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WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

10
CENTS

SEPTEMBER 25, 1937



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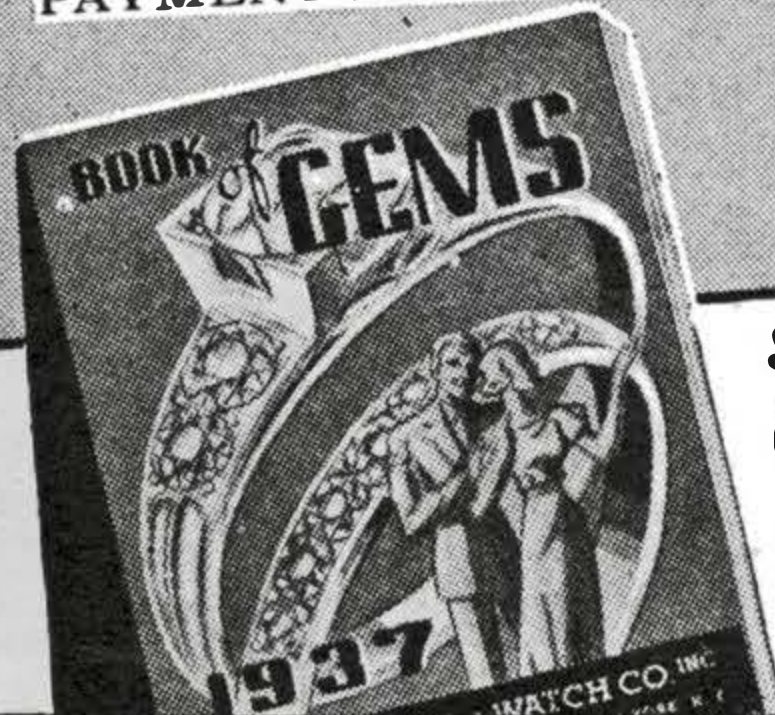
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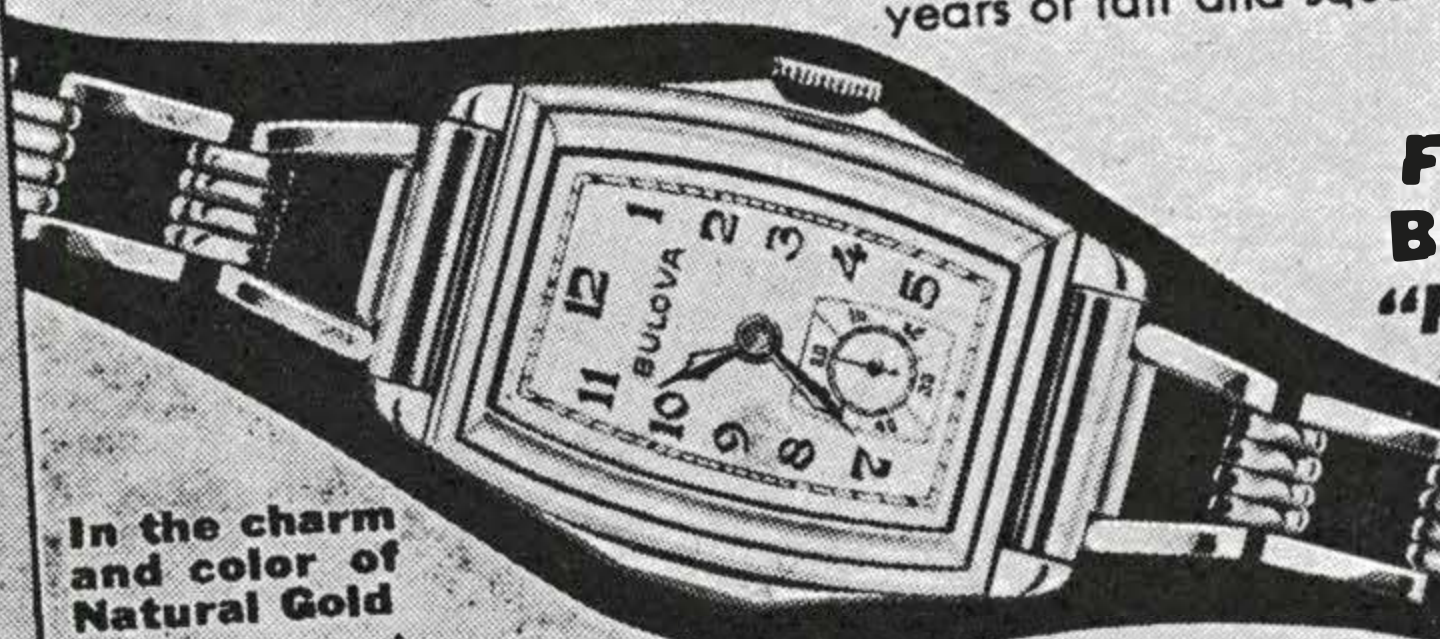


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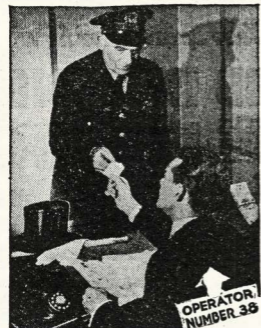
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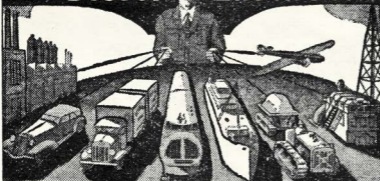
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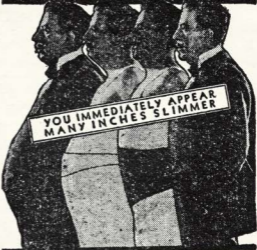
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CHAPTER I.

TEXAS TEMPEST.

A SUDDEN rush of howling wind, a thick swirl of suffocating dust, a deluge of hail and rain—and the unexpected, out-of-season norther struck, just before nightfall.

It lowered the temperature rapidly, washed the air, and soon drenched the thirsty earth. With

devastating force, it sent a muddy flood rushing through the arroyos and quickly turned that section of Texas into a morass.

More than a score of riders for the Wiggle Worm, the huge cattle outfit which dominated that part of the State, were caught in town by the storm while in the throes of the regular pay-day spree.

Sam Gordon, the Wiggle Worm's gray-haired owner, and the acknowl-



edged cattle king of the district, spent the time while the elements raged visiting his old friend, Judge Burlowe, the district's only lawyer, in the latter's office shack.

Judge Burlowe's practice ran mostly to bills of sale, deeds, wills, marriage ceremonies, inquests, and funeral orations. He presided over no court, for there was none for him to grace. Men like Sam Gordon were powerful enough to make their own laws in that district where peace officers were scarce, and punish transgressors of those laws with severity, but with uniform justice.

The judge sipped the drink Sam Gordon had provided out of a pocket flask, puffed on a fat cigar—also presented by Sam Gordon—cleared his throat, and delivered himself of an opinion.

"If you'd got married in your youth, Sam, my friend, you'd probably have a splendid, grown son now to inherit the Wiggle Worm when you kick off. And you wouldn't

have to be worryin' because your only heir is a no-good nephew whose sight you hate, and with good reason."

"If I'd got married in my youth, my wife probably would have starved to death before she could have given me a son. And by the time I got the Wiggle Worm goin' where it really was anything, I was fat and half bald and no woman'd have me."

"You could have got married a score of times. Almost any unattached woman hereabouts would have had you."

Gordon chuckled. "You mean, she'd have been glad to marry the Wiggle Worm, and take me thrown in, 'cause she'd have to. I wasn't lookin' for that kind of a wife."

"And now you're a cattle king, and there ain't any crown prince of cattle land," Judge Burlowe said. "That nephew of yours is somethin' I can't stomach, if you'll pardon me for sayin' so."

"Make it as strong as you like, judge, and you'll be voicin' my own sentiments."

"To think of him ever rulin' over the Wiggle Worm, with its thousands of acres, and its thousands upon thousands of beef critters, its splendid horse stock——"

"Are you warmin' up for a speech?" Gordon interrupted. "I know all about the Wiggle Worm. I'm right proud of my outfit. I carved it out of nothin'. Wiggle Worm critters are known in every market. Punchers would rather ride for the Wiggle Worm than for any other outfit——"

"Talkin' about warmin' up for a speech!" Judge Burlowe said, chuckling. "You've got a right to feel proud of your outfit, Sam, and of your whole life. It's a shame you haven't a son to carry on. But you'll be carryin' on yourself, for a good many years yet."

"You want to get ready to hold an inquest, judge," Sam Gordon said. "Chance for you to make a speech."

"Yeah? Who are you aimin' to kill, Sam?"

"A horse thief, when we catch him. Somebody's been gettin' away with our fancy horse stock, one animal at a time. Can't find trace of a trail. But we'll run him down in time, and when we do——"

"No inquest necessary," the judge broke in. "When a horse thief dies at the end of a rope, it's a natural death."

"If this storm keeps up, the thief won't be able to move a horse for a month, 'count of the mud. Why you reckon a norther should hit us now? 'Tain't natural."

The judge cleared his throat. "Sam, I am not without knowledge and learnin'," he said. "Also, my experiences have been wide and

varied. And I'm convinced of one thing, Sam—it's a waste of time to speculate on Texas weather. Only one thing about it you can be sure of—what you think it'll do, it won't."

SOME of the Wiggle Worm riders loafed and gossiped in the store while the storm raged, and some in the blacksmith shop. A few kept in the restaurant and indulged in badinage with the new blond waitress, imported from the county seat especially for pay day. But the large majority remained in the saloon, at the bar and poker tables.

The fury of the storm presently died down. The wind dropped, and the rain dwindled to a gentle patter. Windows and doors were opened, and the aroma of wet earth swept through the saloon. The stiff breeze blew out clouds of stale tobacco smoke and the fumes of liquor. The poker players cashed in their chips, got up and stretched their limbs, filled their lungs with fresh air, and strolled to the bar.

"Drink hearty, gents!" somebody howled. "We'll have a fine time tomorrow, diggin' little dogies out of the yellow mud."

"Buck" Dale, the competent and grizzled foreman of the outfit, came into the saloon after splashing through the mud from the store across the street.

"Get ready to hit the trail, gents," he ordered. "You're all soaked to the gills on the inside, so a little dampness on the outside won't hurt you any. No loafin' in town till dawn and gettin' out home so bleary-eyed you can't tell a colt from a calf."

In reply to the order, certain indelicate sounds came to his ears.

But that was the usual thing, and Buck Dale only grinned.

One of the men left the bar and sauntered toward him, trying to roll a cigarette with fumbling fingers. His hat was pushed to the back of his head, revealing a mop of curly brown hair and a rather handsome face, flushed with liquor. He walked with his feet far apart, like a man struggling to maintain his balance.

Lew Lake, Gordon's nephew and only surviving relative, and hence potential heir of the Wiggle Worm, came to a stop in front of the foreman, a supercilious smile twisting his thin lips.

"Are you meanin' me, too, Buck?" he asked.

The foreman looked straight at him. "Yeah. 'Specially you, Lew," he replied, promptly. "You're ridin' out with the other boys. There'll be plenty of work for everybody in the mornin', after this storm, and a few hours of sleep won't hurt you any. Your uncle said——"

"Oh, all right!" Lew Lake popped the finished cigarette into his mouth, thumbed a match into flame, and lighted the smoke. "You and my uncle and the Wiggle Worm are goin' to lose a danged good rider one of these days, 'count of your slave drivin'."

"If you're meanin' yourself, Lew, it'd probably slow us up a lot if you quit, but we'd make a brave show of tryin' to struggle right along," Buck Dale replied.

WHY do I have to hit the trail for home now? I could stay here till daybreak and get out in time to do my share of the chores."

"You heard the orders, Lew," Buck Dale snapped. "I'm tellin' you again—I don't play any favorites. You're the old man's nephew,

and maybe you'll inherit the Wiggle Worm when he passes on, but until I'm told different you're only one of the hands to me."

"Treatin' me like I was a kid!"

"Yeah, that's a cussed shame, and you all of a month past the ripe old age of twenty-one," Buck Dale replied, sarcastically. "You stay around here another hour, Lew, and you won't be able to crawl up into a saddle. Even a sponge can get saturated, in time."

"Why, you——"

"Easy!" Buck Dale warned. "Don't rear up on your hind legs at me. I'm one hombre who won't take it off you. You'd better settle down, now. Take your trail drink and get goin'."

To prevent further useless argument, Buck Dale turned abruptly and left the saloon. Lew Lake sauntered back to the bar and motioned to the man behind it.

Lew Lake was the unhappy result of an elopement and marriage between Sam Gordon's misguided only sister and a good-looking itinerant gambler. Gordon did not like his nephew, who had inherited the bad traits of his father. But he had taken him in after his parents had died—his father at the end of a rope, and his mother from shame and grief—and was trying to make a man of him.

To get him over the idea that he was a crown prince and could live a life of ease, Gordon compelled him to live in the bunk house with the men, do his share of the work, and take regular puncher's wages. When he showed desirable qualities, he would be promoted to residence in the ranch house, where Gordon lived in lonely state, as he had for many years, with two Chinese servants.

Lew Lake already had a reputa-

tion for being wild. He could ride, rope and shoot with a skill beyond his years, but shirked work and disliked responsibility. He had endeared himself to the younger and wilder faction of Wiggle Worm riders, and they were always ready to follow his leadership.

"Let's ride!" Lew Lake howled, after drinks had been downed. "All hombres who are alive and kickin' can travel with me, and slow pokes can putter along behind."

Several shouted and jumped to his side. They howled their raucous farewells to the others in the saloon and hurried out into the night. The moon had broken through the clouds, and pools of water glistened on the ground.

Yelling and singing and wild with drink, they splashed through the mud to the shed beside the blacksmith shop, where their ponies had been sheltered from the storm.

"Buck Dale—him and me are goin' to mix it some day," Lew Lake declared, as he fumbled with the reins. "If I'm ever owner of the Wiggle Worm, there's one hombre who won't be on the pay roll long. What's pay day for, if a man can't have his fun? An old woman for a foreman—that's what the great Wiggle Worm's got!"

In their saddles, and with Lew Lake leading, they rode madly out of the town, their horses' hoofs flinging a shower of mud gobs to splash against the front of the buildings.

CHAPTER II.

DISASTER.

THE unexpected storm caught the Cranes off guard, down on the unprotected flat. They had been making slow progress along a faint old trail which twisted through a sea of parched grass and

dry brush, looking always ahead, and toward the west, in anticipation and hope—as did the pioneers.

The Cranes traveled with a sad outfit. The wagon was old and rickety, unstable from uncertain repairs made with whatever materials happened to be at hand. Rents and holes were abundant in the weather-stained canvas cover.

The team of old crowbaits in the patched and mended harness tugged laboriously, with their heads lowered, and their sides heaving. Wheels wobbled on crooked axles, and sagging springs creaked.

Crane was driving, bent forward on the seat with his crossed forearms resting on his knees, and his wife sat beside him, her face flaming red from the heat despite the protecting sunbonnet she wore.

They were middle-aged, and poor in worldly goods. They had traveled many miles, stopping frequently in town or at ranch so Crane could get a job for a few days and earn money for necessary supplies.

The Cranes did not know exactly where they were going—just on out West, toward the setting sun, hoping to find there a likely place where they could settle and spend the remainder of their lives; where they would find the prosperity which had been denied them elsewhere, and where their son would have a chance.

Jim, their son, walked beside the wagon, plodding along through the dust with a vacant expression in his face. He was nineteen, thin and sickly looking. He seldom spoke unless addressed, and then only after a hesitation during which he seemed groping for the right words.

Suddenly, the scarlet and orange splendor of the sunset was blotted out as if by a curtain dropped before it. A black cloud edged with

dirty yellow came over the horizon and spread rapidly, to rush down toward them with terrific speed.

"Storm comin', pa!" Jim Crane called.

"Yeah, I see it, son. It's goin' to be a snorter, too, looks like. We'd better make for high ground."

"Doesn't seem to be any high ground hereabouts," Mrs. Crane said.

"There, 'bout a mile ahead," Crane pointed out. "We'll get to it before the storm breaks bad. Rain won't hurt us any—do good. The horses'll like it. And we can catch fresh rain water and fill the barrel. In the mornin', everything'll be fresh and clean."

Jim knew his father was trying to be heartening. He always looked on the bright side of everything. Whatever happened, Crane always tried to make his wife believe it was something fortunate, tried to keep her hope and enthusiasm alive.

They made an effort to get more speed out of the team. Crane used his whip and howled at the cow-baits, and Jim ran beside the off horse and slapped at him with a piece of dry brush. The horses broke into a slow, half-hearted trot for a short distance, then dropped down to a walk again. It was the best they could do.

The wind came upon them with a whistling rush, filling the air with clouds of thick yellow dust through which they scarcely could see. Jim crawled into the wagon and fastened the ragged canvas cover better, then jumped out again to urge the horses on. The hail and rain came in a downpour, pelting them and the team. The wagon wheels began skidding sickeningly in the greasy mud.

"Arroyo ahead of us," Crane howled above the roar of the storm.

"No water in it yet. High ground on the other side. We'll have to get over—be swamped if we stop here."

ACROSS the flat, the treacherous dry watercourse curved and twisted like a great yellow serpent. Its bottom was deep with dust, which already was commencing to puff with damp spots, like blisters.

The horses hesitated at the bank of the arroyo, as if sensing danger, but Crane refused to accept their judgment. He used the whip and howled at them again, and Jim slashed at their flanks with the piece of brush. The wagon descended the slope to the bottom, rocking perilously, and almost overturning.

Only a man who did not understand the country would have tried such a thing at the time. The old watercourse was one of a series which drained the hills, and had been carved out of the rocky ground by storms like this through the ages. The greater part of the time it was harmless, but it could be a terrible menace when there was a downpour up in the hills.

The wheels of the wagon skidded along the bottom of the arroyo as if on a floor coated with grease. The exhausted horses strained in the harness and pulled slowly toward the opposite side. A couple of inches of reddish water soon surged around the wheels.

Jim Crane gave a cry of alarm and pointed to where, down from the hills, an angry torrent was rushing along the arroyo toward them at express-train speed, roaring as it came, bringing with it tossing masses of débris.

"Get to the bank!" Crane cried. There was a hint of terror in his voice.

Crane sprang down from the seat and helped his wife down. Jim hurried to his mother's other side and grasped her arm to support her. There was no time to unhitch the horses. Getting Mrs. Crane to safety, out of the path of that rushing flood, was the important thing.

The water swirled around their knees and made it almost impossible for them to keep footing. Then the full force of the flood struck. Raging water pulled at them. The horses struggled, but the wagon and harness held them prisoners. One squealed as the team went under. The wagon was picked up like a chip, whirled around, and hurled upon the Cranes.

Jim knew that both horses had been drowned, and that was a calamity for the Cranes. He glimpsed his father's white, drawn face in the ghostly light. A merciful surge of the flood tossed the three of them into an eddy, and Jim and his father carried his mother out to the rain-soaked ground.

"Ma!" Crane cried in a choking voice. He knelt beside his wife and tried to hold her in his arms.

"It's my back," she moaned. "The wagon struck it."

The wagon had been washed against the bank of the arroyo and wedged against a heap of rocks, with the drowned horses still in the harness. Débris packed around it and held it there, so that it would be possible, later, to salvage some of its contents.

When it was safe, Jim got into the overturned wagon. He brought out sodden blankets, and they made a bed for his mother on the muddy ground.

A couple of pine packing cases were in the wagon, and Crane emptied them and broke them with the

ax. He whittled some shavings from a dry piece and got a fire going, finding dry matches in a vest pocket.

THE storm was passing over. It had ceased raining up in the hills. No more torrents would be coming down the water-course, only surface water draining into it. The storm had done its damage and gone on.

Mrs. Crane was unconscious.

"Is she bad hurt, pa?" Jim asked.

"I'm fearin' it, son," Crane said. Suddenly, he was like a wild man. "It's not right!" he cried. "She's bad hurt, a good woman like her, and it's not right! We've got to have help, and I don't know this country. There must be a town somewhere near, or a ranch."

"You wouldn't know which way to go, pa, and it might be miles, and it's comin' on dark," Jim said. "If you had a horse—"

"There—look!" Crane gave a glad cry, and clutched Jim's arm. "There's a horse—several of 'em. They've been in that patch of brush, seekin' shelter from the storm. Must be a ranch somewhere near, with stock runnin' like that on the range. Maybe it's the Wiggle Worm Ranch they told us about, owned by the big cattle king, Sam Gordon. I'll catch up a horse and ride for help."

But first he turned to his stricken wife again. Some of the blankets were getting warm and dry by the fire, and they made her bed more comfortable.

"You watch close beside her, Jim," Crane ordered.

He searched in the wagon and found a lariat and halter, and went slowly through the gathering darkness toward the horses he had seen. A bright moon broke through the scudding clouds, as though to aid him.

The horses were averse to letting a stranger get near enough in the night to use a lariat from the ground. Repeatedly, Crane failed to make a capture. His need for haste was so great he grew almost frantic. He splashed wildly through the mud, through the shadows, panting from exertion.

Then he compelled himself to be calm, exerted all his skill, and finally, after about an hour of effort, roped an old saddle horse that proved tractable, got the halter on, mounted bareback and rode to the fire.

"Ma's still unconscious," Jim said. "She's been moanin' some. I—I'm afraid for her."

"You stay right beside her, son, and keep up the fire as well as you can. Smash the sideboards of the wagon for fuel," Crane directed. "I'll ride west till I hit a well-traveled trail or see a light. I'll get help."

Crane kicked the horse in the flanks and rode over the soggy ground—rode less than a quarter of a mile before he met more trouble.

CHAPTER III.

HASTY VIOLENCE.

LEW LAKE and his companions were far ahead of the others of the Wiggle Worm outfit on the way home. Sam Gordon and his foreman had gone to town in the buckboard, and they would be accompanied by those riders who had not made the wild dash out of town with Lew Lake.

Half a mile from the Wiggle Worm ranch buildings, Lew Lake and his friends stopped for a certain ceremony. It was against ranch rules to have liquor in the bunk house. So Lew Lake always brought along a quart from town,

and they stopped here to empty it and smash the bottle on a rock.

As they were finishing the quart, they heard hoofs splashing in the soggy earth. A rider was approaching, not along the regular trail from the ranch house, but across country from the arroyo.

A rider coming from that direction at that hour of the night, after the storm, was a thing to arouse suspicion. And Lew Lake and the others remembered the mysterious thefts of horse stock from the Wiggle Worm recently.

"Get back in the shadows," Lew Lake ordered the others. "Maybe we're goin' to be lucky hombres, huh? If we've run into the mysterious horse thief who's been rustlin' our stock, we'll sure handle him. Better have your guns ready."

Getting their guns out of their holsters, they pulled heir mounts back into the shadows and waited. The approaching rider reached the trail, then stopped, as if in indecision. Then he came on, straight toward the men in ambush. They could see him plainly in the moonlight.

To their liquor-inflamed minds, he could be nothing but a horse thief, and their mood was violent enough to deal with such in the approved manner. Moreover, there was Lew Lake to give judgment and issue orders.

"Take him!" Lew Lake howled.

The Wiggle Worm men jumped their ponies out into the muddy trail. The strange rider was stopped and quickly surrounded, with gun muzzles covering him. Men were howling at him, reaching for him, bewildering him.

"It's a Wiggle Worm horse, all right, Lew," one of the men shouted.

"So we've finally caught you, huh?" Lew Lake snarled at the cap-

tive. "You're the hombre who's been takin' his pick of our horse stock, huh? Well, you've taken your last pick."

"Wait!" the rider protested, as they tried to seize him. "You're makin' a mistake, men. I'm right glad I met up with you, 'cause I need help. My name's Crane. Had an accident. My outfit got caught in the arroyo in the storm. My horses were drowned, and my wife's bad hurt. I've got to get a doctor. I caught up this horse and started out to find help——"

A gale of raucous laughter interrupted him.

"That there's a mighty poor yarn," Lew Lake roared. "It ain't even entertainin'. But you're too scared to make up a better one, I reckon."

"Please listen," Crane begged. "My wife——"

A ROPE was tossed by one of the Wiggle Worm men, and a noose settled around Crane's neck and was jerked tight, stopping his talk.

"There's a good tree right ahead," Lew Lake shouted. "Fetch him along, boys. We'll soon put an end to this horse thief. This job'll sure please the Old Man. He's been frettin' a lot about that rustled stock."

Deaf to Crane's half-choked pleading, they surrounded the horse he was riding and carried him along with them. Crane was making a desperate effort to loosen the rope around his neck, so he could talk better.

"Wait—wait," he gulped. "You're makin' a mistake. I'm tellin' the truth. My wife——"

"Thought you could pull it off easy on a stormy night, huh?" Lew Lake scoffed.

"I'm not a horse thief. I was ridin' for help. My own horses were drowned. My wife's bad hurt, I'm tellin' you, down by the arroyo. She'll die if I don't get help. My son's there with her. Please believe me! Won't you please ride down there and——"

"Yeah? Want to coax us down to the arroyo, where maybe some of your friends are waitin' to shoot us up and rescue you, huh?" Lew Lake asked. "We'll tend to you first, and then we'll go after them."

"Please——" Crane begged.

"You're wastin' your breath, and you ain't got a lot of it left," Lew Lake interrupted.

He barked another order, and Crane was seized. His arms were jerked behind his back, and they began trying to lash his wrists together. Then Crane started a desperate struggle for life, howling as he tried to fight them off.

He realized, at last, that they were so saturated with liquor he could not reason with them. He saw they were all young and wild. Hanging a man they thought was a horse thief, without giving him a chance to prove his innocence, was giving them a thrill.

Somebody struck him heavily on the head with a gun as he fought, and half stunned him. He slumped forward, and the rope around his neck was jerked tight again.

"Hurry it up!" Lew Lake shouted. "Let's see him dance against the moon."

They rode on to the tree and tossed one end of the rope over a limb, drew it taut, and tied the other end to the trunk. They pulled the horse from beneath the half-conscious Crane. He dangled in the air at the end of the rope, kicking and squirming as life was choked out of him.

"We'll let him swing there till mornin'," Lew Lake said. "Maybe others of his kind will take a lesson from it. A good job—that's what it is."

They gathered up their reins to ride on. But the creaking of wheels and the sound of hoofbeats warned of the approach of Gordon and Dale in the buckboard, the other Wiggle Worm riders with them, so they waited. The "Old Man" would give them praise for this, they thought, and maybe a bonus and a holiday in the county seat.

Buckboard and riders stopped at the tree.

"What's this?" Sam Gordon bel-
lowed.

OH, we caught the horse thief and strung him up for you," Lew Lake reported, boastfully. "He was tryin' to get away with another horse, and rode right into us. Came from town by the arroyo, ridin' bareback and with only a halter. One horse thief less in the country!"

"Who is he?" Gordon asked.

"Stranger. We never saw him before."

"So you've taken a human life, and feel like gloatin' about it?" Gordon asked. "I reckon you're right proud of it, Lew."

"A rope's the usual medicine for a horse thief in these parts, ain't it?" Lew Lake snarled. "I thought you'd be pleased 'cause we'd caught him for you."

"The medicine's all right," Gordon admitted. "But a lot of haste isn't, when you're takin' a human life. You might have waited until I came along, and let me handle it. I'd have questioned the man and maybe got him to do some talkin'. He may have belonged to a band of

thieves we'd like to know about. Did he say anything?"

"Oh, he tried to do some tall lyin', spinnin' a wild yarn about havin' an outfit washed out in the arroyo, and a wife hurt, and pickin' up our horse to ride for help."

"And you didn't investigate?" Gordon roared.

"Aw, shucks! We could tell he was lyin'. And he was ridin' a Wiggle Worm horse with a halter that—"

"Careful!" one of the men warned, suddenly. "There's somebody comin'."

They were quiet, and could hear somebody running toward them, slipping, splashing through the mud. With guns held ready, they waited.

Into the patch of moonlight beside the tree, in clothes caked with mud, stumbled a boy, who shivered in the wind as he stopped beside the buckboard, gasping for breath. The moonlight revealed his eyes wide with terror and wet with tears.

"Here! Who are you?" Gordon asked.

"I—I'm Jim Crane. I heard riders, and men talkin' up here, so I came runnin'. We—we've had trouble. Our team got drowned in the storm. Ma was hurt—"

"What?" Gordon roared. "Talk fast, boy. What else happened?"

"Pa caught up a horse that was runnin' loose, and rode to get help. But we—we won't be needin' a doctor, now. Ma just died. She didn't even speak to me again. And I don't know which direction pa went, how to find him—"

Jim Crane happened to glance up, and he saw the body swinging against the moon. He sucked in his breath in a gasp of horror. And the Wiggle Worm men who heard it never forgot that cry of anguish.

"What've you done to pa?" the

boy cried hysterically. "That's my pa, who rode for help. Ma's dead, and that—that's my pa."

CHAPTER IV.

THE THREAT.

AFTERWARD, it seemed to Jim Crane that he moved in a fog through the maze of events which followed. But certain things were as high lights in his memory.

He always remembered the terrible denunciation Sam Gordon bestowed on Lew Lake and the men who had acted with him when they had done this thing. He had been too stunned to make a denunciation himself, or to offer attack.

He remembered how they all had gone to the arroyo, Jim riding in the back of the buckboard, to verify his story of the tragedy. Then Sam Gordon had started issuing orders, his voice stentorian, and his manner stern.

Men raced to the ranch to return with a team and wagon. The bodies of Jim's parents were wrapped in blankets, and taken to the ranch house. A rider was sent to town for old Judge Burlowe. Another was sent to the H Bar Ranch, fifteen miles away, and Harrison, the H Bar owner, drove over with his wife and their daughter, Betty, a girl of sixteen.

Jim Crane sobbed himself to sleep that night in a bedroom in the ranch house, and when he awoke, in the morning, he found that his ragged clothes had been mended, cleaned and pressed, and his boots greased.

He dressed and slipped out into the big, sprawling living room, to find the master of the Wiggle Worn pacing around nervously as he puffed a cigar.

"My boy," Sam Gordon said, "I

feel a great responsibility in this—regardin' your father, I mean. My men did it, and my own rascally nephew was their leader. Drunk and irresponsible, the lot of them! Yet you must understand that they acted with some justification. Some of our stock has been stolen, and the men have been incensed about it. You understand how we feel about horse thieves in this country?"

"Yes, sir," Jim gulped.

"A stranger ridin' a horse with only a halter on, and comin' from down by the arroyo, where our horse stock was runnin' loose—well, the boys took too much for granted. In this country, with conditions as they are, plenty of people will censure them, but nobody would say punish them. Just a sad mistake. I can only try to make amends to you."

Jim sank weakly into the nearest chair. "I—I reckon it wasn't your fault," he said.

"First, my boy, I have arranged for the funeral of your parents. It will be at noon, and burial will be in the cemetery in town."

"A regular cemetery funeral for pa and ma?" Jim asked, gulping.

"Yes, my boy, with Judge Burlowe preachin' the sermon. And I'll have headstones put on the graves—ones with their names carved on 'em. I'm sure your parents were splendid people, and would have been a credit to the country if they had lived and settled here. And now—what about yourself?"

"I—I don't know," Jim stammered. "Pa was hopin' to settle some place where ma's health would be better and I'd have a chance. I—I'm not sick, exactly. I'm strong enough for work, and I reckon I've got to get me a job. But I—I can't seem to have any get-up."

YOU'VE probably been discouraged," Gordon judged. "What you need is a sense of security, a home, regular work to keep your mind occupied, good food. You want to feel that you're a man, and have a place among men. I know how it is, my boy. I was like that once."

"You?" Jim looked at him in surprise. "They told pa you're a big cattle king."

"I was far from bein' one once. I was just a discouraged boy. But I decided to make something of myself, and did."

"Maybe I can be somethin' some time," Jim said.

"Sure you can! And I'm goin' to help you. You can have a home here with me—"

"Thanks, but I—I couldn't," Jim broke in. "So close to where it happened, and—I couldn't bear it to be near that Lew Lake. I'll never forget what he did. My pa, who wouldn't ever have hurt anybody, ridin' to get help for ma, and that Lew Lake—"

"I know how you feel," Gordon said. "I had an idea you might not like the associations here just now. So I've been talkin' to Harrison, of the H Bar. He's a fine man. His wife is a kind, motherly woman. We've planned somethin' that I think you'll like."

"I—I don't know," Jim stammered.

"You told me last night you haven't any relatives. You're alone in the world. I feel responsible. I want to see that you get along all right, Jim. Let me feel that I'm makin' amends. Don't worry about it now. We'll talk later."

The others got up, and they had breakfast, and kind-hearted Mrs. Harrison mothered Jim, and Betty Harrison showed her sympathy.

Pine coffins had been made and brought out from town during the night, at Gordon's orders. A wagon had been draped with black cloth, like a hearse. Jim rode to town behind it, in a light wagon, with the Harrisons.

It was hard for him to realize that his parents were dead, that everything had changed for him overnight. He stood alone now, to make his own way. It would be Jim Crane against the world. And he remembered what Sam Gordon had told him, and determined he would make something of himself. His pa and ma would like that.

Sam Gordon rode ahead of the hearse wagon in the buckboard, with Judge Burlowe. All but a few of the Wiggle Worm cow-punchers rode their ponies behind, Buck Dale leading them.

There was a small crowd at the cemetery, for Gordon had hinted that they should be there, and his hints were laws. Men and women had driven and ridden in from all the ranches of the neighborhood, along the muddy trails.

Judge Burlowe delivered one of his famous funeral orations. Jim sobbed as they began filling the graves. Mrs. Harrison put her arms around him and led him away, and beside him Betty Harrison was weeping.

"You're to come home with us, Jim," Betty said. "We have to go past the Wiggle Worm, and we'll stop and get any of your things you need."

"I haven't got many things," he confessed. "But I'd like to get somethin' that belonged to pa and ma, for keepsakes."

"That Lew Lake!" Harrison exploded. "Shootin' is too good for him. A millstone around Sam Gordon's neck—that's what he is! If I

was Gordon, I'd run him off the place. He's a no-good young devil."

At the Wiggle Worm, a hot meal was ready. After they had finished eating, Gordon spoke.

JIM, I want you to put yourself in my hands," he said. "I know how you feel about stayin' around here just now, and I don't blame you. But we've found a solution. Mrs. Harrison has a brother, Ned Beale, who owns a big ranch over in Arizona. She wants to go on a visit to him. She'll take you with her. I'll outfit you and furnish the expense money, gladly. On that ranch in Arizona, you can live and work and have a chance to develop among folks who'll be friendly."

"You're all mighty good to me," Jim said.

"Far as I'm concerned, I can't ever be good enough," Sam Gordon declared. "I'll always blame myself for what happened. The front door of the Wiggle Worm is always open for you. Go to Arizona, build yourself up into a fine man, and I'll take care of your future."

They decided the start for Arizona would be made in a few days, and that until they left Jim would stay at the H Bar, with the Harrisons. It was almost sunset when they were ready to leave for the H Bar. Jim went out of the house with the others and toward the corral, where the Harrison wagon was waiting.

He had not seen Lew Lake all day, for Gordon had made his nephew keep in the bunk house with the other men who had been concerned in Crane's death. But now Lew Lake was standing at the well, and Jim Crane went straight to him, his face white, and his eyes blazing.

They confronted each other. Lew Lake, with his silk shirt and fine

boots and his air of being somebody, looked at Jim Crane, the sickly, ungainly country boy who had known nothing in his lifetime, so far, but adversity and sorrow.

Lew Lake tried to carry it off.

"I'm sure sorry we made a mistake," he said. "But there was the evidence, and the way it looked and all——"

"You killed my pa," Jim Crane broke in. "Oh, I know how it looked, but if you hadn't been wild drunk you'd have listened to pa and investigated."

"Well, nothin' can be done now," Lew Lake said. He started toward the bunk house.

"Wait a minute!" Jim said. "I want to tell you somethin' before I leave. I ain't strong, and I reckon I can't lick you. And I don't know much about shootin', and anyhow I ain't got a gun. I'm goin' away now. But maybe I'll come back some day. I'll come back a strong man, who knows how to do all the things you can do. And then I'll be wantin' to see you about killin' my pa."

CHAPTER V.

AFTER FIVE YEARS.

JIM CRANE spent five happy years on Ned Beale's ranch in Arizona. He was made to feel at home immediately. The men were made acquainted with his story, and were kind. They started in to make a first-class cow-puncher of him.

They found they had good material with which to work. His first timidity over, Jim Crane responded to their teachings avidly. For the first time in his life, he knew an existence where he was not kicked and cuffed around, and where he could laugh at adversity.

He gained courage, filled out phy-

sically, became alive mentally. He learned how to work cattle, how to ride and rope and shoot. Before he was twenty-one, the bunk-house men accepted him as an equal.

Each year, Mrs. Harrison came to visit her brother, and on three occasions she brought Betty with her. Betty Harrison showed a keen interest in Jim Crane. Her admiration for him grew as she watched him develop, while she was developing herself.

When he had been in Arizona five years, Jim was surprised when he rode in from the range, late one afternoon, and found old Judge Burlowe sitting on the front porch. After supper, he was summoned to the house.

"I came to get you, Jim," Judge Burlowe said. "It's time for you to come home."

"Home? I reckon this is home."

"This has been your temporary home," the judge explained. "You've been away for schoolin', a man might say. We've had mighty fine reports 'bout you, boy. Beale's written often, and Mrs. Harrison has told us how you're gettin' along. Sam Gordon is right poorly, and he wants to see you."

"I'm sure sorry to learn he ain't well," Jim said. "I'd like to see him, and thank him. But I've told myself I'd never go back there."

"Ned Beale's been tellin' me that you're a real man now, Jim. A real man ain't afraid of anything as long as he knows he's actin' right. Why are you afraid to go back?"

"Didn't say I was afraid."

"You're a man now. You ain't afraid to look at the place where your parents died, or at their graves. You ain't afraid to meet your good friends, the Harrisons, and visit the H Bar. You ain't afraid to let folks see that you're a fine, upstandin',

good-lookin', healthy man, are you, 'stead of the puny boy they remember? And, Jim, you ain't afraid of anybody around there, are you?"

Jim's eyes flashed. "Not of anybody!" he said. "If you're meanin' that Lew Lake——"

"He's still there, Jim. Gone to the devil fast, like folks thought he would. Thorn in Sam Gordon's flesh. If I were you, Jim, I'd come back and see Gordon."

"What does he want to see me for, aside from me just visitin' him?"

"That's for him to say. He's had plans for you all these years. He sent some money for you. Sam knows that a cowpoke can't save much out of his wages, and he wants you to come in style. You got a pet pony?"

JIM'S eyes flashed again. "Yes, sir! I've got my horse Spider—I call him that 'cause he seems to have about eight legs. Caught him myself—he was runnin' with a wild bunch in the hills—and broke and trained him myself. He's a bay, with a white star on his forehead."

"Bring Spider along," the judge said, chuckling. "You can travel along with him on the railroad as far as the county seat, and ride over from there. I'll be waitin' for you in town."

"I reckon it ain't any more than right for me to make the trip. If Mr. Beale will hold my job for me I——"

"You won't need it. You ain't comin' back," the judge said. "That's why I told you to take your pet pony along."

"But I like it here. My job——"

"You're goin' to have a bigger one with Sam Gordon. Can't you understand, boy, that you were sent here to grow up and learn things,

and that Gordon always expected you to come back some day? You just come, and let him do the talkin'."

"Anyhow, I'll go and see what it's all about," Jim said. He was thinking principally that he would have the chance to see Betty Harrison again.

The judge returned the following day. Jim Crane traveled in a stock car on a freight train, with Spider. He unloaded at the county seat in Texas, twenty miles from the little cow town near the Wiggle Worm.

He spent the night in the county seat's hotel, and at dawn got Spider from the stable and began his ride. Five miles from town he found himself in a jumble of hills, where the trail twisted through gulches and among rocks. He sagged to one side of the saddle, puffing a cigarette and looking over the country with keen eyes.

Those keen eyes caught sight of a rider against the sky line who seemed to be watching him. The rider disappeared, and a lifting puff of dust showed that he had cut down toward the trail.

Jim Crane rode on, thinking of Betty Harrison. He realized how he felt about her, and how she felt about him, but he had said nothing. Betty Harrison's father owned the H Bar outfit, and Jim Crane was a common puncher, at forty a month and found.

A metal hornet buzzed past his ear, and made him think of things nearer. Another went by on the other side of his head, singing its sinister song.

Jim Crane had heard bullets sing before. Life had not been all roses in Arizona. Jim had been a member of three posses, and had helped run down cattle thieves.

He jerked Spider to one side of

the trail and dropped from the saddle, darting behind a bunch of rocks as a third bullet came screaming toward him. From the distance came a crack Jim Crane identified as that of a rifle. All he had was his six-gun.

He could not think that this attack was meant for him, knowing of no reason why it should be. The assassin evidently had made a mistake. But a bullet fired in error can be as lethal as any other, and Jim Crane had no desire to play the rôle of human target.

He ran behind the rocks and, keeping under cover, advanced rapidly in the direction from which the bullets had come. Around a curve in the road, he could see a horse standing in a depression, and a man prone on the earth behind a rock, watching the trail.

THE watcher plainly was growing nervous because Jim Crane did not show himself. He could not see Crane's horse. After a time he left the rock and went to his own mount, jumped into the saddle, and rode forward until he could take to cover again. He was directly below Jim Crane when he stopped.

"Drop that rifle, hombre!" Jim Crane stood up in plain sight, holding his six-gun menacingly. "Pronto! You've got some explainin' to do."

The mounted man below made a costly error. He fired a wild shot and dug in with his spurs, bending low over his mount's neck. Before the horse could take a jump, Jim Crane fired. The man below jerked on the reins as the bullet struck him. His mount swung half way around and halted, and the rider slid out of the saddle, dropping his rifle as he sprawled in the dirt.

"Stay put!" Jim Crane barked.

He kept to cover as he descended from the ledge. When he reached the trail, he saw that the wounded man had remained where he had fallen, and that the rifle was out of his reach. But he might have a six-gun and be waiting for a chance to use it, pretending to be hurt worse than he was.

Jim Crane went forward slowly, gun ready. The man in the trail didn't move. And suddenly Jim Crane was beside him, and had turned him over and jerked his six-gun away. The man on the ground opened his eyes.

"Were you shootin' at me, or did you make a mistake?" Jim asked.

"I—I made a mistake when I didn't get you with the first shot, I reckon."

"So you were tryin' to shoot me, huh? I'd admire to know why. Don't recollect ever seein' you before."

"You never have, maybe. But I saw you last night in the county seat."

"What then? I didn't have any quarrel with you. Why did you try to kill me from ambush?"

"No use talkin' about it now. You got me."

"Winged you, you mean. The blood's comin' from high up in your arm. That ain't serious."

"It—went through," the man on the ground said. "Into my breast. Not much profit—in this deal."

"So you went gunnin' for me for profit? A man who does that is a low-down skunk."

"I had to have money, and he promised—"

"Who promised?" Jim Crane interrupted swiftly.

"I ain't talkin' any about it. You—you're pretty decent. I might—give you a tip."

"I'm listenin'," Jim Crane said.

"You'd better—watch out for yourself. You're steppin' on—somebody's toes."

"Loosen up, and tell me more."

The man on the ground started to speak, but choked. His eyes rolled, and he gasped for breath. A gush of blood came from his mouth, and Jim Crane knew he never would speak again.

It was more than ten miles to town. But there was only one thing thing to do—cart in the dead man on his own horse, and report what had happened.

Jim Crane turned to get the horse, and got a shock. The way the horse was standing, Jim Crane could see the brand plainly. It was the Wiggle Worm brand.

CHAPTER VI.

INTO PERIL.

WHEN he came to the little town, Jim Crane stopped in front of the store, riding his own horse and leading the other with the dead man lashed across the saddle. His arrival caused a sensation.

Judge Burlowe came hurrying across the street from his office shack.

"Howdy, judge!" Jim Crane greeted. "This man tried to ambush me as I was ridin' from the county seat, and I got him. Don't know him—never saw him before. Maybe he made a mistake." He looked meaningly at the judge.

"I know him," Judge Burlowe said. "He's been hangin' around the range for some time, doin' odd jobs and drinkin' and gamblin'. Range tramp."

"I'll take you out and show you where he tried to get me. He used a rifle. I cached it out there, and his empty shells are still on the

ground. You can see the tracks where he was waitin' for me to come along."

"Your word's good enough for me," the judge said. "I'm the corner here, and I'm sayin' no inquest is necessary. But you come to my office and tell me more, so I can write out a report."

The judge instructed some of the men to take care of the body. Jim went with him to the office shack, and the judge closed the door and motioned Jim to a rickety chair.

"Now, tell me," the judge said.

"Well, he had a chance to do a little talkin' before he died, and he admitted somebody hired him to get me. Died before he could say anything more. But that horse he was ridin'—it's a Wiggle Worm horse."

"So I noticed," the judge replied. "And I've got an idea that, when the news gets out, nobody'll know how he came to be ridin' a Wiggle Worm horse. It'll probably be said he must have helped himself to it."

"Who'll probably say that?" Jim asked.

"My boy, you'd better be careful," Judge Burlowe warned. "There's a man who may think you're in the way around here."

"If you're meanin' Lew Lake, why should I be in his way? You mean he may think I've come back to deal with him, 'count of pa, and wants to have me bushwhacked so he won't have to face me himself?"

"It goes deeper than that," the judge said. "You'll know more after Sam Gordon talks to you."

"All this is right mysterious."

"You keep your eyes and ears open. I'll get a horse from the stable and ride to the Wiggle Worm with you."

While the old judge was getting on his riding boots, Jim Crane went into the store and bought some to-

bacco, then crossed to the saloon. The man behind the bar greeted him.

"So you're Jim Crane. I remember about your folks. Saw you when that happened. You've filled out some, boy."

Jim grinned. "I've been eatin' regular for five years," he replied. "I'm fat and fit, and ought to live to a ripe old age, barrin' accidents."

"Looks like it ain't healthy for a man to try to make an accident happen to you. Have a drink on the house."

"I don't mind."

JIM glanced at the others in the saloon, about half a dozen men, none of whom he remembered. He got out materials and began making a cigarette, and from the corner of his eye watched the man behind the bar. As Jim struck a match to light the smoke, the other put out a half-filled bottle and a glass.

"Drink hearty!" he said. "Welcome back! Are you aimin' to stay with us long, or is this just a visit?"

"Can't say now," Jim replied. "This here seems to be a dangerous country for me. I get ambushed while ridin' along the trail. And I get offered a free drink—doped!"

"What's that?" the man behind the bar cried.

Jim Crane's six-gun was in his hand, and the muzzle pointed across the bar before the man behind it could reach beneath for a weapon.

"Stiffen, hombre!" Jim ordered. "Reach for the ceilin'. I saw you dope that bottle. You ain't clever at all. You should have had the bottle ready 'fore I came in."

"I—I didn't mean anything."

"That's right silly talk," Jim complained. "You try to give me a doped drink, and you say you didn't

mean anything. Just all in fun, huh? Is it deadly poison in that bottle, or just somethin' to make a man pass out?"

"It's not poison. Maybe you'd have gone to sleep before you got to the Wiggle Worm."

"Yeah, and tumbled out of my saddle, and while I was unconscious on the ground somebody could do what that hombre on the trail didn't. That it?"

"What—what are you aimin' to do?" the bartender asked.

The men in the saloon had been silent and motionless, watching. Judge Burlowe came in from the street, ready to ride, and his eyes bulged.

"Don't be alarmed any, judge," Jim said. "This hombre tried to give me doped liquor, but I saw him tryin' it."

"What?" the judge cried.

"Yeah. Now, he's goin' to drink it himself." His face was stern as he gestured with the gun. "You pour out a good stiff drink of that, and you drink it down! Only one way you can get out of it."

"How's that?"

"Hand me out some information. Who hired you to dope my drink, in case I managed to get this far along the road without bein' shot?"

"I—I can't tell you that. He'd kill me if I did."

"I'll probably kill you if you don't," Jim Crane informed him. "Since I'm right here holdin' a gun, and he ain't, you'll live longer by tellin' me."

"It—it was just a joke. He wanted you to be doped so you'd pass out, and Sam Gordon'd think you got drunk here in town on the way to the ranch. That's it, Crane—just a joke."

"And who had the idea for this fine joke?" Crane demanded.

The frightened bartender gulped and glanced at the others in the room, who were keeping away from the bar. Then he looked at Jim Crane again.

"Let me put my right hand down on the bar," he said, in a low voice.

"Be careful while you do it."

The bartender kept his left hand above his head. He lowered his right to the bar, dipped his forefinger in some suds, and scrawled a name in white foam. Then, with a quick brush of his hand, he wiped it away after Jim Crane and Judge Burlowe had read.

"All right, hombre," Jim said. "Ought to make you drink what's in that bottle, but I'll let you off."

He went out into the street with Judge Burlowe. They got into saddles and rode out of town.

"Lew Lake, huh?" Jim said. "He must be right eager to have me put out of the way. I threatened to come back and see him some day. That was five years ago, but maybe he still remembers it. Afraid I've come to get him, is he? Ain't he man enough to fight fair?"

"Lew Lake ain't a man at all!" Judge Burlowe declared, hotly. "And it's not what you just said. He must know more than I thought he did. If he does—well, he doesn't want you to get to Sam Gordon."

CHAPTER VII.

SURPRISES.

THEY rode to the Wiggle Worm and loped down the lane to the house. Jim saw a few men working around the corral and others busy painting one of the big barns. Jim and the judge dismounted and tied their horses at the end of the veranda and started up the steps.

The front door opened and some-

body came out. Jim Crane's eyes bulged.

"Surprise!" Betty Harrison cried, rushing forward with hands extended.

Jim clasped her hands and felt his heart pound. Judge Burlowe laughed and went on into the house.

"Jim, I'm so glad you're here," she said. "It seems an age since I saw you."

Betty Harrison was the sort of girl to make any man's heart beat faster. She was more than pretty, and gave the impression, besides, of being wholesome, capable. She was twenty-one now, and Jim was twenty-four.

"I wonder what Mr. Gordon wants to see me about?" Jim said.

"I know." She smiled, and dimpled. "He's told me all about it, but I'm not to tell you. Only—Jim, I think it's splendid of him, and I think it's right for you. But let's not talk about that now. There's something else."

"What?" he asked.

"Come here, Jim." She took his hand and led him to the end of the veranda, where there was a seat hidden from the sight of the men working down by the corral. "Sit down."

Jim sat down. He wondered what this meant. Betty's manner was unusual as she sat beside him. She seemed embarrassed about something, which was unusual in her. She looked at him starry-eyed, then quickly away again.

"Well——" he asked.

"Oh, Jim! I—I don't know what to say. I've been hoping things would work out a certain way when you got here."

She swayed against him, and before he knew it Jim had put his arm around her shoulders. When he realized what he had done, he flushed and started to pull it away. But

she leaned back against it, and kept it there.

"Betty, I——" he began. "Oh, dang it!"

"What were you going to say, Jim? Maybe I'm waiting to hear it."

"I ain't got any right to say it. I reckon you know how I feel about you. But I'm only a puncher——"

"You're Jim," she said, softly, glancing up at him.

The look she gave finished him. Before he realized what he was doing, he had kissed her. And when he would have drawn away, he found that her arms were clasping him, and that she was kissing him in return.

"So that's settled!" Betty Harrison said. "I wanted it settled before you saw Mr. Gordon. I wanted you to say you loved me, and maybe wanted to marry me, when you thought you were only a poor puncher——"

"But I ain't said a thing," he protested.

"Maybe not with words, but you told me what I wanted to know. Are you trying to back out, Jim Crane? Don't you want to marry me?"

"Gosh, yes! But your pa will probably shoot me if he learns of me wantin' to."

"And you won't think I'm a fortune hunter, will you, Jim? Mr. Gordon doesn't think I'm that kind of girl, or he wouldn't have told me what he did. Maybe I'll have the H Bar some day—though I hope it won't be for years and years——"

"I reckon you're all twisted," he interrupted. "I reckon you mean that I'm the fortune hunter. A common puncher marryin' a girl whose folks own a big ranch——"

"You don't know how funny that is," she said, giggling. "And don't try to do any guessing. Kiss me

again, then go in and see Mr. Gordon. Judge Burlowe's prepared him for your visit by this time."

"I don't seem to understand any of this," Jim complained.

"You're to ride over to the H Bar with me soon as you're done with Mr. Gordon, and see the folks and spend the night. I've arranged it all. When we're married, I'll be a big help arranging things. Kiss me again."

JUDGE BURLOWE came out on the porch just in time to see that one, and cleared his throat in warning. Jim flushed, but Betty was radiant as she clung to him.

"It's all settled, judge," she said. "I reckon you'll have to iron out your black suit and wash your white shirt and collar, 'cause you'll have a marriage to perform right soon. You go in and see Mr. Gordon, Jim, and I'll wait for you here on the porch."

Bewildered, Jim Crane went into the house with Judge Burlowe. Sam Gordon was in the living room, propped up in a chair with pillows behind him. Jim thought he looked mighty sick. He smiled weakly and put out his hand, and Jim clasped it cordially.

"Sit down, Jim," the judge said, putting a chair beside Gordon's. "I'll let Sam do the talkin'."

Gordon was looking at Jim keenly.

"A fine young man!" was his decision. "I knew you'd come out well, my boy. Ned Beale's been writing to me about you, and he's praised you to the skies. Yes, I reckon you're what I'd want a son of mine to be."

The cattle king glanced through a window at the rolling acres running up to the hills, where Wiggle Worm cattle grazed. He gestured weakly.

"I made it all—the Wiggle Worm," he said. "It's a fine thing, Jim, to build somethin'."

"Yes sir," Jim agreed.

"The Wiggle Worm's somethin' to be proud of. I've been right proud of it. But I won't be here to enjoy it much longer, I reckon. I've got only a few weeks more, Jim. The old machine's breakin' up."

"You mean——"

"I'll be startin' down the sunset trail pretty quick. I'm not regrettin' it. It's the Wiggle Worm I'm worried about most. I'd hate to see it die, too."

"What are you meanin', sir?" Jim asked.

"Lew Lake, my nephew, is my only relative, and he's no good. Like his father before him—a drunkard, gambler, liar. I won't leave him the Wiggle Worm, so he can destroy somethin' I worked so hard to make a fine thing. I've thought it all out, and the judge has worked on it so it'll be legal."

Sam Gordon glanced through the window again.

"Wish I had a son of my own, but I haven't. Jim, I want you to be my son. I've been wantin' it for five years. I've always felt more or less responsible for your father——"

"You wasn't to be blamed for that, sir."

"Anyhow, I feel responsible, and I want to ease my conscience. Don't deny me that right, my boy. Five years ago, when I had you sent to Arizona, I planned that, if you developed right, I'd make you my heir—the heir to the Wiggle Worm—provided Lew Lake didn't straighten up and be a man. And I knew he wouldn't."

"Sir?" Jim gasped.

"I've made my new will, and it's ready to be signed. In it, I'm leavin' Lew Lake five thousand dollars

—which he'll probably drink and gamble away inside a month. That takes care of him legal. And the Wiggle Worm——"

He looked through the window again, and smiled.

THE Wiggle Worm," he said, softly. "It'll keep right on bein' a splendid outfit, and a credit to me, or it won't keep on at all. Lew Lake would disgrace it, wreck it. But you wouldn't Jim."

"Sir?"

"You understand how I feel about the Wiggle Worm, don't you?"

"I think so, sir," Jim replied. "You built it up out of nothin', and now it's famous all over the State. They know Wiggle Worm cattle wherever cattle are sold. Punchers would rather work for the Wiggle Worm than for any other outfit. I reckon you've a right to be proud of it."

"I thought you'd understand, Jim. To Lew Lake, the Wiggle Worm is nothin' but a mess of beef critters that mean money. Jim, I want you to be my son and heir. Lew Lake ain't worthy. I've had you trained for the job. I've got the papers all ready to sign."

"But——" Jim hesitated. "I ain't any relation. And you wasn't to blame for what happened to pa."

"It's either that, Jim, or I'll leave orders to sell off everything, cancel the Wiggle Worm brand, and let my money go to some charities I don't know except by name. The Wiggle Worm isn't goin' to live on after me 'less it lives decent and right. I'd rather kill it."

"I understand," Jim said. "But it must be worth——"

"It's worth a fortune, of course. But you'll be worthy of it. Not scared of it, are you? You can marry Betty Harrison. There's a

fine girl! I'm not afraid to trust you with the ranch. I want the Wiggle Worm to keep on livin'. Won't you take it, and let me call you son the little time I have left to me?"

"It—it doesn't seem possible," Jim said. The thing had dazed him.

"They call me a cattle king," Gordon smiled. "You'll be the crown prince of cattle land, I reckon. That's not a bad job. Buck Dale is still here, and he'll help you. I want you to take charge right away, and let everybody know you're boss. Don't be half-hearted about it. Be firm right from the start."

"Yes, sir."

"Lew Lake may try to raise a fuss. If he does, squelch him. I think he guesses what's intended. The judge has told me what happened to you on the way here. Lew has some friends among the men, who think they'd have an easy time if he got the ranch. You'll have to be careful, boy. Callin' for a show-down and havin' it over with him might be best."

"It's a big thing you're offerin'," Jim said, "and I don't deserve it."

"Responsibility would come with the riches, boy. Remember your father and mother, Jim. They'd be right proud of you. It's for the old Wiggle Worm, too, so she can go right on bein' a great outfit. You aren't afraid to tackle the job, are you?"

"Not if you want me to tackle it, sir."

"Thanks—son. Judge, get out those papers. I'm ready to sign them now."

Jim watched while the judge spread documents on the table, and Sam Gordon laboriously, and with evident pain, scrawled his name on them. Two of the Wiggle Worm

punchers had been called in, and witnessed the signature.

"There!" Gordon said. "One's my new will, and the other is an adoption paper, Jim. The judge will take care of 'em. Now you're my son. Don't ever forget it, Jim—carry on with the Wiggle Worm. Maybe I'll be lookin' down from my bunk house up yonder, watchin' how you do it."

"I'll do my best, sir."

"You go out and see Betty now, and tell her it's all settled. Oh, I know all about you two! She's told me enough. I'm hopin' you'll have your weddin' while I'm still here to see it, and kiss the bride. You ride home with her and see the Harrisons and spend the night at the H Bar. Then come back to me in the mornin'."

CHAPTER VIII.

GUN PLAY.

WHEN Jim went out on the porch, leaving the judge with Gordon, he found Buck Dale talking to Betty.

"All settled, boy?" Dale asked. "That's fine—boss."

Jim grinned. "I reckon it'll take me some time to get used to that boss idea," he said. "You're the boss. You go right ahead runnin' things as usual, Mr. Dale."

"It's Buck—to you."

"Thanks, Buck. I know a lot about ranchin' that I didn't know when you saw me last time, but I've still got an all-fired lot to learn."

"I'll go ahead as usual, Jim, at least till you've settled everything personal," Dale said. "I reckon it's not necessary for me to tell you to keep your eyes open."

Jim's smile fled. "I reckon not."

"And you don't want to have the idea, Jim, that all men fight fair. It

might be dangerous to have an idea like that just now."

"I'm understandin'," Jim replied.

"You'd better take a firm hand with the men right away. Some of 'em may try to walk over you and you want to show them who's boss. I've passed orders for them to assemble so you can look them over. Some are old and some are new. A few of Lew Lake's cronies are still ridin' for us."

"I'm understandin'," Jim said again.

"I'll have the men ready for you in about half an hour, except a few we got out on the range. Any special orders, boss?"

Jim grinned. "Givin' orders is somethin' I ain't ever done a lot of," he replied.

Buck Dale chuckled, and hurried away. Jim and Betty went to the seat at the end of the porch again. She snuggled against him and got another kiss, then grew serious.

"How are you going to handle it, Jim?" she asked.

"You mean about Lew Lake? I'll have to wait and see what happens, I reckon. There's more between Lew Lake and me than this business about the Wiggle Worm. Five years ago, I told him I'd come back and see him some day—'bout my pa."

"Be careful, Jim."

"Yeah. You reckon your pa will start gunnin' for me when he learns about us?"

"Oh, he knows about it already, and isn't throwing a fit," Betty said. "I told him I was going to make you propose to-day. When are you going to be married, Jim?"

He frowned. "There's somethin' to be done first. Everything's got to be settled. I don't want any-

thing hangin' over us after we're married—don't want you worryin'."

"You do what Buck Dale said, Jim—use a firm hand. Mr. Gordon is depending on you, and if you fail, the Wiggle Worm won't be anything but a memory. You can't let Mr. Gordon down now, Jim."

"I reckon not. I guess I'll go in and see him again for a minute before I meet the men."

He hurried into the house. Judge Burlowe was sitting beside Gordon, talking business. Jim gulped and seemed embarrassed, but finally managed to talk.

"It's about Lew Lake, sir," he said. "How do you want me to handle him?"

"That's somethin' for you to decide, Jim. Buck Dale has told him everything by this time, 'cordin' to my orders."

"I reckon I'll just have to wait and see what happens. If I don't do somethin', the men might think I'm afraid of him, and I couldn't have that. If I have him fired, it'll look like I'm afraid to have him stay, and am takin' advantage. I reckon I'll put it on a business basis. Long as he does his work right, he can stay on. Minute he doesn't, he's the same as any other hand. I'll keep our personal ruckus out of the business."

"That's a sensible idea," Gordon agreed, "but I don't think you can do it. Lew Lake will make it personal. Do as you please, Jim, but protect yourself and the Wiggle Worm. That's all I'm askin'."

AS he went out on the porch again, Jim Crane was undecided what course he would take. He saw that the men were gathered down by the bunk house, and Buck Dale motioned to him. His face grim, Jim went down the

steps with Betty Harrison. He mounted Spider, she her pony. Side by side, they rode to where the men were waiting.

About forty were there, the rest being at their work. They stood in groups, looking up at him, appraising him. Jim's eyes swept over them swiftly. He saw Lew Lake standing off to one side in a group with four others, his lips twisted in a sarcastic grin.

"I've explained to the men, Jim," Buck Dale said. "You're Sam Gordon's adopted son, heir to the Wiggle Worm, and the boss. The men are listenin', if you've got anything special to say to them."

Jim Crane rode forward a few feet more, bent over the pommel of his saddle, and looked them over again.

"I reckon all of you know my story," he said. "This here thing that's come to me is unexpected. I'm feelin' that I've been given more than a father and a ranch—I've been given responsibilities. Mr. Gordon wants the old Wiggle Worm to keep right on bein' a great outfit after he's gone—which I hope won't be for a long time."

He hesitated, looked them over again as they stood silently before him. He knew he would have to prove himself to these men. He would have to show himself to be up to the Wiggle Worm standard. For an instant, his eyes met those of Lew Lake, then traveled on.

"I'm here in Mr. Gordon's place," he continued. "Whatever I do or say, it's him sayin' and doin' it. I want you all to understand that. Buck Dale will go right ahead as usual. Same ranch rules. No changes at all, 'less they're necessary. If there's anybody who don't like to stay on, with me bein' here

in this position, he can get his time from Buck."

Lew Lake swaggered forward, urged on by the four behind him.

"You're makin' right big talk, seems to me," Lake said. "Tryin' to wear my boots. I'm the one to be boss here, and everybody knows it. And you and some of your friends—old Judge Burlowe, for instance—work on the mind of an old man who's sick and get him to do this. And that girl beside you helpin', thinkin' she'll marry the Wiggle Worm—"

"That's enough!" Jim Crane barked. "If you stay on here, Lake, you'll keep your tongue civil, and you'll do your work same as the others. You're only one of the hands to me, far as the ranch's concerned. You and me, we've got somethin' personal between us, but we needn't mix that up with ranch stiff."

"You think I'd stay on here, livin' in the bunk house and you in my place up in the ranch house, and me takin' your orders?" Lew Lake cried.

"If you ain't in the ranch house yourself, I reckon it's your own fault," Jim said. "Mr. Gordon probably decided you wasn't fit for the job of carryin' on. You've had the last five years to get over your wildness and learn to be decent."

"I'm not standin' for it!" Lew Lake cried.

"Then you can roll up your blankets and ride, Lake. But you're welcome to stay, if you do your share of the work and don't try to cause trouble. We won't have any trouble makers in the bunk house."

"No? I'll cause you plenty trouble!" Lew Lake howled. "When you went away five years ago, you threatened to come back some day and get me. Well, you're back—and here I am."

JIM saw that Lake was ready to go for his gun, and that his four friends were standing behind him. Jim's eyes grew narrow, and his jaws set. The rest of the men betrayed nervousness. Buck Dale was silent, for this was something for Jim Crane to handle all by himself.

Betty Harrison, on her pony a few feet away, shivered as she waited. She knew a show-down when she saw one. It was for Jim Crane to make the next move.

"Lake," Jim said, "I can see that you're all primed for trouble. Maybe you've coaxed some of the men to stand by you. I gave you a decent chance, and you wouldn't take it. You're through here. Roll up your blankets and ride. That goes for any of your friends, too. You're fired!"

"So you're firin' me off my uncle's ranch?" Lew Lake cried. "Think you can get rid of me that way, huh? Afraid to have me around, maybe. Yeah, I'm primed for trouble, any time you want to start it!"

Jim Crane deliberately dismounted and trailed his reins. With his eyes on Lew Lake's, he hitched up his chaps and pants. Then he strode slowly forward and stopped ten feet in front of the other man, to stand with his fists planted against his hips.

"You're fired!" Jim Crane repeated. "Get your things and get off the ranch. Buck will give you any pay that's due. And if we ever happen to meet again, Lake, remember that there's somethin' personal between us, and act accordin'. I can still see my father—" He stopped, choked with emotion, and his eyes grew misty.

Lew Lake thought it was a mo-

ment to his advantage. His right hand made a swift move toward his holster. The other men scattered out of the way; Betty Harrison screamed.

A gun flamed, but it was not Lew Lake's gun. Jim Crane's eyes had not been so misty that he couldn't see, nor had his momentary emotion put him off guard. He had taken a swift step to one side, and his six-gun was out of its holster before men realized he was going for it. Lake's gun was just leaving the holster as the bullet struck.

It hit Lake's gun and knocked it from his hand, smashed one of his fingers, sent him reeling backward. Weapon held ready, Jim Crane glanced swiftly at the four men who had betrayed association with Lew Lake. But none made a hostile move.

"I could have killed you then easy, Lake," Jim Crane said. "I've learned how to shoot durin' these last five years. You'll know what to expect now, if you ever come lookin' me up. Buck!"

"Yes, boss?" Buck Dale responded.

"See that he has that hand doctored, pay him off and make him ride. If those other hombres want to go along with him, it's all right with me."

Jim Crane holstered his gun and mounted Spider. He looked over at Betty Harrison and smiled.

"Let's be ridin', Betty," he suggested. "It's gettin' late, and we want to be at the H Bar before dark. I aim to have me a wedge of one of your mother's pies."

Betty Harrison's eyes were glistening, and she was smiling happily as she rode beside him down the shady lane.

CHAPTER IX.

TWO FROM FIVE.

WHEN Jim Crane returned to the Wiggle Worm the following morning, riding carefully, and alert for a possible ambush, he found that the four men had left the ranch with Lew Lake. Buck Dale reported that they had gone to town, spent most of the night in the saloon there, and had then ridden away, after purchasing supplies at the store, including extra guns and ammunition.

"You know what that means, Jim," Buck Dale said. "Lew Lake and his pals have taken to the hills. They're fixin' to ride the outlaw trail. I reckon we're due to have some trouble."

"Suppose so," Jim agreed.

"Lake was boastin' in town that he was intendin' to cause a lot of trouble for you and the Wiggle Worm. That finger you hurt when you shot him won't bother him for more'n a few days."

"If they start anything, we'll go right after 'em," Jim decided, "same as we would after any outlaws."

They did not hear anything of Lew Lake for some time. Jim spent the time getting acquainted with the men and the routine of the ranch.

At the end of two weeks, having heard nothing of Lew Lake, they began hoping that he and his friends had left the country. Jim attended to the ranch work, and visited the H Bar when he could. Neighbors dropped in to see Gordon and get acquainted with Jim. The man who was to inherit the Wiggle Worm and marry Betty Harrison was a man worth cultivating.

And there was considerable curiosity, too. They wanted to see what sort of man Gordon had se-

lected to carry on for him, knowing how he felt about the Wiggle Worm. The average opinion was that Jim Crane would do.

Then two nighthawks came riding in at dawn one morning, one of them slightly wounded, to say that a small herd had been stampeded during the night and three beef animals slaughtered wantonly.

The following day, several steers were found dead from poison beside a water hole, and the hole had to be fenced off. A fire started mysteriously in an upper pasture where the grass was dry, and swept along before the wind, burning fences and a couple of shacks.

"It's Lew Lake," Buck Dale said. "One of the nighthawks recognized him. He's commencing' to destroy Wiggle Worm property."

"It's because of me," Jim said. "I'm feelin' responsible for it."

"You aren't to be blamed a mite," Sam Gordon declared. "It was to be expected of Lake, Jim. What are you goin' to do about it, Buck?"

"Send a posse of trusted men after Lake and his gang and hunt them down," the foreman replied, promptly. "I've dealt with that kind before now, and so have you. The Wiggle Worm ain't to be annoyed by a bunch of worthless range tramps."

"While you're huntin' them in one direction with a lot of men, they'll maybe be up to mischief in another," Jim said. "We won't have any peace till that gang is broken up and driven off. It's because of me Lake is doin' this. And there's a personal matter between us, too. So it's no more than right that I should tend to this myself."

"What you mean, Jim?" Gordon asked.

"I'm goin' out alone and get him. I'll ride Spider, and travel till I cut

their trail. Buck can keep the regular ranch work goin', and use the men to guard property."

"It'll be five to one, boy," Gordon warned.

"Yeah, I know. But maybe the men are watchin' to see how I handle this. Wouldn't do for me to show weakness now, would it? This afternoon late, I'll ride over to the H Bar, like I was just visitin' Betty. I'll start from there."

"I don't like it," Buck Dale protested. "Still if your mind's made up, go ahead, Jim. I'll keep men scattered over the range, on guard."

"I don't know where I'll be," Jim said. "I'll ride till I locate them. There's only one answer to this, of course. Lew Lake gets me, or I get him. I'm sorry he's Mr. Gordon's nephew—"

"Not a drop of Gordon blood in him!" the master of the Wiggle Worm snapped. "His father's no-good blood, that's what's in him. I even found him stealin' from my cash box one night. Don't hold your hand on my account, son. Only, be careful. I don't want to lose you, Jim, and the Wiggle Worm can't."

JIM started for the H Bar before sunset and spent an enjoyable evening there. He said nothing of what he intended doing. He left the H Bar late, riding under a swimming moon, but at the end of a dark gulch he turned from the trail.

Keeping to the shadows as much as possible, and riding slowly, Jim worked his way into the hills. In addition to his six-gun, he carried a rifle. He watched for suspicious shadows, and stopped frequently to listen for sounds which might indicate trouble for Wiggle Worm property.

He was wondering where and how

Lew Lake would strike next. He already had stampeded and burned and poisoned. There had been no profit in that, only revenge. Revenge might satisfy Lew Lake, but not those who rode with him. So the Wiggle Worm could expect stock rustling next, Jim decided. Lake had had time to plan for the disposition of stolen stock.

The misty dawn found Jim Crane riding in the hills again. He picketed his horse in a secluded spot, and ate some cold food he had brought along. Then he went into a thicket and curled up on the ground to sleep.

The snorting of a horse awoke him a couple of hours later. He sat up, reaching for his gun. He peered through the brush and saw Spider, with ears uplifted, looking toward the edge of the little clearing where he was picketed.

Next he heard voices, and saw two riders in the brush, watching Spider. Jim recognized them as two of the men who had ridden away with Lew Lake. The wind carried their voices to him.

"It's that horse of Jim Crane's," he heard one of the men say. "He must be around somewhere."

"Been trailin' us, maybe. The horse is picketed, maybe Crane's takin' a snooze. If we can get hold of him and take him back to Lew, we'll see some fireworks."

They dropped out of their saddles, trailed their reins, and advanced cautiously to the edge of the brush, studying the ground. The tracks Jim's boots had made could be seen plainly. The tracks led to the place in the brush where he had been sleeping.

He watched the pair advancing, then saw them separate and come toward him from different directions. Jim silently drew back into

the brush and circled. When he was in a position where their backs were toward him, he stepped out into the clearing.

"Lookin' for me, gents?" he called.

They whirled, guns ready, to find Jim Crane standing there covering them. One dropped his gun instantly, and put up his hands. The other was less docile. He fired, and Jim felt a bullet graze his left shoulder.

Jim's answering bullet struck the man in the breast, and sent him down. The gunman's weapon spun to the ground. The second gunman made a leap for it, grasped it, and sprang up.

"Drop it!" Jim ordered.

But the other, in a panic, was blazing away. His shots went wild. Jim Crane pumped one slug at him, and sent him reeling backward with a shattered arm.

AT the edge of the clearing, he listened a moment. If the firing had been heard, it might bring Lew Lake and the other two men. The man on the ground was motionless now; the one with the wounded arm was cursing softly.

"Come here!" Jim snapped.

The man lurched toward him. His face was white, and blood was streaming from his wounded arm.

"Are Lake and the others near?" Jim asked.

"I'm not sayin'."

"It might pay you to do some talkin'. You'll soon bleed to death if I don't tend to that arm for you."

"If you take me in, I'll maybe be strung up. I'd rather bleed to death."

"Think it over," Jim said.

He listened again, but, hearing nothing to indicate the approach of the others, bridled his horse and pre-

pared him ready for the trail. He then got the other two horses, and led them over. The wounded man was on the ground, propped against a tree, almost unconscious.

Jim took his neckcloth, made a tourniquet, and stopped the flow of blood. Then he got the dead man across the saddle of the horse he had ridden, and lashed him there. He went back to the wounded man again.

"We're goin' to ride," Jim said. "I'll help you on your horse. You try to make a fuss about it, and I'll smash you on the head with my gun and tie you on. Get up!"

With some difficulty, he got the wounded man into his saddle, and tied his ankles together beneath the mount's belly. The wounded man clung weakly to the saddle horn. Jim mounted Spider and started off, leading the horse which carried the wounded man. The one bearing the dead man trailed behind the second at the end of a short section of lariat.

They left the clearing, went through an area of brush, and started down a slope covered with tall grass. Jim was out in the open now, a good target. He watched the hill behind, but saw nothing of Lew Lake and the others.

It was about six miles to the Wiggle Worm ranch house, but halfway there Jim ran across some of the men, and they escorted him in. Buck Dale was waiting by the corral.

"Two out of the five," Jim reported. "They thought they'd caught me asleep, and tried to jump me."

"We'll take care of 'em," Buck Dale said, his eyes glistening. "You get to bed and have some regular sleep now. Maybe I can make this wounded hombre do some talkin'."

CHAPTER X.

BATTLE UNDER THE MOON.

BUT the wounded man refused to talk, and there was, unfortunately, no direct evidence that he had participated in any of the raids Lew Lake had made. The men would have decorated a tree with him, but Jim Crane held out for law and order.

So they doctored his arm and, escorting him to town, advised him to get out of the country and never return. After all, he was only small fry; Lew Lake was the man the Wiggle Worm wanted.

For several days, they heard nothing of Lake except that he and his two remaining companions had visited the town late one night to compel the storekeeper to sell them additional ammunition and supplies, and had spent some time boasting in the saloon.

Life at the Wiggle Worm went on in a routine manner, but with everybody on guard. Sam Gordon was failing rapidly, and Judge Burlowe was a frequent visitor at the ranch house. Jim realized sorrowfully that Sam Gordon was putting his house in order.

He liked to have Jim sit beside him in the evening. He babbled considerably of the old days, and lived much in the past.

"You carry on, boy," he said. "You're makin' a good job of it. The men are commencin' to trust you. Keep the Wiggle Worm alive, keep her a fine outfit. When you and Betty goin' to be married?"

"As soon as things are quiet," Jim said.

"You're meanin' Lew Lake? Maybe he's left the country since you've shot up a couple of his men."

"I'm thinkin' not, sir. There have been traces of him."

"I wish I could see you and Betty married before I go. There's never been a mistress of the Wiggle Worm, and I'd like to see one here. She's a brave girl, Jim—range bred. She wouldn't hesitate to marry you now, and run the risk."

"There's a killer and his two friends runnin' the hills and waitin' for a chance at me," Jim replied. "It wouldn't be fair to Betty to risk makin' her a widow right away."

"Lew Lake'll never make her a widow," Gordon said, with conviction. "You can take care of him. I wish you could be married here, where I can see it. I'm not in any condition to travel to the H Bar, I reckon. A real range weddin', Jim, with all the folks here, and a big feed. It's my last chance to have a party."

Jim told Betty and her parents about it a couple of days later.

"We'll be married right away, Jim, at the Wiggle Worm," Betty said. "I'm not afraid."

"The thing to do," Harrison declared, "is for every outfit on the range to dump men into the hills and run that devil of a Lew Lake down. He's jumpin' only on the Wiggle Worm now, but next thing he'll be rustlin' stock from everybody. And there's always the danger he might pick up some more young devils and start a gang that'd make things serious around here."

"I don't want it to look like I called out an army to settle some-thing personal," Jim replied.

"It ain't a personal matter with you if he starts botherin' other folks and their property."

"I'll ride into the hills again and try to locate him and have an end of it."

"You've done your share already."

"But it's my job," Jim persisted.

"I'm the one Lew Lake is after. The raids on the Wiggle Worm will end when he's done for. This thing's got to be settled. I owe it to Mr. Gordon to settle it."

"Do as you like about it, Jim," Betty said. "But we'll go ahead with plans for the wedding."

THEY decided that Judge Burlowe would perform the ceremony, and that everybody on the range would be invited. But they would keep the affair as quiet as possible, they agreed, on account of Gordon's condition.

Word was sent out, after the actual date had been set. Betty and her mother were busy with clothes. Jim traveled to the county seat with one of the men to get the marriage license. He also bought clothes, and gifts for the bride—one from himself, and one from Sam Gordon.

Nothing had been heard of Lew Lake, but they didn't discount the menace he presented.

"It's not like that hombre to keep quiet this long," Buck Dale warned. "He's probably plannin' some deviltry. We'd better be watchin' day and night."

"What you reckon he'll try next?" Jim asked.

"There's no tellin'. But I've had them fancy yearlin's bunched in the south draw, and I'm keepin' a guard over 'em. They'd make a fine haul for rustlers; could be sold for ready money if they could be worked to the Mexican line, and across it."

Buck Dale spoke better than he knew. Lew Lake had his eyes on those yearlings. He had made arrangements for getting them away, had worked out a route to the border, and knew where he could dispose of the stock to advantage.

The two men remaining to him were eager for profit. They were

tired of the dangerous game of riding the hills simply to satisfy Lew Lake's spite. So Lake had decided to run off the stock, sell below the line, split with the others, and probably return when things had cooled down to pursue his personal vengeance.

Three men were guarding the yearlings at night, and two during the day. The mouth of the draw was about two miles from the ranch house, so that help could be sent quickly if there was an alarm.

But Lew Lake drew attention from the yearlings by suddenly appearing in town with his two friends and terrorizing the place. They took what they wanted without paying, shot up the saloon, and wounded two citizens who showed fight. It looked like Lew Lake's last visit, as if he were venting his spleen on the town before leaving for other parts.

The following afternoon, Betty came over to the Wiggle Worm, with her father, to conclude arrangements for the wedding. Harrison wanted to discuss with Sam Gordon some business details, too. He wanted to present Jim with some fancy breeding stock as a wedding present.

They remained for supper, and while Gordon and Harrison visited, Jim and Betty got their mounts and went for a ride. It was dusk as they came to the mouth of the draw where the yearlings were being held.

The night guard greeted them at the fire, and they dismounted to sit on the ground and listen to one of the men sing while the other played a guitar. The darkness deepened, and a big moon came up.

"Time to be ridin' back to the house, Betty," Jim said, at last.

"Yes. Father will be wanting to start for home."

THEY all stood up, and one of the three guards went back into the shadows to lead their horses up. A sudden cry of alarm came from him. Hoofs pounded, and a shot crashed.

"Clean 'em up quick! Save that Crane hombre for me! Make it pronto, and little noise!" somebody was shouting.

"Lew Lake!" Betty cried.

Jim thrust her down to the ground beside a rock, and sprang toward the horses. Lake and his two friends were riding furiously toward the fire. More shots crashed, as the guards met the attack.

Jim Crane had darted to a dark spot, and was kneeling to catch a sight of the enemy against the moon. He fired at one of the rearing horsemen and missed. One of the guards screamed as he was hit.

A raider toppled from his saddle and sprawled on the ground. Another rode straight at Jim Crane, his gun blazing. Jim sprang aside to avoid the charging horse, felt the blast from a gun scorch his face, fired two rapid shots in return, and brought the man out of the saddle.

Another of the guards had been wounded. The third was firing wildly into the brush. Lew Lake's two friends were down, but Lake himself was still somewhere back in the shadows, waiting for a chance to pick off Jim Crane.

"Stay where you are, Betty!" Jim called.

At the sound of his voice, a shot came from the brush. He snapped a shot in reply, and swiftly changed his position. The guard who had not been wounded was shouting something Jim couldn't understand. Another shot blazed, and as the bullet sang past his head Jim heard Lew Lake's horse crashing through the brush. He slipped through the

shadows to get near Betty, and protect her if there was need.

A pounding of hoofs reached his ears; then he understood what the guard was yelling. Riders were coming from the ranch, charging to the rescue. They had been ready, and had heard the sounds of the attack.

Lew Lake heard them also, and knew they would make short work of him if he allowed himself to be caught. He changed his position again, and emptied his gun in Jim Crane's direction.

"Crane!" he howled. "Jim Crane! You've got all my men, but you ain't seen the last of me! I'm comin' for you later, you son of a hemp stretcher!"

CHAPTER XI.

WEDDING BELLS AND BULLETS.

SON of a hemp stretcher! That taunt brought back to Jim Crane his grievance against Lew Lake. He remembered the night his parents had died, his mother on the blankets beside the muddy arroyo, the horses drowned, his father riding for help, his father's body swinging against the moon.

"I'll get him!" Jim muttered. "I'll get him if it's my last act on earth!"

The men from the ranch lighted flares and picked up the two companions of Lew Lake, to find that both were dead. New guards were left with the yearlings, and the others returned to the ranch house. Because Lew Lake was running wild somewhere, Jim and two other men rode home with the Harrisons and then came back to join the guard.

However, a week passed without a trace of Lew Lake.

"Maybe he's left the country," Buck Dale suggested. "His men are gone, and Lew was never one to ride alone. He'll probably go away

somewhere, and come sneakin' back when he thinks nobody'll expect him. That's bad, Jim. I was hopin' the thing could be settled."

"Yeah," Jim said. "That's a bad thing to be hangin' over a man. All I'm askin' is a chance to meet up with him again, on even terms."

"I'll have the men keepin' watch; they'll have their eyes and ears open," Buck said. "The men are all for you now. They're right glad you're goin' to handle the Wiggle Worm. And I'm afraid it won't be long now, Jim, till it'll be your job. The Old Man is failin' fast."

"I can notice it," Jim said. "I—I wish he could live a long time yet."

"He's a great old man. I came to the Wiggle Worm when I was a mere youngster, and I've never wanted to go anywhere else. I'm hopin' to stay here till I die."

"Far as I'm concerned, you can," Jim said.

"Don't you worry any, boy. Go ahead with your weddin' plans, and don't think of trouble."

The wedding was only a week off now. Sam Gordon was excited about it. He thought of many things to be bought, and kept men and wagons running back and forth between the ranch and the county seat. He bought new furniture for the living room and the bedroom Jim and his bride would use, and had the house painted, almost overnight. He made them take him out on the porch so he could watch men trimming the trees and hedge along the lane, painting the corral fence a glistening white, cleaning up the ranch-house yard.

"Wish I'd got married," he said regretfully. "It's a mistake for a man not to, though not every man's lucky enough to pick up an adopted son as good as mine. Jim, hope

you and Betty have sons. I'd like to have the Wiggle Worm carried on for generations."

They were to be married at high noon, so there could be a feast afterward and the guests could start the long drive to their homes before dark. Jim and Betty were to go to the county seat for a week's honeymoon. They would drive in the buckboard, and some of the men would escort them. Jim decided that looked cowardly, but Buck Dale explained it was a necessary precaution, with Lew Lake's whereabouts unknown.

"The men'll see you get there safe, and they'll go there to escort you back home," Buck said. "It's the heir of the Wiggle Worm they're protectin', not the bridegroom."

Jim was up at dawn the morning of his wedding day, as was everybody else on the ranch. The chores were done, and the men made the bunk house ring with their shouts as they dressed in their best clothes, greased their boots and hair, put on silk neckcloths by way of adornment, and speculated regarding the dancing which would be held in the big barn.

JUDGE BURLOWE rode out early and took charge, resplendent in a rusty black suit, freshly ironed, and white shirt and collar. He kept beside Sam Gordon as much as possible, trying to keep down the old man's excitement.

The guests commenced arriving, and the Wiggle Worm punchers greeted them and cared for their horses. Betty Harrison came with her parents in a light wagon, her personal baggage heaped high in the back, and all the H Bar cowpokes riding behind. Jim helped her out of the wagon and kissed her, then turned her over to the women.

More guests came. Vehicles of every description were packed around the corral. From the ranch-house kitchen and the cook shack came the spicy odors of roast meats, as the Chinese servants sweated over their pots and pans, jabbering with excitement.

The musicians arrived from the county seat, two fiddlers and an accordion player. They had stopped long enough in town to raise their spirits slightly at the saloon, but that was expected of them, and would not interfere with their playing.

Guests crowded the veranda and the big living room. The women went to the bedroom where Betty Harrison was being helped into her bridal gown. Jim wandered around grinning, greeting everybody, being presented to those he had not met before.

Sam Gordon, propped in his easy-chair, beamed upon everybody. The doctor from the county seat was there, watching him, telling him to be careful, not to excite himself.

"Shucks, doc, this won't kill me," Sam Gordon said. "My son's bein' married. The crown prince of cattle land—that's what he is! There's a fine boy, doc. I'm lucky to have him to leave behind. After this is over, I'll just sit here till the last minute comes, lookin' back over my life."

Jim went to his own room alone for a moment. He put on his new coat, and sat on the edge of the bed, thinking. He could scarcely believe, even now, that all this had come to him.

"I'm hopin' pa and ma know," he muttered. "It's what they'd want for me."

Out in the big room, somebody was shouting that it was almost time for the ceremony. Jim and Betty

were to be married just inside the front door, so that guests who could not get inside could hear and see from the porch. Men and women and children were crowding against the walls, getting their positions. The fiddlers began scraping, tentatively, and the accordion player warmed up his instrument.

Jim went out into the living room and stood beside old Sam Gordon's chair. The old man patted his arm. Jim went on to the front door, out to the veranda, to see that the men had a place from which they could watch.

"Come and get hitched, Jim," Judge Burlowe called. "The bride's ready."

The door of the bedroom opened, and Betty came out with her mother and some of the women. Jim gasped, she made so lovely a picture, and a lump rose in his throat. Life was good, after all; he wished only that his pa and ma could be here, to share his happiness.

Outside, somewhere, a gun cracked twice, and somebody shouted. Buck Dale howled at some of his men. The musicians, about to start the wedding march, hesitated.

At the end of the lane, a rider sat on his horse and looked at the house. The men on the veranda knew him instantly—Lew Lake. A third time he shot, to attract attention, then his shrill challenge came down the wind:

"I'm here waitin', Jim Crane! Come alone and get me, if you ain't afraid! Come on, you son of a hemp stretcher!"

"We'll take care of him," Buck Dale growled. "You men——"

"Wait!" Jim barked. "I'm the one he's askin' for."

"That devil planned this," Harrison said. "Lew Lake won't break

up my daughter's weddin'. You stay right where you are, Jim. Buck, let some of your men get their guns and horses and put an end to that skunk."

WAIT!" Jim Crane said, again. "This thing has to be settled. I can't have it said other men fought my battle. Can't you understand? There's somethin' between this man and me. You all know what happened to my pa. Maybe it's right I should have it out with Lew Lake."

"No, Jim," Betty begged, clutching his arm.

He looked down at her. "If I come out of this all right, we'll maybe have years and years together, honey," he said. "You wouldn't want to spend them with a man who didn't settle his own accounts."

She met his look bravely. "No, I—I reckon I wouldn't, Jim," she said.

"Everybody stay right here at the house, then." Jim Crane walked out on the veranda.

"Are you comin', Crane?" Lew Lake was shouting. "Are you comin' to settle it, man to man, or are you a coward and sendin' a bunch of punchers after me?"

"I'm comin', Lake," Jim cried in reply. "Dismount, and wait till I buckle on my gun."

Through the silent crowd, Jim went to his room and returned with his gun belt. On the veranda, he took off the coat and vest of his wedding suit, folded them carefully and handed them to Buck Dale.

He buckled on the belt and calmly took his six-gun from its holster and examined it. He slipped it back into the holster again.

"Lake!" he shouted.

"Yeah?"

"Dismount and go north of the lane, and I'll keep south of it, so we won't hurt any of these folks."

They saw Lew Lake dismount and trail his reins. He hitched up his overalls and strode away from the lane a distance, to a spot where there were no trees or brush to interfere.

Jim Crane carefully rolled up his shirt sleeves. Some of the women were weeping, and the men were whispering imprecations. Jim turned to Betty, and held out his arms.

She ran into them. "Jim!" she sobbed. "Oh, Jim!"

"Now, don't do any cryin'," he said, smiling at her. "That ain't right on a day like this. You just go into the house and wait for me."

"I can't, Jim. I—I'm going to watch. Oh, Jim!"

"Steady," he whispered.

He kissed her as she clung to him, then handed her over to her mother and walked slowly, deliberately, down the steps.

As his boots ground the gravel of the lane, hatred of Lew Lake seared his soul. Again he saw his father's body swinging against the moon. He felt Lew Lake had no right to hostility because he had been deposed as heir to the Wiggle Worm; Gordon would not have left the place to him even if there had never been a Jim Crane.

Jim swung off the gravel of the lane and walked along the grass, to the side. He walked slowly, but with steady tread, his arms swinging at his sides, his eyes fastened on his enemy.

LAKE was standing with his fists planted against his hips, waiting for Jim Crane to come closer. The veranda of the house was thronged with men and women; most of the women were

sobbing, refusing to watch. Men were gathered at the end of the lane, tense, their breath coming sharply. Inside the house, the doctor sat beside the old man, and Judge Burlowe stood in the doorway, ready to flash word of the outcome.

Jim Crane strode on, watching his enemy, half expecting a treacherous move. The sun was high overhead, and gave advantage to neither.

"Whenever you're ready, Lake!" Jim shouted. "I'm waitin'."

There was a moment of silence on the part of both, of lack of movement. Their eyes blazed at each other. Lew Lake's lips worked silently. Jim Crane's face was a mask.

Then, Lew Lake lurched to one side, and his right hand darted to his holster. Both men had their guns out at the same instant. Lew Lake's cracked first, but the shot went wild. Jim missed the first shot also.

That miss seemed to give Lew Lake encouragement. He yelled like a wild man and suddenly charged forward, darting from side to side, his gun blazing.

Jim felt a bullet fan past him only inches away. He sent a shot back, but realized, as Lake darted aside, that he had missed a second time. Lake was running straight toward him, now, and Jim Crane stood still.

Again Lake's gun flamed. Jim felt the bullet strike the back of his left hand, and burn a path across it, half jerking him around. He jumped a foot to one side as Lew Lake slowed in his reckless charge.

Again there came to Jim Crane a vision of his father's body swinging against the moon, of his mother dying by the bank of the arroyo, of Betty waiting at the house in her

wedding dress. His gun cracked again, and again he missed.

Lake fired, and the bullet tore through Jim's sleeve. "His gun throws to the right," he found himself thinking.

But Jim Crane was stony cold now. This was not a man before him, but a monster, to be exterminated. He forced himself to bring up his gun and take deliberate aim. He risked Lew Lake's next shot striking him in a vital spot. He fired.

Lake's shot came at the same instant, and again Jim felt a bullet rip his sleeve.

Lew Lake dropped his gun. He was swaying forward, clutching his throat. Jim could see a spot of red on his breast.

Lake tottered. His knees buckled, and he sank to the ground. He coughed once, then lay still. Jim

Crane holstered his gun and turned back toward the house.

A shrill yell came from the men at the end of the lane, and they came charging forward. The women on the veranda were screaming. Jim saw Buck Dale running toward him, and beyond Buck he saw the flash of a white dress and knew that Betty was running toward him also.

"Boy, boy!" Buck was howling.

"It's all right, Buck. Only a scratch on my hand."

Then Betty was in his arms, laughing and crying at the same time.

"You'll muss your pretty dress," Jim complained. "Wait till I wash my hands and get my vest and coat, and we'll go on bein' married. And we won't be needin' the boys to escort us to the county seat. Not now."

MULE SCARCITY

THE much maligned mule is said by old cowmen to outlast any horse on a long trek. Despite this valuable trait, the mule is fast disappearing. Cowmen have neglected the breeding of mules during the past few years so that, at the present time, there is an actual shortage of both jacks and jennets. William E. Morton, of Kansas City, who is secretary of the Standard Jack and Jennet Registry of America, advocates the return of mule shows at State and county fairs.

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STALKER IN THE CANYON

By GUTHRIE BROWN

Author of "Lion-tamer Slim," etc.

HE was a rangy, black-haired puncher with the flush of health in his olive cheeks and the glow of outdoor living in his dark eyes. There was a springiness to his step in spite of the high-heeled boots and heavy chaps of worn cowhide. He pushed open the doors of the saloon and stood a moment peering through the smoke haze, his nose wrinkling with distaste at the acrid smell of the place.

He walked the length of the room, carefully looking over the faces of the men there.

At last he saw the one he sought. It was bent over a beer mug at a corner table. The cowboy paused at the table edge and looked down.

"You're Bixel?" he asked.

The man hastily wiped his lips, a startled look coming into his sallow countenance. Washed-out eyes under straggling, mouse-colored hair lifted briefly to the face of the young

man and shrank uneasily away. He mumbled:

"Gosh, I'd know you anywhere. Set down."

The cowboy took one of the wire chairs, and the other fumbled in a breast pocket. He brought out a sheet of folded paper, dirty, and showing the effects of long travel. Bixel shoved it across the table and said, "Read it."

The cowboy unfolded the paper, on which the writing was in a cramped, but legible hand. Astonishment grew in his face as he read, to mingle shortly with bewilderment and incredulity. He looked up, and his voice sounded unnatural in his own ears when he spoke.

"Is this true?"

The dissipated face of Bixel took on a degree of dignity. "As true as I'm settin' here, Jack. I write it all out, so's you could take it with you."

The cowboy reread the sheets, and the hand that held them was not too steady. He looked up again, and Bixel cringed before the expression in the dark eyes.

"Why didn't you tell this long ago?"

Bixel was shaking, partly with fear, partly with the drink that was in him. He pointed a finger at the sheets.

"I told why, in there. I hated Frank Day. He stepped in when Hawley and me was all set to fleece that tenderfoot of a cool thousand. None o' the rest ever would 'a' happened, if he'd kept his nose outa what was none o' his business."

"In other words," Jack's tone was edged, "an honest man should stand by and let crooks have their way."

Bixel took a long pull at the beer mug, and again that hint of dignity came into his bearing. "I'm gettin' old, and mebbe I look at things some different now. I ain't tryin' to alibi

none, but it was Hawley's idee. He says to me, 'Le's us catch Frank Day out on the range and give him a trimmin'. That'll maybe teach him to keep his beak where it belongs.' Well, I was agreeable, 'cause I coulda sure used my share o' that thousand. Hawley says, 'We'll git his gun offa him, and then we'll give him the works.' You see, we thought Frank'd put up his hands when Hawley got the drop on him. Instead o' that, he whipped out his Colt, and Hawley, the fool, fired. He missed, then Frank fired—and didn't miss."

"And did he kill Hawley?" asked Jack.

"Nope, just kinda creased the beggar so he was sorta groggy and crazy like. When he fell off his horse he kinda straightened out and twitched a time or two and lay still. I sure thought he was finished, and so did Day. Frank sat there in his saddle a minute, starin' down, awful white. Then he rode away, like a bloody cyclone. I guess," said Bixel reflectively, "it might take a decent man that way, sorta strike him all of a heap and make him act before he stopped to think."

The intent dark eyes of the cowboy compelled the speaker to go on.

"Well, Hawley set up pretty soon and began feelin' of his collar bone and cussin' to beat time. And I was just goin' out to him—"

"Why weren't you with him?" Jack interrupted.

"Well, you see I was agin' throwin' down on Frank, when I got to thinkin' it over, 'cause I was afraid he might grab for his gun, and Hawley says, 'You make me sick! You stay in the woods here, then, till I get him disarmed, if you're so chicken-hearted.'"

"Well, as I said, I was just goin' out to him when this here Liester shows up, ridin' down the gulch.

And I guess Hawley was kinda loony from the creasin' he'd got, cause he thought it was Frank comin' back to finish him. So he starts cussin' and blazin' away like a crazy man, never even tryin' to stand up. And Liester shot him dead where he sat. Then *he* lit out, and I lit out. And—well, that's all."

"All," said Jack darkly, "except that you let Frank Day skip the country thinking that he'd killed a man."

"Well," said Bixel, "I was sore at Frank, you see, and it kinda tickled me, him lightin' out when he was innocent. And was Liester surprised when the sheriff never had a suspicion it was him! He kept a dog-gone tight mouth, and you can bet your neck that I kept one. But—well——"

Bixel hesitated, and drank the last of his beer. "When I heard about what Liester was doin' now—well, I couldn't hardly stomach that. That's dirty. So I hunted you up to find you and tell you the truth. And you—and you don't even think o' buyin' me a drink!" Bixel was on the edge of a crying jag.

Jack bought the drink, shoved a bill into the man's hand, took up the paper, and left. His head was half reeling with the things he had heard; but a strange, wild happiness was mounting through his bewilderment. He had not realized before how intensely lonely he had been.

IT was a fertile and lovely land that lay northwestward below the Curicanti Rim. Jack's eyes lighted as he looked across it to the dim blue shimmer of the low-lying hills beyond. He was nearly at the end of the trail, and his heart was beating hard as he picked his way down through a break in the rim, toward the bottom of the deep gorge

that opened out into the ranch-dotted valley.

A sharp explosion tore apart the summer peace of the late afternoon. Jack pulled his horse up sharply. The echoes of two shots, in quick succession, beat between the close canyon walls. Only two, then a blank of silence. The sound had come from far below him, near the stream that flowed in the bottom of the gorge.

There was something ominous to him about those shots, and about the unnatural stillness that followed them. He didn't want to turn aside to investigate, but an impulse stronger than the eagerness which had driven him for a week of continuous riding sent him down into the canyon bottom. He took his bearings before he started, and so was able to come out close to the place from which the shots had sounded.

The brush and timber became thicker as he descended. He had to get off and lead his horse. Suddenly he heard a shout. He stopped.

"Curt, come here, quick!" he heard, and another voice, from further down the canyon demanded, "What's the matter?"

"Get up here, you sap!" yelled the first speaker. "And quit askin' fool questions."

Jack could hear a horse crashing through the brush below him, coming up the gorge. He tied his own own animal to a tree and went on down, quietly.

From a thick grove he saw two cowboys in a patch of grassy bottom. They were bent above a man on the ground. At some distance a saddled horse was grazing. It, evidently, belonged to the prone man.

Jack's hunch had been right then, that there was something evil in those shots. He was about to step

out into the open when another man appeared on the scene. He was a big, black-bearded man, and he reined his horse in abruptly when he saw the group at the side of the creek. He called:

"Curt! Benny! What's the matter there?"

"Come and see for yourself," Curt told him. "Somebody'll sure pay for this, Borchardt."

Borchardt got off his horse and came slowly toward them. Suddenly he uttered a cry and sprang forward to kneel by the form on the ground. Jack heard him say brokenly:

"It can't be! It can't be him! Who in the world would ever harm Frank Manning?"

Jack felt as if a suffocating grip had suddenly tightened on his throat. Frank Manning! No! No, it couldn't be! Fate would not be so cruel as that, after a wait of twenty years! But for the awful weakness that had taken possession of his limbs he would have burst out of the trees, crying his protest. Dimly he heard Curt's voice again.

"Benny, you beat it for town and get Sheriff Cassell up here. Borchardt and I'll wait till he comes."

Benny, plainly uneasy in the presence of death, was on his horse almost before the words were out. Suddenly Borchardt leaped to his feet, his eyes flashing:

"Boys, I have it! As I come down the cabin, I saw somebody ridin' the rim. He was on a brown horse, and I *thought* he was goin' almighty slow and cautious. I bet that's the man that did for Frank. Likely he was stalkin' him. A while back I noticed that brown horse had disappeared. The jasper musta gone on down toward the valley."

Borchardt turned to seize his bridle reins. "You light out for the sheriff, Benny, and you stay here, Curt,

while I see if I can't pick up the trail of the killer."

"But," said Curt, "who on earth could it be, Borchardt? I never heard of a soul that had a word to say against Frank."

"Somebody with an old grudge against him, likely." Borchardt spoke from the saddle. "I was sure, when I saw that bird up there, that he was new to this country, 'cause he seemed to be feelin' his way along."

"I can't say," Curt objected, "that I exactly fancy the idea of hangin' around here alone, with a killer loose in the canyon. Maybe he'll come back."

Borchardt suggested: "You hide in the bushes, with your gun out. The blackguard," he added with vicious emphasis, "won't be comin' around here very soon when I get on his trail. My best friend, done in by a dirty——" He put spurs to his horse. "I'll try to cut him off before he gets outa the canyon."

He was gone in a whirl of spurring gravel, hard on the heels of Benny. Curt retreated swiftly from sight and took up position against the hillside behind a clump of juniper.

JACK had sunk to the ground, so overwhelmed by the rapid succession of events that it was several minutes before he could think connectedly. He stood every chance of being arrested for the murder of the man he had come nearly a thousand miles to see! The man he had wanted to see above every one else in the world! The thing was incredible, fantastic. But there it was. He was a stranger in the country. There was no one to support his word, no one to identify him. Only that man lying so still out there could have identified him——

The throat of the cowboy closed. He was all alone again, more lonely than ever because of the hope which, for a little while, had been like a bright light, leading him on. He was not only alone, but he was in danger. He must get out of here!

He was back to his brown horse before his mind really snapped into action. Hand on the saddle horn, he all at once paused and flung up his head. Run away and leave that killing unavenged? Not much! It was his place to bring the killer to justice. Yes, it was his duty, and he shouldered it gladly.

He began really to think. Borcherdt had assumed that the killer had gone down the canyon. That, somehow, did not look reasonable to the cowboy. It seemed to him that the man would much more likely go up the gorge, into wilder and more rugged country, that he would take the direction in which he was least likely to meet people. It was certainly a wild and lonesome country through which the cowboy himself had just come, an ideal place for a man to shake off pursuit.

The conviction grew upon Jack that the way to go was up the canyon. He would circle in above the scene of the killing and see if he could pick up a trail. He had to go slowly and carefully till he was safely out of hearing of the cowboy, Curt, and it was half an hour before he got down into the bottom of the gorge again.

Immediately he picked up the track of a running horse in the sunset light, following a well-defined trail up along the bottom of the gorge. But after a short hundred yards he lost it. He beat back and forth for some time, trying to pick it up again. He worked hurriedly. The sheriff had been sent for, and Jack had no idea how far they

would have to go to get him, or how soon the officer would be tracing out this same trail he was working on. He came to the conclusion that his quarry had taken to the creek.

This guess proved correct. The rider had followed the creek bed for a half mile or so. The wet tracks were plain where he had come out of the water. A little farther on, Jack's horse stepped on something that seemed to roll under his foot. The cowboy looked down. At the edge of the brushy path lay a quirt of braided rawhide. It was a slim, light whip, about twenty inches long.

Jack shoved his find into his boot and rode on. But it was beginning to get dark, and he must hunt some safe place to lie up for the night. He worked his way up to the base of the rim and found a dry bed of sand under a shelf of rock. He had crossed a long shale slide to get to this; and, by the purest luck, the shale slid behind him enough to wipe out his track.

For, worn out both from exertion and sorrow, he slept like a log and wakened with the sun in his eyes to hear voices below him. They came up to him clearly through the sharp morning air.

"But where in the devil could he have got to, sheriff?"

"I dunno," drawled a slow, dry voice, as if the matter were the last thing on earth the speaker was interested in.

"Well," the other was a younger voice, "it's a darn funny business, if you ask me. He chases up and down both sides o' the creek, like he was lookin' for somthing, and then he gets off his horse, and gets on again, and rides up to the bench here, and then evaporates, far's I can see."

JACK could have groaned aloud. They were on *his* trail instead of that of the killer! This was worse and worse. Not being experienced in these matters, and with a single idea in his head, he had snarled himself up in the business worse than ever. He could not see either man, but listened again.

"What are we gonna do, Cassell? You go up the canyon and me down, and see if we can cut his trail again?"

"No, I guess not," drawled the voice of the sheriff. "You better go on back home, Tad. I'll set here and think a while."

Jack heard the departure of the deputy and presently that of the sheriff himself, moving toward the bottom of the canyon. With speed and silence the cowboy rolled his pack and stepped softly away in the direction of his hidden horse. He saddled and rode through the timber until he found a break in the rim. He went up through this and into the forested country above. The day before he had seen a swale that held a spring and knee-deep grass. He hung his saddle in a tree and turned his horse loose to graze. He had taught the animal to stay in the vicinity of the saddle, and had left him before for as much as three days at a time. He could only hope that the trick would work as well in this strange country as on the bronco's familiar range.

He still had two days' grub with him. He took that, and a blanket. He was banking everything now on a guess, that the killer would come back for that quilt. He worked his way down into the gorge to a spot where he could overlook the place where he had picked up the quilt.

It was about the toughest thing he had ever tackled—lying up there among the spruce trees, inactive, waiting for something to happen, not

knowing what second he might be discovered. In the middle of his second afternoon there, while he was dozing in the warm sun against the rocks, he again heard a voice below him.

It asked, out of a complete stillness, "What you lookin' for, Jess?"

The sheriff! How could he have got so close without Jack hearing him? The cowboy carefully parted the screen of bushes in front of him and saw a rider in the trail below. Borchardt! And where had *he* come from? The black-bearded man had jerked about with a hand on his hip, the other clutching his bridle reins. Subconsciously Jack noticed the great size of the hand. Borchardt laughed, his tone a little shaky.

"Great guns, Cassell, you might's well kill a man as scare him to death! I thought that murderer must've sure got the drop on me. Where in thunderation did you come from?"

"Oh," was the answer, "I just thought I'd mosey up here and have another look around."

Jack made out the speaker now, a thin, waspish-looking man with leathery features and an old black hat shoved back on a gray head. He certainly was not Jack's idea of a sheriff. He sat on a boulder in the shade of a bush, arms clasped about one bony leg, knee drawn up to his chin. His faded clothing blended so well with the background that it was little wonder he had not been seen.

Borchardt laughed. "I s'posed you was clean outa the county by this time. You'd give out that you believed this killer was headed for the line. I'd no idea you'd come back to look this canyon over again."

"How come you to be up here?" asked Sheriff Cassell.

Borchardt looked as if surprised.

"Why, I was just tryin' to do the right thing by Frank. Ain't I the best friend he ever had around here? I thought mebbe I'd pick up some little clew that'd help you out, if you didn't catch the murderer before."

"And did you find anything?"

Borcherdt shook his head. "Not a thing. I been over every inch o' the ground and didn't get a smell."

"Looks like we're up against it, don't it?"

"It sure does. Where you goin' now?"

"Oh, I dunno. Guess I'll jest kinda keep on lookin' around."

"I'd like to ride along with you," Borcherdt suggested. "I might see something you'd overlooked, and help out a little."

"I'll tell you," said the sheriff briskly, "how your really can help me. Go on down to the valley and tell Tad Endsley to hold up that Redman auction sale if he can. I don't believe I can make it down there by to-morrow. Will you do that for me, Borcherdt?"

IT was plain that Borcherdt didn't like the idea too well, but he could not very well refuse. And Jack had a distinct impression that Cassell was getting rid of his volunteer assistant purposely. What did that mean?

For an hour, after Borcherdt had ridden down the canyon, Jack lay still in his retreat, breathing lightly and evenly. Below him, the sheriff sat on the boulder, occasionally biting off a frugal scrap of chewing tobacco and masticating thoughtfully, sitting with one knee under his chin for a while, and then the other. At last he rose, made a leisurely survey of his surroundings, and ambled along the creek bank a short distance. He disappeared around a

grove of trees and presently reappeared leading a saddle horse. He mounted and turned upstream.

Jack waited until all sound had completely faded, then began swiftly to gather up his few belongings for departure. He couldn't safely stay around here any longer. For some reason that doddering old sheriff was suspicious—or maybe he was just stupid. At any rate, such an old has-been would never run down the killer of Frank Manning. And now Jack would have to give up his plan to wait for the killer to come looking for that quirt. Some other plan must be worked out.

Jack got to his knees for a last careful survey of the slope below him. Everything was clear. He stood up and moved noiselessly long the trail to a little spring where he had been getting his water. He had not dared go down to the creek for it because of the danger of leaving a track. He stooped among the rocks at the spring for a last drink, then rose and looked the vicinity over to be sure he had left no track or other telltale clew.

"Lost anything?" a voice behind him inquired conversationally.

Jack spun toward the sound, so dumfounded that, for the moment, he had no other sensation. Beyond the spring stood Sheriff Cassell, thumbs hooked in his belt, his mild old eyes squinted a little.

Hardly believing his senses, Jack could only stare. The sheriff suggested in the same every-day tone:

"You might pass me whatever you're packin' in the way o' hardware."

The cowboy unbuckled and handed over his belt. The sheriff had no gun in sight. Maybe he wasn't even carrying one, but certainly gun play wasn't going to help this situation.

"That all?" Cassell asked.

Jack nodded, his face a study in dismay and bafflement.

Cassell laughed. "And I'd gamble that you're tellin' the truth, too. Young feller, you got me stumped. You step out here, in the wildest canyon in forty counties, and kill you a man. Then, with the best chance at a get-away that the sun ever shone on, you hang around the country like a cow that's got her calf hid. You ride along the base o' the rim—and go up in smoke, far's I ever been able to make out. Then you light out, up *over* the rim, this time, and hang your saddle in a tree and turn your horse loose. Which so gets me thinkin' in circles and talkin' to myself that I figger I oughtn't to take you in yet, but wait and find out what you'll do next. Then you go down in the canyon again, and lie up in the brush for two days."

The sheriff sighed and shook his head. "I'd like to hung around and seed what you'd do next, only it begun to look like you was departin' permanent this trip, so I reckoned I'd better take a hand."

Jack was sure that his feelings must closely resemble those of a fly in a spider's web. He stood with sagging shoulders, wondering dully just how long this run of bad luck would last. He'd made a mess of the whole business, and the sheriff, whom he had sadly underrated, had shown him up. He raised his eyes at a question.

"You ain't feelin' talkative?"

Jack shook his head. What was there to say, or do?

"Well, come on then," said Cassell, "and we'll go get that horse o' yours."

As Jack stepped forward in obedience to the command, he felt the

quirt still hidden in his boot. He stopped short, and stared at Cassell. An idea had flashed upon him, an idea that seemed utterly fantastic, but—

When he spoke, his voice was so tense with excitement that Cassell turned rather more quickly than was his habit.

"Sheriff, can I ask you a question?"

Cassell looked at him quizzically. "I reckon there ain't no law against it."

THE office of Sheriff Cassell wasn't much bigger than a hat box. The four men made a fairly snug fit—Cassell at his desk, his deputy, Tad Endsley, lounging against the closed door, Borchardt slouched in the one comfortable chair, and Jack seated at the end of the desk.

Borchardt was the last to enter, and Cassell had told him:

"This is the rim rider whose trail we been followin', Jess. Seein' as how you tried so hard to help out on this man hunt, I thought you'd oughta be in at the show-down."

The black-bearded man looked at Jack a moment, then laughed as he seated himself.

"Best day's work you ever done, Cassell, bringin' him in. If only poor old Frank could know—"

The sheriff said rather quickly, "Yeah." He turned to Jack. "Well, young feller, say what you got to say, and make it snappy. I've fiddled along with you more'n I'm used to doin' with killers."

Jack began quietly. "I'll have to give a little history first, sheriff. I'll make it as short as I can. Some twenty years ago, and a long way south of here, a man named Frank

Day met a man named Bill Hawley on the high range."

Both Borchardt and the officer stiffened slightly in their chairs. Both were old enough to have heard that story. Jack went on:

"Frank Day had met up with Hawley and a man named Bixel in a saloon, sortly before this meeting. Hawley and Bixel were all ready to fleece a tenderfoot, and Day saved him from them. They decided they'd catch Day and give him a beating, as a reminder to attend to his own business. They waylaid him on the range. Hawley threw down on him, and told Day to drop his gun. Instead, Day reached for it, and Hawley let go. He missed. Day didn't miss. Bixel was back in the trees, lying low till Hawley should need his help. He saw his partner tumble from the saddle, saw Day sit on his horse for a minute looking at the fallen man, then leave." Jack paused, and reached into his pocket. "The rest of the story is here, sheriff."

He handed over the smudged sheet of note paper. Cassell read intently, and looked up. He said sharply:

"Well?"

Jack said soberly: "Frank Day rode a long way. He changed his name, and settled down to make money in cattle. He made it, and every month he sent a check back to the place he'd come from. He'd left—he'd left a boy back there. The kid didn't have any mother, but his dad had left him with fine folks. And the boy always thought that his dad was dead, that the man who signed himself 'F. Manning' was a partner of his dad's. He didn't know his dad was alive until he got that." Jack pointed to the message in the sheriff's hand.

There was a dead silence in the office before the sheriff said slowly:

"So Frank Manning is Frank Day, and you're his son."

"That's right. I'm Jack Day."

Cassell looked down at the paper again. "Can we get hold of this man Bixel for a witness?"

Jack replied slowly, "We won't need him."

"Huh?"

"Because," the cowboy went on in the same deliberate tone, "Liestler, who killed Hawley, is sitting in this room."

Dead silence again, while the sheriff stared at the speaker, then turned on Borchardt.

Borchardt stood up, his laugh sounding like a rumble. "Well, can you tie that? Of all the brazen stunts, for a killer to try and pin a crime on a man——"

JACK had not moved. He said quietly, "First you kill a man and let somebody else take the blame. Then you follow up the man who took the blame, who thought he was a murderer, and blackmail him. That's the thing that made Bixel come across. He said that was too dirty for him. Frank Manning has been paying you to keep still. Likely the reason you killed him was that he refused to pay any longer, would rather be dead than go on the way he was. And you throw the blame for *that* killing on some one else, too.

"After you'd killed my dad and run up the creek a mile or more, you suddenly got the idea of laying the crime on the rim rider you'd seen. And you sure worked it smooth. You came back a different way from the one you took up the canyon when dad fell. And you acted awful heart-broken, when you got back to where you'd struck him down." Jack was

trying to keep feeling out of his voice.

Borcherdt stood with his hands in his pockets, a sneer on his face.

"You got a wonderful imagination, boy. In the first place you ain't got a lick o' proof who you are, and in the next place you ain't got a lick o' proof for any of the rest o' your wild talk."

Borcherdt suddenly turned on Cassell. "Frank Manning was my friend! You gonna set there and let this four-flusher get away with this?"

Cassell told him, "Talk don't break no bones. Well, young feller?"

Jack drew the quirt from his boot. He still spoke to Borcherdt, whose eyes had flicked the least bit at sight of the whip.

"You're a cool one, Liester. I happened to remember yesterday, after the sheriff caught up with me, that he'd asked you if you were looking for something. When I asked Cassell about it, he said you seemed to be. You were looking for this quirt."

"Never saw the thing before," returned Borcherdt. "Too thin, fella, too thin."

Cassell said, "Not conclusive, young feller. Why monkey around like this? Get that feller Bixel up here, and if he can identify Borcherdt as Liester——"

Jack nodded. "He can, all right—if you can get the dye out of Liester's beard."

Cassell himself saw the big man's start this time. But the latter laughed. "Of all the——"

"I was looking," said Jack to the sheriff, "for a red-bearded man—Bixel's description. Liester was close enough to me, there in the canyon, so's I noticed the hair on his hands was red, but I hadn't a suspicion of him, till I remembered that you'd asked him if he was looking

for something. I don't know," Jack added, "why he'd disguise himself, sheriff, unless he's got other notches on his gun. He'd think he was safe on the Hawley killing."

Borcherdt continued to laugh, but it sounded forced this time.

There was a knock at the door. The deputy sheriff opened it a crack, and held a whispered consultation with some one outside. He turned to the sheriff as he shut the door, a smile on his face.

"Doc says Frank has an even chance to live."

Jack gasped, "He's alive? *Alive?*"

But the cowboy was not heard in the sudden uproar that filled the little room.

Borcherdt, or Liester, as his action proved, had sprung for the door and hurled the deputy aside. But before he could get the door open, the sheriff was across his desk like a cat. A gun butt descended upon the back of Liester's head, and he wilted. Cassell stood astride the inert hulk and bit sparingly into a black plug of tobacco as he remarked complacently, "Give himself away when he thought there was a chance for Frank to identify him."

Jack seized the officer's arm. "Is my dad alive?" He shook the arm.

Cassell nodded, and Jack demanded, "Why did you let me think he wasn't?"

Cassell looked at him. "I had the doc give out that Frank hadn't a chance, 'cause I sorta figgered it'd be a good idee not to let the killer know he wasn't a killer—yet. Better dust up to the doc's place, young feller. Tad, you show him the way."

Frank Day Manning, or Frank Day, as the valley soon learned to call him, got well, largely because of a long lost son at his bedside.



KP PILGRIM

By JOSEPH F. HOOK

Author of "Peavies For Two," etc.

A SUDDEN silence gripped the small knot of ranchers and their women as the sheriff raised his gun and held it poised by the barrel. Scattered all around were household furnishings, wagons, saddles, harness equipment and machinery—the hundred and one things that had been a part of the KP spread, one of the oldest in Nevada.

Horses stamped and milled in the corral, fighting flies and hunting fruitlessly for shade. Cows and calves bawled through the bars at one another, while old bulls answered

the challenge of the younger ones in shrill trumpeting. The vanes of the windmill rattled, and the pumping jack squeaked.

"Going! Going! *Gone!*"

Down came the butt of the sheriff's gun on top of a round oak table. The thud brought tears into women's eyes, and the men's expressions became grim.

For, with the descent of that gun, the KP had passed into history, sold by the sheriff to satisfy the debts against it, by order of the court.

Young Rick Polson was without a home. Years of reckless expansion,

against the advice of older heads, had done the trick. He had mortgaged everything he possessed to buy more land and cattle, figuring that, when the market took an upward trend, he would cash in and make a killing.

But delayed interest, overdue notes, accumulated taxes and a host of other expenses had fallen due before that time, forming a tidal wave that had, financially speaking, swept the young rancher off his feet, leaving him a bankrupt.

The tense silence continued for some time after the thud of the sheriff's gun butt against the table. Then it was shattered by a loud, discordant laugh as "Blackie" Dawson slammed a thick wad of bills on the table.

"There y'are, sheriff," he bellowed triumphantly. "Count 'em, and then gimme the deed. I own the KP now. Me, Blackie Dawson, the sheepman you ranchers hate. Take a look at that dough and let it be a lesson to you. I made that from sheep, not cattle. I wonder how soon you hombres will get wise to yoreselves, and leave the range to them as can make money out of it."

An angry murmur arose from the crowd, but no one made a move. Instead, all eyes were fixed on Rick Polson, who was moving toward Blackie with a set expression on his pale face. Suddenly he lashed out with a fist, and knocked the sheepman sprawling. He let the man get to his feet, and knocked him down again.

Then the sheriff stepped between them, kicking a knife from Blackie's hand as the latter got to his knees and measured the distance between himself and the young rancher.

"I'll get you for this!" Blackie snarled at Rick, wiping the blood from split lips.

The angry ranchers began to close in on the sheepman. The sheriff, however, jerked him to his feet, gave him a push toward his horse, and handed him a bit of pertinent advice.

"Better fork leather, Blackie, and hustle offn this spread, even if you do own it. I can't do nothing if this crowd rushes you. You might've shown more sense than to make a crack like that, about cattlemen going into sheep."

Blackie picked up the knife and returned it to the sheath. Then he mounted, twisted around in the saddle, and jeered at the crowd.

"This is only the starter, you guys," he gritted. "You've tried to haze me offn the range, and see what it's got you. You even tried to tie me up with a coupla dry-gulchings. Well, I'll get even with you all, even if the sheriff is on yore side."

SILENT curses followed him as he rode away. Then Rick Polson turned on his heel and walked to the house. His footsteps echoed hollowly, accusingly, as he passed through the empty rooms. He paused only long enough to buckle on his guns.

The men and women were still there when he came out. Hands reached out to detain him as he passed on his way to the corral. Some of the men offered him money that they could ill spare, and those who had none to offer spoke cheering words.

Rick kept his eyes to the front; for he knew he would break down if he looked into their kindly faces. He brushed the detaining hands aside and kept on to the corral, where he saddled up and mounted.

At first he rode like one possessed, without method or purpose, until the heavy breathing of his mount made

him conscious of its presence under him. He was trying to ride away from it all; from the kindness and sympathy of friends; but, most of all, from the memories that loss of the KP had conjured up.

He recalled his boyhood days, when his parents were fighting to establish the ranch on a paying basis; when the gift of a dime was an event. He saw himself, standing at the deathbed of his parents, who were out by years of labor, though finding solace in the knowledge of a life well spent. And he was hearing again his father's last words:

"I'm glad we had a boy like you, Rick, to leave all this to. You'll take care of the ol' spread."

Rick had staked all on a turn of fortune's wheel, and lost.

"And that's all there is to it," he muttered.

But that wasn't quite all there was to it. There was the matter of Blackie Dawson. What would his father have thought, had he known that the KP would some day pass into the hands of a sheepman? What would his mother have thought, had she known that the plants around the house, watched through the years with tender care, would soon become fodder for a band of lousy woollies?

And what of the old ranch house? It would be turned into a lambing shed. The lower rooms would be penned off, stinking with warm wool and swarming with sheep ticks, while grubby herders bunked upstairs. Blackie Dawson would wield hammer and saw in glee, ripping out partitions; ripping out the very vitals of a hatred cattleman's home.

The thought made Rick squirm. He checked the horse, twisted in the saddle, and gazed back along the trail, through the heat haze and across the blue sage to the old KP;

his fingers clasped around the butts of his guns until they turned white under the pressure.

"Some day, Blackie," he declared through clenched teeth, "I'm coming back, and I'm going to own the KP again. No man ever profited by another's misfortune; and you ain't gonna be the exception."

Then he pointed his horse's head due north, and kept it there for days. He rested only because the animal needed it, not because he did. He wanted to be on the move, to get as far away as he could from the scene of his folly; wanted to hide himself in a country where no man knew him.

He bought food on the way, and ate it on the bank of a creek. He slept at night under the stars, gazing at them steadily and blankly until his tired eyes closed. He shunned the ranches and his fellow men, a prey to black and gloomy thoughts.

He crossed into Idaho, then on into Montana. And still the urge to keep moving was upon him, as strong as ever. Only lack of funds finally made him pause and look around for work. It was then that he ran up against an obstacle of his own making.

The only life he knew, the only thing he could do well, was riding. In Nevada men would have bid for his services. Here he was among strangers, who hired only local help. A recent epidemic or rustling had made the ranches reluctant about hiring strangers.

Each unsuccessful application only added to the fire of anger that had smoldered in Rick's heart since losing the KP. At the Blue Jay Ranch that fire burst into flame when a puncher laughed as the boss shook his head and Rick started to ride away.

Without a moment's reflection, he

slipped from the saddle and was upon the puncher in a flash. His fist lashed out and connected with thin air. The next second he was staggering back from a blow to the nose, with stars dancing before his eyes.

When the stars disappeared Rick saw the puncher standing there, grinning at him. The grin acted like a red rag to a bull, and Rick charged with flailing fists. The stars danced again when he ran into a straight-arm jab. His teeth clicked when a fist smashed against his jaw, and nausea suddenly gripped him as two more blows thudded against his stomach. His legs, numb and powerless, refused to support him, and down he fell.

"Had enough, pilgrim?" the cowboy inquired easily.

"Not yet," Rick gasped. "You wait till—till I get—get back my wind! I'll—learn you—to laugh at—"

"Laugh?" the cowboy repeated. "Oh, so that's what started you going? Thought I'd laughed at you. You're a purty hasty pilgrim. Take a look behind you."

RICK twisted his head, slowly and painfully, squinting through swelling eyes. A calf had stuck its head into a bucket, and the pail had slipped over its ears. Now it was blindly charging around in circles, banging into everything, and bawling in panic.

"That's what I was laughing at, pilgrim," the cowboy explained.

Rick then not only felt sick, but silly as well. He rose unsteadily and leaned against his horse. The cowboy held out a hand, and Rick took it.

"No hard feelings, pilgrim? I had to defend myself."

"It was my fault, I reckon," Rick said, and started to mount.

"What's the hurry?" the other inquired. "Why not stop and eat a bite? The boss doesn't like folks to ride away without eating."

"That's right," the owner of the Blue Jay agreed. "I was gonna ask you to light, when you flicked outa the saddle and started the fireworks."

"I gotta be riding," Rick said.

"I guess I savvy," the cowboy nodded. "Bust, huh? Gotta hook a job sudden. Well, just keep on till you've crossed the Missouri and you'll get all the work you want. Help's scarce over there."

"That's the best I've heard yet. Well, adios."

"Just a minute, pilgrim. It's a cinch you don't belong in this State. In the first place, that 'adios' gives you away. California?"

"No; Nevada."

"In the second place, if you was a Montana man you'd have asked questions when I said that the ranchers, on the other side of the river, needed help."

"Questions about what?"

"The spotted tick. I wouldn't feel right if I sent you over there, without warning you."

"The spotted tick?" Rick repeated. "I reckon it's some sort of a wood or sage tick, or a sheep tick, ain't it?"

The boss of the Blue Jay spoke up here. "Yeah, provided it don't bite you, pilgrim. The only way you can tell it from other ticks is by a tiny spot on its back. If it bites you, and you're out on the range alone, you'll probably die before help gets to you."

"Why do men live there, then?"

Rick inquired.

"Because their interests demand it," was the reply. "But they take

chances every day, every minute. A lot cleared out, though. The ticks can't cross the river, so we're safe on this side. We just wanted you to know, pilgrim, before you rode blind into the spotted tick country."

"How wide is it?"

"The government experts claim it reaches from Antler to Big Bow. I'd think twice, pilgrim, if I was you, before you cross the Missouri."

"I've already thought," Rick said recklessly. "I'm going. If a pizen tick is gonna make me cash in, why, let it."

The boss and his rider exchanged significant glances and then stared at Rick's set face.

"You ain't sore 'cause I licked you, are you?" the rider inquired anxiously.

"No, it ain't that," Rick replied.

"Then why——" he began again.

"Adios, gents," Rick cut in abruptly, and touched a spur to his horse.

He crossed the river and almost immediately came upon an abandoned ranch that looked like a whitened skeleton in the bright sunlight. He was about to ride on when a notice, tacked to the ranch-house door, attracted his attention. He dismounted and read it.

It was a government poster, warning newcomers against the deadly spotted tick. There was not much to it, but its very brevity breathed of the death in store for those who disregarded it.

Rick laughed grimly as he rode on.

"A guy who'll gamble away a spread his folks has worked their fingers to the bone to pay for," he muttered bitterly, "had oughter be bit."

"A lot cleared out," the Blue Jay owner had remarked.

RICK had occasion to remember those words before the sun set that evening. There were more abandoned ranches than the one he had first encountered in the river-bottom lands. More warning notices flashed at him from sagging doors of ranch houses and outbuildings, from rotting fence posts and occasional cottonwoods.

He saw cattle in abundance, but not a single human being until he arrived at the Dollar Ranch, where Giles Ott greeted and hired him almost in the same breath; hired him at double the wages paid on the other side of the river.

After what he had seen and heard, Giles Ott's cheerful tones struck Rick as rather peculiar, as did the laughter and conversation of his riders in the bunk house that night. Nobody mentioned the spotted tick until Rick himself brought up the subject.

"Ain't nothing to it—much," one of them observed. "Oh, a guy gets bit here and there. Some die and some don't. Me, I'm more scared of a rattler than a tick; and they's fifty rattlers to every tick here."

"I've been on this side of the river a year," another rider offered, "and I've yet to see my first spotted tick. If you ask me, I'd say that the newspapers has done this neck o' the woods more damage than the ticks. Folks'll believe anything they read."

There followed an awkward silence, and the riders returned to whatever task or amusement had occupied them before the conversation. But Rick refused to let the matter drop.

"Why does the boss hang on?" he wanted to know.

"'Cause somebody's gotta fight this thing through," a rider volunteered. "Besides, fellers like the boss love their spreads more'n they do

their lives. You'd understand if you was a rancher and had growed up with the country."

Rick smiled grimly at that last statement. He had been a rancher, and he had grown up with the country in Nevada. But he hadn't loved the ranch as he should have done. Not like these men, who were willing and ready to face death daily, hourly, rather than give up, sell, or gamble away that which they prized above life itself.

The thought made Rick feel like a skunk; made him fall into a savage silence that lasted for weeks, during which he shunned the company of his fellow men as much as the work would permit. They were weeks during which he brooded sullenly, cursing himself for the fool he had been, forgetting his boast to Blackie Dawson, the sheepman, that he would return some day and once more become the owner of the KP.

It was the bravery, the unselfishness of these ranchers, that finally brought Rick out of the slough of despondency; a man could not meet up with them and fail to admire such fortitude. In the quiet, efficient manner and methods of the government experts, who had been sent there to combat the dreaded pests, he saw the same quality of bravery, of willingness to sacrifice life that others might live.

Rick looked into himself and realized that he hadn't acted the man, back there in Nevada. Neighbors had warned him of the course he was following, and of what lay in store for him at the trail's end. They had done it because they loved him, were interested in him and whatever he did. He hadn't realized that then, but he was realizing it now.

And he had sneered at them, called them old fogies and busybodies. Yet they hadn't laughed at him, that day

at the sale; that day of reckoning. He felt ashamed when he recalled that he had virtually run away, without letting any one know where he had gone, afraid to face the music of defeat.

Among the neighbors who had tried to be a father to him, Rick recalled old Dan Vaughn of the Triple O. Dan would be wondering where he was and what he was doing. So Rick borrowed writing materials from the boss and wrote Dan a letter. In it he told briefly of his work, of the deadly spotted tick, and of the abandoned ranches, and closed with an apology for having ridden away without saying good-by. A rider carried the letter to Big Bow and posted it, and after that Rick felt better.

A COUPLE of weeks later old Dan replied with a letter in which he clumsily expressed pleasure that Rick was all right, hoped he would return to Nevada soon, and assured him that he had shown his letter to all the neighbors.

Shortly afterward, the boss sent Rick into Big Bow to haul out a wagon load of rock salt for the cattle. The stage pulled in while Rick was loading up, and he almost let a chunk of salt fall on his toes when he saw a familiar figure alight from it and enter the hotel.

The man was Walt Lane, foreman of Blackie Dawson's sheep ranch.

Unable to believe his own eyes, Rick jumped down from the wagon and crossed to the hotel. He looked through the lobby window and saw Lane registering at the desk. Then he went back to his loading, wondering what the man could be doing in Big Bow, so far from Nevada.

He wondered about it all the way back to the ranch, and then dismissed it from his mind with the thought that, perhaps, Lane had

either interests or relatives in Montana.

Rick was riding range not long after that when he saw a horse and rider in the distance. The horse was grazing, while the rider seemed to be searching for something in the sage. When he heard the thud of the approaching hoofs, he glanced up sharply, then stepped over to his own animal and mounted.

As he rode away Rick recognized Lane. He called to him, but Lane loped away. Rick did not follow. Instead, he pulled up and sat there staring after the man while a slow smile overspread his face.

"Don't be surprised if you see sheep lousing up this range purty soon," he remarked to the boss that night, and related what he had seen.

Giles Ott's eyelids narrowed, and his lips came together in a straight line. He had the cattleman's inherent hatred of sheep.

"They's just a handful of us ranchers left in this tick belt," he declared, "but we aim to hold the range ag'in all sheepmen. What you reckon the hombre was looking for in the brush, Rick?"

"That's simple," the rider answered. "He was examining the grass, to see how thick it is. That's the first thing a sheepman looks for—good grazing. Blackie Dawson must've sent him out scouting."

Time went on, and although Rick kept a sharp lookout for Lane, he did not see him again. Nor did sheep drift into the Big Bow country. Discussion of the matter died out at the Dollar Ranch, as both Rick and the boss had come to the conclusion that Lane had gone looking elsewhere for better range.

Then, one day, Giles Ott called Rick to the house. He stood on the veranda, a newspaper in his hand,

and there was a note of tense excitement in his voice.

"Read that," he directed, and handed the paper to Rick.

The "that" was a front-page item about the spotted tick, a report from Nevada that it had been discovered in the district around Forepaw. The old KP lay in the Forepaw district.

Rick read on with a sickening fear gripping his heart. The ticks, so the account stated, had been sent to the college of agriculture for examination, and the reply had come back that specimens were indeed of the deadly variety.

"You know what that'll mean," the rancher observed. "You see what it did to this neck of the woods. Folks'll pile out of there as fast as they can, and there'll be no sale for the land."

Rick's hand trembled as he returned the paper. His face had paled, and his expression had become suddenly grim.

"Gimme my time," he said. "I'm going down there!"

"What good will that do?" the rancher queried. "You can't help none. You ain't no tick expert."

"You wouldn't savvy if I told you; and I don't care to tell you, now. Just write out my time. Hustle!"

Rick left the Big Bow district in the same manner he had left the old KP. He rode like the wind, pausing only long enough to eat and rest the animal under him; then on again. He was hanging to the horn in sheer exhaustion when he flashed across the line into Nevada.

He continued on to the Triple O spread, to see old Dan Vaughn before completing the mission that had brought him back to the district of his birth.

But the Triple O was deserted. Old Dan had gone.

"Scared out by them spotted ticks,

I reckon," Rick muttered, and pointed the horse's head toward Blackie Dawson's sheep ranch.

ON the way he passed the KP. He left green fields of alfalfa and abundant pasture behind him. Now that was all gone, grazed down to the very roots by Blackie's sheep, which had been trailed to other ground. He saw a band of them later, grazing over the Rabbit Ear spread. Its owner, too, had undoubtedly fled in terror because of the dread rumor about the spotted ticks.

Blackie and Walt Lane, his foreman, were actually seated in the former owner's ranch house, when Rick rode up and glanced through the window. Oblivious of his presence, they were sharing a bottle of liquor, and laughing heartily.

"Baldy Flint and Sam Allen are rounding up their stock and getting ready to pull out," Blackie was telling Lane, as the door opened and Rick confronted them with drawn guns.

"Stick 'em up, you two lice!" he snarled.

There was a moment's silence, while the two stared open-mouthed at him. The foreman's hands shot up, but Blackie was a bit slower. His left hand moved up, then his right. The right suddenly flicked forward, and a knife split the air, burying its blade in Rick's shoulder.

The pain and shock nauseated him for a moment. Yet in that brief space of time he instinctively jerked a trigger, checking the downward sweep of Blackie's hands in the direction of his guns. While the house rocked to the explosion, the dark-visaged sheepman sank down with a groan.

During that split second of time, Lane, the foreman, had plunged

across the threshold and slammed the door behind him.

Rick's guns roared, and the bullets tore holes through the thin panels, but the running footsteps in the hall did not falter. Rick darted to the open window in time to see Lane racing toward his tethered horse. He poured a hail of lead after him, but the pain of his shoulder had disturbed his aim. When the hammers clicked on empty chambers, he cursed softly. By the time he had reloaded the guns, Lane was in the saddle and riding for his life.

Rick jerked the knife blade from his shoulder and reeled out of the house. Then began a chase, with Lane's horse no match for Rick's. It was gun-shy, too, and lost ground every time the foreman twisted in the saddle and fired at his pursuer.

Rick felt himself weakening fast, and knew that he could not stand the jolting of his horse if the race continued much longer. He hated to kill an animal, but there was no way out now. When his bullet went home, the falling horse catapulted Lane out of the saddle. He hit on his shoulders, rolling, and before he could gain his feet and start shooting Rick had him covered.

The owner and teller of the Forepaw bank glanced up in startled wonder when they saw Lane enter with Rick's gun prodding him in the back.

"Rick!" the banker gasped.

Rick steadied his swaying body by placing a blood-smear hand against the wall.

"Blackie Dawson's dead, Bentink," he announced in a hoarse whisper. "Hold this man." Then he fainted from loss of blood.

When he came to, the bank was jammed with loud-talking men. The noise ceased suddenly when Rick stirred and drank the sedative the

doctor was holding to his lips. The sheriff was standing close by, a firm grip on Lane's collar.

"Well, let's have it, Rick," he demanded, "before the doc takes you away and fixes you up. Why did you kill Blackie and bring Lane in here? I thought you was in Montana."

"So old Dan Vaughn showed you my letter, too, huh?" Rick smiled wanly. "I reckon he must've showed it to just about everybody. I figured, when I wrote it, I was doing the right thing, but it seems like I was playing into the hands of the man I hated most—Blackie Dawson. I reckon he heard what I'd wrote about to Dan, and that gave him an idea."

"What idea?" the sheriff asked.

"An idea to get all the range around here for his lousy woollies," Rick explained. "He sent his foreman up into Montana to get some spotted ticks. I guessed he was scouting around for range, until I read that newspaper account; then I tumbled. It was spotted ticks he was after. He had to have the genuine article to send to the college and start a scare."

THE men who were packed into the bank let out a roar and surged closer to Lane, whose face was ghastly white, and whose eyes rolled in fear.

"Don't let 'em get me, sheriff!" he screamed. "I ain't to blame! Blackie made me do it. I didn't want to, but—"

"Let the law handle this rat, boys!" the banker pleaded, and then called for silence. "We've got other and more important work on our hands," he went on. "The ranchers are pulling out of the Forepaw district, scared out by a dirty trick, a myth. Ride after them and bring

them back! Tell them there's nothing to the story of the spotted ticks being found here. Divide up the range among yourselves and contact every rancher. Hustle! I'll see that the newspapers of the State are notified at once."

Some of the men moved to obey. Others, however, hung back, threatening Lane. At last the sheriff prevailed on them to go, and over the countryside they rode, carrying the story of Blackie Dawson's inhuman attempt to acquire grazing land for nothing.

Then the lawman confronted Lane with a set jaw.

"What else did Blackie make you do?" he demanded of the cringing wretch. "Talk fast, or I'll let them men outside have you! Who dry-gulched Larry Fellows and Ed Tyson, huh?"

"Blackie did!" Lane cried.

"And you had a hand in it, too, Lane," the sheriff shot at him. "Don't tell me you didn't. Blackie made you get them deadly ticks because he had the goods on you."

The sheriff rushed him off to jail, while the doctor took Rick to his office. He was lying on the cot, with shoulder bandaged, when Bentink, the banker, burst in.

"I've phoned all the papers!" he told Rick, mopping his brow. "We all owe you a lot, Rick. Speaking for the bank's stockholders, I can safely say that we are grateful. If this spotted-tick scare had not been stopped, there wouldn't have been a rancher left here. Land prices would have fallen to nothing. Since the bank holds most of the mortgages, I suppose you know what that would have meant. We'd have had to close our doors."

"I reckon," Rick nodded. "And Blackie Dawson would have had all the range. Well, he got the KP away

from me, but that was all my fault. Mebbe I'll never be able to buy it back, but at least I've put an end to his little game."

"No, you'll never buy back the KP, Rick," the banker said. "Not if I can stop it, young man. However, there's nothing to prevent the bank from buying it and giving it

to you. I've an idea that losing it once has taught you a lesson."

Rick gulped, and when he glanced up at the banker again, tears were rolling down his pale cheeks.

"It's taught me one thing, Ben-tink," he admitted chokingly. "A rancher had better stick to his stock."

A Complete Novel, "MESQUITE MASQUERADER," by DON ALVISO,

in Next Week's Issue.

RUSSIAN COWBOYS IN MEXICO

MEXICO is the land of contrasts and remnants. There are patches and remnants of all sorts of strange tribes and people scattered from the United States border clear down to Guatemala. There is one little bunch of bronco Apaches still loose in the mountains between the states of Chihuahua and Sonora that are forgotten except when they occasionally raid some outlying village, and kill a few poor *poblanos*. There are several hundred wild Yayaus at large, and a strange little tribe of primitive Seri Indians on Tiburon Island in the Gulf of California.

All through the mountain valleys are hundreds of villages of other Indians, no longer "wild," but still maintaining their own primitive customs, each village very different from all the others. Exotic colonies of white people from all over Europe and America, even Mormons "exiled" from the States because they insist on practicing polygamy, have settled throughout the country.

But most astonishing of all are the Russian communities that came to Mexico about fifty years ago because they had religious beliefs different from those of the official church. These colonies are each a little slice of pre-Bolshevik Russia. The men wear old-time shirts outside their trousers, stiff-billed caps, and big clumsy boots. Mostly they are small farmers, but many own and range small bunches of cattle, and they will work in their spare time for neighboring cow outfits. They are good riders and fair cowhands, but they just don't dress the part and it's quite a shock to the gringo visitor to see a big, bearded man dressed like *mujik* out of an old Russian novel come tearing through the brush on a Mexican cow pony.

There are several of these colonies of old-time Russians scattered throughout Mexico, each differing somewhat from the others according to the particular religious faith of the people, and the part of Russia from which they originally came.

One of the best known is in the desert country inland from Ensenada, about a hundred miles south of San Diego a good road. C. L. M.

Interesting And True

By H. FREDRIC YOUNG



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



A PEACEFUL GENT

By EUGENE R. DUTCHER

Author of "Doubling In Buckskin," etc.

JIM CALHOUN stood very still among the crosses. His young face solemn, a little tense, he listened to Parson Jacoby saying words over his brother's body, and he could feel little sorrow. Jim Calhoun listened, but he watched Lew Brant, leaning indolently there against a stout wooden cross, hands not too far from his guns, lips frozen to a half smile, eyes tight on Jim Calhoun—waiting.

A morning breeze stirred the tall grass on the knoll where the citizens of Two Acres came to bury their dead. The early sun cast the shadows of headstones and massive crosses; and close to their shelter a dozen townfolk hovered, not in mourning, but in expectancy.

Jim Calhoun knew they waited for him to call Lew Brant, the man who had killed his brother, Duke Calhoun. And when the smoke of that gun battle had cleared, the

vicious feud between the Calhouns and the Brants would be ended, for there were none left but these two.

Jim Calhoun felt a bit ashamed that there was no hurt inside him for the death of his brother, but Duke had been hardly human—just a machine raised by their father, Tally Calhoun, to draw—fire, draw—fire; and Duke had liked it. Even now Jim Calhoun's own wrists ached at the remembrance of those long, tedious hours of practice in the gulch behind the ranch. When other kids his age were roaming happily afield, or fishing in the creeks, he had stood with a kicking .45 in either hand, and for what? For this short moment when it should come his turn to kill a Brant, or die, like Duke had died, trying.

Parson Jacoby had about finished. "Let us now pray for our departed brother——" His voice shook, for he was close to the line of fire, and as he bowed over the small Bible his eyes roved sideways to the cover of an oak's trunk, as if wondering whether it would accommodate both him and Sheriff Donnelly, who hovered nearby, gnawing nervously at his lower lip.

Jim Calhoun watched Lew Brant slowly straighten to his full six feet, then melt down into a crouch until his long fingers dusted gun butts. It was coming.

Close beside Calhoun a little old man rose on tiptoe. "Watch his left, lad." Uncle Ned had been present nineteen years ago when Jim Calhoun was born. "Watch his left, son," Uncle Ned whispered, above Jacoby's praying.

But Calhoun was not watching. His eyes, gray as the granite stones about him, saw crosses. The father of Lew Brant lay there, killed by old Tally Calhoun. And yonder was

Tally Calhoun's own cross. He had been shot in the back by a drunken "rep" hunter. A little way off, as if she sought peace, was the grave of Mary Dives Calhoun.

Jim Calhoun remembered his mother as the only kind and gentle influence in his life. Often she had told him, "This feud has come down from our grandfathers. It followed us West. Both the Brants and your father have forgotten what started it, if they ever knew, but I'll not let them make a gunman of you, Jimmy boy," she had whispered fiercely, "not ever." But the fever had taken Mary Dives Calhoun too soon, and now, with Jacoby hurrying his prayer to a finish, Jim Calhoun heard another fierce whisper.

"Get close to your guns, Jimmy boy." Beads of sweat stood on Uncle Ned's shaggy eyebrows. "And watch Brant's left."

Townfolk peering from behind tombstones saw Jim Calhoun's lips move, but only Uncle Ned heard him say:

"Somewhere, uncle, there must be another woman like my mother was, and I'm going to find her. I've a right to be happy. This feud is none of my making."

Parson Jacoby's voice trailed away, and the little preacher slipped to the sheltering oak.

Out of the sudden hush Lew Brant spoke. "I'm waiting—but not for long." His black eyes were full of hate.

CALHOUN'S big hands, hanging loosely at his sides, rose slowly. The faces of those watching matched well the gray granite as Calhoun's long fingers lifted level with gun butts—fingers trained to do magic with a .45. But those fingers did not pause. They

moved on to the heavy buckle, and there was a thud of belts and guns on the ground as they fell from Calhoun's flat hips.

"I'm passing," he said. "The Brants win the feud."

Lew Brant half straightened. "You're yellow," he snarled. It was not hard for Brant to be a feudist. Like Duke and old Tally Calhoun he liked to see men die, and the urge was gnawing at him now.

"Get them guns back on quick, or I'll blast you a-standing there."

Sheriff Donnelly, from behind the tree trunk, watched Calhoun shake his head. He stepped timidly into the open. "That would be murder, Lew," Donnelly protested mildly. "After all, this ain't the time or place for a shooting. Suppose you give Jim Calhoun a chance to pull himself together, huh? Be a good guy."

The blood was high in Brant's hollow cheeks. "I'll give him till noon," he rasped. "You heard, Calhoun? Noon, in front of the Buffalo Saloon, and Heaven help you if you ain't there."

"I'll be hoping for divine guidance," Calhoun answered solemnly, and showed them a stiff back. Uncle Ned's wrinkled old hand scooped up the gun belt and, glaring fiercely into the faces of wondering men, he hobbled after his young friend.

The two rode quietly from the knoll. Not until they traveled the road toward the Calhoun ranch did Uncle Ned venture to speak.

"There ain't much use us going to the ranch," he suggested, squinting up at the sun. "We'd have to ride near steady to get back to town by noon."

"We're not going back," Calhoun

answered, and watched Uncle Ned's Adam's apple quiver as the old man swallowed hard.

"You're running away?" Ned's voice squeaked a little.

"Call it that if you want, uncle. What if I was lucky and killed Brant? It wouldn't end there. I'd be constantly battling these half-mad 'rep' hunters, eager for the glory of having downed a Calhoun. Lew Brant has killed four of them. He likes it, but I wouldn't. And some day one of the fools would give it to me in the back, like dad got it." Calhoun paused. He seemed to be looking far beyond the flat desert with its greasewood and sage.

"Don't you see, Uncle Ned," he said at last, "I want to fight the land—not men. I want to build a ranch with my own hands, and find a girl, and raise a family. I want to watch my kids do all the good things I never got to do."

Listening, Uncle Ned felt a hurt close about his heart. He had come with Mary Dives when, years ago, she had married Tally Calhoun, and when she went he had remained to watch over her boy.

"You've got the soul of your mother, Jimmy," he said. "But don't you see, Lew Brant won't let you go. He is a real feudist. The Brants trailed the Calhouns clear out West, and Lew Brant will follow you, son, follow till you meet. A heap better it happened now than after you found that girl. It might mean a broken heart for her. Besides, the West ain't tamed enough for a man to lay away his guns. She is a fighting land."

But Jim Calhoun was smiling. "I'll find a spot, uncle," he said confidently. "A spot where men are human."

IT was a week later, and many miles from his home range, when Jim Calhoun heard word of Lew Brant. A stranger rode into camp at dusk, and over an after-dinner cigarette, the fellow remarked:

"I bumped into that Brant killer this morning. I reckon you've heard of the Brant-Calhoun feud? Everybody in a thousand square miles has. I heard Jim Calhoun up and beat it, leaving his ranch for the bank to take, but they say Calhoun's mom left him a goodly chunk of real cash. Well, I got to be going; and say, Brant is heading this way. If he should stop be plenty polite, 'cause that gent is rattle-snake mean, and just looking for something to hurt."

Slowly Jim Calhoun stood up. "Thanks," he answered, and started kicking dirt over the fire. Uncle Ned, wearied by long hours in the saddle, knocked the ashes from his pipe.

"You can't keep it up, son," he said. "You just can't keep running."

But Jim Calhoun did keep running. The steel shoes of his mount grew thin crossing a great mountain range. A vast desert that seemed to dry the blood in men's veins fell behind them, and there were towns—many towns. Always Jim Calhoun's eyes grew eager as he sought the girl who would be as his mother, Mary Dives, had been. Slowly, in this remote land, the Calhoun-Brant feud became only a legend—a story for cow-punchers to relate in the bunk house. Only once, in those weeks, did Uncle Ned bring up the subject uppermost in his mind.

"I reckon, Jimmy, you should be wearing your guns and practicing," he said. "Your brother was a mite faster than you, and Lew Brant

dropped him clean. Your wrists will be getting stiff. I——"

"We are through with Brant," Calhoun cut in sharply. "You understand—we're done with him for good."

And Uncle Ned said no more. The boy was trying so hard to regain a normal, happy life, and forget those grim, gun-filled years.

IT was noon of the fortieth day that Jim Calhoun rode into a little town and found her. She was standing on tiptoe peaking worriedly over a saloon's half doors. Calhoun should have felt the nearness of trouble. Men raised to constant warfare learn to sense the presence of one of their own kind, but as Calhoun dismounted he paid no attention to the saloon—just to the girl. A little frown was gathering on her forehead, and she tossed her yellow curls as if provoked or worried. As he came near, she turned to him.

"If you are going in there," her hand waved toward the saloon, "would you mind telling my father I have his lunch on the table? You'll know him," she added, realizing this big, smiling man was a stranger. "Dad is Greenville's sheriff."

It was years since Jim Calhoun had really wanted to grin. He did now as he shoved Uncle Ned toward the saloon to do her bidding.

It seemed very natural that they should stand there talking, almost as if they had been friends a long while, only they had not, and the girl realized this first.

"I'm Lynne Shipman," she said.

And because Jim Calhoun was thinking how much she resembled his mother, he answered, "I'm Jim Dives." He always had preferred his mother's maiden name anyway. "I'm buying a piece of land here—

abouts. I want to start small and build it up into a swell ranch. I'm going to fight the land—make it give me what I want."

Lynne's hands were deep in the pockets of her calico dress. "It is wonderful to feel that way, isn't it?" she whispered, eyes bright like his. "I've always wanted dad to give up his sheriff's job and go to ranching."

Both young folks were looking to the end of the dusty street, where alfalfa fields shone green, and beyond it to the open range and the varying purple shadows in the canyons.

It was Lynne who came back from her pleasant thoughts first. "Dad's lunch," she smiled, "is getting cold. I guess we will have to send you after both dad and your friend. And," she added, "there is enough lunch for all of us, if you would care to come. It's the little white house next the jail."

"We'll be there," Calhoun promised. "Uncle Ned must be talking politics." His arm rose, and because Calhoun was happy, he struck the half doors forcefully in. The panels quivered to the impact against a body, and Calhoun faced a man whose wide, thick-lipped mouth emitted a bellow of rage. The fellow's watery eyes dropped swiftly to Calhoun's gunless hips, and his big paw lashed out in an open-palmed slap.

His cheek stinging, Calhoun started forward, fingers curling to fists, but the man leaped back, drawing as he went, and Calhoun found two .45s covering his chest.

"Fist-fighting is sort of messy, stranger," the words came out of several days' growth of whiskers. "I got an extra gat if you are wanting to argue." Sneering, he dropped one

gun on a table and holstering the other, stepped back.

The looks on the faces of men in the room told Calhoun the bully had a local reputation as a bad man. To kill him meant starting a reputation of his own that must always be defended; the very thing he had run away from.

Calhoun saw the sheriff stalking forward. The lawman's eyes were blue like Lynne's, only solemn, now.

"The law won't touch you, son," he said, "if you plug Mouth Tucker. He is asking for it, and it's your right to gamble."

Calhoun spoke softly. "Thanks, but I guess it was my fault for bumping him," he apologized. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry!" bellowed "Mouth" Tucker. "Bah! You're scared, you're scared stiff. Go on, grab that gun, kid, or get out o' town quick!"

Silently Calhoun turned. Lynne, holding open the swinging doors, backed out before his gray face. Her eyes weren't scornful, like those others in the saloon, but thoughtful, as if trying to read his mind. Her hand touched Calhoun's arm.

"That invitation to lunch," she said, "still stands."

"Lynne!" Her father stood there. "I'll be eating heavy this noon. There ain't enough for company. Come along." He stalked away toward the white house.

"Sorry," Lynne whispered, "but dad thinks courage comes above everything else. I—I'm not so sure."

As she moved away, Uncle Ned climbed wearily into his saddle. "I reckon it's move on, eh?" he said bitterly. "It's like I told you, son, this is a fighting land, and a man what ain't willing to go the paece just can't fit in."

"I'm going to stay." Tiny muscles

moved in Calhoun's jaw. "They will understand, after a while, that all I want is peace—to be left alone. Men like Mouth Tucker will get tired of trying to make me fight. Don't you see, uncle, it got so the weight of guns made me crawl inside. The feel of them in my hands brought a sort of madness. I tell you I'd go crazy like the rest of those gun-hungry fools. Maybe I can't win. Maybe it's not possible, but I'm going to try, and I'm trying right here in Greenville."

"The girl?" Uncle Ned asked softly, "you've found her, eh?"

FOR a week the two rode the range in the vicinity of Greenville, hunting a suitable location for a ranch. There was plenty of free grazing land, but water was scarce. Springs were jealously guarded by their owners, and no one wanted to sell at the modest price Calhoun could offer them. On the morning of the eighth day, Calhoun took Uncle Ned toward the purple mountains.

"It looks mighty green up there," he said. "Close in to the foothills there should be water."

"And if there is," Uncle Ned added discouragingly, "somebody will own it."

They found a meadow kept green by the seepage of a dozen mud-oozing springs. For an hour Jim Calhoun poked about like an exploring little boy. At times his eyes grew bright. Often he chuckled to himself.

"Uncle," he said at last, his arms stretching down the long, green valley. "This is mine. I want it."

"Eh?" Uncle Ned was surprised. "Why, there ain't enough seepage here to keep a frog in swimming water."

"Not on the surface," Calhoun

agreed, "but I'm gambling it is underneath. "I'll clean out those springs, dynamite them. They'll flow, not big, perhaps, but there are a dozen of them. Uncle, this is the kind of fight for a man—taking from the earth what he needs."

With a rush, a rider left the timber and came toward them at full gallop. Mouth Tucker reared his mount to a stop.

"What the devil you doing on my land?" he roared. "Didn't I tell you to clear out of the country?"

A true gun fighter would have sensed no fear in Calhoun. "You own this valley?" he asked Tucker.

"Yeah," the bully growled. "It's on the west end of my range. What's it to you?"

Calhoun did not speak at once. His hand went inside the gray shirt, fumbled for a moment at the money belt, and came out holding large bills. "I want to buy it," he said quietly.

Mouth Tucker's big lips lost their sneer, and his eyes glowed greedily. "Sure," he grunted. "Sure, I'll sell. Let's head for town and close the deal right now, huh?"

They were dismounting at the hitch rack when Lynne Shipman and her father stepped from the bank door. It was their first meeting since his trouble with Tucker, and it warned Calhoun to see her smile; but her father seemed to be staring through him.

"You ain't very particular who you trail with, Tucker," the sheriff grunted.

Mouth Tucker grinned. "We've forgot all about that little ruckus," he chuckled. "This fella is buying that west meadow of mine—spot cash, too."

A look of utter disgust crossed the sheriff's face. "So you are buying Tucker off to keep him from

drilling you, eh, Dives?" Shipman grunted. "Me, I don't think your hide is worth the price."

He turned on his heel, and Lynne tried hard to smile up at the man she knew as Dives. "I'm glad you found a location," she said. "Don't mind dad, he just received some bad news, and he's all upset."

Perhaps, if Tucker had not called impatiently from the bank's doorway, Lynne would have explained that the bad news was from Sheriff Odton, of Mill County, informing Shipman that one Lew Brant was systematically searching towns for one Jim Calhoun—and that the two were reputed to be the fastest gunmen in the West. Brant was slowly working toward Greenville, leaving a goodly string of dead "rep" hunters behind him. More information would follow. Had Lynne spoken it might have changed Jim Calhoun's whole future, but she turned away, and Calhoun followed Tucker into the bank.

An hour later he emerged, owner of the green meadow, and that night he and Uncle Ned slept under a tall pine where the good grass met the mountains. A low-burning fire shone on shiny new shovels and picks.

Those shovels and picks grew scarred and mud-spattered in toil-filled days that followed until, at last, one noon, Calhoun's trembling fingers sought a match. A white fuse lay on the ground. The dynamite charge had been placed in one of the dozen springs.

"Uncle!" Calhoun's voice was harsh with excitement. His eyes were wide, like a little boy's. "We'll know soon whether I win or lose. I'm positive there is water underneath. It's just a question of whether we can reach it or not."

UNCLE NED nodded, but he watched the awkward way Calhoun held the match. "Your wrists, son, ain't used to this pick-and-shovel work," he said. "Your dad never let you do nothing what would slow up them hands. Why, you couldn't even outdraw Mouth Tucker, with your arms stiff clear to the elbows that a way."

But now the fuse was lighted, and Calhoun dragged Uncle Ned back to the shelter of a tree trunk. A moment more, and a deep blast sent a sheet of mud and rock into the treetops. Shouting, Calhoun rushed forward. He stood peering eagerly down into the gutted spring—listening to the bubbling, sucking sounds. Then water came lifting up, to overflow and start finding itself a channel to the valley.

"It's enough." There was reverence in Calhoun's voice as he gauged the flow. "A dozen little streams like that will care for my needs. It means work, good, honest, hard work. Can't you just see them, uncle—cows roaming the meadow with their calves?"

He had turned to the fine expanse of the valley. "We'll build the ranch house yonder, where that pine will give shade, and call it Lynda Valley Ranch. I'm going to win, uncle. Nothing can stop me now."

"Nothing?" The word rasped out behind them, and Calhoun whirled. Mouth Tucker stood there by the spring, his huge bowed legs straddled out, his lips pursed. "You sort of stole this here land off me, didn't you, fella? With water, it's worth twice what you paid, so I'm going to buy it back, only I ain't paying you very much, see? Just enough so it's legal."

The muscle stightened in Calhoun's body until the pain in his swollen wrists throbbed upward

into his shoulders. "I'm not selling," he answered.

Tucker gaped. "This here land won't do you no good if you're dead," he snarled. "I'll be waiting at the bank till three. If you ain't come to me by then I'll come to you—a-gunning."

Dull-eyed, Calhoun watched him swagger to his horse and ride away. Uncle Ned was muttering something about, "It's a land of guns," but Calhoun didn't hear. He wandered off down his green valley. How long it was before he returned to their camp, Calhoun never knew. He found Uncle Ned carefully oiling two .45s.

"They are yours, son," he said. "I been carrying them for you in my pack. Even with your wrists in bad shape, I reckon you got near an even break with Tucker. I got a hunch he's sort of yella, deep inside." Ned slipped the shiny .45s into their holsters, but Calhoun pushed the belt and guns away.

"You wear them, uncle," he said stubbornly. "The law is supposed to take care of this sort of thing for a man. I'm going to Sheriff Shipman. If he won't help me, then maybe I'll take my guns."

Uncle Ned squinted up at the sun. "You had best hurry, then," he offered, "'cause Tucker said three, and she is getting close."

It was exactly fifteen minutes of three when Calhoun and Uncle Ned dismounted before the jail. Across the street, Tucker leaned heavily against the bank. Sheriff Shipman came from the post office reading a letter. It read:

Lew Brant definitely heading for your town. Should arrive by the twenty-third.

Deep lines furrowed Shipman's forehead, for this was the twenty-

fourth. He came on toward Calhoun, while, far at the edge of town, a lone rider appeared. A rider whose eyes never rested, and whose left hand at all times kept close company with his hip.

Calhoun would have followed the glaring sheriff into the office, only Lynne, seeing him from the house, called a greeting. Her happy smile faded at the look of him.

"Trouble?" she asked. "The springs didn't flow like you had hoped?"

"There is plenty of water." Calhoun reached for the office door. "I have to see your father."

BUT Lynne's hand held him back. "Jim," her voice was full of softness. "I—I don't like to hear men call you—yellow. It's not true. I know it's not. It's something else, and you need help with it. Perhaps I could be that help."

Uncle Ned, standing at the hitch rack, could not help but hear. He took to squinting down the street, and slowly his old body grew rigid. Fear was in his eyes, for down there Lew Brant was dismounting before a saloon. Brant automatically loosened the guns in their holsters and, up on the balls of his feet, brushed through the swinging doors—a killer on the prowl.

Uncle Ned's eyes came back to the solemn young folks. He saw how stiffly Calhoun's hands hung, and he knew Brant would shoot on sight. His own wrinkled hands dropped to the gun butts at his hips, and Uncle Ned started trembling at the thought in his mind. He was old, he didn't have many years to lose anyway, and Jimmy Calhoun was young—trying to live a normal, healthy life. And the way Lynne

was looking at the boy—yes, she loved him all right.

Uncle Ned swallowed hard. He told himself it would not be so terribly wrong to shoot such as Lew Brant in the back; bad men were supposed to protect their backs. What worried Uncle Ned most was that Brant would protect his back too well. It was said the devil had eyes behind his ears, but with luck they would go down together.

"Good-by, Jimmy boy." It was just a movement of gray, old lips that Lynne and Calhoun neither saw nor heard. "Good-by, lad," and Uncle Ned slipped away.

Calhoun was saying: "I've got to see your father, Lynne. After that, maybe we can talk."

"You want to see me, Dives?" Peevishly, Shipman pushed open the screen door. "Make it fast. What you want?"

Calhoun explained his predicament with Tucker, and saw the sheriff's jaw tighten up. "This ain't an easy country," Shipman grunted. "A man has got to try and protect himself. If he can't, then the law helps him. But you ain't tried yet."

Down in the town hall a clock tolled three. "Jim! Jim!" Lynne's voice—tight with strain. "Tucker—he's coming for you." She whirled on her father. "You've got to do something, dad, please!"

"I'll loan Dives a gun," was Shipman's grim answer, "seeing as he's not wearing one. Tucker ain't broke no law, and if he can bluff this fella into selling him back his land, that ain't my business."

Mouth Tucker came on, and Jim Dives Calhoun just stood there, hand half extended toward Shipman's proffered gun belt, for a man was running madly down the street.

"Lew Brant," he shouted, "he is in the Eagle Saloon! Brant's got a

old fella cornered, and is going to kill him sure."

Brant! The name carried the impact of a bullet for Calhoun. It lifted him up on his toes, and for the first time he realized that Uncle Ned was missing. For the moment that did not seem important, until the excited man cried:

"The old gent come figuring to gun Brant in the back, but Brant collared him. Somebody better do something quick. It's your partner, Dives, what Brant aims to gun."

Calhoun's hand closed on the .45 and drew it from the belt Shipman still held. Then he was running for the Eagle Saloon, and the weight of the gun in his hand bent his weakened wrist. Pains like knives seemed cutting at the cords. Behind him, Mouth Tucker was bellowing for him to come back and fight. Shipman charged along at his side, shouting:

"It's suicide to go in there with Brant. Don't be a fool, man! Wait till I get a posse." He reached out, but Calhoun shook him off.

"I'm not asking the law's help now," he said, and went on alone. And with each step his dreams for the green valley, and Lynne, grew vague. But, Uncle Ned was in there with Brant. Calhoun's lips tightened as he found his thumb hardly equal to drawing the .45 hammer back. No man could give Brant that sort of edge. He hoped Uncle Ned would have sense enough to run when the shooting started. Good old Ned, trying to make things turn out right for Lynne and him. In those last few yards Calhoun reverted to his stern father's years of training. It seemed he could hear old Tally Calhoun: "Clear your mind. Force all thoughts away. A gun fight happens too fast to allow you to think, anyway."

NOW, only Calhoun's leg muscles drove him forward, while the rest of his body relaxed. His chest struck the half doors and, as they crashed back against the wall, Calhoun saw a blur of faces—the frightened faces of men standing in strained positions. The bartender, fat and quivering, ready to drop behind the counter. Over by the piano, the face of a dance-hall girl, frozen in terror. A sallow-faced youth on the piano stool, fingers poised above the keys, statue-like. This Calhoun saw, and shut away. Only two faces stood out clearly—that of Uncle Ned, backed against a far wall, and that of Lew Brant, crouched before him.

Brant turned with the smashing open of the doors. Like snakes, his hands struck hipward and recoiled, holding the blue of gun metal. Only the trained eyes of Calhoun followed the movements of that perfect draw. He saw the guns lifting toward his chest. In that instant Brant sensed how stiff and awkward Calhoun's gun hand was—how slowly the barrel swung, and, gripped by the greed to kill, he divided his attention between Ned and Calhoun.

He fired simultaneously with each gun. Both slugs struck their marks. Uncle Ned, who had stood with hands half lifted, slipped loosely down the wall to the floor. Calhoun took the impact of lead, and doggedly kept the gun muzzle moving toward Brant. So fast had it happened that the doors were still swinging shut behind him when Calhoun fired. He was looking full into Lew Brant's ugly face, and Calhoun always hit where he looked.

Weaving a little, Calhoun moved forward. He hardly glanced at the dead man, but dropped to a knee beside Uncle Ned.

"You got him, Jimmy boy." The

old man was bleeding high in the right shoulder. "Got him fair. Brant shouldn't of tried to drop us both at once. He weren't that good."

Again the doors burst open, and Mouth Tucker entered, followed by Shipman and Lynne. Slowly Calhoun stood up. His shoulder felt a bit numb. Brant had held a little wide on both Ned and him.

"I reckon, Tucker," Calhoun said, "we might as well get our argument over now, too."

Tucker looked from the body of Lew Brant to Calhoun, and his red eyes grew puzzled. "You ain't no gunman," he grunted, "not the stiff way you hold that there gat. But gad, you must be lucky." And now, with a gun muzzle facing him, Tucker lost his bluster. "I don't guess," he decided, "I want that meadow back after all."

Shipman stepped forward and took the gun from Calhoun's hand.

"Anybody," he said, "what is as awkward as you with a .45 sure is smart not to wear one. I reckon, Dives, we all know now you ain't scared, just one of them peaceful gents what holds in till he's pushed too far. Imagine it," he marveled. Shipman was gathering Uncle Ned up in his arms. "This sort of ends the Brant-Calhoun feud," he added, as an afterthought. "And I reckon wherever Calhoun run to, he'll sure be glad to hear it."

"I reckon." Jim Dives Calhoun smiled as Lynne slipped under his arm, and helped him toward the door. He would tell her all about it. She would understand, but no one else need ever know.

"Lynda Valley Ranch," he repeated to himself, softly. He didn't think Lynne could hear, but she must have, for her arm tightened about his waist.



TOLD AT THE CHUCK WAGON

(BRIMSTONE WALLACE, TOP CUSSER)

By RAMON F. ADAMS

THE chuck wagon on a cow range during round-up season is something more than a place to eat. It is the cowboy's social center. Here he meets his fellows when the day's work is done, and his moments of relaxation between supper and the time for him to crawl into his soogans are usually spent in a discussion of the work of the day. The condition of the range, the good or bad qualities of certain horses, and kindred subjects are talked over, one of which is sure to bring forth some reminiscence of one of these hard-riding sons of the plains.

Most cow-punchers are good story-tellers. I have never known

one who didn't have a sense of humor and a point of view decidedly his own. The story-teller delights in unfolding his tale because he knows he always has a group of interested listeners. They are never bored; it is their nightly entertainment, something to break the monotony of a hard day's work and a short night's rest, and any one privileged to "tune in" will find the tales well worth listening to.

Despite his reputation for reticence, the cowboy, when among his own kind, exercises his talents for "spreading it on thick." An outsider will receive a liberal education in the manufacture and use of apt and unique figures of speech.

WE had finished another day's work on the Swinging L range and came charging into camp to strip wet saddles and blankets from our horses. We stopped to see these animals roll in the dust before turning them over to the wrangler, listening all the while for the cook's welcome call to "grub pile."

While we were eating supper, "Bud" Taylor's night horse pulled its picket pin and grazed off about a quarter of a mile.

"How come y'u stake yo' hoss so far from camp, Bud?" asked "Red" Tucker. "Ain't Colfax County's grass good 'nough for 'im?"

Bud looked over his shoulder, and when he saw his horse grazing contentedly in the distance, he started "airin' 'is lungs." He continued his swearing as he prepared to go after the animal in question, and we heard a living stream of expletives until he got out of hearing distance.

"Bud's as mad as a drunk squaw an' he shore ain't no slouch when it comes to cussin'," said "Squatty" Bates.

"With a little study an' practise he'd be 'most as good as old Brimstone Wallace," said "Shanks" Molloy. "Now there was a cusser after a man's own heart. I was present when he won the cussin' championship o' the entire West.

"Brimstone was a tough old pelican from Texas an' like all good Texans he'd been raised to vote the Democratic ticket, to love whisky an' hate Mexicans. When he left Texas, they say he was jes' two jumps ahead o' the sheriff, but he rode as fast a hoss as ever looked through a bridle an' soon left the Law behind. They say he cut 'is teeth on a ca'tridge an' stood up to fight 'fore he was weaned till he was

as bow-legged as a barrel hoop. He didn't take nuthin' off no man an' could whip 'is weight in wild cats, but 'is old woman could shore make 'im tuck 'is tail. He was shore what y'u'd call henpecked. His old woman seemed to be soured on life an' couldn't get the acid out of 'er system. Old Dave Butler used to say that she reminded 'im of a chuck wagin 'cause she had a waggin' tongue an' it rattled all the time. She was so disagreeable a shepherd dog couldn't git 'long with 'er. All she could talk was religion, an' she preached to Brimstone all the time 'bout 'is sinful ways o' cussin' an' lyin'. She didn't stop at preachin' neither but batted 'im round till his scars was a reg'lar war map, an' he took it as mild as milk.

"The worst part of it though was that she was a kind of leader to all the other women in that section an' she had 'em all rulin' their husbands with a half-breed bit. Life got to be plumb monotonous for the married men. Y'u never seen so many meek henpecks in one community in yo' life. They kinda looked to Brimstone to help 'em out, but he 'lowed he was hog tied an' arguin' with 'is old woman was like barkin' at a knot.

"Old Brimstone was also the biggest liar in seven States. Ananias was but an ambitious amateur 'long-side o' him. There was one windy he told so much he got to believin' it hisself. Accordin' to 'is story a big bunch o' 'Paches got after 'im an' chased 'im up a mountain trail. They kept a-gainin' on 'im till he was pretty high up, an' then another bunch o' savages up ahead blocked the trail. He'd shot up all his ammunition an' throwed 'is gun away. The air was so full o' arrers that it nearly shut off the sun, an' 'is hoss thought it was feedin' time.

HE figgered 'is time had come. an' seen he didn't have a chance to git through so many redskins up in front so he thought he'd take a chance through the rough country an' he turned to the right but he didn't git far till he came to a bluff 'bout a hundred feet to the bottom. His hoss was agoin' so fast he couldn't stop 'im, an' first thing he knowed, him an' 'is hoss was out in the air with nuthin' under 'em but space. He thought shore he was a goner an' he hated to think o' the mess he'd make when he'd splatter all over the scenery down at the bottom. He kept 'is head though an' happened to remember he was ridin' 'is trained hoss an' when he got 'bout ten feet from the bottom, he hollered 'Whoa,' an' the good old hoss stopped right where he was at, an' that saved 'im.

"When old Brimstone whispered, y'u could hear 'im in the next county, an' when he talked out loud, well, it was jes' like thunder in high mountains. That's how ever'body found out he was such a good cusser. His cuss words smoked an' sizzled an' scorched the atmosphere till y'u could smell the sulphur. He was an artist when it come to inventin' 'is own cuss words an' varyin' their combinations, an' 'is private cuss words was the envy of all scientific cussers. Nuthin' 'is old woman could do would stop 'im from cussin'. It jes' come natural.

"His competitors soon found out it was like findin' hair on a frog to try an' beat 'im. He won the county an' State championships as easy as a cow goin' through cobwebs. O' course his rep'tation spread, an' it wasn't long till some bat-eared catawampus who said he's the champion o' the Northwest sent down a challenge to the best cusser in the Southwest for the champion-

ship o' the West. The prizes was a silver-mounted saddle, a silver lovin' cup, an' a check for a hundred dollars. The challenge was sent after the spring round-up, an' the match was to be held jes' before the fall works.

"Us boys backed our fav'rite, old Brimstone, to win, sellin' off ever'thing we had to raise the money till none of us had 'nough clothes to dust a fiddle. But we shore had visions of rollin' in clover after the contest.

"Then jes' after all 'rangements was made, the womenfolks got together, put on their war paint, an' said it was high time us heathen men stopped amusin' ourselves a-bustin' the Second Commandment. Old Sister Wallace was the bell mare o' that *manada* an' she made all 'rangements for a sky pilot down in Tucson to come out an' act as converter. At first there's some trouble decidin' where to hold the meetin'. Ever' woman wanted it held on her ranch. Mrs. Wallace 'lowed as how she's the originator o' the whole idea in the first place an' figgered she's entitled to first say, but Sister Campbell came back that old Brimstone's so wicked he's in cahoots with the devil hisself an' would have 'im with 'is pitchfork settin' right at the preacher's elbow givin' trouble all the time an' she thought her place would be the best. Then Sister Jones orated as how Brother Campbell got 'is start in the cow business with a runnin' iron an' ain't got such a sanctimonious rep'tation hisself. An' so it went on, gittin' more pers'nal all the time. The menfolks was out at the corral passin' round hard liquor while the women was at the house passin' hard words, an' that pore divine's got more trouble than a rat-tailed hoss tied short in fly time.

HE fin'ly settled the whole question by tellin' 'em it's 'is pers'nal wish to have the boys build 'im a pole arbor down by the river so's it'll be handy for the baptizin'. Them old catamounts hated labor afoot worse'n pizen, but their womenfolks said build it so they built. Well, ever'thing went 'long lovely. That preacher knowed the Good Book like a cow does 'er calf, an' he could persuade a gopher into climbing a tree. It wasn't long till old Campbell an' a lot o' other old cow thieves was weepin' at the mourner's bench an' a-shoutin' hal-luluyah. Old Brimstone was there ever' night settin' on the back seat lookin' as uncomfortable as a camel in the arctic circle. We figgered he'd floundered in the mire o' sin so long that he never would find the straight an' narrer, an' we didn't worry none 'bout losin' 'im till we noticed he commenced movin' up a set or two ever' night. We knowed if he got converted, we'd not only lose our champion cusser, but we'd lose all our money. We began to persuade 'im to stay outside with us where he could still see an' hear but could keep 'is hat on an' smoke. One o' the boys brought a bottle o' redeye 'long an' got 'im to take a snort o' that.

"Old Sister Wallace got onto our game pronto an' ever' night after that she leads old Brimstone by the hackamore right up clost to the front so's she can watch 'im from where she's a-singin' in the choir. The preacher singled out Brimstone an' preached right at 'im. It was as plain as paint who he was a-talkin' to, an' Brimstone felt just 'bout as prominent as a boil on a pug nose.

"With tears in 'is voice this preacher painted word pictures of the angels a-playin' their harps an'

of the terrors of the everlastin' fires, an' said a whole lot 'bout the wages o' sin bein' death. He had the choir sing somethin' soft while he pleaded an' begged old Brimstone to cast out the devil an' come on up an' give hisself to the Big Boss. I seen old Brimstone blinkin' 'is eyes an' all chokin' up with emotion, an' it wasn't long till he was hittin' the trail to the mourner's bench a-shoutin' so loud all them angels must a-heard 'im. Then ever'body got to shoutin' an' weepin' till it broke up the meetin', an' us boys kissed our bets good-by.

"The next Sunday they held the baptizin', an' when all them converts got into the river, she looked like she was on a rise. When it comes Brimstone's time to be ducked, some sinner out on the bank hollered, 'Good-by, Brimstone; y'u ain't got yo' whoa hoss under y'u now.' Brimstone looked round with murder in 'is eye an' opened 'is mouth to kick the lid off 'is can o' cuss words, but jes' then he was ducked under an' 'fore he could shut 'is mouth, he was near waterlogged. He comes up a-spittin' an' a-spewin', but consider'bly cooled off. I'll bet that was the nearest thing to a bath he'd had since the fall o' the Alamo. Anyway it washed off 'is war paint.

THAT meetin' was follered by a drought. It never rained all summer. The water holes dried up, an' what water in the river that hadn't been sloshed out by the baptizin' jes' nacher'ly vanished. It got so hot an' dry y'u had to prime yo'self to spit. What cattle didn't die jes' wandered round thinner'n anything, an' the whole range smelled like a packin' plant 'fore the pure-food law. There wasn't nough grass left to chink 'tween the ribs of a sand fly, an' we'd all forgot what

water looked like outside of a pail or trough.

"When them converts wasn't a-prayin' for rain, they was out lookin' for clouds, but the only clouds they seen was made by the buzzards that was flockin' to the feast. If we could only git Brimstone to win that contest an' could collect our bets, we'd have 'nough to make the winter in spite o' the drought. The more we thought 'bout it the more desp'rate we got, so we went as a committee to try an' persuade 'im over.

"'Look yere, Brimstone,' said one o' the boys, 'it ain't rained since Noah, an' is drier'n a cork leg. Y'u're losin' cattle like we are, but y'u can do somethin' to save us. If we lose them bets we've put up on y'u, we'll be ruined. If y'u've got a heart in yo' gizzard as big as a horned toad's, Brimstone, y'u'll win that cussin' bee an' save the country.'

"'An' think o' the rep'tation that's at stake,' put in another; 'the whole Southwest's a-countin' on y'u.'

"But Brimstone jes' smiled a little an' shook 'is head. Religion shore had a strangle hold on 'im. Then Cherokee had a bright idea an' said: 'Brimstone, I know all the sportin' blood in yo' veins ain't dried up like the river. We'll make y'u a prop'sition. If it don't rain in three more weeks—that'll be a week 'fore the contest—if it don't rain by then, y'u go over to town to outcuss that galoot from Montana. If it does rain by then, we'll agree that yo' religion is good medicine an' we'll jine the church. Now that's a fair prop'sition. If the Lord is on yo' side, He'll make 'er rain; if He goes ag'in y'u, it's plain as an Indian sign-board that He want y'u to save our money. What y'u say?'

"Brimstone hesitated a minnit an' said: 'That sounds fair 'nough, an' I'll go y'u. But remember, boys, I'll be a-prayin' for rain all the time.'

"'I'll bet y'u forgot 'bout that silver-mounted saddle an' lovin' cup. They'd bring 'nough money to burn a wet mule, an' there's that hundred-dollar check,' said some wise tempter.

"'Yeah, I shore could use them with all the cattle I've lost,' said Brimstone, wipin' the sweat off 'is face.

"'Well, we'll be weavin' 'long, Brimstone,' said Cherokee. 'If them prayers ain't answered, y'u'd better be thinkin' up yo' choice cuss words jes' so y'u don't forget. It won't be no sin 'long as y'u don't say 'em out loud. We'll be bankin' on y'u.'

IT kept stayin' as dry as a covered bridge an' hotter'n Hades with the blower on. Brimstone strained 'is eyes lookin' for the clouds, but there wasn't even a fleck in the sky. The whole country looked like Hades with the folks moved out. Bein's it'd gone this long, we hoped it wouldn't rain now 'fore the three weeks was up, an' it didn't. Brimstone had give 'is word, an' we knowed he'd keep it. As he afterwards said, if the Marster intended for 'im to quit exercisin' 'is outstandin' talent, He'd a-sent a rain.

"Well, the contest came off O. K. Brimstone told 'is old woman he was ridin' out to tail up some cattle an' slipped off to town. He shore out-did hisself that night. He'd been wantin' to cuss the weather so long an' holdin' in 'is cuss words that he was jes' a-b'ilin' over with 'em. He made that Montana hombre look like an amateur. He called forth all

'is private cuss words an' a lot o' new ones for the special occasion an' in 'is excitement he got to shoutin' 'em at the top of 'is voice.

"His old woman said she heard 'im plumb out at the ranch an' recognized 'is voice an' also 'is private stock o' cuss words, an' maybe she did for she shore come skallyhootin' to town in short order. She was mad 'nough to eat the devil with 'is horns on an' came bulgin' into the hall with a cow whip in 'er paws an' murder in 'er eye, bringin' that sky pilot with 'er.

"When Brimstone saw 'er, he kinda hesitated for a minnit, an' we wondered if she's a-goin' to trump the deal. But he was too warmed up to quit, an' shakin' 'is finger at 'is old woman an' that divine, he let out a bunch o' cuss words that'd grow hair on a Mexican dog. He accused that preacher o' laborin' in the Lord's vineyard for twenty years an' never pickin' one grape 'cept through the womenfolks of the land, an' he further declared that

from now on he an' 'is friends will be the big chiefs o' their tepees, an' will rule the roost or tear it apart. That preacher's lip was hangin' down like a blacksmith's apron, an' Brimstone's old woman was shakin' like a dog in a blue norther. She ain't never seen Brimstone so mad before. His cussin' got so hot they covered their ears an' stampeded out o' there like they thought he was crazier'n popcorn on a hot stove. She dropped 'er cow whip in the rush an' forgot what she was agoin' to use it for.

"They couldn't hardly cool Brimstone off 'nough to declare 'im champion of the West. He not only won us our money, but he won back the self-respect o' all them henpecked husbands. They follered 'is lead in declarin' theirselves the boss o' the ranch. Believe it or not, that contest wasn't hardly over till it started to rain, an' there's folks there yet that declares that the smoke from Brimstone's cuss words broke the drought."

GHOST TOWN TO REVIVE

WHAT was once a boom town, and which, since 1873, has been just another ghost town, is soon to boom again. Alta, twenty-five miles southeast of Salt Lake City, was founded in 1868. At one time the population was five thousand. Then there were six sawmills, five breweries, and the usual number of saloons, among them establishments with such colorful names as "Gold Miner's Daughter," and "The Bucket of Blood." It is said that more than one hundred men were killed in these saloons over mining claim disputes.

The mines of that section produced thirty-seven million dollars in silver. The demonetization of silver in 1873 caused the fatal sickness of the town and its final death. But, in this case, death was not permanent. After sixty-four years of silence it will soon be peopled with skiers and outdoor play boys and play girls. Seven hundred acres of surface rights have been deeded to the Wasatch National Forest. Camps and roads will be built and forest service recreational projects promoted. Thousands will enjoy both winter and summer sports at the site of the once roaring mining town.



THE MIRACLE AT GOPHER CREEK

PART III.

By STUART HARDY

PADRE ANSELMO, priest at the Mission of Santa Anita, sends for Johnny Tucker, cow-puncher at the Circle Arrow Ranch. Arriving at the mission, Johnny finds that the padre has two visitors—Bullhead Marsh, a brutish-appearing man, and Bloody Carill, a desperado who for many years terrorized the countryside.

Johnny is amazed to learn from the priest that Bloody Carill is his father. The padre tells him to come inside, that his father has a mes-

sage to give him. Bullhead Marsh insists on hearing this message, and, after a skirmish, Johnny forces Bullhead outside and ropes him to a tree.

Then he returns to his father, who tells Johnny that he has a cache of one hundred and twenty thousand dollars hidden in the Huecos Mountains. He also reveals that Johnny has three half brothers, Nate, Rufe, and Abner Shelby, sons of Bloody Carill by his first wife. He asks Johnny to find these brothers, and then go with them in search of the

cache. Each of the four is to take five thousand dollars apiece from the cache, he directs, and the remainder is to go to families left destitute by the depredations of Bloody Carill.

Johnny agrees to do what his father wishes, and the old man then dies, with peace in his heart. Meanwhile, however, Bullhead Marsh has worked free of his ropes, and has returned to the mission to fight it out with Johnny. He rushes the young puncher, and fells him with a blow. Padre Anselmo, however, picks up a gun and shoots the brutish Bullhead through the wrist. Bullhead staggers outside to his horse, mounts, and gallops away.

Johnny returns to the Circle Arrow, and makes preparations to leave for Gopher Hollow, where he is to meet his three half brothers. While he is at the ranch, Bullhead makes a return visit to the mission, kills Clark Newell, a sheriff's deputy, and shoots old Padre Anselmo through the hand. The priest tells Johnny he gave Bullhead "explicit directions" for finding the cache—only, they were the wrong directions.

Johnny leaves on his trek to Gopher Hollow. He finds the country hit by a severe drought, and on the way to the town comes to a young ranchwoman, Anne Garrick, whose buckboard, with its cargo of one barrel of water, supplied by the government, has broken down. He helps her get back to her little ranch with the water. Her grandfather, an aged eccentric, shoots at Johnny with his rifle, shouting that Johnny is Bloody Carill. Johnny and the girl pacify the old man, finally, and Johnny, who is attracted by Anne, wonders how she will react upon learning that he is Bloody Carill's son.

Proceeding to Gopher Hollow, Johnny learns that his half brothers

have arrived and are waiting for him in the town's only rooming house. He goes upstairs. Immediately, he is followed by two strangers who have been talking together, in guarded tones, on the porch of the rooming house. They are Bullhead Marsh's emissaries.

CHAPTER XII.

THE FOUR SONS.

WHEN Five-ton Prouty had left the room, Johnny Tucker stood motionless through a long interval of oppressive silence. He faced three men, who had hastily risen at his entrance. And while he made a quick appraisal of them, he felt that he himself was being studied, as though he were a horse for sale. They stared wide-eyed from his red head to his dusty boots. Their scrutiny was critical, comprehensive, and a little surprised.

It became actually embarrassing.

Eight years ago, when he'd gone to work of the Circle Arrow Ranch as a chore boy of fifteen, the cow-punchers in the outfit had gathered in a circle to regard him with mock solemnity. They had commented audibly on his good points as well as his shortcomings; on his hair, and on his teeth. They had ordered him to turn around and around, slowly, in order to exhibit himself from all angles. It had been a comic initiation that had left the boy frantically abashed. Johnny had never been able to forget the sensations of that day. Now, in a milder measure, they returned. It seemed to him that, once again, he was being subjected to such pitiless scrutiny.

It was the oldest and heaviest of the three men who finally drew a stubby pipe from his mouth, and

stepped forward to extend a powerful hand.

"Shake, Johnny. I'm Nate."

Nate Shelby had curly black hair that looked like a wig. His muscular countenance had the square jaw of a fighter. Heavy-set and short-legged, he suggested stubborn strength.

"Sure glad to meet up with you," Johnny Tucker said quietly, accepting the big hand. He grinned as he let his eyes rove over Nate's stocky figure. "Wish I'd had you around to help me out of fist fights, when I was a kid."

Nate Shelby chuckled. Apparently Johnny had struck a happy note.

"You look like maybe you handled them other kids pretty well yourself," he said. "This is Rufe."

He indicated a man who looked like himself—squat, black of hair, inclined to plumpness, but lacking in the aggressiveness that characterized Nate.

As Johnny exchanged greetings with his second half brother, he thought—for no reason he could have analyzed—that Rufe must have always been Nate's shadow. He had the impression that throughout boyhood Rufe must have been trying to imitate his older brother. He had the same rolling gait, the same way of carrying his head, the same habit of keeping his chin close to the chest. But he had never managed to capture the dynamic quality of the older man's personality.

"We been wondering plenty about you ever since your letter came," Rufe declared. "Had no idea at all what kind of hombre you'd turn out to be. We were set for just about anything from a dwarf to a giant." Johnny laughed. "I was gettin' kind of worried myself, to tell you

the truth. But I'm sure beginnin' to feel better now."

He turned to the third and, obviously the youngest Shelby. This man, Abner, differed entirely from his brothers. There was no trace in him, Johnny noticed, of family resemblance.

For one thing, Abner Shelby wore store clothes instead of range attire. The jacket of a gray suit having been tossed to the bed, he stood tall and gracefully slim in a shirt of beautiful white silk. He was clean-shaven, and his sandy hair was smoothly combed. He had the smiling face of a scholar—lean, almost ascetic. It was a handsome face, friendly, and Johnny instinctively liked Abner better than the others.

"Proud to know you, John," said Abner, offering a slender hand. "I just won a ten-dollar bet on you."

"Good," said Johnny, grinning. "How come?"

"I bet Nate you'd have red hair. From all I've been able to learn, our father was a redhead in his young days."

Remembering the hysterical rage his appearance had induced in Grandpa Garrick, Johnny Tucker said dryly: "Yeah. I got a notion I kind of take after Bloody Carill."

"In looks only, I hope," said Nate, and his tones held a sudden harshness.

They sat down.

JOHNNY felt considerably more at ease as he tossed his sombrero to a bedpost. He crossed his legs, hooked his thumbs in his belt, and surveyed his three half brothers with a smile. At least, they were no ogres. They were, he judged, sober and law-abiding citizens, men with whom you could talk sensibly. "Maybe the best thing to do," he suggested, "is sort of get acquainted.

Me, I'm a New Mexico man. Grew up around Little Alamo. I'm twenty-three. Been punchin' cows for the Circle Arrow outfit ever since I was a kid. Never was married and never saw the inside of a jail. Reckon that just about covers my history."

Nate Shelby accepted the brief sketch with a nod. He'd been re-lighting his asthmatic pipe while Johnny talked. Now, as he waved the match to extinction, he said on a puff of smoke:

"All right. Might as well get introductions of that kind out of the way. We three, we was reared around Bolton, Oklahoma. Our mother died fifteen, sixteen years ago. Rufe and me, we always herded cows together. A couple years back, havin' some money saved up, we bought a small outfit of our own. It ain't much, but it keeps us goin'. Me, I'm married. Been married eight years. Got two youngsters—a boy and a girl. Reckon that just about covers the high lights. If there's anything else you hanker to know, just ask." He nodded to Rufe. "You talk for yourself."

Rufe Shelby scratched his chin, arched his brows, and shrugged.

"What Nate told you goes for me, too," he said. "Except that I ain't married." And then he added: "It sure knocked us over, Johnny, to get that letter from you! Far as we knew, Bloody Carill had been dead a good many years. Seems like a century since we last heard anything about him."

"At least," Johnny answered quietly, "you knew he was your father. Me, I didn't even know that much."

He glanced questioningly at Abner Shelby. The tall, sandy-haired man sat on the edge of the bed, graceful, nervous fingers drumming a rhythm

on the post. He was smiling pleasantly.

"My turn next?" he asked. "Well, Johnny, suppose you take a guess. What do I look like? A cattleman? A banker? A thief?"

"No-o." Johnny hesitated. "A schoolmaster, I'd say."

"How about a gambler?"

"Oh, I don't know——"

Abner Shelby tilted back his head and laughed.

"That's what I am, Johnny—a gambler. Hope you're not too finicky about such things in the family." He rose, his expression amused, and thrust his hands into his pockets where they jingled coins. "All my life I've found it more profitable to shuffle cards than to poke cows. Oh, I've ridden some with trail herds now and then, but the dust generally choked me. I found it much easier to make a living *without* cows; going from one boom town to another, or sometimes on river boats, matching my card luck against that of other men."

"Offhand I'd guess," observed Johnny, "that your luck generally has the habit of coming out on top."

"I'm not complaining," chuckled Abner. "Though now and then I get some pretty tough days. Seems like I must have inherited a love of gambling from Bloody Carill. He was the most reckless gambler of us all. Staked his life against the law."

Nate Shelby, bending forward, put in, "There's this I better tell you about Abner here. I've never yet heard a man say that he's dealt a crooked card."

Johnny Tucker had no need to offer any comment. Abner himself relieved him of the necessity by saying:

"Well, now that we know one another, suppose we get down to bed rock. I don't mind telling you,

Johnny, we been mighty anxious to hear a firsthand account of Bloody Carill's death—and of the job he left us. We came by train far as Yellow Butte, bringing our horses along, an' here we are. If you don't mind, and if you're not too tired travelin', I'd sure appreciate hearin' pa's story pronto."

Johnny hitched his chair forward. He felt surprisingly at ease now. Knowing something about his half brothers, he was able to suppress all nervous uncertainty. He talked quietly and frankly, telling them everything that had happened at the Mission of Santa Anita.

Not one of those four sons of Bloody Carill had any reason to suspect that their conversation was being overheard by the two men whose ears were still pressed to the wall of the adjoining room. Feeling that they were alone and in complete privacy, the four spoke without restraint.

ONE of the things that Johnny Tucker was forever to remember about his half brothers, always with a sense of admiration, was the fact that none of them asked to be told immediately where the cache could be found. Primarily, they appeared interested in other matters.

"Me," flatly declared Nate Shelby, when Johnny's story was finished, "I don't savvy this at all. What in tarnation did pa expect us to do? If he wanted us to help certain folks in certain ways, why didn't he name them?"

"His ideas," Johnny was forced to confess, "were kind of vague."

Abner, lighting a cigarette, drawled with his quiet smile: "Over in Spain there was once a gent named *Don Quixote* who set out to do gallant deeds. He didn't know

just where or how he aimed to do them, but he got going, anyhow. After a while he wound up fighting a windmill." He blew out a match and flicked it through the open window. "I got a feelin', boys, that the four of us are goin' out on a kind of *Don Quixote* job."

"Sounds loco," grunted Nate, frowning into the bowl of his pipe.

Johnny explained: "Pa's notion was that we do a bit of investigating. He figured we might be able to find some of the folks whose families have felt the burn of Carill slugs. If they were in need, we were to use dad's money to help them." He thought of Anne Garrick, and added slowly, "I've already run across *one* family that could stand a bit of help right well!"

"One?" dryly put in Rufe. "Listen, Johnny. If you was to go through the Gopher Basin real careful, I bet you'd find a hundred people with a grudge against the name of Carill—people who've got a right to that grudge, too. You mean to say you're goin' to hand money out to 'em just because they was once harmed by Bloody Carill? It don't sound reasonable to me. No, sir! Besides, I don't see how it could ever—well, square pa, the way you put it."

Unexpectedly big Nate Shelby rose, jammed his pipe into a back pocket, and evinced all his natural aggressiveness.

"I been thinkin' things over careful since I got your letter, Johnny," he declared. "Seems to me, I repeat, pa's idea was plumb loco. Usin' his money the way he asked you to ain't nothin' but nonsense. Absolute waste!"

At that Abner regarded the chunky man quizzically. "What would be *your* idea, Nate?"

"You know my idea well enough!" retorted Nate. "That money be-

longed to our father. He's dead. By all rights and laws it now belongs to us. There bein' no will to state otherwise, we're the four rightful heirs. My idea is that we go up into the Huecos, find that cache, and split it four ways!"

They all looked at Johnny Tucker, as if awaiting his decision. There was no hesitation in his manner when he rose and shook his red head.

"Nothin' doin'."

"Why not?" Rufe challenged.

"I gave pa my word I'd do what he asked."

"You were plumb within your rights to promise him for yourself," Nate Shelby pointed out. "But how could you make such a promise for the rest of us?"

"I didn't. All I'm doin', Nate, is invitin' you three to join up with me, seein' as how Bloody Carill was as much your father as mine."

The faintest hint of sarcasm edged its way into Nate Shelby's thick voice. "And I suppose that if we *refuse* to join up with you, then you'll simply mosey on alone without tellin' us where his cache is located. Is that it?"

Johnny stiffened, making no reply, but beginning to frown. Had he misjudged these men?

"How about it?" demanded Rufe. "Is that your plan?"

"I hadn't considered," softly answered Johnny Tucker, "what I'd do if you three refused to come into camp. I'm just beginnin' to think about it now."

The strain that had suddenly seized the room was unpleasant. Johnny felt like one confronted by a snarling dog. It might have become worse if it hadn't been for Abner Shelby.

The sandy-haired gambler uttered an easy laugh. With almost feminine grace he rose, propped one shoulder

against the wall, and drew a coin from his pocket. As he flipped it up and caught it, he chuckled:

"Boys, we won't get anywhere like this. Arguin' ain't the politest way for brothers to meet. What do you say we toss?"

Nate Shelby scowled. "Toss for what?"

"Heads, we three agree to help Johnny carry out pa's wish. Tails—well, we refuse." He flipped the coin again. "How about it? Do I toss?"

A hush during which Nate and Rufe consulted each other with troubled eyes preceded their decisions. It was Nate who finally snapped:

"All right! Suits me."

"Me, too," sullenly declared Rufe.

Abner turned amused eyes to Johnny Tucker. "How about you? Are you willing?"

"Toss her up," Johnny said.

The silver coin soared up to strike the ceiling, fell with a clatter, rolled in a narrowing circle, and dropped flat.

Abner bent over it, then looked up with a grin.

"Johnny wins. We help him distribute pa's wealth in some way, still to be decided, that'll please pa in heaven."

And though Abner was ostensibly the gambler of the family, both Nate and Rufe promptly accepted the edict of the coin without dispute or bad grace. They simply shrugged, and Nate said a bit sheepishly:

"If that's the way fate wants it, I give in." He turned back to Johnny. "Where in thunder is this cache we're to hunt up?"

That was the point at which the two men in the next room pressed their ears more tightly than ever against the wall.

Johnny drew a paper from his back pocket. It was a folded envelope. He thrust it into Nate's hand.

"Read it for yourself," he invited. "That's exactly the way pa gave it to me."

The three Shelby brothers huddled together, read the contents of the envelope simultaneously. When they finished, Nate frowned and cleared his throat.

"Well," he said, "I told my wife not to expect me home for maybe two, three weeks. And it sure looks like we might need that time to do a bit of travelin'. Here, Johnny, you keep these directions. If you're ready to head out for the Huecos tomorrow morning, I am, too."

And that—to the utter consternation of the two men who listened at the wall—was all that was said aloud about the location of the Carill cache!

Yet one thing they knew: Johnny Tucker still had the paper.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PRICE OF A HORSE.

AT eight o'clock next morning Nate Shelby descended creaking stairs to find Five-ton Prouty in his store, tying string around the neck of a huge bag of fodder. Five-ton knew very well that if this drought continued much longer, very few people in the Gopher Basin would be able to afford to buy such a bag. But this morning he felt too hot to worry about the future. Despite the early hour, his face and his pendulous chins were already wet with perspiration. His clothes were pasted to bulging rolls of fat on his overfed body.

"Mornin'!" greeted Nate. "Seen Johnny Tucker around?"

Five-ton, turning from the bag, wiped an already soaked bandanna around his red neck.

"Yeah," he replied, breathless.

"Tucker rode out of town about an hour ago."

"Huh?" with a start. "Where to?"

"He said as how you three gents was all asleep and he didn't like to disturb you. Left word he was moseyin' over to the Rafter G and would be back about nine, ten o'clock."

Nate Shelby was puzzled. He couldn't help frowning. "Where's this Rafter G?"

"That's the Garrick's ranch, four miles south of town." Five-ton grinned insinuatingly, even winked. "Can't blame young Tucker for headin' that way," he chuckled. "There's a right pretty girl on the Rafter G."

Still perplexed, Nate scowled out through the door. A man was leading a burro along the street, and its passage stirred up a thick cloud of yellow dust.

"Looks like Tucker ain't the only one interested in the Garrick filly, either," added Five-ton, his tone mischievous. "Two other hombres headed out that way right after him. I watched 'em lope out of town. They took the Rafter G trail when Tucker had hardly disappeared over the ridge."

"That so?" Nate said quickly. His frown darkened. "Who were these others?"

"Maybe you noticed the two gents that took the room next to yours yesterday? Name of Rafferty and Sabin."

"Uh-huh," Nate acknowledged slowly. "Uh-huh. So—so they went, too, did they?"

"Yep. Come drought or storm, Anne Garrick sure attracts plenty of young buckaroos."

Nate Shelby found himself worried; worried in a manner he couldn't satisfactorily explain, even to himself. He left word for his brothers

that he'd be in the restaurant across the road. Then he went out into the blazing sunshine, and the more he thought about the two men who had followed Johnny Tucker out of Gopher Hollow, the more uneasy he became.

"Maybe I'm just an old woman," he mused. "But what the devil—with a hundred thousand dollars at stake *got* to be careful!"

RIDING alone across that arid, drought-devastated range, Johnny Tucker was more seriously impressed than ever with the suffering of Gopher Basin. Often he passed cows that looked ready to collapse. Never before, even in New Mexico's driest spells, had he seen cattle so desperately tortured. They stood motionless, legs parted as if to keep them balanced. When he rode by, they regarded him with bloodshot eyes that seemed to pray pitifully for a drink. Their tongues dangled from mouths that could no longer even froth. They didn't bother to graze, because nibbling at the dead grass would have been like chewing sawdust.

In a hollow he found a prostrate cow whose flank bore the Rafter G brand. The animal lay, stiff-legged, on its side, eyes rolling, belly heaving. Johnny knew it hadn't much longer to live, so he dismounted, drew his six-gun, and put a bullet into the cow's brain.

His face was grim when he rode again.

He found Anne Garrick rationing out inadequate portions of water to the half a dozen horses at her corral gate.

Whinnying, fighting for her favor, the ponies thrust their heads toward her eagerly. She held a bucket of water from which she allowed each horse its chance to drink.

By the time Johnny reached her, the bucket was empty. She put it down, wearily brushed yellow hair back from her forehead, and greeted him with a gallant though tired smile.

"I hope your horse had a drink in Gopher Hollow," she said. "I've just about exhausted my supply."

"My horse had plenty," he assured her. He drew off his sombrero and regarded her closely. In the light of morning she looked even more beautiful than she had the day before. With all traces of dust gone, her face, though baked by the sun, was fresh and young and strong.

"I've got to head out of town for a spell," he slowly explained. "Thought I'd drift by and say adios."

He thought for a moment that a shadow of disappointment lurked in her eyes. But her smile didn't change.

"Expect to be gone long?"

"Two, three weeks."

"Well," she said, "when you come back, drop in again."

He nodded, then glanced uncertainly toward the horses in the corral.

A dozen times during the night he had awakened with thoughts of Anne Garrick. He knew she couldn't have much money. He knew, too, that if she had a man on the place who might occasionally go to Yellow Butte for water, her plight might be eased. And he had sat up in the darkness for hours, wondering how he might help her. He had almost two hundred dollars in his money belt, and so, he had formulated a plan.

"Me, I'm heading for the Huecos," he said. "A sort of prospecting trip. And I'm going to need a pack horse. I was wondering if maybe you'd care to sell one of those ponies."

Anne Garrick's eyes widened in surprise.

"Why—I hadn't considered——"

"That sorrel, now," he went on, indicating a big-boned mare. "She'd do fine. I'd be willin' to pay a hundred dollars cash for her."

"A—a hundred dollars!"

"Unless——" He looked at Anne Garrick uncertainly. "You feel she's worth more?"

"Johnny Tucker, what on earth is the matter with you?"

"Why?" in bewilderment.

"Don't you know the value of horseflesh in Gopher Basin now?"

"Why, no. I hadn't asked."

NOBODY has any money! What's more, nobody needs horses. Every horse means another mouth crying for water. You could probably buy any mount in the basin at your own price, with a top figure of twenty-five dollars."

Johnny put on his sombrero, leaned a shoulder against a post of the corral fence, and grinned.

"Well, now," he said, "you don't expect me to take advantage of the basin's sufferin', do you? To me that sorrel is worth a hundred dollars. Where I come from, down in New Mexico, I'd probably have to pay more. I was goin' to buy a horse there, but I figured I might as well hold off till I needed one bad enough. The time has come." He unbuttoned his shirt over the money belt. "Say the word, Anne, and I'll lead the sorrel off with me."

"Why——" She still seemed staggered.

Johnny Tucker drew a hundred dollars in bills from his money belt and pushed it into Anne Garrick's hand.

She looked down at the money dazedly, as though he had given her something alive and fragile to hold.

Perhaps she was thinking what a hundred dollars could do. Perhaps she saw herself hiring a man who might be at the railroad station whenever a train arrived with barrels of water; a man who would see to it that she received her full allotment, so that her cattle need no longer suffer the pangs of thirst, so that the horses in the corral need no longer whinny in vain. Suddenly her eyes were filled with tears.

Johnny turned quickly, pulled open the corral gate, and hurried for the sorrel mare.

"It's a deal," he said.

He didn't remain long at the Rafter G. Anne Garrick's unexpected tears and his own confused feelings made him lead his new horse away as soon as he could decently utter his farewell.

"Anyhow," he thought, as he rode again across that sea of brown, dead grass—grass that would have burned as swiftly as straw—"anyhow, I've made a *start* in carryin' out pa's wishes!"

Two miles from the Rafter G the trail climbed over the shoulder of a ridge whose slopes were covered with dying cottonwoods. The few leaves that still clung to the trees were lifeless, and there weren't enough of them to cast any shade.

Johnny Tucker had no warning of what to expect when he climbed the ridge. There were no sounds ahead of him. There was no drifting dust to indicate that riders had recently passed this way. In truth, he saw nobody until he reached the summit.

Then, with a startled jerk, he stopped the horses.

Twenty feet below him on the trail—where they had been hidden by the top of the rise—stood two lean men.

Their mounts were far below, tied

to trees. There was something vaguely familiar about these figures. At the beginning, Johnny couldn't place them in his memory. Besides, there wasn't much time to think.

What froze him in his saddle was the fact that both men were leveling Colts at him. One was smiling in a thin, menacing way. Advancing, he ordered sharply:

"Shove up your arms, Tucker! Hop out of that saddle!"

CHAPTER XIV.

AMBUSCADE.

JOHNNY TUCKER'S whole lean body grew taut. He could feel his muscles contract in hard, rigid lumps. The skin on his head seemed to shrivel.

"What—what in thunder is the idea?" he demanded. "What d'you want?"

The man who had stepped forward gestured significantly with his long Colt. "We'll palaver when you get those hands up."

His companion, however, had no such patience.

"You got a paper that you shoved into your pocket last night, hombre," he flung out. "You can either hand it over or——"

Johnny Tucker had no need to hear more. If these men were interested in the paper he carried, he instinctively connected them with Bullhead Marsh. Nobody else could know about it. To argue, he saw, would be futile, yet he had no intention of surrendering the envelope.

And so, though ostensibly obeying the order to dismount, Johnny did more than that.

Obediently enough he lifted his arms and swung out of the saddle. His nerves felt coiled, ready to spring. Had the two men known him better, they would have realized

that the peculiar hardening of his features, the strange narrowing of his eyes, presaged an unexpected act.

It came.

Johnny Tucker dived recklessly for the protection of the cottonwoods. He made a long lunge, his shoulders drawn down to dodge bullets. At the same time his right hand seized the gun in his holster, started to draw it.

Two shots crashed simultaneously behind him. One bullet cracked against the low-hanging branch of a tree. The other——

Johnny Tucker stifled a groan as lead ripped a gash through his right forearm. The stab of hot pain made him stumble blindly. He seized the trunk of a tree and somehow kept himself upright.

"Got him!" a voice roared.

Johnny turned and pulled his weapon from its holster with a cramped left hand. He had several cottonwoods between himself and the men on the trail.

His shot served to send both men scampering out of sight. They didn't go far. He could hear the cracklings of their steps in near-by dry grass. There was high brush, too, on the other side of the trail, and it helped conceal them.

He tried another shot.

Then Johnny grated an oath. His face was white and his eyes were stormy as he glared at his wounded right arm. Hot blood streamed down to redden his hand. He lifted the arm high, rested it against the tree in some hope of stemming the flow of blood. Then his infuriated stare went back to seek the two who had attempted to waylay him.

"You bloody bushwhacker!" he shouted. "I'll——"

Somewhere beyond the screen of brush a harsh voice cried, "Tucker, you're being a dog-gone fool!"

"If I am," he retorted, "that's my business!"

"You can't hold out against the two of us!"

"I can make a pretty good try!" savagely.

"We ain't aimin' to kill you, hombre. All we want is that paper."

"That's the one thing you're not goin' to get!"

"A dead man can't stop us. And the way you're actin' you're only five minutes from your grave."

Johnny rasped, "Start diggin' it!"

This time there was no reply.

HE could catch the sound of angry whispers, and presently he heard the cautious tread of boots moving beyond the curtain of brush and trees. He perceived, with a start that made his heart thud more wildly than ever, what these men intended to do.

One of them was moving in a wide circle in order to get behind him. In a few minutes, he saw, they would launch an attack from front and rear. It would be impossible to hold both off, very long. With only four slugs left in his gun, there wasn't much he could do. Once the weapon was unloaded, his position would be a hopeless one. That was the moment, he judged, when these two men would charge exultantly, emptying their six-guns into his body.

His face gray, Johnny Tucker sank to his knees. He looked around desperately. To run from the trees would mean to reveal himself. His own two horses, frightened by the shots, had bounded fully fifty yards down the trail. He could hardly hope to reach them, Johnny saw, without running through a storm of bullets.

"Dog-gone it!" he rasped. "I sure let myself in for it, this time!"

He could still hear the footsteps

of the unseen men. They were off to his left now. In a few seconds one fellow would be at his back.

And then, suddenly, out of nowhere, a mad idea came to Johnny Tucker.

Eyes flaring, he shoved the six-shooter back into its holster. His left hand trembled as he reached into a back pocket and drew out the envelope on which he had scribbled Bloody Carill's directions.

He squatted on his haunches while that busy left hand searched another pocket and brought out matches.

Johnny struck a flame, held it to a corner of the envelope.

When the paper began to burn, he kept it between thumb and index finger until more than half of it was ashes. Possibly one of the hidden men saw the flame and the spiral of gray smoke, because there was an alarmed cry.

In response Johnny flung out a crack of sardonic laughter. With hardly two inches of the envelope left in his fingers, he tossed the burning thing out to the dusty trail, where it could be seen.

"Take a good look at it, hombres!" he invited loudly. "There it is—the paper you wanted. Nobody's ever going to see it again!"

He heard a voice far behind him rasp, "What in blazes—"

And the other man shrieked, "I'll plug you for that!"

Johnny Tucker merely laughed again—that same crack of mirthless laughter.

"Figure it out for yourself, gents," he called mockingly. The pain of his right arm lent rage to his tones. "Why do you think I burned up that thing? There's only one way you can get directions to Carill's cache now—and that's from me, personally, alive! I've read those words so often I've got 'em memorized. I

don't need a paper. If you kill me now, you kill every chance you've got in the world. There's only one hope for you two coyotes to get the information you want—and that's to quit slinging lead this way!"

There was a pause. Then came a cry that quivered with a mingling of outrage and wonder.

"You mean if—if we quit firin' you'll talk?"

"I didn't say that!"

"What then?"

"I got no idea at all of talkin' to you buzzards," Johnny grated. "Leastwise, not about the things you want to hear. I know only this—if I'm dead, nobody can lead the way to Carill's cache! The next move is up to you!"

There were ten inactive minutes during which Johnny Tucker was able to recover control of his mind and nerves—minutes during which the battle became a silent siege.

Squatting among the cottonwoods, and protected by their trunks, he could follow the movements of the two invisible men by the sounds they made.

HE judged that they had gathered together again beyond the brush. Presently his judgment was confirmed by the drone of their low, tense voices. Apparently they had come together to discuss a method of procedure. What it would be, Johnny couldn't guess. He looked about once more in something like anguish, but could see no way of rushing down to the horses without being shot.

Frowning, breathing hard, he rolled up the blood-soaked sleeve of his right arm. He saw a gash which, though not deep enough to scrape the bone, was ugly. Dangerous, too. The blood about it had already be-

gun to clot, but some was still dripping.

There was nothing he could do for the wound now. In truth, there was nothing he could do at all—save grip his six-gun in his left hand, and wait for whatever might happen.

He could feel his temples thumping. His throat was dry. His eyes strained.

He tried to catch the words the men were whispering out there, but all he could get was a hum, wholly indistinguishable. He would have given a great deal to know what they planned to do. And yet, he reasoned with bitter humor, it couldn't be long before they'd let him know their intentions. Remaining inactive could help them in no way. Sooner or later—within the next few moments, he supposed—they'd launch another attack. The tension of waiting for it, of watching for it, served at least one purpose—it helped to keep his mind off the burning, throbbing pain in his arm.

When the two lean men did make their move, it was one that completely astounded Johnny Tucker.

He heard a rush of footsteps. Catching his breath, he rose slightly, leveled the six-gun in his left hand, and waited desperately for their shots.

But there were no shots.

And the men weren't running toward him. They were running away!

At the beginning Johnny Tucker couldn't understand such a move. He crouched, bewildered, wondering whether this was some trick to bring him out of hiding.

Finally, peering through the trees, he caught a glimpse of them. They were almost a hundred yards away, down near the spot where they had left their horses. Both were running frantically.

"What in the name of Geronimo —" he began aloud.

The ejaculation died on his lips. He heard new sounds—distant sounds that the other men must have caught first. They became steadily more distinct—the dull hammering of oncoming horses.

As an exclamation broke from his lips, Johnny Tucker pushed his way out from among the trees. He reached the trail in time to see both dark-dressed men galloping westward. They were hunched low over their saddle horns, and they rode as though the devil himself was at their heels.

"They're the polecats who were outside Prouty's feed store last night!" he remembered then.

Far beyond them, where the trail crossed a higher ridge, there appeared now a thick gray dust cloud that followed three riders. Squinting against the sun, Johnny couldn't immediately recognize them. He stood still, the gun hanging in his left hand, and watched for a full minute before he saw, with an elated start, that these were the Shelby brothers!

He lifted his left arm high, waved it furiously as he ran forward. He pointed toward the fugitive bushwhackers, yelled. It was a frenzied plea whose significance could not be mistaken. With a kind of savage delight he saw two of the Shelbys—Nate and Rufe—swerve off the trail to charge after the two lean men, they, too, bending low and riding hard as they drew weapons.

Abner Shelby, however, came thundering on to the cottonwoods.

HIS was a strange, almost an anomalous figure on a horse. He had left his jacket behind. In his tight gray trousers and white silk shirt he resembled a circus

stunt rider more than a man ready to set out for the distant Huecos. He arrived in a cloud of choking dust, reined in a lively Spanish mustang with a jerk that made the horse rear high, and slid gracefully out of the saddle.

"What in thunder's happened to you?" he demanded. "What's all the gun play about?"

Johnny Tucker, exhibiting his wounded right arm, managed a bitter grin.

"Walked plumb into a nest o' dry-gulchers," he said. "They were after the directions to the cache. One of 'em pumped a slug into me before I could hop out of the way."

Abner Shelby's eyes were round in amazement. He stared from Johnny's gray face to the blood-clotted arm, and back again.

"How—how did they know you had the paper? Who are they?"

"Never saw them before last night in my life—and if I never see them again, that'll be all right, too." Then he stammered, "What—what you doing, Ab?"

For Abner Shelby was ripping off his spotless white shirt.

"Silk," he said briskly, "especially clean silk, will make a pretty good bandage."

"But looka here, I——"

"You do the lookin'."

Abner drew a knife from his pocket, opened it, and ruthlessly slashed at the armhole of a sleeve.

"I noticed a couple of canteens hangin' from your saddle horn, below. Got water?"

"Some, yes."

Abner at once ran down the slope. When he came back it was to pour cool water over Johnny's wound. He washed it efficiently, with a certainty of movement that indicated long experience in rendering first aid.

Once he squinted over his shoul-

der. Far in the distance two dust trails showed where the other Shelys were still pursuing the lean strangers, and now and then the crack of far-away shots floated back across the basin.

"What brought you three out here?" asked Johnny, steadying his breath.

"Nate just had a hunch. Figured it couldn't be a healthy sign when he learned strangers were trailing you to the Rafter G. So we all came for a look." While he bound the silken bandage around Johnny's arm, Abner asked, "They didn't get the paper, did they?"

"No! I burned it."

The sandy-haired man stiffened, stared, aghast. "It's destroyed?"

"Yep." Again Johnny grinned. Because of the agony in his arm he was grating his words. "Do't let it worry you, though. I got all those directions memorized."

At that Abner stepped back from the lanky cow-puncher and surveyed him with narrowed eyes. There was queer silence before Abner shook his head.

"Well, now," he muttered, "that's nice—very nice. Reckon neither Nate, Rufe, nor myself could remember what he read on that envelope last night. It was mighty complicated. That means from now on we got to rely entirely on *you*."

"I'll get you to the cache."

"Uh-huh," said Abner. "If we can keep you alive." And suddenly a note that was a little shrill came into his laughter. It startled Johnny. It made him wonder, for the first time since meeting this man, how completely he could trust Abner Shelby. His half brother, still laughing in that peculiar way, said, "Yes, Johnny, you—you'd *better* get us there!"

CHAPTER XV.

LAND OF OUTCASTS.

RUFE SHELBY indignantly reported the outrage of the attempted holdup to the Gopher Hollow marshal, Jake Rudd, but it did little good. The men had vanished.

Now, at the insistence of Nate, the four sons of Bloody Carill spent three extra days in the drought-ridden town, so that Johnny's wound might have a chance to heal.

"No use havin' to stop on the trail every time that cut starts bleedin'," argued Nate. "I'd just as soon rest up here till we're sure you're all right."

He and Rufe had been outridden by the fugitive dry-gulchers. Though they had pounded far after the men, they had eventually lost track of them in the bad lands beyond the slope of Gopher Basin. Like Johnny, however, they were convinced that the two must be emissaries of Bullhead Marsh.

"Though how that coyote ever located you in Gopher Hollow," Rufe muttered, "is more than I can figure out."

"Reckon I could take a reasonable guess," snapped Johnny.

"Eh? How?"

"Before I left the Circle Arrow down around Little Alamo I mentioned to my old boss and to a couple of my pals in the bunk house that I was headin' for Gopher Hollow. The way I see it now, Bullhead Marsh found out pretty quick that the directions to the cache he'd got from Padre Anselmo were wrong. It must have made him plenty sore. Maybe he figured to go back to the padre—only he found the mission heavily guarded.

"So he corralled himself the idea of goin' after *me* again. Probably

sent some hombre unknown in that part of the world down to Little Alamo to toss a few questions about me here and there. It wouldn't have been hard to get some Circle Arrow cow-puncher to remark as how I'd headed for Gopher Hollow."

Nate Shelby gravely nodded. "That sounds like the answer, all right." He drew a heavy breath. "It only goes to show that from now on we sure got to ride with our eyes wide open! No tellin' when this Bullhead Marsh tarantula will find some new way of gettin' at you."

They used their three days' rest to buy provisions for the long trip to the Huecos in New Mexico. Splitting the expenses of the undertaking four ways, they bought food, an extra pack horse, and persuaded Fiveton Prouty to let them fill all their canteens at his precious water barrel. And finally Abner bought himself corduroys and boots for the long trip.

And so, when Johnny Tucker's arm was healing nicely under its bandage, the four sons of Bloody Carill at last set out to find the cache in the Huecos.

They discovered that the dry bed of Gopher Creek furnished the easiest trail toward the southeast. It was a natural highway, simple to follow. Despite the heat and the complete absence of water on the range, they made more than forty miles the first day.

"Our canteens ought to hold out another day or two," muttered Nate, when they made camp that night. "By that time we'll be up in the hills. Maybe run across a spring."

It was only by traveling constantly with men, Johnny Tucker decided while he looked into the flames of the camp fire that night, that you really came to know them. He found Nate a hard, determined

fellow, difficult to sway, yet one endowed with a natural strength of purpose that would keep him battling toward a goal in spite of all obstacles.

As for Rufe, he was a difficult one to analyze—one of those men who become totally invisible in a crowd. He had no particular personality, save that which he seemed to appropriate from his older brother. There was no way of guessing how he would react to an emergency. He might emulate Nate's aggressiveness; or he might, Johnny feared, show a streak of cowardice. He hardly knew what to think of Rufe.

The one who really puzzled him, however, was Abner Shelby.

YOU couldn't help liking Abner. You couldn't help enjoying his gay laugh, his reckless, care-free manner. Even during those hot hours in the dry bed of Gopher Creek, his good humor never deserted him. He knew any number of exciting stories—stories picked up in mining camps, on river steamers, everywhere—with which he entertained the others during the arduous trip. And yet there were moments when Johnny, despite his admiration, had doubts about Abner. The blond man was, he suspected, much more clever than he permitted himself to appear—the sort of man whose mind you could never penetrate.

"Reckon, though," Johnny decided, "best thing to do is take 'em all at face value. They look like a decent bunch. Why worry? Besides—they're my brothers."

Another day of hard travel, leading the two pack horses along Gopher Creek, brought them into foothills where, to Johnny's surprise, the river bed began to show signs of dampness. Farther on there were traces of mud. And after another

three miles of slow riding, they discovered a tiny trickle of water wasting itself on the clay bottom.

"Reckon some of the springs that fed the creek ain't quite dried out yet," observed Rufe. "Only they don't give enough water to carry down into the Gopher Basin."

Johnny peered up at the rising foothills ahead of them. It was almost sundown, and the lofty country they faced loomed in the grandeur of purple shadows.

That night, at supper, they used the last water in their canteens.

But they no longer needed to worry. By the middle of the following morning, when they had climbed some three hundred feet above the surrounding country into a ruggedly beautiful region of rocks and woods, they found a bubbling mountain spring where they refilled the canteens. The water was cold, delicious. The horses drank of it eagerly, and Abner Shelby, wiping his lips as he rose from his knees, declared:

"Better than any wine I've ever tasted in my life! And I've tasted plenty!"

During the rest of the morning, while they steadily climbed to cooler and wilder regions, they found many more such springs. Johnny counted sixteen. "And there must be plenty of them around," he reflected, "that we didn't set eyes on."

"It's kind of a shame," said Nate, a cattleman at heart, "to see this water waste itself in bad lands, when the cows down below need it so bad. Don't think I ever saw so many critters dyin' on their feet as I did down in that forsaken Gopher Basin."

Johnny Tucker, who was riding ahead with Abner, said nothing. His brows were drawn in a thoughtful frown. He seemed trouble. Now that they were out of the drought area, the region behind them seemed in per-

spective even more horribly afflicted than he had realized when he was there.

"I reckon," he mumbled aloud, to Abner's surprise, "that a drought, though, is somethin' even all pa's money can't bring to an end."

FOUR days later they rode into the foothills of the Huecos. Camp that night was made beside a narrow stream that sang gayly to the stars. It raced over stones, splashed, sparkled in moonlight, spun in glimmering whirlpools and eddies.

Abner, now that he was presumably nearing his father's cache, was in an unusually exuberant mood. During supper he entertained his brothers with a merry tale of a Dutchman who had been pursued across Utah and Idaho by a wife who had no other purpose than to bring a frying pan down on his head.

Johnny Tucker, frowning into the flames of the camp fire, hardly listened. It was only when Abner finished his story, to the accompaniment of his brothers' chuckles, that Johnny said quietly:

"Keep on talking, Ab. I think there are a couple of hombres watching us from that ridge above."

"Huh?" Nate violently started, reached for the six-gun he'd put on the ground.

"Steady!" warned Johnny. "Don't let on. You three keep sittin' here, talkin' easy. I'll mosey out as if I'm goin' for more firewood. If you hear a yell, come runnin'. Otherwise, don't move."

Sudden tension seized the group around the fire. Abner, his wits challenged, broke immediately into a tale of river boat gambling south of Memphis. He chattered quickly, loud enough to be heard on the ridge, about "Wild Sam" Haney,

who had staked a boatload of cotton on the turn of a card—and lost with a laugh.

Presently Johnny Tucker made a pretense of yawning and stretching. He drawed, "Reckon it's my chance to tote in more firewood, eh, fellers?"

When Rufe nodded, Johnny turned and walked off casually among the trees.

Ten minutes later he returned, his face taut.

"Yep," he said, "we were being spied on!"

"You spotted them?" Nate whispered, the words strained.

"No. They must have heard me comin' up the rise and scampered away like scared coyotes. But I found plenty of signs up there in the moonlight to show where two men had been sprawlin'."

"Maybe it's the same two snakes that tried to dry-gulch you back in Gopher Basin!"

"Maybe." Johnny's voice was cryptic.

He had noticed that his brothers were quite willing to let him assume leadership. That was natural, perhaps, in view of the fact that he had constituted himself their guide.

"Any way you look at it," he declared tersely, "we're now in Bullhead Marsh's territory. If there's going to be trouble, it's going to happen here!"

Rufe rose and moved back from the firelight to peer about uneasily through the darkness. His hand hovered about his holstered weapon. "Maybe—maybe one or two of us ought to stand guard while the others sleep," he muttered.

"From now on we'll do that," Johnny agreed. "But I don't think we're goin' to run into any kind of fight so soon—not till we get to pa's cache, anyhow."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that,"

grimly observed Nate. He, too, had risen and was peering about searchingly. He could see nobody in the darkness. Nor were there any sounds, save those of their own horses.

Johnny remained seated beside Abner and gazed into the flames of the small fire.

"Unless I've got Bullhead all wrong, he'll let us go to the cache unharmed," he insisted. "There's no profit for him in starting a fight now. What'll it get him?"

"So you figure he'll strike only after we get the money, hey?"

"That would be the wisest thing to do, wouldn't it?" dryly demanded Johnny. "Sure. Let us roam free. Just keep an eye on us every minute. Let us get to the cache and dig it up. Then, when we've got the money in our hands—mark my words, gents, *that's* the time Bullhead Marsh will come tearin' into us with sizzlin' lead!"

CHAPTER XVI.

DECOY.

IN the mystic gray light of dawn, while they were saddling the horses, Johnny Tucker voiced a revolutionary idea which Abner enthusiastically called an inspiration.

The truth of it was that the notion had come to Johnny during the night. He had spent an hour in studying the feasibility of the plan; in wondering, also, how far he could trust these three strangers who were his half brothers. In the end he had decided that his doubts were ridiculous. After all, the Shelbys were as much sons of Bloody Carill as he was himself. Responsibility for administrating the wealth Carill had left was theirs as much as his.

So he spoke of his plan in low

tones, while latigos were being tightened and saddlebags strapped.

"If we're being watched by Bullhead's coyotes," he began, "the chances are that only two or three hombres are doing the watching. A bigger crowd might give itself away, and Bullhead Marsh wouldn't want that to happen too soon. What's got me bothered is that when we do get our hands on pa's cache, we won't be able to fight to keep it. Pa said as how there was about a dozen of these outlaws trailin' along with Bullhead Marsh. If it ever came to a hand-to-hand fight, we four couldn't hold 'em off very long against odds like that."

"Got to take our chances," Nate curtly declared.

"Not if we can *avoid* a fight."

Rufe Shelby demanded harshly, "How in tarnation can you hope to do that?"

"Well, I've been thinking about it quite some," Johnny answered in that same low tone, fussing with his stirrups. "And here's the idea I got: Nate, you and I will ride side by side all morning. I'll keep repeating directions to the cache till you know them by heart, same as I do. Sabe?"

"Well?"

"Along about noon, when we camp, Rufe can make out like he's been taken sick. Squirm around on the ground and groan and hang on to his stomach. The rest of us will make a big to-do over him. We'll talk loud enough for anybody watching us to hear. We'll make it sound like Rufe's too dog-gone sick to go ahead. You, Nate, and you, Abner, can do some cussin', sayin' as how you're hankerin' to get your hands on that cache soon as possible. The delay won't appeal to you at all. See?"

Frowning, Nate demanded,

"What's all this sleight of hand leadin' to?"

"Leadin' to this: We'll make it sound like Rufe's sickness is likely to delay us a couple of days. Then I'll offer to save time by going ahead to the cache with Abner, while you, Nate, stay behind to take care of Rufe. My notion is that if you and Rufe stay in camp, whoever is trailin' us will come high-tailin' after Abner and me. We'll lead them off into the hills on a nice long chase. Meanwhile, soon as it's dark, you and Rufe can slip away and head straight for the cache."

The three men were now regarding Johnny Tucker with wide eyes. New tension settled upon them all. Abner looked as if he were about to emit a cheer.

"So while those buzzards are trailin' after Abner an' me, figurin' that I'm the logical one to be watched," Johnny went on, "you and Rufe will get the money. Soon as you've got it, Nate, high-tail straight back for Gopher Hollow. We'll meet you there in about a week."

"But—but what'll *you* two be doin' meanwhile?" Nate blurted.

"Meanderin'."

"Just goin' around in circles, like?"

"Oh——" It was Abner who caught up the idea, and developed it with his impetuous laugh. "Don't worry about us, Nate! We'll give these boys a merry time. What with actin' like we're hunting landmarks, we'll lead 'em through plenty of gulches and over plenty of high land. After a while we'll circle down into the foothills somewhere. Then, durin' the night, we'll make a break for open country. By that time they'll probably be so bewildered they won't know what it's all about. If they guess, it'll be too late. You'll have the money. Oh, you can leave

that gang of buzzards to us, Nate!" Abner laughed again, merrily. "This sounds like it's goin' to be plenty of fun!"

THEY launched the plan at noon. Johnny, suppressing a grin of admiration, couldn't help applauding the quality of acting revealed by the Shelby brothers. Rufe, writhing on the ground with his arms wrapped about his abdomen, gave an appalling convincing imitation of a man tormented by pain. At moments, he appeared to be on the verge of convulsions. The others hovered over him with all the worried solicitude of parents. They loosened his clothing, pulled off his boots. Abner, squatting beside the fire, concocted some sort of odorous drink which he loudly declared was beneficial for any stomach ailment.

Whether or not this pantomime was being observed by hidden eyes, they couldn't be sure. Yet any one of them would have been willing to bet on it.

So it was that, in mid-afternoon, Johnny Tucker and the sandy-haired Abner Shelby set off alone into the wilderness. Their last words to the others, uttered loudly enough to be heard for two hundred yards in that stillness, were that they would return to camp with the money.

They pushed on together for two full days, their course following a wide semicircle. Because they moved slowly, they didn't go far. That, however, seemed natural enough. Among those primitive mountains, where they had to seek passes and deep arroyos to serve as trails, it was impossible to make rapid progress.

Toward sundown of the second day, while they were moving through

the depths of a winding canyon where an icy stream ran, Johnny leaned out of his saddle toward Abner and whispered:

"Unless my calculations are all wrong, Nate and Rufe ought to have their hands on the cache by this time. They ought to be headin' back for Gopher Hollow."

"Me," chuckled Abner, "I've been spending the last couple of hours in silent prayer for them."

"I—I sure hope this scheme works out!"

"Why shouldn't it? So far it's all right."

"It—it'll be kind of tough if somebody stayed on to watch Nate and Rufe."

"After all the fuss we made over Rufe at that camp, I figure you can be dog-gone sure we're the only ones who're being followed," Abner declared confidently. He peered about. "What do you say? What do we do next? Start back?"

"I think we can head out of the mountains, yes."

They rode on in silence, their single pack horse following. It was at best an eerie sensation to feel that they were constantly under surveillance in these wilds. Possibly they were being trailed by men who remained a mile or so behind, content to follow their spoor. Or else, there might be riders on the very rim of this canyon, screened by brush. There was no way of telling where these watchful eyes might be. And Johnny had no desire to search.

"If we *should* spot these hombres at any time," he had warned Abner, "just make out like you see nothing. Anything else we do is sure to lead to a fight, and there's no use sendin' out an invitation to death."

The graveled ground began to rise

toward the canyon's mouth. They climbed through a region that was delightfully cool and shady, caressed by an unending breeze. Where the walls of the ravine were not rocky, they supported a thick growth of scrub oak. Johnny gazed upward and lost himself in speculation.

Often, that day, he had found himself thinking of Anne Garrick, as he was now.

Something tightened within him when he visualized the hopeless fight the girl was waging against the devastation of drought. Her plight might not have been so poignant if she had others on the Rafter G to help share her worries. But with only an old man of eighty-seven as her companion, her life struck Johnny as being almost unendurable. He couldn't help marveling at her indomitable pluck in sticking to the ranch. And he was still thinking of Anne when they emerged from the canyon, and a deep voice said:

"Howdy, gents."

Johnny, caught in reverie, snapped up astonished eyes and went rigid.

With Abner a few yards behind, he had just come around the base of a copper-colored bluff, which had concealed the trail ahead. Now, as his breath caught in his chest, Johnny discovered that they had ridden into a semicircle of mounted men.

There were twelve riders in front of him. Some kept their horses among trees. Others deliberately blocked the trail. Every one of those strangers held a six-gun pointed at the two men who had emerged from the canyon.

The thing that froze Johnny Tucker, however, was the sight of the huge, black-haired figure who had greeted him.

It was Bullhead Marsh.

CHAPTER XVII.

"WHERE IS THE CACHE?"

THE easiest way for you two hombres to commit suicide, in case you're interested," Bullhead remarked in a dry, crackling voice, "is to reach for your smoke poles."

Johnny, every nerve in him vibrant, had just come to that conclusion himself. His first instinct, on seeing the trap into which he and Abner had ridden, had been to yank out his weapon and shoot his way to freedom. Against a dozen leveled guns, however, such an act was unthinkable.

He found himself breathing heavily as Abner quickly moved to his side. To his surprise, the young gambler's voice lost none of its reckless lilt as he observed:

"So these are pa's friends, are they, Johnny? The outlawed polecats you been telling me about?"

"That's right," came from Johnny thickly.

"You sure described Bullhead Marsh perfectly. I take it he's this here gorilla with the black hair an' the——"

"Keep your mouth shut!" Bullhead uttered the command in sudden rage. He sent his horse forward, his eyes blazing. "You're one of the Shelby hombres, ain't you?"

"Abner Shelby, Esquire, of Bolton, Oklahoma."

"Well, get this, Shelby. You don't mean a thing to me, one way or another. Sabe? It's Tucker here I'm interested in! If you try to get smart, it'll be a pleasure to brush you off the face of the earth. That clear?"

"As crystal."

"Then keep your trap shut! Speak when I ask you a question. Outside that, I don't want to hear from you!"

"Yes, sir," Abner said with mock

humility. "I'll try hard to remember, sir."

Bullhead Marsh swung his gaze to Johnny's tight features.

"You been leading us through a nice merry-go-round, haven't you?" he snarled. "Just sort of driftin' through the Huecos, with no particular place in mind. Sort of sight-seein', eh?"

"What gave you that idea?" Johnny asked, forcing mildness into his voice.

"If you'd been headin' any place in particular, you'd have traveled in a straight line! For the past two days you been doublin' back on your tracks."

"I don't know these Huecos any too well. I'm tryin' to locate some landmarks."

"It's sure been takin' you plenty time!"

"I'm kind of slow, maybe."

"Well, I ain't! I know these mountains fine. Lived in 'em long enough." The outlaw's stormy eyes narrowed. "So you're going to tell us where to locate that Carill cache, Tucker. And we'll find the spot pronto."

Johnny sent an oblique look at his half brother. It was answered with a wink. Perhaps both of them had the same thought—that this holdup indicated, at any rate, that Nate and Rufe had not been followed.

Johnny could see it would mean instant death to impart such information to Bullhead Marsh. If this outlaw crowd were informed that the money was already on its way to Gopher Basin, they would have no reason to keep their present prisoners alive. The chances were they'd promptly rid themselves of Johnny and Abner with a volley of bullets and set off, riding with all the speed they could rowel out of their mounts, in pursuit of Nate and Rufe.

Bullhead snapped, "Rafferty, ride up behind these buzzards and take their guns!"

A quick, sideward glance showed Johnny Tucker the two men who had attempted to bushwhack him near Gopher Hollow. He recognized them easily enough, and recognition brought a contemptuous smile to his lips.

But he didn't speak, though his chest pounded. There was nothing to say, nothing to do. Like Abner, he sat motionless while Rafferty rode behind him and took possession of the weapons.

"Now," rapped out Bullhead Marsh, "you two are going to ride with us for a spell. We got a camp up above. When we get to it we'll talk business." He swung his horse around, waved to the others. "Herd 'em along the trail!"

So Johnny and Abner, surrounded by a dozen armed men, were forced along a trail that wound miraculously around colored bluffs and through shadowy gulches. Nobody spoke during that ride. Nobody asked questions. It was as if Bullhead were withholding his most powerful ammunition for a more opportune setting.

And Johnny fought to hide his increasing fear.

Half an hour later they emerged into a clearing hemmed in by trees on three sides. It's western border was a tributary of the cold mountain stream they had seen in the canyon.

Johnny noticed that one of the outlaws had remained behind on the trail, probably as a guard.

Obedying an order to dismount in the clearing, he frowned. His lips made a tight line. Exactly what attitude to assume, he hardly knew. Only one thing was clear to him: As long as he refused to divulge the location of his father's cache, as long

as he mentioned nothing of Nate's and Rufe's strategy, he could hope to be kept alive. If he did anything else, however, he saw no reason why Bullhead Marsh should withhold an immediate shower of bullets.

"All right," Bullhead said, suddenly swinging his bulk out of his own saddle. "Get those ropes ready, Rafferty! It's time we got down to business with these two tarantulas!"

FIVE minutes later Bullhead Marsh, legs parted and hands on hips, surveyed his two prisoners with complete satisfaction. Johnny Tucker and Abner Shelby stood securely bound to trees, some five yards apart. Not only were their wrists and ankles firmly roped to the trunks, but a dozen coils of rawhide encircled their bodies.

"Remember," Bullhead chuckled to Johnny with malicious amusement, "how you once had *me* hog-tied to a tree outside the Mission of Santa Anita? I had more luck with that rope than I figure you'll have with this one, Tucker."

Johnny answered grimly, his eyes flaming into the outlaw's, "My pa begged me to kill you that day. Reckon he knew what he was talking about. I'd have saved myself a heap of trouble."

"Sorry now you didn't, are you?"

"Kind of."

Abner put in, "I'm surprised at you, Johnny. Mean to say you had a chance to plug this snake and didn't take it? Why, it don't seem possible."

Bullhead promptly whirled on him. He walked forward until he stood two feet from Abner Shelby. He thrust out his head to glare into the gambler's eyes.

"Thought I told *you* to keep your trap shut."

"I was never much good, Bullhead,

at understandin' the language of coyotes."

"No? Maybe you'll understand this!"

Bullhead Marsh drew back his fist and let it fly. It crashed squarely against Abner Shelby's chin. It banged Shelby's head back against the tree.

Abner winced in pain, groaned. If it weren't for the rope that bound him to the tree, he would have collapsed. As it was, his body went limp, his knees sagged, and his head dangled forward. He hung there, upright but unconscious.

The rage that boiled up in Johnny Tucker momentarily strangled him. His lips parted, but not a sound issued from them. It was clear that some of the outlaws, too, resented Bullhead Marsh's punch at a man who couldn't lift a hand. A few of them glowered, muttered. But when Bullhead Marsh swung around to glare at them, their objections hastily subsided.

Johnny Tucker finally managed words.

"Nice work, Bullhead!" he said hoarsely. "It—it's just about what I'd have expected of a buzzard like you!"

"I warned him, didn't I?"

"Yeah. A rattler sometimes warns you, too, before it strikes!"

Bullhead hitched up his belt, and slowly approached Johnny. His expression was dangerous. Perhaps he resented the murmur of rebellion he'd heard among his men; perhaps he saw that, to regain prestige, he must handle Johnny Tucker in a way that would insure the speedy attainment of his goal.

"Tucker," he snapped, "I ain't one bit interested in your opinions. There's just one thing I aim to get from you: Where's that cache?"

"That's the one thing," Johnny re-

torted, his voice shaking, "that you won't get!"

"Reckon you'll change your mind about that." Bullhead Marsh's words were uttered ominously. He stood still a moment, peering deep into Johnny Tucker's fiery eyes. Then he went on: "I don't aim to kill you, Tucker. I can't expect you to talk when you're dead."

"That's the only sensible thing I ever heard you say."

"But I got a way of makin' you talk."

Johnny's whole body was pounding and feverish. From a man like Bullhead Marsh you might expect almost anything. Himself pallid, he looked at Abner, still dangling unconscious, then back at the outlaw.

"First off, though," Bullhead said softly, "I'll give you a chance to talk of your own free will. Are you ready to tell us where to locate your pa's cache?"

"No!"

"You'd rather take what's comin' to you?"

Johnny stood silent.

"All right," said Bullhead Marsh, drawing his six-gun. "You're just plain beggin' for it. Did Padre Anselmo tell you what happened to him?"

Again Johnny refused to speak.

"It was very simple," went on Bullhead. "I told the padre that until he started talking I'd put a bullet into his body once every five minutes. Not the kind of slugs that kill, exactly, but slugs in the arms and legs. See what I mean?"

"You're just wastin' breath, Bullhead!"

"Figure you can hold out against blood, do you?"

"Nobody has ever *shot* words out of me."

Slowly brandishing the gun in his hand, Bullhead Marsh studied his prisoner thoughtfully. He saw a lean young man whose face was colorless, yet stubborn.

With a surprising change of tone Bullhead asked, "What the devil did you figure on doin' with all that money, anyhow—that is, if you could have got it out of these hills?"

"That's my business!"

"Believe me, Tucker, you're lucky you're not goin' to get away with that cache. We'd never have let you use it. We'd have hounded you till you gave it up." Bullhead pushed his sombrero to the back of his black-haired head. "All right," he snapped, suddenly decisive, "we'll start now! You got five minutes to change your mind. If you don't, you get your first taste of lead!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

ONE SLIM CHANCE.

JOHNNY TUCKER'S burning eyes sank to the weapon in Bullhead Marsh's hand. They rose to the man's powerful, black-bearded countenance and remained there.

The ten outlaws who watched, stood hushed. One or two of them fidgeted uneasily, as though unable to endure the strain of waiting for the first shot. Bullhead himself didn't stir. He appeared to be counting off the seconds.

"Bullhead," whispered Johnny Tucker, fighting to keep his husky voice steady, "if you put enough slugs into my legs and arms, I'll die from loss of blood. And I'm tellin' you right now that I'll die before I talk!"

There was, in Johnny Tucker's tones, as well as in his savage expression, something that carried conviction. He spoke so harshly that Bullhead himself appeared a little

shaken, as if, for the first time, he was beginning to doubt the efficiency of his plan.

The others must have doubted it, too, for again they began to mumble.

At last Marsh dropped a scornful laugh. "You'll talk different," he predicted, "after you get your first taste of lead. You got about three minutes left, Tucker."

"Three minutes or three hours, it won't make any difference."

Suddenly a stocky man with a limp moved out of the crowd to touch Bullhead's arm. The fellow appeared worried. When Bullhead Marsh frowned at him, he jerked his head to one side.

"I'd like to palaver with you alone."

Though the black-haired leader hesitated, obviously unwilling to leave his prisoner, he finally yielded and accompanied the lame man in the direction of the stream.

They were gone several minutes. Bullhead, scowling at the ground, listened attentively to what the other had to say. The fellow's words were inaudible, yet Johnny saw that he spoke excitedly, with many gestures. His eloquence transformed Marsh's hesitation first to doubt; then, slowly, to weakness.

"You think so?" he asked at last.

"I'm sure of it!" the man declared.

"It'll be sort of wastin' the night, though."

"Wasting nothing! You can't go huntin' the cache in the dark. We'll have to wait till mornin', anyhow."

"Still——"

"I tell you it's worth tryin', Bullhead! I've seen it work before. And look—that tree is perfect for it."

The black-haired man turned to regard the tree quizzically, as though

he had never before really seen it. After a while a peculiar smile twisted his lips.

"Maybe you're right at that, Gimpty," he muttered. "Yep, maybe you're right."

"You got nothing to lose by tryin'."

"I'm beginnin' to agree with you."

Johnny Tucker's apprehension increased while he wondered what was to happen next. He saw Bullhead Marsh thrust his six-gun back into the holster. Lumberingly, the enormous figure approached him.

"Tucker," he said, "my friend here has an idea that maybe you *would* rather die than talk right now."

Johnny waited, tense, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Gimpty suggests that if we was to kind of string you up by the wrists to a branch of that tree, you might change your mind by mornin'."

An icy chill rippled over Johnny Tucker's body. Yet his voice remained firm and a bit sarcastic as he said:

"Nice ideas you hombres play with."

"Any idea's nice if it works," replied Bullhead. "Gimpty thinks by morning you'll be ready to listen to reason. Right now you're in one of those pig-headed moods. So I've decided to give his notion a try." Bullhead signaled to several men. "Come on, gents. Untie him and string him up by the wrists."

It took only a few minutes. There was no way in which Johnny Tucker could have helped himself.

By the time Marsh's outlaws finished their job, his arms were stretched stiff above him. He dangled from the branch of a tree with the tips of his toes barely touching the ground.

IT was an agonizing position. Pain slowly set in; excruciating pain. Though it was sundown, with a cool breeze flowing through the mountains, perspiration oozed out of Johnny's forehead and dribbled down his jaws. He kept his teeth clenched fiercely. From the corners of his eyes he saw that Abner Shelby had just recovered consciousness. Now Abner was gaping at him in horror.

Johnny hung there, wondering desperately how long he could hold out.

As darkness came, the outlaws built two fires and cooked supper. There were several gunny sacks under the trees, from which they drew supplies. The men lounged about comfortably, eating and talking in low voices, occasionally glancing at the prisoners. But nobody offered Johnny or Abner food or water.

Within an hour Johnny Tucker no longer felt real pain. A strange numbness afflicted his body. And the paradoxical part of it was that, while sensation vanished from his flesh, his mind seemed to achieve new keenness.

Once, however, he must have lost consciousness, because when he opened his eyes again the camp fires were red embers, and the men sprawled about in sleep. Only one figure—slim and hunched—sat awake near Johnny's feet.

He was a swarthy little man whom Bullhead Marsh had called "Pinto." Ostensibly he had been left as a guard.

Johnny turned his head to find that Abner was watching him with frantically worried eyes. He forced a weak smile, as if to reassure Abner, as if to say, "I'm all right." Then he fixed his gaze on the hunched figure of Pinto.

For a half hour Johnny Tucker

said nothing, but his mind raced. Pinto glanced up at him once in a while, dully, then resumed his contemplation of the racing stream.

Johnny had scant faith in the thing he finally decided to do. Yet it was worth attempting.

"Pinto," he whispered.

The little man looked up quickly with a touch of sullen anger. "Well? What you want?"

"Pinto, how—how would you like to make five thousand dollars in cold cash for yourself?"

Startled, Pinto parted his lips.

"Keep your voice low," Johnny warned, his own hardly audible. "I'm offering you five thousand for yourself."

"Listen, hombre," wrathfully, "if you're tryin' to bribe me to double-cross—"

In alarm, Johnny looked at the sleeping outlaws. He could see the great bulk of Bullhead Marsh stretched on a poncho between the two fires. But nobody stirred. He moistened parched lips, looked back at Pinto.

"Feller," he whispered huskily, "Bullhead is never goin' to get me to talk! If I had any idea of revealin' where that cache is hid, do you think I'd go through all this? No! He'll kill me before he can get a word out o' me!"

"That's his lookout."

"But if we—if we was to get away from here, I could lay my hands on that cache before morning! Help us, Pinto, and I'll hand five thousand over to you without question!"

"Go to blazes."

"All you got to do, Pinto, is—is cut this rope."

"Not me!"

"After that——"

"My life wouldn't be worth a red cent."

"You won't have to worry about

your life! You can come with us. With five thousand in cash you can get out of these mountains for good. You won't have to worry about Bull-head Marsh at all!"

Pinto started to retort but abruptly checked himself. An expression of wonder, not unmixed with cunning, asserted itself in his small, porcine eyes. Still seated at Johnny Tucker's feet, he hugged his knees and scowled into the embers of a fire.

He was a strange man, Pinto. His career as an outlaw had begun seven years ago, when he had shot a deputy sheriff near Santa Fe. Since then he'd been hiding in the mountains, a member of the crowd that had faithfully followed Bloody Carill.

PINTO was not without imagination. As he gazed into the embers he saw something more than five thousand dollars. He saw himself accompanying Johnny Tucker and Abner Shelby away from this camp. Himself the only armed man among the three, he had a strange dream of going with these two to the cache. Once they revealed its location, why couldn't he shoot them? What need would he have after that of fearing Bullhead Marsh? What need would there be of splitting the cache with the rest of the gang—or any one at all?

Pinto lifted his head to fix an excited stare on the stream.

Far off in the East, in a place called Cape Cod, Pinto had a married sister. He hadn't seen her for fifteen years. Now he toyed with the vision of going to live with her in peace; of arriving with a hundred thousand dollars—a man of wealth and security. He could resume the name he had dropped when he'd

come into the mountains. Who could ever guess that Henry G. Brill, a respectable resident of Cape Cod, was the late Pinto, wanted by the law in New Mexico?

Pinto's jaws began to work as if he were chewing a cud. Little lumps of muscle bulged under his skin. Once or twice he glanced up uncertainly at the man dangling by his wrists from the branch of the tree. Then he peered at his sleeping companions—men for whom he had never had any particular love.

It was only necessity that had kept him loyal to this crowd. The same thing, he knew, could be said of any member of that outlaw group. They had no reason to admire one another. It was only the rule of safety in numbers that had kept them banded together.

Pinto scowled.

"What do you say?" urgently whispered Johnny Tucker.

"How the devil do I know you'll keep your word?"

"If we don't, you'll be toting a gun to make your orders stick, won't you? *We're* not armed!"

From Pinto came a sound that might have been a subdued laugh. Again, however, he squinted narrowly at the sleeping men. There was a curiously calculating quality in his expression.

"All you got to do," Johnny Tucker pleaded, "is cut us loose! Cut Shelby's rope first. Me, I'm apt to collapse. If he's here to hold me up, though, there won't be a sound."

Johnny Tucker had to argue and plead with Pinto for almost a half hour. Yet his heart sang of hope, for through those slowly dragging minutes he could see the swarthy outlaw weaken. And from the corners of his eyes he saw Abner watching, in fascination. Abner displayed

the good sense not to interfere. He was a spectator, enthralled, silently cheering Johnny's wild efforts.

A full hour passed.

Suddenly Pinto rose. He spat, rubbed a nervous hand across his lips. Behind him the camp fires had become dark ashes. He stepped close to Johnny Tucker and whispered fiercely:

"Listen, hombre! If I do this thing, I'm takin' my life in my hands. Sabe?"

"You won't be sorry for it!"

"And if you try to double-cross me, so help me, I'll kill you as I'd kill a rattler! Got that straight?"

Johnny's nerves were banging crazily. Sure," he said, quite hoarse now. "Sure! Come on, Pinto! Cut the—"

"Wait! There's something you got to listen to first." His voice was fierce. "If I cut you free I don't give you any guns. I'll hang on to those. We got to get out of here without a sound. You'll find the horses about two hundred yards be-

low. There's a patch of grass where they're staked. Each of you take a mustang. Don't ride it. Lead it. I'll be behind you. Any sound is apt to ruin everything. You savvy all that, don't you?"

"Of course!"

"We won't go by the trail. There's a guard out there. If we fight him, there'll be too much noise. I'll take you another way. You follow my orders, or I—I'll pump lead into you and then run for my own life! That clear?"

"Absolutely, Pinto!"

"And if you don't lead me to that cache before mornin'—if I begin to suspect that you're tryin' to double-cross me—I'll drill both of you and high-tail out of these hills by myself! Those are my terms. Understand them?"

Johnny nodded, desperately.

For the last time, the excited Pinto sent a swift glance over the sleeping group of outlaws. None of them had moved. Then from his back pocket he drew a bowie knife.

To be continued in next week's issue.

TERRIERS ROUT OUT COYOTES

HUNTERS, using trail hounds to pick up the scent of coyotes, often spend hours digging out the varmints, which have burrowed deeply into the ground. The hounds used are too large to go into the holes. But recently, wire-haired terriers, which are known to go after anything that moves regardless of size, have been initiated into the work of digging up the coyotes. The terriers dive bravely into the holes and drag out the pups, one by one.

Robert P. McFarland, assistant district agent at Grand Junction, Colorado, is the one who planned and developed this novel method of capturing coyotes. He has trained terriers to do this work and believes that this usual household pet will soon acquire outstanding fame as an aid in ridding the country of a dangerous animal.

NOTICE—This magazine contains new stories only. No reprints are used.

Big Bolo's Home-coming

by Harry R. Keller

THE valley was shrouded in fog,
The heavens were starless and still,
When Bolo, the shaggy wild dog,
Came down with the wolves for the kill.
Three months he had roamed with the pack,
And shared in their savage affrays,
Since leaving the sheep-herder's shack
Where old Tony Mons spent his days.

Gray Tony, his master of old!
Big Bolo voiced penitent whines,
Remembering sheep in the fold,
And camp fires at night in the pines.
Beside him his mate, gaunt and gray,
Paced on with the wolf's stealthy tread.
Ere ever there dawned a new day,
Warm lifeblood would flow, rich and red.

A long howl arose from the van.
The lead wolf had sighted the prey!
With deep-throated snarls the gray clan
Surged forward, to rend and to slay.
Big Bolo's long, murderous leap
Fell short as he faltered from shock.
Those blundering creatures were sheep!
The wolves had attacked Tony's flock!

A cell snapped in Bolo's hot brain.
He whirled with the swiftness of light.
Three ewes had been mangled and slain—
His sheep! Tony's sheep! He must fight!
Long training asserted its sway.
Fangs flashing, he turned on the pack!
The dumfounded wolves fell away,
Then, rallying, met the attack.

A charge, and big Bolo went down!
But two wolves would rise nevermore.
From tail tip to quivering crown,
He battled as never before.
And then the whole pack leaped to flight,
As sharply a rifle shot rang!
A bent form appeared in the night,
And Bolo's great heart leaped and sang.

What mattered his throat, running red?
What mattered the flecks of bright foam?
Old Tony's gnarled hand on his head
Had welcomed the wild one back home.





ONLY A MULE

By GEORGE CORY FRANKLIN

Author of "Chief Beats The Fire," etc.

OF course, Chief is the most wonderful horse that ever was, and every mule in my string loves him. I'm Topsy, the first mule in Chief's string, but I'm big and strong, and can hold my temper better than Dynamite or Spot. I work next to Chief, and when there's anything special to be packed, like eggs or dynamite caps, I get that load.

Mules are not like horses; we don't have any real families of our own, and we love horses more than we do each other.

I was born in the South, and when I was three I followed a white bell mare to the railroad and was shipped

with a lot of other mules to Colorado, and broke to pack for Peak Brothers. At first I was almost scared into fits when they put a packsaddle on me. The cinch pinched my belly, the breeching tickled my hind legs, and the breast strap shut off my wind, until I learned how to hold my head high, and then I didn't mind.

After I'd had my buck out, and learned that, no matter how much I kicked and fought, the saddle stayed right there, I stood still, shaking all over like I had when I was a little colt, and one of the men had pitched a loop over my neck and I had choked myself down. It was then that Chief came to me and muzzled my flank. Somehow the touch

of his nose comforted me, and I felt a lot better. Chief waited a little while, then moved up close and stood beside me. He scratched my neck, and even rubbed my ears a bit. My heart stopped beating and I felt good all over.

Al Peak had been sitting on top of the corral, watching us. He got down now and came close. For the first time in my life I liked the smell of a man. I knew right then that I liked Al, but of course, I'd never come to love him as I did Chief.

Al tied me into the string, and I went with the other mules up the mountain to the St. Jacobs Mine. I saw that all the other mules carried loads, but I wasn't given anything to carry for several trips, and then only a couple of sacks of ore that I could have tossed into the canyon if Al hadn't taken a long rope with an extra cinch on it, and thrown a diamond-hitch over the load. I tried a couple of times to buck it off, but got nowhere. I saw that Chief didn't like the way I was acting up, so I walked quietly down the mountain and stood while Al took off my load; then I was unsaddled, and fed oats.

From then on, I learned fast. Chief helped me all he could. In a few days I got so that I liked the work, and would stand quietly while the men loaded me and tied the ropes. One thing I wanted more than all else, and that was to walk next to Chief; every time I got a chance I tried to crowd up past the mules ahead of me, and I got bit and kicked several times for it.

One morning we went up without any loads, until we got to the timber. Chief led us in between two big piles of smooth white mine timbers, and Al and one of the other packers began packing one of the logs on each side of the mules, letting the other end drag on the ground. This was some-

thing new to me, and the scraping of the logs scared me into a panic. I set back until I broke a pigtail and started to stampede down the mountain, leading six mules behind me. But Al jumped on Chief and headed us off, caught hold of my halter rope and led us back to the loading place.

"I guess we'll have to put Topsy up next to Chief," Al said to the packer. "If we don't, she's likely to wreck the train."

That's how I first got to the place I had wanted all the time. I was so happy here that Al decided I would carry a load of logs, and though I was most scared to death, I could touch Chief with my nose when the racket got too loud, and managed to keep my nerve.

FROM that day I worked next to Chief, and learned how to walk on the outside of a curve and so keep the rest of the string from rubbing their packs against the bank. I'd been broken to pack early in the spring, and by the time the rainy season came I was as steady as any mule in the string. The days had been warm and bright, and the work was not hard. We were all fat and full of play, and nearly every morning some of the mules had to buck a little, just to let off steam, but when the rains began and the trail got slippery, we had hard work to keep our footing on the steep places.

There were three streams to ford, and as the rains continued, day after day, the water, that used to come up only to my knees, now washed against the ends of the ore sacks where they rested on my sides, and when we came to the biggest stream, which was only a short distance from the camp where we were unloaded, Al got off and looked it over before leading us into it.

One day, when we went up in the morning, the water was the highest it had ever been, and little Judy, the "popper," was swept off her feet and would have been carried away by the flood if it hadn't been that the halter rope held, and Pete, the mule ahead of her, dragged her to shallow water.

I could tell by my nose that something was wrong with Al, and when he came up close to me to put on my load, the fear smell was stronger on him than it had ever been. Several times, as we came down the mountain, he left Chief to hold the string and went back to talk with the other packers.

We forded the first two streams all right, though the pressure of the water was so heavy that we had to brace our legs against it and lean upstream with all our might. Then it began to rain. When we came to the lake fork it was higher than when we went up, and every mule in the outfit knew that Al was worried. He waited until the next packer rode up on Toby, and they talked quite a while. Finally Al jerked my halter rope loose from the pigtail and took a turn with it around the horn of Chief's saddle. He looked back over the string to make sure that all the packs were riding square, then he rode into the stream. Chief hesitated, snorted a time or two, and walked in carefully, feeling his way.

The mules all led up close, crowding me so that I was on Chief's heels when we hit the deep water. I saw Chief go down in swimming water; something terrible had happened. I didn't know, then, that Chief had slipped on a hidden rock and fallen. Al held my halter high, and then dropped it. Any smart mule would have understood what he meant. I was in Chief's place, and the safety of all the other mules depended on my judgment.

I was in swimming water, with the other mules tied to me, and all of us scared to death. It wasn't far to the other shore, and I could see the trail I knew so well leading away through the trees to the camp and the corral. I'm so big and strong that my pack didn't bother me at all, and I could swim high enough to look around.

Chief came up, swimming downstream between two high banks. I saw Al raise high in his saddle and wave his arms, but I couldn't tell what he was saying. Anyway, I had but one idea, that was to get my hoofs on solid ground, so I swam until I touched bottom, then pulled with all my might on Dynamite. That helped him, and pretty soon we were both on solid ground, pulling at the rest. Every mule that got to the bank made the load that much easier, and it wasn't long until we were all safe in the corral. But I wasn't a bit happy. "Jumbo" Peak, Al's brother, came out and began to jerk the packs off us and loosen the halters.

Pretty soon the other strings pulled in, and the packer who rides Toby yelled: "Al's horse floundered in midstream, and I guess both of 'em are drowned 'fore this."

Jumbo screamed, "What?" and leaped on my back, but I didn't mind. Al had often ridden me for a short distance; besides, I wanted to go to Chief.

I lumbered along across the level ground below the camp, trying to lope, and making a bum job of it. Jumbo weighs two hundred and ten, which is the reason he stays at camp and hires a man to pack in his place. But he rode easy, and I didn't think about the weight. If it hadn't been raining I could have made better headway, but it seemed to come down harder all the time.

Other men came up, now, and soon

passed us, their horses running low and smooth like Chief does when he's out to head us off on the open range. As soon as we got to the river, Jumbo made me slow down and walk along the edge, while he looked in every pile of driftwood for the bodies of Al and Chief. A mile or two below the camp there is a canyon, and Jumbo told one of the packers that unless Chief got out before they went into this there would be no use to look any farther, because Lake San Christobal is a mile wide and stretches for three miles below the canyon.

THE water ran swift and deep, and the banks were too high for us to get down close to the stream. The faces of the men got long, and I knew by the sick smell that Jumbo had given up hope of finding Chief and Al.

We climbed to the top of the canyon though, and kept on. Every few minutes Jumbo or one of the men would get off, and go to the edge, and peek over into the water below. I went once, and after that I stayed well back from the edge. It scared me just to hear the water roar and charge against the sides of the canyon.

The rain fell in sheets. Lightning struck a tree on the hillside and set it on fire, and right after that the thunder roared like the blasts the men set off when they blow rocks out of the trail, and then went off up the valley, grumbling like an angry bull. I'd have given anything to be back in the stable at the camp, but somehow I knew Chief was down there, and if I kept on going perhaps I might help him.

Finally, Jumbo stopped and shook his head. "There's no use to go any farther, boys. Poor Al, it's tough to think he had to go this way."

Bob, the packer who rode Toby, said: "Don't let's give up yet, Jumbo. If Al were on any other horse but Chief I wouldn't think he had a chance to go through that place either, but Chief has got more savvy than any animal I ever saw. He's fast and strong, and a free swimmer. If he wasn't hurt when he slipped on that rock at the ford I believe he'd manage to keep in the deep water and go through into the lake."

"All right," Jumbo said, "we'll go on to the lake, but I don't think there's any use of it."

We didn't stop to look into the canyon any more but went on to the upper part of the lake. There was a big wind and the waves were running high, breaking along the shore with a roar like that of the thunder. The men pulled their hats down and rode toward it, but couldn't see anything because of the spray and fog. Jumbo wanted to turn back, but something inside me seemed to pull me toward where the river came out of the canyon into the lake, and I set my neck and went. Jumbo tried to stop me, but he couldn't because he just had the halter, and no matter how hard he pulled I kept on going.

The farther I went in this direction the better I felt. I couldn't see or smell a thing, but I knew that Chief was up there somewhere, and I brayed as loud as I could, then stopped and listened. There was no answer, but I was still sure, and I went a ways farther, and brayed again. This time I heard a faint whinny, and it tickled me so that I gave a big buck that pretty nearly threw Jumbo, and broke into my awkward lope.

The other men came, and the next time I brayed Chief answered plain as day, "Here I am, Topsy." I hadn't felt so good ever before. I forgot all about the rain and the cold

and the thunder, because I knew that Chief was alive, and waiting for me to come to him. But it wasn't as easy as that. There was an island at the upper end of the lake, and when we got up near the mouth of the canyon we could see what had happened. Chief had done just what the packer had said he would do, kept to the deep water. The river split, and part of it ran on one side, and part on the other. Chief hadn't had a chance to turn, and had been carried straight over to the shore of the island, and he couldn't swim back against the current.

Al was standing there beside him, and the joy smell was strong now. All the men were happy, and Jumbo, kept patting me on the neck and calling me a good mule. But when they began to try to think of some way to get Al and Chief off the island, they didn't feel so good. They walked down along the shore, trying to see how to keep Al from being carried out into the lake if he tried to swim across the swift current.

Al called to Jumbo: "If there was any way to get one end of a rope to me I could tie it on Chief's neck, and you could help him enough so that he could make it."

"Sure he could," Jumbo said, and one of the men went up the hill and brought a log of wood. They tied all the ropes they had together, and tied one end to the log and threw it into the river. It started for the island all right, but when the current hit the slack of the rope, it pulled enough so that the log missed the shore. Al waded out as far as he dared, trying to reach it with a stick he had picked up, but couldn't make it. They tried several times, but couldn't get it. They stood there looking like they didn't know any more about what to do than I did.

FINALLY Al yelled: "I've got it, Jumbo! Tie one end of that rope on Topsy's pack-saddle, and then lead her up around the rocks out of sight. Tie up her halter rope, and let her stand alone."

Jumbo grumbled a little, but I guess he was anxious enough to try anything. They tied the rope like Al said, and led me away. I didn't want to leave Chief there and I balked a little, but Jumbo made me go. I kept looking back at Chief and giving little low brays, not much louder than a colt's nicker. Jumbo took me around behind the rock, and tied up my halter rope. I was mad and something inside of me hurt. I turned part way around, and just then, Chief called.

All the men in our crew couldn't have stopped me then. I whirled and ran to the stream. I hardly knew when I hit swimming water, but I was so far above the island that I was between the two currents, and floating along easy, before Jumbo got back to where the other men were standing. A minute more and I was standing beside Chief, with his nose against my neck, and Al petting me and praising me more than Jumbo had when I had found Chief.

Al untied the rope I had brought and put it around Chief's neck, then he looked at me. "What am I goin' to do about Topsy?" he called. "You can't pull both Chief and her."

"Leave her there," Jumbo said, "and she'll swim out into the lake and we can pick her up."

But Al wouldn't do that. "I'd kill her," he said, "before I'd leave her. Sure, she'd try to follow Chief and swim against that current until she drowned."

One of the men said that would be the kindest thing. "You can open a vein in her leg and she'll bleed to death in a few minutes."

"Bleed nothing!" Jumbo yelled. "That mule has saved Al's life, and I won't see her killed."

"Don't worry," Al answered, "I had no intention of doing anything of the sort." He took my halter rope and tied it into the pigtail on Chief's saddle; then he got on Chief and rode him up in the shallow water above the island. I wasn't scared any more, because, as long as I could touch Chief with my nose, I felt safe.

Al called to Bob: "Get on Toby, and take a turn around the saddle horn. When we start across, you keep the slack out of the rope, but don't go too fast or you'll pull Chief under."

"Right," Bob answered, and in we went. It seemed easy at first, while we were in smooth water, but pretty soon the current hit Chief and swung him downstream. The men on the shore yelled, and Bob put his spurs into Toby, who lunged forward so hard that the rope broke. Bob whirled back, and threw the end of the rope out as far as he could. I saw Al make a lunge for the end of it, and then Chief and I were alone, being swept down the current into Lake San Christobal.

I went crazy and tried to plunge on top of Chief, but he dodged and swung to one side so that the weight of the water kept us apart. Al had made it to the shore all right, because now he was running down along the edge of the lake, talking to Chief.

"Steady, old-timer," he kept saying over and over, "wait till you hit smooth water before you turn, you can make it all right."

It would have been easy for Chief to get out now, but, my hoofs being

small, I couldn't swim as fast as he did, and every little while my head would go under water, and then I was a dead weight, pulling him under, too. Looking toward the shore, I thought we were standing still and that all the rocks and trees were racing upstream. Then a big wave broke over us, and down we went.

I don't know what happened after that, because the next thing I knew I was lying on a steep place with my head downhill. A man had my tail between my legs, and one of his feet against my belly, and was pumping the water out of me. Chief lay a little farther up the bank, and Al and Jumbo were both working over him. I coughed and wheezed a good deal, and, as soon as I could, I stood up and tried to go to Chief, but the men held me back.

Chief lay still, and I saw Al turn away and walk toward the lake, his head down and his shoulders slumped forward like mine are when my pack turns. Then Chief lifted his head and gave a little low nicker to me. Al whirled, and ran back. He pulled Chief's head up against him and held it close. Pretty soon after that the wind died down, the rain quit, and the sun came out.

I felt pretty shaky as the men led us slowly up the road. Jumbo walked with me and Al led Chief, and all the time Al was talking about how Chief had done what every one said couldn't be done—swum through the lake fork canyon and come out alive. We didn't have to work after that until the floods were over, and when we did hit the trail again the water at the ford was only knee-deep, and the trails were dry.

NOTICE—This magazine contains new stories only. No reprints are used.



WRAITHS OF GLORY GULCH

By H. C. WIRE

Author of "Trail Herd Treachery," etc.

HOT, dusty and saddle-weary, Bill Sage at last halted his horse in front of the Piute County Courthouse and gave thanks that his trip was over. Two hundred miles of Nevada desert, it had been, covered in four days, hunting a crime that hadn't been committed! He was dead tired; all he wanted now was to make his report to Sheriff Scott Ross, then sleep the clock around.

He found Ross seated behind the cluttered office desk, and one look into the old man's face told Bill Sage that he was not going to get that twelve hours of sleep after all. Something had happened during his absence; something pretty bad. He was sure of that.

The sheriff lifted his gray head. He spoke before his deputy could put in a word. "I know. You needn't tell me. There wasn't any killing up there in the Sink."

"That's right," Bill said. "There wasn't. It was a false lead."

He backed into a chair, sat down, and stretched his long legs. Bill Sage was desert-born, and showed it. The years of ranching and mining, then this deputy's job, had all combined to mold him, until, at twenty-five, his tall, spare figure was practically all bone and sinew, making for amazing endurance. His hair was brown; the sun had weathered his face to a deep mahogany, out of which cool blue eyes peered contrastingly.

"False lead, nothing!" Scott Ross was saying angrily. "It was worse than false—done on purpose. Somebody got me to send you into the north of the county, while a real job was pulled off in the south. And me," he finished, "sittin' here helpless with my arm in a sling!" The whole lower part of his right arm was still bandaged from a gun wound he had suffered last month.

Bill sat up suddenly. "What happened?"

"Plenty! Robbery, two men killed, and the usual howl that the sheriff's office needs some one who can handle the job!"

"That," Bill stated, "would be the Consolidated Mines people yelling again."

"Sure," Ross agreed. "Two days after you left they finished up a mill run and had some gold to ship out. Fifteen thousand dollars in bars. I asked them to wait till you got back. But no, they'd send their own guards, couldn't depend on my office anyway—you know their talk. So they did."

He paused, and shook his gray head. "Boy, I'd hate to tell you what happened to those guards! We had to gather 'em up in a blanket. Looked like the devils who did it

weren't satisfied with killing, they had to do a job that would scare any man from trailing 'em."

Bill Sage was pulling his tired body together. There was work ahead. Another two hundred miles, or maybe two thousand—it didn't matter. He owed Scott Ross something. Always when the jobs were toughest, that thought kept Bill Sage going.

He glanced across the desk and thought what a shame it was that a man like Scott Ross should ever grow old. For it was Ross, in the early days, who had cleaned up this tough desert county, made it possible for people like the big Consolidated Mines Co. to carry on their operations. Strength still showed in his broad heavy body; there was no diminution of the sharpness in his gray eyes. Yet the years were wearing him down. Scott Ross had reached the time when a man should settle back and reap the fruits of his labor. Ross couldn't. In a cabin up the hill his wife lay sick; every dollar he could make now was used to save this woman who had meant the world to him for forty years.

BILL SAGE understood, shared Ross's feeling. Those two had been his father and mother as long as he could remember. He owed them something, even more than a son's devotion. That was what he never forgot.

Rising, he said hotly, "If the Consolidated people would only stick to mining and not try to run our office, too, we'd get along!"

"We would," said Ross. "But politics, you know. They've got a man of their own they'd like to put here in my seat."

"Sure!" Bill snorted. "Al Slausen, a brother-in-law of the big boss!

Look here. Where's the leak, anyway? When a gold shipment goes out, nobody should know about it except the foreman and guards. But twice now a shipment has been jumped. Who's telling?"

Scott Ross shrugged. "There's a leak, all right."

"You bet there is. And I could spot Al Slausen for a weakfish crook a mile off."

"No proof, though," the sheriff reminded him.

"There will be," Bill promised, "if it's the last thing I ever do!" He put on his hat. "Well, give me the dope. I'll get on the trail before it cools off. Where'd the holdup happen?"

"Fifteen miles down the canyon road," Ross explained. "But you won't find any sign to follow. There wasn't a thing. These guards went down on the regular morning stage, carrying the gold in a little iron box. The stage driver told about it when he got back. Two masked men afoot jumped out from the rocks and blasted away with shotguns. They knew what they were looking for. They got the guards and box out, then sent the stage on. News of it didn't reach me till late afternoon, and when I got there all I found was some tracks in the road. No sign of horses. But down a gulch I ran onto the guards' bodies." Again Scott Ross shook his gray head grimly. "Boy, I've seen Piutes mutilate men they've killed, but only fiends would do what those road agents did. I hate to have you trail 'em."

"That's all right," Bill said absently. He was hardly listening. His mind was already running ahead on this job.

The stage road quartered south-east, thirty miles to the railway and

settled country. More settlements around ranches were to the north. If the outlaws came back west they'd end in Death Valley. South meant into the Black Mountain lava beds, the no man's land of Nevada. But it seemed to Bill that there lay his trail.

A plan formed in his mind. "I'll rest over till dark," he told Scott Ross, "then head out south under cover. They've got a long start on me, and I'm playing it blind right now, but there's one thing in our favor. They can't cash fifteen thousand dollars in bullion just anywhere.

"Maybe they'll take some prospector in on it, salt his ore with this gold, and pass it that way. Or maybe they'll use some crooked assayer for a fence, and sell it through him. But they'll do nothing till the hunt blows over. So, meanwhile, the stuff will be hidden some place." He grinned. "Simple, isn't it? All I've got to do is find where that is."

"If you're going south," Ross advised, "you'd better take an extra pack horse with a couple of kegs of water."

Bill shook his head. "Not even one horse. I'm taking one burro, that's all." He rubbed his chin, which had four days' brown stubble on it. "Give me a week more, and I'll be the crustiest old desert rat that ever prospected the Black Mountain-bad lands! That's my game from here on."

BUT a burro not in use was hard to find. All the prospectors who owned them were either out in the hills, or going out, or figuring they might go any day now.

"Darned old coots!" Bill fumed. "They'll be sitting right here when I

get back, planning trips they never take!"

Dark came, and still no burro. As a last resort he turned toward "Nosey" Ryan's livery stable. Animals could always be had there—a double price charged, when the sheriff's office wanted something.

He found Nosey Ryan at the corals, a lean slat of a man with narrow, shifty eyes, and the long, beaklike nose that gave him his name. This fellow, Bill Sage had thought more than once, was nosey in other ways, also. He nosed into affairs that had nothing to do with running a stable. He might even be part of the grapevine telegraph that mysteriously carried news to wanted men here in camp, and far out across the desert. For this reason Bill had avoided dealing with him to-night. Yet he had to have a burro.

"Nosey," he said, "I want to rent one of your four-legged wheelbarrows. Give me one that can drink dew, if there is any dew, and eat the labels off my tin cans."

Ryan blinked across the dusk. "Goin' out into the desert, huh? Trailin' them men that got the Consolidated gold?"

"No chance," Bill lied. "Looks like they got clean away. I'm laying off a while. Going prospecting."

"Yeah?" Ryan drawled. "Well, sure, I got some jacks here. You come in and take your pick."

Bill vaulted the corral fence and walked down a line of animals eating from a hayrack. He came to a big dun, with a dark stripe running from ears to tail. Its neck was muscled almost to the thickness of its body, showing the animal could carry a load. Its legs were sound, hoofs good and unbroken.

"I'll take this one," Bill said.

"You mean that there Jack

Dempsey?" Ryan asked. "Say, he's a fighter. Killed a man once, sure did. He'll come at you all four feet at once, then chaw your head off for good measure."

"I'll take him," Bill repeated. "Charge it to the county." Then he knew instantly, by the look on Nosey Ryan's face, that he had made a slip.

The man grinned, mouth open, snag teeth showing. "Prospectin' at county expense, huh? All right, sure, prospectin' it is."

Bill wheeled on him savagely. "Nosey, one of these days——" He checked himself and turned back to the burro. No use making things worse than they were.

At his cabin on the hill above camp he made up his prospecting equipment. Dry rations went into the burro's canvas pack bags—flour, beans, coffee and a slab of bacon. Between the saddle forks he laid a ten-gallon keg of water, then threw on two blankets and cinched the load tight.

Heading south, he avoided the thickly built part of camp that sprawled its twisting length in a ravine bottom. He slipped down among a scattering of shacks, came to the main street, and halted before crossing. Off on his left were the lights of saloons and gambling houses. A wave of sound reached him from that direction, a mingling of rough voices, shouts, the banging music of a nickel-in-the-slot piano. Miners' night life had begun.

His hand was on the burro's halter, he was ready to start on, when a hurried step in the street warned him. He crowded back into shadow. A man passed quickly.

When he had gone, Bill moved out a little and watched. No mistaking that skinny figure. It was Nosey

Ryan, and Nosey never hurried like that unless he had something on his mind. He came to the first saloon doorway, turning into it abruptly.

"I'd better look into that," Bill said. If Nosey Ryan was carrying news to some one, he wanted to know who it was.

He led his burro across the street and tied him behind a deserted cabin. Then he went back toward that first saloon.

Nosey was coming out again, no longer hurrying. A sudden startled look broke across his boney face.

"Seeing things?" Bill asked, and went on, not waiting for an answer.

Inside, the room was crowded with men, both at the long bar and the row of tables. He moved on, casually. Halfway down, he turned and rested his elbows against the bar, taking a moment to check the tables opposite him. A card game was in progress at the end of the room, four men he didn't know. His gaze moved, and halted. At a small table, back against the wall, one man sat alone. It was Al Slausen, pouring whisky into a glass, drunk and getting drunker.

BILL watched him through narrowing eyes. This is the way he had figured it about the mine foreman's brother-in-law. The foreman himself was square enough; he was only catering to his family in wanting to give his relative the sheriff's job. But Al Slausen lived in the same house with him. Wouldn't the foreman, at times, talk things over with his wife? Wouldn't he, perhaps, even let her know when a gold shipment was going out? And couldn't Al Slausen overhear that talk?

It had seemed queer to Bill that the big boss didn't know what a weak and shiftless sort his brother-

in-law was. But families are blind like that. It wouldn't be past Al Slausen to double-cross even the man who was giving him shelter.

In a moment Bill sauntered over. Slausen hadn't looked up, but sat with his heavy arms sprawled on the table, shoulders hunched up to his ears. He was a big, blond man, brutish-looking and powerful.

Pausing beside him, Bill waited. Slausen turned his head, then suddenly straightened, weaving backward in his chair. For one tell-tale second a startled look crossed his red face. It changed next instant to a crooked-mouthed leer. "How's prospecting, Sage?"

So that was it; that was the word Nosey Ryan had brought. Ryan, then, was part of the grapevine telegraph here in camp. It was all Bill wanted to know. He turned from Slausen, starting away, but the man's heavy fist grabbed his arm. His voice was thick, savage: "what the devil do you want! You came lookin' for something. What is it?"

"Sure, I came looking for something," Bill told him. "And I got what I was looking for."

Slausen rocked drunkenly to his feet. "You brush louse! If you think——"

Bill shoved him down into the chair again. "Cut it out! You're tight!"

A movement of the man's hand was too quick to see. Bill felt a jerk on his gun. He grabbed downward, caught Slausen's wrist with the weapon clear of the holster, twisted, yanked, and had the gun free in his own hand. Slausen was coming up at him, fist rising. Flat-handed, Bill pushed him in the face and slammed him down into the chair once more.

Then he leaped back. "I said cut it out!" he snapped.

The sudden commotion had brought men running from the bar.

"It's all right," Bill said. "This fellow's drunk. No trouble." He continued to back away.

Slausen watched him with cold, hard eyes. The crowd turned again to the night's drinking. When Bill Sage holstered his gun, moved to the saloon doorway, and vanished outside, one man, who had not stepped back to the bar, came quickly to Slausen's table. He was small, hunched, with a pinched, gray face, and furtive eyes in deep sockets.

In a low voice, lips hardly moving, Slausen said, "Trail him. Let me know where he goes."

It was ten minutes later when the small man came slipping in again. "Took off south," he reported. "Had the burro ready—Ryan's big buckskin."

"Then get yourself a horse," Slausen ordered. "You know the way. You can make it in three days' riding. Tell 'em to watch out for a prospector with that buckskin jack."

The man shifted, but he didn't go. His voice had a whine in it as he asked, "Where's some money, Al? I do your riding, and I'm supposed to get paid for it. You ain't paid me and—"

"Shut up!" Slausen snapped. "Get going!"

"No. You said that you'd pay me—"

Slausen rose, huge and threatening. "You fool! We can't argue in here. Come outside."

They passed unnoticed through the front door, and then their figures melted into deep shadows beside the saloon. There in the dark Slausen halted. In hoarse rage, he snarled, "Now you travel! Get down there and warn 'em about the deputy!"

"I ain't till you pay me," the other began.

Slausen's fist lashed brutally at the whining face. He grabbed the thin neck with his left hand, struck again with his right. A gurgling sound came from the stringy throat. He clamped tighter. "Shut up! I'll show you who's running this!" It was a moment before he released his grip. "Now then—"

But the man had dropped and lay still, his head at a crooked angle. Slausen kicked him. "Stand up, you fool!" There was no movement from the hunched, twisted body.

Unsteadily, Slausen bent over. "Come on now—" He broke off. "The devil!" he whispered. His glance swept back along the dark side of the saloon. There was no one in sight. He picked up the limp body. On the slope above the saloon building a gallows frame stood over an old abandoned shaft. Slausen stumbled up to it. The shaft head was open. He let his arms drop, the burden falling from them, and it was a long moment before there came a dull thud from the depths far below.

Muttering, Slausen backed away. "The bloody fool! Why didn't he keep still? Now I've gotta make that ride myself!"

IT had been a fruitless, ten-day hunt. Keeping always south, twisting back and forth across a wide section of desert, Bill Sage had stopped at every prospector's camp, and had poked around scores of scattered water holes without picking up a single clew to the outlaws' trail.

If two men carrying fifteen thousand dollars in gold bars had come this way, they must have crossed close to a hundred miles of desert in one jump.

He still believed they would make their hide-out in the shelter of Black Mountain. Putting himself in their place, it was what he would do. Nobody went there any more. Even prospectors shunned it now. For a little while one big gold strike had made a wild and roaring camp at a place called Glory Gulch. It had never been lucky. Too many men had died in that mine—from cave-ins and fire and causes unknown—until even hardened old miners said the spot was haunted by the devil himself. Then, suddenly, the gold vein had pinched out, and the camp had died. All that was ten years ago.

Now Black Mountain rose off on the left, a high volcanic cone with the top blasted away. Rivers of lava had spread out from it for fifty miles, and hardened into black, twisting lanes. And between them the desert floor was broken with blowholes, and strewn with rock of volcanic origin.

In order to mail a report back to Scott Ross and pick up a supply of coffee, Bill had come west of the mountain to a little railway tank town. There was only a single store here, relic of better days when this had been the shipping point for Glory Gulch ore.

Entering, he dropped his letter in the mail slot, then turned to find the storekeeper eying him curiously. He was a brown, shriveled man, as much a relic of the past as was his business.

"Say," he asked, "you ain't another one of them, are you?"

"Huh?" said Bill. "Another what?"

"Another one figurin' to go prospectin' up Glory Gulch. You listen to me, that place is haunted. It sure is! I know."

Bill grinned. "So do I know. It always was. I had my first job there

as a kid, just before the boom died—drove a mule in the mine."

"Well, it's worse'n ever. You take my advice and stay out of there. Fellow went in a couple of weeks ago. I warned him, too. He came back, but you should 'a' seen him."

The grin died from Bill's whiskered face. "What happened?" he asked. This sounded like something. It was the first talk he had heard that might give him a lead.

The old man shook his head gravely. "Never did get it straight. This fellow was still half crazy when I got him on a train. But he went into Glory Gulch with plenty of water and a burro. He got back here crawlin' on his hands and knees, no water, no burro. Told me they disappeared first night while he was cookin' supper. Nobody there, either, to take 'em. Not a soul. No tracks anywhere.

"Then there was some one else. He didn't come in to town here, but I've got a pair of glasses that I watch the desert with. This fellow was horseback, and I picked him up cuttin' across to the old Gulch road. That was six, seven days ago. He ain't come back at all!"

"Couldn't tell what he looked like, could you," Bill asked, "at that distance?"

"No. But I made out his horse, sort of a black and white pinto."

"Say!"

"Huh?"

"Nothing," Bill finished. But it was something. Nosey Ryan had a black and white pinto in his rent stable! The rider had passed this point six or seven days ago. He had avoided the store. Of course there were other black and white pintos in the country. It didn't hook up yet, but Bill Sage had a strong hunch that it would.

"Well," he said, "give me about two pounds of coffee, and I'll be going."

"You ain't," the old man began.

"Sure I am," Bill broke in. "I never did believe in ghosts."

Outside again, he filled his water keg from the railway tank. It was getting on toward sundown now, a good time to travel. With steady going, he could cross the sixty miles of desert by noon to-morrow.

HE never would have recognized Glory Gulch as the camp that had been so full of untamed life ten years ago. With the sun at high noon making all things stand out in the stark, shadowless glare, he turned a bend in the gulch bottom and a scene of desolation lay before him.

The camp had been built in a pocket, where the black lava walls swung apart and sloped upward more gently. Gallows frames, above the many shafts that had never paid a dollar, rose upon either side like gaunt, brown skeletons. At the further end of the pocket was the one mine that had struck gold. It was marked by a long, wooden building, at the tunnel mouth.

Bill plodded up the camp street openly. His plan was made. He wanted his arrival to be watched. Yet he had no feeling of ghost eyes, or any others, peering at him from the silent structures that he passed. Roofs of these buildings had fallen in, walls had buckled; some were no more than heaps of weathered planking.

He searched the dusty street for tracks of either animals or men. There was nothing. He plodded on beyond the last sagging structure. Now the mine mouth was above him, three hundred feet up the slope, its

great rock dump shelving out and filling this end of the pocket.

Close under it were the roofless walls of a stone house. Bill turned in. He'd make camp here, using the stone house as a corral for the burro.

Nosey Ryan hadn't lied about that animal. He was a killer and always would be. They come like that, at times; wild jacks born with a hatred for men. Bill had given up trying to be gentle with him. So now, to avoid the bared teeth and cutting slash of hoofs, he looped the halter rope under a boulder, drew the jack's head down, and snubbed it close to the ground. Working gingerly, he unloaded his water keg, blankets and pack bags. Then he led the burro inside the rock walls and released him, but left the halter and rope on.

In half an hour the camp he had made might be that of any old desert prospector. Yet everything was placed with the accuracy of baiting a trap. Pack gear, water keg and a spot for cooking he had located a short distance out in front of the rock house. His blankets were spread on a patch of open ground off at one side. With his camp made, he lay down on his bed to wait. Ghosts, of course, didn't walk till after dark.

He may have dozed a little, dog-tired from the desert crossing. His eyes opened suddenly into shadows around him. Staring for a moment, to make sure nothing had been touched, he rose and built a fire, a big one that any watcher couldn't miss.

When it had died back to cooking size, he made a hasty meal of coffee, bread and bacon. By that time, pitch darkness had settled in Glory Gulch. With enough firelight left to show plainly what he was doing,

Bill returned to his blankets and crawled in, as if for a good, sound sleep.

But he didn't even doze, now. He lay watching. Gradually, his cook fire became only glowing embers, and, at last, winked out. The black lava slopes of Glory Gulch reflected no light from the stars. The darkness was as thick as fog. Waiting, Bill kept a squinting gaze on one thing, the blur of his water keg, that he had set out in a spot of open ground.

Perhaps an hour passed. He could only guess. These ghosts, he thought were a long time coming.

A SHARP, cold tingling up his spine was his first warning. He had seen nothing, heard no sound. Yet a keen sixth sense, developed from long experience, told him some one was out there in the dark.

A long wait followed. The feeling never left him. He kept his eyes on the faint blur of his water keg. It moved. Slowly, as if of its own accord, it tipped over. The water was being poured out! Undisturbed, Bill waited. He had hidden a full canteen in the rocks.

From what had already happened here, he figured that no attempt would be made to kill him outright. A murder would bring investigation. Men hiding in the gulch would not risk that. They'd do to him as they had done to others—get rid of his water, his burro, scare him somehow and get him on the run.

The faintest scratch of board on rock suddenly snapped his gaze in the direction of the rock house. He had leaned an old door over the opening. It was being moved now. Silently, Bill crawled from his blankets

He was on his feet, creeping forward, when thudding turmoil broke loose behind the rock walls. He covered the space to the open doorway in one leap, saw a man's shape come hurtling out, and tackled it low. They went down together. Bill jerked his gun free. His other hand grabbed the man's throat.

He jabbed the gun muzzle between the staring eyes. "Don't move! Don't make a sound!" Then, still clamping his grip on the throat, he listened. Silence had settled again in Glory Gulch.

Bill bent over. The black bearded face was unrecognizable, but then he saw the long, crooked nose.

"Well, well!" he said, keeping his voice low. "Crook-nose Frank! Might have known it. The six months I gave you a little while ago wasn't enough, huh? Right out of jail, and you had to do a job like this!"

He had pulled the man's gun from its holster. "Now sit up! Frank, we're going to have a little talk. Fast, too."

A hoarse snarling voice answered him. "So you think!"

"We are," Bill said evenly. "If you're here, then Dogtooth Charley is with you. Then there's one other. Some one rode in here on a black and white pinto. Where are they, Frank?"

"You find 'em, Sage! You're smart."

"Not talking? All right." Bill dug his gun in the fellow's stomach. "Stand up!" They rose together. He shifted the gun and jabbed it into Crook-nose Frank's backbone. "Now, step in there and have another round with Jack Dempsey!"

Crook-nose Frank stiffened.

"Go ahead!" Bill snapped. He

prodded Crook-nose toward the doorway. From the darkness inside came a sudden grinding of teeth.

Again Crook-nose stiffened, holding back.

"Talk?" Bill asked. "This is your last chance."

Crook-nose nodded.

"All right," Bill told him. "Fast! Where are they?"

"In the old mine." Crook-nose spoke without turning his head. "But a lot of good it'll do you, Sage. I'd like to be there when you walk in and order 'em out! Now listen. You're smart enough. Suppose we split with you, give you a third. How's that?"

"Thanks," Bill said flatly. "There's more than loot that I want out of this."

He forced his prisoner to the pile of camp gear, ordered him to lie flat on the ground, and tied his arms and legs with the pack rope. Here was one ghost of Glory Gulch that would do no more prowling to-night!

THE layout of the old mine came back in familiar detail. Bill pictured it as he climbed warily around the high rock dump. For six months he had worked here; he had made a good part of this rock pile himself, hauling it from the long tunnel behind a mule.

The miners had driven the tunnel straight into the mountain for an eighth of a mile. Then they had raised on the ore vein, making a shaft that, in seven hundred feet, came out high up the slope. This afternoon he had seen that the gallows frame was still standing over the shaft.

Soundlessly, on hands and knees, he reached the flat top of the dump, paused, and located the mine building. It was a long shed extending

from the tunnel mouth. Tools had been kept there, and in it the mine mules had been stabled.

He crept closer. Most of the roof had fallen in. Doors were off their hinges, some of the walls were leaning together until they almost touched. Its air of abandonment was complete. And yet, back in the tunnel beyond this debris of wood, two men were hiding.

How far in? Bill slipped into deep shadow of the shed interior and felt his way forward. He touched metal shapes of discarded picks and shovels. His boots padded on a mat of straw. Suddenly he was aware of wind sucking inward around him. He was at the mouth of the tunnel. The shaft was drawing air in, and up, like a huge chimney.

Bill had paused, staring into the black bore, when faintly, far back, there came a pin-point of red light. The men were there! That was a cigarette.

This was the part of his plan about which he had been fearful. Now, luck was with him. Sure that the men were in the tunnel, he already knew how to get them out.

Stooping, he gathered an armful of straw and laid it against the dry shed timbers. He gathered more, until there was a huge pile, and on these he put loose boards that felt like matchwood in his hands. Without pause, he fired the pile in three places, and hurriedly leaped back from the blaze.

Straw and wood, drying for ten years in the desert air, burned like powder. Flames licked up the sides of the shed and into the fallen roof. And, as the blaze grew, its red tongues were drawn into the tunnel by the sucking draft.

Only a moment Bill waited, mak-

ing sure his men didn't attempt to charge out against the fire. But it had sprung up too suddenly. They'd have no chance. It was a roaring furnace even now. He turned and raced out along the mountainside to the old shaft trail.

Breathless and stumbling, he gained the top. There was already an odor of charred wood coming from the open shaft head. When he crawled to the edge and felt along to locate the ladder, warm air rushed against his hand. Then the smoke came, rolling up in a gray cloud.

He drew his gun, crouched back from the top of the ladder, and prayed that those two wouldn't suffocate before they made the climb. Seven hundred feet was a long way to come. But smoke and fear of suffocation would goad them plenty!

His eyes never left the top of the ladder. When a head rose with the suddenness of a diver coming up for air, he was ready. He waited until the man crawled over the edge. Then he struck. One blow with his gun was enough. The figure stretched flat, and lay still.

Another head was at the shaft edge. A choked, panting voice said weakly, "Charley, take this——" and a box was shoved out.

Bill pivoted. He'd know that voice any time, even when rasping from smoke. Al Slausen!

His movement stopped the man with his head just above the top of the shaft. Bill saw him jerked back, as if dodging a blow. There came a splintering of dry wood, and the sharp creak of nails pulling loose; then a scream like nothing human.

Bill's blood went cold. Slausen had vanished—the scream going downward swiftly, growing fainter, ending. Bill gasped. "Seven hundred feet!"

He stooped and pushed the small box back to safety, and knew by the weight that it held the stolen gold.

Later, down in camp, he built up a fire and looked his two prisoners over—Crook-nose Frank and "Dogtooth" Charley, a pair that should have been put away for life long ago. They'd get it now.

Dogtooth was still groggy from the knock-out blow. It was Crook-nose who asked, "What'd you do with Slausen, huh?"

Bill considered a moment before he answered. "Me? I didn't touch him. The ghosts got him, Crook-nose. And that's once these ghosts of Glory Gulch picked out the right man!"

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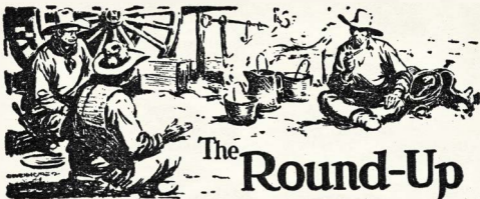
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The Round-Up

FIRST, to-night, we want to hear from one of our Canadian brothers, R. H. Nevard, of Headlands, Saskatchewan. Get up in the saddle now, hombre, and speak your piece.

BOSS AND FOLKS:

Whoa there, bronc! I want to have a powwow with my pals at the camp fire.

Say! Hep Gallegher is sure good to hear about. He gets in lots of tough spots through his inspirations, but he's a right good hombre, and long may he ride the range, says I.

I used to buy *Western Story Magazine* from the news stands, but now I get it by mail as I live twelve miles from town and could not get it very often.

How about an Indian story? I have not seen any Indian stories in the magazine yet, but of course I have missed quite a lot of issues.

Some of my favorite authors are: Glenn H. Wichman, W. C. Tuttle, Guthrie Brown, Hugh F. Grinstead, Frank Richardson Pierce and Ney N. Geer.

And now we are going to put that yarn-spinner, H. C. Wire, in the limelight, so if there are any of you sitting too far out of the circle, just move in.

Mr. Wire was born in southern California, on a ranch belonging to his father. He lived there and on his uncle's ranch at Rifle, Colorado, for fourteen years, with the excep-

tion of two years when he lived in Aspen, Colorado, which, at that time was a good mining town.

After he was fourteen, Mr. Wire's parents homesteaded in the Indian Wells Valley of California. After he received his education, he covered the Osage Indian Reservation on foot, mapping it with the United States Geological Survey, so that he feels that he knows certain parts of the Osage Reservation pretty thoroughly. He also is well acquainted with the Sierra Nevadas, particularly with that section around Mount Whitney. He was a forest guard there for two years in the United States Forest Service.

Much of the time in between and since then he has roamed through the West, seeing what he could see, and hearing what he could hear, or for no other reason than that there is no more friendly, intriguing, and beautiful country in the world. He has had temporary jobs, such as being a newspaper reporter, but these did not hold him for long, because the wanderlust takes him out into the hills and valleys and mining sections of Nevada. It is here, in a little shack which he built himself, that he is far from the maddening throng and is able to write the stories which have to do with the things that he has experienced.

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