

# WESTERN



STREET  
AND  
SMITH'S

STORY <sup>10¢</sup>  
MAY 1939

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1939

## WARRIORS OF THE STEEL TRAILS

a book-length novel  
by HARRY F. OLMSTED





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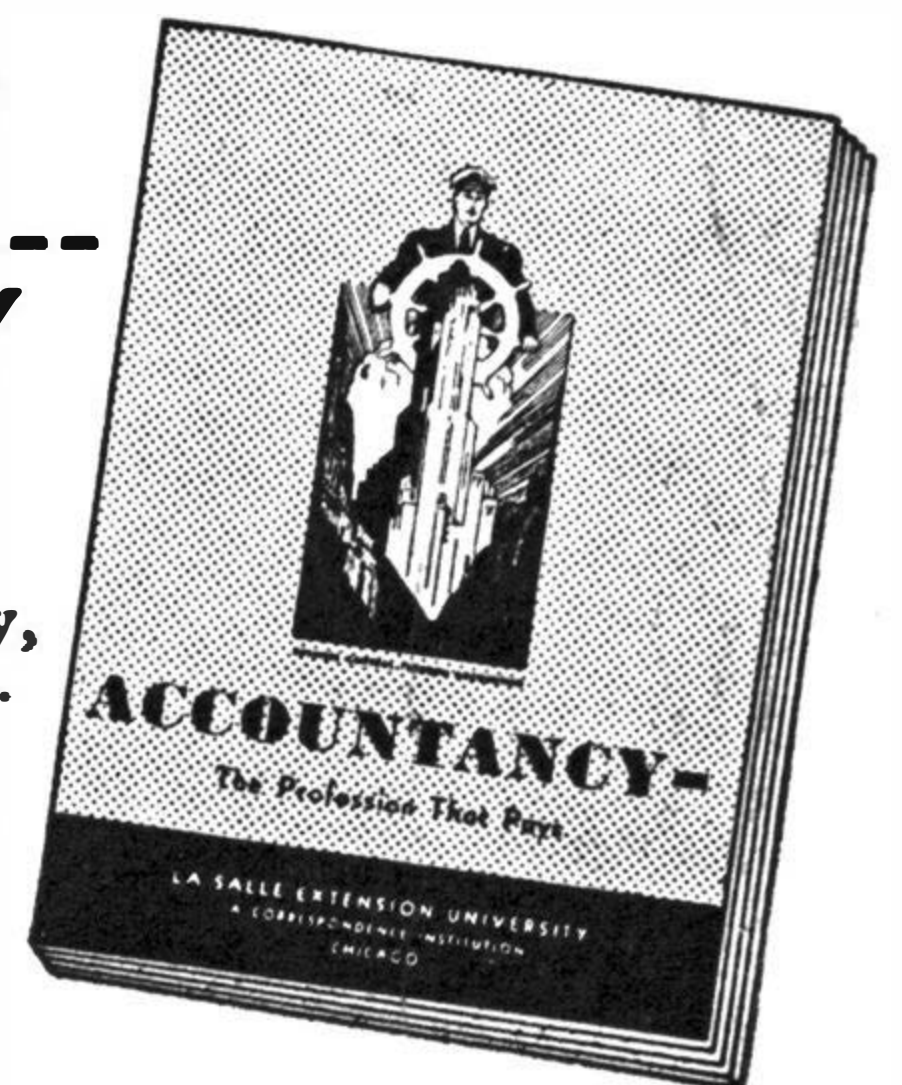
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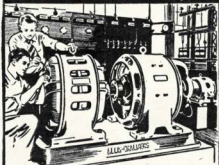
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STREET & SMITH'S

# WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

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CONTENTS FOR DECEMBER 30, 1939 VOL. CLXXIX NO. 2

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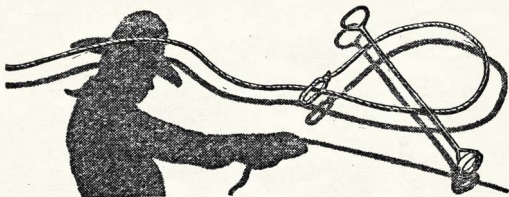
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# The Roundup

MERRY CHRISTMAS, folks! And here's hoping that it will be the best Christmas ever. We hope, too, that the coming year will be prosperous and filled with happiness, and that all the good things in life will come your way.

It sure seems like good old Western Story is making a big hit with its bit of streamlining, for our mail-bag has been crammed with letters the past few weeks from readers who are mighty keen about the new trimmed edges. "The last number of Western Story is swell," writes W. H. Conklin of Rochester, New York. "I can now turn the pages easily as they are all of the same width. I want you to know that I think it is a big improvement."

And from Powell River, British Columbia, one of our riding pals, William G. Bailey, informs us: "I jist gone and done bought my October 14th issue of Western Story, rolls it up in my fist, but before I gets out o' the store I notices something different about it. Well, sir, there was my favorite mag all dolled up in his Sunday clothes, with his

hair (pages to you), all trimmed up nice and even all around and it sure did look like a sweet mag!"

We want to thank our friends, Mr. Conklin and Mr. Bailey, for writing in and telling us that they like this change, and we thank, too, the many other readers whose letters were full of compliments on the ease with which it is now possible to read their favorite magazine, the facility with which they can be saved and bound, et cetera. Sure wish the old Roundup was big enough to print all those fine letters.

We're evidently not the only one who has a soft spot in our heart for The Gamblin' Kid, for since we introduced him some months ago he's become a very popular young hombre. We're glad to have him back with us once more. We know those of his admirers who craved to meet up with him again will enjoy DEUCES WILD, which appears on Page 87 of this issue, and we feel certain that The Gamblin' Kid will make a lot of new friends.

In reply to our inquiry as to whether the Kid was an actual person, Eric Howard, author of these engaging stories, wrote:

"I don't know that there's any particular 'story behind the story' in the case of these tales I've written about The Gamblin' Kid—he's just



a composite character drawn from real life.

"For many years I've been roaming around the back country of Arizona and New Mexico. A lot of it is still real cow country and still 'Wild West,' and it will be that way for a long time to come.

"I've spent a lot of time in the Navaho country, where the Indians have resisted the influence of the whites very successfully. Down in the Magdalena-Datil-Quemado section of New Mexico—this is the country of the late Eugene Manlove Rhodes—you can run into stories at every turn and into cowboys who are the real McCoy, with all of the skill, courage and color of the old-timers. To put them into stories, to capture the color and cadence of their talk, especially their rich humor of understatement is something well worth doing."

And speaking of old-timers we've an interesting note from Santa Cruz, California. Celia Smith Spencer, who signs herself "A California Pioneer," has sent us a fine compliment as well as a revealing sidelight on early day transportation in the Golden State. "I was pleased to read in Western Story for November 11th, the letter from Mrs. Francis M. Hogan," she says, "who is one of our old-timers. You asked us old-timers to tell you what we know about oxen in an early day.

"I live in Lassen County, California, and our supplies were hauled in by ox teams from Reno and Virginia City, Nevada, and at the saw-mills ox teams were used to haul logs to the mill—usually three yoke (six oxen) to haul a load of from three to six logs, according to the size— I enjoy Western Story so much—keep up the good work."

Many thanks to this hardy pioneer

who informs us that she will celebrate her eightieth birthday this coming February. We extend our heartiest congratulations.

#### In next week's Western Story—

When you see Tom Roan's brand on a yarn, you can bet dollars to doughnuts it has more than its quota of thrills and fast-paced action. INDIAN COUNTRY, the full-length novel which we've scheduled for our next issue, is no exception. Laid in the days when hardy pioneers fought and overcame the innumerable perils that stood in the way of their settling on the Western frontier, it is a gripping, dramatic story. We know you'll like it.

Any lumberjack with daring enough to challenge the champion of Talking River knew he ran the risk of being sucked into a hell's broth of boiling water. Who was the Whitewater Kid and what made him try a gamble that could have only one outcome? The answers to these questions add up to an exciting story by Kenneth Gilbert—TREACHERY OF TALKING RIVER.

It looked like a double cross—and even the sheep had to admit it smelled like one, but young Lee Sullivan knew that he'd have to take strong measures if the Aurora range was to be saved from a bitter gun war. Look for BOOMERANG IN POLECAT PASS, by R. Edgar Moore, a short story with a surprise twist.

Also on the tally sheet for next week are stories by such well-known favorites as S. Omar Barker, L. P. Holmes, and Stuart Hardy, plus a full list of departments and features.





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## CANDY FOR THE KID

By S. OMAR BARKER

It's hell to be a button—an' the roustabout, at that—  
 When Christmas snow is driftin' deep an' white across the flat,  
 An' all the older cowboys are a-slickin' up for town.  
 You've gotta swaller mighty hard to keep the blubbers down,  
 For someone's got to stay behind, the way a ranch is run,  
 To feed the stock, an' sure as hell, you're goin' to be the one.  
 Slim's got a gal he aims to see, Tom's goin' on a toot,  
 They're all plumb full of vinegar for Christmas gallyhoot.  
 Dick aims to celebrate at church an' dinner with his ma;  
 Your own folks will sure be missin' you, back in Arkinsaw.

There'll be a Christmas Ball to suit ol' Breezy's dancin' ways,  
 With old friends meetin' up again, an' colored lights ablaze.  
 Ol' Slim, he makes the offer that he'll stay an' you can go,  
 So all you've got to do is build a grin an' tell him no.  
 You've hired on as roustabout, you've got no folks in town,  
 Too young for gallyhootin', so you'll hold the rancho down.  
 You don't make no complaint, o' course, nor let off nary sob,  
 For you'll never be a cowboy if you can't hold down your job.  
 You watch 'em mount an' ride away across the frosty morn,  
 An' you've never felt so lonesome since the day that you was born.

You hear ol' Breezy holler as he gives his pony slack:  
 "We'll bring a stick of candy you kin chaw when we git back!"  
 It snows some more on Christmas Eve, so when you go to feed,  
 You fork the hay plumb generous. It's more than what they need,  
 But Christmas kind o' gits you, an' your feelin's overflow  
 Towards every livin' critter that mus shiver in the snow.  
 Come Christmas Day you try to read some wore-out magazines,  
 But all you hear is lonesome wind an' all you eat is beans.  
 You're forty miles from nowheres, an' a week goes draggin' by  
 Before the boys come driftin' home, wore out an' red of eye.

You don't go out to meet 'em, for by now you're kind o' sore.  
 You slip out to the kitchen when you hear them at the door.  
 "Come git your stick of candy, kid!" You hear ol' Slim's command.  
 "To hell with that!" you answer, for it's more than you can stand.  
 But Slim, he comes an' gits you, an' it makes your gizzard drunk  
 To see the bran'-new cowboy gear that's piled up on your bunk!  
 There's chaps an' boots, a saddle, an' a pair of fancy spurs!  
 "Well, there's your candy, kid," grins Slim. Your vision kind o' blurs,  
 For, bein' jest a button an' a roustabout to boot,  
 You're due to bust out bawlin', but you sure don't give a hoot!

It's swell to be the roustabout that holds the rancho down—  
 An' it's sure 'nuff Merry Christmas when the boys git back from town!



# WARRIORS OF THE STEEL TRAILS



By HARRY F. OLMSTED



## CHAPTER I

## A LITTLE MATTER OF MEAT

A WELCOME sun poured down upon the steaming prairie which seemed to be bursting now with the first green shoots of spring. The moist earth was springy beneath the hoofs of Dan Reardon's saddle pony and his three pack animals laden with buffalo meat. The blue sky smiled as if pleased by the sweet scent of budding things awakening after the winter sleep. The plains seemed to give out an aura of peace, but Dan was not deceived.

The young plainsman, his face thoughtful, was reacting to the psychic beat of warning drums, something he knew enough never to disregard. Just as the willow buds would burst into leaf, just as the earth was swelling to the thrust of pale-green shoots, so the rolling prairie sea would spawn its annual threat of feathered death. Somewhere yonder, where the sky dipped down to kiss the earth, bronzed and restless warriors girded themselves for the trail, groomed their fastest ponies, strung their bows, feathered their lances and made ready their contraband guns.

From lifelong experience with the red man, Dan Reardon knew no fear for himself. Too long had he pitted his wits, his nerve, patience and resourcefulness against the tribesmen to be afraid of them. But there were others to be considered now. The Western Pacific was pushing westward its twin bands of gleaming steel, at from two to five miles a day. Great crews of graders borrowed earth to rear the embankment.

Gangs of tie setters, track layers, sledge men and bolters sweated and dived as they inched across the plains. Ahead were the engineers, protected by soldiers. Long lines of

freight wagons, drawn by straining mules, raised an endless dust as they hauled supplies forward. Switch engine crews bucked ties and steel to the railhead, with tooting whistles, hissing steam and a great clatter of drivers. Behind were the vast commissaries, the office forces. And all looked to Dan to supply the meat that was the lifeblood of the line.

Dan topped a rise and felt the blood run faster in his veins. Yonder, an ugly ribbon of brown on a pale-green carpet stretched the new grade. Dust hung above it in an irregular, crested cloud. Far back, the sun caught the white tilts of Rag City, that disreputable collection of dives catering to the starved senses of the laborers.

Weird, ear-splitting ululations broke in on Dan's reflections with stunning suddenness. Swift thunder of hoofs. Crash of a gun, whine of lead and whir of a feathered shaft. Dan's horse reared up, whinnying its terror. The pack horses swung their heads and broke into a panicky run. For a long moment, Dan had trouble with his mount. Then, when he had the animal straightened out and spurred into a hard run, he jerked his Sharps buffalo gun from his saddle boot and swung in the saddle. What he saw added nothing to his peace of mind.

At least two score Cheyenne braves, hideous in paint and feathers, fanned out behind him, their runty, spotted ponies bellied down in a hard gallop, their few guns reaching out to bring him down, their upraised lances fluttering bravely. They were on the kill and it would be a close thing, if he made it at all.

Throwing his weight in one stirrup, Dan twisted farther and brought the rifle to his shoulder. He caught the sights, threw them across the broad figure of a chief in full headdress and

reluctantly pressed the prong. He numbered many friends among these plains tribes and he knew too well the outraged tempers of the red men at this violation of their age-old hunting grounds by the iron horse of the whites. Nevertheless, he was forced to bow to the first law of the frontier—kill or be killed.

The Sharps roared, recoiled heavily against his shoulder. The chief loosed a shrill scream, tossed his lance high and went back over the tail of his horse. Holding his mount to its utmost effort, Dan jacked out the empty and stuffed in another .50 caliber cartridge. Again the weapon spoke. Another war bonnet vanished. Another riderless horse roiled the pursuit.

OVER a rise and down, the racing Cheyennes were hidden for a few moments. Dan took stock of his packs. They were running strongly yet despite their loads. Arrows jutted from the burdens of two, so far, none had been maimed. He glanced ahead, where the blue uniforms of the regular troops paced along the right-of-way. Then he glanced back where the Cheyennes were piling into view. They were not gaining, their lust tempered by the loss of two leaders. Dan knew he could outrun them easily on his long-legged horse if he were willing to abandon his meat. That he was determined not to do. He'd had to work hard for it, and the railroad crews needed meat.

A bullet grazed Dan and he bent low in the saddle, urging on the three pack horses. An arrow thudded into his cante, humming like a hornet, then snapping off with a splintering noise. The yells were louder in his ears now, as the Indians gained. And the burden-bearing horses were showing the effects of the hard race. Dan straightened, shot again.

It was a mile now to the tracks and, along the grade, the workers were pausing in their labors, staring. The soldiers were moving out to form a ragged line, their rifles giving back the glint of the sun. Three quarters of a mile. Dan could see the men scattering, dropping their tools and racing for the handy gun wagon. Teamsters whipped their mules across the embankment. So near and yet so far!

Dan fired, loaded and fired again. He seldom missed, yet now the Indians were casting caution to the winds, knowing they must drop their quarry soon or not at all. The air was filled with the flight of steel-tipped arrows and bullets whined their song of death about Dan's ears.

A dart pierced one of the pack ponies. It swerved violently and took out, limping, to one side. With a muttered oath, Dan reined aside after the injured brute. Yells of triumph lifted from the thundering horse behind. Dan sheathed his hot carbine, turned the animal back. Then he whirled back toward the tribesmen, his pistol flashing out and spitting venomously.

The audacity of it scattered the Indians from the center and toward the wings, gave them momentary pause. Dan didn't crowd his luck. He had no chance against them in a fight and he knew it. So, having accomplished his purpose, he whirled again and was heading after his pack horses at a dead run. The maneuver had gained him a precious fifty yards. But now the Cheyennes were quartering in from his two flanks. And there was yet a third of a mile to go.

A bullet struck his pony. The animal shuddered, tried gamely to keep on, failed and fell. Dan flung himself free, went to the ground and scrambled back behind the quivering



carcass. Frantically, he stuffed cartridges in his new Colt's pistol, shook out six swift shots. Ponies pitched to his left without materially checking the charge, and he was loading again for a try to the right when, suddenly, Indians and their horses were falling. Streams of lead were whispering overhead and, from the grade, the guns of the soldiers were speaking a rising thunder.

The red riders rallied, reared their mounts. A shrill order flashed along the line. Then they turned and were in full flight, kicking their straining ponies frantically in the ribs.

Dan rose, jammed his gun into its holster, took a last glance at the plains death that had missed him so narrowly and turned toward the right of way, with the cheers of hundreds of men ringing in his ears. Weary, shaken up, caught in the backwash of an emotional let-down, he walked spiritlessly toward the trackway, where alert hands were halting the winded pack brutes. A wagon whirled past him, the driver bawling that he would fetch in Dan's saddle and gear. Dan waved him on, walking soberly to the roadbed.

"Hold it, young fellow!" A deep, commanding voice roused Dan from his preoccupation. He turned to see a stocky, straight-backed man leading a party from a three-seat surrey, south of the embankment. He plowed up the slope from the borrow pit, grabbed Dan's hand and pumped it. "I'm General Graham, the chief engineer of the road. You had a close call, my boy. I've gone through a few tight spots in my time but, I don't mind telling you I'd have kept right on running from the redskins and forgotten all about my pack horses."

"I reckon you'd have done just what I did," Dan said quietly, "if you realized the part fresh meat

plays in putting this road through."

"The plains are full of meat, but men don't grow on bushes."

"Meat is scarce, general. I'll be glad to take you out to prove it."

The engineer seemed taken back. He scowled into Dan's blue eyes. Then he smiled. "If you say so, sir, that's all the proof I need. It was a brave thing and we're proud of you. Your name, sir?"

"Dan Reardon," said the hunter.

General Graham gripped his hand firmly, then turned to his companions who had just come puffing up. "Gentlemen, it's my pleasure to present Dan Reardon, whom you just saw cheat a nasty death by an eye winker. Reardon, Mr. Robert Carter. And Mr. Franklin Monson. These gentlemen are helping finance this great project, Reardon. I'm mighty glad they could be here on the line, to see for themselves the hazards we face."

**B**OWING slightly, Dan expressed his pleasure and touched the moist palm of the florid Carter and the stiff fingers of the nervous, still-frightened Monson. General Graham was quick to follow up with a moral:

"You have seen, gentlemen, what kind of courage it takes here at the end of steel. Can we, at home, who have in charge the raising of finance, be any less courageous?"

Robert Carter shook his head emphatically. "What I've just seen has convinced me, general, that you have communicated your will to these men and that the road must surely go through. It will give me ammunition to convert my colleagues." He turned to Dan inquiringly. "Reardon, whatever inspired you to take after a cheap horse in the face of those savages? You might have been killed."

"A little matter of meat," Dan explained dryly. "Without it, the men do not work as well and the more it costs to complete the work. My orders were to bring it in and I did."

"Spoken like a soldier," applauded the general. "And there you have the spirit of the Western Pacific, gentlemen."

"Admirable," said Franklin Monson, recovering his poise. "May we have the pleasure of your company at our table this evening, Mr. Reardon? I'd like to hear what goes on at the spearpoint of our attack upon the wilderness."

Dan agreed and it was arranged. The two men tipped their hats and started back toward the surrey. But General Graham tarried, looking hard at Dan.

"Reardon," he said cautiously, "are you related sir, to Mike Reardon, who used to boss our supply department?"

"Used to boss it?" Dan inquired. "What do you mean by that?"

"Any kin to you?" persisted the engineer.

"My father, sir."

General Graham's eyes went bleak. "Hm-m-m. Then you haven't heard?"

"Heard what?" Dan felt the blood draining from his face.

The general suddenly seemed anxious to avoid his eyes. "Your father is dead, Reardon," he said, covering his emotion with the bluntness of a soldier. "He was killed—shot to death in the Canvas Palace almost a week ago."

"Murdered?" Dan said hoarsely.

"That's a harsh word, Reardon. Maybe so, maybe not. Certainly there are too many violent killings in Rag City and the wild towns we leave behind us as we move west-

ward. Some are murders, others are perhaps justifiable self-defense. It will be so until there is law to restrain the young hot bloods. In your father's case . . . well, I don't know. From what I've been able to find out, Mike went into the Canvas Palace, drank a little, gambled some and had words with a Texan—Santee Ponder, a gunman employed by Bill Beaugard."

He paused, his face inquiring as he saw the chill in Dan Reardon's eyes.

"Ponder," echoed the young man. "Yeah, I know the one."

"The story goes," continued General Graham, "that Ponder caught Mike cheating at cards and that when he challenged him, your father went on the fight. I don't know. I'm too busy putting this road across a continent to have time to investigate personal quarrels that take place off the right of way. Mike was a good man and I'm sorry. We will be hard put to find anyone to take his place. Well, take it easy, boy, and don't be hasty. We'll see you at supper."

## CHAPTER II

### BLOOD TRAIL

**WHEN** Dan went to the company mess that evening, he was still a little dazed by the catastrophe. Bluff, hearty Mike Reardon dead! The singing, swearing, swashbuckling man who had been father and mother to him lying stiff and cold in a rough pine box, back in Junction City. The man who had taught Dan everything he knew, who had never shunned a fight or lost one, murdered! It seemed fantastic, unbelievable.

Walking into the vast, canvas-topped hall, crowded with the



famished, sweating horde, Dan searched the officials' tables in vain.

"Graham?" echoed one of the waiters. "Oh, he and his guests had the private car hooked to the evening train east. Business of some kind."

Dan nodded and went out. He was glad enough to be alone. It was a nasty night. A hard wind from the west had whipped in black, scudding clouds. A cold drizzle formed pools to give back the glints of dingy lights. Beyond, in the yards, an engine puffed restlessly. Lanterns flashed through the murk and men called to one another. A renewed ringing of the engine bell and an insistent whistling roused Dan from his uncertainty and seemed to make up his mind for him. All at once, he jerked down his dripping hat, hitched the gun at his thigh and broke into a run.

Along the muddy roadway he sped, bracing himself against the treachery of the greasy footing. By the time he reached the tie train the swaying cars had gathered momentum, seemed to be racing past him, their wheels clicking measured warnings. Smoke from the wood-burner swirled about him as he sprinted alongside, peering for the hand rungs.

Now Dan launched himself, caught the steel-ladder holds. One hand slipped and, for a moment he swung there precariously. Then, regaining a secure hold, he scrambled up and over the side of a boxed fuel car. He could have made his way forward to the comfort of the warm, roofed cab of the engine, but instead he crouched at the front of the car, pulled up his collar and hunched miserably, prey to grim thoughts. He had no stomach for company this night.

Sometime around midnight, the rolling train slowed, drew to a stop

in the roaring frontier metropolis of Junction City. Life, red-blooded and robust, pulsed through the night as Dan climbed stiffly from the train and strode toward the gay lights uptown. The new-laid walks swarmed with men making the rounds of the dives. Dan pushed through them, heading for the Canvas Palace, headquarters of Bill Beauregard, king of vice along the ever-westering railroad line.

AS he walked, Dan grew warm from the effort and from the heat of his thoughts. Beauregard and his satellites were the curse of this great project. Waiting like foul spiders to trap the roistering Irish laborers, poison them with cheap whiskey, befuddle, slug, rob them, and then cast their dulled husks outside for the railroad to use as it could. Making their own laws and enforcing them in their own arbitrary ways.

Dan thought of the big, brutal genius who commanded this golden, vampire business, Bill Beauregard. The man had started with the first rail laid out of Omaha, with one rickety wagon, a barrel of rotgut whiskey and a dozen tin cups. Since that historic day, his shadow had lain increasingly dark over the road. From the first, he had prospered, taking practically all of the earnings of the horde of workers, always expanding, discouraging competition with violence.

Somehow Dan's terrible anger turned from the Texas killer who had murdered his father, to this suave, overfed man who was the main-spring of every evil act in Junction City.

"He's the one that's got to go," he told himself. "He's ringed with guns an' the man who braces him will die. But, with him out of the

way, everybody an' everything will be better off."

The Canvas Palace reeked with sweat, smoke and the sour smell of stale liquor. It was a bedlam of reveling, this home of the heartless baron who controlled the lives, habits and destinies of so many of the inhabitants of Junction City. This place and others like it, were the main factor in holding back the progress of the steel, reducing the efficiency of the men and outrating storms, floods and Indian forays put together.

Dan elbowed his way to the bar, took his station there with glass and bottle. The whiskey warmed his chilled blood and while he drank it his roving eyes picked out the wary, hawk-eyed gun toters who looked to Bill Beauregard for their bounty. He knew some of those plug uglies, and many of the crimes rumor connected them with.

Yonder, at the door of the gambling wing, stood bulky, towering Sledge Meagher, the bouncer. He had beaten more than one man to death with his sledgelike fists. At the entrance to the dance hall was Long Henry Varco, a gun flash with a long record of killings in Deadwood. Through the broad archway, presiding over a busy game, was Jonathan Ellsworth, a gambler who had killed several men across his board.

Even as Dan looked at Ellsworth, the man lifted his head. His eyes, striking through the smoky interval, caught Dan's and clung, his brows arching in surprise. Then Dan, not wanting attention from anyone other than Ponder, shifted his glance.

It was some minutes later when the bartender struck a bell with a bung starter, the full-toned peal bringing a hush over the crowded hall.

"Dan Reardon!" he bawled. "Dan Reardon wanted at railroad headquarters at once. Dan Reardon, go to headquarters!"



DAN was startled. What could he be wanted for at this time of night? He thought then of General Graham and decided that someone had seen him in Junction City and had told the chief engineer. Graham had warned him to act sanely and slowly, and was now probably worried about what the son of Mike Reardon might do.

Reluctantly, and with a last sweeping look for the man he sought, Dan bestirred himself and left the saloon, more than a little surprised at the number of eyes that followed his going. It was still raining outside and the wind was cold. He followed the wooden awnings for what shelter they afforded, turning finally to angle across the street toward the drenched and darkened canvas of the company offices. He was swerving around a pool of rain water when his name was spoken from the dingy shadows of a flapping tent side.

"Reardon! This way!"

Suspicion stabbed through Dan. He halted abruptly, poised and dead as he peered toward the hail. Then, almost without reason, he was reaching for his pistol. Too late! A slender ribbon of orange flame licked toward him, then seemingly through him. With the explosion beating along his nerves from his outraged eardrums, Dan felt strength pour from him like grain from a rent sack. His legs gave way and he fell. With



the last of his consciousness, he heard the splashing of running boots. Then he knew no more.

He came back to life with strong hands lifting him and a raucous brogue in his ears: "Come, me bucko. 'Tis a cryin' shame, be jabbers, the whiskey they're givin' us fer our money. Here, stand on yer own feet, me bye. Ye can't sleep here in the mud. Are ye all right?"

Dan couldn't speak, but he did manage a grunt which the friendly track layer took for affirmation. He slapped Dan between the shoulders, nearly knocking him down, and hurried away. Dan stood weaving there, prey to waves of pain through his middle.

The call had been a trick; he knew that now. Jonathan Ellsworth, the gambler, had spotted him, tipped off someone, probably Santee Ponder, and had tolled him outside to his death. And Dan had little doubt that death it would indeed be for him soon.

Surging rage poured through him, the best tonic he could have found. It seemed to release energy from remote reservoirs deep inside him. He surged erect and reeled toward the Canvas Palace again. Beauregard and his killers were laughing up their sleeves that they had consolidated the murder of Wild Mike Reardon, by the death of the only one interested in avenging him. Well, the time was short, but it wouldn't take long. A shot apiece for Beauregard and Ponder. After that, nothing mattered.

### CHAPTER III

#### BLACK-SHEEP GAMBLER

**S**TAGGERING drunkenly, Dan fed his will to survive with the heady tonic of anger. The shock of his wound was passing, leaving

pain that robbed him of breath. Pressing his fingers to his side, he drew them away red and sticky. He was bleeding, but he had to last till he got into the big saloon.

At the corner of the Canvas Palace, he quit the walk, moved down a narrow slot where the drip from two eaves drenched him, where the fierce draft tunneled through chillingly. Near the rear, he opened a door and entered the gambling hall, thinning of patronage now because of the lateness of the hour. Inside he paused, raking the room with a hot glance. Neither of the men he sought was in sight. Nor were there any of the hawk-faced gunmen, unless Jonathan Ellsworth could qualify as such.

Gritting his teeth, holding himself with an awful stiffness, Dan started toward the archway leading to the noisy barroom, leaving little puddles with each step, so soaked and sodden were his buckskins. He saw Ellsworth rise and make the little movement with his hands that meant he was closing his game. He saw chips exchanged for gold. And then, with only a few steps separating them, Ellsworth had lifted his deep-set eyes to Dan. And it was as if the glance had robbed the young plainsman of his scant remaining store of strength. He caught at the back of a chair, braced his hand on the table top and sat down. The gambler shook his head.

"Sorry, Reardon. Game's closed for the night. I have other business—"

The click of Dan's cocking pistol beneath the table cut him short.

"Sit down!" Dan commanded, from between locked teeth. "Shove out chips and cards an' keep your hands on the table."

"And if I don't, Reardon?"

"I'll kill you, Ellsworth. Where's

Ponder an' Beauregard? An' while I'm askin', where's Long Henry Varco?"

The gambler, busy with markers and a deck, shrugged. "How should I know. I'm not their guardian. They come and go; where, is none of my business. But don't worry, they'll show up. They always do, when they're least expected."

"I'll wait for them," Dan said. "An' when they show, see that you don't forget what you just said."

"What's that?"

"That you ain't their guardian. My killin' plans for tonight don't include you, Ellsworth."

"Kind of you," murmured the gambler. "When you start shootin', my friend, I trust that you won't forget that I just work here. I play Bill Beauregard's game, with cards only. You can depend on that, by the word of a gentleman."

The fog over Dan's eyes was brushing away and he saw a bleak and hopeless look touch the man's finely chiseled features. "Thanks," he muttered. "That raises you a little above the rest of these murderous coyotes in my eyes."

From the barroom came a sudden uproar of yelling, whistling and stamping of boots. The watchers at the other tables turned to the archway and began clapping. The gambler's morose eyes lighted. The cynical twist left his thin lips and all sullenness was gone from his face.

Now the crowd in the archway was parting as a girl walked through. A beautiful girl, very queenly in a shimmering silk gown, high-piled chestnut hair and a smile that was balm to Dan's gnawing agony. Her eyes went to the gambler and as she came toward him, he flicked a nervous glance at Dan, then rose and swept off his hat. Courtesy brought Dan up; too. He shifted the cocked

pistol to his left hand, let it hang at his side as he, too, lifted his hat.

"Melody!" There was a note almost of reverence in the gambler's voice. "Allow me to present Mr. Dan Reardon. Reardon, this is Melody Toll, the sweetest singer on the plains."

The girl smiled into Dan's pain-filled eyes, curtsied, then looked at Ellsworth, laying her hand on his arm. "I came to tell you, Jonathan," she murmured, "that I'm singing your favorite song tonight."

"Thank you for thinking that much of me, Melody."

**S**HE laughed lightly, patted his cheek and was gone. With a deep sigh, Ellsworth sank into his chair again. And, because Dan's action was slower, the gambler's eyes widened on the red stain deepening on the plainsman's wet buckskin.

"Reardon!" he said. "You're bleeding!"

"Yes." Dan sat down. "A slug in the guts is all, Ellsworth. A little token of the esteem in which I am held here."

"Meaning what?" Ellsworth asked sharply.

"One of your fine-feathered gunmen tolled me outside and let me have it from the dark. Don't know which one, but, as long as I've a score to settle with Ponder, I'll hold him responsible. Ponder an' the man he works for—Bill Beauregard."

Ellsworth inclined his head. "I'm sorry, Reardon. I thought you were drunk. Such a wound is dangerous. You better get over to the hospital and—"

"Maybe I won't need a doctor when the evening is over, Ellsworth. I'll wait here for the two I named and let the devil decide the issue."

Admiration edged the gambler's



eyes. "What a soldier you would have made, Reardon!"

"I was a lieutenant of Lawson's Rangers," Dan told him.

"Lawson!" The gambler's eyes burned. "And I rode with Morgan."

"I know. You ranked a captain. Remember the licking we gave you at Tyndale's Mill?"

"I've tried to forget the whole, awful mess, Reardon."

Silence fell between them and, after a while, a low groan came from Dan's lips. "Damn it!" he groaned, fighting against that enveloping haze. "Why don't they show up?"

Ellsworth started, poured a drink. "Here," he said firmly. "Get this into you. And give up this damn foolishness. If you wait too long, this bullet will kill you before they do. Hell, man, you've got a lifetime stretching ahead of you if you don't throw it away. You can wait to square your accounts."

Dan took the drink in trembling fingers and lifted it.

"To the old days, Captain Ellsworth," he murmured, and drank.

The gambler's face tipped down and he shook his head. "Those days are dead, Lieutenant Reardon. This is Junction City—under the shadow of Bill Beauregard."

Through the sudden hush in the Canvas Palace came the full, mellow tones of Melody Toll singing "Annie Laurie." Jonathan Ellsworth's head remained bent as he listened. Dan, trying to focus his vision toward that limpid voice, suddenly saw Bill Beauregard come breaking through the crowd, in the wake of the burly Sledge Meagher. From some hidden reserve, Dan drew the strength to rise. Bracing himself with his left hand, he raised his wobbling pistol.

"Beauregard, you double-crossing son!" he called weakly.

His weapon weighed a ton. He

saw Sledge Meagher halt, brush Beauregard back and reach for his pistol. Then blackness was blotting out the figure. He heard Jonathan Ellsworth cry out, "Reardon, you drunken fool!" felt the gun struck from his failing hand. Then felt himself crashing to the floor.

Voices seemed to rise and fall as they swirled about him, quarrelsome voices. Into his half consciousness, came Beauregard's heavy voice.

"—and please learn not to interfere in my business, Mr. Ellsworth. In the guts, eh, and he's lived over it. Well, it won't be for long. He's as good as dead right this minute. The gully out back is running water, boys. Take him out and toss him in. There's too many of his kind committing murders around here."

Dan tried to cry out, but his spent faculties eluded him. He felt rough hands pick him up, knew he was being carried. The brief journey ended. Men counted, laughed and heaved. He had the sensation of falling, then shock ran through him and water was cold against his skin. He had a brief sensation of smothering and tried to struggle against it, but his beaten faculties failed to respond. There was a vast roaring in his ears, then all was blank.

## CHAPTER IV

### UNHEELED SCARS

**T**RAPPED in some dark, deep void of semioblivion, a thousand damning shapes swooped down to torment Dan Reardon. He fought and fought, until exhaustion left him easy prey. Shrieking Indians pursued him endlessly. A thousand times he tried to reach Santee Ponder, only to see that muzzle flame streak from the wet darkness, only to feel the crushing, numbing impact of the bullet in his vitals. And al-

ways he could hear his father crying weakly for help. Always he could see Bill Beauregard lurking in the background, grinning, taunting.

Then, strangely, the darkness of the pit was breaking. The light grew, dispelling all those tormenting shapes. For what seemed an æon, things spun dizzily before him; he felt himself whirled through space and then he was awake.

He lay in bed, in a comfortable room fanned by a soft spring breeze. Jonathan Ellsworth stood over him, looking down with eyes gaunt and harried. His face was gray and sweat beaded his brow. He gave a great sigh of relief as Dan's eyes opened.

"Awake, eh, Reardon? Man, but you've had me worried!"

He turned abruptly away, reeled to a window and filled his lungs with one draft of air after another. For some moments he remained there, staring out into the town. Then he turned to a table littered with bandage, unguents and medicines, picked up a bottle of whiskey and downed a long drink. He shuddered a little as he lowered the flask, then poured liquor into a glass and brought it to Dan's bedside.

"Swallow this," he ordered, holding the glass to Dan's lips. "You must have been mighty close to hell in the last four days. Maybe you'll like to wash the taste out of your mouth."

"Four days?" gasped Dan, when he had stopped gagging on the whiskey.

"And four nights," said the gambler wearily. "And not a wink of sleep have I had. I've sat in a game that long, but this—" He weaved dizzily, caught himself. Then his chin tipped down and his eyes closed. His legs buckled and he was snoring

softly as he measured his length on the floor.

"Four days," Dan murmured. "Four nights! Whee-ew!"

His mind went back to the affair at the Canvas Palace. Ellsworth must have pulled him from the creek, taken him to his own quarters, called a doctor and stood guard as nurse, all in defiance of Bill Beauregard, if the boss of Junction City ever learned of it.

Too weak to think deeply, Dan lay back and took stock of himself. He was out of pain and the itching of his wound hinted at satisfactory healing. From the beat of his pulse, he deduced that his fever had burned itself out. He dozed, woke again to find the gambler sleeping where he had dropped. The afternoon breeze was turning cool and Dan managed to loosen a blanket and drop it over the man's form. After that, spent by the slight effort, he was content to lie there listening to the roar of Junction City.

Engines puffed and shrieked. There was a constant tolling, where Casement's Irish workmen loaded or unloaded steel. Wagon wheels rumbled interminably as empty wagons came in and heavy loads moved out. Here was everything that Dan knew and none of it moved him until the breeze bore him the sudden *pop* of a teamster's bull whip. It cut through Dan's nerves like a knife stroke, drew him to one elbow with a wrench of his breath and a sharp, stabbing pain in his wound. It drew a strange, clammy sweat to the surface and set up a nervous chill.

He sank back on the pillow, amazed at his reaction to so simple a sound. He was trying to analyze his terror when the spiteful echoes of a pistol shot struck into the turmoil of the supply base. It turned him cold all over, drew a fearful cry

from his lips. Then he was sobbing, his head buried beneath the covers, frightened as he had never before been. And all on account of a distant gunshot.

For a long time Dan struggled for control, shuddering, chilling, sobbing convulsively. After a while he quieted, turned his thought to this strange thing that had happened to him. He was sick and weak, but what he felt went beyond that. He was afraid, horribly afraid of guns and the leaden missiles they threw. He, Dan Reardon, crack hunter for the advance crews of the Western Pacific, was suddenly gun shy. That was the deep scar left by the slug of the assassin that had ambushed him in the rainy darkness. And, somehow, Dan knew that scar would remain to devil him, even after his wasted strength came back, even after he found his feet and left this haven for the rigors of the greatest construction job the nation had ever known. He fell into a heavy, disturbed sleep.

**YELLOW** lamplight filled the room when Dan awoke again. And he knew, almost without looking, that Ellsworth was gone. He was alone. And the thought was terrifying. Here he was, weak and helpless, unguarded, and gunmen stalked Junction City who would slip in and shoot him if they learned. It threw him into another sweat. Perhaps Jonathan Ellsworth would get drunk and talk. Some one of Bill Beauregard's killers would come sneaking in and— He listened. Footfalls were approaching the door. Dan cried out in terror and buried his head. He was ashamed of his fear, but shame was no medicine for this unbelievable ailment, and he knew it.

But it was Ellsworth who threw

back the covers and took hold of him. Dan struggled.

"Stop it, you fool!" warned Ellsworth. "It's me. You've been dreaming. Look, Melody, he's covered with sweat and white as a ghost. We've brought you some strong soup. Come, straighten up and try to take it."

Dan relaxed weakly, noticing the girl for the first time. She was smiling at him, and Dan realized as he tore his glance away, that this new sickness had left him unable to meet the eyes of his fellow men. It was horrible. He lay back, eyes closed, and allowed the girl to feed him. And while he ate, Ellsworth talked.

"Looked for a while, Reardon, as if you wouldn't live. And, frankly, I envied you—"

"Jonathan!" scolded Melody.

He shrugged. "Why would a man want to fight back from the peace of eternal sleep for another go at this unbeatable game?"

"It was none of my doing," murmured Dan. "Thanks to you and to God, I'm alive and getting well, it seems."

"Thanking me and God, eh," said the gambler morosely. "Thank God if you will, my friend, but not me. You should, perhaps, damn me. I acted to drag you from the water and stand by you in my time of weakness. Forgive me, if you can."

Dan stared at him. "I . . . I don't understand you, Ellsworth."

"That's because we're as different as night from day, Reardon. You have courage, zest for living. I crave the peace that death brings, yet I am too cowardly to end this mockery."

"Hush, Jonathan!" Melody laid a hand on his arm. "Don't talk like that."

Dan marveled, never having seen a woman look at a man as she looked at Ellsworth. Nor had he ever seen



such bitterness, such despondency, as was mirrored in the gambler's face. There was something between these two, he told himself, something that must go unspoken, something enormous and terrible. And Dan felt a sudden moving kinship to this morose man who had saved his life. Just as a murderer's bullet had maimed Dan's body and stripped him of his most precious characteristic, so had something scalded the soul of Jonathan Ellsworth.

With the girl's grip on his arm and her eyes boring steadily into his, Ellsworth shrugged off his black mood, grinned and lit his pipe.

"By the way, Reardon," he said, in a changed voice. "I am supposed to have been ill for a few days. Bill Beaugard and all the rest think you're dead. Melody and I are all who know different, of all the Canvas Palace crowd. It will be better, perhaps, if you give them no reason to think otherwise."

"Meaning what?"

"I mean get it out of your head that you can buck that crowd. Others have tried it—and failed. You will, too. When you get up on your feet, hop a train and go some place in the East."

"You mean—run from them?"

"They fed you one bullet this time. That you've digested it will prove to them that you're tough. They'll feed you plenty next time, for good measure."

Dan felt the blood drain away from his face. A chill shuddered through his body. So keen was his suffering that he could feel those bullets smashing through his flesh and bone, even as the gambler spoke. "No!" he choked. "No, no!"

Ellsworth misunderstood. "I can understand how you feel, Reardon, about that business of running. If Lawson and any of his men ever gave

an inch, I never heard of it. It was their code to die first. And you're carrying that code along with you. But why? There you had a cause. Here you have—well, nothing more than a fool idea of crying vengeance for one who is happy out of it. Don't be a fool, Reardon. It won't make you a coward to walk out of this mess. The whole lousy business is as rotten as Beaugard, and he's the only one who can win."

"You're tiring him, Jonathan," warned the girl. "We'd better go."

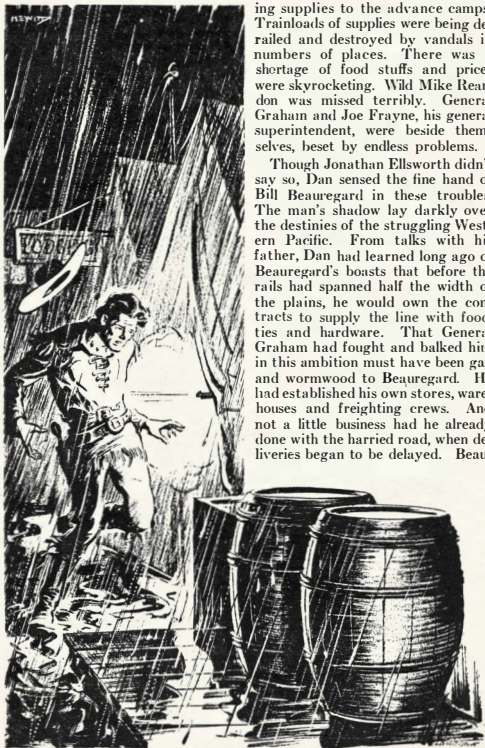
"You're right, Melody," said the gambler, picking up the tray. "You just do some thinking about what I've said. You can do as you choose, of course. But seven days from today, at this hour, you're leaving this room. The following morning, Bill Beaugard will know that you are alive—if I'm still alive myself."

Dan gasped. "You'll tell him that? Why?"

"Because I work for him, Reardon. Because I'm not like you—a brave man. I'm a coward. I lick his boots to keep my slimy place. Now good night to you. See you about dawn."

**T**HOSE seven days sped swiftly. Ellsworth and Melody saw that Dan wanted for nothing. The doctor called on him once each day, reporting favorably after each visit. He gained strength steadily and before the week was up, he was trying his legs.

Jonathan Ellsworth, in off moments, seemed to like to sit and talk with Dan. And the young plainsman learned of the movements in the great game being played from Junction City westward. Fresh crews were pouring in endlessly, from the East. Speed was the catchword. Indians were giving trouble, especially in stopping freight outfits haul-



*Without warning Dan Reardon was cut down by the assassin's lead!*

ing supplies to the advance camps. Trainloads of supplies were being derailed and destroyed by vandals in numbers of places. There was a shortage of food stuffs and prices were skyrocketing. Wild Mike Reardon was missed terribly. General Graham and Joe Frayne, his general superintendent, were beside themselves, beset by endless problems.

Though Jonathan Ellsworth didn't say so, Dan sensed the fine hand of Bill Beaugard in these troubles. The man's shadow lay darkly over the destinies of the struggling Western Pacific. From talks with his father, Dan had learned long ago of Beaugard's boasts that before the rails had spanned half the width of the plains, he would own the contracts to supply the line with food, ties and hardware. That General Graham had fought and balked him in this ambition must have been gall and wormwood to Beaugard. He had established his own stores, warehouses and freighting crews. And not a little business had he already done with the harried road, when deliveries began to be delayed. Beau-

regard was scamping the road, holding back progress, and with good reason. Every day of delay added its quota to his growing fortunes.

Dan shrugged. It was hell, but it was the business of someone who was paid to defeat Beauregard. He, Dan, had made one pass at the man and all it had earned him was a bullet in the guts and a taste of death. He would get away from it all. His pony and gear, he had learned, was waiting for him at the head of rails. Far to the west lay the Rocky Mountains and a good living following the tralines.

**D**AN was shaky on his legs, the night he said good-by to Melody Toll and walked with Jonathan Ellsworth to the yards, where a work train waited to make the run to the end of the line. For a moment they stood silently, staring at the flashing lanterns, at the hustle and bustle of feverish activity. The engine let loose a warning blast and the gambler's hand went out. Dan gripped it.

"Good-by, Ellsworth, an' thanks for everything. Somehow, I'll make it up to you."

"Good-by, Reardon. I'm glad I could be of help—" His eyes turned away from Dan's, widening with surprise and something more gripping. "What will you do now, Reardon? Go back to your hunting?"

Following the man's strange glance, Dan's breath was expelled by a violent reflex. Yonder, moving alongside the cars with the gunman, Ponder, at his flank, came Beauregard. And Dan was suddenly stricken with that old uncontrollable terror. Trembling all over, as if from an attack of malaria, he withdrew his hand from the gambler's clasp.

"N-no!" he stammered. "I'm quitting the road. Losin' myself in the

mountains with my traps. Well, good-by."

The gambler's face was a mask, but in his eyes Dan read a vast disappointment, a trace of scorn. Ellsworth knew now. Knew he was afraid, yellow!

"Luck to you, Reardon," Ellsworth said. He turned his back and headed toward town. And Dan ran to the passenger coach attached to the rear of the work train. Inside, he flung himself into a seat and huddled there, drenched with the sweat of terror lest Beauregard had spotted him and was sending Ponder to finish an uncompleted job.

## CHAPTER V

### SOLDIER'S DUTY

**B**ACK at the head of steel, Dan Reardon was welcomed by men sincerely glad to see him. But their welcome brought little comfort and no answering smile to his lips. Everywhere were the signs of violence. Casement's Irish track crews went to work with guns in their hands. The cohorts of Bill Beauregard still held forth in Rag City, playing their treacherous games, daring the world to interfere. Dan's old boss wanted him to take up his hunting, but Dan begged off, pleading the incapacity of his wound which still bothered him. He stayed close to the bunkhouse, somehow sensing their change toward him. These hearty men took courage as a matter of course, and measured a man by the sand in his craw.

Nights Dan struggled with bad dreams, with Beauregard's killers stalking him, with gun flashes lancing from the dark and lead crashing through his vitals. Once he woke up screaming, with sleep-drugged trackmen holding him in his bunk and trying to wake him. Days he



sat in shady spots, staring out along the trackway toward the distant mountains. Those heights, which he had always considered as a haven, seemed strangely changed now, repelling. And, miserably, Dan confessed to himself, that he was afraid of the Indians. Once he had laughed as he fought them. But now—

Yet even as he feared, Dan also chafed. Idleness irked him. And he could see the gradual slowing of the work. Food, rails, ties, men, all were failing to get to the front in satisfying quantities. Lines of communication were breaking down behind and wild tales filtered to the front camps of burned wagons, vanished teamsters, derailed trains and ravaged stores. A vague restlessness obsessed the brawny workers. The rumor persisted that Western Pacific was going broke, that the work was to be halted, abandoned. Crews demanded their pay at the end of each day's work and the nights saw them riding the empties back to Rag City to squander the money burning holes in their pockets.

For the dozenth time, Mick Mulvaney, the grading boss, came to Dan. He was drawn, worried, frowning.

"By the saints, me boy," he said, bluntly. "When are ye startin' yer huntin'? Ye look fit as a fiddle to me, as far as yer body's concerned. But somethin's eatin' at yer innards, Danny, loike a disease. What is it, me bucko?"

"I'm all right," growled Dan.

"Then, be jabbers, git out an' fetch me in some meat. Two more of me hunters quit today an' the rist ain't bringin' in enough. Come on, now, or are ye afraid?"

"I take that unkindly, Mick," protested Dan, without anger. "You saw me bring in the meat right under the lances of the Cheyennes."

"Sure an' I did, Danny. An' that's what worries me. The Danny Reardon I saw that day is not the lad I'm talkin' to. Devil a bit would that bucko stand by an' see me brave boys drawin' in their belts fer lack of meat. No, sir! What do ye say, Danny?"

DAN kept his face down, shaking his head miserably and fighting against the chill that froze his vitals. Mick Mulvaney spat, turned on his heel and strode away. Dan stared after his friend, stricken with shame—and anger. He was tempted for one brief moment to take after Mulvaney, spin him around and make him eat his insinuations. But he didn't move. It was hard, terribly hard, to prove the truth a lie. Yet, after minutes of thought, Dan knew he must take steps to beat this thing that held him in bonds. The longer he delayed the fight, the less sure he was of winning.

Goading himself, he went to the bunkhouse and got out his guns. He trembled as he lifted the pistol. How awkward it seemed, how deadly. And the heavy Sharps was worse. The muzzle described a circle as he threw it to his shoulder. Trying to catch the sights, he felt sweat break coldly over his body. He closed his eyes and groaned.

Dan fought the long fight in that deserted bunkhouse, the good fight. And, although he seemed to make small inroads upon his fear, he was able to whip his mind to the hardest judgment he had ever been forced to make. Death to him, and to his father before him, had been only the price of failure. Those two things were tied together like man and wife, and Dan hated them. Yet neither failure nor the death it brought, was as bad as cowardice and the scorn of one's fellow men. Failure was the

same everywhere. Death here at railhead was as absolute as death in the lonely mountains. The difference was the audience, the men he knew looking at him fail.

His mind made up that the battleground for him was in the Rockies, Dan took his guns and gear down to the corral and gave his pony a feed of grain. After supper, when the shades of night had been drawn, when the hostile redskins would be haunting their lodges rather than the war trails, he would pull out. Alone, in some high mountain meadow, he would battle his gun shyness and try to reclaim a little of the Dan Reardon he had once been.

The coming of night frightened him. He took no part in the rough and ready hilarity of the evening meal and ate little. Afterward, acting unconcerned, he moved toward the corrals. He had taken but a few steps when a group of horsemen, some of them straight-riding cavalymen, came posting by. Dust rose under the beat of hoofs. Dan shrank back, his nerves suddenly stung by a vital, familiar voice:

"Dan Reardon! By the Lord Harry, but this is luck!"

A horse reared and a stocky figure swinging from a saddle, came toward him. The riders reined down, and then General Graham came through the gloom to wring Dan's hand.

"Mighty glad to see you again, Reardon. And doubly glad to have caught you before you got away on another hunt. You're done with that, my boy. I need you at headquarters."

"Headquarters?" Dan gasped it, feeling the blood drain from his face. "You . . . you mean Junction City?"

"Junction City. You'll take over your father's job. I've tried several men but none came anywhere near

filling Wild Mike's shoes. We're lagging farther and farther behind all on account of the lack of a strong hand behind the supplies. It's trouble, boy, and a jog for a Reardon. Take the first train back and tell Joe Frayne that he's to show you the ropes. Keep food and materials moving up and this line will win from Midland Pacific. Otherwise we'll fail and—" He shrugged, shook Dan's hand again. "Good luck, Dan."

He turned back toward his horse. Dan, paralyzed with the thought of being again thrown across the path of Bill Beaugard, watched him go. Then, suddenly, he was leaping after him.

"General, wait!" His voice was shrill and his fingers sank desperately into the chief engineer's sleeve. "I cannot handle the job, sir. I'm a hunter and I know little else. Surely there is someone who can—"

General Graham laughed, slapped him on the back. "I understand your feelings, Dan. But, like a soldier, you'll stiffen under fire. All you'll need is a knowledge of what is required and how to accomplish it. I'll bet on Reardon drive for the rest. Yes, this is a duty assignment for a soldier, and I know what a fighter you are. Beaugard devils us continually. We can't get at the man and—"

"That's it!" broke in Dan. "That's what I mean. Beaugard and Ponder—they killed my dad. We'll cross and . . . and ther'll be a killing."

**G**ENERAL GRAHAM snapped his fingers. "If they point the finger at you, I know what the outcome will be. And it might be the best way out for us, at that. If they have the sense to let you alone, I think I know you well enough to believe you'll put any idea of personal

revenge behind the need of the Western Pacific. Now listen, here's a few leads for you to think over. Beauregard has been working with the Missouri Valley farmers and they're now refusing to deal with us direct. Pressure. You'll have to overcome that, somehow. Beauregard buys their stuff, skyrockets the price and we have to pay. It's breaking us. He's charging the tie cutters for protection against the Indians, and we pay the charge. Then there's the renegades posing as Indians and cutting our supply lines. It's all got to stop, and you are the man to tackle it."

Dan was trembling, murmuring over and over: "I don't know. I don't know." General Graham stared at him. And after a while he spoke reprovingly.

"Think of your father, Dan. He would have wanted you to step into his place. What father doesn't want that for his son? It was his greatest ambition to see this job finished. Damn it, man, millions of people have their eyes on us. The scoffers are beginning to take hope again, the stockholders beginning to lose it. Now get on back to Junction City and throw yourself into it!"

He rose to the saddle, gave a crisp word and led the way to the corrals. Dust settled slowly about the shaken young plainsman. "*Get back and throw yourself into it!*" The echoes of those words came back to him, stiffening him with their command. General Graham was a military officer, looking upon his army of workers as soldiers. And suddenly Dan saw this whole hectic business in a different light, as the advance of an army against the hostile forces of the wilderness. Indians would give way to farmers, buffalo to horned cattle, once the road was established. In his mind's eye, he saw dark fur-

rows turning the earth through the buffalo grass, wave on wave of green crops swaying in the breeze, pleasant farm homes lining the railroad, peaceful towns. He knew that was the dream that drove General Graham, Joe Frayne and the other courageous men who recognized no hazard tending to halt or retard the overland rails.

Dan's eyes turned westward and somehow, his urge to ride into the mountains had weakened. Behind him, he knew, he would leave the scorn of brave men and the memory of his own father, the laughing, fighting giant who had never feared man or devil, who would have gladly died rather than abandon a trust.

Almost without his knowledge, Dan was moving. He went to the corral fence for his gear, carried it to an empty car of the work train, even then steaming up for the run back to headquarters. He was sprawled in that car, his head on his saddle, staring westward to where the rising moon touched the faraway crests of the Rockies, when the train pulled out. He shivered a little as the thought came to him that he was probably looking at those wild heights for the last time. And was pleased that there was no recurrence of the panic, only a heavy resignation to a fate that seemed inescapable.

## CHAPTER VI

### CHALLENGE!

IT was an ordeal, Dan's return to Junction City. And he both blessed and damned the windy darkness as he made his way to the living quarters of dominant Joe Frayne, the general superintendent. The blackness made him inconspicuous among the many men moving hither and thither among the canvas buildings. But he had to acknowledge to him-



self his fear of deep spots of gloom that shut out the moonlight. It was from one such place that the shot had come, the shot that had snapped something inside him, that had made him something far less than a man.

Depositing his gear outside the lighted front of Joe Frayne's headquarters, Dan went in, waited his turn and was finally shown into the private office of the calm, substantial man who carried so much upon his shoulders and whose personality seemed to fill the room like a tangible force.

"Glad to see you, Reardon," Frayne boomed, crushing Dan's hand in a viselike grip. "Knew your father well and I've missed him more than I can tell you. General Graham has mentioned you often, during our recent set-backs, as the one to take over your father's work."

Dan eyed him gloomily. "That's quite an order for a . . . a hunter, ain't it, Mr. Frayne?"

Joe Frayne smiled. "The answer lies in you, young man. The job is yours and we're betting on the fact that you're a Reardon, son of Wild Mike. I'll sleep better tonight, I can assure you. Now about your duties. You know what you're up against?"

Dan cursed the heavy discomfort inside him. "I understand the trouble well enough," he said spiritlessly. "It's Beaugard."

"Beaugard," Frayne nodded solemnly. "And all his hellish crew. They've pretty well euchered us, at this writing. It'll be your job to out-guess Beaugard, outsmart him and outfight him if it comes down to that. Keep food and materials flowing to the front, and get them as cheaply as you can. Money is tightening up. Prices are rising. We've got to make a dollar go twice as far as before. The construction end is well organized for efficiency, but laborers

won't do a day's work on an empty belly. You mustn't make your father's mistake of thinking all men fight in the open. That cost Wild Mike his life. Your enemies, our enemies, will strike from the dark. They— Why what's wrong, Reardon? You sick?"

Dan clutched at the edge of the desk, knowing that the blood had drained from his face. There was a stabbing reminder of a bullet scar inside him and his stomach was threatening to turn over. "It . . . it's nothing," he stammered. "Just an old wound that gives me trouble. I'll be all right, I hope."

"I hope so, too, Reardon," Frayne said sympathetically. "I— mustn't keep you standing here, feeling like you do. This is my home and office, twenty-four hours a day. You can see me any time, just by sending in your name. Your office will be in the big warehouse, down the tracks. Comfortable living quarters behind. Turn in now and start fresh tomorrow. And make things hum, for we're way behind."

His hand came out. Dan gripped it and turned outside, glad to get away. He was sick and shaken, and the thought that Frayne might learn the reason for his sickness made him sicker yet.

Gulping great lungfuls of air, he plodded down the littered, humming yards, where lanterns flashed and men loaded supplies on waiting cars. Dan paused to watch the work, sensing a definite inertia that had not been there once. The workers, for the most part, were young, army-hardened and trained in discipline. The pick of the many, many thousands who had been tried. But now there was a dogged sullenness about them. Fewer recruits were coming up; each day more were quitting, going back east.

Off to Dan's left, a bunch of men answered the roaring brogue of an Irish bucko and dropped their burdens. There was a quick gathering about a protesting foreman. Voices uplifted angrily. Dan suddenly forgot the thing that gnawed at his insides, walked over. Picking up a lantern, he climbed to a pile of ties.



"All right, men!" he bawled. "Close your jaws and listen to me."

Startled, the men fell silent, staring. Then they seemed to shift into a half circle about him, tanned, brawny-fisted men possessed of tempers as uncertain as open powder. A voice from the rear sang out:

"What's on yer mind, me bucko? Spake yer piece."

"While you're loafing here," Dan's voice flayed them, "chewing the fat and shirking your job, men are going hungry out there on the line. Gangs are standing on their tools, waiting for ties and steel. You talk and the railroad stands still. Well, it's going to stop!"

"An' who says it is?" shouted one, over the sudden mutter of discontent. "An' who the hell are you, me foine-feathered dandy, to tell us what to do?"

"I'm your new boss!" answered Dan. "Son of Wild Mike Reardon. Know him, did you? I've got my orders from Frayne and General Graham, and I'm carrying them out if I have to fire every man in Junction City."

"Ye can start with me, bucko," came the brogue he had heard before.

"What's the use av runnin' good steel an' ties to the front to lay in the rain? The railroad ain't goin' much further, me bye; a man can see it with half an eye."

Dan peered, trying to pick out the speaker. Failing that, he spoke to them with acid contempt. "And I thought you were Irishmen—the pick of Casement Brothers' crews. It seems I was wrong. No Irishman would give up without a fight. The devil only knows what you are, but it must be something pretty low."

**A** ROAR of rage lifted as his barbed words sank home. Their heads turned to this man who had suggested defeat, and curses tainted the night air. And now the first Irishman was busting through them, his great legs churning. A hatless, red-maned giant, he planted himself before Dan. His mauling, freckled fists were jabbed belligerently into his sides. His great shaft of a neck was strained and his red face was contorted.

"Not Irish, eh?" he roared. "Well, maybe ye'd be playzed to tell Shamus McGarvey what he is, thin. Why I can smash yez between me thumb an' finger loike as if ye was a bug—"

"'Tis Wild Mike's whelp, Shamus," warned someone. "I can see it in him now. A splinter off the ould stump. An' Irish as Paddy's pig. Be the saints, we've a boss at last that's a fightin' man from the ould sod. No more o' these pencil-pushin' dandies."

Shamus grinned at the interruption and his blue eyes flashed. "So 'tis Danny Reardon ye'd be after bein', eh, bucko? Shur now, an' that puts a different face on it. The saints be praised. But ye're young, me bye, an' like a little child. The W. P.'s bucklin' in the middle, stag-

gerin' an' goin' down. Them that sticks with it will go down with 'er. Nobody but a crazy fool would go on with such a dead pig in the poke. It'll mean starvin' an' slavin' an' then whistlin' for our pay. None o' us are such fools, Danny bye. What do yez want us to tackle fer ye first?"

A great roar went up from the rest and all at once they were pommeling one another. Dan repressed his first real smile in weeks. He had heard his father speak of the feats of strength performed by the giant, Shamus McGarvey. The man was strong as a bull, but fickle as the wind. Mere thoughts to him were signals to action. He needed a strong hand to steady him, to direct his mighty powers.

When the demonstration quieted, Dan said, "Shamus, you'll be my yard boss here. And I'll be depending on you to keep the boy's working. Now get that train loaded and no jigging around about it. When she pulls out, come over to the warehouse to see me."

The big Irishman's roar almost blew him off his perch. "Be jabbers, Danny, an' ye ain't makin' no mistake." He turned on the men. "What ails yez, ye grinnin' jackasses? Didn't yez hear the lad? McGinnis! Murphy! O'Sullivan! Jump at it, ye spalpeens. Fly at it, or I'll knock yer empty heads together."

Dan climbed down and walked away, listening to Shamus bullying, praising, cursing and belittling, lashing his men to redoubled effort with his caustic brogue. All sullenness, all listlessness had vanished and Dan was warmed inside. It was good to know suddenly that he had allies to lean upon, fighters like McGarvey and the rest to stand with him against Bill Beaugard. But uneasiness walked with him toward the

warehouse. It was his name that had won them. To them, it meant the return of Wild Mike, whom they had loved. What if they should learn he was not made of the same stuff as Mike? Dan shivered. If he could only live up to the name his dad had left!

He was reaching out for a little of his old confidence when he climbed to the platform of the big warehouse and moved toward the lighted doorway of the office. Wondering what sort of man would be holding down the office night shift, he stepped into the untidy little room. And halted abruptly, his breath an audible catch in his throat. Sitting in the swivel chair, his shiny boots cocked jauntily upon the littered desk, was Long Henry Varco, Santee Ponder's running mate in the execution of Bill Beaugard's lawless orders.

Varco's head swiveled about. His eyes widened and an awed whisper came from his suddenly white lips. For a moment he sat there, staring at the man in the doorway. Then he was bouncing to his feet. Dan was trembling, fighting against a weakness that left him helpless. But, as the man came up, he did force his right hand to the butt of the pistol at his hip. Varco, recovering his wonted callousness, filled his lungs and gave a mocking laugh.

"Well, well, if it ain't Dan Reardon. Regular cat, ain't yuh? Nine lives an' everything. What fetches you here?"

Dan licked his lips, his gaze fixed on Varco's gun hand. "A job," he answered. "I've got a job to do here."

The cruel smile faded from the gaunt face. "Startin' it now, Reardon?"

"Starting it now, Varco."

The gunman's eyes were hooded. "I get it, feller. You wasn't satisfied



to get out o' here, through the devil's own kind of luck. You've gotta come back for—"

"For a finish fight with Beaugard, Varco," Dan broke in. "You can tell him I'm here to stay."

Varco laughed. "I'll say you are. Permanent. You'll be here when this town's forgotten."

"We'll see," said Dan. "What you doing in my office, Varco?"

"Your office?" The man lifted bushy black brows.

"Mine. I'm the new superintendent of supplies and I'm too busy to be bothered with your kind. Get out and stay out."

The gunman's grin was bleak. "So-o-o. Not startin' the 'old pay-off yet, eh, Reardon? Well, any time you feel lucky." His lank body shook with silent, taunting laughter. "Dan Reardon, superintendent of supplies. Won't that amuse Bill. Graham must sure be hard up to name a man to the supply depot that won't last no longer than you will."

DAN got a tighter grip on his screaming nerves. His face was dotted with beads of sweat, though it was cool in the office. "I'll last long enough to bust Beaugard and give you something to remember me by, Varco."

The gunman was tense, his lips furled back. "You won't last the night," he promised, swaying on his toes and angling his elbows. "Fact is, you're finished right now. Beaugard marked you for a cold grave, feller, an' that's what you get."

His right hand was flashing in the draw. And, try as he might, Dan couldn't force his own hand to match the lethal move. He read murder in those eyes, but terror held him in its iron grip. Not terror of dying, for in that moment death seemed swift release from the damning thing that

held him. But some unnamed terror, born of the bullet that seemed to have robbed him of his powers, his courage, his fight.

He saw the gun flash from its leather sheath beneath the man's long coat, braced himself for the shock of lead. Then, suddenly, he was shouldered violently aside and to the floor. Across his vision the bulky form of Shamus McGarvey seemed to float with incredible swiftness and the giant's roar filled the small room. With one swipe of his hairy paw, Shamus struck the lifting gun from the killer's hand. He caught Varco's two lapels in his steel fingers, drew the man toward him and struck—all in one vast explosion of muscular effort. Crash of flesh against flesh. Varco's head snapped back sickeningly. His hat flew off and he sank limply into the big Irishman's arms.

Holding the unconscious Varco in one arm, retrieving the hat with his free hand, Shamus jammed the top piece on the gunman's head, picked him up like a baby and carried him outside, without a look at Dan. From outside came a grunt, then the *clump* of a man's body on the soft earth of the roadbed. A moment later, Shamus came in, dusting off his hands, smoke belching from his small inverted pipe. Dan had come to his feet, weak and ashamed. But the straw boss seemed to notice nothing untoward in his behavior.

"The lousy varmint," he rumbled, grinning savagely. "The nerve of the loikes o' him, comin' in here an' drawin' a pistol on me boss. Divil a bit did he expect yez to talk up to him, me lad, afther the chinless bosses the've had here since yer ould man died. Nice wurrok, me bucko. 'Tis the way we'll build this road if it can be built. But watch that devil. He's one o' Beaugard's worst."

"I'll watch him," Dan said. "Now you get back to the job, Shamus. I've got to get some sleep, being up so short a time from a sick bed."

He watched the big Irishman leave, then went back to his sleeping quarters and to bed. The news of this happening, of his own return from the dead, would spread like wildfire through the ranks of Beauregard's henchmen. There would be furnished an added incentive for them to point their brutal talents toward him. As he fell asleep, Dan feared the coming of the morrow.

## CHAPTER VII

### GAUNTLET OF DEFIANCE

**A**FTER a troubled, feverish sleep, Dan awoke with the noises of a waking camp in his ears. He was sitting on the edge of his bunk, pulling on his boots, when the door crashed open and a man surged into the half gloom of the dawn-lit room. Dan came up, snatching his gun from its holster as he rose. He expected the worst and was surprised to make out a scowling, diminutive man with black, towled hair peeping wildly from under his battered hat. His face was like wrinkled leather, his pale eyes snapping as he stood braced on short, bandy legs.

"Shure an' I'm lookin' fer Danny Reardon," he announced belligerently.

"I'm Reardon."

The man eyed him up and down and Dan fancied he saw disappointment mirrored on the knife-blade face. The scowl deepened.

"McGarvey was after tellin' me about yez, bucko," he volunteered. "'Tis Paddy McGinnis, I am, an' 'tis me who bossed the day crew for yer father, Wild Mike, till the lily-fingered dandy who took this over

turned me out. I'm back fer me ould job."

Dan sighed his relief, studying the man. And he had the impression of looking upon a giant trapped in a small frame, a great spirit straining at its bonds. Regretfully, he shook his head.

"Sorry, Paddy, but there's a good man in charge of the day shift. I'll be glad to have you with me, and if the day boss don't handle things like I want them—"

"Sure, an' he won't, me bye. He'll be no good to you or the road. He's no damn good to himself."

"What's that?" Dan blinked. "Come again, Paddy."

"He's had a bad accident, Danny me bye," grinned the little Irishman. "He's broke up most awful bad an' sufferin' terrible."

"So?" Dan was not surprised. There were twenty-five thousand men on the line, most of whom worked with heavy materials, under the most hazardous conditions. "Well, in that case, you take over your old job, Paddy. And I'm glad to have you back."

"Thankin' you most kindly, sir." Paddy doffed his ragged hat, bowing courteously.

"What happened to the day boss?" asked Dan. "You were there when it happened?"

"He got run over, Danny," murmured the little Irishman. "Sure an' I was there, all right."

"Train run over him?" asked Dan, shocked.

"Naw, not so bad as that, me bucko. I'm the man that run over the lippy spalpeen, be jabbers. An' I'm the one who put yez short a boss."

"You . . . you beat that man so bad he can't work?"

"That I did, Danny. I had a fight to handle an' I handled it with a

pick handle. Whin I finished him, I threw him on a car an' started him east. He's somewhere between here an' the Missouri River now, bucko, an' I'm thinkin' he won't be back. Well, I must be after gettin' out to start the byes to wurk. See you later."

Dan stared after him, marveling. The day boss he knew as a big, hulking brute who got good results by driving methods. Half-pint Paddy had ruined him. The day crew would be in as good hands as the night gangs. Somehow comforted, Dan washed and went to breakfast in the mess tent. Later, sitting at his desk, he was confronted by orders, orders, orders. In the midst of his bewilderment, Paddy McGinnis came stalking in again. Dan handed him pleas from construction bosses for ties, for steel, fish plates and spikes. And there were peremptory demands from camp superintendents, mostly trained army men, who predicted disaster if food was not immediately forthcoming.

Paddy scrutinized the communications, wrinkling his snub nose. "Sure an' it'll take twenty-five trains to fill these, Danny," he remarked. "We've got five to sind out today."

"Take care of the food orders first," ordered Dan.

The little Irishman tossed the papers back onto the desk. "An' where will I be afther gettin' the food, bucko? There ain't enough in all the warehouses to fill half these orders."

"Buy it, Paddy. There's five hundred or more farmers' and traders' wagons at the edge of town and hundreds more due in today. Have them in here to see me."

"'Tis no good, Danny bye. The spalpeens won't deal with the road."

"They won't? Why not?"

"They're afraid. Beauregard has

offered 'em protection if they deal with him first. If they refuse, their stuff is dumped an' trampled underfoot. Your only chance is to buy from that devil—at his price."

Dan grimaced. He didn't need to be told what that price would be, to him. It would mean quick bankruptcy for the road. To interfere, would be to invite a quicker show-down with Beauregard and his killers. But the showdown would come, anyhow.

"Paddy," he said. "You ship out whatever you've got. I'll get those wagon men in here and try to make a deal with them. Even if it means offering counter protection by locking horns with Beauregard now. If it comes to a fight, I'll be looking to you and Shamus to stand behind me."

Paddy slapped him on the back. "In a pig's eye, me bucko. We'll be in front o' yez. Not a one o' the boys but wants to take a shillalah to Beauregard an' his divils." He bounced to the door, turned there to fling back: "*Any* of us would have gone to hell for yer father, Danny bye. An' we'll go to hell for you."

**T**HEN he was gone. But his promise to the son of Wild Mike, comforting as it was, could not overcome Dan's reaction to the thing that faced him. He sat there for some time, struggling to control the spasms of shuddering that racked his body, the weakness that ran through him in waves. And, as he fought against the torment, he tried to reason the thing out. There was nothing to fear, he told himself, nothing worse than death. He was not afraid to die; he knew that. He had faced death in many sudden forms, since he was a ten-year-old boy, without fearing it. No, it was something else. The assassin's bullet

had broken something inside him, something he must repair. General Graham and Joe Frayne were looking to him for leadership, and leaders cannot be cowardly and expect to inspire loyalty and courage in their men. There could be no rest for him, no surcease. He must get hold of himself, face the facts squarely and fight his way out of this hole.

He turned back to the reports, complaints, demands, lifting his head only when a shadow gloomed the door. Bill Beauregard stood framed in the portal, a brute of a man, powerfully muscled, thick-chested, beefy-faced, yet a pattern of elegance in his spotless fedora, black broadcloth and shiny Russian boots. A large, unlighted cigar was screwed into one corner of his mouth and a scornful smile lay on his lips. But his eyes were hard and savage as he stepped inside with a tread as light as a cat's and sat down in a chair.

Not once had his glance, direct as a bullet, left Dan's face. And the younger man had the sense of being read, down to the last of the terrifying qualms inside him. Beauregard seemed to fill the entire room and Dan groped for a defense against the terror of him. It didn't help any when he saw the unmoving shadow across the threshold that meant one or more of Beauregard's bodyguards lurked outside the door.

The boss of Junction City cleared his throat. "Been sick, eh, Reardon? Lead poisoning, somebody said. Bad stuff, lead poison."

Anger struck through Dan's fear. "Bad for one as for another," he retorted.

Beauregard laughed. "I get you, Reardon. And mostly you're right. But some men are immune. I'm like that." He bit off the end of his weed, spat it onto the floor. His voice grew

snappish. "You were a fool to come back here, my friend. How much warning do you need? I don't think you would have been here except for the help of some man. I think I know who that man is, and I shall settle with him in my own good time. But enough of that. You're here and in a position to do business. Play the game my way and you've got nothing to worry about. You need supplies; I've got them. Can we get together?"

Dan's lips curled. "At the thieving prices you've been asking, Beauregard?"

The man shook his head. "No. I've learned my lesson in the matter of prices. I've thrown my price schedule away. I'm happy to announce a new list, effective since you took over supplies. Everything has doubled."

Filled with a rage that seemed to beat impotently against this rock-hard figure, Dan forced his panic back into the remote corners of his being.

"It sure smells bad in here, Beauregard, since you entered. You won't mind my opening the window to air it out, after you leave."

Then, mustering all his courage, he dropped his head over the stack of papers before him. He didn't look at Beauregard again. He heard the man's low, animal snarl and the creak of the floor under his weight. From the door came Beauregard's voice, deadly with menace.

"You underestimate me, Reardon. I never make the same mistake twice. It's the secret of my success."

He was gone then and Dan reached a sweaty palm to touch his throbbing, feverish brow. His heart was pumping like a trip hammer and he was almost physically sick. Out in the yards a locomotive whistled,



drivers spun and a heavy train started westward. Paddy McGinnis came barging in.

"There she goes, Danny bye. Carryin' the last of the food except flour. Did yez do business with Beauregard?"

"I did not," snapped Dan. "And I won't."

"Good!" The little Irishman rubbed his palms raspily. "An' if he don't like it, I'll climb his frame. Now what about food for the boys at the front?"

"I'll tend to it," promised Dan, without enthusiasm. "You keep the construction stuff rolling up."

**P**ADDY nodded solemnly and went out. Dan rose and walked out into the hard, bright sunlight, filling his lungs in a vain attempt to lighten his misery. The yards were a becllam. A crew hammered away at an engine. Gangs of men like ants swarmed along the tracks, loading cars with steel and ties. Out yonder, where the busy town turned back the grass lands, smoke rose from tier on tier of covered wagons wheeled by the score from the Missouri Valley, as far east as St. Louis and as far north as the wild Dakotas. And beyond, stretching as far as the eye could reach, plumes of dust rose skyward to dim the early sun, wagons on the march, filled with supplies denied the road because of Beauregard's greed. Twenty-five thousand of them on the way, Joe Frayne had said. An army of farmers and traders, afraid to dare the rage of the boss of Junction City.

Railroad rates for shipping food-stuffs were high, and necessarily so, with all facilities choked with the flow of hardwood, tools and steel. Some trains of food had come forward, but more had been raided, the precious cargo destroyed. A small



minority of renegades were storing up the lifeblood of W. P., daring a vast army of workers to do anything about it. With the scars of one bloody war still unhealed, no one wanted more of war's terrors. But war it must be, Dan saw that clearly now.

A swift-striding, military figure came toward him now, through the mêlée of the yards. Joe Frayne, There was concern in his eyes as he looked Dan up and down.

"How goes it, Reardon?"

*Backed by his Irishmen Dan leaped in. This fight would make or break him—and the giant Meagher had crushed countless men!*



"Tough, Mr. Frayne. Foodstuff is running short. But I'll get more; I've got to get more. I'm going out to the wagons."

Frayne shook his head. "I'm afraid Beauregard's got a strangle hold of fear on the wagon men, Dan. You may only waste time. Of course, if you get in a pinch, feel free to pay Beauregard's stiff prices. But I've got several trainloads on the way, guarded by soldiers. If they get through—"

"Beauregard's doubled his price,"

WS—3B

Dan said bitterly. "A little compliment to me."

Frayne whistled. "That's bad." Then as he noticed Dan's pallor: "You look sick, Dan. I wouldn't neglect that wound, if I was you. Why don't you go over and see the company doctor?" He pointed, "That big tent yonder."

"I'll be all right, Mr. Frayne."

"Stubborn, eh? Then I make it an order, Dan. Get over there for a check-up, right now. We can't

afford to let you get down." Then in a softer tone: "I like the way you've taken hold, my boy. The way the crews are working reminds me of the days when your father was still with us. If we can just hang on, we'll come out of this. Now go do as I say."

An hour later, bared to the waist, his scar showing starkly against the whiteness of his skin, Dan heard the doctor's solemn judgement.

"The trouble is shock, Reardon," he was told. "The bullet passed between your heart and the ganglia of nerves behind your stomach. Both are diseased with shock. I have seen it in many boys, in the War. Full of courage and fight before a battle, scared sick and trembling when they left the hospital. You, too, are afraid, of what you cannot tell. But don't get to thinking you are a coward. What you need is rest, quiet and peace. Avoid excitement and you'll be well in about a year."

"And where will I find those things?" demanded Dan. "My job offers no peace or rest. And excitement is its middle name."

"Quit it."

"I can't," said Dan. "They're depending on me."

The doctor shrugged. "A man is a long time dead, Reardon. Your only chance is to follow my directions. If you insist on playing with fire, I can't guarantee your heart." He was writing a label for a bottle of yellow medicine. "Take this, per directions. But, more important, get on a train bound for the East."

Outside again, in the rush and roar of full-blooded Junction City, Dan walked slowly back to his office. Rest! Peace! Quiet! He laughed scornfully. Those things alone would kill him. Excitement! It seemed to fill the air along the line. He recalled General Graham's words: "Get back

to Junction City and throw yourself into the fight." And Joe Frayne's: "—it'll be your job to outguess Beauguard, outsmart him and outfight him, if it comes to that." They were depending on him. He couldn't let them down, heart or no heart.

## CHAPTER VIII

### TO THE BITTER END

**S**TRENGTHENED rather than otherwise, more fatalistic than before, Dan made a list of his needs, set up a scale of prices that seemed a fair average of what the road had been paying and set out for the wagon encampments. First of all, he accosted a young farmer who lolled dejectedly against the wheel of his wagon.

"What have you to sell?" Dan demanded.

The fellow stared at him sullenly. "Fifteen hundred pounds of cured meat. Ham and bacon. Looks like I'll have to give it away after killing stock an' daring Injuns to fetch it here. A nice how-de-do."

Other wagon men were moving over to listen. "What have you been offered?" Dan asked.

The farmer mentioned Beauguard and named a price so low as to be ridiculous. A few of the others chimed in, cursing their foolishness, in joining a rush that rivaled the gold stampede, twenty years before.

To the young farmer, Dan said, "Drive over to the railroad warehouse and unload. I'll double the offer. And"—facing the rapidly growing crowd—"the offer holds for the rest of you."

"Who . . . who are you?" demanded one.

"I'm the superintendent of supply. Dan Reardon."

They seemed to shrink from him.

"Not much," said one man. "I ain't sellin' to the railroad."

"Why not?"

"I've had my warnings an' I ain't stickin' out my neck to the ax. Bill Purdy—he come from Iowa with me—herefused to take anything offa them Beauguard men. An' look what happened to him. They jumped him one evenin', burned his wagon an' smeared his meat with coal tar. We . . . we buried him next mornin'."

"What you going to do?" demanded Dan, knowing their fear because he knew his own. "Here's your stuff. Beauguard's warehouses are filled and standing still because we won't pay his thieving price. You going to carry it back home?"

"I'll dump mine first," the young farmer declared bitterly. "The railroad's no good. If they want our stuff, why don't they stand behind us? Why don't they clean out the nest of crooks that take orders from this Beauguard?"

"That's just what it's come to," Dan said moodily. "The road has had plenty to worry about that you boys wouldn't understand. Raising money, fighting Indians up ahead, dealing with dust storms, floods and labor troubles. Meeting troubles as they arose. Now the trouble is food, and they'll meet that, too. I give you my promise that if Beauguard interferes with your attempts to dispose of your stuff at a fair price, I'll deal with him, with all the power of a great company. Lay your goods on my loading platforms and if Beauguard molests you, we'll finish him. What do you say?"

For some time they weighed his promise, looking from one to another as if to gather courage, shuffling their feet in their rough farmer boots. After a while the young farmer flashed a hard grin, drove his big fist

into his open palm with a resounding smack.

"By the lord, Reardon," he cried. "I'll throw in with you. This is a free country an' we've the right to sell out where we can, an' at the best figger. But if you let me down, I'll spend the rest of my days warnin' farmers of what they can expect out here."

"If I let you down," Dan said fiercely, "it'll be because I'm dead." He whirled on the rest of them. "How about the rest of you? You want to haul your stuff back to the farms?"

"Come on in, Abe," the young farmer begged one of his friends. "A gamble is all we've got left now. The road's offerin' a fair price an' my folks need the money. Come on, boys. Let's get our feet wet."

His plea turned the tide of their indecision. With no particular enthusiasm and with muttered agreement to "try it this once," they scattered to inspan their animals. Word ran like wildfire through the lines of wagons. A scene of hopeless apathy suddenly became a beehive of activity. Well pleased, and hardly daring to believe it would happen, Dan hurried back to the yards, smiling grimly as he saw a man running toward the Canvas Palace to report this latest railroad move to Beauguard.

**F**OR hours, lines of wagons moved slowly past the loading platforms. Dan got word to Joe Frayne, who came over with his paymasters to give the farmers and traders crisp, clean currency for their produce. Paddy McGinnis, seemingly everywhere at once, bawled orders that speeded the loading of the badly needed supplies. Weighers, checkers inspectors, laborers, all toiled feverishly until the sun went down, until



the chill of evening crept over Junction City and the bell rang the supper hour.

Through it all, Dan stood where he could watch the hectic activity, prey to mixed emotions, satisfaction that food would once again be rolling westward, fear of the new responsibility he had undertaken, grim determination to see the thing all the way through. That he would pay for this afternoon's work with his life he accepted, as the farmers had accepted his price. That, somehow, didn't seem to matter. It was a gnawing uncertainty that dragged on him, a failure to visualize just how Beauregard would strike at him. Such was the nightmare that brought back the flash of a gun through the rainy night, the crushing impact of a bullet and strength pouring out of him like sugar from a torn sack.

Dan went to supper with the rest, but the icy ball in his stomach would not let him eat. Night had fallen when he left the mess hall and went outside to smoke. He was nervous as a rabbit, restless as the prairie wind that moaned about the eaves. The wagons were still unloading, though the line had shortened and the end of a hard day was nearing its end. Dan could hear Shamus McGarvey bawling at his men, speeding the loading of the waiting cars. But his mind was on whatever was happening inside the Canvas Palace. The place gave no outward sign of anything out of the way, but death was being plotted under that big top, and Dan knew it.

Troubled, he went back to his office. Hardly had he seated himself when the low mutter of men's talk, the growing echoes of determined footsteps stiffened him. The platform trembled to the heavy tread of men who suddenly appeared at the door. Dan stood up, white-

faced, his hand on his gun. But these were farmers, scowling, homespun-clad and filled with a volcanic rage. Brown, bitter men who bore in their midst the limp form of one who had been beaten to death, or close to it. Glaring at him, they laid their pathetic burden on Dan's desk.

"There you are, Reardon!" snarled one. "All that's left of poor Pete Sackett. Here's the thing you promised wouldn't happen, that the power of the W. P. would prevent. Here's the boy you won over with your smooth talk, the boy that begged us to trust you. What you doin' about it?"

"Who did it?" asked Dan, and it was an effort to keep his voice from trembling.

"How the hell do we know?" demanded a tow-headed giant. "If we knowed, we'd take care of it ourselves. Personal, I've a mind to take it out of your hide—"

"I wouldn't try that, me bucko," came a rich brogue, and Paddy McGinnis shouldered through the crush with a handful of Irish laborers. "Now what's aafter happenin' in here?"

"Paddy," Dan said sorrowfully, "this is the boy responsible for getting the farmers to sell to us. I promised him faithfully that if Beauregard made trouble, I'd settle with him. I'm going over to the Palace. I want you and the boys to come along to watch my back."

"Be gorra, an' that I will, Danny me bye. Sweeney, go out an' tell the gang to grab their pick handles an' stand by." But Paddy looked worried. "Danny, ye can't clean up on the whole devil outfit. What are ye goin' to do?"

"Nobody saw this happen?" asked Dan, ignoring a question he couldn't answer.

"Ay bane hear it," said a tower-

ing Swede. "Ay bane sitting by my wagon ven Ay hear dem hit him. Ay rush over, find Pete like dis and his horses rip open vid a knife. Ay see only von man going away—a big, strapping feller, bigger'n me."

"Know him if you saw him again?" Dan demanded.

"Yah. Ay t'ank so."

"You come with me to point him out. The rest of you wagon men go back to your camps. No use of you taking any more punishment. Come on, Paddy. The rest of you take Pete over to the doctor."

HE walked outside, his blood hammering at his throat. But the weakness was gone and from some remote corner of his being he drew a force that, for the moment at least, allayed the terror. By the light of guttering lanterns, Dan saw the sea of Irish faces staring up at him, their eyes bright.

"A new bunch, Danny," said Paddy. "Just come in from General Casement's recruitin' office in Omaha. They're hungry for raw meat, me bucko, an' shp'ilin' for a fight."

"Don't be too sure you'll get it," Dan told them. "I only want you there to protect my back. Come on, Olson."

With the glowering Swede at his side and more than a score of fighting Irishmen at his back, Dan strode across the yards and crossed the street to the entrance to the Canvas Palace. Men paused on the walks to stare, and the word flashed out that there was trouble. And throughout that brief march, it seemed to Dan that he was disembodied, hovering above himself and seeing the movements, the gestures of every man in that mob. It was dreamlike and unreal. But the hunting terror was squeezed down

into some guarded corner of his insides, struggling vainly against the rage that drove him. His heart thundered in his breast and he prayed silently that the pump would not fail him until he had done his work.

Dan was the first to smash through the door of the Canvas Palace. It was the first time he had been inside the place since that night he had reeled in with Santee Ponder's bullet gnawing at his vitals. The saloon was jammed with roistering men, who fell silent to stare at the invaders streaming through the door. Men whirled from the long bar. Gamblers rose from their seats, their cards forgotten.

BILL BEAUREGARD stood at the bar end, flanked by Ponder and the towering bouncer, Sledge Meagher. At their various stations among the games were Long Henry Varco, his face cut and bruised from Shamus McGarvey's big fists, and Beauregard's other gunmen and bodyguards. The place reeked with sudden hostility, but Dan Reardon gritted his teeth and plowed through, Shamus and Paddy siding him beligerently, the fighting Irish yard men coursing behind with savage grins. A few yards away, Dan paused to face the boss of Junction City. Beauregard swung a pudgy hand toward the bar.

"Hello, Reardon. Welcome to the Palace! Line your men up to the bar. The drinks are on the house."

Dan shook his head. "We're particular who we drink with, Beauregard. We drink with our friends, and you're no friend of ours, or of any decent man."

Beauregard flushed and the hawk-faced Ponder stepped quickly to one side. There was an instant fanning out of Dan's Irish fighters, a low rumble in many throats and a doub-

ling of fists. Dan felt cold all over, and he still had that sense of being detached. But every nerve was in its place and he could still command his faculties. He flung a swift glance at the big Swede.

"All right, Olson," he said. "See if you can point out the one you saw leaving Pete Sackett's wagon."

The man didn't hesitate a moment. "Yah, sure," he said fiercely. "Ay bane looking at him now. Dat fallar!"

He pointed at Sledge Meagher, the biggest of all the men who took orders from Beauregard. The bouncer, who had handled some of the toughest fighters among the shifting army of Casement's brawny laborers, let a low roar erupt from his chest.

"He's a lyin' son of a dog. What is this?"

"Step out, Meagher!" ordered Dan, and there was a huskiness to his voice. "We go to the mat, you an' me. No holds barred. I'm paying you off for beating that farmer."

"What, with all those men behind you?" taunted Beauregard. "I'll never let that happen, Reardon. You're crazy if you think—"

"My men have orders not to lay a hand on him," Dan broke in. "Unless you or any of your spawn try to interfere. Come out, Meagher."

"Fair enough, Sledge," said Beauregard, grinning. "You can bust him with one hand. We'll drop the man that tries to keep him from being killed. Go on."

The bouncer laughed, stripped off his coat. "Good!" he bellowed. "Peel yer bark, bucko. I'll mop this floor with ye."

A ring was formed, Dan's Irishmen making a circle by gripping each the pick handle of the man to his right. Dan removed his coat and gun, handed them to Paddy McGinnis.

And then, moving slowly toward the shuffling giant, he let his eyes run around the massed spectators. And thus, sitting at a table across the room, he saw the one man in all that great hall who was apparently uninterested in the fight that was about to begin—Captain Jonathan Ellsworth!

## CHAPTER IX

### TOOTH AND TOENAIL

MEAGHER'S rush brought Dan back to reality. He swung his head, bracing himself. Superimposed before the giant's terrifying figure, were filmy pictures of this man in action, of men's brave stands against him, of bloody, beaten hulks dragged away from his savagery. But Dan saw, too, the pitifully broken young farmer, who had sacrificed himself. That steadied him.

Dan ducked away from that first rush and Meagher's powerful arms whistled harmlessly over his head. Then as the giant reeled, off balance, Dan struck him behind the ear, knocking him down. A great, glad cry welled from the Irish yard men, profane applause and blasphemous encouragement.

The look Meagher flung Dan from the floor stirred loose a little of the old fear. But now most of his worry was that his pounding heart might not last to the end of a struggle he knew was only started. Meagher was coming up slowly, measuring his man. Silence fell. And through it struck the cruel smash of a pick-handle against flesh and bone. And Shamus McGarvey's howl:

"No ye don't, ye spalpeen. I'll kill the next bucko that tries to stab Danny Reardon in the back."

Dan's eyes flicked to the interruption. And Meagher leaped—and struck. Dan saw the huge fist coming, tried to ward it off. As well try

to ward off a locomotive. He did ride with the blow, however, else it would have taken his head off. As it was, it drove him through the air, smashed him into the ring of Irishmen and dumped him on the floor.

With a roar, Sledge Meagher came following it, took off and came down with his great boots poised. Dan rolled, seeing the giant only in fuzzy outlines edged with dancing red streaks. There was a dull roaring in his ears, partly from inside his stunned head, partly from the throats of the partisans. Over and over, Dan rolled, with Sledge hopping along behind him, swinging his heavy boot. One of those kicks landed on Dan's hip, sending waves of pain along his side. But it caught Sledge, too. Dan reached for the offending boot, tugged and dumped the giant on his back.

"The boots! The boots!" The yelling of the Irishmen filled the tent as Dan came bouncing up. But Dan backed away, instead. He wanted no boots. That wasn't his way of fighting.

Sledge rolled and came up, cursing bitterly. Something seemed to snap in Dan's mind and, for the first time since he had been wounded in that rainy darkness, he felt like the Dan Reardon who had once hunted for the W. P. He launched himself at the charging bouncer. They crashed together, raining punches, and fell, together. Meagher pounced on his lighter adversary, his fingers hooked as he gouged at Dan's eyes, fending off blows with his elbows, holding Dan down with his weight. Dan lashed out with his flexed legs, heaved the giant off him. Then he rolled after the man, driving breath from his lungs with a full arm swing and hurling himself atop him. Instantly Sledge's arms were about him, like mighty constructors, pull-

ing him in too close for action—squeezing—squeezing!

With that awful pressure robbing him of breath, Dan worked one hand free and up to Meagher's eyes. The man's teeth snapped, fastening on Dan's thumb. And Sledge might have bitten the member off save that Dan, defensively, sank his own teeth savagely into the giant's throat.

Meagher bawled and Dan snatched his thumb free. Then the bouncer had heaved him yards away and both men were coming up. They circled, with the bedlam of a thousand voices dinning their ears. Dan looked short, puny and altogether outmatched. But the giant had tasted of his opponent's strength and was wary about closing.

Dan fainted, and drove his right into Sledge's mouth. Then he ducked a retaliatory swing. His heart was pounding, pounding, and his breath was jerky and fast. Sledge was spewing blood and curses as he roared in, but Dan tied him up, whipping in heavy punches that made the bigger man grunt and give ground. Dan failed to slip one of the man's pawing punches, went down and bounced up at once. But he was hurt, and showed it. He gave backward, Sledge after him, raining in blows. Some of them landed and some missed, but through it all, Dan had only the haziest notion of what was happening. Had Sledge possessed the simplest knowledge of the science of boxing, he would have ended the fight then and there. But he could not catch his man.

**S**LOWLY Dan's vision cleared. There was a slow pain in his middle that reminded him of his wound, without bringing up pictures of an assassin's gun flash, without reviving the old terror. But the action of his breath did remind him of the doc-

tor's warning. "If you insist upon playing with fire, I can't guarantee your heart." The heart was acting up now, and panic hit Dan. He had to finish this before the organ quit altogether.

Like a maniac, he tore into Meagher, ripping short rights and lefts into the roll of fat at the giant's belt. Meagher gave ground, showing that this was his vulnerable point of attack. Dan feinted his hands down, then sledged in a blow that exploded like giant powder on the man's jaw. Meagher went down, his head bouncing on the rough pine floor.

Dan stood over him, wiping sweat and blood from his brows. Pandemonium reigned all about. For the first time in the history of these rag cities, Sledge Meagher was getting licked. And by a man a half head shorter and fifty pounds lighter than himself. Paddy McGinnis was screaming:

"Give him the boot, me bye! Kill 'im."

But Dan fought his own fight. He waited till Sledge came writhing up, then smashed him down again. Up and down. Up and down. Dan could stand up to the giant now, in the knowledge that he had the most power, despite his dogging weariness. Air wheezed from their lungs as they traded blows. Why didn't Sledge stay down, Dan asked himself wearily. And from somewhere a voice kept telling him to fight, fight!

The salty taste of blood and sweat was in his mouth. He could hear his own sobs, curses, challenges, without having the sense of speaking them. Meagher got up more slowly now, and Dan was worrying the Irishmen by giving him time. The bouncer was blind, floundering, and Dan was little better. He heard the man go down and saw the image of the bloody, beaten hulk fade from

his vision. Then strong hands were seizing him. A mighty, triumphant roar beat in his ears and he was choking on the pungent fire of whiskey. It restored his vision, eased the agony in his pounded body.

He stood at the bar, lined now with the hilarious Irishmen. Big Shamus had an arm around him and was beating the bar for service. Paddy was soaking a rag in whiskey, dabbing at Dan's cuts.

"What a fighter ye are, me bucko!" he enthused. "Ye nearly killed the big varmint. Ye beat the heart right out of his carcass an', if I know his stripe, he'll never lift his bloody dukes again. Where's that whiskey, Beauregard, or shall we take yer place apart to get it?"

The boss of rag city nodded from his place at the bar end. Bottles and glasses were set out and the Irish drank to victory. Cool and unmoved, Bill Beauregard walked behind the bar, pausing to face Dan.

"You're a better man than I thought, Reardon. What now?"

Dan gulped his drink. "That's just a one-man sample, Beauregard," he warned. "Get in the way of the road again and you'll think a train hit you. The W. P. is going through, my friend, and you're not big enough to stand against it. Don't try unless you want fight. The boys want to drink. It's on you."

Beauregard smiled. "Sure," he conceded. He snapped an order to the bartenders and walked away.

The Irishmen knocked the corks out of the bottles and waved them high. Dan turned, focusing his eyes on that lone man still playing solitaire as if nothing had happened. To Paddy, Dan said: "Take a bottle to my friend, Ellsworth." He pointed, and Paddy walked over to Ellsworth's table.

The gambler took the bottle with a



surprised look around. His eyes met Dan's across the interval. He waved his hand, flashed a weary smile, lifted the bottle in a silent toast and let the raw liquor run down his throat. Dan acknowledged by drinking, then glanced at Beauregard. The boss of the Canvas Palace had witnessed it all. He was glowering, champing on the unlighted cigar in his teeth.

**T**HE restless Irishmen were ready for more excitement than the saloon could provide. Someone ordered the retreat. Bottles in one hand, pick handles in the other, they roared from the Canvas Palace. And Dan went with them, his body one vast ache, his legs wobbly as the two Irish straw bosses supported him.

"Get me down to the office," he mumbled, when they were out in the night air. "A bed will look better to me than anything else, right now."

"Faith an' 'tis the best place for ye," rumbled Shamus.

They were crossing the street now and, as had happened to Dan before, there was a figure in the shadow of a tent wall before them.

"Well, Reardon!" a rasping voice challenged.

The three of them plowed to a halt, staring. Dan, blinking the red fog from his eyes, made out the tall, thin form, the sharp face of Santee Ponder, Beauregard's ace killer. He saw the glitter of the leveled gun and felt the cold breath of death against his cheek. Save for the pick handles they carried, Shamus and Paddy were unarmed. Paddy still carried Dan's coat and his gun belt across his arm, almost out of Dan's reach. In sudden rage, Dan cried:

"Shoot, Ponder, you damned bushwhacker!"

And he made a frantic grab for the jutting butt of his pistol. He heard Ponder's ugly chuckle as his fingers

wrapped the butt of the piece. He snatched it from its leather and was swinging it when the air shuddered with gun concussion. But the bullet didn't plow its way through him as it had done once before.



Paddy had released him, dropped the coat and belt and was charging the assassin with his pick handle poised. Shamus still held Dan, cursing savage Irish oaths. Then both the Irishmen were silent as a gun continued to speak, the echoes smashing along the tent fronts and running out into the prairie.

Ponder's weapon dropped. He took two stumbling steps forward and pitched full length across the walk. And then, before the wondering eyes of the three witnesses, a man came out of the shadows and strode up to them. It was the gambler, Jonathan Ellsworth!

## CHAPTER X

### CLOUDS OF TREACHERY

**E**LLSWORTH came to a halt before Dan, his face working, a look of bitterness in his eyes. He waited for Dan to speak.

"Thanks, captain," Dan said weakly. "I'm twice in your debt."

The gambler finished reloading his pistol, holstered it. Then his head snapped up. "Damn you to hell Reardon. I don't know why I go out of my way to mess with you, or why I didn't let the flood have you. If Beaugard learns the truth about this, I'm finished at the Palace. And Melody—" His face darkened. "If that devil harms her, I'll—"

Seething with a rage he seemed unable to express, he turned on his heel like a soldier, and lost himself in the crowd radiating to the scene of the shooting.

"There's an odd one, Danny me bye," murmured Shamus. "What did he mean—Melody?"

Dan didn't answer. For the first time he had plumbed the love of that strange, chill man for the lovely singer of the Canvas Palace. So Beaugard's eyes had fallen upon the girl and Dan could think no further. He felt himself sinking and thought of the doctor's warning again. Everything went black as he clutched at Shamus.

When Dan awoke next morning, it was to find his sleeping quarters choked with men. Shamus McGarvey was there. General Graham stood at the foot of the bed, a uniformed orderly and bodyguard behind him. Joe Frayne and two of his trouble shooters stood just inside the door. The doctor hovered over Dan.

Dan stared, rallied and came stiffly to his elbow. He tried to grin away the agony in his battered body.

"Lie quiet there, man," snapped the medico. "You came close to killing yourself as it was. I don't know why you're still alive. Take it easy."

Dan lay back on the pillow, a tight little laugh on his lips. "Don't worry about me, doc. A good stiff scrap was the medicine I needed.

That fright is gone—forever. When I get up out of this, I'll give Beaugard all the fight he wants, and more."

"You may not realize it, Reardon," General Graham spoke up. "But last night's fracas did more to put us over the hump than all our financiers and engineers lumped together. What I can't understand is why you didn't finish the job. Why didn't you pull the Palace down around Beaugard's ears?"

Dan shook his head. "Look at it this way, general. The Palace is not at fault in a strict sense—"

"It's one of a dozen sink holes of hell that has balked us and slowed us all along the line," the general pointed out bitterly.

"True. But these hearty, hard-working men you have working for you need such a place. It's relaxation. If we tear it down, Beaugard will only build another and slow you up even more with damage suits. What's more, as long as the Palace runs, we know where to put our hands on the ones at fault, like I did last night."

Frayne and the general swapped glances, nodding at the wisdom of the words. Graham beamed upon Dan. "That's a view I've never taken of it, Reardon. And it gives me even more confidence in you. You've given the wagon men courage and confidence that we will not let them down. The word has gone out and a steady line of wagons are unloading at our platforms. Now you lie in and mend. If you need anything, just let us know. And thanks again."

**F**OR two days, Dan remained in his bed, thankful for the rest. Paddy and Shamus visited him every few hours, catering to his wants with as much pride as if he were their

champion. Things, they reported, were going well. Flour and other staples were rolling in on the cars, unimpeded. Beaugard was still buying from some of the wagon men, but the majority came direct to the railroad warehouses. Up ahead, the track layers were matching the records of the Midland Pacific as the two roads rapidly approached one another. Staging a mad race for the valuable land grants paralleling the tracks.

Dan was about ready to get up, the morning of the third day, when Paddy came bounding into the room, his face red with rage.

"Hell's brewin', Danny bye," he exploded. "The wagons have stopped comin', be jabbers. Beaugard's payin' double what they've been gettin' from us. Now what?"

"Double?" Dan quit the bed and hurried into his clothes. This was something to worry about. The boss of the rag city was pitting his easy profits, taken from the workers, against the weakened finances of the struggling road. The worst of it was, he had that right.

Still far from steady on his feet, Dan went out to the wagon camps and talked to the farmers. "Money talks," they told him. "No, Beaugard ain't puttin' no squeeze onto us. He's just upped the price, that's all. You up it again an' we'll sell to you. Our folks back home need the money."

All along the line it was the same. And Dan's hopes fled. The railroad couldn't afford such prices. Back at the telegraph office, he wired brokers in Omaha and Chicago. The answers came back. Prices were not up. But it would take weeks to lay big orders down at Junction City. Within twenty-four hours pleas would be rolling in from the front. Food! Food! It was the lifeblood of the

road. Racking his brain for an answer, Dan was sitting at his desk that afternoon when Bill Beaugard walked in. The man was smiling, affable.

"Keep your seat, Reardon. I'm here on a peaceable call. We can do some business together."

"Not with what you've got in your mind, Beaugard. I thought you said you never made the same mistake twice."

"I don't, Reardon, and that's what fetches me here. I tried bucking you and I failed. I've spent a lot of money. The road isn't buying the stuff in my warehouses and I stand to go broke. I'm quitting."

"Quitting?" Dan looked at him suspiciously. He couldn't believe his ears. "Now, what?"

"We can deal as friends, Reardon. I'll sit in your game—on your terms."

"What do you mean, Beaugard?"

"I've overreached myself. I've got agents buying the wagon stuff as far east as Kearney. And no buyers. In two months or less, the two roads will join and the game will be up. What will you offer for my supplies?"

"How much have you got on hand?"

Smiling, Beaugard produced a sheaf of papers. Dan ran his eyes down the inventory, against which were set prices that were about half what he had been paying. He whistled, raised questioning eyes. Beaugard nodded.

"It's yours at those prices, Reardon. I might say there are gents here who are trying to form a pool to buy me out. You'll have to move fast and I'll have to have the full amount—in cash."

Dan looked at the total. "That's lots of money, Beaugard. I'll need time."

"Half an hour," said Beaugard, rising. "You'll find me at the Palace."

**H**ARDLY able to realize he wasn't dreaming, Dan clapped on his hat when the man was gone and went to find Frayne. He found that the superintendent was with General Graham, at the front. That left the paymaster. That official heard him out with a bored air.

"To put out that much cash will cripple us, Reardon. Especially with financial conditions the way they are in the East. I'm sorry."

For a good part of that precious half hour, Dan bullied the man. And in the end his pressure got results. "All right, Reardon," the paymaster finally yielded. "I wouldn't do this except that the general told me to co-operate with you in every possible way. The responsibility is yours. I hope you know what you're doing."

The warrant was drawn and Dan hurried over to the Palace. Beaugard was waiting. "Good work," he grinned. He marked the invoice and wrote out an order on his warehouse boss. "Pull your wagons over and start loading."

Dan pocketed the papers and went to find Paddy. He felt buoyed with the victory and more like himself. But he was only allowed the time it took to reach his office to indulge his satisfaction. Paddy came roaring in after him, his hair tousled, his eyes blazing.

"Faith, didn't ye tell me ye'd bought Beaugard out?" he exploded.

"Sure, I did. What's wrong?"

"They loaded a bit of a wagon," roared the excited little Irishman, "an' told me it was all I'd get. An' whin I stood up for me rights, they ganged on me, the spalpeens!"

"Who did?"

"Fifty o' Beaugard's devils, blast their souls. Armed with rifles, too."

"Beaugard's forgotten to send word," Dan told him confidently. "Come, fetch men and wagons. We'll get our stuff."

Paddy, darted outside, barking orders, while Dan went over to see the paymaster, hoping to dispel a lurking suspicion. Yes, Beaugard had cashed the warrant and had his money. Dan didn't tarry to explain his inquiry. Instead, he hurried over to Beaugard's main warehouse where he found the smirking rag-city boss and a crowd of his men.

"What's up, Reardon?" Beaugard asked.

Dan tore his eyes from the armed, loitering men, saw the scorn in Beaugard's eyes. "Why can't McGinnis get the stuff I bought?" he asked quietly.

"He's got it, Reardon, all the deal calls for. One wagon load."

Dan gasped. "That's a lie, Beaugard! I bought it all, and you know it."

"Better read the invoice, young fellow, and the order on my warehouse boss."

Dan snatched out the papers, and knew at a glance he had been tricked. First of all a crooked gambler, Beaugard had run in a cold deck on him!

## CHAPTER XI

### FIGHTING IRISH

**B**ITTER self-recriminations raced through Dan's mind. He'd been too careless, too sure of himself. He noted at a glance the heavy bars across the doors, the rapidly increasing force of armed men about the place. This was Beaugard's boldest stroke, and he was inviting Western Pacific to meet it.

Long Henry Varco stood behind

the boss, his hand on his gun, his eyes hot. And Dan knew that the slightest resistance would be his own finish. As depressed as he had ever been, as fully conscious of his own shortcomings and certain defeat, he turned to the scowling Paddy.

"Take the wagons back, McGinnis," he ordered morosely. "That'll be all here. We're licked."

Like a man in a daze, Dan went to one of the smaller saloons, bought a bottle. And, while he drank, he studied the papers Beauregard had switched on him, wondering how he could ever have been such a fool, so easily hoodwinked. The fading of the writing apprised him that the day was done, that night was at hand. The bartender, preparing to light the lamps, was staring at him strangely. Dan rose, went unsteadily out the door and bumped into Jonathan Ellsworth. One look at the man told Dan that here was a kindred spirit, equally as unhappy, equally as desperate as himself.

"What is it, captain?" he asked.

Ellsworth stared at him, vacantly at first. Then his face was convulsed with a killing rage and he attempted to pass. Dan grabbed him. The gambler struck down Dan's hand.

"Keep your hands off me, Reardon. I'm in a hurry. I've a long, delayed job to do."

"Job?"

"I'm killing Bill Beauregard."

Dan laughed tartly. "Surrounded by all his killers? You wouldn't have a ghost of a chance."

"I'll make the chance," growled Ellsworth. "And pay for it, gladly. He learned it was me who finished Ponder, but it wasn't his way to come at me personally. Nor to send Varco, who knows he's not fast enough. He had to strike at me through Melody!"

"Melody?" Dan's concern was

plain from the tone of his voice.

"He took her out of the Palace and put her in Frisco Molly's place!" The gambler spoke from between rigid lips. "It's an old game, Reardon. He'll keep her locked up there, starving her until she'll be glad to sell her soul for a crust of bread."

"No!" Dan snarled it. "Then what are we waiting for, Ellsworth? Let's tear the joint down and take her out."

"Take her out!" echoed the miserable man. "Dead! I'm no fool."

"You are a fool!" Dan said scornfully. "If you hadn't been, you'd have married Melody and taken her out of all this."

"Marry her." Ellsworth bit off an ugly little laugh. "I married Melody right after the war, brought her home to my father's house, in Tennessee. She was a Yankee girl and my people were bitter. To think their son would marry an actress and a hated Yankee, poisoned them. They made it unbearable for her. She left the home, not because of their treatment, but in order not to alienate me from my family. And then, Reardon, I did the only decent thing of my life. I turned my back on the business of being a Southern gentleman and struck out to look for her. I found her at last." His eyes were drenched with misery. "She was singing for Bill Beauregard. I couldn't convince her that she wouldn't be ruining my life by coming back to me. I tried to shame her by gambling for Beauregard, but it made no difference."

Dan stared at Ellsworth, his own troubles momentarily forgotten in the face of this tragedy. "How can I help you, captain?" he asked softly.

"By minding your own business, Reardon," was Ellsworth's snarled answer. "I don't know what ails me



when I'm with you. I go soft, rotten soft. To hell with you. I've got a job to do!"

HE brushed past as some flaming impulse moved Dan. He whirled, caught the gambler's sleeve with his left hand, spun him and swung a short, chopping blow to his chin. Ellsworth went down heavily. Dan caught him as he sagged, shouldered him and headed toward his office through the gathering gloom.

Back at his sleeping quarters, Dan put the unconscious gambler to bed, hid the man's guns and went out into the office. Joe Frayne and General Graham were there, having just rolled in from the front on a work train: Both were jubilant. They wrung his hand and praised him for the deal he had made with Beauregard.

With an abiding sense of shame, Dan told them how the thing had worked out. And when he had finished, the two officials sank into chairs, wordless. Frayne's shoulders slumped and the general stared at the floor. Dan didn't wait for their judgements.

"Don't be too put out," he told them. "I made the deal and the stuff belongs to the road. I aim to get it."

Graham came to his feet, protesting. "No, Reardon. I think I know what you're planning. But we can't take that chance now. Reauregard has the law all on his side now, and—"

"To hell with the law," rasped Dan. "It's back in Omaha, Chicago or Kansas City. Right now, Beauregard and his crooks are the law on these prairies, a bad law that must be smashed. Any suits he might bring cannot be heard in the two months until the rails meet and the

country is spanned. After that, it may not matter."

He hitched up his gun and walked out into the night, leaving the two men staring dumbly at one another.

Dan found Paddy McGinnis in the mess tent and Shamus McGarvey taking over the night shift. He got them together and, for some minutes they talked the thing over. Their decision made, Paddy let out a yell and raced toward a puffing work train.

"I'll be back in two hours, me buckoes, wid good ould Ireland burnin' for war. Wait for me, Danny bye."

"Glory be," grinned Shamus, watching the train pull out toward the west and the construction camps. "'Tis a bloody fight we'd be after havin' this night, Danny. An' Shamus McGarvey will have every man in Junction City wid red blood in his veins. I'm on me way!"

HE dashed off into the darkness, rallying his crews. Dan went back to the office, sent a man uptown to learn how things lined up. The report was somewhat alarming. "Beauregard's got a thousand men lined up, scum of the camps, scourgings of the dives, crooks an' pimps. Guns for most and clubs for the rest. Looks like a tough nut to crack."

True to his word, Paddy came back with five flat cars loaded with roaring, cheering Irishmen, three hundred strong. Armed by the railroad against Indian attacks, they had their guns with them. Before the cars rolled to a stop, they were leaping off, following Paddy toward the office, where Shamus had a hundred club-swinging warriors waiting. Dan gave them a short talk.

"This is a showdown with Beauregard, boys, and it'll be no picnic. We're taking the law into our own

hands and emptying those warehouses. When we get into it, it's every man for himself. There'll be bloodshed, but I don't want killing where something else will serve. This is dangerous and I'll hold it against no man if he wants to back out."

"G'wan wid yez!" shouted a burly track layer. "Do ye think I'd ride thirty mile behind a crazy engineer just to quit. Lead out, bucko!"

A roar answered him and then Joe Frayne was running along the platform, holding up both hands. "Stop! Stop it, Reardon! Beaugard's got over a thousand men armed and waiting for you. You're hopelessly outnumbered—three or four to one!"

A bellow of protest rose from the assembled men. "Four divils for each of us? Faith an' it's Beaugard's buckoes that are outnumbered?"

The din they raised was terrific. Dan met the superintendent's eyes and in the glance was mutual acceptance of the fact that there was no holding them now. Dan jumped down and took the lead. Paddy swung along beside him. Dan looked around.

"Where's Shamus?" he hollered in Paddy's ear.

"Blest if I know," shouted the little Irishman. "Last I seen of him, he was plottin' with that gamblin' man, Ellsworth. But don't ye worry, Danny bye, he'll be in it somewhere."

They were marching now, keeping step, chanting. Their boots shook the ground. Faster—faster! Their heads were lowered between heavy, work-toughened shoulders. Their thick arms were akimbo, their weapons at ready. Dan was fairly picked up, swirled along in the van. It was as if they were acknowledging themselves as his men, him their

leader. They would follow him all the way, he knew that. Even to death!

## CHAPTER XII

### BATTLE OF JUNCTION CITY

DAN REARDON was trembling as they swept out of the yards and into the tent-lined main drag. But it was not the trembling he had once known. There was no fear in him, no weighing of consequences. In that moment, he knew he was healed of the wound Santee Ponder had dealt his spirit that rainy night. Now there was only eagerness, an uncontrollable desire to close with Beaugard, to wipe him out of the way of the most splendid project the country had ever known, him and all his hellish spawn.

A yell greeted their appearance and the north side of the street was suddenly thronged with Beaugard's warriors, blocking the way to the disputed warehouses. Yonder, before the Canvas Palace, they blocked the street. By using strategy, Dan might have deployed the railroad fighters, making a show at battle, and so reached his objective. But that never occurred to him. Here was something to be met and put down for all time. Win or die! He called it back to them, and they made those words the theme of their chant.

"Win or die! Win or die! Win or die!"

Then they were running, filling the street as they surged toward the braced enemy. In response, an authoritative bellow burst from the center of the Beaugard phalanx.

"Back, you scum! Back, or we'll cut you down."

As well try to warn back the peak rush of a flooded prairie stream. This was a torrent of flesh and blood—

and hate. A ragged burst of gunfire broke from the front rank of the renegade force. Numbers of the Irish fighters went down, but their fellows stepped over them and plunged on, their own guns spewing death into Beauregard men. Now the two factions came together and there was a crash of hard bodies locking in mortal combat. No room for aiming and firing now, nor time. Clubbed guns swinging. Pick handles rising and falling. Roars, screams, curses as men went down in the welter of battle. Odds meant little now, as warriors struggled to get through the crush and at some unengaged adversary.

Dan Reardon ducked under a swung gun, drove his shoulder point into a man's middle, dumping him. He drove his boots into his victim's face as he surged over him. After that it was like a hazy dream to Dan, a nightmare of bruising blows. Once he went down as someone clipped him on the head from behind. A giant form loomed above him, a down-swinging gun stock menaced him for an instant. Dan's pistol spoke and the man was down. Then Dan was on his feet again, shaking his head to clear it, fighting onward, inch by inch, swinging the barrel of his pistol as a bludgeon. Fighting to live, and for something that seemed more important than life.

Beauregard's toughs were neither physically nor spiritually equipped to stand against the Irish. They gave backward. It became a tide. Dan's crew cleared the street, followed their foes into the buildings, wrecking them. One by one, the lights of the town were extinguished by the fighting men. Isolated battles raged, clear to the outskirts of the town. But the main body of Dan's men followed him toward the warehouses. It was a battle all the

way, for a secondary line of toughs, led by Varco, massed before the tent that housed the precious supplies.

Here there was more gunplay. Men were falling on each side. A bullet struck Dan along the ribs, spinning him about and knocking him down. But he was up at once, hardly conscious of the pain. He had lost all track of Paddy, but there was a horde of howling, raging demons about him, driving the Beauregard men back, step by step.

DAN led the savage rush that brought his men to the loading platform of the big warehouse. Then came the sterner job of clearing Beauregard's picked fighters, led by Varco, away from the door. As he fought, bathed with sweat, arm weary and fatigued, Dan kept a lookout for Beauregard, though he hardly expected that the man would take an active part in the struggle. And the darkness prevented recognition of any kind, until a man was right before his eyes.

Clubs and guns swinging, the Western Pacific Irish drove toward the door. Then suddenly the front of the board-sided, tent-roofed warehouse burst into flame. And Dan saw Bill Beauregard recoiling, still holding the pail that had held the coal oil. It renewed Dan's earlier rage that this man, acknowledging defeat, would burn the badly needed supplies.

"You dirty dog in the manger!" he howled over the turmoil, and leveled his gun. A tough came hurtling into him, preventing the shot. Dan killed him. Then the renegades were on the run, racing to get out of the growing light of the doomed warehouse. And the Irishmen leaped after them, intent now only upon their lust to destroy. But Dan, with

eyes for no one save Beauregard, climbed frantically to the platform as he saw the boss of Junction City drive his boot through a window, kick out the jagged fragments of the pane and step into the building, the front of which was now wrapped in flame.

Gun in hand, Dan bounded across the platform and, with reckless disregard for danger, plunged inside. Smoke blinded him in the gloomy interior and he paused, cursing himself for a fool. Beauregard had probably darted through the place, toward some opening in the rear. The blaze reached the canvas top, filling the room with a weird, smoke-drenched light. And Dan stood transfixed. The place was empty, save for a few scattered boxes and barrels.

Dan was trying to reason out the mystery when his name was spoken, from a smoky corner.

"Reardon!"

Dan whirled, his gun level. Like a gnome of darkness, Bill Beauregard stood there, tensed and ready. And, for a moment, Dan knew a grudging admiration for the man who could have killed him from behind, but who scorned the methods of his hirelings. Then as the slow grin broadened on Beauregard's face, as his gun hand jutted, Dan knew it was only the supreme confidence of this dictator, his ego.

"You've underestimated me from the first, Beauregard," Dan cried, and leaped toward that fearsome figure, weaving and dodging.

Beauregard fired, missed, fired again. Something light touched Dan's left arm, stingingly. And not until then did the son of Wild Mike drop the hammer of his piece. Dan was plowing to a stop then, staring. Beauregard's massive head seemed to settle deeper into his thick shoul-

ders. There was a sudden, stricken look in his eyes as the pistol fell from his grip.

"You have the luck of the Irish, Reardon," he cried in a husky, strained voice. "But luck has a way of changing—"

He didn't finish. His chin tipped down and he fell, full length. And Dan wasted precious moments marveling at the mystery of life and death. So strong, so dominant, so dangerous only a moment ago, now Bill Beauregard was only a huddle of lifeless clay.

His eyes streaming, his lungs racked by the smoke, Dan suddenly was shrinking from the blistering heat. It drove him back through the litter, running. At the rear, he kicked out a window and plunged outside. The blast of cool, fresh air was sweet, and he paused a moment to dash the water from his smoke-seared eyes and to fill his aching lungs. With his vision restored, he was suddenly aware of bobbing torches and of something else that made him think he was dreaming.

Here, at the rear of the big warehouse, flanked on the other side by a dozen smaller storage tents, was a railroad, where there had been no tracks before. And here was a string of cars, piled high with supplies. Bodies, some writhing, others still, lay upon the ground. A protective ring of bloody warriors stretched around the train, and squads of men, like ants, came and went from the warehouses, loading the provender.

Wonderingly, Dan moved toward the miracle, expecting to see it dissolve in thin air. Instead, two figures detached themselves from the line about the train, came toward him. Jonathan Ellsworth and Shamus McGarvey.

"Dan Reardon!" There was real concern now in the gambler's voice

and the old dogging bitterness had given way to the lifting spirit of battle. "Are you all right, boy? We were worried when—"

"I'm sound enough," answered Dan. "Thanks to Beauregard's poor shooting."

"No! He's dead? Where?"

"In there," Dan's hand swung toward the pillar of flame that had been the big warehouse. And even as they looked, Paddy McGinnis came hurtling through the open window, his clothes smoking, his coat held over his head. Light as a cat, he lit, cuffed out the burning spots on his clothes, grinned as he spotted them and hurried over.

"I spotted yez through the windy, Danny me bye," he roared. "An' 'twas the nicest bit o' shootin' I ever saw, whin ye killed the big varmint. But yez must l'arn to finish yer job, bucko. Here."

He handed Dan the papers, containing the true list of supplies Dan had purchased from the boss of Rag City. Paddy had risked his life to get them. Dan's throat thickened with emotion as he patted the little Irishman on the back.

He turned to Shamus. "But this!" He waved toward the waiting train. "How in the devil's name—"

"Sure, Danny bye," chuckled big Shamus. "I may not have had the same grand fightin' as you an' Paddy, but, be jabbers, me an' Captain Ellsworth, as foine an ingineer as I ever seen, beat all the records of the haythen Chinees in layin' this spur track."

The walls of the burning warehouse caved in, showering the train with sparks. The engine whistled and the Irishmen scattered. Dan took the slender hand of Captain Ellsworth. There were fresh, raw blisters on it.

"Thanks . . . friend," he murmured.

"The shoe's on the other foot, Dan. I . . . I've got Melody, and the shadow of the man is gone at last. I—" He could go on. Dan grinned at him and they linked arms, heading toward a street strangely silent now that peace had returned.

**T**HE word had been flashed east and west across a continent. The rails had joined at Promontory point. The Midland Pacific and the Western Pacific were being wedded with a celebration and by the driving of a gold and silver spike.

For hours, some of the nation's finest orators had extolled the heroes of the great undertaking. And, while his own name led all the rest in honorable mention, General Graham said nothing. But, from time to time, his glance strayed to the outskirts of the colorful assemblage, out there on the flats, at the abutment of the long promontory jutting southward into Utah's Great Salt Lake, where Dan Reardon stood with Jonathan Ellsworth, the latter's lovely wife, Shamus McGarvey and Paddy McGinnis.

A shadow of a frown touched the brows of General Graham as he glanced at those four men. He and Joe Frayne alone knew how fully they deserved to be given the credit for what had been accomplished, and how impossible that was. But there was compensation. In their beaming faces, he read pride, contentment, far more priceless than adulation. Each had played his honest part. They had fought the good fight and the spirit that had seen them through to victory, would speed them on to a peace, spiced with the deathless memories of a great adventure.





# CHRISTMAS LEGACY

BY FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

"It's sure goin' to be one hell of a Christmas for the Greer family," old Dave Greer said dejectedly. His big, scarred hands gripped the bars of his cell door as he stood talking to his son. "It's goin' to be hard on your ma, Mike. You know how she feels about Christmas."

Mike Greer did know how his mother felt about Christmas. Raised in New England, she had seen some pretty hectic days since handsome Dave Greer had married her and taken her West. They had lost homes, farms, ranches and outfits, but they had never lost Christmas.

Mom Greer had always managed to come through with a few gifts and a special meal even in the stormiest winters. And more than one frontiersman had attended one of Mom's celebrations and had returned to his camp with renewed faith in himself.

It was going to be mighty tough on Mom Greer to face a Christmas with her husband in jail charged with robbing the United States mail. All kinds of rumors were going the rounds in Mineral City. Some said that Dave had stolen and cached a five-thousand-dollar gold shipment. Others that he had got drunk while mushing the shipment from Mineral City to Sea Otter Cove and lost the gold. Dave's friends held that there was dirty work and that Dave was a scapegoat.

One thing was definitely known: the postal authorities had sent a man named John McGraw to Mineral City to award a new contract for carrying the mail. Also, it was believed that postal inspectors were working on the case in Seattle. Things looked bad for Dave Greer.

"Think hard, dad," Mike urged. "See if you can't remember what happened."

"I've spent most of my waking hours tryin' to figger what did happen," Dave answered hopelessly. "And I'm tellin' you, son, I've had plenty of wakeful hours. Like I told you, I started with the shipment and the regular mail—"

"I know, but what about this drinking business?" Mike asked.

"I bought a quart of whiskey from Sam Monzo before I started, and I took a little nip along the way," Dave explained. "Right after that I must've had some kind of a spell, because I woke up about twenty miles from Sea Otter Cove. The dogs was tied up, and nothin' seemed

to be missin' until I checked the mail with the boat purser at the cove."

"You've been packing mail too long," Mike said. "They should have given you an easier job long ago."

"They promised that after this Christmas I could be postmaster at Mineral City," Dave said. "The job would've kept Mom and me in bacon and beans for the rest of our days. And now everything's gone to hell. Why, you know, Mike, there might not be any Christmas mail this year."

"Sure, I know," Mike answered. He knew, too, that his father was proud of his record in that respect. In the many winters he had mushed mail, he had never failed to arrive at his destination the night before Christmas. Sometimes the effort had cost him frostbite, exhaustion and even illness, but the folks in the community he served had always had their letters and packages on Christmas day.

"You might as well know that McGraw is calling for bids to carry the mail for a year," he said. "They're opening them at ten o'clock tomorrow morning."

"I wish you'd go down when the bids are opened," Dave told him. "I'd kinda like to know who bids, and what the figgers are. But promise me one thing—that you won't bid."

"Why not?" Mike asked.

"Because there's somethin' dirty goin' on. They've got me out of the way," Dave said grimly, "and they'll get you out of the way, too. I want your promise, son."

"I'll promise," Mike said reluctantly, "but I'm out of a job and it's goin' to cost a barrel of money to defend you. We'll be fighting the whole United States government.

But if you want it that way, I won't bid."

"That's the way I want it," Dave told him.

MIKE GREER stepped into the Mineral City Mercantile Co.'s store a few minutes before ten the following morning. The trading post was crowded. Men sat around the oil drum stove and speculated on the mail contract. Others lined the wall and listened to the conversation.

John McGraw, a flinty-eyed man who looked every inch the man hunter, studied the faces of those about him. Few could meet the searching flame that burned in the depths of his eyes. More than one man felt as if he were being silently accused of aiding and abetting Dave Greer's crime.

"Ten o'clock," McGraw snapped at last, "and no bids. I know some of you men have dog teams, and I know many of you are out of work. What's the hitch?"

"Folks have bid against Dave Greer off and on," Sam Monzo, who ran the store and the post office, explained. "And it seems like they always ran into hard luck. Maybe their dogs would get sick or a caribou would cross the trail at the wrong time—"

"What's that got to do with the mail?" McGraw interrupted.

"Plenty," answered Monzo. "The dogs just can't resist chasin' a caribou. Away they go, wrecking the sled and scatterin' mail through the brush."

"And you are suggesting Dave Greer poisoned the successful bidder's dogs and drove caribou across their trail?" McGraw demanded bluntly.

"I ain't suggestin' nothing," said Monzo. "I'm just tellin' what hap-

pened. I'm kind o' sorry the successful bidder didn't have better luck. Then Dave would've been out of a job and the gov'ment would've made him postmaster. I'm sick of runnin' the post office. It's just a mess of trouble. While a man is sellin' a two-cent stamp he's losin' time from his regular business."

"I see," McGraw said softly. He turned to Mike Greer. "Why didn't you bid?" he demanded.

"And have you laugh at me," Mike answered with a bitterness he made no effort to conceal. "You're hounding my father, so naturally I can't expect you to have faith in anyone named Greer."

The crowd grew tense. It seemed to the men that Mike was inviting McGraw's wrath down on his head. They expected an explosion, but they were disappointed.

"I think you and the others are afraid," McGraw said quietly. The tone of his voice carried a stinging taunt. He looked at Mike challengingly, and against his will, Mike found himself reacting to the dare.

"Suppose you make me a proposition to deliver the Christmas mail," Mike suggested.

"Why didn't you bid?"

"My father asked me not to," Mike explained quietly. "He felt we've had enough trouble without me taking over the mail-mushing contract and running into more grief. I promised him I wouldn't."

"Hm-m-m," McGraw said softly. "Your bidding would be one thing. But if I offered you a proposition, that would be something else. Is that it?"

"That's about the size of it," Mike admitted.

McGraw reached for a blank which he filled out, then shoved at Mike. "Read that," he ordered crisply.

Mike read it slowly. It was a contract to deliver the Christmas mail, the load not to exceed one thousand pounds. The price McGraw had set for the job was so high Mike could not resist. He reached for the pen and signed it.

**D**AVE GREER heard that Mike had signed a contract some ten minutes before his son got around to tell him. News travels fast in a mining camp. Dave was alternately proud and worried. Proud because his son had the nerve to tackle a proposition with the cards stacked against him, and worried because neither of them could anticipate the dangers involved.

"I didn't make a bid," Mike explained. "But McGraw offered me a proposition that was too good to turn down. We're going to need money to defend you and it was there for the earning. I'm going to try and raise bail money so you can be out by Christmas."

"That can't be done, son," Dave said. "The gov'ment has set the bail too high. Let's think about your job. You've got several weeks before you have to hit the trail for Sea Otter Cove. You'd better put that time in trainin' yourself and the dogs. You might pick up a few dollars haulin' freight to the mines."

Mike gave the dogs their first work-out the following morning. The team was made up entirely of Mackenzie River huskies, big, powerful fellows in good condition and full of fight. As the days slipped into weeks the dogs grew tough and Mike found his own legs standing up under the strain.

He saw little of McGraw. The postal official was running down small clues and bit by bit increasing his mass of evidence and making the various pieces fit into a pattern. He

was out for a conviction, and men were betting he would get it. Miners, with nothing to do during the long winter months, instinctively turn to betting.

Mike heard they were betting two to one that he wouldn't deliver all of the Christmas mail on time. He had a couple of hundred dollars he had saved, and he had made another two hundred freighting. The day before he was to start out, he took the four hundred down to the Miners' Rest.

"If you've got eight hundred that says I don't deliver every pound of mail I start with," he announced, "here's four hundred that says I do." When he left, every dollar of his money was covered.

Mike was ready to start early the following morning. He was packing enough supplies for the round trip. Sam Monzo handed him two sacks of mail and held out his hand.

"Good luck, son," he said warmly.

As Mike followed the main trail out of camp more than one woman came to her cabin door and waved. The bells his dogs wore gave forth a cheerful jingle, heralding his advance. Here and there children waved. To them, he was a Santa Claus going forth for his load.

Each day Mike cached a day's supplies for himself and dogs to be used on the return trip. He didn't expect to leave the cove with a pound of food. He even cut and cached dry fuel so that he could make his nightly fire with a minimum of effort. The training his father had given him on the trail was serving him in good stead now. The snow continued all the way to tide-water.

Mike camped in a cabin his father had built from the wreckage of an old windjammer and waited for the

steamer to arrive. It nosed its way into the cove three days later. From wheelhouse to main deck she was sheeted with ice, a sure sign that she had run into a storm at sea. She was a day late, which meant that Mike would also be a day late in starting.

He saw men breaking ice around the boat falls and presently a small boat struck the water. A sling load of mail was gently lowered into the boat and a crew of four men, with the mail clerk steering, rowed to the beach.

"Got some special-delivery mail," the clerk told Mike, "and a pouch of registered stuff." They checked it over and Mike signed. Then the clerk brought out a bulky envelope plastered with seals. It was addressed to John McGraw.

"You any relation to the old mail musher?" the clerk asked curiously. "I notice your name's the same."

"He's my father," Mike answered.

"Hm-m-m. Then this must put you in an uncomfortable position," the clerk said. "I was told the envelope contained a complete report on the gold loss, accompanied by instructions to begin immediate prosecution. It is too bad you have to carry it in."

"Yes, it's tough," Mike agreed. "But it's mail. And my job is to carry the mail." He signed for the pouch and placed it in one of the smaller bags. The clerk shook hands and boarded the boat, leaving Mike in possession of some hothouse vegetables, three thick steaks and a freshly baked pie.

**M**IKE loaded and lashed the mail, placed the food within easy reach and started. The load weighed within fifty pounds of a half ton. It required some hard work to break

the sled free, then it moved ponderously. Because the team was fresh and he was behind time, Mike mushed late that night, then broke camp early the following morning. At noon he found the food cache which marked the point on the trail he had originally planned to reach the previous evening. He carried it along and drove late that night. He gave the dogs a heavy meal, and spent some little time frying one of the steaks the mail clerk had given him.

As he worked, his eyes kept straying to the hump on the load which marked the special mail, and the pouch containing the incriminating evidence against his father. It looked as if McGraw might be deliberately testing him, or perhaps framing him. Yet, on reflection, he realized this was the first mail to go into the Mineral City country in months.

The weather remained good and Mike hit the trail early next day. That afternoon he checked on the dogs' condition and decided to push through to the next food cache before camping. Then he would be back on schedule.

It was ten o'clock in the evening when he reached the cache. He groped within the branches of a tree and pulled out the wood he had cut. He reached his hand into the next tree for the cache and then drew it out empty. The cache was gone, stolen!

Several pounds of frozen salmon remained on the sled. This Mike fed to the dogs. His own meal was merely tea and the remains of a loaf of bread. He was dead tired when he turned in, but it was long before he fell asleep. The first thing in the morning he lighted a candle and began scraping snow away from the



tree. Three inches below the surface he found moccasin prints. He knew by their depth that their owner had been carrying a load—the cache.

Mike circled the vicinity, hoping to locate a spot where the snow had been blown away, leaving the tracks exposed. He heard wolves snarling down in the canyon and investigated. Seven of the gaunt creatures had torn the canvas wrappings apart and were gulping down the food. Whoever had robbed the cache had made no attempt to use the food. He had thrown it into the nearest canyon and prowling wolves had found it.

Mike ran back to the sled, got his rifle and returned to the canyon. He rested the weapon on a rock and fired, levering in cartridges as rapidly as possible. He killed four of the wolves and wounded the remaining three. Then he wallowed through the snow to the kill. His own food had been eaten, but some of the frozen salmon remained. Even a wolf couldn't chew fish frozen as hard as a rock. They had dropped down to gnaw it, offering him an easy target the first few shots.

He returned, harnessed his team and continued the weary trek toward Cold Pass. It began snowing when he was ten miles from the summit. This would have been almost the final straw for the average musher. Usually it was bitterly cold on the west side of the pass the latter part of December. The occasional snowfalls were light. But Mike knew, from the way it was starting in, this fall would be heavy.

He cached three hundred pounds of mail in a clump of trees, then began the drive to the summit. He had left a food cache there, also, but he knew it would be gone. Whoever was directing the attacks on him was doing a thorough job of it.

WITH a lighter load, the team made better time. The sled would slip along a few yards when the team slackened somewhat on the pull. Mike kept ahead, breaking trail and stamping down soft spots to avoid the load getting stuck. It was midnight before he reached the summit and the storm was roaring through the pass. Up here it was bitterly cold. Gusts of wind picked up drifts, whirled them furiously and scattered them. The particles cut like tiny knives. One of the lead dog's eyes was closed. Their feet began balling up with ice.

Mike camped, fed the dogs and turned in. The storm was still raging when he woke. He crawled out of his sleeping bag and searched the cache, an ice cave nearby. As he expected, it was empty. He shoved seven hundred pounds of mail into it, and on two pouches he wrote with charcoal:

REGISTERED U. S. MAIL. DON'T TOUCH.  
PRISON OFFENSE!"

"Not that I expect anybody to mush through here," he told himself. "But I don't want to overlook any bets."

He mushed slowly back, breaking a new trail to the three-hundred-pound cache he had left. Much of the trail, he knew, would drift over, but trail building in advance would be worth the effort. He found the mail cache untouched. His dogs eyed him reproachfully when he lashed the pouches to the sled, turned them around and started for the summit again.

Even with the lighter load, mushing was harder than on the previous day. The snow was softer, deeper, and much of the time Mike was at the handlebars fighting to keep the load moving. The brief

day ended, darkness came and the strength of the storm increased. The snow reflected the scant light and Mike could always see. But his dogs were cracking under the constant driving. He knew that. But he also knew that if he had tried to take the load through without relaying it he would still have been far below the summit, hopelessly stuck in a drift.

It was two o'clock in the morning when he pulled into the pass. The dogs dropped in their tracks and Mike sat on the load and presently felt comfortable and sleepy. "Got to snap out of this," he warned himself wearily, "or I'll freeze to death." There was no need to worry about the dogs. The snow was already drifting over them. He freed them from the harness and then spread his sleeping bag in a sheltered spot and turned in.

The scream of wind through the pass awakened him the following morning. "Not a chance to mush today," he muttered, then turned over and went to sleep. When he again awakened, the wind continued to howl through the pass, but the sky was studded with cold winter stars and the aurora borealis was sending flutter ribbons of color from the northern horizon.

Mike dressed, knocked the snow from the load and broke the sled free. Then he went over to the cache in the ice cave and lit a candle. The two pouches he had marked as registered mail were gone.

"Somebody's watching me pretty close," he said. "I wish I could spot their camp. Then I'd get some dog feed, if nothing else." A quarter ration of the fish he had taken from the wolves still remained, but there was no food for himself.

There were two other sacks marked registered mail deep in the

cave. One of them contained the evidence in his father's case. "A lot of things would have been delayed if they'd have grabbed this pouch," Mike thought. "And I couldn't have proved I hadn't concealed or destroyed it in a thousand years."

He loaded the seven hundred pounds of mail onto the sled, harnessed the team and started for the interior country. There were few steep grades to climb from now on, but there were some long, steep slopes to descend. If the sled with its half-ton load ever got away from him, it would run over the dogs. And he needed every dog in the string.

Hour after hour he broke trail, snubbed the sled down pitches, and sometimes relayed portions of the load over bad spots. He had hoped a few miners would be heading for Mineral City for Christmas. Their trail would have made his mushing easier. But evidently the storm had kept them inside. In all the cold world he, apparently, was the only moving human being.

**C**HRISTMAS was two days away when Mike arrived at Birch Bench. He followed the blazes cut on the trees for three miles, then broke from the timber and looked down on miles of flat country.

The trail descended in a series of steep pitches. Mike got out a snubbing rope and took a turn on a stump that was grooved from countless ropes that had used it in the past. "Mush!" he yelled. The team pulled the sled to the brink, then, as the sled tilted downward, Mike felt the strain. He tightened the rope. It held for a moment, but as the weight increased, the stump suddenly snapped off.

The sled leaped toward the dogs. Mike, with the rope in his hand,

raced down the pitch, trying to find a tree or stump that would check the sled. Two birches snapped off, then the rope itself broke in half as a large stump held.

Mike made a flying leap at the load and caught it. He clawed his way over the load, drew a knife and cut the dogs free, then jumped himself. He landed uninjured in a drift, got to his feet, ran along the slope and caught a swing dog's harness. He calmed the team, kept the dogs from scattering, then looked at the sled. It was going end over end. The lashings had broken, the pouches, his sleeping bag, cooking gear and rifle were flying through the air.

The sled stopped in a drift three hundred feet below him. Mike, hoping the runners weren't broken, ran back to look at the snubbing stump.

Examining it, he saw that somebody had sawed it almost in half. "So things happen to those who bid against the Greers, eh?" he savagely observed. "Well, plenty's happening to the Greers now." He went back to the scene of the crash disheartened. There was little chance of getting in on time now.

Pride ran strong in Mike Greer. He knew what several hundred people at Mineral City were thinking. They were saying that, with a Greer at the handlebars, the mail would be in on time. They were telling their kids Santa Claus wouldn't fail them. Mike squared his shoulders. Perhaps there was some reserve of strength in a man for an emergency like this.

He wallowed down through the snow, dragging and throwing pouches as he went. When he reached the sled, most of the load was with him. He went back up the slope to make sure he had missed no pouches, then he got the team

and brought it down. The sled was in bad shape, but the runners weren't broken. While he was making temporary repairs his mind shifted to Mom.

Every year she had set a place for Dave when she fixed up the Christmas table, usually the afternoon before. And when folks said, "But he might not get in, Mrs. Greer. Then, won't you feel kind o' funny lookin' at an empty chair?" And Mike remembered his mother had always answered, "Dave will be along." And Dave always came along. What would she do this year? Would she set a place for Dave and torture herself. Would she set a place for Mike, who was mushing the mail, or would she doubt Mike's ability to take his father's place? Mike was still wondering when he completed the repairs.

The dogs got the sled moving, but without much enthusiasm. Mike continued to speculate. "Mom's got a turkey she had shipped in for Christmas—a turkey and all the fixin's—but a man who's been starving can't pitch in and eat a big dinner. What a Christmas for the Greers any way you figure it! Mush, damn you, mush!" He cracked the whip over the tired dogs and they hit the harness once more.

Mike remembered that day, the night camp he made, and most of the next day. But late the afternoon of the twenty-fourth things began to seem unreal. He knew the cold was getting him. Cold finds a hungry, exhausted man an easy victim. He had to keep resisting the impulse to stop and rest. The instant he faltered the dogs faltered.

It was snowing again, insuring a white Christmas and making anyone but a musher happy. It was four o'clock in the morning when he awakened. Sleep had helped some.

Things were less vague, but he had to figure everything out. He no longer went from one thing to another instinctively.

He slapped two of the swingers who snarled with resentment when he harnessed them. All signs of trail had disappeared. But the leader should know the way, he reasoned. He gave the signal and grasped the bars. The sled began to move. "Sure you're right?" he muttered at the dog, but made no attempt to change his direction. He just stumbled along behind the sled. The harness bells, instead of cheering him, taunted him with their incessant jingle.

He realized presently he was no longer a help to the team. He was a burden, hanging to the handlebars, while his dragging feet were anchors slicing through the snow. He let go and stumbled along, following the marks left by the sled runners.

Somewhere he heard a bell. It rang for several seconds, then stopped. Then it rang again. Mike grinned. "The church bell," he muttered. "I'm on the right trail. New energy flowed from somewhere. He never caught up with the sled, but he heard cheering ahead and presently men came from the swirling snow to catch his arms and help him along.

**T**HEY stopped at the trading post, and Sam Monzo, who had kept open all night, came out. "Mighty glad you made it, Mike," he said. "You've kept the record clear. Here's Mr. McGraw."

John McGraw, wearing a parka and moccasins, greeted Mike and looked at the mail. Men had dragged the sled inside and were unloading it. Someone was giving Mike hot soup and several were caring for the dogs.

"Did you get a special letter, Mike?" McGraw asked quietly.

"Yes. It's in the small pouch, Mr. McGraw! All of the registered mail is in the two pouches," he said significantly. "I had to relay at the pass. That meant leaving the registered mail alone. I had two empty sacks which I filled with frozen moss. I marked them as registered and they were stolen."

"Empty or full," McGraw declared, "whoever stole the pouches stole United States mail. You look to be in pretty bad shape, Mike. You'd better get home. I'll take charge here."

Someone hauled Mike home on a sled. He kept thinking: "This is Christmas—Mom's worst Christmas. And I brought in the evidence that'll break the case against dad."

Mom was waiting for him when he arrived. "I knew you'd make it through, son," she said proudly. She kissed him, then pushed him toward his room. "Go to bed," she said, "and get some rest. I'll wake you up in time for dinner."

He glanced at the dining room. There were three places set, a sign of Mom Greer's indomitable optimism.

Mike didn't think he would sleep. It seemed heartless for him to sleep when Mom was facing such a tragic day, but Nature was exacting her price and Mike slept like one drugged. There was a hot bath ready for him when he woke. He bathed, dressed and came into the dining room.

"Dinner'll be on the table at two," she said. "Some folks have dropped by to thank you for getting their children's presents in on time. The things you ordered for dad and me came, too, along with the things we ordered for you."

"Just about everything came," Mike said.

"Just about everything, from what I hear," Mom nodded.

When the clock struck two she told him to sit down at the table. But it was a couple of minutes before she brought in anything, and he knew she had been standing at the window, staring down the trail that led to the jail. She was bringing in soup when the door opened. She didn't need to turn to see who it was. She had heard that step too many times. She took a long, deep breath.

"Thank God! Dave!" she said quietly.

"Howdy, Mom," Dave answered. He took a deep breath and kissed her. "Howdy, Mike. Merry Christmas to both of you."

"Released on bail?" Mike asked.

"Better'n that," Dave answered. "I'm free! Those postal inspectors are hell on wheels when they get on a case. At first they thought I'd either stolen the gold myself or got drunk and lost it. Then, after McGraw arrested me, he began to look around to find out if some other fellow mightn't be the guilty party. So he looked for a motive."

"And found one?"

"Yep!" Dave replied. "You know how Sam Monzo was always sayin' he wished I'd retire from mail mushin' so I could take over the post office job? Well, while he was sayin' it, he was scared stiff for fear it'd happen. It was him who raised hell with the boys who underbid me. When Sam fin'ly realized the gov'ment was goin' to make me postmaster because I was gettin' too old for mail mushin' he got desperate. He figgered if he robbed the mail and made it look like me, I'd go to the pen and he'd still be postmaster. So

he doctored the whiskey he sold me, and when I took a drink and passed out he took the gold."

"But why should Monzo care if you were made postmaster?" Mike asked curiously.

"He had a shortage that he'd covered up, but which would be exposed as soon as a new man came in," Dave explained. "He was shippin' gold out every little while, so he figgered it'd be easy enough to include the five thousand dollars' worth he stole in a shipment. And that's where he made a mistake. Postal inspectors, workin' with the assay-office boys in Seattle, made a check on the shipments and who they'd come from. There was exactly five thousand Monzo couldn't account for. That was all in that special envelope you brought in. McGraw showed Monzo the evidence and he cracked. Ten minutes later I was turned loose."

"Then it was Monzo or one of his men who robbed my food caches and stole two pouches?" Mike asked.

Dave nodded. "He made a clean breast of it. He had a hunch evidence was comin' and sent a breed out to do the dirty work. But the breed swiped the wrong pouches."

"Which was why I put 'em there," Mike said. "Well, I guess Uncle Sam will take care of the details. You'll be postmaster and I'll be mail musher. You know, dad, it made me pretty sick to pack the envelope, feeling that it would send you to the pen."

"I'll bet it did, son, but it showed you're to be trusted with the mail, and that'll go down on your record," Dave said. "As it turned out, that envelope was the best Christmas present I ever got. Well, Mom, bring on the turkey. You've got a couple of hungry boarders to feed!"

# FLAPJACKS FOR BAIT



By B. BRISTOW GREEN



WHEN Jeff Sloane stepped through the swing doors of the Golden Eagle he had the feeling that he was near the end of his long trail. With the same persistence with which he would have tracked down a wolverine that had robbed his traps, he had followed the trail of the man who had shot him down and left him for dead in his blazing mountain cabin.

The only thing he had known at the beginning of that three-hundred-mile trail was that the would-be assassin was riding a horse with a bar shoe on the right forefoot. In the first town he came to he had learned that the man riding that horse had a nose so flattened that it was as wide almost as his mouth. He knew no one whom that description fitted.

Standing just inside the bat-wing doors, he realized that finding a man, even one as distinctly marked as the man he sought, might not be easy in this town of Black Butte. The saloon was jammed with men of all sorts: teamsters, miners, cattlemen and some, like himself, mountain men clad in fringed buckskin. Most men wore at least one six-shooter either holstered like Jeff's or stuck through his belt.

Only in such a mixed crowd would Jeff Sloane himself have passed unnoticed. Six feet three inches tall, he was lean and strong as a wolf. At the beginning of this trail he had bought a broad-brimmed hat to replace his usual beaverskin cap. Under it, his tawny mane hung to his shoulders. His untrimmed blond beard made him look older than his twenty-six years and his blue eyes held an unblinking steadiness as watchful as a cougar's.

In one corner of the front wall where the light was not bright enough to attract card players, Jeff saw a table with a single occupant, the only man in the place wearing

town clothes. Jeff caught a swamper by the arm.

"Fetch a pint and two glasses to that table," he directed, giving the man a half dollar. Then he worked his way toward the corner.

The swamper, with the liquor in one hand and the two glasses in the other, was at the table waiting for him. Jeff looked down at the man in the chair. "Mister, maybe you'd help a pilgrim get outside this pint," he said pleasantly. "A fellow could lose a leg tryin' to get to the bar."

"Sit down," invited the man. "I could use a drink but I didn't want it bad enough to fight for it."

Jeff sat down, uncorked the bottle and slid it with a glass across the table. "This here town of Black Butte seems to be up and comin'," he remarked.

He observed that the man was stockily built, around forty, with gray eyes and a neatly trimmed brown beard. Neither cattleman, miner nor trapper, Jeff decided.

The man waved a hand toward the crowd. "In three months most of them will be gone and the town will be back to something like normal. One good strike doesn't mean that every hill is lined with gold."

"You been around here long?" Jeff asked.

"Three years," was the answer. "My name's Roberts—doctor of sorts, mostly lead surgery. Reckon I've got the biggest collection of bullets in Wyoming. Get 'em out of all sorts of men from bandits to preachers."

"How come this town's ruinin' such a gold fever?" Jeff asked curiously.

"An old-timer named Gopher Simms made a strike and the whole country went crazy," explained Roberts, pouring himself another drink.

For a moment Jeff Sloane's thoughts whirled. These past three weeks he had had only one thing on his mind; to find the man who had tried to kill him. He had forgotten about Gopher Simms and the letter he had received from the old codger the day he sold his furs in Chinook, Montana, and took up this trail. He had even forgotten that it was somewhere near Black Butte that Gopher was prospecting.

Now the whole thing surged through his mind quickening his pulse. For five years he had been grubstaking old Gopher Simms out of the proceeds of his trapping. He hadn't put much faith in what the letter had said about a big strike, but now he realized it was true. Gopher had struck something big and they were both rich. He concealed his exultation as he looked across at Roberts.

"I take it this Simms gent is settin' pretty," he said casually.

The doctor's brows lifted. "Evidently you're a stranger here. Gopher Simms died six weeks ago."

**J**EFF was stunned. Gopher dead! It didn't seem possible. The letter in his pocket had lain in the post office for a month while he was out in the Montana mountains trapping. That meant it must have been written more than two months ago, but it had said the old man was feeling fine and had made the biggest strike of his life. And now the old prospector was dead.

With an effort Jeff kept his voice steady. "Seems sort o' tough to check in just after makin' a strike. What ailed Simms?"

Roberts shrugged. "His partner brought the body in. Said the old man died just after eating a hearty meal. There were no wounds, no indication of foul play, so the law

wasn't interested." The doctor frowned. "If Simms had had any relatives I would have suggested a post-mortem. The body was doubled up as though he had had cramps." Again he shrugged. "But, shucks, I guess he just couldn't stand his own cooking."

Jeff received most of this information rather vaguely, but one thing hit him hard. Gopher's partner had brought the body to town, the doctor had said. He, Jeff Sloane, was the only partner Gopher had. With the old prospector dead, the claims belonged to him. His eyes lifted to the doctor's.

"I take it Simms' pardner lays claim to the mine now. Who is—"

The question was drowned in an excited clamor at the bar. Someone yelled: "There he is—the Gold King of Soda Gulch! Hi, Jeff Sloane! How's she running?"

At the sound of his own name Jeff jerked. Roberts leaned forward and pointed toward the rear door. "The tallest of those two, that's Jeff Sloane, Simms' partner."

Jeff's eyes swung to the two men who had just come through the door. One, a tall, bold-faced man, stood laughing and talking to the crowd around him. Close-cropped black hair showed under a hat pushed well back and his thumbs were hooked in a two-holstered gun belt. He was enjoying the commotion his entrance had caused.

And then every nerve in Jeff Sloane's body tingled. With the tall man was a heavy-shouldered, paunchy fellow grinning through thick lips under a nose that was broken and flattened until it was as wide as his mouth. There could be no mistake about it; this was the bushwhacker who had tried to murder him. And he was with a man who called himself Jeff Sloane, and

claimed to be Gopher Simms' partner.

Hackles seemed to lift along Jeff's spine. He half rose from his chair and then settled down again as he realized the need for caution. He couldn't prove yet that the flat-nosed fellow had tried to kill him or that the man calling himself Simms' partner had anything to do with the old man's death. But one thing he was sure of: if the attempt to murder him was hooked up with Gopher's strike and he should be recognized, his life would be worth only the lead in his six-gun. He turned to the doctor again. "This Sloane gent," he asked. "He lives around here?"

"No," Roberts answered. "I never saw him before he brought Simms' body in. He had letters that Simms had kept showing that his partner had sent him considerable sums at different times. Also, he had a contract signed by Simms and himself acknowledging the partnership. Sloane claimed he had been helping Simms at the mine for some three months but had been too busy to come into town."

"And the fellow with him?" Jeff asked.

"Oh him!" There was contempt in the medico's tone. "His name is Link; Flatnose, they call him. He's been around here a year or so. A bad hombre. I could never understand why Sloane took up with him, but they're inseparable."

The two men moved toward the bar. The one calling himself Jeff Sloane was tall, well built, with hawkish features and eyes that, across the length of the room, seemed almost colorless. There was a swaggering roll to his long shoulders. Jeff's glance went to the fellow's bands. They were neither rope-burned like a puncher's nor big-

jointed like a miner's. White as though their owner kept them protected by gloves, they were obviously the hands of a gunman.

Jeff wondered if Flatnose Link had seen him clearly the night he had tried to kill him. If he had and should recognize him now there would be no slip-up on the next attempt. He would be ambushed before he could get to the bottom of this business and find out how Gopher Simms had died. And that had suddenly become more important than his stake in the mine.

An idea came to him that seemed reckless and foolhardy, but the more he thought of it the better he liked it. Those two scoundrels were feeling secure. Throw a panic into them and they might tip their hands.

HE borrowed a pencil from the doctor and scrawled four words on a slip of paper. "*Jeff Sloane is still alive.*" Folding the paper, he beckoned to the swamper. "Give this to that fellow Link, but don't tell him where you got it." He gave the swamper another half dollar and watched him deliver the note and slip back into the crowd.

Jeff's hand dropped close to his gun as Flatnose unfolded the paper. He couldn't be sure the man wouldn't know him. Flatnose read the note and wheeled, his gun half drawn while his eyes swept the crowded room. The abruptness of the movement caught the attention of his hawk-faced companion who turned, saw the half-drawn gun and wheeled quickly to put his back to the bar. Flatnose gripped his arm and pulled him toward the rear door.

A breath of relief lifted Jeff's chest. He hadn't been recognized. As long as he wasn't known it would be easy to watch the two men.

At that moment the swing doors

were flung open and a voice like the bellow of a bull swung every man in the room around.

*"Wah-ho-o! Mountain man-n-n!"*

The long drawn out howl made the very lamps flicker.

The call brought Jeff to his feet. There couldn't be two voices like that. He stared at the giant who had leaped through the door. The man stood half crouched, bearlike arms spread as though ready to fly. A black beard, wide as a shovel, spread over his great chest.

The newcomer was dressed in greasy fringed buckskins and moccasins. Through a rawhide belt was thrust a six-gun and a hunting knife with a blade at least fourteen inches long. The man held his ridiculous pose for a moment, then snatched off his cap, threw back his huge head. Again his bellow shook the room.

*"Wah-ho-o! The curly wolf of the Big Horns is in town and a-liquorin'! Barkeep, bust out your white mule. Bighorn Bascom done got him a thirst."*

The mountain man began to move toward the bar in a shuffling Indian dance, peculiarly light for his enormous size. The crowd roared their approval and made way for him.

Jeff looked around for Flatnose and his companion. They were near the rear door talking earnestly together. Jeff said good-by to the doctor and began to work toward the front door. He wanted to get out before Bighorn Bascom saw him. The giant trapper was almost as good a friend as Gopher Simms had been, but, drunk, he was a roaring, fighting fool.

Jeff had almost reached the swing doors when Bighorn Bascom suddenly jerked erect, his bearded face high above heads of the men around

him. His yell boomed out like the blast of a locomotive.

"Buff'lo bulls and grizzly b'ars! If it ain't the Montana Bobcat hisself! Hi-you, Jeff Sloane, ol' trapper!"

Jeff whipped through the swing doors, hoping he had been quick enough not to be spotted by Flatnose. Bighorn's boomed greeting had probably messed things up plenty for him.

The swing doors flew open and two enormous hands clamped Jeff's shoulders. "Jeff, you son of a gun, don't you know me? It's Charlie Bascom."

"Uh-huh," Jeff grunted. "Shore sounded like it, but I got reasons for not wantin' to be knowed 'round this town."

Bascom grinned. "Ef'n you got yo'self tangled with the law, son, we'll unsnarl you plenty sudden ef'n we got to pistol-whup the whole town."

"Nothin' like that," Jeff assured him. "Bighorn, did you know Gopher's dead?"

"Huh? Gopher dead! I seen him four months back and he was healthy as a catymount. How come he's dead?"

"That's what I'm in Black Butte to find out. Leastways, now I'm here, I shore aim to find out how Gopher died. I got an idea he was murdered and likewise, I'm thinkin' the two skunks that done it is in this here saloon right now."

Bighorn wheeled back toward the saloon. "Show me then two reptiles. I'll squash 'em like caterpillars."

Jeff grabbed him. "Hold it, Bighorn. This trail ain't as plain as that." Over the swing doors he saw Flatnose and the hawk-faced man coming through the crowd. He dragged Bascom around the corner of the saloon. "Keep that bull voice of yours quiet," he cautioned.

The two men came out and backed up against the saloon wall. They could hear Flatnose's husky, excited whisper: "He can't be alive! I tell you, Pasco, I shot him dead and fired the cabin. I stuck around until the roof fell and he never come out."

At the name, "Pasco," Jeff's grip tightened on Bighorn's arm. Gopher Simms had mentioned that name in his letter. He had written that Pasco was a drifter who had stopped at the cabin saying he was hungry and broke. He had still been hanging around when Gopher wrote his letter.

Pasco's low reply was given in a snarling, angry undertone. "Well, he ain't dead. That big buffalo called his name plain enough. It's that fellow that went out the door so sudden. What's he look like? I couldn't see him good for the jam."

"I dunno," said Flatnose. "It was dark when I shot him through the window. He went down and I fastened the door and fired the cabin."

ONLY Jeff knew how narrow his escape had been that night. Flatnose's bullet had raked across his chest. But for the fact that he was turning to lay his rifle on the wall pegs it would have gone through his heart. He had only escaped burning to death by crawling into the dugout at the back of the cabin where he kept his furs.

There was a moment's silence before Pasco said, "He ain't dead; that's certain. I reckon we can locate him by trailing that big bull moose. If we don't get 'em both, we're sunk."

Bighorn's huge fists knotted, but Jeff pulled him toward the rear of the saloon. When they reached the back alley, he halted. "How drunk are you, Bighorn?" he asked.

"Drunk!" Bighorn rumbled. "I ain't started. Ain't had but one pint."

"You got a hoss?"

"Shore. Biggest hoss in Wyoming. The barn man charges me double to feed him."

"You know where Gopher's claims are?"

"Uh-huh. I always stopped to see him when I come to town. Wan't nobody there when I come by today. It's up the head of Soda Gulch 'bout ten mile from town."

"Come on," said Jeff. "We're goin' there."

"What sort o' lookin' fellow is this Pasco?" Bighorn wanted to know.

"About my build," answered Jeff. "Black hair, light eyes and a long, sharp nose; a two-gun gent maybe thirty years old."

"I know that gent," Bighorn declared. "Blackhawk Pasco's his name. I seen him down in Utah five years ago. He got run out of the country fer jumpin' claims. He's rotten bad and plenty fast with a gun."

Bighorn pulled away from Jeff. "Wait here. I'm goin' in the back way and get me a bottle of liquor. No," he said when Jeff started to protest, "I ain't gettin' drunk. But I don't aim to put ten miles between me and a drink."

The rear door of the Golden Eagle was on the farther side and just around the corner. From the darkness of the alley Jeff watched the mountain man turn the corner of the building. There was plenty of noise along the main street. He could hear the frequent squeak of the swing doors as men drifted in or out of the saloon.

Ten minutes that seemed like an hour passed while Jeff waited for Bighorn's return. When the giant didn't come, Jeff slipped to the front

of the saloon. Pasco and Flatnose had disappeared.

Stepping to where he could see over the doors, Jeff searched the crowd for Bighorn. The man was six feet, six inches tall and should have been easy to see. But there was no sign of him.

Running to the alley again, Jeff called Bascom's name in a low tone. There was no answer. "Might have got his liquor and headed for the barn," Jeff told himself, and hurried down the alley.

But the mountain man hadn't been to the barn, either. Uneasiness began to gnaw at Jeff. He tried to assure himself that Bighorn could take care of himself. If he had met Flatnose and Pasco and got into a fight his bellowing voice would certainly have been heard all over town. Nevertheless, for an hour Jeff searched the saloons and gambling houses. Finally, he gave it up. What he had to do must be done before Flatnose and Pasco returned to the mine at Soda Gulch. He got his horse from the barn and found out from the man there how to get to Gopher's claims.

It was past midnight when Jeff found the cabin just above a spring in a valley at the head of Soda Gulch. In a shed housing a forge at the mouth of the tunnel he found a piece of drill steel and pried the padlock off the cabin door. He stood there for a moment listening, his eyes searching the dark hillsides rimming the valley. He made out vague shapes of other shacks and tents and guessed that there was probably not a foot of ground that hadn't been located. But Gopher Simms had taken up four claims and the nearest cabin was a thousand feet away.

Jeff went inside, found a lamp and lit it. If the light was seen it would

only suggest that Pasco had returned. Jeff took in the simple furnishings of the place in a single glance: a stove, cooking utensils, table, stools and two bunks, one recently built. An old mail order catalogue lay on the table.

According to Dr. Roberts, Gopher was dead six weeks. If the old man had been murdered there had been plenty of time to dispose of any evidence. Jeff based his hope of finding some clue on the chance that Flatnose and Pasco, believing Gopher's real partner dead, might have been careless.

On a shelf behind the stove there was a small supply of canned goods and a sack of flour. None of the cans except the one containing baking powder had been opened. Jeff tasted the flour and baking powder but could detect nothing wrong with them.

ON a short shelf above the new bunk, Jeff found chunks of ore streaked with wire gold. There was nothing else on the shelf except a little heap of brown stuff which he took to be tobacco. It looked as though someone had spilled some and hadn't bothered to clean up the mess.

The sound of voices somewhere down the valley sent him leaping to the side of the door. Two riders were coming up the trail. Jeff slipped out and around the side of the cabin where he waited with a gun in his hand. The riders came on to within a hundred yards of the cabin and stopped, apparently to water their horses at the stream. The heavy voice of one of them reached Jeff.

"Looks like Sloane and Flatnose are back. They shore don't do much work on them claims. Reckon Sloane figures on selling 'em as the



quickest way to clean up. He's shore one lucky hombre."

Jeff saw the men swing their horses around and ride off across the valley. He drew a breath of relief. Just two prospectors coming back from town.

Putting out the light, he walked up to the edge of the timber where he had left his horse, sat down on the ground and lit his pipe. So far, he had found no clue to Simms' death. Yet he wasn't satisfied. Dr. Roberts had said there were no wounds on the old man's body. That made it certain that he hadn't been shot or killed in an accident in the mine. And certainly Gopher Simms hadn't died from his own cooking. He had kept healthy on it for forty years.

There was but one thing to do, Jeff decided. Flatnose Link, confronted by the man he had attempted to murder, might be made to talk, but he would have to be captured when Pasco wasn't with him.

Jeff knocked the dottle from his pipe and looked up at the sky. A late lopsided moon was just coming up. He could make it to town by daylight. No doubt, Flatnose and Pasco would have breakfast there. Jeff was about to get up when an unpleasant, rank odor caught his attention.

Just beside him were some tall, coarse-leaved weeds. He hadn't noticed the odor while he was smoking, but the smell was familiar, and Jeff merely glanced at the weeds. Then his head lifted sharply. One stalk had been broken and stripped of its leaves.

"Curious," he muttered. "Ain't no woods' animal eats them things." His eyes suddenly narrowed and he jumped up and ran back to the cabin. Five minutes later he was riding for town.

It was daylight when he rode into the barn and put up his horse. "I got a little business with a gent called Jeff Sloane," he said to the barn man. "Know which hotel he beds down at?"

"None of 'em. Him and Flatnose Link got a cabin in town. Come chuck time, though, you might find him in Ma Summers' eatin' place. She puts up the best grub in town."

Remembering Bighorn and his strange disappearance, Jeff asked if the mountain man had left town.

"Reckon not. That brute he rides is still here packin' away the oats. Come to think of it, I ain't heard nothin' of Bighorn which is plumb peculiar. He'd oughta be drunk and ahowlin' by now."

Jeff found Ma Summers just opening her restaurant. She was a big, energetic woman with a strong, motherly face.

"You're a mite early, young man," she said in a friendly tone. "I got to split some wood. Can't get no help these days with every man in town huntin' gold."

"Show me that woodpile, ma'am," Jeff suggested. "I'll split you a mess of wood while you're throwin' them flapjacks together. 'Twon't be no trouble," he added when she protested.

**W**HILE Jeff was piling the split wood behind the stove, four men came into the restaurant. "Hi, Ma," they called, "how's it for some grub in a hurry? We got to be hittin' the trail."

"All right," she answered, and turned to Jeff. "There's plenty of sausage, eggs, spuds and hot cakes. I'll get rid of these boys and then you can eat."

"Load their plates and I'll wait on 'em," Jeff said.

She looked at him with a twinkle

in her eyes. "I've had men waiters but nary one wearin' buckskins and whiskers and a six-gun."

Jeff carried the plates and coffee out and was turning toward the kitchen when the front door opened. He glanced over his shoulder to see the enormous bulk of Bighorn Bascom just inside the door.

Jeff turned and was about to speak, but the words died behind tightening lips. Two other men had stepped in, one on either side of Bighorn. They were Blackhawk Pasco and Flatnose Link. Pasco's right hand rested on a gun butt. His pale eyes flicked over Jeff and on to the four men at the counter.

Jeff Sloane knew that the man was looking for him. But why was Bighorn with the pair? Then he saw that the giant's gun and knife were not in his belt. Pasco nudged the mountain man with an elbow.

"If he's here point him out," he ordered harshly.

That made the situation plain to Jeff and every nerve in him tingled. He was standing with his back to the kitchen. The thin partition would not stop a bullet and the woman at the stove was in the line of fire. He started out toward the counter as Bighorn's glance passed over his face with no sign of recognition.

"Your man ain't here, Pasco," he said. "Likely we're too early."

Jeff breathed more freely, but only for a moment. Flatnose stepped behind Bighorn and whispered something in Pasco's ear. The pale eyes whipped to Jeff and then slewed to the four men eating. He nodded to Flatnose. "All right, we'll eat."

So Flatnose had recognized him, or was at least suspicious. But he and his companion were holding off till the other four men left. Pasco nudged Bighorn.

"Set down," he said sharply.

As the mountain man straddled a stool, Pasco shifted his left gun to the right side, sticking it through his pants band. Flatnose made a similar shift of his right gun. They were taking no chance of Bascom snatching a gun from the holster nearest him. When they sat down they left a vacant stool on each side of Bighorn.

The other four men at the counter could not fail to see the significance of the set-up, though they did not understand it. They kept their eyes on their plates, eating rapidly as though anxious to get out.

Flatnose was studying Jeff through narrowed lids. "Rustle some grub, fellow," he commanded. "We got no time to waste."

Jeff could feel Pasco's hawk eyes following him as he went back to the kitchen. He noticed that the four men had about cleaned up their plates. Another minute and they would be gone.

Inside the kitchen, Ma Summers had three plates ready. "Get rid of them three quick as you can, son," she told him. "Bascom ain't so bad—just loud-mouthed, but that Flatnose Link is ornery and I don't like that hawk-faced man."

"Mrs. Summers," Jeff said earnestly, "I'm askin' you to go out back till them three leave. Hell's liable to bust loose here any minute. If I live, I'll pay for any damage, but I don't want you stoppin' a stray bullet."

Ma Summers' chin lifted. "I ain't leavin'," she declared. "Twon't be the first shooting I've seen. If it gets too thick, I'll duck behind the stove." At that moment another man came through the front door. "There's Doc Roberts," she said. "I got to fix another plate."

WITH the doctor's entrance the first four pushed back their plates, tossed some coins on the counter and went out hurriedly. Jeff saw Pasco's eyes turn toward the doctor and wondered if the presence of one man might hold off the trouble.

Two things were bothering him. One was that Bighorn Bascom was unarmed. If there was gun play, either Pasco or Flatnose would get the mountain man. The other point was that he wanted a chance to try out the idea that had been in his mind ever since he had seen Ma Summers stirring up the first batch of flapjacks. If it worked, he would know that Pasco had murdered Gopher Simms. If it didn't work—Well, anyway, he wasn't sure he could beat Blackhawk Pasco to a gun.

He carried the plates and coffee out and set them before the three. Pasco watched every move. His left hand rested on his leg close to a gun. Flatnose's glance was fixed on Bighorn. There was an angry scowl on the mountain man's face.

When Jeff brought the doctor's plate, Roberts nodded to him, but made no comment on the work he was doing. It wasn't unusual for a stranger to drift into town and get a short-time job in a restaurant.

Jeff glanced at the other three. They were wolfing their food. Pasco had already eaten half his stack of flapjacks. It was now or never. Jeff moved up in front of Pasco.

"Them flapjacks all right, mister?" he asked politely.

"Sure they're all right," Pasco said without looking up.

"You don't taste nor smell nothin' funny about 'em?"

"Huh?" Pasco's head jerked up.

Without taking his eyes from Pasco, Jeff called to the doctor:

"Doc, ain't there some sort of medicine they make out of Jimson weed?"

"Medicine?" questioned Roberts. "They get stramonium from the leaves of the Jimson weed. It's used sometimes in treating asthma, but it's deadly poison."

"So?" Jeff drawled, his eyes boring Pasco's. He kept on talking while he pulled a small paper-wrapped package from his vest pocket and unfolded it. "I was right careful not to put none in the flapjacks the doc and Bighorn are eating." He pushed the open package in front of Pasco.

For a moment Pasco seemed to freeze as he looked at the little pile of dried leaves. The drawl went out of Jeff's voice, to be replaced by steely anger. "You and Flatnose Link are some younger than Gopher Simms. Maybe it'll take longer to kill you than it did him. But I reckon them flapjacks is the last meal you varmints will eat this side of hell."

Flatnose leaped up with a yell. "Pasco, it's him! He's pizened us same as you done Gopher!" He wheeled toward Roberts. "Doc, fer God's sake, gimme something! I'm dying!"

Blackhawk Pasco's face was chalk-white. His lips twitched. Then, with an oath, he clawed for a gun. Jeff Sloane hurled the coffee cup in his face, vaulted the counter and reached for him.

The man twisted like a writhing snake. "It's a trick, Flatnose!" he shouted, and his gun roared. The bullet burned across Jeff's thigh at the same moment his fist thudded against Pasco's chin. They went down together.

Above them Bighorn's voice boomed: "A trick, huh! You flat-nosed killer, here's a better one."

There was a splintering of wood and a crashing of glass as though the front of the building had been torn out.

PASCO was fighting like a wild cat, but Jeff's grip on his gun hand was like a bear trap. He drove one knee into the man's belly, lashed two savage blows to his chin and felt Pasco go limp. Jeff dropped the killer, snatched both his guns and leaped up, remembering that Bighorn was unarmed.

The whole front of the building was a wreck when Bascom strode in from the street, lugging Flatnose like a sack of flour. A crowd had gathered and behind Jeff a voice demanded, "What's coming off here?" Jeff swung around to see Ma Summers and a man wearing a badge.

Before Jeff could speak, the giant wheeled to face the crowd and his roar shook the walls.

"*Wah-ho! Mountain man!* Bighorn Bascom is a-howlin'!" He let Flatnose drop with a thud. "Fust time I didn't throw you far enough, you back-shootin' whelp. This time I aim to bust a hole in the middle of the road."

Flatnose screamed as a huge hand gripped an ankle and an arm. "*Wah-ho!*" Bighorn bellowed. "Get yo' hoofs out th' way, fellows. He's a-comin' fast and he's shore ganna bounce!"

With a heave the giant swung Flatnose above his head, took one forward stride and let him go. Flatnose hit the middle of the street, rolled over twice and lay groaning.

"Holy cow!" a man yelled. "Twenty feet, and Flatnose weighs all of two hundred!"

Bighorn strode out, dragged the dazed man back into the restaurant and dropped him. "Jeff," he roared,

"that there Pasco jammed a gun in my back when I was a-goin' to get that liquor and this bull-nosed reptile beat me over the horns with his shootin' iron. When I come to I was in their cabin and they had my gun and knife. Pasco figured to make me p'int you out so's he could gun you."

Blackhawk Pasco was sitting up and glaring at Flatnose. "You damned blundering idiot," he snarled. "If you hadn't bungled your job, we'd have made this stick."

Again the officer demanded to know what it was all about.

"Them two murdered Gopher Simms to steal his claims," Jeff explained. "They poisoned him with Jimson weed."

"I didn't have nothin' to do with that," Flatnose whined. "Pasco put the stuff in Gopher's flapjacks. I ain't hangin' fer somethin' I never done." He looked up at Jeff. "Pasco learned about you from Gopher and sent me up north to kill you, but you ain't dead and they can't hang me fer somethin' I never done." A look of terror came into his eyes. "Fellow, did you put poison in them flapjacks?"

"Not any," Jeff said grimly. "But I was right when I said they was the last meal you'd eat this side of hell. Leastways, I reckon you'd as soon be in hell as spend twenty years in prison."

He turned to the owner of the restaurant. "Ma Summers, how much I owe you fer the damage Bighorn done?"

"Not a cent, son," the motherly-looking restaurant owner declared. "But I'd sure admire to see Bighorn toss that ornery Flatnose once more. I got an idea he ain't done his best yet."



## THE STORY OF THE WEST

told in pictures and text by

**GERARD DELANO**

The Alamo was an old fortification built during the first settlement of San Antonio by the Spaniards. It was originally designed as a safety refuge for the colonists against Indian attacks, with room for them, their property and stock.

The total garrison of Texans manning the Alamo was only about one hundred and fifty to one hundred and sixty men. These were under the joint command of W. B. Travis and James Bowie (the man for whom the bowie knife was named). Santa Anna and his Mexican troops

reached San Antonio on February 22, 1836, completely surprising the population of the town. The garrison of the Alamo, however, retired in good order to the fort and though confusion existed, there was a prompt show of resistance.

The battle opened that evening with an exchange of cannon shells between the Alamo and the invaders. The cannonading continued the next day in increasing degree, the enemies' siege lasting eleven days as more and more batteries and troops arrived on the field and trained



their guns on the crumbling walls.

No assault was made on the fort till the final storming. By the sixth of March a large breach had been pounded in the north wall. At a signal from a bugle the Mexican infantry rushed forward. Like a tidal wave they poured through the gaping hole and over the walls. Travis fell beside the cannon he was commanding, shot through the forehead. Bowie, who was dying of pneumonia, was killed in his bed, but not before he had shot down several men.

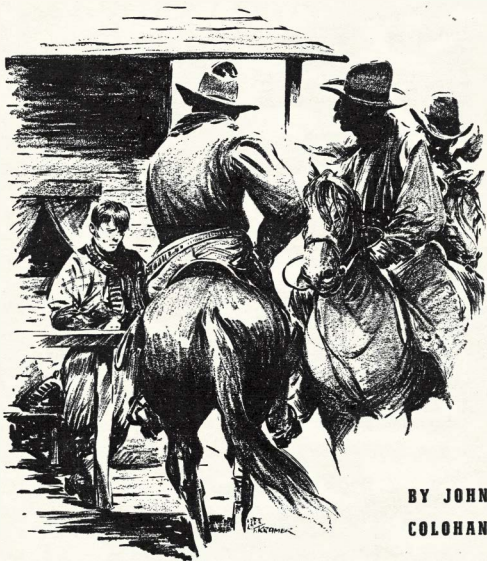
Room after room was carried by the Mexicans at the point of the bayonet. The gory struggle consisted of a number of separate and desperate combats, often hand to hand. Soldiers fell in heaps in front of the long barracks on the west side. This was the bloodiest spot.

The actual storming of the Alamo occupied but thirty minutes. Such few of the Texans who were not killed at once in the assault were promptly executed by Santa Anna.

There were approximately two thousand four hundred Mexicans involved in this siege and final assault, and of these some five hundred were either killed or wounded. The American defenders had made every shell count.

Within a few hours after the smoke cleared away, all the American bodies were gathered into three heaps, sprinkled with fuel and burned. So fell the Alamo—the torch that lighted the way to the independence of Texas.

**NEXT WEEK: THE FUR TRADE  
IN THE SOUTHWEST**



BY JOHN  
COLOHAN

## MAN TRAP

DON LANG was sitting on the Diamond Dot front porch patching a broken headstall when he first saw the little bunched group of riders moving through dust beyond the pasture gate. By the time they had reached the gate he had recognized Fay Moss as one of them, and he put the bridle aside and sat there quietly, miserably conscious of the

feeling of craven fear that boiled up inside him at sight of that big man on the prancing sorrel horse.

There were three riders in the bunch and they came down the Diamond Dot lane at a jog to pull up before the porch. They were Anchor riders all, Fay Moss, Jess Riley, and little, bowlegged Shorty Higgins.

Fay Moss shifted his weight care-



lessly onto one leg in the saddle. "Howdy," he said.

"Howdy," Don Lang said politely. He stood up then. Even standing he knew he wasn't very impressive. He was only ten years old, a youngster in faded Levis and scuffed boots, with a pair of intent blue eyes peering out of a snub-nosed, freckled face.

"Would it be," asked Moss, "that your old man was somewhere hereabouts, son?"

"He's out in back," answered Don.

Fay Moss was a big, heavy-shouldered man with a black mustache and skin that was almost as dark, and even though he was foreman for Grandpa Champs' Anchor outfit, Don didn't like him at all. Whenever he saw Fay Moss he thought of that day in school a year or so ago when Miss Penny had come down the aisle to tell Spud Ainty that his mother was waiting for him outside. Spud and Don Lang had been desk partners that year. He remembered how he had watched Spud and his mother walking down the stone walk toward the schoolhouse gate where a team and buggy was waiting; and that night he had heard Steve talking to Cal Bennett, the general store owner, and then he knew that Fay Moss had killed Spud's father in an argument over a fence.

So Don was afraid of Fay Moss, but he was careful not to show it because Steve had told him that he should never be afraid of anything. Whenever he met Fay Moss he always tried to be polite.

And Fay Moss leaned forward in the saddle and looked down at him. "Tell your dad Fay Moss wants to see him."

The boy nodded. "I'll tell Steve," he said.

THAT was how it was with Steve and him. They lived alone on the ranch, did the work together; and there was no baby talk between them. Don went around the house and found Steve on his knees in the corral, wrapping wire around a broken post.

"Fay Moss is out in front, Steve," Don said. "Him and Jess Riley and Shorty Higgins. They want to see you."

Steve Lang came to his feet, a tall, thin-faced, still young man in Levis, with shoulders that held a hint of latent explosive power. He rubbed the heel of his hand across the stubble of beard along his jaw. "Moss!" he frowned. "Now what in—" He broke the thought off. "Bueno, Don, I'll see what he wants."

The boy was at his heels as he started around the cabin, but Steve Lang put an end to that. "You keep out o' sight, mister," he said. "I reckon mebber I better handle this alone."

And so Don stood fast until Steve had disappeared around the corner of the cabin, but then he dived for the kitchen and ran through the house. The front door was open and Don was already peering through the doorway when his father came in sight.

Don Lang wasted no time in formalities. "The boy said you wanted to see me, Moss," he said.

The shadow of a grin twisted across the Anchor foreman's dark face. "That's right," he said. "Fact is, Lang, there was a dozen or so head of Diamond Dot stuff at Willow Spring this morning. That's fenced land."

"It's Anchor fence," Steve Lang commented. "It's Anchor's job to keep it up."

Fay Moss was still grinning. "We shoved them cows through at Stony

Point," he said. "I figured you'd like to know."

And then, although there wasn't much change in his dad's face, Don knew that Steve was plenty angry. When Steve felt that way he had a trick of twisting his mouth so that it almost seemed like he was smiling. And Don could understand why Steve was angry, too, because the Stony Point drift fence was clear across on the far side of Anchor, and if Fay Moss had turned the cows out there it meant they'd be scattered through all the badland canyons beyond the Anchor fence so that it would take three or four days, or maybe a week, to round them up and get them back to the ranch again.

There was a long moment of silence, with Steve Lang standing straight and tall in the sunlight and Fay Moss grinning down from the saddle. And then Steve nodded. "I'm obliged, Moss," he said quietly. "I'll try to remember it. And now, if you've said what you came to say, I'll take it kindly if you'll get to hell off this ranch! This is fenced land, too."

When you were only ten years old there were things you couldn't understand. When your grandfather was rich, and you and your dad were very poor, it was hard to understand why the men who worked for your grandfather should always be trying to make trouble. You loved your Grandpa Champ, of course. He had given you a swell paint pony for a birthday present, and he was always doing things for you. It was hard to figure out.

Grandpa Champ was rich. He owned the biggest ranch in this end of the State and he kept a dozen riders working for him all the time. But Steve and Grandpa Champ didn't seem to like each other. They

never even spoke if they happened to meet in town or on the road, and the men who worked for Grandpa Champ were always trying to make trouble. Don was always afraid that some day it was going to end up in a gun fight between Steve and Fay Moss. He thought that probably the next time he rode over to the big ranch he would ask Grandpa Champ to tell Fay Moss to keep away from the Diamond Dot. He wasn't sure about that, though. Grandpa Champ was a pretty fierce old man, and Don was a little bit in awe of him.

**B**UT it was a week after Fay Moss had come and gone before small Don Lang paid his next visit to the big ranch. Riding the paint pony, Apache, which Grandpa Champ had given him for a birthday present, he jogged down the long, cottonwood-lined road which led to the big square Anchor house. After he had turned the pony loose in the pasture he saw Shorty Higgins standing in the door of the blacksmith shop holding a red-hot horseshoe in a pair of tongs. Shorty waved the horseshoe at him.

"Hi, button," called Shorty, who was shoeing a horse. "Step right over and I'll fit you to a pair of shoes."

Don watched Shorty shape the shoe and nail it solid. He learned that his grandfather had gone in to town early that morning and had not yet returned. So after talking with Shorty for a spell, Don went around to the kitchen to see One Lung.

One Lung was the Chinese cook. His name wasn't really One Lung, but that was what everybody called him and he always laughed about it. One Lung was frying doughnuts. He made some hot cocoa and Don

sat in the pleasant kitchen eating doughnuts and drinking cocoa and watching One Lung drop little white rings of dough into the boiling grease. Presently he wandered through the big living room, found a book in the bookcase and dropped into a chair before the open fireplace.

This was late April but it was still cold outside, and a cottonwood chunk was blazing in the fireplace. Don spread the book wide before him, but he didn't try to read. He sat there watching the play of flames in the fireplace, just thinking about things. And then he knew that he must have gone to sleep, because a loud noise awoke him suddenly, and he knew the noise was Grandpa Champ pounding on a table like he did sometimes when he was angry. And Grandpa Champ was cussing.

"Damn it, Smalley!" he was saying. He was talking pretty loud. "I'm not talking about Steve Lang! My daughter married him—I didn't. She married him, and she left all this to live in a damn log cabin, and she died there. That's the end of it. I'm talking about the kid!"

And Don sat up straighter in the big chair, knowing now that Grandpa Champ was talking about his mother. She had died a long time ago, and Don couldn't remember her at all, but he wanted to hear what Grandpa Champ was saying.

"Some day that boy will own this whole damn shebang," his grandfather said. "I want him to be ready for it. I want him to have an education. Hell's bells, Smalley, right now he's half fed and half clothed and he's running wild like an Indian kid!"

And then the boy heard another voice and he knew it belonged to Mr. Smalley, the lawyer from Sager City.

"But, after all, Baxter," Mr. Smalley was arguing, "Steve Lang is the boy's father. You can't go behind that. And you can't take a boy from his father unless you can establish unfitness of some sort. Steve Lang is worse than broke and the devil knows how he manages to hang on to that outfit, but that doesn't disqualify him as a parent. You've got no case in court, Baxter."

Don continued to sit quietly in the big chair before the fireplace. He knew now that Grandpa Champ and Mr. Smalley were in the small office opening off the living room, where Grandpa Champ had his writing desk and the big iron safe in which he kept his money. He could picture the two men sitting there. Grandpa Champ was a big man, bigger than Steve, bigger even than Fay Moss. His hair was gray, but his beard was still red. Sometimes in bright sunlight Grandpa Champ's beard looked like it was on fire. And Mr. Smalley, the lawyer from Sager City, was a little man who looked rather like a mouse.

Mr. Smalley was talking again, but now his voice was so low that the boy could hardly hear the words. "Of course, Baxter, if Steve Lang should land in jail, if he were convicted on a criminal charge—something like that—"

There was the sound of a fist banging on a desk. "Damn it, Smalley!" Grandpa Champ roared. "Don't you turn mealy-mouthed on me! I pay you for advice—and I want it dealt out in plain English."

AND then a chair was pushed back and someone was walking across the floor. Don knew it was Mr. Smalley because when Grandpa Champ walked he always stomped and made a lot of noise. And a lock

clicked and he knew then that Mr. Smalley had closed the door between the living room and Grandpa Champ's office.

He couldn't hear much after the door was closed. Once there was the sound of a fist banging on a desk and he heard his grandfather's voice, declaring angrily: "I wouldn't trust Tex Enders ten feet." But the rest of it was just a murmur of voices through the door. Presently Don grew tired of waiting, and he went back through the kitchen to the pasture and saddled Apache again and went home without even seeing Grandpa Champ at all.

It was nearly dark when he got home, and Steve was cooking supper. He wondered if he should tell Steve what he had heard, but in the end he didn't say anything because he figured that it would just make Steve feel bad and he was always hoping that something would happen so that Steve and Grandpa Champ would be friends. But after supper, when the dishes were washed and put away, Don asked Steve what it was that had caused the trouble between him and Grandpa Champ.

But Steve just shook his head. "It's a pretty long story, Don," he said. "I'll tell you all about it some day."

So, instead, Steve told him a fairy story. Don didn't believe in fairy stories any more, but he didn't let on about it because he didn't want to hurt Steve's feelings. This story was all about a beautiful princess who lived in a great castle in a far-off land. Her father was rich and powerful, and the princess was very beautiful, and so a lot of great men wanted to marry her. And her father wanted her to marry one of these great men, but the princess

didn't care for any of them, and so she ran away with a poor cowboy.

Don grinned at Steve then. "I know how it ends, Steve," he said.

Steve looked at him. "How does it end?"

"So they got married and lived happily ever afterward," the boy said.

But Steve looked at him in the queerest way, with his lips tight and a little white knot of muscle showing under the brown skin along his jaw. And then Steve put an arm around him.

"That's right," Steve said. "That's the way it turned out, Don. They lived happily ever afterward."

And Steve got up and went across the room and stood looking out the kitchen window. And that was funny, too, because it was dark outside and Don knew that you couldn't see anything through the glass. But Steve stood there for a long time.

**B**ESIDES the spotted Apache pony which Grandpa Champ had given him for a birthday present and the crippled collie pup which he had picked up in Jim Lester's sheep camp, Don had one other possession highly prized. This was a wonderful secret cave high up on a hillside above the Salt Flat. He thought probably this cave had been one of the hide-outs of the Haggerty gang before Sheriff Gwinn had caught them and sent them off to prison.

Of course, the cave didn't really belong to Don except in make believe, but he was the only one who knew about it, so that part was all right. From the flat plain below you couldn't even see the opening because it was hidden by brush and overhanging rocks, but after you climbed the hill there was a hole

through which you had to crawl on hands and knees and then you were in the cave.

Inside there was plenty of room—more room than he and Steve had in the cabin on the Diamond Dot. Sometimes, playing in the cave, Don was a prospector who had stumbled onto a marvelous lost mine. Sometimes he was an outlaw hiding out, and when he was an outlaw he would lie stretched flat at the mouth of the cave, just looking out across the white expanse of the Salt Flat toward Sager City in the direction from which a posse would have to come.

And because a holed-up outlaw would need supplies in case of a siege, he had brought supplies from the ranch, potatoes and crackers, and some cans of pork and beans. And he had lugged a five-pound coffee can filled with water all the way from Payne Creek. Sometimes he built a fire in the cave and roasted potatoes in the hot ashes and sat there watching the bright flames dancing against the dark walls of the cave. He thought that some day he might build himself a bunk and bring some blankets from the ranch, but he had never got around to that.

But all of that came to an end one day when Steve went riding by along the edge of the Flat below. Sprawled at the mouth of the cave, Don called out to him until Steve stopped his horse and glanced inquiringly over the hillside. Even then Steve couldn't locate the cave until Don crawled out and waved at him.

Steve swung down from his horse and started up the hill. It was pretty steep going and it took him quite awhile to reach the mouth of the cave, and when he got there he

leaned against the rocky shelf and looked at the brush and rocks piled up around the cave.

"My gosh, Don!" he said finally. "So this is the wonderful cave?"

The boy nodded. "This is it, Steve. Come on inside and I'll show you."

But his father shook his head. "Nothing doing, Don. I'll feel safer on level ground. Come on down, I want to talk to you."

He followed Steve down, and when the two of them stood in the white alkali of the Salt Flat, Steve told him that he had to keep away from the cave, that he couldn't play there any more. And when Don tried to argue, Steve pointed out a split in the rock wall above the cave, where a great chunk of the mountain seemed to hang loose in the air.

"It's too dangerous," he said, and Don could see that he was dead in earnest. "You might start one rock rolling and bring that whole mountain down. You could bury yourself and nobody would ever know what happened. You've got to keep away from there."

There was no use arguing with Steve when he set his jaw that way. They rode back to the ranch together in silence.

That night, late, after Don had gone to bed, Steve Lang had a visitor. Don was just drifting off to sleep when he heard the knocking at the door. He heard Steve cross the room and say, "Howdy, Enders. Long time no see. Come on inside."

Sleepily, Don listened for a while to the murmur of voices from the kitchen. Steve and the stranger were talking about horses. Once the stranger lifted his voice. "I tell you, Lang," he said urgently, "it's an easy thousand dollars. Where else

can you pick up that kind of money?"

For a moment then the boy was wide awake, remembering suddenly where he had heard that stranger's name before. It had been that day at the Anchor when Grandpa Champ and Mr. Smalley had been talking. "I wouldn't trust Tex Enders ten feet," Grandpa Champ had said. And now Tex Enders was in the kitchen talking to Steve. Talking about an easy thousand dollars.

Then, floating toward sleep, Don had another thought that brushed lesser matters from his mind. Steve had told him today not to go to the cave any more, but now Don knew that he would have to make another trip because he had just remembered that he had left his knife behind in the cave today. It was a swell knife, a Barlow with four blades. It had one stock blade, and one blade that was a can-opener and screwdriver combined, and another blade for punching holes in leather, and still another that you could use to open beer bottles. Altogether, it was too good a knife to lose. Don went to sleep on the thought.

A LAMP was burning in the kitchen when Steve awoke Don in the morning. It was still dark in the cabin, but outside, through the bedroom window, the boy could see the first faint light of dawn shoving up above the mountain rim. Steve was sitting on the foot of the bed, fully dressed.

"I've got to make a long ride, Don," Steve told him. "It's pretty important. I'll leave breakfast on the table and you can go ahead and sleep. When you get up you can ride in to town and get that pair of boots you've been wanting."

A trip to Sager City alone! A

day in town! That was an event. Don sat up in bed, wide awake.

"I'll leave a dollar on the table for eating money," Steve said. "Tell Joe Millett to charge the boots to me. You can spend the day in town but try to get back home before dark. You reckon you can do that?"

"Sure," the boy said eagerly. "Sure I can, Steve. I've been to town before—I can take care of myself."

Steve reached out and roughed his hair playfully. "You're a good kid, Don. Don't know what I'd do without you. Go on back to sleep, there's lots of time yet before morning."

When Don awoke again, Steve was gone. He breakfasted in haste, picked up the silver dollar which was grub money in town, and went out and caught the paint pony. And because this was a special trip, and because when you owned a horse like Apache you couldn't be too particular about how you kept him up, he worked on the horse for an hour with brush and curry comb until the spotted hide gleamed in the sunlight.

He climbed into saddle finally and turned the paint pony toward town, and he was two miles or so along the way when he thought of something else. He remembered the Barlow knife left behind him in the cave. It meant going out of his way, but he had the whole day before him and he didn't want to lose the knife, so he spun the pony around and pointed him toward Salt Flat and the cave.

Apache was full of life, dancing and jumping around and making believe he was going to stampee, so the boy gave him a free bit and turned the trip over to him. They traveled at gallop then, with the morning air cold against Don's face

and the wind whistling in his ears and behind them a line of white dust reaching back for half a mile. When they were halfway to the cave, Don saw horsemen moving along the far rim of the Flat, and even in the distance he could recognize the big black horse that his Grandpa Champ always rode.

He met the men almost directly below the secret cave. Grandpa Champ and Fay Moss rode in front, and behind were four more of the Anchor men. Grandpa Champ's red beard shone like flame and he pushed his big black sombrero back on his forehead and seemed surprised to see his grandson.

"Howdy there, young fellow," he called out. "Where might you be going so early in the morning?"

"I'm going to Sager City," answered Don. He tried not to sound important. "I'm going in to buy a pair of boots."

"You are?" said Grandpa Champ. "You're riding the wrong road to get to Sager City."

So then Don told his grandfather about the cave and about the knife left behind yesterday, and he pointed out the cave high up on the rocky slope above them.

"I see," said Grandpa Champ. But his glance had shifted from the boy and he was squinting his eyes against the strong sunlight and staring across the dazzling white of the alkali waste land. In the far distance a lone horseman was riding toward them, with white dust rising in thick clouds behind him. He was riding fast.

Fay Moss spurred his horse forward and came up beside the old man. "That's Riley now, Champ," he said.

No one spoke, and the rider drew near and nearer until he jerked

down a sweat-stained horse in front of Grandpa Champ. It was Jess Riley and he spoke in haste.

"The horses are gone, Champ," he said. "Steve Lang snaked 'em out two hours after daylight, an'—"

And then for the first time he noticed small Don Lang, half hidden by the bulk of the bearded man on the big black horse. His voice seemed to fade out as he stared at the boy in stricken surprise. Until Grandpa Champ barked a question:

"How many?"

Never had Grandpa Champ's face looked quite so stern; never had his voice sounded quite so harsh. Jess Riley seemed to speak reluctantly.

"Twelve horses," he said slowly. "From the upper mesa pasture. He tied them head to tail and pointed south."

And then the boy saw that Grandpa Champ was looking at him. Grandpa Champ seemed to be studying about something, and then he spoke to Fay Moss. "You can ride on with the men, Fay," Grandpa Champ said. "Wait at Harvey Gap. I guess you know what's to be done."

"Yeah," said Fay Moss. "I know what's to be done."

"I've got to ride in to town," Grandpa Champ said. "You see, me and Donny are going in to get a pair of boots."

**D**ON LANG sat quietly in his saddle. This was men's talk, and perhaps he wasn't old enough to understand. He knew that they were trying to talk around him now so that he wouldn't understand, and they might just as well have spared themselves the trouble because he knew what had happened. He knew that Steve had stolen some of Grandpa Champ's horses, and he



knew that Fay Moss and the other men were going to try to catch Steve at Harvey Gap.

Once Shorty Higgins had told him that Grandpa Champ raised the finest horses in the State. Shorty had told him that Mr. Bell, the banker in Sager City, had paid Grandpa Champ a thousand dollars for the team of matched bays that Mr. Bell drove behind his rig in town. And Don knew that the choicest of Grandpa Champ's horses were kept in the upper-mesa pasture. And now Steve had stolen twelve of them!

He didn't care about that. Ever since he could remember Grandpa Champ's men had been making trouble for Steve, and if Steve wanted to steal some horses to get even, well, that part of it was all right. But he didn't want Steve to be hurt.

Fay Moss lifted a gloved hand. "We'll be riding," he said.

They rode. The boy watched them whirl their mounts and head straight out across the floor of the Salt Flat. They were riding to Harvey Gap. They were going to wait there for Steve to try to get through with a bunch of stolen horses.

"Well, Donny," said Grandpa Champ, turning to him, "I reckon if we're going to town for boots we better be on our way. Climb up and get that knife and we'll be starting."

Don had forgotten about the knife. It didn't matter to him now, but he didn't feel like trying to explain, so he climbed down out of the saddle and started up the steep slope toward the cave. He went over the familiar path slowly, worming his way around boulders and climbing like a squirrel until he had

reached the dark entrance of the cave. He ducked inside and found the knife still on the flat rock where he had left it yesterday, and he put the knife in his pocket, feeling none of the joy he had expected in its recovery.

Things were all mixed up in his mind. Last night a man named Enders had called on Steve and the talk had been about horses. And once he had heard Grandpa Champ say that Tex Enders couldn't be trusted ten feet. That had been the day at Anchor when Grandpa Champ and Mr. Smalley had been talking, when Mr. Smalley had said something about sending Steve to jail. So maybe Tex Enders had framed Steve so that Mr. Smalley could send him to jail.

Don started to crawl out of the cave, but he lingered for an instant in the low opening, hating to quit the friendly darkness. He could see Grandpa Champ down on the Flat below, waiting patiently on the big black horse. He could see Fay Moss and the other men riding across the white plain toward Harvey Gap, where they were going to wait for Steve. Steve had stolen some of Grandpa Champ's horses and so they were going to try to catch him and send him to jail. Maybe they would kill him.

And suddenly Don remembered what Steve had told him yesterday. Steve had warned him that this cave was dangerous. "You might start one rock rolling and bring the whole mountain down," Steve had said. "You could bury yourself and no one would ever know."

And to the small boy the thought came that it would be a fine thing if the mountain came down now while he was inside the cave, because Grandpa Champ would have

to call Fay Moss and the other men back to dig him out. And if they did that they wouldn't be able to wait at Harvey Gap for Steve and the stolen horses.

A great, jagged rock was balanced almost on end right at the mouth of the cave. Don knew that it was foolish, he knew that he could never budge that enormous rock. But he found a cedar limb, one of the chunks that he had dragged inside for firewood, and he shoved one end of the limb under the rock and pried down with all his might. And the rock moved! Ever so slightly, but it had moved. He threw his weight on the cedar pole again, and this time the pole slipped and he skinned his knuckles against the rocky floor of the cave.

But that great rock was moving now! It was turning, turning, slowly at first, and then it went all at once, roaring and crashing, and another rock followed after it, and another, and dirt was sliding down over the mouth of the cave. And suddenly there was a rumbling, grinding roar, like the sound of distant thunder, and the floor of the cave seemed to tremble violently, and a small boy crouched in pitch darkness, amazed and frightened by this thing he had accomplished.

Gradually all sound ceased, and the cave was quiet. Like a grave. Don lifted his voice, shouting at the top of his lungs, but the crowding darkness seemed to smother the sound, and no answer came back to him. He told himself that it was all right. Grandpa Champ and the men would dig him out. Only he couldn't hear anything that sounded, like men digging. And time passed. Endless time. Hours and hours and hours.

He grew hungry at last, and

thirsty. He had no matches in his pocket, but he managed to find a can of beans and a few crackers. He opened the beans with his pocket-knife and ate some crackers, and drank water out of the five-pound coffee can. There was only a little water in the can. It wouldn't last very long.

He tried to sing, to keep from being afraid, but he stopped that, because if he sang he wouldn't be able to hear the men when they started to dig him out. But when he stopped singing he couldn't hear anything. Maybe they wouldn't dig him out; maybe they wouldn't be able to find him. Maybe he would have to stay here in darkness until he died!

OUTSIDE, men were working feverishly, men and more men as the word of what had happened spread to Sager City. The whole face of the mountain wall had slid away, and a small boy had been buried under thousands of tons of rock and dirt. When the rescuers tried to shovel the dirt away more dirt came in to take its place, so that in the end they had to drive a tunnel, timbering as they went.

They had no way of knowing whether the boy was alive or dead. They worked furiously, in half-hour shifts, until dark, and then they worked through the night by the light of lanterns and flaming torches. By nightfall of the second day they had managed to drive an iron pipe through, and after it had been cleared of dirt they heard ever so faintly a small voice coming through. After that they worked more frantically than before.

It wasn't so bad for Don after the pipe came through. Then he could talk to Steve and to Grandpa

Champ and hear their voices coming back to him, sounding thin and far away. They sent water through the pipe, and hot cocoa, and soup, and he caught it all impartially in the five-pound coffee can. And he could hear scraping noises and he knew it was the sounds made by men digging toward him, and after that it was kind of like a game. Only it seemed to take an awful long time for them to dig him out.

He was asleep when they found him. His father was the first man through, on hands and knees, pushing a shovel before him, and huge, red-bearded Champ Baxter was right behind him. Steve Lang saw the small figure sprawled on the rocky floor and he stooped and gathered the boy in his arms.

That was how it was when Don awoke. He was in Steve's arms, and Grandpa Champ was standing there holding a lighted lantern. Steve was holding him tight, like he didn't mean ever to let go of him again.

"You're all right, Don," Steve was saying, over and over again. "You're all right."

The boy was wide awake all at once. "Sure. Sure, I'm just fine, Steve."

And then Steve put him down. In the lantern light Steve's face was dirty and covered with whiskers and he looked awfully tired. "We'll be outside in a minute, Don," Steve said. "There's been a little cave-in and they're clearing it away. Then we're getting out."

All the time Grandpa Champ had never said a word. He just stood there holding the lantern. He looked pretty tired, too. And then Steve turned to him. "You'll find a dozen Anchor horses in Hank Best's corral at Little Park," he said.

Grandpa Champ lifted his head. "Horses?"

"Your horses," Steve said quietly. "You see, I met a gent who was offering fancy prices for horseflesh. He wasn't interested in brands, so I took a dozen of yours out of the upper-mesa pasture. By the time I got them to Little Park I decided I didn't want that kind of money, so I turned them over to Hank Best and told him you'd call for them."

"That was a frame-up, Steve," said Grandpa Champ. He was talking awfully slow. "I hired Tex Enders to bait a trap for you. My men were going to wait for you that day at Harvey Gap. Only—" And then he put an arm around Don's shoulder. "I've been a damned fool, Steve. It took a boy to show me that."

"Mebbe," said Steve, "we've both been damned fools."

And that was all. Yet it was enough. It was enough to tell a small boy that Steve and Grandpa Champ weren't enemies any more. That they wouldn't ever be enemies again.

And then Shorty Higgins shoved his head inside the cave and said that everything was clear, and they started out through the tunnel. Don was in front, and at first he had to crawl on hands and knees, and then he could stand up, and finally he saw the white sand of the Salt Flat below him. He saw teams and wagons lined up, and a lot of horses, and it seemed like everybody in the whole county was down there looking up at him. He waved his hand and a great cheer went up, and it made him feel sort of foolish. But the sun was shining. He couldn't ever remember when the sun had shone so brightly.



BY ERIC HOWARD

## DEUCES WILD

THE lean, tall, tow-headed youngster who was known through ten counties as the Gamblin' Kid, stepped out of the general merchandise store in Pine City. Dressed in a complete new outfit from head to feet, he looked fit to kill. His hat, a flat-crowned black sombrero of the type he favored, and his new black boots had cost a pretty penny, but the Kid hadn't paid for them. Following his usual custom, he had offered the storekeeper, Sim Bartlett,

"double or nothin'. One roll o' the dice, an' you can use your own dice."

Sim was too greedy to miss such a chance. In spite of his reputation for luck, the Kid had to lose some time. This might be the time. His small eyes gleaming, Sim rolled the dice. Then the Kid rolled—and won.

Sim's lips moved in a burst of inaudible profanity. Rich as he was, he was deeply hurt by the loss he had suffered. The Kid, who had ar-

rived in town an hour before dressed in worn Levis, a torn shirt, battered hat and run-down boots, had spent only two bits in Sim's store. That had been for a sack of tobacco. And he had walked out wearing a hundred dollars' worth of clothes!

A faint smile played around the Kid's lips, giving his usually rather stern face a suggestion of boyishness. He had counted only eighteen birthdays, but the swift rush of events during the past few years had given him the maturity of twice his age. He had been on his own since he was twelve, riding the long trails, holding his own in a land of tough men. His luck had already become a legend.

He glanced at the saddle on the black gelding that stood at the hitch rail before the store. He could use a new saddle. He turned and spoke to Sim.

"I'll roll 'em again," he offered, "for the best saddle you got—double or nothin'."

"No!" the storekeeper snapped. "You come in here again, you lay cash on the counter. Damn all gamblers!"

The Kid laughed. "Damn all storekeepers," he said pleasantly. "You're so used to chargin' six prices for your truck it goes agin' the grain to take a loss."

He moved to the side of his horse and swung lithely into the saddle. As he rode down the street he saw grizzled Sheriff Dan Hayes step out of his office. The Kid waved his hand. The sheriff peered at him.

"Leavin' town?" he called out.

The Kid nodded. "Just came in to get me some clothes. Ask Sim. Adios!"

The sheriff seemed relieved. Not that he disliked the Kid, or didn't trust him. But where the Kid was, things happened. It was just as well

that he was leaving Pine City, especially since Clem Laler had been paroled from the State pen and would be coming back. The Kid had had a hand in sending him to jail. If they met there would be trouble.

As he rode out of town, the Kid was also thinking of Clem Laler. And of Guy Smithson, the lawyer who had defended Laler at the trial. Laler had been in jail for two years, on an old charge of robbery that had caught up with him. The Kid remembered a scene that had occurred in Laler's saloon the night he was arrested. A marshal had come to nab Laler, having finally traced him to Pine City. Two of Laler's men had gun-clubbed the marshal and tossed him into a back room. Laler was trying to decide what to do with him.

The Kid had pretended he wanted the marshal, had an old score to settle with him. Laler had agreed to cut the cards for the lawman. The Kid had won, but Laler tried to renege. That made the Kid so mad he shoved a gun into the marshal's hand and watched him arrest Laler.

Laler had threatened to get the Kid for that. He had been convicted and given a long sentence, but had only served a couple of years. His lawyer, Guy Smithson, had pulled some political wires and Laler was paroled. The Kid remembered the fee Laler had paid Smithson. He had deeded him the Circle F Ranch.

And that ranch was what interested the Kid at the moment.

Not that he wanted it, or any ranch. He preferred to be free to ride where he pleased, to do what he liked. He had been as far south as Juarez, as far north as Billings; he liked a frequent change of scenery.

The Circle F had once belonged

to the Kid's friends, Bob and Myra Fillmore. Bob, who didn't have the sense his sister did, had lost it bucking Laler's crooked games.

THE Kid well remembered the time he had fallen across the porch at the Circle F ranchhouse, badly wounded, with three bad hombres on his trail—men whose plans he had upset. He had been at the end of his rope that time. His luck had run out. But Myra Fillmore, a brave-eyed young woman of twenty-five, had dragged him into the house, had hidden him and nursed him back to health. The Kid never forgot that he owed plenty to Myra Fillmore.

The Kid turned off the road, cut into an arroyo. He came to a deserted nester's shack in a grove of cottonwoods. He tied his horse out of sight, some distance from the shack, then walked back to it. No one had been there for some time. But someone would come soon, he was sure.

He sat down, cross-legged, in the shade of a cottonwood, built a cigarette and took a pack of cards from his pocket. He shuffled the cards idly, then set out a game of solitaire. He had infinite patience and no nerves. An hour passed, another. The sun was high. The Kid got up, walked to his horse, took a hard biscuit and some jerky out of a saddlebag.

At last the Kid heard hoofbeats, then voices. Through the trees, he saw two riders approaching the cabin—beefy, squint-eyed Clem Laler, and his smooth, dandified lawyer, Guy Smithson.

The Kid thrust the food back into his saddlebag, dropped down and crawled forward.

The Kid had friends everywhere, as well as plenty of enemies, and he

had been tipped off by the old man who cleaned up Smithson's office that the lawyer was going to meet Laler here before Laler showed up in Pine City.

From what the Kid could see, Laler and Smithson seemed to be prying up the plank floor in the shack. The Kid's smoky eyes glowed. This was sure something he should be in on. By wriggling forward, he got close to the shack and could hear their voices clearly.

"Well, well," Smithson said suavely, "so you're the one who managed that little affair at the bank. Very clever, my friend. Not even I suspected you—and I'd suspect you of anything."

"I didn't pull it," Laler growled. "Hadn't a thing to do with it. The way it was, I jest come into possession o' this tin box when the feller that got away with it turned up his toes. You remember Buck Thomas?"

"Of course. One of my best clients. Something very strange about Buck's death." The lawyer's voice was oily and sarcastic. "Died of poison, drinking bad water out of a waterhole he knew as well as he knew his right hand."

"Yeah. Must've been crazed by thirst," Laler said hurriedly. "Anyway, here it is. Buck turned it over to me before he started out on that desert trip. Well, you got me out. You claim it cost you plenty. We agreed on the terms. I think you're holdin' me up, but a bargain's a bargain. We'll split this, an' you deed me back the Circle F."

The lawyer was silent for a moment. Then he drawled suavely, "Strange everybody jumped to the conclusion Buck had gone loco enough to drink that water. Funny nobody examined his canteen to see if it had poison—"

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"Shut up!" Laler snapped. "I don't like the way you talk. You listen to me. We make this deal an' we're quits! An' remember I've got as much on you as you've got on me!"

"Why, Laler," the lawyer chided mockingly, "I'm your best friend!"

The Kid moved around the shack to a point near the open door. He took off his hat and peered in. The two men were squatting in the middle of the room with a small metal box between them. The Kid recalled the robbery of the Pine City National Bank nearly three years before. The thief had not been apprehended, nor had the stolen money, amounting to almost twenty thousand dollars, been recovered.

So Buck Thomas had pulled off that robbery—Buck, an ailing desperado with not long to live, who often boasted he wouldn't die alone. But he had died alone. Laler had killed him and left his body beside a poison waterhole.

THE Kid took out his deck of cards, shuffled them, turned up a deuce of spades. He flicked it through the door of the shack. It sailed through space and fell between the two men.

"Deuces wild, gents," the Kid said, and stepped into the shack, his strong, slender hand gripping the butt of his gun. "How's for sittin' in this game?"

A hoarse oath issued from Laler's thick throat. His expression was that of an enraged animal. Smithson paled, but did not lose control of himself.

"Hello, Kid," he said evenly. "What game do you mean? Laler here has been paroled. He's a free man. He's going straight from now on. The parole board put it up to me to see that he does. As a member of the bar, influential in the



politics of this State and county, I intend to see that Laler squares up everything. That's a condition of his parole. So now we're looking into this—er—money that came into Laler's hands by accident. We're going to see it gets back to its rightful owners."

"By jinks," the Kid marveled, "you can lie faster'n a rattler can coil, Smithson. But I'll take your word for it, seein' it's none of my business. While you're squarin' everything, there's one little matter I'll call to your attention. You've got a deed to the Circle F Ranch in your pocket. You can just fill in the names of Bob an' Myra Fillmore, the rightful owners."

There was a moment of tense silence that was ended by Laler's quickly indrawn breath. Then Smithson laughed.

"That's right," he said. "That's one of the things Laler has agreed to square up. You certainly do get around, Kid. You find out things nobody else knows."

"Yeah," the Kid murmured.

He was giving more attention to Laler, whose eyes gleamed with hate, than to Smithson. The lawyer was no fighter. More than once the Kid had seen him back down when trouble loomed; he was one to talk his way out of trouble. Laler, though, might take a chance, go for his gun. The Kid watched Smithson reach into his coat pocket.

"You're right," the lawyer said evenly. "I have the deed to the Circle F right here. I intended to sign it over to my client. But it was his intention to transfer it to the Fillmores. He plans—"

"Well, get it out an' write in their names!" the Kid cut in.

What happened then was a complete surprise to the Kid. He had underestimated Smithson, had not

taken into consideration how much the lawyer had at stake, how desperate he was. Smithson laughed, and as he laughed he jerked the trigger of a gun in a shoulder holster, firing through his coat. The bullet struck the Kid in the left shoulder, and at such close range spun him around. Laler, crouched for a spring, hit the Kid in a flying tackle, brought him to the floor.

"Yeah!" he yelled. "Deuces wild, huh?"

The Kid swung his gun, struck Laler on the shoulder. He tried again, missed his head. Before he could get the gun against Laler's body, Smithson stepped in and struck him across the skull. The Kid fell back, threshing violently for a moment. Then he lay still.

When he awakened it was dark. His head throbbled and he was weighed down by a sense of failure. He lay perfectly still until his senses regained their normal alertness. Bitter thoughts ran through his mind. He had been overconfident, too sure of himself; he ought to have known enough to guard against a trick. He should have known that Smithson, with his career and reputation at stake, would not give in easily. He tried to move and found that he was bound hand and foot.

The two men, Laler and Smithson, were outside the open door. Smithson was talking in a low, persuasive tone.

"Nobody knows a thing but the Kid," he said. "If he lives, he'll talk. There's only one sure way to get rid of him." His voice fell to a whisper. "Burn the shack! Then—who'll know? I'll go back to town. Burn his saddle and bridle. Put a lead rope on his horse, take it over Trechado way and turn it loose on the range. Do you see? The Kid always moves around a lot. It'll be

thought that he's left the country on a new mount. You could lame his horse to make it look right. Then tomorrow you take a train and ride into Pine City. I'll meet you there."

"Damn it," Laler protested, "how'd he know we'd be here? You claim nobody follered you."

"A guess, I tell you," Smithson interrupted impatiently. "A hunch. The kind he always follows. He knew you used this place and guessed you'd come here, maybe to arrange things with me. He's probably been hanging around for days, waiting. You do as I say and—"

"I put in two years down there!" Laler growled. "While you lived on the fat of the land. Why should I do all the dirty work?"

Smithson's tone became curt. "Suit yourself," he said. "Turn him loose. It's nothing to me. I can claim—and make it stick—that I met you here to discuss the return of money taken from the bank. I still hold title to the Circle F."

"All right, I'll do it," Laler said slowly. "But if there's any kick-back, Smithson, damn it, I'll take you with me!"

"What kick-back can there be? Use your head, man. Has the Kid got you spooked, like everyone else? Luck! Bah! Put an end to his luck—and his damned interference!"

"All right," Laler agreed. "But he's so damned lucky it wouldn't surprise me if a cloudburst put out the fire!"

"Luck!" scoffed Smithson. "There is no such thing. I'm riding. You do as I told you. I'll see you tomorrow."

**T**HE Kid heard the hoofbeats of Smithson's departing horse. His head still ached, his arm and shoulder were stiff. What he had heard

frightened him; he had long since learned that a man was a fool not to acknowledge fear. He had been in danger before, but never in danger of being burned to death. Laler was under Smithson's influence, and Smithson was far worse than the Kid had credited him with being. He had put the lawyer down as a smooth, oily crook, playing a safe game; now he knew he was vicious and without scruple, as long as he could get men like Laler to do his dirty work.

The Kid believed in his own luck, but he did not expect a cloudburst to put out the fire Laler would start. He was a gambler and he had heard a preacher say all gamblers would burn.

He was securely tied at wrists and ankles. True, he could roll out of the shack. But Laler would see to that before he started the fire. There was small chance of anyone seeing the fire. The shack was in a very out-of-the-way spot.

He heard Laler muttering outside. And suddenly hope welled up in the Kid's breast.

Smithson had said: "Get his saddle and bridle. Burn every damn thing."

Laler was stalking off to find his horse. The Kid rolled toward the door, dropped to the ground. His horse nickered plaintively and Laler swore.

"Kill him, Yaqui!" the Kid called. "Kill him!"

A wild, high note came from the horse, then sounds of a violent fight. Laler roared an oath which ended in a scream. Presently Yaqui, snorting wildly, came running toward the Kid. He stopped beside the Kid, nuzzling him gently.

With difficulty, the Kid got to his feet, leaning against the horse. But

his ankles were tied tightly together, his wrists behind his back. If he could only get his hands free, but that was impossible. He heard no sounds out of Laler, but he didn't know how far gone he was. If Yaqui had kicked him senseless, he'd come to. And if that happened the Kid wouldn't give a plugged nickel for his chances, for Laler was armed.

The Kid jerked violently at the small, tight rope. Useless. He balanced himself there with difficulty, breathing hard, thinking, soothing the horse. He remembered a new metal culvert under the main road to Pine City, near where he had turned off. It wasn't far. He fumbled for the reins, let them slip through his numb fingers, but held the end. Then, backing up to the horse he flexed his knees and jumped high. He landed in the saddle and managed to get one toe in a stirrup. Sitting side-saddle, he rode slowly to the culvert.

There he half fell from the horse, rolled down and got the rope against the metal edge. He sawed away, sweating hard for ten minutes. The strands parted. He gashed his hand, swore, and kept at it. At last his hands were free. Then he got out his knife and slashed the rope on his ankles.

"Luck!" he muttered. "Whew! Yaqui, I'm goin' to buy you a peck of sugar an' the finest oats an' the best hay! I was afraid you'd forget that trick, with things so tame lately. But I reckon Laler smelled bad to you. Let's go see what you done to him."

Back at the cabin, the Kid struck a match and looked down at Laler. The man lay prone, the back of his head bloody, hoofprints on his back. The Kid's hand went over Laler's head, felt his heart. The man was alive, but unconscious.

**T**HE Kid caught Laler's horse, lifted the unconscious man and put him across the saddle like a sack of meal. He tied him securely, put a rope on the horse and mounted Yaqui. He turned back toward Pine City, but took a cross trail, avoiding the road.

Half a mile from town the Kid rode up to a weather-beaten cabin made of railroad ties, with a dirt roof. An old man, bearded, pipe in mouth, peered out.

"What you got there, Kid?" he called out. "Damn if it don't look like that skunk Laler. But he's in the pen, ain't he?"

"It is Laler, Uncle Joe," the Kid

# "I TALKED WITH GOD"

(yes, I did—actually and literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank. I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You too may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 8, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 8, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

answered. "He's kind o' stove in. Give me a hand with him."

"I'll be dad-blasted!" exclaimed the old prospector. "Looks like you half killed him."

"Never touched him," the Kid asserted. "He had me all tied up an' ready to ship to hell. Then he tried to unsaddle Yaqui."

"Huh! An' the bronc did this? Boy, you got a horse! What you want to do—bury him?"

"No. I reckon I'll take him inside an' take care of him till I can get the doc out here."

"Get the doc! You're crazy! Didn't you jest say he tried to kill you?"

"Yeah, but he didn't make it. Now he's a sick man. Only trouble is I don't want to be seen in town. You go in, Uncle Joe, an' get the doc. Don't tel' him who's here."

The Kid fished into a pocket and pulled out a wadded bill. He pressed it into the old man's hand.

"I don't take no more dinero off you," the oldster protested. "No, by gravy—"

"It's a grubstake," the Kid said mildly. "Next time you strike it rich, cut me in. Anyway, while you're gone, I aim to eat everything you got."

The old man started off. The Kid carried Laler inside and laid him on a cot, then led the two horses into a shed. Before he ate, he examined Laler again and bathed and bandaged his head. Then he sat down at the table and proceeded to eat what was in Uncle Joe's larder, red beans soaked in chili, sour-dough biscuits and warmed-over coffee with the strength of lye. He chewed slowly, thinking solemnly of what he had to do.

There was only one thing that interested him in this affair, that was to get back the Circle F for Bob and

Myra. For Myra, rather. It should be deeded to her; she should own it. The way it had been, Bob had the running of it and he had lost it. Laler had cheated him, of course, as he had cheated everyone. Laler no doubt had poisoned Buck Thomas, stealing the proceeds of the bank robbery. Smithson, too, was in on his crookedness. But all that concerned the sheriff, not the Kid. He had come here to recover the Circle F. He hated to leave a job unfinished.

The last time the Kid had gone to the flimsy nester's shack, where the Fillmores were living now, Myra had looked sick. She had been working too hard. There hadn't been much to eat in the place. But she had refused to borrow money from him; she saw no way of paying it back. Miss Myra was a mighty fine person, the Kid thought. She reminded him of Miz Harris, who had been like a mother to him after his own mother and father had been killed and Dad Harris had carried him home.

But how was he to work on Smithson? How to get him to sign over the ranch? The Kid could think of only one way. It might work, or it might not.

Soon the doctor's buckboard came up to the cabin. The medico was a small, peppery man, with sharp, fearless eyes. He peered at the Kid shrewdly, then glanced at Laler.

"Making patients for me, eh?" he said ironically. "I should be obliged to you, I suppose. Though why I should patch up gunmen when decent folks need—"

"You sound plumb hard-hearted," the Kid drawled. "The sheriff would hate to have this man die. He wants him alive, even if he don't know it yet. If he don't pay you, I will. Or we could cut the cards

for your fee—double or nothin'."

"Never mind that," the doctor growled, slipping out of his coat and rolling up his sleeves.

The Kid glanced outside. "Got one thing to ask you, doc. That you don't say a word about seein' me or Laler till tomorrow."

The doctor's eyes flashed. The Kid met his gaze steadily, and after a moment the doctor nodded. He worked over Laler for nearly an hour. Laler, he said, would not only live, but would be quite all right within a week. He observed the stiffness of the Kid's arm, the bullet hole in his new coat.

"Nothin' but a scratch," the Kid said. "I got a wad o' cloth off my shirt in there to soak up the blood. It's dry now. I mighty near ruined these clothes, though, after winnin' them off Sim only this mornin'."

The doctor examined, cleansed and bandaged the wound, then drove back to town. The Kid sat down at the table, got out his deck of cards, shuffled them skillfully with one hand.

"Play you some poker, Uncle Joe," he suggested.

"What for? Beans?"

The Kid grinned. They played until the sun was down and it began to grow dark.

"Can't see no more without a lamp," the old man remarked.

"Got to go, anyway. You owe me a pound o' beans. I'm leavin' Laler here. The doc shot him full o' dope, so he won't give you any trouble. In case he does, hogtie him."

"You comin' back?" Uncle Joe asked.

"Can't say. Mebbe the sheriff will show up."

"What in time you up to, Kid?" the other remanded curiously.

"Want to see a man in Pine City," the Kid murmured.

HE rode into town unobserved and tied his horse in an alley back of the only red brick building in town. One side of the building housed the bank; and on the other side the doctor, Smithson, and another lawyer had offices. Smithson's office was lighted, the Kid noticed. The rest of the building was dark. The rear door was screened, for ventilation, and the screen door was hooked. The Kid cut the screen with his knife, unhooked it and entered.

He tiptoed to Smithson's door and opened it quietly, an inch. Smithson was hunched over his desk, sorting papers. Getting ready to burn any that might be incriminating, no doubt. The Kid fished out a card he had put on top of his deck. It was a deuce of clubs. It sailed through the opening, landed on the desk directly under Smithson's eyes. He stared at it, motionless.

"Deuces still wild, friend," the Kid said softly, inside the room, back to the door. You try for your gun, I'll get you. There's only one of you to watch this time."

Smithson turned his head slowly. His face was drained of all color, ghastly in the light.

"L-laler?" he asked.

"Laler's taken care of," the Kid said. "About that deed to the Circle F. You got pen an' ink handy. Fix it up. Best make it out to Miss Myra, alone."

Smithson licked his lips. "Coercion," he muttered. "Extortion. You can't—"

"Big words, friend. I believe that about possession bein' nine points o' somethin'. You fix up the deed, I'll see Miss Myra comes into possess-

sion an' hangs on. That's all I want, which is goin' easy on you."

Smithson's fevered eyes bored into the Kid, who returned the look with one full of guile.

"Savvy?" he said.

Smithson was a man grasping at a straw. Moreover, he was a crook who didn't believe any man was honest. The Gamblin' Kid, wise in lessons learned at poker, was counting on that. Smithson nodded.

"Laler's dead," he muttered. "Your luck holds. You got what he had. For a stake like that—"

"Stow the talk!" the Kid ordered. "You got yours. I want the Circle F."

Smithson pulled out a paper, dipped his pen, signed his name with a flourish.

"I'll see it's witnessed by honest men of good reputation," the Kid said, "who'll swear on ten Bibles that you signed it without any o' this coercion."

He reached for the deed, folded it, thrust it into his coat pocket.

"You and I," Smithson suggested, "could work together, Kid."

"Mebbe so. *Buenos noches*," the Kid said. He slipped out as quietly as he had entered. He took from inside his shirt a small package addressed to the bank, thrust it through a slot in a door. Laler would awaken without the stake he had counted on. And without the ranch where he planned to take it easy. Laler would awaken without anything, in fact, except a bitter hatred of Smithson. Well, what happened then was not the Kid's concern. He was not a lawman. Keeping the peace was the sheriff's job.

The Kid rode back to Uncle Joe's cabin. Laler was still in a coma.

"Say," the Kid suggested, "why

don't you go see Sam Hughes? He's sick. Come on. I'm ridin' that way an' Yaqui'll carry double."

"What about him?" Uncle Joe pointed to Laler.

"Leave him. I reckon mebbe the sheriff'll pick him up."

"*Bueno*," consented the oldster, "been wantin' to see Sam."

Two days later the Gamblin' Kid was playing a game of stud, a friendly game for low stakes, in a saloon in the little town of Trechado, shipping point for the Circle F and other ranches.

Bob Fillmore came in, bursting with excitement.

"You fellers hear the news?"

"Deuces are wild," the Kid remarked to the other players, "an' four of 'em takes the pot."

He raked it in and turned smoky eyes to Bob. "What news?"

"Laler killed his lawyer, Smithson," Bob cried. "An' the sheriff killed Laler as he was gettin' away! An' they found money on Smithson that was stole in that bank robb'ry."

"What do you know about that?" the Kid said blandly.

"Damn good riddance," another man observed. "A pair o' crooks! Deal 'em, Kid, an' watch me bust your luck. You want to sit in, Bob?"

The Kid glanced at Fillmore. Bob shook his head.

"Never no more. I'll let the Kid do my gamblin'." Myra wants to know will you come out for Sunday dinner."

"Chicken?" the Kid asked.

"Chicken!" Bob said.

"Tell Miss Myra I'll be there," the Kid said. "An' if it ain't pre-sumein', you might mention my cravin' for pie."



# Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

WELL, for the most part, hunting seasons for the year have closed in the majority of our States. Big game is out of the question until the latter part of 1940. Small game hunting will continue in many States for several months and don't forget that the season is always open on certain predatory animals and birds which you will do well to hunt. There is a lot of sport in this kind of hunting and plenty of good practice, and each time you kill a predatory animal or bird, you save the lives of many of the coming generations of game birds.

Therefore, the shooting season is by no means closed. In some cases, you can still hunt water fowl, so you have a choice of small-bore rifle hunting, shotgun work, and the pleasure of plinking around with your hand gun.

The real winter sport field with firearms is in target practice. Target practice is extensively followed both indoor and out. An indoor match shoot usually calls for the .22 caliber rimfire. The outdoor season includes both .22 rimfire and the larger caliber centerfire numbers.

Of all forms of shooting, indoor target practice with the .22 long rifle cartridge is probably the least ex-

pensive. You can, of course, use the .22 shorts if you prefer, but results will not be quite as satisfactory. If you wish to go in for indoor practice, you can build a range in your basement or attic. Suitable back stops can be properly constructed without much expense. Your nearest junk yard or iron works can probably supply you with a piece of boiler plate steel two or three feet square to serve as a back stop. This is merely set at approximately 45 degree angle to deflect the bullets downward. A light wood trough is built beneath it and filled with sand to prevent glancing bullets from causing damage.

Illumination of your indoor range can easily be accomplished with two or three ordinary light bulbs mounted behind suitable reflectors. You need not even buy these reflectors. They can be made with strips of bright tin. Shooters have even used coffee cans to secure this tin.

If you wish to join a shooting club to organize one, this is also far from being very complicated. All you need is a suitable range and proper



supervision. Juniors may form clubs but they must have adult supervision. A letter addressed to Mr. H. H. Goebel, National Rifle Association, Junior Division, 1600 Rhode Island Avenue, Washington, D. C., will bring you full information on club formation. Members of clubs may shoot in competition through the various postal matches, properly witnessed targets being mailed into headquarters while the competitors do likewise. Headquarters then awards the match after scoring the targets.

In addition to these competitive matches, individual members of the National Rifle Association Junior Rifle Corps may also compete for various qualification medals, the number of medals that may be won being limited to the contestant's ability. Many girls take part in these matches, and rifle shooting is by no means confined to the male sex. Also, many juniors can give adults a good run for their money in shooting matches.

The .22 rimfire cartridge is the most widely used in the United States. Production of these cartridges averages about one and a quarter billion per year, or approximately five million cartridges loaded every working day. The majority of these are used for miscellaneous target practice and plinking. It's a great and inexpensive sport.

For suitable rifles, you have more

than two hundred .22s on the present market from which to choose. It is recommended that you get a standard brand. Mail-order guns may be entirely satisfactory but are not recommended since they vary considerably, and after you have had them for two or three years, it is frequently impossible to secure repair parts. Repair parts on any standard gun of current make can be obtained even after many years. Winchester can supply repairs and parts on some of their forty-year-old guns. Remington can do likewise.

How much money have you got to pay for your rifle?

You can get .22 rifles from about five dollars up to one hundred and fifty dollars. Generally speaking, for good target practice, a single shot is satisfactory, although many shooters prefer the repeating types. Good medium weight single shot rifles with man-sized dimensions, suitable for either adults or well-developed youngsters, can be obtained for about ten dollars, and good repeaters from about twelve dollars to twenty-five dollars. If you wish to go in for serious target practice, steer clear of the automatic rifle. With reasonable care any beginner can shoot safely in his own home, particularly when using a rifle. It is not wise for the beginner to attempt indoor target practice with a revolver, regardless of caliber, as the occasional wild shots might do serious damage.

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

"If gold is where you find it, as the old saying goes," writes G. B. K. in a letter from Akron, Ohio, "what is the point of all this geology stuff and studying the rock formations?"

That's a blunt, straightforward question, G. B. K. Let's look at it this way for a minute. A man who has never played golf in his life may step up to the tee and smack the ball sailing down the fairway first pop out of the box. But the chances are that the golfer who knows the proper stance and swing, the right grip to give his club and the correct follow through will hit the ball oftener and more directly toward his objective.

It's the same way in prospecting. Almost any man may stumble onto a fortuitous gold find, and lots of people have. But the prospector who knows at least the rudiments of geology and has some sound idea of the principles and types of ore de-

position is in a much better position to decide, once the find has been made, what the chances are for developing it into a paying mine.

After all, the first discovery of ore merely indicates that the finder has a "prospect," a showing of valuable metal that may or may not be capable of development into a mine. A mine is a deposit of valuable mineral sufficient in extent and richness to produce the mineral it contains in paying, profitable quantities under conditions necessary for mining that particular deposit. A "prospect" is simply an initial discovery of a limited amount of ore.

It is only when something of the natural geological process involving metallic mineral occurrence and deposition is understood that the prospector can make sensible conjectures as to whether or not he can expect continuity and a reasonable maintaining in richness of the values in the deposit he has discovered. That applies both to placer and hard-rock or lode finds.

Right now, however, we will confine our discussion to lode deposits. The occurrence, deposition and handling of placer deposits has been treated in detail in earlier articles in this department.

As far as the prospector for metallic mineral ores is concerned, the ore finds he is most likely to make will fit into one of the following main categories:

(a) Vein deposits. These are a common and often rich form of metal deposition in which the ore, or valuable minerals themselves, are found in well defined fissures, cracks or seams in country rock filled with a contrasting vein material. Vein deposits of good strength and character are apt, unless cut off by some fault or structural slip in the surrounding

rock to be a rather persistent type of deposit and account for a large percentage of the profitable working metallic mineral mines in existence today. In other words if you uncover a strong fissure vein that is, or can be exposed along the surface for, say two or three thousand feet, you can have a very reasonable expectation that it will continue in depth, barring faults or rock slips, for several hundred feet at least, and so when the lateral ore shoot limits have been discovered by sampling and testing, you can make a rough estimate of the "possible" ore tonnage that may be anticipated in the deposit.

(b) Another type of ore find is that in which the metallic mineral occurs in sulphide form as massive lumps, or chunks that vary in size and are not necessarily continuous. Deposits of this kind frequently are found in limestone rocks, or in the vicinity of rocks that have been thrust upward through adjacent formations from the interior of the earth—intrusive rocks. Such deposits are more difficult to estimate without doing actual development work in the ore body itself. They are usually irregular in shape, and the individual blocks or masses of the ore may be limited, or on the other hand very large and quite sufficient to warrant real mining operations.

(c) Disseminated deposits offer still another form of metallic mineral discovery. In this type of find the ore occurs as scattered particles of

metal sulphides usually shot through masses of intrusive rock, or even in sedimentary formation. Such deposits may be extensive and consistent and if the particles are sown richly and thickly enough throughout the rock to make it an ore—that is, minable at a profit—a good mine may be in the making.

(d) Bedded deposits are also encountered at times. They are flat and generally thin layers of ore, often the pure quill, lying in or between strata of different rock formations. Rich copper and sometimes silver discoveries have been made in such formations among the non-ferrous metallic minerals.

All this information which comes under the general head of geology, or rock study, is of very real use to the prospector, not only as an assistance in apprising him of what types of deposits may be encountered in the field, but also because it will enable him to classify more readily a discovery *after* he has made it, and thus afford a valuable preliminary idea as to the type and possible importance of the find he has made.

To J. K., St. Paul, Minnesota: The "assay value" of an ore is the total value of the metals in the ore figured by multiplying the quantity of each as disclosed in the assay by the current market price.

To G. P., Bristol, Connecticut—Coast lands below the high tide line are not subject to claim staking.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.



# The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

Christmastime is here again and to all the faithful friends of the Hollow Tree, far and near, Miss Rivers sends the Season's Greetings and her most sincere wishes for a Happy New Year.

## Send Iris pictures of horses—

Dear Miss Rivers:

For the past year I have lived at Ash Meadows, Nevada, just across the California line about nine miles from Death Valley Junction, California. This is very beautiful country, and I know some interesting tales about it. I spent several years in motion-picture work, but gave it up to come out here and live as I have wanted to for many years. My ambition is to have a little guest ranch out here for those who want to get away from things or for semi-invalids who need a desert climate. I am thirty years old and would be happy to hear from anyone who cares to write, especially those living in foreign countries. I am a lover of horses and hope some of you Pen Pals will send me pictures of them. There was an issue of the *National Geographic Magazine* back in 1923 or 1924 devoted to the horse and if anyone happens to have it, I certainly would appreciate it if they would send it to me.—Iris Boles, Death Valley, California

## A partner needed here for a ranch—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been a reader of *Western Story Magazine* for some time and would appreciate it if you would publish this appeal and help me find a partner for my ranch. It is a very interesting business, and I have a lot of the finest stock available and plenty of experience, so experience is not essential in my partner.—Jack Shaffer, Sunnyside, Washington

## Jéré wants to hear about Western life—

Dear Miss Rivers:

All my life I have lived in the eastern part of the United States, but I have always wanted to know some real Westerners and find out what ranch life is like. Therefore, I would enjoy having some Pen Pals who lead that kind of life. In exchange for their stories about

the West, I could probably interest them by telling some of the experiences a young woman has who lives in a busy city. Anyone else is welcome to write, too, especially those living outside of the United States. I am interested in business and social life and some sports.—Jéré White, 2522 Edmonson Avenue, Baltimore, Maryland

## This letter comes from "down under"—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-four years old and am in search of some Pen Pals. I will answer every letter with plenty of interesting data from "down under" and, to the first twenty who write, I will send a souvenir from New Zealand. I want to hear from all corners of the world, so come on, everybody, and let me hear from all of you.—Ray Cullen, 18 Albert Street, Linwood, Christchurch E. 1, New Zealand

## Pat likes to do crazy things!

Dear Miss Rivers:

Hi ya, kids, everywhere and anywhere! Will you please write to a sixteen-year-old Southern girl? I'm a senior in high school and love to do crazy things. I am also a camera fiend. I will exchange snaps with those who send me one.—Pat Poty, St. Cloud, Florida

## Don't keep Edwin waiting for mail—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonesome Ohio boy and want to be a member of the Hollow Tree. I am sixteen years old and would like to hear from anyone from fifteen to thirty years of age. I enjoy horseback riding, skating, swimming and dancing, and my hobby is collecting stamps and writing letters. I'll be waiting patiently to hear from you, so write to me from everywhere and anywhere.—Edwin Baker, 428 North 7th Street, Martins Ferry, Ohio

## Calling pals from North and South—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am seventeen years old, a senior in high school, and would especially like to hear from fellows and girls from South Carolina and Maine, although everyone is welcome to write. I am interested in all sports and cooking. I

shall answer all letters and exchange snapshots, newspapers, magazines, and souvenirs. Write soon!—Mildred Gibbs, 1939 Carman Street, Camden, New Jersey

### **Private Kimball has covered some territory—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

This is a plea from a soldier serving in the United States army in the Canal Zone. It sure gets lonesome here at times and, since I have plenty of leisure time, I would like lots of Pen Pals to correspond with. I am eighteen years old and have traveled some twenty thousand miles. My hobby is stamp collecting and writing letters. Here's hoping I get lots of mail.—Private Leslie Kimball, Service Battery, 4th Coast Artillery, Fort Amador, Canal Zone

### **Members of the older generation write to this pal—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

I notice most of your letters are from young people, but maybe you can help me. I am a widow past sixty years of age, and I would like Pen Pals around my age or older. I enjoy fishing, have several hobbies, and also like to travel. Please, you members of the older generation, write to me.—Mrs. Clare Murray, 4104 S. E. Francis Street, Portland, Oregon

### **And here's someone can tell you about mermaids—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely sailor and would appreciate having some Pen Pals. I am a deep-sea diver and can tell anyone interested about the strange things I have seen at the bottom of the sea. I can also tell them about different parts of the world because I have traveled extensively. I will answer all letters and hope that everyone will write.—H. H. Horn, C. B. M., U. S. S. *Orleton*, San Diego, California

### **Richardia and Violet have some interesting tales to tell—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

Two merry cousins from the North Star State are paging Pen Pals from all parts of the world. We've both traveled considerably around the country with various stock companies and can tell you about the interesting experiences we've had while on the road. We also have some snaps of the beautiful scenery in the United States. Richardia is twenty-two years old, and Violet is twenty-one. We promise to answer all letters and send pictures to all who send a snap of themselves.—Violet Benson, 2243 Johnson Street, N. E., Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Richardia Johnson, Rt. No. 2, Hutchinson, Minnesota

### **Eldon is a camera enthusiast—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a government employee in the United States Forestry Service. My occupation is chiefly woods work and drafting, and of my many hobbies, photography comes first. I am

twenty-three years old and would like to correspond with boys and girls from twenty to twenty-five.—Eldon Peterson, B. R. C. No. 451, Priest River, Idaho

### **This Southern belle likes to go places—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a small-town girl sixteen years old, interested in correspondence as a hobby and diversion in my leisure time. I enjoy playing the piano, listening to the radio and going places, and my favorite sports are roller skating and bicycling.—Eleanor Booker, Box 255, McKenzie, Alabama

### **Writing letters is his pet diversion—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely veteran forty-seven years old and a member of the CCC. My favorite pastime is writing letters, and so I am very eager to have some Pen Pals. I will be glad to hear from both young and old, and I promise to answer all letters.—Clyde Southwell, CCC Company 29 46, Silverton, Oregon

### **Mary wants to learn all about stamp collecting—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young girl sixteen years old, and of all my hobbies, letter writing is my favorite. I also collect stamps and although my collection is not very large and my knowledge of stamps very limited, I am interested in them and would like to learn more about them. I am trying to obtain letters from as many different States and countries as possible, so everybody please write to me, won't you?—Mary Tyte, 337 Winona Drive, Toronto, Canada

### **Charlie doesn't give himself much of a build-up!**

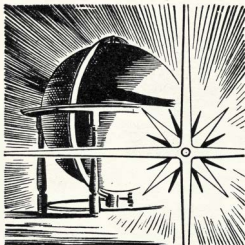
Dear Miss Rivers:

I am eighteen years old, have a face that is as ugly as sin, and a temper that would light fire. But, in spite of those faults, I can manage to string along with most folks, so how about giving me a break? My hobbies include everything from stamp collecting to playing chess, and in sports I enjoy everything from Rugby to fencing, including cycling, boxing and camping. My ambition is to have a collection of snaps and post cards from all over the world, so how about helping me, folks? I'll exchange news, magazines, snapshots, stamps or any old thing and promise to answer every letter. The more the merrier, so come on, you hombres, draw your pens and start shining some ink to this Britisher.—Charlie Taylor, 7 Bishop's Road, London, N.6, England

### **Riding horseback sounds like nice "work"—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am eager to have Pen Pals who would enjoy corresponding with a girl who lives in the heart of the great livestock-producing country. I am eighteen years old and enjoy skating, dancing and horseback riding, which in summer is part of my work. I will exchange snapshots.—Jean Ayres, Zeona, South Dakota



## Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

ONE of our readers, M. L., of St. Louis, is heading into the Southwest for a winter vacation, and he asks about a section that is rapidly becoming one of America's favorite playgrounds, the country around Lake Mead.

Lake Mead, M. L., is the largest man-made lake in the world, and when it is filled will be a hundred and fifteen miles long. It connects Boulder Dam with the Grand Canyon. To give you some idea of the size of this engineering feat, it might be cited that five and a half million tons of concrete were poured into the Black Canyon of the Colorado River to make the dam, and that enough water will be impounded behind it

when filled to supply five thousand gallons of water for every man, woman, and child in the world.

Preliminary to building the dam it was necessary to build a railroad and to erect a complete new city to provide living facilities for the large force of men engaged in the project. The city is unusual in that within a few months the site was transformed from a raw, cactus-grown desert into a model community complete to the last detail for housing six thousand people, including stores, churches, schools, a theater, waterworks, and electric plant.

The lake, which was created as the result of damming up the river, has a shore line of five hundred and fifty miles of rugged grandeur, and because it filled up as far back as the Grand Canyon, has given people access to sections of that famous gorge which had previously been visited by very few hardy adventurers.

Now the lake provides an avenue of easy access to stretches of the river that were inaccessible before, and it opens to all the magnificent vistas of some of the world's most amazing canyons, Boulder Canyon itself, Travertine Canyon, Iceberg Canyon, and the lower and previously unvisited end of the Grand Canyon itself.

You can take any number of boat trips along these waters, and spend days enjoying the grand sights. From the rocky walls, black and red, that give Black Canyon its name to Boulder Canyon twenty miles away is a winding trip reminiscent of the fiords of Norway.

A series of fine roads around as much of the lakeside as it is possible

If you are thinking of a trip to Boulder Dam, or anywhere in the Southwest, and want travel literature and road maps, address a letter to John North, inclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope for reply.

to encompass, are being built so that you may motor around it, enjoying a succession of mountain, desert and lake views such as can be found nowhere else. Air-conditioned cabin cruisers will take you to any point on the lake shore to visit the various resorts, or will take you the entire length of the lake and back in a full day's travel.

While some people will be vacationing around Boulder Dam and Lake Mead, J. L. of Fort Smith, Arkansas, wants to know what the chances are of a man going to that section to engage in farming, so that he might enjoy the natural scenery for the rest of his days. He asks particularly about farming in the section around Las Vegas, Nevada.

Las Vegas, in Clark County, is a modern little city with air-conditioned hotels and all modern conveniences. It attracts a lot of tourists, but mixed in with this crowd you will find the old prospectors coming in with their pack mules and working cowboys who haven't changed a bit in the many generations they have been roaming that country.

However, this is now becoming a fine farming country, and any man who knows irrigation farming stands a chance to go there and do mighty well for himself.

There are two ways of getting water onto the land there, the irrigation system from the river and artesian wells, which are known as

pumping sections of the county.

The climate of this area is such that a long growing season and short, very mild winters, make it an ideal vegetable, fruit and alfalfa district. While it gets pretty hot at times in the summer, if you can believe the thermometer, the heat is dry and it is not so uncomfortable as more humid heat in lower sections. Also, the effect of this heat is to force crops to grow fast and to grow large. The winters are delightful, and are usually mild, snow occurring only rarely.

Almost anything adaptable to a semitropical climate will do well there, but aside from alfalfa for feed, the main crops are fruits and vegetables, because they bring bigger returns per acre than more staple crops. But even alfalfa, when raised for feed, will grow four or five cuttings against two or three in more northern latitudes.

Among the fruits that have done especially well there under irrigation are peaches, apricots, figs, pears, apples, grapes, cherries, plums, and prunes.

There are several factors also that make this a good chicken and turkey raising district. The warm climate makes it possible to range fowl the year round and cut down on the feed bills, its dryness keeps them healthy, and its good local market, plus the fact that it is no great distance from Los Angeles and other West coast cities, insures ready sales for birds and eggs.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

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



# MURDERS AT MESQUITE FLATS



Part Two

by **STUART HARDY**

*The Story So Far:*

Mrs. Katherine Lenroot, the only sheep owner in the country around Mesquite Flats, receives a visit from Soapy Dolan, cattleman, who announces that he is going to bring two hundred head of cattle into the winter range she uses. Sam Squam, Mrs. Lenroot's foreman, obtains her permission to go to Mesquite Flats to try to persuade the other cattlemen to take some action against Dolan. He is accompanied by Demijohn Walker, another Lenroot rider.

On their way to town, the two men see some large, strange-looking tracks which they follow into a cave. Within the cave they find fourteen rope nooses each tagged with a slip of paper which reads "Remember Lenroot?" This is obviously a reference to Mrs. Lenroot's husband who was lynched by a number of unidentified cattlemen.

In Mesquite Flats Sam and Demijohn find another unpleasant surprise awaiting them. Abe Krassel, a cowman, has been found, shot dead. Around his neck was tied a noose similar to the ones the two riders had found.

After Sheriff Ingersol, who is handling the case, has finished questioning them, Sam and Demijohn ride to the ranch of Lucky Hank Bridger. He refuses to interfere with Dolan's plans and tells them he is expecting several other ranchers at a meeting at his place to discuss the matter.

On the way back to town Sam and Demijohn hear a shot. They ride in the direction of the sound and meet Slop Jeffers, one of Soapy Dolan's men. The three of them go on together and suddenly find a body lying on the trail. It is Cal Gordon, a cattleman, and around his neck is another of the strange nooses.

## CHAPTER VII

## THE DEAD TARANTULA

IN that first tense moment, while Sam Squam, Demijohn Walker and Slop Jeffers stared down at the body of Cal Gordon, a queer look came into Jeffers' eyes. They became narrow, crafty, too bright, like the eyes of a lynx. They slid from the dead man on the ground to the face of Sam Squam. Slowly his right hand went back to his holster. The fingers curled around the six-gun and he began to draw.

Sam, hardly three feet from the man, had been looking at Gordon. Yet some inner warning, or perhaps an almost inaudible sound, made him glance toward Slop's hand.

He all but lunged out of the saddle as his grip crashed down on Jeffers' wrist. At the same time his own right hand jerked his Colt from its holster. By the time Jeffers regained his wits he found his gun hand pinioned to his hip and the bore of a .45 aimed at his stomach.

Jeffers went rigid, apparently paralyzed by the suddenness of the thing.

"Let go your iron!" Sam said.

Jeffers looked down at the weapon pointed at his abdomen. Then a queer, hard grin twisted his lips. He relaxed, shrugged, and released his gun. The humorless grin did not fade as the weapon was taken from him.

"Just what," Sam demanded, "is the idea?"

"Figured to protect myself, that's all."

"From who?"

"You."

"I don't rec'lect threatenin' you any."

"When you meet a couple o' killers you don't wait to be threatened," Jeffers retorted.

"Killers?"

The scrawny man nodded to the body of Cal Gordon. "You aimin' to deny you did that?"

From Demijohn, who had impulsively drawn his own six-gun, came a gasp. "Why, doggone you," he cried, "you tryin' to accuse us o' bushwhackin' Gordon?"

"Don't see anybody else around."

"Except you, Slop," Sam pointed out.

Jeffers considered these words. They brought something like contempt to his lips. He shook his

head. "Not me, hombre. I didn't plug him."

"What you doin' here? Just meanderin'?"

"Nope. Headin' for the Bridger outfit. Which same don't explain *your* bein' out here."

Swinging out of his saddle, Demijohn exclaimed angrily, "We're a-comin' from the Bridger place!" He might have added more, but he checked himself when he saw that Sam was breaking Jeffers gun for a glance at the contents of its barrel.

"Keep him covered, Demijohn," Sam said. A moment later his gaze narrowed. "One slug gone! Reckon you ain't had a chance to clean this iron since you blasted it, Slop."

Though his features paled, the hint of disdain still played about Jeffers' features. With no change in his sarcastic tone he said, "So you figure I pumped the slug into Gordon, do you?"

"Suppose you answer that one."

"That slug," declared Slop, "smashed a tarantula that crossed my trail four, five miles back!"

"A tarantula, huh? Reckon maybe the sheriff'll want to see it."

Jeffers shrugged. "When the sheriff asks me to," he said, "I'll go hunt it."

Again Sam glanced down at Jeffers' six-gun. He slipped it into his own holster and swung his horse.

"Keep him covered, Demijohn," he said. "We'll have a look-see below."

They took Jeffers along, leaving the horses atop the low ridge. As they went down the slope, Demijohn kept his gun pointed significantly in Jeffers' direction.

**S**AM was the first to reach the trail. His heart thudded when he knelt beside Cal Gordon and put a hand on the man's heart. He low-

ered his cheek close to Gordon's lips. Had there been any breath at all, he would have felt it.

"Done for, all right," he muttered.

"Right smack through the Adam's apple," growled Demijohn.

Sam's voice hardened as he pointed to the ground near the dead man. "Same crazy spoor we saw near that cave. Same kind o' marks they found around Ab Krassel's body, too."

"What's more," Demijohn remarked with a nod at the paper on the rope, "the same message."

They were still. Demijohn's weapon maintained its guard over the glowering Slop Jeffers.

Presently Sam, sucking in a heavy breath, rose. "Gordon never even had a chance to draw," he muttered. "He was drygulched 'fore he knew anybody was near him." He walked around the body. "Stay here with Slop," he said to Demijohn. "Me, I'm follerin' this spoor a ways. Be right back."

The strange, shapeless marks led him around a few huge boulders behind which they became more confused than ever. This, he reasoned, was where the killer had waited, hidden, shifting his position now and then.

From the boulders Sam followed the line over a ridge, down into a hollow, and across another ridge to a clump of scrub oak that filled a stony saucer. Here they ended—but where they vanished Sam could see the marks of a horse's hoofs.

The killer, he reasoned, had dismounted among these oaks and had gone afoot to the rocks. Obviously he had wrapped something around his boots to obliterate footprints. Bags, maybe. Or even his own shirt and pants. Any thick swathing might account for those shapeless marks.

Was the killer Slop Jeffers?

Frowning, Sam pushed back his sombrero. As he wiped perspiration from his forehead, his troubled eyes fixed themselves on a lizard.

Jeffers, he mused, being right-hand man to Soapy Dolan, had doubtless known that several ranchers were to visit Lucky Hank Bridger's Tilted Chair outfit this afternoon. He might even have known that Cal Gordon generally took this trail when he rode to Bridger's place. "An' there's Slop's clothes," he added to himself. "Never saw dirtier clothes on any hombre. He could wear 'em on his boots, walk around, an' they couldn't get much dirtier."

He couldn't help wondering about the tarantula Jeffers professed to have killed. Of course, if the man could produce it, that might be an alibi.

"But why in thunder did he try to draw iron on us?" he asked himself grimly. "Was he figurin', maybe, to kill us so's we couldn't report meetin' up with him here?"

Slowly, still frowning, he turned back toward the trail. One thing he couldn't understand: why Slop Jeffers should kill ranchers and leave that cryptic message around their necks. It didn't make sense. But then, he reflected, there were undoubtedly many things in Slop Jeffers' life of which he knew nothing.

A swift shadow slid under Sam's feet and with a start he looked upward. Against a white-hot sky a buzzard circled. Soon there would be others, all waiting to pounce down on the carcass.

The sight made him grunt. He hurried back to the body on the trail. Demijohn, he saw in surprise, had just bound Jeffers to a nearby oak. The tied man was cursing volubly, and his face was fiery with

rage. There was little he could do, however, with a six-gun pointed at him.

"Took the lariat from Slop's saddlehorn," Demijohn said with satisfaction. "Easier to keep him quiet this way."

"You polecats got no right to do this!" Jeffers protested angrily.

"We got a right," Sam himself assured him, "to hold you for the sheriff. You tried to draw iron on us!" He looked at his partner. "You hightail into town, Demijohn, an' get Sheriff Ingersol out here pronto."

"What about you?"

"I'll stick around so's them buzzards'll leave something for the sheriff to see."

"Why in thunder don't you tote the carcass into town?" Slop Jeffers cried in fury. "An' me, too!"

"'Cause I'd sooner have the sheriff see things as they lay," Sam replied. "It'll save him askin' a lot o' questions."

"Hell, that body ain't gonna sit up an' tell him things!"

"All the same," declared Sam, "it stays where it is. Go on, Demijohn. Ride."

The little man hesitated, glancing uncertainly from Sam to Jeffers. Then, with a shrug, he went up the rise to his pinto.

"Keep your eyes peeled," Sam called after him. "See if you find a dead tarantula on the trail!"

## CHAPTER VIII

### A LADY RIDES

FOR half an hour, ignoring Jeffers who outdid himself in profanity, Sam studied the marks around the body and pondered on the possible meaning of the killing. And his thoughts were dark. Finally he climbed to the top of the ridge. Jef-

fers still raged, but Sam paid him scant attention.

The sun was hot here. If you looked over the surrounding country you had to squint through a heat haze that trembled. Rocks seemed made of copper, and the shadows they threw were a fantastic blue. Yuccas were like spectres raising their arms in the wilderness.

Sam sat on a rock, pulling the brim of his sombrero low to shade his eyes. Thirty feet above the body of Cal Gordon, he smoked a cigarette and brooded and scrutinized the country around him.

The buzzards were still circling overhead, four of them now. Their shadows, flowing over the ground, kept the horses in a state of constant surprise. Ears raised, they followed the movements much as cats might watch the dartings of an inaccessible mouse. Sam had staked them down on the trail, not only because their presence there helped to keep off the buzzards, but because there was shade beside the boulders.

Presently he frowned down at Slop Jeffers. Jeffers had stopped cursing but was still enraged. Had the man lied? Had he killed Cal Gordon? Then Sam's mind went back to Slop's boss and to the problem of keeping Soapy Dolan out of Mrs. Lenroot's valley.

"Reckon there ain't much use trying to turn the Cattlemen's Association against Dolan now," he told himself glumly. "After what I did to Dolan today, chances are he won't listen to what anybody says, association or no association. He'll be hankerin' to come up there with enough men an' six-guns to blast me out of his way just for the satisfaction."

Yes, he reflected, under such circumstances it would be futile to continue appeals to local ranchers.

"Reckon," he decided, "my best bet is to mosey right on down to Sunbeam an' get somebody else to run cows into the valley. Don't suppose there's nobody 'round Mesquite Flats who'd hanker to buck Dolan that way, but there might be down in Sunbeam."

After an hour of waiting, during which even Jeffers became resigned, Sam began to wonder how soon Demijohn would bring the sheriff. He rose to peer toward Mesquite Flats. And while he stood there, shading his eyes with a hand, he spied a distant blur of dust.

He decided, with some relief, that it must be the men from town. But as the smudge came closer, he frowned in perplexity. That was no group of riders. That dust was being raised by *one* rider. Sometimes it vanished in hollows. Always, however, it reappeared on a nearer rise.

When the rider was less than half a mile away Sam saw, with a start, that it was a woman.

He rubbed an uncertain hand over his chin. Coming along the trail, she'd have to pass the sprawling figure of Cal Gordon. With sudden determination he scrambled down the slope. His horse looked around at him.

"You stay here, old-timer," Sam said with a wave of his hand. "You keep the buzzards away. I'll keep the woman away."

"What's up?" demanded Jeffers. "What woman?"

"Don't know yet."

SAM walked more than a hundred yards up the trail before the woman rider brought her buckskin pony loping around the face of a low bluff. The sight of a man startled her so much that she reined in abruptly.

As for Sam, his heart seemed to do

a somersault in his chest. He halted, pulled his sombrero off damp brown hair, and gaped. It was the girl he had seen on the stairs at the Mesquite Flats Saloon, Gail Duke, who had played such miraculous things on Moulton's old piano. Sam looked, and the very loveliness of her stifled the words he'd been all set to say.

"Why . . . why, hello!" she said, astonished.

Sam recovered some composure. "Howdy, Miss Duke." He hesitated. "You're quite a way off the home range, ain't you?"

"I'm riding to the Kerrigan ranch. This trail leads there, doesn't it? I was told back in town—"

"Yes, ma'am. You're on the right trail, all right. But I sure wish you'd take a sort of roundabout way, say, for a quarter mile or so."

"Why?"

He looked down into the crown of his hat, then met her eyes gravely. "You might not like seein' what's just ahead. I'm waitin' for the sheriff with—a dead man."

Had he struck the girl, she could not have been more stunned. She straightened with a jolt and leaned toward him across her saddlehorn. Her face went white.

"Who?" she whispered. "How . . . what happened?"

Sam told her.

"You mean—" Terror flooded her eyes. "You found him with one of those nooses around his neck?"

"Uh-huh. Been hearin' things around town, have you?"

"Y-yes! Yes, of course! Everybody's been talking about it." He saw confusion rush into her face. She looked past him as though seeking Cal Gordon's body, and her gaze was wild. "Did you find the body just by . . . by accident?"

"Not exactly, ma'am." The girl's behavior vaguely puzzled Sam. Her

panic seemed too acute under the circumstances. A voice which might have been beautiful was too taut. "We heard a shot," he explained. "That's what brought us. My partner's gone for Sheriff Ingersol."

"Didn't you see who did it?"

"No, ma'am. We didn't actually see. We—"

Her manner was so tense that Sam checked himself. He simply couldn't understand it. Certainly hers was more than the casual shock and curiosity of a piano teacher hearing of a killing.

"We met up with one hombre," he said quietly, "but I wouldn't swear he did the shootin'. Got him roped back there."

"Who?"

She couldn't quite keep a note of desperation from the word. Sam saw that her grip on the saddlehorn had become fierce.

"Who?" she repeated.

"Feller name o' Slop Jeffers."

His mention of Slop made her close her eyes. When she looked at Sam again, she was breathing heavily. Her gaze held his with a kind of hypnosis.

"I . . . I saw another man back there!" she said.

"My partner, you mean? Demi-john Walker?"

"No. A . . . a Mexican!"

Sam almost dropped his sombrero. When he found his breath he ejaculated, "What d'you mean? Where? How long ago?"

"Hardly ten minutes. I was coming around a bend in the trail, and there was a man ahead of me. No more than a hundred yards away. He was riding toward me."

"Who was he?"

"I don't know."

"A Mexican?" Sam repeated, incredulous. "You sure?"

"He wore Mexican clothes! You

know—a spangled sombrero, tight Mexican pants, a Mexican jacket—”

“What did he do when you spotted him?”

“Jumped as if he were seeing a ghost. His hand went to the gun at his hip. I stopped my horse and just—just stared. Then he swung off the trail and galloped away.”

“Which way?”

“Southward.”

“Toward the Border?”

“I . . . I guess so. I’m not sure of my directions.”

“What was he like?” Sam demanded abruptly.

“Well—” She hesitated. “Pretty short I think. And kind of slim, yes, very slim—and his face was dark—”

“What kind of horse was he riding?”

She hesitated again. Then she said, “A sorrel. A bony sorrel. It had a long tail.”

“Could you—” But Sam stopped the words. Far beyond the girl, on the rim of a rise, he saw a vast cloud of dust; at least a dozen horses were stirring it. “Well, he said in a relieved tone, “there’s the sheriff and his crowd. You stick around, Miss Duke, an’ tell him about that Mexican. This sure puts a new color on things!”

**I**T was late afternoon when Gail Duke returned to her room above the Mesquite Flats Saloon. She entered wearily. When she tossed her sombrero to the chair, a cloud of dust spurted from it. She sank to the edge of the bed, clasped her hands in her lap, and stared unseeingly through the window. The sun hung behind distant mountains, leaving them forbiddingly dark, a darkness that matched her thoughts.

She felt exhausted. Not physically, but emotionally. It had been an ordeal to repeat her story of the

Mexican to the white-haired Sheriff Ingersol. It had been worse to ride home with the tight-lipped men who brought in the body of Cal Gordon. Her trip to the Kerrigan ranch had been abandoned. She had been in no mood to discuss piano lessons after seeing the figure of Gordon, with blood in its beard and buzzards hovering overhead.

Her thoughts, strangely enough, went to Sam Squam. She liked his face with its determined look and wide-set gray eyes. She liked the way he spoke, the way he looked at her. Even to her it had been clear that he and the cattlemen who came with Sheriff Ingersol had not been on the friendliest terms. Their conversation had been terse. They had even regarded Sam with suspicion.

One thing had puzzled her out in the badlands. The little fellow with the bowed legs and the enormous chest—the one they called Demijohn—had said:

“Sam, I did run across a dead tarantula on the Mesquite Flats trail. He’d been hit by a bullet, all right.”

And Sam Squam had replied, “Maybe it wasn’t Slop’s bullet.”

She remembered how Sheriff Ingersol had turned to Sam then, stiff and frowning. “What d’you mean by that, Squam?”

“Nothing definite, sheriff. Only it’s possible somebody else shot that tarantula, ain’t it? It’s possible Slop saw the thing there, dead, just the way Demijohn did. An’ used it to explain his missin’ slug.”

“You accusin’ Jeffers?” the sheriff had demanded.

“I’m not accusin’ any man,” Sam had said. “It’s just that we oughtn’t to overlook any possibilities at all at a time like this.”

Gail Duke remembered clearly the growl that had risen among the men



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*Continued from page 111*

after Sam's words. Whether the sounds supported him or condemned him, she had been unable to determine. She knew only that nobody had mentioned the dead tarantula again. And the sheriff had freed Slop because of insufficient evidence to cause his arrest.

Thereafter the men had studied the queer marks around the body for a time. Sheriff Ingersol had assigned two of them, Squint Butcher and Dan Cummings, to follow the trail the killer's horse had left.

"An' now, Miss Duke," the sheriff had said, "you just show us where you spotted that Mexican."

She had tried, but she had been confused and uncertain, wholly unsure of where she had encountered the figure. The queer part was that even after an hour of searching she couldn't definitely point out the spot. She hadn't thought at the time, she explained, of fixing any landmarks in her mind. When she indicated the place where it might have been, no hoofprints leading away from the trail corroborated her guess.

Well, the ordeal was over. And Slop Jeffers had gone free. She closed her eyes, pressing her palms against them. Her heart still beat hard. It wasn't until she looked up again, gazing dully around the room, that she saw the letter.

**I**T was propped up on the chest of drawers, against the mirror. Somebody must have brought it during her absence—a letter with a Mesquite Flats postmark.

The sight of it checked her breath. It brought a new pallor to her cheeks, too. She sprang up, wide-eyed, and crossed the room quickly. Her hands trembled when she ripped the envelope open. They shook even more violently when she unfolded the

single slip of paper inside.

The message it contained was unsigned. It was printed in pencil. And it told her:

Leave Mesquite Flats! You can't fool everybody forever. You'll only cause trouble. Go back to Denver. See you there in a few months. Neither you nor anybody else can stop things now. You ought to realize that.

She stood staring at the letter in a kind of horror. It was as though she couldn't believe in its reality. And while she gaped at it, the piano began to play in the saloon's back room.

Somebody was striking the keys clumsily, with improvised chords that often failed to harmonize. Gail Duke knew who it was—Hopi Painter, the blind man. Sometimes he abandoned his whiskey to grope his way into the back room and release a little of the music that helped relieve the darkness of his life. He was playing "The Lonesome Cowboy" now, playing it sadly and badly.

Suddenly Gail Duke uttered a sobbing sound. She shut her eyes fiercely, pressed hands to her ears. She began to move desperately about the small room. She didn't want to hear music now. She didn't want to hear anything. Yet the chords beat through her hands.

She tried not to think of the music. Her eyes fixed themselves wildly on the letter that had fallen to the table. And she thought, "I won't leave! I won't, I won't!"

## CHAPTER IX

### FOUR FRIGHTENED MEN

**F**OR the tenth time that evening Soapy Dolan, half undressed in his Bar V Bar ranchhouse, rose to look into a mirror. What he saw

made him drive an oath through the bandages on his face. The doctor had told him to lie down as much as possible, but Dolan was too restless to remain in bed.

Worse than that, his mind was poisoned tonight with hatred for Sam Squam, a hatred that allowed him no peace. It made him walk about, muttering, inwardly fuming.

He was turning away from the mirror when Slop Jeffers entered the bedroom. As always, Jeffers looked indolent. He leaned his lanky figure against the door jamb, took a cigarette from his lips, and grinned.

"You sure look like you walked into a mule's hind hoof," he observed. "How's it feel? Any better?"

"Shut up!" Dolan flung out.

"No use gettin' sore. Just came in to say we got comp'ny."

Dolan scowled. "Who?"

"Rance Crawford, Skinny Jim Bale, an' Hoke Kerrigan."

At the mention of the neighboring ranchers Soapy Dolan lost some of his anger. His manner became more cautious. His voice sank to a guarded note.

"What they want, Slop?"

"Wouldn't say." Jeffers studied his cigarette. "I told 'em the doc says you wasn't to be bothered. But they claim it's important."

Dolan considered. With his face bandaged and his nose still aching, he had no desire to see anyone tonight. He glowered uncertainly at the lamp. Then he decided that the cattlemen's visit was probably of sufficient importance to outweigh his own discomfort. In truth, he could guess what these three men had come to discuss.

"All right," he growled. "Send 'em up here. An' you stay out."

The men who presently entered had the tact to make no embarrassing references to Dolan's face. They knew what had happened. Everybody knew. Apart from asking if he felt easier, they accepted his condition as a matter of course.

Rance Crawford, who looked like an army colonel, closed the door. Skinny Jim Bale sat down nervously, rubbing his knees. It was big Hoke Kerrigan, wiping a bandana across a beefy red face, who spoke first.

"These damned rope murders, Soapy," he began abruptly. "We got to do something about 'em—an' do it quick!"

From the door Crawford cut in, "This hombre Sam Squam found fourteen noosed ropes after Ab Krasel's death. That means there was fifteen originally. An' . . . an' there was fifteen of us who lynched Nevada Bill Lenroot that night!"

Dolan nodded. "Yeah." His voice thickened. "It sure looks like somebody's out to get all of us, all right. But, hell, there's no use askin' *me* what to do. I don't know!"

"Did you hear about this piano teacher woman?" Skinny Jim asked. "Claimin' as how she saw a Mex on the trail?"

"Uh-huh. Slop told me."

"Sheriff Ingersol's asked Len Foster for the help o' the Border Patrol to watch the Border for this Mex hombre."

"Doggoned if I can see where a Mex fits into this," said Dolan. "How'd he—or anybody else, for that matter—find out who lynched Lenroot?"

"There was only fifteen of us knew who lynched Nevada Bill," Hoke Kerrigan said ominously. "That was the fifteen who done it, an' it ain't likely one o' us would have told anybody!"

RANCE CRAWFORD finally abandoned his position at the door. He came to grasp the end of the brass bed and to look at Soapy Dolan with burning intensity.

"Soapy," he said, "reason we're here is this: We ranchers got to find out who's doin' that killin'. We got to get the buzzard 'fore he gets us!"

The vaguest suggestion of a sneer hung in Dolan's reply: "Figure we can do better'n the law, do you?"

"We got one big advantage over the law," retorted Crawford. "We know the hombres who're in danger! We know the fellers that lynched Lenroot. An' the law don't!" He paused for emphasis. "We know who's got to be guarded. *Sabe?*"

Into Soapy Dolan's eyes, almost invisible behind the bandages, came a queer gleam. He looked from one cattleman to another.

"Gents," he said quietly, "I got a hunch you came here with some definite plan. Let's have it."

"Soapy," said Crawford, "*we'll see* to it that nobody who's in danger rides alone hereafter. But you—we're countin' on you to help in another way."

"How?"

"From what I hear, you're figurin' to drive a herd up into Mrs. Lenroot's valley October fifteenth. Right?"

Dolan nodded.

"We're askin' you, Soapy, not to wait till then. The date you set is a monthaway. Plenty hombres can be plugged in a month. We're askin' you to drive your herd up soon as possible, say Monday or Tuesday."

Behind the bandages Dolan's eyes widened in surprise. "Just what," he asked cautiously, "would that get us?"

"We figure things are the way you told Sheriff Ingersol. Only somebody

close to Lenroot, his widow, maybe, would be killin' to square things for him. Not that I think the woman herself is doin' it. But there's plenty gun toters can be hired to bush-whack hombres! 'Specially some Mex who can cross the Border, shoot, an' hightail back 'fore anybody can spot him."

Dolan's gaze was abnormally bright. Not that he was excited by Crawford's idea itself. He was excited only by the prospect of driving his herd into the valley with the approval of all these cattlemen, on the grounds that the act might help to solve the mystery of the murders.

"If Mrs. Lenroot's got a killer hired," Crawford drove on, "chances are the polecat comes to see her to collect once in a while! So if you an' your boys get up there, Soapy, you can watch her. You can grab anybody who comes. See?"

"That," slowly said Dolan, as though in admiration of the thought, "is quite an idea you roped yourself, Rance."

"It may not get us anywhere," Hoke Kerrigan grunted, "but it's sure worth tryin'! We can't just sit around, all of us, waitin' to be dry-gulched!"

Dolan made a pretense of considering the plan. At last he nodded slowly. "Reckon I ought to be well enough by Monday or Tuesday to ride up there. Only thing is," he peered about at them, "I may have some trouble in gettin' my herd across Mrs. Lenroot's spread."

"Forget that part of it," Crawford said shortly. "We'll make the sheriff an' everybody else see you got a right to that open range!"

THAT night a strange thing happened to Sam Squam. He was in the crowded saloon where both Len Foster, speaking for the Border

Patrol, and Sheriff Ingersol plied him with additional questions concerning his finding of Cal Gordon's body. And when the two officials at last had stepped out, he swallowed his drink with a sense of relief.

"Me," he said to Demijohn, "I've had enough for one day. I'll take the horses over to the stable an' turn in for the night." He added in a whisper, "Aim to get an early start for Sunbeam."

"I'll stay for just one more," Demijohn decided. "See you upstairs."

Bubblehead Cray, the bartender, had been looking out over the swinging doors. Outside, already mounted but sitting motionless at the hitch-rack, was the blind man, Hopi Painter. There was a listless attitude about him, shoulders bent, head drooping. As Sam started for the door, the bartender called to him.

"Say, you in a hurry?"

"Not particularly," Sam answered. "Why?"

"It's pretty near a quarter hour since I boosted Hopi into his saddle. He's still sittin' out there, waitin' for somebody to lead him home. Think you could do it?"

"Where's he live?"

"Over to his cousin's, the Dawson place. That's two miles—"

"Yeah, I know." Sam nodded and went out. The matter of leading the blind man home caused him no annoyance. It was something anyone in Mesquite Flats would have done. It would take only a few minutes.

He mounted, caught Hopi's reins, and started away. He would have spoken to the blind man, but at that instant his glance was caught by the lighted window over the saloon, the window of Gail Duke's room. And he saw in it not Gail but Sheriff Ingersol and the tall, wide-shouldered Len Foster. They were questioning

the girl about the Mexican, he decided.

Suddenly Hopi Painter spoke. His low, husky voice almost a snarl, he said, "Got the fifty?"

Sam stared at him. "The what?"

At his voice Hopi straightened with a jerk. An expression of bewilderment, almost of fear, raced over his features.

"What was that you said?" Sam repeated.

"Nothin'. I . . . nothin'. Who are you, anyhow?"

"Sam Squam."

"Oh! You . . . you leadin' me home?"

"Sure."

Hopi said nothing else just then. But Sam continued to watch him in wonder. They rode slowly, and the blind man kept his head up high. Sam attempted to question him again, but Hopi muttered, "Hell, don't mind me! I . . . I been drinkin' all night. I'm just talkin'. Just talkin'. I get like that."

"Get so's you ask for fifty, do you?" Sam said with a forced little laugh. He watched Hopi intently.

"Is that what I asked for?" Hopi seemed surprised.

"Uh-huh."

"Reckon I was sort o' dreamin' when you came along. Dreamin' o' . . . o' the half dollar I won from Bubblehead."

"That so? How'd you win it?"

"He bet I couldn't play 'Kentucky Home' on the piano without makin' a mistake."

Sam studied him. Why his doubts of the man persisted, he couldn't have explained. Finally he said, "You wasn't expectin' Bubblehead to close up an' take you home, was you?"

That, too, seemed to astonish the

*Continued on page 119*

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*Continued from page 117*

blind man. "Why not? What time is it?"

"'Bout half past ten."

"Well, what do you know! Figured it must be long after midnight! Gee," he mumbled with a shake of his head, "it's kind o' tough when it's always dark, always midnight. You can't tell about the hours passin'. You just guess. . . ." He faltered, and real pain came into his voice, and with it a hint of wistfulness. "You remember when I had my sight, Sam, don't you?"

"'Course I do." Sam spoke gently now.

"I . . . I used to be a pretty good ranny once. Gosh, life sure changed for me when—it happened!"

Sam remembered the thing that had blinded Hopi Painter. Mesquite Flats had spoken of nothing else for weeks. Hopi, who had worked for Soapy Dolan, had decided, on impulse, that he was tired of poking cows. He wanted to make money faster. He'd got a job with a mining outfit in the mountains. That had been only eight months ago. And after a few weeks' absence Hopi had returned to Mesquite Flats—led into town by an old prospector on a burro. He was blind then, his eyes still bandaged. A dynamite blast in the mine had ruined his sight.

When he had led Hopi home tonight, Sam left the man in wonder. He still couldn't understand why Hopi had whispered, "Got the fifty?" Certainly his explanation hadn't been altogether convincing.

The trail to Mesquite Flats dipped through a dark hollow filled with cottonwoods and scrub oak. Sam was still wondering about Hopi when he entered the hollow. His puzzled eyes were fixed on the ground.

And suddenly, without the slightest sound of warning, a gun crashed

among the trees. Something hot and vicious ripped across Sam's left shoulder.

## CHAPTER X

### BUSHWHACKER ON THE RAMPAGE

SAM'S frightened palomino reared, plunged forward. Stupefied, Sam half fell, half hurled himself out of the saddle, landing on hands and knees. In the same instinctive lunge he sent himself diving in among the trees.

Another shot banged out of the darkness. It came from somewhere at his left. The slug hit a tree trunk.

Sam whirled around. Crazy confusion filled his brain, and a kind of fever. The top of his shoulder blazed. He could feel the blood streaming down his left arm.

What this attack might mean, he couldn't guess. He knew only that somehow his gun was in his hand. He had caught a glimpse of fire, and he sent two bullets at the spot. An answer came—from a new direction. He heard lead thrash through the foliage above him.

The suddenness of the thing dazed him so profoundly that he yelled in fury, "What the devil is this?"

But no voice answered.

Crouching low, he listened intently. Because he couldn't see in the darkness, he needed some sound to serve as a target. But all he could hear was the thunder of his heart. Its terrific pounding was echoed in his throat, almost choking him.

He realized, of a sudden, that his shoulder throbbed excruciatingly. It was as if a white-hot branding iron lay upon it. The pain brought an ooze of sweat out of his forehead. He knew the bullet must have cut a deep gash. But why was this happening? *Why?*

There was no time even to glance

at the wound now. He remained tense, straining for a sound, his six-gun ready. Then he imagined he heard a faint rustle of brush somewhere at his right.

He whirled around on his heels. When the sound came again, he fired. And his eyes flared with the flame.

It occurred to him that the best precaution was a change of position. So, on his knees, he moved as soundlessly as possible to another tree, and still another. By the time he stopped he was thirty feet from the spot where he'd flung himself out of the saddle. Here he waited again, listening.

"If that bushwhackin' polecat figures to fight it out," he told himself savagely, "he'll show up soon enough!"

Sam's face was bitter. Bitter with rage and pain. His shoulder throbbed and caused him intense suffering. His whole arm was wet with blood. He could swing the arm a little, he found, but it would be useless in a fight. So he tightened his grip on the six-gun.

It was uncanny, this quiet. In all that darkness his heart still offered the only suggestion of sound.

Suddenly a new fear shocked him. What if the wound bled until he collapsed? What if he fell unconscious, an easy bit of prey for anyone who chose to step out and fill his body with lead?

He looked around wildly.

"It won't bleed *that* long!" he assured himself. "It can't! It'll clot. It'll clot an' stop!"

That was his only hope. To attempt bandaging it now would entail making sounds; and sounds would bring an immediate fusillade out of the darkness. He felt certain of that. No, he had to crouch like this, unmoving. He had to wait.

At that moment there was a loud

rustling at his left, hardly ten feet away! Sam whirled around, blazed away.

An instant crash of gunfire replied—*from his right!* He heard the whine of a bullet within inches of his face. He fell prostrate, nose in the ground, as another shot cracked. The slug nicked the tree a foot above his back.

And then Sam Squam cursed himself furiously. Eyes flaming like a wildcat's, he dragged himself to the protection of trees a dozen feet away.

"Let the buzzard trick me!" he muttered. "He must've thrown a stick or a rock! When I blazed at it, he fired away!"

When he squatted at last behind his new shelter, chest thudding harder than ever, he glared about. If he, too, could find a stick— But there seemed nothing near that he could throw. He began to creep over the hard ground, his gun hand groping out for a stone. Abruptly he stopped, jerked up his head.

Somewhere far ahead—at least a hundred yards away—he caught the thuds of a horse's hoofs. He heard a guttural sound, as of a rasping voice. Then the horse began to gallop. Its hoofbeats thumped off into the night. They hammered fast and after a few minutes dwindled into the distance.

In bewilderment Sam rose. His knees felt so wobbly—in truth, his whole body was so shaken—that he had to lean against a tree.

"The drygulching skunk!" he gasped. "Didn't have the guts to stick around an' fight!"

He listened, but the darkness was hushed. He took a few tentative steps, not quite trusting the stillness. Nothing happened; nothing stirred. Reaching the trail, Sam ventured on among the trees. His eyes searched everywhere, and his gun was ready.

Yet there were no sounds of any kind.

After a time, regaining confidence, Sam stumbled on dazedly. His left arm felt numb. He holstered the gun and put his right hand gingerly on the wound. His mind no longer concentrated wholly on who it might have been who tried to kill him. It yearned ahead to Mesquite Flats, a mile and a half away. He hoped desperately that he could make it, and was not at all certain he could.

HE made it principally because he found his palomino grazing a quarter of a mile from the tree-filled hollow, where some grass sprouted near cholla and chapparal.

An hour later Doc Benner—fussy as a woman, yet quick of hand—straightened from Sam's bedside in the room above the Mesquite Flats saloon.

"There," he announced with a satisfied nod at the bandage. He began rolling down his sleeves. "That'll hold you a spell."

Demijohn was hovering anxiously at the foot of the bed. "Think she'll heal all right, Doc?" he asked.

"Can't see why it shouldn't. The bone wasn't touched. It's a superficial wound."

"What we got to do for it?"

"Nothing for the present. I'll be around tomorrow to change the dressing."

At that Sam lifted his head in dismay. "Say, Doc, how long do I have to stay like this?"

Putting instruments back into his kit, Doc Benner smiled reassuringly. "You'll be sitting up tomorrow," he promised. "The day after I'll let you go home."

"I was aimin' to ride to Sunbeam tomorrow!"

"That bullet," Doc Benner assured him dryly, "changed your mind.

Now, look, Sam, Sheriff Ingersol and Len Foster are outside, both itching to question you. Feel up to seeing them?"

Sam's head dropped back into the pillow. He gave a sigh of resignation. "Yeah, reckon so. Let 'em come in."

When Ingersol and the beautifully proportioned man from the Border Patrol stood beside him, however, there was little Sam had to say.

"Never even had a look-see at that killer's shadow," he declared. "All I can tell you about him is that he's got a spine that's pure yellin' an' six inches wide."

Ingersol and Foster exchanged a grim glance. "Look, Squam," Foster said, "is there anybody who had any reason to plug you?"

"Not that I know of."

"Except, maybe," put in Demijohn harshly, "that Soapy Dolan tarantula or Slop Jeffers! I wouldn't put anything past the Dolan buzzard. You can check up on him, can't you? See if he was home or not when it happened?"

"What about Jeffers?" demanded Ingersol.

"Shucks, he pulled an iron on us once before, didn't he? An' when we hogtied him, he was rippin' mad. Mebbe Slop's got a grudge eatin' away at his mind. Some hombres don't forget easy."

True, they were merely guessing. Still, when the officers departed, after a long inquiry, Ingersol promised to investigate the night's movements of both Dolan and Slop. But it was evident he had scant faith in Demijohn's suspicions.

"It ain't as easy to explain as that," he told Foster as they descended the stairs. "There's been more shootin' an' killin' around Mesquite Flats these past few days than we've had in years. I got a hunch

they're all tied up together. Sam Squam an' Demijohn found them ropes, didn't they? They found the body o' Cal Gordon, too. An' now somebody tries to drygulch Squam. Yes, sir, I figure it's all part o' the same riddle!"

"If it's a Mexican who's comin' over the Border," Foster promised, "we'll grab him soon enough! By tomorrow we'll have five men besides myself watching the Border around here. He won't get past us."

UPSTAIRS, alone with Demijohn, Sam scowled through the window into starry skies. His thoughts as he lay there were mostly concerned with Hopi Painter. Certainly nobody could have ambushed him without knowing he had taken the blind man home. Somebody, therefore, must have trailed him out of town. Yet he recalled glancing back once or twice while he rode with Hopi. He had seen no one behind.

"Demijohn!" he said suddenly.

"Huh?"

"Do me a favor, will you? Get Bubblehead up here a minute."

Demijohn was perplexed. "What for?"

"I want to ask him a question. Get him, will you? I'll tell you what it's all about later."

So Demijohn went down, and Sam, lying in bed, continued to frown out of the window. He was still watching the stars when an uncertain knock at the open door made him turn. He almost jerked himself erect, for Gail Duke was on the threshold.

"Why," Sam stammered, "come in, Miss Duke! Come right in!"

The girl looked harassed. She hesitated, then came quickly to the bedside.

"I wanted to tell you how sorry I

was to . . . to hear of what happened," she said huskily. "It was awful!"

"That's mighty nice o' you, Miss Duke."

"If there's anything I can do—"

He tried to grin. "The doc an' Demijohn are lookin' after me. But it's mighty nice o' you to offer help."

She peered into his eyes, searchingly. "You never even saw who it was that fired, did you?"

"No, ma'am."

She stood still, then drew a sharp breath. Sam was still grinning, and she, too, smiled. It was the loveliest smile he had ever seen.

"If I can be of any help at all, any time, please call me. You will, won't you?"

"Just standin' here, Miss Duke," he laughed, "you make me forget there's such a thing as pain. So I reckon I'll be callin' often."

He saw color rise in her cheeks. Only then did he realize how pale she had been. She might have answered, but the sounds of heavy boots on the stairs checked the words. With another quick, tight smile, she turned to the door.

"I'll come again," she promised, and then she was gone.

A moment later Demijohn brought lumbering Bubblehead Cray into the room. The bartender appeared uneasy, shifting his weight from foot to foot. Yet Sam's voice was casual enough when he spoke.

"Say, Bubblehead, I just want to ask you a queer thing. Did you ever bet Hopi Painter he couldn't play 'Kentucky Home' without makin' a mistake?"

Bubblehead looked surprised. The question seemed to strike him as very strange. He glanced at Demijohn, then back at the bed.

"Where'd you hear about that?" he demanded.

"Hopi mentioned it. Did you?"

"Why . . . why, sure. I bet him a half dollar once. He won, too."

"How long ago?"

"Oh, mebbe two, three months."

"Did you pay the bet?"

"'Course I paid it! Paid it right on the spot. With a dozen hombres applaudin' Hopi. Why you askin'?"

Sam turned back to the window. "Hopi sort o' forgot, seems like. He figures you still owe him the fifty cents."

"Like blazes he does!" snorted Bubblehead. "He's kidded me about it a hundred times since then. Keeps askin' if I want to make any other bets. He knows he got paid!"

To Demijohn the whole conversation sounded incomprehensible. His expression, a bit impatient, suggested that Sam was wasting time on trivial nonsense. He restrained any comment, however.

Sam abruptly raised his head. His voice became strained. "Look, Bubblehead, was Hopi expectin' you to ride him home tonight?"

"Me?" The bartender was bewildered. "Why me?"

"Was he?"

"Course not! I never take Hopi home. I help him onto his horse now an' then, sure. Like I did tonight. But generally I'm too busy to do more'n that. I leave it to other folks to see he gets home."

"Do you know who was supposed to take him tonight?"

"Wasn't anybody supposed to," Bubblehead maintained. "Most everybody knows Hopi. He just sets around waitin' till somebody comes along that's goin' his way. Then they lead him off. Reckon every hombre in town has helped him now an' then. Why?"

Sam frowned at the window. "I was just wonderin'. When I came

along, it seemed like Hopi thought I was somebody else."

LATER, when Bubblehead had descended to the saloon, Sam said grimly to Demijohn, "Better get the sheriff or Foster up here again! I didn't hanker to get a blind hombre messed up in trouble, but it looks like I can't help myself. There's something doggone queer about Hopi Painter!"

"What in tarnation you talkin' about?" Demijohn demanded.

Sam explained, and when he finished, the startled Demijohn scurried out willingly enough to seek the officials. He returned in a few minutes with Len Foster.

"Sheriff decided to mosey out to Dolan's ranch pronto," he announced. "Figured he might do well by strikin' while the iron's hot. If Dolan or Jeffers was riding tonight, their horses might show it!"

"What's on your mind, Squam?" Foster asked. "I got to get down soon. I'm expecting some men from the Border Patrol."

Sam spoke in a low voice, his eyes troubled, beginning his recital with the fact that Hopi had whispered, "Got the fifty?"

When he finished, Foster regarded him in astonishment. "How come you didn't mention this before?"

"Figured a blind man's got troubles enough without bein' branded as a suspicious hombre. 'Course, after I talked to Bubblehead—"

"You think Hopi was lyin' when he tried to explain about askin' for fifty?"

"What's it sound like to you?"

"Queer." Foster admitted. He rubbed his chin. "Yes, doggone queer."

"Any other time I wouldn't have given it a thought," said Sam. "But

now, with this town full o' mystery, seems like everything counts, somehow. Know what I was thinkin', Foster?"

The officer waited, eyes questioning.

"Maybe we ought to keep quiet about this thing," Sam said. "Say nothin' to anybody. You an' the sheriff can keep an eye on Hopi. See who takes him home these nights. Find out who he thought was leadin' him tonight. An' I got a hunch it would be wise to find out why he lied to me—an' why somebody tried to bushwhack me right after I'd had a private palaver with him."

Foster considered the suggestions with a frown. After a long time he nodded. "Yes," he agreed, "seems like maybe there's plenty to wonder about in Hopi Painter!"

## CHAPTER XI

### FUGITIVES FROM THE RAIN

**T**HE rain came the next afternoon. It came suddenly, with scant warning, falling in a cloudburst. In half an hour the range was a vast region of mud.

Len Foster was caught in it. As he rode, his shoulders were hunched under the terrific downpour. It cascaded from the brim of his sombrero and pasted his clothes to his body, revealing the splendid mounds of muscle.

Foster was on his way to the Lenroot sheep ranch this afternoon.

"I was up there yestiddy," Sheriff Ingersol had said. "Figured maybe the woman would tell me something. But I couldn't get a word out of her. You know her pretty well, don't you, Len?"

"I've stopped by now an' then, yes," Foster had granted.

"Why don't you have a try at her? Seems to me if somebody's

aimin' to square things for her husband, she ought to have some idea who it is."

So this afternoon, leaving the problem of Hopi Painter to the sheriff, Foster was on his way to Mrs. Lenroot's when the cloudburst crashed down on him.

It came vertically, in a deluge. When he raised his head to peer forward, he could see only a few feet. Trees even five yards away were blurred. And his black horse was struggling, lifting its hoofs with difficulty out of sucking mud, splashing down again with rhythmic *plops*.

Once, while he was crossing Rance Crawford's Diamond C range, Foster almost rode into a score of cows huddled together. Their heads were lowered under the battering force of the rain. Foster growled and swung his horse away.

He realized, after a time, that he had lost all clear sense of direction. It irritated him. So he turned his mount downhill, hoping he'd strike the narrow stream which crawled through the bottom land of Crawford's spread. Once there, he'd know his way. He had only to follow the stream toward the foothills. And besides, he recalled, there was a tiny cabin somewhere up the banks.

"Best place to get into till this lets up," he decided.

He struck the stream within ten minutes. It was a torrent now, swollen and deep, fully forty feet wide, rushing on with amazing speed. The rain boiled on its surface and the roar of the downpour filled Foster's ears.

He followed the banks, keeping his horse to a slow walk for the mud was deeper than ever. Foster himself no longer held up his head. Only his eyeballs rolled up occasionally when

he peered ahead from under his sombrero's brim.

In another quarter hour he dimly made out the shack. It was a sagging, dilapidated place. Years ago Rance Crawford had set it there as a winter line cabin. That was before his old ranchhouse had burned down and he'd built a new one nearer the stream. Now the place was unused.

It stood dolefully under the branches of a few drooping cottonwoods. Its windows were without panes, and its door had long ago been removed.

A dispiriting sight, yet Len Foster welcomed it with a sense of relief. He could go into it with his horse. Its roof would almost certainly be leaking, but any shelter was preferable to pushing on in this storm.

A crash of thunder rolled down from the mountains, its echoes growling away in a long diminuendo.

Foster dismounted near the open door. Still hunched, he led the horse forward, then stopped abruptly at the threshold. He stared, and his sharp-featured face went gray. In that instant he forgot the rain, forgot the thunder, forgot everything save what he saw.

Katherine Lenroot knelt on the cabin's floor!

She was drenched. Her horse stood inside the shack, pressed against a far wall. Her back was turned to the door and the steady thrash of rain and the roll of thunder must have deafened her to the Border Patrolman's approach. Even now, when he stood directly behind her, she was unaware of his presence.

It wasn't merely the unexpected sight of the woman that held Foster rigid. It was the fact that she was kneeling over a thin, convulsed, motionless figure—a figure Foster recognized as that of Skinny Jim Bale, the rancher.

Skinny Jim's bony knees were drawn up almost to his chin. His

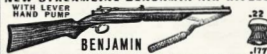
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eyes were shut in agony, and one arm stretched out stiffly, the fingers distended.

Around his throat there was a bit of noosed rope, and to the rope was affixed a slip of white paper!

**AS** the rain hammered at him, Foster's hand started toward his holster. It stopped half way, hesitated, sank again. He drew in a long breath and spoke quietly.

"Mrs. Lenroot!"

His voice, almost sepulchral, all but made the woman scream—this calm, cold woman, always so sure of herself, always so remote and poised. She sprang up with a gasp. She swung around, the back of her hand pressed to her mouth. Wild, terrified eyes stared at Foster. Impulsively she moved back from the door, back until the wall stopped her.

For an instant they looked at each other, with the mud-caked body of Skinny Jim Bale lying between them, with the downpour roaring on the roof.

Dropping his horse's reins, Len Foster walked into the cabin. He stood over the bony man, bent to shake a muddy shoulder. It was futile.

That was when Katherine Lenroot recovered her voice. It came hoarsely and in spurts.

"I . . . I found him here!"

Foster didn't immediately reply. From the corners of his eyes, as he knelt beside the dead man, he glanced at Mrs. Lenroot's holster. It contained a small, pearl-handled gun. His lips tightened, and his hand stretched out.

"Mind if I take a look at that gun?"

Curiously, his words seemed to shock the woman back to a semblance of her customary dignity. "Surely you don't believe I—" she began.

"I'm tryin' hard not to think anything," Foster said. "But it happens I represent the law. Will you let me see that iron, please?"

Her hand shook visibly as it went to her holster. Foster's own fingers weren't far from his gunbelt at the moment. He watched intently as she drew the weapon, gave it to him.

Standing over Skinny Jim's body, he examined the small Smith & Wesson. Finally he nodded.

"I'm doggone glad, Mrs. Lenroot, that all the slugs are still in it." He handed the gun back to her. As she took it, still pallid, he asked, "You found him just like this, dead on the floor?"

"Yes!"

"How long ago?"

"Hardly ten minutes!"

Foster's brows arched slightly over eyes that were a bit dubious. He looked out into the downpour, then back at the soaked woman.

"Pretty bad weather for you to be out in, Mrs. Lenroot, 'specially so far off your range."

"I was on my way to Mesquite Flats!" She seemed to feel, in her desperation, that only a complete explanation would do, yet her voice continued to hold horror. "Demijohn Walker rode home this morning. He told me Sam Squam is wounded—in bed at Moulton's place. So I'm riding in to . . . to help Sam if I can—"

"An' Demijohn? How come he left Squam alone like that?"

"He—Sam had planned to ride to Sunbeam this morning. He couldn't, so he sent Demijohn instead. And Demijohn stopped on the way to tell me. Good heavens, Foster, I didn't do this! I don't know any more about it than you do!"

"I'm not doubting you, Mrs. Len-

root." The words were dry, however, and without much conviction. Squatting to examine Skinny Jim more closely, he rolled the wet body on its back. There was a bullet hole in the man's chest.

LEN FOSTER lifted his head to squint questioningly at Katherine Lenroot. Her breathing was still rapid, her face still colorless. But she was self-possessed again. He glanced from her to her horse.

"How'd you happen to come into this cabin?"

"To get out of the storm, of course!"

"This ain't the usual trail to Mesquite Flats, Mrs. Lenroot."

"I . . . I was in too much of a hurry to stick to the trail," she explained. "I cut across Crawford's ranch."

Since Foster himself had done this, he had no comment to offer. He stared meditatively at the body.

"Skinny Jim's a long way from home, too," he observed. "Pretty near ten miles from his ranch."

"He . . . he must have been visiting Rance Crawford."

"Maybe. Reckon we'll find out at his place where he was headed for."

Mrs. Lenroot's eyes queried him, and fear was still in them. Foster waved to the floor.

"Queer there's no blood around. There ain't enough water leakin' through the roof to have washed it all away so quick, either, 'specially since his body covered the spot where the blood should've been. I reckon he wasn't shot in here."

"He's covered with mud!" she whispered. "Look at his knees! Look at his arms and chest!"

"Yes-es. Sure looks like he

crawled a long ways through mud, doesn't it, 'fore he died?"

Len Foster rose and went to the door. He looked down at the ground. The deluge had long since obliterated any trail Skinny Jim Bale might have left. There was nothing but mud outside, soft brown mud. After a time he came back to face the woman again. Despite Skinny Jim's body, a grim smile hovered over his lips.

"Kind o' funny, Mrs. Lenroot," he said softly. "I was just headin' out to see you. I sure didn't figure to meet up with you like this, though."

"What . . . what did you want?" she asked faintly.

"To ask if maybe you had any ideas that would explain these killings."

"Sheriff Ingersol asked me that yesterday," she said bitterly. "I told him I didn't know any more than he did!"

"No idea at all?"

"None!"

He nodded. There was neither acceptance nor denial in the gesture. It was simply something he seemed to inscribe in the notebook of his mind. Then he looked out again into the downpour.

"Soon as it lets up a bit out there," he said in that same tone, "you an' me, Mrs. Lenroot, we'll tote Skinny Jim into town an' have a powwow with Sheriff Ingersol."

**S**AM SQUAM heard about Skinny Jim's death half an hour before he saw Katherine Lenroot. The news raced through Mesquite Flats; spread from the instant the body was brought in on Foster's horse. It was Bubblehead Cray who reported it to Sam.

Now Sam sat in a rocking chair near his window. Outside, the deluge

had long since abated, but a thin rain still dribbled out of gray skies. It had been this way for more than an hour and it would probably continue.

Heavy bandages incased his left shoulder. Moreover, to prevent too much movement, Doc Benner had put his left arm in a sling. Sam felt miserably uncomfortable, with a dull ache still gnawing at the wound. Yet the tidings of Skinny Jim's murder, coupled with the fact that Len Foster had found Mrs. Lenroot in the cabin, drove even the sense of pain from his thoughts.

She came to see him as soon as she was through with Sheriff Ingersol. When she entered, Sam tried awkwardly to rise.

"Don't," she said quickly. "Stay where you are." And then, in a spasm of wretchedness: "Oh, Sam!"

"I heard," he said gravely.

"Tell me about yourself! This shooting—"

"Don't worry about me," he said. "I'm comin' along fine. It was mighty nice o' you to ride into town."

"I couldn't do anything else when Demijohn told me. Is the wound any easier?"

"Lots." She was very pale, he noted, and her drenched clothes appeared ruined. With all that, however, she still contrived to look beautiful in that pale, statuesque way of hers. She sat down on the bed, her sombrero tossed aside, and tucked back wet black hair. They exchanged accounts of their experiences. And when they finished, Sam regarded the floor grimly.

"We sure seem to have hopped into a mess nobody can understand." He hesitated. "Do they know yet what Skinny Jim was doin' on Crawford's spread?"

"Yes. One of Skinny's boys was in the saloon. He tore over to the sheriff's office soon as he heard what had happened. He said Skinny and Hoke Kerrigan had been with Rance Crawford all morning. They were probably on their way home when . . . when it happened."

At that Sam jerked his head toward her. His gaze narrowed in alarm. "Ridin' together?"

"I suppose so."

"Where's Hoke Kerrigan now?"

"I don't know. The sheriff and Foster have just gone to his place. They think Kerrigan may be able to explain—" She stopped abruptly. Sam, in leaning toward her, had sent a stab of pain through his shoulder. He winced. Instantly she was on her feet, anxiety stiffening her. "Can I do anything for you, Sam?"

"N-no, I'll be all right. Don't worry. Just moved a little too much."

"Have you been alone like this all day?"

"Shucks, no." He managed an uneasy laugh. "Doc Benner was in this mornin'. An' there's a young lady down the hall, Miss Duke, a newcomer, who's been sittin' with me a spell." He paused, something warning in him at the thought of Gail Duke. He went on, "Reckon Demijohn told you about gettin' a rancher from Sunbeam to run stock into our valley?"

"Oh, yes!" Her attitude at once brightened. "That's a great idea,

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Sam! If we succeed, I'm sure we'll have no more trouble with Dolan. And by the way—" Her voice was serious. "Demijohn told me, too, of your fight with Dolan."

At that Sam smiled wryly. "He asked for it, Mrs. Lenroot."

"I know. Do . . . do you think that wound in your shoulder is Dolan's way of hitting back at you?"

Sam had considered this possibility, of course, but he felt unwilling to venture an opinion on it. Or perhaps he was silenced by the fact that he heard quick steps in the hall, and he knew Gail Duke was returning.

He was right. Gail entered, and the sight of Mrs. Lenroot's back halted her with a slight, "Oh," of uncertainty. Mrs. LENROOT quickly turned to the girl.

And what happened then left Sam Squam stunned—stunned beyond all speech.

He saw Gail retreat with a stifled cry. She collided with the door jamb and stood like one paralyzed. Her eyes were wide. Her complexion became ghastly.

Katherine Lenroot, though she didn't stir, became as white as Gail Duke. She stood rigid, head high, eyes flashing.

They looked at each other, these two—that was all.

Yet Sam Squam felt that something had exploded in his room. There had been some terrific clash. He gaped inarticulately from one woman to the other. He couldn't understand this. Only one thing was clear to him: these two women knew each other! *Dreaded* each other!

*What strange bond exists between Katherine Lenroot and Gail Duke? Has it any bearing on the epidemic of murder that has struck Mesquite Flats? Why was an attempt made on Sam Squam's life? Another thrill-packed installment of this gripping mystery appears in next week's issue.*

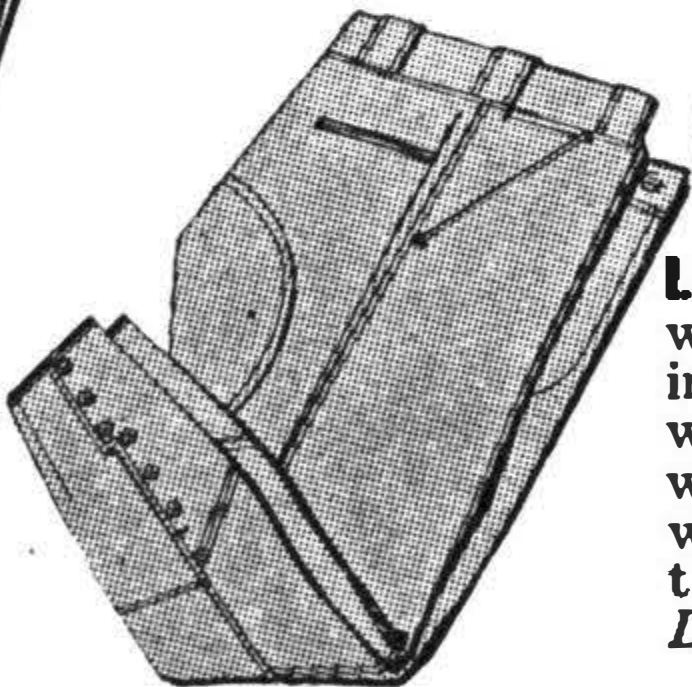


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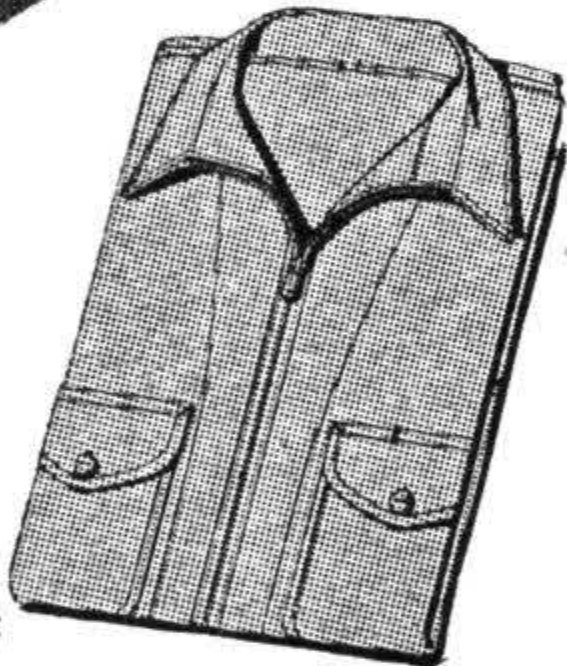
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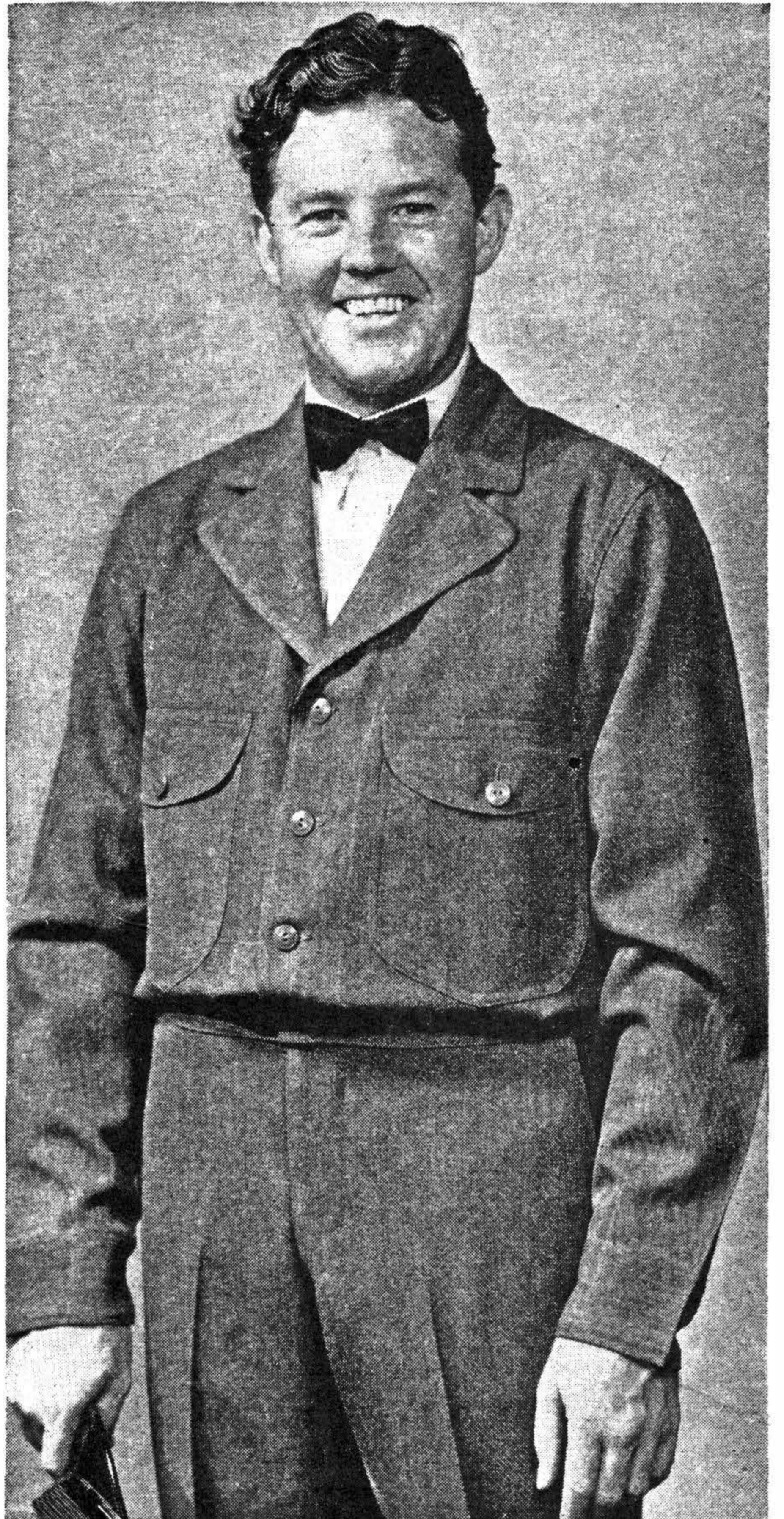
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**Lee Uniform Breeches...** well styled, with button legs, in worsted whipcord, worsted-and-cotton whipcord, cotton whipcord and army twill — all exclusive Lee Fabrics.



**Lee Uniform Blouse...** with Talon fastener, in worsted whipcord, worsted-and-cotton whipcord, cotton whipcord and army twill — all exclusive Lee Fabrics.

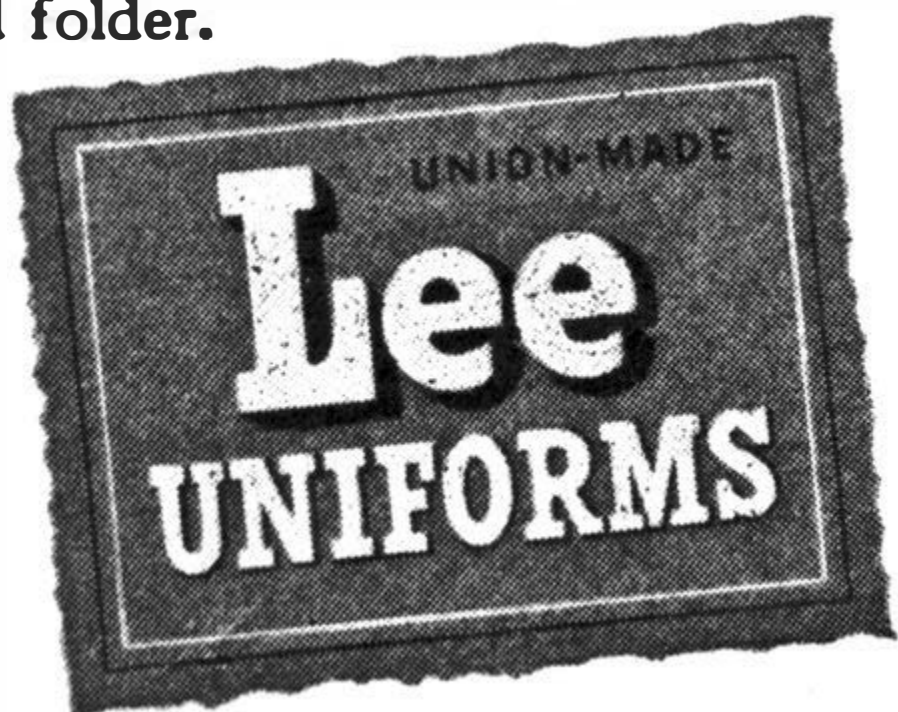


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