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WESTERN STORY

MAR. 9, '40

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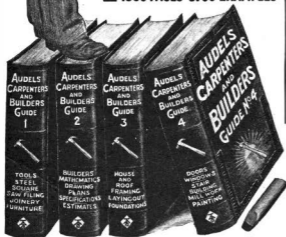
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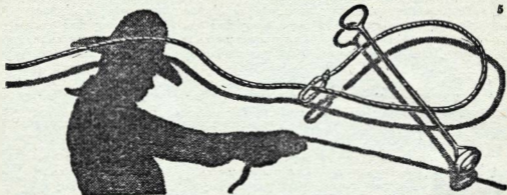


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The Roundup

LAST fall we told you about the cattle ranch, stocked with Herefords shipped from Texas, which had been established in Vermont. We've been following that experiment with keen interest and we figure you'd like to know how it's working out. Well, it looks as though in the future a New England boiled dinner will have to include a fresh chunk of Texas steer, and codfish balls and baked beans will have to make room for a cow-puncher's favorite T-bone.

It all came about, you remember, because there's a lot of abandoned farm land in New England which was going to waste until two enterprising gentlemen were told that the supposedly played-out land would support cattle at considerably less acreage per cow than it took in Texas. New Englanders might buck like locoed brones when it comes to switching Thanksgiving, but on less important matters they'll take a chance if the prospects look good. The two men brought in a herd of Herefords tended by a Texas cow-poke and went into the cattle business.

We were some worried about how that waddy would make it through

the winter. Texas has its blizzards, but when it snows in Vermont, it snows, and a man almost forgets what the ground looks like. We haven't heard whether that cow nurse had to do his punching on skis or in a sleigh, but he must have done a good job of it somehow. There is evidence that the project is past the experimental stage now and it begins to look as though ranching will become an established industry in New England.

Dairy farmers were skeptical of anything coming of that herd of strange-looking whitefaces, but the State of Vermont wasn't overlooking any bets on a chance to put hundreds of acres of not very productive land to work. State experts cooperated with the owners of that first spread established near Lake Champlain and it seems they all knew what they were doing, for the business is growing.

Another man has gone into Vermont and bought six farms comprising around a thousand acres and already another herd of Herefords is getting used to the ghosts of Captain John Smith and Miles Standish in place of Wild Bill Hickok's and Wyatt Earp's. And a Westerner has bought a fourteen-hundred-acre farm which he intends to stock with Herefords.

So it looks as though New England is definitely in the cattle business, and in it to stay. A lot of idle land

will be put to work and that's a big help these days.

We sure hope they'll invite us up come roundup time. We'd like to sit around the fire at night and listen to the hands spin windies about the good old days when the old-timers rode in the Mayflower and the tough hombres weren't rustlers but witches. At that, they could pull a brag about one gent who was sure a top hand with a horse. Remember Paul Revere? If he were alive today he might be tearing through the countryside yelling: "The Herefords are coming!"

Space last week didn't permit us to include the suggestion Malcolm Horlick made concerning a scheme for saving old issues of Western Story Magazine. "How about having some binders so that we can save our magazines?" Mr. Horlick inquires. "They might be two or three inches thick and we'd not only have the magazine preserved but always handy to read." We've had some mighty keen reactions to the trimmed edges from our readers who are not only pleased with the improved appearance of the magazine but with the greater reading ease. We wonder how many of you agree with Mr. Horlick on the binder question. Why not drop us a line and let us know what you think of this plan?

There must be plenty excitement in the Northwest these days, according to a line from Joseph F. Hook, who writes those thrilling salmon pirate stories for W. S. Says Joe: "A short time ago we had a bad earthquake here that scared the liver out of a lot of citizens but did no actual damage. Our house rocked for fifteen minutes, reminding me of a few storms I have experienced at sea. Reading an account of it in

the newspaper, I saw where there was one here, some fifty years ago, that shook the earth so hard all the cows fell down. Well, I wasn't here fifty years ago, so it's the pioneers who are stuck with that yarn."

We've never experienced an earthquake, but we reckon one of those disturbances can "tell it plenty scary."

In next week's Western Story—

L. L. Foreman has at last heeded our plea for another story about that grand old border badman, Preacher Devlin. The result is a rapid-paced full-length novel entitled *CONTRABANDO*. The Preacher starts out on a treasure hunt—and winds up delivering a six-gun sermon to a ghost-town congregation including his old friend, Don Ricardo. If you haven't yet made the Preacher's acquaintance, this is your opportunity!

There was only one smuggling ring to break up, so Gil Corwin reckoned one ranger was enough to do the job. His adventures in *SHADOW OF THE SAD INDIAN*, by Mojave Lloyd, make mighty exciting reading.

Stick a pair of old-timers in a line cabin for a winter, and what do you get? More than likely a case of "cabin" fever. Norman A. Fox writes an appealing human-interest story about a pair of old mossyhorns who almost settled a checker championship with bullets. Look for *GUNSMOKE CURES CABIN FEVER*.

Ray Humphreys, Kenneth Gilbert and many other top word wranglers are on the tally book for next week, and, as usual, there is a full string of departments and features.

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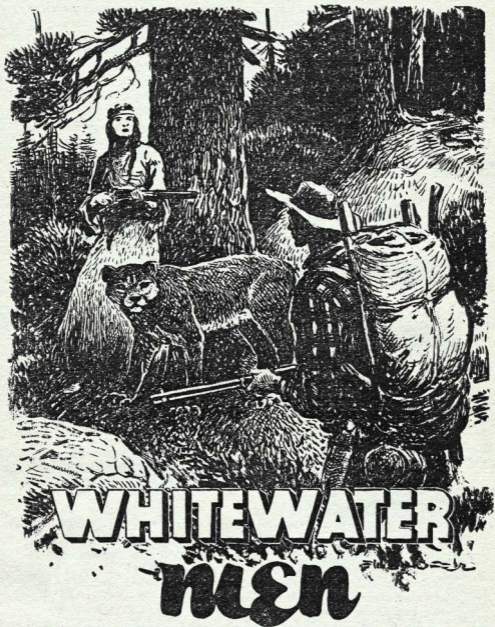
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CENTS



BY KENNETH GILBERT

Part One

STEVE AMERY'S first impression was that he was undoubtedly having a bad dream. He stood there on the narrow-gauge railroad track, peering

around with bleared eyes at surroundings as foreign as the heart of an African jungle. The place was named Broken Ax.

Amery knew that in this strange little wilderness settlement of the high Cascades he must look and act like an outsider, and as such there

could be no welcome for him here.

For that matter, he didn't want a welcome; all he wanted was to get away, to keep going. But, first and foremost, he wanted a drink. His head was throbbing with the effects of a long bout of drinking, and there was a taste in his mouth like scorched flannel. Yet he was free for the time being, at least, and that was something; they'd never look for him here! And as soon as he got hold of Chet Cavennis, the trouble would be cleared away. Cavennis should have been waiting for him, but the man was nowhere in sight. Well, probably he'd be along soon.

There was something arresting about Broken Ax despite its drab lack of pretense. There was a siding with a string of bunk cars; a snorting donkey engine was yarding logs farther down the uneven track; there were a dozen or so unpainted clapboard shacks and, just behind him, a building with a square front on which a sign said "Broken Ax Trading Co. D. Hardy, Prop." Somehow that name, "D. Hardy," stirred the pool of Steve Amery's recollection. But he was certain he had never known such a man. A handful of young and swarthy Indian children played hide-and-seek in the undergrowth beside the track, and an old mongrel limped past Amery with a single, unfriendly look. Otherwise he appeared to have been unnoticed.

"Hell of a place!" he muttered. "I'd trade it all this minute for a single snort of whiskey! And it wouldn't have to be very good whiskey, at that!" Suddenly he found himself chuckling at the absurdity of the situation. Why, he was in reality the owner of the Wompatuck Lumber Co., with all its vast holdings—the vast timber empire that his grandfather, the old Steve Am-

ery, had carved out of this wilderness! All this land hereabout must belong to him; he could take Broken Ax, pile it in a heap and set fire to it if he wanted to! Yet at the moment he had only a few dollars in his pocket, he didn't have a friend—save Chet Cavennis—and he was a criminal in the eyes of the law, a thief. It was funny, very funny!

He cast a disapproving eye over the magnificent scenery. Vast sweeps of green-timbered slopes ran up to the edge of cloud land, their somberness relieved by flashing glimpses of white-ribbed waterfalls that seemed to drop out of the sky. High meadows were visible, and he could see reddish-gray deer browsing on tender shrubs. In a nearby stream, lazy swirls marked the risings of great rainbow and cutthroat trout.

"Hell of a place!" Amery muttered again. "I'll take a good look now because I'll never see it again after Chet Cavennis fixes things up so I can get away!" Suddenly his nerves jerked at a crunch of gravel behind him, and he gave an involuntary exclamation as he turned.

But it was nothing more alarming than a boy of about twelve, barefooted and tanned to the hue of light magenta. The youngster stood there eying Amery in frank curiosity, at the same time sucking thoughtfully on a flat piece of slickish candy.

Amery grinned at him confidently. "You know Chet Cavennis?" he asked. "I wrote him to meet me here. Haven't seen him around, have you?" There was no response. Amery patiently tried again. "How far is it to Camp Three?"

THE boy appeared to weigh the fairness of this question. Suddenly he took the candy from his mouth and faced the store. "Paw!" he called in a shrill treble. "There's

a dude here who wants to know how far is it to Camp Three!"

From inside the store came immediate reply: "Waal, tell him!" The boy looked at Amery again. "I saw you get off the loggin' train a few minutes ago," he ventured. "Reckon you came all the way from the city."

"How far is Camp Three?" Amery asked again.

"Twenty miles. Good trail, and you can't miss it. Or you could follow the tracks of the gallopin' goose—that's the car that brings down logs. Only it's longer that way and darned poor walkin' on the ties. What makes you so shakylake, mister? You keep lookin' all ways like a buck deer in a thicket. Anything you afraid of?"

Amery was startled, but he tried to force a laugh.

"Maybe," went on the boy shrewdly, "you're not goin' to Camp Three at all, but headin' for Painted Valley. If you do, you won't come out again. The Wizard'll get you! Paw says so!"

Amery wagged his head in bewilderment. This boy was getting on his nerves. Broken Ax was getting on his nerves. The whole damned country was enough to drive a man crazy! What he needed was a drink. There might be one at that store. Anyway, he wanted to keep out of sight as much as possible. Without a word to the boy, he strode hurriedly toward the store, pulled open the screen door and stepped inside.

At once he was greeted by the queerly pleasing aroma of fried fruits, smoked meats, salted fish, oiled leather and fresh sawdust sprinkled over the floor. The strange, tantalizing smells aroused a vague and insatiable longing, like a whiff of bacon broiling over an open fire or the fragrance of steaming coffee on a frosty night. These homely but

poignant scents reached out and took hold of him—and reminded him that it had been many hours since he had eaten. Yet food right now was repugnant. What he wanted was a drink that would brace him up.

"Paw," shrilled the boy outside, "that's the dude I was tellin' you about!"

In the gloom Amery made out an oldish man behind the counter and, just in front of it, a slender girl. At sound of the boy's voice she turned, until the light which sifted through the dusty windows fell softly on her face. Amery saw a little girl's sort of face, with a slightly upturned nose. But it was a face that was undeniably pretty. If it had not been for the clearness of her skin, the symmetry of her features, he would have suspected that the girl was part Indian. Her clothes suggested it, as did the woven band around her forehead, the beaded moccasins which came well above her ankles. But her dark eyes were those of a white woman, and they had a clarity which seemed to reach through him. Near her there was a pack board leaning against the counter and on it was piled supplies.

Amery's and the girl's appraisal of each other lasted only a moment. Amery's attention was drawn at once to the old man behind the counter. He was grizzled, his hands were knotted and brown, and two fingers were missing. But his eyes, peering from beneath badgerlike brows, had the boring faculty of steel drills. At that instant he was staring with sagging jaw, an expression of utter bewilderment on his seamed face.

"Steve?" he breathed in awe. "Steve Amery?"

Had the roof fallen in at that moment Steve Amery could have been no more astounded. Panic surged

up in him. He had the wild impulse to turn and run, and yet something held him in his tracks. He swallowed dryly, trying to get himself in hand. This man knew him! There was only one way that could have happened, he thought. Word of his crime, of his flight, had already reached here. But he had to bluff it out. He stood there with brain suddenly cleared of the alcohol fumes, trying his best to meet a situation which had suddenly become fraught with peril for him.

CHAPTER II

THE CHANCE

BUT the moment of terror passed, for the old man smiled in quick apology. "Sorry, stranger! My mistake. Of course you couldn't be Steve Amery. He's been dead nigh onto twenty years!"

Amery felt strength flow out of himself as the reaction came. He put out a hand and rested it on the counter in order to keep steady. In that instant he knew what had happened. This man had for a moment mistaken him for the *old* Steve Amery, the grandfather to whom he bore a startling likeness! Steve Amery wanted to laugh, but the desire choked in his throat. Even if the mistake had been corrected, there was still danger. Did this man know why the young Steve Amery was here in this forsaken wilderness?

But the oldest had turned to the girl again. "Jana," he said hurriedly, "I reckon that fills your list. Dried peaches, five pounds of beans, a hunk of bacon—"

"Paw," broke in the boy from the doorway, "he was askin' me about Cavennis!"

The old man paused in the act of wetting a pencil point on the tip of his tongue as he prepared to check

the list in his hand. Again those steel-drill eyes bored into Amery, yet only for a second. A frown of annoyance came to the weathered features.

"Bingo!" he snapped at the boy. "You do too much blattin' for your own good! Now scat out o' here, and put a choker on that loose tongue of yours! You tryin' to make out you're the bull of the woods?" He was evidently uneasy. "You think of anything else you need, Jana?" he urged the girl.

She shook her head. Amery wanted to hear her speak. Somehow he guessed that her voice would be soft and flowing; it *had* to be! But there seemed to be a shy, wilderness trait in her which made silence a virtue. Skillfully she stowed the stuff in the canvas sack on the pack board, slipped the straps over her shoulders and went out, walking with head bent after the manner of a woodsman, her moccasined feet making no sound on the rough floor.

Belatedly remembering his manners, Amery jumped to the door to open it, but she was past him and outside before he could reach it.

Bingo chuckled appreciatively, tonguing his candy. "That's Jana Wister," he volunteered. "Comes from that place I was tellin' you about—from Painted Valley. Reckon you sort o' scared her, makin' a quick move like that!"

A tin washbasin whizzed through the air and struck the door jamb within inches of the boy's head. "Bingo!" roared the old man. "You scoot now or I'll lam hell out o' you!" The boy vanished.

Amery turned back. The old man bent over the counter toward him. "What can I do for you, stranger?" The mild question made Amery hesitate. There were many things he wanted to know, but he sensed that

he'd have to be careful. "Why," he said casually, "I'm going into the hills. Need a full outfit. Can you fix me up?"

THE old man eyed him sharply again; fleeting hesitation in his manner. But the moment passed. He *did* know something, but how much Amery could not guess. Yet evidently the old fellow was on guard and determined to play along. At once he became the storekeeper again.

"Fix you up? That's why I'm here, mister!" Without further word he looked Amery over with an experienced eye and began laying out things. Flannel shirt of garish plaid, double-thick canvas pants, brown and waterproofed until they were almost stiff enough to stand alone. These the old man staggled just below the knees, tearing the cloth cleanly across.

Nor did he say anything as he laid a pair of steel-calked shoes on the counter. Amery was astonished when he saw they were exactly the right size. Blankets next, thick and woolly. A light belt ax, a box of matches. Some of the matches went into an empty bottle which the old man stoppered. "You'll be fordin' creeks," he explained. "There's a storm blowin' up, too. Wet matches are no good." He threw together a cooking outfit and a quantity of grub. "Bacon and beans will take you over the hump." The grub, utensils and blankets were stowed in a new pack board. "Comes to fifty-eight dollars and a short bit," said the old man as he tallied off the items.

Amery's heart sank. He knew that he didn't have that much money. Not until then did he realize that such an outfit was costly. As though reading his thoughts, the

old man said calmly, "Never mind. It's paid for!"

It was Amery's second moment of astonishment. He blinked as though he had not heard right. "Paid for? *Who* paid for it?" There leaped into his mind just then the thought that Chet Cavennis might have arranged it. Yes, that was probably the way. Yet the old man's next words, startling enough, destroyed that theory.

"*You're Steve Amery, ain't you?*"

The younger man tried to speak but found it impossible. The old storekeeper went on, "You'll likely be the grandson of old Steve Amery. He was my best friend. Knew him when he came into this country fifty years ago, with nothin' but his two fists and an idea. He licked her, too! Cracked the shell and got at the meat inside. I was his woods boss until a log rolled on me. Then he set me up in this store. Never would let me pay him back. But this is my chance!"

"You know," Amery asked softly, "why I'm here?"

The sharp old eyes were hard and penetrating. "I can give a guess! Saw somethin' in a city paper somebody tossed off the narrow gauge the other day. I made out you're in a jam!"

"But it's all a mistake!" protested Amery. "I'm not a thief. I took only what belonged to me! You must know that the old Steve Amery left me the Wompatuck, to be held in trust for me until I reached twenty-five! That happened a month ago. The trust agreement put Chet Cavennis in charge until I was ready to take over."

"The paper sort o' made out that you'd raised hell and put a block under it!" the old man remarked.

"What of it?" demanded the other hotly. "My life is my own, to do with as I want!"

The old man shook his head in disagreement. "Your granddad didn't figure it that way, I reckon! He 'lowed as how you'd fit yourself to take over the Wompatuck when the time came. A man-sized job, if you ask me! The paper made out you'd stolen twenty thousand of the company's money!"

"What if it was company's money? It's mine, I tell you! *I'm* the company! Maybe I did squander it gambling and raising hell, but Chet Cavennis will square things! Those checks I gave—"

"You count a heap on Cavennis!" the old man put in.

"Why not?" Amery said almost impatiently. "It's his job to manage the Wompatuck until I can take over. He's *got* to square this! That's why I'm up here—to find him and explain things. I wrote him I was coming. What I can't understand is why he didn't meet me!"

"Son," and a queer note crept into the other's tone, "old Steve Amery must have foreseen somethin' like this! Must have known what would happen. He aimed to put you on your own, make you fight for what's comin' to you. You're goin' into the hills all right, but not the way you figgered! You're outside the law now an' you're goin' to stay that way until you prove you're as much of a man as old Steve Amery was! I'm not tellin' you *what* to do; I'm tellin' you what you're goin' to do of your own free will and accord!"

Amery shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about! I'm going to find Chet Cavennis and square this. That's all! Cavennis will back me up. Why shouldn't he?"

"There's a place yonder," went on the old man, "called Painted Valley. Old Sagamon Wister's there, the one they call the Wizard. Never mind

why; you'll find out for yourself! Right at this minute you think you're in a sort of jam, but you don't realize how bad a jam it is!"

Wister! Amery recalled the name of the girl as the boy had told it to him. But he also remembered what Bingo had said about Painted Valley: "You won't come out again. The Wizard'll get you!" The whole thing was annoying, confusing. His head ached and he wanted a drink. Of a sudden he didn't like the way this old man was dictating to him.

ALL this doesn't make sense," he retorted angrily. "I'll take that outfit of mine and go. And when I see Cavennis I'll pay you! What I could use right now is a drink. If you've got liquor, I'll take some, and you can add it to the bill."

The old man eyed him sternly. "Nobody but a fool would take a drink at the beginnin' of a trail. You'd be out of breath inside a mile. But if you've *got* to have it—if you've *got* to go to Cavennis, I wash my hands of you!"

He reached under the counter and pulled out a gallon jug, which he uncorked and pushed across the counter. But as Amery was in the act of reaching for it, Bingo's hoarse whisper came from the doorway: "Paw! Pete Wister's on the prod again! He's ore-eyed, and he's headin' this way!"

Somehow the warning note in the boy's voice made Amery forget the drink at that moment. He stepped back and faced the door. The old man came hurriedly from behind the counter. Then a figure darkened the doorway.

Amery saw a young man about his own age, dressed in the usual woodsman clothes. He was plainly drunk. He wore no hat, and his dark hair, uncombed, was matted frowsily over

his forehead. A rifle rode easily in the crook of his left arm.

He stood there teetering on moccasined feet while his eyes accommodated themselves to the gloom of the place and at last found the old man by the counter. "Where is she?" he demanded truculently. "Must have come here! You hidin' her some place, Hardy?"

The old man took a wary step nearer. "Here and gone!" His voice was quiet, placating. "Pete, you're packin' a sizable load. Better grab a snooze in the back room for a spell!"

But the stranger gestured impatiently. "She run out on me!" he complained. "She—" Suddenly his blinking gaze fell on Amery. "Who the hell are *you*?" he demanded.

"Pete," broke in the old man hurriedly, "it's all right! This is a friend of mine!"

Wister sneered. "Friend? You're not so choosy, Hardy. Looks more like a friend of Chet Cavennis!"

Amery's mouth suddenly became hard. "That's right! I *am* a friend of Cavennis! Now, who the hell are *you*, outside of being somebody by the name of Pete Wister?" His nerves were still ragged from the effects of the hang-over; they had been rasped by what the old man said. The bullying challenge of this drunken young hillman with the rifle was too much to be ignored. He was further infuriated by a sense of pity for the girl who had left but a few moments before. Her name was Wister, too. Probably this was her husband.

"Hold up!" roared old Hardy suddenly. In a swift stride surprising for one of his years he stepped forward and seized the muzzle of the rifle which at that instant jumped from Wister's bent arm to his shoulder. "He's lyin', Pete! He's no

friend of Chet Cavennis! You've got my word for it!"

The hate which had flamed abruptly in the other's face slowly died out, and Wister relaxed. He wagged his head in bewildered fashion. But the old man was hurrying on, "Now you listen to me, Pete Wister! I've never lied to you and I never will. So, let it ride the way I've said. You blasted fool! You want to put a sprag in the whole works? What you doin' in town, anyway? Don't you know that three, four Cavennis men came down on the gallopin' goose this mornin'? They acted like they're lookin' for somebody! Somethin's in the wind. Yet here you are in town, with a snootful, while the Wizard is out there alone—"

He left the sentence unfinished, but somehow it seemed to carry weighty significance to Wister, drunk though he was.

THE young man's blurred senses appeared to clear. "Hardy, I reckon you're right! I *know* there's somethin' comin' off. That's why I follered Jana to town. I was afraid something might happen to her. But this stranger here! How do I know he ain't mixed up in it?"

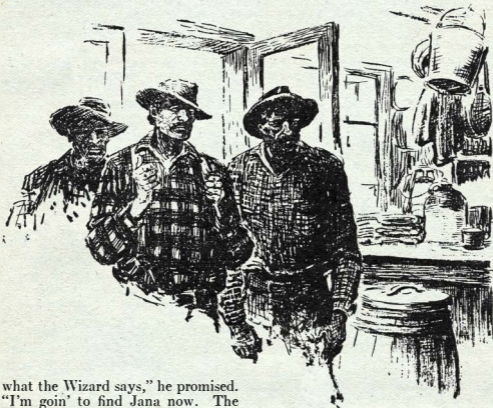
"Because," retorted Dan Hardy, "I said so! What's more, I want your word that you'll forget what's been said here. Let the Wizard decide! You savvy that?"

Apparently the other did; Steve Amery was amazed by the effect of old Dan Hardy's words. The Wizard! That seemed to be a magic name. But why? Suddenly Amery wanted that drink again. Old Dan Hardy had apparently made a sincere effort to save him from trouble, even though he had been compelled to lie to do so. Amery *was* a friend of Chet Cavennis! Yet Dan Hardy

had given his word that this was not true.

Evidently Pete Wister had been convinced. His eyes were still baleful, but he seemed satisfied. "I'll do

crisply with every step he took, the steel-calked shoes clumping on the floor. Somehow in these clothes he looked like a new man. His chin was lifted, his big shoulders a little



what the Wizard says," he promised. "I'm goin' to find Jana now. The Wizard will know the straight of things." He turned and went out, no longer staggering.

Old Dan Hardy sighed gustily in relief and leaned against the counter. After a moment he said quietly to Amery, "You go back and shift clothes. No time to be lost. Bingo will show you the trail. If Pete Wister knew what you told me he'd kill you on sight next time you met. There's a bloody war on, and you'll be smart if you can keep clear of it!"

Amery wanted to ask questions, but the old man's words were compelling. He picked up the things, went to the back room and presently reappeared, the "tin" pants rustling

straighter. The woodsman's outfit fitted him and felt good and comfortable.

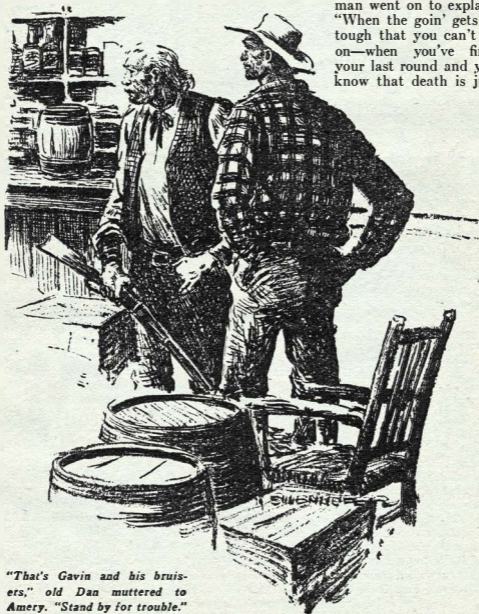
Old Dan Hardy wagged his head in amazement when he saw the way Amery looked. "You're the spittin' image of your granddad when he was your age!" the old man declared. "Well, now, that fact may be good or bad." Suddenly he frowned. "Thunder! I'd almost forgotten. Last time I saw old Steve Amery, 'fore he died, he gave me somethin' which he said I was to give you if you ever decided to go into the hills as he did. Son, I've still got it. Been takin' care of it for a long

while!" He disappeared through a side door and came back almost immediately with a long object wrapped in many folds of cloth. Unwinding the covering, he held up an old repeating rifle.

"She's an '86 model, a .44," he explained. "That's the gun old Steve Amery carried when he came to this

country." Dan Hardy tapped the weathered stock. "Another thing—and old Steve made quite a point of it when he left the gun here—there's a hole drilled in this wood under the butte plate. In that hole is something that money can't buy if you need it bad enough. It's a single cartridge!"

Amery looked puzzled, but the old man went on to explain. "When the goin' gets so tough that you can't go on—when you've fired your last round and you know that death is just



"That's Gavin and his bruisers," old Dan muttered to Amery. "Stand by for trouble."

around the corner—that single shell, old Steve Amery always figured, would be the way out!”

“You mean,” asked the younger man, “that he’d have used it on himself?”

Old Dan Hardy nodded. “Better to die that way than by inches if you’re starvin’ or helpless in the woods. Lots of old-time hunters have their guns fixed that way.”

Amery smiled tolerantly. “Sounds interesting, but I can’t imagine *I’ll* have any need for it. I’m merely going to Camp Three to find Chet Cavennis. Then, when I get my trouble straightened out, I’m leaving this country forever!”

Hardy looked at him oddly. “Maybe so! Still, none of us knows what lies ahead on the trail. Old Steve Amery had a wise head on him. He must have had somethin’ special in mind when he made such a point of tellin’ me what was in the butt of that gun. He figured that you’d never open it unless you really tackled the hills and got into a jam!”

Amery sighed with impatience. “I’ll take that drink now and be on my way—” he began. But he did not finish, for there were heavy footsteps at the door. Old Dan Hardy looked up sharply. Three men bulked there.

“Hist!” he warned in a low whisper. “That’s Bill Gavin and his bruisers. Cavennis must have sent ‘em! Stand by for trouble!”

CHAPTER III

OUTLAWED

AGAIN Steve Amery was puzzled. If Chet Cavennis had sent these men from the Wompa-tuck, why was Dan Hardy alarmed? Probably they brought a message from the Wompa-tuck chief, explain-

ing why he had failed to keep the appointment at Broken Ax. They might even be here to guide him to Camp Three.

The three men came inside, with the tallest of them leading, the others crowding close behind. And suddenly Amery knew that they must have overheard at least part of the conversation between him and Dan Hardy. They came directly toward him, and when they were within arm’s reach they stopped. The first man smiled.

“I hear,” he said, “that you’re aimin’ to get to Camp Three. We’re headin’ that way now. Maybe you’d like to go along with us!” It sounded fair enough; it was just what Steve Amery had expected, but it had a peculiar effect on Dan Hardy.

“Gavin,” said the old man sharply, “wherever he’s goin’ or what he’s goin’ to do makes no never mind! He doesn’t savvy the play, but *I* do!”

“Keep out of this!” snarled the other. “We’ve had you pegged for a long while, Hardy! One of these days you’re goin’ down the trail with your tail feathers smokin’. Cavennis knows how you stand!” He swung back to Amery. “You goin’ along with us?”

Amery looked him over calmly. Ever since he had arrived in Broken Ax somebody had been rubbing his fur the wrong way. Old Dan Hardy had stirred him up; then there was Pete Wister. Now these strangers offered thinly veiled challenge. His head ached for that drink. The whole damned place was crazy! Everybody seemed to be walking around with a chip on his shoulder. What was back of all these threats and counter threats? Of a sudden his anger flared. He was sick of being pushed around!

“Who,” he demanded of the big man, “sent you to see me? Caven-

nis? Why didn't he come himself? Or"—and his voice dripped sarcasm—"was he too busy with something else more important?"

The big man scowled. "You'll learn to clap a choker on that tongue of yours if you aim to last long in these parts," he said unpleasantly. "We were sent to fetch you to Camp Three. That's all the orders I had, an' I don't draw on my imagination none. You goin' along sensible, or do we have to take you?"

Old Dan Hardy still had the ancient rifle. He had been in the act of handing it over to Amery when Gavin and the others entered. Now he lifted it threateningly.

"Gavin," he warned, "I've seen you take others that came into this camp, and I've stood back and said nothin'. This time I'm goin' to *do* somethin'. You start any rough stuff in my place and I'll lay the three of you in a row!"

Anger reddened the big man's face. "Why, you damned old hooty owl!" he jeered. "Reckon you need a lesson!" He moved with astonishing quickness, and before old Dan Hardy could swing the gun muzzle upward, Gavin had twisted it from his grip. A straight-arm shove with the heel of Gavin's hand sent the old man lurching against the counter. "Now," began Gavin, turning to Amery. But the latter had come to life in his own fashion.

That blow, which had almost felled old Dan, touched off something inside Amery. He was jumpy and nervous anyway, and there was the call to battle in the air. He jerked the gun from Gavin's hands and swung it about his head, holding it by the stock. The slashing gun barrel just missed the three, who jumped back in astonishment and alarm.

"Outside, you damned thugs!" he raged. "Soon as I get to Camp

Three I'm going to fire the lot of you!" He charged and they broke and fled.

But in the doorway they jammed for a moment, and Amery fell upon them, using the gun as a club to beat them over heads and shoulders. They got through at last, yelling, and he kept after them. But just outside the door something unexpected happened.

The gun jerked in Amery's hands to the recoil as it was discharged. There was a loud report, a cloud of blue smoke from the old black-powder charge it contained. Astounded, Amery almost dropped the gun, all but blinded by the explosion and the dense blue smoke. Yet it seemed that the weapon fired still again, for he heard another shot. And then it was over, with one man lying there on the planks, writhing and clutching at his chest where blood spurted from a wound almost over his heart. His muscles jerked convulsively for a moment, then he went limp. Gavin and the other man were fleeing down the street.

AMERY stood there with widened eyes, staring unbelievably at what he saw. Then Dan Hardy was at his elbow.

"Hell's cinders!" exclaimed the old man. "You've killed him deader'n a woodchuck!"

Amery shuddered. "But I didn't!" he protested. "The gun went off by accident in the air. It missed him. There was another shot. I heard it!"

"You fought, boy," Dan Hardy went on unheedingly, "like old Steve Amery would have done—up and swingin', even though they was three to one. Another shot, you say? I heard it myself. But it's no matter right now. You had the gun, and that bullet plowed right through him. Jim Deese is the name of this

man. He was one of Cavennis' slug-gers. No way of provin' that the bullet which got him didn't come from your gun. Thunder! I never figgered that old fusee was loaded all the time I been keepin' it around."

Amery was staring dully at the dead man.

"Anyway," Hardy decided, "it puts the run on you, boy. Who else *could* have killed him? That's what folks will be wantin' to know. Course, you can claim self-defense, but you wouldn't stand much chance in court, what with you runnin' away from the law when it happened. Now, by thunder, you've got to take to the hills, until this can be straightened out. If it ever can. There's only one place to go—Painted Valley. The Wizard will help you out, help you to keep clear. He'll do it because of old Steve Amery!"

"But I'm not going there!" retorted Amery. "I'm going to Camp Three. Cavennis has got to understand what happened. Gavin will carry the story to him, and I've got to tell him the truth. He can straighten this out. Dammit, man, the Wompatuck is worth millions! I've got *that* to back me up!"

Old Dan Hardy shrugged hopelessly and turned away. "No use arguin' with an Amery! Waal, now, if you're set on it, why, there's no use stoppin' you! Bingo!" he called. Presently the boy, looking a little scared and awed, appeared from behind the store.

"Look sharp now!" commanded Hardy. "Jim Deese is dead. They'll be hustlin' up here in a minute. That gang down at the yarder has knocked off already. What I want you to do, Bingo, is to show Steve Amery, here, the trail. Understand? The trail to Camp Three! You be

mighty careful, son, that he doesn't get off it. You savvy that?"

The boy eyed the old man in puzzled fashion at first, then nodded his head.

"Amery," said Dan Hardy, turning back to the younger man, "you've got to hustle now. Your pack board is loaded, you've got a gun, and I'll dig up a couple more boxes of shells. Like as not, you'll need 'em! Bingo will get you started. After that you're on your own! But if you need a hand later, why, I ain't forgot that the old Steve Amery was the best friend I'll ever know!"

They shook hands silently. "Hardy," declared Amery, "I'm depending on you. I didn't kill this man, but somebody in Broken Ax did. That person is probably still about. If I knew where to look—"

"But you don't!" Hardy interrupted. "Leave all such to me. I might give a close guess right this minute, but it wouldn't do any good. They've put the sign on *you*! It's time to pull back out of sight until you can get organized." Suddenly his old eyes seemed to have a far-away expression. "Maybe you'll find what you want to know in them hills. Old Steve Amery went there fifty years ago and came out with what he went after. Son, it's up to you!"

That was true, Amery realized, yet his confidence was unshaken. Once he reached Chet Cavennis, all this would be cleared up. Cavennis ran the Wompatuck for the heir to the Amery fortune; it was his job to make good, he had to. They wouldn't hang anything on Steve Amery, not with the power of the Wompatuck behind him. But old Dan Hardy had done the best he could; the only difficulty was that he seemingly didn't understand about Cavennis. Steve Amery nodded to

the old storekeeper again, then turned hurriedly to follow the boy Bingo toward the hills. He was around the store building and away before the first of the men from the yarder reached the place. And near sundown, he was deep in the hills.

THERE was an uneasy moaning in the tops of great firs and cedars as a freshening wind came down from the summits. The trail still pitched sharply upward, with many turns and switchbacks, but it was a plain trail, easy to follow, and Steve believed that he would be over the worst of it before the threatening storm broke. But the stiff climb and the heavy pack on his unaccustomed shoulders made sweat bead his forehead.

"At least I won't run into Gavin and that other man," he reasoned. "They've likely gone on to Camp Three, if they're not still hanging around Broken Ax. Chet Cavennis will understand how it happened. He's *got* to, as long as he's working for me and the Wompatuck!" The thought was reassuring and his spirits rose.

Yet he must not make a mistake about the trail. There was a fork up ahead, Bingo had said. "She breaks off," the boy had explained, "beyond a gully which you cross on a foot log. Right fork takes you to Camp Three."

"Where does the left fork lead?"

Bingo hesitated, eying him curiously for a moment. "To Painted Valley, and the Wizard," he replied. Then, after a new pause, "If Paw wouldn't give me hell, I'd sneak along with you, mister! I'm right curious to see what's goin' to happen!"

"Nothing is going to happen," Amery had told him flatly. "All I want to do is reach Camp Three.

Then I'll have things going my way."

Bingo chuckled mysteriously and an important look came into his eyes. "Mister," he declared, "you've got plenty to learn." He turned away to leave, but Amery stopped him.



"Bingo," he said on sudden impulse, "have you got any idea who fired that second shot back in Broken Ax? The one that killed Jim Deese?"

"Me?" the boy asked innocently. "Paw always reckons I'm too young to have ideas. If *he* doesn't know, how you figure I do?" He closed his lips firmly and vanished down the back trail. But Amery continued to stare after him thoughtfully. Bingo *did* know something, more than he would admit! But for some reason, old Dan Hardy had clamped silence on him, the reluctant silence of the hills. Amery shrugged and went on.

The sun dipped and the blue-black shadows melted into a gloom which crept through the deep woods, getting thicker ever minute. By and by, there came a whispering murmur from ahead, and he knew that it was rain, for he could make out black clouds sweeping down from the heights. Then, abruptly, the storm struck.

It was time to hole up. There was a fierce blast of wind, then the rain fell in driving sheets. Amery took shelter under a wide-spreading cedar and waited patiently for the gale to pass. So terrific was the downpour

that he knew a cloudburst must have occurred among the higher peaks.

While he huddled there, his thoughts ranged back over what had happened in his life recently. That money he was supposed to have stolen; why, it was no theft at all! Even if he did squander it, the money was his to use as he pleased. His checks had always been made good, yet now the bank had refused to honor an over-draft for twenty thousand! That, it itself, was queer, mighty queer. The bank had apparently been willing to let him face the charge of grand larceny, for obtaining money on a fraudulent check. The holders of those checks wouldn't have any mercy; they'd see him in prison for ten years if necessary, to get their money. Damned gamblers and crooks! But why hadn't the bank at least got in touch with Chet Cavennis? They had seemed strangely disinterested at Amery's suggestion. As for himself, he couldn't reach Cavennis at all, save by going into the hills to Camp Three. But at least he had got away from the law, which must be on his trail at this moment. Up here, he argued, would be the last place they'd look for him.

"I'll give Cavennis a combing over when I see him," Amery vowed. "Maybe he doesn't know that the Wompatuck is rightfully mine now, under the terms of the trust agreement. I'll make that Gavin hard to catch, too, unless he helps me get out of that jam at Broken Ax."

Unlucky! That's what he was. Mere chance had turned him into a fugitive at the beginning. Another bad turn of the wheel had made him appear as a killer. It was all damned nonsense! But he told himself that once he was clear, he'd watch his step hereafter.

"By thunder, I was in such a hurry

to leave that I forgot that drink old Dan Hardy offered me!" Standing there beneath the cedar limbs while the rain poured about him, the reaction from the climb gave him a chill. He could use that drink now, all right, to keep warm. But the labor of the trail had sweated the alcoholic fumes out of him; his nerves felt better and his head clearer. He knew now, that old Dan Hardy had been right in warning him against drinking on the trail.

THEN the mountain storm was gone as suddenly as it had come, and the woods grew lighter. The black clouds no longer obscured the nearly vanished sun. There might be half an hour of twilight left, and Amery wanted to reach that fork in the trail before night came in earnest. He shouldered his pack once more, picked up the old rifle, and went on, sloshing along a trail now rutted and muddy. Ten minutes later the trail ended.

There was a gully at his feet and at the bottom of it a muddy stream still roared on its way to the lowlands. The sides of the gully were deeply scored by the flood, and a hundred feet downstream he made out a large log which had evidently been washed down from above.

"That's the foot log Bingo told me about," he decided. "The fork must lie just beyond." He began working his way down the side of the gully, seeking a way across. It was only a temporary setback; he told himself. Probably he'd find a log jam over which he could cross, or he might even be able to ford the flooded creek. But it was rough, slow going down there, and what little daylight was left, seemed to fade out rapidly by the time he reached the bottom. Darkness lay thickly upon the land when he did

finally climb out of the ravine after wading waist-deep through the creek.

He could find no trail here and surmised that he had gone farther downstream than he had realized. But the fork of the trail which lay to the right, was the one which would take him to Camp Three, so Bingo had said. "Bound to cut it if I keep bearing upstream," he reasoned. He kept on through the rain-soaked brush, fighting his way step by step, in a jungle so dense that it seemed a bear could scarcely have got through. Night had come so blackly that he could hardly see where to set his feet. After perhaps thirty minutes of struggling through, with the effort nearly exhausting him, the brush vanished abruptly. He was on the trail at last!"

"Whooy!" he exclaimed, slipping off his pack, "here's where I camp!" He was now deep in the hills, night was upon the land, and if he was hunted, either as a result of twenty thousand dollars' worth of worthless checks, or, more probably, for the death of Jim Deese, they wouldn't find him before morning, at least. A feeling of strengthening security came to him as he got out the bottle of matches old Dan Hardy had stoppered for him, and blessed the veteran's forethought. His clothes were wet from the rain and sweat wrung from his body by arduous labor, and it was probable these matches were the only dry ones he had.

By the light of a match he made out a little natural clearing a few paces off the trail itself, and chose it for his camp site. The creek was too far back to reach, but he discovered a pool of rain water which would do for coffee. A broken stump yielded a few pitchy splinters which started his fire, and there was plenty of down stuff which would burn, once a start had been made. He opened

a can of beans, heated them, and drank his coffee scalding hot. Sitting there by the crackling fire, a feeling of peace and contentment came to him. By and by, when the fire had died, he wrapped himself in his blankets and composed himself for slumber. Almost instantly, he was lost in his dreams.

When he awakened at last, shaking with chill as the cold of the mountain night struck through his dank clothing, the fire was dead. He got up with the intention of flapping his arms and restoring sluggish circulation. But as he gained his feet his ears caught a sound which did not belong to the ordinary night noises of the woods. It was the muffled breaking of a twig. A moment later the sound was repeated, and now he knew why he had been aroused so suddenly. It was not cold alone which had done it. Something was moving along the trail!

CHAPTER IV

WATCH IN THE DARK

AMERY froze, but not before he had reached out and got hold of his rifle, which had been standing against a tree. The weapon had been leaning with muzzles downward resting on leaves, so that possible rain during the night might not run down the barrel. He had been a little astonished that he knew this woodsman's trick; maybe it was something which he had remembered from the many stories his grandfather had told him. Several times he had been rather surprised that he felt so at home in the woods when, so far as he could recall, he had never spent a night in the wilderness before. But he knew intuitively what to do, and his knowledge must have come from the teachings of old Steve Amery, implanted in a boyish mind quick to

receive and to retain impressions.

He stiffened as a shadowy figure moved along the trail, with a light crunch of gravel.

Otherwise the night was steeped in unutterable quiet. The woods were hushed as though breathless in anticipation of something about to happen. The darkness now was not so intense and Amery knew that the moon was rising, although still hidden behind peaks. Suddenly the figure on the trail became more distinct. He saw that it was a man.

It was impossible to distinguish the stranger's features, but Amery could make out a rifle in his hands. The man was moving slowly, stooped as though peering at the ground. Undoubtedly, he was trying to pick out a trail, and Amery wondered if his own sign was plain. He was glad now that the fire was out, but realized that a seasoned woodsman might even be able to smell lingering traces of smoke. Once the man turned until he faced directly toward Amery, but the latter decided that the shadows hid him well and that he had not been seen. A moment later the figure had vanished. Yet in that brief glimpse of the darkness-shrouded face, Amery felt a peculiar twinge of recognition.

He had seen the man before; of that much he was certain, but how or when, there was no way of telling.

Minutes passed as he waited. "Maybe he knows I'm here and is watching to see me make a move," he reasoned. But nothing happened. Convinced at last, that the other had actually gone on he was about to warm himself by means of physical exercise when there came faintly to him the sound of a gunshot.

On the heels of it he heard a human cry of pain. There was another shot, then silence. Amery listened long, hardly breathing, but he

heard no further sound. There was a little prickling sensation at the back of his neck, and he felt a chill that did not come wholly from the sharp tang of the night. The woods grew lighter almost abruptly as the moon at last lifted above the peaks.

Amery considered the situation. His camp site was now revealed more or less plainly to anybody who might be passing along the trail. No longer did he have that feeling of security. He began gathering his stuff. It was not far to daylight, not more than an hour, as he figured. Somehow, he wanted to be far away from this spot when dawn broke, for suddenly he had the feeling that no longer was there safety in the woods. The spectacle of that sinister figure slinking along the trail, the gunshots and the cry; these gave him a qualm of uneasiness that had him peering at the coverts about him, as though half-expecting to see an enemy at any moment. With his outfit assembled and on the pack board at last, he started off along the trail in the direction he had been going. He was fully aware that this was the direction the stranger had taken, and from whence came the gunshot. But he moved warily and with as little sound as possible, and always he carried the old .44 repeater ready in his hands.

"This," he told himself irritably, "is a lot of damned nonsense! Why should I be worried? Who's going to waylay me? Once I get to Camp Three and give Chet Cavennis the facts, all this trouble will clear away!" It sounded all right, and yet, somehow, it seemed to lack conviction.

Always his mind kept going back to old Dan Hardy. The latter had acted queerly, so far as Cavennis was concerned. What could that mean? Dan Hardy was close-mouthed, after

the manner of hillmen, but it seemed that several times he was on the point of divulging things which he felt Steve Amery should know.

THE moon lifted higher and the sky likewise, began to lighten with the false dawn which precedes the day. He was not traveling fast; there should be a long hike ahead of him yet before he reached Camp Three, and likewise, he was on guard, not forgetting that slinking figure which had passed him on the trail, nor the cry he had heard and the gunshots. The trail climbed higher and higher, then with startling abruptness, it broke through a narrow pass and began twisting downward. Yet as he reached this summit he paused and stared ahead uncertainly.

So far as he could see, the character of the country appeared to have changed abruptly. The trees were entirely different, for one thing. He had been passing through stands of gigantic firs and cedars. These trees, as nearly as he could make out, were large maples and alders. He could tell that by the fallen leaves banked along the trail. Even in the weak light he could make out that the leaves were colored by the first light frosts of this autumn season, yellows and browns and probably reds as well, although he could not see well. The place ahead stretched off infinitely into the gloom but seemed to be rimmed with jagged peaks.

Something stirred in the brush nearby, and Amery swung up his gun suddenly. A moment later he saw a bulky shape moving from behind a clump of brush. His teeth clenched in a moment of panic as he saw it was a bear—undoubtedly, a grizzly! Then he remembered the gun in his hands.

He lifted the rifle and took aim,

yet held fire. For the bear, although it saw him plainly, gave no evidence that it intended to attack. It stood there but a few paces off, a monster in shaggy coat, its small, piggish eyes staring at him with mild curiosity. Amery waited. Common sense told him that it would be a mistake to start the battle; it was improbable that he could kill the grizzly with a single shot, and once aroused the beast would be hard to stop. Besides, the bear seemed to have only the most peaceful intentions, for after regarding him casually for a moment, it moved off through the brush, head held low to the ground.

Amery lowered the gun and wiped sweat from his forehead. He was glad that he had managed not to lose his wits in the crisis. It might have been that there lingered in his mind some of the teachings of the old grandfather who had told him stories of the woods, and the ways of the wild creatures therein. At the same time, this grizzly had acted remarkably calm, almost as though it were tame!

Amery started again on the trail which led downward. But something else puzzled him now. If those shots and the cry he had heard were concerned with the shadowy figure of the man he had seen skulking along the trail, why hadn't he found evidence of the possible clash? Here and there he could make out the tracks of the other—prints of moccasin-shod feet in the soil which had been drenched by the cloudburst—but no sign of the man, nor of anybody else. He shook his head, telling himself that the mystery didn't concern him, anyway. All he wanted was to get to Camp Three. It couldn't be many miles ahead.

Once over the summit, the light grew stronger, and the rich colors of the woods became more vivid. He

began to see other animals. Something grayish-brown and ghostly appeared around a bend in the trail below and he stopped as he saw it was a wild cat. But the creature did not appear alarmed. It stared at him for a long moment, then turned aside and vanished in the brush. Amery could have shot it, but there was no necessity to do so. Besides, he had the feeling that it was more desirable for him to move as silently as he could through the woods. A gunshot would betray his presence. There seemed no reason why he should be uneasy on that score, and yet he wanted to reach Camp Three and Chet Cavennis without inviting any further clash. These hills were mysterious, and there was an undercurrent of menace in them which he could not fathom, yet which he could sense; like that man slinking along the trail, the gunshots, the cry. Likewise, he could not forget that the death of Jim Deese back there in Broken Ax had set into motion new forces with which he might have to cope.

A deer trotted around the trail ahead and stopped to eye him from a distance of no more than ten paces. Like the wild cat, it did not appear frightened of him, yet it swung its head and looked back in the direction whence it had come. It seemed uneasy, and presently whistled at Amery and then stepped off the trail. A moment later he saw a young, black bear galloping up the trail, awkward in its rolling gait. It was also disturbed. It looked casually at Amery and then merely loped around him as it went on, so close that he could almost have reached out and touched it with the muzzle of his gun.

"Queer," he told himself. He had the old rifle ready, but he had no desire to use it. These wilderness

creatures seemed to accept him as merely another denizen of the deep woods.

Then suddenly he heard the pound of a man's running feet. There was no mistaking it; the clink of steel-shod boots on gravel in the trail. Holding his gun at ready, Amery stepped quickly off the trail and took up a position behind the trunk of a big maple. He surmised that this was the thing which had caused the wilderness creatures' uneasiness. Peering through the brush, he saw the running man for an instant.

But in that moment, Amery's eyes had taken in several details. The man carried a rifle trailing from his right hand. The left arm hung uselessly at his side. There was a dark streak down the sleeve from a point high on the shoulder. The man was wounded! Yet that was not so surprising in itself, as was the fact that this was one of the men who had been with Gavin at Dan Hardy's store in Broken Ax, and who had fled with Gavin when Deese was killed!

CHAPTER V

TRICKED

AT once, Amery's mind jumped to a conclusion. *This* must have been the man who passed his camp on the trail! But second thought convinced him he was wrong. This man wore boots; the other had worn moccasins. Still, it made little difference. Moccasins or boots, neither might be worn by any hillman up here. It was hardly a clue useful in identification. But Amery was certain of one thing—that this wounded man was involved in some way with that shooting he had heard.

"He's running *away* from Camp Three!" Amery suddenly realized. "Then what happened? Where's

Gavin?" He had the bewildering sense of being enmeshed in a series of events in which he had no personal interest, yet which held a menace grim and unmistakable. This atmosphere of violence could not be normal in the hills. Could it have been brought about by his presence? What was the reason for it? Still trying to answer the questions that churned chaotically in his mind, he stepped out of hiding and went on. The trouble, whatever it was, couldn't concern him. Again he told himself that all he needed was to see Chet Cavennis.

The sun came up flaring above the peaks, driving away the chill of the autumn night. Now the woods through which he was passing were blazing with gorgeous colors, like splashes of paint. The trail leveled out at last and he knew he was at the bottom. It twisted away through a forest which seemed alive with wild creatures.

Rabbits hopped out in the trail in front of him and sat up with calm assurance, unafraid. Coveys of grouse scuttled among the leaves but did not fly at his approach. More than a few times he saw deer standing close to the trail, regarding him with curious eyes as he passed. But the fact most significant to him was that these wild folk seemed devoid of fear. He had seen animals wilder than this in city parks! It was one reason why he did not shoot. A taste of fresh meat would have gone well; it would be hours before he could reach Camp Three. Yet the thought of murdering any of these trusting creatures, somehow went against the grain.

Through a break in the trees ahead Amery saw a column of blue smoke. Surprised, he halted a moment to consider it. The smoke could hardly come from Camp Three, unless he

had traveled farther than he had believed. It might come from the fire of some trapper or woodsman; it might even be concerned with the clash which had sent that wounded man hurrying past on the trail, trying desperately to get out of the place. Amery fingered the rifle, considering the possibilities. Then he saw the smoke disappear for a moment, and rise above the trees in a series of puffs.

"Funny about that," he reflected. "Looks like a sort of Indian signal!" It came to him that if that were true, that it *was* a signal, the substance of the message might easily refer to himself! Yet how could anybody know he was in the place? He had not been seen; he was certain of that.

"Nerves," he told himself. "Getting jumpy again!" But this time there was no liquor handy with which to steady himself; in fact, he hadn't thought much about a drink since leaving Dan Hardy's store.

He continued to watch the smoke column and presently it vanished. So much for that. But there came to him then a feeling that, after all, he was not the only human being nearby. He had the sensation of being watched suspiciously. But his most careful scrutiny of the thickets revealed nothing. A little more warily he went on. He wanted to get to Camp Three without delay. No telling what Cavennis might think or do. By now Cavennis must have the story of Gavin and that man who had been with him—and who had fled up the trail, wounded. Amery quickened his step, rounded a bend in the trail and stopped abruptly, flinging up his gun. A few paces ahead of him in the trail stood a cougar so big that Amery at first could not believe the evidence of his own eyes.

THE great cat regarded him with narrowed eyes which seemed to be chipped from cold topaz and jade. Its ears were flattened to its skull and its long, rounded tail swayed gently back and forth. At sight of the man the cat lifted its head and bared a set of ivory fangs—and it seemed to Amery that it was not so much a snarl as it was a grin. His finger was tightening on the trigger when he heard a voice, sharp and insistent, "No!" If you shoot him, I'll . . . I'll kill you!"

Astonished, Amery half-lowered the rifle and turned. The girl, Jana Wister, stood beside a nearby tree, a gun in her hands, her face set with determination.

Amery let go a sigh of relief, and grinned at her. "Sorry! I didn't know he was tame. I figured he was all set to charge!" Then the surprising aspect of the situation struck him. "But you! What are you doing here? You mean to say that big cat is actually harmless?"

"I raised him from a kitten." Her voice, just as he had expected it would be, was flowing and easy, but there was suspicion and a touch of coldness in it. "What am I doing here? Suppose you tell me what *you're* doing here?"

He didn't like the way she asked the question. There was challenge in her manner. "It's not any secret," he replied stiffly. "I'm on my way to Camp Three!"

The statement seemed simple enough and mild, and he couldn't account for its effect on her. She straightened suddenly as though he had threatened her. "Camp Three? Then your name is Steve Amery, as Dan Hardy said?"

He shrugged and nodded. What difference did it make if she knew? Certainly she couldn't know why he

had come into the hills in the first place; it was equally unlikely that she had heard of the shooting in Broken Ax the previous day. "That's right! This trail goes to Camp Three, doesn't it?"

Again she looked at him queerly. He saw anger come into her face. But there was also doubt. "You ask *that*," she declared finally, "and yet you know! You seem sure of yourself!" He saw her glance behind him sharply, as though she half-expected to see somebody else there. Then she said something to the cougar and the big cat moved on noiseless pads to her side and stood there, watching the man curiously with its cold, lambent eyes. Amery was puzzled and impatient.

"What's all the mystery about?" he demanded. "You act as if you're scared half to death! I don't mean any harm. All I want is to get to Camp Three, and the quicker the better. If you've satisfied your curiosity about me, I'll be moving on!"

He waited, but she said nothing. Then he turned away and started off on the trail as he had been following it before. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw that the girl and the cougar had fallen in behind and were trailing him, only a few paces at the rear. She still carried the gun at ready.

Suddenly he stopped and swung around. As he did so, she half-lifted the gun and the cougar came up closely beside her and stared at Amery with unfriendly eyes, lips wrinkling in a silent snarl. This time, it was plain to Amery, the big cat meant business! Yet it made no move toward him; it simply stood there as though awaiting a command from the girl.

"Listen," he demanded irritably, "will you tell me what kind of blasted

nonsense this is? You prow along behind me with that gun and that big cat of yours as though you were guarding a prisoner!"

The girl's eyes twinkled and were sober again. "That's exactly the way it is, Steve Amery!" she replied in a low tone. "You *are* a prisoner! Do you mean to tell me that you don't understand why?"

AMERY, in sudden fury, dropped the butt of his rifle on the ground. "Is everybody in this country crazy? You tell me I'm a prisoner! I hear shots, see smoke signals. I meet a wounded man on the trail and—"

"You did?" Her voice was quick and sharp. "Where did he go?"

"How do I know? Not that I give a rap! What's all this about? Even the animals in this place are queer, and they're the only living things that don't seem to be afraid! Listen, sister, I've had enough of this nonsense! Your prisoner, hey? Maybe you figure to start that cat after me! If you do—"

"Nothing will happen—except to *you!*" she cut in. "Steve Amery, you are either the biggest liar I've ever met, or the biggest fool! You say you saw a wounded man. There may be others who are not wounded, but dead! And there'll be more!" Her voice rose in excitement. "Don't you really know what's happening?" The blank look on his face apparently seemed to her to be genuine. "You, Steve Amery of the Wompatuck, are *here*, of all places! You may have some of your men following, but it won't do you any good!"

"Sister, you're crazy!"

She laughed a little wildly. "Crazy? I think *you* are, Steve Amery! This is battle ground you're standing on! You and your Wompatuck will fight and kill to get it; we Wisters will fight and kill to keep it! Now, turn around and march! I'm taking you to the Wizard!"

"The Wizard?" Amery demanded in amazement. "But you said this was the trail to Camp Three!"

"So it does lead to Camp Three—if you follow it long enough!" She lifted her gun threateningly. "Start moving! The Wizard will be waiting!"

Steve Amery's thoughts, confused though they were by what he had heard, nevertheless, fastened on one fact—what the boy Bingo had told him about the trail. There came back to him the strange look that passed between Dan Hardy and the boy when the latter had received instructions to show Amery the trail to Camp Three. "Take the right fork," Bingo had said. Had old Dan Hardy tricked him for some unknown purpose?

"One thing," Amery said quietly. "The right fork of this trail leads to Camp Three?"

The girl shook her head. "Of course not! The right fork leads to where you are now—to Painted Valley!"

Then she looked sharply past Amery and, despite himself—for he feared a trick—he turned his head, following her gaze. He saw Pete Wister standing there, rifle at ready, his beard-stubbed face flushed with murderous rage.

Will Steve Amery be forced to fight Pete Wister? Who is the Wizard, and why did Bingo misdirect Steve to the Painted Valley? In what strange conflict has Steve become involved? Read the answers to these questions in the second installment of this gripping serial, appearing in next week's issue.



STORMY ON THE LASSO

BY CHERRY WILSON

"Oh, all jump up, an' all come down.
Grab your honey, an' 'round an' 'round—"

HANDS clapping, feet stamping time, looking ludicrously like his feathered namesake lifting for flight, Wild Goose Bill was calling the dance at the Oxbow school on the shallow ford of Lasso Creek. It was a torrential July night. Over Wild Goose Bill's calls, over the beat of fiddle and feet, the dancers could hear the pound of rain on the roof, its sluicing from eave and window-pane, and the roar of the Lasso, al-

ready out of its banks, flooding the lowlands, making more impassable the roads and trails over which they'd come.

Yet it wasn't the Lasso's roar or the rain's pound that created the tension in the room, that put the quaver in old Idaho's bow, or caused the eyes of Wild Goose Bill to shift nervously from the sets to the door, as he called the quadrille. It was the certainty that feudal guns would blaze grim finale to this night's revelry!

For Rush Sherill was back in the

Loop Loop. And he'd made his talk that he'd be here, come hell or high water! And the Yangles were waiting to keep the vow they had long ago made—and kept at terrible toll: *To kill the Sherill who dared set foot on Oxbow soil!*

Out in all that downpour, as they had been since the first buckboard rolled in, the Yangle boys were waiting! Three of them—Mark, Clay and Sherm. Great, strapping, cat-eyed, cat-quick fellows, alike as peas in the pods of their yellow slickers. They hadn't gone into the dance. For custom in the Loop Loop decreed that guns must be left on the saddles or at the door. So they crouched among the horses at the hitching rail, watching, with catlike patience, each straggling arrival. While back in the hall:

"Oh, how'll you swap, an' how'll you trade
Your pretty girl for my old maid—"

Making the trade Wild Goose Bill was calling for amid shrill, taut-nerved laughter, the dancers were thrilling, for all their nervousness, to the audacity of this young Sherill who had so brazenly thrown his challenge in the teeth of the enemy. And some thought more must lay back of it. A girl, maybe. A girl he'd remembered from boyhood. And many a curious eye turned on the girl dancing in the set near the door. A blue-eyed girl, in a dress the color of her eyes, with gold-bronze hair framing a sad, sweet face. But, no, it couldn't be her! Not Rilla Sean! She was a Yangle!

"Oh, now you've traded, an' you've done
^{fine,}
You swing yours, an' I'll swing mine—"

She was a Yangle! Over and over, in her heart Rilla Sean was crying that, as she swung in the arms of

the cowboy who'd traded for her. She was a Yangle—or the same as one! For Sol Yangle and his wife had taken her, a year-old orphan, to raise as a sister for Clay and Mark and Sherm, before ever they came to the Loop Loop. The Sherills had been their close friends then, and the two families had settled on opposite side of Lasso Creek. The Yangle's Oxbow on the east; the Sherill's Cross Heart on the west. With the Lasso set for the boundary—

"Four hands half, an' dose-e-do,
Little more cinnamon, little more dough—"

Dancing, there, with the lightest feet and heaviest heart ever found on that floor, Rilla was remembering how the Lasso had been no barrier then, but only a shallow stream that a child could wade or play in. And she and Rush Sherill had crossed it back and forth to be together almost every waking hour, until the spring break-up, following a terrible winter seven years back, when ice jams, piling up on the shallows here, had forced the stream into a new channel that cut many sections of choice grazing land from the Cross Heart. Sol Yangle had claimed that land as Oxbow ground, for the Lasso, he held, was the boundary line! And when Tom Sherill, Rush's father, disputed him, bullets had flamed.

Bullets had flamed, and Tom was dead! His brother, Dan, killed Sol. Then another Yangle got him. So for two bloody years it went on. Nine men had died for the land this school set on! Every Sherill but Rush, who had been sent back to Wyoming to grow up with distant relatives beyond the range of Yangle guns. But now he was home—a man—and was coming here! Coming to his death!

A SHRIEKING high chord of Idaho's fiddle, Wild Goose Bill's stentorian bawl, "*Promenade all*," and the quadrille was over. Dancers leaving the floor were now aware of the angrier roar of the Lasso, the fiercer pound of rain, compared to which the downpour they'd come through that evening had been a mere drizzle.

"Lissen to 'er come!" yelled a puncher, throwing open the door to the unmuted rush of water. "Pitchforks, with saw logs for handles!"

Others, crowding up, saw, by the light streaming out, that the creek had now overflowed until the horses were standing in water ankle-deep, and glistening white fingers of foam were reaching almost to the school-house step!

"Bad place, here in the creek bottom," said an anxious voice, "if this gets much worse."

"I'd rather be here than on th' roads, till daylight," another argued cheerfully. "This schoolhouse is five feet off the ground. And there's plenty of run off—"

"All I hope," spoke a ranger in the door, his eyes rising to the three dark figures of Yangles, still maintaining their grim vigil, "is that nothin' thicker than water is spilled here tonight!"

So did they all hope! And somebody said optimistically, "Looks now like it might be. For he ain't here yet. An' nobody but a crazy man would tackle the ford, with the Lasso runnin' like that!"

In Rilla, too, a faint hope was born that Rush couldn't come. And while many of the men got into wraps to move the horses and vehicles to higher ground, she made her way to the platform where old Idaho sat, tuning his instrument. Idaho, beloved old minstrel of the Loop, and friend of Yangle and

Sherill alike through all the trouble, had, in years gone by, made many attempts to bring the warring factions together. His concern now was visible in the worried old eyes he raised to Rilla.

"Boys still out there?" he asked with a sober nod at the door.

She told him they were.

"Too bad," the old fiddler said. "Too almighty bad!"

Her lips quivered. "Oh, Idaho, I'm praying Rush won't come! That he can't cross the Lasso!"

"He'll come," old Idaho said, solemnly shaking his snowy head. "What a Sherill says he'll do will be done!"

"The Yangles, too, do what they say they'll do!"

Idaho knew. And he cried with a sincerity proven before this night was through, "Lass, I'd give my bow arm, if I could stop what will be done!"

He sighed, and raised his violin. For the tense crowd, eager for action, was clapping for another dance. Wild Goose Bill was stepping up on the platform to announce one when, through all the tumult of storm and handclap, they heard the loud creak of a window sliding up at the rear of the hall. And as every eye turned that way, a dripping figure swung lithely over the sill. A gasp went up.

Rush Sherill was there!

They knew him instantly, though he'd been five years away, and the boy they had known had become a man. A man who seemed to bring the other Sherills, dead and gone, alive in the room, for he had the same lean, sinewy frame, the handsome, reckless Sherill face, marked by a square, cleft chin, and long, dark eyes that could laugh or turn to ice in a breath.

They were laughing now as,

quickly closing the window, he tossed wet sombrero and slicker onto the bench by the wall, and faced the room with a grin that plainly said he expected a reprimand. And one was coming!

For Wild Goose Bill, his stern gaze on the low-swung guns Rush was wearing, had started across the room to him. Only to be halted midway by shouts from without, warning all that word had reached the Yangles that Rush Sherill was in the hall!

THERE was a clatter of boots on the steps, and the door was flung open. But Wild Goose Bill was there, arms widespread, barring the opening.

"Back up!" he ordered them sternly. "You can't come in here!"

But Mark Yangle, a step ahead of his brothers, tried to push past. "He tricked us!" he raged. "He mixed in with the men out there movin' their horses an'—"

"I don't know nothin' about that," Wild Goose Bill broke in. "But I know you ain't comin' in here, not with them guns on!"

And a dozen stern-faced ranchers were there, backing Bill, as he placed a hand on Mark's chest, forcing him out over the threshold.

"It seems to make a difference," Mark ground out, "who's got th' guns! You ain't takin' his!"

"He ain't stayin'," Wild Goose Bill said coldly.

"Then," countered Mark, "we'll wait! He can't get out without us seein' him!"

They backed away. The door shut. Men stood guard on it while Wild Goose Bill stalked on over to the window.

"You'll have to go, Rush." His voice was as stern as to any Yangle. "We can't have trouble in here."

The laughter faded from Rush's

eyes. "Not till I've danced, Bill."

"Then give me them guns. You'll get 'em back when you leave the hall."

Hesitating only a moment, Rush unbuckled his heavy belt and handed it over. "I'll be leavin' after this one dance," he told the caller, "and I'll take it as a favor if you'll make it a waltz."

Glad to grant what seemed to be a last favor for a man almost certainly doomed, Wild Goose Bill bawled to the hall:

"Pard-ners for a waltz."

Old Idaho's bow swept across the strings, and the sad, sweet strains of the old range favorite, "Dream Faces," filled the room. But nobody moved to dance to it. Breathlessly, all watched Rush Sherill.

They saw his eyes, slowly searching the floor, dwell fleetingly on the face of every girl there, passing at last to the platform where a girl stood with a hand on the back of Idaho's chair to steady her. A girl whose gold-bronze hair framed a pale, unforgettable face, and whose glorious eyes of larkspur blue, exquisitely matched in high-heeled slippers and party frock, were staring back, as if it were fate into whose face she was looking.

Straight before them all, Rush went up to her. "Rilla," he said quietly, "will you dance with me?"

She could not answer. Speech, thought, feeling, had forsaken her. Years back, almost overnight, the very name, memory of a Sherill had become a horror to stop all thought. Tonight, horror of Rush's coming had made those thoughts flee. But now that he was here before her, the tragic years might never have been. It was as if time had turned magically back, and this just was her old playmate from the Cross Heart asking her to come out and

sail boats on the creek, or play pirate on the old raft moored to its shore.

LIKE one in a spell, she stepped down from the platform into his arms. Slowly, they circled the floor. Other dancers silently swung in, dazed by sight of Rilla Sean dancing with the man whom her foster brothers were waiting outside to kill! And, for a long time, there was no sound, but the heavy overtones of rain, feet softly scraping and the sweet, thin tones of the violin.

It was Rush who broke the spell. Three times, in silence, they had swung the length of the hall. Then he said huskily, "I was afraid you wouldn't dance with me, Rilla."

The girl seemed to realize for the first time what she was doing, "I wouldn't!" she cried. "I *couldn't!* Oh, why did you ask me—a Yangle!"

She'd have pulled away from him then, but his arm tightened about her in the force of his denial, "You're not a Yangle."

"I am!" she flared loyally. "As much so as if I'd been born one. As much your enemy as Sherm, or Mark, or Clay!"

"You can never be my enemy, Rilla," Rush said quietly.

She looked away. "Oh, I prayed this rain would stop you!" she cried fiercely. "That you couldn't make the ford!"

"I didn't," he said. "I rode clean up to West Branch to get across."

"You were *that* determined to come—to start the old trouble up again!"

"It wasn't that, Rilla. I wanted to see you— Oh, I wasn't loco enough to think it was mutual. Naturally, you'd side with them. But I wanted to see you anyhow."

"You wanted to see me"—and never before had those blue eyes

held such bitterness—"so you came here armed—to take the lives of those I love, or have them take yours!"

"When I heard about this dance," Rush tried to make her understand, "I figured you'd be here. And I told somebody I was comin'. Then I was told the Yangles had said they'd be waitin'. So," he finished simply, "I *had* to come."

He had to come! For no Sherill had ever turned tail to a Yangle. He'd made his word good. He was here. But the odds were three to one he'd never leave alive. And Rush was thinking with strange indifference, as they circled the hall, that then the feud would be over. For he was the last Sherill.

Up on the platform, Wild Goose Bill leaned over to whisper in the old fiddler's ear, "You heard what he said, Idaho? He's leavin' when this dance is through!"

Idaho nodded.

"But he's safe while he's dancin' here."

"That's how I figger."

"Can you keep it up, Idaho?"

"Till daylight if I have to!"

And Idaho kept it up ten minutes, twenty, a half hour and more. Many dancers tired and left the floor, to knot up and watch in awed understanding of why Idaho was playing on. While outside, the rain fell, and the waters rolled down to swell Lasso Creek, which by now was rising above the schoolhouse step!

"I'm gettin' out while th' gettin's good!" declared one rancher, impelled by fear stronger than the fascination of the drama being enacted here. "I'd rather be bogged on the roads, than fished out of the Lasso!"

Others, hesitant to admit their fear until now, followed his example, splashing in water to their knees to

hitch the horses, drive up to the schoolhouse porch, load their families in and leave.

Mark Yangle, stationed outside the door, watched each group as it passed, to make certain Rush Sherill was not among them. While on the south side of the building, Sherm Yangle, crouching in the notch of a cottonwood, saw through the window the girl he'd always loved as a sister dancing with a Sherill and was hard put to it to hold his fire until Rush came out. On the north side, inflamed by the same sight, Clay, flat on the woodshed roof, consoled his wait with the grim thought that a Yangle guarded every exit!

And ever the rain fell harder. Ever the water rose higher. And in there—

"Keep it goin'!" pleaded Wild Goose Bill. "Mebbe we can drown th' Yangles out o' there—or damp their ardor!"

And old Idaho kept it going, though his bow arm was aching and the fingers of his left hand numb as they fell on the strings.

ONLY a half dozen couples remained on the floor. And at last Rush, drugged till now by the nearness of the girl he'd remembered through all his exile, awoke to the realization that this dance had gone far, far beyond the duration of any waltz. Was going on for him alone! And he stopped dead still upon the floor:

"Idaho's intentions are good," he told Rilla, "but they won't help here."

But Rilla's white hand remained on his shoulder. For it had come to her, as to Idaho and Wild Goose Bill, that Rush was safe while he was dancing here, so were her brothers!

Bravely her blue eyes lifted to his. "You asked me, a Yangle, to dance. Now I'm asking you—a Sherill!"

He knew why she was asking him. He knew it couldn't change anything. The moment was coming, soon or late, when he must go out. He said, as his arms fell back about her, "This waltz can't last forever. "But," feeling roughened his tone, "I wish it could, Rilla!"

It *would*, if it were up to her! For she'd seen her foster father carried in to die from a Sherill bullet seven years before! She'd seen Mother Yangle die every day of the years since then of heartbreak for him, for her brother, nephew, sister's husband, as she was dying by inches tonight, knowing her sons were taking up the old fight!

On and on, the fiddle played. Slowly, they waltzed to it. Now they were the only ones left on the floor. Almost the only ones in the hall. Then suddenly there was a commotion at the door, and one of the ranchers, who had gone out to hook up his team, was back, standing in the pools of water that ran from his slicker, yelling at the few remaining to leave the building while there was yet time.

"What we been catchin'," he yelled at them, "is the ragged edge of a cloudburst! She broke somewhere in the mountains. There's a four-foot wall of water comin' down the Lasso! Hank Lewis run into it a mile upstream. Most killed his horse outridin' it back to warn us. Says it'll be swimmin' water when she hits. Pile in my wagon! We'll pull up on th' flat, an' wait for daylight!"

The break in the wail of Idaho's fiddle was hardly perceptible. Wild Goose Bill was startled into full consciousness of their peril, but his eyes were on the couple near the plat-

form. Rush had come to a standstill again. And the caller heard him saying:

"This must stop now, Rilla. You've got to go with them!"

And Wild Goose Bill saw her arm tighten about Rush's shoulder, heard her steady answer, "Keep dancing." He leaned back to the old fiddler.

"Keep 'er goin', Idaho! No trickle in the mud is goin' to bluff that girl. We'll win out yet!"

Rush was swung back in step. And in that unreal, chaotic atmosphere, they circled the hall, once, twice. Then, with a rush and a roar, the flood was upon them! The schoolhouse rocked to the force of the unbridled waters, shuddered to the crash of driftwood, swirled down from the mountains. All was hideous uproar.

Her gaze on the open door, through which the last of the Loop Loop had taken frantic departure, Rilla saw a frothy finger of water stretch over the sill, across the floor, breaking at their very feet! But though Rush determinedly swung her toward this exit, she, as determinedly, reversed and swung back up the hall, which now held only herself, Rush, Idaho, and Wild Goose Bill.

"Keep it goin'!" Bill was pleading in Idaho's ear. "The worst of it's here, an' we're still above water!"

Gray with strain, his bow arm breaking at the socket, Idaho kept it going.

More waves of water rolled over the floor. His own face gray, Wild Goose Bill crossed to shut the door. And still Rilla Sean danced with Rush Sherill!

"I can't let you go on with this, girl!" Rush cried hoarsely. "It's too dangerous for you. If the foundations of this building go—"

Her face white as the foam on

Lasso Creek, Rilla said, "You're out of step."

"You're dead game!" Rush's dark eyes glowed with pride in her. "You always were. Even when we were little you had more nerve than all of us boys put together. Remember the time I got caught under the raft? Mark and the rest ran for help, but you swam under and freed my coat."

She wasn't remembering a thing, but what she had seen over Rush's shoulder as the last group fled—Mark still on the stoop out there, his eyes fastened on the door! And she knew Clay and Sherm were somewhere near.

"Keep dancin', Rush," she pleaded, with a pitiful tremor.

She never knew how long they danced, water splashing about their feet, the music unsteady under Idaho's numbed touch. And all the time Wild Goose Bill exhorted the fiddler, like a captain on the bridge of his sinking ship commanding his crew:

"Keep it goin', Idaho! I helped put the wall under this school. She'll stand!"

BUT even as he spoke, there was a terrific crashing as a flood-tossed log struck the north side of the building, shattering every windowpane, then a groaning and rending as supports on the south side gave way. And like a wounded buffalo that sinks to its knees and collapses in death, the Oxbow schoolhouse, with a crazy lurch, rolled over to lodge against the cottonwood, from which Sherm, watching in freezing horror, saw it blot into instant blackness.

In that black, as lanterns were overturned and thrown into extinguishing water, Rush and the girl were thrown from their feet and sent skidding down the steep-pitched

floor against the lower wall. Rush tried to rise, but was hurled back by the flood pouring in at windows and door, engulfing and half-drowning them, as they were caught and swirled in its mad vortex, like the benches, chairs, and every movable thing.

Yet desperately Rush clung to Rilla, grasping at any object to keep afloat, hearing, from somewhere near, the voices of Idaho and Wild Goose Bill, warning them not to try the door, but to get out through the windows, which were still above water.

Holding himself and Rilla up with the aid of a bench, Rush located a dim square of lesser black that he knew to be a window, and fought his way to it. Somehow he managed to hang to the ledge, while he knocked loose the broken edges of glass. Then he pulled himself through, and, hanging there with one leg over the sill, lifted the girl after him. They clung precariously to the slippery ledge.

Dimly, through the raining dark, Rush saw Wild Goose Bill clambering through the next window. Right behind him was old Idaho. Faint and far, across the water, he could hear the excited shouts of those who had sought the safety of the flat. And, close at hand, from the cottonwood that had caught the building, another voice, called frantically:

"Rilla! Rilla!"

The girl did not answer. But Rush, conscious of his responsibility for her danger, called back, "Rilla's safe."

There was a yell from the figure vaguely outlined on the wood-shed roof on their side of the building: "I see them, Sherm! Rilla an' him! They're over here on—" Clay's voice rose to a scream, "*They're gone!*"

For, as some last, hanging support gave way, the schoolhouse lurched again, breaking the girl's hold on the window sill. Rush caught her as she fell. But the wrench of her weight broke his own none-too-secure grip, and together they plunged into the churning water.

Rush's feet touched bottom, but, with Rilla in his arms, he was unable to hold it against the wild whirl of the floor. And they were caught up, whirled about, and borne into the blackness. He felt for bottom again, but couldn't reach it, and realized they must have been carried into the main channel of Lasso Creek!

Suddenly they were caught in the wash of some mighty object and Rush looked up to see the black, twisted mass of an uprooted tree rearing over them! He saw it too late to dodge, but, by some super-human effort, he heaved the girl up toward its branches. Then there was a terrible impact, the flash of a thousand lights, followed by stark blackness.

Through that void of nothingness, Rush heard Rilla calling his name. He tried to answer, but it brought on a paroxysm of strangling and coughing that roused him to the fact that he was lying prone on solid ground, and Rilla was working over him. He saw her terrified face, her tattered, sodden dress, her wet hair a glistening mass upon her shoulders. For the storm had gone, and, in the east, a dull, gray patch of dawn was showing.

Strength of body surging swiftly back, he saw, etched blackly on the lightning sky, the limbs of an uprooted tree that, somehow, seemed familiar.

"How did you do it, Rilla?" he cried wonderingly.

Her voice shaken by relief that he was unhurt, Rilla said, "I can't take the credit, Rush. When you pushed me into that tree, I managed to get hold of a limb, and catch you just as you were going under. The Lasso carried us here."

But Rush gave her the credit, nevertheless. He was on his feet now, standing unsteadily beside her. He felt her shivering with chill, and put his wet coat about her. And, holding it there, he looked about him, vainly trying to get his bearings.

"Where are we, Rilla?" he asked.

Familiar as she was with every inch of the Lasso, Rilla didn't know. "We're lodged on a bar somewhere. The flood has passed. See?" She pointed to the margin of water that had receded far from the tree that had carried them to safety. "It's falling almost as fast as it—"

SHE raised her head as they heard the sound of voices calling their names from somewhere upstream. And her eyes flew back to him. "They're coming!" she cried. "They're closer now. Oh, thank God, you can go!"

"Go?" Rush echoed blankly. "Where?"

"Why, home—to the Cross Heart! Oh, Rush, this is an answer to my prayer! The only way you could have left that hall without bloodshed. Go home, Rush, and forget this feud! Forget that range ever belonged to the Sherills! Oh, I know it's asking a lot, but my brothers will never swerve from their stand that the Lasso is the boundary line. And the land isn't worth the sacrifice of human life! Surely it can't mean so much to you."

He drew her closer, trying to make her understand, as he had in the

hall. "This land means nothing to me, Rilla. The Cross Heart has range to spare. But I can't take this way out. The Yangles called my hand when I said I'd be at that dance tonight. I've got to go back!"

In the relentless code of the range—a code no Sherill had ever violated—he had to go back, find the guns Wild Goose Bill had taken from him, or some other guns, and meet the Yangles. He had to go as soon as it was possible for him to get there. But he put off the moment, feeling the girl's heart beating against his own. However it turned out, this must be his farewell to Rilla. This stolen moment here, with the wild, storm-wracked world, gray in the first break of dawn, the inundated lowlands emerging in squashy islands, the nearing voices of searchers calling.

"I'll answer," Rush said quietly. "They'll come for you, Rilla."

Both started as a voice spoke up from behind them: "Reckon you won't need to do that."

And they whirled to face a figure as sodden as themselves—Mark Yangle!

With a scream, Rilla sprang between Rush and her foster brother.

"It's all right, Rilla," Mark said. "I ain't got a gun." And his tone was oddly gentle. "Couldn't swim with 'em," he explained his presence. "Threw 'em away when the schoolhouse pitched me in the Lasso, I landed below the ford on the west bank of th' creek."

He stepped closer, and they noted a strange bafflement in his face, and in his tone as he went on:

"Walked back to the school when th' water dropped, huntin' Rilla. Hunted all up an' down the creek. Managed to make my way here without wadin' no water to speak of."

Again, he paused, in that baffle-ment he seemed to expect them to share. But they just stared back, bewildered only that a Yangle was speaking to a Sherill in a tone that had no anger in it.

"Mebbe you don't savvy what that means?" said Mark. And when Rush admitted that he didn't, Mark pointed westward in the yellowing light. "Look! There's no creek between here and the Cross Heart."

Rush saw that now. The bar they were on stretched unbroken to the slope leading up to the Cross Heart. The sight bewildered him as much as it had Mark.

"Let me get this straight," he said slowly. "There's no creek between here and the Cross Heart. You walked from the schoolhouse here, without crossing the creek. That means—"

"It means," Mark Yangle broke in. "that the cloudburst heaved the Lasso back in its old bed. This land we're standin' on, the land the school is on, and all the range between and below, is on the *west* bank of the Lasso!"

AND as Rush and the girl dazedly grasped at this astounding fact, the first band of searchers swarmed up, led by Clay and Sherm, both wearing that baffled expression Mark had worn. Their eyes darted from him to Rilla, to Rush. They seemed uncertain what to do, but ready for anything. For *their* guns had not been lost in the Lasso!

There was hysterical joy in Rilla's cry: "Sherm—Clay—you heard what Mark said. Look! The Lasso is back in its old bed! This is Cross Heart land, like it used to be! There's nothing left to fight about. You always said the Lasso was the boundary line!"

"And the Yangles stand by what they say," said Sherm. "But—"

"Then the feud is ended!" the girl cut in happily. "Oh, boys!"—she turned to include Mark in her appeal—"let's think the cloudburst washed the land clean! And never, never let it be stained again!"

Mark looked at his brothers, sobered, chastened, as he had been, by the hours of agony they'd been through, believing this girl—and a real sister couldn't have been more dear to them—had died in the Lasso, in a brave attempt to prevent their staining that land anew! And seeing in their faces that they, no more than he, could refuse this thing she asked, Mark said to Rush: "The feud is ended, where we're concerned."

"That," Rush said fervently, "makes it unanimous."

"And if ever the Lasso jumps over again," Mark told him, "I'm thinkin' we can settle it and still keep the land clean."

"To make that sure"—said Rush Sherill, to the loud cheers of Wild Goose Bill, who had trailed up, as unruffled by his ducking as any feathered namesake ever to waddle out of water, and of old Idaho, happily reconciled to the loss of his violin, if it had played the tune to which the Lasso had wrought this miracle—"to make that sure, I'm cuttin' this range square in two, From now on, half of it is Oxbow land, no matter where the Lasso runs!"

"Fair enough," said Mark. "And it goes without sayin', we won't be trespassing your side of the line. But"—he paused to take in Rilla's happy face, then continued gravely, with emotion too great to conceal—"I reckon that don't apply to Rilla. She's not a Yangle!"



The half-crazy Indians filled Governor Bent's body with arrows and with bullets from his own gun!

THE STORY OF THE WEST

told in pictures and text by

GERARD DELANO

The territory of New Mexico was taken by the United States army under General Kearney without the loss of a single man. The construction of a fort (Fort Marcy) on a hill commanding the city of Santa Fe was begun at once and when it was nearly completed General Kearney, leaving a force for its protection and appointing Charles Bent as the first American governor, departed.

Governor Bent had scarcely taken office when revolt began to flare up at Santa Fe. The Mexicans stirred up trouble among the tribes of Pueblo Indians by giving them liquor and inciting them with tales of the terrible atrocities the gringos would perpetrate on them as soon as the war with Mexico was over.

The rebellion spread rapidly to outlying settlements and by early December many influential Mexicans were holding secret meetings. At last a date was set for a simultaneous uprising in which every gringo in New Mexico was to be massacred.

On Christmas Eve the ringing of the church bell at midnight was to be the signal for handing the Americans this gruesome Christmas present. The Americans, it was believed, would be off guard at that time enjoying the pleasures of the holiday. The Mexicans were to rush the plaza in Santa Fe, take the artillery and, training the cannon into the streets, mow down all who attempted to escape. Meanwhile drink-crazed Indians would carry on a ruthless house-to-house slaughter.

This plot was guarded with the greatest secrecy. The men were sworn not to even mention it to their wives. But a clever young American girl, married to a Mexican, managed to wheedle all the details out of her unsuspecting husband, and hurried with the report to warn Colonel Price, commander of the American forces in New Mexico. His prompt action suppressed the rebellion, but the Mexicans merely postponed the revolt.

In January, 1847, the storm broke. In Taos, where Governor Bent was visiting his family, a drunken mob of Pueblos and Mexicans took to the warpath on the nineteenth, murdered the sheriff, chopped

up the prefect's body into bits and then rushed the building which housed the governor and his family.

The frenzied mob, yelling the terrible war cry of the Pueblos, hammered on the door and windows. Finding all exits blocked by the mob, the inmates frantically began chopping a hole through the adobe walls into the adjoining house. Their neighbors were quick to help from the other side of the wall.

At last the opening was large enough. The children crawled through and Mrs. Bent followed. But before Governor Bent could escape, he was wounded by an arrow shot through the window. At the sight of his blood the Indians became utterly frenzied. Nothing could stop them now. They broke into the house, filled the governor's body with arrows and with bullets from his own pistols, scalped him, and stretching his scalp on a board, paraded it in a drunken orgy throughout the town.

When the news of Governor Bent's murder reached Colonel Price, he set out from the capitol with all the troops he could spare. These were augmented by a company of volunteers, for every American in Santa Fe grabbed up his rifle and insisted on doing his bit to keep New Mexico from reverting to the Mexicans.

Price and his force had to fight their way every inch of the entire sixty-odd miles, for when they were not being ambushed in the adobe villages or forested ravines, they were handicapped by deep snow and the intense cold.

Reaching Taos, they learned that the mob had fortified up in an Indian pueblo about three miles away. It took a full day of tough fighting to batter down their main stronghold, the adobe church. Finally the Indians were cowed and sued for peace, and the Mexicans, seeing themselves defeated, sneaked away.

The taking of Taos, the resultant public execution of those responsible for the revolt, crushed the uprising and no further attempt was made to drive out the Americans.

NEXT WEEK: THE OVERLAND STAGE.



HALF-PINT OF HAVOC

BY FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

SHORTY RAND rolled from his bunk when he heard the steamer whistle announce the boat's arrival at Totem Bay.

Shorty had boarded the steamer at Seattle. She had stopped at a

dozen small towns and salmon canneries, and Shorty's record was perfect. He had gone ashore each time and asked for a job. Some of the cannery superintendents had been curt in their refusal, others had let

him down easy and wished him luck. It all added up to just one answer: "No job."

Two months before, Shorty and his brother Ed had been developing a promising mining proposition down in Nevada. Ed had been caught in a cave-in and badly crushed. A lot of money was needed to put him on his feet again. The mine wasn't advanced enough either to produce an income, nor could Shorty borrow on it. There was only one thing left for Shorty to do, and that was to leave Ed in a hospital and get a job that would earn him enough to pay the bills.

Shorty had started working toward Seattle. Now he was Alaska-bound and still without a job.

He looked out of the porthole and saw a small wharf jutting out from a wooded shore. There was a mass of rock on which the cannery buildings had been erected, and beyond that a waterfall where a creek broke from the dense timber and reached salt water in a fifty-foot leap.

Shorty guessed there was a valley of some kind beyond. He saw shredded clouds resting on the higher peaks and a faint drizzle spilling downward. The spruces were glistening with drops from the recent shower, and when the sun broke through it looked like a setting of a billion diamonds. A raven squawked as he flapped awkwardly above the treetops.

Several cannery tenders and barges were moored to the wharf, and a conveyor was lifting silvery salmon from one of the barges to the fish house. Machinery was whining, and there was a rumble of trucks as men wheeled cased salmon to the storage room on the wharf. It looked to Shorty as if the entire process required a definite number of

human cogs, and as it appeared to be working smoothly, obviously no cogs were missing.

"It don't look like they needed any men there," he remarked to the man who shared the cabin with him.

"They don't," the man answered, "but now that I think of it, the superintendent of the Totem Bay cannery boasts that he's never yet refused a man work."

Shorty brightened. "Say, he must be a pretty fine gent. He's the man I'm looking for."

"Oh, no, he ain't," the other said dryly. "He'll put you to work, all right, but the job will be either so tough that you'll quit, or you won't cut the mustard and he'll have to fire you. That's the catch."

"Well, I might as well get a work-out," Shorty declared. He packed his battered bag and went ashore as soon as the gangway was lowered. He walked directly to the superintendent's office and asked a big man sitting at a desk, if he could see the boss.

"I'M the boss. Carder's the name," the man answered. Shorty took a good look and decided Carder was as tough as they come. He stood about six feet three inches and must have weighed close to two hundred and fifty pounds. But his poundage didn't run to fat; he was as solid as a brick house.

"Where do I put my stuff?" Shorty asked. "What bunk can I have, and what do you pay?"

The superintendent challenged him with a hard stare. "What makes you think you've got a job?" he asked.

"I heard you've yet to turn down your first man," Shorty explained. "So why should I take up your time asking for work?"

"It's true I've never turned a man down," Carder admitted. "But you're only a half a man."

"I'm a man and a half," Shorty contradicted, "and I'll expect pay and a half."

"Man and a half?" Carder snorted. "How tall are you? What do you weigh?"

"Five feet two inches, and I weigh a hundred pounds sopping wet," Shorty answered. "But I've got hair on my chest and brains in my head."

"Where do you get this man-and-a-half stuff?"

"I'm only half a man physically, but to make up for it I've got twice as much brains as the average man," Shorty explained gravely. "When you're a runt like I am you have to develop brains to get by."

"For example?"

"Well, if you gave me a job," Shorty explained solemnly, "and you got, kinda faint when I made good, instead of trying to catch you when you fell and getting crushed myself, I'd shove you over against the wall and make the wall do the work, if you get what I mean."

"I think you're a windbag," Carder growled. "But I won't break my rule even for a windbag and a runt. I'll give you a job, all right. If you last two weeks, I'll give you a fifty-dollar bonus, and if you get away with it a hundred percent, I'll give you five hundred dollars, plus your wages."

"What's the job?"

"Trap guard. Know what it is?"

"No," Shorty admitted, "I don't. To tell the truth, I don't know much about the salmon business. Cattle and desert mining are more in my line."

"We have fish traps," Carder explained. "Every so often the traps

are lifted and the salmon dumped into scows and brought to the cannery. The traps don't supply enough fish, so we buy some salmon from the trollers. Unless the traps are guarded, fish pirates, operating as trollers, raid the traps and sell us our own fish. Guards," he said significantly, "don't last long."

"Why?"

"Either they sell out to the pirates, and I find out about it, or the pirates run them off the trap."

"Why don't you brand your fish," Shorty inquired. "Then you'd know whether you were buying your own fish or not. You don't find cattlemen buying their rustled cattle."

Carder looked as if he were in a mood to commit murder then and there. "You're just a plain damned fool!" he roared. "How the hell could you brand fish?"

"I don't know," Shorty admitted, "but it seemed like a good idea. If it can't be done, though, it can't be done. Fishing isn't in my line, but I'll take the job. Nobody's going to bribe me, an' nobody's ever run me offn a job yet, so that leaves only murder. I've got to take that chance. Now one more thing."

"What?"

"Where does the five-hundred-dollar bonus come in?"

"Bring in evidence that'll convict one of those blasted pirates," Carder answered, "and I'll pay you the five hundred. That's all. Just hang around until the tender gets back from the Swiftwater trap. You'll go out on its next trip. You're a cattle-country man, so be careful and don't fall in the bay."

"Thanks for the chance. But, Mr. Carder, I don't like you. You just rub me the wrong way," said Shorty solemnly.

"And you're a windbag!" retorted Superintendent Carder.

NO one paid Shorty any particular attention as he loafed about the cannery. He saw a gas boat coming up the bay, grunting under the heavy load of fish it carried. The skipper, a giant in oilskins, leaned out of the wheelhouse window, one hand on the wheel, his eyes on the wharf.

"Hey, beetle," he bellowed, "take the line!"

Shorty felt an instant dislike to the giant. Instead of friendly banter, there was only ridicule in the big fellow's tone. Nevertheless he took the heaving line and presently drew in the hawser, with its loop ready to go over a mooring post. It was all he could do to drag it to the first post, but the skipper roared, "Take it to the next one, beetle. Or is it too much for you?"

Shorty cursed under his breath. The skipper grinned. When Shorty's feet reached a spot where the wharf was slick with fish slime the man in the wheelhouse swung the wheel slightly. The bow veered away, and before Shorty realized what had happened, his feet had shot from under him and he was in the bay, still clinging to the line, but gasping from the icy water.

As he was fished out he heard Carder shout: "Shorty, I don't like horseplay during working hours. And that goes for you, too, Swab Grogan!"

The boat's skipper grinned. "I don't like little men," he retorted. "They're no good for anything, and they're cocky. I knock their ears down whenever I find 'em. And as for you, Carder, if you don't like my way of doin' things you can buy your fish somewheres else."

"Let's see what you've got," said the superintendent, ignoring the defiance. He climbed down to the boat and examined the salmon with

an expert eye. "Less than twenty-four hours old."

"Caught last night," Grogan declared. "I always bring in good fish."

"I know." Carder climbed back to the wharf again. "Come up and get your money as soon as they're unloaded. I'll send a man to tally 'em."

He noticed Shorty, shaking with the cold, standing on the wharf. "Go to the boiler room and dry out," Carder ordered. "I don't want a sick man on my hands."

Later, with his clothing dried and a good meal under his belt, Shorty felt better. The day seemed endless and it was evening when the cannery tender arrived from the trap.

A man who showed signs of having been badly beaten sat moodily on a coil of rope, and scowled at the buildings. "That's the last trap guard," Shorty heard someone say. "Carder has three shifts of 'em now—comin', goin', and on the job."

"What happened, Stenstrom?" Carder asked the beaten man.

"Some men in oilskins came onto the trap to talk things over," the guard answered. "I told 'em I wasn't sellin' 'em fish nor turnin' my back while they took 'em. Then I heard somethin' whistlin' through the air. A heavin' line lead struck me in the head and knocked me out, then they went to work on me." He took a deep breath. "When I woke up, I'd had hell beat out of me and the trap was lifted."

"I see," Carder said. "Same old story. Would you know the men if you saw 'em?"

"Sure, but I never saw 'em before, and I ain't likely to see 'em again," Stenstrom said, "because I'm takin' that steamer south." He pointed to the steamer on which Shorty had arrived.

As soon as the tender had tied up the scow load of salmon, it picked up an empty scow and was ready. Shorty picked up his bag and jumped aboard.

The trap was located ten miles from the cannery, and it proved to be a string of piles driven into the bottom and extending at a slight angle from the beach. It ended in a series of netted inclosures. Salmon swimming toward the nearby river to spawn struck the net hung from the pilings, worked their way into the inclosures and were trapped.

A small shack, built on the trap, contained food, bunks, stove, fuel and a blanket. A .30-30 rifle hung over the door, and for close-up work, a twelve-gauge shotgun stood in the corner. Suspended from a nail, was a shell vest loaded with buckshot shells. "A man could put up quite a battle," Shorty reflected. Then he checked over the food stock. "They feed you well, too. I think I'm going to like this set-up."

HE watched the crew raise the trap, and brail out the salmon. When the tender and her heavily loaded scow was gone, Shorty put away his few belongings and turned in. With the trap empty, he wasn't expecting a visit from pirates, and he decided he had better get some sleep while he had the chance.

He did not know how long he had slept before a voice awakened him. "Welcome to our city," it said.

Shorty rolled out of his bunk and stared at a bearded, hard-faced man dressed in oilskins.

"We always try to make the new trap man feel at home," the stranger said. "Have a drink."

"Sure," said Shorty. "Why not?" He took a drink, and found it was good, smooth whiskey.

"I'll bet you're kind o' surprised to see me, eh?" the stranger remarked pleasantly. "Usually a trap guard figgers he can get a little shut-eye the first day. Have another drink?"

"No, thanks," Shorty answered.

"Then let's get down to business," his visitor said. "I'll give you three guesses about who I am, and the first one will be right. How do you feel about things?"

"Suppose you talk," Shorty suggested.

"Fair enough. We'll call regular with our boat, take on a load, slip you your cut, and that's all there is to it," the man said.

"Suppose I don't see it that way?"

"Then things happen," the trap pirate explained cheerfully. "We appeal to a man's reason with words, with money and if that don't work we use an iron bar, fists and guns. Waters are deep along here, and it's a funny thing about the tide; it seems to carry dead fish and what-not a hell of a long ways from here before tossing 'em up on the beach."

"A swell tide for a murder, suggested Shorty.

"Right down our alley," the man added. "I see you're beginning to reason things out. We'll drop around tonight."

"What if I get caught?" Shorty asked. "I'll take the rap, not you fellows."

"Nobody's goin' to hang anything on you," the man assured him. "Cander may have his suspicions, but he can't prove a damned thing. We know what's goin' on at the cannery all the time. The big boss of our outfit takes care of everything. Well, how about it?"

"I'll think it over," Shorty promised.

The man's eyes hardened, but he said nothing more. He got up,

shoved his bottle into a pocket and left the shack. A small boat with a high-powered motor was waiting. A second man, also dressed in oilskins, hip boots and sou'wester sat near the wheel.

"What luck?" he asked when his companion jumped into the boat.

"On the fence," the other said. "He'll come around, though."

"He'd better. A salmon run don't last forever and we can't waste time waiting for a man to make up his mind." The motor throbbed and the boat shot into the gathering shadows of the inlet.

Within sixteen hours the trap was filled again and the tender appeared dragging a scow. "Anything you need?" the skipper asked.

"Yeah," Shorty answered, "some cigarettes and a pair of shears."

"What do you want shears for?" the skipper asked curiously. "Goin' to clip coupons from your bonds?"

"Oh, I might cut a boat tarp out of that old piece of sail hangin' in the shack," Shorty answered casually.

Shorty remained awake most of the night, with his shotgun and rifle ready. Nothing happened. When the scow and tender came in the early morning the trap was filled again. Shorty watched the men lift the webbing with its load of salmon; it was a job for five strong men.

"Here are your shears," the skipper said, as he was shoving off, "but if you can cut a hunk of boat coverin' out of that old sail, you're a wizard."

"Thanks," Shorty said. "I'll see what I can do with 'em."

THAT night Shorty was standing outside the shack, smoking and gazing at the black waters. The trap was fairly choked with salmon and he wondered when the cannery ten-

der would come. Suddenly a blinding light flooded the shack. "Don't move," a voice bellowed through a megaphone. "We've got you covered with a shotgun."

For a moment Shorty stood rigid. A second voice said, "The cannery must've run out of men. They're using midgets."

Shorty made a sudden dive to the platform and rolled around the corner of the shack. Buckshot splattered the structure and some of it tore through Shorty's coat.

Shorty caught up his own weapon, poked it through a hole in the shack and tried to see the boat. The blinding light full in his eyes shut out everything but the bow of the oncoming craft. He raised his shotgun slightly and blazed away. The light vanished and he heard the clatter of glass.

Something droned through the shack. A rifle roared. It blasted away several times more, and each time a metal-jacketed bullet drilled through both walls and splashed into the water beyond the trap. Shorty got out his own rifle and returned the fire. He could make out the raiding craft now, a darker shadow against the shadows of night. The boat was running full speed from the scene.

Shorty wiped the sweat off his forehead. He didn't know whether it was the cold sweat of fear or the heat of excitement. "That was a close call," he told himself. "I can't understand how they got so close. I didn't hear a thing. They must've drifted down with the tide."

The tender and scow did not come until the following afternoon.

"Where were you yesterday?" Shorty asked the skipper.

"Broke down," the man answered. "Sa-a-a-ay! What happened to your shack?"

"While I was cutting out paper

dolls," Shorty answered, "a pirate attacked. We had quite a rumpus while it lasted."

The skipper grinned. "Say, you're all man," he said.

"I'm down on the pay roll as a man and a half," Shorty told him. "But I haven't made the grade yet. I'm just about three-quarters man."

"Well, I'll report the fight when I get back to the cannery," the skipper promised. "Carder will be tickled to death he's got a good man at last."

Shorty nodded. He wasn't thinking of Carder just then. He was wondering how his brother was getting along, and whether or not he would be able to hang onto the job. "If I can just grab that five hundred dollars' reward," he mused, "why, that'll fix Ed up and leave me enough extra to do some work at the mine."

THREE days passed without incident, but Shorty didn't relax his vigilance. In the cattle country rustlers took a battle in stride. They came back again as soon as they had reorganized their forces. Shorty assumed pirates were as tough a breed.

Except for an Alaskan liner and several fishing craft, no vessels were visible the fourth day, until late in the afternoon. At five o'clock Shorty noticed a dory drifting with the tide. It rode high, and the bow rope trailed in the water.

Shorty waited until it was close, then he examined it through binoculars. It was empty. There was a tarpaulin lying across the amidship thwarts or seats, and one oar was missing.

"That's a good-lookin' dory," he mused. "Probably got away from some poor devil. Might as well tie it up. When the tender comes they can take it back to the cannery."

He climbed down a ladder to his

skiff and rowed out to the craft. As he reached into the dory to pull it closer to his boat, he saw a very alert eye peering through a slit in the tarp. He caught up his oar, but the man under the tarp was faster. He heaved upward, tossed the tarp aside and swung his own oar viciously.

Shorty caught the blow with his oar, but there was so much force behind it, he was knocked flat. Before he could get up, the other man had leaped into the dory. Shorty fought back furiously, but the other drove blows into his stomach until he groaned from sheer agony, and then mercifully lost consciousness.

When he opened his eyes, the attacker had him over his shoulder and was carrying him to the shack. Shorty closed his eyes again and tried to clear the fog from his brain. He was angry with himself for having been so easily trapped. A few minutes later, he was dropped into his bunk and tied hand and foot. His captor hung a white lantern in the window of the shack.

Shorty, tiring of pretending unconsciousness, opened his eyes. The man was watching him.

"Bein' a fool comes high," he told Shorty. "You could've just as well been gettin' your fifty or hundred bucks every time we came. Now you get your blasted ribs kicked in, and maybe bumped off besides."

The man wore a mask over his thick beard. Shorty guessed he was somewhere in his thirties. He was powerfully built in the chest and arms, and his body had a barrel-like appearance. The man cooked himself a meal, smoked, and waited. With twilight came a fishing boat.

The man who had contacted Shorty several days before climbed the ladder and came into the shack. "You made a hell of a lot of trouble,

and damned near shot the mate," he said angrily. "And for what?"

He walked away, and a few seconds later Shorty heard him ordering the trap raised. "What about the trap man?" someone asked.

"We'll take care of him later," was the answer. "We've got to load and light out. The tender's due."

Shorty could hear them cursing and grunting as they lifted the choked trap. There was a constant splashing and swirling as the leaping salmon broke the surface and fought to escape. The brailing was carried on smoothly, and with no lost motion. An almost steady stream of leaping salmon poured into the pirate craft.

"If we had a small anchor," one of the men said, "we could tie it to his feet and that'd be that."

"Somebody might look down and see him when the water's clear," a second man argued. "No, the tide's better. It'll carry him away. No need of takin' chances. Just let a few of these blasted trap guards disappear into thin air, and the others will listen to reason fast enough."

The brailing ended. All this time Shorty had been working desperately to free himself. His hands were free, but he couldn't loosen the ankle knots. He made several attempts to reach the table and draw it toward him. He got his fingers on a leg at last and pulled it over. He opened a drawer and got out a knife, then cut the ropes binding his legs and holding them to a post.

He was free, but his legs were numb. He looked around for a weapon. They had taken his rifle and shotgun. There was an ax, but that wouldn't prove effective against men with guns.

He stripped off his coat and pants and pinned them together. He

stuffed torn blankets into the legs to fill them out, then shoved a pillow into the coat and buttoned it. He looked around wildly for something heavy and his eyes caught sight of the tool chest. He opened it and found steel planes, a level, a bag of spikes, and several pounds of lead sinkers.

He shoved them up the pants legs and wired the legs so the weights wouldn't break out. He opened the window, tossed the dummy into the water and threw his hat after it. Then he crawled under the bottom bunk. It was a tight squeeze, but he was small enough to make it.

"The runt got loose," one of the pirates yelled. "He jumped into the water. I saw his arms flounderin' round."

The searchlight whipped over the shack and settled on the water. "There's his hat. Don't see him, though!" someone shouted. "Musta got caught in that eddy and sucked down."

"Search the webbing along the water," the leader ordered. "Don't miss an inch of it. He may be hangin' on. And make it lively! We haven't got all night."

Shorty heard oars rattle and boats bump against the piling. Men yelled back and forth. "I know damned well he went down," one of them insisted. "Both his arms went up in the air as he was sucked under."

Shorty grinned. It had been a good idea to leave the coat arms free of weight so they would go upward as they tried to float. In a few minutes he knew he did not have to worry about a search of the shack being made.

"Knock off," the leader said at length, "and let's get under way. That damned tender will be showin' up."

WHEN the boat moved away, with motors turning over at full speed, Shorty crawled out, opened a locked and got out his only suit of store clothes. He was cold, sick and aching all over. He wrapped himself in a blanket and waited awhile before building a fire. He didn't want sparks from the smoke pipe betraying his presence. Day was breaking when he finally got the fire going and the coffeepot on.

He heard the tender come alongside the trap, but he was too sick to move. "They must have got the watchman," he heard the skipper say. "Nice little guy, too."

"I'll take a look in the shack, sir," the mate said.

Presently the mate came in. He took one look, then shouted for the skipper. The latter shook his head when he saw Shorty.

"They sure gave you a goin' over," he said. "We'll leave the scow here and run you back to the cannery in a hurry."

The mate carried Shorty in his arms, and a couple of deckhands helped him aboard the tug. A few minutes later she was moving full speed toward the plant.

Carder, seeing the tug coming without the scow, knew something was wrong. He called the company doctor and a stretcher was ready when Shorty was landed. He was put to bed in the infirmary and immediately fell asleep.

That afternoon when the trollers and the outfits buying fish in small lots came in, Shorty was sitting up in bed watching.

Although he knew he was disobeying the doctor's orders, he dressed, then walked slowly down the wooden walks of the wharf. Swab Grogan, loud-mouthed as usual, was yelling at a fish buyer.

"Got the best load of the lot and

you know it. Got a fast boat; that's why my fish are fresh." Grogan stopped as he saw Shorty. For a moment it seemed that astonishment had made him speechless, then he roared with laughter. "Look at the beetle. Somebody's stepped on the beetle."

"Beetles have got a tough shell," Shorty said, though it hurt him to walk and talk.

He gazed curiously at the different loads of fish, then he went to the superintendent's office. "What the hell are you doing up?" Carder yelled at him.

"I've got your trap pirate," Shorty told him.

Carder stared at him as though he had gone berserk. "Come again," he said patiently.

"I've got one of the men who's been robbing the trap," Shorty repeated. "Come on, we've got to act quick."

"If you're sure," Carder said dubiously. "I'll get the foreman. He's a deputy United States marshal."

The foreman and a couple of other men joined them. The group went down to the line of fishing boats, Shorty in the lead.

"Where'd you get those fish, Grogan?" Shorty asked.

"Gettin' funny, eh?" Grogan sneered. "Caught 'em. If you say different I'll squash that shell of yours plenty. No damned beetle—"

"I thought you might've bought 'em from somebody," Shorty interrupted. "In which case I was goin' to ask who."

"I never buy fish," Grogan answered truculently. "I catch 'em. Why buy 'em, when you know where the best fishin' is, and when you got a boat fast enough to get 'em in fresh?"

"You heard, Mr. Carder, he says he didn't buy them," Shorty said.

"That fixes the responsibility for the possession of the fish on him, doesn't it?"

"That's the size of it," Carder said.

"Then you'd better arrest him. He stole those fish from your trap, Mr. Carder. Maybe he, or his boat didn't actually do the job, but he's part of the gang that's raiding traps and beating watchmen."

"You'll have to prove this, Shorty," the superintendent said.

"That'll be a cinch," Shorty answered. "I took a tip from the cattle country and branded some of your salmon. I can see a dozen branded salmon on Grogan's boat."

"Branded 'em?" Carder shouted. "Are you crazy, you little—"

"It wasn't hard to do," Shorty cut

in. "I had plenty of time. I lowered the skiff into the trap, got busy with a small net and hauled 'em alongside by the dozens. But I didn't use a brandin' iron. I just snipped off a corner of their tails. That's what I wanted the shears for." He bent down and took one of the salmon out of Grogan's boat. "Look."

The fish, with its snipped tail, passed from hand to hand. Swab Grogan's face had turned a scared green, but Carder was looking at Shorty with awe.

"Branded salmon, eh?" he chuckled. "Shorty, you may be pin-sized, but you got brains enough for a couple of men." He held out his hand. "Mister, you've earned that five-hundred-dollar bonus."

THE END.

BELL TONES

BELLS have always played an important part in the lives of cowboys and frontiersmen. At a big roundup where the horses from several outfits are turned into one large remuda, the horses of one owner would stay within hearing of the bell that had become as familiar to them as the sight or scent of the men who rode them.

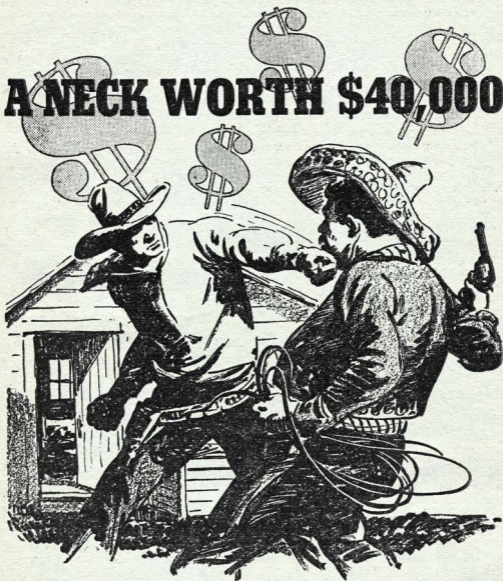
On the narrow freight roads that wound through the mountains during the frontier times, bells were almost indispensable. The driver of an Eastbound team would never go by a possible turn-out or passing place without stopping to listen. If he heard a bell far down the mountain and knew he could reach another turn-out, he went on; otherwise he waited until the train coming from that direction arrived.

Stagecoaches, because they carried the United States mail, had the right of way over all other vehicles. It was the custom for the drivers of freight outfits to give the stages a free road at all times. In some places like the famous Powder Horn Forest, this would have been impossible without the use of bells.

The packers fastened a small bell to the breast strap of the last mule in the string, called the "popper." So long as the man could hear the tinkling of this bell he knew that all was well, even though the trail might be so crooked that he could only see a part of his pack train of fifteen mules.

In Mexico the mule bells announce the coming of the pack trains and are the cause of rejoicing to the villagers. Particularly is this the case in such towns as Canellas, at the bottom of a canyon on the west side of the range, where no wheeled vehicle has ever been seen.

A NECK WORTH \$40,000



BY STUART HARDY

CHAPTER I

NEWS FROM HOME

THE news all but jolted Ken Boyle out of his saddle. He read it on the trail that led from the Costello post office to the little shack he'd built in the mountains, seven miles away. It was the leading

story on the front page of the Colorado *Guardian*, the paper to which he'd subscribed, under a Mexican name, ever since he'd been hiding south of the border. You couldn't get a home-town paper under your own name when the law was searching for you everywhere, ready to shoot you on sight.

Letting his mustang choose its own gait, Ken rested the paper on the saddlehorn. There was a big front-page headline, and under it ran the story:

After condemnation proceedings that have taken nearly a year, the government has at last acquired all the land it will need for the new Kinnesaw Dam project. The entire Kinnesaw Valley will be converted into a reservoir with the completion of the dam. All ranchers in the valley whose land the government has bought for inundation will have to evacuate the property before December 31st of this year.

There was a great deal more to the story, and all of it excited Ken Boyle. But at the very bottom came the paragraph that hit him like a bullet:

Perhaps the strangest development of all is that concerning the B Bar B Ranch, the old Boyle property abandoned by its present owner, Kenneth Boyle, almost two years ago. Though Boyle is a fugitive from Colorado justice, wanted for the murder of Jeremiah T. Webb, he is still the nominal owner of the ranch. The government has set a price of \$40,000 on the big property. The money is waiting for Boyle whenever he chooses to claim it, according to Ernest P. Sutton, director of the project. But, of course, as Sheriff Andrew Fleet pointed out, Boyle is unable to claim the \$40,000 without giving himself up to stand trial for his life, a trial which the sheriff asserts will result in prompt conviction. Thus one of the most ironical sidelights on the building of the dam—

Here Ken had to turn the page. When he did, he stopped reading. He stared, caught his breath. For his picture, with the word "Wanted" under it, looked at him from the sheet.

HE jerked up his head and glared forward without seeing. His lean face became gray, showing sudden new lines between nostrils and mouth.

"Startin' all over again!" he whis-

pered. The mustang pricked up startled ears, as if it understood. "An' . . . an' there's forty thousand dollars! Forty thousand—if I give my neck for it!"

He was young, hardly twenty-four, but at that moment he looked like a man in his forties. He glanced down at himself. His six feet of lean body was garbed in ancient dungarees and a faded blue shirt that were close to rags. His boots were almost flat at the heels. Even his gun belt was frayed.

"Picture of an hombre worth forty thousand dollars," he thought bitterly.

The mustang, turning a bend in the trail, began a steep climb, under trees, that soon had it panting. Mechanically Ken Boyle dismounted. He walked ahead of the horse now, its reins slung over his arm.

He no longer thought of himself. He was seeing his mother growing gaunt and haggard in this Mexican exile: Ma Boyle who lived here uncomplainingly, as stanch and unbending as her pioneer forebears had been in Colorado, her graying head still high, her eyes still flashing. She, too, was pretty close to rags, Ken realized. And the life was terrible for her, lonely and sometimes without enough food. Yet in almost two years she had never uttered a word of reproach.

Ken swallowed. There was always a catch in his throat when he considered the things he'd done to Ma. He'd made her leave the comfort of a fine white Colorado ranch-house, with servants in the kitchen, with forty cowpunchers ready to do her bidding on the range. And what had he given in return? A mountain hovel in Mexico, seven miles from Costello, a hide-out she shared in silent wretchedness!

"If only there was some way o'

learnin' who *did* kill Jerry Webb!" he groaned. "If there was some way o' provin' I didn't do it!"

He checked the thought with a hopeless shake of his head. What was the use? You only tortured yourself by yearning for the impossible:

There was nothing he could do. As long as Ma was with him, he'd have to go along like this, taking no risks. He'd have to get what work he could, poking cows on nearby haciendas. As for the \$40,000 waiting in Colorado, it would have to be abandoned. For it wasn't as if Ma could go and claim it herself. No. After the way she had held up the deputy sheriff with a shotgun that night, forcing the man to let Ken out of the Copper Bluffs jail, the law wanted her, too. She couldn't appear in Colorado now any more than could Ken himself.

He reached the level stretch in the trail from which he could see the cabin above, huddling among cedars. Smoke trickled from its stove-pipe chimney. That meant Ma was stewing the rabbit he had shot that morning.

He put a hand to his mouth to call a greeting. Then, deciding that the news he brought warranted no cheerfulness, he dropped the impulse. Frowning, he began to lead the sorrel mustang up the last stretch of trail—then suddenly paused.

Until now he had been too preoccupied to notice the trail. For the first time, glancing down, he saw that another horse had come this way. It must have come during the past half hour or so, for the spoor was strikingly fresh.

Ken peered toward the cabin suspiciously. There was no horse in sight, however, and that reassured

him. Probably some prospector, he reasoned, had passed on into the mountains. Occasionally a man drifted by the little cabin.

He proceeded more slowly. Quite definitely there was the smell of stewing rabbit in the air. It relaxed the lines of his face. It almost made him smile.

About ten feet from the door he called, "Hi, there, Ma!"

But it wasn't Ma Boyle who stepped out of the cabin. It was a ponderous man, a dark-skinned Mexican with spangles dripping from the brim of his sombrero. Ken, halting, recognized him with a start. This was Miguel Pandro, the post-master at Costello.

And in Pandro's fat hand was a long six-shooter pointing its bore straight at Ken's chest.

"Up with your hands, *señor!*" Pandro said quietly. "Very high and very quick, please, or I shoot!"

CHAPTER II

HEADING FOR DEATH

KEN'S first amazed impulse was to snatch out his .45. But there was a deadly, penetrating earnestness in Miguel Pandro's bright eyes that discouraged the move. Also, Pandro's trigger finger seemed stiff, ready to squeeze, and the tiny bunchings of muscle around the corners of his lips indicated a dangerous nervous strain.

"Up *señor!*" he repeated.

"What in blazes—"

"Up!" The word actually cracked. Pandro's six-gun moved forward.

It was futile, Ken realized, to do anything save obey. As he thrust up his arms, he advanced a couple of steps. His mind, suddenly scared, sprang to Ma. Where was she?

Why hadn't she called out a warning?

"Don't move!" Pandro warned.

But now Ken could see the inside of the shack. And what he saw made an oath of rage clog his throat. Ma was in there, all right. Her wrists were bound behind her, and she was tied down flat on the cot Ken had built. A strip of cloth gagged her mouth. Her face was white, and her eyes were terrified.

"What the devil's the idea?" Ken flung at Pandro. "You doggone—"

"Turn around!"

"What's this all about?"

"You will *sabe* soon enough. First turn around—or must I turn you with a bullet?"

Pandro used a good, almost a punctilious English, though the accent of Spain hung heavy on his words. Moreover, he spoke with grim emphasis that was in itself a threat. Ken shot a wild look at his mother, then slowly turned.

"So." Pandro spoke with satisfaction. Ken could feel the Mexican's hand draw his six-gun from its holster. When he had the gun, the man stepped back. "Do not move!"

Glaring over his shoulder, Ken saw Miguel reach into the cabin door. He pulled out a noosed rope that must have been ready on the back of a chair.

"Your hands behind your back," Pandro ordered.

"Look here," said Ken, and now he spoke in a low, tense tone that showed his desperation. "I don't know what you got against us! You sure can't have any grudge against my mother. You don't hardly know her. What—"

"It is not a grudge," said Pandro in his precise English. "It happens, *amigo*, that always when your newspaper comes I take the pleasure of

reading it first. Today my wife gave it to you, no?"

Ken understood now. And the muscles in his body went rock-hard.

"I saw your picture," Pandro explained. "My wife, she says surely there must be a reward for a man wanted for a killing. So I came here, *señor*, to wait for you to return. I did not like to do this in Costello where there are too many people."

"Why not in Costello?" Ken demanded savagely.

"Because—*quien sabe?* Maybe somebody else would want the reward. Somebody who might, on the trail north, try to take you away from me by putting a bullet into my back. This way is much better. Nobody in Costello will know about you. I will take you across the border—we can be there in a few hours—and give you to the first American official who— But we talk too much! Your hands behind your back, now! *Pronto!*"

SLOWLY Ken Boyle lowered his arms, crossed his wrists behind his back. Over his shoulder he looked at his mother's white, terrified face. He looked at Pandro, too. The postmaster seemed quite gratified with his success as he advanced to slip the noose over Ken's wrists. He held it with both hands, so that the muzzle of his six-gun momentarily wavered.

That was Ken's moment.

He did two things simultaneously: First, he wrenched his body sideward, out of direct line with the gun muzzle. Second, his right elbow smashed back into Pandro's stomach.

The Mexican cried out. His gun crashed. Ken could feel the hot singe of flame in the small of his back, but the bullet went on to hit

a tree. And by that time Ken had hurled his whole weight against Pandro.

The stout man, thrown off balance, staggered a couple of paces. His eyes were wild. He dropped the rope and raised the gun for another shot. But his senses were addled, and he couldn't dodge when he saw Ken's fist coming.

The blow caught Pandro flush on the jaw. He winced. He squealed, and the six-gun dropped from his fingers. When Ken hit him again, on the other jaw, he pitched to the ground, groaned once or twice as he rolled, then lay still.

Ken wasted no time. He scooped up the gun and lunged into the cabin.

He ripped off his mother's gag first. Then, looking around desperately, he snatched up one of her knives and cut the reata that bound her to the cot.

"K-Ken!" she stammered, breathless as he helped her rise. Her face was stricken. "He . . . he had that iron pointed at me 'fore I could even reach for the shotgun!" she gasped.

"Did he hurt you, Ma?"

"Hurt? No!" Straightening, she sounded almost contemptuous of the idea. "But I—" Her voice swung back to fear. "Ken, I sure thought he had *you!* Tie him up, son, 'fore he comes to!"

Ken nodded as he ran out again. Pandro hadn't stirred. He lay face down, breathing heavily. Ken snatched up the noosed rope intended for himself, and by the time the postmaster regained consciousness, he was tightly bound.

"He hid his horse up yonder, in the trees, so's you wouldn't see it as you came up the trail!" Ma explained.

Ken nodded. He was jerking a knot tight at Pandro's ankles.

When at last he rose, he faced his mother with burning intensity.

"We got to get out o' here, Ma! We got to go quick!"

She rubbed her discolored wrists as she glared down at Pandro.

"We got to just leave him here an' vamoose!" declared Ken. "The sooner the better! If he don't get home pronto, his wife may send others up here to hunt him." He started toward the door. "Come on, Ma! Pack up all we can take! I'll saddle the mare, an' we'll travel."

She followed him into the cabin. Once she sent a panicky glance back at Pandro. Then, because the Mexican couldn't hear what she said here, she whispered in despair, "But Ken, where are we going? Where *is* there to go?" She caught his arm, stopping him as he yanked a blanket from the cot. "We can't travel far enough in Mexico to get away! If Pandro lets the news get out that there's a reward for us, we'll be hunted everywhere. There isn't a peon who wouldn't fire at us, Ken, if he thought there was a couple of thousand dollars in it."

"We won't give them the chance," he said grimly. "We're going back across the border, Ma—back toward *home.*"

"Ken, we can't!"

"Got to take the chance."

"If . . . if you go home, you just go to get hung!"

"I'd sooner get hung in Colorado than shot in Mexico." And then: "Come on, Ma, help me fix a saddle roll!"

THEY left the livid, spluttering Miguel Pandro bound to a tree. Eventually, Ken knew, he'd be found there by a rescue party either led or sent by his wife. Ken took the man's six-gun as well as his own, and he and his mother rode off. Ma

rode as easy and naturally as she walked, her gaunt figure at once becoming part of the horse's rhythm.

It wasn't until they were fully ten miles from the cabin, well on their way to the border, that Ken told her what was in his mind.

"It ain't right," he said bitterly, "that you should go on living like this! It ain't right that your life should be ruined because of a shoot-in' I didn't do!"

"Ken," she answered simply, "long as I'm with you, I ain't complainin'."

"Ma, you . . . you sure been grand. But it ain't right. I won't let it be!"

"Don't see how you can change matters."

He had already shown her the Colorado newspaper. Now he said, "When I think o' you living in rags, sometimes not having enough to eat, while there's forty thousand dollars, ours by right, just waitin' for us—"

"Like bait in a trap," his mother interrupted.

"Sure. But—"

"If I was you, I'd forget that money," she said flatly. "You can't touch it."

"Ma, I'm aimin' to get you that money!" he said savagely. "It's yours, an' you're goin' to *have* it!"

"Where?" she asked bitterly. "In jail? While I'm grievin' over the . . . the way they hanged you? Forget it, Ken!"

But the fury of determination continued to pound in him. And as the sweating horses loped across sun-beaten mesas, with only cactus and a few yuccas growing out of the sand, Ken drove out:

"If there's any justice on this earth, you ain't goin' to go on like this any longer—hunted, scared, half starved! I aim to leave you in the first American town we hit. No-

body'll know you. We still got eighteen dollars Mex out o' my last pay. You keep that while I sashay up into Colorado. If it runs out, you can sell the horse."

She leaned out of the saddle to grip his wrist. "They'll blaze away at you the minute you show your face!"

"If they *see* my face."

"Listen, Ken—"

"I got to do it, Ma," he said stubbornly. "This way I'm just killin' your life an' my own. I did it for two years, an' that's plenty. Now we're through. We're startin' over."

She looked at him in dismay. She knew one thing about her Boyle menfolk: once they made their minds up to a thing there was nothing on God's earth could stop them. And Ken's mind was made up. She could see it in his blazing, deep-set, gray eyes, in the hard set of his jaws.

"But . . . but what you figurin' to *do*?" she whispered.

"Can't say yet. All I know is I didn't kill Jeff Webb. Some other hombre did. If there's to be any peace for you an' me, I got to find out who the bushwhackin' buzzard is. I just *got* to! Once I do that we can hold up our chins again. We can collect forty thousand dollars an' start a . . . a decent kind o' life."

Ma shook a hopeless head. "I don't know how you can do it, Ken, especially after bein' away two years. How would you even get started?"

"Ain't figured it yet," he admitted. "Still, there must be a way. There's *got* to be a way!"

"Suppose they catch you?"

He rode in silence a moment. "Well," he muttered at last, "unless some hombre plugs me on sight, they got to try me. If I remember my law, I'm innocent till they prove me guilty. That means I'll have a



Slim burst through the door and without warning cut loose at Ken.

chance, 'fore the trial, to put in my claim for our forty thousand dollars. An' I'll sure see that you get it, Ma, before they—" He stopped because he saw the quick, frightened change in her expression. He simply couldn't stab a knife into her by adding, "Before they hang me."

"You think I want to give you to 'em for that money?" she cried bitterly. "You think I want to sell you, Ken?"

"I ain't been caught yet!" he said doggedly.

CHAPTER III

LION'S DEN

IF Ken and his mother were followed by Mexicans, there was no indication of it. They crossed the Rio Grande at night, and after that it took Ken Boyle fully three weeks to reach Colorado, principally because, having no funds, he welcomed a chance to get a week's job helping with a roundup in New Mexico.

He had left Ma at a boarding house on the outskirts of Los Cruces. Not that it had been easy. At the last moment she had insisted that she was going with him if he went at all. So he'd had to slip away alone, in the night, while she slept. He had left her a reassuring note, all their cash, and one of the horses to be sold.

When he loped away he had no money at all. That was why the ten dollars he earned for a week of cowpunching near Socorro came like a gift from Heaven. It would keep him going while he settled things one way or another.

Now, toward dusk of a hot Colorado day, he approached Copper Bluffs, the town that had once been home to him.

He rode like an Indian scout, cautiously, through brush in the foothills on the western slope of Kinne-

saw Valley. Far to his left the great dark masses of the Rockies blotted out the late sun, their crests still blazing. He had no wish to meet anybody, so his eyes carefully searched the country ahead. Again and again, however, they strayed to the familiar valley, a broad, green valley in which grazed scattered herds of cattle. Soon, when the government built Kinnesaw Dam, most of this country would be under water.

He couldn't yet see the land that had been his own. That lay far ahead, beyond the long reach of the Circle W—the Webb outfit. You had to pass the Webb spread first.

And when at last he saw the Webb house in the blue haze of twilight, Ken drew rein. He stiffened, too.

He sat very still astride the sorrel mustang, eyes fixed on the distant building, its barns and bunkhouse. That was where Jeff Webb had lived, the man whom he was supposed to have murdered. Now that the Circle W belonged to the government he didn't anticipate finding many cowpunchers on it.

"Reckon Sundown Badger'll still be there, though," he muttered. "Prob'ly runs the whole shootin' match by this time. An' mebbe Slim Garnish, their old top hand. If I can only get to Sue."

The thought of Sue Webb made him squirm. He had never forgotten the fever in her eyes when she came to see him in Sheriff Fleet's office after the shooting. She had hated him then. She had hated him as she would have hated any killer; even more, because it was her father who had been shot down. And up to that moment Ken had always hoped that she'd like him well enough to—but he put the idea out of his mind.

Despite her hatred, however, it

was Sue Webb that Ken intended to see today.

He touched rowels to the mustang, sent it pounding downhill through brush in the direction of the house. By the time he reached the place it would be dark, he knew, and that was as he wished it.

Ken had reasoned it all out during the past three weeks. If he was to make any attempt at all to establish his innocence, it must begin with a visit to Sue. Maybe Sundown Badger, her quick-tempered uncle, would be there, too. Maybe he'd pull iron and shoot. Ken had to take his chances on that. He tightened his gun belt, tugged his sombrero lower over his eyes, and prodded the mustang into a lope.

TWO hundred yards from the Circle W house Ken dismounted. It was dark now, and yellow lights shone in the Webb windows.

He began to go forward soundlessly, leaving his horse hitched to a sapling. First he wanted a glance into those windows. If too many people were there it might be wiser to try at another time. But a dog spoiled the plan—with a loud, angry bark.

Ken stopped in dismay. He saw the porch door open, and a girl stepped into its light. She peered toward him, but in the darkness she couldn't distinguish his figure.

"Who's that?" she called.

"Just droppin' by, Miss Webb," Ken called back, evading a direct reply. "If you'll sort o' calm down that dog, ma'am, mebbe he'll change his mind about chewin' me."

She hesitated. Perhaps there was a familiarity in his voice that puzzled her. Nevertheless, as she saw Ken coming forward she spoke to the dog. It growled a bit, then trotted forward to sniff at the visitor.

Ken bent to pat it. Then, with friendship established, he advanced again.

The girl was waiting, still unable to recognize him. When he drew closer something in him jumped. For the Sue Webb who'd been a pretty, yellow-haired girl of eighteen when last he'd seen her was now a tall, slim beauty with head held high. He couldn't control that rising excitement in himself as he approached the porch steps. It was only when he began to mount them, sombrero in hand, that Sue Webb recognized him.

She fell back with a gasp. Her hand leaped to her lips, and her eyes widened in a kind of terror.

"Ken Boyle!"

"Please don't get to stampedin', Sue. I—"

He stopped. For she had whirled around and lunged into the house. Ken, stepping confusedly into the door, saw her cross a room to reach for a rifle that hung over the fireplace. Her face was pallid. Her eyes blazed as they had the day she confronted him in the office of Sheriff Fleet.

By the time she had the rifle in her hands, Ken stood beside her. And he, too, caught the weapon. He held it between them, forcing it down, his eyes burning into hers.

"No call for that, Sue!"

"You . . . you—" The words broke from her in gusts of rage, and she couldn't finish them. Her face was white and furious. At last she whispered fiercely, "Let go of this gun!"

"Sue, you got to listen to me."

"I don't want to hear anything you've got to say! *Let go of this gun!*"

Ken stared down into her face. Her blue eyes were full of a wild fire. He knew there was no use trying to rea-

son with her, so he released the rifle.

As she jerked up the weapon he stepped back and put his hands on his hips. He stood smiling at her, showing no trace of fear or nervousness. The muzzle of the gun hung an inch from his chest, and the girl seemed ready to fire. Ken didn't stir.

"You can if you want to," he said, breaking the crackling silence. "But I got a hunch you won't."

FOR a moment the tension was unbearable as Sue kept the gun close to his chest, her finger on its trigger. She breathed heavily. Their eyes held each other. Maybe she was thinking that this man had ruthlessly shot down her father and that he deserved killing. Or maybe she was thinking of the boy she had known all her life. The seconds passed, but both of them knew the moment of crisis was over.

Ken Boyle nodded. "I figured it would be like this," he said gravely. "Folks like us, we don't kill, Sue. Leastwise, not without givin' an hombre a chance." He paused. "Why don't you put that rifle down so's we can palaver in peace? I've traveled five hundred miles to have this talk with you."

Sue hesitated a long time. Her teeth bit down into her lip, perhaps to stop its trembling. He could see the fires begin to fade in her eyes; and in their place, to his consternation, came the sudden blur of tears.

Sue Webb shuddered and shook her head as if to throw off a spell. Yet the film of tears persisted, and her lip still quivered. She lowered her head, unsteadily propped the rifle against the wall.

"All right." She spoke with difficulty, forcing every bitter word. "Maybe I can't do it—like this. Say

what you came to say and get it over."

"Any o' your men around?" he asked first. "Your uncle, mebbe? I . . . I sure don't hanker to see a gun fight break out here."

"I'm alone in the house," she said stiffly, without looking at him. And then, "Slim Garnish is somewhere around; down near the river, I think." She faced him challengingly. "What is it you want?"

"I want to find out," he said gravely, "who killed your father."

At that she turned her back to him. She made an inordinate fuss about propping the gun up, doing it, perhaps, so that he wouldn't see her face. Without looking at him, she said, "You still expect me to believe you didn't kill him when twenty men saw you do it!"

"They saw me shoot," he admitted. "They even saw me shoot in the direction o' your dad—I'll admit that. But I didn't kill him! It wasn't at him I fired!"

Now Sue didn't speak at all.

"Your dad and I had plenty arguments, sure," Ken went on. "Everybody knows that. We argued every year over who owned certain mavericks, sein' as how our herds used to mingle together pretty free an' easy. An' we argued over who owned those two acres on the side o' Stunted Oak Ridge; not that it ever mattered much, the land bein' useless. An' we even argued the time I told your dad I . . . I sort o' hoped to marry you." He was silent a second; then drew a breath and went on, "But none o' those arguments was serious, Sue. You know that. They wasn't the kind to lead to gunplay. Shucks, I was mighty fond o' your dad, underneath all the bickerin'. An' I always felt like mebbe he favored me, too, in spite o' the arguments."

Ken tore his eyes away from the yellow-haired girl, fixing them on the empty fireplace.

"After all, Sue, you Webbs and us Boyles—our folks have been in this valley together for three generations. They fought the Sioux together. They fought the Cheyennes. Sometimes they even fought each other, but they always wound up shakin' hands. An' roundup time would see 'em all ridin' herd together, like one outfit. Doggone it, I wouldn't have plugged your dad over any argument—no more'n he'd have plugged me!"

SUE swung around to him, and for an instant the fires again threatened to shine through the tears in her eyes.

"What about the argument you had with him before the . . . the shooting?" she demanded hotly. "Everybody in town knows—"

"Yeah, it was quite an argument," Ken conceded. "It was in the saloon, and your dad had had a couple drinks too many. You know how he got when the liquor was in him—steamed up an' r'arin' to go, ready to take on all comers."

Sue started to retort, but the truth of Ken's words stilled the reply, and she frowned at the floor.

"We started the argument about the Stunted Oak Ridge acres all over again. It got pretty wild, all right; but when I saw your dad was really losin' his temper I just walked out o' the saloon. I didn't hanker to fight him, and I sure knew we couldn't settle anything like that, yammerin' over drinks. Trouble was, your dad didn't feel satisfied. He decided to follow me an' have it out, seems like. To sort o' catch me, he took a short cut out o' the saloon's side door, which was nearest him. That was

where I spotted him—at the side o' the saloon, in darkness. He yelled to me. I was out in the street. I know there were about twenty hombres out there who saw me draw and shoot into the alley. They heard another shot, too. They came a-runnin' pronto an' they found your dad dead in that alley—plugged through the heart with a .45, same as I toted. His own gun was still in his hand, an' one slug was missin' from it."

"Yet you claim you didn't murder him!" Sue cried, her voice bitter.

"I didn't," he said simply. "I told my story a hundred times, but they wouldn't believe me. Not that I blamed anybody much. Still—"

"Oh, Ken! With twenty men who saw it happen!"

"They couldn't see your dad in the alley," he maintained stubbornly. "An' they couldn't see the man who came from behind the building an' blasted lead into him. But I saw that hombre! He . . . he was just a shadow in the darkness. Couldn't make him out, except to see he was lean an' sort o' hunched. But I saw him fire at your dad—an' I fired at him!"

"Ken, you've told that story so often—" Sue began wearily.

"You got to hear me out an' believe me," he cut in roughly. "I hit the bushwhacker in the right arm. Saw him stagger and grab at his arm just below the elbow. I started after him, too. But when I ran the gents in the street figured I was tryin' to get away. So they grabbed me. By the time somebody went to look behind the saloon, like I begged 'em to, the killer was gone. That's the truth, Sue, so help me!"

She shook her head again in a gesture of hopelessness. "Ken, you say yourself there was a slug missing from dad's gun. Everybody said he must have tried to get you as he fell.

That was the second shot they heard."

"They were wrong. Your dad didn't fire at all. If a slug was missin', he shot it earlier in the day, mebber at a rattler or a coyote."

Sue leaned her slim figure back against the table. Her blue eyes, reflecting lamplight, were strangely luminous.

"If you were really innocent, Ken, why did you break out of jail? Why did you run away?"

"Figured I didn't stand much chance against twenty eyewitnesses, that was all."

"And you think anything has changed? You think you stand a better chance now?"

He shrugged. "Got to try it. I left Ma down south, an' she's just about penniless. I aim to get her our forty thousand dollars whether I hang for it or not. But before I put in my claim for the money I hanker to . . . to try clearin' myself. That's one o' the reasons I came here first, Sue. I figured there was just one person who could help me—and I sure need help."

"You mean my uncle?"

"No. I mean you."

For a moment, she said nothing. Looking up into his earnest gaze, she still leaned against the table. It seemed to Ken, that despite the strain of this visit, she had never been more beautiful. It was a beauty that filled him with a queer, indefinable ache.

Finally she murmured, "Just . . . just what do you mean, Ken? What do you expect *me* to do?"

He didn't have the chance to explain. Even as he started to speak, he heard footsteps on the porch. He whirled around and, with a stifled cry, recognized the lanky figure of the Circle W's top hand, Slim Garrison, entering the door.

There was a savage expression on Slim's features. He must have seen Ken the instant he started up the porch steps. For when he appeared, a six-gun hung in his hand. Without uttering a word, he raised the weapon and fired.

CHAPTER IV

TELL IT TO THE PRESS

IT was the upward movement of Slim's hand that gave Ken his half-second chance to dive at the floor. He went down just as Slim's Colt crashed.

The slug split the wall, and an old framed daguerreotype fell to the floor with a shattering of glass. By that time, Ken had drawn his own gun. From behind a chair he glared up at Slim's six feet four inches—and saw Sue hurl herself at the man.

"Don't, Slim! *Don't!*" It was almost a scream. She seized Slim's gun hand, forced it back. "Slim, he—"

"Look out!" Slim roared, wrenching away from her. "Let go! I'll—"

"Drop it!" Ken called out harshly. Though still prostrate, he had his six-gun aimed straight at Garrison's heart. His gaunt face wore an expression of bleak warning. "I got you covered, hombre! Drop the iron!"

It was true. In the moment that Sue's onrush had thrown Slim Garrison off balance, his gun pointing ineffectually at the side wall, Ken had covered him. To move at all, the tall cowpuncher saw, meant to invite a bullet. He stood paralyzed.

"You dropping it?" Ken demanded. "Or do I shoot?"

"Slim's gun fell to the floor. His face was a mask of fury. He glared at Sue Webb, now pressed back against the wall in consternation, as though she were afraid that what she

had done was criminally wrong.

"If you hadn't butted in, Miss Sue," Slim said harshly, "I'd have blasted this human polecat off the earth!"

Ken rose, breathless. There were strange red splotches in the pallor of his cheeks, and in his chest there was a hard pounding.

"You came right close to gettin' blasted off yourself!" he declared. "Bustin' in with smoke in your hand, not even givin' an hombre a chance to draw—"

"Killers an' rattlers," Slim Garnish retorted, "I *never* give a chance!"

To that Ken offered no comment. He stood still, his gun aimed at Slim. After a while, the storm in his brain subsided. Without looking at her agonized face, he said to Sue:

"As I remember, you got a cellar under the kitchen. There's a trapdoor. I'm goin' to lock Slim down there till we finish palaverin'. That'll be easier than tyin' him up—or pluggin' him."

"You ain't gettin' away with this, hombre!" Slim flung out stridently.

"For the time bein', seems to me, I am," Ken assured him. "Get goin' into the kitchen, Slim! Move fast!"

"Ken, you're making things worse for yourself—a thousand times worse!" Sue said.

"I got to talk to you alone," he insisted. "Can't do it till I salt Slim away where he won't interrupt. He ain't gettin' hurt any—if he behaves."

SLIM GARNISH made plenty of angry threats as he backed toward the kitchen. But within five minutes he was locked under the trapdoor, in a black cellar that had no other exit. And Ken, holstering his six-gun, went back into the parlor. For a moment, he stared grimly at the hole in the wall and at the

fallen daguerreotype. Then he looked at Sue.

"Where's your uncle and the others?"

She told him shakily, that Sundown Badger had ridden into Copper Bluffs with the two Circle W cowpunchers. Her eyes kept moving toward the kitchen, in fear.

"We . . . we expect to move out of here next week," she added, almost stammering. "Now that the government's taken over the place, I mean. Uncle's sold all the stock. Riders from the Leaning T are coming tomorrow to drive the cattle to their spread. So we let all our men go, except Slim and two others. We're keeping them to help us clear out."

"Expectin' them back soon?"

"Uncle didn't say when."

Ken glanced worriedly out of the window into the darkness. He had no desire to encounter Sundown Badger tonight, as he had encountered Slim. To get away before the man's return, he decided, was the wisest thing to do. So he faced Sue again.

"Look," he said tightly. "I'll talk quick. I've done a heap o' thinkin' lately. I don't aim to hurt you with what I say, but I figure it's got to be said."

Sue waited, still shaken.

"I got to wonderin' who could get anything out o' your dad's death. After all, he was a mighty popular hombre hereabouts. He didn't have any enemies, far as I know—nobody with a grudge who'd want to kill him. Isn't that so?"

Sue jerkily nodded.

"So he wasn't killed in hate," Ken pointed out. "He was prob'ly killed because it paid somebody to have him dead. Well, who profited by his death?"

While Ken and Beany shot it out, Sundown sneaked his hand toward the gun on his desk.



"Ken!" She stiffened, her face losing color.

"I know it's a hard thing to say," he pressed on grimly. "But I got to make it clear the way I see it. Your uncle—yore dad's brother-in-law, Sundown Badger—was a partner in this outfit. He's been a partner for seven years, as I remember it. Came in with some cash, right after the last drought almost wiped your dad out. An' bought a half interest. Right?"

"Why, y-yes," Sue said hesitantly. But—

"With your dad dead," Ken continued, "Sundown Badger could run the outfit to suit himself. You'd inherit a half share, of course, but you was just a kid of eighteen at the time, an' Sundown prob'ly didn't expect any trouble from you. If he figured to doctor up accounts a little at the end o' the year, so's you'd get less than you were entitled to, he didn't figure his own niece would question him too much. Tell me, Sue." His narrowed eyes compelled candor. "Have you been gettin' your share o' the profits every year?"

"Well—" She faltered, moistening her lips, and avoided his gaze. "Well, uncle's been holding the money for me."

"Did he tell you how much? Is it about the same amount your father used to get?"

Again she hesitated. Her hand stroked the edge of the table nervously, and she watched the movement with distressed eyes. She had never liked Sundown Badger too well. She had never liked his ingratiating manner toward her. It had seemed so false.

"Is it as much money as your father got?" Ken insisted.

"To . . . to tell the truth, no. It's a lot less. But uncle pointed out how bad times were—"

"Did he ever give you a regular accounting?"

"No-o. He . . . he doesn't keep regular books. He—" Then she checked the confession. She looked up defensively, even angrily, and her voice rose: "You're not accusing my uncle of killing dad!"

Ken brushed brown hair back from his forehead. "No," he said quietly. "If it had been him, I'd have recognized his big figure that night. You can't mistake a hulkin' hombre like Sundown Badger. But I'm wonderin' if mebbe he didn't hire him some lean gun toter—some coyote of a dry-gulchin' killer—who'd gladly plug a man for a couple hundred dollars."

"No!" It was an awed, shocked whisper. Sue's eyes became round in horror. "No! No! Uncle wouldn't—"

Somehow, then, the rifle she had propped against the wall slid down and crashed on the floor. Its sound, ending her outcry, left her gaping. Ken went to the gun, picked it up, and set it securely in a corner. When he turned back to her, he spoke softly.

"Look, Sue: D'you happen to know if your uncle's got a skinny friend with a bullet scar on his right forearm?"

EVEN before she answered, Ken's heart began to pound with excitement. He could see the birth of a terrible suspicion in her stare. Her lips parted, and she started to speak. But she stifled the words, as though afraid to utter them.

Ken reached out and caught her hand in both of his. It was cold. He pressed it as though to give her courage.

"Who?" he whispered.

"Ken, I . . . I'm not sure! I

can't be sure! I never looked at his arm—"

"Whose arm?"

"He's a tall, thin man—Beany Crow, they call him. He came from somewhere in Idaho a few months ago. He's been hanging around uncle pretty steady lately, especially after he gets drunk."

"Where does he work? Where can I see him?"

"He doesn't work. He just hangs around. Once I saw uncle give him fifty dollars. Beany was drunk and insisting on it."

Ken frowned thoughtfully. He let himself sink to the arm of a chair. Watching the toe of his boot, he pondered—pondered for a full minute on the significance of Beany Crow's demand for money.

Suddenly Ken snapped up his head. He listened. From somewhere out in the darkness came the thuds of horses' hoofs. They were approaching fast.

Sue pushed past him, ran to a front window. It was open, and she peered far out into the night. A moon, full and golden, hung low in the east, pouring a pale sheen across the range. In its light she watched a moment. Then she whispered, "It's uncle and the boys!" She whirled around, flushed, to fix pleading eyes on Ken Boyle. "Get out!" she begged. "Go before they come! You know my uncle. He's worse than Slim! He'll fire at you on sight!"

Ken went to a back window. "I ain't hankerin' to shoot it out with him now," he admitted. "But look, Sue, I want to ask a favor. Fore I go, I'd like to hear you say you'll do it. To . . . to help get your dad's killer!"

"What favor?" Sue was almost frantic in her haste.

"You're pretty friendly with Phil

Dunner who owns the *Guardman* and—"

"Of course, Ken! But please go now. You'll never get away if—"

"See Phil tomorrow," Ken went on unheedingly. "Get him to print a rumor that your uncle is figuring to leave Colorado, soon as he settles with the government for this spread, and travel like a lord for a couple years in Europe."

"Good heavens, Ken! Why should I get Phil to print that?"

He already had one leg swung out of the window. From the roof of the house came sounds of hoofbeats hardly fifty yards away. Even as Sue spoke, she was half pushing him across the sill. Their eyes were close together, hers panicky, his abnormally bright.

"Can't stop to explain now!" Ken said. "I'll come back, mebbe Friday night! Promise to see Phil Dunner an' do it?" He seized her arm. "Say yes," he begged. "That's all I'll ask o' you, Sue. Just say yes!"

She could hear the men dismounting now. Her uncle's deep voice was louder than the others. And here was Ken Boyle, still straddling the back window and pleading.

"All right!" she flung out recklessly. "I . . . I don't know what you have in mind, but I'll do it."

He did a strange thing then. He actually grinned and squeezed her hand in gratitude. Then he dropped over the sill to the ground behind the house, waved to her, and ran off toward his mustang, tied out of sight a couple of hundred yards away.

CHAPTER V

SUNDOWN'S GUEST

THAT night Ken Boyle lay high in the foothills, beside an oak, with hands clasped under his head. It was hours before he could sleep.

Lying there, listening to the furtive sounds of his horse, watching the stars and the moon, he was doing some thinking. By this time a sheriff's posse, summoned by Slim Garnish, must be hunting him. Queerly, however, he wasn't worried. His thoughts kept returning to Sue Webb.

Down in Mexico he had given up all the dreams he had once woven around Sue. What else had there been to do? But now that he had seen her again, his nerves were thumping. Her beauty floated in his mind like a haunting song. And perhaps, if she kept her promise to help him with the newspaper item, there was still hope. Perhaps he could still jerk himself by the boot straps, out of a pit from which there had seemed no escape. In the morning, he mused, he'd ride to Colbert, twenty miles away, and send a letter to Sheriff Fleet.

As for Sue, she, too, lay awake that night. Through her window she could see the moon. Somehow, she was breathless, excited. For instead of seeing the moon she was looking at the gaunt young face of Ken Boyle. She was gazing into his desperate eyes. She was remembering those eyes when, a couple of years ago, they had been able to laugh. And she wondered if they'd ever laugh again.

The most incomprehensible thing was that she had found herself believing Ken while he talked. After two years of being certain of his guilt, she had listened to him for only a few minutes—and the world seemed to have changed.

Her uncle implicated in the murder of her father?

She didn't dare think of it that way. The very suspicion made her shiver under the blanket. And yet, the way Ken had made her see

things! For she *had* marveled, time after time, at the small profits the ranch had yielded in the past couple of years; and she had wondered a little at her uncle's suggestion that he keep her money for her in his bank until she really needed it.

But, lying there, she asked herself with a sudden start, why she was helping Ken Boyle in a plan against Sundown Badger. Why should she ask Phil Dunner to print that absurd rumor in his paper?

Was it because she disliked Sundown Badger? No, that was not the reason. Deep within herself, she knew the real answer. Deep within herself, she knew that if Ken Boyle was innocent she wanted to see him cleared. Incredible, though it seemed, she was praying for his innocence. And so she knew, even while she questioned herself on the wisdom of the course, that tomorrow she would ride into Copper Bluffs to see Phil Dunner and do as Ken had begged her to do.

After that—well, after that, things were up to Ken, himself. He probably had a definite plan.

She fell asleep; finally, wondering when she would see him again. Perhaps Friday, he had said. And tears trickled from her closed eyes, as she recalled how close she had come to shooting a rifle into his chest.

BUT what did Boyle want here?" Sundown Badger demanded for the tenth time in the morning. "He didn't just come to tell you that old loco story all over again!"

They were at breakfast, and Sue nodded as she poured coffee. "That's what he came to tell," she insisted.

"Hightailed five hundred miles, just for that?" her uncle asked incredulously.

"It seems so."

Sundown scowled, far from con-

vinced. He was a ponderous man, almost fat, with a complexion so dark that he might have been a Mexican. Even his hair, though curly, held the black gloss common to men south of the border. And his face always looked swollen. He sat at the table, tapping a knife, forgetting to eat. His troubled eyes watched Sue suspiciously.

"How come," he asked at last, "you didn't let Slim plug the scorpion? After all, Sue, seems to me that when the hombre who killed your pa deliberately walks into your house—"

"Maybe that was it," Sue broke in quietly.

"What was it?"

"That he deliberately came into my house. We don't generally shoot our visitors."

"But a killer like him!"

"*He* claims he's not a killer."

"*He* claims!" Badger scoffed in scorn. "What else could you expect him to say? Twenty eyewitnesses can't be wrong. He did it, all right!"

Sue didn't answer. Her silence was tight-lipped as she stirred sugar in her coffee.

"Well," Badger grunted with some satisfaction, "Sheriff Fleet says he'll keep posses huntin' all day. If Boyle is anywheres around, they'll bring him in, you can bet. Dead or alive, they'll bring him in!"

That speculation made him feel better. His spirits rose higher during the day, too. After Sue rode off to Copper Bluffs, Sundown and Slim Garnish loped off to the foothills, where they joined one of the sheriff's posses at noon. They searched all day, but there was no sign of Ken Boyle. Nevertheless, Sundown felt confident that sooner or later, the fugitive would be found—that is, if he dared remain in the vicinity of the Kinnesaw Valley. If, however,

he chose to disappear again, going to some other part of the country for a couple of years—Sundown shrugged. That was all right, too.

It wasn't until Friday night that he had a real shock.

Sue, to his perplexity, saddled a horse immediately after supper. He noticed that she seemed nervous.

"Where you headin'?" Sundown asked in surprise.

"I . . . I want to ride in the moonlight a spell. I have a headache and the night wind may help it."

She couldn't tell him this was the night Ken had promised to return. She wanted, if possible, to meet Ken away from the house, to head him off. So she mounted near the corral, while Sundown watched from the porch. He rolled himself a cigarette, and a thin smile twisted his lips when he saw her lope off in the moonlight toward the mountains. He smoked, his gaze fixed meditatively on the corral where a few horses milled.

Then, for no apparent reason, Sundown chuckled and went into the house. He was alone tonight; Slim and the other two cowpunchers had gone into town for the weekly dance at the Oddfellows Hall. He settled at the desk in a corner of the parlor and began to study letters that had come from the northern part of the State, letters from people offering land for sale to the ranchers who were evacuating Kinnesaw Valley.

HE was still studying the offers when the thumps of a horse's hoofs made him glance over his shoulder. He thought first it must be Sue returning, so he didn't trouble to rise. But a moment later, when a tall, bony man with a bent nose and close-set black eyes entered the house, Sundown jumped up with a start.

"What in thunder you want now, Beany?" he demanded. "I gave you fifty only last night!"

Beany Crow nodded. He stopped in the center of the room, his sombrero bent low over angry eyes. A folded newspaper filled his left hand. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse.

"So you're all set to vamoose," he said.

"Vamoose?" Sundown was puzzled. "What you talkin' about?"

"Sure. Go on. Act like you don't know!"

Sundown began to lose patience. "You drunk?" he challenged.

"I'm cold sober; sober enough to smell out your whole doggone scheme. So you're goin' to *Europe*." A sneer came into Beany Crow's tone. His voice rose to an effeminate falsetto. "Just think o' that! Rich Mr. Badger figures to take himself away for a long, long trip to *Europe*!"

"What in thunder you yammerin' about?" Sundown was completely bewildered. "Where in tarnation did you ever get a notion like that?"

"Ain't you seen today's *Guard*-*man*?"

"No-o—"

"Go on. Have a look-see!"

Beany tossed the paper to the desk. His gesture was full of contempt. The sheet was folded to exhibit the column headed "Personal Notes," and the first item, concerning Badger's contemplated trip abroad, left the big man stunned.

"This is loco!" he blurted. "Plumb loco! I never—"

"Didn't hardly expect you to say anything else," Beany cut in angrily. "Things like that ain't just made up by fellers who run papers. They got to come from somebody who knows."

"I tell you, I never—"

"I didn't come to argue it one way

or the other, Sundown. Before you go hightailin' off on this trip, though, I want two thousand in cash."

Sundown Badger stared at the man. He was so thoroughly shocked that the paper slipped out of his fingers. "Two thousand?" he whispered. "*Two thousand?*"

"That ain't any too much for an hombre that's just sold a big spread to the government."

And then rage seemed to overwhelm Sundown. His eyes flamed, and his powerful face became mottled. He took a step toward Beany, but he seized the back of a chair to steady himself.

"You . . . you figure to blackmail me like this the rest o' my life?" he asked hoarsely. "You think I'll just keep payin' an' payin' an' payin'?"

Beany shrugged. "No use gettin' excited," he said indifferently. "I just want two thousand, fore you sneak out on me."

"I ain't sneakin' out! That thing in the paper is a lie!"

Beany grinned without humor. He hooked a thumb in his gun belt. "Mebbe so and mebbe not. But I'd rather take the *Guard*-*man*'s word than yours, any day."

BY this time, Sundown's gray face was grim with rage. The muscles in his throat worked savagely. He said in a low, trembling voice, "Beany, I'm gettin' sick o' shellin' out to you. Sick of it, *sabe?*"

"That don't bother me any, Sundown. Any time you want to quit payin', all right. Say the word. Me, I'll mosey down into Mexico, where they can't touch me, an' I'll send a letter back to Sheriff Fleet. I'll tell him how you hired me to come down out o' Idaho and pump a slug into the heart o' your good partner an' brother-in-law, Jeff Webb."

Sundown Badger's breaths were labored. He released the chair. Fingers clenching and distending again, he moved a hand slowly toward the holstered gun on the desk. There was only one way to end the demands of a man like Beany Crow.

But Beany, seeing the movement, grinned again. "Don't be loco, Sundown. I can beat you to the draw any day."

"You dirty—"

"An' don't cuss. It gets me terrible nervous." Unexpectedly, Beany laughed. It was a harsh sound, brittle and taunting. "Mebbe I better tell you I figured you'd try to plug me some day. When my back was turned, I mean. So I'm warnin' you against it. An ol' side-kick o' mine down in Pueblo has my story writ and signed in an envelope. Any time I'm reported dead, he's to send it to Sheriff Fleet. Sabe? I figured you'd better know, Sundown, fore you get any ornery notions about slingin' lead." Beany waited an instant for emphasis, then asked, "How about my two thousand? When do I get it?"

"You—"

Sundown Badger could go no further. It wasn't his strangulating rage that stopped him. It was a sharp voice in the door behind him, the door to the kitchen. A voice that said:

"Reach high, gents! Pronto!"

Sundown jerked his head around. What he saw made him sag back against the desk with a gasp.

For Ken Boyle stood in the door, a grim, ragged figure, his eyes blazing at the two men. There was a six-gun in his hand, and it looked murderously steady.

"I said *reach!*"

Mechanically, his throat too paralyzed to emit a sound, Sundown began to obey. He thrust his hands

up slowly. But Beany Crow did not follow his example.

In his way, Beany must have had a certain kind of courage—the courage of a cornered rat. His hand whipped the weapon from his holster with the speed of a striking rattler. In the same single movement he fired.

The bullet ripped splinters out of the door jamb two inches from Ken's forehead.

Even as the slug struck, however, Ken blazed back. And he had the advantage of not having to draw.

He was still feeling the sting of splinters in his cheek when Beany Crow crumpled to the floor. Blood pouring from a tiny hole in his throat, Beany fell slowly, legs twisting under him like a clown's. He must have been dead before his body rolled over, because he never stirred again.

And for a few seconds Ken Boyle's eyes, bright and narrow, were fastened on the man. He ignored Sundown.

At any rate, so it must have seemed to Badger. He lowered his right hand surreptitiously, reached behind him and found the handle of his six-gun which rested on the desk.

Without actually looking up from the body, Ken said sharply, "Drop it, Sundown! I told you to reach!"

And then, astoundingly, another voice sounded in the room. A deep voice, vibrant with warning. It came from an open window, and it said:

"If *he* don't plug you, Sundown, I will! Shove those hands up high an' keep 'em there!"

KEN didn't appear at all startled by the interruption. In fact, he hardly glanced at the window. He went to the body of Beany Crow, knelt beside it, and rolled up the

sleeve on the right arm. Just below the elbow he saw an old scar—the deep, inch-long bite of a bullet!

"That's it," he muttered.

Sundown wasn't aware of that scar. Sundown, completely staggered, gaped in terror at the long-legged, gray-haired man who entered the house by way of the open window. Two other men followed Sheriff Andrew Fleet, and both of them gripped six-guns.

When at last Sundown found his voice, it was to whisper a strangely squeaky: "Wh-what in blazes—"

"Ain't no mystery about it," Sheriff Fleet cut in brusquely. "Had a letter from Boyle here t'other day. Sent from Colbert. He wrote that if I hankered to grab Jeff Webb's killer, I was to watch Beany Crow an' you, the day the *Guardsman* ran the news about your goin' to Europe. But first, I was to make sure somebody mentioned the item to Beany. I couldn't figure what Boyle meant. That same day, though, his ma got into Copper Bluffs—"

"Ma?" Despite himself, Ken whirled away from the body. He stared, his mouth open. "Ma's here in town?"

Fleet nodded grimly. His narrowed gaze never swerved from Sundown Badger's face, a gaze as steady as the gun in his hand.

"Yep. I got her at my house. She's been a sort o' prisoner, technically speakin'."

"Listen—" Ken began.

"Better let me do the talkin'," Fleet advised. "Your ma's plenty sore about you abandonin' her down in Los Cruces. She says if you got to head into trouble, she's goin' into it with you, she bein' that kind o' woman. Seems like she sold her horse for railroad fare. Anyhow, I listened to her for hours, tellin' me

how you never killed Webb. In the end, I decided to give your letter a try. So we trailed Beany Crow here tonight. The three of us were listenin' outside the window durin' that bit of interestin' palaver."

For the first time, Fleet shot a direct glance at Ken.

"By the way," he asked dryly, "where were *you* while they powwowed?"

"In the cellar, under the trapdoor," Ken told him.

The sheriff gaped. "What were you doin' down there?"

"I wanted to be near Sundown myself, to listen, if Beany came here to see him," Ken explained. "I figured if Beany was blackmailin' him, like it seemed, he'd hightail out pronto for a last demand, once he got the notion Sundown was leavin' the country. So I got into that cellar last night, while folks here was asleep, an'—just waited."

Sundown Badger didn't seem to be listening. He was gaping over Ken's head—gaping at the wall with the stark, wild horror of one who sees a hangman's shadow.

Ken holstered his gun.

"Look, sheriff," he said, "mind if . . . if I ride away for a spell? I'll be back right soon—"

"Ride where?" Fleet demanded.

"I . . . I'd sort o' like to find Sue out there," Ken explained awkwardly. "I'd sort o' like to prepare her—"

Sheriff Fleet drew in a deep breath. He even allowed the hint of a smile to flicker on his lips.

"Yeah," he said, "maybe you'd better. I sure wish you luck with her, son. You kind o' deserve a bit of luck after these past two years. So does she. An' I hear there's forty thousand dollars waitin' to get you started right."



*"One gun's a sin, two's a crime,"
Smoke said. "Hand 'em over."*

BULLETS FOR BALLOTS

BY HARRY F. OLMSTEAD

SMOKE BUNGAY looked anything but a gun marshal as he dozed on the sunny side of Custer City's town hall. His eyes were closed. His lip sagged and his man-breaking hands lay limply in his lap. Outwardly, Old Iron Guts looked like nothing but a sleepy, drunken bum.

But Smoke was neither drunk nor sleepy. He was listening. From the open window above him came voices. Jasper Blench, parsimonious banker, was addressing his fellow councilmen.

"Look 'at us," he creaked. "An up-and-coming town, ripe for new busi-

ness and new voters. But what do we offer them? Smoke Bungay, thug, ruffian, scapegrace, brawler—"

"And killer," added Mayor Bill Darlington, proprietor of Custer City's general store.

"And killer," Blench agreed. "He's a disgrace to society, and I'm for firing him. He's a bad advertisement, and all need for his holster law has passed."

"Ever stop to think he might have had something to do with that?" asked Doc Prothro.

"That's beside the point, Doc." Blench was snappish. "He's been

paid well. And this is a new day, time for modern police protection."

"That's the ticket," cried Tom Brokaw, who ran the Custer Palace. "Let's get us a police chief. I'm fed up on the trouble Bungay stages in my place. It's bad for business. Iron Guts—bah!"

Smoke's jaw muscles bulged, and a growl shook him. The fools! Their memories were short. A few months of peace had lulled them asleep. Only Doc Prothro gave him credit. Blench! Smoke snorted. How he hated that fleshless hypocrite who dished up shameless money squeezing during week days and, of Sundays, became meek and sanctimonious as deacon of the church. And Tom Brokaw! Smoke had run himself off at the legs answering the man's calls for help.

Doc Prothro broke the buzz of small talk. "Then the idea is to fire Smoke, eh?" he asked.

"I've a better idea," put in Tom Brokaw. "And I hope you'll let me work it out before you pin me down. Business calls me to Cheyenne. When I come back I'll have something to report."

After some argument, they gave in to him and adjourned. Iron Guts stirred, rose and moved ponderously to the jailhouse. The day had come when they were through with him. It left a dull pain in his great chest. Why didn't they come to him like men? There was consolation in the answer. They were afraid of him. He had bullied himself into the job and had held it that way. But now, what was Tom Brokaw up to? Here was something he couldn't get his hard hands on.

ALL afternoon Smoke fretted, worried, sweat himself into a lather. And out of his unwonted rumination came conviction. Al-

ways hard on the lawless, he'd been too easy on the makers of the laws. He picked up the book of ordinances and read until the light blurred the fine print. Now and then he wet a lead and jotted down notations. His frayed cigar slanted at a jaunty angle as he sallied onto Frontier Street in the dusk, and his eyes glittered dangerously. He went first to the Custer City Mercantile. Mayor Darlington came out to meet him.

"Howdy, marshal," he said with a cordial smile. "Nice evening. What can I do for you?"

"Bill!" Iron Guts glowered. "What's this bulge under yore arm?" He snatched a pistol from a Texas holster. "I'll just take care of this for you."

The mayor paled. "Hey, gimme that!" he sputtered. "What's the idea?"

Smoke shoved him back, his glare a warning. "From here out, guns will be checked at the Palace Bar, Bill. Don't wear it no more or I'll run you in."

"You crazy?" raged the mayor. "You want to lay me wide open for a holdup."

"Who put the empty-holster law on the books, Bill?" Smoke inquired coldly.

"Who cares about that? That law's for hellions trying to run the town."

"It don't say so, Bill. But it does say you got to close at nine, per ordinance."

"What? Why, you—"

Smoke stalked out, leaving the mayor sizzling and stunned. In turn he visited each business place, disarming citizens, warning them to close. Resentment followed him, but Smoke only laughed at the irate business men, advising them to bully the council.

At nine he had the parson toll the

church bell, then sauntered back past groups of raging, baffled townsmen. Business was just waking at this hour, and he was halting it. Iron Guts strode along, his cigar tilted arrogantly as he moved down to the jail.

"Stink lizards!" he growled, preparing for bed. "It's a sin denyin' a man's constituents the thing they want worst. They ache for trouble; let 'em have it."

Next day was Sunday. The church bell tolled as Smoke invoked the unenforced Sunday-closing law. Clamoring, protesting saloonmen rioted about him. Smoke smiled faintly, listening with affected patience.

"Listen, boys," he protested. "I didn't make the laws. I'm paid only to enforce 'em. If you got a belly-ache, hand it in at council meetin'. There's Darlington an' Banker Blench now. Hop onto them."

They crowded around the two officials and Parson Pettis McCord, who was with them. The preacher smiled benignly at Iron Guts.

"My compliments, marshal," he applauded. "Our better people approve your respect of the Sabbath. The church and council are with you, eh, Mr. Mayor?"

"Humph!" Bill Darlington looked dismayed and uncomfortable. "I'm sorry, boys, but the law's the law. Bungay's within his rights in closing you up. I suggest that you take the matter up at the next regular meeting of the board."

Morosely they dispersed, and Smoke laughed at them, with a silent quivering of his belly. He was like a great rock, against which the tides of resentment crashed and broke impotently.

Next day Old Iron Guts was busy, disarming all who entered town and invoking a law calling for the im-

pounding of all ponies racked for more than two hours. After supper he made the rounds, seeing that all places of business closed their doors. Custer City had leaned heavily upon Smoke at times without liking him. Now, with the days of lawlessness past, they hated him intensely. And Smoke accepted their hate as he had their occasional adulation—with an intolerant glare and a scornful twisting of the lips.

THE Tuesday morning stage carried two passengers to Custer City. Tom Brokaw got out, all smiles, to be met by his fellow board members and whisked away to a special session. The second passenger drew a gasp from those gathered to await the mail. He stepped from the coach, a great, loose-jointed, black-jowled man with wide shoulders, thick chest and long arms ending in a pair of hamlike hands. He stood there before the station, his deep-socketed eyes looking them over. Self-sure and commanding, his curious grin seemed to fade as he glimpsed the star on the expansive front of Old Iron Guts. And Smoke, a little more ruddy than usual, fixed his glance on the crossed holster belts at the man's lean middle and the heavy guns weighting them.

Through the almost instant silence, Smoke's tread sounded thunderous. He halted before the big stranger, who topped his height by inches. And for a long moment the pair regarded each other, like snarling bulldogs. It was plain that here were two of a kind, powerful bruisers who brushed all obstacles aside, to whom the ten commandments were flimsy restraints to be crushed or cherished as expediency directed. Each a ruler in his own little world,

quite contemptuous of opposition. Smoke was the first to speak.

"Howdy, stranger," he said casually. "Had yore breakfast?"

The stranger grinned, stroked his gaunt jaw. "No," he answered. "Why?"

"That's fine," drawled Old Iron Guts. "Nothin' like bad news as an appetizer."

"Maybe you think I can't down it," said the new arrival. "Without a chaser."

"If you can't"—Smoke's face darkened—"I'll buy you a drink. In this town, stranger, one gun's a sin an' two's a crime. I'll trouble you to hand 'em over."

"So that's the bad news." The stranger spoke as if with vast relief. The street was dead still. "I thought you might be going to ride me, marshal."

With Iron Guts watching him narrowly, he drew his guns and laid them side by side on his huge left palm. He offered them meekly enough, but as Smoke reached the man came alive, electrically. His right foot hooked behind the marshal's ankles. His extended hand, gun-weighted, smashed Smoke in the chest. The big lawman went down like a man shot. His head banged the boards and his heels flew high.

A delighted roar of laughter rose from the spectators. It had been a long time since they had seen Iron Guts humbled. But even as they laughed, they cautiously scattered. Smoke, partly dazed by the impact of the walk against his skull, sat up, shaking his head. Then, roaring like a bull, he surged to his feet, whipping out his pistol. But the stranger was gone and the eyes of the townsmen were on the doors of the Custer Palace. Breath gusted from Smoke's lungs as he pumped stiffly down the

walk and shouldered into the bar-room.

Just across the threshold he halted. The stranger stood at the bar, leaning back indolently on his elbows. But his relaxed fingers hung dangerously close to the butts of his weapons and in his eyes was a glitter that reminded the marshal of Big-foot Holloway, the only man by whom he had ever been outdrawn. It made Smoke pause.

"Stranger," he said, hedging, "I never kill a man for steppin' on my toes. That's reserved for them as step on the people's toes. Want a whuppin' awful bad, don't yuh?"

"Bin askin' for it all my life, marshal," the stranger said mockingly. "What's it like?"

"Lay them guns on the bar an' I'll show yuh, smart-Aleck."

A flicker of ironic amusement touched the man as he unbuckled. "Sure. Never let it be said that Missus Carter's little boy Shoshone ain't accommodatin'." His guns clumped on the bar and he shed his coat. "No rules, marshal."

Shoshone shook his gangling arms, expelled a great breath and moved toward Old Iron Guts. A flash of long-repressed fighting spirit ran through Smoke. He wet the palms of his hands in an expressive gesture. "When I see a gent as confident as you," he said, "I hone to see how quick I can tame him. Come in."

THERE was no feinting, no weighing of strength. They came together and the room echoed to the flat, crushing collision. Smoke's clubbing right caught the taller man coming in, rocked him aside, sent a flashing twist of pain across his bronzed cheeks. He closed then, hooking his chin over Smoke's shoulder, and pumping both hard fists into the lawman's paunchy belly.

Iron Guts didn't like that kind of going. Sweat crawled across his brows. His frame jerked into swift rigidity and then he broke away. His guard faltered and Shoshone's right came over, smashing him solidly between the eyes. Blood gushed down over Smoke's crooked smile.

"By hell, you can fight!" he roared, and surged to the attack. He failed to duck, took a stiff jolt on the temple and caught his weaving antagonist with both hands, knocking him to his knees. Shoshone came up instantly, lurching in. His right caught Smoke in the belly, doubling him forward. His left caromed smashingly off the marshal's chin, dulling the light of day.

Shoshone's long arms were about Smoke now, his chin on his chest bending him back, back, until ribbons of agony shot along Iron Guts' spine. Smoke's head cleared and he saw the man's sandy scalp pressed against him. He brought his hooked thumb up into Shoshone's ear, lifted his knee into the man's groin. That drew a roar of protest from the spectators banking near the door. But Iron Guts was no greater respecter of rules than he was of persons. And had not this upstart named the terms?

Shoshone sank his teeth into Smoke's shoulder. The marshal countered with a desperate wrenching side step, breaking the hold and back-heeling the man to the floor. He took off, driving at Shoshone with his boots, smashing like a ram into his belly and ribs. Off balance, he fell, scrambling up as Shoshone came to his feet, his face twisting with pain.

Like two bulls they came together again, their tortured breathing audible over the crash of blows. Shoshone's longer reach was counting

now, and he held Smoke off while belting him in the face. Both men were blood-smearing, but most of it was from the veins of Old Iron Guts. A terrific straight-arm smash put Smoke down, and the taller man was jumping at him. Smoke swept those boots aside with a back-hand swipe, and then they were rolling on the sawdust, locked together.

Shoshone's fingers closed on his throat, cutting off his wind. Smoke was gouging at Shoshone's eyes, kneeling the man cruelly as he tried to break that grip. Agony poured through him as his air supply failed. The sun of his consciousness began to sink. He threshed wildly with knees and arms, and at last his strength prevailed. He wrenched free of those tiring talons, weaved to his feet, his lips blue, his breath whistling. Shoshone came up slower now, nor did Smoke wait. As the man gained his knees, that iron right fist of Old Iron Guts cocked. Suddenly he measured his man and sledged him to the floor with the last iota of his power. Shoshone rolled over; his breath bubbled and he lay still.

Iron Guts filled his great chest, focused his half-closed eyes on the staring bartender. "Hang up his guns," he ordered, "until he's ready to leave town."

Then, recovering his own weapon and with little of his native arrogance, he stalked back to the jailhouse to wash up. Yep, the man could fight. Grudgingly Smoke admitted it. He was sore in every muscle, his features were battered almost beyond recognition. One eye was closed, the other blackened. Twin trickles of blood oozed from his flattened nose. He was spent, dizzy, sick. He lay down, tossed restlessly for a while and then fell asleep. He awakened with a buzz of voices dis-

turbing him, with someone shaking him.

"Marshal! Bungay! Wake up! Come on, snap out of it. Wake up, Bungay!"

Smoke groaned, rose to one elbow and peered from his one good eye. Bill Darlington leaned over him, with Tom Brokaw, Jasper Blench and a number of townsmen banked in the doorway.

"What's the matter?" he asked groggily. "Lemme be, can't you?"

"Rouse up, Smoke," the mayor insisted. "Some big feller's rode into town to raise hell. He upset things in my store an' now he's over at the Custer Palace, shootin' up the place. Listen!"

The muffled smash of a gun rang through the town, shot after shot. Smoke's eyes flamed, then he sank back on his cot. "What's wrong with you gents? Plug him!"

"We can't," wailed Darlington. "You took our guns an' they're hangin' on Tom's wall. That feller won't let us get near 'em. You gotta do somethin'."

Smoke shook off his drowsiness, came to his feet and wrapped his gun belt about him. "Helpless as a bunch of slick-eared kids," he growled, and started for the scene of the disturbance, the townsmen following. He burst into the Custer Palace like a one-man cyclone. The place was empty save for a frightened bartender and a rampaging stranger as big and as heavy as Iron Guts himself. The man grinned at him unpleasantly.

"Hullo! What the hell you want?"

"Tryin' to tree the town, eh?" Smoke's voice rumbled through the empty barroom. "You've bit off too much, feller. Hand that gun to the barkeep!"

"Sure!" With insolent deliberation

the man slid to the bar, laid his gun there. "Now what?"

"Now I'm takin' you to the jailhouse to cool off," said Smoke, and moved toward him.

"You an' who else?" taunted the stranger.

A LOW roar guttered from Iron Guts' smashed lips as he slashed forward. He dropped as the man met him with a straight blow to the face. Iron Guts kicked the fellow's feet out from under him and they grappled on the floor. With a whoop the townsmen crowded in from the street, forming a ring about the combatants. That fight was much like the first one, only it was dirtier. They bit and gouged and kneed one another. They strangled and kicked and used every foul tactic known to rough-and-tumble fighting.

This man was as strong as Shoshone had been. Smoke was spent, his muscles stiff and sore. But there was nothing wrong with his fighting spirit. The fact that the onlookers cheered the stranger, begging him for victory over their own marshal, spurred him to desperation. That they called him Sandblast rang a bell of warning in the lawman's brain. There was a certain intimacy in their appeals, as if they had imported the big bruiser for this very purpose.

The long fire of accumulated scorn burned through Smoke's veins. He fought like a demon. His closed eye bothered him, made it hard for him to avoid Sandblast's right-hand blows when they were up and swinging. So Smoke clinched and took his adversary to the floor. The battle waged there on the sawdust became an epic in Custer City.

Each punished the other cruelly, but Smoke was, and always had been, as insensible to pain as he was

to the sting of criticism. With his powers failing fast, with defeat staring him in the face, he got a hammer-lock on Sandblast and all but tore his left arm out by the roots. Sandblast cried out for mercy and gave up. Smoke climbed unsteadily to his feet, jerked the beaten man up. He was nauseated, gasping for breath. He had double vision, and his head pounded painfully.

"March for the jail, feller," he wheezed. "I'll teach you to—"

But the man whirled, broke from his grasp and darted to the bar for his gun. Smoke launched himself, wrapped his arms about the fellow's legs and brought him down. Sandblast's head banged the bar, stiffening him. And then Smoke was astride him, knocking his head against the rail, over and over, until all tension went out of his victim. He tried to shoulder the limp form and fell down on his face. He was done.

Like a man very drunk or in a trance, he weaved to his feet and stumbled through the silent ring of spectators. They weren't cheering now; they were staring dumbly, awe-stricken and unbelieving. There were things Smoke wanted to tell them, but he wasn't up to it. So he staggered back to the jailhouse and tumbled onto his cot, passing out at once.

Sun striking into the jailhouse woke him. His whole body ached with pain. His mouth was dry, bitter, as if he'd been drunk. He sat up, ran fingers over his bruised face and into his hair. Only then did he hear the turmoil on the street. Through raucous advice from townsmen came a throaty challenge.

"Where's this wampoodlin' big fightin' man? Come out, Bungay, an' fight!"

The defy drew Iron Guts up,

trembling. But he sank back with a groan. He was a sick man. But again the voice resounded.

"Where's that brave badge-toter?"

Smoke reeled to the window. Planted in the street, with the town looking on in glee, was a giant more glowering, more formidable than the other two. And Smoke shuddered, knowing what would happen if he ventured out. He locked up, tumbled onto his cot. Let the town get their police chief. He'd had enough. He fell asleep.

The crash of a breaking window woke him. He sat bolt upright, conscious that it was night. A horse whisper struck through the eerie stillness of the town.

"Smoke, wake up!" It was Bill Darlington, and Smoke snorted.

"G'way! Get somebody else to play yore games. Lemme alone."

"Listen, Smoke, this is serious. They've cleaned me out, gutted the town's tills, killed Tom Brokaw and Reb Duncan. They're at the bank now. Let us in."

Tom Brokaw dead! Shocked fully awake at last, Smoke shot the bolt and admitted them: Darlington, Sven Carlstrom, the blacksmith, Doc Prothro and Jasper Blench. The Custer City Council.

"Killed Brokaw, eh?" inquired Iron Guts. "Then his scheme must 'a' backfired."

"You . . . you knew he was plottin' to take over the town?" gasped Darlington. "I swear we didn't, Smoke. We were plannin' to fire you, fella, and Brokaw told us he'd get those plug-uglies in to beat you up and make you glad to quit. The truth came out when they turned on him, robbed the Palace and killed him. How'd you learn?"

"I didn't," growled Smoke. "But I know the Tom Brokaws of this

world. Lousy crooks, an' gratitude ain't in 'em. You're crooks, too, all but Doc. Jasper Blench, squeezin' blood out o' poor folks' veins. You, Darlington, askin' three prices for yore stuff. Carlstrom, here, gettin' rich by runnin' out competition with lies an' overchargin' broke-down farmers. An' all three of you've owed Doc money for years. No, Brokaw got his needin's, an' you deserve the same. Go hire you a good police chief. The need for gun law has passed."

They fell silent before the finality of his attitude. Only Doc Prothro had the courage to try again. "We forgot your service to Custer City, Smoke," he said meekly. "But we're sorry. If you can get us out of this, we'll resign so you can pick your own council, write your own ticket. Don't think of us; just think of the innocent ones. The Widow Stearns. Poor old Pappy Spears. Others. All they've got on earth is in the bank. Those devils are robbing it right now and we can't do a thing because you've made us cache our guns at the Palace Bar. If somebody don't act, the town is ruined."

Old Iron Guts glared at them in the gloom, stroked his heavy jaw. "To hell with the town an' country," he rumbled. "But ol' Reb Duncan—they oughtn't to have downed him. Hell, he could hardly walk. An' Pappy Spears an' Widder Stearns, it ain't right for them to be robbed. No, them devils has gone too far. They're makin' it personal." He turned aside for his gun, buckled on his belt and drew on his boots. "You say they're at the bank, eh? Good. I'll poke over an' have a little talk with 'em. An' you four stay here, you understand? Pilgrims ain't got no business on the street, come a ruckus. Doc, you may be needed when the smoke lifts."

"It might be better, Smoke," suggested the medico, "if you'd get the guns from the Palace, arin the townsmen and do this thing up right—"

"Right?" All of Smoke Bungay's hard scorn had returned. "Go tell that to yore new police chief. But don't tell me how to handle crooks that are killin' an' robbin' pore folks. Shut up, an' let me alone." He was gone, and the door closed behind him.

"Thank God!" breathed Bill Darlington. "Amen!" murmured Doc Prothro.

NIGHT hung like a grim menace over Custer City. A dim light burned in the Custer Palace and the Mercantile, but there was no sign of life. Silence bore down, and Smoke dug at his sore eyes to improve his vision. He could see nothing, and he found himself wondering if the trouble was over, the damage done, the renegades gone with their loot.

Like some great sullen watchdog, he moved from the walk, followed the darkened alley and came back to the street between two buildings, immediately across from the bank. And there, with the quick echo of his step on the walk threading the drawn silence, he paused, hearkening to the faint clatter of hoofs somewhere in the town.

Horses came trotting from Hank Hornblow's stable into the street, one ridden by Shoshone Carter, the others drawn by lead ropes. From within the bank came a dull, detonating boom that hit the streets and swelled along the fronts. The rider speeded his charges, flashed to the bank rack. He was looking nervously along the silent street, and his gun glittered in his hand as he dismounted to stand among the horses.

Smoke's voice was too flat, too cracked, to reverberate.

"Hi, Shoshone!" he said. "Yore maw's gonna miss her boy."

Shoshone's shot put a period to the taunt, the bullet crashing into the front behind Old Iron Guts. The marshal blasted lead at the flash, heard a gust of breath go out of the renegade and the frightened ponies rear and lunge over his body. Then they had bolted and Shoshone lay unmoving.

Forms were vague on the bank steps, their positions marked by crimson streamers of muzzle flame. Their bullets crashed through the flimsy front wall of the Idle Hour Saloon, smashing glassware inside. Shoulders bent from the heavy burdens they carried, they surged to the walk.

"Someone's downed Shoshone an' set us afoot," one of the men cried. "Sandblast, you go fetch more horses while we put this trigger-crazy gent away."

They ripped at Smoke, their guns making chaos of the night. But Iron Guts had slipped to a new position, and his voice now took on the inflexible note that Custer City knew so well.

"Careful, Sandblast!" he bawled. "A dead man can't saddle no horses."

After that, his gun boomed out from still another angle. And Sandblast was sagging, reeling against a building front and holding himself erect with a terrible desperation as he tried to swing his gun. He couldn't do it. Crying faintly, he dropped. And his partners, having deposited their heavy loot on the walk, were driving lead at the spot where the gun flash had revealed their lone foe.

But Smoke had ducked between

buildings and was forcing his sore muscles to a lumbering run as he stuffed shells into his weapon. He drew up at the rear opening in Hornblow's Feed Barn and eased inside. Since the renegades had to have horses, this was the logical supply.

He heard their boots pounding the walk, saw their dark forms silhouetted against the star glow, up front. "This wouldn't have happened, Coulee, if you hadn't gone loco an' plugged Brokaw," one growled. "We'll be lucky if—"

"You'll be lucky if I don't drill you," came an answering snarl. "Shut yore trap, you yellow rat, an' get a saddle on a bronc."

"Crooks quarrel," rapped Iron Guts from the shadows, "but need of a saddle fetches 'em to a trap. Bad bet, boys!"

It brought them up, stunned. Iron Guts aimed with awful concentration at the one called Coulee. And the tension of Custer City was split by his shot. Coulee made no answering move. His body fell to the ground. And Iron Guts was down, but only to escape the lead they poured at him. He fired again. One of the two survivors screamed, whirled and ran for the entrance. He couldn't quite make it, sprawling on his face, moaning. The last one simply flew as he cleared the doorway, with Iron Guts wasting another cap and pounding ponderously after him. Drawing up in the center of the street, the gun marshal shook out the last of his leads in a futile effort to drop the fleeing man. Then, with great magnanimity:

"You deserve to save your hide, runnin' the way you do," he roared. "Be sure to tell 'em Smoke Bungay's a hot sport—up to the point where play gets to be work. Run, you antelope!"

CUSTER CITY sprang to life, miraculously. Lights blazed up. Men came with lanterns to crowd about Iron Guts, hailing him as a deliverer—the same men who had begged for his defeat in his two bitter battles in the Palace. Down by the bank, the shrill voice of Jasper Blench called for help with the heavy money bags. The undertaker came with his helpers to make his gruesome collections. Doc Prothro directed the moving of a desperately wounded renegade from the stable. It was pandemonium.

Smoke watched it all with scornful impatience, champing savagely on his inevitable unlighted stogie. Hero worshipers fell away from him as he dourly ignored them. And they gave before him as he stalked down to the jail, scowling and ill-tempered. Something less than an hour later, Doc Prothro, Bill Darlington and Sven Carlstrom found him there, his feet cocked on his desk, a near empty bottle at his elbow and a ferocious gleam in his eye.

"What the hell you want?" he demanded brusquely.

"Smoke," said Doc. "We've come to thank you for—"

"Don't want no thanks. What I done, I done for me, savvy." He beat his chest.

"No matter," said the medico. "It worked for the town."

"Yeah? So what?"

The quartet twisted uncomfortably under his glare. "We want to talk to you about the law here, Smoke." This came from Bill Darlington.

"Law!" Smoke reared up, pounding the desk with his fist. "You take that up with yore new police chief. I—"

"Smoke!" Doc Prothro grabbed him, pleading. "You can't quit us now. We're just coming to realize your value to Custer City. You mustn't give up the job you've held so well."

"Who said anything about giving up?" demanded Iron Guts fiercely. "You boys done made up yore minds to have a police chief. All right, that's fine. But when you do, I'm him. Get it? An' sa-a-ay—" The ghost of a smile softened his broad face. "When you fix it, set aside enough for one of them fancy uniforms, an' one of them neat little soldier caps. I tell yuh, gents, we're gonna have law here that the town can be proud of. An' don't forget my raise when you start dishin' out the mazuma. Now get outa here so's I can go to bed. I'm just nacherally plumb wore out."

THE END.



THE BLUE BANDIT



By **DAVE LOGAN**

OLD Frank Muldoon had timed it to perfection. It was Monday morning, when there would not be much doing in any Montana cow town. While blazing sunshine alternated with shadows cast by dark storm clouds gathering over the prairies, he rode down out of the bench lands north of Gold Rock.

A tall ghost of a man in shabby blue, old Frank was not pushing his phantomlike tombstone-gray horse. The last descent of the trail was rocky and dangerous, a mere goat path winding down through the rim-rocks above the river. Muldoon's faded blue eyes had studied the trail just a week ago. He was studying it now, noting the dangerous spots, the quick turns around the rocks that would hastily take a man and his horse out of sight. There was a comfortable feeling of security about the dense jack-pine thickets on the bench lands behind him. There was something comforting in the shaggy fringe of cottonwoods along the river. Trees and rocks were good shelter, and a man needed shelter when he robbed a bank.

Muldoon had been riding slowly, saving the gray's strength for the dangerous run he knew the old horse would have to make once the job was done and they started to put Gold Rock behind them, with the whole town ringing with shots and yells. Twice he had turned out of his way so that the gray could drink at waterholes. Each time the gray lowered his head, took only a couple of sips of the water, and moved on. That in itself was good. No horse could run with his belly full of cold water, and there would be no time for waiting around while the water warmed up inside the horse.

"Yuh just keep yore head about yuh, White Cloud." Muldoon spoke gently and patted the gray's

shaggy blue mane affectionately. "It ain't goin' to be no worse than the last job we pulled ten year ago come this very fall. Yuh was youngish then, of course, an' yuh sure could go it like the devil a-twistin' his tail. Yuh still can outrun most anything what wears hair an' has four feet. We ain't gonna fail on this job. We can't. A lot depends on us."

As they came out of the water he started humming a little tune. It was cool and peaceful-looking here under the cottonwoods which formed a natural grove on a little flat just below the depot and the railroad tracks.

Here and there in the grass were blue-gray rocks beside which a fella might set and rest his back. Among them were black splotches that marked where campfires had been made by cowboys in town with herds or on a spree. To his left was a dark old pump house, and beyond it the black skeleton framework of a coal chute.

Beyond the tracks Muldoon came to the first street. A little hankering came to him to drop into the Silver Dollar Saloon for a drink, but he shook his head and swung up the street to the left, conscious of the heavy and yet secure feeling of the old-fashioned five-shot Smith & Wesson "hoss pistols" riding high and snugly under his coat.

Main Street was next. He swung to the right. To his left the Eagle Bar seemed to beckon to him. He went on, wondering briefly what the big fella with the black mustaches was doing behind the bar. Other saloons called. He ignored them, old eyes studying the big red-brick courthouse and jail building up there well beyond the end of the town with the bald bench lands looming behind it.

THE town was quiet. Few people were on the street, and the dock on the corner of the bank showed that it was just a minute or two until twelve. Muldoon rode on to the post office beyond and pulled rein to dismount slowly. Without haste he walked inside the post office, just like a man who had some business there.

A pretty little black-haired woman came to the window, and Muldoon asked her if there was any mail for Frank Roberts, the first name that came to him. The woman was pleasant. She looked through the letters, then the newspapers, and shook her head with a smile that was somehow a little sad, a little pitying, just as if she knew he was about to do something he hadn't ought to do. He thanked her, lifted his old hat, bowed awkwardly, and moved back outside to the curb.

For several minutes he stood there, looking up and down the street, at the bald bench lands to southward, at the rimrocks and jack pines to northward. Roundup Valley still looked good to his tired eyes. In the old days there had been a lot of fun to be had among the boys. For a minute he found himself regretting everything; regretting that wild night of drinking and carousing in the Miner's Saloon, and afterward the blazing gun fight in the Eagle Bar.

For a second Frank Roberts' white bloodless face loomed out of the past—Frank going down behind the drink-smeared table with hot .45s still cradled in his rope-scarred hands. Hang-dog it, he'd just asked for mail for Frank! Funny, and he had not even thought of Frank at the time! Maybe Frank was sort o' tryin' to warn him. Frank was all right when he wasn't drunk. But

he hadn't ought to said what he did about Nellie.

"Knowed I was a-goin' to marry her." Muldoon whispered the words softly. "An' then when me an' him started shootin', the Claxton boys stepped in, knowin' I was the fastest han' on the gun throw that ever rid this way, though I'd never had to shoot a man."

He shook his head. Funny how pictures came floatin' back to a man's mind right when he was all atingle an' alight with other things in mind. But he saw them all, the quick, hot fight, Joe Claxton slumping to his knees at the foot of the bar with a gun in his hand. Hang-dogged if he wouldn't always remember Joe as a fella sort o' kneelin' down slow an' easy to say a prayer!

Then there was Buck Claxton. Always a lot of noise an' shoot-off at the mouth to Buck. Even bullied Joe now an' then, kickin' his own brother about like a dog. And there he was, a picture of old coming back, a big man weaving and rocking through the gun smoke, the hot blazes of hoss pistols cutting him down, sending him crashing through a table and a chair with two balls through the head.

With three bullet holes in him, Muldoon had staggered for his horse outside. A marshal up the street had opened fire on him from the darkness without a word or a yell of warning—just like a dry-gulcher going into action. One shot had downed the marshal, had dropped him dead just like Buck. Then had come the wild dash for the river—and the rimrocks and jack pines.

MULDOON picked up White Cloud's reins. Slowly, looking like some rusty old-timer with nothing on his mind, he led the horse along the curb and again dropped the

reins. He was right in front of the bank. White Cloud stood alongside the curb with his right side to the building. He had never liked to be mounted from the offside. He was no Indian pony, that hoss.

"But this time it'll have to do," the old man whispered. "I won't be long. Yuh just stand an' wait."

He strolled on into the bank. It was cool inside. The room was big and airy, the windows high. It was like he had known it would be. There were but two men beyond the mahogany counter and the bronze grating of the cashiers' cages. The others were out to lunch.

One of the men sat at a desk, a big, heavy-jawed fella writing something on a pile of papers. He didn't look much like a bank fella; looked more like some hard-fisted, hard-bargaining cattle buyer who would use any trick to put through a deal at his own price.

The second man was a nice-lookin' young gent with his hair slicked down as if he'd been smoothing it back with axle grease, a trick some of the boys on the range used to do in the old days when they came to town to see their best girls. For an instant he thought of himself. Hang-dog if the young fella didn't remind him of those days when he was courtin' Nellie an' walkin' slow an' easy with her down along the river.

"Good morning." The young man stepped to the window. "Something for you, old-timer?"

"Well, yes, there is, I reckon." Muldoon spoke gently, with a deceptive air of bewilderment. He was downright sorry he was not talking his business with the heavy-jawed fella instead of this fine-lookin' young dude. "Yuh see, it's sort o' like this, son. I've got a job to do.

Yuh ain't gonna believe me, I know, but I sort o' hate to do it—"

"Will you speak a little louder, old-timer?" The young man leaned closer. "I didn't catch what you said."

"I was sayin'," Muldoon cleared his throat, "that I've got a job to do. Yuh see, son, I've come to rob yore bank. Easy!" The old Smith & Wessons had come with lightning swiftness into his gnarled hands, their black muzzles covering both men in the room. "I don't want to hurt yuh. 'Tain't my way to draw blood when a little gumption can just as well avoid it. Steady! Let's get it done! Start shovelin' money in that bag."

"What in hell is this!" The heavy-jawed man came lurching to his feet, his big moon face suddenly white from rage and fear. "Why, you damned old bat—"

"Steady!" Muldoon's voice was hard and flat, yet pitched low. It was cool and calculating, firm enough to make any man understand just what he wanted and was going to have before he was done. "I'm robbin' the bank. It ain't the first time I've robbed one, but I ain't never had to kill a man while at it. I know my business like maybe yuh know yores. Don't horn in. Get started, son!"

"Why, you damned old scarecrow—" the other man began.

"Easy, mister!" Muldoon's faded-blue eyes had been as mild as a baby's until the big man started to lurch toward the window. Now they were like balls of cold lightning, like the eyes of some dangerous wild animal at bay.

"That's right, son." He nodded as the young man hastily snatched up a stout canvas bag and started scooping piles of currency into it. "You've got sense. Now, that'll do.

I don't want it all. Never was my way to be the whole hawg at any eatin' trough, even if yuh are covered by insurance. Just put a string round the bag an' tie it tight. I don't wanta spill it when I start makin' my getaway."

BACKING them into the vault, Muldoon closed the door. But he did not turn the bolt and spin the tumblers to lock it. It wasn't his way to risk men dying of suffocation. Suffocation was bad medicine—a heap worse than lead. He had heard of men being locked up to die in vaults before the time lock opened. He did not know that this was a modern vault, with a small glass window in the rear wall of it that was covered by a steel door any man locked inside the vault could open with a turn of the wrist.

Leaving that door unlocked was the worst thing he could have done, but he would have done it if he had realized the danger. He was that way, an old dog not hankering to learn new tricks, and even as he was walking toward the front door a terrific gong started ringing. Red lights started flashing outside the bank. The fat was in the fire, the grease beginning to sizzle and spout into flame.

But that was not all of it. Even as Muldoon was going out the door the heavy-jawed man swung open the vault and started opening fire on him. Muldoon whirled and sent the man crashing down behind the counter with a bullet through his arm and all the fight taken out of him with but one flaming roar of a Smith & Wesson.

When he ran out the door he saw that the street was hell. Men were popping out of restaurants. The

doors of stores and saloons seemed to be exploding them to the street. With a flying leap, Muldoon threw himself into White Cloud's saddle just as a burst of wild shots and a furious yelling filled the street from every direction a man could think of.

"The bank! It's a holdup! Get that old duck!"

But they were not as good with their guns as some of the boys had been in the old days. Muldoon was hardly in the saddle when White Cloud swung into action. He took one wild-fool leap in the air, curved like a fish-tailing white rocket, pitched crazily, and then he was leaving town. They swung around the corner to the right, the shots growing, the bullets filling the air all around them, little puffs of dust boiling up in tiny geysers from the street, spurts of red jerking from the side of the bank's red-brick wall.

It was blood on the moon now. With lightning-fast old hands—hands that had done jobs like this before—Muldoon had tied the money sack to his saddlehorn. His reins were gripped firmly in the snags of teeth, the old Smith & Wessons rising and falling. He was shooting wildly, crazily. He didn't want to kill anybody.

"Up an' at it, yuh old terrapin!" He snarled that at White Cloud through the reins in his teeth. "A man'd think yuh was pegged out like a dryin' hide on the groun'! Up an' at it! Show 'em how the monkey stropped the razor! Uncork yoreself from a hole in the groun' an' let 'em see how the little white birdies fly! *Yee-yow!* Ride 'em high, an' ride 'em wide, cowboy! *Yee-yow!* Make the latigos sing like banjo strings!"

Drum! Drum! Drum! Old Billy B. Damn a-beatin' a tune. The shots raged from everywhere. Suddenly

Muldoon felt something slap him hard in the back. It jerked him upright in his saddle, his white, bloodless face twisted with racking pain. He started to reel, then caught himself, shaking his head. Still holding on to his guns, the reins still gripped in his teeth, he rode on, a fighting man of the old outlaw school, refusing to give up the fight.

THE posse was a wild, reckless mob. Men had grabbed horses, seized guns and rode. It was not hard for the first mile. There was blood enough on the trail. Muldoon was hit, and he was hit *hard*. At any moment they expected to pick him up. Then suddenly the clouds thickened. The sky blackened as if dark shutters had been closed in the heavens. A regular Montana downpour started spilling from the clouds.

It was a storm which would have sent most men scurrying for shelter, but big Bart Lane, the red-headed, hard-swearing, hard-riding sheriff of Gold Rock was no man to turn back for the wildest storm that ever fell. The bank had been robbed. Nearly twenty thousand dollars were taking wings in the hands of an old gun ghost mounted on a flying tombstone of a horse still going it like hell on the moonbeams in the rain and wind.

"He's heading for the Big Snowy!" the sheriff declared at last. He had brought the mob of thirty possemen to a halt high up in the jack-pine thickets on the bench lands. "He's making a swing around, out over the Bulls. We've got to cut him off!"

"Half of us can do that!" put in Long Alec Newburg, Lane's chief deputy. "Half can go on an' try to keep on his trail. Reckon this storm'll soon be over. I figger I can keep on the trail."

Lane looked at him with a frown. Even in a Montana cloudburst Alec Newburg could not help thinking up some bombastic move that might get him elected as the next sheriff of the county. No doubt he was thinking, too, of the usual reward offered by the bank—five thousand dollars, cash on the barrel head! And five thousand was money no man was apt to sneeze at.

"All right, Alec, go to it." Lane's eyes narrowed. "Take your pick of the men and push on, but I'll tell you now that you've picked yourself a job. That gent's got the bench lands on you. He won't ride the tops of them like a bird flitting from one treetop to another so that you can see him a mile away. Something tells me that old man knows his business. He'll keep low, riding below the rims, and pushing on hard to try to get where he's going. Hell, he even figured on this storm! Knew it was coming! Had it figured out as foxy as you please. If you run him down, shoot to kill. I've got a notion that duck won't be taken alive even if you tried it."

"Which I won't try doing." A grin crossed Newburg's rain-dripping face. "Come on, boys. We're still not far off the trail of our man."

"But if he sees you first, Alec"—Lane held up his hand—"just remember the old saying."

"Yeah, I savvy!" A knowing grin showed on the deputy's face. "I'll give your love to the buzzards, and you can give mine to the magpies. If he sees you first, I'll do the same."

"And be sheriff to boot!" With that parting shot from Lane, they were riding again, Newburg swinging on with his half of the posse behind him, and the sheriff and his group touching spurs to their horses and vanishing in the walls of rain.

A-RIDIN' in the rain—a-ridin' in the rain—the Blue Bandit's a-ridin' again!" Muldoon came to his senses mumbling in a singsong voice and lying across the saddlehorn. The money sack, wrapped snug and dry in his old slicker and tied to his saddlehorn, was making a pillow for his gaunt old chest. Rain was mighty good for a man. The cold downpour had stopped the blood. He could tell that because he was cold all down the back. No warm streak was there.

"Good old rain!"

He chuckled. A pouring, raging rainstorm was the blessing of any outlaw's life on a hard-pushed trail. It was wiping out his trail behind him, obliterating every trace. White Cloud's steadily moving hoofs sounded like music in the mud—*suck! slip-slop-slush!* Making holes, all right, and at every step, but the rushing muddy water pouring off the soft slopes of the bench lands would fill every track before White Cloud had gone forty feet.

It was working out all right. The face of the young fella in the bank came to him several times. Nice young cuss, didn't go get 'imself shot like a fool. He was a man who could hold his head in a pinch.

Finally Muldoon managed to sit up. His old guns were back in their holsters. He looked at them, knowing that there was no need of it. He had been shot up before. Had been out cold and not knowing what he was doing or where he was riding sprawled across the saddlehorn of a horse. He had always managed somehow to reload.

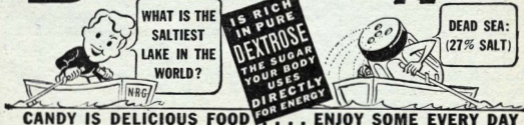
And White Cloud was all right. Hang-dogged if he had ever seen a hoss that could run through so much lead and come out of a fight with nary a bit of hide knocked off! White Cloud was like a cat. Had nine lives, and more dad-burned good, straight-actin' sense than most men! Just like Fightin' Tom, the blue roan he had ridden that night nigh twenty year ago when he pistol-flagged the Katy Flier at the lonely little water tank, and more than a hundred possemen tried to bell them down in a black night gashing great guns of lightning and thunder and pouring rain!

He thought a lot about the past. Many pictures came drifting through his mind. Hadn't been nothin' in all his life but a dad-burned old fool. He should have stood trial for that shooting in the Eagle Bar. He had aimed to do just that when he was going out the

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door. Would have if it hadn't been for that fool marshal opening up on him in the dark. The only reason he had been trying to get to his horse was just to keep from having to shoot any of the rest of the boys. He never had been a killer at heart, but a fella who was as handy as greased lightning with a pair of guns was bound to get into trouble. But it didn't pay, not a dad-burned thing about it paid. No man could play the bad-man game and expect to beat it. Only fools thought that.

Muldoon, the Blue Bandit Robin Hood, they had called him in the Southwest. They had called him that right here in these same old Montana bench lands when he turned against cattlemen and started fighting for the poor, hard-bitten gangs of homesteaders. He had robbed to feed them when they were hungry, when gangs were running them out. And when ruthless men started shooting them down in their doorways at night he had fought like hell for them. Man, woman, youngster and dog had been his sworn friends at every lonely little homestead in those days of long ago.

He had fought fire with fire, sending back thundering lead for thundering lead, the lone wolf playing out his fighting string with all hands, except those of the homesteaders, against him.

But this was his last ride. The pain in his back told him that. Bones had been shattered. He knew that. Bullets had never hurt him when they slipped through without striking a bone. He had felt only a little, deadening streak, a sort of a numbness, a quick, warm flash. But this wound was the real mustard.

FOR three hours Muldoon kept on. At times he felt better. The drip of blood from his mouth let up, helped no doubt by the rain which still came down in sheets, chilling him to the bone. His snags of teeth took fits of violent chattering, but his eyes were clearer. Now and then he groaned a little tune as he watched the rims of the bench lands.

White Cloud kept plugging along at an easy pace, one that he could keep up for hours and hours yet. At last they turned down a rock-floored ravine and headed gradually toward the river. They came to it, and Muldoon saw that it was swelling rapidly. But there was no hesitation when he pushed old White Cloud on through the brush choking the mouth of the ravine and turned downstream with the horse wading in the muddy flood and the dark water slapping at his bell.v.

Now the country was changing. Blue-gray cliffs lifted their shaggy crowns on either side of the river. Muldoon could really begin to grin now. Would have if it had not been for that pain. Hang-dog if it wasn't the most pernicky pain a fella ever had! Left a man at times complete; left him feelin' almost good, and then it'd come romping back, stabbing through him as if another dad-blamed bullet was smacking the fire out of him from behind; at times it made him jerk forward and claw for his saddlehorn as he grew numb all over. The water of the river came up to his knees, but he felt no chill. Even his stomach had quit its foolish spells of jerking and kicking about. Only the feeling that he was filling up all inside remained with him.

But so far he had beaten the law out. They would never find him down here in the Devil Drums, for this was one of the wildest sections.

along the river, a land broken and rebroken, the home of all manner of wild animals, rocks, cliffs, mere holes and deep gashes in the earth. Right here the law crowd could not get within a mile of either side of the river. The only way they could keep to the trail would be to follow the river, and not one of the mob behind would tackle that. Devil take it, they had not played this old river as a getaway friend for years and years!

White Cloud rounded a bend and bore to the right, leaving the main stream for a mile and following a narrow, rock-floored gorge where the water rushed along up White Cloud's knees. In places Muldoon's legs scraped against the rocks at either side. Once they passed under the natural bridge of a long dark tunnel where the sounds of the water whistled like crying ghosts all around them. Quite suddenly they were in the light again.

Muldoon swung to the right under a towering ledge and pulled rein. They were in a deep pocket now, a pocket that was no more than sixty feet across. Like the sides of a great funnel the rocks reached higher and higher toward the dark sky.

"We're here, White Cloud."

Muldoon spoke with difficulty as the pain struck again. Feeling a dizzy spell coming on now that he was sheltered from the cold drip of the rain, he started untying the money sack from his saddlehorn. He did it slowly, conscious of the pain getting worse and worse. With hands that trembled he thrust the sack inside his bosom, and swung White Cloud closer to the rocks.

"Now yuh wait for me ag'in." He reached forward, patting the horse's dripping mane. "Somethin' tells me yuh ain't got much more waitin' to do on me."

He was sure he was dying when he started to drag himself out of his saddle and on to a narrow ledge right there beside him. If White Cloud had moved, Muldoon would have fallen, and when he was on the ledge he had to sit there humped into a knot for a long time. At last he started on, moving on his hands and knees, his face twisting with pain. Once he thought he was going to faint. He shook his head. Hang-dogged if he was going to get a job this near done and then fall down on it!

It was a hard climb. He halted many times to rest before he dragged himself into a crack, turned to the right, and dragged on into a dark hole that had at some time been the lair of some wild animal. In the darkness he felt about until his wet hand found a candle. From his waterproof matchbox he struck a light. A little flame from the candle came flickering up. He placed the candle on a flat rock and felt inside his bosom for a notebook and a stubby pencil.

MMULDOONS face twitched as he wrote. His hand took fool fits and jumped off the damp notebook. He halted several times to rest. Hang-dogged if pushin' a pencil didn't have a way of tirin' a man all out! But he kept on, a lean, rain-soaked ghost sitting high up there in the hole with the light from the candle playing weird shadows across his face. Finally it was done. He sat back and studied it. It looked hang-dogged good to his old eyes. A magician blessed with some idea of proper spelling and punctuation would have made it read:

DEAR TOM:

Here it is. It's quite a pile. It'll do the job, but you remember your promise, Tom.

Don't play me down. I promised little Nellie she'd walk again and she will. Take little Nellie to them big doctors back East. By the time she's twelve she'll walk. You got to do it for her, Tom. And don't you go worrying about that damned bank. It took everything you had and put you to herding sheep. Your brother could have helped you, but since he got to be so high and mighty in life I reckon he ain't got no time to be fooling with a little girl of nine what a horse fell on. You and your Beth was good to me. It was nice for you to let me name little Nellie.

Yours truly,

FRANK.

Painfully he crawled a few feet to the center of the hole. A pile of sticks and old cottonwood leaves lay in front of him, the remains of a wild animal's bed. He brushed them aside carefully and lifted a flat stone. A hole two feet deep was uncovered. He placed the damp note and the money sack inside it and carefully replaced the stone. Just as carefully he swept the sticks, the

twigs and leaves back over it. Now he could go on. His job was done. He turned away to blow out the candle and place it where the brother of the sheriff of Gold Rock, who had once come here with him, would be sure to find it when the rest of the posse had given up the search and ridden their tired horses home.

Tom Lane took his wife and daughter east in due time. Bart Lane and Long Alec Newburg never found the bank's money. They never found the bandit's bridle and saddle, and concluded they were hidden with the money. But they did find the body a week after the robbery.

They found it far away from the river. It lay far up a grass-choked valley with a blue sky overhead and an old white horse standing on a little butte above it like a tombstone keeping silent watch over the dead.

THE END.

STAGE STANDS

IN stagecoach days the distance between stands, where the fresh teams were held in readiness for a quick change, varied according to the roads. On the smooth, level prairie through the lands of the friendly Pawnee tribe, the stations were fifteen miles apart. Farther west, in the country of the Cheyennes and Arapahoes, the distance was shortened to ten miles in order that the stages might have a better opportunity to outrun the Indians in case of an attack. The stock tenders at these lonely outposts were cool, brave men, capable of repairing the broken part of a coach, cooking a meal for the passengers or dressing a gunshot wound. For the most part, the stage stands were not molested by the Indians. If a driver succeeded in getting his outfit through the attack to within rifle range of the corrals and cabins of the stage stand he was usually safe. None of the prairie tribes liked to attack any sort of a barricade, especially one that was defended by men who were accurate shots and armed with fifty-caliber Sharps rifles.

In the mountain country, twelve miles was the approved distance between stations. The distance was covered on a schedule of one hour and the drivers took as much pride in bringing their coaches in on time as did the men who later pulled the throttle on the puffing, snorting narrow-gauge engines.



Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

HUNDREDS of letters have been received during the past year concerning the Model 1917 rifle which the government sells to civilians. Writers want information as to how they may be obtained. Boys, here's the story!

The Model 1917 rifle was an official arm during the last World War. Essentially, it was the Model 1914 British Enfield. Various factories, including Winchester, Remington, New England Westinghouse, and others were tooled up to manufacture hundreds of thousands of these for the British government during the World War. Of course they were made for the .303 British Mark VII cartridge, the standard British government caliber.

Enormous quantities of these rifles were delivered to Great Britain prior to the time the United States entered the War. At that time, we were caught totally unprepared with the problem of mobilizing an army for duty in France. We had to have

rifles. Springfield Armory was making them at full capacity to the tune of twelve hundred a day, but this was not enough. Rock Island Arsenal in Illinois was also turning out a much smaller quantity of these, but still the supply for hasty mobilization was not in sight.

So Uncle Sam stepped in, took over British war contracts, and made alterations in the Model 1914 British Enfield to adapt it to the regular .30-06 service cartridge.

More than a million of these Model 1917 rifles were manufactured in the scant two years we were in the War. Naturally, enormous quantities of them were never issued, but all guns following demobilization were carefully cleaned, heavily greased, and put in storage for future use.

In order to stimulate rifle shooting

Any reader who plans to purchase one of the Model 1917 rifles described in the above article may obtain an N. R. A. application blank, properly indorsed, by writing Mr. Sharpe, inclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope with his request.

in the United States, the war department decided to offer these rifles to intelligent shooters. Under an act of Congress enacted in 1909, the war department cannot sell firearms, ammunition or parts to civilians unless they are members of the National Rifle Association. Therefore, to purchase these government rifles, one must belong to the N. R. A. The cost of this is three dollars per year, including subscription to the N. R. A. magazine, "The American Rifleman." Purchases, however, are not made from the N. R. A., but directly from the war department.

These rifles cost the government approximately twenty-three dollars each. They are sold to N. R. A. members at seven dollars and fifty cents in serviceable used condition and twelve dollars and fifty cents new.

To purchase one of these guns, you submit your N. R. A. membership card to the director of Civilian Marksmanship, War Department, Washington, D. C. He will send you letters of approval, return your membership card, and instruct you where to send your money order. Shipment will be made to you from the nearest arsenal or warehouse containing a supply of these guns. N. R. A. members must agree not to purchase for other individuals or firms.

This rifle is chambered only for the .30-06 cartridge, one of the most

popular big-game sporting cartridges in the world, and ammunition of various types is available in every civilized country and made by all ammunition manufacturers. It is available with a wider variety of loads, bullets and so forth than any other cartridge sold on the American market.

To make a suitable hunting rifle of this Enfield, it is not necessary to spend any money whatever. It naturally can be used in its present military shape by anyone who does not object to the crude bulkiness of a military gun and many thousands of them see service in this fashion.

The home craftsman, however, may wish to alter the military stock more along sporting lines or build a new one. A suitable blank of walnut, rough-shaped, with most of the inletting work for the action already done, can be purchased for about five dollars. The finishing and shaping of it to exact measurements is a matter of the individual skill of the owner. This blank can be used with the straight military sights for hunting purposes, but these may be removed and replaced with hunting sights, if desired.

Incidentally, your membership also permits you to purchase other government arms and ammunition as well as many accessories. Through no other source can you purchase army supplies of this nature.

If you are interested in making a cartridge collection and would like to hear from other collectors, write to this department, inclosing a three-cent stamp for a list of names which will be sent to you as soon as it is compiled. In this way you may be able to trade some of your duplicates with others for something you really need for your collection.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. *Be sure you inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

YOU'LL find Hidalgo County 'way down in the southwestern corner of New Mexico. It lines up against Arizona on the west, and its southern boundary is part of the border line between the United States and old Mexico. It is definitely a gold and glamor region of untowned desert stretches and lonely mountain ranges.

The prospector, or prospective metal hunter, who wants to get completely away from the tarnished gloss of civilization into the sunshine of the Southwest might do well to give the country down there a try, which is what L. B., of Duluth, Minnesota, writes us he has every intention of doing.

"The big open spaces of the Southwest and the mining country out there have always fascinated me," his letter says. "I'm sick of cramped minds in crowded cities. When I

head for the West, I intend to stay there. Been reading a lot about Arizona in your columns lately, but how about New Mexico? Isn't there some good gold country there, too? Hidalgo County, New Mexico, is really the section I have in mind. Anything you can pass along relative to mining in that region will sit aces high with me."

There's plenty of good gold country in New Mexico, L. B., and the State's annual production of recoverable gold has been jumping right up the ladder during recent years. The Lordsburg district in Hidalgo County, a highly important gold producer in its day, is again humming with mining activity. Lordsburg, itself, right on U. S. Highway 80, one of the main roads across the Southwest to the Pacific Coast, is the county seat and is a bustling, active, up-to-date little city.

The actual mining district isn't right in town, but ten miles south of Lordsburg along the slopes of the Pyramid Mountains and in the canyons and gulches that slash the range. The Phelps-Dodge Corp.'s Eighty-five Mine that for a time turned out about ten thousand ounces of gold a year is in this section. Leasers lately have been giving the ground in the district a play, and some of them doing right well by themselves.

It is hard-rock country with the ore deposits occurring as a rule in strong fissure veins, and the ore minerals carrying values in both gold and silver. Considerable pyrite or fool's gold is present in many of the veins, too, so don't be fooled, L. B. Remember if it is bright, brassy, brittle, or in sizable cubical crystals that crumble to a dull gray powder under hammer blows, the stuff is not the real McCoy even though it is yellow,

Over west of Lordsburg just off Highway 80 on the way to Douglas, when you come to the mountains about twenty miles out, mine dumps, head frames and other signs of lode-mining activity can be seen off on the north side of the road. Here and around Steins Pass, once a pretty good silver producer, recent prospecting has uncovered some likely gold leads, and some time ago small lots of real high-grade ore were shipped from some of the holdings.

That makes two prospecting sections, each a few miles out of Lordsburg. But if you want to get thoroughly into the wide places, sashay on down to the Little Hatchet Mountains. There's an improved dirt road from Lordsburg that will take you the thirty miles south to Animas. From Animas it is just plain desert road skirting the unusual Playas Lake, a huge water-filled sink, over to the Little Hatchets.

If you had placer mining in mind, your best bet would be to head for the Little Hatchets anyhow. Placer-gold and colors have been recovered from a lot of the gulches on the west side of the range. But early returns didn't live up to the bonanza expectations of the first finders in most instances, and a lot of people have forgotten that gold-placer was ever found there. Further careful prospecting might disclose some good patches and reverse the earlier estimates of the district's placer possibilities.

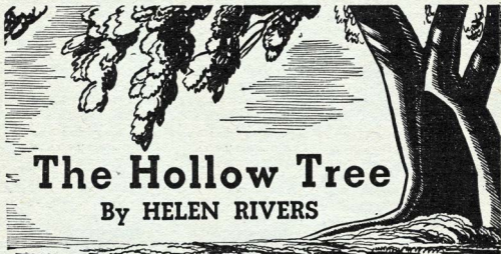
There are lode gold deposits in toward the center of the range, also some copper. Silver-lead ore, too, has been shipped from the area. In other words the mineralization is there all right. But it will probably take hard work and plenty of search to uncover some more of the better grade ore bodies that may still lie undiscovered in that wild and little-traveled region.

The districts already mentioned, however, don't complete the roster. Along the southwestern base of the Apache Hills southeast of Hatchita is a mineralized area that stretches clear into the Sierra Rica range in old Mexico. Silver, gold and a low-grade copper ore have been mined here. Farther south the Fremont district takes in the Sierra Rica foothills, or some of them. But watch your wanderings because the international United States-Mexico boundary line cuts right through this district, and most of the mineralization is over on the Mexican side.

To J. P. L., Savannah, Georgia: The real beginning of the discoveries of major oil fields in Texas that are continuing to the present day was made in 1901 when Captain A. F. Lucas' spectacular gusher opened up the famous Spindletop field near Beaumont down in the southeastern corner of the State. When the Lucas well blew in with a deafening roar it shot a column of oil spouting two hundred feet above the top of the derrick.

● 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.

Letter 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

By HELEN RIVERS

We're always glad to welcome a former member of the Tree back again, and Bill La Rue, whose letter starts things moving this week, is no exception. We're sure pleased to hear from you again, Bill, and hope that from now on, New York won't seem like such a lonesome old town. You'll see to that, Pen Pals, won't you? To prove it, sit right down and send Bill a few lines, pronto.

Dear Miss Rivers:
Way back about twelve years ago you published several letters for me in the Hollow Tree and I sure found many hours of happiness through them. I have always been a drifter until the past few years, and in my travels I misplaced my correspondence. Now I'm ready to start in again. I wonder if any of my old gang of Hollow Tree friends will remember me when they read this letter? I am twenty-nine years old now and live in New York, and my only pal is my police dog. New York is a big place and I'm lonesome here and long for the wide open spaces. How about it, pals, will you write to me?—R. Bill La Rue, 463 West 125th Street, New York, New York

Jennetta plays the saxophone—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am seventeen years old and would like to hear from Pen Pals from all over the world. When it comes to music, I play the saxophone and drum away at the piano. My favorite sports are football, and swimming, and I also enjoy dancing. Here's hoping I hear from lots of lads and lassies.—Jennetta Hart, 605 N. 15th Street, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

Bob has a private zoo—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Can you please find room in the Hollow Tree for one more New Zealander? I have tried lots of times to get Pen Pals, but for some reason nobody ever writes to me. I am sixteen years old and collect stamps, snapshots, post cards, books, badges, birds, animals and butterflies—in fact I have a private zoo and am always ready

to add to it. Please send a snap in your first letter. I promise to answer all, so please fill my mailbox.—Bob McConachie, Cromwell R. D., Otago Central, New Zealand

Margaret is an accomplished sports-woman—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a nineteen-year-old girl, and my hobby is writing letters, so I hope you will print this plea for Pen Pals. I am a Canadian by birth, but have lived in Wales most of my life. I am studying to be a doctor, am an accomplished swimmer, and have won cups and medals for tennis and baseball. Both boys and girls are welcome to write.—Margaret Hale, 147 Cathedral Road, Canton, Cardiff, S. W., Great Britain

This soldier likes to sing—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am an ardent reader of Western Story and decided to try my luck at getting some new friends through the Hollow Tree. I have lots of time on my hands and would very much like to write letters. I am twenty-three years old, love good singing and always try to be handy when there is a song fest going on. I will answer everyone who writes, and the more the merrier. I can tell you some very interesting things about historical San Antonio, so come on, everyone, and write to me.—Pfe. Buel Adams, Company A, 2nd Medical Battalion, Fort Sam Houston, Texas

Make room for this Canadian friend—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am eighteen years old and would like to hear from boys and girls between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five. I enjoy writing letters and promise to answer all who write to me. Here's hoping I get lots of mail!—Violet Bailey, 261 Osborne Avenue, Verdun, Quebec, Canada

Kenneth collects souvenirs—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I would like to hear from boys and girls from near and far between the ages of sixteen and

one hundred. I am sixteen years old and my hobby is collecting souvenirs from all over the world. I'll try to be a good correspondent and all letters will be appreciated. Here's hoping I hear from some of you pals real soon.—Kenneth Denevan, 425 Pine Street, Greenview, Michigan

Calling those born in 1875—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I often read the Hollow Tree and wondered if I wrote to you would you get me a few Pen Pals who were born on August 12, 1875. There are, no doubt, lots of people who were born on August 12th, but I want to hear from those born in 1875.—G. H. Zorger, 291 Market Street, New Cumberland, Pennsylvania

Thelma writes long letters—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Calling all Pen Pals! One seventeen-year-old girl is lonely. Her hobbies are collecting old-time songs, snapshots, post cards and letters. She loves dancing and sports—and, confidentially, she writes nice long letters. She'll even exchange pictures with those who wish. So come on, boys and girls of any age—aren't some of you interested?—Thelma Wilson, 4007—32nd Avenue W., Seattle, Washington

The West calls the West—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young man of eighteen years who would like to hear from those living in the West, especially Arizona, Nevada and western Canada. I am interested in boxing and all other sports, and I will gladly exchange views with anyone who has similar interests. I am fond of cowboy songs and other music. I will be glad to give information to the best of my knowledge to anyone interested in Western Australia and I will exchange snaps with everyone.—Laurence Morris, Isseka, Via Geraldton, Western Australia

Betty wants more friends—

Dear Miss Rivers:

How about some Pen Pals? I have lots of friends, but would be glad to have a lot more. I'm almost seventeen years old and interested in all sports, dancing and most everything else. I'll exchange snapshots, so come on, boys and girls, everywhere. How about a line?—Betty La Grand, Drain, Oregon

The city doesn't appeal to Eben—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Please print my plea for Pen Pals in the Hollow Tree. I expect to leave my beloved Green Mountains to work in the city, and I shall need many letters to cheer me while I'm away from all this scenic beauty. I am a quiet person who loves country life, music, the theater, reading, the radio and motoring. I sure need friends, so please write all you he-men, and I will try to make my answers interesting.—Eben Boyce, Waitfield, Vermont

Irene wants friends from far away—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am trying to get some Pen Pals, if pos-

sible. I love corresponding, especially with friends living outside of the United States. I attend high school and love all outdoor sports. My hobby is writing letters and I will exchange snapshots and small articles with all who care to do so. So come on, you pals, and sling some letters this way.—Irene Woodward, 8627 Mary Avenue, Los Angeles, California

Nora needs cheering up—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely girl eighteen years old, and I wonder if some boys and girls from seventeen to twenty-five would write to me? I am fond of ball games, swimming, hiking and hunting. I'll answer all letters so please write to this lonely girl.—Nora Clawson, 2535 Brighton, Kansas City, Missouri

James will tell all about Tennessee—

Dear Miss Rivers:

How's chances for a hill-billy to see his name in print? I'm nineteen years old and will answer all questions pertaining to Tennessee. So come on, all you boys and gals from nine to ninety, and throw a little ink my way. I give you my word of honor that I'll answer all letters and exchange snaps.—James Cheatham, 307 Raleigh Apartments, 7th Avenue, South, Nashville, Tennessee

Marion likes outdoor sports—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a fifteen-year-old girl and would like Pen Pals from all over the world. I am interested in dancing, roller skating and other outdoor sports. I promise to throw all I'll answer exchange snapshots, so come on, everybody and drop me a line.—Marion Hastings, P. O. Box 104, Southwick, Massachusetts

How about this, Pals?

Dear Miss Rivers:

During my thirty-five years of existence I have read many copies of Western Story Magazine, and the letters in your department receive first consideration. My reason for writing this letter is my immediate and urgent desire to communicate with a lonely, elderly non-living in either California or Florida who wants companionship, loyalty and respect, and who would be willing to share his home with one or two people. My father, nearly eighty-two years old, and myself wish to depart from this State and reside permanently in a warmer climate as the winters in Vermont are too long and severe. The moment arrives in everyone's life when a change is desirable and this is one of them.—Lysie Jones, East Olive Street, Morrisville, Vermont

Don't be so modest, Shirley—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Please publish this so I can get some Pen Pals. I am sixteen years old and my hobby is collecting postmarks and stamps that are advertised. I am also interested in amateur photography and reading and love to dance, although I do not care particularly for swing music. I don't promise snaps because I don't take a very good picture.—Shirley Wilson, Dunbarton, New-Hampshire

How do you know you can't write?

Have you ever tried?

Have you ever attempted even the least bit of training, under competent guidance?

It is seldom that anyone becomes a writer until he (or she) has been writing for some time. That is why so many authors and writers spring up out of the newspaper business. The day-to-day necessity of writing—of gathering material about which to write—develops their talent, their insight, their background and their confidence as nothing else could.

MORE ROOM FOR NEW WRITERS THAN EVER BEFORE

Read what Fulton Oursler, editor of LIBERTY, has to say:

"There is more room for newcomers in the writing field today—and especially in LIBERTY MAGAZINE—than ever before. Some of the greatest of writing men and women have passed from the scene in recent years. Who will take their places? Who will be the new Robert W. Chambers, Edgar Wallace, Rudyard Kipling, and many others whose work we have published? It is also true that more people are trying to write than ever before, but talent is still rare and the writer still must learn his craft, as few of the newcomers nowadays seem willing to do. Fame, riches and happiness of achievement await the new men and women of power."

"Before completing the N.I.A. course, I sold a feature to Screenland Magazine for \$50. That resulted in an immediate assignment to do another for the same magazine. After gaining confidence with successive feature stories, I am now working into the fiction field. Previous to enrolling in the N.I.A. I had never written a line for publication, nor seriously expected to do so."—Gene E. Levant, Broadmoor Hotel, San Francisco, Calif.



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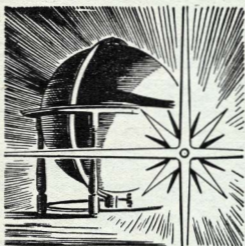
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"The success which has so recently . . . and surprisingly come to me is due to your training. I tendered to a newspaper editor, a column, 'HOW TO DEVELOP YOUR PERSONALITY.' Imagine my surprise and delight when he bought the column, with enthusiasm. He wants to get syndication the first week of July. (The column runs daily except Sunday). I cannot express my gratitude for your help."—Delia L. R. Root, 491 South Transit St., Lockport, N. Y.



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

SEVERAL Canadian readers, as well as some folks here in the States, have asked from time to time about the region of Hudson Bay. What with spring coming on and so many folks getting interested, it might be well to have a look at that section.

Hudson Bay, including James Bay, measures nearly a thousand miles from north to south and six hundred miles east to west at its greatest breadth, its total area being over half a million square miles. In an area so large, temperature and other conditions are certain to vary greatly.

Surrounding the bay and shaped like a great horseshoe, there is a basin known as the Canadian or Archean Shield, or the Laurential

Plateau. This is the geological formation of pre-Cambrian rock which was left exposed when the bay was formed.

This land, rocky and hilly, without much soil, is responsible for the region not having been investigated any sooner than it was. It is not generally good agricultural land, and since the country was at first controlled by the great Hudson Bay Co., which was interested only in getting the furs out of the section, nothing much was done to see if it were worth anything for other purposes.

The bay was first discovered nearly five hundred years ago by John Cabot while he was looking for a way to get to the Orient from England. It was later discovered by a couple of French trappers who came to it from overland routes, and what with its richness as a fur country, both nations took up arms against each other to establish their claims to it. Eventually England established claim to it. Hendrick Hudson who explored it in 1610, won the honor of having the bay named after him.

Then in 1670 there was organized that company which has played such a dramatic part in building up Canada, the Hudson's Bay Co. It was organized in England and was granted a royal charter which gave it practically sovereign rights over the entire basin. For two hundred years it was the big boss up there, getting rich in trading with the Indians, opening up forts, and exploring the country to open new posts for trading.

It was not until 1834 that people began colonizing to such an extent that the company had to relinquish

Those interested in the Hudson Bay country, who would like to receive free literature about it, may write to John North, inclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope. A list of sources of such literature will be sent.

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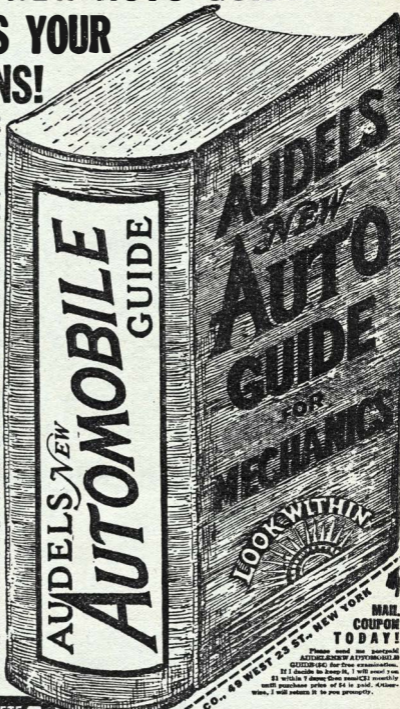
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JACK No. 11

its right to rule to the government of England. After that the Great Hudson's Bay Co. was just a commercial enterprise, like any other.

As to temperature, the more southerly part of the James Bay region lies down between the fortieth and fiftieth parallels of latitude, and the country is suitable for agriculture, but since the region extends one thousand, two hundred and fifty miles north into the very arctic circle, agriculture is only carried on in a part of it.

In the northern part of the region the natives are Eskimos and North American Indians. They hunt and trap over most of the wooded areas but do not mix with each other. Until recently the white population was restricted to a handful of traders, trappers and explorers. Now, however, mining activities are attracting thousands of whites to the new camps and prospectors are spreading out all over the region, making their trips by airplane instead of dog sleds and canoes.

The most valuable fur-bearing animals of the Hudson Bay region are the beaver, otter, marten, fisher, mink, muskrat, bear, wolf, lynx, coyote, wolverine, fox, skunk, weasel and ermine. In one year the Hudson's Bay Co. alone took out ten thousand beaver and a thousand marten, not to mention the more common furs, and for a long time the beaver was the most prized fur, and a beaver skin was made a unit of value for all barter, just as it was in our own West in the early days.

However, today the beaver is so scarce that it is receiving a certain amount of government protection.

For many years the muskrat was the important pelt up there, and as many as a million muskrat pelts have been taken in the delta of the Saskatchewan River in a single season. Lately, they have shown an alarming decline in numbers, so the government put a closed season on them, too.

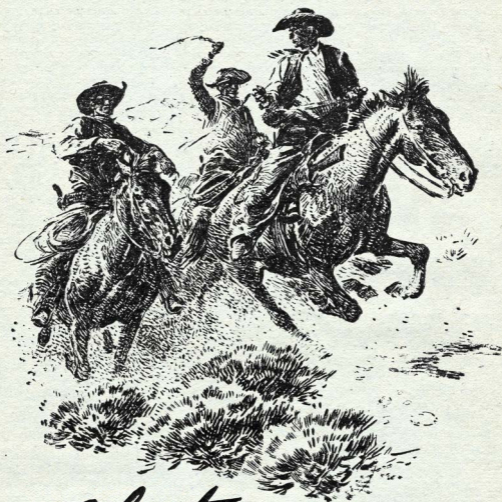
As to locales of different furs, the beaver's favorite food is the bark of the poplar and birch trees, and so you find him from the southern part of the region as far north as these trees grow to feed him. Muskrats prefer low, swampy regions with plenty of water and coarse vegetation, and so they are abundant as far north as these conditions exist.

Polar bears and white and blue foxes are restricted to the more northerly regions. The rest of the animals mentioned are generally found through the whole of the Hudson Bay region.

As for big game for the sportsman hunter, the principal animals of the region are the moose, elk, caribou, musk-ox and deer. The moose has a wide range almost as far north as the limit of the sub-arctic forest belt. Elk were quite numerous on the west slope of Hudson Bay, but are thinning out. The "barren-land" caribou is the most prolific of game animals in this region, running in herds of many thousands, while farther north there are plenty of "wood-land" caribou.

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Ghosts OF THE RIMROCK

Part Five

BY HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

The Story So Far:

The Flagler Expedition, a party of archaeologists, heads for Pueblo Grande, Nevada, to make a study of Indian ruins. Their work is secretly opposed by the Wu-tai-shan Company, a Chinese firm whose affairs are managed by Carlotta Soong, a beautiful half-caste.

Slade Salters, Carlotta's attorney, who has learned something of the secret activities of the company, is convinced that the Chinese are working a gold mine somewhere near the Pueblo Grande ruins. He hires men to follow the expedition and investigate.

Jim Morningstar, the expedition's guide, runs into trouble from the very start—trouble which comes to a head when Jennifer Orme, the only woman in the group, disappears. The party makes for Piute, the

nearest town, to get aid in searching for the girl. There, Jim is surprised to find Carlotta Soong, who promises to take him to Jennifer if he will agree not to enlist the aid of the sheriff. He agrees, reluctantly, but next morning when they are to start, Carlotta, too, has disappeared.

Jim goes to Sheriff Mulhall, who assembles a posse and starts a search for both girls. Little headway is made, however, and lack of water compels the party to split. Jim's group runs into a party of Chinese who are searching for Carlotta. She is found in an old Mormon fort to which some of Slade Salters men have taken her and is rescued after a fight.

The Chinese, to escape Salters' gang, lead Jim and his men blindfolded, through Pueblo Grande to a mysterious destination. When their blindfolds are removed, they find themselves in a beautiful, flourishing Chinese village which is called "Ping-an-shanku."

The whites, although treated with great consideration, are nevertheless prisoners of the Chinese who had discovered this desert garden spot and gold mine years before. Sui Chen, their leader, offers to free Jim's friends and Jennifer Orme, who is also being held, if Jim will consent to become a member of the Wu-tai-shan Company. Jim, although he knows that he will be cutting himself off from his own race, accepts. Before the others can be released, however, Slade Salters' renegades get into the mine and make an attack on the village.

CHAPTER XVIII

AGAINST THE LAW

AFTER taking leave of Jim Morningstar in the desert, Sheriff Huck Mulhall had lost no time in returning to Piute. With some difficulty he gathered a posse of a size to suit his purpose. There were ten men in the group he swore in; seasoned desert men, ready for anything that chance might bring.

Heavily armed and well mounted, they pulled out of Piute without loss of time. Mulhall struck straight toward Pueblo Grande.

He had not anticipated any trouble in contacting Morningstar. But he was wholly surprised to come upon the camp of better than a dozen

men when his posse rode down the draw at the site of the old base camp. These men sprang to their guns with a warning cry, obviously cocked for trouble, but they waited while their leader stepped out to meet the newcomers. It was Slade Salters. Mulhall's gaunt cheeks snapped taut when he recognized the attorney.

"I was hopin' I'd run acrost you!" he rasped, getting down from his horse. Salters confronted him stolidly.

"What for?"

"I'm chargin' yuh with abductin' that girl Carlotta!"

Salters only smiled. "You make it sound pretty bad, Mulhall," he said easily. "Don't run away with any wild ideas. I'm a lawyer. I know how serious such a thing can be—"

"Yuh ain't denyin' that yuh grabbed the girl?" Mulhall cut across his talk sharply.

"Oh, I took her," Salters acknowledged as if there could be nothing damaging in the admission. "It was my way of saving her life. Her people intend doing away with her, Mulhall. They've got her now. It's a question whether she's alive or not and—"

Mulhall was plainly of no mind to be taken in by a glib story. "That's a likely yarn!" he retorted. "What makes yuh so shore of all this?"

"I tell you I know!" Salters insisted. "There's been a split among the Chinese. They're fighting among themselves. Miss Soong got caught between the factions. I know chinks," he went on. "I ought to; I've worked for them long enough. They can be ruthless."

He went on to give a circumstantial story which seemed to bear out everything he had said. There was enough sense in it to make the sheriff hesitate. He listened with an ex-

pression of grim doggedness, then struck in:

"All this don't explain why yuh made so much hell fer me an' my posse at Furnace Creek, shootin' the pants off us! How do yuh explain that, Salters?" His tone said plainly that it couldn't be explained.

"It was dark. We couldn't see who you were. It was all a mistake," Salters responded quickly. "We were afraid it was Morningstar and the Chinese. Naturally, we tried to protect Carlotta. They were after her. As I told you, they've got her now."

Mulhall twitched his nostrils suspiciously. "Morningstar wasn't with no chinks when I saw him last!"

Salters pretended surprise. "Then you don't know he's been riding with that crowd of yellow devils? Queer! He's double-crossed you, sheriff."

Mulhall stared at him dubiously. "Yo're sayin' so," he grunted. "But it don't make sense!" In a few words he told the story of Jim's experience with the Chinese as it had been given to him.

SALTERS listened attentively to the end, then shook his head. "Morningstar told you that to throw you off the trail," he declared. "Why should the Chinese give him water for you when they want you out of the way? He's taken you in completely, Mulhall," he concluded positively.

Mulhall had to admit to himself that the attorney's argument hung together. He glanced sharply about the circle of waiting, tensed men in Salters' camp, taking them all in. Every one was a hard case with whom Mulhall had reason to be well acquainted. He gazed longest at Bronc Yeager, who sat on the other side of the fire. The outlaw was pointedly ignoring him. Yeager was

fortunate in not being wanted at the moment, but he and Huck had locked horns more than once in the past. Mulhall's glance switched back to Salters.

"All this ain't explainin' yore present company," he said flatly. "To be frank, it don't look good to me, Salters."

The attorney's laugh was deprecatory. "I had to find help of some kind," he pointed out. "I was pretty sure you'd believe Morningstar before you would me. So I turned to men who were willing to listen."

Still Mulhall hesitated, held by his deep-rooted distrust of the lawyer. Salters seemed to read his thoughts.

"Let's be sensible about this," he proposed smoothly. "Certainly we've a common object here in this desert. Despite your suspicions, I'm still willing to help rescue Carlotta if it's not too late. Why not throw in together and finish the job?" He sounded so reasonable that Huck would have remained wary on that score alone.

"What kin you an' these gents do fer me?" he demanded. Salters threw out a hand.

"Well, I can tell you that Carlotta has been taken to a canyon or valley somewhere back here in the rimrock. One of the boys thinks he's located a way into the place. He's exploring it now. We're waiting for him to come back."

It was cleverly dangled bait, and Mulhall showed every indication of swallowing it. He and Morningstar had discussed the problem of exactly where Jennifer Orme was. Jim had expressed the opinion that the girl was being held in some secret stronghold of the Orientals. Carlotta would be taken to the same place. It all fitted together.

Whether Morningstar had been cleverly hoodwinking him all along

or not, one thing was certain: Mulhall intended to gain an entrance to this hidden sanctuary at the earliest possible moment—and by any means he found necessary.

"Waitin' ain't my long suit," he said grumpily.

Slade congratulated himself secretly at the compliance the words indicated, despite Mulhall's impatience. He knew he was in luck if he could take the sheriff with him now. He would not only have cleared himself, but he would have the backing of the law in what he proposed doing.

"Nick should be back any time now," he assured Mulhall. "Take it easy till he arrives. There'll be plenty to do afterward."

Huck decided to take his advice. He and the others had no more than eased their broncs, however, before an exclamation sounded from the camp. All turned to see a man approaching. It was Nick Bevans, one of Yeager's men.

"What did you find, Nick?" Salters threw at him as he came up.

"Waal, I crawled into a cave—a long ways in. Reckon I seen aplenty. We better—" Catching sight of Mulhall, Bevans broke off with a jerk. Salters made a sign of assurance, and after a pause the man went on: "It's O. K., Slade? Yuh want me to talk?"

"Sure. Salters nodded. "Mulhall is with us. He's going to help us find the girl."

Bevans told of his discoveries in the rimrock, which made it pretty certain that the way to the stronghold of the Orientals lay open. Mulhall listened long enough to make sure of that. Then he straightened.

"Uh-huh. Waal, I reckon we better git goin'!"

No time was lost in making a start. At Nick's suggestion, they left their

rolls in camp, but clung to the broncs. They were deep in the rimrock, and the trail over which he took them was incredibly rough. In places the ponies had to be led. But when they came to the gaping mouth of a cave, Mulhall flatly declined to take his horse any farther.

"Drag a bronc into that hole?" he demanded. "Why, hell! It don't look safe fer a man, let alone a four-legged critter. Not fer mine, Salters! Yuh kin do what yuh please; I'm leavin' my hoss right here."

Instead of arguing, Salters seemed rather to favor the idea. "We don't know where this will take us," he said, "and we may not need the horses at all. But we'll take ours, to be on the safe side."

They broke off torches of the meager desert brush, and wound down the steep trail to the cave's mouth. A dozen yards inside, it was pitch-dark. The hoofs of the broncs struck sparks off the stone floor; every sound was magnified hollowly. Bevans led the way. For about a hundred yards the going was easy. Then the cave narrowed; several fissures opened off. Here Bevans was obviously at a loss.

"Danged if I remember which way I did go," he confessed. "But it was into one of these cracks."

Salters took command then. In the mouth of each crevasse he held up a torch until he located one in which the movement of fresh air was distinct. They pushed on that way.

HALF an hour later Slade and Mulhall stopped short on hearing distant shouting, then the muffled sound of a gun being fired. It seemed to come from the rear. Their immediate thought was that they had been cut off. Yeager, coming up a moment later, set them right.

Continued on page 108

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Continued from page 106

"Some of the boys got lost," he explained. "Git separated in this place, an' it's jest too bad!"

"Waal, find 'em an' don't lose no time about it," Mulhall growled. "All this damned noise ain't helpin' any!"

They waited for an hour before the report reached them that the straying men had been located and straightened out. Their troubles were by no means at an end, however. The going grew steadily rougher. Even Salters began to ask himself whether he had not made a mistake in bringing the horses. Mulhall was rapidly becoming disgusted with the whole business.

"This ain't leadin' us nowheres," he snorted. "There must be dozens of these caves in the hills. I tell yuh it's a dang wild-goose chase!" He regretted that he had thrown in with Salters, and was half convinced that this was the attorney's means of leading him into a blind alley.

Salters' temper was as short. He was beginning to think the attempt to reach the secret stronghold of the Chinese was a failure. He was on the point of proposing that they should turn back, when Bronc Yeager, exploring a fissure at one side, let out a yell.

"Somethin's been goin' on here," he declared. "There's been men workin' here, that's shore!"

They turned that way. Yeager had not been mistaken. There were unmistakable signs of the activity of men. An attempt had been made to clear the loose rubble away from the floor of the cave. Salters pointed to an opening. "Have a look in there," he directed.

One of his men complied. "Say, take a look at this!" he cried, after a pause.

They pushed forward. Work had

been done in the cave, and it looked like mining. Primitive tools lay about; a rock face had been exposed. Salters took one look at it and his eyes bulged.

"Well, I'll be gol darned!" he breathed. "Gold! Just look at that vein!"

Staring at that underground jewelry shop, the men grew excited. Salters' eyes glistened with instantly aroused avarice. If the vein was as rich as this here, what must it be where the chinks were doing their mining? He had been right! This was a stake worth anything a man had to do to gain possession.

Tip Slaughter nudged him a moment later. "There yuh are, Slade," he murmured. "The hull works, an' no mistake! But why in hell'd yuh have to drag Mulhall an' Yeager an' the others in on it?"

The lawyer gave him a warning look. "Keep your mouth shut," he whispered. "We'll get rid of them somehow."

Snap Clanton, listening near at hand, a wolfish look on his hard face, nodded shortly. "We better!" he growled.

Mulhall approached at the moment. He remembered what Morningstar had said about Indian treasure or a mine, and was making his own deductions. "This is all mighty interestin', Salters," he said. "How much did yuh know about it?" His regard was shrewd, speculative.

Taken off his guard, Salters could only take refuge in evasion. "Why . . . it's as much of a surprise to me as it is to you, Mulhall!"

"Yo're lyin'," the sheriff told him flatly. "Yuh knew about this mine all the time. Yeager an' his crowd did, too, probably. This is what yo're after here, not Carlotta Soong!"

Salters pretended anger. "That kind of talk will get you in trouble

some day, Mulhall!" he exclaimed. "I told you the truth—"

Mulhall took his measure and grunted. "Waal, arguin' won't git us nowhere. We're goin' on!"

"There must be other entrances to this place," Salters responded, glad the subject had been dropped. "Likely they lead to wherever the chinks are holed up. We'll have a look."

TIP SLAUGHTER found the passage a moment later. He announced his discovery by suddenly firing his gun. "Here's a bunch of chinks!" he cried. "I nailed one of 'em! The rest ran."

They thrust forward swiftly. To their chagrin, the lead pinched out. They were forced to turn back. Slaughter was confounded. "Them yellow devils come this way—I'd swear it!" he cried. "But where'd they go?"

Ten minutes was lost in solving the puzzle. From a dark corner, Clanton cried: "Come on, boys! Here's a hole."

They crowded through to find themselves in the main tunnel of the mine. Some distance beyond, daylight showed. They were making for it when suddenly the opening was darkened by the appearance of better than a dozen Chinese, led by a big fellow with a murderous expression on his face. It was Quan Goon and his followers.

Mulhall would have called a halt, but he had no time. Instantly Bronc Yeager threw a gun and blazed away. His men followed suit. The Chinese withstood the blast for as long as they could, answering hotly. Then they turned.

"Push 'em!" Yeager bellowed. "There's only one way to settle this!"

The Orientals were driven back. At last they seemed to recognize defeat and fled rapidly. The invaders



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followed. From the mine's mouth they saw the Chinese racing away on horses. The miners had already fled. But that was momentarily forgotten in the wonder of the scene which lay spread before them. They had come out on the flank of Wu-tai-shan Mountain, and a large part of Ping-an-shanku, the Peaceful Valley, lay under their astonished gaze.

"Hell and horse feathers!" Bart Cagle burst out. "What've we stumbled onto, anyhow?"

Salters knew the answer in a flash. His eye took in the sweeping circle of peaks hemming in the valley, the groves of trees, the glittering stream. Here in one amazing scene was the explanation of the Wu-tai-shan Company.

Surprised as he was by the sight, Mulhall brought them back to the business at hand with a jerk. "There's their town, over there!" he said, pointing. "Likely they got them girls there. Gimme one of yore broncs, Salters; I'm goin' to find out!"

But the attorney showed no intention of complying. "You can't get anywheres down there alone," he said swiftly. "Those Chinese will be throwing lead, too. You and your posse stick here and make sure no one slips away. We'll go down and herd those chinks back up here so you can nab them."

Huck assented grudgingly, knowing it was his own fault that he was afoot. He watched as Slade, Yeager and the others flung into the saddle and raced after the fleeing Chinese. They were on their own now. It was no part of their game to round up these Orientals. Their intention was to shoot them down, wipe them out.

They soon drew up on the retreating Chinese. A running fight en-

sued, which swept on toward the village.

During the next half hour, Mulhall realized exactly what was happening. He cursed himself for letting Salters give him the slip. "Him an' Yeager are tryin' to wipe out them chinks!" he stormed. "This ain't nothin' short of murder!"

Suddenly a posseman vented an exclamation. "Salters is comin' back, Huck!" he cried. "He's retreatin'! The chinks are hard after 'im!"

Mulhall watched grimly as Salters' men were pursued to the very shoulder of the mountain. He followed the fight in the rocks closely.

"Come on, Mulhall!" another posseman exclaimed. "We're goin' down there an' finish this!"

Mulhall silenced him with a look. "Salters was right," he said flatly. "A man ain't got a chance down there without a hoss. We're stayin' right here!"

He stepped farther out on the mine apron, gazing down the slope keenly. It was then that Sulphur Riley spotted him from below. Mulhall saw Morningstar, also. His eyes narrowed.

"Morningstar is fightin' with the chinks, all right," he thought. "An' he's doin' a damn good job of it!" Sudden wrath shook him. "If Salters thinks he pulled the wool over my eyes, I'll show him his mistake!" Jaws ridged, he promised himself what he would say to the lawyer at the first opportunity.

He was so angry that he forgot his own safety, stepping out as Salters and his crowd fell back toward the mine. Without warning a slug from a rifle in the hands of one of the Chinese tore his hat from his head. Sulphur Riley saw it.

"They almost got Mulhall that

time!" he cried warningly to Morningstar.

"Tell your men to stop firing!" the latter commanded Quan Goon.

Quan barked out the order. The crack of guns died out suddenly. The Orientals could not understand and turned to gaze at Morningstar inquiringly, silently asking themselves if there was some connection between this white man and the mysterious appearance of the sheriff.

But if there was open suspicion of treachery in the eyes of anyone looking to Jim for an explanation at that moment, it was Quan Goon. Morningstar saw it there and knew what it meant.

"I was brought here, Quan Goon," he said quietly. "I couldn't have found a way in if I'd tried. I had nothing to do with this."

Quan Goon delayed over his answer, but when it came, it was spoken in a tone as quiet as Jim's had been. "I know you are speaking the truth, Morningstar. What are we to do now?"

"We'll hold our ground," Jim replied. "Beyond that I don't know. But one thing I do know: we can't fight the law and win."

CHAPTER XIX

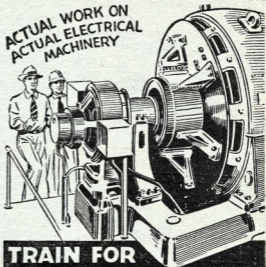
MULHALL MAKES A MOVE

WHEN the firing slacked off until only an occasional popping shot echoed across the valley, Jim took stock of the situation. With the shot that had sent his hat sailing, Mulhall had fallen back; now he and his men were out of sight in the mine. Why they were holding off, what they meant to do, were questions reflected even in Sui Chen's eyes.

"They are in possession of our mine," he said, his tone freighted with anxiety. "How can we drive them out?"

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was Jim's answer. "One man could hold that tunnel against all of us." He thought a moment. "Is there any other way into the mine, through the mountain?"

Quan Goon said no. "The way those men came in is the only entrance."

Jim shook his head. "Well, they can't carry the mine away," he pointed out. "We're not beaten yet."

A dozen men had been wounded in the fight, one or two seriously. Jim looked them over. "These men should have immediate attention," said he. "Have you a doctor in the valley?"

"A good one." Sui Chen nodded. "But he is old. The wounded must be taken to the village."

"Miss Orme said she knew something about nursing," Carlotta added. "She will help us." She turned to Jim. "You should see the doctor yourself, Jim."

Morningstar had received a scalp wound in the fight. He had forgotten it until this minute.

"It's nothing," he assured her. He had no intention of leaving at this critical time. But Quan Goon spoke up.

"You go," he said to Jim. "I will let you know if anything happens."

Unwillingly, Morningstar allowed himself to be persuaded. Carlotta and a number of others helped him remove the wounded to town. A dressing station had been established there. The Chinese doctor was working over the injured.

Jennifer was aiding the doctor. She glanced up as Jim stepped in the door, and for a moment she stood frozen, the blood draining away from her face.

"Jim! You've been shot!" she cried. "Oh, why did I ever let you go?"

She hurried to his side, her eyes torn with anxiety for him. Plain to

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be read in her voice, her manner, how she felt about him! Again Morningstar told himself that this girl was a prize without price.

"I'm all right," he assured her. "It's just a scratch."

Carlotta had entered the door behind him. She stared at Jennifer as the latter dressed Jim's wound, naked tragedy in her eyes. All too plainly Carlotta read the truth, knew that Jennifer loved this man. What it spelled for her was equally plain. A sob rose in her throat. Somehow she choked it down and abruptly turned away.

The awkward moment was broken by the arrival of a man who jumped from his horse outside the door and ran in. It was one of Quan Goon's followers.

"Quan say you come," he told Jim. "White flag at mine. Quan say you know what to do."

Morningstar had been waiting for something like this. He lost no time in getting to his horse. "Don't worry," he told Jennifer, swinging into the saddle. "This will work out all right."

She gave him a smile as he rode away. Jim had spoken with more confidence than he really felt, however. Making for the mine, he asked himself what Sheriff Mulhall would have to say.

ARRIVING a few minutes later, Jim found Quan Goon and the others waiting for him. Sulphur reached his side as he swung down.

"They're askin' fer a parley up there, Jim," he said. "Yuh kin see 'em wavin' somethin' white. We ain't answered yet."

Jim nodded. Stepping forward, he whipped off his shirt, answering the signal from the mine. Sulphur seemed dissatisfied with his decision

to agree to the parley. He still stayed close to Jim's side.

"Hell's goin' to tear loose here before long, Jim!" he warned gloomily. His voice lowered. "Thing fer us to do is to pull out while there's time!"

Jim shook his head. "No. I gave my word, Sulphur. I aim to stick."

"Reckon that settles it, then," the lanky puncher said grumpily.

Suddenly a shout was raised. Others took up the cry. Jim saw Hap Failes pointing up the slope. Looking that way, he saw that a man had broken through the end of the line and was running through the rocks and brush, making for the mine trail.

"It's Merriam!" Hap exclaimed. "He's tryin' to reach Mulhall, at the mine!"

Jim recognized the young scientist. He knew in a flash what had happened. With only a single guard left over him, Merriam had somehow managed to get away during the excitement. He must have learned that Huck Mulhall was at the mine with Salters and the others. True to his determination to escape from the valley, he was making a mad attempt to join the sheriff.

Jim sprang forward. Hands cupped to mouth, he cried out: "Merriam! Come back! Don't throw your life away!"

Bill heard. He had already reached the trail. He hesitated briefly, looking back; then started on again. Too late to do anything, Jim saw one of the men at the mine appear on the apron, rifle in hand. It was Bronc Yeager. Risking a slug from below, the outlaw threw the rifle to his shoulder and pumped a shot at Merriam.

Bill could not have avoided the bullet had he tried. It might never have occurred to him that the men he sought to reach would take him

for an enemy. As the flat crack of Yeager's rifle echoed against the mountain, Merriam stopped. For ten seconds he stood there motionless. Jim saw his legs buckle then. He went down, rolled a few feet and lay still, lodged against a rock.

"Got him the first shot!" Sulphur cried. "Bronc Yeager's shore hell with a Winchester!"

"The fool! He could have been saved, if he'd kept his head," Jim ground out, his mouth drawn tight by the needlessness of it. "I didn't want anything like this to happen." Aside from what Jennifer would think of Merriam's violent end, he caught himself wondering what Huck Mulhall would make of it.

It would not be long before they learned. Again the white signal flag waved from the mine, and again Jim answered it. A moment later Mulhall came striding down the slope, two of his deputies with him. While they were still some distance away, Mulhall spoke to his men, who stopped. He came on alone. Jim advanced to meet him.

"This is a strange rôle yo're playin' here, Morningstar," the sheriff opened up, his gaze sharp.

"I don't find it any stranger than your own," Jim retorted coolly. "I never would have expected to see you with that crowd, Mulhall." Plainly his tone asked the question he did not voice. Mulhall chose to ignore it.

"I reckon yuh know yo're buckin' the law in what yo're doin'?" he fired out.

Jim only shook his head. "I don't see it that way," he declared. "I doubt if you've got any authority to attack these peaceful people."

Aware that he wasn't getting anywhere, Mulhall said testily: "We won't argue the matter. Morning-

star! I'll jest talk to these Chinese myself."

"I'll do whatever talking is necessary," Jim declared. "What do you want?"

"Waal, I want them two girls yuh got here with yuh," Mulhall told him. "The whole country's aroused over Miss Orme's bein' held. I aim to ask her some questions. Where is she?"

His demand was an eventuality which Morningstar had not had time to consider. But he said calmly: "She's in the village, looking after the wounded. I'll send for her."

AFTER a wait of some twenty minutes, Jennifer appeared. Jim had no opportunity for a word alone with her.

"Miss Orme," Mulhall began, "I understand yuh was kidnaped an' brought here against yore will. Ain't that a fact?" Eyes fixed on her, he waited for her answer.

Jim was afraid Jennifer would look at him before she spoke. But her poise was magnificent. "Not at all, sheriff," she said immediately. "I am here because I want to be."

Mulhall reddened. "Don't lie to me, young woman!" he exploded gruffly. "There's sunthin' queer here, an' I aim to git to the bottom of it!"

Jennifer's amused laugh rippled. "I have nothing to conceal from you," she told him. "Just what do you wish to know?"

Mulhall asked a dozen questions, only to be stumped by her cool answers. His puzzlement was plain in his face.

"Waal, I'll have a talk with Miss Soong," he said. "I was told her life was in danger."

Carlotta had arrived with Jennifer. She stepped forward. "I never was in better health, sheriff, as you can see for yourself," she said quietly.

"Then yuh don't want to leave with me?"

"I do not. If I were to ask you for anything, it would be to leave us to ourselves."

Finding himself cut off at every turn, Mulhall faced Jim Morningstar once more. "I ain't at all satisfied that yo're so peaceful here," he declared. "This feller Merriam—"

"That was entirely his own doing, Mulhall. In fact," Jim went on grimly, "his death was nothing short of murder! Yeager had no excuse for cutting him down, and you have none for backing Bronc. It puts you in the position of pulling the chestnuts out of the fire for as snaky a gent as ever set foot in Nevada." He reminded Mulhall of the mine, adding that Slade Salters had wanted possession of it from the beginning, and that Huck was helping him to get it.

Mulhall scowled. "I'm not pullin' no chestnuts out of the fire for anybody, Morningstar," he retorted. "I got in this place the only way I could, but I'm still doin' my own thinkin'! As for the mine, I'm in possession myself, an' I aim to stay in possession till somebody can prove legal ownership to it! I'll bet my soul it was never recorded. Yuh can forget about any warrant of search or seizure," he continued doggedly. "There's a riot here—unlawful assembly. You people are goin' to lay down yore guns an' answer my questions. An' you'll do it peaceably or you'll be forced to!"

Jim shook his head. "You'll never get away with it, Mulhall. Not with that bunch of renegades and black-legs behind you. You'll have to get rid of them before you can talk to us."

"Is that yore final answer?" Mulhall demanded.

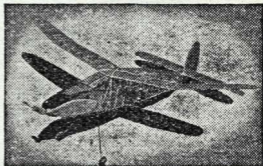
"It is."

"Waal, I'll give yuh till this time tomorrow to change yore minds.

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Better think it over careful, Morn-ingstar!" With that, Mulhall started back up the trail. He had taken a firm tone throughout, but he was far less sure of his ground than he chose to appear.

Reaching the mine, his first thought was of Salters. The attorney was nowhere about.

"Where's Salters?" Mulhall asked Tip Slaughter.

"He ain't here, Mulhall," the renegade answered, coolly and flatly.

"What yuh mean, he ain't here?"

"He's gone, that's all."

FOR a moment, Mulhall glared. "So Salters is gone, huh?" A thought flashed into his mind like lightning. "Reckon I know where! Right now he's streakin' it fer Piute to file on this mine, damn his rotten soul!" His wrath blazed up to think that the lawyer had been a step ahead of him at every turn.

It didn't take him long to decide what to do about it. Ignoring Yeager, who eyed him warily, he spoke in an aside to one of his deputies.

"Tell the boys to git ready fer a play," he muttered. "We're roundin' up this crowd of Salters' before they give us the slip!"

The word spread quietly. The possemen took their positions and waited. Mulhall moved over to confront Yeager. Suddenly, his gun was in his hand.

"Hoist 'em, Bronc!" he ordered. "You've played yore last card in this game!"

Barely in time to save his life, Yeager arrested the impulse to go for his gun. There was black anger in his craggy face as he raised his hands slowly.

"I reckon yore hand takes the pot, Mulhall," he said stonily.

His men, as well as Salters' had been taken by surprise. At Mul-

hall's direction, they were disarmed. Mulhall looked them over narrowly.

"O. K., start 'em off," he grunted to his men. "We'll hold 'em in one of them side tunnels. If they make a break, let 'em have it!"

CHAPTER XX

A RACE FOR HIGH STAKES

A DEEPER sobriety settled on Morningstar's face as he watched Huck Mulhall striding back to the mine. He could dismiss much of what the lawman had said, but he could not forget his reference to the mine. The longer he considered the matter, the more tragically important it became.

"This passes belief," he declared to the others. "I don't suppose it has ever happened before. A producing mine, of great value, and under the laws of this State really belonging to no one! Waiting to drop into the basket of the first rascal who is unscrupulous enough to grab it! And the law will help him do it!"

He did not have to glance at the faces of Sui Chen, Quan Goon and Carlotta to know that they viewed the situation just as seriously as he.

"We'll die fighting for it!" Quan Goon said fiercely.

Jim shook his head. "No, Quan; guns are all right in their way, but guns will not save the mine for you. White man's law is the only thing that will do it. Without it you're lost. Even this fertile valley will be overrun with white men. You'll be forced out, beaten. This land is all in the public domain. It could have been acquired for a song. But you have never homesteaded it. Not an inch of Ping-an-shanku belongs to you legally. As for the mine, it's not only unrecorded, but you never paid taxes on it as a property nor on the gold it has produced. Car-

lotta, you must have known what the situation was."

"We all knew, Jim. But we were afraid our secret would be discovered. That was what made us so helpless."

Sui Chen's round face sagged with the weight of his anxiety. "I suggest that we go to my office at once and discuss this fully," he said. He gave orders that he was to be kept informed of every move the enemy made.

It was a strange conference that Jim Morningstar found himself a party to. From his safe, Sui Chen produced a plat of the mine and the necessary papers for filing.

"They were prepared some years ago and never used," he explained regretfully. Jim found them in order. His decision was made and he spoke plainly.

"What about citizenship?" he inquired. "How many of you are citizens of the United States?"

"We are all citizens, Morningstar," Sui Chen answered him. "Those of us who were not born in Nevada or on the coast entered the country before the Chinese Exclusion Act became a law. We have our papers."

"Good," said Jim. "I will not need them, but you will when you file your homesteads. But that can wait a few days. You have lived on the land and have a squatter's right to it, at least. But the mine can't wait. These papers must be filed at once, before that jackal Salters rushes to Piute and files ahead of you. The county will bring suit against you for the back taxes, and there will be penalties."

"We have no desire to do otherwise," said Sui Chen. "All we ask is to keep Ping-an-shanku and our mine."

"Believe me, I won't stop until I know they are yours!" Jim assured him. "I am not saying it because

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you have made me a member of the Wu-tai-shan Company. I know what you have done here, how you have worked. I know you asked nothing but to be left alone and that you meant harm to no one. Well, I gave you my word that I would work in your behalf. I propose to go the whole way. I'm leaving for Piute immediately."

"You won't go alone?" Quan Goon asked gravely.

"Sulphur will go with me. We'll need good horses."

"The best horses in the valley will be yours," Quan told him. "You'll need food and water. They will be ready." He turned to Carlotta. "Moy Quai, I was not pleased when I found that you had included this man in the brotherhood of the dragon. I see now that there was great wisdom in you. This man is truly our friend. May the bones of my ancestors never rest in peace if I doubt you again."

It was a moment pregnant with meaning for all. Jim had them affix their signatures to the documents. He left them then to acquaint Jennifer with his mission.

"I will be back as quickly as it can be arranged," he finished. "In the meantime, I know no harm will be permitted to come to you." And then: "If you care to address a letter to Dr. Birdsall, I will mail it in Piute, though I expect you will have been released and be well on your way to Reno by the time he receives it."

"Then why bother?" Jennifer queried. His unexpected reference to Dr. Birdsall struck her as strange. She studied him for a long moment, then shook her head in amused reproof. "Jim, there isn't an ounce of subterfuge in you. Let's be frank. There's something you want me to say to Dr. Birdsall."

Morningstar could only admit the

truth. "What about the Flagler Expedition?" he asked. "Its work was far from finished. Will Dr. Birdsall make another attempt at Pueblo Grande?"

"Certainly not this year, Jim. The funds allotted by Flagler Foundation must be exhausted by now. But someone will finish the work some day. That's inevitable."

Jim nodded. "I am concerned only about the next few weeks. Changes are going to come so quickly that in a few months the Wu-tai-shan Company will have no further interest in Pueblo Grande."

When Jim went back to Sui Chen's office he found Sulphur waiting. A few words sufficed to enlighten the lanky cowboy. While Jim and he were talking, Quan Goon appeared with the horses. Ten minutes later they were leaving the valley. Since Mulhall was holding the only other entrance to the valley, they had perforce to leave the same way they had entered, by means of the tunnel which led down to Pueblo Grande.

Quan Goon acted as their guide. Even without blindfolds, that long subterranean passage was not easy to follow. At last, leading their bronses, they came out at the pueblo and once more beheld the sun glaring on the vast, empty Amargosa Desert.

Jim and Sulphur lost no time in getting started. Striking out toward the north, they saw no one. And yet, before the peaks of the Fortifications dropped behind them, Sulphur jerked out: "Come on, push that bronc! Salters may be shovin' the miles behind him, too!"

Jim so far agreed that when night fell he said they would go on. The late moon was beginning to sink in the west when they pulled up for an hour to rest the horses. Morning

found them driving on again.

By midday, a mirage rose out of the heat veils. Jim knew it presaged the weather-beaten buildings of Piute. The town was still half a dozen miles away. One by one, they were put behind, until the county seat drew near. For the past hour Jim had been scanning the bleak, brush-studded land about them. But there was no glimpse to be had of any living thing besides themselves.

Sulphur followed his thought accurately enough. He pulled his pony down to a walk. "Hell, we been foolin' ourselves plenty!" he growled. "Likely Salters ain't even thinkin' of headin' for Piute yet—"

"Don't fool yourself," Jim cut in. "We may be too late as it is. Salters has had a long time to think about this. If he's thought it through to the end, we may find him standing on the courthouse steps when we get there, ready to give us the horse laugh!"

Even as he spoke, Sulphur was gazing off across the sandy wastes, his attention fixed. "What's that?" he demanded. "Over there half a mile beyond the second reef of rocks."

Jim looked where he pointed. Far across the flats they saw a ball of dust moving rapidly in the direction of town. It could only be made by a horseman.

"That don't look so good," Jim growled. "We'll just make sure!"

THEY swung that way. Reaching a high level, they got a better view. After a moment the dust thinned. They had a glimpse of a man hurrying toward Piute. Morningstar's mouth drew into a thin line. There could be only one answer. It was Slade Salters, racing to town in an attempt to beat them to the recorder's office!

"Throw the steel into that bronc!" Jim gritted. "He's not beating us out now!"

Gradually they drew near Salters. For a mile the three horses raced neck and neck, a few hundred yards separating them. The attorney glanced across from time to time, his face inscrutable. For the rest, he was occupied with the task of getting the utmost speed out of his mount. Piute was in sight now. Jim gave his attention to the ground underfoot. A moment later, Sulphur burst out:

"Jim, why be foolish about this? Dammit all, a slug will stop that gent in a hurry!"

He started to draw his gun. Jim called out a sharp warning.

"You can't shoot a man down like that! We'd never get away with it!"

Piute was not more than a quarter of a mile distant now. The horses Sulphur and Jim rode were laboring as a result of this final spurt. They were approaching the head of the main street, the issue still in doubt. Salters angled in for the same objective. There was a wolfish look on his face as he stared at them. He would have used a gun had he dared, but the same consideration stopped him that had given Jim pause.

Putting on a burst of speed, they reached the head of the street together. The first houses flashed by. Sulphur was riding beside Salters. For a moment they raced thigh to thigh.

"Damn you, Salters!" Sulphur taunted him. "You'll never make it! Yore bronc ain't good enough!"

Salters showed him a face twisted with fury. Suddenly, unable to control himself, he lashed at the puncher with his roman.

Sulphur threw up a guarding arm. But the blow never reached him, the quirt falling across his horse's with-

ers. Without warning, the bronc's stride broke. Lurching sidewise, it crashed into Salters' mount. Too late Salters attempted to avert an accident. His frantic cursing did no good. The next instant, horses and men brought up in the dust in a confused tangle.

Morningstar saw that much. He waited for no more. The courthouse was close now. Hauling up before it, he slid to the ground and hurried inside.

His papers were out as he approached the counter. He threw them down and called the clerk's attention. The man nodded. When he took his time about getting around to him, Morningstar let out a blast that brought results.

While the clerk was consulting the county records and studying the papers, Jim threw a glance over his shoulder at the door. Salters had not yet put in an appearance, but at any moment he was certain to come blustering in. Knowing how desperate the attorney was, Jim fully expected to find himself with a gun fight on his hands.

But even if Salters did not go for a gun, there were other ways in which he might cause trouble. If he were to swear that he had been delayed by design, that the collision in the street which had brought his horse tumbling into the dust was deliberate, there was a good chance that he might void, or at least delay, Jim's recording of the mine.

There was no hitch, however. When Jim turned once more toward the door, the mine in far Ping-an-shanku was legally located and recorded, the unquestionable property of the Wu-tai-shan Company.

At the door, he met Salters in the act of entering. The attorney gave him an ugly glare. "You think you've gotten away with something,

Morningstar, but I'll show you your mistake!" he burst out furiously.

Jim scrutinized him. "Help yourself, Salters!" he challenged.

Salters choked, the cords of his neck standing out. Angry blood congested his features. In that moment he was close to murder. But he was not so far gone that he was unaware of Sulphur, standing a few feet behind him, a hand on his gun butt.

"You'll pay for this, Morningstar!" he exclaimed, his voice shaking with rage. He stamped away.

Jim stared after him thoughtfully. Seeing his look, Sulphur grunted: "Don't pay no attention to what he says."

"There's something else on my mind," was the answer. "Wait for me, Sulphur. I've got another errand here in the courthouse."

TURNING back inside, Jim made for a door marked "District Attorney." A clerk looked up from his desk as he entered.

"Is the D. A. in?" Jim asked.

The clerk nodded. "Just a minute." He disappeared in an inner office, to return shortly. "Mr. Hollister will see you."

Morningstar entered. A stalwart, square-faced man glanced at him across the papers littering his desk. "You wish to see me?" he asked. Jim nodded. He introduced himself.

"I've quite a story to tell you," he began. He plunged into the strange story of Ping-an-shanku, the Peaceful Valley. Nor did he spare Slade Salters' part in the tale, beginning from the time the Flagler Expedition had been turned back, and continuing on to the present hour.

Hollister listened attentively, with scarcely a change in his rugged face. He knew Salters and evinced no surprise at the attorney's attempt to grab the mine.

"The Chinese are wrong on a number of counts," Jim pursued as he

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summed up the situation. "I've told them so, and they stand ready to make reparation. There'll be the back taxes and penalties on the gold that's been taken out of the mine. It should prove a bonanza for the county."

Hollister nodded.

"Sheriff Mulhall is up there in the valley now," Jim told him. "I don't know what may have happened since I left, or whether we were within our rights. Mr. District Attorney, I want you to go out there with me and help us settle this matter fairly and squarely for all concerned. Will you do that?" He waited for his answer.

Hollister scatched his lean jaw thoughtfully. "It's an unusual story, Morningstar," he remarked finally. "I find your part in it rather strange for a white man."

"A square deal is all I'm asking for these people," Jim hastened to reply. "I have no interest in the matter other than that."

Hollister rose. "If you'll give me fifteen minutes," he said briskly, "I'll be ready to start."

He was as good as his word. Waiting before the courthouse with fresh horses, Jim and Sulphur were not delayed long before Hollister emerged. Jogging out of town, they headed south. Sulphur turned for a last look at the street.

"Reckon I ain't sorry to put Piute behind," he confessed. "I was afraid Salters'd try some game 'fore we got away. Wouldn't put it past that sidewinder to shove a slug in our ribs if he thought he could git away with it!"

"He knows when he's beaten," was Jim's reply. "I imagine he's seen the light and given up."

But Slade Salters hadn't given up. It would have interested them no little, could they have seen the skulking figure which trailed them at a safe distance until they pulled up for

the night, and then took up the watch again the following morning when they pushed on.

THAT day was an endless boredom of desert travel, with its heat and sun glare. Its one gain was that Hollister took advantage of the opportunity to extract all the knowledge Morningstar possessed concerning the status of the Chinese.

Toward evening, the trio came within striking distance of the rimrock flanking the Fortifications. They had followed a winding canyon for a mile, and were about to tackle the rugged slope leading up to the pueblo, when, without warning, a rifle cracked from a nearby ledge and a slug kicked up the dust ahead of Morningstar. His gun came out and he replied in a flash; they heard the rasp of boots as the killer turned to flee.

"It's Salters!" Jim cried. "After him! He won't get away with this!"

With Hollister joining the chase, they took after Slade. But the lawyer had been ready for this. Crossing the ledge, they saw him pounding away on his bronc, lying low over the animal's withers and jamming the steel home.

Sulphur threw a slug after him. It screamed off a rock at Salters' side. Then the boulders and outcroppings hid him. Hard as they pressed their mounts, they were able to gain but little. Morningstar was studying the throw of the rocky slope. Suddenly he whipped out: "Swing around to the left! We can corner him if we play our hand right!"

They did as he directed. Once Salters fired at them from an undetermined point; but as they drew in, thinking they had him hemmed in an angle of the mountain's shoulder, they suddenly could find no trace of him.

"Don't tell me he's slipped away in spite of us?" Sulphur exploded disgustedly.

That, it appeared, was precisely what Salters had done. "There's his bronc, but he's gone!" Jim exclaimed a few minutes later. "He's taken to the rocks!"

They were soon at the spot. There were no tracks to be followed; the ground was like flint. Believing Salters could not have got far away, they made a thorough search. But though they narrowed the possibility of a man's hiding down to an area of a few hundred yards, and then to nothing, Salters was nowhere to be found.

"Where in hell could he 'a' gone?" Sulphur burst out. "It jest don't make sense!"

"Yes, it does," Jim corrected. "Salters and his crowd know a way into the valley through the mine. That's probably where he has disappeared—into the cave leading that way."

As for themselves, they were lost in a maze of broken granite and malpais. There was nothing to be done but turn back and take the only way Jim knew into the valley.

CHAPTER XXI

DESTINY'S TRAIL

THERE was a guard stationed at the hidden trail into the valley through Pueblo Grande. After a moment's hesitation, during which the district attorney was carefully scrutinized, the man stepped aside and motioned them on.

"The place appears to be well guarded," Hollister commented.

"These people have found out from bitter experience that it had to be that way," Jim explained.

A little more than half an hour later they emerged into the valley.

Hollister caught his breath at the sight which lay spread before him. Men saw them coming; several ran forward to take their horses. Slapping the dust of the desert from their clothes, they went on to Sui Chen's office. Morningstar found the latter, Quan Goon, Carlotta and several others gathered there. Sui Chen himself met them at the door.

Jim introduced Hollister. Sui Chen's surprise was obvious, but he covered it quickly. "You are welcome," he assured the district attorney.

"I have asked Mr. Hollister here as the best and quickest way of ironing out your affairs," Morningstar told the Chinese. "I can report complete success in Piute," he continued. "The mine has been properly located and filed." His story of how Sulphur and he had bested Salters evoked a shout of triumph led by Johnnie and Hap Failes. The Chinese crowding around understood in a flash.

As soon as he could make himself heard, Jim asked: "What has Mulhall been doing, Quan?"

Carlotta answered him. "He came down the mountain with various demands," she said. "We told him you had gone to Piute and that nothing could be done before your return. He needed food, which we gave to him. Then he returned to the mine, and is still there, waiting."

"What about Salters' men—and Yeager's bunch?"

"We've seen nothing of them since you left, Jim. Mulhall refused to be drawn out about them."

"Better send a messenger up there. Tell Mulhall to come down right away," Hollister advised.

It was quickly arranged, Quan Goon starting for the mine without delay. Jim was asking himself where Jennifer might be; hungering for a sight of her. She had not yet ap-

peared when Quan ushered Huck Mulhall into the office.

Presently District Attorney Hollister was presiding over an impromptu court. From beginning to end the affairs of the Chinese company were gone into thoroughly; point after point was ironed out and settled; the possession of the luxuriant valley, the right of the Chinese to carry on here, and similar matters receiving full attention. When it was done, late that evening, Jim had the satisfaction of knowing that he had fought a winning fight for these people.

It meant that when Mulhall, Hollister and the other whites departed for Piute, Jennifer Orme would go with them. Jim could find only a bitter pleasure in the fact, knowing as he did that he might never lay eyes on her again.

Carlotta must have read his thought in his somber expression. Whatever her reaction, she got up abruptly and, excusing herself, left the men to complete the final details. Jim asked himself whether it was suffering that he read in her ivory-pale face as she slipped out, avoiding his look.

TEN minutes later there came a shout from outside the house which jerked them all up sharply. Mulhall came to his feet. "Am I gittin' jumpy?" he rasped. "What was that?" Jim had told him of Salters' bushwhack attempt and escape into the rocks, and Mulhall had not forgotten.

Boots stamped on the veranda; the door was ripped open. Sulphur Riley burst into the room, his excitement plain.

"It's Salters an' his lobos!" he cried. "They've busted through the mine an' got loose in the valley! They're ridin' hell bent!"

Mulhall let out a roar of wrath. "Why, I've had Slaughter an' Yeager an' the bunch of 'em disarmed an' penned up for three, four days! I don't git this!"

"It's all plain reading, Huck," Morningstar told him. "Salters came through the mine and got the jump on your boys. He evidently turned the tables in a hurry. It's your possemen who are penned up now. Talk won't help." He started for the door. "We'll finish the job this time," he said over his shoulder.

There was a brief delay of preparation. Whites and Chinese swung into action then. Almost before they had succeeded in finding mounts, gunfire broke out on the edge of town.

"They're over west!" Jim exclaimed. "We'll spread out and work that way; drive 'em into the open!"

The village was so rambling as to make a clean-cut plan of action almost impossible, however. There were a hundred byways and winding paths to confuse and mislead. Dusk had fallen; under the profusion of trees, the shadows were black. Racing toward the point from which the firing had come, Jim was suddenly taken back when a crashing fusillade exploded at him from a distance of forty yards. He answered hotly, heard the curse of a harsh voice, the pound of boots. Shoving that way with Johnnie Landers at his heels, he found nothing.

A few minutes later his bronc shied at something on the ground. Morningstar caught back his shot in time, leaned down to peer. What he saw sent a cold chill over him. There was a man lying there on the ground, and the man was dead. It was one of the Chinese. Jim's mouth tightened. He scarcely needed to be told that Salters' gang was in grim earnest.

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recognized as Sulphur's, he wheeled that way. Before he reached the tiny square where two roads intersected, there was an outburst of firing. He got there in time to see better than half a dozen renegades trying desperately to break through a wall of fiercely silent Chinese hemming them in. Muzzle bursts freckled the night wickedly with tongues of red. Jim thought he spotted Bronc Yeager. He started for him.

Yeager saw him coming. "No, yuh don't, Mornin'star!" he cried harshly. His gun spat at almost point-blank range, the slug lightly brushing Jim's ribs. Jim fired just as the owl-hooter reared his bronc. The bullet smacked solidly against the animal's chest. For a second Jim thought it had plowed on through, that Yeager was wounded. But even as the pony screamed and went down, Bronc was hauled up behind one of his friends. They raced off into the shadows.

Johnnie Landers started after them. Yeager saw that. Twisting back, he fired once. Johnnie went out of the hull as if hit with a club. Jim was at his side in a second.

"Did he get you, Johnnie?" he demanded. "Are you hit bad?"

Landers struggled up with a sheepish expression. "Hell, no!" he exclaimed. "The slug must've smacked me square in the belt buckle. I'm sore as all get out, but I ain't got a scratch!"

MORNINGSTAR helped him into the saddle. A moment later he got a flash of Mulhall, who, with the help of the district attorney, was busily engaged in routing a renegade from the corner of a house in which the paper lanterns still burned serenely, in fantastic contrast to the violence which had come like a lightning bolt. Huck ordered the man to throw down his gun in the name of the law. His answer

was a savage burst of shots. Jim heard Sulphur's whipped-out exclamation:

"They've worked around us, over to the right! They're right into town now!"

Scattered firing could be heard from that direction, above an occasional high-pitched Chinese yell which might have meant either anguish or defiance. But Jim found something on his mind that would not be put aside.

"Where is Jennifer?" he asked himself. "And Carlotta? Slade Salters won't have any pity if he finds her!"

He knew where Jennifer, at least, might be found. Moving toward the scattered fighting, he made for the girl's adobe. It was not far. There wasn't a light in the place; but that was only prudent, he thought. Reaching the door, he called anxiously:

"Jennifer! Are you there?"

There was no reply. Misgivings assailed him sharply. A louder knock went unanswered. Bursting in the door with a rush, he found the house was empty. The lean lines of his face drew tight.

Even as he returned to the open, a woman's scream pierced the night. It came from a house a few feet away. Jim hurried there. He caught the glow of a lamp; and in its light, through the window, he saw not only Jennifer, but Carlotta as well. Both girls had taken refuge in this place. Evidently they were trying to barricade themselves in. Running along the side of the building, Jim heard the crashing thump of men trying to break in the door.

It smashed open just as he reached the porch corner. A man rushed in; another, hearing the stamp of Jim's boots, turned back. He brought his

gun up as Jim leaped at him; it banged harmlessly. The next moment Jim's fist sent him sprawling headlong. It was Tip Slaughter. Jim stepped over him and got a flash of Salters confronting Sui Chen. Jennifer and Carlotta had fallen back behind the stout Oriental.

"Out of my way, you!" Salters ripped out contemptuously. He slashed at Sui Chen with his gun barrel.

Standing a dozen feet behind him, Jim halted. Salters heard him. He might have thought it was Slaughter, but he paused momentarily. In that stiff silence, Jim said flatly:

"Salters!"

A shock seemed to run through Salters. He recognized that voice. He did not turn at once, but his body stiffened. Slowly he began to wheel, his eyes wolfish in the handsome face. Before he fronted Morningstar squarely, his right arm partially concealed, he suddenly went for his other gun. Jim caught that move on the fly and his own play was instantaneous.

The two guns exploded almost as one. Salters' slug tore across Jim's arm. The latter's aim had been more accurate. Salters' eyes glazed and he tottered drunkenly. He crumpled then, dead as he hit the floor.

"Jim! Jim! You're safe!"

It was Jennifer. Unmindful of Sui Chen and Carlotta, she ran to him and threw herself into Jim's arms. "My dear, my dear!" they heard her broken murmur. "You might have been killed!"

There was undisguised pity in the look Sui Chen gave Carlotta. Neither could miss the significance of this moment. It spelled death for Carlotta's hopes where Jim Morningstar was concerned.

EMERGING from the house five minutes later, Jim found the fight virtually over. Bronc Yeager had been captured after Sulphur drilled him through the shoulder. Though the rest of the renegades battled fiercely, they had no leader after that. Mulhall soon had them rounded up. Looking them over, the district attorney had a few curt words to say as to their probable fate.

"I'll tell you better about that when I find out what's happened to my possemen," Mulhall told him. At the head of a dozen men, Morningstar among them, he led the way to the mine entrance, only to find his deputies free once more and the two men Salters had left to guard them already flown. The possemen's story proved Jim's surmise correct as to what had happened in the mine.

"You git your folks ready to move," Mulhall told Jim. "We'll be pullin' out in half an hour. We can put some miles behind us while it's cool."

Morningstar nodded woodenly. He watched the preparations for departure. The renegades were bound and made ready to travel under guard of the possemen; food for two days was packed. Sulphur, Johnnie and Hap were plainly elated to be going. Jennifer, too, was undoubtedly making ready for the trip. Jim shook his head at the thought. Of all the whites in the valley, he alone must remain behind. He had never known how hard this hour would be to face until now.

It was an added shock to watch Bill Merriam's body being packed on a bronc. Not even the shadow of this man's pretensions stood between Jennifer and him now, but it meant nothing.

Stiffing his despair, Jim turned away to wander beneath the trees.

Only dimly through the misery that was in him was he aware of Sui Chen's friendly hail. "The old man called a second time. 'Jim, I must have a word with you.'"

Morningstar entered the now-familiar office to find it heavy with the perfume Carlotta wore. It told him she had just quit the room. He glanced inquiringly at Sui Chen. The latter was pacing the floor, his hands clasped behind his plump back. "Please sit down, Jim," he urged. And after a pause: "There are some reasons why I regret what I am about to say. They are not all selfish reasons, as you might presume. Some of them spring from my respect and fondness for you; others from my love for one who is as a daughter to me." He bowed his head reverently. "May Quam Yam have mercy on her."



His tone was calm, but Jim could sense the emotional strain the man was under. "I hardly understand, Sui Chen," Jim said. "Let us be frank with each other."

"Yes," the old Oriental nodded, only half hearing. "We have a proverb to the effect that some there are who must walk alone," he went on, his train of thought unbroken. "It is the will of the gods," he sighed humbly. "Mere man can do noth-

ing about it, even though he carries the Green Dragon."

He stopped his pacing abruptly and fastened his shrewd old eyes on Morningstar. "Jim, you have served us nobly. Believe me, this does not come easily. But Moy Quai is right: to hold you to your oath—to keep you from the woman you love—in view of all you have done for us, would be base ingratitude."

Jim pulled him self to his feet and stood gazing at the old Chinese, amazed. "Sui Chen, am I to understand that I am relieved of my promise—that I am free to leave with the others?"

Sui Chen smiled. "So it means so much to you, my son?" He shook his wise old head. "I am not surprised. I, too, once was young." From a desk drawer he took a small envelope. "Between friends there must be no thought of paying for a favor, for a service well done. But I once promised you riches. Take this humble gift as a token of our regard for you. And may the God of Luck go with you."

The unexpectedness of it overwhelmed Jim. He knew Carlotta had done this for him, though he little suspected what it cost her.

Quan Goon stepped into the room. "Miss Ormie is waiting, Morningstar," he said soberly. "I have had your pony saddled. Mulhall and the others have started already."

The two Chinese bowed respectfully, once, twice, three times. It was their way of saying farewell. Jim couldn't let it go at that. He put out his hand and they shook hands in the white man's way.

JIM found Jennifer ready for the long ride. He sensed immediately that she had been informed that he was leaving with her. Her manner was subdued, wistful.

"We are leaving something here, Jim, that is fine and inspiring," she



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murmured softly. He nodded, too full for words.

Silver moonlight bathed Ping-an-shanku in a magic of its own. Peace had returned to the valley. It held them silent and thoughtful.

Emerging from the trees, Jim saw a figure silhouetted against the great rock that commanded a view of the trail out of the valley; someone who stood there motionless, waiting.

It was Carlotta, her face unreadable. Jennifer read the girl's heart plainly enough, however. “Jim, you wait here and say good-by to her,” she whispered. “I’ll ride on.”

Carlotta did not turn at hearing his step behind her. “You shouldn’t have stopped,” she said, her voice small and tense.

“I couldn’t go without stopping, Carlotta. I know how much I owe you—”

“It is nothing, Jim. We can’t all win.” She lifted her face to him, her eyes dark pools in the moonlight, and managed a smile. “The little dragon brought you happiness; that is something.”

Jim caught her hands impulsively and felt the tumultuous beat of life in her. That contact broke Carlotta’s inner defenses. Suddenly she pressed close to him, her eyes wet. “Take me in your arms this once, Jim,” she whispered. “Let me have the feel of your lips on mine to remember—”

Silence infolded them during that long embrace. In the end, Carlotta put him away from her. “Go now,” she made herself say. “And please, Jim . . . don’t look back!”

His face craggy, resolute, Jim fumbled for his stirrup, then swung into the saddle and started down the moonlit trail. Ahead he could see Jennifer, and he knew their trails lay together, not only across this valley and the next, but over the hills and ever beyond, sharing whatever life might bring them.

THE END.

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