voice choked. Desperately, she finished, "Don't you see?"

"More than you know!" Art answered. "Whose snub-horned saddle was that out in the shed?"

A jerk went through her arms. "Bob's. He traded Rath for it. Why? What does that mean? Tell me!"

"It means," said Art, "that Jake Rath is the man I want. What your brother has done is no business of mine." He released her hands. "Can you and I head Morgan off?"

"Yes!" She was already moving toward the door. In the opening she turned. "But then what about Rath?"

"Let's go," Art urged. "Leave Rath to me."

A wagon road twisted up the mountain above the ranch buildings. The girl followed it only a short distance, then swung along the slope and continued on what seemed to Art Lane a wholly unmarked route through the timber. He crowded his dun up close to her roan pony. Back in the shed he had made sure that the border saddle and the one other were missing—proof enough that Bob Lee and Jake Rath were the riders who had slipped away.

A sudden break in the pines showed the clearing and schoolhouse below on his right hand. He hadn't questioned the girl so far, but now he asked, "I'd like to know about this."

She turned her head. "It's a short cut Jimmy Sanford uses coming to school. The wagon road is twelve miles between ranches. Jimmy claims this cuts off four miles here on the upper end. We'll hit the road again and I'm sure we'll reach Morgan before he rides into whatever Rath has planned." She paused, still looking back. "You trust me, don't you?"

"If I didn't," Art answered, "I wouldn't be here. And that isn't all, Caroline. I think you're fine."

Even in the starlight, he saw color

darken her cheeks. Then she faced forward again, and they had no more time for talk.

THEY went single file along the knife edge of a ridge, plunged into a narrow canyon with rock walls so close that sometimes the horses barely crowded through, came to the canyon end. Ahead Art saw the wagon-track road.

"Caroline," he called softly.

She halted. Art rode up beside her, saying, "Wait." Then he sat listening. In the deep cut he had heard nothing save the muffled thud of their animals. Now at this abrupt end, he probed the broader canyon beyond, eyes and ears straining to catch any sign of movement there.

His word of warning to the girl had hardly been uttered when they both bent forward in their saddles, tense, rigid. A sharp clatter of rock had come from somewhere out in the darkness, too short a sound to be placed definitely. It might have come from either up or down the canyon.

Only a section of road was visible from where Art waited. The telltale sound did not come again. He was about to speak, when a gray shape seemed to detach itself from the rocks on his right and move across the opening.

Quickly the girl whispered, "That's him!" Then in the same breath she called, "Morgan! Jeff!"

The gray horse pivoted. The rider's arm flashed down and up almost before the girl could cry out, "It's Caroline!"

"What the devil!" a gruff voice asked.

"Hush," she said, moving closer. "There's a man with me, Jeff, but it's all right."

Jeff Morgan was straight, Jean, as

young-looking in figure as any of his cowhands. It wasn't until Art approached close that he saw the gray brows and gray hair under the black hat brim. And in that moment, even before he spoke, a plan that until now had been vague in his mind, was suddenly clear.

Without waiting for the girl to speak first, he introduced himself and told his mission. "The clews I've been following," he finished, "led into this country, and I'm sure now the man I want is working for you here. He's going by the name of Rath."

Jeff Morgan had crossed his hands on his saddle horn. He bent forward a little. His lean brown face was set. "You're right, young fellow, about things happening on this range to indicate we've got a killer in our midst. But knowing your man and proving his guilt are two different matters. Sheriffing," he pointed out, "was once my profession."

Art nodded. "It hasn't changed any. I need proof, and I'll get it—to-night. You're marked to meet a bullet somewhere up this road. I'm going to see who does the shooting. That will be proof of this job, and one conviction is enough." He swung to the ground. "I'm swapping horses with you, Morgan, and hats."

Both Jeff Morgan and the girl came down beside him. He heard Caroline draw a sharp breath. But it was Morgan who spoke. "What do you mean? You're going to ride ahead in my place? You can't do that! It's too big a chance."

"Big chances," Art said, "are worth taking, sometimes." And it wasn't the job he was thinking about just then. He was thinking of young Bob Lee, caught by some scatter-brained act and headed for the wild bunch—and he was thinking about this girl at his side. He took off his

tan-colored hat. "No time to lose, Morgan. And don't try to follow me. They would hear more than one horse and get suspicious."

"Art!"

He felt a hand grip his arm, and, turning, he looked down into eyes that were warm and soft in the starlight. There was pleading in them, and fear. Impulsively he circled his free arm around the girl and drew her close. He didn't speak, nor did she. Somehow, the understanding of that moment needed no words. Then he released her, pushed Jeff Morgan's black hat on his head, and swung up into the tall gray's saddle.

**F**OR half a mile the wagon road was straight, with barren rock slopes on his left hand, and the dark brush flat of the canyon floor on his right. He felt no danger here. But then he passed a lone pine, standing like a black sentinel. Soon after that, the road entered deep shadow and began to twist among gaunt trunks of the forest.

It crossed a stream, looped back again in aimless wandering, until, making a sudden bend, it vanished into the notch of a side ravine.

Art had drawn his gun, and his hand lay holding it close to his right thigh. With the gray's easy walk unchecked, he passed the bend, moved in toward the dark notch, every nerve in his body alert. One thing was in his favor—Rath and Bob Lee expected Morgan to come blundering into the trap. They were not set for a man who was fully prepared to meet them.

Whether it was sight or sound, or perhaps a flick of the gray's ears, Art never knew—the crash of a gun and his forewarned rolling from the saddle seemed to happen in the same split second. He struck the ground flat. The gray lunged from him.

Two forms slid from the rocks not twenty feet away. He lay dead still, but his right hand, doubled beneath him, had his .38 pointed at the pair.

What happened next was not in his plans. Rath was a cold-blooded killer. But to take a second shot at a man already down— He saw Rath's gun rise in level aim.

"For heaven's sake!" It was Bob Lee's voice. "You got him. Don't shoot again. Don't!"

The two were close together. Art saw Bob Lee, shorter than the man, make a grab for Rath's arm. There was the sound of a scuffle, Rath's savage snarl, then the rap of a gun striking bone. In that instant Art leaped, flinging himself across the short open space.

Rath was half turned away from him. Bob Lee had staggered back, both hands lifted to shield his head. Art Lane was upon them before either one knew that their dead man had come to life. He threw all his weight into the last step that carried him against Rath's thick side. At the same time he lashed upward with his gun barrel, caught the man a glancing blow on the jaw. Rath jerked, pivoted, trying to make a stab with his own weapon. But their bodies were too close. Art struck at the swinging wrist. The fingers relaxed, and Rath's gun fell. Giving the killer no chance, Art swung at him again, this time with a full-armed blow on the side of the head, and Jake Rath went limp and dropped like a sack of flour.

Instantly Art covered Bob Lee; then saw that even now the boy had not pulled a gun.

A wild clatter of running horses broke the moment's silence. Morgan, in the lead, with Caroline crowding behind him, swept around the bend, hauling to a sudden stop.



"Come ahead," Art called.

Rath was stirring. Quickly Art jerked the rope from his dun pony's saddle, bound the man, saying nothing while he worked. When he stood up, the first thing he did was hold out his hand to Bob Lee.

"If you hadn't made a grab for Rath's gun, I'd be dead for sure right now. Thanks." He stared into the young face. "Had enough of running with the wild bunch, Bob?"

A hard grip of the boy's hand came with his answer. "You know it!"

Art turned. He saw Caroline's eyes fastened upon him, but avoided them and spoke to Jeff Morgan.

"No use taking this prisoner to the ranch. So I'll start back with him from here."

"Sure," the ranchman agreed bluntly. "You get this business finished and then you turn in that badge of yours. Sherifing is a good job, but no future. You saved my hide and four thousand dollars to-night. I'm not offering a cash reward, but I've got plenty of range, and there'll be a start in cattle that won't cost you a cent. I'd sort of like to have you here on the Sabino. How about it?"

Lowering his eyes then, Art met the girl's, and in them found his answer. He faced Jeff Morgan, grinned, and said, "It's a go!"

**In Next Week's Issue**

*A COMPLETE NOVEL*

A cut fence in cow country is no unusual sight. Repairing them is part of a line rider's everyday job. But a fence cut in a different place on each separate strand of wire is about as rare as

**IRON GOLD**

By JOHN DUDLEY PHELPS



**SHORTY HANDLES THE LAW**

By RAY HUMPHREYS

Shorty, the Wonder Kid, could do more to get his man by basking in the sunshine than by going after him.

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### PART III.



# SQUARE OUTLAW

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

**M**ORT PATTON, a student and rancher, discovers the lost lode—silver mine of the *conquistadores*, for generations regarded as legendary. "Whispering" Calloway, an outlaw, learns of Patton's find and has one of his crowd dry-gulch Patton as he is riding alone one day with his twelve-year-old son, Denny. "Hawk" McClure, square outlaw, and his pal, "Cata-mount" Larrabee, arrive and scare off the dry-gulcher. Patton, however, is fatally wounded. Before he dies,

he confides his secret to Hawk who, pledges himself to get the treasure and split with Patton's wife and children ranging from a baby a year old to Rita, eighteen and very pretty. Denny is now the man of the Patton family.

While taking Patton's body home, the outlaws meet a man whose face is so scarred as to make him repellent. His name is Tremper, and he has escaped from an insane asylum. Years before he had known Hawk when a blow on the head had sent

Hawk to the asylum. Tremper insists that he is not wholly mad and that, in spite of his spells, he can be very useful to Hawk. He begs to be taken into Hawk's band. Realizing that the man has prodigious strength and is very quick on the draw, Hawk, who cannot help being influenced by his own experience in the asylum, decides to give the man a chance.

Recalling that they failed to obliterate a map that Patton drew on a rock in explaining the road to the lost lode, Hawk sends Catamount back to take care of it, and Hawk goes ahead with Tremper.

Hawk arrives at the Pattons, explains his sad errand and makes arrangements for neighbors to assist Mrs. Patton. Worried at Catamount's failure to return, Hawk sends Tremper to look for him and starts out for Hawk's Nest to make arrangements for seeking the lost lode.

On his way home Hawk is overtaken by Shultz, a Calloway man, who has sent to inform him that Calloway has captured Catamount and is holding him hostage until Hawk is ready to do business with Calloway. Hawk goes with Shultz to Calloway's hideout. He finds Catamount incased in a green hide vest. The vest has already shrunk considerably, and Catamount is finding it difficult to breathe, but he gamely refuses to be tortured into divulging the location of the lode. Hawk bargains for Catamount's safety and future release, but leaves secretly determined to beat Calloway to the lode.

He rests one night at the Nest, then, accompanied by Dan Moran and Jim Merritt he starts out on his trek. Jim Merritt is the scapegrace brother of the doctor who cared for Hawk at the asylum. Doctor Mer-

ritt has sent his brother to Hawk, preferring square outlawry to association with cheap city gangsters. Jim is handsome but not as courageous as he would like others to believe. Hawk finds the Calloway crowd ahead of him, and trying to ambush Rita Patton who, unknown to Hawk, started out on her own for the lode. To complicate matters Denny catches up with them. Denny insists that he has robbed a bank and is now qualified to join Hawk's band. Rita and Jim promptly fall in love.

By strategy Hawk captures the Calloway crowd and puts them in chains. One man, wounded, Hawk leaves unguarded. The Calloways get free, and Dan Moran is killed. The dynamite is accidentally discharged. It releases a stone slab that closes the way out. Hawk and his men and the Calloways are prisoners within the valley.

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE SILVER TOMB.

**H**AWK and Catamount regarded each other with serious faces. The explosion which Hawk had counted on to turn the stampede had proved a boomerang. The stampede ended abruptly, but the great rock slab chiseled by the *conquistadores* to imprison the native miners in the valley was now proving as effective in trapping modern-day men. It played no favorites—McClure men and Calloway men alike were prisoners.

"There was one jasper in the lead," Catamount said. "I wonder if he got through. A lot of good it'd do us if he did; he'd bring a flock of Calloway men. They'd come wheel-in' into the valley like buzzards."

"We'd better get back to the church," Hawk said.

They plodded back in silence, guns in hand, ready for a possible ambush. In one respect, Hawk felt he had a distinct advantage. He was well armed with rifles and six-guns. His ammunition was adequate. Calloway's men had only Jim Merritt's weapons and the ammunition in his belt. Yet, if judiciously used, it was ample to wipe Hawk's men out completely.

Rita saw them coming and opened the church door. The two men dashed in, half expecting to hear singing lead.

"Well, my powder went up," Rita said. "I heard it."

"And the slab door went down!" Hawk informed her.

"By golly!" Denny exclaimed. "That's fine! Now we can be a strange tribe of white Indians."

"That offers a better future, Denny, than an outlaw's calling," Hawk said. "How's Jim Merritt?"

"He wants to die," the girl answered.

Hawk stepped to Merritt's bedside and looked down. "Well, how goes it, Jim?"

"Let me die," Merritt answered in a weak, wretched voice. "I didn't fight back. I just quit like a rabbit that's grabbed by a coyote. Just squealed and tried to get away. Let me die, and don't even mark my grave."

"Jim, don't talk so!" Rita said sharply.

"I've dodged the truth all my life," Merritt said. "But out here I couldn't dodge it. Let me die."

Hawk inspected the wound—a vicious knife slash that had gone deep and stopped against the ribs.

"He's going to get well," Hawk informed Catamount, "and be just

that much of a burden to us. And every pound counts, if we pack him."

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose we had to retreat to some other part of the valley?" Hawk explained. "Or a situation developed where we could improve our position by a fast move?"

"I see," Catamount answered.

"What do we do now?"

"Examine that stone house. It would be like Calloway to load Grout onto us," Hawk said.

They left the church, and each carried a rifle, ready to blaze away at anything remotely suggesting danger. A further depletion of their forces would be tragic. The house was empty. Calloway had taken bedding, food, and even Dirk Grout. One other important problem remained—Crocodile Tremper.

Hawk looked through his window, expecting to see an empty bed. "Well there he is!" he exclaimed. "Dead to the world."

The two went in and shook him. The man was rigid. Hawk lifted up his feet, and it was like lifting a post. His spine remained stiff as a board. Tremper's breathing was deep and labored.

"Another one of his spells," Catamount said. "Hawk, there's a curse on this valley. You couldn't find a spot in the Southwest from Central America to Nevada where more queer jaspers are centered. Tremper, plumb loco. Calloway can't speak above a whisper. Merritt with the build of a mountain lion and a mouse's courage. Dirk Grout and his busted back. Denny's a twelve-year-old outlaw. You once were haywire, and about the only thing you can say in my favor is that I'm a man that means well."

"That leaves Rita," Hawk said, "and she's a hundred-per-cent perfect."

"No, she ain't," Catamount argued. "She's in love with Jim Merritt. Well, what're we goin' to do with this hunk o' clay?" He stared, and then bent lower. "Look, he's got a slight cut under the eye. Somebody's fist done that."

"Hm-m-m! That's something," Hawk exclaimed. "Let's lug him into the church where we can watch him. Denny and Rita will have to get used to his spells."

They carried the massive Tremper into the church and arranged a bed behind a stack of pews. Then Hawk chanced to notice that Jim Merritt's right-hand knuckles were badly bruised. "Are you sure you didn't hit somebody?" he asked sharply.

"I might've," Merritt answered. "But I don't remember it."

"That's a help," Hawk groaned.

**T**HAT afternoon Hawk brought out the canteens he had cached in the hope their lack would restrain any one from attempting to leave the valley. The move had failed so far as Calloway was concerned.

Three o'clock that afternoon Tremper awakened, apparently normal. But he professed to no memory of what had happened the previous night. "I went to bed," he said, "and I woke up in here. I must have had a spell."

Hawk explained the situation, studying the man's face as he talked. "It may get to the point where it's the survival of the fittest," he concluded. "If the Calloways run out of food, they're going to try and take it from us. It might finally get down to one man and—Rita. A search would probably unearth corn seed. That with the ducks, the deer and trout, two might pull through until the corn grew and ripened."

"Just a man and a girl," Tremper

said thoughtfully. Slowly, he lifted his eyes to Rita.

It seemed to Hawk and Catamount that Tremper had determined to be that man.

Leaving Catamount to guard the church, Hawk slung canteens over Tremper's broad shoulders and started for the lake during the black period between sundown and moonrise. Everything that would hold water was filled. If the Calloway outfit decided on a siege, the defenders would at least have water.

Smoke indicated that Calloway had established a camp near the mint, which was a half mile from the church, but none of the band ever appeared. Hawk and Catamount, unable to endure inactivity, prowled about nights hoping to stumble onto some means of getting the upper hand.

Days passed without incident.

One night Catamount awakened Hawk. "Listen!" he said. "Horses, dozens of them moving like they was tired."

"A pack train!" Hawk exclaimed. "One of Calloway's men got through the tunnel before that slab fell. Now he's back with the others to get the silver. We're probably in for a battle."

Daylight revealed an amazing scene. Strange horses and pack mules mingled with the McClure and Calloway stock grazing along the lake shore. Men slipped through the rocks and boulders on the opposite side of the valley, viewing the stone houses and church with lively interest, but taking extreme care not to expose themselves to Hawk's deadly rifle.

The day passed peacefully. Night came and with it the now familiar fumble of hoofs. Occasionally a man's profane voice broke in. Once they heard the crack of a whip.

"Keep an eye on things," Hawk said, "I'm going to have a look." He drew on moccasins, belted on his guns, and added a hunting knife to the equipment.

He made his way to the tunnel entrance. Several flares lighted up the scene. A long pack train plodded past a group of unarmed men who unloaded silver bars and canteens of water, then sent the horses back for more. Other men hurried water and silver through the tunnel to a probable cache beyond.

Hawk wisely concluded armed men lurked in the shadows, ready to shoot down any one who might attack the workers. Whispering Calloway's plan was apparent. He was looting the mint of its silver—making certain of that—and would make an effort to claim the ground later.

Hawk returned to the church, and reported to Catamount. "There isn't a chance of a successful attack," he concluded. "We've a girl and small boy to think about. We can't depend on Tremper. Merritt's in no shape to fight. It drives me crazy to see that silver vanish right under my nose. We don't need it, but the Pattons do."

TWO mornings later, Catamount reported he hadn't heard a sound since three o'clock. Together they watched the daybreak. The golden light struck the higher cliffs, worked down and flooded the valley. Not a horse remained.

"Calloway's got Diablo," Hawk said. "That'll give him more satisfaction than a ton of silver. I'm going to have a look around. You be ready with the rifle to pick off any one who opens up on me."

Hawk emerged with his usual caution under such conditions. As nothing happened, he boldly made

his way to the tunnel. The ground about the entrance was cut to pieces by horses' hoofs and silver bars dropped in the handling.

Hawk entered the tunnel, ready to shoot it out with a possible guard. The familiar slab closed the entrance completely. He struck a match and examined the lower edge of the slab and the tunnel floor. Iron rust and metal scalings indicated the slab had been lifted by mechanical means, then lowered. Hawk hurried back at a dogtrot.

"Whispering Calloway and his men are on their way with the silver," Hawk reported. "As soon as he turns it over to the mint or some express company, he'll set about staking lost lode."

"If we could only get out of here," Catamount groaned, "we could beat that outfit yet. How'd the *conquistadores* who made their last stand in this church get out? For years there was only a few of them against thousands of natives who hated them. They wouldn't let themselves get into a jack pot."

"I've thought of that a lot," Hawk said. He picked up a heavy miner's hammer and banged it against the solid rock that formed the altar end of the church. "Maybe there's a tunnel," he suggested.

He hammered away steadily, thoroughly, waiting for the hollow sound that would indicate an opening. The others watched, breathlessly.

"It's no use," Catamount said, "that's solid rock."

Hawk sat down and stared moodily about. His gaze finally fixed itself on the altar. Golden crosses that should have been a part of the setting had been removed, but otherwise the chancel was in order.

"Come here, Rita," Hawk said in an odd voice. "You've got a wom-

an's sense of order. Does that altar look just right to you?"

She walked slowly about the altar and presently stopped. "No, viewed from this angle, it is set crooked," she said.

"Get me something I can use for a lever," Hawk directed.

Catamount and Tremper hurried out and returned with a small tree, stripped of limbs. They heaved away and slowly shifted the altar's stone base.

"That's enough," Hawk exclaimed. "Look! There's a stairway."

Rita lit several candles, and Hawk took one and squeezed down a narrow passage cut out of solid stone.

"Holy K. Smoke!" he ejaculated. "Come down here!"

One by one they descended and gazed in awe about a tomblike room constructed under the church floor.

"Here's the missin' gold crosses," Catamount shouted. "And here's a *conquistador* who didn't go to Heaven, body and all." He held the candle near a heap of bones and armor. "He was brought down here to die."

The *conquistador* whose remains had been so carefully placed beyond the reach of native vengeance could have been nothing less than a commander. The skull lay in a silver helmet and near by they found a silver shield, badly dented by arrows, stones, and spears.

Scattered about, as if hastily thrown aside, were other helmets, shields, and cuirasses of silver. Hawk's candles revealed a table covered with beautifully-carved silver-and-gold reptiles and a gold tray as large as a cart wheel.

"Here's a silver fish," Catamount yelled, almost joyously, with tiny silver scales that move. Hawk, those old-timers could sure carve silver."

"This wasn't done here," Hawk

answered. "This all comes from the Aztec country—tribute given Cortez."

"The *conquistadores* brought it along when a bunch of 'em settled here, I suppose," Catamount said. "What do you suppose this is? Looks like a silver coffin."

They set their candles down at the end of a silver casket, seven feet long and nearly four feet in width. The sides and lid carried no carvings, nor could they locate a plate which gave the occupants name. Catamount thrust his fingers under the lower end which extended three inches beyond the stone base which supported it. He heaved; looked foolish, and heaved again.

"I can't budge it," he panted. "It must weigh a thousand pounds."

"And you're one of the strongest men I know," Hawk said thoughtfully.

THE dull-silver tomb, the candles burning uncertainly in the underground room, resembled a strange funeral rite.

"Let's get out of here," Catamount said, half seriously, "before we wake up and discover we're dead and buried. Well, we know now that the boys who defended the church and were supposed to have gone to Heaven, bodies and all, snuck down here and shifted the altar base back into place again. But where'd they go from here? There's solid walls on all sides of us."

"Maybe they stayed down here until superstition drove the natives out of the valley," Hawk said, "then they came out. But still, they'd have given their dead a decent burial!"

"Here's my line of reasoning," Hawk announced. "The church is the likely place of an escape tunnel. We know the big fight centered

around here. We failed to find a *conquistador* body, except one down here. We've got to find their get-away tunnel.

They tapped walls without success and stopped again at the tomb.

"If we could shift this," Catamount said, "we might find an opening beyond."

"See if you can raise the lid," Hawk suggested. "Maybe the casket is loaded with silver and gold."

Catamount forced an ax blade under the lid and heaved upward. It moved ponderously—a massive lid of solid silver.

"Watch out," Rita warned, "it's slipping."

The lid shifted suddenly and tumbled to the stone floor with a terrific din. Clouds of dust filled the air and drove them back to the room above.

Ten minutes later Hawk wrapped a wet rag around his nostrils and descended. The candle burned uncertainly, then flared suddenly. Hawk's pulse leaped with hope. Only fresh air could make a candle flare like that. He held it above the tomb and peered in. The candle continued to glow steadily.

"What have you found?" Rita asked, joining him.

"A mummy that was once dressed in a gorgeous uniform," Hawk answered. "There's fresh air coming from somewhere. Smell it?"

"Of course."

"Hold your light closer. I'm going to feel around and see what's on the bottom," Hawk said. He pressed down with his fingers, and the sheet of silver covering the bottom of the tomb appeared to give. Hawk pressed harder and the bottom fell away. Rita screamed and jumped back. The upper end of the casket leaped up, and the mummy fell across the foot of the tomb. Cold air rushed into the room, blowing

out the candles, and leaving them in choking dust and darkness.

"Easy, Rita!" Hawk warned. "There's nothing to get excited about. I'll strike another light." He got down on the floor and lit a candle, then shielding it with his hand, peered into the tomb. The bottom sheet of silver, on which the mummy lay was a trapdoor. Stone steps led into the inky blackness.

"Clever, isn't it?" Rita said. "The *conquistadores* knew no native would ever open a tomb. And they added to what was almost a certainty by telling them that those who weren't buried would be transported to Heaven."

"The natives never suspected there was a passage under the altar," Hawk said. "There's only one thing to do—find out where it goes to."

## CHAPTER XII.

### DEAD AIR.

**H**AWK McCLURE again found the potential menace of Tremper a burden on his movements. Ordinarily, he would have taken Catamount and explored the tunnel. Now he felt that Catamount should be left behind, to keep an eye on the uncertain Tremper.

"Denny," he said suddenly, "you're elected to go with me."

"Golly!" the boy exclaimed. "That's great."

Rita said nothing, but caught her breath sharply, at the same time realizing Hawk's choice was logical.

"I'll take no chances," Hawk assured her.

He coiled a lariat around his shoulders, loaded up with candles and led off, followed by Denny who carried a canteen. The steps below the silver tomb turned into a large tunnel which Hawk instantly recognized as a work-out mine tunnel.



The two stumbled over the stone-littered floor nearly a mile, sometimes descending, again ascending until Hawk lost all sense of direction. Suddenly it grew light ahead. Hawk ran with Denny at his heels shouting excitedly. The light came from a slope which had broken through the mountain a good three hundred feet above their heads. "Golly, Hawk, we can't get through that way," Denny said.

"I'm wondering if the *conquistadores* did," Hawk answered. "The mine continues on, we'll see where it goes."

The tunnel descended rapidly and some of the pitches were so steep that Hawk dug in his heels and skidded. Denny, lighter, kept his feet. The descent straightened out to a low, gentle grade. The air grew moist, stale, and the candles spluttered in the dead air.

Hawk's feet splashed into water. He stopped and lit another candle. "You take this one, Denny, and keep well behind me. If I stumble into a hole, I'll need your light to get out."

The water deepened and surged around Hawk's hips as he walked. Progress was slow, as Denny had to hold his light well above his head to keep it clear of the splashing water.

The next pitch disappeared into the water, which pressed against the top of the tunnel.

"I guess we're licked, Hawk," Denny said.

"Not yet, Denny. I'm going to take a big breath and push ahead, thirty seconds. If I'm not out of the water by that time, I'll turn around. I can hold my breath a minute," he explained. "And if I shouldn't show up, keep your nerve and go back to the others."

He gave the boy his candle, guns, and lariat, then plunged in.

"Golly, it's sure lonely," Hawk said, and his voice echoed hollowly. He counted off the seconds. Passed the sixty mark, then went into the seventies. The water broke suddenly, and Hawk emerged, gasping.

"I think the drift rises and is free of water beyond," he said heavily. "I'm going back."

"I'll wait until I can count a thousand," Denny promised.

"Make it two thousand," Hawk suggested.

Five minutes later, Denny watched him submerge. This time he swam, with powerful arm strokes, one hand constantly striking the wall to guide him. Denny counted aloud. One thousand was long in coming. He reached fifteen hundred before his straining eyes saw Hawk's hand.

"It goes up," Hawk gasped. "I reached dry rock. I came back to tell you." He tied the lariat under the boy's shoulders. "Now I'm going again. When the rope tightens, take a big breath and dive in. Swim like the devil. And don't be afraid. I'll pull you up to air. We'll leave candles on a ledge to light our way back."

Hawk buckled his guns around the boy and plunged in. He was almost out when he felt the rope tighten, then slacken. Denny had followed. Hawk swam almost desperately to air, gasped in a lungful and at the same time turned and hauled frantically at the rope. Denny broke water with breath to spare. Hawk groped through to dry stone, opened his waterproof match box and struck a match on the rock.

He used up three matches drying off the end of the candle, then got a spluttering light. The tunnel was narrower and was driven in a straight line, no longer following a vein. They crawled a hundred yards

before Hawk stopped and shook his head.

"I can't squirm any more, Denny," he said. "Crawl on, but don't get stuck. I think it's lighter ahead."

The boy wormed from view and presently called back. "I see light, Hawk. Whee! I see blue sky!"

"Go on out and tell me what you see," Hawk ordered.

TEN of the longest minutes in Hawk's life passed before Denny returned. "There's a kind of a gulch below us. If you could get out, we could climb down easy. The gulch goes toward the Dry Canyon country. I think I see some landmarks, but I ain't sure."

"Come here and get the canteen. The tunnel water may not be good," Hawk directed.

When Denny appeared, Hawk handed him the lariat and let him haul the canteen and other articles out.

"If I had a horse, Hawk," Denny said, "I could get your crowd—if you'd tell me where the hideout is."

"I'm thinking the same thing, Denny," Hawk answered. "You stay where you are. I'm going back and report to the others and talk things over. The top of this tunnel has sagged, and we can't get through. But with hammers and steel we may break off enough of the bottom so that the rest of us can squeeze through. It'll take time, and we'll need your help."

"How long will you be gone?"

"Maybe two or three hours," Hawk replied. "It's slow work. You've got my guns. If I'm delayed, find a place and rest. If it gets dark, go to sleep. We'll be on hand with grub in the morning. Or—you can go back with me."

"I'll stay here," Denny said. And

there was a mysterious note in his voice that escaped Hawk in the excitement of the situation.

"Where's Denny?" Rita asked, alarmed when Hawk appeared alone.

"Out in the free air this very instant," Hawk answered. He explained, in detail, the difficulties of the passage. "You might get through, Rita, with a little crowding, but the rest of us haven't a chance."

HAWK made up a pack of bacon and tinned goods. He filled an empty canteen with flour and screwed on the top to keep the contents dry. He filled another canteen with ammunition, smeared lard over a rifle, and made up a pack of drilling steel and a hammer. Catamount and Tremper were directed to pack the stuff to the water that filled the tunnel.

Hawk staked the valley in Mrs. Patton's name and his own, and filed location notices. He hoped, by some miracle, to escape and record the claims before Calloway could act. He had an idea that Calloway had purposely delayed any such action, fearing Sheriff Snell would insist on being cut in for a big share. The outlaw was confident, no doubt, that Hawk was securely bottled up in the valley.

Returning to the church, Hawk loaded a pack and followed Catamount and Tremper. Lashing lariats together, he carried one end through the water and left the other with Catamount. There was sufficient rope to permit Hawk to draw a pack through the water and for Catamount to pull the slack back for another load.

Hawk rushed food through to Denny and added a sodden blanket to the boy's equipment. "Spread it out on a hot rock; it'll dry by sun-down," he said. "Now you're all

set. We'll see you in the morning at sunrise. We're going to work most of the night in the tunnel."

Hawk and Catamount took turns, swinging the hammer and holding the steel. Some of the stone, shattered by the crude native drilling and subjected to many years of changing atmosphere gave way with a little pressure.

Shortly after dawn, Hawk heard Denny's excited voice, then he saw a spearhead of yellow light coming toward him in the darkness.

"Golly, Hawk, you're closer," Denny said.

"Did you have a good night's sleep?" Hawk asked.

"Not much," the boy answered. "I went down the canyon and saw Calloway's camp fire. I figured they was at a hole off to the left of the trail we took to the valley. I snuck up. Sure enough, it was. They'd dug it out and was gettin' some water for the horses. The whole outfit seemed all tired out. That gave me an idea. I figured they'd sleep heavy, not expectin' any danger, so I got Diablo for you."

"Denny!" Hawk exclaimed. "Do you mean to say you sneaked into Calloway's camp and got my stallion?"

"Shucks," Denny answered with nicely assumed carelessness, "it weren't nothin' at all. I figured you couldn't do anything in this country without a horse."

"Where is he now?"

"Right down below," Denny said.

"Denny," Hawk explained, "it's going to take a couple of days to make a hole big enough for me to get through. Diablo can outrun any range nag in the West. With you on his back, nothing can catch him. I want you to light out for Hawk's Nest and bring the boys."

"How'll I find it?" Denny asked.

"You know its general location," Hawk answered. "Ride straight for the mountain where that big eagle hangs out. When you come to the river, stop. Every horse in our band is trained to bring a wounded man home. Lurch in the saddle and leave the rest to Diablo. I'll be back in a half hour with more canteens so you can ride clear out of the Dry Canyon country without going near a water hole." Hawk hurried back to the church.

Hawk saw a chance in a hundred of partial, and perhaps complete, victory. The odds against success were tremendous and depended on many things, but a long chance was all he ever hoped for in any man's game. He put the location notices in a bottle to make certain they would be neither soiled or damaged by water. Then, with canteens filled with water, he returned to Denny.

"Handle this bottle with care," Hawk said. "It contains the location notices. Tell one of my men to get it to Eli Darrow, editor of the *Mesquite Messenger*. He'll see that the notices are properly recorded. That'll cinch the claim for us."

"But we want that pack train load of silver, don't we Hawk?" Denny added.

"You bet your life we do," Hawk answered. "Now, good-by and good luck. Keep away from everybody until you reach the Nest."

Hawk watched Denny squirm into the darkness. "Game little devil!" he exclaimed. "I shouldn't have sent him, and yet—all that his father worked for hangs on him."

**W**ITHOUT regard for time Hawk and Catamount continued their drilling, helped occasionally by Tremper whose aim with a hammer was none too certain.

Rita brought up additional provisions to the water's edge, and Hawk ran them through with the lariats. Sixty hours after Denny had left, Hawk pushed through and made his way to daylight. The sun was just setting, and the Dry Canyon country was lost in purple shadows.

Catamount and Tremper joined him, and for a long time the three sat on the brink of a canyon, gazing into space.

"I've been damp for days," Hawk said. "I'm going back through that escape tunnel for the last time. Then I'm going to have a hot meal, and I'm going to bed and not worry about a blasted thing—except Denny."

Hawk climbed the narrow stairs and entered the church a half hour later. It was strangely silent. He stood for a moment in a widening puddle as the water drained from his drenched clothing. He started to call Rita, then changed his mind and walked to the church door.

It was open. Jim Merritt and Rita sat on the steps talking in low tones. The valley was filled with velvet black; the sky white with the blazing light of desert stars. Hawk felt the spell of the night, and he sensed that Rita was captivated by it. But Jim fought it, and fought it successfully.

"I had my two chances," he said, "and each time I turned yellow. It isn't in me to stand up to life. I love you more than anything on earth. And if that love can't see me through any crisis, if it can't lash me to fight my best and die in my tracks, nothing can."

"I've never lost faith," the girl said quietly. "If we love each other as much as—as we know we do, then together we can accomplish anything. We need a man in our family, Jim."

"You've got a better man that I'll ever be," he answered. "Denny! That proves everything I've said. Denny's only twelve, yet he stands up to any kind of a fight."

"Denny's had to fight from childhood," Rita explained. "He knows nothing else. You are just taking your first steps. And that's the truth, Jim."

"I've had a business training," he said slowly, "and I could handle that end of the mine. Keep books, write checks, strike balances, but it's going to take a man to hold it, even if we get it. There'll be a pack of wolves yapping at our heels from the day it's recorded."

"Then—our trails fork?" she asked with a catch in her voice.

"I guess—they do," Jim answered. "It's better for both of us to end it now, than for you to see me tested again and again and always failing you. If I only had the thing, the spark, that sends Denny, Hawk, and Catamount into a fight—it fairly hurls them into it—then I'd hold you against the world."

"Good-bye, Jim," she said holding out her hand.

He looked down, reached hungrily for it, then backed away. "No," he growled, "if I even touched your hand, I'd kid myself into believing all you've said about me finding myself. I've kidded myself long enough." He stalked down the steps and vanished in the darkness.

Hawk ran back to the altar base lest he be caught listening.

"Where's everybody?" he yelled, then returned to the door. "Oh, hello, Rita. Where's Jim?"

"I'm down here, Hawk, stretching my legs," Jim answered. He lit a cigarette, and by the light of the match Hawk saw his hands were shaking. He was pretty much dis-

gusted with Jim Merritt, but he was equally as sorry for him.

"What's the news?" Jim asked.

"I'm here for a square meal and a night's sleep, then we clear out," he told them.

Jim and Rita hurriedly prepared the meal while Hawk got into dry clothing. He ate slowly, explaining what problems remained to be solved, then he turned in.

Jim Merritt listened to his heavy breathing. "That's what I mean by the term, man," he said to Rita. "He has a pitched battle ahead of him, and he's sleeping like a top."

**H**AWK McCCLURE stood knee deep in the tunnel water the following morning and hauled Rita through the submerged area. "Keep going," he directed. "I'll have Jim through in a few minutes."

Sometime later they stood in the sunshine, slowly drying out, while Catamount and Tremper divided their equipment into packs. The mighty Tremper carried a hundred pounds of canteen water on his broad shoulders; Hawk and Catamount carried as much in water, food and ammunition.

Merritt's breast wound prevented him from carrying much of a pack, as the straps cut in and pulled the flesh. But he strapped a brace of six-guns around his hips and carried one of the rifles. Rita's pack weighed fifty pounds, mostly water. She, too, carried a rifle.

They made their way slowly down the deep canyon, then struck off at an angle that would intersect the trail that Calloway's pack train left in the barren ground.

From the first they traveled in the early-morning hours and in the late afternoon and evening. The hot period during the middle of the day

was given over to such rest as they could find in the hot shade of some sun-blasted rock.

Hawk figured the days again and again. It would take so many days for Denny to reach the Nest; so many more for the band to return. Invariably, he concluded his calculations with a sickening sensation in the pit of the stomach. There was always the contingency, "If Denny got through."

All day on the calculated date, Hawk watched the horizon for dust. Not so much as a mirage broke the clear, blue line. He slept fitfully that night and was up before day. Slowly the sun flooded the land. Long shadows raced over broken country; ridges stood out sharply against the sky. Overhead, buzzards wheeled. It had not taken the vultures long to learn that living creatures again moved in the Dry Canyon country.

Hawk's slowly moving eyes stopped suddenly on a high ridge. A horseman, as rigid as though carved from granite, lay against the sky. He was as clear-cut and defined as a cameo. In a flash he moved, and as quickly vanished.

"Watch that ridge," Hawk said. "My boys may be coming, or—some of the Calloways. We'll get ready for a fight."

He looked at Jim Merritt. The man's face was deathly white, and he pressed his hands on a rock to stop their shaking. Rita started to look at him and changed her mind. Ten minutes passed, and no movement changed the ragged contour of the ridge. Then, suddenly, a man galloped into view. He was followed by a second, a third, and a fourth.

"Your man, Hawk!" Tremper said, Hawk caught his breath sharply. The sight of his men riding never failed to stir deep emotions in his

breast. Young, lean and hard: bronzed as Indians, they rode as if born to the saddle—as many of them were. In all the world there were no finer horses—bred for intelligence, courage, and endurance. And from each string of colts only the best were selected.

The mighty Diablo led the band. Spare horses ran with the others.

"Hawk!" Rita exclaimed. "Isn't it thrilling?"

Denny's slight figure radiated pride as he sat on Diablo's back. He made a brave effort to look the stern leader, but his eyes, dancing with sheer joy, were those of a boy who had attained the highest crest of happiness.

"If there was any doubt about that sprout bein' an outlaw before," Catamount said, "it's settled now."

The band pounded to a stop, and Denny jumped to the ground. "I got through, Hawk!" he exclaimed. "And here are *our* men! Calloway's pack train's about ten miles ahead. Some day, Hawk, when you're just Old Man McClure, I'm goin' to be Hawk Patton, the leader."

"We'll settle that when the time comes," Hawk answered.

Denny grinned at Rita, but eluded her and avoided the disgrace of being publicly kissed.

Hawk vaulted into the saddle and swung into the lead. The others fell in behind. He moved slowly, keeping five or six miles of country between the band and the pack train. All day they rode parallel, eyes on the telltale dust cloud ahead created by the many hoofs.

Hawk's men kept their own dust down by following paths that time had crusted over. At sundown they turned toward the pack train. At nine o'clock he ordered a halt.

"Unsaddle," Hawk directed, "picket your horses and get some

rest. We'll decide on a plan of action in the morning."

AT daybreak Hawk crawled to the crest of the ridge separating them from the Calloway pack train. Men were busy saddling horses and adjusting packs. He saw Calloway and Pedro, but there was no sign of Dirk Grout, though the distance made identification difficult.

"They are camped in a spot easily defended," Hawk reported to his men. "We'll ride a mile and wait. The country ahead is more to my liking." They walked their horses to the appointed place.

Hawk strung out his men just below the crest of the ridge and then called Denny. "You take charge of the spare horses and stay here out of sight, with Rita."

Resentment and disappointment filled the boy's eyes. "You don't trust me 'cause I'm a kid," he protested. "I can fight. I'm goin' to fight. You can go to thunder. After all I've done for—for—" He gulped, close to tears—"done for you," he finished.

"A good outlaw obeys his leader," Hawk said sharply. "Do as you're told." He rode off before the boy could reply.

"It took you quite a little while to screw up your courage and tell Denny he couldn't fight, didn't it?" Catamount said.

"Sure. But I don't want the kid hurt," Hawk answered.

Dust drifted over the ridge, warning them that the pack train was just below. Hawk held up his hand and glanced along the line. Jim Merritt, deathly white, was on the end.

"His horse will carry him into it," Hawk thought. Then he brought

his hand down. It was the signal for the charge.

Hoofs thundered, and the line topped the ridge. The Calloway men strung along the pack train, caught off their guard, whirled, and began firing. Hawk blazed at the nearest man, who dropped behind a packed horse and returned the fire. Out of the corner of his eye, Hawk saw Jim Merritt throw his hands into the air, pitch from the saddle, then roll neatly into the protection of a huge, square stone.

"Huh!" Hawk growled. "He hunted cover at the first volley." He lifted his voice and yelled at the top of his lungs. The others joined him and the pack train began stampeding. A mule broke clear and galloped wildly across the country; two horses went in the opposite direction. All along the line the train broke up.

The Calloway men, denied the protection afforded by pack horses loaded with silver bricks, fought from the backs of their mounts and from behind convenient rocks.

Whispering Calloway sensing that Hawk was not only scattering the train, but was cutting out the animals carrying water, rallied his men behind a network of boulders. Six-guns went into holsters, and they pulled rifles from boots and blazed away. A Hawk man pitched from his saddle; a second sagged limply and clutched the saddle horn with both hands.

"We've got to drive 'em out of there!" Hawk yelled. Then something struck him, and he tumbled into the black depths of unconsciousness.

Vaguely he heard Dirk Grout yell. "I got the Hawk!"

Hawk opened his eyes and watched the world swim a moment. Slowly the sun ceased revolving and became a steady, blazing ball. Gun-

fire cracked in every direction. A riderless horse jumped over his body and galloped on, stirrups beating a tattoo on its ribs.

"Hawk's hard hit but still alive," Grout yelled. "I saw his eyelids flutter."

Hawk tried to move, but his muscles refused to do his bidding. He groped for one of the gold-mounted guns a few inches from his fingers, but could not reach it. Grout's mocking laughter dinned in his ears.

"I winged the Hawk, I'm goin' to finish him," he said.

"Go ahead," Pedro said.

Hawk saw Grout's face lifted cautiously above a rock ten feet away. "So you're broken back got well?" he said.

"It wasn't busted," Grout answered. "I'm a good actor."

**H**AWK realized that the man must gloat a moment before he finished him. He tried to reach the six-gun with his right hand again. And again the fingers missed it by inches. His left arm was doubled up under his body. Grout enjoyed his helplessness. He measured the distance between Hawk's fingers and the weapon, as a cat judges the distance between the wounded mouse and the hole toward which it crawls.

"The crack you gave me on the head that night made me sick," Grout continued. "I had a lump on my back where it bumped a rock, but it didn't amount to nothin'! I killed Dan Moran; stabbed him with a obsidian knife I found in the stone house. I roped Jim Merritt, but he was so scared he got away before I could finish him. And now—it's you."

Hawk stalled for time. "How'd you get out of the stone house?" he

asked, slowly reaching for the gun again.

"Through a window," Grout answered. "The last night Tremper almost caught me. I knocked him in the head and—"

Hawk's right-hand fingers fell an inch short of touching the gun. Then suddenly his body rolled back, and his left hand whipped up and fired. A split second later Grout's gun crashed. The bullet struck in front of Hawk's face, driving dirt into his eyes. Through the blur of tears, Hawk saw Grout pitch across the rock, then fall backwards. "While he was watching my right hand," Hawk said softly, "he forgot that the left could get a gun!"

"The Hawk got Grout!" Pedro yelled. "Shoot against that boulder and the bullets will glance into him."

Hawk flattened out and watched the chips fly from the boulder behind him. Lead dug into the dirt, kicking up dust; lead droned across the wasteland, and lead glanced off the boulder, struck the rock sheltering him from direct fire and dropped, twisted and flattened beside him.

"Drive those coyotes out of that rock pile," Catamount yelled, "or they'll get Hawk and the rest of us."

Hawk slapped his arms in an effort to drive out the numbness that had at first paralyzed him. He wondered how badly he was wounded and was half moved to rush the rock pile and get a man or two before he dropped, riddled, but he decided against this. There was too much natural defense. On the opposite side the rocks were fewer, and the Calloway men more exposed.

Hawk's men, slinking from boulder to boulder, were sniping at the Calloway outfit. The odds against them were murderous, and Hawk knew it. His legs quivered as a

glancing bullet ripped through the flesh. Some one cheered. They must have seen his shadow wince and realized what had happened.

Catamount Larrabee was nearly crazed with worry. Hawk watched the big fellow gather himself for a desperate charge. He could see the cords stand out on his neck, and the six-guns gripped in his big hands. The Calloways watching Catamount's grotesque shadow knew exactly what he was planning. Rifles resting on convenient rocks shifted toward the spot.

"Don't you do it, Catamount!" Hawk warned.

"If somethin' isn't done," Catamount said, "you're a gone goose."

Tremper's mighty figure suddenly leaped from cover. He carried two guns, his knife-torn mouth was twisted into a terrible leer revealing his gleaming teeth. His eyes glistened with tears.

He charged, guns blazing, across an open stretch and went down behind a dirt hummock. Another hundred feet, and he could have gained the protection of a square rock which commanded the Calloways' position.

Hank saw Merritt's dead-white face thrust out cautiously and then disappear. A second later, Jim leaped from cover and raced toward that square rock. His hat was shot from his head, and a puff of dust burst from the crown as a bullet cut through it. A second bullet struck his shoulder and sent him half spinning to the ground. He rolled over and fired, just as a Calloway man aimed at him. The man crumpled. Merritt got up and went down again.

He rolled several yards, then staggered to his feet. With both guns blazing, he lurched at the enemy. In that tense moment he had learned



that attack is the best defense. His mad charge disrupted their marksmanship in their desperate efforts to bring him down.

MERRITT sprawled behind the rock, caught his breath, thrust a gun over the rock and blazed away. Pedro's dark eyes widened in astonishment. He clutched at his breast and then crumpled.

Whispering Calloway's shifty eyes took in the situation at a glance. Many retreats had preserved his life. If one of his men showed himself in an effort to get in a shot, then Jim Merritt was certain to kill him. He saw Hawk McClure's men shift swiftly, moving surely, to higher levels that would permit them to shoot downward.

Calloway turned, and running low, raced down a gulch. His men trailed after him. Catamount's Winchester speeded their flight. It was silver, the big fellow wanted, not men. One of them beyond the range of gunfire had rounded up most of the saddle string. He turned into the gulch and greeted his breathless fellows with good horse-flesh.

Catamount, assured that the enemy was running away to fight another day, hurried to the Hawk's side. "Are you bad hurt?" he anxiously inquired.

"A couple of flesh wounds," Hawk answered. "One threw me off balance. I fell and butted my head against a rock. For a minute or so I was paralyzed all over. Help me get to Jim Merritt."

The two found Merritt collapsed from the reaction of his desperate charge and several bullet wounds.

"Hawk," he gasped. "I found the—spark. You thought I rolled from the saddle to save my neck. A bul-

let knocked me off—balance. After that I saw—red. Get—Rita. I'm going to—die."

Denny and Rita rode swiftly over the ridge, knowing when firing ended that the fight was done.

"He's in bad shape," Catamount whispered.

Hawk nodded.

"He finds hisself, then dies," Catamount grumbled.

Rita dropped beside him. Her lips were set; her face white with a terrible fear, yet there was a glow of pride in her eyes. She said nothing until she had bandaged his wounds and stopped the flow of blood.

"It's best—this way, Rita," Jim whispered.

"But it isn't going to be *this* way," the girl said quietly. "You're not going to go back on me now, Jim. You're going to live. There's so much to be done, and you're the man who is going to do it."

"No," he muttered. "No—I'm going to—"

"Don't say it, Jim!" she said desperately. "If you won't say it, it can't come true. I've always been right about you, Jim. I'm right—now. Here's my hand. If you feel yourself slipping hang on tight. We'll never let each other down—never."

"Come on, Catamount," Hawk said. "There's things to be done."

The two sat down in the shade of a rock so that Hank could conserve his strength.

"We lost three men; Calloway, seven," Hawk said. "Funny, but Jim and I are the only wounded."

"There ain't much woundin' done when dead-shots fight," Catamount answered.

"Calloway will tip off Sheriff Snell, now that the silver is beyond his reach. He'll figger to get a cut that

way. Round up the pack train and drive straight for Ashton. There's an express office there. Ship the silver in Mrs. Patton's name. Those not needed to handle the pack train can stick here. There's dead to be buried, and Jim must be cared for. I'll take over that responsibility."

### CHAPTER XIII.

#### THE OUTLAW TRAIL.

**N**EARLY a week later Hawk McClure rode up to a railroad telegraph station and tapped on the operator's window. "Is there a telegram for Jeff Carney?" he asked. On occasion he used his lawful name.

The operator handed him a yellow envelope. Hawk tore the envelope open and read:

PACK TRAIN ARRIVED SAFE AT  
ASHTON STOP SILVER GOES TO  
MINT BY EXPRESS TO-NIGHT STOP  
CATAMOUNT

Hawk rode back to a water hole where Jim Merritt awaited a buckboard which would take him to the Patton ranch. There under Rita's nursing he would recover. His connection with Hawk was not known to Sheriff Snell, and Hawk felt that Jim was safe enough. He had the training, and now the fighting courage to develop Lost Lode into a paying mine.

The problem of Denny remained. Hawk fingered the roll of bills Denny had given him as his share of the bank loot. "Denny," he said, "this is going back to the bank. We'll forget the whole business. And you're going to school."

"Nope, Hawk," the boy promptly answered, "I'm stringin' with you. Ma's rich. If I stay home, I'll be rich. But money won't buy fights

with Whisperin' Calloway. I'm an outlaw, Hawk. A born outlaw."

Neither noticed Crocodile Tremper lurking in a neighboring thicket. Tremper hardly breathed as he listened.

"The outlaw trail leads to jail, and maybe to the gallows, Denny," Hawk said quietly.

"You're free, Hawk. You're free because you're smart," the boy argued. "I'm goin' to ride with you, learn all the tricks, and when I'm your age, I'll be smart. Maybe they'll call me Hawk Patton."

"Think of the disgrace, Denny," Hawk insisted. "You'll break your mother's heart."

"It ain't no disgrace to be a square outlaw," Denny answered. "Folks know you're fightin' men like Calloway and the big outfits that squeeze the little spreads out. And they know you're fightin' crooked sheriffs like Snell. Ain't no disgrace in that."

"Just the same, Denny, Snell's the law until an honest sheriff is elected," Hawk said. "I've been lucky. Some day I'll ride into a trap. That's the end of the outlaw trail—a trap and a jury trial."

Hawk studied the boy intently. He knew he had failed to convince him. "We'll settle this when we get down to the ranch, Thursday," he said.

**T**HURSDAY morning Hawk McClure looked down on the Patton ranch. He watched a buckboard, carrying Merritt, drive slowly up to the ranch-house door. A waiting doctor came out of the house, bent over the wounded man, then ordered two men to carry him inside. Hank saw Rita follow. He turned to several members of his band.

"The job's done, boys," Hawk an-

nounced. "The silver is in the express company's hands. Lost lode is staked. Merritt's going to get the best medical attention. You boys ride back to the Nest. I've got a little matter to settle with Denny and Mrs. Patton.

"Shall I ride back to the Nest, too?" Tremper asked.

"Yes," Hawk answered. "You're one of us." The strange hard glitter lingered in the man's eyes, but of late he had appeared almost normal in his actions.

"I've got a little business I should look after," Tremper said. "If—you don't mind."

"Go ahead," Hawk answered.

When he was alone, Hawk rode slowly around the Patton ranch to assure himself that Snell and his deputies were not lurking in the vicinity. Only the tracks left by the buckboard and the hoofprints of Rita's and Denny's horses led into the valley. Hawk rode down and met the doctor who was just leaving.

"With good care," the latter said, "Merritt will completely recover." He winked. "And there's every indication he'll get good care."

Hawk went into the house and talked things over with Mrs. Patton. "The thing to do is to organize a company," he said, "with Merritt as president and general manager. Fifty per cent of the stock goes to you, fifty to my outfit. The money from the bar silver should finance a mill. Merritt can take care of all that."

"Have you finished your business, Hawk?" A grim voice demanded. "If so, drop those gold-mounted guns to the floor."

Hawk whirled and looked into Tremper's six-gun.

"I'm a special agent of the governor, sent to investigate the goings on in Mesquite County," Tremper said evenly, as he pulled back his coat with his left hand and displayed a badge. "Come along, Hawk."

"You waited until I was alone," Hawk drawled. "You're smart." Hawk dropped the guns, and Tremper picked them up.

"You'd be surprised how smart I am," Tremper retorted. "I didn't have a chance with Catamount and the others around. Well, let's drift." He snapped handcuffs on Hawk's wrists.

Denny bounced into the room, his face dead-white with surprise and anger. "Tremper, you're a dirty traitor," he panted. "And just when I was beginnin' to like you. You—you——" He choked with fury.

"I want a word alone with Denny," Hawk said. And without waiting for permission, he stalked into the yard, followed by Tremper and the boy.

Hawk held up his manacled hands. "You see, Denny," he whispered so Tremper could not hear. "I was right about the outlaw trail."

Tears filled the boy's eyes. He nodded, unable to speak. "I sent the money you stole back to the bank. If anything comes up, I'll say I stole it. In return, I want you to go back to school."

"Hawk, I didn't steal that money," Denny said. "I found it where robbers had cached it. I figured if I turned it over to Snell, he'd pocket it and swear I'd never given it to him. Then I thought if I showed it to you and said I'd swiped it you'd have to let me into your band."

"That's the best news I ever heard, Denny!" Hawk exclaimed. "Now get that chin up. Who knows,

I may find a way out of this." He tilted the boy's chin up and walked over to Diablo.

"Mount," Tremper ordered, "and head for Grand Junction. I'll follow."

Several times Hawk looked back as he rode out of the valley. Denny stood there, stunned, watching his friend ride away. On the valley's rim Hawk stopped, lifted his manacled hands and waved. The boy answered, and Hawk rode from view.

"I guess this'll cure the kid of wanting to be an outlaw," Tremper said. He chuckled—the chuckle of one who by craft had achieved a great purpose.

"He's cured," Hawk said. "He's seen both sides of an outlaw's life. The picture of me riding away

manacled will always be with him. And—I'm glad."

"I knew you'd be. That's why I did it," Tremper observed. He unpinned the badge and dropped it into his pocket. Then he removed the handcuffs and deposited them in a saddlebag. Finally he returned Hawk's gold-mounted guns. "A badge and handcuffs are right handy at times," he said, chuckling at Hawk's astonishment. "I told you you'd be surprised how smart I am."

Hawk nodded. He was annoyed with himself for forgetting those on the mental border line are always doing the unexpected. A new man had joined his band—a man of amazing craft and resourcefulness, equipped with tremendous strength and a strange sense of loyalty.

THE END

NATIONALLY CELEBRATED AUTHOR

ROBERT ORMOND CASE

Has Written

SOLE SURVIVOR

For the August Issue of

COMPLETE STORIES

A Street & Smith Magazine

ON SALE JULY 17th



# MASTER OF MEN

By DABNEY OTIS COLLINS

Author of "Sheepman," etc.

**J**ONATHAN GIMMIT, whose Anchor brand was burned on more cattle than he knew, was smiling—for the first time in thirty years. The smile had no more warmth than a spark struck from granite. At last he was absolute master of Wapiti Basin. Big and massive, like a solidly rooted, storm-battered oak, he stood looking at a legal document on his desk. Still smiling, he lifted his eyes to the photograph of a dark, grave boy which leaned against a clipper ship model on top of the desk.

Footsteps came lightly across the veranda into the house. Jonathan turned to the door. A dark, well-knit man in his early twenties stood there. Any one would have known he was the son of Jonathan Gimmit. Yet his eyes were brown, not slate-

colored like Jonathan's. Nor did he have his father's bold brow and steel-trap jaw.

"You sent for me, dad?"

Jonathan nodded. "Sit down, Samuel."

Sam Gimmit remained where he stood. He glanced at the paper on the desk, and a tightness came into his face.

"It's time you were starting a brand of your own," Jonathan said. "Of course, everything I have will be yours some day. But it'll be good experience for you, running your own brand." He picked up the document and held it out to Sam. "I bought Tom Smith out. Here's the deed to his ranch, made out in your name. It'll give you a start."

Sam's eyes narrowed. He held his hands against his thighs. "You

mean, you burned him out," he said. "Not bought him out."

The smile left Jonathan's mouth, leaving it like a seam in granite. He had the feeling, just for an instant, of losing something fine that had almost been in his grasp. His words came clipped and toneless: "I don't understand you, my son."

"No. You wouldn't. It's all business with you. You set out to own the whole of Wapiti Basin when you settled here. You didn't care how you got it, just so you got it." Sam's voice trembled a little. "If fence cutting and haystack burning and bullying——"

Jonathan interrupted. "I always paid a fair price."

"Fair to you, yes," the young man said bitterly. "But instead of helping the poor devils when droughts or blizzards hit 'em, you did all you could to finish breaking 'em. Like you did to Tom Smith. It took you a long time, but you got him."

"There is no place in this country for weak men, Samuel. The West is being won by strong men. From now on, you and I will rule Wapiti Basin." Again he offered the deed to the ranch that had belonged to Tom Smith.

"Keep it," Sam told him, and the men's glances locked. "Keep it all, now that you've got your hands on it. I'm leaving." He added, with a trace of defiance: "I married Mary Smith yesterday."

The lower part of the old man's face sagged, as if there was a weight in it. "Tom Smith's daughter?" he asked, incredulous.

Sam nodded.

**J**ONATHAN laid the deed on the desk. He said slowly: "You, a Gimmit, married to a common ——" He halted, at the look that came into Sam's face, then went on.

"When you'll be the biggest rancher in Wyoming, one of these days? So you're leaving me?"

"Yes, I am. Took out a claim on Hat Springs."

"A claim on Hat Springs? That's Anchor property."

"Not by law, it isn't. You've run half a dozen homesteaders away from there, but never filed on it yourself."

Jonathan paused. "Tom Smith and that girl are going with you?"

"Of course."

"You're making a mistake, Samuel. The Gimmits have always held themselves high. It isn't too late to undo what you've done."

"There's plenty of good people in this world besides Gimmits. I know you've never thought so. You've never thought of anything but yourself——" Sam stopped, suddenly pale. He had never spoken thus to his father.

"All right," Jonathan said, as if accepting a challenge. "You've deliberately gone against my will, Samuel. I set out to be master of Wapiti Basin, as you said, and I will be master. If I have to fight you, I'll do it, as I would any other nester." His cold glance flicked to the photograph on his desk, back to the man he still thought of as that boy. "Better think it over."

"I have thought it over, for two years. I'm going." Sam did not offer his hand. He turned and went out of the house.

Long after Sam's footsteps had died away, Jonathan stood motionless before the desk. For the first time in his life, he was facing a thing he did not wholly comprehend. He tried to force his mind back to the days of his courtship with Sam's mother. Groping for some shred of memory that was colored with the tenderness he had seen in his son's eyes. This, whatever it was, had

passed him by. Sometimes, on lonely rides, Jonathan had been vaguely stirred by this lack of something in his life, companionship. He had promised himself to take Sam on a long hunting trip up in the Big Horns. But he never had.

He brought a fist crashing down on the desk, so hard that the photograph slid forward, falling on its face. He was master of Wapiti Basin. What place had such thoughts, weak thoughts, in his plan of life? He knew what he wanted, and he got it. No one, not even his own son, could stand in his way. And he had but one method of fighting.

He rode to Buffalo, the county seat. His hard, shrewd eyes looked across the cattle-dotted flats and hills to the mountains that rose in purple splendor from the rim of the basin. Anchor range, as far as eye could reach. Anchor range it would remain, as long as he was Jonathan Gimmit.

**A**RRIVING in the little cow town, he opened his game with the sureness of an experienced hand. First he went to the principal feed store. He demanded that his son be extended no credit. Faced with the alternative of losing the Anchor outfit's business, the merchant assented without argument. Jonathan made similar demands on the lumber yard, the blacksmith shop, the general merchandise store. Not one dared oppose him.

But at the First National Bank, it was different. President Mike Hastings, himself a cowman, had had a brother run out of Wapiti Basin by Jonathan Gimmit. Being a good banker, though, he was tactful.

"We've done business together a

long time, Mr. Gimmit. Now, it seems reasonable that, as long as I consider Sam a good risk——"

Jonathan cut in, "Yes or no, Hastings?"

"Well, now, you know we want to keep your account. But, on the other hand, a bank is a bank. We can't refuse a man money if he's got the collateral to secure his loan. That wouldn't be right."

"Then, you won't do it?"

"But, Mr. Gimmit——"

Jonathan stood up. "All right," he said.

Hastings sprang from his chair. He looked worried. "We can't afford to lose your account. You know that as well as I do. But we can't do what you ask. Why don't you go home and think it over?"

Without answering, Jonathan strode out of the office. Hastings touched his arm. "We ain't in a position to pay it all to you right now," he said anxiously. "You'll have to give me a few days, to call in some loans."

Jonathan's eyes were like ice. "I want it now."

"You'll get it," snapped Hastings, the cowman getting the better of banker. He called to the astonished cashier to close Mr. Gimmit's account. "He thinks he's a king!" he muttered, as he went back into his office. "But his luck won't always hold. Just watch, and see."

Jonathan drew a check for the amount of his balance—it ran well into five figures—and deposited the money in the Stockman's Bank, across the street. This was contrary to his business judgment, for this bank was not considered exceptionally strong. But Jonathan would make it strong. He would become a director, and drive Mike Hastings to the wall. No man had ever yet successfully opposed Jonathan Gimmit.

So ended the first skirmish in his fight against Sam. That night he had Al Pearce, his foreman, come to his office.

Pearce, a wiry, still-eyed little man who had grown gray in the service of the Anchor, shook his head when he heard Jonathan's curt orders.

"I can't do it, Mr. Gimmit," he said. No man ever referred to the rancher as "boss" or called him by his given name, as cowboys have a way of doing. "I been knowin' Sam ever since he was a yearlin'. Learned him how to set a hoss and throw a rope and braid a quirt. And you want me to burn him out?" Slowly he shook his head. "Reckon you better give me my time."

**J**ONATHAN leaned back in the chair. It occurred to him that Pearce was standing just where Sam had stood this morning. He said, "Business is business, Pearce. Do I understand you refuse to obey my orders?"

The old foreman looked him straight in the eye. "I been with you nigh onto thirty year, Mr. Gimmit. I ain't ever refused to carry out orders, no matter what they was. But I can't fight Sam."

Jonathan picked up a pen and wrote a check. He handed it to the foreman. "Pearce," he said, "if you hadn't been with me so long, I'd make you obey my orders. I give you fifteen minutes to pack up."

Pearce took the check and went out.

Sitting there, waiting for the fifteen minutes to pass, Jonathan found himself looking at the photograph that lay upside down on the desk top. He reached up and got the picture and held it in his hands. Beyond the dark, grace boy he saw another picture: a slender woman with liquid eyes black in her fair skin.

He had never seen to the bottom of her eyes. She was holding the boy who, even then, he had known would have little of the Gimmit in him. He searched his memory for more such pictures. There were none, only Sam standing there in the doorway. Jonathan sank deeper in the chair, a vague sense of loss upon him.

His gaze lifted to the clipper ship model, and gradually his face became again like rock. His father had been captain of such a ship, and so had his grandfather. Hard, stern men who ruled their decks with hands of iron. He, too, was born to rule, to be master of men. He had known when he settled in Wapiti Basin, he would become its ruler. No man could stand in his way. His son, who had married into a family of nesters, must go as all nesters.

Jonathan stood the photograph in its accustomed place as if it were only a piece of cardboard, and went to the bunk house. Al Pearce, bent under a heavy load of blankets and duffel bags, passed him without speaking. In silence, too, the cowboys looked at him. There were fourteen of them in the long, bunk-lined room—lean, muscular, quiet-mannered men who lived to ride more than they rode to live.

Jonathan Gimmit faced them from the door. He said: "Saddle up! There's a nester over on Hat Springs I want burned out."

No one answered. No one moved. Jonathan wasted no time. He knew how to handle men. Swiftly he stood before them, a droop to his thick shoulders. His flinty eyes flashed from one still face to the other. "Who's leader here?"

A big loose-jointed man with a rabbit lip broke the silence. "We ain't got none, seein' Al's gone."

Jonathan walked up to this man,



who sat on the edge of his bunk. His square fist shot out, driven solidly to the man's jaw. The cowboy looped backward, hitting the wall as if thrown against it. He lay there.

**H**ALF a dozen angry men leaped up, their features suddenly taut. Jonathan faced them. If his eyes held any expression, it was scorn. The riders backed away, lips moving soundlessly.

"Saddle up!" Jonathan ordered. "Burn that nester to the ground."

He turned and left the bunk house. Power, he told himself, flexing his knobby biceps—that is what counts! The inborn ability to make men do your bidding. The stinging of his knuckles was pleasant to him.

He lay awake, looking toward Hat Springs. About midnight came a faint glow, mounting swiftly into the blackness. It was not the first time a midnight fire had lighted Wapiti Basin. Jonathan went to sleep.

At breakfast, the cook informed him that all the cowboys had quit. There was not a man left on the ranch except him and the chore boy. Another thing the cook said: The boys had not burned out Sam. They had merely set fire to some brush over near Hat Springs.

Jonathan rode to Buffalo. What had happened was so much water under the bridge. He was not given to reflection. But he held the future in his two strong hands. Through a bartender he sent out a call for riders. Next day, and for several days thereafter, the riders came. A hard-bitten lot, gunmen all. Al Pearce would not have hired a man of them.

At the head of seven of these silent, grim riders, Jonathan rode toward Hat Springs. The night was still, warm for May. Frogs chattered from the sloughs, crickets grated from the sage. Along the streams

willows and cottonwoods lifted swelling buds. Spring was coming to the basin. But spring, to Jonathan, meant only calf round-up.

The riders filed down the side of a draw, whose farther wall faded into the star haze. Near the mouth of the draw, houses and a barn bulked dimly against the back drop of the night. This ranch had been Tom Smith's. He had been a hard man to beat, but Jonathan had beaten him. He would beat any man who disputed his authority.

Halting his riders a short distance from the thicket that surrounded Hat Springs, he rode on toward the little shake cabin some nester had thrown together. He stepped from his horse and knocked on the door. It swung open, and Sam stood there, a six-shooter in his hand. Behind him was Mary, the hazel-eyed, honey-haired girl who was his wife. Old Tom Smith, a slant-eyed terrier of a man, glared ominously at him from a corner near the cookstove. His gnarled fingers gripped a rifle.

Just for an instant, Jonathan had the feeling that he looked upon a beautiful vista from a far, far distance. He said, "Samuel, I want you to come home with me."

Sam Gimmit only looked at him. "You've had long enough to think it over. Come on home."

"After what you've done?" Sam's lean face darkened with anger. "I'm staying right here in my claim—with my family."

**M**ARY smiled. She came and stood beside Sam and put a plump arm around him. Old Tom levered a cartridge into the firing chamber of his rifle.

"I can't let you stay here, Samuel," Jonathan said. "If I do, other nesters——"

"I'm not a nester! I've filed on

this claim, the same as you did when you came to this country. You, nor anybody else, is going to run me off."

"I'm sorry, Samuel," said Jonathan. And he was. For he knew his boy was a Gimmit no more; he belonged to Mary Smith. "I'll give you time enough to get out."

Sam said thickly: "You just try to put me out."

"Ain't you got a drop of blood in you, Gimmit?" cried Tom Smith. "Drivin' out your own son, like he was a common thief!"

Jonathan did not look at him. He said to Sam, "I'll give you an hour to get your stuff together. My men have the place surrounded. One hour, Samuel." He glanced significantly at the girl, then got on his horse and rode away.

"No shooting," he told the seven men who slouched in their saddles, smoking. "They'll be gone in an hour."

They saw that he was right. Two men were in the little corral, saddling up. A woman was carrying things from the house into a wagon. Jonathan sat his horse apart from the riders. He had known Sam would not fight, because the girl was there. He lifted his gaze to the stony ramparts reared against the sky. Strong they were, as he was strong.

Yet, even in the fullness of his power, he was haunted by the picture of the honey-haired girl with her arm around Sam. No one had ever put an arm around him. Always he stood alone. Alone against the world, asking favors of none—this was Jonathan Gimmit. He would have it no other way. Still, the picture of those two haunted him. And he had the sensation of trying to reach something that slipped forever out of his grasp.

After a while, a heavily loaded

wagon creaked westward toward the mountains. A small string of cattle and horses followed, flanked by two riders. Jonathan snapped out orders: "And choke up the springs. Fix them so no other nester will ever come here."

The destroyers moved forward. Jonathan waited until flames burst through the roof of the house. Next day he tore down the buildings on the ranch that had been Smith's and hauled the lumber away.

His reign as absolute monarch of Wapiti Basin lasted three and a half years. They were years of drought and blizzards such as the cow country had not seen since '86. On this morning in late August, Jonathan sat his horse, looking out over the parched floor of the basin. No ribbon of water gleamed in all that brown expanse. Beyond the quivering curtains of heat waves, the mountains rose stark blue, unreal—a burned-out kingdom.

**H**EARING the beat of hoofs, Jonathan turned in the saddle. Here came the men he was waiting for: Mike Hastings and two others, appraisers appointed by the sheriff's office. They were coming to appraise Anchor cattle. The Stockman's Bank had failed, carrying with it the last of Jonathan's fortune. During these hard years, he had been forced to borrow much money, plastering note after note on his holdings. Unless he could produce enough cattle to pay off some of these notes, his ranch would be foreclosed. Hastings had been appointed receiver for the defunct bank.

The four men rode across the basin in silence. The tinder-dry grass cracked under the hoofs of the horses. Jonathan had ordered his riders to round-up his cattle and

hold them in the bend of Big Beaver Creek. It was noon when the creek was reached. Neither cattle nor riders were there.

Hastings pointed to the broad trail stretching across the flat toward a saddle in the mountain wall. He said: "You've got no cattle, Gimmit—not a single hoof! Those gunnies you call cowboys stole 'em. I've known all along they were stealing you blind. Reckon everybody knew about it, but you."

Faced with disaster, yet Jonathan noticed the "Mister" left off his name, and he resented it. He was still boss of Wapiti Basin. His eyes bored into the banker's like points of dull fire.

"How many head you want?"

Hastings answered: "Two thousand."

"When?"

"Well, let's see. To-day's Wednesday. They've got to be in the Buffalo yards before the bank closes Saturday."

"They'll be there." Jonathan shook out his reins and rode into the trail of his cattle.

Mike Hastings and the appraisers looked at one another. They turned their horses, back the way they had come. They would have helped anybody except Jonathan Gimmit. He had lived by the sword. Let him die by it.

Jonathan rode hard, stopping only to rest his horse between midnight and dawn. He was without food, but felt little hunger. Sunup of the second day found him climbing the divide that marked the boundary of his vast domain. He looked upon the valley spread beneath him as at some strange new world. It had never occurred to him that there were other cattleranches in this part of the country. Tree-bordered streams wound through this valley;

there was green grass, and cattle. Drought had not struck heavily here.

Jonathan trailed his cattle down the mountainside. He knew, by the freshness of the tracks, he was gaining fast on the thieves. There were at least four thousand head in the herd, he was confident. Such a large herd could not be forced. Also, he did not think the rustlers would make another daylight drive, for there were ranchers living near.

**A**BOUT the middle of the morning, he rode into a small canyon whose floor was ground beneath many hoofs. Water was but now seeping into the tracks. The cows were not far ahead. Jonathan spurred his jaded horse into a lope. How he could recover the herd from ten desperate gunmen and drive two thousand head to Buffalo by day after to-morrow, he did not know. He only knew he would do it.

The throaty boom of a six-gun rolled down the canyon. A volley of shots instantly followed. Jonathan drove in his spurs. The shooting was incessant. There was a low undertone of thunder, too. A sound every cowman knows—stampeding hoofs. They surged around an angle in the wall, those wild-eyed cattle, sweeping down on him like a cloud-burst. He quit his horse, fell, and leaped against a wall. A hot streak of pain ripped across his back. He drew himself up the wall a few feet, and no more horns touched him.

He clung to the rocks, waiting in an agony of suspense for the crazed herd to thunder past. If there was more shooting, he could not hear it. No doubt, some of the valley ranchers had attacked the rustlers, or they were fighting among themselves. The stream of cattle was thinning out now. They had passed too quickly for four thousand head,

Jonathan knew. He dropped to the floor of the canyon.

A rider careened around the shoulder of the wall, his hair flying, a gun clutched in his hand. An Anchor man. He pointed the gun at Jonathan's head, and fired. The bullet passed through Jonathan's hat. Jonathan fired back, and the rider sagged down in the saddle, his horse running from under him. Jonathan drove his legs up the canyon. He was a heavy man, not accustomed to violent exercise. There was a loud roaring in his ears.

The canyon opened suddenly into a large, steep-walled hollow. Men were fighting up there at the farther end. To the right, three men were holding several others under drawn guns. The same glance showed men lying on the ground, some moving, some still. Some one shouted at him; he did not stop. A terrific jar struck his shoulder, spinning him around. He plowed on toward the end of the hollow.

Through a swirling haze he saw two men, locked in awful embrace, plunge from a ledge to the earth. They rolled apart. One lay still. The other, twisting over, raised his gun. Jonathan had no time to think. He flung himself in front of that man on the ground and fell upon him, driven down with the explosion of the gun.

Jonathan looked up, blinking. Men crowded round him. There was Al Pearce, and several more of his old cowhands. And Tom Smith, dour as ever. Then Sam was bending over him.

"You saved my life, dad."

**J**ONATHAN gripped his hand. He would never know how it all had happened. He asked: "How many head of my cattle did they have, Samuel?"

"I didn't take much notice. About a thousand, I guess." Sam looked up at the old Anchor foreman. "What you think, Al?"

"They was between seven and eight hundred head," Al Pearce answered.

Jonathan Gimmit was bankrupt.

"One of the boys come up on 'em cached in this hollow," Sam explained. "We got the whole crowd." His voice became grave. "Think you can ride? My ranch is just a few miles away."

They lifted him gently to the saddle and led his horse into the green valley. His sickened eyes were fixed on a log house in a grove of cedars. Even at this distance he saw flowers about the door. They laid him in a cool bed, and Mary spread the covers softly over him. Tom Smith tiptoed into the room, leading a little boy by the hand. The boy hesitated, then toddled close to the bed. His eyes were brown, and very large.

"You my gramp, too?" he piped.

Something hot and strange stirred in Jonathan. He felt the tiny fingers in his hand, and he held them.

"My name is Jon'than," the child confided.

Tom Smith whispered to the boy, to come away. Jonathan waited in terrible suspense for the child's answer. And when the warm fingers tightened on his, he knew he had lost none of his power. Only, this was a different power, such as he had glimpsed, at times, from a far distance. But it was out of his reach no longer. His glance passed from the boy's golden head to Sam and Mary standing in the door, then to Tom Smith. And he smiled.

Jonathan was old, he was crippled and bankrupt. He had nothing. Yet he realized, for the first time in his life, what it is to be truly rich and powerful.



**W**ELL, well, everybody seems to be present tonight! Put another stick of wood on the fire. Remember that old saying, "First the worst, second the same, last the best of all the game"? So we'll have our brickbat first.

There's another fellow here who doesn't seem to care for "Shorty" McKay and Sheriff Cook. His moniker is L. R. Bushnell, of 201 East Fifth Street, Houston, Texas. Let's hear what he has to say:

**"BOSS AND FOLKS:** I have been buying and reading Western Story Magazine for fifteen years and have enjoyed most of the stories, but I'll have to put in a kick about Ray Humphreys's Sheriff Cook and his deputy. If there was one thing real about them, they would be passable. That bird Ray is about the worst that ever happened. If you will tell him to get some of his characters to kill Cook and Shorty, I would be better satisfied."

Now we just have one thing to say about this fellow's criticism. He says that the stories are not real. As

a matter of fact, when Ray Humphreys isn't pounding out stories about Shorty McKay and Sheriff Cook, he is working very hard, rounding up criminals and making the city of Denver a safer place in which to live. And every one of his stories is based on an actual experience.

Now comes Charles L. Enwall, of Ovid, Colorado, who joins the side that is in favor of Mr. Humphreys's stories. Hombre Enwall doesn't agree with that other brickbat thrower of a few weeks past, S. B. Arthur. Stand up, Charles, and get your "mad" off your chest.

**"BOSS AND FOLKS:** I have read the letter from S. B. Arthur, 1491 Eutan Place, Baltimore, Maryland, in the May 23rd issue of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, wherein he slashes crossways, endways, up and down, at your magazine, authors and readers.

"Well, now let me say: 'Mr. Arthur, ain't that nice? You have been invited by the publishers to give your views, and you gave them in no uncertain terms. It was good

reading, and by all means you should try and get onto the regular staff of authors for this magazine. No doubt, though, your choice of reading does not come under the head of Western style stories. Yet you are only one of perhaps many millions of folks who read, and rest assured that the millions who read good old Western Story will not change their minds because of one who disagrees on writers of short stories. If these many millions didn't enjoy Western Story Magazine, Ray Humphreys and a lot of others would be out of a job, and that would add a lot to the people who need work to-day. Now Mr. Humphreys happens to hold a job in Denver of special U. S. investigator or its equivalent, and perhaps he can make it without writing for Western Story. But what do we care for the special investigator part, so long as Ray Humphreys will write us a short story now and then. I've begun to believe he does know how to write one, too. Darned if I don't.'

"Now, Mr. Humphreys, that's enough about you, for I want to ask Mr. Arthur a few questions and maybe answer them for him, for I don't want to laud you too much, or it will make Mr. Arthur mad, really.

"The first one is: Did you know, Mr. Arthur, that Western stories are written in Western or frontier fashion and do not intend to carry the high-falutin' expressions or English that some writers give us? They are truly Western, and give us a true picture of how the West was conquered. Mr. Arthur, have you ever been in the West, where men were men, and still are? We will admit that all of the West is not what it was fifty years ago, but the Western stories to-day still depict

the real West, and those who do not live there can read about it in Western Story Magazine, for the authors simply relive in mind from time to time, the West as they know it, so that those of the younger generation can read about it. Have you seen an Indian, Mr. Arthur, or a real old-time cowboy in action, or a herd of wild cattle, or a large spread, with trimmings and all? Well, I have lived in the West, or west of the Missouri River, for sixty-one years and never saw an Indian in war paint or a round-up branding iron used, or a real old-fashioned cow spread with its thousands of acres of grassland and its thousands of heads of cattle, and I've been around some, too. But I know they do exist, and I enjoy living their lives over, as it were, through Western Story Magazine.

"Western stories are mostly fiction, of course, but based on actual happenings. Guns and the rope were law and judge in the early days in the West, and still are in some remote places, and the stories which carry the true Western spirit must feature them.

"There are tough hombres, 'whole hog or none,' crooked guys, and square shooters, and what not in the West. No story can ring true unless it can bring out some, or all, of these characters in the narrative.

"Now, the way I figure it, Ray Humphreys's stories are the comic strip of Western Story Magazine. I'll bet Mr. Arthur reads every comic in the Sunday papers, and I class them for little kids, and even some kids don't like them.

"So now, Mr. Arthur, come across and join the big audience, and enjoy Western Story Magazine with us. We're broad-minded enough to forgive you."

# MINES AND MINING

By

J. A.

THOMPSON



This department is intended to be of real help to 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 answered in this department in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

**F**EW lost-mine stories have gripped the imagination of prospectors and treasure-seeking adventurers as has that of the famous, fabulously rich Lost Adams Diggings in New Mexico. Letters of army officers formerly stationed at desert forts in the heart of the fierce Apache Indian country bear testimony of Adams's bonanza diggings. Some refer in considerable detail to the Indian massacre in which five of the seven members of the Adams party were slain. Their cabin was burned to the ground.

Only Adams and one other escaped. These two, after traveling south for ten days through the desert wilderness and suffering untold hardship, were found near the headwaters of the Gila River by an army scouting party reconnoitering from old Fort West, some twenty-five miles north of Silver City.

Adams himself lived to over ninety years of age. He spent much of his life trying to get back to the

ashes and charred timbers of the burned cabin in an effort to locate the sixty thousand dollars in gold and nuggets reputedly hidden beneath the cabin floor at the time of the slaying of his fellow prospectors.

This treasure and the diggings themselves have been apparently lost forever. Lost at least until some lucky prospector again locates the little gulch, the cabin site half-way up it, and the remnants of the stone corral in which Adams and his party kept their stock previous to the Indian raid.

Fort Wingate, about eleven miles east and slightly south of Gallup, has been the starting-out point of many searchers for the lost diggings. Other parties have started out from places farther east and traveled south in the hope of intercepting the diggings in that wild, untenant section of the Southwest.

For years men have tried vainly to relocate the Lost Adams Diggings. Fact or fable—and some of the letters and records extant seem

to preclude the likelihood of the story being entirely fiction—the yarn seems to exert an almost irresistible fascination on all who hear it. We have just received an unusual and interesting letter concerning the diggings from an old-time prospector now living in Florida.

“As an old miner and prospector, the mining articles in Western Story Magazine interest me greatly. Now occasionally some of us old heads cut loose and revive some of the old stories about the many lost mines of the Southwest. Favorite among them is that of the Adams Diggings in New Mexico.

“Over a period of many years I have read scores of articles about those diggings. But now I am going to relate one of the most fantastic tales about them you ever heard. I am no crackpot, either. Just a practical, experienced prospector.

“On September 2, 1932—the date is indelibly stamped on my memory—I had a very vivid dream about the Adams Diggings. It made such a strong impression on my mind that, when I woke up at two a. m., I got up and wrote down the main points of the gold area as revealed to me in the dream.

“Having no maps with which to verify my ‘dream’ bearings, and curious to check on them, I sent to the United States Geological Survey and obtained maps of the precise section involved. When I received the maps and compared them with my notes, everything dovetailed, although I had never actually been over that particular terrane. It all seemed like familiar ground.

“Distances, direction, even contour lines tallied perfectly. This amazing coincidence aroused my curiosity still further. Although I tried to laugh the whole thing off

as a wild dream, my subconscious mind would not let me. I actually dropped the work I was engaged in at the time and laid plans to make the trip—to satisfy myself, if nothing else.

“Before the time came for starting out, misfortune hit me, and it was necessary to have both my legs amputated above the knees. My prospecting days are over. From now on, they can only be a memory.

“The whole thing may sound wild. But I wonder if there is any one willing to spend a week of his time—to gamble a week against the fortune in gold that lies at the Adams Diggings.

“I’ll send full particulars and the map plainly marked, with no strings attached. I don’t ask, or want any one to spend any sizable amount of money on this ‘Believe It or Not’ yarn. But if there’s any one game enough to give my dream hunch a twirl, I’ll be glad to supply the details. If Adams really did find something, and other records seem to substantiate his story, his terrible experience with the Indians, the horrible privations of his flight through the desert must have confused his idea of the proper directions. I believe a man on horseback should be able to ride it to the diggings in three days from the town of Grant.”

That’s more than a proposition. It’s almost a challenge to red-blooded, adventure-minded Western Story readers. If any one is further interested in this old-timer’s dream hunch about the true location of the Adams Diggings, just address Florida Old-timer, care of the Mines and Mining Department, Street & Smith’s Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Inclose a stamp for forwarding your letter to him, and we’ll see that he gets it pronto.



# The HOLLOW TREE

Conducted by

## HELEN RIVERS

It is a natural impulse and it is a good impulse to desire to wander and to roam. Not too much, of course. But the desire to go places and see things should be and is in all of us—in all of us who amount to anything, at least, for traveling educates us, and changing our geographic location often is of great benefit to health, mind, and economic well-being. A wise man once said, "A rolling stone gathers no moss," but a wiser man, we think, added, "but a standing pool stagnates."

If you are one who would travel, it is a mighty good thing to have man's best asset along the way, and at your destination. We mean, of course, friends.

If you would like a friend or friends in a certain section, write to Miss Helen Rivers, who conducts this department, and she will put you in touch with readers who want to correspond with folks in your part of the world.

It must be understood that Miss Rivers will undertake to exchange letters only between men and men, boys and boys, women and women, girls and girls. Letters will be forwarded direct when correspondents so wish; otherwise they will be answered here. Be sure to inclose forwarding postage when sending letters through The Hollow Tree.

Address: Helen Rivers, care The Hollow Tree, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.



**C**HECHAHCOS who are looking for a rugged, out-back country will do well to trek the trail to Idaho. "Old-timer Davidson" will direct the *stamped*, folks.

### DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Hello, folks! I want to tell you-all about a gold ledge, and I hope to interest about half a dozen of you hombres in joining the outfit.

In 1910 my pardner and I were working in Idaho on a placer claim when a Chinaman came to us and offered us a partnership in a quartz mining claim if we would help him find it. He had a map of the location. These diggings were worked about 1885 by both old-timers and Chinamen. Well, we pulled out for the old diggings and had no trouble finding the old claim from

the description on the map. This rich ledge had been found when prospectors were digging in the cracks of the bed rock for the placer gold, about three feet down. The ledge was three pickhandles wide and the gold ran from the size of a wheat kernel to the five-dollar nuggets. The ore was a reddish color, free-milling, and very rich. It seems that the Chinamen who originally had the diggings had worked the old placer in the daytime, which was very poor ground, and at night had worked the ledge. They had had lookouts and had carried the rich ore to their cabin. They had cleaned up from five hundred to a thousand dollars a night. So you can see how rich the ore was in the ledge. Before daylight they would cover the ledge with brush and rocks and then at their usual time in the morning would work the placer ground.

My pardner and I and the Chinaman landed on the claim in the evening, and in

the morning started to work. We ran a cross cut in the creek bottom in the loose gravel, which averaged about eight feet to bed rock. When we hit bed rock, we found that it pitched off again, but could not get much deeper because the water came in faster than we could bail it out. Along the edge of the bed rock, where it dipped, we found this rich ore which the Chinamen must have thrown there and covered up. For they carried only the richest ore to their cabin. We could see the gold in all the samples, which was very soft. We pounded some of the ore and panned it, and had a ring of small coarse gold over halfway around the pan. All had the same results. The lowest assay I had taken was a hundred and twenty-five dollars to the ton. We had to give up on account of the water and lack of a grubstake, so pulled out to town where my pardner lived.

The State Highway is only seventeen miles from the claim, and from the highway there is a dirt road that a car can navigate. You can drive right on the claim.

I would like to have about six men grubstake this trip and go up there with me, but I will not tackle it on a shoestring. Loose gravel can be scraped off the bed rock for a channel with a scraper, or a drag line, and a small gas pump will handle the water.

OLD-TIMER DAVIDSON.

Care of The Tree.

Carl sure will welcome your correspondence.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a soldier boy in the far-off Philippines. And I get very lonely at times. I would like to hear from any one from the States. I will send snaps of my journey while traveling with Uncle Sam. I have traveled over thirty-five thousand miles.

My favorite sports are boxing, football, and tennis. My home State is Tennessee, but I've been away from home six years. I am twenty-three years of age. All of you ink slingers sling a little my way. You won't regret it.

CECIL O. HUBBARD.

Battery B, Sixtieth C. A. (A. A.),  
Fort Mills, Corregidor,  
Philippine Islands.

This Indianan wants Western Pen Pals.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am planning on a vacation trip West, soon, and I would like to find some friends in the States west of the Father of Waters! I am a young married man who would like

to hear from any young married couple who would care to exchange letters. I have been West via both car and motor cycle, and I am now aspiring to go once more, and in not so much of a hurry! I am a printer—composer—by trade, an ex-motorcyclist, and pretty much of an out-of-doors fellow.

I'll also welcome letters from any of the single fellows who care to write.

ROLAND MERCER.

351 Clay Street, Hagerstown, Indiana.



You chechahcos will not want to miss the opportunity of getting in touch with Old-timer Davidson, who soon is to make a trek to a quartz claim with half a dozen good pards. Wear your friend-maker, membership badges, hombres, and get in line.

Twenty-five cents in coin or stamps sent to the Hollow Tree Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring you either the pin style or the button for the coat lapel. In ordering be sure to state which you wish.

Hombres, you-all will welcome this new member from Ireland.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I would like to make my appeal for the friendship of correspondents living in any part of the world. I am a stamp collector in a very, very amateur way, in case that may be of interest to any of you readers, and I would gladly exchange duplicates. While I am anxious to welcome any correspondent, I am particularly keen on those who would exchange information relating to the locality and country in which they may reside—customs, industries, places of interest, and opinions on world matters generally, if they so desire. In return I would very gladly supply any news in relation to this lovely island. I am of the opinion that pen friendship on such a basis can do much to create a spirit of better understanding among the peoples of all nations, by forming, as it must, a source of first-hand knowledge through congenial friendship.

WILLIAM F. SMITH.

116 James Street, Dublin, W. 4, Ireland.

From the most southern city in the world comes this New Zealand girl.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am seventeen years of age, and I live with my parents on a dairy farm in Southland, the most southerly Province in New Zealand. I live twenty-one miles from Invercargill, capital of Southland, which is the most southern city in the world. Southland is noted for its most wonderful mountain scenery and bathing beaches.

My hobbies are horseback riding and dancing, and I am learning to play the piano. I will gladly exchange photos with any one, from anywhere.

MARJORIE YOUNG.

Section 6, Otahuti, Invercargill, R. D.,  
Southland, New Zealand.

A good home awaits some lad.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

My wife and I have no children. We are desirous of giving a home to some boy between the ages of twelve and twenty—preferably twelve to fifteen, but we would consider one older. The boy must have some knowledge of farm life and be of good disposition. We would be good and kind to him and treat him as our own, and would expect him to treat us as a good boy would treat a parent. We are fifty years old. Any one interested please write in care of The Hollow Tree.

J. O. S. OF IOWA.

Care of The Tree.

Here is a Florida home for some one.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a widow, forty-eight years old. I live in a log cabin on a large lake called Lake Winott. I have three large log cabins with fireplaces. I am all alone, and it seems to me that the old Holla could find some one who would like to live here. I would like to correspond with folks who are interested in the country life. We have good fishing and hunting here, and the climate is unsurpassed. I have lived in forty-two of our forty-eight States and feel qualified to judge. And—it would not require a large income to live here.

L. WINNIFRED MYERS.

Lake Winott, Hawthorne, Florida.

Would-be pardners, this is for you.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am on a place here in western Oregon where the fish and game are plentiful. I am wondering if I might find a partner who likes the outdoors as I do and who would like to run a sort of combination hunting lodge and fur farm. It's going to take a lot of hard work and a little time, but I am confident we could make a swell little home and a nice living out of it. I can work out whenever it's necessary to make a grubstake.

So come on, any of you fellows or young married couples who are interested. I might add that I am thirty-one, and a lover of the outdoors.

M. N. POND.

McMinnville, Oregon.

This is an unusual request, folks.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am sending this S O S in order that I shall be able to meet the owner of an ocean-going yacht or sailing ship who would place his vessel at the disposal of an expedition to central Africa, and accompany same. Will those able to help me kindly write as soon as possible, giving the fullest particulars in the first letter? This will be my third African expedition.

MATTHEW MCKAY.

66 Cumberland Street, Workington,  
Cumberland, England.

It should give you pleasure, prospectors, to have this lad's eager attention.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Surely there are some prospectors down in the Southwest who are interested in writing to a fellow north of their usual beat. I can tell you anything at all about our neck of the woods. I am interested in hunting, fishing, and prospecting. I have done plenty of all but the one thing I want most—prospecting. So come on, boys! Limber up your pens and give a would-be prospector something to think about. I'd be glad to hear from British Columbia, too. I'm only eighteen, but please don't let that stop you!

FRED BAKER.

17 Haslemere Apts., 559 Elice Avenue,  
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.



# WHERE TO GO And How To GET THERE

By JOHN NORTH

We aim in this department to give practical help to readers. The service offered includes accurate information about the West, its ranches, mines, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. We will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to us, for we are always glad to assist you to the best of our ability.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

**N**EW MEXICO, with its lofty mountains and mysterious deserts, its color-splashed mesas, its bottomless lakes and petrified forests, offers a long list of scenic attractions to the tourist. Here, too, in the wilderness areas of this vast land, the sportsman finds some of the finest hunting and fishing in the West, while the mild, yet invigorating, climate of the Sunshine State attracts the man in search of health.

It is the celebrated climate com-

bined with the agricultural possibilities that are influencing Harry P. of Syracuse, New York, to consider a change of location to that part of the Southwest.

"I'm a farmer by preference as well as training, Mr. North, but am not as young as I was once, and want for the rest of my life to live and work in a warm, mild climate. Naturally, therefore, I'm attracted to the Southwest and have been seriously considering New Mexico for my future home. The particular section I have in mind is Grant

County. What can you tell me about the irrigated farming districts in this region as to the cost of water, size of farms, and produce raised? Can you tell me also what crops are raised in the Pecos Valley, and if land prices are reasonable there?"

You'll find, Harry, that the irrigated farming districts in Grant County, although limited in area, offer interesting opportunities with good prospects of profits. In the west central part of the county is the valley of the Gila River, an irrigated district of about 5,000 acres of land. The Gila River rises in the high peaks of the Mogollon range and furnishes water for irrigation purposes.

There is no water investment, each farmer doing his share of work necessary to maintain the ditches. The land is rich alluvial deposits, mostly of great depth, and highly productive. Farms range in size from 40 to 400 acres. The staple crops are alfalfa, barley, oats, wheat, potatoes, and corn, and the alfalfa never is adequate to supply the local demand. Family orchards produce an abundance of fruit of high quality. Silver City, county seat of Grant County, offers a substantial market and can consume all the essential products of the Gila district.

In the eastern part of the county is the valley of the Mimbres River, where soil, water, and climatic conditions are about the same as those

in the territory just described and where the same character of crops are raised. Under normal conditions the towns of Santa Rita and Hurley, and the Veterans' Administration Hospital at Fort Bayard, offer a ready market for Mimbres Valley products. The Mimbres Valley extends from Grant into Luna County of which Deming is the county seat.

The principal crops in the Pecos Valley are in the order of their values, cotton, alfalfa, oats, corn, and sorghums. Eleven or twelve

thousand bales of Acala long staple cotton are ginned annually at the five gins serving this section. This practically is a one-variety cotton district. Buyers of the staple are becoming aware of this advantage and are sending their representatives here from mills as far west as the Carolinas.

A premium of half a cent is the usual price paid for this staple cotton. Land in the Pecos Valley sells at reasonable prices and on easy payment terms.

It might be well also for you to investigate the unique agricultural section around the city of Roswell, Harry, where a number of fertile irrigated farms are watered from a great subterranean water belt that gushes forth in hundreds of artesian wells.

Well, it is not the location for a ranch home that James R. of Wilmington, Delaware, is in search of, but a land where he can find plenty of outdoor sport and adventure.

## SPECIAL NOTICE

### ARE YOU TENTING TO-NIGHT?

There's a tent for every brand of camping, and in order to be as comfortable as possible, be sure you have the proper type tent for your particular trip, whether it be spending a night by the roadside or a month in some far-away wilderness. If in doubt, the editor of this department will gladly enlighten you. Address your inquiries to John North, in care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

"I'm bound for northeastern Manitoba this summer, Mr. North, where you may remember gold was discovered not so long ago in the

New Mexico, a region of great scenic beauty, with endless facilities for outdoor life, welcomes the tourist and the sportsman. It also offers much to the man in search of a location for a home. For addresses from which road maps, descriptive literature, and information about farm homes in the Sunshine State may be obtained, write John North.

vicinity of Island Lake. Can you tell me how to get to this section? I hear it is blessed with genuine Western atmosphere and that I'll find trading posts, Indians, and innumerable streams for canoeing and fishing. Is this true?"

Yes, sir-ree, James. It's as true as the multiplication table. The usual means of entry to this section in summer is by way of Norway House at the end of Lake Winnipeg, which is reached by steamer from Selkirk on the Red River, twenty-three miles north of Winnipeg. Norway House, a picturesque spot, with its old trading post and Indian boarding school, is the distributing point for four outposts, namely Island Lake, God's Lake, Oxford House, and Cross Lake, at each of which will be found the usual trading posts, traders, trappers, and Indians. It is in the territory served by these outposts that the angler will find the best fishing.

For the canoist this section is a sort of forest paradise, as a network of waterways provides an easy means of travel. Boats may be engaged at Norway House, and picturesque canoe routes lead north to Cross Lake and northeastward to the Nelson River, God's Lake, and Island Lake, the latter a two-hun-

dred-mile cruise. The maze of waterways include many historic canoe routes used by the pioneer traders and trappers plying between Norway House and York Factory on Hudson Bay.

Well, each man has his own pet outdoor recreation, but Jasper D of St. Louis, Missouri, confesses that a vacation to him mean halcyon days under canvas.

"To me, Mr. North, camping offers unequaled charms, and with the approach of summer comes the craving to escape from city streets into the green shadows of a forest. I'm going to Colorado in a couple of weeks and want to pitch my tent

Readers who are planning a trip across the international boundary to the north will welcome a copy of the pamphlet, "How to Enter Canada." In it will be found a summary of the regulations regarding entry of automobiles, pleasure boats, tourists' outfits, and travelers' baggage. John North will gladly tell inquirers where a free copy of this helpful leaflet may be obtained.

at Trappers Lake in the White River National Forest. Can you tell me how to reach it?"

Trappers Lake may be reached by rail to Yampa, thence 25 miles by wagon road and trail. It may also be reached by rail to Rifle, thence auto stage to Meeker, and wagon road. This body of water is one and a half miles long and three-quarters of a mile wide. Phenomenal catches of trout have been made here, and big game is abundant in the mountains roundabout.

Hombres planning summer treks into the wilderness should take along a fly dope to keep these pests from spoiling the outing, and John North has two good recipes which he'll gladly pass along to readers upon request.

# GUNS AND GUNNERS

By  
CHARLES E.  
CHAPEL

First Lieutenant, U. S. Marine Corps

Address inquiries regarding firearms, marksmanship, and hunting, to Lieutenant Charles E. Chapel, "Guns And Gunners," Street & Smith's WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE, 79 Seventh Ave., New York, N. Y., and inclose a stamped, addressed envelope.



**S**HOTGUN-BARREL length is a popular subject with our readers. The usual question deals with the advisability of shortening the barrel.

This is purely a personal matter that must be decided by the gun owner, but there are certain scientific facts that govern the results he will get.

Since the ideal shotgun barrel has a length of 40 calibers, the 12-gauge gun should have a barrel 29.16 inches long. This approximates the American standard of 30 inches. Shortening the barrel cuts down the average velocity at the rate of  $7\frac{1}{2}$  foot-seconds for each inch removed from the barrel. Thus, a 28-inch barrel will lose 2 times  $7\frac{1}{2}$  or 15 feet per second average velocity; a 26-inch barrel will lose 30 feet per second average velocity. In hunting, this loss is not of any great consequence, but it is still there.

The maximum velocity in the 12-gauge gun is obtained with a barrel slightly over 29 inches long, as we have seen. Increasing the length cuts down velocity because of the friction between the pellets in the outside of the charge and the bore

of the gun. An additional loss is from the tendency of the pellets to string out after leaving the muzzle.

If you point your gun, instead of aiming, sighting plane means little, but the man who takes careful aim will be interested to learn that he gets an additional six inches of sighting plane from a slide-action repeater, or an auto-loader, on account of the length of the receiver.

Here we answer a few of the thousands of letters we received this week.

California police quick on draw.

Police Officer Frank Winslow, of Salem, California, saw Albert Pullman, of San Francisco, burglarizing a cigar store. Winslow ordered Pullman to "put them up," but, instead, the youth reached for a pistol in his pocket. Winslow brought him down, dead, with two shots. We are tired of hearing about criminals beating the police to the draw, and know that the Salem citizens are proud of their fast-shooting officer.

## The caliber .270 on game.

F. P. K., Minneapolis, Minnesota: A few years ago critics maintained that the caliber .270 rifle was better for game than the old reliable .30-06, because of flat trajectory and shocking power, but this is true only if the shots are well placed, and do not encounter bone. Hunters say that the paunch, or the back of the front leg, are vulnerable spots.

## Air rifles and air pistols.

A. W. P., Fredericksburg, Virginia: Air rifles and air pistols are too dangerous to be given to children as toys and not accurate enough for preliminary marksmanship practice, but they do afford a little amusement to adults on a camping trip far away from civilization.

## Firearms for ladies.

Miss L. B. N., Lincoln, Nebraska: The popular arm for ladies is thought to be either a .22 or a .25-caliber automatic pistol which can be carried inconspicuously in the hand bag or pocket, but the police of most cities strongly disapprove of such weapons on the grounds that they are seldom used against actual criminals, but are often fired in a fit of anger when a larger gun would not be available.

## Ancient arms.

H. R. T., New Orleans, Louisiana: The age of your muzzle loader has little to do with its value. Condition, type, make, model, and scarcity are only a few factors determining value. There are many flintlocks, both guns and pistols, for instance, which are much older than the Paterson Colts, but one Paterson Colt is worth a farm wagon full of flintlocks.

## Child shooters.

C. D. R., Evanston, Illinois, writes: "What is the earliest age for teaching my children to shoot?" We have replied that twelve years is a sensible, average age to allow children to practice with the .22-caliber rifle, *under adult supervision*. No beginners, of any age, should be allowed to fire any gun without expert guidance, and certainly children are not exceptions to the rule.

## Guns on the stage.

B. L. C., Duluth, Minnesota: Be careful with guns on the stage. Never fire a cartridge loaded with a bullet. Even after removing the bullet, take out most of the powder and be careful not to point the muzzle where the flying wad will do any damage. Amateur theatricals are often more dangerous than the battlefield.

The U. S. Rifle, (Enfield), Model 1917, Caliber .30, in excellent condition, is sold to citizens of the United States, by the government, for \$8.85, under certain conditions which will be explained to readers sending a stamped, addressed envelope.



# MISSING

This department is offered free of charge to our readers. Its purpose is to aid them in getting in touch with persons of whom they have lost track.

While it will be better to use your name in the notice, 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.

Now, readers, help those whose friends or relatives are missing, as you would like to be helped if you were in a similar position.

**WARNING.**—Do not forward money to any one 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.

**BARLOW, FLOYD.**—His last known address was Oregon City, Oregon. He was formerly a member of the Depot Brigade at Camp Lewis, Washington. His help is needed to obtain pension for a widow and three children. An old buddy, Robert E. Lee, Box 118, Star Route, May Town, Olympia, Washington, is asking the readers for assistance in locating this man.

**ROBINSON, W. A.**—He was born in Illinois. In 1893 or '95 he was employed in the Santa Fe Railroad yards at Denver, Colorado. Would be glad to hear from any one who knew him. Please address Mrs. Algie Wooten, Box 446, R. 7, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

**DEVIN or DEVINE, JAMES.**—About ninety years ago he took a boat sailing from Londonderry, Ireland, to America. Was at one time employed on a boat operating between Buenos Aires, Brazil, and England. Later he was made mate. His father and mother were from County Tyrone. James's mother died when he was very young, and his sister Bridget was brought up by their Grandmother McGettigan, at Urney, Tyrone. The surviving child of Bridget would like to know if any descendants of her Uncle James are living. Please address Mrs. Catherine Bryan, 12 Ivy Terrace, Londonderry, Ireland.

**MORMINO, MARK A.**—He left St. Augustine, Florida, in 1926, and the last heard from him was on January 12, 1931, when he was in Lee, Massachusetts. Has dark-brown hair and eyes. Is about five feet ten inches tall and weighed one hundred and seventy pounds. Complexion is ruddy. Small scar on one cheek. Is a high-school graduate and had several years of college. Mark, don't you remember your family? We need you. Even the slightest information would be gratefully received, as this is a matter of grave importance. Any one knowing his whereabouts or having any news of him, kindly write to his sister, Mrs. Evelyn M. Pomar, 3578 Riverside, No. 3 Jacksonville, Florida.

**NOTICE.**—I am anxious to locate an aunt whose maiden name was Ruth Scribner. My mother was Myrtle Scribner. There was another sister, Bessie. The family lived near Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Soon after my mother married my father, they moved to Cando, North Dakota. I was born there in 1915. Aunt Ruth used to visit us there, but I cannot describe her, as I was too young to remember details. The last time we heard from her was in 1924, when mother died. I want so much to get in touch with her. Any one knowing her, please write to Mrs. N. J. Hendricks, Valley Springs, California.

**ROBERTS, GEORGE B.**—In the spring of either 1892 or '93 he left his home three miles south of Sheridan, Oklahoma, and has not been heard from since. I was only six years old at the time, so I cannot be sure of the exact date. In the last forty-four years I have had many reports concerning him, but none of them led to direct contact with him. If living he would be ninety years of age. When last seen he was driving a team and wagon. He had blue eyes, brown hair, and wore whiskers. Was five feet five inches tall and weighed about one hundred and fifty pounds. Any information would be greatly appreciated by his son, Constable C. G. Roberts, Box 25, Union, Oregon.

**FARMER, RALPH.**—When last heard from he was living in Reno, Nevada. He is a former member of Depot Brigade, stationed at Camp Lewis, Washington. Would appreciate his assistance in arranging for pension for a widow and her three children. Please communicate with your old buddy, Robert E. Lee, Box 118, Star Route, May Town, Olympia, Washington.

**SCOTT, LIZZIE MAY.**—She is my sister, and I have not seen her since I was a little girl. About forty-three years ago she left her home in Jackson, Michigan. If living she would be about sixty years of age. Any one knowing anything concerning her, kindly write to Mrs. Alice Scott Hawkins, R. 2, 3329 Seymour Road, Jackson, Michigan.

**BREWER, ZEL.**—At one time he owned a cattle ranch near Canon City, Colorado. He had a daughter Annie, who was a widow with three children: Sadie, Ollie, and James. Annie had some very close friends named Somerville, who lived in Canon City. Any one knowing the whereabouts of any of these persons, please write to Mrs. Algie Wooten, Box 446, R. 7, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

**DERMONT, OLLIE.**—Daughter of Mrs. Annie Dermont, of McAlester, Oklahoma. Ollie was last heard of in 1903 or 1905 from Enid, Oklahoma. Have heard that she married a Jack Collins of Enid. Would be pleased to hear from her or any one knowing her whereabouts. Please address Mrs. Algie Wooten, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

**ATKINSON, HENRY C.**—He joined the army in 1924 and was last heard from in 1930. At that time he was at Mason Lake, Washington, but he intended going to Alaska. Would be thirty-three years of age. Has medium-brown hair and eyes. Your mother is sick and longs for some word from you. Even the slightest information would be gratefully received by Mrs. Earl Atkinson, R. 1, Shawsley, Virginia.

**KEISER, CASPER.**—In October, 1933, he was employed as a cook at the Chicago World's Fair. His last known address was 2829 Prairie Avenue, Chicago, Illinois. He intended going to Canada. Has dark hair and eyes and is six feet tall. Any one knowing his whereabouts, please communicate with Robert Suter, Box 233, Odenton, Maryland.

**HALL, GEORGE.**—He is my brother. Would be about thirty-three years of age. He is married, and the last I heard he had three children. I have also a sister and another brother. We were orphans and became separated. My sister's name is Marie Guillie. She married a man whose home was in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. My other brother is Sherman Chamberlain. Any news of them would be deeply appreciated. Please address Pernie May Collins, General Delivery, Bessemer, Alabama.

**MATHEWSON, SAMUEL.**—Who has been missing since December 24, 1935. When last heard from he was living on Church Street in Toronto, Canada. Want him to know that I am still waiting for him at head of lake. Wish he would write or send me some word. Any one knowing his whereabouts, please write to Mrs. Samuel Mathewson, care of Mrs. A. P. Davis, R. 1, Kirkfield, Ontario.

**JOHNSON, ROY W.**—Was last heard from in 1926. Used to live on a claim near Gunnison, Colorado. Would be about thirty-eight years of age. Has brown hair and blue eyes. Is five feet nine inches tall and weighed one hundred and eighty-five pounds. An old friend from Winfield, Kansas, would be happy to hear from him. Any one knowing his whereabouts, please advise Marjorie, care of Western Story Magazine.

**BOX.**—My father was Herman Box. I have never known my mother's given name, as my father was killed in private orphanage and given in adoption. I was born in Elmira in 1914. Somewhere I have a brother Burt. My given name is Dorothy. I want so much to find my mother and brother. Any one knowing anything concerning either of them, please get in touch with Mrs. Mary B. Arnold, R. 3, Towanda, Pennsylvania.

**RICHARDSON, LONNIE DENNIE.**—In 1923 he was in Bristow, Oklahoma. Has not been heard from since. He will be twenty-nine years of age on August 4, 1934. Has dark-brown hair, dark eyes, and complexion. His hobby is drawing funny pictures. I, his father, and his sister Jacinta and brother Raymond long to see him. Any one knowing his whereabouts, please communicate with Oliver Richardson, Chadwick, Missouri.

**WAITE and MONTGOMERY.**—Would like to hear from any of the grandchildren or great grandchildren of John Waite and Martin Montgomery. Lois Waite Montgomery was the daughter of John Waite. The Montgomerys had three sons and three daughters. One son, Charles, lived in Iowa. The daughters were Kate, Eunice, and Marrick. My grandmother, Marrick, was born in 1818, in Roxbury, New York. She was twenty-two years of age when the family moved West to Harrisburg, now Sterling. That was in 1838. She married Westly Robinson on April 27, 1847. They made their home in Clyde Township, Illinois. Kate Montgomery married Tyler Martin of Sugar Grove, Illinois. Eunice married Zachariah Dent of Clyde Township. My father is the only child of Marrick and Westly Robinson. He is now past eighty. Would appreciate hearing from any of the family. Please address Mrs. Joe Johnson, 1528 Clinton Street, Joliet, Illinois.

**PRICKETT, DAVE.**—On July 2, 1913, he was heard from in Edwardsville, Illinois. He was then shucking corn for W. M. Voss. Would be fifty-five years of age. Any news of him would be much appreciated by his niece, Mrs. Ruth Ross, 3360 North Sherman Drive, Indianapolis, Indiana.

**HIGGINBOTHAM, J. J. and son.**—The latter is generally called Buddy. Are believed to be traveling in Central Texas. They had a Model T Ford touring car without top, cut down like a roadster, and with a two-wheeled trailer fixed on rocking bolster. Usually have several dogs: fox or rat terriers. The boy is fair with freckles and sandy hair. His eyes are blue-gray. Is twelve or thirteen years of age. Very small for his years. Likes Western pictures, especially Buck Jones. He may be selling needles or pencils. The last heard of them they were in Kaufmann, Texas, where they were picking cotton. That was in the fall of 1934. They are my father and brother. I am most anxious to hear from them, as my father is in poor health. Any news of them would be gratefully received by Mrs. S. D. Royal, 611 East Elm Street, Hillsboro, Texas.

**ELLIS, HENRY.**—When last heard from he was in Corwin, Kansas. That was in 1900. His wife's given name was Edie. Their oldest son's name was Ross. Their home was in Central Oklahoma. The last known of Henry Ellis he was teaching school. Want to get in touch with him or some member of his family. Any one knowing anything of any of them, kindly advise G. H. Creech, 2815 Hastings Street, Dallas, Texas.

**THAYER, EDWIN.**—When last heard from he was living with his stepfather, Ace Chokkel in Waldron, Arkansas. That was in 1930. In 1925 he was living in Booneville, Arkansas. Often spoke of going to Canada. Would be about twenty years of age. Has gray eyes. An old friends is anxious to get in touch with him. Write to Walter, care of Western Story Magazine.

**STANLEY, EDNA, ROSELLA, and GRACE.**—They were born in Cottage Grove, Oregon. Rosella is twenty-seven years of age. Edna is about twenty-five, and Grace is probably twenty-two years old. They were placed in an orphanage in Portland, Oregon, and given in adoption. A family named Kennedy took Rosella and changed her name to Cecelia Kennedy. Edna, when last heard from, was working in La Grande, Oregon. That was in 1927. She is supposed to have gone from there to Portland. Kindly send any information regarding them to H. E. Tower, 608 High Street, Pullman, Washington.

**JONES, CHARLES BOYD.**—In 1909 he was heard from in San Francisco, California. Before that he was a Methodist minister in South Dakota. His father was also a Methodist minister and was in Baltimore, Maryland, from 1907 to 1918. Charles Jones is my father. He would be fifty-two years of age. His brother, David Carroll Jones, is fifty years old. He married Gladys Milner, of Brooklyn, New York. Another brother, John Paul Jones, is forty-eight. In 1918 he was living in Detroit, Michigan, with his wife and son Blair. There were three girls in the family: Mary, Caroline and Elizabeth. Mary was teaching school in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1918. Caroline married a Frenchman named De La Motte in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 1918. Would be glad for information regarding any of the aforementioned. Please address P. L. J., care of Western Story Magazine.

**NOTICE.**—My old friends in Butte, Montana, can reach me at 87-50 One Hundred and Eleventh Street, Goodhaven, Long Island, New York, if they care to. Fred Eckhardt.

**ISELY, JOHN R.**—Formerly with the U. S. Army Signal Corps and stationed at Washington, D. C., prior to February 1, 1934. In March, 1934, he was living at 365 Lincoln Place, Brooklyn, New York. Have not heard from him since that time. He was rather despondent then, and it would be a relief to know how things are going with him. Any one knowing his whereabouts, kindly advise R. A. M., care of Western Story Magazine.

# MEN\* WANTED

for **TEA and COFFEE ROUTES**

MAKING REGULAR  
WEEKLY CALLS *Pays*

**UP TO \$60.00**  
A WEEK



If you want to make money you can start right out on a fine-paying Tea and Coffee Route of your own. My sensational new starting plan produces big profits *at once*—up to \$60.00 in a single week for full time, and up to \$6.50 in a day for spare time. The business is pleasant, you set your own hours, and the opportunity for making big money is really exceptional.

## Permanent Routes Pay Big Weekly Cash Income

Everybody uses Coffee, Tea, Spices, Flavoring Extracts, Baking Powder, Flour, Cocoa, Canned Goods, and other foods *every day*. They **MUST BUY** these things to live. You simply take care of a regular route right in your locality—make calls on your customers once a week and keep them supplied with the *things they need*.

You handle all the money and pocket a big share of it for yourself. You keep all the profits—you don't divide up with anyone. Hundreds of housewives in many localities are waiting, right now, to be served with these nationally famous products.

### Make Money Fast!

Look in the box on the right. See how fast these men and women made money. They used this same plan

**ALBERT MILLS, Route Manager**  
1884 Monmouth Avenue Cincinnati, Ohio

## \* Ladies Wanted, Too!

Many ladies have had unusually good success with Tea and Coffee Routes. They say that it is possible to make as much as the men do—up to \$10 in a day and more for full time, and as high as \$6.50 in a day for spare time. Don't hesitate because you are a woman. Send for this information. I will be glad to send it to you free.

### FORD CARS GIVEN

To encourage prompt service to their customers, I give Ford Cars to producers as a bonus over and above their regular cash profits. The same opportunity to get a brand-new Ford Car is offered to you the moment you start. The car becomes your personal property with no strings attached.

that I will now send you. You read it; then if you see the possibilities, I'll help you start without asking you to risk a penny of your own money.

### I Send Everything

Just as soon as I hear from you I will send you complete details—tell you all the inside workings of this nationwide Tea and Coffee Route Plan. I will explain just how to establish your customers; how to service your route to make money every week. The way I plan it for you, you give only 5 days a week to your route, collect your profits on Friday, and have all day Saturday and Sunday for vacation or rest. The plans I give you took years to perfect. You know they must be good because they have brought quick help to hundreds who needed money.

## FREE—WITHOUT OBLIGATION

Don't send me a cent. Just rush me your name and address on the Free Offer Coupon printed below. I will mail you all the facts Free, and even prepay the postage. Then you can decide for yourself. There is no charge for these plans now or at any other time and you positively will not be obligated to go ahead unless you see big possibilities for money making, fast. Send me your name on the coupon or a penny postcard. By this time next week you can be on your way to big money. Don't waste a minute—send this coupon at once.



### POSITIVE PROOF Of Big Earning Possibilities

Can you make money with a Tea and Coffee Route? Yes. Here's a way to make it, **FAST!** If only three or four people had made money as fast as this, you might call it an accident. But scores have done it! Here are only a few—if space permitted, I could print **HUNDREDS** of exceptional earnings. Wouldn't money like this give you a thrill? Cash every week to spend—more where that came from—ample money for the necessities of life and still some left over for the luxuries.

	Amount Earned in One Week
F. J. Mosher	Wyo. \$ 60.00
Wilbur W. Whitcomb	Ohio 146.00
Clare C. Wellman	N. J. 96.00
Geo. W. Wright	Maine 63.75
A. Pardini	Calif. 69.09
Norman Geisler	Mich. 129.00
Albert Becker	Mich. 100.00
Gunson R. Wood	N. Y. 65.00
Lamar C. Cooper	Mich. 90.00
Helen V. Woolmington	Pa. 45.00
*Ruby Hannen	W. Va. 73.00
Hans Coordes	Neb. 96.40
Lambert Wilson	Mich. 79.00
W. J. Wray	Kan. 78.15

These exceptional earnings show the amazing possibilities of my offer. Don't let this opportunity pass—send me your name today for **FREE** Plans.

**SEND NO MONEY**

**MAIL COUPON *Now***

**ALBERT MILLS, Route Manager**  
1884 Monmouth Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio

With the understanding that your plans for operating my own Tea and Coffee Route will not cost me anything or obligate me in any way, send me the facts about your Route System, showing exactly how I can get started at once making up to \$60 in a 5-Day-Week without risking a penny of my own money.

Name.....  
Address.....  
City..... State.....  
(Please Print or Write Plainly)

*H*eigh ho and cheerio!  
We'll get off when the tide gets low.  
What do we care — we're high and dry  
And Chesterfields — They Satisfy.



Chesterfield's *Mildness* and *Better Taste*  
give smokers a lot of pleasure