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MAY '45

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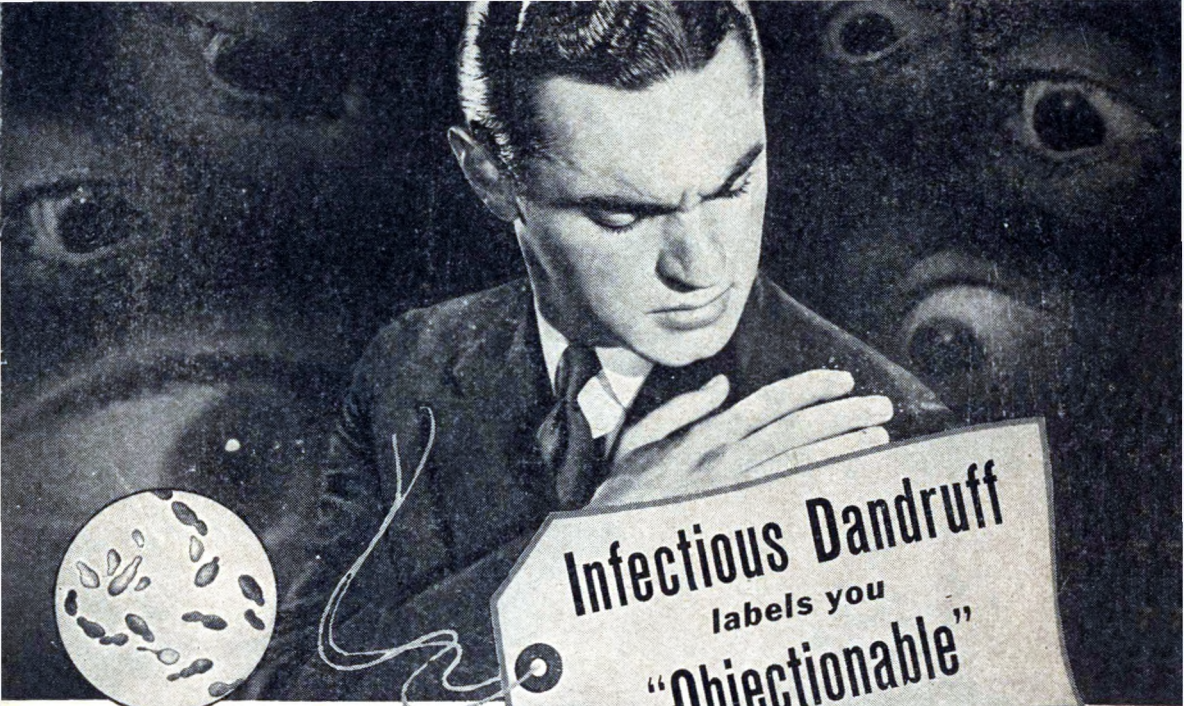
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Keep your

**GIVE NOW...
GIVE MORE**



RED CROSS
at his side

STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC.

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STREET & SMITH'S
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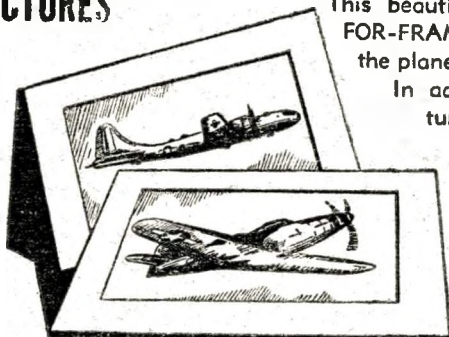
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Even though the law passed his pool herd, Jake Childress couldn't take on two more trouble-dogged mavericks without risking a Winchester cut by ruthless trail wolves



RENEGADE

TRAIL HERD

by WALT COBURN

I

JAKE CHILDRESS was pointing his first trail herd up the old Chisholm Trail to Abilene, Kansas. It was a small pool herd, less than half the size of the regular trail herds that tallied around three thousand head. A score or more brands were represented and Jake's crew was made up

of men who owned a few head of cattle in some of those irons. With one or two exceptions, they were afoot for good horses.

At the branding pens where Jake had put the cattle in his C road iron, Jake realized for the first time what a sorry crew of cowhands this was and he would have backed down and ridden away from it then and there



only he wanted to get his own little bunch of cattle out of Texas. Get himself out before they shot him for a rustler.

"I don't wanta die young," Jake Childress had told the Rangers. He'd grinned when he said it but his eyes had been hard.

"Then you better drift, Childress. Gather them dogies of yourn and git."

There were about three hundred head left after Jake sold his she-stock and culled the stuff that wasn't in shape to stand the long drive. That was all he had left of what had been a big outfit when his father had owned the C spread.

"You wouldn't tell that to the big Childress outfit." Jake had said to the Rangers. "At Childress, Texas."

"And that's a fact, Jake. You wouldn't be tryin' to claim kin to them Childresses?"

"Not even shirt-tail kin. Me'n my Old Man was the bronco tribe."

"And your old man's dead."

"Yeah. Somebody drygulched the Old Man." Jake's voice had flattened. "Could be I'm talkin' to the fellers that bushwhacked 'im."

"You're talkin' to the Texas Rangers, son."

"That's what I mean," Jake Childress had said, and walked away.

Jake was nearly thirty. Tall, wide-shouldered, lean-flanked. With hair so tow-colored he looked prematurely white-haired. His puckered eyes were as blue as his native Texas sky after a rain. Short-nosed, blunt-jawed, he had a wide mouth that grinned easily. A top cowhand anywhere. And tough to whip in any kind of a fight. A chip off the old Childress block. Jake's Old Man had been tough as a boot.

Jake had started out alone with his string of horses, his few hundred head of cattle, bed, grub and camp outfit packed on mules. At Waco on the Brazos he had thrown in with this mixed pool layout. It was the best he could do.

None of them supposedly had ever been up the Chisholm Trail or any other big cattle trail out of Texas. And when they'd asked Jake about his trail experience he had lied glibly enough for a man who had made it a rule to tell the truth unless he had to lie. Because the Old Man always claimed that a liar was forever getting tangled in his own rope.

"I bin up the Jim Stinson, the Pot-

ter and Bacon, the Goodnight and Loving, and the Western Trail to Dodge City. But this is my first time up the Chisholm Eastern Trail to Abilene," he had topped his four lies with one truth. And followed up his advantage. "I'll throw in with you scissorbills on one condition. Put your stuff in my C road iron and hire me for trail boss. And take my orders from there on."

They held a powwow about it and after a long confab they had agreed. Now Jake Childress was stuck with as sorry a looking outfit as ever went up the trail. He had called the men scissorbills and nesters and watched them warily because they looked ornery. And he had a sneaking notion that some of their cattle had been stolen. He picked the best man and the toughest, to ride the point with him and let the sorriest cowhands whip along the drags with their rope ends.

And before they got very far he had good cause to remember what the Old Man had always claimed, that a small trail herd was twice as hard to handle as a full-sized one. Twelve hundred head doesn't handle so good.

But they had crossed the Red River and were into the Indian Territory strip before Jake Childress ran into real trouble. The law had held the outfit up at the Red. Cattle inspectors had ridden through the herd, hard-eyed, grim-lipped. And when Jake had given them a tally list of brands and the number of cattle in each iron and they had finally and with great reluctance passed his herd

along but had kept the tally list, Jake Childress had a notion he hadn't heard the last of it.

"Looks to us, mister," a brand inspector told him at the Texas line, "like every brand in Texas is represented in this remnant herd."

"All but the big uns," Jake had grinned. "Strictly a henyard gath-erment."

"And you could hand-pick the Lone Star State," said a Ranger, "for two-bit cowhands, and got this crew."

"You can't git ary part of an argu-ment out o' me there," Jake Childress had agreed.

"Oh, hell, then. Git along. Take their stink on up the trail."

A few nights later they had camped on water at a place called Hunter's Store where the goat-whiskered old Hunter charged them a cent a head for watering the herd and five dollars a gallon for rotgut corn liquor. A slender gray-eyed girl with heavy black hair and dressed in faded overalls, blue cotton shirt, an old battered Stetson and a pair of glove-fitting new shop-made boots rode out on as good a cow horse as ever Jake saw, to tally the cattle with him. And before five minutes were gone Jake admitted to himself that this black-haired girl who was about seventeen, was a better cowhand than he had in his whole outfit.

Her name was Elva Hunter, she told Jake Childress. Her folks were dead. Old Goat Whiskers was her uncle and her guardian. He was ornery and mean and as crooked as snake tracks. She hated him and was afraid of him. Her boots had been ordered from a mail-order boot cata-

logue. They'd cost her a year's sav-ings. And her ornery old uncle had taken a doubled rope to her because he swore they were the gift of some trail boss whose cattle she had short-counted on the watering fee. Goat Whiskers was a miser. Until he'd had a leg shot off above the knee and an arm torn off by the same shotgun. in a drunken ruckus, Old Hunter had been a hard-riding, quick-triggered warthog from No Man's Land. Even now it was dangerous to cross him.

"If you'll take me along with your outfit, mister," the girl said in a hope-
less tone, "I'll make a hand. Cook, horse jingler, nighthawk, and I kin ride anywhere from the point back to the drags of your herd."

Jake Childress shook his tow head. He told her that was all he needed now, a woman along, to make this the sorriest trail-herd outfit that ever kicked up the dust.

"Not that you can't give the best man in my outfit cards and spades and beat him for a cowhand. But a purty girl would keep 'em in an up-roar. They'd bother you. And fight over you. Besides, with a female around, a man can't cuss free. And I couldn't move this henyard outfit ten feet without cussin'." He softened his refusal with a lopsided grin.

"I kin keep men from pawin' me, mister. Since I got big enough to attract attention, I've bin fightin' 'em off. And even if they quarreled and shot one another down to the last man, you wouldn't lose one cow-puncher out o' the ruckus. And I've heard all the cuss words . . . If I stay here much longer at Hunter's Store, I'll have to kill that old *unc-*

zard or I'm afraid he'll kill me—"

But Jake Childress shook his head. "No kin do, youngster."

They rode along the creek where the cattle were strung out, drinking. Elva Hunter tallied eleven knots in her bridle reins.

"And ninety-three," she told Jake Childress.

That was a closer range count than the stock inspectors back yonder at the Texas line had gotten in five times as long a time and three of them tallying the cattle strung out for an easy count. Jake Childress had cut the girl a look of praise. And when she rattled off the brands in that pool herd, she had him slack-jawed. Maybe if she'd cut off those long, heavy braids she'd pass for a boy. But every white-trash scissorbill in the outfit had already sighted her for a girl and too pretty a girl at that. Jake shook his head again.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky before sundown when they finished tallying the cattle. But it was much too hot for this early spring season. Hot and no breeze; the air dead and heavy. And when Elva Hunter said it would storm before morning Jake Childress told her that nobody but an old-timer or a damned fool ever predicted weather and she wasn't exactly an old-timer.

"I'll gamble you on it, mister," Elva said quickly. "If it don't come a bad thunder and lightnin' cloud-buster before daybreak, you don't have to take me along." And, flashing him a quick smile that parted her full red lips and showed him the whitest teeth he'd ever seen, she rode back to the sod cabin with the tally.

II

There was a jug of booze at the chuck wagon when Jake rode into camp after bedding the herd. And every man in the outfit was drunk or on the way to getting drunk. It was too late in the game to do anything about it. Old Hunter's moonshine corn was powerful and potent. Jake caught and saddled the best night horse in his string and slid his saddle gun into the scabbard. He had a hunch he'd need it. He hitched up his cartridge belt and kicked the drunken, snoring cook awake. The Dutch ovens were cold. There wasn't even a pot of coffee. And then Jake eyed the sullen group that squatted around the uncorked jug.

"I just paid that old billygoat-whiskered robber the waterin' money," he told them. "Paid it out o' my own pocket. It come to exactly eleven dollars and ninety-three cents. Three dollars of that I'm markin' off for my three hundred head. You owe me the balance. I want it now. Eight dollars and ninety-three cents. Dig it up and lay it on the mess box. I'll collect it when I come in from guard."

"You'll have to take it out o' our hides, boss," leered a lanky, raw-boned rancher they called Missouri. "Mebby you think we're all rich like you, Childress?"

It had been coming, right from the start. This showdown between Jake and the big rawboned Missouri. This was it. And if the big trouble maker hadn't been whiskey-clumsy, his shot would have hit Jake in the stomach. It grazed his sweaty shirt and Jake

shifted sideways, his gun in his hand. It roared, spewing flame. They all dodged back at the gunplay, scrambling, stumbling, falling out of the line of fire. Jake's first bullet hit the big Missouri in the midriff and doubled him up so that his aim went wild; then Jake's second shot tore the top of Missouri's head off.

It was almost dark and they had been sitting around an open fire roasting beef ribs on the ends of branding irons or sticks. Jake Childress stepped up on his horse, his smoking gun in his hand, his voice cracking like a bullwhip as he backed his horse in behind the bed wagon for shelter.

"Get up in the firelight, you nester scissorbills!" he barked at them. "Anybody want to pick up Missouri's hand, now's his best chance!"

They were too drunk or not drunk enough to fight. Jake cursed them out, let the rennuda out of the rope corral, and told the man whose turn it was to do the nighthawking not to lose a horse or he'd skin him alive. Then he rode alone out to the herd where he had left two men on guard.

When he reached the herd the cattle were spilling slowly off the bed-ground and the two men on cocktail guard were gone. They had a bottle apiece and had ridden off somewhere to guzzle it, leaving the cattle that had not bedded down to stray off.

Somewhere in the distance sounded the growling rumble of thunder. There was no moon and the stars were blacking out behind a sluggish cloud that was pushing itself up over the far skyline. The girl had guessed right. There was a storm coming

up, and Jake's crew was useless drunk. He had a herd of nearly twelve hundred head of cattle to hold —alone. It couldn't be done.

It was dark, with faint starlight. The night was closing in like a black cavern. And when that storm hit, the already restless cattle would break and run and spill. Scatter from hell to breakfast. Jake's men had their night horses saddled and the storm would sober them up a little. Enough to get some of them into their saddles. But by that time it would be too dark for even a cold sober man and a top cowhand at that, to locate any part of the moving herd. Jake Childress cursed as he rode. Cursed his luck and the fate that had thrown him into such worthless company.

Better, he told himself, a million times better if he had tossed his lot in with the renegade cattle rustlers the Texas Rangers accused him of running with. They'd given him the bad dog's name. Why hadn't he gotten a chunk of the lawless game? From the little greasy-sack feller with a dozen cows and fifty-odd calves, on up to the biggest outfit in Texas that the little fellers cursed and hated, all cowmen dragged their hungry loops. But the Rangers let the big spreads alone.

Rustlers had drygulched Old Man Childress. And they'd done their night-riding best to hamstring Jake Childress, making it look for all the world like Jake was mixed up with their fence-cutting and night-raiding murders. And even the friends Jake had among the Rangers, cowpunchers

he'd worked with, shared with, gone on sprees with, were giving him the cold eye, warning him out of Texas and all but running him off the old C Ranch where he'd been born and raised. They had dogged him out of Texas, crowded him into pooling his bets with this scissorbill layout. Well, he would hang and rattle till daybreak, whip his crew into shape and gather the scattered cattle. He might have to kill a man or two. Missouri had friends in the outfit.

Shucks, they were all of the same sorry tribe. From the pot-paunched Heavy on down to the lantern-jawed, shifty-eyed Amos and the left-handed roper Lefty. They packed guns and talked tough and dragged their spurs loud. The Rangers had told them all that Texas was too small to hold their kind. And those cattle inspectors had acted as though they almost felt sorry to catch a man like Jake Childress in such lousy, stinking company.

Jake's brooding thoughts were as black as the storm that was coming on. He was glad he'd gotten rid of Missouri, anyhow. The darkness thickened and he couldn't even see his horse's ears. He had to fall back on all the cowpuncher instinct and savvy he'd learned since early childhood to keep from losing the herd.

Then, off somewhere in the heavy darkness, Jake heard the sound of a cowboy song, clear-toned as the warbling of a nightingale. Clear and sweet and gay and reckless and plaintive. It was the old trail song called "The Chisholm Trail," some of the verses so ribald they fouled the sweet clarity of the singer's voice. The

song and rider came closer in the night. And Jake called out harshly:

"Quit it! A girl like you! Somebody'd ought to wash your mouth out with strong soap. Cut it out, Elva!"

The singing stopped. The same voice, clear-toned, but angry, gave him an answer.

"I ain't no damned gurl!"

That wasn't Elva's voice. But it was young.

"Then who are you and what you doin' out here?"

"I'm Rip Hunter. Elva's my sister. Uncle Lem sent us out to help hold this herd. And it'll cost you a-plenty. You ramroddin' that two-bit renegade outfit?"

A match flared, cupped in a pair of small hands to light a cigarette. It showed a boy's snub-nosed tanned face, all grin and buck teeth and brown-flecked gray eyes, straight black hair that needed cutting. But it was a well-scrubbed face and the boy's hands looked clean. And the patched and faded shirt, cut down from man's size, was clean and threadbare. Then the match went out as their horses came close together.

Jake sniffed the smoke and coughed. The darkness hid his grin.

"What's that you're burnin', Rip?"

"Corn silk. But she's kind o' green. . . . They're driftin' about right. . . . I heard shootin'. Who got killed?"

"It wasn't me. So you think the herd's driftin' about right. Right for what, button?"

"Ourn. Five hundred and eighty-

seven head. Only there'll be some to drop out with the drags. I throwed 'em in with that scatterment of leaders and then swung around and back here to the drags. They're in our X road iron and barrin' mebbysso twenty head, they're in shape to go up the trail. . . . Elva says you grin like you're easy to git along with but there's a look in your eye and not to monkey with yuh. But it was our last chance to get up the trail. And we ain't got much to lose. And if that damned old whiskered son of a snake gits ornery, I'm goin' to gut-shoot 'im. Me'n Elva's stood about all we kin take. . . . Anyhow they ain't Lem Hunter's cattle. They're ourn. Strays the trail herds dropped. nights like this. And we won't be afoot, mister. Me'n Elva's got a big string of horses that'll top that collar-marked remuda of yourn. We don't want no wages, neither. Just grub. And we won't eat much. And you kin butcher one of ourn, now an' then, along the trail."

The boy's voice had dwindled. The glow of the corn-silk cigarette had faded. There were strange but unmistakable sounds of a boy on horseback being sick. Jake grinned in the darkness, pulled to a slow walk.

"Somethin' . . . I musta et—" young Rip managed finally.

"Try a smoke to settle your stomach. I'll roll you one."

"No. . . . What a man needs is a shot of likker—"

"I got a bottle," lied Jake. "Lemme give you a shot o' white mule—"

"No . . . no, I'll tough it out. I kind o' swore off likker."

Jake Childress swallowed a chuckle. They heard someone singing a little homely song in a soft, plaintive voice and this time Jake knew it was Elva. Then the girl and her song rode up out of the night and Jake wondered if this pair of youngsters could see in the dark because Elva quit singing and hailed them before Jake could make out the moving blot of her and her horse.

"I win that bet, mister!"

"Looks thataway. How many more of you kids?"

"Just Rip and me. That storm is behind us. The wind will be at our tail. Blowin' north. Like a prayer, Rip. We waited a long time. . . . How many bells in your remuda, mister?"

"Five bell horses."

"Then I got 'em all. There'll be two more now. I belled my Drifter and Rip's Skookum black. Your nighthawk turned your cavy loose. I picked 'em up and shoved 'em in the pasture. And Uncle Lem will charge you a pasture bill. But that beats losin' your remuda. I'll wrangle the pasture before daybreak. Have your cavy in your rope corral. You kin hook up your chuck-wagon and bed-wagon teams and move camp by daybreak. Leave Uncle Lem holdin' the big empty sack. . . . Gosh, they're drunk. Drunkenest outfit I ever saw. Most of 'em won't get their heads out from under 'em till day after tomorrow. Lem Hunter's forty-rod makes the drunk come quick but leaves 'em sick as poisoned coyotes. . . . I can drive one wagon and Rip the other. Throw the remuda in with the herd. Till your

men git sober enough to fork a horse and overtake us."

"You're in a lather to git away, you two," said Jake Childress. "Can't wait till sunrise."

"We've waited all year, mister," said Elva. "This is the first time the sign was right. . . . Longer than a year. . . . Since our dad got killed. And Lem Hunter taken us. If it wasn't pitch dark Rip would take off his shirt and show you the raw welts from the last whippin' Lem gave 'im. Twice he nearly died from the beatin's. But that old devil couldn't make Rip holler or whine. And he laid it on worse because he knew Rip was takin' the blame for somethin' I'd done. If we'd had a gun we'd have killed him long ago. . . . Well, I've got a gun now."

"Where'd you git a gun, Elva?" asked Rip.

"I picked it up off the ground. Back at the trail-herd camp. The man didn't need it any more. He'd bin shot. They rolled him in a bed tarp and dug a grave. Nobody was sober enough to see me slip out o' the brush and get the gun. You won't take it away from me, mister?"

"No. No, I won't take it away. But I'd hate to have you shoot anybody with it. Or let Rip shoot anybody. Even that goat-whiskered old hellion at Hunter's Store. You kids must be awful desperate—"

"Yes, sir." Young Rip's voice had lost its shrill bravado. And Elva's voice had been soft, choked with pleading.

"Tell you what I'll do," said Jake Childress. "I'll have a talk with old Lem Hunter in the mornin'—"

"Talkin' won't help us, mister," said the girl quickly. "He'll just whine and promise you anything. Then after you're gone, he'll tie me'n Rip up and quirt us till his arm's played out. He's done it before. I'm never goin' back to Hunter's Store. I'm runnin' away. Takin' Rip with me. If you don't want us, we'll ride on right now. And if Uncle Lem overtakes us, I'll kill him. Come on, Rip. This man went back on his word. I bet 'im it'd storm—"

The wind came with a rush, spattering big rain drops. The cattle were moving ahead of it. You couldn't see them but you could hear the heavy rumble of their moving in the night, and the clashing of their long horns. They weren't running, not even trotting. Shuffling, hooking restlessly at the others, crowding, spreading. Scattering wider. And then the sheet lightning broke the black sky and Jake Childress saw his herd spread out far ahead and he was back with these two youngsters at the drag end.

"Hold on, you two young uns. You win, Elva. My name is Jake Childress—you call me Jake—and till somebody tougher than that snake-eyed old Lem Hunter comes along, you kids are stayin' with me. Mebbyso I got kind o' flimflammed into it, but it looks like I've got the pair of you on my hands. Regardless."

A sheet-lightning glare showed Jake their faces. Rain-sprinkled, scrubbed-looking, alike as two peas in a pod. Only one older and larger than the other. Two slim tanned-

faced kids with gray eyes and thick black hair.

"Your hair, Elva! The big long braids!"

"I whacked 'em off. I guess I kin pass for a boy now. Even my name. Our dad's name was Elva."

"Elva Hunter!" The name slid off Jake Childress' tongue and he spat it out as though it tasted bad.

"Elva Hunter was your father?"

Something in the gritty sound of his voice must have alarmed the girl because she caught her breath. And her voice was tense.

"You knew him? You know our dad?"

"In Texas. A man named Elva Hunter. But unless he was killed in the last few weeks, the Elva Hunter I know is a long ways from bein' dead."

"Mebbyso," said Rip, "Uncle Lem lied."

"This feller's name," said Jake, "was Elva Hunter. But he was always called Long Hunter. On account of bein' so long-geared in his build."

"That's him," Elva said flatly. "Lem's his uncle."

"Long Hunter," Rip spoke up, "was an outlaw."

"Long Hunter," Jake Childress grinned flatly, "is still an outlaw. So you're his kids? And I taken the job of ridin' herd on you. Well, till somebody tougher than your Uncle Lem comes along to claim you, you're in my C brand. That'll mebbysso be Long Hunter—if he's your daddy. Till he shows up, you're trailin' with me. I'm ramroddin' this outfit and you kids will have to take

orders from me. I won't take a quirt to you if you don't. But you'll both be goin' back on your word. And I've got no use for that kind of a man, woman or kid. Is that a deal?"

"Yes, sir," said young Rip promptly. "Damn right."

"The cussin'," said Jake flatly, "is out. And if I ketch you at it, or hear you singin' a dirty song, you'll taste yaller soap for a week."

"I'll cut out the cussin'. I only did it to be tough. Like smokin'. Like I got sick on Lem's booze once. But don't hurt my sister."

"I won't hurt either of you kids. Seems to me like you bin hurt too much a'ready."

"I reckon," Elva said quietly, "you hate Long Hunter."

"How'd you figger that out?" asked Jake.

"He's no good. He hasn't got a friend on earth. Our mother was always runnin' away from him, takin' us kids. And he'd ketch her and fetch us back. The last time he beat her, she died of it. Long Hunter and Uncle Lem buried her there at Hunter's Store and they drove cattle and horses over the grave to tromp it so's to hide it. Then Long Hunter pulled out. And when he didn't come back, Uncle Lem said he'd bin killed down in Texas by the Rangers."

"Long Hunter ain't dead . . . yet. You don't talk like you had much love for your daddy."

"Rip thinks he's somethin' great," said Elva. "I hate him. He killed our mother. But he never killed her spirit. She was a Cherokee. I'm prouder of bein' part Cherokee than

I am of the white man's blood in me. Rip and I are half-breeds, mister."

"Not mister. Jake. And you just keep on bein' proud of your Injun blood. How old are you two fellers, anyhow?"

"I'm eighteen. Rip's fifteen. How old are you, Jake?"

Jake Childress grunted as though he'd been hit in the midriff. The question had come without warning. And he felt his face get hot and was grateful for the darkness that hid the red flush he felt in his face.

"Me? I'll be twenty-eight before long. Only I let on to be older. When you're ramroddin' a cow outfit, you want to seem older or they'll treat you like a kid. . . . Let's kind o' let these drags go and rim around along the edge. That storm's due to hit so you two kids stay close together and hang onto my tail. All we kin do is let these dogies drift. Gather 'em in the mornin' by the light of day."

III

Elva rode on one side of Jake and Rip on the other. He was a little startled when the girl groped out and found his hand and hung onto it. And he heard her voice, low-toned, vibrant.

"Thanks, Jake . . . for taking us along. Rip's a good kid. Too good to be abused. Treat him right, Jake, and he'll make it up to you in his own way. And so will I. . . . You see, you're the only man who ever came up the trail that I knew I could trust. And when I heard that Missouri and the one they call Heavy

and that pale-eyed Amos and the others tell Uncle Lem they aimed to get rid of you before they moved camp, I knew that there was something wrong and that Rip and I could side you in a tight. I guess it was wrong but I hoped you'd need us as much as we needed you. Then you shot that Missouri and the others are fixing to kill you. I heard 'em talkin' when they planted Missouri.

"Missouri and Heavy and Amos have been to Hunter's Store before—with cattle. This is the biggest drive they ever fetched. They drop the cattle here on good feed and water and go back for more. They build up their trail herd here. When they've built it up to about three thousand head, they drive on to Abilene. And don't let 'em fool you. They're not as sorry an outfit as they let on to be. They're fair-to-middlin' cowhands. And they work for Lem Hunter. That is, Missouri and Heavy and Amos. And the one called Ruxtell who always meets 'em here to tally out their cattle. Only Rex Ruxtell didn't show up and Uncle Lem sent me to tally out the herd.

"It ain't a watering fee he collects. He pays 'em a commission on the cattle. Some they buy dirt cheap. But it's mostly stolen cattle. Or they have some sucker like you along with a few hundred head. And they get rid of the suckers here at Hunter's Store. So that's what you're up against here, Jake. That outfit got drunker than they figured. Old Lem has a bottle of stuff he calls knockout drops. I dumped it in the jugs they got at the store. Maybe enough to kill 'em all. I don't care much.

You can't be too chicken-hearted when you're playin' for keeps."

Elva tugged at Jake's hand and he knew that she was leaning from her saddle, trying to read his face when the next lightning flare came, anxious for his approval. And then the lightning did sear the blackness with its almost blinding white glare and he gave her a quick grin.

Suddenly the rain came down like a heavy gray wall and the chain lightning stabbed and thunder crashed. Jake kept Elva and Rip with him as they trailed in the muddy wake of the herd of longhorns that had broken into a run. And he had to shout to make himself heard above the crashing din.

There was no sense in riding down and playing out their horses. They were powerless to check the run or keep the cattle from scattering. The run was on and it would stop when the cattle got too leg weary to do anything but walk-bawl. Jake reined down to a walk and when the crash of thunder rumbled into silence he shouted to Elva and Rip that they might as well take it easy for a few hours. When the lightning flared again Elva grabbed his arm and pointed. Jake caught a swift glimpse of a cabin and two big corrals connected by a branding chute and a small round horse corral beyond.

They rode over there and, leaving their horses in the lee of the small corral, went into the cabin. There was a stove and a couple of empty bunks; pots, pans, tin dishes and a supply of grub. Rip lit a couple of candles and Elva located the cof-

fee while Jake got a fire built. Then they told Jake to take it easy while Elva sliced bacon and made biscuits and Rip peeled some spuds.

The cold rain had soaked them all to the hide and their clothes were sodden and they were cramped and chilled, but the fire and hot strong black coffee and warm grub fixed that. And after they'd eaten their fill Jake rolled and lit a damp cigarette and proceeded to get better acquainted with the two youngsters.

Elva had chopped her hair off to a ragged line above her shoulders and with her hat off, her heavy black hair bushed out around her slender face and her black-fringed eyes were large and dark-gray under almost heavy black brows. Her wet faded-blue cotton shirt clung to her as though it was pasted on and because she was budding into womanhood no man with even one eye in his head could ever mistake Elva Hunter for a boy. Elva looked just what she was, a girl who had chopped off her braids. And whenever Jake looked at her his pulse quickened. Elva was woman enough to realize the effect she had on this cowpuncher. And it made them both awkward and shy and tongue-tied.

Young Rip carried the burden of talk with boyish enthusiasm. His assumed toughness shed, he was a mighty likable kid. And his eyes, gray as his sister's but brown-flecked, were bright with excitement. His boyish chatter eased off the awkward silence and Jake began to feel more relaxed. And Elva lost something of her shyness. But her glance would meet Jake's and they would smile

faintly and their glances would slide away. Elva Hunter was not beautiful but there was something about her that took a man's breath.

"She's got a dress hid out at the store," Rip broke a silence that had begun to get awkward. "It's red. You oughta see her in it, Jake!"

Elva's tanned face flushed and Jake grinned foolishly. The thunder crashed and rain pounded and the noise of the storm blotted out the sounds made by horses and men outside. Then the door was shoved open and the blast of wind and rain blew out the lights of the two candles.

Jake Childress jerked his gun. He'd seen young Rip dive under the bunk across the room. But Elva was alongside him. So close that he could hear her quick breathing and the click-click of her gun cocking. And the odor of her hair filled his nostrils.

"Don't shoot, men!" called Jake flatly. "You might hit a lady!"

IV

The door was open and the storm swept into the cabin. Horses moved out in the black mud. There was the sound of spurs and swishing leather chaps and men moving cautiously in the darkness. And then a white glare as the lightning flashed. And just inside the doorway stood a short, blocky man in a torn yellow saddle slicker and fringed leather chaps. The brim of his rain-sodden hat slanted across a pair of hard green eyes. A week's stubble of red beard marred the blunt square jaw. A six-shooter was in his freckled hand.

"Rusty!" Jake Childress almost shouted. "Don't shoot!"

Then the glaring white light was gone and the darkness was thicker than ever.

"Stand back, boys. It's Jake Childress. With one gal in his arms and another un under the bunk. He's got 'em dressed in overalls. Ol' Lady Killer Jacob. The one in sight's shore purty. But—

Kin she bake a cherry pie, Billy Boy, Billy Boy?

Kin she bake a cherry pie, charm-in' Billy?"

The red-headed cowpuncher's voice broke into a croaking song. Others outside were sloshing in the gumbo mud.

Jake realized that his left arm was around Elva's shoulders and he was holding onto her and shielding her with his own bulk, his gun ready in his right hand. He released the girl and grinned in the darkness when she found his hand and hung onto it.

"Rusty McCurdy should've bin a clown in a circus," he said, "or a side-show freak. But they let the bars down and he slipped into the Texas Rangers. Don't let the sawed-off, U-legged runt plague yuh."

"And I ain't no damn gurl!" sounded Rip's voice as the boy scrambled out from under the bunk.

Jake struck a match and lit the two candles. A tall rangy man and another man with a slim build, both rain-sodden and neither of them wearing slickers, shoved the short Rusty aside and crowded into the cabin. When they saw Elva was a girl, they pulled off their hats. They nodded at Jake, their eyes cold and

Blinded momentarily by pain, Jake bored in, all unconscious of the knife Swain had pulled on him.



hard. But Rusty yanked off his hat and bowed his sweat-matted rust-colored head, the grin spreading across his red-whiskered face.

"This is Elva Hunter," said Jake. "The boy is her brother Rip."

"Now I'll tell a bigger un," grinned Rusty McCurdy. "You're smart, mebby, Jake. But you can't change Long Elva Hunter into a girl. And where's that comical outfit of yourn? Remember these fellers? Cattle inspectors that looked over

your dogie herd back at the Texas line. The big feller is Burt Swain. The slim un is Randy Hayes. They want another look at them cattle. And so do I."

Rusty McCurdy, Texas Ranger, still grinned. But his eyes were as green as ice.

"Then why don't you ride along and look at them cattle you crave so bad to see again?" Jake's voice was saw-edged. "Nobody asked you in

here. If I was you fellers I'd keep ridin' to my chores."

"On a night like this, Jakie?"

"On a night like this, Red Top."

"Mebbyso," drawled the big man, "this Jake Childress would look good wearin' handcuffs."

Jake let go Elva's hand. He grabbed Rusty's slicker and yanked, throwing the blocky little Ranger to one side and off-balance. His six-shooter was in his hand and he slapped the big stock inspector along one jaw and the side of the head with its barrel. Big Burt Swain staggered sideways and the gun barrel back slapped him across the bridge of his hawk-beaked nose. His pale blood-shot gray eyes blinked against the blinding pain. And then Jake whirled and his gun barrel chopped down across Randy Hayes' wrist and the six-shooter dropped from the slim cattle inspector's hand, clattering to the hard-packed dirt floor.

Jake Childress was breathing hard now and his tanned face was a little white and his eyes were blue slits as he backed away, his gun covering Rusty McCurdy.

"I told you fellers back yonder," grinned Rusty, "that Jake Childress was a warhawg if you prodded 'im too hard."

"Arrest 'im, McCurdy!" Big Burt Swain's nose was spilling blood and he was half-blind from pain and the blood seeped into his drooping black mustache and into his mouth and he spat the blood onto the floor. But he had let go of his gun and made no move to grab it again.

Rip grabbed Randy Hayes' six-shooter off the floor and ducked un-

der the table and in behind his sister with it.

Jake cut a quick look at Elva. Her face was pale but the gun in her hand was steady as it pointed at Burt Swain's middle and her gray eyes were dark, almost black in the flickering candlelight.

"I'm plumb out o' my territory, gents," said the Texas Ranger. "I just come along fer the hossback ride. Better simmer down, and dry off. Look what you done to this slicker, Jake!" Rusty McCurdy's green eyes glinted.

"I'll buy you a new un when I sell my cattle, Rusty. That un leaked anyhow."

Randy Hayes held his wrist and flexed the fingers slowly. Pain tightened his lips but his light-brown eyes looked Jake over with something like respect. He was young, somewhere in his early twenties, with sandy hair that was naturally curly.

Jake gave Randy Hayes a hard, appraising look. Then stared at the big black-haired Burt Swain with cold enmity.

"I didn't cotton to you back at the Texas border, Swain," Jake's voice was flat-toned. "The oftener I run into you, the less I like you. Whenever you feel lucky, reach for that white-handled gun of yourn. When you do that, I'll gut-shoot you. That plain enough?"

"It goes double, Childress." Burt Swain pulled a dirty, rain-sodden bandanna from his flank pocket and wiped the blood from his drooping black mustache. There was murder in his pale-gray eyes.

"You're so almighty anxious for

another look at that trail herd, Swain," said Jake Childress, "we'll let you ramble on. You'll just wear yourself out in here."

Burt Swain reached behind for the door latch. Somebody had shut the door.

"Come on, Hayes," he rasped. "Let's go, Ranger."

"Not till I git the wrinkles out o' my belly," grinned Rusty. "My daddy always told me to eat whenever there was grub in sight."

"Not in this storm, Swain," said Randy Hayes.

"Hanged if I'm goin' then. The devil with you, Childress. This ain't your cabin. I'll stay as long as I damned want to."

"Not," grinned Rusty McCurdy, "unless you clean up your way of talkin' in front of a lady."

"Lady! Since when has Hunter's brat become a lady?"

This time Rusty McCurdy stepped aside of his own free will. And Jake Childress charged, bare-fisted this time. Swain's heavy fists smashed into Jake's face. Blood spurted. Pain stabbed Jake's eyes. He bled in blindly, hooking with both fists. They came together with a heavy crash and went down, Swain underneath. The swift, slithering pain ripped along Jake's back. Swain had pulled a knife. And for the fraction of a second Jake knew the fear that every white man has of a knife.

But big Burt Swain did not slash him again. Elva Hunter was across the room before anybody saw her move out of her tracks. The barrel of the six-shooter that had once be-

longed to Missouri thudded down across Swain's thick sweat-matted black head. His pale, bloodshot eyes rolled back and he went limp under Jake's weight. A knife with a six-inch whetted blade and leather handle slid from his nerveless hand.

Jake got onto his feet, blood trickling from his nose, the back of his shirt ripped from collar to the waistband of his overalls. Blood oozed from the long shallow knife rip. He smashed the knife blade with his boot heel and grinned crookedly at Elva who stood there panting as though she'd been running, her eyes dark with fury.

"That," she said, motioning at the knife, "is the bad Injun in him."

"You know 'im, Elva?" asked Jake.

"Know him? He's . . . he's been to Hunter's Store."

Her eyes shot Rip a warning look that shut the boy's open mouth. Then she told Jake to get his shirt off and she'd tend to the knife rip.

"You ain't got a sister," grinned Rusty, "hid out somewheres?"

Randy Hayes squatted down on his boot heels beside Swain. Then looked up with a faint mirthless grin.

"Just knocked out for a spell."

"Too bad," said Rusty. "Let's try a little weather on 'em. Grab 'is arms." The Ranger picked up the unconscious man's legs.

Rip darted over, grabbed the bone-handled gun from Swain's holster and kicked the limp, sagging man.

"That'll learn the damned snake to not cuss a lady."

They lugged Burt Swain outside. The storm was slacking up. Leaving

the knocked-out man lying face up in the mud, they came back into the cabin. Rusty made quite a show of carefully unbuttoning the old yellow slicker that had long ago outlived its usefulness and was brush-torn and ripped in half up to the collar by Jake's yanking. And they were all laughing by the time the little red-whiskered Ranger had hung the tattered slicker carefully on a nail.

"And now"—Rusty hitched up his brush-scarred chaps—"me'n Hayes will take care of our horses. And see if the big feller's come alive. What does a willin' boy do around here to earn mebbby a cup of coffee, lady?"

"There's only spuds," said Elva, "and bacon and I'll make some more biscuits."

"For a bait of grub like that, Hayes and me will cut the big brand inspector's throat." Rusty shoved the slim young cattle inspector out the door ahead of him.

"Is he a Texas Ranger?" asked young Rip. "Honest, Jake?"

"One of the best, pardner. And right up amongst the toughest."

"Hayes," said Elva, "looks like he might be on the level."

"But that Swain feller," said Jake.

"Burt Swain," Elva Hunter spoke quietly, "is Long Hunter's first cousin. He's a renegade."

"A renegade with a law badge pinned to his shirt." Jake nodded. "That kind is always ornery. And treacherous. He sells out, then goes back on his deal. Missouri and the other scissorbills bought him off back at the Texas line. Paid him some-thin' to pass the trail herd. They

got sore when I wouldn't chip in with a hundred dollars."

"How about Hayes?" asked the girl.

"He was workin' under Swain. He didn't see Swain take the money. It was Hayes that wanted to hold the cattle there till he could check up fu'ther on the brands. But Swain told him to pass us along. And there was a deputy sheriff and a Ranger there that had known me in Texas and was willin' to pass my C cattle and said they'd hold me responsible for the rest of the stuff I'd bin damn-fool enough to put in my C road iron. And I just cussed, Rip, so that makes you'n me even and no yaller soap. And you shouldn't kick a feller when he's out." But Jake grinned and thumbed the boy's ribs. Rip giggled and squirmed out of reach.

Jake had pulled off his shirt and straddled an old chair and Elva was washing the blood from the knife rip and daubing the shallow rip with bacon grease.

"You saved me from a bad cuttin', Elva. He'd have killed me. I don't know how to pay you back. Or what to say."

"Why don't you give 'er a good hug an' kiss," suggested young Rip. "She brags she never let a man kiss her. But she'd let you. I reckon she's stuck on you, Jake. Gosh, I never seen her act like that before. Elva's always bin a wildcat. But now, gosh, look at 'er. She's—"

"Why don't you rustle some dry wood?" Elva's face was scarlet.

"You bet. I kin take a hint. Two's company but three's—" Rip slid out of the door and banged it shut

as the tin cup with the rest of the bacon grease sailed through the air. It hit the door with a bang.

V

Jake was on his feet now. He was red-eared with confusion. But somehow he managed to get up the nerve to kiss Elva. And her kiss was soft and warm against his mouth.

Then the door creaked open and Rusty McCurdy came breezing in. He let out a startled "Whoa!" and backed out again, bumping into Randy Hayes and slamming the door. Then he whistled loudly off-key and rapped on the door and came in, ignoring them as he unbuckled his chaps.

"Make Swain wipe the mud off 'is feet, Hayes, if he's comin' back in." He dropped his chaps and short denim jacket and hat on the floor.

Hayes came in and Rip with him, both carrying wood they'd gotten from the lean-to shed.

"Swain's a little feeble yet," said Randy Hayes.

There was a worried sort of look on his young face. It took him a little while to get around to unloading what was on his mind.

"I was told to take orders from Burt Swain, Childress. Well, he passed your herd there at the line. Later he changed his mind. You'd bin gone a day or two when he said we'd overhaul your outfit and make a Winchester cut on your cattle. Then Rusty here showed up and said he was a Texas Ranger and he might as well come along for the fresh air. I didn't like the looks of your trail

herd then. I ain't changed my mind about it. I'm afraid, no matter what Burt Swain decides to do about it, I'll have to work your herd. I don't want to be ornery about it—"

"I'll not get in your way, Hayes," said Jake Childress. "Fact is, I'd be proud to help you trim that herd. All I own is the stuff in my C brand. It's a big C on the left ribs and another C on the left thigh. The little C brand on the neck is the road iron—so's we kin gather and claim anything spilled in a stampede like tonight. But it suits me to just gather my own stuff, and some cattle belongin' to Elva and Rip that they got branded in an X road iron."

"No," Elva spoke up quickly, red spots in her cheeks, "I've changed my mind, Jake. They're stolen cattle. Lem Hunter claims 'em. Rip and I don't want 'em."

"Aw, gosh, Elva," Rip put up a feeble protest, "after all our work corralin' 'em here and proddin' 'em through the chute and burnin' that X on 'em and you give 'em up without a fight! Geemanatalie!"

"Without cussin' once," grinned Jake. "You're doin' all right, pardner. And it'll be up to Randy Hayes. You wouldn't have a list of stray brands in that X gatherment, Elva?"

"I can make out one without too many mistakes. There's some stuff from just about every big outfit that's come up the Chisholm Trail. Some left for watering fees. Some sore footed cut-backs. Some lost on nights like this and never gathered. And none of 'em rightfully belongin' to Lem Hunter."

Randy Hayes grinned faintly and

rubbed his swollen wrist. He cut a quick look at Rusty and the Ranger nodded.

"You give Hayes back his gun, button," said the red-headed Ranger, "and mebbys he won't jail you for a rustler. I got a notion, Miss Elva, that them big outfits won't suffer too much from missin' them few head. They might even be proud to know you and the Rip button had the guts to claim 'em away from ol' Lem Hunter. We'll whittle on them dogies in the mornin'. Right now, I'll swap you all them longhorns for a cup of that Mocha and Java."

Rip gave Randy Hayes back the six-shooter with a mumbled apology and Rusty McCurdy said something about feeling better if they had Burt Swain in here where they could keep an eye on him, and went outside.

They heard him yell something and the shout was followed by two or three quick shots. Jake and Hayes ran out, their guns in their hands. Rusty called to them from the horse corral.

"The big son hightailed it. But before he pulled out he figgered he'd set us all afoot. I ketched him just in time."

"We heard shootin'," said Jake.

"Burt Swain still had a saddle gun. We swapped a shot or two before he drifted but it was too dark to hit anything."

The storm was passing on. Stars patched the broken sky. They put their saddled horses in the round corral and Jake said he'd stand horse guard just in case Swain took a notion to come back.

Rusty said if that was a trick to get Elva out here star gazing it was no dice because they were keeping her busy building more biscuits. He told Hayes to go ahead and he, Rusty, would be along directly.

"Could be, Jake," said Rusty when the young cattle inspector had gone on to the cabin, "that if you play your cards right, this is where you head back down the trail to your C Ranch in Texas."

"Wearin' handcuffs?"

"I might take a hoggin' string and neck you to the little lady and take her along. You're a lucky son of a gun. . . . Nope. You want to go back home, don't yuh?"

"Shore do, McCurdy."

"I've bit off a big hunk of bad meat here, Jake. Hayes might side me in a tight but I can't gamble too heavy on a young feller I don't know. But I've seen you in action and I'm willin' to take a chance on your lendin' me a hand."

"The Texas Rangers," said Jake slowly, "crowded me off the old C Ranch and prodded me up the trail out o' Texas. Why should I take a Ranger's part when he gits off his home range and here in Indian Territory where he ain't got a foot to stand on as a law officer? Your Texas Rangers made it tough on Old Man Childress and his boy Jake."

"You kept bad company. Your neighbors was a bunch of night-ridin', fence-cuttin', bushwhackin' renegades. And it looked like you might be messed up with 'em. I learnt after you pulled out that you wasn't one of their outfit. We

rounded 'em up after you left. Killed a few, taken a couple prisoner and they give up head like calves at a brandin' fire. They said you didn't belong. And they told us who killed Old Man Childress because he was too dangerous to 'em to let him live. They'd 've got you if you stayed. And when you started up the trail with your three hundred head and a string of ponies, you shore played into their hands. They had 'er made to murder you at Hunter's Store and claim your cattle."

"Long Hunter?" Jake Childress' voice was quiet.

"Yeah. Long Hunter. And his pardner Rex Ruxtell. Ruxtell went under the name of Smith down in Texas. Remember Sandy Smith?"

"Sandy Smith and Long Hunter laid a bushwhacker trap for me the same night that the Old Man got killed. You was one of the Rangers that sprung their trap before I rode into it. And it was them that dry-gulched my Old Man. I never actually laid his killin' to the Rangers, Rusty."

"Well, Jake, Smith is Rex Ruxtell and he's Long Hunter's pardner. And with that big brand inspector Burt Swain to back their play, Long Hunter and Rex Ruxtell will show up here at Hunter's store to claim your trail herd. Some of them men in your outfit is in on it. Missouri, Amos Jones, Heavy Harris, Lefty White. They all work for old Lem Hunter. Long Hunter and Rex Ruxtell are old Lem Hunter's two main ramrods."

"That's what Elva Hunter told me. Long Hunter's her father."

"I was scared of that, Jake. You think a lot of the girl and her kid brother. And she's worth fightin' for."

"Yeah."

"Long Hunter and Rex Ruxtell murdered Old Man Childress."

"I ain't forgettin' that, either, Rusty."

"It'll be me'n you and mebbly young Randy Hayes back to back against Long Hunter and Ruxtell and Burt Swain and mebbys old Lem Hunter and them renegades in your own outfit. . . . Them's the odds, Jake."

"Suits me, Rusty."

"Figgered it would. This squares you back home. What about the girl and her kid brother? Where do they stand?"

"Long Hunter's their father. But he killed their Cherokee mother. Elva don't have much love for her dad. I don't know about the Rip button."

"He'll do what his sister tells him. I kind o' noticed the way she taken your part ag'in Swain. . . . I'll take on Long Hunter. After all, you'll feel better if an outsider kills the father of the girl you're goin' to marry."

Darkness hid Jake's confusion. "Who said anything about gettin' married?"

"I've knowed you off and on a good many years, Jake. This is the first time I ever seen that dyin' calf look in your eye. Fetch her and the Rip button on back to Texas. The Texas Rangers will throw you a weddin' party you'll both remember."

On the way back to the cabin Rusty told Jake that more than a few Texans had disappeared at Hunter's Store the past few years. Texans with little pool trail herds like Jake's.

"My daddy was trail boss of one of them little drives, Jake. He was last heard of when he camped at Hunter's Store and bellyached about payin' a cent a head for waterin' his cattle. . . ."

VI

The scattered cattle were rounded up and the din of their bawling was punctuated by the shouts of nearly a dozen hard-looking, heavily armed cowhands as they fetched their drives in onto the flat muddy hold-up ground. Most of the riders were partly drunk and some of them were still sick from the dose of knockout drops Elva had poured into their jug.

Amos Jones, Heavy Harris and Lefty White rode together. All of them were half sick and drunk and ugly-tempered. Old Lem Hunter had abused them with foul-mouthed cursing while he "sobered 'em up" on salt water that made them sick and more booze to take away the shakes and warm the chill in their guts. Old Lem Hunter cursed the dead Missouri for being gun clumsy, cursed the others for not having the guts to back Missouri's play.

Three others in Jake Childress' trail herd outfit had watched, half-drunk and sick as poisoned dogs, and listened. And fear had helped sober them because they knew that old Lem Hunter was planning in his whiskey-soaked cunning brain to kill them

for what cattle they owned in the C road iron. And those three nester cowmen, a father and two big overgrown sons, named Green, were scared and they nibbled at the booze to put courage in their squeamish insides. And they kept watching the skyline for Jake Childress.

"Them cattle's all we got in the world, boys," Si Green told his two sons. "I done promised your maw I'd fetch home every dollar they brought in the Abilene market. I'd ruther die a-fightin' than to go back to your maw empty-handed and empty pockets. Your maw's a stern woman. . . . Wish that Jake Childress 'ud show up. That big stock inspector with the smashed-lookin' face says them cattle of ourn is stolen stock. Dang it all, we raised every head of 'em. Looks like we're throwed in amongst danged thieves. Go easy on that rotgut booze that laid us out last night. And keep your guns handy. Like as not they aim to murder us."

Rex Ruxtell was a man of medium build. With kinky yellow hair and a mustache he kept curled at the ends and waxed. He had a yellowish skin that was pockmarked and never tanned and his eyes were as yellow as a cat's eyes. A range dude in his dress, he smelled of stale sweat and cheap perfume.

"So Elva and the Rip kid run off!" Ruxtell's white teeth bared in a snarl. "Blast your ornery old goat-whiskered heart, Lem. You bin after the Rip whelp again with that bullwhip of yourn. And Elva's run off with 'im!"

"They done rabbited before. And got fetched back. And change your tone, Ruxtell, or I'll give you a whup-pin'. What do you care if I whup that Rip to death? Or you want him throwed in the deal for boot?"

"The devil with Rip. Kill 'im if you've a mind to. But I paid you big money for the girl. I don't want her whip marked. And I don't like her runnin' off. I'll break that breed gal from runnin' off, once I git a-holt of her. You tell her she belonged to me now?"

"Didn't git around to tellin' her. You kin break her the news when you ketch her. You'll have to take her away from Jake Childress first, though. She's run off with him." Old Lem Hunter broke into a drunken chuckle.

Rex Ruxtell's pearl-handled, silver-mounted six-shooter slid from its fancy carved holster, roaring death, spewing a streak of flame across the whiskey-stained pine-board store counter. The heavy .45 slug caught old Lem Hunter's open mouth, just above his dirty white whiskers, and tore out the back of his white-maned skull. He dropped heavily on his peg leg and went down behind his store counter.

Long Hunter had been sitting his horse outside. When he heard the shot he swung from his saddle and came into the store. A flat grin was on his black-whiskered face and his bloodshot gray eyes were hard as steel.

"The double-crossin' ol' buzzard!" Rex Ruxtell ejected the empty shell from his fancy gun and shoved in a

fresh cartridge. "I bet he sold her to Jake Childress. Well, that chore's done. Where do you reckon the old miser's got all his money hid?"

"Rip will know," grinned Long Hunter. He reached for the bottle on the counter and drank from it. "That button's sharp-eyed as a weasel. Mebbysso Jake Childress got Elva. Most mebbysso he didn't. What the devil odds does it make, Ruxtell? You'll git her after you kill Jake Childress off. And we'll have Rip dig up old Lem's cache. No use wastin' time tryin' to locate it. Let's git out to the herd before Burt Swain coyotes on us. Or that whiskey-guzzling outfit falls off their horses to sleep off their big drunk. Blast that Swain. Lettin' that Ranger McCurdy sit into the game, lettin' Jake Childress whup 'im—and fetchin' that greenhorn Hayes along. I told that big bonehead to polish his badge and handle it alone."

"Swain said this Randy Hayes come along anyhow. Him and McCurdy. Swain couldn't git shut of 'em, back at the line. The devil, it only makes two more to kill off, besides Jake Childress and the Greens. Let Heavy and Amos and Lefty earn their fightin' wages. . . . Gimme the bottle. Take the taste of ol' Lem out o' my mouth. . . . How much you reckon's in his cache? I take back what I paid him for Elva. And we split the rest fifty-fifty, me'n you."

"Burt Swain," said Long Hunter, "will want his third cut."

"Swain will git his payoff." Ruxtell grinned flatly and patted his pearl-handled gun. "After he's done his share of the chores."

He had the bottle tilted up when they heard the sloshing of shod hoofs in the mud. They grabbed their guns and Long Hunter looked out the door. Then he was cursing the lone rider who pulled up. It was Burt Swain and there was an ugly scared look on his battered face and his bloodshot pale eyes were dangerous.

"What you two tryin' to do to a man, anyhow?" he snarled back at Long Hunter. "You git me killed and who'll pass inspection on them cattle? Why wasn't you out at the herd instead o' here gittin' drunk? Hell's to pay out yonder! Jake Childress and that blasted red-headed Texas Ranger taken over! They gathered old Green and his two boys and they gut-shot Heavy and Amos, and Lefty threwed his gun away and give up. That damned smart-aleck Hayes is goin' through the herd with a brand list. Elva's helpin' 'im. Rip and the Greens is holdin' the herd. I come on here before they tied into me. Jake Childress and that Texas Ranger ain't a mile behind me. . . . Yonder they come now!"

Jake Childress and Rusty McCurdy were taking their time. They had taken over the herd without too much trouble. The nester Green and his pair of big sons had been on the prod and willing to fight for their cattle. As Jake told Rusty, they were actually more scared of Maw Green back yonder on the Brazos than they were of these cattle rustlers. And young Randy Hayes had done himself proud. He was whittling the stolen brands out of that herd and Elva was helping him cut them. Hayes had been willing enough,

though, to come along with Jake and Rusty to Hunter's Store.

"My daddy sent me out on the brand-inspecting job to make a hand. It's whatever you say, Rusty. You're a Texas Ranger. So's my dad. You might know him. Captain Jerry Hayes—"

"Know 'im?" Rusty had pulled up the slack in his red-whiskered jaw. "Captain Jerry Hayes is my boss. I knowed he had a son. Why ain't you in the Rangers, Randy?"

"My dad thought folks would think he was favorin' me. And I wanted to make good on my own. So I got the cattle-inspector job at the line."

"Then you just commence on this herd, Randy. Elva kin help you cut the stolen stuff. That girl's a walkin' brand book."

They'd taken Lefty's guns from him and he was helping hold the herd. One of the Greens would shoot him if he tried a getaway.

VII

Jake and Rusty saw Burt Swain pull up and swing from his saddle, his carbine in his hand. They saw Long Hunter come out of the store, then Rex Ruxtell. The two men stood there near their saddled horses as though they were undecided whether to ride out and make a fight of it or go back into the store to make a stand inside. And when Jake and Rusty got almost within carbine range and shouting distance, the quick-witted Ranger took the deal. He reined up and Jake followed suit.

"All right, you three tough hom-

bres!" Rusty shouted loudly. "We'll give you a fightin' chance for your taw! This is as far as me'n Jake come. You kin ride to us and come a-shootin'!"

"Come and git us!" shouted Long Hunter.

"Not this mornin', bushwhackers!" yelled Rusty. "Me'n Jake don't ride up in the open while you fellers fight from inside. Stock Inspector Hayes is workin' your herd out yonder about five miles on the flat. Lefty's talked a-plenty. Hayes has enough on you fellers to send you to the pen. Blanket bench warrants. And before sundown there'll be enough gover'ment men here to smoke you fellers outo' your hole. Hayes is sendin' one of the Greens to Chickasha for the gover'ment riders, directly him and Elva gits enough stolen cattle into their stray cut. You fellers got only one out and that's to ride into us and kill us off. Come a-shootin'. Or me'n Jake will ride back to the herd where we belong! This is your fightin' chance. Take it or leave it!"

Long Hunter took a long pull at the bottle and shoved it at Rex Ruxtell and told him to hit it hard and hand it to Swain. Then he swung up on his horse and slid his carbine from its saddle scabbard. A wolfish grin split his black-bearded face. Long Hunter had his share of fightin' guts.

"The Ranger is right, boys. Time's a-slippin'. Let's git this killin' over with. We're three to their two. Hayes will be pickin's. And ary one of us kin wipe out them Green nesters without ary trouble."

Hunter's gun was covering Ruxtell and Swain and his gray eyes were bleak. Rex Ruxtell mounted. Burt Swain drained the bottle and threw it away and forked his horse.

"Let's git at 'em!" snarled Long Hunter and spurred his horse to a run.

Ruxtell and Swain on either side of him, Long Hunter made his charge. And Rusty and Jake rode to meet them because a running target is harder to hit than a man sitting a standstill horse. No quarter was expected, every man of them was tough and seasoned at gun fighting. No shots were wasted at long distance. The gap was closed at a running speed. Two hundred yards shrank swiftly to a hundred, to fifty. Not a shot was fired.

When no more than a rapidly closing hundred feet was between them Long Hunter shoved his carbine into its scabbard and jerked his six-shooter and it spat fire. Its bullet clipped Jake's hat. And in that same split second Rusty's six-shooter spewed a streak of fire and Long Hunter jerked in his saddle. And then Jake was shooting at Rex Ruxtell and he wasn't missing. A slug from Ruxtell's gun ripped Jake's right shoulder and he grabbed his six-shooter in his left hand. The gun was cocked and he squeezed the trigger and it was one of those freak lucky shots. He hadn't aimed but had just pointed the gun and pulled the trigger, yet the .45 bullet tore part of Ruxtell's face away. But Ruxtell, with part of his jaw torn off, kept on shooting and his eyes were glassy and he was dying in his

saddle as he rode straight at Jake Childress. Jake was sick at the sight of it and kept shooting at the man as though he was shooting to rid his eyes of the horrible sight. And he did not even see Burt Swain coming at him, shooting, until Rusty crashed his horse into Jake's and took Swain's bullet in his thigh. The red-headed little Texas Ranger bared big white teeth in a sorrel-whiskered grin and shot Burt Swain twice.

Their horses piled up and Jake was thrown clear but Rusty's wounded leg was pinned underneath the weight of his horse. And then it was that Jake Childress saw Long Hunter lying on the ground. Lying flat on his stomach and holding his gun in both hands, shooting into the pile-up of men and horses. Jake's gun was still gripped in his hand. He rolled over on his side and Long Hunter was not a dozen feet away. Jake thumbed back his gun hammer and pulled the trigger. And then shot a second time as Long Hunter's bullet kicked dirt in his face. At last Long Hunter's black-whiskered face dropped in the mud and stayed there without moving.

One of Long Hunter's shots had killed Rusty's horse. Right through one ear and into the brain.

"Saved me from bein' drug to death." Rusty pulled his wounded leg out from under the dead weight. "Looks like it's all over but the plantin'. How'd you make out, Jacob?"

"Winged," said Jake Childress. "Stay there. I'm goin' in after old Lem Hunter."

Jake got on his horse and rode to the store. In through the wide high doorway where many a tough cowhand had ridden into Hunter's Store. And then he rode out again and back to where Rusty sat with his chaps unbuckled, trying to fasten a tourniquet around his bullet-ripped leg. Jake dismounted with no more than a glance at the dead bodies of Long Hunter, Rex Ruxtell and Burt Swain, uncorked a bottle of white mule and handed it to Rusty.

"If Elva put knockout drops in it, so much the better. Down it, red top."

Then Elva rode up, Rip close behind her, and Randy Hayes bringing up the rear. Elva quit her saddle and ran to Jake, white-lipped.

"I had to come with you, Jake! You're hurt! You're both hurt!"

"A man feels good, hurtin' this-away," grinned Rusty, "when he looks around and sees them that don't feel pain no more."

Randy Hayes carried Rusty to Elva's cabin behind the store and through the door to Rip's room. Rusty said to put him on Rip's bunk because he was hanged if he'd bloody up Elva's clean bed tarp. And then Elva bathed and dressed Jake's and Rusty's bullet wounds with a doctor's skill. She'd had enough practice, here at Hunter's Store, she told them quietly.

The three Greens rode up. They'd let Lefty hit the trail, the elder Green said. He'd promised to send a doctor from Chickasha.

"I had a hunch somebody'd need patchin'," he said.

But Lefty gave Chickasha and all

other towns a wide berth. No doctor came. None needed, Rusty and Jake declared. Elva was worth a corral full of doctors.

Young Rip had vanished. When he showed up an hour later he was lugging a couple of bulging leather bags like Pony Express riders used to carry the mail. Old Lem Hunter's cache. Even Rusty's eyes widened when the contents were dumped out on the tarp.

"Elva and Rip are old Lem Hunter's only heirs," said the red-whiskered Texas Ranger. "You both earned it, even if it runs into a million gold and foldin' money. Nobody would have the gall to deny that or try to take a dollar from either of you." Then Rusty grinned at Jake.

"Looks to me like you're marryin' into the big money, Jacob."

It took a week to work the big herd. Another two weeks to hear from the owners of the stolen cattle. Still longer for Rusty's leg and

Jake's shoulder to heal. And then they took the trail herd, strays and all, up the trail to Abilene.

Elva rode the point with Jake and across the strung-out lead cattle Rip rode with Rusty McCurdy.

Randy Hayes had gone back to the line. Then to report to his father, Captain Jerry Hayes of the Texas Rangers. And in his pocket was a brief report from Texas Ranger Rusty McCurdy to which was added a final paragraph that read:

The bearer of this report, Cattle Inspector Randy Hayes, belongs in the Texas Rangers. I recommend that you swear him in right now.

And Rusty McCurdy kept his promise. The Texas Rangers gave Jake Childress and his bride a reception there at the old C home ranch, that would live forever in their memories. And Rusty was best man.

Rip Hunter gave the bride away. With gestures.

THE END

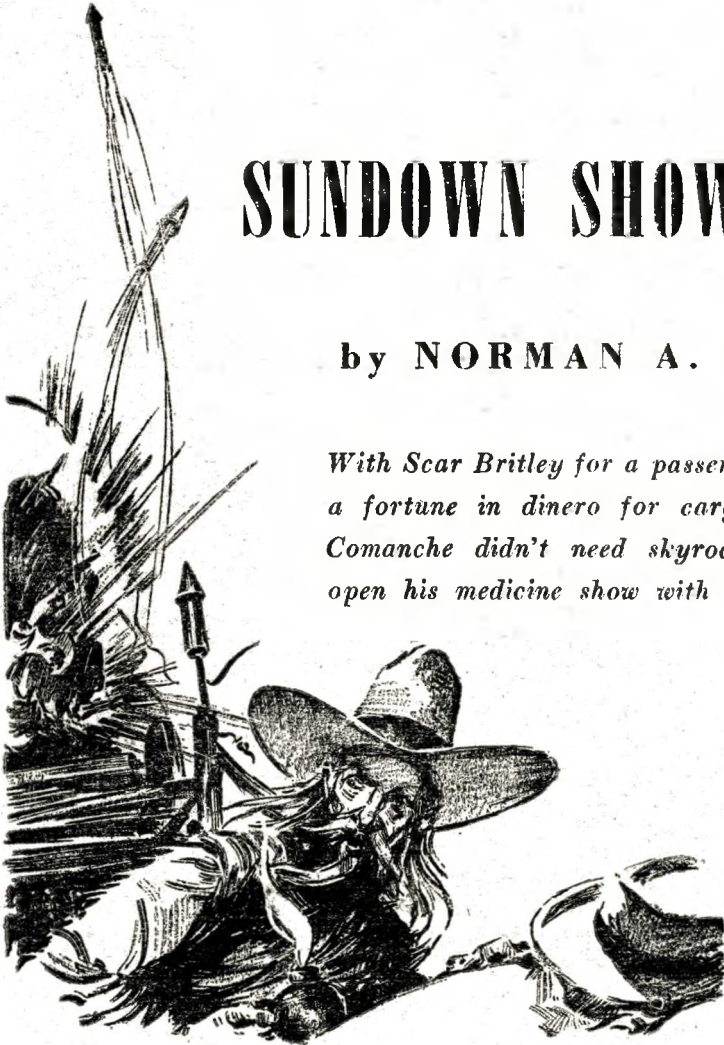


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SUNDOWN SHOWDOWN

by NORMAN A. FOX

With Scar Britley for a passenger and a fortune in dinero for cargo, Doc Comanche didn't need skyrockets to open his medicine show with a bang!



OF the seven days that that veteran pitchman and dispenser of dubious medicine, Doc Comanche, and his slow-witted assistant, big Oscar Lund, had sojourned in Sundown, six had been spent within the confines of this cow town's unpretentious calaboose. That made six days too many. No stranger to jails, still Doc Comanche had long since started hun-

gering for a change of scenery, and the dawn found him pacing the cell's narrowness, a lean, restless figure in fringed buckskin.

"I'd sell my soul, sir," he confided to big Oscar, "for a chance to really stretch my legs."

Five minutes later the capricious destiny that had dogged him through twenty years of roaming the West

gave him his chance. With a vengeance.

First the sheriff came down the cell corridor, and this star totter of Sundown town was a big, burly, black-browed man who owned a quick, explosive temper. At his heels strode a smaller man, sad and sourish of face, and the little man, having his look into the cell, said in a perpetually mournful voice: "That's them, sheriff. Better turn 'em loose."

"I owe you a favor or two, McCracken," said the sheriff. "I aim to oblige. But this galls me mightily."

Doc Comanche was holding his breath, and even Oscar Lund, not the brightest man in the world, showed a certain excitement. They knew this little man, of course. He was Steven McCracken, federal marshal, known to some as So-sad McCracken. Once his trail had crossed with theirs, but much water had gone under the bridge—and into the making of Doc Comanche's New & Improved Indian Medicine—since then.

"They gave me a hand a spell back," McCracken explained. "I'm beholden to the slippery rascals. What's the charge, sheriff?"

"Peddlin' without a license," said the sheriff, ticking off the count on a finger. "Attempting to defraud the public. With each purchase of a bottle of their medicine, they was offering a handsome, colored steel engraving of George Washington, suitable for framing, and—"

"A legitimate premium, sir!" Comanche interjected with offended dignity. "Each purchaser received a postage stamp bearing the likeness of our first president."

"... and disturbing the peace," the sheriff went on. "When a crowd didn't collect at their stand fast enough, that big galoot set off a skyrocket to attract attention. It went smack through the window of Lem Crosby's livery stable and might've burned him out."

"Our pyrotechnics, sir," insisted Comanche, "are fool proof!"

"The manufacturer didn't know Oscar Lund when he made that guarantee," the sheriff countered. "Ninety days is what these galoots drew."

"I'll square it with the judge," McCracken promised. "Don't worry, sheriff. You're a mite edgy today, but I don't blame you. It was a rough deal, your capturing Scar Britley and jailing him only to have him pick his way out of his cell last night. But I've chased that owlhoot hellion and his brothers across three States and a couple of territories, and I'll keep on chasing them."

"Britley's still in town!" the sheriff snapped with savage force. "And he won't get out! I've seen to that. The first thing I did when I found him gone was to throw a ring of riders around Sundown."

"We'll nail him again," McCracken said.

While the sheriff fumbled at the door lock, Doc Comanche placed his hat on his silvery, shoulder-length hair, straightened his buckskin jacket and beckoned to Oscar. The cell unlocked, the two followed McCracken up the corridor while the sheriff said: "I'll pass word to the trail guards to let you out of town, Comanche. If you decide to stay in

Sundown, better behave yourself!"

With that parting warning echoing in his ears, Comanche came out to the boardwalk of Sundown's main street, looking at the blue hills beyond the town with unconcealed eagerness, while big Oscar ranged along one side of him and So-sad McCracken on the other. Glancing at the little marshal, Comanche said: "I'm beholden to you, sir."

McCracken shaped up a cigarette. "Rode in this morning and saw your old canvas-topped Conestoga and crowbait team in the wagon yard. When you weren't on the street or in the hotel, it followed that you were in jail."

"A deduction, sir, which implies no insult, I'm sure," said Comanche and began edging away.

McCracken got the smoke going. "Too bad about Scar Britley slipping through the sheriff's fingers," he observed.

Doc Comanche had the feeling that something was coming, and though he had no idea what it was, he was quite certain that he wanted no part of it. "The law hereabouts is remarkably efficient, sir," he said politely. "Doubtless Britley will soon be returned to custody."

"But meantime he's loose," McCracken said. "And this morning's stage is supposed to tote a bale of currency to the bank over in Eldridge across the hump of yonder hills. Eldridge needs that money but there's Scar, Joe, Boots, and Les Britley to think about. Ain't much goes on that they don't learn."

"You're riding the stage, sir?"

McCracken nodded. "Just in hopes

that they show up. But I'd breathe easier if something else was carrying that currency. Your wagon, for instance, Doc. Who'd suspect it of hauling important cargo? Not the Britleys, since Scar knows you were lately in jail, and I've a hunch he's joined his brothers in spite of the sheriff's trail guards. The Eldridge bank would pay you for the service, Doc, and I'd be grateful, too. I know I can trust you, Doc. Interested?"

"We ain't askin' for no owlhoot bullets aimed our way, huh, Doc?" opined big Oscar Lund.

But there was this to be said for Doc Comanche. Charlatan and fraud, some called him, and certainly he had an eye for an easy dollar, but he also had a reputation for paying his debts. McCracken knew that. And remembering the eighty-four days that he might have remained in the Sundown calaboose, Doc heaved a heavy sigh and said: "Fetch your bank currency to the wagon yard, sir. I'll make the delivery."

"That's fine, Doc," said McCracken. "The money's already in your wagon—fixed up in a wooden box that might be packin' anything. I put it there early this mornin'. Good luck. . . . No, I won't shake your hand. I don't want anybody to realize there's anything between us. I'll see you in Eldridge. We should both hit town about mid-afternoon."

Thus it was that Doc Comanche and big Oscar Lund rolled out of Sundown a half hour later. They'd proceeded to the wagon yard, hitched up their crowbait team, had themselves a bit of breakfast at the nearest

cafe, and taken the trail. Where the last of the false fronts of the town fell behind them, an armed horseman stood guard; one of the men assigned to see that Scar Britley didn't escape the town, doubtless, but it was obvious that the sheriff had had a word with this man, for the sway-backed Conestoga was allowed to pass unchallenged.

The wagon road wound across the flat of the prairie, and the two men rode in silence, Comanche plucking thoughtfully at his skimpy goatee, big Oscar wrinkling his forehead as though trying to puzzle out the significance of their mission. Mid-morning found them into the hills that built a barrier between Sundown and Eldridge, and here a pine-shaded pair of ruts angled off to the west. And here, also, a voice said from the depth of the wagon: "Just turn into that side road, Doc. And keep rolling!"

Comanche knew that voice. Its owner had occupied the cell across the corridor from himself and big Oscar in Sundown's jail, and the pitchman had listened to its rantings for many days. Now he was hearing it again, and it was the more emphatic because a gun barrel jabbed at the small of Doc's back. It belonged to Scar Britley, that voice, and it meant business.

Big Oscar must have recognized it too, for anger spread across his bovine face. "I'll twist his neck, huh, Doc!" he snorted.

"Easy!" Doc ordered, and obediently turned down the side trail.

Nimble of wit, Comanche was already piecing together what had hap-

pened. Britley had kept hidden in town and climbed into Doc's wagon this morning. While Doc and big Oscar had been eating breakfast, of course! Doc had looked into the wagon after he'd hitched up, and Scar Britley hadn't been part of its contents then. But Britley had boarded the Conestoga since, presuming, probably, that the wagon was heading out of town since the team was hitched up. And there was a pretty piece of irony in the fact that the Eldridge currency which Britley coveted, and Britley himself were now jostling along together.

But Britley had a gun, taken from the sheriff's desk last night doubtless, and this was no time to make a show of violence. Bumping over the rutted trail, Doc hoped prayerfully that big Oscar would keep his mouth tightly buttoned. They creaked along in a silence that was broken only by an occasional order from Britley that sent them veering one direction or another, and sometimes the trails were no trails at all. Before noon they came into a brushy pocket, hidden away in the hills, and here a cabin loomed and three men spilled from it to surround the wagon, guns in hands.

"Save your lead, boys!" Scar Britley called from under the canvas of the Conestoga. "It's me."

He came out of the wagon to range alongside his brothers and they made a ponderous, if unprepossessing foursome. A barber could have spent a day on this family, for they were all black-bearded and unkempt of mane. They totaled nearly half a

ton, and they had a reputation that ran to the rapacious. With sorrowful eye Doc Comanche, ordered off the wagon, regarded them while Boots and Joe and Les Britley pounded Scar's back and listened to the account of his escape.

"I got into the livery stable this morning and was set to help myself to a horse," Scar explained. "Then I saw this old quack harnessing up in the wagon yard. A free trip past the guards the sheriff had posted, I figured, and it worked like a charm. Now cut out a saddler for me. There's a chore to be done."

"The Sundown-Eldridge stage?" one of his brothers asked.

Scar Britley nodded. "It heads out today, and it should have currency on it. I learned that much before I was jailed. Wait till the sheriff hears that the stage got stopped by Scar Britley, the gent he thinks he's keeping cooped up in town!"

Adjacent to the cabin was a small corral, and one of the Britleys snaked out a saddler and piled gear upon it. When Scar had mounted, another of his brothers jerked a thumb at Doc Comanche and big Oscar. "What about these galoots?"

Scar frowned. "They fetched me here and saved me walking, but now they know our hideout, and that means we can't let 'em leave. I tell you; keep 'em here till I get back. Meanwhile, see if there's anything worth taking in that wagon."

"We should've stayed in Sundown to make our pitch," big Oscar declared mournfully. "The sheriff said we could, huh, Doc?"

Scar Britley went wheeling through

the timber and vanished from sight, but though the outlaw's parting words had been the equivalent of a death sentence for the pitchman and Oscar, Comanche was at the moment more concerned over the fact that one of the Britleys was climbing into the Conestoga for a look-see. The man did considerable rummaging around, and Doc, thinking of that wooden box So-sad McCracken had placed inside, held his breath. At last the outlaw made his pronouncement.

"Some duds and bedding," he said. "A pair of pearl-handled .45's, a banjo, some grub, a lot of medicine bottles, some full, some empty, a water keg, an open box full of sky-rockets, pin wheels and Roman candles, and another box, nailed shut."

"More pyrotechnics, sir," Doc said quickly.

The lie was left unchallenged. "Get over there alongside the cabin," a Britley told Doc and Oscar after the two were patted for hideout guns. "Hunker down and stay quiet till Scar gets back."

The pair silently obeyed; the outlaws kept at a distance, busying themselves in sundry ways, although always someone had an eye on Doc and Oscar. But at least the two could now talk, keeping their voices at a whisper, and Comanche said consolingly: "Our dark cloud has its silver lining, Oscar. I refer, sir, to Marshal McCracken. Doubtless he will recapture Scar Britley when the stage holdup is attempted, and perhaps he will even force the location of this hideout from him. Then, sir, when a posse comes to round up the

rest of this infamous family, we shall be rescued."

"I reckon you know best, huh, Doc," Oscar said.

At noon food was prepared and the two prisoners were given some. The sun tipped westward and there was silence in this little hollow save for the low talking of the Britley brothers, the nervous stomping of saddlers in the nearby corral. Doc dwelt upon his one hope of salvation, picturing the dramatic arrival of a rescuing posse and even throwing in a troop of cavalry to point up the scene. But shortly thereafter Scar Britley rode out of the timber, making his return, and behind his saddle was draped the trussed, diminutive form of Federal Marshal Steven McCracken.

McCracken was unconscious, and a bullet furrow along his scalp attested to the cause. "Here's another for our collection of prisoners, boys," Scar Britley announced. "McCracken's trailed us for the last time. He was riding shotgun on the Sundown stage, and I creased him with a bullet from the brush."

All but the tiniest trickle of hope was gone for Doc Comanche then, but there was little triumph in Scar Britley, and the pitchman guessed why. "There was no currency aboard that stage," Scar announced. "That's why I fetched McCracken here instead of finishing him and lettin' him lay."

A growl of anger went up from the assembled brothers and one said: "That means it's still in the Sundown bank. We don't need Mc-

Cracken to tell us that. He left the money behind and come along, hopin' there'd be a holdup. Your bushwhackin' spoiled his scheme, Scar, but we've got us nothin' but his carcass!"

"And Sundown will be primed to the teeth," another put in. "Especially when the stage driver comes back to report that Scar Britley's on the loose and looking for bank money."

"I think you've sized it up right," Scar said thoughtfully. "But I've dreamed me up a scheme while I loped along. We're going into Sundown, boys—tonight. No, it ain't as dangerous as it sounds. We won't come roaring in. We wouldn't dare. We'll come into town the same way I went out—under the canvas of yonder Conestoga with the medicine man at the reins. And we'll bust that bank the safe and quiet way. Les, you've always been mighty handy at feeling the combination out of a vault dial."

Again there was a growl, this time of protest, but Scar held up a silencing hand. "It's plumb safe," he went on. "We hit town about sunset, and this medicine man puts on a show—at the far end of the street, away from the bank. While his show is drawing a crowd, you, Boots, and Joe and Les, will be easing down an alley to pry open the back door of that bank. Me, I'll be hunkering in the wagon, and I'll have a gun on these medicine show galoots to make sure they do things proper."

"That gets us into town and into the bank," Boots Britley said with greater interest. "But how do we

skin out of town again, huh?"

"That depends," Scar said. "If we manage the bank job quiet, and nobody's the wiser, you boys slip back to the wagon, and Goat-Whiskers here closes his show and rolls out of town with us. On the other hand, if something goes wrong, we'll snatch saddlers at the hitchrails and line out. That'll make a fuss, but not the kind we'd raise coming in the same way. By the time Sundown catches on to what's happened, we'll be splitting the breeze."

"What about McCracken?"

Scar scratched his nose thoughtfully, eying his prisoner. "He looks like he'll be asleep awhile. Leave him tied, and dump him in the cabin. We'll keep him alive till we come back tonight. Because if it just so happens that that currency *ain't* in the Sundown bank, then So-sad McCracken will likely know where it is. It may take time to make him talk—more time than we've got to spare now if we're going to hit town by dark. But we'll keep him for a hole card."

"You, sirs, are unmitigated scoundrels," Doc said, an edge of anger to his voice. "That's why it gives me pleasure to point out the fallacy in your scheme." He eyed Scar Britley. "You, Britley, know that I was recently in Sundown's jail. That was because the sheriff found no pleasure in our show. Doubtless he will jail me again if I make a return appearance in Sundown."

The outlaw laughed. "You were in jail, and now you're out of it," he observed. "That proves the sheriff packed no real grudge against you.

And this morning that big ox there said that you should have stayed in Sundown to make your pitch because it was O.K. with the sheriff, anyway. And he's too stupid to have had a trick up his sleeve when he made that remark."

And so Doc Comanche and big Oscar Lund came tooling their Conestoga back toward Sundown town, and once again Scar Britley was under the canvas with a ready gun to keep Doc on the proper trails. But this time there were three other Britleys in concealment as well. Behind them So-sad McCracken lay trussed and unconscious in the cabin hideout, and Doc was clammy with the consciousness that McCracken was slated to die when the Britleys returned to the hills.

Doc, himself, and big Oscar were likewise doomed. The pitchman had no doubts about that. If the pat scheme of Scar Britley succeeded in Sundown, Doc and Oscar would have to die because they knew the location of the hill hideout. And if something went wrong in town, their doom would be even more speedily sealed. Nor would giving the Britleys the



currency change anything. Doc had already toyed with that notion and discarded it. Turning the money over to this crew wouldn't alter the fact that the three outsiders who knew of the hideout must be forever silenced. The only hope was to proceed to Sundown and trust to luck.

Thus Doc reasoned, and he had other thoughts besides. He'd taken an assignment from So-sad McCracken, and that assignment had been to help keep certain currency out of the Britleys hands. McCracken had expected no more of him than that, yet Doc saw it differently. This game had become personal now, and given a chance to skin out of it scot-free, Doc would have scorned that chance. These Britleys had to be bested, and if Doc Comanche could find the way to turn that little trick, he was going to do it.

Yet the chance grew woefully slimmer. They came to Sundown in the last light of the day, and now there was no mounted guard at the roadside. That meant that the stage driver had fetched news of Scar Britley's escape, and the men who'd previously been strung out around the town were now doubtless part of a posse that was futilely scouring the range. Driving along the street, Doc passed the bank but was urged onward by a whispered command from Scar Britley. When Doc was allowed to haul his wagon to a halt, they were at the other end of the street, adjacent to the jail building, and Doc's hopes were not heightened when he saw that the sheriff's office to the front of the building was now dark and deserted.

"This is fine!" Britley whispered. "It's almost dark enough for the boys to slip down to the bank. Get set for your show, Comanche, and make it a good one. I want every man that's left in this town up at this end of the street."

The gray of twilight mantled Sundown, the shadows were beginning their creeping, and already lamp light was etching many a window. Not long after, the Britley brothers slipped from the wagon, one by one, merging silently with the night, until only Scar remained. Doc and Oscar, meanwhile, were setting up their stand under the careful orders of Scar Britley who made sure the stand was placed so that the outlaw could keep his gun lined on Comanche while the pitch was being made. Then Doc got his old banjo and while he was plucking a tune from it, the sheriff came riding in at the far end of the street, his weary posse strung out behind him.

Straight toward the wagon the sheriff rode, and Doc soured a note on the banjo but held valiantly to the tune. Abreast of the stand, the sheriff's face was a study in wrath in the light of the oil torches Doc had burning, and the lawman said: "So you're back! I thought I had all the troubles one man could have. But I wasn't counting on seeing you again!"

"A broken axle, sir," Doc said and felt as though his mouth were full of cotton. "It caused us delay before we were far gone from your town. So we decided to return and make our pitch here."

"Then watch yourself!" the sheriff reminded him. "The way I'm feeling, I won't need much of an excuse to jail you again!" The sheriff swung in to his own hitchrail, dismounted and clumped up the steps of the jail.

That morning Doc Comanche would have been content to spend the remainder of a long and active life without ever setting eyes on the sheriff of Sundown again; now he watched the lawman's retreating back with a hungry longing to call to the man—and the certainty that he would die if he did.

A crowd was beginning to gather; part of the posse was in it, and other townsmen were forming before Doc's stand as well. Doc made his pitch and it sounded hollow in his own ears, but he sold several of the regular size bottles of his New & Improved Indian Medicine, and a few of the family size. But when he came to the back of the wagon to get more medicine, Britley stayed him with a hoarse whisper.

"You've got to put on a better show!" the outlaw urged. "There's still too many people up the street. Somebody might notice something going on inside the bank. Get 'em down here!"

Doc glanced at the far end of the street, and in the lamp light splashing from doors and windows, he saw many men, but it was one who chained his eye and set his skin to crawling. Obviously Scar Britley hadn't yet noticed, but that didn't alter the fact that Federal Marshal So-sad McCracken had just ridden into town on a weary, lathered horse.

Now the fat was going to be in the fire! How McCracken had escaped from the outlaw hideout didn't matter. The man was here, and shortly he was going to be jogging to this end of the street. When Scar Britley saw the marshal, that would probably be enough to blow off the lid and let the blue blazes come bubbling out. But even if Britley kept a steady head and a steady hand, McCracken was going to ask Doc Comanche why the pitchman was in Sundown instead of Eldridge, and what had become of the currency that was to have been delivered. And the first sign of a relationship between the little lawman and Comanche would start Britley's gun to banging.

Desperate now, Doc Comanche suddenly had his inspiration.

"A skyrocket, sir! Hand me a skyrocket from that open box," he urged. "Fireworks fetch a crowd faster than banjo music or sleight of hand."

Britley passed a skyrocket to him, and Comanche came to his stand again and adjusted the skyrocket as he wished, fumbling at the job and finding his fingers wooden. Then he seized one of the oil torches, and touched it to the rocket's fuse, and in almost the same motion he stepped nimbly off the stand and thrust the torch inside the Conestoga.

What happened then happened so quickly that the citizens of Sundown were afterward to have a hundred stories, all different, to tell of this evening. First the skyrocket went *whooshing* from the stand, a trail of sparks behind it. Smashing through

the unbarred window of the sheriff's office across the way, it brought that worthy roaring out with murder in his eye. But by then the main street of Sundown was bedlam, for Scar Britley was triggering frantically, the crowd was scattering, and Doc Comanche was feeling the air lash of bullets that came dangerously close. But Britley's aim was poor, for the inside of Comanche's Conestoga was an inferno of exploding skyrockets, pin wheels and Roman candles. For Doc Comanche, after aiming a skyrocket at the jail window, had thrust the oil torch into the box of pyrotechnics.

"*The bank!*" Even above this bedlam, Doc made his wild shout heard. "*The Britleys are robbing the bank!*"

That sent So-sad McCracken wheeling his jaded horse toward the bank, with a dozen men at his heels. And Scar Britley was stumbling down out of the wagon, dazed, bewildered. But he still had a gun in his hand, and Doc, diving over his stand, was upon the outlaw. Big Oscar was in the mêlée, too, and into this fray came the sheriff of Sundown who doubtless understood no part of this but who knew whom he wanted to vent *his* wrath upon. Pinned beneath three men, the fight and the consciousness went out of Scar Britley quickly, but Doc, Oscar and the sheriff were still a threshing tangle of arms and legs when So-sad McCracken and the citizens of Sundown came up the street, herding the other three Britley boys ahead of them.

It was all of an hour before the excitement had subsided and the tale was told, and by then McCracken, Doc, big Oscar and the sheriff were perched upon the steps of the jail building. So-sad McCracken said in that mournful manner of his: "I'm beholden to you again, Doc. When I came conscious and wriggled my way out of the ropes and helped myself to a Britley horse up there at the hill hideout, I thought I'd done a good day's chore. But it's you that really put the deadwood on the Britleys."

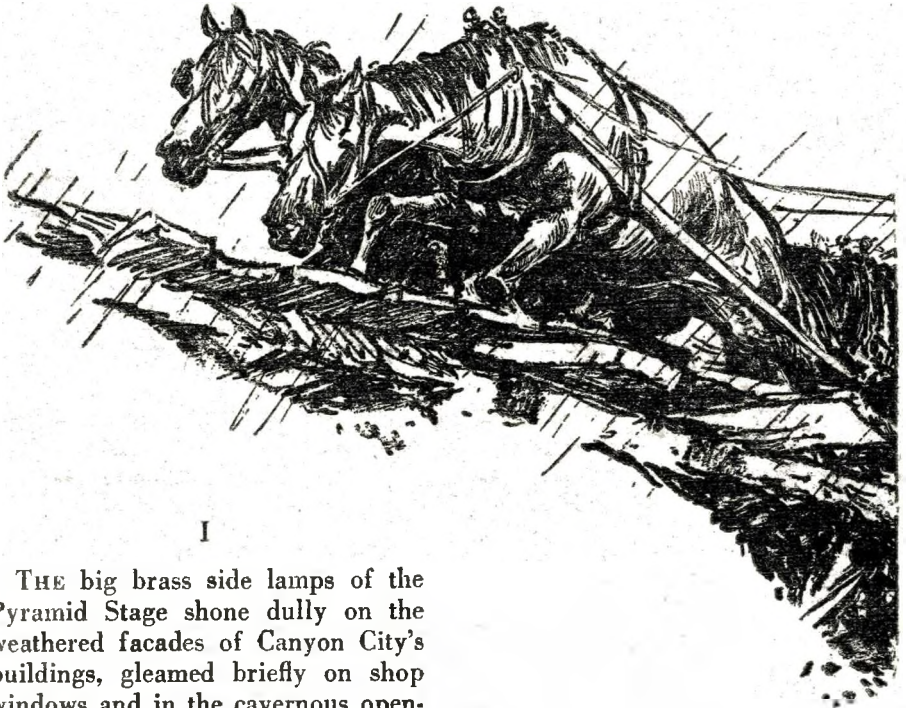
The sheriff, nursing a swollen jaw where big Oscar had hit him in the excitement, scowled. "The Britleys are locked up tight, and there'll be no escaping this time," he said. "But danged if I won't feel safer when that medicine show really rolls out of town!"

"There's a reward on the Britleys," McCracken said. "Not much, but it will fix up your wagon better than it was before the fireworks ruined it, Doc. And it will buy a new window for the jail. I'll deliver that currency to Eldridge myself, now. I reckon your feet are already itching for other ranges."

Doc Comanche only smiled. He had kept a trust and served a friend, and at a likely profit, it appeared. He had pitted himself against the Britleys and had the consolation of winning. He had been in Sundown seven days, and the town would remember him when he came to sell Indian medicine another day. What more could a man ask than that?

RUCKUS AT PAINTED ROCKS

by ROD PATTERSON



I

THE big brass side lamps of the Pyramid Stage shone dully on the weathered facades of Canyon City's buildings, gleamed briefly on shop windows and in the cavernous openings of side streets and alleyways, as Dave Gardner swung the double team of matched blacks down Chickman Street toward the Signal Stage & Freight Co.'s main depot. Rolling at a slower pace through a driving rain,

with the muffled rattle of harness and the whimpering creak of springs, the gale of the mountains left behind, Dave took the outfit up the ramp and

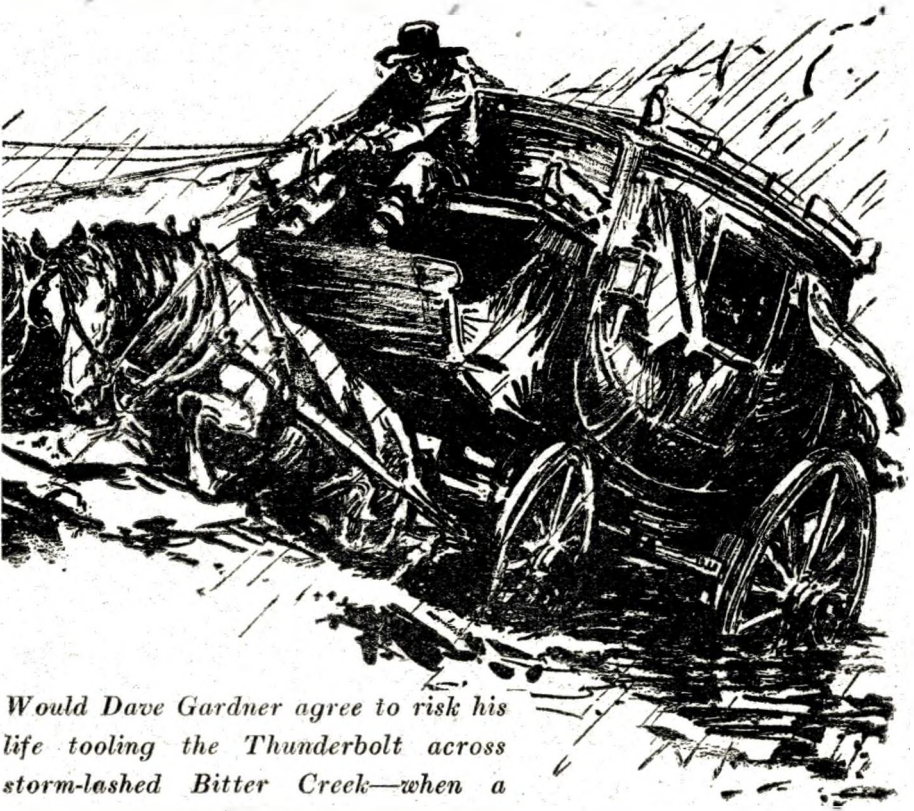
into the wide stone-paved yard at the rear of the depot.

Dave sat high and easy on the pilot seat, arms pulled out taut by the lines, a tall red-haired young man with broad shoulders and a narrow waist. Even after five hours on a storm-swept trail, he was trim, alert, in his yellow slicker, rubber boots and the flop-brimmed hat pulled down low above his light-blue eyes.

He eased the big high-wheeled Concord up to the loading platform, kicked on the brake, threw the ribbons down to a stableman and swung down the iron set-back steps to the platform. He was a good driver and

not ashamed of admitting it. Now, as the passengers staggered out of the coach, he proclaimed in a satiric voice: "Canyon City—change for Butte and Irontown! For a safe ride, travel with Dave Gardner, next president of the Signal Line!"

The silent depot came to life. Hostlers yelled. Lanterns made their quick arcs against the rain. The stable foreman came slapping flat-footedly up the slippery ramp, and Dave squared off and made a playful pass at him. "Hi yuh, Mister Bone! Have your boys put a set of oarlocks



Would Dave Gardner agree to risk his life tooling the Thunderbolt across storm-lashed Bitter Creek—when a posse waited for him on the other side?

on this rig! Somebody moved the ocean when our back was turned—there's fish swimmin' up the trail 'tween here and Painted Rocks!"

"Cut it out!" griped the bone-lean foreman, pulling a sour face. "Ain't I got enough trouble without you makin' jokes at me?"

Dave clapped him on the back, and turned to the rear baggage boot. He began to pile out the luggage, keeping up his banter to the exhausted passengers who took their bags and sloshed on down the ramp to the waiting room. Andy Bone stood and shivered, and presently Dave came back, arching his shoulders a little to work the stiffness out.

"You're an hour late," Bone said in an ominous tone of voice.

"Shucks," said Dave, "I'm lucky to bring the Thunderbolt through at all tonight! They had a bank holdup at Pyramid and the sheriff tied me up for half an hour while he went through the luggage with a curry comb. And didn't it rain!"

The foreman was unmollified. "Tell it to Hanley. He's been bitin' his fingernails."

"Let him bite," Dave laughed, but it sounded a little hollow now, for he'd been trying hard to hold to the old feeling of lightheartedness at finishing his run without mishap, trying to keep back one particular thought—the thought of Montana McIntyre, the girl he would be meeting in a moment now.

The last passenger was out of the stage. Dave grinned wryly at the foreman and headed down the ramp, head bent against the drive of the

cold rain. He realized suddenly that he was tired. His shoulders and arms ached with the strain of the long hours of fighting to keep his horses on the trail and his rig upright. And the excitement at Pyramid had keyed him up. Three men had held up the Miners' Trust, had killed the cashier, just before Dave had pulled into Pyramid's central square. Bullets had raked the stage and spooked the horses, and Dave had had to leave one of his passengers behind with a wrenched knee.

And now, as he headed for the superintendent's office, he sensed that the old kick of getting in to the home station, of rawhiding Andy Bone, didn't hold good tonight. He was remembering Montana and feeling an all-gone sensation in the pit of his stomach.

He pushed through the door into the super's office, freezing a smile on his lean, thin face. He even managed a little of his old swagger. What the devil, he was the best driver Signal ever had, and if he didn't tell the world, who would?

Two people sat in the dim-lit office with its bleak, bare walls and chain-hung oil lamps. One of the occupants was Montana McIntyre and the other Dud Hanley himself. Dave centered his gaze on the girl, and the grin went off his face as though the rain had washed it off. Montana was Hanley's timekeeper and office manager. She was a pretty girl, with coils of chestnut hair and level, long-fringed blue-green eyes. It gave Dave a jolt just to look at her. She had been working at her desk near the wicket and if she noticed him, she

gave no outward sign of it. Dave bitterly told himself that was O. K. with him.

Dud Hanley stood across the room, near the door to his private office, a tall, broad man in his early forties, with a face as hard as something forged and hammered, and eyes that could cut like steel. He stared at Dave from under a V of heavy brows. "In here," he ordered peremptorily, jerking his shaggy head to the door marked "Private—Superintendent." He moved his burly frame through the opening, leaving the door ajar.

Dave had a feeling Hanley had been having one of his heart-to-heart talks with Montana, and he let suspicion crawl into his voice, as he stepped up and said: "Hope I didn't bust up the conference, Miss McIntyre." He had a tight, hard feeling in his throat.

Montana didn't look up to meet his eyes. "Why, hello, Dave! I'm glad you got in all right. I was worried." Her hands, slim and strong, kept riffling through a pile of old-time sheets and way bills, and they shook a bit, he comprehended with his observant gaze.

He tried rather ineffectively to keep the old light bantering in his voice. "I always get in all right. Never worry about Dave Gardner, ma'am."

Now she looked at him, reproachfully, and he felt his neck get hot. "Oh, I clean forgot. It's Davie Gardner—the white-haired boy!" she said.

Dave stared, resentfully, allowing his anger to have full play. "Look, Monty, one of these days I'm goin' to

bust in here and flatten that vinegar face of Hanley's down his throat!" It was a tough-enough grind—the run over the mountains and through hub-high water part of the way—without coming to this kind of a situation. Heavy hours, dangerous trails, complaining passengers, wouldn't be so hard to take if you had something to look forward to—something to work for—

He checked his anger up a bit. "Not the white-haired wonder, Monty. The Poison Pill!"

There was a hurt look in the girl's eyes, but she tried to smile. "I'm sorry, Dave," she said. "You know you're not."

Dave rubbed long fingers through his sun-bleached hair. "It takes more savvy'n I got to figure it out," he said. "All I done was to ask you to quit here and marry me, and you turned me down for that frozen fish in there—" He flipped a thumb toward the super's open office door. He blurted: "Maybe we can still be friends."

"Certainly, Dave."

He watched her puzzledly. Her eyes had the glint of close-held tears, and her mouth was very sad and twitched a bit.

"Then you've fallen for Hanley?" he couldn't resist demanding. "Not that I give a hoot!"

She shook her head, fighting to control her voice. "I . . . keep telling you, Dave, to leave me alone. I . . . can't marry you. Please don't ask me any more!"

It hurt him suddenly to see her this way. He wanted to tell her how he felt, but the anger inside him was

too strong. "Maybe a hundred a month is chicken feed along side of what *he* makes." His voice was harsh. Then he threw up his hands. "Oh, the devil with it!" he said, and kicked open the wicket and went into Hanley's office like a bronc bucking loose from a snubbing post.

II

Hanley was hunched over some papers on his long, flat desk, and he didn't look around at once. "Sit down," he growled.

Dave went over and took a chair. He tilted it back against the smudged white wall, rolling a cigarette and lighting it, watching Hanley's craggy profile out of narrowed eyes. Suddenly Hanley swung around and threw his voice at Dave: "Gardner, you'll have to take the run back to Pyramid. I'm short-handed on account of the storm and can't put anybody on that knows the trails."

Dave felt a tightness at the back of his neck. "I've just finished a five-hour run, and I need sleep," he pointed out.

Hanley picked up an unlighted cigar and stuck it into his thin, trapped mouth. "You can catch up on your sleep tomorrow," he snapped.

"What's a ten-hour grind between friends?" Dave said it with open sarcasm. "Maybe you think highballin' the Thunderbolt's just a good way of spendin' a restful evenin'."

Hanley's eyes were agate-hard. "That's how I run this business—doin' the thinkin' for knot-headed, fool drivers!" he said softly.

"I got business, too," Dave spoke in a calm and deadly tone, "and it's strictly private. Do I have to make it any plainer by tellin' you to keep your hands off it?"

"Your private business," Hanley breathed, biting down on his cigar and talking around it, "is a mighty nice-lookin' gal. Maybe I oughta run that for you, too."

Dave lurched forward, the legs of his chair hitting the floor a quick, sharp rap. "There's a quiet spot out behind the stables, mister—"

Hanley shook his shaggy head. "We're on duty." He raked a match on his trouser leg and held it a moment to his smoke. "Tomorrow, when you get in, is time enough."

Dave was shaking inside himself. He stood up, his blue eyes flecked with angry light. "I'll remember," he said. "I'll take your run to Pyramid, and when I get back I'll be through with you and the Signal Line!"

"Fair enough," Hanley said with an edge of mockery. "I'll have Miss McIntyre make out your time."

Dave whirled and walked out, passing Montana at her desk without a word. He heard her quick catch of breath, but didn't stop. He hit the ramp, boiling inwardly, and headed for Chickman Street and his nearby rooming house. He ignored the rain which slashed obliquely down the street and pelted his face like a thousand pricking needles.

The southbound run to Pyramid was scheduled to leave the depot at eight o'clock, and it was now a little after seven, time enough to pack his

warbag and check out for good. He knew a moment's savage pleasure at the thought of disappearing from Canyon City without even a farewell to the girl who meant more to him than any other ever had; then bleak gloominess enveloped him.

His rooming house was only a block from the stage depot. He let himself into the quiet house and went up to his room. Hauling his battered old warbag from underneath the bed, he opened it and hurled his shaving things and spare clothing into it. Then he scrawled a note to Mrs. Menafee, his landlady, saying:

I'm leaving town for good. Tell anybody that asks for me I won't be back and don't know where I'm heading for.

Then he went downstairs and walked back to the station, waiting under the smoky oil lamps on the loading platform, while stablemen wheeled out the Thunderbolt and trotted the fresh teams up from their stalls. He climbed up to the high seat and stowed his bag in the boot, covering it with the tarp and turning the seat cushions over for a dry place to sit, afterward dropping to the platform again in his slicker and boots, to take tickets from four or five passengers who had drifted up from the waiting room.

Automatically, he sized them up as they climbed into the enclosed compartment whose shutters were drawn against the wind and rain. There was a woman with a pale, drawn face who refused to surrender the bundle which she carried; a short, fat man with a fancy brocade vest; an oldish man

and his drab little wife. The fifth passenger wore nondescript clothing under an oilskin coat. He was lank, with a thin, innocuous face and vague eyes beneath the shadow of a turned-down hat. He said to Dave: "I'll ride topside with you, mister. Give the others more room in there."

"Go ahead," Dave answered absently as he strapped the tarp around the rear baggage boot.

The stranger climbed the iron steps hand over hand. Dave came around the end of the rig, and at that moment Dud Hanley strode up the ramp with the papers for the run. Dave slammed the paneled door, then took the papers and signed out without speaking to the super who watched him from under his dark, bent-inward brows. He handed Dave a small envelope.

"Here's your time. But don't be forgettin' we got a meetin' in the mornin'—out behind the stables. Remember?"

Dave took the envelope, shoved it into his slicker. "I won't forget," he said curtly, then swung up to the pilot seat beside the thin passenger and picked up the lines and the long-lashed whip. He glanced at the man beside him. "Did I get your ticket, friend?"

The stranger dug and handed it over. In the rain and the dim light Dave saw it was marked one-way to Pyramid. Then he recalled that the man had ridden in the coach that afternoon on its northbound run to Canyon City. He started to comment, but changed his mind, kicked off the brake and sent the double team clattering down the ramp into

Chickman Street. Hanley remained staring after the rig for a moment, then gave a shrug and walked back to his office.

The night and the storm closed in around the Concord as it rolled out of town and hit the high cambered stage road leading southwestward toward Pyramid, the county seat. At the relay station near Porcupine Flats, an hour later, Dave halted the rig in a wide, grinding skid and threw the ribbons down to the waiting agent who came sliding up out of the darkness from his log shack. Dave asked the man about the condition of the road beyond.

"Don't know," the agent replied glumly. "But one of the sheriff's boys rode through here a while ago. Said he'd come over the West Fork trail and found it washed out a-plenty."

"Any news about the holdup men?"

"Posse caught up with 'em near Painted Rocks," the man told him. "Got their hosses, and put those rowdies a-foot. They ducked into the brush, so you better be careful who you pick up tonight."

Dave looked at the thin stranger beside him on the seat. "Maybe you better ride down below, feller."

The thin man shook his head. "I ain't afeerd of no holdup men."

A few of the passengers began to get out, and Dave swung down and signed the agent's time card. The thin man let himself to the ground and walked over toward the relay shack. The fat man and the gray-faced woman with the bundle wan-

dered around aimlessly, stretching cramped limbs. The thin man didn't wander. He took a stand against the shelter of the shack, motionless in the heavy shadows, and Dave had a feeling the man was watching him closely. Dave stared back at him, and the thin man walked quickly back and climbed up to the pilot seat.

It happened about an hour later. Dave's attention was on the trail, his mind filled with foreboding about the storm which was an interminable, swirling curtain of wind and rain before his eyes. They came clattering down a long grade, a few miles north of Painted Rocks, and suddenly Dave saw a movement beside the trail. Then the form of a man appeared in the beams of the side lamps. He didn't signal to Dave, but, as the stage clattered by him, he stepped forward a little, and raised his arms above his head. That, and nothing more. It didn't make sense to Dave, and he took a fresh grip on the slippery lines, staring out over the bobbing heads of the horses into the growing pressure of the storm.

A mile or so later, the thin man at his side nudged him and called over the howl of the wind: "What's the next stop, driver?"

"Painted Rocks," answered Dave. "But there's only a house or two there and the folks'll be in bed."

"It don't matter about that," the man said. "I got to get off there. Don't feel so good."

Dave turned his head and stared. The man's face was only a vague blob of white in the darkness, but he didn't look any sicker now than he had back at Canyon City.

"All right, I'll let you off in front of Mulvaney's place," Dave told him.

The stage jounced onward over the washed-out road. The thin man kept bumping against Dave, holding on with one hand to the iron seat rail on his left. Suddenly the dingy buildings of Painted Rocks loomed up out of the storm, and Dave braked the wheels and hauled back on the lines, stopping in the mud and ruts before a wood-frame house with no lights or sign of life in or around it. The thin man muttered, "Thanks," and crawled down to the mud.

"Maybe you can wake Mulvaney up," Dave told him, then kicked off the brake and sent the horses through the settlement and on toward Pyramid, now fifteen miles away.

They reached the Bitter Creek Bridge near ten o'clock, and Dave stopped again, walking forward through the rain to test the span which crossed the creek at this point fifteen or twenty feet above the stream. Peering downward, Dave saw the boiling, yellow torrent roaring through its channel of jagged rocks. Back on the seat, he moved

his outfit forward slowly, cautiously, inching the horses over the rain-stippled planks. The grade beyond the bridge when he finally reached it, was sheathed with an oily coating of yellow mud washed down from the ridge on the right, an invitation to a skid if a driver didn't handle his rig and horses exactly right. On the left was the lip of the canyon through which the creek boiled noisily.

Dave called encouragingly to the horses, rode the brake gently with one hand, as they slipped and slid up the grade to safety a hundred feet beyond. A bad spot was passed, but Dave felt a cynical twinge of sympathy for the driver who would have to bring the Thunderbolt back this way in the morning. He had no intention of being that man, and he had furthermore decided to forego the pleasure of punching Dud Hanley's face for him.

III

The stagecoach rolled into the central square at Pyramid at eleven o'clock that night, spattered with mud and slime, the horses caked with clay



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that also clung to the wagon pole and harness like freshly mixed cement. Dave checked out at the dispatcher's office in the station, saying brusquely to the agent that he was quitting and another driver would have to be found to take the Thunderbolt back to Canyon City.

He went back to the rig after a brief argument with the agent, climbed up and got his warbag, then started down the ramp toward the square. The passengers were moving in the same direction. Dave noted two men with gunbelts strapped over their slickers, talking quietly to the stout man who had ridden in on the Thunderbolt. One of the men was examining papers the fat man had taken out of his wallet. Dave saw the man hand them back and nod; and the fat man, looking puzzled, lumbered on ahead of Dave down the ramp.

Dave sensed that both of the armed men stared at him curiously, but he ignored them and went on, bone-weary now, glassy-eyed with strain and lack of sleep. He headed for the Copper King Hotel, two blocks away, his warbag a dead weight in his hand. Even his slicker felt heavier than it had when he'd left Canyon City. The street was dimly illuminated by lights shining from buildings that lined the square, and he traveled on through flickering shadows and the sound of wind and rain.

At the first corner he came to, he imagined he heard boots slogging the plank walk in back of him. He didn't turn to look, but pushed on, numb with fatigue, intent on the

hotel and warm blankets. He changed his bag to his right hand, then pushed his left into the pocket of his slicker. There was a package in his left-hand pocket—a package that hadn't been there before.

He pulled up short, his mind suddenly alert. At the same moment there was a quick step on the plank walk behind him. Something round and hard pressed itself into the small of his back, and a voice breathed: "Stand still, feller! And hand that bundle over quick!"

Dave didn't move. The pressure against his back increased, and he knew now that it was the muzzle of a gun. The man behind him said: "Quick, or I'll—"

A new voice rapped out, swift and hard: "Put up your hands, the both of you!"

Dave felt the man behind him whirl sharply, and the gun went away as he turned. Dave wheeled, too, seeing a dim shape fade toward a nearby alleyway, seeing other shadows coming toward him through the dark. Then guns crashed in the rain. Muzzle flame spurted toward him, a volley of deafening reports. The man who had stood behind Dave had reached the alley opening when the slug hit him, ramming his breath out in a sobbing gust. He collapsed to the mud and turned over on his back, drawing his knees up in agony, his arms flailing the air helplessly.

Two men came pounding up to Dave, and he saw the glint of rain on steel. "Stand still, or I'll—" a voice said harshly.

"Wait . . . wait—" Dave cried.

He saw the arm swinging up, and

threw up an elbow to shield his face. A gun barrel crashed against the side of his head; and he went down, engulfed by blackness through which blinding lights flashed. . . .

The pale glow of dawn, coming into the bare little office of the Pyramid jail, was rain-filtered and dim, but even so it pushed achingly against Dave's eyeballs where he sat near the window, chin cupped in elbow-propped hands.

There were three men in the room with him, and now he knew them all. The tall, rawboned man with the kindly blue eyes was Homer Cahoon, Sheriff of Canyon County. The chunky one with the frown was Deputy Will Oliver; the third one, short and wiry, wearing a thin white crescent of mustache, was Constable John Peene.

The package Dave had found in the pocket of his slicker the night before lay on the sheriff's desk. It had been torn open and the money inside counted carefully.

"Fifty thousand in new bills," Peene said in an awed voice. "A nice piece of swag, by grabs!"

Sheriff Cahoon stared down at Dave. "So you don't want to change your story, Gardner?"

Dave doggedly shook his head. "That's right, sheriff. I told you all I know."

"We just got word from your boss at Canyon City," Peene said suspiciously, "that you quit last night and got your time. And your landlady says you left a note sayin' you was goin' to light a shuck. Looks to me as though you had a notion to—"

"I can't help how it looks to you!" Dave shouted it, not so much in anger as in jagged desperation at the futility of arguing any more.

Deputy Sheriff Oliver said for the fortieth time, "You still say the thin man that rode in the seat with you to Painted Rocks gave you the money?"

"I didn't say he gave it to me," Dave answered wearily, disgustedly. "I said he must've stuck it in my slicker just before he got off at the Rocks."

"A queer thing to do," opined the sheriff, shrewdly eying Dave. "Three men stick up the bank, one of 'em rides with you to Canyon City, then buys a ticket back to Pyramid just to make you a present of fifty thousand dollars. And how did he know *you* was takin' the southbound run, anyhow?"

"You figure it out," Dave said shortly. "Find out who the man was you killed in the alleyway last night, and—"

"He's a stranger," the sheriff cut in. "Had a room at the Copper King since day 'fore yest'd'y. That's all we know."

"Well, don't ask *me*," Dave sighed. "But if I was goin' to make a guess, I'd say they held up the bank, gave the money to the thin man to take out of town, then smuggle back again, figurin' the law'd be lookin' somewhere else. When the thin man didn't get off the stage at Pyramid, the one you killed followed me to find out what happened to his pard and spotted me taking the money out of my pocket, and—"

"Stow that gab," Peene broke in impatiently. "You must think we're

a pack o' fools to take any stock in a windy like that!"

Dave threw up his hands. "To blazes with you! I'm through talkin' . . . through with everything!"

"I suppose," Oliver suggested, "you never saw McIntyre before?"

"McIntyre?" Dave jerked his head up, staring. "Who's McIntyre?"

"The one we got in the alleyway," Cahoon supplied. "His name was in the hotel clerk's book—Todd McIntyre, from Butte."

McIntyre! From Butte! Dave thought a moment, wondering if there could be any connection. Montana had once lived in Butte. Dave shrugged, pushing the whole thing out of his mind.

"No," he said, "I never saw or heard of him before last night."

Peene jerked at his close-clipped mustache. "Well, come on. Let's get him back to Canyon City. The posse'll report there some time this morning, and we may get some word about Gardner's friends."

"I'll take him up," the sheriff decided, walking to the window and staring out into the driving rain. "The stage is supposed to pull out in a half hour, if the trails are still open."

IV

It took Dave and the sheriff but a few minutes to reach the stage station, four blocks from the jail, but by the time they got there both were drenched to the bone in spite of their slickers. Rain was driving down from the northwest, lacing the streets in long thrashing gusts. Dave, quickening his step instinctively as water

sluiced down the back of his neck, felt the cold edge of metal yank back his wrists.

"Take it easy, bub," the sheriff warned. "Them bracelets ain't lined with velvet!"

They reached the Thunderbolt where it stood on the ramp behind its two-team string. The driver was a new man whom Dave knew only casually. He said, "Hullo, Macey," as the sheriff bought two tickets to Canyon City and took his change. The driver stared at Dave, then at the sheriff, and said to Dave: "It's O. K. with me if you drive the rig, Gardner. I—"

Cahoon shoved Dave ahead of him through the coach's open door. "Gardner 'n' me are keepin' dry this trip, friend," he said gruffly.

After that, Dave didn't think about very much but what confronted him when he reached the end of the run at Canyon City. He didn't even notice the other passengers in the stage: two men and a woman with a little frightened-looking girl. Dave and Cahoon sat together on one seat, with one of the men next to the sheriff and the second man and the woman and child in the seat opposite, their knees almost touching Dave's. Macey, the driver, climbed up above them and started the coach. They rumbled down the ramp and turned north out of town through streets that spewed water at each other and boiled with mud and debris washed down from the surrounding hills.

Dave sat near the window, peering through the slats of the lowered shutters, watching the rain swoop

past the stage and the gray trail swimming up out of the murk ahead to vanish dimly behind. Streamers of wind-torn fog whipped by; clouds, evil and yellowish, raced across the leaden sky; cottonwoods and jack willows clung with their roots to soggy soil, their tortured limbs flapping in the gale while fragments of twigs and leaves pelted the coach with the impact of bullets. Dave felt a twinge of sympathy for Macey on the deck above and for the horses who were being punished by the storm.

They came to the Bitter Creek Bridge finally. First a hundred feet of slippery grade with hardly any foothold for the horses or traction for the high wheels of the stage, then thirty feet of planks laid end to end with a flimsy railing on each side and a drop of— Dave gasped, peering through the shutters at his side.

The Thunderbolt had hit the crown of the hill and was sliding swiftly downward toward the bridge, seen dimly through the ruck of wind and rain. But Dave was staring at the bridge down there, seeing the swirling yellow water that filled the gorge almost up to the planks of the bridge. It was hardly possible the bridge would hold up under the weight of the Thunderbolt and a four-horse string!

And now Macey was applying the brake. Dave heard the ratchet clatter above his head as the driver drew back hard and held it on.

Sheriff Cahoon leaned forward, staring placidly out at the weather.

"Looks a bit bad, don't it?" he said.

Dave leaned closer to the window, eyes slitted, jaw tight. "I hope all hands can swim," he declared grimly, "because there's no place down there to turn this rig!"

The woman passenger screamed softly, a choking, fearful sound; and the little girl began to whimper in her hands, her eyes shut tight. The two men passengers stirred nervously and tried to grin.

The Thunderbolt had topped the hill and was halfway down the grade, the wheels locked and sliding in the greasy mud, the horses fighting to hold the big coach, to prevent the rig from rolling on and over them. Macey, on the pilot seat, was yelling now, trying to soothe the animals, but only managing to spook them more and more. The stage struck the bottom of the grade and groaned to a stop not far from the first plank of the vibrating bridge.

They were standing on a kind of causeway, an approach filled in between the grade and the bridge itself; and as Dave shifted his weight on the seat and stared to the rear, he saw a crack split open across the road, ten yards behind the coach. And as he looked, that crack widened and became a chasm, ten feet wide from brink to brink. He sucked in a long breath.

"That does it, friends," he rasped. "We can't get back even if we could turn this rig. We'll have to chance the bridge or go down with it."

If his remark was calculated to assuage the fears of the passengers,

it singularly failed. Agitation showed on the faces of the men, even on the ruddy one of Sheriff Cahoon, still handcuffed to his prisoner. The woman and the child were weeping silently.

Cahoon looked at Dave, worry deepening in his shrewd eyes. "Well, what's next, Gardner? You've been over that bridge in the rain a hundred times in the last two years. You want to take us through?"

Dave was quiet a moment, hearing Macey's body sliding down the iron steps from the high seat. If he agreed to drive the horses across that tottering bridge, it might mean death, drowning in the torrent that swept up higher as the moments passed. On the other hand, if he could persuade the sheriff to unlock the handcuffs, he'd have as good a chance as the others by sitting and waiting for the water to rise and engulf the stage. Why should he make any effort to save these people, to save the sheriff? Fate had double-crossed him from the beginning. Dave lifted the shutters and stared upward to the cap rock rim above the bridge, toward the piled-up granite peaks smothered in a poisonous rack of clouds. The storm was increasing in intensity.

"Well, what d'you say?" the sheriff demanded impatiently.

Dave didn't speak, but lifted the wrist that was manacled to Cahoon's. The sheriff took the key from his pocket, fumbling at Dave's wrist. Then Macey opened the door and poked a frightened face inside. "Say, Gardner, we're in for it!" he

said in a gulping tone of voice. "We can't get back to the trail and we can't risk the bridge! I think she's goin' to go any minute!"

Dave stood up, bending his head in the cramped compartment, shoved the nervous driver aside and stepped out into the drenching downpour. The wind was a great, shrieking weight, pinning him against the paneled side of the coach. Horses and rig were slewed obliquely across the road, twenty feet short of the bridge, and the stage, tilted to one side, was dipping lower as seconds passed, for the earth beneath it was gradually being undermined by the rushing current of the flooded creek. And now, as Dave started up the side of the coach, he saw water boiling furiously through the planks of the bridge, and under the tails of the upstream edge.

Dropping back to the ground, Dave fought his way against the wind and through the hurtling rain. He was aware that Sheriff Cahoon was coming up in back of him, but making no attempt to restrain him. It was understood without words. Dave was the man who could save them all. There was no other way to do it. The rain whipped into Dave's face, blinding him momentarily. He squinted between his fingers at the bridge, then turned and said to the sheriff: "Don't think it'll hold us." The wind took his words and flung them away into a howling void.

The sheriff cupped hands to his mouth. "Well, what're you goin' to do?"

"The way the water's comin' up,"

Dave shouted, "we'll be sittin' on the deck of the rig in twenty minutes." He paused, staring at the canted planks. "Then men might swim for it, but the woman and the little girl—" He turned and pushed past Cahoon to the stage, jerking the door open. "All out, folks. I got to lighten up to make the bridge."

The passengers crept out, cringing under the lash of the rain and the wind. Dave turned and led them toward the bridge. The woman and child wept softly, but the men were quiet, tense. Dave gripped the rail and led the party over to the yonder bank, each passenger clinging tightly to the one ahead. Dave ran back, feeling the planks sway beneath him.

The sheriff and the driver stood waiting, white-faced, silent. "Inside," Dave ordered. "If we go down, you two're goin' with me. Then there'll be three heroes—" He broke off on a bitter laugh.

Macey and Cahoon clambered into the coach and slammed the door, dropping the sash of both windows and running the latticed shutters up. Dave swung up to the pilot seat of the slanting rig and grabbed up the lines. He kicked off the brake, yelled, "Hee-yah," and sent the nervous horses lunging hard into the traces.

The Concord hit the bridge, high wheels rolling. Hoofs thundered. Dave took the low side deliberately, knowing it would give under the tons of weight, but wanting room to swing. He felt the planks sag, heard the nails splinter and snap. The yonder bank loomed up. He pulled

hard on the left lines then, rolling the horses and the stage, trying to hold the sinking structure steady with the massed weight of his forward rush. He felt the wheels skid, the deck tilt dangerously. The horses fought for a footing on the slimy planks. Then, impossibly, they were clear of the bridge.

Dave yanked back on the long brake handle, pulled the ribbons back hard against his chest, easing the rig up fifty feet beyond where the terrified passengers stood and shivered, staring, in the rain.

The bridge had vanished. Only the splintered butts of broken up-rights stuck up out of the brown, boiling flood. Dave wrapped the lines around the brake handle and pulled in a shaken breath. And now, suddenly, the passengers were crowding around the stage. Other gray figures were coming up from the trail ahead.

Dave started to climb down from the pilot seat, then stared at the two men who ran up beside the blowing horses. His breath ran out in a hard, short gust. He recognized the thin man who had planted the stolen money in his slicker pocket the night before. And he identified the second man as the one who had waved his arms at the stage north of Painted Rocks.

The two strangers spotted Dave at about the same moment. The thin man's face went blank and his eyes shrank down to slits in a parchment mask. The other man stiffened and pulled back, one hand crawling down toward his hip. Other people were moving up out of the swirling

rain behind them, and the two men stopped, uncertain.

Dave had one boot over the side of the stage, one hand on the seat's guard rail. His head was turned, his gaze projected downward. Simultaneously, Sheriff Cahoon and the driver Macey were climbing out of the stage. The thin man made up his mind. One moment he was standing as though transfixed, the next he had flipped a hand down and a gun flashed up.

Dave saw that hard glitter, twisted suddenly and hurled his body out and down, his muscles bunched as the ground swam up at him. A gun crashed in his face and he felt the flash of powder, smelled the smoke. Then his hurtling body struck the thin man and knocked him flat.

Both rolled over in the mud, Dave clawing for the thin man's gun, blinded by muck, gasping for the breath the stage-high dive had blasted out of him. His fingers found metal and he wrenched at it, felt the pistol snap out of his adversary's hand. He came to his knees, swinging blindly at the man's mud-spattered face. Bone met his fist in jarring collision. The thin man went pop-eyed trying to duck Dave's second blow, but knuckles battered his jaw, and he sagged limp, all the fight knocked out of him.

Voices behind Dave yelled. Another gun made a sodden report. Dave rolled over and started to rise. He was in time to see the thin man's companion loom up over him with up-raised revolver. It started down. Dave was on his knees, fingers braced in the mud, when he heard the third

shot and felt the concussion of the outlaw's gun barrel against his head. He fell forward unconscious.

When Dave recovered awareness, he found himself still flat in the mud, with the stagecoach looming wet and shining above him, and gray, drawn faces staring down. His head which ached horribly was pillowed in someone's lap. He looked up. It was Montana McIntyre who supported his head.

"Nice meetin' you here," he said.

She said uncertainly: "Dud Hanley brought me in his buckboard. We heard about Todd. He—"

"Todd?" Dave said it without much interest, then started. "Monty, was he . . . did you—"

She stopped him with a hand pressed to his lips. Pain and tears were in her voice. "Todd was my brother. He . . . was always weak. They put him in the penitentiary two years ago. That's why I couldn't . . . marry you. I didn't want—"

A voice—Dud Hanley's—spoke suddenly, and Dave pulled his glance away from the girl's drawn face and saw the super standing above him. Hanley's eyes were hard and humorless, though his straight mouth had the barest quirk of a smile on it.

"You damn knot-headed fool," he said. "I oughta bust you one for treatin' Montana like you done!"

Dave lay still a moment, then opened his eyes and looked into the girl's.

"Monty," he murmured, "I got a date with Hanley behind the Signal stables in another hour, and . . .

well . . . I reckon I'll deserve what's comin' to me. I—"

"Shut up!" Dud Hanley snapped. "I wouldn't stand a chance against a man that brought the Thunderbolt through the mess you did!" He gave a brittle laugh. "O. K. by you?"

"Sure," Dave said.

Sheriff Homer Cahoon came ambling through the crowd, elbowing his way excitedly. He stopped, water dripping from hat and fingertips, staring down at Dave Gardner.

"Your thin friend cashed in his chips," he announced importantly. "And we're holdin' the feller that waved at you last night. Just like I figured, them three held up the bank. McIntyre killed the cashier and holed up at Pyramid. The thin man bought a ticket to Canyon City and took the swag with him while the other feller left town with their horses. Trouble was, when my boys shot their horses near Painted Rocks, they had no way of gettin' out of the county. So the thin man started

back to Pyramid with the money. His pard wavin' to him from the trail spocked him an' he planted the money in your slicker, knowin' McIntyre'd foller you when you got to town. But—"

"I don't get it," Dave said puzzledly. "How—"

"They had it planned. If anything went wrong, they'd give the driver of the stage a package to deliver to McIntyre. There wasn't no time to explain that to you, so the thin feller just stuck it in your coat."

"Well," said Dave grimly, "reckon that clears me, then."

The sheriff answered with a smile. "You're still technically my prisoner, Gardner. But I'll take a chance. Just don't be leavin' town, is all."

Dave sat up and rubbed a hand gingerly through his muddy shock of hair. He looked around at Montana and grinned his twisted grin. "I won't," he said, putting a hard emphasis on the words. "Not for years and years!"

THE END



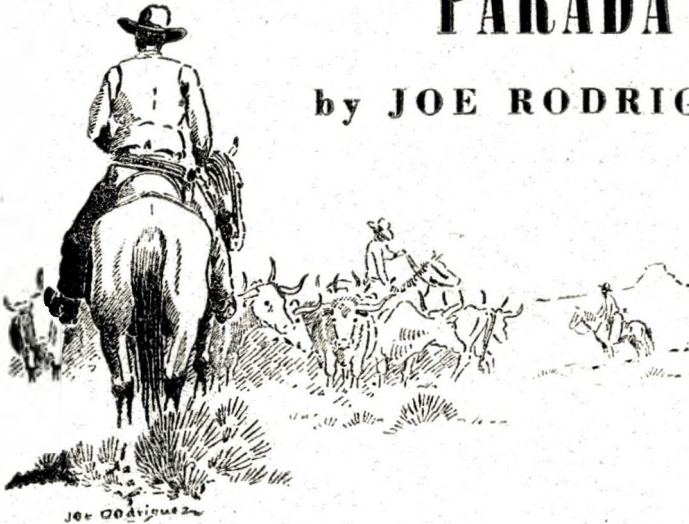
Below are 15 scrambled words all cowhands know. Can you dab your loop on 'em? Answers on page 103.



- | | | |
|-------------|-------------|---------------|
| 1. Wollat | 6. Slandbad | 11. Tersquat |
| 2. Mukooks | 7. Reljing | 12. Gadenere |
| 3. Chaks | 8. Grouth | 13. Clinchuke |
| 4. Ciptek | 9. Gabraw | 14. Sombacks |
| 5. Aniljava | 10. Karet | 15. eelouc |

PARADA

by JOE RODRIGUEZ



You've often heard the word *parada*—it's the Spanish word
Which to an old cowpuncher means the holdup of the herd,
And that's the bunchin' of the cattle from the mornin's' ride,
From which the beef for brandin' or for sale is cut aside.
The boys they set their hosses and they watch the boss,
Slip in and ride throughout the herd atop his cuttin' hoss;
Which looks a little easy, yet it's not just like it looks
For cattle is a science that ain't ever learned in books.

It takes some long experience and that means a lot of years
Of lookin' at a beef cow down between a pony's ears,
The catch to it being what calf belongs to just what cow,
And that's a crossword puzzle if a feller don't know how.
The boss he puts them both together—not a word is said,
He maybe waves his hand in signal, maybe shakes his head,
And to an old cowhand that savvies this is just the word.
To make a little openin' when he busts them from the herd.

You talk about some science, you just watch that pony work,
He knows each critter wanted, nary shy or nary jerk;
That cowman in the saddle knows the weight down to a pound,
And makes no difference, veal or beef, his judgment's pretty sound.
If you ever been a cowboy then you've surely seen,
The old man work *parada* and you savvy what I mean.

(Editor's note: Pfc. Joe Rodriguez is at present serving his country somewhere in the South Pacific.)

MENU—HOT LEAD

by TOM W. BLACKBURN



Jacob didn't cook up that devil's broth of trouble in the Longhorn but he was ready to help a salty stranger bring it to a boil

JACOB had trouble with his feet. They hurt. Sometimes, in the back room in which Jacob and his wife lived behind the Longhorn Cafe, Mama would scold a little.

"For why should you work every hour of the day you ain't sleeping? It's not that you got to. We got money and it's a good business, now. And you ain't young. Better the

business run itself and you get sometimes a little rest!"

Mama never said more than this. She understood Jacob. Stone Mountain was a town which had been built by men. And Jacob had had a part in the building of it. He had nailed up the siding on the Longhorn Cafe himself. It had been the first clapboard building on the

street. He had spent a gruelling, frantic night heaving endless buckets of water onto its flat roof when a grass fire ran into the new town. Good friends had sat regularly in booths marked with their names. They had died and new friends had taken their places. Stone Mountain was Jacob's life and the Longhorn was his stake in the town.

It was the early supper crowd time. The two schoolteachers who had the piney-smelling new building up the street were in one of the unmarked booths. Jacob beamed at them. Young women, these two—pert and pretty. It made him feel good to see them here. It made him feel good to know that at last the time had arrived when young women were not afraid to come to his town to make their living and their home.

Ed Bascom, the stooped, graying teller of the bank, was in the little stall marked with his name, the same table from which he had eaten for a decade. Bull-voiced, horse-faced old Kate Muller, owner of the Circle Bar, was in the Circle Bar booth with three of her riders. Jacob thought Kate might have caught one of them sneaking a drink during the afternoon. She was rumblyng dressing down all three.

There were others—familiar, friendly faces—in the room. Some were steady friends and customers and so rated the private booths which a quirk of fancy had caused Jacob to set apart for such in the beginning. Others were casual trade, spread along the counter or in the unmarked stalls. Mama was right. Business was good. There

was only one flaw to worry Jacob.

Directly across the room from the front door was a large booth which Mama always kept set with clean linen and bright silver. Its benches were upholstered with calfskin over the plain wood of the others. Jacob had built it as a gesture of honor, something he could offer to the customer who was Stone Mountain's leading citizen. His eyes touched the lettered panel over the arched entry to this central booth. The lettering was different than that in the rest of the room. The name up there was the first which Jacob had not posted of his own accord.

Two days after his arrival in town, John Burton had come into the Longhorn with his name lettered on a card and had coolly tacked it up above this booth.

"I like this table," he told Jacob.

Jacob started to protest, to explain, if he could, the kind of man he liked to see sitting there. Burton had grabbed a handful of Jacob's apron front and twisted it tight.

"That card stays there!" he snapped. "Just a reminder of who's boss when Johnny Burton is working a town!"

That had been three months ago. Stone Mountain had come to learn what Burton meant by *working* a town. He had taken over Ed Smiley's Clevis Saloon. Just what that deal was no one knew, because Smiley left town the same day. Burton's dealers were at the Clevis tables. Burton's whiskey, a stand of unfamiliar labels, was racked on the back bar. After a score of years there were tales of

thirsty punchers who tanked too much from those bottles only to be found sick in an alley at sunup, stunned and empty of pocket.

There were tales again of men who loved cards of a Saturday night, sound men at business and sound men at poker, who lost everything they owned in a brief, forced high stake game. And there were three fresh graves in Stone Mountain's dusty cemetery—grim monuments to harried men who had reverted in anger to the first justice of the frontier and lost the toss to Johnny Burton. And for the first time in its history, the town marshal's office had been empty and unclaimed for six long weeks.

Jacob eyed the empty central booth again. Burton would be coming in soon, walking arrogantly and lightly with a gunman ahead and a gunman behind. Jacob would have to serve him. An old man whose feet hurt can't fight the devil with a skillet. Jacob thought of others he had served at that table, men whose names over the arch above it had made him proud. They were a legion of the great. The first, back in a tumultuous three months during the pangs of Stone Mountain's birth, had been a man as handsome as Johnny Burton. A man as sure of himself and as cool—as dangerous. That man was one of Jacob's brightest memories. But memory cannot purge a present evil. It was a bitter thing, but it was true; Stone Mountain had need of a strong, fearless town tamer like Dan Hudson in that booth again. And the dead do not return.

One of the schoolteachers signaled Jacob. He hobbled across, smiling friendliness. The girl blushed uneasily. Her companion nudged her on, under the table.

"I . . . we . . . we were wondering if we couldn't have our names over this table?" she stammered. "We're here every night. And we wouldn't feel quite so much like strangers—"

Jacob made his face solemn and shook his head.

"For five months in this town and already yet you feel like strangers?" he demanded. "Maybe you don't like us, eh? Feel like a stranger and you are one. I do not put strangers' names over my tables. Maybe tomorrow you come in and say hello to Jacob. Maybe you sit down and say hello to other peoples. No more strangers. Then the names—yes!"

Both of the girls colored. Jacob grinned at them. The first one grinned back in understanding.

"All right, Jacob. Tomorrow, then . . ."

Jacob waddled back to his counter, nodding to himself. Nice girls. Time they broke the ice about them a little. Stone Mountain was not used to teachers. If they wanted friends, they'd find the town waiting to take them in—but they'd have to move first. It was time they were told. And this was a good way to do it. Jacob grinned again. Nice girls. He turned.

A man was just coming in from the street, a tall, unhurried man. His body had the loose look of one who had traveled much. But his range gear was clean and there was

an air of neatness about him which was almost fastidious. Jacob eyed him with sharp interest. There was a moment in which he had a compelling feeling that he knew this man—knew him well. Then the moment passed and he knew this was a total stranger.

The tall man moved deliberately across the room, passing close to the booth occupied by the two schoolteachers. The near one of these, perhaps still smarting a little under Jacob's lesson in friendliness and unaware that this man did not belong to Stone Mountain, nodded with awkward stiffness.

"Hello . . ." she offered timidly.

The tall man halted abruptly, plainly startled out of deep thoughts of his own. He stared down at the two women. Then, with flawless, honest courtesy, he lifted his hat. The stern lines of his face were dissolved by a pleased, charmed smile.

"Good evening, ma'am," he answered and moved on. The schoolteacher shot a frightened glance at Jacob in a plea for approval. But he ignored it. He was watching the stranger.

The man came on down the line of booths. He glanced in at Ed Bascom, hunched over his coffee as he hunched all day over his till at the bank. Bascom did not look up. The stranger nodded at Kate Muller as he passed the Circle Bar booth. Kate abruptly gave over the tirade she was delivering to her riders, eyed the man's face with sharp interest, and shot Jacob a curious glance. Jacob had the feeling that Kate had also experienced his own

brief impression that this man was known to him. He shrugged.

Kate turned back to her boys. The tall man stopped outside the center booth. He eyed the card above it without expression. Then, with slow deliberateness, he pulled out the tack which held it, reversed the card so that the blank surface of its under side was turned outward, and reset the tack. He dropped into the leather upholstered seat and turned toward Jacob with a hungry man's impatience to order.

Jacob hurried out from the counter.

"Wingbone soup, fried spuds, T-bone?" he suggested.

The tall man nodded. Jacob waddled back to the soup tureen behind the counter. He was there when Johnny Burton, flanked by his usual pair of aides, entered the Longhorn.

Jacob's feet quit hurting. He didn't have time to think of them. Every ounce of his attention was drawn to the customers' half of the Longhorn Cafe. Jacob knew what was going to happen and his unwillingness to see it happen here in his own place of business froze him up.

Johnny Burton appeared jovial. He had had, Jacob thought, perhaps one glass of whiskey more than usual. Neither Burton nor the two men with him saw the stranger in the central booth, at first. There was reason for this. The schoolteacher who had mistakenly spoken to the stranger was still rosy with the tint of her blush. It heightened her color, pointed her beauty. Burton paused

beside that booth. He looked down at both women, but his eyes were interested only in this one. He bent a little in a mocking courtesy which was streaked with cool insult.

"A lonely woman's like a whiskey bottle with an unbroken seal," he said. "She does nobody any good. I'll treat you to supper—at my table. Both of you—"

The one girl looked across appealingly to Jacob. Jacob wanted to help her. She was a nice girl. They were both nice girls. And Johnny Burton wasn't good for that kind. But he couldn't help. He couldn't move. His thought was riveted on the stranger in Burton's booth.

Ed Bascom straightened above his coffee, seeming to sense the distress in the booth next to him. He thrust his gaunt, stooped body out into the aisle and peered reprovingly at Burton.

"See here," he protested in his whanging discordant voice, "the ladies have already ordered. Heard 'em, myself. Maybe they don't want no company. Ain't a reason why they should!"

There was a little smile on Burton's face. He said nothing. One of his two aides, standing almost shoulder to shoulder with Ed Bascom, shot out a hand and clamped fingers tightly on Bascom's thin arm. With this grip, he gave Bascom a sharp shove which flung him heavily back into his seat. Stunned by this sudden violence, Bascom stared up at Burton with the thin veneer of chivalric courage which had prompted his protest draining from his face.

Burton touched the arm of the teacher. She pulled fearfully away, but there was sand in her, too. She slid out and straightened angrily in the aisle. Her companion followed and the two of them faced Burton and his paired companions.

Nice girls. Jacob felt the pull of admiration again. Good girls, with back to them!

Johnny Burton smiled again, tipped his head mockingly, and motioned for the two teachers to move ahead of him. They passed Kate Muller and her boys in the Circle Bar booth. One of the Circle Bar riders came half out of his seat. Kate shoved him back with a quick touch and said something. She was one to look after her boys.

The two girls were the first to come abreast of the central booth. The stranger within it gestured toward the empty seat across from him. The teachers hesitated, then slid under the edge of the table and onto the padded bench. The stranger smiled friendliness at them.

"Evening," he offered pleasantly. "I'll call the waiter."

Jacob was still immobile behind his counter, a big ladle of steaming soup half upraised. His breath was choked up within him. The paralysis which had seized him when Burton came in the door was even more rigid. A man, he knew, was going to die. A tall stranger with a strong and handsome face was going to die in blood and violence in the middle of the Longhorn at meal time!

Johnny Burton shoved in against

the table, his fingers tensely gripping its outer edge.

"Wait a minute—you!" he snapped. "This is my company and my table!"

"And your town, too, I reckon?" the stranger finished out softly. His eyes raised mockingly to the little placard over the arch, the lettered card which he had reversed before he sat down.

"Maybe so," he went on. "But I don't see a tag—on table, town or on these ladies!"

Burton's face was white. His eyes narrowed down. The toneless level of his voice was wicked.

"Friend," he counseled, "don't play this game! Johnny Burton don't tag what he wants—he just takes it. Get out of that seat!"

Burton's two companions pressed in, flanking their boss and effectually preventing the stranger from obeying Burton's order to get out of the booth. It was the old pressure play at odds of three to one. A man was apt to break under this kind of pressure, either through anger or fear. A man was apt to turn desperate or reckless. But not the stranger in the center booth. He smiled blandly and nodded his head at the two gunmen.

"I like it here, Burton," he said easily. "I like the company, too." He grinned at the two white-faced girls. "But I don't like your friends. And I don't like you. Move on!"

Jacob's heart hammered with a vain effort at forcing blood through constricted veins. Such madness! This boy had a hole in his head—

he was crazy—to make such talk!

Johnny Burton straightened slowly and with satisfaction. As he did so, a practised shrug of his shoulders flicked the lapels of his coat back so that they exposed the brace of guns swung high against his vest.

"You've got thirty seconds," he advised ominously.

The stranger seemed to relax even more.

"I reckon that's enough," he agreed. And at the same instant his lean body exploded with movement.

Every motion, every play of muscle, was finely calculated, easy of execution, and apparently unhurried. Yet there was blurring speed to it all. He dropped low enough to shove one shoulder under the edge of the table, then surged fully upright. There was power in that upward movement. It tipped the silver on the table into the laps of the two startled teachers and raised the table on edge so that the thick planking of its top was a barrier between the women and the entrance of the booth. With the table tilted thus, the stranger had more room on his own side of the booth. He braced his feet apart, swung a little at the hips, and started his belt gun in an upward sweep.

With the first flash of movement, Johnny Burton had eagerly begun the flickering draw which had made him grimly feared in Stone Mountain. Both of his pieces were dropping into line.

Jacob grunted explosively. Frozen muscles suddenly flexed. *Sela!* He could breathe again!

Jacob was not wholly unacquainted with gunplay. In more turbulent years he had seen many weapons and skills at work. He knew this stranger could not face Burton and his two men, all at once. The edge of time and personal speed was too fine. Yet it was difficult to measure another's chances against a striking foe and know where help could best be given. A man could but guess and without a weapon of his own at hand, use makeshift and hope.

With a swiftness which astonished himself, Jacob lashed out powerfully overhand with the arm which held the ladle of steaming soup. The thick, hot liquid shot out like a quivering lance and struck the nearest of Burton's two men on the short shag hair at the base of his neck.

The fellow lost his leveling gun as he clapped both hands frantically to his scalded hide. Through his victim's yelping, Jacob felt the beat of other guns. A corner of his mind idly wondered why it was that when a man was close to gunfire, the jolts came not as something heard but something felt. He wondered whether the stranger had gotten one of the shots in the volley away, but he did not lift his attention from the one foeman he had picked out.

Still squalling, the scalded gunman staggered within reach. The heavy enameled iron ladle Jacob held rose and fell like a stake maul. Once—twice—three times it rang satisfyingly against the skull of the staggering man. The last time there was a difference in the sound, a soddenness to the impact. The gunman

went down. Jacob stood triumphantly over his fallen enemy and swung his gaze toward the rest of the room.

The table was again down in its place in the booth, only slightly awry. The stranger sat as he had before, save that now he was beginning the methodical task of punching spent shells from the chamber of his gun. The schoolteachers were looking in awe from the man across from them to a bullet-gouged splinter which dangled from the edge of the table which had been their shelter. And their eyes mirrored the utter amazement of pilgrims who have witnessed a miracle. The rosy one of the two girls was looking at the stranger with an especial fixity, as though she saw in him something for which she had been looking.

Face down, their bodies overlapping in a weird, impersonal sprawl, lay Johnny Burton and his second gunman. Burton's guns lay at the ends of his limp, outstretched fingers. Jacob bent and lifted the pieces. Both were at full cock, but neither had been fired.

That was sudden death!

Jacob grunted. The stranger looked up from his task.

"You spilled my soup, Dad," he said. "Better dip me another dish. And I think my friends will have some coffee."

Jacob did not move. The feeling had come again that he had somewhere known this man. Kate Muller's head appeared cautiously over the top of the partition between the central booth and her own.

"Mother of Moses!" she exploded. "You give us a bad time, son! You been lookin' for that dead snake?"

The stranger glanced up, surprise on his face.

"Me?" he asked. "No, ma'am. I been looking for a job. Heard there might be one this way. Know of such?"

Kate Muller climbed out of her booth.

"Do I!" she snorted. "Eh, Jake? Look"—she stabbed a finger at the teachers—"take this gent down to the hotel and keep him there so's he's can't get away. We're havin' a meetin' soon's I can locate the rest of the town council. We've got a marshal that'll fit our boots!"

The girls came out of the central booth. The stranger followed them, still looking surprised. The three moved toward the door. Kate Muller came over to stand by Jake. Her eyes were following the stranger as he stepped into the street.

"That kind never dies!" she breathed.

Jacob nodded solemnly. He knew, now, why he had felt he had known

this man. Up in Deadwood a man had had the back of his head shot away while he sat in a friendly poker game. That had been long ago. Dan Hudson was under Dakota sod. But his kind lived. It was not true that the dead did not return.

So long as there was violence in the grass country, so long as renegades crowded an honest man in the empire the old frontier had surveyed, quiet men would ride out of the grass to take their measure for no reward save a glance from a pretty woman and the gratitude of neighbors.

Mama peered fearfully out the kitchen door. Jacob grinned reassuringly at her. Kate Muller hurried out, bustling with pleasure and importance. Jacob started tidying up the center booth and wondered if Kate would send men to haul Johnny Burton and his men away. Ed Bascom was hunched again over his coffee. And Jacob's feet started to hurt again.

But it was all right. Stone Mountain could laze in the sun again and grow. There would be peace.

THE END



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RANGE SAVVY

BY GENE KING



Old hands at beaver trapping and modern scientists alike can tell the age of the beaver that felled any specific tree with amazing accuracy by the size of the chips around the stump and from the tooth marks on the chips and the cut logs. The beaver's cutting teeth and the spacings between them grow and change each year until the beaver reaches full maturity. But contrary to popular belief, beavers can't tell which way a tree is going to fall. They simply turn and duck as it topples and are sometimes killed by the falling trunk.



WET cattle shoved across the shallow waters of the Rio Grande were long one of the most troublesome problems of ranchers and Border Patrol men alike down in the wild brush and chaparral country of Southwest Texas. Now border authorities have a new racket to contend with—wet rubber. According to a report from Monterrey, Mexico, black market operators in the U. S. who specialize in auto tires and tubes are smuggling these items into Mexico via the river. The tubes are first inflated, then strings of tires are tossed into the Rio Grande to be pulled ashore by confederates on the Mexican side. The tires bring 100% higher prices in Mexico.



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FILL

With the gun-slinging Machens riding herd on La Xara, Jack Howard could either vent his owl-hoot brand—or get measured for a hang noose

I

SEVERAL miles south of La Xara, Jack Howard had crossed the Line. Actually the desert country was no different, but one moment he had been in Mexico and the next he was in Arizona. It was somehow like coming home, though from this moment every man was Jack Howard's potential enemy.

He had leaned down, watching his horse's hoofs plow through good American sand and then had straight-

ened, gray eyes narrowed to the seared brown hills that pinched into a narrow pass a few miles north. His deep chest expanded against the sweat-stained shirt and his wide, grim lips softened, taking some of the harsh angles out of his lean, bony face. His long arm lifted and his fingers touched his dusty hat brim in a brief, heartfelt salute.

Then the wide shoulders slouched a bit and he gave a touch of the spurs to his horse. He headed toward the



YOUR HANDS WITH SIXES

by LEE E. WELLS

canyon pass in the distant hills. Just beyond lay La Xara—and a hang noose.

Two hours later he had threaded the pass and approached the first adobe huts of La Xara. It wasn't much of a town, Jack thought grimly, but a .44 slug could hit a man as hard here as anywhere else. His hand remained close to the plain-handled Colt at his thigh as he entered the single street of the town and headed for the small group of

shabby falsefronted stores.

Eyes narrowed against the blistering heat of the sun, Howard saw that there were three saloons, a sheriff's office and jail, squat and sturdy, a few stores and a livery stable. The rest of La Xara consisted of adobe houses of varying sizes.

He swerved his horse and grinned down at a chubby, grimy baby who regarded him with owlish intensity.

"Old-timer," Howard said in a

slow, soft drawl, "you've sort of strayed from your corral. Better git back home, little dogie."

A blast of shots sounded behind him and Jack twisted around in a pantherish flow of muscles, hand slapping down to his gun. A band of cowboys came streaming in from the range and the sun glinted on the heavy sixes that were banging a fusilade into the sky. The baby, frightened by the noise, arose on unsteady, fat legs and ran toward a frame house across the street.

A woman appeared in the open doorway as the cowboys came sweeping on. Roweling cruel spurs along their horses' flanks, they thundered down on the child. Howard tensed and his fingers jerked the heavy Colt out of the holster.

At the last possible moment, the riders swerved around the terrified child, sweeping on to the saloons. As the cavalcade passed the last man twisted around. Howard had a glimpse of heavily lidded eyes in a broad, stubbled face. The man's gun leveled and three slugs kicked up dirt around the child. With a whoop of glee, the man straightened and spurred after the rest.

The mother ran out, swept up her baby and disappeared inside the house. Dust settled slowly, forming another thin layer to those that already had collected on Howard's clothing. He stood there, eyes like ice, staring after the riders.

"That's the Stirrup's idea of fun," an angry voice at his side spoke. "It would've been a heap funnier if one of them slugs had landed."

"Do them jaspers always play that way?" asked Jack.

The man moved out from the corner of the house. He was short and stocky. Ice-blue eyes looked startlingly clear in a mahogany-tanned face. Deep lines set in wide arcs from either side of a harsh, bony nose, circled the thin lips. His mustache was snowy white, just as unexpected against the dark face as the blue eyes. A gnarled hand cuffed back the limp brim from the angry face.

"Stirrup plays that way. There ain't no one to teach 'em better and Stirrup owns the law."

Howard's lips flattened. "Time someone started teaching them, I reckon."

"You, for instance?" the old man asked. Howard realized that on second glance the impression of age was gone. Here was a man of rawhide and whang leather. The white hair and wrinkles could do a heap of fooling. The gun that snugged close to the man's leg looked business-like and ready for use.

Howard nodded soberly. "That sleepy-eyed gent is right careless with a six-gun. There's a big gap in his education. I'll fill it in."

"There's a whole bunch of Stirrup in that saloon," the old man warned. Then he grinned and stuck out his hand. "The handle's Obed Blaine. If things get hot, I got a wagon and a tarp behind the general store. Keep it in mind."

Howard grinned and accepted the hand. He lifted the reins and then his gray eyes clouded. He half turned.

"Is there folks name of Machen in these parts?"

"Friends of yours?" Blaine asked sharply and there was an edge of suspicion to his voice. Howard's hand gently stroked his holster and his voice dropped.

"Not in my books. Just prospecting around for 'em."

"Your wandering days is about over," Blaine answered. "Shake up the Stirrup and see what drops out. But don't forget that wagon and tarp, friend."

Howard raised his hand in acknowledgment and rode on toward the saloon. He shot a quick, searching glance at the jail a few yards down the street, then turned in to the hitchrack. Dismounting, he ascended the few steps to the saloon porch and unhurriedly crossed to the swing doors.

He pushed inside. The half dozen men of the Stirrup lined the bar, whiskey gurgling down bobbing gullets. Howard's sharp eyes cut around the room. Except for Stirrup and the bartender, the place was empty. At the far end, Howard spotted the man with the drooping eyelids. They seemed to half cover the pupils, giving the broad, coarse face a sinister look.

In a swift flowing move Howard pulled his Colt and leveled it.

"Lift 'em up. Stirrup—and keep 'em up!"

The six men froze, some with whiskey glasses halfway to their lips. The bartender's fat face blanched. Slowly the men turned, facing the tall stranger with the hard, angular face.

His glance traveled contemptuously over them.

"Lift your irons gentle out of leather, hombres," Howard drawled. "Except you, Sleepy."

The men slowly obeyed and the heavy guns dropped to the floor. Howard smiled thinly and motioned five of them down the bar away from the weapons. It left the droop-eyed renegade standing by himself, Colt still in his holster.

"You flung a few slugs at a baby out on the street," Howard said grimly. "It sure took a man to do that, and I aim to match sixes with you."

"I ain't augering none," the man answered in a cracked voice. His muddy, heavy eyes dropped to the gun in Howard's hand. Howard slipped it back in leather.

"Now fill your hand, sidewinder. I ain't no harmless little dogie. Let's see the color of your guts."

The five men at the end of the bar strained forward. "Call his taw, Snake," one demanded harshly.

Snake remained silent, hands well away from his holster. He looked at Howard's blazing gray eyes and his own gaze remained fixed as if hypnotized. He swallowed and the stubbled lump in his throat moved convulsively.

"I ain't got no augerment," he repeated.

Howard's tongue ripped the man's pride to shreds, named his ancestors as skunks and coyotes. Snake's lowering face grew red and he licked his thick lips with a pointed tongue, but he made no move for his gun. At last Howard stopped, exhausted

and disgusted. He drew his Colt again and lined it on Snake's stomach. The man turned pale and his breath sucked in.

"Shuck your iron, Yellowback," Howard ordered, "and get over with them other skunks. Next time you want some pistol practice, look me up. I'll be around and plumb willing to help."

"We'll all call you on that," one of the cowboys snarled. Howard's contemptuous glance flicked over them and he nodded. Snake had dropped his six-gun and edged gingerly back toward his friends. Howard moved toward the door.

"The sheriff ought to throw you coyotes in jail for a month," he stated flatly, "and take them guns away from you. Colts is for men."

A hard level voice spoke behind Howard. "I'll do my own lawing, pilgrim, with no advice on the side."

Howard wheeled. A tall man with a star glittering on his open vest, was standing just inside the batwings. A square jaw thrust out belligerently in a sun-red face. But the moment the bulging washed-blue eyes saw Howard, they popped wide open. The thick lips blasted an angry roar.

"Jack Howard!"

"Red Machen!" Howard exclaimed. He heard a sudden rush of boots behind him. Stirrup plunged for its guns, and before Jack stood one of the men who had placed a hang noose around his neck.

II

Howard moved with blinding, blurring speed. His shoulder lunged

into Red Machen. With a startled "whoosh!" the lawman catapulted back through the swing doors and Howard jumped after him. A gun blasted inside and the slug whined close to Howard's ear. Machen hit a porch pillar, caromed forward into Jack's looping fist. Knuckles cracked on bone and Machen sailed off the porch and into the dust of the street.

Howard wheeled and sent a warning slug through the swing doors. He heard shouts up and down the street. A rifle banged somewhere and adobe chips flew from the wall beside his shoulder. Howard whirled. Red lay spread-eagled and unconscious in the street. Across the way a man crouched beside a barrel, levering another cartridge into the rifle chamber.

Howard threw a slug at him. It boomed into the barrel and the rifleman hastily pulled out of sight. Howard ran to the far edge of the porch and jumped to the ground. He wheeled around and slapped a slug at the saloon doors; then, crouching, he raced the length of the building. He was safe from the rifleman behind the barrel for the moment, though he could hear the angry shouts of Stirrup inside the saloon.

At the far end Howard cut sharply down the line of stores, away from the saloon. His horse was out in front and he had to draw the gunhawks away from it. There was a grim, pleased light in his eyes. Obed Blaine had been right. Shake the Stirrup and a Machen fell out. Where there was one, the other would be. Howard jammed fresh shells into his Colt as he ran.

He heard a shout behind him and a bullet sped by high overhead. He turned a corner, wheeled and flashed back. His first shot sent the pursuing cowboys scattering. A second one sailed the hat from a man who kept coming and the gent dove for a pile of empty packing cases.

Howard settled down and carefully placed slugs where they would keep Stirrup under cover and lead them to believe he was making a stand. Then he wiggled back, came to his feet and sprinted along the store building to the street. He halted, peered around the corner, hoping for a chance to reach his horse.

Red Machen was on his feet. The big lawman stood by the horse, bellying orders. Howard's eyes clouded as he realized he was trapped. In a few moments, Stirrup and Machen would hem him in. He remembered Obed Blaine's invitation and his eyes cast quickly along the street. The general store was across the way.

Howard shoved his gun in the holster and stepped out. He crossed the street unhurriedly, but kept a wary eye on the excited knot of men who gathered around the sheriff. He had to check an impulse to run for the shelter of the building. It would instantly have called attention to him.

He reached the far side and edged around a saddle shop. An angry shout went up from beyond the far buildings. Stirrup had found their quarry gone and soon they would be combing La Xara for him. Howard raced to the rear of the shop and, turning the corner, saw a heavy wagon. A golden-haired girl sat on

the high seat, lovely head turned as she listened to the angry Stirrup hands. Howard saw the tarp across the wagon bed, a corner of a crate forming a sharp angle in the rough cloth. Obed Blaine wasn't in sight.

The girl looked around when Howard came up. She had dark-brown eyes and her soft tanned cheeks glowed with health. A pert little nose wrinkled as she smiled. White shirt blouse and a dark riding skirt set off her slender figure, and a flat crowned hat hung down her back from a strap around her neck. Her voice was soft and warm.

"I've been expecting you, teacher," she said. "Hop in under the canvas."

Howard swung himself up on the tail gate and lifted the canvas. There was a puzzled frown between his eyes. "I don't savvy the 'teacher' brand, ma'am."

"Oh, weren't you teaching the Stirrup some manners?" she asked in mock surprise. Her head tipped to one side as she listened to the excited voices on the street. "School must be out."

"It is." Howard grinned. "Out of hand complete and sudden. You'll pardon me, ma'am."

Sliding beneath the canvas, he pulled his Colt out of the holster. He lay flat, six-gun muzzle resting on the wooden boards, ears strained for the approach of the Stirrup renegades. The girl's voice carried to him through the canvas.

"I'm Carol Blaine."

"Glad to know you, ma'am," Howard answered a little irritably. "The handle's Jack Howard."

"Nice name," she said. "Do you think you'll like La Xara?"

"I won't live long enough to know if you keep on talking, ma'am."

"You're not very nice, Mr. Howard. Most men like my company."

Howard choked off an oath. He poked his head out from under the tarp and his eyes blazed at her. Her white even teeth showed in a smile.

"I like your company, ma'am, but your silence would suit me right down to the ground," Howard said bluntly. "Do you want them Stirrup rannies burning powder right around this wagon?"

She laughed. "Get out of sight, Mr. Howard. It looks as if the pupils were teaching the teacher!"

Howard dropped back under the tarp again. Suddenly he tensed. Loud, rough voices boomed out and he heard the trample of feet. Carol Blaine's voice sounded cold and aloof.

"What do you men want?"

"Seen a jasper running this way?" Howard recognized Red Machen's voice.

"No," the girl answered. There was a long, questioning silence and Howard found he was trying to hold his breath. The tarp quivered and Howard's Colt lifted. The girl's voice cut in sharply.

"Bart Machen, leave that wagon alone. Do you want this buggy whip across your face?"

"You're blamed uppity," a husky voice growled. "I aim to look in this wagon."

Something cracked sharply. There was a howl of pain and Howard

heard a body hit the ground. The husky voice swore luridly and then there was a quick shuffle of feet. Red Machen's voice sounded loud and worried.

"Bart! You locoed fool! Leave her and the blamed wagon alone. Do you want trouble with the OB Bar right here and now?"

"No woman uses a whip on me!" Bart Machen raged and the sound of scuffling increased. Howard pulled up his legs, ready to spring to the aid of the girl. Suddenly the scuffling stopped and Howard heard a panting breath beside the wagon.

"All right, Red. Leggo me." Bart Machen's husky voice dropped to a deadly level. "I ain't forgetting this, Carol Blaine. It'll all even up some of these days. If you're hiding that outlaw, Jack Howard, you and your cantankerous paw will sure be sorry. Come on, Red, let's look somewhere else."

The footsteps died away and there was silence for awhile. Howard stirred and carefully lifted the end of the tarp. He looked up at the girl, sitting stiff and angry on the high seat. She still held the light buggy whip in a clenched little fist. Howard grinned when he caught her angry glance.

"I'll take some of them lessons, ma'am. You sure roweled the spurs on the Machens."

"It was a pleasure," the girl said curtly. Her frown deepened. "They said you were an outlaw. Is that so?"

"Not rightly," Howard answered, sobering. "But I reckon there're reward dodgers out for me."

"What charges?"

"Murder and bank robbery," said Howard, gray eyes level.

The girl didn't seem particularly shocked.

"I don't believe it," she stated flatly. "Get back under that tarp and stay there until we get out of town. Dad should be along any minute."

Howard said nothing but his pleased flush and grin was answer enough. He dropped back under the tarp and in a few minutes he heard footsteps again. Obed Blaine lifted the tarp and dropped a coil of wire beside Howard.

"We're leaving town now," he said swiftly. "Ain't no chance to git your hoss for a spell. Stirrup will probably dab a loop on it."

"Temporary loan, Blaine," Howard smiled. "I'll be collecting soon. Right now I don't like La Xara."

"Didn't think you would," Obed replied dryly and dropped the tarp.

He climbed up on the seat beside his daughter and clucked to the team. The wagon started moving, a slow pace down the alley and then a turn to the main street. Howard still held his Colt ready, and time and again he heard shouted orders as Red Machen directed the search. Soon the town dropped behind and there was only the monotonous creak of the wagon wheels, but Howard made no move to come out of hiding. At last Obed Blaine called.

"You can come out now."

Howard pushed the tarp back. He was right behind the seat and had to look up to see Obed and his daughter. Neither of them turned and

Howard could see the soft curve of the girl's cheek and the fountain of golden hair down her back. Obed clucked to the horses again.

"Reckon I didn't read all the sign, pilgrim. Seems like you'n the Machens has got a heap of grit in your craw about one another."

"We have," admitted Howard. "I been waiting for over a year to corner Bart and Red Machen. They've got a hang noose branded on my hide."

"Mmm," Blaine answered noncommittally. "They got a Colt brand on La Xara range. Mind telling me what you and the Machens is chewing on?"

"No," Howard said. "Red, Bart and me worked on Parson's Diamond P up near Haskell. I was just a cowpoke. Bart and Red drew gun wages. The Parsons was feuding with the Orrums up that way and things was getting pretty tight."

"Like here," Obed Blaine cut in, "since the Machens came and bought the Stirrup."

"Bart and Red bought the Stirrup?" Howard asked with an excitement in his voice that made Carol swing around and look down at him. Howard was hardly aware of her. "They didn't have a peso to their name in Haskell. So that's why they moved down here. Bart and Red got that dinero—"

"Down under," Carol said abruptly. She looked down the back trail. "Bart Machen and some of the Stirrup boys are coming."

Howard dropped back under the tarpaulin. The wagon creaked along at a steady gait and soon Howard heard the beating roll of hoofs.

Bart's husky voice sang out.

"Pull up, Blaine. We aim to take us a look at that wagon."

"Keep riding, Stirrup," Blaine yelled in answer, "if you don't want trouble."

But the wagon stopped and Blaine's cursing sounded clearly under the tarp.

"Let go that hoss, Snake."

"Keep your dander, Blaine," Bart Machen growled. "There ain't a thing you can do, less'n you want to die with your boots on."

"I still have the whip, Bart," Carol said icily.

Machen laughed but the sound was grim and dangerous. "You so much as touch that whip and Obed Blaine won't know what hit him between the eyes. Keep him covered, Tex. I'm taking a look-see."

Howard came carefully up on his hands and knees, the high crate keeping his movements from disturbing the tarp. He heard a man climb up on the wheel hub. Abruptly the tarp jerked back and Howard exploded into action.

His Colt muzzle jarred into Bart Machen's teeth and the Stirrup boss catapulted off the wheel. The man named Tex, who held Obed in his gun sights, twisted savagely around, gun blurring to line on Howard. He was a fraction slow. Howard's slug spun the gun from Tex's hand, shredding a finger, and whining on in a deadly ricochet. Howard's six-gun lined down on Bart Machen. The hammer dogged back.

"Call off your hounds, Bart. I'm aching for a good excuse to send you to boothill anyhow."

Snake remained frozen, still holding the team. But Howard knew the other Stirrup gunny had a Colt lined directly on his chest.

III

"Drop that six," the Stirrup man snarled viciously.

Howard grinned and shook his head. "Not me, hombre. I got a dead center on a sidewinder. Pull your trigger and Bart Machen goes to boothill with me. How about it, Bart? Want to die now or hang later?"

Bart remained seated on the ground. Blood streamed from his mouth where Howard's gun muzzle had loosened some teeth. His inflamed blue eyes stared in horrified fascination at the black gun muzzle that held steady between his eyes. He paled and his lips moved in a frightened puffy whisper.

"Put it up, Utah! Don't take a chance! Jack Howard ain't fooling." Howard didn't take his eyes from the Stirrup boss.

"You heard him, Utah. Are you drawing cards or dropping out?"

The man named Utah was a giant. His paunch pressed hard against the saddlehorn and his hams overflowed the cantle. Powerful thick legs rested in shortened stirrups. His chest strained against a dirty shirt and a giant fist dwarfed the Colt that lined on Howard's chest.

Utah's face was runneled with sweat and heavy, reddened, unshaved jowls hung down like dewlaps. His pin-point eyes were lost in rolls of

fat so that only a reptilian glitter showed from beneath the flesh folds.

"The boss says drop the cards," he growled. "So I guess I check the aces to your bluff. But you got gun savvy. Could be a sample some day?"

"You can depend on it," Howard answered gravely. Utah, with a disgusted gesture, holstered his gun. "On your hoss, Bart, and get your sidewinders to pounding leather. You and me will meet again."

Machen came to his feet and climbed into his saddle. Tex nursed his bloody hand and cursed in a painful monotone. Bart spoke a surly word to his men and they wheeled and rode off, heading back toward La Xara. The three in the wagon watched them go. Carol sighed deeply.

"Mr. Howard, you act and think very quickly."

"The owlhoot trail teaches a heap of things, Miss Blaine. We'd best head out of here quick. Bart might get Red and a gun-slammng posse."

Obed whipped up the horses and the wagon rolled heavily toward a line of hills. The trail climbed into a saddle pass and then dropped into a surprisingly green valley beyond. Obed pointed toward a cluster of houses nestled under a grove of cottonwoods.

"The OB Bar—home."

"Good range," Howard said with a wistful sigh. "I used to dream of a spread about like this."

"Good grass," grunted Obed, "and steady water. The Machens' Stirrup Valley is north there just over them low hills. They been eying my spread

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for some time now, and I reckon before long they'll be making a move to add it to their own holdings. It'll cost them a heap of gun smoke."

The three were silent while the team, glad to see the end of the trail ahead, broke into a trot. They dropped swiftly out of the hills and rolled across the rich valley floor. Howard helped Obed unhitch and unload the wagon while Carol went into the neat, white-painted ranch-house. The bunkhouse appeared deserted and Obed noted Howard's curious look.

"Just got four men and right now they keep close to the Stirrup line. Trouble's been brewing for several months now and I ain't one to be caught flat."

Howard made no comment. By the time they had finished the chores, Carol had cooked a delicious dinner. Howard gratefully ate everything placed before him. It had been two years or more now since he'd had home-cooked food like this. At last he pushed his empty coffee cup back, sighing with content as he reached for the makings. Obed and Carol watched him.

"You was telling us something about the Machens when Bart rode up," Obed suggested. Howard's hand remained poised before him, the cigarette paper moving slightly in the breeze from the window.

"It's a crooked trail from beginning to end, but there ain't much further to go." Lighting his quirly, he leaned forward and started talking.

It was a story of hate and treach-

ery. Parsons, back in Haskell, had hated the Orrums, who owned the bank and a couple of big spreads. Parsons had brought in Red and Bart Machen, and Jack Howard had nearly quit when gun slammers came in the picture. He would have if Parsons hadn't argued him into staying on the payroll.

With the coming of the gun-hawk brothers, Parsons had become bolder and more arrogant. Tension had built up until it was ready to explode. Then one payday Jack Howard had gone to Haskell to have himself a little fun.

"I drank too much," he explained to Obed and Carol, "and things got sort of fuzzy. Red and Bart were with me most of the time, and I remember things clear up to about an hour after sundown. I reckon I passed out then.

"Next thing I knew it was morning and half of the men of Haskell was standing around me. I was lying under a tree just at the edge of town. My Colt had been fired and there was a couple of thousand dollars in new bills in my jeans. I didn't know where it came from, but I soon found out.

"Someone had robbed the Haskell bank the night before. Denford Orrum had been shot down, I reckon when he tried to stop the bandits. Denford's son, Frank, was in that crowd and he was mighty hostile. The sheriff kept him from plugging me then and there. The upshot was they took me to jail and charged me with murder and bank robbery.

"Folks said I worked for Parsons and there was bad blood twixt him

and Denford Orrum. Me being on the Parsons payroll, I reckon that made me guilty. They had a hang noose ready for me before the trial was even set."

"Where were the Machens?" asked Carol.

Howard shrugged. "They wasn't around. I had plenty of time to think and I knew they'd done the killing. Parsons would fight hard, but he wouldn't murder and rob. Me, I knew I hadn't, though I couldn't remember where I'd been during the time."

"But how did you get out of jail?" Carol questioned.

"The sheriff got a little careless one day bringing in my food tray. I walked out and he slept locked in my cell. I was clean out of town before anyone found out. I headed for Mexico as the safest place right then. I been down there a year, trying to get some line on the Machens. I heard about them bein' here in La Xara so I come up to try to clear myself."

"That'll be hard to do," Obed said slowly, rolling a bread crumb into a tiny ball. "Red's sheriff and he's got all the law on his side. Bart runs the Stirrup and he mighty nigh controls La Xara."

"That's just it." Howard leaned forward. "The Machens was broke in Haskell, yet they come down here and buy out a big spread and stock it. Where do you figure the dinero came from?"

"The Haskell bank!" exclaimed Carol.

"Nowhere else," Howard agreed. "Red and Bart are mighty eager to

get me killed or behind bars since I showed up in La Xara. Sure, I'm an outlaw, but them two jaspers is in a mighty froth to shut me up. They planted that bank money on me, because I was dead to the world and couldn't help myself. Probably Red or Bart used my Colt to hold up the bank. They had me in a tight noose and by rights I should be dead now and not bothering them."

"They're trying to rod the range here," Obed said quietly, "and I ain't standing still for it."

Howard sat back, frowning. "I've caused you more trouble. Red and a posse will be out here sure, now that Bart knows you slipped me out of La Xara. I'd best be getting on."

"Now you wait," Obed said sharply. "If you can prove the Machens did that job at Haskell, you'll clear yourself and you'll certainly bring peace to La Xara. I'm willing to help you all I can. I'll ride to get the boys so we'll have a few Colts around."

"How about Miss Carol?" Howard asked.

The girl's chin pushed out at a fighting angle. "Miss Carol isn't a baby. You do as dad says and I'll take care of any Machen that comes along."

Howard grinned. Carol flushed and dropped her eyes. A girl with grit and beauty, Howard thought, a combination seldom met. He stared thoughtfully out the window and finally reached a decision.

"I need your help and I could use a hideout. But I won't stay here on the ranch. Go get your hands and

then I reckon we can figure a camp that won't bring Stirrup gunnies down on the spread."

"Fair enough," Obed said and arose. He shoved his hat on his white hair. "I'll ride for the boys now. You hang around close until I get back."

In a few minutes he was gone, streaking northward down the valley toward the distant Stirrup line. Howard watched him go, a worried frown creasing his forehead. He needed the Blaines' help and he seemed close to clearing himself of the murder of Denford Orrum. But he wanted no trouble to come to Carol. He could hear her clear voice now, singing as she worked in the ranchhouse and he listened, his face softening. She was a girl to ride the river with. If he didn't have the shadow of a hang noose over him — He thrust the thought aside.

He looked out over the range, his eyes circling to the low hills that cut the OB Bar from the plain where La Xara stood. Suddenly he made out a plume of dust in the pass. His eyes narrowed and he watched the distant saddle. For a moment he saw nothing and then the plume lifted again as the unseen horsemen hit the lower slope and the dusty plain. Howard wheeled and raced toward the house.

"Red and a posse's coming," he said briefly as Carol whirled around from the table. "If I'm not in sight, you might be able to send them on with no trouble."

"The barn," she answered readily. "Up in the hayloft."

"No. They'd look there." He strode to the window and his eyes quickly cut over the yard. He turned and jumped for the door, Carol following him out to the corral. He roped a white-stockinged mare and slapped on a saddle.

"Bushes line the creek bank, and they won't spot me from the ranch yard," he said as he swung into leather. "With this boss I can make a run for it, if our luck plays out."

"It won't." Carol flashed a smile and impulsively took his hand. She caught herself, blushed and dropped his hand again. "Get going, amigo. I'll send our visitors in another direction."

Howard wheeled the mare and streaked for the distant line of bushes. He plunged into them, slipped from the saddle and parted the leafy branches. He was within gunshot of the ranchhouse, but he had a clear route of escape to the north if the posse found him. His gray eyes cut up the valley and now he could see the hard-riding posse streaking straight for the ranch. Carol came out on the porch and stood, a slight, brave figure. Howard's lips lined down in a hard arc and he waited tensely. The posse swept through the yard gate and pulled up before the porch. Red Machen led them, the fat gunhawk, Utah Warren, beside him.

"Looking for something?" asked Carol.

"You know blamed well what we want," Red snapped. "Get that killing bank robber out of your place."

"He's not here."

"You're a liar," Utah growled and

Howard's hand clenched in a tight fist. Carol's face grew crimson with anger, but she bit her lip and stepped to one side, made a gesture toward the door.

"Take a look," she replied.

Red stared hard at her and then slipped out of the saddle. "Scatter out to the other buildings," he ordered the hard-eyed gunhawks. "Utah, keep an eye on the lady."

"Best job I've had in a long time," the big gunman grinned and grunted his way to the ground.

Red disappeared inside the house and the Stirrup gunnies scattered to barn, bunkhouse and cook shack. Utah Warren hitched his gunbelt up around his hanging paunch and lumbered up on the porch. He stood near Carol, piggy eyes never leaving her. His thick lips broke in a wide smile.

"Now you're as pretty as a sassy paint pony," he said heavily.

Carol swung around angrily. "Keep a civil tongue in your head!" she said.

Utah laughed and took a step toward her. "Proddy, too, and a heap of spunk. I allus like that in a girl."

Howard's hand slapped to his holster. Anger churned in him so that a red haze seemed to hang before his eyes. The Colt slid into his fingers, but Utah had moved with surprising speed for his bulk. He had the girl now and she slapped hard at his beefy face. Howard could not fire at Utah for fear of hitting Carol.

He swung around and jumped into the saddle. He sent the mare crashing through the bushes and threw a

wild slug at the house. Utah swung around, releasing Carol. Howard sent another slug toward him but the mare was moving fast and the shot went wild.

Stirrup men popped out of the ranch buildings. Red Machen jumped out the rear door of the ranchhouse and saw the fleeing horseman.

"There he goes! Get him, Stirrup!"

IV

Howard streaked straight up the valley. Behind him the Stirrup streamed for their horses and Utah Warren was one of the first in the saddle. Carol Blaine had been forgotten, to Howard's relief. He kept watching over his shoulder. The renegades bunched and lined out after him, Red and Utah in the lead.

Howard straightened and settled down for a long, hard chase. Somewhere up ahead, Obed and the four OB Bar hands would be riding back to the ranch. If Howard could reach them, the six-guns might discourage Stirrup.

Red Machen tried to reach Howard with .44 slugs, but there was very little chance of them bringing the hunted man down. Howard paid little attention to them, now and then throwing a hasty glance over his shoulder to see if the posse had gained.

The mare was a powerful little animal and more than willing to give her best. The wide valley streaked by and then the ground began to lift to the first of the low hills. How-

ard's gray eyes keened ahead, eager for the first sight of Blaine and his riders. Behind him the posse pounded, trying hard to close the gap.

The hills were close and just ahead was a wide opening through them. As Howard headed his horse toward it, five men appeared. Howard caught Obed Blaine's white hair and he yelled a warning. The men drew up for an instant, then realized the situation. They came pounding toward Howard in a sweeping rush.

An angry yell sounded from Stirrup and Utah's bellowing curse rose above the rest. Howard spurred to meet his friends, swinging in beside Obed Blaine. Red Machen and the Stirrup renegades had pulled up. The sheriff cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled at Obed.

"We want that outlaw, Blaine. Are you siding him?"

"Come and find out," the old man called derisively.

The posse riders milled around Red. Howard and the OB Bar men waited, grim and silent. They could not make out the words of the argument but gesticulating arms showed a difference of opinion among the Stirrup men. At last Red again yelled up the slope.

"I'm demanding the surrender of Jack Howard."

"Demand and be blasted!" Obed yelled back. "We like the hombre's company. Want to change our minds?"

"Are you asking for a fight?" Red roared.

"Find out."

Red looked over at Utah Warren

who shrugged his beefy shoulders and said something. Red straightened and shook his fist up the slope. Even from the distance, the blazing anger was clear on his face.

"I'll be back, pronto, with enough men to wipe OB Bar off the map. You'll give up that killer then or sure wish you had."

The sheriff turned his horse and the other men fell in behind him. Only Utah Warren remained, stolid and heavy, glaring up the slope at Howard. His fat cheeks quivered a little as he raised his head to yell.

"I got two reasons to gun-auger now, Howard. We'll meet again and the third time takes, they tell me."

He wheeled around and trotted off after Red Machen. The OB Bar men sat silent, watching the posse cut across the valley, away from the ranchhouse. Red Machen headed directly for La Xara and more men and guns. He would be back, there could be no doubt of that.

Obed broke the silence, asking quick questions about the posse and Carol. Howard briefly outlined what had happened. He looked once more toward the vanishing posse, now far out toward the distant hills.

"I won't go back to the ranch, Obed. There's too much danger for Carol."

"I know a hideout," Obed told him. He twisted around. "Jim, take him to the old Injun Rocks. I'll ride to the ranch and send food to you. The Injun Rocks is a regular fort and you'll be safe there, Howard."

"Thanks," Howard answered.

"Best take Carol to some neighbor folks. Red, Bart and that Utah Warren is plenty mad."

"I'll do that. Now git for Injun Rocks."

A freckled cowboy swung around with Howard and took the lead. They headed up toward the pass while Obed streaked for the home ranch. Howard rode silently, thoughts dark and discouraged. In a short time the freckle-faced cowboy cut into a side canyon, a narrow way that led steeply upward to the crown of a hill. Here huge boulders stood in a solid circle, clearly the work of hands long since gone to dust.

"Injun Rocks," the cowboy said tersely. "Beyond is a cliff no one can scale. The only way in is the path we used. An army couldn't take this from one man if he didn't want 'em to."

The man reined around and, with a wave of his hand, started back down the path. Howard dismounted and walked to the rock parapet, peering over. A sheer drop was below him and to one side he commanded the approach up the pass. He returned to the mare and unsaddled, then walked to the other parapet. The cowboy had described it well. The earth dropped away in a sheer cliff of a hundred feet to the burbling little river far down below. Stirrup could not get up here so long as Howard had food, water and cartridges.

There was nothing to do now until Obed Blaine came with supplies. The mare grazed contentedly and Howard wandered aimlessly about for a short

while. At last he sat down in the shadow of a huge boulder and looked thoughtfully up at the cobalt sky. Settling himself more comfortably, he reviewed what had happened since he had come to La Xara so short a time before. He was startled to realize that everything had happened just since morning! He had almost definite proof now that the Machens had the Haskell bank loot, otherwise they would not be so powerful here. Sheer logic from that fact placed the murder of Denford Orrum on the two renegade brothers.

Howard knew that the Machens were worried. They wanted Jack Howard dead before he could prove their guilt and they were straining every effort to bring that about. There would be no arrest in La Xara or, if there was, Red Machen's prisoner would never get to jail alive.

The Machens were rattled and frightened and Howard hoped that they would disclose some clue that would help him clear his own name. But they were dangerous now, like wounded snakes striking in all directions. Howard's head jerked up at a sudden thought. The Blaines had helped him and the Machens already hated the Blaines. It would be like Red and Bart to strike at Obed now, and Utah Warren had Carol Blaine definitely on his evil mind.

Howard sat up and rolled another quiry, considering every angle carefully. Actually, the thing was done now. Even though he was not on the OB Bar, the Stirrup had sufficient reason to strike vengefully back at Obed and his daughter. Unless—here Howard thought it out very care-

fully and arrived at a decision. Only his presence in La Xara would keep Stirrup away from the OB Bar.

With a gesture of finality he flipped away the cigarette and arose. He fished in his pocket and pulled out the heavy backing of his cigarette papers and a stub pencil. Scrawling a brief note to Obed, he anchored it under a rock where the old man would be sure to see it.

Ten minutes later, Howard emerged into the valley at the lower end of the steep canyon trail. He peered up at the sky and set his course. A gentle touch of his spurs started him in almost a direct line for La Xara.

It was night when Howard saw the few lights of La Xara. He rode as close to the town as he dared and then drew rein, narrowed eyes searching the long, dark street. From the saloons bands of lights splashed out in bars on the dust. A lamp glowed in the sheriff's office.

Satisfied, Howard urged the mare forward and rode slowly down the dark street. Boldness again was the ace in the hole since the Machens would not believe he'd deliberately come back into their stronghold. Howard saw the line of horses before the hitchrack of one of the saloons, and a single mount stamped impatiently before the sheriff's door. He drifted up to the frame hotel and dismounted.

He shifted his gunbelt, eyes hard on the sheriff's office. If he could contrive to get Red Machen alone and under his gun, the renegade would talk. There wasn't much real

courage in the hulking lawman's body. He was better at bushwhack murder and under-cover treachery. Howard moved forward, passing the hotel door which was open wide.

A man was just coming out. He stopped short and Howard wheeled. The light fell on a young, harsh face, lighting the glittering eyes. A six-gun glinted in the light from the lobby. Almost catlike, the man came down the few steps and shoved the gun in Howard's stomach.

"I'm killing you, Howard."

"You're making a mistake, Or-rum," Howard said quietly. "I didn't kill your father. The real murderer's down the street. I can prove it."

"Liar!" the young man gritted. "I've been trailing you for over a year. Think I'll let you talk me out of the blasting you deserve?"

Howard drew in his stomach muscles. Frank Orrum showed certain death in every line of his tense body.

V

From the saloon came a raucous roar of laughter. Somewhere back of the hotel a cat yowled dismally into the moon. Every sound seemed magnified and the stomp of a horse was like a muffled roll of thunder. Howard's narrowed eyes locked with Frank Orrum's angry stare and his wide lips were thin drawn.

"I can show you proof," said Howard quietly, "if you'll give me the chance."

"Proof! Chance!" Frank mocked. His lean body settled into a crouch and his lips peeled back from his

teeth. "Did you give my father a chance?"

"Here," Howard answered, "I'll show you what I got." He slowly moved his hand up to his shirt pocket.

Unconsciously Frank's eyes followed the move and he leaned forward. Howard felt the gun shift a little, but his chance was still slim, shudderingly so. His hand came up to his pocket and then abruptly sliced down.

The hard edge of his palm struck Frank's gun wrist. The man's fingers opened spasmodically and the gun fell. Howard's left crossed over in a looping blow that cracked off the jutting, dimpled chin. When Orrum fell limply forward Howard caught him. For a brief moment, Howard felt weak. That was the longest gamble he had ever made.

Bending at the knees, he let Orrum fall over his shoulder. He went at a stumbling run around the corner of the hotel and felt his way down the dark tunnel between the buildings to the rear. He froze when he heard loud voices out in front. Holding Orrum with one arm, he lifted the Colt into his hand. He strained to listen, heard Red Machen's voice booming down by the jail. In another moment a cavalcade rode down the street. Howard caught glimpses of them as they passed the hotel. Red, Bart and Utah headed the riders.

Then they were gone and Howard breathed easier. He holstered the Colt and went on, heading away from the dark adobes of La Xara. When he stumbled into a ditch he decided

he'd gone far enough. Frank Orrum moaned and stirred. Bright moonlight touched the youthful, narrow face, the slack, full lips.

Orrum abruptly sat up, slim body tensing when he saw Howard squatted calmly near by. Howard's Colt hung limply in his hand but it could flick up in a fraction of a second. Frank scowled and rubbed his jaw.

"Well, why don't you kill me?" he demanded.

Howard sighed. "You keep reading the wrong brand, Frank. I don't intend to harm you. I never shot your dad. Now what are you doing in La Xara?"

Orrum shifted around, eyeing the dangling Colt. He answered grudgingly. "I heard the Machens had become big dogies down here, and I figured you and them were in on that robbery and murder back in Haskell. Only two thousand of that stolen money was ever found—on you."

"Didn't that make you do some thinking?" Howard demanded.

Orrum snorted bitterly. "Sure. I figured you and the Machens augered about dividing the dinero. Or that they double-crossed you and left you to face the murder charge. Your talk about being drunk that night was to wiggle out of the tight they left you in."

"You really tangled the loop," Howard said slowly. "So you come down here to square things, is that it?"

"Sure, to kill you if I found you and to brand the Machens with bank robbery if I could. When I found Red was sheriff of La Xara, I had to plan things different. I knew he

wouldn't arrest himself and Bart."

"No," said Howard dryly. "How come they haven't seen you? If I know the Machens, you ought to be pushing up daisies right now."

"I come in late and went right to the hotel. I asked questions there."

"Frank—" Howard's voice was earnest—"I know how you feel about your dad. Believe me, I didn't kill him—and I know the Machens did. That's why I'm here and I got them buzzards riding in circles trying to salivate me before I get a chance to prove anything. You've heard talk about me already, I reckon. The ruckus I had with the Machens stirred up La Xara plenty."

"I heard," Frank admitted.

"Do you think the Machens would be so blamed worried if they weren't guilty? Do you think folks like the Blaines would help me if they didn't figure I was all right?"

"They don't know," Frank growled.

"Frank, will you hold off judgment and give me a chance to prove the Machens did the killing?" Howard asked. "All I want is a fair chance to square myself with the law and with you. You wouldn't want an innocent man to hang, would you?"

Frank squirmed around uncomfortably. "No," he said slowly.

Howard nodded. "Good. You stay low in La Xara for just twenty-four hours. If I don't have the proof then, you can come gunning. Is that fair enough?"

"What do you intend to do?" Frank asked.

"Ride out to the Stirrup and see if I can't force a showdown. Or catch Red Machen and make him talk."

"Fat chance," Frank said bitterly. "The Machens 're riding out after you right now. They intend to smoke you out of the OB Bar if they have to tear that spread apart. They been waiting for Bart and some of the Stirrup hands."

Howard came to his feet in a swift spasmodic motion. He stared down at Frank Orrum. This was the thing he had feared. The Machens would show no mercy at the OB Bar.

"Frank, I'm taking a chance on you," Howard said swiftly. "I don't think you'll back-shoot me."

He whirled on his heel and started running. Frank's call stopped him, made him whirl around.

"Where you going?" Frank demanded.

"To the OB Bar. The Machens and me are due for a showdown as quick as I can get out there."

"I'll string along," said Orrum. "Just to see you and the Machens don't team up."

"Suit yourself," Howard answered, "but I'm riding fast and hard. You'll have to hang and rattle."

"Wait'll I get a gun and hoss," Frank said. "I won't hold you up none after that."

He was gone only a few minutes but Howard impatiently waited for him. The young man came running out of the hotel and headed for the stable in the back. On impulse, Howard followed him and changed saddle from the mare to a rangy bay. Frank watched, hard-faced.

"Horse stealing, too," he commented.

Howard flushed in the darkness, swung up into leather. "You'll eat that before morning, Frank. Now let's see how you ride."

They streaked out of La Xara and Howard led the way toward the distant Blaine ranch. He felt a mounting sense of panic as the miles sped by and they had as yet caught no sign of the Stirrup. Howard set a killing pace and Frank Orrum kept grimly at his side. Abruptly Howard pulled up, raised his hand for silence. The moment the thunder of hoofs was out of their ears, they heard the second, more deadly sound. Distant gunshots sounded from beyond the shadowy hills. Howard's face changed into hard angles and planes.

"They've hit. I'm taking a hand. Siding me?"

"Why not?" Frank asked. "Anything to kill a couple of skunks like the Machens. You and me can have our augerment later."

Howard set the spurs deep and the bay jumped as if a heavy electrical charge had bitten him. The hills came closer and the pass yawned black before them. The sound of gunfire was plainer here. The walls swept past and they dropped down the slope at a dead run.

Ahead, they saw the flash from six-guns, the answering fire from the ranchhouse. The Stirrup concentrated on the house. Howard pulled up and Orrum reined in beside him. The moonlight showed the excitement on his face.

"Here we go," Howard said

grimly. "Hit 'em hard and hit what you shoot at."

Howard raked his horse with spurs and bent low in the saddle. The bay surged forward and Howard charged directly at the knot of men hiding by the gate and pouring a steady fire into the house. Orrum hesitated only a fraction of a second and then he thundered after Howard, gun blasting.

There were only two of them, but they hit Stirrup with all the effect of a dozen men. The Machens had not expected trouble from the rear. The charging men and blazing guns threw them into confusion. Obed Blaine took quick advantage of the situation.

OB Bar streamed from the house and Stirrup was caught in a deadly cross fire. For a long moment the renegades held their ground and then they broke, scattering. Three of them had dropped, a fourth grabbed the gate post and hung sagging there, then slowly slid down to a huddled heap.

Howard saw Utah Warren's lumbering shape in the rushing crowd and he swerved his horse toward the fat gunny. Utah sensed the danger and spun around. He stood gigantic in the moonlight, coolly facing the thundering horseman who bore down on him. He raised his gun and Howard's Colt dropped down, bucked back against his fist.

Utah jerked and his slug cut close to Howard. Jack ripped another bullet into the giant body before his horse sped by. He wheeled the animal around, but Utah was out of the fight. His hand opened and the Colt

spilled out. He stood with stocky legs spread wide apart, swaying a little, heavy head hanging low. Without another sound he fell, sprawling forward on his face.

Stirrup was whipped, though the men milled desperately trying to fight their way clear. Red and Bart Machen retreated side by side, guns blazing. A stray slug caught Red, knocking his legs out from under him. Bart kept up a steady, fighting retreat and had come close to the tethered, plunging horses. Howard vaulted out of the saddle and came running.

"Bart!" he yelled. "Stand and take it."

Machen saw that Howard was close. He turned, his body sinking in a crouch. Howard swerved, plunged to a halt. Both guns blasted together, once, twice. Bart's aim was hurried but even so Howard heard the ping of the slugs close to his cheek. His own lead sank home and Bart Machen slowly swung around, up on his toes. He fell against a horse, then dropped to the ground. The animal snorted in fear and plunged to free itself.

The battle was over with startling suddenness. Howard turned, gun thunder still rolling in his ears, Colt held with hammer dogged back. But Stirrup was gone, the gunhawks fleeing out in the darkness, scattering like a flushed covey of birds. Obed Blaine came striding up, a wide grin creasing his leathery face.

"Done took their tally, by blazes. This is a good night's work."

"Everyone all right?" Howard

asked swiftly. "Carol?"

Obed's grin grew wider. "Right as rain. Funny thing, she was sort o' worried about you. It ain't like Carol to worry about no man—"

"Howard," Orrum's voice called. "Come over here. Red Machen's got things to say."

Howard and Blaine joined the grim, silent ring around Red Machen. His eyes looked wide and frightened in the lantern light and beads of sweat stood out on his forehead.

"Got to square things before I cash in," he whispered and fright made his voice tremble. "Bart and me robbed the Haskell bank. Bart shot Denford Orrum. I didn't. You got to believe me. Jack Howard was drunk and we fixed it so he'd catch the blame. We pulled out of Haskell, bought the Stirrup."

Howard looked up at Frank Orrum. The young man's lean face was lighted with excitement. Red spoke the truth, it rang in every word he said.

Orrum looked down at the shivering lawman. "You'll live, Red. You'll live to hang for the murder at Haskell. I'm taking you back and Jack Howard's going with me. His name will be cleared. I'll see to that."

Red Machen stared up at Orrum, but there was no understanding in the lawman's eyes. He knew he would die here, tonight. Howard straightened and looked away toward the ranchhouse. A great load had lifted from him.

Suddenly the world was right again. The old fear of the owlhoot

trails was gone for good. Every man's hand had been against him for a long, long time. Now every man was a friend. Howard could lift his head again.

Carol was standing near the ranch-house. Howard turned and started toward her. Suddenly he realized he still carried his Colt. With an abrupt gesture he rammed it back in the holster. Six-gun days were gone. The girl waited for him and Howard stopped before her, suddenly

unable to word the emotions that welled up in his throat. They looked at each other in the moonlight and Howard ached to take her in his arms.

"I'll be riding to Haskell," he said at last. "My name's cleared."

Carol's voice was soft. "You'll . . . come back?"

Howard never knew exactly how it happened. But she was in his arms, and his answer was without words. The world was right again.

THE END

MEN WHO MAKE WESTERN STORY



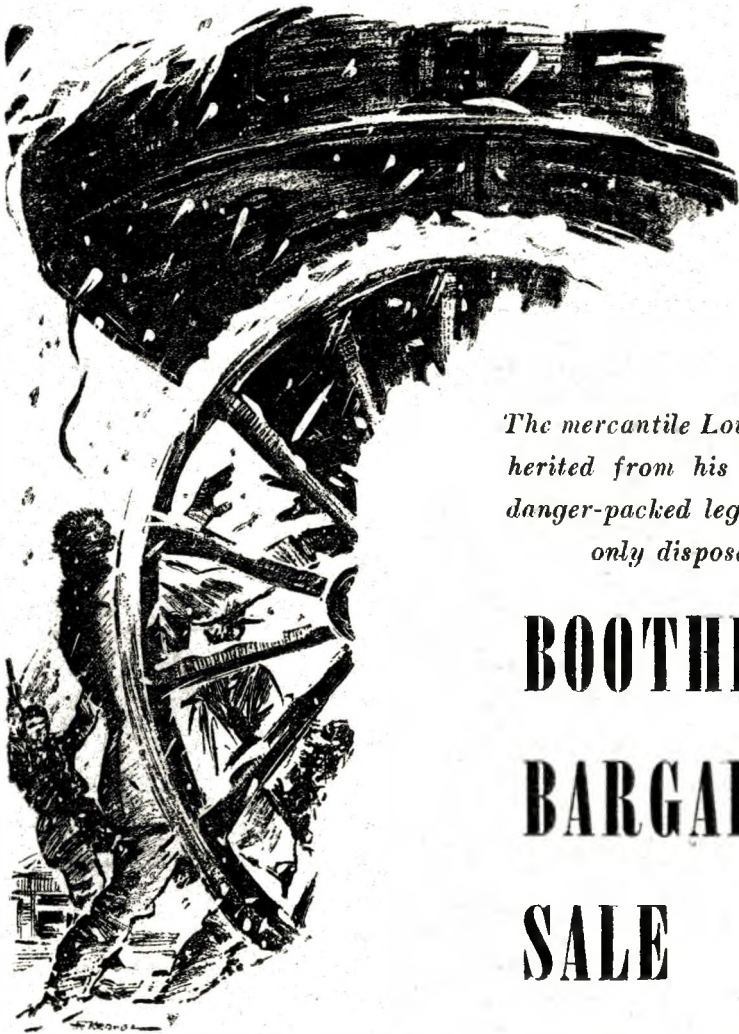
James Shaffer

at present serving his country as a Chief Petty Officer in the U. S. Navy, was born in Virginia, but went out to the great open spaces when he was a lad of twelve. He grew up in Idaho, "the land of the light on mountains," and it was here he went to school, hunted and trapped, worked for both cattle and sheep outfits and, as he expresses it, "grew mighty keen on the West and Western life. But I had to leave, reluctantly, this fine country in

1931 and have since been occupied with various desk jobs until that day the writing bug bit me. It was natural I suppose, that I should turn for material to the land which had so impressed me.

"1942 was a great year for me—I enlisted in the Navy, sold my first novel and got married—three events in my life which I've never regretted. As for hobbies—well, the Navy doesn't allow much time for that other than reading or looking at the pasteboards and trying to fill an inside straight which can be done but oh, so seldom! I've seen duty on both land and sea and am now waiting for another transfer. When I get back in civvies I'm going to head for the West again—there's many a trail out there I want to ride, and a lot of stories I want to write . . ."

JUSTICE IN COTTON FORKS, this sea-goin' Western yarn-spinner's latest story, appears in our next issue. And to round out the tally there are tales by Walt Coburn, Frank Richardson Pierce, M. Howard Lane, Jim Kjelgaard and many others.



The mercantile Lou Kitridge inherited from his uncle was a danger-packed legacy he could only dispose of in

BOOTHILL'S BARGAIN SALE

by CLINT MacLEOD

THIS weekly stage was eight hours late, slowed by the snow-choked passes of the high Ponderas, and Lou Kitridge arrived in Arrowhead with his usual amiability shaken out of him by the rigors of a long, cold ride. A stranger bound upon routine business, he expected that the

townspeople would be indifferent to his coming, or at most only mildly curious. Instead he found a gun-smoke greeting.

That was after he'd unloaded and stamped the circulation back into his long legs. A half dozen men and boys stood stiffly before the stage sta-

tion, a poorly dressed lot in patched mackinaws, and Kitridge had the queer sensation that they'd been waiting for him.

"You Riley Kitridge's nephew?" one, a white-maned patriarch, asked.

Across the street, a straggly row of false fronts, Kitridge had glimpsed a high frame building that bore a sign, KITRIDGE MERCANTILE COMPANY.

"Why, yes," he said. "Are you Judge Day?"

That was when the gun came into evidence, for a boy of about sixteen lunged from the group, his eyes wild and a .45 wavering in his unsteady hand.

"It's him, parson!" the boy shrilled. "And he's no kin to Riley Kitridge, even if he's got the same blood and name. Here's the only argument he'll understand!"

The gun belched, and Kitridge, lurching sideways, felt the air lash of the bullet. His own gun was buttoned under his sheepskin, and with no time to get at it, he snatched up a handful of snow and flung it in the boy's face. At the same time he lunged forward, his long body crashing against the boy. His fingers closed on the youngster's wrist, twisted hard, and the gun fell. It had all happened quickly—too quickly for anyone else to move. Kitridge scooped up the boy's gun and said pointedly: "Anybody else?"

"We don't hold with Smiley Landis' method," the white-maned parson said. "But I guess his idea was sounder than ours. You've already asked for Judge Day, so we know you've made your decision. You'll

find his office over yonder."

"Let him sell us out to Truman Stone!" the boy cried, rage and humiliation in his voice. "We'll still make a fight, even if we have to use sticks and stones!"

The others stood regarding Kitridge with stolid truculence, but making no move. He saw then that only Smiley Landis had worn a gun. A dozen questions came into his mind, but he left them unspoken. A warm meal against his backbone might have made him seek an explanation and a sensible peace here and now; as it was, anger silenced him. He said tightly: "Landis, I won't be here long. But while I am, keep out of my way!"

Hurling the boy's gun into the snow, he turned and strode up the street. Across from the Kitridge Mercantile, he gave the store another glance and saw a girl's face pressed fleetingly to a frosty window. She vanished, and Kitridge went onward, busy with his bewildering thoughts, until he came to the small, boxlike office whose door bore the name of Judge Jonathan Day.

As he stepped inside, a thin, weak-chinned man rose from behind a flat-topped desk. Kitridge gave him a long glance and caught the full reek of the man's whiskey-laden breath.

"Judge Day?" he asked. "I'm Lou Kitridge."

"Welcome, Mr. Kitridge! Welcome!" Judge Day said heartily. "Here, sit down by the stove."

"Where's Truman Stone, judge?"

"Out having supper. Mr. Stone

rode in from his Winged S ranch this morning. He'll be glad to see you."

"First, a couple of questions, judge," Kitridge said. "Your letter told me my uncle had died and that I was sole heir to his store. I'd darn near forgotten I had an Uncle Riley. But after I thought it over, I figured herding groceries wasn't my line and I decided I'd sell the store. I wrote you to that effect and your next letter said you had a buyer—a Truman Stone. I came to close the deal—and I get shot at when I climb off the stage. How come, judge?"

"Those grangers!" Day gasped. "I saw them loitering at the stage station, and I heard a shot a few minutes ago! So they tried to intimidate you, eh? Well, sir—Ah, here comes Truman now, him and his foreman, Con Mingo."

Two men shouldered into the office, and Kitridge's first impression of Truman Stone was of a big body, a pair of bushy eyebrows, and a wide, rubbery mouth. Con Mingo was built along leaner lines, thin and swarthy, he looked as though he knew more about guns than cows.

"Mr. Kitridge," Judge Day announced, and while hands were being shaken he hustled chairs toward the stove.

Spreading broad hands to the heat, Truman Stone said: "Ranching is my line, Mr. Kitridge, but I speculate in other things, too. I think you're wise to sell the store; your uncle was too easygoing to make a success of the business."

"I wish," Kitridge said evenly,

"that *somebody* would tell me why a granger was waiting with a gun to shoot me!"

"Those confounded homesteaders!" snapped Stone. "A penniless lot, they played on your uncle's soft-heartedness. Naturally they resent having the store change hands. I'll want to see the color of their money when I do business. Well, Mr. Kitridge, Judge Day has a bill of sale for the store drawn up. We can finish our business pronto."

Kitridge dug out the makings and slowly built himself a cigarette. Scraping a match along the heel of one of his fancy, hand-stitched boots, Mingo applied the light for Kitridge. The smoke going, Kitridge said: "I'm not so sure, now, that I want to sell, Stone. I've got to think it over. I'll give you my answer before stage time tomorrow."

Stone's frown deepened. "Take your time, if you wish," he said. "But you'd better decide to sell."

"We'll see," said Kitridge and shouldered out of the office.

Onto the street again, he eyed a restaurant's sign but put down an urge to head toward it. Instead he crossed to the store. There were things here he didn't understand, and Truman Stone's explanation for the homesteaders' animosity hadn't completely satisfied him. More than that, he sensed that Stone was too anxious to buy, and the implied threat in the rancher's last words had put the fight in Kitridge.

He climbed the steps of his uncle's store and stepped inside to find a

girl standing before the long counter—the dark-haired, blue-eyed girl who'd looked at him from the window earlier.

"Do you go with the property?" Kitridge asked.

She didn't match his smile. Waving a hand toward a grilled cage in one corner, she said stiffly: "This is also the Arrowhead post office, and I'm the postmistress. I used to give Riley Kitridge a hand, too, but the store's been closed by Judge Day's order, pending settlement of the estate. You're Lou Kitridge, of course. I'm Brenda Landis."

His brows arched at that name, and she added: "Yes—the sister of the boy who made such a foolish move at the stage station. But Smiley had reason for his attitude. When you didn't answer my letter, you let us know how you stood. But Parson Paine thought there'd be no harm in meeting you and trying once more to persuade you not to sell to Truman Stone."

"Letter?" Kitridge interjected. "What letter?"

"I wrote you two weeks ago Tuesday, telling you why Stone wanted

this store and what it would mean to us."

Kitridge counted days on his fingers. "Your letter must have arrived the same day I left," he said finally. "I didn't come straight here, so that's why you thought I had time to answer your letter when, as a matter of fact, I never even got it. Now just what difference does it make who I sell to?"

"Come," said Brenda and skirted the heaped counters to a small rear room where wooden cases reached from floor to ceiling. "This is what Truman Stone wants to keep out of homesteader hands," she said. "Guns and cartridges. The last shipment to be freighted in before the big snow. And even if another shipment could be gotten through, my people couldn't pay for them."

He whistled softly. "You've got a war building on this range?"

She led the way back into the bigger room. "A year or so ago we came here, filed on government land and hoped to make homes," she said. "Stone bucked us from the first, but Riley Kitridge lined up on our side. He extended credit, and in time we'd

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all have paid him off, but now we're not to get that time. Stone has a crew of gun-handly men and the lid's going to blow off any day. We've only about one gun for every five men. We'll have no chance unless we get that merchandise."

"And you all hated me because it looked as though I favored Stone when I didn't answer your letter," Kitridge said. "Now it's making sense."

"Well, how *do* you stand?" Brenda demanded.

He took a handful of hard candy from a nearby barrel. "The man who owns those guns holds the winning cards on this range," he said. "That makes me wonder about something. Just *how* did my uncle die, Miss Landis?"

Her breath caught. "I'd like to tell you Stone murdered him to keep Riley from arming us. Maybe that would make you swing to our side. But the truth is that your uncle was thrown by his horse, his foot caught in a stirrup and he was dragged to death. That horse was a bad one; Riley had been warned to watch him."

Kitridge turned that over in his mind carefully, and then he said, "I still don't know how I'm supposed to stand. I don't need a store any more than I need a third leg, and Stone's the only man in a position to buy me out. There were no strings on the estate Uncle Riley left me. Why should I take cards against Stone?"

"You'll have to answer that one yourself, Mr. Kitridge," Brenda Landis said. "Riley's personal effects

are in his quarters at the back of the store. You'll probably want to sort through them before you sell. Or do such trifles interest you?"

Ignoring the scorn in her voice, Kitridge fished a quarter from his pocket. "Here's for the candy," he said. "If somebody buys this store, I don't want him to say I robbed him blind before I sold."

Brenda had to laugh at that. "The candy's free," she said. "Riley put that barrel there for his customers. A trade stimulator, he called it."

She led him to the cramped quarters that had been Riley Kitridge's, and he got a lamp aglow. There were papers to examine and a huge trunk to explore. He delved into it, finding books and assorted odds and ends that were without interest to him. And then, at the bottom, he found some silver-plated, inscribed trophy cups, and he set them upon a table and studied them for a long, thoughtful time. At last he replaced them and the other articles, extinguished the lamp and came into the store proper. Brenda Landis was still working in the post mistress's cage.

"How long will you keep open?" Kitridge asked.

"I've slept in your uncle's quarters since the funeral," she explained. "I wanted to make sure those packing cases weren't mysteriously moved some dark night. But I have a shack in town, if you want to bunk in the store tonight."

"I'm going to get a bite," he said. "I'll be back soon."

Steak, spuds and coffee at the restaurant put warmth and spirit in Kit-

ridge, and a half hour later he stepped outdoors again and peered into the darkness to orient himself. As he took a step toward the store a gun blared, its flat crash lost in the wind, and lead splintered the restaurant's door jamb within six inches of Kitridge's head.

He'd marked the gun flame over yonder in the shadowy slot between two buildings, and he charged in that direction, running low and zig-zagging and pulling out his own gun as he came. He expected another bullet to spear from the darkness, but the only sound was the quick thudding of boots beating a hasty retreat. As he ran between the buildings, he saw a shadowy figure ahead of him. The figure tripped and went down, and Kitridge sprawled upon the fallen fellow, then hauled him to his feet.

"Now let's see what kind of fight you can make, you dirty, bushwhackin' son!" he stormed. He dragged his captive toward the nearest window and the splash of light showed that he had Smiley Landis in his hands.

"You!" Kitridge ejaculated. "I made one mistake, I see. I should have kept your gun!"

"It was Con Mingo!" the boy insisted shrilly. "Honest it was! I saw him hunkered yonder, waiting for something, and I hid back and watched. After he shot, he lit out, and when you come a-runnin' I started to vamoose. But I tripped."

"It's a good story, kid," Kitridge said. "I'd like to believe it." But he scraped a match aglow and cupped it against the wind and

looked for sign. "Let's see if two of you were hereabouts."

Dragging Smiley with him to where the would-be bushwhacker had stood, he found a patch of ground where the snow had been hard packed, and here the imprint of a boot heel was distinct—a boot heel with a diamond-shaped marking. He'd seen such a boot heel that day, on Con Mingo when the man had struck a match in Judge Day's office. Releasing his grip on Smiley Landis, he said: "Guess you told it straight, kid."

"I'm no bushwhacker," the boy said. "I threw a gun on you today, but I was crazy mad. I been sorry ever since that I didn't take time to give you an even shake."

Kitridge eyed the boy in the uncertain light. "Got a fast horse, son?" he asked. The boy nodded and Kitridge said: "Head into the store and tell your sister I'm not selling—to Stone or anybody else. Then ride and carry word to your homesteader friends out on the range. Tell 'em the store will be open at nine tomorrow morning. And tell 'em that guns and bullets can be bought on credit!"

Smiley let out a triumphant yell and was off into the darkness. Kitridge watched him go, then paced down the street to Judge Day's office. Lamplight threw a saffron rectangle on the boardwalk before the place, and when Kitridge came inside, he found Day and Truman Stone playing cards on the desk top. Before they could speak, he said: "I've brought my answer. I'm opening for business tomorrow—myself. You can



consider the estate settled, judge.”

Stone tossed his cards aside and came to a truculent stand. “What’s the idea of welshing on the deal we made?” he demanded.

“We made no deal,” Kitridge countered. “And where’s Mingo? You shouldn’t have sent him to try and kill me.”

Stone laughed, all pretense gone. “Mingo only tried,” he said. “That was to make you think twice, in case Brenda Landis had put any foolishness into your head. Mingo wouldn’t have missed unless he intended to. You might keep that in mind.”

“That’s a bluff, and I’m calling it,” Kitridge said. “Judge, got any legal objections to my opening my own store?”

“Show him the paper, judge,” Stone said. “It’s time we played our sleeve ace.”

Day gestured toward a small safe in the corner. “There’s a document locked in there, Mr. Kitridge,” he said. “An agreement signed by your uncle whereby he promised to sell no guns or cartridges from his present stock to anybody *but* Mr. Stone—a step Mr. Stone arranged to insure peace on the Arrowhead. Do you care to see that document?”

Kitridge stiffened as the full import of Day’s words hit him. “It’s a

forgery!” he declared hotly. “I know that without seeing it! My uncle was a stranger to me, but I’ve heard enough about him today to know he’d never have signed such an agreement!”

“A forgery?” Day shrugged. “That would be for a court to decide, sir. No, I can’t stop you from opening your store. But if you sell a single gun or bullet, I’ll get out an injunction and have you padlocked inside an hour. Don’t forget that.”

Kitridge pushed to the door and outside, and the heavy laughter of Truman Stone followed after him and blended with the wind. Sick at heart, Kitridge crossed to the store and stepped inside. Instantly Brenda came hurrying to him, her eyes shining and her hands fluttering to his shoulders.

“Smiley told me!” she cried. “He’s already carrying word to our people. You’ll never be sorry you sided us, Mr. Kitridge—”

She saw his face then, and her voice trailed off.

“They’ve beaten us,” Kitridge said bitterly. “They’ve beaten us good.” He told her how it was, and at the end he said: “That agreement was forged, of course. Any man who knew Riley Kitridge would know that. But it ties our hands just the same.”

“No wonder Stone saved this till the last!” she said dully. “It was simpler for him to buy the store; no one would have questioned that. Now he’s resorted to this trick, knowing it will take weeks or months to prove the agreement’s a fake. And

he'll have the homesteaders driven out long before that!"

They fell silent then, two people who had stood ready to make their fight, shoulder to shoulder, but who'd found that fight already lost. And then Kitridge's glance touched the candy barrel and his eyes lit.

"Is there anybody in Arrowhead who paints signs?" he demanded excitedly. "There is! Then get him over here pronto!"

Brenda asked no questions. She got her coat and went out into the night, returning shortly with a mousy little man who carried the tools of his trade. Kitridge gave him orders; a huge cloth banner was stretched upon a wooden framework, and a legend was painted upon the banner, and an hour or so later Kitridge and the sign painter fought the wind atop tall ladders to hang the banner which read:

GRAND RE-OPENING BARGAIN SALE
—A GUN AND CARTRIDGES FREE
WITH EVERY PURCHASE.

Later, when the sign painter had gone, Kitridge and Brenda Landis stood across the street, studying the banner, barely visible in the darkness.

Brenda's hand touched Lou's arm. "This is what I wanted from the first moment I saw you—you on our side, taking the same stand your uncle took. But this is calling for a showdown with Stone. I'm afraid, Lou . . . afraid . . ."

That night Lou Kitridge slept in his uncle's quarters with the store's door barred and his gun at his finger-

tips. Brenda Landis was there early, rattling at the door, and shortly thereafter Judge Jonathan Day put in an appearance. The man began to unfold an argument, but before three words were out of him. Kitridge said:

"Whoa, judge; I'm not bucking that so-called agreement you've got in your safe. You claim my uncle agreed to sell arms to nobody but Stone. O.K. I'm not *selling* those things; I'm giving them away. It's a trade stimulator, just like yonder candy barrel. Help yourself, judge."

"But this is fantastic, sir!" Day protested. "A free gun with every purchase!"

"Some of the homesteaders may be low on money, so I'm making it easy for them," Kitridge said. "Any small purchase gets them a gun. And the offer's open to anybody—even Stone and Mingo. But the deal is one gun to each customer; you'd better tell Stone that. He won't have time to get his Winged S crew into town before the homesteaders arrive, I reckon. Now get out of here, unless you want to buy something!"

Day went, and Kitridge and Brenda began sweeping out the store. It was less than half an hour later when a small boy popped inside, handed a note to Kitridge and left. Kitridge read the note, his eyebrows raising.

"It's from the judge," he told Brenda. "'Please come to my office,' he says. 'I have some valuable information about your uncle's death, but I'm afraid to come to you again. Stone might get suspicious.'"

"Don't go!" Brenda cried. "It's a trap of some kind. Day is Stone's man. Besides, what could the judge know about Riley's death?"

"Judge Day is the weak kind of gent who always throws in with the winning side," Kitridge said. "Since we've found a way to arm the homesteaders, he's afraid that they're going to be the winners, so he's leaving Stone like a rat leaves a sinking ship. And—*Say, what's that?*"

He'd stiffened attentively, and Brenda said: "I heard it, too!"

"Shots!" Kitridge ejaculated. "Muffled shots—like they were fired indoors!"

Then, a sudden suspicion crystallizing, he was out of the store and running the short distance toward Judge Day's office. He burst inside to find Con Mingo sprawled upon the floor, dead from a bullet through the heart. Judge Day was down behind the flat-topped desk, a gun in his hand, and a bullet hole in him, too, but there was still life in the man.

"Speak up!" Kitridge urged, getting an arm under Day. "What happened here?"

"Mingo . . . Stone . . . standing across the street. They saw me write that note . . . give it to that kid. They . . . must have guessed I was quitting them . . . I saw them stop the kid . . . take the note and read it. Then they sent him on to you . . . After that, Mingo came over here . . ."

"And you shot him?"

"He made the mistake . . . of playing cat-and-mouse . . . and that

gave me a chance at the gun in my desk . . . He laughed and told me . . . how Stone was going to win after all . . . said they'd let the kid deliver the note so you'd come. Mingo was going to nail you when you showed up here . . . But I got one shot at him . . . after he'd put a bullet in me . . ."

"Where's Stone?"

"Headed for . . . the Winged S. He's going to get his crew . . . head off homesteaders before they reach town . . . start his range war while they still haven't got guns—"

Kitridge's jaw tightened. He knew he had to make the minutes count, but he said: "What about my Uncle Riley's death. I think I already know the answer. I found some trophy cups and—"

Then he realized he was talking to a dead man, for Judge Day had stiffened spasmodically in his arms. He gently eased the man to the floor, and he said aloud: "You weren't much good to anybody, including yourself, judge. But you took a man's way out at the end."

Outside the office, he scanned the street. A horse stood at a nearby hitchrail, and he darted to the mount, jerking at the tie rope and vaulting into the saddle. He'd make an explanation to its owner later. Flashing past the mercantile, he saw Brenda standing on the porch.

"Which way to the Winged S?" he yelled. Brenda pointed and he swung away at a high gallop.

Out upon the snow-covered flats above the town, he spied Stone ahead of him, a black blob against the

linitless white, and he rode hard then. He'd stepped into a fight, had Lou Kitridge, and there was only one way to win that fight. The real showdown had to be here and now.

Kitridge narrowed the distance between himself and Stone. Once he was within six-gun range, he sent a high shot singing over the rancher. Stone cast a backward glance, then quirted his horse, but Kitridge's second shot, aimed at the Winged S man, brought the rancher's horse down instead.

Kicking free of the stirrups, Stone made a stand, and Kitridge, galloping up, slid from his saddle and stalked forward stiff-legged.

"There's no need of a fight between us!" Stone said hastily. "You can still sell your store to me! Why make a fool play just to side a bunch of stubble jumpers?"

"Maybe they're worth it, Stone," Kitridge said. "Besides, there's Riley Kitridge to think about. I know how you murdered him, Stone. You put a bullet in him first, then fastened his foot in a stirrup and sent his horse galloping to make it look like an accident."

Stone jerked with surprise. "Day's not dead!" he ejaculated. "So he talked—told you that!"

"No, Stone," Kitridge said. "Day's dead, and so's Mingo—they got each other. But you fell for my bluff and told me what I wanted to know, just the same. You see, last night when I looked over my uncle's things I began remembering yarns I'd heard about him years back. He was a prize rider, my uncle, a pro-

fessional at one time. Trophy cups in his trunk prove it. The best rider in the world can get throwed, of course, but seeing that you had a reason for wanting him dead, it seemed kind of fishy that a top hand like Riley Kitridge got killed in a riding accident! From there on out I was guessing."

Truman Stone ran his tongue along his rubbery lips, and then suddenly he snatched at his gun and sent a bullet spearing at Kitridge. That bullet burned through Kitridge's sleeve, but then Kitridge's gun spoke, and the big man buckled at the waist and went face forward into the snow.

Putting his back to the dead man and the dead horse, Kitridge pulled himself aboard his borrowed saddler. When Parson Paine and Smiley Landis and the other homesteaders reached town, he'd be able to tell them they weren't going to need the guns he'd intended giving them. Not now. For if he knew the nature of the gun-handly gentry who'd served Stone, he'd lay his bet that they would be splitting the breeze once the news reached them that their paymaster was dead.

And now he owned a store, Lou Kitridge reflected, and he was stuck with it, he guessed. But there was Brenda Landis to teach him how to ride herd on groceries, and besides the Winged S would likely be going up for sale. If he let go of his own spread across the Ponderas, he might just about break even. And so thinking, he turned happily back toward Arrowhead.

BOOMERANG BOUNTY

by ARCHIE JOSCELYN

What the Weasel thought was a bonanza in blood money turned out to be fool's gold



THE narrow cliff trail made a sharp bend here, and the faltering, draggy footsteps of the man making his way so laboriously along it sounded clearly. Weasel Gittings loosened his gun in its holster with a tentative shove, though he anticipated no trouble, the shape that this other man was in. But it always paid to be prepared for anything, and if he was right, this man coming along the trail now was a plenty

tough hombre—tough, that is, when he was well. But if he was as sick as he looked—Gittings passed a rasping tongue across eager lips. If he was sick now, he'd soon be a whole lot sicker!

He had glimpsed the outlaw from two miles away, had watched him carefully as he approached. Now, abruptly, they were face to face. And Gittings saw that there wasn't the slightest doubt of it. This other

man was Nettle—and, like his name, to be handled with care. Well, he'd handle him that way—for the sick outlaw was worth money.

Gittings had seen the little outlaw two years before, when a posse had been hot on Nettle's heels and his twin guns hot in his hands. He had fought like a wildcat, against apparently hopeless odds, and had escaped. And had dodged the law ever since. Some men still insisted that Nettle was innocent of the crimes charged against him, but that angle of it didn't interest Gittings. There was a thousand dollars reward out for Nettle, and he'd be the man to collect it.

There was no mistake, he saw. This was Nettle. But he no longer looked hard and dangerous. He looked tired, as if the endless trail, the ceaseless hounding, was telling on him. And he was sick. So sick that he only rocked back on his heels at this sudden meeting, his eyes wary. But he made no motion toward his guns. When a man got too sick to care, he was easy to handle.

Still, the man could fight like a brace of wildcats, and Gittings wanted no trouble. That reward might not be easy to collect, by force. Far better to use guile.

"Why, hello, partner," Gittings said, trying to make his voice sound hearty. "Didn't expect to meet anybody, way back in this country." His eyes narrowed. "Say, feller, you look kind of sick."

"I feel sick," Nettle agreed, and the wariness went out of his eyes, which seemed to be too tired to be

alert for long. "Don't know what's the matter with me, but I sure ain't feelin' so good, for a fact."

Already, the beginnings of a scheme had flowered in Gittings' fertile mind. He wasn't called the Weasel for nothing. Crafty, cunning, cold-blooded—he prided himself on all those qualities. They paid, and pretty soon they'd pay off again, in cash. The thing he valued most.

Gittings came a step closer, his eyes solicitous. The trick he had in mind was pretty broad, but it would do no harm to try. And the thicker you laid it on, in such a case, the more convincing it usually was. He'd make out that the outlaw was really pretty bad off. Scare him.

"I don't wonder you feel bad," he said. "Mebby I'm mistaken. I sure hope I am, partner, but from the looks of you, I'd say you had somethin' pretty bad. You look just like a couple of other fellers I've seen before, and if you've got what they have, you sure ought to get to a medico, and fast."

"What?" Nettle asked, and his voice was almost a croak. You could sure work on a man's mind, Gittings reflected, if you knew how. "Got what?"

"Tick fever," Gittings said, dropping his voice. "You know, spotted fever, they call it, where you get bit by one of these ticks. Your blood all sort of dries up, and it's worse'n being run through a wringer that's on fire. It's bad stuff, 'less you get help. You sure better let me get you to a medico, pronto."

Nettle hesitated, and Gittings could almost see the thoughts in his mind, as he strove to weigh the pros and cons. He was scared, now—which he hadn't looked to be when blazing lead was kicking up the dust all around him. He didn't want to die—not that way.

And he was probably figuring that few people knew what he looked like. Gittings had had a good look at him, that time, far better than any of the posse had been able to obtain. But though Gittings had seen Nettle, the little outlaw hadn't seen him. No, it wasn't very likely that anyone in a small town would know him, and there was that risk, as against the thing which Gittings had painted so vividly for him.

"Tick fever," Nettle echoed hoarsely. "I never thought of nothin' like that, but mebbly you're right. I sure don't feel so good." His eyes narrowed with a last flash of suspicion. "I thought they couldn't do much for you, if you did get that."

"Sometimes they can't," Gittings admitted frankly. "But usually they can pull you through, if you don't wait too long. It's yore only chance."

"Well, I—My horse broke his leg the other day, and I'm afoot now. Would you help me get to a medico, partner?"

"Sure I will," Gittings agreed heartily. "I'd be a yellow dog, not to help a feller bein' in the shape you're in, wouldn't I? I got a couple of horses back here just a little way. Come on."

Inwardly he was chuckling. The poor numskull! Nettle would be

sick, all right, when he wore handcuffs, and still sicker when he had a noose for a necktie. And with that thousand dollars—

The years on the dodge had worn Nettle down, all right. He was no longer the fire-roaring gunnie he once had been. Now he was almost pathetic as they finally reached town and got him in bed, and a medico to look him over.

"He's pretty sick, all right," the doctor reported to Gittings, after an examination. "It isn't what he thought, though. Seems his horse rolled on him, and injured him internally. He'll have to stay in bed awhile, but I'll have him around as good as new in a few weeks. He wants to see you now; he seems mighty grateful to you."

"Sure," Gittings agreed. He wanted to see Nettle again, too—before the sheriff arrived, and be there to watch the look on his face when the sheriff did walk in. A thousand dollars had never been easier earned.

When Gittings came into the room Nettle looked up with a smile which somehow transfigured his face.

"Partner," he said. "I sure appreciate what you've done for me, going so far out of your way to help out a feller that you never set eyes on before. And I like to pay my debts. If I come out of this all right—and the doc says I will, thanks to you—why, then I'm going to take you back into those hills again."

He lowered his voice.

"Reach in my pants pocket, there on that chair, and see what you find. . . . That's it. I found me a strike,

a little spell ago, back in there—and talk about rich! You never saw anything like it. I know somethin' about gold, and it'll run two-three hundred dollars to the ton. And since I'd likely have died without your help, half of it'll be yours, for savin' me."

Stricken, Gittings was gazing at the nugget he held in his hand—a nugget big as a marble.

Nettle chuckled feebly. "You can wash a lot of it out like that, easy as pickin' posies," he said. "You don't make a find like that, once in a blue moon."

Gittings' voice was hoarse as he leaned forward. Nettle was grateful, now, but outside, Gittings had heard a step on the sidewalk. Pretty soon . . . the Weasel leaned forward in desperation.

"I . . . I sure appreciate what you've got in mind, feller," he said hoarsely. "Couldn't you, er . . . mebbly tell me a little, give me some idea, say, a map . . . just in case anything didn't go right?"

Nettle shook his head.

"Nope. I couldn't tell you. Even with a map, you couldn't find that strike. The way it is, you'd sort of have to stumble on it, and there ain't a chance in a thousand, 'less you know just how. But soon as I'm out of here, we'll go back, just the two of us. I like to pay my debts and treat people the way they treat me—"

He broke off as the door opened. A heavy-set man with a badge pinned on his shirt strode into the room.

Gittings came wildly to his feet, a half-formed notion of stopping the sheriff rioting through his mind, but it was too late. He shrank back as the officer pushed past him and on, to the bedside. For just an instant the sheriff stared down at the sick man, then turned an understanding, coldly contemptuous eye on Gittings.

"Where did you get the idea that we wanted this man, Weasel?" he demanded. "I suppose all you could see in your mind's eyes was the thousand dollars reward, but next time, you'd better look closer. As a matter of fact, Nettle was arrested in another State, weeks ago, and made a full confession. . . . Sorry to've troubled you, pard," he added to the sick man.

The wan figure on the bed nodded, but it wasn't the sheriff he was looking at, as understanding came to him. The same contempt which had been in the sheriff's eyes was mirrored now in his own, and Gittings, meeting that glance, seemed to shrivel. He'd climbed out on a limb, then sawed it off behind him. No thousand bucks—no gold mine!

The sick man reached for the nugget which Gittings had left on the bed. "Keep it," he said, tossing it to Gittings. "To remember yourself by!"

THE END

Answers to puzzle on page 57.

1. tallow
2. skookum
3. shack
4. picket
5. javalina
6. badlands
7. jinglex
8. trough
9. warbag
10. track
11. squatter
12. renegade
13. chuckline
14. moss-back
15. coulee



MINES AND MINING

BY JOHN A. THOMPSON

WIN, lose or draw, gold prospecting is a fascinating game. Trying to outguess Mother Nature and figure just where a deposit of gold is likely to lie is apt to be a tough job. But at least there are a few fairly well-established rules to go by. That's why the more a prospector knows about gold itself and its occurrence in Nature, the better his chances are for conducting a successful prospecting trip.

No double talk was intended by Reader E. I., of Glendale, California, when he asked us in a recent letter: "How is it that gold is where it is when you find it?"

E. I. was simply and sensibly asking for a little information concerning the whys and wherefores of gold deposits. He felt that the more he could learn about gold as it is found in nature, the better fitted he'd be to make his own field deductions the next time he went in search of the illusive metal.

Let's start with gold itself, E. I., and remember that it is distinguished from other metallic elements chiefly by its beautiful, characteristic yellow color. This color incidentally usually remains untarnished on exposure under nearly all conditions.

Then too gold is much heavier, bulk for bulk, than most metals. It is $1\frac{1}{2}$ times as heavy as lead and nearly twice as heavy as pure silver. Gold is also soft for a metal, softer for instance than copper, silver, platinum, zinc or iron. A needle point can be stuck into a nugget or small flake of gold and it will leave a tiny pin prick. And if you hammer a nugget or small piece of native gold it will merely flatten out. It won't crumble to a powder, as will iron pyrites, or fool's gold.

In nature gold usually occurs "native," that is, as the actual element and uncombined chemically with other substances. But to make gold prospecting more tricky there is sometimes a chance for confusion because the mineral most commonly found associated with gold in lodes or vein deposits is the aforementioned iron pyrites. Both minerals are yellow and have a distinctly metallic appearance.

Unfortunately the iron pyrites rule is one that does not work both ways. Fool's gold is frequently associated with deposits of real gold. But the fool's gold is by far the more common mineral. Not all deposits containing fool's gold have real gold in

addition to the iron pyrites.

Other minerals that occur notably in connection with gold deposits are copper pyrites, zinc blende and stibnite, an antimony sulphide. Often at the surface outcropping where a gold vein has been weathered by atmospheric forces there are yellowish granular showings of limonite—an oxide of iron. Extensive deposits of this material—gossan it is usually called—are likely to be (but again not always) an indication of gold deposits in the immediate vicinity. At any rate, gossan is generally construed as a favorable sign in gold mineralized country. In placer deposits fragments of magnetite or black iron sands almost invariably are found with the tiny particles of actual gold.

Placer gold, the kind found in stream beds and gravel banks and most easily sought for and mined by the small-scale individual gold prospector, occurs as free gold mixed in with the sand, dirt and stones as a result of long, slow, age-old geological processes. As exposed land surface is gradually worn away by time and the elements, any gold that happened to be contained in veins tends to become concentrated at the surface. This is largely because gold, though soft, is extremely resistant to solution in ordinary acids.

As erosion or weathering continues, some of this gold in fine particles gradually settles or is washed

downhill until it finally reaches the valleys or stream beds along with also-washed-down sand and gravel. Once in the actual waterway, the gold, being much heavier than the sand and silt, works through to the bottom and tends to lodge on the bedrock—more especially in joints or seams in the bedrock. Of course different types of bedrock have different capacities for holding the gold particles. A rough bedrock holds them best. They may slide along downstream over smooth bedrock. Even so they won't be lost. You will likely find them concentrated farther along where the bedrock formation changes, or where there is a seam or an upthrust in the solid rock.

Gold being so very heavy in proportion to the size of its particles, it takes strong stream currents to carry it away, or move it very far from its source. For that reason coarse gold and nuggets generally are found in gulches and creeks, or small, fast-flowing streams in mountain country near the veins from which they were weathered away.

This is often the explanation of why placer gold deposits and lode gold, or hardrock deposits are frequently found in the same general gold mining area. Placer prospecting being the easier, and the deposits easier mined, they are generally found first and the vein deposits are located later.

If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter including a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., will bring a prompt, authoritative, personal reply. Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received; please keep them as brief as possible.



WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

BY JOHN NORTH

IF announced plans go through, Michigan will be one of the first States to offer the outdoor enthusiast something ultra-modern in the way of hunting, fishing and camping facilities. Michigan calls the innovation "skycamps." Authorities are already working on the details of these miniature airfields they propose to erect in some 500 to 600 of the State's most popular recreational areas.

The skycamps are to be established at lakes, fishing streams and other resorts throughout Michigan, bringing them within a few hours' reach by plane of the cities and crowded metropolitan areas. The plan affords a preview of the part aviation is likely to play in the future in opening up back country, or hard-to-reach areas to flying fishermen, or just plain vacation campers.

Developed by the Michigan State Planning Commission, the project provides for hundreds of small Class I airports scattered throughout Michigan's great outdoors country. In the future a fisherman may be able to land with his family or his friends in his private or chartered plane at any one of these skycamps within a short time after leaving his home or

office. And he can do it from virtually any section of the Midwest.

That seems to answer H. C.'s recent query from Fort Wayne, Indiana, relative to the practical post-war future of aviation as far as the vacationer or sportsman is concerned. "Do you think increased flying will change the future summer camping picture much?" H. C. asked us. And he added: "Do you know of any plans already being made along these lines?"

Michigan's proposed skycamp plan, affording literally hundreds of airfields in the State's recreation areas, is the answer to your second query, H. C., and the answer to the first question is—yes. Air travel in the days to come is bound to have a definite effect on outdoor vacation habits and possibilities. Not only in Michigan but in other sections as well.

The family car and good roads made trips of considerable distance feasible within the usual range of the two-week holiday period. The airplane can bring within the same compass camping visits to the real backwoods sections remote from roads and at present accessible only

by trails, or long canoe trips and tedious portages. In many cases it is not so much the distance in actual miles that the plane will overcome as it is the ease with which the air traveler can sail over difficult, or even pathless terrain that will make the plane important.

Once a suitable landing field has been provided, a plane can set you down most anywhere in the wilderness you choose. Even before the war prospectors and mining men, fur trappers and others in Alaska and the Canadian Far North were rapidly becoming aware of this, and making a surprisingly consistent use of charter planes in getting them to and from the outpost scenes of their far-flung occupations.

In the future, with planes commonplace and landing strips aplenty, this same method of penetrating into the back-country areas remaining right here in the United States will offer vacation campers the same sort of time-saving opportunity on a fishing holiday. That's a pretty sure bet. Certainly Michigan, with its proposed skycamp plan, thinks so.

Michigan is, of course, grand outdoors country to begin with. Right through the alphabet from A to Z—Arbutus Lake in Grand Traverse County to Zukey Lake in Livingston County—the State is famous for its fishing, hunting and camping facilities. The vicinity of Arbutus Lake,

for instance, up around Mayfield offers about 100 miles of lakes and a similar distance of river and creek waters where trout, bass, pike, perch and panfish may be caught, or ducks, grouse and rabbits hunted in season.

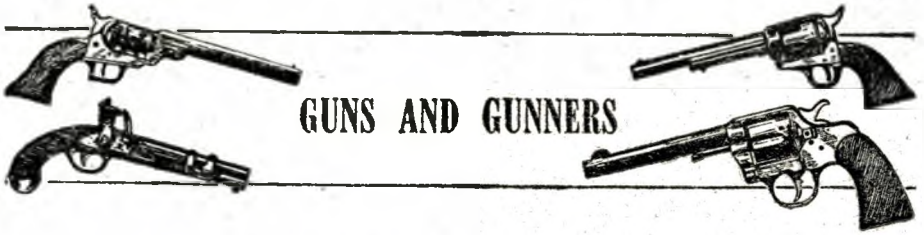
Zukey Lake in south-central Michigan, reached from Lakeland, is the start from which several of a chain of lakes can be tapped by the vacationer out for some good black, rock, or speckled bass fishing, or anxious to get himself a pike or a mess of bluegills.

In between, both geographically and alphabetically, are literally scores of other ideal outdoor vacation spots. There is Lake County in middle west Michigan, real wild life country.

Up until about 10 years ago Lake County was closed to deer hunting and the deer herds that grew up there were long a source of delight to those who get a thrill out of seeing "big" game roaming free and wild in the forest. There is a lot of cover in this county with many streams, lakes and swamps, all of which afford wild life of all kinds a good opportunity to increase.

Yes, sir, Michigan where the ring of the woodsman's ax gave way to the song of the fisherman is already preparing for a new sound—the whirr of the flying sportsman winging his way to a future "skycamp" in the heart of the woods.

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.



BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

THOSE many "wildcat" cartridges appearing on the market have always caught the public fancy. The idea is not, of course, a new one. Ever since the metallic cartridge came into use, private experimenters have been at work with their own variations of existing numbers, always seeking to improve on them.

What makes a "wildcat"?

The term generally applies to a combination of rifle and cartridge not available on the market and listed only as a custom-built proposition. The ammunition is usually non-standard—made by reforming a standard brass case. Often this means that the owner of such a combination must be a handloader—he must be tooled up not only to assemble his loads, but he must also form his own cases from a supply of brass in a different caliber.

Yet I know many a handloader and many a non-handloader who uses wildcats and does not load for them. Many of these freak cartridges are so popular that custom ammunition firms will supply any quantity at prices comparing favorably in cost with factory loads of a similar size.

What are the disadvantages of a wildcat?

In addition to the problem of ammunition supply for the non-handloader, the major problem is the lack of real data on velocities and pressures. Most wildcats are today tested for velocity with different combinations of loads, yet few have been pressure-tested. The reason for this is quite simple—any gun and ammunition, shipped to a laboratory, can be locked in a machine rest and be given a velocity test with little trouble. To pressure-test is a horse of a different color.

Only a pressure gun can be used to test pressures. And a pressure gun costs real money. Such a gun is useless for anything else—except possibly to test velocities at the same time. A standard version of the wildcat rifle could be converted to a pressure gun, but such a rifle might be worth about \$100 if well made and on a good action. The conversion to a pressure gun would cost about \$300 more. And the wear and tear on a pressure gun makes the average cost of taking pressures about 50 cents per shot.

Many new standard cartridges are the result of some ammunition or arms maker varying a wildcat. Take, for instance, the .22 Savage Hi-power.

This was a wildcat designed by Charles Newton. He sold the idea to Savage who produced it under the Savage name. Newton developed it several years earlier. But the cartridge was far from satisfactory and since it was first manufactured commercially in 1912, the home experimenters have produced dozens of slight variations of it. Its possibilities might have influenced Winchester in their development of the .219 Zipper.

Then take the favorite little Hornet. This began life as a wildcat with the modernization of the old black powder .22 W.C.F. This old Winchester cartridge proved popular in Germany, and many years before the Hornet, German engineers revamped the cartridge and adapted it to smokeless powder, at a performance level above the old W.C.F. but below the Hornet. They named it the 5.6 x 35R Vierling.

Brother Niedner saw possibilities in the .25-20 repeater case and, after necking it to .22 caliber, developed one of the Baby Niedner series. Lots of the boys liked it—could it have inspired the Winchester .218 Bee?

One of the most popular of the wildcats was developed by Hervey Lovell, that Indianapolis gunsmith who seems to work more wonders with less equipment than anyone since Harry Pope first got into stride. The original Lovell, made from the almost obsolete .25-20 Single-shot,

raised accuracy and power standards in miniature centerfires. It clicked with the public so well that ammunition makers were quickly cleaned out of their stocks of old brass cases and had to dig semi-obsolete dies out of storage and make hundreds of thousands of new cases to fill the demand of Lovell shooters.

Then came the R-2 Lovell. This was just an improvement, and at least four of the experts now claim to have originated it. Regardless of who is responsible, the many gunsmiths chambering for the Lovell told me that they had quite a few of their jobs in to be done over. And the demand for the R-2 practically forced the original Lovell out of the picture for new work.

What does the ammunition maker think of the wildcat?

That is an interesting question. Some of the boys grumble about the "loss of business." The executives feel otherwise. They know that were it not for the wildcat fans there would be little development in the ammunition field. They study the public reaction to these private developments. They check their possibilities. And they make many a wildcat of their own—altered guns and cartridges about which nothing is ever heard outside of the laboratory. Many of these are supposed to be improvements on popular private wildcats. I've seen quite a few of them.

Phil Sharpe, our firearms editor, is now on active duty as a Captain, Ordnance Department, U. S. A. He will continue to answer all letters from readers. Address your inquiries to Captain Phillip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Store, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.

*A cowtown newspaper
might be a powerful
weapon against Boon
Talcott's lawlessness—
if a fighting editor mixed
his printer's ink with
powdersmoke*



SATAN BUYS A WAR

by WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

I
DON SAXTON leaned back in his chair, stretched his long legs across the desk in front of him, and grimly contemplated the ceiling of his Grant City newspaper office.

Ten days ago he had moved his press north from Gunlock to Grant City, had printed and mailed the first issue of the *News*, and by so doing, had taken chips in a range war that would set newly created

Maupin County aflame before it was done. Too, Lela Travers, the girl he'd hoped to marry, was lost to him. That was the price he had been forced to pay to keep faith with his belief that a newspaper man's job was to tell the truth.

The bitterness that was in Saxton was like a raw and sullen wound. For most of the year he'd been in Gunlock he'd liked and trusted Boon Talcott, but slowly suspicion had risen in him that the man was a crook and a liar. Talcott was the district attorney and his friends held the rest of the county offices. Ten days ago Saxton had learned that his worst suspicions were true. It was then he had left Gunlock, stripping clean the roots that a year in the town had sunk deeply into his heart.

Lela Travers had said angrily she wouldn't marry a traitor. Talcott had cursed Saxton and told him he was a fool to throw in with a losing side, but Don Saxton had sworn to himself that it wouldn't be the losing side. The *News* would tell the people of Maupin County why Grant City and not Gunlock should be the county seat. It would tell them why Talcott and his satellites who held the county offices by virtue of the governor's appointment should not be elected, and how they meant to run the county if they were. This, Talcott wouldn't allow if he could help it.

Saxton hadn't seen Doug Reynolds step through the open door of his office, nor did he know the man was there until Reynolds said: "You're gonna strain your brain if you keep

thinking that hard, feller."

Saxton spun around in his chair, right hand dipping for the gun he habitually wore. Then he saw who it was, and his hand dropped away.

"Howdy, Doug," he said. "Reckon spraining my brain wouldn't be too hard a chore."

Reynolds was Grant City's candidate for county clerk, and he'd make a good one. He was a round-faced little man with pink cheeks and an infectious grin. Now he came up to Don and nodded at a copy of the *News* spread out on the desk.

"You did a fine job, Don. I've got a hunch you swung things our way when you got that paper out."

"I'd feel plumb bad if I didn't," Saxton said grimly.

"You ready to go to the meeting?"

"I reckon." Saxton pulled his lank body out of the chair, and picked up his Stetson.

"You're a queer one to be running a paper," Reynolds said, his eyes sweeping Saxton's hard-muscled, wasp-waisted body. "You wear cowboy duds, and you pack a gun like you could use it. You look more like a gent who'd be breaking a tough string than one who'd sit in a cubbyhole of an office setting type."

Saxton grinned mirthlessly. "I've always had an ambition to ride herd on a newspaper," he said softly.

Saxton didn't explain that he'd reached a goal he'd set for himself years ago, and upon reaching it, had found little satisfaction in it. The

price he'd paid to come to Grant City was his business. He went out of the newspaper office and down the street in long strides, Doug Reynolds half-running beside him.

"Don, there's something you oughtta know," Reynolds panted. "Now don't get me wrong. We appreciate what you're doing for us. We know we wouldn't have no more chance of winning the election without a paper than a snowball has of staying overnight in hell, but some of the boys are wondering why you've changed sides so sudden, and they're a mite suspicious."

"You mean Luke Kelsey, don't you, Doug," Saxton said, and kept on looking straight ahead. "Kelsey wouldn't trust his own grandmother. I don't figure he'll make much of a sheriff, but he'll beat Whang Ransom."

"It's mostly Kelsey, all right," Reynolds admitted between puffs. "You gotta admit it looks kind o' funny. You was mighty thick with Talcott for a year or more. It ain't no mystery how the Gunlock bunch got all the appointments. Talcott's slick tongue talked the governor into it. Besides, you was engaged to Lela Travers, and her dad is the county clerk. Looks like you'd be pulling for him instead of me."

"You ain't under Talcott's thumb, are you, Doug?" Saxton demanded. "If Kelsey expects me to tell all my personal business just to give him some news he's curious about, he can go straight to the devil. My private business is private."

"Sure, sure," Reynolds said in a placating voice. "I just thought I'd

tell you. Don't go off half-cocked if Kelsey gets to shooting his mouth off."

"He can keep it shut, or I'll shut it for him," Saxton said shortly as he turned into the Jubilee Bar.

Grant City's candidates for county office were in the back room when Saxton and Reynolds came in. Tod Summers, who aspired to be county judge and was the self-appointed leader of the group, sat at the table. There were the two ranchers, Carl Haslin and Abe Logan, who wanted to be commissioners. The lawyer, Ralph Cagle, had ambitions to be county attorney, and Luke Kelsey, who owned a small spread up Rip-saw Creek, was the candidate for sheriff.

Saxton sat down beside Cagle. No one said anything for a time, and Saxton felt the tension that gripped the group.

Summers got up and closed the door. He sat down again, cleared his throat, and said: "It's six days to election. What we do in these six days will determine it. Saxton, I want to commend you for your editorial. You said everything, and you said it well."

Saxton nodded his acknowledgment.

"Saxton, what are your plans for your next issue?" Summers queried. "It goes into the mail the day before election, doesn't it?"

"That's right. I plan to say about what I said this time. Besides that, I'll give a short account of each of you men, and state why you should be elected instead of the present office holders."

Kelsey reared up in his chair, his bulldog jaw moving forward pugnaciously.

"Just what are those reasons, Saxton?" he demanded.

"There are two, both of which you know, but most of the voters don't."

"What are they?" Kelsey insisted.

"I didn't think you were that ignorant, Luke," Saxton said softly.

"I got reason for wanting to hear you say 'em," Kelsey rasped.

"I'll be glad to enlighten you." Saxton's tone belied the anger that was crowding him. "Geographically Grant City is the only logical choice for county seat. It's centrally located, and Gunlock is within five miles of the south boundary of the county. That's important in a county that contains more than five thousand square miles."

"It sure is," Haslin said. "I'd have to travel more'n a hundred miles to get to the county seat if I had to go to Gunlock."

"I don't think there is any doubt about people choosing Grant City," Saxton went on, "but what they don't know is that Talcott would cook up some excuse to move back to Gunlock. If you boys are elected, the county seat stays here. The second reason is that Talcott will run the county, and he's a crook. The bunch that's in now takes his orders, and so will everybody else or they'll have trouble with his gun-slicks."

"That sounds good," Kelsey admitted. "But the thing that gets under my hide is how come you've changed

sides right here before election. It's my hunch you came up here to play Talcott's sneaking game for him."

"If you read my paper when it was located in Gunlock," Saxton said crisply, "you'll know that I never came out for Talcott and his bunch of parasites. What's more, I *never* boosted Gunlock for county seat. Why I moved here and decided to take sides is my business."

Kelsey opened his mouth to say something when Tod Summers cut him off. "Luke made a suggestion. I think we should consider it. He feels, since Gunlock is now the county seat, that we should go to Gunlock tonight or tomorrow night with a large force, and move the records to Grant City."

A hushed silence followed Summers' words.

"That way we'd be in time for the paper to tell folks what was the county seat," Kelsey said, grinning confidently.

"That's dynamite," Doug Reynolds muttered.

"There's gonna be some powder burned before this is over, and we might as well start it," Kelsey snapped.

"No!" Saxton's gray eyes were on Kelsey. "Luke, you've got a reputation for trying to hatch your eggs before they're ready. Taking a crack at Gunlock would be the worst thing we could do. In the first place Talcott has convinced the governor that he's the big gun over here, and it wouldn't take much to make the governor take a hand. In the second place, the chances are we'd get shot all to pieces by Tal-

cott's gunhawks and accomplish nothing."

Kelsey reared up again. He roared: "You're a blasted—"

"Luke," Summers said sharply, "you'll keep a civil tongue in your head, or you'll get out. I see no reason to argue this. We'll take a vote. How many are in favor of Kelsey's proposal?"

"Me," Kelsey bellowed.

"Against it?"

"Me," came from every other man in the room. Carl Haslin added: "Luke, looks to me like you're trying to get us all killed."

II

Kelsey relaxed in his seat and said nothing.

"There's one more thing," Summers added. "The Grange is having a picnic Sunday at Roper's Ferry. Might cause trouble, but I figured it would be a good idea if we showed up, and made some talks. The people down there are sort o' in between, and we need their votes."

"I've got a better idea," Kelsey said suddenly, his eyes on Saxton. "Talcott's the big toad in the puddle. If we get him out of the way, we're fixed." He moved to the door and opened it. "Catgut, come in here."

As Kelsey stepped aside, a little bowlegged man pushed past him into the room. Kelsey closed the door again, and came back to his chair. He said: "In case you gents don't know this man, he's Catgut Folen. He's got quite a rep as a gun-fighter. For one thousand dollars he'll fix Talcott's clock for him."

Amazed silence met Kelsey's words. Every man in the room but Folen was in this fight up to his neck. There wasn't one except Folen who wouldn't do his share of trigger squeezing if it came to that, but none except Kelsey would have proposed this thing they had just heard.

A sly grin was on Catgut Folen's skinny face. He was never seen without the two guns on his hips, carried with their butts flared wide. His eyes were the chill blue eyes of a killer, and as they fastened on Saxton, they showed the hatred he felt for the newspaper man. Saxton knew him well. Too well. Folen was Talcott's top gunhand, and he was like a one-man dog in his loyalty to the district attorney.

"We'll have none of that," Cagle said hotly. "If I'm elected county attorney, I expect to enforce the law honestly. I couldn't do that if I were elected by such means."

"You're talking plumb high and mighty, Ralph," Kelsey sneered. "I want to be sheriff. How I get the job don't bother me."

"That's what I thought," said Saxton. "Kelsey, you're the one man in this group I don't feel like supporting for the job he's seeking."

"To hell with you," Kelsey bellowed. "You ain't running for office. I don't need your help. I reckon folks are tired enough of Talcott's man."

"Ain't no doubt of that," Folen said, the sly grin still on his slit of a mouth. "Saxton, I'm sure surprised to see you here. You're

gonna be fixed whichever way this goes."

"That so?" Saxton queried softly. He saw where this thing was heading, and it showed the cunning hand of Boon Talcott behind it. Catgut Folen had contacted Kelsey, and he'd come here for the sole purpose of discrediting Saxton in the eyes of the Grant City men.

"You're smart, all right," Folen went on smoothly, "but I didn't think you was smart enough to pull this off."

"What are you getting at?" Kelsey demanded.

"I might as well say my piece," the gunman said in the same velvety tone. "I figger it was a fake scrap Talcott and Saxton had so Saxton could get in solid with you boys. Talcott is a mite worried about things. This way he knows what you're up to, and he can be ready to beat any scheme you work up."

"That's what I thought," Kelsey roared, "Saxton, you damned, sneaking double-crosser. We ought to gun-whip you out o' town. It didn't look right to me from the start. I reckon there—"

Saxton was out of his chair and across the room before Kelsey could finish. Kelsey half rose, and went back against the wall as Saxton's fist smashed his jaw. He bounced off, and came at Saxton, fists swinging. Chairs tipped over as men ducked out of the way. Saxton hit Kelsey again, a short, cruel right that sent the man crashing over a chair.

For a moment Kelsey lay on the floor, blood pouring from his nose

in a steady stream.

"Get up and fight, Kelsey," Saxton taunted. "You don't use your fist as well as your tongue."

Kelsey got up on his knees, and then his feet. He drew a sleeve across his bloody face, and came at Saxton again, swinging wildly. For Don Saxton this was like a drink of water to a man dying of thirst. Ten days of bitter anger went into the savage beating he gave Luke Kelsey. He took one of Kelsey's round-house blows to get in close. Then he hit Kelsey two times with trip-hammer punches that brought a sag to Kelsey's knees. He buried his fist in the man's hard-muscled middle, and Kelsey went down. As he dropped, Saxton hit him again on his already battered nose. Kelsey fell face down, and lay still.

"I'll kill you for that, Saxton," Folen snarled. "I ain't no good with my fists, and I reckon you're too yaller to face me with a gun, but so help me, I'll kill you before this is over."

"You'll try, all right," Saxton agreed mildly, wiping the sweat from his forehead on his coat sleeve. "You've wanted to try before, Catgut. Now I reckon Talcott will give you the word."

"You sure put it over on these fools," Folen said. He wheeled to face Summers. "You'd better get smart, hombre. You got a side-winder with you, and you ain't got sense enough to see it. You remember how thick he was with Talcott, don't you? They took the same gal to the dances. They—"

"That's all, Catgut." Saxton's

words snapped like a whiplash. "You can pull your iron, or you can travel."

For a moment the gunman's eyes locked with Saxton's, and the hate Talcott had for Saxton was mirrored in the face of the little killer, but here was a challenge Folen didn't expect, and he didn't take it.

"The sign ain't right, hombre," he said thickly. "There'll be a day when it is."

As he wheeled out of the room, Saxton's taunting voice followed him. "When you got my back in your sights, Catgut, I suppose."

The door slammed behind Folen.

"I didn't figure on landing into this," Saxton said, his eyes roving around the room at the men who faced him. "Doug, you said not to go off half-cocked. I'm afraid I lost my temper."

"I don't blame you," Reynolds said quickly. Then he added admiringly: "You're handy with your fists, son. Wouldn't surprise me none if you was as good with the hogleg you're packing."

"I'm sorry about Luke going loco," Summers said, and shot a glance at the still form of Kelsey. "I didn't call you down here for this."

"Forget it." Again Saxton's eyes swept the room. Cagle and Reynolds were for him, but Summers wasn't sure, and Saxton felt a definite distrust in Haslin and Logan. "There's just one thing I'm asking of you men. That's to trust me. I've never told you why I moved my paper to Grant City. The personal reasons I won't tell you

because they're my business. The other reasons are no secrets, and I've told them."

"They're good enough for me," Cagle said.

"Now there's one more thing. The only bad mistake you can make is to raid Gunlock. I hope Kelsey won't talk you into it. I don't know what will happen to me within the next six days. I'm going to Gunlock tomorrow to get some paper I have there, and a few other things. I may not get back, but the *News* has to come out again before election. If I'm not back, Ralph, I want you to see that it's printed and mailed. I'll get most of the stuff together tonight."

"That I'll do, Don," Cagle said, "but I think you're making a mistake going back to Gunlock now."

Saxton had moved to the door. He paused, his hand on the knob. He said: "I've got to go. I know Talcott. Before this is over, we'll be looking at each other through powder smoke. The sooner it comes, the less bloodshed there'll be. Kelsey isn't the only one who'll think of using guns. Talcott may send his men north and wipe Grant City out. You'd be wise to post some guards." He went out then, and as he moved the length of the saloon to the street, he saw that Folen had gone.

Saxton worked far into the night. He slept a few hours on a cot he'd set up in the back of his office. He was up with the sun, shaved, and had finished the editorial for the last issue of the *News* that would

come out before election. Then he buckled on his gun, slipped a long envelope into his pocket, locked his office, and went down the street to the Top Notch Café. While he was eating breakfast, Cutter Barss came in. Barss was the town marshal, a spare, bony man. He had grown gray and a little stooped with the years, but he was still a good lawman.

"Mornin', Saxton," Barss said, and took a stool beside Saxton. "I hear you're going to Gunlock today."

"That's right," Saxton said.

"You're making a mistake, son." Barss shook his head. "I've been in this game long enough to smell trouble a mile off. We've got it a dang sight closer. I also heard Catgut Folen was in town. If I'd seen that ornery polecat, I'd have stuck him into the calaboose."

"He came up here for a different reason than to make a deal to plug Talcott," Saxton said grimly. "If you'd locked him up, Whang Ransom and some more of Talcott's men would have paid us a visit. You'd better keep your eyes open, Cutter. I've got a hunch Talcott might take a crack at Grant City anyway."

"I've been expecting it. I've been doing most of my sleeping in the daytime, and my prowling at night. That's why I didn't know Folen was in town until after he'd gone."

Saxton pushed back his empty plate. "Cutter, I'd like to see you run for sheriff."

"I told Cagle I didn't want the job," Barss answered. "I ain't much good in a saddle no more, but

I wish now I was running. No decent lawman would try to make a deal with a jigger like Catgut Folen."

"Keep an eye on my office, Cutter," Saxton said, and went out.

Saxton hired a hack from the livery stable, and stopped at Ralph Cagle's house before he left town.

"Did you ever work on a newspaper?" Saxton asked as he tossed Cagle the key to his office.

"I used to run one in Canyon City," Cagle said. "I had a Grasshopper press like you've got."

"Then you won't have any trouble. If I'm not back by morning, you'd better get it rolling." Saxton took the envelope out of his pocket, and handed it to Cagle. "There's the dynamite that'll knock Talcott sky-high when the folks in Maupin County read it. I've had my suspicions, but I didn't really know until the day I left Gunlock."

"You're young to be committing suicide," Cagle said worriedly, "and that's what you're doing when you go back to Gunlock."

Saxton patted the gun on his hip. "This is an antidote for trouble, Ralph. But if it does go that way, I'm hoping you'll write me a nice obituary."

"I will, Don. I'll do more than that. I'll carve something on your tombstone like this:

Donald Saxton went to Gunlock.

There he got a dose of lead.

He aimed to show he was on the square.

He did, but now he's mighty dead."

Saxton grinned. "Sounds fine, Ralph. I'll put in a word to Saint Peter for you when I get there."

III

Saxton reached Gunlock shortly after noon. It was a smaller town than Grant City. At the end of the one short business block stood the new brick building that housed the county offices. Boon Talcott's money had built it, money he'd get back and more, too, if things went his way. That was Talcott's method of doing business. It was the same, Saxton thought grimly, with the gravel road that had been built from Gunlock to Talcott's Circle T. The contract had been given to the Gunlock Construction Co., or so it would appear on the records. In reality, it was Talcott who had built the road, and it had cost Maupin County twice what it should.

Whang Ransom, who carried the sheriff's star, took Talcott's orders even more unquestioningly than did the rest of Maupin County's officers. With a situation like that, anything could happen, and some of it already had. Boon Talcott was playing for big stakes.

Saxton saw that the business street was deserted. He tied the team, and went into Jim Haws' restaurant for dinner. Haws, like most of the rest of Gunlock, was a Talcott man. He stared in angry amazement when Saxton came in.

"Hell's bells, Saxton!" he blurted. "I thought you was gone for good."

"I came back for a load of paper I left here," Saxton said. "I left for good, all right. Give me a steak, Jim."

Haws hesitated, then slowly moved back to the kitchen. Presently he

returned. "It's your look out, feller," he said grimly, "but you've stuck your head into a pile of trouble. You left Gunlock high and dry without a paper and Boon don't like it. What's more, Catgut Folen rode into town late last night. He says you ducked a fight with him in Grant City yesterday. If he sees you while you're here, you won't do no ducking. He'll fill your hide full o' lead, and I hope he does."

"You may be disappointed, Jim," Saxton said evenly. "How about that steak?"

Later, as Haws shoved a plate across the counter, he growled: "Fill your belly, Saxton. It'll be the last time it's full before you get a dose of lead poisoning. I'd slip you some strychnine, only I don't want to keep Catgut from having the pleasure of doing the job."

"Thanks, Jim," Saxton said. "Your forethought is something to admire. Be sure you keep under cover when the lead starts flying."

When Saxton had finished eating, he asked: "Do you know if Boon's in town?"

"Yeah, he's in town all right," Haws grunted. "He had dinner here just before you came in, but if I know Boon Talcott, he won't want to look at your ugly mug."

"He'll see it anyhow," Saxton said.

Saxton moved slowly down the boardwalk to the courthouse. He passed scowling, red-faced Sheriff Ransom, who glared at him and muttered an oath. As he climbed the courthouse steps he met Jeff Travers.

The county clerk would have gone on without speaking if Saxton hadn't stepped in front of him.

"Howdy, Jeff," he said softly. "How's Lela?"

Life had been rough with Jeff Travers. He wasn't an old man, but he had the look of age about him. He'd lost two fortunes; one when his business had failed and the other when fire had gutted his newspaper office. Now he had a job that paid a decent salary, and there was money to be made on the side for those who followed Boon Talcott's bidding. Yet Jeff Travers was not a dishonest man. If he kept on, a time would come when he would have to make a complete break, or be involved as deeply as Talcott. Because Travers was an honest man at heart, he'd make the break—and probably die for it.

Travers' faded eyes locked with Saxton's. "Lela's fine," he said soberly. "You shouldn't be here, Don."

"I aim to see Boon while I'm in town, and I want to talk to you before I go back."

"There's nothing you have to say that will interest me," Travers said curtly.

"I think you'll be interested in my proposition. Look ahead a year. If you lose the election, you're out of a job, and Boon will wash his hands of you. If you win, you'll be heading for worse trouble. You'll do well to get into something else while you can. Think it over. I'll come up to your office as soon as I've seen Boon."

Boon Talcott looked up from his desk when Saxton walked through his outer office, and stopped in the doorway. He was a handsome man, was Boon Talcott; tall, thin-bodied and fine-featured. He had a ready smile that showed strong, white teeth, but he didn't smile now.

"Well, if it isn't Benedict Arnold," he said coldly, and motioned to a chair. "How are all the conspirators up in Grant City?"

"Hello, Napoleon," Saxton answered as he sat down. "The conspirators are fine. How are you and all the little thieves?"

Talcott leaned back in his chair. "You've got guts, Don. I'll say that for you. I reckon you know how you stand around here."

"I have an idea." Saxton smiled thinly. "A very good idea. And you know how you stand in Grant City."

"I'm not in Grant City," Talcott retorted, "and I don't intend to go unless I ride with Whang to clean it off the map."

For a time they sat eying each other, neither speaking, and Saxton wondered how he could ever have been taken in by Talcott's smooth exterior. Yet it was not hard to understand. Saxton had stopped in Gunlock overnight, got acquainted with Talcott, and had been argued into staying here. It was the county seat, Talcott had said, and there was no newspaper in the county. The railroad was coming, and Gunlock was bound to grow. Slowly Don Saxton had learned the extent of Talcott's political control, but he

hadn't found out how Talcott was using that control until the day he'd left Gunlock.

"I don't know why you're here," Talcott said finally, "but you made a mistake in coming." Opening a drawer, he took out a copy of the *News*, and pointed a long finger at Saxton's editorial. "You hit us where it hurt when you printed that. You should know me well enough to know I won't let a thing like that go. You made your first mistake when you pulled out. I had big plans for your future."

Saxton laughed. "There's no doubt about the plans, Boon. You say I made a mistake in coming. Could that mistake have something to do with Catgut Folen?"

"Everything. You won't get out of town without facing his guns. I know you're pretty fair with the six you carry, but you're not in Catgut's class. He makes his living with his guns. Don't forget that."

"And men like Folen die with their guns in their hands, Boon. I suppose if I beat him to the draw, Sheriff Ransom will arrest me for murder."

"That's right, and you'll hang, son. . . . Why did you come back, anyway?"

"I had several little chores, like getting some paper I couldn't take before. I wanted to see you, and I wanted to see Lela."

"Lela!" Talcott roared. "Can't you get it through your thick skull she's done with you? Stay away from her, Saxton. I mean that."

"According to you, I'm a condemned man. There's no reason why

I should obey your orders. Besides, all women change their minds. Lela might change hers."

Talcott drew a ring box from his pocket. He opened it, and let the light fall upon the diamond.

"There's one reason I'm glad you pulled out," Talcott said, his voice brittle-hard. "You got in ahead of me with Lela. You won't do it again. I'm giving this to her tonight."

"She won't take it," Saxton said. "You're not man enough to get a woman like Lela."

Talcott let that go. He asked: "Why did you pull stakes?"

"I found out just how much of a thieving politician you are," Saxton told him flatly. "You turned your personality on the governor, and you got your appointments. But you're not going to fool the people. I aim to see to that."

"You still haven't said what you know."

"Enough to beat you. I know about the road deal, and I know how you aim to sell this courthouse to the county. I have it all written up. If I don't get back to Grant City, the paper goes to press tomorrow anyhow. And, Boon, what I wrote is hot enough to curl the paper as it goes through the press."

"How'd you find out so much?"

"I was sitting outside when you and Ransom came in. You didn't see me because I'd turned the big chair around so the light wouldn't be in my eyes. I'd been up late the night before and I went to sleep. I woke up in time to hear everything you said. I'd been suspecting some things anyhow. After I went back

to my office, you came in and started giving me orders about how I had to get in some work for you and your crooked bunch. That was enough, Boon. You should have known me better than to think I'd back up a crook."

"I see." Talcott thoughtfully placed the ends of his long fingers together. "You wanted to throw me out when I went into your office that day, but you didn't tell me why." He jerked a drawer open, picked up a cigar, and put it in his mouth. For a moment he chewed savagely on it. Suddenly he exploded. "All right. You'll find you're trying to cut too big a swath for a gent your size. Get out, Saxton."

Saxton was on his feet, but he didn't leave. Instead, he came up to the desk, and leaned across it. "In a minute, Boon. I came in here to try to talk a little sense into you. If this goes on, there'll be some powder burned. It won't be just me and you that'll get hurt. Good men will be killed. A lot of them. Men like Tod Summers and Ralph Cagle and Doug Reynolds. Don't do it, Boon."

"Get out," Talcott snarled.

"When my paper goes into the mail, Boon," Saxton went on, "it'll kill every chance you've got."

"It won't get into the mail. That's a promise, Saxton."

Saxton stepped back to the door. "All right, Boon. There's one other way. Pull your iron and let's settle this between us."

Talcott got to his feet. His right hand moved toward his gun butt, and then slowly dropped away. "You'd

want it that way, wouldn't you, Saxton? No, I'll let Catgut do the job."

"He'll like it, and you won't risk your hide. I thought so, Boon. You're as yellow as you are crooked." Saxton wheeled out of the room, and went up the stairs to Jeff Travers' office.

IV

Jeff Travers lifted a worried face from his desk when he saw Saxton. "Boon won't like you coming here, Don," he said. "You'd better go. It'll make trouble for me."

Carefully Saxton closed the door. "You've gone a long ways down, Jeff," he said softly.

Anger flamed in Jeff Travers' eyes. "What do you mean by that?"

"There was a day when you were all man. You aren't now. You've scraped around and kowtowed so long to Boon Talcott that you've got calluses on your knees. You're on the square, Jeff, but you're shutting your eyes to Talcott's crooked business and you're ashamed of yourself for doing it. I've got a hunch that Lela is, too."

Travers had risen to his feet. He'd jerked a desk drawer open, and his fingers had clutched the butt of a gun. Then his face went an ashen gray when Saxton mentioned Lela, and he let the gun go. The violence of his anger died in him. He slammed the drawer shut, and lurched to the window.

"You've thought of that, haven't you, Jeff?" Saxton went on grimly. "You were in a position to know what I had suspected. You've hated

yourself, but you haven't had the guts to break with Talcott. Get out of it, Jeff, while you can. We're going to smash Talcott. You'll get smashed, too, if you're still with him."

Still Travers didn't look around, and Saxton kept on. "There's going to be one good town in Maupin County. Grant City will be it because it'll be the county seat. You were a newspaperman once, Jeff. The *News* is big enough for both of us. I'm offering you a partnership. How about it?"

"No," Travers said hoarsely, and didn't turn his head.

Saxton moved back to the door. "Think it over, Jeff. I'm going to see Lela, and then I'll get the load of paper I came down for. There's room in the hack for you and Lela if you change your mind."

"Stay away from Lela." Travers whirled to face Saxton. "She broke her engagement to you."

"Maybe she's changed her mind. You might consider what kind of a home Talcott would give her."

"Talcott," Travers breathed. "He wouldn't—"

"He's bought the ring," Saxton said, "and Talcott doesn't spend that kind of money unless he figures he's going to win. If I were in your shoes, Jeff, I'd do a little worrying."

Saxton went out, leaving Travers still standing at the window, and as he left the courthouse, and moved again along the street, he wondered where Talcott's men were. Sheriff Whang Ransom was the only one he'd seen since he'd come to town. Usually

a number of them would be lounging in front of the Green Front and Gold Star Saloons, or along the hotel veranda. Even Catgut Folen wasn't in sight.

Saxton turned at the end of the business block. Because there was no sidewalk, he followed the rutted street to the Travers house. It was a small, white cottage with a picket fence around the yard, and a row of locust trees lining the street. Saxton walked up the path to the porch, knocked on the door, and when there was no answer, sat down to wait.

Reason told Don Saxton he'd be smart to go back to Main Street, get his hack, load it with paper, and start back for Grant City. If he waited, the rest of Talcott's gunhands would ride back into town, and he'd never get out alive. But Don Saxton didn't always follow the dictates of reason. If he had, he'd never have come back to Gunlock. So he waited on the porch, and smoked. He thought bitterly of the time he'd told Lela he was going to Grant City. She'd called him a traitor and given back his ring. She'd refused to listen when he'd tried to tell her why he was leaving. Now his jaw set stubbornly. This time she was going to listen.

It was late afternoon when he saw her coming up the street, a trim figure in her green jacket, whipcord riding breeches, and boots. He felt the old stirring in him that the sight of her always brought. There was everything in Lela Travers a man would want in a woman. She didn't

see him until she'd turned in at the gate, and had almost reached the porch. She paused momentarily, her blue eyes widening.

"Don," she said. "I didn't think you'd ever come back."

Saxton rose. "I'm not here to stay, Lela," he said softly. "I came on business, and I had to see you before I went back. I'm thinking maybe you'll go back with me."

Her lips made a straight line as she stepped up on the porch. "You should know me better than that, Don."

Saxton drew the ring from his vest pocket she'd given back to him. "I'm hoping that you'll wear this again," he told her. "My leaving Gunlock should have nothing to do with our feelings for each other."

Lela shook her head, but there was no bitterness in her voice when she said: "Perhaps if I were a man, I'd do what you did, Don. I said some things the other day I didn't mean, but we can't go back. When this is settled, and if we're still alive, I may see things differently."

Saxton slipped the ring back into his pocket, knowing the shadow of Jeff Travers was between them. "I've asked Jeff to go to Grant City with me. He can't go on as he has been. When he thinks it over, I believe he'll come. If he waits, it may be too late."

Lela's blue eyes were troubled. "Things have gone wrong with dad from the time I was big enough to understand. The least I can do is to stand by him now. I hate to think what will happen to him if he loses the election."

"And I'm helping him lose the election," Saxton said harshly. "That's really what's between us, isn't it?"

"Yes. That's it. Go on back now, Don. There's nothing for you here but trouble if you stay."

"I told you to stay away from Lela." Boon Talcott was striding up the path, long face dark with anger. A hand was on his gun butt, and the urge to kill was clear to read in his eyes.

"I'll see you again, Lela," Saxton said, and lifted his hat. He swung to face Talcott. "I'm not following your orders here nor anywhere, Boon." He would have gone on by if Talcott hadn't put out a hand.

"Wait a minute, Saxton," Talcott snapped. "I'm the only man who calls on the girl I'm going to marry." He stepped up to Lela, took the ring box from his pocket, and opened it. "Do you like it?"

"Yes," Lela breathed, keeping her eyes from Saxton.

Talcott slipped it on her finger. "It fits. You've got my brand on you now, Lela," he said triumphantly.

"That kind of brand comes off easy," Saxton said dryly.

"Yours did, but mine won't. So long, Saxton. You've got a caller coming."

Saxton looked down the street. Catgut Folen had turned from Main Street, and was walking toward the Travers house.

"Go inside, Lela," Saxton said curtly, and eased his gun in leather.

"If your man doesn't get your killing done for you, Boon, I'm coming after you."

"If you down Folen, you'll go to jail and hang," Talcott said complacently. "How do you think you'll like the feel of a rope?"

Saxton didn't answer. He was in the street now, pacing toward Folen, dust trailing behind him and drifting slowly away in the still air.

"I told you I'd kill you, Saxton," Folen called, "when the sign was right. It's right now. You bought a ticket to boothill when you came to Gunlock."

Saxton said nothing. He paced on, coolly calculating the distance between him and Folen. He'd seen the gunman draw, and he knew he wasn't as fast as Folen. He knew, too, that Folen depended on his speed more than accuracy, that he could empty his gun in less than three seconds. At close range that was a devastating amount of lead.

Saxton didn't wait for Folen to get close. His hand went down, closed over the hard butt of the gun, and came up. Quick surprise showed on Folen's skinny face as his hand blurred down, and gun flame bit sharply into the tree-shadowed street. One bullet breathed past Saxton's face, and a second. Then Saxton's Colt was bucking in his hand. He felt the pound of it up his arm, saw the smoke and heard the gun thunder, saw the bewildered amazement on Folen's face as he stiffened with Saxton's first shot. Lead dug up the dust at Saxton's feet while Folen convulsively jerked trig-

ger. Again Saxton fired. Folen came on, lurching now, gun sagging. Then he jackknifed at the knees and sprawled to the ground.

Saxton held his fire as Folen pulled himself up on arms and knees, tried to lift his gun and found it too heavy. He went back down again, and this time he lay still. Saxton reloaded his gun, and wheeled to face Travers' house. Boon Talcott was gone.

"You're under arrest, Saxton," a man bawled behind Saxton.

Saxton wheeled back, saw Sheriff Ransom, Jim Haws and the man who owned the hotel round the corner from Main Street. Saxton fired, saw Haws stagger and fall, and then Ransom's gun bloomed its rosette of fire. Something hit Saxton a terrific blow in the chest. He staggered and went down.

Just what happened then Saxton didn't know. He heard more guns and hoarse yells, the sound of horses. More firing along Main Street, and then silence.

V

Saxton didn't entirely lose consciousness. He was vaguely aware of being lifted and carried into Haws' restaurant, of Ralph Cagle saying: "His watch saved his life."

"Don't tell him what happened to his press," Cutter Barss said.

Saxton tried to think what could happen to his press. It had been all right when he'd left Grant City. He heard guns again, and Doug Rey-

(Continued on page 126)



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(Continued from page 124)

nolds say: "Kelsey and the rest'll be along purty soon. We'll smoke them polecats out when they come."

For a time Saxton lay on the floor beside the counter. Slowly his mind cleared. His chest felt as if it had been clubbed. When he sat up, a wave of nausea swept over him. He pulled himself to his feet, and grabbed the counter.

"You'd better lie down, Don," Cagle said, and came back from the window, a smoking gun in his hand.

"I'm all right," Saxton said thickly. "What's going on?"

"The Maupin County Ruckus, I guess historians will call it," Cagle said, and grinned mirthlessly. "Cutter and Doug and me decided we'd better come down and give you a hand. We figured it was a little more than a one-man job."

Saxton ran a hand across his face, and tried to remember. 'Folen came after me, and I got him. I looked for Talcott, and he was gone. Then Ransom yelled that I was under arrest."

"That's when we showed up," Cagle said. "We chased 'em back with some lead. They didn't like the sound of it."

"What's going on now?"

"Ransom and most of Gunlock is over there in the hotel, and strung along the street," Cagle answered. "They've got us outnumbered, but it'll cost 'em plenty to smoke us out."

Saxton discovered that his left arm was stiff. "What kind of a wallop did I get?" he asked.

"Ransom got you in the chest, but the slug hit your watch and kind of slid off. Now you'd better take it easy."

"I'm all right," Saxton said. He drew his gun, and stepped to the window. Reynolds had a bandanna around his head. Barss was bleeding from a wicked slash along his cheek.

"Get down," roared Barss. "You're making a target as big as a house."

Saxton had his look. Several guns were firing from the hotel across the street. More from the general store.

"Has anybody seen Talcott?" Saxton queried.

"No," Barss answered, "but I reckon he's over there."

"I guess I'll go back," said Saxton. "I'm a little woozy."

"It's not to be wondered at," Cagle said. "We'll take care of things."

Saxton went back to the end of the counter, and stretched out on the floor. When he was sure the others were paying no attention to him, he crawled through the kitchen, got to his feet, and went on into the alley. One thought rode his mind. Boon Talcott had brought this to Maupin County. Boon Talcott had to die. Talcott would be somewhere across the street, and it was there Don Saxton had to go.

Saxton moved through the alley, skirting the back of the courthouse. It was dusk now, dusk enough that it would be hard to recognize him from farther along the street where

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What you do with your money can wreck you (and your Uncle Sam)



Buy, buy, buy! Foolish people are doing it, *overdoing* it. But sensible folks know that with every needless purchase—or every time you patronize a black market or buy above ceiling—you do your bit to force prices up all along the line. That's the way inflation gets a boost.



It can happen here—again! Today, with fewer goods in the stores while incomes are high, the danger of inflation is greater than ever. Inflation is always followed by depression. What can you do to head off another depression? Buy nothing you do not really—*really*—have to have . . . today.



Save, save, save! That's the way to make America good for the boys to come home to. Pay up debts, put money in life insurance, savings bank, War Bonds. Every cent you save now helps to keep prices down—and when the war is won you'll have use for that nest egg you've laid away.



A home of your own, a better farm, a real vacation, something to retire on—these are things worth saving for. Store up your money now while prices are high. There's a time to splurge and a time to save: today, while money's coming in, is a good time—the *right* and patriotic time—to **SAVE!**

4 THINGS TO DO

To keep prices down and help avoid another depression

1. Buy only what you really need.
2. When you buy, pay no more than ceiling prices. Pay your ration points in full.
3. Keep your *own* prices down. Don't take advantage of war conditions to ask more for your labor, your services, or the goods you sell.
4. **Save.** Buy and hold all the War Bonds you can—to help pay for the war, protect your *own* future! Keep up your insurance.



(Continued from page 126)

Talcott's men had forted up in the hotel and the store. From the corner of the courthouse Saxton could see the ribbons of fire as Talcott guns roared. Presently Ransom and the rest would rush the restaurant. That would be the end of the three who were there. Talcott had to die before that happened.

Saxton crossed the street from the courthouse to the Gold Star Saloon on the corner. He followed the wall to the alley that cut behind it, and went in the back. It was empty. The harness shop was next, and it was empty. Then there was the Green Front Saloon, the general store, and the hotel. Boon Talcott would be in one of the three.

A bracket wall lamp in the rear of the Green Front had been lighted, but the big overhead lamp was dark. This Saxton saw as he opened the door from the back room. He saw, too, that there were two men in the saloon beside the bar. One was Whang Ransom, the other Boon Talcott. Ransom had picked up a whiskey bottle, and was filling two glasses.

"No use waiting till the rest of 'em come," Ransom was urging. "They'll be back when they get Grant City taken care of. We're supposed to be the law of this county. We'll hang every blasted son, and we'll hang Saxton first if he ain't dead."

"There's no hurry," Talcott said. "Use your head, man. When it's dark we'll circle them. We'll come in through the back door while

they're getting some lead from the front."

"We can get around to the back now," Ransom said doggedly. "Damn it, Boon, the longer we wait, the more chance we're givin' 'em to hightail."

A wicked grin was on Don Saxton's face as he palmed his gun and slid through the door. "There's a back door here, too," he said evenly, "and I'm still doing my share of the fighting."

Ransom's filled glass was half-way to his lips when he heard Saxton's voice. He threw the glass to the side, whirled, slapping down for his gun, and died as Saxton sent a bullet into his chest. Ransom fell against the bar and slid off.

Talcott hadn't moved. Now he did, slowly, and faced Saxton. "You're hard to kill, Don," he said. There was nothing handsome about Boon Talcott now. His long face was dirt-smeared and sweaty and evil with hate.

"It would have saved some lives if we'd settled this in your office," Saxton told him.

Talcott licked dry lips, and still made no motion toward his gun. He knew, and Saxton knew, that death lay ahead for one or both.

Saxton slid his gun into its holster. "An even draw," Boon," he said. "It's more than you'd give me."

"It might have been different between us," Talcott said.

"Not between us," Saxton answered.

"There's still a chance—" Talcott began, and under cover of his words

and with the right side of his body away from Saxton, he made his try.

Two shots came almost together, but not quite. Saxton's gun spoke first by the small interval of time that marked the difference between life and death. Talcott clawed at his chest, reeled forward a step and then another, his death-glazed eyes staring into space as a king might watch a dissolving empire. Then he grabbed at a table, missed it, and spilled face down into the sawdust.

Wearily Saxton leaned against the wall, and reloaded his gun. It was as if he'd come to the end of a long and twisted trail. More guns were roaring from the end of the block. Saxton heard them, and vaguely wondered what they meant. He didn't care much. Nothing mattered now. Instantly he knew better. He started to think of the things that did matter. It was then that the long fingers of unconsciousness reached for him and pulled him down into a deep and aching sleep.

Days and nights flowed into one for Don Saxton. There was lamp-light and darkness and sunshine, and through it all flitted the bearded old doc from Grant City and the slim figure of Lela Travers, changing the bandage on his chest or fixing the covers or speaking softly to him.

Then the fever broke, and memories flooded Saxton's brain. It wasn't Lela he saw beside his bed that morning, but Ralph Cagle and

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DEATH VALLEY WILDLIFE

CONTRARY to popular belief that nothing lives in desolate Death Valley, that forbidding, barren area supports a numerically abundant animal life. Some twenty-six species of mammals, most of them rodents, live in the Valley basin below sea level. More live only at the higher elevations.

Few of these desert denizens are ever glimpsed by the average visitor. Most of the animals carefully avoid the desert's daytime heat.

Perhaps the most commonly seen animal inhabitant of the Valley is the antelope ground squirrel. Kangaroo rats, wood rats and several other types also live in the sparse mesquite thickets that dot the scantily vegetated rock slopes.

An occasional coyote or a kit fox may be found. High up the mountain ridges, desert bighorns thrive under rigorous government protection. Wild burros are numerous.

About fourteen species of birds make the Valley their permanent home, most prominently the big black desert raven. More than 150 other bird species visit the Valley in winter, or pause passing through on their annual migrations.

Even fish are part of Death Valley's wildlife picture. Two kinds of small "desert sardines" live in the saline waters of Salt Creek and Saratoga Springs. Insects abound, but snakes are rare.

Only the actual salt flats, supporting no vegetation at all, are actually barren of animal life.

J.A.T.

(Continued from page 129)

Jeff Travers. Somehow the presence of Travers surprised him, for he had thought, in the vague, muddled way he had been thinking, that Travers must have gone wherever the rest of Talcott's bunch had gone.

"You lie still," Cagle commanded, "and do some listening. I know how you're feeling, and how you've been talking. You've got everything bawled up in your head, so get it straight. The *News* came out on time with the story of our ruckus, and the election is over. We won, of which there wasn't any doubt, and Grant City is the county seat. There was one change. Luke Kelsey decided, with a little urging, that he didn't want to be sheriff. Cutter Barss is packing the star."

"Talcott's—" began Saxton.

"Let me tell it," Cagle growled. "They wasn't around Gunlock when you hit town because they'd ridden up to Grant City to wipe us off the map. There was a big bunch in town, mostly Haslin's and Logan's hands, and the Gunlock jiggers got into more'n they figured on. They burned your office, but that was all they did. We ran them off, and most of our boys chased them. Barss, Reynolds and me came to Gunlock to give you a hand in case you'd hit into trouble. You sure had. After we discovered you'd sneaked out of the restaurant, Barss and me trailed you. We found you laid out on the floor with Talcott and Ransom dead in front of you. How you ever made it with the blood you'd lost is a

mystery to me, and you danged near killed yourself doing it."

"My press—" Saxton began.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you. We lost the press, but we got some stuff out. Travers here is the gent that turned the trick. He had an old Washington press he'd kept from the days when he was an editor, and he got the *News* out for you. Don't worry about your press. We're buying another one for you. Got it ordered now. We're going to see that Maupin County has a newspaper."

Saxton's eyes searched Travers'. "Jeff, you—"

"I'm coming in with you, Don. I want to. I—"

"Dad. Mr. Cagle. Is he all right?"

"Right as rain," Cagle said, and winked at Travers. "Let's mosey, Travers."

Lela came up to the bed. The first thing Saxton saw was his ring on her finger.

"I found it in your clothes," Lela said, and knelt beside the bed. "I thought you'd want me to wear it."

"Naturally, honey," Saxton murmured.

"I'm sorry about what happened between us, Don. I thought I had to play along with Talcott until it cleared up. Dad wasn't in the fight. Nobody seems to hold it against him because he held an office Talcott secured for him."

"That's behind us," Saxton said, and reached for Lela's hand. "Let's look ahead. Maybe we've got a job of growing up to do, all of us, along with Maupin County."

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