

# WESTERN<sup>C</sup>

STREET  
AND  
SMITH'S

FEB. 5, '44

Story

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

15¢

February 5, 1944



FOR VICTORY  
BUY WAR BONDS  
AND STAMPS



*Coburn • Fox • Barker • Gilbert*

AN OUTSTANDING SERIAL

ALL OTHER STORIES COMPLETE



# Wouldn't you like a **SHAVING CREAM**

*Guaranteed not to  
"solve your shaving problem"?*

**Plain facts for black-bearded men  
who have discovered that  
miracles do not come in tubes**

If you are the kind of person who really has a "shaving problem"—Brother, you had better see a psychoanalyst.

Our Listerine Shaving Cream is for men with adult minds as well as grown-up whiskers; for men intelligent enough . . . or disillusioned enough . . . not to expect that any soap, cream, lotion, or salve, will make shaving a pleasure.

We say for Listerine Shaving Cream that it is a *sensible* shaving aid. Just a little of it, a fraction of an inch, makes great billows of moisture-laden lather. This helps it wilt wiry whiskers and reduce the sting and nuisance of shaving.

Men with tough beards and tender skins, who have tried it, say that it really gets the razor over the rough spots when they're plowing under their daily crop of bristle.

We promise that this quality shaving cream will help you give yourself a whacking good shave. If this plain, unadorned promise appeals to you, you're just the man who ought to meet Listerine Shaving Cream face to face. Ask for it at any drug counter. The price is low, the tube lasts long; so it is just as smart to buy as it is smartless to use.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL CO.,  
St. Louis, Mo.



In every way worthy of the name,  
because made to the Listerine  
standard of quality



THE **35¢** TUBE THAT LASTS AND L-A-S-T-S  
*month after month after month*



REMEMBER, THERE ARE 2 TYPES OF LISTERINE SHAVING CREAM

Out of this tube come swell shaves  
for men who prefer no-brush cream

# MAKE YOUR RESERVATION FOR A PLACE AMONG THE LEADERS IN THE COMING VICTORY ERA OF MIGHTY INDUSTRIAL-COMMERCIAL GROWTH & DEVELOPMENT— JUST MAIL THE COUPON!

## INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

BOX 4905-P, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of booklet and full particulars about the course *before* which I have marked X:

- |                                                 |                                                                       |                                                                       |                                                                        |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Air Brake              | <input type="checkbox"/> Contracting and Building                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Marine Engines                               | <input type="checkbox"/> Sheet Metal                                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Air Conditioning       | <input type="checkbox"/> Diesel Engines                               | <input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical Drafting                          | <input type="checkbox"/> Ship Drafting                                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Airplane Drafting      | <input type="checkbox"/> Electrical Drafting                          | <input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical Engineering                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Shipfitting                                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Architectural Drafting | <input type="checkbox"/> Electrical Engineering                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Mine Foreman                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Shop Practice                                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Architecture           | <input type="checkbox"/> Electrician                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Mold-loft Work                               | <input type="checkbox"/> Steam Electric                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Aviation               | <input type="checkbox"/> Electrical Maintenance                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Navigation <input type="checkbox"/> Plastics | <input type="checkbox"/> Steam Engines                                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Aviation Mechanic      | <input type="checkbox"/> Foundryman <input type="checkbox"/> Heating  | <input type="checkbox"/> Patternmaking                                | <input type="checkbox"/> Steam Fitting                                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Blueprint Reading      | <input type="checkbox"/> Heat Treatment                               | <input type="checkbox"/> Pulp and Paper Making                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Structural Drafting                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Boilermaking           | <input type="checkbox"/> of Metals                                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Radio Operating                              | <input type="checkbox"/> Structural Engineering                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bridge Engineering     | <input type="checkbox"/> Highway Engineering                          | <input type="checkbox"/> Radio Servicing                              | <input type="checkbox"/> Surveying and Mapping                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chemistry              | <input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Metallurgy                        | <input type="checkbox"/> R. R. Section Foreman                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Telegraphy <input type="checkbox"/> Telephony |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Civil Engineering      | <input type="checkbox"/> Locomotive Engineer                          | <input type="checkbox"/> R. R. Signalman                              | <input type="checkbox"/> Tool Design <input type="checkbox"/> Welding  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Coal Mining            | <input type="checkbox"/> Mechanist <input type="checkbox"/> Inspector | <input type="checkbox"/> Refrigeration                                |                                                                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Concrete Engineering   |                                                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Sanitary Engineering                         |                                                                        |
- 
- |                                                  |                                              |                                                                      |                                               |
|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Accounting              | <input type="checkbox"/> Civil Service       | <b>BUSINESS COURSES</b>                                              |                                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Advertising             | <input type="checkbox"/> College Preparatory | <input type="checkbox"/> First Year College                          | <input type="checkbox"/> Railway Postal Clerk |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bookkeeping             | <input type="checkbox"/> Commercial          | <input type="checkbox"/> Foremanship <input type="checkbox"/> French | <input type="checkbox"/> Salesmanship         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Business Correspondence | <input type="checkbox"/> Cost Accounting     | <input type="checkbox"/> Good English                                | <input type="checkbox"/> Secretarial          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Business Management     | <input type="checkbox"/> C. P. Accounting    | <input type="checkbox"/> High School                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Spanish              |
|                                                  |                                              | <input type="checkbox"/> Managing Men at Work                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Tax Accountant       |
- 
- |                                               |                                                                 |                                                                      |  |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| <b>HOME ECONOMICS COURSES</b>                 |                                                                 |                                                                      |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced Dressmaking | <input type="checkbox"/> Home Dressmaking                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Tea Room and Cafeteria Management, Catering |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Foods and Cookery    | <input type="checkbox"/> Professional Dressmaking and Designing |                                                                      |  |

**SPECIAL  
TUITION RATES  
FOR MEMBERS  
OF THE  
ARMED FORCES**

★

Name..... State..... Age..... Home Address.....

City..... State..... Present Position.....

Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Limited, Montreal, Canada.  
British residents send coupon to I. O. S., 71 Kingsway, London, W. C. 2, England.

STREET & SMITH'S  
**WESTERN STORY**

TITLE REGISTERED U. S. PATENT OFFICE

FEBRUARY 5, 1944

VOL. CCX, NO. 3

**NOVEL**

**KING OF THE RANGE**, *by Walt Coburn* . . . 6

**SERIAL**

**GUN-SMOKE BRAND**, Conclusion,  
*by William Colt MacDonald* 98

**NOVELETTE**

**BACK FROM BOOTHILL**, *by William Heuman* . 67

**SHORT STORIES AND FEATURES**

**SAWBONES' SALVATION**, *by Norman A. Fox* 37

**RANGE SAVVY**, *by Carl Raht* . . . . . 48

**COLD EVIDENCE**, *by S. Omar Barker* . . . 49

**KILLER'S BAIT**, *by Kenneth Gilbert* . . . . 59

**SCAVENGER BIRDS** . . . . . 66

**NAVAHO BLANKETS**, *by Jim West* . . . . 88

**MINES AND MINING**, *by John A. Thompson* . 92

**WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE**,  
*by John North* 94

**GUNS AND GUNNERS**,  
*by Captain Philip B. Sharpe* 96

The editorial contents of this magazine have not been published before, are protected by copyright and cannot be reprinted without the publisher's permission. All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

Publication issued biweekly by Street & Smith Publications, Incorporated, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Allen L. Grammer, President; Gerald H. Smith, Vice President and Treasurer; Henry W. Balston, Vice President and Secretary. Copyright 1944, in U. S. A. and Great Britain by Street & Smith Publications, Inc. Re-entered as Second-class Matter, February 5, 1944, at the Post Office at New York, under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions in U. S. A. \$3.00 per year; to Countries in Pan American Union, \$4.00 per year; elsewhere, \$6.00 per year. We cannot accept responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts or artwork. Any material submitted must include return postage.



*Editor*  
JOHN BURR

*Cover by*  
H. W. SCOTT

# THE BEST OF THE WEST



—in one big

160 page Annual!

An anthology of the finest western stories Street & Smith has published!

The authors in this big bargain book are the top-hand Western writers whose work you know from books, screen and radio. Among the famous names are:

WALT COBURN · BENNETT FOSTER · L. L. FOREMAN  
C. K. SHAW · S. OMAR BARKER · HARRY F. OLMSTED  
HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

Illustrations throughout and a striking four-color cover!

For you who are thrilled by the adventures of the men and women who carved a great empire from the danger-packed frontiers of our country—this is *your* Annual! And it's only 25c (30c in Canada)! Get your copy now. If your dealer can't supply you, fill out the coupon below.

## WESTERN STORY ANNUAL

25c A COPY

30c IN CANADA

AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

WESTERN STORY ANNUAL, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Enclosed is 25c (30c in Canada). Kindly send me the new WESTERN STORY ANNUAL.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_



*With Old Hob Titus and Big Dane Folsom on the prod, Tracy Bierce figured he'd collect a hot-lead jackpot that would make him*

# KING OF THE RANGE

by WALT COBURN

I

DANE FOLSOM ran twelve bands of sheep on his big range that spread out between the Thunder Mountains and Snake Creek. It was one of Montana's biggest sheep outfits.

Dane Folsom was a mighty big man in size and habits, though he had picayune streak that cropped out at times.

For instance, if one of his sheep herders had three or six months wages due him, Dane Folsom would

drive out to the sheep camp in his rattletrap old buckboard, with a jug of whiskey and a deck of cards. He would stay until the jug was empty and he had won what money the sheepherder had coming. More often than not, the herder would be in debt another month's or two months' pay. Dane Folsom would herd the sheep until the sheepherder sobered up.

"Keep 'em in the hole," the big sheepman would say. "Most of my herders ain't bin out o' debt to me since they hired out. And the majority of 'em has worked for me for ten-fifteen years. All they want out o' life is grub and a warm bed and tobacco."

Dane had no scruples about pokering his herders out of their money. The tinhorn gamblers in town would get it if he didn't. An hour after the average sheepherder hit town he was drunk. If the saloonmen and tinhorns left any money in a sheepherder's pockets some bar fly would roll him when he was sleeping off his jag. A big drunk every few months was something every sheepherder needed to keep from going plumb locoed. But there was no need for him to make a fifty-mile trip to town to get it.

"I feed 'em good likker," argued Dane Folsom. "My cards ain't marked. I give 'em a square deal. They like it. Anyhow, I earn what I win from them. If you don't think so, just camp a few days and nights with a drunken sheepherder that ain't bin away from his woolies for six months. Mostly they git a talkin'

jag. Now and then one goes locoed with a gun or knife. There's one that quotes the Bible by the page. A couple have killed theirselves. Money's no good to 'em. Good grub . . . Tobacco . . . A big drunk. I savvy sheepherders."

Dane Folsom stood six feet four in his cheap wool socks, the kind his ranch store sold to his sheepherders and camp tenders. Most of his two hundred and fifty pounds was big bone and solid muscle. His paunch, what there was of it, was hard fat. He smoked cheap, strong tobacco in a blackened corncob pipe. He bought his whiskey by the barrel and drank no less than a quart a day. His leathery face had a florid glow. His eyes were a hard, bright-blue, the whites slightly bloodshot. Nobody ever saw him drunk nor was he ever cold sober. He liked to run hundred yard foot races for big side bets, or wrestle, or lift heavy weights. But the foot races must be run barefooted over ground that had cactus spines or tacks or bits of broken bottle glass hidden in the dust; the soles of his own feet were toughened by brine. His wrestling tricks were bone crushers, and lifting dead weights requires as much skill and practice as it does bull strength.

Out on the ranch Dane wore shabby old clothes and went weeks without shaving. And, unless his wife was there, he slept in the bunkhouse and ate with his ranch hands. The big log house was never opened unless he was entertaining company like wool buyers or city friends who

came for the hunting or trout fishing in the mountains. His clothes smelled of the barn, sheep, stale sweat and strong tobacco.

But at Helena, the capital, Senator Dane Folsom kept a suite of rooms at the Placer Hotel, spent a lot of his time at the Montana Club, and gave champagne suppers at his big three-storied brick house. A Chicago tailor made his clothes, his shirts were custom made, and he smoked fifty-cent cigars. He fought the cattlemen during sessions of legislature, and he bragged that his poker winnings paid his lobbying expenses. Senator Dane Folsom was a powerful man. Powerful and ruthless.

His was a tremendous and awesome model for patterning after. Perhaps that was why his two sons failed so miserably, each in his own way, to size up to their father's idea of what they should be.

Neither of them had anything like the giant physique of their sheepman father.

Waite Folsom, the younger son, was short, small-boned, wiry. He had his mother's straight black hair and opaque black eyes. He was cursed with a quick and violent temper which he backed up with a gun or a knife. He had been expelled from expensive private schools for gambling, drinking, or fighting. Now he was getting into one scrape after another on the ranch or in the small cow towns or at Helena. Only Senator Dane Folsom's political power and his millions kept young Waite

Folsom out of the Deer Lodge prison.

Carter Folsom, four years older, was as tall as his father and he had his father's hard, bright-blue eyes, his straw-colored hair, and large-boned structure. But his muscles were long and lean as a rawhide rope and he walked with an ungainly stride, stoop-shouldered and awkward. Whiskey, beer or Helena champagne made him sick so he let liquor alone. He never learned to smoke.

He had graduated from Harvard law school about the time Waite had been kicked out of his last private school and sent back to the ranch where he spent most of his time hunting wolves and coyotes with a big pack of hounds. The hounds had fleas that never bothered Waite but bit Carter's white skin into ugly red welts and Carter disliked his brother Waite and the hounds with an unspoken depth that was the more dangerous because he never gave voice to it. That was why Waite never suspected his brother when his hounds were poisoned by strychnine baits that he figured the Triangle T outfit had scattered for coyotes and wolves, or to kill the sheep outfit's dogs.

The sheep and cattle feud had begun in Montana with the first band of sheep that had been trailed in. Dane Folsom's first sheep had started the hatred in that particular part of the cow country, particularly with the Triangle T outfit, east of Snake Creek.

Old Man Hobson Titus had trailed one of the first big herds out of



Texas and up the Chisholm Trail to Montana. Old Hob, they called him. Tall, rawboned, soft-spoken, he was a born Texan and nothing but a real cowman in every sense of the word.

Hob's only son, Long Tom, was as like his father as a son can be. He looked and talked and acted like Old Hob. And because Tom's mother had died when he was a small boy, Hob Titus had been more like a brother and camp pardner than a father to the boy. Old Hob's coarse black hair was graying and his drooping mustache was iron-gray. But his steel-gray eyes were undimmed and he was as active and young at heart as his twenty-five-year-old son. On horseback, at a distance, you could not tell them apart.

That they hated sheep was as natural as their Texan memory of the Alamo.

"Keep your blattin', stinkin' woolies on yonder side of Snake Crick," Hob quietly told Dane Folsom at the start, "and mebbys there won't be too much trouble."

But Waite Folsom's hounds had picked up strychnine baits along Snake Creek. Waite bought a new pack of hounds. The older dogs savage-tempered. Big, shaggy wolf hounds that could hamstring and pull down a big native four-year-old beef steer.

"I'll dog their damned cattle till hell's as cold as McGinty's feet," Waite Folsom made his whiskey talk at the Halfway House.

Triangle T line riders found a

two-year-old steer dead. It had been hamstringed, its neck torn, guts ripped out by savage fangs. But none of the dead critter's meat had been gnawed and eaten. It looked like the deadly, wanton work of wolves. The tracks left on the blood-soaked ground were big enough for wolf tracks. Too big for coyote tracks. But not far away the cowpuncher line rider had picked up tracks left by a shod horse. And the news had spread that Waite Folsom was running a new pack of wolfhounds.

Old Hob Titus was laid up at the home ranch with a twisted knee he'd gotten when his horse had stepped in a badger hole on the horse roundup. Long Tom was ramrodding the roundup forty miles away at the other end of the Tringle T range. The cowpunchers scattered along the Snake creek line camps got the news of the dead steer and began packing saddle guns.

## II

At his sheep ranch, Dane Folsom looked over the books at the office. A Basque shepherd named Peralta had four months' pay, minus a few dollars for tobacco and clothes, coming to him. Dane Folsom harnessed the matched team of buckskins he used for such camp trips, and hooked them to the old buckboard. He filled a wicker-covered demijohn with whiskey and shoved a .30-30 carbine into the scabbard strapped to the back of the seat. Dropping a sealed deck of cards into his coat pocket, he told his twenty-three-year-old son

Carter to look after the ranch.

"Till I git back from Peralta's camp on the west fork of Snake Crick. That Basque is hard to trim. I might be gone two-three days. It takes that long to sober him up."

"Wasn't it Peralta that shot you last year?" frowned Carter, who never gambled.

"And it was Peralta that knifed me the year before," his father said. "But I'm still alive. And Peralta is still herdin' sheep for me. . . . I wish to hell you'd git stinkin' drunk, just once. Or lose that damned clean white shirt of yours in a stud game. Or git throwed in jail. Just once. By the hell, you don't even cuss like a man!"

Dane Folsom buckled on his old cartridge belt with its holstered six-shooter and strode out of the ranch office growling into a month's growth of yellowish-gray beard.

Two days later a camp tender rode into the ranch on a sweat-marked, leg-weary horse. He told Waite and Carter Folsom that he had to change horses and get on to town. He had to hire a new sheepherder to take Peralta's place. And to fetch the sheriff. Peralta was dead. He'd been shot. Dane Folsom said he'd found the Basque herder dead at camp, the two dogs whimpering. The band of big wethers had been scattered to hell and gone, and the coyotes and wolves had killed and crippled a hundred or more. Dane Folsom was herding the wether band till the new sheepherder got there.

"Looks like the Triangle T's declared war," said Waite Folsom. The

grin on his lean, dark face was twisted and his black eyes glittered wickedly.

"Why blame it on the Triangle T outfit?" questioned his long-faced, quiet-spoken brother. "Peralta was ornery when he was drinking. A bad loser. He went for his knife or gun. The Senator lost his temper and killed the ugly-tempered Basque, but Sheriff Russ Robertson won't dare arrest the big sheepman who put him in office. Peralta had over a hundred dollars' back wages coming. Perhaps he wouldn't be poked out of it. Killing him was cheaper than firing him. What's one poor, half-locoed Basque sheepherder, more or less?" Disgust and bitterness tainted the voice of Carter Folsom.

Waite eyed his brother with hard black-eyed contempt and anger. Carter Folsom stared back at him, and down from his superior height.

"You're long-headed, ain't you, Cart?" sneered Waite. "You can see the war clouds gatherin'. You're yellow enough to throw the blame of that sheepherder killin' onto the big buck with the gold horns. You're a hell of a son."

Waite Folsom walked across the office to the gun rack. He took down his saddle carbine and dropped a box of cartridges into the pocket of his black angora chaps. His hound pack followed him to the big log barn.

Carter Folsom scowled after his brother. Then, shrugging his lean big-boned shoulders, he opened the

ledger where the men's time was kept. He dipped a pen into the ink bottle and marked PAID on the page devoted to the account of Peralta. The faint smile on his long face was unpleasant.

"Why don't you wear a long black frock coat, Deacon?" a girl's voice called with faint mockery from the doorway.

Carter Folsom straightened his bent back and turned. A faint, angry flush stained his face that never attained a healthy tan color.

The girl standing there in the doorway had dark, tawny hair. There was a golden-tan color to her skin. Her eyes, black-fringed, under almost heavy black brows, were dark amber. Her full, red-lipped mouth was twisted in a mocking smile. Tall, athletic, she wore her soft leather divided riding skirt, her fancy-topped shop-made cowboy boots, dark-green flannel blouse and buckskin-colored Stetson as though she belonged in such range garb—even as Helena knew her in imported French evening gowns.

Helena Folsom was a striking-looking girl anywhere. She could pour tea in the drawing room of the Helena mansion or tally sheep with her father with equal facility. Dance with the governor or lobby a bill through the senate. Rope calves or ride a bronc. She owned her own horse ranch at the foot of Thunder Butte and professed to hate the sound and stink of a band of sheep.

Dane Folsom's daughter had everything her two brothers lacked. Her father worshipped her. Since she

was a small child he had let her bully him. He'd given her the Thunder Butte ranch on her sixteenth birthday. But she'd selected her own stud and picked the brood mares, because, she said, a sheepman couldn't know much about horses.

Helena Folsom would hotly deny she knew anything about the sheep business. Dane Folsom insisted she knew more about sheep and ranching than both her brothers combined.

"Where's Dane?" It was typical of her that she had always called her father "Dane."

"Herding sheep," said Carter, giving her his faint smile. "He took a jug and a deck of cards out to Peralta's camp. The camp tender just came in with the news that Peralta had been killed. Shot to death. The senator's herding sheep till the new shepherd gets out there. You found me marking Peralta's account paid off. I hear you're framing a bill to split the county. Name this part Folsom County. 'It'll cost a million,' Dane Folsom is quoted, 'but it's worth it.'"

"Old Hob Titus," said Helena Folsom, "will spend a million bucking it. You can't blame him. Naming a county after a lousy shepherd. I'm glad Dane shot first this time. Peralta was always bad medicine. Where'd you say that camp is?"

"Snake Creek. Waite's gone to open a range war with the Triangle T outfit. Backing father's play that the Triangle T line riders killed Peralta. Nice people, these Folsoms."

### III

The Halfway House was a stage station. It was located at the gravel crossing on Snake Creek, approximately halfway along the stage road connecting the mining camp in the Thunder Mountains with the railroad eighty miles north. The stage driver changed teams at the Folsom Place and again at the Triangle T home ranch. But it was at the Halfway House that passengers riding the stagecoach got an hour to stretch their legs, take on a big, hot meal, or, if it was winter weather, sit around the big stove and thaw out.

But to the initiated the Halfway House was more than just a stage station. Besides the big log barn, the large horse pasture, the long log cabin with its kitchen and dining room and the big front room where the stagecoach passengers gathered, there was another log building with a homemade pine-board bar and a couple of poker tables. And a ways beyond that was a larger log building with a smooth pine floor and a small raised platform at one end. Built originally for a schoolhouse, it was now used for dances. On the wall behind the platform was a large, crudely lettered sign that read: "TAKE YOUR FIGHTS OUTSIDE."

Bill Barstow owned the Halfway House. He owned the stage line and all its rolling stock and a large cavvy of good stage horses. The contract for hauling all mail and express was a fat one. Passenger fare was five dollars, one way. Meals a dollar per head. Drinks at the saloon were

sold for two bits, beer by the bottle. Poker chips sold at a dollar for the whites, five for the reds, and each blue chip was worth ten dollars. Each chip was engraved with Barstow's Bar B (connected) brand. The top of the big round table was covered with green pool-table cloth. That was the big stake poker table. It was in the back room off the saloon and shut by a heavy plank door. Chips for what Barstow called his "forty-a-month" players sold for two bits, four bits and a dollar apiece and were unbranded. The table over in a corner of the saloon boasted no sort of covering, green or otherwise. It and the heavy barroom chairs were liquor-stained and battle-scarred. Walls and low ceiling were pocked by bullet scars.

Bill Barstow, old Fiddlin' Bill, was a tough character. Short, bull-necked, barrel-chested, with a battered, scarred face, he moved around on a pair of short thick legs. His graying hair had been sorrel-red in his youth. His eyes were as green as old ice, deep-set under shaggy, ragged, battered brows. Broken veins stained his nose and cheeks a dull red. Red hair tufted his thick, muscular hands which had most of the knuckles broken down. But those same blunt-fingered hands could manipulate a cold deck, and Barstow's hard green eyes, slitted and bloodshot, could read the minute markings on the card decks he bought from a mail-order house that handled loaded dice and marked cards.

Bill Barstow had a pair of cauliflower ears and a misshapen flat nose

to show for his long and mediocre career in the prize ring. He was a product of San Francisco's notorious Barbary Coast. Somewhere, somehow, he had learned to play the fiddle. He played it when he was alone. Or when it would not interfere with the high-stake gamblers in the back room. And, mostly, he played it at the dances he "made."

Bill Barstow's wife did the cooking. Her meals were excellent and there was always plenty of grub on the clean oilcloth-covered table. Barstow's three daughters took turns waiting on table. They were identical triplets and dressed alike. They had been christened Faith, Hope and Charity, and they had a habit of swapping names. They got a lot of fun out of taking one another's identity. It made for confusion among the cowpunchers who would ride forty miles to "spark" one of the Barstow girls or cut a pigeon wing at the Halfway House dances.

It was a downright puzzle unless, as Waite Folsom put it, you played the field. Waite never bothered with the girls' right names. He called each of them Sis and played no favorite.

Faith, Hope and Charity Barstow were about five feet three. They were slender and in the first bloom of womanhood. Their black hair had coppery highlights. Their eyes were dark, almost brownish-green. Their skin was tawny velvet. They were good cooks, clean housekeepers, and could ride and rope as well as the average cowboy. They owned their

own brand—three hearts in a row. The Trey of Hearts, it was called. Lovelorn cowhands had a habit of burning that Trey of Hearts on any maverick or mammyless colt they came across. Whenever the Triangle T or the Thunder Mountains Pool roundup worked near the Halfway House, the three Barstow girls would rep with the wagon for a few days or a week.

Tom Titus, wagon boss of the Triangle T, called the Barstow girls the Triple Headaches. But he told them he liked headaches, anyhow.

Carter Folsom was one man who never attended the dances at the Halfway House. He rode miles out of his way to avoid the place. But the three Barstow girls had a habit of cutting his trail whenever they could. He would be riding alone when one of them would gallop up out of a cut coulee or from the brush. Hail him with an easy familiarity that reddened his ears.

"Hi, there, Cart! I'm Faith. Which-away? That's my direction."

Or it would be: "Howdy, sheepherder. Where's your band? I'm Hope. Just to keep the deal straight in case you get sentimental. Is that sunburn, Cart, or are you actually blushin'?"

Again it might be Charity who blocked his trail. "I'm the one they named Charity. You can tell me apart from my sisters on account of a mole between my shoulders. You'd notice it if I wore one of those society evening gowns like your sister Helena wears in the town she's named after.

If you'll come to the dance tonight, I'll wear the one I got from that Chicago mail-order outfit. And I'll promise you every waltz. Beware sport, Carter. Waite will be there to ride herd on you if you're scared."

Carter Folsom hated them, he told himself, like he hated Waite and his flea-covered hounds. But there was at least one compensation. Dane Folsom never suggested that his son Carter marry one of the Barstow girls. Dane Folsom hated Bill Barstow. He had tried to buy Barstow out, had told him to name his own price for the Halfway House, the Trey of Hearts and Bar B ranches and livestock, the stage line and its horses and rolling stock and mail and express contracts.

"No dice, Senator," Fiddlin' Bill Barstow had told him flatly, "I got just what I want here at my Halfway House. And don't be damn fool enough to try to crowd me out o' the country. Bother me and I'll send that no good son of yours to the pen for life. Mebby hang 'im. Waite Folsom killed a man at my place. I got some papers that was in the dead man's pockets and a law badge that was pinned to his undershirt. One of Waite's bullets nicked the badge. They was both drunk, see. The girls know which one of 'em it was they fought over. Take it easy, Senator. And don't fight dirty; I know your tricks. Strictly amateur, mister. Mine're professional. You're groggy before you start, see. Licked in the first round. So long, Senator."

So Senator Dane Folsom hated the plug-ugly Bill Barstow. Hated him

because Fiddlin' Bill was the only man he was afraid of.

"You keep away from the Halfway House," Dane had told Waite. "Get tangled up with one of those Barstow girls and marry her and I'll cut you off at the pockets. Hear that, you young blackleg?"

But before Waite and his hound pack reached the sheep camp on the west fork of Snake Creek, Waite rode to the Halfway House. His father's warning had been water off a duck's back. In one ear and out the other. Waite Folsom heeded no man's threats. But he had dropped two thousand dollars in a poker game at the Halfway House. Fiddlin' Bill Barstow had Waite's I.O.U. for that amount. Waite made it a point of honor to pay his gambling debts.

Waite rode up to the hitch rack in front of the log saloon, dismounted, dropped his bridle reins. His twenty or more hounds lay down around his horse.

He had hoped to find Barstow alone. But there were half a dozen cowpunchers lined up at the bar and Fiddlin' Bill was behind it rolling poker dice for the drinks.

A tall, lean, tow-headed, bleak gray-eyed man in buckskin-foxed California pants that were shoved into the fancy tops of new tan boots, stood facing the door. His right hand was on the ivory handle of his gun. In his red flannel shirt and high-priced Stetson that slanted at an aggressive angle, he looked like a range dude. But he was one of the best cowhands in Montana.

He owned his own outfit, ramrodded the Thunder Mountains Pool that comprised the smaller ranchers, and took orders from no man. Unless, as it was broadly rumored, Fiddlin' Bill Barstow sometimes told him what or what not to do. His name was Tracy Bierce and he came from Wyoming. He had been mixed up in the bloody Johnson County War and left there with a big drive of cattle in his Circle Cross iron. The brand had been freshly burned on their hides. He had not taken the trouble to vent what original brands those cattle wore. Tracy Bierce was that rare specimen of cowpuncher, a braggart, a swaggerer who backed his fight talk with gun or fists. Tracy Bierce was really tough.

With Bierce were half a dozen Pool ranchers or cowhands who worked for the little cattle spreads. They had the hard-eyed, grim-lipped look of men who had heard the owl hoot along the Outlaw Trail. But it had never been legally proven that Tracy Bierce or his Pool men had been members of the Hole in the Wall gang.

They eyed Waite Folsom coldly, nodded to him with a cowman's contempt for a sheepman. A silence had dropped like a shroud when Waite came in, his silver-mounted spurs jingling.

Bill Barstow's brief actions had their significance. He took another whiskey bottle from his back bar and set it, with two clean glasses, at the end of the bar nearest the door. He would drink with Waite Folsom, that action told the young sheepman, but

Waite would be drinking alone and apart from the Pool cowmen.

#### IV

A dark flush spread across Waite's lean, tanned face. Staring back at Tracy Bierce with smoldering black eyes, he filled his glass and gulped down the raw whiskey before Barstow had time to pour his drink.

Then Waite Folsom's voice shattered the silence like a smashed bottle.

"One of our sheepherders was murdered and his sheep scattered. A Basque named Peralta. I'm postin' a thousand dollars' reward for the identity of the man or men that murdered that sheepherder. Cash on the barrelhead, Barstow. And we'll take care of the killer or killers without the aid or benefit of the law."

Waite corked the bottle of whiskey and shoved it into the deep pocket of his black angora chaps.

"I'll see you later, Barstow"—he grinned twistedly—"about that other business. The Senator's waitin' for me at the sheep camp."

He turned his back on Tracy Bierce and the Pool men and walked out. Swinging into his saddle, he rode away. The inside of his belly felt as though it was tied into a hard, cold knot. Some of the color had drained from his lean face so that it had a grayish pallor that made his eyes look like red-black coals alive in gray ashes.

He had ridden nearly a mile when one of the Barstow girls rode up out of a brushy coulee. Neither of them

spoke as she rode alongside him. Their stirrups touched and she leaned from her saddle, pulled his head towards her, and kissed him hard.

Waite didn't kiss her back. He didn't even smile. He pulled the bottle from his chaps pocket, twisted out the cork, and drank thirstily. Then, corking the bottle, he shoved it back into the deep pocket. He was still scowling, his eyes narrowed, staring at the skyline, when he spoke in a toneless voice.

"That's Faith's strawberry roan you're ridin'. . . . Hope's spurs with her H.B. initials on 'em. . . . You kiss like Charity. . . . Well, Sis, who killed Peralta?"

Waite Folsom turned his head quickly and looked at her. But if he hoped to surprise her, he was mistaken. She smiled into his hot black eyes and shrugged her trim shoulders.

"I don't need a thousand dollars that bad, pardner." Her husky voice mocked him.

"How did you know about the thousand dollars?"

"The back room has ears. Quit overmatchin' yourself, Waite. Tracy Bierce and his boys are bad medicine."

"It takes only a small dose of lead poison to kill the toughest man on earth. . . . You know who killed that sheepherder."

"Not for a thousand dollars, I don't. Or a hundred thousand."

"Or a million," snapped Waite. His voice sounded bitter. "You didn't ketch up with me just to swap kisses. Lay 'em face up on the table, Sis."

"I did. I'll repeat it. Don't overmatch yourself. I like you, Waite. All three of us like you. We never have to be on guard with you. You don't try to paw us. You shoot square. We don't want you to get your nose skinned, pardner."

"Somebody murdered a two-bit locoed sheepherder, Sis. An ignorant, lousy, sheep-stinkin', locoed sheepherder. Dig a hole and plant his dead carcass and pile the boulders high for a sheepherder monument. Only a couple of shepherd dogs left behind to mourn him. And they'll give their loyalty and affection to the new herder that takes Peralta's band of woolies."

Then Waite's voice hardened. "It ain't that sheepherder they're after. They want to hang Dane Folsom's big hide on his sheep corral. Maybe they'll be able to do it. But they'll find out they've bit off a big hunk of sheep meat. And before they git the Senator, they've got me to kill. And they'll have Carter Folsom to kill. And even if they kill off Dane Folsom and his two sons, they're not finished. My sister Helena will buy chips in the game. She'll hold aces. And even Fiddlin' Bill Barstow can't beat aces. He can't stack *this* deck."

The girl's face whitened under its velvety tan. Her buckskin-gauntleted hand slapped Waite across the mouth. The slap was as hard as her kiss had been.

A tiny trickle of blood reddened Waite's twisted grin. Then he spoke sharply to the pack of big shaggy hounds that had gathered around the



girl's horse, savage fangs bared.

"That hound pack," he told her flatly, "would pull down a man's horse and tear his throat out. And they won't pick up wolf bait. They'd starve before they eat meat I didn't give 'em. And they're trained to kill. That big brindle dog is the pack leader. Brin is part Dane, part wolfhound, with a strain of pit bull. A natural killer."

Waite licked the blood from his lips as if he liked the taste of it. Otherwise he ignored the slap.

The girl eyed the big brindle hound and shivered, though the hound pack was trailing behind them tamely enough now.

"I can understand," she said, the color coming back into her face, "why men hate you. There's a streak of something in your make-up that's inhuman and cruel and devilish. You're far more dangerous than your big bulldozing father."

"You'll find that streak," said Waite Folsom ironically, "in runts. Big men don't have to use those tactics. They can afford to fight clean. They're big and ruthless and powerful. But a damned runt has to use cunning and learn the dirty tricks of fightin'. Bill Barstow fought as a bantam and up into the lightweight class. A runt who knew every dirty ring trick in the unwritten book."

"Bill Barstow," she said, her temper cooled, "had nothing to do with Peralta's killing."

"Neither did Tracy Bierce. Or Long Tom Titus. Peralta had four months' pay comin'. Dane Folsom went to the Basque's camp with a

jug of whiskey and a deck of cards. Peralta always was a rotten loser. He shot the Senator one time, knifed him another time. But this time Dane Folsom beat him to it. Senator Dane Folsom killed that sheepherder. Peralta gets a sheepherder's monument of rocks. But Montana ain't naming one of her counties after a sheepman that's killed one of his herders. I'm quotin' brother Carter."

That bitter tone was back in Waite Folsom's voice and his eyes were black with dark, brooding thought.

"So that's it." The girl's voice was almost a whisper.

"That," said Waite Folsom, "is the game, Sis."

"Just to keep the record clear, Waite, I'm Charity."

"And charity," grinned Waite, "begins at home. Our trails fork here, Sis." He leaned from his saddle and kissed her. "So long."

The cold knot inside Waite had to be thawed loose. He uncorked the whiskey bottle. He used the stuff to deaden pain inside his hate-warped heart, and to fire his brain. He did not need whiskey, as his enemies liked to claim, to give him guts enough to fight.

Waite Folsom had his man's share of courage. It had taken all the will power and common sense he could drag up out of his hot-tempered system to keep from jerking his six-shooter and making a gun ruckus of it, back yonder. He could have gut-shot Tracy Bierce, perhaps, before they killed him. Bierce would like to crowd him into a gun play

and kill him. It was the walking away from a gun fight that would have been sheer suicide, that put that icy knot inside Waite's belly.

It was a long ride to the sheep camp. And Waite was in no special rush to get there. Carter could be right, at that. Dane Folsom might have killed the Basque shepherd.

But no more than a week ago Waite's hounds had dragged down a big Triangle T steer. The big half-grown pups had gotten excited when he used them to dog a bunch of cattle back across Snake Creek. Before Waite got there in time to whip them off with the long blacksnake he carried coiled on his saddle, they had the steer's throat torn open and its guts ripped out. Those Triangle T line riders were hand-picked for their toughness. They might have killed Peralta.

But Tracy Bierce was Waite's choice as the killer. Yonder were scattered some grazing cattle. Pool cattle.

"Git 'em, dogs!" Waite's voice cracked like his blacksnake whip.

The dogs had the cattle running when Tracy Bierce and half a dozen of his Pool men skylighted themselves for the first time since they had trailed Waite from the Halfway House.

## V

Old Hob Titus had saddled his horse and ridden to the horse roundup camp. One of the Triangle T line riders had fetched him word that the Basque shepherd on the

west fork of Snake Creek had been killed and his sheep scattered and Dane Folsom was herding sheep with a Winchester. Old Hob reached the camp in the early dawn while Long Tom and his men were eating breakfast.

"What's the rip, Hob?" grinned Long Tom. "You must've rode all night. I bet you figgered to ketch us asleep."

"I was scared I'd find you raidin' sheep camps." Old Hob's voice was a slow drawl but his eyes were cold and sharp as he looked at the cow-punchers squatted around on their hunkers eating breakfast.

He told them about the Basque shepherd, his eyes watching every man of them. And he was a little worried by what he saw.

"Turn the outfit over to one of the boys, Tom," he finished. "Me'n you better lope over to that sheep camp an' have a medicine talk with Dane Folsom. Before that hot-headed Waite gits notions and throws us all into a bad range ruckus. There's a fly in the ointment, somewhere."

"A fly," said Long Tom, "that came from Wyoming, if I got only one guess a-comin'. It's about time somebody knocked off Tracy Bierce's long horns."

Long Tom Titus turned the roundup over to one of the older hands and rode off with his father. It was a forty-mile ride to the sheep camp. They traveled a few miles in silence. It was an uneasy silence and that was bad, because usually they could share long hours of never speaking a word and in complete understand-

ing. Now Old Hob was holding back the urge to ask questions. He was going to make Tom speak first. Tom Titus had never told his father a lie. Until recently he had shared all his thoughts with the tall Texan who had been more than a father to him, since he could remember. He'd never held anything back until now. Old Hob was hurt, deep inside. Tom knew it and felt ashamed:

"All right, Hob," Long Tom's voice matched the mirthless grin on his weather-stained face with its week's stubble of wiry black whiskers. "You win. Git set for the gut shot."

"Shoot, Tom." Old Hob Titus forced a grin that matched his son's. He felt a little sick inside.

"I saw you lookin' at the horse I rode last night," said Long Tom. "I'd just unsaddled and turned him loose when you rode up. Anybody could tell that geldin' had bin rode all night. And you watched the boys like you was readin' their minds. And they acted for all the world like so many school kids caught playin' hookey."

"But you'n was the only horse that had bin rode down."

Long Tom nodded. "I was on a lone ride. But nowheres near that sheep camp. I didn't know there'd bin a killin'—"

"Shoot, son, or give dad the gun."

"Here goes. Hang onto your hat, Hob. Last night I asked Helena Folsom to marry me."

Old Hob Titus cursed. He cursed in a slow, lazy Texan drawl, never once repeating himself. In English

and the Mexican tongue. Without taking his unwinking stare from some invisible point between the ears of his horse.

". . . and lettin' a man torture himself a-thinkin' you'd turned wart-hawg an' cut down a lousy sheep-herder because Waite Folsom's hounds killed a Triangle T steer. . . . Gut shot? Hell, you bin a long time gittin' up the nerve to ask her. Wearin' the taller off your bones makin' them night shindavvys to her horse ranch to git back to the home ranch before daybreak. You bin moonstruck, calf-eyed over that girl since you spent half a year's wages on that brood mare you bought on the sly an' give her on her sixteenth birthday. First time you ever held out on me. Well, dammit all, pull up the slack in your jaw. You look silly. What'd she say?"

Long Tom's face was as red as a ripe tomato and sweat-beaded.

"I figgered," he said lamely, "you'd double the end of your ketch rope an' run me off the Triangle T range. A sheepherder's daughter! Gosh, Hob, it's me that's gut-shot!"

"You ain't answered my question. She turn yuh down cold?"

Long Tom shook his head. "She acted somethin' like you just did, without the fancy cussin'. She asked me how come it taken me so long to throw my loop. We're gettin' married as soon as the horse roundup is done. Her outfit's just startin' work behind the mountains."

"Dane Folsom," chuckled Hob Titus. "I'd like to be bushed up

somewheres close when she tells him she's marryin' Long Tom Titus. Senator Dane Folsom is goin' to have big fits an' little uns."

"That," Long Tom told him with a grin, "is what Helena said about Old Hob Titus. She rode on to the Folsom ranch to break the news to the Senator. This sheepherder killin' kind o' messes up the deal—"

"If that big sheep-stinkin' bulldozer is fool enough to figger you in on a lowdown sheepherder killin'—"

"What was you thinkin', Hob," Long Tom cut in flatly, "when you saw my horse rollin' the sweat off in the dust? When you eyed me'n the boys like we'd bin caught stealin' watermelons?"

Old Hub grunted as though he had been kicked in the belly. He nodded slowly.

"Things has happened, Tom, since you went on the horse roundup. Waite Folsom's hounds got poisoned. Every hound in his pack. He bought hisself a new pack of the biggest, orneriest fightin' dogs he could find. He told it at the Halfway House that he was doggin' all the cattle he found strayed onto the Folsom sheep range. One of the line riders found a big Triangle T steer them hounds had hamstrung an' killed. Other cattle with the bush chewed off their tails."

"Any man that would poison a dog, Hob, needs horsewhippin'. That's why we've never put out strychnine baits for coyotes and wolves—because Waite's dogs might pick up a wolf bait."

"Waite has always bin welcome to

ride anywhere on our range with his hound pack. He's done the country good, killin' coyotes and wolves," agreed Hob Titus.

"Tracy Bierce," said Long Tom, "is a cattle rustler and a sort of renegade outlaw. He's a killer. But he wouldn't poison a dog."

"Bierce had a tough rep in Wyoming, Tom. They run him out o' the country. Made the best of a bad bargain when he trailed out a big drive of their cattle on his way out. He located here, him and his cronies. Tracy Bierce is playin' a dangerous game. He's done everything he could to git me'n Dane Folsom bellerin' an' pawin' dirt in each other's faces, throw us into a sheep and cattle war. So he can move in after the shootin' is over. He might even poison Waite Folsom's hound pack to rib that hot-headed young trouble maker into doggin' our cattle. And Tracy Bierce could kill a sheepherder every mornin' to give hisself a good appetite for his flapjacks."

"Tracy Bierce might've killed that sheepherder, Hob. But I'll gamble my chances with Helena that he never poisoned a dog in his life. A dog poisoner is a sneakin' coward. A man with a warped brain."

"Mebbyso," grinned the grizzled Texan, "you learnt that at college. I never did find out what you studied there besides football and prize fightin'. Them professors at Stanford never wrote me that you'd made good marks. But Spider Kelly wrote Bill Barstow from the Barbary Coast, sayin' he'd found the comin' middle-weight champ. A long-gear'd young

cowhand from Montana named Tom Titus. Fiddlin' Bill rode out to the ranch to show me the letter, he was that excited. Then he got roarin' mad when I told him I needed a ramrod for the Triangle T worse than Spider Kelly needed a middleweight champ in his stable of fighters. And speakin' of Fiddlin' Bill Barstow—"

"He'd as soon poison one of his daughters or his missus!" snorted Long Tom. "Fiddlin' Bill is soft-hearted about animals. Any animals. Even skunks. I was there when he whistled soft and a she-skunk come out from under the barn with a whole litter of young and they fed out of a big pan of milk he held in his hands. Deal Barstow out, Hob."

"I wasn't thinkin' of Waite's hounds."

"Fiddlin' Bill and Dane Folsom don't get along," said Tom Titus. "But Bill wouldn't kill a sheepherder. He'd lock horns with the Senator, man to man. You've got to deal Barstow out."

"Bill Barstow," said Old Hob Titus, "runs a tough place. Renegades like Tracy Bierce and his Pool gang hang out there. They claim Bierce is goin' to marry one of the Barstow girls when he gits so's he kin tell one from the other two. Barstow and Dane Folsom hate one another's guts. Fiddlin' Bill wouldn't step out of his tracks to keep Tracy Bierce from killin' a two-bit sheepherder. Not since the Senator told Barstow that he'd rather see Waite Folsom dead than married to one of Fiddlin' Bill's daughters."

"That was the only time any man ever knocked big Dane Folsom down and out with one punch," grinned Long Tom. "Fractured the sheepman's jaw. Fiddlin' Bill broke three knuckles in his left hand. You kin still deal Bill Barstow out."

Old Hob Titus said he'd give up. And no wonder Helena Folsom got to wondering where Tom's loop would land. Those three Barstow girls were almighty easy on a young cowhand's eyes. Make any man a wife to be proud of. And Tom was one man that tough Fiddlin' Bill Barstow actually took to, because Spider Kelly on the Barbary Coast had picked Tom for a coming champ.

"You don't drink much," Hob said. "You play poker at the Forty-a-Month table. But when you show up there Bill Barstow gits out his private bottle and his fiddle, the girls put on their best dresses, and Bill's wife cooks a chicken dinner especially for you. Anybody but me hint that Fiddlin' Bill Barstow wasn't a saint in disguise or that his back-country wife wasn't a queen or that them three girls wasn't real ladies, you'd knock that man's block off. All right, we deal Barstow out."

They rode the rest of the way in easy silence or the kind of talk a couple of cowpuncher pardners swap.

## VI

It was getting sundown when they heard shooting. The snarling yelping of dogs. Cattle running. A few minutes later they loped up on a

sight that halted them. They yanked their carbines from the saddle scabbards.

They had topped a ridge that looked down on a strip of the winding, crooked stream called Snake Creek. Brush flanked the water on both banks. There were giant cottonwoods scattered along the creek. Half a dozen men on horseback were gathered around one rider who swayed drunkenly in his saddle. A man on each side of this rider was holding him so that he could not fall off his horse. The riders had a saddle rope with its noose dropped over the man's sagging head. The rope was thrown over a low limb of one of the big cottonwoods. It was too short and the men were tying another catch rope to it.

The slumped rider was Waite Folsom. Tracy Bierce had Waite's blacksnake in his hand. Its popper cracked like a pistol. Bierce's voice was as sharp as the crack of the whip.

"Down! You, Brin! Skeeter! Shag! Tug! Dobe! Down, dogs!"

The big, savage dogs were obeying the man and the blacksnake whip. There was a wicked grin on Tracy Bierce's face.

"I know the Wyoming rancher that sold you this hound pack, Waite. Knowed these hounds since they was pups. They ain't forgot me. . . . All right, boys. String 'im up! Leave him hangin' for the Senator to find. It'll learn that sheep outfit not to dog cattle!"

Tracy Bierce's voice carried plainly to the top of the ridge. Long

Tom raised his rear sight a notch. Old Hob nodded grimly.

Long Tom lifted his carbine. The stock of the saddle gun had hardly pressed his right shoulder when it spat fire. A .30-30 bullet tore a hole in the top of Tracy Bierce's dented hat crown.

Old Hob Titus' voice cut through the gun echo.

"Reach for the sky, Bierce! Pronto! The next un will kill yuh! We'll git some more before your men kin limber their guns."

"Hob and Long Tom," rasped Tracy Bierce, lifting both hands, "play fer keeps. This set-up is made a-purpose for 'em. Our best bet is to ride away from it. Turn that cattle-doggin' sheepherder loose. Let's git along." He threw away the blacksnake and reined his horse around.

Tracy Bierce and his Pool men started to ride away. Bierce had taken off his high-crowned expensive Stetson and was grinning flatly at the bullet rip in the 5X beaver top. He turned in his saddle to call back in a rasping voice:

"I'll collect fer a new hat, Long Tom!"

None of the others raised a voice or looked back.

Waite Folsom sat his horse under the cottonwood. His hat had fallen off, and his black hair and his face were covered with blood. His shirt was blood-spattered and torn. He was hanging onto the saddlehorn with both hands, the noose still around his neck and the tied rope thrown over the tree limb. His

hounds whined and growled uneasily as they gathered around his horse.

Waite was barely able to talk to the hounds to keep them from attacking the horses of Hob and Tom Titus. His voice was thick, his black eyes glazed and blurred from the blood that flowed from a bullet-ripped scalp. His attempt at a grin was ghastly.

Long Tom and his father took the rope from around Waite's neck and sat him down on the bank of the creek and bathed the blood from his head and face. The bullet that had creased his skull had dazed him. Bierce and his men had ridden him down and beaten him. Another few minutes and they would have hanged him.

There was some whiskey left in the bottle Long Tom found in Waite's chaps and he fed it to him in small doses. The glazed film cleared from Waite's eyes, showing them as black and glittering as the eyes of a diamond-backed rattlesnake.

"I'll kill Bierce for that," he croaked.

"Other men," drawled Old Hob Titus, "has found out that was a hard job to git done. Looky here, Waite, we don't like cattle doggers no better than Tracy Bierce does."

"And I don't like a man that scatters poison baits for my hounds to pick up. Or murderers that shoot down harmless sheepherders. But I'll argue that point out with you another time. They took my six-shooter and saddle gun."

Long Tom grinned faintly. "Waite is tryin' to make up his mind, Hob,

which is the worse, bein' hung by Tracy Bierce or havin' his sheepherder neck saved by Hob and Tom Titus. . . . Hoist another slug of that panther juice, Waite, then fork your horse. We didn't poison your hounds or kill your sheepherder. We're on our way to have a little medicine talk with the Senator. Might need you for interpreter in case he opens up the powwow with a Winchester talk."

Waite Folsom had never been able to pick a fight with Long Tom Titus. Tom had a habit of grinning at Waite's insults or brushing off his belligerent advances with a joshing remark that deflated Waite's wrath like a pin stuck in a red toy balloon.

The three of them rode on together to the sheep camp. Dane Folsom's carbine covered them as they reined up at the canvas-covered sheep wagon.

"You travel in queer company, Waite," he told his son. "Keep your damn hounds off my sheep dogs!"

## VII

Dane Folsom and Hob Titus possessed at least one thing in common. That was a sense of humor. The Texas-born cowman said this was the first time he'd ever stepped inside a sheep wagon. The sheepman tossed a sealed pack of cards on the little table that was hinged to the wagon box and could be lifted and fastened back when not needed. He told Hob he might nick him a few dollars for the privilege.

"But I don't want to bust the seal

on that deck till the sheriff gits here," declared Folsom. "That's the only deck of cards at camp. I fetched it along to play a little poker with Peralta. The Basque was dead when I got here. The sealed deck might help prove my point that I didn't kill Peralta in a poker argument."

Dane Folsom pointed out the fresh pelts he had taken off the sheep that had been killed by coyotes and wolves. They represented many times the amount of money he could possibly have won from Peralta. And Folsom was too much of a sheepman to let wolves slash and cut a band of sheep to help build up his alibi that the herder was dead and the sheep scattered and killed before he got there.

But somebody had timed the cold-blooded murder of Peralta to set a trap for the big sheepman. Somebody who knew Dane's habit of waiting until a shepherd had several months' pay coming and was getting itchy for booze and a poker game, and taking a jug and a card deck out to that herder's camp. Somebody who had a crafty brain and a killer's heart had planned and carried out a cold-blooded murder and put Dane Folsom slap-dab on the guilty spot of the crime.

"And you know damned well," Dane Folsom said bluntly, "that all the proof in the world won't clear me. The law will try me for murder. My lawyer will clear me without sweatin' a drop. But my enemies will keep right on sayin' that I'm guilty as hell, that I bought off the jury, and fixed the judge. That black

stain on the name of Senator Dane Folsom can't ever be wiped off. Clearin' myself in court only makes the stain all the blacker. Or blood redder. Somebody with a smart brain planned it. And he's won, hands down. There'll never be a Folsom County, Montana."

Dane Folsom looked old now. In his sweat-stained old clothes that were marked with the dried blood of the sheep he had skinned, his growth of yellow-gray beard and untrimmed shabby hair, he looked more like an old shepherd than a millionaire sheepman State Senator. Getting a county named after him was his great dream. He wanted to leave it as a lasting monument, printed on maps, for posterity. But now there would never be any Folsom County.

Dane Folsom pulled the cork on the big wicker-covered demijohn and splashed whiskey into clean tin cups. The hard bright light in his blue eyes seemed dimmed.

"It meant a lot to you, didn't it, Dane?" Hob Titus' voice was low-toned.

"More than ever I realized, Hob," said the sheepman, "till I woke up to the fact that it ain't in the cards." He forced a grin.

They lifted their tin cups and drank. It was the first time they had ever drunk together.

"You'd have made a crackerjack cowman," said Hob Titus.

The hard, bright twinkle came back into Dane Folsom's puckered blue eyes. He seemed suddenly embarrassed.

"Comin' from you," he said



quietly, "I reckon that's the biggest compliment I ever had paid me."

Then he chuckled. "I'll tell you somethin' no man ever heard me admit, Hob. I hate them damned, stinkin', blattin' woolies. But my father left me a sheep outfit when he died. And with the woolies he left me a fight to carry on against you cowmen. I'd have bin a yellow quitter if I'd sold them sheep and stocked my range with cattle."

"I never thought about it that-away," admitted Hob Titus.

"No. Nobody else ever saw that angle. Nobody but that girl of mine. Helena savvies. Mebbyso I told her. But most mebby she figured it out for herself when she was a kid. . . . Carter and Waite, here, never guessed. Eh, son?"

"No, sir," said Waite Folsom, eying his father as though he was sizing up a total stranger. His black eyes had lost their defiant glint.

"Carter hates the ranch. But I made him stay there. He wanted to be a lawyer or a preacher or somethin'. It's time I give him his head and let him blaze his own trail." Dane turned to Waite.

"That goes for you, Waite. Name your game. I'll stake you."

"If it's all the same to you, Senator," Waite Folsom said flatly, "Ill string my bets with yours."

Dane Folsom scratched his shaggy untrimmed hair and grinned. He had lost his Folsom County, but he had just found a real son. And as Hob Titus told Tom afterwards, the Senator looked and acted as though

he'd gotten the best of a big deal.

"Looks like we spent a lot of time misjudgin' each other, Waite. I'm proud to claim you, boy."

"You were too big a man for a runt to live up to, Senator." Waite was grinning.

"The bigger they are, Waite," said Long Tom, "the harder they fall. That's what Bob Fitzsimmons said. It made him champion of the world."

Hob Titus stood looking out the door of the canvas-topped sheep wagon. The hounds were on their feet, the big brindle dog growling softly.

"Just a lone horsebacker," he said. "Looks like a reunion of the Folsom tribe. It's your daughter Helena, Dane."

Waite quieted his hound pack outside. The two sheep dogs were on Peralta's bunk inside the wagon. Hob, Tom Titus and Dane Folsom followed Waite outside.

The moon was rising and they watched Helena ride carefully around the bedded sheep so as not to disturb them. She looked a little startled when she recognized Hob and Tom Titus. Her horse was sweat-marked and leg-weary. Her face was pale and drawn and her smile forced.

"I hope," she said quietly, "that you've all got guns and plenty of cartridges. Because Tracy Bierce and his Pool outfit are gathering at the Halfway House. It's a war party. . . . I could use a pot of strong black coffee. Roundup coffee with whis-kers."

She cut Long Tom a quick look.

He grinned and shook his head.

"Coward." Her lips formed the word soundlessly.

Long Tom grinned at her. His hands moved. He was talking the Indian sign language. Her hands talked back.

"I'll slip the saddle off your horse," said Waite, "and rub 'im down."

Helena stared at him. Then shook her tawny head and smiled.

"When did this sudden attack of brotherly love hit you?" She jerked loose the latigo knot, slid it free of the cinch ring, and dropped her saddle and sweat-soaked blanket on the ground. Then slid off the head-stall to let her horse free.

"Old home week," grinned Waite. "The Senator will explain. Don't set yourself afoot."

"My horse is camp-broke. He'll be handy when I need 'im."

Helena walked over to her father, put both arms around him and kissed him. Then she pulled his shaggy head down and whispered into his ear, holding onto him with a sort of frightened desperation.

The big sheepman stiffened. Then his big arms went slowly around his daughter and he looked at Long Tom Titus.

"Helena says she's promised to marry you, Tom. Last week I'd have probably raised holy Ned about it before I gave in. Tonight it makes me feel almighty happy."

One of his arms let go and Tom Titus gripped the big hand the sheepman was shoving at him.

Helena's head twisted away from her father's shoulder. She was smiling unsteadily and tears welled in her dark amber eyes.

"Old home week," muttered Waite. "But I said that before, didn't I? Luck to you both. I mean it. I've put myself on the Injun list or I'd drink to your happiness, health, prosperity and many offspring. Just one thing. Let me be the one to break the news to brother Carter. He hates anything he can't figure out from a law book. Throws him off his stride. Ruins his appetite for a week. He don't like Long Tom. But who or what does the Deacon like? He's woman shy. Scared of a horse. Likker makes him sick. Dogs give him fleas. I think he actually believes the Senator killed the Basque sheepherder— What's the matter, Helena?"

Helena Folsom's knees had buckled and her father had to hold her up. Her face was chalky white in the moonlight.

"Too . . . too much excitement." Her smile was pale-lipped, unsteady. "I need that coffee. I'm all right now, Dane. Just a female, after all."

But even half an hour later when she had eaten supper and downed three big cups of strong black coffee and the healthy glow was back in her tanned face, her amber eyes were dark-shadowed, troubled.

And when Waite, standing guard outside, quieted the growling of the big brindle pack leader and stuck his head in the doorway to say it was a lone rider and Deacon Carter Folsom, at that, the girl gave a queer

little choked cry and spilled coffee from her half-emptied cup.

"Carter? Here?"

"Sure," said Waite. "Why not? He knows there's trouble comin'. And after all, he's a Folsom. Even if he is as gun-shy as a timid bird dog pup that's been gun spooked. I've got the camp tender's gun. Carter can use the one that belonged to Peralta. And remember to let me break the coming marriage news to the Deacon."

But Helena Folsom had set down her cup and gotten to her feet and to the door.

"Sorry, Waite. Let me talk to Carter first. I've got to!" Her voice was tense, desperate.

"Gosh, yes." Waite stepped aside. "Didn't know it was that important."

## VIII

Helena stood at Carter's stirrup, looking up at him. His long, untanned face had a grim, funereal look. A feverish light burned in his eyes. It was the first time she had ever seen him wearing a filled cartridge belt and six-shooter, or the carbine she saw in his saddle scabbard. There was blood on his pale face and his mouth was cut and bruised and one eye discolored. His shirt was torn and blood-spattered.

"I stopped at the Halfway House," he said in a low, tense voice. "Bierce and his men were there. And of course, Barstow. Tracy Bierce and Bierce's outfit are drunk and ugly. Barstow is no more than a prisoner in his own saloon. When I tried to

talk to them, they wouldn't listen. They jumped me. I had to fight my way out of the filthy place. Aren't those a couple of Titus horses? Hob and Tom Titus here? Good. I want them to hear what I have to say. I want the Senator and Waite—"

"Shut up, Carter!" Helena's voice was brittle. "Keep your mouth shut. At least until this thing is over. Tracy Bierce is coming. And his outlaw outfit. This is your one big chance, Cart, to make good. Forget the poisoned hounds. Forget everything but this: That those men are coming to kill Dane Folsom and Waite. And you're as much of a Folsom as Waite or your father. Use those guns to kill Bierce and his renegades. And keep your mouth shut!"

"Just as you say. Until after the fighting." Carter swung from his saddle and handed her his bridle reins.

"I changed horses along the way. Climb aboard and get away from here fast, before those renegades get here. Hurry up!"

Helena shook her head. "I wouldn't miss this for anything, Cart. Tracy Bierce gave me a little tussle once when he caught me alone at my place. I've never mentioned it to anybody till now. I want a shot at that fancy range dude. I don't want to kill him. Just nick his handsome hide. Turn your horse loose, Cart. Nobody in this outfit runs away tonight. Who knows but what it'll go down in Montana history as the shepherders' last stand? Dane's selling the sheep, stockin' the

range with cattle when the grass gets a year's rest from sheep. You'll get your law office at Helena. Waite's going to ramrod the Folsom Cattle Co., throw in with the Triangle T. I'm marrying Long Tom Titus. One day Judge Carter Folsom will look back on tonight and remember it was the turning point in his life. Now keep your mouth shut!"

Carter Folsom straightened up. There was a faint grin on his blood-smearred battered face and his eyes shone like blue sparks.

"You make it sound like quite an eventful night. So I'll add my two bits' worth. One of the Barstow girls saved my life back at the Halfway House. She helped me make a get-away. They'd held me and poured a lot of whiskey down my throat before I began fighting. Maybe it was the booze in me. But when she was riding away with me those first few miles, I forgot everything but her. I asked her to marry me. And she took me up on it in no uncertain manner."

"Carter Folsom! You old son of a gun!" Helena was clinging to him, laughing shakily. "Which one, Cart?"

"I'll be danged," grinned Carter Folsom, "if I know."

He slid the carbine from his saddle scabbard, unsaddled and jerked the bridle off his horse and turned the gelding loose.

Here was a Carter Folsom who was a little drunk and wild-eyed. Packing a saddle gun, and a six-shooter buckled around his long, lean middle. With a skinned nose and a bruised

mouth and one black eye. His shirt torn to blood spattered rags.

Dane Folsom stared hard at his son and blinked.

"Howdy, stranger," muttered Waite, and grinned. "What do we call you? Butch?"

"Just a damned snake in the grass." Carter Folsom's grin twisted one side of his battered mouth. "Coyote Carter."

"Jumpin' Jupiter!" said Dane Folsom. "He's drunk!"

Carter held his hand towards Long Tom. Its knuckles were skinned and crusted with dried blood. "Helena just told me. You're both lucky. Best of everything to you both, Tom."

Helena stuck her head into the doorway of the crowded sheep wagon.

"Douse the light. Here come Bierce and his Pool outfit!"

## IX

It was Hob Titus who took charge. He paired Helena off with her father. Told Waite and Carter to stick together and for Waite to handle his hound pack so that the fighting dogs could do some good.

"Me'n Tom," he said, "will be somewheres around."

The covered sheep wagon made too inviting a target so they left it. Peralta's pair of sheep dogs had given Helena their utter devotion, and followed at her heels.

There was a rimrock shelf on the slope behind the creek. A shallow cave beneath it. Hob Titus pointed

it out to Dane Folsom and the big sheepman nodded. He and Helena and the two sheep dogs climbed the brushy slope and crawled into the cave. It made an excellent fighting nest, protected by the sandstone outcropping and hidden by the brush.

Waite and his hounds crossed the creek and were lost in the brush somewhere. Carter had vanished from sight, disregarding Hob's orders.

Old Hob Titus and Long Tom saddled their horses and mounted. They were the last to leave the sheep wagon where they purposely left a lantern burning inside. It made a yellow blob of the round canvas top. Just the target to attract the gunfire of half-drunken night riders.

The sheep were bedded on a gentle slope about fifty yards from the wagon. Unlike cattle, they would not stampede when the shooting began. They would bunch up, pile up, smothering one another if the pile-up was a bad one. But Dane Folsom was sheepman enough to anticipate such a disaster. He had sent the two splendidly trained shepherd dogs down to stir the sheep off their bed ground.

The dogs worked without further command. Neither of them barked as they nipped the sheep onto their feet and into motion. It was bright moonlight and Hob and Long Tom could see the band of sheep moving, scattering enough to start them grazing, and spread out so that a pile up was less likely. Then Dane Folsom whistled twice and the dogs quit the sheep and trotted back to the rimrock

cave. It had been a tricky sort of job, and splendidly done.

The night riders had skylighted themselves while they were still half a mile away. They rode in a bunch, traveling at a trot, making no effort to hide their coming. There were a dozen or fifteen of them. A hard-bitten, half-outlaw, renegade outfit, heavily armed, skilled at this kind of range fighting, sure of their individual toughness and combined fighting prowess. Their proving ground had been the Wyoming range war that had left the range blood-spotted and marked by lonely graves. The graves of men who had died with their boots on.

Tracy Bierce was riding a little in the lead of his men. When they were about a hundred yards from the sheep camp, he lifted his right arm high, waving his saddle carbine in a sweeping gesture. His men paired off and began to scatter, circling the sheep wagon. Bierce's arm was still high in the air when a carbine cracked up at the rimrock cave. Bierce let out a sharp snarl of pain and his carbine spat an answering jet of flame. As if that was their signal, the Thunder Mountains Pool men spurred their horses to a run and charged the lighted sheep wagon, their guns cracking.

Bierce jumped his horse into the shelter of the heavy brush along the creek. As his men rode close to the sheep wagon from all sides, Waite's voice sounded sharply through the rattling din of gunfire.

*"Git 'em, dogs!"*

The result was wild confusion. The big, savage hounds were already excited by the shooting. They would not pull down a horse. But they would grab a horse's tail and swing for a few seconds until the horse kicked or stampeded or pitched. Then the dogs would turn loose.

They were fast and silent. Gray streaks in the moonlight. Terrifying enough to scare the gentlest horse. And those horses were cowpuncher-broken and none too gentle at any time. They snorted, squealed, whirled, kicked, pitched into one another. Riders were caught off balance and thrown. Bucking horses collided and went down, and the men jumped or were thrown clear of their saddles. Their hoarse shouts added to the wild confusion. The big hounds were attacking the men on the ground or fighting out hound grudges among themselves. About half the Pool men were able to stick to their saddles as their horses pitched or stampeded. Those on the ground fought off the savage hounds as best they could; and when one man got the sheep wagon door yanked open and scrambled inside, the others followed. Riderless horses were pitching and running in all directions, bridle reins trailing and being stepped on and broken, stirrups flapping.

The Pool men crowded into the sheep wagon and the last man in slammed the door on the snarling hound pack. Before they had recovered from their bewilderment a carbine in the brush not fifty feet away was spewing fire. Its bullets tore

through the lighted canvas top of the sheep wagon. Bullets that struck the men crowded inside.

There were half a dozen shots from the carbine in the brush that was gripped in the hands of Carter Folsom. His bullets were hitting flesh and bone. Then the lantern light inside the wagon was blown out. The renegades inside were crouched low behind the protection of the high wagon box. The bunk at one end, filled shelves on the two sides, gave them a fairly good barricade. They rolled the tarp-covered bed on the bunk and piled it at the door.

Waite's gun had been cracking. He had shot at the fast-moving targets of the renegades who had stuck in their saddles. Some of his shots had gone wild. Two or three had hit their mark, wounding the bewildered riders who were too eager to gain shelter to return Waite's gunfire.

Three of the riders came straight towards the brush that hid Hob and Tom Titus. Old Hob cursed softly as his gun lifted.

"It ain't them we want. But we gotta let 'em have it. Don't shoot to kill, Tom." Old Hob's voice was unhurried.

Their carbines cracked. Two of the riders flinched and jerked in their saddles. The third man swung his running horse off at an angle, shooting wildly. Hob and Tom watched the two wounded men tear past on their stampeding horses. Then bullets began whining around their heads like hornets and they had to ride away from that brush shelter.

The best and nearest brush was

sheltering the Pool men who had located the Tituses' hiding place and were smoking them out.

"Looks like we'll have to take that brush away from 'em," said Hob Titus grimly.

It meant racing across a fifty-foot clearing and directly into the enemy gunfire. But it was their only chance. A risky gamble was better than staying here until they were killed.

"Let's go!" gritted Long Tom. His white teeth were bared in a flat-lipped grin.

They jumped their horses out of the bush, like quarter horses breaking the barrier at a race track. Lying low along their horses' necks, they held their fire.

Bullets whined past them. Then two carbines at the rimrock cave above them were cracking. The Pool renegades quit shooting at Hob and Tom as they found themselves caught in the deadly hail of hot lead that came from the rimrock cave. They raked their horses with their spurs and quit that no-longer safe brush shelter on a dead run. Those who had felt the bite of the big sheepman's bullets clung to their saddle-horns.

Hob and Tom rode their horses into the heavy brush and grinned at each other. They looked up at the brush-choked rimrock cave that hid Dane Folsom and his daughter. It was quiet again up there. But bullets were clipping the brush and ricocheting off the sandstone rimrock.

Old Hob and Long Tom spotted

the scattered gun-slingers who were smoking up the rimrock cave. Spotted them by their gun flashes. And from their own heavy brush shelter they began the job of silencing those enemy guns. They got two or three direct hits. And drew the gunfire back to themselves.

Waite had called off his hound pack. He and Carter were swapping a steady fire with the renegades inside the sheep wagon.

Up in the rimrock cave Dane Folsom shoved his daughter as far back into the shallow sandstone hole as she could go and told her to lie flat and cool her gun barrel. His huge bulk stood between her and any wild bullets that got past the brush and sandstone lip of the cave. There was a deep, surly growl to the big sheepman's voice.

"You're hurt, Dane!" Helena said bluntly.

"Nothin' more than a scratch."

"Scratch, nothing. You're bleeding like a stuck bull."

Her gently probing fingers worked in the darkness. There was the ripping of silk underthings. In a few minutes she had the blood stopped and the bullet rip in her father's left shoulder dressed and bandaged.

Down below along the creek Hob Titus swung stiffly, a little awkwardly, from his saddle. Blood soaked his faded overalls and partly filled his boot. He hung onto his saddlehorn as he stood alongside his horse. His lean face had a grayish look.

Long Tom quit his saddle and

eased his father to the ground.

"High up on my flank, Tom. Lodged there somewheres. Feels like my hip joint's busted. Go on with your gun chores, pardner—"

Long Tom's long, whetted jack-knife blade ripped away overalls and red flannels and laid bare the ugly wound. There was a heavy flow of dark blood.

"Lay back and grit your teeth, Hob. You might try cussin'. Sing, if you've a mind to."

Tom's long fingers probed swiftly, gently. The sharp knife blade went in, twisted, slid out slowly. A mushroomed bullet was caught between the blade and Tom's forefinger. He shoved it into his father's clenched hand and told him to hang onto it. Then he stripped off his own shirt and undershirt, ripped them to strips, bathed the wound with cold creek water and a few minutes later, stripped to the waist, he straightened up from a dressing and bandage job that would have done credit to an army field surgeon.

"Take 'er easy from now on, Hob. Help yourself to crick water. Lay easy and it won't bleed too much. . . . I'm goin' after Tracy Bierce."

"Where'd you learn to tie up bullet holes?" Hob Titus forced a grin.

"Stanford. While I lasted. Mostly we watched at a hospital at San Francisco while real M.D.'s worked in surgery. Just call me Doc for short. Hang onto that slug for a keepsake. See you later."

Long Tom wiped watery blood from his hands and swung onto his horse. Stripped now to the belt, his

hide looked white in the shadows. Hob Titus hoped it wouldn't be bloodstained when he saw it again.

"So long, Tom," he whispered huskily. "Good huntin'."

## X

Waite Folsom was having a bad time of it. He was trapped in a brush patch with his hounds, and the men inside the sheep wagon had located him. Their guns poured a steady hail of lead into the brush. Waite's hide was nicked by a couple of bullets. Two of his hounds had been killed. Three more hounds were whining and snarling and licking their wounds.

The Bierce men had not gotten Carter Folsom's location. No bullets snarled through the brush that gave him shelter. He heard Waite cussing and listened to the whimpering of the hounds he hated. Flea incubators. Carter's eyes were blue flint and his grin was thin-lipped.

There was nearly a hundred feet of clearing between the brush that hid Carter and the sheep wagon. Getting to his feet, he crouched like a track runner at the starting line. He gripped his saddle gun. Carter Folsom had never mentioned the fact to his father or brother Waite that he had been track captain at Harvard. That he had broken the intercollegiate record for the hundred-yard dash. Dane Folsom would have been matching him in foot races. And Waite would have joshed him, in his dark, sarcastic way, about being a runner instead of a fighter.



Carter had slipped off his high-heeled boots. Unbuckled the heavy cartridge belt and six-shooter and dropped them on the ground. At the last moment he dropped the carbine.

"On your mark! Get set—"

A gun cracked. The bullet kicked dirt in Carter's face. Then he was off like a streak, faster than a horse could travel the distance at a run. A few bullets whined past him as he dove headlong under the sheep wagon. He was safe now from the men inside who could not see him. He found the big five-gallon can of kerosene, slashed its top open with the blade of his jackknife. Crouched double, he sloshed the kerosene on the wagon box and up onto the canvas top. Then threw away the empty can. He had found an old rag and saturated it. Now he struck a match to it. The rag blazed suddenly, caught the kerosene-soaked wagon box. The flames licked up along the side of the wagon and to the canvas.

But Carter's hands and the sleeves of his torn shirt were covered with kerosene. He gasped with fear and pain as the flames caught his shirt and hands and arms.

Those who watched saw that blazing figure race from the fired sheep wagon and across the clearing to the creek. Saw him dive headlong into the water.

The men trapped in the blazing wagon were too busy with their own peril to pay heed to that running, blazing figure. They had to quit their blazing wagon or die there in its inferno.

Yelling, they yanked open the

door. Waite Folsom's rasping voice shouted its grim warning.

"Throw away your guns when you come out!"

The first man disregarded the warning. Waite's carbine cracked. The man stumbled as though he had tripped over something, sprawled on his face in the dirt and lay there dead. Waite's gun shot another man's legs from under him. The rest threw away their guns and stood there beyond the heat of the blazing sheep wagon, their hands lifted in sullen surrender.

It was by the glow of the burning sheep wagon that Long Tom Titus sighted Tracy Bierce. Just in time, because Bierce was quitting his beaten renegades and making for a coyote getaway.

"Hold up, Bierce!" called Long Tom Titus. "This is one war you ain't running away from!"

Tracy Bierce whirled his horse. He sat bent a little forward across the saddlehorn, a six-shooter in his hand. And he waited like that, his horse moving uneasily, while Long Tom Titus rode towards him at a running walk, shortening the distance to easy six-shooter range. His .45 gripped in his hand. Both men were plain targets in the moonlight.

Up at the rimrock cave Helena Folsom levered a cartridge into the breech of her .30-30 carbine and lined her sights on Bierce. Her face was chalky-white and her eyes were green slits.

Dane Folsom's heavy hand gripped her gun barrel and shoved it until

it pointed skyward.

"Tom Titus wouldn't want it that way, youngster. It's Long Tom's fight."

Both Bierce and Long Tom held their guns so that the barrels tilted upward. Each man watched the other's gun. That was why Long Tom Titus did not see the other gun in Bierce's hidden left hand. When not more than twenty feet distance separated them, that sneak gun spewed flame. Just as a big brindle dog charged from the brush.

Long Tom felt the burning stab of the bullet searing his ribs. His six-shooter roared and he cocked it as it recoiled in his hard grip. He saw the gun in Tracy Bierce's right hand spit flame. The bullet whined past Tom's ear. Then Tom was shooting as fast as he could thumb back the hammer of his gun and pull the trigger. The big brindle hound had spooked Bierce's horse. But as it swung onto the horse's tail and the big gelding kicked out with both hind legs, Bierce's gun was blazing wildly and Long Tom's .45 slugs were ripping and thudding into the renegade's chest and belly. Tracy Bierce was dead when his horse whirled and pitched him off. Dead when he hit the ground with a heavy crash.

The big brindle dog that had undoubtedly saved Long Tom's life from Bierce's sneak-gun bullet, lay on its side, snapping and growling. Then it got slowly to its feet and slunk away, snarling back across its shoulder at the gelding that had kicked it hard enough to break it from ever charging another horse.

Long Tom Titus was the first to sight the bunch of riders coming off the ridge at a weary lope. He grinned flatly and called out to Dane Folsom. The sheepman was coming down the brush-spotted slope behind Helena who was stumbling in her haste.

"Yonder comes the law, Senator. And your deck of cards burnt."

Riding with Sheriff Russ Robertson was the cow-country doctor who acted as coroner. Behind came Fiddlin' Bill Barstow and his three daughters, all of them carrying saddle guns.

Barstow was cussing, fighting mad. He hated riding. He had never learned to sit a saddle. But he had ridden all these miles to kill Tracy Bierce. No man could take over his Halfway House at the point of a dozen guns, order his wife around, make passes at his three daughters. No man could do that to Fiddlin' Bill Barstow and live!

"What," grinned Hob Titus, "you cussin' about, Bill? Bierce is dead, ain't he?"

"I kin lick the man that killed him!" exploded Fiddlin' Bill.

"I doubt it," chuckled Hob. "Unless Spider Kelly lied."

The coroner took over in his full capacity as a cow-town doctor. Helena and the three Barstow girls made excellent nurses.

Long Tom's and Waite's bullet wounds were slight. Dane Folsom and Hob Titus would be laid up a few weeks. They'd have to ride back in the camp tender's spring wagon.

One of the Barstow girls was bandaging Carter Folsom's burned hands and arms and talking to him in a low whisper. She smiled into his eyes, but they stayed hard and clouded.

Bill Barstow had fetched a couple of quarts of whiskey. He pulled the cork on one and handed it to Dane Folsom.

"Time we had a drink together, Senator. And I got somethin' to tell you before it slips my mind. That feller that picked the gun fight with Waite and come out loser—he was one of Bierce's men. He was wearin' a law badge and packin' some papers he'd took off a range detective they killed in Wyoming. Bierce told me about it while him and his tough outfit was pushin' me around in my own saloon. And that's Charity that's fussin' over Carter. I'm afraid you're due for a bad jolt. Better take a man-sized drink, Senator. You're either goin' to lose a son or git a Barstow daughter-in-law."

"It's Carter needs the drink," chuckled the Senator. "He's kind o' woman shy."

"And I'm Charity," said the Barstow girl who was helping Waite patching his hounds. "It's Hope who's holdin' Cart's hand."

"Hope," smiled the Barstow triplet tying the last bandage in place on Carter's arm, "just rode down the creek with Russ Robertson. Look, Carter. So, nobody can ever fool you about me again."

She pulled up her sleeve. On her upper arm was tattooed in tiny let-

ters the name FAITH and three small hearts. The Trey of Hearts brand.

"We had ourselves tattooed when we were away at that high-toned boarding school at Palo Alto, California. Long Tom was at Stanford then and we sneaked away, and he took us to a tattoo man on the Barbary Coast. Tom's the only one that knew we were tattooed. Only Hope and Charity fooled Tom by changing names and then they changed back to their real names and only the tattoo man knew for sure, and he didn't know who was which by the time he'd finished. So we really ended up with our real names branded on the right triplet. The tattoo man didn't want to charge for it when he found out we were daughters of his old Barbary Coast pal, Fiddlin' Bill. Us Barstows know the right people, Cart— Now what's wrong? What did I say?"

Carter's laugh was short, bitter. "Including a guy so damned low-down that he poisoned his own brother's dogs because he couldn't stand a flea bite on his lily-white hide! A weak-gutted coward who killed a crazy sheepherder and tried to throw the blame on his own father or the cowmen or Bierce's gang. Sure, Peralta went locoed and pulled a gun and creased my ribs with it before I tangled with him and the gun went off in the scuffle and killed him. It wasn't the killing that counts. That was more or less of an accident. But I got panicky and rode away from it, let the sheep get scattered that night by wolves. Then, to cover it up, I showed the Senator

where Peralta had four months' pay coming he rode out here for his poker game. . . . That's the kind of a fine specimen you Barstows know. Now let me get away—"

Helena Folsom pushed Faith aside. She slapped Carter hard across the mouth, then kissed him quickly.

"I told you to keep your trap shut. You open it wide and jump in with both feet. What a man! You've been eating your heart out about poisoning Waite's hounds. I knew it long before you told me. It broke you from ever hurting another animal—"

"I tormented him into it," said Waite hotly. "And if he calls himself a coward again, I'll make him prove it by lickin' me. Sure, it took a rank coward to charge that sheep wagon and set himself afire. Peralta needed killin'. He's been dangerous-locoed for years. What the devil,—forget it. And before you get balanced, Senator, give Charity and me your fatherly blessing."

Sheriff Russ Robertson finished checking up on dead renegades and rode back with the third Barstow triplet. They were holding hands and the law officer's ears were red.

"Bill," he cleared his throat and faced Bill Barstow the way he might face an outlaw with a gun. "Hope has just—"

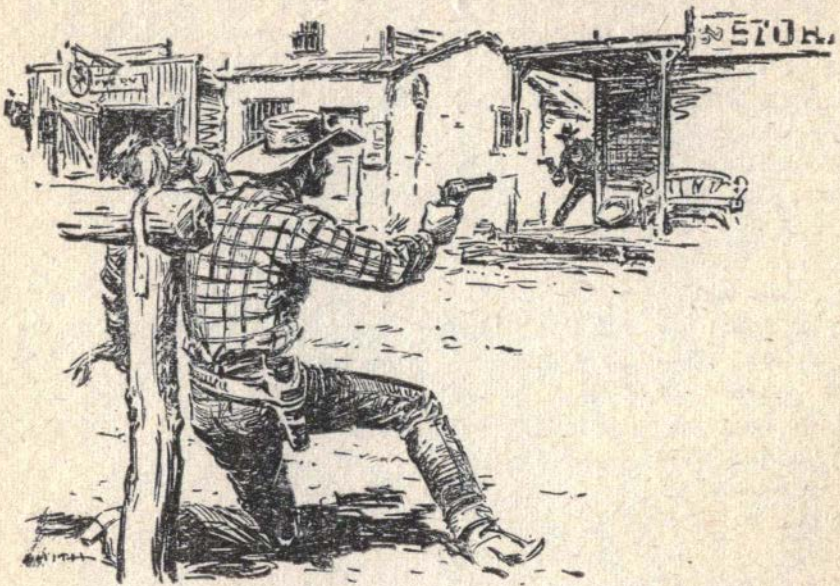
"Yeah. I know," cut in Fiddlin' Bill. "Three treys of hearts in one deck calls for a new shuffle and deal. A new deck. I'm going back in that wagon with Old Hob and the Senator. Come along with us, doc.

You ain't saddle broke, either. Anyhow, we got the likker. . . . Turn loose them prisoners, Russ. They'll quit the country without bein' coaxed. You boys fetch the girls along. There's goin' to be the damnest double-double weddin' at the Halfway House that Montana ever saw. Before I close the saloon for keeps. And that's one dance where the fiddler is really goin' to town. Let's travel!"

The camp tender had brought out a new shepherd, a big Russian. The tender promised to fetch him out a new wagon and grub, tomorrow. The Russian grinned and nodded. He was rubbing the ears of the two sheep dogs and they were licking his hands. He understood no English at all and dead men lying around seemed not to bother him. He would bury the dead men. Pile rock monuments to mark their graves. He had a band of sheep to herd. A pair of fine shepherd dogs to talk to in his native Russian language. He had taken off his Astrakan cap and stood there bareheaded because there were three very beautiful girls who smiled at him.

When they had all gone he put on his cap and found the camp shovel. He stood on the knoll beside the rock monument marking the grave of the Basque Peralta, leaning on his shovel. Watching the sheep graze, watching the sunrise. Life for a shepherd, he thought, was very splendid. Peaceful. The tinkle of the bells as the sheep grazed was an easy sound on his ears.

THE END



# SAWBONES' SALVATION

by NORMAN A. FOX

*Doc Wingate reckoned that old rawhider's powder-smoke prescription would either kill or cure*

WHEN a man opened his eyes to the morning sun, he expected to find himself in his own bed and with four walls around him—not fifty miles back of beyond. From an unsteady perch atop this high-sided freighter, young Dr. Stephen Wingate had a bleary-eyed look at an unfamiliar world as the wagon rumbled slowly down the western slant of the Windigo Hills. Up until a moment ago, Doc Wingate had been deep in a whiskey-soaked sleep. The hunched

back on the seat ahead belonged to Pop Peters, Doc knew, but Pop's presence explained nothing.

"How in blazes did I get *here*?" Doc demanded.

That veteran freighter, Pop Peters, turned around to reveal a seamed and placid face. "Found you in the alley behind the Aces High Saloon back in Argo last night," he explained. "You'd crooked your elbow a few times too many, Doc. I thought a change of scenery might do you

good. Your bag and office things are loaded under the tarp."

Hauling himself up onto the seat, Doc ran a hand through his tousled black hair, adjusted his string tie and brushed dust from his black suit. "Moved me out of Argo, lock, stock and barrel, eh," he mused. "I'd have thanked you to have minded your own business."

The mildness never left Pop's blue eyes. "I'm beholden to you, Doc," he countered. "You nursed my young un through smallpox. But ever since that deal last winter you've been drinkin' yourself down the devil's skids. Argo folks is gettin' so they're afraid to trust their ailments to you. See how I figgered it, Doc?"

Doc gave this his slow consideration, then shrugged with the indifference of a man who has ceased to be concerned about his own destiny. "Another town—another start, eh?" he said at last. "Maybe you're right, friend. What's that one up ahead? I've never been on this side of the Windigos."

The scatteration of buildings that reared below them was nothing to bring brightness to a man's eye, a huddle of false fronts, unpainted and old and looking like less than nothing against the majestic background of the pine-crested hills that surrounded it. Pop flicked his whip, and his voice was casual.

"Bridger, Doc."

"*Bridger!*"

"Yep. Old Jeff Sattler's town. We won't be here long, Doc. Sorry it rakes up old memories."

Doc turned his eyes away. "Jeff Sattler," he murmured. "I shouldn't have tried taking that bullet out of him. Every instinct warned me against it. He was a stranger and he came all the way from Bridger for my help—and I killed him. That's the thought that keeps me drinking, Pop."

"Yep. I know, Doc. We'll find you another town. But what do you suppose is keeping all the Bridger folks indoors on a nice summer morning? Trouble?"

They were winding down into the single street, and this Bridger, brought up closer, had a deep and ominous hush to it. The dust lay thick and yellow between the straggly rows of buildings, and the street was vast in its emptiness, deserted save for a sleeping dog and two men who paced toward each other with a tense wariness that carried an instant meaning to Doc Wingate.

"Trouble all right!" he agreed—and the flat crash of guns made an exclamation point for his words. Those two men had exploded into action, and now only the bigger of the pair was left standing in a swirl of powder smoke. As a gun fight, it had been fast and fancy. The slighter man, a youngster, was down in the dust, the red shirt he wore turning black with a widening blood stain. Pop Peters tooled the wagon to a stand.

"There's neither an undertaker nor a doctor in Bridger," he said. "And here's a need for one or the other."

That was the thing that shook Doc Wingate from his apathy and sent him probing under the loosely lashed tarp for his black bag. He wanted none of Bridger, but he knew when he was needed. He'd been range-reared, and to this day he tailed up every bogged cow he came across. He'd been a doctor afterwards, and months of hard drinking couldn't completely change the pattern of his ways. Bag in hand, he was off the wagon and striding forward, a long, lean figure, when he felt the challenge in the eyes of the lone man who still stood in Bridger's street.

He was well-larded, this fellow, and truculence put a twist to his thick lips. "You'd better let him lie, stranger," he said. "Deke Haddon doesn't waste his lead."

Stooping, Doc lifted the youngster into his arms and started across the street toward a hotel, putting his back to Deke Haddon and saying nothing. There was contempt in the act, and he wondered if Haddon would use his gun again, but he reached his destination unscathed.

The hotel lobby was full of men, most of them crowded up to a big bay window. To a pop-eyed clerk Doc said: "Don't stand there staring! Lead the way to a room!"

"One's empty at the head of the stairs, t-toward the back of the building," the clerk stammered.

Doc found the room, and Pop Peters suddenly appeared, turning the knob for him. When Doc had placed his patient on the creaky bed, he said: "Hot water and towels, Pop. And hurry! There's life in him."

He was already busy baring the wound, and he began to breathe easier for the lung wasn't pierced. Haddon's lead had followed a rib, and it was shock that had made this youngster unconscious. Doc set to work upon him, thankful for Pop's help and glad when the moment came when he could say: "I've done all I can do, Pop. He'll pull through."

"You've bit yourself off a chunk, Doc," Peters observed. "I make this town regular; I know its gossip and its people. Deke Haddon don't take kindly to being bucked. You noticed, maybe, how nobody lent a hand."

"Makes no never mind," Doc said, for he had suddenly been reminded of his whereabouts. "Call me when you get your cargo unloaded. I'm shaking the dust of Bridger."

"Sure," said Pop and slipped away.

Doc sat down by the bed, studying his sleeping patient, and he was there when a girl framed herself in the doorway. She had the same blond hair as the stricken boy's, and Doc guessed their relation.

"Your brother's doing fine," he said. "There's nothing to worry about."

The breath went out of her in a gusty sigh. "I knew this was the day it would happen," she said. "But he managed to slip away from our ranch and he was gone an hour before I missed him. I've already heard about the fight. I want to thank you, Dr. —"

She smiled, and it occurred to him

that he'd gotten less pay for greater chores. "Dr. Stephen Wingate," he supplied. "Late of Argo City, across the hills."

He sensed that he was making a mistake ever, as the words slipped out, but even then he wasn't prepared for her transformation. Her lips curled and something went out of her eyes. "Doctor Wingate!" she said. "You're Wingate of Argo! And you've dared use your probe on another Sattler! I wonder if you know how much I hate you?"

"Sattler!" he said.

"Don't you know? I'm Sarah Sattler, and this is my brother Jeff. We're the children of the man you killed in Argo last winter! Oh, I heard the whole story! Argo folks told us when we came for dad's body. You were blind drunk that day, and keeping yourself out of sight. But they said you'd made whiskey talk, admitting that you'd bungled away Jefferson Sattler's life. He'd be alive, but for you. He was old, but he was leathery enough to ride across the Windigos to the nearest doctor. Now will you get out of here, you drunken butcher!"

Teetering on his feet, he stood there, hearing her yet not hearing her, recognizing irony too great to have happened by chance. There was a devilish design behind this, and only one man could have fashioned it. "Yes," he said. "I'll go. I've got to see a man—about a mess!"

He came out of the hotel like a sleep walker, pausing on the hotel porch and taking a long look. Right across the way stood a jail building.

Young Jefferson Sattler had fallen before it, and Doc wondered fleetingly what manner of law they had in Bridger. But that wasn't his concern, and when he spotted the only mercantile he started obliquely for it and found Pop Peters unloading cargo at the rear of the store.

Doc said: "You know this town and you know its people. That means you knew all along that I was doctoring another Jeff Sattler!"

"Sure," Pop admitted. "I even knew that he'd need you, and I half-killed my hosses getting here before the sun stood very high."

"I called you friend," Doc said slowly. "I've had a knife stuck in me for six months. I didn't figger you'd be the one to twist it."

"Takes pain to cure pain, Doc. Shucks, you know that. It's a case o' hair o' the dog that bit you. You figger you killed one Jeff Sattler. Well, you just handed another his life. Don't that sort of square your personal books, Doc?"

That took all the truculence out of Doc Wingate, for suddenly he saw this mild-eyed oldster's intent, understood Pop's queer attempt to bring about a miracle. Hair of the dog that bit you! Maybe Pop was right. Wonderingly, Doc said: "But how in thunder did you work it?"

Pop shrugged. "I hit this town at least once a month. I've known all about a feud between Deke Had-don's Bar-8-Bar and the Sattlers' Standing-S. It's the old story of a big rancher trying to gobble up his



little neighbor, but old Jeff Sattler made quite a mouthful. He stopped a bullet last winter, and it ain't hard to guess who was behind the gun. Jeff lit out for Argo with that bullet in him, and he died in your office."

"But—" Doc interjected.

"After Jeff died, Haddon only had the two kids, young Jeff and his sister, to buck. Haddon's scheme was to strip the Standing-S of cattle, ruin those kids. Haddon walks wide of Reb Chillwood, the deputy here at Bridger, and he played 'er smart enough to keep Chillwood guessing. But young Jeff got the goods. He done a sneak on the Bar-8-Bar and found the hides of five butchered steers, hides showing mighty plain that the Sattler Standing-S brand had been worked over into the Bar-8-Bar, a trick Haddon likely had in mind when he picked his brand. Plenty of Bar-8-Bar lead was a-buzzin' after young Jeff when he rode away—but he made it."

"How do you know all this, Pop?"

"Young Jeff told me when I dropped off some supplies at his spread last trip. He aims to show those hides to Reb Chillwood, which spells Deer Lodge pen for Deke Haddon. But Reb's been on a long leave of absence, visiting Colorado kinfolk. He's supposed to show back on the eighth of June—today. Figger it for yourself, Doc. Haddon knew young Jeff had the goods on him. Haddon knew the law would be back today. What would you be doing in Haddon's boots if you had his snake streak?"

"Laying for Jeff and forcing a

fight to make sure he didn't get to Chillwood!"

"Sure," Pop agreed. "Trouble was bound to shape today. I fixed my schedule to be on hand. Fetching you was the only problem, but you got a snootful which made it easy. You see, I figgered Jeff would need a doctor or a friend—or both."

"Reb Chillwood hit town yet?" asked Doc.

"Stage rolled in ten minutes ago. Reb wasn't on it. Reckon he'll be along tomorrow for sure."

"Where are those worked-over hides?"

Pop shrugged again. "Jeff told me he hid 'em. Even his sister don't know where. Jeff figgered the knowledge would be dangerous."

"Then," Doc decided, "Deke Haddon will still be wanting that boy dead."

"Reckon that's right, Doc."

Turning, Steve Wingate headed back toward the hotel with a long and steady stride, a man who had found his work cut out for him. He had listened to Pop's theory of a life for a life, and he'd found himself believing it. A doctor's skill had brought young Jeff Sattler back from death, but it would take more than that to keep him alive. Pop Peters had pointed the way; the job was Doc's for the taking.

Sarah Sattler was still in her brother's room when Doc returned. Jeff's eyes were open now, but they held no friendliness.

"Sis tells me you're Wingate of Argo," he said brusquely. "I can't

change the fact that you patched me up, but I hope you've got your bill ready. I don't aim to be beholden to you."

Against this animosity Doc could find no argument, for he knew words would be useless. He could only match their collective belligerency as he said: "Until you're on your feet, Sattler, you're still my patient. As for you, miss, you'd better get another room if you want to stay close to your brother. He's holding down that bed for at least another day. Do you both understand me?"

Anger choked Jeff Sattler, and his sister spoke first. "I'll do as you say," she agreed. "But only because Jeff needs you and there's no other doctor." Then she was gone from the room, and a long and lonely vigil began for Doc Wingate.

First he had a look out the room's only window, one facing the alley. A shed clung to the rear of the hotel and that wasn't to his liking. He thought of moving Sattler to a less accessible room but decided against it.

Jeff kept sullenly silent, and Doc made no effort to break through the barrier. Pop Peters showed up intermittently, and Doc sent the oldster out for food, never leaving the room himself. If Deke Haddon was coming, Doc Wingate intended to be handy to greet him.

Haddon was still in town. Doc discovered that by putting guarded questions to Pop just outside the doorway. Haddon was holding down a table in one of the saloons, and two Bar-8-Bar hands were helping him

bide his time. That much Pop Peters had learned.

And then the night came. Doc used a hypodermic, putting Jeff Sattler into a deep, silent sleep. Doc twisted the key in the door then, propped his chair against a wall and promised himself he'd keep awake. Sounds reached him through the thin walls—the strident clamor of the saloons, the thunder of hoofs as riders hurried in from hill ranches, jingling bit chains, creaking saddle leather. And these made a medley that finally lulled Doc asleep.

He'd have sworn he only dozed a minute, but when something snatched him to wakefulness, the moon stood high enough to shine into the room, and he realized it was nearly midnight. He spent a moment locating the sound that had disturbed him and heard it again—the furtive movement of someone on the shed roof below the window.

That shook the last of the sleep out of Doc Wingate. The window sash was being hoisted slowly, and just for an instant Doc stood hypnotized, staring as a gun barrel poked through the inch or two of space between sash and sill—a gun barrel that leveled toward the slumbering man on the bed. And then Doc jumped.

His own gun, kept from range days, was on the floor beside him, but there wasn't time to try for it. He got his hand on the barrel of the intruder's gun just as it roared, the sound thunderous. Wrenching hard, Doc tried to twist that gun away from its owner, sending his elbow

through the window pane with the effort. Someone grunted angrily, Doc heard the crash of a heavy body falling back against the shed roof, a second crash as the marauder rolled to the alley, and then the swift scurry of retreating footsteps. Deke Haddon had struck and gone again, and it was all over.

No, not quite over, for footsteps pounded along the hallway as the hotel aroused to the gunshot. Fists beat against the door. Doc had one look at his patient as he crossed the room and that was enough. When he unlocked the door and opened it an inch, the first of the startled faces that he saw was Sarah Sattler's. She'd drawn a robe over her nightgown, her blond hair cascaded to her shoulders and her eyes were wild with fear.

"Jeff?" she cried.

"Someone fired at him through the window," Doc said. "He's—dead, Sarah."

He caught her as she reeled into the room, and he wished mightily that he could have told it to her differently. Before he closed the door, he spoke to the others in the hallway. "Will one of you find Pop Peters and send him here?" he asked. "I'll appreciate it."

They held a funeral at the first flush of dawn. Pop Peters had busied himself in the night, building a rough coffin and digging a grave beside old Jefferson Sattler's in the little cemetery just beyond the town. Pop and Doc Wingate carried the coffin into the hotel and out again,

but there were hands to help them load it into a light spring wagon Pop had gotten. Men whose fear of Deke Haddon the day before had kept them off the street now made a shamefaced parade to the cemetery.

Doc walked the distance and Sarah Sattler walked with him, pale but dry-eyed. They didn't tarry long. There was no preacher to say any words, no ritual to be performed. The coffin was lowered and townsmen reached for shovels, and Doc led Sarah away before the first clods fell.

Pop Peters tooled the empty wagon back toward town, Doc and the girl following on foot. As they neared the hotel they came face to face with Deke Haddon and his two Bar-8-Bar men, an unshaven pair with tied holsters.

Coming to an abrupt stop, Doc said: "I reckon you know you finished your work last night, Haddon. No, I can't prove it was you, so you're still clear. But this isn't the finish, mister. And I want you to know I'm siding the Standing-S from here on out."

Haddon tilted back his head and laughed. "You talk like there was gonna be trouble, sawbones. Shucks, the trouble's all over—now. Ain't that right?"

"If you mean that nobody knows where Jeff Sattler was keeping those altered hides, you're right," Doc said. "But you'll make another play some day, Haddon, and maybe your foot will slip. I'll be waiting."

Brushing on past the Bar-8-Bar trio, he escorted the girl into the

hotel and upstairs to her own room at the front of the building. She got the door unlocked and they went inside, and young Jefferson Sattler grinned at them from the bed.

"Too bad there's a bluff shutting off the view of the cemetery," he said. "I'd've got quite a kick out of watching my own funeral. How did Sarah do as a bereaved sister?"

"Perfect," Doc answered. "I don't think she's quite over the shock I gave her last night when I had her thinking for a minute that you were really dead. I'm sorry about that. I couldn't see any other way."

"It doesn't matter," said Sarah. "Not if your scheme works. I don't know why I'm pinning any faith in you, doctor—considering. But I want Jeff alive."

"It's a pat plan," Doc argued. "It came to me the instant I glanced at Jeff last night, not knowing whether I'd find him alive or dead. And I've had plenty of time to round out the details. Now that we've got Deke Haddon thinking Jeff's dead, all Jeff's got to do is keep out of sight till Reb Chillwood rolls in. I'm getting to be a schemer on a par with a certain Pop Peters—but you wouldn't know about that."

There was a puzzled glint in Sarah's eyes. "Just what is your stake in this, doctor?"

Pop came dodging into the room. Smiling faintly, he said: "Somebody owes me a few bucks for the wagon iron I loaded into that coffin last night."

The girl had taken a stand by the front window, and she drew in her

breath quickly. "It's working!" she cried. "Look! There go Haddon and his men riding out of town!"

Pop moved over to her. "Heading for the Bar-8-Bar—maybe. Haddon's sly. I'm going to make sure he's going home."

He slipped away, and that left the three with nothing to do but wait. Sarah Sattler had put a question to Doc, and Pop's arrival had kept her from getting an answer. She didn't ask again, and Doc kept silent.

A taut restlessness held the three of them. Jeff Sattler had to stay in bed; that was Doc's orders, but the medico and the girl alternately paced the room and peered from the window. And thus the hours dragged until stage time.

The Concord came rolling down the west slant of the Windigos in midmorning, stirring the saffron dust of Bridger and coming to a stand up the street. A fat and untidy drummer piled out, a gray-headed cowman unloaded himself, and last of all came a tall, granite-jawed man with a deputy's badge sparkling upon his cowhide vest.

"Reb Chillwood!" cried Sarah. "He's back!"

Doc Wingate was instantly at her elbow, and as he watched the tautness went out of him. He had undertaken a desperate scheme and here was the success of it within reach. Together they saw the lawman unload his telescope valise, shake the hands of a few onlookers who greeted him, then start for the jail building. Jeff said: "Doc, pass me my

Levis and what's left of my shirt. Sis, keep your back turned a minute. Me, I've got a man to see."

And then footsteps were scurrying along the hallway, and Pop Peters was darting into the room. Doc's first look at the little freighter told him that somehow the bottom had dropped out of everything.

"Haddon's wise!" Doc cried. "Do you savvy? I followed him, and he stopped at the mercantile and got a shovel. Then him and his boys went out to the cemetery and did some digging—in young Jeff's grave! I was hunkered behind a headboard, and I saw all of it!"

Doc had his hands on Pop's shoulders, gripping hard. "They know Jeff isn't in that coffin?"

"Sure they know. Haddon had his look and said: 'Wagon iron! My hunch was right! I'd have got Sattler last night if that blasted sawbones hadn't grabbed at my gun. I was mighty sure I wasted my bullet, funeral or no, and here's the proof of it!' That's what he said, and the three of them are coming back to town. Do you savvy, Doc? They'll be layin' for Jeff to cross over to the jail."

"Let 'em lay," said Doc. "I'll fetch Chillwood here."

"It won't work!" Pop moaned. "We've gotten Haddon into a corner, and we've got him desperate. It would be death for any one of us to show up on the street. And death, maybe, for Chillwood. We've shaped up a showdown for ourselves!"

"He's right!" Jeff Sattler decided and swung his underwear-clad body

out of bed. "Doc's scheme has been knocked into a cocked J.B. Where're my pants? There's nothing left but for me to go out. If I don't make it, you'll find those worked-over hides buried at the northwest corner of our Standing-S corral."

"You can't show yourself, Jeff!" Sarah cried. "It's suicide. We'll stay here. Haddon can't keep us cornered forever."

"No, but he can come after us when he's tired of waiting," Jeff said. "I'm going out!"

Whereupon Doctor Stephen Wingate let go with his left fist. He had time to say: "This is mighty poor treatment for a patient," and then his knuckles thudded against Jeff's chin, spilling the youngster across the bed.

"Hogtie him with a sheet, if he isn't unconscious," Doc called to Pop, and reached for Jeff's Levis.

"Keep your back turned, miss!" Doc ordered, peeling himself out of his black suit, wriggling into the Levis and the tattered, bloodstained red shirt.

"You can't go out there!" Sarah gasped. "What right have you to take Jeff's place?"

Doc's voice had a grim, implacable tone. "I haven't followed a notion this far to lose out now. And I haven't time to talk about it."

He'd found Jeff's dusty sombrero and the gun belt the boy had worn yesterday. Putting on the hat, Doc latched the gun belt around his middle and eased his own familiar iron into the holster. Jeff Sattler was

spread-eagled on the bed and would obviously stay that way for a while. As Doc went out of the room, he said: "Pop, keep the girl here!"

He came down the hallway half-expecting to find a Bar-8-Bar man lurking in wait. He came down the stairs, the sombrero tugged low, and he heard the clerk's astonished gasp as he passed through the lobby and out under the porch's wooden awning. There was some life to Bridger today, yet the town seemed ominously quiet and the distance across the dusty way to the jail building loomed large as a mountain ravine. Doc Wingate eased forward, put his foot down into the dust, looking quickly in every direction. And a gun let go over in the direction of the mercantile store.

Lead flicked the brim of Doc's borrowed sombrero, and the medico swung around, firing as he turned. One of hard cases who had been with Deke Haddon had posted himself at the corner of the store, and Doc got him with a hasty shot that had luck behind it. But even as the gun bucked against his palm, Doc was swinging on his heel, knowing there'd be two other gunmen posted at strategic angles.

It took him a moment to find Deke Haddon, and a bullet burned along Doc's ribs before that moment ran out. But now he knew where to look, and he saw the broad face of the Bar-8-Bar boss peering around the jail building.

Haddon didn't make much of a target, but suddenly he leaned outward for another shot—a bullet that

brought Doc to one knee—and that gave Doc his chance. He triggered three quick shots in a single, roaring roll of sound and Deke Haddon came mincing out into view, made a quick bow and fell on his face.

The third man was laying lead all around, and Doc went down in the dust and began rolling, trying hard to find his last foe. Then he heard a gun roar almost overhead. *The hotel*, he thought and struggled to bring his own sights to bear in that direction. A man came somersaulting downward from a building across the street, and Pop Peters shouted exultantly from the hotel window:

"Got him, Doc! He was up on top of the mercantile!"

Men were coming on the run, the tall form of Reb Chillwood in the lead.

"What in thunder—" the deputy began.

Doc managed a weak grin. "There's folks upstairs in the hotel who can tell you what it's all about," he said. "Tell Pop Peters to fetch me my black case, will you. Now I've got *myself* to patch up."

The crowding dusk found young Dr. Stephen Wingate and Sarah Sattler seated alone on the hotel porch, the doctor bandaged and smelling of medicine. Jeff Sattler, who'd had a long talk with Reb Chillwood, was still in bed. Jeff had made his awkward thanks to Doc Wingate hours before, and now nearly all had been said that needed to be.

But Sarah Sattler still had one

question. She said: "You never did tell me what your stake in this was, doctor."

"First, I want you to know how it was between your father and me," he said. "The night he came, I'd just gotten back from a forty-eight-hour jaunt into the mountains to deliver a baby for a rancher's wife. Jefferson Sattler was packing a bullet and it was only by a miracle that he lived to pack it so far. He had to have it removed or he was a cinch to die, yet I knew that I was in no shape to use a knife, tired as I was. That was my problem: leave the bullet in him and let him die, or operate—on the chance that he *might* pull through. I gambled with his life, and I lost. The thing that's haunted me is that I had no right to take the chance. But I didn't start my drinking until afterwards. Do you believe that?"

"When I saw you step into the street, walking out to meet the guns that were waiting for Jeff, I knew we'd been wrong about you," Sarah said. "But I still don't understand—"

"A life for a life," Steve explained. "One Jeff Sattler in place of the other who'd died in my office. That was Pop's idea and it was good medicine for a man who'd lost faith in himself. But I had another stake as well. Before you knew my name, you smiled at me. I'd hoped to see you smile again."

Sarah's hand closed on his. "Haddon's gone and the trouble's over," she said. "I've got a hundred reasons for smiling now."

Old Pop Peters came shuffling to a stand beneath the porch railing. "Cargo's unloaded, Doc," he said. "I'll be pulling out soon. You coming?"

Young Dr. Wingate shook his head. "No," he decided. "There's a place for a doctor in this town. And I like it here."

"Sure," said Pop. "I savvy." He went walking off into the dusk, whistling low and softly, a man whose work was finished, and the two on the porch sat silently listening until the last echo had faded away.

THE END



---

# RANGE SAVVY,

---

BY CARL RAHT

In 1879, at the old stage station of Maricopa Wells in Arizona, there was a deep water well, the only one for many miles. The pumping plant consisted of a yoke of Mexican oxen hooked onto one end of a three-hundred-foot-rope run through a wooden pulley. Attached to the other end was a forty-gallon barrel which had a valve in the bottom. Brought to the surface full of water, the barrel was guided to rest on a wooden peg which punched open the valve, emptying the water into a small tank. The charge was twenty-five cents per head for stock.



When the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe railroad was put into construction in 1879, it was meant to extend only from Atchison, Kansas, through Topeka, the capital, and terminate at Santa Fe, New Mexico. But the enlarged vision of the builders sent the rails westward toward the Pacific Ocean, and the main line never reached Santa Fe. The five-hundred-foot grade lying between Lamy and Santa Fe slowed traffic, it was argued, and the New Mexico capital was bypassed by the main line, leaving the sleepy old Mexican pueblo serviced by a branch line. Hence the saying that people lived in Santa Fe half their lives, while the other half was spent in Lamy waiting for trains.



The lowly cactus, which the uninformed traveler in the Southwest gazes upon with contempt as being worthless, is coming into a new use. Harold L. Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, has issued permits to harvest the familiar spiked yucca plant on public lands, so the fiber stock may replace the raw material of Manila, hemp, and jute which were imported before the war.

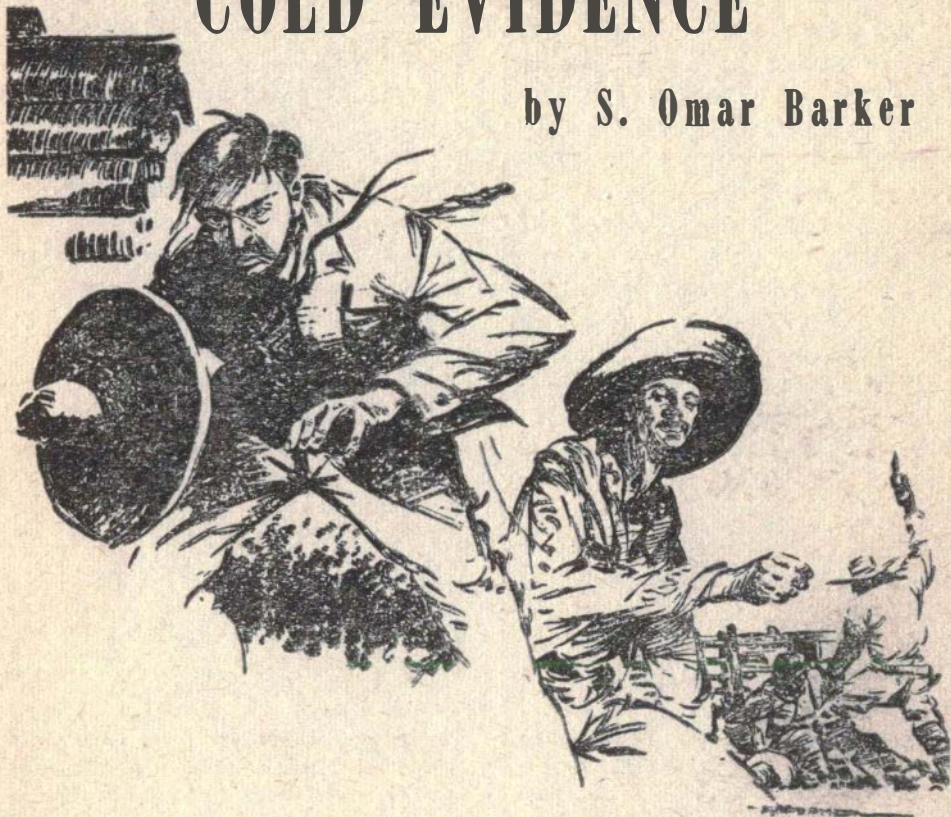


Mr. Raht will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.



# COLD EVIDENCE

by S. Omar Barker



*With the wiliness of his namesake, El Señor Coyote didn't stalk his kinsman's murderers—he led them right into a trap*

IN the crisp morning shade of high-country spruces, Mariano Luján abruptly reined up his rawboned roan, sidled his lean hips in the saddle and listened. On the steep trail two panting pack ponies came to a grateful stop and the two mounted "dudes" reined up inquiringly. In a fleck of sunlight filtering through the dark timber the alertness of the Mexican guide's sharp, brown face

was like that of some wild thing warily testing the wind for some sound or scent of danger.

"No wonder they call you El Señor Coyote!" grinned Dr. Prichard, easing his well-padded figure in the saddle. "What's got you suspicious this time?"

"Don't you heard those noise, Dr. Preech?" A troubled frown corru-

gated Mariano's forehead. "Lees-ten!"

Now even the dudes' unpracticed hearing caught it; a high, wailing sound, thinned by the lift of distance, rising in weird rhythm from somewhere far back down the mountain toward Santo Niño Valley.

"Somebody singing?" Dr. Prichard's companion, an attorney from St. Louis named Dunlap, looked only mildly interested.

Soberly El Coyote shook his head.

"Thass the weep of Meskin womans when somebody dead. But who can be? Day behind yesterday all the peoples was makin' *fiesta*—nobody seeck!"

"Maybe somebody drank too much *mula blanca*," suggested Dr. Prichard dryly, but Mariano was listening again to the distant wailing.

"By wheeskers of the burro!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Thass the voice of my fimmale cousin Agapita Sena! Dr. Preech, more better I go back!"

"Wait a minute," said Dunlap a little sharply. "I thought we hired you for a guide!"

"Thass right, Mr. Downlip." Mariano shrugged politely. "But it ees a customary of the Meskin pipples that they come to the die of his keen-folks. As far as that concerns, Dr. Preech already know the trail to Valle Bonito, don't you?"

"Sure," agreed the ruddy-faced doctor amiably. "We'll go ahead and make camp. When will you be back, Mari?"

"*Pronto!*" promised Mariano. "I horry like hell!"

Handing Dr. Prichard the front pack pony's lead rope, Mariano slipped past them and vanished swiftly back down the trail.

Somewhere out in the timber a camp-robber jay whistled. The attorney from St. Louis, unused to the wilderness, looked a little uneasy.

"Doc," he said, "are you sure you know the way to this—wherever it is we're going?"

"Oh, certainly, Ed! This is the third summer I've—"

"My camera!" broke in Dunlap. "It's in the slicker roll on that Mexican's saddle. Wait here while I overtake him and get it!"

Dr. Prichard chuckled as he caught the other's bridle rein.

"My friend, you don't know El Señor Coyote! The only thing that can overtake that saddle wolf on these mountain trails is his own shadow! But don't worry, he'll be back—probably before we get to the Valle Bonito—with your precious camera unharmed. I know Mariano. He's one Mexican you can count on."

However correct the doctor's estimate might have been in general, this time it didn't pan out. They made camp under a trio of huge spruces that night without their guide. Nor did he show up the next day.

An hour after leaving his "dudes," Mariano Luján quit the main trail to put his lathered roan across a series of steep, wedgy little side canyons and emerge upon a pine-timbered flat half a mile back of the *ranchito* of Fedolina Sena at the val-

ley's rim. It was from here that the wailing had seemed to come. The bench was cluttered with the slash and toppings of numerous recently felled pines. Lately *primo* Fedolino, the somewhat shiftless husband of the "fimmale cousin" whose wailing Mariano had recognized, had been supplementing his scanty bean-patch living by cutting a few saw logs for the chug-a-chug little sawmill over across the valley.

A pretty good axman for his size—when sober—Don Fedolino was a good, kindly man, but not very smart. When felling a tree, for instance, if it threatened to fall the wrong way, instead of simply watching it and stepping around the stump out of danger, Don Fedolino habitually threw down his ax and ran. This time, it seemed, he had run the wrong way. Dead as a doornail, his small wiry body lay on its face crosswise under the branchy trunk of a freshly felled pine. Oddly enough the tree trunk itself, held up by branches, lacked the width of a man's hand of resting on his body. But on one side a burly branch had crushed one thigh into the ground, while on the other a broken limb little bigger than a man's arm lay across Don Fedolino's broken neck, the big end of it wedged somehow under the tree trunk.

Making his way quickly past the three solemn-eyed men and half a dozen crying women sitting or standing about the tragic scene, Mariano wondered why nobody seemed to have tried to get the dead man's body out from under the tree.

"*Pobrecito!*" he said. "Where is

the ax? We will have to chop a little, I think, to get him out."

Mariano stooped to lift the branch from the dead man's neck, but José María Gutierrez stopped fingering at his small black mustache to pull him back.

"Wait, Mariano!" said the young Mexican in Spanish. "We have sent for the sheriff to bring a coroner's jury. It is not proper to move the body until they have passed judgment."

"Judgment on what? Cannot even a one-eyed burro see that the *pobrecito* is dead?"

A second of the Gutierrez brothers put himself with an air of arrogant authority between Mariano and the dead man.

"I, Juan Gutierrez, am a deputy sheriff!" he announced. "It is the law that any man who dies by accident must not be moved until a coroner's jury determines what caused his death!"

Gently El Coyote put a comforting arm around the shoulders of the bereaved widow.

"You see, *prima?*" He shrugged. "Even though dead, your husband, Fedolino, is fortunate; he has friends who know the law!"

The widow of Fedolino Sena was wrinkled and thin and her black, tear-swamped eyes had a look of fear as well as grief in them.

"But those Gutierrez, *prima,*" she whispered, "they are *not* his friends!"

"Hush, *prima!*" said Mariano softly. "When a man is dead, everybody is his friend!"

Since it was the season of sudden thunderstorms, Mariano had that morning rolled Lawyer Dunlap's small, expensive camera up in his slicker to make sure it did not get wet during the trip over the big mountain. Now he removed it and spread the slicker over Fedolino Sena's body to protect it from the warming sun. Then, without further comment, he heel-squatted in the shade of a small pine near the fresh-chopped stump of the fallen tree, to wait.

Here, asking no questions, he listened while Juan and José María Gutierrez explained in detail how the accident had been discovered.

At the recent *fiesta baile*, they said—and as Mariano very well knew—they and a third Gutierrez brother had had a little quarrel with Don Fedolino Sena because he objected to the way young José María was dancing with his daughter. Don Fedolino had been a little drunk at the time, they said, and so had they. But *caramba!* Once sober again, they were so sorry they had talked bad to the old man that they had come, all three together, to apologize, bringing along a bottle of good whiskey for a peace offering.

Knowing Don Fedolino's custom of coming out very early to chop while it was still cool, and hearing the sound of his ax, they had ridden directly here instead of to his house. Then, *por vide de Diós*, as they approached they had heard the crash of this tree falling, and when they got there, there was Don Fedolino, the poor fellow, lying just as the tree

had struck him down, crushed and dead. Quickly, then, José María had gone to bring Doña Agapita, while Pablo, the other brother, had ridden for their cousin, the sheriff, to bring a coroner's jury, as was proper. *Que triste!* How sad for them that Don Fedolino had died before they had a chance to patch up their quarrel with him!

Mariano heard them through without comment, and for some time after sat staring at the fresh-chopped stump.

"Those bottle weeskey," he said finally, grinning, "what you did with heem?"

With an answering grin José María produced the bottle, now half empty, from inside his shirt.

"Maybe you like one leetle dreenk, eh, Mariano?"

"*Gracias,*" said El Señor Coyote and took the bottle.

He was starting to tip it up to his lips when, with a great clump and clatter of hoofs, Sheriff Eufracio Gallegos and his squad of jurymen arrived.

"*Hah, chivo!*" The high sheriff's magnificent middle practically quivered with official importance and the piggy little eyes above his fat jowls gleamed at Mariano with immediate suspicion and distrust. "Always where happen sometheeng bad, there poke the nose of El Coyote!"

Marion shrugged. "The dead man, he was the hoosband of my cousin."

"But you were suppose to be on camping weeth the Americanos in Valle Bonito! How you find out about ever'theeng so queeck?"

Mariano shrugged again.

"Maybe thass why they call me El Coyote!"

"Don't make smart weeth me, *chivo!* I am the high shereef! Geeve me that bottle wheeskey! Don't you got no respect?"

With a wink at the Gutierrez brothers, whose liquor it was, Mariano handed it over.

"Come to my house," he invited, "an' I geeve you some ice from my new icehouse to cold the dreenk for you, shereef!"

For years this slim, sharp-nosed mountain *vaquero* they called El Señor Coyote had been a thorn in the overstuffed side of the pompous *politico* sheriff of Tejón County. Like his namesake, Mariano Luján had a reputation for slyness. Also for often turning up at some poor *paisano's* house in the dark of the moon with the gift of a chunk of fresh beef, which may or may not have come from under a hide bearing the brand of the high sheriff or of some of his many kinfolks and political henchmen. But though the paunchy Don Eufracio had once or twice thought he had a good hold on El Coyote's tail, somehow it always slipped from his grasp before he could really twist it. Now, at Mariano's mention of a new icehouse, the sheriff's bristly black mustache twitched with suspicion—as Mariano had known it would.

"Hah, *chivo!* So now you got cold place for hide stolen biff, eh?"

Mariano did not answer, but to the suspicious sheriff his mere shrug

was a taunt and a challenge.

"Some day, *chivo!*" Gallegos began, but José María Gutierrez was tugging at his arm:

"*Por diablos*, sheriff, is it not time to call to order the jury?"

Six brown Spanish-American jurymen sat solemnly on a log, listening to Pablo, Juan and José María Gutierrez repeat the same account they had given Mariano concerning the death of Fedolino Sena. They heard two neighbors testify to, and the widow admit, the dead man's dangerous habit of running when a tree was about to fall. They solemnly viewed the fallen pine and the body under it, then rendered their verdict: that Fedolino Sena had met his death accidentally, by the will of God a tree having fallen on him and broken his neck.

Suddenly Doña Agapita Sena's quiet weeping broke into wild hysteria.

"No, *señores!*" she cried. "This I do not believe! All his life this poor one had chopped trees and never did they fall upon him!"

It was Mariano Luján who quieted her.

"But, *prima,*" he assured her, "it is the verdict of the sheriff's own jury! It is the voice of the law!"

"You are wiser than I, *primo mío,*" quavered the thin-lipped widow, subdued by the touch of his arm about her shoulders.

Mariano turned to the sheriff, now pompously giving orders for getting the body from under the tree.

"*Mira*, honorable señor shereef!" said Mariano, his tone unusually

grave and respectful. "Here I have the very fine camera of my friend Meester Downlip. Joost in case it be some question in the future about how happen this man keeled, for why don't we took some pictures, of this tree sitting on him?"

"Peectures, eh?" Don Eufracio still sounded suspicious.

"Also one of yourself—wheech prove to the peoples that when happens trouble, always the handsome high shereef, she's Johnny-on-the spots!"

"By the wheeskers of my aunt!" exclaimed Don Eufracio, preening his mustache. "That is good idea, *chivo!* Leesten, *hijos!* Don't move those body! First we gonna took peectures!"

That afternoon, to the quiet wailing of black-shawled women, they buried Don Fedolino's bruised and broken body in the little Campo Santo on a rocky hill near the village of Santo Niño. The coffin was a plain pine box, for which the Gutierrez brothers generously supplied the lumber and nails.

Pablo and Juan Gutierrez, members of the landed and politically powerful Gallegos clan, who rarely had to work with their hands, even did their share with hammer and saw in shaping the casket, though only Mariano Luján's restraint prevented Doña Agapita from running them off the place. It was the younger brother, José María, who hitched up his fastest buggy team and went to bring the *padre*.

Meanwhile Sheriff Eufracio Galle-

gos and his cohort of deputies loped off homeward toward the county seat, then circled unseen back through the piny foothills and, in its owner's absence, inspected Mariano's new icehouse. They found it to be a snug, double-walled log structure, with a small cold room in the middle, surrounded on three sides by a good store of ice packed in sawdust.

When he came out, sucking a piece of ice, the high sheriff was grunting with disappointment, for inside he had found no stolen beef.

Leaving the Campo Santo after the burial, young José María Gutierrez touched the arm of the dead man's pretty, black-shawled daughter.

"Come, Adelita," he urged. "I will take you home in the boggy!"

Without speaking, the girl looked once at him, a mixture of scorn, hate and fear in her dark, red-rimmed eyes, and went on climbing into the battered old wagon that had been her father's. It was her mother already up on the saggy seat who spoke:

"*Vaya*, son of a goat!" she said grimly in Spanish. "Is it not enough that you have killed the poor girl's father?"

But for Mariano Luján's quick interference the lash of her long-handled driving whip would have struck young Gutierrez across the face.

Once the little crowd of mourners had separated, each toward his own adobe home, Mariano rode close to Doña Agapita's wagon wheel.

"To accuse men of murder, *prima mía*," he chided her soberly, "one should have proof."

"They hated him," said the woman stubbornly. "Because he would not let José María make foolishness with our daughter."

"But to hate, *prima mía*, is not to kill!"

"The stump of the fallen pine, *primo*: the cut was not smooth—and my Fedolino was an axman!"

"Ah!" said El Coyote cryptically. "You noticed that, eh? But remember, *prima*, those Gutierrez, they are the keensmen of the Sheriff Gallegos. For the widow of a poor *paisano* it is wise to keep the mouth shut!"

Despite the gravity of his words, one of El Coyote's sharp eyes closed in something like a wink, and for the first time since she learned of her husband's death, Doña Agapita's thin brown face showed a look of resignation.

Mariano Luján's tall roan was drawn and gaunt from hard riding when, cooking their third camp breakfast without him on the Valle Bonito, Attorney Dunlap and Dr. Prichard looked up to see their guide riding into camp.

"It's about time," growled Dunlap, batting watering eyes against the campfire smoke. "Where in thunder you been?"

"Joost different places." Mariano shrugged as he dismounted. "How you found the feeshin'?"

"Never mind the fishing! Where's my camera? You lost it?"

"No lose, joost use!" Mariano carefully unrolled the camera from the slicker and handed it to its owner. From inside his jacket he drew an

envelope. "You hope I deeadn't bost the ko-dak, Meester Downlip," he said respectfully. "Take some look to thees picture. Putty good for first time try, eh?"

While Dunlap inspected his precious camera—and found it unharmed—Dr. Prichard looked at the prints.

"Hell's bells, Mari!" he exclaimed. "What is all this?"

Expertly taking over the job of cooking breakfast, Mariano told them as briefly as possible.

"Me myself," he said apologetically, when he had finished, "I am joost one two-legs Meskin, don't got very smart on the head. Excuse me, pliss, I advise myself, those Meester Downlip, he is a smart lawyer, those Dr. Preech, he is knowing all about the dead mans—maybe for frands they halp me, eh?"

The two men looked at each other.

"Ed," said Dr. Prichard, "that body . . . if there's not too much decomposition by the time it's disintegrated . . . what do you say? Shall we—"

"It sounds like an interesting case," the lawyer interrupted, pulling thoughtfully at his chin. "I can spare the time from fishing, if you can!"

Sheriff Eufracio Gallegos, paunchy and pompous, strode back and forth in front of the little pine log cabin of Mariano Luján, snorting at every step.

"What foolish ees thees? Don't I told you that me myself, the high shereef already hold investigations

of thees? Don't you got the verdict of crooner's jury that those tree fall on heem by accidents? Don't I'm told you ten t'ousand times thees *chivo* Coyote alla time make treecks on the law?"

"Yeah, you told me." Captain Tom Quinley of the New Mexico mounted police calmly went on whit-ling, keeping an eye, from where he sat on Mariano's doorstep, on the three Gutierrez brothers whom he had brought here, against the sheriff's protest, as his prisoners. "But a coroner's verdict ain't final. And when any citizen—even El Coyote—reports to the State police that he has evidence of a murder, it's our job to investigate, and that's what we're here for. Luján said he'd be here by two. It's two thirty now. But I understand he's got a couple of dudes on his hands, which might make some delay reasonable. We'll wait till three."

By five to three the high sheriff, body and soul, was hot. The water in the nearby well was warm, and today there was a padlock on Mariano's icehouse door. In the sheriff's opinion, this business of a State policeman arresting the Gutierrez brothers—*primos* of his—and bringing them here to El Coyote's own den for questioning was twisting the burro's tail too far. Besides, he told Captain Quinley repeatedly, it was all just a trick to make the law look foolish. El Coyote, Gallegos swore, would not even show up.

"You see?" he snorted triumphantly at one minute till three. "What I don't told you?"

Captain Quinley rose.

"Looks like you're right, sheriff," he said reluctantly. "I reckon we might as well— Listen!"

From somewhere not far up the mountain sounded what Quinley would have sworn was the shrill, yapping howl of a coyote.

"El Coyote!" exclaimed one of the three prisoners, suddenly looking scared. "He comes!"

It was not the dudes but his own fagged horse that had delayed them, Mariano explained. He introduced Ed Dunlap and Dr. Prichard to Captain Quinley but ignored the sheriff.

"Well, let's get at it," said Quinley. "I've heard these boys' story and it sounds all right. If you've got anything better, spill it!"

"*Bueno!*" said Mariano. "I show you two pictures. One is a stump chopped by Fedolino Sena, the other the stump of the fallen tree. The chop ees not the same, *que no?*"

The fine lens of Lawyer Dunlap's camera had registered a distinct difference in the ax marks.

"They're different, all right," agreed Quinley. "You mean you figger they killed Sena by choppin' a tree down on him?"

"No, *señor capitán!* When they chop the tree, Fedolino Sena was already dead!"

"Yeah?" Captain Quinley sounded skeptical. "How come?"

"Lies!" protested Pablo Gutierrez. "Look! Show heem pecture of Don Fedolino joost like we find him onder the tree that boost hees neck!"

"Sure for Mike!" Mariano passed



over three more pictures, views of the body from both sides of the tree trunk.

"Looks like it broke his neck, all right," grunted Quinley.

"Sure for Mike!" agreed Mariano. "But what broke hees back an' bomp hees head where the tree don't touch?"

"Pardon me," spoke up one of the dudes. "I'm an attorney, captain. What my client means is that in addition to a crushed leg and broken neck, caused by the tree as shown in the picture, the deceased had *already* suffered a fracture of the spine and other injuries that caused his death *before the tree fell* on him. Therefore his theory is that the Gutierrez brothers picked a quarrel with the deceased and beat him to death, *first*, then felled the tree on him to make it appear accidental!"

"Maybe them other injuries was caused by the tree, too, Mr. Dunlap," argued the captain gravely. "Havin' a big ol' pine fall on you ain't no picnic, you know."

"*Aha, chivo!*" spoke up the high sheriff triumphantly. "Peekneeks, eh? What I don't told you?"

"Pardon me, captain," spoke up the other dude. "I happen to be a physician. An examination of the body would reveal which injuries, if any, were inflicted after death. Dead flesh, you know, does not bruise as live flesh does."

"Come on, then!" Captain Quinley was not a man to waste time. "We'll go dig up the body!"

"But wait, *señor capitán!*" protested Mariano. "Meester Downlip

an' Dr. Preech, she's putty tired. The Campo Santo, she's putty far! For why don't you sent the shereef to breeng the body here?"

"Well, it would also savé herdin' these prisoners all over the map," agreed Captain Quinley. "You can take my car and a couple of men, sheriff. How about it?"

"By the wheeskers of my aunt!" Don Eufracio started to protest. Then all, at once a gleam of something like craftiness came into his small eyes. "Sure, I go, *capitán*. But s'pozzin' somebody got afraids already an' deeg out the body to hide it some places else?"

"We'll take a chance on that," said the officer. "Well, what you waitin' on?"

"Those peecture!" Don Eufracio sidled closer. "There ees one *el chivo* Coyote don't show you, no?"

"Oh, thass joost peecture of a burro weethout no tail!" said Mariano with a shrug. He handed Don Eufracio the picture of himself. For once the fat sheriff was too enthralled with the photographic record of his own magnificence to notice the insult.

When the sheriff and three deputies had rattled away in the car, Captain Quinley turned to Dr. Prichard again.

"This feller's been dead several days, doc. Supposin' he's begun to . . . well . . . to rot?"

"The better preserved, of course," began Dr. Prichard, "the better I can determine . . . well, Mariano, what do you find so funny?"

"Who? Me?" El Señor Coyote chuckled. "Oh, I was joost theenk-in'-s'pозzin' the high shereef gonna esteal the body an' hide it so you don't got nothing on hees *primos*, after all?"

"Look, Luján!" Captain Quinley spoke sharply. "I know the sheriff sometimes stretches the law a little to favor his *primos*, but you surely don't think he will—"

"No, *señor capitán*," Mariano said grimly. "Because the body of Don Fedolino, already she's in my icehouse where I put heem myself joost for—how you say?—keep cold the evidence! *Cuidado, capitán!* Look out!"

Mariano's grim announcement broke off in a cry of warning as the Gutierrez brothers, catching its significance and as yet unhandcuffed, leaped up to make a break for freedom. But theirs was a short squirt and soon dribbled. As Captain Quinley's gun barrel cracked the head of Pablo, the two dudes football-tackled Juan, and El Señor Coyote's quick-thrown hunting knife disabled José María.

Even if this effort to break arrest

had not justified Captain Quinley in holding the Gutierrez brothers for murder, the cold evidence of Don Fedolino's bruised, broken, but well-preserved body in the icehouse would have. According to the expert diagnosis of "Dr. Preech," the crushed leg and broken neck shown by Mariano's pictures to have been inflicted by the tree had occurred *after* death. The broken back, bruised scalp and a dozen other bodily contusions, on the other hand, had been suffered while Don Fedolino was alive.

"By Satan!" said Prichard. "They must have beaten him to death with clubs!"

"Sure for Mike!" said El Señor Coyote grimly. "Thass what I'm thenk alla time. Also my fimmale cousin, Doña Agapita."

"Then why didn't you question the jury's verdict at the time?"

Mariano shrugged thin shoulders characteristically and began to roll a brown-paper smoke.

"In a bonch of wolfs," he grinned, "more better the leetle coyote don't howl till he got some help of frands—don't he not?"

#### THE END



#### THE OLD-TIMER SAYS:

*Take it from an ol' mossyhorn who never did hanker to ride drag—it pays to be way out front when it comes to buyin'*

#### WAR BONDS AND STAMPS!

# KILLER'S BAIT



by **KENNETH GILBERT**

*With a human killer stalking him, Bill  
Leathers had a hunch the voracious  
Moon Eyes might make a valuable ally*

THERE was a light fall of new snow on the bare slopes and in the natural forest clearings, yet beneath the thick canopy of wide-spreading firs the first storm flurry of approaching winter had left no trace. The woods were still, breathless, as the strong moonlight filtered through the screening branches above; the

up-and-down country of the Ohanepecosh seemed a dead land peopled only by ghosts. Just as the moon lifted clear of Sawtooth Peak, one of these ghosts spoke, a sepulchral "Who-who-ooo!" A moment later something floated wraithlike through the trees, a fluffy bird which sailed on widespread pinions.

Suddenly it veered sharply and slanted earthward with the abruptness of a lightning stroke. There was a shrill, chattering scream, so loud that it sent echoes chasing through the forest aisles. A convulsive floundering on the new snow, a struggle which lasted only a few seconds; then Moon Eyes, the great horned owl who had chosen the Sawtooth Valley because he found the hunting to his liking, savagely tore apart and bolted a snowshoe rabbit which had been startled into betraying its presence by the bird's hunting cry. The meal done presently, Moon Eyes climbed noiselessly through the air to the top of a nearby snag where he sat preening his feathers and staring about him with round, catlike eyes. Silence had come to the deep woods once more. Tragedy had struck and was forgotten, in the way of the wilderness.

Yet it had not gone unnoted. Sound carries far in the mountains, and in his cabin fully a quarter of a mile away, Bill Leathers' sharp ears had caught that death cry of the hapless rabbit. There was reason why Leathers should be even more alert than usual. A week before Smoky Fallon had managed to escape from the prison farm at Granite City. Sheriff Jim Doone had carried the word to Leathers.

"He's sworn to get you, Bill," the sheriff had told Leathers. "I know Fallon killed your pardner, Pete Jennings, but it was your testimony that sent him over for life. Best keep your eyes peeled. Last trace of Fallon we had, he was seen at

Startup. That means he's headed this way. Might be a smart thing for you to come into the settlement until we've starved him out. He'll have a tough time living up in these hills all winter; he's bound to show up in the lowlands before long, soon as he finds you're gone."

Leathers shrugged. "I'm stayin'," he said quietly. "No mongrel skunk like Fallon can say he run me out of these hills. Besides, what would happen to my winter fur catch? I got a chore as it is. There's a danged horned owl that's been robbin' my trap line. Took nigh onto four hundred dollars' worth of marten out of my traps. I'll stay and grab that critter before the winter's through. If Smoky Fallon shows up around here, I'll take a chance with him. Save you some trouble, sheriff."

Bill Leathers was willing to take a chance with Smoky Fallon, but that meant he had to stay on the alert more than usual, woodsman though he was. That was why his keenly attuned senses had stirred as he heard the death cry of the rabbit. It meant that old Moon Eyes was abroad again, and likely Bill Leathers' trap line would pay tribute before the night was over. But as yet there was no sign of the outlaw. Maybe Smoky would be too smart to pit his wits against the man who had sent him to prison for life over the killing of Pete Jennings. Maybe Smoky Fallon would strike elsewhere in the hills, and leave his enemy alone. But there was one certainty: Moon Eyes was still in the valley,

and until the great horned owl was dead there would be no let-up in the tribute levied on Bill Leathers' fur catch. Leathers heard the rabbit's death scream and interpreted it correctly. He grunted understanding and turned into his bunk, first placing the ancient 10-gauge, with its double load of buckshot, handy to his bed.

The moon swung higher. By and by Moon Eyes, still perched on the snag, rustled and stirred his feathers. Despite the heavy meal he had eaten, he began to feel the pangs of hunger once more. The insipid rabbit flesh had no staying qualities, and Moon Eyes knew the hunting urge once more. He sent his booming hunting cry echoing through the silences, but, although his marvelous ears were attuned to catch the slightest sound, he heard no nervous stirring of a rabbit, nor an uneasy movement of a grouse, disturbed in its slumber beneath an overhanging clump of brush. He decided on a still-hunting trip and, on noiseless pinions, dipped from the snag and took off through the forest.

He had not gone far when movement on earth drew his attention, and he swung that way. Down there beside a moon-splashed glade was something brown and stirring. Moon Eyes once more dipped sharply and struck. A moment later he had torn a prime marten from one of Bill Leathers' traps, and had lifted to a nearby stump, where he devoured the creature.

As though completely satisfied

with his achievements, Moon Eyes then took perch in a lofty fir, where he clicked his curved beak, ruffled his plumage, and composed himself, well aware that he had once more triumphed over the cleverness of man. It was an hour before daylight when hunger bestirred him once more. After sounding his hunting cry several times without effect, he took off in a general sweep of the forest. He had winged perhaps half a mile in his customarily silent fashion when something on earth drew his attention sharply.

This time it was another snowshoe rabbit. But instead of skulking in covert, it was in plain sight beside what seemed to be a trail. Involuntarily, Moon Eyes swung and struck. Even then the rabbit made no attempt to flee. The talons of the horned owl closed through flesh which seemed remarkably firm and solid. Too late, Moon Eyes realized that it was a ruse, a trick. But, just as he sought to release his hold and bound upward, there was a muffled click. Something had seized his feet. Snapping fiercely with his curved beak, he strove to tear free, but it was of no avail. A small steel trap held him firmly. The crafty trapper had triumphed at last. Moon Eyes, who had preyed upon Bill Leathers' trap line all fall, had fallen victim to the simplest of all lures—a frozen rabbit surrounded by traps.

Hissing and snapping, Moon Eyes tried to tear loose, but the grip of the trap was inexorable. It held him firmly by both feet. The re-

mainder of the night he waited there, knowing that death was his portion. Soon after dawn, the man came.

Leathers stared at the captive with a triumphant grin. "Figured I'd get you at last," he told Moon Eyes. "You've cost me plenty fur. Now it's my turn!"

Picking up a short stick, Leathers advanced on his victim. But Moon Eyes, although he must have sensed that he was facing death, showed no fear. He ruffled his feathers, snapped his beak and glared defiance and hatred at the man with the uplifted club. Leathers had intended to batter life from the hapless bird, but this show of courage won his admiration. He tossed the stick aside, and took off his coat.

"Got a better idea," he remarked. Shielding his hands with the coat, he dropped the garment over the struggling bird. Then, when Moon Eyes could not reach him with talons or beak, the man unfastened the trap and triumphantly carried the owl homeward.

With a length of babiege thong secured around one leg, Moon Eyes was allowed to perch on a short pole stuck between the logs near the cabin's one window. He sat there in silent indignation, glaring at his captor. But he did not attempt to fly; he seemed to understand that he was tethered securely, for the other end of the babiege length was tied to the pole.

Leathers chuckled. "Every time I see you, I'll think of the four hundred dollars' worth of pelts you stole

from me," he told the owl. "But that ain't all. I'm givin' you a chance to pay off." As though the owl might understand, Bill Leathers did not explain what he meant; the idea which had come to the trapper must be kept secret.

That night it stormed, and next day Sheriff Doone and two deputies stopped at the cabin, ploughing their way through the new snow. "You see any trace of Fallon?" Doone asked. "He went up into these hills and he ain't come out yet. We hit his trail yesterday, four miles below here. Might have cornered him if this blizzard hadn't struck." Suddenly he saw Moon Eyes perched on the pole beside the window. "That the critter that stole your fur? Why didn't you wring his neck?"

Bill Leathers smiled. "Aimed to do about that," he admitted, "but I changed my mind. Playin' a hunch. Smoky Fallon *might* show up here, although I aint' seen any sign of him yet."

"What you drivin' at?" asked Doone curiously.

"If I'm lucky," Leathers replied, "I'll be able to tell you about it later. Always believed it sort of jinxed a thing to talk about it."

The lawman wagged his head. Bill Leathers had lived long in the hills, maybe too long. "We'll be back," Doone announced, "to give you a decent burial! If you don't believe Smoky Fallon is out to kill you, then you're crazy. And maybe you are!" He stalked out of the place,

and with his two riders went down the snowy trail.

But Leathers was far from being over-confident. He knew that Smoky Fallon was a dangerous foe. Fallon wouldn't fight in the open, yet he wouldn't rest until he'd had the revenge he'd sworn to take. That was how Pete Jennings had come to die. When Jennings caught Fallon robbing his trap line, he'd merely taken away the man's gun and booted him down the trail.

A week later Pete Jennings was dead, shot from behind. It was Bill Leathers who had supplied the clue which convicted Smoky Fallon—an empty rifle cartridge tossed into the brush near where Jennings was found dead. Fallon had come back and recovered his rifle, which Jennings had thrown aside after running the man off the trap line. It was a low-powered trapper's gun, a .32-20, and Jennings had been killed by a bullet of that caliber. Bill Leathers had testified that there wasn't another gun of that caliber in these hills. Fallon insisted that he had thrown away the empty shell after shooting a grouse. But the jury didn't believe him, and he went to prison for life, vowing that he'd get square with Bill Leathers. That Fallon intended to make good his threat was as certain as that the sun would rise tomorrow. But when and how he would strike, was a matter which only he knew.

Leathers considered the owl, and Moon Eyes stared back at him with fearless defiance. "Reckon you're hungry," the man reflected, "but

you're goin' to be hungrier. Then you're not likely to go to sleep."

The trapper took his gun, peered out of the door cautiously, then walked across the clearing and disappeared into the woods. Nor did he return until just before dark. When he came back he was sober and grim.

"For once Jim Doone is right," he reflected. Less than a mile from the cabin he had struck a man's trail. It wound through the trees and about rocks. He might have followed it, but that would be the very thing Smoky Fallon was expecting. The killer would quickly discover that he was being trailed and would lay an ambush. Smoky would be like a wolf, always watching his back track if he suspected that he was being followed.

"I don't aim to walk into *his* trap," Leathers decided. "Let him walk into mine." He cooked and ate his supper, while Moon Eyes stared at him hungrily. Then Leathers doused the candle, lay down on his bunk and rested the shotgun beside him.

He lay there for a long time, listening, but heard nothing more alarming than the usual forest sounds, the muffled crash of a distant tree falling, the rumble of a boulder rolling down some mountainside after being loosened by frost among the peaks, the faint cry of a rabbit or some other creature as it met death in the grip of a prowling mink or weasel. The night had turned sharp with cold and the snow was brittle. There was no warning crackle of it that would herald the approach

of Smoky Fallon, if he was coming at all.

Maybe the chill had driven the fugitive out of the mountains. Yet Fallon was a thorough woodsman, Leathers knew, and understood how to get along in the wilds. He was armed—Leathers had heard that the man had killed a guard in escaping from the prison farm. With a gun and matches Fallon could survive a long while up here, long enough, probably, to get the revenge he sought.

As he lay there, Bill Leathers could dimly make out the figure of the owl perched silently beside the small window, for there was reflected light from the stars which partly lifted the gloom in the cabin. Moon Eyes was listening, too, understanding the forest sounds which he heard. He heard others which Leathers did not hear at all, for of all wild things, an owl has the sharpest ears. Now and then he turned his head, sometimes to stare at the man lying motionless in the bunk, sometimes to peer out the tiny window.

By and by Moon Eyes sensed that the man was asleep, for the latter's breathing was slow and heavy. The owl turned his head from side to side, listening more intently than ever. Until he was certain that the man was wrapped in slumber, Moon Eyes had concentrated his faculties almost entirely on his captor, but now he seemed to understand that the human being was harmless for the time at least. Moon Eyes was hungry, and his thoughts were of the food that

awaited him in the forest if he were free. At that moment he heard a new sound, one which drew his full attention.

It was unlike the usual forest sounds he knew, for this was a slow and cautious crunching of brittle snow, so light and elusive that only the ears of an owl could have detected it at that moment.

It was like the tread of a heavy-footed buck deer or moose stalking prey, but Moon Eyes knew that these giants did not behave in that fashion. There was stealthy cunning in the approach, and the thing stirred his curiosity. Slowly, almost inaudibly, step by step, it circled the cabin, and the owl's hearing located the maker of the noise just as easily as though the round-eyed bird could see through the log walls. The owl's head seemed to turn on a pivot as it followed the sound.

So engrossed in the task had Moon Eyes become that he did not observe that Bill Leathers had stopped breathing heavily, and had reached down silently for the shotgun. Leathers could hear nothing, but his gaze never left the faintly outlined figure of the owl whose head turned so curiously. The shotgun lifted, and lay across the man's stomach now, but Leathers did not dare cock the weapon, fearing that the click of the hammer would break the bird's spell. Now Moon Eyes was facing the end of the cabin, now the door, now the other side. At last he froze facing the window.

Still Leathers heard nothing. It might be, he reflected, that his hear-



ing was less keen than it had been; or maybe it was only some silent-footed beast which, driven by hunger, had come out of the hills to prowl outside the cabin on the chance of picking up a scrap of food thrown away. It might even be his imagination, Leathers reasoned, yet the horned owl surely heard something which human ears were incapable of hearing. Leathers slid off the bunk, piling the blankets as though he still lay there. With the palm of his right hand he muffled the click of the double hammers as he drew them back. No need to worry about Moon Eyes; the owl was concerned solely in what he heard, and maybe saw, outside the window.

And something *was* there now! Even Bill Leathers heard it. Softly and gently something was pushing open the window, which swung inward. Leathers half-lifted his gun, but from where he stood in the darkness he still could not make out the thing; and he would not shoot until he could be sure. He could see Moon Eyes leaning forward in anticipation.

Now a dark shadow appeared at the edge of the window sill. There was a slight scraping sound. Bill Leathers thought he saw the glint of metal. His own gun swung up, but as it did so the cabin vibrated to the roar of a heavy explosion. There was a blinding blaze of light, the reek of burned powder which stung his nostrils. Particles of it burned his cheeks. So startling was the thing that for an instant he hesitated, and as he did so further hell broke loose.

From the window there came a terrified shriek, a fierce hissing and snapping, the dull thud of a blow. There was a clatter as the pole to which Moon Eyes was fastened, was torn from between the logs and struck the puncheon floor. A mighty buffeting of wings, the snow crunching under running footsteps, then silence.

Bill Leathers eased down the hammers of his gun and peered out the open window, but no longer was a sinister shadow outside. Moon Eyes was gone. In the panic caused by that gunshot, the terror caused by the blast, somehow the babiege thong had broken, and the horned owl had fluttered through the open window.

Leathers saw something lying on the snow and went out to examine it. He found a sawed-off shotgun, such as is used by a prison guard. And there were tracks in the snow leading away from the cabin, tracks well-spaced as if by a man running.

Bill Leathers stood the shotgun against the side of the cabin and, carrying his own gun at ready, set off on the trail, following it by the faint starshine. Soon he vanished in the forest. When he came out again, daylight was breaking over the hills. Soon after, Sheriff Jim Doone and the others arrived.

"You seen anything of Smoky Fallon?" the sheriff asked. "Son of a gun seems to have vanished from earth, unless he's holed up in the woods and hasn't stirred since the storm—"

Bill Leathers yawned and broke in. "I had an idea, and it worked," he declared. "Reason I didn't kill that

blasted owl when I caught him was that I needed a pair of ears. Mine're pretty fair, but I figured that Fallon, when he did come, would make less noise than a cat. So I watched the owl—let him do the listenin'. Nearly missed my chance, though, when I dropped off to sleep."

"But Fallon?" demanded the sheriff. "What happened to him?"

"He shoved open the window and blasted at what he thought was me lyin' in the bunk," Leathers replied. "Then, I reckon, he thought the devil himself had grabbed him by the scalp lock. Because either that owl wanted to get out in a hurry, or else he figured Fallon's head, just above the window sill, was some kind of critter he could kill and eat. Anyway, he must have grabbed at Fallon's head and raked him, because I found

bloodstains in the snow.

"Fallon? You'll find him if you take that trail outside. He must have had the scare of his life, because he kept runnin' once he got started. Got too close to the edge of a cliff and started a slide of rock and snow. He's at the bottom of a deep gully up yonder."

Doone shook his head. "They said Fallon was superstitious as an Injun," he declared. "Might have figured it was a ghost after him, maybe the ghost of Pete Jennings. Anyway, we've been saved some trouble. But you've only cleared up half of yours. Fallon is gone, but that owl is still around to haunt you."

"Let him," Bill Leathers replied. "Reckon he paid off last night for what furs he stole from me. We're startin' square again!"

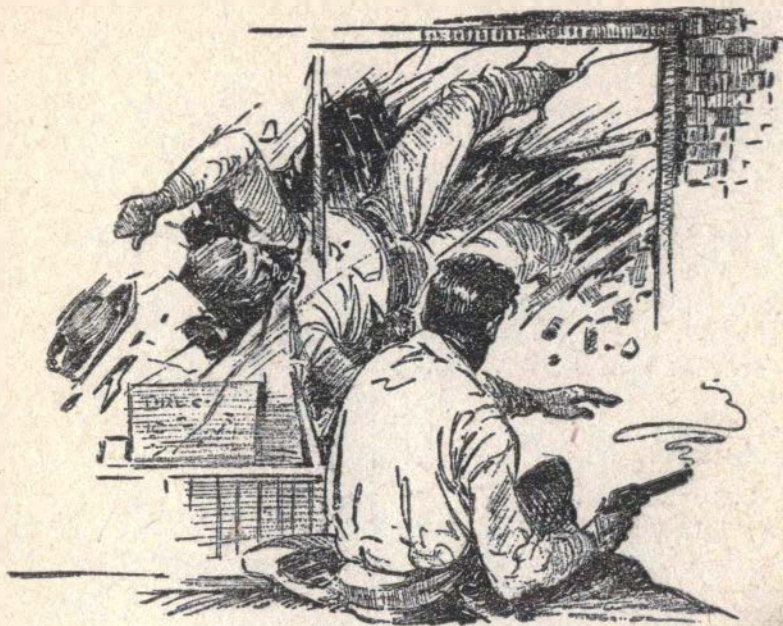
#### THE END

---

### SCAVENGER BIRDS

THE crows of the Midwest have been under a ban since frontier times, and in recent years the magpie has been recognized as an actual menace by the stockmen of Colorado, Wyoming and New Mexico. The magpie is equally as smart as the crow and, like the crow, can be taught to say words; but the black-and-white bird is bolder and much more destructive because of his size and speedier flight. Like crows, magpies employ teamwork in their hunting, one hiding in a nearby tree in order to give warning, while his companion drops fearlessly into the chicken yard to rob a nest or pick up a freshly hatched baby chick.

In some parts of the West, however, scavenger birds are useful. Along the highways of Arizona and California, jack rabbits killed by careless or speeding motorists line the road, and each morning hawks, buzzards, ravens and sometimes eagles may be seen feasting on flesh that otherwise would quickly putrefy and taint the air. In these States buzzards are protected by law, as are the road runners—themselves no mean scavengers.



# BACK FROM BOOTHILL

by WILLIAM HEUMAN

*When Wayne Stoddard found Dream City holding funeral services for him he wrote his own epitaph—in smoking lead*

I

THE bleak Skeleton Range surrounded it like a wall; smoke from the clamoring stamp mills at the east end of the valley hung like a pall over the scraggly flea-bitten town of Dream City.

Wayne Stoddard, ex-marshal of

Arrow Bend, Powder River country, sat astride his gray horse and grinned mirthlessly. The first view of Dream City was not an impressive one even from so distant a point as Eagle Pass. There was little dreaming a man could do day or night with the mills pounding to the accompaniment of frequent dull blasts of dyna-

mite from beneath the surface.

They were digging a bluish silver ore out of the sides of Skeleton Range and the stuff was running to two thousand dollars per ton, with mine stock selling at a thousand dollars a yard!

"It's a tough town," City Councilman Tom Evans had written, "and things are getting rapidly worse. We'll go as high as five hundred a month for your services, Mr. Stoddard."

Dream City was nearly eight hundred miles south and west of Wyoming but they'd heard of Wayne Stoddard; he'd swept Arrow Bend with a six-shooter for a broom. Dream City needed a similar house cleaning.

Quietly Wayne rolled himself a smoke. He was tall in the saddle with a long jaw, straight black hair and blue-black eyes. A pair of matched Buntline Specials hung from his hips, the exceptionally long barrels protruding through the bottoms of the regulation-size six-shooter holsters. A Winchester was slung from the saddle holster.

He watched the small procession winding up the hill from the town. A battered ore wagon carried a plain wooden box, obviously a coffin. A lean hook-nosed sky pilot sat on the wagon seat with the driver. Two men with picks and shovels walked behind the cart.

Wayne Stoddard puffed on his cigarette contentedly. Dream City had had a slight eruption and one man had died. According to Tom Evans' letter, few of the town's male

inhabitants died of natural causes. The gentleman in the box had probably been a mite slow on the draw.

The wagon, drawn by two plodding oxen, stopped at the burial grounds fifty yards below the spot from which Wayne was watching. It was hot in the valley hemmed in by the mountains, and the two grave diggers cursed and swatted at flies as they dug into the baked ground.

When the box was lowered into the earth, the minister read a few perfunctory words, closed his book and climbed back on the wagon. The grave diggers pushed the earth back into the hole. Wayne's eyes flickered, and the gray horse's ears twitched as the clumps of dirt fell on the wood box.

Out of curiosity Wayne turned the animal down the slope. The two men looked up at the sound of falling pebbles. They watched him gloomily.

"Nice mornin', gents," Wayne greeted. He watched the shorter man's cracked lips curl in a sneer.

"There ain't never a nice mornin' in Dream City," the grave digger snarled. "Not as long as Boyd Anton is alive."

Wayne threw his leg out of the stirrup and across the saddle. He had come to Dream City to clean it up. Possibly this Anton was the man to start with.

"I'm a stranger," Wayne told them. "Who's this hombre, Anton?"

The second grave digger, a lean leathery man with a hang-dog expression and faded green eyes, spat down into the grave.

"Anton," he bit out, "is Dream City, and Dream City is Anton. You either take 'em both as is, or they pat dirt down on yore face."

"Like this chap?" Wayne asked pointedly.

The taller man glanced at another fresh mound a few yards away. Wayne hadn't noticed it before. There was a rude wooden cross with a few words scrawled in black paint on the barren wood. He was unable to read them.

"Like him," the tall man grunted, "or Evans."

"Evans?" Wayne asked quickly. He stared at the other grave with fresh interest. "Tom Evans?"

The short man with the cracked lips and twisted nose leaned on his shovel.

"Thought you was a stranger, Johnny," he said flatly.

"I know Evans," Wayne said.

"You knew Evans," the short man corrected, "up till last week. One o' Boyd Anton's bodyguards shot him up in a card game at the Rialto."

Wayne flicked his cigarette away. "Why?" he said quietly.

"Nobody asks Anton why," the short man scowled. "What he does, he does, an' we gotta like it. Last month he cuts our pay down to three fifty a week when we wuz gettin' four dollars and couldn't git along on that."

"What about Evans?" Wayne persisted. "Why was he shot?"

The taller man pushed a heavy stone down into the rapidly filling grave.

"I reckon Tom had a little too

much to say at the City Council. Anton didn't like the Council, to begin with. After Red Burman killed Evans, the Council just naturally broke up of itself."

Wayne Stoddard listened to the story. The two miners, out of the city limits, weren't afraid to speak. Boyd Anton owned the Tom Thumb Mine, richest strike in Dream City; he'd been buying up practically all the mine stock in existence. His word was law and he'd imported gunhands from Texas to back it up.

Anton's money had built the stamp mills and organized the bank; he'd leased the Rialto and a dozen other saloons and gambling houses in the city. You couldn't borrow money, make it, or lose it without Boyd Anton having a voice in the matter.

The tall man's eyes suddenly showed fear. He dropped the shovel.

"You ain't one o' Anton's gunhands?" he asked.

Wayne shook his head. "I'm ridin' through," he said casually, wondering whether it was true. With Tom Evans gone and the City Council broken up, there was no job here. He could go in and buck Boyd Anton, but there would be no sense to it. In the Powder River country he worked for cash on the line. If they wanted the toughs to go, they paid for it. If a man was willing to stick out his neck, Wayne figured, he was entitled to his salary. There was no sentiment in the matter.

"You got sense in yore head," the miner told him. "Ride fast an' don't stop fer nuthin'."

"I might look around." Wayne

grinned. He glanced again at the grave of Tom Evans—the man he'd never met, and now never would. He was moving past the new grave when he threw the question back over his shoulder. "Who's the other fellow you're plantin'?"

"Feller from Arrow Bend, Powder River," the short man grumbled. "Burman got him too. He was talkin' big."

Wayne Stoddard halted the gray. He looked down at the winding streets. A long train of ore wagons was rolling through the main avenue, raising a yellow cloud of dust.

"What was his name?" he asked quietly.

"Name o' Stoddard," the short man answered. "Wayne Stoddard. Know him?"

"No," Wayne replied.

## II

Wayne learned more about himself from the saloonkeeper in the Rialto Bar. Wayne Stoddard had come into Dream City three days ago. He was flashily dressed in the north cow-country style with black sombrero, gray flannel shirt, and expensive cowhide boots. He carried a pearl-handled Colt and twice he'd threatened to pull it on quarrelsome citizens.

"Spoke like a dude," the bartender grinned. "Lost most o' his color when Burman stood him up. I reckon he was pretty much of a fake. Feller came in here last spring and said Stoddard had cleaned up Arrow Bend. Must be a woman's town."

Wayne eyed the glass of liquor reflectively. Once before he'd heard of a stranger from the East impersonating him, riding into a small town with a big reputation and cowering the more timid. The dude had gone too far with his joke in Dream City. Boyd Anton wasn't to be frightened even by the reputation of Wayne Stoddard of Powder River.

The ex-marshal turned and surveyed the crowd along the bar and at the tables. The bartender had proudly nodded to a red-haired man in a monte game at the other end of the room.

"That's Burman," the saloonkeeper chuckled. "They don't come any tougher."

Burman was short and squat with a bull neck and massive jaw. He had small beady black eyes set deep in his head. He had glanced up when Wayne came through the door, studied him contemptuously, his eyes on the Buntlines, and then turned away.

"Feller 'longside o' him," the bartender whispered, "is the Idaho Kid—baby-faced man with the blond hair. Other chap is Ty Simmons, another bad one."

Wayne glanced at the three. The Kid was short and slim with white hands and bright blue eyes like a doll's. Simmons was a gaunt man with sloping shoulders, clawlike hands, and a hatchet face. They apparently formed the bodyguard for Boyd Anton.

"Anton around?" Wayne asked. He was anxious to see the king of Dream City.

The bartender nodded toward a

closed door at the far end of the room. As Wayne looked, a small gray-haired man suddenly darted out, his face bloody, clothing disheveled. He yelled and ran past the table occupied by Anton's men.

Red Burman grinned and stuck out his foot. The old man fell over it heavily. He lay on his face panting. A huge rawboned bullwhacker had followed the old man out, black-snake whip coiled in his hand. He was several inches taller than Wayne's own six feet two, and weighed at least two hundred and fifty pounds.

The crowd had grown quiet as the bullwhacker advanced toward the small man. No one offered to interfere. Wayne glanced around quickly. He read the fear in the faces of the miners.

"Damn you," the bullwhacker snarled, "can't you stay put?" With a powerful hand he yanked the old man to his feet and thrust him toward the door. He was raising the butt of the whip when Wayne fished the right Buntline from the holster. It was not a long shot. The room was not more than fifty feet from end to end.

The bullwhacker yelled in pain with the roar of the gun. The whip dropped to the floor and the bullwhacker whirled, fingers of his left hand gripping the right forearm where Wayne Stoddard's slug had gone through.

"Howdy," Wayne grinned cheerfully. He saw Red Burman come slowly to his feet. The Idaho Kid was backing toward the wall. Only

Ty Simmons remained in his seat, but his right hand had dropped below the table.

Wayne still held the gun in his hand, smoke curling from the barrel. The crowd looked at the long gun as if fascinated. The bullwhacker was walking toward him uncertainly. He stopped five yards away. Scooping a drink from the now empty bar, he came forward till he was a few feet from the smiling Stoddard, shaggy black eyebrows knitted half in fear, half in bewilderment.

The thin gray-haired man had dropped down into a chair, his head hanging on his chest. A big barrel-like man stood in the doorway. Wayne could see him over the bullwhacker's shoulder.

"I'll tear the heart out o' you," the bullwhacker choked with rage. His right arm hung limp and the blood dripped down his fingers to the floor.

"Look me up," Wayne said quietly, "when that arm heals, hombre. You can come with fists or guns. Make your choice." He dropped the Buntline into the right holster.

Red Burman was edging out into the open, his right hand stealing toward his gun.

"You in this, Burman?" Wayne called. "I reckon there's enough lead to go around."

Burman hesitated. He glanced at the Idaho Kid near the wall. Ty Simmons was coming to his feet. In a moment, the three guns would be roaring. Wayne Stoddard stepped

away from the bar, conscious of the fact that he had dug himself a boot-hill grave with his tongue, and knowing that there was no angle in it for himself. He'd faced guns before but only when he was being paid well for it.

The bullwhacker contemplated the distance with his eyes. He still had a ponderous left hand which he could wield like a bludgeon.

"I wouldn't try," Wayne Stoddard told him. "A man can't miss at this distance and I reckon I won't aim for the arm."

The big man in the doorway laughed. It was a booming sound, coming from the depth of his massive chest. He was nearly bald and his face was fat and flabby. He had thick lips and a pudgy nose.

Wayne Stoddard looked into the man's eyes and he realized he was looking at a dangerous man. Boyd Anton moved forward in a waddle. His eyes were green and filmy, reminding Wayne of scum on the top of a stagnant pond.

He came up to the bar and pointed to a bottle on the bartender's shelf. The man hastily got it down and opened it. Boyd Anton poured himself a drink. He grinned at Wayne, but his eyes didn't change expression.

"Beat it, Coleman," he said without looking at the bullwhacker.

The big drover grumbled and shuffled away like a beaten dog. Red Burman and the Idaho Kid went back to their tables. The King of Dream City was taking over.

"Another glass," Anton said. He

filled it and pushed it toward the lawman. "Drink?" he asked.

Wayne smiled. "Don't mind if I do," he said. Mechanically he took the right Buntline from the holster, flipped out the empty shell and inserted a fresh cartridge.

Anton watched with apparent interest. "Long guns," he commented. "They must be slow coming out of the holsters. It would appear a man of your profession would use shorter models."

"I pack 'em with grease," Wayne said. "They come fast when they have to."

"Staying in Dream City?" asked Anton. His green eyes swept the tall man with apparent interest.

A shrug was Wayne's answer.

"You could work for me," Anton told him. "I can use a man with long guns if he knows how to use them."

Wayne Stoddard looked steadily at the gray-haired man stumbling between the tables, making his way toward the door.

"I reckon you don't want me, mister," he drawled. Anton's lips tightened.

"In Dream City," the big mine operator rumbled, "men work for me or they don't work at all."

"Never liked work," Wayne said.

"Why did you come to Dream City?" Anton snapped. He said it like a man who expected and received prompt answers.

Wayne Stoddard studied Anton leisurely. "Thought I'd look around," he drawled.



"You got three days," Boyd Anton told him. "Enjoy yourself. We don't expect to see much of you after that."

"Probably will," Wayne observed coldly. "I might like it here."

Anton laughed in his chest and walked toward the door. Wayne watched the small gray-haired man stumble past. He was poorly dressed and unshaven. Blindly he lurched forward.

Wayne caught him by the arm as he was about to fall.

"I reckon you need a stiff drink, partner," he said, helping the old man toward the bar. He heard the chill tight voice from the door.

"Take your hands off him, mister."

Wayne turned slowly. It was a low voice, yet musical. Men spoke like that only when they had a gun on him. There was an empty table a few feet away. In one leap Wayne had overturned the table and was behind it, the Buntline pointing at the doorway. He stared.

Boyd Anton at the other end of the room laughed loudly.

"Better have a drink for the nerves, stranger," he called.

A slender girl stood in the doorway, gun in hand. Wayne saw the bewilderment in her violet-colored eyes as he held the Buntline on her middle. She had raven-black hair, an upturned nose, and a small mouth that now had a tight, grim expression.

The Buntline drooped. Wayne reddened and stood up. "Put it away," he grinned, "it might go off, lady."

"I should shoot you," the girl told him bitterly. The anger was back in her violet eyes. Wayne wasn't sure whether he liked them angry or bewildered.

"Reckon you need a reason for killing a man," Wayne told her. "Even in Dream City," he added.

The old man spoke from the bar. His voice was husky.

"This gentleman's all right, Pat. He stood up for me a moment ago."

Pat's lips parted slightly. "I heard you were here, Uncle Ned," she said. "I came as fast as I could."

The old man walked to the girl and they went out the door. Wayne watched quietly, elbows on the bar.

"Sorry," Pat called back over her shoulder. "It was a mistake."

Wayne Stoddard smiled. The girl named Pat didn't realize how close she had come to dying. He hesitated a moment and then went out into the night. There was something unusual about the case and he was curious. Anton's man Coleman had been beating up the old man in the back room, evidently with the king's approval. Why a rich man like Boyd Anton should condescend to such forms of enjoyment was confusing.

The lawman caught a glimpse of the two at the other end of the street. They were going into a small store. Wayne started up the boardwalk. He saw a slim figure slouching against the wall at the end of the building housing the Rialto.

"Anton says three days," the Idaho Kid grinned. "Seventy-two hours, hombre."

Wayne smiled. The Kid had slipped out the side door to keep an eye on him. Anton was curious to know why he'd come to Dream City.

"It might take me seventy-two years," Wayne said dryly. "You'll be an old man, Kid." He walked past and he had a tingling feeling in the small of his back. If Anton desired it, any one of a dozen men could probably shoot him down from ambush. The Kid might have had orders already.

Nothing happened. Wayne turned up one street, loitered at the corner,



and then came back through an alley. He slipped through the door he had seen the girl and her uncle enter.

### III

A bell tingled softly above him. He heard voices from the other side of a curtain. Looking around, he saw that he was in a lady's dress shop.

Pat came out. She stood by the

lamp on the small table near the door. Wayne searched for the right words. He wasn't sure himself why he had come in. There would be no angle in this thing. A girl and her uncle were bucking Boyd Anton—unsuccessfully. Wayne didn't know either one of them, but he knew the power that Anton wielded.

"You wouldn't want to buy a dress?" The girl grinned. "I'm afraid they wouldn't fit." She came over with outstretched hand. "Uncle Ned told me what happened in the saloon, Mr.—"

"Call me Wayne," the marshal said.

"Mr. Wayne," Pat finished. "I'm sorry about the whole thing."

The old man came out from behind the curtain. He had a bandage around his head but his face was pale and the fear still shone in his eyes.

"I'm Ned Prescott," he said feebly. "This is my niece Patricia."

Wayne shook the old man's hand. He groped for the right words. "Reckon I didn't like the set-up with Anton," he said bluntly. "I figured if there was anything I could do—"

Ned Prescott smiled and shook his head. "You've done enough already, Mr. Wayne," he said. "When you antagonize Boyd Anton, your life isn't worth a dollar."

"Anton gives me three days in Dream City," Wayne said. "I'm takin' 'em and probably plenty more." He looked down at the girl. "I reckon you could tell me what's going on here."

The two exchanged glances and

the old man shrugged. "It won't do any harm," he said, "and you're entitled to an explanation inasmuch as you got into trouble for my sake." He walked over and pulled down the shade on the door.

Wayne took the chair the girl pushed toward him.

"I own a hundred feet of earth running west of the Tom Thumb claim," Ned Prescott began. "I don't have the capital to mine it and Boyd Anton's been after the property for the past six months. I've tried to borrow money, but Anton controls the bank. I did go to Tucson and got a loan a few months back, but Anton refused to let any of the miners work for me. He controls them body and soul."

Wayne blinked. "You think your property is worth something?"

Ned Prescott smiled. "If Anton wants it, it's worth plenty. He's been working the silver ledge in the Tom Thumb, and I know the ledge runs due west. Anton has been taking less and less ore out of the mine which means that the ledge continues into my claim."

"Has he made an offer?" asked Wayne.

"Five thousand dollars," Prescott said bitterly. "Those hundred feet are probably worth five million." He paused. "I refused to sell. Today was the third time he's tried to use force to get my signature on a contract."

Wayne Stoddard glanced around the shop. Offhand five thousand seemed like a lot of money. Patricia

Prescott spoke from the other side of the room. She'd picked up a dress and her fingers were flying with the needle.

"Uncle Ned has ideas about what he can do with a large sum of money," the girl said quietly. "He was the first resident of this town. He feels as if he could do things for the miners."

"The miners?" Wayne asked. He'd seen them—shiftless surly fellows like the two grave diggers—men without hope in their bloodshot eyes.

"There are no schools in Dream City," Ned Prescott said. "You've seen the homes in which the miners live. They have nothing. If I can mine my claim and take out good ore, we can rebuild Dream City. It'll be a city of dreams—fulfilled!"

The old man's eyes were shining. The fear left him. He seemed taller of stature; there was a dignity about him which had not been present before.

Wayne Stoddard shuffled his feet uneasily. Ned Prescott was out of his mind. With five thousand dollars he could set himself up in Dream City or any other place and be happy. But he wanted real money so he could help the hundreds of miners who had nothing. There was no angle for himself. It didn't make sense to Wayne.

"I reckon there's no law to stop Anton," the marshal observed.

"Anton is the law," Ned Prescott mumbled. "Sheriff Brady receives his salary from Anton. The City Council has been disbanded since Tom Evans' was killed."

"Why was Evans killed?" Wayne asked.

Prescott looked at the girl. "I was a member of the City Council," he explained. "There were six of us with Evans. We decided to bring in a marshal from Arrow Bend—Wayne Stoddard. Anton got word of it and had Evans put out of the way. When Stoddard arrived, Burman took care of him. We'd heard a lot about Stoddard, but he was a disappointment."

Wayne felt the girl's eyes on him. He didn't look her way but he knew she was studying him. There was a similarity between Wayne Stoddard and Mr. Wayne.

"So Stoddard was deliberately killed," Wayne pointed out. "I heard he was talkin' big."

Ned Prescott laughed. "If Stoddard had been a deaf-and-dumb mute Burman would have killed him. He had his orders from Anton."

Wayne stood up to go. Prescott wouldn't sell his mine to Anton even though he was standing alone against the big operator and his entire crew. Eventually, Anton would have him killed, but he wanted Prescott's signature on the bill of sale first.

"My advice to you," Prescott said soberly, "is to keep riding, Mr. Wayne. Dream City is no place to settle down in, and Boyd Anton is your enemy."

"He's yours also," Wayne pointed out. "Yet you're stayin'."

"I have a reason," the old man explained. "It's bigger than myself."

Wayne Stoddard caressed the handles of the Buntlines.

"I'll be around," he said finally. "Maybe I can help out." After three days Anton's gun hands would be waiting for him. They might get him in the back and he'd die because he was a fool like the old man.

He nodded to the girl and opened the door quietly. There was a hotel at the other end of town and he needed a place to sleep. A block from the shop he saw three riders trotting by in the middle of the street. It was too dark to distinguish faces. One of the three was tremendously big in the saddle. It could be Coleman, the bullwhacker.

Wayne shrank against the wall of the building and waited. They could not see him on the walk. He watched the three. They pulled up outside the dress shop.

Quickly Wayne slipped one of the Buntlines into his hand and went back on the run. Two of the men had gone inside the shop. Wayne heard the stifled scream and he started to sprint.

A huge figure rose up in front of him outside the entrance. Wayne caught a glimpse of Coleman's face—the growth of black whiskers, bulbous nose, shaggy eyebrows. A dim light came through the drawn shade across the door.

The bullwhacker's arm rose and Wayne tried to leap back. He'd been surprised at the quickness of the big man. His boot heel caught in a crevice between the boards.

As he staggered backward, Coleman struck him on the head with a

blunt instrument. The bull whacker moved in to finish his job as Wayne sank down on the boards.

The marshal leveled the Buntline and opened up. There was no time to take deliberate aim. He fired once—twice—three times. Coleman screamed as he fell against the store window. His huge figure went through the glass with a tremendous crash.

Wayne shook his head. He felt the blood seeping down his face. Coleman had probably hit him with the barrel of a pistol. He would have clubbed the life out of his victim in another few seconds.

The door flew open and two men came out carrying the struggling girl. Wayne was unable to see their faces. He tried to get to his feet but he was weak and sick. It was impossible to fire without hitting the girl.

One of the two lifted Patricia Prescott up in front of him and they clattered down the street.

Cursing to himself, Wayne crawled toward the doorway. He saw Coleman's boot sticking up in the air. The dead bullwhacker was lying in the window like an ornament.

Lights had flickered in various houses along the street as Wayne opened up with his gun. He heard steps approaching. A man had him by the shoulders and was half lifting him into the shop.

"I reckon you're hurt, son," he said.

Wayne smiled grimly. He wiped the blood away with the sleeve of his shirt. Ned Prescott was lying on

the floor in the center of the room. He looked as if he'd been knocked unconscious with a gun barrel. There was another cut on his head.

Wayne stared at the lean, thin-faced man who had helped him.

"I'm a friend o' Prescott's," the stranger told him. "I reckon you got mixed up with some o' Anton's boys."

The marshal nodded. He sank down into a chair and then started to sag forward. The floor was coming up at him.

#### IV

Wayne came to on the couch with a doctor swabbing his face with a sponge. Ned Prescott was sitting up on the other side of the room. There were five other men in the small room. Coleman's body had been taken from the window, but the glass was still strewn over the floor.

The tall man who had helped him into the shop, came over with a bottle and poured him a drink. Wayne downed it and he felt better. He looked at Ned Prescott.

"Who were they?" he asked harshly.

Prescott shook his head. "I was hit from behind. I thought I recognized the Idaho Kid's voice."

Wayne stared at the men in the room.

"Some of the members of the City Council," Ned Prescott explained dully.

"What do they want with the girl?" demanded Wayne.

"Anton's trying to force my hand,"

Prescott said. "He knows Pat's the only thing I care about in this world. He'll expect me to crawl down to his office and sell him the hundred feet."

"I reckon you'll do it, Ned," the lean man said from the wall.

Ned Prescott nodded. "I wouldn't let Patricia stay in that swine's hands for two minutes."

"It's gettin' bad, Ned," the lean man said quietly. "It can't get much worse now. When they come into our homes—"

Wayne Stoddard waited till the doctor, a small plump man with a foreign accent, finished his work. Then he took another drink from the bottle and he felt the strength flowing back into his body. The doctor picked up his bag and left.

"Where do you think they've taken her?" Wayne asked. His eyes flitted from man to man. The Council consisted of the honest merchants along the street. They wanted to do something but they were woefully outnumbered.

Ned Prescott had an explanation. "Anton has the old Lost River Mine ten miles to the north. It's been abandoned. He may have had her taken there."

"We'll bring her back," Wayne said flatly. "We have enough men right here to work it."

Ned Prescott shook his head. But there was a gleam in the eyes of the tall man. Wayne saw that they were unafraid.

"Anton will have some of his gun hands up there," Prescott explained. "They'll fight and men will be killed.

My claim isn't worth that much. I'll talk to Anton tonight."

Wayne Stoddard stood up. "I reckon before you men go to work," he said quietly, "you'll have to wait for me. You hired me and I figure I'd like a hand in it."

He felt their eyes swivel to him.

"The name's Stoddard," he said grimly. "Wayne Stoddard." He fished Tom Evans' letter from his shirt pocket and handed it to Ned Prescott.

The small man blinked. "But Stoddard was killed the other day," he interposed.

"He was a fake," Wayne told them. "An Eastern dude who wanted to be a gunhand."

Prescott read the letter and the other Council men waited for his comments.

"Looks straight to me," Prescott said quietly. "What are your plans, marshal?"

"We'll have to drive Anton out of Dream City," Wayne told them. "Pronto."

"He'll take a lot o' drivin'." The lean man, Clay Barnett, grinned coldly.

Wayne Stoddard refilled the Buntline he'd used on Coleman. He picked up the sombrero from the floor.

"No one likes Anton in Dream City," he said grimly. "The miners hate him and the honest citizens hate him. Why not organize? Speak to the miners—form a vigilante organization."

"Vigilantes!" Clay Barnett stared. "Keep it under cover," Wayne ad-

vised, "until we're ready to strike." He looked at Ned Prescott. "Don't make a move till I come back."

"What about my niece?" the old man asked.

"Let the Council handle matters inside Dream City," Wayne told them. "I'll work on the outside."

He went out the door and walked swiftly toward the Rialto Saloon. The Rialto boomed day and night with two shifts of miners dropping in to patronize the bar and gambling tables. It was about two o'clock in the morning.

Red Burman stood up when Wayne came in. Anton's gunhand had been sitting in a chair at an empty table. The squat killer's beady black eyes were bloodshot. He was drunk.

Wayne walked toward the door out of which he'd seen Anton come a few hours earlier. Burman staggered over in front of him. He stood with his back to the door, swaying slightly, right hand on the butt of his gun.

Ty Simmons and the Kid were not around. The new marshal of Dream City had an idea where they were.

"What's yore business, hombre?" Burman rasped. "You can't walk around here as if you owned the place."

Wayne measured him briefly. "When you ask questions," the marshal said shortly, "you should stay sober, Burman. It's bad business."

Burman cursed and struggled with his gun. Wayne hit him on the jaw with his right fist. He swung again as Burman started to go down. The

gunman crumpled on the floor. Wayne took the gun from his hand.

The miners at the bar gaped at Wayne but no one made a move. Wayne pushed through the door. The room was big, with a desk in one corner, several chairs and a table with a lamp. There was a stairway leading off to the upper rooms. Boyd Anton sat behind the desk, a green eyeshade strapped to his head, black cigar in his mouth.

The big silver operator made no effort to get up. He grinned at the man in the doorway.

"You're back quick," he said.

"Stand up," Wayne told him. "Get your hat."

Anton slipped off the eyeshade. He flicked ash from his cigar. "Get out," he said tersely.

"Reckon I'm goin' with you," Wayne grinned. "You're talkin' to the new marshal of Dream City." He didn't know where he was taking Anton as yet; he wasn't even aware of the location of the jail house or Sheriff Brady's office. That could be ascertained. If Brady objected, Wayne would have to throw the sheriff into jail along with Anton. With Anton in jail he'd have an ace to play in dickering for Patricia Prescott.

"This town has no marshal," Boyd Anton snapped. "Sheriff Brady represents the law in Dream City." He spoke loudly.

"Maybe I'm a little higher than Brady," Wayne told him. "The City Council installed me five minutes ago."

Anton laughed harshly, the cigar

jiggling between his thick lips.

"I broke up the Council, hombre," he sneered. He sauntered across the room arrogantly and stood before Wayne, the cigar jutting out. "Put your tail between your legs and run."

Wayne's right hand flashed out. He smashed the cigar from the mine operator's lips. Boyd Anton's teeth clinched the jagged stub. His face turned purple with rage.

Wayne Stoddard's right-hand gun was jammed into Anton's capacious stomach. Anton blinked at the speed.

"Get your hat," the new marshal said slowly.

"He'll get it when he's damned ready," the voice drawled from the stairway. "An' don't turn around unless you're askin' for a slug in the back."

Wayne shifted his eyes to the stairway. At the same moment Boyd Anton grasped Wayne's gun hand and yanked the Buntline up into the air. The man on the stairs was big and beefy with a heavy fleshy face. Evidently he'd just awakened, for his eyes were puffed and heavy-lidded. There was a silver star pinned on his vest. He held a six-shooter in his right hand and it was pointed at Wayne Stoddard's back.

Boyd Anton laughed. With a quick movement he unbuckled the marshal's gun belt and tossed it to the man on the stairs. Wayne's eyes flickered up to the gun in his hand still held over his head. Sheriff Brady had the drop on him and Wayne knew it. There was a possibility he could beat the man with

the first bullet, but the possibility was small. Only a fool took a chance on such odds.

Anton reached up and took the gun from Wayne. He hit Wayne across the mouth with his open hand. The blow stung.

"I'm payin' that one back in lead," the lawman told the mine operator.

"Lock him up," Anton said contemptuously. "If he makes a break, Brady, shoot him down."

"Walk ahead," Sheriff Brady ordered. He dug the gun into Wayne's ribs. "So you're the town marshal?"

Wayne didn't answer him. He walked toward the door with Brady still prodding him. The miners stared and then guffawed as Brady marched him out. Red Burman was at the bar pouring himself a drink. He was still drunk and dazed, wondering what had happened.

The sight of Wayne Stoddard jolted him back. With a hoarse yell, he threw the liquor into the marshal's face. Wayne hit him in the nose, disregarding the gun still stuck in his back, and wondering whether Brady would construe this as an act of escape.

Sheriff Brady crashed the barrel of the six-shooter on the back of Wayne's skull and Wayne staggered forward. He grasped at the bar for support. Red Burman was picking himself from the floor. Blood flowed from his battered nose.

"I'll kill the damned coyote," Burman roared in a drunken rage. Wildly he glared about for a gun. Wayne had taken his weapon and tossed it aside in Anton's room.



"The boss says to bring him in," Brady grinned. "You want to stop around, Red, and do him over?"

A crafty expression stole over Burman's wide face. "Reckon I'd like to salt him down a bit," he said softly.

Desperately, Wayne Stoddard got things to focus straight again. He'd had his hat on when Brady hit him. The blow had drawn no blood but it had a stunning effect. Now it was passing over. He regained his feet at Brady's command and walked out of the saloon.

The sheriff of Dream City kept close behind him, the Buntline Specials slung over his arm, his own gun touching Wayne's back at all times. There was no chance for a break even though the streets were dark. But he had to make a break soon. He'd heard Burman's remark. If the red-headed gunman had a chance to work on him while Brady held him under a gun, he'd be in no condition to help the City Council for a long time to come—if at all!

"We had another fresh guy last week," Brady said from behind, "paradin' as town marshal. You heard what happened to him, hombre?"

Wayne made no reply. He could feel Brady's breath almost on his neck. The sheriff was taking no chances. They were at the southern end of the street. A stone building with two small barred windows loomed up before him. There were three stone steps leading to the door.

"Up," Brady grunted.

Wayne reached up in the darkness

and pushed the sombrero back from his brow. As he went up the step he tilted his head back and the hat fell off. Sheriff Brady swore aloud as it fell into his face. Wayne whirled at the same time. His fist caught the sheriff squarely on the chin and knocked him out into the dust of the road.

Brady rolled over yelling loudly as Wayne dived for him. The marshal heard the roar of the gun and saw the flash of flame. He felt the slug knife past his ribs and then he was on top of the sheriff driving both fists into the man's face.

Sheriff Brady tried to get the gun loose for another shot but Wayne tore it from the lawman's hands. In the struggle his fingers closed on the butt of one of the Buntlines lying in the dirt.

With a grin he slid it from the holster and slammed the barrel down on Brady's head. The sheriff lay still.

Leaping to his feet, Wayne scooped up the gun belt and quickly strapped it around his waist. It gave him the usual feeling of assurance. He realized now it had been a mistake attempting to jail Anton. The proper move was to find the girl and bring her back to safety. After that he could move in on the crooked mine operator; he could handle the gun hands one by one as he'd done in Arrow Bend.

A short man stumbled out of the Rialto up the street and came down the middle of the road in a dead run. Red Burman had heard the

shots and wanted to get in.

Wayne Stoddard waited for the man in the darkness. He waited till Burman was twenty yards away. The redhead had stopped and was peering toward him, not knowing whether it was the sheriff or the captive. They were the same height.

"Brady," Burman called.

"Throw lead," Wayne called cheerfully. He jumped aside as he spoke and Burman's first shot went past him. Wayne had both Buntlines out and he let go with each hand. The blast knocked the redhead back. He went down in a sitting position in the darkness, still spraying lead at the elusive form in front of him, dying as he did so.

Wayne Stoddard saw the people spewing out into the streets. This was no time to find how many were friendly. He darted up a dark alley, made a circuit, and got back to the livery stable where he'd stabled his horse. In five minutes he was riding toward the north. Ned Prescott had given him information as to the location of the Lost River Mine. Wayne was sure he wouldn't get lost.

Lost River he found on the other side of Eagle Pass. He didn't see the shallow stream till the gray splashed into the water. The river was lost in elder thickets. It emerged downstream and flowed through a valley of sand and boulders. After awhile it disappeared entirely and Wayne picked it up, seeping out of the sand two hundred yards to the north and west. Lost River was indeed well named.

## V

It was almost dawn when Wayne spotted the buildings of the Lost River Mine clinging perilously to the side of the mountain, half of the dilapidated structures supported on stilts. Smoke curled from the nearest building which had been used as a warehouse or tool shed.

Dismounting, Wayne walked the gray back in among the piñons. After tying the animal to a thick bough, he sat down and closed his eyes. It had been a long and hectic night—a night without sleep, and two men had died. But he couldn't sleep as yet. Patricia Prescott was in that shed and he had to find out who was guarding her.

He leaned back against a tree, telling himself he would get up in an hour and investigate. It was high noon when he awoke, the sun streaming down through the trees. He heard the gray stamping nearby. From the position of the sun he figured it was nearly one o'clock in the afternoon. The cut on his head was throbbing again.

It had been foolish to sleep through the morning. Boyd Anton was aware now of the opposition and he would act quickly. By this time he'd probably rounded up the City Council. Ned Prescott might already have turned over the claim to the mine operator assuming Wayne Stoddard had been killed.

Wayne crept down to the stream and bathed his face and hands. The buildings of the Lost River Mine were around the bend in the river.

He could not be seen from there.

Standing up, he dried his face with his neckerchief. He heard the sharp crack of a rifle, and a bullet whizzed over his head, embedding itself into the trunk of a huge oak standing beside the river.

In one leap, Wayne was back in the bushes, flat on his stomach, gun in his hand, eyes searching the other bank. He saw the man scramble back up the slope, water pail in hand. He recognized the gray flannel shirt and the lean figure of Ty Simmons. They had spotted him.

There was no time to lose. Wayne rushed down along the stream fifty yards and then leaped into the water. It came up to his thighs. He plunged across the twenty-five yards of water to the other bank and then raced through the brush to get in a position behind the mine buildings.

It was unfortunate that Simmons had come so far down the stream for a pail of clear water. There would be two deadly guns waiting for Wayne if he charged the shed now.

Quietly Wayne climbed the slope, keeping low, and taking advantage of every clump of trees. He rested in a cedar thicket to catch his breath, and then started upward again. By this time Simmons and the Kid would be watching the other bank of the river. They were armed with Winchester's and could knock him down before he got within six-gun range. He had to get in where the Buntlines could be brought into action.

Making a wide circle, he came down the side of the slope toward the shed. It was quiet. Peering

through the brush he saw the building. There was a rusted rail track for handcars leading into the mine from the shed. A door opened at the back.

Grimly, Wayne took the guns from the holsters and stood up. There was no cover from the brush to the shed and the distance was about fifty yards. He walked quietly down the hill, hoping the Kid and Simmons were watching the front. Nothing happened. Possibly they were waiting for him to get closer, before opening up. He felt his flesh turning as he waited for the crash of guns.

Then yards from the shed and still no sound. Wayne leaped across the tracks and sprinted up to the door. He kicked it open with his boot and leaped inside.

Ty Simmons was sitting in a chair by the window, rifle across the ledge. He spun around as Wayne came through the door. The marshal saw the amazement in the man's bleak blue eyes.

Simmons yelled and whirled the Winchester. The Idaho Kid was on the other side of the room, near the front door. He was in a sitting position with a heavy-bore shotgun leveled through a crack in the boards.

Ty Simmons managed to get his rifle around but Wayne knocked him from the chair with a slug through the chest. The gunman gasped as the rifle slid from his fingers. He fell forward clutching at his chest, reaching with his right hand for the six-shooter in the holster. Simmons

was no rifleman, and in relying on the longer-range weapon, he'd forfeited his life.

Wayne fell to the floor as the Kid's shotgun went off. He heard the roar and the whine of the leaden pellets as they pludded into the wall behind him.

The Kid dropped the gun and his hand dipped for the six-shooter. Lying on the floor, Wayne squeezed the trigger. The Kid was grinning as he darted across the room. His first shot with the smaller gun missed cleanly; the next embedded itself into Wayne Stoddard's shoulder as the marshal tried to get to his feet.

Wayne let go another shot and he saw the Kid wince as the bullet nipped his ribs. The Kid bounced back through the door. Wayne heard him running away. He staggered toward the window, his left arm and shoulder paralyzed from the bullet wound.

The Idaho Kid ran into another shed about fifty yards down the hill. In a moment he was spurring out on a chestnut animal, heading toward Dream City. Wayne Stoddard swore softly. It meant that Anton would be waiting for him when he came. They'd have enough guns stacked up against him to blow him into hades.

He heard the hammering on the closet door on the other side of the room. He opened it, and Pat stepped out. She was pale and her eyes were wild. Seeing the blood staining Wayne's shoulder and arm, she gave a little cry and ran toward him.

"Reckon it ain't much," Wayne grinned. "One of 'em got away."

For the first time the girl saw the body of Ty Simmons. She shuddered and Wayne caught her right arm.

"Is my uncle—?" she began.

"He's all right," Wayne assured her. "We're backing Anton into a hole." He sat down in a chair while the girl cut open his shirt. The bullet had gone clean through the fleshy part of the shoulder.

Pat Prescott found the pail of water Simmons had brought back. She bathed the wound and bandaged up the arm as best she could.

"The doctor can look at it when we get back," she said when the task was finished.

Wayne grinned wryly. "Reckon we ain't goin' back right away," he said quietly.

"Why?" the girl asked.

"If I go back to Dream City in broad daylight," Wayne told her, "I'll be shot down like a dog. We'll have to wait till night."

"Burman?" Pat asked.

Wayne Stoddard stared at the floor. "Burman's dead," he said slowly. Already, he'd blasted three men in the feud with Anton, and it wasn't over yet. Definitely, he'd taken sides with Ned Prescott and his niece. He was out to make Dream City a better place in which to live. He tried to ask himself why, because it didn't make sense. He only knew that an old man had fought alone against a powerful organization and that he respected the old man—and the old man's niece.

It was dusk when they rode into the outskirts of Dream City, Pat astride Ty Simmons' horse. They went through the back streets, coming up on the rear of the home of Clay Barnett, the Council man.

"They might be watchin' your house," Wayne said. "The Kid has probably told Anton we'll be in."

Clay Barnett's wife met them in the darkened kitchen. She put her arms around the girl.

"Where's your husband?" Wayne asked. Barnett had announced the previous night that he would try to contact the miners and organize them to resistance.

"I don't know." The frantic woman was weeping. "Sheriff Brady took Ned Prescott off to jail this afternoon. Clay hasn't been in all day."

"My uncle is in jail?" Pat cried. She turned to Wayne.

They both heard it at the same time—the distant, disorganized shouting of a mob. Wayne Stoddard smiled grimly.

"I reckon your husband has been busy, ma'am," he said. "This is the beginning of the end of Boyd Anton." He patted the girl's shoulder and ran out into the street.

The crowd was moving toward him from the distance. He saw the myriad of burning torches. He realized now why it had been so quiet in Dream City. The stamp mills had stopped; there were no blasts underfoot. Every miner in town was on the surface. For years they had

been ready to explode against the inhuman monster who had controlled them. Clay Barnett and the City Council had provided the spark for the conflagration.

Wayne ran down the street toward the jailhouse. The building was lit up. Gun in hand, he broke through the door. The lamp on the sheriff's desk flickered. The room was empty.

There was another door leading to the cells of the jailhouse. Wayne pushed his way through. One cell was empty. Ned Prescott sat in the other one. He stared when Wayne came down the corridor.

"We . . . we thought you were dead, Stoddard." The man blinked. "My niece—is she all right?"

"She's staying at Clay Barnett's house," Wayne informed him. "Barnett and the others have raised the miners. They're marching toward Anton's Rialto right now."

"I know." Ned Prescott nodded. "The Kid was in here with Sheriff Brady. I could hear them through the door. They plan to make a run for it. Brady took all his things."

"Anton?" Wayne asked. "Where is he?"

"They intend to skip town together," the old man mumbled. "If they get out, Anton will have the militia in here to stop the riots. He has influence with his money. It'll be the same thing over again."

"Where are they now?" Wayne demanded.

"The Kid said there were three fast horses waiting at the rear of the Rialto. Anton was packing his papers. There's a chance, marshal—"

Wayne Stoddard raced out the door. The killings and the vigilante organization would come to nothing if Anton got away and was able to bring the army in to quell the riots. The mine operator's money would buy his own kind of justice. Barnett and the others would be indicted for organizing the riot. Anton would again be on top of the heap—King of Dream City!

Wayne raced up the street. He saw the vigilantes swing around the corner and bear down toward the Rialto. Cutting through an alley, he went across a vacant lot. There was a shed behind the Rialto where Anton quartered his own riding stock.

The dark figures disappeared into the shed. In another moment they would be gone. Mounted on fleet horses, Anton and his men would surely get away to the nearest railroad at Timbsboro, thirty miles distant.

The marshal stumbled through the darkness. The shed door was open and he walked in. Three men were leading saddled horses toward the door. Boyd Anton was in the lead. The Idaho Kid was on his left. Sheriff Brady brought up the rear.

They heard the noise as the mob stormed into the saloon smashing everything in its way.

"I reckon you boys can wait," Wayne grinned. "You got a few callers. Go in and see 'em, Anton."

Boyd Anton, his fleshy face livid with rage, tried to leap behind his horse, hand fumbling for his gun. Wayne let him go. The Kid was the

one he had to watch—the Kid and Sheriff Brady.

Wayne's first shot caught the Kid above the belt buckle as the slim gunman snaked his six-shooter from the holster. The Kid was grinning as he plunged forward, eyes glassy. He let go a shot which went over Wayne's head.

The marshal leaped to one side. Brady had taken cover in one of the stalls. The three horses leaped and plunged as the guns went off. Anton screamed as he was knocked from his feet by the frightened animals. Wayne Stoddard heard the iron hoofs pounding the wooden floor. He shuddered when Anton screamed again.

Brady's gun roared from the stall. The slug went through the crown of Wayne's hat. He jumped across the intervening space. Brady was backed up against the wall like an animal, his teeth bared.

Wayne Stoddard let go with both guns. He saw Brady cringe as the slugs went home. The sheriff's first bullet struck Wayne in the right leg. The second smashed the lantern hanging from one of the rafters. The barn was plunged into darkness.

Wayne dragged himself along the stall. The three horses were still plunging about madly. He heard a gasp from the place where Boyd Anton had fallen. Sheriff Brady breathed heavily from the corner.

Gripping the gun in his hand, Wayne waited for Brady to make a move. They were a few yards apart in the darkness.

Men with torches ran up to the shed door and peered in. Wayne heard Clay Barnett's voice. Hands caught at the bridles of the three horses and quieted them.

"Here," Wayne called softly. He was sure Brady had stopped breathing.

Barnett peered down at him. "Hurt bad?" he asked.

Wayne shrugged. "Reckon I can be patched up," he said briefly.

The Council man pointed to the trampled body lying in the center of the floor.

"Anton?" he asked.

Wayne nodded. "I didn't wish him that bad myself," he said.

Clay Barnett helped Wayne back to the Prescott house. Ned Prescott had been released from the jailhouse. He listened to the news gravely. Anton's terrible death had evidently impressed him.

"Dream City will be a better place," Prescott said after awhile. "We'll make it a town where men can live in peace and work for themselves."

Wayne Stoddard lay on the couch

and grinned coldly. Since the previous night, he'd been clubbed twice on the head; he had a bullet through the left shoulder and another in the calf of his right leg.

A miner poked his head through the door. "How's the marshal?" he asked anxiously. "We're drinkin' his health with Anton's best liquor."

Pat Prescott smiled down at Wayne. "The marshal is all right," she called. "I think he'll be in town for a long spell."

Wayne looked at her. "I reckon I'll be stayin' around a while, Miss Patricia," he agreed. "If you folks don't mind."

The girl smiled. "Dream City is yours, Wayne Stoddard," she said at last.

The tall man on the couch reflected a moment. "Everything in it?" he asked.

"Everything you want, marshal," she said, her face suddenly pink.

"Reckon I'll stay." Wayne Stoddard grinned at the ceiling. He hadn't been aware of it in the beginning, but there had been an angle all the while!

THE END

★ ★ ★ IN THE NEXT ISSUE ★ ★ ★

WALT COBURN • W. C. TUTTLE • SETH RANGER

S. OMAR BARKER • LEE BOND

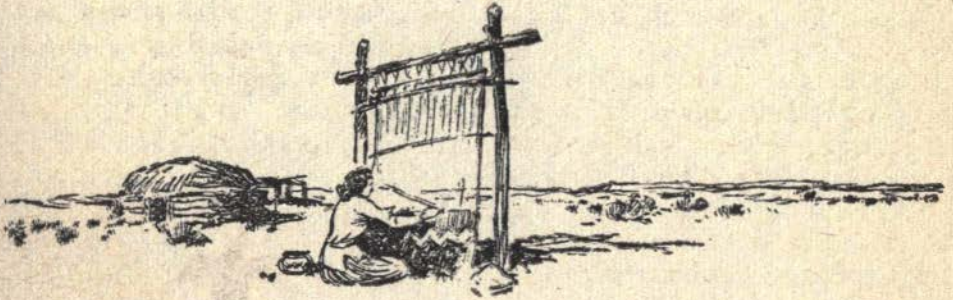
*Plus many other action-packed tales  
of the old West by your favorite  
authors and features and departments*

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

*One of the finest examples of  
American crafts is found in*

# NAVAHO BLANKETS

by JIM WEST



THE grim land of the Navahos, 25,000 square miles of sand and desert, of colored buttes and naked hills in Arizona and New Mexico, is likewise the land of the Navaho blanket. The blankets are big business with the Navahos, running from \$300,000 to \$400,000 yearly. They are one of the few large-scale products of early American handicraft that can't be successfully duplicated by modern machinery.

One reason for this is that among the 7,000 to 8,000 Navaho weavers, mostly women, who turn out the blankets when, as and if they get a chance, no two of them make their blankets alike. And no individual makes two blankets exactly identical. The weavers don't bother to count the color threads in their formalized and varied patterns. They weave by eye as it were, and in doing so

achieve remarkably artistic results when left to their own choice of design.

"Poetry in wool" someone called these unbeatable examples of hand weaving. They are all of that. But it is a mistake to call the early product rugs. It was the white man who turned Navaho blankets into floor coverings and wall decorations. He alone made rugs out of them, something to walk on.

The Navahos are semi-nomads. They move about tending their sheep in summer, living in cluttered hogans built of wood and dirt during the cold, bleak months. They had little use for rugs as such. They wove their blankets to be worn, garments that would keep out the cold and wind and rain—and last a lifetime.

The earlier blankets were not as coarse as the present-day variety



made for the "rug" trade. In the heyday of the Santa Fe Trail when the Southwest was still the frontier country of American traders, trappers and a few adventurous prospectors, a Navaho *serape* was a popular article of apparel. So tightly woven it could hold a bucket of water, one of these products of a Navaho loom brought upwards of fifty silver dollars in the open market.

The Navaho "chief blanket," a rich, stripe-design affair, was traded and valued by other Indians as far north as Canada. Chief blankets were made for general use, not just for chiefs. They came in two sizes. The smaller, something the well-dressed Indian maid might wear, left arms and legs free for domestic tasks. The larger men's blanket was big enough to be wrapped around the entire body.

A good copy of an early-day Navaho chief blanket would probably be worth several thousand dollars now, and considered something of a museum piece.

Blanket weaving, for which the Navahos are famous, is neither an old nor a native art with them. Racially of Athapascan stock from Alaska or somewhere along the north Pacific coast, the Navahos at some important date in their ancient history migrated south and eastward into New Mexico. At present the approximately 50,000 of them in the Southwest comprise numerically the largest Indian tribe in the United States. They raise sheep, make fine silver and turquoise jewelry, and

they weave rugs. Pardon us. They weave blankets.

The nomad Navahos were hunters and fighters, a roaming people knowing no settled home when they moved down into New Mexico. There they found the peaceful, agricultural Pueblo Indians already established in the region easy pickings in their raids after food, plunder, and general booty. They stuck around, and later did a pretty good job of harassing the first Spanish settlements in the Southwest.



*Lightning*

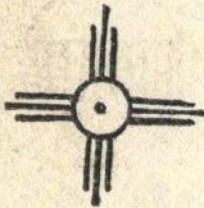
Apparently Navaho women picked up weaving from the Pueblo Indians. However the Pueblo Indians used only cotton in their weaving. The Navahos used only wool. You had to grow cotton and be on hand to harvest the crop. But sheep raided from the Spanish settlements were a mobile property. They and their wool could be moved about by a people addicted to travel, and accustomed to taking everything they owned with them.

The day some Navaho brave seized a few sheep and kept them instead of eating them may well have marked the Navahos' undoing as wandering

warriors. It certainly changed the whole scope of their economic life. Thereafter they became sheep herders, and the Navaho women turned into strikingly clever master weavers.

During the years in which the Navahos played raid and run with Coronado's followers, and wreaked considerable havoc on the new settlements quite a few thousands of the luckless or less fleet among them were captured, including a large percentage of women. As captive slaves these Navaho girls, forced to work for their masters, learned the fine points of weaving. Being adaptable, they learned them well.

According to early Spanish accounts and records, the Navaho



*Sun*

women who became expert were bought and sold like other goods and chattels, the value placed on them for tax or barter purposes being roughly \$400.

The Spaniards, of course, came from an old wool-growing country. Appreciating fine weaving, they saw to it that the Navahos were taught how to turn out the best work. It wasn't until nearly 1850 that the United States undertook to assume responsibility for the Navahos.

By that time the tribe was small, decimated by years of fighting against tough odds. They still acted like Peck's bad boy, plenty bad at that, in the general neighborhood. But weaving and sheep raising had been firmly entrenched in their less vigorous domestic pursuits. An increasing number of Navaho women had become adept with crude made-on-the-spot hand looms, the poles and frames of which were fashioned from any handy mountain oak, piñon tree or juniper. They also made their own dyes, fast colors out of leaves, shrubs and other available material.

This pastoral angle to the Navaho's more active side of life may seem strangely out of keeping with his original character. Yet it was necessary. Swift, and often stolen, horses—the Navahos of both sexes early developed into and still are among the finest riders in the world—kept them moving. But it was their scrawny, ill-fed, under-nourished native sheep that clothed and fed them.

Sheep or no, the Navaho finally became such a headache to Uncle Sam that Kit Carson, suitably supplemented by army troops, was ordered to round up the bunch and put them on some nice farm land in the Bösque Rodondo section of eastern New Mexico. He did, and the next few years were probably the unhappiest the Navahos ever spent. They simply weren't cut out for farmers or ordered regimentation, no matter how well intended. They wouldn't stay put. They wanted out, and



*Hungry*

tried to get out every chance they had. They raised unholy hades.

Uncle decided he'd have to do something. This time he picked for their reservation a large spot in northern Arizona and New Mexico with plenty of space in it, and nothing much else. The roominess of as many square miles as there would be in twelve States the size of Delaware, or three the size of Massachusetts was its one redeeming feature. Most of it was pure and undiluted desert.

There were no neighbors to raid. But sheep could be raised, and the Navaho women could hang up their homemade looms again and go back to weaving some of the finest handmade blankets in the world. It beat trying to farm at Bosque Rodondo, when you weren't cut out to be a farmer in the first place.

With the railroad through to California, and an increasing white trade demanding Navaho "rugs," a coarser weave like that now found in the modern product was introduced. For a time, under the brief exploitation of a few unscrupulous traders who tried to get the Navaho women to

use cheap chemical dyes and cotton warp instead of twisted wool threads, the quality fell away off. But so did the business, and the Navahos, being smart that way, went back to their old thoroughgoing method of weaving.

Nevertheless if you want a present-day Navaho "rug" that will be most representative of the old tightly woven Navaho weaving, get something both the Indians and many Westerners still use—an inexpensive Navaho saddle blanket. The designs in these blankets are usually characteristic of the best Navaho weaver's art.



*Rain*

The so-called Two Grey Hills rug and the Chin Lee are both good, and authentic, products, many of them surprisingly beautiful.

It is easy to tell a genuine Navaho rug from a machine-made copy. The design of the real thing always has slight irregularities. Besides you can smell the desert in them, the mingled odor of gnarled cedar boughs and the smoke of many an Indian campfire.

THE END



## MINES AND MINING

BY JOHN A. THOMPSON

COPPER is one of the most important of all war-needed metals. Though workable deposits of copper have been found in about thirty of the forty-eight States, any new find capable of commercial development would be a distinct aid to our present requirements of that metal.

Writing in from the little mining and ranching town of Datil, high in the mountains of western New Mexico, W. M. is, like all good Western prospectors right now, keeping an eye out for copper "sign." And he says he'd like a few tips on copper ores, methods of recognizing them, and a handy test for the metal itself.

That's fine, W. M., and the best of luck to you in your hunt. In prospecting for copper veins, both float ore and stained rocks are indications. Many copper ores color surface rock an emerald green, or a deep blue. Another frequent surface signal of the presence of a copper deposit is the dull, rusty red of copper oxide. This ore, cuprite, carries almost 90% metal and when found in quantity is an important source of copper. Cuprite is brittle, a copper penny will scratch it, leaving a shiny red streak, and a lump of it feels fairly heavy when held in the hand—heavier than

ordinary rock.

Pieces or nuggets of native copper may be found associated with cuprite deposits. Such nuggets may also be picked up prospecting in stream and creek beds. Copper nuggets are soft, malleable (they can be hammered flat) and heavy enough to be caught in the gold pan. They may show copper-colored, or often the surface will have a dull-green coating of copper carbonate. In either event a freshly cut surface will gleam with the bright salmon-red color of pure metallic copper. Copper nuggets are soft enough to be cut with a knife.

Copper ores are found in a wide variety of different rock, and in many cases have other metallic minerals associated with them, sometimes silver and gold. Copper occurs in igneous rocks, granite, for instance; in sedimentary rocks such as shale; in conglomerates; and in contact zones with limestone. Tremendously extensive but low-grade deposits of "porphyry" ores, the type from which a large share of our present copper production is obtained, have been found in Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico and Utah.

Chalcocite is usually the main copper mineral in these ores, particles

of it being scattered wholesale throughout the rock mass. This heavy black, metallic-looking mineral is a copper sulphide, 80% of which is metal. The streak mark is gray, and a copper coin is hard enough to scratch it. When found heavily concentrated in veins, chalcocite is a rich ore.

Another clue to copper is the brittle, deep brass-yellow mineral known as chalcopyrites, or copper pyrites. It is darker than the pale yellow of iron pyrites, or fool's gold which it resembles, and it gives a greenish-black streak when scratched. If there is any confusion just remember that a knife will scratch copper pyrites easily, but not fool's gold. Try the same knife if, as sometimes happens, you mistake copper pyrites for real gold. The knife will gash or cut into soft, native gold. It will only scratch the deep-yellow combination of iron and copper pyrites known as chalcopyrite.

Indications of copper pyrites may be found in veins in igneous rocks, or near them. It is a common leader in the direction of a workable copper deposit.

Azurite (deep blue) and malachite (emerald green) are copper carbonate minerals found in surface outcrops. Thin dilutions of these ores impart a characteristic blue or green stain to many copper-bearing vein

rocks. The green copper stain produced by malachite is one of the best and easiest-to-recognize surface indications of a copper deposit, provided you bear in mind the fact that a very small amount of actual mineral will stain a large amount of rock. Thus not all copper-stained rock results in discovery of sufficient ore to make a minable property. But some of the green-colored veins do lead to success.

A simple field test for minerals suspected of containing copper is to thrust a sharp-pointed splinter of the mineral in the hot flame of an alcohol lamp, or dip a small amount of the mineral that has been finely powdered, in the wick of a lighted candle. If copper is present it will streak the flame with vivid green. Both for splinter and powder the test may work better if the material is first moistened slightly with nitric acid.

Though this is not a qualitative test it is one much used by miners and copper prospectors as a rough assay. With practice they become able to judge the general tenor of the ore by the degree and deepness of the green color imparted to the flame.

Altogether there are more than a hundred minerals containing copper. Only a few of the most important of those that are of commercial value have been described above.

#### THE END

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, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, 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; please keep them as brief as possible.



## WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

BY JOHN NORTH

RABBIT RAISING has always been an interesting hobby. With a growing number of persons it is a profitable business that has a wide range of possibilities, accentuated by our present wartime needs for food and fur.

Rabbit meat is a nutritious source of protein. It can help out our meat supply. Properly cooked in any of the variety of ways in which it may be prepared, fried, roasted, baked or stewed, it is good eatin'. Ask any trapper, hunter or outdoorsman.

Rabbit skins are marketed for the fur. More skins can do much to meet the rising demands of the fur trade, both to fill the needs of the armed services and satisfy the home market. The skins have many uses. Better grades are dressed, dyed and sheared for manufacture into garments. Skins of lesser quality are used as linings for winter gloves and by hatters for making felt hats.

The soft, warm, fluffy wool of the Angora rabbit is a specialty comparatively new in this country, at least. We used to import about 100,000 pounds of this rabbit wool a year from foreign sources now largely cut off from supplying us.

When Mrs. T. K., of Kenosha, Wisconsin, wrote us recently that

she was interested in rabbit raising we made a suggestion we would like to pass on to other readers who have queried us on the subject. It's this: First and foremost determine the main purpose of the rabbitry you want to start.

If it is wool, you will need Angora rabbits. They are a specialty. If table meat is the principle objective, get the large breeds that will run when fully grown to fourteen or sixteen pounds. If you are aiming at the fur trade, start in with the rabbits whose skin is the most valuable. In this connection always remember that white rabbits, because their skins usually bring higher prices, are the most desirable from a fur standpoint. White fur can be more easily treated and dyed.

Rabbit growers frequently plan for a combination of ends—meat *and* fur. It means double profits. For this purpose the medium to larger breeds that are good fur bearers such as Flemish Giants, New Zealands, Americans, and French Silvers make advisable stock.

Rabbit raising is an enterprise that can, and should be, started on a modest scale. Let it expand naturally as you learn more about han-

dling the animals and the market conditions in your own locality. But don't forget that it always pays to start with sound foundation stock. This means animals that are healthy, vigorous and conform to the best standards of their type and breed.

An unused garage, or part of it, an old hen house, tool shed, or part of the barn may be used to house the rabbits. The main thing is to provide hutches that are not dark, damp, drafty, nor dirty. In larger operations hutches may be lodged in a building of their own.

To provide individual quarters for each rabbit, hutches should be roughly 3 ft. wide, 3 ft. high and from 3 to 6 ft. long. The larger breeds need the longer floor space. Hutches built with double floors of the selfcleaning type are more easily kept sanitary.

Proper diet is necessary in keeping rabbits healthy. They need grains rich in fats and carbohydrates, and protein. Oats, wheat, barley, the grain sorghums and ground corn are all good grain feeds. Hay and soybean, peanut or linseed meal are rich in protein. B'rer Rabbit likes 'em. Mixtures of these foods are available as prepared rabbit feed.

There is no need, however, to rely wholly on scientific feeds. Rabbits thoroughly enjoy lawn clippings if fresh and green, and pretty nearly

every country-raised youngster knows how they go for lettuce, cabbage, kale and garden greens. Victory gardeners will find rabbits can use to good advantage a lot of garden greens that might otherwise go to waste.

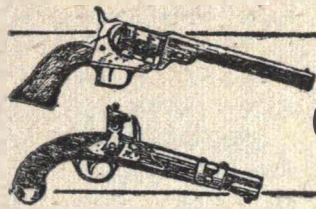
It is advisable to have some sort of basket, or mangerlike arrangement attached to the outside of the hutch and fixed so that the rabbit can yank his food in through the wire or slats. This keeps the inside of the hutch cleaner, and food free. There is considerable latitude as well as difference of opinion in the matter of when, how often, and how much to feed each rabbit. At any rate establish regular feeding hours. Grain and green feed in the morning; hay in the evening has been found a good practice by many professional raisers.

Fresh, clean water should be in front of the rabbits at all times. Small blocks of white salt placed in the hutch will enable them to satisfy any salt deficiency in their regular diet.

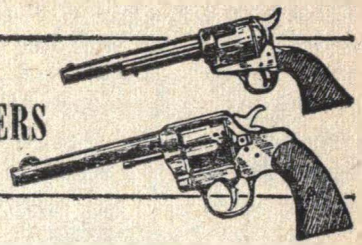
To S. D., Columbia, South Carolina: In Texas wild turkeys have been stocked in chosen areas with good results, according to reports of State conservation authorities. In one region a planting of six gobblers and forty-seven hens tallied some 250 birds roughly eight months later.

THE END

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. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply. Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Store, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.



## GUNS AND GUNNERS



BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

AFTER this war is over, what is in store for the sportsman and gun lover? Will there be new guns? Will there be new cartridges? Will there be a major change in the types, styles, and manufacturing process for the production of sporting arms?

This writer thinks so. The changes will be far reaching. There may even be laws to cover the use of fire-arms.

One of the first of the new ideas—and one already heavily represented in your firearms editor's mailbag, concerns the possibilities of automatic arms. Will they come into prominence, or will they be ruled out from a sporting standpoint?

That question is important.

When a man is sent into battle by the army, he is given a great deal of preliminary training in the weapons he will use. He knows his guns thoroughly. He can take them apart for cleaning purposes, and could probably do it blindfolded. He understands such problems as the "danger zone" in which his weapon is effective. He knows how to shoot and to make each shot count.

Sportsmen are trained the *hard* way. All you need in most States to become a "hunter" is the price of

the hunting license. You can be a moron, or a skilled rifleman—no one seems to care. The net result is that, in recent years, the woods and fields where hunting is conducted seem to be filled with half-wits who have no regard for either their personal safety, the safety of their fellow man, or of private property.

Their destruction has for years worried the real sportsman. Some farmer has a nice spot. Comes the hunting season and a swarm of human locusts descends on him. Within a few days he finds his fences torn down, his chickens, pigs and cattle shot "by accident," and as he hurries about his routine tasks, bullets and shot whizz by alarmingly close. He may even find that windows in his house are shot out.

What happens? The next season the careful hunter gets mixed with a swarm of these locusts, arrives at the hunting ground and is confronted with a series of signs:

NO HUNTING

NO TRESPASSING

PRIVATE PROPERTY—KEEP OUT

Can you honestly blame those farmers?



In the woods, the man hunting big game jumps a deer. Immediately from all sides comes a rain of bullets equaled only on a field of battle. To prevent his family from claiming his insurance, he decides that he will quit hunting.

Because of this trend, many States have already answered the automatic problem by legislating against such weapons in the hunting field. Yet our boys will return from this war, automatic-conscious. They will be accustomed to automatic and semi-automatic rifles, pistols, carbines, and submachine guns. Many military weapons will become private property. Owners will want to use them. Should it be permitted?

There is one satisfaction—most of those boys will have a fair idea of what a bullet can do to a human being. This writer has seen too many crackpots in the woods who like to open up with an automatic rifle and spray the community in the vicinity of a "noise" with a half-dozen soft-point slugs. Whether automatic rifles will be permitted for hunting will depend on the returning soldiers. They will have the power to make or alter laws.

During this war, steel cartridge cases have sprung into prominence. Millions are being used by all armies. Will they come into the sporting field? This writer doubts it. They can be made, but their only excuse

is the brass shortage. They are more difficult and costly to produce. They offer no advantages. They are not popular with manufacturers.

There will be many improvements in arms and in the methods of manufacture. If prices return to normal, new guns should cost less and wear better. We are learning much about manufacture in this war.

Target shooting will spring into greater prominence than ever before. For this, military rifles will be used. There will be plenty of them available, and plenty of military ammunition suitable for target shooting.

Now it is up to those staying home to see that the crackpots do not pass fool gun laws while the boys are away fighting for them. *That is up to you!*

To D. S., Milwaukee, Wisconsin—A simple but effective gun rack can be built into the back of any closet if it is wider than the length of the gun. Use two upright strips of wood about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches square and bore half-inch holes angled downward. A half-inch dowel will make the peg supports. Attach the upright to the wall with screws.

To U. A., Trenton, N. J.—Boiling water makes an excellent powder solvent, but care must be taken to keep it out of the action. Wipe all traces from the bore and oil lightly before putting the gun away.

#### THE END

Phil Sharpe, our firearms editor, is now on active duty as a Captain, Ordnance Department, U. S. A. He will continue to answer all letters from readers. Address your inquiries to Captain Phillip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Store, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your copy. Do not send a return envelope.



# GUN-SMOKE BRAND

by WILLIAM COLT MACDONALD

## CONCLUSION

*One for all and all for one, the Three Mesquiteers close in on Blue Cloud's tough hands for a lead-blistering payoff*

### *The Story So Far:*

Riding into the town of Blue Cloud, the Three Mesquiteers, Tucson Smith, Lullaby Joslin and Stony Brooke, become involved in a strange mystery. As Tucson stops near the jail to remove a stone from his horse's hoof, a prisoner throws a sack of tobacco out the cell window. It hits Tucson in the face and, opening it, he finds a bill of sale for the Horseshoe N Ranch bearing his name as buyer.

Tucson forces Deputy Ben Canfield to

allow him to see the prisoner, a young man named Red Sherry, who explains that he was kidnaped by two masked men and forced to witness the signing of a bill of sale for the Horseshoe N Ranch by Molly Norton. The girl herself was being coerced into signing on the threat that if she refused, her father, who had been missing for several weeks, would be killed. Sherry had inserted Tucson's name in the hope that the Three Mesquiteers might be drawn into the affair. He had been knocked

unconscious as he attempted to escape, and when he recovered found himself in jail.

After a talk with Molly Norton, Tucson and his pals decide to try to help the girl find her father and they send for their crew to run the Horseshoe N for her, pretending that they have bought the spread. They become suspicious of a nearby town called Wagon Springs, which appears to have only one resident, a hard case named Bull Jackson who has a saloon there. Disguised as a Mexican, Stony gets himself a job with Jackson as saloon swamper. During the night a herd of stolen cattle is driven through, and when Stony makes the discovery that a prisoner is being held in one of the buildings, he is sure he has unearthed something bearing on Clem Norton's disappearance. He returns to the Horseshoe N and Tucson, hearing his story, decides to make a raid on Wagon Springs with the crew.

The Three Mesquiteers engage in a hot battle with the renegades at Wagon Springs, rescue Clem Norton and set fire to the outlaw hangout before leaving. After seeing that Norton is taken care of, Tucson rides into Blue Cloud for a talk with Phin Osgood, the banker. Osgood behaves suspiciously, offers to buy the Horseshoe N, and is angry when Tucson refuses to sell. As Tucson is leaving the office, Sheriff Rafe Quinn steps out of a closet, pulling a gun on Tucson, who is forced to kill him. This leaves the town without any law enforcement and Tucson reveals that he has received special authority from the governor to take over in Blue Cloud. He deputizes Lullaby, and sensing that a showdown is approaching, rides back to the Horseshoe N.

### XXIII

TUCSON arrived at the ranch covered with dust, his horse sweating. Stony and Lullaby headed for the corral the instant he rode in.

"What's doing in Blue Cloud?" Stony asked.

"Plenty! I killed Rafe Quinn this morning—"

"The devil you did!" Lullaby exclaimed.

Tucson related briefly what had happened. "We can't leave the town without a peace officer," he concluded. "Lullaby, I'm appointing you deputy, for the time being. Here's the key to Quinn's office. You'll find a deputy badge in his desk. When you hit Blue Cloud, wire the governor in my name, and have him appoint a deputy for Chancellor, in Ben Canfield's place. I want Canfield held on a charge of negligence in office. Things are breaking fast and I figure he might turn State's evidence later when we'll need witnesses. Now, get going fast!"

"I'm on my way," said Lullaby, and ran back to the bunkhouse to get his gun and cartridge belt. Five minutes later he was in the saddle, riding rapidly to town.

As Tucson and Stony walked back toward the bunkhouse, from the corral, Stony said: "Doc Tuttle says Clem's a mite better today."

Tucson nodded. "Yeah. I met the doc on his way back to Blue Cloud, as I was coming here. I told him I was appointing Lullaby deputy for the county. He looked at me sort of queer, but didn't question my authority. I didn't want to take time to explain matters."

The rest of the crew greeted Tucson before the bunkhouse, where they sat talking and smoking. Stony rolled a cigarette which Tucson

plucked from his pardner's fingers, when it was completed.

"Doggone it!" Stony complained. "You steal half my smokes."

"You can start objecting," Tucson smiled, "when I take all of 'em."

"I don't know as I want to do any objecting to the hombre who bumped off Rafe Quinn—" Stony commenced.

"What's that?" asked Ananias.

"You killed Quinn?" Red Sherry put in.

Similar questions were voiced by Bat, Rube and Tex. Tucson told the story. When he had finished he glanced up to see Sourdough standing in the doorway. The cook had a sour expression on his face.

"Yaah!" he said grouchily. "Yo're so busy shootin' guns and killin' people you ain't got time to get here for your dinner. I work my fingers to the bone trying to—"

"I didn't see you scratching your head, Sourdough," Stony said innocently.

"Scratching my—" the cook commenced. Then as Stony's meaning dawned on him: "You go to the devil, smart-Aleck."

"Look, cooky," Tucson pleaded. "I'm plumb starved. I'll eat anything that don't tackle me first. How's about a snack?"

"Nothing doing," Sourdough refused. "You know when meals is placed on the table and if you don't get here—"

"All right," Tucson said hopelessly, "I'll have to get my own dinner."

"You keep out of my kitchen,"

warned Sourdough. "I ain't goin' to have yore messy paws spoilin' good food. I'll feed you. As a matter of fact I put on the coffee when I saw you coming."

"What a cook!" Tucson exclaimed enthusiastically. "I don't know what we'd do without him."

"Probably recover from our indigestion," Ananias offered.

When he had finished eating, Tucson strolled up to the ranchhouse to talk to Molly. The girl and Maria were seated on the long front gallery. After a moment Maria left for the interior of the house.

"Dad's better this morning," Molly told Tucson.

"So I hear."

"His temperature is down one whole degree. Dr. Tuttle feels sure he can pull him through now, if he'll only regain consciousness." The girl looked weary; there hadn't been much sleep for her the past few nights.

"You don't want to wear yourself out, girl," Tucson said. "It wouldn't do to have two patients for Doc Tuttle to take care of, you know."

"I'll be all right. Maria's been just fine. She's a better nurse than I am, really. Anything new in Blue Cloud, today?"

"I killed Sheriff Quinn."

"Tucson!" Molly's eyes widened.

"It was him or me, Molly." Tucson told what had happened. When he had finished he asked: "What do you suppose Quinn meant by saying that Cougar Creek rises in Twin Sisters Mountains?"

"I haven't the least idea." Molly frowned. "Everybody around here knows that. Look"—she led the way from the gallery and pointed toward the peaks of the San Mateo Range—"there are the Twin Sisters. You see, those two highest points, close together."

Tucson nodded. "I was talking to Stony about 'em a spell back. He calls 'em the Sin Twisters. Maybe he's got something there. Somehow, those two peaks and the Cougar are responsible for the skulduggery that's going on hereabouts." Tucson and the girl returned to their seats on the gallery.

"You've never had any trouble with Santee Lombard over water rights, have you?" Tucson asked.

Molly shook her head. "There's plenty of water for both of us, and more. Cougar Creek also takes care of the 21 Bar and the O Slash P, as well. By the way, Ollie Paddock rode over to see how dad was getting along, this morning. Ollie is pretty angry over this whole business. He left word you should call on him if you need any hands to round up Lombard and his gang. I explained to Ollie that we'd have to have proof against Lombard first."

"We may need Paddock's help yet," Tucson declared. "Once I can get the evidence I need, we'll act fast, but until then I'll sort of have to pick my way easy." He tried another angle: "You don't suppose there'd be gold, or silver, or anything of the sort around Twin Peaks, do you?"

"I don't think so. There's an old

mine shaft up there, but the gold pretty well played out, long ago. If you want to pan Cougar Creek, you can find a trace of gold now and then. You might make fifty cents a day"—Molly smiled—"if you ever go broke on cattle. I remember some surveyors were quite excited when they ran across a few grains of gold—"

"What surveyors? When was this?"

"Oh, about six months back. They were working across the State. Some sort of topographical survey for the State. We had them to supper, one night. One of them was fooling with a gold pan, down to the creek. He gave it up in a little while though. No, mining is all finished in these parts. Dad used to say it was good cow country, nothing else."

Tucson left the house a short time later. For the remainder of the day he sat around by himself, thinking deeply. After supper, he drew Stony to one side. "Things are moving too slow to suit me," he stated. "I've got to have some action."

"The riddle of the Sin Twisters bothering you?" Stony asked.

Tucson nodded. "Lombard knows something I don't. When it commences to grow dark, I'm going to ride to the Dollar Sign L and do some scouting around. Maybe I can hear something if I keep my ears open."

"Good idea. I'll go with you."

Tucson shook his head. "This is a lone-wolf job. The more spies the more chance of noise, if you know what I mean. One man can move

around, where more might be noticed—”

“But, Tucson—”

“But me no buts. My mind is made up. Sooner or later, Lombard is going to get word of Quinn’s death. That may force his hand. He may decide to come here and raid the ranch or something. I want every man available on hand. With Lulaby in Blue Cloud, it’s more important than ever that you stay here to run things, should anything come up.”

“O.K., but I hate to see you going it alone. Take Ananias, or Red.”

“I don’t want anybody with me. I can slip over there and hang around. When it gets dark I’ll sneak close to the windows and do some listening. I’ll be back by tomorrow morning at latest—probably earlier.”

“All right, if you want it that way.”

“That’s the way I want it, pard.”

A short time later, Tucson saddled a fresh horse and headed off across the range in the direction of the Dollar Sign L Ranch. He rode steadily for an hour, then slowed his pony to a walk.

It was pitch dark by this time but a little too early for the moon to be up. Overhead the sky was sprinkled thickly with stars and to the right, the high, rugged peaks of the San Mateos were silhouetted darkly against the night heavens. There was a soft breeze blowing. Tucson’s pony sniffed the air eagerly, showing evidences of wanting to run. However, Tucson held the horse down.

He wanted the Dollar Sign L men well settled for the night before he arrived.

Suddenly Tucson saw a small square of yellow light. “There it is,” he muttered. He changed course a trifle. An oblong of light—an open doorway—appeared. Tucson approached cautiously. The lights undoubtedly came from the bunkhouse. It would be better to approach the building from the rear. He went on a trifle farther, then halted near a big mesquite tree. Here he dismounted, tossed his reins over a branch and proceeded on foot.

After a few minutes he heard horses. Corral bars loomed before his eyes in the gloom. He was nearly to the bunkhouse by this time. There were other buildings, all dark, placed at various points. A minute later he could hear voices in the bunkhouse but couldn’t distinguish the words. Slowly he worked his way around the corral.

Hoof beats drummed suddenly in the night as a rider came tearing into the ranch yard. Light from the bunkhouse shone on him momentarily as he flashed past on his way to the corral. As he passed the bunkhouse he yelled: “Santee!”

“That you, Shorty?” came Santee Lombard’s voice from the bunkhouse doorway.

By this time the rider had reached the corral and dismounted a few yards from the point where Tucson was crouched, hidden, in the darkness. Lombard came running from

the bunkhouse. "That you, Shorty?" he asked again.

"It's me," Shorty Davitt replied. "I got bad news."

A second man followed Lombard from the bunkhouse and caught up with the owner of the Dollar Sign L. Shorty had stripped the saddle from his trembling pony by the time the pair arrived at the corral.

"There's hell to pay," Shorty said tersely.

Lombard's voice sounded sharp: "What do you mean, Shorty?"

"I'll get to it in a minute. Dave, open that corral gate, will you?"

Dave Politan did as requested, adding his questions to Lombard's. "What particular sort of hell, Shorty?"

"The kind none of us will like." Shorty struck his pony a blow across the rump and the animal trotted into the enclosure. Shorty started talking while he closed the gate. "Rafe Quinn's a dead duck! We'll get no more help from that direction."

"Quinn dead!" Lombard exclaimed. "What happened to him?"

"Smith killed him this morning, in Osgood's office. The whole town was talking about it when I got to Blue Cloud." Shorty turned to Politan. "Dave, all your plans seem to go on the rocks."

"My plans will work when they're followed," the foreman replied pettishly. "That's why I sent Limpy and Frank to town. But Quinn wouldn't let them stay. He was hell

bent on doing it all himself. Just how did it happen, Shorty?"

"I'm not sure. Osgood still acts as though he's in a daze. He swears the sheriff had the drop on Smith, but, suddenly, Smith yanked his gun and fired. Quinn died almost right away. It's a mighty good thing, too. Osgood says he started to confess what we're doing—"

"Damn it!" Lombard swore. "That would tear our plans wide open—"

"That's not all," Shorty went on. "That Joslin is in town. He's got a badge and is acting as deputy. How do you figure that?"

"I don't," Lombard said sharply. "I don't like it, either."

Shorty picked up his saddle and the three men started toward the bunkhouse. When they had entered the building, Tucson once more got into action. He crept closer to the bunkhouse, where he could hear the men talking excitedly about the news Shorty had brought. Tucson listened amusedly to the various comments.

He was approaching the back wall of the bunkhouse now, where an open window allowed light and voices to escape. Tucson smiled to himself. "No telling what I'll hear if I can get right under that window," he mused, and took a few steps nearer. The voices of the crew inside the bunkhouse sounded louder now.

Step by step, Tucson approached the open window, moving carefully lest a careless boot scrape on gravel and warn the Dollar Sign L men that an enemy was near. He could hear

Limpy Fletcher's coarse tones now: "I'm all for riding to town pronto and taking that new deputy to pieces."

Then the precise, careful tones of Dave Politan: "We will make the plans here, Limpy. Your job is to do as we tell you."

Almost above Tucson's head, now, was the window through which the voices issued. Tucson took one more step. Then it happened:

The earth suddenly gave way beneath Tucson's feet. He felt himself falling, falling. Thrusting out his arms he tried to save himself, but his hands encountered only emptiness. A loose branch whipped across his face. He landed with a heavy jolt on one shoulder. Earth and gravel commenced to pour down on him. A rock came crashing against his head and his senses faded and were enveloped by a dense black curtain of oblivion.

Cries of alarm sounded within the bunkhouse. Men came running. Someone shouted for a lamp. Then Lombard's voice: "Looks like we caught a coyote in your trap, Dave."

"Hold that lamp nearer," Politan said. "We've caught a prize coyote, all right. That's Tucson Smith! Mighty smart, wasn't he, sneaking around here? But this time he's been outfoxed. This little trick spells the end for the great Tucson Smith—an end that's long overdue!"

## XXIV

Tucson awoke abruptly. It was still dark and he couldn't figure out

where he was. He found himself lying on the floor, inside a building. Light from the waning moon made a square of light at a wide-open doorway.

"Probably I'm in a barn." Tucson muttered. There was no one near.

He tried to move his feet and hands, only to discover that both were tightly bound. His head ached terrifically, but he didn't feel too bad. "But what the devil happened?" he wondered. "One minute I was on solid ground; the next it had caved in. Something hit me on the head. I reckon Stony was right; I should have brought somebody with me."

A man's form was silhouetted momentarily against the doorway.

"Hey, how about a drink of water?" Tucson called.

The man didn't reply, but disappeared. Tucson heard him call: "Hey, Santee—Dave! Smith is awake."

And a voice replied from the bunkhouse: "The whole crew will be awake if you make so much noise. There's work to do, tomorrow, remember."

Footsteps sounded on the gravelly earth. Then the beam from a lighted lamp flashed across the doorway and Santee Lombard entered, followed by Politan, Limpy and Shorty Davitt. The men entered the barn and crossed to where Tucson lay. They stood looking down on him.

"I could use a drink of water," Tucson said quietly.

"I imagine you could," Politan agreed, his chubby face lighted with amusement. "Awfully thirsty, aren't



you, Smith? That's fine. I really enjoy this."

"You would, you yellow slug," Tucson said contemptuously. "Why don't you crawl back in your dung heap?"

"Maybe he'd like a few eggs," Shorty Davitt said meaningly.

"Rotten ones," added Limpy.

"Mr. Smith," Politan said silkily, "I'd advise you to be careful whom you term a yellow slug. I don't take kindly to—"

"Who's your friend, Lombard?" Tucson asked. "He looks like something you might find under a rock."

"He's my foreman—" Lombard commenced.

"Allow me to introduce myself, Mr. Smith," Politan said. "My name is Politan—Dave Politan. It's a name you'll remember"—he made a sound that was half giggle, half chuckle—"for the short time remaining to you, at least. I haven't before had the pleasure of making your acquaintance, but I've seen you in Blue Cloud. Perhaps I should say I've never *encountered* you previously—"

"Lombard," Tucson appealed to the owner of the Dollar Sign L, "is there any law against my having a drink of water?"

"I reckon not," Lombard said grudgingly.

"Don't do it, Santee, don't do it," advised Politan. "Think of all the trouble he's caused you. You'll never succeed by pampering your enemies—"

"Politan," Tucson said, "I'll bet

you get a lot of fun pulling wings off flies, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Smith." Politan beamed, rubbing his hands together. "And have you ever watched a horned toad with two legs cut off. It's really amusing—"

"Cut it out, Dave," Lombard growled. He turned to Shorty. "Go get some water."

Tucson said, "Much obliged, Lombard," when Shorty had departed.

"And, Shorty, try sprinkling a little salt in the water," Politan called after the man. "It will make a nice experiment." He deftly rolled and lighted a cigarette, puffed strongly on it a moment, then bent down and started the glowing end toward Tucson's cheek. Tucson braced himself against the pain of the burn, but before the cigarette had touched flesh, Lombard said irritably: "Cut it out, Dave. You know I don't like such things."

"You're just squeamish, Santee," Politan said disappointedly. However, he got to his feet.

A minute later Shorty returned with a cup of water, which he held to Tucson's lips. Half the water splashed over Tucson's face. He didn't mind, though. There wasn't salt in it, after all. The water was cooling on Tucson's parched throat.

"Smith," Lombard said, "we've searched you, but we didn't find that bill of sale. Where is it?"

"Where you'll never find it," Tucson replied.

Lombard nodded. "I figured you'd be stubborn. Smith, we've got to

kill you. You and your pals are too damn noseys!"

"You're running true to form, Lombard. But before you get underway, I'd appreciate learning what happened to me. It seemed like the earth caved in, or something."

Politan giggled. "It did. Neat, wasn't it? You see, Mr. Smith, I had a feeling you might come sneaking around here, to see what you could learn. I had a trench dug on three sides of the bunkhouse, then covered it lightly with branches and earth. I feel it was a very successful trap. I intended to place some jagged sections of broken glass—point up—at the bottom of the hole, but Santee didn't allow me enough time for that—"

"Smith," Lombard cut in with a gesture of annoyance, "I've got to get rid of you. You're in my way. You've learned too much. For the last time, will you tell us where that paper is?"

Tucson shook his head. "No dice, hombre. But before you kill me I'd like to know what your game is here. It couldn't harm you, now, for me to know. I'm just plain curious. Why do you want the Norton ranch? What have the Twin Sisters to do—"

"Don't you tell him, Santee," Politan cried in alarm. "He's tricky! He might find some way to leave word for his friends, before we've finished him. Don't you breath one word of it!"

"I reckon Dave's right, Smith," Lombard said heavily. "We've already taken too many chances on

you. Like Dave says, you're tricky—"

"Thanks for the compliment," Tucson said dryly.

"But we can be tricky too, Mr. Smith," Politan stated, rubbing his hands together. "When we have to, we can be just awfully smart, you know. Right now, you're taking it very easy. You think that some of your friends will show up here and rescue you. They may show up, but they won't rescue you. By the time they come, we won't be here—and there won't be a trace of you, any place."

"Lombard, I'm getting tired of your foreman's *habla*," Tucson said impatiently. "If you're bent on killing me, let's get it over with."

"That suits me," Lombard said. "We haven't decided yet just how we'll do it."

"You might give me back my gun," suggested Tucson. "I'll fight a duel with any half dozen of you, if that suits you."

"We're not that foolish," Lombard said shortly. "Put a gun in your hand and no telling where you—"

"But, wait, Santee," Politan put in, his eyes sparkling. "We should be grateful to Mr. Smith for a wonderful suggestion." He bent his head close to Lombard's and talked, low-voiced, then stood back. "That would be very enjoyable to watch."

Lombard looked sharply at his foreman. "You've got the damnedest mind, Dave. Sometimes I think you're cracked."

"Oh, my, no," Politan snickered. "I'm just clever. And with Limpy to fight the duel—"

"Me?" Limpy looked aghast.

"Now, don't you fret, Limpy," Politan said reassuringly. "I know what I'm doing. If Mr. Smith insists on having a gun, we'll just place one within his reach. Do you agree, Santee?"

Lombard frowned. "Well, damnit, Dave—"

"Please don't cross me, Santee," Politan begged pettishly. "Nearly every time I have a good idea, you won't let me—"

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" Lombard growled. "You and your ideas! All right," coming to a sudden decision, "have it your way. But get away from here. You'd better head up to that old line camp in the foothills. It's up to you. If you like that sort of thing, go to it. But I don't want to be there. I don't mind seeing a man shot, but—"

"Thank you, Santee. I've always said you were squeamish. We'll leave at once, then I'll meet you in town, later—"

"But, look here," Limpy commenced again, "I haven't said that I'd—"

"You will, Limpy," Politan giggled. "This is the best scheme yet. You'll admire it, I know you will. Come on, we'll get ready."

As though the place were distasteful to him, Lombard hurried from the barn without another word. The instant he had disappeared, Politan approached Tucson, raised one booted foot and kicked the prone cowboy in the ribs. Tucson sensed the blow coming and rolled slightly,

thus evading the full force of the kick.

A few minutes later, Politan, Limpy and Shorty left the barn. Tucson wondered what was coming next. Suddenly he realized that beads of perspiration were forming on his forehead. "Great Jupiter!" he muttered. "I've seen some bad ones in my time, but this Politan hombre sure has a twisted streak, along with his badness."

The moon was down, by this time. There was a short period of inky blackness that eventually turned to gray. Gradually it grew lighter outside. Tucson didn't know how long a time elapsed as he lay there, bound hand and foot, waiting for the return of Politan. After a while he heard the sounds of horses outside. Next Politan, followed by Shorty and Limpy, appeared. Limpy was grinning confidently now.

"Still here, I see," Politan said cheerfully, rubbing his hands together. "Well, Mr. Smith, it won't be long now. We'll be starting before you realize it. Santee thought you should have a last breakfast before your departure, but I vetoed the suggestion. I explained to him that eating only dulls a man's mind, and that you would have to be very sharp, very sharp, indeed, this morning. You see, Mr. Smith, we're going to let you have the duel you suggested. We're not treating you badly, you see. We're giving you one chance—one chance in a million." His high, nervous laughter grated on Tucson's nerves. "Get

him out to his horse, boys." He turned back to Tucson, "You'll be glad to know we found your horse where you left it."

Shorty produced a knife and cut the rawhide bonds around Tucson's ankles. "Get up, Smith," he growled, "and walk out to your horse. I'll be plugging you if you run for it."

"We'll both plug you," Limpy rasped.

"Mr. Smith wouldn't run," said Politan, "not with his hands tied that way. And, Shorty, when we get outside, just hold his pony's reins so he won't try to escape."

Tucson struggled stiffly to his feet. With Limpy and Shorty watching him closely, a gun in the hand of each, he made his way out of the barn. Four saddled horses waited there. The sun was still three-quarters of an hour from rising. Tucson glanced down toward the bunkhouse, where smoke rose from a chimney. He caught the tang of burning mesquite in his nostrils and wished for a cup of coffee. Damned if he'd beg Politan for a cup, though. He wouldn't give the ornery son that much satisfaction. A few men were down near the corral, rubbing their eyes as though they had just awakened. There was nothing to be seen of Santee Lombard.

Politan gave further orders. Shorty climbed into his saddle, holding the reins of Tucson's pony. Politan and Limpy stood near, while Tucson mounted. When he was in the saddle, Limpy lashed his already bound hands to the saddlehorn.

"Just so you won't get any ideas,

Mr. Smith," Politan smirked.

*I've got the ideas, all right,* Tucson thought. If only Shorty wasn't holding the reins of the pony an escape might have been possible. As it was, however, there wasn't a chance for Tucson to get away. All three men were armed. Tucson saw his cartridge belt and a holstered .45 slung over the saddlehorn of Politan's saddle. Also, in Politan's belt was a hunting knife in a scabbard. Tucson wondered what the knife was for.

Politan broke in on his meditations. "We'd best get started, boys, if Mr. Smith is ready. You wouldn't want to delay us, would you, Mr. Smith?" The ingratiating tones grated on Tucson's sensibilities.

"I'm ready when you are." Tucson held his voice steady. Inwardly he was boiling.

"So kind of you, Mr. Smith," Politan purred. He smiled amusedly.

The horses started. Shorty led the way, holding the reins of Tucson's pony. Politan and Limpy rode on either side of Tucson. There was silence for some time, while the horses moved rapidly away from the ranch buildings in the direction of the rolling foothills stretched along the foot of the San Mateo Range. Now and then, Politan giggled and glanced at Tucson, but Tucson refused to be coaxed into speech.

Once Politan said: "There's no need of you being sulky, Mr. Smith. We're really being very kind to you." His tones were pettish, as though he were disappointed at not having broken Tucson's nerve. "We could

shoot you down without a chance, you know. As it is, you'll have an opportunity to use a gun."

"You're really going to let me have my gun?" Tucson said calmly.

"And a knife, too, Mr. Smith. You see, we think of everything." Politan gestured toward the knife at his belt. "This is really a very good blade. I spent hours sharpening it—"

"To cut the legs off horned toads, I suppose," Tucson said disgustedly.

"That among other things," Politan confessed.

"I wonder," Tucson mused aloud, "how it would be for slicing off your ears."

Politan looked shocked. "My ears?" He shuddered. "You've really very bloodthirsty ideas, Mr. Smith. I don't like it at all." He edged his horse away as though the very thought had given him a bad turn.

Despite his predicament, Tucson was amused. Two could play at this game. He went on: "And the knife would be very convenient for shaving off the tip of your nose." Brutally he added: "I wonder what your eyes would look like boiled."

"Boiled! My eyes?" Politan paled. "You mustn't talk like that." For a moment the man turned green. He drove his pony nearer to Tucson, lifted his reins and slashed Tucson across the face with them. Tucson ducked his head and managed to avoid the full force of the blow, but two livid welts immediately appeared across his left cheek.

"Maybe that will teach you not to think of such things," Politan reproved. "I don't like you to talk that way."

Tucson smiled thinly. "You're just yellow, after all, aren't you, Politan? Limpy, Shorty, I should think you'd be ashamed to associate with such white-livered scum."

Shorty didn't reply. Limpy growled: "You talk too much, Smith."

The horses moved along higher ground now. By this time, Politan had recovered his self-possession, but he didn't reopen the conversation. Tucson said: "So I'm going to have a knife and a gun and fight a duel with you three. Well, that's—"

"Oh, no, Mr. Smith," Politan contradicted. "Shorty and I are just to provide an audience. Limpy is to be your only opponent."

This was puzzling. Of one thing Tucson felt certain: Matters would be arranged in such way that all the odds would lie with Limpy. He felt sure Limpy would never dare face him in a duel where all things were equal.

The horses dipped down across a shallow hollow, and headed toward a tall clump of cottonwood trees. As they drew near, Tucson could see what remained of an old log cabin, swiftly going to ruin. This must have been the line camp Lombard had mentioned. Apparently it hadn't been used for many years. *Well*, Tucson thought, *this is it*. Within a short time now he'd learn just how it felt to face death. He'd faced the grim reaper on many occa-

sions, previously, but never before in a situation precisely like this one. Dave Politan seemed to make everything different.

The horses drew to a halt. Politan dismounted and walked about, sizing up the various tall cottonwoods. Finally he indicated an ancient tree with a trunk more than a foot through, and called to Limpy: "This should be about right. There are no other trees close by to interfere with your shooting, Limpy. I feel sure it will be very acceptable to Mr. Smith. Bring him over here."

The ropes that secured Tucson's arms to the saddlehorn were untied, though his wrists still remained bound. Guns in hand, the men watched warily while he dismounted and was led to the big tree. Here he was backed against the trunk, and Shorty swiftly lashed a lariat around his chest, under the arms, securely tying him to the tree. Tucson wondered what this was all about.

Politan surveyed the captive with considerable enjoyment. "I hope you're comfortable, Mr. Smith. The rope doesn't bind too tightly around your body, does it?"

"Do you have to tie me to a tree to shoot me, you polecats?" Tucson demanded.

"You'll be free shortly," Politan smiled silkily. "Don't become impatient, please. You wouldn't want to spoil my plan, I know. Shorty, get his gun."

Shorty brought Tucson's cartridge belt and holstered .45, and dropped the weapon on the earth about ten

feet from the point where Tucson was bound to the tree.

"Very nice." Politan beamed. "Not too close, but not too far, either. Limpy, are you ready?"

"Ready!" Limpy rasped. "I'm plumb eager."

He took up a position about twenty-five feet in front of Tucson, one hand poised above his gun butt. Politan said: "You'd better have your gun out and ready, Limpy."

"Hell!" Limpy objected, "I'll have plenty time to draw—"

"Do as I tell you, Limpy," Politan ordered. "We can't afford to run unnecessary risks."

Limpy did as ordered.

Politan drew the knife from his belt and approached Tucson. "Do you commence to get the idea, Mr. Smith?" he asked with his foolish giggle. "I'll cut the rope that holds your wrists together. Then I give you the knife. Your gun is lying in plain view there, on the earth. All you have to do is cut the rope that holds you to this tree and get your gun. Then you and Limpy can shoot it out, as you requested a while back. A very neat plan, don't you think?"

Anger welled in Tucson's heart, but he kept his voice steady. "And you call this giving me a square break?" he demanded. "With Limpy there, his gun already out? Why, he'll be able to plug me before I can reach my gun, even after I've cut this rope. And if I was lucky enough to get in a shot on him, there's still you and Shorty—"

"There are always certain risks

to be run in a duel, Mr. Smith," Politan laughed. "I think this is all very enjoyable, but if you object, we can shoot you where you are." His eyes glittered crazily. "But please don't disappoint us. I think it will be so amusing to watch you scrambling to get your gun while Limpy triggers lead—"

"Oh, hell," Tucson said disgustingly. "I'll accept your proposition. Free my wrists and give me that knife."

Politan beamed. "I thought you'd see it my way." Quickly he cut Tucson's wrists free, then stepping back, cautiously extended the knife. Tucson didn't accept it at once. He flexed his fingers, endeavoring to get circulation restored to his long-cramped hands. Suddenly, one hand darted out, seized the knife from Politan's grasp and made a savage slash at its owner, which Politan avoided only by scurrying frantically out of danger.

"You see, you see," Politan squealed excitedly to Limpy and Shorty. "He's really dangerous. He tried to injure me—after I gave him a knife too. That's pure ingratitude. Watch him closely, Limpy."

"He won't get away with nothing," Limpy bragged evilly. "Are you ready, Smith?"

"Ready." Tucson nodded. His face had paled slightly.

"You will have until the rope is cut through," Politan said. "After that, you'll have to defend yourself, Mr. Smith. And hurry, please, I can see Limpy is growing impatient."

Tucson paused a moment more. Twenty-five feet away stood Limpy, drawn gun in hand. Ten feet away, on the earth, lay Tucson's .45 in its holster. If he could only cut the rope that held him to the tree and reach his gun, he'd have a chance. But Limpy would commence shooting as soon as the rope fell away from Tucson's body—could probably get in three shots before Tucson could reach the six-shooter on the ground. And besides Limpy, there were Shorty and Politan to contend with. It didn't look as though he'd have much of a chance, Tucson mused, a grim smile on his rugged features.

He glanced at Politan and Shorty. One stood on either side of him. Shorty was the nearest, being only about five feet away. Politan wasn't taking any chances: he had backed several paces. Tucson's mind worked fast. The instant the rope was cut, they were expecting him to leap for his gun. Maybe he could fool them, if Politan and Shorty didn't get into the action too quickly. They were watching him closely, though, now; so sure were the two men that Limpy could handle the shooting, that the guns of both were in holsters.

"You goin' to take all day?" Limpy snarled.

"Hurry it up," from Shorty.

"You know, Mr. Smith," Politan said peevishly, "it's not fair to take advantage of our good nature by keeping us waiting—"

"You won't have to wait much

longer," Tucson laughed shortly. "This rope will be off plumb quick, now. I'm starting."

He examined the blade of the knife. It was a long, sharp weapon, whetted to a razorlike edge. Drawing in his body as much as possible, he gathered up the slack of the rope in one hand and commenced slowly to cut through it. Strands fell apart as the length of cold steel bit into them.

Tucson's mind was still operating keenly while he worked. The rope was nearly cut through now. With one hand, Tucson gathered the remaining section into a loop. Another strand parted swiftly. Only a slender thread—and Tucson's muscular grip—held the rope together now. If he could only get it cut all the way through before his opponents were aware of that fact, he'd still have a slim chance.

Slowly, he sawed on. There! The rope was cut through at last, but Tucson held the two ends together. He tensed his body for the leap.

"What are you doing, Mr. Smith?" Politan asked curiously.

"You goin' to take all day?" Limpy repeated.

"This knife is right dull"—Tucson was still going through sawing motions with the blade, pretending the rope hadn't parted—"but I'm doing my best. Be with you in a minute." He knew Politan and the other two weren't close enough to see what he was doing.

Suddenly, with an eye-defying flip of the wrist, Tucson sent the keen-

bladed knife flashing through the air toward Limpy Fletcher! At the same instant, the severed rope dropped at his feet and, ignoring his own gun on the ground, he leaped toward Shorty Davitt, who was so taken by surprise that for a moment he stood petrified. And then Tucson was on him, jerking the six-shooter from Shorty's holster!

Limpy fired once, but the gleaming knife speeding directly at him, disconcerted his aim. The bullet flew harmlessly high, as he turned his body in a fruitless effort to avoid the knife, but the movement came too late. The needle-sharp point of the knife struck deep in Limpy's side, plunging in just below the left ribs. With a gasp, Limpy sank to the earth.

Meanwhile, Shorty had grasped the gun Tucson was ripping from his holster. There was a brief struggle. The gun roared as Tucson jerked it free. Shorty cursed in a choking voice, then abruptly wilted, face down, on the ground.

A frustrated, frightened wail went up from Dave Politan. Pulling his gun he fired three shots at Tucson. All flew wild. Limpy, sprawled on the earth, was raising his six-shooter for another try. A spurt of white fire darted from the weapon, even as Tucson released another bullet. He felt the lead from Limpy's gun cut through the bandanna at his neck, then saw that Limpy was now on his knees, eyes wide, mouth open, the hilt of the knife still protruding from below his ribs. For an instant Limpy stayed erect, then top-



pled over sidewise.

Two explosions came in quick succession from Politan's gun. Both missed. Politan was running away now, trying to reach his horse. Tucson thumbed one quick shot, which kicked up dust beneath Politan's feet. The next instant Politan went sprawling on his face to lie silent and motionless.

Tucson straightened up and drew a long breath. "I'm sure lucky," he told himself. Eying sharply the three figures on the ground, he strode over, retrieved his own belt and gun and strapped them on. Then he examined Limpy and found him dead. Shorty was dying fast, his eyes already glazed. He ceased breathing even while Tucson was looking at him.

Tucson's eyes narrowed as he gazed at the silent Politan. "I'm certain I didn't hit him," Tucson muttered. "Is this a trick?"

Gun in hand, he approached the prone Politan and nudged the man's body with his foot. The result was amazing. Politan flopped frantically about on the earth, then managed to get to his knees, his clasped hands raised imploringly to Tucson.

"Don't kill me, Mr. Smith," he begged. "I really didn't mean any harm. I know I've done wrong, but if you'll only let me live I'll do anything you say—"

"Why, you dirty, yellow-livered coward!" Tucson exclaimed in amazement. "You're not hurt at all—just scared plumb witless."

Tears were running down Politan's face now. Pleas for mercy tumbled

from his white lips. Finally, with a frame-wracking sob, he threw himself face down on the earth and lay there, shoulders heaving convulsively.

Tucson looked down on Politan in disgust, feeling slightly nauseated. Such an exhibition of cowardice wasn't good to see, he reflected. "I never knew, Politan," he said slowly, "that any man in the cow country could break up like this. I've seen some pretty ornery skunks crack under pressure, but for sheer, chicken-hearted quailing in a pinch, you take the cake. For the love o' Mike, get up and quit sniveling. You may be able to plot schemes—dirty schemes—like hell, but you sure lack the nerve to see them through when you get in a tight. I don't know how Lombard—black as he is—ever stood for you."

"Yes, Mr. Smith." Politan rolled over and came to a sitting position, his face streaked with dirt and tears. "Just don't shoot me—"

"Shut up!" Tucson said irritably. "You're not worth shooting, not worth the powder to blow you to hell, where you deserve to go. Instead you're going to prison."

"Yes, Mr. Smith." Politan brightened, now that he knew Tucson didn't intend to kill him. "I guess I deserve to go to prison—"

"Stop that crawling, will you?" Tucson said sharply. "Yeah, you're headed for a cell, all right. Remember what I said about cutting off your ears? You wouldn't want to go to prison without ears, would

you?" Tucson sat on the ground at Politan's side.

"Oh - h - h," Politan quavered. "Please don't—"

"Dammit!" Tucson cut in. "Don't start that again. I just want you to tell me a few things, then we'll get started."

"Anything you want to know, I'll gladly tell—"

"All right. First, what did Rafe Quinn mean by saying 'Cougar Creek rises in the Twin Sisters?' What's that got to do with what's going on around here?"

"It does, you know. That's why they're going to build the dam on the Horseshoe N—"

"Dam!" A great light dawned on Tucson. "That's what Quinn was trying to tell me when he was dying. *Dam*, not *damn*! And I thought he was cursing me. Go on, Politan, spill the rest of it."

Little by little, Tucson got the whole story. Nearly two years before, the authorities of the State had decided to dam up Cougar Creek and thus, eventually, divert its waters to the barren wastes northwest of the grazing country hereabouts, leaving only enough water to flow in the channel to take care of the ranches now watering at the stream.

"You see," Politan explained—he had recovered much of his composure by this time and was eager now to please—"it was decided first to build the dam on Dollar Sign L property. There's a huge saucer-shaped section of the Dollar Sign L

that is ideally suited to such purposes. . . ."

The story went on: Rafe Quinn, through his political connections had got word of the projected dam, which was being kept secret from the public. Quinn had gone to Osgood with his idea, and the banker had put up the money to buy the Dollar Sign L property. Later, it was planned to resell to the State at an exorbitant profit.

"However," Politan continued, "Osgood didn't know Quinn very well, so he insisted on bringing Santee Lombard and me into the scheme. Lombard bought the ranch with Osgood's money. Santee always left planning to me. I agreed the plan was a good one, and that we'd all get rich at the expense of the State. You see, we'd known Phin Osgood, up north, many years ago, before he was a respected banker." An oily smile flitted across Politan's features. "I could tell you a lot of things about Phin."

"You'll have plenty time later. Get on with your story."

"After Lombard had bought the Dollar Sign L, we ran into trouble. The State had made a new survey and decided to build the dam up between Twin Sister Peaks, on Horseshoe N property. Of course that did make a better site, as building there wouldn't entail taking any grazing land out of production—"

"And that left you fellers holding the bag, after Osgood had put his money into the Dollar Sign L," Tucson broke in.

"That's right." Politan nodded.

"I told Osgood we'd have to buy the Horseshoe N, too, if we wanted to make our scheme work. We couldn't afford to lose out, after the money we'd invested—"

"You mean the money Osgood invested."

"Well, Lombard and I had put in some money—all we had. Unless we could get the Horseshoe N, we stood to lose what we'd put in. Of course, we had the Dollar Sign L, but ordinary ranching was too slow for us. We decided we had to have the Horseshoe N, so we could make a nice profit from the State. But when we tried to buy the place, Clem Norton said no. Time was growing short, so—"

"So you embarked on a plan of intimidation," Tucson said grimly. "First you killed two cowboys who worked for Norton. Who killed them?"

"Shorty killed one; a puncher named Tony Barnett killed the other. While we're on the subject, Mr. Smith, it was Nick Armitage who killed Steve Maxwell. I'd like you to remember I never killed anybody—"

"Go on. Why did you kidnap Clem Norton?"

"We thought we could force him to sell. We planned to have him give a bill of sale with a fictitious name filled in—just as we planned later with Molly Norton. Eventually the bill could be transferred into Lombard's name. But after we held Norton a while, we learned that he wasn't the real owner of the Horseshoe N; that the ranch was in Molly's

name. We would have let Norton go, at once, only one day when Santee came to Wagon Springs, his mask slipped down and Norton saw him. After that we had to hold him. He tried escaping three times. The last time a man named Howie Irvine shot him, while he was getting away. That was the day you and your men arrived in Wagon Springs and burned the place. You see, they had let Norton out of the stable for a little while and he made a run for it. Then Howie shot him."

"Whose bright idea was it to get Molly to sign a bill of sale in return for her father?"

"I don't just remember," Politan evaded.

"You're a liar, but go on."

BEFORE  
YOU TURN

THIS  
PAGE—



why not make sure that you continue to receive this magazine throughout the year? Don't take the chance that your newsstand will be sold out—act now! Simply by filling out this coupon you can insure a solid year of reading pleasure with your favorite fiction.

WESTERN STORY  
122 EAST 42nd STREET  
NEW YORK 17, N. Y.

Inclosed is \$3.00. Kindly send me a year's subscription to WESTERN STORY.

NAME.....  
ADDRESS.....  
CITY..... STATE.....

"Well, it was all sort of worked up between Limpy, Shorty, Frank Ettinger and Tony Barnett—"

—"Anyway, they were working under your orders, you mean."

"Let's not argue about that, Mr. Smith. It really doesn't matter. But we promised the girl that her father would be restored if she signed the paper. It was Tony Barnett who came and persuaded her to go to Wagon Springs. The whole plan was upset by that Red Sherry fellow; we had to have a witness to Molly Norton's signature. When Sherry was passing through Blue Cloud, Shorty, Frank Ettinger and a couple of the other boys got him into a poker game and cleaned him out. Then they followed him and made him go to Wagon Springs with them."

"And at Wagon Springs," Tucson cut in, "Red upset your plans. You tried to make him tell you what he'd done with that paper, by threatening to frame him for Norton's murder, but it didn't work."

"I had nothing to do with that. That was Limpy's and Ben Canfield's idea."

"More lies, I reckon, but let it pass. Why did Canfield have to leave so sudden?"

"He lost his nerve. He was dreadfully afraid of you, Mr. Smith. After Joslin shot Armitage, Phin Osgood wired Rafe Quinn to come to Blue Cloud and take charge. He was afraid you'd corner Canfield and force him to tell what he knew. You can see I've really had very little to do with all this—"

"Except making plans and arranging for a little cattle rustling. I'd like to know about that too."

"The cattle stealing was all Lombard's idea. I had little to do with it. We never did get into that end very deep, though we had a good start. In time it would have amounted to something big, I imagine. Our men would pick up a few cows here and a few there. Then we'd drive to Wagon Springs where another crew waited to take over the herd. The herd would then be driven up to Wyatt County where we had good connections for selling. We always forged bills of sale in Wyatt County, so nobody ever learned what was up. The rustling, you see, was just a side line to pick up some extra dollars."

"You certainly are a nice gang of coyotes," Tucson growled. "Something was said about your crew having work to do today. What sort of work?"

"Lombard is taking the crew to Blue Cloud. He says he's going to show the town, once and for all, who's boss in this section. There'll probably be a few fights. That will bring your pard, Joslin, into action. As deputy he'll have to—"

Tucson leaped to his feet. "So Lombard is figuring to bump off Lullaby in the confusion."

Politan nodded. "Lombard is pretty crooked, Mr. Smith. Tonight he plans to raid the Horseshoe N and wipe out your whole crew."

"The devil he will!" Tucson snapped. "Get on your feet, Politan. You and me are going places."

And don't lose any time or I'll cut off your ears yet."

At that moment, Tucson heard the sounds of horses' hoofs. He drew his gun and waited. Suddenly Red Sherry appeared through the trees.

"Tucson!" he yelled joyously.

"Hi, Red!" Tucson hailed. "What brings you here?"

Red glanced at the dead bodies on the earth, then at Politan. His mouth gaped in surprise. "What's happened?" he queried.

Tucson told him in terse sentences. Red flushed angrily and glared at Politan. Before he could say anything, Tucson asked again: "What brought you up here, Red?"

Red explained, "When you didn't come back all night, we got sort of worried. You'd ordered Stony to stay at the ranch, but he was in charge, so he sent me to see if I could uncover anything. I arrived at the Dollar Sign L. There was nobody there except the cook, but I found a deep trench near the bunkhouse, and your Stetson was lyin' at the bottom of it. Here." He tossed the hat to Tucson. "That hat told me you'd been there, and under a little pressure the cook admitted it. He confessed that you and some others had headed up this way. I tied the cook up in his kitchen and followed tracks. A spell back I heard some shooting and I came on fast and . . . well, here I am."

"Good work, Red. We've got to get underway fast. There's a scheme afoot to kill Lullaby. Lombard and his crew have gone to Blue Cloud." He swung on Politan. "How many

*Gift*

---

## AIR TRAILS MODEL ANNUAL

---

*Christmas!*

**T**HE perfect Christmas present for yourself or for anyone who is interested in aviation . . . and who isn't! The new 1944 AIR TRAILS MODEL ANNUAL contains 96 pages of every phase of model building . . . all developments in model-airplane activities! It covers design, construction, engines, sailplanes and everything you'd possibly want to know.

Then there's a special plan-book section in blue and white on heavy stock . . . three-view drawings of famous fighters and bombers of all nations . . . in 16 beautiful pages.

Construction plans for building different kinds . . . flying scale models of famous warplanes . . . and lots of pictures! Don't miss this opportunity to make someone's Christmas a very merry one . . . and your own as well!

## AIR TRAILS MODEL ANNUAL

25c (30c IN CANADA)  
AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

If your dealer cannot supply you, fill out the coupon below. This offer good in U. S. only and not available to subscription agencies.

---

AIR TRAILS MODEL ANNUAL  
79 Seventh Avenue  
New York, 11, N. Y.

Inclosed is 25c (30c in Canada). Please send me the new AIR TRAILS MODEL ANNUAL.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_ Dist. No. \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

men will Lombard have with him?"

Politan did some mental figuring. "Around fifteen, I guess."

"That means we've got to have help," Tucson said. "Red, you know where the O Slash P is. High-tail it there and tell Paddock what's doing. Ask him to get his fighting men to town as soon as possible. Take Politan with you. Toss your throw rope around his neck and if he hangs back, just jerk him out of the saddle and drag him behind. Don't let him get away. He'll be an important witness. You can tie him up and leave him at Paddock's place when you get there. And, if he gets stubborn, slice off his ears—"

"But what are you going to do?" Red asked.

"I'm aiming to ride hell out of three horses and get to the Horseshoe N," Tucson spoke swiftly, "so I can round up Stony and the other boys. There's no time to lose!"

Tucson had already seized the reins of Shorty's and his own horse and leaped to the saddle of Limpy's pony. Kicking the horse in the ribs, he got under way, kicking up sudden clouds of dust, as he moved.

Red gazed after him an instant as he disappeared rapidly through the trees, the two horses he was leading covering space with long, ground-devouring strides. Then Red turned back to Politan.

"Get in your saddle, sidewinder," he spoke contemptuously. "We're going places in a hurry—and my rope's going to be around your neck. I'm sure hoping you'll put up an

objection. I haven't killed me a skunk for a long spell."

But there were no objections on the part of the spiritless Dave Politan. Meekly he obeyed the order and the two started swiftly for the O Slash P Ranch.

## XXVI

Tucson was really pounding his horses across the range. The sun was pushing high above the San Mateos, now, pouring down rays of ovenlike heat. The horses were streaked with sweat and dust. When he guessed he was a third of the way to the Horseshoe N, without slowing speed, Tucson drew Shorty's horse alongside and transferred his weight to its saddle. Tossing aside the reins of Limpy's horse, he glanced back over his shoulder to see the animal run on a few yards, then falter and stand, head down and trembling with fatigue, in the tall grass.

Tucson jabbed savage spurs to Shorty's horse now, and plunged on, leading his own horse behind. The miles flashed past, with Tucson striving to get more and more speed out of the pony. The landscape was a swiftly moving panorama of tall grass, mesquite, rocks and stunted trees. The wind whipped into his face, bringing tears to his eyes.

Almost before he realized it, Shorty's horse commenced to stagger. "Thanks, pony," Tucson muttered. "You've given all you had." He drew his own horse alongside, switched into his own saddle with-

out losing an instant's time, then released the fagged pony he'd been riding. "Here we go, horse," he said, patting his mount on the neck. "I've been saving you for the last lap. Now, let's see what you've got!" The pony's stride lengthened, as it shot forward like a cedar arrow from a yew bow.

By the time the Horeshoe N buildings hove in sight, the third horse, too, was just about beaten out. Tucson ripped out a wild cowboy yell that brought men running from the bunkhouse. He pulled up his foam-flecked mount in a shower of dust and gravel at the corral and slipped to the ground. Stony came running, followed by the others.

"What's up, pard?" Stony exclaimed.

"There's a plot afoot to rub out Lullaby. We've got to get to town fast. Saddle up a new pony for me. I want to see Molly before we leave."

He left on a run for the ranchhouse. Molly met him in the doorway as he crossed the gallery. "I heard you when you came in, Tucson," the girl said. "What's the matter? Where's Red?"

"Red's all right," Tucson said swiftly. "He's riding to pick up a crew at the O Slash P. We've got to get to Blue Cloud and stall off trouble for Lullaby—"

"I won't hold you then," the girl cut in, "but there's some good news you've got to hear first: Doc Tuttle left here just a short time ago. Dad regained consciousness while the doctor was here—"



## THE DISAPPEARING ACTOR

It was mysterious and sinister enough when a leading actor vanished from a stage in a Broadway play . . .

But it was more horrible when the lives and welfare of millions became the stakes in a grisly game!

Could The Shadow find the answer . . . or would the SYNDICATE OF DEATH strike him down, too?

Don't miss the February issue of

## THE SHADOW

AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

"Jeepers!" Tucson exclaimed. "That's great!"

The girl nodded, her eyes shining. "Doc Tuttle says dad will be all right now. Dad talked a little. He told us he saw Santee Lombard at that place where he was held captive—"

"I know Lombard is responsible for that, and more too. But your troubles are ended. I haven't time for details, but you're going to be rich. The State plans to buy the land around Twin Sister peaks for a dam. That's why Lombard tried to get your property. Osgood and Sheriff Quinn were in on the deal—"

"Good grief!" Molly's eyes widened. "I can't believe it!"

"You'll get the whole story later." Tucson was already stepping down from the porch. "Just leave things to us."

"Tell Red I said to be careful." Molly colored. "That goes for all of you, of course."

Tucson paused, smiling. "I've been noticing how things were building up between you and Red," he said earnestly. "Red's on my payroll, now, but if you ever need a good foreman, I'll be glad to recommend him."

"Maybe," Molly replied, her dark eyes dropping, "it's more than a foreman I'll be wanting."

"I'll tell him that," Tucson grinned.

"Tucson Smith! Don't you dare!"

But Tucson had already vanished beyond hearing and was approaching the corral at a swift run. Ar-

iving there, he found all his men mounted and waiting impatiently. Sourdough George cradled his shotgun in one arm.

"I'm going too," he said defiantly.

"I'd be disappointed if you held back, Sourdough." Tucson nodded, and leaped into the saddle of the fresh horse that awaited him. "Let's go, hombres!"

"But what happened?" Stony spurred close to ask the question. Similar queries came from the rest.

"I'll tell it on the way," Tucson said. "We can't lose time talking here."

He and Stony moved into action. Behind came Sourdough, Ananias, Tex, Rube and Bat Wing. The group swung out of the ranch yard in a thick cloud of dust and headed out for the road to Blue Cloud, each man riding as if all the devils from hell were in full pursuit. As they rode, Tucson yelled his story to Stony. Some of the others caught a word here and there. The crew finally learned, through the rush of wind, what had taken place at the Dollar Sign L and later. Their faces became even more grim as they leaned low on their ponies' necks and pleaded with the animals to give just one more bit of speed.

Mile after mile fell to the rear. Before long, topping a high spot in the road, they saw the first roof tops of Blue Cloud. They were only a mile from the town when, glancing off to his right, on the road to the O Slash P, Tucson glimpsed Red Sherry and Ollie Paddock riding





## A message for you . . . from 1953

*(Today, John Jones is just an average American, wrestling with all the doubts and worries and problems that beset every one of us right now. But let's skip ahead 10 years. Let's look at John Jones then—and listen to him . . .)*

**S**OMETIMES I feel so good it almost scares me. "This house—I wouldn't swap a shingle off its roof for any other house on earth. This little valley, with the pond down in the hollow at the back, is the spot I like best in all the world.

"And they're mine. I own 'em. Nobody can take 'em away from me.

"I've got a little money coming in, regularly. Not much—but enough. And I tell you, when you can go to bed every night with nothing on your mind except the fun you're going to have tomorrow—that's as near Heaven as a man gets on this earth!

"It wasn't always so.

"Back in '43—that was our second year of war, when we were really getting into it—I needed cash. Taxes were tough, and then Ellen got sick.

Like most everybody else, I was buying War Bonds through the Payroll Plan—and I figured on cashing some of them in. But sick as she was, it was Ellen who talked me out of it.

"Don't do it, John!" she said. "Please don't! For the first time in our lives, we're really saving money. It's wonderful to know that every single payday we have more money put aside! John, if we can only keep up this saving, think what it can mean! Maybe someday you won't have to work. Maybe we can own a home. And oh, how good it would feel to know that we need never worry about money when we're old!"

"Well, even after she got better, I stayed away from the weekly poker game—quit dropping a little cash at the hot spots now and then—gave up some of the things a man feels he has a right to. We made clothes do—cut out fancy foods. We didn't have as much fun for a while but we paid our taxes and the doctor and—we didn't touch the War Bonds.

"We didn't touch the War Bonds then, or any other time. And I know this: The world wouldn't be such a swell place today if we had!"

*The Treasury Department acknowledges with appreciation the publication of this advertisement by*  
★ STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC. ★

hard. Behind them came four hard-driving cowpunchers.

Wild cowboy yells went up as the two factions joined forces where the trails met. Spurs were plunged in; the riders swept on and on. Then, abruptly rounding a curve in the roadway, Tucson glimpsed Main Street spread out ahead. He saw a crowd gathered some distance down the road, then caught the sounds of exploding guns.

The whole picture flashed before Tucson's eyes a second later. Santee Lombard and his crew were gathered before the sheriff's office and jail, carrying on a steady fusillade of shooting. From the office doorway and windows came answering shots. Then a loud, defiant yell from Lullaby reached Tucson's ears.

"Lullaby's standing 'em off in the jail building," Tucson shouted joyously. "He's still on his feet, carrying the fight to the skunks. C'mon, men, unlimber your guns and break this up. No mercy on the lousy sidewinders!"

So swiftly did the attack come that the Lombard forces scarcely knew what struck them, as Tucson and his men charged into the group attacking the jail. Lombard punchers were sent sprawling under the impact of flying hoofs. Guns roared ceaselessly. A horse went down screaming and kicking, its rider hurtling over its head to go diving into the roadway.

Powder smoke drifted overhead. Dust lifted from the road to envelop horses and men. Tucson glimpsed a man shooting from the shelter of a

watering trough. He thumbed one swift shot. The man's head disappeared. Stony's six-shooter was roaring like mad. At brief intervals, Sourdough's shotgun sent buckshot in various directions. Ananias leaned down and cracked his gun barrel against the head of a Lombard puncher who was running past.

Bat Wing glanced toward the jail doorway. Lullaby was standing there now, laughing joyously, a gun in either hand spitting lead. Suddenly Bat gave a yell of warning. Frank Ettinger was creeping up at one side, his gun barrel leveled at Lullaby. Bat's six-shooter spoke twice. Ettinger straightened to his toes, then spun sidewise to crash against the side of the jail building.

"It's Tucson Smith and his crew!" somebody yelled.

That seemed to be the signal to end hostilities. The Lombard men—those who were still on their feet—commenced voicing cries of surrender. These were quickly herded toward the jail where Lullaby took them in charge and placed them in cells.

Tucson had dismounted by this time. He was eagerly scanning the street in both directions. Suddenly there was a great deal of yelling from the townspeople who had taken no part in the fight. A crowd soon surrounded the punchers.

Stony came riding up. Tucson said: "You seen anything of Lombard?"

"Saw him when we first arrived," Stony answered. "Threw some lead

at him, but missed. Then I lost him in the confusion."

"Santee Lombard?" asked a man standing near. "I just saw him duck into the Sunfisher Bar."

Tucson said, "Thanks, mister. He's my meat." He started toward the Sunfisher.

"You going after him alone?" Stony demanded.

"He's my meat," repeated Tucson. "I won't need any help."

He continued walking toward the saloon doorway. A sudden hush had fallen over the street.

Tucson mounted the steps to the Sunfisher porch. At the entrance he paused, one hand on the swinging doors. "You'd better come out, Lombard," he said quietly.

There was no answer.

Tucson spoke again: "I'm putting you under arrest, Lombard."

From within, Lombard spoke savagely: "If you want me you'd better come after me."

"I'm giving you a last chance, Lombard," Tucson spoke grimly. "You can surrender and stand trial, or stay there and take what's coming. Politan spilled the whole business. You shouldn't have picked such a yellow pardner—"

A leaden slug ripped viciously through one of the swinging doors, not far from Tucson's body. A short, harsh laugh left Tucson's lips. He tensed a moment, then, with the speed of lightning, pushed back the swinging doors and leaped inside the barroom.

A hail of lead swept through the

**You're sure in line for shaving joy  
When you use Thin Gillettes, my boy!  
These blades last long—four cost a dime—  
You look well-groomed, save dough and time!**



**Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade**

doorway where Tucson had passed but a split second before. Except for Lombard, backed into a far corner, the saloon appeared to be empty.

Lombard fired again, as Tucson, moving rapidly across the floor, unleashed three swift shots from his six-shooter. The three reports almost blended, so close together did they emerge from the gun muzzle.

Lombard was spun half around as the shots struck. Another slug tore harmlessly from his gun, as his body jackknifed and he toppled forward to the pine flooring. For a moment, his booted toes drummed spasmodically, then he lay still. Tucson strode forward and turned him over. He was quite dead.

A long sigh of relief left Tucson's lips. Methodically he punched out his exploded shells and inserted fresh cartridges. There was a slight noise near the bar. Tucson whirled around to see a white-faced bartender just rising from behind the long counter.

"Is . . . is that all?" the barkeep quavered.

"That's all," Tucson said shortly.

The swinging doors banged open and Stony rushed in. "You're all right, pard?" he asked anxiously, eyeing Lombard's prone figure.

"I'm all right," Tucson said quietly. He paused. "There's one more job to do!"

"What's that?" Stony asked.

"I've got to get down to the bank and arrest Phin Osgood.

Stony nodded grim agreement. "Come on, let's get started."

They left the Sunfisher Bar and

started east on Main Street, pushing through the crowd that had gathered before the saloon. Several men left the crowd and trailed Stony and Tucson along the thoroughfare, evidently expecting more excitement.

A horse and rig were just pulling to a stop before the bank when Tucson and his partner arrived. The cashier of the bank stepped out of the rig. His eyes widened when he saw Tucson.

"Did you get this buggy for Phin Osgood?" Tucson asked.

The man nodded. "He told me to get it in a hurry. I'm working for him, but . . . but I don't like it. I think he's planning to—"

"To run away," Tucson finished. "It's about what I expected. You in on this game with Osgood?"

"No, sir." The man's eyes were honest and they looked straight into Tucson's.

Tucson nodded. "I believe you. Stick around. You're going to have to take charge of this bank when we leave."

He and Stony strode on into the bank. Just as they entered the front door, Phin Osgood came staggering through the doorway of his private office, burdened down under the weight of a heavily loaded satchel in each hand. His florid face paled, his mustache seemed to wilt, at sight of Tucson and Stony.

"Sorry I can't stop to talk to you gentlemen," he panted. "I've been called to Chancellor on business. Back tomorrow—"

"Osgood," Tucson cut in sternly,

"you're under arrest! Lombard is dead. Politan has confessed to what you coyotes planned. Your game is up!"

The two satchels struck the floor with heavy thuds. Osgood reached to a hip pocket. His nickel-plated revolver flashed into view. "You'll never take me alive—" he snarled.

And that was as far as he got: Tucson had crossed the floor with tigerlike speed, both hands moving into action. One hand knocked the gun spinning from Osgood's flabby grasp; the other slapped the banker across the face with a force that sent him reeling against the wall. That took all the fight out of Osgood and he commenced pleading for mercy, promising to tell of various other nefarious enterprises in which Politan and Lombard had been engaged up in Montana and Wyoming.

"You'll have plenty of time to tell all that at your trial," Tucson said grimly. "And a good many years behind bars to think over all this rattlesnake business of yours. Stony, what's in those satchels?"

Stony knelt on the floor over the two bags which proved to be locked. He glanced inquiringly at Osgood. Osgood sagged a little more, then without a word of protest tossed a couple of keys to Stony. Stony opened the first satchel and a low whistle of amazement escaped his lips.

"Whew!" he exclaimed. "Look at this, Tucson!"

Tucson looked. The satchel was filled with gold twenty-dollar pieces and greenbacks. The other satchel

## Are You Ready for POST WAR COMPETITION?

When peace comes, most of us will face some real problems. Millions of men will come out of the army and navy to seek civilian jobs; great industries will have to convert back; new industries will spring up to supply new wants and habits. Many wartime jobs will vanish, others will shift in nature and emphasis, new jobs will be open.

It will be a time of strain and opportunity. Competition will be sharper—mediocrity will suffer and ability rise to the top.

The far-seeing man and woman will prepare for this. He will increase his knowledge and skill now to safeguard what he has and to be ready for the new opportunities.

If you are that man or woman, we invite your investigation of LaSalle spare time training. Choose the field that looks best to you after the war and ask us for our free 48-page booklet describing the requirements and opportunities in that field and telling about our home study training.

### LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY A Correspondence Institution

Dept. 265-R

Chicago, Ill.

I want to know how I can prepare myself for the post-war opportunities. Please send me your free booklet on the field I have checked below.

- |                                             |                                                  |
|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Foremanship        | <input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Management   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bookkeeping        | <input type="checkbox"/> Accounting              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Traffic Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Executive Management    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Law: LL.B. Degree  | <input type="checkbox"/> Salesmanship            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Business English   | <input type="checkbox"/> Business Correspondence |
|                                             | <input type="checkbox"/> Stenotypy               |

Name.....Age.....

Present Position.....

Address.....

contained more gold and bills. Tucson turned contemptuously to the limp and frightened creature that had once been portly Banker Phineas Osgood.

"Just one more crime added to your already lengthy list, Osgood," he accused. "Trying to run away with the bank's funds isn't going to make your prison sentence any shorter."

But Phin Osgood had nothing to answer this time. Tucson spied the bank cashier looking in at the doorway.

"Come on in and take charge of this money, mister," Tucson called. "Osgood's going on a long, long visit; I don't think he'll ever come back to Blue Cloud. It's up to you to run this bank until the authorities decide what to do. Come on, Stony, let's take this prisoner down to Lullaby. One more jailbird won't add too much to the overcrowding of the cooler."

Stony nodded. "You're the boss, Tucson. I reckon this town knows that by this time."

## XXVII

After things had quieted down, the men gathered in Titus Shaw's bar for a before-dinner drink. Faces were still smoke and dust grimed. Tex Malcolm had a shallow furrow across the back of one hand. Rube Phelps was minus a bit of skin from his right ribs. Ollie Paddock had two bullet holes through the crown of his Stetson, and one of his punchers was at Doc Tuttle's place with a bullet in

his shoulder. That seemed to be the extent of the damage. The Lombard forces, on the other hand, had suffered more heavily. Lullaby's jail was full, and four men, not counting Lombard, had been killed. There were also several wounded at the jail awaiting attention from the doctor. Tucson's attack had come as so great a surprise that the Lombard faction never did really get set to put up a fight.

As Ollie Paddock said: "Tucson, you should be an army general. You strike so swift and sudden, the enemy doesn't have a chance to furnish opposition."

And Tucson's reply: "I'm not forgetting, Ollie, I had you and a lot of good men behind me."

Titus Shaw chuckled. "Tucson, you sure whittle 'em down fast, once you and your pards get started. Lombard dead, Armitage dead, Quinn dead, Politan and Osgood due for long sentences. Shucks! I can't remember all the names of rattlesnakes you've—"

"By the way, Red," Tucson cut in, "what did you do with Politan?"

Ollie Paddock replied for Red. "We've got him tied up, out to my place. I was just telling Titus my foreman has orders to shoot if he tries to escape."

"It'd be a shame to waste a bullet on the yellow skunk," Bat Wing growled.

"We sure nipped a nice little rustling ring in the bud," Ananias put in.

"That's the place to nip 'em," Tex laughed.

"You haven't yet told us what happened to you," Tucson said to Lullaby.

"Haven't had a chance," Lullaby drawled. "Everybody's been listening to that story of yours. Shucks! There wasn't much to my fracas. I saw that Lombard gang when they rode in. They looked primed for trouble, so I wasn't much surprised when things commenced kicking up. They did a lot of riding back and forth along Main Street, shooting guns and such. I warned 'em to be quiet, but they didn't see it my way. However, some of the townfolks was being plumb intimidated, so I knew I'd have to get busy—"

"Thereupon," Stony cut in, "I suppose you headed for a restaurant and ordered a big meal."

"If you were just twice as smart as you think you are," Lullaby said witheringly, "you still wouldn't have any brains." He got back to his story: "Pretty quick Lombard's gang got off their horses and had a few drinks in the Sunfisher. Next a couple of 'em started a fight out in front of the hotel. I recognized it as a fake fight right from the start, so I didn't waste any time rapping my gun barrel around their heads. When they come to, they found handcuffs on 'em. But one didn't come to for quite a spell. I must have hit him harder than I realized."

Lullaby took a drink from his beer bottle and continued: "The whole gang got around, then, and tried to make me release the two skunks. One could walk; the other was still

Watch **MIDWEST**  
**RADIO** after Victory  
FOR ADS LIKE THIS...

**SAVE UP TO 50%**  
on this new **MIDWEST Radio**  
**FACTORY-TO-YOU**

**FREQUENCY MODULATION**

**PUT THIS CHASSIS IN YOUR PRESENT CABINET**

**MIDWEST RADIO CORPORATION**  
CINCINNATI, OHIO  
DEPT. 0200

*and there will be MIDWEST'S FAMOUS 30 DAYS HOME TRIAL*

*Midwest Radio*

**TO ALL** its old friends and customers... and to the rising new generation, too, Midwest Radio Corporation makes this pledge: Once Victory has been won... once the needs of our Armed Forces for radio and elec-

**SEND FOR FREE CALENDAR**

Send us 10c in stamps or coin for a War Savings Stamp and receive in addition an attractive 4-color calendar with International Time Calculator absolutely **FREE**.

tronic instruments has been met and production for civilian demands is approved... Midwest will again be back with its world-famous Factory-To-You plan for buying highest quality radio and electronic equipment — at savings up to 50%.

**MIDWEST RADIO CORPORATION**  
DEPT. 42-8 CINCINNATI, OHIO

groggy. So I made the one who could walk drag his pard down to my jail. The rest of the gang followed, making a lot of talk about drilling me. I told 'em flat out if they shot me, I'd put a hole in their pard—I didn't care which one—at the same time. To back up my statement, I held my gun on the scuts all the way to the jail. Lombard finally called his gang off."

Lullaby grinned. "It looked for a spell as though it would be hot, but after I put the two in cells, things were plumb quiet for the next fifteen minutes. Next thing I knew Ettinger came in my office and said if I didn't release his pals, he and the rest of Lombard's crew would break into the jail and take 'em away from me. I run him out of the office with a kick in the pants. About five minutes later the whole gang came storming my office. I locked my door and started shooting back. Just about that time you fellers arrived."

Stony shook his head. "Seems like we're always pulling you out of trouble, Lullaby. When you going to learn to look out for yourself?"

"When you quit asking fool questions," Lullaby snapped.

"That's the way people learn things," Stony said defensively. "By asking questions."

"That rule doesn't apply to you," Lullaby stated. "You're always asking questions and you haven't learned anything yet."

"Probably because it's always you I ask. Nobody can learn anything from a dim wit."

"Look, scatter mind," Lullaby said

insultingly, "everybody knows I had to teach you to read and write. With my degree from college—"

"Yaah! Your degree!" Stony said scornfully. "What degree—something like 30 below zero?"

"Now don't you try to put the chill on me," Lullaby snapped.

Their wrangling continued, to the delight and amazement of the others. Somebody bought another round of drinks. Tucson took Red's arm and drew him outside.

"I've been doing some thinking," Tucson announced.

"What about, Tucson?"

Tucson smiled meaningly. "Well, for one thing, there's going to be a nice moon, tonight. I wonder how the Twin Sisters will look under moonlight. You should ask Molly to show you sometime. I think she'd be more than willing."

Red flushed and grinned. "That's an idea."

"You know more of what happened today," Tucson continued, "than I had time to tell Molly when I was there. And things have happened since. She'll be anxious to get the story. Besides, she and Maria are there alone with Clem. I think there should be a man there, in case anything came up."

"I'll get started right away," Red said.

"And something else, Red," Tucson went on, "Molly's going to have a nice chunk of money from her sale of Twin Sisters."

Red's face fell. "Yeah, I'd forgotten that."

"I was just thinking," Tucson con-



timed, "that the Dollar Sign L will be up for sale probably, right soon. It's a darn good piece of grazing land and the buildings aren't bad—nothing wrong that paint and a little lumber won't fix up. The place will likely sell cheap. Just in case you know of any young redhead that's aiming to get married and wants to be independent on a spread of his own, let me know. My pards and I are always ready to back a coming cowman—"

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, Tucson!" There was something close to idolatry in Red's eyes as he tried to find words with which to thank Tucson. "You—you're really great! I don't know how to thank you—"

"Don't try, Red. Here." From his pocket Tucson drew a folded sheet of paper. "You'd better take this bill of sale to Molly. It's about time you returned it to her, after making off with it the way you did a short spell back. Luckily, I had that paper and my authority from the governor stuck down in my boot last night when Lombard and his gang grabbed me. They never did think to look in my boot, I reckon. Now go on, hurry out to the ranch and tell Molly we'll see her later."

He cut short further thanks, watched Red fondly as the young fellow hustled in search of his horse, then returned to the barroom.

The men were still drinking at the bar. Stony said shrewdly: "What you been doing, pard, playing Cupid again?"

"You might call it that," Tucson

GUN-SMOKE BRAND



Get into

# RADIO ELECTRONICS TELEVISION now!



Your opportunity is here. Radio technicians needed everywhere — afield in action and at home in industry. Get into Radionics now. National School offers tested home training method—an actual extension of training you would receive if attending school in person.

## SHOP METHOD, HOME TRAINING

For 38 years, National Schools has trained ambitious men for Top Pay Trades. The same technique, the identical shop methods that are so successful in training Radio men at the School, are now available to you by National's Plan of Home Training.

**COMMAND GOOD JOBS** as Radio Technician in Uncle Sam's forces or in civilian industries. National's actual shop practice methods qualify you. Investigate!

## FREE SAMPLE LESSON!

Act Now. You'll be amazed when you receive our Free Trial Lesson and full details. No obligation; no cost. Investigate. Earn while learning.

**NATIONAL SCHOOLS**  
Los Angeles, Calif.  
Est. 1905



### MAIL COUPON FOR FREE LESSON & BOOK

National Schools, Dept. 1-55R  
4000 S. Figueroa, Los Angeles 37, Calif.

(Mail in envelope or paste on penny postcard)

Mail me FREE, without obligation, one Lesson and Opportunity Book, with full details about how I CAN become a RADIO Technician.

NAME \_\_\_\_\_ AGE \_\_\_\_\_  
ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_  
CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_

smiled. He took from Stony's hand the cigarette the cowboy had just finished rolling, scratched a match and lighted it.

"Maybe you'd like it better if I furnished the match, too," Stony suggested with some sarcasm, as he again got out his tobacco and brown papers.

"There are a lot of things I'd like furnished," Tucson said, eyes twinkling. "Eggs and bacon and spuds and steak and coffee and . . . and— You see, it just occurred to me that I haven't had anything to eat since supper last night. Let's find some food."

"There," Lullaby stated enthusiastically, "speaks a man after my own mind."

"That's one place he never will find any nourishment," Stony sneered.

"I don't know about that," Lullaby protested. "Wasn't it some great writer who said: 'Eating maketh a full mind'?"

"I don't know who said it," Stony

grinned, "but one Lullaby Joslin is sure a living contradiction of said statement."

The remark started a fresh argument that was momentarily halted when Stony and Lullaby discovered that Tucson had left without them. They found their pard, three-quarters of an hour later, in the hotel dining room, with an imposing array of empty platters on the table before him and a contented smile on his bronzed features.

"Pards," Tucson greeted them, "I've just reached the conclusion that there's nothing wrong with this life that can't be remedied with good food and a few drinks."

"And a mite of ammunition slung in the right direction," Stony added.

"And," Lullaby drawled, "we mustn't forget a little travel and what Stony calls *real* excitement."

"In the days to come," Tucson predicted, "we'll have plenty of all those things—leastwise, we always have had 'em. They're what make life worth living."

THE END



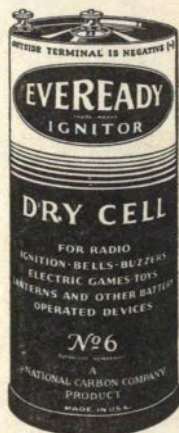
# LIGHTER MOMENTS with fresh Eveready Batteries



*"One Moment, Please . . . There's Someone on the Wire!"*

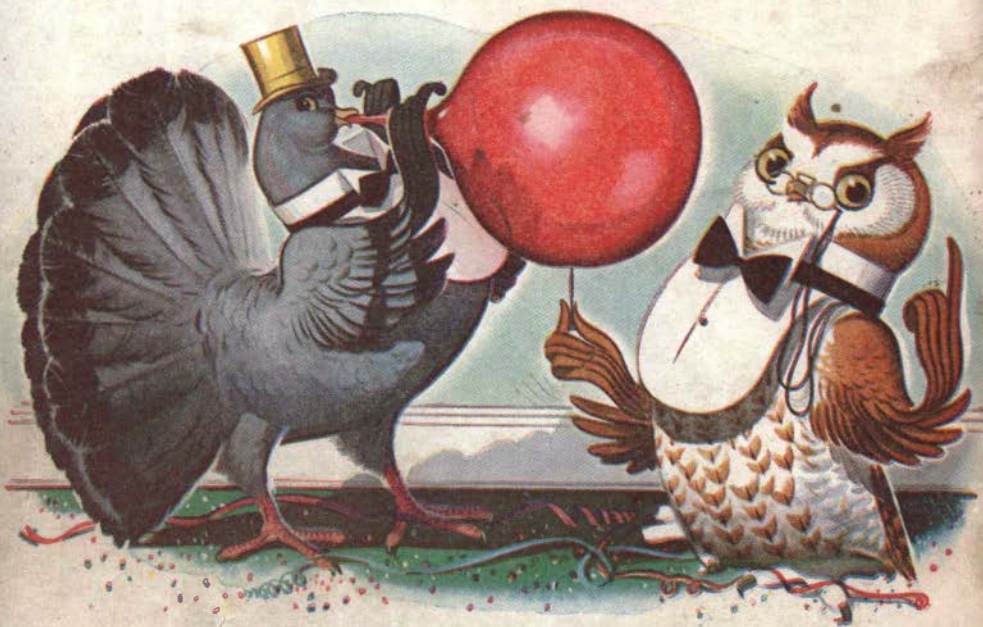
RIGHT NOW the armed forces are using much of our production of "Eveready" No. 6 Dry Cells for field telephone units. That limits the civilian supply, so please use yours carefully.

*Are you buying all the War Bonds you can as often as you can?*



*The words "Eveready" and "Ignitor" are registered trade-marks of National Carbon Company, Inc.*

# Seven things you can do to stop Inflation



Keep prices down! For Victory and your own post-war security do these seven things: 1. Buy only what you need and make things last. 2. Pay no more than ceiling prices. 3. Pay increased taxes willingly. 4. Pay off old debts and avoid new ones. 5. Live within present income. 6. Build up savings and life insurance for the future. 7. Buy and *hold more* War Bonds.



Clear-heads choose Calvert

Sponsored by the makers of

# Calvert

The whiskey with the "Happy Blending"

Calvert Distillers Corp., New York City. BLENDED WHISKEY Calvert "Reserve": 86.8 Proof—65% Grain Neutral Spirits. Calvert "Special": 86.8 Proof—60% Grain Neutral Spirits.