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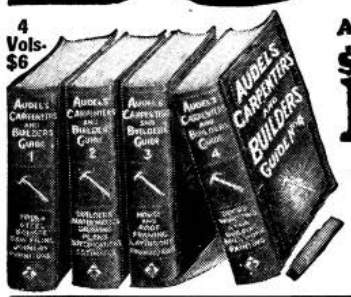

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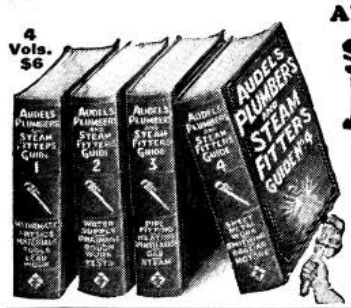

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NOVELETTES

SHORT STORIES

WESTERN STORY FEATURES

DEPARTMENTS

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The Roundup

MISS HELEN RIVERS of The Hollow Tree has given us this letter from Jack Douglas, Box 408, San Bernardino, California. It makes such an interesting little story that we want all you members to be in on it.

I must tell you of an incident that happened last year. I was drywashing for gold in an arroyo about forty miles north of the Old Spanish Trail just south of Death Valley. During the day I had heard some one working up the wash from where I was, and that evening I walked up there to see who it was. I found a middle-aged man and woman with their camp fire enjoying the evening meal and I could tell at a glance, from the arrangement of their camp, that they were new to the desert.

During the conversation the man asked if the button I had on my jacket was the old Hollow Tree button, and finding out that it was, he told me that through correspondence with one of the members he had been advised to try this place in prospecting. Imagine our surprise to find that I was the one that had written him. He had not been having much success, but the next morning, after making a few changes on the machine he had been using and explaining some of the finer points in picking the places to work and how to save those tiny particles of gold, he agreed with me that it was better than what I had claimed in my letters.

After spending two months in the desert, which turned out to be profitable, the man gave up his intentions of returning to Nebraska, bought a small ranch in Riverside County and the last time I heard from him he was doing good with the ranch and also had a produce truck running to Palm Springs. From the man's letters I am sure that we can chalk up a big white mark for the Old Hollow in its quest to bring together those that can help each other, even though it's just to pass the time in a pleasant way.

Thanks for that letter, California Jack, and thanks, too, for the right fine poem. We're hoping we can find space to print it very soon—and we sure hope your mine, Peter Pan, pans out!

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Gun-ghost's Return

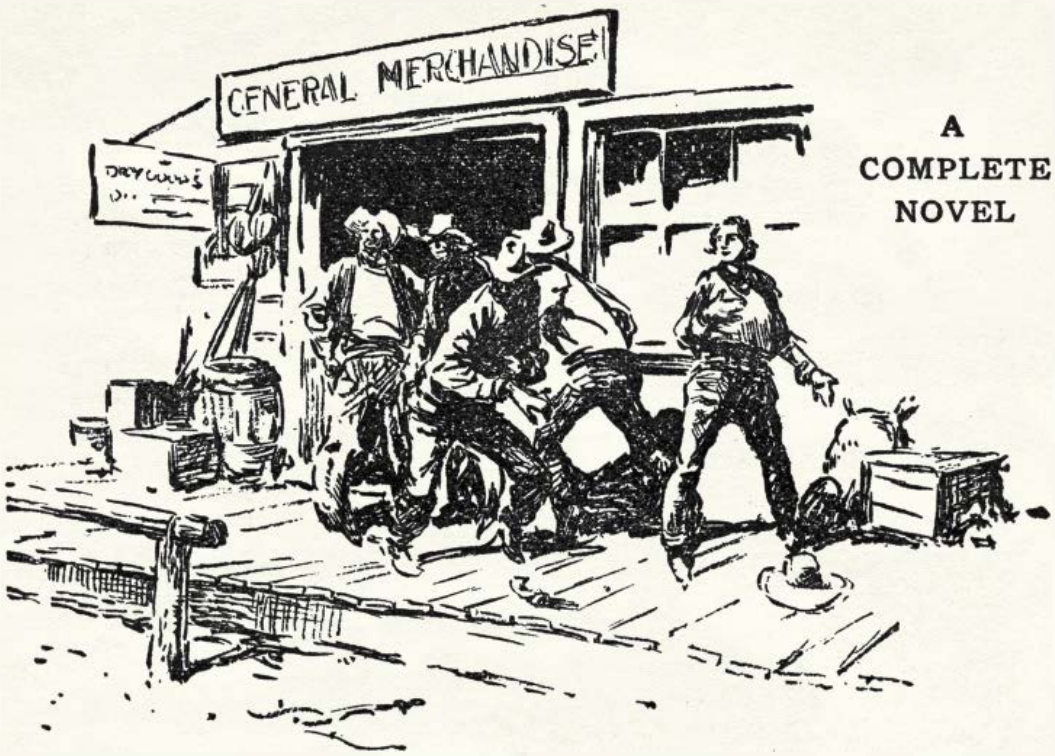
By L. L. FOREMAN

CHAPTER I.

"MAD" MADIGAN STRIKES

A STRAY gust of desert wind drifted up from the south and played with the dust of Sanburn's tidy main street. Doors slammed and windows rattled, and Lant Madigan felt the old unwanted impatience rise in him. He sniffed at the wind, found it good to his nostrils, and was glad he had never learned to like closed doors and windows. To shut out the free wind because of its dust was something he had never been guilty of doing.

"That's Sanburn," he said, and shook his high, dark head. "Every-



A COMPLETE NOVEL

A single shot had made him a gun pariah but, because Lant was a Madigan, he fought on, waging a lone wolf's desperate fight against overwhelming odds...

thing's got to come just so, even the wind. They'd damn nature itself if——"

"Lant—please!" From her high seat on the broken Bar H buckboard, Stella Hilliard stopped him in a tone he knew as well as the words.

He lifted his eyes to her, sitting there so poised and perfect, and caught a look that he recognized, a look that he met often in the eyes of Sanburn folks. It was a questioning, doubting look—a look that said he was a Madigan, and therefore an unpredictable quantity. He had never got over the feeling of being an alien, here in Sanburn.

"Sorry," he said shortly. "I forgot." Inwardly, though, he laughed. As though he could ever forget, or that Sanburn would ever allow him to forget. He was the last of the stormy, roving "Mad Madigans," and everybody knew that a Madigan was different from other people.

"You're so—so strange sometimes, Lant." Stella Hilliard frowned down at him. The frown did nothing to mar her quiet beauty. Nothing ever did. She moved always with an air of bright composure, blond and erect, never allowing a hint of emotional flurry to disturb her serenity.

Lant Madigan, dark as an Indian by contrast, let his inner smile come out. "Strange? Sometimes I think that about you, Stella. About you and the rest of——"

He checked himself, knowing he

was doing no good. To Sanburn folks he was something of a cross between a local curiosity and a man with vaguely dangerous potentialities. As such, everything he said and did was weighed, analyzed, probed for its worst meaning. Even Stella had that habit.

He abruptly changed the subject. "I'm getting nowhere, riding for your father's outfit." He cut the air with an impatient hand. "What I'd give to have a little spread of my own—be my own master——"

He looked even less the hired hand now. The innate restlessness that was always his came alive in his dark, lean face, giving him a keen, reckless look that aroused a startled glance from sharp-eyed old Geoff Hilliard, coming across the street.

"Hey, Lant." Hilliard sent his thin, penetrating twang ahead of him. "I jest bought some stuff in the gen'ral store. Go lug it out." His manner to the Madigan man, as always, was sharp, tinged with an irritation that was a part of him.

MADIGAN felt the old sudden anger rise and tingle in him. He fought it down, and found it no easier to do now than it had been years ago, when he had wandered into this rich valley as a homeless young stripling. Proud, tempery young fool, he had given his right name. That had branded him for a son of the wolf strain, and the brand was still there.

For a moment he leaned his tall, long-boned frame against the buckboard wheel, his deep eyes playing over Hilliard, who drew down his spiky brows and shifted his glance. The thought came to him that all the dead and gone Madigans would be shaking ghostly heads in amazed disgust at this moment, to see the last of their firebrand breed taking orders from this rat-gray little man.

He pushed the thought from him. Thoughts like that led to disaster. He would not allow his outer shell to crack. Some day, when he had his own spread and was his own man, it would be time enough to allow himself that luxury. First he had to lick these Sanburn folks at their own game, just as he had fought down and controlled his own wild Madigan nature.

He would be one of them, whether they liked it or not. He would make them accept him, and the day would come when he no longer would have to take orders from a man like Hilliard. That was what he worked and lived for, and the thought of it quieted his restless spirit, drugging it with an ambition that he had kept alive through the long, hard years.

Hilliard, fussing with the team's harness, sent him another sharp look. "Well?" he queried testily. "Waitin' for somethin'?"

"For something," nodded Madigan, and moved away from the buckboard. He saw the annoyed puzzlement in Hilliard's small eyes reflected in Stella's face, and knew they were mentally testing that cryptic remark, too.

Somebody down the sun-washed street was talking in a droning, studied drawl. The tone was loud, the talker intent upon making himself heard. A half silence fell, men in the street listening to the deliberate words.

"Ever'body knows they're hoss thieves and cow snatchers." The speaker, a lank, broad-faced man, teetered on his spurred heels outside the Sanburn Bar. He looked a little drunk, and his set grin had mischief in it. "We oughta go an'

smoke 'em out, the hull danged bunch. Sneakin', thievin'——"

Madigan slowed his pace, listening. He knew the broad-faced man, a fellow named Holgast, rider for the big Slash L brand and reputed to be bad when drunk.

"Danged no-good trash, thet Romedy bunch," droned on Holgast, and his voice went louder as several other Slash L riders around him grinned. "They done stole ever'thing they got. Hoss thieves an' even——"

"You're a liar!" The clear words were not loud, but they cut across Holgast's voice. A slim, straight figure came forward out of the semi-darkness of the general store and advanced along the board walk, stepping with lithe stride toward the Slash L group.

Madigan, halfway across the street, stopped short. His mind traveled on and saw what was coming. Holgast was baiting a trap for the Romedy girl. That the Romedy girl was walking into it with her head up gave Madigan no surprise. He had seen her once or twice at long distance, riding between town and the Hollow Peak, and the supple swing of her body had carried to him its tale of manlike courage.

"Eh?" Holgast wheeled half around, feigned surprise on his coarse red face. "Well, well—here's a Romedy in pusson! Hah! The only Romedy what ever shows face here. Danged cute face though, eh, fellers?"

THE Romedy girl came to a halt, facing the grinning group. Her washed-out Levis and sun-bleached sombrero did not hide the free, animal grace of her. "I said," she repeated slowly, "you're a liar." Her voice was low, vibrant, with a slight huskiness that gave it deeper tone.

Madigan could not see her face, but he watched her hands. One was in a pocket of the faded Levis, while the other lightly held a braided quirt. More clearly than ever he saw ahead and knew what was about to happen. He hoped he could keep control of himself. He had always managed to avoid tests like this, knowing his own inherited inclination for violence.

Holgast went on grinning, but his eyes were glittery, bold. "The Hollow Peak coyotes," he drawled, "keep clear o' Sanburn, an' they better! But they figger it's safe 'nuff to send in a gal to do their shoppin'. They know we wouldn't bother a lady. That is," he added deliberately, "we'll call her a lady, though I sure got doubts——"

The quirt hissed. Somebody began a laugh, but choked it off as Holgast rapped an oath.

The Romedy girl stood her ground, slim and straight, the quirt swinging in her hand. Up and down the street men looked on with various expressions, some amused, some frowning, but none showing any intent to interfere. To buck the swaggering Slash L mob for the sake of an outcast Romedy took a bigger fool than Sanburn could produce.

Through the muttering of the crowd Madigan heard behind him Stella Hilliard's shocked murmur. "Brawling right in the street! She's as awful as the rest of her kind!"

Holgast, his grin gone and the red line of the lash marked sharp and livid across his broad face, lunged forward with arms outstretched. The left hand of the Romedy girl started upward from the pocket of her Levis and the sun caught a flash of blue steel. One of the Slash L

riders swooped down and grabbed the hand that held the weapon.

"Cursed little she-wolf!" Holgast snatched the quirt and tore it free. "Be danged if I don't give yuh the same! Yuh can go back an' show the——"

"Holgast!" The name broke from the lips of Lant Madigan. He did not raise his voice, yet the dead level tone of it made men whirl to stare at him. He stood in the dust of the street, his dark face alight yet controlled, and in his mind was the certain knowledge that he had rolled the first stone that would start an avalanche.

Behind him again he caught, dimly, the voice of Stella Hilliard. "Lant—please!" That same tone of disapproval that he had come to know, sharpened now with shock.

And Geoff Hilliard's nasal twang: "I knew it! I knew it'd happen some day! He's a——"

"Yuh want somethin', Madigan?" Holgast had turned with the rest of his group, still holding the raised quirt. His angry eyes searched Madigan's face, and saw something there that made him go still and tense.

"Yeah." Madigan took a slow pace forward. "I want you to drop that quirt." There was a storm breaking in him, though it did not show in his disciplined calmness. It appeared only in his eyes, making them look black and glowing under the shading brim of his sombrero. And suddenly he was all Madigan, the shell gone, and a wild spirit within him shrieked its freedom.

THE faces of the Slash L group went stiff, wooden. The eyes of watching men turned somberly expectant. As plain as speech expressions said that an event had come that Sanburn had long awaited—the last Madigan was breaking out into the gun trail.

Holgast turned his thick body squarely to Madigan. Across the dozen yards of street they studied each other's eyes, while deepening silence settled about them. Holgast spoke softly: "I aim to drop this quirt where it b'longs, Madigan!"

"Don't do it," said Madigan, and it was a request rather than a command. A truant shred of reason came to warn him if what this thing meant, for Sanburn was watching, waiting to see if the tamed wolf was to be accepted or branded forever.

The change in Holgast's eyes showed that he caught the mild inflection, but not its full meaning. He threw up his big head, and his lips curled. "Hear thet, fellers? He's askin' me to——"

"I'm not asking. I'm telling you." The shred of reason fled Madigan's mind, and he flung three more words across the silence, putting into them a bite that left no room for compromise. "Drop that quirt!"

Holgast stood still, studying Madigan intently. Then, very slowly, he lowered the quirt and let it fall. Before it hit the ground his splayed hand whipped to his low-cut holster.

No conscious power moved Madigan's right hand. It was as if it had its own reflexes, utterly apart from his will. In that moment he was chill, aloof. He was a Madigan, and the Madigans had always learned their lessons early in life. His gun training went back beyond the span of tamed Sanburn years.

His long fingers hooked the plain bone butt at his hip. Clean and smooth, he plucked the gun clear of its holster, swung the polished barrel in an upward arc, and sent one shot crashing across the sullen heat.

It was a strange draw. The movement of his arm did not reach to his shoulder. His elbow was the swivel point, and he pitched the shot with the motion of tossing a ball underhand, with a swift flick of his wrist.

A second shot, tardy as an echo, sounded as Holgast's cocked gun bounced on the board walk. The bullet skimmed dust and went whirring off down the street. Holgast lowered his head and stared down at his right arm. Its sleeve was taking on a widening dark stain, and his hand was streaked. The first shock of pain sent its shudder through him.

He raised his head, looked at Madigan, then glanced down again. He took a shuffling backward step, and his glaring eyes were not on his bloodied arm now, but on his fallen gun. His left hand twitched, fingers spread to grab.

"Be a fool move, that," said Madigan without emotion. "Do I have to kill you, Holgast?"

The unmoved deadliness of his flat tone had its effect. The Slash L riders, half inclined to pitch in, took pause. The townsfolk, watching with condemning eyes, stared at Madigan as though seeing a stranger. Sheriff Ponse, waddling his fat bulk tardily out of his office, slowed down and coughed.

For a moment the scene held, tension overhanging the heavy silence. Then the swing doors of the Sanburn Bar flapped open to the thrusting body of Stark Walden, owner of the Slash L. Tall, square-built, his arrogant eyes commanded attention.

"Holgast—back up!" He barked the curt command in his clipped, incisive voice. "Hold it, the rest o' you. Hear me?"

They heard, and obeyed. It was a strange thing to see these hard-bitten riders turn and drift off without question, taking the gray-faced Holgast with them. They were like owned dogs, savage and fierce, but giving immediate obedience to their master.

Madigan stood and watched them go before turning his eyes in search of the Romedy girl.

SHE was coming toward him, and for the first time he had a full view of her face. It startled him out of his grim mood. He got a vague, confused impression of vivid color, warm life, and a controlled calm that matched his own. He did not know if she was beautiful or not. She did not have the beauty of Stella, but to compare them was to compare a blue diamond with a glowing opal.

"Thank you," she said, and smiled up at him as naturally as a casually friendly boy. Undisturbed, unruffled, she tucked a fold of her shirt into her Levis. "Nice people, these Sanburn folks."

"They think so." Madigan nodded and wondered if her eyes were blue, green or black. They were dark, and seemed to change color at different angles.

She laughed, a low, amused sound that had a rich note and somehow suggested mockery, tolerance, and a lively sense of humor. The parting of her lips drew Madigan's attention to them. They were firm and curving, and he thought at first they were painted. Then he saw that they weren't, that it was their contrast against the golden tan of her skin that lent them that full carmine hue.

Mexican? No. He mentally discarded that thought. She was not olive-skinned, and her hair, what he could see of it below the faded sombrero, was not coarse. It was fine

and soft, with curling unruliness, a rich blue-black with secret shades that only the sunlight released.

Why, she was more than beautiful. The thought struck him suddenly and led him on to continue his frank, wholly unconscious appraisal. He had a taste for beauty. Beauty in anything had always appealed to the Madigans, whether in horses, sunsets or women. It was one of their traits and sometimes it had been a weakness.

She was talking again in her musical, slightly husky voice. "Don't you know better than to take up for a Romedy?"

He shook his head. "I'm a Madigan," was all he could find to say, and to himself that was ample explanation.

She nodded. "I know." Her understanding eyes went beyond him to the Broken Bar H buckboard across the street. "It's cost you more than it was worth. I'm sorry. Good-by."

Madigan watched her go, watched the free swing of her supple body as she left him, until he became aware that many eyes were on him. The eyes were cynical, with upraised brows and knowing looks. He turned abruptly and strode over to the buckboard.

Geoff Hilliard had a slim sheaf of bills in his hand. "Here." He shoved them at Madigan. "Forty dollars. I'll have no man on my pay roll what'll git in a gun brawl on 'count of a Romedy. Least of all thet wench."

Stella, with eyes as intolerant as her father's, stared straight ahead from her seat in the buckboard. Into her view moved a slim figure in faded Levis, riding a half-broken palomino out of town. Anger for an instant put a cloud over Stella's blond good looks. "That—that creature!"

The buckboard pulled away, leaving Madigan standing alone by the hitch rack. He looked down at the bills in his hand and something within him wanted to laugh. Here he had the rewards of a long inner struggle, here was the residue of his fine ambitions. He was licked. Sanburn had licked him, put him in his place and turned its back on him. No, he had licked himself.

He heard Stark Walden call with gusty heartiness after the buckboard. A great mixer, Walden, in spite of his domineering ways and hardness. He knew everybody, and everybody knew him.

GEOFF HILLIARD, with a fawning respect for any man wealthier than himself, at once pulled up and took the opportunity to have a friendly chat with the great Walden. He leaned forward, pinched face full of neighborly good will, and talked. Walden nodded and threw in a word here and there, but his attention was all for Stella.

Madigan swung on his heel and headed for the barroom. He was not a hard-drinking man ordinarily, but right now he felt the need of a drink, several drinks.

He was on his third when Walden came in, making his entrance with his usual large flourish of flinging open both batwing doors. A dashing, successful rancher, Stark Walden, and he looked the part. People gave him respect. He was a big man, the biggest in Black Draw Valley, and he had a way of subtly reminding people of the fact. Head of the town committee, leader in all civic movements, he had his capable finger in everything.

He took place beside Madigan at

the bar, and the bartender hastened to get out his special bottle. "You handed my boys quite a jolt, Madigan." His laugh rang out, louder than his words, which he gave barely above a confidential murmur. "Mebby not such a surprise though, eh? I guess we all knew you'd kick the harness off some day, an' show us how to handle a cutter."

Madigan said nothing. He sent a brief glance at the Slash L owner, caught a strange look in the pale eyes, and tried to figure out what was coming. Something was coming, no doubt of that. Walden was too friendly, the smile on his heavy, handsome face a shade too transparent.

Madigan wigwagged a finger at the bartender for a fourth drink, but before the bartender could serve it Walden slid his own bottle over. "Try mine, Madigan."

Too friendly. Madigan eyed the bottle without picking it up, and was suddenly seized with a swift irritation for all things hidden, subtle, whispered. "Just what," he asked, "d'you want, Walden?"

He was surprised at Walden's quick acceptance of his mood. The man had many sides to him, and was not dull-witted. Under that large, hearty manner was a smooth brain, and those pale eyes were shrewd, observing.

"I'm coming to that. You've got sense, and I like men with sense." Walden leaned on the bar, speaking softly. "If anybody else had done what you just did, it wouldn't have meant much. But it was you, and that means a lot here in Sanburn. By to-night all Black Draw Valley will be saying you're the triggery hombre they always knew you were, underneath. You're all through here, Madigan. That one fast draw did it."

Madigan twirled his empty glass in his strong, restless fingers. "What d'you want?" he asked again. He knew Walden was right. Years of tame living had never gained him a niche in solid Sanburn, but a single shot had made him a gun pariah—because he was a Madigan. Some of the bloodiest chapters of the border were spotted with that name.

"I want you," murmured Walden. "Yeh, you, Madigan. Hundred a month and extra for good work."

Madigan looked at him, feeling no surprise. "What would you call good work? I've heard things about the Slash L. Folks do talk."

"Don't they, though?" Walden did a juggle with his bottle and filled Madigan's glass. "Well, we do things our own way on the Slash L. Y'know how it is. We're down there at the south end o' the valley. There's Hollow Peak right back of us, and the border beyond that. If I didn't have the right kind o' men——" He let a shrug speak for the rest.

"You losing stock, too?" asked Madigan, and thought of the Romedy clan in guarded Hollow Peak.

Walden shook his head. "No, but it costs money not to. Y'know how much the rest o' the valley loses horses an' stock, plenty and regular. Durn fools rely on the sheriff and their hired hands—that's why. I hire men who can do more'n just use a rope."

"Like Holgast." Madigan kept irony from his tone.

"Sure. Good man, Holgast." Walden showed a smile. "Was, or thought he was, anyway. Won't be much good for a while now. That was the slickest bit of shooting I ever saw. The Madigan draw, eh? I've heard of it. Hard to master, I

reckon. Looks clumsy. Well, you want that kinda job?"

Madigan looked thoughtfully into the back-bar mirror. He could see Walden's face there, but could not read the expression on it. The man was smooth, all right, and there was no telling just what might be in that job, from the casual way he outlined it. But a man could always quit, and a hundred a month was good money. It wouldn't take long to scrape enough together from that kind of pay to start a little independent spread of his own. He wasn't licked yet, perhaps. He'd have his own ranch, be his own master, his own man——

"I'll take it, said Madigan.

"*Bueno,*" murmured Walden. "Report to Redlinger at the ranch. See you later." He moved away, with the air of one who had put over a deal and had nothing more to say.

CHAPTER II.

DOUBLE-CROSSED

SOMETHING was wrong. The knowledge of it ran through the darkened bunk house and caused bodies to rise up from creaking bunks. Window-filtered moonlight shone pale on faces that were set in expressions of tense listening.

Madigan, sitting up with the rest of the Slash L hands, felt the grim expectancy communicate itself to him, without knowing its cause. He guessed the time at an hour or two past midnight, and listened for the sound that had awakened him. Soon he placed it—an oncoming drumming of hoofs.

He swung his long legs out of the bunk and joined the men who already stood at the opened door, staring out into the moonlit night. From the downstairs windows of the big house, a hundred steps away, lights cut yellow paths across the hard-baked yard. He could see the square, commanding figure of Walden, fully dressed in his dark broadcloth and stiff-brimmed hat, standing on the front porch.

The racing hoofbeats drew swiftly near. The rider came thundering across the yard and pulled to a jolting halt at the porch. "Gotta do somethin' in a hurry, Stark!" It was Redlinger, the range boss. Nobody else called Walden by his first name. "Stupper an' the others——"

An oath sounded from Walden and Redlinger's voice dropped to a murmur, then ceased. For a moment there was silence, then Walden said something, softly and rapidly, and ended by raising his voice in a sharp call. "Madigan—you awake?"

"Sure," said Madigan. "Want me?"

"Yeh. Get dressed, pronto. We'll have your horse saddled, time you're ready. Got a little job to do."

Madigan dressed and strapped on his gun belt while the rest of the bunk-house crew drifted back to their bunks. He could sense their eyes coldly following him as he strode out into the yard and crossed to the corral. They didn't like him—the memory of Holgast's downfall stood in the way.

Walden was waiting with the horses. Redlinger had already departed the way he had come, and the noise of his going could still be heard in the distance.

Madigan swung into the saddle. "Anything wrong?" he queried.

"Little trouble, is all." Walden seemed to have lost the quick urgency that had marked his tone in his muttered talk with Redlinger. "Some o' the night crew found a bunch o' strays driftin' off the north range. Somebody took a shot at

'em while they were bringin' 'em back. Might be nothing. Then again, might be something. We'll find out."

They rode in the dusty course of the vanished Redlinger, northeast up the long, rolling slopes of the lower foothills. The moon-etched shadows of the higher Guadalupe peaks were close ahead when Madigan caught a sullen rumble that carried down on the faint night wind.

"They're coming," he said, "and coming mighty fast too from the—what was that? Sounded like a shot."

"Raiders!" Walden spat the word like an oath. "Raiders, sure's you're born. It's that cursed Romedy bunch, or I'm a—hear that? More shooting. The boys're having trouble. Head up there fast, Madigan! I'm cutting back to bring the rest o' the hands." He spun his mount around and spurred off down the slope.

MADIGAN heeled his horse and sent it plunging forward. He could see the coming cattle bunch now, looking like black ripples under the broad shadows of the peaks. Two riders bobbed up, swinging around the charging mass of bellowing shapes. One of them was Redlinger. He flung up an arm, and his words cut through the rumbling racket.

"Git round to the rear, Madigan! Stupper an' Bedloe's got trouble back there! We're——" The rest was lost in a rattle of gunfire.

The scene had an unreal quality about it. Madigan tried to piece things together as he rode hard to the rear of the stampeded bunch. There, in the choking dust kicked up by the cattle, another rider whirled diagonally across his path. It was Stupper. He shouted something, pointed back, and rode on.

Madigan reined in, swinging his mount broadside, and peered back into the dust-ridden darkness. Queer, he thought, for the gun-handy Slash L riders to be chased over their own range by a few nervy cattle raiders. They seemed to expect him to hold back those unknown pursuers.

Horsemen were coming. He could hear the thudding of their hoofs above the lowering rumble of the passing cattle. He glimpsed a group moving fast under the lee of a cliff and a gun cracked out its full round note. Madigan did not see its flash. It came from somewhere behind him, from the direction in which Stupper had gone.

His stiff-braced horse took a sudden side jerk, stood for an instant with all four legs outspread, then sank under him. He threw himself clear, and his gun was out and cocked as he got to his knees. "What the devil!" He swore aloud, then ducked as a series of yellow spurts flickered from the oncoming horsemen.

He heard the tearing impact of lead striking into his dead horse, and fired twice over its still twitching body. Somebody gave a yell and the gunfire increased to a furious volley. The horsemen had split and were coming at him from both sides.

"Git after the others!" bellowed a voice. "We'll tend to thisn!"

The familiar ring of the blaring voice sent its cold shock through Madigan. He sent his own deep-toned call in exchange. "Hey, sheriff! Hold your fire! It's me—Madigan!" He got half up, raising a hand.

The nearest group of riders swarmed around him and he got a

dim view of Geoff Hilliard's pinched, furious face, of three Broken Bar H riders, and of Sheriff Ponse, fat and puffing and full of victory.

"Git 'em high, Madigan!" Gun barrels covered him. "Drop yore iron—fast!" Their hard eyes told that they had cornered a dangerous wolf that would rip them apart if they gave it a chance.

Madigan laughed. "You crazy bog-heads!" he snapped. "What you think you've got? I'm a Slash L hand, driving Slash L stock on Slash L range. Calm down, you and——"

Somebody reached over and knocked the gun from his hand as another rider came rocketing up the slope, followed by three more. The first was Walden. He drew up and stared hard at Madigan.

"Well, now!" His drawl was heavy. "We might have known it, eh? Get any o' his friends, Ponse? We heard the shooting way down home an' came up to lend a hand.

"What the——" Madigan stood up. "This a joke, Walden? You know damn well I was helping Redlinger and the others drive back those strays o' yours."

"Strays? Strays, did he say?" Geoff Hilliard pushed his mount forward, glaring. "Strays be hanged! They ain't strays, an' yuh know where yuh got 'em. You an' yore thievin' Romedy friends took 'em offa my range! They're Broken Bar H stock!"

"He says," put in the sheriff with ponderous irony, "he's a Slash L hand, Walden. Whatcha say to that?"

"Huh?" Walden looked blank, then gave a roaring laugh. "Him? The nervy son! Pushin' stolen stock over my range, then claimin' he's—pah!" He laughed again and the sheriff respectfully joined in.

Madigan swayed forward, fists clenched. "Why, you——" A cold muzzle at his neck pressed its warning.

Walden leaned negligently on his saddle horn. "You're caught dead to rights, Madigan." His voice was slow, deliberate. "You're a Romedy man, an' you proved it. Likely you've been helping 'em lift stock these five years past. Geoff fired you, so you went kinda wild this time an' slipped up. Too bad they didn't rope in some o' your friends."

He leaned lower. "You lying, low-down, cow-lifting son!" His right arm whipped over, a gun butt catching a dull gleam.

Madigan felt the first shock of pain, felt himself falling——

CHAPTER III

OUT OF THE TRAP

HE awoke to bright sunlight and pain. The light poured in from a small window, set high. It hurt his eyes, and he turned them to the shadows. He was surrounded by thick walls and an iron-grilled door. He turned his aching eyes to the window again. It, too, had bars.

Painfully, he sat up on the floor and put an uncertain hand to his throbbing head. It was bandaged, and his face was rough with blood that had dried and caked. "I want a drink," he said aloud, and found his voice was hoarse and shaky.

A chair scraped somewhere. The bulky form of Sheriff Ponse loomed up beyond the barred door, a cigar in his mouth. "Here y'are." He thrust a tin cup through the bars. "Feelin' kinda frazzled, huh? Yuh'll git over it. Yeah, yuh'll git all well—at the end of a good strong rope!"

There was no sense in arguing. A

dull apathy clouded Madigan's mind. "When?" he asked, and took the tin cup.

"Soon enough." The sheriff had all the cheerful unconcern of a man interested in but untouched by events. "Circuit judge is due this week, mebby t'-morrer. There's been men killed in these cattle raids. Mebby yuh didn't kill 'em all, but you're all we got. Nothin' less than a rope would satisfy this valley, so don't git any hopes up."

Madigan drained the mug. "I s'pose it's all settled, then."

"Sure." The sheriff nodded brightly. "Be a quick trial. No use draggin' it out. You're guilty, an' yuh know it. Whole danged country knows it. Ain't no s'prise to me a-tall. I always figgered them quiet ways o' yours was jest an act." He lumbered off, whistling.

Madigan sat down and stared at the floor. After a while he began to laugh, though it made his gashed head hurt. He was laughing at himself, with thin, satiric humor. He had been the only Madigan to follow tame living and now he would be the only Madigan to leave life at the end of a rope.

"Funny," he mumbled, and weariness made his battered head bow over his chest. "Danged funny." The floor heaved gently beneath him and the barred window seemed to be moving. He stretched out on the hard floor again and let loose his grip on his faltering consciousness.

SOMEBODY was hitting him on the face. He raised a guarding arm, dragged open his eyes, and found darkness about him. A small, hard object struck his raised arm, bounced off, and rattled on the floor. He felt for it, and his searching fingers picked up a cartridge.

"S-s-ssss-t!"

The small sound came from outside the high window. He looked up at it and found its square outline broken at the bottom. Against the bit of night sky the sill showed lumpy and uneven. He climbed unsteadily to his feet, reached up a hand, and touched fingers. The fingers moved, pushed something compact and familiarly hard into his hand, then swiftly withdrew.

Madigan found himself gripping a gun and listening to faint footsteps that retreated down the side alley. His mind struggled against the heavy apathy that clogged it. Mechanically he broke open the gun, found it fully loaded, and remembered the cartridge that had struck his arm. Others had struck his face. He knelt and thoroughly explored the floor, gathering up a handful.

The stooping brought new pain to his bandaged head, but the pain cleared some of the dullness from his mind. He straightened up and began to think. The question of who it was that had come to his cell window, he found oddly unimportant. It was enough that he had a gun and a handful of shells.

A sudden noise and a shaft of yellow light threw him into an instinctive crouch. The light poured along the short corridor outside the cell door, and came from the sheriff's office. The inner door had been kicked open. Shadows blurred and mingled with the clump of coming feet.

"What was them sounds, Madigan?" Sheriff Ponse halted outside the door, staring through the bars. "What was yuh movin' 'round for?"

Beside him, Stupper's short and chunky body pushed for room. "Shucks, Ponse, d'yuh figger he'd tell yuh if he was up to somethin'?

Go in an' find out." The Slash L man snapped it like an order. "Don't forget you're responsible for thet hombre."

The sheriff frowned, fidgeted with his keys, and slowly fitted one into the lock. He didn't like being bossed by every Slash L man, but hadn't quite enough nerve to object.

"I'll hold a gun on him while yuh nose round in there," added Stupper, and the deliberateness of his words made Madigan send him a quick look.

The barred door creaked open and Ponse stepped in. Madigan, near the window, looked past him at Stupper. He caught a flicker in the green eyes, a tightening of the mouth, and knew the little gunman was going to kill him. Stupper was going to earn a cash bonus for good work, to-night. Stark Walden was not taking any chances on a trial.

Ponse, the fool, went to the windows and tried the bars, turning his back on Madigan. Stupper's eyes followed him, then darted at Madigan. For an instant both men stared at each other, and the knowledge of coming murder flashed between them.

Stupper's lip lifted in a savage grin and the drawn gun in his hand shifted a fraction to cover Madigan's head. He thumbed back the hammer, and his shout of false alarm made the sheriff jump. "Look out, Ponse! He's gonna——"

His gun roared its crashing report into the close space, then roared again as Madigan dived at the sheriff's legs.

Madigan ripped his gun out from under his shirt just as the sheriff toppled on top of him with a howl. He fired once, from the floor, a split second after Stupper got off his third shot.

He heard Stupper's gasping intake of breath, then Ponse's great weight rolled on him and went limp. A clatter sounded out in the corridor, and a soft thud. Madigan shouldered off Ponse's slack body, and got up. Ponse was dead; Stupper's third shot, flung wild, had got him. Stupper lay huddled on the corridor floor, his breath sounding fainter and fainter.

OUTSIDE in the darkened town voices were yelling and doors banging, while feet pounded along hollow board walks. Madigan stepped over Stupper's body and moved fast down the end of the short passage. The rear door was barred and bolted and it took him several seconds to get it open.

He stepped out into a black night filled with clamor. From all over Sanburn, men were converging on the jail. Madigan softly pulled the door shut behind him and broke into a crouching run. His mind was clear now, and running in balance. Whether he was caught again or not there would never be a trial. They would shoot him down or hang him out of hand.

Through the darkness appeared a horseman, holding his mount to a trot. Against the stars his stiff-brimmed hat and broadcloth coat cut a black silhouette.

"Say, you!" His voice rapped out, curt with authority. "What happened in the jail? Is Madigan dead?"

"No," said Madigan. "No, Walden—not yet!" He leaped, and his gun barrel crashed down on the stiff black sombrero.

Walden's square body swayed over, without losing its rigid outline. His hands did not drop the reins. He seemed to be staving off senselessness by the sheer strength and power of his arrogant will. A groan-

ing, snarling cry came from him. "Here, men! Here he is—Madigan!"

Madigan grasped at the coat, hauled the half-conscious Walden over, and pitched him out of the saddle. The horse danced, snorting and nervous. Madigan vaulted aboard, snatched up the dangling reins, and dug heel. Again came that choked, furious cry from Stark Walden, while shouted replies sounded from all around in the darkness.

The horse, a big, powerful dun, lunged forward to the sharp urge of Madigan's heel. A long shape sprang at its head, while others swarmed from every direction. Madigan slashed at this shape and knocked it down, then sent his mount in a slithering half circle as shots began to thud out. He cleared the gathering crowd of shouting, shifting figures, his mount bowling over two more, and then went thundering on at a rocking lope.

The confused clamor spread. Lights sprang up and the echoing spatter of gunfire increased. A voice, high and shrill with excitement, rang out above the rest. "It's Madigan—he's broke jail! He's killed Ponse an' Stupper!"

Hoofs drummed along the main street before Madigan passed the last scattered buildings. He looked back over his shoulder, and his teeth bared in the defiant grin of a hunted man. They were coming hard after him, roused to the kill fever. Sanburn was hunting the wolf.

Something savage and elemental in Madigan made him send back a high yell and three shots. He was headed south, and a madness within him was glad. Here was the end of the tame Sanburn years. He would cross the border, the way so many dead and gone Madigans had crossed, and plunge into the wild, reckless life to which he belonged. He had never really fitted back there in Sanburn.

He told himself that, while crushing the inner voice that called him a liar. The long-rider life would never entirely claim him. He was too farsighted and had too much conscience. Sanburn was narrow, intolerant, suspicious—but Sanburn held something he had spent years trying to win: solidity, respect, acceptance. At the back of his mind lay knowledge that mocked at him, realization that he had failed.

IT was a good horse, the dun, but there were other men in Sanburn who had good horses. An hour later, his injured head an agony, Madigan still could hear the faint beat of hoofs far in the rear. He had taken to rough country and veered up into the hills, but he could not outdistance that dull, insistent sound.

They were out to get him and by morning all Black Draw Valley would be joining in the hunt. He would have to reach the border tonight or never reach it. Once in a while, whenever he allowed his shape to show up against the dark skyline, rifles cracked out their whining notes.

He took to higher ground, winding around knolls and high points at full stride, while the dun tripped and slipped on unseen rocks and loose stony patches. The Sanburn riders had the advantage, for they did not have to avoid the sky line and knew well enough where he was heading.

He swore at the moon, which had come up to cast its pale, betraying light on him, and decided to change his course. It would be better, perhaps, to cross the Guadalupes into

New Mexico. He swung left, getting higher and higher. With the bulk of the mountains to shut out the sky, it would be harder for those riflemen to sight him.

The dun suddenly lurched to a sliding halt, forelegs braced, and emitted a frightened snort. Madigan, rising in the saddle, barely saved himself from pitching forward over the neck of the animal. He stared ahead, saw a wall of blackness before and under him, and swore again. It stretched off to left and right, a narrow cleft like a knife slash across the broken hills, with unknown depths.

A yell sounded behind him, and again came the vicious spang of a rifle. They had seen him halt, and guessing that he was blocked in his course, were spreading out. He could see their bobbing shapes and hear the fast-coming racket of shod hoofs on rock.

He drew his gun, dragged the left rein, and sent his mount cantering hard along the edge of the drop-off. There was no time to dodge the sky line now; this was a race to escape the net they were throwing out. The same rifle spat its high note again, and Madigan dodged before the close hiss of the bullet. A marksman, that gent, with strictly lethal intentions. He was aiming for the head, where the white bandage showed.

Madigan bent low and raised his gun. A shot or two might spoil that gent's aim. He squeezed trigger and with the crash of his own weapon the rifle cracked once more. He saw the tiny flash of it and heard the whine of the bullet. A hot, driving force punched his shoulder and knocked him half out of the jolting saddle. He made a desperate grab for the horn and felt the horse jerk away under him. Too late, he got an instant's glimpse of the sharp outward bulge of the cleft, just ahead.

The dun was floundering and skidding in a frantic effort to avoid plunging over the edge. Madigan missed in his grab for the horn and found himself swinging outward, unable to hold balance. His left arm was numb, useless. The saddle dragged away and he was hurtling through the air.

He barely escaped the lip of the yawning cleft as he dived helplessly over it. He was falling, his body turning. It seemed then as if something exploded, brought him up short and slammed him away again. He still was falling, but now he was tumbling down a steep slant, with rocks and brush tearing at him. He was a battered, bloody, broken thing, tumbling to final destruction and——

THE crashing progress of his body stopped, and it seemed as if the whole world had come to a silent standstill. He lay supine, but his mind hurtled on. Fragments of hazy consciousness came and went. Daylight struck his closed eyelids, then faded again to night. Deep under his stunned, groping senses, he sensed that he was dying.

And then, in one of his periodic flashes of consciousness, he felt the sense of movement. Hands were holding him. He was being carried. Curse them, they were holding him imprisoned in this smashed body. The fools! Couldn't they see his truant mind way off up there, grinning back as it slowly dissolved and vanished?

He struggled, snarling like a wounded beast in a trap, and a voice said: "We'll have to tie him up. Strong as a bear, isn't he?

Crazy, o' course, an' no wonder. Must've been crawling all this time —three days——"

In the ages that followed, Madigan grew to know that voice and others. He grew to know the exact feel of permanent bonds, too. But all that was outside himself. He was still doggedly hunting his mind. Sometimes the Romedy girl was with him, helping him. Between them, they would corner that vague, grinning thing, but it would always escape again, chuckling like a sinister imp.

He talked, shouted, cursed, tore at his bonds, kicked and glared at shadowy figures that drifted around him. They held him prisoner, regarding him with calm eyes, and went away shaking their heads. Only the Romedy girl stayed, and her deep eyes and low, husky voice gradually cooled his outbursts of feverish struggle.

The day came when Madigan's tired brain gave up the long struggle, and surrendered to his will. The dark, obscuring curtain thinned and melted before his eyes, and he could see at last with clarity and untricked vision. The senseless fury drained from him, leaving him quiet and passive.

Heavy leather straps held his arms, and when he moved a chain swung and rattled. He was in a cabin, and the chain gave him a limited freedom. A hand was in his own. He was holding it with a crushing grip and staring into the face of the Romedy girl.

"You're real," he said slowly. "I didn't dream you." He saw the paleness under the golden tan, and knew he was hurting her, though she made no complaint. He loosened his tight hold on her hand. "Why am I like this? Strapped—chained and——"

"You've been sick," she said, and her dark eyes were soft, shining with a strange triumph. "But you're well now. I knew some day you would—find yourself."

His eyes, wide and deep-socketed, stayed on her. "It's been hard, hard on us both. What's your name?"

"Dare."

He pondered on that, and liked it. Dare Romedy. It fitted her. "Where is this place?" he asked, and found the question not too important.

"You're in Hollow Peak. You've been here all the time since we found you. They think you're dead, in Sanburn." She worked with the straps behind his back.

He felt his arms freed. Mechanically he rubbed them, and found rough, calloused places where the straps had fitted. He moved about the cabin, testing his legs, his arms, the muscles of his long body, and knew he was strong and whole. The scars interested him, there were so many.

There was a square mirror on a wall. He went to it, and drew back in amazement at the face that met him. It was a scarred, saturnine face, gaunt and short-bearded. A white scar stood out on his broad forehead, startling against the dark hue of his skin. It drew up the outer corners of his deep-set eyes and gave him a slightly sinister appearance.

He swung abruptly to the girl, who was watching him with calm, understanding eyes. "How long have I——"

"Nearly three months," she answered, and took his hand again. "Let's go and tell the men."

He frowned, looking again at that scarred, bearded face. "The men?"

She laughed a little. "I'm the only woman here. The rest are men

—Romedy men." Her color-changing eyes lifted to his, laughing and challenging. "Horse thieves and cattle rustlers—if you believe Sanburn folks."

THERE were seven, and Madigan met them all. He shook hands, with a strange feeling of making fresh acquaintance with men he had known a long time. This sense of familiarity he attributed to the fact that he had lived with them, although without sanity. Certain shallow impressions must have been left on his memory. But it went deeper than that, too. There was a sense of kinship, of close understanding, that needed no words to bring it out.

They were like Dare—calm on the surface, yet giving the impression of fiery things underneath. Rich of mood and fluent of speech when occasion called, yet quiet and taciturn between times. And above all, they wore the restraint of men who could be swift, dangerous, deadly.

There was old Jaffah Romedy, family head of the clan, a white-haired, bearded patriarch with wise eyes and a slow tongue. Lined and gnarled as an ancient oak, but straight-backed as an Indian. And Shep Romedy, son of Jaffah, a fifty-year-old edition of his father, although he looked only thirty.

And Agar, Darius, Elam—tall sons of Shep. And Silent Ionel, whose relationship Madigan never quite placed, but who was obviously a Romedy. And Maska, son of Ionel.

Strange names, these were, and strange people. Madigan moved among them, was one of them. For a week he helped with the horses—fine, blooded animals that the Romedys raised—and finally he asked questions. He asked the first when all the Romedys were together in the great log house, and he looked at gaunt-faced old Jaffah. It was night, and after-supper smokes were being lighted.

"This Hollow Peak is a natural fortress," said Madigan, breaking a silence. "It's like a great deep bowl in the mountain, perhaps an old crater. I see no break in the cliffs, but I know there must be one. I see no cattle, either. And yet——" He paused, and asked his question with his eyes.

Old Jaffah tamped his blackened pipe. His keen eyes peered out from under their shaggy brows and swept over Madigan's scarred face. "I've been waiting for that," he said in his slow, rumbling voice. "You see no cows here, eh? No stolen cattle. No horses, except our own. And yet—— And yet what?"

He held up a hand, smiled, and the others smiled with him. "Never mind, Madigan. We know what Sanburn thinks of us. No, you see no cows here. There aren't any. There never have been any. In the six years we've been here none of us have ever touched a cow or a horse that wasn't ours. And none of us have been outside Hollow Peak in that time, either, 'cept Dare."

"Why?"

Jaffah shrugged his great shoulders. "Maybe we like our own company better'n we like other people's. We like each other, and we like our horses. The Romedys have always raised horses—fine horses, thoroughbreds. We sell, but only at our own price, and there are plenty of men willing and eager to pay high for a true Romedy horse."

He leaned back in his chair. Pride gave him a look of austerity. "We keep our strain clean—Romedy horses and Romedy men. We have our own laws and our own stand-

ards, and that is why we live alone. Call us rebels, if you like. A Madigan shouldn't find that hard to understand. Your own people, I hear, were rebels of a sort."

"True." Madigan's mind went back into memory. "I remember my great-grandfather. He lived to a great age, and died in the saddle. He called himself a Black Irishman, and I think he had some Spanish in him. After he died, there was no strong hand left to hold the Madigans together. They drifted, and most of them came to a bad end. They were always restless, never contented. Rebels, yes. Where do the Romedys come from?"

"From everywhere and nowhere," said Jaffah. "They have never owned land, nor stayed in one place very long. I, too, can remember my great-grandfather. He wore a gold ring in his left ear, and called himself a gypsy. A great wanderer, and a great fighter. We did not drift when he died, but kept together."

"In Sanburn," said Madigan, "they call you thieves and rustlers, and worse. Why do you let them?"

"Why should we trouble to stop them?" Jaffah looked faintly surprised and amused. "It would only draw us into their affairs, and into trouble. Let them talk. Strangers are always suspected. As long as they leave us alone, we don't mind what they think. And they leave us alone, never fear. The Walden man once sent some men up here to look at our horses, and——"

He smiled again, and the smile was reflected in the deceptively mild faces of the listening men.

"Silent Ionel saw them coming up the pass. He saw their purpose, too; saw that they were greedy for our horses. He killed three of them with his rifle before they turned and rode back. We've had no visitors since."

SILENT IONEL went on smoking, his eyes quiet and abstracted as though he had not heard. His manner was habitually that of one in deep, brooding thought, undisturbed by passing events. Yet in him too, as in the others, could be sensed the cloaked presence of something fierce and elemental, wild and untamed. They were self-sufficient, strong in their free isolation.

Madigan said, "And yet you carried me up here and took me in. I'm an outlaw, wanted for rustling, breaking jail and murder. You could have let me die. Why didn't you?"

Jaffah took a long draw at his pipe, while the others remained silent. The old man spoke for them all. "We were already caught in your affairs by then. You put us all in your debt when you helped Dare and shot Holgast. But for that, we would have had to go in with our guns and attend to that matter ourselves."

"Somebody paid that debt," said Madigan, and looked at Dare as she rose from her chair. "Somebody pushed a gun through my cell window. You owed me nothing."

He watched the free swing of the girl's body as she walked to the open door. There she turned, looked at them, and smiled. "I did that," she told them, and left.

There was silence after she was gone. Shep Romedy broke it. "Dare isn't a child any longer. We all knew that some day she would—be a woman." His eyes rested on Madigan. "I'm glad it's as it is," he ended simply. "You'll stay, of course, Madigan."

"I—it's——" Abruptly, Madigan rose to his full height, his awakened eyes on the door. "I'd like to. I want to. But there's—I can't even——"

"You'll stay." It was Jaffah who said it this time, and six pairs of steady eyes confirmed his pronouncement. "We would not have Dare hurt. You understand?"

Madigan saw the command in the eyes that met his. A lawless breed, this Romedy clan. They were commanding him to stay, to become one of them. Were he a lesser man, the command would not have come. Calmly, frankly, they were pronouncing the verdict of Romedy law. He had an idea that to oppose that verdict meant death. There was a hint of cool, passionless threat in the brooding eyes of Silent Ionel, the slayer without nerves.

"I—understand," said Madigan slowly, and walked past them out of the great log room.

Jaffah's voice followed him. "We leave this place soon. We would have left before, but we had you here and you were in no state to travel. We take the long trail north, perhaps as far as Montana, with all the horses. Be ready to leave with us in a few days, Madigan."

Wanderers, nomads, eternally pushing onward to fresh country, new frontiers. Restless, hating the shackles of deep roots and settled, softening peace. Again Madigan felt that sense of kinship, that strange feeling of having drifted far and long among aliens, and of finally finding his own kind, his own people.

But he could not go with them. He could not go, and leave failure behind to haunt and belittle him. The memory of Sanburn would always be with him. He had failed there, had become what Sanburn had whisperingly predicted he would become—a man with the blood of violence on his hands, an outlaw, to be shunned by decent citizens and hunted by the righteous. There lay a task to be done, and though it was a task bigger than himself, he knew he would go back and try to do it.

CHAPTER IV

BACK INTO DANGER

HE found Dare Romedy standing half in the shadow of a saguaro that poked spiked, ghostly arms up at the starlit sky. The moonlight was on her face, and the quick flow of life was in her eyes.

"Thanks," he said, and found it difficult to keep his voice at an even pitch. "For the gun—for everything. Is—you've been to Sanburn lately. What's happened there since I left?"

He saw the look of shock leap into the dark eyes, saw the ripe lips part, then press together again with a quick motion. And he knew she had expected words far different from him.

"Sanburn?" Her voice was quiet. A faint mockery, a veil for deeper things, came into her eyes. "Happened? A lot of things happen in Sanburn. They talk a lot down there, but none of them do anything, except Walden. He's a great man."

"A great crook," corrected Madigan. "He was robbing the whole valley, and blaming it on your people."

She laughed, and it had a hard little note to it, as though forced. "He still is, but it costs us nothing. He rules Sanburn now, openly. His men do as they like and nobody

dares to raise a whisper against them. Holgast is sheriff now. Walden put him in."

She turned the full glow of her mocking eyes on him. "Is there any one down there you especially wanted to know about? Such as Geoff Hilliard? Or his daughter? Hilliard plays safe and is very friendly with Walden. It's natural, of course. After all, Walden will be his son-in-law after——"

"What?"

She feigned surprise at his swift vehemence. "Yes. Walden and Stella Hilliard are being married to-night!"

Her words impacted on his brain, stunned him into a long silence that grew strained. At last she touched his arm. "Does it—mean so much to you?" she asked.

He nodded woodenly, his eyes beyond her. "I've got to go," he said. "To-night. Now. How do I get out of this place? Where is the pass?"

She made no answer. On her face the veil of faint mockery fought with inner tragedy, and her breathing came fast. Refusal came into her eyes, grew strong, then died with the swiftness of a futile flame.

"I must go," said Madigan. "Don't you see, Dare? There are things I must do—things a man can't dodge and still be a man."

Dare Romedy turned away. "Wait there." Her whisper came back to him as she slipped off into the darkness.

In ten minutes she was back, riding her palomino and leading a Romedy thoroughbred, a lean-bodied black with dainty hoofs and a wicked eye. The black was saddled, and from the horn hung two gun belts.

"The black is mine," she told Madigan as he mounted. "The guns were my father's. He was the brother of Silent Ionel, and an even better shot. No, don't thank me. I'm helping you on your way to death and another woman."

Her small laugh was shaky, though it tried to be light and firm. "But there are things," she ended, "that a woman can't dodge, either, and still be a—a lady."

There were things implied in her words, things Madigan forced himself to shelve and forget, knowing what the pondering of them would do to his will. He could find nothing to say, and they rode in silence across the deep bowl of Hollow Peak, each avoiding the other's eyes.

They reached the mouth of the pass, a narrow cut, half hidden by brush and fallen boulders. It dipped down below them, winding its steep course to the foot of the great peak. The girl drew rein, and voicelessly waited for Madigan to go.

There were torrents of words behind Madigan's stiff mask, words that shaped and formed themselves into clear, rushing patterns. There were so many things he wanted to say. He wanted to tell her why he had to go, what Sanburn stood for in his private code, and what that code meant to him.

He wanted to tell her, explain to her, what it would do to him to admit failure in the thing he had struggled to win through all those plodding, tame, Sanburn years. He wanted, most of all, to tell her what she—Dare Romedy—meant to him. He wanted to tell her these things.

He said: "Well—g'-by, Dare."

And that was all. He could not trust himself to say more. And so he rode away like this, his eyes not meeting hers, and a vague sense of guilt weighing upon him.

RIDING along the slanted edges of the great eastern slopes of the valley, it took long moments for Madigan to become aware of the distant, familiar roar of trampling hoofs far ahead and below him. The sound struck at his hearing, but did not register until the insistence of it pierced his deep mood of thought.

He listened, idly at first, then with growing attention as the sound swelled. It was a herd on the move, and it sounded like a stampede. A big herd, he judged, and pulled up to peer far down at the near side of the bottom of the hollow. He could see nothing, but his ears told him the running herd was somewhere down there in the darkness, and moving south.

He nudged the black on again, and the sound gradually faded behind him. Then it came again, and he frowned. Another herd, following hard after the first, passed unseen below him, and this time he could distinguish the high-voiced hazing of the herd riders.

There was a faint reddish glow somewhere on the other side of the valley, like the reflection of a hidden fire. Madigan studied it from his high vantage, but did not halt again. By easy stages he dropped down into the valley, and the far glow faded from his sight.

The feeling grew on him that things were happening to-night—things dark and urgent. He brushed the thought from his mind, discarded the ugly question that the south-moving herds had awakened, and hastened the pace of the black. The things that were happening in Sanburn, and the things that would happen when he got there, made other matters seem unimportant.

Noise and light greeted Madigan as he rode steadily into Sanburn's short main street. He hitched his mount to a rack and made his way afoot past the lighted fronts to Walden's big two-storied town house. It stood apart in its own iron-fenced yard, and light blazed from every window. Most of the noise and movement revolved about it.

The yard was filled with buckboards and horses, and with a sprinkling of people, mostly men. The ornate front doors stood wide open, letting more light pour out and beat against shiny wheels, groomed coats, starched dresses and stiff store clothes. Black Draw Valley was gathered in style.

Around the crowded front porch, Madigan saw the faces of men he knew—ranchers and ranch hands, storekeepers and citizens. They were all here, dressed in their best and with their womenfolk. He got the impression of obedient subjects come to pay respectful homage to a chief. When Walden invited men to his big house, they came, willing or not. It didn't pay to displease the mighty Walden.

Madigan pushed his way to the steps, through the crowd, and stepped across the threshold. It was even closer packed in here. People glanced at him, examining with disapproving curiosity his tall, ragged figure and bearded face. They noticed, too, the double gun belts that sagged heavily around his lean middle. But there was no recognition, nor had he expected any. The short black beard and the scar attended to that.

He saw, past shifting heads, Holgast's broad face, and the pale eyes were on him, narrowed and curious. A good watchdog, Holgast. He saw Geoff Hilliard's pinched features, now creased in satisfied smiles. And

then he saw Stark Walden—and Stella.

They were standing together near an inner archway at the far end of the room, and Walden's clipped, penetrating voice could be plainly heard, even above the confusion of voices and laughter. He was nodding, smiling, and shaking hands with men who pressed up to congratulate him on his wedding.

THEY were already married. The thing was done and over. Madigan received the knowledge without any definite emotions. He stopped in the midst of the packed crowd and stood still. His hands dropped away from his gun butts, where they had been resting, and again he knew the feeling of failure.

He was too late. There they stood, man and wife. Stella, pale and beautiful, looked the perfect bride—radiant, a bit triumphant, completely in control of herself. Walden wore the air of a man who had just bought a particularly fine animal at a bargain price.

Drinks were being served and somebody handed Madigan a filled glass. He looked down at it, raised it, and his eyes went again to Stella. "To the bride," he said aloud, and his irony was obvious.

Men closest to him gave him swift, furtive glances. One, not quite sober, nodded. "Yeah, Heaven help her!" he muttered, and at once looked frightened at his own words.

A commotion broke out in the street. Hoofs rattled and came to a standstill. The commotion spread and men began talking in loud, excited tones. People inside turned to stare at the doors. A knot of men came shouldering over the threshold, carrying somebody who groaned and mumbled in a cursing voice.

"It's Johnnie Prawd!" called out somebody in the group. "He's all shot up! Came slammin' in jest now, hangin' onter his hoss——"

"Huh? What's that?" Sam Morrity, a hill rancher, pushed his way to meet them. "Prawd? Why, he's one o' my boys. What's wrong, Johnnie?"

Johnnie Prawd was in a bad way. He motioned, and they laid him on the floor. "Sam—they got us!" His clouding eyes found his boss. "Four-five of 'em. Opened fire 'fore we saw 'em in the dark. Drove off thet cattle bunch we was nighthawkin'. Killed Long Charlie. Thought they killed me too—but I —fooled 'em——"

Madigan thought of the two herds that had passed him, coming up the valley. He darted a look at Walden, and caught a swift eye signal between him and Holgast. Then Walden was striding forward, furious, indignation written all over his heavy face.

"Damn the dirty night-riding skunks!" His penetrating voice overshadowed all others and brought him instant attention. "It's that murdering Romedy bunch again! By Ned, it proves all I've said about 'em! Men, we ought to clean out that thieves' nest once and for all!"

He was taking charge of things, as usual, guiding the swift-growing wrath of the mob, and aiming it at the Romedy scapegoats of Hollow Peak. Madigan saw the plunder-glint in the man's eyes—Walden had in mind those fine Romedy horses.

THE man was an opportunist, sharp-witted and cool under all his loud bluster. He was using this wedding celebration to push a grand coup, for with so

many people in town most of the valley ranches would be deserted to-night. And now, with a premature alarm facing him, he still had the unshaken nerve to turn it to his own advantage.

Again Madigan thought of the passing herds, and of the distant fire glow in the sky. This thing went deeper than a single raid of a few head of cattle. The cattle he had heard passing had numbered far more than a few dozen head. He scanned the crowd for Slash L faces, and found not more than ten or fifteen, at the most. Redlinger was not among them, nor twenty odd others of the Slash L gun crew.

"Holgast, form a posse!" Walden snapped the order at his hand-picked sheriff. "Swear in everybody in town. Bust that Hollow Peak outfit, y'hear? My boys'll help, too."

He threw up an arm and ran his arrogant gaze over everybody in sight. "Is everybody agreed to that? All right, then, let's quit stalling. We got to do it, if this raiding an' killing is to be stopped. Those Romedy outlaws can't hold out against two hundred men. Some of you ride up the pass and keep 'em busy there. The rest climb afoot and——"

"Just a minute!" Madigan had worked his way to a wide oaken staircase. He stood part way up, where he could view the entire room, and sent his interrupting words in a flat drawl.

Faces jerked toward him and eyes ran over his ragged garb and low-slung guns. He looked out of place here, bearded and ruffianly among shaved and Sunday-dressed men. The white line of the scar stood out plain on his broad forehead, drawing his brows up in a sinister query that matched the look in his eyes.

Walden swung his square body and stared hard at the intruder. "And who the devil," he snapped angrily, "might you be?"

Madigan gazed at him with considering eyes that had taken note of the position of every Slash L man present in the crowd.

"I'm the feller," he said quietly, "who's goin' to spike your game, Walden. No, don't move your hands. Nor you, Holgast. Nor any o' you Slash L men."

A woman uttered a faint gasp. Stella, eyes wide and startled, put a hand on Walden's arm and whispered something.

Walden shook it off without taking his eyes from Madigan. "I've seen you somewhere," he said tonelessly. "Lawman? What the devil d'you mean by——"

"I just came up the valley," said Madigan, and spooke to the crowd rather than to the Slash L owner. "You poor fools! How long are you goin' to let Walden do your thinkin' for you? Why'n't you use your own eyes, your own brains? You're all scared of him. He says a thing, an' you make yourselves believe it's so. Well, ask him where most of his riders are to-night!"

"Why, you——" Walden took a step, face stiff. "My men——"

"Never mind," cut in Madigan. He had to talk fast, there was so little time. Any second now the explosion would come, and he did not expect to live through it.

"Over twenty Slash L men are missin' from this merry party," revealed Madigan, "and to-night the whole valley range is being swept clean! Yeah, the whole valley, not just one——"

A Slash L man with bright, crazy eyes made a chopping move with his right arm. The fast scrape of his gun on oiled leather mingled with

the slap of Madigan's hand as it struck down and back. Madigan fired, pitching his underhand shot as the Slash L gunman brought up his gun.

In the following instant of shocked silence Walden's eyes went wide, then slitted. He expelled a whistling breath, and did not look to see the result of the shot, to watch as his man slumped to the floor. Knowledge and incredulous recognition leaped to his eyes, for he noted that draw.

"Madigan!" He uttered the name like an oath.

Madigan's gaze went beyond him, traveling restlessly over Holgast and the Slash L group. He pulled his other gun and rested both barrels on the staircase balustrade before him. "The whole valley range is being raided," he repeated. "Two big herds—mebby more—are being pushed fast to the border——"

"What?" A red-faced man sent his roar across the room. "Say, what the devil is this? Are yuh Madigan? Are you tryin' to tell us Walden's men are——"

"I'm giving you facts," said Madigan coolly. "Two big herds passed me. Your place, Rondle, looked like it was on fire. There's two hundred men in this town to-night, able to ride an' fight. If they rode hard to Silver Ford, they could cut off those herds and——"

Holgast, at a quick signal from Walden, let out a sudden yell. "The lyin' son's an outlaw!" he shouted. "Cut him down, fellers!"

MADIGAN'S guns roared their savage, deafening note. Two men swayed against each other, but not before one of them got off a shot. Holgast charged, shooting as he came. Women were screaming, men shouting, and more guns joined in the ear-splitting racket.

Madigan thudded back against the wall behind him and dropped to his knees on the stairs. A dazed numbness struck all his muscles, and he knew he was hit, though the pain of it did not yet reach him. He was partly sheltered by the edge of the staircase, and he let his body sink lower. Bullets were kicking up splinters in front of him, tearing through the woodwork and ripping chunks out of the banister rails.

He put all his remaining strength into his voice. "Silver Ford!" he cried above the tumult. "An' when you catch 'em—they won't be Romedy men!"

The thunder of running feet almost drowned out his words. People were pouring out of the house and he heard the nervous snorts of horses, the creaking of leather and rattle of wheels. Nearer, in the room, came the cursing of the Slash L gunmen.

Madigan got a flash of Holgast, running, head stretched up for a sight of him. They glimpsed each other at the same moment, but Madigan's left gun spat first, and Holgast changed his run to a sprawl.

Walden's square bulk lunged across the foot of the stairs. No hot fury stirred his heavy face, but biting hatred stabbed from his cold eyes. He had a gun cocked and aimed in his hand, and he stared up at Madigan over its sights.

"I'll make sure of you this time, Madigan!" He spoke softly, all his bluster gone. "I'll leave no bloody ghost to come back!"

Madigan did not try to swing his gun up. He had expected death, and here it was. To try dodging it was to attempt to dodge fate.

"Go ahead, Walden," he mut-

tered, and slumped down wearily on his back. "Shoot! I could've killed you, but——"

A single shot cracked out, followed by a rapid burst of gunfire. Somebody cried out. A few thuds sounded, and broken breathing.

Walden's gun tilted slowly upward, blared, and brought chips of plaster down from the ceiling. The heavy face behind it went frozen, expressionless. Then the tall body toppled, crashed and lay still.

Footsteps sounded and approached the stairway. Silent Ionel, eyes as remote as ever, stepped over Walden's body without a glance at it. He came walking up, a thin curl of smoke trickling from the rifle he held crooked up in his arm. Behind him came old Jaffah, Shep, and the rest of the Romedy men.

They stood looking down at Madigan, and Jaffah spoke. "Dare told us you'd gone," he said. "We came after you to——"

"Lant!" It was Stella, coming white-faced and trembling up the stairs. "Is—it's really you! Was it true—about Stark, and his——"

"—to bring you back," finished old Jaffah calmly. His old eyes went to Stella. "But now—I guess not. I guess Dare was right. She said——"

That was all Madigan heard. The numbness reached his brain, and everything spun dizzily before his eyes——

CHAPTER V

LAST CHASE

HE was in a room of the hotel when he opened his eyes, which seemed to be the signal for a lot of men around him to begin talking. It took minutes for him to shake off his haziness and make some sort of sense of the words.

"Eh?" he mumbled foggily. "Who mopped up what?"

"We did." The red face of Rondle bent over him, grinning. "Caught 'em at Silver Fork. They was all Slash L men, like yuh said. Yeah, we sure mopped 'em up like a——"

"They had danged near every cow in the valley, the blasted thieves!" put in somebody else. "Walden was sure out to get a holt on all——"

"Yuh done a good job, Madigan."

"I got to get dressed." Madigan raised himself in the bed, found himself shaky. "Eh? The devil with what doc says! I'm gettin' up."

They clumped out, nodding and laughing back at him. He was wildly astonished to see how friendly they could be, these solid citizens and ranchers who had once hunted him out of Sanburn. Even Geoff Hilliard, who stayed behind after the rest had left, wore a look of respect on his dried, prim face.

"I—ah—figger I owe yuh an apology, Lant." Hilliard fiddled with his watch chain. "Need some help gettin' them boots on? You're kinda——"

"Uh-uh." Madigan caught his balance and got the boots on.

"I suggested somethin' yest'dy, an' ever'body agreed." Old Hilliard coughed modestly. "We've all chipped in an' made up a reward. It's in the pocket o' yore trousers. It'd kinda—er—way of apologizin', too. An' it's all forgot, 'bout yuh breakin' jail an' so forth——"

"Good o' you," commented Madigan. A thought struck him. "You said somethi.g about yesterday. You mean I been here a whole day?"

"Two days," corrected Hilliard.

"That bullet left yuh kinda stunned. Yeah, the town's gettin' up a big celebration, too. You're a big man in these parts, Lant. Yes, sir, a big man. I got a message for yuh."

"From the Romedys?"

"Hah? No, they're gone. Left yest'dy mornin'. Had the finest bunch o' horses I ever did——"

"Gone?" Madigan whirled, stumbled, and almost fell on him.

"Yeah." Hilliard nodded comfortably. "This message is from Stella. She's all alone in that big house, y'know—it's hers now, o' course, like all Walden's prop'ty—an' she can see now how she never woulda been happy with Walden ——" He paused for breath, looked expectantly at Madigan, and coughed again.

Getting no coöperation, he struggled on. "So she says she's willin' to let bygones be bygones, like the rest of us, an'—an'—she'd like for yuh to call. Say, now, there ain't that much hurry!" he added, as Madigan tripped over his feet on his way to the door. "Yuh goin' right now?"

"Right now," agreed Madigan, a little thickly. "Where'd they put my horse?"

Hilliard blinked. "It's over in Joe's livery stable, far's I know. But—heck—yuh out o' your head, Lant? Don't need no horse. The house is jest a step——"

HE was still talking and following when Madigan crossed the street to the livery stable. Madigan said nothing until he was in the saddle of the black. Then he spared a minute to tell what was in his mind.

"I've licked Sanburn," he said deliberately, while Hilliard and others gaped up at him. "Fine town, Sanburn. Solid and respectable. Good people, too. Yeah, I cleared the slate and I got what I thought I wanted. But—it's not for the likes of me." He nodded toward the Walden house. "Fine house, that, and Stella's right proud of it, I bet. But I wouldn't fit. S'long."

He heeled the black to a canter down the street, while people stared after his tall, bandaged, swaying figure.

He was swaying much worse by the time he crossed the San Bernardino Valley. When he got through the Swisshelms and started across the wide Sulphur Spring country, he was hanging to his saddle horn with both hands. The trail, days old, had almost filled in with drifting sand, but it was getting clearer now.

Somewhere near the Dragoon foothills he sighted them, far ahead and traveling on, with the dust of their trail hanging behind them like a long, low-lying cloud. He was talking to himself by then, saying over and over the things he would say when he caught up with her. Sometimes he thought he was saying them to her, and then his tired senses would come back with a jolt as he realized he was still riding alone on a horse half dead from weariness, across sandy wastes that seemed to have no end.

He tried to send a hail, and let out only a dry croak. His eyes, that had known little sleep for two days and a night, smarted under the steady glare of the sun.

"Dang it," he said aloud, "why don't you halt an' let a feller catch up?"

It was almost as if they heard him. He could see the end of the long dust cloud thinning, and the shapes of horses and men growing plainer. Then one rider broke from

the rest and came tearing back at a headlong run.

Madigan reined in his laboring horse. He leaned wearily on the dust-caked neck, the saddle horn punching into his stomach, and kept his reddened, bloodshot eyes on the slim, rocking figure of the oncoming rider. Then Dare Romedy was hauling in her horse, was jumping down from the saddle and running to him.

He said, looking at her, "Next time I go chasin' a lady, I won't give her such a start on me."

She answered, a bit chokily, helping him as he slid off the black, "Heck—who's a lady?"

BAT TOWERS

AMONG the most unusual buildings of the West are the great bat towers in Texas. Plenty of touring tenderfeet stop to ask questions about these towers, and when they are told that the structures were erected for the sole purpose of housing bats, they either get angry or laugh heartily and drive away, convinced that the native who gave the information is ribbing them.

Easterns do not realize that the huge number of bats housed in these towers are an important factor in the control of insects that prey on man, on crops and on range fodder. Mosquitoes, gnats, various kind of flying beetles and even the large, destructive, winged locusts are the natural prey of these flying rodents. A bat will eat from a quarter to a half of his own weight in insects in twenty-four hours.

Not only that, the bottom of each bat cave is an ever-replenished guano mine. Bat guano sells for from twenty-five to ninety-five dollars a ton for fertilizer, which is a far better price than that paid for the average ton of gold ore!

In the famous Carlsbad Caverns of New Mexico, some miles north of El Paso, Texas, the same so-called "Mexican free-tailed bats" that inhabit the towers have lived there for thousands of years. When the caverns were first discovered guano deposits were over a hundred feet deep in some of the huge rooms and large-scale mining operations were conducted for many years. It is said that a million tons were taken out before the Caverns became a national park where thousands of travelers flock every year to see the brilliant and fantastic pillars and hanging columns.

The bats have been allowed to remain undisturbed in their own section of the caves and in the summer of 1937 they sallied forth early every evening to help destroy one of the worst grasshopper plagues that that section of the range country had ever seen.

Contrary to general opinion bats do not feed all night, but only in the early evening and morning.

C. L. M.

The murdered man lay in his cabin with the door barred on the inside! Who had killed him —and how?

TRAIL of DEATH

By JOSEPH F. HOOK

Author of "Timber Trap," etc.

BURSTING excitedly into Sergeant Raney's cabin, the wild-eyed sourdough slammed the door shut against the thrust of the blizzard. "Long John's been murdered, sarge!" he blurted.

The Mounty eyed him calmly for a moment, then reached for his fur cap and mackinaw.

"Sure he's been murdered, Dolan?" he inquired.

"Sure, sarge! He's covered with blood, and his cabin's tore up!"

The mining camp of Marmot presented a strange sight as the two

men went outdoors. Cabin roofs appeared like rounded igloos, with stovepipes barely protruding above the snow, and snow-packed runways, leading from the street level down to the cabin doors, lent to the camp the appearance of a huge rabbit warren.

"Just give me the particulars, Dolan," the Mounty requested.

Dolan had to twist his head sideways to avoid the stinging snowflakes.

"Well," he related, "Long John ain't been seen around the saloon for a coupla days, so some of us went to his cabin to see if he was sick. The first thing that struck us as strange was the snow drifted agin' the door."

"No tracks leading in or out?"

"Nary a one, sarge. So we hollered and got no answer. Then we dug the drift from the door, but the door was locked. We went around to the window, but it was drifted over, too. We busted the door down, finally, and there was Long John on the floor, dead!"

"You broke the door down?" the Mounty snapped.

"Yeah, we had to. They was a bar acrost it."

"Very peculiar."

"That's what we thought, sarge. How could anybody get inta the cabin, kill Long John, then go out and leave the bar acrost the door on the *inside?*"

"That's up to me to find out, Dolan. Well, here we are."

They heard voices issuing from the cabin as they slid down the hard-packed incline. They kicked off their snowshoes as they walked across the broken door into the cabin. A handful of serious-faced sourdoughs made way for them, their voices lowering to whispers at sight of the officer.

Sergeant Raney took a lighted candle from one of them, merely glanced at the body, and stepped over to the window. He examined the sill minutely, shook his head, and went into the woodshed at the rear. It was stacked high with stove wood on three sides, which left room only for the chopping block between the wood and the rear door of the cabin.

Amid a hushed silence, the officer returned and laid a hand on the stove. It was stone cold. Then he bent over Long John's stiff body. There was a purple-rimmed bullet hole between the eyes, and the face was covered with bruises and blood.

The group of sourdoughs shuddered when the Mounty rolled the corpse over. Directly under the head was a bullet, sticking in the puncheon floor. The sergeant dug it out with his knife.

"A .45 slug," he observed quietly.

HE slipped it into his pocket, then took stock of the cabin. The mattress lay on the floor beside the bunk, and blankets were scattered about. Canned goods and food packages had been taken from the shelves and tossed upon the floor.

"Robbery," the sergeant muttered. "Some one killed Long John for his gold." He raised his voice. "Any of you boys know of any enemies he might have had?"

"Him and Limber-legs Hardy got into a scrap at the saloon a few nights ago," volunteered "Brick" Bronson.

"Yeah, and Limber-legs had a poor season on his claims, too," another offered.

The Mounty picked up an empty baking-powder can and ran a finger around the edge of it, which he held close to the candle flame.

"This can has had gold dust in it!" he exclaimed. "There are particles sticking to my finger."

"So has this one!" a sourdough cried, picking up another empty can and holding it to the light.

A general discussion broke out as the Mounty continued his search. Suddenly he straightened and bent a steady gaze on one man.

"What was that you just said, Mike?" he demanded sharply.

"Why," the sourdough replied, "I was just sayin' that after the scrap in the saloon, I heard Limber-legs swear he'd kill Long John."

"Has anybody seen anything of him since the fight?" the Mounty inquired.

There was a general shaking of heads. "The next cabin is his," some one spoke up. "We could go see."

"You boys take care of the body," the Mounty suggested, "while I have a talk with Limber-legs, if he's home."

"Limber-legs" Hardy was so called because of his prowess on the trail. The man seemed made of steel, absolutely tireless. His face showed the marks of the recent saloon brawl, and there was a heavy stubble covering his lower jaw. His only recognition of the officer's entry was a curt nod.

"Limber-legs," the sergeant announced, watching his face intently, "Long John's been murdered."

The sourdough returned the steady stare with interest, remaining silent.

"Where's your gun?" the Mounty demanded. "Hand it over."

"*My* gun?" Limber-legs observed suspiciously.

He said nothing more as he brought the gun and tossed it on the table. The Mounty sniffed the muzzle, then broke the gun open.

"This gun has been fired very recently, and there's one shell missing," the officer remarked.

"Well, what of it?" Limber-legs demanded sullenly.

"Only that this is a .45, the caliber of the gun that killed Long John. One shot did the trick, Limber-legs."

"Just a coincidence," Limber-legs said. "I can explain about the missing shell, easy. Mebbe you know me and him had a scrap the other night. Well, I ain't been outta this cabin but once since then. I went for a walk yesterday and shot at a crow."

"This blizzard was blowing yesterday," the Mounty reminded him sharply. "You couldn't have seen a crow ten feet away."

"I'm telling you," Limber-legs insisted with rising anger, "I saw a crow and fired at it. Wanna call me a liar?"

"You were heard to say you'd kill Long John, Limber-legs."

"Sure I did. A feller's liable to say most anything when he's mad. But I didn't kill Long John."

"You don't have to answer my questions if you don't care to," the officer said, "but it is my duty to remind you that what you say will be used as evidence against you."

Limber-legs rose slowly from the table, his face flushed and his eyes snapping.

"So that's it, huh?" he snarled. "I'm under arrest."

"For murder and robbery, yes. Long John's gold is missing."

"Then why don't you search me and the cabin, if you think I've took it? Why, I wouldn't soil my fingers on Long John's lousy gold! That's how much I hated him."

Sergeant Raney nodded toward the door. "Come along," was all he said.

He stepped aside to let Limber-legs pass. The news had spread through the camp like wildfire, and now there was quite a group of stern-faced, silent sourdoughs just outside. When they caught sight of Limber-legs, they started cursing, and talk of lynching was heard.

However, they backed away as the officer took his prisoner down the street, and then repaired in a body to the saloon to discuss the case. There being no jail in Marmot, the officer took the sourdough to his own cabin.

"I'm going out," the officer announced. "You'll find some salve on the shelf, and you'd better use it liberally on your face. Those bruises will frostbite easily."

LIMBER-LEGS realized just what those words meant. When the blizzard abated, the Mounty would hitch his dogs to the sled and take him to Dawson to stand trial for murder. That cooled the hot blood in the prisoner's veins and brought with it a feeling of fear.

The Mounty left the cabin door unlocked, so that Limber-legs was at liberty to escape, if he so wished. However, he knew that death in two forms awaited him on the other side of that door. He could freeze to death in the blizzard, or he could die at the hands of his comrades whose threats of lynching had not been lost upon him.

Sergeant Raney returned to his prisoner's cabin and searched it thoroughly, but without finding anything incriminating. When he returned to his own cabin, Limber-legs sneered openly at him.

"Well, where's the stolen gold?" he asked. "Now don't try to tell me you wasn't hunting for it in my cabin, redcoat."

The sergeant hung up his cap and coat and mittens in silence. He sat down at the table, tamped tobacco into a short brier, and opened a book in which he appeared interested. His air of cocksureness finally got on the prisoner's taut nerves.

"You ain't got no right to arrest me," he shouted. "What proof have you got that Mike Sullivan didn't croak Long John? Or Dregs Moody, or Brick Bronson, or any other sourdough in camp? Why pick on me? All the evidence you've dug up agin' me so far is just circumstantial, and purty danged flimsy at that."

Sergeant Raney puffed away on his brier silently. His eyes were on the printed page before him, but he wasn't reading it. On the contrary, he was reviewing the case so far with a good deal of doubt in his mind.

There was plenty of foundation for this man's assertions. The evidence *was* purely circumstantial and somewhat flimsy. He must get concrete evidence against the man before taking him to Dawson, or run the chance of a barrage of embarrassing questions from the inspector there. Still, there was the matter of the gun. True, it was only a small part of the evidence, yet certain things about it stood out clearly and could not be passed over lightly. It had been fired recently, and it had one empty chamber.

To the sergeant, the sourdough's explanation of how that chamber happened to be empty had sounded pretty thin. A coincidence, he had called it. But now, the Mounty recalled, he had handled cases in the past where the coincidences had been almost as unbelievable as this —if this was a coincidence. However, the ballistic expert at Dawson

would settle that in a hurry when he compared the bullet buried in the floor with the .45 found in Limber-legs's cabin.

But the sergeant felt there could be no coincidence about the fight in the saloon and the prisoner's outspoken threat to kill his antagonist. Nor was the missing gold just a coincidence. That evidently was the motive for the crime, and the Mounty realized that unless he found it the case against Limber-legs would never stand up in a court of law.

He kept mulling the matter over in his mind till supper time. Sullen and angry, Limber-legs sat on a bunk, head in hands, leaving the officer to prepare the meal himself. It was eaten in complete silence.

Limber-legs returned to the bunk, and the Mounty washed the dishes alone and put them away, his mind still occupied with the various aspects of the murder, more especially the barred cabin door and the manner in which the murderer must have made his escape following the crime without removing that bar.

In the meantime, a change had taken place outside. The wind no longer hurled frozen snowflakes at the window, nor howled like a banshee. Instead, it seemed to have abated, and a moon had arisen to clothe the snow-bound camp in silver light. In the clear subzero air, voices carried far, even into the cabin.

The Mounty donned cap, mackinaw and mittens, then paused a moment on the threshold, hand on the latch.

"Sounds like the boys are liquoring up in the saloon," he said significantly. "Better drop the bar across the door when I go out, Limber-legs."

"Go roll your marbles, redcoat," Limber-legs retorted. "I ain't done nothing to be afraid of."

The sergeant shrugged, stepped out and closed the door. But during the brief interval it had been ajar, Limber-legs had caught a few words that the men were shouting out in the saloon, and the color slowly drained from his face. Yes, they were liquoring up all right, working up the mob spirit before they lynched him!

Trembling, he waited until he heard the crunch of the Mounty's snowshoes fading into the distance, then slipped across the floor and dropped the heavy fir bar in place.

SERGEANT RANEY entered Long John's cabin again and lighted the candle. And again he went over everything in it minutely. Next he visited the cabin of Limber-legs and did the same thing. Then he sat down and tried to think things out clearly and with an unbiased mind, but the biting cold soon drove him out.

He strode down the street, past Long John's cabin, to Brick Bronson's. He walked onto the roof from the street level and stood upon the frozen snow. From that point he bent a steady gaze across the roofs of Long John's cabin and that of Limber-legs, which resembled diamond-studded domes in the moonlight.

"Limber-legs is bluffing and lying," was his silent comment. "He's done one of two things. He either cached Long John's gold in camp, or somewhere near it. And if he went for a walk yesterday, it was to cache the gold. Well, I'll walk a straight line between these cabins, and if the snow has been disturbed, I'll know if he's cached it in camp."

In the meantime the sourdoughs were drinking at the bar in the only

saloon in Marmot. A number of them were trying to raise the fury of the others by rendering "John Brown's Body" in tuneless song, and substituting the name of Limber-legs when they came to the part that referred to the hanging from a sour-apple tree. When they became hoarse, they moistened their throats at the bar.

Gradually, however, the warmth of the saloon and the power of the liquor began to give an effect which was just the opposite from that which the singers had hoped to produce. Then some one suggested going home, and that started an exodus from the place.

On the way home, however, the men paused in front of Sergeant Raney's cabin and burst forth with the improvised parody. Respect for the redcoat was the only thing that prevented an immediate assault on the cabin to get Limber-legs. Had they known, however, that the Mounty was not there at the time, that respect would have undergone a sudden change.

As Brick Bronson's cabin was the last on the street, he had to go on alone. Long John's cabin, with its yawning doorway, looked eerie in the bright moonlight, and Brick gave it a wide berth, looking back over his shoulder at it apprehensively.

He walked unsteadily to the top of the hard-packed incline to his own cabin door, lost his balance, and crashed against it with a resounding thud. His trembling fingers almost froze as he regained his feet and fumbled with the lock.

At last he got the heavy door open, entered, and slammed it behind him, dropping the fir bar in place. Groping hands held out in front of him, he staggered to the table. Only the slight sound of his hand on the surface of the table, as he felt for the matches, broke the stillness.

Finally locating the box, he struck a match. He made a number of stabs at the candle wick before bringing it and the flame of the match in contact. Then Brick turned, took a step away from the table, and froze in his tracks when he detected a slight movement in the shadow at the other end of the cabin.

Out of the shadow stepped Sergeant Raney. Brick stared at him a second through drink-bleared eyes, then darted a hand under his parka.

THE sergeant's feet seemed to leave the ground suddenly. He launched a flying tackle, butting Brick in the stomach, driving him back against the cabin wall and knocking the wind out of him. While he lay stunned on the floor, the sergeant clapped handcuffs on him, reached under his parka and secured his gun, then jerked him unceremoniously to his feet.

The Mounty held the gun close to the candle flame. "So somebody else in camp packs a .45, eh?" he observed.

Brick was sober when he regained his senses, but he had lost none of his belligerent attitude.

"How—how in the devil did you get in here?" he demanded, breathing heavily. "The door was locked."

"I got in here the same way you got into Long John's cabin, before you murdered him, Brick," the sergeant replied tersely. "And we'll leave the same way, too. But I mustn't forget to take along the gold you stole from Long John."

For just a fleeting instant Brick's glance darted toward the stove. The sergeant, who had been watching him intently, smiled grimly and

stepped over to it. He drew out the ash pan and dumped the contents on the cabin floor. Among the ashes was a rusty baking-powder can. The Mounty picked it up and poured the golden contents out on the table.

"All right, Brick, march," he ordered curtly. The sourdough turned toward the door, but the Mounty caught him by the shoulder and spun him around. "You know which way I mean," he said.

Brick shrugged and walked through the woodshed to the back door. The Mounty picked up the candle and followed him. Brick opened the door with his manacled hands, and the candlelight illuminated the mouth of a tunnel that had been cut beneath the snow.

They walked along it, backs hunched. Soon their progress was halted by a pile of loose snow. On top of it was a broken snowshoe, and above a gaping hole through which moonlight filtered.

"So that's how you got next, huh?" Brick mumbled.

"Right," the sergeant snapped. "I fell through, breaking that snowshoe. Now crawl over that pile and keep going."

A solid wall of snow blocked their path presently.

"A clever piece of work, Brick," the Mounty observed, tearing it down.

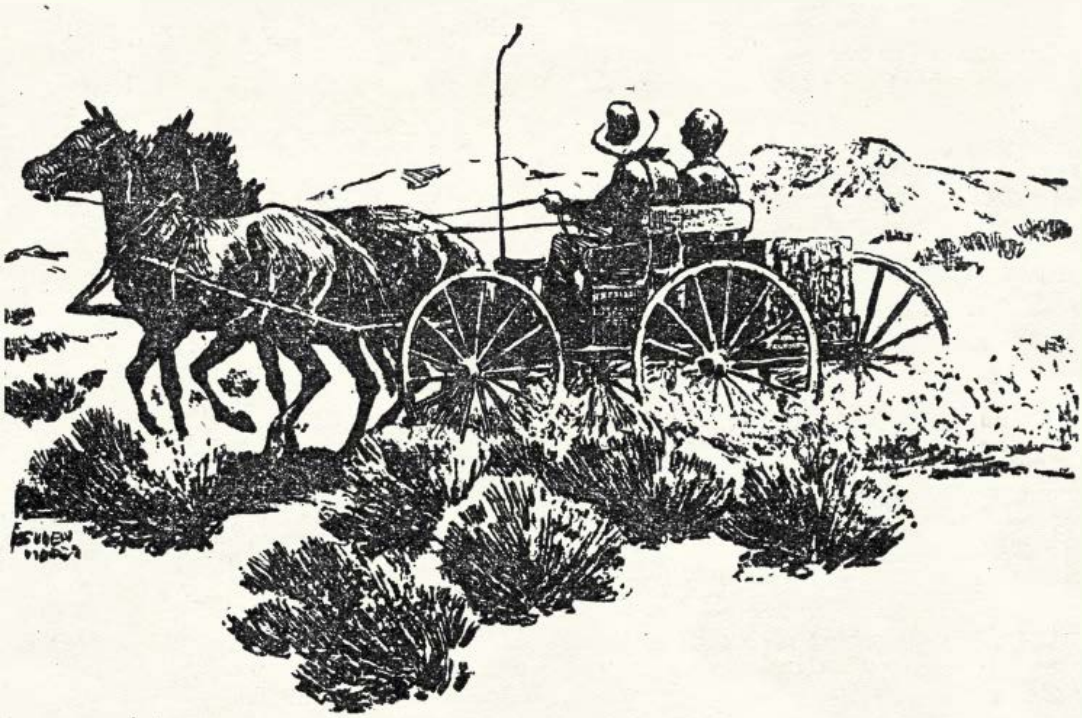
There was a door on the other side—the door to Long John's woodshed. And on the other side of the door was still another wall. But this one was built of stove wood, which the officer soon tore down.

He made Brick pass through the shed into the cabin, and out of it by way of the shattered door.

The camp lay wrapped in silence save for the scuffing sound of the two men's feet in the dry, powdery snow. Sergeant Raney knocked gently on the door of his cabin. It opened an inch, then was suddenly jerked wide.

Limber-legs stood on the threshold, eyes wide and round, glancing from Brick's manacled hands to the stern face of the Mounty.

"Limber-legs," the sergeant said, before the man could utter the cry of surprise that was welling to his lips, "slip out and hook my dogs to the sled, and keep your mouth shut. I want to be well on my way to Dawson with this prisoner, before the boys wake up in the morning."



WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

By JOHN NORTH

IN the Old West there was a name that no real Westerner ever bestowed except in scorn. That word was "dude."

But things are changed now, and the word dude, while still meaning a nonrancher, doesn't carry the sting it once did. The ranchers have finally decided that although it is practically an incurable curse not to have been born on a ranch, it isn't, after all, the dude's fault. And to-day, if he likes, the poor tenderfoot can come and live a while on a ranch, and so do a little to lift the curse from his life.

Thus dude ranches were born.

J. B. D., of Knoxville, Tennessee, wants to know something about them. He writes:

"My wife and son and daughter and myself are going to spend the spring and summer in the West, just traveling and soaking up the Western atmosphere. We want also to take in Yellowstone Park on our trip. We've heard about dude ranches, and would like to know something more definite about them in order to make our plans. Yuh see, our interests are not the same. My wife is a camera fan, my daughter wants to meet young people and mix with them, my son wants to get some round-up dust in his nose while I—although I don't count much—would like to go to war against a ten-pound trout. Now what can you do to make us all happy? What gear should we

take and what part of the West should we visit? Also, how are we going to find out the various places and their attractions?"

Well, J. B., I reckon y'all recognized that this introduction was the typical ranch type of kidding about dudes. The dude ranches give tenderfeet a royal welcome, and it's all informal and a lot of fun. You go out to rough it with other folks similarly inclined, and there isn't a chance in the world of your being lonesome or bored. And now for the direct answers.

From what you said, I'd select the country in Greater Yellowstone County, from Cody on west to Yellowstone National Park, in Wyoming. This county is dotted with dude ranches of all kinds. In your case I would decide to stay a week or so at several of them, thus getting the kind of amusement each of your family wants. Go to the mountain ranches for photographing for the Missus and for mountain fishing for yourself. Give the kid a week during the spring round-up at a working cattle ranch. And if he doesn't get enough dust in his lungs there, go to a sheep ranch for a while. Go to another type ranch—one more like a country club—for your daughter's crowd.

You can classify the ranches about like this: Operating ranches, mountain ranches, mountain lodges and fishing camps, and tourist lodges. Some of them feature sheep, some cattle, while others do nothing but furnish guides and organize mountain pack trips. Still others cater to fishing parties, and they all have social activities at the ranch house.

Some of the ranches are favored by young single folks on account of the social life, others by fishermen or hunters, and others by those who want to watch the real ranch work. Still others gradually become popular with folks from certain States, and become yearly meeting places for people who come back again and again, and get to know each other and expect each other every year.

As to gear to take, I'd suggest that you buy your ranch clothes right in the neighborhood of the ranches, and get the real stuff instead of an Easterner's idea of it. The things that you should bring with you if you already have them are: Cameras, fishing gear, swimming gear, overcoats, flashlights and field glasses, sunburn medicine, heavy sleeping pajamas and tennis shoes. Also any books you want to read while not busy.

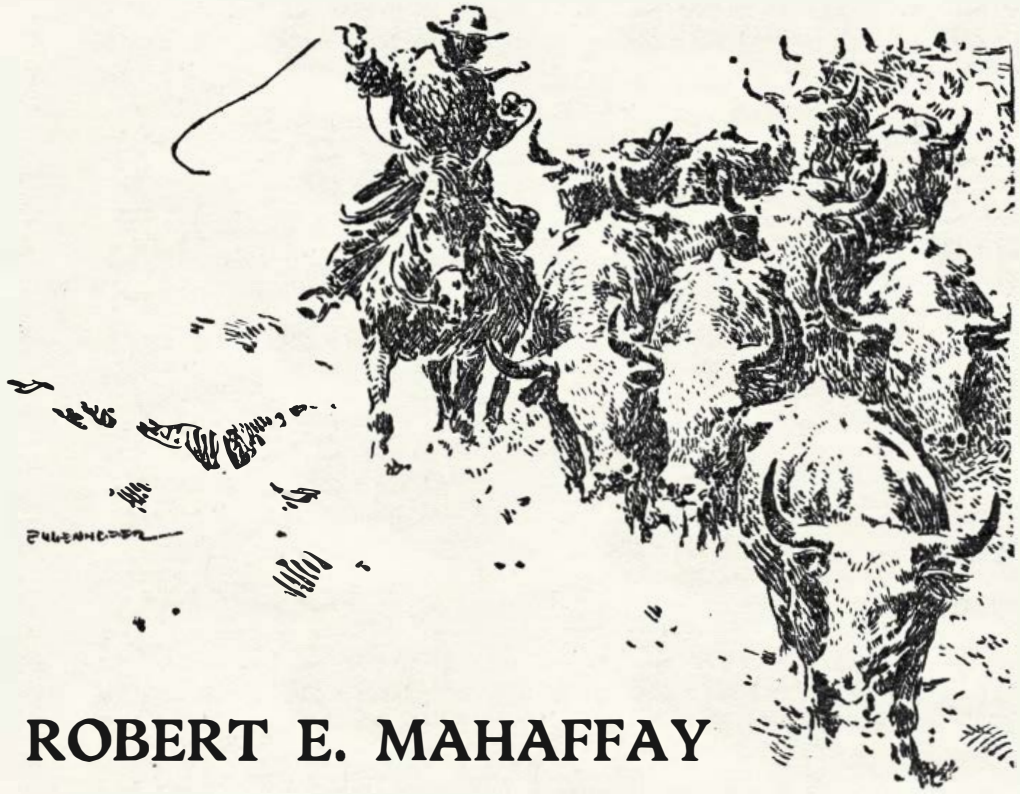
The food on all ranches is fresh, plentiful and varied. You will have all kinds of meats and fresh vegetables and milk and game.

The list of ranches is too long to print here, but I will mail to any one who wants it an address from which information may be obtained about any particular kind of ranch. Just send a stamp with your request.

We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North supplies accurate information about the West, its ranches, mines, homestead lands, mountains, and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

The Raggle-taggle Kid



By ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY

CHAPTER I

BLACK OUTLAW

IN the slanting moonlight, the rope looked like a thick silver cable. There was a slight stir of air through the tall pines, just enough to sway the body slightly, as if the hanged man were making a gentle, unconcerned effort to free himself. His limbs, however, had long ago ceased twitching.

The boy was a huddled shadow on the ground below and a little to one side.

Hakon Blade—rustler, whisky peddler, renegade—was dead. Outraged cattlemen had this night checkmated his wily evasion of the law with that shining silver rope, and no man deserved it more.

The wind, running over the ashes of the burned cabin, brought along the smell of dead smoke. It made the boy feel alone and deserted. It made him understand, too, that he was free, if he wanted to be. And he did want that freedom, had wanted it for a long time with a fierce, hungry longing.

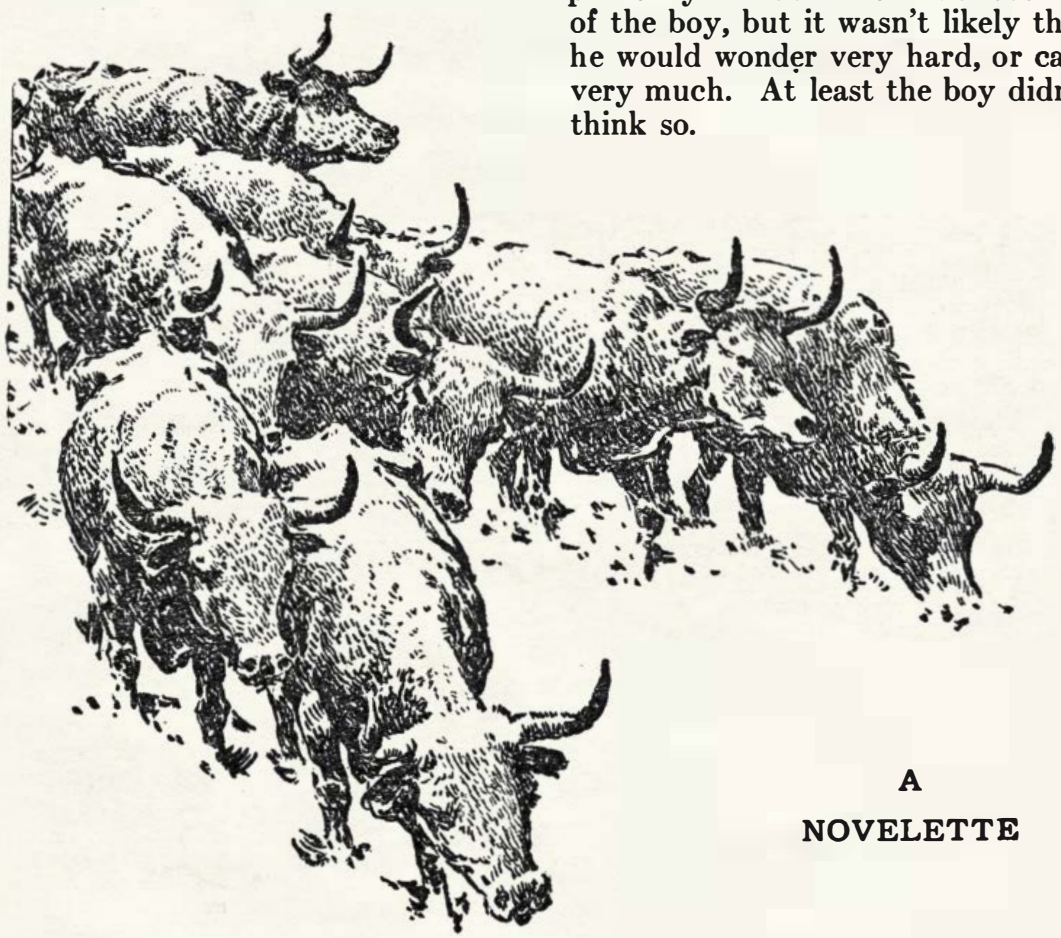
A little way off among the trees there was a rustling sound as a frightened porcupine scuttled for imagined safety. The thought that

it might be Rafe coming back made the boy scramble to his feet. He didn't want to see Rafe again.

He debated leaving the body there, but in the end he did not. He wouldn't seem quite free, the thing wouldn't seem quite finished, he thought, if that was his last memory. So he tied his jackknife on the end of a long branch and sawed through the rope.

From the ashes of the cabin he rescued a shovel—half the handle was burned off—and dug a shallow grave in the soft mold of leaves and pine needles. A charred log end from the demolished cabin was all he could find in way of a headstone.

When he was finished he looked down at it for a moment, absorbed and wondering. It hadn't seemed that this could happen, but it had. Rafe would be coming back presently. He would see the cabin wreckage and the dangling rope end and this mound, and the answer would be plain enough. He would probably wonder what had become of the boy, but it wasn't likely that he would wonder very hard, or care very much. At least the boy didn't think so.



A
NOVELETTE

That button took on a job no three men would have tackled for he had to show the major that there was at least one Blade who was a square hombre!

HE hit the outfit in late June, came plodding over the rim of dirty brown hills lying to the west of the Double Eight with a warped wreck of a saddle boosted across one scrawny shoulder.

Les Whittles—he was bossing the Double Eight at the time—was leaning on the bars of the corral gate, watching the peeler shake the rough out of a bad one. He saw the kid coming and scowled at him and then grinned.

"What's the game, Bud?" He chuckled. "You fork that hull for a spell, do you, an' then get off an' carry it?"

The kid was pretty sober. "Nope," he said. "My bronc played out on me."

"Tough," Whittles grunted. "Bust a leg or somethin'?"

"Nope. Just up an' died on me. He was pretty old."

Whittles guffawed at that. It did seem funny. That raggle-taggle sprout of an awkward kid up on the back of some rickety old bonepile—and then the aged crowbait just caving in from old age.

The kid stood there and let him laugh, his pinched face looking like that of a grave old man. His hair was a sun-bleached reddish color, uncut for months, and he had to keep pushing it back out of his eyes.

He couldn't have been over sixteen, and he didn't look his years. His nose was thin and sunburned, and you could see the bones of his forehead and cheeks and jaw. He had a pretty good jaw, the kid did, even if his two missing teeth did make it look slightly lopsided. He didn't shuffle like some scared kids will, but stood braced in his old boots that didn't match and tried to pull himself up as big as he could in the coat that was about four sizes too large for him.

"If you got a job open," he said, "I'd like a whack at it."

Les Whittles squinted inside the corral. "Bronc stompin', maybe?" he suggested.

The kid looked, too. Behind the poles of the gate that Whittles was fussing with, a black outlaw was giving Jake Seams about all he could handle, and a little more. A first-rate saddler prospect, the black was. There was a smother of dust and no wind to take the smell of hot sweat away, and Seams was cussing a blue streak. The kid looked a bit wistful, as if he'd like to try but knew blamed well he hadn't better.

"Nope," he said, "that ain't my line. Anything with cows, though—I can handle it."

Just then a door slammed up at the house, and the eyes of Les Whittles shuttled from the sulking black to the man who came limping down toward the corral, helping his stiff right leg with a cane.

Whittles snapped, "Nothin' doin', kid. Beat it."

The kid didn't exactly understand, because Whittles had been joking with him just a minute before. He heard Whittles snarl, "All the insides knocked out of that pony yet, Jake?"

Jake Seams grunted, "Not by a long shot!" And spurs raking his sides made the black take up where he'd left off.

The kid turned to stare at the man with the cane. Major Carlysle walked slowly and carefully, but after the first minute or two you didn't notice the limp so much, and he didn't seem to think of it at all. He was fifty, probably, and slim, but his sun-darkened face wasn't lined, his sandy mustache was trimmed, and he carried his shoulders as if they were a neatly balanced weight.

Something about him, a friendliness, perhaps, in his gray eyes, made the kid keep on looking at him. That was why the kid didn't know for sure exactly what happened behind him.

The major had come within fifteen feet of the corral gate, and had nodded and was saying, "Morning, son. Must have been a hot job with that saddle——"

He didn't finish. Whittles yelped, "Look out!"

The kid's head jerked around. Somehow the top bar of the gate, the one Whittles had been leaning on, had slipped out of its socket at one end and fallen. Whittles was stooping for it, but sprawled back out of the way when the black, seeing in that notch a means of escape, came bucking through. The black had to jump about three feet to make it, but he did that, landing spraddle-legged and then tearing away in another sunfishing jump.

DIRECTLY in the path of the raging black, the major tried to turn out of the way. He was too slow, and as he used the cane as a pole to push himself into the clear, the fragile stick snapped in two, destroying his balance.

The kid saw what would happen, and with only a split second in which to make his decision, he jumped for the black's head. A swinging hoof raked the kid's boot as the black somersaulted and Jake Seams spilled over his head. The beast hit heavily, with the kid under his right shoulder.

Dust boiled up, obscuring for a moment the tangle of horse and boy. Whittles came charging through it, crying excitedly, "You all right, major?"

The major was getting up awkwardly from the knee he had fallen on. "Quite," he bit out. "That boy there—give him a hand!"

But the kid had got clear on his own hook and was standing up, his pinched face with its spattering of freckles very white, holding a hand to his side. The black outlaw, neck broken, lay still.

Whittles glared at the kid and growled, "Blamed young fool! Killin' a top-notch saddle pony."

Major Carlysle said steadily, "Forget that." And then to the boy: "Thanks, son, that was quick work. What's your name?"

"Smith," the kid blurted, so defiantly that it wasn't hard to tell he was lying. "Bill Smith."

"Hm-m-m. Just on the move, are you, son?" the major said, looking at the kid's relic of a saddle.

"I'm lookin' for a place to catch on," the kid panted. He jerked his head toward the Cascades, looming westward past the brown hills with the dirty winter snow still clinging to their peaks. "I've drove lots of cattle all over up there."

"Remember what brands they had on 'em?" Les Whittles sneered.

The kid's face got red, because that was the kind of cattle they'd been. The red faded out quicker than it should have, and he stood with his legs apart, and looked like a dog will when he's mighty hungry and knows you have a good meaty bone.

"Wish I had a place for you," the major said uncomfortably. "Right now things are so downright bad ——" He stopped and looked more closely at the kid's white face. "What's the matter, youngster? You're not hurt, are you?"

"A couple of ribs, I guess," the kid said.

CHAPTER II

THREAT

MAJOR CARLYSLE sent Jake Seams for the doctor at Union Gap. For the first time that he could remember, the kid slept between clean blankets up in the big log ranch house. Lying there, with good solid meals in his stomach, he tried to recall just what had happened down there by the corral.

In him was a shadowy suspicion that the escape of the black hadn't been accidental. He remembered Les Whittles's fussing with that bar of the gate, and the snarled question, "All the insides knocked out of that pony yet, Jake?" Then the major had come and the bar had slipped down, and the crippled major had come within an ace of being killed or badly hurt.

If the major had guessed the same thing, he never mentioned it. The major would come limping into the room and ease himself down on the edge of the bed. There he talked gently, cheerfully, his gray eyes steady and bright, occasionally brushing with a forefinger at his sandy mustache.

He told the kid about his leg. "Railroad wreck, son. No one to blame, really. In Pennsylvania. Floods had weakened a bridge, though it looked sound enough. The engine and the first three cars went through." He picked up the new cane he had fashioned out of cedar with a drawknife, and looked at it half ruefully, but not bitterly. "A cavalry man's not much good with a stiff leg."

There was more to the story, and the kid got it bit by bit. The major's wife had been with him in the wreck. She was in an Eastern hospital now, and only a long series of operations would determine whether or not she would live. With his army career shattered, and with that desperate need for money pressing him, Major Carlysle had put most of his slim capital into the cattle business.

It was different talk than the kid had ever heard before. There was friendliness in it, and a warm current of emotion. There had been none of that from Rafe or from Hakon Blade.

It was inevitable that a regard amounting almost to worship should spring up in the kid. This quiet-mannered, understanding ex-cavalry officer was bringing the first touch of softness into his life—a life badly twisted, studded with violence, inordinately harsh.

The kid never spoke of that background to the major, perhaps because he was ashamed of it, or perhaps because the major spoke so reluctantly on the score of his own troubles.

There were troubles enough on the Double Eight. The kid picked up hints of them as soon as his knitting ribs permitted him to get up and about. Bumper cattle years in the Rockies and in Texas had pinched this remote range lying east of the Cascade Mountains in the elbow of the mighty Columbia River. Beef prices had dropped to bankruptcy levels, while ranges closer to the big markets filled what demand there was. In this country, hard-pressed ranchers scrambled to dispose of even a fraction of their beef gather.

The summer drifted along, but there was no talk of a job. The major said only, "There isn't enough money in the bank to pay you anything, son, but if you want to stay on there'll be a bed and a place at the table for you." The kid was

more than content to let it ride that way.

WITH the fall beef round-up came cold-blooded figures on fresh disaster. The rustling toll on the Double Eight herd had been heavy during the preceding spring and summer. The kid remembered brands, particularly the brands on some of the bunches of cattle he and Rafe and Hakon Blade had worked back on the rugged flanks of the Cascades.

It gave him a queer feeling to know that he had contributed to the collapse of the Double Eight. For the major's jam was more serious than he had ever intimated. The kid learned that for himself one Saturday night when he drove with the major in the buckboard to Union Gap.

The major had some men to see. The kid wandered by himself, and when he was tired of walking slipped into a pool hall to wait. The place was full. In the smoke-fogged confusion the ivory balls beat a light tattoo, glasses clinked on the bar, and voices hummed in casual conversation.

The kid pulled in against the wall, and from there idly watched the rolling of the red and white balls. It was the voice of Les Whittles, almost at his elbow, that jerked his attention away. Whittles and a cadaverous, black-browed man had brought their drinks from the bar to get out of the press.

Whittles was growling, low-voiced, "Take my word for it, Veach. He won't have a dime by spring."

The man addressed as Veach, obviously a rancher, asked cautiously, "You sure of that?"

"Dead sure. You'll pick up the place for taxes—you should have two years ago, 'fore he horned in."

"You'll get your cut if I do," Veach grunted. "What'd the beef tally show?"

"He's better'n a hundred head shy. Prime stuff." Staring under his hat brim, the kid could see the grin on Whittles's lips. "Don't look, either, like he'll be able to peddle any of the stuff he did gather. He's been hangin' on, waitin' for a break, but he can't hold out another year."

"See to it he don't," Veach snapped.

The kid pulled his hat down, turned his back, and put some men between himself and the pair, afraid that Whittles would catch him listening. Whittles had been brusque and unfriendly since that first day, and the kid had wondered if it was because the Double Eight foreman thought he had seen too much.

Riding back out to the ranch under a moonlit sky, the kid didn't wonder any longer. That matter of the black outlaw breaking out of the corral had been carefully planned.

Jouncing along over the uneven road, he stared at the major furtively. Neither had spoken, and half the distance was covered. The major's unlined face was relaxed, but he was wholly absorbed in some remote speculation. It made the kid feel alone, and the chill of late fall caused him to hunch down in the old mackinaw the major had given him.

It was hard to believe that the major was licked. Thought of that tightened the kid up inside and sent anger chasing through him. Les Whittles was handing out the double cross, and Major Carlysle didn't know it.

The kid opened his mouth to blurt out what he had heard, but the major said gently, roused out of his thoughts, "Let it go till to-morrow, will you, son? I've got a lot to figure out."

BUT the next morning was a busy one, and in the afternoon the kid saw Rafe. He was in the blacksmith shop, mending a broken bridle rein. The light was bad, with murky storm clouds piling up in a leaden sky. The kid brushed at the lock of sun-bleached red hair that kept falling into his eyes, and looked up to scowl through the doorway at the sky and the distant peaks.

When he did that he saw Rafe leaning against the post at the open corner of the shed, grinning. Sight of him was a shock that took the breath out of the kid's lungs. He had forgotten about Rafe, or had tried to. He had told himself that that desperate night when he had found the body of Hakon Blade hanging by the burned cabin had been the end of something.

Rafe said with a softness that was deceiving, "So this was where you ran to, eh?"

The kid's face went white, and his eyes raced past Rafe into the ranch yard. There would be no getting past Rafe, for he was big and would be watching for just that.

The kid demanded hoarsely, "What you want here, Rafe?"

Even in the dull light of this cloudy day Rafe's black eyes had a glitter in them. "What you reckon I want? You've fooled around here long enough, an' I need you."

"I ain't goin' back," the kid blurted. "I ain't touchin' any of your dirty work again. I'm done."

A week's growth of red beard made Rafe's lips look thick and puffy. He rubbed his tongue between them before he spoke. "Kid, I've lambasted the devil out of you more'n once. If you want another chunk of that, I'll give it to you."

"I'm stayin' here," the kid choked. "You are like the devil! I'll knock them fancy ideas out of you. Oh, I've been watchin'. I was in town last night, an' saw you follerin' that Carlysle around like a dog."

"He's square," the kid said doggedly. "He's been feedin' me an' givin' me a place to stay."

"Square?" snarled Rafe. "They're none of 'em square. You ain't settin' him up against your own brother, are you?"

The kid's throat was hot and dry. "He's worth a dozen like you," he gasped. "All I ever got from you, or pa, either, was whippin's."

Rafe shoved away from the post, his bearded face darkening. "You young fool! Your blamed, stinkin' Carlysle had a hand in the gang that strung pa up!"

The kid stared at him desperately. "Pa had it comin'! He only got what he'd been askin' for!"

"Kid, you'll wish you'd never said that!" Rafe's voice was thick with anger. He took two steps toward the boy and then stopped, swaying.

The awl with which Rafe had been punching rivet holes in the bridle rein lay under the kid's hand. The kid picked it up in fingers that tightened, white-knuckled, around it. The heavy steel needle protruded only some three inches beyond the wooden handle, but as a weapon it could be deadly. The kid held it up level with his own throat so that it was only a handbreadth away from Rafe's heart.

"Don't lay your hands on me," he panted. "I'll put this through you. I swear I will."

RAFE BLADE stared at him, unbelieving at first, then with a hint of fear in his glittering black eyes. The kid's face was tight, strained, and in his frightened eyes there was a desperate, hunted

look. He was close to sobbing when he spoke again.

"I ain't goin' crooked again, not for you or anybody else. I saw what they did to pa. I ain't sore at 'em for that. They was only doin' what they had to. I'm glad of it, even. Pa wasn't any good, an' you ain't, either. You'll wind up same as he did, an' I ain't goin' back with you. I'm stayin' here an' playin' it square like—like the major!"

"Try it," Rafe sneered, "an see how far you get. You ain't told him, I reckon, what your name is. You ain't told him that Hakon Blade was your pa, an' that for the last two years you been ridin' with him, whittlin' on Double Eight beef."

The kid's throat was choking him. "I didn't know it then."

Rafe picked that up with a savage bluntness. "No, you didn't know it! Ask him to believe that. There's another thing maybe you didn't know. The Blades got paid in hard cash for puttin' this outfit on the skids—money that put clothes on your back an' grub in your belly."

"I didn't know it," the kid repeated stubbornly.

"What the devil difference you reckon that makes? Try that song an' dance an' see how far you get with it. You're licked 'fore you start. Stick here an' you'll get a stretch in the jug when they find out who you are."

The kid shook his head dumbly.

Rafe's tone was wheedling. "Forget your notions, kid. It can't work out. You always did have a knack with cows. We'll make a stake an' then clear out of here. You'd like clothes, wouldn't you, an' money an' a good time?"

The kid was still holding that awl, holding it out in front of him, hard. Tears had come seeping out of his eyes and were trickling down his freckled cheeks.

He couldn't get his voice above a hoarse whisper. "I ain't licked, Rafe. I ain't! You get out of here. I ain't listenin' to you any more." Helpless anger swelled up in him, making his voice crack and break. "Get out of here, I said, or I'll shove this down your throat!"

Rafe backed away, snarling, "Stay here, then, an' get what's comin' to you."

The kid sank back against the work bench and watched Rafe lumber away, hulking shoulders swinging.

The energy his anger had given him drained away. He felt sick, and the awl dropped from his fingers and rattled on the stones that made a flooring for the forge. A fist seemed to be closed about his stomach, twisting it.

He walked unsteadily out of the shed and up to his room in the big log ranch house. It was the room the major's wife was to have when she was well enough to come West. The kid hunched there on the edge of the bed, clinging to the thick corner post, staring at the framed picture of the dark-haired woman on the table.

He had cried out hysterically that he wasn't licked, but he felt licked. He was licked as thoroughly as the major was. He knew he couldn't go to the major with his warning about Les Whittles now, for the blame for the ruin of the Double Eight was his as much as Whittles's.

He would have to tell the major at the same time what his father and brother had done. And Rafe had said it wouldn't make any difference, the fact that he hadn't known what was going on.

The major would send him away, he guessed. But he couldn't go

away—not now. Maybe—if he didn't say anything now—there would be some way he could make it up——

The kid stared at the picture of the dark-haired woman, his throat hot and aching.

CHAPTER III

DUPED

SNOW came early that fall, leveling off the peaks of the high Cascades and clotting in the ravines. There was even a flurry of it down on the flat.

To the watching kid it seemed like a token of the end. Before those peaks were barren again the Double Eight would be done for. Winter would cramp it, smash it.

A week had gone by since the talk with Rafe, a week of grim unhappiness for the kid. The thing he wanted to tell the major was a painful lump in his chest. A dozen times he was on the verge of speaking, and as many times the haunting fear that the major would send him away held him from it.

Twice during that week the major drove alone into Union Gap. He came back with faint lines etched on his smooth forehead. He was as gentle as ever with the kid, but his few words were an effort drawn out of deep thought, out of preoccupation that made the kid feel miles away from him. The heavy burden of worry took some of the squareness out of his balanced shoulders, and it tortured the kid to think that he had contributed to that.

The major got back late from that second trip into town, but the kid was waiting up for him. He took the horses and turned them into their stalls and rubbed them down and fed them. When he got back, the major was waiting for him in the big front room.

His gray eyes looked harried, but they were steady and his voice was quiet. "Think you and Whittles can hold down the outfit for a spell, son?"

The kid nodded and gulped, "I reckon so, major. Where—where you goin'?"

The major had gone to his desk and was beginning to work through a pigeonhole filled with papers. He turned around to put his level glance on the boy. "Portland first, then up to Seattle. I thought the bank would carry me, but it can't. No one's fault; things break that way, sometimes. But I've got to get rid of some beef or we go to the wall. We——"

His glance swung away to the door of the kid's room, and the kid knew he was thinking of that picture on the table. "Well, we can't let that happen. I guess you understand."

The kid opened his mouth, fighting desperately to break through that barrier in his throat. "Major, I—there's somethin'——"

The major was already absorbed in the papers. He said, without looking up, "Better get some sleep now, youngster. We'll be turning out first thing in the morning."

But, lying between the warm blankets, the kid couldn't sleep. The wind, curling in through the open window, made a whispering noise, and there seemed to be words to that sound. The whisper was calling him coward and sneering at him.

He heard the major limp off to his room, weariness in his step, and for hours after that he lay staring into the darkness. He would tell in the morning, whatever came of it. Maybe the major would hate him for it, but he had to tell him before

—before it didn't matter one way or the other.

He must have dozed a little after that, because he jerked upright with a start. Then he heard it again—a scuffling, scraping noise outside the house. There was a man's gusty, labored panting, and it seemed to the kid that the darkness was taking shape and moving in the dark square of the window.

A voice crawled out of the dark in a broken whisper: "Kid! You there, kid?"

THE boy swung out from under the blankets, and immediately the cold stung through his underwear. He knew the voice, and it set anger and a creeping doubt throbbing through his head.

"It's me, kid—Rafe! Listen—you got to help me."

The kid was close enough to the window now to make out, dimly, Rafe's shaggy head, his parted lips, his stabbing black eyes. Rafe was slumped over the sill, clinging to it with his arms.

The kid's voice shook. "It ain't any use—you're comin' after me again. I told you that."

"It ain't that, kid. I'm hurt—bad. I got a slug——"

"You're lyin'!"

"I ain't; honest, kid. Put your hand on my neck. No, the other side."

The kid moved his fingers. They came away sticky. "What'd you do to get that?" he demanded sullenly.

"Not a thing; I swear it. There's a slug in my stomach, too." Rafe's voice faltered. He was talking, evidently, with the greatest difficulty. Gasps of pain broke up his words. "I was wrong that day—I talked to you. I seen it—afterward. I was fixin' to pull out of the country. Let you have your chance—to go straight. But to-night—in town—the sheriff jumped me. Over nothin', kid. I got away, but he's tailin' me. I got to—hide."

Jerkily the boy muttered, "There ain't any place——"

"There's got to be, kid." Rafe was pleading brokenly. "I'm dyin', I tell you. That lead in my stomach'll get me—sure. All I'm askin' you is to stop the bleedin'—an' hide me till it's over with. They'll string me up, kid. You can't stand by—an' watch 'em do that."

The boy couldn't, and he knew it. He remembered too keenly the way Hakon Blade had looked, swaying a little, with the moonlight painting the rope silver. And now Rafe was dying, and Rafe was his brother. It wasn't much to ask, but for an instant doubt swayed the boy, for he knew how tricky Rafe could be.

"If you ain't lyin'," he said huskily, "pass me your gun."

"I would, kid, but I ain't got it." Rafe's voice was trailing off. "It was in my war sack—when the sheriff—jumped me."

The kid leaned down swiftly. There was no holster belted around his brother's hips. That decided him. He turned back into the room, pulled on boots, trousers and shirt, and then slipped over the sill.

It was a job, getting the wounded man down to the barn, but he made it. In an empty stall at the back he tried to ease Rafe down, but the burden was too heavy for him and dropped soddenly.

He was pulling down some hay for Rafe to lie on when he heard the horses coming. The hoofbeats swept from the west into the ranch yard, setting up a faint vibration in the barn. For a moment panic clawed at the boy. He waited on his knees, listening, then ran to the wide doors,

swinging them almost shut behind him.

Dawn was just breaking in the east, and a murky gray light was beginning to sift across the low hills. Two riders had pulled in by the house, and one of them was bawling, "Major! Oh, major!"

Les Whittles and Jake Seams, half dressed, came spilling out of the bunk house.

The door of the ranch house opened, and the major was standing there, pulling a coat on over his unbuttoned shirt. He said crisply, "Oh, you, Culverson. Well?"

The kid stared. He had seen Sheriff Lon Culverson once before, a big, granite-faced man with wide, sloping shoulders.

"The trap worked," Culverson exclaimed bluntly, "and Rafe Blade walked right into it. He got out of it, but there's lead in him, I think. He headed this way, an' we picked up his tracks again about a quarter mile back."

"You think he's here?"

"It's likely. He'll be lookin' for a place to lick his bullet holes an' maybe pick up a fresh bronc."

The major's voice was quiet. "In that case," he said, "we'll smoke him out."

FLAT against the barn door in the half dark, the kid saw the deputy and Jake Seams go into the house, but Culverson and Les Whittles and the major came steadily down through the gloom toward the barn. His heart battering at his ribs, the kid took three steps out to meet them.

It was the major who saw him, recognized him, and snapped a warning. "Easy, now! It's the boy. What is this, youngster?"

The kid struggled for the breath he couldn't seem to get into his lungs. "Nothin', I reckon," he gulped. "Thought I heard a noise down this way, an'—an' I got up to look. I—I looked all through the barn, an' there wasn't anybody there."

The kid could feel Culverson's eyes drilling him, like shafts of cold steel. The sheriff said, "We'll have a look in there, anyhow."

The kid's pinched face tightened. He was thinking of Rafe, dying maybe on that straw-littered floor, and of the rope Rafe had said they had ready for him.

He cried out, desperate, "He ain't in there, I tell you! He ain't in there!"

Culverson nodded slowly. "I thought so. Hurt, too, isn't he?"

His deception blasted, the kid could only plead helplessly, "You can't take him out an' hang him! He's dyin'."

Culverson swung his inspection grimly toward the major. "He had enough left to get this far, an' that was all. Be a danged shame if he kicks off 'fore he can stretch rope. He killed Jenkins. Came down after those steers we had planted, but busted through the line as we closed in on him an' got Jenkins on the way. Well, let's haul him out."

A hoarse voice sounded directly in back of the kid, so close it made him jump:

"No need to, I'm comin' out. Hold it, Culverson!"

Whirling, the kid saw Sheriff Culverson's fist fall away from his revolver butt. Rafe was coming out through the foot-wide opening in the double doors, swinging a six-gun ahead of him, hulking shoulders bent over in a crouch. His lips, made ragged by the red beard, were twisted away from his teeth. There was a dark splotch of blood on his

neck, but he wasn't a man who had been dying five minutes before.

The kid got it, then. Rafe had tricked him. With the sheriff hard on his heels, Rafe had taken his chance on a hide-out, thinking to let the search race past him so that he could double back.

"You're a rotten liar, kid," he growled. "Anybody but a halfwit could have pulled it off. Watch yourself, Culverson! Make a move, one of you, an' I'll cut you in two. I can do it. Ask Jenkins."

Moving swiftly as he talked, Rafe kicked the door wide open. In the brief minutes allowed him, he had saddled a horse. The reins were wound around his left hand, and he led it out. Holding the revolver across the saddle, Rafe swung up. The kid wondered where he had hidden the gun. Tucked under his shirt, probably.

Rafe had always been deadly with a gun. Sheriff Culverson's granite face showed that he knew that. The big bay horse sidled away, dancing a little.

"Pull when you're damned good and ready, sheriff," Rafe called.

COVERED, Culverson didn't move. When the pistol range had lengthened to danger, Rafe ducked, spun the bay so that the barn hid him, then swerved away at a racing gallop. Culverson threw one shot that missed, then ran for the house and his mount, yelling at his deputy.

The kid stared after Rafe, his eyes wide and hurt and angry. He had believed Rafe, and Rafe had tricked him. He had thought Rafe was in there dying. Rafe had made it look as if he——

Les Whittles growled, "The son took Skyrocket. They'll never run him down while he's on that pony." His glance, hard and biting, flipped to the kid. "An' you, you young devil—makin' out he was so hard hit he couldn't put up a fight!"

The kid blurted miserably, "I—I thought he was dyin'. Honest, I did."

"But you made a play at hidin' him!" Whittles hesitated, staring. "So that's the answer! Major, when the boys strung up Hakon Blade they only cleaned out part of the nest. They missed Rafe Blade, an' they missed this double-crossin' button. Look at him! If he ain't Rafe Blade's double, with ten years peeled off, I'm blind!"

There was a troubled look in the major's gray eyes. As if he were pulling his mind away from more important things, he frowned and murmured, "Your name isn't Smith, son. What is it? Blade?"

The kid just stood there, shivering a little in his old boots that didn't match, his pinched face going slowly white. He couldn't seem to get any words out of his throat. He knew it was too late now, anyway.

"You been losin' cattle," Whittles snarled, "an' you been wonderin' how. Well, here's your answer. This young sprout's been tippin' his brother off to where the stuff would be an' when the breaks'd be right."

The kid got his voice then. "That's a lie!" he blurted. "I never did that! Major, you ain't goin' to say——"

Culverson and his deputy were in their saddles now. Whittles bawled at the sheriff as he came up, and the lawman pulled in.

"You've missed Rafe," Whittles snapped. "This kid's his brother. Been in on his jobs with him——"

The major cut in sharply. "Hold on, sheriff. There's no charge against this boy. I don't want him touched."

Culverson scowled, his granite features unyielding. "Another of those danged Blades, eh?" He leaned forward in the saddle. "Take a tip, kid, an' get out of this country before you're old enough for the law to monkey with. Or stay in it, an' cross the law again, an' you'll sure as the devil get what your precious brother's going to get!"

Then Culverson was gone, and the kid was staring at Major Carlysle, pleading with his eyes.

The major put a lean hand gently on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, but I can't let you stay here. Too much —too much depends on what happens now. You understand? Take what you need. Whittles will see that you get a horse."

The major limped toward the house, and the kid heard him say to Whittles, "I've got to be pulling out. I'll wire you instructions if I have any luck."

CHAPTER IV

PERIL TRAIL

THE kid sat cross-legged on the ground, holding the .38 revolver between his knees, staring at it. The major had told him to take what he needed, and he figured then that he was going to need this gun.

Light from the little fire he was huddling near slid along the barrel of the gun like a licking tongue. The night, close to freezing, pressed in close, as if it were crowding the kid. Over his head the stir of cold air was swinging the end of the rope, which the kid hadn't been able to reach and which Rafe hadn't bothered with. The kid wondered if he could smell dead smoke again, as he had on that other night, but snow lay over the cabin ashes, smothering any odor.

The kid had been away from the major's ten days. He had thought, when he took the gun and rode away from the Double Eight, that there was only one out for him. The pitifully fierce hopes in him had been smashed. He had had a touch of happiness, and it had been snatched away from him. The world had ganged up on him.

Rafe had said he was licked, and he was licked. That made him wrong and Rafe right. Rafe, who didn't think anybody was square, and who believed in ripping out of the world what he wanted from it, was right.

So the kid had made up his mind to find Rafe and tell him that, and tell him if he wanted a partner who knew all about handling cows, he had one.

He hadn't been able to find Rafe, but on the theory that if Rafe were still alive he would come back to the cabin, he had camped here. Maybe that was a mistake. There had been old phantoms lurking among the pines to plague him, phantoms of the misery he had endured and seen here, phantoms of a youngster's desperate hunger to be free and to go straight.

He had done some crying during the long, cold nights. And he didn't have the thought of the major, who had disowned him, to comfort him. But out of his harsh trouble and his doubt had crept a remnant of the kid who had been.

Teeth chattering, he had sobbed to himself, "I ain't licked! I *ain't* licked!"

So he stared now at the gun—the gun that he didn't want now, after all. He wasn't going to join Rafe. He wasn't going to be warped into crookedness again. He was going to get clear out of the country, like the sheriff had told him to. Some place

a long way off, maybe, what he'd wanted as a scrawny, pinched-face kid, he'd find.

One thing, though, he had to do first. He didn't know whether Rafe was alive or dead, and he wanted to know that before he left, because he wasn't coming back.

The kid got up and stamped out the fire and threw his saddle on the old buckskin gelding Whittles had given him. It would be daylight by the time he got to Union Gap. They'd know there.

He rode down out of the hills, trying to keep his mouth from trembling. He passed the Double Eight and the field with the creek in it where the major was holding the steers he couldn't sell. There was a lump in his throat as he went on toward Union Gap.

THEN, with the dark veil of night thinning a bit, he heard the dull, rumbling shuffle of cattle on the move. The sound came from ahead of him, and his first thought was that somebody had sold some beef. His sharply swelling hope sank suddenly. It wasn't the major. He had seen the major's beef back there in the north pasture.

He could make out dimly the plodding mass of rumps and twitching tails and bobbing horns. Two riders were drifting along behind the drag. The half dark and the noise of the little herd hid the kid until he was almost upon them. The two men were talking, and the voice of one made the kid sit bolt upright in his saddle.

It was drawling, scornful: "Yeah, the major was mighty careful about his instructions. Snow's got the pass plumb blocked. Drive 'em to the Dalles, he said, ship 'em down the river, an' then drive north from Portland."

The kid gulped hard. North of Portland! That meant Seattle. Then the major *had* found a market. But the major's herd was back there——

The kid went past the two men, fast, peering for the brand on the drag steers. The other of the pair was growling, "He can't dig up two orders like this."

Whittles saw the kid then and snapped, "What the devil!"

The kid had seen plenty, and he pulled the buckskin back. He recognized the other man now as Veach, the cadaverous, black-browed rancher who had talked to Whittles in the pool hall.

Whittles spurred close to him, but the kid held his ground. "This ain't the major's herd," he burst out angrily. "They got Veach's brand on 'em! You got orders from the major, but you're sendin' Veach's beef!"

"Smart, ain't you?" snarled Whittles. "Clear out of here before I beat the devil out of you."

"I ain't goin' to let you do it," the kid gasped. "You're double-crossin' the major. He'll go busted!"

Whittles swung his open hand, hard. It hit the kid in the face and knocked him half out of the buckskin's saddle. He had a notion about scrambling for the .38 tucked inside his belt, but the fist of Les Whittles was riding on his gun butt, and he looked angry enough to use it.

"Mind your own cursed business," he rapped, "or you'll get worse than that. I'll sure as the devil put the sheriff to ridin' on your tail. He warned you once. Cross him again an' you'll smell the inside of the jug."

The herd plodded along in the morning dimness. The kid watched it go, trembling because of the anger he couldn't vent. He knew what it meant. The herd that got to Seattle first would be the herd bought.

Then a wild idea hit him. Why not follow Whittles to the Dalles with the major's herd, follow him down the river and beat him on the drive up to Seattle?

He realized, as he thought of it, that the plan was hopeless. Veach would get the flatboats at the Dalles. And even if he, the kid, got boats and got to Portland, guns or the law would stop him before he ever reached Seattle. His thoughts came up abruptly against a blank wall. He didn't have any right to do anything. He didn't belong to the Double Eight, didn't have anything to do with it. He was one of the outlaw Blades—rustlers and murderers, wanted by the law.

Whittles and Veach and the herd were gone. The kid hunched there in the cold dawn, another plan slowly growing in his mind. The major had ordered against it, and Whittles hadn't even considered it. Snow in the pass, he had said. Winter always made the Cascades an impassable barrier for cattle. Yet—maybe a herd could be got across them, through Snoqualmie Pass. It would be shorter by days than the route down the Columbia and up from Portland.

The kid knew that if anybody could do it, he could. He had worked cattle—stolen cattle—in the high hills of the Cascades since he was old enough to swing a rope. He understood about things up there.

He knew, too, what else it meant. If he didn't get the cattle across, or if he were caught at it, it would be rustling. Maybe Whittles would come after him, and maybe Whittles would bring the sheriff. Then there wouldn't be any explaining—Sheriff Culverson would never give him another chance.

The kid's teeth were chattering, but his mouth was hot and dry. This was what he had fought against, what he had run away from.

But he was thinking of the picture of the dark-haired woman on the table in the room the major had given him—and of the major saying in his quiet way, "We can't let that happen. You understand."

The kid turned the buckskin and ran him in the direction of the Double Eight.

THERE had been, he guessed, a couple of hundred steers in the Veach herd. He cut a few more than that out of the bunch of Double Eight steers in the north pasture. He picked up an extra horse, then, and headed out north and west along the Yakima River. Better than a hundred and fifty miles lay ahead of him.

For the first three days the kid made twenty miles a day. He was scared during every minute of daylight, and at night he would start out of his half doze, thinking that pursuit had caught up with him. He was dog-tired at night. Three men would have been a thin crew for that job, but here there was only the kid, and if the weather hadn't held he probably never would have got the herd away from the Double Eight. But the weather held and the feed was good, and the steers had been out of the hills long enough to lose their wildness.

Those were the last breaks the kid got.

He was moving into timbered foothill country the next morning when snow began to tumble out of a lead-gray sky. The cattle moved through it reluctantly, and more slowly. Ten miles or less, the kid knew, was the best he could hope for that day.

Weariness was beginning to sap his energy. He had to keep on the

jump constantly — bunching the stragglers with the end of his rope, turning back occasional bolters, and circling ahead to keep the lead steers from drifting with the wind out of their course. And all of this he had to do with the cold slicing through his threadbare clothes, making his teeth chatter and stiffening his arms and legs.

His mind was in a torment of apprehension. Whittles or the sheriff would be coming after him; he was certain of that. How far Whittles would go with the Veach herd he didn't know—no farther than the Dalles, probably. Then he would be coming back and would find the cattle gone. The start of the trail would be plain to him. He would guess what the kid had done and where he was going.

Snow was whirling down, thinly but steadily. Urging on the drag, the kid would stop to peer behind him, his heart pumping jerkily in his chest. There was always that drifting gray curtain—somber, threatening, out of which he expected disaster to come hurtling.

His own physical misery was slight compared to that haunting fear. Twice, on the fifth and sixth days, he thought he saw a moving shadow behind him, circling warily at a distance. Both times it sent panic racing through him, and both times he was urged by a frantic impulse to shove the herd on in a mad stampede. He knew that if he did that he either would lose it or the herd would be worthless by the time it got through the pass. Both times he waited with the .38 gripped in his cold, stiff fingers. The shadow faded out, leaving only the blurred pine sentinels, and he decided his bloodshot eyes were tricking him.

He got no solid sleep. Most of the nights he spent in the saddle, dozing when he could, steadying the herd when the wind freshened and screamed wild songs as it raced across ridges and down draws.

A new fear was growing in the boy, a fear that he wouldn't last. Sleeplessness and bone-wearying toil were taking their toll, and in the gray, icy morning it was torture getting the herd strung out and drifting. He never got the cold completely out of his body, even when he crouched over his little fire, wolfing half-done strips of bacon and hard biscuits that he had brought along from the ranch in a sack. The cold would be half beaten, but it would crawl back, and seemed each time to penetrate his thin frame more deeply.

Still a day or more short of the pass, the kid tumbled out of the saddle at dusk. The place was a narrow valley bottom with a winding creek flanked by low bushes which would do for feed. So tired was the kid that he didn't see the rider coming up through the swirl of flakes, didn't see him until a voice that was raw and hoarse snarled at him, "Hold it right where you are, mister."

THE kid looked up then and saw the gun in the gloved fist, and the man bulking in the saddle above him. The man, built into a gray mound by the snow, growled through a red beard salted white, "I'll take what grub you got —all of it."

The kid stared. Then he croaked, "Rafe!"

The man peered down. "Well, curse my eyes! Kid, what the devil you doin' here?"

The boy jerked an arm stiffly at the herd.

"But what the devil you doin' here? I been tailin' you for three days now. 'Bout starved out." He squinted at the herd bunched along the mushy-banked creek. "Double Eight beef, eh? For Pete's sake, kid, an' you howlin' so hard about bein' on the square!"

Rafe Blade roared with laughter. "You don't do things halfway, anyhow! Carlysle runs you out an' you jerk a couple hundred beef steers out from under him. But where the devil you goin' with 'em?"

The kid almost told Rafe he was making a mistake, but he had to have help, and he knew it. "The law's lookin' for 'em on this side," he said. "I got to get 'em through the pass."

Rafe scowled at him, then a cunning look crept into his glittering eyes. "Might be it could be done," he said. "Yes, sir, it just might be! It'd be a stake to get out of this cursed country on!"

Rafe's coming seemed to bring with it a measure of luck, for the snow stopped, and for the first night in a week the kid got good hours of sleep. His two horses, more played out than he, had a chance to rest. The kid hadn't counted on feeding two, however, and Rafe ate up most of the grub that was left.

But it was easier going with two men working the herd, and without the falling snow to hinder them, they had made the pass by nightfall. Snoqualmie Pass was a low gap between steep, wooded peaks. Snow lay deep in the hollows and bent low the branches of evergreens, pyramiding on tops that tilted crazily.

The kid stared at a sullen gray sky which hovered just out of reach of the treetops. He prayed no blizzard would catch them here, for a blizzard now would destroy the herd and probably kill both of them. But there was less mountain country on this western side of the pass. They could make it now that the worst was over—he and Rafe. The kid knew he wouldn't have been able to do it alone.

It was gray dawn, and Rafe was shaking the kid's shoulder. "They're on the move, kid. Get 'em bunched an' headed right. I'll be along."

The kid stammered, "Ain't you—ain't you comin' too, Rafe?"

Rafe had his gloves off and was rubbing his hairy fingers. "Sure, I'm comin'. Got to hold back an' do a job first, though."

"What job?"

Rafe scowled. "There's a gent behind us. Spotted him late yesterday afternoon. He holed up on the other side, figgerin', I reckon, to overhaul us to-day. Maybe he'll take talkin' to." Rafe scowled again and swore. "Well, you tied down? Get after them cows or they'll be scattered all over the gap."

Riding to pull the herd together, the kid looked over his shoulder and saw Rafe ride into the pass and disappear. His breath began to come hard, hammering and thumping in his lungs.

He had the herd headed down a long draw when the shots came crisply through the cold air. The wait had seemed like hours. The explosions rattled out with alarming clarity, muffled echoes rumbling away among the snow-laden trees.

The kid couldn't go on. He had to wait there in the gray stillness that followed, staring back up toward the pass. If it was Les Whittles who came through there——

A horseman came into sight, came riding slowly down through the hoof-churned snow. And the man was Rafe Blade.

THAT aching, twisting sensation went out of the kid's stomach. He gasped out in a voice croaking with relief, "Gosh, Rafe, when I heard that shootin' I——"

But Rafe was looking at him queerly. His lips were so tight together they didn't show under his red beard. "It was that gent Whittles," he said. He put both hands on the saddle horn, as if he were groping for something he couldn't see. He tried to hold himself up, but couldn't. Slowly his hulking shoulders sagged, and he fell out of the saddle.

The kid was down in a flash, tearing at the front of Rafe's mackinaw and mumbling hysterically.

"No use—kid," Rafe whispered. "He got me square—through the chest."

"Rafe! Oh, Rafe. It can't happen this way. I'll get you down, Rafe. Lie still. I'll get you down. The devil with the cows."

The glitter had died in Rafe's dark eyes. "Knowed you didn't—swipe 'em, kid. That was a—dirty trick—I played on you—down at the Double Eight. Leave me here—kid. That'll square it. I'm—washed up."

The kid was sobbing. "I won't, Rafe. You ain't dead yet. I'll get you down. I'll get you to a sawbones."

Rafe shook his head slowly and pushed the kid's hands away. With grim effort he wrenched himself to a sitting position. He twisted his body, twisted it savagely, straining with his powerful shoulders.

The kid yelled, but the damage was done before he could prevent it. Rafe sank back, his hard face gray with stabbing pain. Blood rushed into his mouth and ran from between his parted lips. The end came swiftly after that. Rafe's eyes were open, staring, glazed.

For many minutes the kid knelt there in the snow. He couldn't make himself believe at first that Rafe was dead, that Rafe had forced the end so he wouldn't be a burden, so the kid could finish what he had started to do. Yet that was what had happened. And in the kid's mind, suddenly, all of the hurts Rafe had dealt him were washed away.

The kid had nothing to dig with. He covered Rafe's body with snow and with such rocks as he could find, then blazed a tree with his knife. He would come back and see that Rafe Blade got a decent burial—the kind of a burial a man was entitled to. It wouldn't be an outlaw's unmarked hole in the ground.

The days that followed were a blur in the kid's mind. It began to snow again before nightfall. The air turned colder, and the snow froze into icy pellets that ripped along in a screaming wind.

The days were drawn-out periods of torture, with the kid riding down one horse after the other, stiff and freezing in the saddle, flogging his muscles to extra ounces of effort. The lead steers blundered into blind canyons, huddling there, and the kid had to fight them out, untangle the snarl, and get them moving again. There were drifts to be crossed and floundering steers to be roped and dragged up on their feet again. The kid had to break through ahead and steer a course where feed could be obtained—bushes that some cliff face had protected from the snow or clumps of willow along a winding creek bed.

The nights were dull agony in which the half-conscious kid battled his drowsiness, battled his mad desire to burrow into the snow and sleep away hours and days.

He lost some steers. He couldn't help that.

But he forced the herd on, reeling in his saddle, a shrunken, staggering caricature of a cowboy, eyes bloodshot and red-rimmed, shouting in a cracked falsetto, or laughing, sometimes, insanely.

Each morning he was certain he could never move again, but each morning he forced himself to do it. His hands and his feet were frostbitten, and he fought to steady the roaring turmoil of his thoughts, to remember that he must keep up circulation or he would die.

It couldn't last, for the kid had already called on more strength than he possessed, and there had to be an end to the fierceness in him, and the hope, and the raw nerve.

He couldn't remember how many days it had been since he had crossed the pass, but it was on an icy-cold morning that the fighting courage seemed to drain out of him. Though he had clung to it, he was so tired now that he couldn't stand, and it didn't seem that anything mattered any more.

He had risen to his knees, then had pitched down on his side. He lay there with his eyes half closed, his mind foggy and dull. There hadn't been so much snow the last day, he remembered dimly. That meant he must be about out of the mountains. Bitterness crept into his fading thoughts. Another day, maybe, would have pulled him through, but he was done for, like Rafe. The hills and the scattering herd and the snow were whirling about him. He had a single clear impression—that he no longer felt pain—and then darkness engulfed him.

THERE was a burning in the kid's mouth and stomach, a hot whisky burn. He moistened his lips and opened his eyes, but the light stung them so mercilessly that he closed them again instantly. He was tired, tired, tired. He lay with the picture of that glimpse stored in his mind.

He was in the bedroom of a farmhouse, and a gaunt man in overalls was standing at the foot of the bed, scratching his head. Seated near him was a man whose face the kid couldn't see. But he couldn't have mistaken those trim, nicely balanced shoulders, or that quiet voice.

"I'd telegraphed Portland, you see," the major was saying, "and found that Veach's herd, not mine, was on the way here. It was all rather important, so I started to ride back across the pass. I can ride, though my leg doesn't appreciate it, and that's how I happened to find the boy. Now, if I can arrange to rest the herd here with you for a week and get some feed——"

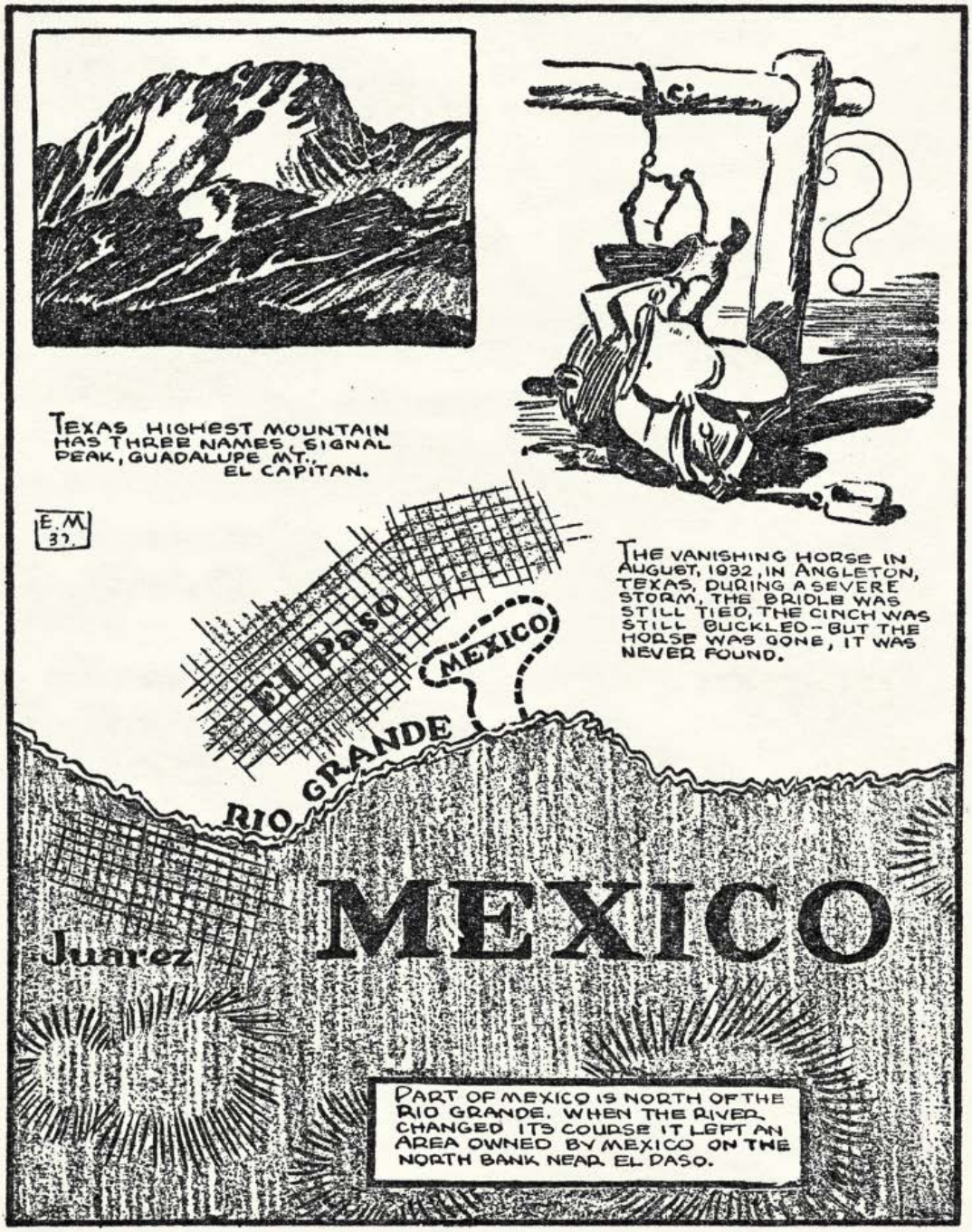
"Quite a boy, that little feller," the farmer said, "bringin' them cows across there. Danged if I can see yet how he did it. Your son, is he?"

"Not my son," the major said. "My pardner."

The kid didn't try to open his eyes again. He was dog-tired, and he had to sleep. But he was a pretty happy kid.

Interesting And True

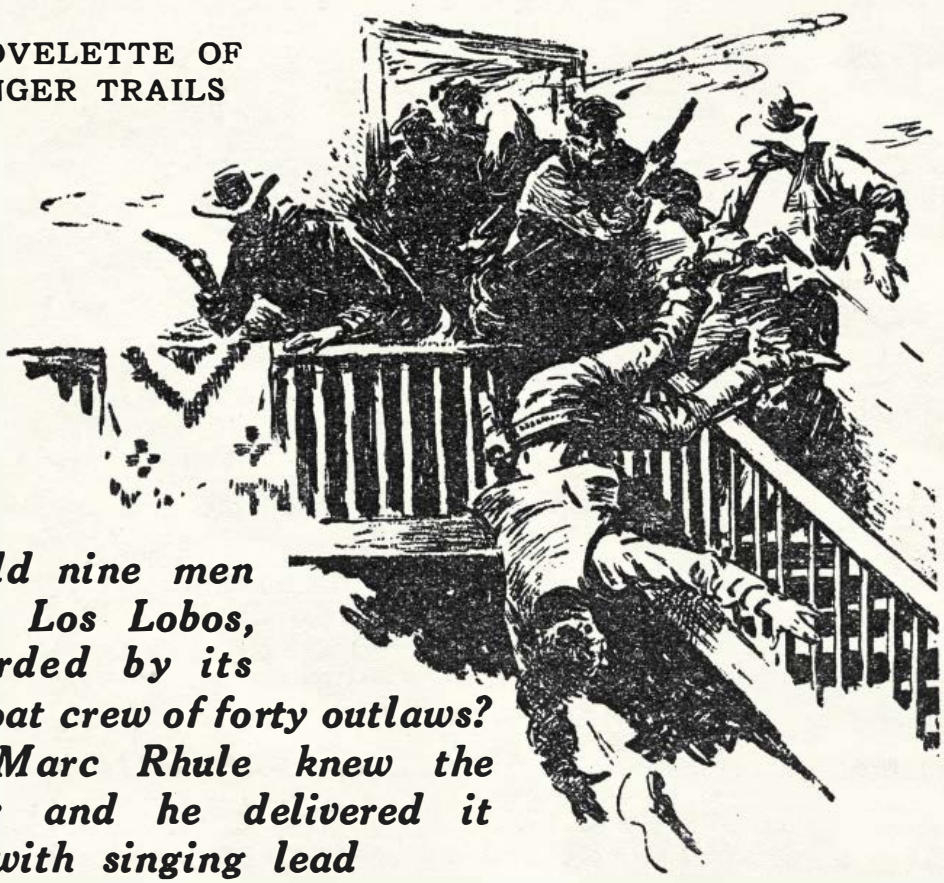
By H. FREDRIC YOUNG



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.

NINE AGAINST

A NOVELETTE OF DANGER TRAILS



Could nine men take Los Lobos, guarded by its cutthroat crew of forty outlaws? Only Marc Rhule knew the answer and he delivered it with singing lead

CHAPTER I

RAIDED

MARC RHULE halted his gray gelding before the front-yard gate and looked back at the ranch buildings of the Rocking R. As fine a ranch as there was in Arizona, he thought, and it was in danger. The ranch and his father and his two brothers all were in dire danger, and he couldn't learn what that danger was. Something had happened in the six weeks he had been away, riding a herd which he had sold over the border.

Well, Harl Wayne would tell him what was wrong. He nudged his horse and started down the road through the dusk, headed for the W Arrow. As he passed the ranch yard his gaze lingered on the dark bulk of the cypress hedge to the north of the house, a box-trimmed hedge inclosing a space ten feet square. In the center of that space lay his mother's grave. Marc bit back a sigh and swung his gaze to the road ahead.

Perhaps a hundred yards up the road he passed an acacia grove, one of the numerous beauty spots his father had planted and nursed to life there in the desert. He gave it a lingering glance of appreciation.

Could he have seen into the grove through the swiftly gathering shad-

LOS LOBOS

ows, he would have been alarmed to see two riders concealed there. One was a big man on a dun-colored horse, a man with powerful hands, hairy and freckled, and burned brick-red by the sun. As Marc rode by, these hands gripped the reins of the dun-colored horse, and the man spoke in a low undertone to his companion.

"There he goes, Wolfe. That leaves the old man at the house alone. The other two Rhule boys went with the cowhands to bring in that herd from the range next to the T F Bar. Looks like Frobisher was gittin' Rhule worried. We better be stringin' back the other way pronto!"

The other man, slender and dark, and sitting a dark-brown horse, answered tersely. "Whatever you say, amigo."

"O. K., let's move," said the big man. "If we don't get there in time to head off that herd, it's goin' to be too danged bad for us. Shag along, Wolfe."

Marc Rhule, far past the grove now, could hear no sound from them as they rode cautiously from the acacia grove and turned toward the field south of the Rocking R buildings. Marc's mind was intent on Harl Wayne. He could always

By **ELI COLTER**

Author of
"Gunfire Gold in Silver Town."

depend on Harl to speak frankly. He and Harl had grown up on those two adjoining ranches, had learned to ride, fight and shoot together. Harl had never let him down yet, and he had become quite capable, too, since his parents had died and left him to run the ranch.

The dark had fallen and the desert moon was bright by the time Marc reached the W Arrow. He dismounted and went into the yard, to find Harl smoking in solitude on the front porch. At sound of Marc's hail, Harl sprang to his feet and came down the steps to meet him.

"Greetings, old beetle face. I thought you were never going to get back from Mexico!"

They went up the porch steps together, and after the first words of raillery and welcome, Marc said grimly: "What's going on here, Harl? Dad's had the devil scared out of him about something, but all I can get from him is that Frobisher has been pestering him to sell the Rocking R, and that he finally told Frobisher the Rocking R wasn't for sale, and to get out and stay out. Why in thunder does Frobisher want the Rocking R? He must be crazy to think dad would sell."

"He's worse than crazy," Harl answered harshly. "He's playing checkers with Dike Wilson!"

"*What!*" Marc scowled disbelievingly.

"Yeah. You might as well hear it, Marc. Your dad don't want to worry you. You're the kid of the family, remember, and he's afraid you'll go off half cocked if you find out what's happened while you've been gone. This is it. While you were in Mexico, the store at Yoonaconda was held up by Dike Wilson and his gang. They killed the storekeeper and lifted seven hundred dollars, all he had in his cash drawer. Sheriff Robey had the nerve to chase Dike and his gang right into Dike's sweet little outlaw town of Los Lobos, and Dike ran him and his posse out and swore he'd kill every last one of them if they ever dared come back."

Marc frowned. "Well, that's not exactly surprising, is it? Los Lobos hasn't been anything but an outlaw roost since Dike Wilson took it over. It's nothing new for them to kill right and left, or to run the sheriff out, either. What's that got to do with Frobisher and the Rocking R?"

"Take it easy, Marc," Harl answered evenly. "It's bad. Two of your punchers saw Dike over at the T F Bar talking to Red Frobisher. There's your tie-up. Dike Wilson wants a clear road to the border for running cattle, and the Rocking R and the W Arrow stand right in his way. Red Frobisher has thrown in with him, and if they can't buy the ranches for half a cent on the dollar—well, you know what happened to the Alvariso ranch, don't you?"

MARC chilled. The great Alvariso ranch had been sacked and burned, and every hand but one had been killed, that one a young boy named José Alvariso, who had escaped and ridden wildly away, swearing to live long enough to kill Dike Wilson and his outlaw pardner, Wolfe Brand.

"Yeah," Harl went on, knowing Marc's ghastly thought, "they'd do it, don't doubt that. Wilson and Brand have got the daylights scared out of the whole range around here, and we can't buck any combination like that."

Marc straightened. "We've got to have help and have it quick, Harl. I'm going to write for Marshal Bill Leeds."

Harl laughed derisively. "Beat

you to it, old son. I wrote for the famous Red River Bill myself. He wrote back that he was sorry we were having it so tough in our neck of the woods, but that he was tied up in the Red River Valley and couldn't possibly come till spring. He said if we didn't have our little difficulties settled by then, we could count on his being here. By spring! We'll all be dead and buried by spring if we don't get the jump on Dike Wilson and—who's that?"

Harl rose to his feet, peering down the moonlit road as the sound of a galloping horse broke the quiet and rushed toward them. Harl descended the porch steps in two leaps, Marc close behind him. They crossed the yard at a run and came to a halt beside the road just as the horseman drew up and slumped from the saddle.

"Miguel!" Marc cried sharply as he recognized one of the Rocking R men. Then he went cold. The Mexican was holding himself upright by gripping his horse's mane, and his right cheek was black with blood from a wound in his head.

"Miguel!" Marc gasped.

"*Si*, Señor Marc. Your father, your brothers, the men—all dead! There was a raid—everything is burned——"

"Miguel!" Marc cried again and caught the swaying Mexican in both arms and held him upright. "Did you—did you see any of them?"

"*Si!* Fro—Frobisher. He have kill your father. They ride north. He have kill—me!" He gasped and relaxed in Marc's arms, dead.

Marc lowered him to the ground and turned blindly toward Harl. "Take him in, Harl. I——"

"I'm going with you," Harl protested.

"No! Marc's voice was harsh. "I'd rather go alone."

"O. K.," Harl agreed curtly. "I'll send my crew to cut their trail. I'll —I'll be here on tap, if you want me."

Without answer, Marc mounted his gray gelding and rode to the Rocking R. The house and barn were a smoldering ruin, reflecting a dim glow that threw into glaring relief the cypress hedge inclosing his mother's grave. The vague shapes of men and horses were sprawled in grotesque postures about the yard. Marc pulled his horse to a halt and sat there, staring.

Then, from under the big locust tree a few feet away, a voice addressed him, muted, but clear above the crackle of the dying embers.

"Keep a grip on yourself, son. We tried to get here in time to stop 'em, but we were too late, and they were too many for us. You're Marc Rhule, ain't you?"

Marc stared at the big man who had stepped out into the monlight, and at the small, slender man who stood close behind him. "Yeah, I'm Marc Rhule. Who are you?"

"I'm Charley-horse Hogan. Me 'n' my bunch knew that Dike and his outfit were goin' to swipe a herd from your dad's men this evenin', and we were aimin' to highjack 'em. I've got five more boys over here. We'll—take care of the dead, if you want."

Marc pulled himself rigidly erect. "My father!"

The big man pointed. "He's over there by that cypress. Your brothers was killed in the house. We couldn't get 'em out. I'll show you where your father is."

Numbed with the shock and horror that gripped him, Marc dismounted and followed "Charley-horse" Hogan. Grant Rhule lay dead across his wife's grave. Marc stood swaying, staring down at the

still figure and thinking of the Alvariso ranch, and José Alvariso, who had sworn to kill Dike Wilson and Wolfe Brand. He said hoarsely, fighting the stiffness in his throat: "That's my mother's grave. Bury him—here."

The big man left the inclosure, and, returning with a shovel, began digging.

The thing was done at last. Marc turned and stumbled out of the inclosure.

CHAPTER II

OUTLAW TRAIL

BEYOND the cypress box Marc could see Hogan's men smoothing the mounds over the Rocking R cowboys. The slender dark man had come to join Hogan again, and Hogan said tersely: "We'd be glad to have you join us, Rhule."

The slender dark man said softly: "So sorry, keed!"

Marc heard the words dimly, still gripped by nightmare. Within him there surged a searing blast of hate, hate for the sheriff, hate for Marshal Bill Leeds and the law they represented, the law that had failed and allowed his father and his brothers to be murdered, their cattle stolen, their buildings burned. He turned blindly toward Charley-horse Hogan.

"Outlaws!" he said thickly.

Hogan gave him a crooked grin. "Gettin' to be outlaw country, ain't it? Better side in with us, Rhule."

Marc shook his head. "No. Thanks for everything, Hogan. But—I'll ride my own trail. And maybe, somewhere, I'll be seein' you." He whirled and strode toward his horse, and he did not hear Hogan say to the small dark man: "He's your meat, Wolfe. Get him!"

Unconscious of the intent gaze of the two men following him, Marc mounted his horse and rode straight back to the W Arrow. He found Harl pacing the yard, waiting for him. As he came into the yard, Harl said sharply, "Well?"

"Just as Miguel said. Dead, all of them," Marc answered. "And everything burned to the ground."

"The boys just came back," Harl said. "Too dark. Couldn't find a trace. They stopped at the Frobisher spread and found it deserted."

"You happen to know what Dike Wilson looks like?" Marc asked, his voice tight, his face grim and set in the moonlight.

"Yeah—since Robey chased him into Los Lobos. Robey says he's a whale of a man with sandy hair and a red face. Says there's one thing particularly noticeable about him: he has enormous hands, hairy and freckled. He says you'd never forget Dike Wilson after you once got a look at his hands."

Marc felt himself chill, then fury swept him. He saw before his eyes the holocaust and slaughter that had been perpetrated by Dike Wilson and Red Frobisher and their gang. He saw those freckled, hairy hands, grasping a shovel, digging, digging. And he heard Harl's voice as from a distant mountain, echoing hollowly in his ears: "Robey says he goes by several different names—one of 'em is Charley-horse Hogan."

Marc suddenly began to laugh, a harsh and half-insane laugh, a laugh that seemed to fill the still night air with something stark and hideous. He turned and started swiftly toward the road.

Harl called sharply: "Marc! *Marc!* Where are you going?"

Marc called savagely across his shoulder: "I'm going to join Charley-horse Hogan's gang!"

Harl started toward him on the

run. "Marc! Come back here! You're crazy. Marc!"

But Marc had vaulted into the saddle on the gray gelding and was off up the road at a wild gallop.

Harl rushed for his own mount and followed, but he could find no trace of where Marc Rhule had gone.

MARC was headed straight for Los Lobos. It was a two-day ride to the outlaw town, and in between the Rocking R and Los Lobos was "Pug" Wallabee's store. Wallabee's so-called store was nothing more than a gambling den and outlaw nest, and the ranchers and cowhands stayed away from it. By the following evening Marc Rhule had reached Pug Wallabee's.

The yellowish glow of oil lamps showed dimly through the dirty windows as he tied his horse to the hitching rack, mounted the steps to the rickety porch, and dropped his hands to loosen the two guns tied low on his thighs. He went through the door and strode coolly up to the bar, taking in with narrowed eyes the motley gang of thieves and cutthroats who lounged about the room. The bartender looked at him curiously, and he was sharply aware of the veiled glances of suspicion and surprise that turned his way from all corners of the room.

He called for whisky and got it. The bartender, who happened to be Pug Wallabee himself, made a few leading remarks, and, receiving no answer but a mocking stare, finally suggested that Marc sit in on a game. Marc shrugged and nodded, set his glass down on the bar, and followed Wallabee down the long room. Wallabee led him to a table where three men were playing poker, waved a hand at Marc, and addressed the gamblers.

"The gent wants to take a hand."

A look of understanding passed swiftly between the four as Wallabee turned away, but Marc ignored it. He knew his life wasn't worth a grain of burned powder the instant he made the first incautious move, but he slid coolly into a chair while the man across the table shuffled for a new deal, and the game went on. It went on in a tense silence, while Marc surveyed the men at the other tables from the corner of his eyes. Then suddenly the three men around the table where he sat straightened and went motionless, and their gaze swerved to something behind him.

Marc turned his head and half swung in his chair. At the end of the bar was a small back room, and the door giving into that room was opening. Marc's eyes narrowed. A man stepped into the open doorway and glanced casually about. Then his head went back with a jerk, his eyes bulged, and he stood as if he were frozen, his gaze riveted on Marc Rhule.

Marc sat bolt upright, staring back, straight into the beefy face of "Red" Frobisher. For an instant nothing in the room moved, then Frobisher spat out a smothered curse, moved backward and slammed the door.

One thing saved Marc Rhule from instant annihilation in that moment. It really looked as if Red Frobisher had been struck with terror at the sight of the stranger none of the men in the room knew: and they wanted no foolhardy show-down with a man who could scare the wits out of Red Frobisher. Not a man moved—not a man but Marc.

Marc Rhule shot to his feet, both guns out. Crouching, he slid sidewise from the table, and, backing against the wall, covered the room.

Then suddenly somebody else

moved, somebody Marc had not noticed before.

A slim, dark Mexican bobbed up suddenly from a near-by table, and Marc's gaze leaped to him. The man was garbed in black velvet strung with silver conchas, with a wide, scarlet sash at his waist and a black sombrero tilted back on his head. To Marc there came a queer, fleeting fancy that there should be something familiar about this dark, dangerous face. The Mexican's liquid voice cut into the ugly silence.

"Queek, amigo! I can handle these cattle. In there—they count the money paid for the Rocking R herds!"

For one instant Marc stared into the dark face, then his gaze dropped to the gun gripped in the Mexican's hand. Whatever else this was, it was no trap. Marc said, *"Gracias!"* and then, with his two guns steadily covering his advance, he moved to the door opening into the back room, turned the knob and kicked the door open.

At a coin-heaped table in the center of the back room sat Frobisher's foreman and one of Pug Wallabee's men. Frobisher was talking to them, standing with his back to the door. As the door flew open, Frobisher cut his speech short and whirled. Simultaneously the other two leaped to their feet, and the room rocked with the blast of gunfire.

Marc Rhule's shots were the swiftest. The lead thrown by the other three went wild, and the Frobisher foreman and Wallabee's man went down together. Frobisher swayed and tried to fire again. Then Marc's guns were empty, and the three in the back room were lying dead on the floor, and the Mexican's cold voice was cutting in urgently.

"Load the guns, amigo! Ride south. The sheriff is coming from the north. *Muy pronto, amigo!* What is the matter weeth you?"

MARC jerked himself out of his stupor and dashed from the saloon, loading his guns as he went, dimly conscious that the Mexican was covering his retreat. As he reached his horse and vaulted into the saddle he was also dimly conscious that no sound came from the room he had just left. He sent the gray gelding racing down the road, but he did not go south. This, he figured, might be a trap, with ambush awaiting him to the south. He had no reason to fear Sheriff Robey. So he took the trail north, straight toward Los Lobos, and less than five miles beyond Wallabee's store he encountered Robey riding toward him.

He felt a slight sense of relief, and slowed his pace, approaching the sheriff with a greeting on his lips. It froze there as he caught the glint of moonlight on Robey's drawn gun and heard Robey's curt command: "Reach high, Marc! I'm takin' you in."

"What the devil!" snapped Marc. "Taking *me* in!"

"You got it," retorted Robey. "Put 'em up or I'll let you have it!"

Marc laughed savagely. Something was wrong, but he had no time now to find out what it was. With a sweep of his arm he knocked the sheriff's gun hand out of line with his body. Then, twisting in the saddle, he swung a pounding blow to the side of Robey's face. The sheriff swayed and jerked his gun up again.

Marc jabbed spurs to the gray and fired, aiming for Robey's hand. The lawman's horse reared, and the bullet that was intended to disable the sheriff's gun hand tore through his throat. Robey stiffened in the sad-

dle, lurched and fell to the ground as his horse plunged forward.

Without a backward look, Marc sent the gray racing down the trail to the south, almost crashing into a horse and rider motionless in his path not a mile from the spot where he had shot the sheriff down. In the clear light of the moon he recognized the rider as the Mexican who had covered his retreat from Wallabee's store. He pulled the gray to a sliding halt, leaned forward in the saddle, and stared at the dark, erect figure.

"I told you to go south," the Mexican said. "You have keel the sheriff, amigo?"

"He asked for it," Marc answered curtly.

"Do not regret it," the Mexican advised. "It was a good job."

"Eh?" said Marc blankly.

The Mexican laughed. "You want to keel Dike Wilson? You want to wipe out his men? Believe me, amigo, to do that you would have to keel the Sheriff Robey."

Marc stared. "You mean that Robey and Wilson were——"

"The same as that!" the Mexican cut in. He held up two fingers, tightly pressed together. "You are careless, señor. You forget the money Dike paid for your cattle. I brought it, because I theenk maybe we travel the same trail together, *si?*"

For an instant Marc remained silent. Then he asked tersely: "Who are you?"

The Mexican sighed. "So, now we spoil it all. But—to you I do not lie. I am Wolfe Brand. Charley-horse Hogan left me to keep an eye on you. It was my orders to get you as a member for our crew."

"Something's crazy here," Marc snapped, "or else you think I'm danged dumb. I know that Wolfe Brand and Dike Wilson work together, and I also know that Dike Wilson and Charley-horse Hogan are the same men."

"*De ninguna manera!*" said the Mexican vehemently. "It is all right for others to theenk that; we have worked to make others theenk that—but not for you. You must know the truth. Dike Wilson and Wolfe Brand have the falling out months ago. They have quarrel over the spoils from the Alvariso ranch. Charley-horse Hogan is *not* Dike Wilson: he is Dike Wilson's half brother. Hogan buried your father."

Marc caught his breath. He knew now where he had seen the Mexican before. He saw big, freckled hands digging, and he heard a muted voice saying, "So sorry, keed!"

He leaned toward Brand and said curtly, "And so?"

The Mexican shrugged. "An' so—Charley and I are waiting until we have enough men to clean up Los Lobos, waiting for a few men like you so we can wipe that town of outlaw scum from the face of Arizona. What you say, amigo?"

"There's only one answer to that," said Marc grimly. "Lead the way!"

CHAPTER III

BRAVE—OR FOOLISH

WITHOUT answering, the Mexican turned his horse and spurred it from the trail to the left, where a faint side trail led to the east. They rode hard for several hours, and the sun was high in the sky when the Mexican finally halted in a secluded arroyo, where there was browse for horses and shelter for men. As they tethered their animals, Marc asked bluntly: "Where's Hogan now, Brand?"

"Charley is out looking for three more men," the Mexican answered. "Weeth Hogan, and you and me, and three more gun hands, we could take Los Lobos." He raised a sharp glance to Marc's face. "You have maybe three friends who could shoot straight, amigo?"

Marc smiled wryly. "I have. When do I start for them?"

The Mexican frowned thoughtfully. "I theenk to-night. *Si*, to-night. You can make it in four days, amigo?"

"Easily," Marc answered. "But—only six of us to attack Los Lobos?"

"That is what Hogan say, and Hogan knows what he is doing," returned the Mexican. "Thees thing you are to remember always, Marc Rhule: I act by the orders of Charley-horse Hogan. In all that I have say I have told the truth. That I do not tell more is because he have say I shall not. Some things it is better that you do not know—now. Maybe never. But—if we wipe out Los Lobos and Dike Wilson and his gang, is it not enough?"

"Plenty for me!" said Marc grimly. "I'll ask no more questions, Brand. To-night I'll go for my men."

He rode from the arroyo at dusk, leaving the Mexican gazing inscrutably after him. He rode straight to the W Arrow, and Harl Wayne, and Shand and Purdy, two of Harl's riders, came out to challenge him. They whooped with relief when they saw who he was.

Quickly Marc recounted what had happened since he had left the W Arrow on the night of the raid. And when he had finished, Wayne asked: "When do we start?"

They started before daybreak, Marc, Harl, Purdy and Shand. They rode steadily, eager for the end of the scourge that had harried them. But when they reached the arroyo the Mexican was gone.

BACK in the arroyo, the Mexican had waited for Hogan's return. All the day and all the night he had waited, but Hogan had not come. By the next morning the worried Mexican would brook inaction no longer, and he saddled his horse and rode toward Los Lobos. After several hours of riding he came upon one of the Los Lobos trails.

There were three trails leading into the outlaw town. From the north, the south and the east, the trails came in, guarded by gunmen who would shoot first and ask questions afterward.

But the western flank of the town was protected by a sheer bluff too steep for man or horse to descend, and here there was no trail and no guard. Within five miles of Los Lobos the Mexican deserted the trail and approached the town from the west. He reached the brink of the bluff in the dusk and sought concealment among the jagged lava rocks.

From that vantage point he stared down at the cluster of miserable shacks that formed a sordid fringe around the main building of the town. That building was a two-story wooden structure, the saloon, dance hall, and general hang-out of Los Lobos, and the hitching rack in front of it was lined with horses. Among the horses, the fading daylight glinted on a silver-covered saddle horn. The Mexican's eyes glittered, and he muttered under his breath: "Hogan, my friend, you are either very brave or very foolish! I would give much to know where you are right now!"

In an upstairs room in the saloon, Dike Wilson reared back in a chair

and laughed boisterously, slopping the drink he held in his big, freckled hand. Across the room from him, tied to a chair, was a man equally large and powerful, with the same big freckled hands. Dike Wilson leered at him and roared again while several of his henchmen sat about looking on.

"Haw, haw!" Dike boomed. "Charley-horse Hogan, just made to order! Why, he looks more like me than I do myself. Now listen, you wolves! To-morrow night we finish the job. The W Arrow is all that stands in our way—Harl Wayne and six measly cowhands. All we got to do is roll in there and clean 'em out. And after we've gone, the hombres that come pokin' around to see what's left will find—what? Charley-horse Hogan, that's what! Hogan's been pretty smart, sashayin' all over the range, bein' took for me. Well, he's gonna be took for me just once more! He'll be found there close to what's left of the W Arrow, full of lead. And they'll bury him for me, and cross Dike Wilson off their list. Boys, that's good! I'm gonna be killed by proxy!"

Dike Wilson stood leering down at Hogan. "And you, Mr. Charley-horse—you're gonna be sorry you ever had the crazy idea to come bargin' into my town askin' for me! You can even start bein' sorry now!" He threw the remains of his drink, glass and all, into Hogan's face. "You guys take him down into the basement and lock him up. I got business!"

While Wilson's thugs carted Hogan's bound body to the basement beneath the two-story building, Wolfe Brand lay on the bluff and watched the town, and Marc Rhule, with Harl Wayne and Wayne's two men, had left the arroyo behind and were riding straight upon Los Lobos.

CHAPTER IV

WOLVES' LAIR

MARC and Harl rode in the lead. They rode all that day and cut no sign of the Mexican's trail. At dark they made camp by a tiny spring seven miles from Los Lobos and ate cold food from the supply carried in their saddlebags. Harl Wayne was increasingly prey to an uncomfortable suspicion, and he voiced it in an aside to Marc Rhule.

"You don't think Brand can be pullin' some kind of slick double cross, do you, Marc?"

"I don't think so," Marc answered, frowning. "But it's something to be considered. You wait here and I'll go on to the town. If I don't locate Brand or Hogan before morning, you'll know it because I won't be back, and in that case you and the boys turn back and beat it for the ranch. Keep close to your horses while I'm gone—you may have to ride in a hurry."

He saddled the gray and rode off into the night, striving to pierce the darkness ahead. He knew that anywhere on the trail some of Wilson's guards might shoot him down, but that was a chance he had to take. Something had happened to Brand and Hogan, he felt sure of that. He rode steadily ahead, nerves taut, senses painfully alert.

He was within a half mile of the town and could see its lights ahead when he was startled to an abrupt stop by a voice from beside the trail. His hands leaped to his guns, as his straining eyes discerned a motionless figure standing erectly against the bole of a gnarled live oak.

"Do not shoot, amigo!" the voice urged swiftly. "He is already dead, the guard of Dike Wilson. Very dead! It is my rope that makes him

stand so straight to guard the trail." The Mexican stepped into the moonlight, gesturing toward the motionless figure by the live oak.

"Where's Hogan?" Marc demanded tersely.

The Mexican gestured toward the lights of the town. "He is there. Why or how I do not know. You have brought your three men?"

"I have," Marc assured him. "Harl Wayne and two of his hands are back a few miles on this trail. They're waiting some word from me. When you didn't show up back at the arroyo we figured something was wrong and hit for Los Lobos. You knew we'd do that."

"Of course. And when Hogan have not show up I had to come see where he had gone, and I see his horse down there in front of Dike's saloon. From all three of the trails I have keel the guards, amigo! I have strung them up with their own ropes and with mine, so that the dead guard the rotting! Tell your men that."

"You tell 'em, Brand," Marc answered harshly. "Go on back on this trail till you find 'em, and bring 'em as fast as you can ride!"

"*Si*, if you say so, amigo." The Mexican peered up at him with curious eyes. "And where do you go, amigo?"

"Into Los Lobos, to try to pay back a favor Hogan did me once. Get going, Brand!"

He nudged the gray to motion, and rode on toward the dim lights of the outlaw town.

WITHIN a quarter mile of the buildings he dismounted, led his horse off the trail, and, tethering it there, went on afoot. Treading carefully to avoid scrub brush, he skirted the trail till he came abreast of the first buildings, then slipped cautiously along in the sound-muffling sandy street. He reached the two-story building of the saloon without encountering any one, and flattened himself against the wall under a sagging outside stairway that led up through deep shadows to the second story of the building.

From within the saloon came a monotonous blare of music, ribald shouts and laughter, and the hum of voices. Marc tensed and held his breath as steps sounded on the platform at the head of the stairs above him. He heard a door slam and a lock click, and a man descended the stairs, halting at the bottom not ten feet from where he crouched. The man who had come down the stairs called: "Spike!"

Another voice answered from the darkness several feet beyond. "Yeah. I'm over here, Dike."

"Keep an eye on the boys," Wilson commanded brusquely. "Don't let 'em get too soaked. Were ridin' to-morrow night! And keep an eye on that snoopin' fool in the basement."

"O. K., Dike." The other man moved off in the darkness, and Dike Wilson turned and reëntered the saloon by a rear door that opened just beyond the foot of the outside stairway.

Marc saw the glow of light from within as the door opened and closed. He moved from his place under the stairs and groped his way down the side of the building in the wake of the henchman who had been ordered to keep his eye on the man in the basement.

He negotiated his way clear around the building, only to discover that there was no outside entrance to the basement. He then started back, congratulating himself that he had avoided running into the man

called Spike. Halfway down the farther side of the saloon his arm brushed some one and he heard a gasp.

"That you, Dike?" a hoarse voice challenged.

Marc whipped up his right-hand gun and brought it down on the guard's head with stunning force. The man dropped without sound, and Marc bent over him. There was no way of tying him. He lifted the inert body and moved on till his exploring right foot found a window leading into the basement. He put down the body of the unconscious guard and tested of the window with his fingers. It was of the casement type, crossed with wooden bars tightly bolted. With a grimly set jaw, Marc stooped and again picked up the senseless guard. Then, swinging him like a battering-ram, he hurled him through the window, carrying panes and wooden bars away with one smashing blow.

The noise of the breaking window had been completely drowned by the din within the saloon. The same din also drowned the sound of shattering glass as Marc took his gun and hacked away the jagged splinters of glass thrusting up from the lower sill. Then he let himself through the window and down to the floor, moving cautiously to avoid the body of the guard.

He stood erect and risked the light of one match. By its flickering light he saw Hogan, securely bound, propped against the wall some fifteen feet away.

Hogan swore softly. "Marc Rhule, by all that's holy! Nice wranglin', kid!"

"I pay my debts, Hogan!" Marc snapped out the match, crossed the dirty floor, and, kneeling by Hogan, drew his pocket knife and cut the big man's bonds.

"Where's your men?" Hogan demanded as he rose to his feet and stretched his cramped muscles.

"Wolfe Brand's bringing them. They ought to be here almost any minute now."

"Good huntin'!" Hogan approved. "My boys will be along any minute now, too. Help me tie that guard with these ropes, Marc, then we'll have to be movin'!"

THEY bound the guard securely with the ropes Marc had cut from Hogan's wrists and ankles, then crawled out through the window and stood erect in the darkness. As they rounded the corner to approach the dark recess under the stairway, a cautious whisper sounded from the darkness ahead.

"Who's there?"

"Harl!" Marc exclaimed in relief.

"All clear, come ahead," Wayne answered. "Brand's with us. That Hogan you've got there?"

"Yes."

The six men congregated in the recess under the stairway. "We won't have to wait long," Hogan promised tersely.

He had scarcely uttered the words when the sound of cautious footsteps came from the empty lot behind the building, and the shadows of seven slowly moving men came into view.

"Caplan?" snapped Hogan in a sharp whisper.

"Yes, sir," answered one of the seven. "When you didn't come back, we rode in, like you told us to do. Show-down, boss?"

"Right," answered Hogan. "We picked the right time, too. Just as I figured, Dike fell for the idea of leaving me to take the gaff when he stages his last big clean-up through to the border to-morrow night. They haven't the slightest idea that

we're moving in on 'em. They're whoopin' it up to beat the devil. We take 'em now, when they're least lookin' for it." He turned to the figure of the Mexican at his elbow. "You got the trail guards, Wolfe?"

"*Si*, amigo. You expected me to do that, as you expected me to follow?"

The big man laughed dryly. "Exactly. I had to play every card, my friend."

Hogan now turned to Marc Rhule. "Looks like we're ready, son," he said. "Have two of your men stay here to prevent anybody from escapin' at the rear. The rest of us will barge into the saloon. From there on you'll all have to play 'er as she lays, and each man look out for his own hide. If you have to cash in, take as many as you can with you. Let's go."

CHAPTER V

NINE AGAINST FORTY

THE men moved forward in the darkness. At the swinging doors of the saloon, Hogan and Marc Rhule, in the lead, met a staggering member of Wilson's gang about to enter. They fell in behind him, and no one paid any attention to them as they followed him down the room for a short distance, then swung aside to drop into places at a card table.

As they were casually seating themselves, the Mexican, Caplan, Harl and another of Hogan's men staggered drunkenly in and collected at the bar. Marc's eyes were strained on the door, his muscles so taut that they ached. Two more of Hogan's men wandered in.

Then the voice of one of Dike Wilson's crew rose above the clamor of the barroom.

"Hey! How the devil did Hogan get loose?"

An instant hush fell over the room, and in the rear several men rose, blinking through the heavy smoke.

Side by side, the last of Hogan's men entered the swing doors, and from the rear of the room Dike Wilson's voice rose in a furious outburst: That's Marc Rhule with him! And that's some of their crew by the bar! Let 'em have it, boys!"

Marc's hands dropped, and he had one swift moment of utter despair. At least forty men were in the room, all heavily armed. Nine against forty! Then, with one quick motion, he and Hogan tipped up the table and ducked behind it, firing as they dropped.

A supporting barrage came from the guns of Hogan's men. Four of the five hanging lamps went down with a crash, and Marc tilted a gun and shot down the fifth just as a terrific burst of gunfire from Dike Wilson's wolves shattered the air. Marc felt the jar of the table as bullets ripped into it.

In the space of a breath the room was in an uproar. Burning oil fell in blazing streaks among the struggling, cursing men as Hogan shouted in Marc's ear: "Make for the door! The boys are ducking behind the bar."

Flattened on their stomachs in the foul sawdust, Marc and Hogan crawled toward the swing doors, bullets whistling above their heads. Behind them the room was a bedlam of milling, shouting men and a murderous hail of lead. The cutthroats in the rear of the room were prevented from firing for a moment by the bodies of their associates, which formed a solid barrier between them and the front of the room.

Then, as the light from the blazing oil grew dimmer, the last of Hogan's men went over the bar, and

Hogan and Marc crawled on toward the door.

Several of Wilson's men dropped to the floor, to creep forward and surround the table where Rhule and Hogan had ducked down. The men in the rear surged forward just as their companions in the front began raking the room with a hail of lead. Those men in the rear thought the firing was coming from Hogan and Rhule, and cut loose at the men near the table. Twelve of Wilson's henchmen went down, riddled by the crossfire fusillade.

Dike Wilson's voice rose stridently above the uproar. "Get outside, you fools! You're pluggin' each other!"

Behind the bar, the Mexican and three of Hogan's men were reloading and firing steadily, protected by the heavy mahogany barricade and taking deadly toll. Beside the Mexican, one of the men groaned and crumpled. The Mexican fired over the man's sagging figure at a spot where he had seen a flash of gunpowder. He raked the space with a deliberate arc of fire. A man cursed and sagged to the floor.

BY this time Hogan and Rhule had gained the swing doors and crawled through. Outside, they rose and crouched close as two figures lurched out close behind them. Marc swung back a gun and cracked the skull of one, while Hogan's big hairy fist crashed into the face of the other. The victims fell on top of each other.

Three more of Wilson's men striving to leave the saloon fell sprawling over the two Hogan and Marc had flattened, firing as they fell. Marc turned both his guns downward, blasting the heap as he would a litter of ravening wolves. Blending with his gunfire, Hogan's guns barked, mowing down the next surge of outlaws fleeing from the saloon. The space before the door grew swiftly into a shambles, a dark mass of riddled outlaw dead.

Then suddenly the din inside subsided and Harl, the Mexican and six of Hogan's men came rushing through the swing doors.

"The rest of them are heading upstairs, to try and sneak out by the outside stairway!" panted Caplan.

"Roll!" shouted Hogan. He led the way, reloading his guns as he ran, his voice filling the night air with a wild challenge: "Red River! A foot deep and a mile wide! Red River!"

They reached the foot of the stairway just in time to see a close-packed group of Wilson's men emerge from the upper doorway upon the landing. Almost as one, the men above and those below fired. Harl Wayne cursed savagely as a bullet tore through his right upper arm, and a man from above sagged against the railing of the building. It gave with his weight, and he crashed down.

"Red River!" roared Charley-horse Hogan, and the guns blasted their retribution again as Wilson's wolves came toppling down like dummies. The doorway showed clear at last, and the acrid fumes of burning wood mingled with the scent of powder.

"The lamps fired 'er!" shouted Hogan. "Looks like we've about cleaned 'em! This way, Marc!"

He ran toward the front of the building, Marc close at his heels, just in time to see the last four of Wilson's men fighting to get clear of the dead and the fire. At sight of Hogan and Marc they tried to shoot their way past, but their frantic haste ruined their aim, and they went down before surer guns.

"Wilson!" shouted Hogan. "He's still in there!"

He and Marc stepped back and looked up at the second story of the burning building as a burly figure moved into sight in the doorway at the landing. Hogan and Marc swung back toward the stairway at a run.

For an instant Dike Wilson stood there silhouetted against the flame, glaring down at them, gun drawn.

"I'll make terms!" he called hoarsely. "Ten thousand dollars apiece if you'll let me go. Ten thousand apiece, or I'll take every last son I can get from the window inside!"

His answer was a blast of gunfire from below. His big body quivered with the impact of the lead that struck him. For what seemed an eternity, he stood utterly motionless, flames leaping behind him, then slewed sidewise and went down, out of sight, into the devouring blaze.

For another long-drawn moment the men below stood silent, then Hogan's voice roused them.

"Caplan, you and Immerman make a check of the other buildings, to be sure we haven't missed a man. Marc and I will take stock of our wounded."

Caplan and Immerman started off at a swift walk, and Marc and Hogan turned at the sound of Harl Wayne's voice close behind them.

"No wounded but me. I've a hole in my arm. Two dead. My man Shand, and your man Swenson, Hogan. Caplan said he fell behind the bar."

"Well, we came off lucky," said Hogan wearily. "We gave a good account of ourselves." He looked up at the building that was now an inferno, with the flames beginning to lick through the roof. "Swenson, old son—*Red River!* May she be more than a foot deep over there! Move back, boys. It's getting too hot here. Carry Shand over yonder and get your horses ready. I've got a job. Want to come along, Marc?"

"Where you going?" Marc asked sharply.

Hogan pulled out a handful of matches and gave him a grim smile. "I'm going to make sure there's nothing left of Los Lobos, son. Ever hear of poetic justic? And that old sayin', 'As you sow, so shall you reap'?"

Marc fell into step with him, and he saw again in his mind's eye the burning buildings of the Rocking R, and big, hairy hands digging, digging.

By the time the two returned to join the other men, tongues of glowing flame were licking at every structure in the town.

Caplan stepped forward to speak to Hogan. "Not a man left alive, boss."

Hogan smiled grimly. "And not one stick left on another within the space of a night. The job's well done, Caplan. Where's Brand?"

"Here." The Mexican moved into sight from beyond Harl Wayne. "And so—what? Where do we go?"

"To the W Arrow!" said Harl Wayne. "You boys may be outlaws, but I wouldn't know about that. Marc's going to need a crew of good men to restock and rebuild the Rocking R. You've got a lifetime job."

"You mean that for all of us?" asked Charley-horse Hogan curiously.

"Every man jack of you!" said Marc.

"Even me—Wolfe Brand?" whispered the Mexican.

Marc swung his gaze to the dark, expressionless face. "You first! You and Hogan. Well?"

"My men can answer for themselves," said Hogan slowly. "I got 'em together for this one job. They ain't obligated to travel with me any farther. That was the agreement in the first place. They're all hard-ridin' cowboys that ought to welcome a real home range to tie to. It's your move, Caplan."

"The Rockin' R is good enough for me," answered Caplan, "and for the rest of the boys, I reckon. Shall we get movin'?"

THEY rode away from Los Lobos that night with the sky a crimson glare from buildings burning behind them. They reached the W Arrow at the close of the following day, and in the front yard, at a gesture from Hogan, they dismounted and gathered in a group.

"You've got your home range, boys," Hogan said quietly. "I'll be movin' on—to the next job."

The Mexican looked at him with veiled eyes, and spoke as would a man who wanted to leave all fear behind him, and know that his future trail was clear. "Señor—you are very sure that you leave me here, knowing what you must? That I have been the outlaw, hunted—that I——"

The big man eyed him steadily. "I know why you became an outlaw, don't I? I know more than you think I do. I've known it all the time. I know that the real Wolfe Brand died, as he deserved, after he fell out with Dike Wilson. Isn't it time to drop the masquerade? I give you my word: you're in the clear, José Alvariso."

The Mexican's eyes flashed. *"Gracias!* Then, if you wish that we drop the masquerade, I never forget —Señor Red River Bill!"

Marc started, and whirled to stare at the man with the hairy, freckled hands.

Marshal Bill Leeds smiled thinly. "I guess the play's over," he said quietly. "I told Wayne here what I did because I knew I had to work in the dark to get Wilson. I had to do it that way because of the part the double-crossin' Robey was playin', and because I'd learned by accident that Dike was my half brother, though he never knew it. But I came the minute I got Wayne's letter. I'm sorry I got here too late to cut Frobisher's trail that night and save—the Rockin' R."

Marc's face was white, his eyes on Red River Bill's large, freckled hands. It seemed as if they were lighted by firelight, as if they were gripping the handle of a shovel and digging, digging. He said hoarsely: "For every man that was killed that night you crossed off the score three to one—in Los Lobos. I guess that's enough for any man."

A slow, understanding smile lighted the face of Red River Bill, and as his gaze met Marc's he saw that he had saved another man from the outlaw trail, from the wreckage that grief and a passion for vengeance would have caused.

"Yeah, son. I guess that's enough for any man."

MINES AND MINING

By

J. A. THOMPSON

TO a man who enjoys outdoor life, prospecting holds much that is attractive. And perhaps the supreme thrill comes from seeking gold in new and unexplored territory where the geological formations are known to be favorable for mineral deposition. There is no telling what an enthusiastic prospecting adventurer will find under such circumstances—a rich prize, or perhaps a fortune.

Yet it is obviously difficult to suggest an "unexplored" region in which bonanza gold might be uncovered. However, the uninhabited, unprospected Kaiyuh Hills in central Alaska may be the answer to those adventuresome gold seekers who have asked concerning such virgin territory. J. W.'s recent query from Dearborn, Michigan, was on this subject.

"Alaska has always fascinated me. I intend to go there and stay several years. But I would like to find a place where I can do my own pioneer gold prospecting, my own exploring, and make, if possible, my own new gold discovery. I don't care how isolated or rugged the country is. All I ask before going in is some evidence the section is mineralized, some evidence that there is at least a fighting chance of gold being found there."

That chance for you may lie in the Kaiyuh Hills, J. W. They rise, lonely and little known, above the swampy lowlands of the Yukon River basin about thirty miles behind the tiny, almost wholly native settlement of Nulato. The range, an uplift of from one to two thousand feet above the surrounding country, is essentially a long ridge of rounded domes separated by broad and deeply cut saddles. Its extreme length is probably seventy-five miles, its width fifteen.

That makes a lot of ground to pioneer in. Nor is it entirely guesswork to predict that plenty of it may be mineralized, because the Ruby district, which the Kaiyuh Hills subjoin, has already proven tremendously rich and the main rock formations in the Hills are definitely similar to those at and around Ruby. Highly concentrated gold placers have been worked for years at Ruby, and the district's production is still a sizable factor in Alaska's annual gold output.

Just recently the distinguished J. B. Mertie, Jr., of the United States Geological Survey, made an important reconnaissance in the little-known Kaiyuh Hills sector. He studied in broad outline the main geological features of the region, and returned satisfied that further prospecting in the Hills would be justified. In fact, though it was not altogether the main purpose of his trip, he sketchily test-panned some stream gravel there himself and found colors and traces of gold. The published report of his findings is now available. We have told J. W. where a copy of this interesting and authoritative data may be obtained, and we will be equally glad to give the same information to others who are interested.

Regarding gold mineralization in the Kaiyuh Hills, Mertie says: "It has been shown that granitic rocks are the ultimate sources of gold in this region, though the gold itself usually occurs in veins of quartz, which may or may not be close to granitic rocks. The general vicinity of such bodies of granitic rocks, however, is the best site for prospecting for gold lodes, and the streams draining areas that are occupied in whole or in part by granitic rocks, or are closely adjacent to bodies of granitic rocks, are the most favorable sites for the occurrence of gold placers.

"No granitic rocks or indications of such rock were observed at the northeast end of the Kaiyuh Hills, but there is no definite proof of their absence. Such rocks occur at the southwest end of the Hills, and this fact, although it does not rule out other areas, makes this part of Kaiyuh Hills a more favorable site for gold prospecting. It should again be emphasized, however, that the single mapped area of granitic rocks is not the only possible site for prospecting. The adjacent region is likely to have similar areas of granitic rocks which have not been mapped, and careful search for all such areas should be the first aim of prespectors."

Just a warning, J. W., about the Kaiyuh Hills. They are hard country to get into, and tough country to stay in. Set in the heart of Alaska, they were meant to be conquered only by the physically fit, the intrepidly adventurous to whom obstacles of geography and climate are merely a ringing challenge to braver effort and not items of total discouragement.

And Bill K., of Chattanooga, Tennessee, also interested in Alaska, asks us how much gold had already come from that richly mineralized country. The amount runs to about four hundred and sixty million dollars' worth from 1880 to the present time. Perhaps three hundred millions of this was gold washed from stream gravels—placer gold.

We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

Old Jim Randall pledged his son to a strange vow— a promise to make friends with their oldest enemy!

Pardners by Proxy

By GUTHRIE BROWN

Author of "Trail Job," etc.

KANE RANDALL strode through the ranch yard and with jingling spurs vaulted the rickety board steps that led to the front porch. He flung open the door of the living room then paused, staring. The room was in semidarkness, and the drawn shades and heavy silence gave the place a strangely disquieting air.

"Dad!" Kane called sharply. "Dad, are you here?"

From the old horsehair sofa in the far corner a feeble voice answered. "Over here, son. It's this bad ticker of mine. I guess she's balked in earnest this time."

Kane went swiftly to the sofa.

"Don't talk like that," he begged. "Why, we're just getting off to a good start." He looked with concern at the pale, gaunt face on the sofa. "Jim Randall never said quit," he encouraged. "And wait till you hear the news. I got the contract, dad! We can deliver the beef to the construction camp—on the hoof, and —dad, you're not listening."

"I'm listening, boy," the older man said with effort. "Kane, I must tell you something. You're twenty-six now, and you may as well face the facts."

Startled by his father's pallor and weak voice, Kane hurriedly brought pillows and attempted to make the sick man more comfortable.

"You're the last of the Randalls," Jim Randall went on. "You were just a little shaver when your brothers went to war. Remember?"

Kane nodded and tried to keep his voice steady. "And when I think how I left you when I was only eighteen, and—— Dad, why do kids do such crazy danged things?"

Jim Randall smiled faintly. "It's a part of growing up, I suppose, son," he said. "But what I have to talk to you about, Kane, is Jud Birney."

"Birney?" Kane's face darkened.

The older man was watching him intently. "Do you know why Birney has always hated me."

"No."

"It was your mother. He loved her, and he never got over losing her. And he's become worse these last sixteen years. When we were first married your mother and I tried to be friendly with him, tried to make him forget, but he never has—I guess the wound was too deep. He's done things I couldn't forgive——"

THE voice trailed off feebly, then went on more firmly: "But that's a long story. One thing, though, is certain—Birney's an honest man, and no matter how vindictive he feels toward me I want you to realize that, for the sake of something that is bigger than either hate or love."

Kane looked down at his father with dimmed eyes. "What's that, dad?" he asked softly.

Siliver-haired Jim Randall pointed out through the open door. "Look

out there, Kane," he said. "I planted that black locust grove before you were born, and broke out the north eighty in my first year here, walking ten hours a day behind my first team of horses. Your mother drove the staples for half the fences on this ranch when she was a young woman. The land is enriched with our toil and happiness and pain, and there is no stain of dishonor upon it anywhere. Is that not a greater thing?"

Kane said nothing. His voice, had he spoken, would have sounded choked and broken.

"I've never put these thoughts into words before," resumed the frail figure on the sofa; "men don't very often, unless the end of the trail's in sight. But what I want you to see is that Birney feels the same way I do and has always fought to keep the Ladore Valley clean. He's stood for a fair chance for the little fellow, though his holdings could swallow half this valley. It seems strange to me that a man as smart as him could get himself in such a hole.

"You see," he went on, in answer to Kane's questioning look, "he plunged on a mining speculation in the Moose Ridge Mountains, and after several of the ranchers around here went for the scheme the whole thing blew up higher than a kite and——"

"Dad," Kane broke in gently, "rest a little. It's tiring you to talk."

The older man doggedly shook his head, but his breath came with more difficulty as he resumed.

"Jud borrowed money of Mower, giving his cattle as security. You know about Mower?"

Kane nodded. "I've heard him mentioned several times since I came home. Big sheepman on the other side of the range, isn't he?"

"He's a hard case," said Randall. "Notches on his gun, ruthless in business deals, employer of thugs—and all the rest of it. His range is poor and he's tried for years to get a foothold in the Ladore. He doesn't want Birney's cattle, but he does want his land. I've heard that he's pressing Birney to sell, and Birney is sailing so close to the wind that he may have to let Mower have part of his land to save his cattle. And if Mower ever does get an entering wedge here, Kane, it won't be the valley we know very long. That man is a steam roller, with money and ability enough to impose his will. We must keep him out!" The tone of the sick man suddenly rang, and a bright spot of color grew in his cheeks.

Kane asked, "How, dad?"

"By saving Birney. We're the only ones in the valley with enough money and backing to do it. The banks have never refused credit to the 4R."

"But if Birney feels as you say he does, he'll never take help from us."

Randall nodded. "That's your job, son. Win him over, make him like you. For all his bitterness, I can't believe that he'll extend his enmity to you."

Randall sank limply back against the pillows, his words barely audible.

"Save him, Kane! Save all we've worked for, your own heritage. Always men have had to fight to save their heritage from vultures like Mower."

THE next few days were dim and unreal to Kane. Warmth seemed to have gone out of the sun, and goodness out of the earth. With each passing hour he realized more and more the rare qualities of the father he had lost,

the father whom he had failed to appreciate until it was too late, and remorse sharpened his grief.

But he was brought abruptly back to present problems one raw November morning when a cowboy handed the new master of the 4R a letter. It was from the foreman of the railroad construction camp which Kane had contracted to supply with beef through the coming winter. The letter read in part:

> Of course you were not to begin delivery until the middle of this month, but our present source of supply has unexpectedly failed us. Will it be possible for you to make your first delivery here on the 7th? If you can't, send me word and I'll try to make other arrangements.

"Can't possibly do it," Kane told the cowboy. "This is the fifth, and it's a three-day drive to the camp. I've agreed to put the beef there in first-class condition. I'd have to run all the meat off them to—— Wait a minute!"

Kane's eyes suddenly lighted and he stood poised in thought a few minutes. Finally he told the waiting puncher, "Tell him I'll be there the night of the seventh with my first consignment."

When Kane reviewed more soberly the scheme that had flashed into his mind, doubt began to assail him. The plan was too bold, too risky. It might only make Birney furious, and involve Kane in all sorts of unwelcome complications. He ought to approach Birney more gradually, take time to win him. . . . Well, the die was cast now and there was nothing to do but go through with it.

The holdings of Jud Birney lay between the 4R Ranch and the construction camp. A direct crossing would cut the length of Kane's drive in half, and if he bought pasture and hay of Birney, he could deliver his beef to the camp in nearly perfect condition.

It was shortly after noon when he set out with thirty head of cattle and one rider to help him. For the first time in his life the young man opened a Birney gate and set foot on Birney's fenced land. His companion slanted a glance at him as he closed the gate.

"Ain't you takin' a long chance, boss?"

Kane's smile was a little grim. "I'm trying not to think how long it is, Shad, and I'm only hoping that we don't meet up with Birney till we get in here a mile or so."

But they met no one, and after a time the cowboy remarked: "Most o' the hands are workin' the east side now, I think. That's where Birney usually does his final cuttin' in the fall."

Kane nodded, and persently the ranch buildings came in sight. He told the puncher, "Hold them in the draw here, Shad, till I see if I can find somebody."

He rode down into the grassy swale toward the corrals, but there seemed to be no one about. A single saddled horse stood with dropped reins before the door of the rambling old log house. Kane dismounted and dropped his own reins. He had set foot on the bottom step to the veranda when he heard raised voices and involuntarily he paused.

"I can't do it, Mower!" The tone was high and strained. "I told you last week that I couldn't do it, that you'd have to give me another month to make this payment. You agreed, when I made the note, that I could have at least sixty days leeway any time I might need it."

"You're talkin' through your hat!" The second voice was coarser and heavier than the first. "I never said nothin' o' the sort. And even if I

had, I need that two hundred right now. It's overdue and I want it. And don't forget that there's another two hundred comin' up in twenty days again. I'll want that, too. I've monkeyed along with you as long as I'm gonna, Birney. I want them payments on the dot."

Birney's tone was more nearly normal when he spoke again. "You know mighty well, Mower, that I'm good for this. But I haven't any two hundred dollars in cash right here in the house. Who would have? When you refuse my check——"

Mower broke in: "A check ain't legal tender, accordin' to law. Besides, this feller I'm dealin' with demands a down payment in cash, and I gotta have it."

The listening Kane felt sure that Mower was lying, using the technicality solely to trap the harassed Birney. The latter all at once seemed to accept defeat, for he exploded:

"All right then! You've been after me to sell that south section that borders on your range. How'll you take it in full settlement for the note I——"

THE door opened. Kane had acted upon pure impulse. But if the impulse was sudden it was calculated. Here was an opportunity made to order, a chance to win Birney's friendship at one stroke.

The two men were so taken aback by the intrusion that they sat speechless for just the interval that it took Kane to collect his own scattered thoughts. Though he had not seen Birney for years, he knew him at once. That square, weathered face and those alert, deep-set eyes, once seen, could never again be mistaken. Birney's iron-gray hair rose in a ramp above a high, creased brow, whose scowl deepened abruptly as he recognized the visitor.

Mower was a somewhat larger man, and Jim Randall's word "vulture" fitted him exactly, thought Kane. The hooked nose and jutting jaws had a curiously pinched look as his rather small eyes narrowed upon the intruder.

Kane assumed an ease that he by no means felt. "Sorry to butt in like this, Birney, but I'm in a hurry. Here's the three hundred I agreed to pay you for pasture and feed."

Kane did not make the mistake of trying to hand Birney the money. He stepped across the room and laid the greenbacks on a table, then turned toward the door. How thankful he was that he had supplied himself with that cash. True, he had procured it to pay another man for pasture and feed, but he had had it ready to bring with him today.

At the threshold Birney's hoarse voice stopped him.

"Wait."

The rancher got out of his chair, walked to the table, and picked up the money. Kane's heart failed him for a minute. He'd lost and this grim old man was going to let his stubborn pride and hate have its way.

Slowly Birney counted over the money, counted again, and then handed Mower two thirds of it.

"There's your payment," he said, and his eyes dismissed Mower as pointedly as the spoken word.

The sheepman stood up slowly, and his hard, crafty glance shot from Birney to the waiting Kane and back again. Shrewd as a weasel, he had no key to this situation, but instinct told him that there was a catch somewhere. How had it come about that these reputed enemies were acting together? However, Birney's cold,

blank gaze was still upon him, and there was nothing for him to do but leave.

The cattleman stood in the open door, watching, until he had ridden off. When Birney turned back to Kane the young man was startled by the look on his face. Hate, rage, and something else—a sort of reluctant acceptance of the inevitable—concentrated their force upon the son of his enemy. His voice shook.

"What'n the devil does this mean?"

Kane was doing his best to appear at ease, but inwardly he was shaken by the ruthlessness and force of the older man.

"Just what I said, Mr. Birney. I have the contract for delivering beef this winter to the railroad construction camp. If I can hold the cattle in a pasture of yours and feed them here, I can put them into the camp in first-class shape. Of course" —Kane tried to smile against that wall of hostility—"I had intended to ask you if I might do this, but when I came to the door and overheard Mower—well, none of us want Mower in the Ladore, of course. I butted in before you could finish your proposition because I knew that if you gave him your word you'd keep it."

Birney's face had not changed during this speech, and Kane's heart sank. He saw that the rancher had bargained with necessity, not with him.

"Use the pasture west of the stone butte." Birney's tone was jerky and he was having trouble keeping his feelings under control. "You'll have to haul your hay from the field a mile beyond. There'll be a coupla stacks measured up and marked for you. Going price for pasture and feed."

He had been speaking to the floor, in short growls. Now he raised his head suddenly and said between his teeth:

"Get out of here, and don't ever set foot in this house again, or within sight of it. When you owe me some more money, send me a check. Get out!"

KANE turned and walked from the house, almost stunned by the violence of Birney's passion. He did not know that he looked enough like his mother to call up a pain so old that it should have been dead. There was no sense or reason to the thing, as Kane saw it. He had his own share of pride and temper, and it came into full play as soon as he had recovered from the impact of the older man's personality. Why, the old fool just didn't have good sense! Well, he could just go his own gait from here on—he, Kane, would make no more advances.

Kane was on his way to the pasture to pick up five steers for the construction camp. He was feeling more cheerful that cold December morning than at any time since his father's death.

As he came in sight of the pasture he met Birney on the trail. The rancher evidently had been waiting for him. Birney sat in his saddle as solidly as if he and the horse were one, his black hat brim pulled low above his glowering eyes. Again Kane felt the weight of the man's unrelenting hostility and vowed that he would not be overborne by it this time. The two horses touched noses and the young man stopped and waited.

Birney began in a growl which would, in spite of him, go off key occasionally.

"I might've known, when I let you

slip that fast one over, that you'd try something else before long."

"What're you trying to say?" Kane demanded.

For answer, Birney flung out an arm in the direction of the pasture.

Kane looked and leaned forward in his saddle. His cattle, some forty head of them now, were bunched about two stacks in a neighboring field, only a few hundred yards from the pasture where Kane had left them.

"But that's all good fence!" he exclaimed aloud. "And why would they break out? I fed them last night."

"And cut the fence before you left for home!" Birney shot at him.

Kane returned furiously: "That's a lie and you know it! What would I cut a fence for, when I have all the feed I need?"

Birney's short laugh wasn't pleasant. "Plain, isn't it? You're sore because you have to haul hay from up the creek, instead of from those stacks close by. Well, that free feed is going to cost you just a hundred dollars, mister."

Kane said between his teeth: "If that fence has been cut, as you say, I won't pay it! Somebody has——"

Birney told him violently: "You'll pay, or the deal's off! I never asked you to come here in the first place."

A pointed retort to the effect that Birney had, anyway, taken his money was on the tip of Kane's tongue. Then he remembered his father. . . . This childish, vindictive old haymaker must be placated for the sake of the Ladore. The voice of the young man was quiet as he resigned himself to the inevitable.

"All right," he said, "I'll pay. I'll have the money with me when I get back from the railroad camp at the end of this week."

Birney's face was set in a hard smile. "Admit you did it, huh?"

Kane looked him between the eyes. "You know very well I'm not admitting it! But I'll find out who did cut that fence——"

Birney broke in. "All you got to do is remember that if it happens again, I'm turning your critters off my land. Once is enough for me."

Kane turned to ride on as he retorted, "But once isn't enough for you to pick bones that're already bare."

Birney had no answer to this shot.

THE fence had been cut, there was no doubt about that. Kane wondered if Birney himself might have done it, in his insane hatred of a Randall. But it was hard to accept that solution. It was more likely to have been Mower, seeking to stir up strife between Kane and Birney. But if that was it, how was Kane to catch Mower? Camp out here the rest of the winter?

Three days later, on his return from the construction camp, he had arrived at no solution. The thoughts of the young man were gloomy, and the weather wasn't helping. It was snowing and blowing hard, with a wind on the ridges that cut to the bone.

Kane decided that he might as well stop and feed the cattle on his way home this morning and save a man a trip up to the pasture later in the day. He harnessed the horses that he kept corralled near the stacks, got a big load on the hayrack in spite of the wind, and took it down to the pasture through the deepening snow.

Again he found the fence down and signs that the cattle had been at the stacks. But they were not there now. Their tracks, fast dis-

appearing in the new-fallen snow, bore off to the west, and the tracks of three or four riders flanked and followed them. So Birney had carried out his threat! And it looked from this as if he must be the one who was doing the fence cutting, too.

Kane didn't lose a second. He had, of course, left his saddle horse back at the stack yard. He unhooked his team, tied one animal to the hayrack and, on its mate, went back for his saddle horse.

The trail had grown very faint by the time he got to it again, although one horse track seemed fresher than the others. He didn't understand that, but gave the matter little thought.

In half an hour he had lost the trail. However, by this time its direction made him certain that he could guess the plan of the drive. On the west side of Birney's holdings was a pit known as Dead Horse Pocket. A small band of wild horses had been snowed in there one winter and starved to death. If Kane's cattle were driven down into the pit and left even overnight they could never, in such a storm, be taken out alive.

He was so sure that his guess was right that he took all the short cuts he could find. They were not many, and it was an hour later before he stood on the rim above the pocket —to see his cattle in the bottom. Rage seized him as he started down the trail, which twisted among boulders and brush as it zigzagged across the precipitous slope.

Halfway down he came out on a bulge of hillside where he could see into the bottom of the pocket again. The steers were standing huddled together in the sleet, heads drooping, and Kane suddenly checked his horse. A rider was emerging from the pocket, at the foot of the trail. Birney! How wrong his father had been about this embittered old man! Jaw hard, Kane again started on. But he had gone only a few yards when the sound of a shot startled him. He saw Birney wheel his horse and dash for the shelter of some huge boulders. Somebody was dry-gulching the old scoundrel! Well, it served him right.

Then, seeking cover himself, Kane frowned. Things didn't seem to fit in quite right here. Three or four riders had brought the cattle up here. Were some of Birney's own men trying to get him? That seemed a fantastic idea.

Three puffs of smoke came from the farther side of the pocket, and Kane crouched behind the brush screen and watched. Birney answered the fire, but he shot only once to the four or five times of the attackers. The puffs of smoke showed farther apart, two of them moving to right and left of the original position. Then the one on the right ceased to appear, while the other two kept up the siege intermittently. Kane wondered if a shot of Birney's had disabled one man.

The surprise of the situation had driven the thought of the cattle from his mind and, anyway, he could do nothing toward getting them out of here while this fight was in progress. The snow was falling thinly now, but that was no sign that it might not be coming down heavily again in a few minutes.

His eye caught a movement on the steep slope to the right of him. He glued his gaze to the spot, and presently made out a man sneaking through the brush. The man carried a rifle, and his attention was fixed upon the rocks that sheltered Birney.

Kane started to move. He couldn't let the old fool be shot in

the back! Then he hesitated. Birney had got himself into this jam; let him figure his own way out. But Kane could not, somehow, convince himself of the validity of that reasoning. Here were three men against one—and that one an old man. And there was the Ladore.

GUN in hand, Kane stalked the stalker. And, by sheer mischance, the man saw him. Apparently the fellow lost his head, for he jerked up his rifle and blazed away at Kane, who crouched behind a rock and waited for a sure shot. But there came the sudden crack of a rifle from another direction, and the man who had been bombarding Kane flung up his hands with a scream and plunged a few feet downhill, falling in a heap in the snow. Birney had got him, thinking, Kane knew afterward, that the fellow had been shooting at Birney himself.

Kane raced into view to snatch up the fallen rifle. Fire poured from the opposite side of the pocket, and he flattened, breathless, in the brush, while lead hail spattered about him.

Birney, seeing this diversion of the enemy's fire, now understood that he had an ally, but he was floored when Kane slid down among the rocks beside him, gasping, covered with snow, but carrying a rifle and a belt filled with ammunition.

"You!" he gasped.

"Yes, you blasted old thief, it's me!"

"Me? Thief?" roared Birney, finding his tongue and straightening. "Why, you——"

He didn't finish, for Kane reached up and yanked him flat on the ground as bullets whined above their heads and ricocheted from the rocks.

"Stay down, you idiot!" Kane snapped.

Birney swore with great fervor, but stayed down. "What do you mean by calling me a thief?" he demanded angrily. "You half-baked young fool, do you think *I* drove your cattle off? I don't know who took 'em, but I followed 'em up here to find out."

Kane stammered. "You—you did that—for me?"

Birney snorted. "I should say not! Your cattle could go to the devil for all o' me, but if there're thieves on my land——"

He was interrupted by a fusillade. The attackers had changed position and some of the lead struck uncomfortably close.

"We got to get those birds!" muttered Kane, ramming shells into his weapon.

Birney backed away from the crevice he had been using for a loophole and threw out an empty shell as he grunted, "That makes two we don't have to get."

"Another?" Kane chuckled. "Birney, you're some shot. You——" His words changed to a yell of warning.

"The last man's making a break for it!"

Across the pocket before them a rider raced toward the foot of the trail, spurs dug into the flanks of his horse, rifle at shoulder as he peppered the rocks.

Kane and Birney said with one gasp, "Mower!" and Birney drew his deadly bead on the fleeing man.

Kane pleaded: "Don't kill him, Birney! Don't you see where we'll have him, if we can capture him? Drop his horse! I'll take care of him!"

The passionate urgency of the voice compelled the older man against his will.

Almost at the foot of the steep trail out of the pocket, Mower's horse was halted as if he had hit a wall.

He turned a complete somersault, throwing his rider clear.

Kane had started running as Birney changed his aim. The stunned Mower could not get to his feet before the young man was on top of him.

JUD BIRNEY and Kane Randall were riding home from the county seat. They had been saying little. Birney suddenly demanded:

"What're you grinning about?"

Kane laughed aloud. "The look on the sheriff's face when we told him that we weren't going to prosecute."

"Batty idea!" snorted Birney.

"And," continued Kane, "the look on Mower's face when we told him that——"

"*We,*" growled Birney. "That's good!"

"Well, *I* told him, then." Kane grinned. "But you let me, remember." He laughed again. "The sheriff was so solemn about filling out that affidavit about just how many cattle Mower had stolen from me, and about just how many shots he'd fired in trying to murder you. And Mower was so awful solemn about signing it, after explaining that he'd intended to lay the blame for your killing on me—*wasn't* it a sweet set-up, Birney?

"There was Mower, sure that I'd blame you for running off my cattle. Then you show up—and he can't get out of the pocket without you seeing him. Then *I* come barging into the picture—and solve all his difficulties! He sees me on the trail and starts peppering you. After he gets you, he'll have three witnesses against me—and the Ladore will be his for the taking."

"I still say it's a batty idea," grumbled Birney.

"Letting Mower off, you mean?" asked Kane. "But he canceled that note of yours——"

"Highway robbery!"

"And he's to sell out and leave the State—or we'll use his affidavit."

"Blackmail!" But there was a twinkle far back in Birney's eyes, and that was the thing Kane had been working for.

The HOLLOW TREE

Conducted by HELEN RIVERS

IN his search for new thrills and excitement, this young man is going to take a *pasear* into the West in the near future. He's traveled from the snowy wastes of the far North to the steaming jungles of South America and he extends this invitation to you members of The Ol' Holla who live west of the Mississippi.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I have been a constant reader of Western Story Magazine ever since I was knee-high and have corresponded with many people whose letters have appeared in your department. Now here I am again with another request.

I have spent eleven months here in the Canal Zone working in Uncle Sam's Civil Service and have decided to take a little trip through the western part of the United States early in July 1938. I would like to contact young men and women who would find time to take me around their respective parts of the country.

I am twenty-two, weigh one hundred sixty-five, am five feet eleven inches tall, blue-eyed, and have light brown hair. My disposition is cheerful and I have a decided love for the unexpected. I have traveled extensively and have accumulated a great many interests. I shall be financially independent and will be free to do as I please while in the West.

This is an open invitation to all you guys and gals from the Far West, or any State west of the Mississippi, to drop me a line and let me explain further my plans.

VICTOR FRANCIS MILNER.
Box 1257, Christobal, Canal Zone.

From atop the Blue Ridge Mountains, this versatile miss is scouting for Pen Pals.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Hello, everybody! Here I come from the Blue Ridge Mountains looking for Pen Pals. How about it? I am free, white, twenty-five and single with blond wavy hair and blue eyes. I'm fond of dancing, movies, reading, swimming, collecting souvenirs, photography and—best of all—letter writing. I would love to have Pen Pals from everywhere, and will guarantee a prompt answer to all who send stamps. Come on, Pals, let's get acquainted!

MILDRED LAWSON.
R. R. #1, Meadows of Don, Virginia.

Come one, come all, and answer the plea of this soldier boy in the Philippine Islands.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I would like to correspond with any one anywhere. I am a soldier stationed at Fort Mills in the Philippine Islands. I am six feet two inches tall, weigh one hundred eighty-four, and have dark hair and gray

eyes. I would like to exchange snapshots with all who write, so come one, come all and answer my plea.

PRIVATE B. SANDERS.
Station Hospital,
Fort Mills, Philippine Islands.

An old friend of the Hollow Tree is back again looking for more names to add to her list.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Many years ago I sent in a request to your Department for Pen Pals and received many answers. In fact, I met my husband through the Hollow Tree and one of my most devoted woman friends. My list by now has dwindled down to just a few, and so I am again asking for Pen Pals from the Far East, England, Scotland, France, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. I have many interesting things to write about and I will assure all who answer interesting letters.

MRS. OSCAR JOHNSON.
685 McAllister Street,
San Francisco, California.

Going, going, gone—to the first twenty who write—a souvenir from Grand Canyon, Arizona!

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a young man twenty years old, five feet eleven inches tall and weigh one hundred sixty-five. I have brown eyes and brown wavy hair and a quiet disposition. I would like to get letters from anybody anywhere. I will answer all of them and give information about any State west of the Mississippi. To the first twenty who write I will send a souvenir of Grand Canyon, Arizona. So come on, you cow-punchers, and send this old Texas straight-shooting, rip-roaring cowpoke a letter.

T. H. CHAPMOND.
N. P. 5A, Grand Canyon, Arizona.

This lonesome little blue-eyed blond wants to hear from any one—especially those from the wild 'n' woolly West.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am sixteen years old with blond hair and blue eyes. I live in the country with my family and sometimes get very lonesome. I enjoy reading books but like reading and writing letters best. I would like to hear from any one, especially those who live in the West. To the first few persons who write, I will enclose a photo of myself so come on, friends, and fill up my mailbox!

THELMA WOOLEY.
R. R. #1, Box 63,
Cedar Grove, Indiana.

A lively lass from out Colorado way wants to hear from either boys or girls.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a sixteen-year-old tomboy who is very fond of sports, animals and music. I would like to hear from either boys or girls who are interested in the same things I am. Here's hoping I get lots of answers!

CLARIS LEE EIBERT.
Gunnison, Colorado.

It is a natural impulse and it is a good impulse to desire to wander and to roam. Not too much, of course. But the desire to go places and see things should be and is in all of us—in all of us who amount to anything, at least, for traveling educates us, and changing our geographic location often is of great benefit to health, mind, and economic well-being. A wise man once said, "A rolling stone gathers no moss," but a wiser man, we think, added, "but a standing pool stagnates."

If you are one who would travel, it is a mighty good thing to have man's best asset along the way, and at your destination. We mean, of course, friends.

If you would like a friend or friends in a certain section, write to Miss Rivers, and she will put you in touch with readers who want to correspond with folks in your part of the world.

It must be understood that Miss Rivers will undertake to exchange letters only between men and men, boys and boys, women and women, girls and girls. Letters will be forwarded direct when correspondents so wish; otherwise they will be answered here. Be sure to inclose forwarding postage when sending letters through The Hollow Tree.

Address: Helen Rivers, care The Hollow Tree, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Talbot's Hide-out

By

STEPHEN PAYNE

Author of "Steer Outfit," etc.

Even a renegade can have a code of honor...

THIS awesome and lonely land atop the mountain range, atop the world, was Talbot's country. He was the only settler, if settler he might call himself. From his aerie, his lookout at the crest of a huge rock pile which lifted above the stunted spruce trees surrounding his cabin, he could see his domain spread out in all directions—crags and pinnacles, cliffs and moraines, dark, mysterious canyons, clusters of fir trees, and lakes set one above another, glistening like jewels in the bright sunlight.

Three years ago Talbot had settled here, far from the haunts of man, and had built his cabin at the foot of Pinnacle Rock. Crippled, embittered, and to a certain degree remorseful, he had elected that here he should spend the last days of his life—his misspent life—and here die in peace. What he craved was peace—peace and a certain sense of security. And security he could never find in towns, ranches, or camps, no matter how remote. For the arm of the law is long, its vigilance unceasing. Some day, unless he placed himself beyond reach of the law, Talbot had felt that he would be picked up, and then he'd spend his declining years behind stone walls, gray and pitiless and cold. That was what he feared more than he feared a hangman's rope, more than he feared a rifle bullet.

Yet he had been unable to burn all his bridges behind him. One link he still was compelled to maintain between his hide-away and the great outside world. This was a matter of necessity, for even a hermit must have his food supplies replenished from time to time, and Talbot could no longer ride a horse. And he walked only with difficulty, slowly, painfully, limping on a

bullet-riddled right leg and a grotesquely twisted left foot.

This link with the outside was one of the outlaws who had ridden under Talbot's banner in the old days, the wild and reckless old days. "Hairy George" had then been but a cub, Talbot the wily old wolf who had led the pack. Talbot had liked the eager, reckless cub, and Hairy George had proved loyal. To him the old man had confided his wish and Hairy George had not been unsympathetic.

It was Hairy George who had helped the crippled outlaw to build the cabin and furnish it crudely. Hairy George had scaled the giant rock pile, which Talbot could not climb, and had dropped down a rope ladder for the old man's use. After that Hairy George had gone away to seek the excitement he craved. But twice every year—in the spring and in the fall—this bandit brought to Talbot two packhorse loads of grub. It was simple fare, mostly the necessities of life other than meat, for Talbot could always get plenty of meat. There would be salt and flour, coffee, sirup, dried fruit, matches, tobacco, beans and salt pork, and sometimes, as a treat, potatoes and onions. Talbot lived frugally and made his own clothing from skins he tanned with his own shaky, blue-veined hands.

WHEN Hairy George had last visited the outlaw, this past spring, Talbot had noticed a change in the man. He wasn't the same reckless, dare-devil kid he had been. He had become cynical, remorseless, and cruel. Talbot hadn't mentioned it but he had hated to see this change. Yet this was to be expected of a man who followed Hairy George's calling along the owl-hoot trail.

A speculative gleam had shone in Hairy George's wicked eyes when Talbot had paid him with gold for the food and for his trouble in bringing it. It was a look Talbot hadn't liked. He had felt then as if Hairy George might pounce upon him like a cougar and demand to know the whereabouts of his cache—the hoard of gold which Talbot had kept to provide for his old age.

But that time the young bandit had held himself in leash. It was now autumn and on this particular day Hairy George had come again with two pack horses loaded with grub and some extra cartridges. And again when Talbot paid him that cruel and calculating gleam filled the criminal's wolfish eyes. Talbot feared the man. But before Hairy George could make a move there came an interruption.

From the east, up over the range, had ridden a stranger, a jovial, middle-aged man who said he had seen smoke lifting from the spruce around Talbot's cabin and had thus found the camp. He further stated that he was a rancher cutting across the mountains to get to Leghorn, west of the range, there to buy a herd of cows.

Talbot couldn't very well turn the stranger away, so he said he was a hermit trapper and glad to have company. But he was deeply troubled, for he could not possibly take chances on having visitors drop in on him. He was a marked man—that twisted foot and the white scar on his temple were inescapable marks of identification. Many a lawman had his description and often during these past two years he had sighted men prowling the top of the range, though none had found

his cabin. But now—was there to be a trail beaten to his door?

Hairy George welcomed the visitor heartily, and after supper engaged him in a poker game. By midnight he had relieved the rancher of his roll—five thousand dollars, the cash with which the visitor had intended to buy cattle. His last cent gone, the cowman rose wrathfully and flung at his opponent, "You're a dirty cheat!"

Talbot didn't know if this was true or not. His eyesight wasn't what it had once been, but Hairy George might easily have palmed cards or flipped them from his sleeve without Talbot's seeing it.

Talbot had learned on the outlaw trail that when you accuse any man of cheating you must be ready to back your hand with action. Hairy George knew this, and so, it also appeared, did the cowman. Throwing his challenge in the teeth of Hairy George, he reached for his gun—to sign his own death warrant.

Vividly the ugly picture those two made in his little lamp-lighted cabin, teeth bared, snarling at each other, stamped itself on Talbot's mind. Nevertheless Hairy George allowed the man to get his Colt clear of leather, and even lift it, before his own right hand flashed. In that hand blue metal glinted and the report of his gun rocked the cabin—the roar of his gun only.

At daybreak Hairy George loaded the stiff, cold body of the cowman on his own horse and tied it there. The cash he had long since stuffed into his pockets. Now he remarked laconically: "Talbot, since you're all crippled up I'll save you the trouble of plantin' this fool. Be seein' you again next spring, old hoss."

Then something in Talbot's faded eyes stopped the outlaw as he was about to swing to saddle. "What's bitin' on you?" he demanded.

"You hadn't no call to kill him," said the old man flatly. "You could of jus' knocked him down. Don't ever come back, Hairy."

Hairy George's sharp-angled face became wolfish, and the blaze of his eyes reached out and scorched Talbot. "Meanin' we're through?" he snarled. "Pals of our callin' in the old days and accordin' to the code you yourself laid down was never through with one another unless they——"

"I know," Talbot broke in, brushing a hand across his wrinkled forehead. "The code was we stuck to one another through hell and high water, backed up one another till the last ditch and then some—unless a man violated one rule I'd laid down."

"Yeah," sneered Hairy George, "whatever a man done was hunky with you, the boss, so long as he never mistreated nor insulted a woman. Aw, what the devil. I've ——" He stopped an instant and glanced oddly at Talbot standing rigid at the door of his cabin before continuing: "You stood for the play I made las' night and accordin' to your code you can't throw me down for that, nor turn agin' me. I'll be seein' you."

AFTER Hairy George was gone down the western slope of the range, leading three horses, one of which bore a gruesome burden, Talbot spent the day wondering where he could hide now and also wondering why he hadn't stopped that fight last night. It wasn't his quarrel, of course, but it——

Early the next morning he climbed the rope ladder leading to his lookout station and anxiously

scanned the country. That murdered rancher—some one might come hunting for him. Talbot could lie, could say he had seen no one, but unless it snowed—and the sky gave no hint of storm—the stranger's horse tracks would tell a different story.

Talbot could not move on, old and crippled as he was, afoot and alone. Without help he could not pack up and go elsewhere. But he now had no isolation, no security. He felt as if he were sitting on a keg of dynamite which might explode under him at any minute. Curse Hairy George anyhow. He shouldn't have killed and robbed that cowman. Yet if lawmen came, saw the horse tracks and demanded to know where the rancher had gone and what had happened, Talbot could not tell them the truth. This the old code forbade. All of that day he suffered in silence. Peace was a mockery, seclusion a delusion. No man who had followed the outlaw trail could ever find either.

In the evening Talbot ascended once again to his rock aerie. He had to rest the long, old-fashioned telescope across a boulder to hold it steady. This done and the instrument focused, the powerful lens brought a distant rider up close for Talbot's inspection. For a long time, then, he was still, his shaky old heart pumping blood through his dried-out body, bringing a glow to his leathery, wrinkled old face. A girl! Talbot hadn't seen one in five years. There stirred within him strange, half-forgotten memories, some bitter, many pleasant.

She rode a sturdy black pony and wore plain and serviceable cowboy clothing. The brim of her wide hat was turned down to shield her eyes against the slanting sunlight—sunlight which shone upon her and upon this vast, beautiful, and lonely land atop the world. Even at this distance, Talbot knew she was following the tracks the rancher's horse had left. The girl was seeking the man who'd been murdered!

Talbot lowered the glass, cold sweat beading his forehead. And then, suddenly, he felt ice-cold waves all over his body. For in the west, jogging steadily toward his haven, was another rider, and the old outlaw didn't need his telescope to recognize this one. It was Hairy George.

The chill passed and now Talbot's body tingled.

"Salty cow!" he said softly. "Things is shapin' up for a showdown. George has gone to the bad proper. I seen it in him. He's a plumb no-good hombre. I'll get my Winchester."

HE had only his ancient single-action six-shooter with him. Starting down the rope ladder more hastily than usual, he slipped and fell. He landed clear of the ladder, but an upthrust sliver of rock formed a crevice between the rope and the rocks, and in this slit Talbot was caught by his left leg. Though it kept him from plummeting on downward, he was now held as in a vise, his body jammed against the rock wall and his trapped leg broken.

Pain shot through the old man, numbing him. He gritted his teeth and tried to free himself, but failed. He could move no part of his body except his arms. And there was nothing he could grasp in order to pull himself upward.

He lost consciousness for a time and when he came back to awareness darkness had fallen. Through this darkness came voices, and Tal-

bot concentrated his entire attention upon listening to them.

"You say there's no place to stop beyond here for at least fifty miles?"

"The girl!" Talbot's dry lips formed the words. "She's talkin' to Hairy George."

"That's right, miss. Your pa you was askin' 'bout, he's all jake. I jus' come from the west an' I met him. Say, why was you worried 'bout him?"

Hairy George! Talbot could see them both now, at the west side of his cabin, there at the foot of the rock pile, about twenty yards distant from him.

"I'll tell you straight," said the girl, bitterness suddenly filling her voice. "He's not my father, only my stepfather. And I have reason to think he was skipping out with money that didn't belong to him—mother's money, which he got by selling her cattle."

"That so!" Hairy George exclaimed. "Anybody besides you suspect that?"

"My mother doesn't. Perhaps, though—it's an off chance—the young cowboy I'm engaged to does. But I told nobody where I was going. When dad failed to come home, I waited a reasonable time, then saddled up and hit out on his trail."

"Then you're all alone," said Hairy George, and there was a tinge of elation in his voice.

Up on the pinnacle, Talbot fought off dizziness and nausea. Hanging thus, head down, racked by excruciating pain, was the most terrible thing he'd ever been called upon to endure. He strained his ears and his eyes, while slowly, awkwardly, he worked his old Colt free of its holster. Fortunate, he thought, that he hadn't lost the gun.

"Oh, yes, quite alone. You see, I hoped to prevail on dad to return home and—— Who lives here? You only just this minute came yourself."

"A funny ol' hermit did live here. But he's picked up stakes. I'm sure of that or he'd be around." As if speaking only to himself, Hairy George went on, "Humph! I'll bet he got scairt, and I'm too late a-gettin' back yere to grab his roll like I figgered out I'd orter do. But I'll find his trail and get his li'le wad!"

"What are you talking about?" the girl asked in alarm. "Why you talk like a—a bandit!"

"That's jus' what I am, missy." Hairy George's voice was like the crack of a whip. He reached out and placed a hairy hand on the girl's arm. "Maybe we'll ride the trail together, to-morrow. How 'bout it? I'm a bad hombre when you cross me, sister."

TALBOT'S blood pounded as the girl screamed. He grasped his gun in both hands, trying to hold it steady. How dark it had grown. He should not have waited so long. Still, not until this moment had Hairy George definitely broken their code—the code of Talbot's old outlaw clan. He was a plumb rotten hombre. So now——

Talbot filled his lungs and his voice lifted in a harsh challenge: "Fill your hand, George!"

Hairy George dropped the struggling girl as if the touch of her seared his hands. He pivoted, Colt in hand. Accurately this wily and deadly bandit located his enemy by the voice.

"You bloody old meddler!" he yelled—and fired.

A second shot roared from the

pinnacle rocks. Then echoes crashed and a human body slithered down the rocky slope. Hairy George's bullet ripping through Talbot had caused a convulsive upward heave of the old man's entire body, freeing his trapped leg.

Meanwhile, Hairy George had staggered forward, throwing wide his arms. Then with a strangled curse he collapsed in a heap.

But Talbot didn't see it. He was dead, but there was a smile on his lips, for he had known when he pulled trigger that his aim was true.

Half an hour later, a mile from the outlaw's cabin, a frightened and trembling girl met a clear-eyed young cowboy.

"Gwen!" he cried, pulling to a halt. "I trailed after you. But what's happened? You look like a ghost."

"I'll tell you, Billy," the girl sobbed. And presently, after this young man had held her in his arms and kissed her and consoled her, she managed to tell her story.

Slowly they returned to Talbot's haven, where Billy lighted Talbot's lamp and looked first at the crumpled body of the old bandit.

"Why," he exclaimed, "this is Trigger Talbot, the outlaw! They say he was a bad hombre in his day, but I wonder if by this last square thing he did he doesn't even accounts and sorta balance the ledger in his favor?"

"I'm sure of it," choked the girl. Tenderly she laid her tear-stained handkerchief over the still face of Talbot, and something, she knew not what, put the words into her mouth, "For him there's peace and security at last."

NEW TRADING CODE FOR INDIANS

UNDER a new code recently drawn up in Washington, notable changes have been put into force regarding trade with Navajo, Zuni and Hopi reservations.

Indians have suffered from time to time from exploitation. The new regulations are designed to prevent this in the future. Twenty-eight rules have been enacted. Only government employees are allowed to trade with the Indians, and these traders are directly responsible to John Collier, United States commissioner of Indian affairs.

Licensed traders are henceforth prohibited from granting or donating money or goods for the performance of any tribal dance or ceremony. All payments to Indians for products or labor must be made in United States currency or in credit on traders' books, at the option of the Indian. Government checks accepted by traders must be made in cash, merchandise or credit for the full value of the check. In all such cases it will be at the option of the Indian.

Trading fees which will be exacted yearly for the privilege of conducting traffic with the tribes, will be used to enforce regulations.

In none of the traders' stores will gambling devices be allowed a place. The new régime is thoroughly approved by both Indians and traders, and it is believed that much of the bitterness and misunderstanding that has existed between the red men and traders will be done away with.

HISTORIC MINES OF THE WEST

(THE ALASKA TREADWELL)

By JOHN A. THOMPSON

Five hundred dollars down—for a sixty million dollar bonanza!

A GOLD mine that produces between sixty-three and sixty-four million dollars in gold bullion has a definite right to documentary recognition, especially when this tremendous output was made mining ore averaging only a little over two dollars in gold to the ton.

Add that the mine was originally purchased *sight unseen* by a Nevada carpenter on his first trip to Alaska and you have the story of the famous Alaska Treadwell, situated on Douglas Island across Gastineau Channel and directly opposite Juneau on the mainland of southeastern Alaska. As a matter of fact, it was in Juneau that John Treadwell bought the mine. He had never even been on Douglas Island at the time, but he took one chance in a million—and hit the jack pot.

In the first place Treadwell was a carpenter, a good one. He had also had considerable experience in and around mines, both in Nevada and in California, where he tackled both placer and lode mining. His big year was 1881. At that time he was building a house in San Francisco

for John D. Fry, a banker. Also at that time in San Francisco, the mining Mecca of the West coast, a lot of stories were making the rounds about some new gold strikes that had been made in the Silver Bow Basin back in the mountains behind Juneau.

"Look here, John," said John Fry, the banker, to John Treadwell, the carpenter, "you've had a lot of mining experience. I think there is money to be made gold mining in Alaska. Suppose you go up to Juneau and see what you think of the country. Don't bother prospecting yourself. Find an already discovered prospect that you believe can be developed into a real mine. I'm not interested in any penny-ante stuff."

John Treadwell was interested.

"Be glad to go," he said.

Fry told him about a specific property of which he had heard. "If you think it is what we are looking for," he concluded, "buy it. My friend Jim Freeborn and myself will back you up. Good luck to you, and you had better catch the first boat. Get your things packed right away."

Treadwell packed hurriedly, trying to control his excitement. Fry had promised him a full third interest in the venture if he made a successful deal. A few weeks later Treadwell's brows were deeply furrowed. The future didn't look as rosy as it had when he cleared the Golden Gate bound for the far North. The specific property he had been instructed to examine turned out to be only a thin stringer of quartz. It carried free gold all right, but the owners had already mined the cream from the narrow vein. Furthermore, he could not see a mine big enough to interest Banker Fry in that little stringer.

JOHN TREADWELL was ready to come home, minus a mine of any sort. Of course he could have bought the stringer, but John Treadwell was on the level, first, last and always.

Waiting for a boat to take him back to San Francisco, and still hating the idea of returning empty-handed with all Fry's expense of the trip for nothing, he dropped into Pierre Erussard's little store in Juneau. Soon the two were talking.

Pierre, a French-Canadian, had been in Alaska quite a while. He told Treadwell that he had found gold in the beach sands on Douglas Island just across the channel, and that he believed also he had discovered the vein the gold came from where it outcropped on the steep hillside about a quarter of a mile from shore.

"Hm-m-m! Too bad I've got to hurry back," said Treadwell. But he was thinking that maybe he wouldn't catch that next boat down to 'Frisco, after all.

They talked some more. Pierre brought out samples, and revealed that he was badly in need of cash to pay for freight on the last shipment of goods sent him from the States.

John wondered. Did Erussard actually have a mine, or a dud? Suddenly the carpenter decided to take a chance. He gave Erussard five hundred dollars of the money Banker Fry had intrusted to him for the purchase of the property in the hills behind Juneau.

"I have two claims," explained Pierre. "The Paris, and the Bear's Nest. The Paris, I think, is the better of the two."

"All right, that's five hundred down on the purchase price of the Paris. Pay your freight bill, get your stuff off the dock, and then

let's go over to Douglas Island and see what I've bought."

When Treadwell saw the outcrop he liked it, liked it so well he took another chance and gave Erussard a bond for twenty thousand on the Paris claim.

"Fry and Freeborn will make it good," he told the storekeeper.

Then Treadwell sped back to San Francisco.

"Phew!" John Fry, the banker whistled. "I didn't think you'd let us in for such a sum, John. Not on an undeveloped prospect. Twenty thousand is a lot of money."

"We'll get our money back," said Treadwell quietly, a remark that afterward proved tops in understatement. The Alaska Treadwell paid its owners over twenty-one million dollars in dividends.

From the start it was the intention of Treadwell and his backers to operate their new mine on a high tonnage and low cost basis. They laid it out on paper, and checked and rechecked their figures and their assays. You don't have to have bonanza ore to make money out of a gold mine, was Treadwell's contention, not if the other factors are right. You simply use your head and run the mine on an efficient business basis.

The Alaska Treadwell proved the correctness of these theories. For years this mine blazed the trail of low-cost gold production for other mines and other mining men throughout the world.

Treadwell returned to Douglas Island in 1882, taking with him a five stamp mill which he set up on the Paris property and began taking out ore. Fry and Freeborn redeemed the bond he had signed in their names and Treadwell got his third interest in the mine. Incidentally Freeborn sold out his share a few years later, but the other two stuck.

BY '83 the Alaska Treadwell was busy with the building of a tremendous battery of a hundred and twenty stamps to crush the ore. In 1887 the number of stamps was doubled. Ore was being mined and milled in greater daily quantities than ever before from a single mine. More stamp mills were erected twice during the next decade, topped off by a three hundred stamp battery in 1899. By then, almost *nine hundred* heavy stamps were daily thumping to sludge and powder the two-dollar gold ore of the Alaska Treadwell lode.

The mine was making money, big money.

Still the management kept on incessantly striving to lower production costs and to improve mining and milling methods. By 1908 they had knocked costs down to a dollar thirty-five a ton, an incredibly low figure, and the mills were taking care of something like three thousand tons of gold ore daily.

That's big mining business, and operations were proceeding at full blast when something happened to the mine itself. Those gigantic excavations of rock that had been going on for years were gradually undermining the foundations of Douglas Island itself. The great, gouged-out hollows underground began to settle. Unfortunately, in the haste to withdraw the ore at the lowest possible cost, no allowance had been made for filling the worked-out portions of the mine with rock waste.

Consequently the strain on the layer of rock holding up long reaches of emptiness that had formerly been the Alaska Treadwell vein grew tre-

mendous, too great for nature to stand. There were ominous rumblings deep in the earth. Far underground huge cracks and seams in apparently solid rock formations began to appear. Up on the surface the ground began to sink. After all, three hundred and fifty million cubic feet of rock had been taken out of the heart of Douglass Island, and nothing put back to take its place.

Extraction of further ore was perforce curtailed. The mine water suddenly became salty, a clear indication that salt water from Gastineau Channel was seeping into the mine from the sea bottom. Disaster was imminent, terrible disaster.

Everything was done that could be done. The salt water content of the mine was checked as carefully and as frequently as a sick man's fever. But it was no use. By 1916 the ocean was dribbling into the underground workings at the rate of forty gallons a minute, and the amount was increasing.

On April 21st, 1917, the expected happened. Some time in the dead of night the whole beach of Douglas Island lunged downward. Buildings were catapulted into the sea like so many broken match boxes. Great cracks appeared along the shore line, and the sea itself surged upward through the gaping rock floor of Douglass Island completely submerging the workings of the doomed mine.

No lives were lost. The management, watching the mine hourly, had seen to that. But the great Alaska Treadwell, pioneer of low-cost gold production, was a definitely finished project.

The lessons it taught in efficient and economical mining and milling of low-grade gold ores live on. These were carried across the channel to the mainland where many of the same engineers and company officers who had been responsible for the success of the Alaska Treadwell carried on an even greater low-cost gold production enterprise—the present multimillion-dollar Alaska Juneau Mining Co., and its group of mines.

Altogether John Treadwell didn't do so badly when he paid out five hundred dollars of John Fry's cash and signed the names of Fry and Freeborn to a twenty-thousand-dollar bond for the purchase of the Paris claim on Douglas Island.

Sometimes Even A Bad Man Can Be Good

RAIDERS RIDE NO MORE

By CARLOS ST. CLAIR

Author of "Buckskin Bucker," etc.

VINCE CRAWFORD was afoot in the trackless desert bordering the Rio Grande. He had left his ranch, sacked and burned by the band of raiders that for two years past had been terrorizing the whole Southwest, without so much as a drop of water or a bite of food. And in the dark, the night before, his horse had stepped in a gopher hole and Vince had had to shoot him.

As far as he knew, it was fifty miles before he could hope to reach a town. His tongue was swollen, his lips were cracked, and his head was reeling with dizziness. His blistered feet in the high-heeled boots made heavy going in the sand, and he had started stumbling and falling, a sure sign that the end was near.

As far as his own life was concerned, Vince didn't care. All that he had spent his life for was burned and gone at the raiders' hands. He'd

be starting over at thirty-six, and it wasn't worth it. But the thing that had spurred him on, that had motivated his flight, in fact, was a thing that he had learned last night, when the raiders had swooped.

Hiding in back of the corral, where he had hoped to snipe a couple of the ruffians, before leaving, he had learned that the leader of this long notorious band did not ride with them in person. The leader was some one higher up, some one they looked to for protection. That would be valuable information for the men who were trying to track them down. And it had been with the resolve to pass that information on to the captain of the border patrol at the town of Cristobal that Vince had started out.

It seemed fairly certain, now, that he would never reach his goal, yet steadily he kept plugging on, for that was the law of this rugged land —never to quit, never to admit defeat, to die a thousand deaths before the final release. And Vince had died a thousand deaths that day.

Near sundown, when he looked across the shimmering sands and saw a black horse outlined against the setting sun, he thought that at last it was the end, that he was losing consciousness, seeing things that were not there. He kept going toward it, though, and the vision did not recede. When the black horse nickered welcomingly, Vince began to sense that it was real. He could see that the horse was saddled, and when he saw the figure of a man sprawled in the mesquite bushes, with the reins gripped tight in a stiffened hand, he could understand a little better why the horse was standing there.

He broke into a clumsy run and dropped to his knees by the fallen man. The man was dead, however. There was a bullet hole in the fellow's shoulder that looked as if it had partly healed, then bled again. It was that which had probably caused his death.

VINCE searched his pockets, a distasteful but necessary task. He found a nickle-plated watch, four sheaves of bank notes in wrappers stamped with the name of a bank at Alma, Texas, and a folded paper with the scribbled message:

To Lem Bartholde, El Cantina Paso Robles. This is to introduce Cas Faber. He's a right guy, Lem, so treat him good.

The note was signed, "The Waco Kid."

Vince took the bank notes and the scribbled message, for now there was a fighting chance that, aboard the dead man's horse, he might reach his destination. He would turn this plunder over, then, to the officers he meant to see. There was a full canteen on the dead man's saddle, and Vince shared it with the thirsty black. And when he climbed aboard, he let the horse have its head, trusting its instinct more than his own to head for the nearest habitation. The main thing, now, was to get to water, food and rest. After that, he could shift his course again toward the town that was his goal.

Toward dawn—with Vince barely able to stick the saddle, and the black horse also going on nerve alone —they came in sight of a group of buildings strung out along a half-dry creek. The black broke into an eager shamble, but as they rode down the brush-grown street, Vince saw that the few buildings were boarded up and long fallen to decay. There wasn't a human soul in sight.

With a mingled groan and curse, Vince pulled the horse to a stand.

"Well, old chap," he said, and laid a consoling hand on the fagged animal's dust-caked withers, "looks like there'd be no breakfast here." He knew, besides, what he did not put in words, that this was the end of the trail for him. No matter what lay beyond the next horizon, he would never reach it.

But now the black horse made a whinnying sound, and with its ears alertly forward started moving up the street toward a spot where a tall brick building loomed grotesquely from the mesquite bushes at the far end of the town.

Hauled up before it, Vince read the faded, creaking sign which hung above a warped green door, and laughed aloud ironically. "El Cantina Paso Robles," the sign announced, which seemed to Vince the final blow of fate. But the black horse whinnied, and to Vince's vast surprise two Mexicans rose from where they'd been dozing by the wall.

Vince said: "Hello. *Buenas dias, señors.* I'm glad to see you."

He had one leg across his saddle, when one of the Mexicans stepped up. "Regret, señor, but El Cantina she is close." The Mexican's eyelid dropped just the slightest fraction of an inch, and by just so much his right hand moved in the direction of the gun he wore.

Vince was weak and tired and sick, and for just a moment he had the notion to turn away. Then his backbone stiffened. He had a duty to perform, and no pair of greasers would stop him, now. If there was anything beyond that door, he was going to share it.

"Closed, eh?" he said. "I think not, señor. Not to me." Stepping suddenly from his saddle, he took the fellow off his guard with a sudden shove that, weak as it was, sent the man sprawling. The other Mexican drew and fired. Vince was expecting that, however, and ducked in time.

BUT now he was at the Mexicans' mercy, and they would have finished with him shortly, if the green door had not opened, just as Vince had hoped it would when he made his play.

A big man with an egg-shaped head, short on forehead, long on jaw, looked out and said: "What the devil goes on?"

The fallen Mexican scrambled up, and both peons bowed and scraped. "He ess stranger, *si?* And your orders are——"

"To keep all strangers out, perhaps," Vince finished for him. "But I'm not a stranger. I got credentials."

The man in the doorway glared, but presently he said: "Come in."

He led Vince through a big, black, empty room. But back of this was another room where some men were sitting, playing cards. Vince's escort led him on, however, into still a farther room where a man sat hunched behind a table poring over a hand-drawn map.

"Well, Monk?" the man at the table asked, his gaze interrogatively on Vince.

"He was tryin' to get in," Monk said. "Knocked Pedro out. Alfredo fired, and the jigger ducked. I thought you better see him, Lem. Claims he's got credentials."

Lem held out a strong white hand. "Let's see," he said. He was sharp, direct, for all his heavy, sleepy look, and deep behind that cautious mask Vince sensed a gambler's recklessness.

Vince regretted a little that he had spoken of credentials. That note might lead him into trouble. There was nothing for it, though, but to

produce the paper he had taken from the dead man's pocket.

"Cas Faber, eh?" Lem said, when he had read the note. "Well, what's your trouble, Cas? What brought you here?"

Vince's brain was paralyzed with fatigue. But dulled as his thinking process was, he was beginning to realize that El Cantina Paso Robles was some sort of robber's roost. A right guy, here, meant some one in trouble with the law. Sparring for time, he shrugged and said: "I'm dead for sleep, that's all, and my horse needs rest. We were three days on the desert without food or much to drink. Only just managed to make it here. The Waco Kid told me it would be O. K."

Lem said: "Before that, chump? What were you doing on the desert? No stalling, mind. This note from Waco looks bona fide, but we don't pass out no charity blind, nor run no chances."

There was something in the fellow's eye, and something in the way the man called Monk moved up behind him, that made Vince's blood run sudden ice. One false step, he realized, and the life that the dead Cas Faber had so miraculously given back to him, out there on the burning desert, would be forfeit.

Again, Vince felt that his life was little worth the saving. On the other hand, the information that he had for the officers at Cristobal was valuable, he felt quite sure. Until the leader of the raider band was caught, they would keep on with their depredations. That would mean more ranches burned, men's work destroyed. The men who fought them were in the dark, not knowing how the leader sat all safe and snug while his hirelings rode. And he, Vince, could help.

He stalled again. "That black horse that I rode in here is a right smart nag. Men have been hung for stealin' horses not half so good."

Lem's eyes were twin gimlets boring in. "Come across," he snapped. "What is it that you're holdin' back?"

VINCE made a quick decision, then. "Well, there was a bank. First National, at Alma, Texas. They lost some cash."

"Ha," Lem purred, "now we're gettin' at it." He said to Monk: "That's the job Waco was speakin' of. Maybe the guy's straight, after all." To Vince, he added: "You and him was pards? What happened to the Waco Kid?"

"Dead," Vince said, and heartily hoped that it was true. He didn't want Waco barging in to spill the beans. "Officers got him," he supplemented.

"You got the dough?"

"Yeah," Vince said.

"Well, hand it over." Lem's voice had the sound of dry, breaking brush. "Mebbe Waco didn't tell you that you trade your loot for protection here. This ain't no charity organization."

Vince let them have the bank notes. He would have liked to turn them over to the captain of the border patrol, but he still had the really valuable thing. They couldn't take that away from him.

Lem counted the bills and smiled. "This makes it jake," he said. "Monk, tell Tessie to bring the drinks."

A black-haired, brown-skinned girl came in with glasses and a whisky bottle. She smiled at Vince, and Vince smiled back, mechanically.

That smile was a great mistake. Once, years before, Vince had accidentally caught his arm in a coyote

trap. Remembrance of the inexorable bite of those metal teeth flashed on him, now, as fingers gripped his arm. Looking up, Vince saw stark murder in Monk's small eyes.

"Lay off of that, smart guy," Monk rasped. "Tessie's already spoken for."

The first startled wonder Vince had felt gave way at once to righteous anger. "Why, you crazy fool," he said, and instinctively his free right fist found Monk's snarling mouth.

But Vince was weak, and Monk but momentarily stunned. He sprang up immediately and only Lem's cold voice saved Vince from a terrific drubbing. "Monk, you fool, lay off of that."

"Well, Tess is mine," Monk mouthed. "I'll kill the dirty——"

Lem hushed him with an upraised palm. "Never thumb your nose at destiny. Looks to me like Cas, here, is just what we been lookin' for."

"You mean," Monk asked, almost incoherent with the rage which would not immediately be quelled, "you mean you'd cut this centipede in with us? You'd let him ride in Curly's place?"

"We got to have another man," Lem said. "Some one like Cas Faber, here, who's bound to string along with us or—choke to death."

Lem shot a slitted glance at Vince, who tried to keep his face inscrutable. Could it be the "raiders" Lem was speaking of? Stumbling into this nest of thieves, had he accidentally come upon the raiders' hideout? Was this fellow, Lem Bartholde, the secret leader of the pack?

He had to know. "If it's the raiders you're speakin' of, I might have somethin' to say myself. I don't care to join."

THE fish rose eagerly to the bait. Anger stirred Lem's frozen cheeks and his pale eyes gleamed. "Perhaps it hasn't occurred to you that you have no vote," he said shortly. "These bank notes here, not to mention the nag outside, would be difficult to explain, if we turned you over to the law."

Vince let that sink in. So this was the way they played it, eh? First got something on a man, then obliged him to work for them. But he was Vince Crawford, and not Cas Faber. He was an honest though poor rancher, and not a thief. Let them turn him over to the law. That was exactly what he wanted.

But then Vince scowled. There was a joker in this deck. Lem had channels, doubtless, through which he made contact with the law. Lem would name him Faber, and swear he was a thief. For years, he had led a lonely life on that ranch of his that was no more. What few neighbors there had been had been cleaned out by the raiders and had moved away. It would be hard to prove that he was Crawford, and that wouldn't clear him anyhow. Lots of outlaws led double lives. Anything he said would be taken for the squealing of a cornered rat and given the same consideration.

Lem said: "That's right, think it over, pard. I guess you see it's going to pay to string along." He added, on a friendlier note: "It ain't such a bad life, after all. Everything lined out for us, and plenty protection higher up. The big boss never lets us down. The only thing can happen is if some rancher gets funny and his bullet finds you out, like happened to Curly recently."

That was not the consideration, though, which moved Vince now.

The thing he saw was that if he seemed to play along he might gain valuable information. It now appeared that this fellow Lem was not the real leader, after all. Lem had spoken of some one higher up. If he, Vince, could learn that leader's name, it would be well worth what it might cost.

He said: "I guess you got me, Lem. I'll play along."

"I thought you would," Lem told him. And then to Monk: "Quit grumblin', you. You said yourself you wouldn't ride till we got a man in Curly's place. And I got word from the chief this mornin' that the Mule Shoe and Bit and Bridle outfits are movin' their beef stuff down this week to the railroad head. It'll take all the men we got to carry out the boss's plan."

Monk grunted assent. "Just keep your hands and your eyes off Tess," he said to Vince, and went shambling out.

Lem grinned and said: "I'll have Tess show you to your room."

"Mebbe I can find it by myself," Vince said.

Lem's cheeks unlimbered in a laugh. "That Monk, he's crazy. Don't mind him."

"Crazy, yeah," Vince said. "That's why I'd just as soon find that bunk myself."

"Well, I'll show you, then," Lem said. "I'd hate to lose you right away."

Vince put in three miserable days at El Cantina Paso Robles. He wasn't sure he had played this right, but now there was no backing out. In spite of the hold Lem had on him —and Lem mentioned the bank notes frequently—he was being carefully watched. He wanted desperately to warn the owners of the Mule Shoe and Bit and Bridle brands, who stood to lose a pretty stake, but he had no opportunity.

And perhaps it was better, anyhow, Vince told himself. The owners of those two big outfits could afford to lose some cattle, if it meant protection later on. And Vince still hoped that as Lem gained confidence in him, the identity of their mysterious chief would be revealed.

WHEN the day appointed for the raid arrived, there were ten men gathered at El Cantina Paso Robles. Some of them Vince had already met, some were strangers to him. Two of those faces he had seen as he peered through the bars of the corral the night of the raid on his own ranch.

It was a long day's ride to the ford at Skull Creek, where their victims were to be surprised. Lem had a map the chief had sent him. The plan was to surround the drinking cattle and head them up a convenient draw. Then two riders would keep the cattle moving while the balance held the cowboys off. Three miles up the draw, where a tributary stream branched off, the chief would have more men in waiting to receive the cattle. Then Lem's band would cut and run for it.

Arriving at the ford, the raiders made a fireless camp, gnawing jerky and hard-tack that Lem passed out. The Mule Shoe and Bit and Bridle herds were bedded down on another creek, a mile away, but they would be moving down by dawn—a perfect hour for the prospective raid.

It was scarcely light when Lem gave the signal to get set, and the raiders mounted. At the very last minute, Lem announced that Vince and Monk would be the ones to keep the stolen cattle on the run, while

the rest stood guard at the gully's mouth.

Vince would rather have been paired with any of the other men, but he was glad enough to escape the fighting. He wouldn't like to think that a bullet from his gun had brought down some loyal cowboy.

Lem said: "I'm lettin' you have it easy, Cas. Mind you do your best."

"O. K.," Vince said. He hadn't learned what he wished so much to know, and now he couldn't help but wish that there was some way he could spoke Lem's wheel. He had cast the die, however, had made his gamble, and he had to stick.

There was smell of dust, first, then of cattle. Through the gray light, Vince could see the red and white backs of the steers, breaking from their plodding file at the smell of water.

Lem was a cool one—a master raider. He waited till Vince's nerves were screaming, before he fired the signaling shot. Then all the raiders fired their guns, and burst in a galloping fan-shaped wedge out of the willows.

The tailenders of the herd turned and scattered, but at least five hundred of the sters that had bunched around the ford took out en masse toward the draw which Lem had pointed out, with the shouting raiders at rear and flank.

The Mule Shoe and Bit and Bridle men proved riders worthy of their hire. There was plenty of fighting. The roar of guns made answering thunder from the hills, with the shrill and angry cries of men as a minor undertone. The solid bunch of stampeding cattle did not break, however. Not a raider fell. Vince saw two cowboys down and writhing, and bit a curse between his teeth. Before he knew it, though, the sound of firing was at his rear, and the roaring up ahead was the sound of hoofs on the rocky bottom of the draw. Monk was beside him, the hat gone from his egg-shaped head, his heavy features grim and set.

The cattle, winded by the climb, soon slowed to a lumbering walk. They would have stopped, if it had not been for Vince and Monk, shouting and snapping their slickers at them as they pushed farther and farther up the draw.

WHEN they had traveled for about an hour, Vince thought they must be near the spot where the reënforcements would take over. Monk had dropped behind, and Vince turned in his saddle to ask the question. That motion probably saved his life. For in the very second that Vince turned, Monk's gun spouted sudden flame. The bullet was a searing probe through the muscle above Vince's heart, and the force of it spun him from his saddle. He hit hard on a jutting rock and the world blanked out.

When Vince woke up, he was lying on an iron cot, and the floor he looked at was strangely patterned in alternate bars of light and dark. Bandages, swathed about his chest, replaced the shirt that he had worn. He was stiff and sore, and to turn was difficult. A high window where the light came through was barred, he saw, and traveling on his eyes found the grating that was the door. That meant he was in jail. He was puzzled, just at first. Then he remembered Monk. He had smiled at Tess, and the crazy Monk had had revenge. Monk had shot him and left him in the draw. He'd been found and brought to jail.

It was over now, and he hadn't

discovered, after all, who the leader of the raiders was. Even such information as he had to give would not be believed, now that he was identified as a member of the band. For anything that he could do, the band would ride and ride again, spreading misery and destruction. With a feeling of sick futility, Vince wished now he had fought it out, back there at his burning ranch, got as many of the raiders as he could and then signed off.

Outside the grilled door of his cell, there was a narrow corridor. Across it was another cell. Vince could look straight into it, but at first he couldn't believe his eyes. Then he pinched himself, and blinked, and looked again. It was Monk, all right. He could not mistake the egg-shaped head, although the fellow's back was turned.

Vince made it to his feet, and to the grilled door of his cell. Clinging to it, he said softly: "Well, Monk —nothin' like havin' a friend in jail."

Monk came roaring to his feet. Vince closed his ears to the vituperation, but gathered from the storm of words that things had not gone as Lem had planned. After Monk had shot him and left him lying in the draw, dead, as Monk supposed, a band of men from the border patrol had swept down on him. Outnumbered, ten to one, Monk had been helpless. Lem, and the men at the gully's mouth, had escaped, however.

"Well, nice to have company anyhow," Vince told him. "I'd hate to hang alone."

Monk laughed. "Hang? Not a chance. They'll get me out."

"I wouldn't count on Lem," Vince said.

"Lem—heck! I mean the big shot. Law——" But Monk broke off with the word unspoken.

Vince gripped the bars with all his strength. "The big shot, eh? You know him, then? He'll get us out?"

"Me, not you," Monk snarled. "You got that black horse to explain, and the holdup job at Alma, Texas. It's just raidin' jobs we're protected on."

"There's other things I could explain," Vince said. "About you and Lem, and El Cantina Paso Robles. I can go to the captain of the border patrol and tell him plenty."

Monk roared with laughter. "You reckon the cap would swallow that from the likes of you?"

"No, I reckon not," Vince said, and knew that it was probably true. If he could name the name, however, that Monk had almost let slip just now, it might be a different story. There was no hope, though.

The day wore on. There were sounds outside the jail that grew increasingly with the hours. The jailer who brought them food at noon told them there was a mob outside that wanted to hang them. "It would save the State expense," the jailer stated as his opinion. "But the sheriff's a stickler for the law."

VINCE shuddered at the growing sounds, but then found a ray of hope in them. Since the jailer's visit, Monk had constantly paced the floor of his narrow cell. He had not touched his plate of food, and he muttered fearfully as he walked. "If I could capitalize on that," Vince thought, "I might find out what I want to know."

He said to Monk: "Well, I wouldn't worry. That boss of yours'll come in time."

Monk snarled back, as Vince had

hoped. "Why don't he, then? This ain't no time for monkey business."

"Mebbe you better send him word. He may not know what a spot you're in."

Monk said: "That ain't allowed. I took my oath on that, when I found out accidental who he was. They'd have killed me, if I hadn't."

"Well, mebbe you prefer to hang," Vince said. "They sure are sore out there," he added, as a particularly savage roar broke loose. "Reckon they'll treat us pretty rough—rememberin' some of them raided ranches."

Monk's face was a drained and ghastly white. "Shut up," he yelled.

"Well, anyhow, you're protectin' him," Vince said. "I hope he appreciates it."

"He'll come," Monk gritted. But that was a whistle in the dark, Vince knew. Monk was scared to death.

Vince let him stew. He couldn't wait too long, however. The shouts outside were growing louder, and even with the best intentions, the sheriff might not stop that mob.

Vince said: "Mebbe if this boss does come, he can't do anything about it. There must be a hundred men out there."

"He'll come, and he can stop 'em," Monk reiterated. But he was in a frenzy, now, as new tumult broke against the walls.

Vince put all the shuddering fear and terror he could muster in his voice. "It won't be long now till they have us. I can feel the rope around my neck—hear the bones a-crackin'."

That turned the trick. Suddenly Monk broke, and screamed: "He's got to come. He can stop 'em, too. I know he can. He's captain of the border patrol. They'd have to do what he told 'em to."

And then Monk saw what he had done, and his voice ran off into shouted curses that seemed to grow increasingly loud as the noise outside died down.

Vince dropped limply to his cot, overcome for a moment by what he'd learned. The captain of the border patrol, the very man he had meant to take his story to, was the secret leader of the raider band. That was the secret of their success. It meant, as well, that, even with this information, Vince's problem was far from solved.

The jailer, coming to get their plates, announced disgustedly: "Well, I guess you're saved. Soldiers from Fort Pitt have come. The sheriff sent an S O S."

That set Monk off on another round of curses, but Vince jumped up. There would be nothing gained now by delay, and he meant to cast the die at once. "Look," he said, "I got to see the sheriff, pronto."

"He's busy now," the jailer snarled.

"You'll regret it to your dyin' day, if you don't take him that message now," Vince told him grimly.

The jailer left with a surly grunt. And Monk said: "So, you're going to squeal. Well, you'll never pull it, Cas. You can never prove it. It'll be your word against the word of the captain of the border patrol."

Monk believed that, too. He was white with fear, but it was fear of what Lawson Kuntz might do to him. "Keep mum," Monk urged, "and I'll see that you get out of here."

Well, there was life for him, if he cared to buy it. Monk would carry out that promise, in order to save himself, Vince knew. And this other plan might fail. But it wasn't life he was interested in.

IN the office of the sheriff, "Four-square" Ike, Vince told his story. Ike laughed at him. "You're puttin' up a bold front, man, but the thing's ridiculous. Why, take the fact of your arrest—the border patrol was back of that."

"The Mule Shoe and Bit and Bridle are two big outfits. The owners may have forced his hand."

"It's preposterous," the sheriff said. "All we know of Kuntz is good. All we know of you is bad. You have no proof."

"We'll get some then," Vince said. "Call Kuntz on the telephone. Tell him the jail is being stormed and you can't hold out. See what he says."

"I already did," said Four-square Ike. "It was him sent the soldiers from Fort Pitt."

"That ought to prove something," Vince pointed out.

"It ain't enough."

"Look then, call him back again. Say that Monk has just confessed, but that nobody heard him except-in' you. Tell him you need five thousand dollars."

"Kuntz won't believe me," the sheriff said. "I got a reputation for being square. That's why they call me what they do."

"Every man, they say, has got his price. He may think five thousand's yours. And he won't dare to take a chance."

Four-square sat and stared at Vince. "And you?" he asked. "What you figure to get out of this? You was a member of that gang, raided with 'em, by your own admission. It ain't goin' to save your skin, if you do prove anything on Kuntz."

"We'd stop the raiders, though. They'd never ride again," Vince answered quietly.

The sheriff cleared his throat. "I been flatterin' myself," he said, "that I was the world's one honest man. Perhaps I'm wrong." He went to the telephone on the wall and put in a call for the captain of the border patrol. If his hunch was wrong, he was a ruined man. Vince admired his courage.

When he got the captain, the sheriff repeated what Vince had suggested. Vince could sense the silence at the other end. The wires hummed briefly, after that, and Sheriff Ike hung up. He was looking more than a little stunned. "I'll get the cash to-night," he said. "Kuntz will deliver it in person. Five hundred extra to see to it that Monk shuts up."

"That cuts it, then?" Vince asked.

"I guess it does," said Four-square Ike. "I'll call the governor of the State, have witnesses here. Kuntz has had a fat thing of it, but I reckon he'll find it didn't pay. Honesty——"

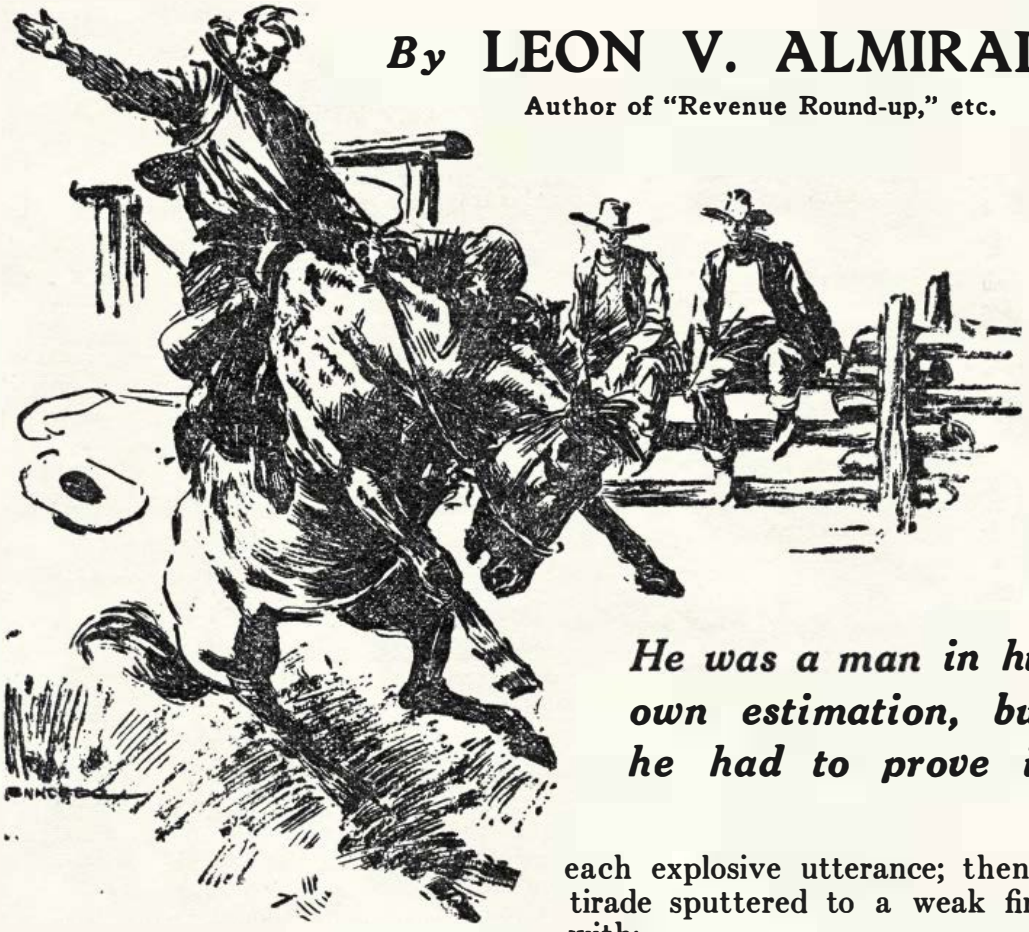
The sheriff stopped, and a slow grin grew on his strained face. "I guess I don't need to preach no sermons. As for that threat of mine a while ago, don't worry, Vince. You'll come off clean, and some to spare. I'll see to it."

"I—I—why, thanks," Vince said. Thought of himself had entered so little into this that his mind wouldn't quite accustom itself to the idea of his own freedom. It seemed a long, long time to him since he had left his burning ranch behind. A lot had happened, but he regretted none of it. The raiders, he knew, would ride no more.

Bub of the Bar B

By LEON V. ALMIRALL

Author of "Revenue Round-up," etc.



He was a man in his own estimation, but he had to prove it

THE red-headed son of old Andy Drinkwater, owner of the Bar B outfit, turned a smoldering gaze out across the flat New Mexico country. The hot look in his brown eyes might easily have been the reflection of the shimmering heat waves which rose unsteadily into the thin air above. But the dripping violence of the words which fell from his lips gave the lie to the suspicion. Bert Drinkwater's heat was self-generated, and his language would have done credit to the vocabulary of a mule skinner. His temperature apparently soared with each explosive utterance; then his tirade sputtered to a weak finish, with:

"Dog-gone it, it ain't fair." Slowly Bert's square-jawed, tanned young face lost some of its moroseness.

He eased through the gate of the big pole corral, closed it, shoved home the bolt, and sized up the bunch of broncs which milled around, their distrustful eyes on him and the rope in his hands.

In particular, Bert watched an extra big bronc, some sixteen hands high—an ornery, long-barreled, strawberry roan, with a wicked roll to his eyes so that they showed the whites.

"Yeah," muttered Bert, fixing his gaze on this brute, "you're my

cookie. There ain't a bronc peeler what's ever been on this outfit that's rid you clean outta bucks. Well, I'm gonna. An' do you know why?"

Just here old man Drinkwater's son saw his chance, and shot his loop. The noose lit neatly over the animal's head and ran down his neck. Bert dug his high boot heels into the corral dirt, yanked hard, and edged toward the snubbing post in the center of the corral. He wound the rope around the post, and drew it tight. Then, opening the corral gate, he fogged the rest of the broncs out in a cloud of dust, and shut and latched the gate on their flying heels.

Reaching up, he took his saddle and bridle down from a pole and walked toward the snubbed horse, which watched him with bulging eyes and flares nostrils. While Bert fastened his long-roweled spurs to his boot heels, he talked.

"Yes, siree, bein' called Bub round this here outfit sure makes me sore as the devil. Mebbeso it was all right when I was five, or even fifteen. But dog-gone it, I'm nineteen now, an' they're still callin' me Bub. 'Hi, Bub, yore paw wants to see you up at the house.' 'Hi, Bub, cookie wants ter know if you'll help him peelin' spuds.' Shucks, why don't these cowpokes, Red Dozier, Pete Glover, an' the rest, snap outta it?"

NOTHING like injured feelings can raise a good grouch, and evidently this purposeful teasing on the part of the Bar B waddies toward the son of their boss was having a much more potent effect than they realized. Rough, ready, kindly, too, if the occasion demanded, they failed to understand that the boy, like his mother who had passed on when Bert was still in swaddling clothes, was sensitive. They could not see that he reacted more acutely to things other boys his age would have laughed off. Had any of these joshing rannies suspected for a moment what was going on in Bert's young mind, they would have quit, particularly "Red" and Pete, for between them they had more or less drynursed him in his tike days. These two had taught him to ride and rope, and never to back down when he felt he was right.

If they'd seen him now, slim-hipped, wasp-waisted, with the devil-may-care light in his eyes as he narrowly watched that man-killer of a roan, they would have been worried. But they would have been further assured in their estimate of him.

Bert had been right, too, in what he'd said about this roan. No twister had ever ridden this beast to a finish. Which, of course, was why Bert had picked it, so, as he said, he could "show 'em he was as much a man as any of 'em."

The reason some of the outfit didn't discover what was on, was because Bert had picked a good time to prove up. If he rode the roan to submission, there would be plenty of evidence in the appearance of the horse itself. He didn't need an audience. So, he'd chosen to-day, when his dad was in Deming at the "danged dental blacksmith shop," as old Drinkwater called the dentist's office. The rest of the punchers were out after strays. The only foreign sounds which reached his ears were the strains of a ribald ranch song as rendered by Andy "Fat" Brown, the cook.

No, sir, he Bert, couldn't have picked a better day to make his ride, and show 'em his name was Bert, or maybe "Kid." He rather liked that last. It had kind of a reckless, don't-give-a-curse sound. But never, un-

der any circumstances, was he to be called "Bub."

"An' you ain't foolin' me none," he told the horse, which pulled away when Bert drew closer. "No, siree," continued the red-headed stripling, "I seen killers, an' I seen the way you act lots o' times. Foxy devil. Just like a lamb from the time the loop goes over yore ugly head, right up to the time you're turned loose, an' then you sure come undone. Well, sink this inter that peaked dome o' yourn: I'm wise, an' you'd sure be sore if you knowed tryin' to fool me this a way's been a big help, seein' as I'm handlin' this job."

Bert talked in a monotonous singsong tone, calculated to have a soothing effect—as the human voice can have, even on the worst of horses—on this roan's savage nature. With the quick, deft motion of one practiced in the art, he slipped the bit between the horse's teeth, and maneuvered the split-ear bridle into place, ducking a wicked lunge from clicking teeth as he did so. With bridle and bit set, the bronc seemed to become actually gentle.

"You wouldn't fool me, you son of a mule, would you?" breathed Bert, laying his saddle blanket across the roan's back, and congratulating himself that at nineteen he was six feet in his socks, because he'd hate to have to reach up on this cayuse.

The roan sent the brightly colored Navajo sailing through the air with one twitch of his back. Three times Bert replaced it before the horse let it stay there.

"O. K., big boy," said Bert, his face daubed with beads of sweat. "Now, here's something for you to toss."

He lifted, and laid his forty-pound saddle on the blanket. The roan merely quivered.

"Yeah," exclaimed Bert. "Like a coyote, you don't do what a feller expects." Gingerly, he cinched the saddle on tightly.

Even that brought only a couple of grunts and kicks, which Bert avoided with easy agility.

"Well," he said with satisfaction, as he walked to the horse's head, "looks like we're all set. All I gotta do is toss off the rope, climb aboard, an' let you do the rest."

HIS left hand reached slowly upward, and took a firm hold on the left cheek strap, while he maneuvered carefully with his right to release the rope. He succeeded, and in that second before the big bronc realized the post no longer held him, Bert toed his stirrup, went up, and settled into his saddle like a feather, with his lines in his left hand.

So occupied had he been, he had failed to hear the faint bawl of cattle as Red and Pete came riding back with some of the strays. They saw the ten head of Herefords into a small fenced pasture, and headed for the water trough down by the horse corral.

Just as they drew abreast of the poled inclosure, Bert went into his saddle on the roan outlaw.

"Look!" gasped Red, shaking the sweat from his eyes. "Do you see what I see, Pete?"

Pete gaped, couldn't, at first, answer. Finally he said:

"Why, the boss'll rawhide us to death if that kid gets bad hurt. You know durn well, since his ma died, Bub there's been the apple of his eye. What the devil do you suppose made him tackle that four-legged killer?"

"I reckon," said Red, "you an' me both knows, if we'd stop an' think."

"Well, for cripe's sake, if you're so smart, le's have the answer."

Red answered: "I seen the boy get kinder riledlike a coupla times, when we been callin' him Bub since he's growed some. Like as not he figgered he'd ride that four-legged spawn o' the devil an' show us. Just kinder took our kiddin' too seriouslike."

When Red was asked for an answer to something, he always seemed to hit the nail on the head, as Pete knew. Pete's only complaint he voiced at once, as usual, disdaining to show his real affection for this gaunt, leathery side partner of his.

"Why the devil, if you seen that, didn't you tip us off, so we coulda kinda used judgment?"

Red grinned sarcastically. He knew how much good it would have done.

Both men slid down from their saddles, made for the corral, and climbed up to the top pole opera seat of the corral, their ropes in their hands.

For a split second after Bert landed in the saddle, the big roan merely stood and shook as if he had a bad chill. Then Bert raked him from shoulder to flank with his spurs, and things happened. The roan swallowed his head; shoved it down between his forelegs, and boiled over. Up, up he went, in one gigantic bound, with the rolling motion of a boat in a ground swell, but Bert, still fresh, gripped with his thighs, and stayed put. Down came the eleven hundred pounds of animated horseflesh, none of those four hoofs hitting the ground in a straight line, for his was a rolling-weave pitch, one of the deadliest of them all.

BUT that light, lithe, slim-hipped rider was still in the saddle when he felt the ground come up and meet the roan, and again he sent his spur rowels traveling along their course. He'd lost his Stetson, though, and his red hair flashed in the sunlight.

The two spectators held their breath. There was nothing they could do right now.

"My aunt!" whispered Red. "I seen a lotta twisters do their stuff, some right on that there sky-rakin' cayuse, an' I knowed Bert could ride, but not like that."

"Psst!" from Pete. Then, "Any time now that roan son of a mule may need a coupla ropes draped over him."

But the time wasn't right then, nor ever.

"Yip-ee!" yelled Bert, when, for the first time, from the corner of one bloodshot eye, he sighted his audience through a blurred gaze. He licked at a thin red stream which trickled toward his white lips from his nose.

In response, the roan devil sunfished, twisting his long body into a crescent, the horns of which alternated. He seemed to try and touch the ground with first one shoulder and then the other, letting the sun shine along his belly.

For just that moment, Red and Pete thought light showed between Bert and his saddle, but it was quickly blotted out.

"Atta boy," wheezed Bert, breathing hard from the severe punishment to his young, sinewy frame. "That was sure a honey of a sunfish. But lookie," again his spurs traveled their raking course. "I'm still with you," he managed to add.

He was, too, and showed not much more wear than the big, foam-lathered horse, whose breath came in sobbing moans. But the roan had one trick left—his finishing one, Bert realized.

He went into a double shuffle, and with the changing of his gait,

reared for the fall backward. Bert cleared his saddle, with no time to spare, and lit on his feet, lines still in his hands, ready for the remount when the roan righted himself.

But this time the man killer added a variation to his usual last card, and turned into a spinner. Instead of completing the backward throw, he spun on his hind feet, hit Bert a glancing blow, and knocked him into the dust; then he moseyed off to one side of the corral, where he stood with head down and sides heaving, in dejected disgust.

Red and Pete were at Bert's side in the corral dust almost as he went down. Kindly hands searched for broken bones, and came away relieved to find none.

"Get some water outta the trough," snapped Red, holding Bert's head on his knees.

Red took the hatful of water from Pete and splashed some on the pallid face of old man Drinkwater's son. Then he wiped the red stain from those white lips. Bert's eyelids fluttered open. Slowly he sat up and took in the situation.

R-E-D," he managed to wheeze, seeking a deeper breath, and looking at his rawboned friend. Then he spotted Pete. "Pete, too," he added, his voice getting stronger. "Well, dog-gone, I sure thought I had that man killer licked. Where'd he go, an' what hit me?" he asked all in one breath.

He wabbled to his feet, and would have started toward where the roan still breathed hard, with down-hanging head, at one side of the corral. But Red stopped him, with:

"Why, sure, you rode him to a fare-thee-well. Lookit him standin' over there with his sides heavin', an' wetter than a new-born calf. Even if he hadn't hit you when he pulled that spin, an' you'd climbed back on him, he couldn't 'a' pitched a lick more."

"That's the truth," chimed in Pete.

Bert bridled. "Mebbeso, but I gotter see for myself," and before they could stop him, he was back by the roan, and up in the saddle, his spurs doing their stuff.

But Red knew horses, and Red was right. The roan had had enough, and merely crow-hopped a few paces, and quit cold. Satisfied, Bert swung down and walked to his friends.

"Know why I rode that there hunk o' TNT horseflesh?" he asked. Before either Red or Pete answered, Bert rushed on: "Well, I'll tell you. I figgered if I did somethin' really tough, somethin' other waddies like us fellers had tried an' didn't come through with, maybe you fellers would begin to believe I was growed up, an' quit callin' me Bub."

Red's homely, lined face lit with a satisfied smile, and he said to Pete: "Like I told you."

Pete nodded grudging assent.

"Well," put in Bert, "how about it? Am I right? Does ridin' that roan hellion to a finish rate me not bein' called Bub any more?"

The three men walked toward the big gate. Red opened it, going through with Pete, while Bert lingered inside to strip his gear from the broken bronc.

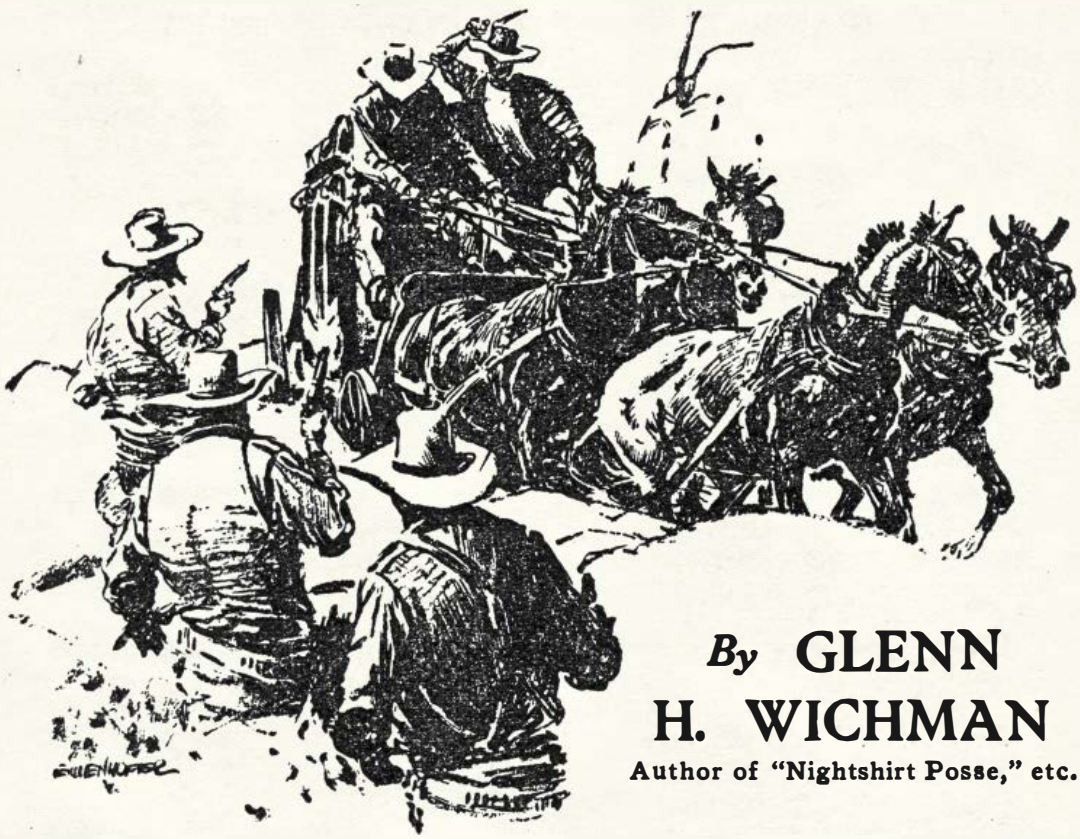
"How about it?" he repeated, nettled when no reply came to his question. "You guys gonna quit callin' me Bub?"

Red and Pete stalked to their horses in silence, their faces sober, but in their eyes a twinkle of mischief. Just before they swung into their saddles, they whispered; then went up, and yelled their reply in unison, as they swirled away.

"We sure are—Bub!"

Owlhoot Business

Old Hep goes into the bandit business—with a little monkey business on the side



By GLENN H. WICHMAN

Author of "Nightshirt Posse," etc.

MY pardner, "Hep" Gallegher and I had just finished patching up the horse corral fence when Mike Given, the Box X boss, came riding back from town. Mike looked to be kinda worried and half sad as he dismounted and began unsaddling his roan horse.

"Boys," announced the boss, as he jerked his thumb over his shoulder, "somethin's about to happen. Back yonder at the crossroad I just ran onto our friend Muzzie Watkins. Muzzie and his horse and his dog were all three asleep beside the road, but Muzzie managed to wake up when he heard me coming. The poor guy's gone out of his head—told me that he was going to turn bandit, and that he wants you two gents to join him in the bandit business. He was waitin' there hopin' that you'd come along. Poor old Muzzie, he's as loco as a loon. Imagine a gent publicly announcin' that he's going to turn highwayman. Did you ever hear the like?"

Neither of us ever had, and besides that it was a little hard for us to believe that "Muzzie" would go in for anything as strenuous as outlaw-

ing because he was, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the laziest man that had ever been born. Watkins regularly wore himself out trying to figure some way to keep from moving. He lived on what was mistakingly called a cow ranch, at no great distance from the Box X. He had no cows, and the nearest the outfit ever came to producing anything useful was when Muzzie got his still to working and ran off a batch of mountain dew. This white mule that Muzzie made was about the only good thing that could be said about him for it was as smooth as bear grease and much more useful. But Watkins was even too lazy to charge folks what the corn likker was worth —he'd accept whatever customers felt like giving. Folks liked him and put up with him and looked after him and tried to keep him out of trouble because he was a likable cuss.

"Sure he was really awake?" I asked the boss.

"Absolutely," declared Given. "I've never seen him more awake or more in possession of what he calls his mind. That's what worries me about it. The guy's determined to become a criminal and he's equally determined that you gents must join him. Of course there's no sense to it and somebody'll have to look after him or he'll get his neck stretched."

"Sure," I agreed, "he couldn't help but get himself caught. Muzzie couldn't get away from a posse even if the posse was hog tied and remained stationary."

At this my partner, Gallegher, got all excited. "You gents," he told me and the boss, "are lacking in vision. Muzzie's really a smart man even if he don't show many signs of it. Why, that guy's got more brains than both of you put together. I've always known that some day Watkins would go in for something deep that would astonish the world. Cold reason tells me that he's thought of something that's big and fine and that nobody else could have thought of."

"Hep," said Mike Given, "you're crazier than Muzzie is."

"Ditto," I put in.

"Anyway," continued the boss, "I want you two to take a couple of days off and see what can be done about it. See if you can't get Muzzie's mind back on his still and off of bandits. It'd be a pity to have him end up in the calaboose." And then, being a generous and kind-hearted sort of a buzzard, Given gave each of us ten dollars for expenses.

Hep and I packed a couple of saddlebags with grub because when anybody went to call on Watkins they had to take their own provisions along if they expected to eat. We saddled our horses and got started.

"The simplest procedure," I said to Gallegher, as we rode along, "would be for us to capture Muzzie, fetch him back to the Box X, and lock him up in the smokehouse for a week or so. That'd take it out of his system."

"Shucks!" growled Hep, "neither you or the boss have any imagination. You take Muzzie for a fathead, but he ain't. Why, that guy's as deep as a mountain lake, and it's a pity that neither of you can see it."

This didn't make sense, so I shut up. And anyway, when Gallegher once got an idea in his noggin there was no use trying to get it out. It was there forever.

ALONG in the early afternoon Hep and I came to the cross-road. Sure enough, there sat Muzzie, just off the road. He was sound asleep, sitting up with his back braced against a tree. To one

side lay his dog, Firecracker, likewise asleep, and near by stood his horse, Hurricane, which was, as usual, in an advanced state of unconsciousness. The beast was swaying like an aspen tree in a gale and looked to be on the verge of falling over.

"This is sure an enterprising-looking bandit camp," said I, as we dismounted.

"Which is one of the beauties of it," came back Gallegher, "and shows what a smart gent Muzzie is. Nobody'd take it for an outlaw hang-out."

After a few tries we managed to wake Watkins. "Pardon me," gasped Muzzie, and nearly choked over a yawn. "I musta dozed off for a second." He blinked his eyes and looked at us. "Well, well—so Mike Given's got you boys to join up with me. That was real nice of Mike."

"I'm very glad to join you in a life of crime," Hep told him, "because there's more to this than just a life of crime. There's a hidden meaning in it somewhere."

Muzzie looked hard at Hep, that is, he looked as hard at him as a perpetually sleepy man could look at anything. "Whata you mean?" demanded Muzzie.

"Nothing in particular," admitted Hep, "except that when as indolent a gent as you are gets fired up to doing something there must be more to it than appears on the surface. In other words, I don't mind joining up with you."

"Shucks," sighed Watkins, "an' thanks a lot. That's a relief off my mind. I thought I'd have an argument tryin' to convince you that you oughta. Shucks, you don't know how kind you are."

Muzzie felt so relieved that he almost went to sleep again and then he suddenly remembered that I hadn't agreed to join his hoot owl gang.

"Well, George," he demanded, "are you going to be reasonable and smart like your pardner, or are you going to give me trouble?"

"It'd be some help to me," I told him, "if you'd tell me how come you've got this crazy idea."

"There's nothing crazy about it," insisted Muzzie. "All that's the matter with me is that I've become consumed with ambition. I'm on fire with ambition an' about to burst with it."

"You sure enough look like it," I told him. "What you need is a doctor. I've got a mind to go to town and fetch out a bone carpenter to work over your head."

Muzzie tried to look dangerous. "If you take a step toward town," he grunted, "I'll shoot you."

This seemed like a vain boast on his part because his holster was empty. I called his attention to his lack of a gun.

"Well, I declare," growled Muzzie. "I musta forgot to bring my shootin' iron along. But that's easily remedied. All I have to do is go home an' get it."

"You ain't explained yet," I reminded him, "why it is you're turnin' bandit."

"I wanta become famous," finally admitted Muzzie, "famous an' rich. I wanta go down in the history books as the Terror of the West. The rip-snortin'est bandit that ever forked a horse."

"There's no chance," said I, "of you either ripping or snorting. In fact, there's no sense in this whatsoever. But I promised Mike Given that I'd do what I can to keep the hangman from gettin' you. And seeing that Hep's tossed in with you, I suppose I might as well. If the world's going crazy I might as well

go crazy, too. Then I won't feel so lonesome."

"Thanks," grunted Watkins. "That's another load off my mind. You'll never regret, George, havin' joined up with the lightningest highwayman on either side of the Pecos."

THIS was something that I oughta have laughed at because Muzzie had never moved faster than three miles an hour in his life, not even on a horse. The whole thing was like the beginning of a nightmare and with scarcely more intelligence.

"Well," announced Watkins, "having got that settled, it's time now that I went home so's I can rest up for to-morrow. I've gotta be as fresh as a daisy to-morrow mornin' because then's when we're startin' in on the bandit business. You gents come on up to the ranch with me an' I'll let you help with the cookin'. Now that we're pardners we'll share the work."

What he meant was that he'd let us *do* the cooking. It took all of a quarter of an hour to wake up Hurricane and most of the rest of the afternoon to get up to Muzzie's house, but finally we made it. Mr. Watkins's ranch house was a source of perpetual wonderment because, as yet, it hadn't fallen down on Muzzie's head. People had been expecting it to collapse for a long time and whenever the wind blew hard bets were made that it had collapsed, provided, of course, anybody could be found who thought that it hadn't.

"I trust," said Muzzie, as we dismounted in what was left of his corral, "that it doesn't rain to-night like it did last night. If it does, you boys'll get wet. The roof leaks more now than it used to. Go right on in and get supper and I'll be in in a jiffy, soon's you call me."

Gallegher and I bedded down the stock for the night while Watkins went into the barn to have a nap. Presently Hep and I went into the

house and found the place to be in an unusually terrible litter. Some one had carted in two or three bales of straw and had broken them open in the front room to sleep on. But the straw was wet now because half of the roof above it was missing and it had rained.

"Looks more like a stable than a bedroom," observed Hep.

"Muzzie had overnight guests," said I, "which is the first time I ever heard of any one being lunatic enough to stay here all night. There must have been a reason for it. There were three men who made three burrows in the straw."

On the floor we found a badly soiled reward notice which some one had recently used to wipe the mud off his boots. The notice offered two thousand dollars for the apprehension of one "Kid" Wattles, who appeared to be an adept at holding up stagecoaches. There was no picture of the Kid, and the description that was printed of him was pretty sketchy and might have fitted any number of men. Besides that, Wattles had a dozen aliases. The crimes which were mentioned on the dodger had all been committed a long ways away; in fact there hadn't been a stage holdup in our end of the State for some time.

"By thunder!" exclaimed Hep. "Mebbe this Kid Wattles spent the night here and used one of his own reward notices to clean his shoes with and then carelessly forgot to take it with him."

"Naw," said I, "the Kid wouldn't go lugging one of those things around with him, especially when he was going to spend a night in a strange house. Give him credit for a little judgment. And the notice says that he generally rides alone and there were three men spent the night here, not one. This is something that I'll have to take up with Muzzie."

We went into the kitchen and built a fire. Hep cooked supper and

it was ready along about sundown. We woke Watkins up and got him into the house and ate.

"Muzzie," I asked, "who was the company you had that slept here last night?"

"Slept here!" grunted Muzzie with some astonishment. "Why nobody's slept here but me for four years."

"Something bedded down in the front room last evening," I informed him, "and you might as well admit it. It wasn't three horses either, it was three men."

"My gosh," grumbled Watkins, "I knew I'd forgot something and now I know what it was. I forgot to take that straw outside."

"Then there were *three* men?" demanded Hep. "Listen, Muzzie, you don't wanta keep anything from your two pardners or it may lead to shootin'."

"Well," eventually admitted Muzzie, and he was smiling now, "the three men didn't stay very long. When it started to rain they got mad an' left."

I showed Watkins Kid Wattles's reward notice. "What does this mean to you Muzzie, and where'd you get it? So far as I know Wattles ain't down in these parts and he hasn't committed any crimes here that I've heard of. These notices must have been scattered up north, but you haven't been up north."

MUZZIE took the dodger and looked at it for a long time. "Haven't any idea where it came from," he said. "But I hope the Kid don't ever get caught. Naturally I'd hope that because we're both going to be in the same line of business. And the three men who came here lookin' for shelter were perfect strangers. Bein' a kind-hearted gent, I naturally took 'em in."

"I'll bet you a dollar, Muzzie," said I, "that prior to the comin' of these three men and this reward notice that it'd never entered your

head to become a bandit. In some way these three men and this piece of paper have started you off. Now if you'll kindly explain——"

"Stuff an' nonsense," interrupted Watkins, "a man's got a right to develop some ambition, ain't he? I do my own thinkin'."

Hep was getting impatient. "Stop this rag chewin', you two, an' let's hear what kind of a crime it is that we're going to commit to-morrow."

"Can't tell you that until to-morrow mornin'," countered Muzzie, "because if I do you may run out on me during the night. Time to go to bed now." Already he was half asleep and he barely managed to get out of the lean-to where he had his bunk before he went all the way asleep.

"Hep," I told my pardner, after Watkins had gone, "if we had a lick of sense we'd ride back to the Box X an' forget about this. No use of us going to the devil along with Muzzie. Besides that, he's crazy an' so are you."

"Nope," declared Gallegher. "I'll see this through if it takes all winter."

Hep cleared off the table and under a pile of dirty tin plates he found a piece of paper on which a crude map had been drawn. There were some words written here and there on it, such as Masterson Canyon, the Narrows, Gun Rock, and the like. Down the middle of the map ran parallel lines which must have indicated a road.

"Looka there!" exclaimed Gallegher. "Now if that ain't a map of the country this side of the mountains I'll chaw my Stetson. And the man who drew it knew a lot about this country. He's got things in just where they belong, the turns in the road and everything."

Neither of us could figure why the map was there or why anybody had gone to the trouble of making it. "It's not one of Muzzie's works of art," I said, "because nobody can

read Muzzie's handwriting except himself. The handwriting on this is as clear as though a schoolmarm had done it."

"Correct," agreed Hep. "The mystery's gettin' deeper. I wish I knew who those three gents were who were here last evenin'."

But there wasn't any answer to this so we blew down the lamp chimney, moseyed out to the barn, and went to sleep on a pile of hay. Next morning there occurred one of the strangest sights that the world had ever seen. Muzzie Watkins was actually up and around with the rising sun, which was probably the first time in his life that he had ever gotten up so early. He wore two guns now and looked to be as frisky as a colt.

" 'Tis a fine day for outlawing," chuckled Muzzie. "You gents toss some breakfast together and we'll be off an' make some history."

While Hep and I cooked the meal, Watkins exerted himself and made three bandanna masks. When we'd finished eating he tried these on us.

"Excellent," declared Muzzie. "We three look just like three other gents and we're near enough their height so that nobody'd know the difference."

"The three men who were here the other night?" I suggested.

Watkins shrugged and laughed but wouldn't tell us any more. We pocketed the masks and rode off, Muzzie setting both the pace and direction. Hep and I trailed along behind and it wasn't a bit of trouble to keep up.

"Interesting," mumbled Gallegher. "This is the most interesting excursion I've ever gone on."

"Make the most of it," I advised him, "because it'll probably be the last one you'll ever go on."

Muzzie led the way across country to Masterson Canyon and when we got there he was practically all wore out.

"Whew!" sighed Muzzie, as he

wiped his forehead. "If I'd known this bandit business was such hard work I mightn't have gone in for it. But it's too late now to turn back. Fortune's almost in our hands."

WE eased down into the broad canyon which, at this point, was more like a wash than a canyon. When we cut the road we turned left and followed it downgrade for a quarter of a mile. At a huge pile of boulders beside the road, Muzzie called a halt.

"Here," explained Muzzie in a hoarse whisper, "is the scene of our crime. We're going to stick up the Bonnyville Stage, which is due to come by here in half an hour."

"The stage!" gasped Hep. "My gosh!"

"Well," said I, "you asked for it."

Watkins yawned and climbed down off Hurricane. "Fortunately," he continued, "if everything works out right we're going to have some help on the job. There'll be one man among the passengers on the stage who, when he draws his gun, you mustn't shoot at. That man will be our confederate."

"Jim Short'll be drivin' the stage," grumbled Hep, "an' Jim's a friend of ours. We oughta start in on strangers."

"Ah, shut up," grunted Muzzie. "You gave me your word you'd go through with this. And besides, if we're successful, there'll be six hundred and sixty-six dollars and sixty-six cents in it for each of us. And if we aren't successful we'll pretend to Jim Short that it was just a joke. That's the advantage of knowing the stagecoach driver."

"Possibly Jim'll get mad an' shoot us anyway," I suggested.

"Possibly," agreed Muzzie, "but a man can't make six hundred odd dollars in about three minutes without takin' some chances."

Just then we heard the clatter of the stagecoach from up the canyon.

"No time to waste!" warned Watkins. "Get on the masks!"

We cached the horses in behind the boulders and put on the bandannas. Muzzie, with a great burst of energy, stepped out in the road with a drawn and cocked six-gun in each of his hands. Me and Hep, half scared to death, loitered to one side. Directly above where we stood the road made a sharp bend and it was around that ninety-degree turn that the coach would have to come. Huge boulders were on both sides of the road. In a few seconds we could hear the stage slowing down to make the turn.

"Be brave, you gents," pleaded Muzzie, even if his own teeth were chattering. "For once in your lives show a little spunk and great good'll come of it."

Even as he spoke the lead horses came in view, then the swing team and the wheel team, and finally the coach itself. Jim Short sat on the box and beside him was a passenger.

Watkins raised his twin Colts and sent a couple of slugs flying into the air.

"Whoa there!" yelled Muzzie. "Stop an' stick 'em up!"

Then he fired twice more and this time Hep's gun joined in the chorus. Jim Short, his face as white as a pillow case, slammed on the brake and pulled up the horses. Three passengers were sticking their heads out of the door and they seemed considerably disturbed too.

But Jim Short wasn't exactly the kind of a guy to surrender without a fight. He dropped the reins and made a grab for his holster. Then it was that the passenger who sat beside him on the box came to life. Quicker than a man could wink an eye this gent produced a gun from a shoulder holster. Instead of using it on us he used it on Short. The stagecoach driver got a crack alongside the head with it that knocked him practically silly. The passenger

caught up Jim Short's gun and tossed it out into the road.

"This," I thought, "must be the confederate that Muzzie was talkin' about."

Things were happening with split-second rapidity. No more had the passenger socked Short than he hopped down to the ground. By the time he got there he had a gun in both hands. He confronted the five passengers who were inside the coach and I never saw anybody who looked more vicious and dangerous than he did.

"Don't you mangy birds move an inch!" he growled at 'em. "Ever hear of Kid Wattles? Well—I'm him!"

MUZZIE, who was standing directly ahead of me, was now shaking as though he had the ague and the hair on the back of his neck was standing straight out.

"Pile out, you suckers!" Wattles roared at the passengers. "The first one who makes a funny move gets it between the eyes!"

"Heavens to Betsy," groaned Hep in my ear. "I'm petrified——"

The five passengers piled out of the coach and lined up under the outlaw's direction. Jim Short, staggering from the blow he'd received, dropped down off the box and lined up with them.

Then Kid Wattles spoke to me an' Hep an' Muzzie. He didn't turn his head, but tossed the words over his shoulder. "Nice work, boys. We've handled this first-rate. Everything under control and nobody hurt. One of you come up an' search these gents. Another get the strong box out of the boot. Hurry!"

Muzzie was the only one of us who moved. He stepped up behind Kid Wattles, raised his gun high above him, and brought the heavy muzzle crashing down on the Kid's skull! Wattles let out a groan, his knees buckled, and he fell. He wasn't

dead, but it'd be hours before he'd be around again.

Watkins ripped off his own mask. "I've saved you, Short!" he shouted. "I've saved all of you and your possessions. And I've caught myself two thousand dollars!"

Jim Short gulped and the color came back into his face. Hep and I pulled off our bandannas and tried to keep from looking foolish. The passengers set up a shout of joy.

"Muzzie Watkins!" gasped Short. "And Hep and George! Gosh, I can't believe it. This thing don't make any sense at all."

"Plenty of sense to it." Muzzie yawned, already beginning to show signs of going to sleep. "Night before last three men came to my ranch seeking shelter. Claimed to be honest cowhands, looking for work, but they weren't honest because they were members of Kid Wattles's gang. I bedded 'em down in my front room. They thought I was asleep, but I wasn't. They did a lot of talking. One of the three was new to the outlaw business and the other two spent a lot of time explaining what was to happen here to-day and what he was to do.

"When they finally was asleep I snuck in and tied their ankles together an' captured 'em. They're now out in my smokehouse all bound up waitin' to be turned over to the sheriff. On one of them I found a map of Masterson Canyon that Wattles had prepared for their guidance. I also found a reward notice. Wattles was to be on the stagecoach to take care of the driver. The rest was easy. Me an' Hep an' George took those three men's places and held you up. Fortunately we're of about the same size and build, and dressed the same, and Wattles never noticed the difference. He thought we were his friends——"

Muzzie's voice trailed off. He'd gone to sleep on his feet. To keep him from falling we stretched him out beside a rock and let him have a nap.

By next day all four of the outlaws were in the Bonnyville lockup, and in a month we had the reward money.

Gallegher was so proud of himself that he nearly burst. "If it hadn't been for my crystal-clear perception," he boasted, "Kid Wattles would never have been captured. I knew Muzzie had some bright idea up his sleeve and that's why I backed him to the limit. I was right. I——"

"Kindly don't break a blood vessel over it," I interrupted, "because this is the first time in three years that you've been right about anything. And if you'd actually known what was coming you wouldn't have helped Muzzie at all and neither would I or Mike Given or any one else except mebbe the sheriff."

Which was the exact truth but, of course, Hep couldn't be expected to admit it.

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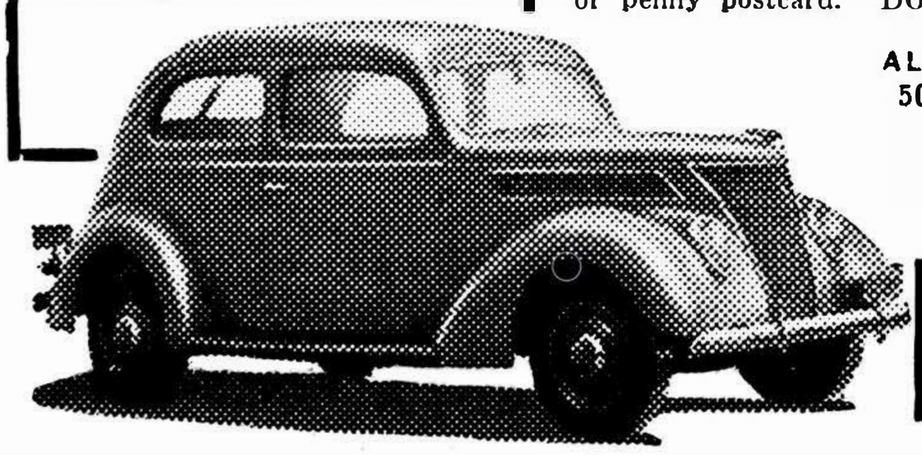

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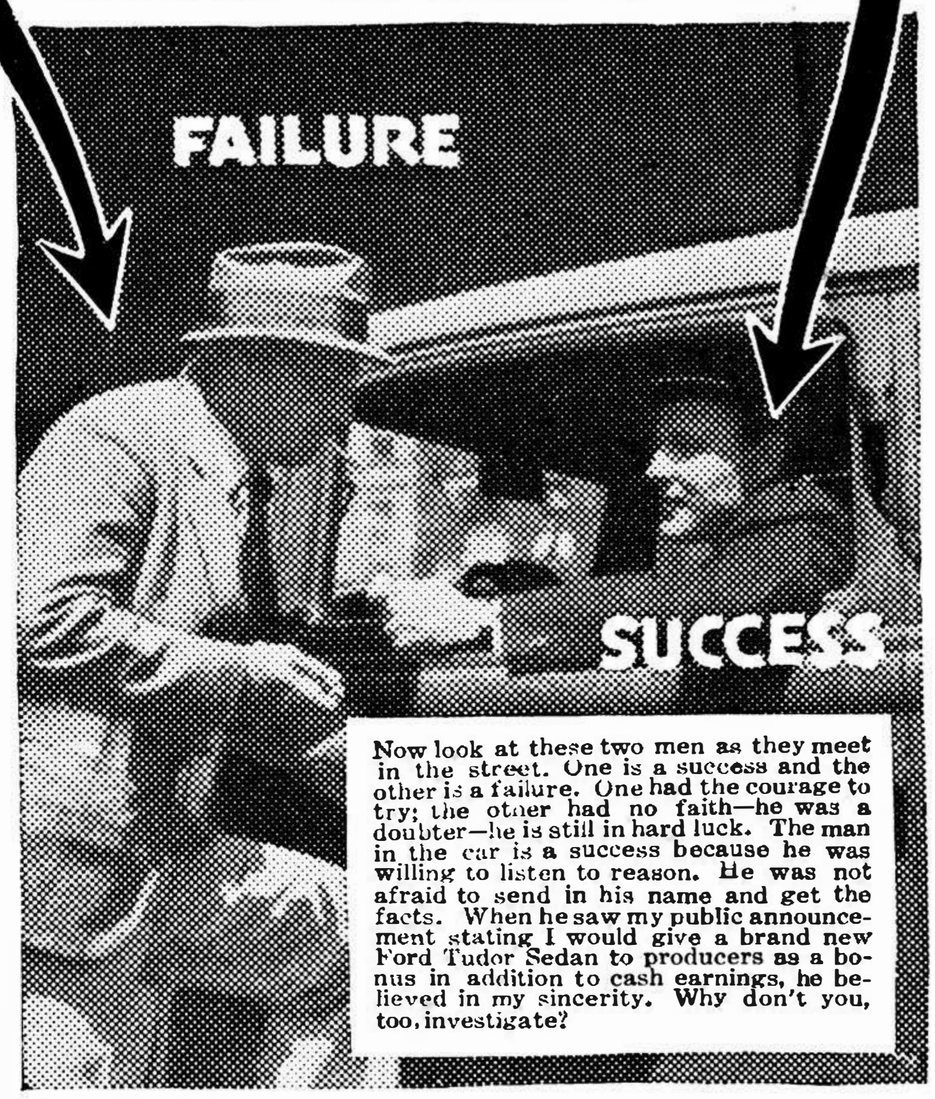

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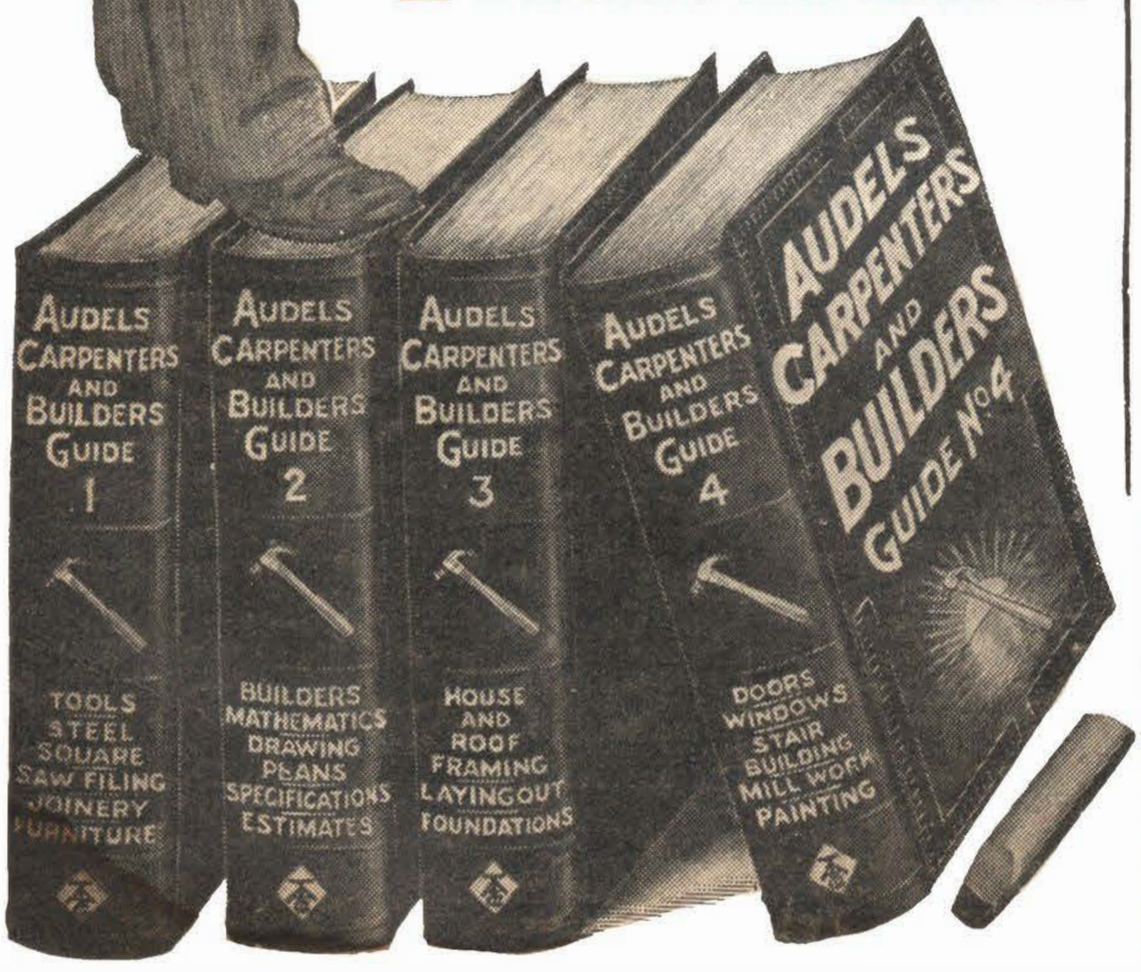

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