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STREET
AND
SMITH'S

STORY

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MAY '46

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of a Cold
or Sore Throat

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YOU may help lessen a cold's severity or head it off entirely if you take this delightful precaution early and often, because . . .

Listerine Antiseptic kills millions of germs called the "secondary invaders" on mouth and throat surfaces before they can stage a mass invasion of throat tissues to produce a cold's miserable symptoms.

Attack the Germs

Ordinarily the secondary invaders cause no trouble. But they can often get the upper hand when body resistance is lowered by fatigue, wet or cold feet, drafts, and sudden temperature changes.

So we repeat: At the first symptom of trouble, gargle with Listerine Antiseptic. Attack the germs before they attack you.

Actual tests have shown germ reductions on mouth and throat surfaces ranging up to 96.7% fifteen minutes after a Listerine Antiseptic gargle, and up to 80% an hour after.

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Fewer Colds for Listerine Antiseptic Users in Tests

Tests made over a period of twelve years showed

this remarkable record:

That those who gargled Listerine Antiseptic twice daily had fewer colds and fewer sore throats than those who did not gargle. Moreover, when Listerine Antiseptic users did have colds, they were usually milder and of shorter duration.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL COMPANY, St. Louis, Mo.

The threatening "Secondary Invaders" which Listerine Antiseptic attacks



TOP ROW, left to right: Pneumococcus Type III, Pneumococcus Type IV, Streptococcus Viridans, Friedlander's Bacillus. BOTTOM ROW, left to right: Streptococcus Hemolyticus, Bacillus Influenzae, Micrococcus Fatarrhialis, Staphylococcus Aureus



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MEXICO CITY!**

**KILLERS IN
THE SHADOWS!**

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THE RHUMBA!**

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HALE · BUCHANAN · LONG

and EDDIE LeBARON and HIS CONTINENTAL ORCHESTRA

Screenplay by Roy Chanslor

Based upon the Collier's Magazine serial by Robert Carson

Produced by PHIL L. RYAN • Directed by EDWARD H. GRIFFITH



STREET & SMITH'S
WESTERN STORY

TITLE REGISTERED U. S. PATENT OFFICE

MAY, 1946

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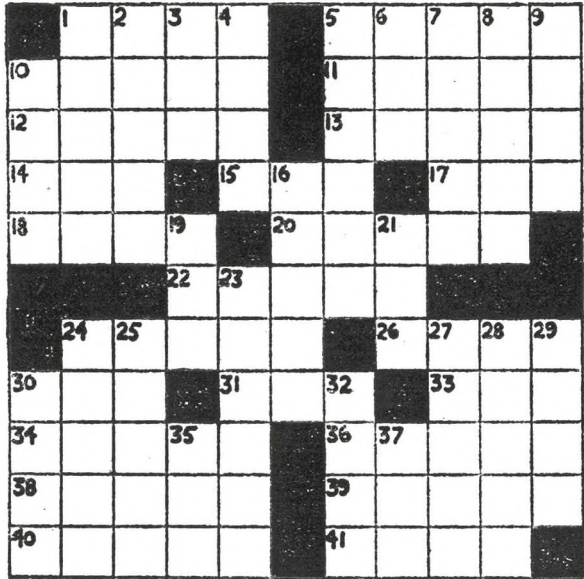
Editor
JOHN BURE

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CROSSWORD PUZZLE



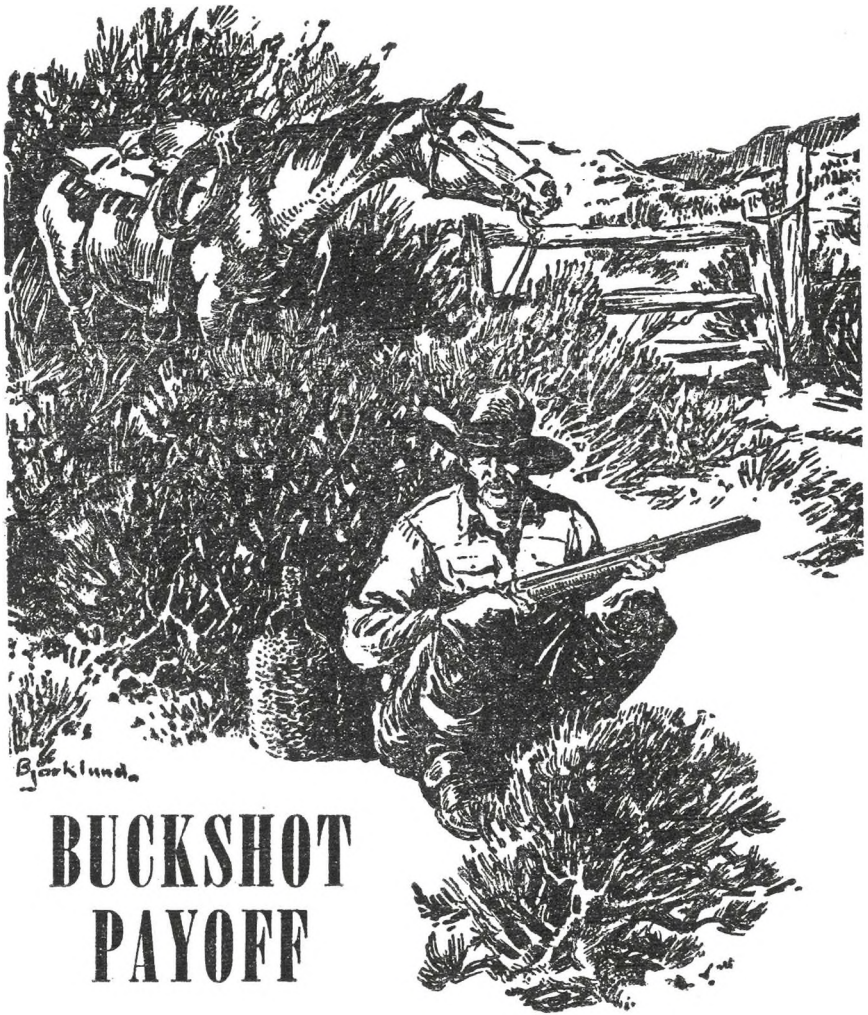
ACROSS

1. Riding whip
5. Saddle strap
10. To track
11. River in France
12. American bird
13. On the inside
14. Dined
15. Assist
17. Lugubrious
18. Western plateau
20. Harassed
22. Manhunt party
24. Isolated hill with steep sides
26. Heated
30. Matter; point
31. Scribe's fluid
33. For shame!
34. Poplar tree. in the Southwest
36. Branding tools
38. Hindu ascetics
39. Cozy corners
40. Scandinavian
41. Obtains
9. Mass cattle together
10. Horses driven together
16. Norwegian playwright
19. Suitable
21. Stitch
23. Indolent
24. Lower than
25. Practice
27. On shank's mare
28. Skating dromes
29. Mixup
30. Beans
32. The snake that kills the rattler
35. Among
37. Caviar is this, too

DOWN

1. Shipping box
2. Is furious
3. Fuel wealth
4. Entreaty
5. Slides smoothly
6. Electrified particle
7. Wash lightly
8. Free meal, show or drink

(The solution to this puzzle may be found on page 124)



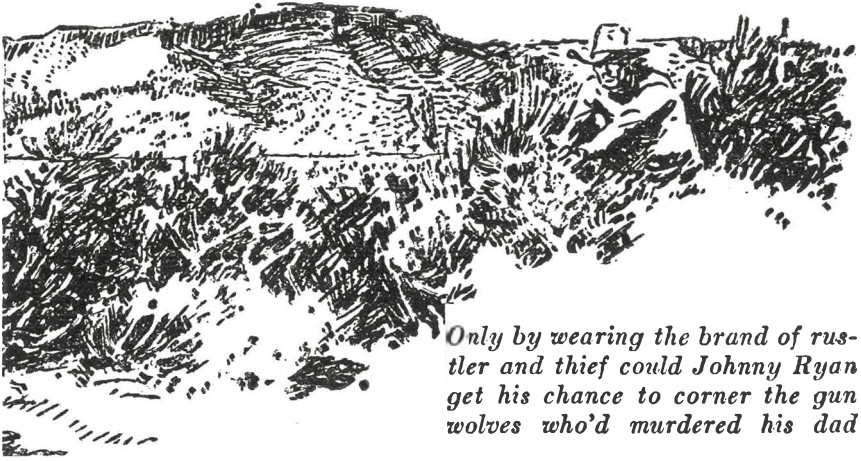
BUCKSHOT PAYOFF

by WALT COBURN

I

JOHNNY RYAN had just finished his barn chores and was starting for his cabin to cook a late supper when he heard a horse nicker down near

the lower gate. He got his saddle carbine and slipped on down the creek through the brush on foot. There was a big blue roan horse standing saddled in behind the buck-brush flanking both sides of the old



Only by wearing the brand of rustler and thief could Johnny Ryan get his chance to corner the gun wolves who'd murdered his dad

road that came through the lower gate. The roan did not snort or spook but acted as though he recognized Johnny. Grinning faintly, Johnny maneuvered around until he could get a good look at the man squatted in behind the buckbrush near the gate.

It was Locoed Dave Jones and he was squatted on his hunkers there in the brush with a jug of forty-rod whiskey and a sawed-off shotgun across his lap.

Johnny Ryan knew the gun was loaded with buckshot. He had made the mistake once of riding up within range of that scatter gun and his face was scarred with deep-pitted pockmarks as a result of his carelessness. So now he stayed back beyond shotgun range and made his voice sound casual.

"Anybody showed up, Uncle Dave?"

The man jumped a little and Johnny crouched lower, ducking his head.

"Who you?" Locoed Dave Jones'

voice creaked like a rusty hinge.

"Johnny. Johnny Ryan."

"Matt Ryan's Johnny?"

"Yeah. You might as well fork old Blue and go on to the ranch, Uncle Dave. Put Blue in the barn and start supper. I'll stand guard. You holler for me when supper's ready."

Locoed Dave Jones stood up slowly as if his knee joints might be stiffened from squatting there so long. Stoop-shouldered, bowlegged, he wore rusty boots and his Levi overalls and old blue flannel shirt were faded and patched. A sweat-marked old Stetson hat slanted down on his grizzled head. There was a faded look to his puckered blue eyes. His skin was leathery and his drooping gray mustache was stained from tobacco smoke.

Johnny reminded him to "break" his gun. And Locoed Dave Jones "broke" the shotgun, ejecting the two shells loaded with buckshot into a horny calloused hand. Then he

pulled the corncob from the wicker-covered half gallon demijohn and offered it to Johnny Ryan. Johnny took a drink. He needed a shot of the forty-rod. It was a ticklish, nerve-twisting job, pulling Locoed Dave's shotgun fangs, being almighty careful all the while not to say or do anything that might excite him into cutting loose with his sawed-off scatter gun.

"They're after me again, Johnny."

"I won't let 'em git at you, Uncle Dave. . . . There's wood and water at the cabin; a quarter of beef hung in the spring house; hay in the manger. Blue looks fat and slick as a seal. You grainin' 'im?"

"He's bin standin' eatin' his fool head off. . . . Anything happens to me, Johnny, I want you to have ol' Blue."

"Nothin's goin' to happen to you, Uncle Dave. You'll live to be a hundred."

"No use in a man a-foolin' hisself, Johnny. They'll git me one of these times. Only thing I hope fer is to send West Richmond ahead o' me to blaze the trail to Hell. West Richmond and them two Jarvis boys. I kind o' overheard 'em talkin' last night about shovin' my dead carcass in a soap hole bog in the badlands."

"They got to get past me first, Uncle Dave; I'll promise you that. You better let me take the scatter gun. Light's gettin' kind o' dim to line sights on a saddle gun. I'd hate to miss big West Richmond or Tol or Med Jarvis."

Locoed Dave Jones handed over the sawed-off shotgun. Johnny shook

his head at another drink and Locoed Dave took a pull at his jug and limped off to where he had left his saddled horse. Johnny Ryan watched him tighten the saddle cinch. Old Blue stood while Dave mounted and then the big blue roan gelding headed for the barn with Locoed Dave humped over the saddlehorn with his jug.

Big tough Deputy Sheriff West Richmond and the two Jarvis boys, Tolbert and Medford Jarvis, had done that to Dave Jones. One night about ten years ago, they had stopped Dave Jones about a mile below Landusky and pulled him off his horse. They had beaten him up, tromped him and left him for dead.

But Dave Jones had been too tough to die. He had crawled back into his saddle, and the big blue roan Blue, a three-year-old colt then, had packed him fifteen miles to his ranch on upper Rock Creek. There his motherless daughter Dodie had somehow managed to drag him out of his saddle and into the cabin and nurse him back to active life. But the whipping over the head with a gun barrel that West Richmond had given him did permanent damage to the cowman's brain. Dave Jones would never regain his right mind. He would live out his days in a shadowed world.

Most of the time he was harmless enough. Dodie taught school at Landusky and lived in a neat little log cabin at the edge of town. There she kept house for her father and Dave Jones, mild-mannered and

soft-spoken, spent most of his time at the big livery and feed barn where he pattered around with horses or just squatted on his hunkers, smoking and whittling.

Dodie Jones had her father put on the Injun list at all the saloons. Saloonkeepers were told never to give Dave Jones a drink of whiskey. But somebody was always leaving part of a bottle around the barn and Dave would pour what was in the bottle into the wicker-covered demijohn he kept cached in the hayloft with his sawed-off shotgun. And it was always about the time when there was a full moon that he would get his jug and shotgun, saddle Blue and pull out for his little old ranch on Rock Creek. To set a bushwhacker trap for West Richmond and the two Jarvis brothers, he said.

Dave Jones did not own the ranch any more. Johnny Ryan owned it.

The Jarvis boys and West Richmond had sent Johnny Ryan to the Montana prison at Deer Lodge for cattle rustling. It had happened a short time before they ganged up on Dave Jones. Johnny had served a couple of years of his sentence when there was a prison break. Johnny had saved the warden's life at the risk of his own and the warden got Johnny Ryan a full pardon and his citizenship restored.

II

West Richmond and the two Jarvis brothers had warned Johnny Ryan never to come back to the Little Rockies. Johnny came back.

He walked into a saloon at Lanasuky one night and found Dave Jones sitting in a four-handed poker game with West Richmond and Tol and Med Jarvis. Somebody down the street had told Johnny Locoed Dave Jones was being poked out of his ranch on Rock Creek. It was the first time Johnny had ever heard the cowman called Locoed Dave.

Johnny had walked over to the poker game. Dragging up a chair, he told them he was sitting in. Dave Jones gave him a friendly grin. They had Locoed Dave partly drunk.

Deputy Sheriff West Richmond was banking the game. He and the two Jarvis brothers eyed Johnny coldly. He ignored their hard-eyed scowls and grinned at Dave Jones.

"Remember me, Uncle Dave?"

"You're Matt Ryan's boy Johnny. Me'n Matt Ryan crossed the plains together."

"That's right, Uncle Dave."

"Matt was ramroddin' the Bear Paw Pool when somebody bushwhacked him. You was wranglin' horses. I was reppin' fer my own iron with the Pool wagon at the time. . . . I ain't seen you around lately, Johnny."

"I bin makin' horsehair bridles in the Deer Lodge pen. I'll cut you high card for your Rock Crick Ranch, Uncle Dave."

"Cut your card, Johnny."

Johnny Ryan had reached out and taken the deck of cards. They were all watching when he shuffled the cards. Shuffled them until he located the ace of spades. Dave

Jones' horse and cattle brand was the Ace of Spades.

Johnny had turned it face up on the green cloth-covered poker table. Big West Richmond and the two Jarvis brothers eyed him narrowly and there must have been twenty or thirty men in the crowd, mostly cowmen or cowpunchers, looking on.

"Now you cut your card, Uncle Dave." Johnny's voice had almost purred, it was that soft-spoken.

Dave Jones—Locoed Dave they had begun calling him—had smiled and cut the trey of hearts.

"Looks like you beat me, Johnny." He had sounded pleased and his faded blue eyes were mild and friendly.

"Looks thataway."

Nobody had noticed Dodie Jones come into the saloon. They did not know she was there until they heard the sound of her voice, brittle as breaking glass.

"That," she said, "is the most cowardly, lowdown, despicable thing I ever hope to witness."

They saw her then. A slim girl of twenty, with curly black hair, almost heavy black brows and thick black lashes fringing gray-blue eyes. Tiny freckles sprinkled her short nose and the tanned cheeks from which the healthy color had drained.

Johnny Ryan had known Dodie Jones since she was a little kid in pigtails. In later years he had seen her at long intervals of six months or a year, met her at the cow country dances. He had seen her with her father at his trial when the sworn testimony of the two Jarvis brothers and West Richmond had

sent him to the pen for stealing cattle from the Bear Paw Pool outfit that Johnny had been ramrodding for two years.

Now Johnny had looked up and into Dodie's eyes and read accusation and condemnation in their gray-blue depths.

Then Dodie Jones, schoolmarm, had helped her father push back his chair and she had led him out of the saloon, the crowd parting to make a lane to the door.

Big West Richmond had broken the uneasy silence with a short ugly laugh.

"So far as I'm concerned, jailbird, you're welcome to that Ace of Spades you just stole." His pale yellow eyes had cut Tol and Med Jarvis a hard meaning look like a command. And they had grinned and nodded.

That was how Johnny Ryan, with the prison pallor still on his hide, got the Ace of Spades Ranch on upper Rock Creek. And it was that night, between midnight and the next dawn, that he rode there alone to claim it.

In the moonlight he took the old road that entered the ranch by way of the lower gate. He heard a horse nicker and a double-barreled shotgun blasted from the buckbrush. It was too far for the double blast to do much damage. The buckshot spread and scattered. A few BB shot hit Johnny's horse. Four or five buckshot struck Johnny's face, chest and hat. His horse had whirled and pitched and thrown him. He had landed on his head

and shoulder and the fall had knocked him out. When he came alive he was on Dave Jones' bunk in the log cabin and Dave was trying to pour whiskey down his throat.

"I mistaken you," said Locoed Dave, "for somebody else. You're Matt Ryan's boy Johnny. Swaller some likker, Johnny. Then wash up. You're kind o' messed up. I taken care of your horse."

Johnny had the buckshot picked out of his hide when Dodie Jones got there the next morning. She had looked scared. Then her stark fear had been replaced by hot anger when she found her father and Johnny Ryan squatted on their boot heels at the pole corral.

Dave had forgotten that he had lost the Ace of Spades Ranch.

"You remember Johnny Ryan, Dodie," he told his daughter. "I've hired him to kind o' ramrod the lil' ol' Ace of Spades. . . . Me'n Matt Ryan come to the country together and Matt could've owned his own iron if he hadn't bin so free-handed and kind o' reckless with his money. Johnny's all right. He'll do to take along."

Dodie had forced a smile and nodded. But her eyes had glinted with contempt when she looked at Johnny. And when her father was beyond earshot she looked at Johnny's bandaged face.

"They call him Locoed Dave. He gets away sometimes and he always comes here with a jug and a shotgun. Any jury would clear him if he had done a better job on you. But if ever you shoot Dave Jones

and a jury sets you free, I'll kill you. Do you understand?"

"You couldn't make it plainer," Johnny had told her, "if you drewed it out on the ground with a sharp stick."

As long as Dodie felt that way about it, Johnny Ryan was too prideful to defend himself. Perhaps he could have explained it so she would savvy. But he had just done a couple of years stretch in the Deer Lodge pen and it would be a long, long time before he could get rid of the prison stigma.

A pardon had not cleared him of the verdict of guilty a jury had voted against him. Johnny Ryan had come back to the Little Rockies for one purpose and that was to prove to the cow country that he had never been guilty of cattle rustling. It was a tough job and mighty near hopeless and he stood a big chance of being killed before he got very far along towards proving anything. Horning into this Ace of Spades deal had not lowered the odds against him and if Dodie Jones wanted to condemn him without giving him a chance to defend himself, then let her play her string out.

Dave Jones would have stayed at the ranch with Johnny, but Dodie took him back to town.

"You come back, Uncle Dave," Johnny Ryan had ignored the girl and had shaken Dave Jones' gnarled hand, "whenever you want."

"Shore thing, Johnny. You're short-handed as it is. You kin git a crew of breeds directly they git done puttin' up the hay. The calf



crop was fair to middlin' and we should ship out a few carloads of beef steers this fall. You kin rep fer the Ace of Spades and ramrod the Pool wagon at the same time, Johnny. Roundup should start in about a month. Like Dodie says, I got my hands full runnin' the barn in town, but I'll drop around now and then. . . . I had a shotgun, Johnny. . . ."

"So you did." Johnny Ryan had grinned through his criss-cross bandages and gotten the shotgun and handed it, empty, to the grizzled cowman.

"Come back any time, Uncle Dave." The cow country had always called the Ace of Spades owner Uncle Dave, nobody knew just why. Unless it was because he was sort of sober-minded and tended to business and slipped home to his motherless Dodie while the rest of the outfit painted the town red.

"Shore will, Johnny," Locoed Dave would promise. "So long."

Peaceful, no harm in him, for weeks at a stretch. And then one evening Johnny Ryan would hear Blue nicker down at the lower gate. He would slip down there and, taking care not to startle Locoed Dave, he would get the shotgun and send the old cowman on to the cabin. Nobody but Dodie Jones was the wiser and she wasn't telling any-

body. And that was how it had been for a long time now.

Johnny gave Dave Jones time enough to put up Blue and get the supper fire started. Then he walked back to the cabin, the sawed-off shotgun in the crook of his arm. Dodie would show up after a while and take her father back to town.

Johnny Ryan no longer ramrodded the Bear Paw Pool roundup. Nor did he rep for the Ace of Spades iron. There were no cattle left in the Ace of Spades iron to gather. A few remnant cows would show up on the spring roundup with calves; one or two Ace of Spades steers might get picked up in the badlands along the Missouri River. But the bulk of the cattle that wore Dave Jones' Ace of Spades brand had been gathered and shipped before Johnny Ryan got out of the Deer Lodge pen. They had been sold to pay off a mortgage the Jarvis T Down held against the Ace of Spades outfit. And to pay off expensive doctors at Great Falls, Helena and Butte where Dodie had taken her father in hopes that an operation might clear his brain.

But none of the surgeons would attempt an operation. They agreed that it would be hopeless and perhaps fatal. That brain injury was permanent. Dave Jones might drop dead tomorrow or he might live for years and die a natural death.

So there were no cattle in the Ace of Spades iron left to gather. The big outfits would gather any few strays and ship the steers and the money they brought would be sent to Locoed Dave Jones.

There was a small remuda of saddle horses and some work horses. Johnny did most of the ranch work himself. He made good money breaking broncs on contract for the big outfits, handling the broncs here at the ranch on Rock Creek. It brought him enough money to pay running expenses. Rather than let the big hay crop go to waste, he fed cattle that the Bear Paw Pool had missed on their roundup and he got paid enough to break even. And times like this when Dave Jones showed up, Johnny was more than pleased to have the old man's company for even the short visits Dodie allowed her father.

Nobody else ever came near the little ranch on Rock Creek. The news had spread quickly enough that Johnny Ryan had gotten out of the Deer Lodge pen and the first night he was back in the Little Rockies he had cheated Locoed Dave Jones out of his little ranch on Rock Creek and squatted there. Dave Jones, it was said, was too locoed in the head to know what the deal was and Dodie was a girl and could not move Johnny Ryan off the ranch where he had squatted. So no white man would go near Johnny Ryan or have a thing to do with him in any way.

It was an ugly story that Deputy Sheriff West Richmond and the Jarvis brothers spread across the cow country. Even the Bear Paw Pool outfit had to believe at least a part of it because Johnny Ryan was too stubborn and prideful to bother defending himself.

All of which handicapped Johnny Ryan when he tried to pick up anything that might help clear his name. Dave Jones—Locoed Dave—was the only friend Johnny Ryan had in the cow country. The irony of it made Johnny grin. It wasn't a pleasant sort of grin. There were times when bitterness filled him with a slow poison that ate into his brain and heart and guts. He wondered sometimes how long he would be able to tough it out. Before he took a wild notion to ride to Landusky and kill Deputy Sheriff West Richmond and the Jarvis brothers where he found them.

Johnny Ryan had no legal deed to the ranch. But he had kept that ace of spades playing card. He would take it out of his warsack now and then, look at it and put it back.

III

West Richmond and the Jarvis boys were letting Johnny Ryan strictly alone. They rode clear around the little ranch on upper Rock Creek. And when Johnny rode into Landusky they eyed him as though he was some stranger with a contagious disease.

Big, swarthy-skinned, hawk-beaked Deputy Sheriff West Richmond always watched Johnny warily, narrowing his bloodshot yellow eyes to slits. More often than not Tol and Med Jarvis also would be in town. And they usually stayed together so that they could fight back to back if a ruckus started. Tol was tall and rawboned with long arms

and long bowed legs. His eyes were pale gray and set too close together on either side of a high-bridged nose that had been broken and set crooked.

Medford Jarvis was short, bull-necked and barrel-chested. His thick-muscled legs were bowed and he walked with a short, sort of rolling gait as though he was keeping those stout bowed legs braced so as never to be caught off-balance. He had pale green eyes and reddish hair and his skin was rough and sun-burnt.

Tol and Med Jarvis were in their thirties. They had fallen heir to the Hayhook brand and ranch when Old Man Jarvis got into a maverick dispute with Matt Ryan. Matt was ramrodding the Bear Paw Pool and he had to kill Old Man Jarvis or be killed. Matt had claimed the maverick for Dave Jones because it was picked up on Dave's range. At the time Dave Jones wasn't with the Pool roundup because his wife had taken sick and was dying. Matt Ryan had gut-shot Old Man Jarvis and then taken the Ace of Spades stamp iron out of the branding fire and branded the maverick.

Tol and Med Jarvis hadn't mourned the passing of their Old Man. But they said that sooner or later they would hang Matt Ryan's hide on the fence and they hoped young Johnny Ryan would side his old man so they could make a bunch quitter out of him. It was loud-mouthed whiskey talk and Matt Ryan had shrugged it off without paying it much attention. He told them that they could rep with the

Pool wagon if they figured they could make a hand without stirring up trouble. But if they started a ruckus among his cowhands he, Matt Ryan, would cut their strings of Hayhook horses right then and there.

Tol and Med Jarvis did not rep with the Bear Paw Pool wagon. They sent a stranger named West Richmond to represent their outfit on the roundup.

The Pool roundup was working around the head of Cow Creek between the Bear Paws and Little Rockies on the fall roundup and holding a big beef herd not far from the Hayhook home ranch. A bad electric storm hit the herd about third guard time and stampeded the works. West Richmond and Dave Jones were on third guard.

Matt Ryan had smelled the storm coming and doubled the guard with two Pool cowhands and he himself had ridden out to the herd and was helping stand guard when the lightning hit the middle of the restless herd. Then the stampede was on and it was a bad one. Daybreak found the beef steers scattered from hell to breakfast. And Dave Jones rode up on the dead body of Matt Ryan and his dead horse piled up in a cut coulee and tromped so badly it looked as though the whole beef herd had run over them.

More than a few good cowhands and good horses have been run over and tromped to death by cattle stampedes. The Bear Paw Pool outfit and the rest of the Montana cow country let it go at that. Matt

Ryan and his horse had been caught by the stampede and tromped to death.

Johnny Ryan was riding the Bear Paw Pool rough string then. He had ridden out on one of his broncs and had barely escaped being caught by the stampede. Not more than ten minutes before the lightning struck the big herd, Dave Jones had met Johnny as they rode in opposite directions around the restless cattle.

It was drizzling rain and cold and in the white flare of lightning Dave Jones' face looked pinched with the cold and Johnny made the cowman take his slicker, using the lame excuse that his bronc wasn't slicker-broke. And as Dave shivered into Johnny's yellow saddle slicker, he remarked that a lightning flash had showed what looked like Tol and Med Jarvis riding around the herd with big West Richmond.

Later, when Johnny questioned Dave about it, Dave got sort of vague and uncertain about seeing Tol and Med Jarvis out at the herd that night. Dave had acted almost scared about sticking to his statement, so Johnny Ryan had not pressed the question too hard. Johnny showed Dave Jones the holes in his dead father's back. No steer horn had made those three holes or the hole in under the right ear of the dead horse.

"So Matt Ryan was tromped to death by a cattle stompede, Uncle Dave," Johnny had said flatly. "Let it go thataway."

There had been shooting during

the cattle run. West Richmond said he had emptied his six-shooter in the eyes of the leaders when he was trying to turn the stampede back and get the running cattle to milling. Other cowhands had fired off their six-shooters for the same reason. But Johnny Ryan had bathed the mud and blood from the dead body of his father and wrapped Matt Ryan in his bed tarp for burial and he knew that somebody had shot his father in the back that night. And he figured that Dave Jones shared that opinion but was scared to admit it. Because Uncle Dave was a man of peace and he was scared of what Tol and Med Jarvis and big West Richmond might do to him and his Ace of Spades outfit or the harm they could do to his motherless daughter Dodie.

Johnny had never blamed Uncle Dave Jones too much for keeping his mouth shut. But he knew it was preying on the cowman's mind and conscience. Nor did Johnny voice his own suspicions. A man who keeps his mouth shut, Matt Ryan had always told him, has the bulge.

When Johnny Ryan fell heir to his dead father's job as wagon boss for the Bear Paw Pool, West Richmond cut his string of Hayhook horses to take the job of stock inspector. Before he rode away from the roundup, the big Hayhook rep grinned down at Johnny from his saddle.

"Why don't you quit the country, Johnny?" he asked. "And save everybody around here a lot of bothersome trouble?"

"I don't rabbit that easy, West."

"You'll soon be makin' horsehair bridles."

Convicts in the Deer Lodge prison made bridles from horsehair dyed gay colors and sent the bridles outside the pen to be sold or raffled off.

Before Stock Inspector West Richmond and the Jarvis boys framed Johnny Ryan on a cattle rustling deal and railroaded him to the pen, Uncle Dave Jones had a talk with Johnny.

"I got some money put aside fer a hard winter, Johnny. I wish you'd take it fer a loan and drift mebby to New Mexico or Arizona. Buy some kind of a spread down yonder. When you git located I'll sell out here on Rock Crick and fetch Dodie along and throw in with you. . . ."

"I got no coyote blood in me, Uncle Dave," Johnny had said.

So they had railroaded Johnny Ryan to the Deer Lodge pen.

There was no real proof that West Richmond, the newly appointed deputy sheriff for the Little Rockies, and the two Jarvis boys had waylaid Dave Jones and beaten and tromped him and left him for dead on the wagon road out of Landusky. It had been night and Dave Jones had been more than half drunk when he left town. Now his memory was vague and clouded and dimmed and he did not remember who had given him that terrific gun whipping.

At least Dave Jones claimed he could not remember. After he got around again he would wander into

the saloons and if West Richmond or the Jarvis boys called him up to the bar for a drink, he drank with them. And the unwritten law of the cow country forbids a man to drink with an enemy. So Dave Jones had drunk with West Richmond and the Jarvis boys until Dodie made the saloons put Dave Jones' name on their Injun list and refuse to serve him a drink.

Even when the moon was full and Dave Jones got one of his "spells," he never mentioned a name. He said "They" were after him, that he was bushed up, laying for "Them." Never the mention of a name.

Uncle Dave Jones was getting supper when Johnny walked back to the log cabin with Dave's empty sawed-off shotgun. Whistling tunelessly through his teeth, the old man limped around, stooped a little, lamed for life.

At the creak of the door hinges when Johnny opened the cabin door, Dave Jones whirled and cringed. One arm came up to shield his head from an expected blow and his dimmed blue eyes had the wild look of fear.

"It's only me, Uncle Dave. Johnny, Matt Ryan's boy Johnny."

"Johnny. Matt Ryan's Johnny. . . . You're a good boy, Johnny. I'm glad you got here. They bin after me again. They bin after me a lot here lately. I need my gun."

"I'll put your gun here in the rack, Uncle Dave. You don't need it now. I won't let 'em hurt you."

Dave Jones' leathery face had grayed. Cold sweat beaded his skin. He wiped it off with the back

of his gnarled hand and took a pull at his jug.

IV

These visits were dangerous. Johnny realized the grave risks Dave Jones ran every time he came here. Johnny never fooled himself into believing that Dave Jones could saddle Blue and get his jug and shotgun and ride away from the big barn at Landusky without being sighted. And it was almost a cinch bet that Dave Jones was followed here. The men who had beaten him were uneasy and suspicious.

For the most part that dimness of memory in the injured brain inside Dave Jones' scarred skull was real. Too real, too damned pitifully real, to be faked. But there would be the risk that when Dave Jones got one of his moonlit spells, some dim spark of half-forgotten memory would be fanned into a feeble flickering flame and Uncle Dave Jones would remember who and what he had seen the night of the Bear Paw Pool stampede and the night he was beaten up and left for dead on the road out of Landusky. If that happened, Dave Jones might tell Johnny Ryan things that he had been afraid to mention out loud even to himself. There was that danger threatening Uncle Dave Jones. There was danger to Johnny when he listened.

Sometimes during those long nights when he was locked up in a prison cell Johnny Ryan had wondered if Dave Jones could have taken the witness stand at Johnny's

trial and cleared the accused Johnny Ryan of that cattle-rustling charge. Dave Jones had sat there in the packed courtroom, a stricken sort of look in his puckered blue eyes, listening to every word of the perjured testimony that had sent Johnny Ryan to the pen.

Lies, crafty lies, backed with circumstantial evidence that had been built up with wolfish cunning. Testimony that told how Johnny Ryan, using his job as ramrod for the Bear Paw Pool, had dropped some Bear Paw Pool cattle into a hidden pasture in the badlands. The brands on those cattle had been cunningly altered and worked and earmarks changed. And when the altered brands haired-over, the cattle would be picked up and drifted out of Montana into Wyoming or butchered and the meat sold. Stock Inspector West Richmond and Tol and Med Jarvis had ridden up on Johnny Ryan and caught him moving those stolen cattle out of the badlands cattle trap.

Dave Jones had sat there and kept his mouth shut when he could have volunteered to take the witness stand in Johnny's defense. But Dave



Jones had kept his mouth shut. And perhaps that was why it had never come out at the trial that the cattle trap in the badlands was on Dave Jones' lower range that took in a strip of rough country at the head of the badlands.

It was Dave Jones who had sent Johnny Ryan down there, ridden part way into the badlands with him. Dave Jones had said he missed some steers and had sort of stumbled onto what looked like a cattle rustler trap in a fenced-off box canyon at the lower end of his Ace of Spades range. But Dave Jones had gotten cold feet and turned back, using some lame excuse to cover the fear in him, and Johnny Ryan had ridden down there alone to investigate the cattle rustler trap. And he had been caught in it. . . .

Those prison nights had been long. Long and lonely and bitter. They were behind Johnny now. But not far enough behind. The memory of them would always stay with him. Johnny Ryan had done time in the pen. Johnny Ryan was an ex-convict. Nothing this side of hell could change it.

Johnny Ryan washed up. His eyes watched Uncle Dave Jones pattering around the stove, cooking supper. The windows were blanketed and the door barred. If Dave Jones dropped dead now from that pressure on his brain, the cow country would brand Johnny Ryan for a murderer. Dodie Jones would kill Johnny Ryan with a gun if the law refused to hang him.

"You won't let 'em git to me, will

you, Johnny?" Dave Jones peered, dim-eyed, through the lamplight.

"I won't let 'em hurt you no more, Uncle Dave."

"They follered me, Johnny. They're out there now. . . . Hear 'em?"

Johnny Ryan heard sounds outside. He stepped over to the lamp. Then moving over to the door, he slid back the heavy wooden bar and took his six-shooter from its holster.

"Crawl under the bunk, Uncle Dave," Johnny whispered. He pulled the door open and stepped behind it. His gun hammer clicked as he thumbed it back.

Dodie Jones sat her horse in the moonlight. Her face was chalky white in the light of the round full moon.

"Where is he?" Her voice sounded dry, brittle.

"You kin come out from under the bunk, Uncle Dave." Johnny's voice was cold. He lowered his gun hammer and stepped into the doorway. "It's only your daughter Dodie. Watch you don't burn your hand on the hot chimney when you light the lamp."

Dave Jones struck a match. The light flared inside the cabin and for a moment Johnny Ryan stood silhouetted there in the cabin doorway, tall, wide-shouldered, lean-flanked. Under his heavy black brows his gray eyes were as hard and bright as polished gun metal.

The shot came from the thick brush a hundred yards away. Johnny saw the brief stabbing flame of the gunfire, felt the ripping,

burning, thudding impact of the .30-30 bullet that grazed his ribs. It staggered him. His left hand still gripped the edge of the door and he slammed it shut as he threw himself flat on the ground outside.

Spooked by the shot, Dodie's big Ace of Spades gelding whirled and tried to stampede with her.

It got her out of the line of fire and Johnny commenced shooting. The range was too far for a six-shooter. The carbine or rifle out in the brush had the advantage. Johnny rolled over and over and quit shooting. Bullets kicked dirt in his face and thudded into the log wall of the cabin. He rolled in behind a big rain barrel at the corner of the cabin, and scrambled to his feet and crouched there.

Dodie got control of her frightened horse. She whirled the big gelding and raked him with the spurs, heading straight at the brush from behind which one or two or possibly three guns were spitting death at Johnny Ryan. It was a fool thing for her to do. Johnny yelled at her. But she kept on at a run.

Then three riders broke brush and headed down the creek through the high willows, traveling at a dead run. In a moment Dodie Jones was riding back towards the log cabin at a lope.

The cabin door opened with a jerk and Johnny dove at Dave Jones' legs like a football player as the grizzled cowman stepped outside. The double-barreled shotgun exploded with a roar like a cannon. Johnny grabbed the smoking shot-

gun from Dave Jones' hands as Dodie rode up and reined her horse to a halt. The dust kicked up from the double charge of buckshot that had plowed the dirt, settled.

Johnny's whole left side seemed numb and his shirt was sodden with blood. A lopsided grin pulled one corner of his mouth. His eyes were slivers of steel and he was ejecting the empty shells from his six-shooter.

Dave Jones got onto his hands and knees and then to his feet. Shivering like a man with chills, he crouched in behind Johnny Ryan.

"Don't let 'em git at me, Johnny!" he croaked.

"They're gone, Uncle Dave. That's Dodie on the horse. You better set another plate for her. And shove the coffeepot back on the stove before it boils over."

V

Dodie Jones did not scare easy, but she was scared now. So scared she looked sick. Johnny had saved her life. He had done some split-second thinking and, by backing it up with fast work, had kept her father from tearing her apart with two loads of buckshot. Enough to scare a tough man. And Dodie Jones was only a girl.

Johnny saw the look of stark horror in Dodie's eyes as she stared at her father. At the sawed-off shotgun Johnny had taken away from him. She might crack up. Scream. Go into some kind of hysteria.

Johnny was still fighting mad. But relief set in now. Relief that

the girl had not been blown apart by buckshot or hit by one of those wild .30-30 bullets that had whined and snarled as thick as hail. And there was a lot of throbbing pain stabbing through the stiff numbness of his bullet-creased ribs. Johnny Ryan was in an ugly temper.

He almost shoved Dave Jones into the cabin, and glared at the girl on horseback.

"Damned if you didn't do a good job of gittin' underfoot." His voice was gritty. "If you got to trail your father, try to come alone the next time. You might as well step down, now you're here."

Color spotted Dodie's pale cheeks. His voice had slapped her across the face like an open-handed blow. And it had served the same good purpose of averting hysteria.

Dodie swung from her saddle. Her knees were weak and she hung onto the saddlehorn to keep from falling. The shadows under her eyes were a dark bruise.

"You win." Her voice was barely audible.

Then her knees hinged and her hand slid from the saddlehorn. Johnny had to grab her to keep her from falling.

He held her and felt a long shuddering sob rack her from head to foot. Then she was limp in his arms and the tears came in a flood. She clung to him, her tumbled black hair in his face. Johnny forgot his own pain and the anger went out of him as he held her almost roughly with his face buried in her heavy curly black hair. The hard aching

lump inside him dissolved as though it was melted by the girl's tears.

Johnny Ryan had been too busy earning a hard living and fighting his own battle against ugly odds ever to have any time for what the cow country called "girling around." He had gone to a few dances but had felt awkward and clumsy and most of the time too girl-shy to walk over and ask for a dance. So he had stood around outside and looked in at the dances while West Richmond and the Jarvis boys cut fancy pigeon-wings.

Dodie Jones, the little Landusky schoolmarm, had always been the best dancer on the floor and the most popular. And West Richmond, in his fancy duds and his pants legs shoved into his boot tops, had cut a handsome figure and when he danced with the little schoolmarm, the others watched with envy because they made such a handsome couple. Range gossip coupled the names of West Richmond and Dodie Jones. And the big swaggering West had horned off the other men.

So the Little Rockies said Dodie Jones was West Richmond's girl. Dodie never took much trouble to deny it. Every girl in the cow country was after the big, handsome, swaggering West.

"You win!" Dodie had sort of whispered.

Johnny Ryan didn't know what she meant. Right now he wasn't giving her words much thought. He felt her arms creep up around his

neck and hang onto him and her face was buried against his chest. Her sobbing slacked off. Then she let out a muffled little cry and pulled away.

"You're shot, Johnny!"

She felt of his blood-sodden shirt and stared wide-eyed at his blood on her hand.

Johnny said it didn't amount to much. He told her to go on in to her father. He'd put up her horse.

But Dave Jones needed no help. He was limping around the cook stove cooking supper, muttering and shaking his grizzled head as though he was vaguely puzzled about the whole thing.

But Dodie unsaddled her own horse and turned him loose in the pasture. Then, leading Johnny Ryan into the log cabin, she sat him on the edge of his bunk and helped him strip to the waist. She did a first-class job of washing and bandaging the shallow bullet rip along his ribs. An inch or so more and the bullet would have smashed through his lung and heart. It had been a narrow escape. As close as or closer than Dodie had come to being killed by her own father's shotgun.

Now and then while Dodie was doing her first-aid job, their eyes met and Johnny would grin against the pain while Dodie's gray-blue eyes would darken and her touch would be like a timid caress.

Dave Jones stood there smiling at them, his faded blue eyes shining.

"Anything happens to me, Johnny, you take good care of Dodie," he said quietly. "She'll make you a good wife. You need a good woman, son, to share things you work fer and fight fer. If your mother had lived, Matt Ryan would've owned his own outfit. But when she died it kind o' taken the warp out o' Matt. What was the use in buildin' up a bachelor outfit, Matt would say. So he pooled what he had with me. Me'n Matt had it figgered out that some day his Johnny would marry my Dodie and we'd just hand you two the Ace of Spades fer a weddin' present. And the two of us would set back and whittle and tell how it used to be done. This Ace of Spades is half yourn, Johnny. It was half Matt's. Now his share goes to you. We never drew up no pardnership papers. Old-timers like me'n Matt Ryan don't need to put it in writin'. I meant to



tell you before, Johnny. But it kind o' slipped my mind. . . . It does a man's heart good to see you two young 'uns together. . . ."

Dave Jones had given Johnny a drink out of his jug, now he corked it. "Take good care of Dodie, Johnny."

"I will, Uncle Dave."

Johnny Ryan's ears reddened. He reached out and took Dodie's hand.

Dodie's eyes dimmed with tears. She leaned over and kissed Johnny. Kissed him on the mouth as though she meant it.

Dave Jones chuckled and limped on back to the stove.

"I won't hold you to that, Johnny." Dodie's voice was barely audible.

So it was just to make her father happy. Johnny felt the pain in his ribs again. The heavy ache was coming back into his heart.

Outside in the night a horse nickered. Johnny was on his feet. He barred the door and turned down the lamp and got his saddle carbine from the rack.

Dodie had a saddle gun. She had fetched it into the cabin when she came in with Johnny, and put it in the gun rack on the cabin wall.

Dave Jones had shoved the long-handled skillet at Dodie. He limped over to the gun rack and took her saddle gun. In the dim lamplight his faded blue eyes glistened strangely.

"That was Blue nickered," he said, his voice quiet. "They've come to take the Ace of Spades. We'll give 'em a bellyful, Johnny."

"That's right, Uncle Dave. We'll give 'em a bellyful."

"Tol and Med Jarvis. And that gun-slingin' West Richmond. I ain't scared no more."

"That's good, Uncle Dave."

"I never killed Matt Ryan, Johnny. Hell, Matt was the best friend I had on earth. I never killed Matt fer his partnership in the Ace of Spades."

"Who said you did, Uncle Dave?"

"That West Richmond and the two Jarvis boys. Their word agin' mine. They made up a story they said they'd swear to in court. Hang me fer the murder of Matt Ryan. And what would become of Dodie with me hung er in the Deer Lodge pen? They had me over a barrel. Later I had to set there and watch 'em railroad you to the pen."

"So that was it, Uncle Dave."

"That was it, Johnny. Then when you was in the pen, I couldn't stand it no longer. Drunk er sober I couldn't stand it no more. So I rode to town. I told West Richmond and the two Jarvis boys I'd seen the three of 'em shoot Matt Ryan and his horse the night of the Bear Paw Pool stompede. Seen 'em do that murder and ride like hell away just before the stompede run over dead Matt and his dead horse in the cut coulee. I seen it in the lightnin' flashes.

"I couldn't gun whup the three of 'em," Dave went on. "I figgered me'n you could cold-trail 'em when you got out o' the pen and cut 'em

down. . . . I give West Richmond and Tol and Med Jarvis till next sunrise to quit the country. They agreed to go. I got Blue and headed out o' town fer my ranch. They was waitin' fer me below town where the wagon road crosses the crick. They yanked me off my horse and I went down a-fightin' the best I knowed how. They gimme a workin' over, crippled me. Sometimes my head hurts inside till it feels like my brain's swole up and bustin' through my skull. I hear men call me Locoed Dave like I was some damned ol' shepherder. . . ."

"I wouldn't let it fret me, Uncle Dave. You got Dodie and me. We'll look after you."

"That's them outside, Johnny. I kin smell the Jarvis stink plumb through these log walls."

"I won't let 'em at you, Uncle Dave." Johnny stood by one of the blanketed windows with his saddle gun.

"I ain't scared of 'em no more." There was a grim chuckle in the old cowman's voice. "How we fixed fer ca'tridges?"

"Here." Dodie picked up her hat. She emptied cartridges from her pockets into the hat and handed it to her father.

Then she took the sawed-off shotgun from the rack and asked her father if he had any more shotgun shells. He nodded and fished two shotgun shells loaded with BB shot from the pocket of his faded Levi overalls. Dodie broke the double-barreled gun, loaded it and took her stand near the barred door.

VI

From out in the night sounded the heavy-toned voice of Deputy Sheriff West Richmond.

"I'm the law. I got bench warrants for Dave Jones and Johnny Ryan. Them bench warrants read 'Dead or Alive.' I'm bound by oath to serve 'em. Throw your guns out the window and come out through the door with your hands up."

Dave Jones had pried the daubing and chinking from between the logs. He shoved the carbine barrel through, squinted along the sights, and his gnarled finger squeezed the trigger. From out in the night came a sharp yelp of pain. The grizzled cowman's chuckle sounded through the gun echoes.

"That damned glory hunter," he chuckled, "and his paw and beller."

Johnny grinned. West Richmond was lifting voice once more.

"We can't be shootin' no wimmin'. Send Dodie out. We won't harm a hair of her purty head. You got to hide behind a woman's skirts, Ryan?"

"I'm wearing Levi overalls." Dodie's voice was brittle. "And I've got a gun in my hand. And I've played you for a big bragging sucker, mister. Remember how you bragged how you'd ribbed the Jarvis boys into shooting Matt Ryan in the back while you shot Matt Ryan's horse? Remember bragging to me how you sent Johnny Ryan to the pen? Whiskey talk, wasn't it? Spilled while you held my hand and danced with me. I'd go home after the dance and scrub with lye soap

and burn the dress I'd worn like I'd burn my clothes after being too close to a skunk. But I got enough talk out of you, big mister, to hang you and the two Jarvis brothers. So you hadn't better let me ride away from here alive. Because I'll hang the three of you for the murder of Matt Ryan. Now you know where you stand. Right where I've put you, West Richmond. You and the two Jarvis brothers. So shut up and commence shooting!"

Somewhere out in the night Tol Jarvis laughed. It was an ugly, rasping laugh. Ned Jarvis was cursing big West Richmond for a big-mouthed slobbering fool.

Then they began shooting. Bullets shattered the two windows and thudded into the thick plank door. Johnny Ryan blew out the lamp. In the darkness he brushed into Dodie and he reached out his free hand and gripped her shoulder and, pulling her close to him, kissed her. It was a fumbling kiss and she laughed shakily and put her hand along his whiskered jaw and gave him a kiss that really meant something.

"Gosh, Dodie, I never knew . . ."

"Neither did I, Johnny. Until tonight."

Whispering in the darkness. While Dave Jones crouched by another slit between the logs and took snapshots at anything he thought might be a man outside. Acrid burnt powder smoke filled the cabin, clogging their nostrils, making them cough. Their eardrums ached from

the thudding din of Dave Jones' carbine.

Johnny was saving his cartridges. There was no sense throwing good lead away shooting at shadows out yonder. And while Johnny and Dodie crouched close together, peering through chinks in the logs, they bridged the ugly gap of the past two years or more with words that should have been said long ago.

Dave Jones had been too scared to talk. Scared of what might happen to his daughter. He had been accused of Matt Ryan's murder by the three men who had killed the Bear Paw Pool wagon boss and it was his word against theirs. Deputy Sheriff West Richmond wore a law badge to give his word heavy legal authority. And that big bulldozer was a past master at running a whizzer. He had bluffed Dave Jones into keeping his mouth shut.

The Bear Paw Pool roundup was camped near enough to the Jarvis ranch for Tol and Med to ride over and meet West Richmond when third guard came on at midnight. No matter how quietly his beef herd was laying on the bedground, Matt Ryan always rode out with the men who went on third guard. So whoever rode in from second guard to call third relief would wake Matt when he roused the third guard men from their tarp-covered beds on the ground.

The storm and stampede had played into the killers' hands. The stampede had blotted out the murder sign. But in the lightning flare Dave Jones had seen the two Jarvis

boys and West Richmond shoot down Matt Ryan and his horse. The Jarvis boys had ridden back to their ranch. West Richmond had run his bluff on Dave Jones. The grizzled cowman had carried his burden alone.

"He never told me, Johnny," whispered Dodie. "I knew something worried him. I'd hear him walk the floor, sometimes all night. And he began hitting the jug. West Richmond said Matt Ryan had tried to steal the Ace of Spades, that you were rustling Ace of Spades cattle. He hinted that Dave Jones had killed Matt Ryan after they had an argument about the Ace of Spades. When I tackled dad about it, he acted scared. Told me to tend to my schoolmarm chores and leave the cow business to him. And that scared me, Johnny."

"It's all over now, Dodie."

"We sat through your trial. I knew you weren't a cattle thief. In my heart I knew it. And I saw my dad suffer for you. He aged ten years during your trial, Johnny. I—I'd see you look at him, and watch him flinch like you'd slapped him. I couldn't understand. . . . West Richmond said Dave Jones was afraid you'd kill him if the jury turned you loose, because the bulk of the stolen cattle had been in the Ace of Spades iron."

"West Richmond didn't overlook a bet," said Johnny grimly.

"You went to the pen. My father got drunk. He was drunk for a week. Longer than that. I was afraid to go near him. Still more

afraid to leave him alone. I thought he was going to kill himself. Then he rode to town to meet West Richmond and the Jarvis boys. And when I saw Blue fetch him home . . ." Dodie shuddered and Johnny held her close in the dark.

"Then you came back from the pen and I walked in on that card game and saw you take the ace of spades from that deck of cards and use it to take the Ace of Spades outfit away from Dave Jones. That did something to me, Johnny. I know now you were saving the outfit from West Richmond and the Jarvis brothers."

"Uncle Dave knew what I was doin'. It showed in his eyes. For just a second. Before they dimmed again."

"I've been blind, Johnny. And stupid. I was too bewildered and confused to think things out. I half believed the lies West Richmond kept feeding me. And when dad trusted you to the limit, when he'd slip out of town with his jug and shotgun, I was terrified."

"Uncle Dave was tryin' in his own way, Dodie, to kill West Richmond and Tol and Med Jarvis before they could murder me like they killed my dad."

"I know, Johnny. And in spite of West Richmond's lies I believed in you. But I was too stubborn to tell you. I began working on big West Richmond. Strung him along until he got tangled up in his own lies. And when I got the truth out of him, I could piece-in what he didn't tell me. I trailed dad here. I was going to talk it out with you and him.

They must have been bushed up out there before I got here. I darn near got you killed."

"This bullet scratch was worth it." Johnny grinned in the darkness. His arms were around Dodie and her lips were warm against his mouth.

Neither of them saw Dave Jones move past them. It was too late to stop him when the grizzled cowman slid back the bar and opened the door and slipped outside, closing the door behind him. It was the closing of the door that yanked Johnny and Dodie apart.

VII

It was Locoed Dave Jones who walked out now into the hundred-yard strip of bald moonlit clearing between the log cabin and the big log barn. With a wicker-covered demijohn in one hand and his double-barreled sawed-off shotgun in the crook of his other arm, he limped along, stoop-shouldered, the brim of his battered old sweat-stained Stetson hat yanked down across his faded, puckered blue eyes. His matter-of-fact voice was the voice of a locoed old codger talking to himself.

"... plumb fergot," the voice of Locoed Dave Jones sounded clearly as it fell across the tense, hushed, uneasy silence of the moonlit night, "I just plumb fergot to grain ol' Blue. . . ."

Dodie must have put the sawed-off shotgun back in the gun rack. Dave Jones had taken it, leaving her saddle carbine in the rack.

Somewhere out there in the black shadows of the night West Richmond and the two Jarvis brothers crouched, watching. Puzzled, they held their fire, staring narrow-eyed at Locoed Dave Jones as they let him cross the open clearing without firing a shot to drop him in his tracks.

From the cabin Johnny and Dodie watched, holding their breath, stunned wordless by Dave Jones' unpredictable move. Johnny was breathing hard, gripping his saddle carbine. Dodie's lips moved in the powdersmoke-filled darkness as though she were praying.

West Richmond and the two Jarvis boys could have shot down Locoed Dave Jones. Tol and Med Jarvis had itchy trigger fingers. But Richmond motioned their gun barrels down.

"I got the fear in that damned ol' locoed coot," muttered Richmond. "He might play Johnny Ryan right into our guns. We'll check the bet to Locoed Dave."

Stay beyond the short range of that sawed-off shotgun and they were safe enough, West Richmond added.

The three of them were over near the barn. The two Jarvis brothers together, big West Richmond about fifty feet from them, his big bulk hidden in the black shadow of the barn doorway. The Jarvis brothers crouched along the high pole horse corral that joined the barn on one side of it.

Deputy Sheriff West Richmond moved out of the barn doorway and

along the black shadows to where the two Jarvises crouched.

"... just plumb fergot," Locoed Dave was muttering, "to grain ol' Blue. . . ."

They let him get as far as the barn doorway. Then big West Richmond called out, his voice rasping: "Hold on, Locoed Dave! Lay down that gun or we'll drop you in your tracks!"

Dave Jones stopped. His head lifted and he peered towards the black-shadowed pole corral from where the big deputy's voice had sounded.

"That you, West?"

"Yeah. Put your gun down, Locoed Dave."

"Directly, West. I heard Blue a-nickerin' fer his oats." Dave Jones limped another step or two, muttering. He had reached the black maw of the barn's open doorway.

Then Dave Jones moved. Not with his halting, limping, stoop-shouldered shuffle but with a silent swiftness that came so unexpectedly and without a hint of warning that he was inside the barn and had vanished in the pitch blackness before West Richmond or Tol or Med Jarvis had the split-second chance to shoot him down.

Dave Jones' voice came out of the pitch-dark barn now, a grisly chuckle.

"Outwolfed yuh that time, didn't I?" The cowman's chuckle had an ugly rattle to it. "You're a hell of a man, ain't yuh, West? Lettin' Locoed Dave outwolf yuh that-

away. . . . Stand your hands, you curly wolves. Move out o' your tracks and I'll fill your backsides full of buckshot!"

Then Dave Jones lifted his voice to a creaky shout. It had been a long time since anyone had heard Dave Jones raise his voice above a dull, listless, creaky monotone.

"You stay in the cabin where you are, Johnny! Hear me, son?"

"I kin hear you, Uncle Dave!" Johnny called out through a bullet-shattered window.

"I'll smoke 'em out into the open, Johnny. You an' Dodie kin cut 'em down. You give Dodie a free shot at that big West Richmond thing that's bin botherin' her all this time. You hear me, Johnny?"

"I kin hear you, Uncle Dave!"

"Sweatin' blood, ain't you, West?" chuckled the voice of Dave Jones. "You and them two tough whelps of Old Man Jarvis is shore a-sweatin' blood. You made me sweat once. . . ." Dave Jones' voice trailed into silence.

It was not a long silence. It just seemed long to those who waited for the sound of his creaky voice. Only long enough for Dave Jones to pull the corncob stopper from his jug and take a long drink.

He emptied what rotgut booze was left in the wicker-covered demijohn. Then he threw it. An overhand throw that sent the jug looping through the air. It struck the pole corral so close to big West Richmond that the burly deputy had to duck and dodge his head to keep from being hit.

"I drunk that last un to my old

side pardner Matt Ryan. . . . You mind the stormy night you killed Matt Ryan? West rode to'rds him. And you two Jarvis whelps rode up out o' the brush behind Matt. Matt never sighted nobody but big West. The lightnin' flashed then and you two Jarvis whelps shot Matt in the back and West shot Matt's horse. I heard Tol and Med holler fer West to put a bullet in Matt's carcass. It was them shots that stompeded the Bear Paw Pool herd. I was there and I seen it happen. You feel like denyin' ary part of it?"

One of them must have moved, there in the black shadow of the corral, because Dave Jones' voice cracked sharply.

"Don't try to coyote on me. I'll start you runnin' directly. I ain't done talkin'. Long time since I done ary augerin'. . . . You fellers got to hear me tell how you worked me over the night I told you I was goin' to the big sheriff at Chinook with my story of how you murdered Matt Ryan. . . .

"West rode out and blocked the road. I was slowed down by booze. I clawed fer my gun and Tol and Med come at me from behind, swingin' six-shooter barrels at my head. You drug me off my Blue horse as West tromped me. Then you was all trompin' and kickin' at me. I couldn't git up. And I laid there and played possum and let the three of you put the boots to me.

"I heard West say the old fool was dead. You got on your horses and rode off. I had to wait till you

was gone. Blue stood while I pulled myself up by the stirrup and saddle strings, tied myself on with my ketch rope. Then I told Blue to take me home. . . . That's what you three murderin' gents done to Dave Jones. . . . I heard you call me Locoed Dave. I don't like to be called Locoed Dave. . . .

"You made me set there with my daughter Dodie while you perjured Matt Ryan's Johnny into the Deer Lodge pen. You told Johnny you'd kill him if he come back to the Little Rockies, but Johnny Ryan don't scare that easy. Matt Ryan's Johnny is goin' to shoot you down directly. I want my daughter Dodie to take a free shot at West Richmond. Now I'm smokin' you three hydrophobia skunks out into the open."

The blasting roar of the ten-gauge shotgun sounded as loud as a cannon. It was a little far and some of the buckshot scattered wide and spattered into the pole corral, but a lot of it hit the thick black blot where the two Jarvis brothers and West Richmond crouched. Tol's nasal voice screamed and Med's cursing was thick-voiced.

Their saddled horses had been left in the brush beyond the corral. Now the two Jarvis brothers made a desperate run for it.

They wanted to get away, beyond range of the sawed-off shotgun that had peppered their tough hides with buckshot. They might have made a getaway if Johnny had not yanked open the cabin door and jumped outside and slammed it behind him.

Johnny yelled at them and stepped out of the black shadow of the log

cabin and into the moonlit clearing, making himself a plain target.

Med Jarvis had caught some buckshot in both legs and could not run. He halted his painful dragging limp, stood on thick bowed legs and lifted his carbine.

Long-legged Tol Jarvis was running. Johnny took a quick snapshot at him. Tol stumbled and tripped and went down. Johnny took another shot at Tol. Then a bullet from Med's carbine ripped Johnny's thigh and knocked him off balance. He threw himself flat on his belly as Tol and Med Jarvis shot at him. Their bullets whined over his head and Johnny pointed his gun at Med and pulled the trigger. Med Jarvis caught the .30-30 bullet in the belly and doubled up as though he had been kicked. Then Johnny began shooting at Tol Jarvis, and he and Tol swapped half a dozen shots.

Suddenly, Johnny's saddle gun was empty. He rolled over on his left side and clawed desperately in his right hand pocket for cartridges.

The cabin door yanked open and Dodie ran out. She bent over Johnny and pulled the empty gun from his hand and shoved her own saddle carbine at him.

"It's loaded!" Her voice sounded shrill.

Johnny never looked up. He saw Med Jarvis sitting up, lifting his carbine, so he shot at Med. Med's head jerked, blood spilling from his cursing mouth, and he slumped over sideways.

Tol Jarvis lay sprawled on his

back. Tol was dead. The two survivors were both dead. It took Johnny Ryan a few seconds to realize it. A bullet kicked dirt in his face and ricocheted off.

Johnny saw the gun flash at the corral and began shooting at it. And he was only dimly aware of the fact that Dodie was crouched there alongside him. She had shoved cartridges into the magazine of his empty saddle gun. And now she was shooting at the stabbing flame of West Richmond's carbine. And both Dodie and Johnny were doing some accurate shooting because it got too hot there for big West Richmond.

Deputy Sheriff West Richmond had played it cautious. Anticipating that shotgun blast from the doorway of the barn, he had put the two Jarvis brothers between him and the barn and they had gotten the buckshot. And he had crouched low and held his fire to let them think he had been mortally hit. Then, when both Tol and Med Jarvis had been killed, he had lined his sights by guess in the dark and taken a shot at Johnny Ryan. He had missed by no more than inches. And then it was Dodie's gun that found him. A steel jacket .30-30 nicked his big thigh. And the other bullets were coming too close. It was time to move away from there.

Not a sound came from inside the dark barn. Dave Jones had fired his shotgun blast. His jug was empty. His creaky voice no longer shouted a grim death challenge. Perhaps the brain tumor had finished Locoed Dave. The doctors had said that was the way the grizzled cowman

would die. Quickly. Excitement would bring it on. But even if Dave Jones was still alive he was no more than an old man with an empty gun.

It was West Richmond's only chance and he took it. He ran, crouched, hidden by the black shadows along the high pole corral and into the darkness of the barn.

The charge of buckshot struck big West at about a twelve-foot range, struck his lowered head and the top of his big chest. A ten-gauge shell loaded with buckshot at that short range is a deadly business. Deputy Sheriff West Richmond might have lived long enough to catch a split-second glimpse of the blast. No one would ever know. West Richmond was dead when his heavy body crashed to the floor.

"I was savin' that second barrel fer you, West."

Dave Jones' voice croaked in the darkness. It made no more than a whispering sound in the gun echoes.

Johnny Ryan and Dodie Jones found Dave Jones sitting with his back to the manger in an empty stall. The grizzled cowman was dead. His faded blue eyes were closed. There was a peaceful look on his leathery face. There was not a bullet mark on him.

It was better that Uncle Dave

should go like that, his job done. He had taken time to fill Blue's grain box.

Dodie and Johnny buried Dave Jones beside the grave of his wife and turned old Blue to graze in the pasture.

Johnny Ryan and Dodie Jones were married quietly. The sheriff from Chinook sold them the Jarvis J outfit for the sum of one dollar at sheriff's sale. That was their wedding present from a grateful cow country.

The Ace of Spades and J outfits were already in the Bear Paw Pool. Johnny Ryan was hired as wagon boss to ramrod the round-ups. They said he had never been fired. Just on vacation.

For several years old Blue grazed in the summer pasture and was bedded in deep straw in his winter stall at the Ace of Spades barn. A saddle was never put on him.

Then the twins were born. And before young Dave and Matt could walk or talk, Johnny and Dodie put them on old Blue's wide back, and the babies crowed and chortled as the big blue roan gelding walked very carefully around the corral.

And framed on the living room wall of Johnny and Dodie Ryan's ranchhouse is a playing card. The Ace of Spades.

THE END



This brand tells you that its owner has been honorably discharged from the armed forces of World War II.



SPRING FEVER

by JOE RODRIGUEZ

When winter days are over an' the spring time comes around,
 'Those cold winds quit a-blowin' an' the snows melt on the ground;
 It's then you get that feelin' that you always get in spring,
 You'll maybe change your grazin' an' not ever do a thing.
 You ride around plumb reckless an' you sort o' wish you knew
 Of somethin' kind o' different in the line o' work to do
 For look at all you're missin' by not livin' right in town—
 But, shucks, even a cowhand's got to think of settlin' down.

You do a heap o' thinkin' as the days go driftin' by,
 But not exactly seein' anything that's worth a try;
 You kind o' miss that pony an' his long, old swingin' lope—
 Your legs might miss the saddle an' your hands might miss that rope
 But once you do have those things an' some muley steer to chase,
 It's then you know for certain that right here's your proper place.

Most any hand will tell you if you ask how come he stays,
 Why he's content with forty dollars an' his lonesome ways,
 I'm sure that if he's willin', he will say that's all he knows,
 For that's about the total that the average waddy goes.
 But money ain't the object, pardner, just take it from me:
 It's just those dreams that tie you down and won't let you be free!



BARB

by JIM WEST

BARB-WIRE fence—"bobwire," the old-timers called it—changed the face of the Western range country. It doomed the longhorn, brought more and better beef to the eastern market, and forced the cowboy to the indignity of doing part of his work afoot. Cursed as a menace to livestock, damned as an abridgment of free rights to the open range, and a problem child to the early law-makers, barb wire won its place in the West years ago.

The countless miles of the bristling wire that have been strung across the West's vast grazing areas since the first barb-wire patents were awarded J. F. Glidden of DeKalb, Illinois, in 1874 give pointed testimony that it is on the range to

stay. Riding, building or mending fence have become some of the inevitable but less glamorous chores in the modern cowboy's life.

Barb-wire fence enabled the cowmen of an earlier generation to import blooded stock safely and thus build up pure-bred herds of quality beef. It also caused bitter and often bloody fence wars because, while it permitted a rancher to control his own range, sometimes it gave him the opportunity to fence in range that he merely claimed was his—by right of prior use or sheer imagination. There were two sides to the fence question as well as to the fence.

To get the whole story, let's go back a bit into early western cattle



WIRE

To fence or not to fence was once a hotly debated issue in the West but even die-hards finally had to admit that "bob wire" had its points

history. Before barb wire made its appearance, the range country was any man's gamble. The cattle industry, as far as the West was concerned, was confined mainly to southwest Texas, original home of the free-for-the-branding, half-wild, brush-country longhorns.

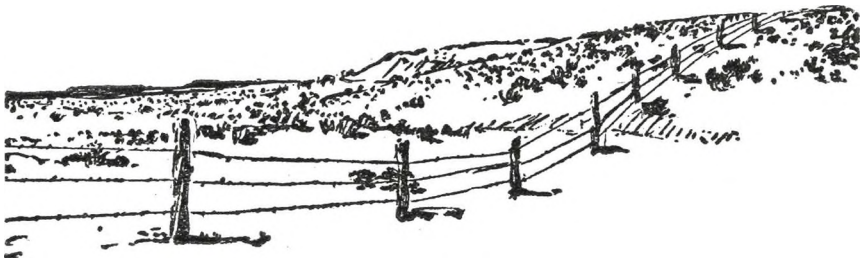
The first ranchers, many of them men who founded their own cattle empires, built some fences, of course. Generally they were picket or pole fences erected where oak, mesquite or other suitable timber was available. But they were comparatively small enclosures—horse corrals, a fence to shut in a special horse pasture, or a few acres of fence around the home ranch. No serious attempt was

made to fence in the actual range.

Even had sufficient wood and labor been available, it would not have been feasible to build miles of wooden fence across the range. The cost would have been prohibitive, upkeep impossible.

Nevertheless some of the first Texas cattle kings early foresaw the value of fences. If nothing else, adequate fencing would prevent drift cattle from mixing with their herds, and their own stock from waltzing back to the brush with migrant groups of longhorns still roaming the far reaches of scrub mesquite, chapparal and thorny cactus that marked the country north of the Mexican border.

As a starter, a few cowmen along



the Texas coast fenced off some of the peninsulas jutting into the blue waters of the Gulf. Thus a comparatively short fence across the narrow neck where the peninsula joined the mainland effectively blocked off a lot of good grass. Cost of such fences was high. The boards for some of them were imported from Florida.

A short time later, with the idea of fencing catching firmer hold on the minds of part of the cowmen—and the rest standing pat for no fence at all and devil-take-the-hindmost—the experiment was tried of enclosing a few big pastures with strands of slick wire. Slick wire meant smooth wire, barb wire's fore-runner, as a fence material.

About the time the first slick-wire fences were completed as large-scale stock enclosures in southwest Texas, barb-wire was invented. This innovation altered the whole pattern of the cattle industry in the West.

The first salesman who dropped down to Texas to peddle the new product got a loud reception—most of it vociferously unsympathetic. Even before the arrival of nesters, hoemen, and further north the avalanche of homesteaders that later overran the high grass plains, cattlemen had divided themselves into two camps, for and against fencing. The reasons were obvious, and understandably human. The no-fence faction—whether rightly or wrongly is of little importance now—believed the fence favorers were more interested in fencing in good range for themselves than in fencing out their trespassing neighbors' cattle.

The real or fancied brutality of the new type of fence gave the anti-fencers further ammunition. Barb wire, they claimed, was a fiendish and inhumane device. The sharp points would cut a horse to pieces. Stock torn by the barbs would be killed off wholesale by screwworm infection. The screwworm danger was particularly applicable to the southern range country where any cut incurred by cattle almost any time of the year except the dead of winter was liable to develop the destructive screwworm grubs.

In the face of all this argument, pro-fence cowmen recognized in barb wire the one thing they were desperately anxious to have—a fence that would hold stock, and could be readily set up over miles of range at a reasonable cost. They started fencing on a grand scale, putting their hands to work digging post holes, cutting and hauling innumerable posts from every available wooded creek bottom. To tighten the wire, many a cattleman simply jacked up a hind wheel of the camp wagon and used that.

As barb wire began to stretch across the range, trouble started. Wordy arguments at first. Men who had been friends and neighbors and used the same range for years turned against each other because one man, perchance in the interest of his own brand, fenced off a watering place he owned that had formerly been shared by other ranchers. Whether his title to the waterhole was clear or not wasn't always what mattered. It was the fence itself that caused bad blood.

When, in desperation, some shut-out rancher, determined that his bawling, thirsty beefs should have the water, or sometimes the grass they needed for their very existence, cut his neighbor's fence, the fat was in the fire. In a pioneer land where law was largely personal and a matter of individual nerve and marksmanship, gunplay followed as surely as night must follow day. The deadly quarrels rapidly spread to bitter feuds.

For a time chaos followed the ever-increasing miles of new barb-wire stretching across the open range and often it was old friends and neighbors who were pitted against each other. Both sides believed they were standing up for what was right and just.

According to Mrs. Sarah C. Blankenship, one of Texas' finest old-timers and a pioneer, native-born daughter of the Lone Star State, the fence wars, brought on when barb wire was first introduced, killed more good men in Texas than ever met their death fighting rustlers and cattle thieves. Sarah should know. As a girl she lived through the fence wars.

It was a curious period in the evolution of the range. Six-guns were standard equipment. Prudent men carried them. But possession of a wire cutter could be tantamount to suicide, making immediate gallows bait of the man brash enough to own one. Such an instrument carried by the wrong man was likely to be regarded as *prima facie* evidence of wrong intent.

Barb wire was not confined to one

part of the West. It spread with amazing speed throughout the range country. Figures show only 40,000 tons of the new material manufactured in 1880. Ten years later production had jumped to 125,000 tons a year. In 1900 nearly 250,000 tons were produced. Most of all this barb wire went West.

Wherever barb wire made its appearance in the range country, it changed the tenor of the cattle business, posing problems that the frontier lawmakers later had to settle. As early as 1888 homesteaders were already pushing west across the northern plains from Nebraska into Wyoming. In Nebraska the legal question of whether it was up to a homesteader to build a fence around his fields to keep cattle out, or up to the stockmen to fence his cattle in, was resolved by declaring the farmer had to fence his crop. Otherwise he had no legal protection against stock on the open range.

The trouble with this was that the legislators were too brief in promulgating their edict. They failed to say what a fence was. And the homesteaders cut corners. Often they merely plowed a deep furrow or two around their fields and called the trench sufficient obstacle or "fence." When wandering cattle failed to halt at the furrow's edge, touchy—or possibly beef hungry—homesteaders shot the animals as trespassers. And the ultimate settlement was not always on a friendly basis.

Obviously, if the cowmen were going to suffer damages because of

their stock "breaking through fences," they wanted the law to state just what constituted a fence. The lawmakers in the different States came up with different answers. But barb wire gained the limelight as well as official recognition. For instance, Montana specified as legal four strands, or three, and a top pole. Wyoming settled for three strands.

Aside from its physical impact on the range and its legal aspects, barb wire brought about tremendous economic changes in the business of raising market beef out West. Building and keeping up miles of wire fence cost money in sums that the small rancher sometimes could ill afford, or had a hard time raising at the local stockman and drover's bank.

In the early 1880's and later, stringing barb wire meant an average cash outlay of anywhere from \$150 to \$200 a mile for wire, posts and labor. The hundreds of miles of fence needed to close in and cross-fence a big spread put large-scale

ranching in the million-dollar business brackets in almost no time.

Fencing also left certain spreads with plenty of good grass and grazing land, but no access to what had once been common sources of water supply. This was especially true in the Texas Panhandle and other semi-arid sections of the country. The only alternative for such ranches was to build tanks, or drill wells and install windmills, the latter another job that generally required a generous outlay of ready cash.

Yet, by and large in the case of barb wire as in the case of most new inventions, the evils attendant on its initial use were eventually outweighed by the good it accomplished. Because it held stock without serious injury, cost but a fraction of that of other types of fence, and required a minimum of wood in a land where timber was largely either scarce or completely non-existent, barb wire filled a specific need on the Western range.

THE END



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



1. snap
2. lataturan
3. totem
4. skygunnac
5. loct

6. sturbdoluc
7. twudass
8. vinera
9. kiwicup
10. tidban

11. wristet
12. secaboo
13. snaresh
14. doged
15. etnaligiv

RANGE SAVVY

BY GENE KING

Cattlemen have tried about everything to put more meat on range-raised beef. One of the latest wrinkles has been to mow down the sagebrush cluttering up much of the western cattle country. Spring mowing eradicates, or at least helps in controlling, this range growth, a pest from the cattleman's, if not the cowboy songwriter's, viewpoint. The better range grasses that replace the sage put more meat poundage on cattle using the range. This has been proved in recent scientific experiments. But it will be a long time yet before sagebrush disappears from the western landscape.



Pioneer placer miners seeking sufficient water to wash gold-bearing gravel through their sluice boxes often made good use of the outdoorsman's method of rough-estimating the quantity of water flow in a creek, or small stream. It is a system modern prospectors might find handy too. Drop a twig or wooden match in part of the current flowing at average speed. Measure how many feet the twig or match floats in a minute. Then estimate average depth of stream, and its width in feet. Multiply the three figures together. From the total obtained, deduct 10% if the stream bottom is smooth, 20% if it is rough, and the result will be a close approximation of the stream flow in cubic feet per minute at that point.



The blue cloth or blanket *capote*, an outside garment made from cloth or a blanket, was part of the traditional dress of early French and Scotch fur traders in the Pacific Northwest and Northern Canada. It had a hood attached that could be drawn over the head. Thus one garment served the dual purpose of coat and a warm head covering. In contrast, the American mountain men preferred an outer garment of leather belted around the waist, and fur caps for headgear. The few American trappers who wore the *capote*, wore it without a hood.



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



SINISTER

I

PARAVANE was tired. He had tried to keep ahead of weariness but he had traveled fast and steadily through ragged country and it was

inevitable, he supposed, that miles and sleeplessness should overtake him here at the end of his track. He sank gratefully back into a deep chair in the huge, richly comfortable living room of John Charington's



CANYON MASQUERADE

by TOM W. BLACKBURN

Ed Paravane was bullet bait when he discovered why Ruth Charington was taking orders instead of giving them on her renegade-rodged spread

Siniestra Canyon ranchhouse. He was aware of his ragged ten-day beard and his travel-stained gear against the subdued elegance of this room.

They had told him at the office in Denver that this would be a peculiar case. He was beginning to understand what they had meant. The mechanical problems of erecting this magnificent house in the bottom of the most inaccessible canyon of the

Yampa badlands hinted strongly that its builder had been an unusual man. It was not surprising that the circumstances of his reported death had also been unusual—sufficiently so to attract the ruthlessly sharp attention of the claims department of the Mountain Divide Insurance Co.

A door opened and closed beyond the railed balcony across the far end of the living room. Footfalls clicked lightly and quickly along an interior

hall. A girl appeared on the balcony and descended the stairs. Rising, Paravane waited for her to traverse the length of the room.

She was small, beautifully so, but she moved with sure grace and perfect athletic balance which a girlhood spent in the saddle will give a woman. Paravane was aware of slightly snubbed, piquant features, large and expressive eyes which, he noted, could be provocative, and a figure out of a line rider's dream. But these had nothing to do with the business at hand—business in which death was involved at the worst and fraud at the best—and he went no further than automatic appreciation of them.

What caught his attention most strongly and held it were the white lines of internal struggle which gaunted the girl's face and darkened her eyes. Grief, he supposed; the obvious conclusion. A daughter could be close to her father in so remote a place as this. But it was strong grief. A grief which had become desperation. And Paravane wondered at it. Suspicion was a claims man's second nature.

Communication being what it was between the canyons of the Yampa and distant Denver, it was nearly three weeks since John Charington had been reported dead. There were characteristics of strength in this girl's face. Sufficient strength to accept death and control grief in three weeks. Paravane was aware of this.

The girl stopped in front of him with a queer admixture of resentment and uneasiness in her eyes.

But the desperation remained, also, wild and barely controlled, deep within her.

"I'm Ruth Charington," she said stiffly. "I understand you insist on seeing me. I can't imagine why. I've signed affidavits. My foreman and two riders from the ranch have signed them. My father is dead. Isn't that enough? You show little consideration for the tragedy in this house. I hope, Mr. Paravane, that you'll make your business brief and your stay in Siniestra Canyon short!"

There was a bitter acidity in her and Paravane felt its sting. But this was a huge claim and the circumstances were highly irregular as regarded the death of the insured. The Denver office had been explicit in its instructions. The claim supervisor there had a reputation for ferreting out fraud and the Charington case had been a dead fish dragged across his trail.

"As brief and as short as possible, Miss Charington," Paravane told the girl quietly. "You can help in that. A few questions. I'm field investigator for the Mountain Divide Co. We have a claim, accompanied by the affidavits of death you mentioned, filed in your name for a life benefit of one hundred thousand dollars under a policy your father carried with us. I have been sent out to verify the circumstances of his death."

"You think our affidavits are lies?"

Paravane shrugged.

"It's possible. I have seen some which were."

"Then . . . you're not . . . you're not going to pay the claim? Your

company's going to cheat us?"

"Us, Miss Charington?" Paravane murmured. "Our files show you to be the sole survivor and beneficiary."

The girl caught herself with an effort.

"A ranch isn't an individual," she said hastily. "Besides, I've been so used to having dad with me so long—"

Paravane nodded.

"Of course. I'm sorry. How did your father die?"

"He was riding a canyon trail a mile below the house. An outcropping above broke loose and knocked him from his saddle into the canyon. There's a huge eddy there we call the Devil's Pool. We've not found his body—"

"Knocked from the saddle . . . an accident, Miss Charington?"

"What do you think?" the girl countered bitterly. "That I killed him?"

"That's not my job. Not to find how he died. That's for the law. Just as prosecution of involved parties for fraud would be for the law if he was found alive. I have only to make up my mind whether or not John Charington is dead."

The girl leaned forward eagerly.

"And you can decide from what I've told you? You can decide that fast?"

"Yes," Paravane agreed. "Yes, I think I can."

The girl eased immediately. She walked with him to the door and opened it.

"I'm sorry if I've been rude, Mr. Paravane," she said. "I'm afraid I've not been myself the past few

weeks. And this ranch is a terrible burden for a woman, alone. Bert Hauser, our foreman, will be in with the crew directly. He'll see you have quarters for the night and fresh horses for your trip back. Maybe you'd like to look around till he comes in."

The girl paused and looked searchingly at Paravane.

"And one other thing . . . you'll hurry that payment when you return to Denver, won't you?"

"When I return." Paravane nodded. He stepped down into the yard and moved down among the home buildings toward the smoky, noisy run of the Yampa.

He sauntered along with the apparent aimlessness of a stranger with time on his hands, but his eyes were busy. Cattle association records at which he had hastily glanced in Denver had rated Siniestra Canyon the top producer on the western slope. From the record, there was evidence that John Charington had left a rich enough estate that his daughter should not be greatly concerned over the immediate payment of even a hundred thousand dollar life insurance policy. In spite of the fact that the ranch was huge, its income should be large enough to permit Ruth Charington to hire a competent manager who would take the burden of its operation from her. And the maintenance of the ranch property should have been able to continue without in the least reflecting the death of its builder.

Yet Paravane saw disquieting signs on his walk to the river.

He saw a cream separator out of use because of a broken drive sprocket which could have been replaced for a couple of dollars and a letter to a mail order outfit. There was a good wagon abandoned in a weed lot because of a sprung king-pin when the Studebaker outfit would ship a whole front assembly for less than twenty-five dollars. Wood trim about the buildings told a story, too. It had been once carefully kept, but it was already a season past needing a fresh coat of paint. These things spoke loudly to a man who operated his own clean ranch on the Green between cases. This ranch was plainly suffering from a shortage of cash. The kind of shortage which might hit even a big outfit in a bad season. But the market had been high for two years and the mountain country had never known such grass as lay in the bottoms, now. It was a bad situation. The need for money was obvious on the ranch. Too obvious, to Paravane's practised eye.

He went out to the corral and hunkered on the top rail there. Mountain Divide was a rich outfit and many attempts had been made to bilk it. Paravane had uncovered several of these. Each had given him satisfaction. But in spite of the familiar signs which indicated fraud here, he could feel no elation. The girl, he supposed. Something about her had drawn his sympathy.

He was still atop the corral rail, chewing thoughtfully at a hay stem, when a knot of riders came up the canyon and scattered in the yard. He watched one of these, a tall, swinging, thick-bodied man, light

down and step into the main house. The man came out again after a moment, swung his gaze over the yard and started toward Paravane. Ed slid from the fence and took the man's hand when it was offered.

"I'm Bert Hauser, foreman here, Paravane," the man said easily. "Miss Charington tells me you're leaving in the morning. Quick work. We're grateful. This has been hard on us all. We'll cut you out some stock after supper. Meanwhile, is there anything I can do for you?"

Hauser was smooth. Smooth and sure. His lips were smiling but his eyes were not. Paravane was aware of a veiled hostility. He nodded and pointed at the crew gathered around the wash trough.

"Yes," he said shortly. "I want to talk to the hand with the longest service on this ranch."

Hauser blinked curiously, shrugged, and shouted across the yard.

"Baldy. Baldy Brown . . . come down here a minute!"

A grizzled, sour-faced veteran detached himself from the riders and rocked across the yard. Hauser made a brief introduction.

"One question, Baldy," asked Paravane. "How long have you been in the canyon?"

The oldster frowned and spat.

"Sixty days," he said truculently. "Make anything of that?"

"Possibly," Paravane agreed. "That's all."

The rider turned away and moved back among his companions.

"That's all you wanted to know?" Hauser grunted in astonishment.

"From Brown, yes." Paravane nodded. "Now, how long have you been here?"

"Two months," snapped Hauser. Then, seeing the implication of the question, he made a hasty and unnecessary addition. "Baldy came in with me . . ."

"And when the two of you were set, you let the old crew go and brought in a new one," Paravane suggested. "Charington must have liked efficiency. Too bad he didn't live long enough to see how his new crew panned out. Hauser, you can forget about cutting me out some saddle stock. I don't believe I'll be leaving in the morning."

Hauser smiled thinly.

"No," he agreed. "I don't believe you will, either. We eat in ten minutes."

The foreman turned on his heel and walked abruptly away, leaving Paravane with that peculiar sandy and thickened feeling at the base of the tongue which is the last vestige in most men of an ancient instinct warning of danger.

II

When the Siniestra crew was done washing, Paravane stopped by the trough and slobbered the dust from him. This done, he followed the others into the mess hall. The meal was virtually silent, a peculiar thing among ranch hands whose daily riding and the usually solitary nature of their work generally resulted in a bedlam of hoorawing and gossip at meal time. Hauser's face was a

mask. However, Paravane noted distrust in many of the eyes covertly watching him and in Baldy Brown's gaze he read an open, smoky uneasiness.

The meal finished, Paravane went out into the gloom of the yard and found a wagon tongue from which he could watch the front of the main house. He sank onto it, rolled a smoke, and enjoyed it unhurriedly. Bert Hauser went from the mess hall to the big house. He was gone about half an hour.

When he came back down the yard Hauser carefully avoided Paravane, as did the rest of the crew. Ranch hands, particularly in so remote an area, usually made the first hours of a stranger's arrival miserable with a constant fire of questions and talk in a desire to pick up fresh trade gossip, word of friends, and the general run of outside news. And in addition, saddle men were generally a garrulous and friendly kind.

Paravane noted this aloofness. Coupled with the distrust he had seen in many eyes and Baldy Brown's open nervousness, it made basis for thought. Paravane finished his smoke but remained on the wagon tongue until he saw Ruth Charington come out on the veranda of the main house, apparently to enjoy the drift of the evening breeze. He rose, then, and sauntered across to her. She was a little startled when he appeared at the rail below her, but the determination in her eyes was evidence that she had been expecting him. She did not turn her head toward him and she spoke very urgently.

"You've got to leave Siniestra. Quickly; tonight."

"Why?" Paravane's question was blunt.

"I can't tell you. Isn't that enough? Isn't there enough trouble here without your adding to it? Can't you see you can accomplish nothing; that there's nothing to interest you here? You only make it harder for me . . . for all of us—"

Paravane saw that the girl was on the ragged edge of emotional collapse. Her voice was unsteady. And again she had used the plural "us" instead of the singular "me".

"How long has bad luck been hounding this ranch?" Paravane asked, keeping his voice soft. "Since before your father hired Hauser?"

The girl started visibly. There was almost hope in her eyes.

"How'd you know about Siniestra's luck? Has somebody been talking—"

Paravane shook his head.

"I was born in a saddle, Miss Charington," he said gently. "It would be hard to hide some things about a ranch from me."

The girl shrugged listlessly.

"The trouble began more than a year ago," she explained. "Prize feeders run off even home meadows; whole herds on the upper pastures vanishing; Siniestra stock being trimmed until we couldn't ship a head. And ambush shots at riders when they cut too wide for sign. Then letters threatening dad's life started coming. Siniestra had been doing so well that dad was about to drop his policy with Mountain Divide. When the letters started

coming he decided to keep it up. We couldn't trace the letters and with the badlands around us we couldn't track down the stolen cattle."

"So your dad advertised for a hard-rock foreman, hoping he'd get a man who could stop it?"

Ruth Charington nodded.

"Hauser?"

The girl nodded again.

"Yes," she said. "He came in with one man. He took hold of the crew and cut the dead wood out of it. He brought in a rougher kind of man. He rode hard and he fought when he could find something to fight."

"But the rustling didn't stop?"

"Not completely. It cut down. But maybe that was natural. There aren't too many head of beef left on our range, any more."

Paravane looked upward at the girl.

"You know this is all none of my business? You know my job isn't to find what's wrong with Siniestra?"

"Yes," Ruth said.

"But I can do my job as I see fit," Paravane went on. "You know that I might be able to help you?"

"I know you might try."

"But knowing that, you tell me to get off the ranch—tonight!"

The girl stood up.

"There's nothing you can do!" she said desperately. "There's nothing anyone can do. Get back to Denver, please! Get payment on that insurance to me as quickly as you can. Do that and I'm sure I can straighten out Siniestra's trouble."

Paravane shook his head.

"Not if you're caught in the kind of trap I think you are. That money would only sink you deeper. I'm not going back to Denver. Not tonight and not tomorrow. Do you know why?"

The girl made no answer. All color had drained from her cheeks. She was staring at Paravane with a terrible intensity in which there was an unexplainable mixture of wild hope and livid fear.

"I'll tell you why, then," Paravane continued steadily. "Because your father is not dead, Miss Charington. And when I find him, I'll have found the root of all your trouble!"

The girl stared a moment longer, then whirled and ran into the house. As Paravane turned away from the railing a shadow slid out of the darkness beyond the corner of the building. Bert Hauser, followed by two of his men, moved swiftly up to Paravane. The foreman held a gun low before him.

"Since you like to talk so much, mister," growled Hauser, "I reckon you and me had better palaver. Get

moving. Down toward the river, where we can keep it private."

Paravane saw that the man's words were edged with purpose. He was aware that Hauser was making no bluff with the gun in his hand. It was plain that if Paravane did not start moving, he would die where he was. He stepped out, angling across the dark ranch yard toward the distant rumble of the racing Yampa. His captors fell in behind him.

Once, far across the yard, Hauser grunted a brief command. Paravane altered his course and took a narrow trail which held level along the wall of the canyon while the river and the canyon bottom slanted steeply away below.

As the walls of the slot constricted along this lower reach, the noise of the river became more pronounced and an ugly note rose in it. Paravane felt a drift of mist across his face. A tremendous hydraulic power shook the air. Then suddenly the narrows were past and the sound of the Yampa became a soft, swift sibilance. He glanced down. Below him was a natural tank in the course of the canyon. A roughly circular



area in which the entire river spun in a great, almost silent eddy, a vast and incredibly swift whirlpool.

Hauser spoke from behind him. "The Devil's Pool, Paravane. You're so anxious to find John Charington you can go the way he went . . ."

Paravane heard a whisper of movement. He flung himself against the rock wall rising above the trail, but he was too slow. The barrel of Hauser's gun sliced downward. Hot violence exploded in Paravane's head. His knees sagged and he staggered. He tried to cling to the rock but rough hands seized him and spun him loose, away and outward. . .

III

Momentarily dazed by the blow on his head, Paravane was only partially aware of the thin, rising terror which accompanies a long, plummeting drop into space. He knew water was below, silently rushing water which would have the force of stone if his body struck it in an awkward position. He threshed in mid-air, trying to straighten himself. Then he struck, feet first and at only a small slant. Even then the impact was brutal, driving the wind from him, and he went far below the surface.

The water was cold. In that way it was a welcome shock. It cleared his head. Fighting down panic, he stroked powerfully with his arms, fighting toward the surface. After an interminable time air was against his face and he gasped for it.

He was conscious of rushing movement, of the living, treacherous

power of the current carrying him. The segment of night sky framed by the canyon walls wheeled dizzily above him. Something in the water smashed painfully against him. His hands pawed out and gripped the branch-stubbed, uprooted length of a small cedar sapling. He clung grimly to it.

A down current seized him and sucked him under, sapling and all. A cross eddy turned him twice over. When he broke water again, he was close to the wall of the canyon. The segment of sky above continued to wheel. Suddenly it stopped and Paravane was conscious that the circular whirling had become a swift downward rush toward another constriction in the walls of the canyon. Remembering the thunder and the spray thrown up by the narrows above, he knew he could not live through another such race. Still clinging to the dead cedar stub, he struck out with his free hand.

It was agonizing work, what little progress he made seemingly lost in the swift run toward the narrows ahead. A rock jugged out from the canyon wall. He fixed his attention on it and paddled desperately until sobs were sticking in his throat, gasping spasms of exertion.

The rock seemed too distant, impossible to reach. Then one of the wild, patternless eddies alive in the water caught Paravane and slammed him with merciless force toward his goal. Water-polished granite slid under him, then a tearing, potholed sandstone formation. Using the cedar stub as a brake against the rough surface, he slowed the drag

carrying him until his fingers could grip the edge of a pothole. Slowly, very carefully for fear he might slip and fall back into the racing current, he dragged himself from the water.

The potholes were scattered up a steeply slanting scarp. He worked his way painfully and after an interminable time, he came to a shelf damp with spray only about a safe twenty feet above the rushing Yampa. Exhausted and shaken, he sprawled onto this.

He did not know how long he had been lying on this shelf, wet and trembling with reaction, when a voice spoke very close to him. It was a peculiar voice, half plaintive and filled with a peculiar note of terrible uncertainty.

"Ruth . . . is that you, Ruth?"

Paravane rolled over.

A rising moon, up the canyon, was throwing a yellow brilliance into the slot of the Yampa. Because of a marked, bulging overhang above, little light filtered onto the bench where Paravane lay. But there was enough for him to distinguish a startling figure.

The owner of the plaintive, uncertain voice was a man. A big man, evidently, in spite of the dispirited sag of his shoulders and the emaciated condition of his body. He had no shoes, but wore a ragged pair of pants, and a cloth swathing about his head which Paravane could not identify. It was either a crude bandaging or a bandana of sorts against the mists rising from the river.

Paravane rose slowly and the man

shrank back with a quick, livid look of fear.

"No, not Ruth, Mr. Charington," Paravane said quietly. "But I bring you a message from Ruth. She's still working hard to save the Si-niestra. And she wants you to know there's hope, now."

"Hope?" the man muttered. "Hope? How can there be hope? But you bring the kind of message Ruth would send to me. Not the kind I always hear. You aren't one of the others, then. You aren't one of Bert Hauser's men?"

"No," answered Paravane. "I'm an investigator from the Mountain Divide Co."

John Charington sank back against the wall behind the shelf and slowly slid down it to a sitting position. His hands rose to the swathing about his head.

"Hope, you said!" he muttered bitterly. "You said there was hope. But if the company has sent an investigator, then it won't pay that insurance. And without the insurance money, there can be no hope. Hauser promised us that—"

Paravane sat down beside the man. Charington was obviously sick in body. It was possible that much of his sickness of spirit could sprout from the same source. Paravane felt an elation in having found the man whom he had decided must be alive. A hunch was not always so reliable or so readily substantiated. But there were a hundred questions. It required an effort to go slowly.

"You *are* John Charington?"

The gaunt man nodded.

"What happened to you?"

Charington raised his head, then shook it and lowered it again to his hand as if it hurt him savagely.

"I'm not sure," he said vaguely. "It's hard to remember. I'm not sure what really happened and what I've just imagined. From the beginning, you mean?"

It was Paravane's turn to nod silently.

"Hauser. He was the beginning." Charington spoke slowly. "I should have seen it, but I didn't. Half the stock on Siniestra vanishing into the cedar breaks. An empire—an honest-to-God one-man empire—bled to death right under my nose. And when I advertised for a hard-case foreman to fight for me, Hauser showed up. I should have seen it was too quick—that he'd been waiting. When he started cleaning out my regular crew and bringing in his own men, I should have known I'd brought the devil right into my own house. Ruth saw it. Maybe I was stubborn. But I'd built this ranch and I had to save it."

The man stopped. His voice trailed off. He seemed almost asleep. He roused himself with an effort.

"Then I was hurt. A bad fall from a horse. My head. Fuzzy so much of the time. To think hurts now. And there are times I can't think. A doctor. A doctor is the answer. But how can I get to one when Hauser keeps me here and watches Ruth? He wants the insurance money. I'm dead. I am to stay dead. When the insurance money is paid, Hauser will take it. He'll leave Siniestra. Then I will be free of the canyon. Ruth can

take me to Denver. I've been sick. No one will know me and we'll be careful. A doctor will fix my head. When I can think again Ruth and I can come back to the ranch. We'll have that, at least. John Charington will be dead, but a nameless old man will be alive and Ruth will have Siniestra after me."

Paravane remained silent. Here was the whole thing; none of it surprising and all of it fitting together. The ammunition the claims department in Denver needed to put virtually every soul on the ranch behind bars. Certainly Hauser and Charington himself, possibly the girl. Paravane found himself thinking of her. As field man, he might be able to draw his report to ease her out of it. But the old man was a sitting duck for the law-book boys Mountain Divide had hired to protect it. And after this session here on the river, there was little doubt what a prison term would do to this battered, shaken rancher. Paravane swore quietly.

If there was a man with a heart in the Denver office and the right kind of a report went in, the ax could fall where it belonged—on Hauser alone. But Mountain Divide didn't have that kind of a man in Denver and a field investigator was supposed to report facts—all of the facts.

"It's dishonest," Charington murmured. "Disgrace. Can't even use my own name any more. But Ruth will have the ranch. She'll have what I built for her . . ."

His voice softened down to unintelligibility. Paravane tried to rouse

him again and failed. The man appeared to have fallen asleep. Curious, Paravane unwrapped the swathing about Charington's head. The cloth proved to be a clumsy bandage about a terrible scalp injury. Paravane's shirt was wet and far from clean, but it was better than the filthy rags he had removed from the wound.

He ripped the shirt into strips and rebandaged Charington's head. He was just finishing this when Charington stirred. His eyes rolled wildly about. Suddenly he scrambled to his feet, crouching.

"They're coming!" he breathed wildly. "They're coming again. Down the foot trail from the house and swearing because they have to walk a mile of ledges in their boots. They'll bring food and they'll hold it away from me. They'll laugh and make jokes at me. Hide! That's the thing to do! Hide! Sometimes they can't find me . . ."

The man scuttled down the ledge and vanished. Paravane followed him a few feet and discovered that when the Yampa had been at the level of this ledge it had hollowed out a cave of sorts back of it, perhaps a series of caves. Charington had vanished into the mouth of this.

Paravane was puzzled for a moment, wondering if the rancher's alarm was due to his dazed and sick condition. Certainly Paravane had heard no sound. Then he realized that Charington had been here in the bottom of the canyon long enough to have become accustomed to the roaring of the river and that he could likely pick up sounds which

would be lost to others in the thunder rocking the canyon.

Moving carefully, Paravane stepped back into the mouth of the cave into which the demented rancher had vanished. A moment later a ladder roughly fashioned of a pair of riatas and a series of short cedar rungs appeared magically on the wall beside the cave mouth. It had been, Paravane realized, dropped down from above.

The ladder swayed. A man's boots appeared, then another's. The two Hauser men looked down into the river below uneasily, then swung toward the cave.

"Damned old fool's holed up inside again," one of them growled. "Suppose we've got to root him out. Bert's got to keep posted as to how he's doing. That girl's a firebrand. If that insurance money comes in, she sure as hell won't part with it till Bert's shown her her dad, ready to deliver."

"How the old boy keeps alive is past me," the other man answered. "That rap on the noggin he took when that wild black pitched him out of his seat would have killed two ordinary guys, and this hole Bert's been keeping him in ain't exactly a healthy place, what with practically no food and all."

"If you'd built this ranch, you'd put up a pretty good fight to keep it," muttered the first man. "There's sand in Charington, all right. Did you see anything below? That jigger Bert tossed into the drink tonight was Ed Paravane. I've heard of him. Runs to sand, hisself. I'd

feel better, and I reckon Bert would too, if we'd sight his carcass along the river somewheres."

"What carcass?" the other man grunted. "When the Devil's Pool gets through chawing a man there ain't no carcass left! Sand or not, Paravane's dead. Come on, let's smoke out Charington and get back up on top. I don't like it down here."

The two stepped into the mouth of the cave. Paravane had been scrabbling about on the rock floor, hunting for some kind of weapon. He realized suddenly that Charington's prison had been carefully cleaned of such before the rancher was brought here. There was only one course left open. He flattened against the wall, the inner darkness his one hope for even odds. A moment later the two were abreast of him and he shot out from his hiding place in a hard, wicked dive.

IV

Paravane's dive was low. He passed between the two Hauser men, his shoulders catching both in the knees and spilling them roughly. It was so dark a man could not use his eyes. And this was no time for rules. Like a cornered cat, Paravane worked in a silent fury.

A man's face was close at hand, his breath in Paravane's ear. Ed rammed an elbow outward, centering a face. The man grunted noisily. Paravane's hand clamped in his hair. He jerked the head high, then rammed it downward with the full weight of his body. The impact

against the floor made a soft, hollow sound within the cave and limpness ran through the fellow.

A little to one side, the second rider was entangled in Paravane's legs. Ed could hear the rasp of steel along stone as the man whipped his gun from under him. There was likelihood that a third man had been left at the top of the ladder. A shot might alarm him; send him for help. There was no time to reverse and reach the second rider with his hands. Paravane bunched his legs and drove them outward in a lashing kick. They brushed the man's torso and apparently caught his arm. There was a metallic click and a faint spark showed where the man's gun hit the stone flooring of the cave somewhere yards into the interior. The man himself rolled free with a startled, angry oath:

"Why, you ringy old scarecrow!"

Mistaking Paravane for Charington, the Hauser man scrambled to his feet and came back in a rush of his own. Flat on his back, risking chance of a wild kick in the head in order to have the purchase of the floor under his shoulders, Paravane waited.

The fellow came in knees first, cleverly locating his foe by the sound of his breathing. The man was heavy and he understood close work. Ed writhed a little to one side at the last moment, avoiding the full force of the driving knees, but they were crushingly punishing, even then, and Ed felt the air burst from his lungs as the impact came.

Big hands reached and clamped about his throat. Powerful shoulders were behind the grip and Para-

vane realized he was in danger of the same treatment he had himself administered to the other Hauser man. Sickened, retching for air, and with his throat virtually closed in a fingered vise, a frenzy swept him. Arching his body suddenly and twisting at the same time, he threw the man's weight from him. The suddenness and the twist broke the fellow's grip.

The darkness was too much for Paravane, whose fists instead of clamping fingers were his best weapons. He rolled, got his feet under him, and dove for the faint light of the cave entry. The Hauser man was close behind him.

Just as Paravane reached the opening to the shelf outside, his boot toe caught on a small unevenness of the floor and he pitched headlong onto

his face. The man behind him squawked sharply. At the same time, Paravane felt a jolt against his thigh and realized the Hauser rider had tripped against him. The man shot over Paravane, landed hard on the very edge of the shelf, and clawed frantically for an instant for a grip. But his momentum was too much and he tipped on over the edge and vanished.

A short, rising wail came up from the void floored by the silent maelstrom of the Devil's Pool. A voice on the rim above shot down anxiously.

"Christie . . . Harris . . . what's the matter down there?"

Paravane roughened his voice.

"The blamed old fool's in a wild spell. We can't corral him. Give us a hand here, will you?"

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Use Thin Gillettes, four for a dime!
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The man above grumbled an oath and the ladder down the face of the rock commenced to swing again. Paravane ducked back into the cave. He could not find the gun he had kicked from the hand of the man who had gone into the Pool, but the weapon of the first man was still in his belt. Lifting this, Paravane moved back to the shelf.

The ladder was apparently short. The man from above had already reached the bottom. He stood on the ledge, glancing about uncertainly, his gun in his fist. Paravane had before witnessed the phenomenon of a situation in which a man could seemingly smell something wrong without there being any other warning at hand. This now seemed to be the case. The man from above was very cautious and as Paravane moved a little toward one side to keep himself hidden as much as possible, the fellow saw him.

Not only that. Already suspicious, the man seemed to recognize that the figure dim within the cave was not that of either of his companions or of John Charington. He made no outcry and gave no warning. He flung his gun up and fired. It was hasty and the shot missed Paravane, but it struck the rock a scant two feet from him and flung a painful screen of shattered stone against one whole side of his head and neck.

One eye clouded with blood. The man on the shelf dimmed, but Ed saw his wrist move, preparatory to triggering a second shot. Without time to raise his weapon high enough for fine shooting and with his torn

face a distraction which made accuracy difficult, Paravane fired his commandeered weapon twice from waist level. For a long instant he was afraid he had missed. Then the man on the shelf turned awkwardly, took two steps toward the foot of the ladder beside the cave entrance, and buckled. He went to his knees, lurched once more to his feet, and, completely losing his direction, staggered off into space from the edge of the narrow shelf.

Paravane felt shaken. He dropped down on his hunkers for a moment. Finding a strip of his shirt left over from bandaging John Charington's injured head, he wiped at his face and fingered the wounds along one side of it. They were superficial though bloody. Painful in the extreme, but of no consequence.

Rising, Paravane went deeper into the cave than he had thus far gone and found John Charington huddled on a pallet on the floor with ragged bedclothes pulled up over his head after the fashion of an uneasy child in a thunderstorm. He raised the man to his feet.

"It's all right, Mr. Charington," Paravane said quietly. "It's all right, now. We're going to get out of here. We're going home . . ."

"Back to Ruth?" whispered Charington.

"Back to Ruth," Paravane agreed.

The old man stiffened. His head straightened on his neck.

"We've whipped them, then! By hell, I knew no thieving son could beat Siniestra down!"

"We've won the first hand," Paravane corrected. "If we're careful

and work it right, we'll clean the table."

"We'll be careful, then," Charington said with an exaggerated, somehow pitiful, demonstration of caution. And he followed Paravane to the foot of the ladder.

Sending the old man ahead of him and following closely so as to guide the uncertain feet and to catch the rancher should he be unable to complete the climb because of his weakened condition, Paravane moved up the ladder. Ed was aware that his escape from the Devil's Pool and his tangle with the three Hauser men at the cave under the overhang had been close things, strongly streaked with luck. But the premonition was in him that they were pale preludes to what would face him when he returned to the Siniestra headquarters with this dazed, light-headed, and unpredictable man who was worth a hundred thousand dollars in cash to both Paravane's own employers and Bert Hauser.

V

The climb up the thirty-foot ladder was interminable. John Charington was breathing heavily when they reached an upper ledge on the side wall of the canyon. Paravane was momentarily uneasy for fear the injured man would collapse. But one of the unpredictable changes which appeared to seize Charington as a result of the effect of his injury swept him and he stiffened.

"Ruth!" he muttered. "Ruth . . ." And he started steadily along the narrow shelving trail. Paravane fell in behind him, readily understanding

why Hauser's men cursed at having to foot this mile-long tortuous track from the ranch to the cave.

They had traveled considerable distance when Charington halted.

"I want to go over this slowly," he said carefully. "I want to be sure I understand. You are an insurance man, come here to see if I was alive or not. Your name is Paravane. You understand what Bert Hauser has been up to—that he has virtually broken the Siniestra and that since my accidental injury he has kept me prisoner in the hope of getting the insurance money?"

Paravane nodded. Things looked good, for the moment. It appeared Charington was in for a period of lucidity. This would be of great value, particularly since he knew the details of the ranch layout, even in the darkness about them. However, the hope was short-lived. Charington immediately passed his hand over his eyes and began to mutter again.

"Enemies . . . enemies everywhere. But I'm not down yet, Ruth. Not clear down. Keep hoping, girl. Keep hoping . . ."

Paravane took the older man's arm and started forward again along the trail.

The next half hour was an eternity of uncertainty. There was the constant fear that Charington's fevered imagination might work up hallucinations which would terrorize him; that he would cry out and alarm Hauser's crew. It was a fair guess, also, that Hauser would directly become impatient over the failure of the three who had gone to the cave to return and the chances were good

that he would send others out to see what had become of them. There was a constant chance, too, that some man of the new Siniestra crew would be idling about the yard at the wrong time and place and thus cut across Paravane's slow approach to the main house.

Paravane guarded against these possibilities as best he could. But his primary purpose was still to get Charington into the house where his daughter could look after him. He believed this was essential. It seemed reasonable that when Hauser discovered that Ed Paravane was not at the bottom of the Devil's Pool and that Charington himself was no longer prisoner in the cave, the foreman would take two abrupt, simultaneous steps.

He would, in the first place, make certain that the investigator who had escaped him once did not do so again. At the same time, he would attempt to remove Charington completely, taking his chances on being able to hold the rancher's daughter until such time as the insurance money had been paid rather than again run the risk of another company man filtering down the Yampa and discovering, as Paravane had done, that the supposedly dead rancher was still alive.

The approach to the main house was therefore very touchy work. In the end, however, Paravane and his companion made it and out of a long habit which had not been derailed by suffering and injury, Charington fumbled along the logs of the rear wall of the building until he found a rusty key to the small rear door

letting into his office. The room within was dark. Charington stumbled against a small table and muttered a soft, protesting complaint.

Quick footfalls sounded in another part of the house and a moment later Ruth pulled open the door into the study. Her fear was more marked. She was at the obvious limit of control. Her lips formed a stiff query.

"Who . . . who is it?"

"Quietly, Miss Charington," Paravane cautioned. "It's Ed Paravane—and your father."

"Dad!"

This time her voice was soft, controlled. She ran swiftly into the room. Charington took a few uncertain steps and they met in an embrace of shaken relief. Paravane stood apart, permitting them this moment. He would have to shatter it soon enough.

This man, though prisoner, had agreed to a representation of his death to an insurance company for the purpose of illegally receiving benefits under a policy. This girl had of her own free will signed false affidavits of her father's death for the same purpose. That the money was to be used as a virtual ransom to buy her father's freedom and safety was a point beyond consideration of the law.

According to the books, these two were due for prosecution, hands down. And Paravane reflected sourly that the Denver claim office was so blasted righteous that a common sense plea would not budge them. This was fraud and the Charingtons

would be crucified for it—if the field reports contained all the facts.

It was a temptation. A certain inner pride had always held Paravane to strictest accuracy. But there seemed circumstances here . . .

He was wrestling with the thought when Ruth Charington crossed to him. Her eyes were not friendly. Ed realized she knew much of what was going on in his mind. She knew the inevitable result of the insurance company finding her father after the incriminating affidavits had been filed. And he admired her for the fact that whether or not she was aware of his own reluctance, she did not attempt to cajole him.

"Now that you've found father, I suppose the next step is to start for Denver," she suggested acidly. "The brilliant investigator and his two prisoners!"

Paravane winced. He nodded toward the windows.

"Ordinarily, maybe, yes," he said. "But the custom is to take in all conspirators in a fraud when you take in any, and there's one or two still missing."

"Hauser?"

Paravane nodded again.

"Don't be a fool!" the girl said sharply. "You may be good, but Hauser has nine men on this ranch. Not even *you* could face those odds, Mr. Mountain Divide. Let's go quietly, out the back way. Any other risk is too big."

Paravane smiled.

"And with that big a crew you think Hauser is so asleep that the three of us could quit this ranch without being caught in the process?

If any of us are to leave Siniestra, Hauser will have to be taken care of first."

The girl bit her lip.

"Take your father," Paravane went on, "and hide him. Hide with him. Keep out of the way. If I'm not back in half an hour, then you can try the back way if you like—and you won't have to worry about any reports. There won't be anybody to make them."

The girl started across the room with her father, then stopped abruptly.

"Reports?" she questioned. "Just what kind of reports are you going to file?"

Paravane scowled.

"Miss Charington, I don't know," he said honestly. "Now, find a hiding place."

The girl nodded numbly and piloted her father out the door into the body of the big house. When they were gone Paravane stepped again into the night by the little back door. Circling toward the front of the main building, he surveyed the yard.

Although lights were up in the bunkhouse across the compound, Hauser and his men were gathered about ten yards out from the veranda of the main house. They appeared to be watching the front of the building very closely. Paravane shoved out far enough from his own corner to see what was drawing their attention. He swore softly.

Ruth Charington had done a very stupid thing—or a very underhanded one. It set Paravane's doubts about

her to wheeling again. The girl was in a tight spot; he knew that. Having signed a false statement of her father's death, she must now realize her own position, once the facts reached Denver and Mountain Divide began prosecution. She must also realize that her father would be involved to the wreck, also.

Paravane cast his mind back to the reunion scene in the darkened ranch office in an effort to measure the girl's attitude there. A numbness had seemed to characterize her, but it could have been a screen for bitter enmity and rapid planning. And there was always the possibility that Ruth Charington had measured the odds her own way.

There was the possibility that she felt that since her father and herself were again together they might be able to deal to better advantage with Hauser—past experience be damned—than with the tall, quiet man whom Mountain Divide had sent to Sinistra. If she had so decided, then Paravane had enemies behind him as well as in front. He watched the light moving across the windows in the front of the house, the light Hauser and his men were watching so intently.

It was obviously a lamp in the hands of either John Charington or his daughter, and it plainly marked their course along the second floor. It disappeared momentarily, then winked again into being in one of the tiny dormer windows of the attic space. It was a complete revelation of the hiding place to which Paravane had sent the girl and her father. It might also be a signal to

Hauser. Or it might be nothing more than the utter stupidity of shaken nerves. Whatever it was, it created a diversion and Paravane seized it.

Hauser's men had bunched close about their boss. Paravane, flattened against the front wall of the house, slid carefully closer to them.

"It's the gal, all right," one of the riders growled. "Prowlin'. She's gone off her head, too, I reckon."

Hauser snorted.

"Not that little witch!" he bit out. "She knows that all that's between me and this ranch right now is her. She'll fight till she drops, but she'll hang onto her senses. This is something different. Looks like she's holing up. And why? I don't like the way this fits in. You boys remember what I told Christie and Harris and Sawyer to do?"

"Get down to the cave and see if the old man was still kicking," somebody said. "And while they was there to look along the edge of the pool for the carcass of that long gent from Denver."

Hauser nodded.

"And those three boys ain't back. See how it fits? Something's gone wrong. Nobody could live through the Devil's Pool, but Baldy, who's heard something about this Paravane, says he was rocky enough to do it if anybody could. Maybe Paravane got to the cave and jumped Christie and the boys—him and the old man together, say. Or the old man, crazy wild, might have turned on 'em and surprised them. I'll give you odds, either way, that Char-

ington's right there in the house—now!"

Baldy Brown shoved forward.

"Then I reckon we'd better root him out, eh, Bert?"

Hauser grunted.

"See he makes a stand against you, this time. I'm fed up with playing. Bring him out toes up, this time. We'll ship his carcass to Denver C. O. D. if that blasted insurance company wants its proof so blamed bad. And I'll settle with the girl when the money comes through!"

Knotted together, Hauser and his men started silently forward.

VI

Paravane had planned an Indian game in the yard, biding his time and picking his men one at a time. He had a chance in this fashion. But now he was crowded. He was aware that the borrowed gun in his hand did not contain enough loads to handle Hauser's bunch in a lump, even if he ran into the luck of the gods. Still, if Hauser got his boys into the big house, the game would be done.

Paravane decided swiftly and scuttled along the wall of the house toward the steps leading up to the veranda. Then, a fractional moment before he was certain to be seen, he dropped into a crouch and spoke sharply.

"Let's stop it here, Hauser!"

He had hoped the element of surprise would give him an additional moment. So far as the balance of the crew was concerned, it did. But Paravane had underestimated

Hauser. The man's swift senses and quick mind recognized his voice, placed it, and grasped the entire situation, all in an instant. Hauser wheeled a little, dropped low himself, and flung a shot into the wall behind Paravane's shoulder. Only a little behind his boss, Baldy Brown flung up his iron.

Paravane fired while Brown's weapon was still moving and the man doubled abruptly onto his face in the dust. Hauser ducked back in a quartering turn which took him behind the remaining five men with him. Another man fired at the flash of Paravane's gun and Ed was flung back against the peeled poles of the house wall, shaken and hurt. From the shelter of his men Hauser fired again, still a little wide but much too close.

Paravane straightened. He knew he was going to go down but the grim thought persisted that if he could reach Hauser—if he could take the Siniestra foreman out of it before he caved himself—the others would probably break. They'd be through with their scheme here. They'd lack the drive and guts to carry it through without Hauser's prodding. They'd clear off the ranch. Holding his gun up steadily in front of him, he stepped away from the house, firing with a merciless regularity as he advanced.

He was hit again. Then, suddenly, a heavier note was taken up in the firing. A man went down a yard wide of the mark at which Paravane had loosed his last shot.

The Hauser bunch broke, scattering a little. Another doubled up.

Hauser himself was again in the open, fully startled now, and without shelter. The heavier fire was ragged. Rifles, Paravane knew—from the house behind him. From the dormer windows of the attic space. Ruth Charington and her father. But why? Why had the old man and his daughter joined him? In the hope, perhaps, that with Hauser and his men out of the way they could then deal with the insurance man whose return to Denver would put them at the mercy of the company they had attempted to defraud.

It wasn't a pleasant thought. Once Hauser's men were scattered or cut down, one of those big rifle slugs from the house between Paravane's shoulder blades would solve a lot of problems for John Charington and his daughter. A lot of problems.

Paravane shook his head, clearing it and driving the Charingtons from his mind. His eyes were fixed on Bert Hauser. He swung grimly toward the man.

The foreman fired, missed, and dropped to one knee. He fired again and Paravane leaned into a hard blow which brought a windy, tortured grunt from him. But he held on. Suddenly Hauser was directly in front of him, coming up from his knee-bent position with eyes wide in alarm and his whole attention riveted on Paravane's face.

The balance of the renegade crew had vanished from Paravane's own attention. The rifles were still roaring intermittently somewhere behind him but none of their slugs were

whistling about him so he supposed the Charingtons still had other targets in the yard at which to shoot.

Hauser was his man. Hauser was within reach of his hands. The rest could wait on this. A running pain which rose as the shock of his wounds subsided left no room for other thought in Paravane's mind. His hands went out. They seemed slow, yet there was impact when they closed on Hauser, so he supposed, after all, the move had been swift.

He caught the foreman by one shoulder and jerked him toward him. Then, because this was not punishment or self-defense but a final thing, to be settled swiftly, he used the hard bludgeon of his forearm instead of his fist. As he was dragged forward, Hauser pivoted. Paravane used this spinning motion and turned himself in the opposite direction so that both movements added to the velocity of the blow. With smooth and beautiful timing, he raised and stiffened his bent arm, catching Hauser on the side of the jaw with the hard and solid bone of his arm, just below the elbow.

Hauser's head went up and to one side at a crooked angle. The man began to sag. Without breaking the rhythm of his own advance, Paravane caught Hauser's head under the crook of his arm, locked his own wrist with his free hand, and made a terrific, twisting upward heave. At about the height of Paravane's shoulders Hauser's head pulled from his grip and the man somersaulted backward. He landed heavily in the dust of the yard and lay motionless except for a slow pulling up of one

leg so that its knee was raised a little. This ceased and the leg fell over limply and unnaturally to one side.

Paravane swabbed clumsily at his face with one hand and took a forward step to look down at Hauser. Satisfied and filled with a vague wonder at how quickly a thing could end, he turned and started back toward the house.

He could see light behind the attic dormers and both of the small windows were open. But the guns which had fired from them were silent. He wondered about the Charingtons but could not focus his mind. A glance over the yard showed him six men lying in a ragged sprawl across the compound. Four had dropped as they ran toward the corral. Two lay close at hand, where Paravane had himself tagged them. The crew Hauser had brought onto Siniestra was wiped out.

There was a big rocker on the veranda of the house. Paravane's attention fastened on it. He wanted to sit down. He'd walk that far. He'd walk up the steps . . . up . . .

But it was an interminable distance and the need to sit down grew too great to bear. He sat flatly in the dust and his mind, veering reasonlessly, touched on the Siniestra report he would have to forward to Denver. That report had troubled him so gravely. It seemed ridiculously easy, now. It was simplicity itself.

The devil with the bloodless and self-righteous desk men in the claims department. John Charington had been found alive. There had been an honest error. The affidavits were

rescinded. The death claim was retracted. The whole thing had been a mistake. And there was another thought in Paravane's mind. A man born on the grass should stay on the grass. Maybe he was done with protecting Mountain Divide's bank account. Maybe he would clean up this thing. Maybe he would settle with the Charingtons. And after that, maybe he would ride north a ways—toward the Gunnison would be a good place—and find him a canyon to his own liking.

Paravane looked up. The front door of the house had opened. Ruth Charington, rifle still in hand, ran down across the yard. Her father came out after her and sank into the rocker on the porch which Paravane had been trying to reach. Paravane watched the girl. He would have to make her understand that she was done with fear. He would have to make her believe that retraction of her claim to the company was all that was required from her.

But Ruth's hostility was gone. So was the tightness from her face. And she seemed to have forgotten her earlier concern about his report. She dropped to one knee beside him in the dust.

"You're . . . you're all right?" she choked.

"Considering," Paravane agreed dryly.

"Here, let me help you. We'll get you into the house. There's a sheepherder down canyon. I'll ride for him and send him on to Cedar Crossing for a doctor . . .

The girl bent above Paravane and

lifted. The brief rest in the dust seemed to have helped. He came up and allowed himself to be piloted unsteadily into the house. A little later Ruth came back into the room in which she had installed Paravane and her father. She was clad in saddle gear, ready to ride down the canyon. Paravane motioned her close to his bed.

"Ma'am, if you'd bring me paper . . . there's my report. The sheep-herder could take it to a telegraph office. And you could send a retraction of your claim."

Ruth smiled.

"I thought you were worrying about that. Stop it. I'm not. I'll send my retraction when I've got a doctor here. And I had time up in the attic to think about your report. I knew what it would be in the end. You're a saddle man. Enough of a saddle man to see into Bert Hauser's game immediately and to know something was wrong with Siniestra. You're too much of a saddle man to send in a report that would ruin this ranch or dad or . . . or me. I . . . I think . . ."

"What?"

"I think that you're even too much of a saddle man to leave the canyon while Siniestra . . . while dad

and I . . . need a man like you as much as we do!"

Paravane tried to reason out the girl's words. Instead, his eyes clung to her and the thought kept repeating itself that she was beautiful . . . beautiful. And this Yampa canyon ranch was a cattleman's dream.

Ruth smiled blindingly, turned, and left the room. Paravane raised himself a little to call her back. He was afraid she still did not understand. A quiet voice spoke from the other bed in the room.

"Ease back, son," John Charington counseled. "You've not only been shot up plenty; you've been roped, thrown, and tied snug with a pigging string. If you've a mind to bow your back about it, better save your breath and rest whiles you've got a chance, 'cause it'll be a chore to get untangled if that's what you're thinking of."

Paravane sank back onto the pillow. His mind was beginning to drift again, but along pleasant trails where the grass was deep and green.

"What'll you pay a foreman?" he asked Charington.

"Shares—if he's in the family," the old man answered. It was enough for Ed Paravane.

THE END

TAKIN' IT EASY!

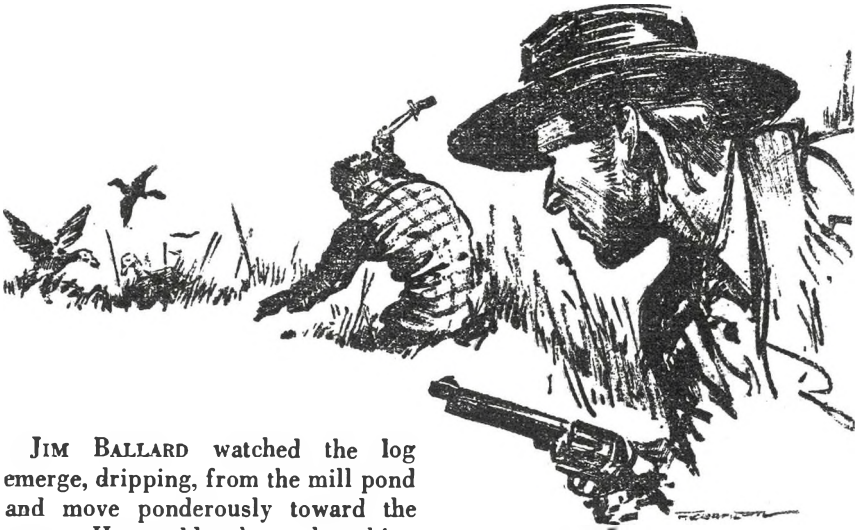
*Mañana is a Spanish word I'd sometime like to borrow!
It means: "Don't skeen no wolfs today wheech you don't shot tomorrow,
An' eef you got some jobs to did, of wheech you do not wanna,
Go 'head an' take siesta now! Tomorrow ees mañana!*

S. OMAR BARKER

*No training had prepared Jim Ballard for
the stiffest job that ever faced a frontier*

LAWMAN

by FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE



JIM BALLARD watched the log emerge, dripping, from the mill pond and move ponderously toward the saws. He could take a breathing spell now. The lumber cargo for the brig, *Jonathan Brent*, was cut and stacked at the water's edge, and Indians had reported that the brig was fighting its way down Puget Sound to Alki Bay. It was 1854; the charts were poor, and a skipper couldn't take chances.

His eyes following a moving log, Jim summed up his accomplishments. He had imported the sawmill from the East by the way of Cape Horn and San Francisco. He had cut lumber and built a hall in time for

the Christmas celebration. He had put up several needed buildings, cut boards for the walls of the mill, and had finished the cargo order. In addition, his natural leadership had been used on numerous occasions. "Ask Jim Ballard to do it!" Or, "What does Jim think?" Or, "You'd better ask Jim about that," were common sentences in Alki Bay. Responding to requests, plus keeping the mill going had cost Jim sleep and rest.

As the saws finished cutting the

last log, Jim shut down the mill and told his employes: "You boys are behind on your work at home. Now's your chance to catch up. I won't need you for a couple of weeks. As soon as the brig lands provisions, I'll pay you off in whatever you need."

He glanced toward the big storehouse—large enough to hold six months' supply of flour, beans, rice, coffee, sugar and other staples. There were shelves for bolts of cloth, blankets, dresses and the things women need. Jim kept a fire going almost all the time to dry out the green lumber and prevent goods from mildewing. On the frontier a man had to think of everything.

Jim blew off the boiler to get the muck and accumulated dirt out of it, refilled it to the proper water level, banked the fire and went home. By eight o'clock he was in bed. He awakened at midnight to the rattle of anchor chain running out. The *Jonathan Brent* had dropped anchor. He went to his window and listened. "Captain Carey, sir," a voice called. It broke off in a choking cry, followed by a thud.

"What's the matter?" Carey's voice boomed through the night.

Jim heard the rattle of blocks as boat falls ran swiftly through them, the splash of a boat striking the water, then the rattle of oars. Someone was rowing rapidly toward the opposite side of the bay.

"Wonder what's going on out there," Jim muttered. "Well, it's none of my business. I've all the grief I can handle right here." He turned in, hoping for a good rest.

About half an hour later someone hammered on his door. It was Jeff Lane, his fiancée's father. Captain Carey was with him.

"Sorry to wake you up, Jim," Lane apologized, "but . . . You tell him, captain."

Carey shrugged. "You have to take what you can get these days in the way of a crew," he said wearily. "Sailors jump ship and head for the gold diggings near San Francisco. I shipped a tough character by the name of Craigen. Troublemaker. A sea lawyer, too. Always talking. He wouldn't obey orders. Wouldn't go aloft when the ship was in danger. The mate finally put him in irons; I was sick when we sailed. Craigen promised to behave. Asked for another chance. Well, we were short-handed, and I released him. He was a model man until we dropped anchor. Then he hit the mate with a belaying pin."

"Kill him?" asked Jim.

"Deader'n a smelt," Carey answered. "Craigen stole a boat and put ashore. We're asking the sheriff or United States marshal in Alki Bay to arrest him."

"There's no sheriff nor marshal here," Jim answered. "We've never needed one."

"You're a growing village," Carey reminded, "and the time has come."

"Yes, that's another responsibility," said Lane. "We've got to elect a lawman."

Jim Ballard named five men in quick succession and in each instance Jeff shook his head and gave a reason why the man wouldn't prove satis-

factory. Every one was too old or too young, or lacked the quick-thinking mind necessary for success.

"We can't afford to have men killed," Jeff pointed out. "We've too few of 'em." Jim realized he was right, which meant, ironically enough, that the community must convert one of its best men into a lawman.

"Craigen can't live off the country very long," Jim said thoughtfully. "The thing to do is to wait for him to come out. We can't risk his picking off men, one by one. It isn't that any of us aren't willing to go after him. It's like Jeff says. Captain, if you were at sea, running low on water, you wouldn't waste it."

"I get your point," Carey admitted. "But suppose he sneaks in for food at night, killing anyone who stops him? Or you send a good man and Craigen picks him off. You send another, with the same result. I'm not trying to discourage you but . . ."

"We've got to air all facts and possibilities," Jeff Lane said. "It looks as though we're facing another crisis. The village stands or falls by the outcome of this. If we fail to arrest our first murderer, then we invite lawless elements to come and make their own rules. If we arrest him and deal justly, sternly, it is notice that we stand for no nonsense. I'll call the people together, explain the situation, and they can elect a lawman."

They held a town meeting at ten o'clock that morning. The men left the fields and woods, the women dried their hands on their aprons, and the children stopped games long enough

to gather in the town hall Jim Ballard had built.

Captain Carey told what had happened. "I've since learned," he concluded, "that he stole a hundred pounds of provisions from the brig's stores and cached them in the boat. It's apparent that the murder was premeditated. You should know the desperation of this man Craigen so that you may choose the right type among you to make the arrest. I'll take the man you pick as lawman to the point where Craigen left the stolen boat, and will give what help I can. If Craigen is captured before I sail, I'll transport him to Portland, my next port of call."

Jim Ballard nodded in agreement, and for a moment he dreamed. "Some day," he thought, "Puget Sound won't be part of Oregon Territory. It will be a State or territory of its own."

"Jim!" Someone broke in on his thoughts. "Dreaming of big cities on Puget Sound ag'in? How do you vote?"

"Vote! Vote!" exclaimed Jim. "What on?"

"We're voting to elect Jim Ballard sheriff," the other answered.

"I vote 'No.'" Jim said.

"Record one No vote," said the man. "Continue!" One by one the others voted Yes.

There was no declining. A man on the frontier did what the others desired. But Jim put up a protest. "I've no lawman training," he pointed out.

"Yeah, and you didn't know nothin' 'bout runnin' a sawmill," someone said, "but you learned to run her by

guess and by gosh, and you're doin' fine."

Jim glanced at his fiancée, Janice Lane. She was very pale. This had happened so swiftly she had not prepared herself to face it. Now she smiled faintly, and Jim grinned.

"I'll do my best for you folks, but you'd better find another lawman when Alki Bay grows bigger," he said. "This isn't in my line."

Captain Carey loaned Jim Ballard a brace of pistols and handcuffs from the brig's store of arms and irons, then he went ashore with him. "Here's where Craigen left the stolen boat. You can see he landed on this tree."

The tree had been torn out by the roots elsewhere and washed up high in a storm. The roots had served as an anchor, while the smaller end was awash at high water.

"Craigen landed here so there'd be no tracks to follow," Jim remarked.

He pushed his way into the timber. The underbrush was dripping from a recent shower. There wasn't a visible track—no footprints in the sod; no broken twigs or brush. The timber beyond was dark and forbidding. For the first time Jim realized the ease with which a lawman could be killed. The hunted man merely waited in a spot of his own choosing for the hunter, killed him, and shoved the remains under a log or buried them on a creek sandbar. Only by the sheerest accident would be a body be found.

Jim returned to the stranded log. "No tracks, captain," he reported.

"The chances are Craigen stayed on the log until the tide went out, walked the beach in the darkness for several miles, then found shelter, knowing that the incoming tide would wipe out his tracks."

"It's quite a problem," said Carey thoughtfully. "But you face a problem every time you turn around on the frontier. I face the problem of burying my mate in your little cemetery, then breaking the news to his good wife when I return to San Francisco." He was silent for several seconds, then asked: "Shall I leave you here?"

"Yes, but after dark tonight, moor an Indian dugout to the log. There's a small one on the beach near my cabin," Jim said.

He started slowly up the beach, following the tide's contour, looking carefully for footprints. Somewhere Craigen had been forced to cross sand above high-water mark.

"I'm going at this wrong," Jim grumbled. "I'm probing blindly. The thing to do is to convince myself that I am a criminal. Well, I am. I'm wanted for murder. I've a few provisions and they've got to last me awhile. I've got to consider pursuit. I can't afford to let a posse from the village, nor men from the brig, close in on me. I'll pick a hideout that will let me watch everything."

Jim's eyes slowly took in the timbered ridges along the bay. Craigen wouldn't go back too far because the timber itself would conceal the village and brig. The man would probably sleep nights believing that it would be impossible for a posse to move through dense timber.

"I'd hide out on that point," Jim said suddenly. It was three or four hundred feet above the beach, and so abrupt that climbing would be difficult. Before a lawman could gain the crest, Craigen would have ample time to escape. The heavy timber afforded the best cover. Wind blowing against smaller trees on the edge of the bluff had twisted and stunted them. Their leaves, trying to stay in the sunlight, created a green screen supported by naked limbs and knotty trunks.

A creek brawled from a deep gulch near the point. It was heavy with devil's clubs on either side. Alders had grown, lived their span, and fallen. The bank was thick with rotted trunks and limbs. Here and there a cedar, down perhaps a hundred years, spanned the creek. Moss grew heavily on the trunk. Going up the creek was a daylight job, but Jim decided to go up at night.

Jim made a pretense of giving up the search, returning to the log and signaling the brig. The captain sent a boat which landed Jim at the settlement.

"I've decided to take that dugout over myself," he announced to the people who had gathered. "Before I make a move, I'm going to get a good night's sleep. I've got to be at my peak to handle that fellow."

"You're right," the second mate said. "He's stocky, with short, powerful arms, and hands that can tear a man apart. He can throw a knife and stick a man. His neck is short. He can pull his chin in like a damned turtle and there isn't much

target for your fist. Ballard, my advice is to shoot him and bring him in. You're dealing with an animal—not a human."

It was grim advice, well intended. Janice who stood next to Jim drew a long breath, filled with dread. Her father looked serious; then he said: "Hanged if I'll let you go alone, Jim. We'll organize a posse . . ."

"It's a one-man job," Jim cut in. "Stealth alone will be successful. And don't worry about me, Janice. I don't intend to be the first sheriff killed in the Puget Sound country."

He awakened for the second night from a sound sleep. The cabin rocked in the wind, and rain was pelting the roof like bird shot. Jim listened a moment in the warmth of his bed. "I hate to leave it," he grumbled, "but I'll never have a better change, with the wind howling over the bluff, and waves washing the shore."

He left a note on the door, put some cold food into his pocket, went down to the beach and pushed the dugout into the water. The wind was behind him, kicking up a following sea. Spray drenched his back and splattered over the craft. He paddled lightly, content to let the storm do most of the work.

Jim headed straight to the creek mouth, drove the paddle hard as a wave carried him into fresh water. Then before the current and undertow dragged the canoe back, he leaped overboard and pushed the boat to the nearest large pool. He filled it with water and piled in rocks until it stayed on the bottom. Then he began wading the stream, arm

protecting his eyes, feet feeling their way over rocks and submerged logs.

Again and again he went under logs spanning the stream, rather than leave tracks by going around. The roar of the storm in the big timber was constant, drowning out all other sounds except the short stretches of rapids and waterfalls. He could hear the sharp crack of breaking trees and the boom of trunks hitting the forest floor.

He crawled from the stream at last, confident that Craigen would never prowl this far from the beach. He was cold and wretched and for a minute he sat on a boulder and thought: "I wouldn't do this for a thousand dollars. Yes, a thousand dollars. It'd be easier to make that sum cutting lumber—as hard as it is. But I'm doing this for nothing—killing something ugly that has reared its head in a peaceful community."

He climbed the ridge, a slow, painful business, with snags catching his

clothing and holding him, and broken branches cutting his face and hands. Now the thought came that this was for nothing—that perhaps Craigen had gone to another bluff to hide out. Jim fought down his doubts, and finished the climb. Up here he could feel the wind's force, for all the trunks between him and the bluff.

He heard branches flying through the air and heard them hit trees and shatter. Fragments dropped without warning on his head and shoulders. He stopped when the smell of exposed tide flats was in his nostrils. He found shelter under a log and huddled there, with knees drawn up to his chin, and arms about his legs, holding, as much as possible, the heat in his body.

A dismal day dawned and he unwrapped the pistols from their waterproof covering and examined them. They were ready. Then, cautiously he made his way back and forth across the ridge looking for sign. He found it—a single footprint in soft earth. It was almost filled with fir needles.

He got down on his knees and blew the needles away. "A short foot," he said, "the foot of a stocky man. It would go with the short arms and bull neck. Besides, no other man has come into these woods."

Jim worked his way slowly ahead, pistol drawn, eyes searching every thicket. He stopped suddenly when he noticed the matted grass near a thicket. It had been stepped on several times, and was slowly raising up again. He crouched and looked around. He was close to Craigen.



"An' I sent him out to round up all dogies he could find!"

Beyond the matted grass lay a windfall. One end protruded over the bluff. From the windfall a man could see the bay, a mass of white caps now. The brig was tugging hard at her anchor chains. Beyond the brig lay the settlement—a huddle of cabins, with smoke whipped away from chimneys as soon as it emerged.

Jim breathed softly. Was Craigen sleeping—or was he waiting for Jim to get closer so that he could hurl that knife? Jim advanced another ten yards. Now he could see the sod behind the windfall. It was gouged out and rain water had partly filled holes made by boot heels. Here Craigen had watched what was going on below. A faint trail led to the roots of another windfall. The spread of roots was twenty feet in diameter affording shelter against wind and rain.

"My man is behind those roots," Jim thought. He was about to make the next move when half a dozen mallard ducks swung low over the point. They circled, came into the wind, hovered a moment, then landed behind the protruding windfall.

"Dammit!" Jim swore under his breath. "If I even stick my head up or make the slightest noise they'll either jerk their heads nervously or fly—or both. And that *would* put Craigen on guard."

Jim couldn't blame the ducks for getting off the rough water, but he wondered how long they would remain. An hour? Perhaps several. They seemed satisfied with their situation and a hen tucked her head under a wing. A big green-headed drake remained watchful.

Jim heard a faint movement to his right. A hand gripping a knife emerged from behind the roots. Then a regular bear of a man crawled into view. His clothing was dry. It was apparent he had spent a comfortable night. Jim thought: "He has a knife, and I've a pistol. That gives me the edge. But I think he's going to get rid of that knife in about ten seconds."

Craigen's gaze was fixed on the green-head. Even in this the man was overwhelmed by his killer instinct. His teeth were set, his lips drawn slightly back, and his eyes blazed with anticipation. The knife hand moved faster than Jim's eyes could follow. The point struck the green-head. The bird gave one flop and lay still. The others flew.

Craigen leaped to his feet, and as he did so, Jim jumped up and ordered: "Up with your hands, Craigen!" The killer whirled in astonishment and raised his hands.

"One move and I'll fire," Jim warned. "I'm arresting you for murder. Turn around and face that root. Keep your hands up."

Craigen's eyes shifted to the knife, half buried in the green-head, and Jim warned: "I wouldn't try it!" Craigen studied Jim with confidence. They presented an odd contrast—one in warm, dry clothing; the other with cuts and scratches, clothing sodden and smeared with mud.

Jim could almost follow Craigen's thoughts—arrest, a swift trial and a public hanging as a warning to others. Everything to lose by submission, everything to gain by mak-

ing a fight of it. The killer must be asking himself: "What's the difference in the long run whether I die by a pistol or a rope? And I might win."

His muscles moved like an animal's gathering for the spring, and Jim warned: "I'll fire. I'm taking no chances with you."

Craigén dived suddenly, body low, hoping the bullet would miss him. Jim pulled the trigger and the cap failed to fire. Before he could pull it a second time, Craigén's shoulder caught him just below the knees. The impact was so great that the man's groping hands missed his legs, and Jim turned a half circle in the air. He struck the ground, the pistol jamming into the muck.

Jim got up with a bound, pulling the second gun. It was smeared with muck and misfired.

"That cuts you down below my size," Craigén taunted. "Guns ain't perfect yet."

Jim backed up and when he felt the green-head touch his heel, he kicked. The duck and knife went over the log. Now it was a case of matching wits, and the outcome for Jim was life itself. Hours of soaking in icy water had drained heavily on his reserve strength. What he accomplished must be done quickly. Each second the fight lasted would improve Craigén's chances.

Jim swung for Craigén's jaw and connected. The man should have dropped, but he was no more affected than if a fly had touched him. There was no buckling of the knees, no dazed expression on his face.

Jim feinted at Craigén's face, then

drove his naked fist into the man's stomach. His fist bounced as if it had struck a rubber ball.

"I've never been licked in my life," Craigén said, grinning confidently. "They hit me and they find they can't hurt me and they get scared. They know they can't lick a man they can't hurt. Then I get 'em."

Jim tried the jaw again, Craigén's counter punch was devastating. Jim felt sick all over, but he didn't go down. He was thinking, "I'm the lawman and this cuss is the outlaw. The law *has* to win. I don't count. It's the law that counts. He's got to be arrested and tried." His plan was born of desperation.

He retreated to the brink of the cliff and punched lightly, devoting his thoughts to avoiding Craigén's blows. There'd be someone on the brig watching the shore and woods through a telescope, half expecting to see Ballard come from the timber with his prisoner.

Five minutes passed and Jim continued to elude Craigén's blows.

"Stand up and fight!" snarled the man.

"Stand up and be murdered," Jim retorted. "My business is to take you alive, and I'm using my own method of doing it." He shifted again, but not fast enough. The blow was a glancing one, but it was sickening.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jim saw a boat tossing on the waves. Now he suddenly changed his tactics. He rushed in and wrapped his arms around Craigén's waist. "Ha!" the man exclaimed. It was a grunt of

triumph, for he specialized in rough and tumble fighting. But Jim's shoulder was in his stomach, Jim's legs were driving him backwards, keeping him off balance, giving him no chance to get set. Suddenly Craigen felt the dirt cave under him.

"You fool!" Craigen yelled. "Look out or we'll both go over."

"That's the idea!" Jim panted. He got his foot against a log and pushed hard.

Together they went over the edge. They dropped ten feet into muck from a slide, and rolled into stunted alders trying to grow on the steep slope. The alders bent and the men's bodies flattened to the ground.

Here the two men broke apart. Craigen, his eyes wide with terror at this kind of fighting, grasped an alder to check the fall. He might have succeeded, might even have climbed the bluff and regained the timber, but Jim drove his feet into the man's chest and broke his grasp.

They rolled over and over, smashing grass and alders, their momentum increasing each second. Jim caught a passing branch and partly checked his fall. It straightened him out and he went the remaining distance feet first. His feet drove knee deep in the muck at the bottom and his body pitched forward. He stopped with stunning force against a boulder.

For a moment he lay there, breathing hard, half dazed. He shook his head, clearing a persisting fog. Vaguely he saw Craigen lumbering up the beach. He stumbled after the man and dragged him down. He drove his fist again and again into

Craigen's stomach and suddenly the big fellow grunted:

"I can't stand . . . any . . . more. I . . ."

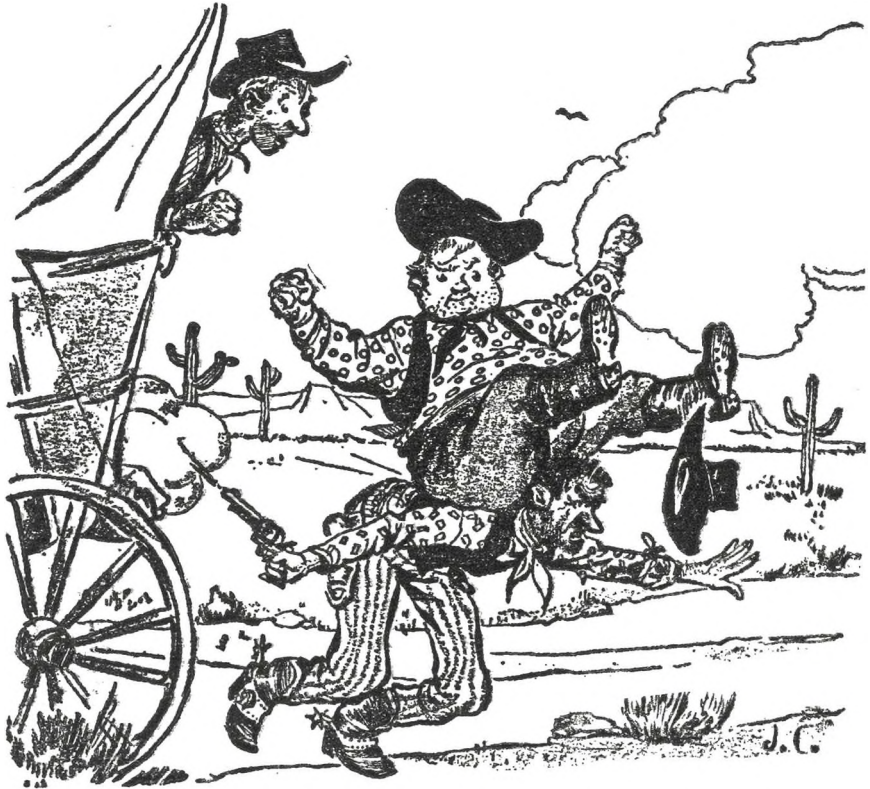
Jim pulled the handcuffs from his pocket and got them onto the man's wrists. He felt worse than Craigen—much worse. But deep within him there was a driving force that made him ignore the sickness and physical pain, that made him retain consciousness and even stand up when the *Brent's* boat grounded and Captain Carey jumped ashore. It was the same force that visualized a great city where dark timber bent against the storm; the same force that had sent Jim Ballard out alone against a killer.

"Here's your man, captain," he said thickly.

Carey shook his head in amazement. "I've been all over the world," he declared, "and I've seen every kind of fight there is, but this is the first time I ever saw a weaker man soften up a brute by dragging him down a cliff."

"It was the only way a man who was all in could take and deliver a prisoner," Jim answered. "Your weapons are up there in the timber. And you'll find my canoe sunk in the creek mouth. Oh, and Craigen's knife stuck in a mallard drake somewhere up the slope."

"We'll take care of everything," Carey assured him, "but first we'll take you home for a bath, a meal, and that rest that we interrupted." He smiled. "I've got to get you in shape. You once promised to build a wharf for my brig, you know."



PUZZLE TRAIL TO PURGATORY

by GIFF CHESHIRE

With that orey-eyed stowaway aboard their jerkline outfit, Matt and Joe figured they'd rather be lost in the desert than planted in Boothill

MATT TANNOCK was lost, together with one double-coupled, canvas-topped freight outfit powered by four spans of clabber-brained and adventurous mules. As he cracked a belated blacksnake in the dawning

light of day, Matt filled the hot Gila desert air with his opinion of the motive power.

"You! You! Seems like a man can't bat an eye without you try your dirty tricks!"

He ceased upbraiding as abruptly as he had started, coming awake enough to remember that Big Joe Gurdane was still asleep—if the noisy disciplining had not already roused him—back under the canvas. Big Joe was the official skinner of this outfit, and Matt was only his swamper. Big Joe would be fit to be tied when he found out where they were, this bright, hot dawn.

For an instant Matt was nearly honest enough to admit he had done more than bat an eye when he gave the lead mules a chance to stray away from the rest of the big L & M freight train. He had in fact taken an abandoned wood-sawing snooze himself. He had no idea how far back that had been.

It was the hottest weather the Gila desert country had known in forty summers, and the L & M train had been laying up by day and moving at night. Instead of sleeping as he should have, back in the little town of Dry Powder the day before, Big Joe had got himself a snootful. Then when they pulled out, after dark, their wagon had been on the tail end. Big Joe had contemplated this position, his own stupor, and the fact that Fred Dinges, the wagon boss, would never know the difference in the dark, and had forthwith turned the jerkline over to his fat swamper.

As for himself, Matt Tannock had felt certain the leaders would have sense enough to follow the wagon ahead. And it was still hot, even if it was dark, and there had been no one to talk to . . .

And when he woke up, here they

were, miles from nowhere. The only possible explanation was that those brown-skinned jack rabbits heading the spans had come upon a tempting turn-off, somewhere back there. And how one fat swamper wished he knew where that somewhere was and how he could reach it again before the proper skinner of this outfit woke up!

A sudden roar behind him told Matt that this was not to be. Big Joe Gurdane looked out-upon country that seemed strange because there was no wagon train stretched ahead, filling the atmosphere with a brown haze of alkali dust.

“What’s the idea pulling ahead?” Joe demanded.

“We ain’t ahead,” Matt answered, wincing.

“Hell’s bells! Are we behind?”

“Don’t rightly know,” Matt confessed. “I got a feeling, though, we’re kind o’ off to the side like.”

For the next five minutes even the mules pricked up their ears in admiration for the language that filled the air, and in appreciation threw their shoulders stoutly against the swinging traces, breaking into a trot.

When Big Joe had discussed everything he felt pertained to the situation, he made his point. “In addition to getting us fired and disgraced on every freight line in the country, where’re we going to find any breakfast out here on this stove lid?”

That, Matt admitted, was an important angle to the predicament. Deep within the folds of flesh girding his middle, hunger burned like a hot coal, and he hadn’t even Big Joe’s

hangover to insulate himself against alluring thoughts of food. He felt pretty certain that Joe would not remain angry with him for long, for Joe was beginning to realize now that he needed his corpulent swamper more than he ever had in their long association.

They made a team, these two habitués of the desert freighting lines. Measure Joe Gurdane and you toted up six foot six of hard muscle slab, approximately the distance the five-foot Matt Tannock was around a much softer belt line. Big Joe was a man of fast and decisive action, but he hated to think. Matt Tannock plied the cerebral art but hated to disturb his comfortable folds of flesh with so much as a tremor of motion. When the two talents were combined, the results were either markedly good or unbelievably bad.

The main result was a mutual dependence. And true to form, having vented himself of his wrath, Big Joe asked: "Well, what're we going to do?"

"The way it looks to me," Matt said thoughtfully, "the thing is to get some breakfast and then get unlost."

Joe nodded. After making various calculations from the position of the sun and the incredibly hot and bare desert encircling them, he said: "We're heading southwest. The Meltshone Trail runs more south. Where we are depends on where we was when we got switched off."

Matt nodded. That information was something only the mules possessed, and there would be no getting it out of them. The thin sprinkling of cacti and Joshua trees was like-

wise locked in eternal muteness. Matt had a sobering feeling that the disjuncture had occurred many miles and many hours past. As ill as he felt toward that traitorous string of mule flesh, he realized he and Joe soon would have to feed and water them. There was a feeding of oats in the burlap nosebags strung on the sides of the wagons, but only a canteen half full of warm and brackish water.

The trail they followed was fairly well worn but gave no evidence of having been traveled recently. If they could raise some landmark they might be able to get their bearings. But Matt had never seen so much monotony in one place in his life. Suddenly he thumped a fat leg.

"By crimony! Wonder what we got that's chawable back under the canvas!"

Joe looked at him soberly. "We don't dare bust into any of the freight. Dinges would sure fire us for that!"

"Thought you said we was fired already. Besides, this is kind of a emergency, ain't it? If you was a sailor on a ship that got into trouble, you'd have a right to eat anything you could find on board, wouldn't you?"

His partner nodded, relieved that the swamper, true to form, had found a way to assuage their collective conscience. The thinking done, the action phase was up to him, and Joe squirmed around and made his way back under the canvas.

"Don't come any closer, hombre!"

Matt's jellylike middle quivered. That voice had belonged to neither

mule, cactus nor Joe Gurdane! It came from under the canvas top, and one of Joe's legs, still protruding, abruptly grew motionless.

"Who . . . are you?" Joe's tight voice inquired, after a moment.

"Never mind who. Just you and your rolypoly pal watch yourselves from here on. This here hoglaig's got a way of actin' sudden!"

The fat swamper reached over and laid a calming hand on Big Joe's ankle to forestall the jigger's exploding into unreasoned tactics, as was often his wont. Matt Tannock presented a lot of target and this was no time to get uppety with a stow-away.

"You can crawl back out, fella!" the voice said. "But don't either of you get funny ideas. I'll be settin' back here watchin'. Just keep on travelin' towards Purgatory."

"Purgatory?" Matt ejaculated.

"That's right. The town, if you behave yourselves. The other place, if you don't." He gave a dry laugh of amusement at his wit.

It at least gave Matt an inkling as to where they were. If this was the Purgatory trail, they must have lost the main train only a short distance out of Dry Powder, in fact within a very short time after Matt succumbed to the temptation to relax. The stinking desert town of Purgatory was about forty-five miles from Dry Powder, off at a tangent from the Meltshone trail. After careful calculations, Matt decided that they must be on the short end of the haul, with the town just beyond the distant horizon. If they could find a

way, it might not be too difficult to get back on the Meltshone road. By crowding it, they might even overtake the train.

The voice chuckled. "I danged near plugged you last night, big mister, when you crawled back here to snooze. Then pretty soon tubby boy went bye-bye, too, and I swear he snored louder than the road racket. So all I had to do was swing the string onto the Purgatory trail, back there at the junction."

"So that's how it happened!" Matt breathed involuntarily. He was painfully curious as to what this jasper's plans were. He had a sinking feeling that he himself would jump at the chance to swap this for their former simple lost condition and painful lack of breakfast.

For a moment hope flickered in him. Fred Dinges, the wagon master, might possibly have noticed that one of his twelve wagon outfits was missing soon enough to discover that it had taken the Purgatory trail. On the other hand, Dinges was easy-going. He disliked the drag dust and always stayed at the head of the train, not being inclined to ride herd very hard unless obliged. Several hours could have passed before he discovered the defection, and then there would be no way of his knowing where his hind wagon had headed.

Big Joe was getting restless. This new development was neither clear nor welcome, and it was his nature to take prompt action in such instances. Such action at this juncture, Matt felt, would be a mistake. He shot Joe a look of warning, which

the big fellow ignored by rasping over his shoulder:

"What in blazes are you up to, mister?"

A chuckle drifted back. "Don't mind telling you, on account of you're going to have a few orders to carry out pretty soon. I rode out o' Dry Powder hossback and come up behind you two-three miles short of the Purgatory junction. I figured certain gents'd be following that horse before long, so I swung up into the tail end of your hind wagon and sent the bronc off across the country without any passenger. I got a hunch it worked."

Again Matt felt foreboding seep through his flesh. He was already aware that the uninvited guest was a curly wolf; it now seemed that said lobo had hounds at his heels. And the advance element of a wolf hunt was no comfortable position for a fat swamper.

"What comes next?" Matt asked, over a wide, sloping shoulder. He asked the question to occupy the fellow's mind, as much as anything. Abruptly he had noticed that they were coming to another junction. It wasn't much of a junction, only a fork where lesser ruts turned southeast from the ruts they were following. Matt didn't want the jeebow to notice that he was nudging the leaders onto it. There was a slim chance it might eventually put them back on the Meltshone trail . . .

"We go on into Purgatory. There you two're going to pose as a couple of wandering peddlers. There's two-three stores there, and you're going

to stop long enough to call on them. I'll take care of some business in the meantime. Then we go on."

The fellow clammed up then, and Matt figured that was all they were going to get out of him for the time being. "You familiar with this country?" he asked.

"No. But all you got to do is follow the trail."

Matt let out an inaudible sigh of relief. From his position there under the weather-grayed duck, the man had not noticed the fork. Where this new trail led Matt had no sure idea, but at least it would not be Purgatory. Anyhow, not the town.

His mind chewed on the problem of what all these strange high-jinks meant, and for a time the heat of rumination deadened him to his hunger pangs. A low brown fringe of hills was lifting on the horizon in this new direction.

"You come to a creek, I been told," the man volunteered presently. "Purgatory's only a mile or two beyond that."

"Speaking of water," remarked Joe, "I got full of rotgut last night and I'm drier'n a sponge. The canteen's hanging down on the shady side of the wagon. We'll have to stop to get it."

After a moment's reflection, the man grunted. "All right. But wait until I can crawl out where I can keep an eye on you. I could use a drink, myself."

Matt stopped the wagon. Joe squirmed over to one side, and the jigger crept out, head first and keeping his six-shooter handy. He wasn't particularly outsize but he had a face

and pair of eyes that could have backed down a grizzly. Of more interest and no less disturbing was the fact that he wore a bloody bandage around his left forearm. He had been in an exchange of hot lead compliments before he hopped on his horse or immediately thereafter.

Matt was silently cursing his partner for making them stop and let the jigger take a look-around. The renegade frowned at the low hills ahead, and Matt swallowed. When you went down the Meltshone trail those hills accompanied you, some eight-ten miles to the right. Matt was reasonably sure that if they could get through the hills, they would shortly thereafter hit the main trail. If they crowded things they might even connect with the train, for Dinges would halt it, come the heat of the day, which was already at hand. But a bigger *if* was getting rid of this jigger, who wasn't giving Big Joe the ghost of a chance to take action.

The renegade was still scowling suspiciously. "This don't look right to me, Fatty! Nobody said nothing about no hills around Purgatory!"

Matt shrugged. "Told you I don't know this country. You said to keep following them ruts, and we're still on the ruts."

"Well, let's get going." The man sent an unconscious searching look over the country behind them. Presently they were tooling along again, with Joe back at his proper place as skinner, but they moved more slowly now for the animals were thirsty, tired and hungry. The renegade crawled back out of sight, but he

never let the teamsters forget the six-gun, handy behind the canvas.

They were climbing a slant so gradual Matt doubted that the man behind was aware of it. Then they topped the grade and the fat man sucked in his breath, for the outfit started rolling so fast Big Joe had to slam on the squealing brakes. There was a growl, and the renegade stuck his head through the canvas again.

"Hey, this don't make sense to me! I never heard nothing about any grades! If you galoots're trying to run a shindy on me, just remember what I told you! It's the town of Purgatory or the real place!"

Matt felt a cold chill running up his spine, then a distraction swerved his thought. A group of horsemen broke abruptly over the far ridge, causing the outlaw to jerk in his head like a frightened snap turtle. "Keep right on rolling!" he rasped. "If they stop you, just remember I got a bead on your kidneys!"

There were half a dozen men in the approaching group, Matt counted. And they filled the road as they lick-larruped up, forcing Big Joe to stop. A deputy sheriff's badge glinted on the vest of the leader.

"Hey!" the lawman yelled. "You seen a jigger on a white-faced black anywhere?"

There was a rumbling sound from Joe that indicated he figured this was as good a place as any to go into action.

"Ain't seen no jigger on no horse anywheres!" Matt cut in hastily. By way of distraction, he continued:

"You seen anything of a L & M freight train?"

"Sure. Back on the Meltshone trail."

"How far's that?"

"Fifteen-twenty miles on through the hills. You're pointed at it."

Big Joe apparently was unable to still his rumble. "What you hunting that jigger for?" he grunted.

"Robbing the Dry Powder bank and killin' the night marshal. Marshal caught him coming out and got hisself gunned down. About ten, last night. By the time the boys could get organized, the dirty son had got a big start. Marshal lived only long enough to say he thought it was Tony Largo, a jigger with a coyote face!"

Matt jerked involuntarily. That was the cuss now lining on himself and Joe, beyond any doubt. "Did he get away with the dough?" he asked tightly.

"Yep. Oscar Burns says probably thirty thousand dollars. Jigger busted in through the back door, and the marshal just happened to run into him . . ."

Matt was not listening. That swag was doubtless right back there under the canvas with its ill-natured custodian. The fat man felt sweat bubbling out of his pores. If this posse got to wondering what a big freight outfit like this was doing way off in these hills they might decide it needed investigating. And if they started a search, the atmosphere would be thick with sizzling lead. Evidently they had not found Largo's riderless horse or they'd be searching everything that moved.

He could not help breathing a sigh of relief when the posse went on. The feeling was short-lived. Tony Largo opened the canvas a little way, so that one evil eye gleamed out. "I gotta good mind to let you have it!" said the bandit. "Weren't your fault they didn't get onto me!"

"Now, now!" Matt remonstrated hastily. "We didn't know there was a posse anywhere near here! How could we? You been with us practically ever since we left Dry Powder!"

"Yeah . . . that's right. Maybe you didn't do it a-purpose, but you heard what that lawdog said. We're off the Purgatory trail, and if we keep going we'll hit the Meltshone road. That won't do. And if we turned around and headed back that posse'd be suspicious, sure as shootin'."

"Why you got to go to Purgatory?" Matt asked.

"Pal of mine's waitin' there. I figured to pick him up and make you jiggers haul us right on out o' the country. Blast you, I gotta good mind to gun you anyhow for fouling it up!"

Matt winced, seeing out of the corner of his eye that Big Joe was building up to the action level again. For a moment Matt figured Joe might as well have at it. Matt was thinking maybe a little faster than Largo. Presently the bandit would decide that this wagon outfit had served its purpose. He would remember that its pair of teamsters knew far more than it was healthy for him that they know. He would calculate that he could best get in touch with his Pur-

gatory pal on foot. Then he would do his gun work, take his swag, and disappear into the hills.

Yet Matt doubted that Big Joe could get very far under the immediate circumstances with Largo's gun not two feet from his short ribs. Even Big Joe seemed to acknowledge that as he sized up the situation out of the corner of his eye.

Matt could see the mental processes taking place behind Largo's eyes exactly as he had forecast them to himself. Largo ruminated, his feral eyes glinting coldly.

"Look, Largo!" Matt said desperately, knowing that if he and Big Joe had ever needed his brains they needed them now. "Your best chance is to stick with us and let us get back with our outfit. Who'd ever think to look for you in a big freight train like that? Once we get into Meltshone, you can cut across to Purgatory from there. Looks to me that's a far smarter way of working it."

"Nothing doing!" Largo snapped. "It'd give you fellers too many chances to mess me up. If I rely on myself, I know I ain't going to get no double-cross!"

"Danged if I'd put any faith in that," Big Joe growled.

"Shut up, Joe!" Matt ordered. He looked at the bandit placatingly. It wasn't hard to figure out that the pal in Purgatory was likely waiting with an owlhooting outfit, with which Largo had not wanted to be bothered while he did the job in Dry Powder. What Big Joe had just said connected with something in Matt's agile mind.

"Why bother with that jigger?" he asked. "You'd just have to split the

loot with him. Fifteen thousand is a lot of money."

"He's got our outfit," Largo answered. "I ain't hitting the badlands without grub and soogans."

"Ah!" Matt said. The exclamation resulted from the fact that he had hit a promising angle, but he made it look as if he had just thought of something. "We got the stuff right here to outfit you, mister! Listen! Me and Joe're going to get fired for this, anyway. We'll fix you up for a lot less than your Purgatory pal'll cost you!"

Largo's eyes gleamed. It was clear that he was interested in the idea of crossing his partner out of the take from the Dry Powder job. Mentally thanking Big Joe for the tip, Matt resumed.

"Want we should stop and bust open some of them cases?"

After a moment the renegade nodded. "Yeah. Looks like you got a good idea."

Big Joe pulled the rig to a stop. The bandit climbed down first and kept his gun carefully on the teamsters when they dropped to the ground. Excitement was rekindling in Matt. He knew Largo would make no such deal with them. The bandit might ride along that way until he got what he wanted, then he'd wind things up in his own fashion. And even if he would deal, Matt had no intention of following through with it.

He knew also that, given stomping room, Big Joe would go into action. That had to be, and Matt was providing the space. Whether

or not Joe came out of it with a whole hide, however, depended entirely on the cleverness of one Matt Tannock. He felt a little sorry for Joe, but that was the way it had always been, Joe running the muscle end and Matt plying the brains.

They walked around to the back of the wagon, Largo prowling behind with his fangs bared and ready to bite. Joe looked at Matt.

"Hoist yourself up, Joe," Matt said. After the big fellow had pulled up over the tailgate, Matt looked at Largo. "You want to give me a lift? Joe'll need a hand digging down to them groceries, and I'm a little hefty to climb up there by myself."

Largo looked at him. Matt was unarmed and regarding him pleasantly, as if confident they were just making a friendly deal between them. The bandit seemed to consider climbing up himself, then gave that up as confining him to too close quarters. Disregarding this hesitation, Matt had already got hold of the hind Jacob's staff and with bulging eyes and straining tendons was lifting himself upward.

As he anticipated, Largo could not resist adding a push where it would do the most good. He put a shoulder against Matt's big roundside and hunched his shoulders in a mighty heave.

Squinting his eyes against several things he anticipated, Matt let go his hand hold, and every last ounce of him dropped like lead on top of Tony Largo. The desperado's pistol exploded and Matt didn't know if the bullet had missed him or had just

not yet penetrated deeply enough to hurt. Then he hit the ground with a giant thud, with a sizable portion of Largo underneath him.

Then Big Joe came sailing over the endgate, as Matt had prayed he would. Largo was twisting himself in frantic lunges, and Matt saw the bore of the six-gun swerving toward him. Sweat broke out all over him, then Joe ended his long, sailing leap. After that the air was full of dust and cursing and hot lead, and Matt scrambled for safety to give Joe elbow room. His own work was done. . . .

The lost freight rig had barely got back onto the Meltshone trail when a funneling of dust to the northeast informed Matt that they were going to connect with Fred Dinges and the main L & M train. His elation at having Tony Largo, trussed up and cursing, back under the canvas—together with some thirty thousand dollars belonging to the Dry Powder bank—dissolved abruptly. It was going to take more than a clever head to square this with the wagon master.

They pulled to the side of the trail, blowing the string while they waited for the train to pull up. Then a horseman came smoking out ahead of the train. That would be Dinges. It was evident from a distance of a hundred yards that the wagon master had his war paint on.

"Where in blazes've you been?" Dinges roared. "All day, while the train rested, I had to ride the back trail, trying to locate you!"

Matt spoke up quickly to take the

reply away from Big Joe. "Well, there was a jigger robbed the bank in Dry Powder—"

"I heard about it!" Dinges snapped. "But a freight outfit ain't no rig for ridin' posse after no outlaw!"

Matt grinned. "Take a look under that canvas, Fred. Or if you'll quiet down you can hear the cussin'. There's your bandit."

"You got him?"

"Yeah." Matt told how it all had happened. Inasmuch as Tony Largo had turned the outfit onto the Purgatory trail, the fat swamper could see

no reason for explaining to the wagon master that both he and Joe had been asleep at the moment.

As the wagon master listened, the anger on his face gave way in interest, then to admiration. "Well, now! Fancy that jigger picking our rig to make his getaway in. And us catching him like we did ain't going to hurt our name any, in these parts. You and Joe must be tired, seeing you didn't get no rest all day. I'll tell you what. Soon as we hit Meltshone I'm going to leave you bozos lay off a trip on full pay. That'll give you a chance to catch up on your sleep!"

THE END

MEN WHO MAKE WESTERN STORY



Larry Bjorklund

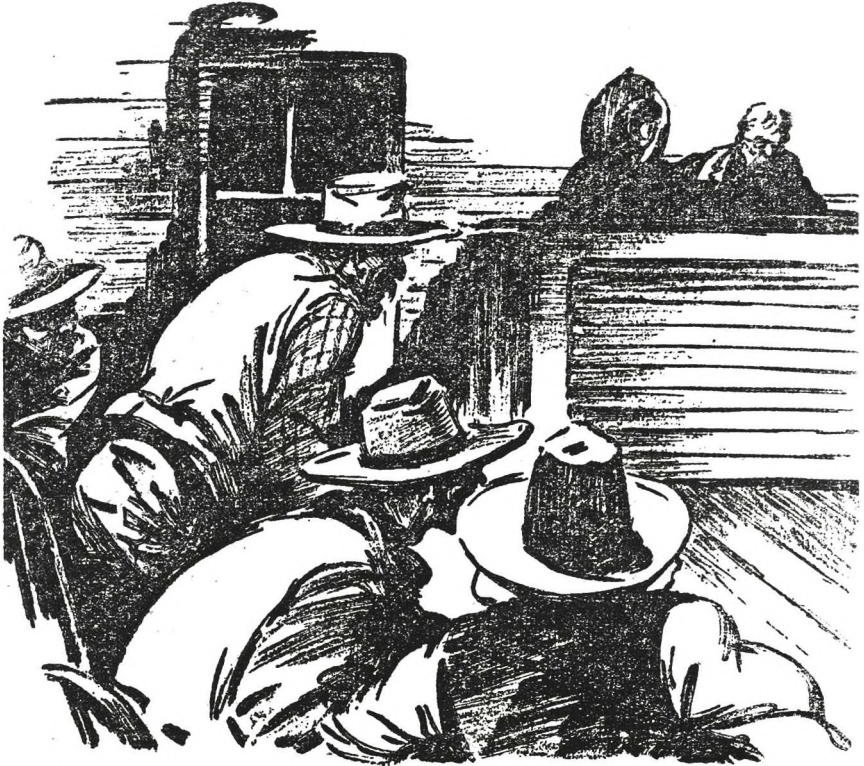
whose illustrations have contributed so much to our pages, was afflicted early in his Minnesota home with an "itchy foot" so, taking the Mississippi by the headwaters, he and a friend got a rowboat and voyaged from St. Paul some 1,826 miles down to the jetties below New Orleans. This jaunt proved only an appetizer and, with time out for school and earning the necessary travel funds, Larry tells us that, "the geography of North America then got thoroughly curried, priorities given to Arizona and New Mexico.

"After such pleasures, living in New York naturally cramped my style, so I built

a little home in the Westchester hills. I began illustrating Westerns (believe it or not my first sale in the East was not a ornery gun-slinger or an end-swapping bronc, but an ad for a mama doll in a N. Y. newspaper!) and collecting ancient pistols and rifles, parts of which were not always obtainable—so the thing to do was make 'em myself. No wonder our basement resembles the innards of a submarine. But the fun I've had among milling machines, drill presses and accessories served me in good stead during the War years, when I was busy making precision instruments. So long as I confine murders to pen and ink, and mayhem to the reverberating machinery below decks, my wife and small daughter are very understanding. I don't mind the quiet of our hills being shattered by our chickens which cackle and crow and our dogs who bay and bark but when I hear boogie-woogie music or water dripping in the sink I turn, with a shudder, to find release in my favorite reading: the Sears Roebuck catalogue and Westbrook Pegler."

Coming in our next issue: Walt Coburn, Rod Patterson, M. Howard Lane, Seth Ranger, S. Omar Barker and many other top-hand features.

"I've never run from trouble," asserted Blaine Cardwell. Then Roaring River went noose-crazy and it was run—or shoot!



GAMBLER'S GUNS

by WILLIAM HEUMAN

I
 THEY were putting the noose around young Fenton's neck, the knot directly behind his left ear. Blaine Cardwell, standing on the top step of the Red Lion Saloon, a

half block from the scene, could see the tall, slim man's knees sagging as he stood on the box below the makeshift gallows.

"He didn't seem like no damn killer to me," the bartender mum-



bled. "Reckon he did a little more drinkin' than was good fer him, but he ain't the only one doin' that, mister."

Blaine rolled a cigarette with his long, white fingers and slid it between his lips. He was small and slim with a narrow face. Clear gray eyes studied the scene down the street without emotion. He'd seen other men die at the ends of ropes, this was no novelty.

"Funny thing"—the bartender

scowled nervously—"I figured Fenton was doin' pretty good up on his claim. Why the devil should he slit a man's throat for his poke?"

"I wouldn't know," answered Blaine. He had black hair beneath his flat-crowned hat, and there were a few gray strands around the temples, giving away his age. On his left cheek bone was a tiny scar where a bullet had grazed his face in a shoot-out over a card table.

The bartender was breathing

heavily now as the doomed man stared over the heads of the big crowd which extended nearly to the steps of the saloon where Blaine was standing. Every miner in Roaring River had knocked off work today to see the murderer, Fenton, hang.

The Red Lion bartender was a fat man with an apron tied up tightly above the bulge of his stomach. Tiny beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead and upper lip as he watched the doomed man.

Blaine Cardwell took the cigarette from his mouth and stared at it reflectively. It was never a pleasant sight to watch a man die at the end of a rope, and he felt his own stomach turning a little. There was no indication of this on his face because years back he'd learned to conceal his emotions, realizing that an enigmatic expression was the professional gambler's ace card.

The fat bartender had to talk to conceal his nervousness. Fenton was standing on the wooden case saying something, but they could not hear his words at this distance. The committee had strung a rope over a protruding beam in an unfinished house at the corner, and they'd gotten a four-foot square wooden packing case for a platform. This was the first official hanging in Roaring River.

"It had to come," the bartender said. "When a man's poke ain't safe, we got to have law."

"You think this will make Roaring River a safe town?" Blaine asked quietly.

"Hell, no," the fat man grumbled.

"This is only the beginnin', Cardwell. There'll be more necks stretched afore it's over." He added as an afterthought, "An' maybe some of 'em won't deserve stretchin'."

Blaine Cardwell smiled at the remark. He'd seen this happen in a dozen towns during the past twenty years—gold towns and silver towns, tough trail towns where the hard cases were taking over. Usually, they hanged the very bad, but invariably there were others caught in the net—dazed men at whom the finger of suspicion had only pointed, with unfortunate results.

Fenton had been accused of murdering a miner by the name of Ed Halsey. The killer had cut a hole in Halsey's tent, crawled in, and stuck a knife in the man's throat as he slept. Two days later the remains of Halsey's poke had been found in Fenton's cabin. The murdered miner had kept his dust in a small black leather bag, and a dozen men had testified that the bag found in Fenton's cabin was Halsey's.

Watching Fenton's face from the distance, Blaine was suddenly struck with the thought that this case was remarkably like one he'd heard tried in a nearby mining camp a year ago. A miner had been murdered in the very same manner, and his poke had been found in the cabin of the man accused of the murder. The accused man had been hanged.

"Who's gonna push that box?" the Red Lion bartender was saying. "That's a hell of a job, Cardwell."

A hush had fallen over the crowd.

Fenton had stopped speaking and was waiting resignedly, knowing that only a miracle would save him now.

Blaine studied the faces of men in the crowd nearest him. Most of them, like the bartender, were sweating profusely, despite the coolness of the late afternoon. The Roaring River camp had been established high in the mountains along either side of Roaring River.

Three men stood in a group directly across the street, watching the scene in silence. Two of them Blaine had known in the other mining camp, and he remembered them because they'd been chased out of town by a vigilante committee.

George St. John, an angular man with red hair, huge flapping ears, and a thin, bony nose, leaned against the wall of the barber shop. He had both hands stuck in his trouser pockets, and his shoulders hunched as he stared at the young miner about to die.

The second man, short, heavy-set Burro Sam, was staring out from behind one of the uprights which supported the awning running out over the board sidewalk. Burro Sam had shoulders and arms like a gorilla, and a huge, pear-shaped head with a covering of sparse brown hair.

Blaine could see Sam's mouth working a little, and once the squat man ran scrubby fingers up toward his thick throat and caressed it nervously. It was a curious gesture and it caught Blaine's eyes at once; it was the act of a man who felt a rope around his own throat.

"Fenton was a damn fool," the bartender muttered. "Why didn't he get rid o' Halsey's bag. He might o' known somebody would walk into his cabin any day an' find it there."

Blaine nodded. The case, he knew, had been too easy. Fenton seemed to be flabbergasted by the enormity of the thing. He'd protested his innocence vigorously, but that first moment after he'd been accused established his guilt in the minds of the men of Roaring River. Blaine knew from observation that an innocent man was more likely to act guilty when cross-examined than the actual culprit. A man with enough nerve to slit another's throat would not flinch from the stares of his neighbors.

"Who'll it be?" the bartender whispered. "I wouldn't have this thing on my mind, Cardwell. What if he didn't do it?"

Again Blaine stared across the road. The third man with Burro Sam and St. John he did not know. This fellow was sallow-faced with a protruding upper lip. He had slanted eyes with a battered black slouch hat pulled down over them. Not as tall as the red-haired St. John, his right shoulder drooped a little which automatically seemed to raise the left, and made it appear as if his head were cocked to one side.

St. John and Burro Sam had been in that boom camp last year when the miner was found dead in his tent, his empty poke discovered in the tent of a fellow miner; and George St. John had been the one

who had found Halsey's poke in Fenton's cabin!

"There he goes!" the bartender choked suddenly.

Blaine saw a big miner run at the wooden case, hit it with his shoulder and knock it over. Fenton swung clear. Looking across the road again, Blaine Cardwell saw Burro Sam clutching at his throat. St. John's face was expressionless, but his hands seemed to be thrust deeper into his pockets.

A sigh swept over the crowd of miners. Blaine Cardwell, face tight, turned and walked into the saloon. He had the heavy feeling that something was wrong.

Inside, the bartender pulled out a bottle and poured himself a stiff drink. Wiping his lips, he stared at Blaine Cardwell, the only man in the room, and then shook his head.

"Have one?" he invited.

Blaine nodded. He never drank during working hours, but now he felt as though he needed something. He had a vision of Fenton's white face, and he could see the young man's mouth, lips loose.

II

Miners started to drift in silently and Blaine walked over to his faro layout and sat on the lookout stool. There would be no bucking the tiger until tonight. Right now these men only wanted to drink.

Con Featherton, a fellow gambler, came over and stood near Blaine. He was a thin-faced, hawk-nosed man with a worried expression.

"They kind of rushed poor Fenton," he observed with a grimace.

"It was a fair trial," Blaine declared. He had picked up his card box and was studying it. "Fenton had a judge and jury convict him." He saw George St. John and Burro Sam coming into the Red Lion. Sam walked hurriedly to the end of the bar, procured a bottle, and poured himself a stiff drink. St. John sauntered among the crowd, pale blue eyes flitting from man to man. He saw Blaine, scratched his chin, but gave no other sign of recognition.

"That boy," Featherton spoke positively, "didn't seem like a murderer to me. He worked his claim like any other man, and he didn't bother anyone."

The sallow-faced man who had been with St. John at the hanging came in with a tall, gangling cowboy in tow. The puncher, about twenty-one, had a tanned, healthy-looking face and laughing blue eyes, the devil dancing in them. He was drunk.

Blaine Cardwell stared at the newcomer thoughtfully. The puncher had a straight nose and a rather wide mouth, but it was his eyes which caught Blaine's attention. He'd seen those eyes before on another man, but that had been far back in the past when he'd been young himself.

"Who's the kid?" he asked Featherton. The sallow-faced man was steering the puncher toward the bar.

"Goes by the name of Touchstone," the gambler replied. "John-

ny Touchstone. I cleaned him the other night in stud."

"Touchstone," Blaine repeated slowly.

"An odd name," agreed Feather-ton.

"One a man doesn't forget," Blaine Cardwell said. He'd known another Touchstone.

Feather-ton drifted away and Blaine put his case box back on the green table top. On a hunch he pushed his way leisurely through the crowd and took a station against the wall a few feet from Burro Sam.

Years ago Blaine had grubstaked a down-and-out vaudeville man, a ventriloquist. The grubstake had never earned Blaine any gold, but he had managed to learn the principles of ventriloquism from the actor before the man gave up prospecting and pulled out for the East.

Standing behind the blocky Burro Sam, Blaine called softly:

"Sam. . . . Oh, Sam."

He threw his voice to Sam's left, so it seemed to come from the barren wall. It was high-pitched, sound-

ing remarkably like that of Hugh Fenton, the dead man.

Burro Sam had been pouring himself another drink, and Blaine saw his shoulders suddenly stiffen. Slowly Sam's head came up, but he was afraid to look toward the wall.

There was a lot of noise in the smoke-laden room, and since Sam was standing by himself in this corner, no others had heard the voice.

Blaine pursed his lips and said in a softly menacing voice.

"You know me, Sam?"

Again it was Fenton's voice. This time Burro Sam turned around, the bottle still gripped in his left hand, face working, the color of dirty clay. His greenish eyes seemed to be popping out of his head, and his mouth was open, lips quivering.

Blaine lit a cigarette. Out of the corner of his eyes he watched Burro Sam stare at that blank wall. Suddenly the blocky man dropped the bottle to the floor with a crash and rushed toward the saloon door,



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nearly knocking down the slim Con Featherton as he went by.

Blaine stared at the bottle which rolled toward his feet, trickling liquor. Then he walked away, knowing that Burro Sam knew more about the murder of Ed Halsey than did Hugh Fenton who had died for it!

He noticed that St. John had joined the sallow-faced man at the bar, and both of them were chatting with Johnny Touchstone. Blaine remembered that Hugh Fenton, a lonely soul in the camp, had been taken into the confidence of St. John and his friends some time before.

Walking up to the bar, Blaine edged his way next to St. John. The red-headed man came around, giving him a cool stare. Officially, they had not acknowledged that they knew each other in this town, St. John probably realizing that Blaine was one of the few men who knew about his past.

"How's business, George?" Blaine asked casually.

"All right," St. John answered. He poured a drink for himself, and one for young Touchstone as Blaine signaled for a bottle himself. "Breaking a precedent, Cardwell?" St. John asked.

"I feel," Blaine said easily, "that I need something today. That wasn't a pleasant sight." He lifted the glass and said casually: "To Hugh Fenton's soul."

He saw St. John's long fingers tighten around the glass as he drank.

"You were a friend of Fenton's,"

Blaine remarked. "You must feel more affected than the rest of us, George."

"I knew him." St. John scowled evasively.

Blaine glanced at Johnny Touchstone, huddled over the bar, a glass inside the circle formed by his arms.

"Fenton was about that young man's age," Blaine went on. "Who would think that he was capable of murder?"

St. John turned around on him, surveying him coldly. "What are you getting at, my friend?" he asked softly.

Blaine looked surprised. "I'm sorry for young Fenton," he said. "I thought he was your friend."

"A man should pay for his crimes," stated St. John.

Blaine Cardwell felt the sallow-faced man come around and stare at him. A six-gun bulged from beneath the man's coat. St. John carried a Remington revolver strapped around his waist.

"He should pay," Blaine agreed easily, "provided he is guilty." With that he walked over to his table and sat down. He listened to the mumble of voices as he shuffled his deck aimlessly. By tonight Fenton would be forgotten, and the Red Lion and Roaring River's twenty or so other saloons and gambling houses would be going full swing.

St. John and the stoop-shouldered man stood at the bar with Touchstone for a few minutes after Blaine left them, and then St. John hitched at his belt and pushed his way

toward Blaine's table. The gambler unbuttoned his black frock coat and let his fingers slide across the pearl handle of a six-gun. The gun was a small one and did not make too big a display beneath his coat.

St. John strolled up to the table, smiling a little, hands hanging at his sides, the right very close to the butt of his Remington.

"Maybe," the redhead said, "I should take exception to your remarks, Cardwell."

Blaine shrugged. "Why?" he asked.

"Fenton was my friend," St. John told him softly.

"It would appear," Blaine remarked with a grin, "as if it were a dangerous thing to be your friend, George."

"Then," St. John chuckled, "you are very lucky, Cardwell." He added in a different tone, "You'll remember to keep out of my business in the future, and keep your remarks to yourself."

Blaine Cardwell stood up, placing the deck of cards on the table. St. John was deliberately trying to make an issue out of this, hoping that Blaine would be goaded into making a play.

"What are you afraid of, George?" Blaine asked him. "You're clear, aren't you?" There was a hint of doubt in his voice which brought the red to St. John's face.

"Damn you!" St. John grated.

Blaine saw him tightening up and he foresaw the next move. Lips scarcely parted, he made a clucking sound to St. John's left, and when the redhead's eyes swiveled, Blaine's

right hand moved very fast. When St. John looked at him again, Blaine's six-gun was leveled at his stomach.

A man yelled to Blaine's right and then dived for cover. Johnny Touchstone, at the bar, turned around, staring stupidly. The stoop-shouldered man started to edge along the bar as if making for the door. His coat was open.

Without looking at him, Blaine pointed with his left hand. "All right, friend," he said. The saw-toothed chap stopped and grinned foolishly.

"You're asking for trouble," St. John said tersely. "You'll find it in this town, Cardwell."

"I have never run from trouble," Blaine told him. He watched George St. John button his coat and move toward the door. The stoop-shouldered man went with him.

Con Featherston came over and picked up Blaine's case box. "I wouldn't fool with those chaps," he said softly. "That hombre with the bad shoulder is Lyman Wilks from Tombstone. He's got a bad name."

"I thought," Blaine observed, "that we'd caught the chap who was pulling off the murders in this town."

Featherston laughed. "There'll be more," he said. "Every man who tries to pull out of Roaring River with a decent-sized poke is in danger of his life."

Blaine nodded. There had been other murders in Roaring River before the killing of Ed Halsey, but

none of the murderers had been apprehended. Miners leaving Roaring River had never been heard from again.

"The boys," observed Featherton, "will be getting tougher all the time as this goes on. They'll grab the first man who looks guilty and string him higher than a kite."

"Hugh Fenton," Caldwell said. He went over to the bar and stood beside Johnny Touchstone. "Drink with me?" he asked.

"Reckon so," Touchstone grinned. "Anybody's got the dinero to buy me one."

"Broke?" Cardwell asked him.

Touchstone nodded. "Cleaned out last night," he admitted. He had a soft drawl which had a familiar ring to it. Blaine Cardwell remembered the State where people spoke like that.

"Come up with a trail herd?" the gambler asked as he poured the drinks. About thirty miles to the west of Roaring River there was a town which was a trail-drive terminus, and many punchers from the south came over to Roaring River after disposing of their stock.

"Had a job with an outfit in Lewistown," Touchstone said. "We brought three thousand head o' beef up the trail."

"Lewistown," Blaine murmured. There was no doubt about it now. This boy was Buck Touchstone's son . . . Marta's boy. Big Buck had been sheriff of Lewistown when he and Blaine had been rivals for the affections of the tall, quiet-spoken Marta Evans. Buck had won out, and Blaine left the town the day after

their marriage. He'd never gone back. Buck and Marta were his best friends in the old days and he'd felt the loss when he learned several years later that both of them had died in a smallpox epidemic, leaving a son with Marta's mother.

"Need a stake, boy?" Blaine asked quietly.

Touchstone grinned. "I figured on sleepin' in the barn with my horse," he admitted.

Blaine pushed a few gold pieces toward him. "Pay me when you get it," he said, "and stay away from St. John."

Touchstone's expression changed. He pushed the coins back along the counter, and Blaine Cardwell saw the stubbornness come into his jaw.

"I reckon nobody tells me who my friends should be, mister," the puncher drawled.

Blaine grinned and pushed the money back again. "I'm wrong," he admitted. "Just be careful in this town, Johnny." He walked away, thinking of Marta, wondering how it would have been if she'd married him instead of Buck. Down the trail he'd met no one to compare with Marta Evans.

III

After eating his supper, Blaine went back to the Red Lion. The owner of the Red Lion paid him three hundred a month to run the faro bank, and Blaine was worth double that money. They had a fifty-dollar limit per card each evening, but occasionally the owner let

that go up to a hundred or two hundred. Miners from the back creeks moved in each night with several thousand dollars' worth of dust in their pokes. It came easy in Roaring River, and it went easier than that.

Blaine closed the bank at two o'clock in the morning and went over to the bar for a drink. The owner of the Red Lion, a small man with a little pug nose, stood at the end of the bar, hands in his pockets.

"Careful on these streets, Blaine," he said. "I don't want to lose the best faro dealer in the State."

Blaine smiled. He went out onto Chestnut Street and he took his six-gun from the holster. Chestnut Street was the main avenue in Roaring River, but it was as dark as a back alley at this hour.

Gripping the gun in his hand, Blaine walked steadily toward his hotel which was on the next block. A drunk lurched past him once, and Blaine flattened against the wall, the gun pointed at the man's body. That stunt had been pulled on him many times.

Passing a shadowy alley, he heard a man groaning softly in the blackness. Blaine smiled and kept moving. A man had been stabbed to death here a week ago when he'd gone in to investigate a similar noise.

About to cross the street toward the hotel, Blaine saw a shadow move at the corner. He faded back into the protecting darkness of a store front and watched the shadow carefully, knowing that George St. John

was afraid of him, afraid of what he suspected.

Another man crossed the street and took up his position on the opposite corner. They had not seen him approaching, for he had walked soundlessly, and kept in the shadows of the buildings along the street.

Blaine Cardwell caressed the cold steel of his gun barrel. The hotel where he lived was a two-story wood structure. There was an alley to the left of the entrance, leading to the hotel stable, and Blaine studied this alley carefully.

The two men watching the front entrance were expecting him to come down Chestnut Street from the Red Lion as was his custom each night, approaching the hotel from the corner on which he was now hidden.

Still gripping the gun, Blaine started a cautious retreat, staying well back into the shadows, until he came to the entrance of the alley. Listening for a few moments, he started walking up the alley, trying not to kick the tin cans strewn along it. The footpad who had groaned a few minutes before seemed to have left.

Emerging on another main street, Blaine walked two blocks south, and then cut down to Chestnut again, coming up on the opposite side of the hotel. Walking under the dark awnings, he slipped into the stable alley next to the building.

The man at the corner was still in position, hugging the wall of the hotel. Blaine crouched down on one knee in the alley and called softly:

"George."

Blaine heard the muffled oath, and then a six-gun cracked, the flame biting a hole in the darkness. The slug seemed to ricochet off the corner of the hotel building, and then Blaine fired twice himself. There was a sharp cry of pain, followed by the sound of boots hammering on the wooden sidewalk.

Blaine leaped out of the alley and sent one shot toward the second man on the opposite corner. This man took to his heels in the other direction. Reloading, Blaine walked into the hotel.

The desk clerk, a frail man with big, thick spectacles, peered at him sleepy-eyed from behind the rough pine-board counter.

"Hit anybody?" he asked curiously.

"No luck," Blaine smiled. "Just pinked him."

"A hell of a town," the clerk grumbled. "I don't know why we stay here."

"Plenty of gold along Roaring River," Blaine said.

The clerk nodded sagely. "But them that digs it don't keep it," he observed. "There's the rub, Cardwell."

"What do you think about Hugh Fenton?" Blaine asked casually.

The hotel man rubbed a pair of bony hands. "Let that boy rest, Cardwell," he scowled. "This town needed a sacrifice. They had one."

"And they'll need more," Blaine observed, "so the murdering can go on without a vigilante committee being organized."

The clerk nodded. "As long as the miners can string up somebody

every once in a while they'll be satisfied. Justice is being dispensed, even though the stealing and killing goes on in the same way."

Blaine Cardwell was thinking of Johnny Touchstone as he went up to his room—the boy, and of Buck and Marta.

"Why stick *your* neck out, Cardwell?" the clerk called after him.

Blaine smiled. His affair with George St. John had already been noised about the town, and every man in Roaring River knew that it hadn't been finished.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of my neck," retorted Blaine.

During the next week Blaine ran across Johnny Touchstone several times. The puncher had decided to stay at the diggings for a while, and Blaine gave him a grubstake. He'd taken an instant liking to the younger man. Touchstone was like his dad, a square-shooter.

Once Blaine saw George St. John and Burro Sam in company with Touchstone, buying him drinks at the Red Lion. After the long trek north Touchstone was out for a good time and he was having it. Blaine watched the trio reflectively as they moved out of the saloon late that night.

Around noon the next day there was a knock on the door of Blaine's room at the hotel. Blaine was shaving and his face was half full of lather. He called to his visitor to come in. It was Con Feather-ton.

"You kind of like this Touch-

stone," Con observed. "Better get over to the warehouse."

Blaine stopped with the razor poised. "Why?" he asked quietly.

"Seems as if Touchstone held up the Lincoln stage," Featherton said, "killed the driver, and also the only passenger. He got off with three or four thousand in gold in the stage treasure box."

"Where is Touchstone?" Blaine asked quickly.

"Some of the boys have him over at the warehouse," answered Featherton. "Whole town's gathering for the trial. It looks like another Hugh Fenton business to me."

"On what evidence?" Blaine wanted to know.

"They picked up Touchstone's neckerchief," Featherton explained. "Gray one with blue dots. You've seen him wearing it. The thing was found in the coach." The gambler paused. "That stage driver was popular, Blaine. This will go bad with the boy."

Blaine Cardwell walked quickly to the window and stared out. The warehouse was farther down the street, and he could see miners coming in to town on horseback, or running down the street on foot. One man yelled to his partner, and then made a motion as if hoisting up a body. Blaine walked back to the mirror and finished his shaving.

"It's not much evidence," he mused. "Con Featherton was sitting on the only chair in the room, smoking a cigar. "There are other neckerchiefs like Touchstone's."

"If the kid can dig his up,"

Featherton said, "he'll be clear. If he can't . . ." His voice trailed off. He began on a new tack. "A lot of boys will recognize that neckerchief, Blaine. Only punchers wear them in this town."

"I'll go over," Blaine stated.

"This town wants another hanging," observed Featherton. "When a decent man like that driver gets shot down, it's going too far."

When Featherton went out, Blaine took his six-gun from the bed and examined the cylinders. Sliding it into the holster, he walked down the stairs.

"Population of Boothill is growing fast," the desk clerk said as Blaine walked past him. "Another one this afternoon."

"Not yet," Blaine told him. He walked leisurely down the street, smoking a cigar and watching the big crowd gather. The warehouse was a long, shedlike building, one story high. Hugh Fenton had been tried there also.

In the crowd outside the doors. Blaine spotted George St. John, Burro Sam and Lyman Wilks. As he walked behind the squat Sam, he said softly:

"You forget me, Sam?"

It was Hugh Fenton's voice, coming from a spot to Burro Sam's right. The heavy-set man spun around, mouth working spasmodically. Blaine saw him mumble something to George St. John, and the red-headed man scowled at him.

At the door a big miner was standing with a shotgun.

"I'd like to see the prisoner," Blaine said.

The miner scratched a heavy black beard. "Reckon you better leave the gun here, Cardwell."

Blaine handed over his gun and went through the door. He found Touchstone sitting in a corner with two miners squatting on boxes a few feet away, six-guns in hand. The puncher's face was blank, but he managed to grin as Blaine came up.

"You hold up that stage?" Blaine asked him.

Touchstone shook his head. "I reckon I don't go in for stuff like that, friend," he drawled.

Blaine smiled at him, knowing the blood in the kid's veins. "What about that neckerchief?" he asked.

"Lost it last night," Touchstone said laconically. He'd seen Hugh Fenton die a few days ago and he knew what was in store for him.

"Watch me at the trial," Blaine whispered. "Be ready to move."

Touchstone stared at him. "They giving me a fair trial?" he asked slowly.

Blaine shrugged. "They want a hanging," he said. "Watch me." He went outside and retrieved his gun, getting the remaining details of the case from a miner. The Lincoln stage had left Roaring River at dawn with one passenger, a drummer from the east. Miners had found the coach several hours later with the driver's bullet-riddled body slumped in the seat, and the drummer dead inside. They'd come back with Johnny Touchstone's neckerchief.

"Lot of shooting for one man," Blaine stated.

The miner shrugged. "He could have pinked the driver first, an' then finished the drummer when the coach stopped. It's a hell of a business."

Blaine walked around to the rear of the warehouse. The building had a front on Chestnut Street, with the rear part of it ending in an alley. A back entrance to a stable opened up on this alley, and Blaine walked into the semi-darkness.

When the hostler came out, Blaine said:

"Saddle two fast horses. I'll be back." He handed the man a bill and went away.

IV

Around at the main entrance to the warehouse the miners were selecting a jury. Judge Amos Crane, a former member of the judiciary in an Eastern State, was to preside at the trial.

Blaine Cardwell watched the twelve grim-faced miners file on to a bench along the right wall of the building. Crane sat behind a make-shift bar at the head of the warehouse. Touchstone was brought up to the front and seated on a box. His hands and feet were untied, but he was watched closely by two miners.

Blaine studied these two. One was a huge man with hamlike hands. He was dressed in a dirty red flannel shirt and heavy boots. The other guard was a lank fellow with a cavernous face. Both had six-shooters in their hands.

Blaine managed to get a position

up front along the wall directly opposite the jurymen. A couple of hundred men crowded into the building while others looked in through the windows. George St. John and his comrades stood in the rear, and Blaine saw St. John stare at him suspiciously.

Johnny Touchstone looked at Blaine once, moistened his lips, and then listened to Judge Crane giving the details of the case. There were no lawyers in the makeshift court room, but witnesses were called and Touchstone's neckerchief was produced.

A half dozen men testified that they'd seen Touchstone wearing the neckerchief around his throat on many occasions. Johnny stated that he'd lost the thing, and Blaine Cardwell saw the unbelief in the eyes of the listeners.

"Where were you staying while in Roaring River?" Judge Crane wanted to know. "What were you doing the morning the stage was held up?"

Touchstone explained that he'd been occupying an abandoned cabin a half mile up along the river. He'd slept late that morning.

"Any way of proving you were in your cabin when the stage was held up?" Crane asked. He was a ponderous man, weighing nearly three hundred pounds, with a huge head and sparse gray hair.

Touchstone thought for a moment and then shook his head. "I was alone," he admitted.

Crane stared at him in moody silence, and Blaine saw the worry in the big judge's blue eyes. The case

was going very badly for the puncher from Texas.

"In my estimation," Crane scowled, "there is not sufficient evidence here to find a man guilty. Are there any more witnesses?"

An ominous silence settled over the packed mob.

"What in hell more do we want, judge?" one man howled from the rear. "The town's goin' to the dogs."

"Send the jury out," another miner roared, "an' somebody git a rope."

There was general laughter at this sally, but Johnny Touchstone didn't flicker an eyelash.

Blaine Cardwell watched the twelve men file out of the building and cross the street to a saloon. They went into one of the back rooms, deliberated for about fifteen minutes, and then strode back again, the foreman in the lead.

Blaine opened his coat and let his long fingers slide down along his vest, coming to rest in the pockets. His right hand was a few inches from the six-shooter. Carefully, he measured the distance between himself and Touchstone. It was about six feet. The two guards stood directly behind Touchstone as he sat on the box, and both had their guns in hand.

The door opening onto the back alley was another couple of yards behind the guards. Blaine assumed it was open. Under such heavy guard he didn't think the miners would figure on an attempted break by the prisoner.

The jurymen sat down, but the

foreman remained standing, a red-bearded man with a hang-dog expression on his face. He glanced at Touchstone nervously.

"What is the verdict?" Judge Crane asked.

"Hang him," the foreman growled.

There was a moment of strained silence as all eyes swiveled toward Johnny Touchstone. Not a sound could be heard in the big room but the strained breathing of the miners.

Blaine Cardwell poised his lips, and, scarcely moving them, said:

"You forgetting me?"

It was Hugh Fenton's voice and it came from behind the judge's seat. The jury foreman's lips started to tremble and his legs nearly gave way. All eyes turned to him, and then Blaine took two long steps. His gun barrel cracked over the lanky guard's head with sufficient force to stun him. The two guards had forgotten Touchstone in their amazement at hearing Hugh Fenton's voice.

Johnny Touchstone, facing the crowd, had seen Blaine coming up with the gun, and he went into action himself without a second of hesitation. Whirling around, the puncher grabbed the fat guard's gun, yanking it from his inert fingers.

"The door," Blaine called out quickly.

A miner yelled from the rear of the room as Touchstone swung his right fist, catching the heavy-set guard full on the jaw and knocking him up hard against Judge Crane's makeshift bench.

Blaine kept his gun on the mob, smiling a little as Johnny Touchstone hurled himself at the door, smashing it through. A six-gun barked from the rear, the slug smashing into the wall a foot above Blaine's head as he stepped through the door himself.

Racing down the alley, stumbling over rubbish, they broke into the stable. Two horses were saddled and ready for them. One was a heavy-barreled buckskin, and the other a dapple gray, somewhat smaller.

Blaine Cardwell leaped into the saddle of the gray, just as the crowd started to pour into the alley.

"Let's go," he said to Touchstone.

They cut out of the alley and on to a main street. Hammering down this thoroughfare, they hit the stage road north to Lincoln.

"Was . . . was that Fenton?" Touchstone gasped when they had slowed their horses a trifle.

Blaine smiled. "Ventriloquism," he stated blandly.

Touchstone grinned and shook his head. He glanced back once. Several shots had followed them, but all were wide.

"I heard about them fellers," Touchstone chuckled, "but never thought I'd ever see one of 'em."

Blaine, knowing the country better, turned off the stage road about a mile out of town, and headed off into the hills. The miners had organized no pursuit, recognizing the futility of it. Both of the fugi-

tives were mounted on fast, fresh animals.

"Kind of wondering," Touchstone said finally, "why you stepped in, Cardwell. This will finish you in Roaring River."

Blaine shrugged. "I knew your dad," he said simply, "and I didn't think his son would commit murder."

Johnny nodded. He held out his hand. "But for you, I'd have been a dead man now, Cardwell. Reckon I won't forget that in a long time."

Blaine shook the younger man's hand, liking him all the more.

"What happens now?" he asked.

Touchstone smiled wryly. "I'll ride," he said. "What else?"

"No," Blaine told him. "That's the worst thing to do. You'll have a price on you all your life. You'll be staying in the shadows."

"I didn't kill those men," Touchstone pointed out.

"If you run," Blaine reminded him, "even those who think you're innocent now will turn away."

Touchstone waited curiously, staring at his animal's neck.

"Stay around," Blaine urged. "We'll try to clear this thing up."

"You have an idea who's behind it?" Touchstone wanted to know.

Blaine Cardwell nodded. "We'll hide out here the rest of the day. I'm going in to Roaring River tonight."

"There's a noose waiting for you," Touchstone observed. "Don't put your head in it."

Blaine left Touchstone in a little gully at dusk, and then headed south

for Roaring River. A full moon swung overhead, dimming the stars near to it. Keeping off the road, Blaine approached Roaring River from the west side, seeing the lights flickering across the little creek from the summit of a hill.

He walked his horse across the shallow stream and tied it in a vacant lot behind the stage company building. This was three blocks from his hotel, and keeping in the back alleys, he approached the building cautiously.

Groups of men stood on the corners along Chestnut Street, and in front of the saloons. Blaine remained in one of the alleys waiting his chance to cross over to the hotel. He could hear some of the talk, and he caught the word "posse."

There was a sudden flurry of noise from the direction of a saloon and then two men fell through the batwing doors and rolled into the dust.

As the crowd ran toward the scene of the fight, Blaine walked swiftly across the street, looked into the hotel, and then walked inside.

The desk clerk's spectacles nearly fell from his face. "Glory be!" he gasped.

Blaine headed for the stairway, grinning. "Get Con Featherston over here," he said quickly. "I'll be in my room."

The clerk reached for his hat on a peg nearby, and then darted for the door. Blaine entered his own room and closed the door. He did not light the lamp on the table.

About ten minutes later he heard the step on the creaking stairway, and then Featherton's light knock on the door.

"That you, Blaine?" Featherton asked softly.

"Come in!" Blaine called.

"Hell," Featherton chuckled when he sat down on the bed in the darkness, "we figured you were fifty miles from here, Blaine."

"The boy is innocent," Blaine said quietly. "I want to prove it."

"How?" asked Featherton.

Blaine related his plan carefully. "Take a few drinks and start talking bfg. Nobody knows how much you've won the past six months."

"I drop a hint," Featherton said, "that I'm pulling out in the morning?"

"You'll be trailed," Blaine said, "and you'll take them to us."

Featherton hesitated, and Blaine Cardwell added:

"They would have hanged that boy, Con, the same way they got Hugh Fenton. Both of them were innocent."

"All right," Con said softly, "I'll take my chances." He went out, and Blaine walked to the window a few minutes later. Looking down from behind the shade, he saw a man step into a doorway directly across the road. Another man was crossing to the stable alley, probably going through to guard the rear door.

Blaine bit his lips. In some way he'd been seen coming in to town and St. John had spotted him. The redhead was reserving for himself

the pleasure of shooting down the man he feared.

Gun in hand, Blaine went down the stairs quickly, hurrying past the frowning hotel clerk.

"What now?" the clerk growled.

"Keep your head down," Blaine told him calmly. He stepped to the rear door, swung it open, and fired two shots into the air. Then he raced toward the front part of the hotel, hearing a shout in the alley. The front door burst open and George St. John broke through, eyes wild.

Blaine struck the man down with the barrel of his gun before St. John could turn on him. He heard St. John's small moan, and then he rushed out into the night, chased across the street and down the back alleys to his waiting horse.

Men were stumbling out of saloons and several shots were fired aimlessly. Blaine splashed across Roaring River and headed for the hills. His horse had plenty of speed, and Blaine let him out.

V

Johnny Touchstone had a tiny fire going when Blaine rode down into the gully just before midnight. The puncher stared at the sweating animal.

"Trouble?" he asked.

"I came close to being set up," Blaine admitted. He squatted down beside the fire and gave the younger man an account of his interview with Featherton.

"You think St. John is behind the

killings?" Touchstone asked when Blaine had finished.

"We'll find out in the morning," Blaine told him grimly. "Con Featherton is not known as a dangerous man, and he'll be followed if he hints that he's made his pile."

"Reckon it still won't clear me," Touchstone remarked, "even if St. John does hold up Featherton."

"We'll see," Blaine said. He took from his coat pocket an extra Colt .45 he'd picked up in his room and handed it to Touchstone. "You might be needing this tomorrow," he smiled.

The puncher slid the gun into his holster. "I've had the feelin' all night," he grinned, "that I was half-dressed, Blaine."

At dawn the next morning they sat their horses in a cottonwood grove just off the Lincoln road. The sun edged up above the rim of the mountains to the east; it skimmed the tops of the trees and gradually dropped down through the branches.

Hearing the soft thump of a horse's hoofs in the dust of the road, Blaine drew his gun and waited. Con Featherton had promised to leave Roaring River at exactly dawn, which would bring him to the spot a short while after.

Blaine saw the gambler coming up on a black gelding. He waited till Featherton was almost abreast of them, and then he called out softly:

"Keep riding, Con."

Featherton touched his cap but didn't turn his head. He had a

heavy saddlebag and he carried a rifle in a saddle holster.

"Keep him in sight," Blaine whispered to Johnny. "If he goes too far ahead of you, they might shoot him down before you can help him."

"Where . . .?" Touchstone started to say, but Blaine was already riding away, pushing back through the woods along the road, heading up into higher country. He held a course parallel to the road for about two miles and then cut back toward it, coming out at a narrow cut. It was along here that the Lincoln stage had been held up on more than one occasion. Huge boulders, ten and fifteen feet high, lay along the base of the cut and a cavalry troop of horsemen could hide here without any difficulty.

Crawling up to the edge of the embankment on foot, Blaine glanced down toward the road which was about eighty feet below. Less than fifty yards away from him, crouched behind a boulder, were George St. John and Lyman Wilks. Both men had their guns out and were staring down the road up which Con Featherton was coming.

Already, Blaine could hear the drum beats of Featherton's horse coming around the bend. Blaine lifted himself a little higher to see if he could spot Johnny Touchstone, and then the rifle cracked from the opposite side of the road.

Even before the slug struck him, Blaine knew he'd made his first serious mistake in not ascertaining the position of Burro Sam. The rifle

bullet struck him a glancing blow on the temple. There was a roaring sound in his head and he felt himself pitching forward involuntarily over the brink of the cliff.

He tried to hold himself, but the strength had gone out of his body. He hit the sand of the embankment with his left shoulder, rolled over and went down, tumbling head over heels. Dizzy, shaken and sick, he slammed up against one of the boulders with his back at the bottom of the slope.

On the way down he'd managed to retain his grip on his six-gun, but the knuckles and fingers of that hand were bruised and bleeding badly.

There was a shot down the road, and a man gave a short shout. Staggering to his feet, Blaine ran in and out among the boulders, hearing other shots, and then Johnny Touchstone's high-pitched Texas yell.

He came out on the road just as Burro Sam broke out from behind a boulder directly opposite from him. The squat man held a Winchester in his hands and he was running toward the fallen Con Featherton. The gambler's horse shot past Blaine, snorting in terror.

Sam spotted Blaine the moment he came out from his hiding place, and he sent a hoarse shout of warning toward St. John and Wilks trotting toward Featherton. As Burro Sam went down on one knee, raising the Winchester, Blaine's first shot hit him squarely in the chest. The Winchester barrel pointed up

in the air as it went off, and Burro Sam stood up very straight before falling backward, arms outstretched.

George St. John spun around quickly, gun spouting flame. Blaine felt one slug go through his coat, and another kicked up the dust inches to the left of his boot. The distance was about thirty yards.

Blaine aimed unhurriedly, ignoring Lyman Wilks. He threw one shot at St. John and saw the redhead cringe as the bullet took him in the middle. Down on one knee, St. John fired two more shots as Blaine walked toward them steadily. The gambler had his gun trained on Wilks now, but there was no need for it.

Johnny Touchstone broke out of the timber, driving his big buckskin straight toward the two road agents. Wilks got a shot at him, but Touchstone's big Colt roared twice, both bullets going home. Wilks fell backward as if he'd been hit with a blacksmith's hammer.

Then Blaine watched George St. John pitch forward very slowly on his face, the blood trickling from his mouth.

Touchstone pulled up his horse and slid out of the saddle. He looked at Blaine curiously as the gambler came up, the right side of his face bloody, clothing torn from the fall down the embankment.

Con Featherton lay on his face in the middle of the road, but he looked up as the two men came up. Blood drenched the gambler's left shoulder and his face was very white.

"Last damned time I play decoy for any road agents," he managed to say.

Blaine helped him to his feet. "We'll have you patched up in an hour's time," he promised. "They'll name the town in your honor."

"Hell with 'em," Con mumbled. "They might hang *me* tomorrow."

Touchstone had taken a quick look at St. John and Wilks. Both men were dead, but Burro Sam was groaning farther down the road.

"Let's have a look at him," Blaine suggested. He supported Con Featherton.

"This hombre don't have long to live," Johnny Touchstone observed. They found Burro Sam lying on his back, looking up at the sky. There was a hole through his chest and he was coughing blood.

Blaine bent down and shook his head. Sam's greenish eyes were glazing. His head lolled back and forth foolishly.

"You know me, Sam?" Blaine asked.

Recognition came into the squat man's eyes, and a look of animal shrewdness.

"You ain't gettin' nuthin' out o' me," Burro Sam whispered.

Blaine stood up. He threw his voice directly above Sam's head, imitating the tones of Hugh Fenton.

"You forgot me again," Fenton said as if injured.

Sam lifted his head, lips working. "You hear that?" he gasped. "He's after me again . . . Fenton!"

Blaine shook his head. He glanced at the placid Johnny Touchstone.

"You're dreaming, Sam," Blaine said. "Fenton's dead."

"He's after me," sobbed Burro Sam.

Again Blaine threw his voice into the air above Burro Sam.

"Where did you put that stage treasure box, Sam?" Fenton asked softly. "You owe me something out of that. I was hanged for you, Sam."

"He's talkin'," Burro Sam shrieked.

"The box," Hugh Fenton repeated easily. "You killed that stage driver the same way that you killed Ed Halsey. I want some of that money, Sam."

"Take it," Burro Sam howled. "George hid it in a cabin . . . old man Johnson's place up on Goose Creek. It's under the floor." He started to foam at the mouth again, twisting violently, and then his body jerked and he was dead.

Con Featherton mopped the sweat from his face with his good hand.

"The boys in the camp are still trying to figure out that one, Blaine," he muttered. "So it was ventriloquism?"

Blaine Cardwell nodded. "You heard Sam's confession," he said. "I guess that clears Johnny in town."

"Clears up a lot of things," admitted Featherton.

Riding back to town together, Johnny Touchstone remarked: "Kind of lucky for me you happened along, Cardwell."

Blaine shrugged. "A man should kind of look after his best friend's boy," he smiled. He added to himself: "Also his best girl's!"

*For two-bits old Dad Stanton would furnish
all the hot water and soap you could use
—but he didn't say anything about those*

BULLETS IN YOUR BATH

by WILLIAM J. GLYNN



OLD Dad Stanton's worry had been a nagging botheration ever since the fight Saturday night. But it was real enough now, with big, stubble-jawed Pete Northfield shouldering

into Ott's place and tramping toward Dad's bathhouse section of the barber shop.

Dad's faded blue eyes wrinkled almost shut in his lined face. His

old knot-jointed hands, white from much hot water, trembled slightly as he braced his stooped figure in the doorway opening on the steamy tub rooms in the rear.

Pete swaggered to an abrupt stop on his run-over boots. He stood there, facing Stanton, glowering like a sullied bull, heavy, powerful, on the prod. A .45 six-shooter swung on his hip. Pete's Saturday-night drunk was over, and it had left him cold sober—ugly Monday-morning sober.

Pete's crafty little eyes were as yellow as saffron and cat-mean. He swiveled his shaggy head to look at the wall clock and with that movement all of Dad's previous fears came to sudden, terrifying climax. Pete was after Homer!

The hands on that clock were showing five minutes to ten. When it chimed, Homer Le Brun would come swinging in on his polished boots, ready for his usual morning's bath. Homer hadn't missed a day in the year Dad had been running the bathhouse. And Dad was proud of that record, partly because Homer was almost like a son, and partly because it spoke well of his clean management, and brought Tombstone's better trade to his door.

Yet, at the moment, Dad caught himself hoping that just for this once, the handsome young owner-manager of the Crystal Palace Saloon and Gambling Hall would feel sufficiently clean to skip a day. If Homer poked his smile in that door, trouble would break with all the virulence of a smallpox epidemic. For Homer was the man who had

given Pete his well-deserved licking Saturday night.

But it was a forlorn hope. Dad knew that as well as Pete knew that it was Homer's bath time. The big mule-skinner knew, too, that Dad was an old stove-up ex-cowhand who had worked for Homer as a bartender until his trembling hands had spoiled his mix-magic and Homer had set him up in business as ram-rod of the bathhouse. That was why Dad had helped Homer throw Pete out of the saloon.

"How about a bath, Pete?" Dad asked, his voice thin and reedy. "Best zinc tubs in Tombstone. All the hot water'n soap you kin use for two-bits. No time limit on soakin'." Dad heard himself chant the old line and strained for a naturalness that somehow wouldn't come. "Or," he tried again, "seein' Ott ain't here yet, how about lettin' me give you a shave and get that bush off your jaw-bone?"

Pete shook his head and gave his puffy face a dry wash with a big brown hand. He winced when his fingers touched the purple discoloration under his right eye.

"No!" he said savagely.

Dad took a deep breath and glanced covertly at the clock. Three minutes to go. "I got hot cloths," he said hopefully. "I'll soak that there black eye Homer gave you." It was the wrong thing to say.

"There's nothin' wrong with my eye," Pete shouted. "But there'll be plenty wrong with yours, if yuh don't show me a tub."

Dad spun around. His hands didn't tremble so bad when he could

move. He could think better, too. He led the way down the hall separating the tub rooms on either side. At the second door on the right he turned around.

"Not in there," Pete roared, treading Dad's high heels. "I ain't no herd critter. There's six tubs in there." He pointed across the hall to the door with Homer Le Brun's name on it. "In there," he said, "that private bath—that's what I want."

Dad had been afraid Pete would ask for Homer's private bathroom, and he was fairly certain Pete wasn't really interested in a bath. But he wouldn't tip his hand yet.

"I . . . can't let you have that room, Pete," he said. "That's the only single-tub room I got. It's Homer's. It's his . . ."

"Le Brun is due here in a couple minutes, ain't he?" Pete broke in curtly, holding the old man steady with his hard little eyes. "Yo're tryin' to stall, so's I won't get my chance at that fancy dude. You can't fool me, yuh old moss-back. I ain't here for no bath, neither." An ugly grin spanned his thick lips, and he patted his six-shooter.

The steam from the big wash boilers on the range filled the air. In it and through it was the odor of soap and clean towels, and underlying all was the menace of that .45 and big, tough Pete Northfield and his hate. Dad felt his hands begin to tremble again and held them down close to his gunless thighs.

"Nothin' but an old stove-up has-been," Dad muttered to himself and

watched Pete move into Homer's room.

Pulling out his six-shooter, Pete waved it at Dad's white face.

"Remember, not a word to that tinhorn," Pete said. "You bring him right back here and don't give me away. Savvy?"

"You're goin' to shoot him, with him not knowin' you're here or nothin'." Dad took a gulp of the steamy air. "'Tain't fair, you dang good-for-nothin' polecat. I—"

Pete's big left hand shot out and with his open palm he slapped the old man, sending him reeling back against the wall. "Now you git, an' fetch some hot water, just like you was gettin' Le Brun's bath ready. That tinhorn's payin' me what he took off me Sat'day night."

Dad picked himself up. Hot blood surged in his sunken cheeks. "You dang—"

Pete lifted his gun, cutting Dad off. "Quiet!" he ordered. "Le Brun's comin' now." Pete poked his head out of the bath door, caught a glimpse of Homer's silk tile hat shining in the morning sun. He ducked inside, thumbing back the hammer of his Colt.

"You git for that hot water," he whispered.

Dad threw a frightened glance over his shoulder, saw the tall, smiling Homer moving lightly toward the tub rooms.

"Morning, old-timer," Homer called, loosening his white stock. "Hope you have that hot water ready."

"Mornin', boy," Dad said glumly

and backed toward the range at the end of the hall. He didn't dare say a word with Pete in there, waiting like a hungry spider in its web.

Homer looked at Stanton, puzzled. "Off your feed, Dad?" he asked. Then he turned toward his tub room, and Dad scurried to the range to dip out a big bucket of the almost boiling bath water.

Homer *did* have a gun, he told himself as he came back up the hall. It was only a little .22 Standard, a "discourager," as Homer named it, a seven-shot pocket gun. But it was a weapon. On big days in the saloon, Homer often had to use it a time or two against drunken cousin-jacks from the mines and paid-off cowhands on a tear. But he'd never killed a man, never done more than put one of those small lead pellets into a hand reaching for knife or hidden gun. Homer Le Brun was a businessman. He wasn't a gunman or quick-draw artist.

At the bath door, Dad put down his bucket, his eyes wide. Pete had Homer backed up against the tub.

"Hand over the thousand I dropped in your dive," Pete was saying, his six-shooter jabbed into Homer's flat stomach.

Le Brun's brown eyes were slits that flicked over Pete's shoulder to Dad Stanton. Surprise was strong in them.

"I haven't got that much on me," he said to Pete. "But why are you pulling a gun on me? You came into my place Saturday night, drunk and mean. When I told you to leave, you got ugly and demanded a chance at the table. You named the game,

six high, ace low, high man to take the money. And you named the stakes—a thousand dollars. If you made your money like you say, driving jerkline to Bisbee with ore, I'd give you back the thousand. But you're just a damn outlaw."

To Dad, Homer said: "Better skin out and get the marshal, Dad. This welsher—" He broke off. Dad was standing there, stockstill, his old hands trembling. "Unless you're in on this," Homer added. "You didn't warn me when I came in."

Dad's heart was in his eyes then. But how could he tell Homer that he didn't have any part in it—that he was so scared his legs wouldn't move—that his tongue stuck in his mouth like a dry wash rag. He picked up the bucket and Pete spun halfway around so that he could watch both men.

"Shut up, the two of you," Pete growled. "I want my dinero, an' if you ain't got it, I want an I.O.U. for it."

"And if I don't write an I.O.U.?" Homer asked, his voice tight.

"Then I do what I'm goin' to do, anyway," snarled Pete. "You an' this old coyote bait that runs this steam hogan are movin' out o' town—to boothill!"

Dad's eyes shuttled to Homer, hands high, gray-faced. The saloon owner wasn't making any move toward the walnut butt of that little gun in his inside coat pocket. It was all up to Dad, and he suddenly felt very old and tired and frightened. Pete turned slightly, so that he could get his big hand in Homer's

pockets. In another minute he'd feel that hide-out gun!

Biting his lips to stop the trembling, Dad cursed out the long hard cowman years when he'd slept on the ground, the kinky broncs he'd ridden and the outlaw horses that had thrown him. It all added up to make an old man. Time was, with a six-shooter in his strong young hand and a spring in legs and back, there'd have been no stopping him.

It was an effort to bring himself back. This was the time. And his memories were too sweet to spoil them in these last years by showing yellow. He lifted the bucket, steeling himself to silence. Shoulder high, he balanced the pail for an instant, winked one old blue eye at Homer and sloshed the steaming water at Pete's big red neck.

The mule-skinner reared, yowling like a pig in the scalding kettle. His .45 threw fire and thunder into the little tub room.

Dad followed the bucket, diving at the big jerkline skinner, his wiry arms encircling Pete's middle. They both fell, thrashing, to the floor.

Screaming with pain, Pete was groping for his six-shooter and trying to dislodge the tough old burr on his back.

Dad knew Homer had leaped into action, but he was too busy to do anything but grip that red neck and hold tight. Then a sharp barking broke out, a rattling fire from Homer's little .22 break-up, as the saloon owner worked the spur trigger and thumbed the hammer.

The lead pellets danced and sang

against the tub. Red spots appeared on Pete's big paw that was reaching for the .45 on the floor. Another spot stamped down on his left hand, lead sliced across his stubbled jaw, ripped over his ribs.

Pete lay still after that, howling and whimpering like a kicked dog. Dad got up, grinning, staring at his hands that had somehow got as steady as a cow pony cutting herd.

Pete was looking at his hands also, but he wasn't grinning. His little eyes were round marbles and he was moaning over and over, "I'm hit. I'm hit!" and shaking the hot water from his lobster-red face.

"Quickest shootin' I ever see," Dad said, chuckling. "I always knowed you had sand in your craw, Homer."

Le Brun smiled and prodded Pete with his sharp-toed boot. And when the big mule-skinner got to his feet, holding his lead-pierced, bleeding hands, Homer poked him out into the hall and on to the front room to greet the curious citizens crowding into the barber shop.

Marshal Breckenhill was there in the front, and he slapped Homer on the back. Dad was beaming.

"Baths," he called. "All the hot water'n soap you kin use for two-bits."

"There's the man to congratulate, marshal," Homer said. "He—"

"Yep," Dad interrupted, "you kin pass me the cigars. I'm the only feller in Tombstone to see this handsome young saloon owner outshoot and outwit the toughest outlaw this side the border."

Would Varner ever summon the courage to tackle the mystery that stood between him and the cached treasure in Joe Carson's cabin?



by **BOB OBETS**

MEN MURDER FOR GOLD

THE man called Varner was watching from the darkness of the mesquite when, about midnight, Joe Carson rode in from the direction of Frio town. Carson's great shaggy gray dog began a frenzied, glad barking, leaping against the length of stout chain which held him to a foundation post of the two-roomed ranchhouse.

"Glad to see me, huh?" Joe called cheerfully. "Reckon you done ate up that rabbit I left you, and turned over the water pan. How about it, Chief? Ready for rations?"

Varner, crouched in the brush at the edge of the clearing, watched the young ranchman put up his horse and unchain the dog. The muscles of Varner's thin, sharp face kept twitching. His sweaty hands gripped a rifle.

This wasn't the first time—or the second—that Varner had spied on Joe Carson. But tonight Varner's mind was made up. It would be simple enough. . . . After Carson was dead, he'd grab the gold cached under the cabin, get on his horse and ride. He'd ride far away from here, take

a new name. It wouldn't be the first time, or the second, that he'd changed location hurriedly and taken a different name.

There was nothing to hold him here. The land, the few head of cattle, even the miserable shack Varner lived in, belonged to Joe Carson. Varner hated this desolate country of the Big Brush. He had stopped here only because it offered refuge from the relentless men who hunted him. He had intended to stay just long enough to rest up a bit, then head on for Old Mexico and safety.

Discovering Joe Carson's cabin, that first night, he had changed his mind. For through a window he had watched Carson, and he had seen something that held him as firmly in this land of tangled thickets as if Joe Carson had chained him with the long chain that held the great gray dog, Chief.

Varner hated the land and he hated Joe Carson. But above all, he hated the dog. For it was the dog, and Varner's fear of the beast, that kept him from getting the gold. . . .

From the shadows of the mesquite, Varner watched Carson. He saw the young fellow get on his hands and knees and crawl under the house. A match flared, and in a few moments Carson came crawling out, went inside the house and lit a lamp. Varner had witnessed this same performance several times before—but tonight was different. This was the last time he was going to watch Joe Carson. After tonight, all that gold would belong to him.

Varner's sharp little eyes, gleaming in the darkness, might have been the eyes of a wary, vicious rat.

Joe Carson, standing beside the kitchen table, was polishing a small object against his sleeve. In the lamplight the object gleamed and threw off scintillating yellow-gold fire which tormented Varner. He was certain that Carson was taking gold from the hiding place beneath the cabin's floor, and the thought of that gold, the desire to possess it, was driving Varner mad.

How much gold was hidden under the floor? There must be a lot of it, for Carson went to town each week. He went there to spend the gold. The thought of that—Carson spending the gold—drove Varner almost to a frenzy. It fed his hatred for the dog, Chief. It made him so desperate that once, while Carson was away, he had tried to outwit the dog. The thought of that terrible experience was enough to make Varner break out in a cold sweat.

Varner had tossed the dog a rabbit, then crawled under the house on the far side of the beast. Only the stout cabin, Varner was certain, had saved his life. The dog hadn't barked, hadn't made a sound. But Varner, seeing those yellowish eyes rushing at him in the half darkness, had screamed. The chain had halted the dog's rush barely in time.

Varner was afraid now, with the dog loose, to go any closer to the house. But he was close enough. Carson was sitting at the table, with his head tipped down. He was read-

ing something, Varner thought, perhaps a letter. His back was turned part way toward the window, offering a target Varner couldn't miss. Varner was an expert with a gun. His rifle was a .30-30, carrying lead-nosed bullets. From a distance of several hundred yards, those slugs would tear a hole as big as Varner's hand in a deer or a man.

Varner raised the rifle. He sighted along its blued barrel at a spot between Joe Carson's shoulder blades. His right hand began a steady, slow squeezing that tightened his finger against the trigger. Then he started to tremble. He lowered the rifle from his shoulder and groaned.

He couldn't do it! Not this way. The law was after him for clubbing and robbing that crossroads store-keeper. The law was after him for a lot of things. But not for murder. The law hung people for murder. There had to be a better way. He'd take no chances on a rope on strangling or . . .

Varner saw the yellow eyes coming toward him, moving slowly out of the shadows that bordered the ranchhouse. He muttered a curse that was almost a sob, whirled and bolted headlong through the brush.

He reached the old sagging cabin where he stayed, ran inside and slammed the door. His clothes were torn, his hands were bleeding from thorn scratches. His breath sobbed into his lungs. He stood listening, he imagined he heard the soft padding of the dog's feet circling the house.

"Damn that dog!" he cried. "Damn him and his nosin' around!"

Varner couldn't sleep. He lay on the sagging bunk, racking his brain to hit upon some safe, sure way to get rid of Joe Carson and the dog. He finally dropped into fitful slumber, only to dream of wallowing in a bed of golden coins. He woke with a violent start, imagining he heard claws scratching against the wood of the door, thinking he heard the snuffling, whining of an animal trying to get in the house.

After that, he lay sleepless, in a clammy, cold sweat. He thought, as he had thought so many times before, of simply shooting the dog, some day when Carson was away from the house, taking the gold and riding off with it. But again he rejected that plan. For though Carson seldom wore a gun, there was something about him, something in his cool gray eyes, that warned Varner. He had a hunch that, for all his friendliness, Joe Carson wasn't the man to give up any possession without a struggle. Varner knew that, so long as Carson lived, he would never enjoy the gold. He would live in fear—the same gnawing, maddening kind of fear that would torment him if he killed Carson.

So what to do? He couldn't kill the dog and take the gold, for fear of Carson. He couldn't kill Carson, for that would be murder, and murder had a way of finding a man out. Varner was smart. Never yet had he paid the penalty for a crime. But a murder that didn't look like murder . . . that could in no way be connected with him. This Big Thorny Thicket country between the Nueces and the Rio Grande was lone-

some. Joe Carson hadn't a neighbor within thirty miles. A man with brains ought to be able to think up a plan. . . .

Varner's chance came a week later. He almost let it slip by. His first impulse, when Joe Carson rode over and asked if he'd mind keeping an eye on Chief for a few days, was to refuse.

"I wouldn't feed the brute . . ." Varner began, then stopped. He forced himself to smile. "Forget it, Carson. I just don't go for dogs much. Reckon I owe you something for lettin' me stay here. How long you aim to be gone?"

"Three days. I'll get back to Frio on the afternoon stage. I'll leave Chief chained, with plenty of water. Just kill him a couple of cottontails."

Carson reined his horse around; then, somewhat hesitantly, he said: "Varner, I been hopin' we'd be better neighbors. You said you'd been sick, not able to work. Well, stay as long as you like. Makes it a little less lonesome. . . . And, Varner, see that old Chief don't turn over his water pan, will you?" He lifted his hand, touched spur to his horse.

"So he don't begrudge me the use of his shack," Varner muttered viciously, watching Carson ride into the brush. "It's not fit for a pack rat to live in, but he says: 'It's all right for you, Varner.' Him with a pot of gold hid under his nice new ranchhouse!"

A bit later Varner made his way through the strip of mesquite that separated the shack he stayed in

from Joe Carson's. The big gray dog, securely chained, was gnawing the remains of a rabbit Carson had left him. When he saw Varner, his neck ruff bristled and he bared gleaming fangs. He didn't move, but his yellowish eyes watched Varner steadily.

"You damned wolf!" Varner snarled, and in a violent gust of anger he snatched a rusty horseshoe which hung on the yard fence and threw it at the dog.

The dog's rush was so sudden, so savage that Varner yelled. He leaped back from the gate where he had been standing, and thought surely that the dog would come right on through it. When the big animal hit the end of his chain, Varner was gray-faced, shaking with a spasm of fear.

"I'll fix you! I'll fix you!" He went running to the woodpile, going all the way around the yard fence, keeping well out of reach of the chained dog.

"Now, damn you," he taunted, coming back with a length of heavy half-green mesquite wood which, trimmed with Carson's ax, made a formidable club.

The dog was smart, so Varner held the club behind him as he edged through the yard gate. He knew now just how far the chain that held the dog would reach. But when the dog came at him, not making a sound, showing his fangs and with his yellowish eyes gleaming, Varner barely suppressed another yell. He leaped backward as the chain snapped taut. His heart was pounding hard enough to knock a hole through his chest.

The dog was pulled back on his launches as he hit the chain's end. Varner stepped in and swung his heavy club. Hate and fear went into that swing, and for a minute he thought he had killed the beast. He didn't want to do that, for in his twisted brain an idea was fermenting. Its possibilities afforded him a pleasure he didn't want to miss. . . .

Use Carson's dog to get rid of Carson. It was ironic—a thought so sweet that it set Varner to trembling. Later, he could kill the dog. That old smokehouse behind his shack would be the best place. Kill the dog, hide the gold in a safe place, then maybe ride over and tell the Mexican family on Puerco Creek. Or maybe just grab the gold and head for Mexico. Wouldn't make any difference. Whoever found Joe Carson and the dead dog could draw their own conclusions about what had happened.

First thing was to get the dog over to the smokehouse, without beating him up too much. All right to starve the brute. That would just make him more vicious. But it was too early in the game to kill the dog or injure him much.

Varner watched the dog get shakily to his feet. For a few minutes, Varner contented himself with baiting the dog, standing just outside reach and prodding him with the club. Only once did Varner lose control and hit the animal a solid blow. He wanted to beat the dog's brains out. But he kept telling himself that wouldn't be smart. He had to use his brains, play it safe.

Joe Carson didn't own a wagon. He didn't own much of anything, just the two-roomed ranchhouse deep in the mesquite, a few head of cattle, a few acres of brush-covered land. But Joe Carson, when he stepped off the stage at Frio, thought he was the richest man in the world.

He looked at the girl beside him, and he couldn't believe yet that all the gentle loveliness, the saucy tilt to her nose, the curve of her breast, belonged to him. She had had plenty of more prosperous men to pick from. She had everything a man might ever want, yet she had waited for him. With little more than a sack of tobacco and a shoestring, he had left her, three years ago, in Carrizo, and told her that when he came back he'd have a stake. Now he had the stake, and she was his wife!

"It's not much, honey," he told her as they followed the rutty road that led to his ranch, riding in a buggy he had rented in town. "It's not much, but it's ours. There's plenty water, good grass. I've got a hundred head in my brand, and this time next year I'll have that many more. The house . . . well, you'll have to put up with that. You ought to see the one was on it when I bought the place! Fellow named Varner's stayin' there."

"Never mind the house," she told



him. "I'll love it. If it has walls and a roof, it's our home. Our first home."

"Sue, you don't know how lonesome it was! Every week I'd go to town for your letter, and they kept me going. Then Varner came a couple months ago. And, Sue, I want to tell you about a game I played. Sort of a hide-and-seek . . . no, I won't tell you. I'll wait and show you."

"You had your dog," Sue reminded him. "You wrote me about Chief. Joe, I can't wait to see him!"

"He's a fine dog, Sue. Can't savvy why he dislikes Varner so much. I'd have bet my boots, Chief wouldn't harm a fly. But Varner . . . I guess that's why Varner doesn't come over very much."

It was just dark when they reached the ranchhouse. Before he even put up the team, Joe had to show Sue inside. She looked at the curtains he had made and put up with his own hands—curtains made from a sheet he'd taken from his bed—and her eyes brightened. She looked at the rawhide-bottomed chairs, at the table in the kitchen room, at the deer horns on the wall, at the deer skins on the floor—all things fashioned by Joe, for her—and the brightness in her eyes grew into tears.

"Joe," she said, "oh, Joe, you really must love me very much. But what's worrying you, Joe?"

"Chief," he said. "Wonder where he is? Wouldn't think he'd be over at Varner's, but—"

"You old grandpa, quit worrying. Go out and look for your dog, while I see about cooking supper."

"I'll step over to Varner's, then."

She kissed him and told him to hurry back. "Won't be more than ten minutes," he told her. "After supper I want to show you that game I played that kept me from being so lonesome."

Varner didn't know Joe Carson had returned until he heard him approaching the shack. Varner heard the young ranchman call, "Neighbor, you home?" and for a moment fear shook the outlaw's scrawny frame. Then he thought of the gold. Nothing could go wrong. He had every detail planned.

"Carson?" he queried, stepping to the door. Then, as he made out Joe Carson's tall form coming toward him in the gloom: "I'm afraid I've got bad news for you."

"What is it?" Carson asked. "Not about Chief?"

Worried him! Varner restrained a grin. In the doorway, with the light of the lantern Carson had loaned him full upon him, he nodded his head.

"I sure hate it, Carson. All my fault, too. He turned over his water pan, and I didn't want him to go thirsty—fine dog like that. Guess I got too close to him. He leaped at me like a wolf, Carson, and I had to defend myself. Always was afraid of dogs, and I had a stick of wood. I was tryin' to rake the water pan toward me. I didn't aim to hit him so hard, but . . . well . . ."

He stooped, pulled up the leg of his trousers. "See that bandage? Critter bit me to the bone. I . . ."

"If Chief did that, I don't blame

you for whatever you did, Varner. Did . . . did you have to kill him?"

Varner shook his head. "You know I wouldn't do that! He's in fair bad shape, though. I toted him to the old smokehouse in back. I sure didn't want that dog to die, after you left him in my care. When he was near dyin', I doctored him—"

"Get the lantern," said Carson. "Let's take a look at him."

Varner carried the lantern, and as they went around the house, with the huge, grotesque shadow of Joe Carson dancing along the warped boards of the wall, fear stirred again in the outlaw's miserable soul. Nothing could go wrong, he kept telling himself. As he had expected, Carson was too upset and worried about his dog to be on the alert. And the damned dog was starving; hadn't had a bite to eat since Carson left. The brute was feverish from the beating Varner had given him, vicious as any dog could get. This plan took brains!

Joe Carson didn't have a chance. He was thinking about Chief. He couldn't understand the dog's attacking Varner. Before Varner came, the dog had never shown any trace of viciousness. But Chief had jumped Varner, bitten him on the leg. . . .

The old smokehouse and the shack Varner lived in had been the only buildings on the place when Joe Carson took it over. The smokehouse, ready to fall down, was a squat structure no higher than a man's head. Made of adobe, it had a roof of sod and brush that many rains had sadly weakened. The mud chimney had

fallen down, leaving a square hole in the roof. And Joe Carson, seeing how tightly Varner had wedged the one door shut, was thankful for the opening in the roof. There were no windows. Chief might have come near smothering in that small place.

"Hold the lantern up, Varner," Carson said. "Let's get in there."

He bent down to move the mesquite log—big around as a man's waist—which Varner had shoved against the door. Inside the smokehouse, hearing Carson's voice Chief set up a glad whining. In his eagerness, he began leaping against the wall. Varner heard the scratching of the dog's claws against the wall as Chief leaped, and the blood ran cold in his veins. Then he thought of all the gold under Joe Carson's ranchhouse, and his blood ran hot again.

Joe Carson, bent over, was tugging at the mesquite log and he never knew what hit him. For with one swift motion, Varner grabbed up the club—the same heavy knotted club he had used to batter Chief senseless with. He brought the club smashing down on Carson's head. Bright scintillating pin wheels flashed in Carson's brain, flared brightly, winked and went out.

"You poor damn trustin' fool," Varner muttered viciously. "This one will finish you proper!"

He lifted the club, intending with one mighty blow to crush Carson's skull. In that moment, one of the last moments in his life, Varner saw the yellowish eyes, the big gray shape rushing toward him around the corner of the smokehouse. Screaming, Varner tried with futile desperation

to use the club. He was too late. A terrible, slavering weight crashed against his chest. Ripping teeth sank into his throat. . . .

Joe Carson came out of the blackness to find Chief standing over him, whining and licking his face. After a time, he stood up. He muttered, "Varner . . ." and then he saw the man lying there, and the sight made him sick.

When he found the club he realized what had happened to him. He understood how Chief had got out of the smokehouse, when he saw bits of stick and adobe clinging to his furry gray coat and remembered the hole in the roof where the chimney had once stood. He saw, too, how terribly Chief had been beaten, and he shook his head.

"No wonder you hated him, Chief. But why would he beat you? Why did he try to kill me? I've never harmed him. Tried to help him, in fact. And I don't own anything worth stealing . . . except . . ." And he almost smiled. "I'm about the richest man in the world. Come along, fellow. She'll be worried about us."

It was two hours later when Sue said: "Quit worrying about it, darling. . . . Joe, you promised to show me something. Remember?"

"My game!" said Joe, his boyish grin flashing out.

He had taken off his boots, and now he stood up and went across the bedroom in his socks. From his

trousers pocket he took a small object that caught yellow fire from the lamp-light.

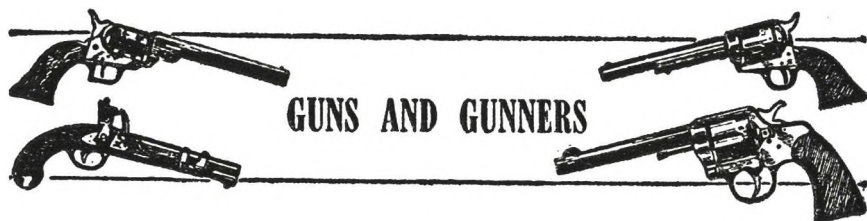
"Let's see, now. Won't make it too hard, this time." He placed the object inside one of his boots, laid the boot on its side in the middle of the floor. Then he blew out the lamp that stood on the pine dresser, and brought it back with him to the bed. Sitting down on the side of the bed, he murmured: "Now, wait. Won't take the fat rascal very long. Guess he's been lonesome, too."

Perhaps fifteen minutes passed. Came the scurrying of small feet across the floor, into the kitchen, back again. The spur on Joe Carson's boot jingled faintly. Joe struck a match, lit the lamp.

"Oh!" Sue gasped. "That's the cutest thing I ever saw."

Joe chuckled. "Fat little scoundrel. Caught him in the act, didn't we? Looks guilty, too. Watch him wiggle his whiskers! He always looks under the kitchen stove first, then in my boots. Steals the thing, and I crawl under the house and steal it back again."

The fat gray pack rat, on the floor near Carson's boot, didn't give voice to his own opinion of the underhanded way Joe had caught him stealing. He couldn't. Because, had he opened his mouth any wider, he would have dropped the prize—the empty shell of a brass six-shooter cartridge that gleamed between his strong jaws with all the glitter of burnished gold.



BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

WELL, I'm back in the U. S. A. again, preparing to enjoy life this summer. Just a gun bug come home. After traveling all over Europe, it seems mighty good to be back where guns are used for sporting purposes.

One day just before leaving I received a call from the Theater Provost Marshal. The first thing I spotted was a little gold badge on his uniform that outshone the stars—he was a Distinguished Rifleman. We finished the official business and afterward the office was cluttered up with chaps wearing stars on their shoulders. And don't kid yourself—they were just as enthusiastic as buck privates, PFC's and the T-4 boys I had previously encountered.

Most of my friends know that I was in charge of the Small Arms Section, Enemy Equipment Intelligence Technical Service. We sought out all kinds of enemy weapons, analyzed them, made reports, and returned specimens to the U. S. A. for further study. In this work I had some good boys who knew their guns. It wouldn't be fair not to give credit to one of the most enthusiastic gun bugs in the European Theater of Operations.

I found Corp. Roger Brooke of

San Francisco in the field and had him transferred. We worked together—until the job was finished. He was Sergeant Brooke, then.

Ordnance Intelligence owes much to Roger Brooke. He was a valuable man. Why? Because he was a gun bug before the war—an amateur gunsmith, tinkerer, target shooter, handloader, and student of what makes guns and ammunition tick.

Roger knew and loved guns. Nothing the Germans designed or made could baffle him. And the analytical reports he turned out were the best in the ETO. We worked together days, nights and Sundays. Together we traveled thousands of miles through France, Belgium, Germany, and a couple of way stations. Some of these days we'll get together again—and the talks will be not of war weapons, but the new ideas in the sporting field. At this writing we are on opposite sides of the U. S. A.—but I'm looking for a letter any day.

I'm beginning to find out about the changes in the industry since the war started, but the biggest change has taken place in the American people. Take a semi-official survey made by a military source.

Some 6,000 returning soldiers—just GI's—were sampled. Some 40 percent had not been interested in firearms before the war. More than 60 percent indicated that they wanted to hunt, fish, target-shoot or just play with sporting weapons when they got back to civilian life. There's a big crop of shooters coming.

You'd be amazed to know how many American troops hunted on the European continent—not for enemy troops, but for game. When one type of shooting stopped, another started. And tons of captured enemy ammunition were burned up over there in miscellaneous target practice. So when ex-Private Bill Jones tells you that he shot the K-43 a lot and doesn't think much of it, don't tell him that it was a German army rifle and he couldn't have used it, because he probably did. And if he told you it isn't much good, he probably knows why.

Those who have never been in the Army seem to think that every man called into service is given a gun and sent out to shoot at the enemy. For every soldier who shoots in combat, there are dozens who not only never fire a shot, but also never hear a shot fired. Yet their work is extremely important.

Millions of troops have never carried guns. Millions of others have carried guns thousands of miles and never used them. Were it not for these chaps, the boys who shoot

would be lost. There would be no one to transport them around the U. S. A.; no one to train them; no one to get them overseas; no one to find them places to sleep or food to eat or entertainment in off hours; no one to haul supplies, take care of supplies, drive trucks—one could go on and on.

Yes, those are some of the lads who were far from the danger zone—but many were right up there. They supplied food, ammunition, got them where they were needed—and on time. Now that we're back, we'll have to check up on what's new for the boys. Found one thing—the Weaver K2.5 hunting scope. Bill Weaver, down in Texas, has been making the scope sights we used on our Model 1903A4 sniper rifles. During the war he learned much about rifle scopes. This new 2½ power job is a honey. It has a 1-inch-diameter tube, length 10½ inches and weighs, less mount, only 8½ ounces. Light-gathering qualities, due to large lenses, are excellent and permit an eye relief of from 3 to 6 inches and a field of view of 43 feet at 100 yards as against 30 feet for his old 3-30 model (the sniper scope). All adjustments are internal.

Two of these were awaiting me although Bill wrote me about it overseas a year ago. One has the new coated lenses. Better ask for that one—it's better.

Phil Sharpe, our firearms editor, is now on active duty as a Captain, Ordnance Department, U. S. A. He will continue to answer all letters from readers. Address your inquiries to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure you print your name clearly and enclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.



MINES AND MINING

BY JOHN A. THOMPSON

WORLD FAMOUS for its nitrate deposits and its copper—the mines at Portrerillos hold about a quarter of the world's known copper supply—Chile's gold possibilities are sometimes overlooked. They have not been given the widespread publicity accorded Chilean nitrate, or Chilean copper.

Yet in placer districts not generally known to the average U. S. prospector, ground suitable for large-scale operations such as hydraulicking or dredging has turned out millions in Chilean gold. In addition, scores of individual prospectors have made beans and bacon or a nice stake hand-working smaller gold deposits.

Chile is a strange country. A good deal of it is a barren, desert waste much like parts of our own Southwest. Back towards the foothills of the towering Andes it is rough and hilly. But from the northern desert near the Peruvian border to Cape Horn at the southern tip of the continent much of Chile is highly mineralized.

With adventure in mind and gold prospecting somewhere in South America his goal, ex-Sergeant W. T.

wrote in from St. Louis, Missouri, to ask about the chances of finding gold in Chile. "In fact," he declared in his letter, "anything you can tell me about Chile of interest to the placer gold prospector will be welcomed, the bad as well as the good."

Chile, W. T., is sliced thin. More than 2,600 miles long, the country averages only about 100 miles in width. Gold, either lode or placer, is found in nearly every province.

The big drawback, especially to placer mining, is lack of water in many of the gold-bearing areas. On the other hand, the small-scale placer gold seeker can find beach sands along the coast that contain the precious yellow metal. Gold can be washed out with water from the sea.

The west side of Chiloe Island below Valdivia boasts extensive black beach sands that carry gold. There is placer gold near Puntas Arenas on the Strait of Magellan. Beach gold has been mined on the shores of the bleak and barren islands stretching down to Cape Horn.

Other beach placers are at Cucao, Llanquihue and Playa del Paramo.

River placers, too, are found in

south Chile, notably along the Quilacoya River in Concepcion Province, and the Damas and Repocura Rivers in Cautin Province. Other gold-bearing streams worth mentioning are those along the Valdivia River, and the Tucapel placers in Arauca.

Prospecting is free in Chile, and no license to prospect is required. The small-scale operator, using hand-mining methods, rocker, sluice box or even just a gold pan, hasn't much to worry about. He can operate pretty much at will. As is the case with the mining laws in the United States, discovery of mineral is a necessary pre-requisite to staking a claim in Chile. And the first person who reports, or registers, a new discovery is considered entitled to the claim.

For staking lode claims, or where tracts for dredging or hydraulicking are involved, the laws are more complicated. A survey of the land must be made and an annual tax paid in advance. In addition a limit is set on the number of claims allowed.

The individual gold prospector in Chile is apt to be interested primarily in uncovering a deposit he can work by hand methods. But he ought not to pass up colors simply because the ground proves too lean for small-scale operation. If the colors are sufficiently extensive and fairly uniformly distributed over a

sizable area, careful testing may show the deposit amenable to mechanical treatment.

In the past much of the gold prospecting in Chile has been rather hit-or-miss style. Often gold-bearing gravels were only panned at random and the deposit recommended or condemned on the result.

Obviously, according to modern standards of systematic testing, that ground hasn't been properly checked at all. It's merely been stabbed at. Up-to-date testing may disclose some good bets for large-scale placering that have heretofore been missed.

The Chilean Departamento de Minas y Petroleo itself lists the following districts as some of those worth careful study and further investigation:

1. The bed of California Creek in the Marga-Marga district near Valparaiso.
2. The gravels at the foot of the hill known as El Quemado at Catapilco near La Ligua in the Province of Aconcagua.
3. The gravels at the foot of El Quiqui hill and the Illapel River bed, at Illapel, Coquimbo Province.
4. Los Vilos, southwest of Illapel. Also Canela, near Illapel.
5. The drainage region of El Arroyo watershed near Las Palmas, north of La Ligua.
6. The unexplored gravel terraces south of the coast port of Coquimbo around Andacollo.

If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., will bring a prompt, authoritative, personal reply.



WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

BY JOHN NORTH

WITH vacations just around the corner, canoe trips are hard to beat. They afford the thrill of gliding along quiet waters, the zest of riding turbulent rapids, the excitement of breasting the waves on a windswept lake.

Light enough to be carried over land portages, strong enough to hold two men and their camp gear, the canoe is a versatile craft. It will take a man places that often can be reached by no other means. And, properly handled, a well-designed canoe is safe and remarkably seaworthy.

Reader B. R., whose recent letter came in postmarked Altoona, Pennsylvania, says his plans for a summer vacation this year center around a canoe cruise. "There will be just two of us, buddies, on the trip," he wrote. "Any dope you can give us about such a trip, styles and sizes of canoe necessary and so forth will be welcome."

For two men, with tent and other camp stuff to be included in the deadweight load, the proper size canoe is a regular 18-foot guide's model. Much depends on the length of the trip, distance you will be away from supplies, and the type of water you intend to navigate.

A near-home trip, traveling light in the matter of camp gear, could probably also be made in the smaller 16-foot or 17-foot size canoe with a 34-inch or 36-inch beam. Such canoes are lighter. They will carry two men easily, but if they are weighted down too much with duffle they ride low in the water and are sluggish to handle.

It is a good rule to avoid loading canoes to their rated capacity if possible. Get the next bigger size. You'll then have room to spare, a craft that isn't being strained perhaps dangerously by an overload, and, generally speaking, a more worry-free trip as far as your canoe is concerned. Too heavily laden canoes lose a great deal of their maneuverability.

Important also are the paddles you choose. Impelled by your muscles the paddles will supply most of the motive power. You will be using them a large part of the day. Choose them with care for balance, heft and length.

Roughly the rule as to length—and it is a pretty good one to follow—is that the bow man's blade should reach to his chin and the stern paddler's to the top of his nose. The trouble in applying this is that stock

paddles generally come in even lengths and the height to a man's chin or nose top doesn't. Besides men's arm lengths differ in men of approximately the same height.

The best thing to do is to consider your individual arm length. If it is longer than average choose—for a bow paddle—one that reaches slightly above your chin, and vice versa. This will generally take up the slack caused by the paddle being made in stated lengths.

Spruce, ash and maple all make good paddles. Spruce paddles are light and strong, but have little spring in them. Maple paddles are apt to be heavier. They are strong and have more spring in them. A paddle with at least a certain amount of spring in it is best for a long trip.

Unless you are a demon for punishment and blessed with a Tarzan physique shun, for canoe cruising, paddles with an overly long and broad blade. True, they produce a more powerful stroke, but your arms have to wield them. On a long trip such blades will tire the average person. A narrow, or in-between width blade, say 5 or 6 inches wide, is less strenuous to handle.

Canoe styles vary even more than the paddles. For small streams or placid, shallow water a flat-bottom model draws less water when loaded than do the curved bottom types. If much open water, such as is found on large lakes, is to be encountered,

remember that a model with low ends lessens wind resistance and is easier to keep on a true course.

A canoe that is rounded below the water line provides more steadiness in crossing rough or windswept stretches of open water. These models have more draft than the flat-bottomed types, but they carry a heavy load well and are excellent for cruising large lakes or big rivers.

Among other items, the open gunwale construction has much in its favor for canoe cruising. Open gunwales clean out the canoe more or less every time it is beached and turned over. This helps to prevent an accumulation of sand working in between the planking and the canvas. A narrow, inch-deep keel strengthens a canoe and makes it easier to handle in a wind. A broad, flat keel will protect the bottom of the canoe where river beds are shallow and stony.

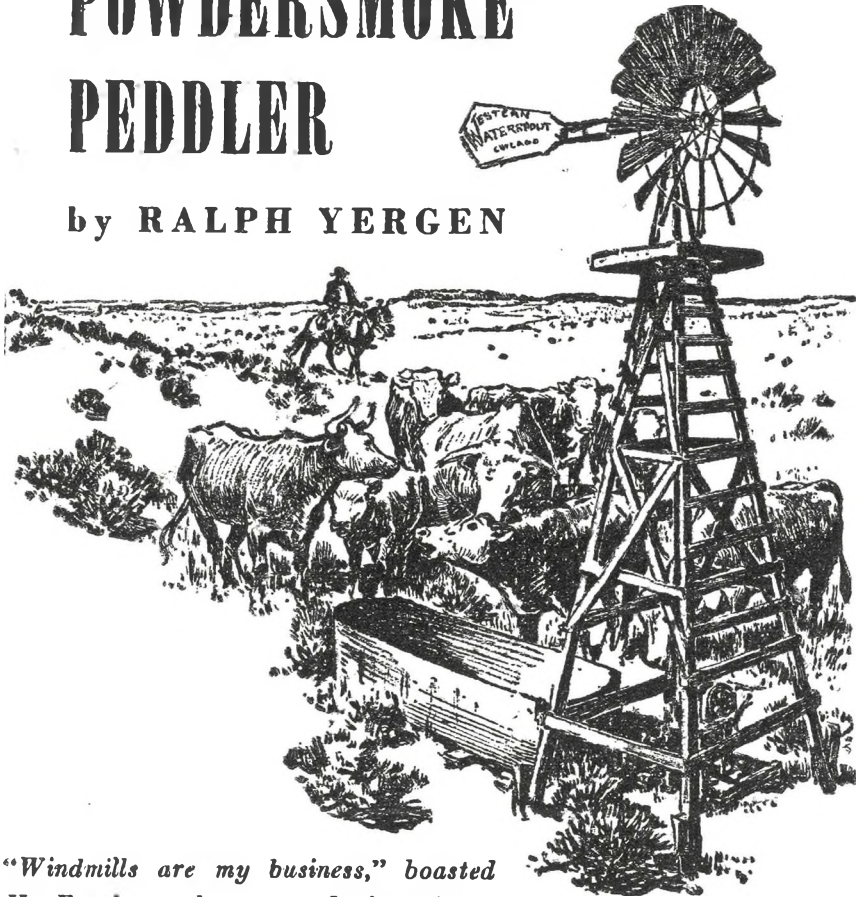
Ideal canoe country is the sort of wilderness that consists mainly of woods and waterways, the latter in a series of rivers, small streams or connecting chains of lakes. Yet even though a real wilderness canoe cruise may be out of the picture almost any near-home stream or river that boasts about 30 miles of navigable water can provide all the setting that's needed for an enjoyable canoe camping trip.

Try the close at hand trips first. We'll wager you'll be planning a more distant one later.

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.

POWDERSMOKE PEDDLER

by RALPH YERGEN



"Windmills are my business," boasted Hy Evering so he was ready for trigger trouble when he discovered why the Duckfoot's Waterspout wasn't working

I

ONE number eleven boot hooked over the saddlehorn, Hy Evering squinted intently at the Duckfoot Ranch buildings glistening in the late sun like marble ramparts across the prairie sage. It was strange enough

that no human life was visible, yet there was another reason why the lanky salesman felt both puzzled and chagrined.

Although a steady breeze was making the sage blossoms dance like purple elves, the ring of silvery blades atop the windmill tower re-

remained as motionless as a tombstone. At the tower's base a sizable herd of whiteface cattle crowded about the long wooden trough, and their plaintive bawling rolled to Hy's ears.

"Them cows are powerful thirsty," Hy muttered, "An' that wheel ain't turnin' an inch. First time I ever knew of a Western Waterspout to go on the hog."

Thirsty cattle ordinarily meant money in Hy Evering's pocket. Only a year previously he had sold the Graysons that now idle wheel because the Duckfoot had no consistent source of surface water. On his ride out from Nutgrass he had confidently constructed his arguments for a second windmill sale to Dick and Sue Grayson. Their herd was increasing; the winter's snow had been short; a long dry summer could be expected. But if the first windmill he had sold them was already out of order, what chance did he have of selling them another?

Prompt investigation being as grooved a habit as curiosity with Hy Evering, the salesman directed his big claybank horse, Sandy, off the rock-studded road and toward the white-painted buildings. Some queer, invisible penetration seemed to reach out and fill him with foreboding. Although it was the hour when blue-eyed, coppery-haired Sue Grayson ordinarily would be cooking supper for her young husband, no smoke curled from the chimney. Nor was there any sign of Dick's presence. The corrals were empty. A weather-faded wagon stood near the silent barn, but no team was in sight.

Hy rode through the milling cattle

to the water trough and dismounted. The trough was as dry as a powder horn. Nothing appeared to be wrong with the wheel high atop the skeleton-like tower. And then Hy noticed that the control lever was turned off.

He shrugged. "Don't make savvy," he muttered. There was a pitcher pump in a tile well behind the house capable of supplying household needs, but it was of small use in watering cattle.

Hy's impulse was to reach up and release the locked wheel to see if the pump was working. But he decided to consult the Graysons first.

Leading his horse, he started toward the house. Then he stopped abruptly as he spotted a thick-bodied stranger bulked forbiddingly in the back doorway.

The man's big head was plastered on bull-muscled shoulders. A black-butted revolver hung low against his thigh. His face was as dark as an Indian's and a brushy balcony of black brows overhung close-set eyes the color of barb wire.

"Howdy, brother," Hy called out, his usual jocular manner a bit forced. "I'm looking for a gent name of Dick Grayson. Is he around?"

The man in the doorway didn't move, didn't speak. He just kept his cold eyes riveted on the windmill salesman.

"Said I was looking for Dick Grayson," Hy repeated, even louder. "Owner of the Duckfoot. He or his wife here?"

"Ain't neither one here," the man growled out of the corner of his slash mouth. His stub fingers inched over

the brass cartridges in his gunbelt toward the grimy holster.

"Who in thunder are you?" he asked abruptly.

"Evering is the tag," Hy enlightened him loudly, feeling that he was beginning to make some progress. "Windmills are my business. The best investment any cattleman can make. Plenty of water makes good beef, and good beef means more profit. The Waterspout windmills I handle are backed by a hundred percent guarantee to pump water in a goose-feather breeze. They'll work till doomsday on a drop of oil a month. Tougher than whalebone and built for the beatings they get on the Western cattle ranch.

"Cheapest power on earth," he continued enthusiastically. "You buy the mill and Mother Nature will run it for you. All you got to do is sit on your . . ." Hy suddenly stopped talking, a rare occurrence for him when there was a prospect around. He had suddenly remembered that the windmill behind him was turned off.

The blunt-featured man stepped from the doorway with a heavy, threatening stride. "We don't want none of your blasted windmills. Go peddle your junk some place else."

A new sibilant voice sounded in Hy's ears. "Thees hombre ees bother, Señor Lud?"

Glancing past the big man, Hy spied a lithe-bodied Mexican slinking forward from the house corner. A feller to be watched, Hy was thinking. He wondered how many more such jaspers were eying him from the Duckfoot coverts, and he re-

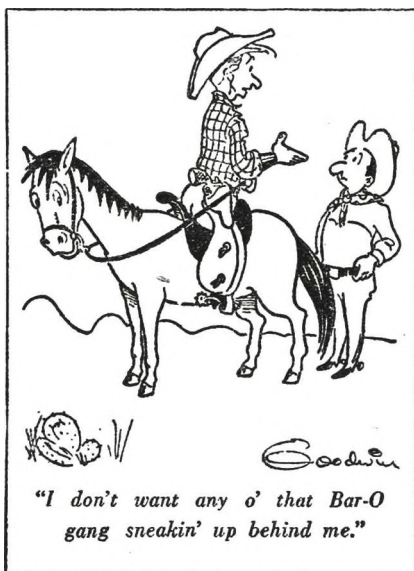
membered there were only five loads in the six-gun holstered at his thigh.

"I'm still looking for Dick Grayson," he reminded, toning down his lusty baritone. "I aim to find out what become of him."

"I bought out Grayson last week if you got to know," the man called Lud growled. "Him and his missus cleared out Sunday. Don't know where. An' don't give a damn."

Hy's eyebrows arched. "So Grayson sold? Never figured he'd pull loose from the Duckfoot. If you got his cattle, mister, you'd better let me give you a hand getting that windmill to going. Them cows need their whistles wet."

Lud's brow foliage lowered. "We'll take care of our stuff without any help from you, Nosey. We ain't invitin' strangers to hang around sizin' up things which they might take a notion to pack off some dark



night. If you get what we mean, you'll vamoose!"

Hy shrugged. "If that's the way you want it, amigo." His foghorn voice boomed over the prairie. "But I'm predictin' right here and now you'll soon go smash in the cattle game!"

Hy swung his long, lean frame into the saddle and trotted Smoky on toward the barn. He passed a board-front dugout in the rocky bank behind the house, remembering it well. Formerly occupied by a sheepherder, the room had been transformed by the Graysons into a freeze-proof storage place. A worn trail linked the ranchhouse to the dugout, and Hy noted fresh boot prints.

As Hy passed the barn, a glimpse through the half open stable door revealed things in topsy-turvy disarray. It looked as if even the floor boards had been torn up. Hy stroked his chin in puzzlement. Something off color was in progress here at the Duckfoot.

Instead of retracing his trail back to the road, he decided to short-cut through the narrow draw which rooted beyond the corral and thus to strike the wide curving road a couple of miles onward.

Just as he dipped into the draw, Hy speared a quick glance over his shoulder. Lud, the big man, was disappearing into the kitchen, and Hy spotted the Mexican legging it swiftly toward the barn.

II

The wind sang in the piñon overhanging the gulch rim as Hy Evering

meandered along, neither hurrying nor idling. Once during a lull, he thought he detected the distant drumming of a racing horse over to the west, but the wind sprang up again, and he wasn't sure. His thoughts slipped back to the men at the Duckfoot, and the more he dwelt upon the situation, the more puzzled he became.

It seemed highly improbable that Dick and Sue Grayson would sell the Duckfoot at any price. Their thoughts of the future had revolved about their neat little spread and they had appeared to be as happy as any two people Hy had ever met. Yet if they hadn't sold their spread, how come these men to be so firmly ensconced on the Duckfoot? And what had become of Dick and Sue?

A cool chill coasted down Hy's spine as he began to consider possibilities. He had half decided to double back and investigate further when he emerged from the draw's mouth to the edge of a broad flat, carpeted by green grass gold-tinted by the setting sun.

Hy drew his horse to a halt, gazing across the plain toward the sleek ribbon of road that skirted the opposite edge. It came to him that a horseman riding across the flat would provide an ideal target, gilded brightly by the slanting rays. He recalled the sight of the Mexican slinking toward the barn and the sounds he thought he had heard somewhere on the brushy stretch above the draw.

In his travels Hy had acquired a certain caution as well as a vast knowledge of human nature. And now, much to Sandy's disgust, he

chose to angle over the rocky, brush-splotched terrain that rimmed the flat.

Sandy had gone scarcely two hundred yards when a nicker floated from the shadows ahead. Hy froze the bronc to a startled halt, his right hand spilling with liquid swiftness to the six-gun at his thigh.

He spotted a white-faced horse tethered beneath a scrub pine. And then sudden movement from a huge rock ahead and slightly above him jerked at his attention.

The Mexican who had sided Lud at the Duckfoot swiveled toward him, muddy eyes protruding like ripe olives. A hissed curse, and a rifle's blue barrel was swinging about to level on the salesman.

Clearing its holster in a leap, Hy's gun coughed scarlet flame. The slug flattened on the stone surface beside the rifleman and screeched away at an angle, ruining the ornamented sombrero crown.

The rifle gushed a blue-white storm of smoke and Hy felt the hot rush of the bullet past his ear.

"Steady, Evering," he muttered, as he triggered his second shot at the bushwhacker.

The Mexican's rifle seemed to sprout wings and fly out of his hands. He lurched back, teetered an instant on his heels and collapsed in the dust.

Hy drew forth a faded blue bandanna and sponged his forehead. "Weather's warmin' up," he told himself. He edged forward and surveyed the man sprawled on his back, hopping the fellow could talk. But the bushwhacker was stone dead.

"Nice perch," the salesman commented. "The buzzard could roost on this hump and pick a man off like a plum when he crossed the flat. Or maybe he was here just to gawk and see that I didn't switch back to the Duckfoot."

A self-satisfied grin crinkling his sun-leathered face, Hy shoved his Stetson farther back on his head and reloaded his six-gun. There was but one thing that a man with as much curiosity as Hy Evering could do next. And Hy did it.

Making his way back to the draw, Hy headed again toward the ranch buildings. Halfway there, he pulled out of the draw, circled widely and came up from the opposite direction. He left Sandy under a juniper tree and prowled on through the tall gray sage.

Soon the hoarse bawling of thirsty cattle sounded ahead of him and the gaunt tower loomed above like a ghostly sentinel. Here in the screening sage Hy crouched, while the blue twilight faded to the powdery silver of a full moon rolling over the distant crags to the east.

First checking his six-gun loads, the long-legged salesman resumed his foot journey toward the dark ranch windows, stalking as silently as a coyote. He bypassed the windmill tower and the bunched cattle, circled the dugout doorway and crept into the barn's black shadow. He paused, listening. No sound escaped the buildings. Warily, Hy slid through the stable door into the barn.

The moonlight coming through the cobwebbed windows showed a weird

sight. The barn's interior, once kept in good order by Dick Grayson, was a mass of wreckage. The floor was torn up, feed sacks ripped open, straw and hay bales slashed, boxes and machinery wrecked.

"Looks like somebody lassoed a cyclone and drug it in here for the night." Hy muttered.

One fact was obvious. These men now holding down the Duckfoot were searching for something. It could hardly be Dick Grayson's money, for Dick kept his dinero in the Nutgrass bank. Hy shrugged. The deeper he delved into this puzzle, the more swathed in mystery it became.

Curiosity gnawing at him with an insatiable appetite, Hy climbed over the wreckage to the horse stalls. Here he found a half dozen horses tied and quietly munching hay. Three of them were Duckfoot horses, he discovered by the guarded light of a match. The other three carried brands which were strange to him. Hy moved outside into the wall shadow. Faint candlelight was now flickering from the kitchen windows. Listening keenly, he could detect the

rumbling of voices. The house walls began to beckon him, and unable to resist the temptation, he prowled silently across the moon-brightened space toward the nearest shadow.

He was halfway across when the soft thudding of hoofs whirled him about. Two young steers had detached themselves from the group about the dry trough and were trotting toward him, hopeful that he would somehow provide a drink. Muttering under his breath, Hy continued on toward the house. The pair kept following him, and the next minute the entire herd was slithering after the first two steers.

Vexed, Hy hesitated, wondering what to do. He could not turn back to the barn now, with the kitchen wall only a few yards away. He broke into a run, toward the house shadow, the cattle following hopefully.

"What the devil!" a voice from within the walls suddenly barked out.

A kitchen window squawked loudly, and a gaunt, hollow-eyed face appeared in the opening. "What do them damn cows see—"

Abruptly, the gaunt-faced man spied Evering, and his deep-set eyes bulged. With a blistering curse, the man dropped behind the window ledge as if struck by lightning.

A voice shrilled through the wall. "It's that nosey cuss again. Watch him!"

As he ran, Evering whipped out his six-gun. He was within an arm's length of the house shadow when a guttural voice snarled behind him.

"Freeze, hombre!"

SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD PUZZLE



Hy flicked a sharp glance over his shoulder and froze.

Standing in front of the dugout, outlined by the moon's rays, was the big man with the inky brows and close-set eyes. The six-gun clutched in his right hand was leveled squarely at Hy's spine.

"Drop that smoke-pole!" came the threatening order.

Cursing himself heartily, Hy complied. He thrust his hands into the air and turned to confront his advancing captor. The big man waddled from side to side like a bear as he lumbered forward.

He was peering steadily at Hy from beneath the dense brows. "Ol' Nosey back again, huh? Mebby to sell us more windmills. Ching! Sleet! Bring some rope and paw through this geezer for a hide-out."

The hollow-faced man rushed outside and began to search Hy's pockets. Fishing out a jackknife and wallet, he thrust them into his own pocket.

"All I can find which is worth hookin', Lud," he announced.

Something clicked in Hy's memory. Lud, Ching, Sleet. Those names formed a chain that linked these men with a famous quartet of raiders who had thwarted the sheriff's of four States with their daring holdups and hard-riding escapes. The big man, then, would be Lud Kuznic. The others Sleet Hazzard and Ching Jiller, two viciously cold-hearted gun fiends. The fourth member was reputed to be Lud Kuznic's younger brother, but the Mexican whom Hy had liquidated

there by the big rock did not fit his description.

The thick-bodied Kuznic, leader of the cutthroat gang, eyed the salesman with cold belligerence.

"Mebby you think I was fool enough to swaller that crazy wind-mill story of yourn, Nosey. What happened to Carlos?"

"Don't recollect havin' been formally interduced to no such gent," Hy said.

"You seen the Mex," snapped Kuznic. He waved the pistol threateningly. "He follered you. He didn't come back. What happened to him?"

"Reckon he could have dozed off suddenlike and maybe forgot to wake up," Hy hazarded.

The outlaw snorted. "Hurry up with that rope, Ching," he called to the house. "This hombre knows a damn sight more'n he wants to tell. We'll have to work on him. Likely he's in cahoots with Grayson somehow. Mebby—"

"Can't find any rope," a harsh voice clipped, and a kinky-haired man with sharply chiseled features emerged from the kitchen doorway. "Got to look in the barn, I guess."

"Let it go right now," Kuznic ordered. "We ain't got forever. Wasted two days already. We got to be on the move before daylight. That Nutgrass law houn' could get wind of us any time. You keep a six stuck in Nosey's ribs, Sleet. Settle his hash at the first wrong move. Fetch him over to the dugout an' if he don't sing, we'll slip him some hot lead."

Berating himself for his stupidity, Hy allowed himself to be shoved

along by Sleet Hazzard's gun muzzle. He had bobbed the whole setup, he told himself. He should have hatched out a better plan of investigation.

III

While Kuznic held open the dug-out door, Sleet crowded the prisoner inside. The low roof scraped Hy's hat from his head, and his fingertips touched the damp boards. Feeble light from a smoky kerosene lamp laid its dim touch upon the scrambled interior. Potatoes, miscellaneous vegetables, canned fruit were dumped in a heap in the center of the small compartment. Many of the glass jars were broken, only a scattered few remaining on the shelves intact. The belly of a small stove glowed red, and the handle of a branding iron protruded from the firebox.

Beyond the stove, the rumpled figures of a man and a woman, each bound hand and foot, filled the room corners. Hy was only moderately surprised as he recognized Dick and Sue Grayson.

Dick's grimy, worried face lifted, and amazement widened his dark eyes as he spotted Hy Evering. A spark of hope glowed in his face, then instantly died as he discerned the gun in Sleet Hazzard's hand. Dick didn't say anything. He just stared.

"Howdy, Dick, Sue," Hy said, his sharp gaze sweeping from the bronzed, disheveled rancher to pretty, coppery-haired Sue Grayson. The woman's blue calico dress was soiled and torn, but her spirit obviously remained unbroken and her

eyes flashed defiantly at the renegade crowd.

"What . . . what you doing here, Hy?" Dick finally managed to croak.

"Come to sell you another wind-mill. But 'pears your guests here have other plans."

"You're damn right!" Kuznic roared, as he pushed forward to confront the Graysons. "You two decide to talk yet?"

The worried, hopeless look intensified on Dick Grayson's face. His voice held an agonized ring. "I don't know what you mean. We don't know anything about any cached money."

Kuznic drew a deep breath, expelled it in a snort. "Need a little hot life, huh? Well, you'll damn soon get it if you don't take this last chance I'm givin' yuh. We all know my kid brother Pete rode out here with the money. There was five of us that cracked the bank vault that night. Pete slipped out of town on this side totin' the bagful of cartwheels and frogskins. The rest of us headed the other way to draw the sheriff's crowd away from Pete. But somebody spotted Pete and they lathered after him.

"When they caught up with Pete here on the Duckfoot, he was deader'n a cooked lobster. But he didn't have the dinero on him. We learned that over the grapevine. The bank never did find that dinero. Who hooked it, unless it was you Graysons?"

"I tell you I never saw the money," Dick said wearily. "I woke up that night and looked out the window. It was bright moonlight. I saw a

hombre lead my best hoss out of the corral and ride away. I picked up my thirty gun and knocked him out of the saddle. When I got to where he lay, he was stone dead. He never moved after he hit the dirt. Then the sheriff come gallopin' along and took charge. The loot wasn't on Pete nor on the hoss he killed gettin' here."

Lud Kuznic cursed. "Either Pete had the swag on him or he cached it here on the Duckfoot. With the sheriff crowdin' his heels, he wouldn't have stopped to cache it until his nag fizzled out. And his nag didn't go down until he was just short of these here ranch buildings. Even then he wouldn't have had time to hide it deep. We've turned over this here place three times, and we ain't found that dinero. Somebody put it away in a good place, and you can tell us where, Grayson."

Grayson shook his head hopelessly. "I don't know where it is," he insisted.

"Won't you men please go away and leave us alone?" Sue Grayson pleaded in a low voice. "We don't know anything about your stolen money. If there's a shred of decency in you, somehow you'll know we're telling the truth."

Hy stood near the fruit shelves along the wall, Sleet slouching to his left and partly behind him. The gun muzzle pressed relentlessly into his side, and icy circles seemed to expand from it. Hy was watching the drama before him, his shrewd eyes squinted. He was convinced

that Grayson was telling the truth. Neither Dick nor Sue knew anything about that stolen bank money. But certainly Lud Kuznic was not convinced of any such thing. Like most crooks, Kuznic did not believe that anyone could be honest.

The burly gang leader reached down and snatched the branding iron from the stove's fiery maw. He brandished it above Dick Grayson, a fiendish glitter in his eyes.

"Mebby this will loosen your tongue, wise hombre," he spat at Dick. "Mebby you'd like to see that cute little wildcat of yourn branded a few times. Ching! Come over here. Got a sharp blade on you?"

"You black-hearted devil!" Grayson raged, his face the color of month-old snow. "Nobody but a madman could do such a thing, Kuznic."

Lud Kuznic grinned evilly. "I ain't fergittin' neither that you was the ranny which salivated my kid brother Pete."

Ching Jiller pushed past the stove, his marblelike features appearing sharper than ever in the lamp's eerie glow. He produced a polished steel knife and tested the edge with a finger nail.

"Get that heifer on her feet, Ching," Kuznic commanded bluntly. "Slice a few clothes off'n her. We'll slap this iron right on her hide. Mebby that'll loosen up Grayson."

For the first time, Kuznic seemed to remember Hy. He spun, his eyes glittering coldly at the salesman. "You wasn't snoopin' around here for nothin', Nosey. If you got an idee about where that dough is

cached, spit 'er out before it comes your turn to fry."

It was a rare occasion when Hy Evering had nothing to say. But he was not yet ready to speak. Regardless of the cold lump in his stomach, his mind was racing, fitting things together, trying to find a way out. But each direction his thoughts took seemed to carry them into a blind canyon.

Neither of the Graysons knew where the money was hidden. Of this Hy was certain. Also, he was sure that if Kuznic's gang did manage to find the money, neither he nor the Graysons would be released. All three knew too much. Attempting a battle unarmed and with a gun muzzle poking a man in the ribs would be a perfect way to commit suicide, but it would not help the Graysons any.

Hy gritted his teeth in silent helplessness as he watched Ching grasp Sue and pull her roughly to her feet. She stood there in silence, pale as a snowbank, weaving slightly on her bound feet. The lamp glow sparkled lightly on her hair. Her blue eyes filled with horror, she watched the iron as if it were a rattler's fanged head.

Ching's thin lips twisted into a cruel smile as he lifted the knife blade and laid it against the dress hem at the curve of Sue's throat.

The glitter in Kuznic's eyes seemed to grow reptilian as he poised the glowing iron in readiness to press against Sue's skin. "You'll talk, damn you; you'll talk!" he was muttering exultantly.

Hy had appraised every object

within reach, and now his gaze was settling upon a half gallon jar of pickles sitting lonesomely on the top shelf only a few inches from his fingertips.

Dick Grayson's hoarse voice rasped out through the brittle silence. "Don't, don't! You damned, crazy fiends. I can't tell you where that bank loot is. I don't know. I swear I don't know. But take every cent we got. Take all my cows, the ranch, everything you want. But don't touch my wife with that branding iron. Let her go! Or by Satan, I'll . . . I'll . . ."

"You'll what?" Kuznic goaded. "You'll tell us where the bank dough is? Go ahead." He shoved the iron nearer to Sue.

Dick was straining at his ropes like a wild man. His range-conditioned muscles bulged, but the ropes only cut deeper grooves. Finally he fell back into the corner, panting in sheer exhaustion.

"What you waitin' for, Ching?" Kuznic said impatiently.

As the sharp blade began to slit slowly down the front of Sue Grayson's dress, revealing the satiny whiteness of her skin, Hy turned his head slightly to the left, straining the corner of his eyes until Sleet's face became visible. Sleet's eyes were fastened upon Sue Grayson with an intentness that seemed all but hypnotic.

At the same instant, Hy's right hand curled slyly about the heavy pickle jar on the shelf. Praying for accuracy, he lifted the container and dropped it behind him.

The jar struck Sleet's forearm like a falling stone. His startled curse exploded through the room. As the six-gun was knocked from his grip, the hammer dropped and the slug seared the calf of Hy's lean leg.

Hy was whirling as the gun roared. His doubled right fist drew a swift arc through the air, terminating abruptly on the point of Sleet's jaw with a loud crunching sound. As the gunman collapsed, Hy landed on top of him, clawing for the gun on the floor.

Bellows of alarm and loud curses jammed the air. As Hy grabbed at the gun, he glimpsed Ching's arm flicking forward like a snake's head. He buried his face behind a wide shoulder, and felt the stinging bite of the blade as it slashed a furrow through arm muscle.

There was a blur of motion from the other end of the room. Sue bumped against Ching, spoiling his draw as he made a fast grab for his holstered six-gun.

"It's Nosey busted loose!" Kuznic thundered. "Stay clear. I'll settle his hash!"

He dropped the hot iron and was ripping his gun free of leather when Grayson's awkwardly rolling torso crashed into his legs, rocking him against the stove.

Hy's fingers closed on Sleet's six-gun. Flipping the barrel into line with Ching's body, he triggered twice. The lank gun wolf doubled up as if struck by a flying timber.

Almost obscured by gun smoke, Kuznic bounced away from the stove, howling with pain. The odor of

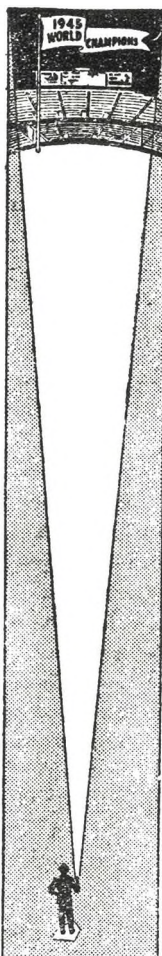
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scorched cloth blended with stinging powder fumes. His six-gun was still clutched in his hand, and he was in the process of throwing down on Hy when the salesman's bullet neatly divided his brow line between the close-set eyes.

As the smoke cloud lifted, Hy arose out of the pickle jar wreckage, vigorously stroking his jaw. "Too bad about the pickles." He sniffed regretfully. "Dills, too."

When the Graysons were free and out in the clean night air, Hy remembered the thirsty cattle.

"What's wrong with the windmill, Dick?" he asked.

"Pump stopped working. I had just shut off the wheel, thinking to fix it when those four cutthroats rode up and took over."

"Hm." A shrewd gleam entered the salesman's eyes. "I'll put my hoss and saddle against a broken-down tomcat that I can tell you where that bank swag is cached. Get a lantern, Dick. We'll rip that pump apart. Your stock needs the water."

With Sue holding the light, they pulled the pump while the thirsty cattle formed a ring of spectators. Hy plunged a hand into the cylinder and yanked forth a fat wad of soaked, greenish paper.

"There's a head of your bank's cabbage!" he crowed.

Dick Grayson's eyes bulged. "How in tophet—"

Hy grinned. "Pete Kuznic no doubt had the dinero in a water-proof bag that night. With the sheriff so close on his tail, he decided to ditch the money so that he wouldn't lose it if he was caught. Whenever he got out of jail or got a chance to come back here, he figured he could fish it out of your well somehow or other. But the drawstring soon rotted in the water and the frogskins floated out of the bag. They sucked up through the pipe and plugged the valve in the cylinder. Lud and his gang looked everywhere but in the well. If they'd let me help 'em fix the pump so's the cows could drink, they'd have found the dinero."

"Hy," said Sue gratefully. "If there's any reward for these bank robbers, we'll see that you get all of it."

"I don't want no reward," Hy assured her. "All I want is to sell you folks another Western Water-spout."

"Sold!" Dick Grayson said. "The best investment any cattleman ever made. And the cheapest power on God's dry earth."

Hy Evering grinned. Peddling windmills was a cinch if a salesman didn't mind peddling a little powder-smoke first.

THE END

Answers to Scrambled Words on page 36.

1. span 2. tarantula 3. motte 4. gunnysack 5. Colt 6. cloudburst 7. sawdust 8. ravine
9. wickiup 10. bandit 11. twister 12. caboose 13. harness 14. dodge 15. vigilante



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