

WESTERN^K

STREET
AND
SMITH'S

JUNE '45

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STORY JUNE 1945

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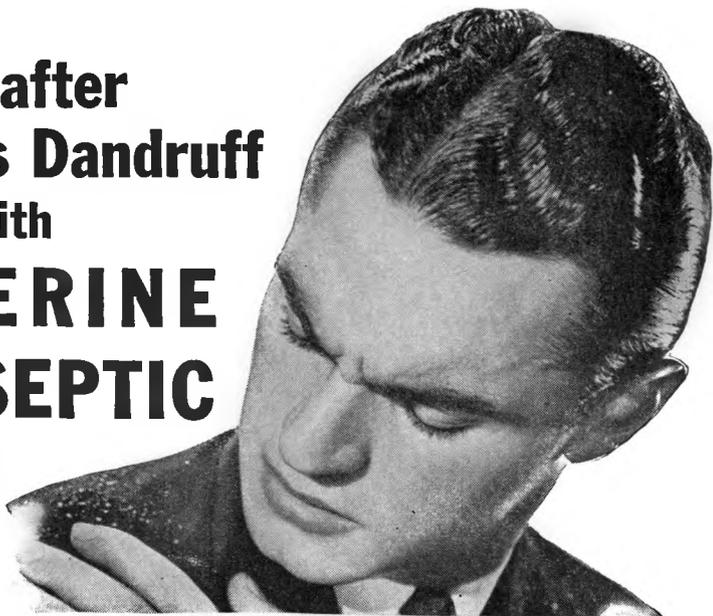


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Kills "Bottle Bacillus"

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Listerine Antiseptic gets after

the tested treatment

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LAMBERT PHARMACAL Co., *St. Louis, Mo.*



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STREET & SMITH'S
WESTERN STORY

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JUNE, 1945

VOL. CCXIII. NO. 2

NOVEL

BIBLE BEN'S REP, *by Walt Coburn* 6

NOVELETTES

JUSTICE IN COTTON FORKS, *by James Shaffer* 40

SIWASH SAVVY, *by Frank Richardson Pierce* . 64

GOLD CAMP GUN GHOST, *by M. Howard Lane* 88

SHORT STORIES AND FEATURES

THE JINX OF WRONG WAY CHARLIE,
by Jim Kjelgaard 32

RAWHIDE RECIPE, a poem of the cow country,
by S. Omar Barker 39

TEXAS MEDICOS NEED GUTS, *by Bob Obets* . 55

PUZZLE 63

WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE,
by John North 82

GUNS AND GUNNERS,
by Captain Philip B. Sharpe 84

MINES AND MINING, *by John A. Thompson* . 86

HALFWAY TO HELL, *by Joseph Chadwick* . . 108

RANGE SAVVY, *by Gene King* 118

OUTLAW DEPUTY, *by Bruce Douglas* 119

COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

Editor
JOHN BURR



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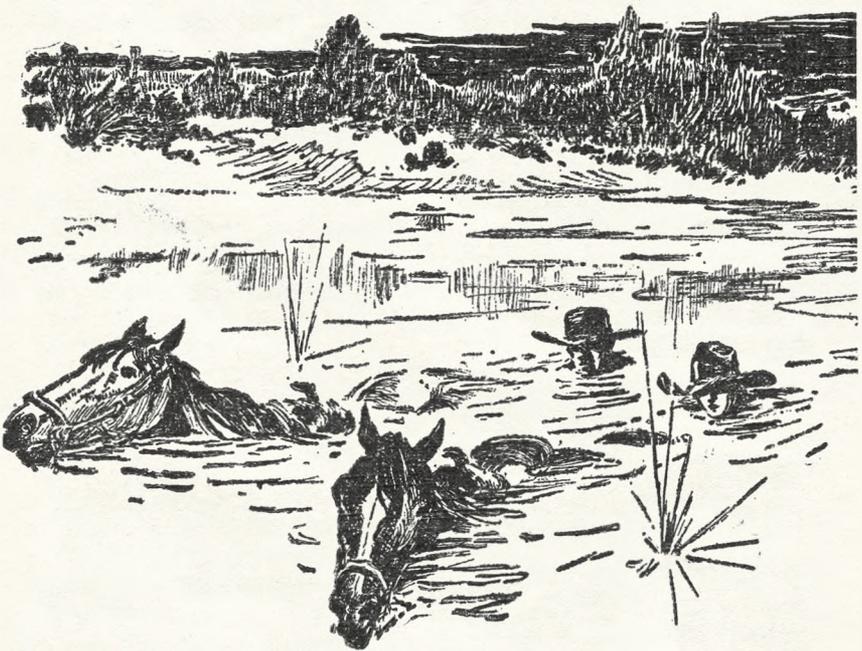
PICTURE STORIES

AUGUST ISSUE — 10c A COPY

BIBLE BEN'S REP

by WALT COBURN

As soon as the law slipped the hobbles on Bass Burnett, he found himself in a renegade-rigged gun-trap!



I

EVEN a year in the pen will fade out a man's hide and maybe cut some hard lines in his face. But that's nothing that a few weeks of weather in the saddle won't cure when the warden hazes you out the big gate

onto open range again. It's the prison sores inside a man's heart that are hardest to heal. Sometimes those deep hurts keep on festering and, like as not, they open wider. And when that happens a released convict might as well cut his throat with an old dull knife, because he'd

be just as well off in his grave.

That was what Bible Ben told young Bass Burnett. Bible Ben was Bass' cell pardner in the Wyoming penitentiary.

"You'll be gittin' your walkin' papers one of these days before long,

had had no bill of sale for the horse he'd been forking.

With Bible Ben it was a different story. He had laid his Bible aside, he told Bass Burnett, to ride down



son. And I'd like fer to help you ride the straight trail when you're turned out o' the big corral."

"I never rode any other kind of a trail, Ben," said Bass. "I got railroaded."

"Shore thing, son. And them's the worst kind when they slip the hobbles. Bitter inside their guts."

Bass Burnett had made the mistake of trying to ride the grubline across Wyoming during the big range war. Too green or too careless or perhaps too mule-headed to believe that a man could ride through without taking sides, one way or another, he'd been picked up by prowling law riders, tried and sent to the pen. Horse stealing was the charge. Bass

from Montana with some shirt-tail kin he had up yonder, and to gather a few head of cheap cattle while the Wyoming cattle war was going on. Somewhere along the trail he had trusted the wrong folks. Bible Ben was riding the wrong point of the little trail herd when the law stopped them. The others, the shirt-tail kin, had coyoted.

"And there I was, son, with a gatherment of mixed brands and none of 'em vented proper and the drive was in my road iron. The judge throwed the book at this ol' sinner. He gimme twenty-five years to repent. Knock off a few years fer good behavior and I'll still be on the younger side of a hundred when I git out. But I got a feller workin' fer me on the outside. Ol' Jake Van, up in Montana, is pullin' a few strings. Jake Van and my

young un, Toby. I'll sashay out o' here some fine day. But till then, I do my best to git along. I ain't got an enemy inside these prison walls. And the chaplain lets me read my Bible to the boys. Even the warden hissself says I wrangle a fair-to-middlin' sermon, because I kin tell it in the kind of lingo the boys all savvy. . . . I should've stuck to circuit ridin'."

Bible Ben had been a circuit-rider parson. A good one, if his prison sermons were a fair sample. A grizzled, stoop-shouldered, kindly man with faded, puckered blue eyes set under ragged brows, and his voice soft-toned. And for all his Bible-toting, a cowman and a good 'un. Even now there was no visible sign of resentment or bitterness in his heart. He was doing a lot of good here in prison. And that seemed almost to content Bible Ben. His only worry was "That young un of mine, Toby. Left alone to run my little outfit. . . . But Toby's got Jake Van acrost the river. And Jake Van's a good man to tie to. Frettin' won't do me no good."

It was due to the good influence of the grizzled circuit rider that twenty-three-year-old Bass Burnett from Texas was paroled out of prison after he had served a year and a day of his fifteen-year stretch.

"Bible Ben," the warden told Bass, "has convinced the parole board and convinced me that you're innocent. Even the law makes its mistakes in times like this when the country is torn by a range war.

That law can't give you back the year it took out of your freedom. But if you profit by what Bible Ben has preached, perhaps you can turn this bad experience into profit."

Bass Burnett said he aimed to try to profit by it. But he'd be willing to camp here in prison a few more years if the law would turn Bible Ben free instead of him.

The warden had smiled faintly and shaken his head. He said it looked as though Bass Burnett had really learned something big from the circuit rider. One of the rules laid down by the Big Boss: Love thy fellow man. But Bass was not to worry himself too much because Bible Ben would be on his way back to Montana before long.

An ironclad rule was stretched. Wyoming right now was no place for a neutral cowpuncher, so Bass Burnett was given a railroad ticket to the little cow town of Rimrock, Montana, and a letter from Bible Ben Gillis to a cowman named Jake Van.

"I'll be happy to know, son," Bible Ben shook hands with Bass in the warden's office, "that you're paroled to Jake Van. He needs a good cowhand. He's gittin' along in years and he's stove-up some and cain't buck them Montana blizzards like he used to. And you kin kind o' keep an eye on that young un of mine. Good luck, son. I'll see you one of these days."

Bass Burnett had his saddle and chaps in a sack, a hundred dollars in his pocket, a ticket to Rimrock, Montana, and that letter to Jake Van. He had learned more than a little

from Bible Ben and he was almighty happy when he walked out through the prison gate that sunny May day.

There was nothing like a sign of any kind in the clear blue sky to warn of danger, of the black ugly storms ahead.

II

But when he got off the train at the little cow town of Rimrock, Montana, lugging his sacked saddle, Bass got his first disappointment. Jake Van was not in town to meet him, though Bass had seen and read the letter Bible Ben had written his old friend a couple of weeks ago, telling Jake to meet Bass Burnett in Rimrock the fifteenth day of May. And this was the night of the fifteenth.

Bible Ben had told Bass that the most likely place to find Jake Van would be the White Elephant Saloon.

"Ain't seen Jake Van," the saloonman told Bass, "since he come to town fer grub after the snow melted. That was last March. He gits his mail at Buffalo Crossing down on the Missouri River—"

Then he let a wry grin spread across his beefy jowls and called to the little group of three or four cowpunchers standing at the far end of the bar talking together in low tones.

"Here's a stranger askin' about ol' Jake Van. You Gillis fellers might know. Is Jake in town?"

They had eyed Bass from under their hat brims when he came in through the swinging half doors. They showed a sort of partly con-

cealed curiosity toward the tall, wide-shouldered, lean-flanked stranger with the cropped wiry black hair, slate-gray eyes and blunt nose and jaw, his lean face too pale for his worn cowpuncher clothes. There had been nothing friendly in the way they sized him up. And now their looks were guarded as they cut one another swift glances. Then all stared hard at the tall stranger who asked for Jake Van.

Bass stared back at them. The saloonman had called them Gillis. From the descriptions Bible Ben had given Bass from time to time in their prison cell, Bass reckoned these three men and the fourth man who had come in the back door and joined them, were the "shirt-tail kin" who had coyoted on the circuit rider.

They were all tall, over six feet, rawboned, sandy complexioned, with pale blue or gray or green eyes, and hawk beaked. They varied in age and general appearance, but all were stamped by the same earmarks and brand.

There was one who seemed to be the leader. His sandy hair and week's stubble of whiskers and tobacco-stained drooping mustache were sprinkled with gray. His pale-green eyes were bloodshot, shifty. He countered the saloonman's question with one shot straight at Bass.

"What the hell kind o' business you got with Jake Van?" He had a nasal voice.

"Personal," said Bass Burnett quietly. "Strictly personal."

A younger one of the little group named Gillis crowded past the

others. He stood about six feet four in his run-over high-heeled boots. His eyes were greener and he was a little drunker than his companions. His thin-lipped mouth twisted.

"Personal, eh?" He swaggered down the length of the bar and stood close to Bass. "The devil yuh say!"

"That Oren," cackled the youngest of the Gillis outfit, a pimply youth in his late teens. "That dadburned Oren. . . . Clean his damned plow-share fer 'im, Oren. Him an' his 'stric'ly pers'nal!"

The lanky rawboned Oren Gillis turned his head and winked. Then he doubled a dirty, scabby big fist and shoved it under Bass' nose.

"Smell this, mister!"

The others were edging along the bar now. They all packed guns. The pimply youth fished a big knife from the pocket of his dirty and grease-glazed Levi overalls. He thumbed a metal button that released a spring and a three inch whetted blade opened. Stropping the knife along the leg of his overalls, he showed his yellow buck teeth in a grin.

"Lemme whittle on 'em, Oren."

"Don't git underfoot, Barlow," said the nasal-voiced older Gillis.

"Aw, shucks, Paw, I kin take my own part."

"You let Oren play his string out. . . . Ask 'im oncet more, Oren. Just oncet more." There was an ugly whine to the nasal voice.

Bass Burnett knew what he was up against. He'd had it happen before. Along his back trail and in

prison when the convicts ganged up. He had no appetite for it. Anyhow he was out on parole. That meant no liquor, no fighting. He wasn't supposed to pack a gun without special permit from the law. His cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter were in the sack with his chaps and saddle.

Bass cut a quick look at the saloonman. The big-paunched, beefy-faced man behind the bar shifted uneasily on large flat feet and shook his head sullenly. But he did make a sort of whiskey-voiced protest.

"Don't start no kind o' ruckus, men."

Bass Burnett was something like the proverbial drowning man who, in the few brief seconds before he goes under for the third time, has a vivid split-second memory of his past life. Only he was recalling all the many things Bible Ben had told him concerning his shirt-tail Gillis kin. A coyote pack, none of them with the guts to tackle a man unless he had the rest of the bunch at his back — yellow-bellied, treacherous and therefore all the more dangerous. Whip one of 'em and you had the whole mangy pack on your back.

But there was no way for Bass Burnett to back down. No way of easing his way out of what looked like a bad ruckus. Many a brave man has taken water, suffered a lot of verbal abuse, when he is hopelessly outnumbered and when the best he can hope for is the worst of the deal. But this Gillis tribe wouldn't let a lone man get out of

it that easy. They were crowding the play right now, forcing the fight on him. The best bet he could do was take the deal away from this Oren. Bass Burnett took it—so swiftly that none of them suspected it.

Bass had learned how to handle himself in just about any kind of a ruckus. With the odds piled against him the way they were now, it was no time for clean fighting.

He hit big Oren Gillis. Hit him hard—and hit him low. And when Oren doubled up like an empty sack, Bass hit him hard in the face as he sagged forward. Blood spurted.

Bass had stood wide-legged. Now he untracked himself with a twisting sideways leap. Grabbing up one of the heavy barroom chairs, he swung it like a flail. He waded into them with long-legged strides, swinging. The chair caught the pimply-faced Barlow alongside the head and knocked him sideways and the long-bladed knife sailed through the air. Bass never gave them a chance to get set and on balance. The heavy chair missed Paw Gillis and struck the edge of the bar and two of the chair legs snapped off. His backhanded swing knocked the gun from Paw Gillis' hand and numbed the older Gillis' arm to its shoulder. Bass Burnett knocked another Gillis down. Then the saloonman smashed the only light in the place, a big swinging lamp above the bar.

The saloon was plunged into darkness. A couple or three six-shooters split the blackness with streaks of fire. The crashing roar

filled the place, but the shots went wild.

Bass Burnett was on his way out the back door. He slammed it after him. It was so dark outside he stumbled and went to his hands and knees a time or two. The sound of the ruckus in the saloon dimmed behind him. He did not stop running and dodging to keep in the black shadows until he reached the feed and livery barn at the far end of the little cow town's main and only street. He had left his sacked saddle and chaps with the barnman. But the man was nowhere around. There was nobody here at the lantern-lighted barn to stop him and he took the first horse he came to. Leading the big brown gelding out of its stall, he saddled it, then buckled on his chaps, cartridge belt and six-shooter.

The big brown gelding was grain fed and fresh. There was a hump in his back. But few horses will pitch in the dark to amount to anything. Bass Burnett swung into the saddle. Even those few crow-hopping jumps felt good under him. Then he yanked up the big brown's head and split the breeze at a run. And even as he rode out of Rimrock he saw and heard the battered Gillis tribe come crowding out of the saloon onto the street. They sighted him in the distance and began shooting. But the range was too far for six-shooter work and it was dim moonlight and Bass and his running horse made a mighty difficult target. Bass heard the dismal whine of a few wild .45 slugs. Then he was out on the open prairie. Slow-

ing to a long lope, he let the big brown gelding pick its own gait along the dusty wide road that showed dimly in the light of a half moon.

Now that it was over and behind him, Bass Burnett grinned into the night. It felt fine and exciting and exhilarating. The taste of battle in his mouth was salty. He was breathing hard and sweat trickled down inside his clothes. Pulling off his hat, he let the cool clean night air dry the sweat that matted his thick-cropped wiry black hair.

He had not come out of the swift ruckus unhurt. His nose was trickling blood and one eye was swelling shut and his left shoulder felt lame and throbbed with dull pain. But he'd felt no pain of blows and he was a little surprised to find he'd taken any punishment at all. It had all happened so swiftly and in the excitement of it, he'd fought headlong and with a swift fury. But even the bruised pain made him feel good. It was a part of this great and wonderful miracle called freedom.

When he was certain they weren't chasing him, Bass slowed the big brown gelding to a trot that ate up the miles. This was the main wagon road that led south from Rimrock. It was just as Bible Ben had described it. A sixty-mile ride to Jake Van's place on the Missouri River. Forty miles of open flats and rolling hills and bench lands. Sagebrush and greasewood and bunch grass. Open cow country. Then the badlands with their rough

chops and scrub pines. It was the cow country Bible Ben loved and had ridden for many years, from ranch to ranch, cow camps, horse camps, even sheep camps, preaching his salty, earthy, homely sermons. Summer and winter, spring and fall. Welcome, for the most part, wherever he stopped with his shabby old leather-bound Bible. And if Bible Ben had drawn a detailed map with its ranches and line camps and roads and trails and creeks and the big Missouri River and the southern boundary, he could not have given a plainer sight of the cow country Bass now traveled.

The blood pounded through Bass Burnett's veins. Life came into his skin and every pore in his tall, hard-muscled body breathed in the freedom of the wide-open country.

III

As he rode along, Bass sang some half-forgotten song. It was the old trail song made up about Sam Bass. He'd been named for that Sam Bass. For all he knew they might be kin. He didn't know. There wasn't much he did actually know about his origin or early years. Because Bass Burnett was a range orphan. Brought up around the big cow outfits in Texas, he had wrangled horses, nighthawked, done all kinds of ranch and roundup chores. For the most part he had been liked by the other cowhands who had teased him a lot but had taught him the countless little things a man has to learn if he wants to hold down a job as a real cowhand. And Bass

had been willing and eager to learn. He'd made all the mistakes a green-horn makes. But they said of young Bass Burnett that the button seldom made the same mistake twice. And winter times he managed to get his schooling. He'd get a town job at the livery and feed barn or somewhere around horses and cattle. Work at his chores when school let out, study by lamplight or candlelight, reading everything he could get hold of. Until he had gone to prison, though, he had never read any part of the Bible. But Bible Ben helped him read it and explained things about its text that Bass would never have understood, and if those explained passages in the Bible were seasoned by the circuit rider's homely translation, nothing of the real meaning was ever harmed by Bible Ben's interpretation.

Then Bass Burnett's song faded slowly and his grin was gone and the night seemed to have a chill in it. He was thinking about the ruckus he'd been forced into back yonder. The coyote Gillis tribe. Why had they eyed him with such cold suspicion and enmity? Why had they tried to crowd a fight on him? There had been cold-blooded murder in every pair of pale Gillis eyes when they sized him up.

Bass Burnett knew, just as certain as he knew he was free of prison, that he was riding into trouble. That he was going to need all he had in the way of guts and brains to survive. Bible Ben had hinted all around it, never coming right out with a warning. He had just let Bass figure it out for himself. Bible

Ben had sprung Bass out of the Wyoming pen. Somehow the grizzled circuit rider who was doing time for cattle rustling, had talked the parole board and the prison warden into releasing Bass Burnett on parole to Jake Van. But it looked to Bass Burnett as though Bible Ben was counting on Bass to pick up something like a hard-hating bitter feud.

It was about midnight when Bass Burnett left town. Sunrise found him nearing the badlands along the Missouri River. The big brown gelding had a fast running walk that ate up the miles and Bass savvied how to get distance out of a horse without playing him out. And after that first getaway sprint he hadn't sweated a hair on the big ridge runner. And the forty miles he had covered hadn't wearied the big gelding. Bass had crossed a creek a little after daybreak and when he watered his horse he got off to quench his own thirst and got his first look at the brand on the big brown gelding. It was JV (connected). And that was Jake Van's iron, Bible Ben had said.

A man could busy himself with a little guesswork about a JV horse being in the feed and livery barn in town. Bible Ben had said that if old Jake Van wasn't there at Rimrock to meet Bass, he'd manage somehow to have a JV horse waiting for him. Well, the horse had been there and luck had favored Bass Burnett when he led that big brown gelding out of the stall without bothering to read the brand in the

dim lantern light. So Bass couldn't be picked up for horse stealing again. But the saloonman said Jake Van hadn't been to town in a couple of months. It was hardly probable that the big brown had been eating his head off in the town barn the past two months. The horse was hard, grain fed, but had no sign of the hay belly he'd get from a couple of months in the barn and feed yard. Somebody had fetched the big JV brown to town since Jake Van got that letter from Bible Ben. Or else Jake Van had slipped into town after dark, left the horse, told the barn man to keep his mouth shut, and pulled out before the saloonman or anybody sighted him. But most mebbly Jake Van had sent somebody to town with the brown gelding.

But that letter of Bible Ben's had cautioned Jake Van to keep it a secret about Bass Burnett's coming. Not to tell even Toby. And until Bass got there and had a medicine talk with Jake, it would be safer all around to keep it dark about Bible Ben sending a man to side Jake and to sort of rep for the circuit rider till he got out of the Wyoming pen. And Bible Ben had warned Jake to say nothing to Toby till Bass got there. There was no sense, Bible Ben explained, in a man's spreading his cards face up and showing his ace in the hole, while the others kept their hole cards buried.

So Bass had something to think about and puzzle over as he let the JV brown pick his own gait along the dimmer trail through the badlands. But he never got so deep in thought that he became neglect-

ful about keeping his eyes and ears open. Because back yonder at that gravel crossing—what he judged from his memory of Bible Ben's word pictures and mapping of the country would be the roundup crossing on Beef Creek—Bass Burnett had read fresh sign. Tracks of shod horses and booted men. Three or four riders had halted there at the gravel crossing long enough to water their horses. One man had been chewing tobacco, spraying the gravel and buckbrush with tobacco juice. A quart of whiskey had been drained and the bottle thrown aside there. There were the short stubs of a couple of cigarettes. A dirty red bandanna fouled with drying and dried blood was tramped in the gravel. Dropped there, unnoticed, and tramped in the loose gravel by a shod hoof.

There was a short cut from town to the badlands. And if Bass Burnett read the sign right, the four Gillis kin had taken that shortcut, beaten him to the creek crossing by at least half an hour, then had ridden on. They had, he suspected, changed horses along the way. And they were ahead of him. Their individual ranches were scattered along the Missouri River. They might be headed for home. On the other hand they might be bushed up somewhere along the trail, setting a gun trap. They were a bushwhacker outfit. When they feared a man bad enough and hated him, the Gillis outfit would bushwhack him, drygulch him. They had killed a few men that way, Bible Ben had inferred, along their back trails. So

Bass Burnett rode with his eyes and ears open and his right hand near his six-shooter. And he kept reading their horse tracks.

Then the horse tracks quit the trail, scattered into pairs, and were lost. And there were no more shod horse tracks along the main wagon trail that led to Jake Van's place at the mouth of Ten Mile Creek, where it emptied into the big Missouri River. That bothered Bass Burnett. He savvied a lot of bushwhacker tricks. This had all the earmarks of the setting of a drygulch gun trap.

It's an uneasy feeling, riding along, a stranger in a strange land, expecting to ride around the next brushy bend in the trail and slap-dab into a hail of bullets from the brush. A man rides tense in his saddle and his eyes and ears get strained so that every little movement of the brush ahead, the slightest sound, becomes distorted into danger signals. Then it's only a rabbit or a white-tail deer or stray cattle. And the feeling of relief relaxes taut nerves until the next alarm. Riding along like that becomes mighty tiring and wearisome. You wish it would happen and get done with it.

Bass Burnett rode into no bushwhacker trap. But by the time he sighted the log cabin and barn and cattle shed and the pole corrals that were Jake Van's place, his muscles ached and his nerves were rubbed raw and he was empty-bellied and weary to the point of exhaustion. A sixty-mile ride, the last twenty miles

of it tense and tight as a taut fiddle string, is no man's picnic. It was more than a year now since he had forked a horse, and the saddle muscles in his legs were lame from it. But this was the end of the trail and he stood in his stirrups to take a first look at the little ranch that would be his home for a while.

It was just as Bible Ben had described it—even to the big sandstone rimrock spotted with scrub pines and matted with clumps of buckbrush. The great shelving rimrock jutted out above the ranch buildings and corrals and about a hundred yards back and above the squatty, spread-out cattle shed built of logs and covered with a thatched roof of willows, with a spraddled feed yard aproned out in front. The sandstone cliff gave the cattle shed, used in the winter, a splendid protection from the northern blizzards. Jake Van called his place Sandstone Ranch.

Bass reined up before he rode down the quarter mile or so from the ridge. He could see loose horses grazing in the hay meadow that spread out between the buildings and the river bank almost a mile further on. The buildings and corrals were back from the river and above the flood-water line, and giant cottonwoods and tall willows fringed the river banks on both sides. Across the wide strip of river that was silvery in the morning sun, just yonder on the other side, was the little ranch that belonged to Bible Ben Gillis. Just as the grizzled circuit rider had pictured it for Bass Burnett in their prison cell.

But there was no sign of human life down yonder. No smoke came from the cabin chimney. No rider, no man on foot pattering around the place. There was nothing suspicious about that, though. It was mid-morning. Jake Van might be riding back in the breaks after cattle. Jake Van batched it here. He had no hired man.

From what Bible Ben said, old Jake was a hard worker. Breakfast and barn chores would be over and done with before daybreak. Then he'd saddle a horse and ride back into the badlands to see if some JV cow or heifer had dropped a calf or if there was a slick-eared maverick that needed JV branding. Haying time. Jake hired a crew of breeds to put in his hay crop. No, Jake Van wouldn't be home this late in the morning. He might not show up till dark. Ride on down, stranger, and make yourself welcome. Busy yourself with a few chores to pay for that bait of grub you needed so bad to take the wrinkles out of your belly.

But just the same, Bass Burnett had a hunch he was riding into danger. Some instinct kept warning him there was something wrong down yonder. And he had his hand on his gun when he rode down the old wagon trail to Jake Van's place. Quiet. Silent here. Too silent. Like a graveyard.

Then Bass saw Jake Van. He knew it was Jake Van on account of the long white hair and beard, for that was how Bible Ben had described the old river rancher. But

Jake was dead. Sprawled out and his battered old hat lying off to one side of where the shaggy white head and beard were pillowed in a drying puddle of blood. And there was blood on his back, staining the faded old blue flannel shirt where the sweat-marked galluses crossed below the big shoulders. A six-shooter in the old holster hung from a filled cartridge belt. The old river rancher had been shot down, shot in the back on his way to his cabin. He'd never had a chance to pull his gun.

Bass Burnett stared down from his saddle at the dead man. His big JV brown gelding stood stiff-legged, ears cocked, whistling softly through flared nostrils at the ugly smell of blood and death.

Bass Burnett had gotten here too late. But it was no more than an hour or so after the actual murder. Perhaps not that long. Too late, though, to save the life of Jake Van. And Bass was blaming himself for this killing.

"I talked too much, back yonder in town," he told himself. "The wrong gents heard me askin' about Jake Van. They beat me here . . . And they bushwhacked the old man . . . Them shirt-tail Gillis bushwhackers—"

He was as certain of it as a man could be sure of anything he did not understand. He blamed himself for loose-mouthed carelessness. He had talked out of turn. That loose talk had voiced Jake Van's death warrant. He spoke his bitter thoughts aloud.

Weariness and hunger were gone now, wiped away by this ugly sight

of a murdered old man. But Bass Burnett was not a man to waste time cussing himself out for something that was done and beyond repair. He cared for the big brown gelding that had carried him here. After watering the horse at the swift flowing creek, he unsaddled and tied him in a stall and filled the manger with hay and put a bucket of oats into the grain box.

Then he spent about an hour prowling around, his six-shooter in his hand. He found horse sign behind a clump of willows across the creek where the bushwhackers had lain in wait. An empty whiskey bottle and cigarette stubs and boot marks showed they had waited for a while in their bushwhacker trap. And then Bass Burnett was able to re-construct the crime. He'd found a horse in the barn. The horse had been ridden and unsaddled and tied in the stall. Jake Van's horse . . . Jake had left the barn and started for the cabin about fifty yards away. Likely he had been riding since day-break and had gotten back about ten in the morning and put up his horse and headed for his cabin to get himself something to eat for noon dinner. And the bushwhackers had known his habits and used that knowledge to murder him here on his own ranch.

Bass Burnett went on to the cabin. He'd get a bad tarp or a blanket or soogan to cover the dead man, then fix himself a pot of black coffee and a bait of hot grub. Smoke on it. According to law, he had to leave the murdered man where he lay until the sheriff or one of his deputies or the coroner got there to fix the blame for

death. Maybe somebody would show up.

Then Bass remembered Toby Gillis, Bible Ben's young un, across the river. Holler loud enough or shoot in the air a few times for a signal and Toby Gillis should show up in sight over yonder to see what the racket was about. He'd send Toby Gillis to town. Or leave Toby here with the dead man and ride back to town himself. But the first thing to do was to wrap himself around a bait of grub before he passed out from weak hunger

IV

Somebody had been inside the cabin. It was a shambles. Everything torn apart. The tarp and soogans and blankets had been yanked off the bunk and scattered and the straw tick mattress ripped open and the straw pawed all around. Boxes and cans had been emptied. The cabin floor, pine boards that had worn thin in places were ripped up and holes dug in the ground they had once floored. Somebody had made a hasty if not too thorough job of searching Jake Van's cabin. Hunting for something, wrecking everything in a ruthless search.

It took a while to locate coffee and canned stuff and a slab of bacon and a quarter of beef hung in the cool dugout cellar. Bass made the coffee strong and wolfed the grub. Bacon, beef, canned tomatoes, fried spuds and a pot of coffee.

Jake Van's saddle carbine was in its rack along with a sawed-off shotgun. There were plenty of car-

tridges. Bass took the saddle gun along. Saddling the dead man's horse, he rode down the trail to the river bank.

The river was bank full and muddy from the late spring freshets, and it looked half a mile wide. Bass Burnett shouted himself hoarse, then fired six times, counting ten between each shot, for a signal. Nobody shouted back or fired a return signal. No sign of Toby Gillis or anyone else on the far bank of the river. Buildings and corrals across yonder were hidden behind the willow and cottonwoods so Bass could not tell if there was anybody over there. This took up perhaps half an hour. Then Bass gave it up as a bad job and rode back to dig Jake Van's grave.

He was playing a hunch that somebody would show up. Anyway he couldn't leave that poor old feller lying dead on the ground with only a bed tarp for protection against the coyotes and wolves and bobcats and mountain lions, to say nothing of the damned blow flies. It was a long, long ride to town and back. He'd dig a grave and if nobody showed up before dark, he'd bury old Jake Van. Law or no law, he was doing the decent thing by a dead man. But he reckoned somebody would show up.

Bass Burnett reckoned correctly. He had the grave dug down about six feet and was standing in it, shoveling and sweating, when he heard the sounds of men coming on horseback. He scrambled up out of the grave, sodden with sweat and dirt.

The rider in the lead had a law badge pinned to his shirt. It glinted

in the sunlight as he reined his sweaty horse to a halt. The gun in his hand glinted likewise. And it was pointed straight at Bass Burnett when he hoisted himself up out of the grave hole.

"Reach high, mister!" rasped the lawman. "Make a wrong move and I'll save the law the bother of hangin' you fer Jake Van's murder."

The badge toter was a Gillis. Another of the shirt-tail Gillis kin. He had the same pale eyes and hawk-beaked nose. Only he was better looking and much better dressed than the other Gillis men who rode up behind him.

In fact, Deputy Sheriff Sam Gillis fancied himself something of a range dude. He wore a loud-patterned flannel shirt and his Californian wool pants had a checked pattern woven into the cloth and the seat had been foxed with buckskin. His shopmade boots were alligator leather with his brand in white leather inlaid in the fancy stitched tops. His new high-crowned, broad-brimmed Stetson was carefully dented and yanked on his head at a fighting angle.

"I'm Sheriff Sam Gillis," he left off the 'Deputy.' "Who in blazes are you? I know why you killed Jake Van. The old codger was a miser. Had it hid somewheres. Like as not, you lifted ol' Jake Van's cache. Figgered to hide his carcass in a hole in the ground. Lucky that I cold-trailed you from town. You was askin' about Jake Van in town. You started a ruckus in the White Elephant and like to killed Oren an' young Barlow. Then you stole a JV horse and hightailed it. Rode

straight here and murdered pore o' Jake. We ketched you dead to rights, mister. Now what's your handle and where'd you come from?"

Deputy Sheriff Sam Gillis grinned thinly. Paw Gillis and the lanky battered Oren and another lanky raw-boned Gillis who had been in the ruckus at the White Elephant, had guns in their hands as they sat their horses. They were ready and plenty willing to shoot at the drop of the hat. The pimply young Barlow was not with them. And Bass wondered where the knife-slinging younger Gillis might be.

"Why don't you just gut-shoot him, Sam," snarled Oren. He had lost some front teeth and his mouth and broken nose were swollen and discolored. He was half-drunk.

"I'm ramroddin' this, Oren," said the badge-toting Sam Gillis. "I'm the law. The only damn law this side o' the county seat. I gotta find out who this stranger is. Then mebbysso we'll shoot some holes in him. Talk fast, stranger."

They were playing for keeps. No doubting that grim fact. They were going to kill him. It would be murder. But the killing of Jake Van had been just that. Plain cold-blooded murder. It was Bass Burnett's turn to die. He knew it. They knew that he knew it. If Bass made a gun move, that would be the only signal they needed. Their guns covered him. They were cocked guns.

Then it happened. A faint puff of dust lifted as a steel-jacketed bullet drilled the high dented crown of Deputy Sheriff Sam Gillis' new Stetson.

The bullet made a whining sound as it cut through the felt hat crown and hit the ground beyond. Then the sound of the shot came.

Sam Gillis ducked his head. The color drained from his face. The badlands threw the echoes of the single shot down to them.

"It come from up on the rimrock," sounded Oren Gillis' voice.

"Where we left Barlow on guard," whined Paw Gillis. "What's that drunken young whelp think he's a-doin', anyhow?"

A second bullet whined. This time it was the lanky Paw Gillis who ducked as a .30-30 bullet clipped a gash in the top of his sweat-stained old black hat.

"Dammit, that ain't Barlow pot-shootin' at us!" Fear made Oren Gillis' voice rasping.

"Let that stranger alone!" The voice came down from the rimrock through the gun echoes. It sounded high-pitched, young and desperate. "Let him alone. Get goin'. Shoot him and I'll kill every last one of you murderin' snakes. I got Barlow up here and I'll get you if you don't drag it right now. I ain't foolin'."

"It's that blasted Toby!" creaked Paw Gillis. "Toby's just fool enough to do it. I'm pullin' out. Come along, Oren."

Oren was scared. It showed in his shifty bloodshot eyes. And Bass Burnett had a six-shooter in his hand now. He'd slid it from its holster when that first shot had whined and they'd all ducked at its threatening sound and looked up at the rimrock.

"If Toby don't," said Bass Burnett

flatly, "I will. I'll kill the badge polisher first. Your guns ain't fast enough to stop that shot. Now put 'em away. Or use 'em. And I hope you'll be fool enough to try your luck. I got one with your name on it, Oren. Let's play some marbles, you coyotes. That's what Bible Ben calls you. My name is Bass Burnett. I'm reppin' for Bible Ben!"

He lifted his voice loud enough so it would carry up to the sandstone rimrock.

"I told you it was him," whined the nasal voice of Paw Gillis. "Dammit, Sam, didn't I tell yuh to gut-shoot 'im, then talk to his dead carcass?"

Paw Gillis was snarling like some snaggle-fanged old gray wolf now and his eyes were pale slits.

But it was Oren who first lowered his gun and reined his horse and started off.

"You goin' to use that white-handled gun of yours, Sam?" Bass Burnett's white teeth bared. "Let's go!" His gun click-clicked to full cock. He couldn't miss the front of that red and black-checked shirt.

Deputy Sheriff Sam Gillis knew it. He shoved his pearl-handled six-shooter into its carved holster. His grin was twisting under a small pointed yellow mustache.

"You're a damned convict, Burnett," he said, "out on parole. You broke that parole in town. Busted it again here when you pulled a gun on a law officer. You're under arrest."

"But I ain't goin' anywhere," grinned Bass Burnett.

Toby Gillis, up on the rimrock,

must have gotten nervous or a little impatient. The .30-30 up there cracked again. The second bullet ripped a gash in the high-crowned hat of Deputy Sheriff Sam Gillis.

"Git goin'!" shrilled the voice of Toby Gillis through the gun echoes. "I'm shootin' to hit the next time!"

Oren was already under way and Paw Gillis was cursing in his nasal whine as he trailed after Oren and now Sam Gillis, the deputy sheriff, whirled his horse and spurred after them and there was only the other Gillis who had said nothing, left here. He sat his horse, scowling, poker-faced, the ugliest and most dangerous-looking member of the Gillis tribe. He was cross-eyed and his tanned skin was deeply pitted with pockmarks. He had a six-shooter in his hand and he looked as though he might have the guts to use it.

"I'm Dummy Gillis." He spoke in a voice that had no tone at all. Spoke slowly, as if he had to measure each word. And his mouth worked queerly when he talked. "Deef . . . and . . . dumb. Dummy Gillis . . . You hurt Toby . . . I will . . . kill . . . you."

Then Dummy Gillis shoved his gun back into its holster. He rode away slowly, as if he was in no hurry to overtake the others.

Bass Burnett did not know he had been holding his breath. Until it escaped his lungs in a long, audible whistle.

Dummy Gillis. He remembered now what Bible Ben had said. There was one of the shirt-tail Gillis tribe who was deaf and dumb, or let on

to be. Kind of a freak. Bible Ben said Dummy wasn't so lame-witted as he seemed. He wasn't the locoed simpleton the others claimed he was. Dummy could almost be trusted. Because Dummy was plumb devoted to the young un, Toby.

They were hardly out of sight before a lone rider on a big roan gelding came up out of the brush from some trail that led down from the rimrock.

V

Somehow Bass Burnett knew it was Toby Gillis. But he didn't know that Bible Ben's young un was a girl. Not until this slim boyish-looking cowhand in shabby clothes yanked off an old Stetson and shook loose a pair of heavy braids that had been coiled under the hat crown.

"They're a darned nuisance and I'd whack 'em off if dad didn't value 'em so high because my mother had hair like that . . . All right, stranger. Spread out your soogans and I'll look 'em over for lice and nits. One lie out o' you and I'll pull the trigger and I won't miss. What's your game here?"

The six-shooter in her slim tanned hand was pointed at his midriff.

The color had ebbed from Bass Burnett's face and he was staring slack-jawed. He pulled his hat off clumsily. Tongue-tied, he stared at this girl with hair the color of old gold. A tanned girl with a sprinkling of freckles across her short nose. She had a firm little chin and her red-lipped mouth was a trifle wide and her eyebrows were black and a

little heavy. Her eyes were deep gray-green, almost black under the heavy fringe of long eyelashes. Tear stains like dim scars were on her face. And Bass did not pay any attention at all to the gun in her hand. He had not been this close to a woman in over a year. She was as beautiful in his eyes as a wild flower and he drank in that beauty and the sound of her voice was no longer shrill but soft and warm and vibrant. Bass' blood pounded into his throat and he felt weak and he trembled as though he had a chill.

Then he saw Toby Gillis flush under his stare and he spoke in a dry, unsteady voice.

"He always spoke about you as his young un . . . Toby . . . and I just naturally figgered that Toby was a boy. I can't help gawkin' at you. I just come out o' the pen and the sudden sight of a girl kicked the wind out o' me. I didn't mean to be insultin'."

"Jake Van was the only friend I had on earth. If you killed Uncle Jake, I'm goin' to kill you." Toby's voice was brittle.

"Why didn't you let that Gillis gang kill me, if that's what you're thinkin'?"

"I'd want to do the job myself."

"It was you that did that fancy hat creasin'?"

"Uncle Jake taught me to shoot when I was big enough to lift a gun. Get down to brass tacks, mister. Talk turkey."

"They said somethin' about Barlow bein' left on guard up yonder on the big rimrock."

"I slipped up on Barlow and bent

a gun barrel between his short horns. Hogtied him and gagged him . . . Quit beatin' around the bush, mister."

"Somebody killed Jake Van before I got here. He was to meet me in town but he didn't. When I got here I found him dead. They'd bushwhacked him, then wrecked his cabin like they was huntin' gold. After I covered Jake Van with his bed tarp I rode down to the river and hollered my head off, tryin' to locate you."

Toby Gillis was staring intently at him. "I heard you tell them you were reppin' for Bible Ben."

"He was my cell pardner in the Wyoming pen. He got me paroled and sent me here. A couple of weeks before my parole came through, Bible Ben wrote a letter to Jake Van tellin' him I'd show up. I promised Bible Ben I'd go to work for Jake Van. And I gave him my word I'd look after his young un." Bass's face flushed hotly and he grinned awkwardly. "I didn't know Toby was a girl."

Toby shoved her six-shooter back into its holster and patted the stock of her saddle gun.

"I'm used to taking my own part. You don't talk like a liar. And you haven't the earmarks of a bushwhacker . . . I heard the shooting over on this side of the river. But by the time I got across in my canoe, whoever had done the shooting had faded out of sight. Uncle Jake was dead. I'd started for the cabin to get a blanket to cover him when I sighted you riding down the ridge. I took to the brush. I always keep

a horse here. Fetch my saddle in the canoe Uncle Jake gave me. I saddled up and coyoted. I was up on the rimrock when you were hollering for me. I might have come down but I heard somebody coming. It was Barlow and that bald-faced thing was drunk. So I beefed him and played my hand out from there . . . They'll come back and you'd better be ready to shoot first. That Gillis tribe is bad medicine."

Bass Burnett smiled faintly. "Your last name is Gillis. So is Bible Ben's. But you both talk like they're a different breed."

"You bet they are, mister. Paw Gillis is a third or fourth cousin of Bible Ben Gillis, by marriage. There're no blood ties. Oren and Sam and Barlow and the Dummy are close kin to Paw Gillis. They moved in here and squatted along the river. Dummy is the only one I can trust. And I'm scared of him. When he looks at me my skin crawls. If ever he laid a hand on me I'd kill him. He knows it. The poor beast. Ugh!" Toby shuddered.

Bass knew what she meant and how she felt. Dummy Gillis was the most dangerous one of that mongrel tribe.

Then Toby wanted to know about her father. They rode down into the pasture and Bass caught and saddled a fresh JV horse and they rode a ways into the badlands where they would be safe from a bushwhacker bullet. And he told Toby about Bible Ben. Tears welled to the girl's deep gray-green eyes, softening them. She listened like a child. And before Bass had finished, her hand had crept into his and he held it and tried his

best not to let her realize that the touch of her hand fired his blood. Because she couldn't understand how he had suddenly and overwhelmingly fallen in love with her when they didn't even know one another. She was just like a small child as she listened while he told her about all the good Bible Ben was doing for those tough convicts in the pen. And while he talked on, so as not to break the spell, he found himself telling Toby how Bible Ben had sort of saved him from becoming bitter and hardened by the raw deal he'd gotten. As he told her about his own life, they sat there on the ground holding hands, their shoulders touching, and somehow Toby took up the talk and now Bass was doing the listening.

Toby's mother had died when she was six years old. Bible Ben and tough old Jake Van had managed to raise her. She'd never gone to school but they had bought her school books, all kinds of 'em, and put her through from the first reader on through the grades. She had a big library of all kinds of books. And she'd learned a lot from Mother Nature. She knew the ways of wild animals and birds, trees and flowers. The stars in the sky. And there wasn't much about horses and cattle she had not learned from old Jake Van. And since she could remember she had kept house for Bible Ben and Jake Van. Now Bible Ben was in prison and Uncle Jake Van was dead.

"I'm reppin' for Bible Ben, Toby," Bass told her. "You reckon you could kind o' take me on trust till

your daddy shows up some day soon?"

Toby looked up at him. Straight into his eyes. A slow warm flush crept into her cheeks when she read the love in his eyes. But she did not flinch or pull away her hand. She smiled a little and nodded her tawny head, and then her head was against his shoulder and his arms were around her. It was the first time a man had ever kissed her lips. Bass Burnett knew it, somehow. He fought down the tumult in his blood and his kiss was both clumsy and gentle.

It was Toby who heard the crack of a dry stick under a stealthy boot. She flung both arms around Bass' neck and threw him flat on his back. It was a split-second before a gun roared. The heavy .45 whined a few inches above them. And through the gun roar came the horrible, inhuman, animallike scream of Dummy Gillis. And then he broke through the heavy buckbrush, his eyes glittering insanely, froth flecking his writhing mouth and he was screaming and his gun was spewing fire and the bullets kicking dirt. He was insane now. That thin thread of sanity had snapped. He meant to kill them both.

It seemed to Bass Burnett that he was in the grip of some horrible nightmare, as if his gun arm was paralyzed. His six-shooter seemed to weigh a ton and it felt as though it was tied in its holster. But in reality it was only split-seconds. He threw Toby aside and into the brush and rolled over and onto his feet and his gun was hardly out of its holster before it spat death. His first bullet hit Dummy Gillis in the belly, stag-

gering him, but Dummy kept coming, his gun blazing, the shots wild. Bass' second shot went through his head and he stumbled and crashed almost at Bass' feet.

Bass pawed through the buckbrush and picked Toby up. He'd thrown her hard and her head had struck against the trunk of a scrub pine and knocked her out. There was blood soaking the back of her gray flannel shirt. It came from a shallow bullet rip across her shoulder blade. Dummy Gillis had barely missed killing her. She blinked her eyes open as Bass carried her in his arms like a small hurt child. She shuddered and clung to him, sobbing. But she was game. He put her on her horse and mounted his own JV gelding. They could hear Deputy Sheriff Sam Gillis shouting to the rest of his gang.

"He got the Dummy!" Gillis' voice was jubilant. "That's murder in the law book! We got that Bass Burnett where we want 'im now. Kill 'im where yuh find 'im!"

VI

Sam Gillis had used the Dummy like a hunter uses a coon hound. The deaf and dumb half-wit had an Indian's knack for trailing. His eyes and nose were those of a hound, those senses abnormally developed perhaps by the impairment of his hearing and speech. Dummy had trailed Bass and Toby. Sam Gillis and the others had trailed the Dummy.

They were not too far behind now as Bass and Toby ran for it. It was a race with death. And death might

have overtaken the two fugitives if it had not been for Toby. Bible Ben's young un knew the badlands. Since childhood the rough breaks and the big river had been her back yard. She took the lead and Bass followed at her horse's heels. Twisting, dodging their horses let out to a run. Brush raking their faces, they slid down steep shale banks, skirted the white alkali-crust soap-hole bogs where a horse and man would break through the alkali crust and sink out of sight in the bottomless black bog in a few minutes time. Then they were out of the badlands and dodging through the high red willow brush along the river. They pulled up at the river's edge long enough to blow their winded horses and slack their saddle cinches and they could hear the Gillis gang shouting and cursing back yonder.

"Ever swim the river, Bass?" Toby asked.

"There's always got to be the first time, Toby."

"If your horse weakens, slide off and hang onto his tail. He'll take you across. Here we go."

The water was wide and muddy, the current swift and treacherous. They were out in the channel when Sam Gillis and his posse pulled up at the river's edge. Bullets spattered the water behind them and they slid off and hung onto the tails of their swimming horses so the Gillis tribe had only their heads and the heads and necks of their swimming horses for targets. The range was far too long for accurate shooting but some of those bullets splashed the water too close for any comfort. But they

were grinning at each other when they were dragged ashore through the shallow water by the two blowing, lunging horses.

Sodden and dripping, breathing hard, they led their horses through the willows and after a while they tightened their cinches and rode on to the log buildings and pole corrals Bible Ben had so often described as his home. The large sod-roofed log cabin was covered with morning-glory vines that were now in bloom. There was a white picket fence and a big flower garden in front. Roses, sweet peas, a big bed of red and yellow tulips and other flowers whose names Bass did not know. Tame whitetail and blacktail deer came to Toby when she whistled. There was even a large family of tame skunks and two enormously fat porcupines. A magpie perched on Toby's shoulder and scolded raucously. A score or more of cottontail rabbits ran around and there were meadowlarks and robins and bluejays that she said returned each spring from the south. A big wild goose with a crippled wing that Toby was mending, waddled along behind them as they went up the gravel path between the rose bushes. Toby's home. There was a tightness in Bass Burnett's throat as she led him by the hand to the front door.

Toby had told him while they stabled their horses that even Deputy Sheriff Sam Gillis did not have the nerve to cross the river. He was afraid he would get shot out there in mid-stream. And nobody but a drunken, locoed fool would tackle

the big Missouri after dark, bank full as it was this season of the year.

"They might tackle it tomorrow," she said. "There's a ferryboat at Buffalo Crossing ten miles up the river. Paw Gillis runs it. He's got a saloon there and a trading store. But Dummy is the only Gillis who ever could handle the ferryboat after dark when the river's high and the big snags like cottonwood trees come down the current waterlogged, below the surface. Foul the ferryboat on a big snag like that and it might be a week before they can get it back in commission. So we're safe till tomorrow, Bass."

When she lifted the latch Bass Burnett grinned and picked her up and carried her inside. Kissed her before he put her down.

"Though you won't be a bride, Toby," he told her, "till Bible Ben gets here to do the job."

Navajo rugs covered the scrubbed pine-board floors. There were shelves of books, gay-colored curtains on the windows. Flowers in vases. Rawhide furniture. A little organ in the corner. Toby's mother's organ, brought here when she had been a bride.

Bass didn't want to track water and dirt on the floor. But Toby dragged him in anyhow and showed him into the spare room. She said he'd find dry clothes in the closet. Clothes belonging to Jake Van who had been about Bass' build. He used this room a lot when he stayed overnight to play checkers or dominoes with Bible Ben.

They had buried Jake Van. Before they rode away from the Sand-

stone Ranch, Bass Burnett had wrapped the dead man in his bed tarp and lowered the canvas-shrouded body into the grave and then while Toby knelt there with her head bowed in prayer, Bass had shoveled in the dirt. Toby said she reckoned that was when she had begun loving Bass.

It was getting dark by the time Bass had washed and dressed and come into the kitchen where Toby, changed into a red-and-white-checked gingham dress and a white apron, was getting supper. He stood there in the doorway watching her, happier than he'd ever been in his life.

After supper he showed her a legal-looking document somewhat the worse for its wetting in the river. It was his parole. And a letter from the warden to Jake Van.

"I'll turn it over to you, Toby. I'm paroled to you now. For life."

The blinds were pulled, the windows shuttered and the doors locked. The Missouri River was a formidable barrier between them and the Gillises on the other side. But even so Bass Burnett could not shake off that feeling of danger threatening them out in the night. Toby shared it. They talked in hushed tones. Silent at the slightest sound outside. The lamp was turned low. And they had their saddle guns and six-shooters handy.

They had found a great happiness, like prayers answered. But so long as any of that Gillis tribe was alive, this happiness was threatened.

Bass had cleansed and bandaged the bullet rip in Toby's shoulder but the pain ached dully and was a constant reminder of the danger that

threatened them both. And Bass had a swollen black eye and other bruises that kept him from forgetting the Gillis tribe.

"I never shot a man till today," he said quietly. "They say that killin' the second time comes easier. That's what the tough uns in the pen used to tell me. But they're wrong. I've got to kill again and keep on killin', against all the teachin's of Bible Ben. And you're his daughter, Toby. There'll be blood on my hands—"

"Maybe I'm like the preacher's son that turns out bad, Bass," Toby told him. "Jake Van was an old outlaw. A tough road agent till the law cut him down. He did a long stretch in the pen. He'd killed men. But there wasn't a finer, bigger-hearted man ever lived than Uncle Jake. It might be that I'll have to help you do some killing, Bass. I won't quit on you. My mother had to help fight Injuns. Bible Ben has had to use a gun. He's as handy with a gun as he is with a Bible. I was there with you today when you had to kill that horrible, pitiful Dummy. I love you, Bass. Nothing on earth can take any part of that love for you away from me." She had her arms around his neck and was whispering in his ear.

Bass held her in his arms and told her how he blamed himself for Jake Van's being killed.

"They aimed to kill me in town but I got away. They rode around me and got to the Sandstone Ranch and killed Jake Van. They aimed to kill me, then blame Jake Van's murder on me after I was dead and couldn't defend my name. I talked out o' turn.

It was that talk got Jake Van killed."

"You're wrong, Bass. It was the letter my father wrote Uncle Jake. Uncle Jake never got it. I know that. He gets his mail at Buffalo Crossing. It never amounted to much. Catalogues from saddle and boot outfits, mail-order companies; newspapers. Paw Gillis is postmaster at Buffalo Crossing. He opened that letter and read it and kept it. Jake Van never saw it. Uncle Jake was over here yesterday. He was wishing we'd get a letter from Bible Ben."

"Bible Ben told him not to tell you I was coming."

Toby smiled and rumped his hair. "Bible Ben is something of a scalawag, Bass. He let you keep on thinking I was a boy, didn't he? Did he tell you that Uncle Jake Van couldn't read nor write and was too stubborn to learn and that Toby always read the newspapers and catalogues aloud to him? And that the first thing Jake Van would do with that letter would be to fetch it straight to me to read aloud to him?"

Bass grinned, then laughed softly. "The darned ol' son of a gun. He knowed all the time I'd always bin kind o' girl-shy. He set the bear trap. I bet he knowed this would happen to us."

"Bible Ben," smiled Toby, "is a scalawag."

She asked him about the sign left by the bushwhackers, in behind the buckbrush. The horse tracks and boot tracks, the cigarette stubs and empty whiskey bottle.

"Think hard, Bass, before you come up with the answer to this one.

Could one man and one horse have left that sign?"

Bass nodded. "That's what it looked like. One man was bushed up there long enough to smoke four cigarettes and finish a pint of whiskey he packed. One horse tied in the brush could have tromped the grass and left sign. Now you point it out, that's more like it. Only I was naturally supposin' the four Gillises I'd run into in town had beat me here. And there wasn't one of 'em looked as though he had the guts to tackle the bushwhacker job by hisself."

"Sam Gillis would work alone. Deputy Sheriff Sam Gillis doesn't like eyewitnesses to his murdering. And I saw a lone rider over there after Uncle Jake pulled out about sunrise. I thought it was Uncle Jake come back. Now I know it was Sam Gillis. The others didn't show up till Sam fetched 'em along for a posse to get you. They had Bible Ben's letter. It gave the fifteenth as the date of your arrival at Rimrock. They must have stolen one of Uncle Jake's horses and left it in town. Their job was to gang up on you and kill you. And on that same date Sam Gillis would kill Jake Van. Sam Gillis killed Jake Van." Toby's voice was brittle, her eyes dark with bitter hatred.

"Why?" Bass put the question bluntly.

"They want the Jake Van place. And they want Bible Ben's ranch. And Sam Gillis and Oren Gillis both want Bible Ben's young un, Toby."

"What about Jake Van's buried treasure?"

"Uncle Jake never believed in banks. Too easy to rob 'em, he said. He'd held up a few himself and knew. He banked his life's savings in an old Wells Fargo strongbox he got somewhere. It's up in our hayloft, under a big pile of hay. He gave it to me. And when that Gillis tribe got Bible Ben sent to the pen Uncle Jake figured they'd get him next and he signed over his outfit to me, lock, stock and barrel. His ranch, his JV brand and all the cattle and horses in that iron. The legal papers are in the strongbox. Uncle Jake knew he was living on borrowed time, that sooner or later they'd murder him. All Jake Van asked was the fighting chance to get one or two of 'em before they got him. Sam Gillis never gave Uncle Jake Van his fighting chance. So I'm reppin' for Jake Van now."

There was no mistaking the tone of Toby's voice or the glint in her eyes. She meant to kill Sam Gillis. Even as she had meant, not too many hours ago, to kill Bass Burnett because she suspected him of being that lone rider she'd sighted across the river at Jake Van's place. Bass recalled her fancy hat creasing with a .30-30 and said he was glad he wasn't wearing Deputy Sheriff Sam Gillis' boots. But he held back the decision to kill Sam Gillis before Toby got a chance to line her gun sights and turned the channel of their talk to pleasanter things. Sitting side by side on a worn old horsehair sofa, they talked out their dreams.

But even while they planned their future, they kept listening for sounds outside and their nerves were taut.

So tightly strung that Bass Burnett forgot he hadn't slept for a long time and that he had some aches and pains. Sleep was out of the question. Sam Gillis had the guts to take the ferryboat across. He'd herd the others with a gun if need be. Time counted and Deputy Sheriff Sam Gillis wasn't the man to let it slide past idly.

It was the black hour before day-break and Bass and Toby were finishing a pot of strong black coffee when they heard shooting. It sounded like four or five or six guns cracking and the gunfire was coming closer. Bass and Toby grabbed their guns. Toby blew out the lamp as shod hoofs pounded. There was a heavy thump against the door. Then a voice, a sort of croaking, agonized voice out in the dark moonless night. And a thumping at the door.

"Lemme in, young un! I'm shot! Dyin'!"

VII

Before Bass could stop her, Toby had slid back the heavy wooden bar and yanked the door open. They charged in so furiously that the girl was flung backwards, thrown off balance and onto the floor, to one side.

It was one of the oldest bushwhacker, night-rider tricks in the book, well-baited, timed to the second and neatly sprung. And Bass hadn't had time to warn the impetuous Toby. But she knew what it was now. And she did not need the warning Bass shouted at her in the darkness.

"Lay flat, Toby! Don't fire a shot.

"I'm shootin' at their gun fire!" It was pitchblack inside. Dark outside. But the open doorway showed dimly and the black bulks of moving men could be seen against the background of stars.

Bass' six-shooter spat fire as he pulled the trigger and thumbed the hammer back and pulled the trigger again and again, shooting point blank at the dark moving bulks filling the doorway. He could not miss. And as the heavy .45 slugs hit their human targets, the log house was filled with howls of pain and groans and thick cursing. The air was thick with the choking burnt gunpowder, the darkness stabbed by jets of gun flame.

Bass Burnett kept shifting swiftly in the darkness. He would fire a shot, then jump sideways when they fired at the place where they'd caught that second's glimpse of gun flame. Or he would throw himself flat. The big living room was filled with the crashing roar of guns and the groans and screams of wounded and the cursing of those alive. It was all a terrible din and confusion and through it sounded the voice of Bass Burnett.

"Outside, Toby! Git out o' here! You're underfoot. I can't shoot for fear of hittin' you. Outside. And holler when you git there!"

Then, from a window somewhere behind him, a window with bullet-smashed panes, sounded the brittle voice of Toby Gillis. Almost in his ear.

"I'm already outside, Bass!"

Not loud enough to be heard beyond a few feet. Her groping hand,

its arm stretched through the smashed window, found the back of his shirt, tugged at his shirt tail.

Bass grinned flatly in the darkness. He backed against the wall, pulled backwards by her tugging until he could feel the chilly night air on the back of his neck. Guns spat flame and bullets thudded into the log walls. He twisted around. The lower sill of the window was about belt high. He threw a leg across and the jagged points of broken window pane cut through his Levi overalls. Then he bent over and dove through headlong and landed sprawling almost on top of Toby, an empty six-shooter in one hand, short-barreled saddle carbine gripped in his other fist.

They crouched low against the outside wall. Bass shoved his empty six-shooter into its holster. There was no time to reload the hand gun. But there were cartridges in the magazine of his saddle carbine, one in the breech.

Inside the log cabin guns kept exploding, making a terrific crashing din. Some of the bullets whined out through the smashed window.

Then Bass and Toby caught sight of the man who was crawling out through the open doorway on his hands and knees. The man got to his feet and stood crouched outside in the darkness against the log wall of the cabin. And then he was edging his way along the outer wall towards them. Bass gripped Toby's shoulder and forced her down flat on the ground. The man who had sneaked out of the cabin to let the other Gillis

kin fight it out, was not a dozen feet away.

No more than two guns were shooting inside the cabin now. There was a shrill, high-pitched scream.

"Don't shoot me no more! Don't kill me! I don't wanta die so young!" Barlow's voice, a keening horrible wail.

Paw Gillis' nasal whine. "Dammit all! How'd I know it was you?"

"You shot me! You damned ol' snaggle-toothed coyote son!" Barlow's screaming was punctuated by the crashing roar of his gun.

Then Paw Gillis' nasal voice was cursing thickly. "You've gut-shot me, you whelp! Killed your old man! I should've knocked yuh on the head the day you was born—"

The man outside flattened and crouched against the log wall laughed. An ugly, rattling sound.

"You out here, Toby?" he called cautiously. "It's me—Bass Burnett! Where are you, Toby?"

"Here!" Toby's voice was the same brittle voice that had come down from the rimrock. She was on her feet. "Right here, Sam. You killed Uncle Jake. I'm killin' you!"

The six-shooter in Toby's hand spat fire. But her shot missed because Bass had hooked out a long leg and tripped her and she went sprawling.

"I got the deal!" Bass Burnett's carbine cracked from no higher than his flank. "I'm reppin' for Bible Ben!"

Sam Gillis was shooting as fast as he could thumb back his gun hammer and pull the trigger.

But Bass Burnett was colder-

nerved. No taint of cowardice spoiled his aim or sent his shots wild. He sent bullet after bullet into Sam Gillis' body and his gun was empty when Sam Gillis hit the ground. Dead. As dead as any man can be with his heart ripped out by a .30-30 cartridge.

The gun echoes died in the night. And it was quiet inside the log house. Quite as a tomb. The three men inside, Paw Gillis, Oren Gillis and Barlow Gillis, were dead.

Bass hardly felt the pain of the bullet rips in his hide. He picked Toby up and stood her on her feet and then he lifted her and carried her away from there past the big log barn and down to the river's edge. It was all over now and Toby was limp as a rag and sobbing and only her arms, clinging tightly around Bass Burnett's neck, had any strength.

Toby was bruised and shaken but no bullet had hit her. She ripped off her underskirt and tore it into strips for bandages. And she made Bass peel off his shirt so she could bathe and bandage the bullet rips in his shoulder and along his ribs.

She worried aloud about her father until Bass laughed a little unsteadily and told her that Bible Ben was safe. Safe as a convict can be locked up inside the walls and bars of a penitentiary.

"Bible Ben gits out next month." Bass told her. "He plans to be home the ninth of June. Not a day before. I wasn't to let his young un know he'd be home on that date. And, scalawag or not, I'd keep the secret only you got yourself so worried about him."

"The ninth of June. That's my birthday, Bass!"

"Likewise," grinned Bass Burnett, "your weddin' day. And won't that surprise that psalm-singin' ol' rascal when we tell him to dust off his Bible and turn to the weddin' ceremony page."

Bass Burnett thus voiced a true prophecy. Or a part of one. Bible Ben showed up on the ninth day of June to find his ranch populated by ranch folks from all around and both sides of the Missouri River. Women busy in the kitchen and dining room. The hayloft empty and its floor slicked for dancing. Two fiddlers and a barrel of whiskey from Buffalo Crossing. The front room decorated for the wedding ceremony.

The Gillis ranches had been sold to the highest bidder at Sheriff's Auction. Bass Burnett had made the first bid. A hundred dollars. Nobody bid higher. The ranches of Paw, Oren, Sam, Dummy and Barlow Gillis were sold to Bass Burnett for one hundred dollars cash.

Bible Ben's sky-blue eyes were crinkled and bright as blue stars in a

mist of unshed tears. His voice choked up more than once as he read the marriage ceremony. But he called the square dances in a lusty voice. And after the wedding breakfast they crossed the river on the ferryboat at Buffalo Crossing and came back up on the other side and gathered at the grave of Jake Van. The women wept and men stood with bared heads bowed while Bible Ben preached the funeral sermon for the tough old river rancher who had been his pardner.

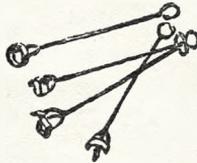
"Greater love hath no man . . . than he give his life for a friend . . ."

Then Bass Burnett and his bride rode away together.

"Yonder they go," said Bible Ben huskily, "like I prayed they would."

And long, long afterwards the circuit rider, making his travels from one ranch or cow camp to the next, would tell how the prayers of a man inside prison walls had been heard plumb up in Heaven by the Big Boss. It was Bible Ben's favorite sermon. He called it "The Sermon of Bible Ben's Rep."

THE END.

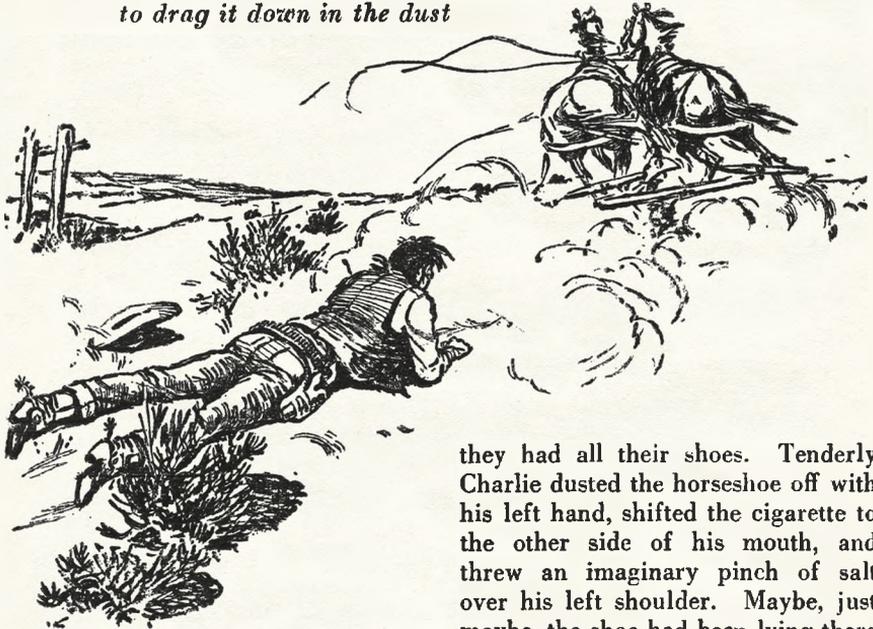


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THE JINX OF WRONG-WAY CHARLIE

by JIM KJELGAARD

*The Bar-C was an up-and-coming spread but
Charlie was afraid its top hand was going
to drag it down in the dust*



THE horseshoe was lying in the sandy path that led from the corral gate to the barn. Charlie shifted his cigarette to the side of his mouth, and bent to pick it up. He straightened and turned to look at the work team, cropping grass in a field. But

they had all their shoes. Tenderly Charlie dusted the horseshoe off with his left hand, shifted the cigarette to the other side of his mouth, and threw an imaginary pinch of salt over his left shoulder. Maybe, just maybe, the shoe had been lying there especially for him.

He hoped so. It was about time he had some luck.

He walked to a shed, hung the shoe on a spike driven into the wall, and turned around to square his shoulders and adjust the gun hanging at

his belt. The Bar-C was a lucky spread. With a man like the Boss riding herd, it couldn't help going places. But for the past six months Charlie, the Bar-C's only hand, had been just about the unluckiest cowboy who ever rolled a cigarette.

When he saddled up, the cinches broke. If he tried to use a branding iron, he burned himself instead of the calf. When he repaired fences, it usually took about ten minutes for some dogie to come along and walk right through his newest wire and strongest posts.

Charley jerked the cigarette butt from his mouth and threw it away. Wrong-way Charlie—nothing he ever did any more was right. He rolled another cigarette and thrust his hand deep into the pocket of his Levis to feel about for a match. When he drew it out a silver dollar came with it and fell in the grass. Charlie swore, and stooped to pick the dollar up. He leaped erect, rubbing his right hand with his left and glaring balefully at the cigarette. Of all the cowboys in the world, nobody but Charlie could have been burned by the butt of a cigarette he had just thrown away. Served him right, he thought balefully. He must be loco not to stamp out a burning butt and run the risk of setting fire to the grass!

More carefully, he ground the smouldering cigarette under his boot-heel, picked up the silver dollar, put it back in his pocket and stood erect. There was a snap and a little thud behind him, and Charlie whirled. A broken spike and the horseshoe he had just hung on it lay on the ground.

He shook his head, ready to give up. That spike had probably been there for twenty years, and would have been there another fifty if anybody but Charlie had hung a horseshoe on it. He shook his head again. When a jinx fastened itself on a man that way, there just wasn't anything he could do about it.

He dusted himself off carefully, reached up to curl the brim of his big hat, hung his gun in exactly the right place, and walked up to the house. It was a nice house, a lot different from the one-room shack Charlie had ridden up to five years ago. He had been riding the grub line, and had been surprised to see the Boss in the shack. The Boss had been a kid then, and mighty proud of the stubby whiskers that decorated his chin.

He hadn't been an ordinary kid. Owner of the shack, a couple of old sheds, eleven cattle, a saddle horse, and six hundred and forty acres of land, the Boss had in his eye a dream saying plainly that, though it might take a little while, eventually he was going to have the world by the tail on a downhill pull. And he had been right. You just had to compare the Bar-C then and now to realize that. The Boss and Charlie had done it all—or rather, the Boss had planned it all and Charlie had helped carry out the plans.

Even five years ago, when there was no prospect of wages and apparently not much of anything else, Charlie had not hesitated to attach himself to the Bar-C. Now there were wages, top wages. The Boss was plenty smart. But the very

warm place he held in Charlie's heart was inspired by something else. Even after five years of working seventeen hours a day, and having little fun, the Boss still kept bright dreams in his eyes. He also kept a vast tolerance for, and understanding of, everything about him.

Charlie, who slept in the bunkhouse and never thought of intruding on the Boss' domain unless he was sent for, rapped gently on the door. There was a little silence. Then:

"Come on in, you old wolf!"

Charlie went in, and stood with his hat in his hands. The Boss, seemingly, was walking about three feet off the floor on air. His face was happy, his grin broad enough to swallow a dogie. Charlie beamed. The Boss was gay. The Boss was excited. And, Charlie knew, the Boss was also in love with Nancy Steele, daughter of Old Man Steele who owned the big ST spread.

The Boss danced over and slapped Charlie so hard between the shoulders that the cowboy's hat flew out of his hands. "How are you going to like it?" he yelled. "How are you going to like being foreman of the Bar-C, with half a dozen riders to do the work for you?"

Charlie took the cigarette from his lips and snapped it into a convenient water pail. "Why don't you light," he suggested, "an' tell me why you're flyin' around like a loco buzzard?"

"Oh, yeah. Sure. Look now, Charlie, sit right down at the table and I'll tell you everything. I didn't want to say much until I was sure everything was panning out all right."

Charlie sat down at the table. The Boss sat down on the other side and unceremoniously pushed a big pile of greenbacks^a away from him. He raised a hand over them, and crooked a finger downwards.

"See that?"

"Yeah."

"There's four thousand dollars there. It's the money we got for the steers."

"That's right."

"An' there's a new banker at Hyatt, Charlie. His name's Williamson. He took over the bank last week. I saw him when I went to Hyatt. I told him we had permanent grass and water, and that there're two sections around us just as good as ours. I also told him we had four thousand dollars. He said he'd investigate, and if everything I told him was true he'd put twelve thousand more to our four. I just now got a letter from him. He's investigated and thinks he can see his way clear to backing us. But he wants to come out and see for himself before clinching the deal."

The Boss rubbed his hands together and glowed all over the room. Charlie beamed. Sixteen thousand dollars was a lot of money, more than he himself would venture even to think of. But the Boss could handle it all right.

"That's right nice," Charlie declared.

The Boss got up and walked around the room. Then he turned happily to face Charlie.

"Wait'll you meet this fellow. He knows cattle, and he's got a big sixteen-hand palomino that'll knock

your eye out. Some day I'm going to have a horse just like it for myself. But there're things we have to do when he gets here."

"What things?"

"He's all business, Charlie. He respects efficiency more than anything else. We have to show him that we're efficient, too, that we're capable of running and protecting this ranch if he puts money into it."

"Dang it, we run an' protected it five years."

"Aw, there won't be much to do, Charlie. Just walk around looking like you're efficient, and if Mr. Williamson asks you any questions, answer 'em like you know what you're talking about. He's worried about rustlers and outlaws, but I told him we haven't lost a dozen head to them in five years."

"Yeah," Charlie said grimly, and his hand dropped to the butt of his gun, "an' the wahoo what took 'em ain't gonna take any more. I caught up with him back in the hills."

The Boss was walking on air again. He gathered the greenbacks together and shoved them into the table drawer. "Hitch up the buckboard, will you?" he asked. "I think I'll drive into Hyatt and see if I can bring Mr. Williamson out to look around today."

Charlie left the house glumly, chewing on a stragglng corner of mustache that strayed into his mouth. This was going to be a fine thing. The Boss wanted twelve thousand dollars to expand his ranch. When he had expanded it he would probably up and ask Nancy Steele to



marry him. But getting the money depended on a banker who worshipped efficiency, and the banker would have to come out and look around just when the jinx had wrapped itself around Charlie's neck. Nothing ever worked out right.

Charlie went into the barn, harnessed the pair of light roan geldings that the Boss used on the buckboard, and led them outside. Backing them into place, he lifted the wagon tongue into the dangling iron ring that held it. Charlie hitched the tugs and climbed up on the seat to pick up the reins.

The geldings, restive after being confined to the barn for two days, began to dance and rear. There was a metallic snap as the bolt in the double-tree clevis snapped. The horses plunged ahead. The wagon tongue dropped to the ground. Still clinging grimly to the reins, Charlie sailed over the front of the buckboard and landed spread-eagled in the grass. The off gelding, a spooky horse, took the bit in his teeth and began to run.

"Whoa!" Charlie shouted. "Dagnabbit, whoa!"

He let go of the reins and watched the pair of geldings gallop into the field. Then, getting to his feet, he rubbed his bruised knees, and stalked ruefully towards the corral. He caught a horse, slipped a bridle over

the animal's head, looked questioningly at a saddle and mounted bare-back. A saddle certainly couldn't fall off if he didn't put one on.

Galloping after the geldings, Charlie caught them, and led them back. Tying them to the buckboard, he put a new bolt in the clevis and rehitched the team. But this time he was taking no chances. He led them to the house and stood by their head-stalls until the Boss came out.

"Daggonit, you're getting old!" the Boss jibed. "Did it take you all this while to harness a team?"

"Yes, Boss," Charlie said meekly.

The Boss laughed, picked up the reins, and drove away at a fast trot while Charlie stood looking after him. When the Boss was out of sight he sat glumly down on the porch to think a while. The Boss didn't know about the jinx, or that nothing ever went right for Charlie any more. So far Charlie had managed to rectify his own mistakes.

Charlie wrapped his right arm around one of the pillars that supported the porch roof and hung grimly on. Everything about the ranch was spic and span; it couldn't be in better shape. But it wouldn't stay that way very long if Charlie tried to do anything. The jinx would be sure to mess things up. He would anchor himself right here until the Boss came back with his banker, and remain here until the banker departed. Certainly nothing could go amiss if he didn't do anything.

Half an hour after the Boss had departed, Charlie heard the horses in the corral whinny. He looked

down the road, and almost swallowed his Adam's apple.

A rider, mounted on a splendid palomino, was coming towards the house. Charlie stood up, and held his legs very stiff to keep them from trembling. There wasn't a palomino in the country except the one that belonged to the Boss' banker.

Mr. Williamson must have decided to ride to the ranch and, cutting across country, had missed the Boss on the road.

The rider pulled his mount to a walk, and stopped him in front of the porch. The palomino, a magnificent animal, looked inquisitively all about, then fell to pawing the ground with its front hoof. Charlie's eyes strayed from the horse to the rider, a tall, thin, hawk-nosed man with cold gray eyes and a revolver on his belt. Swallowing, Charlie controlled a wild impulse to run away.

"W-won't you get down?" he invited.

"I might."

The rider swung from his mount, and walked up the three porch steps to stand beside Charlie. He looked through the window into the house, glanced at the barn and sheds, and turned to look hard at Charlie. Charlie shifted nervous feet.

"The Boss left about a half hour ago to meet you in Hyatt," he explained. "I expect he'll be right back when he finds you ain't there."

"Do you think he will?"

There seemed to be a little amusement in the man's gray eyes, and a little of something else that Charlie could not read. But a cowboy

couldn't be expected to know everything that went on in a banker's mind. Unaccountably, the banker led his horse around to the rear of the house and returned. Charlie resumed the conversation where it had been broken off.

"Yep. The Boss ain't a man to fool around. But he's got everything all ready for you. The four thousand dollars is right there in the table drawer."

"So that's where it is, eh?"

"Yep," Charlie said expansively. He was feeling better now. The banker had been here five minutes and nothing had happened. Maybe the jinx had made up its mind to let Charlie alone for at least a little while. "This is the best darn ranch in the West," continued Charlie, "an' the Boss is the best darn risk."

"I'm sure he is."

Charlie looked at the ground. The banker wasn't very communicative, not what you'd call a big talker. But somehow Charlie had to keep him both entertained and present until the Boss got back. The old fear of the jinx welled up in him.

"Look," he said desperately, "why don't you just go in the house an' set there until the Boss gets back? Help yourself to anything you see."

"I like it here."

Charlie swallowed, cast about for something to say, and came up with: "How do you like the place?"

"It looks all right."

"It is all right," Charlie asserted. "It's the best darn—" It occurred to him that he had said that before. But at the same time a happy thought struck him. The Boss had said that

the banker didn't want to invest his money in any ranch where rustlers were a danger, and this was a fine opportunity to show how rustlers were handled on the Bar-C and what able defenders the ranch had.

"We had rustlers here wunst," he volunteered.

"Yeah? What happened?"

"There wasn't but one," Charlie admitted, "an' he got away with eleven yearlin's. But I took out after him, an' ketched him back in the hills. Do you see that little rock out there? All right, that's the rustler an' this is me. I says to him, 'Grab clouds!' I says. Instead he tries to draw. Then—"

Charlie snapped his gun out of its holster, was about to level it and shoot when his thumb slipped. The gun roared and Charlie stared, horrified, at the banker. The man was lying on the floor, a thin trickle of blood washing down his temple. Charlie holstered his gun and knelt beside him. The bullet had creased the banker's skull. Charlie gave a sigh of relief. The man wasn't dead, though he would be out for a couple of hours.

But the Boss was hurt. Charlie struggled in the sea of his own remorse and despair. Never before had he had a gun accident, nor had he ever hit anything he hadn't aimed at. But just this once, just when the jinx had his spurs deep into the hide of Wrong-way Charlie . . . He lifted the unconscious banker, carried him inside, laid him on the Boss' bed, and bathed his wound. Then he stumbled out to the porch and sat

down. He would wait for the Boss, tell him what happened. Then . . . then . . . He was unable to think of anything after that. There didn't seem to be anything.

Half an hour later Charlie heard the pound of hoofs, and looked up to see the Boss coming in a furiously driven buckboard. As the lathered, heaving horses drew up beside the porch, Charlie looked blankly at the man who sat beside the Boss. He was a gray-haired but slender and straight man, and the Boss' wet handkerchief was bound around his head. Beneath it, his face was set in determined fury.

"Charlie!" the Boss yelled. "This is Mr. Williamson, the banker! He started to ride out here, and some hombre stuck him up, hit him on the head, and took his horse! I picked him up on the road! Hurry! We want you to get on the trail right away!"

"Huh?" Charlie grunted. For a second he swayed drunkenly back and forth. Then: "Oh, *that* man. I already got him. He's inside now, out colder'n a dead turkey." He glanced quizzically at Mr. Williamson and said: "That's the way we do things on the Bar-C. You see, around here we're efficient."

THE END

MEN WHO MAKE WESTERN STORY



Ray Nafziger

was born a "Jayhawker" but grew up in Nebraska where his father ranched in the sandhill country north of the River Platte, a day's travel from the old spread of Buffalo Bill Cody. The family then moved to a spot near historic Rock Creek (Wyeth), a station on the old Overland and Pony Express routes and likewise on the Oregon Trail.

"I've done a heap of wandering in my time," writes Ray, whose home is in

the Southwest. "Was with the U. S. Bureau of Animal Industry during the first big outbreak of hoof-and-mouth disease; thinned beets in Idaho; the Army in World War I; started a dude ranch near Santa Fé. But I liked best of all my job as forest ranger in central and western New Mexico. There are the unforgettable memories of little settlements like Tajique, Chilili, San Rafael, San Mateo, Grants . . . the Mexican dishes one got at isolated ranches . . . yarns about Penitentes, Apaches, outlaws, lost treasure . . . the mysterious ancient ruins at Abo, Quarai, Gran Quivira . . . all of these things and hundreds like them started my twenty years of writing Western yarns during which, I hope, I have brought some little entertainment to our readers . . ."

A true son of the West and a top-hand teller of tales is Ray Nafziger, whose BOOMERANG TRAIL will appear in our next issue along with other stories of the range by Walt Coburn, S. Omar Barker, Tom W. Blackburn, Rod Patterson, Giff Cheshire—plus departments and features.



RAWHIDE RECIPE

by S. OMAR BARKER

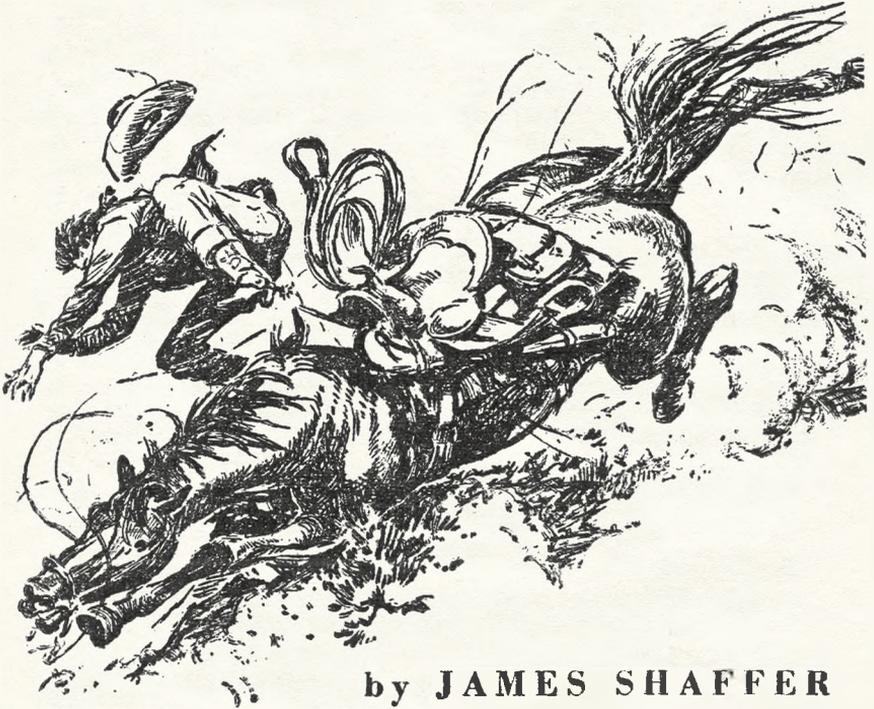
Now here's a salty sayin' that you'll hear out on the Plains:
 "All it takes to ride a bronco is a stiff back—an' no brains!"
 Of course, if them there cowboys want to make that kind of cracks
 About their own rough doin's, they can do so. But the facks
 Should all be duly noted by the rest of us, to wit:
 To bust a bronc you've got to have some tough meat where you sit.
 Just like a man with one arm gone can't play upon the fiddle,
 No man can ride a bronco if he ain't split up the middle.

Another fack that's just as plain as day is plain from night:
 You ain't no bronco buster if your head ain't sewed on tight.
 You also need a pair of eyes that see things mighty quick,
 Because sometimes you may git throwed an' have to dodge a kick.
 Your ears don't play no special part in gittin' broncos skinned—
 Just so they ain't so big an' loose they're flappy in the wind.
 Your legs need plenty muscle, yet without no surplus meat,
 To hold a horse between 'em while the saddle pounds your seat.
 You don't want no hay fever with a bronc between your knees,
 For sure as hell he'll throw you if you take time out to sneeze.
 Your nose must do to breathe through when the buckin' comes unsprung.
 For if your mouth flies open, dang your soul, you'll bite your tongue!
 Most any man can set a horse at canter, trot or lope,
 But settin' on a bronc requires a gizzard-gyroscope.

You've heard that salty sayin' of the cowboys on the Plains:
 "All it takes to be a peeler is a stiff neck—an' no brains!"
 No doubt that's just meant for a gag, for when the facks is knowed,
 That there ain't even all it takes to climb on an' git throwed!
 For straddlin' buckin' broncos like them Western punchers do
 Requires a heap of qualities. I've mentioned just a few,
 But what it takes the most of, when you come right down to taw,
 Is what is sometimes knowed as *sand*, or *gravel*, in your craw!

Would Cleve Cannon be cut down by bushwhack bullets before he solved the mystery of the three vultures who dispensed

JUSTICE IN COTTON FORKS



by JAMES SHAFFER

I

CLEVE CANNON'S tired roan brought him into Cotton Forks about high noon. As the roan shuffled through the thick dust of the main street, Cleve's hand was close to his Colt, which he'd carefully checked twenty minutes before. He dismounted at the livery stable with the

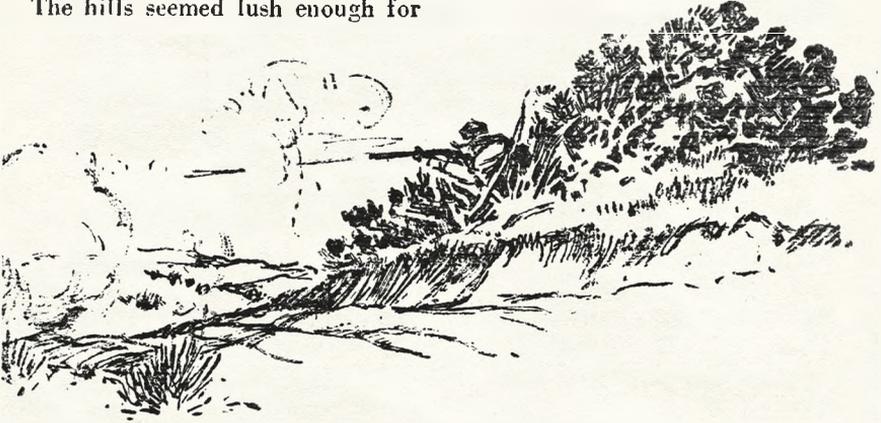
stiffness of a man who has spent much time in the saddle these last few days. He stretched his muscles against the weariness that long saddle hours bring, as he gave the stableman instructions for the care of his pony. Still in the shade of the livery, he built himself a smoke, and viewed Cotton Forks over cupped hands that held the match.

There was little to see. Cotton Forks lay in the hollow formed by a ring of rolling foothills; a row of false-fronted buildings thrown haphazardly along the boundary of a thick ribbon of dust that was main street. And yet certain things he saw stuck in Cleve's mind—little things, that struck a faint note of discord.

The hills seemed lush enough for

arrest 'em, and a justice of the peace to convict 'em—whether they're guilty or not."

He flicked his smoke into the dust of the street, eased his Stetson forward to shade his eyes and strolled toward the middle of town. Riding in, he'd spotted the weathered sign of the Jack o' Diamonds Bar. Now he



good cattle—and he'd seen good cattle riding in. That would make a man expect to find Cotton Forks a prosperous place. It wasn't. There was a general air of decay about the town. The boardwalk was rickety and in need of repair; the paint had long since peeled from the buildings and the warped signs over the doorways. All that is, except two signs. They were new and freshly painted, and seemed all the more brazen and swaggering for it.

One of them read "Sheriff," and the other one, done in fancy letters, read "Justice of the Peace."

"So they've got law and order here now, eh," Cleve mused, and his lips twisted in wry humor. "A sheriff to

spotted the sprawling bulk of a man sitting in the shade of the awning. The man was eying him with more than passing interest. Cleve changed his direction, boots scuffing toward the Jack o' Diamonds.

Brady Halligan watched him approach. Brady's eyes were sunk into the fat of his face, and the eyelids appeared at all times ready to droop. It was a mistake to think that his eyes missed anything, however. And those that had made the mistake, had found it out too late to correct it.

They were not missing anything now. They took in the dust of a long, fast trail that lay behind Cannon; the well-worn butt of his Colt, and the equally worn tie string that

held the gun in the right position on his thigh. And they took in the mocking recklessness that was none-too-well hidden in Cannon's deep gray eyes.

"Welcome to Cotton Forks, stranger," Halligan said, as Cleve's rangy body reached the shade of the awning. The smile he got in return did nothing to warm his heart or start a friendship. It was a mere crack of the lips.

"I'm wondering what kind of fare-well it will be," Cleve answered, and continued into the saloon.

Brady Halligan stared at the batting doors, still swinging gently from Cleve's entrance. He was remembering the hell-with-it-all look in the dusty stranger's eyes, and the fact that his six-gun had been carefully wiped free of dust. And lastly, the impudent reply to what Halligan had considered a friendly greeting. For a moment, he turned these things over in his mind, then heaved his bulk out of the chair and followed Cleve inside.

And Halligan was quick to note, as he stepped into the saloon, that the stranger was sipping his drink slowly, like a man who doesn't want to befuddle his mind, or slow his hand with too much forty-rod. The stranger spotted Halligan in the big mirror back of the bar, but he didn't turn around, or make any other greeting; just sipped his drink and minded his own business. Halligan walked toward the rear of the saloon, where Spade McElroy, the deputy sheriff, was half-heartedly practising trick shots on a pool table.

"Yeah, I seen him when he come in," Spade said before Brady could speak, "uh . . . was just going to make him shuck his gun." There was a no-gun law in Cotton Forks, now that law and order were in the saddle.

"Never mind that," Brady Halligan said. "Go over to the hotel and tell Iverson to put him in the big corner room—in case he checks in."

"Huh? Oh, sure," Spade said. After receiving instructions about the big corner room, he looked at the stranger with fresh interest. He put the cue stick down. "Sure. I'll tell Iverson."

"And tell the sheriff to drop around this way," Halligan said. "Never mind, here he comes now."

A roly-poly little man with a wide grin on his face pushed through the batwings and came in. The big Colt around his middle was hung at an awkward angle, and seemed almost as big as the wearer. It hung almost in the middle of his round stomach, and flopped and banged against his legs as he walked. All he needed to look like a circus clown was a tall, cone-shaped hat. He wore a law badge on his vest.

"Hey, Poke!" he sang out to the barman. "Gimmie my usual. You know—sweet milk with a dash of sa'sparilla!" He laughed and winked broadly at the stranger. "Nothing like a little ree-freshments to keep a man a-goin'."

The bartender set out a bottle and two glasses. The lawman dashed a heavy slug of straight whiskey into each and downed them one after the other—neat.

"Ahhhhhh," he breathed in satisfaction, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Stranger in town, ain't ya? Welcome to Cotton Forks—I'm the sheriff." He chuckled again, for no apparent reason.

"I welcomed the stranger a few minutes ago," Brady Halligan said, bellying up to the bar. "But he seemed more worried about his fare-well than his welcome."

"Pshaw," the lawman said sympathetically, "Cotton Forks is a friendly town—full to the brim with law and order, and kindness to all." He chuckled.

"It's the law and order part that bothers me," Cleve Cannon said. "I been in these towns before that just got the law and order bug. Seems like I'm always running afoul of some of their fool laws."

"G'wan," the sheriff joshed, "we ain't got no fool laws here." He appeared indignant and banged his fist on the bar. "Why, I wouldn't enforce 'em if we had." Then he laughed again, and Cleve watched his round little belly jiggle as mirth shook him. "Fact is, I don't enforce much of anything. Folks around here thought it'd be nice to have law and order, so they elected me to the job."

"I forgot to introduce myself," Brady Halligan cut in. "My name's Brady Halligan—sort of an old-timer around these parts, and right now, the mayor of Cotton Forks. The sheriff, here, answers to Happy Bostick. Don't believe I caught your name."

"Cleve," the stranger said quietly. "About this law and order stuff—you

mean you're arresting hombres and trying 'em, instead of the old way?"

Happy Bostick nodded, and emphasized it with a chuckle. "Fair trial in front of a dozen of their peers—that's the jury, you know." He swung around as another man entered the saloon. "Here's Judge Tyler. He's the gent that sentences 'em."

Tyler was thin and wispy. He had a straggly little goatee that Cleve Cannon figured hid a weak and receding chin. He puttered up to the bar and reached for a drink with the manner of a man who's used to doing it. Cleve Cannon sipped his drink slowly.

So these, he thought, are the three. Not a very formidable trio. Brady Halligan looked too fat and lazy to drag the gun that sagged in a slipshod manner at his hip. Happy Bostick looked as though he couldn't stop giggling long enough to get tough, and Judge Tyler looked like a man who'd flinch at the pop of a six-gun.

"Cleve, here," Bostick told the judge, "is interested in our law and order campaign in Cotton Forks—but he's kind o' leary of it."

"Lawlessness was rampant in this town, and the people rose up and struck a blow for the cause," the judge intoned in a singsong voice. "They wanted safety, peace, and security—in other words, law and order. And we're the men they elected to see that their mandates are carried out."

"I see," Cannon said quietly. "And you're carrying 'em out. Had

any big trials here yet, judge?"

The judge seemed to swell visibly. "I've tried twenty-eight cases."

"What were most of the charges?" asked Cleve.

"For a gent that don't like law and order," Brady Halligan cut in, "you seem danged interested. Most of the cases so far have been over land boundaries, and of course, some rustling. We got some nesters 'round here. They ain't doing so good, so once in a while they slow-elk some beef from one of the big cattle spreads."

"Um, sounds like tame stuff," Cleve said.

"We have other cases too," Brady Halligan went on, and he was watching Cannon closely. "There was one case of a gent that robbed the bank here."

"Suppose you hung him?"

"Nope," the judge broke in promptly. "He got a fair trial. Fact is, if it hadn't been for smart work on the part of the sheriff, we'd never have caught him. It was real detective work on Happy's part—catching that Cannon gent."

"Yeah?"

"This Cannon gent," Halligan said, "brought a bunch of horses up here from Texas. Sold 'em, but instead of lightin' out for Texas again, he got sweet on a nester gal and hung around. Well, them thieving nesters robbed him of his roll, and reckon he was ashamed to go back to Texas 'thout no money—so he robbed the bank one night."

"It was a humdinger of a trial," Bostick put in with a chuckle. "Plenty of excitement and all. We

never did find all the money. Cannon hid it before the trial."

"But he was convicted, as he should have been," the judge intoned. "I sentenced him to twenty years."

"I noticed," Halligan said off-handedly, "that your cayuse carries a Texas rig. You wouldn't know this Cannon gent, would you?"

Cleve shrugged his shoulders. "Texas is a big place. A man'd have to git around right pert to meet everybody down there." He set his glass down on the bar and moved toward the door. "I'll be around for a few days," he said. "Maybe we'll all have another drink together—before I go."

He strolled down the street to the livery stable, and then inside. From the deep shadows in the stable, he watched the street. He saw Spade McElroy, the deputy, leave the hotel and go into the Jack o' Diamonds. Pretty soon the judge, the sheriff, and Halligan came out. They stood on the boardwalk talking for a moment, then the sheriff and judge went their separate ways. Brady Halligan resumed his seat in front of the saloon.

II

Cleve Cannon found the stableman dozing in the office. He shook him gently, then inquired: "Got a good mount to rent?" The stableman yawned and pointed to a bay mare. Cannon said "Okay" and saddled the bay himself. As he jogged out of town, he caught sight of Sheriff Happy Bostick waddling toward the stable in back of the sheriff's office with a saddle on his arm.

A few miles out of Cotton Forks, Cleve topped a rise, and spread out below him was a typical nester settlement. He rode down into it. As the bay trotted past a cornfield, he caught sight of one of the nesters almost hidden in the high corn. The man held a shotgun in the crook of his arm. Cannon stopped.

"Looking for the Larson homestead," he said.

The man looked him over for a long moment. "Down the crick about a mile—cabin sets in a clump of cottonwoods." He shifted his position slightly as he talked, and Cleve could see the hammers on the gun. Both cocked. A dry chuckle broke past his lips.

"Law and order," he mused to himself. "No-gun law." He rode on down to the cabin, dismounted and knocked on the door.

The girl herself opened the door. Cleve pursed his lips for a soundless whistle. It brought swift color to the girl's cheeks, but only for a moment.

"You must be Cleve," she said. "Chick told me about you. He . . . he said you'd come."

"It's a long ride from Texas, Anne," Cleve answered. "Could we sit?"

The girl led the way into the clean little living room. "Halligan, Bostick and Tyler . . . do they know—"

Cleve nodded. "I had a drink with 'em in the Jack o' Diamonds. I gave my name as just Cleve, and I don't look a whole lot like Chick."

The girl shook her head, and he saw dull despair in her eyes. "Halligan—he'd notice the resemblance

right away. He never misses a trick of any kind." She blinked rapidly, and he could see her struggle to hold back the tears. "When I think of Chick in that place . . . all shut up . . . he liked plenty of room—"

"We're gonna do something about it," Cleve said quietly.

"But what? I mean . . . they had so much evidence against Chick. He'd sold the horses and everybody knew how much money he had. Then he was robbed and he swore he wasn't going back to Texas broke. They found some of the bank money in his pockets after the robbery."

"These three that run the town. What about 'em? How'd they get in office?"

"It was the nesters' doings," said Anne. "Oh, I know it sounds crazy, but that's the way it happened. Halligan owns everything around here almost — the biggest ranch — the biggest store in town—everything. And he was running things to suit himself. The nesters got organized—or thought they did—and decided that Cotton Forks needed a sheriff to enforce the law and see that they got a fair deal."

"And Happy Bostick was the man, huh?"

Anne Larson nodded. "He was Halligan's man all along—but we didn't know it till he was voted into office. Since then—with the law on his side—Halligan's been driving the nesters out one by one. Halligan makes the law do his bidding. A month ago a state marshal came down to investigate. He was killed and a nester was convicted of the murder. He got a life sentence."

"How do they get these convictions in court? After all, there must be some people—"

"Perjury," the girl said quickly. "Witnesses lie on the witness stand. Some do it for money, and others because Brady Halligan says so."

Cleve nodded. He told her about the man he'd seen in the cornfield with a shotgun, and asked why the man was on guard.

"We nesters aren't going to allow Halligan and his men to arrest any more nesters," Anne explained. "They don't get a fair trial, so when Halligan's bunch try to arrest any nester, we'll fight."

Cleve got up to leave. The girl followed him to the door. "Somehow," she said, "things don't look so hopeless, now that you're here. Chick tried to tell me that you'd come, and that things would be all right when you got here, but I couldn't believe it—then."

"I wouldn't worry too much," Cleve said, but the moment she was out of sight, his brow wrinkled in thought. He'd had no idea things were as bad as they were. From what Anne had told him, Halligan and his cohorts had Cotton Forks sewed up tight.

Chick was in prison—and, as far as the outside world was concerned, fairly convicted in a court of justice. The word brought a bitter twist to Cleve's lips. Halligan dispensed justice with a cocked .45.

Cleve let the mare walk, and rode slumped in the saddle, thinking over the events of the past few hours. But he could find no weak spot in Halli-

gan's scheme. His right hand brushed the butt of his six-gun, and it brought back the feeling of helplessness. He could start gun talk with the bosses of Cotton Forks, but that wouldn't get Chick out of prison. In fact, any slip on Cleve's part would put him in there with his brother. And Anne—no wonder Chick had been slow about coming back to Texas.

As he neared the field of tall corn again, Cleve took a look around for the silent shotgun guard. The man was nowhere in sight. Then Cleve saw something that almost made him pull to a stop.

The spot where the man had been when he'd passed before, was trampled and the corn was broken and beaten down, as if two people had wrestled on the spot. A cold, uneasy chill trickled down his spine, and he scanned the trail ahead. The trail was leading out of the narrow creek valley, and rough patches of boulders and brush bordered the trail farther ahead. Cleve put his trust in the horse. He slid his feet almost out of the stirrups, and watched the animal's ears. Half a mile further, the horse's ears suddenly pointed forward. Cleve tensed.

He got a split-second glimpse of a black muzzle eying him from a clump of brush off to his left. He kicked mightily with his left foot and fell out of the saddle, putting the horse between him and the brush. A shattering roar broke the stillness. Cleve felt the mare shudder and quiver as heavy slugs hit it. The horse squealed once in mortal agony, then stumbled. Cleve kicked free.

Cleve hit the ground rolling. As he landed, he flung a slug into the brush, then rolled again. Another slug, and another roll. There were no more shots from the brush. Scrambling to his feet, he dived for a big sandstone. From its protection he slammed three quick shots into the brush, then reloaded. In the silence that followed, he caught the faint drumming of a fast-running horse.

He waited a long moment, then got to his feet and made a dash for the brush. No more lead came his way, and when he reached the brush, he found only the shotgun and numerous cigarette butts to show where the would-be killer had lain in wait. He picked the shotgun up. He couldn't be sure, but it looked like the gun the nester in the cornfield had been holding.

He turned and walked swiftly

down to the cornfield. And there he found the nester, stretched out on the ground unconscious. The lump on the back of the man's head showed he'd been slugged from behind.

Cleve scratched his chin and squinted in deep thought. "The first part of their plan went wrong when that bushwhacker missed me. Mebbe I can throw another hitch in their plans by doing what they don't expect me to do." He bent down and picked up the nester.

III

"That's the story, gents," Cleve Cannon finished. He took his Stetson off and ran his fingers through his hair. The nester stood in the center of the group, sullen and handcuffed. They were all gathered in the sheriff's office: Judge Tyler,

**You ease off beard in jigtime, men,
With Thin Gillettes—four blades for ten—
They save you dough and treat you well—
And your face sure looks and feels swell!**



Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

Happy Bostick and Brady Halligan.

In the shadows of the dark, smoky light from the grimy lamp, the mayor of Cotton Forks looked like some fat, bloated bird of prey. And the way the lamp threw his shadow on the wall, made it appear that he was ready to pounce on the poor, luckless nester. Judge Tyler was tugging at his goatee, and squinting at the nester. Happy Bostick was reared back in his chair, grinning and rubbing his fat stomach.

The nester, Joe Kirby, was suddenly defiant, as he faced them in the shadowy little office. He rattled the cuffs on his wrists and glared at Halligan.

"That's your shotgun, ain't it, Kirby?" Happy Bostick asked. He chuckled. "Ain't much use denying that—we've all seen you carry it often enough."

Cannon was watching Brady Halligan. The mayor had been silent all through his story.

"I figure," Cleve said, "from the lump on Kirby's jaw, that he over-loaded the gun, and it knocked him out when he pulled trigger. That's how I come to find him laid out cold in the cornfield."

"But the motive," Judge Tyler said nervously. "A jury won't believe a man tried to commit murder unless he had a motive."

Brady Halligan's big bulk shifted to a more comfortable position. "I think I can supply that," he said softly. He turned to the nester. "You had all the money you possessed in the bank, and since the bank didn't pay off its losses in that robbery, you lost heavily. That right, Kirby?"

The nester glared. "Every time you open your mouth, you lie, Halligan."

Cleve Cannon felt the muscles of his stomach tense up. "What would that have to do with him taking a shot at me, Halligan?" he asked softly. The shadows seemed to be closing in around him in the little office. There was no sound except the heavy breathing of the men in there.

"You're Chick Cannon's brother." Brady Halligan said evenly. "The man that robbed the bank. Most of the loot from that robbery was never recovered. Evidently Cannon hid it somewhere—and he hung around that nester settlement a lot. And now—just about time for a letter to get to Texas, and for a man to ride up here, you show up—giving a different name."

Cleve faded back into the shadows. "I don't like that kind of talk, Halligan."

Happy Bostick chuckled. "Don't be so touchy, Cleve—or Cannon. Halligan's just showing you what the motive for this attempted murder is."

"That's right," Halligan said. "The nesters were very bitter about the robbery."

"You engineered that robbery, Halligan," the nester snarled. "You and your damn—"

Halligan came out of his chair smoothly. With cool deliberation, he drew back and smashed his fist into Joe Kirby's face. The nester staggered back, but Halligan followed him, striking him again across the face with his open hand. The flickering light of the lantern lit his

face up, bringing a satanic cast to his features.

"I'll teach you damn land-grabbers proper respect," Halligan said softly, as he let his huge bulk sink back into his chair. Kirby was leaning against the desk, about ready to sag to the floor. Happy Bostick jumped up and grabbed his arm.

"Come along, fellow-me-lad," he said cheerfully. "Reckon you'd be safer locked up in a cell." He chuckled and bubbled with mirth at his own joke as he led the groggy Kirby back to the cell row.

"We'll have an early trial," Judge Tyler broke in. "Git the case over with, I always say. Tomorrow I'll round up a jury. You be on tap, Cleve . . . er . . . Cannon. Star witness, you know. Exhibit number one—the man that was shot at."

"I'll be around," Cleve said, and let himself out the door. He started up the boardwalk, his boots clumping loudly. This part of town was nearly deserted, and the street light threw only a dim, glimmering light. He shot a quick look around, then stepped off the walk.

Quickly, he kicked off his boots, and hurried back to the sheriff's office. Hunkering down in the darkness, he edged slowly up to the window of the office. The window wasn't shut tight, but the shade was pulled down. He pressed his ear to the sill.

"Aw, Brady, you take things like that too hard." It was Happy Bostick talking. The sheriff giggled. "Why, he was quicker'n a jackrabbit—never seen a man move so fast."

"You missed, dammit!" Halligan

snapped. "And with a shotgun, too!"

"We could still do it tonight," Tyler's nervous voice broke in. "Bostick, where do you keep your bottle? . . . You could blame it on the nesters—they'll be madder'n hell about Kirby's arrest."

"You'd be overdoing that angle," Halligan growled. "I'll *still* do the thinking for this crew. Hand that bottle here, Judge." There was a faint gurgle. "I got an idea we can kill two birds with one stone. Now listen . . ."

His voice dropped, and became only a dull monotone to Cleve Cannon. He pressed closer, but could distinguish no words at all. Cursing silently, he eased away from the window to a distance where it was safe to slip his boots on. A moment later he headed up the street toward the hotel.

Spade McElroy was sitting in the lobby of the hotel when he came in, and Cleve saw the slight nod he gave the hotel desk man. So he wasn't surprised much when he got a big corner room in the hotel. With the door securely locked, he went over the room carefully.

There were two windows in the room, but they appeared safe enough, since there was no way they could be reached. There were two doors—one opening into the hall, and the other into another room. He examined both locks and hinges very carefully, but could find nothing out of the ordinary in either place.

Still, he was remembering McElroy's slight nod, when he'd entered the hotel, and decided to take no

chances. He slipped his clothes off and draped them over the chair near the door into the other room. He bundled the pillow and blanket up in a roll and laid them out on the bed, spreading another blanket over the dummy. Then he made himself as comfortable as possible, under the bed. He didn't like the necessity of the arrangement, but he was tired and needed sleep. Any squeaking of the bedsprings would awaken him, and he laid his Colt within easy reach. But the precautions were apparently unnecessary, for nothing disturbed his sleep that night.

But the moment he opened his eyes the next morning, he noticed that his shirt was not draped across the chair the way he'd left it. He started a grim hunt over the room. When he reached the door leading into the other room, he found it. The hinges on the door were fakes—they permitted the door to open. Whoever had entered last night had been careless, or in a hurry, and hadn't placed them back just right.

Cleve stepped over to the bed and his frown increased. The dummy had not been touched. That, then, was why he hadn't awakened—the intruder had stayed away from the bed. But why? The nocturnal visitor had had him at his mercy—why had he gotten cold feet and failed to harm him? Or had he intended to harm him? But if not, why the visit?

Cleve didn't know the answer to that one—but he found it, a moment later. He'd slipped into his clothes, buckled his gun on, and rolled a smoke. He was fishing for a match

in his pocket when he made the discovery.

He had more money in his pockets now than he'd had the night before. He swore softly. "Ten, twenty and fifty dollar bills—tucked in with my own roll of ones and fives! How come?" He sat down on the edge of the bed and tried to think the thing out, but the more he thought, the dizzier the whole thing became. Finally he shrugged and headed for the street.

Trouble was rodding Cotton Forks that morning, and he felt its chill breath the moment he stepped out of the hotel. Little clusters of men stood around on the streets, and he noticed that even on this hot day, they all wore their coats. Nesters. And even the coats failed to hide the suspicious bulge of a hideout gun.

He passed one of the groups, and heard the talk die away at his approach. He felt their sullen stares on his back as he passed on. Then suddenly he slowed down. He was passing the Jack o' Diamonds.

"We ain't putting up with it, Bostick," a voice was rumbling from inside. "This is another sandy Halligan's tryin' to run—and he ain't gonna git away with it. Turn Kirby loose!"

Happy Bostick's laugh was a little forced. "Now, boys," he placated. "I keep telling you, Halligan nor me had nothing to do with Kirby's arrest. It was that stranger."

"That story won't hold water!" an angry nester shouted. "Why would Kirby try to plug a stranger?"

"Don't know," Bostick said. "I figure that the stranger got in an

argument with Kirby, and the shooting resulted." His voice dropped to a confidential tone, and Cleve Cannon eased inside the saloon. "This hombre is Chick Cannon's brother—the hombre that robbed the bank—and he hit town looking for trouble. He ain't took off his guns, has he? And he was told about Cotton Forks no-gun law."

"I want to talk to Kirby," another nester broke in. "He can tell us."

Happy smiled broadly, and shook his head. "No can do, boys. It's again' the law."

"A lot of those laws are danged convenient, huh, sheriff?" Cleve Cannon asked. The whole group whirled around. For a moment the smile left Bostick's face, but only for a moment.

"The law's the law—that's all there is to it," he said. "See you boys later." He pushed through the crowd and left. The nesters stood around in a silent, sullen circle, eying Cannon.

"We figured Chick Cannon to be a straight gent," one of them told him. "But we ain't so sure about his brother."

Cleve shrugged. He'd had a feeling since last night that he was walking right into Brady Halligan's trap, but he couldn't figure out how. It was a little clearer now, he thought, after listening to Happy Bostick's line of gab—but the main point was still obscured. Brady had something up his sleeve—killing two birds with one stone, he'd said—but what?

"Never did get it straight about my brother," he said. "Just what evidence did they have against him?"

"I ain't surprised you don't know about your brother's case," a nester snapped. "You don't look like a gent that would take any interest. But since you asked—Chick was convicted by some money they found on him."

Cleve was rolling a smoke. He spilled some of the tobacco out of the paper. "How'd that convict him?" he asked slowly.

"It was bank money," the nester went on. "It was new money, and the bank had a list of the numbers of the bills. They found some of them bills on Chick Cannon."

Cleve Cannon had to resist an impulse to run his hand into his pants pocket and feel the roll of bills in there. "What lawyer is defending Joe Kirby?" he asked.

"Herb Dulaney," a nester told him. "But if you're thinking of any tricks, You're—"

"I don't even know any good card tricks," Cleve said, and walked out. Dulaney's office was over the feed store, and its poverty-stricken look showed plainly that he wasn't stringing along with Brady Halligan. Dulaney was in his middle forties, a scrawny little man, with baggy frayed clothes.

"What do you want here?" he snapped. "You're Cannon, aren't you?"

"You defended Chick, didn't you?" Cleve asked, and when Dulaney nodded, Cleve dug into his pocket and brought out the money. "Guess then maybe you've got a list of these banknote numbers." He tossed the bills on the desk.

Dulaney pawed hurriedly through

one of his desk drawers and dragged out a list. He spread the notes out on the desk, and checked their numbers.

"It's stolen money, all right. Where'd you get it?"

"The question is not where I got it," Cleve said softly, "but what I'm going to do with it—now that I've got it."

Herb Dulaney looked interested. "Just what did you have in mind?" he asked.

"Joe Kirby's in a tight spot. You'll see him before the trial. I think he'll play ball—"

"I'm his lawyer," Dulaney cut in. "Joe'll play ball if it's to his interest."

"Then you take this money," Cleve said, "and listen to what I have to say."

IV

The courtroom was packed. Cleve shoved his way to the front of the room, and took his seat on the bench reserved for the witnesses. He looked over at Dulaney and Joe Kirby, then twisted around and looked at the crowd. A frown puckered his brow at what he saw.

The courtroom was packed with nesters; only a sprinkling of Halligan's cowboys were present. And Cleve noted that they were placed at strategic spots; mostly in the corners of the room. That meant, he thought, that most of Brady's crew was outside. This gang would be caught like rats in a trap in case trouble started. And it was going to start.

Judge Tyler entered the court, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Even with the hefty drink he'd evidently just taken, he was visibly nervous. Cleve slid his gaze around to Happy Bostick. The rotund little sheriff was showing some signs of strain.

"They're wondering what *my* game is," Cleve thought. "They know darn good and well that *I* know it was Bostick who tried to blast me, and that I found Joe Kirby in that cornfield, still unconscious from a slug-ging he'd gotten. But they don't know that I know their game. I'm to be framed just like Chick. They'll find some of that bank money on me. That's what Halligan meant by killing two birds with one stone. It's sort o' like holding deuces, when deuces are wild—and this game is going to get wild."

He twisted around for a look at Brady Halligan. Only the big mayor seemed cool and undisturbed; he showed none of the nervousness of the judge or the sheriff.

Judge Tyler banged his gavel on the rough, unpainted desk. "This here court'll come to order," he yelled. "Let's git going. Cannon, git up here and tell your tale."

His boots clumped hollowly in the sudden silence, as he walked over to the witness chair. He looked over the crowd for a moment, then started talking. He told how he'd come to Cotton Forks to find out what had happened to his brother, and how he'd ridden out to the nester settlement to see the girl Chick had been sweet on, and how he'd seen Joe Kirby in the cornfield on his way

down but hadn't seen him on his way back.

A low, angry rumble went through the crowd when he reached that point. Happy Bostick's face lost its smile, and Judge Tyler wiped the sweat off his brow. Cleve shot a look at Halligan. The boss was slumped down comfortably in his chair, and he couldn't hide his satisfaction at the angry rumble of the crowd.

"I saw the muzzle of the gun sticking through the brush," Cannon said, "and I ducked. The slugs killed the horse, and then I flung a few shots into the clump of brush. I figure one of my slugs creased Kirby—because I found him in the cornfield, stretched out."

"There ain't no bullet crease on Kirby!" an angry nester yelled. "This whole thing's a frame-up. Halligan's back—"

Cooler men dragged the speaker down, but Cleve could feel the tension building up in the courtroom, as he walked back to the bench. Judge Tyler kept yelling for silence, then called Kirby to the stand.

"You heard what Cannon said," the judge barked. "Whatcha gotta say?"

The courtroom grew as silent as a tomb. There wasn't even the sound of heavy breathing in the crowded room. All eyes were trained on Joe Kirby except Cleve Cannon's. He was watching Brady Halligan. Joe Kirby started to speak, and an audible sigh ran through the packed room.

"It's the truth."

Brady Halligan dropped the unlit

cigar he'd been rolling between his fingers. His jaw sagged open in astonishment, and his eyes were puzzled. Tyler dropped his gavel and fumbled for it hastily. Happy Bostick's face turned a shade whiter, and the nesters were held in a stunned silence.

"What did you say?" Tyler yelled.

Kirby clenched his hands till the knuckles were white. His eyes roved around the room, and passed fleetingly over Cleve Cannon.

"A gent came to me yesterday," Kirby said. "Told me about Cannon being here to try to re-open Chick Cannon's case. This gent said he didn't want the case re-opened—he didn't say why—and offered me some money to bushwhack Cannon."

Herb Dulaney got to his feet. "You took the money? Why?"

Judge Tyler banged on his desk. "Hey—dammit, this is irregular—"

Cleve Cannon raised his voice. "What's irregular about the defendant answering questions, except that he's not giving the answers you'd like him to. Get on with the trial."

"Why'd you take the money?" Dulaney asked the nester again.

Kirby answered promptly. "Just had a hunch that *maybe* it might be some of the bank money—"

A rumble of noise from the nesters drowned out the rest of his words.



Dulaney waved his hand for silence.

"You still got the money—and you can name the gent that gave it to you?"

Kirby started digging in his pocket. He nodded. "Sure. Br—"

"Duck, Kirby!" Cleve Cannon roared.

Brady Halligan was moving with incredible speed for a man so fat. He'd flung his huge, misshapen body sideways out of his chair, and his gun was lifting. It roared, just as Kirby dropped flat. Cannon's gun spoke next, and he heard the slug thunk into Halligan's flesh. Happy Bostick was laughing as he went for his guns—a high-pitched giggle that was drowned out by the roar of Cannon's Colt as he slung lead at the lawman. Joe Kirby and Lawyer Dulaney were wrestling with Judge Tyler.

Brady Halligan was sagging, but ne was getting his gun up. Cannon thumbed back his hammer for another shot. Something slammed into his shoulder, and he realized that Happy Bostick was still in the game.

But he wanted Halligan, and he dropped flat behind the bench. He lined Brady up in front of his sights and let the hammer drop . . .

A little while later when they were patching up Cannon's shoulder, a nester pushed through the crowd.

"Halligan's up at the Doc's house, but he ain't got long. And he's talking—telling plenty. Wants to get it off his chest before he cashes in."

"Guess there wasn't any need to try to keep Judge Tyler alive, then," Joe Kirby said wryly.

"Two stories are better than one," Cleve pointed out. "Reckon we won't have no trouble in re-opening Chick's case now."

"Naw. Halligan's already confessed that Chick was framed," the nester informed him.

Cleve looked up and grinned at Joe Kirby. "Guess the only thing to worry about now is Kirby's perjury on the witness stand about how he got the money from Herb Dulaney. Law and order 're all right, gents—but that's one charge that won't be pressed."

THE END



THE OLD-TIMER SAYS:

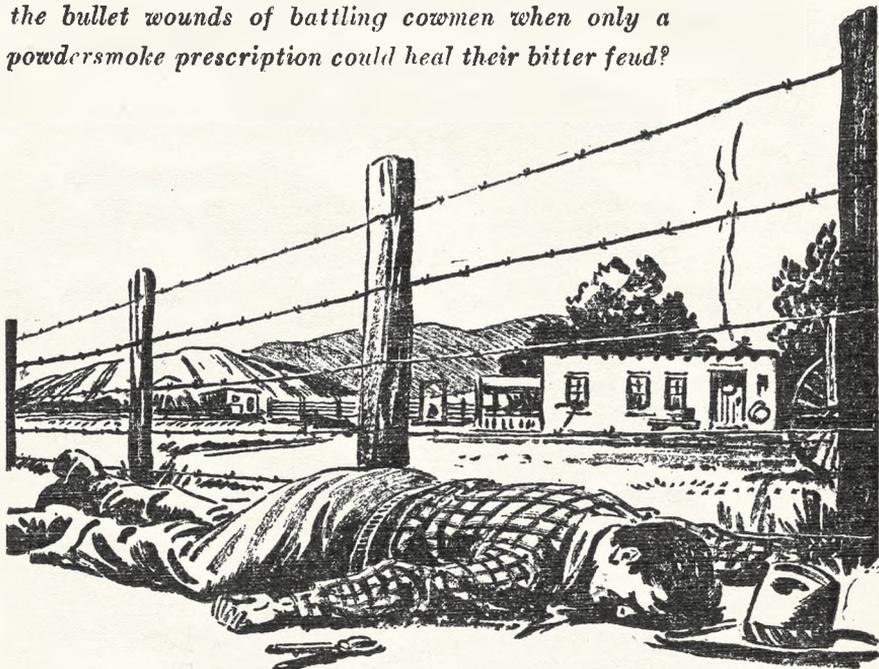
Those boys of ours are sure takin' the rough edges off the Japs an' Nazis, so it's up to us to help them stay in the saddle by diggin' in deeper than ever for

WAR BONDS AND STAMPS!

TEXAS MEDICOS NEED GUTS

by BOB OBETS

How long would Doc Kirk wear himself out patching the bullet wounds of battling cowmen when only a powder-smoke prescription could heal their bitter feud?



It was two in the morning when Joe Kirk got back to Caliente and the three-roomed adobe which was his office, hospital and home. The sand was still blowing.

For most of this night, in a dobe hut on the Puerococita, Joe Kirk had

listened to that sand pelting against the windowpanes. The sand, the heat, the bitter hopeless fight he had waged in that miserable adobe had pulled his nerves to the snapping point. Young Juan Anselmo, caught by the ripping horns of a

steer, had died, leaving Joe Kirk to ride home with a washed-out feeling gathering inside him that was close to fear.

Why hang on in this wind-blasted, burned-up, desolate country? What did it get you? You worked and you fought; you scraped a bare living, and you knew you ought to leave. But somehow that seemed like quitting, so you stayed on—waiting for the Thompsons' baby to come or Watt Jones' bullet wound to heal. Some day you were worn-out, finished—like old Doc Sawyers. You spent the rest of your days on five or ten acres of grubbed land, piddling with a garden and chickens.

"Hang it, I won't!" said Kirk vehemently, and sent his horse with an almost savage slap into the mesquite-pole pen.

Entering the adobe by the back way, he lowered his bag to the rammed-earth floor and lit the lamp. Weariness made him stagger, and the smoky yellow of the lamp glow brought his eyes an instant pain.

He reached to turn down the wick, and his hand felt shaky. Pushing both hands out in front of him, backs toward him, he looked at them solemnly. He looked at them a long time. When he couldn't hold them steady, he shook his head.

He found himself at his pine-box desk. He couldn't think clearly. He simply wrote the jumbled thoughts that came into his head:

Dear Carson:

You offered me a job in your hospital. When you get this, I'll be on my way.

I probably won't like the city. I guess this Texas mesquite is in my blood—and the dust and the gunpowder and the people. But there's no future to it. So I'm quitting.

Sincerely

Joe Kirk

Joe put the letter in an envelope, blew out the lamp and stumbled to the wall bunk. He fell onto it fully dressed.

He was dreaming of an operating room, white and shining, when a violent hand on his shoulder shook him back to consciousness.

A voice was saying: "Wake up, doc, you ain't dead. Wake up."

And again that yellow light was rasping his eyes, and the hand was hauling him up from the pillow.

Two men stood watching him. Both wore guns; but it was the hard alertness of their eyes that caught Kirk's attention.

"Go away. I'm sick. I'm finished here," Kirk mumbled.

One of the men laughed. His gun came into his hand.

"Hangovers are hell, doc, but you're sure a-going. I reckon that slug broke the young squirt's back, but old Pleas keeps bellerin' for you."

"Pleas? Pleas Butler?"

"That's him. Seems to think you can just wave a hand over that boy of his, and he'll get up and walk. Hell, he can't even wiggle his toes."

Kirk's feet hit the floor. "Throw a saddle on my horse," he ordered the man with the ready gun, and lurched across to the washstand. He

splashed his face with cold water, straightened and asked: "How'd it happen? And where do you two come in?"

"Don't get smart, doc," said the man waiting in the doorway; and then his thin lips grinned. "Speakin' in medical terms, I reckon you might call her a blood boil. She's been festerin' ever since Pleas and Ike Grissom fell out o' each other's bosoms over those windmills. The drought aggravated it, and young Butler gettin' shot tonight sure brought it to a head. I reckon tonight Gus and me and the other boys old Pleas has imported in will sort of act as a poultice on that festerin' sore. Doc, there's sure gonna be a fight!"

The man chuckled, pleased with his own wit; and Joe Kirk held silent. His mind flashed back and once more he stood here, a young, young doctor, cocksure in his inexperience, listening to the urgent voice of a ranchman with a left arm that dangled and a scalp that dripped blood.

"Can you come right now, doc? Old Pleas is hurt bad. We fought him off, but that locoed horse trampled Pleas near to death. Hurry, Doc!"

Softly Joe Kirk said: "And now those two hate each other. Now they're fighting . . ."

"Yeah," said the thin-lipped man, "and it's gonna be a good one. Grab that bag, doc, and let's ride."

They rode south and the sand was still blowing. Joe Kirk made a mask out of a bandanna, but the

sand got under it and stung his nostrils and gritted against his teeth. Tomorrow, he thought, he'd ride out of this.

It wouldn't be quitting! Any man had a right to better himself. The hospital would have modern equipment. The patients would have money. A young doctor, a good one, could go far. And there wouldn't be any droughts or any gun fights. There wouldn't be any sand to blow . . .

The two men with Kirk kept their heads swinging in a constant alertness. They rode steadily and about two miles out they passed a field of cornstalks, fruitless and scorched, rustling lonesomely in the wind. Skirting the pack-pole fence, they came upon a house, built of mesquite logs chinked with mud. This was old Doc Sawyers' place.

Chickens were roosting in the big mesquite in front, and Kirk could picture Doc Sawyers, of a late evening, scattering grain from the doorstep, perhaps recounting a time when men respected and looked up to him and he was the best man on gunshot wounds in the State.

A sadness came over Joe Kirk and an ache came in his throat. Then he remembered Carson and the letter, and his spirit soared. He was leaving! Climbing till he reached the blue of the sky! Nothing could stop him!

They had pulled off the main road; and the man on Kirk's right said: "You bring a gun, doc? Old Ike Grissom's hired a right salty crew and he's some stubborn, hisself."

And now they rode with the plaintive bawling of a thousand cattle. They breasted a black-brush ridge, and below them in a little hollow sprawled the dobe buildings and pole corrals of Ike Grissom's Chupadero. A hundred yards to the right of the corrals the wooden blades of Pleas Butler's twin windmills whirled briskly, pumping water into a big concrete tank that emptied into numerous small troughs, so full that the water spilled over and trickled on to a willow-fringed pool.

Cows in Pleas Butler's brand drank their fill from the troughs or the pool; but the sight and scent of the water served only to tantalize the cattle of Ike Grissom. For between them and the silvery water marched the posts of a fence, and patrolling that fence were a dozen horsemen with rifles.

Through the yellow dust Joe Kirk could see Grissom's men holding the thirsting cattle with difficulty, for the scent of the water maddened them. Their moaning was a pitiful sound to hear.

Kirk faced again toward the buildings, and saw four men ride leisurely from behind a clump of black-brush.

He made out first the drooping mustache of Ike Grissom, and then he recognized Grissom's son, Rowdy. The two others were strangers, wary-eyed and alert as the two men beside Kirk.

"Watch it, doc," murmured the gunman nearest to Kirk. "Gonna be—"

"By Satan, Grissom, it's two of Butler's men!"

Hands hit gun butts with definite, slapping sounds.

"Hold on!" Ike Grissom yelled. "That's Doc Kirk."

He lunged his horse in between, cursing his two riders. He leaned, caught Kirk's hand in a crushing grip. Concern husked his voice.

"Doc, you see that Packsaddle Hill? When the sun comes over that hill, hell is going to pop. You walk that horse along with me—up on that hilltop where you can stay clear of lead. Doc, you been promis'n' to come see me. You're gonna stay a week!"

"I'm going to the Chupadero," said Kirk wearily. "I'm going to see what I can do for young Johnny Butler. Tomorrow I'm leavin' this, the dust and thirst and bullet holes. I'm not coming back."

"Johnny, huh?" growled Ike Grissom. "I wish it was Pleas. I wish his belly was full of hot buck-shot, and he was so danged thirsty his tongue was draggin' the ground. I wish— Doc! You're not! You can't leave here, doc! What—"

But Kirk turned his horse down the slope.

A rider on a huge black horse, coming fast up the slope, flashed past him, and Kirk caught a glimpse of a white, anxious face. Remembering Madge Allee as he had last seen her, laughing, sparkling with life, something like anger whipped through him. She belonged to young Rowdy Grissom, and all her worries were for him; but she shouldn't have any worries. There

shouldn't be any thirsty cattle or any fight.

Behind Kirk, one of Grissom's riders made a swift reach for his gun, and just as swiftly Ike Grissom was upon him. "Blast you, that's Doc Kirk!"

"What is this—a picnic?" sneered the man.

"I'll wrap that gun around your head," said Grissom. "Doc saved me my arm. He pulled my wife through the gripe, after she'd near stopped breathin'. He's more man than I ever saw or ever hope to see. If he wants to doctor Pleas Butler's boy, it's all right with me."

Pleas Butler, red-faced and fat, came hurrying to the door to meet Kirk.

"Doc! I was afraid they wouldn't let you through. But I might've known. It's bad, doc. Worse'n when that horse trompled me. Johnny can't move a muscle from the waist down."

Young Johnny was on a cot, his bony frame thin under the sheet, his face white, beaded with sweat. He looked up at Kirk, said: "Hi, Doc." Then he fainted.

Kirk used the long pine table in the dining room. Butler's wife brought hot water, and he sterilized his instruments and prepared the wound.

"It hit a fence post first. Bounced off," said Butler. "Doc, if you can make him walk again—"

Kirk had no trouble locating the bullet. The flattened slug had slammed its way to the backbone, where it had lodged. But after he

got hold of the bullet, Kirk had a close ten minutes getting all the blood vessels tied off. When finally he stepped back, his overworked nerves were strumming like wires in the wind.

"Can't tell yet," he muttered. "Spinal cord seemed all right, but he's had a shock and lost a lot of blood."

"Doc, you mean . . . mean he might not walk?" asked Butler.

"I mean," said Kirk bluntly, "he might not live. That's what comes from your fence, Pleas, and your silly quarrel with Ike Grissom. Don't you think that's gone far enough?"

Butler started cursing. He cursed Ike Grissom until he was out of breath, then went to a corner and got his rifle.

"Doc, it's gettin' light out there. You stay away from the windows. Ike Grissom's responsible for my Johnny a-lyin' there. Ike started this. But by the grace of Sam Houston, I'm a-going to finish it!"

From outside came the pound of hoofs. A voice shouted: "Doc! Doc Kirk."

It was one of Grissom's men. He held a rifle with the barrel up and a white rag tied on the end of it.

"Doc, you got to come quick. That damned black horse threw Madge Allee, and she's hurt bad!"

Kirk rode with Grissom's rider back through the gate.

In his three years here, Kirk had spoken less than a dozen words to Madge Allee, yet now he was more concerned about her than he cared to admit. He realized, for the first

time, that always the thought of her had been in the back of his mind, affording him a secret pleasure.

He found her huddled on a saddle blanket in a brushy swag beyond the ridge. Grissom's rider said: "Better go get Ike." And in the turmoil of his mind, Kirk didn't wonder about that or about the girl's being here alone.

He dropped to a knee beside her and said: "Madge." He took her



hand, and it was icy; her eyes were closed. With gentle fingers he went over her arms, her ribs.

Then, startlingly, her husky voice said: "The hurt's inside, Kirk. Just let me lie here a while . . . Kirk, is Johnny Butler hurt badly?"

"Pretty bad," said Kirk. "In a hospital I could save that boy. But here . . . well, I've got to save him, anyway. Damn it, I will!"

"Yes," she said, gazing up at him steadily. "He's only a boy. He's only twenty. Like Rowdy. Kirk, I

understand now what Ike Grissom meant. You've got a heart and a soul. Ike says your heart must be big as a barrel."

"He's wrong, Madge. I haven't any heart. I guess I haven't any courage, either. All I've got is my skill and my hands. Tomorrow I'm leaving. I'm not going to be just a cow-country doctor. I'm a surgeon, and I've got to go where my hands take me. I—"

She sat up and caught his shoulders.

"Of course you have, Kirk. You've got to use your hands where they'll do the most good. But it isn't just your hands people love, or even your miracles. It's you. It's the bigness of you. The unselfishness."

"You said 'people,' Madge—"

"Yes, Kirk . . . and I'm people, too."

Kirk could see the clean loveliness of her, the gentle curve of her lips. He wanted to kiss her and to tell her a lot of things. But he thought of Carson and the job that was waiting, and slowly he shook his head. "No, I wouldn't be able to go."

The spang of a rifle whipped over the ridge. Kirk helped Madge up and they looked at each other.

"Why, Madge? Why was I sent for?" he asked.

"Ike was afraid you might get hurt. This would keep you away from the fight," she said.

Kirk got on his horse and rode back over the ridge.

Grissom's men, all except the few who were trying to hold the herd,

were covered by the black-brush of the hillside, with only their rifles and the tips of their sombreros showing. Butler's riders had quit their horses and were scattered behind the troughs and the willows. Two of them were on the flat roof of the ranchhouse, and from a front window a rifle glinted in the first rays of the sun.

Near the fence, with a pair of wire cutters gleaming in his outflung hand, lay young Rowdy Grissom.

As Kirk started down the slope he saw Ike Grissom, on his high sorrel, break from the scrub mesquite at the foot of the hill, only to be driven back by a fierce volley from the rifles across the fence. The booming voice of Pleas Butler shouted in the wind.

"Nobody's comin' near that fence. Leave him lay there, like my boy's a-layn'!"

Kirk rode straight to the fence. He wasn't afraid, because he wasn't thinking about the rifles that were lifting to cover him. He wasn't thinking about Ike Grissom or Pleas Butler. Their foolish squabble was not important. Only young Rowdy was important. Young Rowdy lying there so still, so desperately in need of a doctor's help.

It seemed to Kirk, as he dismounted and unstrapped his bag, that there would always be someone who needed his help.

Voices were yelling in the wind and above them came the sharper protest of the rifles, their ringing echoes slamming back from the red-tipped crest of Packsaddle Hill.

Lead slapped the pommel of Kirk's

saddle and his horse went away, snorting and bucking a little. Kirk sucked in a great breath.

He became aware, for the first time, that the dust no longer was blowing. The sweetness of huajilla and of cat's-paw was in his nostrils, and suddenly he thought it the sweetest air a man could ever breathe.

He saw Ike Grissom break from the mesquite, shouting insanely, the red bandanna at his neck flagging from the wind of his riding. Pleas Butler came running from the house, and he too was shouting above the rifles, shouting in a voice thin with emotion, waving his hat as he ran in frantic signal for his riders to stop firing.

Kirk dropped beside young Rowdy, and Rowdy, rolling over, said: "Get out of this, doc. You get out."

Something came out of the sky and struck Kirk's head. As if in echo to the crashing thunder inside his skull came the clap of a rifle. The brown earth tilted at a dizzy angle. The red rim of the sun on Packsaddle Hill faded and flared and then winked out.

A great roaring grew in Kirk's ears, and the roaring became the drumming of hoofs, the clashing of horns.

Kirk's throat burned and when he opened his eyes he saw Pleas Butler beside him with an anxious look on his face and a stone jug in his hands.

Someone said: "The doc can't die. He's too much man to die."

And Kirk turned his head and saw Ike Grissom. There was such a mournful expression on Grissom's droop-mustached face that Kirk sat up, his lips twitching in a grin; whereupon both of the ranchmen began talking at once.

"How you feelin, doc? Take 'er easy, old stud! You gotta get your strength—"

"I'm fine," said Kirk, and put a hand to his throbbing head. He felt a gash he could lay a finger in. Then he reached for the jug. Butler helped him tilt it, and then Kirk added, "I'm fine as silk," and he got up and staggered across to a window.

He saw Grissom's cattle pouring through a gap in the fence. Most of them had already reached the water and were drinking thirstily from the troughs and from the pool under the willows.

"I guess they were mighty thirsty," said Kirk. "I guess they broke through in spite of your rifles, Pleas."

Grissom looked out the window; and Butler scuffed his boots against the floor. Haltingly Butler said: "Doc, I cut that fence. I reckon you were right. Guns won't fix things. And all the water this side of Oklahoma ain't worth the lives of you or Johnny. Or Rowdy. I didn't realize that, till I saw you lyin' out there."

"Doc," Ike Grissom said, "when I saw you ride out to my boy, after those rifles had already drove me back, I— Aw, doggonit, I can't tell you!" He took out a bandanna, blew his nose violently.

Kirk went across to young Johnny. He tickled the sole of Johnny's foot, and Johnny wiggled his toes and tried to grin.

"A month or so, and you'll be frisky as a colt," said Kirk, and his stumbling feet carried him into the adjoining room, to the cot where Rowdy Grissom lay.

Young Rowdy had a clean wound in the fleshy part of his thigh. Someone had bandaged it, but Kirk wasn't satisfied with the job. He stripped off the wet cloth and then he stood there, watching his hands. When they became steady as rock, he set to work.

It didn't take long. Kirk gave Rowdy's shoulder a little shake, picked up his bag and went to look for his horse. He found the animal, beside a big black, tied to a porch post. He was strapping on his bag when a hand touched his arm. He turned to see Madge Allee.

"Kirk, there on the porch stand the two biggest ranchmen in this country, friends again," Madge said. "It's a big country, a growing country, Kirk, and it needs big men."

She smiled, a little wistful, a little sad. "Kirk, will you ever give me another thought, unless I'm hurt or sick?"

"You're sweet," Kirk said, "and the thought of you will go with me. It will be with me always."

A faint color touched Madge's cheek. "Kirk, will you be content . . . with just the thought?" she murmured.

"Madge, you mean— Madge, you'll go with me?"

“Yes, Kirk, I’ll go with you. Or I’ll stay with you here. Texas needs men like you. This country needs you. But I won’t influence your decision.”

Kirk’s eyes lifted past Packsaddle Hill and he gazed beyond the blue of the sky. He saw Carson, he saw hundreds of doctors in hundreds of hospitals; and again he saw young Rowdy Grissom, so still on the ground. It seemed that there was no doctor at hand, no hospital; there was just the mesquite and the cattle and the spanging of rifles.

Then it seemed that the rifle fire faded. New towns were springing up, linked by twin ribbons of shining steel. People were coming in, new industries and hospitals; and he saw himself, Joe Kirk, adding his small bit to the building of this Western world. It was not a

spectacular part, but it was a necessary part. It was a job a man could sink his teeth into, and therein find lasting satisfaction.

From the porch Mrs. Butler called: “Doctor Kirk, I hate to bother you about such a little thing, but Pleas is too stubborn to do it himself. His rheumatics has been a-botherin’ him something terrible, and I thought—”

“I’m glad you told me,” Kirk said. And he was watching the sweet curve of Madge Allee’s lips. “I’ll be riding out this evening to see those two boys. I’ll bring something along for Pleas. . . . Ready, Madge?”

They mounted and rode away from the cheerful waving of Butler and Ike Grissom. And Kirk, with Madge beside him, knew that he was the luckiest man in all the world.

THE END



Below are 15 scrambled words all cowhands know. Can you dab your loop on ‘em? Answers on page 130.



- 1. ralroc
- 2. rived
- 3. neergnroh
- 4. rilyqu
- 5. part

- 6. seops
- 7. dignish
- 8. zabonna
- 9. etimandy
- 10. rosler

- 11. telivasa
- 12. griging
- 13. swingtab
- 14. kope
- 15. perlees

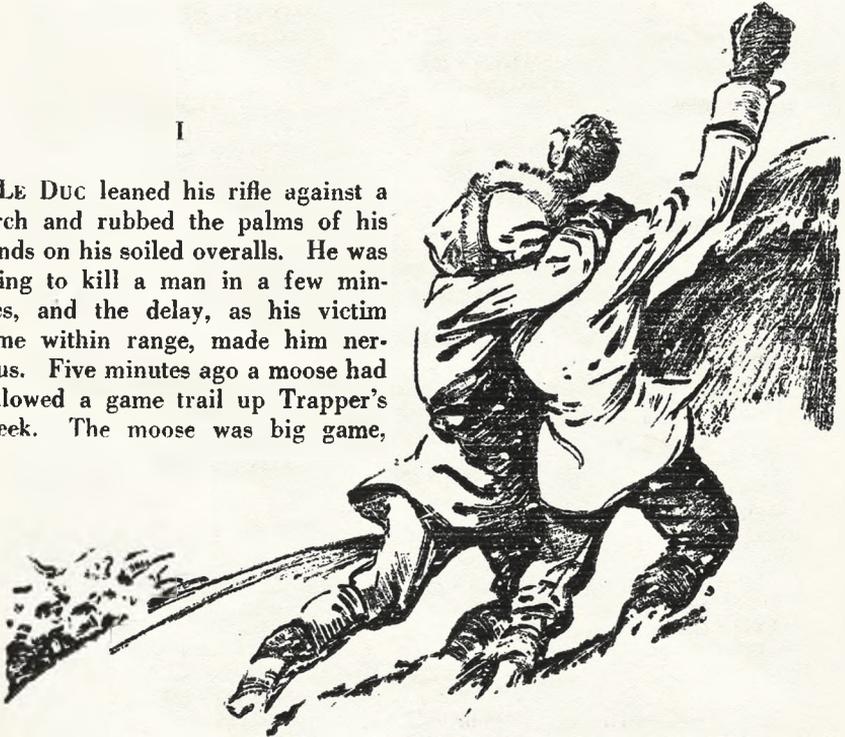
Cold Deck's chechahco lawman had no trouble picking up Pete LeDuc's back trail but had he learned

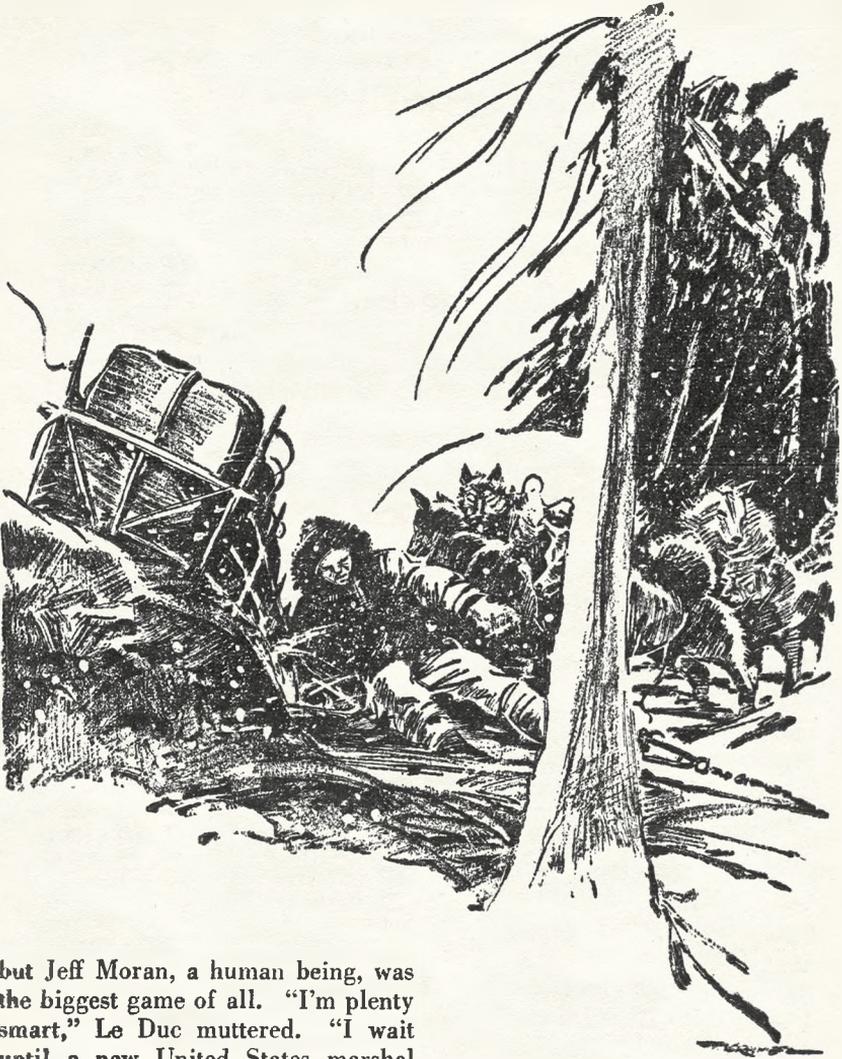
SIWASH SAVVY

by FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

I

LE DUC leaned his rifle against a birch and rubbed the palms of his hands on his soiled overalls. He was going to kill a man in a few minutes, and the delay, as his victim came within range, made him nervous. Five minutes ago a moose had followed a game trail up Trapper's Creek. The moose was big game,





but Jeff Moran, a human being, was the biggest game of all. "I'm plenty smart," Le Duc muttered. "I wait until a new United States marshal comes to Cold Deck. I don't take no chances on the old marshal; he's too smart. But this new one—this Chip Gilbert—he ain't smart enough for Pete Le Duc."

Wiping his palms again, Le Duc reviewed his plans. There wasn't a

chance of a slip. He had thought everything through. He had read about "perfect crimes" in magazine stories, but the killers were dumb; they left tracks for a smart man to follow. And right there was where

Pete planned to cash in. He was going to leave a trail—deliberately—for the new marshal to follow.

He saw Jeff Moran before he heard him. The younger man was following the moose's trail. The moose would supply him with meat for the winter, and if he dropped the animal close to his cabin, it would be a short haul. When Jeff, fresh from the Outside, had bought Old Man Jenson's trap-line outfit, with its main cabin and shelter cabins, Jenson had taught him the tricks of the trade.

"An important one, young feller," he had emphasized, "is to kill your winter's meat as near the cabin as possible. It saves wear and tear on you and your dogs. Haul your moose or caribou in on its own hoofs is my motto."

Now Le Duc knew that Jeff was following Jenson's advice. Jeff disappeared behind a birch thicket; then, as the birches thinned, he became a vague shadow. Le Duc wiped his palms again, then picked up his rifle. It was cocked and he brought it up to his shoulder. He aimed directly at Jeff, following him through the sights, then he "led" him a trifle and fired.

Jeff's body jerked from the bullet's impact. Muscular reaction caused the rifle to fly from his hands as he pitched to the ground and rolled over.

Pete Le Duc dropped his own rifle and plunged into the icy stream. This was part of the plan to make the crime appear an accident. "They'll know that as soon as I saw I'd made a mistake, I done my best

to help Jeff," he muttered. He climbed the bank, pushed through the thicket and looked down on his victim.

Jeff Moran was sprawled in the trail gasping. "Pete . . . you . . . shot me," he said. "It was an accident . . ." He broke off and stared at the trapper's hulking figure, the bearded face and the calculating eyes. Something he saw in them caused the dying man's own eyes to widen with disbelief, then freeze with horror. "Pete, that was no accident. Pete, you tried to murder me!"

Le Duc did not answer. He stood in his tracks, watching the younger man die.

"Pete, you can't get away with . . . murder. The killer always slips somewhere along the line. If I die, you'll swing for this. It isn't too late. Help me . . . stop the bleeding . . . and I'll . . . I'll . . . Do something . . . quick!"

Jeff Moran's eyes grew dark as life drained away. It was like purple shadows filling a draw at sundown. "He's done for," Le Duc muttered. But it was five minutes before he moved from his tracks. Then he dropped to his knees at the dead man's side and felt his pulse. Now he turned and started down the trail. He was keyed up with excitement and his blood surged through his body. Again and again he reviewed the story he would tell the new marshal.

On Cold Deck's outskirts Le Duc broke into a trot, and when he opened the marshal's door he was

breathing hard. "I was hunting moose," he gasped, "and shot my friend, Jeff Moran. He's . . . up . . . near his cabin . . . Mr. Gilbert."

"Dead?" The marshal was on his feet, his black eyes probing the trapper's.

"Yes. I felt his pulse and waited for signs of life. There weren't any. I left him to . . . report."

"That's right. Always report these things immediately," the marshal answered. "I'll get Sam Chadwick. He's the deputy district attorney for the Cold Deck country. Also Hank Wiltse, the commissioner."

Chip Gilbert left on the run, dodging into cabins and out again, as he hunted for Chadwick and Wiltse. Le Duc could hear the murmur of surprise as the news passed from mouth to mouth. Once he heard, "Pete Le Duc shot at a moose and killed Jeff Moran." And someone exclaimed: "Thunder! How could an old trapper like Le Duc mistake a man for a moose? I'd expect it of some of these young chechahcos coming into Alaska these days, but not of Le Duc."

Le Duc grinned. "I'm plenty smart," he muttered to himself. "I figured somebody would ask that one. I'm ready with the answer. Here they come—blasted young coyotes trying to take over the country." He glowered. "Them and their new-fangled ideas."

The trio came into the room and Chip Gilbert said: "I'll hitch up a dog team. We'll bring the remains here."

Sam Chadwick, a slim, dark, alert-

looking man, asked in a mild voice: "How did it happen, Le Duc?"

Pete smiled inwardly. They weren't going to make him tell the story over several times and trap him. "When we get there," he said, "and I can point out where I was waiting for the moose, and where the moose was, I'll tell how it happened. I feel terrible. Jeff was my good friend. I helped him build a new cabin when the old one burned up. He helped me dig my well deeper. He was the first good neighbor I ever had."

"Then you didn't get along with Old Jenson?"

"Nobody got along with Old Jenson," Le Duc replied. "He kept on his side of Trapper Creek, and I kept on mine."

Chip Gilbert came along with the dogs. "Le Duc, you're tired. You must've hit a fast pace coming in. Ride the sled on the level stretches and down grade. You can walk up the hills."

Le Duc got onto the sled and covered himself up with a robe. It was pretty soft, putting it over this way. He could tell that this fresh young district attorney was just itching to make a case out of this and build up his name. With a tough marshal and a good district attorney, the lawlessly inclined whites, breeds and natives simmered down.

About a mile from Jeff Moran's body Le Duc stopped the sled, and pointed to tracks in the snow. "Here's where the moose came out of the brush and started up the trail."

They followed the trail a short distance to a ford. The stream hadn't frozen over, but the rocks were ice-coated.

"We'll cross here," Le Duc said. "One of you can stay on the game trail with the dogs."

"I'll stick with the team," said the commissioner.

Gilbert and the district attorney followed Le Duc across the ford. Presently Le Duc stopped. "I heard a moose coming," he said, choosing his words carefully. "I watched, and saw him coming up the game trail. It makes cuts across bends in the stream, so you can't always see what's on it. The birches are thick in spots. Now when he got opposite me I saw it was a moose. I had no idea Jeff was out hunting. I'd stopped at his cabin yesterday while I was hunting, and he didn't say anything about going out. I fired at the moose, then I heard Jeff yell. I dropped my rifle and crossed the creek. It's about knee deep here. . . . Any questions about this side of the creek?"

"No," Gilbert said. "There's your rifle right where you dropped it. And I noticed that your pants were wet and glazed with ice when you came into my office. Pick up your rifle."

Le Duc nodded. "When you shoot a man, you don't go the long way around to keep from getting wet. You wade the stream."

Chip Gilbert studied the scene. The commissioner and dog team had stopped on the opposite bank, and Chip yelled: "We're going

back to the ford, Hank. No sense in getting wet."

II

When Chip Gilbert reached Jeff's remains, he was silent for several tense seconds. It wasn't the silence of an officer seeking evidence, but that of a man who knows that a good friend has reached the end of the trail.

"Seven of us came North together," he said, more to himself than to the others. "We'd heard the old-timers were thinning out and that the country needed young blood, so we came. That's the way it's always been on the frontier. Now the first of us is gone. And *that's* the way it's always been, too. Who'll be the next. And when? Tomorrow? Next year? Or forty years from now when we've done our part and are slowing down—giving way to another bunch of youngsters?"

Then his eyes changed, and he was a young marshal, making up in freshness of mind and sharpness of wit what he lacked in experience.

The moose tracks at this point swerved to avoid a boulder, but a man following a moose would squeeze between the boulder and back and save wallowing in muck that was slowly freezing.

"What's your idea of what happened, Le Duc?" Chip asked.

"Jeff was trailing the moose," answered the trapper. "He cut over the hill and came down to the trail. He could tell the moose hadn't passed yet. There weren't any tracks. So he squeezed between the

boulder and got in a sheltered spot beyond. He figgered to knock off the moose as it went by. He was probably aiming when I fired. When I overshot the moose, he got the bullet."

"A moose is a big target. You should've hit him."

"I was shooting fine," Le Duc explained. "I didn't want him to run, wounded, so I tried to break his back." He was surprised at his calmness—and well pleased, too. He concluded that when the chips were down he was dead. "I've thought out everything ahead of time," he said to himself, "and now it's paying off. I have the right answer to every question. The blasted fool can't figger that the moose could've passed along here an hour before Jeff showed up. Old Jenson would've thought of it; so would the old marshal."

Chip Gilbert back-tracked on Jeff's footprints. Yes, there was no doubt of it, the dead man had stalked a moose for some distance. Here he had stood for several minutes while the moose, taking his time, had eaten. There he had raced, crouching low, gun butt touching the drifted snow.

Chip turned suddenly on Le Duc. "Why didn't you see him waiting for the moose?"

Le Duc was ready for that question, too. "For the same reason Jeff didn't see me, I suppose. We both snuck up, keeping out of sight, Mr. Gilbert."

"I wonder where that moose went?" Chip mused. "Hank, suppose you head back to town with

Jeff's remains. Sam, Le Duc and I'll follow the moose tracks. While I'm up this way, I might as well see your place, Le Duc. A new marshal should get first-hand knowledge of his country. He never can tell, he might get caught in a blizzard and have to make his way to a cabin or freeze to death."

The Moran and Le Duc cabins were about three miles apart. Jeff Moran had died within a mile of his cabin. They were within a half mile of Le Duc's cabin when Chip said, "I guess we've lost our moose. His trail seems to have got mixed up with others."

"I guess it has," Le Duc said.

He guessed the purpose of this visit. Gilbert wanted to look into his meat cache to determine whether or not he needed meat. He smiled slyly and watched Chip's eyes take in details as they neared the cabin. A full meat cache would be hard to explain.

"You don't believe in unnecessary work, do you, Le Duc?" Chip said.

Outwardly Le Duc was calm, but inwardly worried. The question had taken a turn that puzzled him. Before he could decide on an answer, Chip added: "You built your cabin beside a spring, close to a creek, and snug against a stand of timber. You have water, fuel and trout fishing within two hundred feet."

"Trapping is a hard game," Le Duc said, relieved, "so a man should save extra work."

"Mind if I take a look inside your cabin?" asked Chip.

"Help yourself," Le Duc replied.

It wasn't very clean, which didn't surprise Chip. A number of rusty traps were piled in a corner, and there were heaps of chain to secure them. The stove was cold, and ashes had gathered about it. A broom would have helped a lot to improve the appearance of the cabin. Blankets, long unwashed, lay in a tangled heap on a bunk. The air was heavy with the odor of pelts and smoked salmon.

"Snug cabin," Chip commented. He went outside and climbed a ladder leading to the food cache, a structure on stilts to keep prowling animals from raiding it.

He climbed the ladder, peered inside, closed the door and descended. "You sure need meat, Le Duc," he said. "There isn't ten pounds left. Nice cache. Well-built."

Chip's eyes were still looking about when a moose started across the clearing. In a flash Le Duc's rifle was at his shoulder. Chip knocked it up, twisting the weapon from the man's grasp.

Le Duc turned on him savagely. "What in thunder's the matter with you? That critter was within a hundred yards of my meat cache."

"Where you're going to spend the winter, Le Duc, meat will be furnished free," Chip told him. "I'm arresting you for Jeff Moran's murder."

"Leave it to a chechahco marshal to go off half-cocked," the trapper snarled. "I come clean on an accidental killing, and this is what I get for it. But I might've expected

something like this—a marshal, district attorney and commissioner all out to make a reputation. Okay, I'm going along without a fuss, but somebody's going to pay heavy damages before I'm through with 'em. Unless I can get bail, I'll lose most of the trapping season."

"Murderers don't get bail," Chip said. "Your trapping seasons are a thing of the past. You went after the biggest game of all—a man. Come on, it's a long way to jail, but we'll make it."

Le Duc looked around the cell. Despite his confidence in himself, he was depressed by a feeling that he might be there a long time.

"Send for Lawyer McFee," he said.

The marshal nodded. When a man asked for McFee, it was an indication either that he was guilty or confronted with evidence hard to explain.

McFee came the next day—a hawkish man, with cold eyes. He never let up on a witness, and often the trial judge had to remind him of courtroom rules. There was a rumor that he had been disbarred in one of the States, another that he had accepted stolen money as a fee, knowingly, and was hiding out. Many believed that the name, McFee, was an alias.

The lawyer sat down on the stool in Le Duc's cell. "Let's hear the story that you told the district attorney and marshal," he said bluntly.

He assumed that Le Duc was guilty, and he wanted to bolster up whatever story the prisoner had told.

He listened without interruption to the story.

"And that's what happened," Le Duc concluded. "I don't see why they arrested me."

"I do," McFee snapped. "Well, a man is presumed to be innocent until proven guilty by a trial before a jury of his peers. I'm assuming that you are innocent." By inference he planted in Le Duc's mind the thought that, if Le Duc were guilty, his lawyer didn't want to know it.

"If you were crazy enough to have planned a perfect crime, there are two points where you slipped," McFee continued. "Maybe this young squirt of a district attorney is smart enough to have spotted the weak spots. Maybe he just arrested you on a hunch. In either case we'll see what can be done. First, how much money have you got?"

"Five hundred dollars' credit at Kraemer's store," Le Duc answered. "Three, four thousand dollars' worth in furs I shipped Outside."

"We'll get that turned into cash and deposited in the Cold Deck Territorial Bank," McFee said.

"How soon can you get me off?" asked Le Duc. "I should be running my trap lines."

"Are the traps set now?"

"Some of them," Le Duc admitted. "There might be a thousand dollars' worth of fur in 'em." The thought suddenly came to him that he might trick the marshal into going with him while he ran the trap line. He didn't want to stand trial, even with McFee as an attorney. "Them traps should be run, Mr. McFee," he pointed out. "It's too bad

to leave animals to die that way."

"A very tender-hearted man," the lawyer sneered. "I'll see what can be done." He turned suddenly, as if Le Duc were on trial. "You hate these young fellows that come into the country, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Don't admit that in court," warned McFee. "That's why I asked you the question. You're liable to have something like that thrown at you. Why do you hate these young men? Why did you hate . . . Jeff Moran?"

"Moran and people like him have new-fangled ideas—things like crop trapping. You know, take no more fur than was born the year before," Le Duc said. "My way is to clean out a country and move on. The fur will come back. Men like Moran got laws passed. They obeyed 'em, but when I trapped the old way they made trouble."

"Did they report you to the warden?"

"No," Le Duc admitted. "The wardens come into the territory to take a game and fur census. Then they figger out whether the country can be left open for trapping or closed. They look over Moran's side of the creek and find plenty of fur. You don't have to see the animals. A good warden can tell by their trails. They come to my side—"



"I know," McFee interrupted. "On your side of the creek, fur is depleted. And that happened last year?"

"No, it was going to happen this year," Le Duc answered. "I propositioned Moran to forget the rules. Told him wardens didn't get into this country often. Why not trap plenty in a year when fur is bringing high prices?"

"What did he say to that?"

"He said he wasn't going to over-trap and then move on. He figured a long haul deal—a crop every year—was better. Except for that we got along fine," Le Duc said. "Nobody knows that we had trouble over this. I never let Moran know that I was again' it. Just kept my mouth shut and said I'd string along with the idea."

McKee had heard enough. Personally it was his belief that Le Duc was a killer. As a lawyer, he appreciated that the case would be a tough one, but he was confident of winning it. It was going to take more money than his client had, so accordingly he went to the marshal.

"Le Duc's traps are out," he said. "There's fur in them. As an act of mercy, I feel that he should be taken over the line and the trapped animals removed. How do you feel about it, Gilbert? Le Duc'll have to be properly guarded, of course. He'll pay the expenses of the extra deputies."

"We'll start in the morning," Chip Gilbert answered. "It'll give me a chance to get acquainted with the country." He was thoughtful a moment. "I'll take Al Dawson along.

He's a kid who wants to be a marshal some of these days. He's only twenty, but tough. I'll have a chance to size him up."

III

McFee and Chip entered Le Duc's cell together. "I've fixed it up," the lawyer said. "You're to pay the expenses of Chip Gilbert and Al Dawson. It should be worth it. One good pelt will cover everything."

"Yeah," Le Duc said softly. "It should be worth it." He was thinking, too, it would save the lawyer's fees. Inside of forty-eight hours, if all went well, he would be free. "These young roosters want to learn the tricks of the country, do they?" he thought. "Well, I'll learn 'em."

When Chip unlocked the cell door the following morning, Le Duc felt that he was as free as if a jury had acquitted him. Snow had fallen during the night and they had to break trail from the moment they left town.

As they neared Jeff Moran's cabin Le Duc said: "We'll save time if we take a short cut Jeff made to my place. There'll be a couple of spots where we have to lift the dogs and sled over boulders, but the rest of the going will be easy. It's drifted down here on the game trail."

As he was breaking trail, he turned away from the river and climbed a steep slope. About a half hour later he stopped. "Here's where we give the dogs a lift," he explained. He began unharnessing the leader.

Al Dawson knocked the snow from the boulder, crawled over and said: "Give me the first dog."

Chip and Le Duc boosted the dog to the top of the boulder, and Al swung him down, securing the chain to a bush. Three more dogs followed, then they lifted the sled, load and all.

"Snake it off there," Chip directed. "The soft snow should break the fall."

Dawson grabbed a line and hauled hard. Taking advantage of the momentum, he kept the sled moving to a clear spot where it would be easier to hitch on the dogs. A heavy branch, loaded with snow, blocked his way. He lifted his foot high and drove it down so that the runners would pass over it. The snow leaped upward and a stabbing pain shot through his leg. He fell over on his side, his expression one of bewilderment and pain.

"Chip!" he gasped. "Bear trap!"

As Chip started to leap over the boulder, Le Duc jumped him from behind. He caught the marshal's throat in the crook of his arm and applied the pressure. Chip struggled briefly to free himself, then relaxed. His face turned purple as his lungs sucked for air, and his eyes rolled. Le Duc hurled him against the boulder, then drove his fist into the younger man's chin before he slipped to the snow below.

Le Duc bound Chip's hands and feet and watched the marshal slowly regain consciousness. "You had to be smart," he sneered, "and arrest me. Well, I didn't kill Moran, and I told you so. But you knew it all.

So I took this way. I know when I'm going to be framed. You, Sam Chadwick and Hank Wiltse had everything worked out. Two can play at that game. I knew Moran had set a bear trap here. He told me, so I wouldn't get into it. That's why I had you take this short cut. Going back a ways, that's why I asked McFee to give you the song and dance about fur in my traps." He laughed mirthlessly. "I wanted to get you into that bear trap, Gilbert. But Al Dawson went ahead. Well, I handled you, Gilbert. I got your gun, your packboard and enough grub to carry me along."

He ranted on, jeering and snarling, until his fury had spent itself. In a calmer voice he said, "It'll be snowing again soon, and snow covers tracks."

Le Duc strapped the marshal's holster and belt around his waist and made up a pack. He thought: "I should kill them both, but, they don't know that I killed Moran; they just think they know. If I kill these two, then everyone in this part of Alaska will hear about it and they'll run me down. I'd really swing. I'll play safe and leave 'em. First, Gilbert's got to get Dawson out of the trap. Next . . . he'll have a man with a busted leg on his hands. And *that's* all the time I need."

His eyes slowly took in all details; then, satisfied, he plunged quickly into the brush.

Al Dawson waited until he was sure Le Duc was gone, then he called in a low voice: "Chip! Did he put you out of commission?"

"I'm trying to get loose," answered Chip. "How're you making out?"

"Leg hurts like the devil," Al replied. "The bones must be broken in a couple of places."

"As soon as I work loose, I'll be over there," Chip said. He kept moving his feet back and forth until the lashings were down around his ankles, then he got up and hopped and rolled through the brush until he was within reach of Al's hands.

"He took my hunting knife," Al said. "But he missed a pocket knife." He pulled off his mittens, got out the knife and slashed Chip's wrist lashings. Then he cut the loose thongs around his ankles. Chip walked around for several minutes to restore circulation, then cleared the snow away from the trap. Opening it was a long, tedious business.

"Your leg is in bad shape," Chip told Al, "but I don't think it's broken. You won't be able to walk on it for several weeks. You must have stepped on a branch. It took most of the force of the trap. You got a wallop on the ankle where it was caught between one jaw and the branch. When you fell, your leg went in deeper and the jaws slid up the shin bone."

"That leg must be a mess," Al said.

Chip built a fire, warmed Al's leg thoroughly, then bandaged it. He carried the deputy back over the trail to a cleared spot and put him down. Then he got dogs and sled over the boulder, and hitched them up.

"I've been thinking," said Al.

"Take me down to the main trail, Chip, put me into a sleeping bag, and tie it to the sled. The dogs will take me into town."

"I'll take you into town," Chip said flatly. "We can't take any chances. The dogs might overturn the sled and leave you beside the trail."

"I'll tell you what," Al insisted. "Attach a line to the lead dog's collar, and let me hold the other end. Then if I'm dumped out they can't leave me. I'll be holding him. I can crawl around and get organized again. I'll make it through. You see, you can't afford to let Le Duc's trail get cold."

Al could see that his logic had had its effect on Chip. It was beginning to snow and that fresh trail wouldn't remain long.

"It's going to be man against man out there," argued Al. "You've got to outsmart him, and experience is on his side. You've got brains. It should give you the edge if you work fast. Don't you see he's counting on you to take me in?"

"Yeah," Chip admitted. "You're right about that."

"He made one mistake which proves to you, and will probably convince a jury, that he murdered Jeff. Now he's made another. Or has he? He hasn't if you waste time on me." Al fought down the pain and continued the argument.

"He made two mistakes when he killed Jeff," Chip said. "Okay, he made a third when he counted on me taking you in. I feel like a quitter, but . . . well, all right!"

Five minutes later the marshal watched the dogs move slowly toward town. They were tired enough so that they probably wouldn't chase caribou scents. And, being homeward bound, they could be relied upon to keep moving.

Chip made up a pack of sleeping bag and grub. Cached away in the bag was a six-gun which Le Duc had missed. It was loaded, but there was no spare ammunition. "I've got just six shots to expend in this man hunt," he reflected, "and no more. That should be enough."

Now he tried to picture what Le Duc would do. First, the man would make a bee line for his cabin. He would want certain supplies if he planned to spend much time away from settlements and occupied cabins.

"He's probably got a second rifle cached away in his cabin," Chip concluded. "A killer wouldn't be fool enough to rely on only one rifle. Le Duc would know that if he were arrested and held for questioning, the marshal would take his rifle. And that was what I did. It's held as an exhibit. So Le Duc's at his cabin right now. By the time I can get there, he'll be on his way. There's no use in following his trail. The idea is to head him off."

IV

Chip Gilbert kept to the ridges because they were clear of snow on the crests. Later the fall would be heavy, but brief gales had carried most of the snow into the gulches.

About two miles beyond Le Duc's

cabin Chip turned sharply at right angles. His idea was to intersect the fugitive's trail. He moved carefully, shaking the snow from the brush after he had gone through in order partially to cover his footprints. The snow was sticking as it fell and in a few minutes the brush would be covered enough not to attract passing notice.

A faint depression caught Gilbert's eye and he dropped to his knees and with a handful of brush carefully cleared away the newly fallen snow. Underneath he found a fair footprint. "Le Duc didn't stop long at his cabin," Chip mused. "This print is a good hour old. He probably knew exactly what he wanted and where to find it. It's a deep print, so he's carrying a heavy pack." He brushed aside more snow and found four more prints. The space between them was short, an indication that Le Duc was not forcing the pace now.

Chip drove himself for the next hour, lashed by fear of losing the trail. Suddenly it was fresher and a low spot on a log marked where Le Duc had sat down and rested. He decided to take it easier. The man couldn't be more than fifteen minutes ahead. It was almost dark, and Le Duc's tracks gave no indication that he had any intention of camping for the night, no wavering, as if in search of a sheltered spot.

"He knows every inch of the country," Chip said, "which means he has a camp site in mind. I'm getting tired. That choking and the sock on the jaw took something out of me."

He hung on another half hour be-

fore resting. The snow continued to fall lightly and stick. When the footprints were little more than depressions, Chip took up the chase once more. The trail ran almost straight for a mile, then turned sharply.

In the uncertain light it looked to Chip as if Le Duc had found shelter at the base of a rock slide. A space about a hundred yards wide running almost from the creek bed to timberline was cleared of trees. Willows were probably growing there, though Chip couldn't be positive.

A tangled mass of broken trees, boulders and a few, stunted growing trees loomed up fifty yards distant. "This calls for making haste slowly," Chip muttered. "He may have holed up in there, or it could be a short cut. It's no place to blunder into."

He continued to keep brush between himself and the spot. He had never seen a finer place for an unsolvable murder. The killer need only place the remains at the foot of the slide, climb up, dislodge a few boulders and start a second slide that would cover a body with twenty or thirty feet of debris.

There was a law of the wilderness that popped into Gilbert's mind as he stood there. "When you kill a moose or caribou," he reminded himself, "and leave the meat overnight, don't go blundering in there the first thing in the morning. A bear might be in there feeding. He might rush you before you could defend yourself. Circle the spot. If tracks lead *in*, but not *out*, get set for trouble. If they lead in *and* out, you're safe."

Chip cached his pack and began a wide circle. At one point he crawled

along the slide area and, looking down, he realized that one man hidden among the boulders could stand off a hundred. Le Duc's tracks led in, but they didn't lead out. Chip returned to his pack and carried it to a point halfway up the slide. It would be a wretched, cold camp, but it had the advantage of giving him a view of the lower country at dawn.

After a meal of cold grub Chip crawled into his sleeping bag. He awakened at midnight, and again at four o'clock. It was snowing lightly. Shortly before dawn a wolverine picked up Chip's scent as it crossed the slide. It approached from several different angles, then, lacking the courage to attack a man, it retreated. It squatted down several yards from Chip's camp and thought things over.

Away from the man, the wolverine felt that its courage was equal to anything. At dawn it began stalking again. From the heap at the base of the slide, another creature emerged, crawling on all fours. It was Le Duc.

"I still don't believe I slipped when I killed Jeff Moran," Le Duc muttered, "but I'm going to take no chances here. Chip Gilbert isn't smart enough to follow me. He ain't trail-wise. He's too young. I'm crazy to be nervous but I'd better play it safe."

His eyes cleared a boulder and looked toward the creek. They moved slowly back and forth, covering every square yard of the ground. He wasn't looking for footprints. The snow had covered them early the

previous night. He was looking for something out of the ordinary—the seemingly unimportant item that indicates objects have been disturbed—a broken branch, or bark scraped from a passing pack. The attitude of animals was another sign Le Duc watched for. He saw a cow moose cross the creek, breaking through the ice, indifferent to the cold. She sensed no danger. Le Duc began to relax, then his eyes lifted to the slide.

He saw the wolverine, and instinctively crouched. "Hm," he muttered. "I know them critters—mean, murderous devils, and they ain't afraid of anything, except men. Then they act nervous like that cuss is acting right now. It looks like I got Nature on my side. My guess is, Chip Gilbert is looking for trouble again. Won't that young fool ever learn?"

His first thought was to wait until Chip showed himself, then drop him with a single rifle shot. The snow, drifted in great masses at the top of the slide, would move with a little help. "Nobody would ever know," he muttered. "A rifle shot carries a long ways when the air is still like this, and someone might be in these parts. There's a better way . . ."

He was down wind from the wolverine. Knowing that the animal would hunt cover the instant Chip moved, Le Duc used it as a sentinel. Watching for signs of the wolverine's retreat, he made his way to the timber paralleling the slide. He climbed fast and was breathing hard when he reached Chip's level. The wind continued in his favor and presently he was looking down.

Le Duc couldn't see Chip, but he

sensed that the lawman was behind a slab of rock split off when the slide came down. It looked like a piece of rimrock.

A shift in the wind carried Le Duc's scent and the wolverine vanished like a puff of vapor. Le Duc, knife in hand, came slowly down the slide. Some twenty feet from the rimrock he stopped to decide on his approach.

"Put 'em up high, Le Duc," Chip ordered. "That includes dropping the knife."

Something stirred behind the rimrock and Le Duc recognized a six-gun muzzle—a menacing black circle almost concealed by rock fragments and snow. He dived head first toward the spot. The weapon exploded almost in his face, but the bullet missed his head and shoulders. The gun roared again and then he was on Gilbert.

He brought up the knife in a vicious slash, intending to rip through the marshal's clothing and find his stomach. Chip threw himself backwards, bringing up his foot at the same time. The foot caught Le Duc under the wrist with such force the knife flew from his hand. It struck a smooth place on a slanting rock and clattered from view.

V

As Le Duc went down, his hand caught a slab of rock weighing a couple of pounds. He hurled it. It struck Chip's shoulder just as he was covering the outlaw with his gun. The discharged bullet passed inches from Le Duc, and droned through



the frosty air. Now Le Duc came in head first, his left arm knocking aside the gun. His head struck Chip's stomach like a battering ram, driving him back against a rock and knocking wind from his lungs. He brought the gun around and pulled the trigger. The hammer fell harmlessly against the fur of Le Duc's parka sleeve. It caught and when the outlaw drew back his arm to drive in a punch, the gun was torn from Chip's grasp.

Le Duc needed only to leap backward and gain time enough to free the gun and turn it on Chip. He saw it as he swung at the marshal's jaw. And as the blow missed, the fur gave way and the gun fell into the snow.

Chip caught up a rock and slammed it against Le Duc's chest. The man staggered and Chip hurled himself at him. Le Duc's arms wrapped themselves around Chip's body, and the two men hit the slide.

"You damned fool!" Le Duc roared. "Leggo! We'll be killed!"

They were gaining momentum as they rolled. The impact of their bodies knocked boulders loose and in a matter of seconds a small slide was moving.

"Spread your legs out and stop this rolling!" the outlaw bellowed. "Spread 'em out!"

His own legs were spread wide.

Chip spread his. There was no percentage in being dashed to pieces on the rocks below. They came to a stop against a stunted tree that had been trying to grow on that slide for twenty years. It stopped them, then bent low. They slid off and it straightened up again.

A rock hit another rock, bounded high and cleared the men's heads by less than a foot. Bits of shattered rock splattered against their clothing. Chip came in swinging, though the ground underfoot kept slipping and throwing off his timing. Another rock tumbled past them.

"Finish it somewhere else," Le Duc yelled. "We'll be killed here." He ducked his head, and Chip got his own head out of harm's way in the nick of time. He stood his ground, gambling on the rocks, in the hope of finishing off the outlaw. It was a case of who was going to outgame whom.

Chip's fist caught Le Duc's jaw and the man staggered slightly. Then he came in, forgetting the rocks, the slide and everything but the marshal.

Chip whipped in blows at various angles—to the jaw, to the temple and to the stomach, trying to find the soft spot. The stomach was Le Duc's weakness, he decided, because after each blow the man covered up. Chip shifted his attack to the jaw, then when the other's guard came up, he drove in a single punch that changed Le Duc's color from a ruddy red to a sickly gray. The killer's knees buckled, then he fell.

Chip grabbed the man's wrist and dragged him clear as a mass of snow

thundered down from the upper slide. He secured his wrists with rawhide thongs and when sufficient strength had returned for the man to stand, he started him toward Cold Deck.

Near the slide Chip picked up a club. "Weapons, grub, sleeping bags and everything but our clothes are under that last slide," he said. "That means we neither sleep nor eat until we get to town. And don't worry about the weapons. One funny move on your part, Le Duc, and I'll let you have this club. Not knowing exactly how much of a blow it'll take to knock you out, I'll put everything I have behind it and play safe."

Hour after hour they moved slowly toward Cold Deck. "I'm about finished," Le Duc protested finally. "You'd better break trail awhile."

"We'll rest, but you'll break trail," Chip said. "The instant you're behind me, you'll be on my back, choking the life out of my body."

"I'll keep a hundred yards behind," Le Duc said desperately. It seemed to him as if his legs would break off at the hips.

"No," Chip answered. "This is my first case and I can't take chances. I've lost you once already, you know."

"And you haven't convicted me yet, either," argued Le Duc. "I got a watertight defense on the Jeff Moran charge. That's one thing. Getting the jump on you is another charge. I'll beat that, too," he boasted. "I'm an innocent man being taken to jail to be framed, so I get the jump on the marshal. I don't kill him, nor his kid deputy. I leave

'em tied up, because I don't kill people. What jury will convict a man who doesn't kill when he has the upper hand?"

"If you get by the Moran charge," Chip admitted, "you can make quite a case for yourself on the other one. You must be rested by now, so let's get going. Just between us, Le Duc, I had an idea that your mind worked something like this."

"Like . . . what?" Le Duc was breaking trail again.

"You didn't want Jeff trapping in the same country, so you figured out the perfect crime. You counted on a green marshal slipping when it came to gathering evidence. You knew that if I failed to prove an alleged accidental shooting was murder, and if Sam Chadwick failed to prosecute you in a way that would bring conviction, we'd look bad. We'd look so bad the chances are that we'd be yanked out of the country and new men sent in. The delay would give you time to overtrap both sides of Trapper Creek and clean up."

Le Duc said nothing, but he was worried.

"It's a funny thing, Le Duc," Chip went on. "You start out to make a sucker of a chechahco marshal, and you end up by giving him an education in his work that no amount of book study would give him. Books on police work; listening to the experiences of old marshals are fine, but the only real education comes from Professor Personal Experience."

"How'd I educate you?"

"First by making a couple of slips

when you committed your perfect crime—”

“I committed no crime, so I couldn't make any slips,” Le Duc retorted savagely.

“We'll skip that, except that the slips taught me to take nothing for granted,” Chip continued. “Then I learned that your plea to remove fur from the trap was a subterfuge. That one was learned the hard way. It almost worked.”

“It worked,” Le Duc retorted, with pride in his tone. “I almost got away. I did get away at first.”

“Yes, getting Al Dawson into the trap taught me there were numerous angles that a desperate man could work,” said Chip. “You made your third mistake when you figured to gain time because I'd take Al back to Cold Deck. I would have, but for Al's gameness. He proved his stuff by a willingness to gamble on the dogs taking him home. I hope that they did. He'll be on permanently as a deputy marshal as soon as he's twenty-one.”

“What else?”

“The wolverine,” Chip answered. “When you saw his actions you knew that I must be up there. It made me feel helpless, then I thought, ‘Shucks! Le Duc will cash in on this, so why don't I? When the wolverine lights out in alarm it'll be a sign he's moving in on me and I can be ready for him.’ I didn't think that you were desperate enough to dive at a six-gun covering you.”

“Now you know it all,” Le Duc sneered.

“No,” Chip replied quietly. “Just enough to realize that as long as I

am a deputy marshal in this region, I'll be learning. Also, just enough to know that it's the kind of job I like, and that I'll stay with it as long as I can deliver the goods.”

Le Duc made no comment. He was too tired to think clearly; even to plot escape, but he knew that Chip had also learned the importance of making a prisoner break trail and thoroughly exhaust himself while the marshal followed and remained relatively fresh.

He was pondering on this when voices came through the swirling curtain, and Sam Chadwick bellowed: “Is that you over there, Chip? Are you okay?”

“Yes,” Chip answered.

They came through the snow and Sam Chadwick said: “Al Dawson got in pretty late because the dogs played out, but the doctor says there's nothing wrong with his leg that time and rest won't fix. Pile onto the sled and ride in. You, too, Le Duc, though you deserve damned little consideration.”

“Up front, Le Duc,” Chip said. “I've learned never to let a prisoner get behind me.”

Twelve men listened to Sam Chadwick sum up the case against Pete Le Duc, charged with murder in the first degree. Le Duc sat at the defendant's table, with the marshal behind him. He had told his story to the jury and looked twelve men squarely in their eyes. He had heard McFee's attempt to riddle the government's case. And he had heard Chadwick ask him questions that Mc-

Fee had warned him would be asked; questions that seriously damaged his story.

Now Chadwick was saying: "Le Duc was an experienced trapper. He knew the law of the wilderness; he knew how to save himself work. He built his cabin on the bank of a stream, near a spring, where logs for the cabin and for fuel were close. He had moose within gunshot of that cabin. It's logical for a man to kill his meat as closely as possible to his cache. It's the unwritten law, you might say. And right here was where Le Duc made his first mistake in his perfect crime—the mistake that told Chip Gilbert that this was murder. Le Duc was *hunting* moose, according to his story, near Jeff Moran's cabin. Every pound of that meat would of necessity have to be carried more than two miles over rough country. *And there were moose within rifle shot of Pete Le Duc's cabin.*"

Le Duc felt the jury's eyes upon him, as if they would penetrate to his most secret thoughts.

"Gentlemen," Chadwick was saying, "do you remember Le Duc's story of the killing? He shot at a moose, and Moran, in the line of fire, was instantly killed. Gentlemen, you are Alaskans. You've hunted moose. What happens when you fire and miss? The moose gets out of there as fast as he can move, which is pretty fast. Or he charges you. And that's pretty fast. The moose that

Le Duc claims he fired at, walked slowly along the trail. And *he continued to walk slowly along the trail* after he had passed the point where this defendant claims he fired the shot that missed the moose and killed Jeff Moran. No, gentleman, the moose passed that point long before the shot was fired. And that was Le Duc's second mistake in his perfect crime. Gentlemen it wasn't accidental death, or manslaughter. It wasn't second degree murder. It was premeditated first degree murder. Thank you."

Sam Chadwick mopped his face and retired. The judge gave his instructions to the jury; then Le Duc watched the twelve solemn men file into the jury room. So those had been his two mistakes. "Why?" he asked himself, "didn't I think of them?" They were obvious enough. A chechahco deputy marshal had noticed such slips. Perhaps it was because when a man plans a perfect crime, he is so busy thinking of big things that he misses the obvious ones.

Le Duc didn't know. He only knew that Sam Chadwick had driven these points home, and that twelve Alaskans would realize their importance. There could only be one verdict, Le Duc told himself, as the door closed on the jury. And when it opened again and he looked at their faces, he knew that they had arrived at that verdict—guilty of first degree murder. Then hanging by the neck until he was pronounced dead.



WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

BY JOHN NORTH

CUT-OVER timber lands on soil that is suitable for agricultural purposes are one of the big farm resources of the Pacific Northwest. Such lands also exist in other parts of the country. Baldwin County, Alabama, for instance, where reasonably priced former timber country acreage is in good demand for development into farms by home-seekers anxious to avoid the severe winters of the North, and perhaps get in a bit of Gulf fishing, or other water sports as well.

A back-to-the-land movement has been in progress for some time in this portion of Alabama. For several years fall and early winter have witnessed considerable land clearing, both by older established farmers and newcomers in nearly all the potential farm districts of Baldwin County. Reader T. Y. of St. Paul, Minnesota, has heard about Baldwin County. It's the spot, he thinks, in which he would like to make his future farm home and he has asked us to tell him something about the general setup. What can be grown there, climate, just where the county is located and so forth are the questions in which he is vitally interested. "I have always wanted to settle on

farm land near the Gulf of Mexico some day," his letter stated. "Perhaps Baldwin County is the answer."

Could be, T. Y., and the section is right in the heart of Gulf coast resort country.

Baldwin County, roughly seventy-five miles from north to south and about thirty miles across at its widest point is the largest county in Alabama. It is almost entirely surrounded by water. The Gulf of Mexico forms its southern boundary; Mobile Bay, the Mobile, Alabama and Tensas Rivers its western boundary; Little River the northern boundary, and Perdido Bay and Perdido River run up its eastern edge.

Originally the county was covered with forests, chiefly long-leaf pine. There is still much good timber left. Lumber mills are dotted through the forest, getting the remaining lumber out.

Of the nearly million acres which are still in forest or in cut-over stump land a large part is suited for future farms or orchards, and considerable acreage of it is available to new settlers. In some cases the actual cost of clearing the land is small. In other cases where the pine stand was

heavy, moving the stumps will cost more but this can often be offset by the fact that there is likely to be a market for the stumps at the chemical plant in Bay Minette.

Once cleared, the country is not simply scrub land. It is good, rich farm soil and the combination of mild winter climate and right-growing soil gives the county its advantage from a crop-producing standpoint.

With a growing season of from 290 to 325 days almost year around the maturing of two food or feed crops on the same land each year is possible. General practice is to follow early season crops with some different crop which will mature that fall, then follow it with another or winter cover crop, used for pasture and soil building.

Summer heat is tempered by proximity to the Gulf, 80 degrees being average with nights usually cool and mitigated by breezes from the Gulf.

Freezing temperatures are not unknown in winter, but they are usually confined to a few "cold snaps" occurring during mid-winter months.

Early truck crops are a Baldwin County farm specialty. Irish potatoes do well, some yields of 300 bushels an acre having been reported. The county potato crop average is better than 150 bushels an acre.

In addition considerable early "table" corn is shipped from Bald-

win County as well as sizable amounts of cucumbers, sweet potatoes, cabbages, beans and peas. All sorts of berries and general garden truck can be grown for home use. The Magnolia River and Fish River sections have been growing water-melons commercially for years.

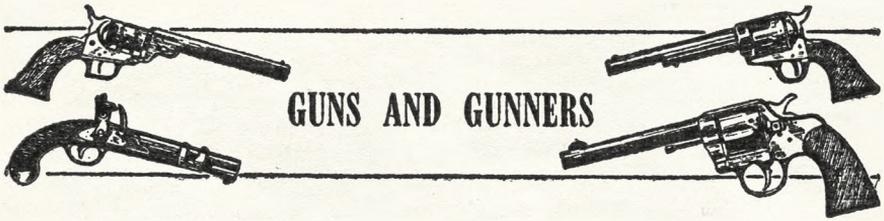
The bulk of the commercial crops are shipped to northern markets—early markets, at that. The main shipping rush starts late in April or early May, when more northerly farmers are just getting their seeds in, and lasts until mid-July.

On the livestock side of the ledger, the farm cow is pretty much a fixture and some who have specialized in dairy farms have developed outstanding herds. Milk can be produced readily and cheaply due to plentiful cut-over pasture land and the fact that most of the feed grains can be grown right on the farm.

The beef cattle industry is growing in this part of the south, including both the growing and raising of stock, and fattening or finishing off of stock brought in each year from far western ranges. Farm flocks of sheep do well and make Baldwin County Alabama's leading "wool" center.

Mild climate and low feed costs are an asset to the poultry farmer too, and not only chickens but many ducks, geese and turkeys are raised down there as well.

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.



CAPT. PHILIP B. SHARPE

THERE is a class of individuals in this land of ours variously known as gun nuts, gun fans, enthusiasts, and just plain "nuts." I call them gunbugs. You would think that with a global war, these lads would disappear, at least temporarily. I haven't found this to be true.

In the more than two years I was on active duty in the United States, I found them wherever I went—and plenty of them. I visited most of our arms and ammunition plants. I found them working on machines, on test ranges, in laboratories, and in offices. I found them in uniform in the armed forces, both as officers and as enlisted men. I came to believe that these lads are more numerous than ever.

I recall a visit to the Winchester plant last summer. Winchester, you know, was the only factory outside of Springfield Armory, to make the excellent M1 semi-automatic rifle, popularly known as the Garand. Perhaps you did not know that before Uncle Sam's Ordnance Dept. will accept a rifle, it must be targeted for accuracy, and must give acceptable groups.

Springfield Armory does its tar-

geting in a machine rest. Winchester uses the actual shooter—an expert rifleman who shoots targets at 100 yards using a forearm and elbow rest. A good man can equal a machine rest in this position, as any top-notch shooter will testify. But it is hard work to test-fire rifles all day—the same old routine work.

At the Winchester plant I met one of my old friends from Camp Perry. He had just finished a target and brought it over for my inspection. We talked briefly, and I silently wondered if he hadn't tired of the game. I got my answer without asking.

"Phil, how about staying over this evening and coming out to Henry Lyman's place in Middlefield with us. We've got a match on . . ." He had been shooting all day, and he was going out for an evening of match shooting with the boys.

The gunbugs in the army too, are enthusiastic. While stationed at one army post, I had occasion to visit the Provost Marshall for a special permit. The Provost, a colonel, was wearing a .45 auto that didn't look like "issue." I asked to look at it, found a special match gun, and soon discovered that he was a dyed-in-the-

wool gunbug.

In the examination of a piece of captured enemy equipment, I took it into the instrument laboratory on the post. The job finished, it didn't take long to discover that the lab chief, a captain, was another gunbug. He had developed a new wildcat cartridge, built a gun for it, and he showed me the works. He had been testing it with lab equipment and it showed much promise as a new light cartridge.

I could go on and on. Wherever I've been, I've found gunbugs, and their enthusiasm is growing, not dying. It looks as though the shooting game will be the biggest that the country has ever enjoyed, in the years to come.

I prefer to avoid saying that we will "get back to normal" after the war. We won't. The old "normal" will not be accepted by gunbugs. The firearms and ammunition of 1940 will not satisfy. Military developments have been rapid and astounding, and they will be reflected in the products of the commercial manufacturers and in the demands of gunbugs after world peace becomes a reality.

Among the things to look for will be new binoculars and other optical instruments, including range telescopes.

One of the things I might mention about optical goods is that the new

peace-time product will have coated optics — both lenses and prisms. The military has proven the value of this idea and has developed it to the nth degree. You may not like the looks of the new lenses—they will not look like clean water-clear glass—they will have a distinct purple, brown, blue or green stain. If you get anything like this, be careful in cleaning as it must not be removed. The most common will be purple, a baked-on magnesium fluoride coating.

Unfortunately a lens does not transmit or pass all of the light entering it. Some light—usually about 6 percent—is reflected and wasted from each surface. Since an optical system has multiple lenses, the light loss often runs 35 percent. Coating the optics reduces this loss to between 7 and 10 percent.

In bright light, with conditions favorable, coated lenses show a small improvement. At dusk, on hazy days and in poor weather, the coated lenses show as high as 35 percent increase in light transmission and visibility. I look for coating on most quality instruments after the war.

You will also see plenty of new guns and new accessories after the war. Born of necessity, these developments will be demanded by shooters, and the manufacturers will always try to meet the demand.

Phil Sharpe, our firearms editor, is now on active duty as a Captain, Ordnance Department, U. S. A. He will continue to answer all letters from readers. Address your inquiries to Captain Phillip E. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Store, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.



MINES AND MINING

BY JOHN A. THOMPSON

In prospecting there is a wide difference between a "specimen" of an ore and an actual "sample" of an ore vein. The two are not the same thing by a long shot.

This distinction between specimens and samples is the question that M.K., at present in Toledo, Ohio, has on his mind this week. "I am working in Toledo just now," he writes, "and saving funds against the day when I can go prospecting in British Columbia. Right now I am pretty green at the business and willing to admit it. But I am anxious to learn. Are ore specimens and samples the same thing? If not, can you explain the difference?"

Specimens are usually one or two picked pieces of ore, or of an ore vein that a prospector has located. They may be fairly large chunks or small fragments. But to show the true character of an ore and permit exact identification of any particular mineral they usually should be at least about 1x2x3 inches in size. Larger pieces are seldom necessary for purely identification purposes.

Sometimes a few grains of material or a single crystal will be sufficient to identify it. In solid ore the 3-inch size specimen is better.

Specimens primarily show what an ore is, not how rich it is. And there-in lie the heartaches to the novice. Hand-picked as representative material of a new find, specimens are almost invariably richer than the minable ore vein will be. Having them assayed can prove valuable as an indication of the tenor of the ore in, say, the case of gold lodes for instance. But a specimen assay is no demonstration of the richness that can or should be expected throughout the vein.

Samples, on the other hand, provide the figures on which to base your actual mining arithmetic. They should be typically representative of the entire ore body or vein, or as much of it as is exposed and reachable by the sampler.

Good sampling is an art as well as a science. And it is one that sometimes requires will power as well as skill. There is no practical point, for instance, in a sampler succumbing to the temptation to take more of the rich material in a vein than the lean. The result will give him a higher average ore than is warranted and raise his hopes unduly.

If he attempts to mine the ore himself, disappointment is sure to result.

And if he sells the claim or enlists financial aid in developing the property, the first thing the prospective buyer or backer will do is take his own samples, or have them taken by an expert.

For all concerned it is best to sample fairly. That means that the sample should not be a single piece of ore crushed and powdered. It must represent, in as accurate a proportion as possible, all the various kinds of material in the vein or rock in question. One important reason why this must be done is that usually metallic minerals, especially the precious metals like gold, are irregularly distributed throughout the gangue, the quartz or other rock minerals constituting the main body of the vein.

Generally speaking, the more uniform the material in a vein, the easier it is to get an accurate sample, and the smaller the sample that may be taken. On the other hand when samples are taken fairly, the larger the sample taken, the better its chances are of telling the true story of the vein's worth.

How large a sample should be taken of any particular vein depends on many factors. However, generally speaking good sampling practice requires the taking of from 1 to 2 pounds of material for each foot of width of the section of rock or vein being checked. In cases where the valuable material—gold for instance—is very irregularly distributed,

more than 2 lbs. per foot of vein width may be required.

And it is essential in accurate sampling that an equal quantity of rock be taken from each unit of width in a section—for example from each foot in a 3-foot sample.

Samples can be cut with a prospector's pick or by using moils and a hammer. Chip samples consist of rock chips taken from points evenly distributed in a band, or from a grid-work of marked points laid out across the width of a vein. Channel samples are somewhat different. They include *all* the pieces of rock from a channel of even width cut straight across the vein.

In either case the pieces of rock broken off should be caught in a sample box, sack, or on a sampling sheet set at the base of the vein. Sacked, labeled and securely tied, a sample is ready for grinding, quartering and assaying. It will tell you pretty closely what the makeup of the vein is at the sampled point, and give you a good idea of the values to be expected from that particular section of the vein.

The above refers of course only to sampling hard-rock or lode deposits of metallic ores. Sampling placer deposits, such as gold-bearing gravels, is a different procedure entirely. But even in the latter case, it is accurate sampling that gives the prospector an idea of the likely average value of his deposit.

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 Store, 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.

GOLD CAMP GUN GHOST

by M. HOWARD LANE

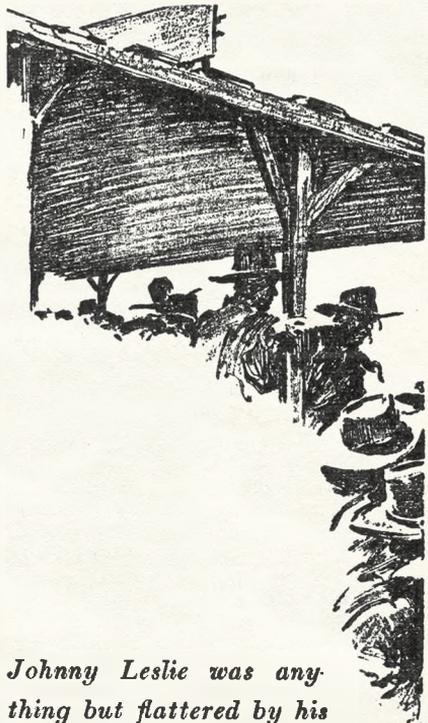
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WHITE ELK town had called him *El Quelete*—The Buzzard—because he was prematurely bald, and Johnny Leslie had tried to laugh it off, but the name had hurt just the same. He'd worn a hat whenever it was possible, but a man who knew little more than the art of tending bar and handling guns couldn't wear a Stetson while he was behind the mahogany.

It wasn't his fault that he had lost his hair at thirty, but that hadn't mattered. They'd have called him The Buzzard anyway.

So Johnny Leslie had stood as much as he could and then he'd pulled away from White Elk. In another town folks certainly wouldn't call him *El Quelete*.

And he'd been right, for wherever his wanderings carried him, and they had carried him far, he reflected, not a soul had called him The Buzzard. Some had smiled at his billiard ball head when he was behind a bar, but those same people had never smiled a second time when they'd met him



Johnny Leslie was anything but flattered by his welcome home—a salvo from blazing lobo guns!

off-shift with a pair of black Colts strapped to his lean thighs.

He'd been gone better than a year now, and he'd never stayed in one place for longer than it took to make a stake that would set him on the move again. He'd headed West from White Elk, and drifted like a tumbleweed clean to Oregon. There he'd hopped a Portland steamer, and sailed down the coast to San Francisco. In that metropolis he'd bought one of California's famous horses, a palomino, with a coat that shone like dusky gold. He'd named the big horse, Oro and Oro had seemed to like wandering as much as his master.

So they'd kept moving, and at last Johnny had realized ruefully that he

was just making one mighty big circle that sure as shooting would eventually carry him back to Montana and White Elk town. At least people would notice him there, and sometimes even being laughed at was better than being ignored.

When he'd come to that conclusion Johnny had quit drifting, and started traveling, in just as straight a line as he could follow. It was the way he'd done things all of his life. A stubborn sort of man, Johnny Leslie had never let circumstances change his course, once a decision was made.

And now with Oro jogging comfortably along beneath him, Johnny Leslie was nearing White Elk. The plains about him, where fat cattle bunched in their feeding, and the sight of the Bitterroots hanging like a blue cloud against the horizon brought something into his throat that was hard to swallow. White Elk lay in a cup of nearer, pine-stippled



hills, and Johnny found that he was breathing fast.

"Oro," Johnny spoke the words aloud, "we're comin' home. And this time we're going to stay put, come hell, highwater, or damnation!"

The sun was diving into the west as Johnny hit the wagon road that led up a wide, sloping canyon through the Antelope Hills. There were ruts in the road that he didn't remember. It was wider, too. Brush had been smashed down, and in places boulders had been excavated to widen the thoroughfare.

"Looks like a danged stampede of wagons went through here," he muttered, and unconsciously he touched the bright silver rowels he'd bought in California to Oro's flanks. The palomino lifted to a lope. White Elk lay just over the rise ahead, and as the palomino topped it, Johnny involuntarily drew rein, gray eyes widening.

A year ago White Elk had been just another placid, cow-country town. There'd been some half dozen stores, and three or four saloons. A hotel, a few restaurants, and a blacksmith shop, owned and operated by huge Bode Dexter, mayor of the little town.

Pay day once a month on the plains ranches had made things a little lively for White Elk's grizzled marshal, old Pop Poole, but other times life had coasted along like a smooth, deep river, with nobody in a hurry and most everybody happy.

Now Johnny was seeing enough change to make any homcomer blink. White Elk wasn't the town

he'd left behind. Log cabins and tents dotted the bowl thick as prairie dog holes. And Sioux Street itself. Where once a dozen somnolent horses had been anchored to hitch rails, there were fifty now. A few buckboards and buggies had used the street in the old days. Now the thoroughfare was a-rumble with ore wagons, and covered Conestogas, and every type of conveyance a man could name. The boardwalks were a-swarm with people. Johnny could see them, busy as ants, moving through the pleasant twilight.

"Well I'll be danged!" Johnny said.

A boom had evidently hit White Elk. But why? Johnny asked himself the question as he urged Oro forward. This was cattle country, not farming territory.

One thing, though, looked fairly certain. He'd probably have little trouble getting back his old job at Shad Whittaker's Emporium. With so many in White Elk, the saloonman could probably use another experienced barkeep.

The boardwalks along Sioux Street were thick with people, and every face was strange to Johnny Leslie. Most of the men were bearded, and all of them wore guns. Their clothes were rough and bright, and their boots were heavy and flat-heeled.

"Miners," Johnny ejaculated under his breath. "Prospectors. Why, dang it, somebody must've struck gold in these hills and started a stampede. No wonder White Elk don't look the same!"

Whittaker would be able to tell him all about it, Johnny knew, and

he pressed on toward the false front of The Emporium, a block ahead.

From the boardwalks men were eying this newcomer, seeing a tall, lathy man with sharp-cut features, wide shoulders, narrow waist, and long, straight legs. His white Stetson was stained from travel, but his black guns in criss-crossed belts looked as though they'd just been freshly polished. Johnny was wearing gray, tight-fitting California pants, and a whipcord shirt to match. They were his best clothes, and he'd put them on for this homecoming.

But now as Oro carried him on along Sioux Street, he began to wonder if he was going to see anyone who would recognize him. The old townfolk seemed to have disappeared. But Whittaker and Pop Poole and Dexter would still be here. He felt sure of that. Pop, he decided, was probably having his hands full now.

The Emporium loomed ahead, and Johnny wondered as he swung Oro into the crowded rack in front of the saloon, if Shad would start right off calling him *El Quelele*. If he did, the whole town would pick it up again soon, and Johnny hated that thought.

He heard the batwings of The Emporium creak open as he swung down from Oro and a remembered voice boomed: "*Quelele. El Quelele.*" The sound went through him like an arrow.

He ducked beneath the hitch rail and straightened, and Shad Whittaker came rushing across the boardwalk, big, white hand extended.

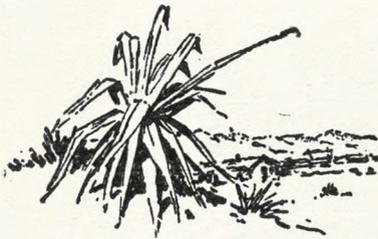
Once the saloonman had worn range garb to match the dress of his customers, but now his clothes were a gambler's black and white. Impeccable, with black pearl studs in the front of his boiled shirt that were just the same color as his small, black eyes set close on either side of his big, fleshy nose. His teeth were a gleaming white as he grinned at the homecomer, and somehow Johnny found his hand refusing to meet the saloonman's grip.

"Howdy, Shad," he said meagerly.

Whittaker clapped him on the back. "Boy, you're looking fine," he boomed. "And am I glad to see you—"

"Yuh ain't the only one glad to see Johnny Leslie," a soft old voice said from one side. "Son, how be ye, and air you lookin' for a job?"

Johnny turned his head. Pop Poole had moved out of the welter of people tramping the boardwalks. The marshal was a little man with scraggly white mustaches drooping down on either side of his wide mouth. His shoulders were narrow, and the pair of Colts at his scrawny thighs looked almost too big for him to carry, but Johnny had seen the old Texan move quicker than any cat when the need arose. There wasn't a straighter man in all Montana than Pop Poole, nor one who could buffalo a drunk any quicker. Everyone in White Elk had respected the marshal when Johnny had been here before, and life had run along smooth and easy. Now his first glance showed him that Poole had aged this last year. His leathery face had garnered fresh wrinkles, and his shoulders



were hunched forward like the tired old man he was.

His hand came out, and this time Johnny had no trouble making his own right move. "Pop"—he met the other's grip—"it's mighty danged nice seein' you again. Travelin's all right, but a rolling stone don't gather no moss . . . nor friends. It feels good to be here, only things sure have changed."

"It all started when a proddy bronc tore up the sod out along Elkhorn Creek, and the cowpoke riding the critter got down to look at the bright specks glitterin' in the dirt," Shad Whittaker said. "What he found was free gold. So he come rushing into town to file a claim, and the word got out and started a rush. It's another Grasshopper Gulch discovery—"

"And White Elk is turnin' into another Bannock!" Pop Poole put in grimly.

Johnny blinked at the two men facing him, and suddenly he felt cold all over. Bannock had needed Vigilantes, and plenty of them, to curb the lawlessness that had struck their town. After dark a man with gold in his poke couldn't walk the streets. Prospectors had been robbed and murdered on their claims. The outlaw organization had called themselves "The Innocents" and that

had been their war cry if one of their members was captured. It had been rough and wild in Bannock, and Johnny wondered fleetingly, if the reason he'd seen no familiar faces on his ride down Sioux Street was because the local folk were afraid to show themselves in their own town this close to dark.

II

"You mean—" he blurted.

"Now wait a minute." Shad Whittaker was still smiling but a hard brightness had come into his black eyes. "You stay out o' this, Poole. I saw Quelele first, and if he's after a job I'm hirin' him. He was the best bartender I ever had, and the handiest man in town with a pair of Colts."

"Which same the Law needs," Poole cut in.

Whittaker went on as though he hadn't heard the marshal's remark. "I'll pay you two hundred a month, and throw in room and board if yuh'll come back to work for me, Quelele," he said flatly.

That was exactly one hundred dollars more than he'd received the year before, Johnny reflected. Business was evidently booming, and then the vagrant thought crossed his mind that perhaps Whittaker was more interested in hiring his guns than services behind the bar.

He saw the lines deepen in Poole's face. "I can't match that offer," the lawman admitted. "But the town shore needs a deputy marshal. Bode Dexter and the Council, at their last meetin', authorized me to hire one of my choosin' at a hundred per, and

him to pay his own expenses outside of cartridges which I'll furnish. So I was kind o' hopin' when I saw yuh, son . . ." he let his words drift off.

Shad Whittaker laughed. "The Emporium needs Quelele worse'n you, Poole. I run a decent place, but it takes a good man with guns on his hips to keep it that way. Yore job will be to keep an eye on the crowd, Quelele, and that way you can help Poole as well as me. What do you say?"

Johnny drew a deep breath. Things were happening fast. He'd never expected a welcome quite like this.

A thin cry coming from the mouth of the alley alongside The Emporium jerked him around, and he caught the impression that a mother and her small daughter had been passing the alley at the same instant a pair of burly prospectors had stepped out. They'd knocked the woman and girl to the boardwalk.

Johnny heard one of them laugh coarsely, and the other say: "Right purty pantalettes she's wearin', Sam. Let's help her up. Mebbe she'd like to take a walk with us. The young un can trot along by herself."

Marshal Poole had turned at the interruption, and so had Shad Whittaker, but Johnny, already faced that way, was moving faster than either of them. Long legs driving him forward, he was close to the pair of prospectors before either the marshal or Whittaker could move, and there was a sudden, burning anger in him that he'd never felt before. He caught one glimpse of the woman's

face as she tried to get to her feet, and then his eyes settled on the pair of prospectors. Half-crouched, his hands settled close to the butts of his Colts.

"You gents," he told the pair flatly, "had better start makin' your apologies to the ladies. Folks ain't treated this way around White Elk!"

The one called Sam wore full black whiskers that fell to his chest. His red mouth gaped as he laughed. "Hear him, would you, Slim?" he drawled. "Mebbe he's new in town, and ain't learned the ropes yet. Think we should teach him that folks mind their own business here nowadays?"

The other prospector towered a good six-foot three, and he was thin as a fence rail, with a scraggly roan beard covering his bony face. He grinned and there were only snagged stubs of teeth in his mouth.

"Might be a good idee, Sam," he agreed. "Greenhorns has got to learn—sometimes the hard way."

Johnny took another step forward, and his thoughts were clear and hard as crystal. If he backed down now, he'd be the laughing stock of the town, for a crowd was already starting to gather. If that happened he'd be of no use to either Whittaker or Pop Poole. There'd be nothing for him but Oro's saddle and the long trails he'd already traveled.

His long-barreled Colts were flickering from holster leather as he moved. One swung left and one right as he stepped between the pair. It was the first time he'd ever used them to strike a man down, but each barrel landed neatly above the ear

of the hard case nearest to him.

He watched them sag, incredulity on both their faces. They hit the boardwalk together, and Johnny stepped back a pace. Both of them had their eyes full on him, for neither had passed into unconsciousness, and he saw a hatred in their gaze that he'd never met before. They were men who wouldn't forget being buffaloed. But two enemies in White Elk were not a lot to worry about, for something told Johnny Leslie that he'd have many more before the town was safe for decent people to walk the streets after dark. His decision was made in that instant.

"Pop," Johnny said across his shoulder, "you've hired yourself a deputy!"

Bode Dexter, in a full-cut black coat and white stock, pushed out of the crowd. "And I'll be the first to congratulate you, Leslie!" he boomed.

The woman and her daughter had managed to gain their feet. Johnny's gaze touched the mother. Her face was oval and her eyes were blue, and without the lines strain had put about her mouth, she would be mighty pretty, he thought.

Hesitantly, she came toward him. "Thank you," she murmured. "I . . . I don't know quite what else I can say—"

Johnny reached for his hat, then thought better of it. Somehow he didn't want this young woman to see that his head was bald as a billiard ball. He nodded a little stiffly.

"There ain't nothin' to say, ma'am," he told her with a forced

smile, "except that some things are fitten, and some ain't. This town used to be a mighty decent place, and there ain't no reason why it can't be the same now."

"I know you'll help make it so," the woman said softly. "Good luck to you!"

With her daughter by the hand she turned and the crowd parted to let her move back down the walk.

Johnny felt Pop Poole's gnarled hand on his arm. "Son," he murmured, "we better get out of here and take a walk to the calaboose. There's the place for us to talk."

"Hold up a minute, Quelele." Shad Whittaker had come up on Johnny's other side. "Let's not do anything in a hurry. I've made you a mighty fine offer—"

Johnny turned on the saloon-keeper, and his eyes were chilly as ice. "Your offer, Shad," he said succinctly, "is too danged good. And quit callin' me Buzzard. Pop, let's take that walk you mentioned."

Someone in the crowd laughed brazenly. "All good deputies are six feet under. That's where this one will end—"

Slim Pelter and Sam Johnson were stirring on the boardwalk, like a pair of sluggish rattlers, but the fight seemed to have left them. Something—Johnny Leslie had no time to analyze it now—was holding them quiet.

Bode Dexter had come into the picture again. Brown beard bristling, he answered that voice from the crowd. "Leslie will be here long after some of the rest of yuh are gone," he said emphatically. "Son,

call on me if you need anything!"

Johnny eyed the mayor of White Elk and thought that prosperity had certainly made Dexter put on a lot of airs. "I will," he said briefly.

Pop Poole's faded eyes studied his companion as they moved out of the crowd. "And that's what you're goin' to be up against, son," he murmured. "Some of the folks who have come into town want no law save what they pack in their holsters. Mebbe you've made a mistake—"

"If I have," Johnny told him dryly, "it won't be my first one. What's the name of the lady those hombres knocked down?"

The marshal chuckled. "Mrs. Halstead," he answered. "Marianne. She and her husband and daughter were right amongst the first that come followin' news of the strike. He filed a good claim—mebbe too good, because he was one of the fust that got shot in the back while he was bendin' over his pan out along Elkhorn Creek. Miz Halstead moved to town after that happened. Since then she's been takin' in washin'."

"Shot in the back?" Johnny's attention had caught right there.

"Son," the marshal murmured, "don't go off half-cocked. I'll tell you the whole story when we git to my office."

Johnny took a chair across from the marshal after he'd watched the lawman thoughtfully pull blinds down across the two front windows.

"There's some," Pop Poole said, "as wouldn't be above tryin' to plug

us through a window, and until we can lay a hand on 'em, or put a bullet through 'em, I feel a heap sight happier with the windows covered."

He sighed, and continued: "Here's the picture, son. Fust off came the decent element. Prospectors, and plain miners ready to work for day wages. Follerin' 'em came the tin-horns, and gamblers, and plain riff-raff that makes any gold camp a Hades on wheels. New saloons set up for business. Some hombre started a dance hall with painted honkatonk gals ready to gobble a miner's money. The tinhorns were out with their skin games, but you expect that when a gold boom hits your town.

"But when it comes to murder, that's a hoss of another color. As I told you, young Jebb Halstead was one of the fust to git here, and one of the fust to get lead in the back. Since then, other prospectors out along Elkhorn Creek have been killed the same way. Lead comes from the pines fringing the sides of the canyon through which the creek runs, and there ain't ever been airy witness to sight the killers. You might as well be chasin' ghosts, only ghosts don't pack .30-30's!"

"Who takes over the abandoned claims of the murdered men?" Johnny asked, and he was digesting the marshal's report.

He watched the lawman shrug. "Fellers you can't pin nothin' on," Poole answered. "Just prospectors, like the rest. I've talked to some of them and their stories stand up."

"Mebbe," Johnny said, and he had hunched to the edge of his chair, plug

"somebody coached 'em ahead of time. Somebody with a lot more brains than they've got. That was the way 'The Innocents' worked in Bannock."

"I know," Poole acknowledged. "I also know," he scowled, "that the situation here is goin' to get wuss fast unless we nip it at the source. Right now honest White Elk men don't dare show their faces after dark, and that ain't doin' my rep any good. If a better man could be found to fill my shoes, I'd step out of office tomorrow."

"They won't find a better man," Johnny said with certainty. "I'm glad to be workin' with you."

The marshal's face had turned serious. "You can still back out, son, if yuh want. I'm bound to warn you that our lives won't be worth a plugged nickel until we nab the big mogul backing this show. Hirin' you is apt to bust things wide open, because it will show 'em that we mean to clean 'em out. So you can still change your mind, if you want. What's it to be? Mebbe a dead hero—or a live bartender?"



Johnny grinned at the little lawman. "Neither. I'm figuring on bein' a live deputy!"

III

Someone knuckled the front door, and Johnny watched Poole's hand slip down and bring a Colt from his hip. He slid sidewise out of his own chair and around a corner of the marshal's desk, hands close to his own guns.

"Come right in," the old lawman called.

Johnny watched the door open, and his breathing quickened a little as he saw that their visitor was Marianne Halstead.

"Why" . . . she said uncertainly, her eyes touching the marshal's Colt as she stepped inside.

Pop Poole flushed. "Ma'am," he stammered, "things has got so we take no chances."

"I know." She nodded, and Johnny noticed how the light from the hanging lamp overhead seemed to catch in her hair and turn it to bright gold. She'd sure be mighty pretty, he thought, once the marks of grief were erased from her face, and then he caught himself a little confusedly. A man had no right to think such things when his back at any moment might become a target for alley killers.

"I . . . I just stopped on my way home to thank you again for aiding me, Mr. Leslie," she said a little primly, "and to find out if you gentlemen might like a home-cooked meal. I've got some venison stew on the

back of the stove, and a berry pie in the oven—”

Johnny licked his lips. “Ma’am,” he told her honestly, “I’ve been livin’ on bacon and beans so long that I figure any shote I sight might likely call me brother. So I’ll accept that invite with pleasure.”

“As for me,” the marshal chuckled, and there was a merry light in his eyes, “I’ve allus heerd that three makes a crowd. Johnny, why don’t you walk on home with Miz Halstead. I’ll be makin’ the rounds while you’re gone. Yuh can join me later, if you don’t eat too much pie!”

Johnny felt redness in his cheeks, and he could see the makings of a blush on the widow’s face.

“Please just call me, Marianne,” she said simply. “It . . . it”—her eyes brightened with sudden tears—“it’s the only name I like to remember now!”

“Sure and we’ll do that, ma’am.” the marshal said understandingly. “You folks trot right along. I jest ain’t hungry right now.”

Marianne talked a little about her husband as she cleared away the supper dishes. “Jebb was a fine man,” she murmured. “We had a good claim, but I couldn’t hold it after . . . after he died.”

Johnny was glad she’d brought up the subject for he’d wanted to ask her a few questions, and he hadn’t known quite how to bring them into the conversation. “Your husband was shot from the pines fringin’ your claim?”

“Yes,” Marianne nodded. “The bullet came from across the stream. I heard the rifle and ran out of our cabin and . . . and Jebb was dead.

I couldn’t see a sign of anyone, and Sheriff Poole hasn’t been able to find any tracks that might give him a lead to Jebb’s killers or any of the others who have died. Oddly enough, the two men who bumped into me and Martha this afternoon, are the ones who jumped our claim after I abandoned it.”

“How long was it before they stepped in?” Johnny leaned forward across the table, and his bald head was a shining target in the lamp-light. He heard the roar of a gun outside the kitchen’s one window, and he felt the breath of the slug close to his ear. Leaning forward had saved his life, was the thought that crossed his mind, as he flung himself sidewise to the floor.

Own guns out of leather, he snapped two quick shots through the already shattered glass, and he heard the swift rush of boots outside the house.

“Johnny!” Marianne’s voice was high.

“I’m all right,” he jerked out the words, and his own boots punched him toward the door. He hauled it open, and jumped to the left down the side of the house hoping to catch the killer if he swung around the opposite wall.

Clouds coming from the Bitter-roots had all but covered the sky. There was only the vagrant flash of moonlight through breaks in the overhang. The widow’s place was on the outskirts of White Elk, and as he reached the road in front of the house, Johnny could see no sign of movement. The man who’d tried to

shoot him had faded like a ghost into the darkness, but a glance toward town showed him horsemen silhouetted against the lights of Sioux Street. There were six of them heading this way at a gallop, and it looked as though one man was leading a riderless mount.

"Now what—" Johnny got out the two words, and then he felt Marianne Halstead come close against him, and for a heady second he was conscious of the soft warmth of her body. "Get back inside!" His voice was harsher than he realized. "I guess Pop knew what he was talkin' about this afternoon when he said we were gun bait! My danged bald head made a good target!"

The horsemen were rushing closer, and Johnny recognized the small shape of the marshal leading them. They reined down in a welter of dust, and Poole tossed the homecomer Oro's reins. His face was a hard, granite wedge in the moonlight.

"Climb aboard, son," he invited. "Trouble's on the make and we've got to ride. You'll excuse us, ma'am," he said to Marianne.

Johnny swung into his saddle, wondering what had happened. A glance showed him a familiar crew behind the marshal. The lawman's posse was made up of old-time townsmen, and the mayor, Bode Dexter. His white shirt gleamed, for he had discarded his coat. "We're being challenged," he growled, "and by damn we'll fight. I told you, son, that hirin' you would bring things to a head. The bunch we're fightin' is out to whip the law, or die tryin'!"

"What—" Johnny began.

"Clem Peters," the marshal cut him short. "You never knew him, but he was one of the best of the crowd that come in on the first wave. A steady-goin' feller. He panned his gold and saved it to ride back to Cheyenne and marry a little gal there. He pulled out o' town this afternoon just afore you rode in—and now he's dead. We got the report from Hank Bailey out along the stage road east of here. Comin' to town for the evening he found Clem strung up to a oak alongside the road. They was a note pinned to his chest. Hank brung it along, but left Clem for us."

He passed a scrap of rough paper to the homecomer, and Johnny thumbed a match alight. He read scrawled words, and felt a chill settle along his spine.

"Here hangs Clem Peters," the note read like a rude limerick, "he tried to git away with a pokeful of dust. If any more tries it, they'll git jist the same. Spend yore dinero in White Elk." It was signed: "The Boosters."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" Those were the only adequate words Johnny could muster. "The Boosters. Bode, yuh better start a Chamber of Commerce!"

"They got more gall," the mayor snorted, "than them blasted Innocents had in Bannock. Killers and thieves is what they are, and we've got to stamp 'em out like you would a den of rattlers."

"You got to put your finger on 'em fust," Pop Poole said grimly. "Leslie," he added, "warn't that a shot we heard out thisaway as we

were pullin' out of White Elk?"

"You could call it that," Johnny told them flatly, "but a miss of an inch is as good as a mile. I'm still here, and ready to ride."

Marianne Halstead's face turned up to him as he swung in beside the marshal, and Johnny thought he heard her murmur, "Come back. Come back," and then his spurs were against Oro's flanks, and an unaccustomed warmth was in his heart. But it wasn't enough to drive the chill from his spine, for he knew that there would be no returning until the killers who sought to rule this town were under the sod they had reddened.

They found Clem Peters' body, and the recent breeze that had sprung up was moving it to and fro, in a kind of ghastly dance. Head canted sideways, bloodless face distorted, the sight was something none of the possemen would ever forget.

"Don't ride too close," Pop Poole cautioned. "This road is dusty, and there should be tracks a-plenty for us to read."

But as they left their mounts and moved forward, Johnny shook his head and pointed to an oak limb tossed carelessly against the bole of the big tree.

"The Boosters," he said quietly, "swiped out their tracks afore leavin'. We'll get no more lead on 'em from this killin' than you have on any of the others. I ain't the one to say, but I'd suggest buryin' Peters right here where he died. He'd probably like that a heap sight better than ridin' back to town under a diamond hitch. I know I would!"

"You're talkin' sense, Johnny," Bode Dexter agreed, "and I for one will volunteer to stay and help dig a grave. You and the rest head back to town. Mebbe if you look real close, you might find some hosses that has been rid real hard."

"It somethin' to keep in mind," Poole conceded thoughtfully. "We'll look over every bronc on Sioux Street."

A silent crowd headed back toward White Elk. Only once did the marshal speak to his new deputy as they drew near the town. "Could the cuss who took a pot shot at you through the widder's kitchen window have been one of the outfit comin' back from this hangin' bee?"

Johnny shook his head. "Not likely," he answered logically. "The hombre who tried to take my taw must have seen me walk home with her, otherwise how'd he know I was at her house? The hangin' behind us must have took place at about the same time."

Poole groaned. "Every time I begin to git the glimmer of an idee it blows up in my face."

"Something is blowing up in town right now," Johnny cut in, for his eyes were keen enough to see what looked like a hundred torches lighting Sioux Street, still a mile or more in front of them. Silhouetted blackly against the light was the high, squarish bulk of a Concord.

"You got a stage due in to-night?" he asked.

"Jumpin' catfish—no!" Poole tried to peer ahead, but his eyes weren't strong enough to make out distant details. "The mail coach

pulled out this afternoon, headin' for Virginia City, and I happen to know there was a good load of gold in the strongbox that some of the boys was sendin' out for safekeepin'. You don't think—"

"This ain't the time to think," Johnny told him harshly. "Let's find out!"

Lamplight was still bright in Marianne Halstead's frame house when they raced past her place, and Johnny guessed that maybe she was waiting up for their return. That warm feeling filled his chest again. She hadn't seemed to mind his appearance, and that was something to remember.

"But I ain't goin' back to see her," Johnny renewed his stubborn vow, "until we root out the troublemakers in this town."

He and Pop Poole were gunbait. If he'd needed proof of that he'd had it in the roar of the single shot that had come through the Halstead kitchen window.

They were rushing down Sioux Street now on horses with flying feet, and they were close enough to get a clear picture of what lay ahead.

"Hell's brewin' in a kettle," the marshal yelled across to him. "By damn, that's the mail coach ahead of us, and I'll lay you odds it's been stuck up and the strongbox stole."

Smoke from the many pine-knot torches was fragrant in the night as they reached the outskirts of the crowd swirling about the Concord. Grizzled Tom Weaver, its driver, was still on the seat, holding his restive six-horse hitch quiet as other men unloaded the coach.

"Here comes the marshal," some-

one yelled, and a lane opened for them.

Tense faces, reddened by torchlight, turned up to them as they drew alongside the Concord, and got their first good look at what townspeople were taking from it. At the sight, Johnny drew a deep, stabbing breath. Tom Weaver had brought in a load of dead men.

IV

"Every one of my passengers!" the grizzled driver was almost chanting the words. "Every one of 'em killed without so much as a chance to draw iron. They was a boulder in the road and when I clumb down to see could I move it, they rode out o' the trees with shotguns in their hands, and turned 'em loose through the coach windows. Fellers wearin' black handkerchief masks and plain clothes yuh could never recognize. They shot my passengers and took their valuables and the strongbox. Then they ordered me around, and told me to bring my load back here. Said it was a warnin' as to what would happen to the next bunch as tried to get airy gold out o' town. 'Spend it in White Elk,' one of 'em told me to tell yuh all. He said them were the orders from The Boosters."

"We've got to stamp out this menace, Poole!" Shad Whittaker declaimed.

The Concord had halted before The Emporium, and they were carrying the dead passengers into the big saloon. Shad was right in his glory, Johnny thought ironically. The morbidly curious would be surging inside

to take a look at the slain men, and the sight would probably make them thirsty. The Boosters were certainly boosting Shad Whittaker's business this night. It was something worth remembering.

"Quelele," Johnny found Shad Whittaker's black eyes on him, "you ought to have some ideas."

Johnny shrugged. "None worth namin'," he said briefly, but even as he spoke quick thoughts were surging through his mind. The same men who'd wantonly slaughtered this coach load of passengers could not have been the ones who'd hung Clem Peters, for both crimes had probably occurred at about the same time. And that meant the outlaw organization had more members than he'd previously suspected. In numbers there was sometimes strength, and in other cases numbers might make for disunity. There'd never been honor amongst thieves. Right now there were probably Boosters in this crowd, wondering if they'd get their honest share of the strongbox gold looted from this stage. If a man could put doubt in their minds, the members might turn upon each other like wolves fighting over a carcass. They might even lead a lawman to their kingpin.

At his side, Poole was issuing orders. "All of yuh as want to go after the killers who held up this stage, meet down at the livery soon as you can slap leather on your cayuses. We'll be there waitin'—"

"After you and me take a ride to the calaboose," Johnny said softly, for the marshal's ears alone.

A puzzled frown creased the law-

man's brow, but he went on without faltering. "As for the rest of you I'd suggest yuh git back to yore cabins and ketch some shut-eye. You can't work—"

"What the use of diggin' gold for them Boosters to steal," someone in the crowd yelled. "Me, I'm headin' out o' this blasted country in the morning, empty-handed, so I won't git myself kilt along the way."

"And that," Johnny whipped straight in Oro's saddle, and his voice rolled out over all of them, "is just what they want you to do. If they can chase everybody off Elkhorn Creek, the clean-up will be theirs instead of yours. So go ahead and run like hell, and you'll probably keep runnin' the rest of your lives!"

Before anybody could answer his fiery words, Johnny swung Oro and headed back through the crowd. He found Pop Poole beside him. Together, they rode to the squat, log jail and swung down in front of it. Poole had left a light burning inside.

"I ain't walkin' into any dark rooms," the old lawman grunted, "and you ain't either. If them Boosters manage to get us they'll take over this town lock, stock, and barrel, before decent folks can get organized to fight 'em. I get a feelin' that's their plan. Otherwise they wouldn't be usin' that talk of keepin' hometown money at home."

"We think alike," Johnny told him succinctly. "But that ain't the only idea I've got."

Johnny led the way to the porch as he spoke, and now as they stepped inside, he headed quickly toward a

gun cabinet against the far wall. From it, he brought a sawed-off shotgun.

"Put that blasted thing back where you found it," the marshal yelled. "It's loaded."

"And goin' off, soon!" Johnny grinned, and his thin brown face looked almost boyish. "Howsom-ever, the only casualty will be one of your front windows."

"Why, fer Pete's sake?"

"Because I'm bankin' on an old truth," Johnny told him flatly. "There ain't ever been any honor amongst thieves, and I aim to prove it. I'm backin' a hunch that that feller, Sam, and his pard, Slim Keeter, who took over Mrs. Halstead's claim are a pair of your Boosters. If the they aren't, what I aim to do won't hurt 'em any. If they are, we'll have the name of their chief, come mornin'."

"Your chore right now is to get out along Sioux Street, and spread the word that one of said Boosters got your new deputy. Make it sound good, because I'm not riding with you and your posse. Come dawn, I'll be settin' above the Halstead claim, ready to dust Sam and Slim with a little lead when they head for the creek to start panning. With you and your posse out in the hills, and me dead those two hombres are going to think that their own boss has decided to thin out some of his own men."

Pop Poole slapped his thigh. "Thunderation," he exclaimed, "that idee shines like a nugget. You figger they'll hightail it for their chief to demand a showdown?"

"Right," Johnny said decisively.

"And you'll be tailin' 'em, a gold camp gun ghost. Lordy, I wish I could side yuh. Son," Poole's face grew completely serious, "you got to promise me one thing afore I consent to let you try yore scheme."

"What's that?" Johnny lifted one brow quizzically.

"That you won't try and jump their kingpin single-handed. He'll have killers around him. Takin' him is a chore for a whole posse, not one man."

"I figgered that's what you were goin' to say," Johnny told him flatly, "And my answer is *nada!* You've got good family men in your posse, and I ain't going to see any of 'em killed if I can help it. This is my chore."

He raised the shotgun and fired one barrel. Glass tinkled as he looked at the marshal, and his eyes were the same pale hue as the gunsmoke drifting from the weapon.

"Get movin', Pop," he said coolly. "There ain't nobody goin' to miss a bald-headed barkeep if things turn out wrong."

In the gray pre-dawn, the town was quiet. Men driven by excitement and fear had to spend a part of the night in their beds, and this was the hour when sleep was heaviest.

Johnny Leslie rode Oro across an empty Sioux Street, and his eyes touched The Emporium. He wondered if the stageload of dead passengers were still inside the saloon, lying on the pool tables.

"They'll have company followin' 'em to Hades, if I'm lucky," Johnny murmured, and then he was riding

through an alley, and out into the fringe of the Antelope Hills. The bright thread of Elkhorn Creek came dashing down through a gap straight ahead. Pines and boulders mantled the slopes on either side. He rode Oro into their cover, and moved slowly along a deer trail he found paralleling the creek. There was no need to hurry, Johnny reflected. The blackbeard, Sam, and his lanky partner, wouldn't be out and about the claim they'd jumped before full daylight came over the hills.

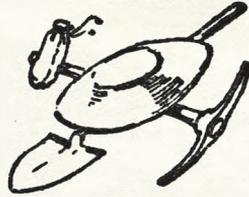
He rested the .30-30 he'd taken from the marshal's gun case lightly across the bows of his saddle.

Half an hour later he tethered Oro in the pines flanking the cabin Marianne Halstead had described to him the night before. After that there was nothing to do but wait, and watch the thin blue smoke curl from the cabin's chimney. The crisp morning air brought the smell of frying bacon and eggs, and Johnny wondered how long it would be before he could sample some of the same.

Finally the pair came into the open, and as they headed for the creek, Johnny could hear the clear drift of their words. "It's yore turn to do the shovelin' today, Sam," Slim said. "I'll take care of the rocker. Dang me, this is tough work for a pair of gents who ain't used to liftin' anything heavier than a pack of cards."

"Or six-guns," Sam agreed. "Howsomever, if things pan out right, we won't have to go back to either job, once we're done here."

It was as much as they were going to say, Johnny realized, and it veri-



fied a part of his suspicion at least. This pair were members of the band who called themselves The Boosters.

He leveled the .30-30 across his knees, and adjusted the sights. A bullet was in the chamber. He cocked the weapon deliberately, and there was something close to a prayer on his lips as he squeezed the trigger.

Dust and gravel spurted up between the pair, and he saw them fling around, and stand like men frozen. They were perfect targets as Johnny dropped another shot between them, and he grinned as they both flung themselves toward brush siding the trail.

A few minutes later he saw them crawl out near the pole corral behind the Halstead cabin. Men fearful of their lives, they got horses out of the corral and saddles aboard them in rodeo time. The tall one was cursing monotonously, and the blackbeard, Sam, had only one thing to say. His ragged voice carried up the slope to Johnny.

"Quit that blasted cussin'," he ordered peevisly. "It ain't helpin' matters any. There's one hombre goin' to give us the answer to this, and only one. Poole's posse is out chasin' the boys who polished off the stage, and the sneaky deputy he hired is dead, accordin' to what we heard afore leavin' town. So it ain't any of

them that tried to bushwhack us."

"Which makes it one of our own bunch," Slim Keeter answered. "The chief is goin' to answer for this!"

They were away then, heading down-canyon, and Johnny was up on Oro following them. Two bullets had turned the trick, he thought grimly, but they weren't the last that would be spent.

V

The pair were heading for Elk-horn, and townspeople would be up and about before they reached there, Johnny realized suddenly. And he was supposed to be dead. It was a contingency he hadn't anticipated. A gun-bait deputy couldn't follow this pair along Sioux Street. Someone other than himself had to watch that pair once they reached White Elk.

"Leavin' me one choice," Johnny muttered, and he felt his breathing quicken. No one, he thought, would suspect Marianne Halstead if she was down town collecting laundry.

Johnny crossed the creek and veered over the ridge into the next canyon. White Elk loomed a couple of miles away, houses clear in the fresh morning light.

Oro tasted Johnny's spurs, as he swung down through the pines. "Hoss," he told the palomino, "we'd mebbe been better off if we'd stayed in Californy, but I'm glad we came back—trouble and all."

He was glad he'd returned to White Elk, and Marianne Halstead had a lot to do with it. Johnny was willing to admit the fact, as she opened her

kitchen door at his knock. Fresh in crisp gingham, she greeted him with a demure smile.

"This is," she murmured, "an unseemly hour for a gentleman to call!"

Johnny answered her smile, and then his face sobered. Swiftly he explained his mission. "You've got to be down town," he ended, "waiting for Sam and Slim when they show up. Watch where they go, then come back and let me know."

Her hand came out and touched his arm, and her eyes lifted to him briefly. "If I learn the answer," she said a little breathlessly, "you'll ride in and face death."

"Somebody's got to do it," Johnny's eyes were bleak, "before you and other folks can live in peace. I've elected myself to handle the chore. Now, you better get movin'. We got no time to waste."

He watched her leave, and his heart went with her. "Don't be a danged fool," he told himself grimly. "Gun bait ain't good husband material, and don't you be forgettin' it!"

There was coffee simmering on the stove, and he sat and drank cup after cup, careful to move silently, for fear of waking Marianne's daughter sleeping in an adjoining room. Time was a heavy hand laid on his shoulders, but his watch showed him that Marianne had been gone for minutes instead of the hours it seemed.

Then at last he heard a step outside, and the kitchen door opened. Marianne stepped in and sagged against the wall. Her face was white.

"I saw them," she whispered. "They . . . they went in the back door of The Emporium!"

"Shad!" Johnny said huskily. "Jehoshaphat! And he wanted to hire me. Mebbe he figgered I'd join up. Now—"

"Now you're going down there," Marianne said, and her eyes were pools of fear. "Please, please wait until Pop Poole and his posse return."

"That's what Pop wanted me to do," Johnny told her quietly, "and I'll tell you the same as I told him. There's been enough men killed already. Nobody will miss a bald-headed barkeep."

Johnny followed back alleys to the rear of The Emporium. Stairs rose to a second story where Shad Whittaker lived in sumptuous style in an apartment that covered the whole floor.

In boots that made no sound Johnny mounted the stairs. The door at the head of them opened beneath his hand as he had known it would, for Shad Whittaker's proud boast had always been that his home was open to friend or foe alike. "If they got no use for me," Johnny had heard him say more than once, "I'll be waiting for 'em. If they're friends, I've always got a private bottle open."

Johnny stepped into the hall that ran the length of the building. He'd been up here before, and he knew the arrangement of the apartment. The kitchen and dining room, with a bedroom beyond, were on the right. On the left was a long, stately living room where Whittaker entertained in regal style.

A door halfway down the hall

opened into the big room. Johnny guessed that Whittaker and the pair he'd flushed from Elkhorn Creek would be in there. He pushed open the door and stepped inside, hands snug about Colt stocks. Emptiness greeted him, and then he heard the cautious scrape of a boot at his back.

"You're one I'm glad to send to Hades," the voice belonged to the blackbeard, Sam. "I tried it once last night and missed yuh, but I won't miss this time."

Johnny lashed back with one spurred boot before attempting to turn. He felt big California rowels contact flesh, and a howl answered his attack, as he whirled, gun flickering from leather. The blackbeard was bent forward trying to clutch his roweled shin, and once again Johnny smashed the barrel of his Colt against the other's skull.

He leaped aside as the other crumpled, and a long stride carried him into the hall. Whittaker was evidently in his bedroom. He'd made a mistake by coming here first, and the blackbeard's yell would probably rouse the saloonman and Slim.

On the run, Johnny headed down the hall. He tried the bedroom door and the panel opened to his touch, but this time he did not step into the room beyond. It was too easy for a man to hide behind an opening door.

There were three men in the room. Two of them were caught unawares, and Whittaker was still in his bed, motionless beneath the covers. His face was seamed with sleep, and his eyes looked bewildered.

"You're dead," he croaked. "Poole said you were—"

Johnny ignored the saloonman, for surprise had caught him like the grip of steel manacles. The prospector, Slim, was here but it was the third man who held his attention, for in his wildest imaginings he would never have expected to find him in this room.

"Bode," Johnny's own voice was little more than a croak. "Bode Dexter!"

The huge blacksmith-mayor had settled back in his chair, and his eyes were watchful as a cat's. "There ain't no law agin' visiting your friends," he drawled.

Like a warning bell, one thought was ringing in Johnny Leslie's mind. Dexter's face had shown no surprise at sight of him. He'd known all along that White Elk's new deputy had not been killed in the marshal's office, and only the kingpin who gave orders to his Boosters would understand that.

Bode Dexter's hands were down alongside his chair, and he did not appear to be armed.

"You choose some funny friends," Johnny said through dry lips. "Sam and Slim here headed into town to see their boss. So that makes—"

"Me the one," Dexter drawled. "Well, I'd never get rich shoein' horses, but you won't be around to prove it!"

Flame spurted from between the fingers of the blacksmith's big hands, and Johnny realized that the mayor had palmed a pair of sleeve deringers as the force of one heavy slug tore through his left shoulder and flung him against the door case. He

got his right-hand gun up as Slim Keeter slid sidewise from his chair, clawing for holstered Colts.

Johnny shot and he saw the force of his slug seem to settle the mayor in his chair.

"You—" Dexter started to say, and a gush of blood from his mouth halted his words.

Keeter's Colt was rising, and through the dark fog lifting to envelop him, Johnny realized that the law would need talkative witnesses to name the rest of The Boosters. He made himself think that the prospector's hip was a round white target such as he'd aimed at more than once in the good days when White Elk menfolk had shot for pleasure instead of gold. He centered his target and squeezed trigger. Slim Keeter seemed to melt back against the floor, a cry of agony on his lips.

Shad Whittaker was still lying strangely quiet beneath his blankets, and through a roaring noise that was starting to fill his head, Johnny heard the pound of many boots in the hall at his back, and Pop Poole's yelping cry:

"Hold 'er, son. Hold 'er—"

They were around him then, tired, dusty possemen, and a pair were helping to support his rubbery legs. Someone else was close, too, and he made out Marianne's face.

"I saw them come back," her explanation seemed to come from a far distance, "and I told them you were up here."

Pop Poole had yanked the covers back from Whittaker's big body, and Johnny saw why the man hadn't been

able to help himself. Buckskin bands bound his arms and legs.

"Dexter was here after my gold," Whittaker was telling the marshal. "He knew I had a safe, and he was trying to make me tell him where it's located. Slim and Red found him here, and they were about ready to mix it themselves when Quelele walked in. Keeter was accusing Dexter of starting to kill off his own men. He said somebody had taken two shots at them—"

Poole was grinning like a satisfied cougar. "Could've been a gun ghost done that shootin', but it warn't. You can give the credit to Johnny Leslie. He got the idee that mebbe there warn't much honor amongst thieves, and from the looks of things, he was right. "But, Bode . . . I

dunno." He shook his head at the dead blacksmith slumped forward in his chair. "I guess the sight of raw gold turned his head. It does that to some men—"

"I hope it don't have the same effect on Johnny Leslie," Shad Whittaker remarked, and Johnny noticed how the saloonman emphasized his name, "because he's goin' to be due for a little wedding present when the time comes along. A gent can't get started in double harness on a deputy's salary, so I'm ante-ing a thousand to start the party right."

Johnny grinned. "If that's the ticket," he told Whittaker, "why mebbe I won't even mind being called Quelele."

"But *I'll* mind it!" Marianne Halstead said primly.

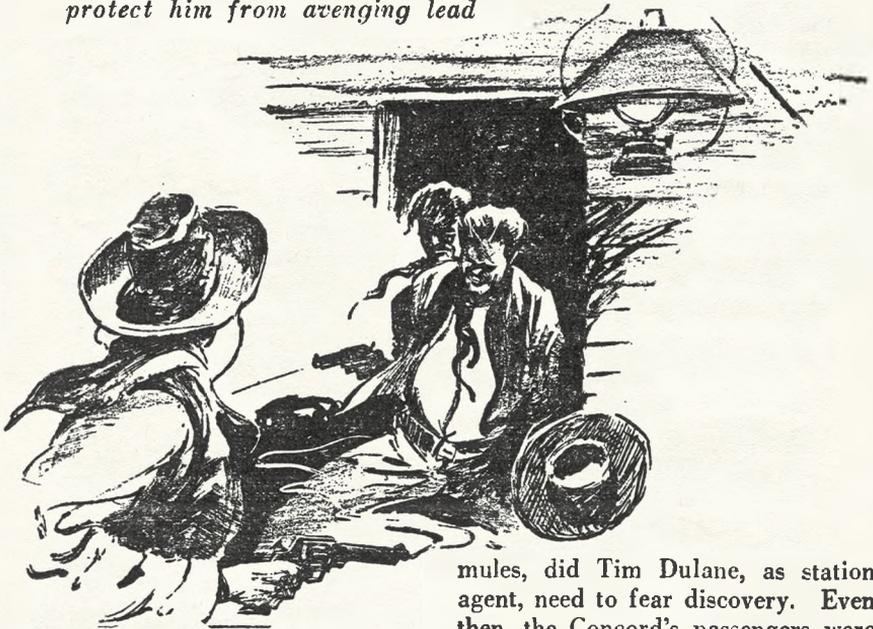
THE END



HALFWAY TO HELL

by JOSEPH CHADWICK

If Tim Dulane didn't find a way to round up Jess Hagar and his hard cases, even the hideouts of the Owlhoot Trail wouldn't protect him from avenging lead



HALFWAY HOUSE, with its high adobe walls and the emptiness of the surrounding desert, was for Dulane more than a mere stage station. It was a sanctuary; it was a haven for a man who desired above all things the safety of solitude. For only a few minutes, the time it took to give the once-a-day stage a fresh relay of

mules, did Tim Dulane, as station agent, need to fear discovery. Even then, the Concord's passengers were apt to be too travel-weary to recognize a wrangler of Spanish mules. If chance recognition were possible.

True, an occasional wayfarer came by. A desert rat, perhaps, or a saddle tramp. Such men Dulane did not fear. They came; they wolfed down a hand-out meal, chinned a little, then drifted on. But this stran-

ger—the man who called himself Luray—was different.

“So your name is Dulane,” said Luray. “Been here long, Dulane?”

“Long enough,” said Dulane.

“It’s a lonely way for a man to live.”

Dulane thought of a prison cell, and muttered: “There are lonelier places.” And he was certain a flicker of some hidden emotion showed in the eyes of Luray.

Luray had ridden in on a tired dun horse, at sundown. Now it was dusk, and Dulane had lighted the swinging oil lamp. The lamp’s yellow glow filled the big room with a pattern of light and shadows; it fell upon Luray’s face, sharpening its angles and making it appear granite-hard. Having eaten at Dulane’s board, Luray now sat idly smoking. Wherever Dulane moved, he felt the stranger’s gaze upon him.

“Queer. I don’t remember your name, friend,” said Luray, “but I’ve seen your face somewhere.” He sat lost in thought a moment longer, then shrugged and rose. “Maybe I’m mistaken. I’ll be riding on.”

He took a silver dollar from his pocket, laid it on the table.

“Your money is no good here, Luray,” Dulane said.

Luray said, “Thanks, Dulane,” and picked up the dollar.

He came around the table and walked toward the open doorway, patting his stomach as a man will after a meal. He lifted his quiry for a last puff, then he flung the butt out into the darkness. He was fast, and he was tricky. His hand dropped fast, grabbing for the holstered six-

gun at his thigh. He swung around, the weapon half clear of leather. But Dulane, at that instant, was upon him.

Dulane’s fist struck hard against Luray’s chin, reeling the man against the wall. His left hand closed about Luray’s wrist. He drove his uplifted knee into the stranger’s abdomen, and then, as the breath puffed painfully from Luray, he wrenched away the six-gun. Dulane stepped back, breathing hard.

“Who are you, Luray?”

There was no fear on Luray’s face; it was caution that made him hold his hands shoulder high. “In my shirt pocket . . . a badge,” he said.

“Get it out.”

Luray obeyed. He held the badge up so that the lamplight fell upon it. Dulane’s eyes clouded, as he recognized the badge of a United States deputy marshal. Luray returned the badge to his pocket; he kept his empty hand up and lifted the other when he had disposed of the badge.

“I know you, Dulane,” said Luray. “You’re an escaped prisoner from Yuma. You were serving a ten-year term for a stage robbery, and you were sentenced under the name of Jack Duke. Why the devil did you do it, Dulane? You had less than a year left to serve.”

“I was going loco, Luray.”

“You’ll have to go back.”

Dulane shook his head. “Not ever,” he said.

Concern, but still no fear, showed in Luray’s eyes. “You’re going to kill me, Dulane?” he asked. “Shoot me down in cold blood?”

It seemed to be a thought with Dulane, for he stood there for a long moment, the leveled gun in his hand. But finally he shook his head. He broke the gun, emptied the cylinder of cartridges, and tossed the empty gun to Luray.

"Ride out, badge toter," he said tonelessly. "Ride out. I'll not be here when you come back."

Luray remained by the wall next to the doorway. He said, "I didn't come here manhunting you, Dulane. I had a tip that the outlaw Jess Hagar was headed here. The law wants Hagar more than it wants you."

"You trying to make a deal, Luray?" Dulane demanded impatiently.

The lawman stared at his hardened face, then shrugged. "That would be no use." He moved to the doorway. "I'll ride out now. I won't forget you gave me the chance. You've got twenty-four hours' grace, Dulane."

"I won't be here when you get back," Dulane told him.

Some passing wit had long ago named Halfway House, adding: "It's halfway to Hell."

It was no longer an overnight stop on the stage line; the hurrying Concordes paused there only for a fresh relay of sturdy little Spanish mules, then rolled on to the town of Pickett. Now, with Luray gone, Dulane went to the corral. The mules were pampered animals; they had been fed, and, it being soon stage time, he now watered them. There was also in the corral a sorrel gelding, Dulane's mount.

Once the stage had come and gone,

Dulane had to saddle the horse and ride out. For Luray would be back. The marshal would give Dulane his time of grace, but then he would be back. It was the owlhoot for Dulane.

Dulane climbed to the top bar of the corral fence, perched there with his dark thoughts, with the soft desert night all about him. His mind reached back, and his memories were ugly. Nearly ten years it had been. Ten years out of his life. Ten years of prison, then escape. He had shed the name Jack Duke, which the vanity of youth had made him take, and under his own name he had managed to land this job at Halfway House—a job no other man wanted.

But ten years ago, he had been a different man. He had been a brash young Texan drawn to the Territory by the tales of gold and silver dug out of the ground to make men rich. He had taken a job at Lodestar, then a booming mine center, driving a freight wagon. And in his brashness, he had smiled in his jaunty Texan way upon the wrong girl.

Nora Ames was her name. She had been the belle of Lodestar, and her father had been the bonanza king—rich as Midas, and wolf mean. The girl had smiled back at the Texan; it became a friendship, then more, and a twenty-year-old penniless Texan had dared to suggest marriage. He had not reckoned upon Judson Ames. The bonanza king had warned the bucko from Texas; the Texan had laughed, and then he was set upon by hard cases. A beating laid him up for a month, and it cured him of romantic notions. Nora

Ames had been sent East before he recovered. Recovered? The Texan who called himself Jack Duke out of vanity turned bitter and mean, and he teamed up with the outlaw, Jess Hagar. Judson Ames was shipping gold by stage, and there was a hold-up. It had been prison for Jack Duke, but not for the cunning Jess Hagar.

"Jess Hagar!"

Dulane muttered the name loud, hating the sound of it. That deputy marshal had said he had come hunting Jess Hagar—at Halfway House. Why? Why should Hagar's trail lead to such a place? Dulane shook his head, perplexed. He had been at the stage station two months, and in that time he had neither seen nor heard of Jess Hagar. A sudden uneasiness filled him. It was possible that Hagar had heard he was at Halfway House. Some stage passenger might have recognized him as Jack Duke, some shady acquaintance of the outlaw. Or perhaps a stage driver or one of the gun guards . . . A man, Dulane suddenly realized, never knew just what another man's eyes saw.

It was still early, still not stage time, but now there was a clatter of hoofs shattering the night quiet. Not mules in harness, Dulane realized, but freely running horses. They came along the road from Pickett, and they swung in through the gateway in the high adobe walls. There were three riders, and a harsh voice called out: "Hello, the station!" And even after ten years there was no forgetting the sound of that voice.

Again Dulane muttered: "Jess Hagar!"

Deep in Dulane something stirred. Hate ran through him, and fear too. He dropped down from corral fence, a hand on his gun butt, and he walked slowly toward the newcomers.

The trio had reined in before the station house, and the yellow patch of light from the doorway fell full upon them. There was Jess Hagar—famed gunman, notorious owlhooter. A big man, Hagar, bulky in the saddle. Ten years ago, when he had been perhaps in his middle twenties, Jess Hagar had been a handsome man. But now a life of wanton excesses had left its mark, and his swarthy face was turning flabby. His dark eyes, steady as the muzzles of a double-barreled shotgun, stared at Dulane—weighing him, judging him, sizing him up.

"You Dulane, the station agent?"

Dulane nodded, surprised that Hagar did not recognize him. But then he remembered that it was ten years, and that prison, more than anything, changes a man. "I'm Dulane," he said.

"What time's the stage due?"

"At ten, if it's on time."

"Good. We'll wait."

Hagar said that, then waited to see what Dulane would do or say. When he was satisfied that there would be no protest, he swung down from his horse. He tossed the reins to one of his companions. "Tobe, take the horses around back." He jerked a nod at the other man. "Kid, you stay with me."

Dulane shifted his gaze to the man,

Tobe. Here was a lean, leathery man; a man of thin lips and restless eyes, an outlaw and nothing more. Tobe took the reins of the Kid's mount and went around back with the three horses. The Kid, Dulane saw, "was just that. A youngster still smooth-checked, but with the brightness of a vast excitement in his eyes. He was still new to this business, Hagar's trade, and awareness of it made him keep his hand at his holstered six-gun.

"What's all this?" Dulane asked.

Hagar laid a flat look upon him. "We're meeting a hombre due on to-night's stage," he said. "Any objections?"

"A queer place to meet a man."

"Our business, Dulane. You keep out of it."

"So long as you don't pull any sneak tricks, yes."

Jess Hagar showed a smile, a smile as false as any smile could be. It was meant to be disarming. "Now what sneak trick would we pull, friend? If we were hunting trouble, we'd have thrown down on you." He shook his head. "We've come to welcome a friend. You mind if we wait inside? We can play some cards while we wait."

"Suit yourself," Dulane said. There was nothing more he could say, unless he wanted to back his words with gunplay. He watched Hagar and the Kid go inside, and the full weight of his fear was upon him. This gun-hung trio was up to no good. It looked like a stage holdup, one to be undertaken within a stage station—where the risk run would be small. Jess Hagar was still cunning.

The shifty-eyed Tobe came back from putting up the horses. He walked past Dulane and went into the stage station. He was carrying a bottle of whiskey. Dulane took out his watch, noted that it was but a few minutes after nine o'clock. His feeling of unease grew, was leaden within him, and he began to regret that he had forced the deputy marshal, Luray, to ride out. If Luray were there at Halfway House . . . Dulane put away the thought. He pocketed the heavy silver watch, turned to enter the adobe house.

He stepped into a trap. Stepping through the doorway, Dulane saw the threat too late. The Kid was pressed against the wall inside and as Dulane passed, the Kid's hand snaked out and grabbed Dulane's gun from its holster. Jess Hagar stepped forward, and he struck a low blow. Hit in the belly, Dulane doubled over. Hagar hit him next at the base of the skull, knocking him to his knees. Dulane's vision blurred. Hagar stepped back, laughing harshly.

"That's just a lesson for you, Dulane. I'm Jess Hagar. Maybe you've heard of me. If so, you'll heed what you've just been taught."

Dulane said nothing. He pulled himself to his feet, fighting down the dizziness of the outlaw's punches. His mind raged, was hate-filled, but now, with his gun gone, he could do nothing.

"What you want, Hagar?"

"What I always want," said Jess Hagar, his tone taunting. "There's a man on tonight's stage who's carrying a big gold poke. Me, I aim to have that gold." He showed a sud-

den impatience. "You'll keep out of it, Dulane. Any tricks and the Kid here will gun you down. You savvy?"

Dulane looked at the Kid. The young outlaw was faintly grinning, and he held Dulane under the sight of his own six-gun. The Kid's excitement made him dangerous. Dulane vaguely realized that this nameless youngster was no different than he himself had been at that age—a young bucko feeling his oats, sowing them wild with the wrong sort of companions. A shame, Dulane thought. Aloud he said: "I savvy, Hagar. I'm no fool."

Hagar chuckled at that, and he clapped Dulane on the shoulder.

"You'll do, friend," he said. "Play it our way, and maybe we'll cut you in." He motioned to the Kid. "Put that gun inside your belt. Tobe, break open that bottle. We've got time to waste."

Dulane believed that there is both good and bad in every man, but now, as the slow minutes dragged, he knew that Jess Hagar was wholly bad. The outlaw's mind was warped; perhaps it was diseased. The man could drink his whiskey, sit at a table and play at cards—within the hour he would rob and maybe kill. In an honest profession, a man of Hagar's cunning might have risen to the heights of success. As an outlaw, he had lived too long.

Dulane stood against the wall, watching the hard-cased trio. His mind looked forward and saw how it would be. The stage would roll in, driver and gun guard feeling safe

within the walls of Halfway House. Then Hagar and his companions would strike. There would be gunplay, of course, and decent men might die. A voice in Dulane's mind seemed to say: "There's nothing you can do, unarmed. Keep yourself safe."

But Dulane had his score to settle with Jess Hagar. Ten years ago, after that stage holdup Hagar and he, as Jack Duke, had pulled, Jess Hagar had tricked him. The outlaw had stolen his horse during the getaway, and he—the Texan kid who had gone bad just that one time—had been picked up by the posse. Jess Hagar had gotten away with the loot.

"Dulane!"

Hagar's voice shattered his heavy thoughts. The outlaw was gazing at him, a sudden suspicion in his dark eyes. Whiskey had brought a dull red flush to his flabby face. Dulane watched him warily.

"I knew you somewhere, Dulane." That was like an accusation. "Where?"

A chill swept through Dulane. He did not want to rouse the outlaw's suspicions; he did not want the man to know that he was that young Texan who had called himself Jack Duke. Such knowledge would make Hagar more dangerous.

"I've been about a long time, Hagar," Dulane said.

Hagar grunted. "All right, all right . . . But I'll remember you."

The outlaw went back to his drinking and his card game, but now he kept shooting Dulane suspicious glances. He would remember. That Dulane knew. And then—

There was no warning. One instant the doorway was empty, the next Luray stood in it. The deputy marshal had his six-gun out and leveled, and he said, in his flat, unexcited way: "All right, Hagar. This is it."

So Luray had come back without waiting twenty-four hours. But he had returned for Jess Hagar, not for Dulane. He must have been waiting out on the desert, watching Halfway House—and so had seen Hagar and his hard-cases arrive.

Jess Hagar sat behind the table, facing Luray. Tobe and the Kid, opposite their leader, sat with their backs to the lawman. Hagar had dropped his cards, and now his hands were flat on the table top. The other two strained about, to look at Luray. It was Hagar who spoke.

"You've got me, Luray—flat-footed."

"It took a long time, Jess," said Luray. "But now I've got you all together. You and Tobe and the Kid—and Jack Duke."

Hagar's face showed surprise. He turned his head to stare at Dulane. "So you're Jack Duke?" he muttered. "Well, now, that's funny."

"Not too funny, Jess," Luray said. "You're done. Stand up and shuck your gunbelts—but first turn your back. I don't want to kill you. A bullet is too clean a thing for you. A rope is what you've earned."

"All right, Luray," muttered Hagar. "I'll take the chance of escaping later. Boys, stand up and shuck your belts like the marshal says."

"You first, Jess," ordered Luray.

"Sure," said Hagar. And he rose, turned his back. He unbuckled his gunbelt and let it fall heavily to the floor. "What I'd like to know is how you got on to me being here, Luray."

"I arrested the other man who was to have ridden out here with you, Jess," said Luray. "He told me where you were headed and why."

Hagar grunted at that. Luray ordered Tobe and the Kid to stand and drop their gunbelts. It was then that the Kid made his play. Dulane saw it coming. He called out, but too late. The Kid twisted about firing from his holster. Luray lurched back, staggered against the wall, and a shocked look spread over his face. He fought to get his gun up, but now it seemed too heavy for him. He began to fall. His knees buckled and he fell sprawling.

The Kid stood there with smoking gun in his hand, his young face suddenly pale. Jess Hagar laughed and said loudly: "Kid, you're good!"

He swung about then, toward Dulane. "So you're Jack Duke, eh?" he muttered. "It's been so long I'd forgotten you, hombre. I reckon you hate my guts." He stooped and picked up his gunbelt. "We'll talk it over, amigo—after the stage gets here."

From across the room, the man Tobe muttered: "Jess, this badge toter ain't dead."

"He ain't?" said Hagar. "Well, Kid, finish him off. He's your game."

It was then that Dulane knew that Jess Hagar was a crazy man. Dulane watched the Kid raise his gun, but the gun wavered. The Kid was still

pale; beads of sweat stood out on his face. Then: "Jess, I can't do it!"

"Well, I'll be hanged, Kid. You're soft—soft inside!"

Dulane walked over to the fallen Luray. He rolled him over onto his back, and saw the spreading red patch on his shirt. Luray groaned and looked at Dulane, and he said thickly. "So you got me?"

"Not me, Luray," said Dulane.

He grasped Luray under the shoulders and dragged him to the far end of the room. He lifted the man onto his own bunk, then ripped open his shirt. The wound was at the right side, and if nothing worse Luray had broken ribs. The bullet had come out under the lawman's shoulder blade, and so it was a clean wound. Dulane had ointment handy; he got water and cloth for bandage, and he cared for Luray as best he could. The three outlaws watched him in silence, and when he was finished Jess Hagar said mockingly: "Now ain't that neighborly? Dulane, you've gone over to the law!"

Dulane frowned. "Luray will send me back to prison, if he lives and gets the chance." He walked slowly toward Jess Hagar. "He was here earlier tonight, and he said he'd take me back to Yuma. I planned to ride out after stage time, and hit the owlhoot. I'm not on his side any more than you are!"

Hagar held his gun aimed at Dulane's middle. Dulane ignored it, went on to the table. He took up the outlaws' bottle and poured some of the whiskey into a tin cup. "I've got nothing to live for but the owlhoot,

Jess. I don't care if I live or die."

He lifted the cup and drank some of the rotgut whiskey, conscious that the dark eyes of Hagar were watching with uncertainty. "I'll bargain with you, Jess," he went on. "I'll help you with the stage, on your promise to let me ride out."

The uncertainty was replaced by cunning, and Hagar grinned. "Fair enough. You have your mules ready when the stage comes in, so the gun guard ain't suspicious."

He lowered his gun, started to holster it. Then Dulane made his play, a crazy play that had only the slimmest chance. He flung the cup, whiskey and all, into Hagar's face. He whirled as Hagar bellowed, jumping the pale-faced Kid. Dulane's own gun was still sticking in the Kid's belt. Dulane wrenched it free, got his left arm about the Kid's neck and held him as a shield. Tobe's gun blasted first.

Tobe's bullet struck the Kid, and the Kid screamed and sagged against Dulane. Dulane fired at Tobe, fired twice, and saw the lean outlaw begin to fall. But now Jess Hagar had recovered. His gun roared, and its slug slammed into the body of the Kid, which Dulane still held.

Dulane fired at Hagar, but the dead weight of the body he held burdened him so that he missed. Hagar was cagey, shifting quickly one way and another, trying to get in a telling shot—and all the while he cunningly worked toward the doorway. Dulane's left arm, supporting the Kid's riddled body, began to ache; suddenly the body slipped, sagged down. Hagar fired, but Dulane had dropped

to a crouch, and so saved himself. Then Hagar had leapt through the doorway.

"Get him, Dulane!"

That was Luray, shouting from the bunk. Dulane had a glimpse of the lawman trying to rise, but then he was at the doorway. Hagar had disappeared around the dobe building, making for the horses. Dulane ran to the gateway of Halfway House, pressed against the wall, made himself small in the thick shadows. A shout sounded and there was a drumming of hoofs. The three horses came streaming through the darkness. Dulane saw them race past the lighted doorway. Hagar, cunning always, was driving the two riderless horses before him in an attempt to foil Dulane's fire.

The horses pounded toward the gateway. Dulane's gun flashed, but the shot missed. Hagar fired twice, wildly. Dulane tried again, and this shot caught Hagar in the chest. The outlaw flung up his arms, fell backwards over his mount's rump. Dulane shot him again before he struck the ground. The horses raced on through the gateway, out into the desert dark.

The stage rolled in half an hour late. By then there was no sign of the gun battle. Dulane had dragged Hagar's body inside the house, extinguished the oil lamp, then pulled the door closed when he came out. He had the relay of mules ready for the stage.

Old Mark Givens, the driver, halted the Concord with a flourish. Chris Hand, the gun guard, climbed

down and opened the coach door, saying, "Halfway House, folks," to the passengers. "Step down and stretch your legs while the wrangler changes mules."

Dulane worked by the light of a lantern. He worked quickly, expertly handled mules and harness, and as was his habit he paid no attention to the passengers who descended from the coach for a few minutes relaxation. But now, with his chore nearly finished, he heard a voice exclaim: "Jack . . . Jack Duke, is it really you?"

He knew that voice, knew it even after ten years. He looked up and watched Nora Ames come hurrying toward him. She was older, no longer a girl but a handsome, mature woman fashionably dressed in gray. The picture she made, the beauty of her, hit Dulane with a tremendous impact. Then he saw behind her the bulky figure of her father. Judson Ames was staring at him, a granite cast to his face.

"Jack, it's been so long. . . . I hunted everywhere for you, when I returned from the East." There was happiness in Nora Ames' voice, but a hint of tears too. "No one would tell me where you had gone." She managed a wavering smile. "But now I've found you!"

Dulane controlled himself, even though his heart was pounding crazily. He looked down at Nora's hands, which held gloves and a reticule, and there was no wedding ring. So she was still unmarried. Dulane's thoughts roiled.

Then he said, forcing out the words: "I'm afraid you're making

a mistake, miss. My name is Dulane. Not Jack Duke, Tim Dulane."

It was as though he had struck the girl. She reeled back a step, and she stared at him with disbelief. Dulane deliberately turned and finished his task of harnessing the mules. He was hard. He had to be hard.

"Get her rolling, Givens," he called to the driver.

The passengers got back into the coach, Judson Ames handing his daughter in. Givens and his gun guard climbed to the box. Suddenly then the arrogant Judson Ames said: "Hold it!" and climbed out again. He came to Dulane, and he said: "Dulane, I gave you a raw deal years ago. I thought I was protecting my daughter's best interests. I've been a tough one in my time, and no better than you, I reckon."

"Say what you're thinking, Ames," said Dulane.

"All right, friend. I'm thinking that I'd rather have Nora married to a penniless drifter than have her not share her life with any other man—as she's determined to do." It was clear that this was difficult, that Judson Ames was humbling himself. "I mean, Dulane, that you may call on my daughter . . . if you care to."

He swung away. He entered the coach, and it rolled away with the clatter a stage always makes. Dulane stared after it until it was lost in the darkness. There was no hope

in him, for inside Halfway House was Luray who would take him, if he did not hit the owlhoot, back to Yuma Prison.

Dulane dug three graves at a proper spot out on the desert. He packed the three bodies out by mule, and it was gray dawn by the time he had the graves filled in. He returned to the station, entered the house, and found that Luray had taken three suitable boards and whittled them into grave markers. The lawman had finished marking two of the boards; he had used a soft-nosed bullet to print the name "Jess Hagar" on one board and "Tobe Mercer" on the other. Now, seated on the bunk, still pale from his wound, he finished the third board.

"This marker is for the Kid," Luray said.

Dulane glanced at that third board, and then he stared. With the lead cartridge, Luray had block-printed the name: "Jack Duke."

Dulane lifted his gaze to Luray. "What's this mean?"

"The Kid had no name, so far as anybody knew," said Luray. "Maybe it was Jack Duke. Who knows? Put up that marker, Dulane. Jack Duke died last night."

Comprehension came to the eyes of Dulane. He saw Luray holding out a friendly hand. Dulane grasped it, and, perhaps for the first time in ten years, his grim face showed a smile that held no bitterness.

RANGE SAVVY

BY GENE KING

EARLY timbermen in the Pacific Northwest frequently left big tree stumps that stood as high as fifteen feet off the ground. These stumps have puzzled later generations, but the trees "weren't cut by Paul Bunyan." Though it may have seemed like extra work to build a scaffold clear of the ground for the men to work from, high sawing saved clearing away underbrush, and it was easier going with a "Swede Fiddle" sawing the trunk higher up than cutting through the pitchiness of the butt further down. In reality the high stumps were a time and labor-saving short cut in the pre-machine age of timber cutting in the far West.



Many of the smaller streams and rivers in the desert and semi-arid portions of Nevada flow upside down. The beds of the streams are on top, the actual water flow traveling beneath the surface along bedrock. Even so, these upside-down rivers form an important water resource of the locality. The subsurface water supply in them can be and is developed for placer mining, irrigation and other purposes just as can be the water in surface-flowing streams.



Though Plains Indians in the badlands country of northern Montana and the Dakotas usually let their ponies shift for themselves during winter, they often cut down cottonwood trees and fed the tops to the animals in particularly bad weather. The idea was not so much to keep the tough little horses from starving as it was to prevent them from wandering off in search of grass. The hardy animals could stand the weather but they had a tendency to stray, and hunting lost horses in a blizzard was a chore the Indians tried to circumvent. Hence the young cottonwood tops of which the ponies were very fond and which were quite nutritious.

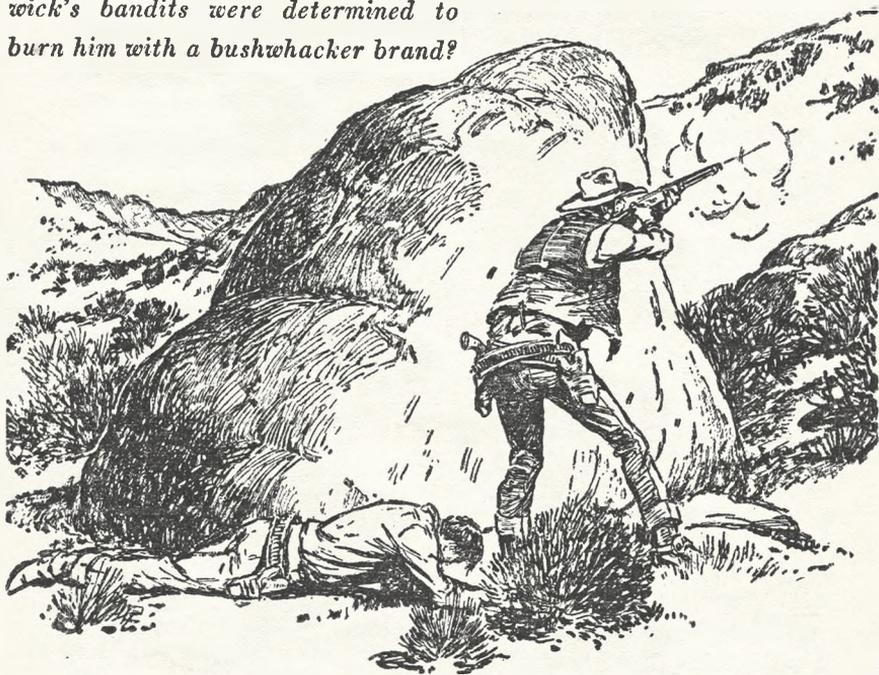


Mr. King will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

OUTLAW DEPUTY

by BRUCE DOUGLAS

How could Old Fox keep his rep as a square-shooting outlaw when Hodwick's bandits were determined to burn him with a bushwhacker brand?



To the lean, gray-haired, snow-browed old man sitting motionless in his saddle at the top of a wooded ridge, this business of getting ready to pull a holdup was an old, old story. Twenty years old. So old as to have lost its excitement and become monotonous. . . .

Four things, monotonously repeated: Find out where money was on the move. Set the trap. Spring it. Then disappear.

For twenty years he had been repeating that formula successfully. Though his face was on reward notices all the way from Texas to Mon-

tana, he had never been caught. And in all those twenty years he had never once killed a man while committing a holdup. Many a time he had ridden away empty-handed when an easy killing would have won him the loot. That was why his traps had to be good. To fool the victim, get him off guard, so that there would be no shooting.

Perhaps it was the cleverness of his traps that had earned him the name he went by. Old Fox. Except for the reminder which he carried in an inside pocket, to comfort him on lonely nights when he was holed up in the wilds, he could hardly remember having had any other name.

Old Fox squinted up at the sun and gauged the time with the accuracy of an Indian. In about a quarter hour, he estimated, the messenger would be riding down the steep slope into the mouth of this gulch carrying the bag of cash. Pay-off money for the hundred or more cowboys who had worked in the big Spruance Valley roundup.

Fifteen short minutes. But Old Fox had sized up the situation two days before and knew exactly what he planned to do. Close beside the trail, just at the point where the messenger would enter the narrow gulch, lay a huge boulder. A man behind that boulder could wait until the messenger had ridden past, then get the drop on him from behind. There would be nothing the rider could do but raise his hands and give up the payroll without a fight.

Old Fox dismounted and hitched his horse in a clump of trees and brush. Though he had two guns rid-

ing in tied-down holsters at his sides, he drew the rifle from its saddle scabbard.

"The more artillery you display," he muttered, drawing on long experience, "the less likely you'll have to use it."

He got down on his hands and knees and crawled rapidly down the slope through the dense underbrush, dragging the rifle along at his side.

He arrived none too soon. He had scarcely reached the boulder and crouched behind it when the sound of an approaching horse broke the stillness, rapidly growing louder. Old Fox flattened himself against the boulder and peered up the slope.

The man had the bag of money resting against the pommel of his saddle, balanced against his thighs. As he rode, he glanced sharply to left and right and his right hand hung close to the gun butt.

Silent, rifle held ready, Old Fox moved to the far corner and peered out, waiting for the man to pass by and present his back to view.

The rider was still hidden behind the boulder when a rifle shot cracked out. The bullet whined in, ricocheted off the boulder, and plunked into dirt with an angry buzz. Old Fox heard an angry yell, and knew from the sounds that followed that the rider had leaped from his horse to the floor of the narrow trail.

Suddenly tense, Old Fox glanced quickly out across the trail. A tell-tale wisp of smoke showed that the shot had come from halfway up the opposite slope and some distance down the trail—at least a full hun-

dred yards away and completely out of range of the six-gun which the messenger carried. Another shot burned in; and again the boulder behind which Old Fox stood rang with the impact of a bullet. Over on the other side of the boulder, the messenger was cursing in an angry monotone; and the deep roar of a .45 resounded in the gulch as the man futilely emptied his six-gun at the distant target.

A third shot winged in; and Old Fox flipped his rifle up and fired at the flash. He lifted his voice in an encouraging shout:

"This way, hombre! Crawl around here with me if you ain't too wounded to move!"

A surprised voice answered: "He ain't hit me yet, but I can't reach the skunk with this six-gun." And presently the messenger, flat on the ground, wriggled around the boulder and lay beside Old Fox.

The old outlaw was snarling under his breath. "The murderin' sidewinder! If there's anything I hate, it's a drygulcher! By gum, this'll show him whether we're helpless or not!"

He lifted the rifle and pumped two quick shots into the brush on the opposite slope.

A yell answered the second shot; and Old Fox growled: "Nicked the buzzard!"

He pumped a shell into the chamber and waited, rifle at ready. And when the next shot came screaming toward them, he shot low and a little to the right of the flash.

His shot was followed by a long, burbling scream. And suddenly the

bushes over on the opposite slope parted as the drygulcher rose spasmodically to his feet. The man hurled his rifle from him and clutched both hands around his throat, from which blood was streaming. For a moment he stood there, balanced in a kind of unstable equilibrium. Then he pitched forward and rolled down the steep slope to lie in a huddle in the trail, limp and still.

"That's that," Old Fox said and ejected the spent cartridge from his rifle.

The messenger was white-faced as he scrambled to his feet.

"By thunder!" he exclaimed, expelling breath from his lungs gustily. "That was close! You shore saved my life, old-timer. Shore lucky you was on hand with a ri . . ."

The word died in his throat as he found himself looking into the business end of Old Fox's right-hand six-gun.

The messenger's gun was already back in its holster. He lifted his hands uncertainly skyward. Old Fox spoke in a mild, drawling voice.

"An' since I saved yore life, hombre, I'm goin' to count on you to report truthfully that I killed that drygulcher while defendin' yore bag o' money, not while liftin' it off you. I've killed plenty men in my time, but never while pullin' a holdup; an' I wouldn't want my reputation spoiled."

A sudden change of expression in the messenger's eyes warned him, and he started to turn. But he was too late. The hard muzzle of a

gun pressed warningly into his back.

"Drop the gun," a voice rasped. Old Fox obeyed. He lifted his hands high above his head and turned to face his captor. The man was young, sturdily built and straight-backed. Old Fox's eyes fixed on the emblem of authority on the man's vest. The badge of a sheriff.

Old Fox smiled into the leveled gun. "I guess I was a bit careless, sheriff," he drawled. "I thought one man hid out along this gulch was all there'd be. An' I shore didn't hear yuh come up behind me."

The sheriff's laugh was genuine and hearty. He gestured behind him with a quick jerk of his head.

"I've been hid out in the brush right close to this boulder since before you crawled down here. I figured if anybody was goin' to try to lift the roundup payroll, this'd be the spot. So I come down here an' holed up two hours ago."

He paused, and his clean-cut tanned face became serious. "I didn't figure on a drygulcher, though, hangin' out of gun range with a rifle. You pulled a right praiseworthy rescue, old-timer. Too bad you had to spoil it by followin' up with a holdup. I swear, I plumb hate to take you in."

The cowboy Old Fox had rescued spoke up quickly. "Couldn't you let him go, sheriff, if he promises never to come back to your county? After all, I still got the money; an' you seen him save my life."

Old Fox was peering intently into the young sheriff's face. He saw

kindliness there, in a pair of steel-blue eyes the color of his own. But behind that kindliness lay a stern devotion to duty and Old Fox was not surprised when the lawman shook his head.

"It wouldn't be right," the sheriff said, "to send him away to rob other people, just because those people live outside Spruance County. No, old-timer, I hate to say it, but I'm afraid you've come to the end of your trail."

He reached out and lifted the outlaw's other gun from its holster. "But you can count on me," he added, "to put in a good word with the judge when you come to trial."

Around sundown the sheriff brought his prisoner's supper in with his own hands. And to top that, he even offered to let Old Fox come out into the jail office to eat it.

"I know who you are now," he said. "Your face is on dozens of reward notices goin' back over twenty years. An' from your reputation, I'd say you told the truth when you said you never killed a man while committin' a holdup. Listen, old-timer, I got my supper on a tray out in my office. If you'll give me your word not to make a break while you're out of your cell, we'll just have our supper together out there. What d'yuh say?"

Old Fox gave his word and, picking up his tray, followed the sheriff out into the office. The lawman settled down behind his desk; and Old Fox sat in a chair a little distance away, his tray on his lap. The two men ate in silence; and after they

had finished, Old Fox stood up and brought his tray over to set it on the desk. The sheriff built and lighted a quiry and offered the makings to his prisoner.

But Old Fox did not notice the gesture, for he was gazing intently at the framed photograph of a woman which stood on the sheriff's desk.

The sheriff said: "Have a smoke, old-timer?" Then, noticing the direction of the old man's gaze: "That's my mother."

There was a depth of pride and affection in his tone. Old Fox continued to look at the picture, throwing his next words over his shoulder.

"What's her name?"

"Mary," the sheriff replied. "Mary Hollingsworth Lucas. I'm John Lucas."

Old Fox's sun-faded blue eyes remained fixed on the picture. "She looks," he said slowly, "like a woman who'd found contentment in life. I reckon you've made her a pretty good son."

"I tried," Sheriff Lucas said seriously. "An' I think she led a pretty happy life. I wish, though, that she could've lived to see me sheriff. She'd 've been proud of that, just like she was proud of my father."

Old Fox turned slowly, and, seeing the makings in the sheriff's hand, took them and started building a smoke.

"Your father?" he repeated. "He alive now?"

The sheriff shook his head. "He died twenty years ago when I was just a baby. Died fighting for a friend. Against injustice. Mother always held him up as an example

to me. She left Texas an' moved here right after he died."

A dreamy look came into the sheriff's eyes, and he took a long drag on his smoke and exhaled slowly.

"I wish he'd lived," he said simply. "Wish I could've known him. Him an' me. . . . There've been times since I took office when I'd shore have liked to have his guns backin' my play."

He grinned, flipped his smoke out a window and rose as a girl came in through the street entrance.

"Grace!" he exclaimed, and moved swiftly across the floor to meet her.

Old Fox turned to look. He saw a girl of nineteen or twenty, lithe and shapely, with a well-shaped head, dark eyes and brown wavy hair. Her face, he decided, would be pretty except for the signs of worry now upon it. The girl held out both her hands to Lucas and looked up into his eyes.

"Oh, John," she cried, "it's happened! That . . . that Hodwick came around to see Ronnie again this evening. They stood out by the corral and talked for a long time. And now . . . now Ronnie has gone!"

"Gone?" the sheriff repeated. "You mean—"

She nodded, her eyes welling with tears. "I . . . I'm afraid he's ridden out to join Hodwick's gang. He's— John, he's only eighteen, and so headstrong."

John Lucas' face was set in grim lines. "I'd give it another name," he said harshly. "A boy like that, with everything to live for, throwin' in with a bunch of crooks simply because he lacks spendin' money to

jingle in his jeans! I'd 've made him a deputy if he'd shown any signs of settlin' down; but a deputy's pay just doesn't come in fast enough for the likes of him!"

The girl's eyes widened, and she took a step back. "John," she exclaimed, "if he . . . if Ronnie runs with Hodwick, you . . . you might have to arrest him some time!"

John Lucas nodded grimly. "If Ronnie thinks that just because I'm engaged to his sister, I won't do my duty as sheriff—"

Color rose in the girl's face, and her dark eyes flashed.

"John, you wouldn't!"

They faced each other angrily. John Lucas' jaw was set, his lips drawn to a thin line. Watching the two, Old Fox knew that though they spoke of arrest, that was not what they were thinking about. They were thinking that if Grace's brother hit the outlaw trail, John Lucas, as sheriff of the county, might have to face him some day. With guns. Might even have to kill him.

"Grace, if I ever have to trail Ronnie down, I'll do my best to bring him in alive," Lucas said heavily. "That's all I can promise you."

The girl's eyes were wide and horror-filled; and she spoke in a husky, faltering whisper.

"Then . . . so long as that . . . that chance . . . exists, I can't marry you, John."

Trying to keep back a sob, she turned on her heel and hurried out into the street without looking back.

The young sheriff stared after her with anguished eyes until Old Fox

said mildly: "I reckon you'd better lock me back in my cell, sheriff."

Old Fox was wakened in the middle of the night by a scratching on the bars of his cell window and a sibilant whisper outside.

"Fox! Hey! Old Fox!"

Coming quickly up off his hard pallet, Old Fox flattened himself against the wall beside the window.

"Who is it?" he whispered.

The voice from outside answered "Name of Hodwick. You don't know me, Old Fox, but I've got me a wild bunch here in Spruance County, an' I need yore help on a big job. I've got a saddled horse out here for you, an' a crowbar I can pry these window bars out with. Sheriff is out with a posse after some rustlin' I planted for him to find. I can spring you loose easy if you'll throw in with me on this job tomorrow."

"What kind of job, Hodwick?" Old Fox questioned.

"Bank job," Hodwick said in a low, cautious voice. "That bank right across the street from this jail. You got took this afternoon tryin' to lift a four-thousand-dollar payroll, Old Fox. That bank has got a hundred thousand in it waitin' to be carried away. There's five of us in it, countin' you. That means twenty thousand for you. Think of it, Old Fox! Freedom. An' enough money from one job fer yuh to retire an' settle down on! What d'yuh say? We need those guns of yores on this job."

Old Fox remained silent for so long that Hodwick finally repeated: "What d'yuh say?"

"If the bank is right acrost from this jail," Old Fox said finally, "what about the sheriff? Won't he be right on hand?"

A low, harsh laugh sounded out beyond the window. "That's where you come in, Old Fox. Wait till I've shown you how I got this all planned out. The sheriff won't have a chance. From where I got you stationed, you can plug him in the back as he comes out of the jail!"

"Then the sheriff ain't got a chance?" Old Fox said mildly.

"Like I'm tellin' yuh," Hodwick repeated, "the sheriff gets plugged the very first thing. That's the key to the whole plan. We pull this job right at nine in the mornin' when the bank opens. There won't be many citizens on the street at that hour. An' them as is won't be likely to pull their irons when they see the sheriff lyin' in front of his jail with a hole in his back. It'll be a walk-away!"

"I see," Old Fox said slowly. "An' you picked me to plug the sheriff. Why?"

"Jehoshaphat, Fox!" Hodwick's voice was roughly persuasive. "You ain't goin' to pull that lily-white stuff on me, are you? I know you've built a rep fer doin' yore holdups without killin'. It's an ace-in-the-hole to try to git a short term out of a judge if you git caught. But you're old now; an' even without any murder charges agin' you, you're wanted in enough places to keep you movin' from one jail to another the rest o' yore life. What I offerin' you is freedom, an' enough stake from this one job so's you can retire an' settle down."

He paused. Then: "If you're

squeamish about pluggin' the sheriff, Fox, I can put another man on that job, an' you can ride in with the rest of us an' take the bank. I reckon a man that wears two tied-down guns won't hesitate to use 'em on men that are shootin' in his direction, eh?"

This time Old Fox's answer came without hesitation. "Go ahead an' bust me out. I'm with yuh, Hodwick. I'll handle the sheriff just like yuh got it planned."

"Good!" Hodwick grunted and went to work with the crowbar.

In a comparatively short time Old Fox was once again astride a horse and riding beside Hodwick along a trail through dense darkness. Half an hour later they passed through a narrow passageway between high cliffs and out into a little circular valley. In the center of the valley a bright bonfire glowed. As they approached, men around the fire slipped back into the darkness. Hodwick rode straight up to the fire and dismounted in the circle of light; and Old Fox followed suit.

"Come in close, men," Hodwick called into the outer darkness. "I've got the fifth man to pull this bank holdup with us. This is Old Fox—the hombre who up to today has always been too slick to git caught."

Three men came forward, and Hodwick named them one by one as they came into the light. Old Fox peered intently into each face in turn. Then, seeing one other figure lurking in the shadows behind the bonfire, he turned to Hodwick.

"Thought yuh said there'd be just five of us," he said. "I see another

jasper back there in the shadders."

Hodwick laughed loudly. "Him? Step up, Ronnie, an' let an old owl-hoot hombre have a look at you! Ronnie only joined us tonight. He's goin' along tomorrow just fer the experience."

The lad called Ronnie came reluctantly forward. In the light of the bonfire his face looked sullen.

"That ain't what you told me when I come with you, Hodwick!" he complained. "You said there was money in it for me!"

"Oh, shore, shore," Hodwick reassured the boy. "I aim to deal you a thousand out o' the loot. But you got to git blooded, Ronnie, afore you git an even cut with the rest of us on these jobs. Fair enough, ain't it? A thousand dollars spendin' money, fer a kid yore age?"

Ronnie brightened a little. Old Fox spoke up.

"If this is Ronnie's first job, an' he needs to be blooded, Hodwick, why'n't yuh put 'im along with me, an' I can side him if he gets in a tight spot?"

"Shore, shore," Hodwick agreed. "That'll be fine, won't it, Ronnie, sidin' an old-timer like Old Fox? Watch him, kid, an' you'll learn a-plenty!"

Hodwick picked up a stick and, squatting down on his haunches, leveled off an area of dirt with his palm and began drawing a diagram.

"Now watch close," he ordered, "an' I'll show yuh where each of you is posted an' tell you what to do."

For a full five minutes he outlined his plan while the others listened. Old Fox noticed that at no time in

his explanation did he mention the killing of the sheriff; and immediately after it was over, Hodwick placed an arm over Old Fox's shoulders and led him aside.

"Ronnie don't know about our plans fer the sheriff," he whispered with a kind of ghoulish relish. "Since his sister an' the sheriff are sweet on each other, we figgered we'd better not tell 'im."

Old Fox chuckled appreciatively. "I get yuh. The first thing Ronnie knows about it will be when the sheriff is flat in the dust with a hole in his back; an' then it'll be too late fer the kid to back out. Yuh're a slick one, Hodwick. After that, yuh'll have a hold on Ronnie fer life!"

Hodwick laughed uproariously and walked back toward the fire.

The guns which Old Fox wore in holsters at either flank didn't have quite the feel of those which were still locked up in the sheriff's office. But they were good guns. Hodwick had seen to that.

Hodwick had seen to everything. And everything seemed likely to go off on schedule. Hodwick, Old Fox meditated as he waited with the patience of long habit for nine o'clock to come around, was a clever outlaw and a dangerous one.

Old Fox was stationed at the mouth of an alley right beside the jail. From that point he commanded the jail entrance to his left, and a clear view of the bank across the street. Ronnie stood right behind his shoulder; and as the hour of nine crept closer and closer, the youth showed

(Continued on page 128)

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(Continued from page 126)

greater and greater signs of nervousness. Old Fox spoke to him out of the corner of his mouth.

"No use gettin' excited, kid," he said, as Ronnie rubbed the palm of his hand on his shirt and again grasped the butt of a gun already slick with sweat. "Yuh must feel pretty big an' important, lookin' forward to havin' a thousand dollars in yore jeans for half an hour's work. Eh, Ronnie? But we got to wait quiet now. When things get started, I'll tell yuh what Hodwick told me to have yuh do."

Two bank clerks came up the street to the bank and one of them inserted a key in the door and presently threw the door wide. They went in. Close behind his shoulder, Old Fox could feel Ronnie trembling.

"Just about one minute, kid," Old Fox said quietly. "Get yore mask ready; but don't put it on till I say so."

Ronnie fumbled in a pocket. Old Fox cast a quick sideward glance in his direction, then made a final calculating survey of the street. Hodwick had been right: there were very few citizens on the street at this hour. Through the windows of the bank he saw one of the two bank clerks working at the dials of the big vault door. Presently the man straightened up, and pulled the door open.

It was the signal for quick, tumultuous action. Four masked men came riding into the street and dismounted quickly in front of the bank. Drawing their guns, two took positions on either side of the entrance,

while the other two stepped into the bank.

"Watch!" Old Fox said sharply, and Ronnie leaned forward tensely. Through the window they saw the two bank clerks start with surprise, then lift trembling hands above their heads. But the motion of surrender did not save the life of the clerk closest to the vault. The gun in the hand of the larger of the two bandits spat flaming death; and the clerk slumped down to the floor in a crumpled heap.

"Yuh see, Ronnie?" said Old Fox. "That's the way a good bank holdup is run. Kill a man to start with, an' that makes outsiders afraid to pitch in an' fight. Quick, Ronnie! Here comes the sheriff out of the jail office! Hodwick told me to let you be the one to plug him. You got to be blooded, yuh know, afore yuh'll make a good outlaw. . . . Not yet. Wait till he's out far enough so's he's got his back to yuh. It's safer that way. A good owlhooter never takes an unnecessary chance, Ronnie."

He turned to look at the boy, and found him trembling and green in the face. Guns were booming in the street now. The two men at the bank entrance had turned their guns on the sheriff; and the sheriff was advancing step by step in the face of their fire.

"That lawdog is a pretty brave hombre, ain't he, Ronnie?" Old Fox said. "Yuh got to admire the way he tackles the whole bunch single-handed thataway. Two more steps, an' he'll have his back to yuh, an' yuh c'n plug him. Get yore gun out,

kid. It's time to go into action if yuh want to be an outlaw!"

A groan came from between Ronnie's clenched teeth. "I . . . I can't! I won't do it!"

Old Fox whirled to face him. "Okay, kid," he said in an entirely different tone from the one of sneering worldly wisdom he had been using. "There's yore sister's sweet-heart out there, fightin' one against four. He said he'd make yuh a deputy if yuh showed guts enough to be one. If yuh don't want to fight agin' him, then go on out there beside him an' show him yuh're deputy material!"

Ronnie's eyes popped wide with astonishment. Old Fox said: "Go on! I don't aim to plug yuh. An' if I do, you'll be dyin' in a good cause, won't yuh?"

As he watched, a great change came over Ronnie. The lad's shoulders squared, and he took a deep breath and drew his gun. His face was white as a sheet; but his step did not falter as he strode out and took his place beside the sheriff.

Old Fox waited until the sheriff had cast a quick glance sideward and recognized Ronnie at his left. Then he drew both his guns. They were hurling a constant stream of hot lead across the street and into the bank as he moved out and fell into place at the sheriff's right.

"Come on, sheriff," he growled. "Let's get these yellow-bellied murderers!"

Step by step, the three moved forward. And one by one the bank robbers went down under their lead.

(Continued on page 130)

MORE ROOM FOR THE NAVAJOS

THE Navajo Indian Reservation in northeastern Arizona, Utah, Colorado and New Mexico is the largest in the United States. It comprises some twenty-five thousand square miles of land set aside specifically for the Indians. And now Uncle Sam is afraid it's not enough.

The rapid growth of the Navajo Indian tribe is giving the U. S. Indian Service one of its major headaches, and an economic problem that must be solved some time in the near future. The fact of the matter is that the Navajo Reservation, semi-arid land suitable primarily for grazing, has grown too small for the increasing Navajo population. The Navajos need more room.

When the land was set aside it was ample to provide for the 10,000 Navajos. Today, under reservation living conditions, the tribe has expanded to 50,000 and a still higher population is counted on in future, since more than half the tribe at present is under twenty years of age.

The major industry of the Navajos is sheep-raising. The reservation's principal crop is grass. Since raising of sheep, spinning and weaving the wool into rugs and blankets provide the Navajos with their principal form of livelihood, the necessary increase in livestock to support the increased population is causing a serious over-grazing problem. The natural resources of the wild, barren region are proving insufficient.

J. N.

(Continued from page 129)

The fight ended as suddenly as it had begun. Two dead men lay on the sidewalk in front of the bank. And two others had joined the unlucky bank clerk in a spreading pool of blood on the bank floor. Men came running along the street from both directions to form an excited circle around the trio.

Sheriff Lucas looked from one to the other of the two who had sided him in the fight—Ronnie, a stripling just coming into manhood, and Old Fox, weathered and gray. He spoke first to Ronnie.

"Thanks, kid," he said in a husky voice. "I knew you had stuff in you, if it would ever come out. I reckon this cinches that job as deputy for you—if you want it, Ronnie."

Ronnie's voice was equally husky. "I sure do!" he said, and his voice broke on the last word.

The sheriff turned inquiring eyes on Old Fox. "You shore turn up in the queerest places, old-timer," he commented dryly.

Old Fox grinned at him. "Just reducin' the percentage o' skunks in my profession," he drawled. "It's a hobby o' mine."

The sheriff's clean-cut face was suddenly serious. "In your profession," he repeated. "Old Fox, I don't know just how you ever got into that

profession; but you shore don't belong in it. Listen. I can get you a pardon because of what you've done today. I guarantee that after I've talked with him, the governor will grant you a free pardon for any crimes you've committed in this State an' refuse extradition if any other State sends for you. I've just made Ronnie a deputy sheriff. The law allows me two deputies. If you'll take that other badge, I'd shore like to have your guns backing my play reg'lar—like they did today!"

A murmur of approval went up from the surrounding crowd, and somebody raised a cheer.

Old Fox stood absolutely motionless for a long moment, his sun-faded blue eyes looking into the admiring eyes of the young sheriff. Then, almost automatically, his right hand rose and fingered at a pocket, feeling the reassuring hardness of an old tintype he had carried next his heart for twenty years. The picture of a woman. The same woman whose smiling face looked out from the frame on the sheriff's desk. A woman who had spared her son from shame, and brought him up to be proud of his father's memory. . . .

Old Fox said: "Proud to, son. Plumb proud to." And Sheriff John Lucas seized the old outlaw's hand in a firm grip.

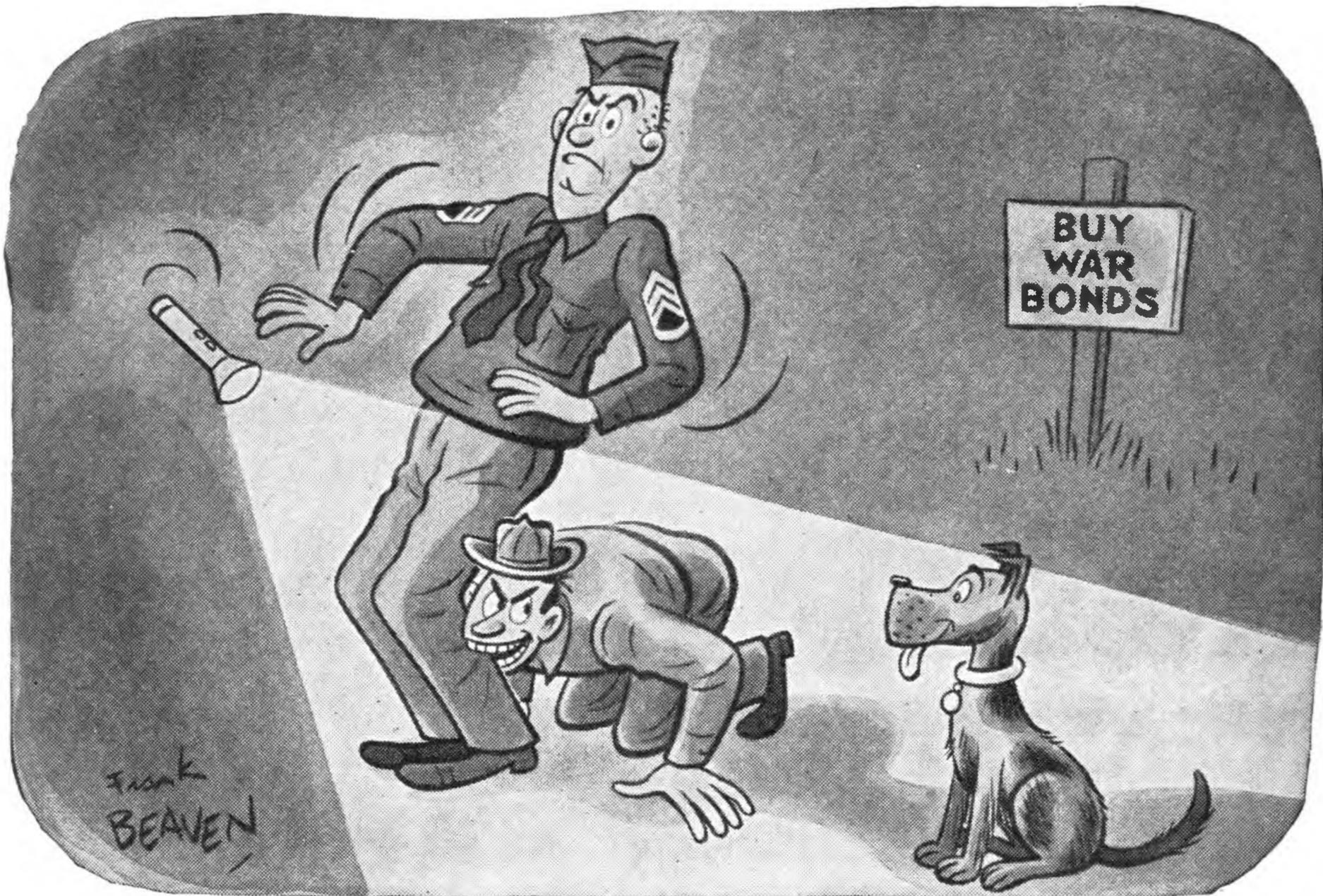
THE END

Answers to puzzle on page 63.

1. corral 2. drive 3. greenhorn 4. quirlv 5. tarp 6. posse 7. shindig 8. bonanza
9. dynamite 10. sorrel 11. salivate 12. rigging 13. batwings 14. poke 15. sleeper

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