STREET AND SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY

10¢

MAGAZINE NOV. 25 1939

NOV. 25, '39

FOOL'S GOLD

by HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

also SETH RANGER - HARRY F. OLMSTED - L. L. FOREMAN

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by S. J. E.
(NAME AND ADDRESS SENT UPON REQUEST)

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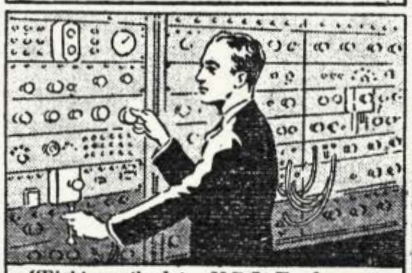
"When I finished training I accepted a job as serviceman with a Radio store. In three weeks I was made service manager at more than twice what I earned in the shoe factory."



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J. E. Smith, President
Dept. 9MD, National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.

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Dear Mr. Smith: Send me FREE, without obligation, your 64-page book "Rich Rewards in Radio" which points out Radio's opportunities and tells how you train men at home to be Radio Technicians. (Write Plainly).

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CONTENTS FOR NOVEMBER 25, 1939 VOL. CLXXVIII NO. 3

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DEPARTMENTS

COVER BY DAVID BERGER

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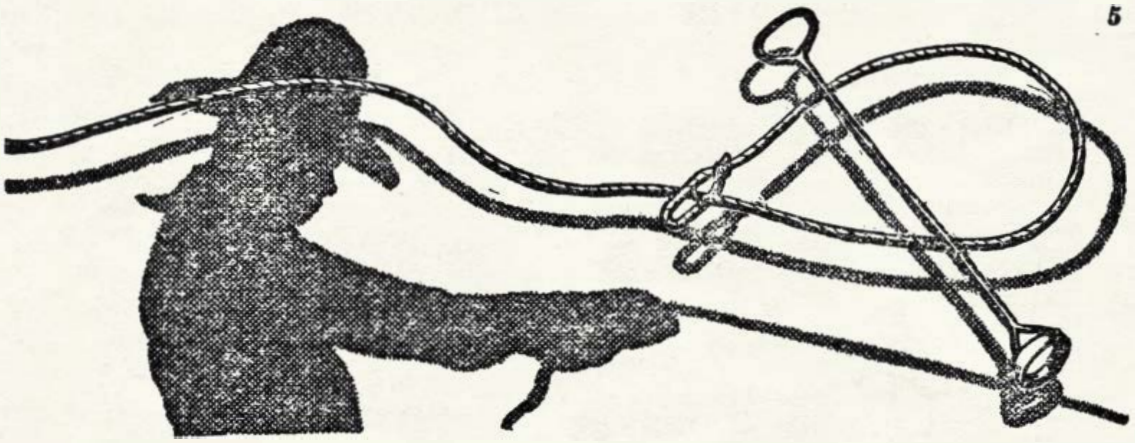

The Roundup

SETH RANGER, whose novel, WOLF LAW, is featured in this week's issue, has sent us an interesting account of a recent discovery on the northwestern tip of Alaska.

Helge Larsen, curator of the National Museum in Copenhagen, Denmark, and his party, found the ruins of an Eskimo village near Ipiutak at Point Hope which is believed to be more than two thousand years old. The ruins were made up of more than two hundred dwellings which had been buried for many centuries. They were arranged in four long rows and lacked the usual long entrance passageway so typical of the Eskimo manner of construction.

The party also found many stone slabs, covered with crude inscriptions and primitive art work, harpoon heads, arrow heads, and other tools which differed greatly in design and ornament from the known Eskimo implements. But, probably the most unusual discovery of all was that of bone needles, proving that this ancient race were able to sew hides and skins together for clothing. Near the village was a burying ground, and the skulls found there indicate that these long-ago people were of Eskimo stock.

Mr. Larsen has, for nine years, been making explorations in the Arctic, but most of his work has been in Greenland.

Knowing Seth Ranger's flare for the unusual in stories of the Far North, we can safely promise our readers some thrilling stories, for he informs us that he is working at the moment on a story which is set in this unusual background.

In your next Western Story—

Seems as though every batch of mail the postman brings has in it at least one query from someone who wants to know when we're going to publish another Cherry Wilson story. The answer, at long last, is that we've scheduled an outstanding full-length novel by this author for next week's issue. The title is BRAND OF THE THUNDER GOD, and it's the story of the enduring bond between a man and his horse that came to dominate the lives of both in a strange and exciting way. We're sure you'll find it a gripping, unusual yarn.

We've also corralled a string of stories and features wearing the brands of such old favorites as Frank Richardson Pierce, Gunnison Steele, B. Bristow Green, Jack Sterrett, Luke Short, and many others. Be sure to rope yourself a copy of this big issue!

READ

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THE

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MAGAZINE

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

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

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

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

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

★ **Athlete**

ON SALE NOVEMBER 11th

WOLF LAW

By SETH RANGER

CHAPTER I

GUILTY!

NOTHING seemed very real to Nat Donovan these days. True, he followed the normal routine of living. He ate three times a day, but he was never filled. Each night he went to bed, but he slept poorly and had weird nightmares. There were moments when he was almost convinced he had died in the bitter arctic cold with old Pete Ferry, and that he was now passing through a hell on earth to pay for his sins. When he reached this frame of mind he knew he was close to madness.

And yet the former realities he had associated with life no longer existed. He seemed to be moving in a trance. Certainly this man, sitting in the courtroom charged with Pete Ferry's murder, could not be the old Nat Donovan. The Nat Donovan who had come to Alaska so filled with youthful hopes two years ago. Nor could the beautiful creature sitting aloofly at the district attorney's table be Jane Ferry, old Pete's daughter, the girl who had promised to marry him.

Nat shook himself, as he had done hundreds of times during the trial, but the sense of unreality persisted. The district attorney was addressing the jury, driving home points that stirred the flames of mob law in the breasts of many of those packed tightly into the courtroom. Nat lifted his gray eyes to the jury and saw only hate and loathing in the half dozen faces. His gaze shifted to the humans filling the seats and lining the walls. Again he met only hate.

No, this wasn't real. It couldn't be. But the deputy marshals with the sawed-off shotguns were real enough. They stood as a barrier between Nat and an outbreak of mob law. The judge had spoken to them seriously of their sworn duty, lest they relax their vigilance for one moment.

The judge had reminded the crowd, too, that the deputies had been chosen with care and that they were men who would kill, if need be, to preserve the law.

"You know the story," the district attorney was saying, "one of the saddest, most tragic and vile in the North. This defendant, Nat Donovan, came North two years ago to make his fortune. On the steamer he met Jane Ferry. Donovan at the time was twenty-one. Miss Ferry, eighteen. He is a rugged, quite handsome man. She is lovely. A romance developed. On arriving in Alaska, Miss Ferry introduced him to her father, Pete Ferry. Later, when they became engaged, Pete was the first to give them his blessing."

Nat held his breath. This was hard to take. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Jane's beautiful eyes fill with tears. She caught her breath sharply, then regained her composure.

"Pete Ferry, you will recall," the district attorney continued, "had a fur trading post on the Siberian coast. He had received an order from a Hollywood furrier for Russian sable pelts, two hundred thousand dollars' worth. Pete spent a fortune in trade goods to obtain the fur."

The older traders nodded. They had sought the same order, but had lost out since they lacked Pete's contacts among the Siberian Eskimos.

"Word traveled along the Siberian coast by mukluk telegraph that Pete had accumulated the furs," the district attorney said. "An official named Lettov heard of it. Lettov

was what we would call a racketeer. He decided to confiscate Pete Ferry's trading post. Word of this proposal reached Pete's ears, also by mukluk telegraph. He cached the sables and was making plans to escape with it when Lettov appeared. The post, and all in it, was confiscated and Pete was given an umiak and a week's supply of food and told to get out. He did."

"I think the jury is familiar with all this," the judge remarked quietly.

"I merely wanted to refresh their memories," the district attorney said. "It explains why Pete suggested that the defendant and himself attempt to cross the Bering Strait ice in midwinter. The fur, worth a fortune, was rightfully his, but was obtainable only through stealth."

"You may proceed," the judge ruled.

"We don't know all that happened up there on the ice," the district attorney continued. "The defendant testified that the ice broke suddenly and they lost most of their provisions. He testified, too, that Pete Ferry insisted he take the provisions and attempt to return to the American side."

"And he did, too," Nat Donovan shouted. "He had some fool Eskimo idea about the old dying so the young could carry on. I tried to talk him out of it. And when he refused to listen to reason I tied him up and—"

"Silence!" the judge said sternly. An angry murmur passed through the crowd.

"It's my life that's at stake," Nat retorted. "I tied Pete up, believing I could make it to the American side dragging him on a hand sled."

"You testified to that on the stand," the judge pointed out. "You will not interrupt again."

"We'll shut him up, judge," a miner yelled. "With a length of stout rope!"

"Get the rope! Get the rope!" A score began the cry.

Tense nerves snapped as the crowd took up the demand. The deputy marshals stood there, alert, ready to handle any disturbance. The bailiff pounded for order and the judge shouted, "I shall order the room cleared unless this is stopped."

Gradually the courtroom relaxed.

"WE don't know what happened out there on the ice," the district attorney continued, "but Nat Donovan hadn't been in the North long enough to learn its code, the code that man shall sacrifice for man. Instinctively he went back thousands of years to the law of survival, to the law of fangs—the wolf law. Something most of us manage to keep down welled within Nat Donovan's breast, and he determined to survive, as the young wolf determines to live at the cost of the old wolf's life. The government's surprise witness, the Eskimo, Sapsuck, told the rest of the story in his simple, honest way."

The members of the jury nodded. Sapsuck had seen Nat overpower old Pete Ferry and lash him to the sled. The native had watched from across an ever-widening lead in the ice and in the excitement Nat had not noticed him. Later the Eskimo's view had been blotted out by a sudden snow flurry.

At that moment Nat, according to *his* story, had gone a short distance to locate a possible avenue of retreat over the broken ice. When he returned to where he was positive he had left the sled, there was no trace of it. Eventually he made

his way to the nearest American settlement and told his story. It was months later that the marshal in the region arrested him on a murder charge.

"I shall ask Miss Ferry to please leave the room now," the district attorney said. His voice was gentle, solicitous.

Jane looked surprised, then turned pale as she realized why she had been asked to leave. She rose and walked down the space cleared for her in the crowded aisle.

"You will remember Sapsuck testifying that when the snow flurry ended he heard the snarl of wolves on the opposite side of the lead," the district attorney continued. "He looked across and saw the wolves tearing at the remains of a human object lashed to a sled. Sapsuck is an educated Eskimo. He put in several years on an American whaler and is a Christian. Feeling that the remains of the white man on that sled should be buried decently, he waited until the lead closed, then made his way over the rough ice and gathered up a number of grim items."

The district attorney removed a cover from a box. "I call your attention to the government's exhibits. The skull of Pete Ferry. A leg and thigh bone, all bearing the marks of wolves' teeth. Buttons, which his daughter testified were from his clothing. And, lastly, his nugget watch chain. Sapsuck carried these to a trading schooner caught in the ice and asked that the master bury them. The master, as you know, turned them over to the nearest government officer."

Nat Donovan listened dully as the district attorney drove home the various points of damning evidence. No, this wasn't real. This was a nightmare and presently he would find old man Ferry shaking him and saying, "Roll out, son. Days are short and we've got to make the most of 'em."

The plea which Nat's attorney made showed that he was discouraged by the weakness of his client's case. "This wasn't murder, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, it was a horrible accident," he said. "The defendant's only thought was to prevent Ferry's sacrifice of his life. He lashed him as a measure of protection, never dreaming that wolves ranged so far onto the ice. He made his mistake when he left the sled and a sudden snow flurry blotted out his vision. New to the North, new to the ways of the ice, he couldn't find the sled again. And that is the whole tragic story. Had he been an experienced man, he never would have left the sled. And yet, from the chechahco's viewpoint, it was important to conserve strength, so why use it up dragging a sled until he had located a definite avenue of retreat?"

There was more, all of it futile. Every man on the jury believed Nat had been governed by wolf law during that tragic hour. His regrets had come too late.

The jury went into the jury room and remained just long enough to take one ballot. They filed out and the foreman handed the verdict to the clerk, who passed it up to the judge.

"Guilty!" announced the judge. A loud cheer went up from the crowd.

"Do you wish the jury polled?" the judge asked the defense attorney.

"No," Nat answered, speaking for himself. "There is no question that the verdict represents the convictions of each juror. I request sen-

tence be passed at this time. I have nothing more to say."

The judge considered matters for several long minutes, then said, "Stand up!" Nat got to his feet. "It is the judgment of this court," the judge said solemnly, "that you be taken to the McNeil Island penitentiary and there hanged by the neck until you are dead. And may God have mercy on your soul."

The marshal stepped forward. "If the court please," he said, "the steamer *Taku* is anchored in the roadstead. For the prisoner's safety I feel he should be taken aboard. If we wait until her next trip it will be necessary to maintain a considerable guard at the jail in view of public feeling."

"I agree with you. The necessary orders will be issued," the judge declared.

THE marshal waited until the room was cleared and the crowd scattered, then he escorted Nat to jail. The wind was blowing and a heavy surf was booming on the beach. Nat doubted that any boat could go through the surf to the *Taku*, riding at anchor three miles offshore.

Apparently others shared his doubt, because those who had remained in the vicinity of the jail finally drifted away. At sundown the surf quieted somewhat, but it was still too rough for the tugs. Nevertheless, the marshal appeared at Nat's cell.

"Come on, Donovan, we're going," he said crisply. "Your things are packed."

"Through *that* surf?" Nat asked in astonishment.

"Yes. The *Taku* can't delay sailing any longer. The coast guard is sending a power lifeboat," the marshal answered.

With guards walking in front of him, Nat was hurried to the creek bank. More guards brought up the rear.

A sailor was holding the lifeboat close to the landing. The crew wore life belts and the man at the wheel had a lashing ready to fasten should occasion arise. "In you go, Donovan," the marshal ordered.

Nat jumped aboard and went into a forward compartment. Then he looked startled and muttered an apology. Jane Ferry was sitting on an opposite seat. Her face was expressionless as she looked at Nat.

"Wasn't expecting you, Miss Ferry," the marshal said. His voice plainly indicated he would have taken his prisoner to another compartment had he known.

"I didn't want to wait for the *Taku's* next sailing," Jane explained. "The coast guard offered to put me aboard."

The lifeboat leaped ahead under full power. Nat watched the shore drop astern for several hundred yards, then the snug craft swung and took a sea over the bow.

The lifeboat approached the *Taku* cautiously. The gangway was down, but water was dripping from it. Two sailors stood on the landing, ready to lend a hand; and above, the rail was lined with passengers.

Coast guarders mounted the deck house, held Jane's arms, and when the next wave lifted the lifeboat high she jumped. The waiting sailors caught her and she went up the gangway. Nat made it on the next wave and the marshal followed.

The marshal opened a door below decks and Nat entered. "Ship's brig, eh?" Nat observed bitterly. "Never thought I'd come out this way when I headed North two years ago, full of hope and damned-fool dreams."

CHAPTER II

THE KEY TO FREEDOM

THE Bering Sea was rough and Nat Donovan stayed in his bunk and fought off seasickness. Odors came from the galley and assailed his nostrils. A steam pipe kept his cell excessively hot, and there were other odors from the steerage to combine with the heat. The porthole light was dogged down tight to keep water from entering the cell. It was barred, though even a small man wouldn't have been able to get through it.

Days passed without incident. Three times daily the marshal and a steward appeared with Nat's meals. The food came from the first-class table and was good, but Nat ate it without relish.

Later there came a steady calm and Nat guessed that the ship, instead of crossing the Pacific and entering Puget Sound via Cape Flattery, had crossed the Gulf of Alaska and was following the protected waters of the inland passage.

The faint strains of music in the evenings told Nat the passengers were dancing. It brought back memories that hurt, the nights he had danced with Jane in his arms; the shipboard friendship that had ripened so swiftly into love. He wondered if she were dancing now. Probably not. The tragedy which had struck so swiftly had left its mark, a mark that would take time to blur.

Sometime that night the ship docked. Nat looked through the porthole and saw a stamp mill clinging to the side of a sheer mountain, and he heard the thunder of stamps. This was Juneau. He had his bearings now.

Just before the ship sailed in the small hours of the morning, Nat, looking through the porthole, saw Jane walk up the gangplank after a quick trip uptown. She carried newspapers and magazines. An attentive young man followed her and Nat felt a dull twinge of jealousy.

There was dancing again that evening, but the music was often drowned out by the blasting of the ship's whistle. There were periods when the echo leaped back almost before the whistle ended. Then the engines stopped turning over and the ship went along on her momentum while those on the bridge calculated their position.

Suddenly Nat heard someone fumbling with the lock. "Who's there?" he asked sharply. No one answered. He heard a key turn, but the knob did not move and after a moment or two Nat crossed the cell and turned the knob. The door opened. He stuck his head out and looked quickly up the passage. There was no one in sight. A couple of corridor lights burned dimly and snores came from a ladder passage leading to the steerage.

"Damned queer!" Nat muttered. But he wasted no time on speculation. A dozen desperate plans flashed through his mind. He might stow away in a boat and escape when the steamer docked. He rejected that plan instantly. The ship would be searched from stem to stern.

Nor could he launch a boat. The important thing right now was to get out of the cell. He doubted if anyone aboard except the steward, the marshal and Jane knew him by sight. Yes, there would be one more—the unknown person who, for some reason, had unlocked the door. He thrust things he might need into his pockets, buttoned up his coat to the ears and stepped into the passage.

He followed it aft, his heart pounding with suspense. It missed a couple of beats when he heard voices, then the passage was suddenly blocked by two girls. Their fur coats were wet with spray and fog and their cheeks glowed. They gazed at him with frank interest, then squeezed past.

"We appear to have a new male," one whispered to the other. "Where has he been keeping himself?"

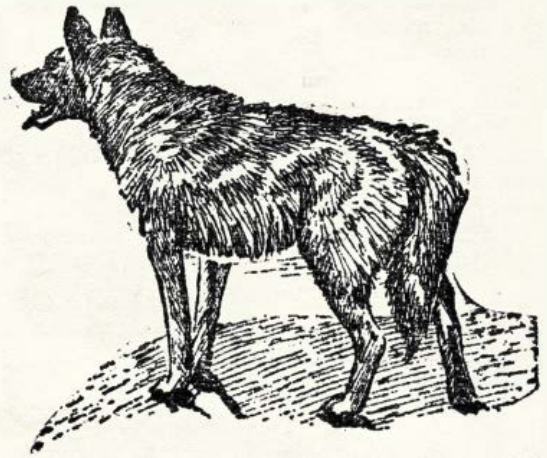
Nat walked aft and stood by the flagpole and its drenched halyards. He thought it was possible that the person who had turned the key in the door might join him, but no one came.

Nat stepped between two boats and stared at the fog, wondering how long a man could live in the icy water. Not long, unless he were very strong. Even then he would have to have dry clothes, and don them as soon as he left the water.

He looked speculatively at one of the boats, removed the lashings and peered inside. Nothing. He inspected several before locating a tarpaulin. Then he returned to the main deck and tried several doors. Eventually he found one unlocked. A man slept soundly in the upper bunk. The lower bunk was unoccupied.

Nat pulled a lifebelt from under the berth, thrust it under his overcoat and returned to the deck again. Standing between the boats, he stripped, put on the life belt, then wrapped everything in the tarp and rolled it tightly. He lashed it with pieces of small ropes and left the knots so that a slight pull would untie them. That was necessary because his fingers would be numb later on.

He waited a moment to make sure the few people on the boat deck were not watching him, then he jumped, clinging tightly to his bundle. The shock of the icy water almost drove the breath from his body. He went deep enough to hear the pound of the propellers in his ears, then came



up. When he bobbed to the surface the *Taku* was just disappearing into the fog.

NAT began to swim. The shore must be close, because the last echo had leaped back, and he could now hear the wash of water against the rocky beach. He swam toward the sound, swam with dogged persistence.

The cold ate to his very marrow. He lost all sensation in his arms and legs, but oddly enough they continued to obey his will. Once he stopped and listened. The wash from the steamer no longer broke against the shore, but he could hear her whistle echoing wildly along the timbered ridges.

Now Nat could hear water gently washing dead ahead. He swam toward the sound and suddenly his foot struck a submerged rock. Barnacles tore into his flesh. He tried to keep his feet near the surface, swimming easily so he would not strike a rock.

He felt a rock under his free hand and climbed out. He tried to stand,

then fell back weakly. He rested for a while, then got to his feet. He was shaking violently now. He got to the highest point on the rock and found it wet. The tide was low now and the rock would be submerged at high tide.

Nat unwrapped the tarp, dried off and dressed. He put on his overcoat and stamped about until something like warmth returned. Dawn, gray and somber, came at last, lighting the fog overhead, but hardly breaking through. The tide was coming in, climbing slowly but surely toward his feet. He might be able to stand and keep his head above water at high tide, but there was nothing to be gained. And if a passing ship saw him, there would be questions asked.

He undressed again, wrapped his clothing in the tarp and slipped from the rock. The shore was about a hundred yards distant. He could see it now, though when the fog thickened as it rolled down the passage, there were moments when it was blotted out.

Nat crawled to the scant beach completely spent, dried off again and dressed. All the time he was trying to figure out some practical place. Someone had once said, "A man can escape from almost any jail in Alaska, but where can he go? Sooner or later he must come into a town to board a steamer, then he'll be picked up. You can't walk out of Alaska without a lot of grub; you can't swim or drive out. You take a steamer or plane and that's a bottle neck you don't get through."

Nat found a dead tree, got a match from the waterproof box and built a fire. He dried the tarp and got warm, then worked his way along the beach until he came to a game trail. He followed this for several miles. The brush was soaked with water and soon his legs and feet were sodden. The trail skirted a clearing and Nat pushed through the surrounding thickets and found himself in front of a cabin covered with moss. A faded totem pole leered at him and a few feet away mossy palings overgrown with brush marked an inclosed burial plot. A native's home, but it was doubtful if anyone had lived there for many years.

He built a fire, went over to the nearby creek and kicked a salmon out of the shallows. He broiled it, then dug clams from a sand bar and finished the meal with steamed clams. He could, he supposed, survive a week or two on fish and clams. But logically he couldn't see the sense in enduring such a diet unless there was a purpose back of it. Because he hadn't anticipated freedom, he had made no plans. Now that it was a reality for the moment at least, what had he better do with it?

His thoughts leaped instantly northward. He had reviewed Sapsuck's testimony countless times, but he went over it again. The man had spoken the truth when he described how Nat had overpowered old man Ferry and lashed him to the sled. He had witnessed that all right, but had he actually seen wolves attacking the bound man? Nat wondered. He, personally, hadn't seen any wolves, nor heard them when he had wandered along the lead in his efforts to locate the sled after the snow flurry blotted everything out.

"What next?" he asked himself. Even admitting the wolf part of the story was true, his greatest crime was carelessness in leaving a bound man for even a moment. And now that he thought of it, Pete Ferry hadn't protested. Pete hadn't ex-

pected wolves, or he would have said so, for he had wanted Nat to survive for Jane's sake.

Slowly, but surely, Nat arrived at a conclusion. He would carry out Pete Ferry's plans. He would push on to the Siberian trading post and attempt to bring out the cached sable. All he had to lose at best was a life that had already been forfeited through due process of law.

The idea was appealing to a man in his desperate position. Before the law caught up with him he might crowd a lifetime of excitement and adventure into a brief span.

CHAPTER III

COLD NERVE

NAT worked his way along the beach at low tides for two days before he saw a salmon cannery located in a cove. There was a late run on and tugs were dragging scow loads of fish from a nearby trap. He waited another day before a steamer landed.

Tourists from the boat flocked ashore to watch the canning, and Nat mingled with them boldly. When several boarded the steamer, Nat joined them. The marshal had allowed him to keep his watch, a gold one in running order. Nat made his way to the barber shop. He had a moment of hesitation, and then concluded that success depended now, and in the future, on cold nerve.

"I got in a poker game and was cleaned out of my season's pay," he confessed to the barber. "Are you on this run all the time?"

"Been on it for years," the barber answered.

"I'd like to borrow thirty bucks on the watch," Nat told him. "I'll give you fifty bucks for it inside of six months."

The barber inspected the watch dubiously. "All my life I've been a sucker for hard-luck stories," he said resignedly. "O. K., buddy."

Nat took the money and sat to wait until the barber was ready to give him the shave he needed badly. He picked up a Juneau paper. It was dated the previous day and there was a headline telling of his disappearance. Much was made of the mystery regarding his escape, and the marshal's insistence that he had locked the door. The ship had been searched from top to bottom without finding a trace of the fugitive. When she docked at Seattle a guard would be thrown about the craft on the faint possibility that the condemned man was hiding in the cargo, but the captain issued a statement in which he said there wasn't a chance in a hundred of Nat Donovan surviving the fierce tides and icy water.

Later on, shaved and bathed, and looking like any young man who had put in a summer at cannery work, Nat went to the purser's office and bought a steerage ticket. Four days later the steamer docked in Seattle. He had done the incredible, he had successfully passed through the bottle neck. Now he needed money, and he thought he knew the man to supply it—Sport Dorgan, a reckless, dead-game young fellow who never turned down a gamble and whose luck was as good as his nerve.

Nat Donovan looked up Dorgan in the phone book and went to see him. Dorgan was a big fellow, with a quick laugh, brown curly hair and shrewd black eyes. His face was shaved so close his cheeks looked like a ten-year-old boy's.

"Your face is familiar," he told Nat, "but I can't seem to place it."

"I'll tell you where you've seen my face in a few minutes," Nat an-

swered. "They tell me you like to take long chances."

"I'll gamble on anything," Dorgan admitted. "For money, for marbles, or just for the thrill. I'm not afraid to take long chances, even if it does sound like blowing my own horn."

"It sounds like a plain statement of fact to me," Nat said. "I've taken a longer chance than you've ever taken—or ever will. I'm taking one right now."

"Go ahead." Sport Dorgan's face was alive with interest.

"I jumped overboard from the steamer *Taku* on the chance I could make it through the icy water and treacherous tides to shore. I made it," Nat explained simply. "I'm taking a chance now, a chance that you won't call the police."

THERE was admiration in Sport Dorgan's eyes. "I know the waters of the inland passage," he said. "Black tides suck through submerged reefs. I've seen whole trees drawn under like straws. And you went into it. Now I know where I've seen your face. On the front pages of newspapers. You're Nat Donovan."

"Yes. I'm Donovan," Nat admitted. Then, starting from the time he met Jane Ferry on the northbound steamer, he told his whole story up to the moment he pressed Dorgan's doorbell button. "You've got to gamble on the chance I'm telling you the truth," he concluded. "You've got to gamble that I didn't go crazy up there and kill Pete Ferry so that I could survive."

Sport Dorgan's face was thoughtful. "And you're willing to make a try for that fur cache," he said, "because you think the girl's entitled to it? Well, she is. But it takes nerve, lots of it, after you've seen old man Ferry's skull and bones with teeth marks on them."

"Will you back me?" Nat asked simply.

"What's your proposition?" Dorgan opened a book and found a map of Alaska.

"I need grub, a rifle, ammunition, sleeping bag and so forth," Nat answered. "And my outfit and I should be landed here." He pointed to a cape extending into the Bering Strait. "I won't dare show my face in any of the Alaskan towns, so I can't change planes except in small places. And I can't go North by steamer. Some of the passengers or crew would be sure to identify me."

"Where do I come in?"

"You put up the money and you cut in on a quarter of the fur if, and when, I bring it out," Nat offered.

"That'll be fifty thousand," Sport Dorgan computed. "I'd have to put up a couple of thousand at the outside. A twenty-five-to-one shot. Who gets the rest of it?"

"Jane Ferry," Nat answered.

"Where do you come in?"

"Where can a condemned man spend money?" Nat countered.

"That's right," Sport agreed. He smoked thoughtfully for several minutes. "I suppose I can be charged with aiding and abetting a criminal's escape," he observed. "There's a thrill in a chance like that. It rather appeals to me."

"It's a deal, then?"

"Yes, but I'm cutting myself in on it," Dorgan declared. "I'm through being a short sport. I'm going all the way—all the way to that fur cache."

"Don't forget Lettov will try to shoot us full of holes," warned Nat.

"I'm forgetting nothing," Sport answered. "Here's some money. You'd better hole up until I get

things organized. Make out a list of what'll be needed. I suppose you'll need a dog team?"

"Pete Ferry advised against dogs," Nat explained. "He said they might scent the village dogs when we got close to Lettov's trading post and start howling. That would be a tip-off."

"Well, you're the doctor. I'm strong enough to pull a hand sled to hell and back," Sport said cheerfully.

After Nat had made out his list and departed to register at a quiet hotel, Sport hopped into his car and drove to Jane Ferry's apartment. Nat had mentioned the address.

Jane was very pleasant in a reserved, grave way. Sport had an idea she was desperately in need of sympathy. Alone, she had endured much. She had heard the story of her father's death from the lips of an Eskimo witness, and had testified in a trial that had brought the death sentence to the man she loved.

"You've never heard of me, Miss Ferry," Sport said when he had introduced himself. "But—"

"Of course I've heard of Sport Dorgan," Jane said quickly. "The sport columnists poke no end of fun—good-natured fun, of course—at you. They say you'll bet which lump of sugar a fly will land on."

"Yes, I did make such a bet once," he admitted. "And won it, too."

"I'm afraid I've a lot of dad's sporting blood in me," Jane said. "I like men who play hunches and take long chances. I play hunches myself. But I always lose."

"You're making things easier for me," Sport told her, "because now you'll understand my motive. Otherwise you might have regarded me with more or less well-founded suspicion. I'm going after the fur cache and I want to know if anyone, besides yourself, can lay claim to the fur if it is brought out?"

"Not a person in the world," she answered. "Dad had an agreement with . . . with Nat Donovan, but —" She caught her breath sharply.

"I understand," Sport said sympathetically. "You loved Donovan very much, didn't you?"

"Yes," she answered, "deeply." There was no pity for herself in her voice. She was of a breed that accepts the breaks as they come and does not complain.

When Sport Dorgan left Jane Ferry that night it was with the heady and disturbing feeling that he had fallen in love at first sight. And there was very little he could do about it.

SPORT thought a lot about Jane the next day as he bought the things Nat had listed. That night he asked her to go out to dinner with him. He knew all this would seem natural enough to Jane as long as he was to make an attempt to recover the furs.

There were moments during the evening when she was downcast, but on the whole she seemed in a happier frame of mind, and when they separated that evening she said, "You're a cheerful person, Mr. Sport Dorgan. Life looked rather bleak until you came along and dragged me out of my shell."

"Just a boy scout," he assured her lightly. "Doing his daily kind deed. Do you know," he continued with a grin, "I think I should make a report on what I'm buying for the expedition. I might make a mistake, though I've received some very sound advice. Suppose we get together tomorrow night and go over the list?"

"Very well, if you're still in a mood to be kind," she agreed.

But it was not until several nights later that he spoke his mind. "Have you any clues regarding the cache?" he asked. "Did your father ever mention landmarks or draw any sketches?"

"The furs are worth two hundred thousand to any Hollywood furrier," she answered. "Perhaps more. But reports of their value spread along the Siberian coast until their worth was fixed at half a million. Lettov sent men, renegade Americans, to Alaska to shadow dad."

"Fellows who would have knifed Lettov in the back, eh?" Sport observed. "Then taken the furs themselves, if they could."

"That was dad's idea. He said if no one but himself knew the location, then it wouldn't be possible for others to learn it. He trusted me, of course, but he was afraid I might drop a careless word," she explained.

"Wasn't he afraid he'd be killed by Lettov's agents?"

"No," she answered quickly, "and I feel he was absolutely right. Dad believed they'd take good care not to harm the one person who knew the cache's location. 'They won't kill this goose,' he often said, 'as long as it knows where it's hidden the golden egg.'"

"Go on," Sport urged.

"It wasn't until dad and Nat Donovan started that dad talked," she said. "Then he told Nat everything."

"And you're sure Nat was told everything in detail?"

"Yes," Jane replied. "Dad realized the hazards, but Nat was almost one of the family. He would have been if all had gone well. Dad hoped they'd both come safely through the adventure, but if something went wrong, then he hoped Nat would finish the job. He said as soon as he got onto the ice he would tell Nat everything. And I know he did."

"Who do you think unlocked Nat's cell door?" Sport asked. "Someone who perhaps hoped he would escape and lead the way to the cache?"

"I doubt it," Jane said. "Nat never admitted in court, or anywhere else, that he knew the cache's location. So it isn't likely he was released for that reason. I think Nat was helped by someone who either believed him guiltless, or felt he should die trying to swim ashore rather than on the . . . the—" And then, without warning, her splendid composure broke and she sobbed like a child.

Gently Sport took her into his arms and comforted her. At last she relaxed and her sobs ceased. For a few minutes she stayed in Sport's arms as though they were a refuge and a haven. And because Sport was sensitive enough to know that sudden loneliness in a girl wasn't love, he held her with reverence and kept his own feelings to himself. Sometime the day would come when he could tell Jane how he felt about her.

"I guess I won't see you again," Sport said when he was leaving that night. "I saw in the morning papers that snow is flying up North and the pack ice is already crowding southward through Bering Strait. The sooner I take off the better. So this is good-by."

Jane's handclasp was warm and friendly, her eyes concerned.

"Good-by," she said, "and do take care of yourself. You are a sportsman, but you'll find no sportsmanship in Lettov, his men, the elements or the wolves that range along the shores. They'll all combine to break you down, wipe you out. You'll be a man, my friend, if you survive. I

wouldn't ask anyone to go. But I know it would be useless to ask you not to. And so, good luck."

CHAPTER IV

AT ICY POINT

AT dawn the following morning, Nat, with his belongings in one small bag, was waiting at the curb when Sport drove up in a cab which was to take them out to Lake Union. A seaplane, riding heavily on the lake, was moored to a float. The motor was warm and the pilot was taking a last smoke.

"I think that fellow knows me," Nat said in a low voice. "I know him. He's called the Mushing Eagle."

He was referring to Ed Wills, who had been given his nickname by natives when his plane crashed and it had been necessary for him to travel a hundred miles on foot in the dead of winter.

Wills never batted an eyes when he saw his passengers. He tossed his cigarette into the water and said casually, "Hello, Donovan. In case you're worried about my recognizing you, forget it. I think Sapsuck lied. I don't believe your breed would go haywire in an emergency. I think you made a tragic mistake, as someone called it during your trial, but I don't know how the hell you'll ever prove it. It took a lot of nerve to jump off that steamer. I know what those waters are like, and I made a bet with myself that you'd survive. I'm making another bet you'll bring back the furs."

After which laudatory and sincere expression of his feelings, the Mushing Eagle proceeded with the difficult business of getting the heavily loaded plane out of the water.

Although more people per capita use planes in Alaska than in any other place in the world, this was Nat's first flight. Looking down, hour after hour, at the mountains and glaciers, the snow fields and lofty lakes, which stretched on and on, he appreciated what a tough soul the old sourdough really was.

He was an ant prospecting a plowed field. He crawled for months in his search for treasure or furs, and he spent more months crawling back home again—often empty-handed.

The pilot set the plane down on a remote lake, taxied to the beach, jacked up the plane and substituted skis for pontoons while a handful of whites, breeds, and natives looked on with interest. Later, amid much grunting and shouting, the plane was towed to a snow-covered field where it took off.

More mountains covered with snow rolled under their wings, but the timber grew smaller and finally disappeared. They looked on a land that was an unbroken expanse of white, dazzling in the slanting sunlight of the brief day.

Just as darkness set in the scene changed. A long line, like a blue vein on a very white face, stretched into the distance. "We're over the Arctic Ocean," the pilot informed his two passengers. "The dark line is an open lead."

Nat nodded. Sapsuck had looked across a similar lead and watched him overcome old Pete Ferry and bind him to his sled.

"Donovan," Wills said suddenly, "if you can spot the cache from the air, I'll set the plane down beside it."

"It wouldn't work," Nat answered. "Before we landed the natives would hear the motor. We'd have a reception committee that would guess what we were after and stick to us like brothers. If any

village on the Siberian side heard a motor the news would travel by mukluk telegraph. Thanks, though, for offering to take a chance. An illegal landing over there might cause international complications."

"Nat's right," Sport declared. "This is a job that must be accomplished afoot."

The plane dropped down to Icy Point, circled several times, then landed on a smooth stretch of young ice. The pilot turned, came back, and stopped within a hundred yards of an abandoned igloo.

Nat was familiar with the region, for old Pete Ferry and he had stopped there several days while a storm raged. A native village under a chief name Oopik was located five miles distant. The remainder of the region was utterly barren.

The pilot helped them unload their outfit. There was a threat of storm in the air. A strong wind was coming out of the North and he took off in the half darkness as soon as the last pound of freight was out of the plane. He had promised to come back for them in a month.

NAT studied Sport Dorgan's face curiously as the plane vanished. For the first time in his life Sport couldn't summon modern conveniences by merely picking up a telephone. For the first time in his life he must rely on his own efforts to survive. No restaurants to prepare his meals; no soft beds; no steam heat.

"How do you feel, Sport?" he asked curiously. Sport's reactions were important.

"To tell the truth," Sport admitted, "I feel damned funny inside, and just a little bit helpless. I've never kidded myself, and I'm not going to kid you. We've got long miles to hike before we get anywhere in this country. Well, shall we get this gear stowed?"

They carried their supplies, including several cans of gasoline and an outboard motor, inside. They built a fire in the Yukon stove and cooked a meal, being careful not to raise the temperature of the igloo high enough to thaw the sod overhead. Nat Donovan had learned many tricks from Pete Ferry, and, what was more important, he remembered them.

Nat's plan of action was simple, if somewhat desperate. The previous year Pete Ferry had bought a small umiak, or skin boat, and cached it for emergency about a mile from the igloo. Natives on both sides of the Bering Sea had been quick to adapt the white man's methods, where practical, to their own life. Why, they argued, paddle an umiak when the white man's outboard motor would paddle it for them?

Umiaks, which are made of driftwood tied together with thongs, and covered with skins, aren't constructed to support the weight and vibration of an outboard motor in the stern. The natives, however, cut a hole in the bottom four or five feet from the stern and then built a bulkhead to prevent water from entering the craft. The outboard motors were lowered through the hole until the propeller was below the bottom. A big motor could shoot the light skin craft along at incredible speed. Usually one native—and a very proud man he is—acts as engineer, opening and closing the throttle as directed, and lifting the motor clear when the umiak is landed.

Nat planned to follow leads wherever possible, using the outboard-powered umiak. Whereas a plane, thundering over the villages would

be noticed, the muffled exhaust of an outboard would be silenced by the grind and boom of the contending ice floes.

Approaching the fur cache, it was Nat's intention to remain in the vicinity until the weather was favorable for a quick escape. Then he planned to load the sables aboard and streak for the American shore, fighting off any pursuit Lettov might attempt. If it were necessary to make a stand, he would send Sport Dorgan on with the fur and finish the fight alone. Capture, he knew, would mean death. But when he considered that angle, he only shrugged his shoulders fatalistically.

Nat outlined his general plan to Sport that night before they crawled into their sleeping bags. And Sport accepted it with mental reservations. Privately he determined that Nat would make no lone stands.

"And now," Nat concluded, "I'll draw you a map of Lettov's trading post, and the cache."

Carefully he sketched the region, marking the important points. He let Sport look at it a long time, then dropped it into the fire.

"Shouldn't I keep that?" Sport asked in surprise.

"Yes," Nat answered. "In your head, but not where it can be found. Take pencil and paper and draw it from memory."

"Hm-m-m. Smart idea," Sport said.

"Not original, though," Nat answered. "That's the way old Pete Ferry handled it. I had to look at three different sketches before I could duplicate it."

Nat sketched the region four times before Sport could draw the map.

"I won't forget it now," the latter said. "It's etched on my brain."

"Good," said Nat. "Now let's get some sleep."

SPORT got his first taste of mushing over the ice early the following morning. They dragged a lightly loaded sled a mile over smooth ice, then found themselves in the rough stuff. A few minutes later, a threatening storm broke.

Nat halted. "This will break your heart, Sport," he said, "but we're going to leave the sled on the beach and go back to the igloo. There isn't a chance of finding that umiak cache in bad weather, and I don't want to siwash it."

"Siwash?" Sport asked, puzzled.

"Camp without shelter," Nat explained. "We'll just use up strength we'll need later on."

"You're the doctor," Sport agreed.

They left the sled lashed to an outcropping on a cliff. Neither snow nor ice could cover it, and the sled would be easy to locate later on.

"You lead the way back, Sport," Nat directed. "Let's see what your sense of direction is like."

"I've hunted a lot," Sport said as he led off. "That should help some."

They had covered half the distance into the teeth of the wind when Nat suggested they take advantage of the shelter offered by a pressure ridge, to rest and have a smoke.

Nat smoked in silence for several minutes and let the snow drift steadily above him. It was falling at a forty-five-degree angle now. Later on, when the wind blew harder, the flakes would speed along almost horizontal.

"What did you think of Jane Ferry?" Nat suddenly asked Sport. "Back in Seattle I got hungry for a glimpse of her and I used to haunt

"I die laughin', Nat Donovan," the native croaked. "Sapsuck know you never get out alive!"

her neighborhood. I saw you take her out one night."

"Yes, I did," Sport answered. "I wanted to find out whether or not her father had told her where the cache was located. He hadn't. I guess she thought I was on a wild-goose chase. Naturally I didn't tell her you were alive."

"You saw her several times?"

"Yes," Sport answered. "She was feeling pretty low and I cheered her up some, I guess. It wasn't hard to do."

"You fell in love with her, Sport," Nat said bluntly. "You couldn't help yourself. No man could. Did . . . did she say much about me?" There was an almost pathetic note of yearning in Nat's voice that Sport noticed.

"She didn't talk about you much except to say she loved you deeply," Sport answered.

"Did she say she loved me deeply or had loved me deeply," Nat asked quickly. "Think hard, Sport."

"I guess she used the past tense," Sport said after a moment's reflection. "She must have, because she can't know you're alive."

Nat was on the point of making some comment when he leaped to his feet. He breathed hard for a second. "I smell burnin' oil," he shouted. "Do you?"

"I smell something," Sport declared. "The igloo?" he suggested.

Without answering, Nat led the way, racing through the storm, with the odor of burning gasoline and oil growing stronger and stronger. The swirling snow concealed the flames until they were close, then Nat saw there was small hope of saving anything. A column of fire was leaping through the roof opening. Here and there sod on the dome was falling, exposing the skeleton of twisted driftwood.

The two began throwing snow into the flames, hoping to salvage some of the canned goods before the cans melted and burst. Suddenly a five-gallon tin of gasoline exploded, filling the air with leaping flame. After that neither could approach close enough to throw on snow.

"Now we're up against the real thing," Sport said. "No food and no shelter except what we can make out of snow."

"Fortunately we had our rifles and ammunition with us," Nat remarked. "We have our sleeping bags, too. How many matches have you got?"

"I filled my box just before we left camp," Sport answered. "I saw you were doing it and thought it a good idea. What about Oopik's village?"

"If you want a diet of seal oil, walrus, and seal meat running heavily to odor when it thaws, you may find it at Oopik's," Nat said gloomily. "Then again the whole village may have pulled out for better trapping. Things don't look so hot, but we'll last, some way, until the Mushing Eagle shows up."

"A month from now," Sport reminded him. "What do you suppose started that fire? There wasn't a spark in the Yukon stove when we left. We'd both smoked, but all the cigarette butts went into the stove, so that's out. You don't suppose one of Lettov's men heard the plane, do you?"

"We haven't been here long enough for any of that bunch to cross and start trouble," Nat answered.

Nat decided to circle the area. He had gone less than a hundred yards when he made a discovery.

"Sport!" he shouted. "Take a look at this."

Mukluk tracks led to the rear of

the igloo, then away in the same direction from which they came. The snow was heavily tramped, as if the man who had made the tracks had spent some little time in the area immediately back of the igloo. Going onto the ice, Nat examined the tracks and concluded from the amount of snow drifting across them that the man had spent nearly an hour in the vicinity.

"He probably waited until we pulled out," Sport suggested, "then got busy. I've hunted in snow country and know something about tracking animals. I'd say he's been gone about a half-hour."

"You stay here," Nat ordered. "I'm going after that cuss. He's probably got a food cache out there on the ice. Since he's destroyed our food, we're going to eat his!"

HE made a pack of his sleeping bag, caught up his rifle and struck off before Sport could protest.

Nat could tell from the distant grinding of the pack that the ice was broken up well offshore. He might have several hours of smooth traveling, or he might find a lead blocking his path almost immediately. Ice changed constantly and pressure exerted miles away might open leads at his feet. The weak or thin ice naturally gave way first.

Nat went into a tireless trot, his eyes on the outgoing tracks. For a while the incoming tracks ran parallel, then suddenly they turned in a northeasterly direction. "He had a hide-out off that way somewhere," Nat reflected. "Probably stationed here to guard against anyone planning to cross the ice. Having broken up our expedition, he's heading for the Siberian coast again to report to Lettov."

Nat began to tire after an hour, but the tracks were fresher and he knew he was gaining. It stopped snowing a half-hour later, one of those brief, quiet periods which herald a harder storm. Looking ahead from the elevation of a pressure ridge, Nat caught sight of a lone figure plodding steadily about two miles away. The man carried a heavy pack on his back. He was probably armed, though the distance was too great for Nat to notice details.

Nat worked his way off the pressure ridge and then trotted on, ready to hunt cover the instant the man's body came into sight again. He wanted no long-distance battle on the ice if it could be avoided. Nat skirted another pressure ridge in order not to show himself, rounded a mass of ice some thirty feet high and found himself on the edge of a lead.

It was about fifty feet wide and getting wider. Tracks led down to the water's edge, then continued over the ice on the opposite side, proving the lead had opened after the other had crossed. Nat ran along the edge of the ice some distance before seeing a slab that would support his weight and yet be light enough to ferry him across.

He stepped cautiously on it, then using the butt of his rifle as a paddle, started across. He had selected the narrowest point for his crossing, but the wind was blowing him down the lead to an open area. Presently there was a hundred feet of water on either side.

Nat decided to stop fighting the wind and go with it, working the berg toward an icy peninsula a hundred yards distant. Occupied with the problem of navigating a sluggish slab of ice, he failed to detect the fur-clad figure watching him from a pressure ridge a half mile distant.

The watching man rested his rifle on an ice block, took careful aim and fired. The bullet kicked up a jet of water twenty feet to Nat's left. He swore and flattened out on the ice. "Damn him, he must have spotted me," Nat muttered.

This was a real jam. He needed to stand up and paddle, because it required strong paddle strokes, plus the wind against his body, to progress to the desired landing point. The other man had all the advantage. Even a poor shot would either get the range by trial and error, or would finish his victim with a lucky shot.

CHAPTER V

DEAD MAN'S SECRET

THE second shot came after a long wait. It clipped the edge of the slab, droning viciously and scattering ice fragments in every direction. The man was improving his marksmanship. He was probably fussing with sights and making wind calculations.

Nat got to his feet and began paddling again. He kept his body swaying, making as poor a target as possible, though he had an idea it would be just his luck to sway into a bullet. Two more followed. They straddled him, one passing a few feet to the right, the other hitting the ice to the left.

A battleship ten miles from a target would straddle the first two shots and make a direct hit with the third. The other fellow should, by all the laws of chance, hit with his next shot. Nat had just completed a stroke when the bullet came. He threw up his hands and fell backward, writhing on the ice. After a while he grew still and there was no sound save the lapping of water against the slab's ragged edges.

Three long minutes passed, then a shot, droning dismally on the frosty air, struck the ice inches from Nat's head. Ice showered, then there was another period of tense silence.

Again the minutes dragged and again a bullet's sinister drone came over the floes. It was obvious that the man intended to keep shooting until neither ice nor water jetted upward. Then he would know he had scored a bull's-eye and the bullet had gone into Nat's body.

Two more bullets struck, then Nat got to his feet. It was no use trying to fool the rifleman. Nat began to paddle while the bullets struck near him at regular intervals. He put everything he had into it. He had an idea the movement of the berg was causing the man to miss.

As soon as the slab touched the main body of ice, Nat tossed his pack behind a snowdrift, then jumped to solid footing. He got the pack onto his shoulders and advanced on the pressure ridge. The other man suddenly crossed an open stretch and dropped behind a mass of slabs turned on edge. Nat got in one hurried shot that kicked the ice up at the man's heels.

The other's strategy was now clear. His new location was defensively as effective as a concrete machine-gun pill box. Nat flattened out behind a pile of ice and studied ways to blast out his enemy. There was no effective retreat for either man now. It was wolf eat wolf.

A bullet struck close to Nat's heels. He saw the rifle muzzle protrude from a small hole between slabs and fired at the spot. Ice chips splattered in a cloud, but the rifle muzzle remained there. It spurted flames and another bullet missed Nat's exposed feet by inches.

The man might not be effective firing at a slowly moving, bobbing target a half mile distant, but Nat knew he would be murderous at two hundred yards.

There was only one way to meet such a situation, disconcert the fellow's methodical aim by attack. Nat got rid of his pack again, broke suddenly into the open and hurled himself at the pressure ridge. The first shot clipped fur from his parka. The second whistled close to his ear.

The man was emptying the rifle now. He had two cartridges left when Nat completely exposed himself fifty feet away. Again Nat's emotions were completely fatalistic. He was doomed anyway. Therefore, to get in his first clean shot at his enemy, he gave that enemy a perfect shot at close distance. It was a question of who got in the first shot.

Nat stopped dead in his tracks, aimed and fired as the other's rifle roared. The fur-clad figure stiffened, then collapsed, the rifle slipping from his hands. One hand was mitted, the other exposed, to give the trigger finger full play.

NAT approached the limp figure with a mixture of emotions. By destroying a food cache the man had committed the worst crime in the North, a crime worse even than murder. He had fired at his enemy again and again when he was on the slab of ice and unable to hit back. Nat couldn't admire either the fellow's courage or his sportsmanship. On the other hand Nat found little personal satisfaction in victory. Rather, it was one of several mighty unpleasant jobs life had thrust upon him at various times.

Nat dropped into the hole, which was ten feet square and sheltered on all sides by thick slabs of ice. He put the other's rifle in a safe place, then threw back the man's parka hood. Surprise and recognition were mutual.

"Sapsuck!" Nat exclaimed.

"You! Nat Donovan!" Sapsuck muttered. It was clear that he was going fast. "You got away! They no hang you! How?"

"Yes, I got away," Nat answered. He was looking intently into the other's eyes, striving to read the thoughts passing through the native's brain in his last few minutes of life. "And you were right here to stop me, or anyone, who tried to get Pete Ferry's furs. Maybe you succeeded at that. We may freeze and starve."

"Sure, you die," Sapsuck predicted. His weak voice was heavy with satisfaction. "If you go to Lettov's place you die. You can't cross lead again. Too wide."

"And you've burned our grub, anyway," Nat said, hoping to draw the dying man out.

"And you kill Sapsuck. I know! I die! Somethin' inside says, 'Sapsuck, you die!' But Sapsuck laugh at Nat Donovan and then die. Sapsuck know somethin' Nat Donovan give his life to know. And he won't tell! So Sapsuck laugh." The native drew in his breath and let out a burst of horrible laughter. Gloating and satisfaction of revenge were in the native's eyes as he uttered the sound.

"To die laughing is a good way to die," Nat said quietly. "A better way to die is to unload your mind—to make amends for the lies you've told."

"I die laughin', Nat Donovan. Wouldn't you like to know what Sapsuck know? Hah! Hah! Hah!" The sound was hardly human and it blended with the eerie wind, moaning over the ice fields. And deep

and distant came the sullen thunder of contending ice floes. "Sapsuck knows somethin' . . . somethin'—" His voice made a supreme effort to complete the taunt and failed. His eyes grew dull until even the hate was hardly evident, then he bared his teeth in a wolfish smile. His last breath was a heavy gasp, then he was dead. But the smile remained, fixed and taunting the man looking down at him.

Nat wouldn't have given two hoots in hell for his chances when Sapsuck first started shooting, but he had come through alive. Inwardly he knew his chances of survival were not much better even now. Frost and hunger don't miss as ofen as rifles and lead. Frost and hunger need but a single, fair chance and the job is done.

Nat's reflections went back to the courtroom when Sapsuck testified against him and told what the district attorney called a simple story. There had been no hate in the man's face as he testified and submitted to cross examination. His lack of emotion had been the most telling thing against Nat. Sapsuck had convinced the jury that he was a disinterested party and held no malice toward the defendant.

The hate must have been of recent development. Perhaps it was the hate of a man who had felt defeat. The fury of Nat's attack, the utter recklessness, must have amazed the native. He probably did not realize that it was the attack of a man who believed he had nothing to lose, not even life, and everything to gain.

"He gloated," Nat said aloud. "He said he knew something that I would give life itself to know. Maybe the wolves didn't get Pete Ferry, after all. Maybe— Still, Sapsuck had the bones, with fang marks on them. They were white man's bones."

NAT got down to the grim business of performing the last rites for Sapsuck. He searched the man and found a knife of strange design. The blade was made of Swedish steel, taken, no doubt, from the keen-edged knives used in cutting up whales. The handle was fashioned from a sperm whale's tooth.

It was a souvenir worth keeping, but Nat left it with the body. He didn't want someone to recognize it in the future and possibly ask questions or plan revenge. He left the rifle with the body also. It was a .30-30 caliber, similar in make to the one he himself was using, and he appropriated all of the native's remaining ammunition. Then he opened the pack Sapsuck had carried.

It contained nothing but food—white man's grub; bacon, prepared flapjack flour, dried fruit, beans, rice, sugar, several pounds of butter and some freshly cut steaks. There was no mystery of the source; every pound had come North on the Mushing Eagle's plane. Before firing the igloo, Sapsuck had robbed the food cache, taking all he could carry of the choicest food. Several cartons of cigarettes completed the loot.

Nat returned to the lead. It was now nearly a mile in width. There wasn't much chance to cross it with a berg for a ferry and a rifle butt for a paddle. The wind, blowing against him, settled that question. He could only hope Sport would survive while he pushed on and located Lettov's trading post.

Nat took full advantage of clear weather to put as much distance as possible behind him. He had reason to believe the ice was still crowding

southward, but he knew from experience a change in wind can start the floes swing into the Arctic Basin. Even with a umiak he would be hard put to make his way to land. Without one, he hadn't a chance.

Nat mushed that night until he found it difficult to distinguish ice from shadows, then he camped and ate cold food. He slept well enough, ate more cold food, and pushed on throughout the day. There was no slacking his pace. The fear of a possible break in the ice gave him no rest. Snow flurries slowed, but did not stop him completely.

A vague shadow in the distance, revealed only when it stopped snowing, might, Nat knew, be the Siberian coastal hills and mountains. He still wasn't certain, however, when he was forced to quit for the night.

The mountains were there when he awakened in the clear dawn. Haughty, snow-ladened and forbidding, they seemed to be warning all foreigners to keep their distance. Ice was pressing hard against a headland about twenty miles to the northwest and the thunder of breaking floes was constantly in Nat's ears.

Less than an hour after Nat left camp he faced a new lead. It was less than fifty feet in width, but carried a warning of things to come. Five miles ahead towered solid land, frozen tight.

CHAPTER VI

A RECEPTION COMMITTEE

NAT made up his mind that regardless of what happened he wouldn't lose his pack with its precious food supply and sleeping bag. He might have to throw away the rifle, but the food stayed with him.

He set off at a swift pace to find a slab suitable for ferry purposes. There was plenty of ice along the main body, but the slabs were either too broken up or too heavy to handle. Some of them were strange shapes, badly out of balance and ready to overturn on the slightest provocation. He found one that seemed suitable, but when he stepped on it, it was almost awash.

Nat decided to chance it, and began paddling. He was halfway across when he saw the lead close up a mile distant. The wind, catching the main pack, was moving it. The edge which Nat had just left was turning like a circular saw, miles in diameter. The ragged edges were not unlike saw teeth as they gnashed into the shore ice.

He paddled furiously and managed to jump to the shore ice when the advancing pack was several hundred yards away. He began running as soon as his feet touched. The creaking and groaning as the shore ice felt the pressure filled the air. Sometimes the sound came from a point directly underfoot. Nat raced madly, but seemingly without purpose. The sound was evident wherever he ran. He felt the ice lift all of a foot into the air. Cracks formed, then as the pressure eased, the ice fell back, leaving an opening five or six inches across.

Nat's breath was coming harder now. Although the air was not dangerously cold, it seemed to sear his laboring lungs each time he breathed. His heart pounded heavily in his ears.

He jumped over another crack, slipped and fell. The weight of his pack turned him over. He rolled back again, got to his knees, then to his feet. One knee, weakened under the fall, was causing him a lot of pain. The ice wasn't letting up any more than a volcano lets up on victims fleeing before it.

If his knee gave way, Nat knew, he stayed where he was, and that was that. A pressure ridge formed a quarter of a mile ahead. Ice slabs as big as block-long pavement and many times as thick lifted upward, towered briefly, then fell back, shattering into blocks as big as flatcars. Then the pressure driving in heaved up another mass and presently a ridge formed that made its uncertain way over the ice field.

Nat climbed over the new ridge while the ice was still slipping and sliding into place. There was no time to wait for settlement. If he got caught in a slipping piece, that was an incident, and a small one, in nature's present mood.

Looking across at the shore line, Nat saw a dozen fur-clad figures running along a low hill. Natives had sighted him.

"A dozen of them," he muttered. "I refused the plane because I wanted to show up here without anyone knowing what was up, and then I walk into a reception committee."

A pressure ridge formed ahead and Nat ran to it, found a pile of shattered ice affording concealment and waited. The natives on the beach were probably Lettov's men and of the two, a pressure ridge in the act of forming was the lesser danger.

As Nat squatted down and watched the natives he had the impression of being caught in the center of an earthquake. The ice under him was shaking, and that tumbling and falling on every side of him could well be the walls of falling buildings.

The natives remained on the ridge for nearly an hour, then moved off in a southeasterly direction, evidently convinced that he had been wiped out. Nat waited until it was dark before emerging. A quarter mile of lead, choked with broken ice, explained why the natives hadn't pressed an investigation. They knew better than to cross a lead that offered neither footing nor sufficient open water to paddle a skin boat.

Nat tried ferrying on a slab, and when that started to capsize he began jumping. He had seen men jump from log to log, none of which would sustain their weight longer than a second, and he tried the trick now. Ice rolled and sank under his feet, but he was always on the next piece before it was too late. He did not dare stop to look around for the most secure blocks. It was a case of keep going or go under.

Breathless and exhausted, he gained the shore ice and fell flat on his face. Few men, now that he thought of it, had ever crossed from North America to Asia on foot. It was something to talk of in the future, but for the present he was content to sprawl on the ice and catch his breath.

It was long in coming, and when he finally breathed normally he wanted to just sit on the ice and watch the floes of two continents fight it out. Then he remembered that it was hours since he had eaten and that in a few minutes it would be dark.

Nat headed for a point where, if at all, he might find driftwood. The chances were good that the natives had salvaged every bit of it. They came out to ships, on the rare occasions when American vessels anchored off the Siberian coast and recovered every stick, even to small pieces of crates, that was tossed over the side. Trees didn't grow in the arctic, thus wood was almost priceless.

Nat found a piece of stranded tree cached above the point. No doubt

the natives had dragged it out of the water and left it until conditions warranted it being towed to their village. Nat made a fire, broiled one of the steaks, cooked some flapjacks and dried fruit and dined like a king. He felt he deserved it. In prison

they gave a man anything he wanted before he died. It seemed just as logical to celebrate escape from immediate death by eating the finest meal his pack afforded.

Looking across the ice to the curtain of snow that was again falling, Nat pondered on what Sport Dorgan was doing. Probably he was speculating on his partner's fate.

"He'll wonder why I didn't come back," Nat mused. "That is, he'll wonder until he climbs to the bluff, looks toward Siberia and sees the lead."

NAT spread his sleeping bag in a sheltered spot and fell asleep almost immediately. His clothing, slightly damp from perspiration and water that had splashed on it during the crossing, was hung up to dry near the smoldering log. Old Pete Ferry had taught him the importance of stripping everything off before crawling into a sleeping bag. Any dampness within the sleeping bag was apt to result in the formation of a glaze of ice.

Nat awakened when the fire burned low, pulled his clothes from the improvised line, folded and placed them inside the pack, and then fell asleep again. It couldn't have been more than a few minutes before he awakened. A half dozen ivory-headed spears were pressing into his body and his camp swarmed with fur-clad natives.

Someone in authority spoke in dialect. Nat cautiously sized up the situation from the doubtful protection of his sleeping bag. A stocky native had taken his rifle. Another had picked up the small hand ax he had brought along.

"Any of you boys speak English?" Nat ventured.

The question appeared to surprise them. He felt the spears ease slightly. They seemed less menacing. There was a brief exchange in dialect and he heard the name, Sapsuck, mentioned several times. A sawed-off native with a row of fine teeth seemed to be in command.

"Put clothes on!" he ordered. "No funny business, damn hell!"

Nat crawled forth, conscious the weapons were ready to run him through on the slightest provocation. He dressed rapidly, then awaited orders.

"You pack," the English-speaking native ordered. His companions were impressed, apparently, by the cussing he was giving this white intruder.

Nat packed. He pointed to his breast. "I Nat Donovan," he said.

"I, Sir Walter Raleigh," the native informed him. "I big shot, damn hell."

"I plenty big shot," Nat announced, tapping his breast. "Damn hell! Damn hell!" He let them have both barrels to see what effect it might have. His companions were impressed, but Sir Walter was dubious.

"Where you come from?" he asked.

"I big chief San Francisco," Nat

said. A native who had served time on a whaler, as this man undoubtedly had, would undoubtedly have heard tall and impressive stories of San Francisco. The city suffered nothing in the telling when whalers described it to natives.

"You put pack on. We go. No funny business. Damn hell," Sir Walter Raleigh ordered.

Nat was placed between the spear carriers and the party set off at a steady pace, Sir Walter leading.

The reference to Sapsuck made Nat uneasy. It was evident they had linked him up with the native. Perhaps they were from the same village and wanted information. Nat, lacking knowledge of the dialect, was at a distinct disadvantage.

WHEN they had covered about three miles, the party stopped before a cliff overlooking the sea. Houses, supported on driftwood piling driven into the almost sheer walls, clung precariously. A dozen half-starved dogs prowled the ice below. Scenting a stranger, they charged instantly and were driven off by bone clubs taken from the walrus.

Single file, the party followed a narrow, icy path to a point under the largest house, which Nat concluded was a community building. The leader opened a door in the floor and squeezed through. Nat followed.

The room, practically airtight to keep out the cold was heated to a high temperature by closely packed humans and seal-oil lamps. Because of the temperature, and perhaps because they believed it unhealthy to perspire in the clothing they wore in the cold, those in the house were mostly naked.

"Take off clothes," Sir Walter Raleigh ordered. A sour-faced young native prodded Nat with a spear to enforce the order. Obediently Nat stripped down to his shorts.

A squaw with tattooed lips and wearing very little clothing, shuffled about tending the lamps and waiting on the men. An aged native, obviously a chief because of the respect accorded him by the younger natives, spoke briefly with Sir Walter Raleigh. The latter nodded repeatedly, then advanced on Nat in a threatening manner.

"Damn hell," he said, "you kill Sapsuck. Him brother!"

"Sapsuck?" Nat questioned. "Never heard of him."

"How you get on ice. Sapsuck on ice. Him no come off. You come off. Damn hell!" The native's voice fairly thundered. "You think you fox. You hide down behind ice. I damn hell better fox. I go way and say, 'him sleep!' I come back. You sleep. Damn hell, I big shot more as you."

"Sure, you're a bigger shot than I am here," Nat admitted. "But in the United States, I'm the big shots." He held up three fingers. "I three big shots." At another time, Nat thought, this would probably be very funny, but he couldn't see the humor just then.

While Sir Walter Raleigh explained all this to the aged chief, Nat's eyes never left the chief's face. He desperately needed some little hint of the old man's inclination as a guide to his own actions and words.

"I tell him you say you no know Sapsuck," Sir Walter explained. "He say you lie damn hell. He say you know plenty. All white men know Sapsuck."

Nat took a shot in the dark. "What did Sapsuck ever do for him?" he asked.

When this was translated Nat sensed he had scored a bull's-eye. He got the idea Sapsuck was an enemy of the chief. If so, then Sir Walter Raleigh's talk of Sapsuck being a brother was merely a trick to get Nat to admit he knew Sapsuck. Well, he hadn't admitted any such thing, for which he thanked his lucky stars.

"You tell chief, damn hell," Nat roared, "I hear about Sapsuck. Him no good. Who tell me Sapsuck no good? Damn hell I tell you." He turned on his eloquence and pounded his clenched fist into the palm of his hand. "My friend, Pete Ferry, tell me watch out for Sapsuck. Him no good. Him Lettov's friend. Damn hell."

Nat's anger was, no doubt, very impressive. As Sir Walter translated this outburst, the chief seemed impressed. A long conversation between the two Eskimos followed. Nat waited patiently and without apparent fear, but he was wondering if he would ever breathe fresh air again.

Sir Walter presently explained that the chief wished to know if white men betrayed each other, or if they all worked together in peace and understanding. Nat wasn't sure what the chief was driving at, but he explained there were good and bad white men. Pete Ferry was a good white man, he declared, and he was trying to be as good a man himself. Then he asked why the chief wanted to know. He had a feeling something very personal might be involved.

The chief, if Sir Walter correctly represented his views, had heard of Pete Ferry. Pete had traded with the Eskimo people for years until Lettov took over the trading post. Since then things had been bad. The natives had been cheated and abused and there were tales that Pete had double-crossed the Eskimo people by selling out to Lettov. The chief, it appeared, was very confused and trusted no white man. It was his opinion that white men had corrupted Sapsuck and others with whiskey and had turned them against their own kind. He wanted to know if white men did these things.

Again Nat explained that a few white men did, but most whites were like most natives, strictly honorable in their dealings. Another conversation followed, then Sir Walter asked abruptly, "Who was the white man Sapsuck brought over the ice last year? He old white man. We see him long way off. When we come close, Sapsuck shoot two men. One die. Damn hell. We learn wolf kill white man. Sapsuck put bones in sack and go back." He pointed toward the American coast line.

"What's that?" Nat's shout startled the natives, and two pressed spears against his naked breast. "Say that again!"

The chief interrupted with a demand to know what caused Nat's excitement. Nat couldn't explain that if Sapsuck had brought a live white man over the ice that man must have been Pete Ferry. And if it were Pete, then he, Nat Donovan wasn't guilty of murder. It explained Sapsuck's triumph in death and cleared up his repeated assertion that he knew something Nat would give his life to know.

NAT'S moment of triumph was brief, and instantly followed by a period of depression. In the fight on the ice he had killed the one man who could have cleared him.

"I think," he told Sir Walter, "the man Sapsuck bring is my friend and

your friend, Pete Ferry. I think Sapsuck let wolves get him. I hate Sapsuck."

When this was repeated, he saw the first trace of friendship appear on the old chief's face. He might have won them completely by telling them the story of the fight, but that was too dangerous, for it might be repeated and reach Lettov's ears.

The various pieces of the puzzle were beginning to fit and form something of the real pattern. Sapsuck had crossed the lead during the storm and found old Pete Ferry lashed to the sled. He had doubtless taken the trader over the lead and forced him to walk to the Siberian coast.

While these things were trooping through Nat's mind, some kind of a debate was going on among the natives. The chief, it appeared, was inclined to believe Nat's story. The younger men were warning him to trust no white man, Sir Walter explained, because of Lettov's actions. In the end, decision was postponed, and Nat was permitted to spread out his sleeping bag and get some rest. He slept on top, because the igloo was too warm for him to crawl inside. When he awakened, he found his belongings beside him and untouched. The chief's people were strictly honest. The men had learned to smoke Russian cigarettes, with their long, paper holders, and when Nat opened a carton of the American kind, only their eyes betrayed their longing. Nat grinned and passed them around.

CHAPTER VII

TRAILED

NAT wasn't officially given his freedom, but gradually restraint was relaxed, and he was permitted to visit other igloos and join in the sports that were held on the ice.

He stepped onto a skin *blanket* held by the younger men and was tossed thirty feet into the air. The idea, it seemed, was to land on the blanket without breaking any bones. He nearly broke his neck the first two times, but the third time he landed neatly and was accorded the usual applause.

Nat cooked his own food, the natives permitting him to use their precious store of driftwood for fuel. But for all his freedom of movement he felt he was being held by invisible bonds. They, like all other natives along the Siberian coast, had heard stories of the sable cache. And, although they couldn't compute the value in dollars, the amount of trade goods they believed the furs would bring proved they had overvalued the cache.

Through Sir Walter, Nat learned that the cache was now regarded as the property of anyone who found it. Pete Ferry had been gone so long, it was explained, he probably wasn't interested. And if he was dead, as reported, then certainly he could hold no claim.

Nat was convinced the natives also believed if one of their number found the cache, Lettov would take the furs from them. For that reason elaborate plans had been made to hurry the treasure over the ice to some place like Nome. Here it would be exchanged for literally tons of trade goods which they would take back in a chartered schooner. The tribe, it was believed, "would have full bellies for many years," as Sir Walter explained it.

Observation convinced Nat that Sir Walter had won his nickname because of his unfailing courtesy toward the women of his tribe. The other men kept the women in their

place, letting them do the heaviest kind of work and taking them more or less for granted. Undoubtedly Sir Walter was following the politeness he had observed in white men toward their women on his trips to Nome. Some whaler, with a sense of humor, had given him his nickname.

Nat decided to test the extent of his freedom. Accordingly he announced that he was going hunting, wolves having been heard in the region. He carried only his rifle and a day's food. He worked along the beach ice, hoping to sight a seal or wolf. He saw several white foxes in the vicinity of native traps, but made no attempt to disturb them.

On his return, Nat went a half mile inland, and, as he expected, found tracks proving he had been followed. He returned to the beach and continued over the ice to the village. The cordiality of the natives and this new freedom of movement was now explained. They believed he knew the location of the cache, guessed he was after the furs, and were watching him, confident that sooner or later he would lead them to the spot.

Twice during the following week Nat made extended trips and nothing was said. Sir Walter might ask him about the wolves and foxes that he had seen, but that was all. A snowstorm kept everyone indoors several days, but as soon as the weather cleared, Nat announced that he would be gone several days. This time he took twenty pounds of food and his sleeping bag. Again, he was permitted complete freedom of movement. "They've got it into their heads," he told himself, "that this is the time I'm going after the fur."

While the air was clear, except for threatening clouds, the wind continued to blow, quickly drifting the snow over mukluk tracks. Nat made his pace a fast one, hoping to shake off pursuit. As soon as he disappeared over a ridge, or a heap of ice piled up against the shore, he would turn and cautiously watch a few minutes. Invariably a group of three natives trailed him.

"That's all settled," Nat mused. "All I can hope to do is to size up the country and locate the point where Pete Ferry made his cache."

The second day he was just climbing a ridge when he looked across and saw four natives approaching. They were a mile off and if they continued their present direction would pass him a good half mile inland. They seemed to be following a trail, for their pace was fast.

NAT holed up in a drift and watched them. They passed in single file and seemed fresh enough. They left the impression of being taller than Sir Walter's tribesmen, and at least two of them carried rifles. "If anybody wants to travel," Nat reflected, "this is the week to do it. Last week we had bad weather, and we may have more for days to come."

If Pete Ferry's description of the country was accurate, Nat had an idea he was close to Lettov's trading post. He didn't want to blunder into the post or hunting parties, but this was one of the chances he had to take when traveling in good weather. He might be sighted, then ambushed before he even realized that others were in the vicinity.

Within the next two hours the country changed, grew rougher, and the snow in the gulches was deep, but still blowing. Nat climbed a high ridge, looked across five miles of broken country and saw a bold headland. The ice was piled high

at the base and in other ways it answered Pete's description of the cache site. The wind was blowing hard over there. He could see a cloud of snow blown from the crest. It waved like a fluttering white veil in the clear, cold air.

Pete Ferry had spoken of a veil, also. "You'll see it only on windy days," he had told Nat.

According to Nat's rough calculations, Lettov's village should be in an inlet two miles this side of the headland, roughly three miles from where he stood. To reach the headland he would have to circle the village, or pass close to it after darkness had set in. That was dangerous if a dog scented him. He continued on to the next ridge, approached the crest cautiously and looked below. The settlement was almost covered with snow. Well-tramped paths led from a large two-and-a-half-story frame building to numerous igloos.

The village was strangely quiet. Neither children nor dogs were visible in the open areas. A faint column of smoke trailed upward from the large building, and when it reached a high elevation the wind whipping across the headland carried it away. Nat saw no smoke coming from any other building. Presumably people were in the igloos, but there should be some sign of life outside.

Nat watched the settlement for an hour; then, keeping under cover as much as possible, he descended to the level area between ridge and headland.

"Something queer here," he mused as he debated whether to pass within a few hundred yards of the village or lose valuable time and strength in making a circuit.

There were windows in the trading posts, but not the igloos, and Nat decided to risk the shorter route. The igloos were plainly visible as he approached. They were constructed of driftwood and sod. Heavy skins spread over the tops kept out the cold and moisture.

The skins were held in place by skin lines to which were attached heavy stones. The stones cleared the ground by a comfortable margin so that the entire weight of each would be on the line. The skin lines crisscrossed in such a manner as to hold down all edges. And the wind could hardly get under a big skin at any angle.

Umiaks, bottom up, stood on driftwood supports which were high enough to keep the dogs from gnawing them. There were clusters of one and two-hole bidarkas, or small skin boats, on similar supports and lashed down with skin lines.

The entrances were curtained with walrus hides, and Nat walked over to one and examined the tracks. No one had entered or left the igloo for at least an hour. Made bolder by the silence, he approached the frame building. The front entrance was well packed, but no mukluk tracks were visible. The snow continued to drift across smoothly, leveling off the humps, filling in mukluk tracks made hours before.

NAT made his way to the rear door, made certain he was unobserved, then gently pushed against the door. It opened readily and warm, stale air filled his nostrils. He had left some of his supplies at Sir Walter's village as evidence that he would return. Now he considered the possibility of loading up with sufficient food to last him two or three weeks. Supplied with staples, he might add an occasional seal to his larder and survive a month or more.

He looked into the main storeroom. The counter was scarred and worn from much use. The wood was smooth and dark from age and the oil and liquid that was bound to soak into the wood from seal carcasses and other kinds of meat left on the counter. The air carried the odor of seal oil, along with the steam of drying woolens.

Show cases held cheap cigars, candy, needles, thread, bolts of cloth, rubber boots, and many other items primitive people want. There were no rifles visible nor ammunition. It was evident Lettov didn't believe in trading weapons to the natives.

Nat hastily crammed his pack with staples, removing each item carefully so as not to disturb the general effect to the eye. No telling what system of checking Lettov had installed to guard against natives helping themselves.

He was ready to leave when sudden shouts faintly penetrated the thick walls. Nat stepped to the window and saw a big, broad-shouldered white man coming toward the building. He was followed by two natives who were raising some kind of protest. Abruptly the white man whirled, snarled a command, then lashed the nearest native across the face with a whip. Though the man's face was partly protected by a parka hood, nevertheless he clapped two mittened hands to his cheeks. When he drew them away the left mitt was covered with blood.

Nat caught up his pack and ran to the second floor. A narrow hall ran the length of the building. Several small doors led from the hall to compact bedrooms. Everything was built with the realization that it cost money to heat rooms, and the smaller the room the less the expense.

Nat looked into several rooms and shook his head. The beds looked as if their occupants crawled into them fully dressed. The blankets were stiff with grease, the pillows unspeakably filthy.

The odor of stale tobacco smoke was proof that the rooms were regularly occupied. Nat quickly concluded that no place on this floor offered concealment. He climbed a ladder and entered the loft. It was gloomy and cold. Here was stored an astonishing amount of traps, boat parts, nails, rusty tools, and several reindeer carcasses. Sails were stretched from the rafters, along with booms for small sailboats, whale harpoons, and knives for cutting up whales.

There was quite a heap of tusks taken from the annual walrus kill, with here and there a brown, fossilized ivory tusk. Nat shed his pack, closed the trapdoor and pushed through to a small window looking down on the village. A similar window afforded a view of the rear of the building and the country beyond.

Darkness was close and at least a dozen small parties of men were returning to the village. Behind them followed women and children. Tired dogs brought up the rear, taking full advantage of the trail the human beings were packing down. It looked to Nat as if a large-scale hunting expedition was returning. Things apparently had gone wrong, because he saw no game coming in, and the big white man's attitude toward the natives was anything but pleasant.

He stormed among them, lashing right and left with his right hand. His other hand rested comfortably on the butt of an automatic pistol, just in case native resentment was strained to the breaking point.

PRESENTLY Nat realized there were two distinct groups of natives. The objects of the white man's wrath were smaller and heavier than the preferred group, who remained aloof but obviously enjoying all that had happened.

When one of this latter group threw his parka hood back, Nat saw distinctly Mongol features. He stood almost six feet and was broad and heavy. The thin, drooping mustache he wore gave him a sinister aspect. The others were of the same breed, the result of former Northern invasions of Mongols, Tartars, and the tribes roaming Asia. That they inherited some of the fierce fighting qualities of their ancestors, Nat didn't doubt.

The village, which had been deserted when Nat arrived, was soon crowded with natives. There was an atmosphere of fear surrounding the smaller natives that extended to children and dogs. The women appeared beaten and completely subdued. This contrasted strangely with the light-heartedness Nat had noticed among the women in Sir Walter's village.

Presently the big white man's heavy voice filled the building. "Why the hell didn't you find him? He's out there somewhere. We're goin' out tomorrow and every day until he's found. Understand?"

"We look all over, Mr. Lettov," a native answered in halting English. "We no find. Snow blow. Cover tracks."

"Sure the snow covered the tracks. That's why he made the break," Lettov roared. "He wouldn't be fool enough to make a break when he could be followed. He's holed up somewhere. You savvy what I mean? He's hidin'. He'll have to show himself, then he'll leave tracks. If you don't bring him in, I'll take it out of your blasted hides."

Nat wondered whose escape could cause so much excitement. Presently, standing close to the window, he saw a subdued native leaving the building. Immediately the men of the village gathered about him, and he explained, with many gestures, what Lettov had said. The men separated and returned to their igloos in a dejected mood.

"This village is ripe for an outbreak," Nat reflected. "But they wouldn't have a chance against the big fellows Lettov has lined up with him, and they know it."

He stopped thinking about the natives' troubles and gave considerable thought to his own situation. He hadn't expected the natives to return so suddenly, and now he was practically a prisoner in Lettov's trading post.

Nat ate cold food and arranged his sleeping bag, intending to get some rest, then attempt to leave the village when everyone was asleep. Having put in a hard day on a man hunt, the natives would be sleeping soundly.

Nat only dozed slightly under the circumstances. Each unusual sound below aroused him and before he was completely awake he had the rifle in his hands. Sometime near midnight a mass wailing aroused him. The high-pitched voices of the women blended with the men's deeper voices as they gave way to grief. Nat ran to his window, not expecting actually to see anything, but a nearly full moon, flooding the snow with white light revealed a strange scene.

Two fur-clad men, obviously dead, lay lashed to a hand sled. Two other men, completely exhausted, had fallen in their tracks. Nat, checking on the last twenty-four

hours' events, remembered the party of four which he had seen heading toward Sir Walter's village. It was possible that men from that village following Nat's trail had encountered the party, and a fight had resulted.

The wailing continued. At last Lettov, followed by a number of tall natives, stalked out. He was enraged because the wails had aroused him and Nat had an idea he was partly drunk. He swayed on his heels and frequently pressed his hands against his head. The English-speaking native was dragged from his igloo and Nat took a chance and opened his window a crack with the hope of picking up some of the conversation.

"Listen you," Lettov snarled at the native, "find out what's happened? Who killed these men?"

"Me ask. Me, Plenty Talk, find out."

"So that bird calls himself Plenty Talk," Nat thought with grim amusement. "At that he's got it on me. I can't speak Eskimo, while he does turn loose a fair brand of English." Then he pushed back his parka hood—at the risk of frosting an ear—to learn what had happened.

CHAPTER VIII

ARCTIC GRAVE

AS Nat put the story together, the party of four, hunting the escaped man had headed rapidly toward Sir Walter Raleigh's village, believing he might have found refuge there. The natives appeared to regard the villages of igloos built on stilts high above the water as an arctic fortress.

The party had encountered three men led by the Eskimo "who was nice to women." In Nat's opinion, that could be no one but Sir Walter. Although they had been armed with rifles, and the other party was equipped only with spears, the latter had gotten the jump on them and killed two of their number before they could bring rifles into action. In fact they had lost their rifles in the fight.

This evidently annoyed Lettov. Nat guessed the man permitted only his most trusted men to use rifles. Lettov fired numerous questions at the survivors. What had the victors done afterward? They had returned toward their village. Was the escaped man with them? No, they had seen nothing of the escaped man, not even his tracks.

It all ended when Lettov ordered everyone to bed. Nat knew the village would be restless the remainder of the night. The wives of the dead natives would be wailing. There would be running back and forth between the igloos. And all of the dogs realized something unusual had taken place. Human excitement had been transmitted to them. There were snarls and dismal howls as muzzles were turned toward the moon.

Nat swore with irritation. He had counted on making a clean escape around two in the morning, confident that the snow would blow across his tracks. Now he was doomed to remain in the loft another twenty-four hours.

SEVERAL parties left the village at daylight and began circling the region, no doubt working on the theory that the escaped man might attempt to return for food.

Nat smelled bacon frying in the living quarters on the first floor and knew Lettov was up and breakfasting on white man's grub. He ate cold food himself and kept an ear

Nat reached the burial ground and staked everything on a ruse to fool Lettov. If it failed—

on the ladder leading to the loft and an eye on what was going on in the village.

At noon the igloos emptied. The remains of the dead men, wrapped in skins, were loaded onto sleds and a procession started for a mound a half mile distant. The mound lifted from the valley floor and was the first of a series of rises that ended in a bold sweep to the headland.

Nat hurried to the other end of the loft and looked through that window to watch the procession. He hoped the trading post would empty of its white man and Tartarish natives, but only the local villages were numbered among the mourners.

Nat could discern several driftwood platforms on the mound, the graves of a land where frozen soil makes earth burial impossible without the use of dynamite. The mourners remained some time, then returned, two men dragging the now empty hand sleds.

NAT, considering all angles, decided the coming night offered the best chance to make his own escape. The excitement was over and the village presumably would sleep. He slept from four in the afternoon until ten o'clock, then waited for the trading post to quiet down. Two natives were arguing drunkenly in dialect and Lettov was cursing the tribe generally for not running down the escaped man.

It was midnight before Lettov turned in. Nat waited until one o'clock, then lifted the trapdoor and listened. Drunken snores came from several rooms on the second floor. The first floor remained a mystery. Nat hoped Lettov was asleep, also. If the man was awake and sounded the alarm, men would pour down the stairs. And that gave Nat an idea looking to his own self-preservation.

He made his way to the rear window and dropped the pack into a snowdrift. It made some noise, but the wind muffled it. He returned to the loft, and opened the jaws of several heavy traps. As he descended the narrow stairs he left the traps at convenient points. If the men slept until daylight, as they should, they would see the traps and no harm would be done. If they rushed to help Lettov make a capture, then anything that happened would have to be classified as the fortunes of war.

Each board seemed to creak loudly as Nat stepped on it, but he reached the main floor without incident. Then as two boards groaned under his weight, Nat heard a heavy body turn in bed.

"Who's that?" Lettov's voice demanded sharply.

Nat froze in his tracks, his hands gripping the rifle, his eyes on the open door from which the demand had come.

"Answer, or I'll drill you," Lettov threatened. Then, evidently thinking the intruder was a native who might not understand, the man said something in dialect.

Nat did not move. Again the bed creaked under the movement of a heavy body. With a sudden bound Lettov shot through the door, automatic pistol clutched in his hand. At the same instant Nat made a forward thrust with his rifle butt. It caught Lettov in the stomach and knocked the air from his lungs. Involuntarily his muscles relaxed and the weapon slipped from his hands.

Lettov stumbled forward and Nat brought the gun butt upward, hoping to catch him on the jow. Lettov rolled his head just in time and

his arms caught Nat about the waist.

"I've got him!" Lettov roared in English. "He came back for grub. I've got him!"

The man's strength, even though momentarily weakened from the effects of the gun-butt blow, was tremendous. Nat couldn't use the rifle effectively in close quarters. He dropped it and broke clear. As Lettov rushed in to renew the attack, Nat rained blows on his jaw. He put everything he had behind the blows, but in the darkness his timing was poor. He missed three before one connected. Lettov's arms dropped momentarily and Nat wasted no more time with his fists. He drove his heel into Lettov's stomach and as the man went down Nat picked up the rifle and stepped over the writhing, gasping body.

The uproar and Lettov's shout for help had awakened those on the second floor. Nat heard a trap snap and a man howl with pain. The staircase groaned as men struggled to pass the trapped man. Another native got his foot caught between steel jaws and he fell. There was complete chaos. Nat let the rifle butt drop into Lettov's stomach once more for good luck, then raced through the room to the heater. He kicked it over, turned and fairly dived through the back door.

There were a few coals in the heater, enough to fill the room with smoke and keep everyone busy putting out the fire. Nat caught up his pack, swung it over his shoulders and ran toward the headland. He wanted plenty of good strong wind to cover his tracks and he was sure he would find it up there.

The igloos remained quiet for several minutes after his escape, then Lettov's bellows from the trading post aroused their occupants. This accomplished, Lettov ran to a second-floor window and began firing at the figure stumbling up the nearest ridge. Nat was only a vague target in the moonlight, but there was a chance a lucky shot might bring him down.

AS the bullets whined over his head, Nat redoubled his efforts. He stopped in a little depression below the burial mound and caught his breath. He watched the wind cover his tracks and shook his head. "Too slow," he told himself. "Sooner or later they'll get close enough to follow me. I've got to think and think fast."

The shouts of the natives in the village showed that pursuit was being organized. Nat picked up his pack and ran to the burial mound. Again he felt the bold course was the safe one. He could always fight it out if strategy failed.

He thrust his pack into a snowdrift, pulled snow over it until it was covered, then stepped back and studied the effect. The wind was blowing snow over the marks his hands had made. In fifteen minutes the spot might escape notice unless examined too closely. Nat lifted one of the bodies placed on a platform the previous day and carried it to the drift. He removed the first layer of skin in which it was wrapped, then thrust it into the drift.

Nat returned to the platform, spread the skin upon it, then hoisted himself onto the skin. He placed the rifle beside his body, then drew the ends of the heavy skin together. He hoped to escape detection, but if he failed he could go into action with the rifle. Native superstition was such that the slightest movement on his part would cause a moment of utter surprise followed by an interval of helpless-

ness while thought processes were being brought into play again. During the interval Nat thought he might have a chance—perhaps one in fifty—of reaching a wind-swept rock pile fifty yards away.

As the minutes passed he was anything but comfortable. The platform was somewhat shaky. The driftwood legs and the slabs supporting his body were bound together with rawhide thongs. The slabs were uneven and portions dug into his hip, ribs, and shoulder. He lay with his eyes turned toward the village, watching through a slit cut in the hide.

About twenty minutes later Lettov, followed by his trusted men, gained the summit of the mound. "It was him," the man declared, evidently referring to the escaped prisoner. "I told you he'd come back for grub."

Evidently, Nat thought, these people had no idea that he, Nat Donovan, had crossed the Strait to recover the cached sable. He hoped the escaped prisoner would be flushed into the open. That would ease the pressure. In fact, if that happened, Nat could probably pick up the pelts and cross to the American side without opposition.

Lettov stood a hundred feet away, looking over the platforms and cursing the snow which had drifted across Nat's tracks. "He went this way," he declared impatiently. "I saw him. He's ahead somewhere and if we move fast we're sure to pick up tracks before they're drifted over again. Spread out and move fast."

The order was translated and the men scattered. Nat dare not move, however, for stragglers were drifting past the burial ground constantly as they hurried to take part in the hunt. Whether their hearts were in it or not, none dared brave Lettov's wrath by refusing. Under Lettov's directions the natives were quartering the entire slope as hunting dogs quarter a field.

Nat lost them in the silvery light high on the slope where distance diminished them to the size of pinheads. They began trickling back shortly before dawn, pausing briefly on the edge of the burial grounds to gaze uneasily at the skin-wrapped bodies on driftwood platforms. Now and then a man would lift his eyes and gaze curiously at the stars, for some believed when a man died a new star appeared in the heavens.

Lettov came last, tired, baffled, and sullen. "He disappears into thin air," he complained to Plenty Talk. "I don't understand it. There should be tracks on that slope. All of 'em wouldn't be drifted over."

"Maybe him spirit!" Plenty Talk ventured uneasily.

"Shut up that kind of talk," Lettov rasped. "You'll have these fools scared to death. Won't be able to get 'em out of their igloos. There're tracks somewhere and we'll find 'em."

Nat Donovan, watching Lettov, knew there would be plenty of tracks in the morning. The wind had died down. The snow was no longer drifting.

CHAPTER IX

FUR CACHE

AS soon as the last native had disappeared, Nat rolled from the platform, returned the rightful occupant to the place, dragged the pack from the drift and set off for the headland. From now on his speed, strategy and fighting resourcefulness would be taxed to the limit.

He gained the crest, dropped down the opposite side and stopped when he was about a hundred feet above the shore ice. There he shed his pack and sized up the bluff. Its almost sheer walls were free of snow except at one point. Here a large mass had fallen into the sea at some remote time, leaving a basin which retained snow.

Nat burrowed about in the snow until he located several rocks. He fastened a line to one of them, dropped it over the cliff, then began to walk down the face, clinging to the line with his hands, supporting part of his weight on his feet. He reached a ledge, worked his way along it and found a cave at the end. The entrance, he now realized, was not visible from the water. And even if it had been, he doubted if anyone could have approached the headland during the open season because of the surf. He lighted a candle and entered.

Apparently no ancient Eskimo had ever lived here. The floor was rough and uneven. Ragged pieces of rock that had fallen from the roof littered the way. At the extreme end Nat saw the bow of a three-hole bidarka.

He pulled aside several walrus hides and looked down on various items, each of which he realized was of definite importance. There was the bidarka and its paddles ready for the water; and there was a hand sled large enough to carry the bidarka if it was balanced right. Coils of rawhide lines were piled, ready to lower the various items to the shore ice. And lastly, there were the furs properly prepared for storage and made up into bales.

Everything was exactly as Pete Ferry had described it. Sport Dorgan, or anyone else who had learned the directions to the cache, could have found it. As Pete Ferry had warned, "Findin' 'em won't be hard once you've memorized instructions. But gettin' 'em safely over the ice to the American shore is goin' to be another story."

Thus far, Nat had played his cards reasonably well. He had been quick to push ahead when he realized he could stock up with food at Lettov's trading post. And by taking a long chance he had escaped the net Lettov had hastily spread.

There was one drawback, and a serious one, to the present situation; it takes an expert to paddle a bidarka. The instant the novice shoves off, even in the calmest water, he is likely to find himself in the place the keel should be. A waterproof skin parka covers the paddler, and as the bottom of the parka is fastened to the hatch coaming, man and craft are presumably leak-proof. But man hasn't learned to breathe under water, and it is either right the craft again—a difficult trick in itself—or drown.

Nat carried everything to the cave mouth, lowered each item to the shore ice, then sent his pack and rifle down. Lastly he slid down the line to solid footing. If there had been any choice in the matter he would have proceeded to Sir Walter Raleigh's village, obtained help, and then crossed to Icy Point. The distance between the two continents was somewhat less there. From where he stood it was between eighty and a hundred miles in a direct line to Icy Point. And that is a lot of distance to travel over moving floes.

But the chances of passing Lettov's village unobserved were all against him. Resolutely he prepared to cross in a direct line, hoping he wouldn't be carried into the Arctic Basin.

There was a strong temptation to lighten his load by throwing food away. He had a month's supply now. With luck he should be at Icy Point within a week. But there was the chance the moving ice might keep him at sea for a month or more. Again, Sport was probably starving and would need food. All things considered, the extra food was worth its weight in sables. Nat decided to keep it.

He lashed the bidarka to the sled, loaded everything but the rifle inside and covered two of the hatches. The third he left open for himself. There remained a coil of line and several large seal skins. These had been removed with care, and the openings sewed up. Inflated, the Eskimos used them to attach to the harpoon heads they drove into whales. Enough of them prevented a whale from sinking after the kill.

Nat added the floats to the load and started off. The ice was rough, and snow had piled up in drifts, but he made steady progress the first half-hour. He sat down to catch his breath and check the course. The sled runners were sheathed with strips of ivory and the load moved easily on the level. He could make three miles an hour under favorable conditions.

AS Nat rested, his eyes roved the shore line for signs of life. The headland concealed him from the village proper and would continue to protect him for the next ten miles. After that there was little possibility of being observed by anyone standing at sea level. He wasn't certain, but he thought he saw a dark speck on the headland crest that wasn't there before. Perhaps it was a rock that had escaped notice.

He resumed the trek, looked over his shoulder and saw that the speck had changed position, was, in fact, now moving. Somebody had spotted him! He speeded up until he was trotting. His course was uncertain, snakelike, as he avoided every possible obstruction. Pursuers, of course, would follow a direct line.

Two hours after he started he skirted a pressure ridge and found a lead directly ahead. It extended as far as he could see in either direction, sinister black water, but dead calm. The width varied from a half mile where he stood, to perhaps a couple of hundred yards at a point a mile to the northeast. That mile, following the edge of the lead, was littered with ice fragments. Nat decided it was easier to ferry the lead at the widest point.

He inflated the sealskins and lashed them between the sled runners, then lashed the bidarka to the side of the sled. As long as the lashings held and the sled remained afloat, the bidarka couldn't capsize. The rear hatch extended well back of the sled, so Nat could paddle on either side. Somewhat dubiously he shoved the mass into the water and got aboard. The bidarka rode dangerously low with its heavy load. Nat paddled, and raft and skin boat moved into the lead. A wind would have been disastrous, so would floating ice fragments. Sometimes the bidarka headed northeasterly, again southeasterly, but by hard paddling Nat managed to cross the lead.

He removed the lashings and hauled the bidarka out first. It proved a tough job and for a moment he thought he might have to lose time unloading. Then he got the sled out and the seal floaters clear of the runners. He loaded the bidarka to the sled and headed over a floe he guessed was moving slowly.

As soon as he was behind a pressure ridge he climbed to the highest

point and looked toward the headland. The pursuit was on. Several men were running beside a sled supporting an umiak. Others, pulling attached lines, were running ahead. Distance made it impossible for Nat to identify the members of the party, but he was certain Lettov and Plenty Talk were along. They were making at least two miles to his one and they would cross the lead three times as fast.

Nat left his rifle on the ridge, dragged the load a mile to the protection of a second ridge, then trotted back to the rifle. He was in a position now to maneuver without immediately endangering his load, nor exposing himself when he began dragging it again.

The natives were launching the umiak when Nat got back to his rifle. He cut crosses on the ends of several metal patched bullets so they would mushroom when they hit, then he waited until the umiak was in the middle of the lead. He aimed carefully at the bow near the waterline and fired. A jet of water leaped up six inches to the left. Nat fired again and saw water splash at the waterline. He wasn't interested in killing men, but in sinking their craft. He knew from the shouts and confusion the second bullet had splintered bow woodwork and torn a hole in the skin covering. Now he ripped several holes in the side, knowing the bullets would penetrate the nearest side, pass downward, mushroom and tear a larger hole below the waterline.

Half of the crew was busy now, trying to plug up the holes. The others, under Lettov's bellowed orders, were turning the umiak around and making for the opposite side of the lead. Nat, without exposing himself, returned to his sled. He knew he had won an engagement, but not a battle. The battle was ahead. Lettov now knew the fur was on its way to American markets and he would stop at nothing to wipe out the lone man and take over a small fortune.

Nat crossed five leads that day and put twenty miles behind him, but he was almost out on his feet from physical exhaustion. He had eaten nothing during the day, partly because there wasn't time to prepare food, but mostly because he was too tense from the pressure of the pursuit. He went to bed hoping for a snowstorm, fog, or anything that would cover his movements, but the day dawned calm with an overcast sky.

He fortified himself with a meal cooked over a small, driftwood fire. There wouldn't be many such meals, as he was carrying his wood, and had cut down the weight there. He laid a compass course and started. Again and again during the day he climbed pressure ridges and studied the floes. There wasn't a sign of pursuit. Nat was worried by that. He would have preferred to have Lettov in the open.

The ice was rougher now, but Nat only crossed one lead during the day. He had now covered a total of around forty miles. Whether or not he had gained that much depended on the drift of the ice.

The third day passed without incident, other than heartbreaking labor. Nat began to hope Lettov had lost his trail. But he knew such hope was rank folly. Certainly there were other umiaks at the village; certainly Lettov, dominating the natives as he did, could force them to paddle their hearts out or break their backs hauling the skin boats over the ice.

CHAPTER X

THE LAW WAITS

NAT awakened the morning of the fourth day and saw the snow-covered hills of the American continent. The low-lying headland was Icy Point. There was no mistaking its contours. He had a brief feeling of elation, then he speculated on his own future. He supposed he might successfully dodge the law for a while, but sooner or later it would catch up. Life without Jane wouldn't be living, anyway; it would be a dreary existence.

Nat made good time over a five-mile stretch in the early hours of the fourth morning. Then he faced a lead two miles in width. He changed his load about, lashed the bidarka to the sled and started across. A ripple broke constantly across the skin boat's deck and gave him some concern. If it got rougher the sled might chafe a hole in the skin hull and start a leak.

Nat was a third of the way across when he saw a half dozen fur-clad figures coming over the ice. He stopped paddling. So that had been Lettov's strategy. He had crossed the ice in advance of Nat and had now caught him in the open. Nat sent a bullet over their heads to slow the advance, then retreated to the floe he had just left. Perhaps tonight, under the cover of darkness, he could safely cross. What he needed was a change in weather again.

Nat landed and dragged his bidarka and sled to the nearest ice offering protection. The lead had widened and there was little danger of Lettov attacking. He relaxed, smoked, and planned the night's movements. Then just to play safe he climbed a pressure ridge and looked toward the east. A tall Eskimo appeared to be signaling to someone on his own floe.

Nat looked westerly and hastily slid from view. A dozen natives, led no doubt by Lettov, were closing in on him. He caught up the rifle and opened fire. The men scattered. The Eskimos on the easterly floe were now retreating. Apparently the party was satisfied with forcing him back within range of Lettov's party. If he attempted to cross the lead now, Lettov and his men would be quick to make the most of their opportunity.

Throughout the day Nat watched the ice in front of him. Frequently there were brief movements, but no man cared to show himself. As darkness settled, a faint, red glow appeared on Icy Point. Someone had built a fire.

"Good old Sport," Nat thought warmly. "He can't know I'm out here, but on the chance I need a beacon he's gone into action."

The ice, at least, had been favorable. It had carried him in a generally southerly direction during the day. Nat launched the bidarka and sled, moored it to a slab of ice, then returned to the pressure ridge. A half-hour passed without incident, then he caught sight of advancing figures. At first they moved with caution; then, believing no doubt that he had left the floe and could be caught in the open, they approached on the run.

Nat aimed at the largest and fired. As the man howled in pain he shifted his position and fired again. He moved slowly back and forth until he had fired a half dozen shots, then he reloaded and ran to the bidarka. He shoved off and began paddling rapidly, hoping to lose himself in the shadows before the attacking party was convinced he had left the protection of the ridge.

With the red glow as a guide, Nat paddled nearly two hours before he gained the westerly floe. He landed with rifle ready for immediate action. The floe was still, except somewhere ahead where there was a mild grinding going on. He got the sled and bidarka out of the water and a few minutes later was plodding toward the beacon.

Nat had rigged a skin harness to go about his shoulders so that his hands were free to fire the rifle. He carried it lightly, ready to use it on the slightest warning. All night he pushed steadily toward the beacon. Sometimes it died down, again it blazed. Someone was feeding the flames.

He was three miles from Icy Point when the first streaks of daylight appeared. He would be visible from the point, and certainly Sport Dorgan would find means of helping him the last few miles. He glanced back to make certain he wasn't trailed, then looked ahead. A few seconds later a bullet whistled overhead. Two others came. From the ice jets leaping wherever a bullet struck he knew several were firing at him from different angles.

NAT sprawled flat to escape the hail of lead, then worked himself free of the harness. This, he knew, was the showdown. If he could stand them off, or wipe them out before he himself was killed, then Sport could get the furs. And Sport, being the man he was, would tell Jane the whole story.

There wasn't much protection where Nat was, for Lettov had waited until he had reached an open stretch. Nat crawled on his stomach to the nearest hummock, hardly two feet high, and blasted one native out of his position. Then he raced to better cover. Protection lasted only a few minutes, then the shifting men could see portions of his body once more. Only poor marksmanship saved him.

Risking a quick glance about, Nat saw at least thirty natives scattered over the ice, and all converging on him. "Thirty to one," he muttered. Well, he tried to philosophize, all he had to lose was a forfeited life. A half dozen broke into the clear, ran a dozen yards and dropped to cover before he could fire. Then several more dashed forward. To the south he could see a large party working along a pressure ridge. This group was too far to do immediate damage, but all were important in the future.

As the nearest group dashed forward again, Nat was ready. He stopped one native, a Tartarish-looking fellow, in the midst of his charge. A moment later Nat heard Lettov's voice urging his men on. Plenty Talk was repeating the trader's commands and getting immediate action.

Nat saw the strategy now, to gain an ice hummock that would look down on him. To do so every man must expose himself. The law of averages told Nat several would make it. He broke suddenly from cover and was halfway to the hummock before his attackers realized his purpose. Then something heavy knocked Nat flat. There was a moment when the attackers expected a trick, and during that moment Nat got to his feet again and gained the hummock. He felt himself and decided a piece of flying ice had struck his head.

A dozen natives, led by Lettov, broke into the open. While Nat tried to get in one clean shot another stalked him from the rear. Suddenly the man landed on his shoulders. The two went down and

when Nat fought back he realized a night on the sled had taken its toll of his strength. He got under the native and heaved upward. For a moment his legs almost gave way. Then with an effort he hurled the man outward. The fellow clung to Nat and though he was thrown clear of the rim of the hummock behind which Nat had taken protection, he dragged Nat's body into view.

Bullets splattered about the two figures. The man suddenly cried out and Nat squirmed backward. While the man was still sliding, Nat regained his rifle. Lettov was fifty feet away and aiming as Nat flung his rifle to the shoulder. A half dozen weapons were aimed at him. There was no escape, but he meant to take Lettov with him. He felt the weapon's recoil, then saw Lettov's arms go up in a convulsive gesture.

The top of Nat's parka hood was shredded by bullets a moment later. It wasn't poor marksmanship that had saved him. Rather it was the natives' astonishment when their leader, who had convinced them he was invincible, fell. One man, horrified that Nat had survived, turned and fled. The others followed. But the large party Nat had seen coming along the pressure ridge was now advancing at a trot.

Nat turned, raced to the sled and began dragging it to a point offering better defense. A small lead, rapidly getting wider, yawned dangerously before him, but beyond that he saw Sport coming over the ice on the run. Nat lashed the bidarka to the side of the sled for the last time, he hoped, then ran back and blazed away at anything he saw. The large party was still coming, however. And to the north Nat saw a lone figure trotting over the ice.

As Sport reached the edge of the lead, Nat launched the bidarka and began paddling. Sport's lead whistled steadily over his head and occasionally there came answering shots, but Sport was keeping Lettov's natives too far back to get in effective shooting.

AS Nat leaped to the ice, Sport's big hand caught the sled and the two dragged the sled and bidarka to safety. "So you got the furs!" Sport shouted. "I looked at that ice, and listened to it, and decided you had about a chance in a thousand. But when I saw those natives hunting you from hell to breakfast, I hiked up your chances to one in a million. I couldn't get over that blasted lead to give you a hand, either." He stopped talking and stared.

"What's the matter?" Nat asked.

Sport turned him around suddenly. "What do you make of that. The natives seem to be engaging in a free-for-all. And playing for keeps, too."

The party Nat had seen coming along the pressure ridge was now attacking Lettov's Tartars.

"Give me your binoculars," Nat shouted.

Sir Walter Raleigh was leading the attacking party. Plenty Talk and the Tartars were in retreat. Everything was clear now. Sir Walter's people had been convinced that Nat was no spy of Lettov's. They had followed him when he left their village and encountered several of Lettov's men. Having killed two, they had gained faith in themselves. Later, learning that Nat was crossing the ice alone and that Lettov's men were following to attack, they had gone after their enemies and were coming into the fight just as Nat beat them off. Now they were mopping up.

"That seems to be all taken care of," Sport said, while Nat turned the glasses on the lone figure. As yet neither party had noticed him.

"Sir Walter has them on the run," Nat said, returning the glasses to Sport. "Can't figure what that native's doing by himself."

"Oh, you mean Lone Wolf out there? I saw him earlier in the day. It looked as if he were trying to pull a flank movement on you," Sport said. "He's dangerous. He's packing a spear into a gun fight." He laughed lightly, then began dragging the sled.

Sport said little until they reached the Point. "I hate to hit a groggy man," he said reluctantly, "but—Jane's here!"

"Jane! You're kidding!" Nat exclaimed. "Damn you, Sport, did you send for her?"

"No," Sport denied. "Of course not! Someone recognized you when the Mushing Eagle changed from pontoons to skis. The news spread and created a sensation. Jane caught the first plane North, then asked the Eagle to bring her on here. And—" He hesitated.

"Go on," Nat said impatiently.

"Two law officers came with her," Sport explained. "The ice had broken up along the beach and the plane had to land inland a couple of miles. They brought grub to me and went back this morning for more. You see, I didn't tell them I thought I spotted you coming over the ice. I just said you'd been gone for days and I had kept a fire going nights. Now what do you want to do? We can get the jump on the lawmen and leave 'em here. The plane can land you where you aren't known, and—"

"And the pilot, you, and everyone else will automatically become criminals," Nat interrupted grimly. "Thanks—but no dice. Anyway, here they come over the ridge."

"Damn it!" Sport groaned.

"What I'm going to ask comes hard, Sport," Nat said. "Do you love Jane?"

"I'm afraid I do," Sport admitted. "But she loves you, Nat. A girl's love is hard to kill sometimes."

"She's going to need you and need you like hell in the days to come," Nat said grimly. "I don't need to ask you to be gentle with her. I know you will. Well, here she is."

THE moment Jane recognized Nat's figure, she broke into a run. And she didn't stop running until she was in his arms. Sport Dorgan walked over and stopped the two marshals.

"I don't care if you are the law," he said firmly, "those two are going to have a moment alone."

Neither Jane nor Nat could speak at first, then he said huskily, "I've waited for the party who unlocked my cell door on the boat to show his hand. Nothing's happened, so it must have been you."

She clung tightly to him. "You sat in the courtroom without fear, Nat," she told him, "and you didn't flinch when they sentenced you to . . . to—" She couldn't finish. "I kept thinking that you might have made a mistake in leaving dad lashed to the sled, but that you could not have deliberately left him to die. Wolf law was never your law. On the boat I was tormented by my thoughts. Then I suddenly realized what dad would do if he were alive. He'd have given you a chance to escape, or die trying. Anything but the gallows. So I slipped into the marshal's cabin, took his keys and unlocked your door. Oh, Nat, why didn't you go ten thousand miles from Alaska?"

"Your dad wanted us to be happy," Nat answered. "He was ready to die to give us a chance. Well, I couldn't leave the job unfinished. And it's finished. You'll have to lean on Sport in the future, Jane. He—"

A marshal's voice interrupted sharply. "That fellow out there is done for now. The floes are coming together."

Nat had forgotten the lone figure fighting his way over the ice. He had supposed the man had retreated with the others. Now the man was leaping from berg to berg, a few rods ahead of the slowly closing ice jaws. Sometimes he landed cleanly on a block. Again he missed and sank to his armpits.

Nat began unloading the bidarka. "What are you up to?" the marshal demanded. "You can't do anything."

"There's a chance I can make it," Nat said. And when the marshal tried to stop him, he added, "After all, I haven't a damned thing to lose."

Sport helped Nat carry the sled and bidarka to the lead and launch it. "Thanks, Sport," Nat said warmly. "If I'm lucky, I won't come back."

Jane was crying softly, perhaps praying that Nat *would* have the kind of luck he wanted.

The lead was full of broken ice, and as the edges of the two floes closed in the broken ice was turned into a seething mass, then either thrown onto the contending floes or smashed under.

The trapped man managed to keep slightly ahead of the mass. Now he saw what Nat had done. He signaled for Nat not to come closer, but to turn around so that they could start instantly.

Nat turned and drove the bidarka stern-first into a mass of ice. The other leaped and landed on the sled. "Get into the front hole," he roared at Nat. Lay down flat."

NAT'S blood almost turned cold as he recognized the voice. "Pete Ferry!" he exclaimed hoarsely. He got into the front hole and thrust his body down until only his head showed. This kept the center of gravity low.

Pete got into the rear hole, grasped the paddle and cut the bidarka free. Deftly working the paddle, he kept the craft right side up. Again and again he drove through stretches of water closing in on them. The group on shore was watching with agonized attention. The entire offshore floe was piling onto the shore ice.

A piece of ice spilled onto the frail bow and drove it under. Then as it slipped clear, Ferry sent the skin boat ahead again. Another piece, thrust underneath, lifted the bidarka half out of the water.

"They're gone now!" a marshal shouted. "If their legs weren't inside, they might make a jump for it." Pete swung the craft clear and righted it with a paddle stroke. Sport Dorgan and the others, risking their own lives, ran to the edge of the crumbling floe and tossed a line. Nat caught it and they hauled the skin boat to the floe by sheer man power. Hands lifted Nat and Pete clear, then all raced to safety.

"Dad! Dad!" Jane sobbed in her father's arms. "I can't believe it. Sapsuck said the wolves had finished you. He even brought bones with fang marks to prove it. He told a terrible story of Nat's cowardice—"

"Coward, that boy!" the old man snorted. "I figgered the only chance Nat and you had was for me to drop out of the picture. I've

knowed some mighty fine old Eskimos who've done it. And it's right. But Nat, the blamed chump, wouldn't stand for it. He overpowered me and lashed me to the sled, then tried to locate the best route back. This Sapsuck come out of the snowstorm, packed me to a skin boat he had, and left the sled to the wolves."

"I squared the Sapsuck account," Nat told him grimly.

"Lettov figgered he could force me to tell where I'd cached them sable pelts," Ferry continued. "He give Sapsuck the job of bringin' me in. They knowed I'd planned to come for the pelts. I guess Lettov must've been afraid the fellers on this side of the Berin' Strait would figger I was alive and start an investigation, so he must've had Sapsuck show up with human bones."

"He did more than that," Jane said. "He had Nat accused of murder."

"The hell he did!" Ferry shouted indignantly. His fury increased as he related what had happened. "Lettov gave Sapsuck the job of watchin' for rescue parties, and he worked on me. He got pretty mean at times. But I knowed as long as I kept my mouth shut he wouldn't kill me. He kept me prisoner and tried tricks to make me talk. Well, I didn't." There was grim drama in his voice. "The gang of tough natives he'd brought in, knowed all about me. But the nice fellers, like Sir Walter Raleigh, didn't. I had friends and word got to me a white man was with Sir Walter. 'That's Nat,' I told myself. 'I wonder where he's been all this time.' Then I escaped, figgerin' to meet Nat near the cache and give him a hand. They ran me ragged, and I didn't get near the cache until after Nat was on the ice. I drug a bidarka along, but couldn't make much time because everybody was after Nat. Well, I guess that's all."

"Where'd Lettov get the human bones with the fang marks on them?" Nat asked.

"This Lettov is an American born of Russian parents," Pete explained. "They figgered they could muscle into the fur racket, so he got in with officials in Siberia, picked up authority and confiscated all the posts. The officials sent a man to investigate and he got et by wolves. Lettov saw to that. And that's where them bones come from."

Sport Dorgan came over to Nat and shook his hand. "This has been the most thrilling gamble of my life," he said sincerely. "I want to congratulate you, Nat, and you, too, Jane. And believe me it comes right from my heart. I suppose we'd better fly to Juneau and start the ball rolling so you'll get a pardon. After that—well, you two know the answer."

He took Pete Ferry's arm and started him toward camp. The two marshals, with an understanding glance at each other, followed, and Nat and Jane were left alone. Nat's mind went back to those tense hours in the courtroom when nothing seemed real. He gave an involuntary sigh.

"What's the matter?" Jane asked.

"I'm wondering if this is all real," he said, "or what it is?"

"Will this help to clear up things?" she asked softly, kissing him. For a brief moment he held her, then he relaxed. Really relaxed for the first time in many weeks.

"Hell damn," he sighed, as they hurried to overtake the others.

THE END.

THE STORY OF THE WEST

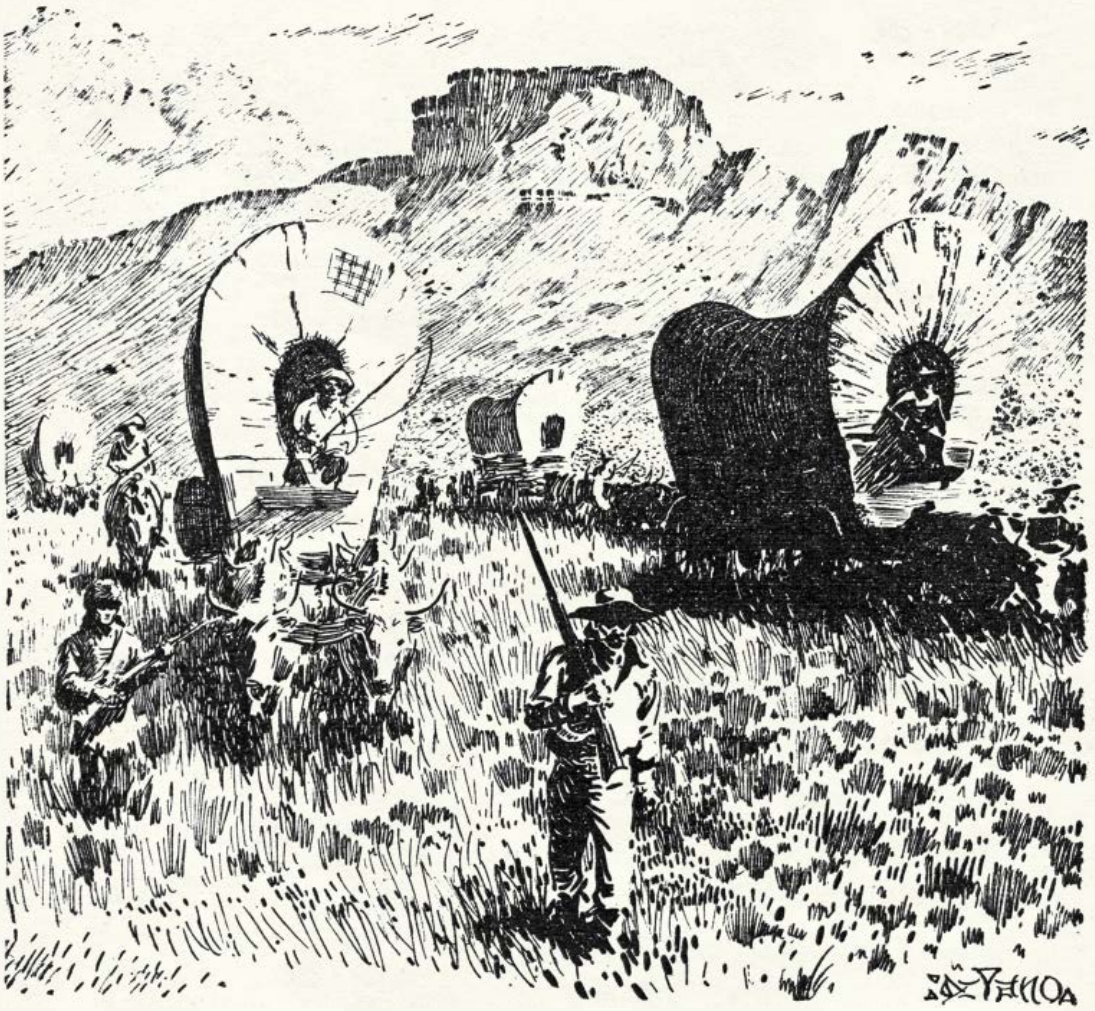
told in pictures and text by

GERARD DELANO

The earlier caravans over the Santa Fe Trail were small and not as well organized as those which later cut deep ruts across the prairies. As attack after attack by the marauding Indians harassed the caravans, more and greater precautions were taken against disaster. Steadily each year the size of the caravans grew, their very size being a large measure of insurance, and as their size increased so did the value of the larger total loads so transported.

But the captains of these caravans did not place too much confidence in size and numbers alone. Little was left undone to insure the safe passage of the huge trains. It soon became a common practice to organize each caravan quite as definitely and effectively as a military unit.

From the rendezvous at Council Grove,



Missouri, the huge wagon trains proceeded across country under definite leadership. Such leadership was a serious responsibility and only went to men of proven character, experience and ability.

From Council Grove the caravans traveled in two long lines, but after crossing Pawnee Fork, the formation was changed and from this point on till the borders of the mountains were reached, the wagons traveled four abreast.

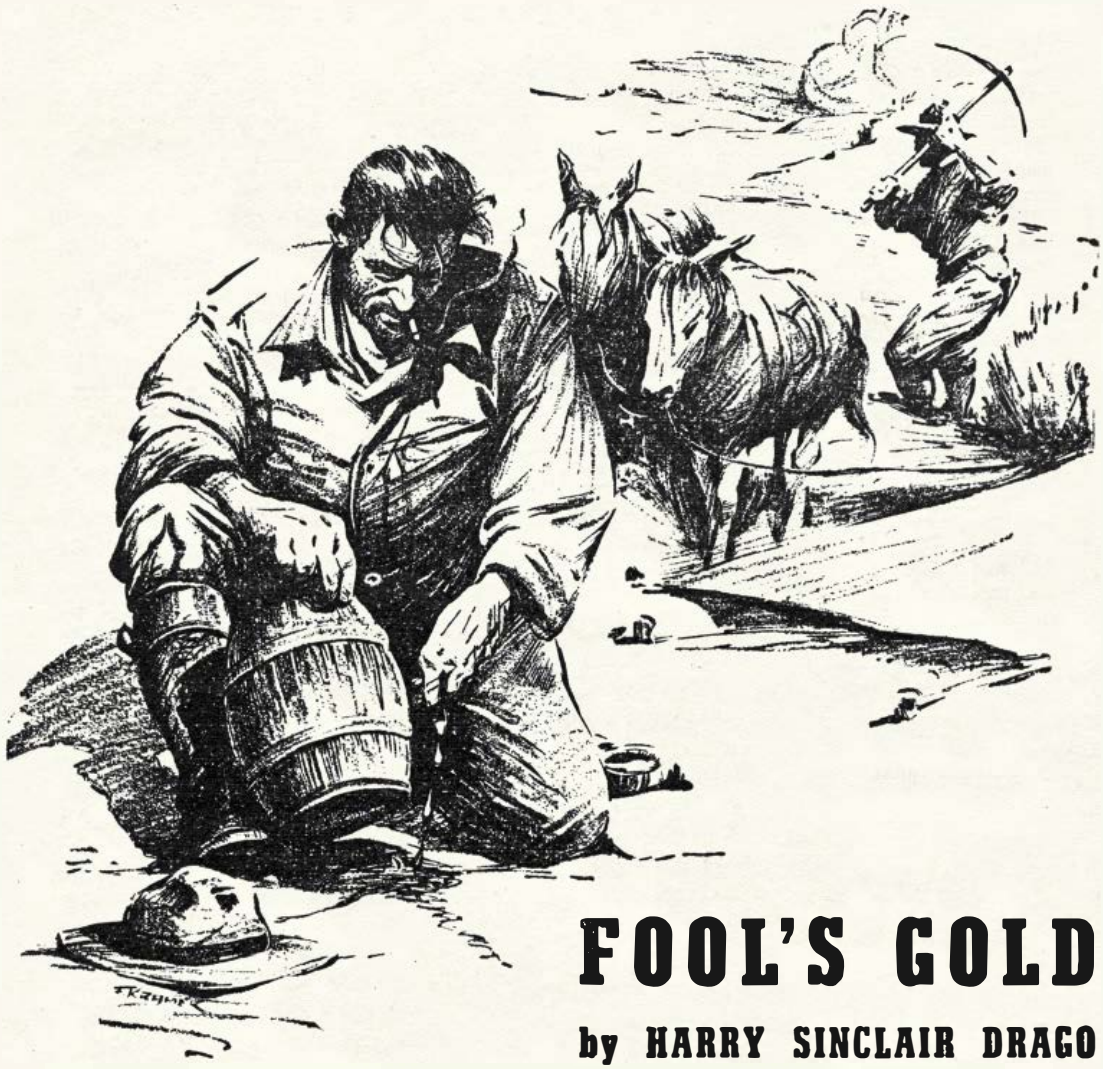
By marching so, better progress could be made and in the event of attack the entire caravan was more readily formed into a defense corral. There was a very definite procedure in this "forming" as well as carrying out the other details of caravaneering the Trail.

When these caravans were large, the men and wagons were apportioned into four divisions. To each division a lieutenant was appointed, whose duty it was to inspect each creek and ravine on the route, select the best crossings and superintend such crossings, as well as the "forming" of each encampment.

In "forming" the wagons for camp or defense from a four-abreast line of march, the two outside lines spread out and met at the first angle, while the two inner lines kept close together until they reached the point of the rear angle. Then they wheeled suddenly out and closed with the hinder ends of the other two, thus forming a quadrangle, with a gap left at the rear corner for the introduction of the stock.

While on the march the rear wagons of the caravan were seldom guarded, as all the loose horsemen pushed to the front, some often being as much as a mile in the lead.

NEXT WEEK: REVOLT IN TEXAS



FOOL'S GOLD

by HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

In the late afternoon of this long, sun-whitened day, three burros led by a man crested the last treeless ridge of the inhospitable Santa Cristobal range and looked down on the ranch-dotted valley of the Luna de Plata.

Below, the parent creek and its tributaries made green traceries across the wide sweep of country below. The lead burro stopped of its own accord and sniffed thirstily at the distant green patches. Brent Logan did not urge the animal on. He, too, had stopped, and it was not only because the sight of living green things once more stirred something in him.

Lacking a day, a month had passed since he and the burros had headed south to lose themselves in that vast, barren reach of open desert between the Funerals and the Panamints. Reluctantly he had put that white-hot land, with its bitter noons and brooding silence, far behind him again; now he was almost home. Across the valley of the Luna de Plata he could see the little town of Luna. He dismissed it with a glance, and, his gray eyes narrowing unconsciously in his strong young face, he focused his attention sharply on a clump of poplars, match-high in the distance, that marked the site of a ranchhouse that stood at the

forks of the Luna de Plata and Dutch John Creek.

It was an unguarded moment for him, and something of what that ranch and those who lived there meant to him was mirrored in his eyes. He and his kid brother, Ferd, had built that little spread and made it pay. Two years back, he had cut himself adrift from it forever. Ferd had the ranch now; and he had Lannie Wheeler for his wife—lovely Lannie whose favor Brent Logan had once counted his one treasure beyond price.

The memory of it all was on him now—as it was whenever he stood here, the desert behind him for a brief spell and the world that once had been his unrolled before him—and it tightened his mouth and left his face gray and wintry with regret. Not that he could have done any different had he had it to do all over again; for the truth was that the desert had got him, enticing him with her mystery and luring him on with her promise of gold, jade that she was, and bending him to her will until the virus that had been fermenting in him all through his cowboy years, back even when he and Ferd and Kim Roberts were forking their first broncs for the old Frying Pan outfit in Steptoe Basin, had made a confirmed desert rat of him at thirty.

"Lannie did the right thing in gettin' through with me," he mused aloud, in the habit of desert men. "I used to think a good stake would satisfy me and I'd be finished with rattin'. It doesn't work out that way at all. It's tough when you never find a ledge, but it's downright hell when you do. There's no gettin' through then; you're hooked for life."

He was in a position to know the truth of this, for two weeks ago, in a tangle of malpais forty miles south of Monument Wells, where no man in his senses would have dreamed of finding a color, he had stumbled across a veritable little jewelry shop, exposed by the drifting sands. Knowing the next storm would cover it up, he had stayed with it until his water was gone. If he never found it again, he had upward of twenty thousand dollars' worth of the stuff on his burros at this minute. As a lodestone to draw him back for more, it was overpowering; as money—though he had never owned so great a sum—it meant little.

Until now, he had not realized exactly how little it meant. Standing there, eyes slitted and suddenly bleak, he knew. Twenty thousand, or a hundred times twenty thousand, it would be the same. Without Lannie Wheeler by his side, nothing was going to mean very much.

AN hour later Brent had reached the floor of the valley. Dutch John Creek, only a few feet wide here, stood in his way. He drove the burros across and splashed after them. He started to circle a heavy stand of young aspens that came close to the creek here when a girl rode out of the trees. In the uncertain light Brent stared at her for a moment before he was sure who it was.

"Lannie!" he exclaimed then, his surprise complete. "What are you doin' way up the creek?"

"Waiting for you, Brent," she answered, her voice charged with an excitement she could not hide. "I've known for a long time that you always cross the creek here." Brent saw her chin quiver. It sent a chill through him; usually she was so calm and sure of herself.

"I . . . I've been watching for you for days," she went on. "I was

beginning to think you never would come—"

"Lannie, there's somethin' wrong!" His tone was worried, insistent. "What is it? Why isn't the kid here?"

A step brought him up beside her pony. Catching her hand, his fingers closed on it fiercely as though he would squeeze the truth out of her. For a long moment only her deep breathing broke the stillness of the early evening.

"Brent," she said then, her cheeks bloodless, "I wanted to be the one to tell you. We buried Ferd on Friday."

Speechless, his face hard and flat, Brent Logan stared at her for seconds on end.

"Why, Lannie, that can't be!" he cried. "Ferd never was sick a day in—"

"He was killed, Brent. He had a chance to sell our young bulls to Henry Lifield. He drove them to town and started home with the money on him. Someone shot and robbed him at that old stone corral this side of Sander's place. I . . . I found him there."

Brent turned away, overwhelmed by his sense of loss. For the moment he could think of nothing else. He had always been proud of Ferd. Between them had run an affection and deep respect that had gone further than the mere fact that they were brothers. They had never let anything get in the way of that, not even Lannie.

The burros had moved out on the little grassy flat between the creek and the aspens, old Jenny's bell tinkling peacefully in the gathering purple haze. To Lannie there seemed to be a note of heartbreak in it. Slipping down from her pony, she went over and sat down beside Brent. For a long time they sat in silence.

"Graham must have some idea who did it," he said at last. Link Graham was the sheriff. "These things never fool him for long."

"I'm not interested in what the sheriff does," Lannie said. "I'm looking to you, Brent."

He nodded soberly. "You're right. This is up to me."

A stoical calm settling on her, she told him how she had waited for Ferd that night and then had gone out looking for him until she had found him slumped down in the dust beside his pony, a hundred yards west of the stone corral on the Box S road.

"I don't know how I did it, but I got him back on his horse and brought him home," she continued. "Bozey and I did what we could. It was too late."

"You got Graham right away?"

She nodded. "I sent Bozey." Old Bozey was Lannie and Ferd's one hand.

"Well?" he prompted.

Lannie took a long time over her answer.

"Brent, I . . . I know who killed Ferd."

THE unexpectedness of it jerked Brent to his feet. Amazed, he stared at her. "You're sure?"

"Yes. Long after Bozey left for Luna, I lit a lantern and went out to have a look at Ferd's pony. He was riding that piebald mare, Heads Up, that he liked so well. I thought maybe I'd find some message from him. It was there. Not on his saddle, but scrawled with his finger on the white shoulder of his pony. Written in his own blood, Brent. Two letters K and I."

"But that doesn't make sense," he protested, feeling a sharp sense of disappointment.

"It does if you add a letter to it.

The letter M, Brent."

"Kim? Kim Roberts?" he jerked out fiercely. It was incredible. "Oh, no, Lannie, you're wrong! You don't know what you're sayin'! Kim is my best friend. He was Ferd's friend. We were kids together, pals for years. I know Kim has been goin' soft around town, drinkin' too much and busted most of the time, but he couldn't have done this. You're wrong!"

Finished, his words hung on in the stillness until he found them mocking him for the very vehemence of his denial.

"What does Graham say about this?" he asked.

"He doesn't know. No one knows but you, Brent." Her voice had a stony, dead-level quality as she went on, "I thought you'd want it that way."

"Of course," he muttered, his face furrowed and grim. "Lannie, you don't know what you're askin' me to believe."

"I'm not asking you to believe anything," she said flatly. "At least, you know what I found."

"Yeah," he murmured, so deeply engrossed with his own thoughts that his lips barely moved. His life was passing in disordered review across his mind. He had known Kim Roberts for more than twenty years. Old memories were flooding him; memories of good times they had had together; of days when one had come through for the other. And yet, doubt was eating into him; eating into the solid wall of his faith like some poisonous acid. He knew a man could change a lot over a span of years. He knew Kim had changed; he was no longer the laughing, reckless side-kick he once had been. But a killer, turning on a friend, striking him down for money. Brent groaned unconsciously. He'd have to be sure—terribly sure—before he did anything.

LANNIE had not taken her eyes off him, waiting for him to speak. Her patience exhausted, she got to her feet and stood gazing at him with reproachful, accusing eyes.

"Brent, is that all you have to say?" she demanded. "I don't suppose I should be surprised. I know what the desert has done to you. You're driving yourself slowly mad with your dreaming, building a wall around yourself so that nothing else matters!"

"No, Lannie," he protested. "You just don't understand—"

"I think I understand perfectly," she whipped back. "It's about time someone made you take stock of yourself. When I told you I wouldn't marry you unless you put this madness out of your head, it didn't take you long to decide that I wasn't worth the sacrifice. It didn't take you much longer to be through with Ferd. For two years you've never set foot on the ranch. You've gone miles out of your way to keep from doing it. And Ferd needed you. We . . . we both needed you, if you must have the truth."

An ache in his heart that she failed to understand, he stood before her, fumbling for words. "You're wrong, Lannie," he got out clumsily. "I didn't want to stay away—"

"But you did," she said inexorably. "Maybe it wouldn't have made any difference, but I can't help feeling that this wouldn't have happened to Ferd if you'd stayed a little closer to him. You've been going around like a man in a daze. A day or two in Luna and you're off again for weeks. You haven't bothered with what's been going on

around you. You don't know it, but there have been rumors for a long time that Kim Roberts has been mixed up in the rustling that's been going on since spring."

"I'd have done somethin' about it if I'd heard it," he said woodenly, a remote defiance in his tone. "It never was my way to let a friend down nor to take a rumor for a fact. Talk can get around about any man."

"There are some things people don't say unless they know," she retorted. "If it will make things any clearer to you, let me tell you that Kim rode into the ranch one night in May on a lathered pony. Ferd got up and went down to the barn with him. Half an hour later the sheriff and a posse were there, asking if we'd seen anyone. Ferd said no, but the next day he admitted to me that Kim Roberts had stayed out in our barn the rest of that night."

Her back straight and proud, she turned to go to her pony. Brent reached out and stopped her. His hand heavy on hers, they stood facing each other for a moment.

"Lannie—are you tellin' me the truth?"

"You've never had anything but the truth from me," was her blunt answer. She unlaced his fingers and got into her saddle. Picking up her reins, she said, "I know how much you meant to Ferd. I used to think I knew how much he meant to you. I even thought I still meant something to you." She shook her head regretfully. "I'm sorry I bothered you. I'll see the sheriff tomorrow."

She would have ridden away but Brent's hand flashed out and caught her pony by the bit. "You go home and stay there," he commanded. "I'll take care of this."

LUNA was just a little, down-at-the-heel Nevada cow town, but it made a brave showing at night. Coming down its main street from the sheriff's office, Brent Logan was stopped a dozen times by old friends who wanted to express their sympathy. They were men who had few words for such moments. Some had no words at all, but a handshake or pat on the shoulder sufficed to express what they were thinking. They took it for granted that he would do something about Ferd's killing. And yet, there was a veiled question in their eyes that did not escape him. Nevertheless, he was not going to let himself be swayed into doing something he might be sorry for. Kim was going to have a fair chance to prove himself innocent or guilty.

Mounting the low step in front of the Silver Dollar Saloon, Brent paused under the wooden awning only long enough to remind himself that no word or gesture of his should carry any hint to Kim that things between them were not as they always had been. He knew he would find Kim inside.

A tall, blocky figure, he walked into the saloon. As he stood near the bar, running his eye over the crowd standing there and beyond to the men playing cards at the rear tables, something touched the room that had not been there before. The noise died out of the place and a chill wind seemed to touch it. The men at the bar threw him brief nods and turned back to rivet their eyes on their glasses. But they were waiting, listening. It was written all over their stiff, tense backs.

"Hi, Brent!" came a call from the rear of the saloon. "Doggone, you're back at last! Order up while I cash in. I'll be with you in a minute."

That was like Kim. Brent smiled.

"Don't cash in on my account," he said. "You might break your luck."

It was said lightly, but a man at the bar found such deep significance in the remark that his hand shook nervously and he spilled his drink.

Brent waited where he stood for Kim to join him. Kim still wore high-heeled boots and a Stetson. In other ways his attire was that of a town man; white shirt, open at the throat, and a pair of black trousers. It was a little thing, but Brent could not help remembering when Kim's whole wardrobe had consisted of the clothes on his back and an extra pair of overalls.

They turned to the bar together. They did not shake hands. But it never had been their way to do so.

"When did you git in?" Kim asked.

"An hour or so ago." Brent felt Kim's eyes searching his. Maybe that was his way. Brent had never noticed before.

Kim shook his head soberly. "It's hell about the kid, Brent," he said. "I wanted to go after you, but I didn't know where to look."

"Just as well, I guess. Nothing I could have done that can't be attended to later."

Under the lamps Brent could see that Kim's tan was wearing thin. He saw the man's mouth muscles twitch as he gazed into his glass.

"Have you seen Graham?" Kim asked.

"Yeah, had a long talk with him. He doesn't seem to know anythin'."

Roberts nodded. If he was relieved, he dissembled the fact.

"If you haven't anythin' better to do, let's get out of here," Brent suggested. "I want to have a talk with you."

"Sure!" Kim agreed. He seemed quite at ease except that his eyes had suddenly gone as blank as an Indian's, an old trick of his that Brent Logan had often remarked in him when he was emotionally aroused. "I been sayin' for days that, when you got back, between us we'd git to the bottom of this business. I'm puttin' off anythin' I got to do till we git the gent that got Ferd."

"I knew I could count on you," Brent said as they started out.

BRENT had a cabin at the edge of town. They had turned off the main street and were striking off across the lots toward it when Brent said, "Kim, you got any idea who killed the kid?"

If he had been waiting for the question, Roberts could not have been more ready with his answer. "I couldn't put my finger on anyone, but I'd sure like to have fired some questions at that bunch of horse hunters who were out on the flats this summer. Some hard gents among 'em, and they were havin' poor pickin's. Been some rustlin' here, you know."

"You say anythin' to Graham about it?" Brent asked.

Kim flexed his shoulders contemptuously. "You can't tell him anythin'—nor git anythin' out of him. He claims that bunch was headin' north four-five days before Ferd was washed out." And then suddenly: "Suppose you and me go after 'em, Brent, and shake some talk out of them. We'll find 'em somewhere along the Tokolumne Divide."

He was unconsciously helping Brent to an opening, and the latter took advantage of it. "I'm afraid I can't, Kim. I don't see how I can do anythin' about it for three or four weeks."

"What?" Kim's tone was indignant, but Brent fancied he caught a note of relief in it. "Do you mean

to tell me you're goin' to do nothin' till every clue is stone-cold? What's got into you? I knew you and Ferd wasn't so friendly of late, but I didn't figger you'd take it this way."

"Ferd and I were friendly enough," Logan replied quietly. "Don't make any mistake about that." Hostility was burning dangerously close to the surface in him and it was with an effort he remembered his rôle. "Makes me sound like a skunk, sayin' I got to put this off, but I don't see how I can do any different."

"What do you mean by that?" The question was sharp and, to Logan's ears, freighted with suspicion.

"I'll show you in a minute," Brent said, unlocking the kitchen door. "Wait until I strike a light."

An old canvas tarp covered the kitchen table. The whole rich harvest of ore he had brought home was spread out under it.

"Kim," he announced with a grave air of confidence, "I'm goin' to make your eyes pop. I'm lettin' you in on a secret that I wouldn't trust to any man in Luna but you."

With a switch of his arm he tossed the canvas aside. For a long moment Kim Roberts stood gazing at the golden treasure, his eyes torn wide and perspiration dampening his forehead. Watching him, Brent saw greed and envy written on Kim's face, leaving it an unpleasant mask. It didn't help any to tell himself that the sight of raw gold had awakened the same feelings in better men than Roberts.

Kim reached out and picked up a piece of ore, squeezing it in his hand. Then he dropped it and heard it fall with a metallic thud.

"Brent, you've struck it!" he grunted. "It's almost pure gold!"

Brent nodded grimly. "There's more, lots more where this came from. But a storm could cover it up and I'd never find it. How can I go off chasin' down the gent that killed Ferd when I got a stake like this waitin' for me?"

Kim shook his head dully and said nothing. His thoughts seemed to be only half on what Brent was saying.

"I don't have to tell you to say nothin' about this," Brent declared. He hesitated, then plunged on, "Kim, I'm cuttin' you in on this. We'll have to work fast. We'll pull away in the mornin'. A third of what we bring out is yours."

Kim rubbed his hand across his moist face. His eyes were carefully blank as if he were being careful to keep all hint of greed out of them. "Brent, you mean it?" he asked.

"Sure, I mean it! Will you be ready?"

"Ready?" Kim grinned vacantly. "Ready—with a chance like this? I'll be here at sunup!"

He sounded like the Kim Roberts of old. Brent caught himself momentarily accepting him as such. "Needn't be as early as that," he said. "We'll have to buy grub, and I'll have to turn this stuff over to the bank."

With one thing and another, it was nine the following morning before they headed out of Luna. Brent was conscious of the glances flicked at them, and conscience made it easy for him to believe that his game was no secret to these men. Link Graham stood in the door of his office and watched them pass. Brent waved a hand at him, but Link's weather-beaten face did not lose its bleak look. It was almost as though he were telling himself that one of these two would not be coming back.

Long after they had crossed Dutch John Creek, where Lannie had waited for him before, Brent

glanced back. Someone was sitting a horse at the edge of the trees. "Lannie," he murmured to himself. "I wonder if she'll understand!"

THEY camped the second night out at Granite Tanks, just a cup in an outcropping with a spring that never failed. They were in open desert now.

"We'll fill the kegs and canteens to the brim before we leave here," Brent said after supper. "It'll have to last us until we get back."

"What about Monument Wells?" Kim asked. He had had less and less to say as they journeyed southward. The desert affected some people that way, Brent knew.

"Been dry for a year," he replied. "We'll just about make the Wells by tomorrow evenin'. That'll leave us a long, hard day."

With nightfall, a cooling breeze sprang up. Stretched out on the ground, watching the stars, Kim seemed thoughtful. It had been a cruel, hot day, the heat boiling up out of Death Valley, far below the horizon, licking their faces with the torrid breath of a furnace. A thought struck him that paled his face.

"A man who didn't know this country sure would be up against it," he said to Brent. "He'd never git out alive."

Brent pretended to be amused. "Nothin' like that's goin' to happen to us. I could find water if I had to. We'll be loaded down and travelin' pretty slow when we start out. That's why we'll be smart to come back this way. Otherwise, we could swing far east toward Clark's Peak and Mesquite Springs." The name came off his tongue easily, though he was coining it for the occasion. There were no springs within forty miles of Clark's Peak.

But Kim Roberts nodded. He had heard of the Peak and did not question the existence of Mesquite Springs. "You could find it, all right, eh?" he queried.

"Sure. Last fall I located water about a day's walkin' to the west of where we're headin'. But if we went that way we'd end up in Death Valley—and that wouldn't help us any."

Roberts, busy with a cigarette, let it go without comment. But after a while he said: "Mesquite Springs east or west of the Peak?"

"West," Brent told him.

Before they turned in, Kim got their talk back to Mesquite Springs no less than four times. Logan wondered if he surmised correctly what was drilling through the man's brain.

"Don't worry about Mesquite Springs," he said. "Reckon a man couldn't miss it. But there's no chance of our goin' that way."

They reached Monument Wells after dark the following evening. It had been a cruel day for Roberts. The white glare of the sand had puffed his eyes and his lips were in bad shape. Supper out of the way, he stretched out a few feet away from the dying embers of their tiny fire, a brooding silence on him.

Before night fell, broken country had loomed up ahead of them to the south. When Roberts finally asked a question it was about those ragged hills and narrow defiles.

"Old Charlie Prothro calls that country the Driftin' Hills," Brent explained. "I never heard any other name for it. Just mountains of movin' sand. Been blowin' up there today. I hope it doesn't mean trouble for us."

Kim sat up. "What kind o' trouble?" he demanded sharply.

"Well, when sand gets movin' across the floor of the desert it can

change the look of things in a hurry. With what water we've got, we don't want to waste any time lookin' for the ledge."

"You fool! You don't mean to say you didn't mark it?" Roberts whipped out in sudden fury.

"Mark it for another man to find?" Brent shook his head scornfully. "I should say not. But don't worry about it. I'll come pretty close to hittin' it on the nail."

All this was beside the point with him, even as an indication of what went on in the man's mind, for, by now, Brent knew he had a stranger with him. This was not the Kim Roberts he had known. But it did not answer the question that plagued him.

LATER, when the night turned cool, Kim's temper improved. "Nerves wearin' thin," he said in a tone of apology. "I keep forgettin' that you don't find yourself on Easy Street without soakin' up a little hell along the way. How much do you figger we'll take out?"

"We've got four burros. We ought to bring out as much as they'll pack."

Roberts mused over that for a while, his eyes blank in that Indian way of his. Brent was thinking, too. If a man would kill a friend for a few hundred dollars, what would he do to steal a fortune? That was the big question; the temptation was to be the test.

Roberts got the talk around to Mesquite Springs again. This was to the point. In the end, water, or the lack of it, would be the deciding factor. Far less adroitly than he supposed, Roberts referred to the springs again and again. It got a little too obvious for Logan. If anything happened to him, a shot in the back, for instance, and Roberts came out alone, he would not dare to try Luna. There were towns and a railroad east of Clark's Peak. He'd have to go that way, and he'd need water.

"Why do you keep talkin' about the springs?" Brent asked without warning. "I told you we weren't goin' that way."

"Why . . . why I was just figgerin' what I'd do if somethin' happened to you and I got lost," Roberts said innocently.

"Nothin's goin' to happen to me," Brent said, a dead-level quality in the words that made Roberts stiffen unconsciously.

By midmorning they were in the Drifting Hills. The going was hard, exhausting. There was some wind above them and they were continually being whipped by stinging showers of sand. Brent called a halt and roped the burros together.

"Keep close to the jacks," he warned. "And keep an eye on the rim. We'll miss some of this stuff if you do."

Roberts nodded behind the kerchief that hid his face. The hot sand burned through his boots and the reflected light from the white cliffs drove needles of fire into his eyes. Sand—nothing but white sand! It worked into his clothing and his mouth. Twice within an hour he insisted on stopping for water. Going on, they had progressed less than half a mile when an overhanging cutbank of sand let go and buried him completely. Brent dug him out, sputtering and cursing.

"I told you to look out for that sort of thing," he told him.

"Damn you, don't try to tell me nothin'!" Roberts raged. "We been in here two hours now! You ain't tryin' to git through! All this twistin' and turnin' don't mean anythin' but one thing! You're tryin' to lose me in here! Trap me!"

"Lose you? Trap you?" Brent echoed puzzledly. "You're crazy! Why would I want to do that?"

Kim evidently realized he had gone too far, said too much. "Mebbe you've changed your mind about the ledge," he muttered. "You're gittin' close to it now, and mebbe the givin' ain't so easy."

Logan was too angry to be careful with his words. "If there's any yellow in one of us, it ain't in me," he said with a bitter rasp. "If you want to turn back, I'll take you as far as the edge of the hills and give you a burro. You can go back to Luna."

Now that it was said, he regretted it. He didn't want to lose Roberts that way. But with the opportunity given him, Kim backed down. "Forget it," he said. "I was a fool to go blowin' off that way."

THEY camped at the ledge that night. A storm had covered it, but an hour after breakfast they had it exposed. At noon, they crawled into the scant shade of the mesquite. Brent had rigged up a tarp to help out. It was blinding hot, but Roberts' disposition had taken a turn for the better. Knocking out the stringers of virgin gold from the rotten quartz with the temperature at 118 degrees was bitter hard work. But it didn't matter. The gold fever was getting Roberts. Brent wasn't immune to it himself.

"If this keeps up," he said that night, "we won't be here more than seven days. There's a limit to what we can pack out." He mentioned Ferd, and dwelled on what this find would have meant to him. Kim tried to turn the conversation into other channels, but Brent kept it there deliberately.

"Damn it, can't you talk about anythin' else?" Roberts exploded.

"Does it bother you?" Brent queried.

"No, but it gives a fella the creeps."

"Before I'm through, I'll give the gent that bushwhacked the kid the creeps, I promise you," said Brent. "I reckon by now he feels pretty safe. That's his mistake. I'll nail him if it takes the last breath that's in me."

That night, as on the nights that followed, Brent kept his gun a few inches from his hand simulating sleep until Kim's snores told him it was safe to doze. He knew he had two things to watch: Kim and the water.

By the end of the fourth day Brent estimated that they had taken out no less than thirty thousand dollars' worth of the precious yellow stuff. Roberts had become a grim, silent figure. As for Logan, he himself was so wary by now that he wondered how Roberts could any longer be deceived. And yet no word passed between them to indicate that one watched the other, with death waiting, possibly, for both.

"A man can stand only so much of this," Brent brooded that night. "Watchin' every move he makes, figurin' that the next second may bring his play. It's drivin' me mad. The only answer to it is that I've been dead wrong about him. Lannie must have been mistaken."

But the following noon, as he started to water the jacks, the truth hit him with sledge-hammer violence. Doubt, suspicion, became grim, unmistakable reality even as he drew in his breath. Lannie had not been wrong. Kim Roberts was a wolf, capable of any crime! The evidence had come to him at last.

They had long since emptied their canteens and were using one of the two kegs of water that remained to

them. The last keg was to be kept to get them out—and it was little enough. The keg which they had begun using only the previous day should still have been two thirds full. But it wasn't! Sometime during the night at least two gallons of water had disappeared.

Logan said nothing. But he had only to count the canteens to discover that one was missing. It was all he needed to know. Roberts had filled a canteen and cached it somewhere. Of all the crimes on the calendar of a desert man, this was the lowest kind of treachery. Stealing water on a pardner!

"A man capable of stealing water wouldn't bat an eye at stickin' up a friend and puttin' a slug into his heart," Brent muttered. He was passing judgment on Kim Roberts.

Brent made no attempt to find the missing canteen. He knew the showdown must come quickly now, and he waited for it with redoubled vigilance. At noon, he forced the issue to make certain that by evening this ghastly masquerade would reach its climax.

It was easily accomplished. Getting a drink, he left the tap slightly open, knowing that all afternoon the precious water would be trickling into the sand.

Roberts discovered the dripping tap when they knocked off work for the day. The keg was almost empty. He raged and cursed violently. But Brent could detect the insincerity of his anger. The dripping tap had covered Roberts' theft of the water.

"I don't know how I happened to do it," Brent lied. "I reckon it puts it square up to me to go huntin' water. The keg we've got belongs to you."

He had actually found a flowing spring the previous fall, and not ten miles from where they stood at the moment. Placing it forty miles to the west had been part of his trap. In offering to go dashing off for it, he knew he was supplying Roberts with an out far better than the man could contrive for himself.

BRENT spent the night at the spring. He wasn't in any hurry to get back, for he knew what he would find.

"The murderin' skunk is makin' tracks for the Clark's Peak country," he mused. "Bet he waited only long enough to be sure I was gone. About thirty-six hours from now he'll know he's lookin' for water that ain't to be found. He'll get tangled up in that mess of cross canyons this side of the Peak and won't know which way to turn." He grunted with bitter satisfaction at that picture. "The creeps will be on him by then; he'll be thinkin' of Ferd, all right."

He knew that the burros with their rich cargo were lost to him forever, but he did not wince at the price. He had squared Ferd's account.

Brent returned to camp in the morning. There was nothing left, save some camp gear and what food Roberts had tossed aside in his hurried departure. Only the food was important. There was enough to last Brent a few days. He'd work today and tomorrow to take out as much gold as he could. Then he'd start movin' north.

It was night when Brent headed north, after obliterating every sign of the camp and covering the ledge with sand. The wind would do the rest. An hour before sunup, he told old Jenny they had come far enough. He took her pack off and let her roll for a few minutes before he put the picket rope on her. He had a can full of bacon grease and some flour

left, but he wasn't hungry. Stretching out on his blanket, he tried to sleep. But thoughts of Kim Roberts kept intruding. By now Roberts was in trouble, Brent knew. Well, if ever a man deserved what was in store for him, that man was Kim Roberts.

But that thought didn't bring sleep. Dawn found Brent staring wide-eyed as the sun slipped above the horizon. It would take Roberts two or three days to do his dying. A bullet would be merciful compared to what the sun would do to him.

"It'll give him time to think of the kid and do his repentin'," Brent told himself bitterly as he pulled on his boots.

He made a batter of flour and water and fried it. It was tasteless, but he got it down. Kim Roberts wouldn't be doing any eating this morning. He'd be looking for water. Fifty thousand in gold with him, but it wouldn't buy him a drink, and he'd trade it all for a sip! Fool's gold! And he had sold his life for it.

"Let him burn in hell for his drink!" Brent growled, his voice unreal in his own ears.

But a man who dies as Kim Roberts was to die does not die only once. He dies a hundred deaths. Brent winced involuntarily at the thought and put it out of his mind.

To the north, the Drifting Hills were distinct and easily seen in the still crystal-clear air. He'd get through easily. Instead of stopping at Monument Wells he'd push right on. With luck, he'd be back in Luna late the following day.

Twenty minutes later he was ready to move. Then suddenly he jerked the pack off old Jenny.

"Good God, I can't do it!" he cried. "I can't go through with it! I've got to go after him! He'll have to take his chances with the law!"

THE decision made, new vitality flowed back to Brent. He cached the ore in a clump of mesquite, rearranged Jenny's load and struck off toward the southeast. He had taken only a few steps when a cry reached him. Whirling to the north, he saw two men and a burro approaching. Fifteen minutes later Link Graham and Charlie Prothro, an old-timer who knew this desert better than most men, walked up to him.

"I stood this as long as I could," Graham explained simply, "then Charlie volunteered to find you and Roberts." He shook his head regretfully. "Seems I got here too late, though."

Brent told him the whole story. "Killin' is too good for him, Link, but I've got to let you have him," he finished. "I've got to fetch him out."

"We'll find him somewhere in that tangle of canyons west of the Peak," Charlie observed. "And he'll be alone. The jacks will smell trouble, and when they try to turn him, he'll beat 'em, and they'll walk out on him. Never was no restraint in that feller. When he had water, you can bet he swigged it down. He's in trouble right now, and he'll be crazier than a loon by the time we catch up with him."

They got started and made good time that day. After sleeping for three hours in the early evening, they went on again.

"Wearin' the suet off me right down to the stumps, but I reckon I can stand it," Graham declared without complaint. "We'll look for him as long as we got water enough to git us out."

They picked up the burros in midmorning. Charlie started to back track them, only to have the trail peter out in a flinty canyon.

"We better stay up on the bench

and work the canyons with Link's glasses, Brent advised.

The day wore on in blinding heat. Down in the canyon nothing stirred. "Reckon the buzzards have got him," Charlie declared. "And good riddance, says I."

Nevertheless, they continued to watch. In the late afternoon the sound of a shot electrified them and shook them out of their drowsiness. It was followed by a cry from Graham that he could see someone on the bench far ahead.

"It's Roberts!" he shouted, glasses to his eyes. "Couple coyotes follerin' him. He can't kill 'em. Can't hold his gun steady."

Prothro took the glasses. "Huh," he muttered. "He's crawlin' on his knees now—lettin' the sand run through his fingers. Thinks it's gold! He's ravin' mad! Yep, there he goes, tearin' off his clothes the way they all do!"

"Come on," said Brent. "Let's get him."

"Wait!" Charlie ordered. "He'll shoot the first one of us he sees. We'll wait here and hide out. You speak to him, Logan, when he's near enough. We'll be ready for him."

The better part of an hour passed before Roberts drew near. The coyotes, catching the man scent, had fallen back. Brent groaned as he got a good look at Roberts' distorted face. He had long since ceased to be Kim Roberts; now, he no longer looked like him. He was laughing madly, talking to himself, his words barely distinguishable.

"Kim," Logan called out, "throw down that gun and come here!"

Roberts backed away, his gun raised and waving as though it were a reed in the wind. A horrible grimace twisted his face as he saw Logan. There was no trace of recognition in his staring, bloodshot eyes.

"Stay away from me, Ferd!" he cried thickly. "Don't try to hurt me or I'll kill you again!"

"Good God," Graham groaned. "He thinks Brent is the kid!"

Logan took a step forward. The weaving gun barked once, twice. Then it was empty. The slugs had gone wild. With a wild scream Kim threw the gun away and started to run.

"Git him before he goes over the wall!" Link yelled a shrill warning.

Brent needed no urging. He dashed forward, but he was too late. Blind to the abyss opening before him, Roberts plunged into the canyon. Graham put his glasses on the broken figure where it lay on the canyon floor, two hundred feet below. He lowered them slowly.

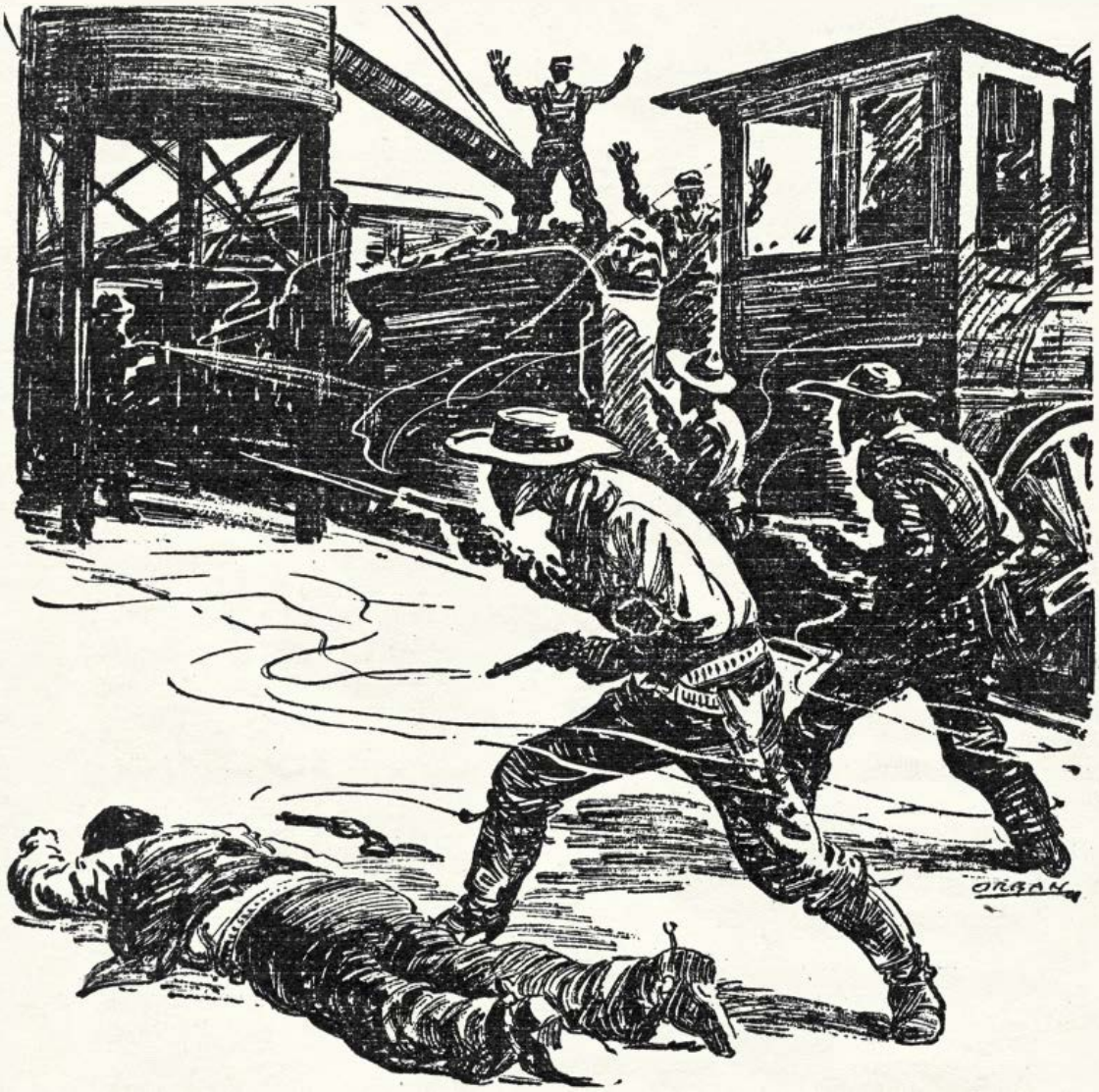
"Well," he said with grim realism, "it saves hangin' him." He looked at Brent's wooden face with shrewd understanding. He had a hunch that this trip of vengeance had destroyed much of the desert's fascination for Brent Logan.

"Thing for you to do is to git headed for Luna," Graham advised in a matter-of-fact tone. "Charlie and me'll bring the body in. You stop at the Shoebar Ranch and have 'em send out a wagon to meet us, with grub and water."

In the cool of the evening Brent Logan came down into the valley of the Luna de Plata. Under old Jenny's leadership the burros struck out on their old course. When Brent turned her, Jenny gazed at him questioningly with her big round eyes.

"We won't be goin' that way no more, Jenny," Brent explained. "We'll be stoppin' at the ranch. Lannie will be waitin'."

THE END



TALKING WIRES OF DEATH

by HARRY F. OLMSTED

NUMBER NINE was late. Joe Longstreet, station agent at Amity, pocketed his watch, moved to the door of his box-car office and squinted eastward through the night. Number Nine had passed Rifle, twelve miles east. It should have reached here before this.

While he waited for the flash of the beam, Old Joe looked across the tracks at the lighted town. And memories came crowding in. When he had taken this job, thirty-five years ago, there had been no town; nothing but sage and sprawling cattle pens. From this same doorway, he had seen Jeff Biddle erect the first store and Fats Sullivan wheel the first barrel of whiskey into the tent he called the "First Chance Sa-

loon." Yancey Phelan's blacksmith shop had been the third business establishment.

Fifty people had soon followed this lead. They had accepted Old Joe's name for the new town—Amity—and had named him its first mayor. That was long, long ago. Of those first citizens, only Jeff and Fats and Yancey were left. And few knew that the station agent and telegraph operator had once been mayor.

With an undulled sadness, Old Joe thought of Martha, his wife. Hers was the first headboard in the little cemetery, though there were two more in the Longstreet plot now—one for young Martha, who had died trying to shield her husband, Phil, from a gunman's bullets, one for Phil, who had died despite her heroic effort to save him. Amity had grown away from Old Joe since then, leaving him only his three cronies, his job, and little Joe, Martha's and Phil's kid. Yes, Amity had changed. The friendship for which it was named was largely dead. Cowboys and miners and toughs used it as the theater of their hell raising. Amity was bad to the core.

Light came streaming along the rails and the echo of the whistle roused Old Joe. He looked to his lights; they were green, all the way. The Limited never stopped here. But tonight she did. Like a live monster, she came snorting into Amity, shuddering to a stop. It was the fireman who climbed down from the cab.

"Joe!" he shouted. "Get the sheriff. They held us up and killed Nick."

The next twenty minutes were nightmares to Old Joe. Nick Bolger, the engineer, was dead. The express car was a shambles. Fifteen thousand dollars, the pay roll of the Bennington Mine, at White Cloud, was gone. Sheriff Carter Gantt held the train to question the crew, then hurried uptown to organize a posse. Gantt boasted of his efficiency in office, but somehow couldn't keep the peace or fetch back lawbreakers from his many sorties with a posse.

With the train gone and the townsfolk drifting up town, Old Joe locked the office and started toward his little cabin on the hill. There Maria, his Mexican housekeeper, would be setting supper for him and little Joe. But tonight's excitement seemed to have robbed Old Joe of his appetite. And the tolling of the bell in the town hall reminded him of the Citizens' League caucus, where a city ticket would be nominated. There was only one other party in Amity, the Union Party, and it polled few votes. So those named here tonight were as good as in office. Curiosity drew Old Joe into the hall.

The place was crowded, both with people and with the bull voice of Mayor Tim Aulick. An adroit politician, Aulick had served six full terms as mayor, and was asking a seventh.

"We've traveled far from the loading pens of our beginning," he thundered. "We've become a real city under my administration. Examine my record and don't change horses in the middle of the stream. At this stage of our development, a strong hand is needed, an experienced hand, if we are to keep our fair city—"

"—the hub of hell she is now!" interrupted a cracked voice. "The hangout of thieves and crooks and toughs. A place no decent woman dares walk in."

Tim Aulick stiffened. Red suffused his round face and thick neck. His eyes drew together. "Who said that?" he demanded angrily.

THE audience turned to stare, and Joe sat there, suddenly panic-stricken. He hadn't meant to blurt that out, but he felt it so fervently it had just popped from his lips. And now Yancey Phelan, the blacksmith, was bawling above the buzz of voices:

"That's the stuff, Joe! Stand up and tell him what for. Keep a-going."

Hands lifted Joe to his feet and then all was silent as they waited for him to speak to the man who glared down at him from the platform. Joe grasped the back of the seat before him, steadying his wabbly knees. The faces turned toward him were blurred, and he licked his lips, reaching into his whirling brain for words, as Tim Aulick's laugh rolled through the hall.

"So," he cried mockingly, "our old brass pounder finds fault with my administration. Let's see, I think he was mayor of Amity when all he had to look after was a few jackrabbits and antelopes. He's seen our growth; he's seen our problems multiply and he can't see why we can't make things run as smooth as in the old prairie-dog days. Talk on, Longstreet, you interest us. Tell us how you'd run Amity if you were mayor again. We're not too proud to learn."

A stir of talk ran through the hall. Some called encouragement, others taunted him. But it was memory of those early, clean, man-to-man days that gave Joe the courage to speak.

"Yes," he said, his voice gathering force with each word. "I was mayor of Amity once. The first mayor the town ever had. We were small then, but men were the same —some fair, some greedy, some just naturally cussed. But when a man overstepped the line of the law, he was dealt with, without fuss or feathers. Now, it seems like, every man and his yellow dog does as he damn well pleases, and to hell with the law. You saw a sample of it tonight. We pay a sheriff and we spend money for men to help him, but he might as well set at home an' twiddle his thumbs, for all the good he does. If I was mayor of Amity again, I'd send for a town tamer, a man like Long Tom Hickman, and pay him his price to plant the crooks and run the toughs out. That's what I'd do and, by damn, I'd give the citizens a town we could all be proud of."

A roar of applause drowned him out, a roar that died as Tim Aulick demanded silence.

"You heard him, folks. He shows you plain enough that he's living back in the good old blood-and-thunder days. He'd spend your money to import a killer and turn him loose on our streets. He'd license the worst kind of a criminal to work his way with us. Why, an honest man's life wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel—"

"It ain't worth that much now!" someone shouted.

The mayor stiffened. "Hold on, there," he remonstrated. "Ain't that goin' too far? If you feel that way about my administration, why don't you run some old, crippled-up relic like—"

"Good idea!" Jeff Biddle was on his feet. "Gentlemen, I nominate our tried and trusted friend, Joe Longstreet, for mayor. He served us well once, and he will again."

The hall was suddenly a bedlam of argument, the chairman pounding vainly for order. Joe Longstreet slumped into his seat, suddenly frightened. But relief came when order was restored and one of Tim Aulick's political henchmen leaped to the stand.

"You can't offer Longstreet's name in nomination," he bawled. "The addlepated old fool ain't even a member of the party. Hell, he ain't even voted for nobody knows how long. Beside, it's plumb ungrateful to forget all the years of faithful service Tim Aulick's given this town."

Aulick's many cohorts took it up, chanting and stamping their feet. But Fats Sullivan leaped to the platform beside the mayor, his voice reaching through the din. "All right, if Joe ain't a member of the party, we'll form a party for him and split the ticket. Everybody who wants Honest Joe Longstreet for mayor, follow me out of the hall."

There were cheers and jeers as Fats Sullivan led the way up the center aisle. Jeff Biddle and Yancey Phelan followed, inciting recruits. Someone caught Old Joe, dragged him into the aisle. And perhaps a third of those present, swayed by the fervor of the moment, fell into a howling, jubilant procession that quit the hall and trooped to Sullivan's saloon. There, with formality if not sobriety, they formed the People's Party and officially nominated Joe Longstreet as their candidate for mayor.

It was very late when Old Joe trudged up the hill to his darkened house. He had taken several drinks too many and was a little unsteady on his pins, but his brain was crystal clear. He stood for a moment looking at the bed, where the moonlight struck across the face of his sleeping grandson. His eyes were a little wistful.

"I . . . I reckon I'm just a doddering old fool to most folks," he faltered. "But not to him. Maybe I can be somebody yet—somebody he can be proud of."

He went out into the living room, to sit in the moon glow before the cold fireplace. After a while he lifted a loose stone in the hearth and took out a coffee can. It was heavy with money, three hundred and sixty-nine dollars and some cents. It had taken him a long time to save it against the boy's education. The mayor's job didn't pay much, but it would go a long way toward swelling this account. Old Joe was smiling as he took out ten cents—tobacco money for tomorrow, replaced his treasure and went to bed.

Next morning it all seemed like a dream to him. But friends dropping in during the day let him know he was in the race for mayor. Jeff and Fats and Yancey were each heading a committee. Signs were being printed. A house-to-house campaign was being instituted and meetings arranged for. A week sped past, during which Old Joe walked on air.

It was all exciting and the sparkle grew in Old Joe's eyes. He laughed with the trainmen as they joshed him about his dabbling in politics, and was happily pleased at the frown of worry often on the face of Tim Aulick.

HOPE had grown almost to an ache in Old Joe's heart, that night a week before election. Dusk had fallen with a high wind and a fine driving rain. The seven fifteen local had labored in late, and had lost itself in the eastern murk. And now Old Joe was hunched over his key, awaiting word of Number Nine, and praying it would be on time. For their was an important meeting on in Fats' saloon. The Union Party candidate, knowing he was hopelessly outmatched, was making overtures to throw his strength to the choice of the People's Party, for certain considerations. If the deal was straight and decent—

Joe's key was ticking. The Limited had whirled past the siding that held the local, thirty miles east. The young engineer who had succeeded Nick Bolger was hitting his schedule, right on the nose. Old Joe looked to his lights, straightened up his desk and waited restlessly. Fifteen minutes fled past. Twenty. Twenty-five. Number Nine should be showing.

Instead of sliding doors, the boxcar had a regular-sized door with its upper half glass-paned so Joe could see approaching trains. Old Joe was rising, turning toward it when one of the panes went out with a crash of glass. Startled, Joe swiveled to the sound. He was staring into the muzzle of a pistol. A muffled, husky voice struck from the stormy shroud of night.

"Steady, feller! Take it easy and you won't be hurt."

"Wh-what you want?" The aching lump of worry in Old Joe's throat made talk difficult.

"When Number Nine signals, give her the yellow light."

"Slow her?" Old Joe shivered as icy fingers played about his spine. "No, I'm damned if I do."

A chill, savage laugh stabbed him. "Brave dispatcher resists outlaw and is shot to death. Don't forget that I can slow her down over your carcass. Think this over, old man. If you don't follow directions to the letter, that kid you're raising will be lost to you, permanent. My partner's beside him now, listening. If the train don't do as I order, he'll take care of the brat."

Old Joe, lanced in his most vital spot, broke. "No!" he cried. "Don't harm my boy, mister. I . . . I'll do what you ask, but don't—"

"Quit the bawling! Listen, now. When she signals, give her the yellow light. When she hits the siding switch, flash the red light, quick. When's she abreast of the station and almost stopped, flash your green light and send her on. You got it?"

Dumbly Joe Longstreet nodded. But his mind was busy with that voice. There was a vague familiarity about it, yet he couldn't place it. Like trying to recall a figment from some almost forgotten dream. His ears were straining for the sound of Number Nine's whistle, for he had seen the flash and flare of the headlight on the rain-streaked window. Then the door was opening and Carter Gantt, sheriff of Amity, was inside, smiling at him as he shook water off his raincoat.

"Bad night, Joe," he said, glancing at his watch. "Nine's on time, looks like. Sometime she'll crack up, tryin' to make speed in this kind of weather. How's tricks?"

"So-so." Old Joe forced a grin. "Ain't often you pay me a visit on a night like this, Carter."

"Little nervous about the Limited," confessed the lawman. "She's carrying the mine pay roll again tonight. You remember what happened just a month ago?" He glanced at the broken window and the puddle forming on the floor beneath it. "Busted pane, eh, Joe? Looks like you'd get that fixed. Who done it?"

"Some hobo, I reckon." Old Joe mumbled, twisting uncomfortably. "I didn't miss nothing. Have it fixed tomorrow—excuse me, Carter. There's Nine, whistlin'!"

He moved swiftly to the levers, flagging the fast train with the yellow board. The whistle tooted twice in acknowledgment. Number Nine was slowing.

"Slowin' her down, Joe?" Carter Gantt asked. "What for?"

"Railroad business!" answered the

old operator curtly. "Don't bother me, Carter."

He heard the engine hit the switch frog at the siding and his teeth were sinking into his lip as he gave her the red light. Sheriff Gantt loosed a yell.

"Stoppin' the Limited! What's the idea, Joe? You can't—"

"Will you go outside and let me alone?" Joe demanded angrily.

"No, I won't." The lawman made a leap for the lever. "Not with that pay roll aboard. What you trying to do, Longstreet? Play with outlaws, maybe?"

Joe swung at his jaw. Thoughts of little Joe's danger gave him a strength of desperation. His knuckles exploded under Gantt's chin, driving him back and down.

Hissing and throbbing, the engine came abreast of the station, the air brakes set. Frantically Old Joe jerked the lever, turning the lights green all the way. Two sharp blasts from the engine and the drivers spun on the wet rails. Slowly Number Nine gained momentum, purring away into the stormy night.

But Old Joe's panic didn't lessen. He jerked open a drawer, plucked out the pistol lying there and ran. His feet slid in the muddy street. Wind hurled the rain into his face, drenching him. Breath whistled from his lungs as he raced up the hill. He burst into his house like a one-man cyclone.

"Joe!" His shout filled the house. "Joe!"

The housekeeper rose from before the fire. She stared at his muddy boots, at the gun wabbling in Old Joe's hand. His queries bewildered her.

"*Madre de Dios,* 'ave you gone loco, Don José?" she cried. "The boy, he ees een bed. There 'ave been no man 'ere. Thees politics, they make you dreenk too much, señor."

Old Joe couldn't believe her. He darted into the bedroom, saw the boy sleeping peacefully, then left the house without a word, his shoulders slumped dejectedly. They had tricked him.

Back at the station, Carter Gantt was just rousing. He glared at Joe balefully. "You damned old fossil," he raged. "What'd you hit me with?"

"Sheriff or no sheriff," Old Joe muttered, "you've got no right coming in here foolin' with my signals. Next time, I'll—"

But he could not go on with the sham. Brokenly, he told the story of the man outside the broken window, and the threat against little Joe.

"You fool!" raved the sheriff. "You eternal damn fool. Why didn't you tip me off?"

"And have us both killed by that bandit?" Joe said. "No, siree. And there was the kid to think of. Before I let them harm him, I'd—"

"Longstreet," said Carter Gantt, "if this is what I think it is, you're in a jam."

And it was. The lawman insisted that they wait. And, after a while the call for Amity was rattling over the wire. Old Joe answered. The train had been stopped at the Squaw Creek trestle, five miles out. The mine pay roll has been lifted again, this time without casualties. Miserably, Old Joe told the sheriff.

"So?" The lawman caught Joe Longstreet's collar, dragged him from his chair. "I thought so. And you was in on it. Get goin'. You're headin' for jail."

FOR the first time in his life, Joe Longstreet wished he was dead. All day he had sat in the sheriff's office, browbeaten by Carter Gantt, by the division superintendent of the road and by two railroad detectives.

His story had never varied, for he had told the whole truth, and stuck to it. Along toward evening, the superintendent threw up his hands.

"I've had enough of this," he said wearily, hurling his cigar into the spittoon. "I think you may be telling the truth, Longstreet; certainly we would have trouble proving the contrary. But you were putting personal interests ahead of the road when you failed to tell the sheriff about that bandit outside the window. And you violated the rules when you slowed the Limited. This town has been a thorn in our side for a long while and I believe the time has come to place a new operator here. I'm sorry."

Discharged after thirty-five years! Too miserable to appreciate the fact that he was not being held in prison, Old Joe shuffled home dejectedly. And, for a week, he stayed there, brooding, rejecting the demands of his friends that he take an interest in the campaign.

Election day dawned, with the townsmen casting their votes. When the polls closed, Old Joe slunk down town to learn the result. From the first, it was apparent that Tim Aulick was being re-elected by a bigger majority than ever before. And it was a joke around the town that Old Joe Longstreet had tallied exactly three votes. Jeff Biddle, Fats Sullivan and Yancey Phelan had been loyal, right up to the last. And late that night Yancey's blacksmith shop burned to the ground, despite the valiant efforts of the volunteer fire company to save it. Next morning Old Joe and his three cronies met at the ruin to talk things over.

"Your luck clabbered when you got behind me," Joe said miserably. "I don't see why I let you do it."

"Luck, hell!" Jeff Biddle spat. "Maybe you call it luck that four masked men came into my place as I was closing up last night, put out my light and wrecked my store."

"The same four that stuck me up just as I was goin' to close my safe, around two o'clock this morning," said Fats furiously. "And Gantt conveniently not to be found."

Tortured with a hundred stinging self-recriminations, Old Joe left them. Head down, he moved along the street toward home. He was wondering about little Joe and his future, when a voice hailed him.

"Hello, mayor. When can we expect Long Tom Hickman here to clean up our town?"

Old Joe halted, startled. Grinning cruelly, Tim Aulick stood there with the sun beating against his great body. But the old-timer wasn't touched by the taunting flare of Aulick's eyes, nor by his gloating. His mind was going back to the rain-swept night a week ago, and the voice threatening him over the barrel of a pistol leveled through a smashed pane. A strangely familiar voice, for all its savage gruffness. And he was listening to that voice again—now. The thing was crazy, impossible, yet—

"You won fair and square, Aulick," Old Joe heard himself mumbling. "The town is yours for two years more. I hope you take good care of it."

"I'll be taking good care of it when you've dragged yourself out of Amity and are forgotten, you old crook," Aulick said venomously. "What's holding you here, anyway?"

White-faced, Old Joe turned away and continued on down the street. Bewilderment was tormenting him. That voice! It was the same, but who would believe him?

By force of habit, Joe turned his

steps toward the boxcar that had housed his full interest all these years. The clicking of the telegraph key was music to his ears and there was a brightness to his eye, a flaring of his nostrils, as he paused in the doorway. The telegrapher, hardly more than a boy, lifted his head from the desk.

"Well?" he asked impersonally.

"I'm Longstreet," said Old Joe. "I sat so long where you're settin' that I guess I'll be pretty homesick for it. Thought mebby you wouldn't mind if I hung around an' . . . well, mebby I might be able to help you."

The brass pounder shook his head. "Don't need any help, Longstreet. And, besides, company orders are to keep you out of here."

Bewildered, Old Joe backed outside, walking along aimlessly. What happened to old operators like him? That was the question that recurred day after day, during which he thought at times he would go crazy. He had to do something. But what? Tim Aulick had started a new store, competition that was striking right at Jeff Biddle's livelihood. Yancey Phelan had reared a new shop, but he was feeling the pinch of the Aulick boycott. Fats Sullivan was tending his own bar since the robbers had cleaned him out.

THEN, out of the depths of Old Joe's hopelessness came the spark of an idea. And, strangely, it was the plight of his three friends that motivated it. That night, when the clock in the town hall was striking twelve, Old Joe slunk to the familiar old boxcar office. They had forgotten to ask him for his keys, and he found it easy to let himself in.

Breathing hard, from the strident pounding of his heart, he sat down, threw the switch and sent his call clicking over the wires. From distant Fremont City came an answer. Old Joe tapped out his message:

TOM HICKMAN
PRAIRIE CITY
WILL YOU CLEAN UP AMITY AS MARSHAL? WRITE STATING TERMS.
JOE LONGSTREET
MAYOR OF AMITY

Afterward, shivering in his bed, Joe regretted that crazy impulse. An old busybody, clutching at straws, that's what he was. Better, probably, if he did what Tim Aulick had suggested—leave Amity.

Two days later the postmaster handed him a letter addressed to "Joe Longstreet, Mayor of Amity," The man was laughing. It was a rare joke. But Old Joe didn't notice. Outside, he ripped open the envelope and read the short note. The last paragraph was his answer:

> I will be glad to accommodate Amity, providing I am given a free hand to deal with the crooks in the only way they understand. My charge will be three hundred and fifty dollars a month. I await word from you.
>
> *(Signed)* TOM HICKMAN.

Old Joe smiled as he tore up the letter. He had enough laid away to hire the great town tamer for a month. After that—

Imbued at once with more courage, more fear, Old Joe crept again to the brass key and sent his answer to Long Tom Hickman. Terms were satisfactory. Would the marshal time his arrival for a certain night on the local train, so the town could meet him? And, in due course, Hickman wrote that he would arrive on schedule.

Old Joe was basing everything on a wild scheme. Men are greedy, especially crooks who have lifted two pay rolls in succession. Their canniness might prevent the lightning striking three times in the same place. But if they felt the game had

suddenly gone soft, their greed would sway them to move again.

The old telegrapher spent his days now on the platform outside the boxcar, harkening to the messages being tapped out inside. At last he heard what he wanted to know. The mine pay roll would come on the Limited, as usual, this time under heavy gun guard. Old Joe was almost joyous as he hurried uptown. Sheriff Carter Gantt stood outside his office. Now was the time to bait the trap.

Old Joe called the lawman aside. "Carter," he said, affecting a distasteful humility, "I've gotta get my job back. I need it. It's all I know and—"

"So what?" demanded Gantt coldly. "I can't get it back for you."

"I know. But I've got information that the Bennington pay roll's comin' through on the local the night of the fourth. If them robbers know that, they'll find it duck soup. You take steps to euchre 'em, Carter. An' if you nab 'em, give me a little credit. If the company knows I tipped you off, they may give me another chance."

Gantt's eyes narrowed with interest. "How could you know?" he asked skeptically.

"I listened, Carter. I heard it come over the wire."

"Well!" Gantt stroked his jaw and stared at nothing. "O. K., I'll do that, Joe. Glad to. Thanks for the tip, and don't breathe this to a soul."

He hurried away as if in search for someone, and Old Joe went home.

The fourth dawned and dragged its length, with Old Joe nervous as a rabbit. The day seemed endless. At six thirty he went down to the station. He had to wire Tom Hickman, care of the local, advising him of the probable holdup. He would know what to do. And so, when he entered the office at a quarter to seven, there was but time to get the message through in time to catch the train at Rifle, forty five minutes east.

The operator was busy, taking down a message. Old Joe halted in the doorway to listen, his eyes widening. Division headquarters was ordering all dispatchers to report promptly on the westbound local, which would be carrying the Bennington payroll. Old Joe's plant had become reality, but it did not alarm him. All that mattered was whether Aulick would take the bait.

The wire grew silent and the operator turned, grinning as he saw Old Joe.

"Somebody named Hickman ain't learned how the election came out, looks like. A wire for you, Longstreet."

Old Joe snatched it from his hand. Before his blurred eyes swam the message:

MAYOR JOE LONGSTREET. AMITY
UNAVOIDABLY DETAINED. ARRIVE TOMORROW NIGHT.
TOM HICKMAN

THAT was perhaps the worst moment in all Joe Longstreet's life. All his hopes crumpled. Tim Aulick's luck still held. He had won again. Old Joe saw Jeff and Fats and Yancey ground down, down, farther down, under the crooked mayor's iron heel. And the thought that he, Joe Longstreet, had done that to them, stiffened him.

Wildly he glanced around. What could he do? His eyes fell upon the belted pistol hanging from the corner of the desk. He leaped for it.

"Hey, what you think you're doing?" the operator demanded, springing forward.

But Old Joe was ready with a barrage of blows that sent the young op-

erator spinning into a corner. Joe grabbed the weapon and buckled it about him as he raced outside and down the track. A light handcar stood in its little mounded platform, and the operator almost caught Old Joe before he could get it onto the track. Then the old-timer was aboard, pumping furiously and watching the irate young brass pounder fall behind in the deeping gloom.

Old Joe clattered across the frog; then the grade caught him and the car gained speed alarmingly. All he had to do was to sit down, hang on and worry. It was downhill all the way to Rifle, and beyond. And the local was steaming toward him, at full throttle. Where could he board her? And what could he hope to do if he did get aboard?

The speed increased, the wheels clicking an ever-quickening beat. Old Joe lost his hat, but it didn't matter. What good was a hat? His hair streamed back and his eyes ached as he stared ahead. Where do we stop? Where do we stop? Where do we stop? The wheels flung it back at him, and he couldn't answer.

Minutes galloped now that he prayed for time, and miles slid beneath the careening car. Maybe Aulick and his men were already stopping the local. Maybe they wouldn't fall for his bait.

He saw the distant flash of the local's light, rose hurriedly and caught the swinging pump handles. He had to get the car off the track. And Old Joe's soul ached with the sense of frustration and predestined failure.

The clatter of the speeding handcar echoed sharply and Old Joe saw the dark bulk of the water tower float past him. He had forgotten the water tank. Maybe the local would be stopping here. Following the dark bulk with his eyes, as he flashed past, Old Joe suddenly knew he had guessed right—the train would be stopping here. For beneath the tower, in the deepest gloom, he saw the quick glow and ebb of a cigarette coal. And yonder, its beam reaching a ghostly finger across the hills, came the local.

Old Joe had never known such an urgency as that which motivated his heavy tread on the brake. He met the swinging of the pump handle with violent counter force. The car slowed, slowly, steadily. Joe was a full quarter mile past the tank when he brought the handcar to a stop. And the beam of the headlight was striking toward him as he dragged the speeder off the tracks.

He flung himself down as light illuminated the tracks. For to be seen by those men lurking beneath the tower would be fatal. The rails sang. The night gave back the shrill echoes of the whistle blast. Brakes were rasping and the train was slowing as the engine passed him. Then Old Joe was on his feet, running as he had never run before.

Car after car swept past him, until he was straining, laboring after the red light at the rear end of the last car. His legs were shaking from the unwonted strain of it. His lungs were screaming protest. It seemed as if his pumping heart would leap out of his chest.

Now he swung wide, to come in behind the shadow of the tank. The train shuddered to a halt and Old Joe was staggering as he passed it. The dark shadow of the water tower hid him and then he was plowing to a halt, watching a strange byplay. The fireman, standing on the tender, had pulled down the spout, only to straighten and throw his arms high. A brakeman, stepping off the blind baggage, was quick to answer the

order that failed to reach Old Joe. The engineer stood behind his cab, his hands also up. And, silhouetted against the flaring of the firebox, four shadowy figures crept forward, their guns palmed and ready. They were masked, those outlaws, but there was no mistaking the towering, bulky shape of the leader. Dragging down a desperate breath, Old Joe whipped out his gun and lumbered in behind them.

"Tim Aulick!" he yelled triumphantly. "I hung the bait an' you came for it, like a starvin' wolf. This is your last job, Tim."

The big bandit froze. Then he was whirling, his gun swinging. Joe's first bullet killed him. Then Joe's pistol swung, smashed lead into another man who had spun to face him. Hot lead snarled through the night, seeking him out. But he was in deep shade, and they missed. The engineer snatched a gun from his overalls and blasted down the third bandit. The survivor, shooting wildly as he ran, reached the rear of the tender and climbed the blind baggage. The fireman, lifting a huge piece of coal, smashed him to earth, between the cars.

It was over, and Old Joe stood there wheezing like a wind-broke horse, his knees trembling. Overexertion was an agony in him and it was with difficulty that he hung onto the tag ends of his consciousness. Then someone made him lie down and reality faded in a deep, restful sleep.

IT was the next night. Old Joe Longstreet, dressed in his store clothes, occupied the seat of honor on the rostrum. The town hall was crowded, the aisles as well as the seats jammed with people. Amity had elected Old Joe mayor, by acclamation. The division superintendent of the Rocky Mountain Western had just finished an apologetic little speech, praising Joe's heroism.

Now it was Old Joe's time to speak, and they cheered him wildly as he rose. Their faces blurred before him and his knees were less tractable than after he had completed that killing run at the water tank. He opened his lips, but no sound came. And he was struggling bravely for words when a murmur broke out at the entrance and the crowd parted to permit the entry of a towering, picturesque man. Down through the crowd he came elbowing his way, wide of shoulder, slim of hip and deep of chest, his hat held in his hand. He paused at the foot of the aisle, his eyes inquiring.

"I'm looking for Mayor Joe Longstreet." His deep voice rolled through the sudden silence.

"Here's the mayor," cried Jeff Biddle, waving his hand toward Old Joe.

"Mayor," said the stranger. "I'm Tom Hickman. I'm sorry I couldn't get here last night."

It relieved Old Joe to have something to talk about beside himself. He held out his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Hickman. And pleased to have you clean up our town. I'll be proud to back you to the limit."

The town-tamer smiled, pulling his down-curving mustache. "From what I hear," he said heartily, "you haven't left me much to do. Give me that kind of co-operation and I'll soon be out of a job. Let me say, sir, that you are a great man!"

And the roar that went up from that great gathering, proved to Old Joe that the town of Amity fully shared Long Tom Hickman's sentiment.

THE END.

The girl cried out and Long Jim leapt forward.

DEAD MEN CAN'T DELIVER

by L. L. FOREMAN

THIS Paloma cow town dozed under the beating heat of the noonday sun, but Long Jim took slow and close scrutiny of the street's almost empty length as he racked his rough-gaited roan outside the livery. He had ridden in quietly and without notice.

The sheriff's office and town jail squatted between high false fronts. Long Jim picked it out by its steel-strapped windows, and trod that way with a light stride, keeping to the shade of the fronts. Nearly there, he paused. A man and a girl had moved out from between buildings, and stood on the boardwalk. Long Jim pulled his faded sombrero down another inch and waited for them to get off the street. He didn't want to pass them and draw attention to himself.

The man was talking in a low, insistent tone, his hand gripping the girl's wrist. Long Jim scowled impatiently, wishing the man would do his promoting elsewhere. Just as he was hoping the girl wouldn't call on him to butt in, she gave out a little cry of hurt and humiliation.

Long Jim broke his pause, took fast strides, and his bone-hard shoulder bore the brunt of impact. The man stumbled and caught his balance, but lost his hat. He whirled, and Long Jim knew at once that he

stood in the presence of this town's kingpin. The keen, whiplash look of the man, the straight and arrogant stare, all bespoke it.

"If that was deliberate—" The voice was sharp and gritty.

"It wasn't," drawled Long Jim. "I did it without thinkin' first." He picked up the fine Stetson and slapped the dust from it, doing its shape no good. "Here's your lid."

It was snatched from him. Black eyes stabbed at his low-slung gun, at his face with its gauntness and bleached-out hue. "Watch your step, jailbird!"

Long Jim flinched a little. His face was a give-away to his back trail, and he knew it, but that epithet made his right hand itchy. He stared somberly after the man, crossing the street, until a call from the girl drew his regard her way.

"Thank you!" She sent him a smile with it. She was stringing bundles on the saddle of a hitched pony.

"Hm-m-m," said Long Jim, and strode on to the sheriff's office. His right hand lay flat against his holster when he stepped through the open doorway into the cool shade. For a moment he stood in motionless silence, adjusting his deep-set eyes to the gloom, and felt the twitch of a muscle ripple the flat breadth of his cheek as he made out the slumped shape of an armchair slumberer.

The sleeping man snored gently, chin on chest, hat tipped over his eyes. His body had the heaviness of indulgent middle age, and his unbuttoned vest bore a sheriff's star.

Long Jim flattened his wide lips. Where he'd come from they didn't grow fat and soft. They grew lean to the bone, like himself. Anger made his voice hard and brittle.

"Bill! Bill Garner! I'm here—look at me!"

The snoring ceased. Slowly, the awkward sheriff raised his head, eyes traveling up Long Jim's dark and shabbily garbed silhouette to the hand on the holster. His gaze rose swiftly then to the pale blur of Long Jim's face.

"I see you're here." The sheriff's growl held a dry deliberation. "I'm lookin' at you. But I ain't Bill Garner. Who the hell might you be?" He shoved back his hat, and his eyes glimmered with blue frost in the gloom.

Long Jim relaxed his right hand. He kept his face blank of all expression. "I reckon I made a mistake," he said shortly, and turned for the door. "Sorry I broke your sleepin'."

"Hold on!" The command halted him. When he looked back the sheriff stood square and solid on his feet, thumbs in belt. The tone and look of the man tumbled Long Jim's first opinion and erected a new one. Fat, this man, but not soft. His cold eyes probed deep.

"You called me Bill Garner," remarked the sheriff. "Damn queer. Garner wore this badge before me. You knew him then?"

"No," Long Jim answered. "Before that. I dropped in to look him up."

"Dropped in from where?" The sheriff's eyelids drew close. "Never mind answerin'. I've seen faces like yours before. You come from behind big walls, mister! I'm Sheriff Blount. I try to rod the law hereabouts. What's your name?"

"Long Jim."

"That all of it?"

"It'll do to go by," Long Jim said in a deceptively casual tone.

Sheriff Blount rocked gently on his heels. "You have till sundown to quit this town!" he announced flatly.

"That'll give you plenty time to find out about Bill Garner."

"S'pose you tell me now?" Long Jim suggested.

"Hm-m-m, no," decided the sheriff. "You go ask Ryerson. Cort Ryerson, over in the Trail Break across the street. He knows. So do I, but this badge keeps me from handin' out opinions without evidence. Don't forget that sundown deadline, Mr. Long Jim!"

LONG JIM pushed through the bat-wing doors of the Trail Break, and took time to look the place over as he moved up to the bar. Talk among the small barroom crowd dropped and picked up again, but a few eyes kept regard of him until they met his cool stare in the back-bar mirror. It occurred to him that strangers drew close attention in this town.

He bought a beer and asked, "Where'll I find Cort Ryerson?"

The wooden-faced bartender surveyed him briefly without reply and moved off around a low partition. From the click of chips, a couple of games were going on back there. Long Jim finished his beer and waited. The bartender returned.

A sharp voice from behind the partition snapped, "Hey, you out there, come here!"

"He means you," the bartender remarked.

"So?" murmured Long Jim. "I thought maybe he was callin' his dog." He passed the tables and rounded the partition.

There were a dozen men here, at the card tables and standing lounged against the near wall, but he picked out his man at first glance. The man sat well back in his chair, cigar in hand, meeting Long Jim's gaze with a straight and querying stare. He looked more the successful cattleman than a saloon owner. A jet of humor spiked Long Jim. This was the man he had shouldered off the boardwalk.

"I'm Cort Ryerson." The words came short and clipped. Cold dislike tinged the sharp black eyes. "Who're you and what d'you want? If it's a job, you're out of—"

"It's not," cut in Long Jim. "The name's Long Jim, an' I want to know what became o' Bill Garner."

Again the silence. The lounging men took on alertness. The players peered up. Cort Ryerson, alone, showed no sign that the spoken name of Garner meant much to him. He frowned. "Garner? Oh, yes. Used to be sheriff here. Friend of his?"

"Maybe," Long Jim said. "Maybe not. He . . . uh . . . owes me somethin'."

He stood impassive under the searching sweep of Ryerson's quickened eyes. The saloon owner got briskly to his feet. Latent energy and a driving force marked his every movement. "Come into my office," he said swiftly.

Long Jim followed him into a back room that reminded him of a banker's private sanctum, with its polished woodwork and dark leather. He remained standing while Ryerson took the chair behind his desk, and wondered if the heavy curtain draping another doorway hid a gun guard. Ryerson pushed forward a cigar box.

"Smoke?"

"Thanks, I got makin's. Long Jim smoothed out a rumpled wheat sheaf.

"How much," Ryerson demanded bluntly, "did Garner owe you?"

"Half of all he's got," answered Long Jim.

Ryerson smiled faintly. "Too bad. You must have looked for-

ward to collection day. But you'll never collect!"

"Why not?"

"Dead men can't deliver. Garner's dead!"

Long Jim crushed his makings. "Then I'll take it from what he left behind!"

"Not unless you take it with a gun," said Ryerson coolly. He drummed on his desk. "I could tell you a way to do that, but I'd like to know first why Garner owed you that much."

"I'll tell you," Long Jim said slowly. "We owned a spread down in the Chiricahuas. I wasn't much more'n a kid. We bucked the Heflin Syndicate when it moved in, an' they swallowed us up. So Bill an' I set to work an' took our loss out of the syndicate's cattle. You could call it rustlin'. We sold the stuff fast as we got it, an' banked our cash in Bill's name."

"That," broke in Ryerson, "was a mistake."

"Yeah," Long Jim agreed. "The law jumped us on our last haul, but they didn't catch Bill till it broke light next mornin', miles away. At the trial, I claimed Bill wasn't in the thing, an' they couldn't pack enough evidence to convict him. I got ten years. Bill used to write to me in prison how well he was doin' here with a ranch he'd bought with our money. Our ranch, he called it. Then he was elected sheriff. Two years ago he quit writin'."

"You did ten years?"

"Seven," corrected Long Jim. "I got out early on good conduct. But seven o' those years can do a lot to a man. I was eighteen when I went in. When did Garner die?"

"Two years ago. He didn't just die. He was killed."

"Two years!" Long Jim winced. "I thought he'd gone back on me, when he quit writin'. You learn not to trust anybody, where I've been. Who killed him?"

RYERSON spread his fingers, gazing thoughtfully at them. "I'll tell you the facts," he said carefully, "and let you judge. Garner built up quite a spread here, the Rocking J Diamond. He had a foreman—fellow named Hyatt—who managed the ranch after Garner got to be sheriff. Two years ago Hyatt came in and said he'd found Garner out on the range with a bullet in him, and that he'd died. A lot of us looked at the body, but we kept our opinions to ourselves. Later Hyatt produced a will, signed by Garner, leaving everything to him. A forgery if there ever was one, but Garner left no kin to challenge it in court. Can you add that up?"

"Yeah!" Long Jim spoke through taut lips. "Hyatt murdered Bill!"

"Exactly," agreed Ryerson. "And now I suggest that you follow my advice, if you want to collect what's owing you."

"I'm listenin'."

"Good. Ryerson expanded a little. "Here it is. Take a gun to Hyatt. Make him sign a confession. Turn that confession over to me, and I'll handle the rest. Between us, with that in our hands, we'll make him sell out to us for a song. I've been after that Garner place for a long time. Then we'll hand that confession of his over to the law, and I'll pay you five thousand for your cut." He leaned back. "How does it sound?"

Here, Long Jim decided, was a man on the alert to cut himself a profit out of any set of circumstances.

"It doesn't sound exactly," he observed critically. "It just smells!"

Ryerson came erect with a jerk.

"What? You mean you won't throw in with me on this thing?"

"Roughly speakin'," said Long Jim, "that's it. Hell, man, I've got my own game to play, an' it sure don't include doin' your dirty washin' for you! I'll get Hyatt, an' I'll make a stab at gettin' what's mine, but I'll be— Listen, Ryerson! Don't give the high sign to your gunnies behind that curtain, or we'll all hit the same road home!" He backed to the window.

"You fool!" Ryerson said softly. "Do you think I'll let you grab that Garner place from under my nose, after I've worked for years to get it? Use your head and take my offer, or you'll never—"

Sudden disturbance cut him short and sent his look at the closed door. Long Jim took the instant's pause to ease out his gun and open the side window. Somebody's voice, muffled slightly by the door, rapped out in the barroom.

"Out o' my way, you scum! I've come to see Ryerson!"

Something thumped on the floorboards. The door swung open and in stumped a crippled old wolf of a man on a crutch. He wore no gun, but he had the look of fighting days behind him. He banged the door shut with his crutch, and wheeled to glare at Ryerson.

"You blasted bandit!" He leveled a thick, calloused finger. "If I was younger—"

Ryerson held up a hand. "If you carried a gun instead of that crutch," he snapped, "I'd be glad to take you on! What's put a bur under your tail now? Talk fast and get out! I'm busy."

"He sure is!" put in Long Jim, with one leg thrown over the window sill. "An' he'll be busier if he slaps that hand down!" He kept watchful survey of the heavy curtain, sure that he had heard movement behind it.

"My cows!" exploded the old cripple. "A bunch o' your Bearhead gun hands jumped my riders at Harque Crossin' this mornin', an' took my beef herd from 'em!"

Ryerson looked coldly amused. "I've warned you what would happen if you tried crossing my range, haven't I?" he remarked. "Better send 'em over the mountain trail next time. You might get a few of 'em out that way. You can't cross my range!"

"I'll cross where I've always crossed!" thundered the old cattleman. "You got me hemmed in, but you ain't got me licked! I want them cattle back, or by—"

"Sorry." Ryerson's tone held deliberate taunt. "The law doesn't say I have to do that. If your Mex riders abandon your cattle on my range, it's up to you to come and get them. That is, if you can find them. You might have a little trouble there, but that's your funeral!"

The cripple advanced a step. "Why you—"

"That's enough!" Ryerson half rose, slapping both hands down on his desk.

THINGS came fast then. Floorboards resounded hollowly in the barroom to the quick pounding of advancing feet. Ryerson dropped abruptly down behind his massive desk, a shade ahead of the wicked spurt of Long Jim's gun. The heavy curtain swayed, one edge bent to the thrust of a shotgun's sawed-off snout. The crippled cattleman rocked across the line of fire on his crutch.

Long Jim saw the shotgun veer its muzzle to follow the old man, as if the hidden guard had changed his mind and chosen that one for the

first victim. The crutch described an arc through the air, and whacked behind the desk. A gun clattered on the floor, and Ryerson's voice came in a sharp oath of pain. Long Jim fired low into the curtain, twice, and flung his other leg over the sill.

"C'mon, old-timer!" He sent his yell at the cripple.

The curtain bulged and came down with a crash of ornate pole and bronze rings. The old man dodged it and the floundering shape tangled in it, and swung nimbly on his crutch to the window. Long Jim, already outside in the alley, grabbed him by the shirt and hauled him through. He whipped one shot at the inside door as it burst open, and sprinted for the street.

His roan stood droop-headed at the livery hitch rack. Long Jim hit the saddle, tore loose the reins, and dug both heels. As the roan came to startled life, the cripple made the street, hopped into a buckboard, and let out a shouted warning to a girl on a bundle-strung pony.

"Hit for home, Ann—pronto! That gent's done stirred up a brew that'll set hell a-burnin' round here!"

The girl turned brown eyes on Long Jim. "Take the west fork this side of the river, mister!" she called briefly, and spurred for the buckboard team, swinging her quirt.

Long Jim, taking the jolts of the uncocking roan as it bucked straightaway down the street, found time to grin at the girl's cool readiness at meeting emergency. As he flashed past the sheriff's office he got a glimpse of a stout figure erupting out of the door with a rifle. He chopped a shot for luck that caved in the sheriff's window and sent the lawman promptly ducking back. Long Jim got pleasure out of that shot.

The cracking of a gun brought him low in the saddle, and he took a look back. In the kicked-up dust he made out the buckboard, careening on one wheel in a tight turn off the street. The girl rode abreast of the team and used her quirt. The shapes of men, fogged by the dust, were spilling out of the Trail Break.

He waited for them beyond the west fork. They had to fight the lively dun team to a slow-down. The girl, breathless, waved a hand at Long Jim as he reined abreast and rode with them.

"Dad was right!" It was hard to tell whether there was censure in her tone or not. "You certainly stirred up a frolic back there! Dad, you ought've known better than to get into it. At your age!"

"My age is all right," grunted the cattleman, between swearing mildly at his team and shortening the lines. "It's my leg bothers me." He squinted up at Long Jim. "You better pull for the Rio! This is bad country for those who don't get along with Ryerson. I oughta know. His Bearhead gunnies ran off the last o' my Mex hands this mornin'. I doubt if I'll find any willin' to take their place. Folks know I'm on Ryerson's blacklist, an' they run shy."

The girl turned in her saddle. "Maybe *he* wouldn't." She gazed at Long Jim. "Like to sign up with us?"

Long Jim looked away. " 'Fraid I can't," he said. "I'm headed for the Garner place—the Rocking J Diamond. Maybe you could tell me where 'tis."

"Sure." The girl's eyes were surprised. "You're looking to hire out to the Rocking J Diamond? Welcome! That's our place!"

"Huh? But—" Long Jim caught himself. "I heard," he said carefully,

"that a man named Hyatt owns it."

"That's right." The cripple peered quizzically up at him. "I'm Hyatt! This is my daughter, Ann."

IT seemed to Long Jim that they must sense the sudden chaos in his mind. In the welter of his turgid thoughts one stood out. This was the man who had taken possession of the Rocking J Diamond by reason of Bill Garner's murder and a doubtful will.

For all Ryerson's cold-blooded sharpness, he had told the facts about that. Bill Garner would never have willed the ranch to his foreman or to anybody else, while his old partner lived with a claim on half of it. That will had been a forgery and nothing more. This man Hyatt held the ranch by a cheat. Maybe he hadn't killed Bill Garner, but he had turned the murder to his own profit, just as Ryerson would have done if he'd had the chance. And this girl, with her level brown eyes, was in it too.

Long Jim kept his gaze away from her. "I'm Long Jim," he announced mechanically, while his thoughts straightened and ran on. "I'm two weeks out of State prison."

Their hush lasted a moment until Hyatt broke it, clearing his throat and speaking in a growl. "Didn't ask where you came from. Don't give a durn. You still of the same mind about comin' to our outfit?"

"Yeah." Long Jim nodded slowly. "Yeah, I'm still o' the same mind. There's no reason why I should change my aim. No reason at all!"

He said the last with a note of harshness, and dropped back behind them without further word. Seven years! He'd lived that long on hope for the future, clinging desperately to the promise of that day when he would begin a clean new life as a cattleman again. Be damned if he'd let himself be robbed by a crippled old rawhide and a brown-eyed girl! He'd take what was his, one way or another, and pull out before Ryerson's mob and that frosty-eyed sheriff came along.

When they pulled into the Rocking J Diamond ranch yard, he had his course figured out. He glanced about the place and gave silent credit to Bill Garner. He'd built up a real outfit here, and located in fine range.

Ann Hyatt, carrying her supplies, went into the big, white-painted house after turning her pony loose. Long Jim walked over to Hyatt who was unhitching the buckboard team.

"Where," he asked curtly, "is Harque Crossin'? An' how far did your Mex hands get with that beef herd? An' how big was the herd?"

Hyatt looked at him. "Three miles straight east, where the river widens on the bottomland. They got 'bout a mile beyond, crossin' Ryerson's Bearhead range, far's I know. A hundred an' seventeen head, all heavy primes, worth fifty a head at the market figger. Those damn Bearhead guns'll spook an' scatter 'em all over, an' run all the beef off 'em. That is, if they don't run 'em south over the line. Hey, where you goin'?"

"Goin' after that beef herd," said Long Jim over his shoulder, and swung aboard the roan. Leaving, he stopped by the bunkhouse long enough to rustle up an old bolt-action Krag .30-40 rifle and a handful of shells.

Hyatt came stumping over to head him off as he emerged from the bunkhouse. "You crazy wampus!" he rumbled. "They'll nail your hide up, you go skally-hootin' over the Bearhead range! Come back here! That's an order!"

"Be darned to your orders!" growled Long Jim, and kicked the roan to a lope across the hard-baked yard, on his way to collect a debt that would buy him a new start in life.

HE forded Harque Crossing where the old cattle trail was plain. It swung to the north, but he left it to follow fresh cow tracks that led to a fold in the hills, and entered a winding pass. It became evident that Hyatt's second guess was correct. The Bearhead riders hadn't maliciously spooked and stampeded the herd. They were keeping those prime beefs bunched, headed for the line and a Mexican market. And they traveled without haste, not wishful to sweat off beef poundage. Later they would run a Bearhead herd across the tracks and obliterate the sign.

The pass became a canyon. Its walls shortened, and Long Jim came out on the summit. He followed the tracks along the ridge until they dropped into the winding bed of an old water course, and a brief halt brought to his ears a distant bawling of cattle. The dipping sun threw long evening shadows, and he risked a faster gait down the pebbled arroyo. Pretty soon the light would be too tricky for good shooting, and the Krag's accuracy was a doubtful factor.

Where the dry arroyo shallowed out, he rode part way up the bank and scanned a meadow pocket dotted with bawling cows. The Bearhead riders were bedding the animals down for the night, contemptuous of any risk of pursuit. Long Jim picked out the shapes of three mounted men, riding herd around the restless cattle and forcing them into a loose-knit bunch. Over at the timberline to the right, another man hunkered by a cook fire with coffeepot and fry pan.

Long Jim left his roan tied in the arroyo, and prowled afoot down the slant to the pine fringe. He took close sight, altered his aim with some regret from cook to coffeepot, and let drive.

The solid roar of the Krag brought the cook leaping to his feet, and Long Jim couldn't tell if he'd hit the pot or whether the cook kicked it over in his prompt jump for tree cover.

Long Jim worked the bolt and lined himself behind a trunk. A gun spat its quick flash from somewhere past the fire, and the bullet's whir came close. A fast shooter, that cook. Long Jim hugged cover and let loose a return shot. Hoofs drummed in the meadow pocket. The three riders, bent low, came circling around the cattle. No jump-and-run cow thieves, these, but well-trained trigger men.

Spooked by the gunfire, the cows were breaking up, but the pocket held them together. Long Jim waited until the foremost rider swung across his sights, head on, and braced his shoulder against the kick of the Krag. While the heavy .30-40 slug still screamed, he flipped the bolt and took new aim. Rider and horse parted company and plowed up gravel. The horse stayed down, but its rider stumbled up and went weaving off at a tangent, dazedly shaking his hanging head.

The Krag roared again, and this time the shot slapped a man half out of his saddle. The wounded rider changed course, hanging onto his rearing mount, and cut for the arroyo. The last of the trio swung broadside and spurred after him, chopping blind shots into the pines. They were gunhands, but the blasting Krag was too much for them.

Long Jim stroked the bolt with his hard palm, and wondered about the cook.

His wondering lasted until a hard-running horse beat a swerving course through the pines behind him. By the time he got the Krag worked to his shoulder, the cook was clear of the pines and thundering across the slant for the arroyo. Long Jim watched him catch up the dazed and stumbling man who had lost his horse, and haul him up behind him. Then hoofbeats rattled off up the arroyo, and the ending of gunfire left the evening almost hushed.

Long Jim looked down at the milling cattle. The Bearhead gun hands had hit the arroyo quite a way above the spot where he'd left his roan. He still had his horse. And here was his stake. It would be a job for one man, but he could push them south and have them across the line before the Bearhead riders had time to spread the alarm and cut him off. He left the pines and ran for his horse.

IT took time to get the cattle moving south for the break in the pocket, and Long Jim was too busy to give much attention to the back trail until a voice called his name.

He twisted in the saddle, gun half drawn, and stared at Ann Hyatt reining in beside him. Her face, with the warm glow gone from the tan, was tense and desperate.

"Dad's been arrested!" Her words came tumbling. "Sheriff Blount came out with Ryerson and took him in—for murder! Ryerson claims he got evidence from you that dad killed Garner!"

"Huh?" Long Jim blinked. "What evidence?"

"He swears that you told him you smuggled a letter out of prison to dad when he was Garner's foreman, telling dad you could prove Garner had once been a cattle rustler, and suggesting he blackmail Garner and share what he got with you!" She rushed breathlessly on. "Ryerson says you told him dad wrote you later that he had tried to blackmail Garner, but Garner drew a gun, so dad killed him!"

"So? What's the rest?"

"You tried to sell that letter of dad's to Ryerson, but he refused to buy it and started to call the sheriff. So you fired at him and escaped. That's his story. He has a dozen of his men to swear that they heard you."

"Ryerson," pronounced Long Jim, "is darn clever. Also, he's the biggest liar unhung! I got no letter."

"I know." She nodded hurriedly. "They can't convict dad of murder. But it will mean an investigation of that will, and . . . and—"

"And," Long Jim ended for her, "that will's a forgery!"

"Yes!" she admitted. "We forged it." She looked at the cattle. "Where were you taking them?"

"South," he replied bluntly. A forger and a rustler. It seemed to him like he and this girl made a pretty good pair.

"Oh." Her eyes came back to him. Her plea was direct, desperate. "Please, Long Jim, won't you help us?"

"Why should I?" he parried harshly. He looked at the cattle and thought of the stake that meant a new start. And that turned his thoughts into another channel. "The will was forged; you admit it," he said remorselessly. "And Bill Garner, who killed him?"

"Ryerson!" The girl's eyes were level and candid. "That's something everybody knows, but nobody can prove. While he was sheriff, Garner kept Ryerson in line. It was

I who found Garner lying on the range, dying. He whispered that it was Ryerson who shot him. I got dad, and as we carried him to the house he asked—"

"Is that true?" Long Jim held her eyes with his, and knew that it was. He hauled his mount around. "The sheriff, is he Ryerson's man?"

"No, but he's careful and shuts his eyes to a lot," she answered. "He doesn't want to end up like Garner— Wait, I'm going with you!"

"You're not," growled Long Jim. "Where I'm goin' you don't belong!" He sent the roan in a slashing lope back across the pocket and up the arroyo, leaving the girl and her pony cantering along the fast increasing distance between them.

IN sight of Paloma, with the sun sinking low behind him, the violent uprush of Long Jim's anger chilled to calm-brained purpose. He thought again, tardily, of that herd and shrugged off his regret for the lost stake. A clean new start just wasn't meant for him. His mind and his conscience could never be clean, with the memory of that girl's plea to haunt him, nor as long as Bill's murderer lived and strode his cold-blooded way to greater power.

The seven hard years had been flung to waste, and the brief future lay down there in that town, where a kingpin needed killing. He had a deuce's chance against Ryerson's aces, and he reflected bleakly that he had never been favored by any particular luck. And if he lived to ride out again, he would ride the dim and furtive trails of a law-hunted fugitive, with a heavy load of danger crowding behind.

The red glow of sundown tipped the roofs of Paloma and filled the main street with shadow, softening the harsh outline of the false fronts. With the roan tied back of the livery and his hat pulled well down, Long Jim cruised along the short alley for the street. Passing the jail, a voice brought him up short. He slid a look through the sheriff's broken front window.

It was dusky in there, with no light burning yet, but he made out the stiff-brimmed Stetson and black coat of Cort Ryerson. Two other figures lounged in the office, one on each side of him, hands in pockets and filled holsters thrust casually forward. The fat shape of the sheriff made a murky outline at the rickety desk.

"I'm not asking you." Ryerson spoke with sharp force. "I'm telling you! Move Hyatt to the county seat jail, for . . . er . . . safety's sake. Do it tonight. Load him on a buckboard, and take the old stage road by way of Lodgepole Pass. This tin jail you got isn't safe enough."

"That road might not be any too safe, either!" Blount sounded strained. "Somethin' might happen to Hyatt on the way, an' all the blame would be laid on me!"

"Something," snapped Ryerson, "might happen to you, Blount, if you don't do as I say!"

"Such as what?" mumbled the sheriff.

One of the lounging gunmen spoke up. "Such as what Garner—"

Ryerson whirled on him. "Shut your mouth, damn you! Blount, you either do as I say, or we'll have a new sheriff who will!"

Long Jim's step was soft as he entered, but quiet as it was, the sound of it swung Ryerson around. The street's graying light lay behind Long Jim, putting his face in darkness, but the loose hang of his right hand pricked the two lounging gunmen to a wary stillness.

Sheriff Blount reared up from the desk, fumbling at his thick waist, and blocked the way. He laid a heavy hand against Long Jim's chest. "Watch yourself, you!"

Long Jim shoved him aside without looking at him. His eyes met the glimmer of Ryerson's stare. He spoke in a low, thin voice. "I'm sayin' you're a liar, Ryerson! An' I'm sayin' you murdered Bill Garner! What's your answer?"

He drew, seeing the answer on its way in the shape of holster-slapping movements, and his gun thudded out the first report of a foursome blast that rocked the little room with sound. He knew that he was hit. Knew, too, that he had hit Ryerson. One of the gunmen dodged Ryerson's falling sprawl, but slashed his gun back into line too late to beat the second burst of Long Jim's heavy single-action.

The other gunman stood with legs spread apart, thumbing fast. Long Jim hammered a shot at him on his way to the door, and stumbled out into the aroused street. Doors banged, and the boardwalk rang hollow to the weight of running feet. He rounded the jail's corner into the alley, bumping the wall in his uncertain stride. The sheriff was yelling his head off back in his office, cussing the mob and telling everybody to keep out or he'd shotgun them to blazes.

Long Jim steered an erratic course to the roan behind the livery, and caught a good hold of the saddle-horn. In just a minute, when this giddiness passed, he'd drag himself aboard and get out of this damned town. With one shoulder shot through and a leg going numb, riding this rough-gaited devil was going to be a fit.

His hold slipped and he fell against the roan. The horse rolled a mean eye and sidled away from him, letting him go to his knees. "Damn you, horse!" Long Jim mumbled. "I been good to you, an' look how you treat me."

HE still was trying to reach a stirrup when somebody hurried by him and jerked down the roan's head. "Stand still, darn you!"

A hand caught at Long Jim, steadying him, and he saw it was Ann Hyatt beside him. And past her he saw another figure—a fat, striding figure, gun in hand. It came on, and threw a surprising powerful arm around his waist.

"Help me get him into the jail," grunted the sheriff. "The back way. C'mon, quick! Hull town's boilin'!"

Long Jim lay on his back and counted five bars on the cell window. Somebody was helping Ann tie up his shoulder and leg. He asked, with only mild interest, "What's all the shoutin' out there?"

"It's Blount, mostly," Hyatt answered him. "Can you roll over?"

Long Jim rolled over. "Nobody needs to know 'bout that will," he muttered, his face in the hard pillow. "It's all right, far's I'm concerned."

The cell door clanged, and Sheriff Blount stamped in. "Well," he announced with lusty relish, "I got 'em told! Pay day's over for them Bearhead hard cases, an' they know it. They're startin' a hot race for the Bearhead. Reckon they'll loot it clean 'fore mornin', but I can't be watchin' all of 'em."

He prodded Long Jim with a blunt finger. "Ryerson's dead. I can make out to handle this town, now he's gone. He . . . er . . . died resistin' arrest."

"Huh?" Long Jim grunted dazedly.

"If you're able," suggested the

sheriff, "feel the front o' your shirt. I pinned that badge there when I pushed you in the chest. Mebbe I forgot to swear you in as my dep'ty, but you didn't give me much time. Anyhow, I made things legal as I could. I gotta go now. Got work to do. There's a feller out here, you busted his arm. The one who said somethin' 'bout Bill Garner. I want to see if I can't get him to talk some more on that subject."

He moved to the door. "It's my way," he added modestly, "to use my head an' kind o' wait for things to crop up. You cropped up real nice! There's another job I got to do, too. Feller raised a ruckus 'round town today an' wrecked my window. Called himself Long Jim, or somethin' like that. Big feller 'bout ten foot high an' ornery as a winter wolf. Er . . . I forgot your name. What is it?"

"Jim Fleming," said Long Jim.

"Uh-huh. Well, it's sundown, an' that ornery cuss, Long Slim, or whatever it was, oughta know by now what happened to Bill Garner!" The sheriff ambled off.

Long Jim heard Hyatt say, "Tell him, Ann."

"I was just going to." Ann touched Long Jim's arm. "Listen. Just before Bill Garner died, he asked us to hold the ranch for a certain man who some day would come. He didn't say where he'd come from. Just said his name, Jim Fleming, and died. He'd never made a will so there was only one way for us to hold onto the ranch. That was to pretend Garner left it to us. So we forged a will. We've been waiting for Jim Fleming to come and claim it. All you had to do—"

"I'm all Blount called me!" muttered Long Jim. "I oughta be shot!"

"You *are* shot!" Anne's tone was frigid. "What more do you want?"

Long Jim rolled painfully over and looked up at her. Her tone had fooled him. There was no coldness in her eyes.

"I'll tell you," he said. "I . . . well, anyhow, if it wasn't for . . . for where I've been, I'd sure like to tell you what—"

"Who's talking about where you've been?" she demanded. "And who cares? Don't try to change the subject?"

Her father fitted his crutch under his arm and got under way. "I guess," he said cheerfully, "I better leave you two to fight this thing out!"

THE END.

The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

We had a short note this week from Barbara Dunne, whose letter was published some time ago, in which she thanked us for getting her so many pals. She also says, "If I didn't answer everyone as I promised, it was because I go to school and that means homework—lots of it. I want to thank everyone for their nice letters, though, and I'm very sorry I haven't the time to write because I certainly enjoyed hearing from you."

Write to this lonesome sailor—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a sailor in the United States navy and would like to have some Pen Pals from all corners of the world. I am twenty-two years old, enjoy all sports—especially tennis, and as a hobby collect stamps and snapshots. I promise to answer all letters, so come on and drop a few lines to a lonesome sailor.—E. C. Thomas, U. S. S. *Finch*, Manila, Philippine Islands

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Prospectors read this—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I spent almost a year out in Arizona prospecting and took up eleven mining claims—some very good and others only fair. I have some pretty good assays, but I can't work all these claims, so I would consider leasing some of them at a reasonable price. If anyone is interested in mining claims, I would be glad to hear from him. —Alma Koldorn, Renville, Minnesota

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Lee will tell you about his experiences—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am thirty years old and would like American, Mexican or Arabian Pen Pals, or some from other foreign countries. For several years I have taught school and traveled during the summer through the West and Mexico. I will tell anyone interested about my experiences while camping, hunting and trapping, so please write and send me snapshots if possible.—Lee E. Albin, Sweet, Idaho

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Hazel wants lots of mail—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like to receive lots of letters from boys and girls between fifteen and eighteen years of age. I am fifteen, like outdoor games, and my hobby is writing letters. I promise to answer all letters as soon as possible, and do hope I get a whole stack of mail.—Hazel Hipshire, 703 West Second North Street, Morristown, Tennessee

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Dorothy is a baseball fan—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-three years old and would like to hear from folks of all ages from everywhere in the United States and all foreign ports, especially Scotland and Ireland. I am an ardent baseball fan, so all you other fans please write to me.—Dorothy McCoy, Huntington, Arkansas

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Nita wants to hear from cowboys—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty years old and would like to have lots of Pen Pals. For eighteen years I have been living on a ranch here in Yakima. I enjoy all sports, especially horseback riding, and also like old-time dancing. I would like to hear from cowboys but everyone is welcome, and I promise to answer all letters. Those who send snapshots will be answered first.—Nita Emogene Woodward, Route No. 7, Yakima, Washington

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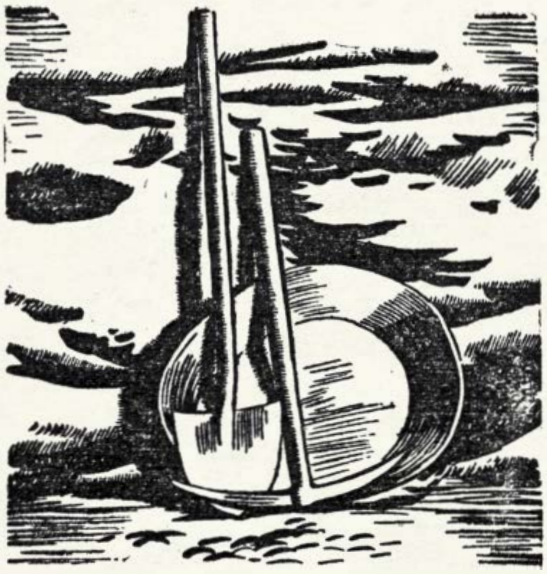
Quick answers guaranteed if you inclose a picture—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am an Argentinan twenty-five years old and would be pleased to have some Pen Pals from any part of the world. My chief hobby is collecting stamps and, believe it or not, I like to study. Those who inclose snaps of themselves, I shall answer immediately.—Betty Kenny Delamer, Libertad 391 Haedo, F. C. O., Buenos Aires, Republica Argentina, South America



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

A TROUGHLIKE sluice box is the easiest sort of a small-scale placer gold-saving device to build. But it won't function without riffles, those cross slats, cleats, or what-have-you, set in the bottom of the box. It is the riffles that actually catch the gold.

What to make them out of, their size, shape, and how they work are the questions H. McKinley of San Antonio, Texas, has just fired at us in a recent letter. G. B., of Mobile, Alabama, has been puzzled about riffles, too. This is an answer to these two readers, and all the others who have queried us on riffles.

In the first place there is nothing very complicated or intricate in riffles. Their purpose is to afford an obstruction to the smooth flow of wash water running through the sluice box. Thus they tend to retard the material moving over them and give the heavier gold a chance to settle. They also form retainers in front of which the gold lodges and is caught. Aside from the above functions they cause little eddies or "boils" that aid materially in the mechanical separation of the gold from the gravel with which it is mixed.

These "boils" should be strong enough to keep the riffles from clogging with sand, but not too strong to prevent the gold from lodging and staying in the box.

Shape, size and spacing of the riffles have a great deal to do with the strength of the eddies they cause. Almost any riffle will work to a certain extent. But to get the proper, efficient, gold-saving results in virtually every small-scale placer operation where sluice boxes are used, a little individual experimenting must be done to find out which riffles work best under the particular type and condition of the actual gravel being handled.

Two to four-inch peeled poles cut from a creek bank and laid longitudinally along the bottom of the sluice box are probably the simplest form of riffle. There is a chance, however, that in using pole riffles the gold may tend to slide along the grooves between the poles, and an appreciable percentage may thus be lost out of the lower end of the sluice. Sometimes this can be counteracted and better results obtained by cutting the poles into short lengths and laying them crosswise in the sluice box.

Wood blocks, about four inches thick and cut across the grain, make good riffles. So do strips made of wood an inch and a half or two inches square, spaced about three inches apart and fastened together to form a sort of lattice for easier removal from the box when making a gold clean-up.

If there is no wood available, cobblestones laid in the bottom of the box will often make amazingly good gold-saving riffles. Angle-iron riffles, "Hungarian" riffles as they are called, are made of light two-inch angle iron set crosswise in the box, and spaced, as the wooden cross riffles are usually, about three inches apart. Spacing, however, may vary from two to three inches, according to personal taste or actual practice tests.

All the above-mentioned riffles are essentially suitable and efficient for saving fairly coarse gold such as are found in the average run of placer gravel. In other words, gravel that is a mixture of small stones, fine sand, and at least moderately coarse gold.

In cases where the gravel itself is mostly fine sand, and the major portion of the gold values are in fine particles, better results as a rule can be obtained by discarding such high obstructions as two-inch cross riffles for old carpet, rough napped blankets, burlap, canvas, animal hides (hair side up), or corduroy fastened to the bottom of the sluice boxes themselves. Such minor ridges and roughness as afforded by the corduroy, burlap and so forth will be sufficient for saving the tiny particles of very fine gold. The riffle material may be held in place by wooden cleats, or thin strips of metal lath, or may be covered with wire mesh.

Some prospectors use the less common form of zigzag riffles, and claim good success with them in handling fine material and fine gold values. In this method cross riffles, instead of being extended the full width of the box, are cut in half and staggered along the bottom of the box from alternate sides. This produces a back-and-forth swish to the wash water as it courses through the box, its free passage obstructed first on one side, then on the other.

To Willy K., Norwich, Connecticut: Topaz is a hard, transparent wine-yellow semiprecious gem stone when found in good crystals. Most of the gem topaz comes from Brazil. Fine crystals in smaller sizes have been found in this country in Maine, Colorado and Utah.

The largest topaz crystal ever found, three hundred and fifty thousand carats, weighing one hundred and fifty-three pounds, has just recently been added to the mineral collection of the Smithsonian Institute at Washington. Topaz gems are usually worn only about four or five carats in size, which gives an idea of just how huge this new topaz really is.

The giant crystal at Smithsonian has a few flaws in it. Nevertheless, much of it could be cut into a fortune in beautiful gem stones. Though the color is pale blue on the outside, the interior is the pure wine yellow of true gem topaz.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

EVERY firearms editor gets hundreds of inquiries annually from some chap who describes his physical characteristics, such as height, weight, length of arm, et cetera, and wants to know what the proper dimensions are for a rifle or shotgun to fit him. Some gun editors have been recommending a lot of specifications along these lines. I prefer to make no such recommendations.

I have checked carefully with hundreds of excellent shots concerning gun specifications and with an equal number of mediocre and poor shots concerning their ideas. The experts don't worry about the dimensions of a gun, but the poor shots do. They feel that their poor shooting is due to improper fit of the gun.

Such reasoning is merely an alibi. If you learn your gun thoroughly, you will have no trouble handling it regardless of stock dimensions. There are, of course, a few very slight exceptions to this. For example, extremely short people with short arms may find it difficult to reach the trigger of a standard gun properly. All they need to do is shorten the stock slightly.

Letter after letter comes in from the chap who wants to know how his gun was sighted in at the factory, and if it will be necessary for him to change the sights for a certain type of shooting. The answer is for him to personally try it out and learn where it shoots.

Sighting in a gun is not difficult and does not require elaborate equipment. Merely use common sense and endeavor to eliminate the human error of holding. This can be done either prone or sitting, with the gun rested over a sandbag, stump, folded blanket, or any similar device.

In this respect, do not rest the muzzle of the gun against the sand-

bag or any other hard object. This may change the vibration so the gun will shoot to a different point of impact than when it is held free. Rest the wooden part of the fore end only and preferably cradle it in your hands, with your hands on the sandbag.

A ten-pound sugar bag is ideal for this kind of testing. Take the bag out and fill it full of sand or soft dirt. Sand is, of course, preferable. Instead of sewing it up, tie the mouth of the bag with a string. This small bag can be placed on any convenient object depending upon shooting conditions. Lay the left forearm, if you shoot right-handed, on top of the bag and hammer your wrist and hand into it to make a nice groove. Then merely rest the forearm of the rifle lightly on your hands.

Try a shot at a small target at the desired range. Fire two additional shots, holding the gun identically the same way, and see if the bullets group closely together. If they are high and to the left, you want to move the rear sight down slightly and to the right. Then try three more shots.

As for changing sight adjustments: Generally speaking, I would say don't do it. If you are hunting in territory where you get mostly close-range shooting and have sighted in for fifty yards, you can shoot at any distance from twenty-five feet to a hundred yards without worrying about where the bullet is going to land.

Estimate your range carefully and learn how much your bullet will drop by studying catalogues before you go into the woods. Then, if you find that your bullet is going to drop fifteen inches at a given range and you sight a deer at that range, hold on him just above the backbone.

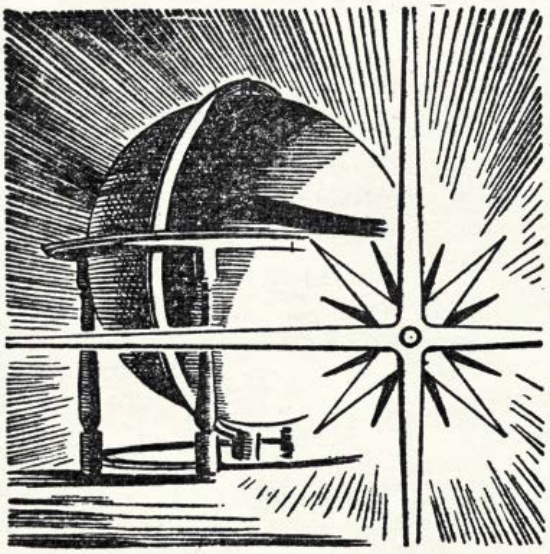
Wherever you can, discard crude open or V-type sights in favor of the peep variety. Peep sights are very easy to use once you become accustomed to them. They are much faster and can be used under poorer light conditions. You need a large peep for hunting and a very small disk inserted for target shooting.

Do not make the mistake of trying to center the bead of your front sight in the middle of the aperture or ring that you see through the peep sight. The eye will do this automatically. Merely look through it without looking at the rear sight. Then line up the front sight with the game since you have but one sight to worry about under these conditions.

You can shoot much faster than when you have to strain the eyes to line up a rear sight at short range, a front sight some eighteen to twenty-four inches in front of it and the target, all at one and the same time. This really does save time. Bear in mind that precision match shooting is never accomplished with open sights.

If you are interested in making a cartridge collection and would like to hear from other collectors, write to this department, inclosing a three-cent stamp for a list of names which will be sent to you as soon as it is compiled. In this way you may be able to trade some of your duplicates with others for something you really need for your collection.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns And Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. *Be sure you inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

I HAVE just received a letter from a young fellow who has been farming most of his life, with the exception of scattered periods when he worked as a carpenter. He is going to be married soon and wants to go up into the Northwest, where he hears there is a great opportunity for a young fellow to get a start on the cheap land from which pine and other timber has been cut. He has a very small amount of money, and he asks advice about whether it is enough for him to start on. He also wants to know about how the land is cleared in that country. So do a lot of other such inquiries.

To answer a lot of hopeful inquirers, and yet not put a damper on their ambitions, requires more information than they usually give in their letters. The answer depends on the man's experience as a farmer, as a business man, as a general farm mechanic, his eagerness and ability to work, and especially on his ability to plan in advance, for there is hardly a profession that depends more on foresight than farming, and this is particularly true of a man just starting in, either experienced or not.

To begin with, anybody *can* succeed, despite the obstacles of very little money or experience. It has been done and will be done again. People who are well experienced in settling newcomers on the lands in the Northwest have a very definite idea of what the average settler needs in the way of cash and equipment if he is to get started without too much hardship. But remember, it can be done on less, if you have it in you to succeed.

The consensus of opinion is that, besides the personal qualities mentioned above, the settler, to insure success, should have the following cash and equipment, or cash enough to buy it:

He should have, or be able to buy, at least two work horses, wagon and harness, a plow, harrows, mower, rake, four cows, a cream separator, and at least three hogs and some chickens. He should also have enough money left over to live on for a year and to make a down payment on his land.

Now this looks like a big order for a man who hasn't any money but is looking for a start. However, it should be remembered that the above is the total of what he needs to start a going farm.

If you are looking for an opportunity to build a home of your own in a new locality, write John North, inclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelpe, and you will be sent useful information on this subject.

There is another side of this story, and this is the one that will appeal to the man without all the cash and equipment listed above. That is, buy and build your farm on the instalment plan, so to speak. But don't go into debt doing it.

Let us take the case of a man whose record I have. He worked for one of the lumber companies which was clearing the land. He bought eighty acres of cut-over land and paid for it out of wages until he had a clear title to the land. He did not touch it immediately. But when he got it paid for he went in and cut down enough of the small second-growth timber to erect a cabin and barns. Then, to save paying rent in town, he moved into the place while still holding his job. He stocked his little farm with chickens, pigs and a couple of cows as fast as he could get the money. His wife took care of the chickens and fed the pigs while he was at work. Soon they were selling a few eggs some milk and baby pigs.

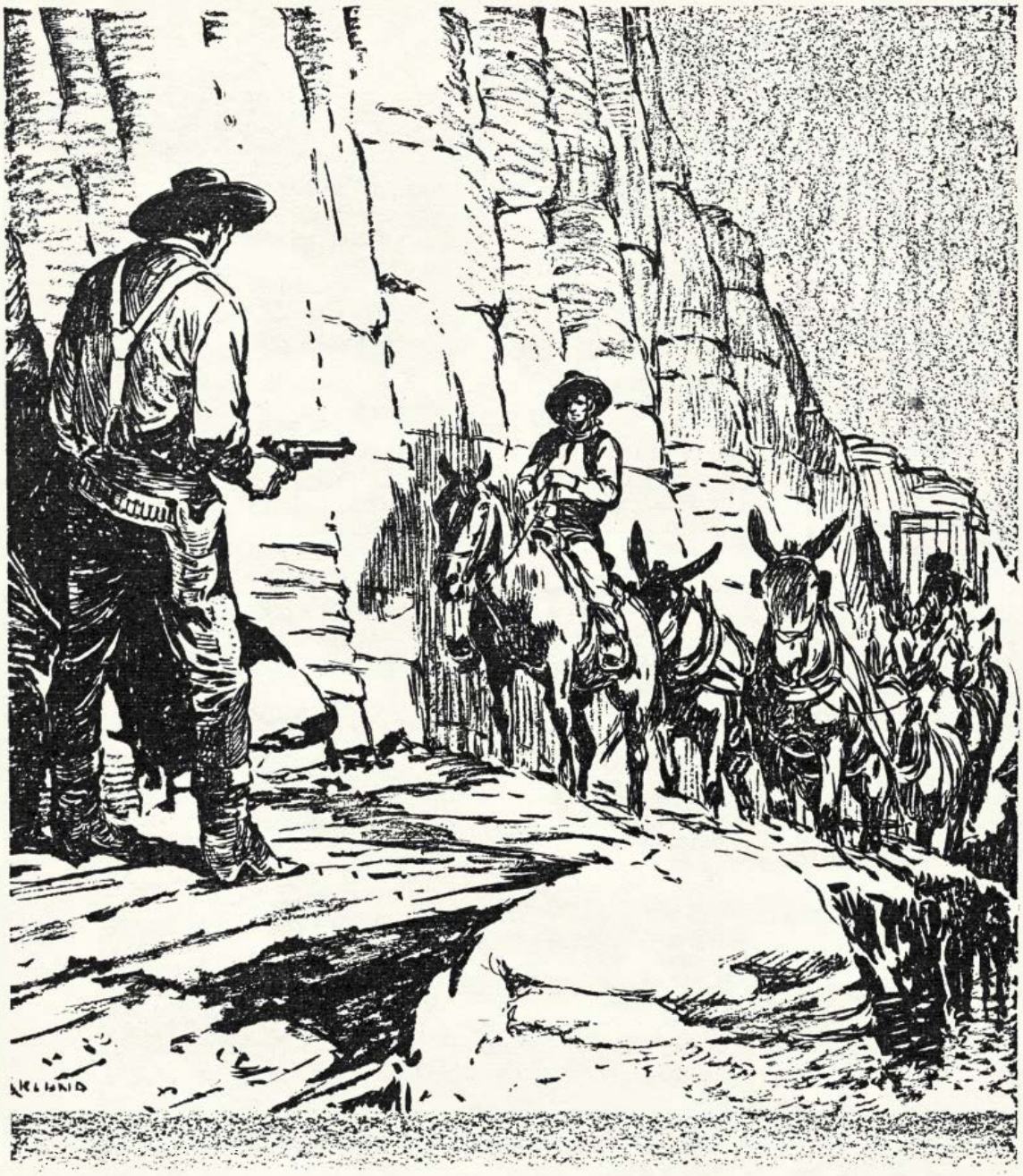
Gradually he cleared his land, acre by acre, and put in vegetables. Most of his money, so far, was going into clearing the land of stumps. After a while he had his whole place cleared and planted, had his tools bought and was ready to quit his job and go to work farming in earnest.

Now to answer the questions about how the land in Minnesota and other northwest States is cleared of stumps. There are several ways, depending on the locality and the choice of the owner. One popular way in Oregon is to first buy a herd of goats of the Angora wool variety and turn them loose on it for a year or two. The goats will clear out the underbrush of all living matter. Later the farmer comes along and cleans out the brush and burns it, then goes to work on the stumps, burns them out, blasts them, puts a stump puller on them, or hires a bulldozer.

Other farmers sometimes fence off the uncleared land and turn a bunch of hogs onto it. The hogs dig out the roots of the ferns and other small brush and weeds and leave it as clear as a whistle, except for the stumps, which are then ready for the bulldozer.

The bulldozer is a caterpillar-type tractor operated by a Diesel motor. It has a heavy scraper-type blade across the front something like a snow plow.

Now we begin to get a picture of what a man with a strong urge to own one of those farms can do. He can go up there, follow his trade or profession, gradually acquire enough land, get it paid for, build his own cabin from the wood on his own place, build his barns, clear a small patch for five or ten dollars, raise his food and some to sell, save a few more dollars and clear more land, and so on until his farm is as big as he wants it and is well stocked. At no time has he spent very much money. He pays his way as he goes, step by step, and after a while he is independent and owns his own place.



DEAD FREIGHT FOR PIUTE

Part Two

by LUKE SHORT

The Story So Far:

Piute was the kind of boom town where anything went, provided a man could back up his play. After a stage holdup in which his fellow passenger, Celia Wallace, was robbed of ten thousand dollars, Cole Armin is ready for almost anything except the accusation that he, working with his uncle, Craig Armin, owner of the Monarch Ore Freighting Co., has had the girl robbed in order to ruin her brother Ted's freighting business.

Cole attempts to explain that he has not seen his uncle since he was a child and is making this trip to take advantage of an offer of a job with Monarch. Celia refuses to be convinced, so, as soon as the stage reaches Piute, Cole seeks out his uncle.

Craig Armin welcomes him cordially and talks of his plans to make Cole a partner in the business, talk which impresses Cole until he recognizes one of the Monarch teamsters as the man who held up the stage. He demands that his uncle turn over the ten thousand dollars that was stolen.

Craig finally agrees, but with an unwillingness that makes Cole realize he has made a bitter enemy of his only living relative. Cole returns the money to the Wallaces, and they, learning of his break with his uncle, offer him a job as a partner in their company. He accepts.

Late that night there is a rap on the door of the Wallace's living quarters. Ted opens the door and from a back room Celia and Cole hear him being arrested for blowing Monarch's safe and taking ten thousand dollars from it.

CHAPTER IV

A BARGAIN

For one brief instant Cole stood there, baffled. And then he was suddenly aware that he held ten thousand dollars in his hand—the ten thousand they would accuse Ted Wallace of stealing from the Monarch safe. He heard the swift tramp of feet coming toward them, and Linton's voice saying: "Search the place!"

Cole moved then. He lunged for the window, swinging his leg over the sill. The noise he made must have been heard in the other room, for those feet began to run.

For a desperate second, Cole tried to remember what was below him, and he couldn't. He didn't know. He rammed the bag of money in his waist band, and swung outside, hanging from the sill. Then, shoving himself away from the building with his foot, he dropped. It was only a six-foot drop to the sloping roof of the next building. He hit it, fell and started to roll down the roof to the passageway between the two buildings. He clawed wildly at the shake shingles, and could not stop.

He hit the ground with a grunt, fell and rolled over on his back. A man's head appeared in the window above, and Cole lay motionless. The man pushed out a gun and shot, not down, but toward the rear of the passageway. Then he bawled: "He got away! Out the back stairs and you'll catch him!" And he poured three more shots toward the rear of the compound.

Cole came to his feet and ran for the street. He stepped out into the crowd that jammed the boardwalk and drifted with it for five minutes, until he was two blocks away. Whatever alarm they might raise now would take time. Besides, it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack. He was unknown here, save to a few people, and his description would be that of a tall man in a black suit who needed a shave.

He could fix that part of it up soon enough, and give himself some time to think, in the bargain. He drifted down street past the saloons where the barkers were standing, yelling in hoarse voices about the quality of the whiskey and the girls inside, until he came to a barber shop.

Spotting an empty chair, Cole went in, took it, and asked the barber for a shave. The money bag

against his belly was heavy, and it reminded him that he had to do something, and do it fast. Once his face was lathered and the hot towel over it, he knew he was as well hidden as if he were in the next State. And he considered.

This had all come so fast. In a few brief hours he has tossed one job overboard, and won a partnership in Western Freight. He had learned that his uncle was crooked and bold as sin, and that Celia Wallace and Ted Wallace were generous, friendly people. It embarrassed him, and made him grateful at the same time. And before he had a chance to understand it all, the law had broken into Ted's room to arrest him. There was only one thing Cole was sure of, and that was that Ted Wallace hadn't blown the Monarch safe. Knowing Craig Armin the short time he had, Cole was willing to bet that Armin blew his own safe. Craig wasn't wasting any time. He was going to ruin Western at the first chance, and his chance had come. Ted Wallace had unwisely made a brag and a protest to the sheriff, as Craig Armin knew he would. And now he would be jailed —the only man who could run Western Freight.

COLE'S brain worked tirelessly while the barber shaved him. He wished that he knew this town better, knew its people and its customs and the way it worked. Nothing he had learned in Texas applied to Piute. He couldn't break Ted out of jail, for that would outlaw them both, and Western Freight would be ruined. He knew only one friendly man in this whole town, Juck. He must work through him, and keep the money safe.

By the time the barber was finished, Cole thought he had a plan. It was to match Craig Armin's gall with the same kind of coin.

"The saloons are doin' a right nice business tonight," he observed idly to the barber as he came out of the chair.

The barber was a mild little man with the face of a lugubrious undertaker. "They always do," he said gloomily. "Take all our money."

"Funny thing," Cole said, putting on his coat. "All these people, Mexicans and Irish and Germans, mixing together in one saloon. You'd think they'd fight all night."

"They don't mix," the barber said. "They each got their own favorite saloon."

"That a fact?" Cole asked, looking in the mirror and putting on his hat. "I suppose they all like their own kind of people. Teamsters all hang out in one saloon, timbermen in another, hostlers in another; like that, eh?"

The barber nodded, and said nothing. But Cole knew he was on the right track.

"What's the teamster's bar, for instance?" he asked.

"The Desert Dust. Up a block and turn to your right." The barber made a face. "Phooey! It smells like they were servin' drinks in a stable. They're a tough lot, too."

Cole smiled, waited until he was finished, and then stepped out into the street. He let the crowd, which had thinned out somewhat on this edge of the business district, carry him along to the end of the block. Then he crossed the street, passed a second-rate saloon that was jammed to the doors, and went up the side street. It was dark here, with a faint shaft of light up ahead.

When he reached that light, he found that it was the Desert Dust. The windows of the place were dirty,

and when Cole shouldered through the bat-wing doors into a bedlam of noise and smoke, the stench hit him like a pillow. Squinting against the smoke, he walked down past the bar, which was crowded with rough and boisterous men in tattered clothes, and observed the drinkers. No luck. He went on to the gambling tables in the rear then. And there, just as he had hoped, was Juck, watching a faro game. Cole walked up to him and touched his arm. Juck turned around and started with surprise. Cole didn't say anything, only tilted his head toward the rear. Juck followed him out into the alley without a word.

Once outside and his eyes adjusted to the dark, Cole said: "Juck, I got ten thousand dollars in this bag. Can you hide it for me?"

"Sure," Juck said, then he added slowly: "I don't get it, Armin. You mean you're trustin' me?"

"You're part of the company, Juck, and it's Western's money. You look like a man one could trust."

"Give it here," Juck said roughly. "If I ain't got it when you want it, I'll hang myself."

"That's only part of it. Now listen." He told Juck of the sheriff's visit, the arrest of Ted Wallace for blowing the Monarch's safe, and his hunch that Craig Armin had blown his own safe to trap Ted Wallace with the money. Juck agreed that it was probable.

"All right, Juck. Now listen careful. I've thrown in with Ted Wallace. We're partners in Western. But I'm green in this town. I don't know anybody."

Juck nodded.

"I'm playin' a hunch, now, shootin' in the dark. And you got to help me."

"What kin I do?"

"Before you promise to help me, Juck, there's something I want to tell you. You might go to jail for it."

"It's rough, hunh?" Juck asked.

"No. It's blackmail, Juck. Are you willin' to go to jail for that stage robbery of Celia Wallace?"

"Oh," Juck said and waited.

"I don't think you'll have to, Juck," Cole said quietly. "But you might. It's a risk."

"That's a long haul, for robbin' a stage," Juck remarked. "You can't figure no other way?"

"No," Cole said. "There it is, Juck. If you don't want to take a chance, say so."

Juck thought a moment. "You take care of my family, if I go?" he demanded.

"I will," Cole said. "I'll promise it."

"O. K., then. What do I do?"

Cole smiled in the dark at Juck. He was simple and loyal; a good man.

"Hide that money first," Cole said. "Then meet me at the Cosmopolitan House in fifteen minutes. That enough time?"

"Plenty," Juck said, and vanished.

A QUARTER of an hour later, Juck and Cole walked into the lobby of the Cosmopolitan House and inquired at the desk for Craig Armin's suite. It was 2-B on the second floor. The clerk said he didn't think Mr. Armin wanted to be disturbed.

Cole ignored him and they went upstairs and found 2-B. They were let into the foyer by a Chinese servant. Cole gave his name, knowing it would serve to draw Craig Armin from the party that was obviously going on in the rooms beyond. They were shown into Craig Armin's ele-

gantly paneled study that opened off the foyer.

They were scarcely seated in the rich deep chairs when Craig Armin came in. He was dressed in evening clothes, a commanding figure. He looked from Cole to Juck and back again. "Well?" he said, curtly, impatiently.

Cole came to his feet. "I'm plumb sorry about that robbery tonight, Craig, but I'm afraid you got the wrong man arrested."

Craig Armin shook his head. "The sheriff doesn't think so. Wallace made threats against me tonight, then robbed my safe."

"It's too bad," Cole said sympathetically. "Still, I think you better bail Wallace out."

"Bail Wallace out? Are you crazy?" Armin asked sharply.

"Is Sheriff Linton in there?" Cole asked obliquely.

"Why . . . yes. He just got back from locking Wallace up." Armin smiled dryly. "And you want me to tell Linton to free him? You're a damned fool, my boy."

"Not free him," Cole said doggedly. "Just bail him out. Because if you don't bail him out, Juck has a story to tell to the sheriff about a stage robbery."

Craig looked at Juck, and smiled faintly. "You like the idea of going to jail, Juck?"

"I'm all set for it," Juck grinned. "I'm gettin' paid to go. How about you? You all set for it?"

Craig's face changed slightly. "Nonsense! Neither of us wants to go."

"But Juck don't mind," Cole said softly. "He's willin'. All he's got to do is talk."

"I'll deny it!" Craig said sharply. "My word carries some weight."

"The only trouble with that is that you can't file the numbers off banknotes," Cole lied calmly. "For instance, Miss Wallace had a one-hundred-dollar banknote, number A-177B34. Her bank wrote the number down, back in Illinois. It's stolen from her by Juck, who admits it. It's returned to me, by you. And she has it now. How did you get it, unless Juck gave it to you?"

Craig Armin's face was tense. "That's bluff!"

"Not bluff," Cole corrected, "because your scheme didn't work, Craig. It would have worked if your pet sheriff had grabbed the money tonight and given it back to you. But he didn't. I've got the money and the banknotes." He turned toward the door and had his hand on the knob when he said: "I'll get the sheriff."

Craig Armin didn't move. "Juck, I'll give you a thousand dollars to skip the country," he offered.

"To hell with you," Juck said promptly.

"Wait!" Armin said, then, to Cole. "What's your price, Cole?"

"Bail Ted Wallace out."

"But, damn it, he's my competitor! How'll it look? He robbed my safe!"

"So he is. It's too bad." Cole smiled faintly at the rage and anger on Craig Armin's face. "You made one bad mistake, Craig. You figured Juck wouldn't want to go to jail and you were safe. I'll pay him to go to jail, just so he can drag you in, too."

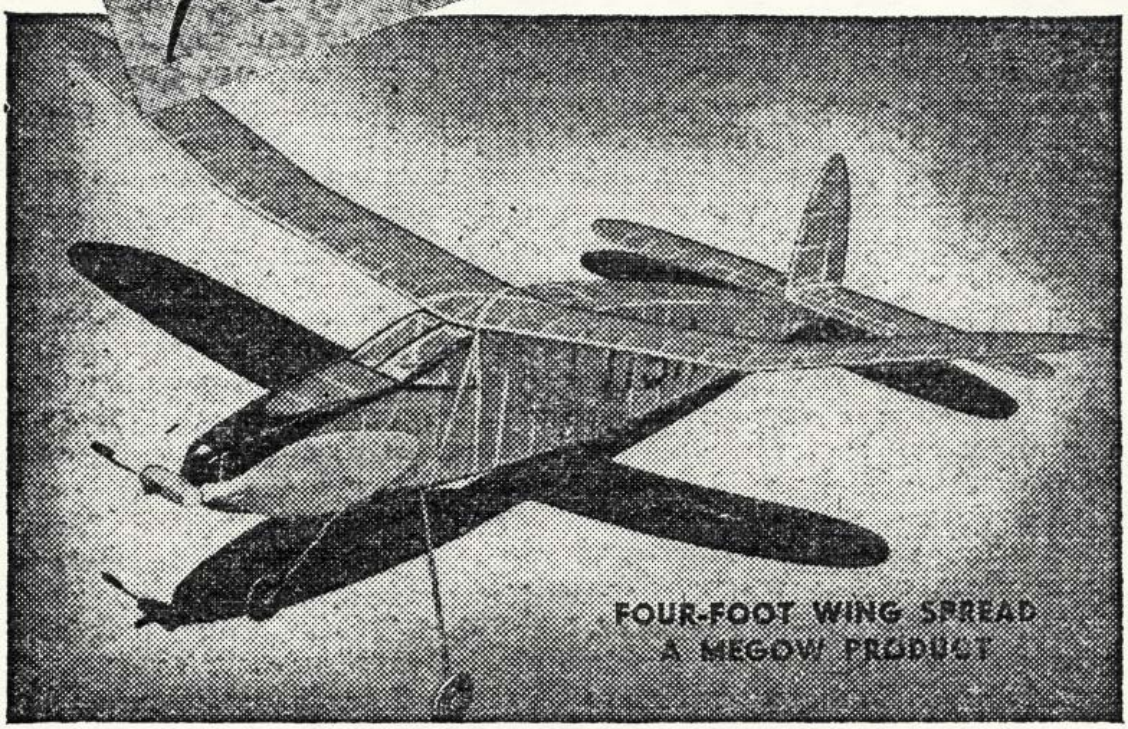
Craig Armin only glared at him.

"Understand," Cole said. "I'm not asking Linton to drop the charges. Linton wouldn't free Wallace, because you played your hand too good. You couldn't make Linton free him without giving away your part in the robbery. But bail will

Continued on page 104

Free! THE WORLD'S

THE PERFECT



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Continued from page 101

get him out. Just put it on the line."

"You've got bail money!" Armin snapped. "Use it!"

"That money can't be spared, Craig. It's going for new wagons and mules so we can run you out of the country." Cole paused, grinning.

Craig Armin's gaze sharpened. "We?" he echoed.

"I'm with Western—a partner," Cole said mildly.

Craig Armin's face settled into cold fury. "I'm willing to let bygones be bygones, Cole," he said slowly. "Forget this nonsense, you and Juck, and come over to Monarch. We'll lick every freighting outfit in sight, and you'll have more money than you can spend."

"I'll stay where I am, I reckon," Cole said. "I like the smell of my new partner considerable better than I do yours, Craig. And Juck likes his new boss better. We're goin' to have some fun, it looks like. We're goin' to see how far we can run you out of Piute." He grinned. "Now, you aim to bail Wallace out?"

Without a word, Craig Armin went to the door and Cole held it open for him. There was a look of savage hatred on Craig Armin's handsome face. He had been bested twice today by a cowhand from Texas, and he did not like it. But he was heading for Sheriff Linton right now, and with bail money.

CHAPTER V

BILLINGS TAKES A WALK

COLE did not enjoy his night's sleep in the hay loft of McFee's Livery Stable, but Juck didn't seem to mind. It had been necessary, however, because Cole was sure of one thing. Craig Armin, to wipe out the constant threat of having to answer for a stage robbery, would not rest until the man who could convict him was dead. And Cole proposed to checkmate him as soon as possible.

Once the town was awake, Cole left Juck in the loft and, without visiting the Wallaces, hunted up the most down-at-the-heels law office he could find. The firm of Chas. Beedle, Attorney-at-Law, was located in a tent at the edge of town, one of a dozen such which housed the cheapest red-liquor joints in Piute.

Mr. Chas. Beedle had to be wakened from a drunken stupor. His office furniture consisted of a cot furnished with dirty blankets, a framed diploma, a stack of leather-covered law books, and two jugs of his neighbors' best liquor. He was fat, unshaven, and merry, and didn't at all mind being wakened.

Cole stated his business, and pen and paper were brought out. Cole dictated what he wanted drawn up into an affidavit. Leaving a blank space for the names, which Cole did not mention, the affidavit stated that Juck had robbed the stage at Craig Armin's request, had turned over the ten thousand dollars to Craig Armin, and had been paid off with a bottle of whiskey. Dates, times and such were as accurate as Cole could make them. He waited until Mr. Beedle, who showed no curiosity at all, had it copied out in the proper legal language, and then waited some more for a duplicate. This was important. Afterward, Cole paid Beedle, bought him a drink at the neighboring tent saloon, and went back for Juck.

Together, they stepped into a hardware store next to the feed stable where there was a notary public. Both copies were filled in with the names, witnessed and notarized. Afterward, Cole called for a sheet of

paper and wrote a note. It was addressed to Craig Armin. It said:

> In case you took a sudden dislike to Juck, I am sending you this. It is a copy of the original affidavit, which is in the bank. As long as Juck stays healthy, it will stay there. If anything happens to him, I'll show it to the right people.
>
> COLE ARMIN.

He put the affidavit in an envelope and paid a boy a dollar to deliver it to Craig Armin's suite. After that, breathing easier, he sent Juck off to get the cached money and headed upstreet for the Western Freight Co. offices—his office, he suddenly realized.

THE compound was deserted of all wagons except one. Cole climbed the steps and knocked on the door of the Wallaces' living quarters. Celia opened the door.

An involuntary cry of delight and relief escaped her, and then she smiled and Cole went in. Ted Wallace, stripped to the waist, was shaving, a small mirror propped up in the window.

"Hi, boy," Ted said and looked at Celia with a grin. "Satisfied?" he asked.

"Of course," Celia said. Color crept into her face, and she looked prettier than ever.

Cole looked puzzled, and Ted explained. "Sis has been in a stew half the night and all morning about you, Cole. She was afraid something had happened to you."

"Well, he didn't come back here," Celia protested. She was still blushing and Ted grinned at her, then said to Cole: "I told her any man who could jump out a window with ten thousand dollars, dodge the sheriff and talk Craig Armin into goin' my bail—well, nothin' could happen to him."

"He bailed you out, then?" Cole asked.

Ted nodded and his smile faded a little. "Bailed out, for five thousand. My trial's next month. In that time," he said slowly, "I've got to find proof that I didn't blow his safe. There's one way to do that. Just run him out of the country. And now," he asked finally, "how did you swing it?"

Cole sat down and told them what argument he had used to persuade Craig Armin to go Ted's bail, and what he had done that morning to keep Juck alive. By the time he was finished, Juck came in with the money, and then Celia called that breakfast was ready for them.

Ted put on a black suit and came out just as they were finishing. "Juck," he said, "you know a good ore wagon when you see one. And Cole, you know good mules. This morning, you and Juck buy four big wagons, tandem, and eighty mules. The Acme Freight outfit will be glad to get rid of 'em. Me, I'm goin' over to the Cosmopolitan House to see Huggins." To Cole, he explained: "He's manager of the Glory Hole mine. He can't get enough ore out, because the mine is too high for the big wagons. Monarch won't use them on that road. They're scared. This afternoon, Juck, you're goin' to haul eighteen tons of ore in one load down from the Glory Hole to Union Milling. If you get down without a broken neck, smashed wagons and twenty dead mules, we've got the contract."

"I'll do it," Juck said, and grinned through his thick lips. "When I git down with that, I'll take the same hitch down from the China Boy."

"What is this China Boy?" Cole asked.

Ted shook his head, and laughed ruefully. "It's a mine at the end of

the world, higher than the sky. Even the birds are scared to perch on the road to it. If we get the Glory Hole contract, we're goin' after that."

"One thing at a time," Juck said.

Ted laughed and turned to Celia. "Sis, I've even got a job for you. Go over to Simmons and buy out his lumber yard and his ground, this mornin'. Western's gettin' a new wagon yard, too. I'll be ready to sign the papers this noon." He looked at Cole. "That all right with you? Here goes our ten thousand."

Cole grinned. "It's all right with me," he agreed. "I don't savvy it much, but I'm for it." As a partner in a freighting business, Cole realized, he had a lot to learn about it.

THERE were several roads out of Piute—rough, sandy and rocky—but only one of them went very far. That led over the Sierras and into California, while the rest led to the mines high up on the shoulders of the Sierra Negras. Most of the mines in the Piute field had been forced by the location of the gold and silver-bearing ore strata to pitch on the craggy heights a thousand feet above the flats.

Cole and Ted, riding on front of the high-sided ore wagons in tandem that Juck was driving, looked at them now. To their left were the mountains, scarcely timbered on this eastern slope, sharp and black and frowning. They rose in almost sheer, rearing ramparts beyond the town, challenging the ingenuity of the mine founders to get their mine buildings to even stay put on that steep slope. Cole pointed them out, one by one, tiny clusters of corrugated-roofed buildings with a long heap of tailings smeared below them.

To Cole's right, out on the flats, were the reduction mills. In the still, hot desert out here, the boom of their stamps kept the air pulsing. Seven of them lay sprawled in huge red buildings across the face of the rolling rocky waste below the town. Here was the problem, laid out for any man to see. It was to get the most ore in the least number of trips for the least amount of money down that two-thousand-foot drop to the reduction mills. A railroad, still new to the West, could not do it, so mules had to. The man who had the wagons and the courage to keep that ore moving had his hand on the throat of the Piute field.

When the road turned toward the mountains, Juck shaded his eyes and peered up. The narrow road, crawling in switchbacks up the face of the slope, was shared by three mines, the Elfin, the Swampscott Girl and the Glory Hole, one above the other, the Glory Hole highest of all. Since the road was a one-way affair, a system of signals had been devised. When a loaded wagon pulled into the narrow opening beside the Elfin building, a huge red flag, visible to the freighters on the flats, was hung out. It meant that a wagon was on its way down, and until it was on the flats no up-traffic was allowed. When Juck looked, there was no red flag.

At the foot of the lifting road, Ted said to Cole: "You go on up with Juck. I'm headin' over for the Union Milling to see about some more mules. I'll catch up with you before you get to the Glory Hole." He pulled his horse aside, and then added: "Go ahead of Juck, and you'll be out of the dust."

Cole waved and rode on. He spurred his horse, pulled past Juck, who was cursing out his half-broken mules for the long haul, and then he was on the road. It lifted in a sharp grade, clinging to the face of the

Continued on page 108

GOING BALD?
Help Stimulate HAIR GROWTH!

STOP BALDNESS AT THE DANGER AREAS— KEEP YOUR SCALP CLEAN AND REMOVE FOREIGN SUBSTANCES THAT CLOG THE PORES AND CHOKE THE ROOTS . . . USE VITEX'S TRIPLE ACTION TREATMENT & BE HELPED TO A GOOD HEAD OF HAIR . . . HUNDREDS USE VITEX'S METHOD

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Good news travels fast! Hundreds of men, and women, too, who have enjoyed the benefits of satisfactory hair and scalp treatments at VITEX'S FIFTH AVENUE SALON have voluntarily praised and recommended the products used here at the Institute. Now, to meet the public demand, no matter where you live, you can use VITEX'S products in your own home and enjoy their benefits just the same as if you were being personally treated by one of VITEX'S hair and scalp experts. VITEX'S TRIPLE ACTION CONDITIONER AND CORRECTIVE POMADE have been packaged for home use and will be shipped anywhere with easy-to-follow, result-getting directions.

HOW ARE THINGS UP THERE . . . IS THERE ANY CHANCE FOR ME TO HAVE HAIR ON MY HEAD AGAIN?

Re-Awaken Live But Dormant HAIR ROOTS

Hair hunters have grown in leaps and bounds! The reason is simple. There are several local causes of baldness, any one of which might be attacking your hair-growing area. In order to bring them back alive . . . providing it isn't too late, it is necessary to get at the cause of your trouble . . . remove the trouble and then nature can work without interference. VITEX'S TRIPLE ACTION CONDITIONER will help to stop itch, excessive dandruff and help promote normal hair growth. VITEX'S CONDITIONER causes a quick dissolving action on crusted dandruff and accumulated matter that clogs the pores, creating a purification and cleansing effect that leaves the scalp nature clean so that hair has a chance to grow. Helps reawaken dormant but live hair roots by inducing a stimulation in growing areas. VITEX'S CONDITIONER for the Hair and Scalp is the result of over 30 years' experience, study and application. It is a Concentrate, consisting of carefully selected and entirely harmless ingredients, exactingly prepared and compounded to create and maintain a healthy scalp condition that will be conducive to the natural continued growth of hair.

VITEX'S Treatment Helps Promote Three Important Hair Benefits

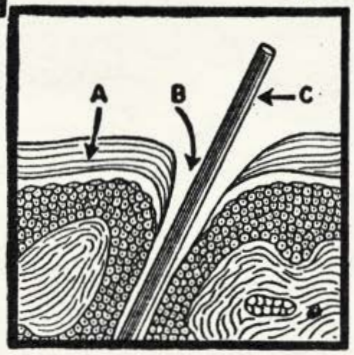
1. Stimulates Growth Areas: After applying VITEX'S CONDITIONER you will note a pleasant tingling or "drawing" sensation. Evidence of how effectively your scalp is being stimulated in the areas where blood must nourish the hair roots.

2. Helps dispel excessive dandruff, stops itching. Effective in dissolving accumulated waste matter that strangles the hair and causes irritation by clogging up the follicle "funnels."

3. Purifies as it cleanses. After you have allowed VITEX'S CONDITIONER to "work", it saponifies easily with water and rinses completely clear, leaving the scalp healthfully clean and the hair naturally brilliant.

HEALTHY ROOTS MEAN HEALTHY HAIR GROWTH

The Bible tells us that "Cleanliness is next to Godliness." Cleanliness is so important to the hair roots because when there is no crusty, scaly coating to choke the life from your hair roots, circulation continues, and hair has a chance to grow. VITEX'S CONDITIONER helps clear away foreign substances that interfere with hair growth.



8 Treatments Only $1

Send today and receive an eight-treatment bottle of VITEX'S TRIPLE ACTION CONDITIONER for only $1.00. Sent anywhere upon receipt of price or C.O.D. with a money back guarantee if not satisfied. $5.00 WORTH FOR $3.00. Save money. Order this special $3. combination. A 16 oz. size of VITEX'S TRIPLE ACTION CONDITIONER (4 times the quantity) is regularly $3.00. Order this and we include a 1 oz. $1. size of VITEX'S CORRECTIVE POMADE free. You save $2 and you really should have the POMADE because it is used daily and helps speed up results. RUSH COUPON TODAY!

Money Back Guarantee

You do not risk a cent using VITEX'S TRIPLE ACTION HAIR CONDITIONER. You must be satisfied or your money will be refunded in full after ten days trial.

VITEX HAIR INSTITUTE, Dept. 611—521 5th Ave., N. Y.

☐ I accept your special offer. Enclosed find $1.00. Send me the 8 treatment size of VITEX'S HAIR AND SCALP TRIPLE ACTION CONDITIONER postpaid in plain wrapper. If not satisfied with results, I will return unused portion within ten days for full refund.

☐ I enclose $3.00. Send large Economy Size of VITEX'S CONDITIONER postpaid, and include free a 1 oz. jar of daily CORRECTIVE POMADE.

☐ Ship order checked above C.O.D. I will pay postage.

Name.....

Address.....

NOTE—Canadian and foreign orders must be accompanied by cash.

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black rock. Soon it made a switchback, and to Cole's inexperienced eye it seemed an impossible space for two big wagons to negotiate.

The road lifted steadily, making countless switchbacks. And now it was high, with the sheer drop to the canyon below an ever present threat. The road had been blasted out of living rock at an enormous cost of time and powder, but when Cole came to one switchback, he reflected that more of both time and powder should have been expended on it. It was narrow and sudden, and one slip would send a team hurtling down six hundred feet to annihilation on the rocks below. Cole rode past and then turned in his saddle to watch Juck.

Juck's lead team swung wide, almost to the cliff's edge, and then the others came on, nimbly skipping the taut chain as it crowded into the wall. And then the swing team came in sight, pulling straight for the edge, and finally the wheel team, with Juck mounted on the off-mule. He held his mule close to the edge, watching the stub of the tongue, and then, suddenly, the wagon came in sight. Its hub missed the rocks by two feet, and Cole grinned at his own concern. Juck had done it without a pause.

Cole swiveled his head back to look up the trail, and there, forty feet ahead of him, halted on the trail, was a new buckboard pulled by a team of horses.

Cole reined up, the rumble of the empty wagons swelling behind him, and he saw who was in the buckboard. It was Keen Billings and another man. Billings had his gun drawn and pointed at Cole.

THE rumble of the ore wagons stopped and Cole could hear the heavy breathing of the lead mules behind him and then Juck clamped the brakes on.

Keen Billings was grinning, his big muscular jowls knotted in a smile. "Hello, there, nephew," he drawled. "Funny place to meet, ain't it?"

Juck's voice lifted in the following silence. "Keen, back that damn team up and clear out of here! Where was your flag?"

Keen handed his gun to the other man and dismounted on the wall side of the road; the space between the buckboard and the drop side of the road was too narrow for comfort. He walked past his team and stopped in front of Cole.

"So you're the hard-case freighters who aim to freight the Glory Hole stuff with a ten-team hitch, eh?"

Cole folded his arms and leaned on the saddlehorn. "That's right."

"You need practice, maybe," Keen said mockingly.

"That's why we're here."

"All right. Practice backin' that hitch down to the flats. You listenin', Juck?"

Juck was. "Damn you, Keen," he yelled, "you can't do that! There's a clause in every contract Craig Armin has got that says if he don't obey flag signals the contract is void!"

"That's right," Keen admitted smoothly. "Only read it again. It don't mention any buckboards, does it? Maybe you didn't notice. I'm drivin' a buckboard, not an ore wagon."

"We got right of way over that!"

"Take it if you can," Billings retorted. He laughed deep in his throat. "This ought to be good. Go on back to the flats, Juck. I'd like to see it done."

The situation was clear enough to Cole. Juck couldn't come up to back any play Cole might make. If Juck dismounted and tried to walk on the offside of his spans, one shot from the gunnie in the buckboard would frighten the mules and Juck would go over. If he tried to walk between them or on the cliff side, that same shot would get him kicked to death by the mules. Cole had to do something and do it quickly, and he could think of nothing except to stall.

"Look, Billings," Cole said swiftly. "A couple of hundred dollars ought to make you change your mind."

"A thousand wouldn't," Keen Billings told him, laughing. "Go ahead and sweat blood for awhile. I'd like to see it."

Cole drew out a sack of tobacco from his shirt pocket and rolled a smoke, watching Keen. He cursed himself for having come along without a gun. And he wondered what would happen if he should sink spurs in his horse. Nothing, probably, except that the horse would rear up and Keen would back off. But what if there were some way to get the horse to lunge into Keen, surprising him?

Cole lighted, and took a deep drag from his cigarette. He thought he had it.

Keen was grinning at him, and Juck was silent, too concerned to curse.

"I might raise the ante above a thousand," Cole drawled. He extended his sack of tobacco lazily. "Smoke? It's a peace-pipe smoke, Billings."

"Not from you, it ain't," Billings said curtly. "No, thanks."

Cole still held the sack of tobacco out. "The Indians scalp a man for turnin' down the peace pipe," he said. "Don't go against your luck." Gently, he pulled his horse around so it was quartering to Billings.

Billings was laughing. "I ain't an Indian, nephew. I don't smoke with you, not ever."

"O. K.," Cole said, and started to

pocket his tobacco. At the same time, fighting a distaste for the job, he crushed his burning cigarette into the shoulder of his horse. The horse's instinctive reaction, as Cole had expected it would be, was to shy away from the pain. And that meant that he lunged forward and sideways, into Keen Billings.

THREE things happened then. Cole rolled out of his saddle toward Billings, Billings yelled and lunged back, and the gunnie on the buckboard let go with a shot.

The slug missed Cole and hit his horse squarely in the head. Cole, his lunge falling short, knew he would miss Billings, but the pitch of the falling horse added to his momentum as he rocketed out of the saddle; his shoulders slammed into Billings' knees. Billings went over backward, kicking. Over the racket, Cole could hear Juck cursing the frightened mules.

And then both he and Billings were down, almost under the feet of the buckboard's team. Cole knew that he was screened from the man with the gun for several seconds, and he ducked his head against the awkward drubbing Billings, flat on his back, was trying to deal out.

Savagely, then, Cole pulled himself toward Billings' head and brought his elbow crushingly into Billings' face. Billings grunted and put his hands up to his bleeding mouth. Raising his fist like a hammer, Cole pounded it down on Billings' thick nose. For seconds, then, the fight was gone out of him. Cole rolled to his knees, yanked Billings up by the slack of his shirt to his knees, bending his arm around behind him, and then hauled him to his feet, facing the gunnie.

"Go ahead and shoot!" Cole, using Billings as a shield, taunted.

The man was standing on the bed of the buckboard, reins of the skittish horses in one hand, the gun in the other. And he couldn't shoot.

"Throw that gun away!" Cole said swiftly.

"Damned if I will!" the gunnie yelled. "Let him go!"

Cole shoved Billings straight at the head of the nearest horse. The smell of blood, the cursing, and the violence frightened the horse. He reared back, and the buckboard slewed around, its hind wheel on the edge of the drop.

"Throw that gun behind me!" Cole yelled.

The gunnie took one terrified look at the rear wheel of the buckboard. "Quit it!" he yelled. "I'm goin' over!" In his fright he had forgotten the gun.

"Throw it over here or I'll shove you off!" Cole yelled.

The gunnie was licked. He tossed the gun over the horses, and Cole shoved Billings to his knees and lunged for it. He came up with it in his palm. The gunnie had driven the horses up out of danger. And Billings, his nose streaming blood and his eyes watering, came sullenly to his feet facing Cole. Juck let out a whoop of joy. He was halfway down the chain, all thought of the danger of being kicked gone at the sight of Cole's predicament. Now he vaulted to the back of the closest mule and yelled: "Steady, Cole. I'm comin'."

"Want to see how a worm turns, Billings?" Cole drawled. Billings looked up just in time to see the gunnie vanish over the tail-gate of the buckboard and run up the road. Juck pounded up behind Cole.

"Unhitch that team, Juck," Cole ordered.

Juck made a fast job of it. "Billings, give him a hand," Cole directed.

"Take that front wheel. When I count three, you heave."

Juck chuckled, sensing what was going to happen. He took the rear wheel, Billings the front. At the count of three they heaved and the buckboard made a slow turn on its off-wheels, hung their a second on its side, then toppled over the cliff. None of them spoke, waiting the seconds until they heard the crash of the buckboard below.

"Now, Juck," Cole said. "We'll get my dead horse off the same way."

Billings and Juck rolled Cole's dead horse off the edge, first taking off the saddle and bridle.

"And now, you loud-mouthed joker," Cole said slowly to Billings, "you're goin' to see something. Saddle one of those horses for me. Drive the other up the road ahead of you. You're goin' to walk. You're goin' to walk clear up to the Glory Hole. We'll load this wagon and you're goin' to ride on top of the load down this road. There's a chance Juck can't make it and he'll lose the load. And if he does, you'll make almost as big a splash as the mules. Now git, mister!"

CHAPTER VI

DOUBLE-CROSSERS' DEAL

KEEN BILLINGS presented himself at Suite 2-B of the Cosmopolitan House at nine o'clock that night, weary to exhaustion, his feet blistered, his clothes covered with dust and still not wholly over his fright. He stumbled into the study. When Armin came in, Billings was sitting in a chair, boots off his bleeding feet, his head hanging.

Armin closed the door behind him and surveyed Billings with distaste. "Now what?"

Billings told him what had happened. Cole Armin, Juck and Ted Wallace, not content with beating him up and destroying the buck-

board, had walked him to the Glory Hole, then made him ride down atop eighteen tons of ore to the Union Milling, from which place they had made him walk back to town.

"And what do you want of me?" Craig Armin asked dryly, when Billings was finished.

Billings gaped. He was confounded for the moment. "Why . . . I thought you'd want to know."

"What a fool I've got for a super!" Armin said scathingly. He walked over to his desk and handed Billings the Piute *Enterprise*. "Read that!" he said savagely. "And when you're done with that, read this!" He took another paper from his desk top and slapped it on the newspaper that Billings had taken.

First Billings read the newspaper story. It asked, with a successful attempt at sly humor, why Craig Armin had bailed out his competitor from jail, after said competitor had robbed his safe. The other paper was Cole's affidavit, along with the note.

Billings looked up, not knowing what to say.

"And you expect me to cry over your little prank kicking back?" Craig Armin asked in cold fury. "Why, damn you, Billings, I had this business built up to where I didn't have to worry! I could forget it! But now you've botched up the whole thing. Why did Juck ever leave that yard alive? What in the name of hell do you think I pay you for?"

"I . . . I couldn't see how it'd turn out," Billings stammered.

"Maybe this will help you see!" Armin raged. "I'm not firing you, Keen. I'm cuttin' your wages in half! Furthermore, I'm going to sign a contract with the China Boy for a price that Western can't match! And you . . . you've got to come through with teamsters and guts enough to get that ore down in big wagons!" His face was livid with rage. "I want

this Western outfit run out of Piute! We'll beat their prices if we have to lose money on it! And it's up to you to get the stuff out! You hear? It's up to you! *You!* No more choosing and picking the low mines! We're goin' up for ore from the high mines! *You'll* do it, you hear? *You!*"

He ceased talking, breathing heavily. Then he said in a calm voice: "Get out, you fool!" He walked out of the room, closing the door carefully behind him.

BACK in his room at one of the more modest of Piute's hotels, Keen Billings threw himself on his bed. He had a bottle of whiskey and a water tumbler in his shaking hands, and he poured himself a half tumbler of liquor and drank it down. He sat there, waiting for the glow to start in his belly, listening to the night sounds of the town outside his window. A cold fury seemed to have frozen his brain.

Presently, he rose, stripped his shirt off, and poured out a basin of water, first taking another drink. He washed, the whole scene in Armin's suite simmering in his mind. So he was a fool, was he? He'd been running Craig Armin's dirty errands for three years now, fronting for his shady work, bluffing deputies, buying off the law, using his bully boys and blackmailing when they wouldn't work. And for all this, he was getting his pay cut in half and being driven to suicidal work. For he knew, well as he knew his name, that not a teamster in Monarch's pay would take a ten-team hitch down from the China Boy unless he, himself did it first. And he couldn't do it. He couldn't take that hitch down from the Glory Hole, like Juck had done today, much less from the China Boy. The thought of it put goose pimples on the skin of his rope-muscled shoulders. He was through at the Monarch when he refused that job. And he would refuse. He had to.

He sat down on the bed again, feeling a little better physically. But anger was having its way with him. He hated that Western crew, every man jack of them, but it was an impersonal hatred. His hatred for Craig Armin was hot and wicked and overpowering.

After awhile, he got up, put on a clean shirt and combed his short black hair. His eyes, when he looked at them in the mirror, were crafty, and he smiled at that. Damned right they were crafty. He had an idea.

He put on a coat, took a last drink and put the bottle under his pillow. Then, wanting to look his best where he was going, he got out his best Stetson.

At the bar of the Cosmopolitan House, Billings took his drink over to an empty table and sat down. His nose felt as big as an apple where Cole Armin had smashed it, but it couldn't be helped. He kept his eyes on the door, watching the movement of the customers. Presently, as he had hoped, Sheriff Ed Linton walked into the room, looking around him for company. He saw Billings, nodded, and pretended not to see Keen's beckoning finger.

Billings had to go to the bar to talk to him. "Bring your drink over, Ed," he said. "You and me have got medicine to make."

Cornered thus, Sheriff Linton couldn't demur, although Keen Billings was not a good man to be seen with. Too rough.

Seated at the table, Billings leaned back. "I think you and me ought to pool a little information, Ed."

"I doubt it," Sheriff Linton said coldly. He didn't want to be too familiar with Billings, and his eyes said so, if his words didn't.

Billings understood him, but he was not one to be snubbed. "You know, I can remember when you were an out-at-the-pants shyster over in Marysville," he drawled. "The boys used to throw you out of the saloon, just for fun."

"Is that what you called me over for?" Sheriff Linton asked coldly.

"Hunh-unh. I called you over to talk about money. Big money."

"How much?" Sheriff Linton asked idly.

"Say, a couple hundred thousand."

Sheriff Linton's eyes lighted with interest, but it was cautious interest.

"You never saw that much," he scoffed.

"How would you like the Monarch Freighting Co. and all of its contracts?" Billings demanded bluntly.

Linton stared at him for a long moment, many things streaking through his mind. "Big talk," he said.

"O. K.," Billings said indifferently. "Go 'way."

LINTON didn't stir, but he kept looking at Billings. "Go on. I'm listening."

"So you can tell Craig Armin, maybe?" Billings queried shrewdly.

"I know when to keep my mouth shut. I said go ahead."

"Armin ain't so tough," Billings said quietly. "He can be cracked wide open. He *is* goin' to be cracked wide open," he corrected. "Question is, after he's cracked, who's going to take his place?"

"The Western?"

"If we don't," Keen Billings said softly.

Linton looked around him and hitched his chair closer. "You interest me. Go ahead."

Billings hunched over the table and began to talk in a low voice. "Craig Armin has got his fight up, Ed. He's out to lick Western any way he can. Tonight he told me he's goin' to make another try for that China Boy contract. That shows how much he means business."

"Can you swing it?"

Billings grinned. "Don't get ahead of me. I say Craig Armin aims to fight. If he can't beat Western aboveboard, he'll wreck 'em. That give you any ideas?"

"Not many."

"It does me. What if I lose this China Boy contract for him? What if we can't swing it? What if I lose other contracts for him? Can't get the ore out, and he has to forfeit. What if I lose mules for him, and wagons and men, so that these mines won't give Monarch any business? And all the time it will look like an accident, like Western was gettin' rough. What will he do?"

"What will he?"

"I tell you, he'll fight Western! And when he's crowded far enough, he'll give me orders to wipe out Wallace and Armin. That's the way he plays, Ed—beat 'em or kill 'em."

"I see," Linton said slowly. "Then what?"

"When Wallace and Armin are dead," Billings said slowly, "we make him our proposition. He hired Wallace and Cole Armin killed. I've got the proof, because my men and me will do it. He robbed Celia Wallace of ten thousand. I've got the proof. He blew his own safe to land Ted Wallace in jail. I've got the proof, because I blew the safe."

Linton's eyes widened, but he said nothing.

"We—you and me—put that up to him," Billings said grimly, "and then give him his choice. He signs Monarch over to us and clears out

of Piute, or we arrest him, jail him, and hang him."

Billings leaned back and spread his hands. "What's simpler? I got the evidence, you got the authority. I tell you, Monarch is ours for the takin'. Yours and mine!"

Sheriff Ed Linton's face was a strange thing to see just then. As a politician he had learned to school his emotions, but now he could not keep naked greed out of his eyes. There was first caution, then interest, then dismay, then calculation, then approval, tinged with doubt.

"All right as far as it goes, Keen," he said slowly. "But if you pull down Monarch until Craig'll fight, you'll build up Western at the same time. And when we get Monarch—if I go in with you, I mean—we'll have a dead horse, not worth a damn."

"Wrong!" Billings said flatly. "Didn't I say Craig would tell me to get rough with Western? Don't worry. I'll wreck 'em. I'll whittle 'em down to our size before Craig is crowded into makin' his play. And then, without Cole Armin or Ted Wallace to run it, we can buy 'em out for drink money."

"It's nice if you can do it," Linton conceded slowly. "But those two are tough hombres."

"I'll have someone in their office," Billings said quickly. "They can't make a move but what we know it."

"That," Linton said dryly, "is the first nonsense you've talked, Keen."

BILLINGS leaned forward eagerly. "Some time ago Monarch had a teamster name of Pete Burns. Young feller, with a good education. He was savin' money to go to medical school back East. The boys had a grudge agin' his uppity ways, so they loosened a king bolt on his wagon. He came down from the Lord Peter with a load and the wagon broke loose. He broke both legs and got gangrene and died. To cover it up, I told his sister it was some of Ted Wallace's work. She hates Wallace more than anything in this world." He tapped his finger on the table for emphasis. "That gal is beautiful. She's smart. She also knows how to keep books."

"I don't follow you," Linton said slowly.

"Haven't you heard that Ted Wallace bought out old Simmons' lumber yard next to his corral behind the Western office this morning?"

"No. Besides, what's that got to do with it?"

Billings laughed shortly. "He'll need a bookkeeper. Letty Burns will be that bookkeeper. And best of all, Craig Armin will pay her to spy for us, because he figures it will help him."

"A woman?"

"You haven't seen her, or heard her talk. She'll get the job." Billings leaned back in his seat now, surveying the sheriff. "There's the proposition, Ed—colder than turkey. Between us, we can take care of Craig Armin. Our only worry is that Western will have all the contracts when we get Monarch. I say they won't. I say, with this gal to tip us off to their moves, we can keep them broker than Monarch. Find a hole in that, if you can. You can't," he added quietly. "Monarch is ours for the takin'."

Sheriff Linton built a steeple with his fingers, and stared at it in heavy concentration. Billings watched his face, and saw the greed mount up in his eyes. He had chosen his man with care, for Ed Linton was hungry for money—as hungry as Keen was for revenge. A half smile played on Sheriff Linton's face for a long min-

ute, and then his eyes grew skeptical.

"It's a nice scheme, Keen, except for one thing."

"What's wrong with it?"

"You say Craig Armin, before he will take a licking, will kill Cole Armin and Ted Wallace."

"He will."

"How do you know he will? There's a lot of difference between fighting and killing, Keen, a lot of difference. Armin doesn't strike me as a man who'll order murder."

Keen Billings' smile was slow, wicked. "Ed, just how do you think old man Joyce—the fellow who owned Acme freight—died?"

"Why, his horses spooked on a high mountain road and he fell off the cliff."

Billings shook his head. "I shot him," he said simply. "Armin paid me to."

Linton's eyes glinted, and he leaned back slowly in his chair. He sized up Keen Billings for a long moment, weighing the man, and then he snapped his fingers. "Boy!" he called.

When the bar boy came over, Linton said: "I want a look at your wine list." As the boy went to get it, Linton said to Billings: "That's all I wanted to know, Keen. It's a deal. And we'll drink to success in champagne. Because I think we've got something here."

They shook hands, firmly and hard.

CHAPTER VII

STRANGE HOLDUP

AT the end of his first day's work behind a ten-span hitch, Cole had a deep respect for Juck's ability. He swung his team up toward the hoppers of the Union Milling and found two wagons ahead of him.

Pulling up his teams in the dusk, he turned and waved Ted Wallace, who was behind him, to a halt, then dismounted stiffly. He was tired, his nerves edgy, for he was not used to this work. He had been freighting from the Lord Peter all day, but even its wide road and its gentle grade had been hard enough for him. He had a lot to learn, he thought humbly, before those tons of ore behind him ceased to be a constant threat. He was slapping the dust from his Stetson when Ted Wallace walked up.

"Aren't those Monarch wagons at the hoppers?" Ted asked.

Cole glanced over in the dusk, and said he didn't know.

"Since when did they start freightin' in spring wagons?" Ted asked curiously, and then added: "Let's have a look."

The small wagons were half empty now. Their ore was being shoveled into the big hoppers which were located on the highest point of the slope above the descending buildings of Union Milling. Fed down by gravity, it would soon be in the mill's stamps, which were making the evening dusk throb even now with the sound of their engine.

The tally man from the mill and some idle shovel men stood around the wagons, grinning. The Monarch teamster was standing by the front wheel of his wagon, scuffing the dust with his feet.

As Cole and Ted approached, Cole saw his relief man, Bill Gurney, squatting on the road to the side of the teamster. Bill was talking, and Cole put a hand on Ted's arm as they mingled with the shovel men and paused to listen.

Bill Gurney was a sour little mon-

key, rough-tongued, hard-bitten and scrappy. He was saying to the teamster: "Tell me again, Loosh. It give me an earache the first time."

"Go easy, rooster," the Monarch teamster warned. "You're liable to lose some teeth."

"You won't loosen 'em," Gurney said promptly. "You ain't got a man in your outfit that could hit the ground with his hat. Not after today, you ain't. You're dead, the hull damn lot of you."

The Monarch teamster flared up. "O. K., runt. You'll have a crack at it pretty soon, I reckon. See if you can do better."

"We'll do better," Gurney said. "We got the nerve. We're gettin' paid wages. We ain't bein' drove. We're gettin' a bonus. We got good mules and harness. We'll do it!"

"Maybe," the tally man from the mill said.

The Monarch teamster looked over at him and nodded agreement. "Maybe is the word. Me, I don't think it can be done."

"Not by them Monarch women, it can't," Gurney said dryly. "You're damn right."

Loosh lunged for him, then. Gurney stepped back, came to his feet, holding a heavy wagon spoke in his hand. Loosh stopped short at sight of it.

"See that," Gurney said, waving the spoke. "I could wrap that around your skull, Loosh, if I wanted to. Now look." He threw the wagon spoke away, and when he spoke his voice was sharp with scorn. "I don't need nothin' to whup you, Loosh. You and your hull damn lot. Come on."

"Easy, Bill," Cole interposed quietly. "What's the ruckus?" He stepped into the circle of men. The shovel men in the wagon had ceased work now, and were watching.

BILL swiveled his head, saw Cole and grinned. "Howdy, Cole." He nodded his head toward the enraged teamster. "Ain't you heard?"

"What?"

"Monarch got a wagon hung up on the China Boy road this mornin'. Not a man in the lot of 'em, includin' Keen Billings, had the guts to drive her down. So they unhitched, and shifted the load to these damn buggies, and it's took 'em seven hours to get the load down." He looked over at Loosh and grinned. "That's right, ain't it, Loosh?"

"You'll get a crack at it!" Loosh snarled. "Let's see you do it!" He turned and walked away. Bill laughed, and went over to Cole's wagon, and Cole walked over to Ted.

"You heard him?"

"Sure," Ted said slowly.

"You thinkin' the same thing I am?"

Ted nodded. They were both thinking, not of the Monarch's failure, but of their chances. Ever since the Piute field was established, the China Boy, a fairly rich mine, had been forced to shut down time and again because its ore could not be moved fast enough to keep men in work. Its isolation, its height, the treacherous shale that the road to it passed through, had all combined to scare out the freighters. Small wagons could move it, but it took too many wagons, horses and men, and the cost of them made the freighting prohibitive. There was a standing offer by the super of the China Boy that any outfit that could move four hundred tons of ore in a day would get a contract that was better than any offered in the Piute field. And the only way to move those four hundred tons of ore was in big wagons, tandem.

Ted Wallace, like Cole, was mentally calculating their chances. With their four new wagons, they had ten

now, all told. By working from dawn to dusk, pulling all wagons off the other jobs, including the new Glory Hole job they'd just landed, they could, by making two trips with twenty tons to a wagon, deliver the four hundred tons. The Monarch had tried and failed. Up till now, Western had never had the wagons. It had them now, and this was the time to make the bid. Craig Armin, thinking to cut Wallace out by getting the contract first, had failed to move the required ore.

"I think we've got a little business to talk over with the China Boy super tonight, Cole," Ted said finally. "Let's ride."

It had been a punishing day, for they were crowding their luck. Riding back in the dusk, Cole could see the lights of Piute winking ahead of him. The setting sun, long since screened out by the hulking mass of the Sierra Negras, put the town in darkness early. Piute lay there under the shoulder of the mountain, challenging them to lick it.

Already, Cole reflected, the money Celia had brought was spent. It had been poured into wagons, into more and better mules, into harness, and into a new wagon yard, which was started that morning. They were taking chances, he and his new partner. They were betting on doing a hard job better than Craig Armin, and trusting to luck and skill to pull them through to their reward.

Ted looked over at Cole, who was silently contemplating the town. "You feel a little funny in the stomach?" Ted asked.

Cole looked at him and shook his head slowly. "I don't reckon. Why?"

"That China Boy business," Ted said wryly. "A man's a fool to try it. But if we swing it, we'll have a contract that will let us buy ten more wagons and two hundred more mules. And with that, Cole, we're on top. We'll have this field tied up." He shook his head and murmured: "But what a hell of a chance!"

"You've got the drivers, haven't you?" Cole asked.

"Countin' myself, yes."

"Then we'll swing it," Cole said confidently. "The only thing I don't like is that you're takin' the chances, Ted. I'm not. I didn't put up any money. And I can't drive a wagon good enough to help out."

Ted laughed then, his uncertainty gone. "Did you ever stop to consider, partner, that if you hadn't been thinkin' a little faster than Keen Billings yesterday, we'd only have nine wagons today? And with nine wagons we couldn't even try for the China Boy contract."

It was slight compensation to Cole, however. Yesterday he had been lucky. Maybe he wouldn't be again. And all the time there was that thought in the back of his mind, that it was Celia Wallace's gratitude and Ted Wallace's generosity that were responsible for his being in Western Freight. He wasn't pulling his share of the load, it seemed to him. And his willingness to learn the business and share the work was, in the end, not much more than just willingness. Any six-dollar-a-day teamster could do his work, and do it better than he could.

IT was dark when they rode into Piute. They avoided the main street, clinging to the off streets where mean little shacks housed the shifting population.

They turned into the alley that ran between the corral and office, and Cole found himself eager to see how the day's work on the new yard had progressed. There was a lantern in the old corral and wagon yard

when they rode in. Along one side, rank on rank, mules were chewing contentedly at their feed. The board fence on the other side of the lot adjoining the lumber yard had been torn away, and a long stretch of new board fence loomed up in the dark.

They unsaddled, turned their horses to water in the pole corral at the rear of the yard by the stables. Together then, they walked over into the new wagon yard, pausing by the edge of the stables to look into it. There wasn't much to see in the darkness. The lumber sheds had been torn down, and the boards were piled over the lot. The new board fence had been hastily thrown up around both old and new yards by the crew Ted had hired. The two-by-four frames of the office, next to the big archway opening onto the side street, were upright, but that was all. Still, there was a lot of room here, and both of them, without saying it, were seeing this yard as it would be some day—jammed with wagons, its long sides housing the mules, and the busy blacksmith shop and spacious corral.

Ted lifted his hand and pointed and was about to speak, when, stepping out of the darkness of the stable's side, a man confronted them. He had a gun held close to his midriff and it was pointed at them. His face was masked.

"Reach for it!" he ordered harshly.

Ted and Cole, taken by utter surprise, did just that. The man stepped over, shucked their guns to the ground and then stepped back.

"It's pay day tomorrow, boys. Got anything in your safe across the alley?"

"You're a day too soon, my friend," Cole said quickly.

Ted laughed, then. "Don't bother to bluff him, Cole." To the man he said. "We pay by check, mister. There's not a dollar in the place."

"Seems to me I read 'bout your stealin' some money from Monarch," the man growled.

"That was a lie," Ted said easily.

"Lie or not, you better get the money."

"I haven't got it, I tell you."

The man cocked his gun; the sound of it was very clear. "You're goin' to take me to it," he said coolly.

Cole had the sudden conviction that this man meant business. He was sure of it when the man said: "You thought long enough. You aim to?"

"Sure," Cole said swiftly. "Come along."

On the heel of his last word, there came a sharp *crack!* from the alley.

The robber stepped backward and glanced toward the alley gate. There, standing in it, was a woman, her gun leveled. Celia!

"Get back, Celia!" Cole shouted.

For answer, she shot again. This time the bandit swiveled his gun half around, apparently thought better of shooting at a woman, then turned and raced off into the darkness. Cole lunged for his own gun in the dirt, found it, and sent two shots after the man, knowing he missed him.

Then he hurried over toward the girl. Ted was there, and as Cole came up he turned to him. "This isn't Celia," he said.

THERE was a deep, warm laugh from the girl. "Would you like me to stand over by the lantern so you can see me?" she asked lightly.

She stepped into the yard, and the light from the lantern fell upon her. She was smaller than Celia, and her dark hair was parted in the middle

and brushed tightly back to a knot at the base of her neck. The full gingham dress she wore was faded, but neat and clean, and there was a look of certainty and self-respect on her well-molded, handsome face. Her dark eyes were wide-set, and full of humor as she looked from one to the other.

"I'm Letty Burns," she said.

Ted and Cole swept off their hats. "I . . . I never saw you before in my life, Miss Burns," Ted stammered, "but that cutthroat meant business."

Letty Burns held out a small gun in her palm for them to see. "In all the time I've been in Piute," she said, half laughing, "this is the first time I've ever used that." She put it back in her pocketbook.

"It did the trick," Ted said, smiling too. "Thing I can't understand, Miss Burns, is how you happened to be in the alley at just the right time."

"I was waiting to see you, Mr. Wallace," Letty Burns told him. "I wanted to talk to you."

"Then let's go inside," suggested Ted. "A stable yard is no place for a talk."

Celia came out of the kitchen as they entered, her face flushed and eyes filled with pleasure at seeing them. Ted introduced her to Letty Burns, explaining their meeting. Then Letty sat down and Ted pulled up a chair beside her. Cole didn't say anything.

"What was it you wanted to see me about, Miss Burns?" Ted asked.

Letty Burns looked at Cole, who was standing beside Celia. "It . . . it's private, if you don't mind. Business."

Cole started to go out into the kitchen after Celia, but Ted said, "Wait," and he came back. "We're partners, Miss Burns," Ted added to the girl. "If it's business, you can speak to both of us."

Letty Burns' gaze faltered and she bit her lip. Then she said swiftly: "It's about a job. Oh, I know I'm a woman, but won't you listen to me?" She was talking to Ted, now. "You're building a new wagon yard, I've heard. I also know that both of you are working as teamsters. But soon, when the new place is done, you'll need someone in the office, someone better than the old man down below who just sweeps out and refers business to you." She looked at Cole, whose face was expressionless.

"I've had training," she went on, directing her attention to Cole now. "I can keep books, write letters and take care of all the correspondence, pay bills, make out invoices. I've done it all before. When my father was alive, before his store burned down in San Francisco, I did all the work. I know I can do it."

Cole and Ted looked at each other. "Teamsters are a pretty rough crew, Miss Burns," Ted warned.

"I can take care of myself," Letty Burns said quickly. "Just give me the chance. I'll work for very little, and I'll prove I'm worth more than you pay me!"

"You need the work, Miss Burns?" Cole asked quietly.

SHE swiveled her head to look at him. The way he phrased the question, the way he said it, the faint suggestion of doubt in it, the inscrutable expression in his eyes made her study him closely. But he was only a waiting, a tall unsmiling man with a kind of sober courtesy.

"Very badly," she answered simply.

They didn't speak for a moment, and then Ted said to Cole: "It's something new. Lord knows, all the male brains in this man's town have quit and are working for miner's wages."

From the way he spoke, Cole knew he liked this girl. And then there

was that affair out in the stable yard, which was in the back of both their minds. It was a debt to be paid off to this girl.

"There's no reason why a woman can't do as good book work as a man, I reckon," Cole said noncommittally, leaving it squarely up to Ted.

Miss Burns smiled her thanks, and then looked at Ted.

"If you can do all you say, Miss Burns," Ted said finally, "there's no reason why you can't have the job. I'm keepin' a rough set of books in the office below. If you can get them straightened out in the few days before our new shack is up over in the yard, then the job's yours." He was about to look over at Cole to see if he approved, but Letty Burns came to her feet, her face lighted with joy. "Then you'll try me, anyway? I'll prove it, Mr. Wallace!"

And Ted, enchanted by her smile, never got around to glancing at Cole for his approval. For Celia came into the room then and announced that supper was ready for them all, Letty Burns included.

It was a pleasant meal there in the tiny kitchen and Celia treated Letty Burns as an old friend when she learned of Ted's decision. Letty was the first woman Celia had met in Piute, and they immediately began talking of clothes and places and recipes and household matters, as women will. Letty Burns had a quick wit, and more than once during the meal Ted threw back his head and laughed at things she said. She was a resourceful girl, for there were few ways for her kind of woman to make a living in Piute. Cole did more listening than talking, and when they were finished, excused himself.

He heard Letty say to Celia: "I'm going to work a little for my supper, anyway, Celia. We'll go through those dishes in no time, if we both pitch in."

When Cole walked out of the kitchen into the living room, Letty was overriding Celia's protests, while Ted laughed at them both.

In the living room, Cole stopped in front of the table. There was Letty Burns' pocketbook on the table, and Cole gazed at it gravely for a long moment.

Then, hearing the three of them still talking in the kitchen, he reached over, opened it, and drew out the gun. He plugged out the shells, glanced at them, and put them back.

As he was slipping the gun back in the pocketbook, Ted called: "Ready to go over to the Cosmopolitan, Cole?"

"Any time," Cole replied. He reached into his shirt pocket for his sack of tobacco, and the gesture was an absent-minded one. He was wondering about those shells in Letty Burns' gun.

For, as he had thought when he heard her shooting at the holdup man in the wagon yard, they were blank shells.

CHAPTER VIII

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

HARVEY GIRARD, like most of the well-paid executives of the Piute companies, lived in the Cosmopolitan House. There was, indeed, no place else to live in comfort, for the town was still raw and had not settled down in five years of its growing boom. But Harvey Girard was a workingman, all the same, not one of the big-money men from San Francisco. As a consequence, he could not afford one of the second-floor suites, and had his rooms on

the third floor. And the Cosmopolitan House, once it passed the second floor, forgot its elegance and spaciousness and was just another frontier hotel. The stairs from the lobby to the second floor were broad and carpeted; from the second to the third, they were narrow, steep, uncarpeted and dark.

Climbing them, Cole and Ted went single file, and when they reached the top of the stair well they found themselves in a dark and narrow corridor lighted by one single lamp.

They found Girard's room and knocked, and were told to enter. The room was a sitting room, littered with papers, topographical maps, books and ore samples. For the China Boy mine, of which Girard was superintendent, lay a long ride from Piute, and this was his town office. He was a big man, gruff and craggy looking, about fifty. When he saw them, he smiled faintly.

"I didn't think it would take you this long to get here," he said, as he shook hands with them.

Ted grinned. "We came up to weep over the Monarch's hard luck," he said.

"Don't laugh," Girard warned them good-humoredly. "I've got a hunch you'll be in the same spot."

"Well, that's what we came for," Ted said. "We're goin' to try it day after tomorrow. Ten wagons, twenty-ton load and two trips, sunrise to dark."

Girard shook his head. "I hope you make it. Because if you do then my directors will quit hounding me to get the ore moved and let me alone."

"Have you got the ore there ready to load?" Cole asked.

Girard nodded. "The same ore I had ready to load on the Monarch wagons this mornin'—minus eighteen tons," he said dryly.

"Then have a crew there early day after tomorrow," Ted told him, "because we'll swing it, Girard."

The three of them talked a moment longer, and then Cole and Ted left. At the door Girard shook hands and wished them good luck.

Going down the hall, Cole was doing some figuring. Day after tomorrow, they would be up at three, so that they would hit the China Boy road at daybreak. The last of the wagons working on night shift at the Lord Peter could be left at the mill and be checked by the mill's blacksmith soon afterward. The mules would already be fed and rested. Tomorrow, then, would be the day to pick the drivers and get them ready to go.

They were at the stair well, and Cole stepped aside to let Ted go first. Ted went ahead, and Cole followed.

And then something rammed into Cole's back that sent him kiting into Ted, slamming into him with every ounce of his hundred and seventy-five pounds.

The force of that blow never gave them a chance to catch their balance. Cole grabbed wildly for the rail and missed. The force of Cole's impact had bowed Ted's back and he fell sprawling on his face down the steep steps. His momentum pinwheeled his body in a slow arc and he crashed onto the floor below with an impact that shook the stairs. And Cole, helplessly following, fell on him a moment later.

It was Cole who moved first, dragging himself to his knees, head hung, gagging for breath. Ted was lying on his face, motionless. Someone attracted by the racket had come out of a nearby room, and he and Cole reached Ted at the same time.

Cole, still half stunned himself from the fall, turned Ted over. Ted was unconscious, he saw through a haze of pain. Then he noticed that when Ted was turned his right leg lay at an awkward angle.

The stranger put it into words. "Handle him easy," he said. "His leg's broken."

BY the time Ted had been carried over to the rooms above the Western office, both Sheriff Linton and the doctor had arrived. Cole shooed the curious out of the room, and then went back into the bedroom, where Celia was waiting while the doctor made his examination. Sheriff Linton, always tactful, was in the kitchen conversing with Letty Burns in low tones.

Inside, the doctor, a small, dry man with a professorial beard and a racking case of hiccups, straightened up and told Celia: "I think it's just concussion from the fall. Skull isn't fractured. And, of course, his leg's broken." He turned to Cole. "I'll need splints." And he described them, hiccuping as he talked.

Celia, tight-lipped and wide-eyed, looked at Cole from the other side of the cot, misery in her eyes. There was nothing Cole could say to her, and he turned and went down into the compound, crossed the alley into the wagon yard and went over to a pile of lumber.

When he stooped to pick up the boards, he felt a sudden and painful twinge in his shoulder. He had been afraid of that, and he cursed soundlessly. Since the fall his left arm had been numb, and something in the back of his mind told him not to try to use the arm for a while. He flexed his fingers, and found he could move them. It was all right, then, and he went back up the stairs, his face set against the quiet, constant pain in his shoulder.

Celia and Cole helped the doctor

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set the leg, and Ted only stirred fitfully under the pain. When it was finished, the doctor left, and Celia and Cole went out into the kitchen where Letty and Sheriff Linton were sitting.

Letty Burns got up and came over to Celia. "Is there anything I can do, Celia?" she asked solicitously.

Celia only smiled and said there wasn't, and Letty Burns thanked her and said good night. As she was going out, she said: "I don't suppose you'll want me to start work tomorrow, Mr. Armin?"

"You might as well start right away," Cole said. "Good night."

With Letty Burns gone, Cole and Sheriff Linton regarded each other like two wary dogs, each remembering the night of Cole's escape with the money.

"I'll only take a moment," Linton said briskly. "Armin, how did Wallace happen to fall?"

"I was at the top of the stairs, and Ted was ahead of me," Cole explained. "Somebody—I didn't see or hear him—kicked me in the back. I slammed into Ted and we both fell down the stairs. Ted broke my fall or I'd have a broken leg, too, I reckon."

"I see," Sheriff Linton said. He plucked his lower lip, considering. "Any motive for anybody doing it?"

Cole's sober eyes held Sheriff Linton's for a long moment. "Does anyone in this man's town need a motive for committin' any crime, sheriff?"

Linton flushed. "There is a lawless element here, I grant you. But we do our best."

"When it suits you," Cole said quietly.

He and Sheriff Linton regarded each other carefully. There was a cold, wicked anger in Cole's gray eyes, and in the sheriff's there was a searching, resentful curiosity.

"Very well," the sheriff said meagerly. "I don't do anything if you won't co-operate."

"I'll co-operate," Cole declared. "Lord knows, it's plain enough to every man in the street by now what happened. The Monarch wanted the China Boy contract. They couldn't cut the mustard. Now that we got the wagons and enough teamsters, we aimed to try it. Then, all of a sudden, Wallace is shoved down stairs and his leg is broken." His face was very grim. "By a strange coincidence, sheriff, Ted Wallace is one of our best teamsters. Now you go on from there."

"You're implying," Sheriff Linton said, "that Monarch was interested in keeping Ted Wallace from making the try?"

"Not implyin', I'm tellin' you."

Celia was watching Cole's face. The muscles along his jaw line were standing out, and there was a kind of smoldering anger in his eyes that was still under control.

"Nonsense," Sheriff Linton said, in his most poised manner. From him, this one word was the ultimate in ridicule.

"That's all, sheriff, except one thing," Cole drawled. "Western Freight has got a job to do, and we aim to do it. But when we get that job done, there's goin' to be trouble. I keep a tally book in the back of my mind. It's addin' up. Tell Monarch that."

"You'll answer for any trouble that starts, then," Linton said crisply.

"Starts, hell. I'll finish it!"

Linton lounged erect, bowed stiffly to Celia and left the house. They could hear his measured footsteps as he descended the outside stairs.

"You've made him angry, Cole," Celia warned.

Cole's sultry gaze shifted to her, and slowly the anger in his gray eyes died. "I reckon," was all he said.

CELIA went in to look at Ted, and Cole remained where he was, leaning against the cold stove, his eyes soberly musing. This had him baffled, this town, its law, its politics.

He could understand Sheriff Linton's reluctance in refusing to handle anything as potentially dangerous as the arrest of Craig Armin for stage robbery. Any sheriff anywhere would feel the same. He could also understand, though not approve of, Linton's glib acceptance of Craig Armin's story that the safe was blown by Ted Wallace, who was, after all, a logical suspect. But the sheriff's refusal tonight to believe any wrong of the Monarch was the tip-off. It told Cole that he could expect no help, only hindrance, from the sheriff's office, and that in the end this would be a matter for cold steel and hot lead to settle, with Sheriff Linton strongly against him.

And that thought placed the situation squarely before him. The Western Freight Co. was now his responsibility. It was in the thick of a fight, expanding, crowding its luck, taking risks and bucking long odds —and Ted Wallace, the man who knew it and could pull it through, was flat on his back and would be for a long time. And he, Cole Armin, with no experience except a certain ability to read a man carefully and then act accordingly, was left to take up the reins. He couldn't even back out, for there was Celia to consider. But couldn't he? Wouldn't that be better than bluffing, and losing in the long run?

Cole walked slowly into the bedroom. Ted was sleeping now, and

Celia pulled the covers up to his shoulders. Then she leaned her back against the wall, hands behind her, and raised her glance to Cole.

"What will we do, Cole?" she asked.

Cole was suddenly ashamed of what he had come in there to say to her. He never said it; something in Celia Wallace's face stopped him. It was the look of trust that was in her eyes, and it told him better than words that she was putting all she had in his hands. He was a humble man, really, but he forgot that when he studied her.

"Do?" he echoed, and his voice was low, strong, confident. "We'll do what we aimed to do all along, Celia. Tomorrow, Ted will be able to talk. He can run the business from his bed, and I'll see that his orders are carried out. As for the China Boy trial, well, Ted never claimed he was the best teamster in Piute, did he?"

"No," Celia said slowly.

"Then we'll hire the best. And I'll ride herd on him with a gun in his ear if I have to."

Celia laughed then, but her laugh was shaky, and Cole knew that she was close to breaking. He added, with more confidence than he felt: "You just get Ted well, Celia. I'll take care of Western."

But it was two long hours after he was in bed before he slept. He stared at the ceiling, beating his brains for a way out. He knew so little about this business, so damnably little! Were there other good teamsters? Could they be trusted? Would Girard back out when he found Ted was flat on his back?

A thousand questions such as these finally so exhausted his brain that he fell into a heavy, troubled sleep.

SHERIFF LINTON left the Wallaces, still smarting under Cole Armin's threat—for it was a threat. But behind his irritation was a wholehearted disgust for Keen Billings. Why had the fool risked such a clumsy trick as this affair in the hotel? It was risky and dangerous and it might have killed both Cole Armin and Ted Wallace, the two people most necessary to their plan.

Linton went over to the Cosmopolitan House bar, but Keen Billings wasn't there. Patiently, then, he started the round of the saloons. In half an hour he found Keen. He was playing poker in one of the back rooms of Womack's Keno Parlor. When Billings saw Linton open the door, he excused himself without having to be asked, and joined the sheriff in the corridor under the gallery of the saloon.

"Come out in back," Linton said brusquely.

Together, they sought the alley behind the saloon. Once in the darkness and alone, Sheriff Linton turned on Billings.

"What kind of a ham-fisted play are you pulling off, Keen?" he demanded hotly.

"Me?" Keen said, just as hotly. "I was aimin' to ask you the same thing. What did it get us?"

For a moment, Sheriff Linton's surprise made him speechless. "I'm talking about shovin' Ted Wallace down the stairs," he explained patiently.

"So am I? Why'd you do it?"

"Why did *I* do it? I didn't, you fool!"

Of one accord, they moved together into the rectangle of light shining from one of the saloon's back rooms. Once there, they looked at each other carefully. There was surprise and protest on both their faces.

"Wait a minute," Linnton said.

"You mean to tell me you weren't up there on the third floor inside that end room? You didn't shove Armin?"

"So help me," Keen swore, "I ain't been out of that chair in there all night, Ed. Ask the boys."

"And I was at the faro table in the Cosmopolitan House when it happened," Linton muttered. "I can prove that, too."

They were speechless for a moment, and then Keen framed the question. "Then who did shove them?"

Linton shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "I know one thing, though. Both of them might have been killed by that fall. And where would we be if they were?" The suspicion was not wholly gone from his face.

"We'd be plumb out of luck," Billings growled. There was suspicion on his face, too. "You damn well better get to work on that, Linton."

"I intend to."

There was a long pause, during which neither of them voiced his doubts of the other. They were each suspecting a double cross of some kind on the part of the other, but one thing confounded them: how could this accident help either of them?

Billings spoke first, perhaps because suspicion died easier in him. "All right. You didn't do it, and I didn't do it. But it's done." He paused. "It comes to me, Ed, that maybe it helped us after all."

"How?"

"Ted Wallace had been to see Girard, hadn't he, about tryin' for the China Boy contract tomorrow or the day after?"

"Yes. That's what Girard said."

"And Ted's got to drive one of the teams. He's got ten wagons and maybe nine good teamsters, no more."

"Well?"

"That fall put Wallace out. He'll need another teamster."

"Then he'll get one."

"But what if he can't get one?" Keen murmured.

After a moment's pause, Linton smiled and shook his head. "But there are lots of idle teamsters in Piute, Keen."

"But if there ain't?"

"Then Western can't even make a try for the contract. But you can't buy every teamster off."

Keen Billings' eyes were musing. He smiled slowly. "Not without money, no," he agreed. "But Craig Armin has the money. And he'll put it up to see Western lose that contract." He waved easily. "So long, Ed."

"Where are you going?"

"I got an idea, Ed. I'll hunt you up tonight if it works." His face grew a little bit hard. "You just do your sheriffin', and let me worry about this."

They parted there, Keen Billings heading down the alley, Sheriff Linton going into the saloon. But in the back of both their minds the seed of doubt had been placed. Could he trust his partner? And if he could, then who had shoved Ted Wallace down those stairs? And that led them both to ask another question: Was there somebody else in on this? If there was, who was it and what did he want out of it? Unless they could answer these questions, there was a strong chance that their plot against Monarch and Western would start a cataclysm that would destroy them both.

With Ted Wallace unable to drive an ore wagon, what chance has Western of getting the China Boy contract? Will Cole discover Letty Burns' duplicity? Has a new enemy taken chips in the game of double-cross being played by Keen Billings and Ed Linton? Read the answers to these questions in the third installment of this engrossing serial—in next week's issue.

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