STREET AND SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

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THE MYSTERY OF WHISPERING SPRINGS

a full length novel by BENNETT FOSTER

also RAY NAFZIGER • E. C. LINCOLN • NORMAN FOX

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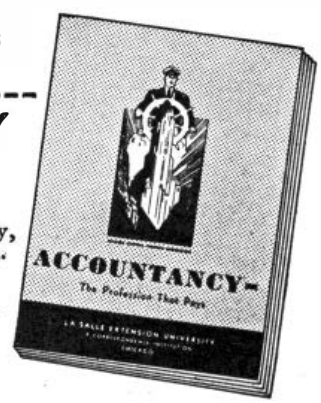

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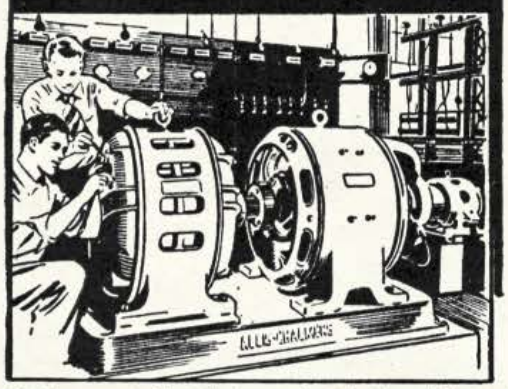

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WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

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CONTENTS FOR DECEMBER 9, 1939 VOL. CLXXVIII NO. 5

BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

SERIAL

SHORT STORIES

WESTERN STORY FEATURES

DEPARTMENTS

COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

10c per COPY
$2 Six Months
$4 per YEAR

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

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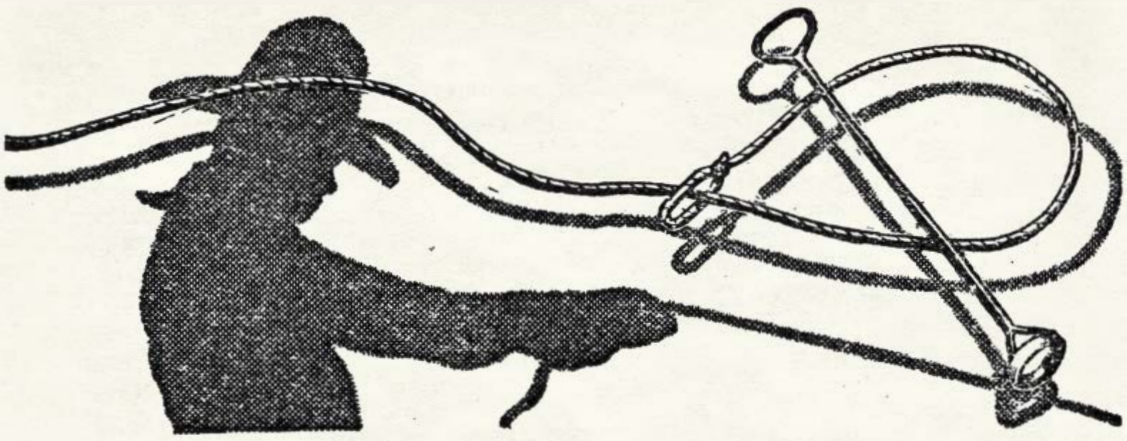
Printed in the U. S. A.

STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC. • 79 7th AVE., NEW YORK, N. Y.



The Roundup

WHEN we published Cherry Wilson's feature novel, BRAND OF THE THUNDER GOD, in last week's issue, we wanted to give you the history of this ever-popular author, but unfortunately space didn't permit. So we take this opportunity of making you acquainted with a writer whose warmly human stories have endeared her to countless of our readers and who ranks high in the tally book of those who thrill and entertain you through the pages of Western Story Magazine. Writes Mrs. Wilson:

"I was born and raised in Pennsylvania, migrating with my parents to the Pacific Northwest when I was sixteen years old. After a short time they returned to the Keystone State. But I—then, and ever, a dyed-in-the-wool Westerner—stayed on. For, here in Washington, I had met my affinity in chaps and sombrero, was married to him, and immediately left for Reno, Nevada—on our honeymoon! Why *Reno*, where marriage is supposed to end? Well, we wanted to get the last mile out of our money. And it worked out Reno—almost to a penny. But we didn't worry. We were young, very much in love, and Bob could do anything from bulldogging a steer to fiddling for a dance, while I wasn't exactly helpless myself.

"Thus began four years of joyous gypsying, doing anything that came to hand: taking charge of a cattle ranch near Carson City; 'packing' for a mine out of Redding, California. (Bob doing the packing, of course, but I was always along, as I've always been with him through everything); timber work, and so forth; then up to the Coeur d'Alene country of Idaho and the mining business (in which we've always had interests). Throughout this time I had been doing bits for local newspapers—feature stories, correspondence, even, for a while, writing a column under the heading 'Cherry's Corner.' So things were when, suddenly one day in Spokane, as the press sheet I am inclosing dramatically states, the crash came.

"Bob fell desperately ill with pneumonia. Complications developed. Doctors said his one chance for life was to get out in the open again—rough it. And one mid-December day, with three feet of snow on the ground, the thermometer at twenty-eight below zero, we moved on a raw homestead in the mountains of what had formerly

been the north half of the Colville Indian Reservation. 'Crazy!' everybody said. 'You can't make a go of it.' And it did look pretty hopeless. No possible way to make a living until spring came and we could cut our timber (if Bob was able to cut it), and haul it to market.

"We knew nothing of writing beyond our little newspaper experience. But one day, grasping at anything, I wrote a story, sent it to Western Story Magazine—and got a check! It seemed a miracle then. And now, after years of fiction work, it still seems a miracle. Anyhow, it was the beginning of a writing career.

"Other stories were written in the little cabin that winter, and they, too, sold. And so we were enabled to live on the homestead and 'prove up' on the claim. Then, with Bob's health regained, we began rambling again, California, Arizona, Montana, Utah, Mexico—even a pasear to New York.

"In the years since homestead days I've sold well over two hundred stories, innumerable novelettes and serials, five books, and six motion pictures, all of which had been serialized in Western Story Magazine.

"For the last two years we have alternated between fiction writing, motion picture and radio work. This and other work kept us in Hollywood or over in the Arizona desert, within touch of Hollywood, for all that time. But always we come back to the Northwest where we like it best. And always we try to spend a part of each year out in the wilds.

"For we're probably the greatest lovers of Nature of all times. We love the outdoors and the wild things that live therein. Always we have lived at peace with them. Have never found an animal that wouldn't be friendly if it had a chance. Sometimes a little too friendly, if you can imagine that. Or did you ever share your home with an overgrown cub bear, for instance? Even here in the city we have made our chipmunks so friendly that they practically live in the house with us. Often our animal friends creep into our stories. As the chipmunks did recently in THE WOLFER OF PHANTOM CREEK, which you published some time ago."

And, as we go to press, we're mighty glad to say that a recent letter from Mrs. Wilson tells us that there's another novel on the way.

In next week's issue—

Heading the list is a stirring full-length novel by Kenneth Gilbert, whose yarns of the Far North are always welcomed by Western Story readers. GOLDEN MUKLUKS is the dramatic story of a man who baited himself with gold in order to trap the mysterious killers who had tortured and murdered his father. The climax of this strange man hunt takes place against the background of a yawning crevasse and makes mighty thrilling reading.

Can a man ever forget that his was the bullet that accidentally ended the life of his best friend? That was the problem Riley Spain had to face, and a big problem it was, for the bullet that had killed Gus Darien seemed to have left an unhealing scar on the spirit of the man who had been his pard. Look for BULLET BRAND, a dramatic story by John Colohan.

Also down in the tally book for next week are stories by S. Omar Barker, Eugene R. Dutcher, Glenn H. Wichman, Luke Short, and many others, plus, of course, a full string of departments.

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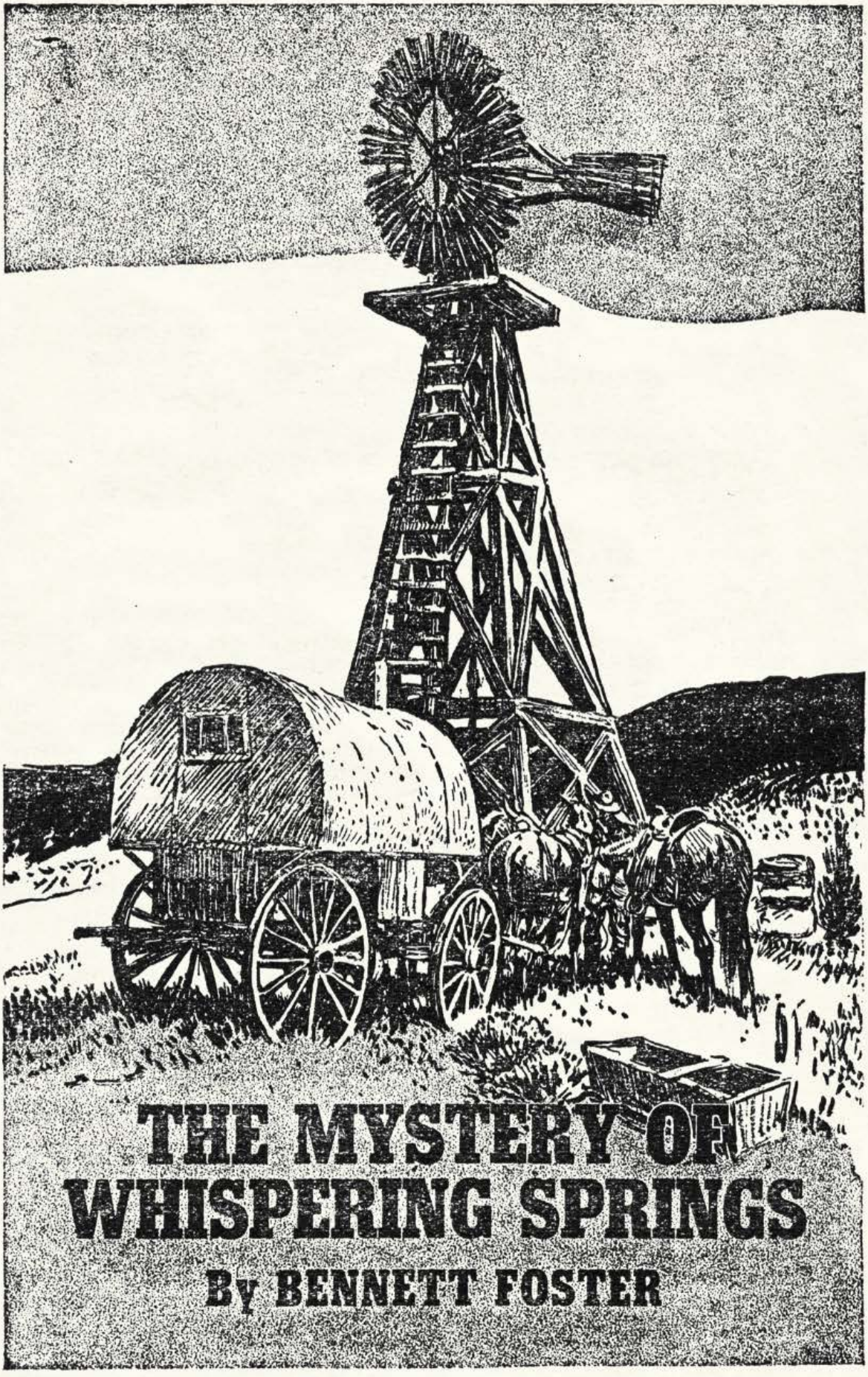


THE MYSTERY OF WHISPERING SPRINGS

By BENNETT FOSTER

CHAPTER I

THE WINDMILLER

JOHN ENGLAND clucked to the mules and scowled at their mouse-gray rumps. It was a fool idea any way you took it, this business of coming into the country under cover. But, fool idea or not, here he was with two mules, a sheep wagon, and a set of windmill tools, brogans on his feet instead of riding boots, and bib overalls in place of Levis or California pants. He didn't even *feel* like a deputy United States marshal any more. He felt like a windmiller, and even the gold shield, pinned unaccustomedly inside his shirt, and the rubbing of the .44 Smith & Wesson in its holster sewn inside the overall bib, couldn't banish the feeling.

"Geddup!" England commanded. "Geddup, or I'll—" The blacksnake whip circled out and popped viciously over the mules' backs, not touching them but conveying a world of menace in its hiss.

The mules flopped their ears and increased their pace not at all. Squawman, fastened to the hames of the off mule, looked back reproachfully. Squawman weighed twelve hundred pounds and looked, even in the best of flesh, like a raw-boned plow horse, but the big bay son of a gun could cover a hundred miles between daylight and dark and, stoked on oats, turn around and do it over again. A little softness crept into John England's slate-gray eyes as he looked at Squawman. It was mighty good to have one friend along in a strange country.

The mules, having finished the pull, stopped automatically at the top of the hill. John England, rising from his seat, looked out over the mules' ears and forgot Squawman. There, below him, stretching away to the south, was the Landmark Valley with Landmark Butte a little dot at its farther end, and the Rim reaching on and on, black and forbidding like a great snake.

The sun caught silver from Latigo Creek and threw it in England's eyes. Away to the west the Silver Horn River twisted in a line of green, and directly below, a black clump spoke of buildings and a ranch. From where he stood, John England could see fifty miles to south and west. Somewhere within that area Bob Louderman was buried. But, more important, somewhere within that reach of country were the men who had killed him.

"Geddup!" England snapped at the mules, subsiding to the seat once more. "Geddup, you line-backed jackasses!" The off mule grunted and the nigh mule flopped his ears, and the wheels of the sheep wagon creaked as the descent was begun.

John England shifted on the seat, settling himself. Once more he felt like a deputy United States marshal. Once more he recalled that he had asked for this job, that it was his own idea, coming into the country this way. Fortunate it was that he knew enough about windmilling to carry it through. Once more the slate-gray eyes were hard and without depth, for John England was driving his sheep wagon, hauling his windmill outfit down into the Landmark country to find Bob Louderman's body and the men who had killed his friend and fellow officer.

THE mules did not stop again until England turned them off the road through a gate into the yard of a ranch. Two dogs came barking their challenge, halting just at the edge of safety before they reached the heels of the mules. England waited for the clamor of the dogs

to die down, and looked about him.

The log house, long and low, was dark save where a lamp burned in the kitchen, its light streaming through the windows into the dusk of the yard. There were corrals behind the house, and a barn and sheds. A windmill creaked as it pumped, and water gurgled into a tank in the corrals. From close by the windmill a horse neighed, and, peering through the gloom, England could see the animal tied to the corral bars. The dogs, having given their alarm, quit barking and sniffed at the wagon wheels. England dismounted over a wheel, stretched his cramped muscles and lifted his voice.

"Hello—" he called, and stopped before he had finished the time-honored hail of the strange rider. The back door had swung open. Light streamed through and then, blotting out that light, a figure flitted through the open doorway and came running.

England was momentarily blinded by the light in his eyes. He got a confused impression that the runner was a girl. Then again the light was blotted out and a voice, harsh and deep, rasped an imprecation.

"You little devil! I'll—"

John England thrust forward one brogan-covered foot. The girl was gone, lost somewhere behind the sheep wagon, but the man, charging after her, tripped over England's extended foot, up-ended and, like a cow hitting the end of a rope, crashed down to the ground. The dogs were in an uproar, and England stood, poised.

The fallen man scrambled up. There, at the edge of the light from the kitchen door, his face was indistinct, but his actions were definite enough. He roared, inarticulate, wordless, and fists swinging, charged.

England was ready. Eyes narrow, shoulder muscles bunched, he timed that roaring charge, and at the exact moment, when blow and charge would coincide, swung his left hand in a long, looping stroke. The hard fist crashed home and once again the charging man was up-ended.

Eyes fixed on him, John England took a step, reached under the wagon seat and brought out a short-barreled Winchester.

"No, you don't!" he warned, the first words he had spoken since the door swung open. "Let it alone!"

The man stopped fumbling at his waist. The barrel of England's carbine was in the light and it was very steady, a deterrent to further hostilities.

"Damn you!" the fallen man rasped, his voice thick. "You—"

"You belong here?" John England asked.

"You—" The sitting man rose to heights of invective. England checked the unflattering estimation of his ancestry by moving the Winchester.

"I see you don't belong here," he announced, answering his own question. "That's your horse by the corral. Fork him an' pull out!" Cold command was in his voice and in the motion of the Winchester.

"Why, you—"

"Shut up!" Still in the shadows and his features indistinguishable, England's tone must have carried utter finality to the man on the ground. Silence followed the command.

"Now, get up, forget that gun of yours an' fork your horse!"

The fallen man scrambled to his knees, came up more slowly as the Winchester gestured disapproval, and gained his feet. From the far side of the wagon there came a

thump, a shrill yelp, and then the gradually diminishing agony of a dog that has been well kicked by a No. 2 shoe. Squawman, too, had taken a hand in the festivities.

"Your dog?" John England asked and then, not waiting for an answer, "Get your horse an' follow him!"

The man who had risen moved forward, stepping into the light. England saw a dark face distorted with anger, eyes slitted, lips curled back until white teeth showed. For a moment the man was silhouetted against the light, then he had crossed it and was moving toward the tied saddle horse. Winchester at the alert, John England followed, stood by watchfully while the horse was untied and mounted. He remained, half hidden by the dusk, while the rider turned his mount and moved away.

THE mounted man spoke no further word, nor did John England. No word was necessary. But rage sat upon the man, showing in his posture, in the one glance he cast back as he crossed the path of light. Thoughtfully, England put the wagon between himself and the other. No use of taking chances on a shot being thrown back out of the gloom. The man rode on, the hoofbeats of his horse diminishing in the distance. When they faded entirely, John England came from behind the wagon and stepped out into the light.

"You can come out now," he said quietly. "I won't hurt you."

There was no answer.

"You can come now." England's voice was reassuring.

He waited. There was a rustling sound from close by, then a footfall padded soft, and the girl stepped into the light.

Long black braids hung over her shoulders. Her eyes, too, were black and the light showed high cheekbones and a copper-skinned face. Lips parted a little, eyes wide, she stood there, one hand lifted to touch her throat. Here was no white woman, but an Indian girl, and a very pretty one.

"Well," England said, a little disconcerted. "Well—"

Gradually the fright left the girl's face. A stolid mask supplanted it. Only the eyes remained bright and alive.

"I go get supper," she announced, her voice a throaty contralto. "Supper time now."

She turned and padded toward the kitchen, moccasined feet noiseless on the hard earth. John England leaned the short-barreled Winchester against the wagon wheel and watched her go.

"Now what," he asked himself, thoughtfully scratching the back of his neck, "do you think of that? Huh?" Squawman flicked an ear at the sound of his master's voice, and after a moment England stirred, moving from the wheel and bending down to unhook the chain tugs of the mules. Then, with the mules freed from the wagon and with Squawman following like a well-trained dog, John England took his team to the corrals for water.

He had watered the mules and was debating the advisability of unharnessing them, when he heard horses coming in. Leaving the mules and Squawman at the tank, he went out to meet these new arrivals. It was quite dark now and the men, three of them, rode into the light and dismounted.

Having seen the sheep wagon, the oldest of the riders stood in the light that came through the still open kitchen door, and waited until England stepped out of the darkness.

There was a little awkward pause, then England said, "I was just movin' through the country an' I stopped for water, an'—"

"You better stay the night," the man said, weariness in his voice. "I reckon Birdsong has got some supper ready. Wait till I unsaddle an' we'll go to the house, Mr.—"

"England," John England supplied the missing name. "I'm a windmiller. I heard that this was a windmill country, an' I thought there might be some work for me. Things have played out in my line where I come from."

The older man brightened visibly and held out his hand. "I'm Louis Godine," he said. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. England. You've come to the right place. I was goin' to send to Landmark tomorrow for Jake Striber to come out and fix a well. He's had two shots at it an' ain't got it fixed yet. If you're lookin' for work—"

"I can use a job," England said. "I won't brag, but I've fixed some wells."

That was true. Down in the Panhandle—a windmill country if there ever was one—he had worked on many a windmill tower and well.

Godine grunted his satisfaction. "Then take the harness off your team an' we'll go eat," he invited. "You got your tools with you?"

"In the wagon," England answered, and moved off to where the mules stood.

The meal, eaten in the ranchhouse kitchen, was silent enough. Godine and his two riders, Buck Creasy and Tommy Pradeau, were hungry, and after brief introductions the four of them sat down and stoked away food. When the meal was finished, cigarettes were rolled and Godine lighted a pipe. The food and tobacoo loosened tongues. Godine asked a few questions—not many, for that was not etiquette—and England answered them.

In the casual conversation England left the impression that he was from the Panhandle. This was correct enough, but he did not say how long a time had passed since he had left that rolling country. Creasy had worked for an outfit in the Panhandle and knew something of the country and its inhabitants. The talk rolled along while the Indian girl worked about the kitchen, cleaning up after the meal. When she had finished she took a lamp and walked out of the room. Soon Godine, stretching, arose from his chair.

"Bedtime," he announced. "I can stake you to a bed, England."

"I'll sleep in the wagon," England said. "Thanks just the same, but I got a bed in there."

"Suit yourself," agreed Godine. "Four o'clock is going to come pretty early, boys."

Creasy and Pradeau, taking the hint, got up from their chairs and said "good night." They walked on out, heading toward the bunkhouse, and Godine turned to England again.

"I don't want you to think that a fellow can use a lantern for a bed on the Concha," he said apologetically, "but we're workin' cattle over by the Rim an' we've got to get an early start. When Ruthie's here we generally don't make so long a day of it."

He answered the question in England's eyes. "Ruthie's my daughter," he said. "She's off visitin'. In the mornin' I'll take you out to the well that's been causin' trouble. It's right on the way to where we're workin'. Good night."

England said, "Good night," and walked out to his wagon. The lamp

burned for a few minutes in the kitchen and then was extinguished. The Concha had gone to bed.

CHAPTER II

ENGLAND TAKES ORDERS

ENGLAND was stretched out in his bed in the sheep wagon when a scratching on the canvas broke into his thoughts. He listened a moment. "Yes?" he said, his voice

low. From beyond the canvas cover of the wagon, Birdsong's throaty whisper came to him.

"You don't say anything?"

"About what?" England asked.

"About Andreas Lemoine? About the trouble?"

John England grunted. It was evident that Birdsong wanted no mention made of her visitor and about the difficulty in the ranch yard.

"I won't say anything," he agreed, and waited. But no sound came from beyond the canvas and, after a moment, England lay back once more. Indians were queer people, mighty queer. The Landmark country was right up against the Broken Bow agency, he knew, and of course that would be where Godine had got Birdsong. The Sioux girl did not want anything said about Andreas Lemoine and the trouble he had encountered. Probably a lovers' quarrel, England thought, and grinned. Lemoine. That was a French name. Andreas Lemoine was probably a breed and had become too ardent in his courting. Well, now he had a sore spot on his jaw to remind him that ardor did not always pay dividends, and there was no need of causing Birdsong any uneasiness. So thinking, John England drifted off to sleep.

Four o'clock did come early. England, wakened by Pradeau passing by on his way to the corral, rolled over in his bed and sat up. Deliberately he began to dress, pulling on the hated bib overalls and stamping his feet down into the cold leather of the low-heeled shoes. He was using the wash bench at the bunkhouse when Pradeau came back with the horses, and by the time the horses were penned and England's toilet finished, Godine was at the kitchen door, calling that breakfast was ready.

At breakfast it was decided that, rather than take the wagon out to the broken well, England would accompany the riders on horseback. Godine wanted to get to the work and he did not choose to be delayed by the slowness of the wagon. Accordingly, after the meal all four men saddled horses, England bringing an old worn-out saddle from the wagon. They rode off together, the mules, left in the corral, thrusting their black muzzles over the top bars and mourning plaintively after Squawman.

Some eight miles from the ranchhouse, Godine and England parted company with Creasy and Pradeau, taking a dimly marked road toward the east and the Rim, while the other two went on toward the south. The road wound over the uneven country, climbed a little, and stopped. John England and Godine stopped with it. The sheer escarpment of the Rim was broken where the road ended, a canyon splitting

up through the limestone and the black basalt of the caprock. Just at the mouth of the canyon stood a windmill tower and three roughly built troughs for salt. Despite the breeze that rustled the cedars in the canyon, the windmill was not turning.

"There's your job," Godine announced, dropping down from his horse. "That's the Whispering Springs well."

LEADING their mounts, the men walked toward the tower. There was a big dirt tank below the well, dry now but with moisture still clinging to the bottom earth. Farther down the slope were three small galvanized tanks, fed by gravity from the dirt tank above. These too, were dry.

"I need this water," Godine announced. "I want to throw a bunch of wet cows down here right away. How long do you think it will take to fix the well?"

"I can't tell until I look at it and find out what's the matter," England answered. "You called this the Whispering Springs? Did it use to be a spring?"

"Used to be," Godine nodded. "Then something happened and the spring quit running. They put in a dug well but it kept caving and sanding up, so when I bought the Concha I had a caisson outfit put in. It's a four-inch well and pumps lots of water when it's right, but if I had it to do over I think I'd put in a two-inch outfit. A two-inch well will run in lighter winds."

"But won't deliver so much water," England pointed out.

"No," Godine agreed, and then, briskly, "Well, I'll leave you to look it over. You figure out what's the matter and go back to the ranch and get your outfit and have at it. If you need anything we'll get it from town."

"All right," England said absently, looking at the tower.

"I'll see you tonight, then," Godine announced. "You'd better figure on eating with us and staying at the ranch. So long."

With that he mounted and, turning his horse, loped away. John England walked up to the fence that surrounded the dirt well, tied Squawman to a post and, climbing over the wire, went to the well.

A cursory examination did not give him much information. The tower and wheel were all right, and the rod rattled in the casing. When England turned on the mill and watched, the rod traveled steadily and showed no sign of being broken. The trouble then lay in the leathers, the cylinder, or in the checks. England grunted.

Shutting off the mill again, he pulled up two planks from the platform and peered down. As Godine had said, the well had been dug. Only a part of the boards used to line the hole were still in place. Again England grunted. Probably a piece of board from the cribbing had fallen, and working down, was caught in the check or had been pulled up into the cylinder. Anyhow it would be a job.

Having finished his examination of the well, the pseudo-windmiller caught Squawman and, mounting, started back to the Concha. Things were working out about right. He had a job and was established as a windmiller. That was all to the good. He could camp at the well and, while he worked, watch the country. Then at night, when the day's work was done, he could saddle Squawman and make a ride.

Bob Lauderman's last report to the marshal's office had been con-

cerned with the fact that whiskey was being run into the Broken Bow Agency. The report had been mailed from Landmark, the little shipping town down the valley, and Bob had been, according to his report, tracing down the source of the whiskey. John England frowned. Running whiskey to the Sioux was a Federal offense and carried a heavy penalty. Both England and Abe Struthers, the United States marshal at Cheyenne, were sure that Louderman had been killed because of that whiskey running. A deputy United States marshal does not simply disappear and cease to be heard from without cause; and England was certain the only thing that would have stopped Bob Louderman was death. He had punched cows with Louderman, shared his blankets with him, been his partner, so he had asked Struthers for this assignment. No matter how long it took, no matter what obstacles lay in the way, John England intended to find out what had become of his partner and, having found out, finish the job.

A cow and calf bobbed up out of a coulee close beside the road and stood looking at the rider. England reined in Squawman and surveyed the cow. The Concha brand was plain on her ribs: a circle with the two parallel bars marked within it.

"Mebbe," John England said to the cow, "you were around when Bob got caught. Mebbe you know how it happened. I wish I did."

WHEN he reached the ranch, England went directly to the corral and, catching the mules, harnessed them. He was hooking the mules to his wagon when a girl came out of the house and stood on the back porch. This was not the Sioux girl, Birdsong, but a far different person. England finished hooking the tugs and put the lines up on the wagon, while the girl came on down the steps from the porch.

She was small, and big black eyes made her face appear curiously pinched. Her hair was raven-black and curly, but the thing that attracted attention was not her face nor hair, but her figure. She was humpbacked. England glanced hastily at her deformity and then bent his gaze once more to her face.

"Who are you?" the girl demanded, her voice oddly clear and light.

England touched his battered, greasy hat. "I'm John England," he answered. "I was hired to fix the Whispering Springs well. I just come in—"

"Father hired you," the girl said. "I see."

This then was Ruthie, the daughter of Louis Godine. "Yes, ma'am," England answered.

"Have you found out what the trouble is?" Ruthie asked.

"Not yet," England answered. "I'm just goin' out with my tools."

"You'll be in tonight?" England caught a flash from the big black eyes.

"Why"—he hesitated—"I thought I'd camp out there. I won't lose any time that way, and—"

"You'll come back tonight." It was a command. "You'll waste less time coming in and going out than you would cooking for yourself. Come in tonight."

"Why—" England began, then stopped.

The black eyes were coolly calculating. "You'll find that I can give orders," Ruthie Godine stated. "Father will stop and tell you to come in. You'll save time and trouble by taking my word for it."

"Yes. ma'am," England said.

"And you'll be paid by the job, when you get the well repaired," the girl made final announcement. She turned then and started back toward the house. England watched her disappear through the kitchen door. He stood, looking at that blank opening for a moment, collecting his thoughts. From the kitchen came Ruthie's voice, light and high and flicking like a whiplash as she gave orders to the Sioux girl.

Involuntarily, John England shuddered. Never had he seen anyone like Ruthie Godine. That small woman was a force, a driving power, a restrained violence. Slowly, England climbed to the wagon seat and, picking up the lines, clucked to the mules. He would do as he was told: leave the wagon at the well and come in at night. He had received his orders and he knew that he must see Ruthie Godine again, must plumb the force that ordered the Concha.

It was noon when he reached Whispering Springs once more. There was food in the wagon, and England ate a cold lunch, opening a can of beans and a box of crackers. The mules and Squawman grazed where he had hobbled them, the mules staying close beside the bay and yet maintaining a respectful distance.

Having eaten, England brought out his tools and began work. Disconnecting the pump rod, he pulled it and then plumbed the well. The wire he used showed that there was water at a depth of about twenty feet. So he was right; the trouble lay at the bottom of the well and not in the cylinder. The next thing was to pull the pipe.

He made ready to do that, climbing the tower, taking up a heavy crowbar and a block and tackle. By the time he had finished his preparations, working alone and slowly, the sun was sliding down toward the Silverhorn River and long shadows lay across the land. He put away his tools, locked the door of the sheep wagon and, saddling Squawman, made ready to depart. There was not much chance that the wagon would be molested, still, when he mounted, he sat on Squawman undecided. He wished that he could stay alone and secure in the sheep wagon. Presently he turned the horse and, moving decisively, started the mules back toward the ranch.

CHAPTER III

A PIECE OF SILK

SUPPER was ready when England got in to the Concha. The two riders, Creasy and Pradeau, had already washed up and, their hair, glossy with water, was neatly combed. Making a hasty toilet, England joined them in the kitchen. Birdsong waited on them, silent as always, but Godine and Ruthie did not eat with them. At the table Creasy mentioned that there was company. When the meal was finished and the men had left the table to go out into the yard to smoke, Godine came around from the front of the house accompanied by two men. Godine came directly to England, his guests flanking him, and made his introductions.

"This is Carl Welch," he said, nodding to the heavy-bodied, middle-aged man at his right, "and this is Andreas Lemoine. This here is John England, Carl, the windmiller I was tellin' you about."

England shook hands with Welch. Lemoine stood back and did not extend his hand. England watched Lemoine narrowly. The last time he had seen that heavily handsome dark face it had been contorted into

a snarl. Now Lemoine kept his eyes blank and looked impassively at England, who said that he was glad to meet both men.

"I've got a well or two that needs attention," Welch said directly. "When you get through with Louis here, you can move right on down to my place. I'm just below Louis."

"Andreas!" Ruthie Godine's voice, light and clear and commanding, came from the front of the house. Lemoine turned and, with no word of excuse, walked away to answer that summons, and Godine and Welch exchanged glances.

"How long do you think you'll be on the Whispering Springs?" Godine asked England.

"I've got to pull the pipe," England answered. "The bottom check is stuck. It depends on how lucky I am."

"I'll pay you by the job," Godine announced. "You can stay at the ranch at night and take a lunch out with you. You'll make more time that way than you would cooking for yourself." The man echoed his daughter's words of that morning.

"All right," England agreed. "I'll make a price on the job when I find out how much work there is to do. I've been gettin' ten dollars a day."

Godine grunted as though hit in the belly, and England suppressed a grin. "But I won't charge you that," he added. "I want to get started here in this country an' I'll make you a price that's right."

"Well," Godine said, "I've got to have that water. Get it done as soon as you can."

ENGLAND said that he would, and Godine and Welch went back toward the front of the house. England drifted off toward the bunkhouse. There he found Creasy and Pradeau playing cribbage. They invited him to join them, changing the game to draw pitch. Both the Concha riders were young and were friendly enough, maintaing only that reserve that always exists between the man that works on foot and the man who does his work on horseback.

The game rocked along and England, turning on the friendliness of which he was capable, so eased the riders that they began to talk.

"I reckon," Pradeau said, "that you run into the boss today, didn't you?"

"He hired me last night," England answered.

Pradeau and Creasy exchanged looks. "I mean the boss," Pradeau said. "Ruthie. She gives the orders around here."

"Godine's daughter?" England suggested.

"Stepdaughter," Creasy corrected. "She's got the last word at the Concha. If jobs wasn't so scarce I'd pull out. She rides everybody. I'll be damned if I sabe why the Sioux girl sticks. Ruthie makes life hell for her."

England played the deuce of clubs. "Mark me up for low," he said. "So the girl kind of runs the place, does she?"

"Her an' that damned half-breed, Lemoine," Pradeau said. "He's Carl Welch's foreman, but he spends about half his time over here. He makes one crack at me an' I'll quit, damned if I don't. What's trumps?"

"Clubs," Creasy answered. "I could get along without Lemoine an' I could do without that bunch of hands Welch has got. Sometimes I think—" He broke off to count his tricks, the hand being over. England waited, but when the cards were dealt again the talk took a new direction.

It was enlightening enough. Pra-

deau and Creasy were familiar with the country and they discussed the work that they were doing. In that discussion localities and places were mentioned. England, slipping in an occasional adroit question, got a pretty good picture of the Landmark country. He learned that the agency bordered all along the Rim, that there was a road from Landmark to the agency headquarters, but that except for one other path, there was no way to the top except by the road.

"There used to be a trail up Whispering Springs, but there was a rock slide that filled it up," Creasy said. "Good thing, too. Them Sioux will steal anything that ain't nailed down. If they could get down through the Whispering Springs, we'd be missin' cattle." He frowned darkly.

"I wonder if my camp outfit will be all right out there," England said. "I kind of hated to leave it, but I was told to come in."

"I wouldn't leave it if I was you," Creasy advised. "I reckon a Sioux could come down that canyon afoot, an' if he did an' seen anything that he wanted, he'd take it."

"I'll talk to the boss in the morning," England announced. "Either I'll bring in the wagon or I'll stay out there."

The game went on, and presently Creasy announced that it was bedtime, and put away the cards. There was spare bedding, and England, undressing with the riders, took the indicated bunk and when the lamp was blown out, crawled into his blankets and lay thinking. Ruthie Godine ran the Concha, and she and Andreas Lemoine were on ultra-friendly terms. There in the dark, England grinned. He wondered if Ruthie would be as close to Lemoine if she knew that the lump on the breed's jaw had been caused by John England's fist, and if she knew that Andreas Lemoine was honeying around the Sioux girl, Birdsong.

IN the morning England left early for the well, riding Squawman, and leaving the mules at the ranch. Everything was just as he had left it, the wagon locked, nothing misplaced, everything all right. Having assured himself of that, England prepared to pull the pipe. He overhauled his block and tackle, looked to the timber hitch on the pipe, and then, because he was a horseman and not accustomed to working afoot, ran his rope through a single block on the bottom of the windmill tower, made fast the end to the saddlehorn and, mounting Squawman, took a strain.

The rope came tight as Squawman, looking back, and with England hanging off in the right stirrup, pulled away. There was a little creaking sound from the top of the well tower, a crackling, and then the heavy bar and the block came crashing down. England stared. If he had been under the tower, where normally he should have been, the crowbar and the block would have smashed him down, would have killed him!

Squawman stopped at a touch of the reins. For a long minute John England sat in his saddle, looking down at the catastrophe under the tower. Then, dismounting, he walked back slowly and looked up. The crowbar and the block lay in a tangle of rope at his feet; the well tower loomed above him.

Presently, England climbed the tower. There, on the wooden platform, a platform made from two-inch planks, he saw what had caused the wreck: two neat saw cuts had been made under the place where

the bar had rested. Just a little strain and the bar had pulled out that chunk of wood between the saw cuts.

England climbed down from the tower and went to his wagon. When he picked up his saw from its place in the tool locker he could see that there was still a grain or two of freshly cut wood in the teeth. He put the saw back and went to the well again. Somebody wanted him dead, wanted it badly.

A survey about the well showed no sign of trespassers. England went back to the tower. He had a choice; he could do two things about this: Either he could quit work on the well, make a big fuss about the attempt on his life and so lose any chance he might have of doing the job he was in Landmark Valley to do, or else he could keep his mouth shut and go ahead. With a faint grin on his tanned face, England began to untwist the tangled ropes and straighten out the blocks. Maybe, just maybe, he would learn who had made those saw cuts, and maybe, just maybe, that knowledge would help him along toward finding the murderer of Bob Louderman.

Having rerigged his tackle, England came down from the tower and made fast his chain to the top of the pipe. He had finished that when he saw that he had an audience. There, twenty feet away, a big, stolid-faced Indian sat on the back of a little pony. England nodded to the buck, spoke to him and, receiving no answer, went on about his work. Once more he ran his rope through the single block and tied it to the saddlehorn, and once more, mounting, he set Squawman to pulling. This time nothing above gave way and the pipe started up.

It was a slow process. Twice England had to change his hitch to get the pipe out, but when he finally had it out and on the ground he was repaid for his labor. Examination of the bottom check disclosed a piece of black rag, the thing that had caused the Whispering Springs well to quit pumping. England pulled out the rag and examined it. It was tattered and sopping wet. There were holes in it. But it was silk and the edge was hand-rolled. He had seen enough black silk neckerchiefs to know that this was a piece from one.

Puzzling over where that piece of

silk had come from and how it had gotten into the well, his thoughts were now interrupted. All this time the big Indian had sat his pony,

watching with expressionless eyes. Now the man dismounted, came padding over and, reaching out a copper-colored hand, took the piece of silk and grunted.

"Hey," England exclaimed, "give that here!"

Stolidly the buck put the silk in his pants pocket. "You name England?" he demanded gutturally.

"Yeah," England answered. "Say, give that silk here. I—"

"You good man," the buck announced. "Me Charlie. Birdsong my girl. You get out of this country."

"Now what the hell?" demanded England.

"No good country," announced

England realized the Indian knew all about the murder—if he could be made to talk.

Charlie. "Man get killed. You get out."

"The hell I will!" England said, his anger rising suddenly. "Give me that piece of silk an' pull your freight. *You* get out!"

Charlie's face was inscrutable. "Not good country!" he said again. "You go."

The tip of the silk was protruding from his pants pocket. Reaching out swiftly, England pulled out the piece and wadded it in the pocket of his own overalls. His gray eyes searched the stolid, heavy face of Charlie. "What do you know?" he demanded. "You—"

"I go now," Charlie announced with dignity, and turning, padded to his horse. He mounted, turned the pony, and without looking back rode into the mouth of the canyon above the well and disappeared into the cedars.

NOW what the hell do you know about that?" John England demanded. He stood, staring at the place where Charlie had disappeared, and then presently walked over to the pipe again. So Birdsong was Charlie's daughter, was she? And Charlie thought that England was a good man and had warned him to pull out of the country. And Charlie said that men got killed. Charlie knew something, probably knew plenty. John England shrugged. Getting information out of an Indian was like getting water out of a rock: it couldn't be done. Still, and England's face grew hard and grim, Charlie was going to have a visitor. Charlie was going to tell what he knew or he'd spend the next few years of his life shut up in a jail and questioned daily by somebody who knew how to ask questions.

"'Man get killed,' huh?" John England murmured. "It kind of sounds like Charlie knows about Bob. If he does—" He left that threat unfinished.

He was in a hurry now. He wanted to get this business done. Here was a definite lead and it must be followed. Still he was posing as a windmiller and he wasn't ready yet to throw that disguise aside. One fortunate coincidence was the fact that Charlie was Birdsong's father and that he, John England, had done the girl a favor. Perhaps if he stayed with this business of windmilling he would get more information.

Suddenly England grinned. There was a way for him to stay hidden and still pursue this lead. Abe Struthers had told him if he wanted any help all he had to do was say so. A letter to Abe would bring him over to the Broken Bow Agency, following the lead that Charlie had given, like a bloodhound baying Eliza. Abe knew how to handle Indians and was a regular old hellion to boot. Abe Struthers had been in the law business all his life and now, as United States marshal, he carried plenty of weight.

"I'll just write a letter tonight," John England murmured. "Won't Abe have a time of it, diggin' information out of that fat buck?"

Chuckling, he went on with his work.

Further examination brought to light the fact that the cylinder of the Whispering Springs well had served as long as it should. England grunted. He could go to town and mail his letter when he got a new cylinder. That was a good idea. Certainly he was not going to entrust a letter addressed to the United State marshal at Cheyenne, to anyone at the Concha Ranch, or to anyone in the whole Landmark

country. Just the address on that letter would give away the whole thing. The letter had to be mailed on the train and not in the post office, and it had to be mailed at once. The acquisition of a new cylinder would solve the whole problem. England began to replace his tools in the wagon. He would close up shop here and tomorrow he would go to Landmark. Things were at least progressing.

He had put the last of the tools away and was ready to leave for the ranch when suddenly he remembered something. Playing pitch last night, Creasy had said that there was no horse trail up the Whispering Springs Canyon. Yet Charlie had gone up the canyon and he had been on horseback. England sat down to think that over. There was just one conclusion that he could reach. The trail up the canyon had been cleared of rocks and was now passable for horses.

John England had not gotten his job because he was dumb or because he couldn't think. He was no political appointee. Abe Struthers had put England on his force because he knew that England thought straight and that, in a tight, he was worth double his weight. Now England's square jaw firmed, his eyes became narrow slits, and his face settled into the mask of a fighting man. Hard men, looking through gun smoke, had seen that mask and thrown down their weapons and quit.

"So," England murmured, "this is the way they take the liquor, is it? So that's why they don't want a windmiller camped in the mouth of the canyon. I reckon that's the answer."

But who were they? Who were the men that shoved the whiskey into the agency? Who were the men who had climbed the windmill tower and made those saw cuts, hoping that the falling bar and block would blot out John England?

"Mebbe I can find out if I stick around," England mused. "I think I'll have a try at it."

CHAPTER IV

TWO DISCOVERIES

THE sun went down before England, seemingly satisfied at last, mounted Squawman and started toward the Concha. He had killed time for the benefit of anyone who might be watching; now he was departing for the same reason. Squawman ambled along the road toward the Concha, and England, apparently a tired man going home from work, in reality was keenly alert. Where the Concha cow had come up out of the coulee, with darkness descending, England turned off the road and now, all his apparent weariness gone, he began to retrace his path. A good distance away from the well, he dismounted, tied Squawman in a clump of cedars and went back on foot to the well.

When he reached the mouth of the canyon he made a cautious survey. He could see but little through the gloom but his ears were alert. No sight nor sound came to alarm him as he slipped down to the sheep wagon. From the wagon, moving noiselessly, he retrieved the short-barreled Winchester, and with the gun in his hands sought swiftly for a lookout station. A grin spread over his square face. The moon would be up in another hour and he would have light. And when the moon came up he would be hidden, but his hiding place must be a vantage point. What better place could he find than the windmill tower?

Chuckling soundlessly, he went to

the well and climbed up to the platform. That would be the last place anyone would look, and from the tower a man could see everything that went on below him. England reached the wooden platform and lay down. It was about an hour until moonrise. He stretched out and wished that he could smoke.

Above him the wheel creaked as the vane swung it in the vagrant wind. Below him the canyon stretched silent, the sheep wagon a gray blotch in the gloom. The tower whimpered, the bolts working a little in their wooden sockets as the wind swayed it. England, coiled on the platform, began to doubt the wisdom of his choice. The tower swayed and vibrated as the night wind grew, and over the edge of the Rim the moon tipped up, mellow gold, and the shadows began to shorten where the cedars stood.

For an hour after moonrise, nothing happened. England changed position and wished that the well platform was not so hard. Then, down below, a horse stamped and leather creaked. England stiffened.

"Damned windmiller has gone back to the Concha," a voice said. "I saw him leave."

"I'll get him out of here in a couple of days," another voice stated. "I've been talkin' to Godine." England could not place that voice, but it was familiar.

"They're late," the first man said. "The moon's up."

Peering over the edge of the platform, England cursed soundlessly. The speakers were in the gloom, not in the light. He could see pack horses and the figures of men, but he could not discern the faces.

"The block didn't get him," the first man said. "Damn him, I wish that—"

"He's got the well pulled," the second speaker interrupted. "Wonder what was the matter with it?"

BOTH laughed a little and moved, and England slid back on the platform, swearing at himself. He had surely played the fool. Here he had climbed up the tower and perched on the platform, thinking it would make a good lookout, and all he had done was put himself up in the air where he could not see and where, if seen, he would make a perfect target. These men below were undoubtedly the whiskey runners and they wouldn't hesitate to shoot.

Down below a man moved, strolling over to the well. His voice floated up. "Wonder if he worked on the wheel." There followed a grating sound and then the cut-off wire went slack and the vane, swinging out behind the wheel, turned it into the wind. The wheel creaked and then as the wind struck it, began to turn. England crouched close to the platform. One of the men down below had turned on the wheel.

And he had no idea of turning it off. England could not hear what was said now. The wheel was spinning, humming with the wind. And the wind was not constant. It changed course and when it changed the vane banged and the wheel came over into a new direction. The whole tower vibrated and in front of John England the big wheel spun a vicious circle.

England cowered close to the planking. Above him the cogs ground smoothly in their greasy mesh, and the eccentric arms went up and down. As long as he stayed put he was safe enough, but he could not rise up and he could not look over the edge of the platform. The spinning wheel precluded that. And he could not get down. The mo-

ment he appeared on the ladder he would be a target. England pulled up his legs and clung to the platform, hoping that no portion of body or clothing protruded. He cursed his own foolishness as he heard through the humming of the wheel that ran wild and the vibration and noise of the well the indistinct voices that drawled on below him.

How long he stayed there cramped on the platform he could not say. He knew that presently there was no more talk below; at least he could hear none. Still he dared not move. The wind came up strong, and the wheel ran wild as the vane banged it back and forth, and England's muscles became stiff and cramped. The moon climbed on up and flooded the canyon, then slid by overhead. With fitful gusts the wind died away and finally there was quiet.

England stretched out his legs and, moving stiffly, felt for the cut-off wire and found it. Now there was no sound from below. England slid his legs down through the manhole in the platform and waited; then cautiously he put his foot on the top rung of the ladder and, clutching the Winchester, began to descend. Down he went and when his feet struck the ground he leaned against the well tower and trembled with the release of nervous tension.

Again the wind came, puffing from across the flats. England reached for the cut-off lever, pulled it down and tied it with a piece of wire. Above, the wheel, not turning now, banged back and forth as the wind struck the vane.

England, cursing himself for a fool, left the tower and went to the wagon. He unlocked the door, crawled inside and sat down. He had heard the whiskey runners, he had held, right in his hand, the key to the death of Bob Louderman and the knowledge of who was running liquor into the Broken Bow. And he had muffed the chance; he had fired a blank, just because he had thought the windmill platform would make a good lookout point and because someone had indulged an idle fancy and turned on the well. All he had was the knowledge that the Whispering Springs Canyon was the pathway the bootleggers used, and the fact that one of the whiskey runners had a familiar voice, a voice that he had heard somewhere and heard recently.

WHEN the sun came up, John England retrieved Squawman and rode to the Concha. He was still angry with himself and weary with lack of sleep. He reached the ranch only to find that Godine and the two riders had already gone and Birdsong was clearing the breakfast dishes. The Sioux girl looked stolidly at the tall man in bib overalls.

"I get you breakfast," she announced, and poked up the fire in the stove. England washed his face and hands and combed his hair, and was ready to eat when Birdsong announced that the food was ready.

He was at the table, attacking ham and eggs and drinking coffee, feeling better now with the fortification of hot food, when Ruthie Godine came into the kitchen. There was a warning sparkle in the girl's black eyes and her dark brows were drawn together in a frown.

"Why didn't you come in last night?" she demanded. "I told you to stay here at night. What happened?"

Hastily England improvised. "I worked late," he explained. "I got the well pulled an' found out the bottom check was stuck. When I went to come in my horse was gone

an' I didn't catch him till this morning. I had to have daylight."

The frown remained on Ruthie's face. "Tie your horse," she ordered curtly. "Any fool would know enough to tie his horse. You say the bottom check was stuck on the well?"

"Yes, ma'am," England said meekly. "It had a piece of rag in it. And the well's got to have a new cylinder. I figured I'd go to town today and get one."

"You'll go back to the well and put the pipe back," Ruthie snapped. "I'll get the cylinder. You aren't being paid to take trips to town. I'm going in anyhow."

"But," England expostulated, seeing his chance of mailing a letter to Struthers fading, "I got to get a certain kind of cylinder, an'—"

"That's a four-inch well," Ruthie interrupted. "I know enough to get what you need. Write out a list of what you want and I'll bring it out tomorrow. I'm leaving in half an hour."

She turned and walked out of the kitchen, and England, his eyes thoughtful, watched her go. There was no telling Ruthie Godine what he would do; Ruthie did the telling on the Concha. Birdsong padded up beside him and placed a tablet and pencil at his elbow.

"You write," she announced placidly.

England scrawled down the things that he needed: a new cylinder, a new check, a coupling or two. He had barely finished when Ruthie came back into the kitchen, dressed for her trip. Birdsong had left the kitchen while England wrote and now Ruthie, picking up the tablet, tore off the written sheet and glanced at it. Finished, she folded the paper and put it in the pocket of her shirtwaist.

"Shall I get your team?" England asked politely.

"Birdsong has the team hitched to the buckboard," Ruthie answered. "You finish eating and go on out to the well. That's where you belong."

She turned and walked out of the kitchen. Rising from his chair, England followed her to the door. There was a buckboard and team in the yard, the Sioux girl standing at the heads of the impatient horses. John England watched Ruthie climb into the seat, pick up the lines and start the horses. The buckboard went forward with a leap and Birdsong jumped to clear the horses and the wheels. Ruthie paid no attention to the other girl but applied the whip and the buckboard turned out through the gate, two wheels almost off the ground.

WHEN Birdsong came back into the kitchen, England was drinking the last of his coffee. He put the cup down and eyed the Sioux girl quizzically. This was the first opportunity he had had to speak to her alone. He grinned.

"She kind of made you jump," he said, nodding his head toward the door.

Birdsong nodded without making answer. England began fashioning an after-breakfast smoke. "Kind of bossy," he suggested. "I should think you'd quit an' get a better job."

"I like job," Birdsong said, stacking up the dishes England had used.

"One of these days she'll run over you with that buckboard," England suggested.

"I'm lucky." Birdsong carried the dishes to the dishpan on the stove.

"But you might have a change of luck." England lighted his smoke. "I saw your dad out at the well yes-

terday." He wanted to pump Birdsong if possible, try to get her to talk. If she loosened up at all he might find out a few things about Charlie. It was an idea anyhow. Birdsong had her hand deep in the pocket of the gingham dress she wore.

"I keep luck," she told him. "I got luck piece. See?"

From her pocket she pulled a small object. John England caught a glimpse of hair and of silver. He reached out his hand and his voice was strangely hoarse when he spoke. "Let me see that!" he commanded.

Birdsong extended her hand reluctantly. On the brown palm lay a charm, a small rabbit's foot, the end set in silver. There was a little ring on the silver setting so that the charm might be attached to a watch chain. England's eyes went blank as he looked at the charm. His big fingers picked it up from the girl's palm and turned it over gently.

"Where'd you get this?" he asked.

"Present," said Birdsong.

England continued to turn the charm. The silver was scarred where engraving had been obliterated. In John England's pocket was an identical rabbit's foot, silver and all, his initials engraved on the silver. He and Bob Louderman had bought those rabbit's-foot charms in Cheyenne, laughed about them, said that they would bring them luck.

"Who gave you this?" England demanded hoarsely.

Birdsong drew herself up. "Present," she said. "Tommy give me that."

Tommy! Tommy Pradeau! That clean-faced kid that rode for the Concha. That kid who played draw pitch in the bunkhouse. Tommy Pradeau! John England extended the charm toward the girl and she took it.

"Lucky piece," Birdsong said. "Tommy give him to me."

"I don't think it's so lucky," John England said, almost to himself.

He went out of the kitchen then, all his ideas of questioning Birdsong about her father forgotten. He walked down to the corral where Squawman was eating hay from the rack, and pulling his cinch tight, mounted the big bay horse and started back toward the east. He would ride out to where Tommy Pradeau and Louis Godine and Buck Creasy were working cattle, and when he got there he would put on the pressure. It was not John England, windmiller, who rode east, but John England, deputy United States marshal.

CHAPTER V

CHARLIE SUPPLIES A CLUE

A MILE from the ranch, England saw a horseman coming toward him. He kept Squawman going in the direction of the horseman. As the two horses drew nearer, the other rider put his mount to a lope and hurried. England let Squawman keep his trot and then, suddenly, reined in and reached into the bib of his overalls to make sure that the Smith & Wesson was clear. The approaching rider was Pradeau.

The puncher's face was wreathed in a grin. "Missed you last night," he said, reining in. "You didn't get in."

"My horse got away," England alibied, keeping his hand hidden in his overall bib. "I worked late, pulling the well."

"Find out what was the matter?"

"There was a rag in the bottom check. A piece of neckerchief." England eyed the black neckerchief at Tommy's throat. "I sent to town for a new cylinder this morning."

Tommy grinned. "I'll bet Ruthie

bawled you out," he predicted. "I've come in for some horn dope. We run out."

"Oh," England grunted, and then suddenly: "I saw that rabbit's foot you gave Birdsong." He was watching Pradeau narrowly.

Tommy Pradeau flushed. "It's nothing to you what I give Birdsong," he bristled. "If I want to give her somethin', I'll—"

"I know where you got it," England interrupted sharply.

"What if I did find it at the well?" Pradeau demanded. "That's no crime. Somebody lost it, an'—"

"You *found* it at the well?"

"Sure. Before you ever went out there. I know you didn't lose it. You weren't even in the country then. Somebody dropped it there an'—"

"Wait a minute!" England admonished. "We'd better get together on this. You found that rabbit's foot at the well, you say?"

"Right by the tower," Tommy agreed. "Look here, England, Birdsong's my girl. I know that she's a full blood an' I'm not, but that don't make any difference. She's a mighty fine girl. We're goin' to stick to our jobs until we get a little stake. When we get enough ahead we're goin' to start out on our own and—"

"You're a breed, then?" England's voice was sharp.

Again slow color mounted to Tommy Pradeau's face. "What if I am?" he countered sullenly. "It's no disgrace. I don't see what right you've got to butt into my business. I don't see—"

"I guess I'm all wrong," England said wearily. "I guess I'm all wet."

"I guess you are, if you think there's anything wrong about Birdsong's havin' that rabbit's foot," Tommy said hotly. "You mind your own business an' go on an' fix your well. That's all you got to do!"

He reined his horse sharply, kicked with spurred heels and went by England in one jump. His horse was running when it hit the ground, and England, turning in his saddle, watched Pradeau sweep away. When the rider was a hundred yards off, England started Squawman.

"He found it at the well," he murmured. "At the well. I— Well, damn me for a fool!"

Squawman felt his rider's heels against his ribs. Shaking his head, the bay started on east, lengthening out in his ground-covering stride.

But before he reached the well, England slowed. He had been all over the ground there and found nothing. Suppose that Bob Louderman had been killed at the well? There had been no sign; nothing. The Whispering Springs well was as barren of evidence as a bald man's head is of hair. England was convinced that Louderman was dead. Moreover, he knew that the Whispering Springs Canyon afforded a pathway for the whiskey runners to reach the Broken Bow Agency, and he knew that Charlie, Birdsong's father, was connected with the deal in some way. He had any number of disconnected facts. He needed to sort them out and resolve on a plan of action. Should he now throw aside his disguise and go ahead, or should he wait a little longer? He could not make up his mind. He needed time to think.

WHEN he reached the well, England's mind was still in a turmoil. Mechanically he dismounted, unsaddled and hobbled Squawman. Mechanically he set about his work. There was not a great deal that he could do until the new cylinder and the new check were at hand, but he thought best when his hands were busy. At least he could tighten the bolts in the tower. He could tell Ruthie, if she checked up on him, that they needed tightening. He set about that task.

At noon he came down from the tower and went to the wagon. Once more he opened a can of beans; he had brought no lunch, had completely forgotten it. He was sitting in the scant shade the wagon afforded when he heard a grunt and, looking up hastily, saw that again he had company. Charlie and the little bay pony were just beyond the shade. England had not even heard the horse come up, so engrossed was he in his speculations.

"Hungry," Charlie announced.

England got up, went into the wagon and returned with another can of beans. These he opened with the ax and held out to the Indian.

"Help yourself," he offered.

Charlie slid down off his horse, pried back the can top and delved in with his fingers. When he had eaten a handful of the beans he spoke again.

"You ain't dead?" he demanded.

"Not that I know of," replied England. "See here—"

Charlie swallowed more beans. "I hear man get dead," he announced.

"You heard that or you saw it?" England snapped.

"I hear Injun get drunk. Talk alla time about man get dead."

John England's eyes narrowed. "What man?" he demanded.

"Injun or dead man?" Charlie asked placidly.

"The dead man."

Charlie shrugged. "Don't know," he said. "Just man dead." He waved a vague hand. "Injun up at agency get drunk, talk about kill man."

"What Indian, Charlie?" England leaned forward.

Charlie's face went blank. "Don't know," he said.

"You do know. You—"

"Don't know," Charlie maintained stolidly. "You good man. Birdsong say so. You get out."

"What Indian was it, Charlie?" England's voice was patient. "What man was killed?"

"Man killed?" Charlie asked innocently.

John England groaned inwardly. He knew that the fat Sioux buck who sat there sucking the last of the bean sauce from his fingers had decided that too much had been said already. John England had been too interested, too intent. The way to get information from an Indian was not to appear eager.

"Nice day," Charlie observed. "You got more beans?"

England shook his head. There, squatting in the shade, right there beside him, was a mine of information and he couldn't get past that impassive face.

"Got water?"

"In the wagon," England said. "Charlie, you—"

CHARLIE had grunted heavily to his feet and disappeared around the tail gate of the sheep wagon. Only his stocky legs and moccasined feet were visible.

"Some day I kill Lemoine," Charlie announced. "No good. Bother my girl. I kill him an' put him in the well."

"And they'll catch you," England said automatically. "The well will stop up, an'— What a damned fool I am!" He came to his feet like a released spring.

Charlie came around the end of the wagon. "Fool?" he asked.

"You bet I am!" England snapped. "Of course, that's it!"

He was in the wagon now, delving into the tool box. A spade clanged on the ground as he threw it out. Another shovel followed. "In the well, of course," he muttered. "That's where the neckerchief came from! Of all the damned fools— Grab that spade, Charlie!"

"You goin' to dig?" Charlie asked.

"In the well," England said. "You're going to help me. You—"

Charlie sat down with finality. "Squaw dig," he announced. "Not buck."

"The buck will dig this time," England said firmly. "You grab that spade."

Reluctantly, Charlie picked up the spade.

But when the cover was off the well, England saw that it was impractical to have Charlie help with the digging. There was not room in the well for two men to work, and a man would be needed on top to hoist out the dirt. Accordingly, John England rigged a block and tackle to the well tower, brought a bucket from the wagon and made it fast to the rope. Charlie grunted as he watched the preparations, and before the work was done he ambled off to his pony.

"I go now," he announced. "Not dig."

He mounted and the pony trotted off. Anger welling up, England reached into the bib of his overalls for the Smith & Wesson. He half drew the gun, then let it slide back into the holster. There was no use of trying to force Charlie. No use at all.

The little bay pony, carrying the heavy-bodied rider, disappeared into the canyon, and John England sat down and swore. Bob Louderman's body was in the well, he knew it, was certain of it, and the only available help was riding a fat bay pony up the Whispering Springs Canyon.

But sitting and swearing was of no benefit and England knew it. He got up and went to the well and looked down into the black depths. He had a job on hand and he was going to do it. When he lowered a rope into the well and hauled it up again he found that it was about twenty feet to the dirt in the bottom. Of course there was no ladder. That meant that he had to go down on a rope. There was plenty of rope available and there were blocks. He already had a single block and line fastened to the well tower.

Now, going back to the wagon, England got out his double blocks, carried them to the well and rigged them to the tower. It would be slow, hard work, but he could do this thing alone. It was entirely possible for him to lower himself into the well, fill the bucket and then hoist himself out and pull up the bucket. He could hoist himself with the double block in place of using his strength climbing a rope out of the well. He threw a piece of plank into the well to afford a footing, lowered a spade and the bucket and then, stepping into a sling rigged at the bottom of his double block, let himself down.

When he reached the bottom he found that it was filled with sand and that the sand was quick. He wedged the plank across a corner, thankful that the cribbing was solid, and, with the spade, filled the

bucket. With that done he laboriously hoisted himself up, pulled up the bucket after himself, and dumped it. Then down into the well he went once more. At this rate, he told himself, he would be at the Whispering Springs well until doomsday before he got his job done. Still he stuck grimly to the task.

WHEN night came England was about ready to close up shop and admit that he must have help. He pulled himself up out of the well and sat on the curbing, his feet hanging down into the well while he rolled a smoke. He had gone down about two feet. The cribbing was all gone and the sand was sliding into the well almost as fast as he could dig it out. He would have to crib as he went down, that was certain. What he needed, and needed badly, was someone to work at the top of the well.

While he was smoking, studying his problem, the help he needed arrived. Tommy Pradeau came riding up to the well, stopped his horse and, dismounting, walked over to England.

For a moment neither man spoke, then John England, letting the smoke trickle out of his nostrils, said laconically, "You're just in time, kid."

Pradeau shifted uneasily. "I kind of blew up out there," he announced, waving a hand vaguely toward the west. "But I'm stuck on Birdsong an' she's kind of stuck on me, an'— Well, it's pretty tough to be a breed in this country. People don't like us much."

John England got up stiffly. "I've been diggin' out the well," he said. "I— You came along just in time, Tommy. I need some help."

Pradeau nodded. "Maybe I can get the old man to let me help you tomorrow," he said. "We're through with the cattle right now. We'll go in and you ask him if I can come out with you tomorrow. I think—"

"We won't go in an' we won't ask him," England announced positively. "We'll stay here and you'll help."

"But—" Tommy began to protest.

Pushing a hand under the bib of his overalls, John England brought it out after a moment's fumbling. His gold shield lay in the palm of his hand.

"I'm a deputy marshal, kid," he announced. "You're goin' to stay here an' help me, an' we won't go in tonight."

Tommy's eyes widened incredulously. "You—" he began.

"I'm workin' on a case, kid," England explained. "You're deputized to help me. Godine won't have any kick coming about your staying out tonight and helping me tomorrow. We'll throw the boards back over the top of this well an' cook a meal. I've got enough bedding for us to sleep, and tomorrow when we get done with this job I'll explain to the old man. You hobble your horse and I'll rustle some firewood and cook supper."

Tommy, eyes still wide, stood stock-still for a moment, hesitating.

"Go on," England said. "Go ahead an' do like I tell you."

The cowboy walked off to his horse while England, picking up the ax, went into the canyon to find a dry cedar.

CHAPTER VI

THE WELL GIVES UP ITS SECRET

WHEN supper had been cooked and eaten, and the dishes put aside—for there was no water to wash them—John England talked a

little to Tommy Pradeau. For the most part he asked questions. He told his helper a very little of why he was in the country, and why they were going to dig out the well. Tommy listened, wide-eyed. He could not give England a great deal of information. He had never seen Bob Louderman, he said, but he had heard that there was a marshal in the country working on the whiskey running. As for the whiskey runners, Tommy knew nothing. Rumor and conjecture were rife in the Landmark concerning who bootlegged whiskey to the reservation, but aside from repeating that, Tommy could give no definite leads.

"Charlie knows something about it," England said slowly, after he had listened to what Tommy had to say. "You can help me there, kid. You talk to this girl of yours an' get her to work on her father. Maybe she can get him to tell her what he knows. I know where the whiskey is going through, and if I hadn't been a fool, I'd have caught some people last night. I don't think there'll be any action tonight, but I'll sit up awhile anyhow.

With that statement, Tommy, already excited, became more so. He insisted that if any watching was to be done he would have a hand in it, and John England, tired out by lack of sleep and his labors, finally agreed. The two of them would split the watches, he said, and so it was arranged.

Both men were awake before the sun came up. England had given Tommy the last watch, and when the gray of morning was in the sky, Pradeau came to the wagon and wakened him. There was enough water left in the keg for coffee, and they made a pot and drank it, and ate the last of the crackers and some canned fruit. Then, with those scanty rations fortifying them, they attacked the well.

The platform planks afforded cribbing, something that would hold back the sliding sand. With England in the well, digging, and with Pradeau hoisting up the buckets, they made good time. There was a great deal of sand in the well, and despite the cribbing more slid in. And then, about ten o'clock, John England found what he was looking for.

"I've found him, kid," he called. "Hoist easy this time."

Pradeau took a strain on the rope and England leaned back against the side of the well while a horror went slowly dangling upward. England heard Pradeau gasp and then become violently sick. Down in the bottom of the well England himself felt the retching of his stomach. He steeled himself and called:

"Let down the rope, Tommy. I want to come up."

There was a little lapse of time and then the rope slithered down into the well. England tied a sling, put his foot in it and called to Tommy to hoist. Jerkily he went up, reaching out when he gained the top and seizing the curbing in his hands. He pulled himself over the curbing and took a step forward to lean against one leg of the tower, keeping his eyes averted from the thing that lay beside the well. Then, when his nerves were steady once more, he spoke to Tommy.

"We've got to look at him, kid," he said. "We've got to!"

TIME and the sand and water had not been kind to Bob Louderman. A ghastly, bloated thing lay there beside the well, and yet identification was easy. The clothing had not rotted to any great extent, the boots were intact, and when England

steeled himself and searched the sodden pockets, he brought out a billfold that carried Louderman's name stamped in the wet leather. Pradeau, strengthened by the other man's example, had stood by although he took no part in searching the body. When England straightened from that unpleasant task, Tommy Pradeau met the officer's eyes.

"He never had a chance, did he?" the young rider said. "Not a chance."

England shook his head. "They caught him and tied him up and gagged him. Then they killed him," he said. "It was a piece of that neckerchief they tied his hands with that stopped up the well." He knelt down again and began to work at the wet knot of the black silk neckerchief that tied Bob Louderman's hands. "They thought this thing out," he continued, his voice hard. "It was murder, all right, an' they figured out just how they'd do it. Likely Bob found out about how they took whiskey up the canyon here, and was laying for them to arrest them, an' they caught him."

With Pradeau watching him silently, England stood up again, holding the black silk neckerchief, one corner of which was ripped away.

"There's thousands of these things," he said slowly. "Maybe this belonged to Bob and they used his own neckerchief to tie him up."

Still holding the neckerchief, England strode off toward the wagon. Tommy stood stock-still beside the well, his eyes following the young officer.

When England came back he was carrying a tarpaulin. He spread it out, Pradeau helping him, and carefully, averting his eyes when he could, the officer placed his friend's body on the sheet and covered it. When that task was done both men walked away from the well, England heading toward the wagon, Tommy following.

Reaching the wagon, England, with sudden loathing, began to strip off his overalls and shirt. Without a word Pradeau got the water keg, sloshing the remnant of water over England's hands, using some little on his own hands. England, stripped to his underwear, went into the wagon. Pradeau, at the tail gate, could hear the thump of brogans as they were dropped, and the sounds of England stirring about inside. When John England reappeared he was dressed in a clean shirt and Levis, and boots were on his feet. Latching a gun belt about his middle, he stepped down from the wagon and, bending over, retrieved the Smith & Wesson from the bib overalls.

"Now," he announced, looking at Tommy, "I'm done with that. We've got things to do. We've got to get the sheriff out here and we'll have to have an inquest and a lot of other red tape. I want you to get to the agency. Find Charlie an' get what you can out of him. He knew that there was a man killed. He knows some Indian up there that got drunk and talked out of turn. Work on Charlie, make him tell you what he knows. Then you find me and tell me what he said."

Tommy Pradeau nodded seriously. "I'll go," he agreed.

"You can go right up the canyon," England said. "They've opened the trail so that a horse can get up. I'll ride to the ranch and have them send in for the sheriff from there. I—" He stopped suddenly, bending down to pick up the black neckerchief from where it lay on his discarded overalls.

Pradeau had started toward his horse when England called him back. "Wait," the officer commanded sharply. Pradeau came back, his bridle dangling from his hand. England was staring at the neckerchief.

"This thing didn't belong to Bob," he declared. "There's some sort of figure stitched here in the corner. Look."

Pradeau looked over England's shoulder at the black silk. There, embroidered in the corner, were two intertwined hearts.

"Ever see anybody wear this, Tommy?" asked England.

"No," Pradeau answered. "I've never seen that before, not that I know of."

ENGLAND continued to stare at the embroidery. "Some girl gave that to a man," he said slowly. "She stitched in those hearts and gave it to him. And he used it to tie up Bob's hands before he killed him. Damn it! I—" He broke off and was silent for a long moment. When he spoke again his voice had lost its heat.

"You go on, kid," he directed. "Get to Charlie and make him talk. Don't let him see what you want to know or why you want to know it. Just get him to talking and pry around an' get all the information that you can. Get him to come down to the Concha with you. When we get him there I'll put on the pressure. Go on now, and be careful."

"I'll bring him down," Tommy Pradeau promised, and went on out toward his horse.

When Pradeau had departed, John England went out and collected Squawman. Saddling, he took a last look around the Whispering Springs well and then headed for the Concha. He kept Squawman at a brisk pace all the way to the ranch, and when he rode into the yard the big bay was well lathered. Louis Godine and Buck Creasy were there, mounted and ready to go out.

Godine and Creasy came straight to England. For a moment neither of the men recognized him. A change from bib overalls and brogans to Levis and boots can bring about a mighty transformation. Then, without dismounting, Godine began to throw angry words at England.

"What in hell happened to you?" he demanded. "Where were you last night? Where is Tommy? By what right—"

England got down from Squawman. He stood, legs spread a little apart, hands resting on his hips, meeting the angry stare of the cowman. His voice was sharp and incisive as he interrupted the tirade.

"I stayed at the well," he announced. "Tommy stayed with me. We dug it out this mornin'." He waited, his slitted eyes fixed steadily on Godine's face to see what effect that announcement would have. If Godine knew about what had been found in the well he would surely give some sign. But the rancher's face showed no change of expression.

"If you needed a man to help you, you ought to have come in!" Godine stated angrily. "I'd 've sent a man out to help you. But you kept Tommy out there without sayin' 'by your leave,' or nothin'. I'll get somebody else to finish work on that well, England. Yo're fired. I'll pay you off, an'—"

"I don't think you'll need to pay me, Mr. Godine," England said quietly.

"I pay my debts," Godine continued, still scowling angrily. "Ruthie brought out that stuff you

It wasn't a windmiller, but Deputy United States Marshal England who waited to spring his trap.

wanted for the well when she come from town this mornin'. She—"

"Where is Ruthie?" England demanded. "I want to see her."

"You got no business with Ruthie."

Reaching into his pocket, England drew out his badge and, holding it out so that Godine could see the gold shield, winking in the palm of his hand, interrupted the angry man once more.

"There was a murder committed out at the Whispering Springs well, Mr. Godine," he said quietly. "A deputy United States marshal was killed out there an' buried in the well. I want to talk to your daughter."

At the sight of that badge and with England's quiet voice cutting through his anger like a knife, Godine deflated. The scowl left his face and, his eyes widening and his lips parted in amazement, he stared at the gold shield that England extended. "You—" he began.

"I'm a deputy marshal," England stated crisply. "I was sent in here to investigate the whiskey running into the Broken Bow Agency and to work on the disappearance of Bob Louderman. I want to talk to your girl. I think she can help me."

Godine could only grunt his astonishment. He had no word to say as he dismounted from his horse and followed England toward the door of the ranchhouse. Buck Creasy, taking a moment to recover from his surprise, dismounted, tied his own horse and Godine's to the fence, and followed the others.

CHAPTER VII

DOUBLE-CROSSED BY A WOMAN

BIRDSONG was in the kitchen when England entered. Her black eyes were bright with curiosity, but her face was impassive as he nodded to her and strode on through the kitchen, Godine following him. The kitchen opened into a big front room, half living room, half dining room. Ruthie Godine was sitting in a chair near the front windows, and she glanced up quickly as England and her father came into the room.

Removing his battered hat, John England laid it on the table and crossed the room toward the girl. "I'd like to talk to you a minute, Miss Godine," he announced.

Like her father, Ruthie, momentarily, did not recognize him. With her recognition of England, her black eyes flashed angrily. "So you came in from the well?" she snapped. "It's high time. I told you—"

"He's a deputy United States marshal, Ruthie," Godine interrupted. "He found a man's body in the well. He—"

"If it's all the same to you, I'll tell her myself," England said, without turning from the girl. "Like your father says, I'm a deputy marshal," he continued. "I was sent in here to investigate a murder. I—"

"Oh, I see." Ruthie's voice was cold. "A spy. I understand. And what can I do for you, Mr. Spy?"

England disregarded the cutting sarcasm of her tone. He reached into his pocket and brought out the black silk neckerchief. It was still damp and, carefully unfolding it, England placed the rumpled square in the girl's hands.

"I'd like to have you help me with this if you can," he said simply. "I'd like to know if you can tell me anything about this."

He was hoping that Ruthie might give him some information. She might possibly know of someone who had embroidered the intertwined hearts in the black silk and given the neckerchief for a present.

It was just possible that she did have that knowledge.

The girl spread the silk in her hands and her voice was icy and level. "I'm sure I don't—" she began, and then drew in her breath sharply. She had seen the intertwined hearts. England, watching the girl narrowly, saw the color drain from her face.

"It was tied around the hands of the man I took out of the Whispering Springs well this mornin'," he said slowly. "He'd been bound an' murdered and dumped down into the well, and the well caved in on top of him. The corner of that neckerchief was what stopped up the well."

"I'm sure I can't give you any information," Ruthie Godine said, looking steadily at England. "I've never seen this neckerchief before."

England knew that the girl was lying. Birdsong, standing in the doorway, with black eyes inscrutable, gave him an idea. He began to talk slowly.

"I came in here under cover," he said. "I was supposed to be a windmiller an' scout around to see what I could find. When I first hit here none of you folks were at home. I was out in the yard unhitchin' the mules when Birdsong here came busting out of the kitchen with Andreas Lemoine after her. I guess he'd got too brisk with his courtin'. Anyhow Birdsong was scared. I tripped Lemoine an' sent him along home. He—"

England had been watching Ruthie's face. Now he broke off what he was saying. The girl's face had become a pasty white. Her eyes widened and one small, sharp-pointed eyetooth caught over a lip to still its trembling.

"Andreas!" she blurted after a long silence. "He wasn't here!" Her hands lay tightly clenched in her lap.

"You can ask Birdsong," England said quietly.

"Come here all the time." Birdsong's voice was throaty. "Bother me all the time. He bad man."

Suddenly the little distorted figure swayed in the chair. The small hands twisted the torn neckerchief into a knot and flung it away, and Ruthie's voice rose almost to a shriek. "Andreas!" she shrilled. "I gave him that neckerchief. I—Damn him! Damn him!"

John England, reaching out, scooped up the neckerchief. "I thought that was it," he said quietly. He turned apologetically to Godine. "You'd better look after her." Holding the neckerchief, he walked to the kitchen door and passed through, Birdsong following him.

Even with the kitchen door closed, the shrill sounds of Ruthie Godine's wrath came through the panels. England looked at the Sioux girl.

"Tommy's going to bring your father down here," he told her. "Charlie knows something about this murder. I want to find out what it is. You get him to tell me the truth, Birdsong. If he does tell me an' he wasn't mixed up in it, I'll look after him. I'll look after you an' Tommy anyhow. You won't want to stay around here after this."

Birdsong looked at England, her eyes bright. "Tommy?" she questioned.

"Is all right," England said reassuringly. "I'll look out for Tommy."

"I'll talk to Charlie," Birdsong promised.

ENGLAND nodded and went on out of the kitchen. Outside the house he sat down, his back against the wall, his eyes moodily searching the long line of the Rim that lay

against the east. He could hear Birdsong as she moved about inside the kitchen, and from the front of the house the shrill voice of Ruthie came, gradually diminishing.

It wasn't pleasant to be an officer, John England reflected. A man got a lot of dirty jobs, tough jobs. He had to do them, had to steel himself and go on through with the work. Ruthie's tirade stopped and presently the thump of boots sounded in the kitchen, and Buck Creasy and Godine came out.

"I'm sorry, Godine," England said, getting up. "It had to be that way though. I had to know."

With his bandanna, Godine wiped sweat from his face. Creasy stood by uneasily. "I reckon you had to know," Godine said reluctantly. "Just the same—"

"There wasn't any other way I could do it that I could see," England replied. "An' it had to be done."

He looked at Creasy. "I want you to ride to Landmark an' bring the sheriff out," he said. "Bob Louderman's body is at the well. You get the sheriff an' a couple of his deputies an' keep your mouth shut. Can you do that?"

"Yeah," Creasy said uneasily.

"An' if you don't keep your mouth shut an' Lemoine gets word of this, all hell won't hide you," England warned. "Now go on to town an' get the sheriff out here right away. Tell him what's up an' don't tell anybody else."

"Yeah," Creasy said again, but made no move to go.

"Go on, Buck," Godine commanded. "Don't just stand there."

Creasy went down the steps at that and walked out to his horse. He mounted, turned the horse and rode at a walk through the gate. Beyond the gate the horse struck a trot, and the diminishing sound of the hoofbeats came back to the men on the porch. Godine slumped wearily down upon the steps. England leaned against a porch post.

"It'll take Buck five hours to get to town," Godine said slowly. "Ben Lorimer an' his deputies won't be out till sometime around mornin'."

England nodded. "Tommy Pradeau went up to the reservation," he said. "I sent him up there after Birdsong's father. They'll come down here."

Godine made no answer. Birdsong came out of the kitchen, padded silently past the two men and went on down toward the chicken house.

"Ruthie's my stepdaughter," Godine said suddenly. "I married her mother when Ruthie was just a kid. Ruthie is—" He broke off abruptly. England waited. "She's queer," Godine went on, after a lapse of time. "Ever since she was a little kid she's had to have the limelight. I guess her not bein' quite all right warped her a little. She's given the orders around the Concha. I let her. Lemoine kept comin' over. He's big an' he's kind of good-lookin', an' he paid a lot of attention to Ruthie. I guess—" His voice trailed off.

ENGLAND nodded his understanding. He knew how things had been at the Concha, knew how the crippled girl, handicapped, strong-minded, hungry for admiration and for attention, would react to the homage of a man like Andreas Lemoine.

"The dirty skunk!" Godine snapped.

"He's all of that," agreed England. "Bob Louderman was caught and tied up and gagged. They took

him out to the Whispering Springs and killed him. Lemoine did it. Bob never had a chance."

Again silence fell between the two men. Godine got up. "Well," he said uncertainly. "I—"

England also arose. "I'm going to look after my horse," he said. He walked away, took Squawman's reins and led the bay horse toward the corral. He put him in, stripped off saddle and bridle and turned him loose. Squawman shook himself, found a place to roll, then got to his feet and walked over to the other horse that was in the pen and stood silently conversing. England leaned against the fence, watching the two horses. Godine, witsfully seeking company, had followed England to the pen. He, too, leaned against the fence.

"I wish—" Godine said.

"So do I," England answered the unfinished wish. "It's this business of waiting that's the hard part. I could go down to Welch's and arrest Lemoine. But Tommy is bringin' Charlie down here, an'—"

"You'd be a fool to go up against Lemoine alone," Godine told him. "He don't know what you've found. When Lorimer gets here you can go down an' arrest Lemoine without havin' to kill anybody. Lemoine's bad. He killed a man three years ago an' come off clear on a self-defense plea. He—"

"He could be arrested," England said with finality. "It isn't that. But I want to take him and see him tried. Bob Louderman was a friend of mine."

Godine nodded. "An' your business is to bring 'em in alive, not dead," he said. "That's what an officer's for. It's up to the courts to try 'em."

That was so, John England thought. What Godine had said was exactly true. It was the business of an officer to apprehend a criminal, to bring him in and turn him over to the court. That was the officer's job. No lawman had the right to act as judge and jury, or executioner. And yet a fierce anger burned in John England when he thought of Bob Louderman, who had been young and full of life and the joy of living, and who was now a bloated, decomposing thing that lay covered by a tarpaulin close by the Whispering Springs well.

"It wasn't Lemoine alone," England said, almost whispering the words. "I'll get them all!"

Godine pushed himself away from the corral bars and peered up at the sky. "It's pretty near supper time," he said prosaically. "I'll turn my horse out." He walked toward the front of the house where his mount had been tied to the fence.

Birdsong, coming back from the barn, stopped at the woodpile, loaded her arms with wood and went on toward the kitchen. England turned a little and looked toward the west. The sun was low, dropping toward a cloud bank. Even as he looked, the sun disappeared behind the clouds and the sky darkened.

Birdsong had disappeared into the kitchen. The chickens, close gathered about the front of the chicken house, were quiet, and from somewhere behind the barn a field lark sang sleepily. England saw Godine come through the kitchen door, running toward the corrals. His voice was high and excited as he called:

"My horse is gone. Ruthie ain't in the house, England. She's pulled out."

John England jerked himself erect. "She's gone to warn Lemoine!" he snapped, his voice metallic.

CHAPTER VIII

STORMING A GUN NEST

FOR an instant the two men stared at each other and then John England bent and, picking up his bridle, made for Squawman. He had the bay bridled and was saddling when he saw that Godine, too, had caught a horse and was putting on his saddle. Neither man spoke. England finished with his saddling before Godine, but he waited until the older man was ready before he opened the corral gate. England mounted, but Godine, leading his horse, went to the house and disappeared through the kitchen door. When he came out he was fastening the belt of a six-shooter about his middle.

"I told Birdsong that we'd gone to Welch's," he told England as he stepped up into his saddle. "I told her to send Lorimer down there if he came before we got back."

England nodded and the two men rode off side by side.

They were some little distance away from the ranch before more was said. Then, without looking at his companion, England spoke. "You didn't have to come, you know," he remarked.

"She's my girl," Godine said doggedly.

They rode on, not pushing their horses, not letting them slack. Ruthie had a start, a good start. They could not possibly catch her before she reached Welch's house, but they hoped to be in time to prevent Lemoine from leaving.

"Welch has got a pretty tough crew," Godine said. "There's four of them down there, beside Lemoine. I don't think Welch is mixed up in this. He's always—"

"How can he help but be mixed up?" England said quietly. "This whole thing comes from running whiskey into the reservation. Lemoine was in it and likely the men that work with him. Welch is bound to know something. He isn't blind, I don't think."

Godine offered no comment to that and the two rode along, covering the ground steadily, but not moving so rapidly as the night moved upon them.

Darkness had settled when Godine reined in his horse. "This is Welch's," he announced. "The house is a couple of hundred yards ahead. Ruthie is in there. I'd hate for—"

"We'll look out for her," England answered. "We'll take no chances on her gettin' hurt. But I won't let these boys slip away either. I can't do that."

"No," agreed Godine, "you can't do that. How do you aim to handle it?"

England frowned in the darkness. "I'll call to Lemoine to come out and give up," he answered.

"He won't do that," Godine said simply.

"Then we'll make 'em send Ruthie out," England said, "an' I'll go in an' get Lemoine. You'll look after the girl. This ain't your business, Godine."

Godine did not answer. "You hear me, Godine?" England said sharply. "It ain't your business!"

"You wouldn't have this to do if it hadn't been for Ruthie," Godine answered stubbornly.

"Just the same you'll stay out of it," England ordered. "I'll ride down to the house now."

Once more he started Squawman, Godine coming along beside him. The posts of a gate and the supported crossbar loomed before them, and England stopped his horse and dismounted. Then, hitching up his trousers as a man might who is go-

ing to flank a calf, he stepped to the gate and lifted his voice in a call.

"Lemoine!"

There was no answer. "Lemoine!" England called again. "This is the law!"

NOW indeed there came an answer from the house. From a window a rifle flashed, the flame blooming briefly in the night. Warned by that premature shot, England dropped down, and above the gate lead whimpered as from the dark building beyond guns flamed their hate and defiance. For perhaps a full minute the men in the house fired and then the shots died away and quiet reigned.

"If you want it that way, send the girl out," England called. "Get your women out of there." Lowering his voice he spoke to Godine. "Are there any more women here?"

"Welch ain't married," Godine answered. "Neither are any of his crew."

"Send the girl out," England called again.

A laugh, high and derisive, answered him. "An' give the pot away?" Lemoine called. "Not much. We'll keep her here. She's right out in front, England. Go ahead and shoot!"

Ruthie's voice came, high and reedy, but the words were indistinct. Apparently the girl was expostulating with Lemoine. England and Godine heard the breed laugh again.

Another voice called from the house, "Pull out, England. You can't make it in here. If you try, you'll be killed. The girl will get killed, anyhow."

"That's Welch," Godine whispered.

"That's the whiskey runner that was at the well," England said grimly. "I thought I'd heard his voice before."

"What are you going to do?" Godine questioned.

"I don't know," answered England. "They'll slip away. Damn this dark. The moon will be up pretty soon, but they've got a fine chance to get loose before it rises,

or they got a good chance to slide out an' get around us. I wish—"

"England! England!" Ruthie called from the house. "It was Andreas. He was the one. He killed—" Her voice choked off.

"Damn them!" Godine flared. "They're—"

A little whimpering noise came from the house, broken by a savage laugh. Godine, before England could restrain him, started from the gate, running toward the dark loom of the building. Guns blasted from the house, and Godine tripped and went down like a man falling over a loose rope.

"Godine!" England's whispered call was anxious.

For a time there was no answer, and then Godine spoke, his voice uneven, "I've got a leg shot."

England swore beneath his breath and began to crawl forward. He couldn't leave Godine lying there. The moon, almost full, was coming over the Rim, just the tip of its gold fullness showing. England reached Godine, pulled the man to him, and with Godine helping as much as he could, inched back toward the gate.

"We'll fix that leg," England an-

nounced when they were in the shelter afforded by the gate posts. "You're darn lucky they piled their fence posts beside the gate."

Godine did not answer, and England, locating the wound by sense of touch, twisted his neckerchief tightly around it. That would have to do for now, he thought; have to hold until there was light or until this thing was over.

"The moon's comin' up fast," Godine said. "You'll have to get around in back, England. I can hold down the front, I guess."

"Listen," John England commanded sharply.

Horses were coming along the road, coming steadily. "Either that's—" England began, and then, "The sheriff couldn't have got here so soon, could he?"

"No," Godine grunted, and the two men strained their ears to listen.

The horses had been heard at the house, too. There was a commotion on the porch and Welch called: "England! Say, England!"

England made no answer. The horses had stopped and Tommy Pradeau's voice came cheerfully, "Hey, England?"

"Yeah," England answered. "That you, Tommy?"

"Me an' Charlie an' Birdsong," Tommy said casually. "Charlie says that it was Lemoine that killed your pardner. A buck up at the agency got drunk an' told him about it. Fellow named Bluefront."

"Why did you bring the girl along?" demanded England.

"She wanted to come." Tommy was almost beside England now. "Say, you need some help here?"

"Plenty of help," England said grimly. "Godine's hurt an' they've got Ruthie in there."

"Birdsong told me about that," Tommy remarked. He was beside England now, crouched behind the pile of fence posts that lay close against the gate. "Say, Charlie's got a rifle an' he's kind of mad. Birdsong hadn't told him much about Lemoine bothering her. Charlie had been gettin' a little whiskey on the side an' he'd been keepin' his mouth shut, but he's kind of mad now."

"Well we can use Charlie, all right," England said. "You tell Birdsong to stay back. She—"

"She got the rifle off your saddle when we stopped," Pradeau announced. "I guess she's gone around to the back. She said that she was going there."

"Damn it," England swore helplessly. "She'll get herself shot."

"Not Birdsong," Tommy Pradeau said. "She won't get hurt. I told her to be careful. Say, England—"

"Yeah?"

"You ain't goin' to be hard on Charlie, are you?"

"No."

Silence for a moment. The moon had come up, full above the Rim. Shadows lay long about Welch's house. On the south where a line of poplars grew, the shadows moved.

"We ought to do somethin'," Pradeau suggested.

"Ruthie's in there," England said.

AS though in answer to that statement a high-pitched scream came from the house. A little figure, dark and beetlelike in the moonlight, broke from the porch and ran toward the cottonwoods. Ruthie Godine almost gained the trees, while guns thudded from the dark house. England was on his knees shooting across the post pile at the flashes beside the house. Godine's Colt clamored for attention at the end of the posts, and Pradeau got in three shots. Then the running figure checked, stumbled, and

sprawled flat on the ground.

At the end of the post pile, Godine cursed steadily, his voice tearful, unsteady. "They've killed her. Damn them!"

Another running figure broke from the poplars, reached the girl on the ground, snatched at her and, crouching, dragged her into the shadow of the trees.

"Birdsong!" Tommy Pradeau exclaimed. "She—"

"Ruthie is out of there now," England said grimly. "Dead or not, she's turned us loose!"

"And now?" asked Pradeau.

"Now I'll go in an' get 'em," England said determinedly. "Into the house. Godine, you'll stay here and hold down the front. Tommy, you want to get your girl an' see if she's all right. Can you make it over there?"

"Yeah," Tommy assured him. "I can make it."

"Then you do that. Where's Charlie? Charlie!"

There was no answer.

"He's pulled out," Tommy announced needlessly.

England made no comment. He was looking at the house and yard bathed in the moonlight. To the west and north of the house the shadows were long. The corrals and the barn behind the house, partially visible from the gate, were black and forbidding. North of the house a slope came down sharply, and below the slope stood a wagon.

"I think I can go in," England announced. "If they haven't put somebody out by the corrals. I'll have to chance that."

"I'm goin' down to where Birdsong is," Tommy said, and, rising, made a dash toward the end of the poplar grove.

He reached his destination, disappearing into the poplars despite the rattling expostulation of the guns in the house. England hitched up his trousers again, crouched behind the post pile and spoke to Godine.

"Hold down this end. I'm—"

"Hey!" Tommy Pradeau's voice floated across the yard. "Ruthie ain't hurt bad. Birdsong's got her."

"Thank God for that!" Godine ejaculated. "England—"

He did not finish. John England had run from the shelter of the post pile, crouching, weaving, a wavering target in the moonlight. For an instant he showed, flitting batlike across the open while the men in the house sought frantically to stop him with searching lead. Then he disappeared, dropping from sight in the shadow at the end of the yard fence. Godine fired twice at the porch of the house, inched back behind the post pile and, jacking shells out of his Colt, began to reload.

From the post pile England, following a carefully marked line, reached the shadows of a pile of brush in the fence corner. The brush gave him momentary shelter and, tugging down his hat, he went on. The knoll to the north of the house protected him and, lying against the flank of the knoll, panting, he looked toward the wagon, his next destination. As he lay there regaining his breath, a dog set up a frantic clamor from the barn, and England swore. If that dog was loose, he'd have trouble.

The dog stopped barking abruptly and England drew a full breath. If he could reach the wagon now he might possibly gain the side of the house. That would offer some protection. Welch's house was flanked on all sides save the back. Godine was in front. Tommy Pradeau and Birdsong were on the south. He, John England, was on the north. Only the back was clear, and

Tommy could partially watch that.

The way to go in, England thought, was to reach the side of the house and follow it to the rear. He took a deep breath. It was like plunging into icy water, this thing he was attempting. Of course he could get to the back of the house, always supposing that fortune favored him and that Lemoine and Welch had not put a man in the barn or at the corrals. And when he got there he could wait. Daylight would come eventually, and with daylight reinforcements from the sheriff's office in Landmark. But John England did not want to wait for those reinforcements. He wanted action and he wanted it now. Those men in there had killed his partner, murdered him when he was helpless. Hot anger coursed through England. He was not going to wait, not now, not when there was a gambling chance of winning.

"Ho!" A guttural voice sounded almost at England's elbow. He was so startled that he almost jumped from the knoll. "Charlie!" he exclaimed, recovering himself. "What—where have you been?"

"Man out back by shed," Charlie announced. "Dog, too. I fix 'em."

"The hell you did!" was all John England could manage.

"Sure," Charlie grunted. "You go in house?"

"If I can get in," England answered.

Charlie meditated over that. Then: "You drive 'em out; I get 'em," he announced placidly.

England discerned a black splotch that he had thought was a rock. The blackness moved a trifle and disappeared. The fat Sioux buck could move and hide with the facility of a young quail.

"All right," England agreed. "I'll drive 'em out an' you get 'em."

Gathering himself, he made a run for the wagon.

CHAPTER IX

A DEBT PAID WITH BLOOD

THE men within the house and those watching had not been idle during this time. Shots splattered sharply from front and sides. Godine, at the post pile, was watchful, and occasionally his Colt spoke spitefully. To the south Tommy Pradeau and Birdsong kept up a desultory fire. Southeast of the house a gun spoke authoritatively. Either Tommy or Birdsong had chosen a new position. And in the house the beleaguered men, Lemoine and Welch and Welch's riders, answered the shots. Satisfied, England flattened himself beneath the wagon.

When he was ready he made his run for the house. In this effort he had co-operation. Charlie, hidden on the knoll, worked his Winchester like a madman, the gun stuttering steadily. Charlie's efforts aroused the others, and while John England dashed for the side of the house the whole yard was ringed with gunfire. Reaching the house, England once more checked.

The firing died away. England, motionless, heard men move inside the log house and a voice said hoarsely, "This was a damned-fool idea in the first place, Welch. We should have pulled out."

Welch's voice was querulous. "It's Lemoine's idea. He said we'd trap 'em."

"Trap, hell!" snarled the first speaker and then, anxiously, "I wonder if Joe's all right. How many are there out there, do you think?"

"Too damned many," Welch said. "I think we'd better make a break out the back. I think we can—"

Lemoine interrupted. Evidently

he had just come into the room. "There's four outside," he stated. "If Joe will get on the job he'll stop 'em from coming around in back."

"Somebody got under the wagon," Welch announced. "That's why I called you. I think it was England. You take one end an', Casey, you take the other. I'll take the middle an' we'll blast him out of there."

AGAIN England heard movement. A piece of glass broken from a window tinkled down beside him and he moved swiftly. Three of Lemoine's force were concentrated in one room. That left two others in the house. There had been six men. The one in the barn Charlie had accounted for. England edged along the side of the house, reached the end and, turning it, walked through the moonlight toward the back door.

The eight strides which took England to the back door, covered an eternity, but miraculously no one fired, no one checked him, and as he reached the door the house rocked with the reverberations of shots as Lemoine and Welch and Casey tried to blast a man from under the wagon. Any noise that England made as he opened that back door was covered by the crashing of the gunfire inside. England stepped through the opening into blackness and closed the door.

He paused beside it, letting his eyes grow accustomed to the blackness, and then as the shooting stopped, moved across the kitchen he had entered.

He went through the door into another room, one hand holding the Smith & Wesson, the other extended. He could see, dimly, the bulk of a bed, light reflecting from a mirror, the faint square of a window. Something moved across the window.

"That ought to do it," Lemoine said, grunting with satisfaction.

"All right, Lemoine," John England announced. "Put up your hands."

He crouched and shifted as he spoke, knowing what was to come. He could have shot at the bulk of the man beside the window, but he had not. Now, instantly, on the heels of his words, the dark room came to life. A constant flame from gun muzzles lighted the room as the men close by the window threw lead.

England, crouching, answered those shots. He fired twice, centering his shots below gun flame, dropped flat to the floor, rolled and fired again, and rolled farther. Three times more he shot, changing his position, sure that wherever his lead went home it found an enemy. He broke the Smith & Wesson, catching the empties in his hand, his palm burned by their heat, his shoulder and upper arm on fire from a long furrow through the flesh. He stuffed shells into the gun and waited, scarcely daring to breathe.

Abruptly the firing ceased. Somewhere in the front of the house a man was calling anxiously, and over by the window sounded a steady groaning. To England's right a voice called querulously, "Andreas —Andreas—" The querulous voice broke off short in the middle of the name and there was a slithering sound and a thump, dull and lifeless. England waited. Boots thumped in the room beyond the door.

"What the hell's happened?" a voice demanded.

Just to John England's left there was movement. England twisted, thrust out his arm and pulled the trigger of the Smith & Wesson. The muzzle of the short gun was meshed in something soft, pressed against

flesh. The shot was muffled, deadened. England wrenched the gun away from the cloth that trapped the muzzle and fired twice at the door. From the doorway there came the noise of a hastily scrambling exit. A body threshed on the floor beside England.

England thrust out his left hand, and snapping teeth closed into his flesh. He wrenched his hand free and without realizing he was doing it, flicked blood from the wound.

Outside a shot sounded and then a high-pitched whoop. Charlie was on the job.

"Are you done?" England asked softly.

IN all that silent house there was no answer. Then came the steady padding of feet on the floor, and from the door Charlie spoke.

"Good joke on Lemoine, huh?" Charlie grunted, and lighted a match. Before the flame died away, the buck's grinning face was briefly illuminated.

Tommy Pradeau joined them and they made a search. With Charlie carrying the lamp which somehow had come through unbroken, and England, gun ready beside him, they looked through the shambles that Welch's ranchhouse had become. In the front room a wounded man groaned beside the wall and offered no resistance when Charlie kicked his gun out of reach.

In the bedroom that England entered there were four men: Welch, two nondescript riders that Tommy Pradeau and Charlie identified as Casey Flint and Shorty Ness, and Andreas Lemoine, his shirt still smoldering from the flame from England's gun.

Out in the barn there was a sixth man and a dead dog. The man in the barn was not a pretty sight, for Charlie had used a knife on him And so, with the search made, England's little posse gathered on the porch, the moon—far to the west now—challenging the feeble light of the lamp.

Birdsong had bandaged Ruthie's wound, a deep furrow along her side, and had repaired the damage done to Godine's leg. Now, with a clean dish towel, she bound England's arm and the gaping wound from the bite in the flesh of his hand. All possible repairs made, the group held a consultation, and Birdsong and Tommy Pradeau took their horses and rode to where the trail to Welch's ranch joined the main road. There they would wait for Buck Creasy and the men from Landmark.

John England sat on the lowest step of Welch's porch, Charlie beside him, weary lines drawing his face into those of an old, old man; Louis Godine sat on the ground, his back braced against the steps and his legs stretched out before him. Ruthie's head was pillowed on his good leg.

That was how they were when, in the light of early morning, Creasy and Ben Lorimer and eight hard-visaged men from Landmark rode up. Lorimer swung down from his saddle and came stiffly toward the porch, and England got up to meet him. There was talk and explanation then, and John England showed his commission and gave his authority. The men went into the house, and when they came out again Lorimer looked at England gravely.

"You might have waited for us," he pointed out dryly.

England, remembering the tarpaulin-wrapped body that lay out near the Whispering Springs well, shook his head. "There's some things," he said, "that won't wait, Lorimer."

The sheriff was a man of action

himself, an old officer, and he understood. "Louderman was your pardner, wasn't he?" he said, and turning to his men, gave orders.

Later, when a posseman was hitching a team to the wagon and when blanket-wrapped bodies were disposed in the shade beside the porch, there came a disturbance from the rear of the house. En route to find what was wrong, England and the sheriff came upon a scowling posseman supporting the none-too-steady Charlie. Charlie wore a foolish grin on his usually stolid face, and he waved a bottle in his hand with unabandoned joyousness.

"We found the whiskey cache, Ben," the posseman said virtuously. "An' right in the middle of it was this Injun, drunk as a lord. I snaked him outen there. We can throw him in jail for ten years. He—"

John England shook his head. "I'll take care of Charlie," he said. "He goes with me."

The posseman looked his astonishment and released his hold. Charlie, still smiling fatuously, slumped down and went to sleep.

THE bodies were loaded, Charlie among them, as inert as any, and the wagon started to town. Buck Creasy, dispatched to the Concha, came back with the buckboard and Ruthie was placed in it beside her stepfather. Ruthie's black eyes were big and there was the old glint in them, a calculating possessive glint that made John England repress a shudder.

"I can't come back to the ranch," he told Godine, answering the ranchman's invitation. "I've got too many things to do." Godine looked his disappointment and pressed the invitation, and Ruthie, her voice light and clear once more, added her word. But England was adamant, and with Creasy driving, the buckboard started for the Concha.

Two possemen, directed by Lorimer, followed the buckboard. They were to go out to Whispering Springs and bring back Bob Louderman's body in the sheep wagon England had left there. Two more possemen, armed with the information that Charlie had given them, started to the agency to pick up the Indian, Bluefront. It was all wound up, all finished. John England, standing in front of the house with Lorimer beside him, felt a weight slough from his shoulders.

"An' now what, England?" Lorimer asked.

"Now," England answered wearily, "we'll go to town. I can sleep a week. I've got to stay a while. I'll have to be at the inquests an' the hearings. I guess—" He broke off. Tommy Pradeau and Birdsong came around the side of the house and walked toward the two men. Lorimer eyed them curiously.

The man and the girl stopped, and Birdsong, reaching into the bosom of her dress, brought out the silver-mounted rabbit's foot.

"I tell you good luck," she said to England, dangling the little charm at the end of its cord.

John England smiled. "Good luck," he agreed. "You see me in town, Tommy. I've got somethin' in mind for you and Birdsong. An' here—" He reached a hand into his pocket and brought out his own charm. "You might as well have the mate to that one Birdsong got." His voice softened and his eyes held a faraway look. "They kind of belong together," he said, thinking of Bob Louderman. "I'd like to have them that way again."

THE END.

NO MORE FOOFARAW

by RAY NAFZIGER

THEY brought the telegram to young Kirby Hazard as he sat playing poker in a private room of his and his partner's gambling house, known as the "New Trail." At the moment there was over a thousand dollars in the pot, and Kirby waited for the showdown before he opened the wire.

Reading it, he straightened to sudden rigidity. His father, Dan Hazard, was dead. Dead and buried. Killed by horse thieves. The telegram had been sent by a neighbor, old Frank Selvering.

Kirby's first thought was the ironical one that his father had been killed while he, the most reckless of

the Hazards, was still alive. Five years ago when Kirby had left home, Dan Hazard had predicted that his son would end up by being shot in some saloon brawl. Instead, it had been Dan himself who had met violent death.

His partner in the New Trail, Jim Personett, Kirby found at the bar in the main room which was thronged with men trying their luck at roulette, faro, stud and draw. The room was ornate, with a redwood bar, polished hardwood floor, the best chandeliers, tables and chairs money could buy. Nothing but the finest would do for the gambler, Kirby Hazard, who was a strikingly well-set-up fellow with the hammered-flat muscles of a bronc rider, wavy chestnut hair, friendly, shrewd gray eyes, a ready smile.

At twenty-five Kirby still had a disarming boyishness that drew men, but the brain behind the smile was razor-sharp, his poker was as cold and ruthless as an Arctic winter; and the gun he wore in an ornately carved holster was counted one of the three fastest in the newly opened trail town of Grants. He and Personett, owners of Grants' finest gambling and drinking establishment, were on their way to make a fortune. Neither ever forgot that goal; Jim Personett, stocky, with flashing dark eyes, even less than Kirby.

"Do you have to go home?" was Personett's first question when Kirby had told him the contents of his wire. "Tobe and Serk Dolman will be in with their herds inside a week. They'll drop ten thousand before they leave."

"I'll be back in time to help take that ten thousand from 'em," Kirby assured him. "Yes, I got to go. Got a eleven-year-old brother that's been left alone. I'll take the night train to Caprock and ride home from there."

It was pure vanity that made Kirby load the palomino saddle horse he had won from a California gambler into a stock car with the saddle string of a rancher headed his way. That horse and the fancy rigging would show the folks back home just how high he had climbed since leaving a backwoods mountain range country.

He spent the train ride in a stud game and by early morning when the train reached Caprock, he was five hundred dollars richer. Unloading the palomino, he headed for the ranch by way of the county seat, Val Verde. Reaching the town at dusk, he put up his horse at the livery stable, pleased at the crowd which gathered to admire the slim-legged palomino and the saddle, a flat-horned thousand-dollar Mexican rig, heavy with hammered silver. He had won it at monte from a Mexican *hacendado* who had ridden north with a longhorn herd.

Even the sheriff who came over to invite Kirby to his office was visibly impressed by the outfit.

"That rubbing out of your father was dirty," he said after they were in the courthouse. "They killed him while he was sleeping in his blankets in Chupadera Canyon and run off fifty head of horses. Frank Selvering and I took out a posse and tried tracking, but they were slick enough to scatter the trails on the malpais. Nothing we could do."

Kirby nodded agreement. Rustlers were working in big bands, sets of men relaying stolen horses and cattle out of the State. In time, when the country was more settled, the rustlers would be discouraged through hempen ropes fitted about a few carefully selected necks.

"I heard a cow buyer telling about

your new place at Grants," the sheriff continued. "You've come a long ways in a short time."

"Faster than I'd have come ranching, I guess," said Kirby. It was true. He had come a long ways since this little town and its tinhorn poker games, where if a puncher lost a couple months' pay, it was something to be talked about. Men in the New Trail place had lost enough money to buy the biggest outfit in the Val Verde country. Visiting his home town again, Kirby Hazard was more satisfied than ever that he had left it.

But when the next day he topped the round mountain and saw the rambling log ranchhouse on the bench below, its pole corrals and the drooping green lace of the big pepper trees which the Spanish *conquistadores* had brought up from Peru, he stopped his horse and for long minutes sat his saddle, looking down sadly on the ranch. He was wishing that he could see the familiar figure of his father, weather-beaten, taciturn, working hard to develop his horse ranch.

THE crash of a rifle shot, then another, made Kirby spur down the slope. But when the regularity of shots told him that someone was shooting at a target, he slowed the palomino. Behind the line of pepper trees he found the rifleman, his young brother Lanny, firing at a target placed against a low cliff.

When Lanny, engrossed in his shooting, at last heard the hoofs of the palomino, he turned and stood looking at Kirby without a word. Then tears slowly came into his eyes, and when Kirby got down, the boy took an uncertain step toward him. Kirby realized, seeing those tears, what his coming meant to Lanny. The lad, with the yarns he had heard about Kirby's occasional gun fights and big gambling winnings, had made a hero out of his older brother. Awkwardly Kirby put his arm about the youngster's shoulders. The boy's eyes went to the horse, the saddle, lingered admiringly.

"Why the gun practice, kid?" asked Kirby.

"I figure they'll be back for more horses," Lanny explained. "The polecats that got dad, I mean. He had a hunch that night there was danger and sent me and Eph back to the ranch. And they got him when he slept—damn them."

"I doubt that they'll ever raid in this country again," said Kirby. "They were just a bunch of horse thieves, Lanny; the country is full of 'em. If we knew where they went, I'd be for following 'em, of course, but as it is, I've got to be starting back to Grants in a day or two."

The boy looked a little dazed. "You're going back, Kirby?" he said in a hoarse, strained voice. "I didn't figure me and Eph would be running the ranch alone."

Eph was the big Negro who had been with the family since he was born. A good hand with horses, but almost a child in mind. "We won't run the place at all, Lanny," said Kirby. "We'll have to sell it. You'll come an' live with me."

The boy set his mouth stubbornly. "I want to stay here, Kirby. I hoped you'd stay, too, to wait for those buzzards to come back. It wouldn't be right to sell the ranch after the way dad's worked. He's got everything ready to build the dam across Cerro Creek so we can plant that flat below in alfalfa. We'll have the finest horse ranch in the country here."

Kirby grinned. "Small pickings

for me, Lanny. I can buy a place this big every six months with what my partner and I make."

"I figure that me and Eph can run it," the boy insisted.

"We'll see," said Kirby. Silently they walked toward the house, stopping at the little fenced-in cemetery of the Hazard family. In it lay not only their mother's and father's graves, but those of other relatives—their grandfather, an uncle and aunt who had worked and died on the ranch, giving years to building it up.

Kirby Hazard was silently asking why they had worked so hard. They had been fools to make slaves of themselves. Alone he had made more in the five years he had been away from home than they had made in all the years since his grandfather had located here. And he had done it not by hard, sweating work, but by using his brains.

While they stood there two neighbors rode in, oldish lank Frank Selvering and his brother-in-law, Tod Wilshire, a small, dark man, with a quick, jerky way of moving. Wilshire worked on the Selvering ranch.

The pair shook hands with Kirby. "Glad to see you again, boy," said Selvering, who was a placid, slow-talking sort. "But I hate to think of what brung you back. Your pa was a mighty good neighbor. Heard about your place over at Grants. They say you're on the road to big things."

"Just clawing for a foothold," said Kirby, pleased by the compliment.

"I'm hoping you'll be a neighbor of ours again, Kirby," said Selvering. "Your dad has got the place built up to where all it needs is good management."

"Not mine," Kirby told him. "This place is too small for me."

"Intend to sell, then?" asked Selvering thoughtfully. "I'd hoped you'd come back to stay. We need the help of your gun against the rustlers that wiped out your dad."

"Maybe you could buy the place," Tod Wilshire suggested to his brother-in-law.

"We ain't goin' to sell," put in Lanny hoarsely. "I'm staying here at least until them rustlers come back. Me and Eph can run the ranch."

"Looks as if I'd have a scrap with Lanny if I try to sell out," Kirby told Selvering. "But those rustlers won't be back. After a cold-blooded murder they'll make themselves scarce in this country."

"That's what I figger, Kirby," said Tod Wilshire. "Say, why not give me a chance to run the outfit? Frank's got a new son-in-law, Tate Dykes, that can help him. I'll guarantee there'll be no stealing of any horses while I'm in charge."

"Don't need anybody to run the place," Lanny said flatly. "Me and Eph will run it." Plainly the boy didn't like Tod Wilshire.

"You could do worse than let Lanny stay on the place for a while, Kirby," remarked Selvering. "Then later you could locate a good man up in Grants—some trail boss out of a job maybe—and send him down. Meanwhile, we'll be looking after Lanny. Him and Eph and me and Tod and my son-in-law start gatherin' horses over in Cimarron Basin tomorrow. Your dad and me contracted to sell a bunch of our geldings. We got a buyer coming out Monday."

Kirby weighed the advisability of Lanny's staying on the ranch with a good man in charge. "Could do, maybe," he agreed. "But Lanny needs to go to school a few years more. Who's teaching here now?"

Selvering chuckled. "Same girl

that was teaching here when you left. Donna Thomason. You must remember her, Kirby."

KIRBY flushed a little. Not likely that he would forget Donna. When he had been riding these slopes, a reckless puncher, he had asked her to marry him. Donna had refused, and from the reasons she had given, he admitted that she had known him better than he knew himself. In him, she had said, was the itch for new country and faces, the excitement of hair-trigger decisions that meant disaster or fortune, life in fast flashes instead of the slow drift of days on the range.

Hearing her name for the first time in years, Kirby was astonished and troubled at his sudden eagerness to see her again. It was, of course, to make sure that he had really forgotten her, he told himself. Donna would look at his fancy horse and saddle and call it foofaraw—show stuff that appealed to kids—just as she used to make fun of the fancy-looking horses and expensive hand-tooled saddles he bought instead of saving his wages.

They'd be farther apart now than ever, he knew, yet after dinner he saddled a fresh horse and rode across the mountains to the Thomasons. Donna's rancher father lived in a green-roofed house a few hundred yards from the schoolhouse corner. It was surrounded by an apple orchard and the odor of fallen fruit lay heavy in the air, mingling with the scent of fresh-cut meadow. As Kirby rode into the yard, he found himself thinking back to the many times he had ridden here to court Donna Thomason.

When he saw the girl, just returned from a ride on an obstreperous colt, he had to laugh silently at himself. His heart was beating hard again. As if five years had been a few pages of a book turned over by an idle breeze.

Donna's hand was warm and firm in his, her greeting smile warm. Five years had only added to her attractiveness. After the exchange of greetings, he restrained himself from talking about the girl herself, and instead talked about Lanny.

"I thought you might help in talking him into going away with me," he told her. "He wants to stay on the ranch."

"Maybe Lanny thinks it would be running away to leave," Donna said coolly.

"Running away from what?" Kirby asked, puzzled.

"From the work that your father was doing. And from the men who killed your father. Lanny thinks they'll come back, and he wants revenge on them. He'll be afraid of staying without you, but he's got too much courage to leave. Couldn't you arrange to be with him for a while, Kirby?"

"Can't be done," he said. "I've got to get back to my business." He flushed a little. "Even if it is gambling," he added defensively.

It made him angry that Lanny, Frank Selvering, Donna Thomason, seemed to take it for granted that it was his job to get back into riding clothes again, just to keep a two-bit outfit on its feet.

"Lanny idolizes you," said the girl. "But he'll think that you're deserting him when he needs you must."

"What do you think?" he asked directly.

"What does it matter what I think? But if you want to know"—her voice was suddenly low—"I think you're dodging responsibility and the disagreeable work and steady plodding of the ranch. It wasn't in you to stay in this coun-

try five years ago; it's not in you now. But I'd hoped that some day you'd come back—wanting to stay."

"But why should I?" he argued. "I can buy a better ranch than dad's with the money I can make in a few months. Of course, it's gambling, but it's as honest as most businesses. I can support a wife. Why don't you go back with me, Donna?"

He knew that she would not even consider that; she did not even answer his question.

"You can buy a ranch, yes," she said earnestly, "but you could never really own it. The people that had built it up into a ranch would still own it. The real owners of the Hazard ranch are lying in your family cemetery."

"They're welcome to it," he said, angered. "Because I happened to be born on that ranch I'm not letting it be a ball and chain to me. I live my own life—and it happens that I want to live it a long ways from this country."

He rode away with the memory of the look in Donna's eyes, not contempt, but sorrow. He told himself angrily that she was as unreasonable as Lanny whose eyes wistfully begged him to stay. He'd had enough of this. He would get back to Grants. The Dolmans would be arriving, wanting action in big-stake poker sessions, and Jim Personett needed Kirby's help. Lanny could stay here on the ranch with Eph; he'd send down a capable man to run the outfit.

On the following morning Frank Selvering, his brother-in-law, Tod Wilshire, and son-in-law, Tate Dykes, rode over with a pack outfit to head for Cimarron Basin, which was ranged by both Hazard and Selvering horses. Lanny and Eph were to ride with them. Saddling his palomino, Kirby prepared to return to Grants.

"Lanny will be all right with us," Selvering assured him. "No gang will dare jump five of us."

When Kirby shook hands with Lanny, the boy's hand was a little unsteady in his. Lanny was wearing his father's big six-shooter with a cartridge belt that went twice around his waist.

"I'll be back in a month, kid, to see how things are going," Kirby promised. "You'll be all right with the Selverings."

IT began raining when Kirby was halfway to the railroad town of Caprock, and the palomino dragged into the town with his head carried low. Kirby, as he stabled the horse, grunted with disgust. The palomino was all show; the oldest pony on the Hazard ranch had more stamina.

There was no train until morning, so Kirby went to the one gambling place in Caprock. It was filled with a tough lot, mostly outlaws and rustlers, he decided, the kind that didn't come to Grants because there they might run into cowmen who might know their records and add them up to a hang rope.

They had plenty of money, however. Stacks of gold and silver coins were piled on the tables. Kirby joined the ring at the roulette layout, lost, lost again, then hit suddenly and took the few eagles and double eagles the banker shoved across to him.

A queer thought came to Kirby as he picked up the gold pieces and held them in his hand. For a moment it looked, to his eyes, as if those dull gold disks had blood specks on them. Imagination, of course, but among the men placing bets in this room could easily be those who had murdered his father.

He remembered a talk he had had once with Jim Personett. There had been a bloody railroad holdup and they had discovered later that two of the bandits had gambled and lost their ill-gotten gains in the New Trail.

Personett had laughed, looking at the gold pieces the men had lost. "No blood spots on them," he had remarked.

There were no blood spots on these pieces either, of course. Kirby looked about the room. It held the kind of excitement he had experienced for five years, and suddenly he realized that he was rather tired of it. Donna Thomason was right; the coins they used for money here didn't buy anything real—only more excitement. These men were like a lot of boys playing marbles, and the money they gambled with was play money.

And in a flash he could see the life ahead of him, losing, winning this play money, gambling away the years, a kid that had never grown up.

Back there in his home country men didn't play; they worked. Lanny, riding range for his father, wanting to stay on the ranch, was more of a man than any grown-up who made his living gambling. And in Cimarron Basin his brother, with the old Negro and a couple of neighbors, was quietly going about the business of gathering a bunch of valuable horses which would be plain invitation to money-hungry rustlers. Maybe Personett did need him in Grants, but Lanny needed him more, Kirby suddenly realized.

Kirby looked down at the gold in his hand again, the gold that might have been some of that received from the sale of his father's horses. He flung it on the roulette table, and with a choked oath turned and left the place.

Half an hour later he was riding back. Not on the palomino, but on a tough cow pony that had pitched like crazy when he had first mounted it. And the saddle was not the gaudy Mexican affair, either, but an old hull a cowboy had left in payment of a livery bill.

Kirby rode most of the night in a slogging rain. At daylight he laid over at a ranch a few hours to rest his horse and snatch a little sleep before pounding south again under clearing skies toward Cimarron Basin.

AT dusk Kirby reached the rim of the basin and looked down. The holding pasture the Hazards and Frank Selvering always used while gathering horses was a rock-walled side canyon. Near it a campfire gleamed through the pines as Kirby worked his way down the successive rims. Playing a sudden hunch, he tied his horse and approaching on foot, remained back in the brush while he looked over the camp.

Selvering, Tod Wilshire, Eph and Lanny were there. Kirby waited until Lanny came out for firewood, then called to him softly. Lanny stopped and stood staring at his brother in the starlight.

"You back, Kirby?" he said in a low voice, and the sudden happiness in his voice was pay for the long ride. "I been hopin' you would. I got a feelin' them thieves is a-comin' back tonight. With the buyers arrivin' tomorrow, tonight's their only chance of gettin' this bunch."

"We'll hope they come, anyway," said Kirby grimly. "Where's Tate Dykes?"

"He had to pull out this afternoon. His wife is sick."

"I been thinking, Lanny, about dad being shot in his blankets. Wouldn't want the same thing to happen to you. Drag your bedroll off where it'll be away from the others. I want to be layin' in it tonight; you can sleep out in my saddle blankets and slicker. I've been thinking that whoever shot dad might've got close enough to do it because he was a friend. Don't tell Eph or Selvering or Tod Wilshire that I'm here."

For supper Kirby opened a can of dried beef and a box of crackers and chewed them slowly. The night after the rain was balmy, vapor-filled, soft to the skin. Somewhere on the mountain a coyote lifted a few short sharp barks and started a long wail.

Kirby approached the camp again. Tod Wilshire was posted as guard over the horses in the rock corral. Eph, Lanny had told him, was to follow Tod as guard, then Selvering, Lanny being counted out.

The fire sank to coals, casting a faint red glow on the sleek wet cliff behind it, and Selvering, Eph and Lanny turned in. Quietly Kirby took Lanny's place, easing into the blankets, his rifle by his side.

Near midnight, after Eph had relieved Tod Wilshire as guard, the crash of a rifle came from the corral followed by a loud bawl from Eph. Three or four rifles began crashing like mad, the echoes rolling like thunder against the high rims.

Selvering's voice arose as he hustled out of his bed. Then the thud of hoofs came and a chorus of yells. The horses had been swept from the side canyon corral. Kirby was swearing as he ran back to his horse where Lanny had been sleeping.

"I'll git my horse," offered the boy.

"You stay here in camp," Kirby ordered. "I'm following 'em and it may be a long trail."

Selvering and Tod Wilshire were preparing to ride off in pursuit, but without waiting for them or making himself known, Kirby spurred hard along the only route the band of stolen horses could have been driven. After two miles he pulled up. There was no sound of hoofs ahead and, lighting a match, he found no prints in the canyon bottom. He remembered an old trail which turned up over a low saddle in a high ridge, heading for the other side of the range, and rode back to it.

Here hoofmarks were plentiful in the wet earth and he pounded in pursuit. The men who had driven off the horses knew this country well. They were setting a fast pace, too; Kirby could not gain on them. Wet trees drenched him with water and a snag ripped the leather jacket half from his back.

Across a narrow valley and climbing through a long steep canyon, Kirby pulled up to a walk. A scattered slide of boulders rose at the side and from the pile he heard the faint click of a gun. Evidently a guard had been left to take care of any pursuers. Kirby flung himself from his horse just before a rifle crashed.

On hands and knees, six-shooter in his paw, he went clambering up over the rocks. There was a little stir above and the flame of a gun. Kirby's six-shooter spat fire across the short space. A yelp succeeded and then silence.

There was a hole in Kirby's thigh with blood soaking his breeches leg, but he was able to make his way over the rocks to locate the man who had shot at him. He found a man with a bullet-smashed forehead. The fellow was no stranger, but Tate

Dykes, Frank Selvering's son-in-law. Clearly, he had been planted to stop Lanny Hazard and Eph in case they had pursued the rustlers.

Selvering and Wilshire, of course, were in it, too. Pretty slick of the Selvering bunch, pretending to be friendly and helpful, Kirby thought. Pretty, slick, too, having Selvering's horses run off with the Hazard geldings to turn suspicion.

KIRBY'S horse had gone off dragging his reins, but he limpingly hunted for Tate's horse, found it tied to a cedar and mounted. He was losing plenty of blood from his leg, but he figured that he could afford to lose it and he rode, gritting his teeth to keep from grunting at the pain. The trail was plain in the starlight and occasionally the distant clatter of hoofs came back to him. Twice as he topped ridges he thought he heard the sound of some rider following. That would be either Selvering or Tod Wilshire.

Ahead in the deep narrow hole of Dry Canyon, drifting clouds were leaving shrouding streamers. Kirby stopped and listened. There was no longer the clatter of horse hoofs and the faint incense of smoke came, he guessed, from a fire in some abandoned trapper's cabin.

The swirling clouds lifted a little, letting in the gray of coming dawn. With someone following him, Kirby had to get into action quick. The group at the house would recognize the roan as Dykes', and the rider they would also take for Dykes. At least it was worth a chance, and Kirby rode boldly in.

Revealed by the flickering light of a fire built before the doorway, was a little group. One called to him. Kirby only made a grunt for reply and kept riding in. Four men there; more than he had expected. He identified Selvering's brother-in-law, Tod Wilshire. He must have gotten ahead on the trail while Kirby had gone past the ridge turnoff.

Just then Wilshire identified Kirby and with a warning yell to the others, swept up a rifle leaned against a door frame. Kirby fired fast, emptying his rifle, while shots hailed at him in return. The roan went down, and Kirby, flopping to the ground like a giant fish behind the horse, reloaded.

One of the bullets had ripped through his left arm, but he was able to steady the gun. He had seen Wilshire go down. The remaining three had scattered and were centering their fire on him.

Then Kirby heard a yell behind him and saw lank old Frank Selvering riding out of the trees. A rifle was in his hands, and he was pumping shots madly. It had been Selvering, then, that he had heard following him. Now the renegade was coming in to end him.

Kirby tried to turn his gun against the rancher, but he was too badly crippled to move fast. Next instant Selvering, leaving his saddle, was plummeting down on Kirby, evidently wanting to take him alive. But instead of shooting his enemy, the rancher merely flung himself alongside and was pushing his rifle over the carcass of the horse, swearing heatedly as he pulled trigger on an exploded cap.

"Look here," said Kirby dazedly, as Selvering stuffed his rifle magazine, "your brother-in-law's layin' up ahead."

Selvering, taking out a plug of tobacco, bit off a corner and crunched down on the hunk.

"You're tellin' me," he snorted. "The polecat! And I found my son-

in-law layin' back along the trail instead of being with his sick wife. What's left of 'em are in that cabin. You keep 'em smoked up from here and I'll charge 'em from the back."

Without waiting for a reply, Selvering slid back and crawled along a line of boulders toward the brush. But Kirby, fighting off a wave of blackness, knew he wasn't going to last until Selvering could make his charge. A rifle crashed from the window of the log cabin and Kirby, leaving his rifle, got up to run forward staggeringly, firing at the window, the six-shooter in his hand jumping, its explosions like thunder in his ears.

The man who had been at the window ran from the doorway and fell a few feet away. Kirby pulled up in the yard, looking down in amazement at three grotesquely sprawled bodies. The fourth man inside was yelling that he was ready to quit. Kirby ordered him out and leaned against the door frame waiting until Selvering came into camp.

"Looks like a clean-up," Kirby muttered.

"Yes," Selvering said bitterly. "A clean-up of rustlers and of my in-laws. I'm thankful the skunks are none of my blood. Anyway, you can go away now and leave the ranch to Lanny, knowing he'll be safe from thieves."

KIRBY HAZARD continued to lean against the door frame, looking at the canyon, its high rims, and the sun breaking through the clouds. This was the real thing he was thinking, this country and the work done in it—building up a ranch, defending it against marauders, far from the kid gambling games in his and Personett's New Trail establishment. Then his knees buckled and he slumped to the ground.

Twice during the long trip in which Selvering packed him out, helped by Lanny and Eph, Kirby recovered consciousness for brief moments. Then there was a long interval and when he awoke he was in the Thomason house with the apple orchard seen through the window. Lanny was there in the room, and Donna Thomason. Kirby ate a little soup, and slept some more. It was night when he woke again and only Donna was at the bedside this time.

"How long before I'm able to ride?" he demanded.

"Are you in a hurry to get back to Grants?" Donna asked.

He smiled. "No, not that. But I'm thinking there's going to be a lot of riding to do. A lot of work. It will be hard to try to take dad's place, and I've got no time to lose."

Donna looked at him, sudden tears coming to her eyes. "You're not going back to Grants?" she asked tremulously.

"No. Lanny needs someone to look after him; to see that he doesn't play hooky from school. There's only one thing I'm worried about—what sort of teacher they'll have here this year."

"Why should you wonder?" she retorted. "I'll be here, of course."

"You're wrong there," stated Kirby Hazard with a broad grin. "You're going to be over on our ranch helping me to become a real rancher. I've had my fling and I'm ready for a man's work. Lanny can have the palomino and that fancy Mexican saddle. I'd like to keep the outfit around to remind me occasionally what I once thought was important. They're like that New Trail gambling place of mine and Personett's. Kid stuff. Foofaraw!"

THE END.

One of the attacking Pawnees was just about to swoop down on the little boy when a charge from Uncle John Smith's rifle blasted him from his saddle.

THE STORY OF THE WEST

told in pictures and text by

GERARD DELANO

Through association with such men as Jim Bridger, Kit Carson and James Beckworth, Uncle John Smith gradually took to trapping, trading and guiding; in fact, anything which tended to satisfy those itching moccasined feet of his.

On one occasion Uncle John was returning from a trapping expedition with three other companions. Their mules were piled high with beaver pelts, for they had been very successful. Reaching the Santa Fe Trail at a point near Pawnee Rock, they pitched camp at about four in the afternoon. Suddenly, as the trappers were hunkered around their after-supper campfire, the mules snorted and became uneasy.

"Injuns," said Uncle John, his hand straying to the rifle at his side.

Soon a volley of shots sounded down the trail. Grabbing their guns, the trappers ran out from the rocks and raced in the direction of the firing. Round a turn in the Trail a Mexican ox train from Santa Fe was halted and making efforts to form into a corral. More than sixty Pawnees were circling them on their swift ponies, yelling fiendishly and shooting volleys of deadly arrows as they swooped near the wagons.

Just as the four white men reached the caravan, the Pawnees succeeded in cutting off the last wagon. An American and his wife and their little boy jumped out and tried to run through the mounted redskins' line and join their comrades. A dozen arrows struck the man before he took three steps and he fell dead. A yelling Pawnee dropped from his horse and snatched his scalp in an instant. Another Indian raced alongside the running woman, snatched her off her feet and, swinging her up before him on his pony, carried her swiftly off into the nearby sand hills. The little seven-year-old boy, running desperately and screaming for help, was just about to be picked up by another Pawnee when Uncle John took a stand, threw up his rifle and killed the Indian.

The Mexicans now renewed their efforts at forming an effective corral, and the Indians withdrew momentarily for a brief powwow. But only for a few minutes, for back they came again, yelling louder than ever. They were closing in, tighter and tighter, till now they were in easy rifle range. Still closer again they circled and now they slipped down on the off side of their ponies and loosed a rain of arrows.

Uncle John and his three American comrades were now burning powder aplenty, and as each of the four shot, a Pawnee parted company with his mount and rolled in the dust, his bow, quiver and arrows flying in different directions. Each time the Pawnees came back to pick up their dead, the Americans "rolled" four more of them in the dust. As dark came on, the Pawnees, discouraged by the deadly fire of the four Americans, suddenly quit and disappeared.

When it became evident that the redskins were through, Uncle John decided the caravan had better pull out. The trappers joined their outfit to the caravan and journeyed along with it toward Independence where they knew they would get a good price for their furs. Before they reached their destination, however, they were again attacked by the Pawnees. The Indians, far outnumbering the whites, were once more decisively routed.

The following autumn, Uncle John went back over the Trail, taking with him the little white boy, Paul Dale, whom he had rescued from the Pawnees. They found his mother, who had been carried off by the Pawnees, safe at Bents' Fort. She had made a brave escape. As she rode along, a captive of the Indians, she had noted which had the swiftest pony and had also kept her eye on the sun by day and the North Star at night for direction.

One night, while the Pawnees were all sleeping, she crept out of the wickiup, grabbed the pony she had selected and rode away. She had to travel four hundred miles over mountains and prairies, but she reached the Trail at last. Eventually she met up with an American caravan nearing Bents' Fort. What joy was hers when Uncle John Smith returned her little boy to her!

NEXT WEEK: REVOLUTION

CUPID IN CHAPS

by E. C. LINCOLN

As the long gray car skidded around the corner with a screech of rubber the two saddle horses in its path whirled on their haunches and leaped for their lives. When the dust and the profanity had at last settled, a diminutive bald-headed rider swung down from his pinto pony to retrieve his Stetson from the street.

"That guy might've killed us!" he piped aggrievedly. "You see who it was, Big?"

His companion, a six-foot-five giant on a huge black horse, grinned down at him with good humor. "Heck, no," he rumbled, shifting a cubic yard of white cardboard box to an easier resting point on his hip. "Ol' Rusty moved so durn fast he come near unloadin' me. Ain't seen

him so spry since he was a yearlin'."

"Wonder was it them fellers that was on the train. Thought I seen a checked suit," said the little man. "I sure'd admire to slap their ears back," he grumbled, as the pinto pony took up his shuffling walk.

"Yeah," his big companion agreed. Then, as they turned the corner from the railroad station into the busy main street of a growing cow town, he pointed. "There's a lunchroom, Willie. What say we eat?"

The lunchroom, at that time in the morning, was empty of customers. The giant settled himself on a stool at the counter, doubled his great legs under it, and, after several unsuccesful attempts to find a safer haven, deposited the white box on the floor behind him. The little man crawled to a perch near enough for company but far enough away for good elbowroom. After several minutes of hopeful waiting he rapped politely with the sugar bowl.

From the confines of the kitchen a blond waitress emerged. As her glance took in the two patiently waiting customers, she stopped in surprise, then giggled as if amused at something.

"Mornin', Mr. Cummings. Mornin', Mr. Griffin," she greeted. "I didn't hear you come in."

Mr. Griffin's widemouth fell open. Mr. Cummings' birdlike, weather-beaten face turned red, and he hastily removed his hat, exposing for a second time the shining baldness of his cranium. "How'd— You sure got the advantage on us, ma'am," he stammered. "How come you know our names?"

The girl's eyes twinkled with fun. "I thought everybody in the West knew Willie Joe and Big George," she said. "Oh, my! You're going to the wedding!"

"Seems t' me you know a whole lot," Big George rumbled with some resentment. "You one o' these fortune tellers? Or mebbe they got lady detectives in this here town."

Now the girl laughed outright. "Nope," she said, running a red napkin down the spotless counter in search of imaginary crumbs. "About the wedding! Well, that big box with the satin ribbon on it is a dead give-away. Couldn't be anything but a wedding present. Then you're both all dressed up. Forty-dollar Stetsons that are still stiff; new Levis that've hardly been worn at all, and silk neckerchiefs, and those bead-work vests and silver spurs. For the rest—" The girl reached under the counter and brought out a newspaper. "The Doane County *Weekly Argus* just came in this morning. Here you are, right on the front page, pictures and everything. It tells how you won the calf and steer roping at the Indian Fork rodeo last Saturday. And then a whole column about you gentlemen."

Big and Willie looked. After one glimpse they swore, and apologized in unison. "It's us, ma'am," acknowledged the little man unhappily. "We . . . we're wearin' our work clothes in the picture. What's the feller say, ma'am?"

"All about how you two never used to have a dime, even," the girl explained. "Then a big oil company hit oil on that little homestead claim where you were starving to death down in Oklahoma. And now you've got so much money you can't count it, and a big horse ranch in New Mexico, and silver-mounted saddles and . . . and everything you want in the world. Summers, it says, you load two horses on a private car and start looking for fun. And you win 'most every contest you enter. And Mr. Big George can take a barrel of

sugar on his shoulder and walk upstairs with it. And there can't anybody put anything over on Mr. Willie. And—"

"Yes, ma'am," interrupted Willie Joe hastily. "Looks like he'd got it all in, an' then some. So to save time for us starvin' range riders, here's th' only two things you don't know: We jest unhitched from that one-car freight an' passenger train that runs down from the main line. An' in this here box we got a silver water pitcher that we hunted all day yesterday in Billings for. It's the weddin' present, an' Big's goin' t' be plenty tired totin' it afore he turns it over to the happy bride. An' now, ma'am, if you don't object none, my big boy friend here wants two T-bones done plenty, an' six fried aigs on the side. For me personal, two orders o' hot cakes an' plenty slush to slide 'em down. An' one gallon o' Java which we'll divide up. An' while we're satisfyin' the pangs o' starvation, ma'am, you can jest tell us what you know about this here weddin'. We got the invite down at Indian Fork, with a note Mis' Jones put in personal tellin' us to hit the Open Eye a day early 'cause they'd be doin's. Otherwise, we're plumb ignorant."

TEN minutes later, when the two travelers were silently but efficiently satisfying their desire for sustenance, the blond waitress was really giving out information. Not often did she have such an audience.

"An' so," she chattered on, "after Mis' Jones' husband died, she took on the Open Eye an' run it herself. But I guess she got lonesome, 'cause she's made plenty passes at the boys round here. But they all ducked. Then this Henri Fenton Conti comes to stay at Curly Melander's dude ranch, and that ain't but twelve miles from the Open Eye, an' him an' Mis' Jones get to going together. They say she give him that car he drives round in. I wouldn't know about that." She paused to get her breath, then went on:

"He's a lawyer in Chicago, an' at least ten years younger'n she is. Slick looker. He's in this paper, too." She paused to shake the *Weekly Argus* as if it were unquestioned proof. "I guess pretty near everybody in the county's goin' to that weddin'. 'Tain't that they give a hoot for Liz Jones, but they say she's goin' to wear them Kandahar diamonds, and everybody wants to see them."

Willie Joe's flapjack-loaded fork stopped in midair. "Kandahar diamonds?" he queried. "What's them? Me 'n' Big knowed Liz an' Johnny Jones eight years ago. Warn't no diamonds then. Johnny was jest a little Englishman come here an' lived on checks he got from home. Raised cows. Nice guy, if he did talk funny. But a long ways from ownin' diamonds. Spill it, miss."

"The paper's had stories about the diamonds, lots of times," said the girl. "They come when somebody in his family died, an' when Johnny passed on, Liz got them. Folks say they're big as pigeon eggs. Thirty of 'em in a necklace. She keeps 'em hid. Nobody round here's ever seen 'em. My, I'd like to set my eyes on jools like that just once! But it ain't my day off an'—"

Willie Joe ran a crust of bread carefully about his plate till the last vestige of the syrup was removed. Then he slid from his stool, inquired the amount of their debt, added a five-dollar bill, and shoved the total across the counter. "For you, ma'am," he said politely. "An' thanks for the information."

The girl, speechless with awe, was

still staring when Big had edged the troublesome pasteboard box past the screen door. "My!" she breathed at last. "My! They're gentlemen, them two."

By the middle of the afternoon Big and Willie had made good progress along the forty miles of dirt road that led across sagebrush flats, then over a low pass through the Little Blues to Bull Valley and the Open Eye Ranch. After the hot sunshine of the sage flats the cooler air of the divide was grateful relief.

Earlier there had been some talk. Willie, for instance, had remarked that it beat him what Liz wanted to get married for, anyhow. "Liz warn't a bad ol' gal," he declared. " 'Course she was kind o' hoss-faced, an' she sure did make Johnny toe the line. 'Tain't likely the boys was pesterin' her, even if she's got a heart bigger'n a barrel. That girl in the lunchroom says she's made th' Open Eye th' best cow spread in the county, an' she's got them diamonds. So 'tain't money she's after, tyin' up with this Conti dude. Nossuh, Big, I jest don't savvy."

But when Big had suggested mildly that maybe Willie's personal experience with a certain Goldie Azuza in the not-too-remote past might throw some light on the problem, the little man had dropped the subject and lapsed into an injured silence, unbroken for many a dusty mile.

NOW Willie was amusing himself reading sign on the mountain road. Here a deer had crossed; there somebody's car had skidded on a turn; at the ford of this creek cattle had watered. Once a bear track wandered past a flat rock, now turned over and still dark on its exposed face. It was when they had crossed the crest of the divide and were descending through a grove of quaking asp with the encouraging prospect of seeing the Open Eye fences when the road straightened again, that Willie Joe drew rein and grunted with mild interest.

"How'd you read that, Big?" he queried when the giant on the black horse had come up. "This here auto turned off the road an' pushed into the brush a ways, then backed out ag'in."

Big George, in his turn, studied the sign. Then he swung the black horse into the crushed undergrowth for a distance of about twenty yards. There, faint but still discernible, an old foot trail led up around a rock ledge.

"Sure," said Big. "Feller jest drove in here far's he could, then unloaded and packed in. Funny, though; that trail ain't been traveled much, not for some time."

"Know where she goes?" queried Willie Joe.

Big George thought for a moment. The eight years since he had ridden that country had dimmed the map of his memory and he needed a little time to get things straight. "Yeah," he rumbled at last. "Back in there 'bout a quarter mile is where Sandy McRae had his cabin when he was trappin' the Bull that winter 'fore he pulled out for Oregon. Reckon she ain't been used since, less'n it's fellers gone in fishin', or somethin'. Let's git goin', Willie. I'm sort o' curious to see the Open Eye again an' I'd sure like to be there afore supper."

So Willie Joe desisted from his favorite pastime of speculating upon trail sign, and soon the Open Eye lay below them, less than half a mile away. Almost an ideal cow spread it was, with its many acres stretched along the fertile river bottom between high walls of rimrock that

shut off the winter winds. The darker green of the alfalfa meadows lay in checkerboard squares, promising great stacks for winter feeding. Thin trails wound threadlike to distant grazing along the bottom, or up to the open range of the benchland beyond. As Big and Willie emerged from the quakers, about fifty two-year-old whitefaces clattered ahead of them down the slope, then turned to watch their progress.

The ranch buildings lay under the north rim in a loop of the Bull, and the dirt road on which Big and Willie were traveling crossed the river on a wooden bridge a hundred yards from the house. Outbuildings and the pole fence which kept stray cattle from the grassy yard were bright with new whitewash. Even the corrals had a well-kept look of neatness that pleased Willie's critical eye.

"Looks like Liz done right well by herself," he chirped in his shrill treble. "Or mebbe she's jest had the place cleaned up special for the weddin'. Them folks movin' round down there seem right active. Git the string tight on that box, Big. 'Twon't be long now."

In another five minutes they had clattered across the wooden bridge and dismounted at a hitchrack just outside the whitewashed fence. Then, and then only, did the busy ranch seem aware of their arrival. A bow-legged cowpuncher, hurrying by with an armful of pine boughs, looked at them and stared.

"Big 'n' Willie's come, ma'am!" he roared.

Then the busy groups stopped working, and a woman came hurrying from the house. A moment later, Big and Willie were chuckling and shouting greetings and shaking hands with their hostess and everyone else within reach. The years, Big thought, hadn't used Liz Jones so kindly; in fact, she looked even less attractive than he remembered. The buckskin shirt that hung down over a man's Levis showed seasons of hard wear, and the iron-gray hair under the shapeless Stetson looked stringy. In person she was surely running to weight, and her face was almost as leather-brown as Big's own; but the sharp eyes were bright, and the generous mouth had lost none of its determination.

"So you boys got here!" she greeted in a voice that left no doubt of her delight at seeing them. "Didn't know's you'd get the invitation in time. I read in the paper you were in Indian Fork and I sent Pete right to town. Don't want any of my old friends to miss this wedding. I'm trying to do it right, like Johnny woulda done. Barbecue t'night, and champagne, and all the fixings. My gang's sleeping down in the cottonwoods, but I've saved you boys a place in th' bunkhouse, 'less'n you like sleeping out better. Well, I reckon you know most of these folks, anyhow. Jest make yourselves t' home."

WILLIE JOE swallowed hard. For what seemed a long time he had been trying to interrupt the flow of Liz Jones' fluent welcome, and he was fast becoming desperate. "Ma'am," he blurted, "Big an' me'll look out for ourselves all right. But we brought yuh a weddin' present in this here box, an' Big's jest about wore out carryin' it, an'—"

"For me?" she beamed. "Why, that's just lovely of you two boys."

The bow-legged cowpuncher, his arms now empty of the pine boughs, was coming down the porch steps. "Hey, Pete, you durn loafer," Liz called. "Come get this box and put it in the office with the other presents. I'll sure look at it jest as soon's

I finish decorating the dining room, boys," she apologized. "Wedding's tomorrow at twelve, high noon."

Then she hurried away, leaving Willie and Big to their own devices.

Not that they minded. For the next two hours they were holding joyful reunion with old acquaintances in a crowd constantly augmented by newcomers arriving for the barbecue. Strangers, after the first few minutes, ceased to be strangers and became tried and trusty friends. Big and Willie, even without questioning, learned much, especially about the Kandahar diamonds, which seemed to divide interest about equally with the person of the bridegroom, and the more immediate prospect of the wedding supper.

Henri Fenton Conti, they discovered, might be all right if you liked dudes. No, he wasn't here right now. Be back for supper, though. Gone to town to pick up the feller that'd be best man, another guy from Chicago. They were going to stay for the wedding rehearsal, then go back to the dude ranch for the night and come over in the morning. But folks wouldn't pay much attention to the bridegroom, not when Liz came out in her new white buckskin dress and them Kandahar diamonds to tone it up.

So when, a little after six o'clock, a low gray car rumbled across the wooden bridge, Big and Willie came a-running with the rest, to stare curiously at the dapper young man with a toothy smile who slid from under the wheel. With him, so presumably the best man, was a florid-faced individual in a checked coat and baglike trousers creased to a razor edge.

The widowed owner of the Open Eye, with a look of joy on her weatherbeaten face that made Willie Joe catch his breath and think of Goldie Azuza, linked her arm through Henri Fenton Conti's and patted his hand.

"Come on, folks," she shouted in a voice that carried beyond the house to the most distant corrals. "You that don't know him, come an' meet Henri, an' Mr.— What'd you tell me his name was, honey?"

Willie and Big, reluctant but curious, joined with the group, now grown awkward and embarrassed in the presence of so much sartorial elegance from the big city.

Willie said, "Pleased t' meet yuh," to Henri, and learned that the latter's bosom friend in the checked coat was Mr. Jordan, also of the legal profession. Henri's handshake was unresponsive. Big George couldn't think of the right words, but he squeezed Henri's manicured fingers so cordially that the bridegroom's knees buckled under him, and his bright smile vanished in a look of pained astonishment.

"That Jordan guy," hissed Willie Joe as he herded his giant partner to the fringe of the group. "Quick, Big. Know him?"

"Sure," Big George said. "He's one o' them fellers was on the train."

"Yeah," Willie Joe whispered. "Bend down like you was fixin' yo' spurs. That Jordan guy reckernized us, too, an' he ain't pleased none whatever. An' Henri! Say, Big, did yuh see the way Liz looked at him? He's got a face like one of them angels on a Christmas card, but his eye says sidewinder, or I don't savvy snakes. You know what I'm thinkin', Big?"

But before Big George could digest the import of Willie's question, someone down in the cottonwood grove was hammering on a crowbar gong. Big and Willie joined in the stampede to the long tables.

Life, for Mrs. J. Babington Jones' guests, grew steadily bigger and brighter as the evening went on. Heroic helpings of beef and lamb came hot from the barbecue pit. The popping of corks played a pleasant staccato accompaniment. Off in the shadows Hank Greenberg sawed his violin and the two Sackett boys thumped manfully on their guitars, getting in form for the wedding march tomorrow. And over all the fun and confusion the bride-elect beamed on her festive guests and whispered audibly to the dapper young man at her right.

It was well toward midnight when they began rehearsing for the wedding, and two o'clock was nearing when Liz Jones called it enough. Big George, his knees aching with weariness, yawned openly as he followed Willie Joe out to the bunkhouse.

BUT Willie, it seemed, had no idea of going to bed. "Come on, Big," he piped when they had slipped away into the shadows, "we got things t' do. I been watchin', an' that Henri Conti ain't showin' the proper enthusiasm. Somethin's on the fire, Big, an' it's all tied up in my mind with them Kandahar diamonds, an' them car tracks that pulled off th' road, an' that Jordan guy in the checked suit. I'm going to take me a pasear up to that ol' cabin of Sandy's. 'Twon't take more'n an hour, an' we might learn somethin'."

Big protested. Champagne made a man ready to pound his pillow, he grumbled, and it wasn't their funeral, anyhow. Willie always seemed t' be stickin' his nose into other folks' business.

But in the end he followed his diminutive partner, skirting the bright patches of moonlight on the bridge, stumbling and swearing when his high heels turned on the rough footing of the mountain road, but still following till they had made their way up the bush-grown trail and Sandy McRae's old home must be close at hand.

When the two of them emerged in a tiny clearing above the creek, streaks of light gleamed dimly through the chinks of the dilapidated log cabin before them. They went on hands and knees for the last fifty feet, till they had reached a point where they could hear the animated, though somewhat inebriate, conversation going on within.

"And that's all," Henri Conti's soft voice was saying. "Now we'll say our parts over so there won't be any slip. Now, Alki, you're the best man. The music starts. I grab the blazers off the old jane's neck. What do you do?"

The answer, in the voice of the man of the checked coat, was confident. "Jump for the door and throw my gat on 'em till you get a start. Hay, Henri, ain't some of these hicks likely to be packing gats themselves?"

"Not a chance," the bridegroom told him scornfully. "This is a wedding. You'll laugh yourself sick when you lamp me in those leather pants, and the old dame all lit up with diamonds and white buckskin. Pink and Spider, how about you?"

"Touch off that dynamite we just planted under the bridge soon's you and Alki get across," two voices answered him.

"O. K. With the bridge out they can't run a car off that place. Time they get word to the hick cops we'll be five hundred miles away. And they won't know which way."

The man called Pink spoke up. "Gotta hand it to you, chief, to think of everything. But what I don't see's why you cut us in.

Why'n't you marry the dame, then just watch your chance and slip off with them Kandahar blazers quiet and peaceable?"

Henri Conti's voice shook with indignation. "Me?" he shouted with an oath. "Me marry that dame? Boys, you don't know her. I'm scared stiff as it is."

Big and Willie, listening, lost the next words in the laughter that followed. When they could again hear the conversation Henri had calmed down.

"Don't blame you boys for not liking this hotel, but it's the best I could do," he explained. "There's plenty hootch and lunch and blankets. Wish I could take you all to the ranch tonight, but I couldn't make up any story that'd hold. Well, let's go, Alki. We'll leave you two have your beauty sleep. Won't be seein' you again till the fun's over. Don't get drunker'n you are, an' we'll pick you up soon's we cross the bridge." Then the bridegroom and his best man stumbled through the door and off down the moonlit trail.

Willie Joe's fingers closed on his partner's mighty arm and they retreated silently to the deeper shadows of the pine growth. There Big George let loose his indignation.

"The skunk!" he grunted. "Let's go tell Liz, right quick. Then we'll find a dead cottonwood an' string these guys up—"

But Willie Joe shook his head thoughtfully. "Nope," he pronounced. "Didn't you see how Liz looked at that Henri boy? Big, it ain't right, an' it ain't human, but she's wantin' that little snake worse'n she ever wanted anythin' in her whole life, an' I got a hunch that once she gits him she'll durn well keep him. Big, we got to split up. You stay here and watch these hombres. I'll go yank out that dynamite they got cached an' keep an eye on th' ranch. This here weddin's goin' through on schedule, an' Henri an' them Kandahar diamonds they stay right where they belong, till death do them part. S'long, feller; don't start nothin' you can't finish."

THEN Willie Joe was gone, and Big George felt lonesome, and too worried for comfort. The night wind was cold, and his great limbs grew painfully stiff. At last he had an idea. He crawled to the darkened cabin again and felt along the tumbled stones of the foundation. There were plenty of holes large enough even for a man of his size, and soon Big was stretched comfortably under the rotting boards of the cabin floor.

Here he was out of the wind at least. The thought resentfully of the champagne that left a guy so sleepy after the funny feeling wore off. He promised himself grimly to keep awake—and promptly went to sleep.

Despite wandering pack rats and mutterings of discomfort overhead, Big slept till a burst of laughter and men's voices broke through to his consciousness. Then he awoke with a start, blinked in wonderment at his surroundings, saw that the light of day was streaming brightly through the gaps in the foundation, and wondered what in blazes he'd do.

The two men in the cabin above him seemed to have a joke all by themselves, for again and again the laughter broke out. Big, listening with close attention, found it hard to distinguish the words, but at last they came more clearly.

"Sure'd like t' see Henri's face when Alki beats him to the blazers," said Pink. "Looks to me like we're

going to miss half the fun."

"Aw, what's th' difference?" said the other. "Y'know, Pink, Henri's got it coming to him. Thinks he's plenty smart. He ought to know we ain't going to do no cheering over twenty grand each, not when he's hogging right close to a hundred an' forty for himself. Splitting that two hundred grand three ways, like Alki says, sounds a lot better to me. To hell with Henri!"

"Yeah," Pink agreed. "It's sure a joke on Henri. He plans it, an' then Alki an' us counts him out. Say, Spider, you don't reckon Alki'll count *us* out? I mean, not stop for us when he's over the bridge?"

"Thought of that," said the other grimly. "There's an old log lays right near where I got the batteries hid. We'll pull her across the road, so he'll have to stop a minute anyhow. Then—"

Big had heard enough. He rolled on his side to look at his watch. It said 11:05. Less than an hour till the wedding! He wished that Willie were there; Willie always knew what to do, and something surely had to be done quick. When nothing else occurred to him Big took a deep breath, wedged his knees under him, set his back against the rotted floor, and stood up.

He came through in an eruption of dust and cracking cottonwood poles and splintering boards, and the two men at the decrepit table were frozen rigid by the shock of his advent.

"Mornin', fellers," chuckled Big George, and his right fist, swinging quickly, smacked on Pink's sagging jaw. The man called Spider reached for his coat pocket with a snarling oath. Big's boot toe swung in an arc, and a blue automatic leaped to the roof timbers, then clattered on the floor.

But Spider, broad of shoulder and deep of chest, wasn't yet through. A bottle caromed from Big's lowered head; a table leg glanced from his arm. Then Big's knuckles cracked home below Spider's cauliflower ear, and it was all over.

He picked up the automatic and decided it would do. Pink's pocket contained a second one. Big pulled the clip and tossed the weapon through the window into the rushing waters of the creek. Next he rolled his unconscious adversaries back to back, and bound them intricately and securely with the rope which had come on Henri's roll of blankets. Now he stood back and inspected his handiwork.

"Reckon you'll sleep fer some time yet. Anyways, you'll be safe till Willie, an' Liz, an' mebbe the sheriff, decide what to do with yuh. An' this little stutter gun"—here Big squinted humorously at the automatic, small as a child's toy in his great hand—"I reckon I better take her with me, seein's I cain't tell what might happen."

Then, with a stabbing recollection that time was passing, he lunged from the cabin and went loping down the rough trail.

Stumbling, falling, cutting hands and knees on the jagged rocks, Big lumbered on till his heart seemed bursting from his throat. Then, when he was sure that there wasn't enough air in all the world to fill his laboring lungs, the Open Eye lay before him.

He crossed the bridge and was in the ranchhouse yard where buggies and buckboards and spring wagons were packed in wheel to wheel. The poles of the hitchrack were filled solid, while the crowd of Blaine County ranch folk that massed about the steps and threatened the porch railings extended far

out into the yard, a holiday crowd as colorful as any rodeo.

BIG slowed to a walk and sauntered across the wooden bridge looking for Willie. From the corner of his eye he saw Henri Conti's long gray car parked clear of the press. He hunted through the crowd desperately till he caught the gleam of a bold, egglike head, then he plowed straight to his goal.

"Willie!" he gasped. His diminutive partner, whose face was set in worried lines, grunted with relief as Big seized his arm. A moment later they had worked through the fringe of the crowd and hunkered down among the wagons for talk.

"Them two guys in the cabin, Willie," gulped Big when he had caught his breath, "I tied 'em up. You know what? They're double-crossin' that Henri feller. That Alki, Henri's best man, he's goin' to grab the diamonds hisself, beat Henri to it. Quick, Willie! What'll we do?"

Willie Joe whistled softly. A silence followed, broken only by the giant's heavy breathing. "Dunno," said Willie, at last. "Nossuh, Big, fer once I dunno. But I know two things, Big: All these folks has come to see a weddin'. There's goin' t' be a weddin'—somehow. Liz wants this Henri broomtail, an' she's goin' to have him. We can't do nothin' but wait, an' watch right careful. An' say, Big, I left that dynamite under the bridge. I jest jerked the wires an' hung my handkerchief on it. You kin see it from the steps. An' there's a .306 rifle on the nails jest overhead. Put her there this mornin'. If things go wrong an' them guys git to the car, take a shot at the handkerchief. Now c'me on. You stick to that Alki feller. I'll trail Henri."

Back in the crowd, they forced their way regardless of trodden toes and sour glances, through the press on the porch till they were inside the house. Henri and his best man, they heard, were in Johnny's old office, ready and waiting. Liz Jones was primping up next door. The wedding party would meet in the hall, kept clear, or relatively clear, for the purpose. Big, with Willie in his wake, edged forward to the office.

Suddenly the murmur of the crowd was hushed, and strains of music drifted from the distant dining room. The door of the office opened, and Henri Conti and his best man came forth. Someone in the crowd giggled, for the dapper Henri was draped in black leather chaps heavy with silver conchas, and a kerchief of purple and gold swung low on his spotless silk shirt. His best man, blue of jowl and shifty-eyed, still clung to what the well-dressed urbanite should wear on such occasions, a black cutaway and striped gray trousers. They talked together as Big and Willie nudged unobtrusively behind them.

Then the hum of the crowd swelled in a gasp of delight as Liz Jones made her entrance from the bedroom. A smile of joy lighted her weather-bronzed face. Her riding boots were soft and white and stitched with silver butterflies. Her fringed skirt and blouse of white buckskin were sewn thick with beadwork. And about her neck in triple loops flashed the scintillating glory of the Kandahar diamonds!

"Ready, Henri?" she beamed; and as the bridegroom came to her side: "Tell 'em to start the weddin' march, darlin'."

But at that moment, so quickly and smoothly that almost no one among the gaping spectators caught the significance of it, Henri Conti's best man swung his left fist squarely

into the bridegroom's face, and his right hand, armed with tiny cutting nippers, shot toward the blaze of the bride's priceless necklace.

But Big George's great arms shot out, closed viselike about the thief, and his great voice rumbled in Alki's ear. "Take it easy, feller," he said, "you done shot yo' wad." And when Alki Jordan made the mistake of thinking otherwise, Big's fist, moving a bare six inches, touched the point of his jaw. And, though Big still held him erect, Alki Jordan relaxed in sleep.

Henri Conti's face flamed with rage. Forgetting his bride, forgetting all but the betrayal of his well-laid plan, he flung himself upon his unconscious best man, fists flailing wildly.

"Double-crosser!" he screamed. "Why, you—"

But Willie Joe had caught his wrists and twisted them in a hammerlock; and Willie's boot, driven into the crook of Henri's knees, brought him to a sitting posture.

"Shut up!" hissed Willie. "Look sick, cain't yuh?"

All this happened while a man might count to three, rapidly, while the astonished crowd gaped open-mouthed. Now Liz Jones dropped to her knees beside the wilting bridegroom, and her arm went about his neck while the Kandahar diamonds swung and sparkled on her bosom.

"Henri! Henri, dearest!" she breathed. "My brave boy! But you shouldn't take such chances, Henri, even for me. It's not your fault your friend is a crook! What if he did try to steal the diamonds? They aren't real, Henri. The real ones're in the vault in Denver. Johnny had these made for me to wear. They cost just seventy dollars, Johnny said."

Big George, with plenty on his mind, wanted to break in. He opened his mouth, then saw that Willie's left eye was screwed tight. He guessed that Willie meant him to keep still.

Liz Jones, rising to her feet, brushed off her buckskin skirt. Her voice lost its note of hysteria and took on its accustomed ring of authority.

"Get that man into the office, Big," she commanded, "and tie him up. We'll tend to him when this weddin's over. And get the ring out of his pocket. You'll have to be best man, Big. And Willie, you take Henri to the kitchen and wash him up. His lip's bleeding. I'll go powder my nose."

AND so, when the wedding party was again assembled, and the frantic look in the bridegroom's eyes had faded to a glassy acceptance of his fate, it was the best man, Big George, who got things going.

"Git back, everybody," he roared. "We're r'arin' to go. Start that music!"

The crowd gave way, opening a narrow passage before them. Big bent low, his great hand resting affectionately on the shoulder of the shrinking groom, and he whispered so that only Henri could hear him.

"Brace up, feller," he said, "an' answer so folks kin hear yuh, or this little stutter gun in my pocket might start talkin'. Yuh may be a maverick now, Henri, but yuh'll be a split-ear dogie in less'n five minutes. Hey, that ain't no way t' look! Keep them knees stiff! Listen to the music, Henri. Git in step, feller."

And with the bride blazing splendidly behind them, Henri Conti and his best man moved through the breathless company toward the pine-decked dining room.

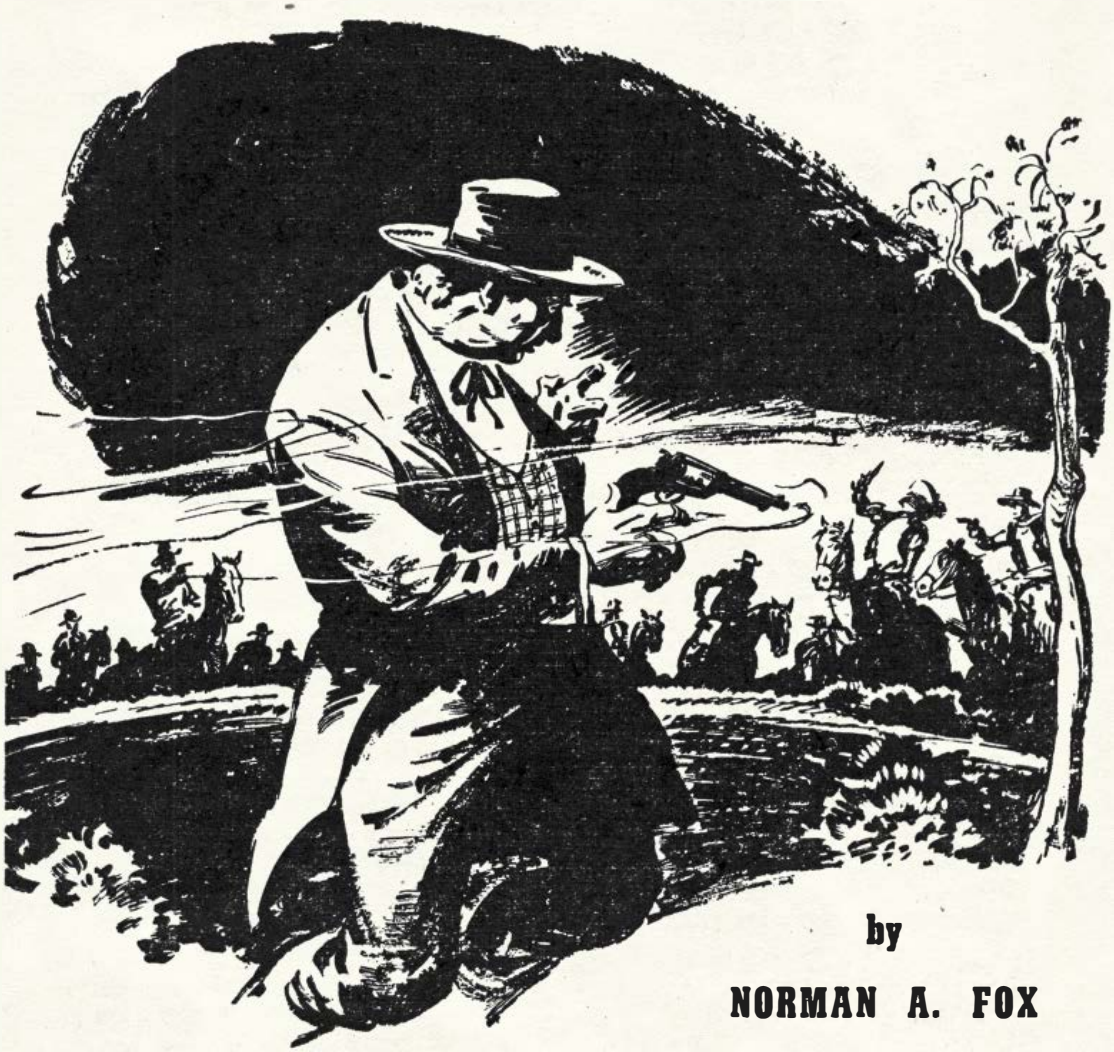
THE END.

TOWN GALS

by S. OMAR BARKER

I CAN view a hoss remuda—maybe forty in the bunch—
An' rope my pick of ponies on a mighty sudden hunch,
But when it comes to town gals, well, I've been a-sparkin' three
For goin' on a year, I guess, an' still it puzzles me
To choose the charmin' *chica* that would suit a puncher best
To cook the future gravy that he spills upon his vest.
Jo Ann's a likely filly, with a smile that makes you think
You have fin'lly found the nectar that them gods is said to drink.
She ain't so very uppish, though she's been to boardin' school,
An' the man that wouldn't marry her ain't nothin' but a fool.
Then, jokin' 'crost the counter of a cow-town eatin' joint,
I know another heifer that I'd hate to disappoint.
She knows a cowboy's stummick kinder neighbors with his heart,
An' on the road to ro-mance that's a mighty healthy start.
Her name is Kitty Davis an' I've sparked her more than some—
But when I'm 'round Miss Rosabelle my heart thumps like a drum!
It cuts up like a bronco with a bur beneath the kack,
For Rosabelle's as purty as a little red-wheeled hack.
She's blue-eyed, blond an' blushin'—jest the love-inducin' kind.
Them three I've been a-sparkin' an' I can't make up my mind
Which one to swing my loop at for an ever-lovin' wife
To succor, soothe an' side me on the trail that's knowed as life.
I can judge a hoss remuda, be they wild or be they tame,
But when it comes to town gals, well, it jest ain't quite the same.
You circle 'round the ponies with your lass rope in your hand,
An' when you fin'lly flick your loop, you know it's bound to land.
It ain't that way with town gals, for they sometimes dodge the loop,
An' leave you feelin' foolish as the bird that's called the goop.
Theres' three I've been a-sparkin'—Kit, Jo Ann an' Rosabelle.
Suppose all three should dodge my loop? I'd be as mad as hell!
To heck with sparkin' town gals—Rosabelle, Jo Ann an' Kit!
For I know a nester's daughter that I figger I can git!

MEDICO'S GUN MEDICINE



by

NORMAN A. FOX

By midnight the two men were beyond the frowning walls of Wolverine Pass, and the broad sweep of Horseshoe Valley spread before them, pale and ethereal in the moonlight. Here long-threatened danger had materialized this very night. Yet cantankerous old Dr. Eli Drumm, tossing away the whiskey bottle he had just emptied was unconcerned. Danger, real or rumored, was just another thing to be viewed with cynical contempt by Doc Drumm.

Bleary-eyed, the medico swayed in the saddle, a massive man; prematurely gray, prematurely wrinkled. Beside him rode lean young Phil Overland of the Quarter-Circle-O, his thin face puckered with worry. Doc Drumm, well aware of the covert glances of his companion, didn't encourage the boy to put that worry into words. But as the miles unreeled, Phil at last broke the spell of silence.

"It's bad—mighty bad," the youngster said. "Even if dad ain't more'n scratched, it'll mean war, sure as shootin'. Dad ain't took kindly

to nesters filin' on water and plowin' up the range, but he might have overlooked such. I had him almost convinced that the Horseshoe is big enough for all of us. But if it was some hotheaded sod buster who took a shot at dad tonight there ain't gonna be no holdin' the old man."

The medico shrugged with silent indifference.

"Maybe you could talk sense into dad," Phil ventured. "Him and the rest of the ranchers set a heap of store in you, Doc. Reckon if anybody can stop hell from poppin' hereabouts, it's you."

Doc Drumm swore beneath his breath. He wished he'd brought along an extra pint of whiskey, and he wished this young fool would quit talking. He wanted to tell the boy flatly that he wasn't interested in the trouble between the ranchers and farmers in the valley, but he knew Phil Overland wouldn't understand.

No one in the Horseshoe country had ever understood that indifference of Doc Drumm's. They couldn't savvy why he chose to serve them, yet lived apart from them. They knew him only as a booze-guzzling old sawbones, a medico whose competency wasn't questioned, were he drunk or sober. To Doc that competency was both a blessing and a curse—a blessing because it gave him work to occupy his mind; a curse because his skill hadn't saved the one person in all the world who had ever meant anything to him.

Therein lay his secret, gnawing sorrow. The memory of it was always strongest on nights like these; nights when he was called to distant patients. It had been on such a night that duty took him from his wife and baby daughter. He'd returned to find his wife dead. She'd fallen downstairs, they told him, had fractured her skull and lived for hours in pain. And something had died in the doctor that night, for he knew Alice Drumm would have lived if he, the only medico within miles, had been home.

That was why Doc Drumm hadn't amounted to much since. He'd given his baby daughter to a family to raise and, though the parting had hurt at the time, he'd long since put the thought of her out of his life. And that was why Doc Drumm, wandering at last to Horseshoe Valley, had taken root, yet lived aloof. People were patients—and patients always reminded him of the one who had kept him from Alice Drumm. At first he'd hated them all for that. Now he was merely indifferent.

That attitude made him callous to Phil Overland's plea. The youngster had come to Wolverine to fetch Doc to care for his father, who'd stopped a bushwhacker's lead. Very well; he'd dig the lead out of old Gid. But he'd have no hand in patching up the troubles of this war-threatened valley.

SUCH a mood still claimed the medico when the two dismounted before the sprawling ranchhouse of the Quarter-Circle and Phil ushered him to the bedroom where the wounded rancher lay. Lanky Gid Overland, flat on his back, was still a range king, and he was bellowing orders before Doc opened his black case.

"Yuh git this lead out o' me pronto, Doc," he stormed. "I got to start me a war, savvy? If them scissorbills want gunplay, I'll deal 'em a hand!"

Doc methodically ripped away a sleeve of Overland's nightshirt and removed a makeshift bandage. "There's no lead in you," he said

gruffly. "It passed through your upper arm. Mighty poor shooting."

"Never was a sod buster could handle a gun," Gid shouted. "This is Onny Kief's work. Last time we met we had fightin' words, and I'm bettin' he dry-gulched me tonight. I'll show the damn stubble hopper. Nick Vaca and them gun-slingers of his has been hangin' around Wolverine for a month. Never thought I'd hire a pack of gunnies, but I aim to put Vaca to work. I'll settle things in Horseshoe and settle 'em quick!"

While the oldster raved, Doc cleaned the wound, bandaged it properly. "You keep that arm in a sling," he said, but the rancher ignored him.

"Just stop in and see Nick Vaca when you get to town, Doc," Gid Overland ordered. "Tell him to lope out here tomorrow fast as he can. Don't forget that, Doc."

"I'm not going to town," Doc said irritably. "Long as Phil dragged me into the valley tonight I'll just ride on. Onny Kief's wife is down with fever."

Gid Overland sat bolt upright. "Onny Kief's wife!" he echoed. "Yuh ain't gonna keep on carin' for sick nesters now they've showed their hand?"

Doc Drumm tossed bandages into his case. "I'm havin' no part in your confounded war," he said bluntly.

"So that's how yuh stand," Overland bellowed. "Yuh're takin' sides when yuh tend to nesters, damn yuh! I ain't standin' for it, savvy? Yuh ride down the valley tonight and yuh can keep to hell off Quarter-Circle range afterward. And I'll have every cattleman in the valley blacklist yuh, yuh damn turncoat!"

Doc Drumm turned his bleary gaze on the oldster, and for an instant his wrath was at kindling point. But he merely shrugged as he reached for his case. "I'm taking no sides," he said flatly.

He closed the door on Gid Overland's curses, pulled himself into the saddle. His anger rode with him as he turned his broad back on the Quarter-Circle and headed toward the south end of the valley. Gid Overland was like the rest. When you eased a man's aches for a dozen years that man believed he owned you. A doctor's life was always supposed to be secondary to his patient's. To hell with that idea!

The thunder of hoofs jerked Doc from his thoughts long before he reached plowed ground. Swiveling in the saddle, Doc found Phil Overland behind him. The youngster mustered an apologetic smile as he drew abreast.

"Dad didn't mean what he said," the boy apologized. "Reckon he ain't forgot a lot of things, includin' the time you pulled me through pneumonia. He's just fightin' mad tonight."

Doc grunted. "Makes no never mind," he said.

"Figgered I'd explain," Phil Overland went on. "Likewise, I'll ride down to Kief's place with you. I'm gonna let Onny know how things stand, Doc. Me, I don't believe it was him slung lead tonight."

"Any fool would know that," Doc said vehemently.

"Dad don't know these nesters like I do," the boy countered. "Me, I've been callin' on their new schoolmarm and I've got to know the farmers pretty well. They ain't wantin' trouble, and I can't savvy why any of 'em should've dusted dad."

Doc Drumm made no comment. His silence was an unpierceable armor, and Phil held his tongue.

Wordlessly they rode onward, and wordlessly they dismounted before a tar-papered shack just as dawn limned the eastern hills. Phil followed the medico inside, where an emaciated woman lay beneath patched blankets while a stubby man in frayed bib overalls kept sleepy-eyed vigil.

"How's she been?" Doc asked.

Onny Kief, the first man to turn sod in Horseshoe Valley and leader of the nesters by virtue of that fact, arose. "Her fever's gone down," he reported listlessly. "I've been up all night with her, and so's Miss York, here."

FOR the first time Doc noticed the gingham-clad girl who was seated in a shadowy corner. Phil Overland spoke up. "I want you to meet Alice York, Doc," he said. "She's the schoolmarm I was mentionin'."

Doc nodded absently. As the girl came forward he had his first real look at her. It was then his protective armor served him in good stead. Mumbling a jerky "Howdy," he turned to Mrs. Kief, and if his hands fumbled as he took her temperature it was hardly a betrayal of the inward agitation he strove to conceal.

"Your missus is over the worst of it," he told Onny mechanically. "I won't need to come out here again unless she has a relapse."

He left hurriedly, almost oblivious to Phil Overland, deep in whispered conversation with Onny Kief, whose face knotted into a frown as the youngster spoke. Case in hand, he was almost to his horse when someone plucked his sleeve. He turned, dour and defensive, to face Alice York.

"I'm glad I've met you, Doctor Drumm," she said, and he groped for the slim hand she extended. "These farmer folks speak very highly of you. Since they're my folks now, it's nice to know their friend."

If her eyes told him more than her words, he was blind to that hidden message. He mumbled something of no consequence, climbing into the saddle as he spoke and punctuating his remark by nudging the mount.

In this manner the trails of Doctor Eli Drumm and his daughter crossed, only to part again. And it was a man shocked into sobriety who loped toward Wolverine. The sight of a girl, golden-haired and blue-eyed, had wrought that change.

Alice—Alice York. York, Doc remembered, had been the name of the folks who had raised her. Possibly they had legally adopted her. Certainly the name of Doctor Drumm had meant nothing to the girl. But Doc had known her on sight, and by virtue of that fact an old ghost kept him company through the spreading dawn.

She was very like that other Alice Drumm in face and form and manner. She was his daughter, yet she was a stranger who reminded him of things he wanted to forget. Once, years back, he had looked forward to such a reunion. Now he had built a shell about himself, and there was no room within that shell for a daughter who was a living reminder of a happiness that had been shattered.

The very sight of her had been enough to reopen that ancient wound. There was only one medicine for his misery, and Doc was glad to find the saloon open when he reached Wolverine. A quart of whiskey in his pocket, he climbed to his little office over the mercantile store. There, hunkered by a win-

dow, he watched the town wake to a new day.

It was his balcony seat, and from it he'd viewed the drama of Wolverine for a dozen years. Now he ignored the scenes below him just as he ignored the bed that stood white and inviting in the adjacent room. But the curtain was going up on a new and sinister act, and he was conscious of the actors taking their cues.

First there was a Quarter-Circle rider who headed for the Queen High Saloon. Later that same horseman headed back to the pass, but now half a dozen men rode with him. Prominent among them was cruel-eyed, slouch-shouldered Nick Vaca, professional gunman. Gid Overland had bought himself a range war.

That was only the beginning. In the days that followed, Doc, sitting by the window with his bottle, saw Nick Vaca ride in to make extravagant purchases of cartridges. Rumor seethed through the town, and fragments of stories reached Doc. Thus he learned of barns fired in the night, of wheat fields trampled by stampeding cattle, of death and disaster and all those horrors that attend when the red god rides.

In those days Doc remembered Phil Overland's plea for intervention. He had scorned that plea, but now some prickling of a calloused conscience awoke him to a vague sense of responsibility. Yet it was none of his affair, he told himself doggedly. They were all a pack of fools. Once he had put the interests of such as them above his own. He had been paying for it ever since.

Sometimes Phil Overland rode down the street, a weary, dejected figure. At such times Doc remembered what he had sensed the night at Onny Kief's, that the boy had fallen in love with a girl whose loyalty belonged to the nesters. Nor could he forget that the girl was his own flesh and blood. Still Doc Drumm clung to his neutrality and to his bottle. There was nothing he could do, anyway, he told the four walls of his office. Gid Overland would probably boot him off the place if Doc tried to argue with him.

SUCH was still Doc Drumm's attitude on the night when boots thudded on the stairs and Nick Vaca and his men lumbered into the office carrying a semiconscious, gun-shattered companion between them. They stretched the man upon a table, and Vaca, running a hand over his stubbled jaw, turned to Doc.

"Dig a little nester lead out of this gent," he ordered. "I'll be back shortly to see how yuh're doin'."

They all crowded out of the office and Doc began to examine the wounded gunny. The fellow had been hit in four places, but none of the wounds were dangerous. However, he had lost a lot of blood and was feverish with pain. Beneath Doc's probe he groaned, cursed wildly.

"Arizona," he said distinctly. "Let's head back to Arizona. I got no hankerin' to see a Montana blizzard."

Doc paid no heed. He had heard the feverish prattle of delirious men before. Sometimes they poured out their souls, but souls were of no interest to this medico. He worked away, and it was many minutes before his patient spoke again.

"Hell of a risk, Nick," the man babbled. "Got to make shore yuh only wound him. No sense killin' the gent that'll sign the pay checks."

A spark of curiosity stirred within Doc Drumm, and he bent closer.

"It's worth a try," he prompted the man.

The delirious man took the cue. "Shore it is," he agreed. "These cowmen and farmers is ready to jump at each other's throats. Can't kill Overland, though. He's the gent that'll hire us."

The man's voice trailed away, but he had said enough. Now Doc knew why Nick Vaca had hung around Wolverine. Vaca had wanted a war so he might sell his services. He had bushwhacked Gid Overland in order to force a war. It was a game as old as time. And the key to the trouble in Horseshoe Valley had been thrust into the unwilling hands of Doc Drumm.

"Yuh got him in the arm!" the wounded man cried, with delirious triumph. "Yuh just winged the old coot!"

A boot sole scraped in the doorway. Jerking around, Doc saw Nick Vaca standing there, his eyes narrow as he looked from patient to medico.

"Has he been ravin' much?" Vaca asked pointedly.

"Some," Doc admtited. "He's in no shape to move, and he'll have to stay here. Help me put him on the bed."

Vaca lent a hand. "Reckon a doc knows that fever ravin' don't mean much," he said significantly as they placed the groaning man in the bedroom. "Reckon yuh'd forget such wild talk as soon as yuh heard it. Eh, Doc?"

He fished a gold piece from his pocket, tossed it to the medico. "I gotta be goin'," he said. "There's work to be done tonight. Take care of yoreself, Doc."

The gunman's voice was casual enough, but Doc didn't miss the implied threat. When Vaca left, Doc stared at the coin. Vaca had paid well, for he didn't want anyone speculating on the things the wounded man had said. That was ironic. Vaca didn't know that Doc Drumm wasn't interested in anything in Horseshoe Valley.

The gold piece, though, would more than pay for the hotel room Doc would have to take while Vaca's gunny occupied his bed. Also, it would buy whiskey. Pocketing the coin, Doc collected the few belongings he wanted to take to the hotel. It was while he was making a bundle of these that the door creaked open. Turning, Doc almost dropped the bundle, for his visitor was a girl, golden-haired and blue-eyed—Alice York.

"Doctor," she said without prelude, "can I speak to you for a moment?"

DOC heard himself greet her. He managed to motion her to a chair, but the surprise of her entrance left him befuddled. "Yes," he stammered. "What . . . what is it?"

"There'll be a dance at the schoolhouse tonight," she said. "Every farmer in the valley will be there, including Mr. Kief. He's their leader, and he's the one the cattlemen are after. Will you come to that dance, doctor?"

"The nesters are giving a dance?" he asked incredulously. "With war in the valley?"

"It's my idea," she said. "Mine and Phil's. Don't you see? We'll have all the farmers together, and the cattlemen are bound to show up. You'll have a chance to talk to both sides at once, show them the futility and foolishness of their fight. I know they'll listen to you because both sides respect you. Won't you say you'll come?"

Doc Drumm heard her out in silence, the magnitude of the thing

she asked strong upon him. She wanted him to intervene. Yet only one thing would sway Gid Overland from his purpose, and that thing was the proof that the rancher had been duped into a fight. And if Doc provided the proof, Nick Vaca would kill him for it.

Before, Doc hadn't cared about this range war, for he hadn't had any interest in the people involved. Now intervention would involve him personally. This girl who was both a daughter and a stranger was asking him to risk his life for a thing that meant nothing to him.

"I . . . I can't do it," he said slowly. "It isn't my place to step in. I'm a doctor—not a diplomat."

She didn't speak at first. Watching her, Doc saw words tremble on her lips, saw contempt shine in her eyes.

"I see," she said finally. "Phil told me what your attitude would be. I didn't believe him. My father was a physician, Doctor Drumm; or so I was told by the folks who raised me. I used to dream about him. Now I know those dreams gave me a false impression of your profession. I thought all doctors were unselfish men; men who made the world a little easier for the rest of us. I thought doctors lived to ease suffering, any kind of suffering. Now I know I was wrong!"

She got up from the chair, crossed to the door. There she paused, one hand on the knob. "I followed a long trail once," she said scornfully. "Along that trail they told me about a man who had ceased to be a man. But I thought anyone who had been a real doctor once would always be a doctor in spite of himself. I was going to prove that to myself before I told you who I was. It doesn't matter now. I'll try and do the thing you're too self-centered to do!"

She was gone then, and the closing door cut off her sob. Doc Drumm gazed after her, a stunned, bewildered man. She knew him! She had known him all along, trailed him here. She had believed in him, and that faith had prompted her to ask his aid. And he had refused her.

Self-centered! She'd called him that, and he'd had no defense to make against the accusation. Now he wondered if she were right and there was no defense to make. Had self-pity made him incapable of pity for others? Slumped in a chair, he tried to think about it, and while he was thinking the silence was broken as the wounded man in the next room began to babble again At first Doc Drumm was deaf to the words, but at last their import sliced through his consciousness, brought him to his feet.

"Damn yuh, Nick!" the man was snarling. "When the time comes we'll settle it with cards or dice. Savvy? I've had my eye on that nester schoolmarm myself. Guess I got as much right as yuh."

DOC DRUMM strode into the bedroom. For a long time he stood there, his big fists closing and unclosing, his eyes suddenly alive with blazing anger as he stared at his restless patient, listened to his ravings.

"No!" Doc said aloud. "I'll probably save your life instead of choking it out of you. Maybe she knew me better than I know myself. Maybe a gent who's been a real doctor once will always be a doctor. Maybe it's his job to make it easier for the rest—skunks included."

He looked at the wounded gunny again and mechanically adjusted the blankets. It came to him that he and this man were opposites—one a builder, one a destroyer. And it

came to him, also, that the real issue in the valley was not between ranchers and nesters. It was between builders and destroyers. In the one class were nesters and ranchers alike, and in that same class was Dr. Eli Drumm. On the other side of the fence was Nick Vaca and his ilk. And by virtue of that reasoning, Nick Vaca, destroyer, was the enemy of Doc Drumm, builder.

It was an elusive idea, and it wasn't at all clear in the whirling mind of Doc Drumm. But he did know that he hated these men who planned to villify the girl who was like the one person in all the world that Doc had ever cared about. And that factor alone sent Doc down the stairs and to the street and to the livery stable where he kept his horse.

The hostler had an extra six-gun, and Doc borrowed it from him. Somehow he had a feeling that he might need such a weapon before this night was through. With the gun cold and hard against his stomach, he headed through Wolverine Pass and into the valley.

And thus it came about that Doc Drumm rode on a night call, unfortified by liquor, yet without any ancient ghost dogging his trail. Instead, a sense of happiness was his saddle mate, a feeling that at long last he had found something that gave a meaning to his useless life. That feeling persisted and was with him when he dismounted before the nesters' schoolhouse, where a fiddle scraped as the farmers baited a trap with themselves in the grim hope that peace would come because of it.

Doc didn't go inside. Loitering near the doorway, he was veiled by shadow, yet conspicuous because of his bulk. He saw men wander out of the hall, scan the horizon with naked apprehension in their eyes. Phil Overland and Onny Kief and a score of men whom he had doctored were there. Some recognized him, greeted him heartily. And the news of his presence, seeping through the crowd, brought Alice to him.

"I knew you'd come," she breathed. "I knew it!"

He wanted to tell her that he'd always be near when she needed him. He wanted to say that he'd been a blind, cynical old fool. But before he could speak she flung her arms about him, kissed his wrinkled cheek.

"Dad," she murmured. "This . . . this was the way I prayed it would be."

Then he was shoving her aside, urging her toward the door, for, suddenly, a score of riders were outlined against the night. The cattlemen had come. They were there in force and Gid Overland was leading them. But it was Nick Vaca and his men, riding well to the fore, who caught and held the attention of Doc Drumm.

And studying them, Doc knew this was not the time for diplomacy. A gun was the only argument against Nick Vaca. But to challenge Vaca was to ask for incredible odds, since the combined guns of that group of riders would be siding Vaca.

Yet it was in the face of such odds that Doc Drumm made his play. Plucking the gun from his waistband, he strode forward.

"Vamoose out of here, Vaca," he said coldly. "If you light from that saddle I'm telling what that gent said in my office!"

He heard Vaca curse, saw the blur of motion as the man jerked at his gun, felt the shock of lead as something struck his shoulder, pivoted him. Then Doc fired wildly, and destiny must have guided the bullet, for Nick Vaca fell from his

saddle. But Vaca's gunnies were shooting, pouring a volley at the man who had killed their leader. And cattlemen were snatching at guns, too.

Doc had failed. He knew that as lead hammered at him, brought him to his knees. He was going to die beneath the guns of Vaca's men and the guns of the ranchers. And the thought of failure dwarfed the thought of death into insignificance as darkness finally claimed him.

DOC'S head was cradled in Alice's lap when he opened his eyes again. Stretched on the ground before the schoolhouse, he saw a ring of faces surrounding him, faces stamped with concern. Gid Overland's face was in that circle and so was Onny Kief's. Nesters and ranchers crowded shoulder to shoulder.

"He's gonna live," Gid Overland shouted and back-slapped Onny Kief heartily. "Don't stand there, yuh confounded stubble hopper!" the range king bellowed. "Fork a hoss and ride it till yuh find a sawbones. Think a doc can patch hisself up?"

"Vaca's men?" Doc asked weakly.

"Dead," said Gid Overland. "We filled them damn fools full of lead. Who the hell did they think they was, shootin' at *you?* Did they reckon we'd sit and watch 'em salivate the gent that's been tendin' to all of us for a dozen years!"

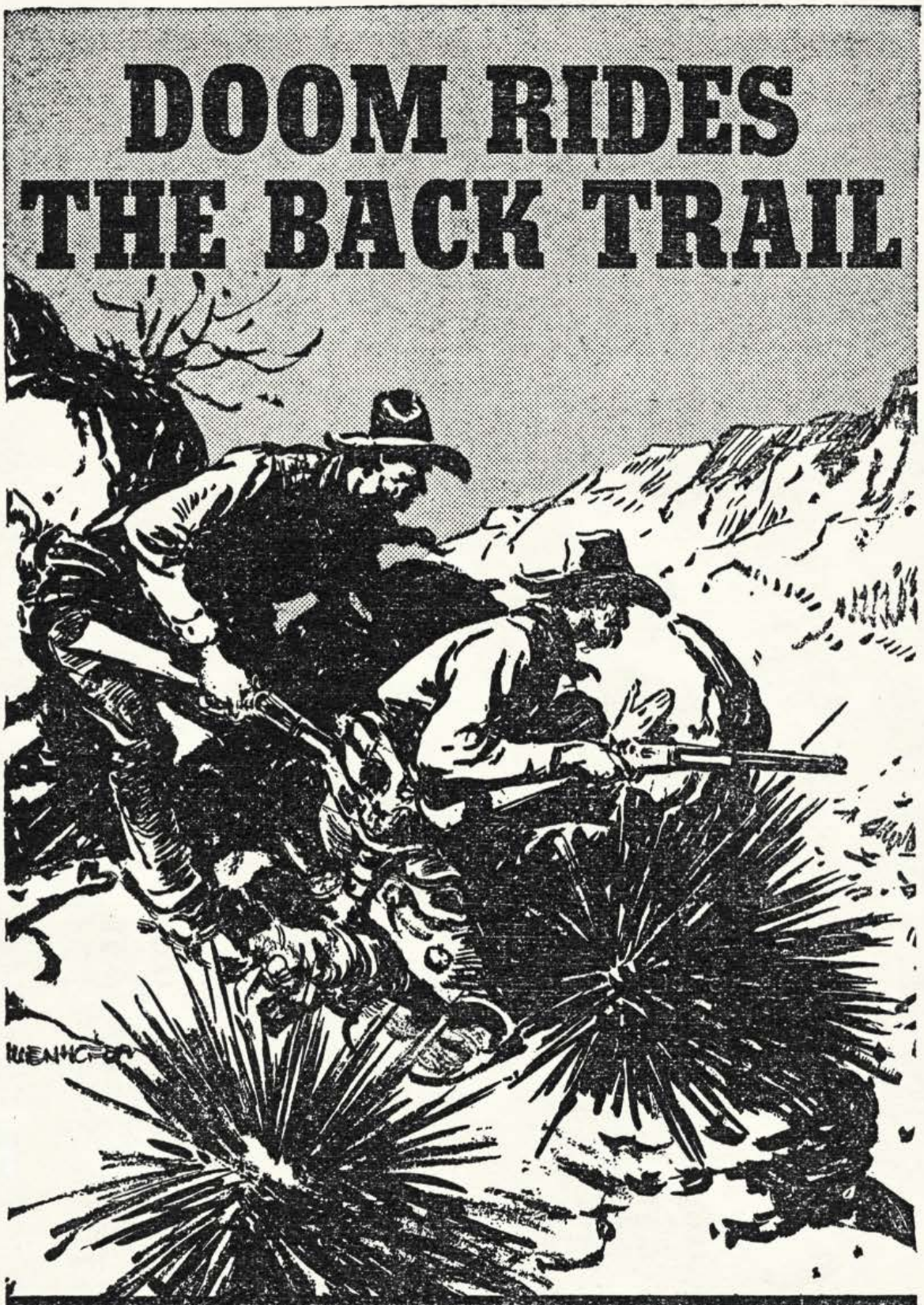
Only then did Doc Drumm begin to understand this miracle that had saved him. He had served the people of the Horseshoe, yet lived apart from them. They hadn't understood his indifference, but they'd savvied the service he'd rendered. He'd locked them out of his heart, but they'd taken him into theirs. The proof of it was there as declared enemies forgot their fight because they were concerned about him.

Doc sighed happily. He'd stopped a war temporarily and he'd stop it permanently when he told Gid Overland the truth about Nick Vaca. But that would only be the beginning of a greater service to Horseshoe Valley. He owed a debt here. He had to pay for a friendship he'd earned without deserving it. He had to go on justifying himself in the eyes of a girl whose faith had never faltered.

The chores were cut out for him and Doc Drumm was going to work!

THE END.

DOOM RIDES THE BACK TRAIL



By DON ALVISO

EARLY that morning eight men from outfits around Big Meadows rode into Steptoe, and now faced Sheriff John Haggard by the porch of the Roundup Hotel. Grim faces, tense voices, rifles slung to saddles and grub bags full; these were the unmistakable signs of a posse ready for the trail. Jay Bolen was there, too, his horse alongside that of his new boss, Sam Hellman. Hellman was the quiet, solid-looking cattleman who had showed up when word got around that Sheriff Haggard's Box H was up for sale.

Hellman was stepping right into place as one of the owners on Big Meadows. In fact it had been his talk that brought these men together in Steptoe's early dawn. The others on Big Meadows had known John Haggard too long and had too much personal feeling for him; it took a newcomer to push them to the job they knew had to be done. Hellman claimed it was high time that the rest of Spade Malloy's bunch was rounded up and hanged. The other ranchers reluctantly agreed, but each in his heart felt mighty sorry for John Haggard.

"Three thousand dollars," Sheriff Haggard was saying. "That reward will be paid to the man that brings him in—dead or alive."

Jay Bolen took note of the sheriff's words: "Bring *him* in—dead or alive." Haggard spoke as if there was only one outlaw to be brought in, though it was known that the two remaining men of Spade Malloy's gang were hiding out somewhere in the maze of canyons and ravines in the Ramparts Hills. Two men guilty of robbery and murder, but only one of them seemed to matter to John Haggard.

There had once been three in Malloy's outfit. Spade Malloy's brother Ace had been caught and hanged by Sheriff Haggard a month ago, and Spade, hell-spawned leader of the trio, swore that he'd do the same for the lawman if it was the last act of his life. Spade and the third member of his outfit had taken refuge in the wild Ramparts Hills north of the Meadows. That third man was the sheriff's son, Steve Haggard.

The momentary quiet that fell after Sheriff Haggard's words was broken by Sam Hellman's even voice. "I reckon we realize what this means to you, John. I'm a newcomer here, but I've got the same respect for you that's held by your old friends; friends who've kept you wearin' that star for fifteen years. I've got just this to say: No man can blame you for throwin' up the job. If it was my son I wouldn't want to stay, knowin' it would be one of two things. Steve will either get killed when this posse runs him into a corner, or we'll bring him back to the rope. You're not one to dodge a duty, John, but it's too much to expect a man to spring the trap under his own boy."

John Haggard lifted his gray eyes to the far-off Ramparts, avoiding the gaze of these men who were his friends. He spoke almost as if he hadn't been listening to Hellman. It was the longest speech any man had heard out of Haggard in the twenty years he'd been on Big Meadows.

"Steve always claimed he wasn't in on that train robbery he was sent up for, and I believed him. But the thing happened over in Latigo County and was out of my jurisdiction. I couldn't do nothin' about it, and I feel like I failed Steve, standin' by and lettin' him get sent to prison. Well, he broke out of Yuma bitter and hate-poisoned to the soul. That's natural for a man that's

spent three years in hell for somethin' he didn't do, but that don't excuse him none for his part in killin' and robbin' Stub Morgan. I saw Steve ride away with Morgan's tin box under his arm. Spade Malloy was with him and Spade shot my nag out from under me. Steve's in just as deep as Spade and I guess he deserves the same medicine. But —I don't want to be around when you bring him in."

He took the star from the breast of his flannel shirt and tossed it to Sam Hellman, who was leading the posse. Haggard's cold gray eyes swept the group, lingering for a moment on Jay Bolen. Every man there knew his thought: if Steve could only have been the man Jay Bolen was! If Steve hadn't started running with the wild bunch, he wouldn't have been sent to Yuma and he would never have got rung in on the Morgan killing.

THERE was irony in the fact that young Steve Haggard was about to pay with his life for the death of Stub Morgan, a recluse who had lived upon a squatter's claim in a pocket of the Ramparts' eastern foothills. Rumor said that he had prospected occasionally back in the canyons and knew every trail by heart. Though he was miserly, unsociable and unliked by the men of the Meadows, he was regarded as harmless. In the eyes of the law robbery was a crime, and murder was still murder. The dark deeds of the Malloy gang were many and notorious. It seemed a significant fact that their depredations had broken out anew soon after Steve Haggard's escape from Yuma prison.

Haggard swung his white-socked roan and rode away. The men watching his receding figure knew that he was doing the only thing left for a man of his breed to do under the circumstances: he was leaving the Meadows forever.

Jay Bolen felt a hard lump push up in his throat. He was young and new enough on the range that its punishing ways had not yet hardened him. He couldn't forget the time when he had ridden in, a stranger on the range, and found a place on Haggard's Box H. He hadn't claimed then that he was a puncher. He had told nothing at all about himself except his name and need of a job. John Haggard was too much a cattleman not to see that his new rider had been long years off a horse's back; that he wasn't too handy with a rope. But Haggard had taken him as he was; and in the year that Bolen had stayed there, old-timers on the Meadows were heard to remark that young Bolen was sort of taking a place in John Haggard's life, the place of the son who had drifted to the wild backtrail.

As if Haggard's departure was a signal, the posse broke into pairs as previously agreed and started on their way. Beans Crane, a lean and weathered puncher who also rode for the Box H, swung in with Jay Bolen and together they cut across the Meadows. They rode several miles before the silence was broken.

"I ain't dumb enough to think this is goin' to be any picnic fer you, Jay," Beans said finally. "Bein' sort of adopted to old John, it wouldn't be any fun for yuh to decide between pumpin' Steve Haggard full o' lead or takin' the same yourself."

Jay cast a quick glance at the other man, but remained silent. "Now suppose your nag was to go lame suddenlike and yuh had to sashay back to the Box H," Beans continued. "It's quite a ways an'

it might be all over afore yuh caught up again."

Jay swung off a little to the left, fanning their course west of the men who rode ahead. "No," he said, "I guess not, Beans."

"Uh-huh, that's what I thought," murmured Beans, and the two rode on, swinging gradually farther to the west. The others, riding in pairs, were heading straight for the mouth of Devil's Canyon, which gave easiest access to the myriad of gulches and ravines of the Ramparts Hills. Under Sam Hellman's leadership they rode on without looking back. Hellman had a way of leading men. He looked like a good bet for Big Meadows' next sheriff.

"You're swingin' too fur to the left, Jay," Beans reminded after a while. "We'll miss the canyon."

"Yeah," Jay replied absently, and rode on.

"Which, in hawg Latin," Beans persisted, "means that yuh're aimin' to miss it. And som'eres back of them stingy jaws o' yourn they's a reason, not that I'd ask what it is."

A tapering ridge of the Ramparts foothills lay just ahead. Jay let rowel tips roll gently on his claybank's flanks and the horse increased its pace. With Beans close behind he was soon out of sight of the posse in the shelter of the ridge, then he slowed his pace and Beans came abreast.

"I know where Steve's hid out," Jay said abruptly. "A cave in the rocks about three mile up this canyon."

"Steve an' prob'ly Spade Malloy," Beans pointed out. "Two against two; them in shelter, an' us in the open. Or do yuh figger Spade'll be there?"

"That," Jay said, "is a chance we'll have to take."

Their horses were eating distance at a running walk when they entered the Ramparts Hills on the narrowing, ascending floor of the canyon.

"Yuh knowed this an' yuh could've told the others an' had them along," Beans remarked. "But yuh didn't. I'm askin' why."

Jay's eyes were searching the canyon ahead. "You said you'd lie me onto a lame horse if I wanted, Beans. Well, I'd do the same for you. You can turn back now and nobody'd ever know."

"Not me," said the oldster. "I'll set in, but curiosity makes me saddle sore. Steve Haggard has made it too hot for every committee that's tried to smoke him out. Afore he's hogtied somebody's goin' to be pickin' lead out o' their stummick. I never been called yeller, but we're takin' onreasonable chances goin' it alone. Say—you ain't loco enough to think Steve's not guilty on that Morgan killin'?"

"No. Steve's guilty as hell."

Beans was silent while the horses picked their way over a stretch of tough going. Then: "You ain't aimin' to warn Steve so he can slip out?"

"No," Jay said quietly. "If Steve Haggard gets away from me, he'll have to feed me more lead than I can carry first."

"S'pose he's gone when we git there?"

"That," Jay declared, "is another chance we take. He was there at daylight this morning. I saw the smoke from his fire through glasses. We won't know for sure till we get there—and then it's my ruckus, and I'll have to go it my way. I'm ropin' Steve, and Malloy, too, if he's there. Past that, Beans, your guess is as good as mine."

"Maybe," Beans grumbled, "but yuh got some facts yuh ain't disclosin'."

Jay carefully scanned the canyon ahead as he answered. "Hardly that, Beans. You might say there's an old score I got to settle with Steve Haggard. Nothing more."

They turned off into a shallow side ravine and before they had gone a half mile Jay pulled up and got down.

"Bring your rifle, Beans," he ordered. "We'll ease up to the top of the ridge and have a look."

A FEW minutes later they were crouching behind the sheltering boulders at the crest and were looking down into the canyon they had deserted for the side ravine. Jay pointed to two dark spots that showed on the steep rock of the opposite wall. They were the openings of abandoned prospector's tunnels. Overhanging ledges shuttered them from the view of anyone on the canyon floor. Jay pointed and spoke softly to Beans.

"He's in one of them; I don't know which. I'll lay low while you slip one or two over that way. Maybe we can coax him out."

Beans slanted the barrel of his rifle over a boulder and spattered four shots against the rock around the caves. The only answer was the echo of gun reports bouncing off the canyon walls; the ghostly sing of caromed lead whining its tangent from uneven rock.

"Try it again," Jay ordered, "closer," and Beans emptied the magazine a little nearer to the tunnel mouths.

A moment later there was an answering shot, and Beans saw a faint puff of smoke rise from behind a granite barrier before the entrance to the left hand tunnel. The man in the cave had spotted them and his lead kicked up a little spurt of alkali dust close to the boulders where Beans and Jay were hidden. Beans ducked low behind the boulder and began reloading the magazine from his belt.

"He's in the little one to the left," he told Jay. "From here it looks like they's a trail runnin' up the canyon wall."

Jay raked off his wide-brimmed black sombrero and raised himself just enough to peer over the boulder and study the face of the opposite slope. He flung quick words at Beans. "Paste one on that chunk of granite now and then till you see me comin' up the trail. When I get close to him, you speed 'em up to hold his attention."

"I knowed a guy as loco as you oncet," Beans said, shaking his head. "But he got lockjaw from powder burns an' died. S'pose Spade Malloy is over there with Steve, you loco—"

But Jay wasn't listening. He was off down the slope, running toward his horse. Then the claybank was pounding off down the gully to swing back into the main canyon and disappear into the shelter of a tall brush clump from which Jay emerged afoot a few minutes later.

Beans' worried eyes followed Jay's slow ascent up the steep trail, and he took his gaze off Jay only long enough to flatten a slug now and then on the block of granite on the high ledge. The fellow over there was trading lead for lead. Beans grinned when he saw a tan sombrero shoved up on one end of the granite slab, and then a rifle barrel sneaking around the other end. An old trick, Beans reflected, that wasn't working today.

Then Beans saw Jay round a point where he made a fair target for the man above. Quickly he fed a handful of shells into the magazine and began pumping shot after

shot around the edges of the granite boulder. The last lead from the rifle swept away the tan sombrero, and Beans began firing with his Colt, spacing his shots a little to make them last.

Jay catfooted up the last twenty feet of the slope, his sharp black eyes welded to the back of the man crouched behind the granite slab. That gaze took in Steve Haggard's heavy head of straw-colored hair, the powerful build of him; solid, but lean-hipped from years in the saddle. Steve Haggard's looks didn't fit in with his reputation as a killer. Add thirty years to him and take away that hunted look and you'd have John Haggard all over again.

Jay's voice cut into the moment of quiet. "All right, Steve. It's all over."

Steve's body tensed and whirled in one lithe, pantherlike move. Still hunkered behind the rock, he faced Jay, thumb on the hammer, his muzzle grooved to the other man's heart. "You . . . you—" he stammered.

"Drop that iron, Steve," Jay ordered. "Before you do something you'll be sorry for."

Steve regained his composure. A tight, reckless smile twisted his face; more than a smile, it was the snarl of a hunted animal at bay.

"Sorry!" he scoffed. "I'd never be sorry for anything I ever done to a bullying buzzard like you! Standin' over somebody with a gun. That's all you know!"

Bolen's thin lips barely moved. "That's all over, Steve. I'm here as your friend."

"Friend!" Steve snarled. "Well, here's what I got for the kind of friend you are!" Jay saw Steve's thumb jerk back against the fretted hammer and slip away, heard Steve's bitter cry, "Take *that* to hell with you, Jay Bolen!"

But no explosion followed. There was only the futile hollow snap of firing pin on a spent shell. Steve had emptied his gun at Beans Crane across the canyon.

Throwing down the useless gun, Steve made a grab for his rifle. Jay leathered his iron and covered the distance between them in one continued, timeless move. With the impact of his charge Steve's body snapped back against the granite in a stunning, breath-destroying blow. Expecting gunplay, he had been unprepared for this. He lay there on the ledge, dazed, while Jay gathered up his rifle and six-gun.

TEN minutes later, when Beans Crane reached the ledge, he saw Steve Haggard standing on uncertain legs while Jay Bolen held a match for his cigarette. Steve's gun was in his holster and Jay was speaking to him.

"If you're O. K. now, Steve, let's get goin'. Can't tell how soon the others'll be headin' this way."

Steve's hard look bored into Jay's eyes. "In the time I've knowed you, Jay, you ain't ever been a liar," he said half reluctantly. "But if this ain't on the square, I'll lead yore liver if it's the last thing I ever do."

Then they became aware of Beans standing there. Steve gave a little start, habit sending his hand toward his gun, but Jay was undisturbed.

"Bring your horse out, Steve," he ordered. Steve disappeared into the shadows of the tunnel and came back a moment later leading a saddled bay.

Beans cleared his throat uncertainly and bent his puzzled eyes on Jay. "Wh . . . where did you ever know Steve Haggard?" he demanded, mystified.

The words jerked Steve's gaze to Jay, and for an instant their eyes locked in a meaning look which Beans Crane could not read. Then Jay shrugged.

"In Yuma prison," he answered laconically. "I was there the same time Steve was."

Quick understanding flashed to Beans Crane's face. "I reckon I been wrong about yuh, Jay. Yuh're aimin' to hit the trail with Steve."

"That's right," Jay agreed. "I'm hittin' the trail with Steve."

"An' yuh never intended to bring Steve in," Beans said slowly. "Yuh don't aim to make him tell where that tin money box of Morgan's is cached."

"That's where you're wrong," Jay said quietly. "That's what Steve and me are hittin' the trail for. Listen, Beans. I want you to ride across toward Devil's Canyon. Give us fifteen minutes, then you fire the three signal shots. That'll bring Hellman and the posse. You tell Hellman I've hit the trail with Steve. Tell him that, and nothin' else. Then grab a fresh bronc and take John Haggard's trail. When you find him, tell him he's needed back at Steptoe."

"I ain't good at riddles," Beans protested, "an' I ain't hankerin' for trouble. If yuh want Hellman told somethin', s'pose yuh tell him yourself. Me, I'm headin' for home."

"Listen, Beans," Jay said patiently. "You remember Spade Malloy's threat that he'd get John Haggard? And knowin' John, where d'you suppose he's headed now? He knows Stub Morgan had a sister livin' over at Aguila. He's just received the money from the sale of the Box H, and unless I'm crazier than you think I am, he's on his way to Aguila to give Morgan's sister that cash, thinkin' to do what he can to square Steve's account."

"An' yuh figger Spade will tail Haggard an' git him and the cash?" Beans asked doubtfully.

"It's only a guess," replied Jay, "but it's something to think about."

Beans raked back his battered sombrero and scratched his head thoughtfully. "Well, Jay, I never figgered yuh for a jailbird, an' this thing looks loco as a drunk sidewinder to me. But if yuh figger John Haggard's headin' for trouble, I'll trail him. Can't be no harm in that."

Beans went hurrying off down the trail and as soon as he was out of hearing Jay turned to Steve. "You know these hills, feller. We've got to dodge that posse and cut Spade Malloy's trail. You lead the way."

"Pickin' up Spade's trail is easy," Steve declared. "We been playin' tag up here for a week, Spade and me. But dodgin' the posse is something else."

Descending to the canyon floor, Jay got his horse from the brush clump and together the two rode northeast, following the canyon toward the ridge of the Ramparts. Picking their way through the stunted growth along the summit, Steve suddenly threw out his hand in a silent warning to Jay. They pulled up in the scant shelter of a straggling juniper and stared between thin-leafed branches at Sam Hellman and the posse. The riders had topped the ridge and halted less than a hundred yards away, scanning the confusion of canyons and ravines to the south. Hellman was giving directions in clear, even tones.

"So that's Sam Hellman!" Steve whispered. Suddenly Steve's horse champed noisily at the bit, and Hellman's gaze swung toward the foliage that hid them. Both men sat breathless. Hellman continued

to stare as if uncertain whether he had heard a sound or not. Jay could feel the strained tenseness of the man at his side. A nicker from one of their mounts, a sudden creak of saddle leather, and the thing would be done. Steve Haggard would never be taken alive, and the men of the posse, keyed up and eager, couldn't be held back. They would shoot first and talk later.

Then when the strained silence became almost unbearable, Hellman gave a curt order and the posse moved. Jay heard Steve's outward rush of breath, turned to see the look of relief on the hunted man's face as the six riders of the posse swung off at a slant to drop into the canyon Steve and Jay had recently quitted.

IT was the evening of the next day when Steve Haggard and Jay Bolen topped a rise and looked into the western end of Aguila Valley. A lone man on a white-socked roan rode eastward far off on the trail below. Jay looked at Steve and nodded, and their eyes followed the slow advance of the man.

But even as they watched, stark tragedy struck on the winding trail that cut the valley floor. A sluggish mushroom of gray smoke marked the spot of ambush. The report of a rifle sped over the quiet air, and they saw the rider sag in his saddle, sway, and tumble to the earth. Steve raked hide, and as he and Jay raced down the slope, he cried, "Spade's given us the slip somehow, and cut in ahead!"

Meanwhile John Haggard lay sprawled on the sod beside the trail. His body lay motionless near the bole of a leaning cottonwood. A moment later Spade Malloy stepped from the brush across the trail, shaking out a coiled lass rope. An evil smile racked the outlaw's red features. His beady eyes gleamed out from under thin, colorless brows, and he muttered to himself as he hurried forward. Bending over Haggard, he quickly explored the unconscious man's pockets, drawing forth a long leather wallet. Then he straightened, listening to approaching hoofbeats.

As suddenly as he had left the shelter of the brush, he whirled and darted back into it. He tore the rifle from under the skirt, thrust the barrel out between the branches, drew careful bead and fired twice. Jay's claybank flung up its head, shuddered, and went down, his front legs doubling under him.

As Jay kicked free and doubled to break his fall, he saw Steve flash by, heard the blast of his gun slinging lead toward that brush ambush. Spade Malloy's rifle cracked once more; Jay heard that sound as he hit the hard earth, rolled, and struggled dizzily to rise to his feet. Seconds passed before his head cleared, and he came upright in time to see Spade Malloy, bent low over the horn, tearing hide in a mad rush from the brush clump. With Jay's numbed gaze on him, he raced eastward on the trail.

As the hoofbeats of Malloy's escape died away, another sound drummed at Jay's ringing ears—the approach of a horse coming down the slope from the west. But Bolen was staring at a spot between him and the brush clump. He saw Steve's horse, riderless, reins dragging. Close by, stretched full length, face down, lay Steve Haggard.

The rider from the west pulled in. It was Beans Crane, and his shout jerked Jay into action. He rolled Steve over on his back and saw the widening crawl of crimson soaking the cloth over Steve's shoulder.

Beans slid to a stop and his accusing look went from Steve to John Haggard, who still lay motionless where he had fallen.

"Yuh might want to tell me what happened," Beans suggested grimly.

Steve's lids fluttered open, and a heave of his deep chest drew fresh reviving air into his lungs. He struggled and sat up.

"I'm listenin'," Beans reminded.

Jay helped Steve to his feet, and then looked hard at Beans. "Your suspicions are gettin' kind of tiresome, Crane. You can think what you damn please."

Beans' eyes went back to John Haggard. "Maybe yuh'd like to know what I think of a skunk that'd shoot up his old man. Yuh might also be int'rested in the fact that Hellman an' the boys found Morgan's tin box, empty, back in the canyon where Steve was hid out."

At mention of the posse, the menace of pursuit flashed to Jay's thoughts. His gaze swung to the west where the Aguila trail topped the ridge and dipped down into the valley. The shapes of six riders were silhouetted there for a moment before they hit the descent, their mounts prodded to a fast run.

Steve had dragged himself across the trail and was kneeling over his father. He had used his own bandanna to stop the flow of blood from John Haggard's chest wound. There was relief in Steve's eyes as he looked up at Jay.

"He's—alive," he said hoarsely. "If we could only get him right to a doc—"

Beans had edged up closer. From the look of him Jay guessed he was torn between what he considered his duty and a loyalty to the friendship that had run on between him and Jay for more than a year. The clattering hoofbeats of the approaching posse sounded nearer. Jay threw Steve a quick look and jerked his head.

"No, you don't!" Beans said weakly. "You two better stay—"

But his indecision had slowed him. He was staring into the throat of Jay's gun, staring helpless as Steve flung into the saddle.

"Steve and me are ridin', Beans," Jay said. "You look out for John." Then Jay backed to John Haggard's white-socked bay and whipped away in a tight turn that threw the brush between him and Beans. Side by side, Steve and Jay pounded eastward, following the hoof scars which marked Spade Malloy's passage over the trail.

Behind them the sounds of the pursuing posse died abruptly. But they would linger there at the brush clump by the cottonwood only long enough for Beans' hurried explanation. Then they would resume the chase again with renewed determination. Steve and Jay rode on, forcing their mounts to the utmost. Once on a smooth piece of trail, Steve pulled over close to his companion.

"I want you to know—just in case I don't make it. I killed Stub Morgan. I figured he had it comin' and I ain't denyin' it. But takin' the money box was Spade's idea, and afore we split Spade got the drop on me and took the box."

Jay nodded, his eyes on the narrowing trail. They were riding single file now, Jay ahead. Another mile was covered, and then Jay looked over a straight stretch to see Spade Malloy in the distance.

Jay coaxed a last burst of speed from the roan. He saw Malloy half twist in the saddle, saw the glint of the setting sun on the long dull barrel, and then the barrel spat flame. The crashing impact of lead

dragged Jay's head backward. In that instant his skull seemed numb. Waves of darkness were sweeping over him and his clutching hands groped vainly for the horn. As out of a painful dream he called to Steve:

"Don't . . . wait for . . . me. Go get 'im . . . Steve—"

Then Jay slipped from the saddle, his eyes unseeing, his ears deaf to the thundering hoof drum of Steve Haggard's racing pursuit of Spade Malloy.

WHEN Jay again opened his eyes he half expected to see Spade Malloy's menacing face glaring at him over the barrel of a gun. Instead he was looking up at John Haggard. He swung his gaze and took in the somewhat familiar surroundings of an upstairs room in the Roundup Hotel in Steptoe. His exploring fingers encountered the thick bandage that covered his skull, and a question leaped to his lips.

"Steve? What happened— Did Steve—"

John Haggard's voice was low and leaden. "Steve got away. Posse trailed him and Malloy for three days after you was hit, then lost all sign. Maybe I should be thankin' you, Jay, but I'm wonderin' why you did it."

"Can't you guess?"

Haggard shook his head. "I been told that you was in the Yuma pen along with Steve. That might have somethin' to do with it. I'm willin' to let it ride at that. Men have gone to prison for things they didn't do, and—" Haggard stopped talking to listen to the Saturday afternoon noises from the street below.

The voices swelled to an uneven volume, and then rose higher as they were punctuated by exclamations of surprise. John Haggard left the bed and went to the window. He looked down, and Jay saw his big hands grip hard against the sill. Jay lifted himself so he could look, too. What he saw made him gasp. Steve Haggard was riding down the middle of Steptoe's main street, leading a horse which carried a limp body lashed across the saddle. John Haggard's wondering eyes went from his son to the woman who rode by his side. A woman, straight-bodied and still young, whose clear eyes seemed to be searching the crowd in front of the Roundup Hotel.

"It's Steve Haggard, bringin' in Spade Malloy!" someone shouted.

John Haggard flung from the window and dashed out of the room. Jay climbed from the bed and made his way weakly to the window. The woman with Steve had slid from the saddle and was picking her way between the crowding men toward Sam Hellman. She held out her arms to him and he embraced her.

John Haggard strode on toward where Steve sat swaying in the saddle. While the others were intent on the sight of Sam Hellman holding the woman in his arms, no one saw Haggard's arms reach out to hold Steve as he fell. From the upstairs window Jay saw the woman break from Hellman's embrace and run back to her horse. From a saddlebag she took a leather pouch. She faced the crowd.

"Which one of you is Sheriff John Haggard?" she asked in a strong, determined voice.

Not till then had they noticed John Haggard standing there, seemingly bewildered, holding his son's body in his arms. The woman's gaze followed the others, and a sad smile crept across her strained face. She turned to Hellman again.

"Sam, come here and help take

care of Steve," she ordered. Hellman came and took the limp body from John Haggard's arms, turned, and went up the steps into the hotel.

John Haggard stood still, staring back at the woman with questioning eyes. She thrust the leather pouch toward him. "This," she said, "is the money Spade Malloy's men stole from the railroad three years ago. Also your wallet which Spade stole from you when he shot you on the Aguila trail."

Haggard's fumbling hands took the pouch. His lips tried vainly to form words that would not come. The woman looked into his troubled eyes and spoke softly.

"Steve Haggard spent three years in prison for something he didn't do. He came out determined to kill the men who had kept silent and made him suffer for their crime. There were three men in Malloy's gang when they robbed that train. They had been trying to get Steve to join them. When he refused they tricked him and left him to be caught and accused of the robbery. When Steve broke out of Yuma he came back to Big Meadows intending to wipe out the Malloy gang and return the money to the railroad. Instead he found a price on his head; he was branded an outlaw, but that didn't stop him. You caught Ace Malloy and hanged him. You cheated Steve of that. But Steve brought in the leader—he brought in Spade Malloy."

"Yeah, but there was three in Malloy's outfit!" cried someone in the crowd. "An' Steve Haggard was the other one."

THE woman's look swung over the crowd of listening men and they saw the tears that misted her eyes. Strugging for control, she answered, "No. Steve wasn't the one. The third man of Spade Malloy's gang was . . . was Stub Morgan!"

John Haggard's gaze was fastened on her face. The surprised mutterings of the men around him went unheard. He took one step toward her and his deep voice trembled. "And who . . . who are you?"

"I am Rose Morgan," she admitted. "Stub Morgan was my brother. Two days ago Spade Malloy came to my house in Aguila. He told me what I had suspected for a long time; that Stub had been breaking the law. He told me what they had done to Steve Haggard and said Steve was following him. He threatened to . . . to kill me if I didn't hide him." She spoke quickly, as if eager to finish. "Steve came, and Malloy ran from the house. Steve followed him, and—"

Her voice broke, and her hands came up to cover her face. Sam Hellman stepped to her side. For once the rancher's confidence seemed broken, and deep emotion shook his voice.

"Rose and I are going to be married," he explained. "We just been waitin' till I found a ranch where we could settle down. She wanted to be close to her brother, so I came here to Big Meadows and bought the Box H. After I got here I began hearin' about the Spade Malloy gang. When I found out that the third one was Stub Morgan, and not Steve, well—it was too late. Then Steve came up from Yuma and killed Morgan. I kept still to protect Rose. That was my mistake."

John Haggard's eyes were blazing, his forehead corded with anger. "You knowed this, and yet you stood by while my boy was bein' hunted like a coyote. You even—"

"Wait!" Rose pleaded. "What Sam has done he did for me. I

haven't spared myself to clear your son's name. Doesn't that count for Sam, too?"

Haggard nodded reluctantly and started to turn away, but Hellman's voice stayed him.

"This changes the lay of things," Hellman said. "You won't be leavin' the Meadows now. It ain't right that you should. The Meadows needs you. The Box H needs you, and—after this, *we* couldn't stay. Somewhere Rose and I will find our place. Far enough away that the ghost of Stub Morgan will never come to haunt her."

Haggard nodded again. The hurried revelations had suddenly changed everything for him, and for Steve. He was stirred beyond words. With trembling hands he opened the pouch Rose Morgan had handed him. He took out the money he had received for the Box H and thrust it into Hellman's hands.

Jay Bolen's voice came down from the upstairs window. "There's a guy up here askin' to see Sheriff Haggard and Beans Crane!"

As John Haggard's eyes went quickly to the upstairs window, Hellman stepped forward quickly. The rancher's hands fumbled for a moment at the breast of Haggard's flannel shirt, and when he stepped back a cheer went up from the crowd. Jay caught the flash of the setting sun on the silver star which again adorned John Haggard's broad chest, saw Rose Morgan and Hellman mount and ride away.

Then Beans Crane and the sheriff moved toward the stairs. A moment later they stepped into the room where Steve Haggard stood beside Jay Bolen. Steve came toward his father with outstretched hand.

"I guess Jay has been a better son to you than me," he said, "and I want to be the one to tell you, so you won't be thinkin' something that ain't so. Jay was there at Yuman pen when I was, but he was a guard, not a prisoner. I told him about you and how I come to be there. After I broke out, Jay quit his job and trailed me."

With one arm about his son's shoulder, John Haggard reached out his other hand and gripped Jay's. There was deep thankfulness in his gray eyes as he spoke. "It's all over now, and I got two fine sons. And no man could ask for more."

THE END.

Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

OUTSIDE of the popular little small bore rifle in the .22 rimfire series, perhaps the most popular firearm in this country is the shotgun. To a great many of us shotgun shooting means wing shooting at waterfowl, upland game, and small animals like rabbits. To others of us it means Skeet shooting.

Skeet is a game designed for the average man to increase his wing shooting ability.

To shoot Skeet you need the facilities of a Skeet club plus a shotgun. The sport is not expensive since shot shells in the various Skeet loadings cost only sixty-five to seventy-five cents per box, depending upon gauge. A round of targets of twenty-five shots in a single round of Skeet average and costs about fifty cents at the different clubs. Some clubs charge even less.

To get a better understanding of Skeet shooting, this description should help. Skeet targets are round, saucerlike affairs made of a light pitch composition and extremely fragile. For years they have been called "clay pigeons," although there is no clay in their composition.

A round of Skeet consists of twenty-five shots and differs tremendously from the old established wing shooting game known as trap shooting. Two target houses are used, one known as a high house and the other as a low house. In the high house, the bird leaves on a somewhat descending plane from a height of approximately ten feet or so from the ground. At the low house it leaves from a height of about three feet, rising somewhat. Therefore, the two houses give entirely different angles to the shooter.

Picture a Skeet field laid out on a clock basis. The high house is located at the nine o'clock position; the low house at three o'clock. You shoot from eight different stations. Station One is located at nine o'clock in front of the high house. Station Two at eight o'clock; Three at seven o'clock; Four at six o'clock; Five at five o'clock; Six at four o'clock, and Seven at three o'clock. Therefore, Station Seven is located in front of the low house, but the shooter stands slightly to one side so as not to be

struck by the bird. Station Eight is located in the center between the two trap houses, in other words, at the point where the hands of the clock are hinged.

To shoot Skeet, you step up to Station One, load your gun and call "Pull." A rapidly traveling target is released from the high house directly overhead, headed out somewhat beyond the center. You fire at that and break it. Then you call for your low house bird. This bird does not come directly at you, but, due to the slight angle, passes a few feet to your left.

You then move to Stations Two, Three, Four, and so forth and repeat these single shots. At every station you of course get entirely different angles in your shooting. Practice and skill counts much in obtaining a high score.

From Station Seven you move over to Station Eight in the center of the field. Here you have to work extremely fast. The distance between the two trap houses is exactly forty yards. Therefore, the distance from Station Eight to either trap house is only one half that distance. The bird will travel fifty-five miles per hour under normal conditions, meaning that it will pass over your head in approximately one second. Excellent nerve control is necessary to break this bird in that short space of time, but a small amount of practice will work wonders along these lines. At Station Eight you shoot first the high house and then turn around and take the low house. In one case, you have the bird coming out from a high elevation to approximately level and angles slightly to your right. In the lower house, the bird is angled to your left, rising rapidly. To break them, you must shoot quickly.

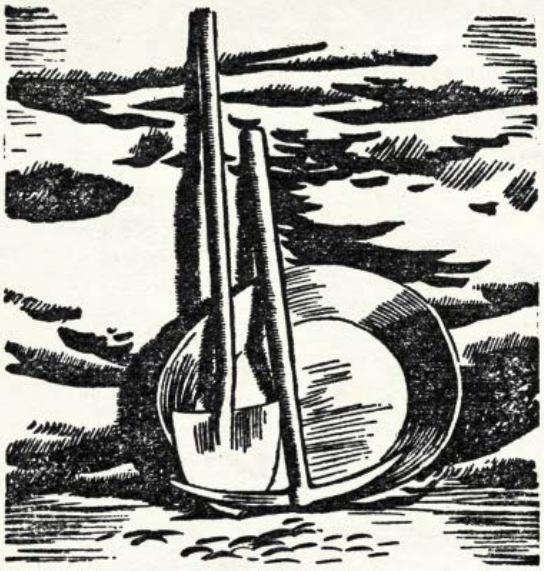
This finishes sixteen of your twenty-five shots. You then go to Station One for your doubles. At this time, two shells are placed in the gun and at the command to pull, the trap boys release a bird from each house simultaneously. You shoot the one going away from you first, working quickly to reverse your gun and pick up the incoming bird and break that.

Following Station One you progress to Station Two and again take doubles, then to Station Six at the four o'clock position, from there going to Station Seven for your final two shots. This completes twenty-four shells, leaving one odd number. Under present rules, the first shot you missed must be repeated. This takes care of the odd shell.

There is probably a Skeet club in your vicinity. You can readily determine this by writing the National Skeet Shooting Association, 275 Newbury Street, Boston, Massachusetts, for full information. Try it out. Use your regular upland game gun and you'll enjoy the sport.

If you are interested in making a cartridge collection and would like to hear from other collectors, write to this department, inclosing a three-cent stamp for a list of names which will be sent to you as soon as it is compiled. In this way you may be able to trade some of your duplicates with others for something you really need for your collection.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns And Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. *Be sure you inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

We pushed on through Mineral Park and up to the crest of the Cerbats this week to get the answers to Jimmy B.'s recent letter to this department. Jimmy hails from Lima, Ohio.

"Read some time ago in Western Story Magazine that you were heading out to Arizona," he writes. "Wonder if you will be near the old Mineral Park area in Mojave County. My dad, who went West years ago, spent some time out there, and used to speak highly of the mining possibilities of the region. Are they still mining out there? What sort of a town is Mineral Park today?"

Well, Jimmy, strictly speaking, Mineral Park no longer is. There was a time when it was the Mojave county seat, too. But the row of saloons and store buildings that faced Main Street and teemed with lusty life are gone completely. Crumbling piles of dobe mark the site of some of the former larger structures. The stone walls of the old jail and the high iron bars of the little two-foot-square windows are still in place, although the jail itself is roofless.

No, the town is gone. But the mines are still there, and many of them are active. Most of the boys live right out at the mines these days. When they have to go to town they can get in their cars, snake down the narrow, steep, and twisting mountain roads and cut a mile or so across the semidesert floor of Sacramento Valley until they hit U. S. 93, the new paved highway that will whip them into Kingman in almost no time at all.

Up near the old pass that the early-day wagon trains used in crossing northern Arizona before the advent of the Santa Fe, we talked awhile with the boys at the Evahom Mine. They had some nice ore and they were justly proud of it. Bonanza silver stuff that would probably run a hundred dollars a ton or better.

In effect they just about agreed with what the other scattered miners in the region told me. They had plenty of good rock, stuff that would make a profitable mine—if they only had some adequate means of handling it. As things stood, only the bonanza patches could be made to pay.

The trouble lies not in scarcity of value-carrying rock, but rather in the fact that up around Mineral Park, Mother Nature splashed her metals out with an altogether too lavish and indiscriminate hand. As a result the ores are, for the most part, a highly complex combination, the gold and silver values all mixed up with lead and zinc and sometimes a little copper in a manner

that makes it very hard to "unmix" them again. It is a smelter job to separate the values out into the various categories of the different metals.

It can be done, of course, and thanks to improved and constantly improving smelter technology, better done than it could have been years ago. Which is a definite bright spot in Mineral Park's future development. But right now, because there are no nearby smelters equipped to handle these particular types of ores, most of the stuff has to go clear to Salt Lake, Utah, or Amarillo, Texas, for treatment.

That means trucking to the railhead, and then further freight rates taking a huge slice out of the potential profits locked up in the ore itself. Still the mines, the leasers and the prospectors are going ahead gamely. There are spots of high grade that will keep them going. Meantime they are watching the other stuff, saving it against the hoped-for day when perhaps a smelter may be erected at least within reasonable truck haul from the mines themselves, perhaps somewhere on the Arizona or Nevada side of the line around the Boulder Dam vicinity.

Such a smelter would cause a sizable mining boom all along the thirty miles of the mineralized Cerbat Range, towering, gaunt, rock-faced peaks that rise in places some four thousand feet above the adjacent desert plains. It would bring deserved prosperity to a brave camp, and to a dogged, determined group of miners plugging steadily away in their continued search for high grade and forgetting the heartbreak caused by the fact they are forced to throw aside as profitless, ore that under other circumstances or in another situation might well represent the makings of a million-dollar mine.

To Harry W., of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Tellurium is one of the so-called rare metals. Some native tellurium has been found around Vulcan, Colorado. Main difficulty, however, as far as profitable prospecting for it is concerned, is not in the scarcity of the metal. Large quantities could readily be recovered from the residues now going to waste in lead and copper refineries throughout the country. Its utilization is held back by lack of outlets for the metal itself.

So far it is used in small quantities in alloy and carbon steels. Minute quantities are also used to toughen, harden, and increase the corrosion resistance of lead. But the amount is so small that tellurium lead costs only a fraction of a cent more a pound than ordinary lead.

Research scientists, of course, are working constantly on the development of new uses for tellurium. But even if quantity-consuming uses for it were opened up, the source of supply of the metal for quite some time to come will most likely be the waste dumps of the big lead and copper refineries, rather than deposits of the metal itself found by the prospector.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

It looks as though Molleen O'Day whose letter appears below is trying to vie with Donald MacClaren to see who takes the honors when it comes to writing the most interesting letter. This Irish colleen has led a plenty interesting life, too, judging by the way she causually mentions "gold fields," "jungles," et cetera. Looks as though they'll both need assistants to help answering their mail! She writes:

Dear Miss Rivers:

Would girls and boys about twenty years old, interested in light music, ballroom dancing, authors and journalism, please write to me? I'd be very happy to tell them about Australia. I've lived in the "great outback," in the pearling district, Broome; in the gold fields of Kalgoolie, in the jungle of the Northern Territory, and am now nursing in the city, so I'm sure I shall be able to answer all kinds of questions. My great-great-grandparents came here from Ireland during Australia's darkest period and there have been tales repeated down through each generation of all the men who made history during those days. I won't bother you with details now, but just write to me and I'll tell all.—Molleen O'Day, 106 Victoria Avenue, Chatswood, Sydney, N. S. Wales, Australia

Partner wanted here—

Dear Miss Rivers:

It has been a good many years since I have written to the Old Holla, but here I come again. I have a small ranch a few miles south of Wickenburg, the dude ranch capital of the world, and also several mining claims. What I am looking for is a partner who can take charge of the ranch and mining claims, as I am too busy to do so. He must be congenial, self-reliant and have enough income or capital to finance himself for a year or so until we can get things on a paying basis. He must be able to rough it and take the hardships that a person encounters when they undertake a ranching and mining proposition in this country. No drugstore cowboys need apply. What is wanted is a loyal true-blue pal who doesn't know how to say "quit." This is about the biggest order I've sent in yet, but the Old Holla has always come through with results before, so I'm sure I'll find the fellow I'm looking for this time, too.—John M. Owen, Box 502, Wickenburg, Arizona

Calling middle-aged pals—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am past middle-age and lonesome, and would enjoy hearing from other lonely folks. I like outdoor sports, especially camping and fishing, and home making. Here's hoping I get lots of letters.—Mrs. J. Mallon, c/o A. A. H., 3323 Troost Avenue, Kansas City, Missouri

Hear all about Vermont—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Now that the long, cold Vermont nights are here again, I have plenty of time to correspond with Pen Pals of all ages from everywhere. I am twenty-seven years old, was born and raised here in Vermont and I'd like to tell folks all over the world about this beautiful State. I'll exchange newspapers, views and snapshots with all who'll send me the same things. Here's hoping I get plenty of mail to answer these long nights.—Merrill Higgins, Box 215, Bellows Falls, Vermont

Everyone is welcome to write to this pal—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-eight years old and would like some Pen Pals—young, middle-aged or old. I'll exchange souvenirs, post-card views or anything else my Pen Pals collect. I would especially like to hear from someone out West, or one who lives on an Indian reservation, but will answer all letters regardless of where they're from. I'm looking forward to answers by return mail—and lots of them!—Mrs. A. Calvert, Jr., Rt. No. 1, Box 211, Troutville, Virginia

Interesting letters a certainty from Edgar—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-three years old, single and would like to have some Pen Pals near my own age. I have had three years of college and four serving in the navy, so should be able to write a fairly interesting letter. My chief hobby is

aviation, particularly the designing and building branches. I enjoy all sports, dancing and photography. I sincerely promise to answer all letters it may be my good fortune to receive, and will exchange pictures and snapshots with everyone.—Edgar Louis McCord, U. S. S. *Ortolan*, c/o Postmaster, San Diego, California

We're sure Ruby doesn't need a rabbit's foot—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a girl of the Ozarks, fifteen years old, and sure hope I don't need a rabbit's foot to get me some Pen Pals 'cause I haven't one. I'm a big cut-up and always ready to have fun. I can ride a horse, shoot a gun, in fact do anything that a farm girl in the Ozarks should be able to do. Hope I get lots of letters from boys and girls everywhere, especially from the West. I'll answer all letters promptly, so please don't disappoint me.—Ruby Pinkston, Rt. No. 1, Bonne Terre, Missouri

John's hobby is stamp collecting—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been a constant reader of your Pen Pal page for some time, and would appreciate very much becoming a member of your most interesting club. My hobby is stamp collecting, and I will gladly answer all correspondence from collectors in all parts of the world.—John J. Bronner, 248 Louis Street, St. Paul, Minnesota

Margaret won't let you down—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am sixteen years old and pleading for Pen Pals. I love all sports, dancing and swing music. I wish everyone would write and I promise faithfully to answer all letters. I won't let you down, so come on, everyone, and let's be friends.—Margaret Mandeville, 923 South Main Street, Jacksonville, Illinois

Circus folk write to Harry—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have read Western Story for many years and certainly enjoy it, especially so because I live in the West. I am familiar with the country out here, too, because I once conducted a tour through the West with an indoor circus. I am now planning a boat show in Alaska, in my own boat, leaving in the spring and spending about five months in Puget Sound and Alaskan waters. It should be a trip to be long remembered. I would enjoy hearing from other readers who have circus talent. I made this trip part way before, but not in my own boat.—Harry Kreger, Rt. No. 1, Box 175, Manette, Washington

Answer this S O S—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Hark! Hear that S O S? It's from way down ole Kentuck' way, and is a plea for Pen Pals from all corners of this world. I am a veteran's widow, stumbling around the milepost of forty years, and my greatest pleasure is writing and receiving letters. My favorite recreations are picnicking, motoring and walking. Ladies and gents, young or old, who'll be the first to write to me? I'll exchange snapshots if anyone wishes.—Mertice Collier, 412 Beach Street, Mayfield, Kentucky

Write to these two buddies—

Dear Miss Rivers:

We are two buddies who have been reading Western Story Magazine for some time and enjoy it very much. Ralph is twenty-one and Louis is nineteen. We are both fond of outdoor sports and participate in all the competitive activities that our organization affords. We will answer all letters and exchange snapshots.—Ralph Mayhew and Louis Schmidt, Company B, Nineteenth Infantry, Schofield Barracks, Honolulu, T. H.

Sally wants to collect Western songs—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been sitting here looking at Western Story Magazine and thought I'd write to the Hollow Tree and see if I could make some friends who might exchange cooking recipes and crochet patterns with me. I am thirty years old and live on a farm. I will welcome all regardless of age, and would enjoy having some foreign pals to write to. Also, if anyone has some Western songs to spare, I would like to have them. I haven't any now and would like to start a collection. Come one, come all, and fill the old mailbox to overflowing.—Sally Brown, Rt. No. 1, Box 109, Rockland, Maine

From Oklahoma comes this short plea—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I'm in my late twenties and would like to hear from Pen Pals from all over the world. I like all sports, particularly horseback riding. My father rode on the original Chisholm Trail. Will you please try to get me some Pen Pals? I would appreciate it very much.—Johnye Martin, 815 Ash, Duncan, Oklahoma

And here's a "self-made hillbilly"—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Please print this plea to Pen Pals who are looking for a dude like me. I am a city girl, but since I've moved up here to these hills and valleys, I've called myself the "self-made hillbilly"! I love to do everything that keeps me out in the open spaces. I play the guitar and sing and yodel. I would like to have Pen Pals who collect cowboy songs, so I could exchange with them. My favorite screen hero is Gene Autry, so come on all you Autry fans, and help me collect his songs. I promise to answer all letters and will be waiting beside my mailbox with an extra trailer to hold all your letters, so come on, dudes, we'll have a lot of fun writing to each other.—Anne Musick, R. D. No. 2, Loganton, Pennsylvania

Always room for a CCC boy—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Is there room in the Hollow Tree for a CCC boy? I would like to hear from boys and girls from all parts of the United States, especially from out West. I would also like to hear from boys in other CCC camps. I like all kinds of sports and outdoor life. I will answer all letters and those who send a snapshot will receive special attention.—Dewey Abbott, CCC Company 4424, Quitman, Mississippi

These lads have traveled some—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Our names are John and Barney and we are twenty-one and twenty-two years old. We will gladly exchange letters and photos with anyone who will write to us. We've traveled quite a bit through China, Hawaii, the Philippine Islands and about half of the forty-eight States. Here's hoping our letter brings results.—John Podres, Company F, Fort Wadsworth, Staten Island, New York

Calling all stamp collectors—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a fifteen-year-old Briton of Scottish extraction with a bent for stamp collecting and letter writing. I would like to correspond with a lot of stamp collectors from America or anywhere else. Come along all of you and snow me under with mail.—Ronald Moffatt, 318 Saltwell Road, Gateshead 8, County Durham, England

Gladys is lonely in the country—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am twenty-nine years old and would like to have some Pen Pals of any age from all over the United States and foreign countries. I am fond of the movies and most any form of amusement. I will gladly answer all letters and exchange snapshots. I get very lonely up here in the country and hope I hear from lots of pals.—Gladys Hunter, R. D. 1, Elmira, New York

Ernest will exchange stamps, too—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Will you please send out my S O S for Pen Pals which I need very badly. To the first one who writes from each State in the United States and sends me a canceled postage stamp for my collection, I will send a stamp-size picture of the State Building in the State from which their letter was sent. And to all foreign correspondents who send me a stamp, I will send one of the sweepstake drawing in Ireland. I have lots of time to write letters, will answer all regardless of age, and answer any questions about the beautiful State of Texas.—Ernest R. Williams, Room 105, Ward 8, U. S. Veterans Hospital 93, Legion, Texas

American pals wanted here—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a seventeen-year-old Canadian girl and would like to hear from Pen Pals in the United States. There's some American in me which makes me very interested in your country. I take an active part in sports, especially swimming, softball, skiing and skating and have loads of time to write letters. But I don't want to be too greedy with my first letter, so I'll sign off, hoping you Americans will help the postman earn his pay.—Dorothy Moran, Matapedia, Quebec, Canada

Clyde has lots of time to answer letters—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a forty-seven-year-old World War veteran in a CCC camp and if there was ever a lonesome person, it is I. I would like to be a member of the Hollow Tree and hear from Pen Pals everywhere. I will exchange snaps and have plenty of time to answer all letters. I enjoy fishing, camping and music.—Clyde Southwell, CCC Company 2946, Silverton, Oregon

Lee will swap fish stories—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a lonesome ex-CCC boy who would sure like to have a lot of Pen Pals, boys or girls, from everywhere. I have a good sense of humor but it sure is worn thin from writing to dozens of Hollow Tree-ites and only receiving one answer. I hope to carry on a long correspondence with this pal, but one robin doesn't make a spring, so I appeal to the Hollow Tree for more robins and promise to answer every letter. I am in my early twenties and like all sports, especially fishing, hunting and hiking, and I have done them all in Arizona, Oregon, Washington and California. I would be glad to swap yarns about "the one that got away" with anyone. I enjoy listening to Hawaiian music and dancing to swing music. My hobbies are collecting calling cards and snapshots and trying to write poetry.—Lee Farris, 340 West 106th Street, Los Angeles, California

Write to these two Jersey girls—

Dear Miss Rivers:
We are two girls who would enjoy having lots of Pen Pals. Eleanor is sixteen and Mary is nineteen years old. We will exchange snaps and postcards with persons from all over the world. Mary would especially like to hear from those living in Panama, Philippine Island, Mexico, Sweden and Switzerland. Eleanor would like to hear from those in Hawaii, Mexico, Philippine Islands, France, Switzerland, China and Brazil.—Eleanor Faust, 96 Third Street, Passaic, New Jersey, and Mary Jane Stetz, 138 Passaic Street, Passaic, New Jersey

Corporal Combs has traveled some—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a twenty-three-year-old soldier in the United States army doing a tour of foreign service in the Philippine Islands. I have been all over the Eastern seaboard of the United States and can tell everyone much interesting information about Guam, Panama, Hawaii and China. I've been in the "Islands" about three years now and the letters from home have been getting altogether too few. It would be a pleasure to correspond with anyone interested in out-of-the-way places and I will exchange snapshots. —Corporal Charles Combs, Headquarters Battery, 59th Coast Artillery, Fort Mills, Philippine Islands

Rosemary and Catherine enjoy flying high—

Dear Miss Rivers:
We are two Boston girls fifteen years old, interested in having Pen Pals from all over the universe. We are interested in bicycle riding, swimming and other sports, and we intend making aviation our life's work. We would enjoy hearing from others interested in flying, too. We will exchange snapshots and souvenirs and will answer all letters, so come, boys and girls, and sling some ink our way—we'll be waiting. —Rosemary Sullivan, 545 E. Fifth Street, South Boston, Massachusetts, and Catherine St. John, 534 E. Fifth Street, South Boston, Massachusetts

Pete will send souvenirs to the first ten who write—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a lonely boy of nineteen years and would like very much to hear from Pen Pals from all over the world. I was born in Texas and can tell you some interesting things about it. My hobbies are collecting postcards and snapshots and I enjoy dancing. To the first ten who write I will send souvenirs from Texas, Louisiana and Mexico.—Pete St. Clair, Carville, Louisiana

Missing Department

MARCH, GEORGE B. (BARNEY)—Since 1930 he has been a member of the United States army and has been stationed in the following places: Fort Wright, 1934; Co. D, Sixth Engineers, Fort Lewis, Washington, 1935; Tenth Signal Service Co., Caurtel de Espana, Manila, Philippine Islands, 1936 and 1937. If I remember correctly, he returned to the United States from the Philippines in the spring of 1938. I received a letter from him soon after his return, at which time he was stationed with the Eighth Signal Service Co., Presidio of San Francisco, San Francisco, California. At that time he expected to leave the army and start for Sydney, Australia. The people he was going to visit there have not seen or heard from him and are anxious to find out what has become of him. "Barney, if you see this, please write to your friends at 15 Darley Road, Randwick, Sydney, Australia, and I, too, would like to hear from you once more." Or if anyone knows his whereabouts, please write to me, David McKie, West Bathurst, New Brunswick, Canada.

WILSON, WOODROW (TEX)—He is my brother, and I am very worried about him. He is twenty-six years old and has dark-brown hair, gray eyes, dark complexion, weighs 144 pounds and is about five feet seven inches tall. He boxes a lot. Last seen in California and Nevada. "Tex, dad died within a year, please write me at once." Or if anyone knows his whereabouts, please write to Miss Helen Reaster, 3144 N. Southport Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

LITWIN, THOMAS—He is my father, and I haven't seen him for fourteen years. "Dad, if you see this notice, please get in touch with me, because something very important has come up." If anyone knows his whereabouts, please write to Ganey Litwin, 14 Bradford Street, Portland, Maine.

COLLINS, JACK—He is my uncle, and when last heard from five or six years ago he was headed for a mine in Oregon. He is thirty-four years old, medium height, and has blue eyes and brown hair. His folks would like to hear from him. "Jack, please write. Charley is here. I am Ada." Or if anyone knows his whereabouts, please write to Mrs. W. H. King, Oatman Star Route, Kingman, Arizona.

SMITH, FRANK STANLEY—He is a friend of mine, but we lost track of each other and I have not heard from him for fourteen years. When last heard from he was living at 521 West 134th Street, New York City, and was connected with a New York publishing company. I moved several times between 1926 and 1928, and think that caused the break. If anyone knows his present whereabouts, I would appreciate it if they would get in touch with me.—Charles Devall, "Lilyval," 5 Rutland Drive, Morden, Surrey, England.

WILLIAMS, CARRIE—She, her brother, Johnny, and sister, Neona, were all adopted in 1916 in Fort Worth, Texas. Neona and Johnny have been found, but she is still missing. They and her other sister and brother, Gertrude and Alex, would like to hear from her. If anyone has any information concerning her whereabouts, write to Mrs. Gertrude Williams Barfield, Route No. 4, Box 93, Wichita Falls, Texas.

BRABHAM, JOE B.—When last heard from he was in Stockton, California. He is thirty-six years old, five feet six inches tall, and has blue eyes and a fair complexion. "Joe, if you see this, write to your mother and brothers. It will make us very happy. Come home, if possible." Or if anyone knows his whereabouts, write to his mother, Mrs. Janie Brabham Ligon, 1520 Assembly Street, Columbia, South Carolina.

NOTICE—If there is anyone by the name of Mr. and Mrs. Devreux living in Manitoba, Canada, will they please write to me at once? It is very important.—Mrs. Loretta Risch, 1218 Sandusky Street, North Side, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

SCOTT, ELIZABETH MAY—She left her home in Jackson, Michigan, in 1890. I think she was married in Detroit, Michigan, in 1891, to a man from Buffalo, New York. She is now sixty-five years old. If anyone knows her whereabouts, please write to her lonely sister, Mrs. Alice Scott Hawkins, 3329 Seymour Avenue Road, Jackson, Michigan.

DESOTELL, J. D.—He is a cousin of mine, but is as dear to me as a brother, and I would appreciate it if anyone knowing him would communicate with me. He was in Brush, Colorado, when last heard from, but was supposed to be leaving there and going to New Mexico. I have been trying to find him for years. Write to Mrs. Cora B. Hunt, Route No. 2, Grant, Michigan.

ROLPH, GEORGE—He disappeared from Durango, Colorado, in 1904. He originally

came from Detroit, Michigan, and at one time worked in a steel mill in Pueblo, Colorado. I would also like any information concerning his relatives. He had a sister, Alberta, who is believed to have married a man named Morrison. I also think he had a half-brother named Charlie. Please send any information to his daughter, Mrs. A. B., 10546 Irma Street, Tujunga, California.

WARNER, LON—He is my father, and he left my brother and me with my mother and grandparents when we were very small children. I was born in January, 1913, and my brother was born in September, 1914. If anyone knows his whereabouts, I wish they'd please write to me. "Father, if you see this ad, write to me and include my middle name or initial."—Ruth Warner, 3414 East Twenty-fifth Street, Kansas City, Missouri.

HUSTON, WILLIAM—He is my father, whom I haven't seen since 1902, at which time he was in Marion, Indiana. When last heard of in 1910, he was in Oklahoma. He is an oil-well driller. Any information will be greatly appreciataed.—Edgar Huston, Jessieville, Arkansas.

MEIERS, BARNEY—He is my father's brother, and when last heard from in 1931 he was living at 89-13 Eighty-seventh Street, Woodhaven, New York. I would like to get in touch with any of my father's brothers or sisters, or any of their children.—Archie Meiers, 256 Nelson Street, Annandale, Sydney, N. S. W., Australia.

OWENS, JEWEL (DICK)—He is my brother, and was last seen in Greenville, Texas, about the 18th of July, 1939. He is thirteen years old, five feet three inches tall, weighs 124 pounds and has light-blue eyes and light-brown hair. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please communicate with me, Hazel Owens, c/o Oscar Harvey, Route No. 2, Box 26, Amity, Arkansas.

SMITH, JOHN M.—I would like to get in touch with him and his wife and son. When last heard from they were somewhere in California. Anyone having any information, write to his sister, Bertha Rawlings, c/o Mrs. C. Henderson, Forsan, Texas.

EGLESTON, CHARLES E.—He is my son and has been missing since September, 1938, when he left his home in Richland, Michigan. I heard he was in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. "Son, if you see this, won't you please write to me? If you don't want anyone else to know, that's all right with me. I don't care what has happened; I love you and want you to come to me or at least write." Or if anyone has any information as to his whereabouts, write to "M. W." in care of the Missing Department, Western Story Magazine.

ADKINS, ELGIN—He is my brother, and when last heard from was working in timber near Everett, Washington. He is twenty-three years old, about five feet eight inches tall, and has brown hair and eyes. Anyone having any information as to his whereabouts, please write to his brother, Elbert Adkins, U. S. S. *Indianapolis*, San Pedro, California.

ATTENTION—I would like to hear from any of the boys who were with me in the Philippines between 1920 and 1923. I was in Tenth Company, C. A. C. Please write to Clarence M. Lewis, Route No. 1, Winona, Texas.

MATTISON, ALLEN, ROWLAND and CROZIER (ROBERT)—Allen is forty-six years old, and when last heard of, in 1929, he was in Chicago, Illinois. Rowland is forty-five, and was last heard of in 1929 in Granite City, Illinois. Allen and Rowland are my sons. Crozier is my brother and is supposed to be in Memphis, Tennessee. If anyone knows their whereabouts, please write to Art L. Mattison, 1321 South Harwood Street, Dallas, Texas.

McCAIN, JAMES—He is my brother and has been gone from home for three years. He is twenty years old, five feet ten inches tall, and has a brown birthmark on his lower lip. When last heard from in 1936 he was in Washington. If anyone knows his whereabouts, get in touch with me or tell him to write his brother, Paul McCain, Route No. 1, Box 118, Bristow, Oklahoma.

HUDSON, WILLIS THOMAS—He is my brother, and has been missing for thirty years. He is fifty-four years old now, and when last heard from was working on a farm in Oregon. His ambition was to travel. His mother is still living and is waiting for him to return to her. Anyone having any information, please notify Ray Hudson, 509 E. Center Street, Lexington, North Carolina.

WATTS, ROBERT—He is my son and has been gone from home for eleven years. When last heard from in 1929 he was in Agnew, California. He is thirty-six years old, five feet eleven inches tall and has dark eyes and dark curly hair. He is sometimes called Slim or Bob. If anyone knows his whereabouts please notify me.—Mrs. Lillie Watts, Scranton, Arkansas.

MOULDIN, ROBERT—He is my father, whom I have not seen since I was four years old. He is about forty-five years old. "Daddy, please get in touch with me if you see this. You have a little grandson." Or if anyone knows his whereabouts, please get in touch with me.—Mrs. J. I. Hatfield, Rt. No. 3, Box 292, Hanford, California.

ATTENTION—I would like to get in touch with my father, whom I have never seen. He and my mother were divorced when I was only a year old. He is sixty-seven years old, about six feet tall, partly bald and has dark-brown eyes and brown hair. He used to live in Colorado, and was a section foreman for the Southern Pacific or Rock Island Railroad in Kansas. My name before marriage was Louise Elizabeth Risinger. My mother's name is Rhoda Ann Risinger. If anyone knows my father's whereabouts please get in touch with me.—Mrs. Louise E. Cupples, 3112 Perlita Avenue, Los Angeles, California.

BRIGHAM, FREDRICK EARL—He is my father and has been missing since 1930. When last heard from he was in Flin Flon, Manitoba, Canada. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please communicate with his son, Wesley Brigham, Fort Frances, Ontario, Canada.

CARNAHAN, D. L.—He is my son and was last heard from ten years ago, at which time he was at Pitcher, Oklahoma. He is five feet eleven inches tall, weighs about one hundred and eighty-five pounds and has blue-gray eyes, reddish-brown hair, and has a nervous cough. He used to work in the Jack mines. Any information about him will be greatly appreciated.—Mrs. Alva Morrow, Borego, California.

DE GARMO, GOLDIE MAY—She is my sister and was taken from the Fairview Orphans' Home by a Mr. Hugh Bassett of Bennington, Vermont, about twenty-nine years ago. I believe they were married. They left Vermont and their destination was unknown. Our mother's name was Lydia and father's name was Orville De Garmo of

Kingsbury, New York. If anyone has any information about my sister please get in touch with me.—Arthur De Garmo, Kleburg, Texas.

HIGDON, SAMUEL TAYLOR—He is my father's brother and was last seen in 1920 in Clarksville, Tennessee. His father is dying and would like to see him if possible. He is forty-five years old, five feet seven inches tall, weighs about one hundred and fifty pounds and has black hair, turning gray, and blue eyes. If anyone has any information about him, please communicate with me.—J. D. Higdon, Rt. No. 4, Box 163, Hanford, California.

McKEEVER, WILL (WALTER)—When last heard from he was in Allentown, Pennsylvania. He is about thirty-eight years old and was raised in Polk County, Arkansas. His brother, Dee, died in 1936, and his father is in very bad health. Anyone knowing his whereabouts, please get in touch with me.—Mrs. Dee McKeever, Rt. No. 1, McLean, Texas.

DUNCAN, ALVIN—He is my father and has not been heard of in about thirty-five years. At that time he was a cowpuncher in or near El Paso, Texas. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please communicate with me.—Alvin Lee Duncan, Rt. No. 1, Box 100, Scotts Mills, Oregon.

BILLITER, PAUL—It is two years since I've heard from him. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please get in touch with me, or have him write to me.—Joe Goodwin, "The Palms," 143 E. 40th Street, San Bernardino, California.

NOTICE—I would like to hear from any of James McNutt Woolard's children or relatives. He was my father and was married twice before his marriage to my mother. He was born in Oconee, Illinois, and had a sister, Betty. His mother and father were last known to be in Sherman, Texas. His father's name was Valentine Woolard, and his mother's maiden name was McNutt. He died on March 12th, 1939. If anyone has any information about my father's family, I would appreciate it if they would get in touch with me.—Clovis Woolard, c/o W. H. Griffin, Rt. No. 1, Bastrop, Louisiana.

OGDEN, KENNETH—He is my son, and when last heard from in August, 1934, he was working on a ranch in New Mexico. I heard later that he was working in a filling station in El Paso, Texas. Any information will be gratefully received by his mother who is gravely ill here in a hospital.—Mrs. Myrtle Hodges, Ward 205, Rancho Los Amigos, Hondo, California.

WALDEN, R. L.—Any information concerning his whereabouts would be appreciated. He was last heard of in Spokane, Washington.—Mr. and Mrs. G. C. Walden, 2811 E. Washington Avenue, North Little Rock, Arkansas.

TAYLOR, OLIVE—She is my sister, and when last heard of was living in New York. She is eighteen years old. If anyone knows her whereabouts will they please communicate with her brother, Richard Taylor, 80 Paris Street, Belfast, North Ireland.

SCHOEDER or SHERDIN, CORRINE—I went to school with her in Redding, California. If anyone knows her whereabouts, please get in touch with me or tell her to write me.—Mrs. Leonard Markham, 1317 Sacramento Street, Redding, California.

BURROW, FARRIS O'NEAL—He is my husband and he left Steele, Missouri, on May 14th, 1939. He is twenty-six years old, about five feet ten inches tall, has brown hair, blue eyes and a fair complexion. "Farris, please let us hear from you. We are worried to death. Jerry kisses your picture every day and asks when you'll be back. We still love you." Or if anyone knows his whereabouts, please get in touch with me.—Mrs. F. O. Burrow, Rt. No. 2, Alamo, Tennessee.

THURNER, MARTIN—He is an old A.E.F. World War buddy of mine. He's about forty-two years old and lived in Chicago, Illinois, in 1917. From there he went to Camp Wheeler, Georgia, and was in the Headquarters Company, and from there went overseas. We separated in France and never met again. He was generally employed in construction work in civilian life. He had two sisters living in Chicago. If anyone knows his whereabouts, I would appreciate it if they would get in touch with me.—Ray L. Burnett, 110 Kinsie Street, Thornton, Illinois.

MOORE, MARY—She left Ireland in May, 1884, to come to Canada or the United States. She was last heard from in 1886. If anyone knows her or has any information about her, will they please get in touch with her son, William Barr, 2224 Prospect Drive, Des Moines, Iowa.

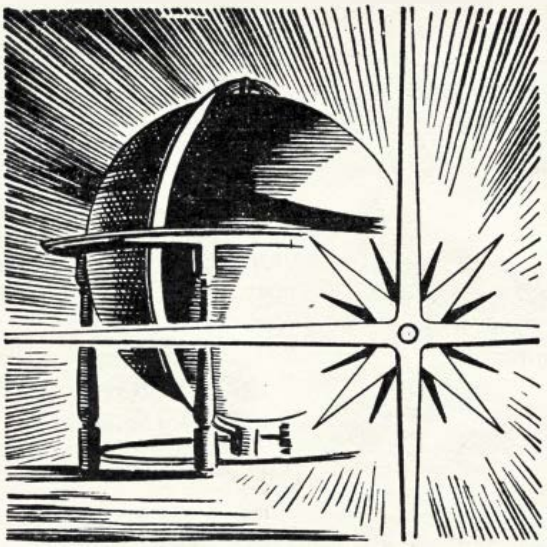
● There is no charge for the insertion of requests for information concerning missing relatives or friends.

While it will be better to use your name in the notices, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to anyone who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

A NUMBER of readers have written in asking about outdoor sports in North Carolina. It seems that they're just beginning to hear that this is a mighty great State for the man who loves the smell of the timber and the fields and streams. So, to answer a whole group of questions at once, here is what the sportsmen do in North Carolina, and where they do it.

The deep-sea fishing alone is something to write home about. Due to the fact that the warm waters of the Gulf Stream sweep to within thirty-five miles of the cost of North Carolina at Cape Fear, and to within ten miles at Cape Hatteras, there are myriad small fry in those waters and the big fish follow them for food. The result is that you can take a boat a few miles offshore at most any point on the coast of North Carolina and be sure of getting a workout for your fishing tackle, no matter how heavy it is. The big fighters that swarm the outlying waters are really champion-size amberjack, dolphin, barracuda, tarpon, bonita, and sailfish.

Closer inshore, around the bays and inlets, can be found the great schools of smaller game fish. Here there are swarms of bluefish, channel bass, kingfish or cero, and Spanish mackerel. One of the favorite ways of spotting these schools in order to raid it is to get a small boat and go out and watch for swooping seagulls, feeding on the schools. Then the fisherman begins trolling and the fight is on. Also there is a lot of surf casting for those who like to fish from the shore, and it is no child's play to try to hold a thirty or fifty-pound channel bass from the beach.

In the still shallower water around the salt-water sounds and the mouths of large rivers there are great schools of sea trout or weakfish, striped bass, bluefish, flounders, croakers, and sheepshead, a wide-enough variety of salt-water fish to suit any taste or tackle. Also there is plenty of room. There are over three hundred miles of shore line, fifteen hundred miles of inland waterways and two thousand miles of coastal sounds for you to whip with your lines and lures. And there is no license required for coastal salt-water fishing.

For the fresh-water man and the

If you are interested in learning more about North Carolina, you may like to receive a booklet describing outdoor sports in that State, a Homeseeker's Guide to North Carolina, and the leaflet entitled "How to Outfit for a Camping Trip." A letter to John North, inclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope will bring you this literature free.

"pan-fish" man there is everything to be desired. Moving back inland from the salt-water line, he will find the Coastal Plain threaded with slow, sluggish rivers and creeks running down to the sea. But under this sluggish water there is living dynamite for the fisherman, fighting black bass with a mean look in their eyes, while pike, crappie, and perch without number are ready and waiting to bend your light rod double and give you plenty of sport.

Lake Mattamuskeet, which covers about fifty thousand acres in Hyde County, offers its own particular species of bass. Found in such quantities that the season stays open after other waters are closed, this famous fish is becoming famed all over the country for his fighting qualities. The Roanoke River, emptying into Albemarle Sound, is the nation's number one breeding ground for the terrific fighter, the striped bass.

As the fisherman goes inland the number of streams and lakes increases, and so does the number of fish to be caught, mainly trout, bass, bream, muskalonge, and all varieties of perch and sunfish. In western North Carolina, many fishermen are attracted to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, where fishing for trout and bass is attracting large numbers of anglers every year. The park doesn't charge for fishing there, but the angler must have a State license.

When the outdoorsman lays down his fishing tackle and picks up his gun he will not be disappointed in North Carolina, whether he is after big game or varmints.

In the swamps and lowlands of the eastern part of the State, deer are plentiful, and the official estimate is that three thousand hunters get their bucks every season. In the western part of the State there is said to be an increase in the number of deer. The annual deer hunt in the Pisgah National Forest has become one of the South's leading sporting events.

Your real big-game hunter will want to hang a bear's head over his fireplace, and if he can do his part there are plenty of bear down in the Coastal Plain and in the mountains. In fact, bear almost overrun some sections, and there isn't a day that a good bunch of bear dogs can't root up a bruin.

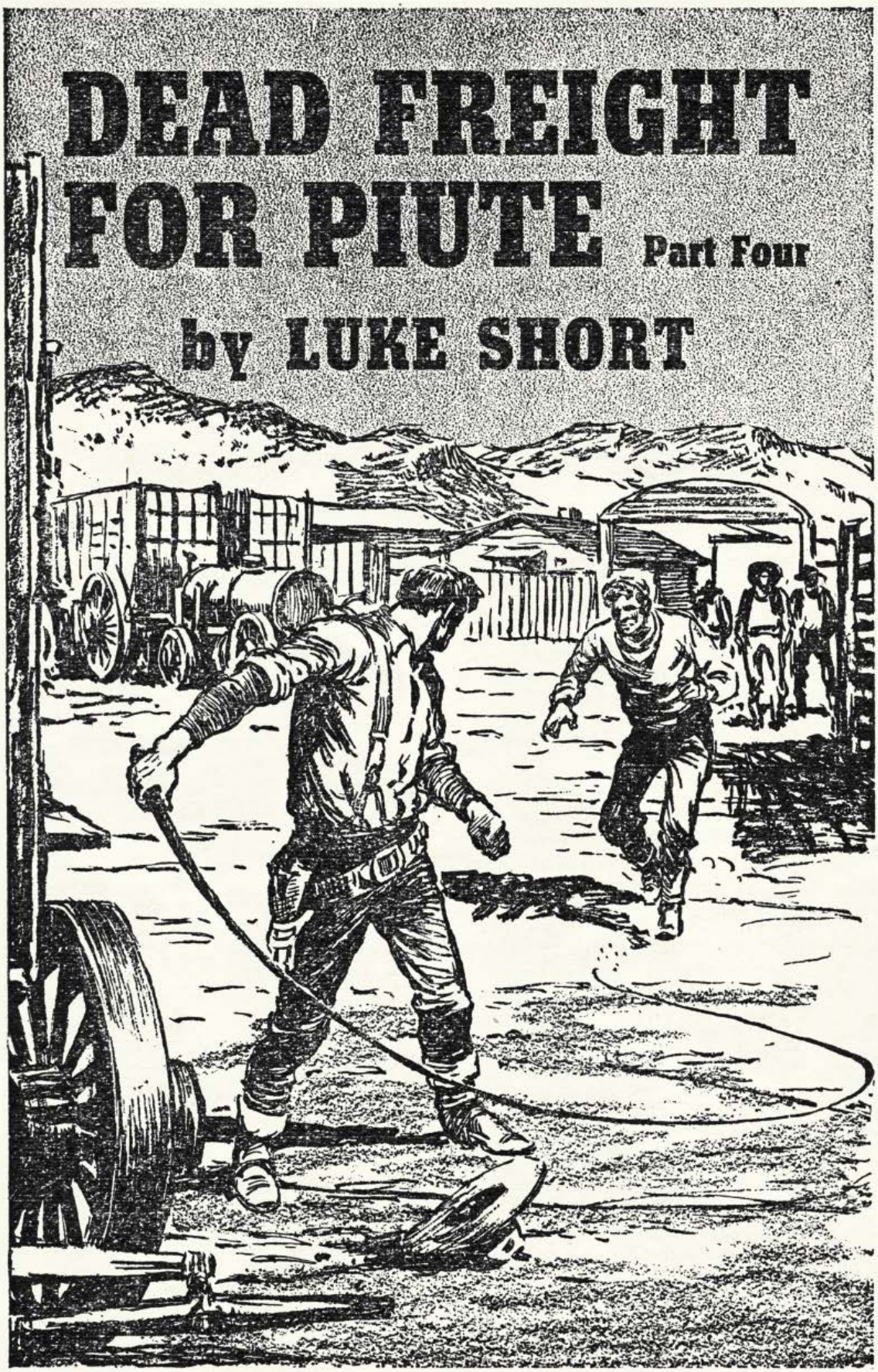
Even if big-game hunting sounds too strenuous for most folks, there is one kind of hunting that everybody can do. The young boy with a five-dollar .22 and the expert target man can both have their fun, and cheaply, too. Rabbit hunting and squirrel shooting take plenty of leg work and a real nose for the outdoors. When you outsmart a squirrel into sticking his head over the limb of a tree to satisfy his curiosity, you've won your laurels as a woodsman.

So choose your sport and you'll find it in abundance in the sunny State of North Carolina, and find plenty of it. It's a mighty satisfactory place for the outdoorsman.

DEAD FREIGHT FOR PIUTE

Part Four

by LUKE SHORT



The Story So Far:

Although he had come to Piute to see his uncle, Craig Armin, about a job with the latter's freighting outfit, Cole Armin turns down a partnership in the company when he discovers that his uncle has engineered the theft of ten thousand dollars from one of his competitors whose business he is trying to ruin. Cole demands, and gets, the stolen money on threat of exposing his uncle.

When Cole returns the money to Celia Wallace, from whom it had been stolen, she and her brother, Ted, offer him a job as a partner in their company, the Western Freighting Co. He accepts. With the ten thousand dollars brought by Cole, badly needed wagons, mules and equipment are bought, and Cole and Ted make arrangements to try for the business of the China Boy Mine, a freighting proposition that has so far proved too difficult for even Monarch, Craig Armin's company, to handle. But as they are leaving the office of the China Boy superintendent, Ted is pushed down a stairway and breaks his leg, which leaves Western without enough teamsters to handle the new job.

Cole, although he lacks experience as a teamster, takes one of the wagons on the China Boy test haul. On the way down his brake lever snaps. By quick-witted action and luck he manages to bring his team down safely and the China Boy contract is awarded to Western. When the brake lever is examined it is found that it has been tampered with. Cole swears he will get Keen Billings, Craig Armin's right-hand man, whom he suspects of tampering with the lever.

That night a fire starts in Monarch's yards, and Cole is arrested on suspicion of starting it. He is released when he gives an alibi, but Sheriff Ed Linton puts him under a five-thousand-dollar peace bond, which cuts deeply into Western's small capital.

CHAPTER XV

DISASTER AT THE CHINA BOY

BREAKFAST next morning was awkward. Cole ate swiftly and went over to the new wagon yard. Ted was silent, even with Celia. The whole air of the house was intolerable to Celia. It was an atmosphere of gloom and defeat, of polite suspicion and resentment and jealousy. She knew that, because she shared it. For Celia was not fooling herself any longer, now that it wasn't necessary.

She loved Cole Armin, and he didn't love her. Those were the plain, bitter facts. He was courting Letty Burns. Hadn't he gone to Letty with the news of the China Boy contract, rather than to her? Celia was a proud girl, but she was honest with herself, too. Cole didn't love her, that was all.

For a while she had fooled herself into believing that she was the reason Cole was here, the reason he was helping them and risking his life for them. But last night, when she had blunderingly trapped him into a situation where he couldn't deny he was courting Letty, had shown her different. He was here because their gratitude over the return of the stolen money had forced him into the partnership. She remembered his reluctance that night, and she blushed. No, she and Ted had done nothing for him. And he carried the burden, while they sat helplessly by and watched him fight.

Celia came to a sudden decision then. She went into the living room, straightened her hair, put on her hat and went into Ted's room. He was staring gloomily out the window.

"I'm going shopping," she said. "I won't be long."

She bent and swiftly kissed him on the forehead, and he smiled wanly at her and patted her hand. There was nothing they could tell each other, and Celia left.

But she didn't go shopping. She crossed the street and went up the sidewalk to the Cosmopolitan House. At the desk, she asked for Mr. Craig Armin's room number, and was given it. She walked upstairs and knocked on the door of Suite 2B. She was let in by the

Chinese servant, who led her through a short corridor into Craig Armin's elegant study.

When she stepped into the room, Craig Armin looked up from his desk. He came slowly to his feet, amazement plain on his face.

"Mr. Armin, I'm Celia Wallace, Ted Wallace's sister," Celia said.

"I know," Craig Armin said. Then remembering himself, he gestured politely to a chair. "Won't you sit down."

Celia wouldn't let herself be awed with the opulence of the room, nor the prepossessing manner of its owner. She sat down opposite the desk, and Armin sank into his chair.

Celia smiled and began. "Mr. Armin, let's forget each other's names for a moment and be human beings. Will you?"

"I'm willing to listen to you, Miss Wallace," Armin said with frigid obliqueness.

"I have a suggestion to make," Celia went on stubbornly. "Both the Monarch and the Western are bent on destroying each other. Surely you can see what that means?"

"I'm afraid I can't."

"Why, that nobody will win! We'll both be bankrupt!"

"And you have a cure for that, Miss Wallace?" Armin asked, smiling faintly.

"I have. It's very simple, too."

"What is it?"

"There are twenty-odd mines in the Piute field," Celia said steadily. "Why can't we divide them up—half to Monarch, half to Western?"

FOR once Craig Armin was speechless. His impulse was to snarl a refusal at this girl, but something in her cool and direct manner told him he would come off the worse if he abused her. He shook his head.

"I'm afraid that's impossible," he said.

"You mean, you like seeing men killed?" Celia countered.

Her level gaze disconcerted him. He pulled the lobe of his ear and wondered how to frame an answer. He knew he was blushing, and he hated himself for it. More than anything else, he did not want to let a Wallace know that his steely surface could be cracked. When he realized he was pulling his ear and blushing, like a schoolboy caught in the jam pot, he lowered his hand quickly and composed his face.

"Miss Wallace, I don't like violence any more than you do. But I have no choice."

"But you're the one who is using violence," Celia pointed out calmly.

"I don't want to contradict you, but the facts speak differently. Perhaps"—and he smiled faintly, inclining his head—"you didn't hear that an attempt was made last night to burn Monarch."

"That wasn't any of our doing!" Celia said hotly.

Craig Armin raised both hands, smiled and shook his head. "I'm afraid you've been spared some brutal truths by your brother and my nephew, Miss Wallace. That's all I can say."

"Then you refuse to be reasonable?"

"If being reasonable means letting another outfit steal and burn and fight their way into my business, I do."

Celia stood up. The bare-faced gall of this man angered her, and she could understand Cole Armin losing his temper. She was losing hers, and she didn't care.

"Very well," she said. "I can tell you one thing, though, Mr. Armin!

Cole has been pushed too far, already. He's not a man for guns, but he will take to them soon."

"You forget the peace bond, Miss Wallace."

"It's you who forget it!" Celia said hotly. "You forget that when Cole breaks his bond, you'll be dead!"

She whirled, her skirts billowing, and walked out of the room, her back straight as a gun barrel. In the hotel corridor, she leaned weakly against the wall and put her hand to her eyes. She had lost her temper and made threats and for what? Craig Armin was inside, laughing at her. She went down the stairs, thoroughly chastened. This thing that had been set in motion was not as easy to stop as all that. For the first time, she had got a glimpse of the implacable hate that burned in Craig Armin, and it was ugly.

When she returned home, the first thing she saw on the table was Letty Burns' hat.

Ted called to her the moment the door slammed. "Celia, come in here!" His voice was angry.

When Celia went in, Letty Burns was seated in a chair, her handkerchief to her eyes, sobbing quietly. Ted's face was dark with wrath, and his eyes fairly sparkled. Celia looked from one to the other.

"For Heaven's sake, what's the matter?" she asked.

"Just listen to this," Ted said in a thick voice. "We wondered why Cole was at Letty's last night. Well, Letty told me. Cole accused her of putting us onto Jim Rough and knowing about the brake lever being sawed. He accused her of plotting to kill him, and ruining Western!"

With the contrariness of a woman, Celia felt her heart lift in joy. Then Cole hadn't been courting Letty! And he hadn't wanted to confess for fear they would take it just the way Ted was taking it now. To cover the happiness in her face, Celia knelt by Letty and took her in her arms.

"My dear, my dear, don't cry. We're your friends. Cole made a mistake, that's all."

"B-but he believed it!" Letty sobbed. "Maybe he still does, even though I could have betrayed him to them last night!"

"He doesn't!" Celia said. "I'm sure he doesn't. He didn't even mention it to us."

"Th-that's why I came over to see you," Letty stammered. "I didn't want you to think that of me."

"I'd break his neck if he ever said that!" Ted said vehemently. He watched Letty, his eyes filled with pity.

CELIA comforted Letty and stopped her crying. And soon, reassured, Letty left for the office downstairs. Her act had been partly desperation, and partly the desire to forestall being named as a traitor. For Letty had been scared last night —scared half out of her wits. She had taken Craig Armin's cold cursing without flincing, after Cole and the others left. But she was afraid of him, afraid of his threats. This was his advice, this bold stroke of outright denial, and much as Letty loathed herself, she feared him more. For she knew Craig Armin, with Keen Billings' knowledge, was building her up for a more crucial test, a more brutal betrayal. And there was nothing she could do now except go along with them. She was in it up to her neck.

When Celia left Letty at the door, she came back into Ted's room.

"Think of it," Ted said bitterly. "Suspecting that poor girl. Why,

damn him, I'll have it out with him over this!"

"Ted!" Celia said sharply.

He looked up at her, startled by the tone of her voice.

"You won't say a word to Cole about this! Do you hear me? Not a word!"

"But he can't do a thing like that!" Ted cried vehemently. "It's . . . it's not fair!"

"All right, it's not," Celia said swiftly. "Cole made a mistake. But he's helped us. He's stuck with us! He's done the best he can! If he suspected Letty, it was to protect you, Ted. And me." There was a hard edge of determination in her voice that Ted had seldom heard, and then only when her mind was made up. "Grant a man his mistakes, Ted. We've all made worse ones than that, and you know it!"

Ted's face was torn between the dregs of anger and a new indecision.

And then Celia played her trump card, played it quietly. "If you say a word about it to Cole, Ted, I'll take the next stage to San Francisco and home."

It was the least thing she could do for Cole, to spare him this. For she knew that he would leave them if Ted confronted him with this. And Celia didn't even want to think of that. She wouldn't.

Ted grinned suddenly. "Why, Seely, I guess you mean it. No, I won't say anything, if you don't want me to. But I don't like it."

COLE didn't go back to the Wallace rooms for his noon meal. That morning at the bank he had borrowed up to the hilt on the face of what was left of the China Boy contract, and the sum had been less than he hoped for. He wanted to spare Ted that news until tonight, after he had made the deal for the new wagons. For, with luck, he might strike a deal that would compensate for the other disappointment.

He ate in a small restaurant on the main street. And he sat alone at the counter, a tall, booted man wearing worn corduroys, scuffed half boots, checked gingham shirt open at the collar—and no gun. For this was the task he had set himself: to stay out of trouble. And real trouble was always backed with guns.

He ate slowly, half-heartedly, pausing to stare at his food now and then with such obvious concentration the waitress wondered at him. The thing that was gnawing at the back of his mind, and had been all morning, was the same question that troubled him last night. Who set the Monarch fire? He had it reasoned out that he could stay out of trouble if he had to; he could even take it when the Monarch retaliated for the fire. But what he could neither predict nor fight when it happened was another incident like last night's. What if somebody spooked a span of Monarch's mules up on one of the high mountain roads, and the teams and the wagon and driver went over? Sheriff Linton would pick him up five minutes after the news was broken, and no alibi could save him. He was entirely at the mercy of the man who set the Monarch fire. The thought of it made him jumpy. Each time somebody came into the café, slamming the door behind him, Cole would flinch and wait for Sheriff Linton's hand on his shoulder.

Finally, when he could stand it no longer, he paid his check and went out onto the street. A week of this waiting would kill a man, and for one desperate moment he listened to the small voice that told him to

clear out while he could. He fought it down, but he couldn't fight down the conviction that he was bucking something that would lick him in the end. He was in a hole! He could only fight blindly.

The Acme Freighting wagon yard was at the far end of the main street. Once upon a time, and not so long since, Acme had been strong competition to Monarch. That was before Ted Wallace came to Piute with his single wagon and his ambition. And now Acme was a monument to Craig Armin's rapacity. Cole remembered Craig Armin at their first meeting boasting of destroying Acme, and he smiled thinly at the memory. At present, Acme was a small affair, with no contracts, few wagons, and many debts. They kept going by hauling odd loads for the swarm of prospectors up in the Sierra Negras who were glad to make a week's wages from an occasional load of ore.

The arch into the Acme yard was weathered and faded, and there was a look of dilapidation about the whole place. Cole swung into the yard and, seeing a group of men by an empty wagon fronting the sagging stables, cut across to them.

At sight of him, the teamsters parted—to reveal Keen Billings in violent conversation with a man in a black suit.

"Money is money, dammit," Cole heard Keen say. "There's your proposition!"

"Not any price to you coyotes," the man in the suit declared grimly. "Now get the hell out of here, Billings!"

THE man's eyes shifted to his teamsters, and then he saw Cole, who was in the circle of grinning men. Evidently, the man recognized Cole, for he smiled and nodded and then said to Billings, "I've got some business to talk over, Billings, as soon as you drag it."

Billings, scenting something, wheeled and saw Cole. For a second, he just stared balefully at him, his heavy-jowled face petulant and still flushed by his blustering.

"So," he observed, leaning back against the wagon, "you boys have ganged up already, I see." He turned his head toward the man he had been talking to. "I'll make a flat proposition. I'll give you fifty bucks each more than the top price that Western offers for your wagons!"

"I'll burn 'em, first," the man said promptly.

"Your little game of freeze-out won't work, eh, Keen?" Cole murmured.

Keen Billings cursed him, and the teamsters laughed with huge enjoyment. Cole smiled, too, and Billings' face was ugly with anger. He lounged away from the wagon. "Don't start any trouble, Armin," he said. "I'm warnin' you!"

Cole's smile died. "I don't want any trouble with you, Billings. Get out!"

Billings suddenly laughed. "I don't reckon I will," he said. "I'd like to rawhide you into a fight, Armin, and watch you land in jail for breakin' your peace bond. What does it take to make you fight?"

"Nothin' you got on the books," Cole answered, grinning.

Billings tentatively cursed him. Cole shook his head. "It'll take more than that, Keen. I saw my mother's marriage license."

The teamsters guffawed at that, and Billings started in again to curse. When he was finished, Cole was still grinning.

Billings glared at the laughing teamsters then and swung around to Cole. He sized him up, decided to take a chance.

"But Celia Wallace ain't got one yet, has she?" he taunted.

The teamsters' laughter died off and they looked at Cole. His smile was gone. "Be plain," he drawled. "Celia Wallace isn't married."

"But she damn well ought to—"

Cole hit him, then. He knocked him sprawling in the dust against the wagon wheel, and the smack of his knuckle-studded fist on Keen's jaw could be heard all over the lot. The blow was unthinking, automatic, instantaneous. And Cole knew, behind his anger, that this was a mistake, the worst mistake he could make. But it was done now.

Keen scrambled off his back, grabming for the gun in his holster. A teamster put his hand on the Monarch man's wrist, pinned it to the ground, grabbed his gun and threw it over the wagon.

Keen came to his feet and backed up, fear in his small pig eyes. Cole advanced toward him slowly, and Keen backed into the wagon. He was terrified now, for his baiting had succeeded with a vengeance. He was hemmed in on all sides by the teamsters. And then his eyes fell on the soft, oiled black-snake whip that a teamster had left on the step of the freight wagon.

He grabbed it and in one down-sweeping gesture uncoiled it at his feet. The teamsters scattered like a covey of quail, and only Cole remained. Armed now, Billings' fright was gone, and he laughed deep in his bull chest.

"You want to know what I said?" he asked Cole. "I said Celia Wallace needs a marriage license, mister. She come over to Craig Armin this mornin' tryin' to beg us off on account of you. And if that don't mean she's—"

COLE lunged for him. Billings brought the whip around and down in a whistle that ended in a crack like a rifle shot. Cole put up his elbow to shield his face, but the lash curled around his head and cut into his cheek. And still he came on. The lash missed him on the second blow, but the weight of the whip came down across his shoulder like a club. And then Keen Billings was cornered against the wagon, with no room to swing his whip. He brought the whipstock down like an ax across Cole's back just a moment before the latter's head rammed into his midriff and they went sprawling in the dust.

Terror gave Billings an added strength. He grappled with Cole and they rolled over and over, slugging futilely. Billings tried to bring his knee up in Cole's groin, but Cole twisted and put his hand under Billings' jaw and shoved. Billings' head went back and he gagged and then his hold broke, and Cole rolled free. Billings made a dive for the whip. Cole lunged for him, swinging a low hook that caught Keen on the cheek and deflected his course. When he got to his feet, Cole was standing on the whip.

Cole came in, then, and again Billings was crowded against the wagon. Cole pinned him with one hand and slugged with the other, beating Billings' soft face back until his head banged against the wagon side. Billings slugged blindly, and kicked, and cried out, but Cole fought with the cold fury of murder. When Billings, licked already, started to topple over, Cole stood him erect again, and slugged three

Continued on page 114

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Continued from page 111

savage blows into his face before Billings sat down.

"Nuff!" Billings groaned.

"Oh, no, it's not," Cole panted. He leaned over Billings, grabbed him by the hair and yanked his head back.

"Celia Wallace isn't married, Keen. Tell me that."

"No. A fine girl . . . a fine girl . . . a—" His voice dribbled off into silence, and he collapsed.

Cole stood over him, panting, his fists wet and dark with blood.

Then he looked up at the teamsters around him, his eyes slowly fading back into sanity.

"Well, I reckon that does it," he said calmly. "I might's well go to jail."

"Throw Billings out in the street, boys," the man in the black suit commanded crisply. "Then shut the gates and come here."

His order was obeyed and the gates were swung shut on Keen Billings, who lay half-unconscious in the dust. The man in the black suit came over to Cole and put out his hand.

"I'd swap fifteen years of my life for the privilege of watchin' that, Armin. I'm proud to shake your hand."

Cole shook his hand, and then the man turned to the teamsters. "Listen careful, boys," he said. "Gather close." When the teamsters had crowded up, he explained: "Cole Armin is on peace bond. When this fight gets nosed about, Linton will pick him up, jail him, and he'll lose his bond. Are we goin' to let him do it?"

"No!" the teamsters shouted.

The man turned to Cole. "You get the hell home," he said. He peeled off his coat and threw it in the dust. "Mark, tear my shirt. Joe, you rough me up some. The rest of you boys back up my story. When I wouldn't sell Billings the wagons, he went for me. I give him the whuppin' of his life. And nine witnesses to prove it! Are you backin' me, boys?"

They were, and they made it plain. Then the man—whose name Cole did not even know—turned to him. "Them wagons're yours for your own price, Armin," he said. "Now git out of here and keep your mouth shut and let the boys make a hero out of me! At last, I'm even with those Monarch sons, and I'm makin' it stick."

COLE washed his hands at the horse trough behind the Acme, thanked them, and went back to town through the alleys. Already there was a commotion out on the street which announced the crowd had spotted Keen in the Acme archway.

He had been saved this time, saved by the generosity of ten strangers, all leagued with him in their hatred of Monarch. But that was luck. It wouldn't be that way again. Through his fog of weariness, he was trying to remember what Keen had said about Celia. "She come over to Craig this mornin', trying to beg us off you." That was what Billings had said. Celia couldn't have done that.

Wearily, he climbed the steps to the house. Halfway up the stairs, Celia came out the door in her street clothes and hat. Seeing him, she stopped. "Cole!" she exclaimed. "What's happened to your face?"

Cole steadied himself on the railing. "Celia, did you see Craig Armin this mornin'?"

"Why, yes. Who told you?"

"Did you try to beg him off? Did you ask him to leave me alone?"

Celia's eyes flashed. "I did not, Cole Armin! I told him we were foolish to fight, that we ought to divide the field. When he refused, I told him he was signing his own death warrant!" She looked magnificent standing there, her face flushed and concern behind the outrage in her eyes.

"Thanks, Celia," Cole said. "That's all I want to know."

The sound of horses galloping pulled his glance around toward the alley. He saw Juck ride in the compound gate, and behind him was Harvey Girard, the China Boy super. They slipped from the saddle at the same time and tramped across the yard. Juck saw Cole first, and he stopped. Then Girard, too, stopped and looked up.

"Cole, it looks like we're done for," Girard announced tightly. "They knocked my watchman in the head last night, loaded a skip with black powder and caved in the last three galleries of the China boy. There won't be any ore to haul out."

CHAPTER XVI

A SCARED MAN

SHERIFF ED LINTON had long ago sent Keen Billings on to his hotel in a spring wagon and was doggedly questioning Mort Cornwall, the Acme owner, when one of his deputies rode up and asked to speak with him. Linton drew off to one side of the wagon yard, conversed with his deputy a moment, then came back to Cornwall. Cornwall was surrounded by his grim teamsters. His shirt was torn, his hands were bloody and the blacksnake whip Billings had tried to use on Cole was still lying in the dust before him.

"I've got to go, Cornwall, but I'll come back to you," Linton said.

"Come ahead," Cornwall invited. "If you aim to arrest me, git it over with. But I'd like to see you make it stick."

"That was pretty rough treatment on a trespasser," Linton said sternly. "Too rough, entirely."

"But it wasn't no ordinary trespasser," countered Cornwall. "The Monarch run my business to the wall, sheriff. They killed my father-in-law. And now they got the gall to come down here and try to bully me into sellin' them wagons, so Western won't get 'em." He laughed shortly. "A whippin' ain't half rough enough, if you ask me."

"You nearly killed a man."

"A damn pity I did such a sloppy job," Cornwall returned.

Sheriff Linton turned on his heel, exasperation plain in his face, mounted his horse and joined his deputy.

Outside the yard, riding toward the center of town, Linton said to his harried-looking deputy, "Where's Girard now?"

"I dunno. Likely rousin' the town."

"You say there were four men killed in the explosion?"

"That's right."

"And he's sure it happened that way?"

"That's right. One of the miners workin' night shift got took sick. He was waitin' for the cage when this powder-loaded skip come by him at the gate. He give a yell down a winze into the gallery below, and all them men down there run for the winze into the higher gallery. Four of 'em was workin' a stope, though, and they got buried. That gallery and the two below it where the day shift was workin' was plumb caved in."

Linton's face was pale. They

were in the town's afternoon traffic now, and he gave his horse its head and let it pick its way through the snarl of traffic on the main street.

"I don't see how it was done," he said finally. "Somebody on top must have seen who did it."

"Hunh-unh. On night shift, the gradin' shed is closed down. The ore skips is tripped into a big storage crib to be unloaded in the mornin'. The only man workin' on the top is the hoist man, and he's night watchman, too. They slugged him, broke into the powder shed, and while the hull damn camp was sleepin' they loaded the skip, put a long fuse to the stuff and let her go down, then rode off."

When they reached his office Linton didn't even dismount. "Hunt Girard up and talk to him," he told his deputy. "When he's calmed down enough to talk, send for me." He remembered something then, and said, "Did you say 'they'?"

"What?" the deputy asked blankly.

"How many men did the job? You said 'they slugged him over the head.'"

"Girard didn't know how many," the deputy replied. "I just figured it would take more than one of 'em. Monarch men, I reckon."

"Ah-h-h!" Linton snarled, and pulled his horse around into the street again. Here it was again. Four men dead in a mine explosion, and again the finger of suspicion pointed toward Monarch. Toward Keen Billings, in particular. Could Keen have ridden out there last night and done it? He could have. He would have had the time, though barely enough. But did he? Linton shook his head, silently voicing his denial. No, Billings wouldn't have done it, for he was afraid now. Then who did?

At Billings' hotel, the Piute, Linton dismounted and went into the lobby.

"Billings been brought in yet?" he asked the clerk.

"They carried him up a little while ago," the clerk said. "What happened?"

"He tripped on a match," Linton snarled.

HE climbed the stairs, found Billings' room and knocked. There was a muffled sound in answer, and he went in. Billings was lying on the bed, the remains of his shirt off. His thick-muscled body was a mass of bruises and cuts. His face, when he raised his head to look at Linton, was so swollen that it reminded Linton of soft, unset dough.

"Did you get him?" Billings groaned.

"You were trespassing," Linton said sternly. "He warned you off, and you stuck there. He was standing on his rights, Keen."

"Who?"

"Who what?"

"Who was standing on his rights?"

"Cornwall, you lughead."

It was a struggle for Keen Billings to sit up, but he did. "You damn fool!" he said in a voice filled with wrath. "Cornwall didn't beat me up! Cole Armin did!"

Linton stared at him, and then smiled beneath his mustache. "You're loco, Keen. Cornwall beat you up."

"It was Armin, I tell you!" Billings shouted. "Don't you think I know who I was fightin'?"

"No, I don't," Linton countered. "Cornwall had the shirt ripped off him. There was blood on his face and his hands. He'd been in a rough and tumble if I ever saw a man who was." He paused. "You

sure you feel all right, Keen?"

Billings swore with blistering violence. "It's a frame-up, Ed—a frame-up, I tell you." He told, between curses, of his attempted deal with Cornwall, of Cole's entrance, of his taunting of Cole, and of finally remembering the peace bond. But he had gone too far. How was he to know that Armin was sweet on Wallace's sister? That had brought on the fight.

Linton listened carefully. "But dammit," he expostulated when Billings had finished, "the whole Acme bunch claimed Cornwall fought you!"

"They're shieldin' Armin!" Billings yelled. "Go arrest him, and get him out of the way!"

Linton shook his head slowly. "No chance, Keen. Not with eight men calling me a liar, I don't arrest Cole Armin. I want to stay sheriff here long enough to get our business done. Armin wouldn't stand for an arrest now, anyway. He'd fight first, after what's happened."

"This scrap, you mean? He come off winner, so what's—"

"I don't mean this scrap," Linton cut in grimly. "I'm talkin' about somethin' else. I don't think you'll like to hear it, either."

Billings looked carefully at him, warned by the expression on Linton's face.

"What?"

"Where were you last night from eleven o'clock on?" Linton asked.

"You ought to know," Billings said slowly, warily. "We sat in a game for an hour."

"And after that?"

"I come to bed." He was still watching Linton, sensing something was wrong. "Why?"

"Somebody slugged the hoist man at the China Boy last night," Linton explained bleakly. "They loaded the skip with powder, lowered it, blew in three galleries of the China Boy and killed four men." He added dryly, "So the Western's China Boy contract ain't worth the paper it's written on—for four, five months, at least."

BILLINGS was utterly motionless for a moment, and then he scrambled off the bed and lunged for the door. He locked it and hurried to the window shade and pulled it down.

"Where's Cole Armin?" he demanded hoarsely.

"Scared, Keen?" Linton drawled, amusement in his voice.

"Is . . . is he comin' up here for me?" Billings asked huskily.

"Not that I know of."

"Listen," Billings said. "You go down in the lobby. When you see him come in, hold him off until I have time enough."

"For what?"

"To get out of here!" Billings said hoarsely. He dived into the closet. From out of it, he threw a warbag and a pile of clothes and boots. When he came out of the closet, Linton was leaning against the foot of the bed. He held a gun in his hand, a small pocket gun, and it was pointed at Billings.

"Sit down, Keen," he drawled.

Billings sank into a chair, his face a pasty gray under its bruises.

"Just sit there and think a minute," Linton said. "Just think."

Billings tried to speak and failed. He tried again and the words came this time. "All right, Ed. What?"

"You ain't pullin' out of here, Keen. What about our deal?"

"To hell with the deal!" Billings muttered.

"So you say. I don't. I say it's goin' through."

"But Armin will kill me! Ed, I swear I didn't blow up the China Boy! But he won't believe me! He'll kill me!"

"I'll hide you," Linton said calmly. "He can't kill you if he can't find you, Keen."

"Yeah," Billings said dully, staring at the floor. "Yeah, I guess that's right."

Linton walked over to Billings and slapped him sharply across the face. "Damn you, Keen! Wake up! You're not dead yet, and you won't be if you listen to me." Still Billings didn't come out of his apathy. Linton watched him impatiently.

"Got any whiskey in the room?" he asked.

"In the top drawer," Billings said thickly.

Linton pocketed the gun, got the whiskey from the dresser, uncorked the bottle and handed it to Billings. "Take a long swig of that."

Billings, docile as a child, obeyed. His hands were trembling as he tilted the bottle. He took one drink and then another, and Sheriff Linton, his eyes cold and alert, watched him cynically. The whiskey helped. Billings rubbed his eyes, shook his head, and then said in a quiet voice, "I'm all right, Ed."

"Got over your scare?"

"No. Neither would you, if all this was pointin' to you instead of me." He looked up at Linton. "I tell you, Ed, he'll hunt me down and kill me. He was killin' mad over that sawed brake lever. But this— Why, hell, this finishes it."

Sheriff Linton laughed softly. "Sure, it does, you fool. It almost finishes Western, too. Now, what's there left to do in the rest of our little scheme?"

"I dunno," Billings said numbly.

"GET a hold on yourself!" Linton snapped. "Our plan was to whittle both the Monarch and the Western down. All right, Western is whittled down. Now all we got to do is whittle Monarch down one more notch. And then Craig Armin will be where Western is now, and he'll play his last card. He'll call you in, pay you enough money to satisfy you, and then tell you to wipe out Armin and Wallace."

"Ed," Billings said dully, "who blew up the China Boy?"

"Aren't you listenin', you fool!" Linton flared up. "Didn't you hear me?"

"I heard you," Billings said. He took another swig of whiskey from the bottle. "All right. Go ahead."

"There isn't any more!" Linton said harshly. He walked over to Billings, and again he slapped him savagely across the face. He did it twice more, and when Billings ducked his head into his arms, Linton backed off.

"Hell take it, man, are you in a trance?" he raged.

"I'm all right, Ed," Billings protested. "Quit it. Quit it, I tell you. I've heard every word you've said. You're right. You're dead right." He looked at him. "But can you hide me so Armin can't find me?"

"I can," Linton said sharply. "Do you think he's got eyes that can look through walls?"

"Maybe he has," said Billings. "He's got everything else."

"You've got a big, wide, woolly stripe of yellow up your back, Keen," Linton sneered. "That's your trouble."

"I guess it is," Billings agreed without resentment.

"Well, you won't go yellow on *me*, my friend," Linton said ominously. "I'll tell you what I'm go-

ing to do with you. I'm going to rent the room just ahead of this one. And you're goin' to stay in it. Cole Armin is goin' to look for you. And I'm goin' to stick with him the whole damn night until I prod him into a fight and jail him. And then do you know what you're goin' to do, my friend, while he's hunting you?"

"What?" There was a spark of interest in Billings' gray face now.

"You're goin' to take a greener and blast a shot at Craig Armin—a shot so close he'll think he's dead!"

Keen didn't say anything.

"That alibis Armin," Linton went on. "He'll be in jail. But it also gets Craig Armin wild. It's the last shove. You'll get your orders from him tomorrow to take care of Cole and Ted Wallace. I'll free Cole, then." He leaned back against the dresser, his handsome face speculative and satisfied. "With Cole Armin free and Craig Armin wild, we got what we're after, at last. From there on in, it's a downhill drag."

"I see," Billings said quietly.

Linton watched him with shrewd eyes, waiting for him to pick holes in the argument. But Billings didn't, because there weren't any holes. It was tight. It was nice. But there was just one thing wrong in the picture, and Billings stubbornly kept coming back to it.

"Look, Ed. Don't get sore now, will you? I want to ask you something."

"Go ahead."

Billings spread his hand and ticked off counts on his fingers. "First, Ted Wallace is shoved downstairs and his leg broke. Second, that brake lever on Armin's wagon is sawed. Third, the China Boy is blowed up, and four—"

"And all those things have helped us, haven't they?" Linton interrupted. "They made Western mad enough to burn Monarch down. It made Armin mad enough to threaten your life and get a peace bond slapped on him, so he couldn't fight us. What are you kickin' about?"

"I want to know who done it all!" Billings cried. "So would you, if you had to stay locked in a hotel room while Armin hunted you!"

"But what does it matter?" Linton insisted. "You're alive."

"I got a feelin'," Billings said gloomily.

"What?"

"Somebody has took this right out of our hands," he said, raising his gaze to Linton. "Somebody knows what we're tryin' to do. And before we can finish, we're goin' to get it."

"That's damn foolishness!" scoffed Linton.

"It couldn't be you, workin' with somebody else, could it, Ed?" Billings asked quietly.

"Be careful," Linton warned.

"Because all this falls on me," Billings went on stubbornly. "I'm the ranihan that Cole Armin is huntin'!"

"You're Monarch's manager. Who else would he hunt? Not me."

"I just wondered," Billings said slowly. "It seems mighty damn queer."

"But not so queer you'll back out, Keen," Linton said, iron in his voice. "Because I've got enough to hang you, my friend, and you gave it to me—free. Remember who killed Joyce at Acme? Think that over!"

They glared suspiciously at each other for a long moment, and then Billings' glance slid away.

"Wait right here till I rent this next room," Linton said brusquely. "Leave your clothes here, and move in next door. I'll be back in a minute."

He unlocked the door and stepped outside. In the hall, now darkening in the late-afternoon dusk, he paused and stared down the corridor. So Billings thought he was crossing him, selling him out. Linton hadn't thought of it before, but why not? Once Cole Arnin and Wallace were dead, what was to stop him from doing just that, and getting Monarch for himself?

It was an idea, anyway. He'd have to think it over. As he walked down the stairs, he was smiling faintly under his silky, handsome mustache.

CHAPTER XVII

COLE MAKES THE ROUND

WHEN Girard finished telling of the China Boy explosion, none of them—Cole, Celia, Juck, or Ted—said anything immediately. There wasn't much to say, anyway, in the face of blank ruin.

"It's murder," Girard said. "I've got to face the families of those four men! And what can I tell them? That Monarch killed them, that the sheriff—even if he could get proof—is scared to use it, and that all we can do is take it."

"You haven't got any ore on top that we could haul, Girard?" Ted said miserably.

"You know I haven't," Girard replied. "The mine was closed down until the freightin' trials for you and Monarch."

Ted looked over at Celia. "Well, I reckon that does it. We're sunk. I don't know what the bank will do about my note. I borrowed on the face of your contract, Girard. They won't take it now. And I'll have to sell some of the wagons and stock for collateral for the money I borrowed for Cole's bond."

Cole, who was closest to the door, went out into the living room. His warbag lay in the corner behind a chair, and he was bending over it when Girard went out the door, announcing: "Well, I'm going to raise hell with that fancy-pants sheriff, Cole. Won't do any good, though."

"I reckon not," Cole said quietly, and Girard went down the steps.

Cole fumbled among his stuff and found his gun and belt. He had put them in there last night, hoping he wouldn't have to use them and afraid that he would. But last night the China Boy contract had stood between Western and utter failure. Tonight, it didn't. Nothing did. They were done.

He straightened up and started to put the gun belt on, when he was aware of someone watching him. He wheeled and saw Celia standing by the door just inside the room.

"What's it going to get you, Cole?" Celia asked quietly.

"I'd sort of like to leave my mark, anyway," he drawled. "When Ted gets enough money saved to start Western again he's not goin' to have to fight Keen Billings."

"They'll get you," Celia said in a tight, parched voice. "You can't fight a whole town, Cole!"

"Maybe." Cole picked up his hat.

Celia wanted to cry out, to stop him. She couldn't let him go this way, walking out to kill a man and be killed himself. But she wasn't going to stop him, she knew. There are times when a man's own code is in question, and he has to act according to his lights, foolish or suicidal or rash though they be. And those times, if he is a man like Cole Arnin, there is no way a woman can stop him. He has to do it. Celia understood that when she said good-by to Cole, but there was mis-

Continued on page 122

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Continued from page 120

ery in her face as he closed the door after him.

Juck spoke from behind her. "I'll watch him, Miss Celia. He won't get in no trouble."

She shook her head. "It's no use, Juck. I know."

"What if he can't find Billings?" Juck rumbled.

"But he will."

"Not if I get the word out to Billings in time," Juck said. He brushed past her, and he did not even see the faint glint of hope in her eyes.

For something happened to Celia, then. If Juck could help that way, she could help in another way.

COLE headed out into the street and down it, bound for the Piute Hotel and Keen Billings. It was almost a relief now to have this worry over, to know that the worst had happened. Not quite the worst, however. The worst would be having Keen Billings go free. Cole felt calm, his nerves keyed up and screwed tight, and they would be that way until it was over. For it never occurred to Cole that it wasn't Keen Billings who blew in the China Boy.

The town was just lighting up, but the Piute Hotel lobby was still dark when Cole entered it.

At his entrance a man rose from one of the lobby chairs and said, "Lookin' for someone, Armin?"

Cole hauled up, and Sheriff Linton strolled over to him, a half smile on his face. Something warned Cole to go a little easy now, if he was to play out his string.

"Yeah," he said amiably, "I'm glad you stopped me, Linton. I have a couple of questions to ask."

"Go ahead," Linton drawled.

"How do I go about breakin' my peace bond?" Cole asked pleasantly. "I mean, what have I got to do to forfeit it?"

"Just get in another ruckus like you were in this afternoon," Linton said easily. "I doubt if you could find a half dozen more men to lie for you, like you did today."

Cole smiled, without humor. "That worked nice, didn't it?"

Linton nodded. "Pretty nice. But it won't work again."

"You didn't answer my question," Cole reminded him.

"I'll answer it this way," Sheriff Linton said slowly. "You can hunt Keen Billings and if you find him, you can choose him. But when you go for your gun—and it don't matter if he goes first, because you'll rawhide him into it—you're fair game. You're dead, in fact."

Cole looked searchingly in his eyes. "Maybe," he said softly.

"No maybe about it. I'm stickin' close to you tonight, Armin. You won't have a prayer of gettin' away with it."

"I'll take a chance," Cole said. "Where is he?"

"Suppose you find him," Linton suggested.

"Suppose I do," Cole answered, a reckless light in his eyes. He went over to the desk, asked for Billings' room number, and was given it. Linton followed him up the stairs and waited as Cole knocked on Billings' door. These was no answer. Cole opened the door and looked into the room. It was dark in here. He walked across to the window, pulled up the shade and looked around him.

Linton, lounging in the door, drawled, "This is against the law, of course, but we'll overlook that."

"Thanks," Cole said, without looking at him. He opened the closet door. Billings was gone, but

not for good. His clothes lay in a heap in the middle of the floor.

"Well, there's other places," Cole murmured. "A rumhead like Billings won't stay out of a saloon long."

Linton shrugged. He followed Cole downstairs and out on the street, and paused at his elbow when Cole stopped to consider where next to look. Piute was too big to search house by house, but it wasn't too big to search bar by bar. Besides, the word would get around. All he would have to do would be to start it, and someone would flush Billings.

The first bar was a small one, but he inquired of the bartender for Keen Billings. When he was told Billings wasn't there, Cole said, "Tell him Cole Armin is lookin' for him, will you, if you see him?"

The bartender smiled knowingly, looked at the sheriff with a puzzled expression and said, "Sure."

By the time Cole, with Linton trailing him, was three saloons farther up the street, the word was ahead of him. When he approached the barkeep in this bar and opened his mouth to speak, the bartender said, "Sure. I'll tell him," and then laughed, along with the crowd at the bar.

LINTON was annoyed, but he tried to pass it off as a joke. The next bar Cole went in was the Desert Dust. The freighters were just off the day shift, and they were drinking up. When Cole entered he received an ovation. More than one teamster from the Monarch joined in, too. Juck was standing back among them, and he grinned at sight of Cole. The teamsters gathered around Cole and Sheriff Linton.

"Anybody seen Billings?" Cole asked.

There was general laughter at that. Then one teamster said, "Who's the dude with you, Cole?"

Sheriff Linton wheeled. "Who said that?" he demanded.

"I did," a teamster behind him said.

Before Linton could get turned around, another voice said: "You're a liar. I did."

Linton's face was angry. "I won't take any lip from you men!" he warned. "Understand that, for once an' all!"

They were big men, and Sheriff Linton was of medium size and dapper. Minus the badge which he scorned to wear, his brag was ridiculous, and these men knew it. It gave one irreverent teamster an idea.

"Who are you, runt?" he asked.

Sheriff Linton glared at him. "I'll give you the benefit of the doubt, my man, just in case you really don't know. I'm the sheriff."

"Where's your star?" another man asked.

"He's braggin'," a third jeered.

"Make him prove it," said a fourth.

Linton looked from one to the other, unable to pin any of them down. And then, just as he was getting ready to speak, somebody reached over his shoulder, grabbed his hat, and pulled it down over his eyes.

Two other husky teamsters picked him up by the collar of his coat and the seat of his pants, took a run and threw him through the bat-wing doors. There was a second of silence, then a crash as a tie rail split, and a solid thud on the ground.

When Sheriff Linton, his face livid with rage, burst through the doors a moment later, his pocket gun in his fist, every man in the room was innocently lined up at the bar, eying the door.

"Stand back there!" Linton

snarled. "Line up and give me your guns!"

One teamster turned ostentatiously to his neighbor. "I heard a hell of a good joke today," he remarked.

"What was it?" his neighbor asked.

And as one man, the teamsters took their drinks, turned their backs to the sheriff and listened to the joke. Linton yelled and bawled at them. He even let loose with a shot into the floor that nobody paid any attention to. Finally, not daring to arrest the whole saloon and not wishing to risk further assault on his dignity, he backed out the door and vanished.

A teamster spat. "He ain't even half a man, without he's got a couple of deputies on each arm," he said.

Cole looked over at Juck, who avoided his glance. But this was Juck's work, Cole knew.

"Anything we can do, Cole?" a teamster asked seriously.

"Nothin'," Cole said. "Thanks, boys."

He went out the door, and immediately Sheriff Linton fell in beside him. Cole stopped. "Ain't you had enough, Linton?" he asked.

The sheriff was white with fury. "Armin, tomorrow I'm goin' to close up that saloon and fine the owner! Now get along!"

"I believe you'd do it," Cole said contemptuously.

"I will. Are you still goin' through with this?"

COLE wheeled and started upstreet, not bothering to answer. He was beginning to worry, now, about Billings' showing up. If it were left to Billings, he knew, the man would run. But Billings and Monarch aimed to live in this town and be part of it. And to save his face, his reputation for toughness, and to prove that he was a better man than any Western could put forward, Billings would have to show up, sooner or later. He might choose to do it from ambush, or turn it into a surprise, but it would have to be done if he were to stay in Piute. Cole was counting on that.

After covering four more saloons, Cole knew that the word had been out long since. The crowd tagged at his heels now, the morbidly curious and the people who loved to see gun fights and bloodshed. Cole hated it, but in a way it would help. Sooner or later, Billings would walk out of a saloon, and the crowd would scatter, and he and Keen would shoot it out.

It was at Womack's Keno Parlor, a big saloon that was the hangout of the better-paid workingmen like Keen Billings, that Cole saw two deputies from Linton's office at the bar, facing the room, their elbows resting on the bar edge. They were two huskies, long-jawed and big, with the brutal faces and cynical eyes of men who are peace officers but little concerned with justice. They looked at Sheriff Linton, their boss, ready to take their cue from him. And Linton looked mussed and dusty and wholly angry. That was enough.

"You still on the prod?" the first deputy sneered, eying Cole. "You want to watch out, mister. Somebody'll pull a gun on you and you'll faint."

"It won't be you, pardner," Cole said mildly, and spoke to the bartender. "Billings been in?"

"Ain't seen him," the bartender said sourly.

"Tell him I'm lookin' for him," Cole said, mouthing the familiar and hopeful formula.

The first deputy, meanwhile, had looked over at Linton, and Linton, his anger still at the boiling point, nodded. He'd have to make his chance now, for they were coming to the last of the saloons. He signed the deputy to go ahead.

When Cole was finished, the deputy said: "Maybe I better take that gun away from you, Armin. You'll hurt yourself."

"And maybe you better not," Cole said, glancing over at the sheriff. He knew he was going to break his bond, but he wanted it to count—with Keen Billings.

Sheriff Linton shrugged. "I don't care much, one way or the other."

The deputy snapped his fingers. "Hand it over."

"Wait a minute," Cole said slowly. "Have I said what I wanted of Billings?"

"You don't need to."

"But I haven't. So you boys go whistle. I haven't broke any peace bond, feller. And any man has got a right to carry a gun in this town." He tilted his head toward Linton. "Ask him."

"He said he didn't care, brother," the deputy said, color flushing up into his full neck. "I do. Hand it over."

"But I care, too," Cole drawled. "And as long as the sheriff don't, why, I reckon I'll keep it."

The deputy reached out and cuffed Cole across the mouth with the back of his hand, and there was a smile on his cynical face. He had it wiped off immediately, for Cole cuffed him back, and hard enough to break the skin of his lip.

THE deputy stood for a full second, blank astonishment on his face. And then he swung heavily at Cole's face. Cole ducked, caught him off balance, and put both hands in his midriff and shoved him back into the arms of his fellow deputy.

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"Go careful, Big Wind," Cole said mildly. "If I bust this peace bond, I aim to make it count with a gun."

The deputy, now on his feet, looked at Linton, whose hand was in his pocket. The sheriff wasn't looking at him, but was watching Cole for the first move.

And the deputy, who was in the habit of shooting first and talking later, grabbed for his gun. Cole's hand streaked for his. Like a flash, Sheriff Linton had whipped his gun out of his pocket and rapped Cole across the skull. And the second deputy knocked the first deputy's arm up, so that his shot crashed into the bar mirror.

Cole melted to the floor, his gun clattering from his unconscious hand.

"Well, he broke his bond, all right," Linton said grimly, standing over him. "I knew he would."

And because this was the hang-out of the deputies and Keen Billings, nobody demurred.

The first deputy, spitting blood from a cut lip, picked Cole up by his feet, the other by his head. Linton cleared the way as they carried him out of the saloon, dragging him in the dust as they ducked under the hitch racks on either side of the street, and into the sheriff's office.

Linton opened the door at the rear of the office that let into the cell block. A drunk was sleeping off a jag in the first cell. Linton unlocked the cell door with the big key ring, and his deputies threw Cole on the cot. They were standing there, looking at him, as the blast of a shotgun lifted over the racket of the town.

Linton turned his head. "That was a greener!"

His two deputies ran for the door and left him alone with Cole. Linton stood there a long time, looking down at his prisoner. Then, his face twisted with hatred, Linton slashed

Cole across the face with the keys, leaving a cut in his cheek.

Afterward, feeling better, he closed the door and went out.

CHAPTER XVIII

LETTY'S WARNING

LETTY was standing by the compound gate in the alley, wondering whether to risk it or not, when she saw Celia open the door and slip out. Celia came down the steps, walked out of the compound and went down the alley, her stride purposeful.

Letty waited until Celia was out of sight, then walked slowly into the compound, as if undecided about something. When she passed into the glow of the lantern hanging on the gate, an observer could have seen indecision in her face—and doubt. This was her chance. Cole Armin was on the prowl, and Celia had gone out. It would never be easier.

She remembered Ted's face, how fiercely he defended her to his sister, and the memory made a warm glow inside her. She was a fool for treasuring the moment, she knew, but she was only hurting herself. Ted had been kind to her, and so had Celia. But there was the memory of Pete, and thinking of him was like twisting the knife in a partly healed wound.

She gazed up at the lighted window, and then, suddenly, she seemed to make up her mind. She looked behind her and saw that the alley and compound were deserted. Then she climbed the steps, knocked gently on the door and walked in.

Ted had heard the door open, and he put his gun back under the covers when Letty stepped into the room. A smile broke on his gloomy face.

"Letty!"

"I had to come," she explained

quickly. "I wondered if there was anything I could do."

"Sit down," Ted said. He watched her hungrily as she moved the chair beside his bed.

"The word is all over town, about our losing the contract," she said. "Will . . . does it make any difference to Western, Ted?"

Ted laughed shortly, bitterly. "All the difference in the world. With it, we could have pulled through. Without it—"

"Are we finished, then? Is Western done for?" Letty tried to ask it casually, but she couldn't. She was hoping against hope that he would say yes, so that she could take back the word to Keen Billings and Craig Armin.

Ted looked at her. "Who said so?" he asked.

"I . . . just wondered."

"I'm not licked," Ted said quietly. "I'm just back where I started. I've got a new wagon yard and more wagons. Not enough wagons, but they'll have to do. And we start all over again."

He fell quiet, staring at the dark window, and Letty watched him for a moment. "What are you thinking?" she asked.

Ted smiled wryly. "I was thinking about when I came in here, with one wagon, six mules and a lot of ambition."

A SHADOW of pain crossed Letty's face. She was thinking of another man who had come into Piute the same way—her brother.

"I knew a man who did that, too," she said dully. "Only he didn't have your luck."

Ted looked at her. "Who was that?"

"My brother, Pete."

"What happened to him?" Ted asked.

Letty looked at him, looked him straight in the eye. "He died," she said. "Someone slipped a kingbolt on his wagon, and his wagon went wild. He broke both legs and died of gangrene."

Ted put his hand out and touched hers. "I'm sorry, Letty. I didn't know."

Letty's body was taut as he touched her. Was he acting? He was, of course, for he had slipped Pete's kingbolt. He had killed Pete. She had to keep telling herself this, because it gave her a certain rigid courage, and somehow made this a little less awful. But deep within her she knew that it was destroying part of her. She was weak and disgusting, not even a good hater. For even the memory of Pete and how he died couldn't keep her from going soft when she saw Ted Wallace. Grimly, then, she remembered what she had come for.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "Only, it taught me a lesson, Ted."

"What?"

"That this freighting business is the most hateful business in the world! It breaks men and kills them and forgets them and doesn't care, just so the ore gets out! Just so a company can get a contract!"

"Why, Letty!" Ted said, surprised at her vehemence. "I didn't know you felt that way about it."

"I do," Letty said. "That . . . well, that's half why I came up here."

"To tell me that?"

"To ask why you and Mr. Armin don't quit, don't get out of it, while you still have a little money left."

There it was, and Letty watched him. She had made her plea on two grounds, and her sincerity as Ted watched her couldn't be doubted. She hoped Western would quit, so that she could break with Billings before something terrible happened.

Her other reason was more obscure, and she would scarcely admit it to herself. But dark intuition warned her that something would happen to Ted if he didn't get out.

TED'S face was puzzled as he studied hers. Then he said: "I don't work that way, Letty. Cole doesn't either."

"What have you to look forward to?" she asked desperately.

"Why, we started from the bottom once. I did, that is. I can do it again. We've got a lot to look forward to. Beating Monarch, for one thing."

"But you can't, Ted!"

"Why can't we?"

Letty made a hopeless gesture. "They have money! They have gunmen! They have the sheriff back of them! How can you fight those three?"

"I dunno," Ted said slowly. "But we will."

"And be alive in the end to tell the tale? No, you won't, Ted."

Ted smiled. "Are you scared, Letty?" he asked gently.

"Not for myself. For you."

He put a hand on hers. Letty knew, by the look in his face and his eyes, that he was going to say something that she couldn't let him say. She drew her hands away.

"I'm thinking of Celia, Ted," she said. "What would she do?"

"If what?"

"If you get— If the same thing

happens to you that happened to my brother." Letty's eyes were dark and afraid and bitter. "Ted, I don't know how else to say it. You'll laugh at me, and call me a woman. But I know I'm right." She paused. "Something terrible is going to happen to us, Ted."

"Why do you say that?"

"I can't explain it. Call it intuition if you will."

"It sounds like a warning," Ted said, laughing.

"Then call it that!" Letty said vehemently.

Ted stared at her, puzzled. "Letty, do you know something?"

Letty's face drained of color. She stood up. "No!" she said. "No! How could I? All I know is that I have an uneasy feeling about us, Ted. It's something I can't fight. And if I could, I'd make you send for Craig Armin tonight and have a talk with him. He'd buy you out and be glad to. And then you'd be rid of this . . . this monster of a freighting business!"

"No. It's gone too far now, Letty. Some day—I don't know how or when—Craig Armin is comin' to me with a proposition to sell Monarch. I'll stick until he does."

Letty sighed. "I knew you'd say that. I was sure of it."

"What else could I say?"

Letty didn't know. She stood there, staring down at Ted. He was looking at her, when the sound of gunshot, heavy and distinct, came to them. Outside, leaden silence quenched the loud racket of the town.

Has Cole broken his peace bond for one punch at a deputy? Will he fall into the trap Ed Linton has rigged up for him? If Keen Billings did not dynamite the China Boy, then who is the guilty man? Mystery and drama provide thrills aplenty in the fifth installment of ***DEAD FREIGHT FOR PIUTE.*** *Be sure you read it in next week's issue!*

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$10 with Lifetime° pen, pencil and 8-day clock—(without clock $60)—with two Lifetime° pens, $10

ADMIRAL Ensemble, $8.50—PREMIER, $15—STATESMAN, Lifetime° Feathertouch°, $14

$10 with Lifetime° pen

$7.50 with pen

$10 with Lifetime° pen