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STREET & SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY

TITLE REGISTERED U. S. PATENT OFFICE

JULY, 1944

VOL. CCXI, NO. 3

NOVELS

- GUN LAW FOR HUNGRY GULCH,
by Norman A. Fox 6
- THE COFFEEPOT BOILS OVER,
by Walt Coburn 36

NOVELETTES

- RIDERS OF STARBUCK RANGE,
by Rod Patterson 66
- MURDER AT TALKING ROCKS, *by Clay Starr* 107

SHORT STORIES AND FEATURES

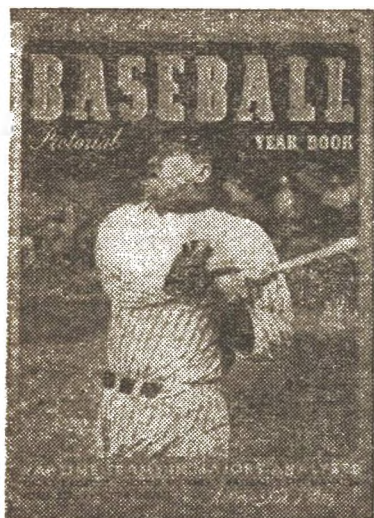
- DEATH CARD, *by Hapsburg Liebe* 30
- HOOFS OF VENGEANCE, *by S. Omar Barker* 59
- RANGE SAVVY, *by Carl Raht* 65
- PEDDLER BAIT, *by Cliff Walters* 85
- PUZZLE 88
- TEXAS TIMBER, *by Jim West* 89
- RIMROCK MANHUNT, *by Melvin W. Holt* 93
- WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE,
by John North 101
- MINES AND MINING, *by John A. Thompson* 103
- GUNS AND GUNNERS,
by Captain Philip B. Sharpe 105

COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

Editor
JOHN BURR

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GUN LAW FOR HUNGRY GULCH



by NORMAN A. FOX

I

HE heard the ragged beat of gunfire as he came riding toward his father's C-Bar-C spread at sundown. He'd put a hard day behind him, hazing strays out of the timbered reaches of this remote mountain valley, but the weariness dropped from

him now. He spent a moment separating echoes from sounds, and then he was spurring forward, for his father, alone and crippled, was obviously in danger, and he, Kent Callishaw, would be desperately needed.

The trail was so slippery with pine needles, a horse had to have a

If Blackstone didn't sway the fear-warped jurors of that miners' court, Kent Callishaw meant to use Colt law to break Saul Beatty's murderous stranglehold on Hungry Gulch



strain of mountain goat to find footing, but Kent came at a high gallop, bending low to avoid sweeping branches.

He was just twenty, this Kent Callishaw, dark-haired and blue-eyed, but his tall, well-knit frame had filled out, and that made him a man by high-country standards. He had no idea what he'd find at trail's end; peace had ruled this Powderhorn country all of Kent's days, but

he could use the Colt he carried, and there was work for him as he came thundering into the little clearing where the C-Bar-C buildings stood.

The ranchhouse, a crude cabin, had a little porch where Colorado Callishaw caught the sun, and he was here now, a gaunt, gray oldster wedged down into a chair. His useless legs were blanket-wrapped, but he was all warrior from the waist up, a six-gun spouting in his hand.

A dead man sprawled in the yard, another man had sought refuge around the corner of the cook shack, and Colorado was keeping him there by steady shooting. But Colorado triggered a last bullet, fumbled at reloading, and that gave the man behind the cook shack the moment he needed. A lean, wolfish fellow, he came edging into view, triumph in his eyes, as Kent rode up.

"Here, you yellow sidewinder!" Kent called, and that brought the man around, firing as he turned. Kent had his own gun out and thundering; he felt the tug of a bullet at his sleeve, but the stranger had dropped his gun and taken a faltering step forward. Twelve rocks, each a foot high, were arranged in neat rows, six and six, beside the cook shack, and the fellow got his feet tangled in them and fell dead.

Kent was already off his horse and racing toward the porch. "Dad!" he cried. "You all right?"

Colorado Callishaw, finishing his loading, nodded. "They wanted me alive—not dead," he said. "But when I started shooting, they shot back."

Kent glanced toward the cook shack. "Sam Lee? Where's he?"

"The Chink went to town for a load of grub," Colorado explained. His eyes drifted to the sprawled dead men, and he frowned. "So they found me," he mused. "Son, this ain't so good!"

Puzzled, Kent said: "You know these fellows?"

"I disremember their names, but they're Saul Beatty's men." Colorado pointed to the distant high blue shoulder of Bearclaw Ridge, etched brightly by the setting sun. "From the boom camp, Hungry Gulch, over beyond the ridge. Sit down, son. It's time I did some talking to you."

Kent eased himself onto the porch steps. He'd stood the gunfire test, but now that it was over, it was like a nightmare remembered but not believed. Knitting his brow, he said: "Saul Beatty? You used to cry out that name when your sleep troubled you. Or so ma told me before she died." Suspicion flared in his eyes. "Has this got something to do with your coming home crippled?"

Colorado smiled, a mere flashing of the teeth. "How much do you really know about your old man?" he asked.

"Why . . . not much, I guess," Kent confessed. "Mostly what ma told me. You met her in Colorado where you had a claim that finally petered out. Ma wanted a small cattle ranch, so you come up here to Montana and settled in the Powderhorn. But you were still a prospector, dad. You went gallowantin'

off when news came of a strike in Hungry Gulch."

"And she let me go," Colorado said, his voice gentler. "She knew the needings of a man's soul, bless her. Yes, I headed for Hungry Gulch; they were tellin' tall tales of those diggings. But the best claims were already staked, so your old man started snoopin' for color, with an eye out for the right kind of rock formation. And I found the Mother Lode, son."

"But you came home broke—" Kent began.

Colorado's eyes darkened. "I never got to touch that gold. It was a few miles beyond Hungry Gulch, and I came back to camp to file my claim. But I made the mistake of stopping at Saul Beatty's Hurdy-Gurdy House for a drink, and, like a fool, I bragged of my find to the barkeep. The house bought a drink, and there must have been a Mickey Finn in it because I woke up in Saul Beatty's private office."

"Who was this Beatty?"

"He'd come into the gulch with the original stampede, him and a dark, silent gunman called Boothill. Girls and crooked games were Beatty's business, and he owned a claim or two. He must have had his help trained to keep an eye out for easy pickings, and they thought they'd got the king nugget when they got me. They wanted the location of that Mother Lode, and Beatty and Boothill used Apache tricks to try and get it out of me."

Kent's fists clenched. "Torture! So that's how you were crippled!"

Callishaw nodded. "They ham-

mered my back with gun butts, hurting my spine so that my legs went dead afterwards. They did a lot of things I'd rather forget, but I didn't tell 'em, son. They finally figured I was too near dead to talk, and they threw me into the alley. And that's where Placer McLane found me."

"McLane? The little miner who fetched you home four years ago?"

"Right, son. Placer and me was sort of partners, and he toted me to his cabin that night and doctored me. That's where I made a map of the Mother Lode, while I could still remember landmarks. I had Placer wrap that map in oilskin and put it in a tin box and bury it deep in the dugout under his cabin. Then Placer went to Guy Lathrop, head of the miners' court. Placer told Lathrop the whole story, and Saul Beatty was arrested and brought to trial."

"I'll bet he got his needings then!"

"I've told you about miners' courts, son. They call a jury, and either side can hire lawyers or do its own talking. It's crude justice, but it brings order until real law comes. Only Beatty had a stronger grip on Hungry Gulch than I knew. He paraded witnesses to prove he hadn't been in the gulch that night, and when Placer testified that he'd found me behind Beatty's place, Beatty brought new witnesses who swore Placer had been blind drunk at the time. The jury knew it was listening to lies, but Boothill stood in the back of the courtroom, his arms folded, his guns hung low. And they brought in an acquittal for Beatty."

Kent cursed, low-voiced.

"I didn't dare work the Mother Lode as long as Beatty ruled Hungry Gulch," Colorado went on. "Placer brought me here secretly, but he didn't go back to the gulch either; he figured his life wouldn't be safe after testifying against Beatty. Placer had a wife and kid in Bannack, and he joined 'em. Meanwhile I've been hiding out here, waiting for the day I could pull Beatty off his perch. You see, I had an ace in the hole, son. You."

"Me?"

"You were sixteen then; you're twenty now. I've schooled you with a gun, and schooled you in the law. Today I saw how you stand up under fire. Remember the time I had ma fetch out a batch of secondhand law books I sent away for? You didn't like reading those books; you thought it was silly when I had you set up those twelve rocks yonder and pretend they were a jury and made windy speeches to 'em. But all the time I knew your day of destiny was coming. You're set to go up against Beatty now.

"Maybe book law has come to count for something in that boom camp; maybe gun law still rules. Either way, you're fixed for fighting. I want Saul Beatty proved crooked, son, and I want him to stand before the miners' court a whipped dog, like I once did. And I'm thinking there's no time to waste. You see, Placer McLane's back in Hungry Gulch. Sam Lee fetched a letter from town yesterday, a letter I didn't show you. Placer said his wife had died and him and the kid had come to Hungry Gulch. He aims on get-

ting that buried map for me, but said he'd run into some trouble. Placer never was no hand at writing."

Kent's gaze touched the sprawled bodies of the dead gunmen. "And these fellows were sent by Beatty! Do you think—"

Colorado nodded. "Beatty's likely never given up wanting that Mother Lode and hoping he'd get his hands on me again. It's queer that Beatty's men cut sign on me right after Placer wrote a letter. I'm wondering if they have an eye on Placer, and saw the name and address he put on that letter. He might be in danger and not know it. Which means you'd better start for Hungry Gulch tonight. Now step inside and fetch me the paper you'll find in the top bureau drawer."

When Kent returned, Colorado spread the paper upon his blanketed knees. "Here's Hungry Gulch, as she was," he explained. "See; there's Beatty's place, and the mercantile next to it, and up here's Placer's cabin. You'll find my map buried there."

Kent took the map, folded it and placed it in his pocket. "What about leaving you here alone, dad?" he said anxiously. "Beatty sent yonder pair; he may send others."

"He'll wait for these to report," Colorado judged. "And he'll be a long time waiting. Before he's ready to send others, maybe you'll tangle his twine. Sam Lee will take care of me, Kent. If you have to worry, worry about Placer McLane."

Kent nodded gravely. There were things to be done and he did them, and he was ready for riding at moon-

rise. Two new graves were on the C-Bar-C as he loped away, and from a high ridge he had his last look back. He saw his father on the porch below, and he raised his hand in farewell. He saw those scattered twelve rocks, touched now by the moonlight, and his eyes were solemn.

"Gentlemen of the jury," he said aloud, "I'll be seeing you!"

II

Along the twisted length of a mountain ravine, men had once built a tent town that had undergone a transformation; sturdier structures had replaced canvas, but some of the shanties were made of potato sacks and wagon covers, and some had whiskey barrels for chimneys.

Most of the buildings sprawled in the ravine's bottom, but many were perched halfway up the steep slope, as though they sought to escape the hurly-burly below but had grown tired and squatted to rest. The ground was rocky and scarred; the ceaseless pulse of a stamp mill thundered over the constant roar of the camp. This was the boom town, Hungry Gulch.

Kent Callishaw saw it from a high slope late one afternoon. Hard riding had brought him here quickly. He took a moment to look down upon this citadel of Saul Beatty, and then he found a tilting trail and followed it into the end of the camp's single snaky street. The two rows of facing buildings almost pinched together in places; a pair of ore wagons were hub-locked, the drivers heaping blasphemy upon

each other. Kent jogged forward slowly, fascinated by this raucous world so far removed from his peaceful Powderhorn country. A strident voice jerked him from his reverie.

"Hey, cowboy!" it demanded. "Can't you read?"

Kent reined short. Here at the camp's outskirts, a crude booth had been erected from old lumber, and two men stood behind it, one bearded and with the red-veined nose of a heavy drinker, the other, he who'd spoken, a tall, long-faced man, garbed entirely in black, a man with cold, close-set eyes. Across the booth's front stretched a banner reading:

CHECK YOUR GUNS HERE.

Kent smiled with a great show of naïveté. "Thanks just the same," he said. "My iron's not heavy. Reckon I can pack it without staggering."

The man in black frowned. "This ain't an accommodation for pilgrims! We keep the peace here by defanging folks. Now fork over that cutter!"

"Why waste wind?" the bearded man interjected. "Drag him off his horse, Boothill."

That name hit Kent like the impact of a miner's sledge, a blunt reminder of the tale Colorado Callishaw had told. So this was Boothill, the dark, silent lieutenant of Saul Beatty! This was the man who'd helped torture Colorado. A heady anger took hold of Kent, making him forget the need for caution.

He took a quick look to see if there were others to side these two.

Some flannel-shirted miners were farther up the street, and a trim, lithe girl was coming this way, a bucket in her hand. His voice flat, Kent said. "If you want my gun, feller, you'll have to come get it!"

Surprise broke the bleakness of Boothill's face. "Why, damn you!" he snapped, his hand dropping hipward.

Diving from the saddle, Kent hurtled over the counter of the booth, and as he smashed against Boothill the two went down in a tangled heap. Kent got to his feet first, snatching Boothill's holstered gun and tossing it aside. There were stacks of guns under the counter, and one at the hip of the bearded man, but that fellow made the mistake of rushing at Kent's exposed back. Half-turning, Kent drove his elbow hard into the man's midriff. The bearded fellow fell groaning, but by then Boothill had lurched to a stand.

Kent had forgotten his own gun, forgotten everything but a desire to hurt this cold-eyed man, to take some repayment for the pain Colorado had suffered. Lashing out with his fists, he sent Boothill reeling against the flimsy counter which collapsed. Pressing his advantage, he rained blows at Boothill until his fists connected with the gunman's exposed jaw, and Boothill went down to deep sleep.

For an instant Kent stood poised, his fists cocked, his chest heaving, and then a girl's shrill voice reached him.

"*Look out!*" she cried.

Kent spun about, to see the girl,

the one who'd been walking in this direction with a bucket, but he saw something else as well. The bearded man, forgotten by Kent, had hoisted himself upon one elbow and gotten his gun from leather and was leveling it at Kent.

But in this same breathless moment, the girl came running forward. Leaping the leveled wreckage of the booth, she brought her bucket swinging down upon the bearded man's head, and he slumped forward, the gun spilling from his fingers.

"Do . . . do you think I killed him?" she gasped.

Kent saw now that she had blue eyes, and hair of the sunlight's own hue. "I reckon not," he said. "But let's get out of here."

Miners who'd glimpsed the fight were pouring down the street, but they came only out of curiosity, surrounding Kent and the girl and asking clamoring questions. Holding firm to the girl's elbow, Kent shouldered a lane, leading his horse behind him. The girl turned to grin at the crowd. "Nothing to it, boys," she said. "The checking booth just went out of business, that's all. Better help yourself to your guns before Boothill wakes up."

Farther up the street, Kent steered the girl into the shadowy slot between two buildings. "I want to thank you," he said.

She tossed her battered bucket aside. "I was going chokecherry picking up the gulch. When I saw that man about to murder you, I . . . I just acted on impulse, I guess. Some welcome to Hungry Gulch,

stranger!" She extended her hand and glanced around before she said in a lower tone: "I'm Lois McLane."

"McLane?" It was the second time a name had hit Kent hard today. "Any kin to Placer McLane?"

She hesitated. "His daughter," she said, and Kent stared. Colorado had mentioned Placer McLane's kid, but Kent had somehow visualized a boy of eight or ten. Taking her hand, he said: "That makes us partners, in a way. I'm Kent Callishaw—Colorado's son."

It was her turn to be surprised. "I'd have helped anybody against Beatty's men," she said. "But I'm mighty glad it was *you*. You came because of dad's letter?"

Kent nodded. "To help Placer, and to get Beatty's scalp. Is there any law left in the gulch?"

Bitterness drew her lips tight. "They have their miners' court, and Guy Lathrop's still head of it. But he and his Vigilance Committee can't pin anything on Beatty, and Beatty's getting bigger, and harder to buck, all along. Beatty started this gun-checking business with nobody's sanction. It's supposed to insure orderliness; all it means actually, though, is that Beatty's men can wear guns, but nobody else can. The miners have grumbled, but they haven't made any real fight. Beatty's got them buffaloed. He has his honkatonk hall; he owns a mine; and I think that Redmask takes his orders from him."

"Redmask?"

"He's a lone road agent who has been stopping treasure coaches lately. They call him that because he wears

a fancy, red-beaded mask. But I've noticed that the dust that's lifted usually belongs to the Golden Fan Mine—which *isn't* Beatty's. And Redmask, according to description, just about tallies to Boothill's build."

"I'd sort o' like to meet up with this Redmask," Kent said. "But my first job is to help Placer, and to find dad's buried map."

Lois' fingers suddenly closed on Kent's arm. Boothill was lurching up the street, his hand to his jaw; the man never looked in their direction and was quickly gone from sight.

"I should have hit him harder," Kent observed. "But never mind him. I take it you know what happened to my father in this camp. Are you staying at your old cabin, where the map was buried?"

"Do you know where that cabin was?" Lois asked. "Then take a look at the street now!"

Her voice told him something was wrong, terribly wrong, and Kent stepped forward for a look. He knew how this street should be; he'd studied Colorado's map by every campfire he'd built, and he instantly recognized certain buildings for what they were. But there were new structures, too, and one had been reared where once Placer McLane's cabin had stood. Boothill was just turning into this high, ornate building which bore a sign:

SAUL BEATTY'S PLEASURE PALACE

"Of all the rotten luck!" Kent exclaimed.

"Beatty built that new shebang to

replace his old Hurdy-Gurdy House," Lois explained. "It's mighty tough that he built where dad's cabin once stood, but it's not so unnatural. Shacks and cabins have gradually been cleared out of yonder section to make it a sort of business district."

There was irony in the idea of Beatty squatting on the very map he coveted, but it aroused no humor in Kent. "No wonder your dad wrote that he'd run into trouble trying to get the map," Kent said. "Where's Placer now?"

"He's swamper at the Pleasure Palace."

"Working for Beatty?"

"Beatty didn't recognize him," Lois said. "It's been four years, and dad shaved the beard he used to wear. We've made it a point never to mention our name here, when we can help it; that's why I hesitated when you asked if I was kin to Placer McLane. You see, dad had to get inside Beatty's place, somehow. Beatty enlarged dad's old dug-out and uses it for a cellar. He only dug about a foot deeper, so the box dad once buried for Colorado is probably still there. Dad intends to get it."

Kent's jaw tightened; he was remembering Colorado's suspicion that Beatty had an eye on Placer McLane—the suspicion that had been whetted when Beatty's men had found Colorado's Powderhorn hide-away shortly after McLane had sent a letter from this camp. But Kent left his thoughts unspoken.

"I'll appreciate it if you'll stable

my horse at the livery for me," he said. "Then you'd better lay low in case that bearded galoot finds out who busted a bucket over his head. Me, I'm going to the Pleasure Palace. Now don't look so scared. I went off half-cocked when I met Boothill, but I'm playing my cards careful now. If you see your dad, tell him about me. But I'm Jim Kent to anybody else."

Lois nodded. "Be careful," she said.

But he was already angling across the street, his sombrero slanted low. Shouldering inside the Pleasure Palace, he came into a large room with a dancing floor and a bar at the far end. Tonight this floor would tremble beneath the feet of miners and honkatonk girls, but now it was vast in its emptiness. Striding forward, Kent glanced at the barkeep.

"Where's the kingpin?" he demanded.

The apron eyed Kent's gun in astonishment. "Upstairs—end of the hall," he said.

Kent sauntered toward the stairs, aware that the barkeep was bending below his counter and guessing that the fellow was jerking a signal cord to warn those above that a visitor was coming. Smiling thinly, Kent climbed to a dim hall flanked by doors which undoubtedly gave off into the rooms of the percentage girls.

Reaching Beatty's office, Kent shouldered inside without knocking. Two men were here; one seated behind an ornate desk, the other, Boothill, standing.

"What in blazes!" Boothill ejacu-

lated. "It's the jigger I was telling you about, boss!"

It took a wide chair to hold Saul Beatty. A man who favored good broadcloth, his heavy-jowled face looked affable enough, except that his eyes held no real humor. Looking at him, Kent felt the same surging anger he had unleashed on Boothill, but this time he held tight check on himself.

Frowning, Beatty said, "Didn't they teach you to knock on doors, stranger? But never mind that. They tell me you refused to check your gun."

Kent shrugged. "Would a freighter check his load of goods? My gun is my meal ticket. That's why I'm here. They say Saul Beatty's the kingpin of this camp, a man who appreciates the right kind of help. When do I go to work?"

Boothill sucked in his breath at this new evidence of Kent's audacity, but Beatty's frown vanished. Leaning back in his chair and placing his finger tips together, he studied Kent thoughtfully.

"Your name?" he asked.

"Kent—Jim Kent. From yonder."

"You look pretty young to be earning gun wages."

"Boothill found me old enough," drawled Kent.

The dark-garbed gunman scowled. "Hire him, Saul, and I'll be quitting," he said.

Beatty smiled. "That would be a mistake, Boothill. You're still smarting from that belt on the jaw. Forget it. When a gent's wide enough across the britches to give you trou-

ble, the idea is either to kill him or get him on your side. We can use this kid. Now shake hands, the pair of you."

But Kent was fumbling for makings, and his hands were suddenly busy at building a smoke. "About the wages—" he began.

A scuffling noise came from the hallway beyond, the door burst inward and two men lurched into the room. One was the bearded fellow who'd been at the checking stand; his head was bandage-swathed, and he held a squirming prisoner, a little man whose clean-shaven face was seamed with age.

"I've been keeping an eye on him, like you wanted, boss," the bearded man said. "I come in just now and caught him digging in the dirt floor of the cellar. The sign says he's dug lots of holes and filled 'em again."

Beatty's eyes hardened. "Good enough, Simms. Let go of him." His glance flicked to the little man. "Now tell me what you're hunting, Placer. Oh yes, I know you're Placer McLane. I didn't tumble at first, but your face bothered me—and I never forget a face. You've been watched ever since I recognized you. Just what are you after?"

Simms' hands off him, Placer McLane stood disheveled and defiant, his eyes shifting from Beatty to Boothill and on to Kent. Four years ago this little man had fetched Colorado Callishaw to the C-Bar-C, and just for an instant the light of recognition flared in McLane's eyes. Kent's heart stood still, but McLane made no betraying sign.

"I'm not talking, Beatty," he said defiantly.

Beatty frowned thoughtfully. "Let's see, this was the site of your first cabin, wasn't it? Did you bury something in your dugout? Gold, maybe?"

"I kept my gold in the safe at the old Bella Union Saloon," McLane countered. "Everybody knows that."

"So you did; so you did," mused Beatty. "Then—"

"That letter!" Boothill suddenly exploded. "Remember the letter we saw McLane mail a couple weeks ago, boss? The one that had Colorado Callishaw's address, when we managed to get a look at it? Maybe McLane's searching for something Colorado left behind."

"Perhaps," Beatty said, but his interest had quickened. "Which reminds me; it's about time Grady and Hassayampa got back from the Powderhorn with Callishaw. Boothill, you'd better take our friend McLane back down cellar. Kent, go along and you'll learn part of the ropes."

Boothill looked puzzled. "What do you want me to do with McLane, boss?"

"Let him dig," Beatty said. "There's something in that cellar that seems to interest him. Let him dig—till he finds it."

III

The cellar beneath the Pleasure Palace was used for storing cased liquor and other goods; a smoky coal oil lantern lighted it dimly, and a tall man had to stoop in this musty

hole. Prodded here by Boothill's gun barrel, Placer McLane was put to work with a shovel.

Boothill seated himself on an up-turned keg, and Kent hunkered on the steps leading down from the ground floor of the building.

"Hurry it up, feller," Boothill ordered, flourishing his gun.

Placer McLane's heart wasn't in this task; Kent could see that. But McLane had no choice; the dirt flew and a hole deepened and expanded in the cellar floor. An hour crept by, and another and still nothing was unearthed.

Boothill built himself cigarettes, balancing his gun upon his knees while his fingers were busy, and never offering the makings to Kent. Saul Beatty had accepted Kent, but Boothill still remembered the beating at the checking booth. Kent could read the hatred in the gunman's close-set eyes.

This concerned Kent not at all. He was more interested in McLane at the moment, and he was busy with plans that had to be perfected before McLane uncovered that tin box. Placer was stalling, Kent suspected, but under Boothill's watchful eye the little man had to keep working. Finally McLane's shovel grated against something; the sound was only slight, and McLane paused, sleeved sweat and dirt from his face.

"We're all wasting time, Boothill," he said. "There's nothing buried here."

"Your shovel just hit metal!" Boothill snapped. "I heard it! Git to digging!"

Reluctantly McLane obeyed. Hip deep in the wide hole, he unearthed a black tin box. Boothill came off the keg, leaned and snatched the box, hammering and prying at it with his gun barrel. The oilskin-wrapped contents in one hand, he fumbled at the fastenings, spread out the enclosed paper.

"A map!" he murmured. "A map with Colorado Callishaw's name written on it!" His eyes widened. "By thunder, this must be the map of the Mother Lode!"

"Just fork it over then," Kent ordered, his gun level in his hand. "I'm Colorado's kid."

This was an unguarded moment for Boothill. He'd obviously forgotten everything but the map he held, and Placer McLane swung his shovel, bringing it down across the gunman's knuckles. With a howl of anguish Boothill dropped map and gun and the map went fluttering almost to Kent's feet.

But as Kent stooped to pick it up, a gun barrel jabbed hard against his side, and Saul Beatty said: "I'll take that, Callishaw!"

Beatty was here, on the steps. He had come so quietly that Kent hadn't been aware of the big man's presence until this moment. "I wasn't positive about you, Callishaw, till you spoke up just now," Beatty said. "But when you first come into my office, I noticed that you favored Colorado Callishaw some. Like I told Placer, I never forget a face. So I gave you the same as I gave Placer—rope enough to hang yourself. I've been hunkering up there

out of sight, at the head of the steps, waiting for you to make a play."

Kent's gun slipped from his fingers, and Placer said dismally: "I thought you was Colorado's boy, too, but I held my tongue, naturally. A fine finish this is, kid!"

There was bitterness in Placer's voice, and Kent, too, tasted the gall of defeat, but suddenly Placer was swinging his shovel again. This time he struck at the lantern, blotting it out, and in the same instant Kent swerved sideways, his hand chopping blindly at Beatty's right wrist.

Beatty dropped his gun; Kent heard it clatter upon the steps, and Kent wrapped his arms around Beatty, the two of them sprawling down into the excavation, a tangled heap of flailing arms and legs. Yonder in the darkness, Boothill cursed and Placer grunted with effort, and Kent knew that those two were also struggling.

This was blind fighting. The door above was slightly ajar, but that door was at the end of an unlighted hall leading from the main upstairs room to the cellar steps. Now Kent had his chance to hand out some punishment to Beatty, but there was more than lard to this big man, and Kent was hard put to keep a hold on him.

Knowing that Placer, with his years against him, would be no match for Boothill, Kent panted: "Placer! Try for a gun! There's three of 'em . . . somewhere . . . around—"

Beatty got his hands on Kent's windpipe, choking off Kent's words.

Breaking free of the man, Kent came to his feet and lashed out wildly with his fists, but Beatty, also making a stand, must have swerved in the darkness, and the big man rushed at Kent, pinioning his arms. "Boothill!" Placer McLane's voice ejaculated. "He's found one of those guns! He just hit at me with the barrel!"

And then the gun blazed in Boothill's hand, the fiery redness lighting the cellar for an instant, the concussion beating against Kent's eardrums in this confined space. This was no place for wild shooting, not when Beatty might easily be hit, and Kent wondered if Boothill had gone berserk. But the man triggered again and again, and Kent saw now that Boothill was firing at the ceiling, and he grasped the gunman's intent. Boothill was raising an alarm to fetch help.

And that help came quickly. Men crowded down the steps, bewildered by what was going on, until Beatty began bellowing sharp commands. A lantern flashed in Kent's face, rough hands were laid on him, and he saw Simms and half a dozen others milling about. Beatty snatched the lantern and held it aloft.

"The map!" he cried. "Where's the map!"

McLane writhed in the hands of captors, Boothill stood disheveled and triumphant, the tin box lay in the excavation, and Kent's gun and Beatty's were at the foot of the steps. But the map that had slipped from Boothill's fingers and fluttered across the excavation to Kent's feet had vanished.

"Where is it?" Beatty demanded,

turning hot, furious eyes on Kent. "What did you do with it?"

Kent shrugged. "I never touched it," he said. "You stuck a gun in my ribs, remember, before I could pick it up."

"Search 'em," Beatty ordered his men and glared about wildly. "Search the two of 'em right down to the skin. And look in every corner of this cellar. There's a piece of paper somewhere around, understand. And it's got to be found!"

Seeking fingers ran over Kent and Placer, their pockets were turned inside out and even their boots were examined, and while this was going on, other men frantically searched the cellar. Beatty, turning to Boothill, said: "Take this pair up to my office and keep 'em at gun point. I'll be there as soon as I finish tearing this dugout apart."

The two were herded up into the big ground-floor room, and Kent saw then that it was well past lamp-lighting time. The music was just striking up, the flamboyantly dressed percentage girls were lined along benches while a scattering of miners bought tickets for this first dance. The three men threaded unobtrusively among them, but Boothill kept so close behind his prisoners that he might have reached and touched either at any time, and in this manner they were brought upstairs to Beatty's ornate office.

"Over against the wall, you two," Boothill ordered. Putting his shoulder against the door jamb, he stood there, holding his gun level. Placer,

backed against a wall beside Kent, said, under his breath: "You got it?"

Kent shook his head. "Somebody else eased into the cellar and picked up the map," he said aloud. "That's the only answer. Maybe one of Beatty's men was close to the cellar door, heard what was going on and got a lone-wolf idea of his own. He might easily have slipped downstairs in the darkness, picked up the map while the rest of us were fighting, and then injuned away. Whoever files the Discovery Claim is going to be a rich man."

Boothill's close-set eyes narrowed. "That's hogwash!" he snapped. "No man would be fool enough to cross

Beatty. The minute the fellow filed on the Mother Lode, Beatty would be wise, and that man would be a gone gosling!"

Kent shrugged and held his tongue; a few minutes later Beatty came bustling into the office. Boothill shot an inquisitive glance at his boss, but Beatty shook his head.

"Some of the boys are still looking," Beatty said. "But it isn't in the cellar; I'm sure of that." He eyed Kent and Placer malevolently. "One of you two got it; you must have!" he charged. "Or—" A sudden suspicion stiffened him. "Maybe you know something about this, Boothill."



As Placer's shovel crashed against the lantern, Kent leaped for Beatty's gun.

Boothill scowled. "Why don't you search me, boss?"

Beatty gnawed at his under lip. "No, it's one of this pair. It don't make sense, but they must have got away with it somehow." He fell to pacing, massaging his ponderous jaw the while, and then he stopped in midstride, his lips drawing tight. "We'll just have to *make* you talk," he said. "We've got ways to loosen your tongues. Do you want it the hard way, or are you going to spill the truth?"

A cold sweat broke over Kent. He had his share of nerve; he'd proved that since he'd come to Hungry Gulch, but he remembered the Apache tricks that had been used upon Colorado Callishaw, and the picture was far from pleasant.

"If you've got to do any torturing, Beatty, for Pete's sake work on me," Kent said. "Placer's an old man; he couldn't stand much of it."

"So?" drawled Beatty. "If you want to protect your pardner, all you've got to do is tell me where the map's gone, Callishaw."

"I don't know!" Kent said curtly. "And if I did know, I wouldn't tell you!"

"Then we'll have to take that stubbornness out of you," Beatty said. "Boothill, fetch a rope to tie 'em up. And you'd better put the shutter on yonder window. We don't want the whole gulch to hear these two holering."

Downstairs the band was beating out music, the sound percolating upward into this remote room, and Kent knew that no roistering miner

would guess what was going on overhead. Beatty brought his own gun to hip level, and Boothill moved toward the door, but as he opened it, Simms came running along the hall. The bearded man had the dirt of the cellar upon his knees, and Beatty glanced at him eagerly.

"You found it?" Beatty demanded.

Simms shook his bandaged head. "Some of the boys are still looking," he said. "But I come to tell you that Guy Lathrop's downstairs, him and a couple of his Vigilance Committee. They want to see you, boss."

"Lathrop? What the devil fetched him here?"

"Placer McLane," replied Simms. "All Lathrop told me was that he wanted to see you about Placer McLane."

This made no sense to Kent; Placer had kept his identity a secret in the gulch, but some of the tension ran out of Kent at the news, and McLane's face broke into a broad grin.

"Go ahead; ask the Vigilantes up, Beatty," Placer jeered. "Lathrop's never been able to kick your legs out from under you; you've been too smart for him. But I guess this spoils your little game tonight."

Beatty at bay was a man wild with fury, his face contorting, but only for an instant. Then he fell into deep thought, and he seemed to be busy at pursuing an idea. When he smiled there was something about that smile that told Kent Beatty had found a way to twist this unexpected new development to his own advantage.

"How would you two like to kick out your lives at the end of a Vigi-

lante hang rope?" Beatty asked. "That will be easier than what you'd have got from me if Lathrop hadn't showed up, but it still isn't a man's way to die. So I'm giving you this one last chance. Tell me where the map is—or take the consequences."

"Get this straight, Beatty." Kent said. "We can't tell you what we don't know!"

"So that's your answer?" Beatty turned to Simms with a grand flourish. "Tell Mr. Lathrop and his friends to come up. Tell them I have a couple hombres who should be of interest to them—the notorious road agent, Redmask, and his accomplice, Placer McLane. The Vigilantes have been spoiling to hang somebody for a long time. I think I've got some hemp fodder for them!"

IV

At first Kent only stared, not quite understanding, for this reference to Redmask carried no meaning for him—until he remembered Lois McLane mentioning a lone road agent who wore a fancy red mask, a man who stopped the treasure coaches that ran out of the gulch. Amazed, he said: "Do you really think you can pin that on me, Beatty?"

Boothill stirred uneasily. "A few shotgun guards have died," he said. "The gulch gets pretty wild whenever Redmask's name comes up. Maybe we're the ones that'll get stung if we go kicking over a hornet's nest like that, boss!"

"Don't be a fool!" Beatty snapped. "Lathrop knows something; other-

wise why should he be here asking for McLane? We can't kill these two—not with Lathrop downstairs. But no matter what they tell him, we've got to spin a wilder yarn and make it stick. Hey, Simms; just a minute!"

Simms had already started down the hall; Beatty went after him, overtook the bearded man and whispered a few words. Simms went on downstairs after that; a few minutes later Lathrop and his Vigilantes mounted to the office alone. Lathrop was a little man, his face browned by wind and weather; and the two who were with him were of a pattern, grim, silent men who kept their hands deeply buried in their coat pockets.

Smiling, Beatty said: "I've got to apologize, Lathrop. I always thought your Vigilance Committee was something of a joke, but it looks like you've really been on the job. So you're here to arrest McLane."

Lathrop showed surprise. "What the devil are you talking about, Beatty? I never even knew McLane was back in the gulch until tonight. Then his girl come and said that her father, the swamper at the Pleasure Palace, was Placer McLane with his whiskers shaved off. She was mighty worried. Placer always knocked off work about sundown, she said, just before the dancing started here. But Placer hadn't come home tonight, and the girl seemed to think he was in trouble. She kept at me till I promised to come and see what was keeping him."

Beatty pretended surprise, making a great show of it. "Somebody's

trying to pull the wool over your eyes, Lathrop," he said. "See this young feller, here? He's Redmask, and he's been working in cahoots with McLane. Placer took a job at the Palace to keep an ear to the ground; you hear all the gossip of the gulch in this place. Whenever McLane heard of a treasure coach going out, he got word to his pardner, and this young feller did the rest."

Placer swore a mighty oath, but before he could burst into a torrent of words, Kent's fingers closed on his arm.

"Let 'em do their talking," Kent urged. "I want to hear all of it, before I make my say."

Lathrop regarded Kent with interest. "You must be the jigger the whole gulch is talking about," he decided. "The fellow who busted up Boothill's checking booth. Stranger here, ain't you?"

"Yes and no," Beatty said, before Kent could answer. "Take a long look at him, Lathrop. He's Colorado Callishaw's kid. He admitted that, after I'd noticed the resemblance to his dad. Colorado and Placer were partners in the old days, remember. And now the kid and Placer are teamed up—but not in the mining game. This kid is Redmask."

Lathrop looked skeptical. "You got proof, Beatty?"

"Young Callishaw rode in today, big and cocky, and when Boothill tried to stop him, he tangled with Boothill. Maybe that was a play to impress me. Anyway, he had the nerve to come right up here and try to make a deal with me.

"You know the talk of the gulch,

Lathrop; some folks think I've mixed into a few crooked deals. Likely McLane had told the kid about my rep, and Callishaw believed this road agenting could be made into a big-paying proposition if he had help. He suggested that him and me team up."

Glib of tongue, Beatty was telling it convincingly, and Kent, listening, had to admire the way the man built his monument of lies on a slight foundation of truth. He, Kent, *had* ridden into the gulch and clashed with Boothill, and he *had* come to Beatty and tried to palm himself off as a hard-case customer. And Lathrop was beginning to be impressed, no doubt of that, though he said dryly:

"Of course you weren't interested in no such proposition, Beatty?"

"I strung him along," Beatty continued, not heeding the thrust. "I pretended I didn't believe any part of his talk, just to see how much he'd tell. That's the trouble with these fuzz-faced badmen; they're young enough to have the strength and nerve for the job, but no matter how smart they are, they've got to let everybody know they're tough, so they go shooting off their faces.

"It was that way with Callishaw," he continued. "The minute I scoffed, he spilled everything. Told me his inside man worked right here in my place. Had me send for Placer to prove it. Yeah, he's Redmask, all right, and Placer's his pard. I wonder how much McLane's girl knew; she certainly got jumpy fast when Placer didn't show home on time."

"We'll leave the girl out of it," Lathrop said and eyed Kent. "I'd like to hear your side of this, Callishaw. I knew your father, boy. I find it hard to believe that his cub would be a back-shooting road agent."

"Ye're confounded right he ain't!" Placer snorted, but Kent's hand tightened on the old prospector's arm again.

"I could spin a pretty wild yarn myself, Lathrop," Kent said. "The point is, would you believe it? It's just my word against Beatty's."

"I know Beatty from away back," Lathrop said bluntly. "I think he's been behind everything crooked in Hungry Gulch, and he knows how he stands with me. But I'm not judge, jury and executioner hereabouts; I'm only a mucker who's tried to organize a little real law in this camp. We call a jury to do the final deciding. It would be up to that jury to weigh your story against Beatty's and figure out which was the windy."

"Then," said Kent, "I'd like to stand trial."

Anger colored Beatty's face. "You've faced your cards, Lathrop," he snapped. "You've told me what you think of me, and that's my thanks for putting Redmask in your hands. Very well, mister; I'm sending one of my men along with your Vigilantes to make sure this pair really gets locked up. It would be too bad if they accidentally slipped away from you between here and a prison cabin."

"Save the oration, Beatty," Lathrop said wearily. "Maybe this hom-

bre is Redmask; I'm not saying he isn't. Maybe he did come here and make you a proposition; there's an old saying about birds of a feather. But if that's true, I'm betting you threw him to the wolves because I showed up here when I wasn't expected. He'll be tried, Beatty—tomorrow. You'll get your chance to make your charge stick. And if he's Redmask, he'll hang, and so will Placer McLane."

"Go along with them, Boothill," ordered Beatty. "I still don't trust these Vigilantes."

The two men who had accompanied Lathrop, silent listeners all along, produced pistols from their coat pockets, and Kent and Placer were led from the office, Boothill trailing behind.

"You might have a look at Callishaw's horse and gear," Beatty called after them. "Since there's only one livery stable in the camp, the cayuse shouldn't be hard to find."

Lathrop nodded and the two prisoners were taken downstairs. Skirting the crowded dance floor, they came out into the jostling street where miners stared at the little group in undisguised surprise. But Lathrop answered none of the questions people put to him.

A small, empty cabin on the outskirts of the camp was the prison. Its door was held by a padlock which Lathrop unsnapped, and Kent and Placer were thrust inside.

"You'll be kept here under guard," Lathrop told them. "And you'll have as fair a trial as I can get you. I play no favorites; I'm trying to

bring the law here, and it's got to be a just, impartial law. If you're guilty, Callishaw, I'll take pleasure in pulling on the rope. But just the same, I've got to thank you for one thing. When you wrecked that checking booth, you put guns back into the hands of most of the miners. Some still haven't the nerve to wear them openly, but at least Beatty hasn't got quite the grip on this camp that he had at sunup. Good night."

He was gone then, the door was locked behind them, and Kent fell to pacing the narrow width of the prison cabin.

"Thank God for Lois," he said. "At least if she hadn't sent Lathrop when she did, we'd be in an even worse mess. And I don't think Lathrop will bring any charge against her."

"There's some comfort in that," Placer agreed. "But she can't help us any in court. She could swear on all the Bibles in the world that I had nothing to do with Redmask. But folks would just remember that she was my daughter, and disregard her testimony."

The two turned silent, each busy with his own thoughts, and some time later Placer said: "Who's scratching at the window?"

There was only one window in the cabin, an opening too small for a man to squeeze his shoulders through. Kent crossed to it and swung back the frame. Guy Lathrop stood outside.

"One of my men scouted out your horse at the livery stable, Callishaw," Lathrop said grimly. "He

found these in the saddlebag. I'm wondering what you've got to say about it." He thumbed a match to life with his left hand; in his right he held a red-bearded mask and an empty gold dust poke bearing the stenciled imprint of the Golden Fan mine."

"I see," Kent said and sucked in his breath. He remembered Beatty's whispered talk to Simms in the hallway beyond the office, just before Lathrop had come upstairs, and he remembered that it had been Beatty who'd suggested that his, Kent's, gear be examined.

"That stuff was planted," declared Kent.

"I wish you could prove that," Lathrop said, and all of the friendliness had gone out of his face. "The jury's bound to be impressed by this."

Kent closed the window, most of his assurance gone now. Beatty was framing him with painstaking thoroughness, and Kent began to regret having been so willing to stand trial. True, he had come here hoping for a day in court with Saul Beatty, and he was going to have that day, but, ironically, it was not to be such a day as he had planned. Not with himself as the prosecuted and Beatty as the prosecutor. Kent had wanted it the other way around, and now he wondered if he had let himself into a trap from which there was no escape.

V

On the south slope of Hungry Gulch stood a big building with a bell surmounting it, and the boom-

ing of this bell called the miners to their court at high noon the next day. Escorted by Vigilantes, Kent and Placer were brought here, and Kent, ushered into the building's single room, looked around curiously, for this was a place of justice such as Colorado had often spoken about.

Sunlight streamed through many windows to touch the rough benches and the miners who came crowding onto them; Guy Lathrop and other appointed members of the court were seated in the front of the room, and these officials began picking a jury at once.

"The whole camp must be here," Kent observed as he and Placer were thrust into front-row seats.

"Beatty's got his men scattered through the room," Placer said, after a long look. "Ah, here comes Lois."

The girl came down the aisle and took a seat as close as she could possibly get to her father and Kent. She looked as though she'd had a sleepless night, and Kent, guessing that camp gossip had already told her of the charge against him and Placer, tried to smile reassuringly at her. Beatty was here, too, arrogant and confident.

Lathrop rapped for attention and silence fell over the room.

"Prisoners," he said, "do you want counsel?"

"I've had a little schooling in the law," Kent spoke up. "I'll do our talking."

A slight murmur rose from the crowd, and Kent tried to gauge it for its portent. Most of these miners were reserving their judgment, he supposed, waiting till the evi-

dence was presented. As the man who'd beaten Boothill, he had earned their respect. But the name of Redmask had been pinned upon him, and thus he'd also earned hatred.

"Saul Beatty brought the charge against you, so Beatty will handle the prosecuting," Lathrop said. "But you have the right to challenge the selection of the jury."

"I'm a stranger here," Kent remarked. "I'll leave that up to Placer."

McLane made no protest as the twelve were chosen. "They're all honest enough," he told Kent. "The point is whether they own a rabbit's guts. But they're as good as any other dozen that might have been picked."

Kent watched with quickened interest. This court worked crudely, its proceedings without polish, but he sensed the basic fairness of it all.

Saul Beatty came first to the stand, and he was sworn in, proceeded to tell the same story he'd told Lathrop the night before—the glib account of how Kent had come to him and admitted being Redmask and proposed an alliance. Beatty pointed out the relationship between the Callishaws and the McLanes, offering this as further proof that Placer had been Kent's accomplice.

When the big man finally sat down, one of the Vigilantes took the witness stand.

"Tell the court what you found in Callishaw's saddlebag," Lathrop ordered.

The beaded mask was produced, and the poke with the Golden Fan's

imprint, and when these exhibits were raised to view, another murmur came from the court, an angry murmur. Someone yelled: "Take the dirty sons out and hang 'em!"

It might have been one of Beatty's men who'd shouted; or it might have been an honest miner, swayed by sight of what seemed tangible proof of Kent's guilt. Kent didn't know, but the feeling of being trapped was strong upon him.

Beatty smiled toward the jury. "Upon this evidence, I rest my case," he said. "Doubtless young Callishaw will deny ownership of the mask that damns him. I wouldn't expect him to do otherwise. But I'm sure, gentlemen, that justice will be done."

Now it was Kent's moment, and he came to his feet and turned to the jury, looking at the twelve and framing his words. This was different than speaking to the twelve stones on the C-Bar-C, and because it was different, he wondered if all the talk in the world would avail him anything. These were men, flesh and blood, and they were under Beatty's sway because they were human and afraid. Yet the spark of decency and courage was doubtless in them, and there might be words that could fan it to flame.

Picking the beaded mask from Lathrop's table, Kent held it up to his eyes. "Gentlemen of the jury," he said. "Mr. Beatty has told you that I'll deny ownership of this mask; but he was mistaken. It is my mask. But I'm glad to be rid of it; it never fit me worth a hoot. See? The eyeholes are cut for a man whose eyes are close-set.

Like—" He looked around speculatively, and his finger suddenly stabbed in the direction of Boothill, who sat near Beatty. "Like our friend Boothill, yonder."

What had started to be another angry murmur turned into a roar of laughter. Kent knew he had won a measure of sympathy for himself, and he pressed his advantage.

"I'm not going to try denying the evidence that has been piled against me," he went on. "That would merely be a matter of my word against Beatty's. But I'm going to bring a counter-charge—right here and now! I charge Saul Beatty with torturing my father, Colorado Callishaw, four years ago, and with threatening to torture me and Placer McLane in the same fashion—and for the same reason—last night."

"It ain't Beatty that's on trial!" somebody thundered from the benches, and Kent, glimpsing the man, recognized him as one of those who'd come running into the Pleasure Palace's cellar the night before to help subdue him and Placer.

"My father came to this gulch four years ago," Kent went on. "He came hoping to find color, and he did—the Mother Lode!" He paused, waiting for the astonished murmur to subside. "He might have done as any other miner would have done," Kent said. "He might have filed a Discovery Claim, then let the rest of you stake out next to him, as is the custom. He might have made himself rich, and some of the rest of you might have profited, too. But before he got around to filing, he

stopped in at Saul Beatty's old Hurdy-Gurdy House."

His voice commanding attention, he told the story that Colorado Callishaw had told to him, spoke of the four years of exile Colorado had since spent on his Powderhorn ranch, living always with the fear that Saul Beatty might find his hiding place. He told of the coming of Grady and Hassayampa, the pair who'd been sent by Beatty, and he spoke of his own trip to Hungry Gulch and of the events that had ensued. He spun his yarn to its fullness, giving every detail, and the courtroom turned silent, straining to listen.

"... And that's how I come to be in Beatty's office when Lathrop arrived last night," Kent concluded. "And that's why Placer was there. Lois McLane had sent the Vigilantes, and she had good reason for fear when her father didn't return home on time. She knew what a dangerous piece of work he'd been trying to do. She knew he was in the Pleasure Palace to find the map of the Mother Lode—the map that rightfully belongs to Colorado Callishaw."

Kent dropped his hands to his sides, his speech finished, and he knew he'd impressed this crowded courtroom, no doubt of that. But Beatty was on his feet again, all smiles.

"An entertaining story, gentlemen—a very entertaining story," Beatty said mockingly. "So it's me that should be on trial, not this young rogue! But I'll point out a slight flaw in the brilliant picture he's

painted. Where is this fabulous Mother Lode that men might have shared if Colorado Callishaw had filed upon it? Where is this map that Placer McLane was trying to recover? In fact, where is one single scrap of evidence to substantiate all this wild hogwash?"

"Sure, where is the map?" Boot-hill spoke up. "Callishaw tells it that the map disappeared after a wild fight in the cellar. Shucks, there never was no map."

"I suggest," said Beatty, "that a Vigilante delegation go search my Pleasure Palace from roof to cellar. Find that map, and I'm willing to stand trial. Do you suppose I'd be wasting my time here, if I had such a map? I'd be out driving claim stakes and posting a notice, you can bet! Don't you see, gentlemen? Callishaw's only hoping to cloud the issue. But we're here to see that Redmask gets the hanging he needs!"

Kent was beaten then, and he knew it. He hadn't hoped to be able to prove that he wasn't Redmask; he'd only hoped that the telling of the whole truth might convince the jury of his real purpose in coming to Hungry Gulch. But he knew now how his story must have sounded in the ears of others—a wild tale with no shred of proof to back it.

Then suddenly Lois McLane was on her feet, her hand darting into her pocket, and she held a paper aloft. "Here's the map of the Mother Lode!" she cried. "If it's proof you want, I've got it. Take a look!"

Lathrop, too, was on his feet.

"Where did you get that?" he demanded.

"I told you last night that I was worried about my father," she said. "Also I was worried about Kent, since he'd gone to the Pleasure Palace. When dad didn't return at his usual time, I slipped into the Palace. It was at the supper hour, just before the dancing started, and the place was practically deserted then. I came into the hall leading to the cellar because I figured that would be the place to find dad. But I found Saul Beatty hunkering in that hall, so I flattened out against the wall in the darkness and kept quiet.

"When dad dug up the map, just as Kent told you, Kent made his play, but Beatty slipped down the steps and jammed a gun in Kent's ribs. The map had fallen to the bottom of the steps. I came tiptoeing behind Beatty, and I saw it just before dad smashed out the lantern. So I groped down the steps while the others were busy fighting, and I got the map and slipped out again. I couldn't do anything to help dad and Kent, but at least I was able to save the map."

"Why didn't you tell me this last night, child?" Lathrop asked.

"I thought it best to keep it secret that I had the map. Beatty would have been after me if the news had leaked out, and I wasn't sure how much real protection the Vigilantes could give me against him. But, at the same time, I was mighty worried about dad and Kent—and for good reason, since I'd left them fighting

Beatty and Boothill. So I came to you and talked you into going to the Palace to see about dad. I never meant to tell anyone I had the map, so long as Beatty was kingpin in Hungry Gulch. But if you've got to have evidence to believe Kent's story—here it is!"

"This certainly puts a different face on matters," Lathrop said. "Let's see the map."

That was when Beatty moved. For four years he'd wanted such a map; he'd tortured one man for the location of the Mother Lode; he'd threatened torture to two others, and now the map was within his reach. He lunged straight toward Lois, wrested the map from her, and then he careened toward the aisle.

"Cover me, boys!" he shouted to his men. "This will make us all rich!"

Chaos ruled the courtroom; men came to their feet and began battling other men, but since miners were recklessly hurling themselves at Beatty's men, the sight sent a thrill through Kent. These miners had stood in awe of Saul Beatty's might; now they were challenging that might, for Beatty at long last had been exposed for what he was, and the truth had been too strong for the stomachs of Hungry Gulch.

Guns began banging; Kent saw Simms rear up and then go down with a bullet through him, and Beatty, the aisle blocked by fighting men, ran toward a window and went through it head first, carrying away the pane and part of the sash.

Snatching a gun from the nearest holster, Kent went after him. Boothill rose to block his way, snapping a shot, and Kent, swerving, felt that bullet pluck at his shirt. He fired, and Boothill, his eyes rolling upward, crashed to the floor dead, overturning a bench as he went down.

Shouldering a lane for himself, Kent got to the window Beatty had broken, and he went through the window and lighted running. Ahead of him, Beatty was hurrying down the slope into the camp, and Kent thumbed a quick shot. Turning, Beatty triggered, then tripped over a stone and went sprawling. He fired as he rolled, and he got to his feet again, but Kent, making a stand, sighted calmly, and the kingpin of Hungry Gulch went down, clutching his chest.

Beatty was dead when Kent reached him, and for a long time Kent stood staring down upon him, and he said aloud, to nobody: "Dad trained me for book law and gun law. He knew that if one didn't work, the other would. And he was right—dead right."

Presently miners came running to form a vociferous ring around Kent, and Guy Lathrop plucked at his elbow.

"We've drawn the fangs of all of Beatty's men who are still alive," Lathrop said. "We were able to give them a real fight, thanks to your wrecking that checking booth yesterday. One of the boys tried that beaded mask on Boothill just now, and it was sure made for those close-set eyes of his. I reckon we've seen

the last of Redmask, but the miners' court has a heap of work cut out for it today."

Lois and Placer McLane were elbowed through the crowd, and it was to them that Kent turned. . . .

It was hours later when Kent stood on a night-shrouded slope of Hungry Gulch with Lois at his side. Placer McLane had been with them, but the little man knew when three made one too many, and he was gone now, leaving the boy and girl alone.

"A great day for the gulch," Kent observed after a long silence. "Beatty's dead, so is Boothill and Simms, and the rest have been tried and hanged or banished."

"And you're a very rich man," reminded Lois. "You can work the Mother Lode now."

"Rich?" Kent said. "We all are. Colorado figures that Placer's his partner on that deal."

His mind turned to the lonely man in the Powderhorn whose exile was ended, and he remembered talk of a doctor, a specialist who could make Colorado's legs useful again, now that there'd be money to pay for an operation.

Looking at Placer McLane's daughter, Kent wondered how she'd like dividing her time between a cattle ranch in the Powderhorn and a claim in Hungry Gulch. And because there was something in her eyes that told him she would follow, unquestioningly, wherever his trail took him, he said: "Yes, darling, I'm a very, very rich man!"



For which of the White Horse's tin horns did those seven spade aces spell a sinister boothill message?

DEATH CARD

by HAPSBURG LIEBE

THERE was gold in the rough country just west of town. Cattle ranches lay in all other directions. It meant a great deal of loose money, which in turn meant gamblers. Most of these hung out in Tom Henley's big White Horse Saloon. The bolder of the miners and cowboys clashed frequently with the card sharks. The sheriff job was no picnic here.

Henley had developed a nose for trouble. Every night or so he tipped me off in time to prevent a shooting in the Wild Horse. Early one night he slipped to my office with this announcement:

"Cowboy stranger who don't give any name, never drinks, sits at a wall table with his hat pulled down and watches. Sure is up to something.

Suggest you look him over, sheriff."

Five minutes afterward I stepped into the White Horse to find the usual noisy crowd lining the bar and ringing the small tables. I saw no strange cowboy, so I ambled back to where Ashby Griffin, the gambler, sat playing stud with a miner. Griffin was a big man and not fat. His eyes were shifty, but plenty keen. He always wore black except for a white shirt.

Suddenly Griffin began swearing and spread the cards face upward before him. "Where the devil is the spade ace?" he spat at the miner.

"Search me." The miner shrugged. "Them are yore cards, not mine."

"I just bought 'em," Griffin muttered. He half turned in his chair. "Hey, Tom, bring me a deck!"

Henley hurried back with it. Griffin ripped the cover off and deftly fanned the cards out on the table. There was no spade ace among these, either.

"Now what in thunder!" Griffin snapped. He was a little pale, which seemed odd, for his nerve had made him famous—or infamous—here in the White Horse.

Henley was as much puzzled as anybody else. He brought five more decks of cards, all he had unpacked. I took it on myself to examine the seals. They showed no sign of having been broken. Yet there was no ace of spades in any of the five decks!

The strange cowboy had joined the bunch of men gathered at Griffin's table. Tall, lean as a wolf, he was, with cold blue eyes and reddish-brown hair that the sun had burned to a coppery hue. He carried a heavy new six-gun with buckhorn handles, holstered on the left for a cross-body draw.

Beside him stood Iverson Dew, another top-notch gambler. "Seven black aces loose and wild," murmured Dew. "Sure is funny business, sheriff!"

He glanced meaningly at Griffin as he said that. Griffin sprang up from his chair facing Dew. These men had no truck with each other; professional jealousy, maybe. Dew also was a big man and a bad one, but he didn't wear the gambler black. The two weren't a thousand miles from gun work when I stepped in between them.

"It's not funny to me," Griffin said.

He played cards no more that night.

Cornering the busy Tom Henley at his cash register, I asked if he was still in the dark as to the missing aces. He said he was, and that he'd never heard of such a thing before. But he had a sort of halfway hunch, he said, and he cut an eye over to the cowboy stranger, who was sitting again with his back to a wall, broad hat drawn low in front, watching.

I went to the cowboy and asked bluntly: "What's your name and where you from?"

He looked up at me. "I'm from a good many places, lawman," he drawled. "Tell you who I am if you'll give me your word that you won't tell anybody else."

"I'll keep the name to myself," I said, "for just as long as it doesn't conflict with my job."

He got to his feet and said in a low voice: "Rame Hale is the name." Then he turned and walked to the street entrance, through it, and disappeared in the darkness outside.

The man was smart, and he was dangerous, I figured. And yet, somehow I liked his style.

The White Horse was quiet now, quiet, that is, for the White Horse, so I went back to my office in the front fourth of the squat jail building. In a few minutes Ashby Griffin came running in. He was out of breath and sheet-white.

"Look, sheriff," he panted. "In my coat pocket. Can you beat that?" He showed me a playing card, an ace of spades.

"Ash," I said, "maybe somebody

you've cheated is playing a joke on you."

"Joke?" Griffin snarled the word. "You don't know what you're talking about. The ace of spades is the *death card!*"

There it was. No gentry is quite as superstitious as the gambling gentry.

"Look, Ash," I said, laughing. "A dozen men were close enough to you, just after you'd wound up the stud game with the miner, to drop that card into your pocket without being seen. It's just a joke. Use your head, man."

"But what about Tom Henley having seven card decks with no spade ace in them?" the gambler asked.

That, of course, was a poser. I'd just told Griffin to use his head. Now I tried hard to use mine. It occurred to me that Ashby Griffin feared *somebody* in connection with the death card, so-called. All these slicksters had a past.

"There's a strange cowpoke in town, Ash, as you must have noticed," I said. "Have you ever seen him before?"

The black-clad man's eyes, ordinarily shifty, held straight on mine. He said, "I never saw that cowboy before, sheriff," and I was half persuaded to believe him. He continued: "I want you to go to my room with me, and go in first and light the lamp and make sure everything's all right. Will you?"

His armpit-holstered .38 was fully loaded and in good order. He must have known this. Yet he examined the weapon now.

Tom Henley had two long strings of furnished rooms in the upstairs of his saloon building. Griffin's quarters were in the left front corner. The two of us were threading the hilarious saloon crowd, heading for the stairs at the back, when Iverson Dew bobbed up like a sort of giant jack-in-a-box and started hooting:

"Look at him, will you? Ash there, white as his shirt. Look at him! Ha, ha! What's the matter, Ash? Spooks after you?"

Dew had been drinking and he always became snake-mean in his cups. The tones of his voice had been more nettling, even, than the words. Ash Griffin was beside himself anyway. I caught Ash's gun arm, which was the size of a four-by-four timber and almost as hard, and pulled my own iron fast. I figure I headed off a killing.

"Look, Dew," I said. "This is the second time tonight you've jumped Ash Griffin. The first time you hinted that Ash had stolen those aces—for crooked work later, of course—and there was nothing to warrant it. A little more of that stuff, and you'll be paid for, no matter what happens to you. Get me?"

Dew's heavy figure straightened. He turned cold sober. His response was so quick that I thought he might be trying to pull wool over my eyes.

"All right, sheriff," he said. "I'm sorry."

I pushed Griffin on, toward the stairway.

The upstairs hall was black dark. When we came to the left front-room door, I unlocked it with a key that Griffin had given me, opened it, went

in and lighted a small oil lamp on the dresser. Ash followed me, closing the door. At once he saw something that I'd missed.

"There!" he gasped, pointing. "And my room was locked!"

Lying on the floor near the open front window there was another ace of spades!

"Not much of a trick to toss it through the window from the sidewalk below," I declared. "Don't be an old woman, Ash. Go to bed and forget about it."

He pulled the shades full down over both windows, and when I left a moment later, closed and locked the door behind me.



Although I'd laughed at Ashby Griffin, I now felt plumb sure that this spade-ace business was not a joke but something sinister. The strange cowboy, Rame Hale, didn't seem to fit in with sinister things. And yet, it looked to me like there just had to be a connection.

The night was moving along and hilarity in the White Horse was growing. With Henley and his bartenders counted out, only two men there were not mixing into it. One of the two was Hale, still sitting against a wall. The other was Iverson Dew, standing at the rear end of the long bar and drinking—a bottle of red pop!

Dew beckoned me over. "Funny thing just happened, sheriff," he told me. "Found this in my coat pocket."

It was a spade ace, the third of the seven that were missing.

"Think I've heard that called the death card," I remarked.

Dew grinned. "Right. Made me uneasy for a minute. But, shucks, I'll die when my time comes, and not before. Say, how do you reckon the aces got out of the decks and no seals broken?"

"It can be figured," I said, and began talking about strangers of different kinds. Pretty soon I was satisfied that Iverson Dew didn't know Rame Hale from Adam's off ox, as the old saying goes.

Not long afterward I walked up to Hale. He got out of his chair, pushed his big hat back on his coppery thatch and leveled his cold blue eyes at me defiantly, like a weapon.

"Hale, you were watching Iverson Dew and me, over there at the bar, like a fish hawk watching a trout," I said bluntly. "You saw Dew show me a spade ace that he'd found in his coat pocket, and it interested you considerably. Maybe you'd better tell me about this."

"As matters are, sheriff, you've got no reason to throw me into your jail, have you?"

"No," I said.

Hale looked relieved. He dropped back into his chair. I drew a chair up near his and sat down.

"You were smart with the aces, Hale," I told him. "You bought the seven decks from a day barman, so neither Henley nor any night barman

knew anything about it. You wet the seals and took 'em off, took the spade aces out, stuck the seals on again and returned the decks. Could hardly have been any other way."

He made no denial. Best not to rush him, I decided. We sat there with no more talk between us, for a good while, just watching the boisterous crowd. Then a cowboy-miner argument had to be put down. When the job was finished, Rame Hale had disappeared.

Half an hour later he was back in his wall chair. His blue eyes twinkled as I resumed my chair beside him, but they were still cold and watchful.

"Look, cowboy," I said. "The gamblers, Dew and Griffin, aren't a bit too good to shoot you in the back. You'd better tell me things and have the law with you."

"Dew wasn't afraid, but Griffin looked like he'd seen a ghost. *And maybe he had,*" Hale said mysteriously.

After a minute or so, he went on: "I don't figure that it can hurt anything to tell you, sheriff, for I've broken no law. I've been huntin' one particular gambler, a big man, big like Dew and Griffin, and that's all the description I had to go on; they change their names, as you know. The one I've been huntin', he had good reason never to forget the ace o' spades. I tried the trick on lots o' gamblers. But only Ashby Griffin was hard hit. Oh, yeah, he's superstitious. They all are. But that was only part of it.

"Well, I had four black aces left. I snuck outside, little while ago, took

a tall horse from the hitch rail and stood on the saddle under Griffin's window, pushed the shade in easy and tossed the four aces to his bed. He had a quart bottle in his face and didn't see me. I never wanted to kill him so bad. But it would've spoiled any chance I might have of gettin' the sixteen thousand dollars back!"

I stared at him. "Sixteen thousand dollars? Cowboy, you're going too fast for me. What—"

There was an interruption that hushed me up. In fact, it hushed up the whole White Horse crowd.

Ashby Griffin was not merely drunk. He was boiling, crazy drunk. Yet he did not stagger. Bareheaded and with his hair tousled, eyes red and wild and popping, he had appeared a little above the middle of the stairs, waving his double-action .38 gun and yelling:

"You think you got me, don't you? You think you got me!"

His fast shifting gaze told me that he wasn't addressing any one man of those below. Maybe he was talking to a ghost—in a manner of speaking, that is. It was just in him to kill somebody. Then he spotted Iverson Dew at a table.

"You double-crossing son!" he screamed and fired.

Dew crumpled. I had almost reached the foot of the stairway. It was in my mind to shoot the raving *loco* in a shoulder and disable him. But my foot caught on a chair and it threw me flat. Thinking he had killed Dew, although he'd only creased him, Griffin was now all set to kill me. At that short distance, he

couldn't have missed. He was in the act of squeezing the trigger when a heavier weapon bellowed out, and he dropped, tumbling the rest of the way down the stairs.

I sprang up and whipped around to see who it was that had saved my life. There stood Rame Hale, smiling coldly, with his buckhorn-handled gun smoking. His voice was quiet.

"So I had to kill him after all."

Tom Henley hurried the doctor in to look at Griffin. But it was no use. "Make your peace, friend," was all the doctor said. The big gambler's sheet-white face changed queerly. His dimming eyes filled with something that none of us had ever seen there before. I knelt over him, and he spoke.

"It's the death card, all right. . . . Sheriff, in money belt around my waist . . . seventeen thousand odd

dollars . . . big bills . . . Won most of it from a cattleman . . . in Nueva Mex. . . . His whole ranch was in that last pot, but . . . he had three kings . . . I had a pair of aces . . ."

Griffin fought for breath to continue: "I stole my third ace off the bottom . . . ace of spades, death card. Some tinhorn saw me do it, and told . . . later. . . . Cattleman shot himself. Want you to send this money back . . . to his folks, sheriff. His name was John Hale—" and with that the gambler sank back dead.

A low voice broke the silence and I looked around at Rame Hale.

"John Hale was my brother," he explained. "I figured it was up to me to square things for him."

And he'd done a good job of it, I reckoned—with a black card that spelled Boothill to a tinhorn with a guilty conscience.

THE END

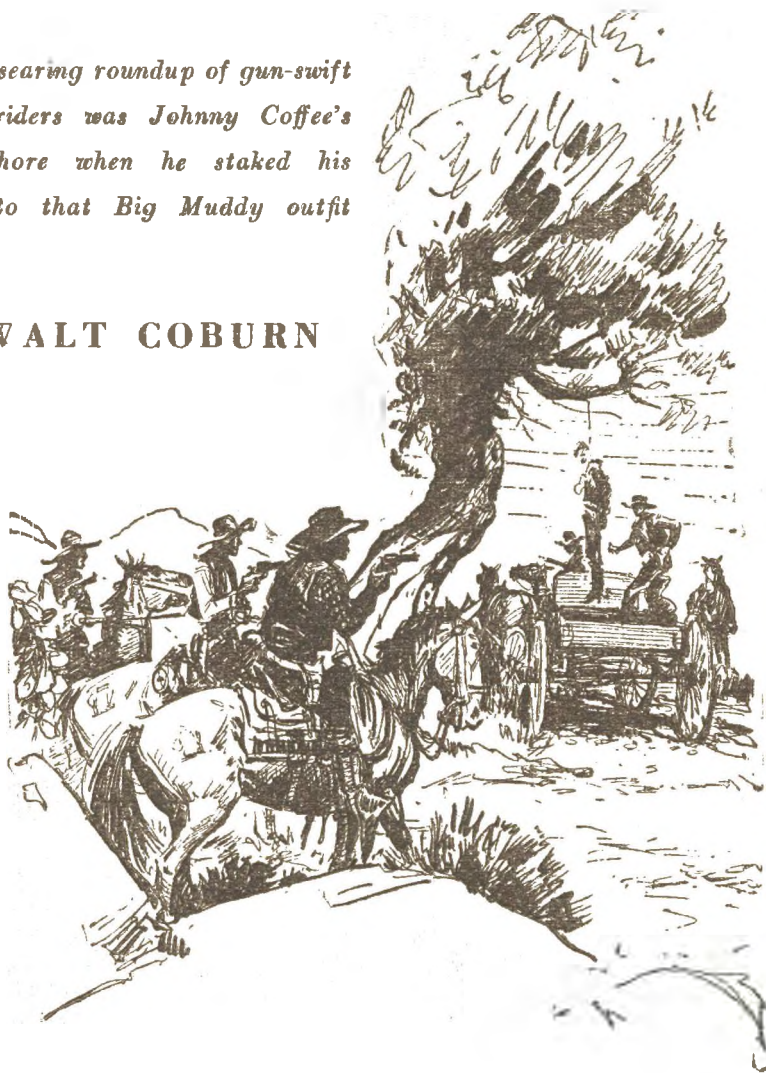


"Put 'em up—hic—an' fight like a man!"

THE COFFEEPOT

A lead-searing roundup of gun-swift night riders was Johnny Coffee's first chore when he staked his claim to that Big Muddy outfit

by **WALT COBURN**



BOILS OVER

I

It was after sundown and getting dusk when Johnny Coffee followed the roundup trail down off the high bench to the gravel crossing on the Big Muddy. His horse spooked and his bed horse pulled back on its hackamore rope.

Yanked out of the middle of some young cowpuncher daydream, Johnny clawed clumsily for his six-shooter. And then when he saw what had spooked his horses, his grip slid away from his gun and his jaw slacked and he stared, unwinking and wide-eyed. Stared at the first hanged man he'd ever seen, or ever hoped to see.

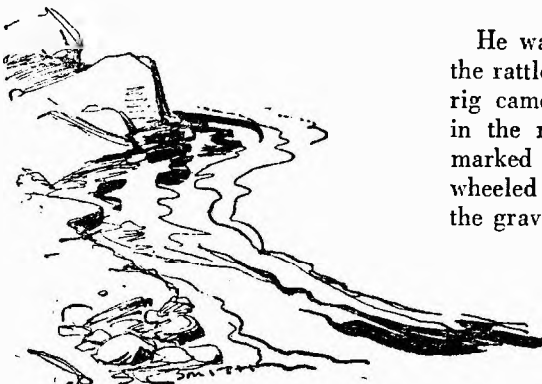
There in the dim twilight the hanged man looked ghostly and unreal, dangling motionless from the low limb of an old cottonwood. His

hat lay on the grassy ground and on his shabby boots were buckled a pair of silver-mounted spurs with silver conchos on the spur straps, and it came into young Johnny Coffee's mind that the man wouldn't ever have any more need for a good hat or a pair of handmade spurs.

Johnny giggered his horse closer and he got a better look at the hanged man's face, discolored and the eyes bulging out. His stomach tightened into a knot and clammy sweat beaded his face. He felt as though he was going to get sick as he kept reining his spooked horse closer. There was a lot of blood dried on the hanged man's faded blue flannel shirt, and pinned to the front of the bloodstained shirt was a piece of torn wrapping paper. Johnny got close enough to make out the words crudely printed there:

LET THIS HORSE THIEF HANG.

He was reading it when he heard the rattle of buckboard wheels. The rig came into sight around a bend in the road and a team of sweat-marked sorrels hauled a yellow-wheeled buckboard down the slant to the gravel crossing. The driver was



a woman and she let the team drink out in the deepest part of the creek. Then she tightened the lines with a buckskin-gloved hand, clucking softly and the sorrels splashed ashore.

Johnny Coffee stared at her. She was a handsome woman with gray-ing copper-colored hair and ivory-tinted skin. Her eyes were dark and black-fringed, and her eyebrows were just a shade heavy for a woman. She wore a dark-green corduroy riding habit, tan boots and a man's Stetson. There was a sawed-off shotgun across her lap.

Kicking on the brake, the woman stared hard at the young cowpuncher. Johnny's face, with a week's growth of black whiskers and a powdering of dust, flushed. He grinned uneasily under the woman's hard black-eyed scrutiny and pulled the hat from his thick, sweat-matted wiry black hair. His blue-gray eyes stared back without flinching.

"Who are you?" The woman's voice was low-pitched, husky. One buckskin-gloved hand gripped the sawed-off shotgun. "What are you doing here?"

"I just rode up"—Johnny nodded at the hanged man—"on this!"

"Stranger, no?"

"Yes, ma'am. Texas." Pride crept into his voice and he straightened a little in his saddle.

"Another Texan." Bitterness tainted her husky voice. "Another gun-slinger Texan. . . . I shouldn't have said that. There must be some Texans who are men and not killers. You look too young for that sort of

work. . . . You'd better ride on to town before somebody finds you here. Because I'm cutting down that hanged man and taking his murdered body to town for decent Christian burial."

"I'd be proud to help you, ma'am. It ain't a job for a lady."

The woman shook her head. "Thank you, young man. You're a stranger. Otherwise you'd hesitate before you offered that kind of help. There wasn't one man in the cow town of Big Muddy who would come with me."

"What kind of men you got there at town?"

"Cowards! They do their night riding under the name of Vigilantes. You're looking at a sample of their work. They've got orders to let this murdered cowboy hang here. They're afraid to go against those orders. When Sam Coffee cracks the whip, they cringe like yellow curs. Sam Coffee is the boss of the Vigilantes. He owns the big Coffee-pot outfit and he claims a lot more range beyond his boundaries. Have you ever heard of Sam Coffee?"

"Yes, ma'am." Some of the healthy color was drained now from Johnny Coffee's tanned face.

"Big Sam Coffee," said the woman, "is a cold-blooded murderer."

Johnny licked his sun-cracked lips. His eyes slid away from the woman's hard black stare. And he looked at the hanged man.

"I'll help you cut that fellow down," he said.

It wasn't what he'd started to say, at all. He'd wanted to speak up in hot defense of his older brother Sam.

It was more than a dozen years now since Sam had gone up the Chisholm Trail with the Coffeepot trail herd, riding the point with their father, Old Man John Coffee. Ten-year-old Johnny had been left behind with his mother on the old Coffeepot ranch on the Pecos.

Neither Old Man John nor his older son Sam had ever returned to Texas. John Coffee had died. Sam had stayed in Montana to run the outfit where they'd located on the Big Muddy.

Then a year ago Johnny's invalid mother had died. He'd sold the Texas outfit. And now he'd come north to throw in with Sam. Sam had no notion Johnny was coming here to Montana. Johnny had aimed to surprise him.

All the long way up from Texas young Johnny had anticipated that surprise. He'd dreamed it a thousand times. How he'd ride up, a grown man now. No longer a skinny, cow-hocked button. A cowhand wherever you put him. Sam wouldn't know him. He'd pass himself off for another grubline rider.

"How's chances for a job with your Coffeepot outfit?" he'd tackle Sam for work.

Then in a week or two or maybe a month he'd draw his time.

"Just make the check out to Johnny Coffee," he'd say. And Sam's eyes would bulge out like a toad-frog's.

So much for that. His dreams had hit a snag. And it looked like a mighty ugly snag, if a man could believe this lady.

So, "I'll help you cut that feller

down," was the best he could do right now. The sign wasn't right for declaring himself.

"If Big Sam Coffee or his straw boss Mitch or any of those Coffeepot killers catch you at it," warned the woman, "you'll stretch a hanging rope. That's the penalty."

"I'll risk it," said Johnny Coffee quietly.

II

The woman flashed him a quick smile. Her teeth were very white. She looked younger when she smiled because the bitter lines etched in her ivory skin at the corners of her red mouth, were erased.

"What's your name, cowboy?"

"Johnny . . . Just Johnny. If you kin coax that team in under that tree limb—"

"I'm Ramona McFadden," said the woman. "The Horseshoe outfit on the Little Muddy. Big Sam Coffee and his night-riding Vigilantes made me a widow when they murdered my husband."

She nodded at the hanged man. "That's Whitey Wills, my wagon boss and ranch ramrod."

Then she swung the team around and coaxed them with soft words and almost caressing touches of a raw-hide buggy whip, and braked to a halt underneath the hanged man.

Johnny swung from his saddle and onto the flat buckboard. Untying the tarp-covered bedroll, he spread it out on the floor of the buckboard and, cutting the taut rope with his jackknife blade, lowered the hanged man down onto the bed. He had to

fight back the waves of nausea that kept sweeping over him while he loosened the hangman knot and cut the rope noose that was sunk deep in the dead man's swollen neck. He was covering the dead man with the bed tarp when three men rode up out of the willow thicket that fringed both sides of the Big Muddy.

They had guns in their hands, and though it was twelve years since Johnny had seen "Mitch" Mitchell, one-time Coffeepot ramrod of the Pecos spread, he recognized the lanky cowhand at once.

Mitch was a man you couldn't forget. He stood six feet four without his boots on. His hair and drooping mustache were a dirty gray color and his big nose had been broken and badly set so that it was crooked. The heavy drooping mustache hid the cruel line of his thin-lipped mouth.

"What in blazes you think you're doin' here?" he rasped.

Three guns covered Johnny Coffee as he jumped down from the end of the buckboard and stood there on widespread legs. He was a little under medium height and had the wide shoulders and closely knit build and lean flanks of an athlete. His legs were slightly saddle-bowed. Blunt-jawed, short-nosed, blocky, he looked shorter than he really was. His faint grin was flat-lipped. The play called for a strong bluff and he made it boldly.

Johnny had taken that sinister warning pinned to the hanged man's shirt and shoved it into the pocket of his old brush-scarred chaps. He

pulled it out now, unfolded it with steady hands.

"I'm keepin' this," he said flatly, "till whoever wrote it, takes it off my dead carcass. I'm the new Horseshoe hired hand. Me'n my boss are takin' Whitey Wills to town to give him a decent plantin'."

Johnny's blue-gray eyes, set under heavy black brows that almost met above the short nose, were narrowed. Shadowed under the slanted brim of his sweat-marked dusty Stetson.

"You got a lot o' gall, Shorty," snarled Mitch, spitting a gob of tobacco juice on the rear wheel of the buckboard.

"Drive along, ma'am," said Johnny. "I'll make out all right."

But the short twin barrels of the sawed-off shotgun had swung up over the buckboard seat.

"You're asking for both barrels, Mitchell," the woman's voice was quiet, deadly. "Buckshot. I'm remembering what you did to my husband, Barney McFadden—and to Whitey. Did you ever see what's left of a man who stopped two loads of buckshot at close range, Mitchell?"

Mitch and his two men were eying the woman now. Her face was like carved ivory and her black eyes glittered.

"Let's fade, Mitch," said one of the two men, "She ain't foolin'."

"I'm playing for keeps, Mitchell," said Ramona McFadden.

"A man," Mitch rasped, "can't shoot a woman. But this short-complected thing—"

"Is the Horseshoe ramrod," finished the woman coldly. "Now

get along, Mitchell. Take your two hombres with you. Make one little wrong move and I'll tear you apart with buckshot. *Vamos!*"

Mitch reined his horse around. His two tough hands were already on their way. Then the lanky Mitch sighted the Coffeepot brand on Johnny's saddle horse and laden bed horse. He cut Johnny a hard, narrow look.

"Them's Coffeepot horses but they ain't out o' our remuda. Where'd you steal them Coffeepot geldin's, Shorty?"

Johnny Coffee's six-shooter slid into sight and it was full cocked, pointed at Mitch's lean belly.

"Git goin', Copperhead. You heard the boss tell you. We're playin' for keeps."

"Them's Coffeepot horses." Mitch Mitchell's long, lantern-jawed face was as dirty gray-colored now as his hair. "You're a damned horse thief. . . . Who learnt you to call me Copperhead?"

Johnny Coffee grinned flatly. Out of his dimly remembered boyhood that nickname of Mitch Mitchell's had somehow cropped up. And he recalled his father saying, down in Texas, that Mitchell was one of them Copperhead renegades from Missouri or Kansas who straddled the fence during the Civil War, and that you couldn't trust Mitch any fu'ther than you could sling a long-horn by the tail, though he was a top cowhand.

"A copperhead leaves snake tracks, big mister," Johnny said flatly. "The hammer's back on my gun."

Mitch's long yellow teeth bared.

And for a few seconds Johnny's heart pounded hard against his ribs and his nerves were taut. Then the lanky Mitch reined his horse and spurred off at a lope to overtake his two tough hands who were already making tracks for safer distance.

Ramona McFadden was smiling at Johnny and the hard glint was gone from her black eyes. Johnny took a deep breath and grinned.

"Whew!" He was sweating.

"Mitchell and his two men are headed for the Coffeepot home ranch," said Ramona McFadden "You'd better turn back from here, Johnny. Ride all night. Don't ever come back on this range because they'll kill you on sight now. You're a brave boy and a caballero. Tonight I'll say a prayer for you. *Vaya con Dios, Johnny.*"

Johnny Coffee shook his head. "I've come a long ways, ma'am. Too far along the trail now to turn back. You've hired a new ramrod."

III

The little cow town of Big Muddy was no more than a few scattered buildings and a wide dusty street. Three of the buildings were saloons. Another was a dance hall. They showed lights and were noisy. The general mercantile store was in darkness. There was a lantern lighted in the big red-painted feed and livery barn where Ramona McFadden stabled her team. They left the tarpaulin-wrapped body of Whitey Wills in the harness and saddle room.

Ramona McFadden had pointed out a log house with a white picket

fence at the edge of town and told Johnny that was where she lived when she was in town.

"With my little niece from California. That little cabin at the back is yours, Johnny. The bed's made. And Wong, my Chinese cook, will have supper ready." She pointed the buggy whip toward the lighted windows with shades drawn down.

But at the feed barn Johnny told her he reckoned he'd look the town over first, though he promised to sleep at the little cabin. He offered to walk home with her but she shook her head.

"I know you're holding out on me, Johnny, and that's your business. But Big Muddy is a tough town. Be careful. Don't get into trouble. I'll be waiting up for you."

She was smaller than Johnny had supposed, when he helped her down from the buckboard. But there was something high-headed and brave about this little lady with the gray-ing copper hair that won his admiration. Ramona McFadden was a native Californian. California Spanish, she said. She'd eloped with a wild Irishman, she told Johnny, and never regretted it, even when black tragedy struck.

Johnny walked slowly up the wide dusty street. Saddled horses stood at the hitch racks in front of the saloons. He looked in through the open doorways but saw no sign of Sam Coffee. The summer night was warm and the double doors at the long log dance hall at the far end of the street were propped open. There was the noise of a tinny piano and a squeaky fiddle. The place was

crowded. Cowpunchers lined up at the bar at the far end. Other spurred cowhands were dancing with the percentage girls.

Suddenly through the laughter and the scuffing of boots on the dance floor sounded a woman's shrill scream and a man's hoarse cursing. There was a thud of fists and trampling boots and the dancing couples broke apart and the fight became a free-for-all ruckus. Women squealed as they huddled together back against the log walls and benches. Fighting men milled around in the middle of the dance floor.

Then a six-shooter roared, loud as a cannon above the lesser sounds. It roared again and a third time, and the knot of fighting men broke apart, crowding one another back. Only there was one man who did not move. He lay sprawled face up on the floor and blood from his bullet-torn chest and belly spread slowly across the waxed dance floor.

Johnny recognized the dead man. He was one of the pair of tough-looking cowhands who had been with Mitch Mitchell.

Standing spread-legged above the dead man was a big man with heavy shoulders that tightened the seams of his flannel shirt. A big bull-necked man with sweaty coarse black hair, beetling black brows and a bulldog jaw. His big white teeth were bared and his bloodshot eyes were as cold and hard as frozen steel. There was a smoking six-shooter in his big black-tufted hand. His other hand was clenched into a hard fist.

"Anybody else," he roared in a

thick bellow, "want a dose of the medicine I give to yellow-bellied things? Come an' git it!"

"Wait, Sam—" a voice bellowed.

Johnny Coffee, standing outside in the night's shadows, stared, white-lipped. It couldn't be. That big, loud-mouthed, drunken killer, couldn't be his brother, Sam Coffee. The Sam he remembered was lean and long-muscled. This man was as hulking as some black bull, getting paunchy and too heavy. Ugly, ornery drunk. That couldn't be Sam!

Then a tall, beautiful, willowy woman with heavy tawny hair and golden-brown eyes, dressed like some queen in a low-cut black evening gown that did not belong in a little cow town like Big Muddy, crossed the floor. Her head was held high, and anger rather than fear showed in her eyes. Her hand, diamond rings glittering, was gripping the big cow-puncher's shoulder.

"Get out, Sam. I've warned you before. Take your rough house hoodlum stuff out where it belongs. I—"

He grabbed her by the arm and without even looking around at her, flung her back and across the floor with all his big bull strength and drunken fury. Thrown off balance, she fell and her head struck a corner of the platform where the piano was. Blood trickled from her cut forehead and she lay there as though she was dead.

There was a heavy sort of hush for a moment and then a tall slim man in a tailored blue suit and white shirt, a man with the pale skin and sharp

eyes and well-kept hands of a gambler, pulled a short-barreled pistol.

But before he got the gun clear of its shoulder holster Big Sam Coffee's six-shooter belched flame. The gambler's head jerked back a little and then he caved in at the middle and his legs buckled and he went down. Sam Coffee sent two more slugs into the gambler, then shoved his empty gun back into its holster and slid a second six-shooter from an armpit shoulder harness.

"Any more tinhorns want chips in my game?" Sam Coffee demanded in a bull roar.

Sam Coffee was a killer now with the taste of blood in his mouth and the smell of powder smoke in his flaring nostrils. Men backed into each other as they edged towards the door.

Then the lanky Mitch came in the back door with a gun in his hand and he threw men out of his way. His rasping voice had a nasal whine.

"What's the rookus, Sam?"

"This thing on the floor claims you let Barney McFadden's widdler cut that Whitey down. Says she's got a new ramrod hired and you let 'em run the three of yuh off. If you've turned yellow on me, Mitch, I'll—"

"You'll what, Sam?" Mitchell's voice was a snarl. He brought the long barrel of his six-shooter down with a swift, chopping blow that thudded against big Sam Coffee's sweat-matted black head with a sickening sound. Sam's hard gray eyes went glassy and he swayed on his spread legs and then crashed heavily.

Sam still had a grip on his six-

shooter as he went down and when the lanky Mitch squatted down and made a grab at it, Sam shook his sweaty black head. He was not completely knocked out and even with a lot of his bull strength ebbed away, Big Sam was a powerful man. Reaching up, he grabbed the front of Mitch's dirty flannel shirt and pulled Mitch off balance and down on top of him. Mitch tried to jerk away and Sam swung his six-shooter like a club. Its blued steel barrel caught Mitch across his big misshapen nose and the lanky ramrod let out a snarl of pain as the blood spurted. They had each other by the hair and were clubbing wildly at each other's heads with their guns.

The tawny-haired dance-hall owner had been helped to her feet by a couple of her girls and the pasty-faced piano player. Wiping at the trickle of blood that came from the cut on her white forehead, she glared, yellow-eyed as a she-mountain lion, at Big Sam Coffee and Mitch Mitchell as they rolled over and over on the floor, fighting like a pair of big dogs.

"Where's Duke?" she asked the piano player.

He pointed towards the dead gambler. She stared at the blood that stained the dead gambling man's spotless white broadcloth shirt and soaked the expensive blue suit. She did not scream or faint or weaken as another woman might have but her voice was brittle when she spoke.

"The Duke was always a neat dresser. Tell the bouncers to carry him to my cabin, Professor, and see that they don't roll 'im. You clean

him. His watch and chain and that diamond ring. His wallet and the bankroll. And don't hold out on me." She nodded at the pair of fighting men as they mauled each other there on the blood-smeared dance floor while the men made a packed ring around them.

"Which one of those yellow cowards killed the Duke?" she asked.

"Sam Coffee. The Duke bought in when he saw Sam hurt you, Frisco."

The woman fluffed her tawny hair and dabbed at the trickling blood with a clean white handkerchief the Professor handed her. And now there was an ugly little double-barreled derringer .44 pistol palmed in her jeweled hand.

Two burly men wearing brass knuckles and with the battered-looking faces and heavy build of wrestlers had carried the dead gambler out. Now they came back in through the back door. One of them had a shot-loaded leather blackjack swinging by a leather loop from his wrist. They looked at the woman and grinned uneasily.

Frisco beckoned to three neatly dressed, dapper-looking, cold-eyed men who looked like just what they were—tinhorn gamblers. The Duke had been their boss. Now the Duke was dead and they were turning to the woman called Frisco for further orders. Underneath their buttoned coats they each packed at least one gun. She motioned her percentage girls out the back door and nodded to the two plug-ugly bartenders who shed their soiled bar aprons and slid on brass knuckle dusters.

"*Sic 'em!*" Frisco hissed it through

clenched teeth. Her yellow eyes glittered in the smoky lamplight as though she was saying "Sic 'em!" to a pack of fighting dogs. And they worked together like a team, as if they'd done it before.

IV

Johnny Coffee had moved away from the front doors and around the corner and down the long outside log wall. He was standing back in the shadows, unseen, beside an open window and so close to the statuesque Frisco that he could have reached inside and touched her. So close that he could hear every word spoken and see everything that went on. And when he saw the burly plug-uglies separate and come at the tipsy circle of cowpunchers from behind, and not a man among that cowhand outfit aware of the rear attack coming, it was more than he could stand. Frisco had moved in behind the bar now and Johnny Coffee let out a wild cowboy yell.

"Look out behind, cowhands! The bulls are chargin'!"

Johnny followed his war whoop in through the low open window. His six-shooter was gripped in his right hand and when he saw one of the gamblers pull a short-barreled belly gun, he fired. His bullet tore through the tinhorn's gun arm above the elbow, the thudding force of it jerking the gambler around and staggering him off balance.

A second tinhorn slid a pistol from a hidden shoulder holster and Johnny jumped him and clubbed down at the gambler's wrists with his

gun barrel. It was a short, savage blow and bones cracked as the blued-steel six-shooter barrel hit. A bullet clipped Johnny's ear as the third tinhorn took a snapshot at him and Johnny's gun spat fire. The heavy .45 slug crashed into the tinhorn's shoulder and knocked him backwards and the nickel-plated .38 slid from the gambler's hand and clattered to the floor. And then Johnny Coffee waded into the fight, using his smoking six-shooter for a club.

It wasn't his fight. No part of it belonged to Johnny Coffee. But somewhere in the middle of it was his brother Sam and that treacherous copperhead Mitch Mitchell. Johnny was going in after the lanky Mitch. He had to fight and dodge his way through the tangle of cowpunchers who were battling Frisco's tough bouncers. He was knocked off his feet twice and each time he scrambled up, his shirt and undershirt were more badly ripped. His nose was spilling blood and his lips were split open and bleeding. One eye was battered and closing by the time he fought his way through the tangle. Then he pulled up short and tried to dodge back the way he had come.

Because Sam Coffee needed no help from him. Big Sam Coffee and the lanky Mitch Mitchell were both on their feet. Standing back to back, they were gun clubbing every man who came within reach. They were both blood-spattered and their shirts ripped to rags and Sam Coffee was roaring his drunken challenge to the world.

"Come an' git it!"

Johnny Coffee crouched and started back through the milling mob of fighting men. But Mitch Mitchell sighted him and his nasal snarl cut like a saw through Big Sam Coffee's bull roar.

"There's that short-complected—"

Mitch Mitchell's six-shooter roared and Johnny heard the close whine of the bullet past his head. The heavy .45 slug struck one of the Coffeepot tough cowhands in the thigh and the man let out a profane yell.

Johnny ducked low and plowed through the fighting tangle. Mitch was shouting and cursing and yelling for somebody to stop that blasted Horseshoe man before he got away. But they were all still too busy with their own fighting to pay Mitch any attention.

The place was a bedlam now. Johnny was ducking and dodging as he made his way through the tangle of fighting men towards the rear door. And he had reached the end of the long bar when he saw the tawny-haired Frisco. She had a gun in her hand, the wicked little der-ringer and she was standing beside the battered, liquor-stained piano. The little double-barreled pistol was pointed, steady aimed, straight at Big Sam Coffee. Sam and Mitch still stood back to back and Sam was facing the woman, his big white teeth bared and his bloodshot eyes staring straight at her. He could have shot her but he kept his gun barrel tilted upward beside his hulking shoulder.

Frisco's eyes were the yellow eyes of a she-mountain lion. The range was not too long for the little der-

ringer and her white hand was steady. She looked for all the world like some beautiful statue carved from white marble and dressed in black satin. She was going to kill the man who had shot the tinhorn gambler Duke. There was no doubt about it. And Sam Coffee knew it.

Johnny straightened up alongside the bar. Shifting his gun to his left hand, he reached out his right for a half-filled bottle of whiskey and hurled it as fast and as straight as he could throw. He wanted to knock the little gun out of the woman's hand. But the bottle struck her a glancing blow on the side of the head.

The little gun must have been cocked because it exploded with a loud bang and its recoil threw it into the air. Frisco swayed dizzily and then crumpled. And she lay there in a heap with her tawny hair dyed crimson from the cut in her scalp.

Johnny Coffee felt as though his heart had quit beating. He'd killed a woman. Something like a dry sob burst from his throat. Then he moved as though in some horrible nightmare. He gathered the woman up in his arms and went out the back door with her limp burden seeming like no weight at all. He stumbled in the darkness, bewildered because it was unfamiliar ground and he did not know which way to go. So he just kept on until the clean fresh night air cleared his throbbing head.

Then he saw that he had traveled a lot further than he realized. The dance hall with its din was almost beyond earshot. He was out in the open and away from town and there

were big clumps of sagebrush around him. A rutted side road turned off and not a hundred yards away showed the lights of a house with a white picket fence around it. Ramona McFadden's house.

Johnny thought to himself that this was the devil of a thing to do. But it was the only bet he had. He carried his limp burden through the gateway, up a gravel walk that was lined along both sides with rose bushes and onto a wide porch. He was using both hands to hold the limp woman, so he had to kick on the door.

It opened. And he stood there tongue-tied and frozen in his tracks staring at the girl who had opened the door.

She was about sixteen or eighteen at the most, small and trimly built and dressed in a green-and-white gingham house dress. Her skin was the color of old ivory and her eyes were large and black in the lamp-light and heavily fringed by thick, long black lashes. White teeth showed when her full red lips parted in a frozen sort of smile. And her nose was short and she had a firm little chin. Her thick hair, the color of copper, was parted in the middle and plaited in two heavy braids that hung below her waist and were tied with green ribbons.

She stared, wide-eyed, at Johnny Coffee, hatless, battered, blood-smearred, his clothes in shreds and at the limp form of the tawny-haired woman in torn black satin with her hair disheveled and blood-dyed above one temple.

"Who is it, Nita?" That was Ramona McFadden's husky voice calling from somewhere inside the house.

"I . . . I don't know. You'd better come quick." And then color flooded the girl's frightened face and she opened the door wide.

"Oh, I am a stupid thing! Forgive me . . . Come in, please . . . whoever you are—"

Then Ramona McFadden came through a far doorway. She had changed to a house dress and there was a large tortoise-shell Spanish comb holding her graying copper-colored hair.

"*Madre de Dios!*" Her voice was husky. "It's Johnny! And that woman. *Por Dios*, Johnny! Who killed her? What has happened! You are hurt! Why do you bring that woman Frisco to my house. Have you no respect for my little niece?"

Hot anger and resentment overrode Johnny Coffee's confusion and self-consciousness.

"I got the wrong house." He turned abruptly and started away. But he had not taken more than a step or two before Ramona McFadden pulled him back.

"No, no, no, Johnny! Bring the poor woman inside! I was upset! *Santa Maria!* Put her in there on my bed. . . . She is dead, then?"

"I saw her fingers move," said the girl. She had a low, throaty voice like her aunt. "Have you ever seen such beautiful hair, Ramona? Like gold. And the white skin. No freckles."

"*Por Dios*, child! To chatter about freckles when there is a woman



Copperhead Mitch covered the ground in swift, leaping strides as he came in for the kill.

dying. . . . Wong! Hot water! Whiskey! Pronto!"

Then she led the way into a candle-lit bedroom. Johnny laid the woman gently on the bed. The tawny hair cascaded over the pillow. The woman's eyes blinked open. She looked at Johnny. Then past him and up into the eyes of Ramona McFadden. Then around the room. She struggled to leave the bed but the gray haired widow of Barney McFadden pushed her gently back with a smile.

"You have been in an accident. Please. This is your home. . . . Nita,

show Johnny to his cabin. And tell Wong to hurry. Run along, child."

Ramona McFadden herded them out of the room and closed the door. But before Nita and Johnny had time to move far enough away he heard the voice of the woman Frisco speaking.

"Wild horses couldn't have dragged me into your house!"

"But you are here," sounded Ramona McFadden's husky voice. "And you're hurt. I want you to stay."

"Barbary Coast can't cross north of the slot and move in on Nob Hill

just like that. You're Ramona de la Huerta. And I am—"

"You are the wife of my brother Carlos. I heard you sing Carmen at the Opera House in San Francisco and I cried. Your voice was a golden thing—like your hair. When Carlos married you and you ran away, I cried again. Both times I cried I was sad and happy inside my heart. Now you are here. My house is yours. It is as if the Señor Dios sent you. . . . My father was a proud man. Too proud. Too stern. Too ambitious as a *politico*. He disowned Carlos. Even as he disowned me when I ran off and married Barney McFadden.

"Now my father is dead. Before my mother died she told me about Carmenita at the convent school, at San Francisco. You and Carlos had disappeared. I went to San Francisco and brought your daughter back here with me. And then my husband was killed.

"When you and Carlos showed up here a month ago, I was afraid. I took Carmenita and moved to the ranch. I hid her away from you and Carlos. I was going to adopt the child. We called her Nita. She would be Nita McFadden. But I know now that would be wrong. I'll send Johnny to find Carlos and bring him here—"

"Carlos," the voice of the golden-haired Frisco broke in bluntly, brittle as breaking glass, "is dead. That Sam Coffee killed him tonight. I would have shot Sam Coffee but something struck my head. I heard my pistol explode. Perhaps I did kill that murderer. . . . No, the child

must be Nita McFadden. She must never know. It would be too unfair to her. Too—"

Johnny Coffee had tried to get the girl Nita away. But she shook off his hand and stood there, tense, listening, beside the closed door. Now she opened it quickly and went in and, in the brief moment before the door closed, Johnny saw her face. Her eyes were shining like dark stars behind tears and her lips were quivering. And he saw her run to the bed and throw her arms around the woman with the golden hair.

"I heard! I heard! I'm glad!"

V

Turning away from the door, Johnny almost bumped into a very fat pigtailed Chinaman with a pitcher of hot water and a large white crockery basin and a quart bottle of whiskey.

"Hell. Damn!" cackled the Chinaman.

Johnny grinned and took the whiskey. Then the bedroom door opened and Ramona McFadden came through and took the large pitcher of hot water and the big white basin.

"Get cleaned up, Johnny," she told him. "Wong will fix you up. You'll find clean clothes in the cabin. Whitey's. He won't mind your having them." Tears wet her cheeks but her eyes were shining and she was smiling.

"But you're hurt, Johnny!" she cried.

"Nothin' that soap and water won't cure, ma'am."

He wanted to tell her how he hap-

pened to mix into that fracas. That he'd thrown the bottle of whiskey that had knocked out the golden haired lady. Because he hated to see a lady use a gun on anything. And that, regardless of what he had grown into now, Sam Coffee was still his older brother and he wanted to straighten Sam out. But that he wasn't quitting her in a tight. Johnny Coffee was almost eager to tell her all that. But she never gave him the chance.

"Go along with Wong, Johnny. Tell me about it when you get cleaned up. Fix yourself a stiff drink. You need it."

"Come 'long," grinned the moon-faced old Chinaman. "Chop-chop. Good likka. Too many wimmin here. No mans no mo'. Likee boss-man Ba'ney. Cuss. Holla loud. Holla, 'Lattle yo' damn hocks, Wong. Or I cut off queue to makee hair bridle.'" Wong's sing-song voice shrilled and stopped and the grin faded on his moon face and he shook his head with its coiled queue.

"Hell damn. Boss man Ba'ney gloat man. Cuss like hell damn. Makee fight. Makee fun. Lotsa fun. All gone now. Too many wimmin. . . . Whitey come. No good. Dlink likka. Talkee big. Mitch fella makee fight. Whitey lun like hell. No good. Hangee Whitey. All light . . . You come. You go dance. Stay out in da'k. Watchee. Heap fight. You watchee. Mo fight. Hell damn. You holla. Jump in window, Shoot one gamble man. Shoot two gamble man. Makee heap fight. You all light. Likee pie, cowboy?"

"You was there, Wong?"

"Outside. Watchee. Lotsa fun. Hell damn!"

Wong poured buckets of hot water into a big wooden tub in the little log cabin, laid out towels and a razor and shaving mug, fetched clean clothes from a chest of drawers. There was even a new Stetson hat and a pair of new shop-made boots that fit Johnny's feet.

Bathed and shaved and dressed in clean clothes, Johnny Coffee felt and looked like a new man. The whiskey warmed him and Wong fetched him a big steak, fried spuds and hot biscuits. Half a raisin pie and a lot of strong black coffee topped off the meal.

The cabin, Wong explained, had been Barney McFadden's den where he and his cronies played poker and drank whiskey.

"One fella alle time come. Him and Boss Man Ba'ney heap fliends. Play checkas. Dlink likka. Tell stolies. Fella had gray-black bea'd. Call John Coffeepot. You got him boots. Him hat. Now you takee this."

Wong slid a long-barreled six-shooter from under his loose black Chinese blouse. The gun had an ivory handle. On it was carved the Coffeepot brand. Johnny remembered that six-shooter. It had belonged to his father.

"Where'd you git this gun, Wong?" he asked.

"Boss Man Ba'ney have. When John Coffeepot get murder."

"John Coffee," said Johnny, "was drug to death by a horse."

"Hoss don't pack gun," Wong said.

"Blonk don't shoot man in back. Mebbyso Sam Coffeepot shoot his papa. Mebby Mitch and Sam Coffeepot makee dry-gulch bushwacks. Most mebby Mitch Mitchell make murder. Then fix John Coffeepot's spur in saddle cinch. Makee hoss lun like hell. Murder." Wong's red-brown eyes watched Johnny's.

"Why?" asked Johnny. "Why would they murder John Coffee?"

"Sam Coffeepot no good. Dlunk allee time. Allee time gamble. Papa John Coffeepot keep mad. Cussee. Callee Sam Coffeepot bad names. Callee Mitch mo' worse bad names. Boss Man Ba'ney say: 'Watchee step, John. Them two son of a snake bad medicine.' Boss Man Ba'ney alle time light. He fetchee home that gun. He say, 'Wong, that Sam Coffeepot kill his own papa. Mebbyso Mitch and Sam. Most mebby Mitch make that dry-gulch bushwhack. John Coffeepot my fliend. I hang them hides from Sam Coffeepot and that Mitch on fence.' But they dry-gulch bushwhack Boss Man Ba'ney first. Lob him pockets. Lob big house at lanch. Burn lanch. Sometimes lob this house too."

"Rob the house, Wong? Why?"

"Hunt lettah. Fat lettah John Coffeepot give Boss Man Ba'ney long time back . . . No find. Wong Pong got that lettah. Alle time hide lettah. Boss lady call you Johnny. Wong ketchem. You Johnny Coffeepot. No?"

Johnny nodded. "I'm Johnny Coffee."

"All light." Wong reached in under the loose black blouse. His

hand came out with a thick manila envelope. "You takee, Johnny Coffeepot."

Johnny stared at his name written in rusty black ink on the sealed envelope: "JOHN COFFEE, JR.—FROM HIS FATHER, JOHN COFFEE."

He was about to slit it open with the blade of his jackknife when he heard the sounds outside. Men on horseback. Night riders.

"Better keep it for me, Wong." Johnny handed back the unopened envelope.

Then he blew out the lighted lamp and Wong opened the cabin door and they stepped outside. It was bright moonlight and they could see a lot of men, some on horseback and others afoot, coming from the main part of town. They were drunk and noisy—and dangerous.

Inside the house Johnny faced Ramona McFadden, Nita and the golden-haired Frisco. The girl's mother was wearing a heavy silk robe and her arm was around Nita's shoulders and they looked very beautiful to Johnny, and very, very happy. And while fear blanched their faces they were more defiant than afraid. Frisco's head was bandaged and her eyes were yellow again with fury. Both she and Ramona McFadden had saddle carbines. Nita had a .38 pistol, and Wong had picked up a rifle from some hiding place.

Save for a black eye, a bruised mouth and a swollen nose Johnny Coffee looked respectable enough. His father's six-shooter was shoved into the waistband of his clean over-

alls. He grinned faintly and shook his head at their guns.

"It's me they're comin' after," he told the three women. "I'm goin' out to meet 'em. Lock the doors and fasten those window shutters. They're ornery but they're not mean enough to harm women."

"Mitch Mitchell," said the tawny-haired Frisco, "would kill his own grandmother."

"But Sam—"

"Sam Coffee," Frisco cut in, "lost his shirt to the Duke in a two-night-and-day poker session. That's the real reason he killed the Duke. To cancel a gambling debt with a six-shooter. Sam Coffee gambled away the Coffeepot outfit. I have the signed papers to prove it. So Sam Coffee is coming after the papers he couldn't find on the Duke or in the cabin where we lived. You'd better make your stand here with us, cowboy."

"It would be suicide to walk out there, Johnny," said Ramona McFadden. "Those men are cold-blooded murdering killers."

Nita said not a word but her dark eyes were pleading with him to stay.

The drunken mob was scattering to circle and surround the house. They heard Mitch Mitchell's loud, rasping, whiskey voice.

"Come outa there, Shorty! Come out from behind them wimmin's petticoats!"

VI

Johnny Coffee went out to face the night riders. Alone.

"I've got an ace in the hole," he

told the three women. "Let me play it my way. It's our only chance to make a win. . . . Any way of my gettin' out o' the house without bein' shot on sight, Wong?"

Wong had led the way into the cellar. And out through a trapdoor that slanted above the ground. And Johnny Coffee crouched there in the black shadows with a six-shooter in each hand. He watched and listened and what his ears picked up gave him something like confidence.

There were a lot of men out there in that whiskey-crazed mob that were already sick of this business of bothering women. Their talk against Mitch Mitchell and Big Sam Coffee was getting mutinous.

"The devil with this," grumbled a voice. "I don't like ary part of it. Ramona McFadden's a real lady. And so's the gal Nita—"

"Me'n Jane," said another man, "aims to git married. But she'll shore gimme the bum's rush if I git tangled in this mess. Frisco's in that house. That feller fetched her here. Dead or hurt bad. An' Frisco's as square as they come. Jane's worked three years now fer Frisco. Worships her, I'll tell a man. And so do the rest of the girls. Frisco rides close-herd on them and don't think diff'rent."

"You're a-tryin' to tell us, mister? The only reason I ain't married to Ida is because she won't have me on account of I work for the lowdown Coffeepot outfit. . . . I wouldn't help hang Whitey Wills. And the only reason I'm here is to protect them three wimmin' in the house yonder if Mitch an' Big Sam gits tough an'

ornery to'rds 'em. That goes as she lays, fellers. Anybody with me?"

"Deal me in, feller."

"You kin bank on me."

"Shucks," drawled a lazy Texan voice, "that goes fer all of us, pardner. Come a showdown, we'll all fight for them wimmin in yonder."

"It's that new Horseshoe ramrod we're after—"

Johnny Coffee gripped both six-shooters and crouched low in the black shadows.

"All right, you Coffeepot cowhands," Johnny's voice was not loud. It was level-toned and deadly quiet. "I'm your huckleberry. I'm the new Horseshoe ramrod. . . . Whoa, there. Steady. I shoot fast. What's the crime agin' me, boys?"

"Horse stealin'! You got two Coffeepot horses!" That was a new voice in the shadowed bunch of men on foot, not fifty feet away.

"I never stole a horse in my life, mister." Johnny's voice was flat-toned.

"Hey!" shouted the man. "Hey, Sam! Mitch! Git here fast. We got that Horseshoe ramrod cornered out here."

"Lemme at 'im!" Mitch Mitchell's voice snarled. He rode up out of the night.

Johnny gripped his gun. Let that long-gear'd Mitch ride a little closer and he'd be inside six-shooter distance.

"Hang onto your bushy tail, Mitch!" bellowed Big Sam Coffee. And Sam came riding up. "Where is he?"

"Hid alongside the house some-

wheres," sounded the ugly voice of the man who had summoned Mitch and Big Sam. "And about time you fellers got here. Some of these jaspers is gettin' yellow. They're bunch quitters. Soft on them dance-hall—"

A six-shooter spat fire. The coarse, ugly voice screamed, choked into a death rattle, and was silent.

"Jane's a decent girl," said the man who had fired the shot. "No man's goin' to say anything about her."

"Shut up!" snarled Mitch. "Nobody's hurtin' your girl. . . . Where's that Horseshoe thing that stole two Coffeepot horses?"

"I'm right here, Mitch an' my gun's pointed at your belly. My trigger finger's shore a-itchin' so better take it easy. . . . I never stole a horse in my life. I raised them two geldin's from colts—at the Coffeepot Ranch on the Pecos. Dad was shore right when he called you a damned copperhead, Mitch. . . . It's me, Sam. Your kid brother Johnny. I hit the lady with the bottle so's she wouldn't shoot you. I come north to surprise yuh, Sam. To throw in with you an' claim my half of the Coffeepot outfit here in Montana. I'm your kid brother Johnny—"

Mitch's nasal laugh sounded. Then big Sam Coffee's voice, thick with cold fury and whiskey. A low, rumbling, ugly bellow.

"I got no brother. I never had no brother. Old Man John Coffee was a Texas Ranger. He killed my father in the wire-cutters' war down in Texas. My mother was dead so John Coffee adopted me. He quit the Rangers an' went back to ranchin'.

Old Man John Coffee raised me fer his own son. Shore. And since I kin remember he worked the hide off me. Learnin' me to be a cowhand, he claimed. And after you was born I got shoved into the discard. He never aimed to leave me no part of his Coffeepot iron. He'd killed—"

"That's a damned lie, Sam!" Johnny's voice cut like a sharp knife. "You're lyin' to yourself and you know it. John Coffee treated you like his own son. Give you everything you wanted. Shore, he worked you. He worked me just as hard. He didn't want us to grow up no good and triffin'. . . . There's a story about the man that found a snake that was half froze. He warmed the snake in his blankets. When the snake got warm it bit the man that saved its life. I reckon you're that same kind of a snake, Sam. Because you wrote back home that our dad had bin drug to death by a bronk. That was a lie, wasn't it, Sam? You killed John Coffee!"

"I hated John Coffee's guts," growled Sam. "I dealt him plenty trouble an' made him swaller it. I made him pay my gamblin' debts and git me out o' scrapes. And I laughed in his face. Old Man John Coffee called Mitch a damned copperhead. Shore he did. But he didn't fire Mitch. He didn't dare, because Mitch knowed who I was. Mitch was one of them wire cutters that rode with my real father. And Mitch told Old Man John Coffee that he'd tell me my real name if Old Man John didn't treat him right. And after we got located here on the Big

Muddy, Mitch took me off on a drunk an' told me who I was. And what a hell of a joke on Old Man John Coffee that turned out to be—"

"Shut up, Sam," snarled Mitch. "You run off at the head too much."

"You go to the devil, Copperhead," growled Sam. "I'm dealin'. I'm a-tellin' the button yonder why I'm a-goin' to gut-shoot 'im. He's sneaked up here to claim the outfit. Old Man John Coffee left a will. We didn't find it on Old Man John. It wasn't at the Coffeepot ranch on the Big Muddy, because he'd give it to Barney McFadden to keep. And we didn't find it on Barney's carcass or at the Horseshoe Ranch, or here at his widdler's house. But I'll gamble all I got that we'll find it on Johnny Coffee's carcass. I'm playin' fer big stakes, Copperhead. Playin' fer keeps. When I figger I can't count on you, Mister Copperhead Mitch, I'll have you hung fer bushwhackin' Old Man John Coffee and Barney McFadden. I got a clean alibi fer both them dry-gulchin' jobs."

"All you got, Sam," snarled Mitch Mitchell, "is a bad memory. You hired the Duke to give you an alibi for them jobs. But you fergit, Sam. You killed the Duke."

"The Duke was worth more dead than ever he was worth to me alive, Copperhead. I made him put that alibi in black-and-white writin'. Now he's dead and can't deny it."

"You was with me on both jobs, Sam. My word's as good as yourn. And your alibi don't make your big hide bullet-proof, Sam. You ain't

much good to me no more. You lost the Coffeepot to the Duke. He poked you outa it. His widdler Frisco has the papers. Johnny Coffee's shore correct. I'm a damned Copperhead that straddled the fence and fit on both sides, wherever I could find easy pickin's. But you're the snake that Old Man John Coffee warmed in his blankets. Shore as hell, Sam, you're the snake that bit Old Man John. Because I shot to miss that night and there was only one bullet that Barney McFadden found in Old Man John Coffee's carcass after the bronk drug it. And now we've both run off at the head too much. We got to hang together or, as the sayin' goes, we'll hang separate. . . . Let's git our chores done here. Whoever gits the Johnny Coffee think kin claim the Widdler Frisco. Ain't that the deal, Sam?"

"You kin have the Widdler Frisco, Mitch. Me fer the little Nita gal. . . . All right, you Coffeepot tough hands!" Big Sam Coffee lifted his voice to a loud roar. "Circle the house and close the circle. Don't harm the wimmin. Kill the Chink when yuh sight 'im and we'll string 'im up by his long pigtail. Close in, you tough hands!"

"And we're killin' ary man that tries to rabbit on us!" snarled Mitch Mitchell. "Close in on that house, you sons! Earn that fightin' pay you bin a-spendin'!"

"I'm a-comin' at you, you Johnny whelp!" roared Sam Coffee.

"Hell damn!" hissed a soft voice in the darkness beside Johnny. "Damn hell."

VII

Johnny Coffee told himself that his ace in the hole had turned out to be a dirty deuce. He had hoped to stop Sam by declaring himself. He'd hoped, perhaps a little desperately after seeing Sam in brutal action, to somehow straighten out an ugly mess.

"I'm your kid brother Johnny—"

That had been Johnny's ace in the hole. That, and reminding Sam that he'd saved his big, tough hide from a couple of .44 slugs from a derringer pistol. But Sam Coffee had no kid brother Johnny. And he did not know the meaning of the word "gratitude." Because he was a warmed-up snake with a deadly set of fangs. He was as much of a snake as the Copperhead. Even slimier than the Copperhead Mitch Mitchell. So they had to be killed like you'd kill two snakes. Johnny Coffee gripped his two guns.

There were some actually tough gun-slingers working for the Coffeepot. Hired gunhands who were ready to take any kind of killer orders. But before they charged the house and set fire to it, they'd have to get past other Coffeepot cowhands like that one who wanted to marry a dance-hall girl named Jane. And another who had a girl named Ida. And now half a dozen quick gun fights broke out. Swift, vicious, savage, deadly. Continuation, maybe, of grudge fights between real cow-punchers who had perhaps worked for Old Man John Coffee and were still loyal to his memory and had found a new champion in Johnny,

and the renegade tough hands hired by Mitch and Sam to do night riding and murder. There could be only one finish to those scattered fights. Death took the losers.

Sam Coffee and Mitch and others on horseback had quit their saddles because they made easy targets on the back of a horse. The burly Sam and lanky rawboned Mitch swung to the ground just in time.

"Hell damn!" The Chinaman's rifle barrel lowered.

"Take 'er easy, Wong," said Johnny. "You'll git another chance directly."

They crouched on either side of the slanting cellar trapdoor. Then Sam's hulking shadow loomed up not twenty feet away and Johnny knew it was Sam, the man he'd always called his brother and sort of hero-worshipped when he was a kid.

Sam had always bullied him in a sort of hoorawing way but a lot of that joshing had been mighty cruel and now Johnny understood how Sam had meant to hurt him. And that big drunken hulk crawling through the night's shadows with murder in his heart and whiskey brain was the Sam Coffee who had murdered Old Man John Coffee who had been Johnny's father. And now Johnny had his murdered father's long-barreled ivory-handled six-shooter gripped in his right hand.

"I'm killin' you, Sam!" he called out.

Sam's big crawling bulk flattened out, belly down on the ground and his gun spewed flame. The heavy .45 slug struck Johnny in the thigh.

He'd been crouched and the smashing thud of the bullet knocked him off his feet as he pulled the trigger and he missed.

Sam's second shot plowed through the slanting cellar door and threw splinters in Johnny's face. Johnny lay on his left side and the long-barreled six-shooter in his hand spat a streak of fire. He couldn't miss that big bulk. He heard Sam's horrible death bellow and shot again. But Sam Coffee was a hard man to kill. Sam's gun kept spewing streaks of flame and the bullets were thudding into the slanting cellar door, every one hitting closer to where Johnny lay in the black shadow.

Johnny kept thumbing back his gun hammer and pulling the trigger and he wasn't missing. But he couldn't kill that big roaring, cursing bulk that was Sam Coffee. Couldn't silence Sam's bull roaring or his six-shooter.

Then the long-barreled ivory-handled six-shooter was empty. The hammer fell on an exploded shell. And when Johnny was going to drop it and use his own gun that he'd been gripping in his left hand, the gun wasn't there and his left hand was empty. He must have let go of the gun when that first shot of Sam's knocked him down. He was groping around on the ground in the dark, hunting for it, when he heard Mitch Mitchell laugh. The laugh came from somewhere behind Sam. And Sam was cursing horribly.

"I always wanted to do this, Sam!" Mitch's rasping voice was an unholy cross between a laugh and a snarl. His gun sent a short spurt of flame

out of the black shadows. Sam Coffee's bellowing and cursing ended abruptly.

Mitch Mitchell had stayed back there in the black shadows. He'd counted the shots from both guns as Sam and Johnny Coffee shot it out. Waited until Sam's gun was empty. And until Johnny had fired six times. Now the Copperhead Mitch was moving up for the kill. He'd killed Sam and he was coming after Johnny.

Johnny saw him coming. Long-legged, crouched, covering the ground with swift, leaping strides.

Johnny Coffee's fingers fumbled clumsily as he ejected the empty shells from his father's six-shooter. His fingers were all thumbs and the cartridges seemed to be glued in the loops of his filled cartridge belt. He had no more than a few seconds. Split seconds counted. That was Death coming at him.

Then from the other side of the slanted cellar door a rifle roared like a cannon. The bullet caught the leaping, long-legged Mitch in mid-air. The heavy .45-70 hit him just under the front of his long lantern jaw and he fell spread-eagled so close that Johnny could have reached out and touched him.

"Hell damn!" said Wong Pong.

Johnny felt giddy and sick from the pain and then he wanted to laugh. Laugh and shout. Death had passed him up.

Wong Pong picked Johnny up and when the Chinaman pounded on the cellar door, Ramona McFadden shoved it open from the steps below. Wong Pong half-carried, half-

dragged Johnny down the steep steps and into the big cellar where the three women had waited out the fight raging outside.

The fighting was all over now. Frisco went outside and the two men who hoped to marry Jane and Ida greeted her. She sent them to tell the girls that everything was all right and to look after them until she got there.

"I'm busy, boys," she told the crowd of men, "looking after my own daughter Carmenita. Nita McFadden."

There was no doctor at Big Muddy. If there had been, he couldn't have done a more skillful job than Wong Pong did when he cleansed and bandaged the bullet hole in Johnny Coffee's thigh. The bullet had missed the bone and gone on through the muscle. It would leave an ugly scar when it healed.

With Wong Pong for a doctor and three women to nurse him, Johnny Coffee found out that a bullet hole in his hide could be almost a pleasure. Though there were times when he agreed with Wong Pong that there were too many women around. One would do. And her name was Nita. She would do from now on. Forever.

There was a regular epidemic of marriages at Big Muddy. And it looked as though the Coffeepot and Horseshoe outfits were going to be mighty short-handed for working cowpunchers. They were getting married and taking up ranches. Frisco and Ramona McFadden were grubstaking each couple to land and

a little bunch of cattle in each man's individual brand.

Frisco handed Johnny the papers on the Coffeepot. "The Duke cold-decked Big Sam," she explained. "Anyhow it wasn't Sam's outfit to gamble with."

Old Man John Coffee's last will and testament left the Coffeepot outfit, lock, stock and barrel, to his one and only son John.

"Because," explained the letter Old Man John left behind, "my adopted son Sam has proven many times that he is treacherous and can't be trusted. He has already gambled away his share. And even as I write this I know that Sam and Mitchell are planning to murder me."

The time came, as it was bound to come, when Nita and Johnny Coffee were to be married.

"You're both young," said Ramona McFadden, and she smiled and her dark eyes sparkled merrily, "And that's as it should be. Love is for the young. God bless you both."

Johnny and Nita declared they were not going further than their Coffeepot home ranch for a honeymoon. Their new log house was finished and they'd spend a month furnishing it.

So it was Ramona and the tawny-haired mother of Carmenita who took the long train trip—to San Francisco and then on an ocean liner.

"Wong's right," said Ramona McFadden. "Too many wimmin. We're going to be gone a year. Regular

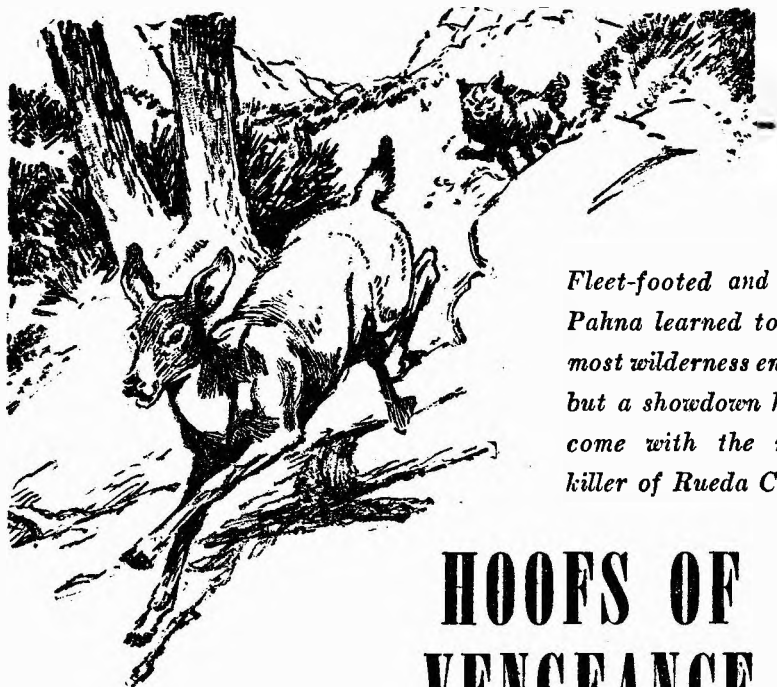
traveling spree. And don't try to tell us we'll be too badly missed."

Wong Pong moved out to the Coffeepot ranch. He'd cleaned up the town house after the wedding banquet and without a word to anyone, had pulled out, driving a very fat and very lazy team he called his own, his bedroll, his pots and pans and an old tin trunk loaded on his wagon. They looked around the house for him and he was gone. But they'd find him at the home ranch when Johnny and Nita got there. There wasn't anything that anybody could do about it, even if they'd wanted to. Which nobody did.

"His name is Wong Pong," said Ramona McFadden. "That's the name on his 'chok gee' papers. With his picture. . . . But Barney always called him Hell Damn. Or Damn Hell. He'd like you to call him that, Johnny. It makes you extra special. And you belong to him now. For life."

Johnny Coffee nodded. He was remembering about Mitch. He'd had a look at that big old heavy .45-70 rifle. At the exploded shell in the breech and the empty magazine. There had been only one cartridge for the gun that had killed Copperhead Mitch Mitchell. Once, a long time ago, Mitch had dragged the Chinaman around by his long queue and with the blade of his pocket knife open, threatened to cut off the Chinaman's pigtail.

"If Wong Pong wants it that way, that's the way it'll be," nodded Johnny Coffee.



*Fleet-footed and agile,
Pahna learned to elude
most wilderness enemies,
but a showdown had to
come with the roving
killer of Rueda Canyon*

HOOFS OF VENGEANCE

by S. OMAR BARKER

REDDISH-TAN in their summer pelage, bigger than a mule's and rounder, Pahna's ears stood out from her suddenly raised head in a wide V of motionless inquiry. A few steps up the piney slope the yearling mule deer buck that was her twin also left off browsing so abruptly that a sprig of wild rose still hung from his mouth. The thorn sprig quivered slightly, but not even the woods-keen eyes of Joe Tamber, reining to a stop on a ridge crest a hundred yards away, could detect any other

movement about the two Rocky Mountain mule deer.

"Jeeminny!" thought the young trapper, sensing the uncertain fear which held the two big-eared yearlings tense. "I'd shore hate to be a deer! Gotta be on the *cuidado* ever' darn second!"

By which he meant to observe that for such comparatively defenseless creatures as deer, eternal vigilance is the price not only of liberty but of life itself. Yet now for a long moment these two stood watching

him, dangerously indulging their natural instinct of curiosity despite the fear that held their every muscle tense to spring away and run.

"Like as not I'm the first strange booger they've seen since their ma quit 'em," Joe surmised. "Maybe they need a lesson!"

He was right. Always before, the old doe's example had told them when to stand and when to run, when to sneak and when to hightail out of there *pronto*. But now they were on their own. Weeks ago their mother had given them the slip, preferring to hide out alone for the birthing of another year's fawns.

Over across the draw Joe Tamber slid from the saddle, edged behind a tree and raised the rifle. Quickly he tried the young buck's shoulders in his sights, then shifted the bead to the rounded nob of sleek head between Pahna's big ears. If a man wanted venison, here was easy pickings. Too easy. Joe knew that there were men who, like coyotes, would kill any deer they got a chance at, in season or out.

Deliberately, the trapper shifted his gunsights to a big roan rock and pressed the trigger. As the .30-30's report spanked the air, Joe let out a loud, unearthly squall. The suddenness of these terrifying noises, plus the spatty *z-zing* of lead glancing off a rock within six feet of her nose caused Pahna's already tense muscles to explode into a stiff-legged leap over a high loggy wind-fall.

With every jump thereafter her speed increased as she vanished around the hill. Fast as she ran,

the young buck led her, his big ears folded back, the mild brown orbs of his eyes wide with fright.

Remounting his horse, Joe Tamber chuckled. "Maybe that'll learn 'em not to stand gawkin' at a man with a gun!"

Like most born woodsmen, this young trapper liked deer; liked to see them friendly and unafraid. Yet he knew that the sooner they learned to fear man as a deadly danger, the better their chance to live.

But there were other perils in these woods against which Joe could offer no schooling: perils whose stealthy, padded feet carried them like shadows through the woods upon their ever-watchful, ever-ready, sharp-fanged quest for raw red meat.

Cozied up for the day in beds of fir needles deep in a dense thicket, two coyotes suddenly pricked up their ears at the *clump-clump* sound of running deer. Their moist black nostrils quivered at the scent of Pahna and her twin on the wind.

Silently the old he-coyote rose and ran, limping a little but straight-tailed and purposeful, to intercept the course of the deer. With a faint whine of eagerness his younger companion followed.

Rounding a rocky side ridge, Pahna and her twin caught the danger scent barely in time to whirl and leap away down the hill before the slim gray killers were at their very heels. Their flight from Joe Tamber's shot had tired the two yearling deer considerably, but terror is a mighty stimulant. The spurt of leaping speed they put on now was

too much even for the lightning attack of the coyotes.

Yet, for Pahna, it was a close thing. Straight ahead loomed the branchy barrier of a log-tangled windfall. Behind, yapping a little in his excited certainty of a quick kill, the younger coyote came flashing on, no more than his own length from her heels. Ahead of her the buck's high jump spanned the windfall for a crash landing that sent him on limping.

To the young doe the barrier looked both too high and broad. Yet as between the slash of fangs and a seemingly impossible leap, there could be but one choice. Behind, as she leaped, the snapping coyote whined when the snap of his jaws barely missed her.

To her own surprise Pahna cleared the windfall with inches to spare, landed four-footed on the steep rocky slope and sped away to overtake the buck, leaving the younger coyote clambering through the windfall's tangle as best he could. The old he-dog with one toe missing patiently detoured around it.

To him the quarry's temporary spurts of speed did not matter. Sooner or later, if he kept after them long enough, the weary, winded, lung-bursting deer would give out. Then his own doglike endurance would bring him in easily for the kill. He had done it before, he could do it again.

Hours later, in the dusk of twilight, despairing of outrunning their pursuers, Pahna and the little buck obeyed an ancient instinct and sought

the refuge of water. They staggered down to the little creek in the bottom of Rueda Canyon with their last remnant of stumbling strength, only to find its pools too shallow to save them. Tongues out, tired lungs rasping for wind, the two small deer's last hope was to dodge in and out among the willows.

Pahna turned downstream, the buck turned up. Whether for obscure reasons of their own or whether guided by some equally obscure whim of fate, the coyotes chose to follow the buck.

Cowering knee deep in a pool close under the tangle of yellow-bark willow, a hundred yards downstream, Pahna heard his bleat of ultimate despair as the wolves closed in, their white fangs flashing to pull him down. She heard a great threshing of the brush, too, for when he could no longer flee, the little buck put up a fight. Pahna heard a surprised yelp from one of the coyotes as a sharp black hoof struck him. Then, after a moment there came no further sound except the low growling of the gray killers gorging themselves.

After a while Pahna felt her strength revive enough to start sneaking away downstream. Where the creek emerged upon the open meadow, she stopped, instinctively cautious about showing herself in the open. Finally, after a few moments of tail-twitching uncertainty, she decided to risk crossing a few yards of open hillside toward the cover of dense fir thickets higher up.

Halfway across she froze to a trembling stop. There, trailing

along the hill ahead, so gorged that their slow, self-satisfied gait was actually a waddle, were the two coyotes. But now, loggy with over-filled bellies, they paused only to eye Pahna without particular interest and continued on their leisurely way.

Pahna's original fear of coyotes had been no more than a natural instinct. But in time it grew to be an almost constant dread that was close akin to hatred. Hatred of all coyotes, of course, but hatred particularly constant and fearful against the old black-ruffed Limpy who persistently made his home in the Rueda Canyon country, and with equal persistence slaughtered deer and evaded traps.

Other coyotes came and went, some deer killers, some not. Trapping here a few weeks each summer for the State Game Department, young Joe Tamber always caught enough of the slim gray wolves to keep their number pretty well reduced. But old Limpy continued to avoid traps, to survive, and to feed on venison.

Once upon a time mountain coyotes had been satisfied to feed upon the leavings of mountain lions. Then the big cats had been killed out, and the coyotes learned to hunt for themselves. Compared to the coyote, the mountain lion is a humane hunter. Creeping close upon an unsuspecting deer, in a few quick leaps the long-tailed cat seizes his victim and kills it instantly with a powerful bite through neck or head. Or he misses, and that's that. A clean quick kill or nothing.

By contrast, the coyote's method of hounding a deer until exhausted, then often hamstringing it and starting his meal even before the victim is dead, is a slow and cruel torture.

By the summer that Pahna was a three-year-old, with twin fawns at her side, the old limp-footed coyote of the Rueda ridges had pursued her almost unto death at least half a dozen times. By what tricky favor of fate she had escaped him, Pahna did not know. Perhaps partly because when pursued she had learned, if possible, to stay with some other deer.

Then, at the showdown, she might manage to dodge away into the willows while the killer pulled down another victim. But mostly her escapes had come off by a margin of luck so narrow that it could not be expected to hold out much longer. Sooner or later, if something did not happen to him first, old Limpy would slaughter Pahna just as he had slaughtered many another deer. Pahna seemed to sense this, and her fearful hatred of the coyote grew with each narrow escape.

Pahna had borne a single fawn when she was a two-year-old, only to see it slaughtered by old Limpy before it was six months old. It was when she gave way to a reckless mother impulse to defend her fawn, that the young doe had gotten a long fang rip in one shoulder, laming her a little for life. Old Limpy would have killed her that day but for the sudden rattle of rifle shots from a ledge up on the mountain.

It was too far for Joe Tamber to hope to hit the coyote, but his

yell and the threat of bullets did succeed in scaring Limpy away—for the moment. Later Limpy returned, picked up the trail of the doe and fawn again and killed the fawn. But Pahna escaped.

Thus it was little wonder she feared and hated him. Now, a sleek, graceful, grown-up doe with fine twin fawns at her side, she lived watchfully and warily day and night lest the coyote come upon them unawares. The presence of Joe Tamber in the woods this summer, the sound of his rifle, the occasional whiff of the strange coyotish scented bait he used at his traps, these added, also, to her uneasiness. If she had only known it, it was for her sake and that of others like her that Joe stayed in the Rueda country so long, determined "to ketch that there limpy ol' deer-murderin' blanket-blank of a kiote, if it takes all summer!"

But old Limpy was trapwise. The weeks passed and he still ran free.

Then the thing Pahna dreaded happened: a drift of midnight breeze rustling the moon-silvered leaves of quaking asp in the cove where she lay chewing her cud beside her fawns brought to her delicate black nostrils the dread news that old Limpy was after her again.

For a brief moment Pahna considered lying still in the hope that the coyote might not be on her trail, after all. At the nudge of her nose the two fawns flattened against the ground, heads outstretched, stone-still. But it wouldn't do. Old Limpy's rank wolfish scent was com-

ing closer and closer. In swift silence Pahna rose, and at a long-stepping, low-headed sneak, led her fawns westward away from there.

But sneaking was of no use either, with Limpy actually on their trail. Soon Pahna broke into a high-leaping run, and the fawns followed suit. But they were still too young for such a breakneck pace. Within half a mile they began to lag. In the moonlight of a clearing Pahna glimpsed the shadow of death coming swiftly on behind them.

With the age-old strategy of wild mothers in defense of their young, Pahna turned back at a slant, almost directly toward the coyote, luring him to follow her instead of the fawns, even challenging him with a snort.

Like a streak of shadow, Limpy leaped after her. The doe's first spurt barely escaped him, but once sure he was following her instead of the fawns, Pahna sped up. When she began to tire, she made for an old deer trail rimming the ridge, then followed that. Behind her she heard a strange, brief yip as Limpy topped into the trail.

Thereafter Pahna ran in terror, blindly heading for the scant refuge of water at the canyon bottom, yet ever swinging back eastward, drawn by an unconquerable desire to return toward her fawns.

Tongue out, sides heaving, Pahna splashed into the willow thickets of Rueda Creek as she had often done before when old Limpy pursued her. But always before there had been another victim available for his cruel fangs, and Pahna had escaped. This

time she was alone. She stood knee-deep in a trout pool, listening. Neither sound nor scent of any pursuing coyote reached her. Even Pahnna sensed the strangeness of it.

Gradually her wind came back and fear for herself left her. In its place arose a desperate anxiety for her fawns. Timidly, yet valorously because she went despite her own great fear, Pahnna climbed back up the mountain to investigate.

It was near dawn when, with a twitch of her black-tipped tail, Pahnna picked up the trail of her twins. Their trail scent showed they had tried to follow her.

Presently Pahnna raised her head and bleated softly. From somewhere beyond the ridge-rim trail came a timid, doubtful answer. At a long-legged sneak, Pahnna started toward it. Coming thus up wind, Pahnna was almost on top of the black-ruffed coyote crouched in the trail before she either saw or smelled him. With a strange, growling snarl old Limpy leaped for her throat.

In that surprised instant her haired for her old enemy combined with anxiety for her fawns to crowd fear out of the young doe's heart. Rearing, she struck savagely at the lunging coyote with both her sharp front hoofs.

Maybe it was luck that guided the blow. More likely it was the hampering effect of one of Joe Tamber's steel traps clamped onto one of the coyote's toes that threw him off balance. Luck or not, the coyote's slashing fangs missed, and one of

Pahnna's hard, sharp hoofs struck the shell-like thinness of his skull just behind an ear.

Outstretched on the ground, rigid and quivering, blood coursing from his nose, the cruel killer of Rueda Canyon was as dead as he would ever be. But to Pahnna, enraged by her ancient hatred, he evidently didn't look dead enough. Again and again her forefeet struck and stomped him until old Limpy quivered no more.

Then presently the old timid fear reasserted itself and Pahnna sprang away, bleated to her fawns, and with them following her, fled.

It was about sunup when Joe Tamber came by and read the "sign." That a deer—a medium-sized doe at that—had tromped a trapped coyote to death was as plain to Joe as it was amazing. That old Limpy had blundered into the trap while pursuing a deer also seemed indicated.

Stooping to release the trap from the dead coyote's foot, Joe let out a long, low whistle. Evidently old Limpy had been caught since around midnight and had fought the trap plenty hard. For the toe by which he was caught was pulled practically off, held only by a single thin, frayed tendon that *just one more lunge would have broken*, freeing the coyote to hunt and torture and kill again as soon as his foot should heal.

"Sister," grinned Joe Tamber, addressing the valiant lady who had done this thing as if Pahnna were actually there to hear him, "you shore done your stompin' in the nick of time—now didn't yuh!"

RANGE SAVVY

BY CARL RAHT

In the earliest days of recording brands in Nevada, a very simple device that would serve as an iron-clad proof of ownership was needed. The ranchers, accustomed to using what was at hand, soon solved their problem. A piece of leather branded with the very iron used on the owner's cattle, was brought to the courthouse and left there for a record. As the number of recorded brands increased, these leather replicas became unwieldy to handle, and drawn ones were fitted into files. But the drawn brands used in court records today can't compare with the old leather brands for authenticity.



In many instances the motor-driven saw has replaced the cross-cut hand saw with which lumberjacks fell trees for the sawmill. The motor-driven saw can fell the larger trees and cut the trunk into the required lengths much faster than the hand saw. But where the tree is under three feet in diameter, the hand saw is faster, due to the loss of time in moving and setting up the power saw for action. Where the terrain is rough and there is much brush the old colorful two-man cross-cut saw is still needed to get the job done.

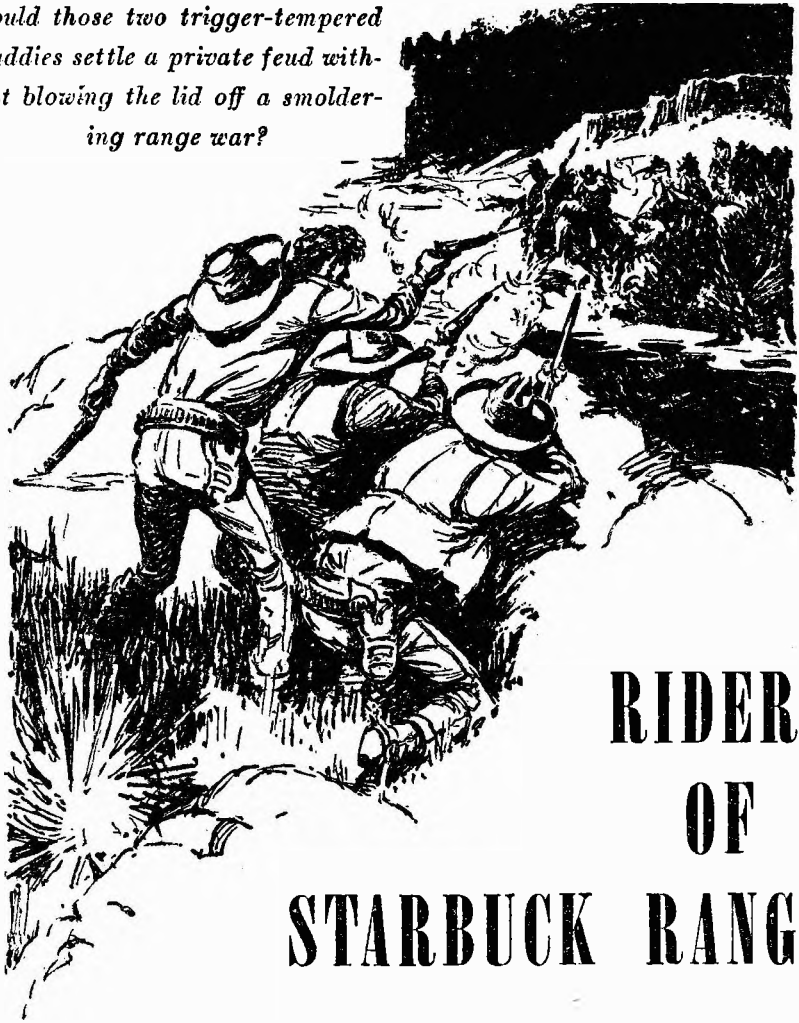


Although horse racing was the earliest sport in the South, with the Kentucky Derby topping the list, the first horse racing held in the United States was in the West, when Coronado first brought horses into the country. The speed of the wiry little Spanish ponies amazed the Indians and they immediately wanted to match their fleetness against the strange beasts. Wagers were made, and though the Indian braves were outdistanced with each new try, they were eager to try again, and horse racing was born in the West.



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

*Could those two trigger-tempered
waddies settle a private feud with-
out blowing the lid off a smolder-
ing range war?*



RIDERS OF STARBUCK RANGE

by **ROD PATTERSON**

I
It was spring in the upland country around Pop Starbuck's big cow spread, and, between the coulees thickly tangled with verbena and

low-lying hummocks of mescal and Spanish bayonet, the hogbacks bore pale-green tufts of bunch grass that tempted the lean red steers off the trail on their way to summer pas-

tures on the high range.

Pop Starbuck, tall and stoop-shouldered, though still spry despite his sixty-six years and a touch of rheumatism, sat spraddled out on the top rail of the huge holding corral, blue eyes fixed steadfastly on a sizable bunch of young stuff his trail drivers were hazing out of the corral and pointing eastward over the divide. Spring roundup was over and, with the fat beef cut out and held for market, the remainder—some two thousand head—was being sent out gradually in several small but compact herds.

Hard by the corral, Eb Garnet, Brad-S foreman, was busy at his work, seeing a score of half-wild grass horses roped, snubbed and loaded with stores and camp gear for the several trail crews. With the chore finally completed to his satisfaction, Garnet came ambling over to where Pop sat.

"I'm sendin' Till Bascom out with the chuck wagon with Number Three. O.K.?" The foreman asked.

Pop nodded his iron-gray head absently. "It's a good spread, Eb. But, somehow, the bigger the outfit gits, the more it wears me down. I've watched cattle line out of this corral for a good many springs." He gave a heavy sigh. "Just the same, I don't ask for no more'n to stay at it long's my hide holds my old bones together."

Eb Garnet, about fifty years old, appeared older because of his wrinkled, sun-blackened skin and saddle-twisted legs. He had gray, hawklike eyes under salt-colored brows and a naturally grumpy way

of speaking through a mouth that looked as if it could bite nails in half with the greatest of ease. Now, he said dourly:

"By grab, you're lucky if yuh got anything left at all in another two years, with that bunch of range pirates hornin' in on our grass down to Haycreek Flats. That Qualters crowd is plumb bad medicine, and don't say I didn't warn yuh."

Pop displayed no alarm at mention of the wildcat rancher's name. "You're a proddy old antelope, Eb," he said with a grin. "Hope I don't live to see the day when I'll be one."

Garnet continued in his gloomy voice: "And with the saddle bums yuh been hirin' lately, you're goin' to lose, ranch, hide, hair and horns, and shirt to boot!"

Pop waved that away good-naturedly. "I ain't had bad luck with any drifter I ever signed on, Eb. Have I?"

"Well," said Garnet, "that Johnny Duluth's gonna bring us a basket full o' grief 'fore we're through with him!"

A movement on the divide to the east brought Pop's gaze up with a quickening of interest. "Hullo, here comes a rider."

Garnet turned to look, then returned his gaze to the old man perched on the rail. "I sent Johnny Duluth down to Spanish Springs with that bunch o' yearlin's yest'dy—What's the matter?"

Pop pointed a gnarled hand. "Ain't this Johnny ridin' in now?"

Garnet looked again, squinting his hard eyes against the day's white

glare. "Yeah," he answered tersely. He waited a moment, then said rancorously: "Didn't I jest tell yuh? Here I send that kid down to the Springs to watch that young stuff, and now he comes skally-hootin' home like he was payin' a social call, and leaves the cattle for any brush popper to jump!"

"Well, he ain't comin' in to quit," Pop observed in his dry voice. "Leastways, a man comin' in to quit us'ally takes time to tighten the cinch on his saddle, and you c'd git your fist under his."

Johnny Duluth, the subject of their conversation, rode into the outer yard along the shifting flank of the outgoing herd.

"You shouldn't 've sent Johnny down to Spanish Springs," Pop told the foreman. "That's open desert, and I told you we'd stay clear of the desert range 'long as Cash Qualters and Mart Rambo have them old homestead sites pre-empted."

"Pre-empted!" Garnet exploded. "Dagnab it, the way you talk we might's well pull the cattle in close to the ranch and let them blasted blacklegs hog the whole blame' country!"

"It's big enough," Pop said mildly. "And I'm too old a turkey to stir up a private war over range and water rights."

Johnny Duluth came toward them, riding at a high trot, with his long legs held close against his bay horse to hold the saddle on. He dismounted, took a quick yank at the kak, and then peeled both it and the bridle off, turning the horse loose. He was around nineteen or twenty,

of slim though compact build, with the flat shoulders and tight thighs of a horseman. He had brown curly hair that needed cutting badly, and steady hazel eyes, and he wore a red wool shirt under a cowhide vest, and blue jeans held in firm cylinder shape by being drawn down tightly over high boots.

"You told me to bed them cattle down at the Springs every night," he said, and looked around for a spot to deposit his saddle, then dumped it one-handed on top of a pile of supplies and camp gear near the rail. "Well, you can't water 'em there without a gun, and the Winchester you gimme got busted, so I had to leave 'em and come on in."

Pop eyed the young cowhand from head to toe, then said quietly: "You must've worked that rifle like a Gatlin' gun to break it. What's the matter with your eye and your hands, son?"

Eb Garnet swore softly as Johnny extended his right hand, and then the foreman reached over and grabbed the other one and turned it so the hand was palm up. The wrist was marked with a welt like a rope burn, and the kid's left eye was tinged with blue. Johnny yanked his arm away and backed off a pace or two.

"Keep your hands off me, Garnet," he said with a threatening scowl.

Garnet stared bleakly at the old man on the rail. He gave a broad shrug, a gesture he invariably reserved for calamities. "Yuh can't trust a saddle tramp, I told yuh, that, Pop. Guess yuh'll listen to me after this."

Pop let himself down from the

rail with a groan as his rheumatism caught him in the small of the back. He straightened up and leaned against the rail, studying Johnny with a calculating gaze.

"What happened, son?"

"I got jerked down," Johnny replied in the same truculent tone. "That bay's plumb ornery in the brush."

"Look, Johnny," Pop said slowly, dryly, "it ain't no disgrace to git the worst of it in a fight. What really happened? Did Cash Qualters' outfit jump you?"

There was a tense silence. Johnny broke it by blurting out: "What else did you think happened?" Blood was climbing hotly up around his ears as he spoke, and his hands were balled into fists at his sides. "I had that hundred head at the Springs for the night, and Lon Fay and Rob Colin rode up and ordered me off. I told 'em to go pound salt, and they hopped me."

A flicker of shame showed briefly in his dark eyes. "They split and hit me from two sides. Colin rode me down and Fay got the rifle with his loop 'fore I could place my second shot. They roughed me up some and hogtied me while they busted up that bunch of cows, then let me go and told me to tell you that Qualters and Rambo had filed a water right on the Springs and wouldn't stand for nobody else usin' 'em." Johnny spread his hands. "That's about all."

Pop waited until the kid had finished. "Well," he said with some relief, "it could've turned out a whole lot worse. And I'm glad you

didn't shoot nobuddy, son."

"Hold on!" Eb Garnet's puckered face showed the darkening of suspicion. "Yuh say yuh fired one shot? How come yuh didn't git Lon Fay 'fore he roped your gun?"

"All right," Johnny flung back angrily, "I'll tell you why! Fay was ridin' a palomino mare. I could've got him but I hated to risk shootin' up a good horse. I'll know how to handle Lon Fay next time I meet him, though!"

"There won't be no next time," Pop said firmly. "I don't like to lose cattle or grass any better'n the next man, but I'd sooner lose both than have one of my boys shot over 'em, or have him shoot anybuddy else either." He gave Johnny a slow wave of the hand. "Go on over to the cook house and git your dinner. We'll decide what to do with you later."

Johnny hesitated, then pulled his shoulders up and let them fall again. Turning, he swung toward the log ranch buildings at the rim of the yard.

Pop and Garnet watched him move away, noting the proud angle of his head, the almost arrogant stance of his broad shoulders. Pop tipped his black hat back and scratched his balding head. "Shore wish't I knowed—"

The fast-arriving rumble of horses' hoofs stopped him in mid-sentence, and both he and Garnet whirled around to face the sound. Stationed like this against the corral rail, they saw the group of horsebackers that showed as a wide scatter of shadows against the sun. Those shapes at

first were too vague to be counted, but presently, as the party drew swiftly closer, the riders took solid form in the heat haze, and it was then that Pop Starbuck dropped his warning words: "It's Cash Qualters and his crowd!"

A score of horsemen galloped up and stopped in front of the two men who stood so still beside the corral. They were a hard-looking lot, with felt hats flapping, their faces gaunt and dust-covered, rifles jutting up from under saddle flaps, holstered revolvers slapping lean thighs. The ranch yard seemed suddenly filled with them, a weaving panorama of sweating horses and grim, sardonic men. Two of the riders came forward, holding in their horses with a tight rein.

Cash Qualters sat high on a roan with a white star on its forehead. Tall, even in the saddle, Qualters was an angular, rail-thin man, with dark bitter eyes and a mouth as narrow as a knife blade. There was a scar over one eye that, healing, had drawn the upper lid enough to give him a staring, sinister look. Mart Rambo, his partner, sitting his sorrel on the left, was a burly, squat-shouldered man, pale-eyed, bald, with an unpleasant, broken-toothed grin that seemed never to leave his face, though there was no humor or friendliness in it.

Qualters hooked one hand around the saddlehorn and spoke to Pop with an iron insolence. "One of your men took a pot shot at my foreman. His name's Duluth—and I want him! Pronto!"

Pop's glance never wavered from the wildcat cowman's surly face. He said, "So?" in an almost affable tone of voice. "Sorry, Qualters, but I can't turn Duluth over without askin' him some questions."

Qualters had a reputation of being a tough and quick-witted gun fighter. He was known never to wait for anything or anybody when the pinch of his own will squeezed him. Since seizing the old homestead sites on Haycreek Flats some six months before, the aggressive streak in his character had been broadened by a driving desire for power. And so, he had begun throwing his cattle where he pleased, pushing out farther and farther from the dobe house that was his headquarters on the Flats. There were sixteen men in his crew, and there wasn't one among them that could ride out without keeping a cat-eyed watch on his own back trail.

Now, Qualters studied Pop with his hostile eyes, weighing him with a hard care and making up his mind what he would do.

"I'll send down to the Springs for them cattle you scattered," Pop said, in a louder, more insistent tone. "And we won't bother you no more, 'long's you've filed a water right."

"I've looked that beef over, Starbuck," said Qualters, "and I've decided to claim sixty head for the water you been usin' at the Springs the past six months."

Pop took the brass-faced statement without blinking an eye. "I don't want no trouble with you, Qualters," he said finally, "but I won't stand for

no rawhide like that. Not none."

The wildcat rancher laughed shortly. "Old man, don't leave me catch any of your men within a mile of my range. Far's I'm concerned there ain't no more Brad-S. All beef with your brand on it is maverick stuff on Haycreek Flats from now on, and open to my iron!"

"You're talkin' pretty tall, Qualters," said Pop. "That's gov'ment land you hold. Don't fergit that, mister."

Qualters' flat cheeks were red as brick dust as he hurled out his insulting challenge: "Stay off the Flats! Stay off the Springs! And fire that man Duluth or I'll take care of him!"

Eb Garnet had been standing with his back pushed against the corral bars, ready and waiting for the smoke-up that seemed inevitable. When it didn't come, and when he heard Pop's mild handling of the outlaw, a crease formed slowly on his forehead beneath the rim of his tipped-back hat, and his chin began to come up as he stared aghast at his boss.

"We'll see about it, friend," Pop said evenly, steadily. "We'll see."

Qualters leaned forward a little in the saddle, throwing his harsh words down at the old man like open-handed blows. "Starbuck, you're goin' to need a heap o' guts if you aim to stay in the cattle business." He flung his horse around with a cruel jerk on the steel curb bit and, with a savage, down-slapping gesture, took his whole crew out of the ranch yard at a long, high lope.

II

Pop and Eb stood motionless, staring after Q & R as the party went streaming over the divide in a long, running column. When they were lost in the cloud of their own dust, Garnet turned mocking eyes on Pop and said with a rank disgust:

"How does it feel when yuh eat crow—feathers and toe nails and all?"

Pop opened his mouth to make reply, but the voice of Johnny Duluth in back of him commanded the moment. "What did Qualters want, Mr. Starbuck?"

The young drifter stood with the loose drape of his shoulders against the corral bars, his tall, lean body resting slackly on long legs that projected thin shadows against the sunlight on the ground.

"He was lookin' fer *you*, buster," Garnet said curtly.

Johnny shrugged. He waited in stoical silence.

Pop spoke. "We'll let somebuddy else bring them yearlin's back from Spanish Springs, and we'll send you out with one of the trail crews to where Qualters and his tinhorns can't git at you. You won't have no more trouble with 'em."

Johnny's eyes focused on the old man's leathery face. "Might be better," he said in his slow, soft drawl, "if we *did* have trouble with that bunch. It might do less harm than to duck it. Still, it ain't no skin off my hide what you do. And there's plenty of outfits around where I won't have to hide from nobody." His gaze grew more intent. "Can

I burn a ride out of here on the chuck wagon when it heads out for Yakapai?"

Pop's eyes narrowed, and his flat mouth stiffened almost imperceptibly. "You wanta quit?"

Eb Garnet let out a low, triumphant grunt. Without a word, he produced his time book. He already had it open to the right page, and that fact and his smug manner thrown in caused Pop to glare at him balefully.

"Crow, durn you, crow!" Pop growled. Then he looked back at Johnny Duluth. "There'll be no droppin' off to sneak back and run the chuck line around any of my camps, young feller. Joe Amber'll see to it you stay on the wagon till you git to the railroad at Blackhorn Station. And Till Bascom'll be ridin' with you, so don't try no funny business. Till's a dead shot."

Johnny released one of his rare grins. "You think of everything, Mr. Starbuck." He glanced at the yellow pay slip Garnet offered him, then shook his head, declining it.

"Now what's the matter?" the foreman shouted angrily. "Ain't it enough for the little work yuh done on this spread?"

"Well, it's mostly my fault about them yearlin's I had to leave at the Springs," said Johnny. "You can call it square till you find how many Qualters run off." He looked at Pop. "Thanks for givin' me a chance, mister. I'll pay for that busted rifle—sometime."

Pop refused to answer that, but said: "The wagon's about ready to

pull out. You better put your saddle aboard while there's room for it."

Johnny nodded, and Pop, and Garnet moved across the yard toward where the big red-wheeled chuck wagon stood near the water tank. The kid watched them a moment, then ambled toward the pile of camp gear and fumbled briefly with his old Meaney saddle, tying the stirrups together over the horn. Then he stowed the kak under the seat of the chuck wagon and fixed himself a roost above it, next to Joe Amber, the red-faced driver.

Till Bascom, the cook, took his orders from Garnet about watching Johnny until they reached the railroad, and presently the wagon jounced out of the yard with a clatter of pots and pans.

When the wagon had passed beyond the yard, Pop said: "Well, we'll have to save out a pack horse to bring the kid's camp gear back from the Springs," adding glumly: "I swear I don't know whether I handled that boy right or not."

"He ain't worth a barrel o' shucks," Garnt commented sourly. "A danged saddle tramp!"

"First he lets on to be all primed to bust the whole country apart," Pop went on obliviously, "and then he ups and walks out over a little argument. Well, I'll have to send somebuddy down to round up them yearlin's at the Springs and pull 'em off the Flats."

"I'll do it," the foreman offered with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm. "I won't ask nobuddy else to."

Pop gave Garnet a sidelong glance full of suspicion. "If it's just to bring in the beef, all right," he said. "But if you're plannin' on startin' in where Johnny Duluth left off, and smoke up Q & R, then you c'n stay put."

"Yuh must take me for a fool," Garnet grumbled. "It ain't goin' to be no picnic scoutin' cattle out of a rock pile with a bunch of gunmen layin' for a chance to start a ruckus. You can come too if yuh think it's such a saddle-blanket cinch."

"I will," Pop said with sudden emphasis. "Git my coat over there on that pile of stores. And bring my gun belt, too. It's under the coat."

Garnet sauntered over and picked the jacket off the top of the pile, staring down. "Your belt's here, but there ain't no gun on it." He looked around, a frown on his puckered face. "Now I remember. Johnny dumped his saddle here and when he picked it up he done a heap o' fiddlin' with the stirrup leathers."

Pop walked over and took the coat, feeling it all over carefully, then bent and ran his hands in under the sacks and blanket rolls where the coat had been lying. "Well, that's why he wouldn't take his pay slip," he muttered half to himself. "He was fixin' to sneak back to the Springs all the time I was augerin' with him!"

Garnet's reply was indulgent to the point of mockery. "And he's got your gun but no camp rig, so he'll be headin' hell bent to pick up the rig he left down there at the Springs.

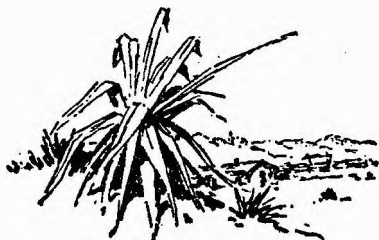
Your reasonin' is plumb breath-takin', Pop!"

"Oh, shut up, Eb!" The old rancher turned to gaze up toward the divide. "I git it all now. Johnny's done had dealin's with Qualters' outfit afore. If he'd been an ordinary puncher, they'd 've sprung that windy about water rights first 'fore they ordered him off. 'Stead of that, Lon Fay and that other one beat him up to scare him, then brought up the water rights to make a good case for Qualters with me. That proves they knew him and wanted him out of the country quick. And there's that business about the palomino mare."

Pop scratched his bald spot, holding his hat with the same hand. "There's somethin' mighty queer about a man holdin' his fire for fear of hittin' a hoss—even a good one—when his own skin's in danger of bein' peeled."

"Talk ain't goin' to git us no-where," Garnet said sarcastically. "Let's *do* somethin' for a change."

"All right," Pop agreed with gusto. "Saddle up my pony, and have one of the corral hands rustle up a pack hoss. We may have to lug Johnny Duluth back hogtied and gagged. I won't have a cattle war started just because an ornery kid



has put the Injun sign on a bunch of land pirates!"

The ground around Spanish Springs still showed the marks of Johnny Duluth's scuffle with the two Q & R riders, but none were fresher than five or six hours. When Pop Starbuck and his foreman slanted their horses down into the small basin that held the springs, they saw that Cash Qualters had not even posted a guard here, and that the missing Brad-S yearlings were nowhere nearby. Even the buzzards that commonly circled over this spot had cruised to other haunts. And there was no sign of Johnny Duluth either.

"Hidin' back in the rock breaks, prob'ly," Garnet gloomily opined.

"He's had plenty of time to walk over here from Cholo Pass," Pop mused, "if he managed to git the drop on Amber and Bascom."

After a thorough look around, the two cowmen moved east into the hard-rock country that rimmed Haycreek Flats, keeping an eye on the scenery for signs of Johnny or Cash Qualters' scouts.

The grass in this region abutting the Ute Desert grew thin and in widely separated places, and it was evident that Q & R had done a good job of scattering the Brad-S beef, or had deliberately run them back to the Flats to Qualters' grass. Pop said he didn't think Qualters and Rambo were fools enough for a rustling play of that scope and magnitude.

Pop and Garnet inched their way deeper into the low red hills, collect-

ing a few Brad-S strays, and beating the draws and gullies for more. They raked coves and thickets, and finally Pop rode ahead and counted up what they had gathered in the course of the afternoon, holding his cow pony at the head of a faint trail through the broken lava and jag-tooth rocks.

"Mmm," the old man murmured. "I tally forty-two critters, Eb. That makes us about sixty shy. Let's see what's at the end of this here trail."

They rode on, the horses picking their way along a deep gulch, the edges of which kept caving off under them. Pop said, "Take care, Eb. We don't wanta wind up down there with our backs broke." The old rancher had been wearing a heavy Colt pistol to replace the weapon Johnny Duluth had taken, and now he pulled the holster forward a little so the butt rode next to his saddlehorn, handy for a quick draw. "And we don't wanta git bushwhacked, either," he added succinctly.

Eb Garnet, impatient at their slow pace, squeezed past and peremptorily took the lead. "There's been no cows down in here," he complained. "The grass ain't been grazed in—Hold up!" He reined in so suddenly his moro horse nearly slid sideways off the bank. Pop's pony came piling up behind Garnet's and almost fell over him.

"Look!" Garnet was pointing downward, every muscle of his body drawn up taut.

Directly ahead the gulch opened out into a stand of withered greasewood trees with a small bog hole in

the center. Pop peered anxiously over Garnet's shoulder.

"I'll be caterwopously durned if there ain't a man down there asleep," the foreman whispered.

A grayish clump on a dead greasewood moved, and turned into a huge turkey buzzard that unfurled a six-foot spread of wings and went flapping noiselessly away, skimming the crags and trees by inches. Then, from back in the greasewoods, three more buzzards took off and floated silently into the blue.

Eb Garnet spurred up his horse, but Pop was beside him and caught hold of his bridle. "Wait here, Eb, with the pack horse. I'll go down and see if there's anything for us to do. That's a dead man down there."

The foreman accepted the command with unexpected good grace, while Pop eased his horse down to the clearing and dismounted to make his cursory inspection. A cloud of flies hovered around his bared head as he bent on one knee beside the still form on the ground.

Pop looked up finally. "It's Lon Fay, Qualters' wrangler," was all he said.

Garnet swore softly. "We better line out of here, Pop, and we better do it quick!" He did not move in the saddle, just stared down at the old man, adding dismally: "Johnny had it in for Fay, and now he's squared the score."

Pop nodded grimly. "And Qualters'll say we helped him do it, too." He stood up slowly, staring down at the dead man. "But still we can't be sure Johnny done it, Eb."

"Then where's that palomino Fay was ridin' when they tackled the kid this mornin'?"

Pop shook his head morosely. "Mebbe she bolted," he said doubtfully. "Well, whoever done this little job made a center shot of it." He cheered up suddenly. "By gosh, Johnny *couldn't* have done it! Why, he couldn't hit a load of hay with that old buffalo pistol of mine less'n he was used to the way it pulls to the left!"

"Qualters'll swear he did, though," Garnet argued stubbornly. "And he'll say we was in on it, like you just said. Then we'll have a fight on our hands and no mistake!"

Pop frowned, then relaxed. "We'll head that off pronto. You'll have to take this hombre in to Rosadero and report to the coroner and the rangers, while I scout around for the kid."

"What if yuh find him and he's got that palomino mare?" the foreman demanded.

"I'll hold him, no fear. And if he's got the hoss with him, I'll find a piece of swale to turn her loose in. There's no call to make it look worse for Johnny than it already does." He beckoned urgently. "Come on! Help me load this hombre on the pack hoss! There's no time to lose! Qualters may be ridin' this way right now!"

III

Pop didn't have to look far for Johnny Duluth. Less than an hour after Garnet had sloped southward with the body of Lon Fay lashed to the pack horse, the old cowman found the kid's camp alongside a

shallow rain pond, with a low caliche cliff on one side and a wall of giant sagebrush on the other. Pop had cut Johnny's sign in a stretch of *vega*, and had had no trouble tracking him down. Now, he circled and rode in unannounced through the barrier of brush, running the risk of getting himself shot with his own gun by a startled and determined young man.

Johnny had his borrowed camp outfit spread out on the sunbaked ground, and was grazing a grizzled old range horse at the end of a rope nearby while he cooked a flour cake on a flat rock in front of a small fire pit. Pop's sudden arrival sat him back on his heels, but he recovered his composure quickly.

"Howdy," he said evenly.

Pop held in his pony. "Had you doped right, looks like. But why ain't you burnin' the breeze 'stead of campin' out on Qualter's range?"

Johnny thought a minute. "I got to thinkin' about them cattle, and decided to mosey back and bunch what was left for you."

"Oh?" Pop let a tinge of suspicion creep into his voice. "Where'd you git that hoss?"

"Roped him an hour ago. He must've strayed out of Qualters' rumba."

"They hang hoss thieves," Pop told him in a hard, flat tone.

"I'll take my chances," the kid said roughly.

Pop considered Johnny out of veiled eyes for a long moment. Then he said: "What d'you know about the man from Q & R that was killed in the breaks a while ago?"

The kid had started to remove his flour cake from the rock as the old man spoke. He dropped it in the fire and burned his hand grabbing for it. He didn't look around, but said in a low, hurried tone: "Which one of 'em got killed?"

Pop said, "Lon Fay," and watched Johnny's profile for the telltale tightening of jaw muscles.

None came, but the kid stood up, whistling with his breath on his burned thumb. Then he stared up at Pop and said: "Fay was a stinker." And that was all.

Pop dismounted stiffly and walked toward the young cowhand. "Fay was the one that was forkin' the palomino you was afraid of shootin' up. Ain't that right?"

Johnny nodded, still staring at the old man with a deliberately innocuous expression. "What about it?"

"Did you kill Fay?" Pop asked softly.

"No," the answer came whipping back. Then Johnny stiffened. "Who's that in the brush?"

Pop scrambled back to his horse to get the rifle from its saddle boot. He had the weapon when the sagebrush parted and a horse and rider pushed into the open. The man in the saddle pulled up casually, shading his eyes against the afternoon's amber sunlight. He gave no sign of surprise or any word of greeting, but stepped down from the horse with easy grace and turned to face the two men who stood rigidly staring. His horse was an eye-ful—a golden palomino. Sleek, long-legged, powerful.

The stranger was youngish and dark-eyed, with a Mexican beadwork vest and elaborate beaded buckskin gloves. When he finally spoke, the words came slowly, unhurriedly, in an easy Texas drawl. "Got my trails twisted, gents, and seen the smoke of your fire. Thought I'd say howdy."

Johnny Duluth stood as motionless as a statue, his hat brim dropping a shadow over his face and obscuring the expression on it—all of it except his hazel eyes which were bright and dilated so nothing but the widened pupils showed. He said steadily, evenly: "The hombre that tries to ride that horse off this range ain't goin' to get very far."

The stranger matched stares with the kid, and said, after a short pause: "Way it looks now I *ain't* goin' to get far, but it won't be you that'll stop me, Johnny."

"I got something to say about what happens to that mare," the kid went on, a hardening of anger in his voice. "Don't forget that, Sid, like you done before."

"Hey, what's goin' on here?" Pop demanded irritably, looking from one to the other. He stopped his gaze on Johnny's stiff-set face. "You know this man—met him afore?"

Johnny stabbed a glance at the old man. "That's right. And don't ask no more questions because I ain't goin' to answer 'em!"

Pop put his puzzled gaze on the man called Sid. "What's your business, mister?"

Sid pulled his shoulders up, let them fall. "I worked for Cash Qualters."

"Worked?"

Sid ducked his head, still watching Johnny out of the edges of his narrowed eyes. "I'm the one shot Lon Fay."

Silence came down, drew out interminably. The three men stood there in the sunlight, not speaking, hardly seeming to breathe. Then Pop spoke. "I was just tellin' Johnny about findin' Fay back in the breaks. My foreman's headin' to town with the body to report to the coroner and—"

"He didn't make it," Sid said shortly. "Qualters caught up with him down at Toweep Wash."

"You mean—" Pop gasped, and couldn't finish.

"Your man cut and run," Sid said in the same curt tone. "But Qualters got Lon's carcass—damn him! There's goin' to be a lot of smoke around here 'fore sundown, mister!"

Pop swapped glances with Johnny Duluth who now was listening tensely to the talk with sweat showing wet and glistening on his cheeks.

"We'd better ride," Pop said.

The tension appeared to run out of the kid's lean frame as Pop spoke. Suddenly he reached inside his shirt and pulled out the old pistol he had taken from Pop's gun belt back at the ranch. "I got you into this jackpot, Mr. Starbuck," he declared with a hard accent on the words. "You and Sid ride out. I'll stay here and wait for Qualters."

"The devil you will!" Pop waved the foolhardy offer down impatiently. "You're comin' with us, Johnny. If we git a move on we might make Brad-S, and there's still three-four of my boys down there. Come on!"

Qualters'll be combin' these hills—
may be ridin' this way right now!"

More than a dozen Q & R rannies were waiting on Haycreek Flats at the spot where Eb Garnet had deserted the pack horse with Lon Fay's body lashed to it. Garnet had torn a hole in the horizon when Qualters' men had surprised him en route to Rosadero an hour before.

Of the twelve waiting riders, Qualters himself was the coolest, though even he was walking up and down restlessly before the group that squatted on boot heels and silently smoked. Mart Rambo was there, whittling nervously on a pine branch. His thick-jowled face showed the pale streak of fear, and his mouth twitched from time to time, and his queer eyes kept darting to his partner's stolid face.

Cash Qualters' edged voice finally rapped out over the silence. "Here comes Colin and Barney. Who else is missin'?"

"Clegg and DePard," Rambo cried shrilly. "They took Lon's body back to the ranch."

"It's takin' 'em long enough," growled the tall outlaw. "We got to get goin' before Starbuck's boys get back on Brad-S. I want to settle this on our *own* ground."

Rambo had been drinking some, not enough to affect his reasoning powers, but enough to change his customarily docile manner to loud and violent opposition. "Look here, Cash," he screeched, "you can't expect to gun down a lot of men and not get the rangers on our neck! We



A huge turkey buzzard stood guard over the spread-eagled body.

can take it easy and safe and still bust up Brad-S!"

Qualters hit the stock man with his hard voice: "The devil with playin' it safe! We'll never get another break like this!" His eyes were blazing and his face was white with rage. "You can stay out of it, Mart, if you're so damned yellow, but shut your mouth and leave me run this show!"

Rambo wilted. "All right—all right," he whined. "I only—"

Qualters turned to the waiting men. "Let's ride. We won't wait for the others." He held up his hand as the crew sprang up eagerly and moved toward the horses. He waited with a show of implacable patience until he had their attention. "One thing, boys. Sid's missin' with that palomino mare of his. It may be he was the one plugged Lon to square the ruckus they had this mornin', but now's the time to finish with Brad-S, and by thunder, we're goin' to go through with it or I'll see you all in hell!"

Pop Starbuck and Johnny Duluth and the young man called Sid were a-saddle and moving surreptitiously through the brush, heading due east from the spot where Pop had come upon Johnny. As they topped a rise, Pop threw a glance over his shoulder. Dust, like a gathering storm cloud, showed its gray drift far back in the broken jungles of rock and brush. "Here they come, boys," the old man called warningly. "About two mile back!"

With shortened stride, the horses eased themselves down the slope of a small bench. "Let's bear south now," suggested Pop. "We might miss a drygulch. No tellin' where Qualters has posted look-outs with all afternoon to do it in."

They cut a tangent through the brush and chapparal, striking in the general direction of Brad-S which lay eight-odd miles away, beyond Coffin Creek and the intervening hills. When they hit the creek, twenty min-

utes later, they found the going somewhat easier on the horses, and pushed the animals without let-up on past the Broken Buttes. Pop scanned their back trail constantly, urging Johnny and Sid to watch the path ahead for interceptors.

"Watch out!" Johnny yelled it out, pulling in so abruptly that Sid almost ran over him. "I hear horses on the right!"

Pop reined down, standing up in the stirrups, trying to see over the crest of a hogback. Viewing nothing alarming, he cast about for a spot to make a stand against Q & R, but saw no satisfactory bulwark, nothing but scraggly brush and naked rock. "Keep goin'!" he called softly, and hit home with his spurs.

The three men came up out of low ground and galloped on the level along the rim of Coffin Creek, with the muddy water some ten feet below them on the left. And now, suddenly, Brad-S Ranch came into view, only about a mile and a half away. They could make out the water tank and the red siding and the pale adobe clay between the bunkhouse logs even in the fading light.

Pop Starbuck had traveled the Chisholm Trail in the wild and woolly days; he had helped swim a herd at Doane's Crossing on the Red River when the stream was high, and he had fought to stop a stampede in a Kansas lightning storm. But not once in his life had he seen men ride with the reckless, furious speed shown now by Johnny and Sid.

The old man pounded after them, eating their dust, his leathery face

grim, his eyes narrowed over a flame of excitement. Nobody spoke. It was all a man could do to dodge the brush that leaped at him out of nowhere, that threatened to tear him out of his saddle. They ripped through the wild willows that choked the banks of the creek, and had almost reached the wagon road to the ranch when, without warning, six riders bulged out of the brush a hundred yards away, and squarely in their path. Pop and his companions brought up with a long, grinding slide of hoofs that sent a cloud of dust billowing into the air.

The Q & R punchers had halted, and now a swift scattering of their revolver shots broke over the mesquites, and lead sang over the three men with a sibilant threat.

"Dismount and hit for the creek," Pop said tersely, and slid to the ground, dragging his rifle from the kak all in the same movement. Johnny and Sid came down from their horses at the same instant. "Them shots'll bring my boys runnin' like honey drawin' bees. If there's anybuddy over there," he added as a rueful afterthought.

"Take care," Sid warned, his thin face drawn and white, a look of danger in his dark eyes. "There's plenty of quicksand around here, and the other side of the creek's nothin' else but!"

The three reached the shore of the creek and halted, facing the sound of the Q & R guns which were still tentatively feeling for a target. The mud where the three cornered men stood was hock-deep and churned into a loblolly by the hoofs of wan-

dering cattle. Dusk was coming swiftly over the chapparal and over the sluggish, murky water. It was a ruby-red sunset, and the creek was as crimson as fresh blood with the reflected glow.

Their horses blew, and all the hot excitement of pursuit faded with the day's light. There was a lull in the firing over yonder, but Pop said warningly: "They're just waitin' for the rest of the gang to come up—which won't be long!"

There was a three-quarter moon, and a thin scud of gray clouds skimmed the tops of distant mauve-colored hills to the west. At length there came the indistinct sounds of hoofs which presently increased to a ragged tattoo of many hard-riding men. Silence, then the sharp crackling of the nearby brush, and the low, filing hum of man talk. Bridle rings jangled. Bit chains clinked. A voice said: "What the devil! Let's go down and git 'em out o' there right now!"

"Come on, boys," Pop whispered. "We'll try to crawl along the shore line. But look out for quicksand or we'll all be goners quick!"

The hoofs of Pop's pony splashed musically for a few yards, then the others started. The creek rose in a cold circle about the feet of the three stealthily moving men. It spilled down over their boot tops.

IV

Pop Starbuck suddenly gave a sign to leave the water, and Johnny and Sid obeyed in utter silence, pulling their horses after them on

tight-held bridles. They reached a spot on shore about ten feet beyond the stream.

"Wait!" Pop murmured, and that was the moment another burst of gunfire brightened the sagebrush along the bank like heat lightning, throwing every rock, every boulder, into stark outline. The bullets went high and clattered in the scrub like hail stones.

The three men ducked, and Pop said, "There's mebbe a dozen men in that jag of cutthroats." He levered a cartridge into his rifle with deft hands. "We got to stay down low and pick 'em off like turkeys on a limb." He dropped to one knee in the center of the willow motte, grunting out an oath as his rheumatism twinged him. Johnny and Sid got down, too, after first slapping the horses back into the creek.

More bullets screamed past and splashed in the stream, throwing up little jets of white water into the moonlight. Then Pop opened up with his Winchester. The sharp cracks of the weapon echoed out over the mesquites and the passage of the slugs made a sound like the breaking of piano strings drawn too tight.

A voice deep in the brush—Qualters', unmistakably—barked a hoarse command. "Charge 'em, boys! Bust 'em to hell!"

Johnny and Sid were hunkered down beside the old cowman, their pistols out and ready as they stared steadily through the moonlight for a man to shoot at. Pop said, "There's a cup in them rocks straight ahead. Let's try for it."

Silently, the three stood up and

made a rush out of the willows. They reached the natural fort in the rocks a split second before Q & R guns thrashed lead over the spot they had just left. Now Pop and Johnny and Sid began firing with a steady, clocklike regularity at the dim shapes, mounted and a-foot, that kept drifting back and forth in the yonder moonlight like vague gray wraiths. And now the six-guns and rifles of Qualters' men laid a spearlike pattern beyond the mesquites and the sage.

- When Cash Qualters' charge finally came, it came furiously, the horsemen swinging in a semi-circle, and Pop and his companions let go with a sudden volley of shots. Two saddles emptied, the horses rearing past riderless and wild. The charge broke and veered away, returning to the brush in confusion. The Q & R riders reformed their ranks amid violent cursing, and tried again, this time yelling like Comanche Indians, firing recklessly, blindly.

There were now thirteen men in Qualters' crew, seen more clearly in the saddles of their rangy brush ponies. And now their guns were keeping up a constant fusillade. Suddenly all those riders burst out of the sage again. And this time Cash Qualters himself was in the lead. His high-riding shape showed to the men in the rocks.

Pop drew a bead and fired, and watched Qualters throw away his rifle and fall headlong to the ground, down under the slashing hoofs of his star-faced roan. The charge came on, but wavered and broke as it had

before. Eleven men rode back into the hemming brush this time.

Pop sighed. "I got Qualters, but don't git cocky, boys. We're in for one helluva gun whuppin' 'fore we're 'through!'"

The words had hardly left Pop's lips when Qualters' men made their third attempt. And this time they came out silently, without any yelling or undue noise. Hoofs hammered on the rocky ground as the whole party rushed back and forth along the creek bank, wheeling, turning, firing at the men who were forted up among the rocks, drawing closer and closer with every swing they made.

Sid's revolver was roaring out its raw, wild song as he slammed lead into the ranks of the galloping horsemen; the explosions of his gun were as steady and measured as though he was counting as he fired. His jaw was grim-set, and his eyes flamed with a mad light. Suddenly, he flung himself up and out and went stumbling over the rocks into open ground, blazing away with his pistol, hurling his voice at the outlaws with an eerie yell.

Johnny Duluth stopped firing long enough to shout, "Sid—Sid! Get back, you fool!" Then he let go at a rider racing by.

One of Qualters' rowdies plunged suddenly out of the ruck of smoke and dust and bore straight down on Sid where he crouched on level ground. Pop Starbuck laid a shot on the man. He hit the rider's horse, and watched it sink. The rider, hurled clear of the saddle, struck hard and rolled over and over, end-

ing up in a limp huddle ten feet in front of Sid.

Johnny tried to yell again at Sid, but the sound he made was ghastly, inhuman. Then, abruptly, he stood up in the cup, and swung outside of it. Pop saw a shot explode in the kid's face from the muzzle of a rider's passing gun, but the bullet did not touch him.

Now Sid was on his feet again, and he was screaming oaths at the attacking punchers and firing his six-shooter without taking aim. He was standing that way, defying the outlaw's fire, when Johnny lurched up in back of him. There were two black shapes blocked against gun flame, and then Sid dropped as though cut down by a giant scythe. Johnny stood alone, staring down at the man sprawled at his feet.

For the next few wild, roaring minutes Pop was too busy to bother about the two men who were acting like maniacs out there in front of him. He poured lead at Qualters' men until his rifle jammed, then he threw it away and pulled out his pistol and took up where he had left off, punching bullets at horse and man alike.

It was a crazy and savage dog fight. The din swelled louder; bullets squashed around Pop, but he ignored them as dust and smoke boiled over him, and the yells of Qualters' men ran on endlessly.

And then, suddenly, to the southward, in the direction of the ranch, other yells rose against the night, and new guns took up the fiendish chorus. Pale flashes showed be-

tween the tangled mesquites, blinking and fading and blinking again like giant fireflies on the wing. And the hollow crash of those new guns grew nearer, and hoof thunder poured out across the hills.

Q & R was running wide again, beaten back by this fresh threat and by the stubborn resistance of Pop and his gun-crazy friends. Some of Qualters' men were a-foot, their horses shot dead under them; others lay motionless on the ground, grotesquely posed with arms and legs stretched out or twisted. And now, Eb Garnet's war whoop slit the night, and with that signal, Q & R began fading back into the deeper brush. Where there had been sixteen men in the crew Qualters and Rambo had flung relentlessly at Pop and his companions, only eight riders turned and ran tuck-tail into the wilderness.

Riding ahead of three rangers and a posse of local ranchers, Eb Garnet roared up to the spot where Pop, Johnny and Sid had made their stand. Waving his party onward, the foreman lit down and confronted Pop under the smoky stars.

"Jehoshaphat," he gasped, "I was afraid we wouldn't git here in time! After Qualters jumped me and grabbed Fay's body, I hit for town and got Judge Hinchley to make out a warrant for Qualters and Rambo and call the rangers out. We picked up the rest of the bunch on the way up here." He blew out a long hard breath. "We heard the shootin' ten miles down the line and it sure sounded like the Battle of Bull Run, by grabs!"

Pop rested weary, bloodshot eyes

on his foreman. "Eb, I'm dead beat. Can't take it like I uster." He glanced over toward Johnny Duluth who was kneeling at Sid's side. "Help us git the stranger over to the ranch. He's been hard hit."

Then Pop limped up to Johnny and dropped a hand to his shoulder, staring kindly down into Sid's pained face.

Sid opened his eyes. "I'll be . . . all right," he breathed. "Just a slug in the brisket is all."

"You blasted fool," Johnny said scathingly. "What'd you expect to gain by bustin' out in the open like you done?"

Sid grimaced. "I killed Long Fay when he beat our mare with a bull whip. I wanted to make sure Qualters and Rambo got what was comin' to 'em, you see?"

"Well," Johnny said, a reluctant gentleness in his tone, "Both of 'em are dead. Pop got Qualters and you got Rambo."

"That's fine," Sid answered and closed his eyes, breathing hard.

"Look," Pop put in bluntly, "you two've made enough durned hooraw to put me in my grave before my time."

"Serves you right for mixin' into what wasn't none of your business," Johnny snapped. "Sid's my brother, whether he wants to admit it or not, and this blame' ruckus is how he handles everything he gets into. I followed him here all the way from down Laredo way when he swiped my palomino and signed on with Qualters' bad bunch. And now he's killed a man because that man took a whip to our horse, and the rangers'll take

him back to the hoosegow." He stood up, pulling his chin down and staring at the man on the ground with hot, resentful eyes. "I rode down to Haycreek Flats this mornin' from the Springs to get him to quit Qualters and tie up with me. But he was too damn ornery to listen!"

"Shut up a minute, can't you?" Pop said irritably. "Gosh, you c'n make more noise than a blizzard on a tin roof! Now—about your brother here. The rangers won't be takin' him no place atall, because Sid's workin' for me and he helped me bust up Cash Qualters and his crowd. How does that suit you?"

Johnny's mouth fell open and he forgot to close it. He got it shut finally, though, and gulped. "Pop, it . . . it suits me plumb down to the ground!" he whispered.

The three of them: Pop Starbuck, Eb Garnet and Johnny Duluth, sat in the warm kitchen at the ranch late that night. Sid Duluth's wound had been washed and dressed and he was resting on Pop's private four-poster bed. Outside the house, a wind moved the tall boughs of the doorway cottonwood. Pop got up and put a stick of firewood in the stove, went out to look at the patient, and came back and sat down again.

"He's asleep and he ain't got no fever," the old man said. "I count on havin' him up and around and in shape to ride in ten days' time. Then he can go with you, Johnny, and jine up with Number Three herd at Yakapai."

"Who," Eb asked slyly, "gits that

palomino mare?"

Pop considered the question carefully, watching Johnny from under lowered eyelids, waiting. Suddenly Johnny looked up and grinned.

"We'll toss a coin for the mare," he said eagerly. "Winner rides her the first six months—loser the last."

Pop leaned back in his easy chair with a deep-drawn sigh. "There's two wrong things in this here world," he laughed. "One's to be too blame' worried about your feller man. T'other's not to be worried enough." He looked across at Johnny Duluth, gravity holding his furrowed face once more. "Johnny, I'll take that old pistol of mine if you're all through with it. I think a heap of that hogleg. It belonged to a friend of mine. Davy Crockett was his name."

Johnny stared and swallowed hard. There was a short run of silence in which he met the old man's kindly gaze unflinchingly. Then his bronzed face broke in a smile that went clear up to his ears. He stood up quickly, and went over to his pack in the corner of the room and came back and handed the revolver to Pop as if it was something fragile that he might break if he wasn't extra careful.

He stood still, staring at the red-hot lids of the stove. "Pop," he said simply, "this here's the best spread I ever hit. And I don't ask for no more'n to stay here till hell freezes over." He turned and laid his glance on the old cowman's gentle face. "And when hell freezes over, Pop, me and Sid'll skate with you and Eb on the blasted ice!"

PEDDLER BAIT

by
CLIFF WALTERS



George Greer figured on selling Echo Stanton a bill of goods but Echo was something of a trader himself

It wasn't the first time in the three years that they had been competitors in Deepville that tall, rawboned George Greer had strode across the street to jump, roughshod, on bald, rotund, middle-aged Echo Stanton who had just opened, and was now sweeping out, his log-walled store.

"So forty cents a hundred ain't enough to pay Jug Johnson for haulin' up here from the railroad!" Greer said angrily. "You've got to start something by hikin' the anty to fifty cents a hundred. Which I'll have to pay, too. Well, you sure have started something!" He advanced an ominous step.

"Now, h-hold on," said Echo. "You know, Greer, that f-fifty cents a hundred ain't too much for draggin' freight all the way up this m-mountain slant. Jug's got a big family to support and—"

"And you've got another lesson comin'!" Greer moved in fast, lashed out with a hard, quick blow that sent his smaller competitor staggering back against the counter.

Echo Stanton didn't go down. Awkwardly but courageously he lunged at Greer and fought for a moment. But for only a moment. Greer was too long of arm, too young and powerful for the usually mild

little storekeeper. And Greer made the most of his advantage, as he had on three other occasions. He knocked Stanton back against the counter again, and closed in on him.

Greer's fists were still meting out vicious punishment when old Jug Johnson slouched into the store. When he saw what was going on, the freighter grabbed up a new, double-bitted ax which had been unpacked only yesterday.

"Back up, Greer," ordered Johnson, as calmly as if he were speaking to the old gray team he had so often driven up to Stanton's freight platform. "If you don't, I'll divide you right down through the middle." The ax lifted.

George Greer backed up, glaring at Johnson. "You'll never haul any more freight for me, you booze-guzzlin' old gopher!" he growled.

"You won't need no more freight if you don't get on back to your own store," Jug retorted, still holding the ax poised. "I wouldn't want to have to get this bright-shinin' tool all smeared up with coyote carcass."

Greer swore, made a quick exit and strode to his own false-fronted emporium across the street.

It was a week later that Echo Stanton crossed that street to enter his enemy's store. It was deserted except for Greer, impatiently pacing back and forth. Greer halted abruptly, blinked unbelieving eyes and growled: "What in thunder do you think you're doin' over here, Stanton? Lookin' for another dose of knuckle medicine?"

Echo Stanton justified his nick-

name as he stammered: "N-now, don't r'ar up like a wounded grizzly, Greer. I ain't here l-lookin' for trouble."

"No?" The taller man eyed his competitor suspiciously. "I've licked you four times, Stanton. The last time pretty bad. Now I hear that when you take a drink or two, you start stutterin' around about how you're goin' to settle our feud, once and for all, with a gun. Is that right?"

"Yeah. That's what kind o' scares me," Echo replied. "The thought of m-murder." Then, laboriously but persistently, he explained that this ever-mounting hostility might lead to killing; but he didn't want to kill or be killed. The trouble was Deepville didn't have enough business for two stores, although one would be profitable. Echo concluded by saying, "I was here first, G-Greer. But now I'm offerin' to s-sell out to you."

George Greer, sometimes called Windy Greer, smiled with satisfaction. "So at last you confess to bein' whipped in more ways than one, Stanton. Well, it's taken you a long time to come crawlin' across that street and admit it. You thought, when I started this store, that I couldn't hang on. That's because I'm a good talker, a born peddler. I was peddlin' rheumatism medicine all over this Western country when I was only sixteen. Sellin', for a dollar a throw, little bottles of stuff that I could make for two bits a gallon. If you talk smart enough, fast enough—"

"H-how about buyin' me out?" Echo interrupted timidly.

"Suppose I did buy you out? You've growed up in that store over there. It's the only business you know, Stanton."

"D-don't worry about me. You never have. Anyhow, I know gold when I see it. And that new placer strike over in the W-Willow River country—"

"That!" Greer's tone and eyes were contemptuous. "How many men, of all the hundreds that go chasin' over there, will find enough gold to pay for their boot leather? Yeah, and how many'll strike it rich? Shucks! I've heard about these big gold strikes all my life. And seen some of 'em. No, Stanton. As well as I know that *one* store in Deepville could make good money, I wouldn't send a poor, nugget-crazy old fool stumblin' off into the wilds to maybe starve or freeze to death durin' the winter that's just comin' up."

"But if I *w-want* to go—"

"Nope." Greer was firm. "You're just gettin' desperate. But I don't want murder on my hands any more than you do. And, since you're man enough to admit that you're licked by someone who's a better storekeeper than you are, I might . . ." From the counter Greer picked up the stub of a cigar and lighted it leisurely.

"Might what?" Echo Stanton asked.

"Reward your . . . uh . . . humility. Save you the sufferin' of public ridicule. I know you're only usin' this Willow River gold strike as an excuse to pull out o' Deepville. Crawl away, licked, from this place where you've lived in all your life. Do you know anything about prospectin'?"

"No-o, but some say gold's so plentiful over there that—"

"Oh, sure! It chokes the grass roots out. Makes the stream yellow 'cause the gravel bars are so full of nuggets that— Jumpin' Jehoshaphat! You're a storekeeper, Stanton. An ignorant, slow-thinkin' old storekeeper. Better not give it up. Especially when I'm feeling sorry enough for you to help you out."

"Now what?" Echo's mild blue eyes widened a trifle.

"Instead of buyin' you out," Greer answered, "I'll sell you my place here. Give you a chance to prosper. You buy this outfit, move the stock over to your buildin' and this town'll have one *good* store. Now, for about four thousand cash—"

"Nope," Echo said firmly. "Two thousand's all I've got in the bank. But maybe s-somebody else'll pay you your price if—"

"Then you'd still have the same thing," Greer argued. "Two stores and neither one of 'em makin' money." He talked on and on, smoothly, fluently, persistently.

Yet, when he had finished, Echo Stanton turned toward the door and said: "Sorry, Greer. Two thousand's all I've got."

"Then two thousand it'll be!" Greer said. "That is, if you'll make out the check right now. While I make out a bill of sale."

Somewhat dubiously Echo mumbled: "Well, I guess maybe I am too old for g-gold chasin'. If two thousand—"

"Sold!" said Greer, shrewd eyes gleaming.

The deal had hardly been consummated when Greer took a fresh cigar from the dusty showcase—Echo's showcase now—and said: "Didn't I tell you I was a born peddler, Stanton? Well, ain't I? Didn't the only man in town with a little cash come over here to sell me his store—and then buy mine? Look, you old fool!" Greer reached in his pocket. "See the size of this nugget?"

"W-where did *that* come from?" Echo was staring.

"From the Willow River country, the place I'll be headin' for within an hour." Greer laughed as he reached for his hat. "This makes *five* times I've licked you, Stanton." Slamming the door behind him, he headed for the bank to cash the check he had just received.

Echo Stanton looked around the store he had just bought. Quite a stock. And probably worth the four thousand Greer had asked for it at first. Echo was still sizing things up when old Jug Johnson shuffled through the door.

"I just seen Greer headin' for the bank," the freighter said with a grin. "Half-runnin', he was. Well, I hated to part with that old nugget my dad fetched back with him from Alaska that time. But when Greer said he was goin' to work on me with an ax if I didn't pay him them few dollars I owed him— And since you offered to cancel that store bill I owe you if I paid Greer off with that nugget . . . well, I decided to do it."

Echo grinned. "No regrets, I hope, Jug."

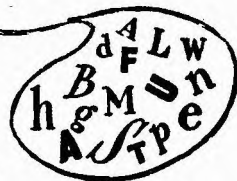
"Nope. If that polecat had stayed in town, he'd tackled you again. Made you kill him sooner or later. He sure is windy. Why, he talked so danged fast when he seen that nugget that I couldn't've told him, even if I'd wanted to, that the only reason that nugget had come from the Willow River country was 'cause I'd happened to have it in my pocket when I was huntin' elk over there last fall."

"Yep, he's quite a talker—Greer," said Echo, still smiling. "S-selling all this for two thousand. He's a born peddler, all right."

THE END



Here are 15 scrambled words all cowhands know. Can you dab your loop on 'em? Answers on page 130



- | | | |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1. Tobos | 6. Erab | 11. Alikal |
| 2. Reo | 7. Fisfehr | 12. Hotnugs |
| 3. Lihltoob | 8. Bican | 13. Gohback |
| 4. Perro | 9. Bonac | 14. Royora |
| 5. Nancoy | 10. Purstir | 15. Neim |



TEXAS TIMBER

by JIM WEST

Texans aren't bragging when they claim a larger forest area than that of any other State

TEXAS is not all cattle and cowboy country. Nor is the balance wholly made up of cotton lands, oil fields and empty space dotted at wide intervals with typical Western towns and large industrial cities. One of the Lone Star State's most valuable natural resources is wood. Forests, green with pine and commercial

hardwoods have provided Texas with one of its earliest and most lasting businesses.

It is a startling revelation to those who harbor the idea that Texas is all treeless plain to learn that forests cover approximately one-fifth of the land area of the State. Because Texas is such a big State the almost

hard-to-believe result is that when Texans claim a forest area greater than that of any other State in the Union they are stating a truth.

Commercial forests in the East Texas timber belt alone amount to eleven million acres, or about seventeen thousand square miles. There are as many acres of post-oak woods scattered throughout the State. Other additions, three million acres of cedar brakes (source of much of the cedar oil the housewife uses to polish her furniture), timbered sections in the west Texas mountain and canyon region, plus big ranges of mesquite trees, bring the total of Texas' forest lands to something like thirty-five million acres.

That's about ten times the size of Connecticut. It's a lot of forest. Much of this tree-covered area is classed primarily as "protection" timber, chiefly valuable for its watershed use in preventing heavy rainfall run-offs and soil erosion. Nevertheless many small sawmills and specialized wood-product plants exist in these "protection" forest sections.

Texas' principal lumber industry is centered in the eastern part of the State, in what is known as the Piney Woods. There can be found most of the twenty-five billion board feet of commercial timber that supports a lumber industry doing from forty to fifty million dollars' worth of business a year.

The Piney Woods is a huge pine forest some hundred miles wide extending from the Oklahoma border in the north down the eastern edge of the State almost to the Gulf Coast,

a distance of close to two hundred and fifty miles. In this vast stretch of longleaf, shortleaf and loblolly pine and commercial hardwoods, mainly oak, the towns, often crowded in by the adjacent forests, are distinctly lumber centers.

Mills whine and scream on their outskirts as the whirring saws slice giant logs into pine boards and hardwood flooring. The smell of raw pine is in the air. Timber camps where Texans wield sharp axes with the skill of North-country woodsmen lie deep in the forests and are reachable only over rutted logging roads that wind over low, red clay hills. Here and there farms have sprung up on the cut-over tracts.

In normal times in the Piney Woods about one out of every ten men living there is a full-fledged lumberjack, or else is connected in some way with the lumber industry. The sawmill is the economic center about which their world revolves.

Shelbyville, founded in 1817, was built on lumber. Its first sawmill operated by horsepower and cut an average of one log a day from the surrounding forests. Pineland is a lumber mill town. Kirbyville, named after John Kirby, a sawmill operator, is another lumber town. Silsbee, thirty miles further south started out as one of Kirby's logging camps. Today it is a busy town with a mill and log pond out at the edge of the encroaching pine woods. Even Beaumont, the big modern seaport city and oil center of the East Texas Gulf Coast owes much of its first development to Texas lumber.

Lufkin, shut in by towering pine

forests, is close to the center of the nearly two million acres of virgin pine now under the protection of the Federal Government in Texas. Headquarters for the Angelina Division of the Texas National Forests, it is also the site of a paper mill completed just before the present war which manufactures needed American newsprint out of wood pulp obtained from local East Texas longleaf pine. Woodville and Kountze are lumber towns, the latter set on the edge of two million acres of dense, vine-clad forest known as the Big Thicket.

Bears and panthers are still found in the Big Thicket. Deer and small game abound there. The Thicket is estimated once to have been over a hundred miles long and more than forty miles wide in places.

Until timber men began gleaning its riches in pine and moss-festooned hardwood, the only roads into this wilderness were old Indian trails and the pathways followed by the wild animals. Orchids grow in the Thicket, and rare ferns that stand as high as a six-foot man. Palmettos clutter the underbrush. Exotic water lilies, hyacinths and cattails line the lakes and ponds deep in the woods.

The Big Thicket is neither a swamp nor an enormous marshland, as some believe. Underfoot, the land is dry, and the soil generally rich. The Thicket's menace lies in the heavy tangle of undergrowth, and the sheer size of the solid jungle. Even today it is considered dangerous to venture into some sections without a guide. A man wandering only a few miles into the trailless portions could easily get lost and perhaps never find his way

out. Stories of such happenings have been told.

Texas timber men are cutting into the Big Thicket, hacking away at its fringes. But there are still parts of it about which very little is actually known.

Trees grow faster than average in East Texas, a region with a fifty-inch rainfall, a long, warm growing season and a soil admirably adapted to timber. All this, coupled with State and National forest conservation plans, point to excellent possibilities for maintaining a steady, long-time timber yield from the Piney Woods. In fact each year sees so many millions of trees become saw-timber size through natural growth that authorities have declared Texas' timber resources sufficient to keep lumbering a major Texas industry indefinitely.

Some of the cut-and-run lumber men of an earlier era would get a jolt if they could come back today and see the scars of cut-over land they abandoned now green with new forests of marketable second-growth wood. Trees that sprang up from nature's seedlings.

Commercially, the pine is the most important tree in Texas. It furnishes nearly ninety percent of the lumber cut in the Piney Woods. The longleaf and the shortleaf, or yellow, pine found in East Texas are western extensions of the great southern pine belt.

Texas longleaf grows most profusely in the deep, sandy soil of Angelina, Tyler, Newton, Jasper and adjacent counties. The main shortleaf region runs from central East Texas up to the Red River. The lob-

lolly is found chiefly between the longleaf district and the Gulf Coast.

In the mountain sections of West Texas are pines similar to those of the Rocky Mountain and Pacific Coast timber areas—ponderosa, Rocky Mountain white, and so forth, but they do not grow in sufficiently thick stands in Texas to form the basis for a big lumber industry.

Next to the pine, the oak is the principal commercial wood in Texas. It supplies the bulk of the hardwood cut in the eastern timber belt. White oak, valuable for flooring, barrels and shipbuilding is the main variety. The post oak is more widely dis-

tributed. Though used for fuel and, as the name implies, fence posts, the post oak has little timber value from the lumberman's standpoint.

Texas has a wide variety of trees. Others among those found principally in East Texas include the white ash, linden, red bay, beech, red birch, gumwood, dogwood, hackberry, black locust, magnolia, sycamore, bois d'arc or hedge apple, and—surprise, surprise!—the sugar maple.

There are still cattle and cowboys in Texas, sure enough. But don't forget there are trees, and timber too. Thirty-five million acres of them.

THE END

MEN WHO MAKE WESTERN STORY



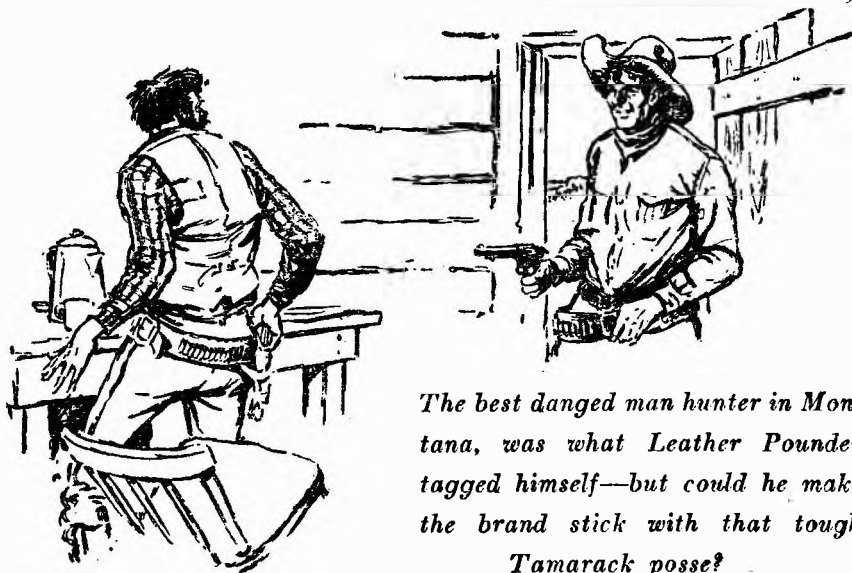
L. Ernenwein

Unable to resist the call of the Range, L. Ernenwein "left New York State, where I was born, and lit a shuck for the West as soon as I reached the age of understanding." Not only did he fall completely under the spell of the Southwest but the urge to write about the cattle country has enabled him to carve an enviable niche among today's top yarn spinners.

An ex-newspaper man, "Ernie" now devotes his time to fiction with headquarters

on his spread in southern Arizona, which bears the picturesque name of Renegade's Roost, where, despite this formidable title, we gather that he lives the life of a typical, and very lucky, family man. "My wife, known as 'Slim,' is the best cook east or west of the Pecos," he gleefully admits, "and I have two small daughters, Zeta and Patricia. To complete the family there's Rowdy, my steedust horse and our dog Pal. My main hobby is the hours I spend forking Rowdy, haunting cattle corrals along the Mexican Border, chinning with cowpunchers, lawmen, ex-badmen and old prospectors. I've published four books and over a hundred stories and I reckon there's plenty more yarns hiding out in the mesquite thickets waiting to be choused into print."

Well, just you and Rowdy keep that lass rope busy, Ernie, and chouse out a lot more tales like BACK-TRAIL BREED, which we're featuring in our August issue, and we'll all be happy. * * * Also in the next issue: Walt Coburn, W. C. Tuttle, Frank R. Pierce, Eli Colter, Jim West and a host of others.



The best danged man hunter in Montana, was what Leather Pounder tagged himself—but could he make the brand stick with that tough Tamarack posse?

RIMROCK MANHUNT

by MELVIN W. HOLT

SUNRISE was at hand, and there was a cluster of waiting saddle horses champing their bits in front of the small white-painted ranchhouse when the rider on the pinto approached through the live-oaks. The grimly drawn faces of the men gathered in the yard were sharp evidence that trouble had struck here.

Their talk ceased abruptly and they stared curiously at the stranger as he swung the pinto into the line of horses, reading their brands as he

dismounted. His name was Pounder, Seth Pounder. But because his slender frame had been rendered tough as a well-seasoned strip of cowhide by his years of riding the rugged Northern ranges, he'd come to be known as Leather by his acquaintances.

His freckled, sharp-nosed face wore the stamp of youthful impudence. A wide, cocksure grin matched the outward flare of the walnut gun handle from his holster.

His slate-gray eyes were calmly inquisitive as he bore the slit-eyed scrutiny of the group standing by the porch.

"Howdy," he greeted amicably. "What for's all the powwow?"

One of the six men stepped in front of Pounder, his beefy face tinged with angry resentment at the inquiry. The man was Buck Galvey, straw boss of the Double S. Galvey stood spraddle-legged, blocking the stranger's path, arrogance in his every manner as his pale eyes weighed the lean figure.

Backing up Galvey was Sherm Saunders, the nattily attired Double S owner, the flatness of his sun-darkened face showing that he shared Galvey's resentment, even encouraged it.

"Why're you sticking your nose in, stranger?" Galvey spoke. "State your business."

The freckled face before him was still grinning, all but the gray eyes.

"I was heading for the town of Tamarack with the notion of maybe finding me a riding job. Saw you hombres from the ridge yonder and rode down to see the owner of this spread."

A graying middle-aged man wearing a sheriff's star on his sagging vest stepped to the foreground.

"I'm Dan Woodlock, stranger. We're looking for young Bob Yarbo," he said. "But he's gone—packed up a few of his belongings and drifted. We don't expect him back. He figures losing this little cow ranch of his is better than stretching a hang rope, I reckon."

Leather chuckled dryly. "Which

still ain't a bad way to look at it. What's this Bob Yarbo wanted for?"

"Murder," the sheriff bit out. "The way things stack up, it looks like he killed his neighbor, old man Henley. Henley didn't run many hosses, so when they started getting rustled a while back he noticed it right off. Found a few head of them penned up in Yarbo's north pasture, and accused Yarbo as a thief. Bob tore the gun out of his fist and called him a liar, tacking on the threat that somebody was going to be sorry about the matter. But Henley ain't sorry. He's dead. He was found on the trail from town late last night, shot in the back. Now we find that Yarbo's vamoosed. Appears to me like a case of two and two making four."

It was the logical solution. Leather, though, wasn't a man who judged on circumstantial evidence alone.

"You aim to go after him?" he asked.

"We do. As sheriff of this county, I got a duty to uphold." He pointed to a notch in the cliffs a mile to the south. "The rimrock country begins yonder, and extends for twenty miles or so before we reach the State line. If he leaves a plain trail, we might still be able to nab him."

"How about me coming along?" Leather offered. "I'm tolerable at slinging a gun, which might come in handy."

"Suit yourself." Woodlock shrugged and motioned for his posse to mount.

Burly Buck Galvey continued glar-



ing at Leather. "You still ain't said who you are," he persisted flatly.

"Name's Pounder. Leather Pounder. From up Montana way."

"Leather pounder, eh? You fancy yourself a regular hard-riding fool, do you?"

"I sit a saddle pretty well, but I ain't no ways a fool. Was a deputy sheriff where I come from, and they called me the best danged man hunter in Montana."

Galvey's lips twisted scornfully. "They give you any medals for bragging?"

Leather's grin grew wider. "When a man's good at his business, he don't have to brag. Another thing I'm good at is telling the difference between a *man* and a *skunk*."

Galvey swore explosively and aimed a swinging fist at Leather's jaw. The best danged man hunter in Montana parried the blow deftly, at the same time uncorking a blow of his own, a hard right that spatted solidly against Galvey's bulbous nose and brought a gush of crimson from his nostrils.

Galvey backed away, circled warily, coiled to spring. Leather

set himself for the charge. But Sheriff Woodlock and Farrel, his tobacco-chewing deputy, intervened quickly, their drawn six-guns waving the two combatants apart.

"Break it up," Woodlock ordered sternly. "We got more important things to do than scrap among ourselves."

Galvey was cursing under his breath and wiping his bloody nose with a bandanna as he mounted his horse.

"We'll finish it later, you blasted interloper," he promised Leather.

"Any time, hombre, any time," Leather said amiably.

"Look at Buck's nose, will you?" one of the Henley punchers in the group said to the other. "It's plumb closed up from that wallop he got."

The second puncher's eyes danced with delight. "Yeah. How he's gonna smell?"

"He'll go right on smelling like a skunk, I reckon," murmured Leather, ignoring the dagger-sharp glances of Galvey and Saunders and the two lawmen.

They set out on the man hunt, Woodlock taking the lead, flanked by Galvey and Saunders. Leather brought up the rear, his freckle-splotched features solemn and thoughtful now.

At the opening between the cliffs they found boot prints on the ground, presumably where Bob Yarbo had dismounted to tighten his saddle cinches for the grueling ride ahead of him. Unnoticed by the others, Leather dropped back and made a hasty comparison of the

prints with his own. His were about half a size larger. He made a mental note of the fact as he mounted again and hurried to rejoin the posse.

Further down the notch they found tiny tufts of horsehair on the buckbrush where the fugitive had ridden through. Woodlock studied the sign and nodded grimly.

"It's him, all right. He's forking that big roan of his. Let's hurry, boys. Maybe he ain't so far ahead of us."

For another mile they had fairly easy going. But as they rode deeper into the maze of tangled brush, twisting gullies and jutting rimrock, the sign began to disappear. Finally the trail seemed to play out altogether. Woodlock cursed angrily, and the tobacco-chewing deputy echoed his sentiments.

"He's fogged his sign, men," the sheriff grunted. "We'll scatter out a little and see if we can pick up the trail again."

They did so, but had no luck. Buck Galvey kept his hate-laden gaze fastened on Leather almost continually. Sherm Saunders took a leading part in the search, and Leather began to suspect that Saunders had quite a bit of influence with the sheriff, perhaps by virtue of having helped elect him. After half an hour of futile groping, Saunders sighed and said resignedly:

"Looks like Yarbo wins this hand, sheriff. We're stumped."

Leather frowned. Maybe he was wrong, but it seemed that Saunders was giving up too easily.

"Reckon so," agreed Woodlock. "We might as well turn back. I'll

send out messages to the officers of the adjoining counties to be on the lookout for him."

Leather reined away from the group and sat his horse in the shade of the overhanging rimrock, placidly rolling a cigarette as he watched them.

"You coming back with us, Pounder?" Woodlock queried.

Leather shook his head slowly. "Think I'll keep traveling south. I've changed my mind about settling down in this neck of the woods. If *that*"—he looked sharply at Buck Galvey—"is any example of Rimrock County's citizenry, I think I'd like it better elsewhere."

Leather was not opposed to a mild fabrication now and then, so long as it served the interest of justice. The way he figured it, he still had a job to do here. And after the posse's departure he set out with determination to accomplish it.

He picked up the lost trail again in less than fifteen minutes, and he stuck to it. To a man experienced at reading sign, however dim, it wasn't so difficult. A bent sprig of grass, a dislodged pebble, a broken twig on a bush—Leather's keen eyes missed nothing as he rode along.

For a time the trail led straight southward, then angled to the southeast, finally cutting abruptly back to the north. After that the spoor became plain again. Leather's interest in his task heightened as the morning sun climbed above him.

It was close to noon when he finally topped a rise and came within

sight of the mud-chinked log cabin with the dilapidated barn in back. He judged the place to be some five miles south of Bob Yarbo's ranch-house. A plume of bluish wood smoke lifted from the stone chimney of the cabin. Leather followed a line of trees down into the vale and approached the place cautiously from the rear.

Dismounting behind the barn, he unhasped its back door and crept into the musty interior. A sleek black gelding was munching oats in the front stall. But of more interest was the sweat-streaked, travel-gaunt roan which Leather found hidden in the gloomy recess of a grain crib. He grinned. Things were beginning to tally up.

When Leather stepped into the doorway of the cabin a few minutes later, his six-gun was leveled in his fist. The man inside, having just finished his meal and still seated at the dish-cluttered table, gave a surprised start and leaped up from his chair, hand jumping to his holstered gun. He stared into the bore of Leather's .45 and hesitated.

Leather nodded. "That's right, killer. Don't try flashing that gun. Act nice and I won't hurt you—very much."

The man's hand dropped to his side, and panic crept into his dark eyes. Leather sized him up. He was thin-chested and bony, his cinnamon-colored beard frowsy and unkempt, his range clothing badly in need of strong soap and water.

He approached the bearded man and lifted his gun, tossing it behind the stove.

"Wh-what's the meaning of this?" the man stammered.

"I think you know, Whiskers. Where's Bob Yarbo?"

Whiskers blinked at him. "I don't sabe what you're driving at!"

Calmly Leather shifted his gun to his left hand, rocked forward on the balls of his feet and drove a smoking Sunday right into Whiskers' face. The man staggered backward, tripped on a spur and went down. When he pulled himself up, blood was seeping into his beard from a cut lip.

"I don't like beating up a man at the point of a gun," Leather told him. "But sometimes it's the best way to get results. Now talk!"

"But I told you I don't—"

Wham! Again that punishing fist hammered home. Whiskers sat down heavily on the floor, swearing as he spat out a broken tooth.

"Me being a younger man, I reckon I can keep this up longer than you can." Leather moved toward him, his fist poised to strike again. "When my hand gives out, I can always switch to this gun barrel. Hate to see you get marked up this way. Get on your feet, coyote."

Whiskers cowered. "No, don't," he muttered.

His name, it came out, was Gant Tolver. And he talked. . . .

When Leather rode away from the cabin a half hour later, he was leading the roan and the black gelding along behind him. The sullen Gant Tolver was mounted on the latter horse, his wrists lashed securely to the saddlehorn.

A horseman popped suddenly into

view from a grove of live-oaks across the little valley. Spying Leather and his captive, the horseman reined to a quick halt and frantically jerked his gun. But his upset state of mind spoiled his aim and his bullet whined harmlessly over Leather's head.

Leather, it seemed, wasn't the least bit excited. His gun came up and thundered, just once. The rider tumbled off his horse and lay very still.

Sherm Saunders sat on the porch of his Double S ranchhouse and peered anxiously into the night around him. He had been sitting there for more than an hour, smok-



ing one cigarette after another, occasionally exchanging remarks with the two punchers beside him, but remaining taut-faced and silent for the most part. Twilight had deepened to darkness, and Saunders still waited.

"What in thunder could be keeping him?" he wondered.

The two punchers and Buck Galvey made up Saunders' pay roll. They were a small crew, but they could be trusted.

Rimrock County had long been a horse raiser's heaven; only Bob Yarbo and a few other small ranchers worked cattle. The Double S itself was not a big spread, but

Saunders ran a fancy breed of steel-dust broncs. Lately he had been branching out to other breeds, some of them not so good, but equally profitable. Anyway, you couldn't stop to check on a cayuse's pedigree when the night was very dark and you were in somewhat of a hurry.

A sudden trampling of hoofs came from the corral behind the house. Saunders stiffened as he heard the sounds.

"Something's scared the saddle hosses," he said. "Might be Buck, at last. Cabe, maybe you'd better take a look."

One of the punchers got up and disappeared around the house.

Saunders rolled another cigarette and lit it nervously. When it had burned down to his fingers he tossed it away and rose impatiently, beckoning the second puncher to follow him.

"Cabe's taking a long time to get back," he grumbled. "We'll see what's so interesting out there."

But what they saw was downright disconcerting. Cabe's body lay sprawled on the ground near the corral fence, half hidden by the black shadows of the barn. The astonished pair ran forward and squatted beside Cabe to examine him.

Sherm Saunders never knew what struck him. *Something* did. There was a dull thud as his hat crown caved in, and the rancher fell back limply.

The second puncher whirled around swiftly, but the move was a belated one. Again the thud sounded, and the Double S man sagged like an

emptied sack, falling across the bodies of the first two.

From the shadows emerged Leather, smiling contentedly as he stood over the unconscious trio and stroked the trusty barrel of his six-gun.

With no one to stop him now, the man hunter from Montana made a thorough search of the ranchhouse. Finally poking into a closet in Saunders' living room, he discovered a man lying bound and gagged on the floor in a gloomy corner.

The man's dilated eyes blinked rapidly as lamplight streamed into his face from the main room, and he mumbled through his gag.

Leather leaned over him and hastily ripped off the gag.

"Bob!" Leather's tone held relief.

The folks who happened to be on Tamarack's main street early the next morning were treated to a very interesting spectacle. Down the dusty thoroughfare rode Sherm Saunders, two of his Double S hirelings and Gant Tolver—all of them tied in their saddles and looking quite disgruntled about it. In charge of this strange cavalcade were wide-shouldered, blond-haired young Bob Yarbo and a gangling, freckle-faced hombre whom the Tamarack citizens had never seen before.

Sheriff Woodlock and his deputy blinked in amazement as they hurried out of their office and watched the horsemen halt at the hitch rail. Woodlock's hand dropped threateningly to his holster as he eyed Yarbo. Deputy Farrel chewed his tobacco and said nothing.

"What the devil's going on here?" Woodlock demanded.

"We've brought you some boarders, sheriff," Leather announced. "The main point is that Bob Yarbo didn't kill Henley, after all. Gant Tolver's your man. I'm told that Tolver's an old owlhooter from 'way back. Saunders hired him to do the killing, and you'll find five hundred dollars in Tolver's jeans to back me up on that."

"Now why would Saunders hire Tolver to bushwhack Henley?" the sheriff asked adamantly.

"Simple when you know the facts. Saunders had Henley killed and framed it on Bob to get them both out of his way, figuring to buy in their spreads afterwards. He had Bob kidnaped and held prisoner at the Double S. Bob being wanted for murder, Saunders aimed to bring his body in to you later with the story of how his riders had finally tracked Bob down and shot it out with him.

"You see, Saunders had turned his Double S into a two-bit owlhoot spread. He wanted to go into the hoss-stealing business on a big scale, but the lay of the land was against him. Bob's and Henley's little spreads had him cut off from the trail through the rimrock country to the border. That's why he wanted the two spreads. Cousin Bob's suspected him for some time."

"Cousin?"

Leather nodded. "Yeah, Bob's my cousin. He wrote me about the trouble he was having with Henley, and said that he thought Saunders was back of it. I decided to come down

and help him out. The way it all happened, I got here just in time. When we started out on that murderer's trail yesterday morning, I suspected right away that something was fishy about the set-up."

"How'd you know?"

"Remember them boot prints we found? I knew they hadn't been put there by Bob." Leather grinned. "Didn't you ever notice the size of Bob's boots? I used to kid him about them big feet of his when we was kids, growing up together."

Woodlock was amazed, to say the least. Suddenly he noticed the absence of Buck Galvey.

"You'll find Galvey's carcass down near Tolver's cabin," Leather informed him. "Yeah, we finally settled our little argument, for keeps. Reckon Saunders and Galvey had a hunch I didn't really aim to quit the country when I left your posse, so after the hunt broke up, Galvey doubled back and rode to Tolver's to be sure everything was all right."

"But even counting Buck, there's still one prisoner missing," Bob Yarbo spoke. "Sheriff, you ought to know right now that—"

His voice was drowned by the

roar of Leather's hastily drawn .45. Deputy Farrel dropped his gun and gazed stupidly at his bullet-broken hand. His glum face had paled to a sickly shade of gray. A sizable quid of chewing tobacco, when accidentally swallowed, can play havoc with a man's stomach.

"Now you sabe how efficient Saunders' set-up could have been, eh, sheriff?" Bob said. "He even had your own right-hand man bought off!"

Leather sighed wearily and holstered his six-gun. "I'm even surprised that *you're* honest, sheriff. But the sign points that way, and I'm right glad. Now that it's all over, I'll likewise be right glad to get back to a peaceful life again, helping Bob run his spread."

Woodlock's eyes widened in mock surprise. "Oh? You mean that cow-punching is among your lesser accomplishments?"

"Sure. Used to punch cattle before I was a deputy sheriff. Why'd you up where I hail from they called me—"

"I know," the sheriff finished, smiling. "The best danged cow-puncher in Montana."

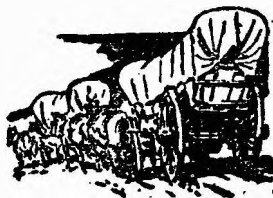
THE END



THE OLD-TIMER SAYS:

Whether it's ridin' the rough string, or bustin' Japs an' Nazis, our boys never holler quits till they get the job done. Let's show 'em we're worth our taw, too, by puttin' every extra cent into

WAR BONDS AND STAMPS!



WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

BY JOHN NORTH

HIKING makes a grand, healthful, unrationed outdoor vacation camping trip. No gas coupons needed. The hombra who travels the woods and mountains afoot, his skeleton camp gear with him, has a freedom of pace and movement no other type of camping enthusiast can match.

He can reach the otherwise inaccessible places. He can get back into the heart of unspoiled nature, and feel for himself the gripping, primitive thrill of the forest's all-enveloping solitude. Camp hiking through the wilderness is one of the finest antidotes there is for frayed nerves and hectic city living.

Try it sometime. J.C. from out in Los Angeles, California, intends to. "I'm set on a hiking trip this summer," he wrote. "Don't want to hurry it. I want to take my own sweet time. But I do want to get away from roads and paved highways, from cities and busy towns.

"Is there anything out here in the West similar to the famous Appalachian Trail where a fellow could camp-hike in the wilderness yet follow a marked-out path?"

Oh, brother! Is there? Ever hear of the PCTS, the Pacific Coast Trail System? The distinguishing

insignia of its diamond-shaped markers is a tall, lone pine and the words "Pacific Coast Trail System" around the border.

Any time you feel like a long walk, hit this trail at the nearest convenient point and keep going. It stretches from the Mexican border south of Campo in southern California up through California, Oregon and Washington, and then goes on almost to the Fraser River in British Columbia.

This great Pacific coast hiker's heaven follows the high line of mountain ridges. Only now and then does it dip into the valleys. It's plenty scenic. It leads the fisherman to mountain lakes and crashing, white-water streams seldom reached by other types of campers. It takes the hunter into and through some of the most marvelous big-game country in the West.

Is it accessible? Sure it is. All the main east-west highways on the Pacific coast cross it at some point or another.

The hiker can reach the trail by bus, taking this form of transportation out to the nearest contact point. He can plan his trip so that he returns to the same point. Or, if he pre-

fers, he can quit the trail at a highway connection further along.

From Los Angeles, for example, the trail can be reached by going out to Saugus, then taking Route 6 in the direction of Palmdale. Trail and highway cross around Soledad Pass about six or seven miles west of Palmdale. There is another crossing at Cajon Pass on Highway 66 back of San Bernardino. The Palm Springs road, Route 99, cuts the Pacific Coast Trail System at San Gorgonio Pass between Banning and White Water.

Out of San Diego by Highway 80, the road to Yuma, Arizona, the trail is crossed in the mountains beyond Pine Valley in a corner of the Cleveland National Forest. In Oregon and Washington the story is the same. The trail, an incredibly long, tenuous mountain path, thin as the gossamer strand of a spider's web, is reachable by the main highway arteries running east and west across the mountains.

For almost its entire length from Mexico into Canada the trail traverses land that is government-supervised and has been set aside as part of our National Forest reserves. That means Forest Ranger supervision, with a Ranger in charge and on duty never very far away. It also means that National Forest regulations regarding camping, camp sites and campfires must be adhered to.

Many of California's most important National Parks are included in the trail's windings. The eastern edge of Sequoia National Park is skirted near Mt. McKinley, highest peak in continental United States. Further north the trail passes not far from the Devil's Postpile, a gigantic heap of rock columns of ancient basalt. The columns lie at all angles, from the vertical to almost horizontal, forming one of nature's more fantastic geological oddities. The Postpile is now a National Monument. Yosemite National Park and Lassen Volcanic National Park in northern California are also crossed by the trail system.

In southern California there is a stretch of about seventy-five miles where the trail is on its own, and not encompassed in federally reserved forest land. This is the leg of the system that jumps from the Angeles National Forest north of Soledad Pass up via Tehachapi to the southern tip of the Sequoia National Forest. Roughly, it lies parallel to, but west of, the main paved highway from Los Angeles to Reno, Nevada—Route 6.

Along the tremendously lengthy, unbeatably beautiful scenic stretches of the high mountain ridges that wall off the Pacific coast the PCTS affords a footpath for the hiker. It's more than *two thousand miles long*. That ought to afford hike enough for any shanks' mare enthusiast.

Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply. Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.



MINES AND MINING

BY J. A. THOMPSON

VALUABLE as diamonds are, the average prospector not specifically hunting the gems might easily pass one up should he encounter it in a stream gravel. Size for size, diamonds are considerably heavier than sand, or quartz pebbles. They can be saved in a gold pan as they lag behind the lighter common gravel.

In the rough, diamonds don't glisten. The gorgeous display of light and color is the result of the careful cutting and polishing to which the gems are afterwards subjected.

Freshly found diamonds have a greasy surface appearance, or what mineralogists call an adamantine luster. Adamantine is difficult to define. Dictionaries say the word means "hard, like a diamond," leaving us right where we started.

This peculiar but definite look of hardness is one of the diamond's principal physical characteristics. Which is as it should be. The diamond, a form of chemically pure carbon, is the hardest natural substance known. It will scratch any other mineral.

Using a diamond to scratch glass is not a good test. Common quartz

will also scratch glass. But the diamond will scratch quartz. Though not conclusive, that's a better test. Topaz, corundum and a few other minerals besides diamonds are also above quartz in the hardness scale.

After a diamond is rubbed hard on your shirt sleeve, or other convenient bit of cloth, it will pick up small pieces of paper. Diamonds become electrically charged by friction. This is another helpful check.

Add these items together, and what have you got? A diamond quite possibly if it (a) is a heavier-than-average pebble or small stone; (b) is not necessarily shiny but with a "hard" look; (c) has the ability to scratch quartz, corundum or any other hard mineral; (d) when rubbed will become sufficiently electrified to pick up small bits of paper.

Should you find a stone of this character and suspect it of being a diamond, save it. Don't try other tests yourself. When you can, get it into the hands of a competent, reliable jeweler or diamond expert for further inspection and examination.

Color is not necessarily a good diamond indication. The perfect transparent, flawless, colorless stones, in general, make the finest gems. But

diamonds may be tinted various colors.

There are also darkly tinted diamonds and stones with flaws or cracks in them that prevent their use as first-grade gems. Diamonds not up to gem quality can be used in industry and in fact are virtually essential in many important grinding processes.

Prominent among industrial diamonds is the material known as bort—gray, brown or black opaque diamonds mined extensively in Brazil. Carbonados, or black diamonds, are another variety of industrial diamond.

Seaman 1st Class, R. H., with an A.P.O. address that indicates he is at present somewhere out in the Pacific with our gallant naval forces, asked us about diamonds this week. "What do they look like? Where do most of them come from? Have they ever been found in the U. S.?" he wrote.

South Africa is at present the world's greatest diamond-mining center. Over 90% of the world's current output comes from the mines around Kimberly which are operated under rigid government control.

Of the other two countries, India and Brazil, that have so far furnished the bulk of the world's diamond output, India was the ancient source of supply. Many famous and fabulously valuable individual stones such as the Kohinoor, the Great Mogul and the Blue Hope came from

the Indian fields, which lie chiefly in the southern and eastern portions of the Indian peninsula.

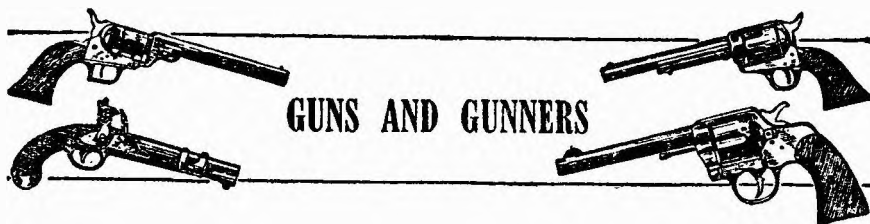
The Brazilian diamond mines, discovered some ninety years ago, were at first little better than small diggings in which the precious stones were washed from stream gravels in much the same manner as prospectors pan for placer gold. Between 1861 and 1867 some ten million dollars' worth of rough stones were shipped from the then new diamond center of Diamantina.

The provinces of Minas Geraes and Bahia are the important diamond-producing districts in Brazil. Much of the present product consists of bort or carbonados.

Gem diamonds are also found and mined in Borneo and in British Guiana. The U. S. is apparently not a fertile field for the out-and-out diamond prospector, though the gems have been found here.

Good gem diamonds have been mined from a deposit near Murfreesboro, Arkansas. From time to time placer miners in California and Oregon have recovered isolated diamonds in their gold pans or sluice boxes. A few small diamonds have been discovered in stream sands along the eastern slope of the Appalachians from Virginia south to Georgia. And spotty occurrences of the rare gem have been uncovered in Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio and Indiana.

If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., will bring a prompt, authoritative, personal reply. Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received; please keep them as brief as possible.



BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

AMONG the riflemen and just plain "gunbugs" of the United States there is a growing interest in military weapons, not only those in use by the United States armed forces, but also those used by our allies and the enemy military.

My mail in recent months has been heavy with inquiries concerning foreign equipment, the boys chiefly desiring comparisons between foreign weapons and their counterparts as used by United States troops.

This information is extremely difficult to supply in a letter, and because military personnel is restricted in commenting upon both United States and foreign weapons, this writer is somewhat handicapped in answering inquiries of that nature. For a long time United States information compiled upon foreign matériel was classified "Confidential."

Officially, "Confidential" is defined as: "This document contains information affecting the national defense of the United States within the meaning of the Espionage Act 50: U. S. Code 31 and 32 as amended. Its transmission or the revelation of its contents in any manner to an unauthorized person is prohibited by law."

It was suddenly discovered that any report on a piece of captured enemy equipment would probably fail to reveal information not already known to the enemy, who would probably know a great deal more about their own equipment. Thus, in recent months data on captured equipment have been removed from the Confidential classification.

This is a lucky break for the American gunbug who likes to play with foreign equipment. After this war there should be enormous quantities available in this country, much of which will be brought back as souvenirs by returning soldiers.

Generally speaking, United States ordnance is superior to most enemy equipment. German small arms are usually well made and well designed, although the quality of materials and workmanship of guns recently manufactured is not equal to that of older designs of the same models.

Japanese equipment is generally of very poor quality. Few original designs are found in their rifles, pistols and machine guns. The Japanese have long been known as copyists, and most of their equipment is found to be reproductions of German, English and American designs.

Most of the Japanese pistols are of a modified design, combining the features of the German Luger and the German Mauser. On quick glance, the Japanese Nambu 8mm Model 1925 pistol appears to be a Luger, but the toggle-joint breech mechanism is replaced with a modified blow-back system, with the locking bolt swinging up through the barrel extension into the under side of the breech lock, as in the Mauser.

The Japanese Nambu pistol uses a .30-caliber cartridge similar in appearance to the .30 Luger, except that it is of lower power and less efficient. A 102-grain bullet is driven at a velocity of about 860 feet per second or approximately the same velocity achieved in our own .45 automatic pistol with the bullet weighing 230 grains.

The Japanese Arisaka 6.5mm rifle is a modified Mauser. Its chief improvement over the German Mauser design is in the sliding metal piece fitted over the bolt to cover the action and keep out dirt and mud. As the bolt is drawn to the rear, the attached metal cover slides with it. The length of the barrel is 30.3 inches.

In recent months captured Japanese rifles have been found to be similar to the 6.5mm or .25 caliber, but chambered for the British 7.7mm rimless. The latter is a .30 caliber.

This department does not generally devote its space to the review

of books on firearms. During this war there have been numerous books released on gun subjects, most of which have apparently been written with an eye toward sales profit only. In one ammunition book, for example, this writer found more than two hundred errors in the first one hundred pages. It is because of these many errors in current books that this writer neither recommends nor reviews them.

There is one book recently published which is so outstanding in its type of information that it can be heartily recommended. It is available only with stiff paper covers at \$2.00.

The Military Service Publishing Co., of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, has recently released "A Basic Manual of Military Small Arms," by W. H. B. Smith. Page size is 8½x11 inches, and the 212 pages have from one to six illustrations on each page.

Never before has any author attempted to assemble such a wide variety of material in such a clear and simple manner. Generally speaking, the book is a big "How" covering the loading operation, disassembly and assembly of military small arms.

It covers rifles, automatic pistols, revolvers, semi-automatic rifles, sub-machine guns, light and heavy machine guns up to .50 caliber, and includes weapons of many different countries.

Phil Sharpe, our firearms editor, is now on active duty as a Captain, Ordnance Department, U. S. A. He will continue to answer all letters from readers. Address your inquiries to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.



Unless Arizona Archer found the mysterious link between Trigger Barrows' gun wolves and the phantom of Ghost Valley he'd never avenge that merciless

MURDER AT TALKING ROCKS

by CLAY STARR

I

ARIZONA ARCHER was riding a country which was new to him and Big Mike Lucas, his saddle pard. There was something spooky about

the mesa trails of high New Mexico, a land of far distances and hazy turquoise sky. Arizona was a seasoned veteran of the long trails at twenty-four, and he didn't scare easy. His Double A cattle outfit over in

the Arizona Strip was paid for, but his old friend Snowy Bailey was in trouble.

Bailey's letter had explained that it wasn't the kind of trouble a man could fight in the open. Dry-gulchers were taking pot shots at Bailey's cowboys. Ghost voices whispered from the rocks, and B-in-a-Box cattle were disappearing mysteriously.

Arizona reined his black cow horse to a sudden stop when a hollow explosion boomed from some unseen place. As the rattling echoes died away, he turned to Big Mike with a question in his narrowed tawny eyes.

Big Mike was a huge man who had been an outlaw until Arizona had reformed him, and the reformation had been rough and effective.

"Let's get out of these hills, Arizona," Big Mike muttered, his voice hoarse with strain, but before Arizona could answer, a jerky wind-roughened voice began to whisper, and the sound seemed to come from a landslide of clustered rocks.

"Yuh got me, Trigger, but you won't get the B-in-a-Box. There's one feller faster than you, and he hates outlaws like poison!"

Big Mike rolled his eyes and hunched his wide shoulders.

"Do you believe in ghosts, Arizona?" he asked huskily. "They ain't a soul around here!"

Arizona Archer was medium tall even in the saddle and he hated outlaws of any breed. His right hand dipped down to loosen the long-barreled six-shooter in his holster as he

scanned the rocky mesa for some sign of life.

"That wasn't any ghost, Mike," he said positively. "But we'll be ghosts if we don't fan the breeze. Hit that roan with the hooks and follow me!"

Arizona nicked his big black with a blunted spur and took the lead, heading for a curving bend in the mountain road. He checked his horse and cuffed back his gray Stetson after making the turn, and was staring down into a deep valley when Mike came up on the run.

"Look," Arizona said tersely. "Four horsebackers down there going away, but it couldn't have been them we heard."

"What we heard was a ghost," Big Mike insisted, and one huge hand trembled on his gun. "Distance don't make no never-minds to a spirit, and that was one we heard whispering out of them rocks!"

Arizona Archer was staring after the racing horsemen down on the valley floor. His firm jaw tightened to match the bleak look in his steady eyes, and Big Mike could read all the signs.

"I'm going down there for a look-see," Arizona said in a flat voice. "Seeing that you are afraid of spirits, you better wait up here until I get back."

His companion stared sullenly and nodded his shaggy head.

"Mebbe I better, at that," he muttered. "I'll play a hunch I just now got. Hit on out, cowboy!"

Arizona nodded briefly, nudged his mount with his spurs, and ten min-

utes later they appeared like a flash of sunlight on the valley floor.

Sliding his horse to a stop, the young trail rider stepped off a-running. He had seen a white-haired man lying on the ground.

He went to his knees and reached under Snowy Bailey's shoulders, raised the wounded man to a sitting position, and caught his breath sharply when a pair of brown eyes opened to stare at him defiantly. The old man spoke with the same voice Arizona had heard high up on the mesa trail.

"Trigger Barrows done it. Talking Rocks!"

Arizona stared at the brown stain on the wounded man's chest, just over the heart. Bailey's brown eyes closed slowly, and a hollow rattle sounded from his corded throat, and Arizona knew that he held a dead man in his arms. He sighed softly as he laid Snowy Bailey back on the lush grass and stretched to his feet.

"*Vaya con Dios,*" he murmured gently.

"Elevate, you dry-gulchin' side-winder!" a reedy voice commanded tremulously. "You rub out my dad, and then you tell him to '*Go with God.*' Don't make a pass for your gun!"

Arizona turned swiftly and his right hand had slapped for his gun, but he stopped the move when he saw a half-grown boy crouching toward him behind a cocked six-shooter.

"You must be Pee Wee Bailey," Arizona said softly, so as not to set off the boy's strained muscles. "About sixteen, aren't you? . . . But I

didn't kill old Snowy. I was riding the mesa trail when I heard the shot that killed your pa. I heard him talking, and I rode down to lend Snowy a hand."

"You're a contaminated liar!" blazed the boy. "It's more than two miles to the mesa trail!"

"My gun ain't been fired recent, Pee Wee," Arizona pointed out. "I cleaned it just this morning in camp, and you ought to take a look to make sure. Hold the drop, but hold your fire at the same time."

Under the menace of the boy's cocked weapon, Arizona flipped his hand down and up with a smooth, flowing movement. He drew his six-shooter, reversed it in his hand, and offered it to the boy.

Taken by surprise, Pee Wee reached for the weapon, lowering the muzzle of his own gun at the same time.

The Double A owner slapped side-wise with his left hand. Pee Wee jerked back and pressed trigger, but Arizona caught the falling hammer on his thumb. He wrenched the gun loose, holstered his own six-shooter, and pried the pronged hammer from his left thumb. Then he holstered the captured gun deep in leather on the boy's right leg.

"I'm Arizona Archer, Pee Wee," he explained gently. "I rode over here from the Arizona Strip to help your pa. Now I'm going to help you if I can."

"Pee Wee, that's me!" the boy snarled. "I'm big enough to take care of myself, and I don't need any outside help!"

Once more the boy slapped for his gun as anger distorted his smooth young face. Arizona made a dive, caught Pee Wee in his arms, and pinned the lad's arms to his sides.

"Quit fighting your head, button," Arizona said. "I knew your pa well, and he said something just before he went . . . west!"

Arizona's arms tightened to hold the struggling boy. Pee Wee stopped fighting; tilted back his tousled head to stare at his captor. His brown eyes matched those of the dead man.

"What did he say?" Pee Wee asked.

"He mentioned someone named Trigger."

"You said . . . *Trigger?*" murmured the boy.

"I said Trigger, and it was your pa's voice," Arizona answered steadily. "He likewise said that this Trigger wouldn't get the B-in-a-Box, and he mentioned that there was one man faster than Trigger. A man who hated outlaws of any breed."

Pee Wee Bailey bit his lip and turned his face to hid the scalding mist in his brown eyes. Arizona wisely released the boy who turned his back until he had controlled his emotions. After a time, Pee Wee turned back to him.

"I can read sign, cow feller," Pee Wee began slowly. "You allowed you had a letter from the old man, and came over to lend a hand. Old Snowy told Trigger Barrows that there was one man faster than him. That must be you, Arizona Archer. Old Snowy was all the kin I had," Pee Wee went on. "I own the B-in-

a-Box if I can keep it. Will you help me, cowboy?"

"The Box B," Archer murmured softly. "I saw that brand on some white-faced cattle this morning."

"That's the Bailey iron," Pee Wee explained, and then his brown eyes narrowed. "You're a gun fighter, Arizona Archer. What else, besides that?"

"I own a spread of my own," Arizona explained without boasting, "an' I've had to fight for it ever since I built up my herd—which is why I'm gun-swift!"

"Arizona," the boy said slowly, and then he scuffed his feet as he made several attempts to find words, "I can't ask you," he muttered. "Trigger Barrows is the fastest man with a six-shooter in high New Mex. He's got an owlhoot gang, and he's killed four men here in Ghost Valley already. Every one of them drew on him first!"

"He's that fast, eh?" Arizona drawled, as he rubbed the worn handle of his gun. "I'd like to meet up with this killing gun hawk. How come me to hear old Snowy's voice way up there on the mesa?"

"Nobody knows," Pee Wee answered with a shudder. "Four times the sheriff rode down from Cowhide town, and each time a voice mocked at him from the rocks."

"I don't take no stock in ghosts," Arizona said soberly, and then he leaped behind a tall rock as two men rode through the narrow pass into the valley.

Pee Wee Bailey turned with a gasp of surprise. A wide-shouldered cow-

boy was riding with both hands held shoulder-high. A stern-faced man rode just behind with a gun in his hand, and a ball-pointed star on his faded vest.

"Sheriff Crag Lane!" Pee Wee greeted the older man. "And you caught the dry-gulcher who killed my dad!"

"I caught this rannihan up on the mesa trail," the grizzled sheriff answered. "I heard the shooting, so I brought this gent along. Looks like an owlhooter to me, and he calls himself Big Mike Lucas."

"Don't cock that gun, sheriff," a deep voice warned. "You've made a mistake, and I'll prove it after you holster your shooting iron."

Sheriff Lane stopped the thumb which was earing back the hammer of his gun. Big Mike smiled with relief as Arizona stepped into the clear. The sheriff slid his weapon into leather while his hard gray eyes probed Archer's tanned face.

"You're obstructing the law, cowboy," the sheriff said sharply. "I've been sheriff here for twenty years, and I've never lost a prisoner up to now!"

"There always has to be a first time," Arizona answered evenly. "Big Mike is my saddle pard. Him and me were riding the mesa trail when Snowy Bailey got rubbed out down here. We both heard him name Trigger Barrows as his killer."

"You're Arizona Archer according to this hombre," Sheriff Lane murmured and an expression of respect changed the scowling set of his seamed features. "I've heard of you. All I got against you is the fact that

you're a gun swift with a reputation."

"Did you ever hear of me drawing on an honest man?" Arizona asked sharply.

"That's right, I never did," admitted Lane. "I could use a pair of good deputies on this case. Take the job and your pard ain't under arrest."

"I'll help the law, but I won't work for it," Arizona answered, and his voice was firm. "I came over here to help Snowy Bailey, and me and Mike will help old Snowy's chip. Now, who else runs in the wolf pack?"

"Well, there's Skull Peters, Shorty Gates and his half-brother, and Jose Garcia," Lane answered. "Each a killer with a price on his head."

Arizona shrugged carelessly. He was measuring the distance from the valley floor to the high mesa trail. "I can't understand how me and Mike heard old Snowy, and us all of two miles away. Mike thought he was hearing a ghost, but Snowy was alive when I got down here. Me, I don't believe none in ghosts!"

Sheriff Crag Lane glanced down at the body of Snowy Bailey. His voice was a low growl as he spoke to Arizona Archer, and his right hand was close to the law gun in his worn holster.

"You're under arrest, Archer! It's all of two miles down here from the trail, and Snowy was shot just above the heart. I'm calling on you to surrender before I match my draw against your drop!"

"Better not commit suicide that-away, sher'ff," Big Mike advised dryly. "We heard a voice whisper-

ing up through the rocks, and it sounded to me like a ghost. Unless you want to be one of the same, don't crowd Arizona into a gunplay."

Sheriff Lane scratched his head as he dropped his hand away from his gun.

"I've heard that voice whisper through the rocks myself," he admitted honestly. "There's a place up at the bend of the mesa trail known as Talking Rocks. I'll hobble my gun hand if you'll talk some more, Arizona."

"A gent talks down here in the valley, and his voice carries up through the cliff," Arizona said thoughtfully. "There must be a cave around here, and it's like one of those speaking tubes in the quality hotels down El Paso way."

"By dogies!" The sheriff slapped his lean thigh. "I believe you've hit on something, cowboy. I never did set much store on this talk about ghosts wandering around that cluster of big rocks. Come to think of it," he added, "I don't know of any cave in these parts."

Arizona glanced at Big Mike and shook his head. The sheriff had forgotten that he had placed Arizona under arrest, and Mike wisely remained silent.

Pee Wee Bailey was standing away from the group, staring down at the form of his father. He turned to Arizona and touched the cowboy's arm.

"They boogered my dad's hoss," Pee Wee said in a low throaty voice. "We can put Snowy on my sorrel and take him back to the Box B. I'm

not very heavy, if your black hoss will carry double."

Arizona nodded, and the sheriff helped him lift and rope the dead man to Pee Wee's saddle. The sheriff said he had law business in town, and rode out of the valley.

Arizona mounted his black and kicked a stirrup loose. Pee Wee mounted behind, and Big Mike brought up the rear, leading the pack horse. There was little talk until they stopped at the tie rail in front of the Box B ranchhouse.

Pee Wee Bailey slid to the ground and ran up the steps to a small gallery in front of the house. He opened the door to the large front room, called over his shoulder.

"Bring him into the front room and lay him on the couch."

Big Mike was throwing off the ties which bound Snowy Bailey, and frowning fiercely. He was afraid of the dead, but he helped Arizona carry the body into the house. Pee Wee turned his back as he spoke softly.

"I'll look after him. The undertaker will come out from Cowhide. I'm 'bliged to you and Mike."

"Better bring out a couple more boxes," a sneering voice drawled from the porch. "Up them flippers, you two saddle tramps!"

Arizona turned in a crouch with his hand slapping for his holster. He stopped the move when he saw two hard-faced gunhawks watching him from just inside the door.

One was a lean, cadaverous-looking hombre with a head like a skull. His deep-set eyes were cold and steady, and the tight skin covering

his bony face was like old parchment.

The second man was short and squat, with wide powerful shoulders, and a shock of bristling red hair. He held a cocked gun on Big Mike who was watching him for some sign of carelessness. Mike shrugged and raised his big hands.

"Showing some sense," Shorty growled thickly. "Me and Skull was itchin' to press triggers."

"I've heard about you two jaspers," Arizona drawled softly. "Skull Peters and Shorty Gates. You make a pair in that wolf pack rodded by Trigger Barrows."

"Right," Shorty agreed. "Trigger allows he could use a gun like yours in our outfit. That, or you get a slug where it will do us the most good!"

Arizona stared thoughtfully at the two outlaws. He and Mike were in a tight, but there might be some way out. An outright refusal would bring sudden death.

"Later mebbe," Arizona answered carelessly, and turned his back. "Right now we've got to think about the deceased."

Skull Peters caught the slipping hammer of his gun under his calloused thumb, and drew in a deep breath. Shorty Gates turned his head to follow Arizona's movements. Big Mike took a gambler's chance and rapped down for the handle of his six-shooter.

Shorty Gates saw the move and whirled. Big Mike was already rocking back the hammer of his Peacemaker as it slid across the lip of his scabbard.

Then hell broke loose in the long front room as Skull Peters whipped into a turn to throw down on Big Mike Lucas.

Arizona twitched his right shoulder, made a lightning draw, and triggered a point shot at the skeleton man. Both guns roared in unison, and Big Mike Lucas was slapped into a spin with his smoking gun spilling from his hand.

Shorty Gates was down with his head under him, breaking his stubby finger nails as he clawed at the spur-splintered planking.

Skull Peters swayed like a broken reed in a strong wind. Then he unhinged at the knees and sprawled to the floor like a worn rope.

"He's cashed his chips," Pee Wee's changing voice wavered tremulously. "An' Big Mike is dead!"

"I ain't no such dang thing!" a snarling voice contradicted hotly.

Big Mike came to his feet like a great shambling bear, his face working spasmodically.

"A slug just sliced me across the short ribs," he explained curtly.

"Put the kettle on to boil, Pee Wee," said Arizona with relief. "An' we'll slap a bandage on this bullet burn."

While Pee Wee stirred up the fire in the kitchen stove, Arizona examined the raw wound.

"An inch to the left and you'd have taken it center through the ticker, Mike," he remarked calmly. "You saved us a killing, and I won't forget it."

"Them two," Mike muttered, and pointed to the outlaws with his chin. "The sheriff will want to know. I

didn't throw off my shot and neither did you."

"They must have been hiding out back," Arizona said carelessly, and started to wash the wound from the pan of water Pee Wee brought from the kitchen.

"There's two horses tied out back," Pee Wee said. "We don't want any part of those hombres on the floor."

"Button your shirt and help me carry them out," Arizona told Big Mike. "We'll rope 'em to their saddles, and let Trigger Barrows do the digging."

Head and heels, they carried the two dead outlaws through the kitchen. Pee Wee made jumper blindfolds to keep the horses from spooking. Skull Peters was laid face down across his own saddle, ankles and wrists tied with piggin' strings and, after Shorty Gates was tied the same way, Arizona jerked the blinds loose. He tied the reins up short and turned to Big Mike.

"Mount up and point out across the valley," he ordered shortly. "I'll be right behind you. Pee Wee can stay here until we get back."

Big Mike was about to argue, but he held his tongue when he saw the expression on his partner's face. Pee Wee Bailey would want to be alone with his father when the undertaker arrived.

"Like you said, boss," said Mike. He climbed into his saddle, took the lead reins of the dead outlaws' horses, and rode slowly out of the Box B yard. Arizona mounted his horse and turned to the boy.

"Stay in the house and keep your gun handy, Pee Wee," he said, and

tried to keep his deep voice careless. "Mike and me will side you until this ruckus is settled, and I reckon you know what I mean."

"It means more killing," Pee Wee answered in a hard bitter voice. "Ghost Valley won't be safe as long as Trigger Barrows is on the loose!"

Arizona nodded as the kid's jaw thrust out, and Pee Wee rubbed the handle of his old single-action pistol.

"Ghost Valley will be safe enough," Arizona promised grimly, and waving his hand, he rode after Big Mike Lucas at a gallop.

II

Three canyons led into Ghost Valley with the Box B at the north, and the pass leading to Cowhide at the south. Arizona Archer overtook Big Mike at the mouth of a winding dry wash, and called to him.

"Take it slow, Mike. Trigger Barrows ramrods quite an outlaw spread back here in the lavas, and I'd like a look at his roost."

"These cayuses I'm leading must see something," Mike murmured. "See how the bay pricks up his ears."

"Prick up your own and reach for a handful of sky!" a rasping voice commanded.

Arizona dropped both hands to his saddlehorn before slowly turning his head.

A big man was blocking the trail, and the six-shooter in his right hand was leveled for a shot. His long thin nose separated a pair of piercing black eyes and a tiny black mustache etched his thin upper lip. A pair of big lobeless ears lopped out from

under coal-black hair, like the stubby horns of a yearling bull.

"You must be Arizona Archer," the stranger stated. "I'm Trigger Barrows, and I sent Skull Peters and Shorty Gates to make you an offer."

"Them two are dead," Big Mike interrupted rashly. "We figgered you'd want to dig 'em a home where the buffaloes roam." He stiffened when the muzzle of a rifle touched his spine and his hands went up shoulder high in token of surrender.

"Shall I make for kill, Señor Barrows?" a silky voice purred.

"Just keep that wide-shouldered hombre under your gun, José," Barrows told the pock-marked half-breed. "I'm interested in his salty pard." Big Mike Lucas crouched in his saddle, trembling with fury. The big gaunt roan under him sat back suddenly when it felt a gentle pressure on the right stirrup.

Big Mike left the saddle like a bull-dogger taking his steer. The surprised José triggered a slug into the air, and then a pair of wide-spread arms tore him from his silver-mounted saddle.

In the ensuing mêlée the breed slipped from the arms of Big Mike but, just as he eluded his captor, the swinging stirrup of his own mount clipped him smartly on the side of the head and José Garcia crumpled to the ground, out cold.

Big Mike recovered suddenly. "Drop that cutter, Trigger," he roared at the sinister outlaw leader, "I've got you covered and I can't miss."

Trigger Barrows expressed his sur-

prise in the jerk that flipped up the heavy gun in his right hand. For a brace of heartbeats he poised in the saddle like a hawk making ready for flight. Then he shrugged his shoulders as he spoke to Arizona Archer.

"Call your watch dog to heel, Arizona. I ain't ever met a gun-hand as fast as myself. I'd admire to match you for a draw-and-shoot!"

"Who's a dog?" Big Mike demanded. "Eat crow, you killin' son, if you want to live long enough for showdown!"

Trigger Barrows clicked his teeth and made retraction without hesitation. His desire to match speed with a master made everything else seem insignificant by comparison.

"Taking it all back, big hombre. I called you out of turn, and I'm eating crow."

Arizona sat through a long silence, broken only by Big Mike Lucas. Mike said: "It's between you and him, Trigger. Holster your hogleg and give Arizona a break. I'm passin' my word that I'll pouch my cutter."

Trigger Barrows flipped his hand, but he stopped it halfway to his holster when an angry excited voice came from behind him.

"You can't do it, Trigger Barrows. You killed my pa, and I'm taking up where he left off!"

The big outlaw again centered his gun on Arizona Archer. Big Mike snarled softly like a hound on a leash. Then the calm unruffled voice of Arizona Archer suggested a possible solution.

"Ride up the trail and wait for sunrise, Trigger Barrows. Tomor-

row is another day, and I'll bring you showdown. A fair break on both sides, according to the code of old Judge Colt!"

Trigger Barrows acted so quickly that both Big Mike and Pee Wee Bailey were taken by surprise. He wheeled his horse and spurred the animal into a high lope. The ring of steel shoes on lava rock pinged sharply through the twilight, and then Big Mike remembered his attack on José Garcia.

"On your feet, hombre!" Joe barked at the figure who sat on the ground stroking his jaw in bewilderment. "Hit leather and get long gone!"

José Garcia murmured his thanks as he stumbled to the edge of the brush. As his horse made a lunge, Garcia made a stiff-armed vault to the saddle and Mike watched with a little smile of pride tugging at his lips. Once more he had restrained his killing temper.

Mike turned slowly to see how Arizona was taking Garcia's departure. Arizona was gripping young Pee Wee by the shoulders, looking down into the boy's sullen eyes.

"I told you to stay home until Mike and I got back," he said soberly. "How come you didn't do it?"

Pee Wee blinked. He had expected a harsh tirade, and the gentleness in his benefactor's voice restored his confidence.

"I had to come, Arizona," Pee Wee answered hurriedly. "Rustlers! I was in the house with Boothill Tony when we heard the cattle stampeding.

Six riders were running our shipping steers up the Cowhide trail, and I came hightailing to you for help!"

Arizona whirled to face his partner.

"Smoke your roan's hoofs getting to town," he ordered. "Notify Sheriff Lane, and then ride back with him like the devil was hanging onto your coat tails!"

Big Mike stared while the orders sank into his slow-moving brain. Then he jumped into his saddle and pounded off.

"They'll kill Mike. They headed straight up the mesa trail!" Pee Wee protested.

"Mike takes a heap of killing," Arizona said reassuringly. "I counted four hundred head of shippers in your herd, and we've got to work with the law. Mount up and let's hit out for the Box B."

"Do not make the move, señor," a hissing voice whispered from the brush. "The big one run away from José Garcia, but you cannot escape!"

Dark eyes can see better in the gloom, but Arizona's tawny eyes had adjusted themselves to the semi-darkness. The pock-marked Garcia was straddling the lava trail with a gleaming knife cradled in his swarthy right hand, and his arm was back for the throw.

"Mike didn't run from you, hombre," Arizona said softly, and then his voice crackled. "Jump him, Mike!"

Arizona was staring at a spot behind Garcia, who jumped suddenly as he turned his head. Arizona dug for his six-shooter, and the gun roared deafeningly just as Garcia de-

tected the ruse and made his throw.

José Garcia stumbled and coughed hoarsely. His heavy body hit the ground and bounced from the force of his fall. The wide shoulders twitched, and drumming boot toes dug little holes in the dirt before settling to rest.

"I had it to do, and this time I didn't throw off my shot," Arizona muttered, as though he were half angry with himself.

Pee Wee Bailey shook himself like a dog coming out of water. The knife had been meant for him, and he had been too stunned to move.

"You saved my life again, cowboy," the boy said in a deep voice, to keep it from changing. "You're just like my brother Jim was."

"I was going to ask about Jim," Arizona said slowly. "He'd be about twenty-two if I remember right. All old Snowy said was that Jim had gone . . . away."

"Jim was shot twice in the past year," Pee Wee explained in a low shamed voice. "He left a month ago. All we found was a note saying he was pulling his freight for parts unknown."

"He didn't say where he was going?"

Pee Wee shook his tousled head. "Jim just said we didn't have a chance against the Barrows gang, but you can't blame him. He was still weak from his last wound. Barrows shot high, and the slug just missed Jim's heart. Took him a month to heal up enough to walk around, and he never was the same."

Arizona shook his head. He had known old Snowy Bailey down in

Texas, and the old cattleman had never wanted for nerve. The same cold courage showed in Pee Wee, and Jim Bailey had never shown the white feather.

Arizona hadn't seen Jim for more than six years, but he remembered the wiry cowboy and his willingness to fight anyone who stepped on his toes. He couldn't make himself believe that Jim Bailey had dogged it.

"Jim will come back," he told Pee Wee. "He had some mighty good reason for leaving, and you made me believe Jim was dead. You said old Snowy was the only kin you had!"

"Jim is dead," Pee Wee stated hotly. "Trigger Barrows finished the job he started when he wounded Jim. You can't tell me no different!"

"I reckon not," Arizona murmured, and climbed his saddle. "It's

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getting dark, and we better be hitting back for the Box B."

"Can't we wait here for Mike and Sheriff Lane?" Pee Wee asked hesitantly, and all the defiance was gone from his voice.

Arizona started to speak and then stopped. Snowy Bailey was back in the Box B ranchhouse with Boothill Tony.

"You don't have to go into the house, Pee Wee," he said gently. "I just thought it might be better to stay where the sheriff could find us. We'll wait out in the yard."

Pee Wee silently mounted his horse and led the way through the dry canyon and Arizona rode beside the boy toward the dim yellow lights in the distant Box B house.

"I ain't afraid," Pee Wee murmured in a muffled voice. "Only I feel so all alone when it gets dark, and I miss Jim. He always bucked me up when I got spooky, and he thought a heap of you. Don't tell anybody I ran out on old Snowy, will you, pard?"

"I won't breathe a word," Arizona promised earnestly.

The lights in the Box B house grew brighter, and soon they came to the yard. Arizona dismounted to open the gate and spoke sharply.

"Did you leave the gate open?"

"I closed it after me," Pee Wee answered positively. "Looky, there's a horse tied to the rail near Tony's wagon!"

Arizona stared at the low-covered black wagon which had brought a casket from town for Snowy Bailey. He whispered to Pee Wee, who was

just off to one side, to separate the target they made if danger threatened from the house.

"You keep behind me, Pee Wee. It might be the sheriff, but if it means more trouble, you know what to do. Barrows rods quite a gang."

Arizona made no sound as he crept toward the front door through which a coal-oil lamp cast a yellow glow. A shudder of repugnance twitched his shoulders as the strong smell of formaldehyde wafted from the room. He stopped suddenly when the frightened voice of the undertaker broke the stillness of early night.

"But the dead!" Boothill Tony protested. "I have made my so-good friend Snowy Bailey ready for the grave. You can't do this so terrible thing!"

"To hell with Snowy Bailey," a coarse voice snarled. "That Arizona gun-slammer made my brother Shorty ready for the grave, and Shorty gits the coffin. Now you dump that corpse out on the floor if you hanker to keep on practicin' yore chosen perfession!"

Arizona stiffened with anger at the proposed desecration. Two steps put him inside the room where he balanced easily on the toes of his boots, while he took in the scene under the garish yellow light.

Boothill Tony was standing at the head of a gray casket. His thin sallow face had lost all color, and his brown eyes were rolling with terror.

A wide-shouldered gunman stood at the foot of the bier with a .45 Colt pointed at the little undertaker's heart. He was taller than Shorty

Gates by six inches, but thick lips and bulbous nose marked him unmistakably as Shorty's blood brother.

"Don't move, Gates," Arizona interrupted, and his voice was low. "Remember that you're in the presence of the dead!"

The burly outlaw held his gun hand still as his head turned slowly to place the speaker. His right hand slowly holstered his gun and his thick coarse voice whispered through the long room.

"You killed my brother. I'm Buck Gates and I've taken up for Shorty!"

"Not here," Arizona answered through stiff lips. "We can wait until after Snowy has been put away. It's only decent and proper."

Buck Gates scowled and narrowed his eyes. His thick lips snarled back to show broken yellowed teeth. Then he stomped his left boot to spin his body around and face Arizona Archer, clawing at his six-shooter as he made his turn.

Arizona's face was like a mask carved from stone as he finished his lightning draw. The gun exploded in his hand just as the outlaw's weapon was starting over the lip of his buscadero holster.

Buck Gates opened his fingers as his knees buckled. Boothill Tony thrust out an arm to fend the falling body away from the casket, and Arizona turned slowly as a hand gripped his left arm.

"You killed him," Pee Wee whispered. "He ought to be dragged on the end of a rope after a running hoss, for what he was going to do!"

"Look, pard," Arizona said

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calmly, as he turned Pee Wee toward the kitchen door. "You wrangle up a bait of grub while I take the remains outside. I had it to do, but I didn't like it none."

Pee Wee kept his head turned away from the casket as he hurried to the kitchen.

Arizona glanced at Tony and pointed toward Buck Gates with his chin. No word was said as they took the dead outlaw by shoulders and feet, carried the body outside to the tethered horse, and roped the limp form face down across the scarred saddle.

Having finished the ties and pulled the slip knot which held the bridle reins to the rail, Arizona turned the horse, slapped it across the rump with his Stetson, and sent it racing across the yard.

"We carry the casket of Snowy Bailey to the grave now, yes?" Tony said anxiously. "It is better that I finish my work and get back to Cowhide town."

Boothill Tony turned for a last look at the lighted windows of the Box B house, and cut his team sharply with the whip. The fear gradually left him as he raced up the valley, and he slowed the sweating horses to a walk.

"Stand yore hosses, Boothill," a harsh voice suddenly commanded. "Where have you been?"

Trigger Barrows kned his horse closer as he covered the terrified undertaker with the cocked gun in his big right hand.

"I . . . I have buried the dead,"

Tony stammered. "Snowy Bailey has been laid to rest!"

"Yeah? I met Buck Gates coming up the trail," Barrows said bluntly. "Did Arizona rub Buck out?"

"But yes," the frightened Tony admitted.

Hoofbeats echoed from the upper trail, and Trigger Barrows reined his spirited horse close to the wagon.

"You drive slow and don't stop to talk," he ordered Tony. "I'll be back here in the shadows, and I'm pressing trigger if you give an alarm!"

Boothill Tony shook out his reins and started his horses. His brain was numb with fear, and he sighed with relief when a rider roared out of the darkness from the Cowhide trail. The gruff voice of Sheriff Lane barked a question.

"Is that you, Tony?"

"It is me, Tony," the undertaker croaked.

"Stand your hosses!" the sheriff yelled. "I heard voices speaking up there at Talking Rocks, and one of them sounded like Trigger Barrows!"

A flash of orange flame winked from the shadows and a single roaring shot kicked Crag Lane backward from the saddle.

Boothill Tony whipped his team halfway up the grade before they slowed to an exhausted walk. He screamed softly when another rider loomed out of the brush to cover him with gun metal, and then Tony recognized Big Mike Lucas.

"Trigger Barrows!" Tony babbled

hysterically. "He has kill' the sheriff down in Ghost Valley!"

"You hit out for town." Mike advised, "and tell the folks about Sher'ff Lane."

Big Mike started cautiously down the trail, and his eyes narrowed as he saw a saddled horse grazing nearby. He caught the dangling reins as he recognized the horse Sheriff Lane had ridden out from Cowhide.

Big Mike knew that he could not match Trigger Barrows' speed with a six-shooter, but Fate had given him one chance for escape. He, too, had recognized the outlaw's voice near Talking Rocks, and Mike took his one chance when he headed the sheriff's riderless horse toward the valley, and sent it clattering down through the pass.

Thudding hoofs echoed loud and clear through the half gloom of the starlit night, as the frightened horse bolted down the rocky trail. Mike crouched low in his saddle and scratched with both feet as he sent his roan in close pursuit. Twenty yards in the rear; just space enough for a round of shells from a fast-triggered gun.

Mike filled his lungs as the riderless horse bolted from the pass into Ghost Valley. Five fast explosions made one long stuttering roll, and Mike knew that the outlaw leader always carried the hammer of his gun on an empty.

Horse and rider slammed out of the dark shadows of the pass like an arrow from a choke-cherry bow, and the crescent moon was riding high above the Organ Mountains when Big Mike raced into the Box B yard.

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He saw two silhouetted figures under a clump of cottonwoods, and Arizona Archer came into the light with his head uncovered.

"Where's Sheriff Lane?" Arizona called.

Big Mike dismounted and started to strip his riding gear as he told the story. Another murder had been committed in Ghost Valley, and Pee Wee shuddered as Mike told about hearing voices coming out of Talking Rocks at the top of the mesa grade.

"There's grub in the kitchen," Arizona told Mike. "Better eat while you can. The moon will soon be high, and we might find some trace of that rustled herd of Box B beef."

III

Big Mike came from the kitchen wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Pee Wee Bailey was under the cottonwoods by the new grave, and Mike went to Arizona who was staring out across the valley.

"I found some sign up there near them Talking Rocks," he whispered. "Let's ride, and leave Pee Wee here to look after the Box B."

Pee Wee Bailey came from under the trees with a glitter in his brown eyes. He breasted up to Big Mike and spoke through clenched teeth.

"I'll fight for the Box B as long as I'm alive," Pee Wee muttered. "I heard what you said to Arizona, and I'm riding along. I know the country better than you do."

Arizona smiled at the boy. "You're big enough to pack a man-

sized gun, and you don't make much of a target," he agreed. "Bolt your hull on a fresh horse, and you pick a big one for yourself, Mike."

There was no more talk while three ropes flipped in the holding corral to snare top Box B horses. Then the slap of latigo straps and the soft creak of oiled saddle leather.

Pee Wee Bailey took the lead as they loped down the valley and up the mesa trail. He drew rein near a shale slide which glinted brightly in the moonlight.

"Here's the blind," Big Mike whispered. "It leads back to another canyon almost like Ghost Valley. There's only a hogback between the two, and five men are holding a bunch of cattle in that blind valley!"

Mike gighed his horse up the steep bank, and led the way through a twisting maze of rocky trails. When they stopped on a little shelf, Mike pointed down to the floor of the hidden valley where restless steers were grazing in the high blue stem, guarded by riders.

"This trail must be the only way out," Arizona murmured. "Pee Wee guards the pass while you and me ride down on opposite sides, Mike. We booger the herd, and I'd hate to be those night riders when the stampede breaks for the opening to get back to their own range."

"Those are Box B steers, and I'll ride down with you," Pee Wee argued.

Arizona explained that it was important to guard the trail, so Pee Wee agreed reluctantly. Big Mike was already riding off to the right,

and Arizona took the left fork. Both kept behind fringing rocks as they neared the valley floor where singing rustlers were trying to bed the herd.

A roaring shot blasted out from the right to signal Big Mike's attack and a night herder swung his horse to shoot at the flashes of Mike's gun.

Arizona was directly in the rustler's path, and the raider chopped a shot at him. Arizona triggered his six-shooter, and the rustler's horse plunged away with an empty saddle.

The restless cattle bellowed and started up the trail for the narrow pass. Two herders raced around in an effort to head off the leaders, and saw their mistake when it was too late. A wave of rushing steers caught up with the horses and swept past without slackening speed.

Arizona reined behind a nest of rocks to reload his smoke-grimed gun. He leaned forward when a rasping voice came hollowly from the clustered rocks behind him.

"I've got the kid, Arizona. You overplayed your hand!"

Arizona whirled like a cat although nothing but craggy rocks rewarded his search. Trigger Barrows was in the valley, and the stampede hadn't lasted more than fifteen minutes!

A flaming light winked from the upper end of the hidden valley. It flickered briefly and disappeared as Arizona sent his horse at a dead run toward the place where the tiny beacon had flashed.

As Arizona thundered down the valley floor and slid his horse to a



*IT SIMPLY
COULDN'T
HAPPEN . . .!*

THE THING THEY SAW HAPPEN
SIMPLY COULDN'T—

Solid blackness transforming itself to
whiteness, like something human turning
ghostly—and ghostly it was.

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could harm it with anything so impotent
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THE SHADOW

AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

stop, he saw a little stone house built in the side of a cliff at the left. A rangy Morgan gelding stood with drooping head at the tie rail—the horse Pee Wee had ridden.

There was no light in the house and, as Arizona slid from the saddle he called cautiously: "Are you in there, Pee Wee?"

"Arizona," answered a faint voice, "inside." The big rider crept up on the porch of the darkened shack and quietly pushed the door ajar, his gun suddenly springing into his hand when he saw two figures in the dim light.

His hand went to the pockets of his chaps, opened his froggin' knife, and cut the bonds that held Pee Wee a prisoner. Then he turned to the man on the floor.

"Jim Bailey!" he almost shouted. "I knew you didn't do it!"

"Howdy, Arizona," a weak voice answered. "Get out there and kill Trigger Barrows. He was just out there with a light."

"Barrows will keep," Arizona argued. "I'll cut you loose pronto!"

"Only my legs are tied," Jim Bailey muttered. "That killer shot me through both arms and brought me here. You've got to kill him, Arizona. Pee Wee done told me about old Snowy!"

Arizona whirled and ran from the room but his searching eyes found no sign of Trigger Barrows. Then he heard the sound of racing hoofs. And a yell came across the tall grass as Arizona clicked back the hammer of his gun.

"Don't shoot, Arizona. It's me—Mike!"

The big man raced up and emptied his saddle in front of the stone house.

"I just saw Trigger Barrows," he panted. "He was riding a big bay, but he was too far off for pistol shooting. You hurt any?"

Arizona explained about the light, and finding Jim Bailey in the cabin with Pee Wee. Mike listened with a chagrined scowl on his heavy round face.

"I wish I'd got that big son," he growled. "Now he's quitting the country!"

"He won't leave," Arizona said positively. "Not until after sunrise!"

A raucous burst of laughter stiffened all three and turned them toward a cluster of rocks just beyond the house. The laughter died away on a low mocking note, and then a rustling whisper came clearly across the trampled battle ground from the rocks.

"You said sunrise, Arizona Archer, that's right. I always keep my word. I'm giving you until then to live!"

"That's Trigger Barrows!" Pee Wee said in an awed whisper. "He's the only one that knows the secret of the Talking Rocks!"

"Arizona," the weak voice of Jim Bailey called from the cabin. "Come inside."

Jim was sitting with his back propped against the side wall. His thin face was dead white except for the two spots of crimson which burned on his high cheek bones. Both arms were heavily bandaged to make the Box B cowboy an almost helpless prisoner.

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"There's a cave running under the hogback," the wounded man began in a weak voice. "It connects Ghost Valley with Hidden Valley, and that's how Barrows got over there so quick. Don't take any chances with that outlaw, because he won't give you a fair shake for your taw."

"I'm going to dress those wounds of yours, Jim," said Arizona, changing the subject. "You've got some fever."

Jim Bailey sighed. "I promised myself to take it to Trigger Barrows after I had healed up my hurts," he murmured. "But it won't wait that long. It's up to you, now, Arizona."

Pee Wee was heating a kettle of water on the little stove which stood in one corner of the room. Big Mike found a clean shirt hanging in a closet, and used it to make new bandages.

Arizona took a bottle of perman-ganate from the inside pocket of his calfskin vest, poured a few drops into the water, and started his rude but effective surgery. The bullets had not touched the bones, and the wounds were clean.

Big Mike Lucas finally blew out the thick candle to plunge the room in darkness and Pee Wee sat beside his brother, telling Jim about the herd which they had stampeded back onto their home range.

Arizona was sitting on the porch looking out over the valley when a low rumbling voice came from the cluster of rocks nearby.

"Better get some sleep, Arizona. I'll tell you the meeting place just before . . . sunrise!"

Arizona Archer nodded his head without speaking. He could hear Jim and Pee Wee talking in excited whispers behind him, and then Big Mike's hand touched his arm.

"Don't try to slope out on me, now," Mike muttered harshly. "If I ever get that big killer in my bear trap, I'll lower the boom!"

"Let's strip the riding gear from the horses," Arizona said after a long pause. "Then we all better get some sleep and wait for what tomorrow brings."

IV

Arizona Archer opened his eyes as the first gray fingers of dawn filtered across Hidden Valley and Big Mike stirred sluggishly as he heard Arizona pulling on his boots.

"About an hour until sunrise, Arizona," Pee Wee announced, trying to keep his voice casual. "You going through with it?"

Arizona nodded and spoke cheerily to Jim Bailey who watched like a man who sees another preparing to do the work he wanted to do himself.

Arizona grunted softly as he found a box of cleaning tools which he carried to a chair and laid out to his liking. Then he ejected the shells from his six-shooter and cleaned every movable part of the balanced weapon.

"What else?" he drawled. "Didn't I pass my spoken word to meet that outlaw ramrod?"

"But you don't know where he is," Big Mike argued. "He might be on the mesa trail, or over in Ghost Valley."

"I can find him," he answered confidently. "And this time it will be according to the code."

"I met him according to the code," Jim Bailey said bleakly, "and look what it got me. It was a fair shake, but he cleared leather before I could get started. That's how fast Trigger Barrows is on the draw! Don't go, Arizona," he pleaded. "I know Barrows will meet you. Last night he said he was only living for the chance. He didn't give the old sheriff a chance, and what has he got to lose?"

"The one thing he wants most," Arizona answered. "His chance to live!"

"But he's got that now," Pee Wee objected. "All he has to do is slope over the hill to get away."

"Let's walk outside," Arizona sug-

gested, as he holstered his gun. He walked stiff-legged like a dog on the fight. Big Mike and Pee Wee followed him around the house, and Arizona stopped before a great conical heap of lava-burnt boulders. He pointed to a gaping irregular hole above his head.

"I discovered this last night. Listen," he told the others, and he began to speak in a strong clear voice.

"Trigger Barrows, Arizona Archer talkin'!"

Big Mike made no attempt to hide the doubt on his craggy face and Pee Wee widened his eyes and leaned forward. Then it came; the hollow rustling whisper which had dominated Ghost Valley for two long years.

"I hear you, Archer. You are near

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my house in Hidden Valley!"

"And you are near the spot where Snowy Bailey and the sheriff were murdered," Arizona answered coolly. "It will be sunrise in a few minutes, and I don't know the short cut through Talking Rocks. I'll ride down the mesa trail—alone!"

"Naw, you don't," Big Mike cut in angrily. "I don't trust that killing rustler after what he did to the sheriff!"

"Barrows will dry-gulch you sure as sin," Pee Wee added. "That bus-cadero don't know the meaning of the gun fighter's code!"

"Like I thought," the rustling whisper vibrated from the rock pile. "You meant to bait a trap!"

Arizona clenched his brown hands and glared at the hole in the Talking Rocks. His tawny eyes were blazing as he made his war talk.

"I said according to the code, Barrows. That means man to man with empty hands, and a draw-and-shoot on signal!"

"Hit your saddle and fan your horse down the hind legs," came the growling answer. "I'll be waiting where you found old Snowy Bailey. I know the code as well as you do!"

"I'm coming, Trigger," Arizona answered.

Turning his back on the rock pile, he walked to the house and spoke to Jim Bailey. He told the wounded Box B man not to worry, and then backed out to the tie rail to mount his horse.

Big Mike scowled and held out his big hand.

"I ain't worried none, Arizona.

Speed to your hand!"

"Adios, pard," Pee Wee gulped. "I know nothing can stop you, so chouse on over the hill. And keep the sun out of your eyes!"

The big sorrel broke into a plunging run down the valley, and the wind in Arizona's face slowed down his racing pulse.

The stout mountain horse climbed the steep grade which led to the mesa trail, stopped to blow for a time, and headed for the rocky pass leading down into Ghost Valley.

Box B cattle were grazing contentedly, showing little effect of the midnight stampede. A hazy pink glow hovered above the Organ Mountains as Arizona rode through the pass and came out into Ghost Valley.

He cuffed his hat low to shade his searching eyes, drawing a long deep breath as he saw the towering figure of Trigger Barrows step out, empty-handed, and stand beside a great split rock.

Arizona rode up to within fifteen paces, swung down from his saddle, and waited until the horse had drifted to one side.

"You came alone," Barrows broke the silence.

"Like I promised," Arizona agreed. "I used your tools to clean my gun back in the stone house where I found Jim Bailey."

"This is your last sunrise, Arizona," Barrows stated, and barely moved his lips. "The cattle can be rounded up again, and after you're gone, I'll finish what I started!"

"After I'm gone, you won't be on the prowl," Arizona contradicted.

Trigger Barrows clawed his gun from the scabbard with one burst of blinding speed, thumbing back the hammer while he was throwing down with trigger finger through the guard.

Arizona Archer dropped his hand down and shifted to the side with his gun spilling over the lip of his holster. He rocked the hammer with his thumb just before a ball of fire tipped the outlaw's swiveling muzzle across the trail.

Lead tore at Arizona's calfskin vest when Trigger Barrows was jerked back and to the left. Arizona caught his bucking gun and eared back for a chopping follow up on the recoil.

Trigger Barrows was leaning forward and trying to turn his body to face the man who had beaten him to the gun. Arizona held his follow up when he glanced at the outlaw's face.

Gray and twisted, with black-jowled jaw sagging, Trigger Barrows came around slowly, and his smoking gun clattered to the trail. A downward plunge as the outlaw's knees buckled suddenly.

Arizona Archer waited until the thudding boots had settled in the little holes they had made. Then he holstered his six-shooter.

Arizona turned quickly as speeding hoofs swept into the valley from the narrow pass. Big Mike and Pee Wee Bailey came up fast with six-shooters in their hands.

"You won," Pee Wee said shakily.

"I was taking up for you if you shot second!"

"After me, the kid was first," Big Mike boomed hoarsely. "We heard you and Trigger talking through the rocks, and I think I know where the cave is joining Ghost with Hidden Valley."

"When Jim heals up his hurts, it won't be any job to round up your shippers," Arizona told Pee Wee. "Look right behind that cluster of talking rocks near the stone house, and you'll find a trail. You can widen the entrance to the cave with a little work, and you'll have twice as much range."

"You knew where it was?" Pee Wee asked in a whisper. "And you rode all the way around?"

"Trigger Barrows fought according to the code," Arizona said. "And I played out my string the same way."

"I wish old Snowy knew," Pee Wee murmured. "I'll tell him tonight."

"Take good care of Jim," Arizona answered with a smile. "I'll send a doctor out from Cowhide."

"You mean you're leaving right off?" Pee Wee demanded.

"Mike and me will be back one of these days, but we've got to round up our own shipping beef," Arizona answered. "You won't have any more trouble, Pee Wee. Trigger Barrows has killed his last man. There won't be any more murders at Talking Rocks!"

THE END

Answers to puzzle on page 88.

1. boots 2. ore 3. boothill 4. roper 5. canyon 6. bear 7. sheriff 8. cabin 9. bacon 10. stirrup 11. alkali 12. shotgun 13. hogback 14. arroyo 15. mine

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