

STREET
AND
SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY

MAGAZINE JUNE 3, 1989

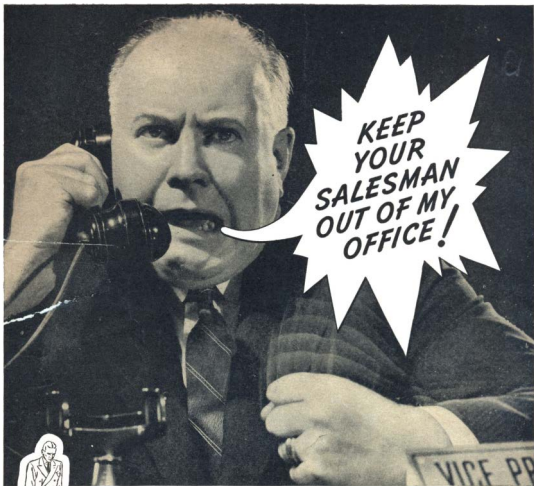


beginning

RENEGADE ROUNDUP

by WILLIAM
COLT MacDONALD

William Colt MacDonald



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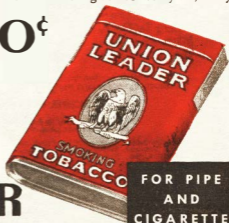
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WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

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Publication issued every week by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Allen I. Grammer, President; Henry W. Raiston, Vice President and Treasurer. Copyright, 1939, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., New York. Copyright, 1939, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., Great Britain. Entered as Second-class Matter, September 4, 1917, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions to Canada, Cuba, Dom. Republic, Haiti, Spain, Central and South American Countries, except The Guianas and British Honduras, \$5.00 per year. To all other Foreign Countries, including The Guianas and British Honduras, \$7.00 per year.

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CLINGING FOR THEIR LIVES TO A ROCKING BUOY



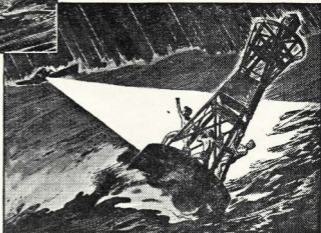
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① "I stayed out on Lake St. Claire until well after dark fishing," writes Clifford Thorne of 716 Van Dyke Ave., Detroit, Mich. "As I started rowing home a terrific squall hit. Rowing was almost impossible and the rain was so heavy it blotted out lights half a mile away. And then, over the howl of the wind I thought I heard cries for help.

② "But I couldn't tell where the sound was coming from. I thought of the powerful, focusing flashlight that lay on the back seat, reached cautiously for it and played it around me... and there they were! Three youngsters clinging in terror to a rocking sea buoy. They had tried the usual stunt of swimming out to the buoy and back, but the storm spoiled the plan.



③ "Yes, I got 'em ashore safely, in spite of an overloaded boat, the heavy seas and the heavy rain, and I can't take all the credit either. Plenty of it belongs to 'Eveready' fresh DATED batteries, first for finding the lads on that buoy and later for standing by us and pointing the way through that storm to a safe landing.

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THE ROUNDUP

WHEN do we hear from Robert Ormond Case again?" queries Paul B. Mitchell, a reader of eleven years' standing in Grant's Pass Oregon. "In years past he has brought Alaska so close to us we could actually see it." Mr. Mitchell is only one of the many who have inquired concerning stories by this author who is famed for his tales of the Northland, and we're glad to report that Mr. Case called on us not long ago and that we discussed some yarns for Western Story Magazine. We hope to hear from him in the near future, for he has been absent from our contents page far too long.

We made mention some weeks ago concerning another cow-horse article by Charles L. McNichols. We are glad to announce that his latest story, THE WILD HORSE SITUATION, has been scheduled for next week's issue. McNichols, who travels about the West getting his information first hand, wrote us of an amusing incident which happened to him not long ago. "Once while out getting material for one of my articles," he says, "a couple of riders dropped into my camp. They had just started telling me about the ranches they had worked for when we heard a woman coming up trail yelling at the top of her lungs.

"The boys dived into the brush right and left, but the woman cut the man at the left from cover and started chasing him around and around with an ax. 'I'll teach you to carry my man off,' she kept yell-

ing wildly. His wind was better than hers and he got away, but she dropped down by our fire and, after apologizing for raising a row before strangers, she explained that her husband had been away on the summer range for three months and this was his first day home. She had set him to packing water up from the spring so she could do an accumulated washing. When the water wasn't forthcoming she went down to the spring and found two empty buckets and two sets of boot tracks headed toward our camp.

"One Tex—the guy she had chased with the ax—had stopped by with the news that there was a Western Story writer camped in the next canyon. So Pete, the husband, and his pard had made a clean getaway—just dropped the buckets and went a-visiting. Well, we figured the woman had a right to be a little riled so we fed her fried rabbit and coffee and it all ended in our having a mighty pleasant visit."

We're always glad to be able to announce a new Tom Roan story. There'll be one in next week's issue, a rousing adventure novel entitled, BOOMTOWN BUCKAROOS. It's the lusty story of Wyoming Frank Dalton and his pardner, Bullard Buzzby, and the strange reception they got in the hell-raising town of Badwater. Join them on the "Hoof, Human, Oil & Spit Devil Express" next week, and we'll guarantee you a trip you'll never forget. There'll be plenty of other top-notch stories, of course, plus a full line-up of departments.

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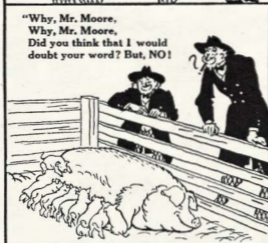
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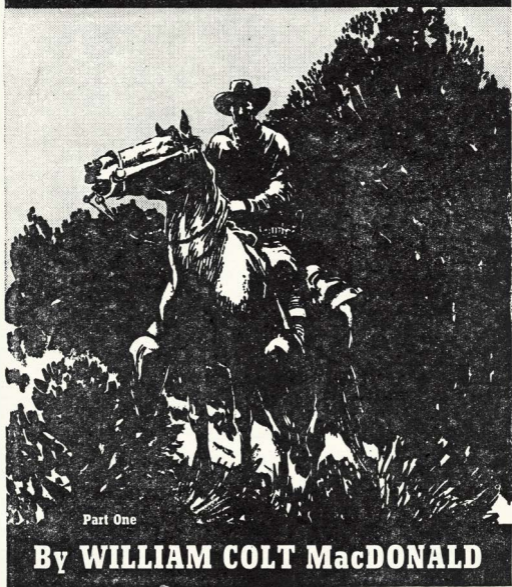
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RENEGADE ROUNDUP



Part One

By **WILLIAM COLT MacDONALD**

CHAPTER I DRY-GULCHED

NICK VULCAN left the crowd that had begun to gather in front of the sheriff's office and strode with long, deliberate steps along the shady side of Vista

Wells' main street. He was a dark, saturnine individual with a good breadth of shoulder and a tough jaw. He wore two Colt's six-shooters and a look of hard, grim determination. There wasn't any need for him to display the deputy United States marshal's badge he

carried; everyone knew who Nick Vulcan was. Such was his fame.

What Vulcan was doing in Vista Wells, however, nobody knew. He hadn't even admitted he was in town on official business. He was strangely tight-lipped on that score. He had merely appeared one morning, some two weeks before. If he had been sent for, he didn't say; he was equally silent as to whom or what he was seeking.

When questioned, Sheriff John Laramie, of Centaur County, denied any knowledge regarding Nick Vulcan's activities. There'd been some trouble in the Centaur country, the sheriff admitted, but not enough, in his opinion, to warrant the arrival of a deputy United States marshal. Sheriff Laramie opined, somewhat huffily, that he felt himself equal to handling Centaur County, with no help from the government.

Be that as it may, Nick Vulcan was in Vista Wells and, at present, striding with firm, purposeful steps along the town's main thoroughfare. He paused momentarily to glance, over swinging doors, into the Cloverleaf Saloon, then glumly proceeded on his way.

It was Saturday afternoon; the usual cowhands were at bars; the regular buckboards tied before stores and shops; the customary number of brones lined both sides of the street and switched irritated tails at the flies buzzing in the afternoon sunlight.

A block farther on, Vulcan stopped before Whitey Shaw's Warbonnet Saloon. The place seemed to be crowded. Sound swirled continually through the doorway—voices, laughter, the clicking of ivory balls on a pool table, the clink of glasses. Vulcan pushed aside one swinging door and stepped inside,

pausing momentarily to allow his eyes to become accustomed to the inner light after the sun glare of the street.

A row of men stood along the bar, served by the perspiring Whitey Shaw. At the back of the room, three cowhands from the Frying Pan outfit manipulated pool balls on the green, felt-surfaced table. Five men in range togs sat at one of the tables across the room from the bar, studying poker hands.

One of the poker players, Gage Hammond, owner of the Circle H, glanced up at Vulcan, nodded, and resumed his scrutiny of the cards in his left hand.

Vulcan didn't answer the nod. His dark eyes swept the room. "The sheriff just brought in his deputy," he announced. His voice had a peculiar harsh quality that penetrated the myriad sounds in the saloon.

THE clatter of glasses died away as the men at the bar swung around to face Vulcan. Silence descended for a brief moment, then one of the men at the pool table asked, "What do you mean, Nick, brought the deputy in? You talking about Howie Moran?"

"I'm talking about Howie Moran." Vulcan nodded. "He's dead. Dry-gulched by some murdering skunk."

The silence held for a strained moment. Then somebody made a comment to the effect that this was the second deputy Sheriff John Laramie had lost within two months. And in the same manner.

Four of the men at the poker table started to rise, but at a short word from Gage Hammond instantly settled back in seats. Pool cues were put down with some haste, and men started hurriedly toward the door—

way, everyone talking at once. They flowed out toward the street, crowding in the direction of the sheriff's office.

Within a minute the Warbonnet was practically empty. Vulcan had stepped to one side, scrutinizing closely each face that passed. Now he again gave his attention to the room. The five men at the poker table, the bartender, and one lone individual at the bar were all that remained.

"Nick, you ain't no asset to business," Whitey Shaw said resentfully, his albinolike features contorted to a frown. "Now if you could only bring 'em in that fast, I would—"

Vulcan ignored the words to interrupt, "Only two hombres in this saloon didn't seem surprised at the news I brought. Hammond, you're one of those two hombres. Your four hands playing cards with you started to leave. You stopped 'em. I'm asking why?"

Hammond laughed shortly. He was a big, cold-eyed man with a thin scar running from his temple down to his clean-shaven jaw. He shoved his sombrero farther back on the iron-gray thatch of hair that made him look older than he actually was, and laughed again. There was more sneer than humor in the tone. "Meaning," he asked icily, "that if I fail to show surprise, that very fact is proof that I already know something about that deputy being rubbed out?"

"I didn't say that."

"You hinted at it," Gage Hammond snapped. "Don't be a fool, Nick. Why should I have anything to do with that deputy's death? And why should I be interested? I came to town to play cards. I stopped my men from leaving because I didn't want the game inter-

rupted. Can't a man be surprised without jumping up and running outside, like all those other sheep did? Hell, I've seen dead men before—and I expect to see more of 'em before I die. So"—and the sneer was very pronounced now—"you can cross me off your list of suspects."

"Maybe I will, maybe I won't," Vulcan said tersely.

Gage Hammond shrugged bulky shoulders. "That's whatever," he grunted. "Take my advice and don't be a damn fool. I didn't have anything to do with Howie Moran's killin'. If you think I did, let's see some proof." He turned to the other card players. "Whose play is it?" And then before anyone could reply, he again lifted his head to Vulcan: "You mentioned *two* hombres, Nick. I've been disposed of. How about Larry Crockett, there?"

THE poker players swung around to face the young fellow who stood at the bar, elbows resting easily on the mahogany edge. Larry Crockett was a tall, slim-hipped, red-headed hombre with a contagious grin. He wore high-heeled riding boots, Levis, and a woolen shirt. A roll-brim sombrero rested on the back of his well-shaped head, and a Colt's .45 was slung at his right hip.

"Now, Hammond," Crockett said reprovingly, "don't you try to divert the law's suspicions. My hands are clean. Don't you wish you could say as much?"

Hammond half started from his chair, then sank back. "What do you mean by that, Crockett?" he demanded in an ugly voice.

"No more than I said," Larry Crockett replied easily. "I'm not making any accusations, Hammond.

Nick here is doing that, and he didn't seem entirely convinced with your reply."

Hammond didn't know whether to be angry or not. Before he had time to say anything more, Vulcan left the doorway and came across to the bar.

"Never mind what I'm convinced of, Crockett," he said coldly. "I'll take care of Hammond. But there's a lot of things I don't know about you."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Crockett drawled. "Look here"—as though struck with a sudden idea—"why don't you hire a fortune-teller? Get one of those past, present, and future sharks who knows everything and tells all. Mebbe we'd both be surprised. It'd be as good a way as some of the guesses that have been made hereabouts."

"Meaning what?" Vulcan demanded, unsmiling.

Crockett's lips twitched. "I'm not sure myself," he murmured gently. "I'm not the law hereabouts. Let's not get off the track, Nick. You were going to ask me some questions."

Vulcan flushed under his tan. He never felt quite sure whether he was being kidded or not when he talked to Larry Crockett. The young fellow always had an air of knowing more than he actually told, and it was difficult to pin him down to anything definite.

"Dammit, Crockett," Vulcan said crossly, "I intend to ask you some questions and I want straight, direct answers. None of your beating around the bush. And there's no need of you grinning thataway. Howie Moran's body was found on your Bridle Bit holdings, over near Buffalo Hump ridge—"

"Yes," Crockett interjected softly. "On my holdings. Go on."

"Yes, on your holdings," Vulcan repeated testily. "Though the devil only knows what you have holdings for. You never run any cattle—"

"Not any more," Crockett agreed placidly. "since they all took wings, or something."

"And yet, by the jumpin' jeepers," Vulcan said with some exasperation, "you're never lacking for money. I don't understand that, and some day I'm going to have an explanation or know the reason why you—"

"One thing at a time, Nick," Crockett reminded, "you were going to ask some questions about Howie Moran. Now, just what do you want to know first?"

"A lot of folks," Gage Hammond put in, "would like to know just where Crockett's money comes from."

Crockett smiled tantalizingly. "Can't you make any guesses, Hammond?"

Slowly an angry red flush traveled up Gage Hammond's face, forcing into thin white relief the scar that coursed the side of his jaw. He opened his mouth to speak, closed it again. The four men at his table, hard, tough-bitten individuals known as Lippy Vaughn, George Revas, Spanish Grant, and Steve Riker—all Circle H hands—looked from Hammond to Crockett, and then back to Hammond again, as though waiting some suitable reply from their chief.

"Can't you make any guesses, Hammond?" Crockett repeated insolently.

There was an ugly note in Hammond's voice when he replied, "I might, Crockett. I could point out the number of cattle that's disappeared from various herds hereabouts."

Larry Crockett laughed softly,

apparently taking no offense at the words. "No good, Hammond," he said. "Any proof that might convict me of throwing a wide loop seems to be lacking. You know that as well as I do. On the other hand—"

LET'S chop all this palaver," Nick Vulcan said harshly. He sensed the extreme antagonism between Crockett and Hammond, but gathered that it had nothing to do with the matter he was investigating. "We'll return to first cases. Crockett, you weren't surprised at the news of Moran's dry-gulching. What—"

"There's no reason I should be," Crockett cut in.

Vulcan stiffened. "Now, dammit, you will talk. You've said too much—or too little—not to explain those words."

"Hell!" exclaimed Crockett. "There was no reason for me to be surprised. I already knew about Howie being shot. I told Sheriff Laramie about it, and he went to fetch the body—"

"You told him?" exploded Vulcan. "What did you know—say, when did you hear about— Dammit, Crockett, you come clean: where do you stand in this?"

"I found the body," Crockett stated simply, "on my way to Vista Wells this morning, early. It wasn't far off the trail. A couple of buzzards were circling. That's how I happened to notice—"

"You throwing a straight rope?" Vulcan demanded. "I'm aiming to check with Sheriff John, and—"

"I take it you didn't stop to get details, then?" Crockett asked. "Go ahead, check with the sheriff. He'll back me up."

"No, I didn't wait to ask details,"

Vulcan said a trifle lamely. "Come right down here, figuring to see could I pick up anything."

"It might be a good idea to pick up Crockett now, Nick," Gage Hammond suggested. "After all, you've only got his word for what he says. How do you know he didn't do the shooting?"

Crockett laughed. "You'd sure enough like to see me put out of the way, wouldn't you, Hammond?"

"Nothing of the sort," Hammond said stiffly. "All I want is to see justice done."

His four companions at the table nodded. "That's it, justice," George Revas said. He was an undersized, shifty-eyed man with an unshaven jaw.

Crockett studied the poker players a moment. "So you'd like to see justice done." Then, half to himself, "I wonder if you really would."

Spanish Grant swore under his breath and said something to Hammond. Hammond shook his head irritably, then turned to Nick Vulcan. "Best thing you can do, Nick, if you take my advice, is to follow up Crockett's words, question him and see what he knows."

"I'd already decided that," Vulcan said shortly, "without your advice." He swung back to Crockett. "Go ahead, talk. I want to know everything connected with your finding that body."

Crockett nodded a trifle grimly. "All right, you all asked for it. Don't blame me for what happens. Like I told you, a couple of buzzards attracted me to the body. Then I looked around some."

"Find any sign?" Vulcan demanded.

Crockett nodded. "Plenty. Enough leastwise, to picture in my mind what happened. Like we all

know, the sheriff has had Howie Moran riding a lot, looking for rustlers. Well, I picked up the trail of Howie's horse. He was passing south of Buffalo Hump ridge—

"On your holdings?" Gage Hammond reminded.

ON my holdings," nodded Crockett. "I liked Howie right well. He often stopped off at my place to rest his saddle and pass the time of day. Yesterday afternoon happened to be one of those times. He'd been riding over west of the Bridle Bit and had something on his mind—"

"The same being?" Vulcan cut in.

Crockett shook his head. "Howie didn't put it into words. Just mentioned he'd discovered something that would blow the top offn hell when he told his story to Sheriff John. A short time later he mounted and pulled out. Then, this morning, I found his body—"

"You already told us that twice," George Revas growled.

"Shut up, George," snapped Gage Hammond.

"Crockett," Vulcan said impatiently, "you mentioned finding sign."

Larry Crockett nodded. "There were tracks showing a rider had been drifting along to the rear of Howie, ever since yesterday morning, before he stopped at my place. Then, as Howie neared Buffalo Hump ridge, said rider swung off Howie's trail to climb up atop the ridge. He squatted in the brush there the length of time it would take to smoke two cigarettes—"

"Got it right accurate, ain't you, Crockett?" Revas sneered.

"The butts were in plain sight for anybody to see," Crockett said simply. "Anyway, the murdering

coyote waited until Howie had come in line with his rifle sights, then he pulled trigger. Twice. Once for Howie's horse, probably so it wouldn't come home alone and give the alarm too soon."

"You're certain sure it was a rifle?" Vulcan asked.

"It'd have to be at that distance, Nick," Hammond said scornfully. "Course, I forgot you're not so familiar with the country over that way"

"It was a rifle, all right." Larry Crockett delved into one pocket of his overalls and produced two exploded cartridge shells which he handed to Vulcan. "I found these where the murderer waited."

Vulcan examined the shells eagerly. His head suddenly jerked around to the poker table, sharp glance taking in one of the men seated there. "A .38-55 caliber," he snapped. "Revas! You carry a .38-55 smoke pole. Just last week I heard you boasting how you could shoot—"

"You're crazy!" Revas had gone suddenly white. He jumped out of his chair and backed away, one protesting hand extended as though to ward off an accusation. "You're crazy," he repeated hoarsely.

"Sure, he's crazy," Gage Hammond rasped. "Sit down, George. You ain't the only one using a .38-55 Winchester."

Revas hesitated. He didn't sit down, but backed away another pace before Vulcan's penetrating gaze. "There aren't so many rifles of that caliber used hereabouts, at that," Vulcan said, flat-voiced. "Revas, I'd like to know just where you were yesterday afternoon—"

"You've got to have more than the caliber of a rifle to pin a crime on Revas, Nick," Larry Crockett cut in softly.

"Sure he has," Revas half whispered. He backed away another step. Vulcan looked rather uncertain.

"Dammit, George, I told you to sit down," Gage Hammond rasped. "Nobody's accusing you of anything."

"Member back about a week ago," Crockett continued. "It rained right hard one night. That dobe clay up atop Buffalo Hump is sort of reddish color. Down in the brush, where the murderer waited for Howie Moran to come along, the sun don't reach some of the hollows. It's a mite muddy in spots. The murderer stepped in one of those spots. I saw a clear imprint of his foot. If he hasn't cleaned up his boots—"

No one waited for Crockett to finish. Every eye went instantly to George Revas' booted feet. Spanish Grant muttered an oath, then checked himself. The other men at the poker table were half out of chairs now.

Nick Vulcan took one quick step forward, his gaze intent on the strip of caked mud adhering to Revas' left boot. Revas was looking down on the betraying boot as though hypnotized. His head jerked up suddenly, features working spasmodically.

"Now, dammit," Vulcan exclaimed, "you have got some explaining to do, Revas. I want—"

And that was as far as he got. Revas, apparently galvanized to action by the words, threw discretion to the winds and made a sudden stab for his gun.

"You damn fool!" Vulcan belatedly, his own hands darting to his hips. His right gun roared, then his left.

Revas fired once as his gun bar-

rel cleared scabbard. He took two tottering steps, then suddenly crashed, face down, on the pine floor.

CHAPTER II

"DON'T GET TOO SMART!"

POWDER smoke slowly swirled through the Warbonnet bar-room and vanished in thin air. The four men standing near the table stared in blank dismay at the silent form stretched on the floor.

Whitey Shaw was frozen rigid behind his bar, mouth wide open, eyes bulging. Larry Crockett hadn't moved during the shooting. He stood as before, back to the bar, elbows resting on the edge of the long mahogany counter, one boot heel hooked over the bar rail.

Nick Vulcan appeared bewildered, unbelieving. "The fool!" he exploded abruptly. "He gave himself away. All I wanted was to question him."

Larry Crockett nodded. "His actions were the strongest evidence against him. Figuring you were going to place him under arrest, he got panicky an' lost his head."

"I had to shoot in self-defense," Vulcan kept insisting. "It was him or me. Revas nearly got me, at that." He gazed at the ripped furrow of corduroy along his left pants leg. "Only for me being faster—" Vulcan paused suddenly and swung toward Gage Hammond.

"All right, Hammond, it's your play," he said sharply. "Maybe you can do some explaining. Revas was on your Circle H pay roll."

There were excited yells along the street now and the sounds of running feet. The roaring of six-shooters had attracted attention. An excited, wild-eyed man burst through the swinging doors of the Warbonnet, then stopped abruptly

as his gaze fell on George Revas' prone body. The pack at his back pushed him on, inside. They flowed into the saloon, everyone talking at once, asking questions.

Vulcan paid no attention to the crowd. He strode across the floor, facing Gage Hammond, and repeated his questions.

Hammond by this time had again regained his composure. He looked at Revas' dead body then back to Vulcan. "I can't tell you a thing," he stated flatly. "Until this morning I hadn't seen Revas for three days. Damned if I know what he was up to. Probably some feud between him and Howie Moran. He was in the habit of crossing the border to Cisterna Vista quite frequent. Anybody can tell you that. Maybe him and Howie were sparking the same Mex gal over there—"

"It don't go down, Hammond," Vulcan broke in, his eyes steady.

Hammond looked hurt, then angry. "Suit yourself," he said testily, shrugging bulky shoulders. "I've told you all I know. If you think different, it's up to you to prove it. Whether you believe me or not, I'm obliged to you for rubbin' Revas out. I was going to fire him anyway. He deserved what he got for his dirty dry-gulching. I always knew he was no good. Never at the ranch when there was work to be done. Always runnin' over to Cisterna Vista. Dammit, I'm glad to be rid of him. Just saved me the trouble of givin' him the sack, and payin'—"

"Oh, hell!" Vulcan said wearily, and turned away. He shook off questioners and started to reload his guns.

Hammond called after him, "Don't you believe me, Nick?"

Vulcan didn't answer.

Hammond shrugged his shoulders and started talking to his Circle H hands.

A TALL, grizzled man with wide, sun-bleached mustache, and a star of office on his open vest, pushed through the crowd, then paused, looking down at the dead Revas. He raised his lined, weary face to Vulcan. "Now what?" he demanded.

Vulcan explained in terse syllables. "I did it. Had to. He'd have gotten me."

"Why, in God's name?" Sheriff John Laramie burst out.

"Lost his head," replied Vulcan. "Thought I was arresting him for Howie Moran's murder. His actions proved he did it."

Sheriff John swore an oath under his breath. He looked at Hammond, then back to Vulcan. "Well, this is quick work, Nick," he said tiredly. "Congratulations!"

Vulcan shook his head. "Don't thank me. Larry Crockett it was that put the bee on Revas."

Laramie darted a quick glance at Crockett and frowned. He didn't say anything, but turned back to Vulcan for details. Vulcan gave them in clipped, terse sentences. "You know my authority," he concluded shortly. "If you think an inquest is necessary, I'll testify. Crockett and Whitey can swear Revas went for his gun first. So can Hammond and his men. But I'm not sure they will."

The Circle H men muttered angrily. "Nick, you've got me all wrong," Hammond said in an injured tone.

"If you're all wrong, it's your own doings," Vulcan snapped.

Hammond opened his mouth in a hot retort but checked it as Sheriff

Laramie said, "There won't be any inquest necessary, Nick."

Vulcan nodded shortly, shrugged his shoulders and turned to follow Larry Crockett whom he'd seen pushing out to the street. Starting east along Main Street, Crockett heard Vulcan's call after him, "Hold on a minute, I'll go with you."

Larry swung around until the

deputy United States marshal had caught up. He waited for Vulcan to open the conversation.

"Where you heading?" Vulcan asked.

"Figured to get a drink down to the Cloverleaf," replied Larry. "Too crowded

Why the bandit had stopped the stage was still a mystery when he ordered the boulder moved and the stage on its way.



in Whitey's place right now."

"Hell," Vulcan growled. "If you feel the need of a drink after what happened, how do you think I feel? Crockett, I hate like blazes to have to gun a man out."

He didn't say anything more; neither did Crockett. They strode side by side along Main Street. At the first street corner, looking south, they could see, somewhat more than the length of a city block distant, the wire fence and white monuments that marked the International Boundary Line between the United States and Mexico. Some small buildings there indicated the customs houses of both governments.

Beyond lay the town of Cisterna Vista, sister city to Vista Wells. Half sister is probably the more appropriate word, considering the nationality of its inhabitants, nor could even the most optimistic observer term that scattering of poor shops, shacks, and dobe huts a real city. Its sole excuse for existence lay in the fact that it was the Mexican port of entry for this district.

THE two men found the Cloverleaf empty of customers. The bartender took their orders and set out glasses and a bottle. Vulcan poured his glass brimful and waited impatiently for Larry. Larry splashed a few drops in the bottom of his glass and nodded. "Regards!" he said automatically.

Vulcan eyed the small amount of whiskey frowningly and tossed off his own drink. He rolled a coin out on the bar. "Thanks," said Larry. "Have another?"

"No," Vulcan snapped, "and you don't either. Don't tell me that's a drink you just took. Thought you were coming here because you were thirsty."

Larry smiled. "I figured you'd want to question me some more. Kind of had a hunch you'd follow, if I pulled out, so we could get the questioning over with."

Vulcan eyed him appreciatively. "Thinking two jumps ahead of me, eh?"

"Two, anyway," Larry drawled.

Vulcan's jaw dropped. What he might have said was interrupted by the bartender in an effort to make conversation. "I understand there was some shootin' down to the War-bonnet bar a short spell back."

"That so?" Vulcan asked bluntly. "We haven't heard of it yet. Maybe if you'd go to the door and keep your ears open—in the direction of the street—you might get some news."

The barkeep took the hint, and after a moment rounded the corner of the bar to take up a position in his doorway.

Vulcan turned back to Crockett, lowering his voice. "I don't just know what your status is, hereabouts, Crockett, but you have my congratulations on the way you pinned that shooting on Revas. I'm obliged to you for helping me do my duty."

Larry shook his head. "It's me should be thanking you, Nick. I liked Howie Moran. He was a right nice hombre. Something had to be done about Revas."

"Did you know it was him done it?"

"Not for sure, but I was practically certain. The sign was pretty plain. He acted just about the way I expected him to act. When you first brought the news that Sheriff John had brought in Howie's body, I was watching Revas right close. He pretended to be surprised and started to rush out with the others but—"

"Look here," Vulcan interrupted, "when you told Sheriff John about finding the body, did you explain about finding sign, too?"

Crockett shook his head. "Laramie's not as young as he once was. His draw has slowed considerable. I didn't want to see Revas kill him."

"What had you figured to do about it?"

"Maybe," Crockett said slowly, "I'd have killed him myself. I liked Howie Moran. Then you showed up and—well, I just let things take a natural course. If I'd killed Revas, I might have had to face trial. You had the authority I lacked—"

"Hell!" Vulcan burst out. "You used me!" Light seemed suddenly to dawn on him. Grudging admiration showed in his features. He lowered his voice again. "Damned if that ain't the first time anybody made a cat's-paw out of Nick Vulcan."

Larry was silent.

"You're smart, Crockett," Vulcan said slowly. "Just don't get too smart."

CROCKETT ignored the menace in the last words. "Not so smart," he said pleasantly. "I just used my head a mite. I've seen Revas around town quite a bit. Had a hunch he'd react the way he did, if anybody started to ask questions."

"You knew him better than I did," Vulcan admitted. "He sure surprised me when he went for his gun."

"He didn't stop to think," said Larry. "If he'd kept his head he might have bluffed himself out of the mess. Even if you'd arrested him and brought him to trial, a smart lawyer might have got him

off. There's several hombres use Winchesters of that caliber, and that reddish mud that was stuck to his boot isn't peculiar to Buffalo Hump ridge. It's scattered all through this country. Howsomever, that part is settled. Howie's account is squared!"

Vulcan raised one protesting hand. "That's enough on Howie Moran," he stated bluntly. "Now I aim to learn just what it was Moran found out."

"About what?"

"You said"—Vulcan prodded Crockett's chest with a long forefinger to punctuate each word—"that Moran told you he had learned something. Something that would blow the top off'n hell. Those were your words. I want to know what it was."

"I can't tell you, Nick."

"Can't—or won't!"

"Can't. You see, Howie didn't tell me what it was. Said it was Sheriff John's right to hear it first. And then, Howie was killed before he could see John."

"I wish I could believe you, Crockett."

"We're agreed on that, anyway," Larry smiled. "You're danged suspicious, Nick."

"Why shouldn't I be?" Vulcan said heatedly. "There's an undercurrent of strong feeling through this country, based on, as near as I can figure it, the wholesale stealing of stock. There's a definite antagonism between you and Gage Hammond, but if he has anything on you he doesn't put it into words. And you make no open accusations against him. It's a damn funny situation. You hate each other. Hell, why shouldn't I feel suspicious? There's something between you and Hammond. I've watched

you both for a couple of weeks now. You're both always hinting at things when you meet."

"Maybe," Larry suggested innocently, "Hammond thinks I stole a cow from him, but can't prove it."

"One cow! Jumpin' bullfrogs! He complains he's losing 'em by the tens and twenties!"

"Do you believe him?" Larry asked.

Vulcan frowned. "I suppose it's my duty to believe him," he replied evasively. "Just as I believe the other stock raisers who claim to be losing stock. Now, if you and Hammond were friendly, I might suspect you both of a hand in rustling, but as—"

"Why suspect me?" asked Larry. "I don't run any cattle. No one sees me selling any."

"That's just it," Vulcan said helplessly, "and yet you always appear well fixed. Just what do you do for a living?"

"Deponent sayeth not." Larry's eyes twinkled. "Look, Nick, why you so interested in cattle rustling?"

"I'm not, except that it may lead to something else that's more in my line. Hell! It shouldn't be necessary to have a government man here to handle a rustling problem. That's a job for the cattle association, if Sheriff Laramie can't take care of it." Vulcan paused, then continued: "I understand you used to run cattle—you and your father—under the Bridle Bit brand. Now all you have is your land and some buildings. Where's your stock?"

TWO years ago," Larry said gravely, "my father died. He'd always wanted to be taken back to Kentucky to be buried, as we'd done with mother, a few years previously. Wishbone

Herrick and I accompanied the body back to Kentucky. Wishbone's my right-hand man. Or I'm his," Larry added whimsically, "I'm never sure which. Anyway, Wishbone and I were gone some time. When we returned to the Bridle Bit, every damn cow and horse I owned had vanished. We just had a small outfit. We'd left two cowhands and a cook to take care of things in our absence. The cowhands were found out on the range, shot in the back. The cook was murdered at the ranch, and some money we'd left in a tin box was missing."

"Hell!" muttered Vulcan. "That was tough. And you never learned who did it?"

"Hammond or some of his crew," Larry said grimly.

"You got proof of that?"

Larry shook his head. "I just know."

"They don't pay off on guesses," Vulcan said a little dryly.

But Larry nodded unperturbed. "That's what Sheriff John told me when I laid the matter before him. But, you see, it wasn't pure guess. And yet, I couldn't prove what I knew. And so, I'm letting things ride, picking up a little information from time to time. Some day I'll make all the details dovetail."

"I know how it is," Vulcan said sympathetically. "A feller will get a right strong hunch on something, and yet he can't make anybody believe him. Look here, has Hammond ever tried to buy your ranch?"

Larry shook his head. "I've always half expected he'd make some sort of cheap offer, but he never has. My holdings adjoin his, too. Cowhorn Creek, that heads up in the Centaur Range, is the boundary line between the two outfits. He's north of me, northwest of Vista Wells. I

suppose you know the layout around here, Nick; the Diamond K outfit is twenty miles due north of town; the Frying Pan is eighteen miles to the northeast; the 9 Bar about the same distance, but south of the Frying Pan. You see, the local outfits sort of radiate, fanlike, west, north, and east of Vista Wells."

"You're due west of here, aren't you?"

Larry nodded. "My Bridle Bit is around twelve miles' ride from town. Another eight miles west of me, with the home ranch smack-dab against the Centaur Range foothills, is the Rafter B. That's the place I understand Hammond would like to buy."

"Who runs that?"

"Nobody there now. Just empty buildings and corrals. Jared Bristol used to own it; he's dead now. Jared married Sheriff Laramie's sister, who passed on when her daughter Joan was born. I suppose Joan is the owner. She's living over in Texas some place. I haven't seen her since we were both kids."

"She's coming back," Vulcan said unexpectedly.

"Joan Bristol?" Larry exclaimed.

Vulcan nodded. "Leastwise, I reckon that's who Sheriff John meant when he said he had a niece due to arrive shortly. He happened to mention it yesterday. I rather gather he didn't like the idea."

"I wonder what she aims to do?" Larry mused.

"Sheriff John didn't say."

Larry dismissed the matter from his mind and changed the subject. "Nick, you've asked a lot of questions. I'm asking you one now."

"Go ahead and ask. I don't say I'll answer."

"Nick, who requested you, a deputy United States marshal, to be

sent down to this country?"

Vulcan stared at his questioner. "You don't know?" Larry Crockett shook his head.

THAT," Vulcan said slowly, and his eyes looked half-unbelieving, "is a mystery. After what you told me, I was commencing to think you were responsible. You see, Larry, we don't know. The office received an unsigned letter saying the government should be interested in what was going on in the Centaur country. That didn't sound like a rustling problem. We weren't very busy, so the chief ordered me down here to look into things. Maybe I shouldn't tell you this. Maybe you're trying to pull some sort of game on me, pull the wool over my eyes. Frankly, I don't know. Law and order's my game. I play it the only way I know how. Now that I'm here, I aim to do my dam'dest to enforce it."

"Call on me if I can help," Larry urged.

Vulcan smiled grimly. "I'd be glad to do that, if I could be sure what side you're on," he said, "but I'm none too sure of you—yet. You still haven't told me just how you make a living."

"With a tin cup," Larry said gravely, "and a handful of pencils. If you watch close, you'll catch me sitting on a street corner with my eyes closed. I might even be singing a song—"

"You're singing one now," Vulcan interrupted impatiently, "and I don't like the tune nohow."

Larry grinned. "I was under the impression it was the words you didn't care for, Nick. Well, I think I'll drift outside. Maybe I can pick up a fresh tune. Coming?"

Vulcan shook his head and beckoned the bartender from his position near the door. "Maybe it's a fresh air you need, more'n a fresh tune—fresh air a long way from Vista Wells, Larry. I'd like to be sure of you, but I can't. Well, my motto is, when in doubt, take a drink."

He tossed a coin on the bar as Larry Crockett passed out to the street.

CHAPTER III

LARRY HITS HARD

TWO doors east of the Warbonnet Saloon, Larry saw Lippy Vaughn emerging from the Paris Barber Shop, his face freshly shaved, his hair heavy with perfumed grease.

Vaughn was Hammond's foreman on the Circle H and ruled the crew with a loud voice and a pair of pile-driving fists. He was a boisterous, bullying man, somewhat overgiven to an indulgence of strong drink. At the present moment, while he couldn't be termed drunk, his small, bloodshot eyes reflected more than a casual acquaintance with the cup that cheers.

A heavy frown crossed Vaughn's features as his gaze fell on Crockett. Then he assumed what he considered a cordial smile and waited, hand outstretched, for Larry to come up with him.

Larry eyed the outstretched palm suspiciously. "What's the idea of the welcoming committee, Vaughn?" he asked.

"Congratulashions," Vaughn said thickly.

"On what?"

"For turnin' up that dirty Revas the way you done. That was smart work, Larry. I admire your—"

"Wait a minute," Larry said coldly. "What's this all about,

Vaughn? You and I have always done our roping on opposite sides of the fence. I don't get this."

"'S all wrong," Vaughn persisted. "We never understood each other. Cordial relashuns should be 'stablished. The Circle H feels it is under obligashuns to you, Larry, for exposing that dirty killer, Revas. We had no idea he—hic—was such a lousy coyote. Probably him what killed that other deputy of Sheriff John's—shome time back—hic! Gage Hammond—sure deeply 'bliged to you—"

"For what?" Larry interrupted sharply.

"Fer gettin' rid of a skunk, course. Revas never was any good. We owe you a heap—"

"Cut it, Vaughn. It don't go down. Hammond and all the rest of you Circle H hands hate me as much as you ever did."

"No, Larry, you're mistaken. I shwear you're mistaken."

"Don't swear, Vaughn. I wouldn't believe you on a stack of Bibles. I suppose Hammond ordered you to talk this way."

"Cer'ainly." Vaughn looked surprised, then checked himself. "No, you don't—hic!—understand."

"I understand, all right," Larry said grimly. "You're acting under Hammond's orders. Pretending you're glad I turned up Revas, so suspicion won't fall on you. You and the Circle H may fool a lot of folks, Vaughn, but it don't go with me."

Vaughn's face flushed darkly. "You callin' me a liar?" he demanded, dropping his drunken manner.

"Exactly," Larry said thinly. "You and all the Circle H outfit, when they try a dodge like this. I

don't like Hammond and his crew and you know it. And they don't like me. That settles the matter."

LARRY started on, but Vaughn seized his arm. "You ain't calling me no liar," Vaughn said angrily. He tightened his hold and swung his other fist at Larry's head. Larry dodged the blow, jerked his arm free and cut loose, one clenched fist taking Vaughn in the stomach, the other catching the side of the big foreman's head.

Vaughn grunted and sat down heavily on the sidewalk. Somewhere on the street a man yelled "Fight!" and a crowd came running. By this time Vaughn had staggered up, one hand clawing at his holstered gun.

But Larry didn't give the man time to draw. Instead he whipped out his own gun and rapped the barrel sharply alongside Vaughn's head. This time the man didn't even grunt as he dropped like a poled ox at the edge of the sidewalk, then rolled off to sprawl in the roadway.

Larry laughed shortly, shoved his gun back in holster, and started to push through the swiftly gathering crowd. Gage Hammond, followed by Spanish Grant and Steve Riker, confronted him, barring his way.

"What's the idea, Crockett?" Hammond demanded hotly. "What were you and Lippy fighting about?"

Larry laughed again. "We were playing marbles, Hammond, and Vaughn got mad when I won."

Grant and Riker closed in on Larry on either side. "One of these days you'll go too far, Crockett," said Hammond.

"Maybe this is the time, Gage," Grant said meaningly.

Larry darted a contemptuous

glance at Grant. The man was thin, wiry, with swarthy features. He wore a pair of ivory-buffed six-shooters at his hips. A flat-crowned sombrero was jerked slantwise over one eye.

"Maybe this *is* the time, Spanish," Larry agreed coolly. "I'm ready any time you are."

"You hintin' you got enough nerve to cross guns with me?" drawled Grant.

"Not hinting," Larry said flatly. "I'm stating a fact."

"Now?" Grant demanded.

"Any time," Larry snapped.

Nick Vulcan's voice came through the crowd. "Not now, anyway. Break it up, you hombres! There's been enough lead spilled for one day."

Irritation glinted in the eyes of the Circle H men, and they backed away a trifle. Vulcan confronted Hammond. "A law-abiding citizen controls his men, Hammond."

"I can't control Crockett, though, when he hits one of my men," Hammond declared hotly. "I've got some rights."

"Said rights," rasped Vulcan, "don't include three Circle H men ganging up on Crockett." He cast a contemptuous look at the unconscious Vaughn, sprawled in the road. "Better get that carcass away some place and throw water on him. I don't reckon he's hurt much."

AT that moment Sheriff Laramie arrived on the scene, demanding to know what the trouble was.

"You take over, John," Vulcan said shortly. "Street fights come within your jurisdiction. I reckon it don't amount to anything more—though it might have."

Laramie glanced sharply at Crockett. "What did you hit Lippy for, Larry?"

Crockett gave brief details. "Then before I could get away," he concluded, "these Circle H hombres arrived and wanted to continue the argument. Nick Vulcan couldn't see it that way, though it was all right with me."

"You got more nerve than sense," Vulcan snapped scornfully. "You and your tin cup! Bah!" He turned away.

"Scatter, hombres," Sheriff Laramie ordered the crowd. "Gage, you better have Grant and Riker pick up Vaughn and take him home."

"Now, look here, John," Hammond protested, "we got some rights. Crockett hit Lippy. He may be hurt serious."

Laramie sighed. "You'd better do like I say, Gage," he said heavily. "I don't reckon Lippy is hurt. Just leave Crockett to me." He took Larry's arm and started off. "Come on, Larry, I want to talk to you."

They passed through the rapidly scattering crowd and headed along the street.

"Where are we heading?" asked Larry.

"Down to my office," the sheriff replied.

"Am I under arrest?"

"Of course not. I just want to talk to you."

They walked west along Main Street until they arrived at the sheriff's office, a long, low, white-washed building of adobe. The office was at the front and contained a desk, several chairs, and a rack for guns and handcuffs. The walls were covered with reward notices for "wanted" men, a calendar from a packing house and some

maps. At the rear of the office was a closed and bolted door which opened on a block of jail cells.

Laramie led the way into his office, dropped his sombrero on a rack and wearily dropped into a chair behind his desk. "Close that door and sit down," he said wearily.

Larry obeyed, seating himself on a straight-backed wooden chair near the desk. He waited for the sheriff to open the conversation.

John Laramie didn't speak for several minutes. Instead he sat gazing through one of the high-set windows, placed in the wall to his left. Finally he sighed and said abruptly, "Larry, why don't you get out of the Centaur country?"

"Do you know of any particular reason why I should?" Crockett asked quietly.

"It might bring peace all around."

"Meaning if I got out of the country, the rustling would stop?"

Laramie frowned impatiently. "I didn't say that, at all. The point I'm making is that you'd be safer."

"Why you worrying about me?"

"Keeping the peace is one of the duties of my office. I don't need to tell you that. With you and the Circle H outfit at each other's throats, there'll be trouble. There'll be bloodshed. You can't buck that outfit alone, Larry."

"Why don't you ask Hammond to leave the country?"

"Don't be unreasonable, Larry. Gage Hammond has a big, working outfit."

"I've got my Bridle Bit to think of."

"Admitted. But you're not running any cows."

"No," Larry nodded a bit heatedly, "and I don't intend to run any more until rustling is cleared from

this country. I'm staying until Gage Hammond is finished."

"What have you against Hammond?" Laramie demanded.

"Do you have to ask?" Larry replied bitterly. "He wiped out my herd. If the sheriff's office won't do anything about that, I'll have to—"

NOW, just a minute, boy," Laramie said testily. "Any time you bring me proof of that accusation, I'll act on it. But, be reasonable. I can't take a matter like that to court just on your say-so. The judge would laugh me out of the county house."

"Reckon you're right," Larry agreed reluctantly.

"Of course, I'm right. And there's no need of me directly accusing Hammond. He'd just deny it. Anything I said would only put him on his guard. Meanwhile, I've had deputies riding the country to see what they could pick up. You've seen what happened to two of 'em. First, Tom Shelby, now, Howie Moran. Both dry-gulched."

"If you've had 'em investigating the Circle H's activities," Larry pointed out, "maybe what's happened lends a certain amount of proof to what I've told you."

"There's no proof against Gage Hammond."

"George Revas was on Hammond's pay roll. Surely you don't believe what Hammond said about Revas."

Laramie wearily shook his head. "Damned if I know what to believe. But I know I can't do anything without proof. If Vulcan hadn't killed Revas outright we might have learned something—"

"That was unavoidable, John. Vulcan shot to defend himself, and he shot straight. He didn't have

time to think matters over."

The sheriff rolled a brown-paper cigarette and tossed the papers and sack of "makin's" over to Larry. Larry twisted a smoke. A match scratched. Neither man spoke for a time.

"I'd sure like to know what it was Howie discovered before he was killed," the sheriff murmured at last.

"You mean that remark he made to me about learning something that would blow the top offn hell?"

Laramie nodded. "It might prove important. Now we'll never know. And I suppose I've got to appoint a new deputy. I hate to do it."

"Why not appoint me?" suggested Larry.

The sheriff looked startled. "Good God, no! You've seen what happened to two deputies. They were men I didn't know before they came here, and I feel right bad about the business. But I've known you since you were a little tad, and your father was a good friend of mine. No, Larry, I couldn't do it." He seemed anxious to change the subject. "Larry, if I find a buyer for your Bridle Bit, will you take the money and get out before you get killed?"

"Thanks, no, John. I don't want to sell."

The sheriff sighed deeply. "I figured you'd say that, of course. But I had to try." Again he abruptly changed the subject. "Do you remember my niece, Joan Bristol?"

Larry nodded. "I remember her as a long-legged tike with a couple of black braids and eyes as big as dollars. That's quite some years ago."

"She's coming back here."

Larry nodded. "I know it."

Laramie looked surprised. "Dammit, Larry! I never saw such a hombre as you. I've never told you anything yet that you didn't already know."

Before Laramie could ask where he got his information, Larry said, "What's Joan coming back for?"

Laramie shook his head disgustedly. "It's against my advice. I've tried to dissuade her. She still owns the Rafter B, you know. Now she's got it into her head she wants to run the ranch and raise beef stock. She's giving up her teaching job over in Texas to do it."

"Not a bad idea," said Larry. "Why try to stop her?"

"This is no time to start running cattle," Laramie said shortly. "With cows disappearing right and left, she'll just lose what little money she has. I wanted to find a buyer for her place, but she wouldn't listen to reason."

Larry chuckled. "You ought to go in for real estate, John, the way you offer to find buyers for folks."

Laramie didn't smile. "I really had a buyer for the Rafter B. Gage Hammond wants the place."

"So I've heard."

THE sheriff looked steadily at Larry a moment. This time he smiled rather ruefully. "Can't I give you any news, a-tall? Do you know everything?"

"There's a lot of things I don't know," Larry said seriously. "Howsomever, I don't know that Hammond has made any particular secret about wanting the Rafter B. I've overheard him talking about it, once or twice, in the Warbonnet."

Sheriff John looked a trifle relieved. "I'm glad to hear that's how it is. For a minute I was afeared you'd been spying around the Cir-

cle H. Knowing how they feel about you, I hoped you wouldn't be fool enough to be caught on Hammond's holdings. He'd shoot you in a minute for trespassing. And there wouldn't be much I could do about it."

"I realize that," Larry said shortly.

Laramie cast a sharp glance at him, then added, "I've got a favor to ask, son."

"Shoot. Anything in my power, I'll be glad to do for you—providing it doesn't entail leaving the Centaur country."

The sheriff shook his head. "I reckon what I'm going to ask won't put any strain on your principles, Larry. It's this way: Joan is arriving on the noon stage, Monday—day after tomorrow—and I'm not going to be able to be on hand to meet her. She'll probably have luggage, and a buckboard will be needed to drive her out to the Rafter B. I don't know if she'll be alone, or what. Anyway, I'd like to have somebody help her get settled, and—"

"Say no more, John. I'll meet the stage and drive her out to her place. Only, I'm surprised at your trusting me—a suspected cow thief."

"Don't talk like a fool, boy," the sheriff said sharply. "I never said anything like that. I may not agree with you in your attitude toward Gage Hammond, but I know full well I can trust you to see that Joan arrives safe at her place."

"Thanks, John."

"No thanks necessary, boy. There ain't so many folks hereabouts that knew Joan when she was here before. She was right small those days. And most of them that might remember her have work to do on weekdays. I hate to ask anybody

to give up his time. With you meeting her, it will be like being met by a friend, so long as I can't be on hand."

"You must figure to be right busy yourself," Larry commented.

The sheriff nodded. "I've got to go over to Cisterna Vista. I may be over there all day. You see"—Laramie hesitated, then continued—"I've had news that Brazos Bart is in the neighborhood, just across the border."

"You've been after that outlaw a right spell now, haven't you, John?"

The sheriff nodded. "I'd like to catch him. He's in Mexico some place, and would like to sneak back across the border. It'll be a feather in my cap—not to mention the big reward—if I can put the cuffs on Brazos Bart—"

"Or bring back his body."

"I'd sooner take him alive. I've got connections across the line that keep me posted when Bart nears this neighborhood. Twice I've almost captured him, but each time he eluded me."

"Have you ever seen him, John?"

Laramie shook his head. "No, but I'd probably recognize him. There's been descriptions issued. I judge he's about your build and light complected. He's been a terror for holdups, that boy, train and stagecoach. But I'll get him yet. Lord knows I've wasted enough time trying."

"Brazos Bart seems to hang around Cisterna Vista a lot."

The sheriff nodded. "I reckon he uses the town as a sort of headquarters."

Larry Crockett got to his feet. "Well, good luck, John. And don't worry about your niece. I'll be on hand to meet her Monday noon."

"Thanks, son. I'll appreciate that."

Larry left the sheriff's office, strode back to the Warbonnet hitch rail and mounted his waiting pony. Turning its head west on Main Street, he pressed spurs to the little horse's sides and started for the Bridle Bit.

CHAPTER IV

RISKY WORK

CROCKETT didn't push his horse hard on the way home. The pony followed the well-marked trail without much guidance by its rider, who slouched in the saddle, lost in meditation.

Ahead, standing high and rugged in the distance, rose the peaks of the Centaur Range, their jagged spires already touched with sun's descending light, the hollows and deep ravines darkly purple. Occasionally, Crockett rode past huge clumps of prickly pear. Now and then an outcropping of granite caused the trail to swing in a wide curve until the barrier had been passed. Mostly, though, there were rolling grass lands on either side, dotted here and there with thorny mesquite or clumps of sage.

A few hundred yards north of the trail, Buffalo Hump ridge threw a long shadow to the east. A number of circling buzzards rose as Crockett approached the spot where he had that morning discovered Howie Moran's dead body. Then as the rider moved on along the trail, the scavenger birds once more swooped to earth.

"Working on Howie's pony, I reckon," Larry mused distastefully. "Poor cuss. Anyway, I'm glad Revas paid for that killing. I got a hunch it will be some time before

Sheriff John appoints another deputy."

He rode on, his thoughts somber as he tried to figure out what discovery the dead deputy had made. Almost before he realized the fact, he had arrived at a point where a narrower trail swerved north from the main road which continued on to Joan Bristol's Rafter B ranch buildings. Larry turned his pony on the narrower trail and, mounting a low rise of ground, glimpsed two miles away his own huddle of buildings, shaded by tall cottonwoods. He touched the horse with spurs and moved forward at a faster gait.

Before long the ranchhouse stood out plainer among the cottonwoods. Some distance from the house was the bunkhouse where Larry lived with his sole companion, Wishbone Herrick. The two men rarely used the ranchhouse any more.

Clustered about the bunkhouse were the other structures—stables, blacksmith shop, windmill, corrals, and so on. From afar, Larry spied Wishbone seated atop a corral rail, awaiting his return.

Wishbone had been Larry's father's foreman in the old days, and now, even though the Bridle Bit no longer raised beef stock, Larry had kept the old fellow on. There was a close relation between the two, more like that of father-and-son alliance than of employer and hired hand. But in practically everything, Larry was the acknowledged chief.

AS Larry rode into the yard, Wishbone clambered stiffly down from the corral rail. Herrick might have been anywhere between forty and sixty years old.

His eyes were a keen blue and his legs in their faded overalls resembled a pair of calipers. Several inches might have been added to his lean, tough height could his legs have been straightened out. His hair and mustache were almost white, the latter close-cropped. His features were brown and leathery from years of exposure to broiling sun and desert winds.

"Well, yo're back," he greeted crustily as Larry pulled to a stop and dismounted before the corral gate. Wishbone swung open the gate, and Larry started to remove the Heiser saddle from his pony. "Thought you said you was comin' back by noon. What's kept you all day? It ain't took all this time to get a sack of makin's. And did you learn what Howie had discovered?"

"Howie," Larry said, swinging saddle and blanket from the horse's head, "is dead."

"Tell you say!" Wishbone exclaimed. "What—"

"George Revas shot him, after he left here yesterday."

"Well, tell it, tell it," Wishbone said impatiently.

Larry told the story while the bridle was stripped off and the pony turned into the corral with some half a dozen other saddlers. Larry was still talking when he picked up his saddle and strode up to the bunkhouse with Wishbone at his side.

"By the jumpin' tarnation! You did good work reading sign on Revas," Wishbone interrupted once.

Entering the bunkhouse, a long narrow building with bunks arranged along one wall and furnished with a long table and some chairs, Larry set down his saddle in one corner and tossed his sombrero on

a bunk. An open doorway at one end of the bunkhouse revealed a mess kitchen, from which issued the savory odor of cooking food.

"Got a stew on for you," Wishbone was saying. "Go ahead with yore yarn. I'll get things on the table. It won't take but a jiffy to toss some coffee in the pot."

Larry followed him into the kitchen and continued talking while Wishbone prepared supper and placed dishes and knives and forks and spoons at one end of the long mess table. By the time Larry's story was finished, they had seated themselves and begun to eat.

"By gum!" Wishbone ejaculated, at the conclusion of Larry's story, "you shore had a full-testin' day. Wish I'd been there to see you smack down Lippy Vaughn. You should have put a slug into him, 'stead of just bendin' yore gun bar'l over his conk. That's what I'd have done if he pulled an iron on me."

Larry shook his head, smiling. "If that had happened, Sheriff John would have had to put me under arrest—"

"Damnation to hell! Lippy pulled on you first, didn't he?"

Larry nodded. "That's whatever. There weren't any witnesses close by when he pulled. I might have had a hard time proving he started the scrap. I'm under suspicion of one sort or another now. I don't want to get in any deeper."

"Sheriff John pretty strong in his suspicions?"

"Not so strong as Nick Vulcan. He don't seem to know just what to think of me. He's got a hunch there's some connection between Hammond and me, but he can't just figure things out, seeing Hammond and I are so bitter toward each other."

The two men ate in silence for a few minutes. Finally, Wishbone set down his cup and grunted, "This Joan Bristol gal, now."

"You remember her, don't you, Wishbone?"

WISHBONE grunted again. "Shore, I remember her. She was just a little but-ton, though, when I see her last. Going to run cattle, eh? Huh, she's prob'ly growed up to be one of these long-jawed females with a scratchy voice. Goin' to run cattle! Bab! Like it was somethin' as easy as knittin' or sewin' on buttons. It beats all what some women try to do. Aces to tens she can't find a husband, so she's takin' on man's work, anyway."

"You might have her figured wrong," Larry said mildly.

"Shore, I could be wrong, but I'll bet I'm not. Mebbe she ain't the mannish, dominatin' type. What then? In that case she's a fluffy, ruffly, clingin'-vine kind of a female what'll always be runnin' to us to settle her problems."

"Why to us?" asked Larry with a grin.

"We're nearest neighbors to the Rafter B, ain't we? And we got to be neighborly. Nope, this ain't no country for a woman, not unless she stays in town." Wishbone set down his coffee cup with a loud clatter. "So you're going to meet her, eh?"

"I expect to."

"Sheriff John should take care of his own relatives," Wishbone grumbled. "Didn't you have sense enough to tell him you might have work of your own to do?"

Larry's eyes twinkled. "I didn't dare to."

Wishbone swore suddenly. "By damn! I nearly forgot, I was so in-

terested in yore news. A letter come from Bosschere this afternoon." He produced a soiled envelope from his right hip pocket and tossed it to Larry, who picked it up.

"Miguel bring this?" asked Larry.

Wishbone nodded. "I reckon that's his name. Anyway, it was same Mex that always brings you notes."

Larry nodded and slit open the envelope. He read the inclosed letter over twice, then scratched a match to the paper and held it and the envelope until they were almost consumed, before dropping the still-flaming bit of paper to his plate. For several minutes he had nothing to say.

"Well, what's wrong?" Wishbone demanded at last.

Larry shook his head. "Nothing wrong, exactly. Only, I think you're right, Wishbone. I *am* going to have work to do, 'long about the time that stage comes through. Oh, yes, there's the usual, tomorrow night, too. Not much, but too much to overlook."

"Dammit," Wishbone said irritably, "I wish you'd overlook most of it, anyway. It's risky work, boy. But what's this about the stage?"

Larry smiled. "Apparently Hammond needs more money to carry on operations. He mentioned to Bosschere that he was sending Steve Riker to Capitol City for some cash. Riker leaves tomorrow. He'll be on the same stage that brings Joan Bristol. It's going to keep me humping to meet Joan and Riker both."

"Larry! You fool! You're not going to try—"

Larry's eyes danced with amusement. "Sure I am, Wishbone. Now, just hold your lip a minute. Hell! I can't miss an opportunity

like this. Any time I can put an extra crimp in Gage Hammond, you don't expect me to pass it up, do you?"

"Larry, you young idjit—" Wishbone began angrily.

"Hush up, you old crab," Larry grinned. "Don't be such a pessimist. I wouldn't miss a chance like this for anything."

"But look here. You can't—"

"Will you button your lip and let me think?"

Wishbone subsided to a sulky silence. It was beginning to grow dark in the bunkhouse. Wishbone rose, lighted two kerosene lamps resting in wall brackets, poured hot coffee into both their cups and sat down again. Still Larry didn't speak. He sat hunched in his chair, apparently lost in thought.

SUDDENLY he sat up, grinning. "I've got it!" he exclaimed. "Five miles east of Vista Wells there's a narrow curve in the road, where the stage route swings between some hills. There's a lot of brush at that point, too—"

"I tell you, you're crazy!" Wishbone half shouted.

"Keep still and listen to me a minute. How many guns we got around here, I mean rifles and shot-guns?"

Wishbone frowned and considered. "We-ell, there's your .30-30 an' your .44. I got a .44. Then there's your dad's old .44 an' those two scatter guns, an'—"

"That's enough. Look, I'll go to town Monday and hire the buckboard to meet Joan with. Later I want you to ride in, but don't come into town. Cut wide around it, so's nobody will see you. Bring an extra horse—better make it that pinto gelding; he's not worth a damn for

work, but he can sure travel. That's what I'll need—"

"What you need," Wishbone interrupted exasperatedly, "is a doctor to examine yore head. It's honeycombed with damn fool ideas. You'll get it blowed off, shore as hell!"

"Now, wait a minute, listen to me—"

"You listen to me," Wishbone belatedly. "We're getting along plumb comfortable as it is, without you taking on additional risk. I won't have it—"

"Look, Wishbone, can't you just see Gage Hammond's face when he hears the news? He'll be wild!"

"Wouldn't he!" Wishbone's features lighted with an unholy joy. "He'll be fit to be tied—but say, wait a minute—" His features resumed their former dour expression. "I'm not giving my consent to no crackbrained schemes that will likely get you pumped full of lead slugs. Now listen to reason—"

"You listen to reason, you stubborn old fossil," Larry grinned. "Regardless of whether you like it or not, I'm going to go through with the idea—with your help or without it. Don't talk so much. It bothers my planning, and I've got to plan this so it will dovetail right down to close timing. Now you listen to me."

And Wishbone listened. From time to time he shook his head protestingly—but he listened, nevertheless.

CHAPTER V

HOLDUP!

THE stagecoach, drawn by six running horses, swayed and rocked on the twisting road between Capitol City and Vista Wells. It was managed expertly by Sad Sam Quinlan on the driver's

seat. Next to Sad Sam sat the guard, Buckshot Kimball, a shotgun across his knees, amply loaded with the sort of ammunition from which Kimball derived his nickname. The strong box, carrying only United States mail, was at Kimball's back. A large leather trunk was lashed securely to the railing on top of the coach, and in the boot at the rear was a second, smaller trunk.

Two miles back, Kimball had lighted a cigar; Sad Sam had taken another bite of his "eatin' terbaccy." It was their customary ritual at this point in the trail. They were nearing Vista Wells. Another two hours, or an hour and a half, if all went well, would witness their arrival. It was only when passing through the Gunlock Mountains, some distance to the east of Vista Wells, that either driver or guard had any misgivings.

In former days, road agents had thrived in the Gunlock Mountain passes and the road was none too smooth. These days, however, hold-ups were almost a thing of the past, and while there hadn't been any great improvement in the roads themselves, Sad Sam knew, like he knew his own mind, every chuck hole or obstacle that might be encountered along the trail. Break-downs, as well as road agents, were generally admitted, nowadays, to be things over which no great concern need be felt.

Scenery rocked past on either side of the coach—rolling grass lands, mesquite, sage, an occasional yucca. Dust erupted beneath the flying hoofs of the half dozen horses and flowed to the rear of the coach in great clouds. Overhead the sky was cloudless, seemingly an inverted sapphire bowl.

Sad Sam Quinlan spat reminiscently, thinking of former days

of driving. "Ye know, Buckshot, there ain't nothin' to travel nowadays," he remarked. "With these thorough-braced coaches, a passenger can sleep like a babe in arms the most of his trip. There's some agitation right now for straightenin' out grades and smoothin' out this road at sartain points. If that comes to pass, I'll betcha I'll be able to make close to ten mile an hour on this trip, one of these days."

Buckshot Kimball nodded. "Stage travel ain't what it used to be. It ain't only the roads that make the difference, either. Y'know, Sam, it must be nigh onto three years since anybody tried to hold us up."

"That's nateral," Sad Sam chuckled. "You've put the fear o' Gawd in their hearts with yore buckshot slugs. 'Tain't healthy, nowise, to hold up this stage. I reckon all the outlaws has l'arned their lesson and took their business to other routes."

"I reckon that's so," Kimball nodded with considerable complacency and a fine sense of satisfaction in the part he had played in bringing about such a condition.

The coach rocked on, both men secure in their own minds that this trip would end safely as they all ended these days.

BELOW, in the coach, the passengers rested comfortably against cushions and lazily watched the scenery jerk past. The passengers were three: two women and a man. The man, Steve Riker of the Circle H, sat on the forward seat, facing to the rear.

Riker was a hard-faced hombre with eyes placed too closely together and a pugnacious jaw. He had pulled the holstered gun at his right hip, around to the front where it could be easily reached in case of an

emergency. On the floor, at his feet, rested a small leather satchel, which he had refused to allow to be placed in the boot with other baggage.

Across from Riker, facing forward, sat Joan Bristol, her lovely gray eyes fixed dreamily on the passing vista of rolling hills and rock and brush. She wore a tight-bodied traveling outfit of some soft material that matched the shade of her eyes, and a small bonnet covered her heavy blue-black hair.

At Joan's side was Teresa Pico, a Mexican girl servant whom Joan had hired in El Paso. Teresa was young and round-faced with sloe eyes and a tendency to giggle. Despite the warmth of the day, she wore a brightly flowered dress of voluminous dimensions and a vividly colored serape about her head.

Steve Riker, seeing the two women when he first stepped into the coach at Capitol City, had anticipated an unusually pleasant journey with much conversation. He had ignored Teresa and proceeded to devote all his attention to Joan, introducing himself with what amounted almost to a flourish. Joan had acknowledged the introduction with a cool, impersonal nod, but seemed disinclined for talk after a minute scrutiny of the Riker face and personality.

Somewhat miffed, Riker had abandoned the attempt and confined himself to the Mexican girl, after the coach had got under way, but here, also, he found little satisfaction. Teresa met all his words with a responsive giggle, but whether she was laughing with, or at him, Riker couldn't quite determine. Finally he gave up and the trip was continued in silence, broken only now and then when Joan addressed some comment to Teresa.

Up above, they could hear the occasional crack of Sad Sam's whip, interspersed, now and then, with profane remarks to his team. Not that Sam had anything to be angry about; it was just his customary manner. The stage rocked on toward its destination.

Five miles east of Vista Wells, the coach slowed to negotiate a narrow curve of road between two rather steep hillsides strewn with large boulders and loose chunks of granite which were almost lost in the tangled brush. Sad Sam pulled the team to what almost amounted to a walk, deftly handling the ribbons to bring the coach safely around the turn in the trail.

"If there's one spot I'd like to see straightened out," he grumbled to Buckshot Kimball, "this is it. A feller can't make no time a-tall, slowin' down for this danged-blasted narrow—"

And then he stopped short. His jaw dropped and his eyes bulged. Ahead, squarely in the center of the road, was a granite boulder. It wasn't a large boulder, but it was large enough to prevent the coach's passing until it had been removed from the road. The boulder had, apparently, been jarred loose from its centuries-old bed on the hillside and plunged down to rest in the rutted stage route.

Buckshot saw the boulder at the same minute and was about to add his profanity to Sad Sam's when they both spotted something of more definite importance. On either side of the coach, gun barrels were poked through the brush, and back in the shadows men's hats could be seen above the weapons.

Sad Sam jerked on the reins and footed the brake. Buckshot tightened his grip on his scatter gun and started to lift it.

HOLD it, you!" a voice rang out sharply. "Drop that gun! Get your hands in the air, both of you! Don't try any shooting, you fellers, if you don't want my men to salivate you. Passengers outside. Everybody hands in air! Quick! I've no time to waste!"

Buckshot swore and Sad Sam swore, but they both got their hands into the air, even before the horses had come to a complete halt. Inside the coach, Teresa gave a slight scream that quickly changed to a nervous giggle when she felt Joan's hand quickly cover her mouth. Riker started to reach toward his gun, but, seeing the weapons pointing toward the coach from both sides, he, too, lifted his hands in the air.

Buckshot Kimball and Sad Sam twisted on their seat a trifle and looked down over their shoulders. As yet, there was no one to be seen. Then a masked figure emerged from the brushy shadows, just below them. The bandit cradled a Colt's .45 in each fist. The driver and guard atop the coach took that much in first.

Then they noticed tight striped trousers tucked into boot tops and a plaid woolen shirt. A blue bandanna crossed just below the bandit's eyes, shielding his face from view. A second bandanna crossed the top of a huge black sombrero and tied under the chin, thus drawing down the brim of the hat to cover the man's hair.

Joan Bristol was the first to leave the coach, followed by Teresa and Steve Riker. Riker was muttering angry threats to which the bandit paid no attention.

"Climb down, you two," the hold-up man ordered the guard and

driver. They climbed down and lined up beside Riker and the two girls, their hands still in the air. Buckshot eyed the shotgun he had thrown to the road, and wondered how quickly he could get to it.

The bandit apparently read his thoughts. "Don't try it, mister," he warned hoarsely. "My men have got you all covered. Driver, you'd better toss that hawg-laig of yours down by that shotgun. You won't be needing it." Then, sharply, to Steve Riker, "Unbuckle that belt, hombre. And keep your claws away from gun butts!"

Riker cursed and started to obey. The belt dropped to the dust. "And you might watch your language, feller," the bandit went on. "I don't figure these ladies appreciate it."

Teresa giggled. A momentary gleam of surprise and admiration appeared in Joan's gray eyes and vanished immediately, to be replaced with a look of scorn as she took in the bandit from head to foot. There was little to be determined from the eyes that showed above the mask, but the girl did notice the right hand grasping the six-shooter. Across the knuckle of the thumb a fresh scratch showed, faintly crimson. Probably caused by a mesquite thorn, she thought, during the bandit's passage through the brush.

"I don't reckon these ladies have any guns concealed about them," the bandit was saying. "All right, driver, your stage can move along, any time you like, that is, as soon as you've moved that rock from the road—"

Sad Sam gasped in surprise, and before he realized what he was saying, he asked, "Don't you want the strong box?"

The bandit shook his head.

"United States mail in there. I don't like to tangle with the government. Too dangerous."

"But what—" began Sad Sam.

"Less talk, driver. Get that rock out of your way and get started. It's a mite hefty for two men to handle, so you better get your passenger to help."

"Aw, I ain't working for this stage company," growled Riker. "I won't—"

"Get going," the bandit said sternly, tilting one gun menacingly.

Riker cast a helpless glance toward the interior of the coach where he had left his small leather satchel, hoping that it would go unnoticed. Then urged on by Sad Sam and Buckshot, he reluctantly left the coach and moved up toward the head of the team.

"Don't any one of you try anything," the bandit warned. "My men are keeping you covered every minute. Just roll that rock to one side and get started as soon as possible and nobody'll get hurt."

Sad Sam, Buckshot Kimball and Riker were already at the boulder, endeavoring to roll it to one side. The bandit darted a swift look into the interior of the coach, seized Riker's satchel and lifted it out. He cast a quick glance at the men working on the boulder, then tossed the satchel into the brush.

THAT'S all, ladies," the man nodded, and Joan thought she could detect a note of laughter in his voice, "you can get back inside. Incidentally, miss, I don't want that money I saw you stuffing out of sight so quickly when I first stopped you. It's safe, so far as I'm concerned."

Joan wondered if he had really seen her, or if he was just guessing.

Her face flushed hotly. "Come, Teresa," she said stiffly, and stepped back into the coach, followed by the giggling servant girl.

The bandit moved up toward the head of the team. Buckshot, Sad Sam, and Riker were pulling and tugging at the boulder in the road. Perspiration streamed from their features. The bandit chuckled.

"Your passenger isn't giving his best, men. You should have that rock moved by this time. Shall I warm the ground under his feet so he'll try harder?"

One six-shooter roared, then the other, and two spurts of dust puffed up from beneath Riker's feet. He bellowed hoarsely with fright and made frantic efforts to get the rock rolling. The efforts were successful and the rock began to move. A minute more and it had been rolled out of the roadway. The coach was free to proceed.

"All right, get moving," the bandit ordered.

"We want our guns," declared Buckshot Kimball.

"Get moving," the bandit said sternly. Again the guns lifted in his hands. "Climb up on that coach and tool 'er. I don't want to have to speak to you again."

Riker, almost running in his haste, leaped into the coach and slammed the door shut. Joan looked at him contemptuously. Teresa giggled and said something in Spanish to her mistress. Riker's face went red, but he didn't say anything. Buckshot and Sad Sam climbed back to their seats.

"You'll never get away with this, hombre," Sad Sam yelled angrily. "The sheriff will—"

"Get moving or I'll order my men to pull triggers," the bandit inter-

rupted. "Get away from here as fast as you can!"

Thus warned, the driver picked up the reins. The whip cracked in his hand. There came a jangle of harness and the horses lunged against the traces. The wheels began to move, gathered speed, and the coach rolled off.

The instant it was out of sight, around the first curve, the bandit darted back into the brush, where he collected several hats and guns from either side of the road and shoved them into a couple of burlap sacks. Three minutes later he was once more in the saddle, riding hard on a pinto gelding in the direction of Vista Wells, on a short cut across the hills.

THE usual knot of loungers hung about the old frame hotel, known as the Vista Wells House, awaiting the arrival of the noon stage from Capitol City. Nick Vulcan sat on the veranda railing, smoking a cigar. A short time later Sheriff Laramie put in an appearance. He greeted Vulcan, but seemed engrossed in his own thoughts and made no further attempt to continue conversation.

"Here she comes!" somebody shouted.

A cloud of dust had appeared at the end of the street. Six plunging horses emerged from the dust, as the coach skidded and careened into view, the driver plying the whip furiously.

"Sad Sam is shore layin' it on," a man commented.

"I noticed that," a bystander nodded. "Either something's wrong, or Sam's been drinkin' again."

Vulcan had stepped down from the veranda and was standing at the sheriff's side. More people gathered

to witness the arrival of the coach. Larry Crockett pushed through the crowd and nodded to Vulcan.

"I'm surprised to see you on hand, sheriff," he said to Laramie. "Thought you were going to be in Cisterna Vista all day."

Laramie shook his head shortly. "Had to change my plans."

Larry nodded. "Well, it's good you can meet your niece, anyway. The buckboard I hired to take her out is over yonder—"

He broke off abruptly. With a great deal of noise and jingling of harness, the coach came to a sudden halt before the hotel, the horses sliding back on their haunches in a thick cloud of dust.

"We been held up!" Sad Sam bawled loudly. "Where's that darn sheriff?" Then he caught sight of Laramie. "Hey, John, you'd better gather a posse—"

Further words were lost in the confusion of excited voices. Sad Sam and Buckshot leaped to the road. The door of the coach banged open and Steve Riker emerged, cursing, to fight through the crowd toward Gage Hammond, who had come running from the Warbonnet.

Laramie and Vulcan were shooting questions at Buckshot and Sad Sam. The latter was panting out a jerky description of the outlaw:

"Tall, lean hombre—masked—plaid shirt—Oregon breeches—big, black sombrero—"

Nick Vulcan swung around to eye Larry Crockett, who was moving toward the doorway of the coach. Larry was in denim shirt and overalls. His sombrero was an indiscriminate gray.

At that moment Gage Hammond came plowing through the crush of townspeople to roar something at the sheriff about Riker having been robbed of "eighteen hundred in gold!"

Joan Bristol appeared in the doorway of the coach just as Larry reached it to offer a helping hand. He swept off his sombrero, grinning widely at the girl. "Remember me, snip?"

The girl looked at him steadily for a moment, then answered his smile with one of her own. "Larry Crockett! As if I could ever forget that red head of yours. It's good to see you again."

"You, too." Larry seemed in no hurry to release Joan's hand, which was still inclosed in his big right palm. Blushing a little, the girl lowered her eyes. Suddenly she noticed the faintly crimson scratch across the thumb knuckle of Larry's right hand. With an involuntary start, she drew back!

Will Joan identify Larry Crockett as the bandit who held up the stage? What is back of the enmity between Crockett and Gage Hammond? Is Nick Vulcan acting under secret orders? Follow this exciting range country mystery in next week's Western Story.



HEP AND THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE



By **GLENN H. WICHMAN**

Hep And The Language Of Love

GEORGE," my partner Hep Gallegher said to me very solemnlike one day when we came in from ridin' line, "somethin's got to be done about the boss. The poor guy's goin' loco with his heart troubles. When a gent of his years has heart troubles it's apt to be fatal. I reckon it's up to me to manage his courtin' an' get him hitched up."

This seemed a very bum idea to me. "If you as much as mention it to Bill," I told Hep, "he'll probably blow up and shoot. Don't be a dimwit. For once in your life mind your own affairs. You pay attention to what I tell you."

"I'm a brave cowhand," Gallegher declared. "It's too bad you ain't never noticed it. You want to wake up. It's lucky for Bill I understand the principles of winnin' a widow lady's heart. It's just a question of goin' about it right."

"A lot you know about it," said I. "You've never come yourself within forty miles of gettin' married yourself."

"As a lover," Hep continued, "Bill'd make a fine sheepherder. He needs a guiding hand. Somethin's gotta be done. Besides I've got an idea. Probably the finest idea that ever leaked into a fellow's dome."

"Not a chance," I insisted. "You've never had an idea yet that was worth a nickel."

"Button up," Gallegher growled. "You wait an' see."

For six months or more Bill Ramsey had been as nice an old gent to work for as me and Hep had ever met up with. But for the past couple of weeks Ramsey had been showing signs of screwiness as well as being as cross and ornery as a bobcat.

Bill Ramsey's ranch, which was the Box R, was the finest beefsteak layout in the valley and had made money for years, but now Bill was neglecting things. His mind wasn't on prime steer beef any more. It was on Mrs. Matilda Overholt, a widow lady who had bought the neighboring 3 Bar F. A lot of other gents' minds were on the widow lady too, which didn't make it any easier for Bill.

After me and Hep had put our horses in the corral we heard a commotion going on up behind the ranchhouse. It sounded like someone was throwing rocks at a tin can.

"It's probably poor Bill," Hep explained. "He may have gone entirely loony from grief or unrequited affections or something. Come on."

We eased up around the west side of the house, and it was Bill Ramsey all right who was making the racket. Bill had an empty five gallon oil can that he was kicking around. He'd give it a good swift kick and then follow it and give it another good swift kick.

"Softenin' of the brain muscles," Gallegher whispered. "A fine man's bein' ruined all on account of a widow lady."

Ramsey gave the can three or four more good kicks before he noticed me and Hep standing there under a sycamore.

"Shut up!" Ramsey yelled at us, just as though we'd said something.

"Shucks," Hep murmured under his breath. "The pity of it. Old Bill's in a fair way of being as nutty as a Mexican jumping bean."

BILL RAMSEY was a little fellow and ordinarily pretty good-looking and he wore some mustaches of which he was very proud. But now his face was

white and his chin was thrust out and his mustaches seemed about to stand out too. And he certainly looked like he wanted a fight.

"We'd better run," I suggested.

"Coward," Gallegher grunted. "Ain't you got any spirit?"

Bill gave the can another kick and then came up to where we stood.

"If either of you birds laugh," he warned us, "it'll be the same thing as a death warrant."

"I wasn't thinkin' none of laughin'," Hep assured him. "But I was thinkin' some of bursting down and having a good bawl. I'm—"

It looked for thirty seconds as though old Bill Ramsey was going for his smoke-pole. But after a struggle with himself he kept his hand in his pocket.

"Have a good bawl," he repeated. "What's the matter, Gallegher? Stomach-ache?"

Hep brightened up because the boss had given him an opening. "Bill," he asked seriously, "did you ever hear tell of the language of flowers and vegetables?"

Bill Ramsey looked astonished. Then he tapped his forehead with his forefinger and looked first at me and then at Hep.

"George," Bill said to me, "what'd we better do with him? Language of flowers and vegetables. It's bad enough for me to be out here kickin' a coal oil can around. I've got an excuse for it. But Hep hasn't any right to be talkin' about the language of flowers and vegetables. Anybody with a lick of sense knows that vegetables can't talk."

"Shucks!" Hep declared. "I never said they could. But each flower or vegetable has a meaning. You give a person the proper flowers and vegetables and it's just the same as talk-

ing to them. Just like the smoke signal language or the deaf-and-dumb language or the English language or the Chinese language."

"Well, that's a new one on me," Bill Ramsey admitted. "George, has your partner been smoking marijuana?"

"Now listen, Bill," Hep put in hurriedly. "I've got a great idea for you that's going to get you in solid with Mrs. Matilda Overholt."

Ramsey's face got purplish. "Who the devil," he roared, "said anything about Mrs. Matilda Overholt?"

Gallegher screwed up his courage. "Be reasonable, Bill. Everybody knows that you're soft on Matilda, just like a lot of other guys are. You spend half your time ridin' over there. But you ain't gettin' no place. Somebody's goin' to beat your time unless you shake a leg—"

Well, sir, it looked again as though Ramsey was going for his hawg leg.

"Why not let him get it off his chest, Bill?" I said hastily. "You an' me know that he's a candidate for the nut house. Let's humor him."

"Well, all right," Bill agreed. "I'm sort of like an Indian when it comes to loony people. Bad luck to harm 'em. But I can only be pushed so far and no further. Go on, Gallegher. Proceed with the vegetables."

"It's this way," Gallegher explained. "When Matilda was a young filly the language of flowers and vegetables was used by a lot of lovers. It's kind o' out o' date now, but in them days it was hot stuff. Chances are a hundred to one that she remembers it. Wouldn't it please her, Bill, if you would be the one man with enough old-fashioned romance in your soul to use it? It'd set you apart from all these other heavy-footed birds and give you the jump with her. I shouldn't wonder if it'd

knock her for a row of loops."

Bill Ramsey looked puzzled and I must have looked likewise.

"But if I don't remember such a language," Ramsey objected, "so why would Matilda remember it? And what can I do about it?"

"Matilda was raised in the Middle West and the East," Hep said. "This language was very common back there when she was a girl. Out here where you was brought up they've always raised more hell than they have flowers and vegetables and the language never became common."

"I'll agree with you about the hell-raisin'," Bill agreed. "What next?"

"Well," Gallegher continued, "you have been goin' over to see Matilda but you ain't been makin' no progress. Probably all you do is say things an' look at your feet. That's no way to impress a widow lady because you probably haven't got nerve enough to come right out and say, 'Matilda, I love you. Let's look up the parson.'"

Bill's face got a little red. "Gosh," he gasped. "How'd you guess it?"

"Because I understand such things," Gallegher admitted with a rising chest. "I have an insight. What you want to do, Bill, is give Matilda a big thrill via the flower and vegetable language. Hand her out some tender sentiments that'll make her heart turn a flip. Speak to her with the old-time language of love."

Ramsey shook his head sorrowfully. "My gosh," he groaned. "It's hard to believe, but mebbe it'd be worth a try. I don't know nothin' about the flower language, though. I never heard of it."

"But I do," Hep said proudly. "Once I found a book on it in a bunkhouse. I put it in my warbag, and I've still got it. Come on!"

SO me and Bill followed Hep down to the bunkhouse, where he got out the book. The three of us went over and sat down on the top pole of the horse corral. The book was called, "Hill's Manual of Social Forms," and was printed away back in the '80s.

"Each flower or vegetable," Hep elucidated, "means something. According to this book, you can write a whole lot of sentences by selecting the proper flowers and vegetables and lining them up in the right order."

"It still sounds like a lot of hog wash," Bill complained. "Even if it's in a book."

"That's the trouble with you lovers," said Hep. "You'll never try anything different. Listen to this: A bachelor's button means 'I'm single, but wish I wasn't.' A cabbage means profit. A cocklebur means 'Vain is beauty without merit,' which means it doesn't do a man any good to be handsome if he's a louse at heart. A coltsfoot means 'Justice will be done you—'"

"By thunder," Ramsey interrupted. "Do you expect me to take her over a dead horse's leg?"

"Shucks," Hep sighed. "A coltsfoot is a flower. Not part of a dead horse. A cucumber means criticism. An everlasting pea 'Wilt thou go with me?' A head of lettuce means cold hearted. A persimmon means 'Bury me under the wild flowers.' A potato means 'I am not stingy.' A snowball flowers means thoughts of heaven."

"Thoughts of heaven," Bill moaned. "Hep, if you're making a monkey out of me that's what you'd better be thinking of."

"There're about five hundred flowers and vegetables and other odds and ends of agriculture listed here," said Hep, as he turned the

pages. "A pansy means 'You occupy my thoughts.' Gents, ain't it wonderful?"

"You've overlooked something," Bill said. "There're few flowers and less vegetables in these parts. Unless you want to go in for canned goods."

"I've thought of that," Hep replied, promptly. "Good old Gallagher always thinks of everything. We'll get some flowers and seed catalogues and cut the illustrations out of 'em. Those'll take the place of the flowers and vegetables we ain't got."

Ramsey nodded. "That'll be less bulky," he admitted. "But it still makes me nervous."

"Pardon me for intruding myself," said I, "but they tell me that Mrs. Matilda's got a violent disposition. Now if she should get insulted at something about this—"

Bill Ramsey sprang to the widow's defense. "Watch yourself, George," he warned me. "Don't speak lightly of such a fine lady. Matilda has a very sweet and lovable disposition, although she is high-strung."

I apologized and changed the subject. "How'll you take Bill's tender sentiments over to the 3 Bar F?" I wanted to know. "In a wagon?"

"That's something I'll have to figure out," Hep admitted. "I've got a lot of thinkin' to do."

"Well, get busy," urged the boss. "And don't make a mistake because you'll never make another if you do."

"Listen, Hep," I pleaded after the boss had gone back to the house, "pull in your horns before it's too late. You're likely to end up with portions of your anatomy missing."

But Gallagher was feeling unusually full of helpfulness, and for the next couple days he was as busy as a flea. Poor old Bill stewed around, getting more and more downcast.

FINALLY Gallagher had the love message written and lined up on the veranda of the ranchhouse. It consisted of the following items, reading from left to right:

The picture of a pansy, pasted on a large cardboard; one can of sliced pineapple; a stick of peppermint candy; one can of peas with the word "Everlasting" written above the peas; the picture of a couple of persimmons pasted on carboard; a small willow tree planted in a bucket filled with dirt; one large potato; a little oak tree set in a box of dirt; an old pocketbook that had wool bulging out of it; a piece of a cedar tree set in a keg; and the picture of a red rose mounted on cardboard.

"There you are?" Hep said proudly. "Now what do you think of that?"

"By thunder!" the boss yelled, and after that he seemed speechless.

"A translation of the message," Gallagher continued, "is as follows and to wit. I know it by heart. 'You occupy my thoughts (pansy) because you are perfect (pineapple). I have a warmth of feeling toward you (peppermint). Come with me (everlasting peas) or I'll bury myself under the wild flowers (persimmon) from melancholy (willow tree). I'm not stingy (potato) and I'm brave (small oak tree). I offer you my all (shepherd's purse). I live for you (cedar tree). I love you (red rose).'"

Bill Ramsey was still speechless and so was I, but finally Bill got his larynx unlimbered.

"Do you think," he gasped, "that I'm going to cart all that junk over to Matilda's house?"

"Why, certainly," said Hep. "If that ain't a sweet and tender sentiment, I'm a goat. If you don't take it over, I will an' I'll tell her it's

from you. If you haven't got any courage, I have!"

"Let's buy a barrel of beer instead," I suggested.

"That's a fine idea," the boss agreed.

Gallegher looked as melancholy as an old buffalo. "And to think," he murmured, "that I've gone to all this trouble. Bill, you don't deserve a fine widow lady like Mrs. Matilda Overholt. is. You ain't even got the backbone of a jellyfish."

"The hell you say!" Bill Ramsey shouted. But he still wasn't very vehement about it. "Tell you what I'll do, Hep. I'll go along with you and George—"

"Not me!" I interrupted.

"Oh, yes, you're comin' too," Bill said. Which settled it because I wanted to keep my job on the Box R.

We hitched a couple of driving mares to the spring wagon and put the message in the bed behind the seat. It just about filled up the bed, owing to the three trees. Then the three of us crowded up into the seat.

"I feel like a perambulating forest," Bill complained, "as well as like an idiot. I hope the team runs away and upsets us."

"I was suspectin' somethin' like that," Hep said, "which is why I'm drivin'."

"To think I'd ever have come to this," the boss continued. "If there're any other lovers hangin' around Matilda's house, I expect I'll have to do some killin'."

"Try an' calm yourself, Bill," Gallegher advised. "Get yourself some cheerful thoughts. Think of weddin' bells an' parsons an' the like."

Within an hour we drove into the 3 Bar F ranch yard. The yard was deserted except for some horses down by the corral, but when we stopped the mares by the hitch rack we heard the sound of organ music. It was

loud and booming and came from the ranchhouse.

"That's Matilda, playin' her organ," Bill Ramsey said. "I think I'll run—"

"I think you won't," Hep declared, grabbing hold of him.

The organ music became louder and more booming. It sounded like thunder in a canyon.

"She can sure pump the organ," Bill said, as his eyes lit up with admiration. "You ought to see her legs go up and down."

"We're in luck," Hep exclaimed. "While she's carryin' on the cannonadin' we'll get the message up on the veranda. Come on, you birds! Shake a leg. Be sure and get it all lined up in the right order."

So the three of us hauled out the pictures and the potato and the canned goods and the trees and in almost no time we had them up on the veranda. Hep looked as proud as a peacock as he stood surveying the display that was spread out before the front door and giving it a final check-up. Bill Ramsey had one hand on his gun and with the other tugged at his off mustache. I tried to roll a cigarette but the tobacco kept bouncing out of the paper.

"Even money," said I, "that Matilda blows up like a keg of powder."

"If she does," Bill declared grimly, "I'm going to cut Hep's ears off."

THE organ music continued for a moment more and then it ended with a burst of fireworks both in the lower and upper registers. Either that or else the organ pedal had got a hot box. Anyway, it stopped. Then we heard Matilda's voice.

"Land of Goshen!" she screamed excitedly. "Where did those trees come from on the veranda?"

"Search me," a man answered.

"Well I'll be hogtied for a horse thief!" said someone else.

Ah, ah, thought I. There's a pair of suitors inside. That's who those horses down by the corral belong to.

"Oh, my gosh!" Bill Ramsey groaned.

The door opened immediately and out popped the widow lady. Both me and Hep had met her once at a hoedown in town. She was good-looking and about the same height as Bill Ramsey but a little heavier. Her eyes were blue and full of determination, as was her jaw. She always spoke out loud and said exactly what she meant.

"By all the saints!" Matilda exclaimed. "Who put this rubbish here?"

Then she became aware of the three of us.

"Hello, boys," she said to Hep and me. She glowered at Bill. "How do you do, Mr. Ramsey," she said real formallike, and as though she was mad with him.

"Howdy, ma'am," Bill managed to reply, as he blushed up to his hair roots. "It's a right nice smart pleasant day, ain't it?"

By now the two suitors had come out the door and stood beside the widow. We knew both of 'em. One was Slim O'Brien, the lanky storekeeper from Apple City, which was the nearest town. The other was Red Shannon who ramrodded the Flyin' over on the other side of the hills. Both these gents were of a jealous and bilious disposition and from their looks they both wished that me and Hep and Bill Ramsey had been drowned in infancy.

"Well," the widow lady demanded, "I suppose it was you fellows who brought this stuff here. It wasn't here before you got here, so it must have been you." She started

to smile and then decided not to. "I don't like to have my veranda littered up. It's a very poor joke indeed. What's the meaning of it?"

Me and Hep looked at Bill. It was supposed to be his turn. Bill opened his mouth, but nothing came out of it except a gulp.

"A can of pineapple," Matilda said. "A can of peas. A potato. Some pictures and three scrubby-looking trees. And somebody's old pocketbook. What do you think this is, Hallowe'en?"

"These bums are insultin' you, Matilda," Slim O'Brien, the storekeeper, put in. "They think you don't have enough to eat an' they've brung you a hand-out. Just as though you didn't have enough to eat for the next hundred years. It's pretty low."

Then Red Shannon, the ramrod, had his say. "They think you don't have any shade trees or firewood around here or pretty pictures—"

The air was gettin' frosty.

"Kindly shut up!" Hep told the two of them. "We wasn't talkin' to either of you."

"Ditto," Bili Ramsey growled, and tugged at his mustache.

"Well, anyway," the widow lady continued, "I wish somebody's explain this nonsense before I lose my temper."

Again me and Gallegher looked at Bill.

"Go ahead, Gallegher," Ramsey growled out of the corner of his mouth. "You got me into this. Tell Matilda what the meaning is."

"The meaning in a potato!" O'Brien sneered. "Say, that's a good one!"

"Or the meaning in a can of peas," Red Shannon added. "Ma'am if these homely buzzards have come

here to insult you, they've got me to argue with."

"I'm quite capable of looking after myself," Matilda said, as she looked severely at poor Bill Ramsey. "I'm beginnin' to think these three men are out of their heads."

"No, we ain't, ma'am," Hep declared. "Don't you understand the language of flowers and vegetables, Mrs. Overholt?"

THE widow lady looked plumb puzzled. She knitted up her brow and screwed up her mouth. Then some kind of a light must have dawned in her head, for she smiled, very weakly.

"Well, I seem to remember something about that when I was a girl," she said. "My first beau and I had some signals. When he passed me the mashed potatoes it meant something and when I passed him the mustard it meant something, but I don't seem to recollect what."

"Hurrah!" Hep yelled. "I knew, ma'am, you were a lady of education and intelligence." He pointed down toward the stuff on the floor. "Here, ma'am, is a message in the language of flowers and vegetables that Bill has brought you over."

"Them trees ain't vegetables," Red Shannon sneered. "Whoever heard of stewing up a mess of oak trees?"

"My, but you're a dumb guy, Red," Gallagher informed him. "Trees belong to the vegetable kingdom. It's a pity you never went to school."

The storekeeper thought it was time he shoved in his oar. "What a thickheaded way to do something," he offered free, gratis and for nothing. "If Bill's got something to say, why don't he say it? Or mebbe the cat's got his tongue."

"You shut up!" Bill Ramsey growled. "Another crack like that an'—"

"This here is romantic," Hep explained. "It's clearly evident that you birds ain't got any more romance in your system than a pair of hoot owls."

"I have too!" Red Shannon shouted. "Them's fightin'—"

"Come, come, gentlemen!" the widow lady interrupted severely. "Don't start fightin' until I see whether I've been insulted or not. If I *have* been—" Again she was lookin' hard at Bill Ramsey and Bill looked as though he wished he was up at the north pole.

"It's easy to read, ma'am," Hep said encouragingly. "You begin at your left and go to your right."

"Pineapple," Matilda murmured. "A can of peas. That might make a salad. If the potato was cooked, you could have peas and potatoes and the pineapple for dessert."

"You might eat it, ma'am," Slim O'Brien offered, "sitting under one of the trees—"

"While lookin' at the pretty pictures," Red Shannon continued.

"Now listen, you birds—" Bill Ramsey warned.

It was pretty clear that there was a bit of hostility getting into the atmosphere. The widow lady must have thought so, too, because she said:

"I'm getting tired of you men coming around here armed like a lot of road agents. Kindly either go home or put your guns inside the house. You're no more gentlemanly than a parcel of bandits. You do that now and then we'll get at the bottom of this thing."

"A fine suggestion," Hep agreed. "This is a high-class occasion an' we

ought to remember that we ain't at a rodeo or bullfight or somethin'."

Bill Ramsey grumbled and likewise the other two lovers but it ended up by all of us putting our smoke-poles inside the house on the living-room floor. Then we went out again on the veranda.

"Canned goods, trees and pretty pictures," the widow lady repeated. "My, my, what a puzzle."

"They're criticizin' what you eat, ma'am," Red Shannon said. "They're meanin' that you should eat nothin' but peas an' pineaples an' spuds, which's fodder that ain't fit for the human stomach."

"It's worse'n that," Slim O'Brien declared. "They're meanin' that you oughta give up eatin' civilized canned goods an' go to eatin' trees, like a cow when the grass's bad. You know how cows do when the grass's bad?"

ALL of a sudden the widow lady's face got red. "Heavenly days!" she gasped. "I believe they're intimating that I'm too chunky—"

"Good gosh, no!" Gallegher yelled.

But he was too late. The widow lady had by now got it firmly in her head that we thought she was fat. She exploded all at once, just like a bomb. There was a broom standing beside the door. This was the thing her eyes fell on when she whirled around looking for a weapon. She grabbed it with both hands.

"I'll avenge you bein' insulted, ma'am!" Red Shannon shouted.

"You're darn tootin' we will!" the storekeeper chimed in.

Bill Ramsey bristled up like a rooster. "Why you crazy bums!" he roared at Red and Slim.

Which was how the battle got going. But Bill Ramsey took his first swing at Hep. And he hit him, too.

Gallegher went over backwards, off the veranda. And he lit right on his head.

Matilda took a swing at Bill with the broom. She missed the boss by an inch and the broom hit me alongside the ear. I saw a lot of things, including stars and moons. By now Red and Slim and the widow lady had tangled with poor Bill, all three of them at once. He did the best he could, but there were too many fists and brooms for any one man to duck. Ramsey collected half a dozen punches at the same time.

"My gun!" he yelled, just as he was knocked off the veranda.

But there wasn't any chance for him to get his hardware. And he'd had enough of punches. So he took to his heels. He headed for the barn, Slim O'Brien, Red Shannon and the widow lady in hot pursuit.

By now Hep had managed to pick himself up. But he was considerably bewildered and took a swing at what he thought was a man standing in front of him. There wasn't any man there.

"Come on!" I yelled. "Bill's apt to be hung!"

So me an' Gallegher likewise headed for the barn. The boss was running like a jackrabbit, but he wasn't any match for Slim O'Brien. All of a sudden O'Brien tripped poor Bill up from behind and down he went, all in a heap.

This scurvy trick seemed to do something to the widow lady. It must have softened her heart toward the boss. Anyway her wrath now included Mr. O'Brien.

"That was a dirty thing to do, Slim!" she screamed at the storekeeper. Then she took a swing at O'Brien with the broom, but her aim wasn't no good. Red Shannon got the broom in the eye.

"The very idea!" Matilda yelled. "Trippin' up a little guy like Bill! You don't fight fair!"

Which was how the second half of the battle got goin'. Now the odds were different. This time, for some unfathomable reason, we had the widow lady on our side. Hep and I came to the boss' defense and Matilda swung the broom. Shucks! The ranch yard was entirely full of fists and boots and broom handles. And we raised more dust than a stampede of shorthorns.

But neither Slim nor Red were very brave guys when the goin' got rough. A few seconds later they were runnin' for their horses as though the law was after 'em.

"Cowards!" Matilda yelled. "Come back and fight! Pickin' on a little guy like Bill! And not fightin' fair!"

The boss sat on the ground, rubbing his head and looking pretty sad and forlorn. With one foot he took a kick at Gallagher, who was likewise on the ground. Hep was holding his stomach and trying to get his breathing apparatus to work.

"Language of flowers and vegetables!" Ramsey said bitterly. "Gallegher, when I get my gun I'm going to—"

"Poor Bill!" panted the widow

lady, kneeling beside Ramsey. "The idea of them pickin' on a little man like—" Then she recollected what the fuss was all about and began to get mad again. "Now look here, Bill Ramsey, if you were intimating that I'm too heavy—"

"Intimating nothing of the sort!" Bill yelled. "It was that lunatic Gallegher's idea of the way I ought to ask you to marry me!"

Matilda would have looked just the same had she fallen off a cliff, she was that astonished.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed. "Why in the world didn't you say so in the first place? Here I've been waiting for two weeks for you to—"

Me and Gallagher, being polite gents, looked the other way. Then we picked ourselves up and ran, for Bill, after hugging the lady of his choice, had started for the house for his shootin' iron. But Matilda came to our rescue. She disarmed Bill and made us stay for supper. All was forgiven and we even got invited to the weddin'.

"That was a close call," Gallagher told me on the way home. "I've got a knot on my head like a goose egg. Shucks! Lumps like that are hard on brains."

"What brains?" I asked.

THE END.

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NEMESIS OF THE NORTH



By HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

Nemesis Of The North

CHAPTER I

HELL ON THE SKEENA

FROM a rayine well up the spruce-clogged slope where he waited with the horses, McLeod saw the *Prince Rupert* swing round the bend. He had believed himself fully prepared for this moment, but now that it had arrived his nerves began to snarl under the lash of conscience, though his part in what was to follow would be slight indeed.

The temptation to back out of this business, to run, even now, occurred to him and was just as quickly dismissed. He had come too far for that. Then, too, there was the question of his loyalty to Yukon Riley. Whatever Yukon was—outlaw, fur pirate—he had put a roof over his head and fed him; and when you're down and out you don't forget such things.

Already the old stern-wheeler was nosing in to the bank below, alongside the long, heaped stacks of cordwood. Bells jangled; lines were flung out; men leaped ashore.

In a moment the river steamer was moored and the gangplank dropped. It was the signal for the half dozen men crouched in the brush, a taut readiness stamped on their harsh faces, to raise their waiting rifles.

At a signal, the hidden men sprang up. "Stand where yuh are!" Yukon Riley, their leader, roared at the captain when the latter showed signs of ducking back from the pilot-house window. Bull Fraser, a snarl twisting his whiskered lips, covered the group of passengers on the foredeck. The others made for various parts of the boat, ready to quell the

first sign of resistance.

"O. K.," Yukon nodded when the surprise of the *Prince Rupert* was complete. "Toss them bales on the bank." He indicated a pile of baled furs resting on the deck.

Frenchy Ledoux, a brawny individual with an evil face, did so hurriedly while Riley, Bull Fraser, and the Dawson Kid invited the passengers to shell out. Father Gravois, the Skeena River priest, mild and white-haired, had nothing to surrender but advice.

"*Le bon Dieu* forgive you, my sons," he said quietly, looking fearlessly into the gun barrels. "You are making a mistake."

"Stow that!" Yukon rapped out harshly. "Step aside, so we can keep a watch here." His hard eye snapped to a scowling trapper contemplating some move behind the priest's back. Suddenly his gun crashed. The trapper's smashed rifle flew out of his hands.

The significance of that one shot cowed the others. Riley's men edged ashore, keeping their guns trained on the men on deck.

"Cast off!" Yukon barked the sharp order. "You're pullin' away, and I don't want to see a head showin'!"

The captain gave the necessary commands. The roustabouts released the mooring lines and scrambled aboard. The gangplank was pulled in and the *Prince Rupert* swung away from the bank, its paddles churning.

The fur thieves warily watched its going. As it swung out of sight around a bend, Yukon whirled.

"Get McLeod down here with the pack horses," he ordered. "We're clearin' out in a hustle!"

Ledoux swung into the bush. A moment later they heard his whis-

tled signal. Presently McLeod made his appearance leading the horses he had been left to guard.

YOUNGER than any of these men except the Dawson Kid, McLeod was ordinarily clean cut, an air of good breeding about him. Just now his jaw was covered with stubble and there was a hard discontent riding his wide shoulders as he helped to lash the fur bales on the backs of the extra horses.

"Haul that hitch tighter!" Bull Fraser snapped. Tough and ugly, and a hardened scoundrel, he ordered the others around and gave himself airs, though he was new to Yukon Riley's gang. "Here, lemme do it, if yuh don't know how!" Roughly he attempted to thrust McLeod aside.

"Forget it, Bull," Yukon advised sharply. "Mac's doin' all right. We ain't got no time to fool around. Finish this and we'll get goin'!"

Yukon Riley was a six-footer of over two hundred pounds weight, and his steely gray eyes and jutting jaw carried persuasion. Fraser cursed and turned on his heel.

A moment later they were in the saddle and angling up the ridge through mixed pine and spruce. This wild, little-known country on the flank of the Caribou Range was close enough to the rolling prairie world to make possible the use of horses. Yukon was in a hurry, for there was a Mounted Police post less than a hundred miles to the west.

A bleak late November sky spit the first flakes of a coming storm as they pulled away from the Skeena. Topping the ridge, they were forced to fight the rising, bitter wind, their hard faces tilted against the sting of sleet. Nobody had anything to say. But later, threading a canyon

deep in the Caribou, Bull Fraser edged toward Riley, purpose in his hawklike features.

"Yukon, how sure are yuh about McLeod?" he demanded.

The big outlaw laughed. "Fine time to ask now," he responded. Then: "He's O. K. He was a Seattle doctor, one of the best. He got in some trouble or other an' pulled out. This is where he landed."

"Couldn't stand the gaff, eh?" Fraser grunted.

"Don't kid yoreself!" Yukon cut him off grimly. "Some skunk put a shady trick over on him. He's been huntin' the bird ever since."

Fraser pretended to let it go at that. But he was not dismissing the matter from his mind.

With the cold cutting into their bones, they drove on into the gathering night, their destination Yukon Riley's hide-out on Wild Goose Lake, where they expected to hole up for the winter, or at least until dog-team travel was possible.

Dawn was beginning to stain the sky when Yukon called a halt. The men were ravenous, but a cigarette was their breakfast.

The Dawson Kid made an attempt to estimate the value of their haul of furs and found the packs composed mostly of prime beaver, mink, and marten—a rich prize. Only Bull Fraser refused to be beguiled by it. Across the snapping fire of spruce boughs he watched McLeod steadily. When the latter rose to gather fresh fuel, Bull turned to Riley.

"McLeod ain't our kind," he said. "What's got him down to this?"

"Just one thing," Yukon muttered. "Whiskey."

"It's gents like him that get a man into trouble," Fraser said unfeelingly.

"I'll do my own worryin' about that," Yukon declared bluntly. He was boss here, and he wanted it understood.

Two hours later the snow turned to driving rain. Numb and shivering, they spurred their weary mounts, pressing ever northward. Fear of pursuit grew more remote, and as the bleak, storm-lashed day drew to a close, they reached Wild Goose Lake. Here was food, shelter, and whiskey. McLeod asked no more.

BEFORE the week was gone, winter locked the land tight in its icy grip, howling down out of the arctic wastes with a shrill, soprano scream. For three days it snowed, a white curtain blotting the forest world from sight; and then came the strong cold and crystal-clear skies, with the mercury dropping to twenty, thirty, forty below zero. The song of the wolves quavered over the wilderness, and at night the aurora borealis hissed and crackled overhead.

But in the cabin on Wild Goose Lake no one cared. The log fires roared and there was always meat in the pot. For amusement they had a worn deck of cards. McLeod played with the others. Though his part in the robbery of the *Prince Rupert* had been small, Yukon Riley promised him his cut of the proceeds. It did McLeod little good, for within a single night the others stripped him of his interest in the pelts.

McLeod cared little. Disliking the life as he did, he none the less expected to go on. In a matter of months, perhaps weeks, he would be no better than the rest of them. What happened to him now no longer mattered greatly.

Such a mood was no inducement

for him to drink less. He drank more. The whiskey which Yukon Riley had on hand at the cabin was soon finished. When it was gone McLeod's frayed nerves lashed him to madness and he told himself he would sell his soul for the brief surcease to be found in another drink. But the days dragged on; miserable, an unending agony for him.

There were times, however, when he momentarily found courage to fight the craving that had him under its heel. In the end, he gave up. Why fight? What incentive did he have for even making the effort?

Late in January matters came to a head with him. Though he might die in the attempt, he was determined to strike out for one of the river towns. His nerves were tearing him to pieces. He became watchful, calculating, knowing that Yukon and the others would oppose his going, fearful lest their whereabouts be discovered through him. He meant nothing to them. If necessary, they would snuff out his life without compunction.

Yukon knew what McLeod had in his mind and guarded against it. Any member of the gang who showed up in Porcupine would be spotted quickly. McLeod might not be recognized, but dogs were known the length and breadth of British Columbia; and Yukon's teams would not be likely to escape detection.

The Mounted knew Yukon's hide-out was somewhere in the Wild Goose Lake country. They didn't know exactly where, but they had been drawing closer and closer for the last two years. Once suspicion became fact with them nothing short of a thousand-mile flight could keep them from bringing the gang to justice.

WITH Yukon, to think was to act. He got McLeod in a corner and eyed him narrowly. "Thinkin' of pullin' out, are you, Mac?"

McLeod nodded, too wary to deny it outright. "I'm thinking about it, all right."

"Pass it up." Riley disguised the flat order with the tone of advice. "Stick it out, and you'll be glad you did."

"I expect that's right," McLeod nodded reluctantly. "I . . . I won't do anything without letting you know."

"That's the stuff!" Yukon said gruffly, clapping him on the shoulder. "We don't none of us want any mistakes to happen here."

McLeod was in no doubt as to Yukon's meaning. He had no thought of betraying the gang, but he had to go. He didn't know this country, had never driven a team of malemutes. But he could manage a pair of snowshoes. In places, he'd find the snow covering the ground to a depth of a dozen feet or more. Suppose he got lost or broke a shoe?

His luck had never been good. A bad break now would spell his finish. But that didn't matter; forces within him, which he could not control, had long since forced the decision.

He secreted a pair of snowshoes in the woodpile, placing them where the webbing would be beyond reach of any marauding porcupine. Two days passed. His chance came in the late afternoon when Yukon ordered him to take a hand sled and bring in some wood. McLeod drew on his parka and mukluks and started out.

McLeod began to fill the sled, and Yukon watched from the window for a few minutes. When he turned away, McLeod located the cached

webs. A moment or two and he was swinging away through the trees. Once out of sight of the cabin, he turned south and struck out for the river.

Such questions as he dared to ask had given him no better than a vague idea of the way to Porcupine. It lay somewhere to the south. Beyond that, he could not be sure. Now, with the first heavy darkness of night on him, he realized his helplessness. Porcupine became a needle in a haystack. Well he knew that his straying tracks could easily carry him past it.

But he had to go on. Exertion had made him warm; he had to be moving before his blood began to chill. There was so much timber down in this stand of spruce that he fell repeatedly. At risk of losing his way completely, he doubled back and swung around it. With a feeling of relief he saw the northern lights begin to dance in the sky, and knew he was moving southward.

Topping a long rise, he felt the sharp edge of the scouring wind. That wind began to kick up the powder-dry snow and whip it into his bloodshot eyes. His face felt sandpapered. Far off, the long-drawn howl of a gray wolf sent a shiver down his spine. There was a loneliness in it that clawed at his courage.

"Wolf bait," he muttered. "That's about what I'm down to."

Once he thought he had reached the Skeena. It was only the shore of a nameless lake. He had not been told of any lake between the camp and Porcupine. The thought that he was already hopelessly lost wrung a groan from him. He had been falling more frequently the past hour. The question of how much farther he could travel was becoming ever more disturbing.

Certainly it could not be far.

"I'll go on until I drop," he said grimly. "That'll end it. Maybe it will be the best way for me—"

A thought struck him that pulled his head up. A picture of big Dan Taggart began to dance before his eyes—big Dan Taggart, who had kicked him down to hell. McLeod's blood began to move faster as he thought of that cruel, bitter face. Nothing short of whiskey itself could have proven so powerful a stimulant.

"No!" he burst out. "This can't be the end for me! I've got to square my debt with Taggart first!"

CHAPTER II THROWN OUT!

HE had kept that hope of revenge before him like a distant star ever since the Sunday afternoon at a Seattle country club when Dan Taggart, supposedly a prosperous broker at the time, swore that he had seen McLeod slip out of the locker room several minutes before a theft of money and jewelry, totaling several thousand dollars, was reported.

Taggart's story, plus the discovery in McLeod's car of an empty wallet, which was identified as belonging to one of the members who had been robbed, quickly led to McLeod's indictment.

Suspecting immediately that Dan Taggart was accusing another in order to hide his own guilt, McLeod had tried to fight back. But he found that his friends, including the girl to whom he was engaged, had tried him and found him guilty even before the courts got around to doing it. He had jumped his bail that night, coming north and changing his name from Bruce Matthews to the one he bore today.

It was a step he often regretted until he chanced to learn that Taggart had disappeared from Seattle with a cloud on his name. That knowledge had confirmed every suspicion and he swore to devote his life to running the man down.

Several times he had almost caught up with Taggart only to lose him again. But his hatred had endured. It flamed in him now, when every aching exhausted muscle protested strenuously.

"Fools pay for their folly, and I've paid for mine. But I never threw up the sponge," McLeod reflected grimly. "I'll live to prove that to Taggart!"

Without warning, he crested the low ridge that had fought him for an hour. He halted and stared. There were lights below. "Porcupine!" he gasped. "I've made it!"

From some unknown source, strength flowed into McLeod's weary legs. He pushed forward stiffly, spurring himself on. It took him forever to reach the head of Porcupine's snow-choked main street.

"Whiskey!" he panted. "That's what I need. I'm pretty far gone but—"

Late as it was, most of the saloons were still ablaze with light. From the brightest came a burst of gaiety threaded with feminine laughter. Fumbling out of his snowshoes, McLeod stumbled toward it.

Edging up to the bar, his frosted glance swept the place. It held nothing new for him. From Dawson down these combination places were all the same; some a little bigger, maybe a little more ornate; but they held the same tired musicians, the same girls, sad-eyed in spite of their gaiety, and the same lonely men, all seeking forgetfulness. That

was all right with McLeod; it was what he was seeking.

A dozen men stood at the bar. They glanced his way with an obscure interest. "Whiskey," McLeod told the bartender, hardly aware of the others.

It was shoved out to him, a bottle and a glass. McLeod steadied himself against the bar and poured out a slug. He downed it at a gulp and felt it burn all the way to his belly. He started to pour a second drink, then hesitated. A girl was ending a song. There was boisterous applause as she finished. A group of admirers led her up to the bar. One of them elbowed McLeod aside as he reached for the bottle. The bartender's hand closed over it first, however.

"What about the four bits for the one you had?" There was a ready hostility in the question. McLeod felt the man's eyes searching him, and it was his shabby clothes and not his half-frozen, shaking body that interested the other. With feeble persistence McLeod clung to the bottle.

"Don't take it away," he begged. "I've got to have another drink. I . . . I haven't a cent, but—"

"I thought so!" the barkeep growled. "No whiskey for bums! Clear out or I'll take that drink out of yore hide!"

"But I'm no bum," McLeod protested. "I'll pay you—"

"Out!" the bartender repeated.

THE girl who had been singing and the men who had brought her up to the bar were listening. As proof of how far he had fallen, McLeod turned to the man who had thrust him aside.

"Stranger, would you set me up to a drink?" he pleaded. "I—"

"Nix!" the barkeep jerked out.

Reaching across the bar, he swung McLeod around. "I told you out!"

A signal brought up the bouncer. He was a big bull of a man, and in his weakened condition McLeod was putty in the fellow's hands. The bouncer caught him by the collar and the seat of the pants and started to run him out when the girl intervened.

"Wait, Mike," she said. "Maybe the poor devil does need a drink. He looks half dead. Who is he, anyhow?"

"I don't know who he is, Floss," the bartender spoke up. "But you know the boss's orders. Out with him, Mike!"

McLeod had a blurred glimpse of the girl's face as he went sailing through the door. When he picked himself up out of the snow she was standing in the door regarding him.

He realized she was pretty in her blond way, despite her cheap dance-hall finery. No trace of hardness marred her mouth. When she smiled at him he noticed that the curve of her cheek was soft and youthful.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Here's a dollar. Go buy yourself a drink somewhere."

It rubbed him the wrong way. He did not ask himself why. He just knew it was not pity he wanted.

"I'm not down to taking money from women," he muttered.

"That's in your favor. I didn't think you were a bum."

"Is that so?" he retorted, his tone bitter and sarcastic. "Suppose you save your sympathy until it's asked for." Turning his back on her, he started to stumble away.

As a rebuff it was as deliberate as a slap in the face. Floss Johnson's head went up angrily and her lips curled with a fine disdain. With the male population of Porcupine figuratively at her feet, it

remained for a man without the price of a drink in his pocket to put her in her place.

"Guess I was mistaken about you at that," she called after him. "But I asked for it."

Raising her arm, she flung a silver dollar at him. Her aim was poor, and the coin buried itself in the snow. McLeod did not even glance back. Floss stood there a moment and then walked back into the saloon.

A big man, a cigar clamped in his mouth, met her as she closed the door. He was the proprietor of the establishment.

"What is it, Floss?" he demanded sharply. "You ought to know better than to stick your head outside in this weather, dressed that way."

"Nothing, Dan," the girl answered. "It was just the poor devil Mike tossed outside. I felt sorry for him. I offered him a dollar, but he put me in my place all right."

She laughed and would have dismissed the incident, but the big man refused to let it go at that.

"No bum can get away with that in this town," he declared hotly, "or my name ain't Dan Taggart! Mike!" he called. "Fetch that gent back here!"

"No," Floss protested. "Let him go, Dan. My skin isn't that thin."

Taggart gave in grudgingly, never suspecting the identity of the man whom he would have had dragged back for a beating.

In his own mind, at least, big Dan Taggart had made himself an important figure in Porcupine in the year or more that he had been here. He had taken the old Northern Lights Saloon, rechristened it the Frisco Palace, and built it up to its present magnificence. He was making money, and if the gold creeks flowing into the Skeena lived up to

their promise, bringing men in from all corners of the North, he knew that his fortune was made.

In appearance Dan Taggart had changed but little, and in character, not at all, since he had left Seattle so hurriedly. Ruthless, all wolf under his suave exterior, he could trim his sails when it was to his advantage to do so. That explained why a girl like Floss Johnson, sensitive in spite of the influence of her environment, found him more attractive than the rough-and-ready crowd of men with whom she came in contact.

It came her turn to sing again. Her choice of song reflected her mood. Taggart called her into his office when she finished.

"Floss, those tear-jerkers don't help business," he remonstrated. "I've told you that before. That bum get you down?"

It was a shrewd observation, but she denied it. "Don't be silly," she said. "I've seen too many derelicts for that." Nevertheless, she had found something in McLeod's eyes that would not be dismissed.

DOWN the street, the latter tried his luck in another saloon, and with no better results. This time, however, he got out before he was thrown out.

Floundering on, McLeod stopped in front of a saloon that was closed for the night. An idea was born in him as he ran his eye over the place. There was a fever in his veins. It built up a force that swept everything before it, common sense included.

After a hurried glance up and down the deserted street, he climbed the porch cautiously and peered through the one dirty window. A light, turned low, burned inside. He could see a row of bottles on the

back bar. The sight drove all reason out of him.

Raising a fist, McLeod drove it against the door. The result was unexpected. Instead of the splintering of a panel there was a crashing of glass that jangled sharply on the frosty air. It rained down on the boards at his feet. His knuckles were bleeding. But he paid no attention to that in the absorption of the one flaming thought: he could get in now!

Thrusting his hand inside, he felt for the lock and released its catch. Still the door didn't open. Feverish with anxiety, he fumbled around. There was a bar. Quickly he pulled it out of the brackets.

With the creak of the door he was inside and making swiftly for the bar when the draft from the door put out the light. He fell over a chair, and the next moment barged into a table. The bar succeeded in eluding him altogether.

Cursing in his haste, McLeod felt for a match. It dropped from his trembling fingers and he spent agonized moments hunting for it; it was his last. He found it finally.

The burst of flame when he struck the match momentarily blinded him. Then he saw the shadowy shape of the bar, caught the glint of banked bottles.

Lunging across the bar, he snatched a full bottle and knocked off its neck. Before he had time for a real pull at it, the thump of hasty footsteps sounded on the saloon porch, and a dark shape loomed in the door.

McLeod whirled, full awareness shocking through him. Before he could collect his scattered wits, a second man came running. This man bore a lantern. Its beams struck McLeod and chased a weird host of shadows through the place.

"What is it, Olsen?" the newcomer demanded. "What's goin' on here?"

Muskeg Olsen, Porcupine's blond, rawboned marshal, took his time about answering. He was looking McLeod over in the wavering light.

"Ay tank Ay hear somet'ing break in here," he growled finally. "Ay tank Ay see a light, too. Ay ban right enough."

He walked forward, the law badge glinting on his chest. His big, ham-like hand was holding a six-gun. Without wasting any words he relieved McLeod of his weapon, then stepped back.

"Vot you vant in here, you?" he growled.

McLeod simply gestured toward the bottle standing on the bar. He was past explaining. There wasn't anything to explain, anyway. Olsen drew his own conclusions accurately enough, his leathery skin crinkling around shrewd, faded-blue eyes.

"Viskey, huh?" he grunted.

"Well, I'll be damned!" murmured the second man. Olsen paid no attention, jerking his head curtly toward the door.

"Out—nice and careful and slow," he ordered McLeod. "Ve got a nice hotel in Porcupine, with bars on the windows, for your kind. You ban good for six veeks, anyvay. Get going!"

CHAPTER III

A MAN FINDS HIMSELF

FOR some reason the law was slow in bringing McLeod to trial for breaking and entering Nate Taswell's saloon. He asked Muskeg Olsen about it. The marshal told him the traveling court was at Moose Crossing, on Stuart Lake, where the judge lay sick.

"If he don't get vell and come on, Ay turn you over to the Mounted

and dey ban take you below," Olsen added.

"Sick, eh? What's the matter with him?" McLeod inquired. He still had a professional interest in such things.

The marshal shrugged. "It ban the grippe, I guess," he said. "Swiftwater Bailey brought the news, along with the mail. Swiftwater he say t'ree-four faller sick over there. One man get sick one day and drop dead the next." He recited the details as the postman had told them.

"Sounds more serious than grippe to me," McLeod observed.

"Vot, then?"

"Influenza—the flu—if you really want to know. It can knock men over like flies when it strikes hard enough."

Muskeg chose to laugh at such an idea. "Bah! Ain't nothing like dat!" He picked up the tray, from which McLeod had eaten his dinner in his cell, and started out. "Ay tank the judge be here soon enough for you."

"Don't be too sure," was the brooding answer. "I've fought two or three epidemics of flu. I know what it can do when it gets a good start. I hope I'm wrong this time."

"Ay tank you wrong, all right," Muskeg declared as he locked the cell door. "Couple faller catch cold and somebody drop dead with heart disease—what's dat?"

"From what you tell me, it wasn't heart disease that killed that man," McLeod insisted.

"No?" Olsen's laugh was derisive. "Ay suppose you ban know all about dat, eh?"

"I know," was the dogged answer. "I'm a doctor—" It was a slip and he would have recalled the words had it been possible. But Olsen's laugh was only louder.

"So you ban a doctor, hey?" the

marshal giped as he took his leave. "Vell, Ay ban a Chinaman! Dat makes us even! Haw! Haw!"

But on the following day he was less humorously inclined. "Swiftwater Bailey didn't go on," he announced. "He's got bad fever, an' dere's two-three other cases in Porcupine."

"Yeah?" McLeod queried cynically. "Well, who dropped dead of heart disease here?"

Olsen's look was startled. "How did you know dot happen, McLeod?" he demanded sharply. "Chuck Landers it vas."

McLeod only nodded. There could be little doubt now. However long others would be in coming to the realization, he knew that a devastating epidemic threatened this Caribou Range country.

For two days he saw little of the marshal. On the third, however, Olsen looked him in the eye soberly. "You ban know plenty, McLeod!" he exclaimed. "It's the flu! Dere's half a dozen dead men in Porcupine right now, and a dozen sick vuns—"

McLeod frowned, but found nothing to say. He told himself it didn't concern him. All he wanted was to win his release so that he could pull away before Yukon Riley traced him to Porcupine.

JUST before the early evening fell Olsen came again. He was not alone. To his surprise, McLeod saw that his visitor was the girl who had offered him the dollar. He gave her a cold, measuring glance. In her fur coat and hat, her face glowing with the sting of the wind, he realized she was even prettier than he had supposed.

"I heard Muskeg had locked you up," she said. "Please don't resent my coming. I must talk to you."

"This is the second time you've

gone out of your way to speak to me," he said rudely.

"And both times you have been surly and ill-mannered," she retorted. "Believe me, I'm not here because it's a pleasure, nor because I find it the least bit amusing."

McLeod's head went up and he stared at her in frank and embarrassed amazement. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "I beg your pardon." He hesitated. "But I don't know what you can have to say to me."

Floss' eyes warmed. There was pride in this man that adversity had not dimmed. A haircut and a shave had altered his appearance. She could see good breeding and intelligence in his face.

"Mr. McLeod," she said, "I understand from Muskeg that you're a doctor—"

McLeod stiffened, a quick denial trembling on his tongue. "Well, what of it?" he countered. "That's gone—forgotten."

"Men are dying—six today," Floss said quietly. "Doc Wharton didn't open his drugstore this morning. He passed away an hour ago. There's no one to take his place."

"That's just too bad," McLeod growled. He flung himself on his cot and sat with his head cupped in his hands. The doctor in him was stronger than he had supposed. Still, this was not his fight; not a man in this country had any claim on him.

"Don't be too bitter," Floss pleaded. "I know what you're thinking—"

"I wonder," he cut her off. "When I hit this town, all I asked was a drink. I got thrown into jail for it. Now you come running to me for help. Why should I lift a finger?"

"That's something you'll have to answer for yourself," Floss said

quietly. The marshal would have spoken, but she silenced him. "I . . . I didn't think you'd find it so difficult, Dr. McLeod."

IT got to him. He jerked himself to his feet suddenly, excitement working in him. "You're right," he said. "You're right! I must have slipped pretty far down the ladder to be standing here hesitating at a time like this."

He turned to Olsen. "O. K., marshal, I'll do what I can! You'll have to do something, too. You've got the authority. Close up every saloon and dance hall in town. Don't let people congregate anywhere. Arrest anyone you catch spitting in a public place. Tell everyone to keep their windows open, get all the fresh air they can. If they have to stay in bed to keep warm, make them stay there. You can take me down to the drugstore now. I'll have to see what I've got to work with."

Olsen unlocked the cell door. "Ay take care of everyt'ing," he promised. Ox Pederson, the deputy marshal, was in the office. Muskeg gave him his orders. Then the marshal took down a warm mackinaw from a peg. "You slip into dis, doc," he told McLeod. "She ban purty cold."

Floss put her hand on McLeod's arm as he and Muskeg started to leave. "Good luck, doctor. I'm sure you'll never regret your decision."

McLeod nodded. Going down the street, Muskeg said: "Floss ban nice girl, doc. Not like the rest."

"Yeah," McLeod said shortly. "She's all right."

He found that Wharton's stock of drugs left a lot to be desired. A few disinfectants and simple antiseptics



McLeod stayed behind when the gang jumped the boat—but just the same he would be outlawed!

and the usual backwoods drug-store's assortment of standard drugs seemed to be the size of it. Not quite, however, for under the counter McLeod located a demijohn of spirits. He handed it to Olsen.

"Better get that out of here where I can't get at it," he suggested. The

marshal was reaching for it when McLeod changed his mind. "Maybe you better leave it here, at that,"

he said. "If it can lick me now, there's no hope for me."

He gave of himself that night as he had never done before. With Muskeg at his side he moved from cabin to cabin, spraying throats, doling out quinine. His other directions were simple, as they had to be.

"Keep warm, get plenty of fresh air, and keep to yourself," he repeated time after time.

Just before dawn, Muskeg called a halt. "Ve go home," he said. "You need something to eat and some sleep."

Ox Pederson met them with the news that there had been several more deaths.

"It will be worse tomorrow," McLeod predicted wearily. "You see that the rooms in which those men died are fumigated, Muskeg! You'll find some sulphur in the drugstore. Burn a little in each room. Better burn their blankets, too."

It seemed just a matter of minutes when Muskeg awakened him. "It's ten o'clock, doc," he said. "Ay brang you some breakfast. Ban a dozen peoples here asking for you already. More cases."

"Have you got the town closed up?" McLeod asked as he ate.

"Yah. Some grumbling about it, but Ay got things closed up all right."

THAT day was a repetition of the one that preceded it. The street was deserted, save for those who came to the drugstore for medicine or to summon the doctor. One of them was a girl from Taggart's Frisco Palace. She addressed herself to Olsen.

"What's the idea?" she demanded. "We want to pull out of this town. LeBeau is willing to drive us down river to Skeena City. His dogs can make it and the snow is good. But

Pederson says we can't go."

"That's right," McLeod spoke up. "My orders. We're not spreading this epidemic if we can help it. You're better off here, anyhow."

"Yeah?" was the defiant retort. "Who are you to be tellin' me what to do?"

"I'm doctor enough to tell you that fear and whiskey are the two best friends influenza ever had," McLeod said warningly. "I'd advise you to go back to your place and stay there."

Olsen got her out. "Come on," he said to McLeod, "we have a look at those cabins along the river."

There were sick men and women in most of them. "I'll need more quinine," McLeod told Muskeg. The latter volunteered to get it. Not until the marshal had been gone some minutes did it occur to McLeod that he'd never have a better chance to make his getaway. It couldn't be far to Skeena City. Here was the river. He could find a pair of snowshoes in any cabin.

He mentally toyed with the idea for a few moments. In the end he shook his head slowly and finally. "Only a rat would run now," he told himself, "needed here as badly as I am." Yukon Riley had often boasted that there was only one way out of his gang for any man. McLeod was taking that into consideration, too. "I couldn't go if I knew he was going to show up tomorrow," he mused.

Night had fallen before he dragged himself back to the drugstore. He was lighting a lamp when someone entered.

"Mind shutting that door behind you?" McLeod called out without looking up. The other stopped as though struck by something familiar in the voice, then came on more slowly.

Straightening, McLeod threw him a frowning glance. Abruptly he froze in his tracks. The man pulled up, too.

CHAPTER IV

SHADOWS OF VENGEANCE

DAN TAGGART!" McLeod whispered hoarsely, every nerve in his body taut as a strung wire, his knuckles white on the counter's edge.

Taggart returned his gaze, as surprised as McLeod at this unexpected meeting.

"Well, if it ain't Doc Matthews!" the big fellow got out hoarsely. "I never thought I'd be as glad to see you as I am."

His words were without meaning to McLeod. "You helped to bury Doc Matthews three years ago," he got out slowly. "My name is Jim McLeod."

Taggart spread his hands in ready acceptance. Breathing easier, he said, "McLeod is all right with me."

"What are you doing here?" the latter rifled at him.

Dan Taggart grinned wolfishly. "That's good," he muttered contemptuously. "You're evidently the gent who was in my place the other night. You didn't stay long. I'm running the Frisco Palace."

An almost overwhelming sense of heady rage roared through McLeod, and he wondered at his own slowness. Standing before him was the man who had engineered his ruin. The raw itch to cut him down, annihilate him in a twinkling, was a more imperative need than whiskey had ever been. Stiffening, his lean features like carven granite, McLeod made a lightning grab for his holster.

Only when his hand failed to come in contact with the cold steel of his weapon did he remember that he

was unarmed. A tremor shook him as he realized that he stood here, face to face at last with his most bitter enemy, hatred and revenge in his heart—and was helpless to act!

McLeod's desperate glance darted around, trying to find something he could use as a weapon. There was nothing in reach; it was his hands or nothing. Gathering what remained of his depleted strength into a single effort, he swung for Taggart's head.

The latter saw the blow coming. He threw up a guarding arm and whipped out a pistol with the other. Lunging wildly, McLeod got his hands on the gun only to feel it torn out of his fingers. The next second Taggart brought the barrel down in a slashing blow that dropped him to the floor.

McLeod was not completely out, but his brain reeled as he waited for the finishing flash of the man's gun. It didn't come. Big Dan's boot took its place, burying itself in his ribs in a numbing kick.

"Get up, you dog!" Taggart grated. "Make another pass like that and it will be your finish, no matter how much I need you!"

MCLEOD did not try to understand. Fury sweeping him, he struggled to his feet. Hanging on the edge of the counter, he glared at Taggart through a red haze. "You tossed my life away, kicked me down to hell with your lies!" he rasped. "What do you want with me now?"

"It's my girl," he growled. "She's sick. Get your things on and bring your bag. You're going up the slope to my cabin!"

"So that's it," McLeod exclaimed. "You don't kill me because there's something I can do for you." His laugh was bitter. "You better fin-

ish me while you've got the chance. If I live, I'll settle my account with you, Taggart, and there won't be any mistake about it."

There was no escaping his deadly earnestness. Big Dan's flinty gaze narrowed. "I'll take care of that," he said bluntly. McLeod's steady look questioned him and drove him on. "Do what you can for Judith, and I'll keep my mouth shut about you."

"I had an experience with one of your girls this afternoon," McLeod said thinly. "It wasn't pleasant—"

Taggart shook his head. "I'm not talking about one of the girls at the Palace. Judith is my . . . my daughter."

McLeod stared at him incredulously. Dan Taggart with a daughter! It passed belief. To his almost certain knowledge, the man had not even been married three years ago.

"How do I know you won't talk?" he queried, trying to hide the real direction of his thoughts. "How could I believe you?"

Taggart's answer was grudging. "I've got to keep still. If I don't, your doctoring days will be over for a spell. And Judith is mighty sick. I . . . I hope it isn't too late."

McLeod's stare was puzzled. He didn't get it. Taggart sounded as though the girl really mattered to him.

"All right," he said slowly. "I'll have a look at her."

"And you'll pull her through, doc!" Big Dan ground out, hardening again. "You ain't no backwoods pill-mixer. You're a doctor!"

TAGGART'S cabin was situated amidst a grove of cedar and birch not far from the outskirts of Porcupine. Heading that way, the other at his side, McLeod marveled at his own coolness.

A day ago he would have said that he must have this man's life on sight or forfeit his own in the attempt; instead of which, his thoughts were coldly calculating. But there was no help for it—until he got his hands on a gun, at least.

So engrossed was he in his own concerns, the grim past rolling up like a threatening storm cloud, that he was totally unprepared for the shock of surprise he received when his weary glance fell on the face of Judith Taggart, lying wan and feeble in her bed. He had made no attempt to picture beforehand what the girl would be like; but whatever he expected, it had not been this.

Judith was young, somewhere between fifteen and sixteen. In health she must have been lovely, with dark unfathomable eyes. Even in tossing, feverish sickness McLeod felt the impact of her beauty. Her brows, her long luxuriant hair, were raven black. But the smooth olive of her cheeks had given place to a hectic flush.

"What . . . what do you want?" Judith whispered huskily, searching his strained pale face.

"I've come to look after you," he told her reassuringly. "I'm the new doctor. I'm going to help you." His tone must have conveyed his calm readiness to assume the burden of restoring her health, for the girl relaxed limply as he went on with his diagnosis.

There was little question in his mind that she was desperately ill, but he made sure in his methodical way. It was some minutes before he glanced up to meet Taggart's inquiring regard, fastened on him from across the bed. They walked to the corner of the room, out of the girl's hearing.

"What is it, doc?" Big Dan

queried hoarsely. "Is she bad?"

"She is—very," McLeod said simply. He watched the blood drain away from Taggart's fleshy face and read some secret fear there. "Why didn't you come for me yesterday? Twenty-four hours is a long time to wait when a girl is as sick as she is."

"I'm depending on you to pull her through," Taggart said flatly. "Be damn sure you do!"

"Save your threats," McLeod murmured soberly. "I'll do what I can—for her sake, not for yours. Put some more blankets on her bed. I want the window open. And heat something and put it over her feet. They must be kept warm."

"You're going to give her medicine, ain't you?"

"I'll tend to that part of it," McLeod muttered, picking up his bag and stepping into the kitchen.

FOR two hours he remained in Taggart's cabin. Dan followed him outside as he was about to leave.

"Is she any better, doc?"

"She's no worse. That's something of a miracle—not that you'd understand. You'll have to get a woman in to take care of her. She mustn't be left alone a moment."

"I'd like to know where I'm to get somebody," Taggart replied. "The women in this town who ain't sick themselves are too scared to go where sickness is."

"I doubt they're that heartless," said McLeod. "You find someone. And while we're about it, what's this story about that girl being your daughter?"

"Well, stepdaughter, then, if you like that better," the big man muttered. "I married her mother soon after I came north. She died last summer. Let it go at that. When

will you be back?"

"In the morning. Sooner if she takes a turn for the worse. Just remember, don't leave her alone."

"And don't you try to do a sneak from Porcupine," Taggart retorted. "It won't be healthy."

McLeod did not dignify that threat with an answer. Going down the hill, he asked himself what was behind Taggart's concern for the girl. He refused to believe that the man had any affection for her, or for anyone, save himself. And yet, he *was* concerned.

A grim smile touched McLeod's face as he recalled big Dan's warning not to leave Porcupine. He knew the bargain he had made with Taggart meant exactly nothing, and yet, with the man in Porcupine, nothing could drive him away.

This slope was studded with cedar and dwarf pine. Leaving the path Taggart had used, for a short cut of his own making, McLeod had the feeling that he was being followed. Turning suddenly, he saw a man dart behind a tree. His first thought was that it was Muskeg, keeping a secret watch on him. When he got a second glimpse of the man, however, McLeod realized he was a head taller than the marshal. Comprehension came immediately. "Yukon!" he thought. "It can't be anyone else!"

Not more than fifty paces separated them. McLeod saw that Yukon had his rifle trained on him, and he was a dead shot. McLeod wondered why he didn't fire and have it over with. He considered running. He was too late for that, for the next moment Yukon called on him to stand where he was, or take the consequences.

"So you found me," said McLeod. "I thought you would. You warned me not to go—"

"That'll keep," Yukon interrupted heavily. "You got medicine in that bag?"

"Not very much."

"I reckon you got enough to put me on my feet. Get it open!" The outlaw's voice sounded tired. McLeod heard him breathing heavily.

"Sick, eh?" he asked. And at Yukon's heavy nod: "Man, you're plenty sick! The flu is what you've got! I haven't got anything that'll make you well in a minute. You ought to be in bed right now!"

"You'll keep me on my feet till I've done what I come here to do," Yukon told him harshly. "I'm squarin' with a double-crossin' skunk who threw me down, and nothin'll stand in the way!"

FOR the minute McLeod failed to understand. He thought Riley was referring to himself. But Yukon went on savagely: "I've been several kinds of a fool in my life, but when a gent tries to hold out the money for skins I've risked my neck for, he don't do it the second time. That man's in Porcupine, and I'm goin' after him!"

McLeod's eyes narrowed. Suddenly the truth flashed on him. "Dan Taggart!" he jerked out. "It must be him! Am I right?"

Yukon nodded, showing no surprise at the question. "Git that bag open, doc."

McLeod's thoughts were racing. If his problem had been complicated before, it was answerless now. "I can't do anything for you here," he said hurriedly. "I haven't got the stuff, anyway."

"Then we'll go after it. Lead the way now, and not a peep out of yuh if we meet anyone."

They met no one—not that it mattered, for McLeod's lips were

sealed. On reaching the drugstore, Yukon ordered McLeod behind the prescription case that cut off the rear of the store from the gaze of any chance passer-by, then lowered himself heavily into an old chair.

"Keep that light turned low," he said hoarsely as the other stared at him. "You got any likker in here?"

"Yeah," McLeod nodded, "but you don't want any, the way your heart is pumping. It will kill you, Yukon."

"Stow that talk!" the outlaw rasped. "Get that liquor out an' fill a tumbler for me." He stood his rifle against the counter.

McLeod put the whiskey on the prescription counter and set a glass beside it. "I'm warning you," he muttered.

Yukon refused to listen. "Better have one yerself, doc."

"I'm not drinking."

Riley started to laugh, only to have his bitter mirth end in a fit of coughing. McLeod shook his head but said no more.

"Dig out what I'm goin' to need," Yukon wheezed. "The quicker I git it into me the safer I'll be."

McLeod got out some quinine for a dose. He was measuring it when a crash swung him around. Yukon Riley lay on the floor, his hand clutching his heart.

McLeod stared at the glassy eyes of the man. "I knew it," he thought. An examination only confirmed his suspicion. Riley was dead.

CHAPTER V

PLAYING FOR TIME

STUNNED for a moment by the suddenness of it, McLeod knelt there trying to think. A heavy step on the porch aroused him. Hurriedly he snatched up Yukon's belt gun and slipped it into

his bag, then pressed the rifle into the dead man's fingers.

"Doc, you ban there?" It was Muskeg Olsen's voice.

"Yeah. Back here!" McLeod straightened up, preparing himself for the questions he knew would be fired at him.

"Vell, doc," Muskeg was saying as he came around the counter. The rest of what he had been about to say died on his lips and he stood there staring at the still form on the floor. "Riley!" he managed to gasp at last. "Yukon Riley!" His eyes went to McLeod, questions crowding close in them. "Turn up the light, doc," he said heavily.

Pretending not to have heard him, McLeod continued to gaze at the dead man with a piercing intentness.

"So that's Yukon Riley," he murmured. "I . . . I've often heard of him."

"Vot? You mean you didn't know him?" Olsen demanded "How did he git here?"

McLeod was on safe ground as far as that went. He told Muskeg how Yukon had stopped him up on the slope, and then, step by step, related what had happened up to the moment the marshal entered the drugstore.

"Vell, doc, you ban lucky. In more vays den vun," Muskeg said thoughtfully.

"I guess I was," McLeod agreed; and he and the marshal were not thinking of the same things.

"There vas a price on him, dead or alive. You knew that, doc?"

"No, I didn't know it."

"There be a few dollars coming your vay now."

McLeod shook his head. "I don't want it. I'll earn my money some other way. We've got to get him out of here."

"Sure," Muskeg nodded. "You ban lock up the place now. Ay try keep your supper warm for you. Ve go to the jail. You eat somethings, den ve get Ox to help us."

THEY were back an hour later with Pederson. Somehow the news had got around town that Yukon Riley, the outlaw, was dead in Porcupine. It brought several curious townspeople to the drugstore.

Ox and Muskeg wrapped the body in a blanket and carried it out to a hand sled. They were pulling it away when McLeod spoke to the group that had assembled.

"You men would do well to go on about your business," he told them. "I'll have to fumigate this place."

The men filed out, and it was only then that McLeod saw that Dan Taggart was one of them. Taggart held his ground.

"What are you doing down here?" McLeod shot at him angrily. "I warned you that girl needed constant attention."

"She's getting it," Taggart drawled with provoking assurance. "Floss Johnson—one of my girls at the Palace—is looking after her."

"Floss Johnson?" McLeod echoed, his surprise apparent.

"Yeah. She seems to have taken quite a shine to you, doc," Taggart laughed. "Floss, I mean."

"Your stepdaughter couldn't be in better hands, if you're telling the truth and she's really there."

"Why shouldn't she be there?" Taggart rasped. "You've got a lot to learn about women. They'll go the whole way for the right gent."

McLeod gazed at him understandingly, a deeper grimness touching his mouth. "And you're evidently the right gent," he said.

"Well, for her sake, I hope you're mistaken. I think I'll go up to your cabin and have a look for myself."

"Swell!" Taggart said with jeering emphasis. "You can't drop in too often for me." And as a warning afterthought: "Just remember you're there in your professional capacity."

McLeod's eyes drilled him for a moment. "What do you mean by that?" he demanded.

"Just that," was the stony answer. "Before you leave, doc, I'd like to ask you a question. Are you sure it was the flu that killed Yukon Riley?"

"Perfectly!"

Dan Taggart shrugged cynically. "Funny," he said, "him being alone here with you like that." The inference was clear enough. McLeod's lips thinned with hatred.

"Not so funny as the fact that he wasn't wearing a belt gun when Olsen examined him," he observed cryptically. "Think that over, Taggart. It may help to keep your rotten hide in one piece."

ON his way up the slope, McLeod paused to slip Yukon's gun in his pocket. When he knocked on the door of Taggart's cabin, Floss opened it for him.

"I hadn't expected you up again tonight," she said.

"I saw Taggart downtown," he explained. "He said you were here. I had to be sure someone was with the girl."

Unconsciously he had said more than he intended. He realized it as he saw Floss' eyebrows go up.

"I mean—" he murmured awkwardly and stopped.

"I think I understand what you mean," she said. "Dan's that way, I know."

"How is the girl?" McLeod asked.

"She drowsed off a short while ago."

"That's not a bad sign. She's a hospital case. If I could only collapse that right lung, but I have so little to work with."

"I know what you've been doing," Floss told him, her pride in him mirrored in her eyes. Suddenly she was sad. "Strange, isn't it, how we sometimes find ourselves?"

"Isn't it?" McLeod murmured, a softness in his voice that had long been absent. "You, for instance, Floss. You know how contagious this disease is. Yet you're here, doing all you can for that girl. Aren't you afraid?"

"Of course. But someone had to be here; Dan is no person to look after her. Or after anyone else, I guess," she added unhappily. She pulled herself together as she felt McLeod's eyes on her. "But that's all right; you get about what you deserve in this life, taking it altogether."

"I wonder," McLeod mused, studying her. She had an indefinable attraction for him. Out of a long silence, he said: "Are you in love with Taggart?"

The question surprised her, and she could not hide the fact, though she tried to dismiss it with a smile. "I thought I was," she answered. She shook her head at some secret thought. Of a sudden her eyes were inscrutable. "I'm not fooling myself about Dan. I stopped doing that a long time ago." Just as suddenly she threw off her moodiness. "But why talk about it? It hasn't anything to do with my being here. Judith is so young and sweet. I want her to have a chance, doctor."

Just why, he couldn't have said, but McLeod had a feeling of humility in her presence. Reaching for

his hat, his hand closed over hers for a moment.

"Between us, maybe we can make your being here mean more than a chance for her," he said.

CHAPTER VI

THE NORTH BRANDS ITS OWN

McLEOD was often at Taggart's cabin in the days that followed. He always found Floss there. He told himself she could not have looked after the girl more tenderly had she been her mother.

Taggart kept a hawklike watch on Judith's condition, too. McLeod knew the man was waiting for the first hint that she would recover; that matters between himself and Taggart would move to a quick showdown once the girl was out of danger.

McLeod was ready for it. There were new cases every day, but they were milder now; the epidemic was passing. If Judith was not making visible progress it was only because she had been snatched back from the very brink of death. He believed she was safe. He knew he would be certain about it long before Taggart could have the knowledge. It would give him an advantage that he did not propose to waste.

Changes had taken place in McLeod of which he himself was unaware. Freed of his craving for liquor, his gnawing sense of inferiority went with it. It changed everything for him and made him a dominant personality. He was a doctor again—doing the thing he had always wanted to do. It was explanation enough for McLeod.

Muskeg had long since given up any pretense of watching him. Therefore, it seemed less than an im-

portant matter when the marshal told him one evening that the charge of entering Taswell's saloon had been dropped.

"Does that mean I've got to move out of here, Muskeg?" McLeod asked.

Olsen laughed. "No," he answered. "The jail is yours, doc, and so is the rest of the town. You make plenty friend here."

DAN TAGGART had also noticed that fact. Sitting in his office in the closed Frisco Palace, he had turned it over in his mind many times. It complicated things for him. He knew McLeod was waiting for him to make a move.

"It wouldn't be any great trick to catch him off guard and let him have it," Taggart told himself, "but it might not end there now, with folks feeling the way they do about him." There were better ways, smarter ways, he decided. It wasn't so easy to hit on one. But he still had a little time left. Better be sure of himself before he moved.

The following afternoon Taggart was standing at a window in his place when he saw McLeod hurrying up the street. He watched him until he turned up the slope, and noticed that McLeod's step was unusually light and buoyant.

"Real anxious to get there," Taggart sneered. "It ain't only the kid he's going up to see. Well, I'll take care of that, too. He ain't fooling me about anything. Judith has been O. K. for two days."

At Taggart's cabin, Floss greeted McLeod with a warming smile. He motioned for her to lead the way to the kitchen.

"Why did you do that?" Floss asked as he closed the kitchen door

behind him. "Judith is sound asleep. She's really much better."

"Let's talk about me instead of Judith," he suggested. "Floss, did Taggart tell you about me? I mean all about me?"

"Yes." Her voice was a little uncertain.

"Do you think I stole that money in Seattle?"

"How could I, Jim? How could I, knowing what I know?"

Standing there immovable, McLeod saw her eyes misting. It did something to him, something strange and wonderful. Before he could get words out in reply, she went on: "Why do you ask?"

"Thanks, Floss. I had to know."

He was hoarse. It was all he could do to control himself. Starting to turn away, he paused. "But you're tired, worn out. You'd better go down the hill for a rest. After I've made one call in town I'll come back and stay with Judith until you get back."

When Floss left a few minutes later, McLeod watched her from the window of Judith's bedroom. His eyes were strangely tender as he turned back to examine the sick girl.

FIVE men peered cautiously out of the thick spruce on the edge of Porcupine. They were Yukon Riley's gang. A tense-ness rode them; all were heavily armed. In Yukon's absence, Bull Fraser had constituted himself their leader.

"There's Taggart's place," he muttered, indicating the rear of the Frisco Palace.

Four pairs of eyes glittered as they stared. "It's closed up!" the Dawson Kid growled.

"No matter," Fraser's voice was harsh. "Big Dan'll be there. Fol-

low me!" He made for the place, darting wary glances.

They reached the Palace undiscovered. The back door was fastened, but Frenchy Ledoux found a window they could crawl through. Bull waited till they were all in, then led the way to the saloon. The silence was ghostly. Their moccasins made no noise. Fraser headed toward Taggart's office door.

Big Dan started up from his desk as the door opened. "The place is closed!" he began harshly. "What do you mean—" He broke off, his face hardening as he recognized these men.

They pressed close, silent and wolfish. A less thick-skinned man than Taggart would have been affected by their air of menace. "So yuh didn't expect us, Taggart?" said Fraser softly.

Dan grunted. "What're you here for?"

"A little matter of some peltries that ain't been paid for," Bull told him flatly. "We've come to collect. At the same time, yuh might explain why yuh didn't fork over to Yukon, and why he didn't come back!"

Taggart stared. "Why, Yukon's dead!" he jerked out. "You mean to say yuh don't know?"

Their hard faces mirrored their surprise. A man cursed. Fraser was the first to get command of himself. "So Yukon is dead, eh?" he grated. "And instead of lettin' us know, yuh left us out there in the wilderness without grub or anything else, and without a cent to buy more!" There was a threat in his cold ferocity. "Yuh damned skunk!"

"Hold on!" Dan said quickly. "I couldn't do a thing! My hands weretied; there's a flu epidemic here.

Men're dyin' like flies. I didn't even lay eyes on Yukon before he cashed!"

IT was at this moment that Floss Johnson, entering the place to speak to Taggart, was arrested by the sound of raised voices just as she started to open the office door. Mention of Yukon Riley held her rooted, listening. The men in the office had no inkling of her presence.

Fraser studied Taggart narrowly. The others were muttering; plainly they preferred not to believe him. Hands were on guns, and there was an atmosphere here of more than distrust—of threatened violence. "Flu, huh?" Bull growled. "But I suppose it was lead poison that got Yukon!"

"No," Taggart jerked out. "The law never touched him!" He knew to a hair the tightness of the jam he was in; his collar felt wet. In desperation his glance darted toward the window. Suddenly he started. McLeod was just passing by on the street, on his way up to Taggart's cabin after having made his sick call in town.

"There's the gent who put Yukon away, if anybody did!" Taggart exclaimed. "That damned clumsy doctor! Riley was found dead in the drugstore, and McLeod claimed that—"

A shock ran over them all at that name. "Who?" Fraser snapped. He made for the window and the others crowded around him. They stared. Suddenly a wrathful curse exploded. "It's him, shore as hell! Damn it, boys, that's the rat who did fer Yukon!"

Taggart stared at them in amazement. He failed utterly to understand their anger, but it was all right. He congratulated himself on his inspiration, and on the chance

which had led McLeod past his window at just that moment.

Fraser whirled, his stubbly face knotted with fury. "We know all about McLeod," he grated. "What'd he claim, Taggart?"

Dan told what had happened at the drugstore, giving it a twist of his own. According to him there was little doubt that McLeod had managed to get Yukon Riley there and then given him a dose that finished him. He would have put questions of his own, but the bubbling rage of these men gave him no opportunity.

"Where's McLeod goin'?" one demanded sharply.

"To my cabin, I expect—"

"Let's get goin'!" the Dawson Kid whipped out, starting for the door. "We're squarin' with McLeod right now!"

Nothing could have suited Taggart better. He was even more eager than the others. But he wanted to make sure. "Better wait till dark," he advised. "It'll be dusk in half an hour! Then you'll be sure of yoreselves—"

STARTING away from the other side of the door in sudden fright lest she be caught there, Floss failed to catch the rest. She did not wait. Hurrying to a side door, she let herself out. She made sure that she could not be seen from Taggart's window as she started down toward the jail.

Muskeg Olsen met her at the door. "Vell, Miss Floss—" he began, with his heavy smile.

"Quick, Muskeg, there isn't a minute to lose!" she exclaimed. Dr. McLeod's in danger!"

"Vot's dis?" Olsen rumbled, catching her excitement. Hastily she gasped out the story of what she had heard in the Frisco Palace.

She had recognized Yukon Riley's gang readily enough; they had been in the Frisco Saloon several times before. She and Muskeg could only hope that Taggart's crafty persuasions would work, and there was time enough before dusk to warn McLeod, get him beyond reach of those ruthless men.

Muskeg wasted no time in pondering the situation. Growing respect for McLeod lent speed to his wits now. In five minutes he had a dog team ready. "Doc ban up at Taggart's cabin, Ay tank?" he said.

"He must be. Hurry, Muskeg!"

They started up there. Floss scanned the sky anxiously on the way; the eastern sky was already dimming. She urged Olsen to go faster.

CHAPTER VII

BULLETS WIPE OUT A DEBT

McLEOD met them at the door as they arrived. His brows rose at sight of the dog team. "What—" he began.

"Doc, yump on dis sled and make tracks!" Olsen ordered without ceremony. Gravity swept McLeod's features at his tone.

"The law?" he demanded.

"No, doctor. Yukon Riley's gang! They're coming after you!" In swift words Floss told him what she had learned. "You haven't a minute to spare! Big Dan has made them believe you're responsible for Yukon's death. They'll not stop short of your own!"

Only slowly did it come home to McLeod what she was doing in tossing Taggart aside like this.

"Floss," he got out tensely, "why are you doing this for me?"

"Don't ask!" she murmured, turning away sharply. "I . . . I don't know why I'm doing it!" But the

answer was in her eyes and she could not dissemble it. McLeod took a step toward her, amazed, speechless. "Why are you standing there?" Floss cried. "There's no telling when they'll get here. Please!"

McLeod shook his head. It was incredible; and yet belief swelled to a mighty torrent in him. "Floss, you . . . you do mean it! It's true! You love me—"

A tear rolled down her cheek unheeded. "Jim, must I beg you to go?" she pleaded.

"I can't go!" he burst out. "I've got to square my account with Dan Taggart. I've lived for it!"

"Don't let revenge ruin your whole life," she implored, her fear beating against him. "Jim, listen to me! I don't amount to much—but if I mean anything at all to you, forget him!"

"I'll never forget him," was the uncompromising answer. Yet he was fighting himself even now; this girl meant more to him than he had dreamed. But to do what she asked meant running, and he knew he would never run again. "He's behind this! I knew the showdown was coming. I thought he'd wait until Judith was out of danger—"

"He's convinced she is. A few days, and he'll be ready to begin hounding her again." She didn't wait for his question. "Oh, I got the whole miserable story the night she was delirious. Her mother left her a few thousand dollars and warned her not to let Taggart know where it was. He's been trying to drag the secret out of her for months."

"So that's why he was so concerned about saving her! The wolf! I can imagine what that girl's life has been here. It's all of a piece with what he did to me!"

"Jim—"

SHE never finished what she was going to say. Suddenly Muskeg jerked out tensely, "Dem faller ban comin'! Dere's five of 'em!" He was staring down the trail. McLeod flung a look. Olsen was right. Fraser and the others were coming this way, hard purpose in their manner.

"Take the sled and go!" Floss cried to McLeod. "You can get away—"

McLeod's headshake was flat and final. His eyes were dangerous. It was Muskeg who caught the girl by the shoulder and whirled her toward the sled.

"Get goin'!" he ordered. "Doc won't go, somebody haff to. Start over de Wild Goose Lake trail, find de Mounted. I sent for dem. Dey ban not very far!"

Floss galvanized into action as though mention of the Mounted were a powerful stimulant to her. The next minute the dog team swung away under her guidance, the long whip snaking out with a crack. Desperation was lending her competence.

Bull Fraser and the others saw her start. Their rifles came up; several of them cracked. Slugs kicked the snow up around the sled, but there were no hits. The next moment Floss whirled into the cover of the trees.

Muskeg turned to McLeod. "You got a gun, doc?"

McLeod nodded curtly. "Get inside," he grunted as a slug struck the cabin front. "This is goin' to be a narrow squeak, if we pull through at all."

Darting inside, they barricaded the place as well as they could. Fraser's crowd came on till they were within effective six-gun range and then spread out to encircle the place. A hail of bullets rained into

the logs. Then a harsh voice sailed across the frosty air.

"Come out of there, McLeod! Yo're never leavin' that place alive!"

Olsen looked at McLeod, who only shook his head. They let their guns answer for them, firing from the windows. The fur thieves had taken cover in the scrub growth surrounding the cabin. For ten minutes the firing went on. It was increasingly difficult to distinguish anything from within as the dusk thickened.

"Pretty quick those birds will be able to close in and squeeze us like a lemon!" McLeod growled. Muskeg shrugged.

"Maybe ve sqveese one or two of dem," he returned, unmoved.

McLeod's thoughts followed Floss. She would never be in time, he felt certain. In the darkness there was little chance of her finding the Mounted anyway. And if she did; if she brought them here? The answer to that was so gloomily involved in dark possibilities that he gave it up.

AS darkness increased, his prediction seemed about to be proven true. The muzzle bursts of the attackers flamed ever closer; lead probed through the chinking and clattered inside the cabin. McLeod knew that Ledoux, Dawson Kid, and the others would not pause till he was stretched out lifeless.

While Muskeg watched the rear of the cabin, he stood guard at the front. Suddenly, amidst the rattle of spiteful shots, he caught the thud of running feet. A man was outside the barricaded door, pounding on it heavily.

"Show yoreself, McLeod! By God, we'll get yuh one way or another!"

The door, for which there was no disc-overable bar, began to sag inward. McLeod fired through it without apparent effect. He was considering throwing it open and meeting the enemy face to face, when a cry was raised outside. It was a cry of alarm, and hard on its heels came the crackle of gunfire from another direction.

"Look out, boys, it's the Mounties!" Bull Fraser roared. There was more scattered firing, and the slap of moccasins running. McLeod delayed no longer. He flung the door open with a bang. There wasn't much to be seen outside, but dusky figures flitted this way and that; guns flashed. McLeod saw a man go down, and knew that Yukon's old gang was struggling now for survival.

Muskeg flung past him and plunged into the thick of it. His yell pealed in the darkness. Only McLeod's distrust of the law, which had hounded him so long, kept him from taking a hand.

But it was soon over. Almost before the fur pirates had become aware of what was upon them, the Dawson Kid was dead and the others were cornered. McLeod watched three trim forms in the scarlet and blue of the Mounted herd them forward. The cuffs were snapped on as Floss appeared. She made for McLeod's side, a world of relief in her face.

The sound of firing had brought a handful of men out from town. Big Dan Taggart was at their head. There was a swaggering assurance in his manner which was explained by his first words.

"Looks like yuh made a clean-up, corporal," he said. He indicated McLeod. "There's another man you're lookin' for—"

Corporal Lord looked from Tag-

gart to McLeod and back again. "Doc Matthews, isn't it?" he said. And then: "You're mistaken. We're not after him. But who are you?"

"He's big Dan Taggart!" Bull Fraser struck in, before anyone else could speak. "Don't let him git away; he was mixed up with Yukon and the rest of us! Nose around a little, and you'll find out still more things about him!"

WE don't need to do that," was the dry answer. "We've got enough on Taggart now to put him away. We were hunting for him when we came across Riley's camp at Wild Goose Lake—"

McLeod's eyes were bright with sudden hope. "Hold on," he cried. "Let me get this straight. You say it's Taggart you want, and not me?" "That's right," Corporal Lord acknowledged. "He's being extradited for the job he pinned on you. An accomplice of his in Seattle gave the game away just before he died. You can drop that alias you've been using, Bruce Matthews."

The latter's laugh was bitter. "I don't know that I will," he murmured. "It's done more for me than my own name ever did."

"Suit yourself about that," Lord told him. Turning to one of the constables, he said, "Snap the cuffs on Taggart, Bill. We'll be getting along."

Big Dan snarled his rage, but things had moved too swiftly for him. Cursing McLeod and Floss, he was hustled out of the cabin and down the path to Porcupine, along with the members of Yukon Riley's gang.

Constable Lord watched his men out of sight, then turned back to McLeod. "By the way, doc, there's something you can do for me if you

want to. We've been asked to look after Taggart's young stepdaughter. Her uncle—her mother's brother—is on his way up from San Francisco to take her home with him. Seems he didn't like the idea of the girl staying with Taggart after her mother died. I'd appreciate it if you'd keep an eye on her till he comes."

"I'll be glad to," McLeod assured him. "She's just getting over a bad attack of the flu. I'll have her in good shape so she'll be able to leave with her uncle."

Lord nodded his thanks and hurried down the path after his men. McLeod stood staring after him, still troubled by his thoughts.

"Muskeg," he said to Olsen, who had lingered, "maybe I ought to be going with them. I was mixed up with Yukon myself for a short while." He told about his meager part in the holdup of the *Prince Rupert*, but swore that was all he had ever had to do with Riley's outlaw activities. Olsen wagged his head.

"Vell, maybe we forget about dat," he said judicially. "After vot you do here, doc, there ban witnesses to swear dem faller lie if it ever come to court." He threw a

shrewd glance at Floss and smiled.

McLeod felt his throat constrict with emotion. He knew Muskeg was giving him an out, and he meant to take it. He couldn't put his thanks into words, but as the marshal started down the path alone, cackling to himself, McLeod silently promised that he would act them.

Side by side, he and Floss stood watching the sheriff go. The Mounted and their captives could be seen farther down the path. Even after Taggart and the rest were out of sight they stood there. McLeod's hand closed over the girl's, and for both the moment was too full for speech. Seconds passed before Floss broke the spell that gripped them.

"Jim, did . . . did you mean that about not going back to the States and finding your old place?"

He nodded slowly. Looking down at her, there was a world of meaning in his eyes. "Jim McLeod and Porcupine are good enough for me—if they are for you—"

"Jim!" she cried, feeling his arms about her. "We *have* found something precious here, haven't we?"

"Something we're not going to lose, darling! The North has put its brand on us—and it's not a bad brand, Floss!"

THE END.



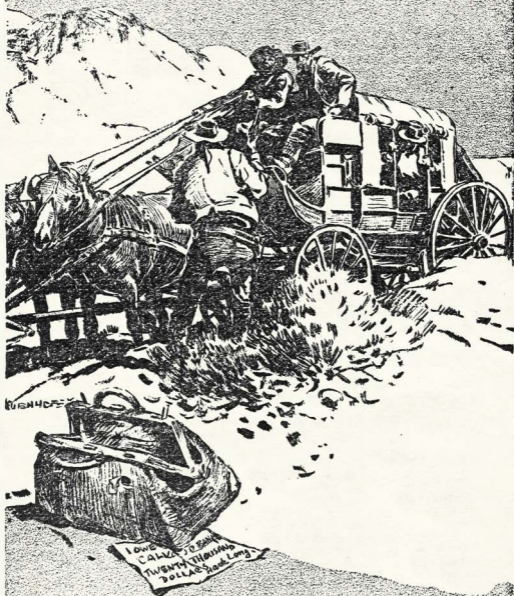
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ILLEGAL INTEREST



By **BEN JONES**

Illegal Interest

JIM DOBEY set his placer pan on a rock and turned toward the west. His eyes squinted against the strain of the glare on the parched stretch of sand that spread out below him. Cactus sentinels wavered, swayed in the heat. Jim scanned the horizon anxiously, hoping that one of the wavering objects might materialize into a figure on horseback.

For Hank Long was long past due. Calvajo was only two hours' ride from the Bola mine, and Hank had been gone twelve hours.

Jim Dobey's young face was taut with anxiety as he turned back to his placer pan. The tension in his face eased a little and his blue eyes brightened as he dipped for a pan of gravel and water. It was fun to watch the sun glitter on the particles of gold in the bottom of the pan as he tilted it from side to side. There wasn't a richer strike in the Sierras than this claim he and Hank were working.

Unconsciously Jim Dobey's left hand went to the breast pocket of his plaid shirt, felt the crinkle of paper there. That crisp paper was a letter from the Northwestern Mining Co. testifying to the richness of the Bola mine. It also announced that when Jim Dobey and Hank Long appeared at the Northwestern Mining Co.'s office in Tucson, the company was ready to pay them a small fortune for their claim.

Jim turned back to scan the shimmering desert below. There was just one catch. In twelve more hours the Bola mine would not be theirs to sell unless Hank turned up in time with the money needed to take up their option on the property.

One of the swaying shadows in the glare below took definite shape, became a man on horseback. When Jim Dobey saw that hunched rider astride a loping horse, he headed for the foot of the rise at a run. The rider down there was Hank Long. And something was wrong. Hank loved that piebald horse too much to run her in this kind of heat.

At the foot of the rise, Hank pulled up, struggling to sit erect in his saddle. When Jim Dobey reached his partner's side the old man was cursing between panting gasps for breath.

"Help me up the hill," he choked. "This blankety-blank shoulder is giving me merry hell."

The right side of Hank's dusty plaid shirt was dyed deep brown with dried blood. His wizened, leathery face was twisted into a maze of painful wrinkles. His straggly walrus mustache looked even more droopy than usual. But there was a vibrant angry glow in his faded eyes.

WHILE Jim Dobey bathed and dressed the gun wound in his skinny shoulder, Hank Long talked. Occasionally he took time out to curse. And Jim's young face settled into tight, grim lines as he listened.

"Lem Craig turned us down cold on the loan," Hank declared. "Said the bank ain't in a position to lend money right now. I know he's a liar. I argued for two hours yestidday. He kept stallin'. I went back this mornin'. When he stalled me off again I demanded a showdown."

"He know when our option on the mine is up?" Jim asked.

Hank nodded. "Shore he does. Ain't he workin' for Simon Luke? And don't Luke own the Bola? Or will if we don't pick up that option

tomorrow. Anyway, this mornin' I accused Lem of refusin' us the loan because he'd been ordered to do just that by his boss, Simon Luke. He blustered but I could tell he was lyin'. I got sore and—well, mebbe I looked like I was goin' for my gun but—

"I ain't betting maybe on that, you old pepper pot," Jim put in dryly. "That temper and fool darin' of yours is gonna get you killed yet."

"Well, I ain't takin' a deal like that without puttin' up a fight. But that buzzard Craig beat me to the draw." Hank's voice was heavy with tragic mournfulness. "Jim, I must be gettin' old. I'm gettin' soft when a parlor dandy like Lem Craig can outdraw me. He shot me in the shoulder afore I could get my gun out."

Hank broke off and began to curse again. Jim Dobey tied a knot in the bandanna he'd put on Hank's shoulder and stood up.

"You can't handle Craig like that, Hank," he said. He's a banker, not an outlaw. And this ain't the old West. There's law and order out here now."

"Then Craig ain't got no right actin' like a outlaw," Hank protested. "And he's usin' that law and order to hold us up. We're law-abidin' citizens and we got collateral, iron-clad security, to put up for that loan. Bankers is supposed to help citizens—"

"I still think we can get the loan from Craig if he's approached right," Jim told him. "Maybe he was tellin' the truth, maybe he didn't have the cash on hand. But if he'll give us a certified check—"

"It's Tuesday," Hank said shortly. "That means the stage is due today with the bank's weekly supply of cash from Tucson. Every-

body knows that."

Resolutely, Jim Dobey turned, picked up his saddle.

"I'm going to see Craig myself. We got to get that option money to Simon Luke before noon tomorrow."

Hank's spindly, bowed legs trembled a little as he stood up. He walked over to where Jim was saddling his horse.

"Look, son," he said quietly. "I'm a short-tempered old fool, I know. But I didn't pull a gun on Craig till I'd tried everything else. Craig takes his orders from Simon Luke, and he ain't goin' to give us that loan. Now that we've found gold on this claim, Luke wants it back. And he can get it back if we don't show up at his place with three thousand dollars afore noon tomorrow."

Jim looked grim and determined. "It's the only chance we got, Hank. I'm going to see Craig."

There was a strained look in Hank's faded eyes as he watched his young partner mount his horse. "Craig and Luke use the law to hide behind while they rob and steal. They've skinned many a prospector out of rich claims around here. And they're aimin' to skin us. There ain't but one way to deal with skunks like that, Jim. You got to show—"

"Shooting them won't get us anywhere, Hank," Jim interrupted. "You'll just swing for murder and that ain't getting the mine for us. Things like this have to be done legal. Outlaw methods won't work."

Hank shook his head mournfully. "But Craig and Luke is outlaws, Hank. Not the old-fashioned kind that robbed honest with a mask and gun. But outlaws jest the same. And yuh gotta play the game their way or they take the pants offn yuh."

But Jim Dobey shook his head

stubbornly. "You take it easy with that shoulder, Hank. If I get the money I'll ride on up to Simon Luke's and pick up that deed. If I fail—" Jim didn't finish. He didn't have to. Six months' hard work and all the money he and Hank had saved for years was sunk in the Bola. If they lost now, they'd not only lose a fortune, but every last cent they had. There would be nothing left for them to do but become roving cowpunchers again. And Hank wasn't as spry as he use to be.

Old Hank watched his young partner become a part of the wavering mirage that floated across the trail to Calvajo. His eyes looked after Jim Dobe, but their faraway expression showed that he had forgotten his partner already. There was a glitter in the faded eyes, something in the old man's bearing that was alien to the despair that filled his partner.

The piebald horse picked up his ears and stared at Hank as the miner spoke loud.

"If Craig won't do business like an honest man, then there ain't nothing else left but to do business his way. Jim's a good kid, but he jest don't understand human nature."

Hank chuckled as he turned and picked up the saddle Jim had taken from the piebald horse. There was new life in his step as he turned toward the corral where their one extra horse stood.

"Jim jest don't know nothin' about sycology," he murmured.

JIM DOBEY faced Lem Craig across the banker's roll-top desk. Craig's smile was cautiously bland.

"I'm sorry, Jim," he said regretfully. "But I can't make the loan. Actually the mine ain't yours and Hank's to put up for collateral."

"Legally it's ours for another twelve hours," Jim Dobe pointed out. "I've shown you this letter from the Northwestern people. By tomorrow night we can repay the loan with interest. With double interest if yuh want it that way."

Craig shook his head. There was a sly, uneasy look in his little eyes. His fat face showed his nervousness as he faced the grim-faced young miner.

"I can't do it, Dobe," he insisted. "And I wish you'd stop—"

Craig broke off as the sound that had been gathering outside in the street rose to a roar and almost drowned out his words. He and Jim Dobe turned and faced the door as the thud of many boot heels and the excited clamor of voices grew louder outside the door.

The banker moved to the door, threw it open. Past Craig's shoulder Jim Dobe saw the crowd that filled the bank. A glimpse through the wide-open front doors showed him the stagecoach pulled up in front of the bank.

An excited cashier headed the crowd that moved toward the door of Craig's office. Beside the cashier was a white-faced stage driver carrying a satchel which he thrust out toward Craig as he reached the door.

The banker motioned the cashier and the driver into the room and closed the door on the curious crowd. Then he took the satchel. As he faced the nervous driver, he seemed to have forgotten Jim Dobe's presence.

"What happened?" he demanded. "Holdup?"

The driver nodded. "At Panther Pass. A lone masked agent. Didn't take nothin' but the bank's money. And he writ somethin' on a piece of paper and put it inside the bag. Said it was for you."

Jim Dobey was standing at Craig's shoulder as he opened the satchel. It was empty except for the slip of paper. Jim recognized the scrawled writing before he read the signature at the end. The message read:

I OWE THE CALVAJO BANK
TWENTY THOUSAND DOLLARS.
Signed: HANK LONG.

Craig stared at the note, his eyes bulging angrily. The cashier and the white-faced driver cringed perceptibly beneath his glare. Jim Dobey took a step toward the door. Craig whirled.

"You, Jim Dobey!" he rasped. "You're a party to this! I'm goin' to have you arrested as Hank Long's partner!"

Jim opened the door, glanced out. The crowd had drifted away from the bank. He could see some of them standing around the coach outside, talking about the holdup.

Reaching for the gun at his hip, Jim turned to face Craig again. The banker's voice broke off at sight of the bore aimed at his heart. The color left his fat cheeks.

"Hank was right about you, Craig," Dobey said coldly. "If yuh weren't a greedy, grasping skinflint, Hank wouldn't have done this thing. Yuh can't arrest me for nothing. And if you do get me arrested, it's going to be for murder—*your* murder."

Craig shrank back against the desk. Disgust showed in Dobey's face. "You come out of this room afore I've forked my horse and you're a dead man," he warned.

He left the office, closing the door behind him. As he made for the front of the bank he knew that fear would keep the banker in there for a few minutes. But greed would spur Craig to have a posse on his trail as soon as he thought it safe.

The sheriff's office was next door to the bank. As Jim Dobey forked his horse he nodded to the officer who stood on the front porch of the jail.

As Jim reached the edge of town, the sound of a gun shot crashed the silence. He spurred his horse to a run without looking around. That would mean Craig had got up the courage to give the alarm.

THE trail Jim Dobey took led to Tucson. Side roads led off along it farther up, one to the Bola mine, another to Simon Luke's spread. As he rode, Jim Dobey weighed several things.

He could head for the mine, lead the posse there deliberately. He knew Hank wouldn't go to the mine. Even the slow-thinking Craig would sooner or later get around to figuring where Hank would go. But Craig probably wouldn't figure it out until the posse had failed to find Hank at the mine.

But when Craig finally thought of that place and sent his posse looking for Hank there, Jim Dobey decided he himself had better be there. The old fool had pulled a crazy stunt, but, after all, they were partners.

"He'll get hisself hanged yet," Dobey muttered disgustedly. "And I reckon I'll be sidin' him when he swings."

Undoubtedly Hank meant to pay Luke for the Bola, then sell it to the Midwestern people. But how he expected to gain anything by holding up a bank messenger to get the money to put the deal over, Jim Dobey couldn't see.

"Make jest about as much sense as pulling a gun on Lem Craig when he wouldn't give him that loan. What good will owning the mine do if we both go to jail."

Jim Dobey glanced back and urged the little mare faster along the trail as the drum of many hoofbeats grew louder. Wasn't nothing he could do right now but get to Hank.

"Might as well both of us leave this country fast as we can ride. Reckon there's as much work for a couple of cowhands down in Texas as here in Arizona—if we can outride the sheriff."

But before he'd reached the trail that turned off to the Bola mine he knew there'd be no outriding the posse. His horse was too tired in the first place. And theirs were fresh.

"Jest one thing to do," he muttered as he jerked his horse off the trail, headed her up the side path that led to the Bola. "Reckon I'll try an old trick on the boys and hope for the best."

He sat his horse, waiting, a little ways off the main trail. As the first of the sheriff's posse came in sight, Jim Dobey spurred his horse toward the mine. At the same time he turned in his saddle, aimed and recklessly fired five shots back toward the main trail.

"They'll reckon I must be scared outa my wits to do such a fool thing," he muttered.

The ruse worked. The posse left the main road, headed up the trail after Dobey.

The sun was setting and the long shadows grew blacker. Dobey went around a curve in the trail. He jerked the mare abruptly to the left of the trail, slipped out of the saddle and pulled the horse behind a thick clump of brush. He just had time to shove his Stetson over the mare's face when the posse rounded the curve.

Jim Dobey held his own breath, crouched low, until the last of the sheriff's outfit passed on up the trail.

They were going at a lope. The sheriff knew the trail led to the mine. He'd figure Jim Dobey meant to barricade himself there and fight it out.

Soon as they were out of sight, Jim turned and galloped back to the main road. Before the sheriff discovered the ruse he would have a head start for Tucson. And the law officer would probably go back to town for further orders from Craig before he followed that far.

It wouldn't be any use trying to catch Hank at Simon Luke's. With the start Hank had he would be on his way to Tucson by now. A smile came to light Jim Dobey's face suddenly.

"If Craig was smarter Hank wouldn't have got any further than Luke's. But I reckon Hank was gambling on Craig's dumbness a little."

DAWN was tinting the western sky when Jim Dobey rode into Tucson. It was a draw as to who was the more weary, he or the wiry little mare. As he headed up the deserted main street, Jim patted the tired horse gently on the dusty neck.

"Yuh'll get a week's rest-up for this, little horse," he said. The mare pricked up her ears at the sound of his voice and struggled to break into a trot.

Jim Dobey didn't expect to find the Midwestern Mining Co.'s office open at this hour, though he thought he might find Hank there waiting. So when he rode up and saw a light showing in the window of the mining company's office, Jim's eyes opened in surprise.

"Reckon it's like Hank, at that, to pull that Midwestern outfit out of bed to close the deal."

The official to whom Jim Dobey

had given samples of Bola ore to three weeks before opened the door to his knock. Hank was at the man's shoulder.

"Come on in, Jim," Hank drawled. "I told Mr. Sweeney here you'd likely show up in time to sign these papers along with me."

Mr. Sweeney didn't seem surprised at the lateness of the hour they had picked to do business. Prospectors, he explained as he fussily arranged papers, came in at all hours. They had to do business and get back to their mines. He understood things like that. He slept in the rear of the building for such emergencies.

The sun was showing above the horizon when they came out of the office. Hank waved the Midwestern check to dry the ink as they walked across the porch.

"You take that mare of yours over to the livery stable and rent yoreself a fresh horse, son," Hank said. "We got to get going."

Jim Dobey frowned. "And fast," he said. "That note you left in the bank satchel was about the craziest trick— If yuh had to hold up that messenger, Hank, why in the name of sin did you write out a confession—"

Hank's grin stopped him. "Look, son. Yuh get that horse and we'll head for Calvajo. We got no time to hold post-mortems now. Besides, I can't wait to see Lem Craig's face when—"

Jim Dobey's jaw had dropped. Now it clicked into place with a snap. "Calvajo! Hank, you gone plumb loco? We got to ride all right. But we're ridin' as fast as we can outa this neck of the woods. There's a posse on the way to Tucson now, and its gunnin' for—"

"You get that fresh horse, son," Hank said mildly. "We're headin' for Calvajo. Reckon yuh can't get

in much more trouble so yuh might as well let me finish this deal. And, yuh'll have to take my word for it, son, I ain't jest shootin' wild. I got my reasons"

Half an hour later Jim Dobey rode down the street astride a fresh horse. The town was awake now and the main street was milling with horses and wagons and people. Jim searched the crowd for Hank.

He saw Hank step out of the Tucson bank. He was waving something white to and fro. When Jim reached the bank, Hank was mounted on his own horse. His hat was in his hand and he was fitting the white slip of paper he'd brought out of the bank inside the inner band of his dusty old Stetson.

"Let's ride, son," he said before Jim could ask any questions. "I put our money in the bank. When we've settled with Lem Craig we'll come back and—"

"Can't see that the money is goin' to do us much good anyway if we go back to Calvajo," Jim put in impatiently. "Even if we get there. There's a posse on the trail that we're sure to run into."

Hank chuckled. "Shore. I figured that, son. But we ain't going to run into that posse."

Hank had prospected this part of the country all his life. He knew every burro trail as far west as the Sierras. He told his partner of a side trail they could take.

"It's rougher and a leetle longer. But we won't run into that posse."

THEY rode hard and fast, and there wasn't time for talk. All the way Jim Dobey fought with himself. He was a fool, he told himself, to let Hank lead him into a corner like this. But for the life of him he couldn't see any way out. Well, he thought disgustedly,

he might as well go the whole hog; he'd followed Hank this far.

As they rode into Calvajo people on the boardwalk that ran down either side of the main street turned to stare after them. By the time they dismounted in front of the bank quite a crowd had collected. It was a silent, curious crowd. Everyone knew there was a posse out for the two partners. But it was Lem Craig's business. They were willing to let the banker fight his own battles.

Lem Craig's reaction to the appearance of the two prospectors wasn't reassuring. Jim Dobey noted the triumph in the fat face, the glitter in the piggy eyes that brightened at sight of Hank and himself. The banker had a gun on them when he rose from the chair behind the roll-top desk.

"You're under arrest, Hank Long," he snarled.

"Put up the shootin' iron, Lem," Hank said mildly. "You can't arrest nobody. Anyway, we're here on business, legit'mate business." He chuckled. "We're gonna do this legallike, Lem, jest like you do business."

"You're under arrest," Craig repeated doggedly. "You robbed this bank of twenty thousand dollars and you're going to jail for it."

Hank looked surprised, but patient. "Yuh got things a leetle mixed, Lem. I *borrowed* twenty thousand dollars from yore bank. They's a heap of difference in borrowin' and stealin'. And I'm here to pay yuh back the loan—with the proper interest added."

Triumph leaped into Craig's small piglike eyes. He glanced at the cashier who stood in the doorway.

"Get a deputy. I want a lawman witness when I search them to tes-

tify that we found the bank's stolen money on these outlaws."

Hank's chuckle didn't warn Craig. But Jim Dobey relaxed a little. He didn't see yet how in tarnation Hank was going to get out of that holdup confession, but he knew the signs. Hank held a trump card of some sort.

A young deputy came on the run. He looked eager but bewildered as he turned to Craig for orders.

"Hank Long just confessed he's carrying the money he stole from the bank," Craig told the lawman. "I want you to be witness to its removal."

But a thorough search of Hank and Jim Dobey's persons failed to reveal any money. A search of their saddlebags also was fruitless. Lem Craig's face began to droop.

"That note you left in the satchel is a confession Hank Long," he snarled. "You got the bank's money. It'll go hard with you if you don't give it back."

Hank's voice was soft, calm. There was, now that the young deputy sheriff had appeared, a fine show of injured innocence in his manner. Jim Dobey watched his partner with reluctant admiration.

"I aim to pay yuh back the money I *borrowed*, Lem," Hank said patiently. "Yuh got my signed note, legal and aboveboard for the loan. If yuh'll get the note now—"

"Where's the money?" rasped Lem Craig. "Where's my money?"

"If yuh withdraw that highway-robbery charge against me, Lem, I'll pay off that *note* with interest." Calmly Hank shifted his tobacco. "But yuh don't get one cent of that twenty thousand back that I *borrowed* from yore bank, Lem, if yuh send me to jail."

The banker's eyes were bulging, his fat jowls shaking with anger.

TWENTY thousand is a big price to pay for the satisfaction of seein' me behind bars, Lem," Hank went on. "Simon Luke ain't goin' to want to see his bank lose that much money, either." Deliberately Hank sent a stream of tobacco juice across six feet of space, neatly hitting the center of the spittoon at Craig's feet. "—especially now that nothin' Simon can do will get him back the Bola mine."

A look of surprise and uncertainty showed in Craig's face.

"The Bola is legally the property of the Midwestern Mining Co.," Hank went on. "Sold to them this morning by me and Jim Dobey. And Simon Luke's got his three thousand for the claim. I got his receipt to prove it, locked safely in the bank at Tucson, Lem. And I'm ready to pay you back that loan the minute yuh produce the note I signed."

Craig tried one more bluff. "Where's the money?" he sneered. "Yuh ain't got it on you. Where'd you hide it?"

"Get the note," Hank said quietly. "And I'll give yuh legal tender for it, interest and all."

Craig turned to the cashier, nodded. There was silence until the man returned with the note Hank had left in the bank satchel. Hank reached for it, but Craig drew back suspiciously.

"All right," said Hank. "Let the deputy there hold the note till yuh get your pay."

As he handed the note to the young deputy, Craig snarled, "Keep your eye on these outlaws. They're up to pullin' something crooked."

Hank chuckled. "I ain't never seen a man fight so hard against earnin' a little interest as you are, Lem." He reached for the battered

hat he had flung to Craig's desk as the deputy searched him. Craig watched with the suspicious alertness of a ferret as Hank pulled back the sweat-stained band inside the hat and took out a narrow slip of paper which he handed to the banker.

"Here's a certified check on the Tucson bank, Lem," he said. "For the twenty thousand—plus interest." He chuckled. "The interest might be a mite illegal, but I reckon it ain't the fust time yuh took a bit of illegal interest for yourself, Lem."

Craig was staring at the check. Hank stuck a stogy into his withered mouth. He reached for a match, struck it on his thigh. As the flame flared up, he leaned over swiftly and touched the flame to the note the young deputy held. As the paper flared up, the startled lawman dropped it to the floor. Hank stopped Craig's leap for it.

"That's legal, too, Lem," he said firmly. "Yuh got yore money. That note is mine now. Let it burn to a crisp, Jim. I don't trust the law-abidin' business methods of our town banker."

As the two partners forked their horses and headed for home, Hank was still chuckling. "I knew Lem Craig wouldn't take a chance on losing that twenty thousand dollars. His greedy soul wouldn't enjoy revenge if he had to pay that much for it."

Jim Dobey tried not to show too much approval.

"I still say them crazy stunts of yours is going to get you in trouble yet," he said gruffly. "Your luck won't hold forever, Hank."

"Son," Hank's voice was gentle, patient. "How many times have I got to tell yuh, it ain't luck. It's sycology—plain sycology."

The Story of the West



THE successful return of Captain William Becknell to the U. S. after his highly profitable trip to Santa Fe in 1821 stimulated new interest in the New Mexico trade, and several other trading expeditions to the Southwest were made.

In the summer of 1822 Captain Becknell got together a party of about thirty men and five thousand dollars' worth of goods. Being an excellent woodsman and pathfinder and anxious to avoid the roundabout route of the upper Arkansas country, Becknell determined, after reaching that point on the Arkansas since known as the Cachés, to head directly

for Santa Fe. He had no idea of the terrible trials in which this would involve him in the seething wastes of the desert.

With no other guide than the sun and stars, the party pushed forward across the arid plains which extended beyond the horizon to the Cimarron River. There was not a drop of water.

That night and the next they dry-camped. As the blood-red sun sank behind the heat-shimmering horizon on the third day there was not a drop of water left in the entire outfit, either for men or mules.

In desperation they killed their dogs

told in pictures and text by **GERARD DELANO**



and cut off the ears of their mules, drinking the sticky warm blood greedily. But this only had the effect of making them all the more frantic for water.

Weak, raving and barely able to stand, they held a council and decided their only hope was to return to the Arkansas.

But just as they were about to turn back, an old buffalo plunged into camp. Mud and water dripped from its legs and its stomach was distended with water.

Quickly taking aim with his rifle, one of the men killed the buffalo. The stomach was opened, and the men drank greed-

ily of the water which it contained.

The strongest now backtracked the buffalo down the trail and reached the bank of the Cimarron where all canteens were filled and water taken back to those too weak to walk.

The caravan now wisely retraced its steps to the Arkansas, crossed the river, and followed the trail to Taos. To the inhabitants of the sun-baked adobe town, the earless mules of the party told eloquently the story of their torture by thirst.

NEXT WEEK: WAR WITH THE ARIKARAS



He's Got To Be A Cowboy!

By S. OMAR BARKER

He's got to be a cowboy, so he'll know the wayward ways
Of wander-footed cattle, whereabouts to look for strays;
And how to haze them gently when the snows of winter pass
To where their bony briskets will grow fat with greening grass.

He's got to be a cowboy that his horse will nicker to,
Who's ridden trails of trouble and has come on fighting through,
With spurs that still can jingle, and a hand that's firm and strong,
With lips at home with grinning, and a heart that loves a song.

He's got to be a cowboy, so he'll know the lampless night
As intimately as city folks know streets ablaze with light,
So when a long day's riding finds him far from home or camp,
He can thread the darkness surely to a cabin's yellow lamp.

He's got to be a cowboy, for life's trails are often dim,
And it's good to mount your saddle knowing you can count on him
To get you to "the wagon," where the campfire's ruddy glow
Is a symbol of the faithfulness that every heart should know.

He's got to be a cowboy, tough as leather, sure and strong.
He's got to be a cowboy, so he'll do to take along!
A man to swim the river with and never shirk his part—
He's got to be a cowboy if he wins a cowgal's heart!

BROKEN WILDERNESS TRUCE



By KENNETH GILBERT

Broken Wilderness Truce

JIM LAWSON came awake at his little camp in the deep forest with sudden, agonizing effort and a nightmarish feeling that somebody had him by the throat. His thoughts flew to Bart Slade, the killer on whose trail he had clung for nearly three weeks through the grim fastnesses of the high country. Gasping for breath, he struggled into full wakefulness.

The unseen hands relaxed, and Lawson realized that they didn't belong to Bart Slade. Then, as the sleep-drenched brain of the deputy cleared, he sat up abruptly and looked around. A startled exclamation was wrenched from him.

What had been peaceful gloom at sundown was now lighted by a flickering glow, weird and unreal. In a half circle tightening swiftly was a leaping line of red shapes like the painted bodies of savages rising and falling in the orgies of a death dance.

Forest fire! It was the choking smoke which had aroused him, not the deadly grip of Bart Slade's steely fingers. Driven by a gusty south wind, the jaws of the flame trap were closing rapidly. Bart Slade was not there in the flesh; yet in the mocking wind and the spiteful crackle of fire it seemed to Jim Lawson that he could hear the killer's malevolent chuckle.

For this onrushing blaze could scarcely be a coincidence. It was too sudden and sweeping and it covered such a front that it must have been started in several places. Slade, realizing that he was being relentlessly overtaken, must have touched off the tinderlike woods in

the hope that if the deputy did not perish outright he would at least be delayed long enough for the outlaw to escape.

"Didn't think he was that smart," Lawson told himself gloomily, even while his mind came to grips with the problem of saving his own life. It was a bitter thing to admit, but he realized that he was licked. "Son of a gun must have figured on this long ago! Waited until I got close enough, then set her afire. He'll get two-three days' start now. These woods will be too hot for me to travel, even if I do get out."

It was a moment of disappointment more deeply personal than official. He had wanted Slade, dead or alive. Since the day that the outlaw had broken jail at Bearpaw after killing the sheriff, kindly old Pete Drain, the deputy had become a grim nemesis, for Pete Drain had been like a father to him. Slade had shot down the old officer ruthlessly, giving him no chance. Retribution to Jim Lawson had become a matter of urgent necessity.

Bearpaw volunteers had formed a posse, but Jim Lawson wanted no help. He put thin oil on his gun and set out alone, and because he was mountain bred and knew the ways of the wilderness as few did, while Slade was no true hillman but a hanger-on of the settlements, the result seemed certain.

ONLY a matter of hours behind the outlaw now, Lawson had counted on a reckoning soon after daylight. But he had underrated Slade's shrewdness; the man was more cunning than he had believed. Slade's act in putting a blazing barrier behind him was something Lawson had failed to anticipate.

Lawson realized dishearteningly

that if he lived he'd have to go back to Bearpaw and confess defeat. But the chances of his getting out of this flame trap alive were almost nil. The wind was strong and the brush burned like dry hay. Only seconds had elapsed since he awakened, but already escape seemed cut off. There was only one course to take: run before the fire—and trust to luck!

As he started off something zoomed past his head like a bullet. He caught a glimpse of a brown-feathered body. "Grouse!" The bird darted to freedom before the rolling pall of smoke, but once clear it seemed to become confused, for it circled back in bewildered fashion, then dived into that advancing wall of flame. Lawson winced as he contemplated that dread moment of agony before quick death. Maybe he, too, would feel it!

There was a light thudding of feet behind him, a whistling snort of alarm, and Lawson stopped involuntarily. He saw a young blacktail doe, her half-grown fawn beside her, so close that Lawson could have touched her muzzle. The doe's eyes were rolling in terror, and the deputy saw that the searing finger of death had brushed the fawn, for there was a hairless patch on the youngster's flank and the tender flesh was livid.

The fear-stricken baby deer made a mewling sound of protest at the pain and weaved unsteadily on slender legs. But when his mother, after that moment of surprise at overtaking the man, started off again, he staggered after her.

"Poor little devil!" Lawson thought, his own plight forgotten for the moment. Slade had done this, and if it were possible for Jim Lawson to feel greater resentment toward the man who had killed old Pete Drain, he felt it now.

There was a crash of brush and the woods shook wildly as a black bear lumbered past. The bear gave the man only a fleeting glance from its reddened, piggish eyes and kept on. Greater than awe of any two-legged enemy was its inherent fear of the red death that rode the wings of the wind.

At that moment Lawson saw why the grouse had wheeled and come back to its doom.

Just ahead was a line of fire. The befuddled bird had evidently assumed that the ring of death was complete. That was why it had gone headlong back in the direction whence it had come. The man's throat tightened suddenly in apprehension. Somehow the wind had driven a wedge of flame on each side of him and, it seemed, the points of those wedges had come together.

But the pair of deer and the bear had not returned. Somehow, Lawson's woods sense told him, they had managed to get through. Even while he hesitated other wilderness folk streamed by him—frightened rabbits, a blacktail buck, a scuttling figure which he knew to be a gray fox. There *must* be a way out. At top speed he raced after them.

THEN he suddenly remembered! Less than a half mile ahead was a little wilderness lake. He had passed close to it late that afternoon. The wild things were seeking water, the only refuge left.

Lawson still clung to his short-barreled carbine. The gun impeded his progress through the brush, but he was reluctant to throw it away. Yet before he reached the lake shore the fire nearly caught him, for seconds had become precious. Just in time he broke through the brush already beginning to smoke in the in-

tense heat, and fell with a splash into the cool water.

For a long minute he lay there, drawing into his lungs gasping breaths of the fresher air which was close to the surface. With a vast sweep the fire came down to the water's edge and licked up the dry reeds as though expecting to find Lawson hiding in them. All about him in the thick smoke were splashing that he knew were made by forest creatures who had also gained the sanctuary.

The air grew hotter as the burning brush ignited dead trees. It came to Lawson presently that he had merely been reprieved from death; that he would either be suffocated by smoke or blistered by the flames unless he could get farther away from shore. But this was impractical for, although Lawson was a good swimmer, the water had the chill of ice, and if he tried paddling out in the center of the lake he would probably take a cramp and drown.

Where had the fleeing animals gone? That was the question which kept dinning away in Lawson's brain. Surely they knew what they were doing. It might be that the fire had not yet reached the other shore. If he could swim across the lake he might still escape.

But he couldn't do it burdened with the gun. And he had to decide quickly.

Lawson reached down, unlaced his boots and pulled them off. Then he waded in closer to shore and poked along the bank until he found a hole, probably made by a burrowing muskrat. Into this he thrust his boots and gun, coat and outer shirt. At least he could travel now. Guessing at the direction toward the other shore, he struck out, going in blind, for the smoke was a curtain

which shut off all visibility beyond a few feet ahead.

Swimming warmed Lawson a little, although it was hard to fight off the numbing effect of the water. As he drew away from shore the smoke lessened and sometimes a veer in the breeze gave him a glimpse of the terrible destruction being wrought in this beautiful virgin forest among the hills.

NOW and then the whimsical wind which came in intermittent gusts would seem to clear a path through the smoke clouds like a curtain being rolled back, and as Lawson swam he could see a surprising distance. Once when it happened he caught sight of tall cliffs against whose dark, frowning faces the hellish reflection from the fire played and flickered like heat lightning. As realization of what that meant came to Lawson he stopped swimming and trod water, pondering.

"Black Canyon Wall! Hell's bells, I'll bet Slade has gone and trapped himself! He didn't know that the wall was just ahead when he started that fire, and that he couldn't climb that rock face. Figured he'd get *me*, but what he's done is to go and fry himself instead!"

The realization of Slade's fatal error brought no feeling of triumph or satisfaction to Jim Lawson. This wasn't the way he wanted the thing to turn out at all. Vengeance rightfully belonged to him, he argued, not to this fire. Slade, crowded against the unscalable rock wall by the fire as it crept upwind, had perished by his own inadvertence. He had won out in the end, for he had outwitted Jim Lawson and escaped him. Lawson tried to fight off the feeling of disappointment that engulfed him. Fate, it seemed, had

played him a scurvy trick.

There came another break in the smoke, this time from ahead. As Lawson caught sight of what lay there a new sense of uneasiness filled him. The fire, he perceived, had by now swept entirely around the lake!

There was no hope of escape that way. Lawson hesitated, debating what to do. To return to the shore he had quitted would mean slow death in the smoke; it was much thicker along the water's edge than out here in the lake. But the water was too cold to endure for long. Already his leg muscles were beginning to knot and cramp. Bart Slade had triumphed again, it seemed. Not only had he escaped man-devised retribution, but he was going to kill Jim Lawson also.

Then, in his black moment of hopelessness, Jim Lawson heard sharp, clapping sounds in the water to his left. Curiously he faced that way, and presently out of the murk came a half-grown elk that swam with a high, splashing stroke. The elk saw the man but gave no heed, holding steadily to a course that cut across the one Jim Lawson had taken.

Again that woods sense of the man came uppermost. "Where's that calf goin'?" he asked himself. "Looks like he knows what he's about. Maybe he's plumb foolish when he ain't scared, but not now."

The young elk disappeared and Jim Lawson found himself swimming strongly in the direction the wilderness creature had gone. He put more effort in his strokes now, for the elk was a strong swimmer, and Lawson didn't want to get too far behind. He could still hear the steady splashing in the smoke ahead, but he could not gain on the calf.

The splashing stopped abruptly, a puzzling thing, but Lawson kept

on. Then out of the smoke shadows there loomed trees that overhung the water.

Lawson's first thought was that he had reached the opposite shore of the lake. But he saw no fire, though he knew the tiny body of water was surrounded by flame. He kept on hopefully, reached the trees and found firm ground under his feet. As he dragged himself gratefully from the water, shaking with a chill, he saw through the haze that he had landed on a little island.

Then he remembered having seen it when he passed by the lake the previous day; for some reason the fact had escaped him when he reached water after that terrifying dash through the burning woods. But the elk calf evidently knew all about the island and, gifted with an inherent resourcefulness, had struck out for the place when all other sanctuary had been swallowed by fire. Lawson saw the youngster standing a few paces off beneath the sweeping limbs of a cedar. The calf eyed him curiously but with no sign of fear.

A PURRING whine made the deputy look around sharply. Just to the left a female bobcat, carrying a kitten in her mouth—probably the only one of her babies that she had been able to rescue—gave the man warning. But the gray-brown haunter of wilderness glooms, ordinarily one of the shyest of creatures, made no effort to leave. Nor did she threaten Lawson, after warning him that she would not permit him to molest her or her young.

A little farther on was a she-bear and her cub. The bear stared at the man impassively, but the cub, big ears perked forward comically, looked as though he would like to

investigate this strange newcomer who walked on two legs instead of four.

From beneath coverts other creatures regarded Lawson without misgiving. He saw three deer, another black bear, several foxes, a pair of raccoons. Lying draped along a limb was a great lynx, topaz eyes glowing coldly in the light from the ring of fire about the lake. All were quiet, waiting. They showed no uneasiness at the presence of one another; neither were they alarmed that man, the greatest destroyer of all, had come among them.

And Jim Lawson understood. He knew that there had been vouchsafed to him one of the rarest moments of the wild, when all the ancient hates and fears had been temporarily buried. It made him feel strangely humble.

"Thunder!" he breathed. "If you folks can keep a truce, so can I!" But hardly had he voiced the thought when his throat tightened at a new discovery.

Lying half-hidden behind a log was a monstrous, shaggy body which, at first thought, he had believed to be a brush-covered stump. But now the thing moved and Lawson saw a round, moonlike face, a silverish muzzle, small eyes set wide apart.

Slowly his breath exhaled in realization that here was the king of them all, a giant grizzly. In such close quarters this monarch of the hills was dangerous. Not a living thing on the island could face him and live. Jim Lawson stood there frozen with apprehension, ready to turn and dash for the lake again if the grizzly made a threatening move.

But the mighty ruler of the wild evidently was in a benignant mood; he, too, was observing the truce. He

regarded the man with little interest and no fear. It struck Lawson suddenly that *all* these wild creatures seemed to feel that he, even as they, understood and would keep the truce.

For the first time in his life the man had a curious sense of inferiority, a feeling that he was nowise superior to these wilderness folk, that in fact they were honoring him in assuming that he would not break the spell which lay upon them like a sacred moment.

Yet abruptly he saw the gaze of the wild creatures shift toward the other end of the little island. Lawson himself heard nothing, but he realized that their ears were keener than his. Moreover, he saw that they were suddenly disturbed: their attitude of mutual peace had vanished. Once more they were alert, on guard against threatening danger.

He, too, felt their uneasiness, without understanding the reason for it. There came to his ears a splashing sound in the brush, a grunt as of satisfaction, the startling snap of a dry stick breaking. Then from the water and fringing willows emerged the figure of a man. *Slade!*

AS motionless as any of the wild creatures, although his brain was a maelstrom of cross-impulses, Lawson watched. Slade came nearer, noisily, water dripping from his clothes.

Lawson guessed what had happened. After starting the fire and finding himself trapped, the outlaw had somehow managed to get around a point of the advancing blaze. He must have known of this lake and island. There was no coincidence about it; the lake was the only refuge within miles, and there was but one island. What made

Lawson marvel was that Slade had survived at all.

So he and Bart Slade had come together at last! But it was not the moment of which Jim Lawson had often dreamed. He was unarmed, whereas Slade had a six-shooter stuck in his belt. There raced through Lawson's mind a whimsical, random thought.

Would Bart Slade understand the situation here? Would he keep the truce? Lawson asked no odds of him. All he wanted was an even break, any kind of a break, for that matter. But not here. Not here and now.

At that instant Bart Slade saw the deputy.

The outlaw ripped out a surprised oath, and his right hand flew to the gun. The weapon leaped to the level of Jim Lawson's middle, an easy shot because Slade was only a few feet distant. The fact that Lawson did not move, but stood there calmly with hands at side, evidently puzzled the killer, for he did not press the trigger. Then he saw that the deputy was without a weapon.

A grin of pleased satisfaction came to Slade's stubble-covered face. The left corner of his mouth drew up in a sneer of triumph. He wagged his head.

"Lawson," he snarled, "I've been afraid of you. Couldn't shake you off my trail. Seemed like you were sort of a human bloodhound; you know this country better than I do. But now I could kick myself for worrying about you for even a moment.

"I figured the fire would get you, but this way suits me better. Lots better! Lawson, I'm goin' to squeeze this gun and you're goin' to feel this first slug; like as not you won't feel the others. Then I'm

goin' to fan out of this country soon as the fire burns out and the world is goin' to think that the blaze killed both of us. Nobody but me'll ever know what happened." His chuckle was low, evil. "You—"

But he broke off as his eyes fell upon the wild creatures regarding him watchfully, suspiciously from every covert. For an instant he wavered, then courage came back to him. Yet his eyes were still wide with astonishment and uneasiness.

Lawson saw his reaction and laughed. "Witnesses!" he exclaimed softly. "They know what you've got in mind, Slade. They can spot a killer soon as they see him.

"They don't like you, Slade. Notice there's no wolves on this island? These wild critters don't like wolves. They know that a wolf can't be trusted, that he's a killer

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first, last, and always. In their eyes you're a wolf, Slade!"

But the outlaw was regaining his confidence. "Tryin' to scare me, Lawson? Well, you're barkin' up the wrong snag this time!" He grinned as a new thought came to him, and his eyes lighted with a devilish twinkle of appreciation. "Say," he exclaimed, "this gets better and better! Know what I'm goin' to do, Lawson? I'm goin' to shoot you so you'll live awhile. Then I'm goin' to pull out and let these wild critters finish you off. Smell of blood will stir 'em up! That she-bear with her cub looks plenty mean right now—"

"Behind you, Bart!"

Involuntarily, the outlaw swung half around at the warning. What he saw made his jaw sag and drove him backward involuntarily. Until that moment he had not, apparently, seen the huge grizzly.

At the sound of the men's voices—perhaps the very tones conveyed a meaning as plain as words—the shaggy old monarch had bestirred himself. The hint of battle in the air was a challenge to his might, his sovereignty. For the moment he was no longer a king who was willing to keep truce with his neighbors; he was a formidable beast who was cornered by men, the arch enemy of all. The spell was broken; the grizzly was going to betake himself elsewhere or, if necessary, fight.

SLOWLY the grizzly rose from behind the log, his vast bulk ominous. But he muttered his displeasure with a rumble that came from deep within his chest. Jim Lawson, the hillman, understood what the great silvertip had in mind, but Slade misinterpreted it. As he saw it, the grizzly was about to attack.

The outlaw's nerves gave way like the snapping of a thread then. The menacing silence which hung over the island, a silence traced only by distant popping sounds as the fire around the lake shore caught in resinous snags that presently flamed like giant torches, was broken by the clapping reports of Bart Slade's six-shooter.

Jim Lawson saw the grizzly flinch, saw blood spurt suddenly from wounds in the shaggy chest. But the next instant the air was filled with the vengeful roar of the aroused beast. Bellowing hatred of the man who had wounded him, the giant lurched forward in an overwhelming rush. No mere six-gun could stop the terrific power that lay in his tremendous muscles. With speed born of desperation, Bart Slade, given no chance to run, sent his last bullet crashing into that ponderous body before he went down under the weight of it.

Only for an instant did the grizzly pause, then he caught sight of Lawson. But the latter was running for water, and all about him milled the other wild creatures, panicky at realization that the king of them all was bent on destruction.

The deer whistled alarm as they plunged into the lake, the black she-bear and her cub went galloping to the far end of the island, and the others scattered. Only the cats had opportunity to spring into the lower limbs of trees, where they climbed to safety.

Jim Lawson swam with nervous strokes, putting distance between him and the island as quickly as possible, for it was not beyond the bounds of possibility that the grizzly would actually follow him in the water. But more likely the giant would go back to wreak further

Continued on page 129



GUNS AND GUNNERS

by Phil Sharpe

IT looks like things are picking up in the firearms industry. Two new automatic rifles made their appearance this spring. This time the Savage Arms Corp. pointed the way.

During the Summer of 1938, Savage brought out the first low-priced .22 automatic or autoloading rifle. This was a unique action, very simple, and designed as a combination self-loading arm or as a bolt action repeater. I shot one of these quite extensively when it was first brought out and found a lot of minor defects in it. Savage changed the action design several times before stabilizing upon it the early part of this year. The rifle they now have is quite fool-proof and is brought out in two or three grades in the \$16-price class. This is slightly more than half what previous .22 autoloading rifles have cost.

During the Summer of 1938, O. F. Mossberg & Sons went to work on a new autoloading rifle which has just made its appearance and is being brought out in two models. The better grade is in the \$16-price class.

This Mossberg unit has a tubular magazine in the butt stock, loading through an opening in the rifle on the right side of the stock. It han-

dles .22 long rifle regular or high-speed cartridges, either lubricated or *dry*—something rather unique. Our tests fail to show any major flaws in this little rifle and it is well equipped with suitable sights, magazine capacity 15 long rifle cartridges. It weighs 7¼ pounds.

Still another newcomer is the Winchester Model 74 autoloader in the \$17-price class. This model is designed for use with the popular .22 short rimfire instead of the long rifle and it comes available with the standard open rear sights and a neat little adjustable peep rear.

Magazine capacity of this rifle is 20 of the short cartridges, although a special gallery model is designed to hold 15 cartridges.

This new rifle weighs about 6¼ pounds, has a walnut stock of one piece design, full pistol grip, and a semi-beavertail style of forearm. The magazine is of the standard tubular type located in the butt stock of the rifle, introduced by Winchester in their old Model 1903 .22 automatic some thirty-six years ago.

All three of these little .22 automatics have extreme rapidity in shooting but naturally require a separate pull of the trigger for each shot. Full automatic or "machine gun"

type would, of course, be barred by law.

In addition to these rifles a new target .22 revolver recently made its appearance, the Iver-Johnson Model 822, an 8-shot 6-inch barrel single-action type of target gun with adjustable sights.

This little Iver-Johnson is well designed, well balanced, and weighs 28 ounces. A large grip and adjustable finger rest allow the shooter perfect control for target shooting or miscellaneous plinking. This gun is in the \$20-price class and is the finest target hand gun ever turned out of the Iver-Johnson factory.

This is a good time to bring up a very important problem—that of safety with firearms. Each year thousands of people are injured with “unloaded” guns. Invariably it is the untrained shooter who causes this damage, and there is little excuse for it.

There is no reason why anyone cannot train himself in playing safe with firearms. Here are a few very simple and highly practical rules.

Don't point any kind of gun at any object at which you do not intend to shoot.

In picking up any firearms, whether it be your own or the property of another, do not pull the trigger until you have examined it. Open the action and see if it is loaded. Close it and open it again and see if you made a mistake.

Never hand a gun to a companion until you have opened it to de-

termine whether it was loaded. *Do not trust to memory!*

When hunting, be careful to see that the muzzle of your gun is *never* pointed in the direction of a companion. See that it is always pointed either up in the air or at the ground and never at the ground directly in back of a companion. Bullets can ricochet or glance.

When shooting with either shotgun or rifle be sure of your background. Shotgun pellets will travel 200 yards. The .22 rifle has a dangerous range of one mile.

Never stand a loaded gun up against a tree. Lay it flat on the ground.

In climbing through a fence always unload your gun. It takes but a moment. Then pass it through the fence and lay it flat on the ground. Follow this by climbing over or through the fence a few feet *from your gun*. Then pick the weapon up and reload.

Do not carry loaded guns in cars.

Never pull a gun, either loaded or unloaded, through any obstacle or from a car seat with the muzzle pointed toward you—or toward anyone else.

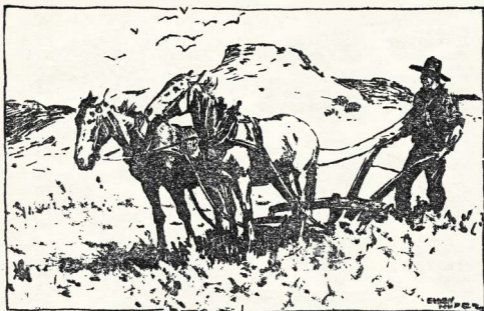
Do not trust to safeties on firearms. They can fail.

Keep your gun in good condition.

Do not attempt to remove obstructions of any kind from any form of gun by shooting them out.

Always play safe—and live long to enjoy the sport of shooting firearms.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns And Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. *Be sure you inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply.*



WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

by **JOHN NORTH**

If you want to know more about small farms in southern California, write John North, inclosing a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Information will be forwarded telling you where you can get literature with pictures of these ideal communities free.

I HAVE had a number of letters asking me what agricultural prospects there are in Southern California for the man without too much money. In answer to this question, I want to stress the fact that without any money at all you have practically no chance to get started. But if you have saved a little and plan wisely, with the advice of experts, you can make a fair living and assure yourself of security in a climate that is ideal the year round.

The area of the southern part of California is greater than that of all the New England States combined and is sparsely settled. For a long time, lack of water held the desert part of the country back, but now with irrigation projects being built, new lands are being opened to agriculture. There is still some fine land that is relatively cheap, and this offers you a chance to make a living on a few acres.

Diversified farming is the rule here if you have a large enough acreage.

If not, it is well to specialize. California, for instance, does not grow enough dairy products for its own use. Milk, butter and cheese are shipped in now, and yet you can raise dairy products cheaper in California than you can in the most important dairying States in the Union. Naturally this factor makes for good prices. If you have sufficient acreage, you can raise from five to eight cuttings of alfalfa hay a year to feed your dairy stock.

The poultry business attracts many people who prefer less laborious work than some branches of staple farming. And in southern California the poultry business is growing steadily, particularly down around Fontana, near San Bernardino. With a small amount of money, and with the right kind of management, you can make a fair income from a very small plant.

Another promising business for the man who wants to live in an ideal climate is truck gardening on a few rich, irrigated acres. You can either have a diversified crop of small truck, or specialize in one or more crops, rotating them so as to produce a year-round income. Winter lettuce, celery, beans and garden peas are good crops for this type of farming.

The man who is thinking of locating in southern California would do well to consider operating a small orchard. Lemons, oranges and grapefruit, of course, do very well here. In addition you can choose from

apricots, prunes, apples, pears, or other fruits, and be sure of a fair living if you plan your orchard carefully. There is also a good market for wine and table grapes which can be grown out here.

English walnuts are another steady crop that brings in millions to California orchard owners. If you want to see them in the fields, look around the towns of Whittier, Orange, Fullerton, Anaheim and others in the vicinity of Los Angeles.

One of the most attractive arrangements out here, in so far as security and contentment are concerned, is to mix products. I am thinking of the man who starts with a small herd of good dairy cattle, a few chickens, and enough land to raise his feed.

The man operates his dairy, raises the food for his stock and sells it in its manufactured or processed state, so to speak, in that he feeds the alfalfa to his cattle and markets it in terms of dairy products. This gives him a regular return which is augmented by a moderate income from chickens and eggs. Then add your vegetable garden, so that you don't have to spend much cash for food, and you have a system of living that offers about all life can give you.

So, if you are planning a trip west this year and if you intend looking around for a place to settle, bear in mind these facts, drive through the country and talk to the farmers themselves.

We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

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

MINES AND MINING

by
**J. A.
THOMPSON**



IT'S a smart prospector who familiarizes himself with the fundamental mining laws and regulations of the country he intends to prospect. With such knowledge he will be in a position to protect his own rights in the event of making a discovery, and he can keep from unwittingly trespassing on the rights of others.

Peter J. L., of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, has a query about mining regulations in the United States. "Before I start west this season on the gold-prospecting trip that I have been anticipating for a long time now, I would like to ask a typical greenhorn question. Where can I prospect and stake a claim if I make a discovery? I mean, what sort of land. Isn't it all privately owned by someone, as land is here in the East?"

That's a logical query, Pete, and plenty sensible. You fellows just starting out, or wanting to prospect, are welcome to ask us any mining question that is on your mind. We're here to answer them. The amateur interested in tackling the game for the first time gets just as much consideration in these columns as does the experienced prospector when he comes to us for help.

Uncle Sam gives the prospector a

break. The United States system of mining laws is based on the sound, democratic idea that unappropriated public lands in the United States belong to the people of the nation themselves, along with such mineral deposits as may exist on them. Millions of acres of this land still exist in the unsettled, or only sparsely settled sectors of the West.

As a matter of fact, the government is the biggest landholder in the country, most of the Federal land being held in the Far West. Four fifths of Nevada is Federal-held land, three fifths of Arizona, the same portion of Utah, a little more than half of Idaho, and just under half of Oregon.

Any citizen can prospect on unoccupied portions of this vast public domain; that is, on public land to which title has not already been given to someone else, and if he makes a mineral discovery can stake a claim under the regulations giving him title to the mineral, or minerals so discovered as his own. In other words, finders keepers, losers weepers, is the gist of the American mining code, with the first discoverer of a valuable mineral deposit winning.

Conversely, public land already occupied, or appropriated, belongs to its recorded owners, together with

such mineral deposits as may exist on it. That keeps the other fellow off your claim and you off his.

Aside from unoccupied portions of the public domain other lands open to prospecting and claim staking are lands patented under the stock-raising homestead law, lands in National Forests in the public-land States, and lands within railroad grants if patent title to them has not yet been issued. The Federal mining laws are applicable in the following States. In them, and in them only, can valid mining locations be made under the United States Mining Laws. The complete list includes: Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Idaho, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, Wyoming, and the Territory of Alaska.

Aside from these tracts of Federal public domain there are large blocks of State-owned land in most of the Western States. These lands are usually open to prospecting and claim staking under regulations similar in principle and detail to those that apply on United States government land, with, however, the following important differences: For actual mining a discovered deposit a nominal lease rental is frequently exacted, and sometimes a royalty on the value of the minerals won; also, there is a trend in some States toward adopting the license system for prospecting on State lands, the sys-

tem now in vogue in Canada and in many, perhaps most, countries of the world today.

No license is required to prospect the unoccupied portions of the public domain. Any citizen of either sex, native born or naturalized, may prospect on that land and stake a claim if actual discovery of mineral is made.

Remember, however, that State laws must be observed on State lands, forest regulations when prospecting in National Forests, and so forth. Data on such laws and regulations can always be obtained from local authorities in the various specific areas and should be looked up and checked when you reach the field and before you start actual prospecting.

To M. G., Columbus, Georgia: In general, mineral desposits in Indian reservations are subject to disposal only under lease. Deposits in such lands are under the administration of the Office of Indian Affairs, Washington, D. C.

To K. T., of San Jose, California, who asks about selling mined placer gold in the state. The U. S. Mint in San Francisco will purchase mined gold in the form of bars, lumps (nuggets), grains and dust in its native state if free from earth and rock, or nearly so. In other words if your gold concentrates are clean. Aside from the Mint certain licensed buyers also authorized to make such gold purchases.

We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

THE HOLLOW TREE

Conducted by **HELEN RIVERS**



THERE is probably no sadder time in all our lives than when we find ourselves robbed of the companionship of those nearest and dearest to us and we stand alone, contemplating the lonely years ahead. Mrs. Gibson, whose letter appears below, is facing that moment now and we want all you Pen Pals to rally 'round and send her lots of cheery letters to help fill her empty hours and see her through this trying time. Here is her letter:

Dear Miss Rivers;

I am a very lonely widow fifty years old and want all the members of the Hollow Tree to write to me. The death of my loved ones has left me all alone in the world, and I am very sad. I am a nurse by profession, and love outdoor life so much that I think I should have been born a cowboy. I'll be waiting for your letters, so don't disappoint me.—Mrs. Pearl Gibson, 420 S. W. 5th, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

David will send souvenirs—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am seventeen years old and sure would appreciate receiving letters from everyone. I en-

joy dancing, some sports, music of every kind, and am a rabbit correspondence fan. I will send souvenirs of Detroit to all who write.—David De Loye, 20100 Omira Street, Detroit, Michigan

Write to this widow, too—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely, middle-aged widow and would like to hear from those who love the great outdoors—camping, fishing and traveling. Come on, other lonely pals, and write to me.—Mrs. A. A. Hills, 3216 Troost Avenue, Kansas City, Missouri

Bob has artistic leanings—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-one years old and would like to hear from cowboys and cowgirls or any boys and girls between sixteen and thirty years old from any part of the United States. I enjoy sports, especially boxing and football, and my favorite pastime is sketching and painting. I will answer all letters.—Bob Brand, Crookston Newbigging, Newtyle, Angus, Scotland

Vivian is a versatile miss—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Would I like to get into the Hollow Tree? I'll say I would! I am eighteen years old, a senior in high school, and my ambition is to be a nurse. I love all sports, especially swimming, skating and basketball, which I have played for four years. I also enjoy dancing, singing Western songs and playing the guitar and harmonica. Besides being a good sport, I have several hobbies as a side line, collecting stamps, snapshots, souvenirs and drawings, but best and most interesting of all is letter writing. I have songs, stamps, snapshots and letters to swap, and sincerely hope I hear from all of you.—Vivian Gravel, 127 Grand Avenue, Swanton, Vermont

Here are four hard-riding cowboys swinging hungry loops—

Dear Miss Rivers:

We are four lonely cowboys who would like to have Pen Pals from every part of the country. We will exchange snapshots with everyone. Tex is twenty-one years old and his favorite sports are riding and roping. Charles is twenty. Bill Thompson is twenty-two and his favorite sports are breaking wild horses and hunting, and John is twenty-one and enjoys boxing and swimming most.—Tex Malone, Bill Thompson, Charles French and John Lee, c/o Circle C, Apache, Arizona

Ken can tell you about places he's visited—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a homesome soldier and would like to hear from Pen Pals from all over the United States, England and Australia. I am twenty years old and in my lifetime have visited practically every State in the Union, and Panama and Hawaii as well. I like outdoor sports. Here's hoping someone answers my plea and cheers me up. I promise to answer all letters.—Ken Kridger, R. M. G. Company, Twenty-ninth Infantry, Fort Benning, Georgia

Two French "mam'selles" crash the gate this week—

Dear Miss Rivers:

We are two young Nova Scotia girls who would like just heaps of Pen Pals. We are calling the army and navy from coast to coast and sea to sea, and cowboys and cowgirls as well. We are both French and promise to answer everyone with interesting letters and our pictures, so come on, boys and girls, don't be bashful.—Bunny Chlassen and Joyce Daryl, P. O. Box 2, Liverpool, Nova Scotia

From far-off India comes this plea—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely British soldier, twenty-two years old, and would like to hear from boys and girls living in all parts of the world. I enjoy all sports, and my hobby is collecting snaps and writing letters. I will send snaps to the first ten who write.—Lance Corporal E. Clark, No. 4458012, Second Platoon, A Company, First Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, Jhansi, India

Maxine is especially interested in three of the forty-eight States—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young girl and would like to hear from people living in New Mexico, Oregon, and Oklahoma, although everybody is welcome, too. I enjoy all outdoor sports and will exchange snapshots, so come on and fill up my mail box, please.—Maxine Lucas, 1250 Twenty-fifth Street, Huntington, West Virginia

James wants some friends in the British Isles—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would appreciate it very much if you would help me find Pen Pals from all parts of the world, especially England, Scotland and Ireland. I am interested in all sports, especially baseball, football and hockey. My favorite indoor sports are writing letters, reading and collecting scenic post cards. I promise to answer all letters promptly.—James F. Robertson, 58 Marlboro Street, Belmont, Massachusetts

Dorothy likes sports—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Is there room in the Old Hollow for a sixteen-year-old girl from Texas who is very lonely? I am a senior in high school and expect to graduate with honors. In the small town in which I live there isn't much to do, so I have plenty of time to write letters. I enjoy all sports, especially roller skating, bicycling and basketball—I'm a member of our high-school basketball team. I'm an ardent stamp and post-card collector, and spend many of my leisure hours with my album and scrapbook. Come on, Pen Pals, from all over the world and write me some interesting letters.—Dorothy Terry, Floyd, Texas

Gertrude wants some more Pen Pals—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Although I have some Pen Pals now with whom I am corresponding, I would like to have a good many more. I like to write and receive letters and will be delighted to hear from all parts of the United States and foreign countries. I am a widow forty years old and work for my living, but I have leisure in the evenings to write, read, sew or crochet, all of which I like to do. I would like to have picture post cards from everywhere, and in return will send some of California. In my younger days I did

some traveling in Mexico and lived in South America for a few years. I'll be looking forward to having my mail box full and running over, so don't disappoint me.—Gertrude G. Stevens, Route No. 1, Box 196, Hollister, California

This CCC boy will tell you all about Arizona—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a CCC boy nineteen years old and have plenty of spare time to write letters. Arizona is a wonderful State and I will tell you all about it, so please, boys and girls, write to me.—Marcus Blann, CCC Company 1837, Kingman, Arizona

Calling all cyclists—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I'd like to join the Hollow Tree and get some Pen Pals for myself. I am twenty years old and a keen cyclist. I'd like to exchange experiences with cyclists in America, particularly, but I'd like anybody to write who would be interested in hearing about the part of England in which I live. Here's hoping I have a full letter box.—Alan Hall, 9 Derby Crescent, Helburn on Tyne, County Durham, England

Frances has rhythm—

Dear Miss Rivers:

One of my girl friends joined the Hollow Tree and received so many interesting and educating letters that I would like to try my luck. I am sixteen years old, a junior in high school, and can play the drum and cymbals. I have been in two bands and one drum corps. I enjoy all sports, so come on, boys and girls from everywhere, and answer me soon.—Frances Connors, Denison Avenue, Framingham, Massachusetts

Earl enjoys letter writing more than anything—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a soldier twenty years old and would like to enter my plea for Pen Pals. I have lots of time off and can assure you I will answer all letters and exchange snapshots. I like all outdoor sports, but like writing letters better, so come on, boys and girls from all over the world, and write to a lonely soldier. Send me your picture and I promise to send mine.—Earl Ward, Headquarters Squadron, Maxwell Field, Montgomery, Alabama

Make room for Jacqueline, she likes to correspond—

Dear Miss Rivers:

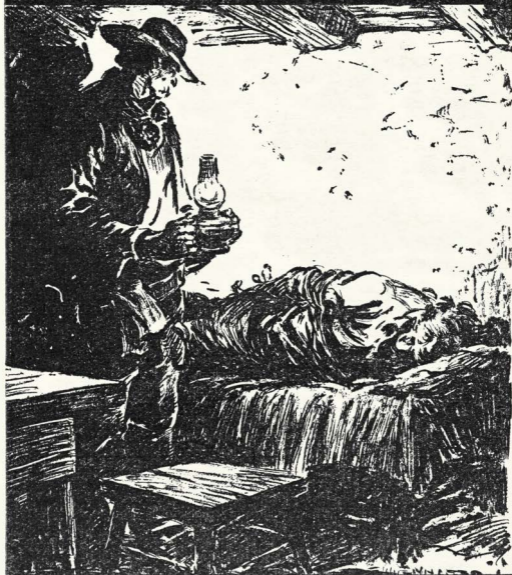
Is there room in your Hollow Tree for one more? I am a sixteen-year-old girl, a junior in high school, and I love to write and receive letters, especially from faraway places. My hobbies are collecting snapshots and toy dogs. I promise to answer all who write and hope you will keep me busy answering you all.—Jacqueline Storms, 1 Willow Street, E. Paterson, New Jersey

Calling all Pen Pals who live on ranches—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am eighteen years old and would like to hear from some Pen Pals who live on ranches. My favorite sports are swimming, baseball and football, and I also like to write letters. I promise to answer all letters, so come on, you Pen Pals, and fill up my mailbox.—Chester Baranoski, 12404 Union Avenue, Chicago, Illinois

BRAND OF HATE



Part Four

By W. C. TUTTLE

Brand Of Hate

The Story So Far:

RUSTLING and murder cast a stark shadow over the Smoke River Valley, and the grisly shadow of suspicion points toward Barr Hawk, a young rancher with a small spread.

Just as Barr manages to clear himself of a charge of rustling a calf belonging to Kirk Malloy, he finds himself in a more serious predicament. Dud Ryan, a cattle association detective whom Kirk Malloy had employed, rides out to the Lazy H to question Barr and is mysteriously shot from ambush as he stands on the doorstep. Barr and his hired man, Eph Woods, knowing their story of the murder will not be believed, rope the detective's body on his horse and succeed in chasing the animal back toward town without being observed.

Barr and Steve Duane, a gambler who is engaged to Kirk Malloy's daughter, start a game one night in Duane's saloon. Barr wins fifteen thousand dollars and is given a check by Duane. Because he fears the gambler will try to get the check back, Barr immediately buys fifteen thousand dollars' worth of cattle from Kirk Malloy, giving him the check and getting a receipt for it. That night, however, he is held up by a masked man who takes the receipt from him.

When Barr tries to force delivery of the cattle he has bought, Malloy's foreman denies any knowledge of the sale. Duane also denies that he gave Barr a check. All in all, Barr is able to find no witness, except Eph Woods, who will testify that either transaction took place.

On top of this, Barr receives a letter from the Smoke River Cattlemen's Association telling him that he has been given twenty-four hours to dispose of his ranch and get out of town. The threat is all the more mysterious because no such organization exists.

That night Barr decides to play safe and sleep outdoors. He is awakened by the sound of a shot from the house and, investigating, finds Buck Frayne, the sheriff, lying on the floor, badly wounded. Barr is put under arrest for the shooting, but, realizing that the townspeople are in a lynching mood, he breaks away and flees. While he is hiding out in the mountains, he runs into some cattle whose brands have been changed from Flying M, Kirk Malloy's iron, to JYR, a brand belonging to

Jim Riley, one of Steve Duane's friends. Just as he realizes that he has stumbled on the answer to Smoke River Valley's rustling problem, Barr is attacked by a hidden assailant.

CHAPTER XIV

BIG ODDS

BARR HAWK awoke to a hazy impression that he was in a darkened room, with a head the size of a bushel basket, on which someone was beating with a mallet. He could hear a jumble of voices somewhere. He tried to lift his head, tried to brace himself with his hands, but found that he could not use his hands at all.

"I told yuh his head was hard enough to stand it," a harsh voice said.

"Comin' awake, eh?" queried another voice. Barr strained his aching eyes, but was unable to make out the figures of the speakers.

Then a light was brought into the room and placed on a chair. The lamp had a very dirty chimney and there was little oil in it. Barr's eyes gradually focused on one of the men.

"Jim Riley, eh?" muttered Barr. "Riley and Olson."

"That's right," jeered Riley. "Poked yore nose into somethin', didn't yuh, Hawk? If that bullet had been a quarter of an inch closer, you'd be shovelin' coal. Might have been better for you, if it had been closer."

"I don't know what yuh mean, Riley," Barr said painfully.

"Don't bluff, you damn fool," Riley growled. "That won't go down with me and Olson. We know what you seen in that canyon."

"What I seen?" queried Barr, bluffing. "I don't understand."

"No? The hell, you don't! We seen yuh when yuh started into the canyon. We seen yuh look at the

brands on them steers. Yuh can't fool us, Hawk; we've got yuh marked down."

"Well, would I care what you done to the Flyin' M?" Barr asked reasonably.

Riley laughed aloud and slapped his knee. "There might be some truth in that, too, eh, Olson?"

"I'd trust him—just like I'd trust a rattler, Jim," Olson snarled.

"Aw, who's trustin' him? Can't a feller laugh once in a while? You take life too serious."

"I still don't know what yuh mean," insisted Barr. "If yuh think I'm runnin' to the Flyin' M to tell 'em that you're misbrandin' their stock, you've got another think comin'."

"That's right, you ain't runnin' to tell 'em," laughed Riley. "We don't have to trust yuh any more, Hawk. Won't anybody have to trust *yuh* any more."

Barr gritted his teeth against the pain in his head. Riley's remark indicated that they were going to kill him, but when? If they had wanted to kill him so badly, why had they taken him out of the canyon and carried him to their ranchhouse?—he wondered.

"What day is this?" he asked.

"Wednesday," answered Riley.

"And the weddin' at the Flyin' M is t'morrow night," Olson added.

Riley laughed and lighted his cigarette over the top of the lamp chimney.

"Still want to make a bet that Steve Duane don't get married, Hawk?"

"Why not?" queried Barr. "My hunch is that somebody will kill Duane before the weddin'."

He was bluffing, but the two men did not realize that. They looked momentarily baffled. Here was a man, roped hand and foot, knowing

that there was no chance of escape, still willing to bet that the wedding would not take place.

Riley leaned forward, scowling almost into Barr's face. "Who do yuh mean, Hawk?" he demanded. "Who'd kill Steve Duane? You better talk, damn yuh, or I'll kick yore head off!"

"So yo're workin' for Duane, eh?" laughed Barr. "I've thought that all along. He brought you two into this valley to wreck the Flyin' M."

"A hell of a lot you know about it," laughed Olson. "Sure, he brought us in here. But he didn't work out our brand. Do yuh think he'd help us rustle Flyin' M cows when he'll own the whole Flyin' M outfit after the weddin'? Yo're the only person in Smoke River Valley who knows who's stealin' Flyin' M cows. And you'll never tell."

"So it was you that killed Ryan, the Association detective, eh?"

"Yo're all wrong there, Hawk. You killed him yourself."

"With yore .30-30?" queried Barr. "Hardly, Riley."

"With our .30-30?" Riley growled. "Wait a minute! Where the hell did yuh get that idea?"

"I found the empty shell. It was fired from yore rifle."

"He's lyin'," interjected Olson. "Steve Duane borrowed—"

SHUT up!" snapped Riley. Barr closed his eyes, his mind working swiftly. So Steve Duane had borrowed their rifle, had he? Then Steve Duane had shot Ryan. Duane had seen Ryan in the Casa Del Mar, knew that the detective was going to the Lazy H, followed him there and shot him with the borrowed rifle.

"Was Ryan here to put the deadwood on Steve Duane?" Barr asked.

"Are you tryin' to say that Steve

Duane shot Ryan?" demanded Olson.

"Sure. With the gun he borrowed from you," replied Barr. "That shell was fired from yore gun."

He was bluffing again, but the bluff worked. He had never had any opportunity to compare the shell he had picked up with one from the JYR rifle. Steve Duane might be innocent, of course, but Barr had a hunch he had solved that murder. Before either of the men had a chance to wonder how he knew so much, Barr shot another question at them.

"Who hired you to hold up me and Eph and steal the receipt that Kirk Malloy gave me, Riley?"

Riley laughed. He rolled a fresh cigarette.

"It was supposed to be a check," he pointed out.

"Duane sent yuh, didn't he?"

"Why couldn't it have been Kirk Malloy?"

"Because he already had the check," replied Barr.

"The young feller's smart, Jim," remarked Olson. "He got yuh there."

"He ain't smart," denied Riley. "If he was smart, he wouldn't be all tied up for shipment. Take a look at them ropes, Tug, we'll be headin' for town pretty soon."

"Collectin' a reward from Steve Duane, eh?" Barr asked.

"Reward for what?" asked Riley.

"For me."

"Yo're our meat, kid. Steve Duane may have to pay, but it won't be for yore scalp. Duane would bust an artery if he knowed we was stealin' all them Flyin' M cattle. We'll run our own end of the deal, don't you worry. If they want you bad enough—dead or alive—you might be worth somethin' to me and Tug."

"You fellows are too crooked even

to play square with yore boss," said Barr. "But that's yore business. I haven't had anythin' to eat or drink since last night, Riley."

"What the hell do yuh think we're tryin' to do, Barr—fatten yuh up?" retorted Riley, blowing out the light.

Barr heard them lock the house and walk down to the stable. The ache in his head was a little better, but he would have given much for a drink of water. A test of his bonds showed that Riley and Olson knew plenty about knots. The situation looked decidedly dark for Barr. No one would think of looking for him at the JYR. And with the information he had, Riley and Olson would never release him alive.

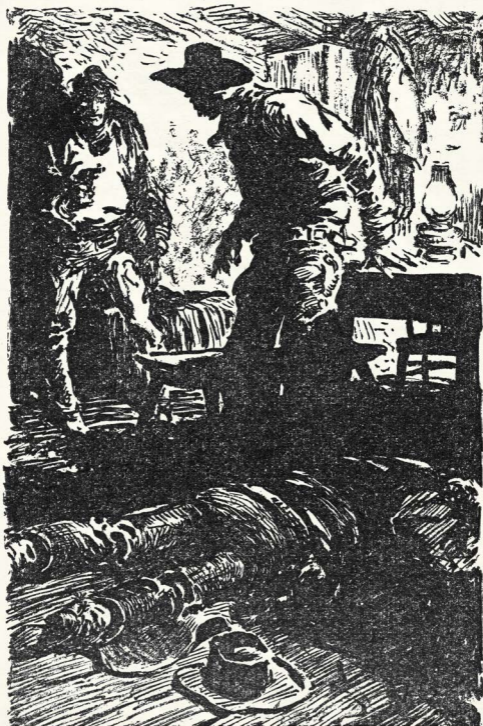
"The two of 'em are robbin' the Flyin' M, and Duane murdered Ryan," muttered Barr. "I plumb forgot to ask Riley who shot Buck Frayne. I'd rather be loose and dumb than so darned smart—and tied tight."

NEEDESS JONES brought Tom Ward, the prosecuting attorney, out to the Lazy H to see the sheriff. They found old Eph Woods and Dr. Haney there. Buck Frayne was feeling so much better, he demanded to be allowed to go back to town, but the doctor ignored his pleas.

Old Eph told Needless he was worried about Barr Hawk. "I looked for him back before this," Eph declared.

"I've been waitin' for him, too," smiled Needless Jones. "He's got to eat, yuh know."

"Fine thing!" snorted old Eph. "Barr's as innocent as a baby, and you darn buzzards, settin' around here, waitin' for his stummock to force him into yore arms. Buck don't know who shot him. Hell, it didn't *have* to be Barr."



"Riley reached for his gun, Olson," Barr said coldly. "Are you gonna try it?"

"The evidence," remarked the prosecutor, "doesn't point to anyone else, Mr. Woods."

"Anyway, you wouldn't know, Eph," laughed Needless. "You was too busy with that bull calf."

"Yeah, we had a hell of a time," agreed Eph, with a grin. "Pipestone Springs is quite a place. That danged, little, bowlegged devil of a marshal kept follerin' me and Zibe around all the time, warnin' us to be good boys."

"Then they had a raffle for a bull calf, and I had the winnin' number, which was sixteen. But that blasted marshal had ninety-one, and he turned it upside down an' claimed the bull. He got it. Sure, he got it. Put it in a corral behind his danged jail. But me and Zibe knocked down the fence and recaptured our bull."

"We could have gone away, peacefullike, but Zibe says he's tired listenin' to this marshal's lip. So we captured him, put a gag in the critter's mouth and packed him a ways out of town, where we elected him to twist the calf's tail all the way to Del Rey."

"The darn little rascal was awful tough. Threatened us with everythin' from *cholera morbus* to first-degree murder. But jus' the same he done the tail-twistin'. Halfway to Del Rey he decided to take a drink with us. By the time we got to Del Rey, he was just as drunk as me and Zibe."

"Givin' the bull calf a big drink was his idea. Must have been a quart of Pipestone Springs whiskey that went into that calf, and it was jist like havin' a rope on a box of dynamite. He let out one big bawl, dug in his hoofs and headed for the lights of the Casa Del Rey, with all three of us stringin' out on them two ropes. I remember turnin' a

handspring over the pool table and goin' plumb out through that back door, along with Zibe."

"And the marshal took that bull calf back with him that same mornin'," choked Needless, wiping tears from his eyes.

"He did? Well, it's all right. Both of 'em are as stubborn as hell. They ort to do well together."

Needless got to his feet and moved toward the door. "Somebody just rode up," he said quietly.

It was Jim Riley and Tug Olson, stopping to inquire about the sheriff's health.

"Needless t' say," remarked the deputy, "you ain't seen Barr Hawk."

"Ain't you caught him yet?" asked Riley.

"Needless ain't been lookin' for him," stated old Eph. "All he does is to set here, waitin' for Barr to git hongry and come home."

"A good idea, at that," grinned Riley. "No one man could ever corral him in the hills. How yuh comin', Buck?"

"Oh, I'll live," grinned the sheriff. "How are you, Riley?"

"Fine. Yo're goin' to miss the weddin' t'morrow night, Buck."

"Yeah. Just my luck."

"Duane is certainly making great preparations," said Tom Ward. "He hasn't overlooked anything."

"One thing he's overlooked," Eph said quietly.

"What's that, Mr. Woods?"

"The fact that Barr Hawk is loose—and Barr offered to bet him five thousand dollars that the weddin' don't come off."

BARR HAWK wouldn't dare interfere with that ceremony," said the lawyer. He looked around at the circle of faces in the yellow lamplight, and then added, "Or would he?"

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"That's the question," Needless replied.

"I tell yuh, where's somethin' wrong in the whole deal," declared Eph Woods. "It ain't natural for Mary Malloy to marry that gambler, even if he does wear diamonds and smell nice. She loves Barr Hawk, I tell yuh, and Barr loves her. Why did she ride over the other night—alone?"

No one seemed able to have an answer for that question.

"Barr Hawk never made that bet with Steve Duane, did he?" asked the prosecutor.

"Duane wouldn't bet," replied Needless.

"I'd make a little bet," Eph said soberly. Riley laughed.

"You'd bet that Duane don't marry Mary Malloy, Woods?"

Old Eph nodded grimly. "I've only got a couple hundred saved up, but I'd bet that much."

"Even money?" asked Riley.

"No, I'd need odds. Say, five hundred to two hundred."

"I'll take that bet," grunted Riley. "I ain't got the money with me, of course, but—"

The lawyer laughed. "I'll write out the bets and hold the stakes. You can pay up—after the wedding."

"Why not say after tomorrow night?" queried Eph. "Write it out."

"Wait a minute," interrupted Needless. "Eph, what are you basin' yore bet on? Do you know somethin'?"

"I know that Barr offered to make a bet with Duane. That's all."

"I'd want longer odds than that."

"I'll give him all the odds he wants," laughed Riley.

The lawyer wrote out the conditions of the bet, and Riley and Eph signed the paper, which the lawyer put in his pocket.

"Well, I reckon we'll be driftin'

on to Del Rey," said Riley. "Glad to see you lookin' better, Buck."

"Oh, I'll be all right," replied the sheriff.

When Riley and Olson rode away, old Eph turned to the others.

"I wouldn't trust either of them jaspers as far as I could throw that bull calf by the tail," he declared.

"Why not?" asked the lawyer. Eph rubbed his stubbled chin thoughtfully.

"I'll mebbe be able to tell yuh Friday, Mr. Ward."

The lawyer laughed shortly. "One would think that something was goin' to happen Thursday night."

"You better keep out of it, Eph," warned the sheriff. "After makin' that bet—"

"Oh, I'm not even goin' to the weddin'," Eph assured him. "I'm neutral."

"Well, I'm going," declared the lawyer. "If anything happens, I want to be right there."

"Nothin' is goin' to happen," declared Needless. "It's all talk."

CHAPTER XV

"GET HIM—DEAD OR ALIVE!"

KIRK MALLOY and Jim Spears were in Del Rey when Riley and Olson rode in. Duane was talking over wedding plans with Kirk Malloy at the Casa Del Rey. Riley came up to them with the information that the sheriff was improving rapidly.

"No news about Barr Hawk?" queried Malloy anxiously.

Riley laughed. "Needless Jones is waitin' for him to come home. He's workin' on the the'ry that Barr's got to eat pretty soon."

"He better watch Eph Woods," Duane growled.

"Speakin' of Eph Woods," said Riley, "me and him made a bet on the weddin'. He bet me two hun-



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dred against five hundred that there won't be any weddin'."

Steve Duane's jaw slackened for a moment. "Eph Woods—why, damn him, what does he know about it?"

"Backin' up Barr Hawk's bluff, I reckon," replied Riley. "Anyway, it's a good bet—for me."

Steve Duane's jaw tightened, as he looked around the smoke-filled saloon. "I don't like it," he muttered. "Damn 'em, it's my business, gettin' married. Who would stop me? It's my business, isn't it? Well, they won't stop me. I'll put enough rifles around that place—"

Duane stopped and looked sharply at Kirk Malloy. "C'mon into my office," he said peremptorily.

Malloy followed him into the little office, and Duane closed the door.

"Is this any of your doin's, Malloy?" he asked harshly. "Have you got anythin' to do with all these threats, bets and all that?"

"You know better than that, Steve," replied Malloy quietly. "Have I put any obstacles in the way of your marriage?"

"I'm not so damn sure," Duane said darkly. "But if anythin' happens to me, Malloy—"

"I know," Kirk Malloy cut in.

"I wouldn't trust you very far, Malloy."

Kirk Malloy was silent. He looked very old and gray, the lamplight accentuating the deep lines of his face.

"There doesn't need to be any trust between us, Steve," he said quietly.

"That's right. I told Spears he was through, after the wedding."

"Zibe Summers has gone," said Malloy.

"There's another old rattler I wouldn't trust. Good thing he's gone. I think I'll ask Tom Ward to be best man at the wedding.

Either him or Sam Hale. I'm going to back Hale against Ward in the next election. He'd make a good prosecuting attorney. I'm goin' to boss this valley, Malloy."

"Old Eph Woods has never been much of a gambler," murmured Malloy. "I wonder why he made a bet like that with Jim Riley."

Duane's fingers trembled as he lighted a fresh cigar.

"And Barr Hawk is somewhere in the hills," added Malloy. "Why not call the weddin' off, Steve? Postpone it for a while."

"Not by a damn sight. And let folks think I'm afraid? Malloy, I'm goin' to be the biggest man in this part of the State."

Kirk Malloy shrugged his shoulders wearily. "All right, Steve."

"If anythin' happens to me, you know what happens to you, Malloy. It's up to you to see that nothin' does happen to me. Remember that!"

JIM RILEY was waiting outside the door when Kirk Malloy came out with Steve Duane behind him. Then Duane stepped back, allowing Riley to enter, and closed the door again.

"What's on yore mind, Riley?" growled Duane.

"Barr Hawk, mostly," Riley replied.

"Any sign of him?"

"Not yet. But sooner or later he's got to find food, Steve. Needless Jones is waitin' out at the Lazy H for him to show up. But just between me and you, Steve, Needless and Hawk have always been friends."

"Well?" queried the gambler.

"What's it worth to you, gettin' him cold, Steve?"

"What do yuh mean, Riley?"

"Me and Tug ain't goin' to take

long chances to get him, unless it's worth our while.

"I'm not payin' for his scalp, Riley," declared Duane. "The law can handle him."

"Oh, sure," agreed Riley, as he carefully rolled a cigarette. "It's all right for the law to git him—except for one little thing, Steve."

"What's that?" Duane asked quickly.

Riley shaped the cigarette slowly, looked at it from all angles, placed it carefully between his lips and lighted a match on the heel of his boot.

"What the hell did you mean by that remark, Riley?" asked Duane.

"That warnin' note, signed by the Smoke River Cattleman's Association," replied Riley. "Hawk recognized yore writin'."

Riley was guessing, but Duane didn't realize it.

"Also," continued Riley blandly, "he knew that I was the one who came to his place that night, stuck him up and took that receipt."

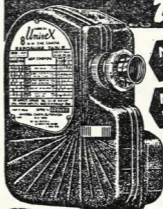
"Suppose he does?" the gambler snapped. "What can he do about it?"

"I dunno," replied Riley, blowing a stream of smoke from his nostrils. "But that ain't all, Steve. Yuh see, he found the empty rifle shell that killed Ryan, the detective. Then he came over to my place and found other .30-30 shells scattered around—and they all matched the shell that killed Ryan."

Steve Duane leaned across the crude desk, a startled expression in his eyes.

"Yuh see," continued Riley, "the deadwood was kinda on me and Tug. But Barr Hawk is smart. He rode past our place, stopped and talked a while about this and that. We got into an argument about rifle shootin', and Barr wanted to shoot with us at a target. But Tug told him that you borrowed our .30-30 and all our shells to do some coyote shootin'."

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"Why, that damn mouthy fool!" exploded Duane. "I'll—"

"Wait a minute," Riley interrupted. "Tug didn't know you killed the detective. He wasn't trying to throw the deadwood onto you."

Jim Riley had made up the story from whole cloth, but Duane was too frightened and angry to analyze things.

"We've got to do somethin', Jim," he declared. "We can't let the law get Hawk. I'll pay for his scalp. I'll—Riley, you and Tug go after him. I'll give yuh that fifteen thousand dollars, if you'll stop him cold."

"No check," Riley said coldly. "It'll be cash this time, Steve."

"Cold cash, Riley. Now get goin'—fast!"

Jim Riley met Tug Olson near the front of the saloon, and they rode out of town in the darkness.

"Duane is offerin' us fifteen thousand in cold cash for Hawk's scalp," chuckled Riley. "I scared hell out of Duane."

"Man, that's real money!" Olson exclaimed.

"Real—hell!" scoffed Riley. "After that weddin', he'll double the ante. Tug, we've got a nest-egg that'll hatch us a fortune."

THE ranchouse at the Flying M was the scene of great activity next day. Duane had hired all available men and had taken some of his own men from the Casa Del Rey to assist in putting things in order for the wedding. At least a hundred guests would be present.

An orchestra from Castroville had already arrived at Del Rey. The kitchen of the ranchouse was piled high with food and liquor. The Casa Del Rey would be closed, to allow the bartenders to cater to the thirsty wedding guests. Fires were started early in the barbecue pits, and a

butcher from Del Rey was busy cutting meat for the huge grills.

Steve Duane was the most active man at the place, nervously giving orders, rushing hither and yon. A couple of Flying M hands stood watching him.

"A hell of a weddin', Blaze," said Al Blanchard. "Look at Duane, will yuh? Does he look like a bridegroom? Look at Mary. Look at Kirk Malloy. Happy—hell! I tell yuh, pardner, I don't like it. Did Duane ask you to help guard the place?"

"Yeah, he did," nodded Harris. "I told him I was a cowpuncher, not a soldier. He's got two-three of his gamblers hired to act as guards. Slim McCoy draws the front gate. His job is to watch for Barr Hawk."

"Like I said, ain't it a hell of a weddin'?" queried Blanchard. "What do they expect Barr to do—ride in and swipe the bride?"

"Or shoot the bridegroom," added Harris.

"Not a bad idea, at that—neither of 'em, Blaze. Jim Spears was sayin' that none of us will be sure of a job after the weddin'. Mebbe that big tinhorn is goin' to run the Flyin' M. I dunno, it's beyond me."

"Well," drawled Harris, "if Barr Hawk wants to ride in and swipe the bride, I'll shore do all I can to help him."

"Better not let Duane hear that kind o' talk, Blaze."

"That's right," Harris agreed. "Td shore hate to have to kill him now, 'cause I'm kinda hankerin' to see a weddin'."

In the meantime, out at the JYR ranchhouse, Barr Hawk wasn't enjoying life at all. Jim Riley and Tug Olson, already half-drunk, were getting ready for the wedding. They had refused food to their captive, but had given him a drink of water.

"Gotta keep him alive for a while," Olson said drunkenly.

"Shore," agreed Riley. He's our little prize package, gettin' more valuable every minute. Fifteen thousand today, twenty-five thousand t'morrow. Kid, yuh better think who you're goin' to give the Lazy H to, 'cause somebody is gonna inherit it."

"What's the idea?" asked Barr. "How am I worth so much money?"

"Might's well tell him," Olson chuckled.

"Yuh see, Hawk," explained Riley, "you know that Duane murdered that cattle detective. You could prove it if you were free. Duane knows that, so he's offerin' me and Tug fifteen thousand dollars to keep you from ever tellin' it. T'morrow we ask for a raise in the ante. We're goin' to find out how much Duane really thinks his neck is worth."

"He don't know we've already got yuh." And Tug laughed hilariously.

"So Duane *did* kill Ryan, eh?"

"Shore did. And with our gun, too. We owe him somethin' for that."

"Do you happen to know what hold Duane has over Malloy?" asked Barr.

"Not all of it," Riley replied. "But we know that Duane served twenty-five years in the penitentiary, hatin' Kirk Malloy every day of it. When he got out he came straight here. He made Malloy give him the Casa Del Rey Saloon."

"But why did he hate Malloy?"

"Well, all I know is that Duane says Malloy double-crossed him, married his girl, and got away with all the money. He's makin' Malloy pay damned well for what he done, even to marryin' his daughter."

"Why didn't Malloy shoot him?" asked Barr.

"Pardner, that's somethin' we don't know."

"And Duane forced Malloy to deny that I bought those cattle, eh?"

"What do yuh think?" laughed Riley. "Duane is no fool."

"You'll both find that out," said Barr. "He'll double-cross both of yuh on this deal. You watch."

"Anyway, you won't be interested, kid," said Olson, tugging at his Sunday boots. "We'll get you at long range—'bout three feet. Leave it to me and Jim to figure out a good story to tell the law. We're good at stuff like that, eh, Jim?"

"I hope t' tell yuh, Tug. Let's have another drink and then go to Del Rey. No use goin' to the weddin' just yet."

A FEW minutes later they rode away from the ranchhouse, leaving Barr, whom they had gagged before they left, to ponder over what seemed to be a very short

future. He was well bound. His wrists and elbows were roped around his body, his ankles tied so tightly together that he had no feeling left in them. But he was not tied down to the cot, on which they had left him.

"Not much use of rolling off the cot," Barr told himself. "Only get bumped on the floor. But, even at that, what's the use of lying here, waiting for them two murderers to collect my scalp."

The bump was none too pleasant, because he landed on his face. His head began bleeding a little, but he felt a little better at the thought that at least he was getting some action. The gag made breathing unpleasant, so he tried to rub it loose against a leg of the cot. But this only rasped his jaw and did not help the situation in the least. Then Barr began rolling over and over, inch-



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ing, sliding, until he was in the main room.

It was getting dark outside, but he could still distinguish objects in the room. He rolled to the center and took stock. There was not a thing he could use to saw ropes loose. Placing his feet against a table he upset it, crashing an oil lamp to the floor. But the glass shattered into bits too small to do him any good.

Then Barr's eyes caught sight of something in a far corner, and he rolled over to it. The object was an old double-barrel shotgun. Placing his two feet against it, he upset its balance and lowered it to the floor, where he shoved it around carefully, wondering if it was loaded.

He finally inched around, until he was sitting on the gun, and his groping fingers managed to manipulate the top lever. Then he rolled away and managed to break the gun part way open with his feet. It was loaded. He shoved the butt against the wall and succeeded in closing the breech. Carefully he put one boot toe against the spur of a hammer and shoved it to full cock. It was ticklish business. Then he carefully cocked the other barrel.

"Now," he told himself, "I've got a loaded gun, all cocked, and no way to shoot it. Mebbe I can sit on it and pull the triggers with my fingers, but I'll never shoot higher than their bunions."



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CHAPTER XVI

RELEASED!

OVER at the Lazy H, old Eph Woods washed the supper dishes. He was in a thoughtful mood. The sheriff was asleep, and Needless, replete with food, was dozing in the main room. The doctor would be out soon. At least, he had said he would stop in before going to the wedding. Eph called softly to Needless, and the deputy sauntered out into the kitchen.

"I've been doin' a little thinkin', Needless," Eph said quietly.

Needless glanced through the doorway at the gathering darkness, spat dryly and turned back to Eph.

"Thinkin' about what, Eph?" he asked curiously.

"About that bet I made with Jim Riley."

"Yeah? What about it?"

"Riley's no gambler, Needless."

"First time I ever knowed him to make one bigger'n two-bits," agreed the deputy.

"There yuh are."

"Well, what's the answer, Eph?"

"Riley and Olson have captured Barr."

"What makes yuh think that, Eph?"

"Him bettin' five hundred against rny two hundred. Do you think that Riley would make a fool bet like that unless he had a cinch? Somethin' has happened to Barr, or he'd have been back here before this. Needless, I tell yuh, them two rattlers at the JYR have captured Barr Hawk."

"Mm-m," breathed the deputy. "Mebbe you've done said somethin'. But . . . but you wouldn't want the law to get him, would yuh, Eph?"

"I'd rather the law had him than them two snakes, Needless," Eph declared.

"Uh-huh. Say! You ain't tryin' to get me away from here, are yuh?"

"If you don't go out there, I'll go."

"All right, I'll take a chance on yuh, Eph. I've got to go over to the Flyin' M anyway, so I'll go past the JYR. See yuh later."

Needless saddled his horse and rode away from the Lazy H, realizing that there was some merit in Eph Woods' argument. Eph listened to the deputy riding away, took a look at the sleeping sheriff and hurried down to the stable, where he quickly threw a saddle on his horse. And when Eph headed toward Del Rey a few minutes later, he rode at top speed.

There was no light showing at the JYR ranchhouse when Needless drew up at the front porch, and sat there on his horse, wondering if there would be any use of dismounting. He did not fancy the idea of investigating dark houses. The place was as silent as a graveyard. Needless opened his mouth and yelled loudly:

"Anybody home? Hey, Riley! Anybody home?"

A moment later the house shook from the muffled report of a shotgun, and Needless saw the flame from the barrel illuminate the room for the fraction of a second. He was out of his saddle in a moment, gun in hand, clinging to his reins with his left hand.

"What the hell's goin' on in there?" he yelled. This time there was no answer.

Needless was no coward. He tried the front door, only to find it locked. Around to the kitchen door he went, but that door was also locked. There was a short-handed ax sticking in a chopping block near the back door. Needless grabbed it and proceeded to smash the lock. Then, gingerly, he entered the kitchen.

"Where are yuh?" he called into the darkness.

Several thumps on the floor indicated that someone was in the main room. Needless lighted a match and found a lamp on the shelf. With his gun in one hand, he entered the smoke-hazy main room, where he saw Barr Hawk on the floor, sprawling beside a double-barrel shotgun. There was a fresh furrow across the floor, where that charge of shot had torn its way into the baseboard across the room.

It only required a few expert slashes of Needless' knife to release Barr, who sat up, grimacing the stiffness out of his jaws and lips and trying to regain circulation in his legs and arms. Needless rolled and lighted a cigarette for him. Neither of them had yet spoken a word.

"Good thing yuh had that shotgun, Barr," the deputy said finally.

"Yeah," Barr agreed hoarsely. "I recognized yore voice, Needless."

"Didja? How long have they had yuh here?"

"Since yesterday mornin'. Riley's bullet creased me over in Broken Arm Canyon. They were holdin' me here for ransom."

"Ransom? Who from?"

"Well, they said that Steve Duane was goin' to pay for my scalp. How did you happen along here, Needless?"

"Old Eph," grinned the deputy. "He made a bet of two hundred against five hundred with Jim Riley. His hunch was that Riley had you tied up, or he wouldn't have made a bet like that."

"Eph made a bet with Riley?"

"Yeah, that the weddin' won't take place."

"It's tonight, Needless."

"That's right, tonight."

"Well, it won't be—if you'll act quick. Listen, Needless, you forget that the law wants me. Arrest



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Duane for the murder of Ryan, the detective, and arrest Riley and Olson for stealin' Flyin' M cattle. Needless, I've got the deadwood on 'em. It's a cinch to prove the misbranded cows, and the rifle that killed Ryan is in Duane's office. It was Riley who shot Buck Frayne, thinkin' it was me. Get goin', will yuh?”

“I'll be a son of gun!” snorted Needless. “What are you goin' to do, Barr?”

Barr limped over to a smears, cloth-curtained cabinet where Riley had left his gun and belt. He strapped it around his waist.

“They killed my horse out in the brush,” he told Needless, “and there ain't a horse left on the place. I'll be here, if they double back.”

“Mebbe I'll be on time at the weddin’,” said the deputy. “Anyway, I'll get Duane, before or after.” He started toward the doorway, but stopped and looked back. “There's somethin' I forgot to mention, Barr,” he said solemnly.

“What's that?” asked Barr. “Yuh better wash yore face—you look like hell.”

CHAPTER XVII

A DEAD BRIDEGROOM

IT seemed that everyone in Smoke River Valley had responded to Steve Duane's invitation to his wedding. Long before dark the fence around the ranchhouse was tied solid with teams and saddle horses, while the corrals were also ringed with saddle animals. In the yard were un-harnessed teams, tied to wagon wheels, eating hay from the wagon boxes.

Not only did the adults turn out for the wedding, but they brought their children and dogs. One room in the house was filled with sleeping babies of all ages. Women met and gossiped together for the first time in months, while the men talked cat-

tle over their drinks. On the spacious front porch, the orchestra from Castroville played a few tunes, waiting for the signal to start the wedding march.

When dark fell silent, armed men lurked along the fences, carefully scrutinizing each newcomer. Steve Duane was not taking any chances of having anyone come who might interfere with his wedding to Mary Malloy. Upstairs, surrounded by women, sat bride-to-be, indifferent to their conversation. Often her eyes strayed to the clock. A woman came in and closed the door.

"They're wonderin' what's keepin' the preacher," she said. "He's late now."

"It's just nine o'clock," another woman remarked. "Mebbe his horse balked."

The women laughed nervously and one went out to see what was going on.

"My old man said he heerd somethin' about there might be trouble," another woman piped up.

"What kinda trouble, Mrs. Wiloughby?"

"Gun trouble, I reckon. We have more of that than anythin' else."

"Won't be no trouble," said a buxom matron. "The prosecutin' attorney is best man. He shore looks all-fired important. So does Sam Hale, the lawyer. You'd almost think it was the openin' of court."

A woman nudged Mary. "You ain't sick, are yuh, honey?" she asked solicitously. "Or scared? That's the way my weddin' affected me."

Down at the front porch, Steve Duane and Kirk Malloy stood together. Duane looked at his watch by the light of a Chinese lantern, grunted angrily and put the watch back in his pocket.

"Ten minutes late," he muttered. "I can't imagine what's keepin' him," said Kirk Malloy. "He should have been here half an hour ago. Something must have delayed him."

Steve Duane looked sharply at Malloy. "Do you suppose that somebody stopped *him*?"

"You mean—prevented him from comin', Steve?"

"You know damn well what I mean. Send one of the boys to find him. Pass the word that the ceremony is postponed a few minutes. Tell—wait a minute!" Duane stepped away from the light and looked toward the main gate.

"Thought I saw a buggy down there," he said. "But I guess—"

THE rest of his sentence was not completed, for a shot blazed from the darkness behind them. Steve Duane grasped Malloy's arm, and nearly yanked the rancher down on top of him. But Malloy jerked away and went stumbling on for several steps. Steve Duane was flat on his face in the flickering lights of the lanterns when men piled out across the porch rail or came running around the house.

"Take him into the house!" ordered Malloy. "Clear the main room!"

The orders were heard over the roar of conversation, and Duane was carried into the house. The stairs were crowded with women. In their midst was Mary Malloy, her face whiter than her wedding gown.

Steve Duane was hard hit, but conscious, a snarl on his lips.

"Doc Haney is out at the Lazy H," a man said.

"Never mind . . . the . . . the doctor," whispered Duane. "Sam Hale, where are yuh? Where's . . . Sam . . . Hale?"



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The lawyer shoved to the front. "Here I am, Steve."

"Hale," Duane spoke with difficulty, "in . . . your . . . safe. That . . . letter . . . tells the . . . story. Damn . . . him . . . I'll pay—"

He sank back.

No one spoke for several moments. Tom Ward bent over him, then straightened up slowly.

"He's gone, folks," he said. "Sam, we better go and get that letter from your safe. He seemed to think it was important."

Sam Hale nodded and they walked out together. Kirk Malloy and Mary looked at each other. The rancher tried to smile reassuringly, but it was only a grimace.

Jim Riley, cursing softly, left the room and hurried to his horse. That shot had cost him and Olson a pretty penny. Tug was half-drunk, so Riley did not wait for him. He mounted his horse and went galloping toward the JYR, almost at the moment that Needless Jones drove his lathered horse through the main gate at the Flying M.

Needless shoved through the crowd around the body of Steve Duane, and stopped short. He looked closely at the body and then his eyes swept the room.

"Who shot him?" he demanded.

"Nobody knows," replied Al Blanchard. "It was out of the dark."

"Prob'ly Barr Hawk," said someone. "He's the only one who'd do it."

"Barr Hawk never shot him," Needless declared. "Was the wedding'—"

"The preacher ain't got here yet," Blanchard told him.

"Good! Folks, I came here to arrest Duane for the murder of Dud Ryan."

Needless waited to let that information sink in. Tug Olson, who had

listened from the back of the crowd, slipped away and went quickly to his horse.

"Malloy," said Needless, turning to the rancher, "I'm lookin' for Riley and Olson. They've been runnin' the JYR iron over yore Flyin' M stock for months. Barr Hawk got the deadwood on all of 'em."

Mary came close to Needless. "Barr Hawk? Needless, is he all right?"

MARY," grinned Needless, "any old time that Barr Hawk's got a gun in his hand, he's all right. Riley and Olson had him prisoner since yesterday mornin', but he's loose now. Where's Riley and Olson? Wasn't they here?"

"They was here when Duane was shot," offered Blanchard. "I was just havin' a drink with Olson when we heard the shot."

"I'll bet they're runnin' away—goin' home," said Needless, chuckling.

"What's funny about that?" asked a gambler from the Casa Del Rey. "Barr Hawk's there," answered Needless.

"Hey! Here's the preacher!" called a voice.

The slightly disheveled clergyman was ushered into the room. "Sorry," he panted. "Sorry to be late. 'Not my fault, though. Why, a masked man came to my stable and—my goodness! What on earth!" He had spread the body on the floor.

"There won't be any wedding, reverend," a man said soberly. "It'll be a funeral instead."

"I . . . I don't believe I understand," gasped the minister.

"You've got plenty company," said Blanchard. "But what about the masked man?"

"Oh, yes, of course—the masked man. He—well, he came into my stable. I told him I was in a hurry,



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because of the wedding, but he said he wanted to talk about souls. He asked me if I wanted to save my soul, and I told him that I considered my soul already saved. He . . . he said, 'Well, a good way to test it out is for you to try and leave this stable before I give you permission.'

"And you stayed," said Blanchard. "I . . . I'm at least thirty minutes late," replied the minister.

Blaze Harris went over to Kirk Malloy and whispered, "Mary went out the back way just now. Runnin', Malloy."

"Why—" The rancher seemed in a daze. "Mary? Where—"

"She went when Needless said that Barr was at the JYR."

"My God!" exclaimed Malloy. "Come with me, Blaze. Get the boys together. We've got to go fast."

THE two lawyers were driving swiftly toward Del Rey, their buggy wheels rattling over the ruttled road.

"Damnedest thing I ever heard of," declared the prosecutor. "Minister late, and the bridegroom shot. Could that have been the reverend we turned out for this side of the gate?"

"Looked like his old gray horse," replied Hale.

"What do you know about that letter, Hale?"

"Not a thing, Ward. When Steve Duane came to Del Rey he brought the letter to me and asked me to put it in my safe. Asked me, of course, never to mention it. It was plainly lettered to be opened only after he was dead. Well, he's dead now. Wonder who shot him?"

"It's all damned queer, Hale. Duane and Malloy were alone out there."

"Lots of funny things happen in Smoke River Valley. Did you see

Kirk Malloy's face when Duane was talking about that letter?"

"I was looking at Duane," replied Ward. "Was something wrong?"

"Malloy looked like a man on the way to the gallows."

"Friendship for Steve Duane, maybe."

"It wasn't grief, Ward. Well, we'll soon have that letter. It might tell us a few things."

The town was dark when they drove up to Hale's little office. Everyone was at the wedding. They unlocked the door and lighted a lamp. Hale opened the small safe, shuffled through some papers and found the letter, which he held up to the light.

"That's the one," said Hale. "Might as well open it, Ward."

"I'll take it, jist as it is—sealed," announced a heavy voice behind them.

Hale was still on one knee while Ward stood near him. Both turned to look into the muzzle of a gun, held by a masked man who stood just inside the doorway.

"Don't make me shoot," warned the man. "Give me the letter."

He held out his left hand, and Ward handed the letter to him. The man shoved it into his chaps pocket and backed to the doorway.

"I'd stay in here quite awhile, if I was you," he said quietly. "It might be a whole lot safer. *Adios, amigos!*"

For more than a minute neither man spoke. Hale got slowly to his feet and brushed off his knee. They looked at each other and then at the empty doorway. From somewhere came the drumming of running hoofs, as a rider hurriedly left town.

"As you very aptly said a while ago, Hale," remarked Ward, "a lot

of funny things are happening in Smoke River Valley."

CHAPTER XVIII

DEAD MAN'S CONFESSION

TO Barr Hawk, waiting at the JYR Ranch, it seemed years since Needless Jones had ridden away. He sat in the dark main room, his six-shooter on the table beside him, his ears tuned for every sound, wondering what had happened at the Flying M.

Then it came, the faraway beat of running hoofs. Barr picked up his gun. The rider made a running dismount at the porch, fumbled with nervous fingers at the padlock on the front door. Barr could hear him panting before he opened the door and came in.

Barr had righted the table and brought the lamp from the kitchen. Riley fumbled in the darkness, taking the chimney off the lamp. His back was to Barr as he managed to light the lamp and put the chimney back in place.

The air was heavily tainted from kerosene from the broken lamp, and Riley sniffed suspiciously. Then he seemed to sense the presence of another in the room. His right hand moved slowly back toward the butt of his gun, as he turned his head.

"It's a nice night for it, Riley," Barr said quietly.

"You?" breathed Riley. "Why, you—"

His right hand streaked to the butt of his gun, but the weapon never came all the way out of the holster. Barr's first shot knocked Riley backward, and his hand fell limply along his thigh. Then he buckled at the knees and collapsed, falling nearly under the table.

For a long time Barr stared down

at Riley, wondering what had happened at the Flying M to cause the man's racing return to his own ranch. Had Needless tried to arrest Riley and Olson?—Barr wondered. Then he heard another horse, galloping heavily as it turned in at the ranch gate. Quickly Barr stepped aside, backing against the wall near the door.

Olson dismounted swiftly and came stumbling into the room. He went nearly to the table before he realized that Riley was piled up on the floor and that the room reeked of powder smoke and kerosene. Slowly he turned around and saw Barr, the lamplight glinting on the blued Colt in his right hand.

"Somethin'," whispered Olson, "went wrong."

"That's right, Tug," Barr said coldly. "Riley reached for his gun."

"Oh, yeah," replied Olson dumbly. "He did, eh? Yeah, I see he did. Well?"

"Ain't you goin' to reach?"

"Me? Why . . . no, I don't reckon so, Hawk," Olson hesitated. "Say, Steve Duane's dead. Somebody shot him at the Flyin' M."

"Before the wedding?" asked Barr.

"Yeah—before. The preacher never got there. I dunno who shot him. Mebbe it was Kirk Malloy, I dunno."

"Did Needless Jones get there before you left?"

"I didn't see him," Olson denied nervously.

"He was goin' to arrest you and Riley."

"Uh-huh. Before he died, Duane told 'em about a letter in Sam Hale's safe. Hale and Tom Ward went to git it. I dunno what it was about." Olson seemed to be trying to talk against time.

"Unbuckle yore belt and let it fall, Tug," said Barr. "Don't move to get yore gun; you can see what happened to Riley."

"Uh-huh—shore. I know somethin' about that letter, Hawk. Duane told me one night that he had a letter hid that would ruin Kirk Malloy. It was to be opened after Duane died. He said it was his ace in the hole. Malloy was scared to kill him. Duane was a bad actor. He spent twenty-five years in the pen."

"Olson," Barr said quietly, "if you stay in Smoke River Valley, they'll have a rope around yore neck in a few hours."

"All I done was steal cattle, Hawk," Olson protested.

"You'd have a fine time provin' it. I'll make yuh a trade."

"Trade what?" Olson asked eagerly.

"A written confession. Have yuh got a paper and pencil?"

"In a drawer in that table."

Barr secured the necessary articles, told Olson to sit down and write. He started to dictate, but Olson stopped writing and looked up at him.

"If I confess to all that, Hawk," he argued nervously, "they'll hunt me down, no matter where I go."

"Not with Jim Riley's name signed to it. Now, go ahead. When this is finished, you fade out and keep goin'."

ABOUT the time that Tug Olson left the JYR ranchhouse, heading north to freedom, two men came along the road from Del Rey to the JYR. One of them was Eph Woods.

"You'll have t' be careful in Castroville," he said. "You left here two days ago, remember."

"I'm halfway to the Cannibal Islands right now. But, Eph, I had to do it. I knowed the story. The night that Steve Duane talked it over with Kirk Malloy, I overheard it all. And damned if I don't believe Mary heard, too. Years ago, Kirk Malloy was roped into a steal-in', killin' gang of outlaws. Runnin' ahead of the law, they cached their loot. In some way this gang was holed up in the rocks, out of water. Thinkin' that Malloy could be the cause of startin' some shoot-in' and give the rest of 'em a chance to get away, they let him go back to a waterhole.

"They thought it was suicide for Malloy, but he managed to escape, while the officers were shootin' up the rest of the gang. Duane swore that Malloy sold out to the officers and afterward dug up the loot. Malloy did marry Duane's sweetheart, and when Duane got loose he came here to blackmail Malloy. Duane wrote this letter, had Hale put it in his safe, and told Malloy about it. That's why nobody killed Duane—until tonight. Mary heard the story and sacrificed herself to save her father. He never asked her to marry Duane. It was a long chance, Eph—a chance that we might find out who had that letter."

"Well, all I can say is that you've got more luck than sense, Zibe. I almost got religion, talkin' it over with that minister in his stable to-night. Now if I can find Barr at the JYR, everythin'll be fine."

BARR saw Mary as she rode into the yard, a white figure on a big black horse. Close behind her were Kirk Malloy and Jim Spears. She came up to the lighted doorway, but Barr blocked her view of the room.

"I had to kill Jim Riley, Mary," he said quietly. "I know what happened at yore place; he told me."

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Kirk Malloy and Jim Spears brought their horses to a halt near Mary and Barr.

"Jim Riley is dead," Barr told them. "I had to kill him. But before he died he wrote out a confession and signed it. Here it is."

Kirk Malloy's face was white and haggard, as he took the penciled confession. He held the paper close to the lamp and stared at the writing with bloodshot eyes.

"Why . . . why—" he muttered. "It says that the letter Duane held against me was all a lie, framed up by Duane for blackmail."

"Yeah, that's right," agreed Barr. "He told me the same thing. He told me he helped DUANE write the letter."

"Well, that's funny," whispered Malloy.

"Funny?" Mary said huskily. "Dad, I think it is wonderful!"

Malloy's trembling fingers placed the confession on the table.

"Signed by Riley—before he died," said Barr. "He wouldn't lie at a time like that."

There was a noise in the doorway, and they all looked around.

"Howdy, folks," greeted Eph Woods. "What's goin' on? Huh! Dead man, eh? This country is gettin' tough. Jim Riley, eh? Well, I figured he'd go out with his boots on. How're yuh, Barr? I jist came from Del Rey. Funny thing happened to Tom Ward and Sam Hale. They opened Hale's safe and took out a letter—and a masked man took it right away from 'em. I never knowed such goin's on in this country. It's shore amazin'!"

"Masked man?" Malloy said weakly. "A . . . a masked man got the letter?"

"Yeah, that's right. Just took it and pulled out. But it shore was a funny thing. I was comin' along near the hitch rack, when the man got on his horse, and I seen that

white letter flip out of his pocket. I read what it said on the outside, and it didn't say *who* was supposed to open and read it. So I figured that you, bein' close to Duane, Kirk, was entitled to have the darned thing. So here yuh are, Kirk. Better put it in yore pocket and read it where the light's better."

Kirk Malloy fairly staggered as he reached for the letter. Crumpling it up, he shoved it deep in his pocket—and for the first time in months, a healthy color showed in his lined face. He was breathing like a man who had been running a long way.

"That letter didn't mean anythin', anyway," said Barr. "Before Riley died he wrote out a complete confession, Eph. Riley tried to put the deadwood on us for rustlin' Flyin' M calves. Duane shot Ryan to keep Ryan from recognizin' him. Then Riley shot Buck Frayne, thinkin' Buck was me. A fine trio of crooks—Duane, Riley, and Olson."

"Riley confessed and signed it, eh?" marveled Eph. "That's fine. Why, here's Needleless Jones—forty minutes late, as usual."

"Needless t' say, I've been busy," retorted the deputy. "What was that about Riley?"

Barr explained about the confession, while Needleless nodded violently.

"That's fine. Now, all we've got to do is find out who killed Steve Duane."

Old Eph was down on his knees, examining Riley's body. Without looking up at the deputy, he said, "If I was the sheriff I wouldn't look very hard. I'd jist mark it down as justifiable homicide and a great savin' to the county."

"Yeah, I reckon yo're right, Eph," agreed Needleless. "I jist thought if we could find out, we might make the hombre a nice present."

Barr walked out on the porch and Mary followed him.

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"Thank you, Barr, for all you've done," she said quietly. "I think I am just awakening from a long nightmare. I . . . I just realized that there are stars in the sky again . . . and a moon. I don't suppose you will ever understand."

"I . . . I've been kind o' missin' that moon myself, Mary," Barr admitted. I shore hope our cloudy weather is over. It's been pretty danged gloomy lately."

Inside the house, old Eph was saying:

"—all them decorations, Kirk. They'll keep until t'morrow night. The folks want a weddin', yuh know. And I'll bet yuh odds that the preacher will be on time. What do yuh say?"

"Why, that's up to Mary and Barr," replied Kirk Malloy.

"What did you say, Mary?" whispered Barr eagerly, his arm around Mary's shoulder.

"I . . . I said that— But this white dress is ruined from riding, Barr."

"Gosh, we could blow out the lights—if that's all the dress you've got, honey."

A LITTLE while later Barr and old Eph were riding through the moonlight toward the Lazy H. Barr was riding Riley's roan gelding.

"I'm not answerin' any questions," declared Eph smugly. "What a man knows and what he don't know, that's

his own business. Course, you don't need to answer questins, either, Barr—but I'd like to ask yuh one."

"Go ahead, Eph," laughed Barr. "It's about that signed confession of Riley's. Yuh say he was dyin' when he wrote it?"

"That's right, Eph. A feller wouldn't hardly write a thing like that, unless he's dyin'—or thinks he's dyin'. I reckon Riley knew."

"Riley must have been a tough son of a gun, Barr," Eph said meditatively.

"Course he was tough. But what are you drivin' at, Eph?"

"Jim Riley," said Eph, was only shot once—and the bullet *went square through his heart.*"

After a long silence, Barr said, "Yeah, he was tough. He was the first man I ever knew who could be shot that bad and live to sign a confession. We're a fine pair of liars, Eph."

"Liars? Don't you class me with yourself, Barr Hawk," Eph said indignantly. "I won't have it!"

"Then don't tell folks that you saw that letter drop from a man's pocket at ten o'clock in Del Rey on a night when there wasn't a light in the town. And right at the Casa Del Rey hitch rack where the moon at that time tonight would be shaded by the buildin'."

"As far as I'm concerned, the case is closed," Eph said meekly. "But I guess a little lyin' clears up a lot o' trouble sometimes."

THE END



Broken Wilderness Truce

Continued from page 92

vengeance on the human killer who had wounded him, who had violated one of the most sacred laws of the wilderness, who had broken the truce which is invoked only when the red death rides through the forest.

If he had had a gun, Jim Lawson might have faced the grizzly, although only the most accurate shooting could stop the enraged beast now. Yet Lawson wanted nothing more at this moment than to get away from the island which, a peaceful sanctuary but a brief while before, was now a place of death where old killing impulses had been aroused and left to vent their fury.

Nothing could have saved Bart Slade from the consequences of his act. It was as though the hand of Fate had struck at him for his ruthlessness in firing the woods and destroying the harmless folk. He had flouted not only the laws of man but the law of the wilderness folk, and Fate had exacted her grim penalty.

Jim Lawson swam on. He heard the roaring of the grizzly behind him and shuddered at realization of what was happening. Old Pete Drain was avenged, and so was the prospector whom Bart Slade had killed. But Jim Lawson felt himself curiously free of any feeling of triumph. Rather his own desire for vengeance now seemed petty, as though it was something of which he should be ashamed.

On shore the fire was burning itself out. The smoke was still thick and Jim Lawson knew he still had an ordeal ahead if he would live. But something told him that he would live. Nothing in the future could surpass the terror of the immediate past.

THE END.

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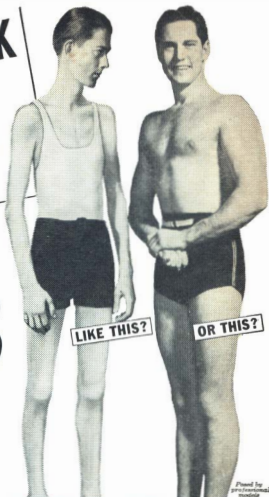


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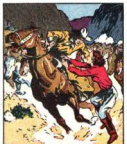
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 CAMELS ARE MADE FROM FINER, MORE EXPENSIVE TOBACCOS... TURKISH AND DOMESTIC



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SMOKE 6 PACKS OF CAMELS AND FIND OUT WHY THEY ARE THE LARGEST-SELLING CIGARETTE IN AMERICA

LET UP — LIGHT UP A CAMEL!
 SMOKERS FIND: CAMELS NEVER JANGLE THE NERVES