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WESTERN STORY

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NOVEMBER 1944

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SHORT STORIES AND FEATURES

Editor
JOHN BURR

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Could that young candy-chewing cowhand feed Square Butte's tough rustler combine a bait of bullet fodder?

THE JELLY BEAN TRAIL

by WALT COBURN

I

He could not have been more than twenty or twenty-one years old. And he was either sheepherder-ignorant or else he was too smart for his britches because all he had to say in self-defense was that he hadn't calculated it to be horse stealing.

"The horse I was ridin'," he explained to the sheriff, the justice of the peace and grizzled Aaron Brockway who'd had him jailed, "was leg-weary. I rode into that pasture and when I come onto a horse that looked like he'd pack me a long ways, I dabbed my line on 'im and changed saddles. I left this mister as good a horse as I taken." He turned a pair of guileless blue eyes toward the justice of the peace. "I figgered it was a fair swap, judge."

The J. P. hid a faint grin behind the palm of his hand while Aaron Brockway made a sound that was a cross between a snort and a snarl.

"And where," asked the sheriff, "did you git that played-out horse you left in Aaron Brockway's horse pasture? Where . . . and how, button?"

A mild grin spread across the young cowpuncher's tanned face.

"I swapped for 'im, sheriff."

"Like you swapped for Aaron Brockway's bald-faced sorrel?"

"Yes, sir. Like I bin doin' all the way along the trail, sir, to Montana."

"And where'd you git the horse you started with—from wherever it is you come from?"

"From Wyoming. On a horse that belonged to my old man. A good un. Better'n any I swapped for along the way."

"And like as not," said the justice of the peace, "you stole that first horse from your father when you ran off."

"No, sir. You're wrong there. My old man didn't need a horse no more. You see, he was dead. He got shot in that war in Johnson County. I didn't see no sense in hangin' around there no more. Both sides was doin' a lot of bushwhackin'. So I hauled my freight."

"Did you bother," the sheriff asked, "to shoot the man or men who killed your father?"

The tow-headed young cowhand shook his head. "No, sir. I was kind o' glad the old man was dead. He was mighty ornery."

"Mebby you killed him?" Brockway put in shrewdly.

"Nope. I never had the guts to take a shot at my old man. I ain't a gun-slinger."

The cowhand had stabled Aaron Brockway's bald-faced sorrel at the feed and livery barn here in the little cow town of Square Butte. The sheriff had found him bedded down in the hayloft with a large paper sack partly filled with that kind of cheap candy called jelly beans. When he'd rubbed the sleep and hay dust from his eyes, the young stranger had grinned disarmingly and offered the law officer some jelly beans.

He opened the sack now, selected a couple of red ones and popped them into his mouth.

"What's your name?" asked the J. P.

"John."

"John What?"

"Just John. That's all. Jim John."

"Then John's your last name. Full name's Jim John," said the J. P.

"Yes, sir."

"That's a hell of a name," spoke Brockway.

The tow-headed cowpuncher grinned faintly and nodded. "That's what my old man used to say."

The justice of the peace scowled thoughtfully and reared back in his creaky swivel chair. His eyes studied the prisoner for a long minute. Then he spoke to Aaron Brockway.

"There it is, Brockway. An open-and-shut case of horse stealing. The horse is your property. This young

man broke the law when he took the horse. Even if he pleads guilty the minimum sentence is five years in prison, allowing time off for good behavior. But he's hardly more than a boy and he's not a criminal type. I'd hate to send a young feller like that to prison. However, if you prefer charges—"

Aaron Brockway was a tall, big, rawboned man with graying mud-colored hair and drooping mustache. He had a large nose and his eyes were a pale-gray color and bleak as a winter sky. His voice rasped.

"Some of these young uns is the worst kind, judge. We got no more than this feller's word fer what he's told us. He's ketched guilty. I don't see no call fer you to git chicken-hearted about it. I demand that you give 'im the limit!"

The sheriff cut Aaron Brockway a hard, cold look, then spoke to the white-maned judge.

"The kid didn't show no fight, judge. He was packin' a six-shooter but he'd lost it in the hayloft. Taken a while to paw around in the hay till we found it. He kep' yawnin' like he wasn't plumb awake, and eatin' them jelly beans. He hadn't had a square meal in a week till I taken 'im to the Chinaman's an' got the wrinkles bulged out o' 'is belly. I don't see no cause to throw the book at 'im."

"The taxpayers," rasped Brockway, "hire you to ketch horse thieves, not to set 'em loose in court. Stick to your job, Riggin."

The sheriff's name was Pete Riggin. He'd owned his own cow outfit until the hard winter wiped him out. He was short and heavy-set with a square face and shrewd, humorous, gray-blue eyes.

"I'll remember that, Brockway," he drawled lazily.

"We'll get on," said the justice of the peace, "with the case." And to his game of pinochle in the back room at the Last Chance, he might have added mentally. And to his bottle of rye. Judge Hough hadn't been sober within the memory of Square Butte's citizens. He owned the Mercantile and let his shrewish wife run the store. And when some little cowman got too badly in debt for his year's supply of grub, clothing and ranch machinery, Judge Hough would draw up a mortgage and have the debt-laden rancher sign it. He was sometimes referred to as Old Buzzard Hough.

Sheriff Pete Riggin, his keen eyes watching narrowly, caught the look that passed between Judge Hough and Aaron Brockway. And the peace officer rightly figured out just about what was coming.

Judge Hough cleared his skinny throat.

"I don't hold with Sheriff Riggin," he said, "when it comes to settin' the prisoner loose so that he can break the law again. On the other hand, I can't see eye to eye with Aaron Brockway when he wants that this young feller be sent to prison for the maximum of fifteen years. So I propose that we temper justice with mercy, as the sayin' goes. . . . Therefore, providin' it's agreeable to all parties concerned, I sentence

the prisoner Jim John to ten years for horse stealing. But instead of serving out that sentence in the penitentiary, this court hereby puts the prisoner under probation in the legal custody of Aaron Brockway. Aaron Brockway will give Jim John employment on his ranch at nominal wages and assume all responsibility for the good behavior of said prisoner, Jim John. Is that agreeable and satisfactory, Aaron Brockway?"

Brockway's thin-lipped mouth twisted in a faint smile.

"I'll take this Jim John in hand, judge," he said flatly.

"Case dismissed." Judge Hough avoided the sheriff's eyes.

Jim John grinned uncertainly and shoved the paper bag of jelly beans into the side pocket of an old canvas coat he was wearing. His blue eyes looked straight into the eyes of the grizzled gray-mustached sheriff.

Sheriff Pete Riggin handed the young cowpuncher his six-shooter.

"Here's your gun, young feller. I hope you won't have no need to use it. You're workin' now for Aaron Brockway. It won't be long till you commence to savvy what I'm drivin' at. Good luck. If ever you need me for anything, you kin locate me here at Square Butte. So long."

Sheriff Pete Riggin stared hard at Judge Hough and Aaron Brockway. Then he turned and walked out of the log cabin.

II

Riggin walked across the street to the Last Chance. Mike Shanley and Ab Abbott, two cowmen whose outfit joined the range claimed by Aaron Brockway, stood drinking at the bar. Shanley was tall and long-muscled with grizzled red hair and a very homely face that the wind and sun had colored dark brick-red. His eyes were as green as deep ice and he had a wide grin that labeled his easygoing nature. But, once driven to anger, Mike Shanley was what they called hell on wheels.

Shanley's partner in the Y Down outfit, Albert Abbott, the Albert shortened to Ab, was a quarter-breed from somewhere down in the big Southwest cow country. He was short, almost squatty, with heavy shoulders, barrel chest and thick bowed legs. When angered or drunk there was a deep red spark in his opaque black eyes that were set on either side of a flat, wide-nostriled nose. Ab Abbott had an ornery streak and he was said to be treacherous. The cow country did a lot of guessing and wondering about that partnership because they liked Mike Shanley and distrusted Ab Abbott.

The two men lived about ten miles apart, on joining ranches. Shanley was a bachelor but Abbott had a Mexican wife, a grown son he called Pancho and a good-looking daughter, Nina, about sixteen or seventeen. Nina Abbott was as wild as some young animal while Pancho was plain mean and unmanageable and was always getting into bad scrapes that his father and Mike Shanley had to yank him out of. But the last scrape Pancho Abbott had gotten into had been a killing that even Shanley couldn't square. He had

shot and killed Harry Brockway, Aaron Brockway's nephew and only kin, when they were both drunk at a dance. Pancho was hiding out somewhere now in the badlands along the Missouri River.

Ab Abbott scowled at the sheriff when he came in through the swinging half doors of the Last Chance. But Mike Shanley grinned at the law officer and waved him up to the bar.

"How'd the trial come out, Pete?"

Pete Riggin filled his whiskey glass. "Looks like Aaron's got hisself another cheap cowhand to take Harry's place. No self-respectin' cowpuncher would hire out to Aaron Brockway at any wages. So Old Buzzard give the tow-headed drifter ten years, then put him on probation and turned him over to Brockway to work it out."

"What kind o' damn law is that?" growled Abbott.

"Judge Hough's law, Ab." Sheriff Pete Riggin's voice was lazy.

"And what did the pris'ner have to say about that kind of a deal?" asked Shanley.

"Nary a word. Just et a couple more jelly beans and shoved his gun into his pants and acted like he didn't quite savvy what it was all about."

"Scared, I reckon." growled Ab Abbott.

"Somehow I got the notion he don't scare easy. He just didn't give a hoot. Just a big ol' jelly-bean button. Either plain dumb or almighty smart."

"He must've bin sleepin' off a bad jag," insisted Abbott.

Sheriff Pete Riggin said he never heard of anybody getting drunk on jelly beans and then he covertly watched both partners as he put a careless question.

"You fellers has bin handlin' considerable of them Wyoming cattle," he said lazily. "Did either of you ever run into a feller named John down along the Wyoming border? Or in Johnson County if you got that far?"

"John who?" asked Shanley.

"Last name's John."

"That's a hell of a name," Shanley grinned, "for a last name. John."

"So Aaron Brockway said. When the Jelly Bean told us his name was Jim John—"

Ab Abbott choked on his drink and spat the whiskey into the big brass spittoon. Mike Shanley's eyes were deep ice green.

"Never heard of no Jim John," said Abbott, when he had quit coughing.

Pete Riggin had a notion that Abbott was lying.

Then the swinging doors moved and Aaron Brockway stalked in with the tow-headed young cowpuncher trailing him. Brockway's pale eyes narrowed to bleak slits as he walked to the bar and his big hand brushed the butt of his six-shooter. The sheriff managed to keep between Brockway and the two cowmen partners.

Using his left hand, Brockway reached for the whiskey bottle. The paunchy saloonman tending his own bar reached down and picked up a heavy bung starter and his whiskey-veined face purpled.

"Nobody's paid the damages done

to my place from the last ruckus you all got into," he wheezed. "Take your arguments out in the street. I'll bust the skull of the first man that looks cross-eyed. You're the law around here, Pete. Why don't you git on the job?"

"Keep your shirt tail tucked in, Fat," said Sheriff Pete Riggin.

Brockway poured whiskey into his glass, downed it and shoved a five-dollar bill across the liquor-stained bar.

"Gimme two quarts of your forty-rod, Fat," he rasped. "And don't never serve the kid here nothin'. He's a horse thief out on parole. I got charge of 'im."

The cowpuncher grinned. But a dull flush had flooded his lean tanned face and for the fraction of an instant the boyish good humor was gone from his eyes, leaving them hard and bright. And when he spoke his voice was quiet.

"Have you got a bottle of that red strawberry pop?" he asked the saloonman and put a silver dollar on the bar.

Fat snorted and his voice wheezed like a blacksmith's bellows.

"Don't handle it. Got to have a special license fer that high-proof stuff."

Jim John grinned apologetically. He took some jelly beans from his pocket and shoved them into his mouth.

"Hand me them bottles," Brockway said. "So I kin git out o' here. Your place stinks bad."

"It won't be so bad," grinned Mike Shanley, "after you go. How much you payin' the Jelly Bean Kid, Aaron?"

"More'n he'll be worth, Shanley."

"Keep him on your own side of the bound'ry, Brockway," Abbott growled.

"That goes double fer you, Abbott," Brockway snarled. "If ever I ketch that breed Pancho on my range again, I'll double a wet rope an' whup him to death. And if Pete Riggin would take the trouble to earn the big sal'ry the taxpayers hand 'im, he'd collar Pancho Abbott and that'd be one hangin' I'd shore be proud to enjoy."

"The cow country orter reward Pancho for riddin' Montana of that no-good nephew of yourn," growled Abbott. "Harry Brockway tried to git his dirty hands on Nina. Pancho would kill any man that looked cross-eyed at his kid sister. Harry found that out a little too late."

"Then keep your brat home, Abbott, where she belongs. If she'd a stayed where she belonged, in a kitchen, instead o' ridin' alone all over the country, nobody'd bother her. But—"

"That'll do, Aaron," said Shanley bluntly. "Better shut that big mouth of yourn. Or you might choke on a bullet."

Sheriff Pete Riggin stepped in between the two big men. "Fat claims he runs a quiet joint. Keep it thataway. Git your likker and drag it, Aaron."

When Aaron Brockway and the tow-headed Jim John had left, Pete Riggin heaved a big sigh of relief.

"I wish you fellers would fetch

this janglin' to a head and shoot the head off."

"Mebbyso," grinned Mike Shanley, "if Aaron Brockway got killed, Pete, you'd git back the ranch him and Old Buzzard Hough taken away from you on that mortgage." His green eyes puckered shrewdly.

"I'd have to read up the law on that," Riggin drawled. "What do you fellers make of the Jelly Bean Kid?"

"He might do all right herdin' sheep," chuckled Mike Shanley, "providin' it wasn't too big a band."

Ab Abbott said nothing. He rolled and lit a cigarette and when he cupped the match flame in his thick stubby hands and lifted it to light the brown-paper cigarette, the reflection of the flickering light flame showed tiny red sparks in his opaque black eyes.

"I heard of a Jim John," wheezed Fat. "Down in Wyoming. He trailed with the Hole in the Wall gang. Tough hand. Ramrodded an outfit that was rustlin' durin' the Johnson County War. He trailed 'em into Montana till he got paid off in hot lead instead of foldin' money. He was plenty tough while he lasted."

"Could this Jelly Bean Kid be that Jim John's son?" asked the sheriff, his eyes watching Shanley and Abbott from under his slanted hat brim.

Fat hesitated a couple of seconds. He had had a saloon once down on Powder River that had been the meeting place for all sorts of men. And he'd not come away from there without getting spattered by some of the blood that had been spilled in that sanguinary range war. But he was almighty close-mouthed about things he'd seen and overheard.

"Well, sir, Pete," he wheezed, "you got me there. Jim John was a hard-case. Don't look like he'd throw a son that eats jelly beans and calls fer sody pop and ain't got the guts to take his own part—"

"But," grinned Sheriff Pete Riggin, "men branded with a name like Jim John don't run in bunches."

Judge Hough came into the barroom. He handed Pete Riggin a legal-looking document.

"Bench warrant for Pancho Abbott. It says Dead or Alive. Aaron Brockway swore it out. He wants that you should serve it on Pancho."

III

THEY butchered a sucking yearling and Aaron Brockway told the towheaded Jim John to slash the Y Down brand out of the hide, cut it into small chunks and scatter the chunks along the boggy end of the creek.

Aaron Brockway had ridden out on horseback and his new hired hand had fetched the light wagon with the meat tarp, butcher knives, ax and a big bucket to hold the heart, liver, kidneys and marrow guts. In the wagon were two pairs of old yellow slicker pants made like bib overalls, the kind sheepherders wore with short slicker coats to keep their clothes from getting bloody.

It was a bright moonlight night. Young Jim John, now called the Jelly Bean Kid, used Aaron Brock-

way's saddle horse for the brand scattering. He rode down the creek and out of sight in the willows and buckbrush that fringed both banks of Wolf Creek and he was half a mile from where Aaron Brockway was busy skinning the hide off the butchered yearling. Wolf Creek was the agreed boundary between Brockway's Leaning B range and the Shanley and Abbott Y Down range. For a few miles it was boggy and there were no crossings. The Jelly Bean Kid tossed the bits of hide at the mud and shoved each chunk out of sight with a long green willow stick he'd whittled to a point. He worked at his job without leaving the saddle.

"Right now would be a good time," sounded a young voice from behind a thick willow clump, "to ride away from it. Leave old Bad Eye with the wagon and the meat."

Jim John had stiffened in the saddle at the first sound of the voice. Then he relaxed and a slow grin spread across his lean tanned face.

"He'd shore faunch an' fight his head, all right." He wiped his hands on the horse's mane and reached into his shirt pocket. "But there wouldn't be no fun if you wasn't there to watch 'im."

"If you're clawing for a sneak gun, Jelly Bean," called the young voice, "change your mind. I got you covered."

"I guess," he grinned, "you're kind o' spooky. I don't pack a sneak gun. You like jelly beans?" He pulled a bulging muslin sack from his shirt pocket.

Nina Abbott rode around from behind the brush. In her chaps, shabby old buckskin jacket and Stetson hat she looked like a boy. A small, slim, tanned boy with thick, curly black hair, white teeth and smoky dark-gray eyes set under black brows and shadowed by heavy, long black lashes. She packed a saddle gun and catch rope and there was a .38 pistol in her slim tanned hand.

Jim John ignored the gun and handed the bulging sack towards her. Shoving the pistol into its holster, Nina helped herself to some of the jelly beans.

"That's a Y Down beef you killed." She munched the candy.

"That'd be hard to prove now. I guess you're Nina Abbott."

"And you're the Jelly Bean Kid. I'm glad you're a tow-head. You're kind o' homely but you've got a nice grin and I like your eyes. There's a dance at the schoolhouse coulee tomorrow night. I'll meet you at the outlaw cabin at the head of the breaks and we'll go to the dance together. If old Bad Eye won't let you off, come anyhow. Or are you scared of him?"

He grinned easily at the taunting mockery of that challenge. "I never tackled him yet. But I don't think he scares me much. What time you want me to meet you at that old outlaw cabin?"

"I'll be there about an hour after dark." Nina held the sack of jelly beans out to him.

"You keep 'em. I got more at the ranch. I'll fetch another sack of 'em tomorrow night."

"Harry Brockway," she smiled, "and the other boys always fetched a bottle."

"All I like," he told her, "is strawberry pop. It won't make the drunk come, but I git along on it."

Nina laughed. She had a soft, throaty laugh that matched her smoky dark eyes.

"Take off your hat." She smiled at him.

He flushed a little and pulled off his old sweat-marked Stetson. Nina rode her horse so close their stirrups scraped. She stared at him, then nodded and said all right, he could put on his hat now.

"I just wanted to see," she laughed, "if you parted your hair in the middle."

Jim John's face colored a hot, dull red. Her head was close to his and her soft laugh was mocking him. He reached out and grabbed her roughly and kissed her hard. Nina made no effort to get away. But when he let go of her she slapped him. A short, hard, stinging, open-handed slap. The imprint of her hand left a white mark on his flushed face. But his hot anger was gone and he grinned as he pulled on his old hat.

They were both breathing rapidly and Nina's smoky eyes were shining.

"Schoolhouse Coulee"—her voice was an unsteady whisper—"is on the Y Down range."

He nodded. "Yeah. I know. And the outlaw cabin is at the edge of the badlands where your gun-slingin' tough brother Pancho is hidin' out."

Again Nina's dark, black-fringed eyes studied him and though she was hardly seventeen there was something grown up and mature about her. Her whole environment, her rough contacts with such men as her own father and renegade brother, all had tended to erase her childhood. She had never played with dolls, like other small girls. She'd had living pets, wild things she had tamed. She'd heard cursing and seen men fight to the death. She had learned how to handle a green bronc and she was handy with a catch rope or gun. Nina Abbott was wild and free—reckless, with a teasing streak in her. But she was not tough. And she was as wholesome and forthright as a boy.

"The deal's off," she said bluntly. "Forget it."

Jim John shook his head. "I'll meet you there at the old outlaw cabin about an hour after dark. About moonrise. And I'll take you to the dance at Schoolhouse Coulee. So long."

Aaron Brockway was in an ugly humor when the young cowpuncher rode up. The cowman had his saddle carbine gripped in both big hands.

"You bin gone a hell of a time!" he growled. "Where you bin? What you bin up to, anyhow?"

"When I used to help the Old Man butcher one of these slow elks," said Jim John, "he'd make me ride off a ways with the brand and do a good job of scatterin' it."

"Then this ain't your first moonlight butcherin'?" The cowman was somewhat pacified by the young towhead's calm manner and speech.

"Gosh, no. I was raised on that kind o' meat."

"Then finish the job. You're strong enough to load them quarters by yourself. If anybody rides up on you, gut-shoot 'em—unless you want to go to the pen for butcherin' a Y Down beef. Play your string out like a tough hand."

Brockway shed his slicker pants, threw his skinning knife in the bucket and wiped the blood from his hands onto the bunch grass. Then he mounted and rode away at a lope, his carbine across the front of his saddle. The lanky cowman seemed in a big hurry to get away from there. And the young hired hand savvied why when a lone rider showed up like some ghost in the night.

Young Jim John packed a six-shooter in a holster fastened to the cartridge belt Aaron Brockway had given him while on the wagon seat was a .30-30 carbine that the cowman had told him to take along. But he made no move for either gun. He kept on skinning off the hide on the stolen yearling. And when Sheriff Pete Riggin rode up and reined to a halt, Jim John looked up and grinned slowly at the law officer.

"I'll have to look at the brand on that hide, son," Riggin said.

"That'd be a job," declared Jim John, "even for a hell-diver mud hen." He lifted a part of the skinned hide and shoved his hand through the hole where the brand had been cut out.

"I'd orter take you to jail, I reckon."

"Should I finish the butcherin', then? Or let the carcass rot here? I'll have to drive this outfit to town. I'm afoot for a saddle horse."

"Where's Aaron Brockway?"

"Gone."

"Where'd he ride to?"

"I didn't ask. And he never said. You want I should finish this job, sheriff?"

Sheriff Pete Riggin nodded. "Supposin' I arrested you, son?"

"You couldn't make it stick in court, sir. There's no brand. And where there's no brand, there's nobody kin prove claim to the beef. Nobody to make a charge agin' me."

"You shore know the answer to that un."

"The old man taught me that when I was a kid."

Jim John reached into his shirt pocket and then remembered and his hand came out empty.

Sheriff Pete Riggin dug into his own pocket and brought out some jelly beans.

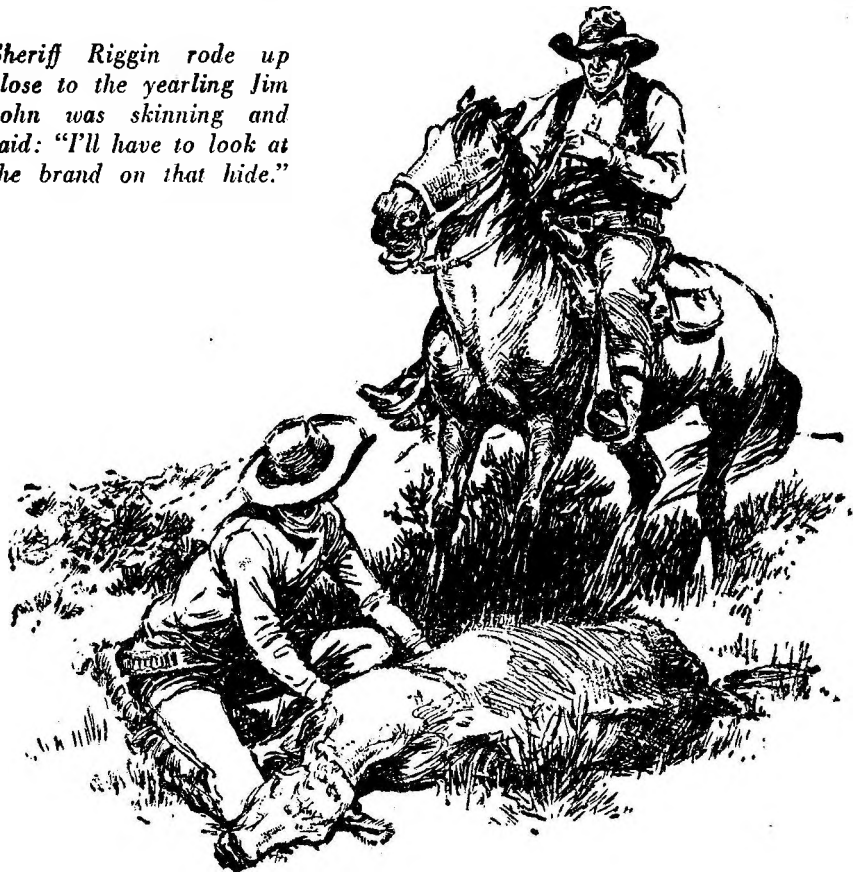
"Have some on me," he grinned.

Young Jim John straightened up and looked square into the puckered eyes of the grizzled law officer.

"She'd offered me a bait of jelly beans, an' I sent her home with a lecture that was water off a duck's back. I'd hate to think what might happen to her if that damned Aaron Brockway ketched her this side of Wolf Crick."

Young Jim John had been working for Brockway nearly a month. He nodded. He wasn't grinning now and his blue eyes were bright and hard.

Sheriff Pete Riggin hooked a leg



Sheriff Riggin rode up close to the yearling Jim John was skinning and said: "I'll have to look at the brand on that hide."

around his saddlehorn and poured flaky tobacco from a muslin sack into a brown paper. He rolled it and lit it and the smoke drifted from his mouth and nostrils when he spoke.

"Aaron Brockway," he said quietly, "and Mike Shanley and Ab Abbott is three of a kind. They're curly wolves. And that Old Buzzard Hough is the he-wolf of the pack. They was all mixed up in the big war in Wyoming. They either got run out o' Wyoming or they drifted before they got cut down there. And they didn't leave empty-handed. They come out with a big drive of stolen cattle. And since they located here, they've handled a slue more of such cattle. But they got too greedy like their kind always gits.

"There was some shootin' when they split up. The survivors divided. Hough sided with Aaron and Harry Brockway because he figgered Aaron could out-wolf Shanley and

Abbott. Pancho Abbott killed Harry Brockway. It wasn't ary drunken fight. Pancho just about worships his kid sister Nina. That's his one and only decent streak. So when Aaron fixed to marry his nephew off to Ab Abbott's daughter so's to give him a sort o' holt on the Y Down outfit, Pancho stopped it with a gun.

"So far as I know, it was a fair gun fight. Pancho was always faster than Harry with a gun. That's all the bulge he wanted. Pancho Abbott has guts. But if he figgers he's up agin' a better man, he'll bushwhack him. So I ain't ridin' into a bushwhacker trap in the badlands. And when Aaron Brockway has to call in the law that shows he's scared. But I ain't allowin' Old Buzzard Hough and Aaron Brockway to use me for the monkey to yank out the hot chestnuts. They kin do their own feudin' and the sooner they kill off one another, the cleaner the country will be. And for the same kind of reason, I'm givin' you your chance to git out o' the ruckus that's a-comin'. I'd ruther see a son of mine in the pen than have him dirtied in this bloody mess. How's about lettin' me take you to jail, young Jim John?"

"I'm playin' my string out here, sheriff, if you'll let me."

"Your father, Jim John," Sheriff Pete Riggin tried his shot in the dark, "was mixed up with Brockway, Shanley, Abbott and Buzzard Hough. They killed Jim John. And you hope to pick up your dead father's gun and play his tough hand out. That it, son?"

"Somethin' like that, sheriff."

"You don't stand a snowball's chance in hell, boy. Your father was tough. He was no better than the men who killed him. He ain't worth your throwin' away your young life, son."

"I hated my old man's guts," said young Jim John quietly. "I'd have shot him if I'd had the nerve to fight him fair. And I drawed the line at bushwhackin' him."

"Then why—"

Young Jim John shook his head. "I can't tell you my reasons, sir. You'll just have to let 'er ride like that. I've got to handle it my own way. I'm shore obliged for your friendship but I've got to play this lone-handed."

Sheriff Pete Riggin scowled and pinched out his cigarette.

"I'll be around somewheres, son, when you need me." He started to ride away. Then he turned back.

"Just one thing, son. . . . That little Nina kid. Don't size her up wrong. She's wild and headstrong. But there's ain't a more decent girl in Montana."

"Yes, sir." Jim John's face reddened. "I never thought otherwise."

The gray-haired law officer looked straight at the young cowpuncher and was satisfied with what he read in the boy's blue eyes.

"Well, don't run out o' them jelly beans," he grinned and rode on.

IV

Young Jim John went back to his butchering. He had the hide off and the paunch and entrails out on the ground, the beef neatly quar-

tered and loaded in the wagon and the old bloodstained wagon tarp thrown over the meat when Aaron Brockway rode up. And you could tell by his horse that Brockway had not ridden hard nor gone far.

"I seen a horsebacker ride off from you." The lantern-jawed cowman spat out the words with a stream of tobacco juice. "Rode like Pete Riggin."

"Yeah. It was the sheriff."

"I told you to gut-shoot anybody rode up on yuh."

"I know," said young Jim John. "But I didn't."

"By Satan, when I give you orders, you foller 'em out."

"I do my best, mister. But I didn't see no call to kill that feller. My old man always told me it was bad luck to shoot a law officer."

"And your old man was somebody named Jim John."

"That's right, mister. You said yourself it was a hell of a name."

Jim John climbed up on the wagon seat and unwrapped the lines from around the set brake which he kicked off with his foot.

Aaron Brockway was scowling at him, bleak-eyed. Nina had called the cowman Bad Eye. He was rightly named.

"What did Pete Riggin an' you have to talk about all that time so confidential?" he rasped suspiciously.

"Mebbyso," grinned young Jim John, "the sheriff was goin' to arrest me and I kind o' talked him out of it."

"You couldn't talk Pete Riggin out o' the time of day. By Jehoshaphat, you better not git smart-Alecky with me or I'll double a wet rope and whup you to death. Don't never let me ketch you a-throwin' in with Pete Riggin or that Y Down outfit or I'll make a bunch quitter out o' you. Git this meat to the ranch before it gits fly-blowed . . . you damn Jelly Bean!"

The big cowman rode on ahead almost out of sight, cutting straight across country by a short route after he'd piloted young Jim John to the wagon road that led to the ranch. And Aaron Brockway was not quite out of sight when young Jim John saw the two riders join him and the three of them sit their horses a minute or so, as though they were talking, before they rode off together. Even at that distance in the moonlight the young tow-headed cowhand had recognized those two riders for Mike Shanley and Ab Abbott. He had expected some kind of a ruckus, guns spitting sudden death. But not a gun had been fired. Perhaps they'd had Aaron Brockway covered when they rode up on him. Aaron Brockway wasn't the man to buck any two to one odds.

But watching them narrowly young Jim John got the notion somehow that not a gun had been drawn and that Brockway hadn't been surprised at their meeting him. It looked as though it had been arranged. And whatever feuding hatred they felt towards one another had been laid aside, at least for a while. The three of them seemed to be having a medicine talk as they rode into a long draw and out of sight.

Young Jim John saw no more of them. And as he drove along the wagon road he had time to think about the girl he'd met. There was something about remembering her that quickened his pulse and brought a warm flush to his face. He'd kissed her. That was the first time in his life he'd ever kissed a girl like that. She'd slapped his face and he was glad she had. But she'd sure thrown him a double two-handed kiss to take along. And she was meeting him tomorrow night—if he could slip away from Aaron Brockway. . . .

But that ornery cowman rode mighty close herd on his hired man. Worked him from long before daybreak until after dark, then set him afoot. The only night horse Aaron Brockway kept in the barn was his own private horse. And the cowman slept near the door in the log bunkhouse. It was the slack season between the calf and beef roundups. A breed hay crew was pulling in next week to put up hay at the home ranch. So right now there was only Aaron Brockway and his Jelly Bean hired hand at the ranch. It would take some doing to give Aaron the slip.

V

Fate seemed to be dealing young Jim John a lucky hand. Because the next evening when the chores were done and Aaron Brockway had wolfed down his supper, the cowman pulled on his hat and took his saddle gun from its rack on the cabin wall.

"I'll be back before sunrise." He fixed young Jim John with his bleak pale stare. "So don't try to rabbit on me."

He rode away on the only horse in the barn, leaving his hired man afoot.

Wrangling the big horse pasture on foot was a sweaty, leg-wearying job. Young Jim John thought he'd never get any horses eased from the pasture and into the big pole corral. Half a dozen times or more he had a little bunch of the gentler horses nearly to the pasture gate, when they would break back on him. His whole body dripped with sweat, his legs ached and his high-heeled boots had rubbed big raw blisters on his heels by the time he finally got eight or ten head of gentle horses, work teams, all but a couple, into the corral. He saddled the best of the three geldings, tied him in the barn and turned the others back into the pasture.

Then he took a quick bath in the creek and shaved in such a hurry he nicked his jaw in several places, and put on a clean shirt and a pair of clean faded Levi overalls. He rubbed tallow on his boots, combed his unruly straw colored hair with his fingers and pulled on his old Stetson. Getting his saddle gun, he blew out the lamp.

It was already an hour after dark. It would take an hour's hard riding to get him to that deserted outlaw cabin at the edge of the badlands. What if Nina got tired waiting there for him and pulled out? She'd think he'd lost his nerve. It seemed to him that he was forking the slowest horse on earth. He didn't realize

until now how much he'd looked forward to seeing that girl again. He'd never felt that way before about any girl. And he'd met his share of them down in Wyoming. Some of them had been darned easy to look at, too. He cussed himself for a young half-baked fool.

"I don't give a darn," he finally made himself admit, "she's the only doggoned girl I ever met—"

His swift heart thumping sent the blood into his throat when he rode up to the deserted old log cabin in the scrub pines. It had been used once for an outlaw hideout. Now its sod roof was thick with weeds and caved in at one end and the chinking and daubing was gone from between the logs. No sign of life there. His heart sank into his boots. Either Nina Abbott had grown weary and impatient waiting and had ridden away, or she'd just jobbed him with a lie and hadn't come at all. Then off in the scrub pines a horse nickered. Young Jim John's sweaty, blowing horse gave reply. His nerves taut, he slid his .30-.30 from its saddle scabbard. This could be a gun trap he'd been tricked into.

Then Nina's voice hailed him from the cabin. She stepped out of its black interior. She still wore her Levis and the buckskin jacket and she carried a saddle gun in the crook of her arm. She didn't look like any girl who was fixing to go to a dance.

She wasn't smiling, either, and in the moonlight her brown face had lost its healthy color and her eyes were black pools.

"I thought you'd never get here." Nina Abbott's voice had lost its softness, its undertone of hidden laughter. It sounded as brittle as breaking glass.

"Brockway left me afoot. I had to wrangle the pasture by hand. . . . What's wrong, Nina? Something."

She nodded. Then he saw the livid bruise that covered one cheek. He swung from his saddle and stood close to her, staring into her dark eyes.

"If Aaron Brockway hurt you," he said tensely, "I'll kill him!"

Her laugh was short. "Ab Abbott did it. You can't see the quirt marks on my back. He left me tied up and locked in the root cellar. But I got out."

"But why—"

Nina smiled twistedly. "It was those darned jelly beans. When I pulled off my jacket some of 'em fell out on the floor. I wouldn't tell him where or when or how I got 'em—"

Young Jim John reached out and took both her hands. They needed no more words now. His arms were around her—gently, because he'd felt her wince when he touched her shoulders—and she kissed him back when their lips met.

"Who are you?" she finally asked him in a low voice. "Why are you hired out to Aaron Brockway? Was your father a cattle rustler they called Whitey?"

"Whitey." He nodded. "I don't reckon they knew him by any other name. He said Jim John was a hell of a name for a man. He was towheaded. So they called him Whitey. And in the end, they killed him. Brockway and Shanley and Ab Ab-

bott. They killed him when they was shovin' out a big drive of cattle that my father had stole from my grandfather. My mother's father. He was a big cowman in Wyoming.

"My mother finally left my father when I was about sixteen. She'd run away from home to marry Jim John. And when she found out how ornery he was, that he was a cattle rustler and a killer, she was too prideful to go back to her father. She stuck with it till my father tried to make a cattle thief and bushwhacker out o' me. It was for my sake she swallowed her pride and went back to my granddad's ranch. She died a year later.

"My granddad raised me. He was the finest man on earth. Whitey—Jim John—hated him. My granddad's name was Matt McCoy. He sent word to the Hole in the Wall for Whitey to quit the country; he didn't want to have to kill the father of his grandson. Matt McCoy taken to me strong. And he was just about everything a kid could find in a man to tie to. . . .

"But Whitey didn't quit the country. He got Brockway and Shanley and Ab Abbott to help him and they run off all the McCoy cattle they could gather on a fast roundup. When my granddad headed 'em off, they killed him. And later when Whitey tried to claim the bulk of those cattle, they killed him off."

"And where were you?"

"Away at school where Matt McCoy was sendin' me through college. In his will, he'd left me his big outfit. My father had the renegade gall to try to move in on me. He showed up. I hadn't seen him for five years. I saw him comin' and was ready. I had a gun pointed at his belly while he made his talk. He tried to lay the bushwhacker blame on Brockway and Shanley and Abbott, but I knew he was lyin'. I told him to ride away or I'd kill him. So he rode off cussin' me and threatenin' to come back with his gang and wipe me out and take the remuda and all the cattle in the McCoy MC brand. You know the iron. There's plenty of those MC cattle on the Shanley and Abbott range and a lot more vented and branded with Brockway's Leaning B. So when I could git things in shape, I cold-trailed the outfit. I found my father's grave but shed no tears there. And I came on to play my string out. How'd you guess that Whitey was my father?"

"Shanley and Ab Abbott beat it out of Fat, the saloonkeeper. I think Fat told Sheriff Pete Riggin that Whitey's name was Jim John. The sheriff knows by now who you are. He's hard to fool. And he's after 'em now, like as not. Because Fat died from the beatin' they gave him. Shanley was with my father when they showed up for breakfast, both of 'em half drunk. And scared. So scared they patched up their feud with Aaron Brockway. And when I spilled those jelly beans they both stared at 'em, there on the kitchen floor where I was startin' their breakfast. Then my father grabbed me and tied my wrists to the hitchrack and quirted me until Shanley took the quirt away from him because he said he didn't want his purty young bride-to-be all marked up. . . ."

"His *what?*"

"His future bride. Shanley is payin' a big price for me. Horses and cattle. Like they used to buy a young squaw." Nina Abbott's voice was bitter.

"Where was your mother? What was she doin' while you was bein' quirted?"

"Sleeping," said the girl quietly. Too quietly. "In her grave. They buried her a week ago. She died from one of Ab Abbott's drunken beatings. Pancho wasn't there to take her part that time. . . . You say you hated your father. How do you think I feel towards mine?"

This time young Jim John held her closer, until the tears came and until after her sobbing had ceased. And they both knew that from here on and forever, nothing but death would ever part them. They were the children of hate. Their love sprang from that, strong and pure and brave and almighty splendid.

"They're down at the river by now," Nina said. "Even Old Buzzard Hough is there to see that they don't cheat him on the tally. Pancho hasn't been hiding out in the badlands. He's fetching up a trail herd of stolen cattle. They'll be some of your grandfather McCoy's cattle. Hough took along the money to pay off Pancho's Wyoming renegades he hired to help him."

"What about their feud?"

"There's never been any real feud," answered Nina. "The cowhands who got killed off now and then while the feud was supposed to be so strong and bitter, those were men they wanted to get rid of. All but Harry Brockway. Pancho killed him because Aaron Brockway had bought me, like Shanley bought me last night, from Ab Abbott for his big overbearing nephew Harry. Pancho is a cattle thief and a killer, but as long as he's alive, he'll fight for me. And when he finds out that his sister Nina has fallen way down deep in love with a darned tow-headed Jelly Bean, he'll fight for you —if they don't murder him before I get to him. Pancho never had any part of a chance to go straight. Not with a renegade like Ab Abbott for a father."

"But this feudin' business, Nina?"

"Was to fool Sheriff Pete Riggin. The hard winter had just about wiped him out and Hough had a heavy mortgage on his ranch. So he was appointed sheriff. Deputy sheriff, I guess he really is. They want to get rid of him. Put Aaron Brockway in his place. And they keep trying to trap him. But whenever they set a trap I tip him off. Pete Riggin is a good man."

"You kin gamble on that," agreed young Jim John. He was wishing that Sheriff Pete Riggin was here right now.

"I've bin waitin' for that stolen trail herd to show up, Nina. I had a notion that's where Pancho Abbott was but I wasn't certain. I left it wide open for 'em down in Wyoming. Rode away from the ranch. Boarded a train. Got off at a water tank stop where there was a saddled horse waitin'. My grandfather'd adopted me, changed my name legally to Jim McCoy. So it was Jim

McCoy who took the train. And Jim John who started up the rustler trail on horseback, with a sack of jelly beans."

"Why the jelly beans?" Nina managed a smile.

"I like 'em." He took a bulging sack from his pocket. "Have some."

He tried to talk her into going to town. "Ride to Square Butte, Nina. Tell Sheriff Pete Riggin he'll find me at Rustlers' Crossin' on the River."

Nina laughed and shook her mop of curly black hair and kissed him fiercely.

"Where you go, Jelly Bean, I go." She patted the short-barreled carbine. "I've got one with Ab Abbott's name on it in this gun."

Nothing he could say or do would swerve her from that grim purpose. He read that in her smoky eyes. But he made up his mind that he wasn't going to let Nina Abbott kill her own father, no matter how ornery Ab Abbott might be.

"Anyhow," she clinched her argument, "Sheriff Pete Riggin isn't at Square Butte. He's down there in the badlands along the river. They killed the saloonkeeper Fat. That's murder. And he's got enough on 'em all now to hang 'em. Even Old Buzzard Hough. Because it was Hough who ramrodded the job."

Young Jim John said in that case they'd better be going. "There'll be other dances we'll go to."

"I made that up about the dance," she told him, the laughter back in her smoky eyes. "I just wanted you to meet me here. I made up a lie to get you to come. What do you think of me now? I'm just a bold girl with no pride. I wanted to see you again. Tonight. I didn't know why. I'd heard Shanley and Ab Abbott talk about having to kill you when you got underfoot. I was going to try to coax you if I couldn't scare you into quitting the country. If you'd asked me, I'd have gone with you. Love hadn't hit me between the eyes then. But I trusted you. And I guess I needed you. Or maybe I did love you. I don't know. Anyhow, I tricked you into meeting me. That's not a nice thing for a girl to do."

"I think it was almighty horrible, myself. . . . Have some more jelly beans."

He handed her the sack, then took something from his pocket. It was metal and shiny and he pinned it to the breast pocket of his clean blue flannel shirt. A deputy sheriff badge. He rubbed the heel of his hand on the shiny metal and grinned at her.

"Just a Jelly Bean Sheriff," he told her.

When a man is soft or weak or otherwise unfitted for the rough and tough life of a cowhand, the cow country calls him a Jelly Bean.

But young Jim John, legally named Jim McCoy, was no weakling now. He was young and easygoing and he'd let them shove him around and he'd stood for Aaron Brockway's insulting abuse. He was grinning now like some schoolboy. But his eyes were blued steel in the moonlight. He'd shed something of that guileless manner when he pinned on the law badge.

"It'll be the first time in my life,"

he said quietly, "I ever shot at a man to kill him."

VI

It was too big a job for one man to tackle. And Nina Abbott was bound to be more of a handicap than help. Jim John would be slowed down and thrown off balance trying to protect the girl he loved. She might be game and a crack shot and all that, but she was a girl and he was bound to protect her. And with her underfoot and the odds what they were against him, young Jim John wouldn't have a sheepherder's chance. But he knew better than even to hint it.

Coming down to cases, any one of those renegades would be more than a match for the Jelly Bean Kid deputy sheriff in a gun fight. He was fast with a gun and better than average when it came to accurate shooting. But he'd never had a gun fight in his life. And even tough young Pancho Abbott had killed at least one man in fair fight. As for Aaron Brockway and Mike Shanley and Ab Abbott, they had survived more than a few tough gun scrapes. Why, even Old Buzzard Hough had a gun rep.

In spite of his quiet self-confidence and that grim determination that was fired by his love for Nina Abbott, that solid black wall of brutal reality rose up to block Jim John's way. There was no dodging around it or crawling under it or climbing over it. Or even shooting his way through it. It was there. Those big tough odds. They'd cut him down before he could warm a gun barrel. And with the girl to handicap him even further, he was a goner before he started. Young Jim John had bitten off more than he could even start to swallow.

They could see the wide strip of river, silvery in the moonlight. Giant cottonwoods and heavy red willow thickets on the banks throwing deep black shadows. A long sandbar spread out, smooth and flat, towards a brushy island. And this was Rustler's Crossing where, at this time of the year when the water was low, a man could ford without wetting his saddle skirts. There was a line camp on either side of the river—log cabins, cattle sheds, barns, pole corrals, branding chutes and fenced-in hay meadows. Two river ranches. Until the hard winter had struck, both places had belonged to Pete Riggin. They had been called Riggin's north and south ranches. Now the place was known simply as Rustlers' Crossing.

The last of the herd had been crossed before dark. The cattle had been turned loose to scatter out and graze. There had been some cows with big early calves in the drive and they were bawling now as the cows located their lost offspring. Other calves that had gotten footsore and leg-weary had been killed and some of those cows were bawling in vain for calves they'd never find. But the trail herd had been crossed and tallied out and turned loose where the grass was tall along the river bottomlands. A stolen remuda grazed in the north horse pasture.

Inside a long log cabin that served for a bunkhouse, Old Buzzard Hough

opened a small ledger and got out a pen and a bottle of black ink. Aaron Brockway, Mike Shanley and Ab Abbott each produced stubby pencils and vest-pocket tally books. They sat around a large round-topped poker table. A lighted lantern hung by a rope and iron hook from the ridge log and shed a shadowy yellow light on the men sitting around the table. Black paint covered the closed windows like opaque curtains.

Outside in the black shadows Pancho Abbott squatted on his spurred boot heels, a saddle gun across his legs, on guard. His cigarette glowed in the darkness. Now and then he took a short pull at a half-emptied quart of whiskey. The night shadows hid the scowl on his lean, swarthy face, the ugly glint in his bloodshot black eyes. His head, with its heavy mat of coarse black hair, tilted a little sideways as he listened to the voices inside. He had worked the mud daubing and a strip of chinking loose from between the logs, using the long blade of his knife, so that he could see inside and he seemed more absorbed in what he heard and watched inside the bunkhouse than he was interested in his duties as guard. And something he'd seen or heard was rankling Pancho. They had a jug on the table and they were all feeling their booze. Their greedy elation over the safe delivery of the stolen cattle was tainted by suspicion and hatred of one another. Not a man inside that bunkhouse trusted any of the others.

Young Jim John and Nina left their horses in behind some brush and made their cautious approach on foot. The girl had showed her claws when he tried to make her stay behind. They were so close now that the Jelly Bean Kid could have smashed the nearest blacked-out window with a rock. They crouched there in the shadow of the brush, tense, gripping their guns. Then a match flared in the thick shadows near the door. The match flame, lifted to light the cold stub of a cigarette, revealed Pancho Abbott's face. He lit his cigarette and blew out the match light.

When Pancho moved, Jim John saw the strip of light where he had pulled out the chinking. And they saw Pancho cautiously shove the barrel of his six-shooter into the opening. Aaron Brockway's rasping laugh sounded inside and then his nasal, rasping voice.

". . . so don't commence crowin' too loud, you damned ol' rooster. Remember what happened to my nephew Harry. You met Ab's price and his missus ain't alive to block the deal and the bride ain't got a damn thing to say about it, but till you git Pancho's consent—"

"Shut your long jaw, Aaron!" Mike Shanley's voice cracked like a whip lash. "I'll make my dicker with Pancho. Till I do, you keep your damn trap shut. Or you won't be alive to dance at the weddin'. Me'n Nina will git along, once I trim her claws—"

Pancho's gun roared. Inside the bunkhouse Shanley's voice broke in a hoarse howl of mortal agony. Then somebody inside knocked out

the lantern light. And Ab Abbott's ugly voice roared out of the darkness in there to blot out Shanley's groans.

"Pancho! You drunken fool! You want to mess up the deal?"

Young Jim John turned to grab Nina but the girl had left his side. Her voice, low-pitched, yet penetrating, came back to him as she ran towards the long log bunkhouse.

"Pancho! Come quick! Into the brush with us! Pancho!"

Then the bunkhouse door was flung open and men with guns in their hands came piling out.

Young Jim John heard Pancho Abbott call his sister's name.

"Nina! Baby! Down!"

Their movements were shadowy. But the Jelly Bean Kid could see the tough Pancho take his sister in his arms and hold her tight. Then with a hoarse, racking sob he lifted his six-shooter and swung it down like a club. The girl went limp in her brother's arms and dry, choking sobs racked Pancho Abbott as he laid her on the ground in the deep black shadows along the log wall.

"God forgive me. . . . But I'd rather see you dead like this, little sister, than married to one of these brutes. . . . That Aaron Brockway has always wanted you, baby. . . ."

Then Pancho Abbott was crouched and his gun spat fire. Aaron Brockway's six-shooter spewed flame and Pancho twisted. Suddenly his legs gave way and he pitched forward on his face and lay there.

"That's for Harry!" Aaron Brockway's voice rasped. "Don't take it up, Ab, or I'll gut-shoot yuh. It's time that locoed Pancho got his ticket to hell punched."

Old Buzzard Hough seldom laughed. When he did it made an ugly, grisly sound. It was worse than Shanley's dying curses inside the bunkhouse and made young Jim John shiver. And he rose from where he was crouched behind the brush.

The three of them were standing bunched just outside the door: The lanky Aaron Brockway; short, heavy set Ab Abbott, and the skinny, black-clad Judge Hough, the Old Buzzard with a long-barreled gun in his claw-like hand.

"The process of elimination," cackled Old Buzzard Hough. "It's thinning the tough ranks. Let's get back to the business in hand. And a drink of whiskey. One of you had better put Shanley out of his misery. His damned wailing offends the ears—"

"Drop your guns!" called young Jim John. "You're all under arrest. For the murder of Matt McCoy, in Wyoming!"

"Who the devil are you?" growled Ab Abbott.

"Jim John McCoy. Deputy sheriff from Powder River."

"Hell's fire!" rasped Aaron Brockway, "it's that damn Jelly Bean!" The gun in his hand spat flame. The bullet would have hit young Jim John in the chest or belly if he'd stayed on his feet.

But even as Brockway called out, something hit the Jelly Bean Kid from behind. It was a carbine barrel and it caught him in behind the

knees, jackknifing his legs and dropping him to his knees. And that was Sheriff Pete Riggin's calm, steady voice beside him as the bullet from Brockway's gun whined over his head.

"Shoot to kill, son!"

The sheriff's gun exploded alongside and a little behind young Jim John as he caught his balance again. And then he and the grizzled sheriff were crouched there behind the shadow shelter of the buckbrush, their guns spewing flame.

Young Jim John saw Aaron Brockway's lanky frame swaying like a corn shock in the wind. The Jelly Bean Kid was shooting at Ab Abbott's stocky shadow and he was sending his bullets into the quarter-breed's thick chest and hard belly and not a shot missed. Abbott was dead on his feet when his gun slid from his hand and he went down with a heavy crash.

Old Buzzard Hough tried to get back inside the bunkhouse, shooting as he went, his bullets clipping the brush that sheltered the grizzled sheriff and the Jelly Bean deputy. He was going in through the door when a gun inside roared like a cannon. Old Buzzard Hough screamed like a wounded animal as he went down, clawing at his bullet-torn belly. He lay there partly inside the doorway writhing and screaming, until a second shot from inside put an end to his agony.

Aaron Brockway was mortally wounded but he was dying hard. He lay there on the ground now, sprawled out, holding his six-shooter in both hands, and his shots were kicking dirt in Jim John's face when Sheriff Pete Riggin put a bullet through Brockway's skull.

"You hit, son?" Pete Riggin's voice was tense.

"I don't think so, sir. I'm kind o' excited—"

"Hold your fire in there, Shanley!" shouted Sheriff Pete Riggin. "It's all over but the shoutin'. What shape you in?"

"Kind o' bad, Pete. Kind o' bad . . ."

The Jelly Bean Kid wasn't taking the time to figure out the meaning of that exchange of words. He was on his feet and running. He had to step over Pancho Abbott's dead body to reach Nina. She moaned a little as he bent over her and when he lifted her in his arms she stirred and her eyes fluttered open and then her arms went up around his neck and she clung to him. Her hat and thick mop of black curls had cushioned the blow of the gun barrel that otherwise would have smashed her skull.

"Pancho?" she whispered.

"They killed him, Nina. He died fightin' for you."

Sheriff Pete Riggin had lit the lantern inside the bunkhouse and Nina was on her feet, dizzy, with young Jim John McCoy's arm around her, supporting her, when they went in.

The sheriff was down on one knee beside Mike Shanley. The red color was drained from Shanley's homely face and his bloodshot eyes were like

green glass. He looked at young Jim John and Nina Abbott and grinned faintly.

"That's the man for her, Pete. . . . I never had ary intention of claimin' you, Nina, fer a wife. But I promised your mother I'd take care of yuh. She was a good woman. . . . I had to play it like I did to git you away from Ab. I tried to explain it to Pancho but he called me a liar and worse. He was drunk. Sober, he might've listened. . . . But I don't hold it against Pancho for gut-shootin' me. It's the only decent move I ever made. . . . Only I never had ary part in the killin' of Matt McCoy. But I did kill Whitey . . . Jim John. . . . Killed him in a fair gun fight. It was Old Buzzard Hough started me on the Outlaw Trail. He was a two-bit judge in Wyoming. Sentenced me for a long stretch on a framed cattle-rustlin' charge, then give me my choice of goin' to the pen or throwin' in with his renegades. Whitey was ramroddin' his rustler gang out o' the Hole in the Wall. . . . I remember you as a kid, young Jim. And I'm the feller with all the big red whiskers that got you and your mother away from Whitey's place and delivered you to Matt McCoy's ranch. You growed into a man. . . . How's about a drink from that crock, Pete? Before I ride acrost the Last Divide—"

Nina Abbott freed herself from young Jim John's arm. "Heat some water! Hurry! Rustle clean cloths for bandages. Who's got a sharp knife?"

Then she was down on her knees, cutting away Mike Shanley's shirt and undershirt, working with feverish speed and steady fingers. She used cold water until they could get a kettle of hot water, used raw whiskey for antiseptic. While she worked, she gave Pete Riggin and young Jim John curt orders. And Mike Shanley lay there without flinching, gritting back the pain, his lips flattened in a grin and his eyes green and shining. The bullet had made a dangerous and painful rip in the hard lean belly muscles. But Mike Shanley was going to live. He said so.

"I got to dance," he said, "at the Jelly Bean's weddin'."

And he did. It was Riggin & Shanley now that owned the Montana outfit. And after the wedding Jim John McCoy took his bride to Wyoming, to make their home there on the MC ranch.

Pete Riggin and Jim John McCoy got any indictments against the reformed outlaw, Mike Shanley, quashed. Shanley had promised Pete Riggin to help the sheriff get back his stolen outfit and wipe out the rustlers. Shanley claimed it took a rustler to ketch a rustler and said he'd have to work it his own way. Which he'd done.

It was a long, leisurely horseback ride from Square Butte, Montana, to the McCoy Ranch in Wyoming. Nina and Jim McCoy camped along the way. It was their moonlit trail to Happiness. They made a name for it—the Jelly Bean Trail.

THE END

CHICKEN HOUSE CHAMP

by S. OMAR BARKER

Romeo Jones might have known he wasn't courting anything but trouble when he started back-trailing that fugitive from a Thanksgiving dinner

ONE thing about roamin' the range with this six-foot, flap-eared ruckaboo blond named Romeo Jones: you never have to wonder what he's ponderin' about. Because if it ain't gals, it's women.

"Some day, Nogal," he says, dreamy-eyed as a droop-horned cow, "I'm goin' to marry me one of 'em. Then you'll see!"

"See what?" I inquire.

"How it seems to set down to a Thanksgivin' dinner with turkey an' fixin's," he says, "instead of driftin' the range wonderin' where our next bait of beans is comin' from—like a couple of drag-tailed coyotes."

"*My* tail ain't draggin'," I shrug. "Besides this ain't Thanksgivin'."

"But next Sunday is." sighs

Romeo. "An' just look at us! My stummick's as empty as a waterhole in a drought."

"So's your head. Thanksgivin' comes on a Thursday this year."

"Is that a fact? Well—"

He busts off suddenly, staring at a sandy spot of ground.

"Great gadflies, Nogal!" he exclaims. "This here track looks like a woman's!".

It does look like a feminine hoof print, all right. Any man with a foot that little would be wearing cowboy boots, and this track ain't.

"Gee, I'll bet she's purty!" sighs Romeo.

"You're the first idiot I ever knowed to fall in love with a gal's track," I says. "Come on, let's travel!"

"Nogal," he solemnizes, "I bet this pore damsel is lost on the desert. It's our solemn duty to rescue her."

"It was your ma's solemn duty to knock you in the head with a churn dasher when you was little, too, and save the world from an idiot, but she didn't do it. Besides, this ain't no desert. An' besides, didn't I hear you vow that the next gal you fell in love with would have to be rich?"

"What makes you think this one ain't?" he argues.

So I point out that this heifer track shows wore out spots in the soles of both shoes, but that only stirs up Romeo's simmerin' chivalry into a boil.

"Pore little gal!" he sighs. "I'm shore glad my hoss will carry double!"

So the upshoot is that instead of headin' on for Wagon Mound where I used to have a step-uncle that runs a hotel which might invite a couple of crowbait cowboys to a bunk and a biskit, here we go, tryin' to trail out the track of some fool woman, zigzaggin' every which way.

Finally, in a patch of scrub oak on a rocky ridge, we lose it completely. After circling and crisscrossing for an hour trying to cut her sign again, even Romeo gives it up, and we head out once more towards Wagon Mound.

We ain't gone half a mile when yonder comes a dust. Out of it one rider splits off northeast while two come galloping on. They draw up to us with their horses all lathered like the devil was doggin' their heels.

"Seen any tracks?" abruptly inquires the cowpoke with a three-day stand of wheat-straw whiskers.

"Yeah, but we lost 'em," says Romeo sorrowfully. "Up on them oak ridges. Look like she jest up an' flyed away. I—"

"Hold on a minute!" busts in the bulb-nosed stranger, who is just a leetle too short for a telephone pole and too long for a bed slat. "You mean there's a woman mixed up in this?"

"If there ain't," I says, "there will be. On the other hand, if you lopin' Lotharios ain't too wind-broke, I wish you'd tell us what in thunder you're talkin' about!"

"Why, ain't you heard?" exclaims Wheat-whiskers. "There was a train robbery on the Caprock Grade last night. We naturally supposed you fellers was out huntin' for the

robbers, same as we been doin'!"

"We ain't lost no train robbers, mister," I says. "All we're huntin' is a table to nudge our knees under, come Thanksgivin'."

"With a dark-eyed damsel named Dorthy to deal out the doughnuts!" adds Romeo dreamily.

Ol' Wheat-whiskers and his pardner swap grins.

"Excuse us, gents!" says the Buckaroo Bed-slat. "Since you ain't out to help hunt them train robbers, I reckon we better be pushin' on. If you come onto 'em, try an' git word to the sheriff, will you? There's a reward offered."

"Thanks," I says. "I'm sure sorry we delayed you."

And off they lope.

"Great gadflies, Nogal!" says Romeo, worried as a fresh-weaned calf. "Supposin' they happen onto that pore little lost lady?"

"Well, what if they do? She ain't no train robber, is she?"

"'Course she ain't! But I'd feel a heap better if I was there to pertect her! Nogal, I'm a-goin' back an' see if I can pick up her trail again!"

There's a limit to what a man can put up with, even from his pardner. I'm just fixin' to tell Romeo that right here our trails split, when I hear something. It comes from a juniper thicket on a ridge to our right, and it sounds like the yelp of some ol' wild turkey hen rounding up her flock. Romeo hears it, too, and for once his mind is weaned off women. He begins to grin and smack his lips.

"Boy-oh-boy-boy, Nogal!" he whispers. "Thanksgivin' dinner—on the hoof! Let's go git it!"

So we leave our ponies and sneak up through them junipers so quiet I can hear my own rheumatism. We crawl up to about fifty yards from the thick little clump of junipers that turkey yelp seems to be coming from and still we can't spy no turkeys. Then all of a sudden Romeo grabs holt of my arm.

"Yonder!" he whispers. "I see 'em movin'!"

Personally I don't see nothing but a bluejay, but without waiting to show me, Romeo bangs away with his old .45. Instantly if not sooner, from amongst them junipers out jumps a red sunbonnet, black shirt and blue overalls with a gal in 'em.

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" groans Romeo. "I've shot me a woman!"

"Well, you'll never git one no other way," I says. "Head her off, quick, before she takes to the wild bunch."

But he don't have to head her off. She draws up in front of us plumb winded, scared and mad—but purty. Her big brown eyes are blazing, her cute little neck is bowed and she stomps her foot like she aimed to take right to us. In one hand she's got a little oblong box and in the other a chunk of blue carpenter's chalk.

"Well!" she practically snorts. "What do you think you're shootin' at?"

"Why, my dear Miss Dorthy," gulps Romeo, with that quivery quaver in his voice that tells me it's love at first sight again, "didn't you even see it?"

"See what?" she demands.

"Why, gosh, ma'am!" sighs Romeo. "That big ol' panther—undoubtless he mistook your soundin' off on that turkey call for a real live turkey, the way he was sneakin' up on you! He was jest crouched to spring when—when I shot. I'm mighty sorry I missed him an' skeered you thataway, Miss Dorthy, but—"

"What," she inquires, calming down a little, "makes you think my name is Dorthy?"

"Well, it's such a purty name," sighs Romeo. "An' you're such a purty gal—I jest thought maybe—"

"That's funny!" she busts in, and if it ain't a smile she gives ol' Romeo, at least it's the sprout of one. "Because my name does happen to be Dorthy!"

"Yuh see, Nogal?" Romeo turns to me. "That proves it!"

"Proves what?"

"That it's Fate—us meeting thisaway!" he avers. "I knowed it was a beautiful dark-eyed damsel name o' Dorthy—didn't I, Nogal?"

"Oh, sure!" I shrug. "Just from her track!"

"My track?" She looks kind o' puzzled.

So Romeo tells her who we are and explains how we been trailing her, for fear she might be lost in the desert or something and need a brave cowboy knight to rescue her. That makes her smile sure 'nough, and she explains that it wasn't her that was lost, but her turkeys, which she has been out looking for every day for a week. Her and her pa and ma, she says, are trying to dry-farm it over about two miles northeast, and she had five hen turkeys and a gobbler. But the hired man they keep on account of her pa's lumbago left the poultry yard gate open, when he rode in one night from gallivantin' around, and the turkeys must have got out and gone to join the wild bunch. She could sort o' stand it, losing the hens, she says, but this ol' gobbler she was saving up special, because she's expecting company for Thanksgiving, and if she don't have turkey for dinner her heart will be plumb busted.

"Don't you fret your purty head no more, Miss Dorthy," says Romeo, laying it on smooth and thick. "It's still four days to Thanksgivin', an' I'm goin' to see that you have turkey if I have to steal one!"

"Oh, I wouldn't want you to *steal* on my account, Mr. Jones" she coos.

"Oh, shuckins!" protests my palpitatin' pardner. "Stealin' for a gal like you would be a privalidge!"

"Oh, Mr. Jones!" she sighs.

"Jest call me Romeo!" he smirks. "Or maybe I'll shoot you a wild one!"

"Like you did the panther?" I inquire. "If you got to have a turkey, whyn't you just capture them train robbers an' use the reward money to buy one?"

"Train robbers?" she says, excited. "You mean—I mean—do you suppose all the sheriff's deputies will be out hunting train robbers—even on Thanksgiving day?"

"Not if Romeo Jones gits a pop at 'em first," I tell her, maybe a little sourcastic. "He's death on train robbers—same as panthers!"

The upshoot is that Romeo's pony gets to carry double, after all, while we escort this young homesteader heifer home—with the gal in the saddle and Romeo settin' at the polite distance of about half a inch behind the cantle, braggin' with every breath about how lucky she is that he come along just when he did to scare off panthers and supply her with Thanksgiving turkey. The way she bats them big baby brown eyes and seems to swaller it, I get a feelin' that this time maybe that little bare-bottomed button they call Cupid is going to cheat me out of a cowboy *compadre* sure 'nough.

She don't have to invite us for dinner, because Romeo aimed to stay anyway. But she does. I never was overfond of corn meal mush, but it's been so long since my stummick shook hands with vittles of any kind that the first thing I know I've let the gal's pa, ol' Sag-eye Coleman, talk me into a job harvesting corn for my board while Romeo rustles up a turkey.

Dorthy's mother is a right peert little woman, but ol' Sag-eye is wet-nursing about as purty a case of the lazy-lumbago as I ever heard grunt. The only farm work he seems able to do without hurting his lame back, is to ladle in the mush.

At first guess I'd say that this hired man named Burt Klicker ain't much better. He's a bold-eyed, buck-toothed booger, with a face that bevels out from his eye sockets, then bevels right back into his neck. You can't hardly tell which is his chin and which his Adam's apple. But to hear him tell it, he's the feller that drowned the duck. It's also plenty plain that he harbors hopeful intentions toward dark-eyed Dorthy.

Right now he seems to be all het up with big ideas about collecting the reward for catching them train robbers.

"Smith an' Jones, eh?" he remarks. "Them would be mighty easy names to think up in case a couple of train robbers didn't want to use their own, wouldn't they?"

"Shuckins!" says Romeo. "You don't think them outlaws might actually try to pertend they was *us*, do you?"

"Never mind what I think," Bevel-chin Burt laughs in that peculiar cackle of his. "Where was you gents at four minutes after eleven last night?"

"Who wants to know?" I inquire, laying a hand on the holt of my hawgleg.

That sure sobers him down quick.

"Not me!" he vows. "Gee! Can't you fellers take a joke?"

"Please, boys," begs Miss Dorthy. "I wisht you wouldn't quarrel!"

The way she bats her eyes sure is soothing.

"O. K., ma'am," I says. "Which-away's all this corn fodder you folks wanted folded?"

That afternoon Bevel-chin Burt and me haul fodder while Romeo loans the gal my pony and they both ride off to hunt her lost turkeys. But they don't find 'em. Him and Miss Dorthy are just unsaddling when me and Bevel-chin barge in with our last load.

The gal looks plumb discouraged

but Romeo comes out of his dreamland daze long enough to try and cheer her up.

"Shuckins, you ain't got no call to worry, Miss Dorthy," he brags. "Ain't I promised I'd git you a turkey for Thanksgivin'?"

"You're very kind," she sighs. "You can chop us up a little wood after supper if you want to."

"Listen here, young lady," I suggest, waving my chin towards a bunch of chickens meanderin' into the chicken house to roost. "What you worryin' about? A nice fat hen's as good eatin' as a turkey any day!"

But she shakes her head. "It's a special occasion," she says. "Besides, those hens are layers and I've been saving the egg money for my . . . I mean for a new dress, an'—"

"Just wait till I collect that reward money," butts in Bevel-chin Burt, bargin' up close behind her. "I'll buy you a dozen new dresses, an' a batch of fancy petticoats, an' candy, an' a diamond ring, an'—"

"Thank you, Burt," she says quietly, sort o' sidling away from him. "But I don't really want candy and a diamond ring. I want a turkey!"

"An' I'm the feller that'll fetch you one," brags Romeo. "Meantime I'll jest slip in an' gather them eggs you speak about."

But Bevel-chin Burt bulges suddenly in ahead of him, blocking him away from the gate.

"It's my job to gather the eggs around here!" he says. "Hens is tunny thataway. Strangers bustin' in on 'em scares 'em an' makes 'em so nervous they won't lay!"

"Is that a fact?" Romeo flares up. He starts to shove Bevel-chin out of the way, but the gal's hand on his arm stops him.

"Please don't quarrel," she says soothingly. Then when Bevel-chin has disappeared into the chicken house: "Burt just likes to do special little things for me—and he's so touchy sometimes. We have to sort of humor him."

"The best way to humor a jughead like that," I says, "is with the butt of a six-gun right behind his left ear!"

"Never mind, Nogal," says Romeo. "It ain't manners for newcomers like us to git high an' mighty with the hired help! You put up the horses, will yuh, while I wash up? I want to show Miss Dorthy how purty I can blow soap bubbles!"

So that's how it goes: Romeo hunting turkeys and blowing soap bubbles, Bevel-chin Burt gathering eggs and bragging about the train robbers he aims to catch, while I put out the sweat, undressing ol' Sag-eye's cornfield. Romeo claims he's located where some turkeys roost, but he ain't brought in so much as a feather.

Then the evening before Thanksgiving, Romeo don't even show up hisownself. Miss Dorthy ain't rode out with him that day, and she seems purty worried.

"Don't you fret," I tell her, "he's probly just met up with a widow some place. Probly tryin' to talk her out of a turkey."

But when he still ain't come in by midnight, I begin to git mad. "No-

gal," I tell myself, "you're gittin' too old to lay awake nights worryin' your fool head off about a borned idiot. You been threatenin' for years to quit this perilous pardnership anyhow, and there ain't no time like the present!"

It's just getting daylight when I finally slip out and saddle my horse without waking anybody up. I'm all set to ride away, when I get the fool notion that if I'd swipe a couple of eggs out of the hen house, they'd do to boil for breakfast as soon as I get over the hill. So I lead my pony around to the back, yank open the back window and crawl in. And that's when it happens.

Out front I hear the voice of ol' Bevel-chin holler: "Hey you! Keep out o' there!" This is follered by the pound of running horses' hoofs, then the big shootin' starts. The front door of the hen house whams open so hard it jerks plumb off the hinges, and in busts Romeo Jones with a big ol' live turkey gobbler in one hand and his go-bang in the other. The gobbler gobbles, the go-bang bangs and the air is suddenly filled with squawkin' chickens dodgin' bullets. When a piece of hot lead misses me by about an inch I lift the lid of the chicken feed bin to dive in for cover. In so doing I step on an old settin' hen. She squawks and so do I.

"Who—who's there?" pants Romeo, swinging his smoking gun around, trying to kick the door shut, dodge bullets and hang onto his turkey all at the same time.

By that time I'm inside the big feed bin. It's two-thirds full of shelled corn, into which I start digging like a pet coon in a peanut patch.

"Don't shoot, Romeo!" I quaver. "There ain't nobody back here but us chickens!"

"Is that a fact?" he grunts. "It's a good thing there ain't, or I'd be plumb surrounded!"

With that he lets go another shot at whoever is slingin' lead at him from outside, then pauses to load his gun.

"Great gadflies, Romeo!" I whisper hoarsely through a knothole. "What's up?"

"It's ol' Bevel-chin! I don't know who he's got helpin' him. They're after my turkey!"

"Then why in tarnation don't you let 'em have it?"

"Nossir," he says. "I climb a forty foot tree at midnight to pick this ol' gobbler off'n his roost an' neither ol' Bevel-chin nor nobody else cain't take it away from me! Quick as I git this gun reloaded I'm gonna step out there an' run them coyotes back to their holes!"

Saying which he steps back and pushes the ol' gobbler into the bin with me, slams the lid down, and sallies forth a-shootin'.

I ain't sayin' whether it was pure loyalty to my pardner, or this ol' gobbler takin' to me with his spurs there in that feed bin that sends me forth to battle at Romeo's side. Whichever it was, I git out there too late to be of any help. As I barge out the door a young feller with a

star on his shirt and another feller in a long-tailed black coat come lopin' up and take Romeo's enemies from the rear. The next jiffy there's two of 'em down and the other 'un throws up his hands.

"I'm Deputy Sheriff Tom Wingo," says this good-lookin' young buckaroo with the star. "What's goin' on here?"

"They was tryin' to take my turkey!" pants Romeo. He wipes blood (which turns out to be chicken blood) off his face and tries to find the hole it come out of.

"Turkey, my eye!" I says. "You know what I found hid under the grain in that feed bin?"

"Lemme guess!" grins Romeo. "Easter eggs!"

"Easter eggs, nothing!" groans Bevel-chin Burt from where he lays nursin' his allotment of bullet holes. "It's that train robbery loot. I captured it off'n these two train robbers last night an' hid it in there till I could git word to the sheriff to come after it. But—"

"He's a low-lyin', double-crossin' skunk, officer!" says the hombre with his hands up. All of a sudden I see that him and the human bed slat nursin' a shot foot there on the ground are the same two ruckaboos that Romeo and me had met on the lathery horses, pertending they was chasing train robbers. "This chinless wonder," he goes on spillin' the beans, "he was in on the train robbery the same as we was. We let him hide the loot for us till things sort o' blowed over. But when we got to thinkin' maybe we better check up on him, this is what we run into!"

By this time Romeo has run back into the hen house after his turkey. He's already coming back out with it under his arm when here comes the Sag-eye Coleman family bustin' out from the house. Romeo prances right up to meet Dorthy.

"Gee! You did get one, didn't you?" she exclaims. "We can still get it cooked in time for the wedding dinner, can't we, ma?"

"Wedding?" gulps Romeo. "Shuckins, Miss Dorthy . . . this here is mighty sudden! Of course maybe I did sound like I wanted to git married . . . but . . . but I just been thinkin' how bad I'd hate to quit ol' Nogal . . . an' . . . I mean I—"

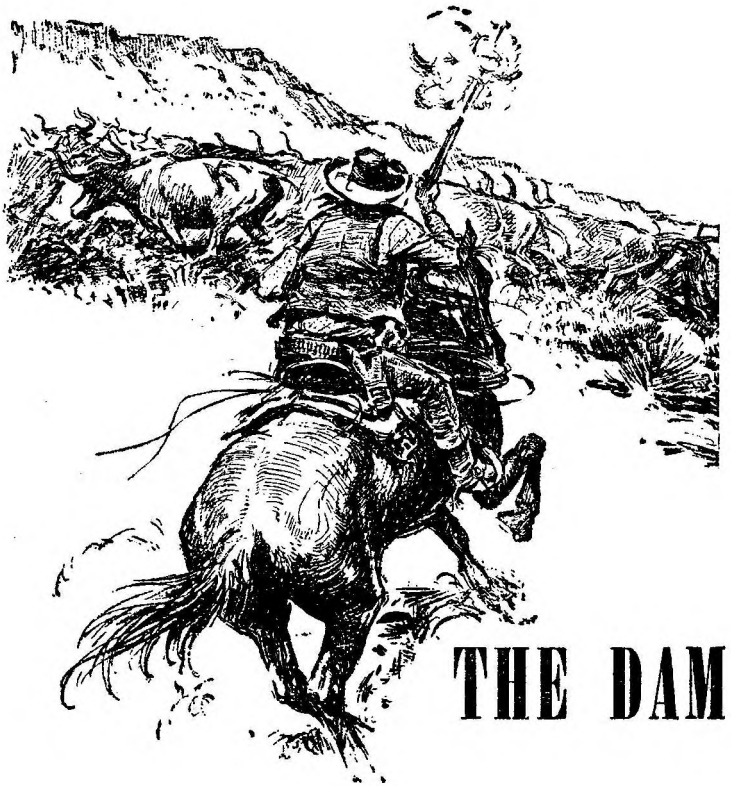
But it don't matter what he means, I reckon, for the gal don't stop to listen. She runs right on past him to greet this young deputy sheriff with a smack that sounds like an ol' cow pullin' her foot out of a bog. And he laps his arms around her like they'd been there before.

"Gee, I'm glad you came so early, Tom, dear!" she purrs. "Now while pa entertains the preacher, you can help pick the turkey, and crack the hickory nuts for the cake, and—"

Romeo's grin as he hands over his Thanksgivin' bird to the blushin' bridegroom is kind o' rueful all right, but certainly not plumb heartbusted.

"See what I mean, Nogal," he grunts, "about not wantin' to quit you—just yit?"

THE END



THE DAM

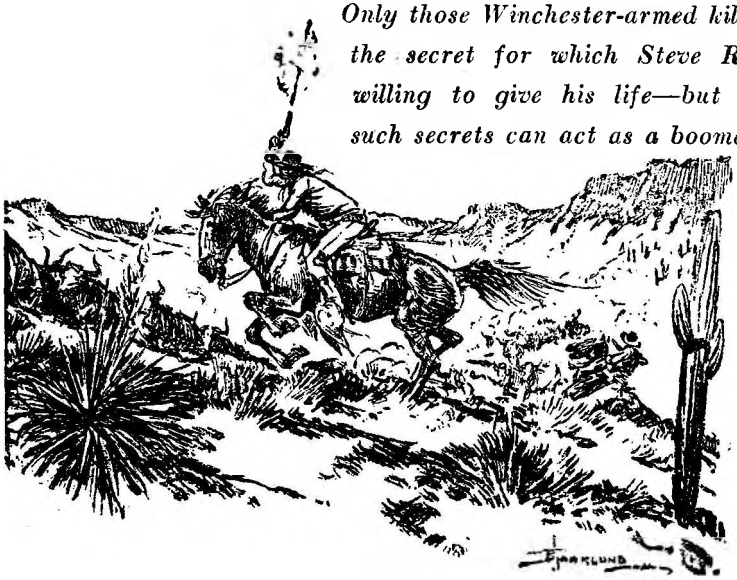
I

FROM the beginning there had been something about suave Mel Parker that hadn't rung true. It was nothing Steve Rader could definitely name; it was the uncertain, irritating feeling that the man's friendliness, ready smile, and cheery talk covered something that just wasn't quite right. For six months now Steve had been leaning over backwards, trying to be fair.

It was important right now to trust Mel Parker. The man was in full charge of all the work on the Kuarchi Canyon dam, which meant life to all the ranches down below in the wide valley. Steve's suspicions might have remained vague and uncertain had it not been for a sudden impulse to see the concrete mixers at work.

He had ridden over to Kuarchi from his spread and now he sat on the edge of the deep pit watching the organized confusion below him. Parker had already routed the Big Jonnie River around the works

Only those Winchester-armed killers knew the secret for which Steve Rader was willing to give his life—but sometimes such secrets can act as a boomerang . . .



AT KUARCHI CANYON

by LEE E. WELLS

through a high flume so that the turbulent waters poured safely beyond the downstream cofferdam. The excavation had gone swiftly and the bedrock had been cleared for the foundation. Over to one side cursing teamsters whipped their powerful horses, hauling out dirt from the far end of the work.

Just below him, Steve could see the laborers sweeping the rock clean with stiff wire brooms and concrete was already pouring into the deep ditch just before the line where the mighty bulk of Kuarchi Dam would soon raise. Steve watched, hand resting lightly on his hip just above the holstered Colt. His thin, tanned face was alive with interest as he studied the line of dump wagons bringing up the concrete.

From another direction cranes lifted heavy stones and placed them close, ready for setting into position. Above it all was the ceaseless angry roar of Big Jonnie, lifted out of its bed and confined to a flume.

Steve neck-reined his horse and

rode toward the big towering mixing plant. Swinging out of the saddle, he stood tall and straight, looking up toward the high wooden bins, gaunt and strong against the blue southern Arizona sky. Laborers milled around him. From the cement house rose a cloud of gray dust as the sacks were split and dumped on conveyors. Nearby rock crushers roared and thundered. Wagon loads of sand were dumped in huge buckets and lifted upward to the mixing chambers. Beneath the high bins, traps opened, letting the mixture fall into dump wagons to be taken to the dam.

Steve walked slowly forward, careful not to interfere with the work. His sharp eyes rested on a dump wagon just pulling away from the hoppers. The concrete mix did not look exactly right. Parker must be cutting the binder down to the lowest amount within safety.

Steve's gray eyes clouded and he started toward the cement shack. From nowhere a hard-faced man stepped up and blocked his way. The man's voice cut sharply above the noise.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm taking a look at the shack," Steve answered evenly.

The man shook his head. "No, you ain't. Only workers is allowed in there."

Steve felt his face flush angrily and his wide, generous mouth flattened into a red line above his strong chin. The snarling arrogance in the man's voice rubbed him the wrong way. This man might be a foreman, but Steve had his doubts about that.

"Whose orders?" Steve asked quietly.

"The boss'." The man dropped his hand suggestively close to the low-tied holster on one thick leg. "So just rattle your hocks out of here, hombre. You might get hurt."

They stood glaring at each other. At that moment Mel Parker himself came up. He saw the situation at a glance and forced himself easily between the two men. Steve caught his slight signal to the gunman, who hitched at his gunbelt and walked truculently off.

Mel smiled at Steve. "What's the trouble?" he asked.

"I wanted to watch the concrete mix. Your man had other ideas and he did a heap of roweling."

"Sorry, Rader," Mel said easily. "He was obeying orders. There're too many belts, conveyors and machines over there. An outsider might get hurt or killed and I don't want that. Let me show you the quarry. It'll interest you."

He had Steve's arm and had turned him around before Steve had a chance to protest. Then it was too late. Steve closely eyed another wagon of concrete going by. Parker's dark eyes narrowed and there was a glint in them that wasn't pleasant.

"I didn't know ranchers would be interested in concrete," he remarked with a laugh. "Do you know much about it?"

"Some," Steve admitted. "Between my third and last year in college I worked all summer on a Colorado dam. It taught me a lot."

"It must have." Parker's eyes narrowed. Then his olive face lighted in the ready smile that disclosed even white teeth. "I'll hire you as engineer, maybe."

Steve grinned but said nothing. Parker quickly led him from the pit and along the canyon wall to the quarry. Here rock that would form the foundation and heart of the dam was cut. Parker explained the various processes in blasting, cutting, shaping and getting the stone to the dam down the canyon. It was interesting enough, but more than ever Steve felt the rise of suspicion. That concrete had not looked just right.

Later, as he rode away from Kuarchi Canyon, Steve tried to tell himself that it was all right. Parker had skilfully kept him from the mixers and had adroitly changed the subject when Steve had tried to mention it. Steve pulled up and twisted around in the saddle, looking back to the black maw of Kuarchi where it opened onto the plain. He slowly shook his head. That dam had to be right, every bit of it. Too much depended on it.

Steve Rader's final acceptance by his neighbors even hinged on the successful completion of the dam. He had been born and raised in Kuarchi Valley and his father had been the most powerful rancher in southern Arizona. The Rafter R was a giant spread, watered by the Big Jonnie, its graze rich and deep.

Steve's whole life had been aimed toward the directing of the Rafter R. His father had sent him out with the herds, riding line on the roundups from the moment that he could ride a pony. He had learned every trick of the trade by the time he was eighteen.

Then old John Rader had sent Steve off to college. He must learn new ways and methods so that, in time, the Rafter R beef would be prized wherever steers were sold. Its herds must be improved by better breeding methods, the Rafter R become a business and a small industry worked by scientific methods. That had been old John Rader's dream for his son and his ranch.

Despite his father's wealth, Steve had had to earn a portion of his college expenses. Old John believed that a man never fully appreciated what he got for nothing. So for two summers Steve had worked on construction jobs, most of them small. But his last summer had been spent on a big federal dam in Colorado. The chief engineer had graduated from Steve's college and the two became friends. Steve learned a good deal about civil engineering.

That made him uncertain now about Parker and Kuarchi Dam. On the face of it, everything was going smoothly and Parker seemed to know what he was doing. Maybe he knew too much, Steve thought, too many ways to cut material for his own profit, to shade specifications in ways that could easily escape detection. Sooner or later, of course, the defects would show. But it would be too late if the big pile of masonry crumbled against the onslaught of Big Jonnie's waters.

Steve straightened and headed toward the distant Box C, Judson Car-

ter's spread. This thing worried him and he wanted to talk it over. Judson, the leader of the Kuarchi Valley ranchers, might have some ideas how this delicate situation could be handled. Besides, there was Mary.

Coming back from college, Steve had found that Kuarchi Valley had changed. His father had died a month after his return and Steve took over the big ranch. It was then that he found that the ranchers in the valley looked on him with suspicion and distrust. He could not explain it and he soon found he could not fight against it. Only Mary Carter accepted him. Time and again her quiet words of advice and encouragement kept him in the valley.

Steve topped a rise and saw the small Box C. With a light touch of the spurs he sent his horse into a fast gallop. Dust from the dry land billowed up behind him, a signal to the ranch. Before he reached the yard fence he saw four figures come out in the yard, one of them a girl.

Mary met him at the fence. Steve saw her father, Judson, and two of the valley ranchers up on the porch. Mary smiled out of sky-blue eyes but there was a shadow of uncertainty on her face and in her full red lips.

"Reeves and Gates are here, Steve," she said as Steve swung out of the saddle. "They're still wondering why you financed the valley spreads."

Steve's smile lost its warmth and his gray eyes darkened. "I reckon I never will be accepted here, Mary."

"Don't talk that way, Steve," she said vehemently. "Things will work out."

Steve nodded and turned to the porch. Judson Carter came to the top of the steps in welcome. He was a stocky man, powerful in body despite the deep wrinkles in his tanned face and the thick shock of white hair that crowned it. Gates was small, thin and pinch-faced. His green eyes were shrewd and hard and there was little friendliness in them when he spoke briefly to Steve. Reeves was almost Gate's twin except that he was an inch taller and had brown eyes. Carter looked a touch embarrassed as he spoke.

"I'm glad you came, Steve. The boys have been talking about the mortgages you took on the spreads."

Steve drew up slightly. "What about them?"

Gates pushed forward and his voice was harsh. "Understand, Rader, we're mighty thankful you helped us finance our part of the dam. It means a reservoir of water during dry spells and it checks the Big Jonnie's floods in the spring and fall. We figure all of us will make a heap of dinero in the long run."

"That's the way I see it," answered Steve. "The territory and the federal government are carrying the biggest part of the load. All we had to meet in the valley was ten percent of the cost. I advanced the first half of it to get the dam started."

"Sure," Gates said. "We'll meet the last half next fall when the dam's completed. The fall roundup will take care of that. But some of the boys has been trying to figure why

you gave the money. Rafter R never did need that dam. It was the rest of us got drought hit in summer and flooded out in spring. Some of the boys is wondering why you took mortgages on us."

"I could have advanced the money without collateral," Steve admitted, "but it would have been practically a gift that way. My father taught me a man works harder for something he has to pay for. That's the way I see it. The mortgages don't bear interest and they're long term. But you'll work to get out of debt, to get your spreads free of the mortgages. I can't see anything wrong in that."

"There ain't," cut in Judson. "That's what I've been telling 'em."

"Maybe not," Gates said stubbornly. "But there's been talk you hope to foreclose on them mortgages. You'd have the whole of Kuarchi Valley then."

Steve felt himself grow tight with anger. He had advanced thousands of dollars, hoping to help his neighbors and break down the barrier they had erected against him. Now, again, he felt the deep suspicion that held them, suspicion of little men against a powerful one, of poor against rich, of old traditions against the new methods Steve had tried to introduce. He answered Gates coldly.

"Foreclosure depends on you ranchers. Meet your debts and you'll have no trouble."

"But you hope we ain't got the money when the time comes due, is that it?" Gates eyed him narrowly.

For answer, Steve's heavy fist cracked against the man's chin. Gates sailed back into Reeves who tried to free his gun from its holster. Steve's Colt swept out and lined down. His voice sounded choked with fury.

"Slope out of here, pronto! I'm sorry now I helped."

Gates shook his head to clear it. Reeves let his gun drop back in leather and the two men cautiously circled Steve and descended the steps. In another moment they rode away toward the distant cow town of Gurley. Steve watched them go, his thoughts black. Bad concrete at the dam, and suspicion and distrust here. Real trouble loomed ahead for Kuarchi Valley.

II

Mary had come to the porch and she looked at Steve with troubled eyes. He knew what she thought and he shrugged faintly.

"I lost my head. I shouldn't have done it." He looked up at her and then at Judson. "What do you think about me? Do you think I'd foreclose to grab the whole valley?"

"Steve! You know we don't!" Mary exclaimed.

Judson quietly shook his head. "We don't, but the others wonder. Gates and Reeves will tell a story that won't do you any good, Steve."

"What do you know about Mel Parker?" Steve asked abruptly.

"Very little," answered Carter. "He seems to know his job and is certainly pushing the dam. The construction company put him in charge of the work and the ranchers all like him."

"Any whisper about trouble at the dam?" Steve asked.

"None at all! Is there?"

"I don't know," Steve answered

honestly. "Parker's got a few gunhawks scattered among his workers for some reason. He wouldn't let me near the cement mixers and I didn't like the looks of the run that was going into the dump carts. Poor concrete binder in that foundation and Kuarchi Dam won't last through the first flood."

"But what could he gain!" Mary exclaimed. "He's been here and he's very nice and polite. Father and I liked him."

Steve's brows arched. It was the first he knew that Parker had even been away from the dam or Gurley. He sank down in a chair on the porch and stared moodily out over the heat-blasted range. In the distance there was a dull thud that spoke of dynamiting at the dam quarry.

"A crooked engineer could make a fortune on a job like Kuarchi," Steve said slowly. "For instance, specifications for concrete came to two hundred thousand dollars. Suppose Parker cut one out of every ten sacks for himself and either falsified the purchase records or sold the cement to someone else. That in itself is twenty thousand dollars."

Judson whistled and looked round-eyed at Mary. "I never thought of that."

"If Parker is splitting with the inspectors, he can get away with it," Steve said gloomily. "There's a dozen other ways he can cut corners and steal money."

The three of them were silent for awhile, the Carters stunned by the enormity of the chance for stealing. At last Mary frowned and laughed, though it was a little weak.

"I don't think Mel Parker would do that. He—well, he looks honest to me."

Steve grinned, then sobered when he looked at Judson. "What do you think? Hadn't we better check the records in some way?"

"What right have we?" Judson asked. "The Territory and the federal government contracted for the dam. They're supposed to check and approve and we just meet a small portion of the contract cost. Parker won't have to open his records to us."

"I'll have another look at Kuarchi," Steve said with finality and arose. "I want to make sure of this before anything's said."

"We could bring this up at the next meeting when Parker reports on building progress." Judson rubbed his hand along his cheek. "But he don't have to show us any books or accounts."

Mary walked with Steve out to his horse. They stood by the fence a moment, Mary with a frown breaking the smooth expanse of her high forehead. To Steve, she was beautiful, not very tall, but lithe and shapely. Corn-gold hair caught glints from the burning sun and by contrast her eyes seemed even deeper in color. Her rich mouth was pursed thoughtfully.

"I just can't believe it of Mr. Parker," she said finally.

Steve chuckled and squeezed her arm. "You're like that, Mary. That's why you let the Kuarchi Valley pariah take you to dances and socials. I'll be around in a couple of nights."

He vaulted the fence and swung into saddle. Then touching his broad-brimmed hat, he grinned and turned his horse toward the Rafter R.

Twice more within the next week, Steve tried to investigate the work of the dam, with no luck either time. On his first visit, he was met near the construction camp by another of the gunhawk breed. This man was not insulting. He calmly ordered Steve off and then called the foreman when Steve protested. The official confirmed the gunhawk's orders.

"Dams are dangerous, Mr. Rader. We can't have folks roaming at the work, near the flume nor in the quarry. Accidents happen. So Mr. Parker has given orders that no visitors be admitted. This guard is only doing his duty."

The gunhawk grinned tight-lipped at Steve, and there was nothing more to do but ride away. Parker was completely within his rights, and the excuse sounded plausible enough. But Steve's suspicions increased. Four days later he tried again.

This time he got as far as the construction camp office. The dam had been rushed fast. Beyond the camp in the canyon Steve could see that half of the foundation had been laid and Parker was ready to shift the river again to complete the other half.

Steve watched the constant movement of men and materials for a moment and then entered Parker's shack. A clerk looked up and said the chief engineer would be in shortly. Steve waited. In an hour Parker came in the door.

He stopped short when he saw Steve and an involuntary frown made his bland, oval face ugly for a second. Then it was gone and he advanced, smiling, his hand held out.

"Glad to see you, Rader. Come in my office."

He led the way through a flimsy partition to a corner where his own desk sat piled high with papers, blueprints, invoices and the thousand and one details of dam building. Parker waved Steve to a chair near the desk, then went to a cabinet in the corner.

"How about a drink?" he asked.

"Thanks," Steve answered. His eyes narrowed. In plain sight was a payroll sheet, just far enough away that the rates could not be read. Steve leaned forward and Parker, turning, saw the move. He came to the desk and pushed paper aside to make room for glass and bottle. That covered the payroll and Steve sank back in his chair, disappointed. Parker poured drinks and then sat down. He eyed Steve over the desk.

"I hear you've been around the dam several times," he said casually. "Anything on your mind?"

"Just watching the work," Steve answered.

Parker toyed with his glass. "That can be very dangerous," he said softly. "A stone falling from a crane, a premature explosion, a slip off the edge of the dam—a hundred things."

"Is that a threat?" Steve demanded, a slight edge to his voice. Parker smiled silkily and his brows arched.

"Why should I threaten you, Rader? I have nothing to conceal or

hide here, though word gets around that you believe I do. In fact, Miss Carter is quite worried about it. A very lovely girl, by the way."

Steve's fist clenched and a muscle jumped in his lean jaw. He kept control of himself and sank back in his chair. He kept his voice level.

"You may not be familiar with this part of Arizona, Parker, and with Kuarchi Valley. We believe that a man's as good as his word and trust him the full way until we have to change our idea. Then we can be pretty proddy. We're the same about our girls. We like them left alone."

"Understandable," Parker agreed. He put the glass down on the desk and leaned forward. "Why hedge words, Rader? You dislike me. You've been snooping around to get something on me. You're jealous of Mary Carter. I won't bother to tell you I'm in the clear on the dam. But I *will* give you fair warning about the girl."

Steve eyed him levelly. Parker sat back and looked out a window. The steady roar from the dam continued.

"If there's fair play all around," Steve said slowly, "then I have no argument. I want to see Kuarchi Valley have a dam, a real one that the first flood won't wash out. I want Mary Carter to have the man she figures is for her."

"Noble!" Parker exclaimed and laughed. "Now here's my stand, Rader: You're liable to get hurt on Kuarchi Dam. Stay away. And you're liable to lose your girl, because I'm interested."

III

Two weeks later Steve had found Mel Parker at the Circle C using his charm on Mary Carter. Parker had greeted the rancher in apparent friendliness, though Steve found it hard even to speak civilly to him.

Mary had noticed it. Parker soon took his leave and rode off toward the dam. Mary turned to Steve, a touch angry.

"Steve, you could be nice to Mel. He's doing so much for all of us."

"Maybe, Mary," Steve answered. "I'll wait to see. I trust him no further than I can see him."

"You're unfair, Steve," Mary said.

They changed the subject but still the slight irritation stood between them. Steve asked Judson about the ranchers and he learned that Gates and Reeves were still talking about foreclosure on the mortgages.

"What do you think, Judson?" Steve asked. "And you, Mary?"

"Steve!" she exclaimed and linked her arm in his. "You don't have to ask me that. But you *are* fighting Mel."

"I don't think you want the valley," Judson put in carefully, "but you don't like Parker and he knows it. He figures it keeps him from going ahead as fast as he'd like."

"Did Parker say that?" Steve laughed.

"I heard Gates say that he did. That's all I actually know. Mel ain't breathed a word against you here, Steve. He seems to like you, from what he's told Mary."

Steve rode back toward the Rafter

R in a black rage. Honest, straightforward and direct, he found himself being bested by Parker's tricky tactics. Even the Carters were succumbing to Parker's clever poison and that hurt more than all the rest.

It was late at night and there were still some miles to go to the Rafter R. Steve hardly saw any of the dark landscape that wheeled past him. His thoughts were centered on Parker and ways to bring the man into the open. He rode by a clump of cottonwoods that grew close to the trail.

The blast of a shot ripped the night wide apart. A burning streak cut across Steve's shoulder. He had a glimpse of a tongue of orange flame that licked spitefully from the darkness, then the horse reared and plunged. Steve fought it, dragging his six-gun from the holster. He heard a second roar and the evil whistle of the lead close to his ear. He threw a slug toward the lance of flame.

The horse came under control and Steve sank the spurs. He charged directly toward the cottonwoods, gun ready-cocked in his fist. Excitement gripped him, and anger. Parker had made the first open, hostile move in this attempted drygulch.

Steve plunged into the shadows under the trees. He saw no one but he caught the faint thud of a horse's hoofs, fading away in the distance. Instantly he set spurs and started in pursuit. The ambusher was somewhere ahead, and close. Steve pressed on, eyes straining to pierce the darkness.

At last he pulled up and listened. No sound broke the stillness of the night. Steve tried to catch some movement, some faint indication that the ambusher was close by. But at last he swore and reined the horse around toward home. Whoever had taken the shot at him was beyond pursuit. He had probably pulled up somewhere in the darkness and calmly allowed Steve to ride right by him. Then he had struck off at a tangent to safety.

Steve arrived at the Rafter R without further adventure. After getting help to dress his shoulder he went to bed determined that the next day in Gurley, Parker would have some sharp questions to answer.

Early the next morning Steve rode into town with his crew. The heavy freighters still rolled down the street but the crowd was augmented today by cowboys from a dozen different outfits, in for the ranchers' meeting.

Steve rode directly to the schoolhouse. Already there were many horses at the hitchrack, a whole row of buckboards. Through the open windows of the building he could hear Judson Carter calling the meeting to order. Steve dismounted, tied his horse to the rack and signaled for his men to do the same. They were close behind him when he mounted the few steps and entered the building.

Mel Parker had just arisen and a storm of clapping swept over the group. Parker smiled, laughed and then held up his hands for silence. He saw Steve for the first time and a fleeting look of fear swept over his face. It was gone almost instantly

and the old, suave smile returned.

Steve stood up behind the last row of benches and his eyes swept over the audience. He caught several scowling looks from some of the ranchers but he paid no attention to them.

"We have started up from the foundation," Parker was saying. "Temporary channels and flumes have been costly in that we must constantly blast and drill our way through the solid rock of the canyon walls. I am holding down cost as much as I can but still this must be expected."

"How much dynamite and cement have you used, Parker?" Steve called.

"Enough to do the job, no more," Parker said curtly. He smiled at the rest of the audience. "You men have hired my company to do this job and its reputation is known—"

"Will you present the invoices to us?" cut in Steve. "I propose that Carter, Gates and Reeves check the price, quality and the amount on hand."

"Rader"—Parker swung around—"it seems to me you are unduly suspicious. These things are all in the contract and I'm accountable to my company."

"I *am* suspicious, Parker. Some jasper tried to bushwhack me last night. Know anything about that?"

"I do not," Parker said flatly. "Men, I guess the time for a showdown has come. I'm trying to build a dam for you ranchers of Kuarchi Valley. I keep running into suspicion and antagonism from Mr. Rader. I believe I know why he is trying to cripple me. Rader doesn't want Kuarchi Dam to be finished. It will upset plans of his—"

"You're a liar, Parker!" Steve broke in. He stepped into the aisle, a lithe grim figure with blazing eyes.

The ranchers jumped up from their seats. They glared at Steve, ordering him in blunt profanity to sit down. Judson Carter sprang to Parker's side and beat on the desk for order. At last the noise slowly eased and Carter's voice could be heard.

"This is an association. I reckon it's up to the majority whether we want to check invoices like Rader suggests. It might be a good idea, it might not. I don't reckon I'm in position to say."

"Maybe I should quit and my company withdraw," Parker flared. Carter checked him but Steve saw that the shot had reached the ranchers. They could not afford to run the chance of the work on the dam stopping.

"I'm calling a vote," Carter announced. "All in favor?" The silence was intense. "All ag'inst?" There was a roar that shook the walls. Steve flushed but held his ground. Parker's flashing smile of triumph was like a whiplash to Steve.

Gates arose and yelled to be heard. A comparative quiet again held the angry ranchers. Gates glared at Steve, still standing in the aisle.

"I reckon every man of us here owes Steve Rader. We all gave mortgages on our spreads to him. At the time, it seemed to be the only way to get the dam started. Now I

ain't sure but what we was playing right into his schemin', sidewindin' deal."

"You're wrong, Gates," Steve answered quietly.

Gates smiled wolfishly and shook his head.

"I sure wish I was. But things have sort of proved I ain't. Parker is working for us and you try to block him. If this dam goes, there ain't a one of us could meet them mortgage payments. But it ain't going wrong! Savvy? You ain't going to block Mr. Parker no more."

Steve moved toward Gates, with a deadly even step. He was only dimly aware that here and there hands dropped swiftly to holsters. There was an electric tension in the room.

"Gates, you fool!" Steve grated. "I'm doing everything I can to make sure the dam is built. That's why I'm asking that we keep a close check on everything. That's why—"

"Lying talk," Gates snarled. He turned to face Carter. "I move that Steve Rader be hereby pitched out of this association so he can't cause no more trouble. We may owe him dinero, but we sure don't have to take his roweling."

A storm of seconds rose over the room. Carter's face turned white and he looked dispairingly at Steve who had been shocked motionless. Steve stared in disbelief at the angry faces around him, at Parker's pleased smirk from the head of the room. He took a half step toward Gates, halted, caught himself and swallowed hard.

"Mr. Chairman," he said with difficulty, "there is no need to call a vote. You have my resignation from the association, effective now. But I warn all of you that you're only asking for trouble, only asking to be robbed. I'm also warning you I shan't stop fighting to see that you get a fair deal—even though you don't deserve it."

"Get out of here pronto, Rader!" a raucous voice called.

"Rader"—Mel Parker stepped up to the desk—"I have a word of warning for you and I think these gentlemen will back me. Don't come snooping around the dam. I'm placing guards there and you might find yourself stopping lead."

Steve grinned, tight-lipped. "Gunhawks and renegades, no doubt. You might have your hand called on that."

"Still trying to hold up the dam!" Parker exclaimed in mock wonderment.

Gates swung out into the aisle. His face was flushed and his hand taloned over his holster. Around him the other ranchers stood ready for trouble. The Rafter R men at the back of the room stood tense and ready to back their boss in a gunplay. Hell could break loose in this little room in an instant and Steve knew it.

He turned sharply on his heel and walked to the door and out. His men clustered close around him and Steve, swinging into the saddle, rode out of Gurley. Mel Parker had won another round.

IV

Looking back on the next few months, Steve was never certain how

he managed to keep an even balance. The open break at the ranchers' meeting had definitely cut him off from any more than necessary business contacts in the valley. Even the Carters seemed to grow more aloof, less friendly. Steve heard only indirectly of the progress on the Kuarchi Dam. He learned that Parker had hired more guards, that the canyon was practically an armed camp.

For the most part Steve remained on his own spread. Twice he scouted toward the dam and each time he had been challenged by gun-hung hombres who turned him back. The workers on the dam remained in their camp, never coming to Gurley. So Steve was surprised one morning to meet a rider, who obviously came from the dam, crossing his range.

At sight of Steve the man pulled up, uncertainty showing in every line. His eyes narrowly watched Steve as he approached. The man rode a sorry nag and was dressed in denim trousers and stained work shirt. He carried no gun. As Steve came closer, relief flooded the man's face.

"I thought you was one of Parker's gunhawks." He grinned through a black stubble. "I was ready to light a shuck plumb pronto."

"Sounds like you're not anxious to meet one." Steve drew rein.

"Mister, I ain't!" the man breathed. "I done quit up at the dam. Slipped out last night with my hoss, though I still don't see how I done it. Things ain't right up there, mister."

"What do you mean?"

"I've always done honest work and I stood as much of that stealing up at Kuarchi as I could. Besides, they done cut my pay about ten percent. I'm heading for a decent, honest job."

"I think you and I had better have a talk," Steve said, keeping the excitement out of his voice.

The man shook his head. "I want to stay alive, mister. I'm riding on, fast. But I will say this: Someone sure ought to examine the concrete that's going into the face of that dam. When that water backs up and puts enough pressure on, it's going to jump plumb through that dam."

"Is it Parker who's cheating on material?" Steve asked.

"I ain't saying, mister, but he gives the orders. Me, I'm gitting yonderly before I'm missed up at Kuarchi."

Before Steve could stop him, he sank his spurs and disappeared in a cloud of dust toward Gurley. Steve felt a deep elation and excitement. This was what he wanted! Parker *was* cheating. On a dam the size of Kuarchi, an unscrupulous chief engineer could make himself thousands of dollars over and beyond his salary. Concrete could be mixed mostly sand and gravel, and the company charged for the full amount. Ten percent of the cash payroll of the laborers was another large item. The difference would go to Mel Parker. But Steve sobered. The big problem was the proof.

Turning, he rode slowly back to the Rafter R. There would have to be some way to slip around the ring of guards. He would have to get the proof himself, for Parker had

every other person in the Valley completely duped. Steve's jaw set firmly and he urged his horse to greater speed.

With a dozen Rafter R men at his back, Steve rode toward Kuarchi Canyon. It was late twilight and full night would cover him by the time he reached the dam and the ring of guards. The men rode silently. Night came and at last they approached the entrance to the canpon. They rode silently and tense, ready for trouble. Far ahead, Steve saw a match glow and knew he had reached the gunhawk cordon. He spoke softly to his foreman and then disappeared to one side in the night.

He worked close, then dismounted and crept to within a few yards of the guard. Slipping his gun out of the holster, he held it ready. Attached to a strap over his shoulder was a small box. He tensed, waited, watching the vague moving shadow of the guard.

Abruptly the night was shattered by a series of staccato gun shots. The Rafter R men were acting according to plan. Instantly the guard near Steve whirled, listening. Steve heard him plunge toward the distant racket. From another direction, Steve heard guards shout to one another and converge on the Rafter R men.

Instantly Steve was on his feet. Running low, he sped directly for the canyon and the construction camp. As he had planned, the gunshots and alarm had broken the ring of guards and the way to the dam was open.

Several times he crouched down as men came close to him. Out beyond the canyon came an occasional shot, growing fainter as the Rafter R men faded into the night. Silently Steve skirted the big construction camp, the barracks, warehouses, workshops and offices. He headed toward the great gray blot in the night that marked the high face of the dam. Using a narrow trail, he scurried up the face of the cliff toward the unfinished top. He expected to meet guards but there were none. Evidently Parker had considered his outer ring enough.

At last Steve edged out over the forms, stopping here and there to test the concrete. Already much of the finishing face stone had been set. Most of the concrete was hard and he desperately sought the forms that had been poured that day. His search carried him across the dam to the far wall and at last his hand sank into a heavy muck. Instantly he swung the box from his back. He clawed wet concrete into it, closed the lid.

Now he had only to slip beyond the guards again. He crouched on the catwalk above the forms. Far below, he could see the lights of the camp, hear the rush of the Big Jonnie's waters. Above him loomed the dark walls of the canyon extending even higher than the dam. Faintly from down below came the sounds of shouts. A line of lanterns started toward the dam and the only path of escape that way. Steve crouched a moment up on the crest and then moved on the short distance remaining to the far wall of the canyon.

He couldn't be caught up here by

Parker and his men. It would be far too easy to arrange an accident, or Steve could simply vanish to become part of the great wall of Kuarchi Dam, buried deep in concrete. He peered upward and felt along the rock wall of the canyon.

The lanterns steadily ascended. Steve's face felt pinched and tight. He moved back across the dam crest, searching the rocks, and found a narrow ledge that angled upward toward the rim and disappeared in darkness. He had no way of knowing if the ledge led to the top or simply faded out in sheer rock. But he had to take the chance.

Moving with care, Steve pulled himself up on the ledge and flattened himself against the rock. He worked himself upward and out. The gray form of the dam disappeared and Steve knew himself to be out over the sheer drop of hundreds of feet to the Big Jonnie.

He inched along, feeling his way. The lanterns had reached the dam crest now and scattered out. Parker was making sure no intruder was up there. Steve moved on. He had the feeling the solid rock behind him tended to push him forward out over the lip of the ledge. Beating back the thought, he kept moving.

He heard shouted orders from the dam, and one of the voices might have been Parker's. But Steve concentrated on the snail's pace, dangerous way he made up the face of the cliff. Suddenly he felt the ledge widen. At the same moment he felt the edge of the canyon rim at his shoulders. He carefully raised his arms and rested them over the lip. In another moment he could brace his arms and lift himself to a safe and secure seat on the rim. It was only then that he realized there were beads of cold sweat on his face and his hands trembled a little.

The reaction passed and Steve came to his feet. He moved off in the darkness, heading toward a distant break in the high cliffs that would lead him back into Kuarchi Valley. Hours had passed before he met some of his Rafter R men and by dawn they were back on the ranch and preparing for a well-earned rest.

Late in the afternoon Steve rode to Gurley. He had packed the little box of concrete for shipment to the manufacturing company for which he had worked and with it had sent a letter asking for an analysis. To Steve there seemed to be little concrete in the mixture and he wanted to be sure. He had also written a letter to the construction company asking for their standard of mix used for the Kuarchi Dam. He was certain the two reports would not be alike.

Gurley was crowded again. Near the post office, Steve met Judson Carter and Mary. The girl was glad to meet Steve. Judson mentioned the dam.

"Heard there was some trouble up there last night. Parker said prowlers tried to reach the dam." The old man shot a swift glance at Steve. "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"It sounds as though Parker is using his imagination a good bit,"

Steve evaded. "No harm done, I suppose?"

"No, Mel moved too fast." Carter rubbed his hand along his wrinkled cheek. "But it wasn't imagination, Steve. There's trouble of some sort brewing. One of the workers was found dead, just out of town. He'd been shot."

Steve tensed but said nothing. The Carters talked a few minutes more and then left him to return to their ranch. Steve expressed his package and letters and then wandered down to the undertaker's. As he expected, the dead man was the worker who had suggested that Kuarchi Dam be watched. Steve turned away from the silent body.

"Just one more bad job you'll answer for, Mel Parker," he breathed. "You're in this big when you have to kill to keep a man quiet."

V

Time passed all too slowly for Steve Rader. He kept waiting for a report on the concrete sample but it didn't come. The construction company had quickly answered, giving the mix specifications for Kuarchi Dam. Steve tried to keep patient.

In the meantime the work on the dam was rushed to completion. Fall had come and all the valley ranchers plunged into their roundups. Back behind the high wall of the dam, the stored waters of the Big Jonnie piled up and the winter snows and rains, later, would assure the ranchers that the days of drought were gone for good.

Steve knew that the Kuarchi cattle were being collected near Gurley on a flat plain that had always before been flooded this time of year. A cattle buyer would be along and after the sale, the final payment to the construction company would be made. Steve was honestly glad that, so far, nothing had happened to delay the dam. But there was a steady, insistent fear, that all was not well.

The association decided to celebrate the completion of the dam. Parker would formally turn it over to the ranchers and the next day the cattle buyer was due. Kuarchi Valley would long remember the celebration. No more damage from flash floods in spring and fall, no more killing dry spells in the long summers.

Steve attended the formal presentation of the dam, paying no attention to the dour, scowling looks he received from the ranchers about him. Mel Parker was all smiles and triumph. The big dam looked as solid as Gibraltar and behind it a considerable lake had already formed. Judson Carter, Mary and Gates were with Parker when the spillways turned the first water into the new aqueducts that in turn emptied into the irrigation system. The grim canyon walls echoed and re-echoed to the triumphant shouts of the ranchers.

After the ceremony at the dam, Steve rode silently into Gurley at the head of his Rafter R crew. He saw the bunched valley cattle down below the dam close to the town. Carter's beef was there, and Gates' gather, along with those of every other spread. The herd represented

the full wealth of the valley.

Gurley was in holiday mood. Men from every spread rode down the street. Buckboards and ranch wagons choked the way and the sidewalks crawled with booted men going from saloon to saloon. Steve was struck by the fact that there were no workers from the dam present. He learned from the stage station manager that Parker had shipped them out as a body. Even the gunhawks were gone.

That night there was a celebration at the schoolhouse. The little building was crowded and the party flowed out onto the yard around it. From within came the quick strains of a fiddle and the shuffle pound of dancing feet. Steve watched Mary Carter swing with Mel Parker. His gray eyes were dark with hurt and he turned away from the window. Wandering away from the crowd, he lit a cigarette.

It was dark out here. Far behind him Steve heard the faint strains of the fiddle and an occasional muffled shout. To the left twinkled the lights from Gurley and beyond that in the darkness was the big herd waiting for the buyer in the morning. Somewhere out there, the mighty thick barrier of Kuarchi Dam held back the accumulating waters. Steve heard a slight sound and whirled. It was Mary Carter.

Without thinking, he took her in his arms and kissed her. For a moment they were close, then Mary sighed happily and stepped back.

"I'm glad you did that, Steve. Now I know."

"What?" Steve asked, puzzled.

"That it's you I love. Mel asked me to marry him tonight. He wanted me to go with him. He's going out of the country for awhile."

Steve's hands clenched and he growled. Mary quickly stopped him. "Don't, Steve. You've won. Don't make me regret it. Mel isn't what you think."

Steve said nothing. He felt a deep sense of triumph and happiness that Mary had chosen him. But there was also anger that Parker had tried so hard to steal Mary from him. Still, Steve couldn't blame the engineer for trying. Maybe he had done a good job on the dam, though Steve still doubted it. He took Mary's arm and started back with her to the schoolhouse. As they stepped into the yard a Rafter R man came up. He handed Steve a letter.

"Come in on the late stage," he said. "The postmaster figured it was important."

Steve glanced at the letter, saw that it was the long delayed report on the concrete analysis. Excitement mounted in him and he stepped close to a lighted window to read the letter. He had just ripped open the envelope when the sound came.

It was like distant thunder, a dull rumbling echo from deep in Kuarchi Canyon. Instinctively Steve looked up at the star-studded, clear night sky. The rumbling grew louder, then increased with a strange roar. All about him, men remained frozen, listening. Suddenly Steve realized the meaning of the sound.

"The dam!" he shouted. "It's broken!"

The piled-up water behind the barrier had placed too much pressure on the wall. It had cracked, broken away. From nearby a man yelled in desperate fear.

"The cattle! The herd'll be plumb wiped out!"

Steve exploded into action then. He jumped toward the crowded hitchrack and his voice rose in a bellowing command. "Rafter R! Hit leather!" Without thinking, he stuffed the letter in his shirt pocket. He untied the horse and swung into saddle. Rushing forms materialized out of the gloom and he heard men swearing as they threw themselves into leather.

Sinking the spurs, Steve headed in a dead run for the bedding ground. The herd was in a flat plain directly in the path of the wall of water that would come rushing down Kuarchi canyon. There would be only one chance, as Steve saw it, to save the beef.

He swept around the outskirts of Gurley, bending low over his horse. He could hear the steady thunder of hoofs behind him as the Rafter R crew pressed close. The shadowy land whipped by in a fast blur and Steve strained ahead for the first glimpse of the herd. Then he saw it. The guards had realized the danger. They had started the cattle moving slowly toward higher ground, still some distance away. But Steve knew that the flood waters would be down on them long before safety could be reached.

He raised high in the stirrups and his six-gun blurred into his hand. It exploded and he pulled the trigger again and again, heading straight for the herd. His men sensed what he planned. Instantly gun thunder split the night. The cattle broke from the orderly circle in which they had been held. Bawls of fright sounded and Steve grimly fired again, pressing in closer.

Abruptly, the stampede started. The cows headed straight for the high ground, pounding along like thunder. Steve kept pressing in. Guns still roared, giving extra speed to the frightened cattle. Steve felt the sharp rise of the ground and at last the herd thundered over the crest and scattered. But they were safe.

Steve turned his horse, held it in. He stared toward dark Kuarchi Canyon. At that moment the wall of water burst out onto the plain. It swept like a flood out where the cattle had been only a short time before, a giant wave that would have swept everything before it. On the far side of the flood, the water washed away an adobe hut and an old barn at the edge of town. The roar of it drowned out all sound.

Then the crest was gone and the water returned to the old bed of the Big Jonnie. The immediate danger was past. Steve carefully picked his way over the muddy ground toward Gurley. The Rafter R men fell in behind him, silent, awed by the disaster that had been so narrowly averted.

Steve remembered the letter. He stopped and read it by the light of a match. His face became grim. Parker had cut the concrete far below specifications. That dam had been

a frail structure of sand and rock, hardly anything else. Steve rode into Gurley and met the glum ranchers looking out at the flooded plain. Steve hunted for Parker. He found him, talking angrily to Carter. Gates and some of the others stood near.

"That dam was blown up," Parker thundered. "I guess we all know who did it. Rader has you all where he wants you."

"But who'll rebuild the dam?" Gates asked, swallowing hard.

"I don't know," Parker snapped. "I built it by specifications and my company's not liable. I'm afraid we'll have to collect that last installment, too."

"P a y i n g thousands," Gates moaned, "for something we ain't got!"

"You're paying nothing," Steve cut in and stepped up to the group. The men whirled, staring at him.

Gates swore and his hand dropped down to his holster. Steve's gun flashed up and lined down. Gates remained frozen and still. Parker was white-faced but there was an evil triumph about him. Nothing could be proved.

"Parker, there was some excitement up at the dam awhile back. You claimed prowlers. You're right. It was me. I got a sample of that concrete you used and sent it away to be checked. No one else had the sense to do it."

Parker flinched and his eyes narrowed. He looked swiftly around but the ring of ranchers hemmed him in. They stared at Steve, some with open hostility, others as though the disaster had driven all emotion from them. Parker's hand dropped slowly to his side. Steve pulled the letter from his pocket and handed it to Carter.

"Read it, Judson. That's the material actually used. You know what was called for. Parker not only skimped on concrete, but probably on reinforcing rods too. He pocketed everything he could, falsifying purchase orders or selling the material on the side. That's why he had gun guards up there; that's why we didn't see any of the workers and Parker moved them out as a body. That's why one of those workers was shot. He'd slipped away and Parker was afraid he'd talk."

Carter moved to a lighted doorway and read the letter. Parker started edging away. Steve watched Carter and the ranchers. The old man looked up, anger in his face. He slapped the letter in a swift gesture.

"Steve's right. That dam wall couldn't have held, and Parker knows it."

"The whole thing could be easily pulled." Steve went on. "Parker had a few of the foremen and inspectors in the game. The workers themselves could only follow orders as to specification and methods. The workers were paid in cash each week. Parker drew the full amount of the payroll from the bank but he had cut each laborer about ten per cent. The remainder went to himself and his few foremen."

"About thirty thousand dollars," Gates whispered softly.

"Certainly." Steve faced the

pinch-faced rancher. "Not counting the money made on the cement, reinforcing rods, padded expenses, food for the workers, barracks. This was a big swindle and Parker could afford to pay off the foremen who worked with him. He had hoped the dam would hold until he could get out of the country. But it didn't."

"It's so—blamed big," Reeves said awesomely.

"Certainly the graft was big. Parker could pay for the murder of a worker who had quit, to shut him up. He could ship the workers out of Arizona pronto when the job was finished so there would be no whisper even until he could get in the clear himself. But the Big Jonnie upset his plans. It cut through that barrier of sand and gravel and loose rock."

"Hey!" Gates yelled. "Watch him!"

Steve turned in time to see Parker make a break. The engineer ran swiftly down the street. Steve jumped into the saddle of his horse and set the spurs. He raced after the fleeing man. Parker heard him coming. The man halted, whirled. Steve caught a glimpse of metal and then a gun blasted.

The slug swept Steve from the saddle and he hit the earth with a bone-shaking thud. For a moment he was dizzy. His left shoulder seemed turned to water. He dimly heard the shouts of the ranchers. Then his head cleared. Parker was running again, faster. Steve dragged his gun from the holster. Biting his lips to hold back the pain, he steadied his hand, took careful aim and pulled the trigger.

Parker's leg was knocked out from under him. He fell sprawling, the gun dropping from his hand. In another moment the ranchers swarmed over him.

It was over an hour before the excitement died down and the ranchers could be called to order in the little schoolhouse. Parker was safe behind bars in the little jail. Steve's wound had been patched and he stood on the platform near Carter, Mary close by his side. Where fiddle and dance had ruled a short time before were grim-faced Kuarchi Valley men. Steve stepped forward and held up his good arm for silence.

"This only means delay," he said clearly. "The construction company is bound by contract to finish that dam according to specification. Since we have the proof of Parker's graft, the state and the federal government will see that the dam is rebuilt without further cost to us. The roundup is safe and will be sold tomorrow. It's only a matter of waiting until the dam is built again."

Gates arose from the benches and asked for the floor. He looked at Steve, flushed, and then his lips tightened. He faced his companions doggedly.

"I reckon we've all been locoed fools. Steve here tried to warn us about Parker but we wouldn't listen. We was plumb asleep and believed that sidewinder rather than our own neighbor. Me, I'm plumb disgusted with myself. I hereby move that Steve Rader be made a member of

this assembly, that we give him an apology for all the trouble and worry he's had, and that from now on he checks the new dam and everything that goes in it."

A roar of acclaim greeted Gates' motion. Steve's eyes lighted. Mary's hand pressed his arm and she leaned close to talk above the noise.

"You're part of the valley now, Steve. There won't be any more suspicion or dislike. You're one of us—completely."

"Not quite," Steve answered swiftly. "I haven't married a Kuarchi Valley girl."

"You'll do that soon, won't you?" Mary asked with a smile.

Steve grinned widely. He lifted his arm again and the noise subsided. The ranchers waited for him to speak. He gave Mary another smiling glance and then faced the assembled men.

"Is there a preacher in the house?" he asked.

THE END

MEN WHO MAKE WESTERN STORY

W. C. Tuttle

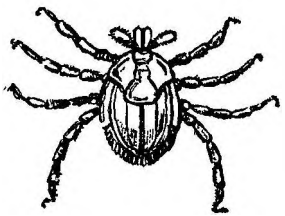
W. C. Tuttle, whose daddy was a buffalo hunter and old-time sheriff in Montana, grew up in an aura of gunsmoke and longhorn cattle with blanket Indians for amusement, and here Tut punched cows, herded sheep and became plumb fascinated with what has been his life's hobby—fishin'. After "emerging from adolescence without a scar, I put in a year with the Forest Service," he says. "Kinda missed my throw then for awhile—a job with a saddlery company, selling cigars, posing on street corners, ran a street car, an express company—just wasted time so I quit and went fishing. Two years of perfect bliss, but I backslid badly!

"For ten years I held down a job as a cartoonist when, with malice aforethought and an old Smith typewriter, I wrote a story. Sold same and was ruined for life. So I turned to fiction and came to California to write for the Pictures and am still here. Except for the wife, I was my own boss until 1936, when I foolishly let them talk me into becoming the President of the Pacific Coast Baseball League. Then it turned out I had eight bosses for eight years! Resigned last November and went back to my boots and saddles. I hope I never backslide again, because those eight years were practically wasted—no fishing. . ."

Tut's famous characters, Peaceful Peters and The Piegan Kid, have long been prime favorites with Western fans. The Piegan Kid's latest adventure, DINERO DILEMMA, will be featured in our next issue along with Walt Coburn, Frank R. Pierce, Norman A. Fox, S. Omar Barker, Jim West and many others.

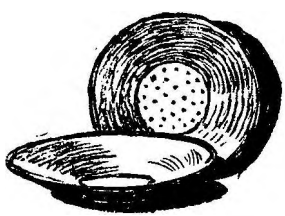
RANGE SAVVY,

BY GENE KING



TICK fever, which is caused by a minute parasite conveyed to cattle by means of cattle ticks, and which used to be responsible for cattle losses estimated as high as $40,000,000 a year, has been virtually eliminated today. In 1906 a vigorous campaign was begun to eradicate the tick, a cattle pest in itself aside from its role as a carrier of cattle-tick fever. The method most commonly used, namely dipping all cattle in tick areas at regular intervals, usually every two weeks during the tick season, has been going on ever since. As a result the ticks have been gradually wiped out and losses to Western cattlemen from the disease have been practically eliminated.

Among the Plains Indians horse stealing was an honored occupation. A successful Indian horse thief earned a double reward—the acclaim of his fellow tribesmen, and the horse. An unsuccessful horse-snatching brave, caught in the act, was killed forthwith, which made the game hazardous. Double honors were accorded an Indian who lifted a horse tethered near an enemy's tepee on the theory that it was twice as daring to steal a horse from under an enemy's nose as it was to snatch one in the open field. The death penalty was meted out by Indians to captured horse thieves.



Though gold pans are usually made of iron they can be made of almost any metal, provided they are strong enough and thick enough to withstand warping, bending and the rough usage of a placer prospector in the field. The ordinary sheet-iron pan varies in size from ten to eighteen inches in diameter at the top. Panning can be made easier by first screening the gravel to remove coarse pebbles. When no screen is handy a trick sometimes practiced is to use two gold pans, screening small amounts of the material through an old pan into the bottom of which holes have been punched, directly into the second, solid-bottomed pan for washing.

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.

NIGHT HUNTER

by JIM KJELGAARD

For himself, the fox feared none of the forest's stalking denizens, yet he knew the danger of leaving his cubs unprotected

THE den was on a hillside. Short grass grew about its mouth, and, farther up the hill, briers, and down the gentle slope that pitched away from the den's mouth towards the ice-cold stream in the little gully below, was a tumbled mass of boulders. Just at dusk the fox came to the mouth of his den with all the softness and stealth of a cloud's shadow.

He lay perfectly still, his black, pointed ears motionless and his sharp muzzle pressed so tightly to the ground that he seemed part of the red earth. But he was watching and listening, and sifting with his nose the wind currents that drifted to him from the beech forest across the gully.

He knew, before he saw or heard it, that a buck was coming to drink. The wind carried the deer's scent to him, and he knew that it was a buck because does had a different smell. Presently he saw the deer, a robust, stocky-bodied buck with a stubby rack of velvet-covered horns, emerge from the forest. It stood still, like the fox, reading with its eyes, nose, and ears the story of what lay before

it. The buck pulled a mouth full of grass from the ground and chewed it. Then he walked the remaining distance to the stream and bent his head to drink.

He did not keep his head down for more than one second at a time. The fox watched him closely. He could see nothing of what lay behind him, and because no wind stirred in that quarter he could smell nothing. But from where he stood beside the creek the buck could see everything. His actions would tell the fox what he saw.

The buck's head came up. For five seconds he remained absolutely motionless, his steady gaze fixed at some point on the opposite hill. He wheeled, ran a few steps back towards the forest, and stood looking back over his shoulder. Then he turned and walked back to the stream.

The evening deepened, stars that had been pale in the sky blazed brightly yellow. There was a rush and sputter deep within the den, and three pups tumbled out of it.

The fox watched them fondly as they went about their play, three sprawling young things, still awkward on baby legs, rolling in a rough and tumble heap down the hill.

There was a little scraping within the den and another cub appeared. He was slightly larger than his sister and two brothers, a bit more heavily furred, not quite so puppyish. He slunk to the den's mouth, as his father had, and looked all around before emerging. None of the cubs had ever been in danger. But the fourth and largest was the only one that had so far indicated that he knew such a thing as peril might exist. The others would have to learn, and their education would be more painful than his. He seemed to know by instinct that a fox's principal assets, ranged in order of their importance, were cunning, speed, and the ability to fight.

On the other side of the stream, a little way apart, the buck was grazing. The fox started downhill, towards the stream, and the pups crowded at his heels. They lined up on the bank, being very careful to avoid wetting their black feet, and drank. The fox led them back to the den, whirled, and raced away from them.

It was time to start the night's hunting.

For half a mile, after leaving the den, he ran at top speed. It was not the gait he used for hunting, or flight, but something else that was entirely different. Since early morning he had been in the cramped den, with the pups sprawled on or about him. The rest of the night he would have to devote to serious hunting in order that they might eat. But this brief interval between leaving the den and starting the night's hunting was his own. It was the one luxury he permitted himself. In it he could give free rein to all the pent-up energy within himself that so cried for release.

But even in the reckless abandon of his speed, he relaxed none of his caution. When he came to a grass-grown, long unused tote road with

deep wheel ruts on both sides, he paralleled it until he reached a narrow space and cleared the road in one mighty bound. The fox knew of the traps the ruts hid. The only safety was in the brush and even there, last winter, he had come upon the frozen carcass of another fox, hanging in a snare.

He ran on, deep into the huckleberry brush that spread across the top of the mountain. In spite of the fact that enemies who would gladly catch and eat him were about, he felt little fear. He worried when the cubs were with him, and when the essential business of these long night hunts gave him time to think about them. But now he exercised only caution. He had long since learned that the offensive weapons given beasts of prey big enough to harm him were no match for his own defensive weapons. The fox seldom, and never if he could call on either his speed or cunning, fought.

He traveled upwind, and changed his direction when the wind changed. The wind carried to him the scent of everything that moved and breathed.

A pale, three-quarters moon illumined in soft outline the ghostly cloud streamers that were strung across its face. Its wan beams spread over a meadow that lay before the fox, revealing the high, wild hay, and the darker copse of wild chokecherry brush in the center of the meadow.

The meadow was the last place where the fox and his mate had been together. That was ten days ago. They had been hunting the field mice whose tiny, burrow-spotted paths wound alternately on top of and underneath the wild hay. The fox had just caught and eaten a fat mouse when he saw his mate leap high in the air, and heard the rattle of steel.

Cautiously he had crept up to her, and from a distance watched. The little vixen was in a trap. She had rolled over and over, then run in a crazy, three-legged circle with the trap clinging to her fourth paw. But as she ran she had wound the trap chain around the drag to which it was attached. That had shortened her field of movement until finally she was able only to fling her body about. Finally exhausted, she had lain very still. The fox had stayed with her until morning, when he had smelled a man coming.

He had fled into the forest, and back to the cubs. But he had returned the next night without finding sign of either the man or his mate. Every night after that he had come to the meadow, and watched from its edge without going into it. But his mate had not been there and was not there tonight.

The fox turned and slunk away, his wild orgy of speed over. He was ready now for the serious business of hunting. There had been a great hatch of grasshoppers in the huckleberry brush that day. Numbed by the night cold, they clung in myriads to the woody stalks of the bushes. The fox explored various bushes with his pointed nose, when he found a grasshopper flicked it into his mouth with his tongue and swallowed it.

But at the best the insects were only tidbits, enough to quiet without appeasing his own hunger, and the cubs still had to eat.

The breeze shifted suddenly, from the west to the northwest, and brought a powerful, sweet odor with it.

It was the scent of a honey tree, a dead stump or stub where wild bees had hived and laid away their syrupy store. The fox reared with his front paws on a moss-covered boulder and smelled. Mingled with the sweet scent of the honey was the musky, heavy odor of a bear, a big bear.

The bear was at the honey tree, ripping out sections of bark and claws full of dead wood in order to get the hoard of sweets within. The fox's nose told him that the bear was at the tree, his memory what the bear was doing. He had seen bears rob honey trees before, and had already decided to have some of the plunder.

The fox walked forward, slinking very near the ground and traveling very slowly. The honey so perfumed the air that other scents rising between himself and the tree were subjugated to it, and any enemies lingering within reach would be doubly hard to detect. The fox smelled, without disturbing, a woodcock that had alighted on the edge of a bit of marsh, and walked around the west earth to come back on the scent that led to the tree. A mouse squeaked, and leaves rustled as the little rodent scurried before the fox. Grunting querulously, a porcupine gnawed at the exposed roots of an aspen. The fox passed all these, and lingered to make sure nothing else was about. Then he saw the honey tree. It was a huge, dead oak, that clung tenaciously to the earth in which it was rooted even after sap no longer ran up its trunk. But the great lower branches were seasoned, strong, and the bear sat on one of them holding on with three paws while he ripped at a hole in the trunk with his fourth. The sound of his champing jaws mingled with the enraged buzzing of the bees within the aperture he was enlarging. A sheen of light frost glistened on the tree. Like the grasshoppers, the bees were half numb with cold.

The bear was hooking his right front paw into the small aperture by which the bees entered the tree, ripping out chunks of dry wood, and letting them fall to the earth below. When enough honey smeared his paw, he licked it off and thrust it back into the aperture. As soon as he had eaten all the honey he could reach, he ripped off wood until he could reach more. There was a ripping, rending tear, and a great segment of the tree loosened.

The bear let it fall, and rose to hug the tree with all four paws while he thrust his entire head into the aperture. His jaws smacked noisily and sticky streamers of honey dripped from the sides of his mouth to coat the sides of the tree and ooze to the ground. Splinters of bark and wood fell.

Carefully, picking each foot up and putting it down as daintily as though he were walking on very fragile things that at any moment

threatened to break, the fox went forward. He looked up at the feeding bear. The fox had seen dozens of bears without having had reason to fear any. They were big and powerful, but only cubs went out of their way to chase foxes. The fox snatched up a succulent bit of waxey comb that was covered with juicy honey, and swallowed it. It was good, sweet, satisfying; once or twice a year the fox feasted like this.

He pried from the wood slab to which it had been attached another large piece of comb, and with it in his mouth leaped suddenly up and sideways. His long tail rippled as he traveled swiftly through the forest, gliding rather than running. At the base of a beech tree, several hundred yards from where the gluttonous bear was still blissfully gorging himself on honey, he paused to scrape a hole. He deposited the ball of honeycomb within it, and with his nose pushed dirt and leaves over it. Tomorrow, if hunting was poor, he would know where to find food. If he caught nothing tonight, he could return and carry the honeycomb to the cubs.

He ranged widely through the forest, for he was hunting desperately now. The waning moon, and the flutter of an early rising crow's wing in another tree, told him that the night was coming to an end. He came to the edge of another meadow, a small one, barely thirty feet across. He left the forest and went into the open place.

Then his body stiffened, his tail straightened, and he began to stalk. Just ahead, a rabbit crouched in a clump of heavy grass. The fox was within three feet of the grass when the rabbit dashed out. He dived sideways, striving mightily to throw the hunting fox off his trail by a ruse. But the fox had anticipated such a move. When the rabbit came ducking back, he was there to meet it. His jaws opened and closed, and for a second the rabbit quivered in his jaws. Then it lay still.

With the rabbit dangling from his jaws, the fox started back toward the hillside den.

He came back on the hillside about three hundred yards upstream from the den. The buck, after grazing its fill, had wandered to a pile of rocks and lain down beside it. Now it snorted, leaped erect, and dashed out of the fox's path. The fox paused, one forefoot curled close to his breast, watching. Then he dropped the rabbit and leaped wildly ahead.

But almost as soon as the panic seized him, he controlled it. Years of self-imposed iron discipline, that to him had meant the difference between living and dying, would not let him for long give way to anything that was not first well thought out. He stopped on top of a fallen, moss-covered log, his muzzle outstretched and his body tensed.

The wind had carried to him a new odor from the den, a musty, offensive stench that had not been evident when he left. He dropped swiftly from the other side of the log and ran down the creek bank. He stopped again, some distance from the hillside den. The odor of the wolver-

ene was very plain and powerful now. The fox raised his head. Just up the bank he heard the wolverene, scratching about the mouth of the burrow. Mingled with its dank musk was the scent of blood.

The fox leaped the creek. On the other side, where the wolverine had overtaken and pulled it down, he found what was left of the female pup, the smallest of the litter. Its furry body was ripped and torn, and the wolverene's heavy musk stank on the earth about it. Ten feet from the female pup, one of her brothers was half eaten. The fox's lips curled back from his thin muzzle and his crafty face became a savage fighting mask. He raced up the hillside to the den.

The wolverene, interrupted at his task of digging into the den, turned his short, stubby neck and regarded the fox through beady eyes. A sharp squall of rage escaped him. He sprang into the air, four paws distended and tail stiff behind him. The fox's fur bristled. In the light of the waning moon he was a monstrous thing that appeared twice as big as he actually was. But, even in his rage, the sound brain that had kept him alive throughout the years of his forest life still guided him. He knew better than to meet a wolverene in direct combat. He side-stepped, and the wolverene's body thudded in the place where the fox had been.

The fox dived in, scored the tough flank of the den pillager with needle-sharp teeth, and leaped over his adversary to land lightly on the other side. The wolverene squalled again, flung his heavy body towards the fox. But once more the fox slipped aside. Thirty pounds of raging fury, a thing that even bears avoided, the wolverene stopped to claw and tear the earth. The fox dashed in; his chopping teeth struck once, twice, and again. Then he ran up the hill to the briers and turned at bay.

The wolverene raised his chunky head and blinked at him. This was something new in his experience, something he had never met before. Always he had gone where he would, fighting for the right of way when it was not granted him. This was the first enemy he had ever encountered with which he could not come to grips. His slow brain pondered the problem. But he knew only one way to fight—rend with his jaws and tear with his claws until his enemy was either dead or defeated.

The scratches inflicted on his tough hide by the fox's slashing jaws stung, but they did not hurt. The wolverene had been pounded by a lynx, and once had fought his way through a pack of wolves into a rocky den. He knew that this light, dancing wraith was not capable of hurting him. But it was very perplexing not to be able to get his teeth into it. He snarled, bristled, and sprang up the hill.

The fox waited, biding his time. The wolverene's dripping jaws gaped within inches of his face before he moved. Then he leaped, straight up and out. The wolverene reared, fanned the air with his paws and tried to catch the fox as it went over his head. He whirled, and rolled down the hill towards the place

where the fox was going to light. But almost as soon as the fox touched the earth he leaped again, sidewise this time. The wolverene rushed past, and almost in one movement the fox was in again.

The fox's questing jaws found a satisfactory mark this time, the wolverene's stubby tail. For the fractional part of a second they ground deeply. The wolverene jerked away, waddled to a small rock. He reared, with his front paws upon it, and bent his small head towards the fox. Again he rushed, but checked himself with his final charge half completed. Contemptuously he turned and scratched dirt towards the fox with his hind paws. He went down to the den, seized the third dead pup that was lying near its mouth, and walked up the hill.

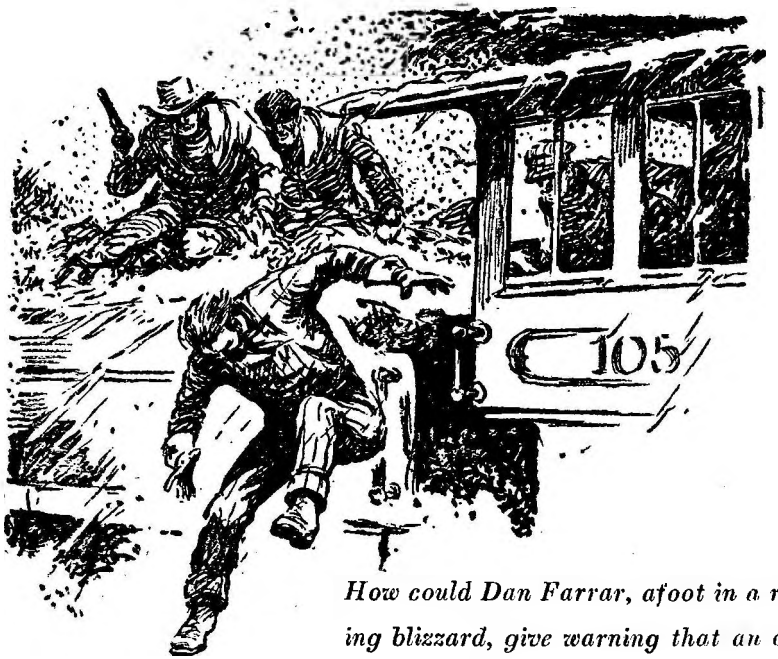
The fox watched him go, and followed him a little ways. Then he returned to the den and pressed himself very tightly into the cool earth near it. His yellow eye blinked, a sobbing moan expressed the heart-rending grief he felt. He had loved the pups greatly, but they had meant something else to him too, something that he did not understand. Life itself had not been more precious. Had the fox been capable of reasoning more deeply, he would have known that the pups expressed fulfillment of a deep-seated desire to procreate his own race. But all he knew now was pain.

At a sudden soft noise down the hill, towards the boulders, the fox raised his head. He rose, trotted softly towards it, and thrust his nose into the small crevice. The nose of the fourth, the biggest and most intelligent pup, met his. The pup slunk through the crevice, and slunk very close to his father's protecting flank. The fox smelled him all over, and whined. Then he started down the hill, towards the stream. The pup followed, and the fox watched approvingly as he leaped the stream.

The fox traveled up the stream bank, to where he had left the rabbit. He sat with his back arched, his white-tipped tail spread on the ground behind him, while the pup ate his fill. Some of the fox's racking grief had departed. He would take this pup into the forest now, teach him its ways.

He was not worried or afraid. It was as though he knew that the best always survived, and in the years to be foxes of his blood would come again to the den on the hillside.

THE END



How could Dan Farrar, afoot in a raging blizzard, give warning that an owl-hooter-manned train careened through the night on an errand of death?

RAILS OF DOOM

by CHARLES N. HECKELMANN

I

THE night was alive with the shriek of a wild winter wind and a whirling screen of snow. Whipping across the land, the soft smother of flakes threw up an elusive, shifting barrier in front of the thirty-car freight train that rumbled up the long grade to Signal Hill.

Dan Farrar shoved the throttle through the full arc of the sextant and listened to the muffled, laboring bark of the exhaust. Rails and ties were a spinning blur in the yellow smear of the headlight. Leaning out of the cab, Dan stared into the storm-lashed night.

Icy particles pelted his cheeks,

stinging like a thousand tiny steel darts. He ducked his head back into the cab.

In the ruddy glow issuing from the half-open firebox door his irregular features appeared strong and rugged. Dark, heavy brows met above the bridge of his nose. The eyes beneath those brows were blue and shadowed now by an unmistakable trace of anxiety.

Behind him Luke Henry, the tallowpot, threw a scoopful of coal on the fire and faced him with a quizzical smile.

"What's eatin' you?" he demanded.

Henry was a slender, wiry man with a square, high-boned face and insolent dark eyes. There was something reserved and secretive about him. Farrar regarded him thoughtfully before replying.

"It's a bad night for trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" Henry's eyes flickered strangely. "You afraid of storms?"

"I'm thinkin' of those blasted Sioux."

Farrar's face tightened with strain every time he remembered the box car of rifles and bullets for Fort Forester that was part of his train. Indians had already ambushed one supply train bound for the stockade and had massacred a scouting party.

"You figger the Sioux may hold up this freight?" The fireman's gruff voice held a mocking note. "We're not carryin' anythin' important this trip." His voice dropped insinuatingly. "Or are we?"

Farrar almost blurted out his knowledge about the guns and ammunition in the box car coupled to the caboose. No one was supposed to know about that. Which was why no armed guards had been sent along. Anything of the sort would have called attention to the train.

Nor was it known that General Slade was sending a half dozen wagons from the fort to the small way station of Sentinel Tanks to pick up the contents of the special car which was to be spotted on a siding.

The Division Superintendent, a friend of the engineer's, had revealed this bit of news, together with the fact that reinforcements were on their way to the depleted garrison.

Now Farrar peered intently at Henry, searching for some hidden meaning in the fireman's query. But Henry's face was bland and expressionless. With a shrug, Farrar turned back to the boiler head. But he couldn't shake off a constant feeling of evil, of approaching disaster.

The train was close to the top of the grade, and the locomotive exhaust had risen to a thunderous roar. Farrar didn't even hear the padding steps behind him. But he felt the hard pressure of the gun barrel that suddenly prodded his back.

"Lift your hands and turn around," Luke Henry directed.

Farrar obeyed. He stared angrily at the fireman. Something ugly and horrible was rearing in Farrar's chest, leaving him with the frigid feeling of being trapped.

"What are you tryin' to do?" he demanded harshly, cursing the fact that he was unarmed.

"Can't you guess?" Glittering

points of light illuminated the fireman's dark eyes. "You ain't the only one who knows about the army rifles on this train." Henry gestured toward the boiler head. "Ease up on the throttle. I'm expectin' friends."

Farrar moved the throttle back through its arc. The powerful surge of pounding cylinders was reduced.

Boots clattered on the metal apron beyond Henry and three rough-looking men, heavy sheepskin coats coated with snow, heaved themselves up into the cab from the right-of-way.

The leader of the trio was built on a massive scale. He was at least three inches over six feet and his shoulders and arms were solidly padded with muscle. Melting snow rimmed his reddish brows, clung damply to the unruly tangle of his russet hair.

"Good work, Henry!" the big man said. "Right on time!"

"What about the brakemen?" Henry asked sharply.

"Only two of 'em and they've been taken care of."

The big man's glance swept all around the cab, then came to rest on Farrar who gave a start of shocked surprise.

"Wes Talbot!" Farrar exclaimed. "So you're runnin' with outlaws!"

"Correction," replied Talbot. "I'm *runnin'* 'em."

Farrar's lips pressed against his teeth. Anger rushed up into his eyes, darkened the bronzed hue of his skin.

Talbot had been an engineer with the railroad until he'd been sacked for disregarding a dispatcher's orders by failing to pull into the hole for a main-line passenger train on an important single-track stretch. A head-on collision had followed with considerable loss of life.

Talbot had saved his hide by jumping clear, but he'd been blackballed from all railroads. He'd disappeared for several months. But lately unconfirmed reports had circulated among the frontier towns that Talbot was riding with owl-hooters.

Here tonight in the swaying locomotive cab the truth of those rumors was being firmly established while Farrar swore savagely under his breath because he was helpless to do anything about it.

"What'll we do with Farrar?" Henry asked suddenly.

"Keep him at the throttle till we get past the division point at Sanderson," answered Talbot. "We can't risk showin' ourselves before then. Besides, every freight has to stop there for last-minute orders."

A sly, hungry gleam flickered in Henry's eyes.

"And after that?" he inquired softly.

For one brief instant the fireman relaxed his vigilance. His gun barrel slanted downward. Farrar saw his chance and leaped at Henry, making a desperate stab for the Colt.

Talbot, moving rapidly for a man of his bulk, jumped into the fight. From the outside pocket of his sheepskin coat he dragged out a gun and slammed the barrel against Farrar's head.

II

A hideous, ringing sound stabbed through Farrar's skull. He staggered backward, his shoulders striking the side of the cab. Talbot whirled on him, thoroughly aroused now and dangerous.

"One more stunt like that, Farrar, and I'll nail you to the boiler head with bullets," the outlaw leader warned.

A reddish haze swirled in front of Farrar's eyes.

"Now or later," he murmured. "It wouldn't make much difference."

"To me it wouldn't," Talbot agreed maliciously. "Tough luck that you're the hogger on this freight. You see, it wasn't so much of a secret that rifles for Fort Forester were on this train or that army supply wagons are due to meet the train at Sentinel Tanks.

"By this time a bunch of my men are already attackin' those wagons and their soldier escort. Meanwhile, a bunch of Sioux are camped atop Hurricane Pass on the Ortona Trail waitin' to ambush the two hundred troopers now headed for Fort Forester."

"You mean that—about those troopers?" Henry asked.

Talbot nodded, obviously pleased with himself.

"I've had scouts posted along all the main trails for days. This mornin' they spotted a column of cavalry joggin' along the hill trail east of Ortona. So I tipped off the Sioux. At the rate those soldiers were travelin' they should reach Sentinel Tanks about two hours after midnight—if nothin' happens to 'em!"

Despite the coldness of the night Farrar was oppressed by a hot, foggy stillness that seemed to be closing in around him. It was an invisible pressure, at once deadly and frightening.

He was one man, unarmed, against four gun-hung renegades. He alone stood between that column of cavalrymen and disaster. Once this freight reached Sentinel Tanks and the outlaws took over the rifles and ammunition, there would be no hope for the soldiers, or for the small garrison at the fort.

Any attempt to escape would have to be made near Sanderson where the station agent would be able to wire ahead to Sentinel Tanks for assistance—provided Farrar lived long enough to get word to Sid Downing, the Sanderson agent.

"How did you learn about the rifles?" Farrar finally inquired.

There was a clattering sound of shifting coal behind them. Two more men stumbled into view and dropped down into the locomotive cab. One of them, lanky and dour-faced, Farrar recognized instantly as Clyde Robell, dispatcher at Ortona.

"There's your answer," Talbot told Farrar.

The young engineer's body seemed to knot up. A wave of blood rose heavily in his wind-burned face. Robell would naturally have been aware of the special car on the train.

"Another coyote gone over to the outlaws," Farrar growled.

Robell grinned and rubbed his hands together.

"More money in this than in rail-

roadin'," he jeered. "And Talbot shore made it worth my while to spill what I knew."

"And what are you gettin' out of this dirty deal, Talbot?" Farrar demanded.

"A fortune in furs, which my friends, the Sioux, will hand over to me in exchange for rifles and ammunition."

Talbot regarded Farrar without pity, without any other sentiment except a wicked amusement. Death waited for those two hundred troopers racing toward Fort Forester through the blizzard. And death waited for Dan Farrar in the cab of a freight locomotive.

An abrupt command from Talbot sent the engineer back to the throttle to guide the train on its grim journey.

Snow drifted down heavily, blanketing rails and ties. It sifted into the cab, leaving a powdery white trail. But the train thundered on, while the blackness above the smokestack was starred by vivid sprays of leaping sparks.

III

Half an hour later, they clattered over switch frogs, slid past the green eye of a semaphore and pulled into the Sanderson yards.

The dull yellow gleam of a lantern bobbed up and down in the snow. Then Sid Downing, the station agent and dispatcher, ran up.

"Hello, Dan!" he called to Farrar who was leaning out of the cab. "Rotten night. Snow's pilin' up fast in the canyons."

Desperation kept tugging at the taut skin around the engineer's eyes and mouth. A wild impulse urged him to blurt out his predicament. But the memory of Wes Talbot and the other outlaws lying on top of the coal in the tender, their guns trained on both Downing and himself, held him back.

One false move now would bring quick destruction. And with their deaths would go the last opportunity to warn the agent at Sentinel Tanks of what was happening. So Farrar forced himself to ask a routine question.

"Any new runnin' orders, Sid?"

"No. Track's all clear ahead."

Suddenly Downing was gone, stumbling off through the storm.

Farrar frowned dismally. He cut off the air and jerked the throttle. Steam jetted from pounding cylinders. Thousands of tons of weight hit the couplings in a succession of ringing clashes as the big high-wheeler rumbled out of Sanderson.

"Nice goin', Farrar!" Talbot called mockingly from the tender. "You knew what was good for you, keepin' your trap shut. Too bad I have no further use for you."

Talbot spoke coolly and without visible expression. In the flickering light coming from the half-open firebox door Farrar saw that there was no mercy in Talbot's eyes. The outlaw's last words had been a simple death sentence.

The certainty of this laid a pervading chill upon Farrar. He felt as if some powerful vise was slowly contracting all the cells of his body, squeezing the blood out of them.

He had to make his desperate bid

for freedom now while there was still an opportunity to get back to Sanderson.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Talbot, Robell and the other renegades stand up and lurch uncertainly across the coal. Luke Henry turned away from the boiler head to watch his companions.

At that moment Farrar closed the throttle and grabbed the air-brake lever. Brake shoes locked around skidding wheels. A tremendous shudder ran through the entire length of cars. Henry dropped his scoop and staggered. Talbot and the others were pitched onto the coal.

Farrar dashed for the opening between tender and cab. He was dimly aware of Henry falling on his face and digging for his gun. Then Farrar leaped into space, heard the crash of a shot and the whine of a bullet going over his head.

The train was sliding to a stop. Two more guns opened up savagely and the wailing wind caught up the thunderous rolls of sound, absorbing them in its own ferocious tumult.

Farrar struck the right-of-way on his feet. His momentum carried him forward. Arms flung outward, he hit the edge of a culvert on chest, knees and hands and rolled down the embankment in a flurry of snow and loosened cinders.

Rocks cut and bruised him. The jolt of his fall drove the wind out of him. Grimly he scrambled to his feet and ran back along the culvert toward Sanderson.

Boots thundered upon the ties, coming in his direction. Guns blasted wildly. Bullets probed for him in the howling gale. He drove himself to move faster. Breath was tearing at his lungs and his legs felt like weighted stumps of lead.

The firing ceased abruptly. Someone shouted. In a few minutes, Farrar heard the hiss of steam, the bark of the locomotive's exhaust. Talbot had given up the chase. He was going on.

Ten minutes later Farrar staggered up to the deserted Sanderson station. His body struck the door, pushed it open. He reeled through, slipped to his knees with fresh snow falling from him in a white shower.

Sid Downing leaped up from his telegraph sounder.

"Dan! What are you doin' back here?"

The dispatcher stooped down to help Farrar. He got his hands under the engineer's armpits, dragged him to a chair.

"Renegades! Wes Talbot!" Farrar gasped hoarsely.

"Renegades!" repeated Downing. "Where's your train?"

At last Farrar found his breath. Strength flowed back into his muscles. He got to his feet, grabbed Downing by the arms.

"Contact the operator at Sentinel Tanks," he commanded. "Tell him that Wes Talbot and a band of outlaws have grabbed Freight No. 32. They're plannin' to hand over all the army rifles to the Sioux."

Downing was shocked into immobility by the news. Farrar went on rapidly, doggedly. "They had me covered with guns when I pulled into Sanderson. They would have

blasted us both if I'd said a word. Sid, you've got to believe me. Some of Talbot's outlaws are waitin' at Sentinel Tanks. By now they've probably dry-gulched the soldiers with the supply wagons from the fort.

"Tell the operator to send a rider to the fort for help, and to send someone along the valley trail to warn the troopers comin' to reinforce the garrison that they're headed for an ambush."

Downing's face took on a sickly hue. Hopelessness dragged at his lean, stoop-shouldered frame.

"It's no use, Dan," he murmured. "The storm knocked down the wires between here and Sentinel Tanks. I haven't been able to reach the operator there in the last hour. Those soldiers are doomed!"

The slow, corrosive acid of despair spread through Farrar. The snow melted from his clothes, forming a muddy pool around his boots. His face was lined, and he looked much older than his twenty-seven years.

"Wait!" he said fiercely. "It's a long, hard pull to Sentinel Tanks. One tough grade after another. Talbot can handle that freight but it'll take him thirty minutes or more with the heavy load. We can cut across country—if the drifts aren't too deep—and meet the train near the top of Sentinel Hill."

"What can we do there?" Downing inquired skeptically.

"Cut that box car of rifles out of the train."

Downing shook his head. There was a doleful expression in his eyes.

"We'd never make it in time in this storm."

"We've got to make it!" shouted Farrar inexorably. "Come on. We'll need horses and a few more men. Nothin' like tryin'."

Some of Farrar's driving energy was communicated to the wizened station agent. Hope flickered feebly in his pale face. He took a gun from a desk drawer, then followed the engineer out into the snow.

They raced into the main street behind the depot. It took them ten minutes to round up a half dozen men and some horses. Farrar singled out one man he knew slightly.

"Brady, ride like the devil until you catch up to the army troopers marchin' along the Ortona trail. Take any short cut you can find. Tell 'em they're headed for a Sioux ambush. Tell 'em white renegades have grabbed a freight train carryin' a box car of rifles and bullets meant for Fort Forester."

Farrar's voice lifted, turned almost ferocious.

"Tell 'em," he went on grimly, "that we're goin' to try to head off the train and cut out that box car

without the renegades knowin' about it. We'll hold that box car—if we can—till the troopers come. You can lead 'em over the old Indian trace to Sentinel Canyon, where we'll be waitin'."

With a curt nod Brady rode off into the night. Then Farrar and the others mounted and sped out of Sanderson. They followed a dim trail through thick timber where the tall trees had impeded the fall of snow. It was a hard, gruelling ride over rough, uneven country.

At times their horses floundered in deep drifts when they cut into open parks. They stumbled over concealed deadfalls, forded half-frozen creeks and plodded up steep, winding grades.

And all the while they traveled, Farrar was plagued by the torturing fear that they would be too late. Talbot would be proceeding under a full head of steam. He could not know the wires were down. Therefore, he'd be intent on reaching his rendezvous with his men at Sentinel Tanks as quickly as possible, to thwart any plans set into motion by Farrar to break up the ambush.

The horses were spent and weary when they broke through the trees and struck the right-of-way. Gleaming rails slid past them, angling up a steep grade toward the ridge. Beyond, around a series of torturous curves, the tracks dropped again in rapid descent toward Sentinel Tanks.

At a signal from Farrar they dismounted, ground-tied the horses out of sight in the brush. The snow was not falling so heavily now. But the wind still droned forcefully down from the northern peaks.

"We're in time," said Farrar as the piercing wail of a locomotive whistle reached them.

"How are you goin' to work this?" Downing asked Farrar.

"This grade will slow the freight considerably," the young engineer replied. "My guess is that Talbot and his pards will be hangin' out in the engine cab. They won't be expectin' trouble here. Even if they are, the snow will shield our movements.

"We'll all stay hidden until the forward end of the train is well ahead of us and there's no chance of our bein' spotted from the engine cab. Then I'll hop on the train and uncouple the rifle car and the caboose behind it. That'll only be two cars off the train. Talbot won't notice the loss in weight. And with this blizzard coverin' everythin' he won't even know the cars are missin' until they reach Sentinel Tanks."

Farrar hesitated and glanced stiffly at Downing.

"While I'm uncouplin' the cars, Sid, you and Jackson can jump on the caboose and the box car and set the hand brakes so the cars don't roll back down the hill. Better shove some of those old railroad ties lyin' in the culvert under the wheels, too. Be careful when you hit the caboose—though I don't reckon any of the renegades will be in it. They were all in the engine cab and none of 'em would relish walkin' along the tops of them cars in this storm."

"After Talbot arrives in Sentinel Tanks and finds the box car of rifles gone, what then?" queried Downing.

"I figger they'll come back this way huntin' for it."

"They won't suspect what happened?"

"Why should they? They'd never expect anyone would try to head 'em off here or try to uncouple the cars. I'm bankin' on Talbot thinkin' that the cars got loose by themselves. And he's got too big a stake in this game to let those rifles go without a fight. He'll be back and we'll be waitin' for 'em with the army rifles." Farrar frowned and added in a slightly less confident voice: "And if those troopers believe Brady's message they'll be here to back us and give Talbot's bunch a hot-lead surprise."

The diffused yellow glare of the locomotive headlight now sliced through the billowing snow screen. Farrar motioned Downing and the others toward the protection of the culvert lining the right-of-way.

A heavy vibration ran through the rails. The headlight beam grew brighter. Then the huge bulk of the engine rumbled into view. It steamed past, dragging after it a string of gondolas and flats.

IV

Farrar waited impatiently, his nerves tingling, as the cars rattled by. When the front section of the train was dipping out of sight toward the first sharp bend in the long grade to Sentinel Tanks he came out of concealment.

Snow whipped frostily into his eyes. The box car and caboose rolled toward him. Beside him Downing and Jackson were low, crouching figures, running against the force of the wind.

Farrar reached the rifle car, leaped toward the heavy couplings and pulled himself up. Then, holding onto the steel ladder of the box car with one hand, he fumbled with the coupling pin. Ties and rails blurred past in rocking motion.

His fingers were stiff and awkward with cold. The coupling pin resisted his efforts. He tugged strenuously, almost losing his balance. He pulled himself back, weakness hitting him in the belly.

A sudden convulsive movement jolted through the cars as Talbot braked for the curve up ahead. The couplings slid together. Farrar tugged viciously at the pin and it came free. The two sections came apart. The box car lost momentum and the rest of the train pulled away into the whirling snow.

Farrar jumped down to the right-of-way. He looked up, saw Downing and Jackson feverishly turning the hand brake, locking the wheels. Then two other men appeared from the culvert carrying weathered ties in their arms. The ties were shoved under the wheels of the caboose and the two cars ground to a stop.

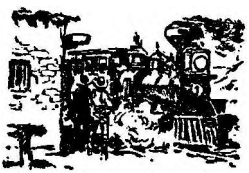
"We did it, after all!" said Downing, after he had scrambled down from the box car. He was winded from his efforts but eagerness showed in his pale cheeks. "What's our next move, Dan?"

"Break open the padlock on that car and help ourselves to those rifles," Farrar told him. "Here, Sid, see if you can shoot that lock off."

The lock proved to be unusually strong. Five shots were required to break it. Then the men slid the door back and began dragging out long crates of rifles and smaller cartons of bullets.

Several rifle cases were split open. They contained new Henry repeaters, the type gradually being adopted by the army in place of the regulation Springfields. Each man took two Henrys, loaded them and settled down to await the attack which Farrar was certain would come.

Thirty minutes dragged slowly and interminably by. The snow dwindled and finally stopped. A cold wind drove the fleecy clouds overhead into full retreat. Suddenly the



moon appeared above one of the serrated mountain peaks to the north.

Crouched down behind the shelter of the deep culvert, Downing gave utterance to the worry that was going through each man's mind.

"Those troopers ought to be showin' up soon, Dan."

"Yeah, if Brady caught up to 'em —and they believed his story," Jackson added doubtfully, tugging at his brown spade beard.

There was no time for further talk. Hoofbeats pounded toward them and a band of horsemen galloped into view. There were as least twenty of them. They came on in a solid wave and lifted a jubilant yell into the night when they sighted the two railroad cars.

Excitement drove the man beside Farrar up the slope of the culvert. One of the renegades spotted him and called to his companions. Immediately Farrar gave the signal to fire.

A wicked salvo of bullets struck into the midst of the outlaws, decimating their ranks. Two renegades were unsaddled. A third screamed in death's agony as his bucking pony carried him out of sight.

"There's Dan Farrar!" shouted Wes Talbot, his massive body a broad target in the saddle of a big Morgan horse. "He's brought help. Ride 'em down, buckos!"

Jackson, kneeling beside Farrar and pumping lead into the attacking outlaws, dropped his Henry rifle and keeled over.

Two yelling riders, guns spitting in their fists, stormed toward the edge of the culvert above Farrar. Grimly he swung his rifle about and squeezed the trigger on two fast shots. Both slugs found their mark, tearing through flesh and bone to vital areas, dropping the owlhooters limply forward upon the manes of their ponies.

The rifle barrel grew hot in Farrar's hands. Existence became an endless cycle of firing and shifting position, of hearing bullets whining overhead. Abruptly the attackers retreated out of range. In the brief moment of respite Farrar and his friends reloaded.

"Won't those soldiers ever ar-

rive?" wailed Downing, fear and despair riding his nerves.

Farrar didn't answer. Better than anyone else he realized the gravity of their situation. Even with a box car of rifles and ammunition four men could not hope to hold off more than a score of armed renegades. There could be only one end for them—certain and horrible death.

Crawling to the top of the embankment, Farrar saw Talbot's gunslingers mass, reform, then come charging toward the culvert again.

"Give 'em hell!" Farrar yelled. "Here they come!"

The four defenders opened up on the phalanx of horsemen with a fierce volley. Muzzle flame streaked the darkness. Farrar lined his sights on Luke Henry spurring toward him. Henry fired rapidly. A slug burned across Farrar's ribs. He felt the rifle buck against his shoulder, saw Henry clutch at his coat front, then twist out of the hull.

Behind Henry galloped Talbot. The tips of Talbot's gun muzzles frothed redly. Dirt sprayed into Farrar's face as a bullet dug into the earth a few feet away. Then the man beside Downing cried out in pain and rolled over in the snow.

Farrar's rifle crashed again and again. Talbot slewed drunkenly in the saddle. His horse bucked crazily. Talbot lost his stirrups, then fell to the ground and vanished beneath a welter of trampling hoofs.

Even as Farrar rose to meet the charge of an onrushing attacker he was thinking that he and his two remaining companions could not possibly turn aside another charge. This was their last stand.

A scowling face loomed in front of him. A knife glittered in the moonlight, twanged through space. It narrowly missed Farrar's neck. He fired and missed. He fired again, but there was no answering report. Desperately he reversed the empty rifle and clubbed the outlaw over the head.

At that precise instant a bugle pealed somewhere behind him. Hoofs thudded along the right-of-way. The renegades whirled their mounts and stared down the grade. Farrar turned. His heart leaped in relief and gratitude at the sight of the blue-clad cavalrymen speeding toward the scene.

The troopers fired as they came, pushing their horses into a fast gallop. Their shooting was deadly in its accuracy. Outlaws dropped like dried leaves tumbling from trees in an autumn gale.

Suddenly the fight was over. The few renegades not killed or wounded quickly surrendered. Soldiers closed in around them, disarmed them and herded them against the caboose.

The lean, hard-faced captain in command of the troopers cantered up to Farrar and Downing, now standing wearily in the bloodied snow. Before the captain could say anything Downing began to tell the entire story of the night's happenings.

The captain listened in growing amazement. When Downing had finished, the army man turned to Farrar and extended his hand.

"Farrar, you've done the army a service that can never be forgotten. I'll admit your man had to do a lot of talkin' to convince me we weren't heading into a trap by comin' here. I can see now how that move saved our lives and"—he gestured toward the opened box car—"and the important shipment for the garrison at Fort Forester."

"I'm afraid you'll find the escort that accompanied the supply wagons from the fort massacred," said Farrar bleakly. "Wasn't anythin' we could do about that with the telegraph wires down."

"Man, don't apologize," said the captain. "It's tough on those soldiers. But no one could have saved them." He grew thoughtful. "The army could use a fighter like you. But I seem to have heard your name before. I reckon you must be the son of 'Hogger' Farrar, one of the early pioneers in railroading. I've heard men say Hogger Farrar had the railroad in his blood, and that his younker was of the same breed."

"That's right," conceded Farrar with a weary smile. He pointed to the shining ribbons of steel. "Here's where I belong, captain." He paused and his face sobered. "Come mornin', I'll see that an engine is sent up here to haul that box car down to Sentinel Tanks."

The army captain straightened. His face was stern.

"And after that," he declared, "we'll see what can be done about roundin' up those redskins who were supposed to ambush us on the Ortona Trail." He paused and his voice softened. "You don't need a uniform to be a soldier. What I've seen here tonight is proof enough that your kind of fightin' railroad man can do as much toward winning the West as the best trooper that ever climbed into a uniform."

THE END

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

1. Perniju
2. Koochin
3. Aboutroust
4. Goosans
5. Capkaddles
6. Xeno
7. Pitcke
8. Clul
9. Grouth
10. Trailmoob
11. Spadetora
12. Rugcoa
13. Clanet
14. Pool
15. Thornrosh

Will Rogers

FREE MAN'S PHILOSOPHY

by S. OMAR BARKER

I heard some cowmen swappin' views
  Concernin' their estimations
About a homely cowboy whose
  Dry wit once tickled nations.

One said he'd knowed him as a lad
  Who rode the rough string willing,
An' always gave the best he had
  To keep the herd a-milling.

Another recollected how
  He'd always kept folks grinning—
Another said he'd savvied cow
  As well as trick rope spinning.

They'd knowed him, too, in later years,
  When world-wide fame had crowned him.
He'd nursed no hates, he'd feared no fears—
  That's how his old friends found him.

They said he'd joshed his way to fame,
  Yet not too rough nor loudly.
"Will Rogers" was this cowboy's name—
  His old friends spoke it proudly.

"Nobody ever was abused
  By that ol' whale line spinner!
'Twas bein' friends," one oldster mused,
  "That made Will such a winner.

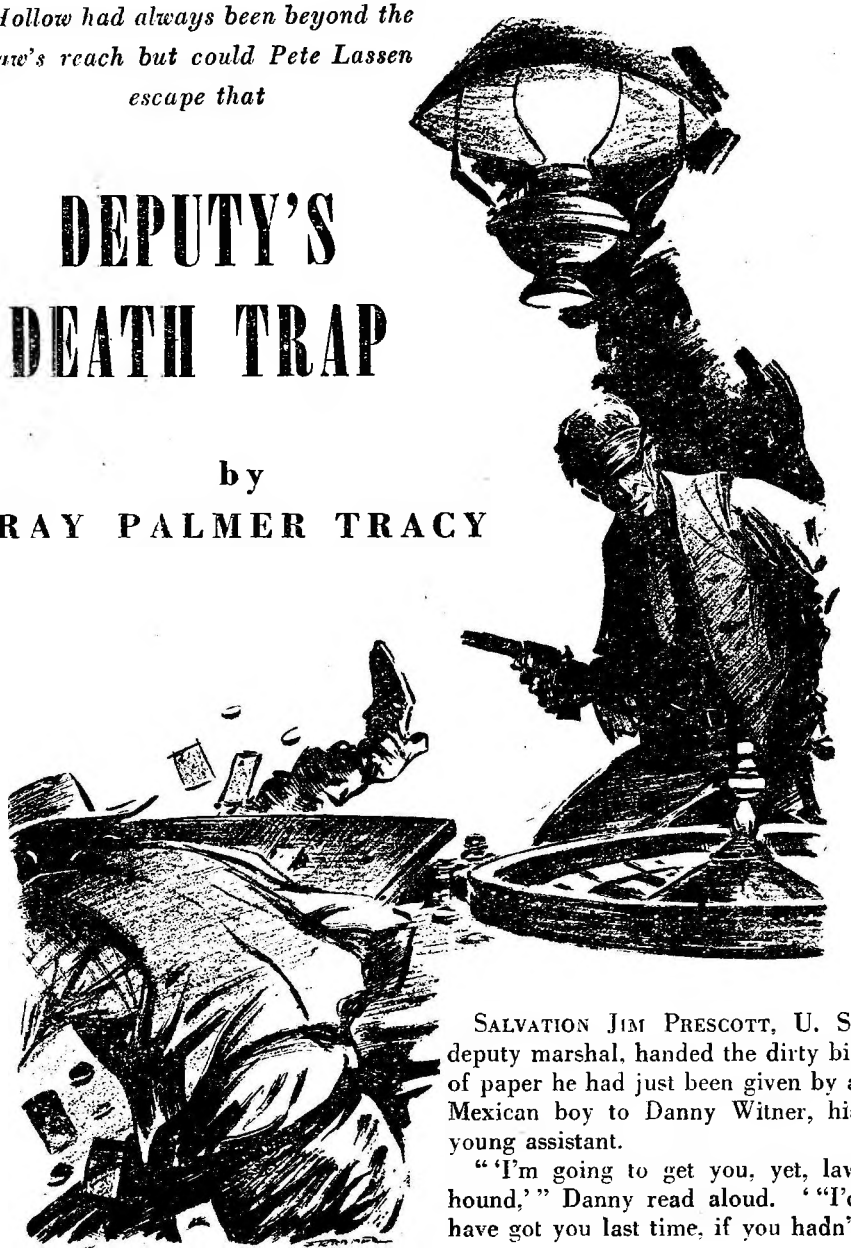
"His wit, fresh growed from Western ground,
  Gave a worried world a breather.
He never pushed no one around—
  Nobody pushed him, neither!"

The renegade stronghold at Holy Hollow had always been beyond the law's reach but could Pete Lassen escape that

DEPUTY'S DEATH TRAP

by

RAY PALMER TRACY



SALVATION JIM PRESCOTT, U. S. deputy marshal, handed the dirty bit of paper he had just been given by a Mexican boy to Danny Witner, his young assistant.

"'I'm going to get you, yet, law hound,'" Danny read aloud. '"I'd have got you last time, if you hadn't

tried to trick me. I'm waiting for you at Hardesty. Play it straight, if you've got the guts, which I doubt. Scarface Drew.' "

"My old friend Scarface is givin' me the come-on again," growled Salvation. "Last time I tried to keep a date with him, when he was sure of where I was, he slipped over to Plateau and cracked a bank. Before I found out he had jobbed me, he was back across the border."

"You ought to get him to help work up a plan to trap Pete Lassen and his Holy Hollow gang," grinned Danny.

"I'll have to drop Pete for awhile and try to outfigger Scarface." Salvation ignored the suggestion. "Of course he intends to pull the same thing on me again. The worst part is he advertises them notes he writes me all over the country. If I don't put a stop to him soon, there're plenty other lone buzzards who'll get funny ideas. This time I've got a hunch Scarface is going to pull a job over in Mesa Alta. I got word he was there looking the bank up and down. And it's far enough from Hardesty to give him a clear field, if I fell for his scheme."

"Why not let me go to Mesa Alta?" asked Danny. "He don't know me and he'd be just as much out of the way, no matter who got him."

Salvation considered. He had picked up Danny when the boy was an orphan of ten, and raised him like a son. Danny was following in Salvation's footsteps. Now twenty-two, the kid was working as a special officer under the marshal. He had handled small cases well, and was as fast as Salvation himself with a gun.

However, the marshal couldn't make himself believe that Danny was grown up and ready to take on top-flight work. He didn't think Danny could take Scarface. But the chances were a hundred to one they wouldn't meet. Scarface wouldn't show himself until he knew where Salvation was. Danny would never see him and Salvation would save valuable time.

"Sure you can have the job," Salvation said.

"Thanks," said Danny, pleasantly surprised. "And I've thought of a way to get hold of Pete Lassen. If I get Scarface, I'll go straight from there to Holy Hollow. If you don't hear from me, I'll meet you there a week from today, and we'll take Pete into camp."

Salvation wanted to laugh. The Holy Hollow gang was nothing for Danny to tangle with any more than Scarface. What that gang needed was a visit from a seasoned hand. Salvation opened his mouth to give a blunt refusal, then hesitated. He hated to change Danny's eager expression to one of disappointment. After all there was no danger of Danny even meeting Scarface.

"All right," he agreed. "If you take Scarface, go to Holy Hollow and I'll meet you there a week from today. But you've got to get Scarface. You don't go unless you do."

Half an hour later, Danny left the office in Sapho, where Salvation was making temporary headquarters, and rode into the desert in the direction

of Mesa Alta. Salvation smiled as he watched the straight, stocky figure fade. Danny was a great boy, but he didn't seem to realize size doesn't always mean man grown.

Suddenly it occurred to Salvation that he hadn't asked Danny what his plan was for catching Pete Lassen. He was so sure Danny wouldn't get Scarface, he hadn't been interested.

In the days that followed Salvation turned his attention to the problem that had been receiving the major share of his attention lately. How to lay his hands on Pete Lassen and break up his Holy Hollow gang?

Located well up in the mountain, Holy Hollow had more avenues of escape than a rabbit warren. In perfect security, so far, Pete Lassen ruled a gang that preyed on the mines to the north, and dealt in wet cattle both sides of the border.

Sheriffs had tried to bring Pete to justice. But sheriffs go after gangs with posses. When any posse reached Holy Hollow, Pete and members of his gang with prices on their heads were just not around. And several private operators who, attracted by the big rewards, had tried to infiltrate into the gang, had mysteriously vanished.

It was a foregone conclusion that Pete Lassen and his Holy Hollow associates would get the attention of U. S. Deputy Marshal Salvation, Prescott, whose nickname had been acquired from his often repeated remark: "The law is the salvation of honest men." Under that name he had become famous for destroying outlaw nests which had resisted all others and seemed impregnable.

So Salvation had come to Sapho and learned all he could about Pete and his gang. Then he sat down to evolve one of those simple but startling plans to bring them to justice which had made his name feared among those who rode the owlhoot trail.

But none of those flashes of inspiration had come to Salvation, and Pete and his gang still sat safely in Holy Hollow.

While he thought up and discarded one plan after another, Salvation kept one eye on the desert, expecting to see a chastened Danny riding home empty-handed. Then he woke with a shock to discover a week had passed and no word from the boy.

He had a moment of panic. Perhaps the hundredth chance had happened and Danny had met Scarface. The outlaw might have killed him.

His first impulse was to ride directly to Mesa Alta. But, and here was the sticker, Danny might have been lucky. Even now he could be in Holy Hollow. And Salvation had promised to meet him there.

There was nothing Salvation could do but saddle his horse and ride to Holy Hollow—ride into an outlaw nest for the first time in his life without a definite plan of action in which he had perfect confidence.

It was early when he crossed an arm of the desert. Before it became real hot, he left the cactus-studded wastes behind and followed the road into the canyon which led up to Holy Hollow.

He rode slowly, his guns tied

down on his lean thighs, and the light sparkling on the white at his temples. His steel-blue eyes, undimmed by the years, swept the dun, towering walls of rock. No one would have believed that this hard, competent man was tense and nervous inside.

The news of his approach had probably already reached Pete Lassen and there are ways to cool off even a U. S. marshal without the chickens coming home to roost. These would be tried out in Holy Hollow, perhaps. Salvation was ready to deal with them, if and when they came up. It was not danger to himself but to Danny that caused the butterflies in his stomach.

Danny might never have reached Holy Hollow. Again he might be there and in Pete Lassen's clutches. That could prove even worse.

As he entered the single, dusty street of the town, Salvation saw a woman back of a house taking in a washing. A blacksmith was hammering in his shop. A wagon in front of a store was being loaded with supplies. And the Silver Crescent Saloon, Pete Lassen's headquarters, looked peaceful as a church. Only the large number of horses at the hitch rail suggested that an unusual number of men had gathered for this time of day.

Salvation watched eagerly for some sign of Danny. But the only attention he drew was from the livery-stable man who leaned in the door of his barn and watched him woodenly.

Pete might have Danny in the saloon, intending to use him to bait a trap for the marshal. There was

certainly something brewing for there was a distinct feel of ominous tenseness in the atmosphere. Salvation might be heading for disaster, but he had to go through with it.

Stepping down at the saloon hitch rail, he tied his horse. He loitered a minute to give Danny a chance to signal him, if he was outside and free to do so. Then he shoved open the saloon door.

The big room was well filled. Some were patronizing the games ranged around the back wall. A poker table in back was filled. A small group was drinking at the long bar.

Everyone glanced around when Salvation entered and then returned to the business in hand with studied indifference. It was always the same, following the old pattern. Salvation moved to the bar, using the mirror to keep an eye on what was going on behind him.

He ordered a beer, but before he could raise the glass, a big man came from the back of the room. He was tall and wide and dressed with the care of a foppish gambler. His two guns were in embossed holsters and the light flashed on their mother-of-pearl handles.

The man's face looked out of place above his fancy clothes and snowy linen. It was dark and heavy-featured with pockmarks pitted among the coarse pores. The lips were heavy but gave the impression of thinness the way he compressed them. A pair of muddy eyes that never seemed still gave him a restless appearance like the head of a poisonous snake moving from side to side.

This was the first time Salvation had seen Pete Lassen, but he recognized the outlaw from descriptions he had been given.

"Well, well," greeted Pete heartily, "if Salvation Jim Prescott ain't come to pay us a call."

Salvation turned to face him. "I like to get around over my district once in a while, Pete," he said, at the same time keeping an eye on the others. All seemed to be absorbed in whatever they happened to be doing.

It was apparent that Pete Lassen was not afraid of his visitor. Maybe Salvation's fears had not been unfounded. Pete would act like this if he had Danny in his power. Salvation looked carefully around the room. At least Danny was not in sight.

He glanced back at Pete's restless eyes. "Nice place you've got here, Pete."

"I like it. That's why I stay," smiled Pete. "Someday, when business is better, I'm going to put up a building of native rock. Probably Holy Hollow never will grow much, but it might as well be substantial, something that will last—last a lifetime at least."

The opening was wide for Salvation to say that Pete Lassen wasn't going to need anything substantial in Holy Hollow, that Pete was now under arrest and had a date with a rope.

It was too obvious that that was what Pete wanted him to say. For another thing, the outlaw had not come close to Salvation, but had

stopped six or eight feet away. Pete was not going to try to cut down the famous gunhand himself and risk losing. He was going to cave in weakly and let someone else cut Salvation down. That was why he was standing the way he did—to give a clear line of fire.

Salvation wondered who had been delegated to cut him down. The bartender and the men grouped at the bar were easy to eliminate. None of them was in a position to fire on him. It had to come from across the room. While his mind was busy with this, his mouth did lip service to Pete's statement: "I always did like rock for building purposes."

"Makes fine tombs, too," chuckled Pete, with the air of a man who held all the aces and could rake in the pot at any time.

"Fine for those left to look at them," Salvation agreed in a tone that brought a speculative light to the outlaw's moving eyes. After all, Salvation had a reputation for pulling out of tights.

Again the marshal tried to spot who was to be his executioner. His only chance was to locate the man and beat him to it.

It might be the tall, lean, evil-faced man methodically feeding quarters into a slot machine. Or the man dealing faro had all the requirements as far as appearances went.

He glanced back at Pete. The outlaw was enjoying the great Salvation's hesitency.

"Come take a look around at the games and maybe try a few," Pete suggested.

Somewhere among those games was where the danger lay. It would be suicide to go there until he got some inkling of where the blow was due to strike.

"I've got a drink here," he stalled. "I'll take in the games in a little while."

Salvation was so sure Danny had been done away with, it took a terrific effort of will not to go for his guns in an attempt to finish Pete, who stood waiting for him to drink his beer. The only thing that restrained him was the certainty that the instant he gestured toward his holsters, a bullet would come winging across the room.

The roulette layout was the only gambling appliance hard to see. It was in a dark alcove. A shaded light threw a lure over the colorful wheel. The operator, a green eyeshade shielding his face, was in the shadow—a nice spot for a killer. Perhaps he was the man. Or, maybe it was the guard at the end of the alcove. No doubt they both had the qualifications. They wouldn't have been where they were if they hadn't.

Salvation sipped the last of his beer. He didn't care much what happened to him now Danny was gone. But he was going to get Pete Lassen in partial payment if he had to trigger his gun after he had taken his last breath.

"Well," he said, "let's go take a whirl at the games." He glanced at Pete and waited for him to move out.

There was an amused flicker in the moving eyes. The outlaw understood why Salvation was waiting for him to lead the way. The marshal was

not going to allow anyone to get behind him.

Pete started for the faro table, but Salvation slanted toward the slot machines. He wanted to begin at the end and work down.

Quickly Pete changed his direction and got on the upper side of the lawman. Salvation made a note of that. The man planted to kill him was below the slot machines. Pete was leaving a clear lane.

Salvation made Pete's work difficult by hugging the slot machine while he played it, keeping himself fairly well covered. Pete was also sharp enough to get someone between him and the marshal.

When they finally drifted toward the faro table, Salvation noted that Pete kept a little to one side toward the center of the room. Salvation foiled a clear lane to the table by stepping squarely behind Pete.

Pete didn't like that. And, with the time getting short, the strain was beginning to tell on him. Salvation saw drops of perspiration on Pete's forehead. The outlaw was beginning to realize why Salvation Prescott was a great lawman. He could take a poor hand and play it well.

Salvation was tense and ready. He expected to see action at the faro table when the time came for him to step from behind Pete. So he did the unexpected. He didn't wait till he was opposite the table to approach it. Instead, he swiftly slanted that way when he got a man between him and the dealer. In two strides he was at the table.

Nothing happened. He glanced at Pete out of the corner of his eye. The outlaw was flinging a warning glance at the operator of the roulette layout, only a few steps beyond.

Salvation shifted to one side to use the faro dealer and his layout as a shield. With seeming carelessness he glanced at the roulette layout.

The operator was leaning over, gathering in bets. The light shone for an instant on the side of the face under the green eyeshade. There was a long, livid scar reaching from the chin point almost to his ear.

Salvation hoped the shock of recognition did not show in his face. There was only one scar like that. The man operating the roulette wheel was Scarface Drew.

There was no longer any doubt over who was to be the executioner. The scarred outlaw had proclaimed all over the country that he was going to get Salvation. He thought he had found a perfect setup. No wonder Pete was showing himself so boldly. All he had to do was to send out the body of Scarface with that of Salvation Prescott and all would be explained. Scarface Drew must be simple not to think of that. Or maybe he was too cocksure to consider that possibility.

Something else raced through Salvation's mind. Danny had met up with Scarface, and Scarface had won, or Danny would have returned to Sapho. Salvation's rage turned from Pete to the man behind the roulette layout.

Protected as Scarface was by his layout, the alcove, and surrounded by ready gunmen, he would be hard to get at. But Salvation was sure he could get him before he was cut

down. The sour thing was that Pete Lassen would escape.

While he waited for just the right second to make his final play, Salvation laid a bet at the faro table. Carefully, he stayed out of reach of Scarface, but kept his eye on him.

Scarface was under a strain too. He stood in the semi-gloom back of the whirling wheel. One hand reached out to the edge of the layout where the light shone brightly. The fingers drummed a nervous little tune over and over.

An electric shock raced up Salvation's spine. He had seen that hand drum like that many times. And there in the light, showing plainly, was a bunch on the little finger between the first and second joints, where the finger had been broken. There could be no mistake. The man he had taken for Scarface Drew was Danny Witner. Danny had not only taken Scarface, but this was his plan for getting Pete Lassen. And it was working.

The faro dealer raked in Salvation's bet. Salvation wagered again. "You took my money that time," he called, unable to keep the lilt out of his voice. "But this time you lose!"

The drumming hand vanished. The roulette operator tensed in the shadow. He knew Salvation had spotted him and was ready.

The atmosphere of the room had grown tense in the last minute. It was tightening by the second. Everyone in the Silver Crescent was sure that in the matter of a few watch ticks, the great menace to Holy Hollow would join the others who had tried to upset its lawless life.

Salvation did not wait for Pete to open the play. He took a firm grip on the table. Before the dealer could turn his first card, he cried out: "Now! Danny! Now!" He flung the table, cards, money and all on top of the dealer, knocking two apparently innocent bystanders off balance at the same time.

With a bound, he had his back to the wall and his deadly guns were out. Both he and Danny were in action.

This was no time for sportsmanship. Pete Lassen and his Holy Hollow gang did not know the meaning of the word. No holds were barred. Danny's first shot cut down the guard at his side. He knew the man was there to kill him as soon as the supposed Scarface Drew had shot Salvation.

Pete Lassen's moving eyes were stunned into quietness for an instant. Salvation's words and the blast of gunfire told him that he had been tricked.

"Double-crossed!" he snarled. "Get 'em, boys!"

He never finished the sentence. When you cut off a snake's head the body will soon die and Salvation acted on that known fact. He drilled Pete Lassen through the heart.

But the body of the snake was still threshing dangerously. Lead splattered around Salvation and Danny. Salvation felt the hot sting as a bullet plowed across his thigh.

Danny staggered and Salvation caught his breath. But Danny only

teetered and regained his balance. His deadly gun flamed again.

Suddenly it was over. Three men broke out of the saloon and took to their horses. The others, far from an easy exit, lost their nerve. The snake's body ceased to wriggle. Hands went up in the air. The rocking blasts of gunfire silenced. There was nothing but the cursing of the wounded and the sharp smell of cordite.

Danny had a small gash along the side of his head which, a little more to the right, would have put him away for good. It had nearly knocked him out of the fight at a critical moment but it was all right now with a handkerchief tied around it. Salvation's only wound was a seared streak across his upper leg that stung like fire.

Salvation and Danny gathered up the prisoners, wounded and dead, and got a wagon to haul them outside. The three men who had escaped, they crossed off the list. They were long on their way toward the border.

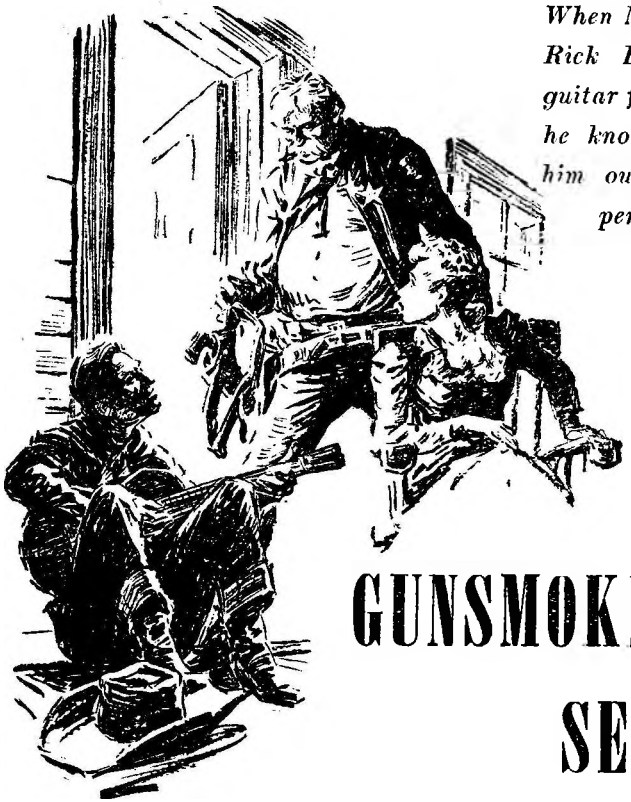
"So you come up with Scarface Drew in Mesa Alta?" questioned Salvation, trying to keep the pride out of his voice.

Danny shook his head. "I didn't go there. I figgered he had shown himself in Mesa Alta to throw you off. So I went to Hardesty. I got Scarface at the corner of the bank. He's in jail waiting for you. He set as a model while Bill Heath fixed me up so you couldn't tell us apart. Then I went to Pete Lassen with a scheme to get you. Pete knew about Scarface's threats and notes. He fell, hook, line and sinker. Hence the roulette layout."

Salvation was silent a minute. The boy had used his head. Boy! Shucks! That was the way an experienced man figured. He viewed this thought with amazement. Why, Danny had grown up. Look at the way he outfigured Scarface Drew. Then see how he had taken in Pete Lassen as slick as ever Salvation himself had fooled an outlaw. Danny was a top-flight lawman.

But Salvation didn't say all that to Danny. No use in giving the boy a big head. He waited until he was sure he could control the pride trying to burst into his speech. Then he nodded his head gravely. "You done well, Danny," he approved. "Couldn't have done better myself."

THE END



When Marshal Kirk made Rick Bradley trade his guitar for a law badge did he know he was sending him out to face a desperado's gunfire?

GUNSMOKE SERENADE

by ROD PATTERSON

RICK BRADLEY looked a lot like any other saddle tramp that ever hit the town of Furnace Flats sitting on a crowbait horse. That is, he looked like any loafer that ever rode out of that vast land of painted rock and sagebrush until he unlimbered his battered old guitar and made you want to laugh and cry. When he tipped his chair back against a blotched white wall with lamplight glinting in his bleached-white hair, you forgot about his youth and his threadbare jeans and faded shirt and scuffed-out boots, because you were hearing a minstrel sing—a poet of the chaparral. You knew Rick Bradley was a wanderer a long, long way from home.

The songs he played and sang belonged to the land along the Rio Grande, a land of low red hills and white-brush draws and mescal and Spanish oak. If you came from that

country, his singing took you back again and you forgot about the desert and sun-baked rocks and grub with sand in it and high-wheeled freighters crawling up the trail to Virginia City.

You could hear the west wind whispering in pecan groves, and you could smell the dust of distant herds, and hear the far-off bellowing of longhorn steers and the swish of grama grass that ceaselessly changed color under a high hot Texas sun. And you could see the Rio as plain as anything, wide and flat and yellow, swinging down the long bends between walls of brush with bronze and gold blossoms and gray-green leaves, rankly growing in the spring.

Rick Bradley had drifted northward through a hundred cow camps for no earthly reason that he could give except that he'd always been a fiddle-footed fool and the scenery behind the next hill or the next range of mountains intrigued him a lot more than a job or an easy place to lay his head. But all that was before the day when he wandered into Furnace Flats and first saw Laurie Kirk.

Laurie lived with her father, Dan, on a street consisting mainly of false-fronted wooden buildings: a row of saloons and shops, and a red-painted Wells Fargo bank. The town blamed its existence on a freight trail and nearby silver mines at the rim of the Nevada desert. Dan Kirk was ambitious and, in the ten years he had lived in Furnace Flats, had promoted himself into the job of peace officer. He was a capable marshal. Laurie, his daughter, kept house for him.

If Rick Bradley hadn't laid eyes on the girl, he'd probably have stayed a day or two, then drifted on his way. For there was little in the line of work for a saddle tramp in the town or in the land about. Of course if Marshal Dan Kirk had been so minded he could have scraped up some kind of a job for Rick—even swamping out saloons—but Dan had no patience with saddle bums.

"Them Texas loafers are about as useful as a shotgun shell in a thirty-gun," the marshal had complained one night after Rick had left with his guitar to roost in the hayloft of the livery up the street. " 'Specially the kind that sit on their backsides and sing through their nose and whang at a bunch o' rusty strings. Laurie, why'n't you slap the Injun sign on this here Bradley and shag him on his way?"

Laurie was as pretty and fragile as a cameo—gray-green eyes, ivory skin and piled-up old-fashioned hair—and she didn't in the least object to Rick and his old guitar. In fact, she rather definitely liked both.

"Why, dad," she'd said indignantly, "how can I hurt him by asking him to go? He's good and kind and . . . and he's a gentleman." She'd blushed under her father's penetrating stare.

And so the weeks went by. What little money Rick had had when he hit town was nearly gone. Just the same, about half-past seven every night, you'd find him on the Kirk gallery with his guitar, strumming and singing in his West Texas drawl:

and back in the shadows sat Dan Kirk, scowling like a thundercloud.

When the desert moon rose over the piled-up granite peaks and the stars winked on and the coyotes sang in the rocks, Rick's clear voice would lift softly above the flat hot roofs of the town.

"Once in the saddle I used to go dashing;
Once in the saddle I used to go gay. . . ."

But Rick could sing about other things than the Rio and the Brazos bottomlands. He could sing best about a bone-weary young man who wandered across this great faceless land in search of something he couldn't put a name to. And he could sing about this young man finding at last what he'd been searching for, but then not having the gumption or nerve to state it right out in words because he didn't have anything but his old horse and his saddle and his guitar.

And back in the shadows on the gallery Laurie Kirk's heart would skip a beat and color would climb into her cheeks, while her knitting would suddenly lie idle in her lap.

Well, it was mid-July when it happened—exactly a month since Rick had ridden into Furnace Flats. The tension on the Kirk gallery had grown greater with the passing weeks, and something had to break. Even Rick sensed it as he swung up the street that night toward the marshal's little house on Washoe Street.

"Evenin', folks," Rick drawled as he took his customary place on the floor of the gallery with his broad shoulders propped up against the sun-bleached wall. He smiled, and the lines around his eyes deepened perceptibly and the warp of his mouth against the flat white teeth was a friendly thing to behold.

"Why, hello, Rick," Laurie answered. As always she sounded as if she were surprised to have him call on her though he'd been here each night for thirty days. She was sitting in her rawhide rocker near the open door through which the oil lamps glowed.

Dan Kirk just growled. Not words. Just a proddy grizzly grunt. The girl looked at him quickly where he sat on her left in the darkness. Then she glanced back at Rick and said a little nervously: "I . . . we were just talking about you, Rick. I—" She couldn't seem to finish it somehow.

"Well, thanks a heap," Rick said as he tuned his guitar with long, agile fingers. "Hot night," he added with plain embarrassment. "Shore *is* one hot night."

Dan Kirk got up out of his chair at that and moved his heavy frame out to the railing where he knocked the dottle out of his smelly corncob pipe. Then he faced around and his bleak gray eyes stared at the man hunkered down against the wall. The marshal was a heavy, stolid man. His stubborn will showed in every line of his blunt gray face; there was a grimness around his mouth that warned you he was a dangerous man when he got mad.

"Why don't you wear a gun?" he demanded of Rick, and scorn underlined the words.

Rick stopped tuning up his guitar. He shook his head in a kind of absent way and said: "Ain't got nobody to use it on. I guess that's why. I don't hate no man, marshal, and no man hates me. Not that I know of, anyways."

Dan Kirk snorted through his nose. He turned away abruptly and clanked into the house. When he came out on the gallery again, he had a brass-studded gun belt in his big knob-knuckled hands. He let it fall at Rick's feet, and it made a sound like a wagon axle hitting the floor.

"Put that on," the old man ordered. "It's an extry one I happened to have. You been hintin' around fer a month now about me gittin' you a job. Well, I'm givin' you one right now. You're goin' to be constable here in town. Providin' you prove you really wanta work." His voice had a flat ring of contempt in it which he didn't try to cover up. "Stand up and git swore in."

Rick rolled his eyes up to the marshal's scowling face, and his own was as still as a statue's for quite a while. His fingers plucked the strings of his guitar—gently, very gently—three almost inaudible chords. Then a little slow, crooked smile crawled along his flat lips and his eyes crinkled at the corners.

"Why, marshal, that's right fine of you. Thanks a heap," he said. With the words, he got up and stood still with the guitar held straight down against his side. He faced Dan Kirk, erect and tall, his head up, waiting while the marshal administered the oath.

When Dan Kirk finished he pinned a little ball-pointed star on Rick's shirt, but he didn't shake Rick's hand.

Then Laurie spoke from the shadows, her soft voice pleased, almost triumphant. "Didn't I tell you, dad? I knew Rick really wanted a job!"

The marshal ignored her words. He said to Rick, coldly: "Now you c'n put that danged music contraption away for good. You won't be needin' it no more."

"Yessir," said Rick, and he turned and handed the guitar to Laurie. "You take care of it for me, Miss Laurie. Wouldn't trust nobody else with it." Afterward he bent and picked the gun up and belted it carefully around his waist. When he had buckled it fast, he looked at the marshal standing before him in the dusk, and his gaze was quizzical, tinged with a little doubt.

The marshal cleared his throat. "There's a saddle tramp hit town a while ago," he said. "He's drunker'n a fiddler's clerk and he's been bustin' glasses down at Bull Ledger's bar. Go down there and grab him 'fore he does any more damage. I'll open the jail and wait there till you bring him in."

Rick stiffened visibly. "A kind of tall hombre with a long face and a scar on his jaw?" he asked in a thin, low tone. "An hombre ridin' a star-faced roan?"

"Oh, then you've seen him a'ready?"

"If that's him, I saw him when I come past Bull's tonight."

"Well, that's him prob'ly," the marshal said.

Rick thought a moment, not speaking.

"You yella, too," the marshal blurted out, "as well as lazy?"

"No," Rick said softly. "I ain't lazy and I ain't yella."

"Well, then git on down there!"

Suddenly, Rick was staring at Laurie through the shadows on the gallery. But the girl refused to meet his intense glance. And now he seemed to be waiting for her to speak, to make some sign of approval or disapproval, but she wouldn't even look at him. He said, "All right, I'll—" and floundered. Then he moved very slowly, almost as though walking was something he hadn't tried before; he moved like a man feeling for a stair in darkness, and went down to the plank walk. And there he stopped and turned slowly back, his face unreadable, as blank as wood. "So long," was all he said, and immediately pulled his shoulders back and passed on down the street.

Laurie called after him, but her voice was low and he couldn't possibly have heard her words: "Good-by, Rick. I'll be waiting here tomorrow night."

Marshal Kirk vented a short hard laugh. "Yella!" he muttered. "He's got a streak of yella up his back!"

Rick's footfalls came back to them as he faded out of sight; they caught the slow, deliberate way he put his feet down as he walked the boards.

Pacing on toward the business section of town, Rick stared unseeingly ahead. Presently the lamps of shops and saloons appeared, making a barred pattern of ochre-colored light across the silver dust. There was no fear on Rick's still face. Only bitterness—a resentment of Marshal Kirk who was mercilessly sending him against a gunman whose name was known from Abilene to Cripple Creek. For the man who was kicking up a ruckus at Ledger's place was Black Jack McGillicuddy who in five years had carved twenty-two notches on his gun. And most of these notches tallied fighting men who were plenty tough but whose courage was more than their good sense.

Rick had never made a name as a gun fighter—gunplay was out of his line. Marshal Dan Kirk might have stood a chance against Jack McGillicuddy, but Rick Bradley certainly did not. Rick wasn't the kind of man you'd expect to find in a tough trail town like Furnace Flats. He was the easygoing, quiet sort you'd find riding under the stars singing a herd of restless steers to sleep, or fogging wild-eyed dogies out of the chaparral.

Rick tramped on along the street past the high facades of saloons and shops. Sound lifted at either hand: the murmuring of talking men; the brittle clink of glasses; an occasional burst of drunken song. But from Bull Ledger's Saloon no sound came; the crowd in there was strangely mum.

The lights from the windows of the saloon fell on the dusty street as

Rick came up, a street now empty except for ponies, patient and small, under their high, wide-skirted saddles, and for the dim figures wandering and swaying through the light and darkness along the wooden walks.

Inside the one big room the dance-hall girls in high button shoes and brilliant, short-skirted gowns of tinsel and taffeta were huddled fearfully at the far end of the raw pine bar; and all around against the walls were tables filled with stiff-faced men.

As Rick, shabby in his faded old shirt and saddle-whitened jeans, came through the batwing doors, there was a stir throughout the room; big hats turned slowly toward the man who was reckless enough to come into Bull Ledger's place at a time like this.

Rick's eyes, blinking a bit from the sudden flood of light, traveled around the room and stopped finally on the figure of one man who stood aloof and silent in the center of the bar. It was a tall man with eyes as yellow and furtive as a cat's and hooded by long flat lids; a man with a long, high-cheekboned face darkened by weather to the color of saddle leather. The pale track of an old scar showed on his lower jaw. He was swaying a little on his elbows which he had planted on the bar, but his head was turned toward the door, and his queer, feline eyes were actively darting around the room, alert, on guard.

Even a stranger could have read the signs in this silent room, would have seen the danger in Black Jack McGillicuddy's eyes. Here was an outlaw, drunk and looking for trouble which he was bound he'd get before he left this town tonight. There was a false, hard nervous air about McGillicuddy—the look of a man who would pull his gun and start shooting at the sound of a lifted voice.

On McGillicuddy's left—ten feet away—stood a pudgy little man with a moonlike face. This was Tom Gumm. The reason Tom still stood where he was, instead of back against the wall with the crowd, was that he couldn't move as fast as the others. He had lost a leg in a stagecoach accident a year ago. Up to now he hadn't tried to stir out of gun range, but had stood against the bar, his belly squeezed beneath its rim, hoping for the best.

The crowd still stared at Rick Bradley where he stood just inside the doors, his gun belt sagging low down on his hip, the copper star glinting on his shirt. And now McGillicuddy's eyes were drilling at him from beneath their flat, thin lids. McGillicuddy broke the silence himself.

"Step up and h'ist one with a gent," he said to Rick in a voice like dry sheets of paper rubbing together.

Tom Gumm's bulk quivered against the bar, but he didn't even now try to get out from the spot which had turned suddenly untenable. But Rick moved a pace forward into the room and stopped, the half-apologetic expression on his lean face appearing slightly ludicrous.

"Jack," he said quietly, "I just

can't drink with you. I got to take you in."

The crowd drew in a simultaneous breath. Save for that short gust there was no other sound. McGillicuddy stiffened as though a fist had clubbed him on the chin. Then his face went blank. "Fella," he murmured, "ride over that trail again."

Rick said, in the same mild tone: "You got to come along with me."

The gunman placed his hands flat out upon the bar. He let the silence run, then gave a short, savage excuse for a laugh. "Well," he said dryly, "come and get me, kid."

Rick paused, strain marking his cheeks and streaking his blue eyes. He seemed unsure; seemed undecided about just how to accomplish the awkward chore he had been given. Then, suddenly, startlingly, McGillicuddy had whipped around, and his gun was out, though nobody had seen the lightning of his draw. There was a look of dark pleasure on his long face now. "Get out of here, youngster!" he breathed. "And get out fast!"

"Can't do it, Jack," Rick said softly. "I got orders to take you in and I'm goin' to do it." At the same moment he started toward the outlaw, moving slowly, deliberately on his lanky legs. His eyes never stirred from the gunman's swarthy face and his hands hung stiffly down against his sides.

One gun roared—it wasn't Rick's. A puff of smoke drifted suddenly under the hanging lamps. Tom Gumm yelled once, and threw himself heavily to the floor. But Rick fell slowly, breaking first at the knees, then at the waist. And as he went down he drew his gun—the gun the marshal had given him.

Staring down through that mist of bluish smoke, McGillicuddy was deadly, patiently intent. Rick moved on the sawdust; he brought his weapon out and up, determinedly trying for a shot. Without any change of expression, the outlaw deliberately fired again—point blank. Rick's body twitched as the bullet struck into his defenseless flesh. He lay half on his side; and the gun kept coming up to line its sights on the outlaw's chest.

An animal sound came from the crowd. McGillicuddy heard it and knew it was time to leave. He started sliding along the bar, stepping carefully over Tom Gumm's prone shape. He backed to the door and through it into the night, and the doors fanned the smoky air after he had gone.

But Rick Bradley was on his feet, eyes staring and glazed with pain. Blood sluiced down his arms and dripped down his shirt front in bright ragged streaks. For a moment he swayed there in the middle of the hushed room, then made the doors in one blind, staggering rush. There he went to his knees again, but the side of the door braced him, and once more the gun in his hand came up.

With the doors pushed outward an inch or two, he could see the street: he could see Black Jack McGillicuddy out there, heading for his star-faced roan at the long hitch rail. And the gunman heard Rick's gasped-out warning: "Stand still or

I'll drill you, Jack!"

McGillicuddy swung around, throwing up his weapon all in the same quick motion.

Rick fired. The gunman grunted audibly with the shock of the slug, but he let one shot go at Rick—and missed. Rick fired twice more, cracking lead into the outlaw, hearing it strike his body hard. And then at last McGillicuddy went down. He took a step sideways, a queer lurching stride, then pitched on his face. Rolling over on his back, he stiffened out, knees buckling a moment, then straightening to full length. After that he did not move.

Laurie Kirk entered the room in the Buckhorn Hotel where they had carried Rick Bradley. He lay entirely motionless on the bed. The doctor had just finished with a ticklish probing job and had stepped out a moment to smoke his pipe. Rick's eyes were shut; his face was drawn and colorless; his lips as gray as ash.

Laurie had Rick's guitar as she moved softly up to the bed. Carefully, tenderly, she placed it on the counterpane. The girl was almost as white as Rick, and there was a wildness, a desperation in her eyes.

"Rickie," she whispered, "I brought your guitar. I . . . we . . . didn't know—" Her voice choked.

"I got him," Rick said faintly. "I . . . got him good."

The girl gripped his hand where it lay limp on the coverlet. "Yes," she said, "you . . . got him . . . good."

"You and your dad thought I didn't have the guts to go through with it," Rick said, "but I fooled you both. Guess you know now—"

"Rickie!" Laurie was staring down at him, white-lipped and tense. "But you don't think—"

Rick's eyes stayed closed. "I ain't that big a fool. I know what you and your dad was tryin' to do."

Her eyes were stricken. "But . . . we didn't know it was Jack McGillicuddy."

Rick gave a hollow laugh. He didn't speak again. Finally Laurie rose and turned, walking dazedly from the room, blindly stumbling into the hall. Doc Keyhoe, coming back, saw her face, and he gravely shook his head.

Marshal Kirk was waiting in the hall, his stern eyes clouded with fear and suffering. Laurie stared right through him. "You knew all the time it was Jack McGillicuddy," she told him icily. "You knew it and still you sent Rick there."

The marshal's mouth drew tight. "Don't, Laurie," he begged her. "Don't say that—don't think that!"

"It's true," she said relentlessly, "and you know it is."

"Laurie, I *didn't* know it! On my honor I didn't! A kid came to the house just before Rick got here tonight. He told me a man was kickin' up a ruckus at Ledger's place. How was I to know—"

"I don't believe you!" the girl flung back. "And now Rick thinks *I* was trying to get rid of him, too! Trying to get him out of town!"

A soft strumming sound was coming suddenly from Rick's room. Three wistful chords, then silence—and then three more.

"Well, bless my boots," the marshal said in a deep, awed voice, "he's a-playin' that thing again!"

Clear, clearer than words could be, Rick's old guitar was calling Laurie back. And Laurie heard it. Her head came up and she stood poised, listening, exulting, a radiance on her face. Then she turned with a rush and reached out for the door. It opened slowly, very slowly, and Doc Keyhoe stepped into the hall.

"Go on in, Laurie," he said, and he was smiling now. "He's goin' to pull through this, though it beats the devil how he could take all that lead and—"

Laurie didn't wait to hear the rest of it. There was a silky swish of skirts, and then she was on her knees beside Rick Bradley's bed. His eyes were open now, and he was grinning his twisted grin at her.

"Okay, Laurie," he said softly, hungrily reaching for her hands. "Doc told me everything and I can't call him a ring-tailed liar after what he just done for me. I . . . I'm plumb sorry I had you and the marshal doped out wrong."

Laurie was crying a little now. She held his hand in both of hers, and the hot tears brimmed and splashed on the counterpane. She couldn't speak. Anyway, there was no need for words.

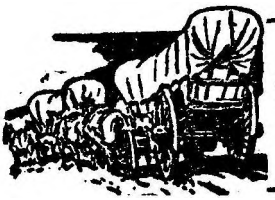
"Well, I reckon I earned that star," Rick said. There was a long time when he didn't speak but just stared at her with a tenderness in his eyes; but presently he squeezed her hands and said: "Maybe you better call the marshal in here now. I got to shake hands with my new boss."

THE END

REPAIRING A DISHED WHEEL

One dish the pioneer did not like was having the spoke of a wheel become loosened by the dryness of the prairie air so that a sudden wrench would twist a wheel and make it "dish" inside instead of out. Under the extra strain such a wheel soon gave way, and the loss of a wheel meant disaster. Blacksmith shops capable of resetting a tire were many miles apart, but the resourceful freighter was not to be beaten by such obstacles. The team was unhitched and turned loose to graze. A support was placed under the axle and the wheel removed; and since it would be impossible to get sufficient heat to weld iron, the tire was pried loose without cutting it. The wheel was then turned over and the twisted spokes forced back into their original position and held there by two braces bent over the outside of the hub and bound to the felly with rawhide thongs. The tire was replaced and thin wedges of soft wood were driven between it and the felly. If there was a stream near by, the repaired wheel was rolled into the water and left there for an hour or two. If there was no stream, water was poured sparingly from the keg carried on the side of the wagon, until the wood swelled enough to tighten the tire.

G. C. F.



WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

BY JOHN NORTH

FAR from being a land of nothing but snow and ice, Alaska is also a country which has rich, fertile soil. When the land is cleared it grows things—farm crops, potatoes, hay, grain and vegetables.

We have been there. We have seen the opportunity for peacetime settlement Alaska offers those possessing the vision, spirit and stamina of our pioneer forefathers. As far as its agricultural development is concerned, Alaska is a young country—a last frontier.

It is no place for the weak-chinned, the lazy, or the take-it-easy lads. But for those willing to take the bitter with the sweet, Alaska does hold promise, and a post-war chance to grow up with the country.

Fellows like J.K., a wartime sailor in the U. S. Navy, are already asking us about Alaska. "I have seen the Aleutians at their worst," he writes. "And still I like Alaska. There is something about the bigness, the clean freshness of that wilderness country that fascinates me. When the war is over I am going back. I would like to have my own farm there some day. Is that possible? Before the war I was raised on a farm in my home State of Nebraska."

If you are willing to put up with pioneer conditions, J.K., obtaining a farm in Alaska as a post-war plan is plenty possible. You can homestead one—up to 160 acres in size.

Within Alaska's spectacular, towering mountain ranges are low-lying valley lands with definite long-range possibilities for agricultural development. The start has already been made at Manatuska, in the Tanana Valley and at a few other places. Moreover Alaska offers a market for home-grown farm products in its bustling, little cities.

Of Alaska's total area of nearly 600,000 square miles, the country is estimated to contain approximately 65,000 square miles of tillable land. An additional 35,000 square miles is considered suitable for grazing. Most of this is still wilderness, awaiting clearing and developing.

You can buy at "reasonable" prices a few farms and some farm land already developed in Alaska. But you don't have to. Uncle Sam will give you the land, let you homestead it and make it yours forever if you will just fulfill certain requirements of the homestead regulations. If you are a citizen and eligible to homestead in the United States under the homestead laws, you can homestead in Alaska.

Mainly you have first to be sure the land you homestead is agricultural in quality. After that you have to live on the land part of each year for several successive years, cultivate increasing portions of it each season —1/16th by the second year—and build a habitable house on it.

At present certain areas in Alaska, owing to war conditions and military necessity, have been withdrawn from homestead entry. Prominent among these wartime withdrawals is the removal from homesteading of all land along the new Alaska highway for twenty miles on each side of the road from the Yukon Territory border to Big Delta, where the new road joins the older Richardson highway.

Most of this withdrawn area along the new through road to Alaska is at too high an altitude for successful agricultural development anyhow. Some of the most promising farm land open to homesteading lies in the Tanana Valley around the city of Fairbanks. There are other sections, of course, such as the Cook Inlet-Manatuska Valley area, the Kenai Peninsula, the upper Kuskokwim River Valley and parts of the main Yukon River Valley.

But balancing availability of good land, markets, transportation facilities and other general conditions, the Tanana region is a district that should at least be kept in mind. Fairbanks, the city center of this area, is at the northern terminus of the Alaska Railroad and of the Alcan Highway. It also has a modern airport.

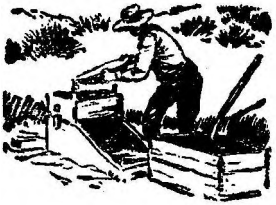
In the Tanana section winters are cold, but healthful and invigorating. The winter air is generally crisp and clear. In summer it is truly the land of the midnight sun. On July 1st the sun rises at 1.30 a.m., setting at 10.30 in the evening. During June and July and parts of May and August twilight is continuous throughout the brief night hours.

The frost-free period in this region extends ordinarily from about the middle of May to the 10th of September. Chief crops are grain, hay and potatoes. There are a few dairy herds in the vicinity of Fairbanks. Hogs can be raised in the valley.

When the gardens are properly cared for, the Tanana Valley homesteader can grow most of his own vegetables. Cabbage, cauliflower, radishes, lettuce, beets, carrots, celery, beans, turnips, peas and onions (from sets) all do well. Currants and strawberries can be raised. The surrounding country is prolific in wild berries.

Alaska, famous for its lavish production of gold and other minerals, of fish and fur, has literally millions of undeveloped potential farm acres. Some day these acres will write the chapter of the country's agricultural wealth in the pages of its already glamorous history.

Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply. Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.



MINES AND MINING

BY JOHN A. THOMPSON

PROSPECTING in the United States is free. Citizens, either native born or naturalized, or those who have formally declared their intention to become such, may make valid locations of metallic mineral claims on otherwise unoccupied portions of the public domain.

Nor do the federal mining laws regulate or limit the number of locations, or claims that may be staked by an individual or an association.

But you can't blanket the land with claim stakes helter-skelter either, and have the locations valid. The first provision of the regulations requiring that an *actual* discovery of a deposit of the mineral claimed must be made *within the limits of the claim*, takes care of that. It is a fair regulation. Find the metal first and you can claim it, hold it and develop it.

Sgt. B.L., who has seen the hard fighting in Italy, has, he writes, every intention of taking himself a prospecting trip in the West when the war is won. "I want to come back and do something I have always dreamed of—hunt gold deep in the back country of the West. Any dope you can give me on the regulations involved in staking a claim will be very welcome."

Sergeant, rights to mineral lands on the public domain are initiated when you actually prospect for the minerals that may be on them. They are clinched by locating or claiming that portion of the land on which a discovery has actually been made.

Briefly, a location is made by staking the corners of the claim (or marking them with suitable stone monuments), posting notice of discovery on the claim itself and complying with the local State mining laws regarding the recording of the location notice and the carrying out of the necessary discovery work to make the location valid.

Those latter regulations vary with the different States. They supplement but do not contradict the basic principles of the Federal law. Date concerning the State laws can be obtained locally in the mining district in which you make your discovery, or from officials of that State before setting out.

Nowadays placer claims, wherever feasible, should be located on and described by legal subdivisions. Where the country is still unsurveyed and this cannot be done, such claims must be marked, like all other claims. That is by corner posts or monuments, so that their boundaries can

be accurately and readily traced. All claims should have an additional post or monument at the actual point of mineral discovery on which the location notice is posted.

This location notice is important. It must contain the name or names of the locators of the claim, date of location and sufficient description of the claim with reference to permanent natural objects to identify its ground location. A copy or duplicate of this notice is filed for record at the county recorder's office in the county seat of the county in which the land is located.

Placer locations are 20 acre tracts for each individual locator. A group or association may file a claim up to but not exceeding 160 acres, provided such a claim is made by not less than eight locators.

Lode locations, the discovery of valuable mineral in vein deposits, may not exceed 1,500 feet in length along the vein, or be wider than 300 feet on each side of the middle of the vein. The end and side lines of lode locations must be parallel to each other, though the side lines need not necessarily be an unbroken straight line.

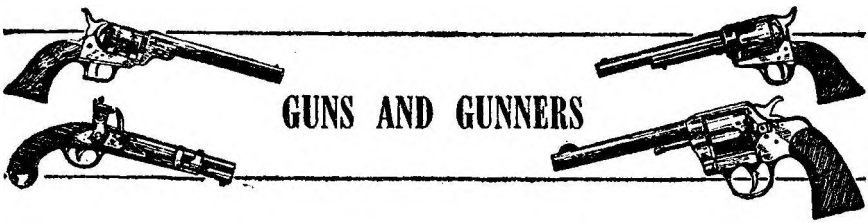
The United States mining laws are applicable to, and mineral claims may be staked on vacant public lands in the following States: Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Idaho, Louisiana, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakato, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. And in the Territory of Alaska.

Except for Mt. McKinley National Park in Alaska, and Death Valley National Monument in California, mining locations may not be made on lands in national parks and monuments *after their establishment*, according to information from the General Land Office in Washington, D. C.

Mineral claims may, however, declares the same information, be staked in national forest lands in the previously mentioned public land States. Such claims are subject to the observation of forest regulations.

All metallic minerals, in fact whatever is recognized as a mineral, metallic or otherwise, can be staked under the federal mining laws, provided they are found on public lands in sufficient quantity and of an adequate quality to render the deposit valuable as a potential mining property. There are certain important exceptions. Coal, oil, gas, oil shale, sodium phosphate, potash, and, in Louisiana and New Mexico, sulphur are outside the usual mining laws and not subject to location. Deposits of these minerals are acquired under a different system of mineral leasing laws.

If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., will bring a prompt, authoritative, personal reply. Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received; please keep them as brief as possible.



BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

WHAT an opportunity for the collector the fortunes of war will bring! What new group of collectors will be born! And what souvenirs! Already these boys are blossoming forth with all kinds of rifles, cartridges and collection pieces. What kind of collection will *you* make?

The problem of collecting rifles is a rather difficult one. Millions of arms are being captured by the Allied Forces, and hundreds of thousands of them are being officially returned to the United States—*as scrap.* Many captured rifles are placed back into service against the enemy. Others are placed in a pile and burned. This removes the wood stock, and very effectively burns the metal parts to a value of about a half cent a pound.

But there will be many of these guns coming back in serviceable condition and a few may be sold to proper individuals after the war as souvenirs.

Can you shoot these? That depends. Japan uses two rifles, both of them being modified Mausers. The Arisaka 6.5 mm. uses a semi-rimmed cartridge. It has never been made in this country and probably will not be made here. If you have one of these guns, you will have trouble getting the ammunition as there is no other cartridge that can be properly formed to use in it. The rifle has a 30-inch barrel and the 139-grain pointed bullet develops only 2400 f.s. velocity. This same cartridge is used in the Jap Model 1922 light machine gun and the later Type 96 light machine gun.

Another and later Jap rifle is the 7.7 mm. (.30 caliber) rimless. This uses a special cartridge with a 184-grain flat base bullet. This Arisaka rifle is a much better gun than the 6.5—more powerful, better balance, and a 23-inch barrel. It is a modernization of the earlier type. But no ammunition. The heavy bullet gives a velocity of 2350 f.s. The same cartridge is used in the Type 99 light machine gun.

The Japs have another 7.7 mm. cartridge, the semi-rimmed type. It looks like the rimless but the rim is larger in diameter. It *will not* work in the rifle. This uses a 205-grain boattail bullet at a velocity of 2200 in the 30-inch heavy barrel heavy machine gun Type 92.

Still another cartridge is the Jap 7.7 mm. *Rimmed.* This cartridge fits only the Japanese Aircraft Vickers and Lewis Machine guns—both patterned on the British guns the Japs purchased in the early 1930's. This ammunition fits no other Jap guns but can be shot in any British rifle since it is identical with the .303 British.

German rifles are good collection pieces in that they use the 7.92 mm. cartridge, readily obtainable in the United States. One American firm has made millions of rounds of this ammunition for China.

The owner of the Italian rifle is out of luck. He must use the special 6.5 mm. Mannlicher Carcarno rimless cartridge. No other cartridge will fit the rifle.

The collector of rifles is in one class—the collector of cartridges is in another. He can spend a lot on the game—or spend little. He can build a collection of sporting cartridges, or of military cartridges. He can limit his collection to one of each type of foreign caliber, or a sample of every head marking he can find.

I collect cartridges. I've some 4500 different ones—and have only scratched the top. This collection, which is for reference, is indexed, so I can find out what I want in a hurry. I collect every head marking, indicating date and make. In some cases these indicate type of bullet.

If you collect cartridges, don't forget to save all duplicates. They make excellent material for swapping.

This game of collecting samples of cartridges from this war is not healthy unless you know what you are collecting. Unfortunately, military restrictions at present prevent the disclosure of all of the information, but I cannot caution readers too highly to determine what they are getting. Don't take the other fellow's word for it—*know!* Plenty of stuff is very dangerous and should be handled with care.

First, collect only small arms cartridges. By this I mean the American designation. American small arms include rifles and machine guns up to .60 caliber. Most foreign nations include 20 mm. and up to 30 mm. (bullet slightly over an inch in diameter) in their small arms group.

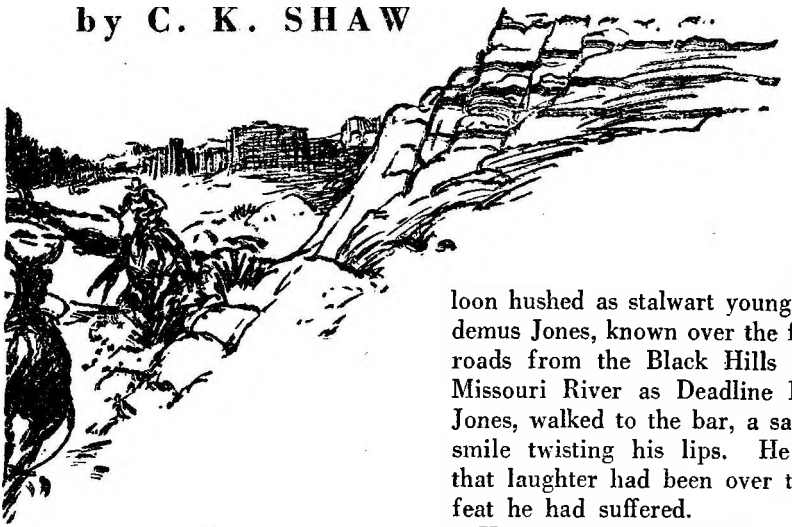
Don't collect 20 mm. cartridges and larger. These usually are dangerous and many are loaded with high explosive. Some have a delicate nose fuse; some have a concealed base fuse.

Even the smaller sizes around .30 caliber are not always safe to handle and keep. Incendiary bullets are dangerous. Armor-piercing, ball and tracer rounds are usually safe. High explosive bullets are often found in small arms ammunition.

A DEADLINE THAT HELD

Stripped of his own outfit in the first round of a mysterious freight war, Demus Jones made himself a target for renegade lead when he agreed to gun-guard the gold-laden Benson train

by C. K. SHAW



I

It was evening in Deadwood Gulch, Dakota Territory. Blue spruce, Ponderosa pine and quaking aspens whispered above a hundred miners' cabins of the gold rush that had, in the twinkling of an eye, brought forth the town of Deadwood, confined to a single street by mountain walls.

There were men in this town with sore hearts, shaking hands and defeated eyes. And there were other men with stout hearts and dangerous eyes.

Laughter inside the Cheetum Saloon hushed as stalwart young Nicodemus Jones, known over the freight roads from the Black Hills to the Missouri River as Deadline Demus Jones, walked to the bar, a sardonic smile twisting his lips. He knew that laughter had been over the defeat he had suffered.

He stopped beside a man whose long-jawed face was dominated by a pair of close-set pearl-gray eyes. This man was Cole Eastman, owner of one of the largest freight trains hauling between Deadwood and Fort Pierre.

"Finish what you were saying as I entered, Eastman," Demus Jones said.

Cole Eastman blustered. "I was saying the deadline you drew around your new freight train didn't hold."

"You were not speaking of my train," contradicted Demus. "You were speaking of Alma Benson."

Eastman's face turned the color of

his ashy hair. "I was saying she had the laugh on you!" he snapped defiantly. "You got mad and quit her train, then lost your own the first trip out."

"There are others besides Alma Benson who are laughing," said Demus.

Cole Eastman's eyes glistened. "Perhaps," he agreed. "Folks in the Black Hills would as soon think of pitying a lion that had gotten its whiskers singed, as feel sorry for you, Deadline. You'd better laugh along with the rest."

"I'll laugh later," Jones replied. "After I get the man who touched off that dynamite I was hauling."

"*Touched* off the dynamite!" Eastman's cry echoed in the quietness.

The two men looked steadily into each other's eyes.

"If your train was blown up," Cole Eastman breathed, "it could mean the Indians are wise to the ways of dynamite."

"White men did the job," Jones said bleakly. "It means a freight war!"

Eastman's eyes narrowed. "A freight war! Go slow, Demus, with that talk."

"It means a war to exterminate the small outfits, and the first blast on my train was supposed to get me. It got one of my skinners instead; I'd gone out to look at a sick mule." Demus Jones' voice grew louder so all in the room might hear, even the thick-shouldered sandy-haired man standing by the front door. "It's a big outfit that's starting this war," he said. "A big outfit, Eastman, like yours or Henry Amos'!"

Men held their breath for Cole Eastman's reply which came in a gust of words like hail whipped by a high wind.

"If you're charging me with blowing up your train, say so without chewing up the words! We're both freighters, but you're also a gunman. I suppose you're here to notch that lightning gun of yours again!"

"I'm not ready yet to smoke up," Demus Jones replied quietly. "Henry Amos would gain as much as you by destroying my train."

Cole Eastman strove to control his anger. "We would benefit no more than Alma Benson!" he snapped.

Demus Jones' voice heated with a threat. "Leave her name out of this."

The thick-shouldered sandy-haired man by the door waited to hear no more. Moving unobtrusively, he left the saloon.

"Alma Benson has almost as many teams on the road as Hen or I!" protested Eastman.

"I said leave her name out."

Eastman's lips cut to a tighter line. "I should thank you for warning me my name heads the list of suspects," he said.

"When I find the guilty man, a forewarning won't save him," Jones replied, and left the saloon. Outside, he mounted his black horse, Chief, and rode to the stable where Alma Benson kept her freight stock. Swinging down from the saddle, he led Chief up the runway incline.

A month ago Demus Jones had

quit as wagonmaster of the Benson freight line, and the burning-eyed Alma had ordered him never again to set foot on her property. As her new wagonmaster, she hired Rex Leland, a stranger from the Nebraska freight roads and, it was said, a gunman of note. Since Leland's arrival in Deadwood, the town had waited with relish for the moment when he and Deadline Demus Jones would clash.

As Demus led Chief another step into the stable, Rex Leland came from the small office, speaking over his shoulder to someone within. When he saw Demus Jones, his hand swept for his holster.

As naturally as the batting of an eye, Demus palmed his gun, and when Leland saw that the muzzle was in line with his heart, he let his own half-drawn weapon slide back to leather.

Left-handedly Demus Jones slapped Chief into a stall. "I like him out of the path of bullets," he said to Rex Leland. "Why are you gunning for me?"

"You've been ordered to stay off this property!" Leland snapped. He was the red-faced man with sandy hair, broad shoulders and thick thighs who had been in the Cheetum.

At the sound of Demus' voice, Alma Benson came from the office, dark eyes flashing. She was tall, and supple as a panther. Her features were regular and now a flush showed through the skin burned golden by wind and sun. She was dressed in buckskin suit, boots and Stetson and a gun hung grimly at her slim waist.

"Demus Jones, get out of my stable!" she commanded.

"I see you're still snapping out orders," said Demus.

"And men are still taking them," Alma Benson countered.

"There're odds in men," Demus responded, not once shifting his glance from Rex Leland. Slowly he holstered his gun.

Alma's anger climbed higher. "Leland, get that scabby black horse out of this stable," she ordered.

"Don't touch my horse, Leland," Demus Jones warned.

Rex Leland's hand whipped for his gun, his fingers clutched on the butt, then withdrew. His thick-shouldered body was bunched in defeated rage; Demus Jones had beaten him a second time.

The anger that had burned in Alma Benson turned to ice. "Go finish checking the mules in the second corral," she ordered Rex Leland, and turned to Demus as her wagonmaster's feet crunched away. "You are fast," she breathed. "It must be a great satisfaction for you to humble Rex Leland—since he has so ably taken your place."

Demus Jones was not listening. With narrowed eyes, he was watching Rex Leland depart. There was a set to the thick shoulders that seemed to fascinate him. He had seen such a pair of shoulders outlined for a second by the light of his burning freight wagons.

"Has Leland been in Deadwood all the while your train has been laid up?" he asked Alma Benson.

"Where my wagonmaster has been is no business of yours," she said shortly.

"It might be well to answer, Alma," he said.

"Rex Leland has been in Deadwood the last three days, if that's what you want to know. Leland heard you in the saloon charging that your train had been blown up through foul play. Demus Jones, you just humbled Rex Leland in a gunplay, but that doesn't reflect on his courage. There are other ways of showing courage besides flashing a gun. There is, for instance, the man who takes defeats standing up, instead of crying a foul. I haul dynamite from Fort Pierre; I know my risks. If my train is ever blown up, I shan't moan around like a whipped dog!"

Red climbed to the man's leather cheeks. "You hate me, don't you, Alma?" he asked. "I don't take back a word of what I said a month ago. A wagonmaster who works for you is just an echo of a man, just a sounding board for a woman boss. But I still admire you. No one in these hills or any others can compare to you. I'm sorry you hate me."

The severe lips loosened a little, hinting of a softness their owner seldom revealed. "You admire me, yet you despise the way I give orders," she said. "Mr. Deadline Demus Jones, that's wishy-washy. I like people who either hate or love, and do both with all their soul! Now get out!"

Demus led Chief from the stall. "I came here to warn you to throw double protection around your train this next trip," he said. "There's a war on for control of the freight between the Hills and Fort Pierre. I've been eliminated—for the time. See that you're not next."

Alma's dark lashes fanned. "I'm not afraid," she said. "This defeat has shaken you, Demus. I can see how charging it to a freight war eases your pride, but isn't it a cowardly out?"

"I had a deadline drawn around my train," the man said quietly. "Someone crossed it."

"It was Fate!" the woman breathed.

"Call it that," Demus answered, "but remember, Alma, when Fate starts dabbling in things, queer mixtures are apt to result. Just now Rex Leland was pushed into making a certain swift move with his shoulders that has started me thinking along a new line."

"Don't dare connect Rex Leland with this thing!" Alma blazed, then she quickly smothered her anger until it showed only in her eyes. "You're not playing this very shrewdly," she said. "You openly warned the man you are after, in the Cheetum Saloon; now you warn Rex Leland. If these men have made any tracks, they will most certainly cover them now."

"That's what I expect them to do, and while they're covering their tracks, I'll strike!"

She grew pale. "Do you suspect me?" she asked.

"No, Alma," he answered. "I came here for just one thing—to warn you to double-guard your train. I'm leaving now."

"Thank you, Sir Galahad," she said defiantly.

II

Demus Jones had supper, and later he talked with one of the herd boys from Alma Benson's stable. He learned that Rex Leland had been gone on what purported to be a mule-buying trip, for two days and one night. The night he was away was the night Demus's train had been blown up. A man on a fast horse could have made it back to Deadwood the following day.

Demus walked up the gulch to thick timber that he might be away from the hum of awakening night life. He sat down on a log to think. Why had Alma lied to him about Leland's absence?

He pictured her dark eyes burning with anger, then recalled them when they were velvety from a surprised pleasure. He had loved Alma Benson for a year. He loved the slender fingers that handled a pistol so well; he loved her even when her lips were set at their most severe line. But he knew it was dangerous to dwell on these things.

Slowly he rolled a smoke. Dreaming of a woman dulled a man's keenness, and Demus Jones knew he had need to be alert. He had warned Cole Eastman and Henry Amos and, through Alma, he had warned Rex Leland. The guilty one of this trio would immediately take action to guard his safety. The surest way to do that would be to remove forever the man who had cast suspicion upon him.

Demus Jones struck a match. A gun boomed and a bullet sped within an inch of his cheek. Sliding off his log, he flattened to the earth. He listened to feet crashing away without moving to pursue, then cautiously made his return to Deadwood. In the thick trees and blackness, there was no hope of overtaking his assailant.

The rutted street crushed between the walls of Deadwood Gulch, was now much alive. Men milled before saloons on both sides of the thoroughfare and fakirs painted glowing pictures of wealth in sing-song voices. On each side of the street a row of kerosene torch lights blinked, making here a bright spot, and there a pool of shadow.

Demus Jones avoided the light spots and circled to a view of Alma Benson's stable. Where a few hours before the big corral at the back had been quiet, it now buzzed with activity. Demus knew it meant the Benson train was making ready for a trip to Fort Pierre, and he wondered what had brought this about. The talk in Deadwood was that Alma was waiting for some fresh mules from Helena.

Demus saw Rex Leland bustling about and heard Alma clipping out her imperious orders. After an hour of seeing nothing unusual except this late-hour decision to throw the train on the road, Demus turned back to town and sought the Cheetum Saloon.

The bartender leaned across the bar as Demus approached. "Alma Benson was in here looking for you

about an hour ago," he said. "Did she find you?"

"No," Demus replied. "Set out a straight whiskey. Who else was in here and heard I'd gone up the Gulch?"

The bartender shook his head as he poured the whiskey. "Shucks, Demus, fifty or more. 'Course they didn't all hear."

Demus Jones leaned both elbows on the bar and studied his drink. Alma Benson had been looking for him. A hope that there was something personal connected with this warmed his blood. Alma had liked him once—a lot.

Suddenly he glanced into the bar mirror and saw three masked men gliding at him from as many angles, pistols drawn. Three men, one directly behind him, one coming from the back door, one from the front! The fellow from the front was slow; he was holding up the parade.

Demus' hat was drawn low. In the mirror he saw that the man to his left still had several steps before he would be at the best spot. Demus picked up his whiskey, started the glass toward his lips. For a split second he might fool the trio.

Then twisting sideways, he leaped away from the bar and pitched the glass and liquid into the face of the man directly behind him, the one who seemed to be the leader. This left his first shot free for the man at his right, the one from the back door. The fellow from the front door was still a step out of line. Gunfire shook the room. Reverberations shuddered to the rafters and out upon the street. Jones' gun swept in an arc of flame. The man from the back door stopped his first bullet, then the right arm of the front door assailant dangled helplessly to his side. When this fellow tried to shift his gun to the other hand, it clattered to the floor.

The man from the back door was lunging for the night and safety, and Demus let him go, for the one into whose eyes he had tossed the whiskey was getting his bearings. It had been only a second since the fight had begun, but now Demus had his enemies whittled down to this one. Both of their guns boomed together and Demus' hat flew from his head. But the man before him folded across a card table and lay still.

The man who had advanced from the front door was stabbing with his left hand for an under-arm weapon. Demus ordered him to lift this one still good hand and the fellow obeyed.

"Take his mask off," Demus said to the bartender.

The remaining five guests of the saloon were backing from beneath their table, jubilantly siding with the victor.

The bartender gingerly approached the man standing with the wounded right arm and snatched off his mask, revealing a young, thick-lipped, sullen face whose whiteness was accented by inky black hair.

"Who sent you?" Demus demanded brusquely.

"Nobody sent me," the young man mumbled.

The bartender, aided by the five

guests, now had the mask off the face of the man across the card table.

"You did a better job on this one, Demus," the bartender said. "He's dead. I've never seen him either."

A crowd was forming. Cole Eastman was among the first to arrive, and soon Alma Benson. The five men who had witnessed the battle from beneath the table, gave forth glowing accounts of Demus' ability.

"I see you've opened yourself another shooting gallery, Demus," said Alma scornfully.

"They opened it," Demus replied. "I closed it. Do you know either of these men, Alma?"

"That's Blacky Stebbins." Alma pointed to the youth. "He's in the Gulch from Montana. I—hired him a couple of days ago."

"Who hired you to try and kill me?" Demus rapped at the youth.

Stebbins stared sullenly at the floor.

"Answer!" Alma Benson commanded him.

He looked at her. "Don't snap no more orders at me!" he flared. "I'm through with takin' a woman's lip." He looked at Demus Jones and jerked his head toward the dead man. "I'm glad you killed him; he was so sure he was better than you. He offered me fifty dollars to come with him, just to keep the bystanders from mixin' in. He was certain he could take you alone."

"A dead man hired you," Demus scoffed. "That lie isn't going to help you. Here's the sheriff; you better talk."

"I am talkin'," the youth breathed as the sheriff bore down. "The dead man yonder was hangin' around the Benson stable and he offered me fifty—"

"That's a lie!" Alma Benson interrupted. "That man yonder was never around my stable."

The youth shrugged. "My word ain't worth much against yours, but just the same I ain't lyin'."

The sheriff jabbed a gun into the youth and asked him if he were able to walk to the jail. The prisoner responded by heading for the door.

"He'll talk 'fore he ever gets shed of bars," the sheriff called back to Demus.

Word came soon after that the man who had escaped by the back door had been found dead. "He was wounded in the chest and the back of the neck, the news bearer told Demus. "The one you gave him in the neck was what finished him."

"I only shot him in the chest," Demus said. "Someone evidently feared he'd get caught and talk."

Alma Benson waited for the hubbub to subside, then she spoke quietly to Demus.

"You mustn't connect me with this attack on your life," she said softly. "Blacky Stebbins lied about that dead man ever having been around my stable. For the sake . . . of the past, Demus, do you believe me?"

Demus covered her hand in a quick clasp. "I believe you, Alma," he replied. "Remember what I told you about a double guard around your train."

She withdrew her hand from his arm, smiling briefly. Cole Eastman

joined them before she could speak again, or before Demus could ask her why she had been searching for him earlier in the evening. Eastman's eyes were feverish, his breath shallow.

"I'm convinced now somebody blasted your train, Jones," he said. "That same somebody is trying to kill you to shut your mouth. The threat you made in the saloon wasn't long bearing fruit."

Demus' smile was thin and twisted. "I figured it wouldn't be. Now all the freighters on the road will be on the alert."

Eastman's lips pinched together. "And you said the guilty man was me or Hen Amos! That's a mighty narrow field. Hen is in Fort Pierre, which, according to your figuring, leaves this plot against your life up to me."

"Hen Amos is a thorough man," Demus replied. "If he blew up my train, he would provide against any trouble I might make later. He might even plan to be in Fort Pierre when I returned. The field is very narrow, Eastman, but it still includes Hen Amos. And there might be another."

"Another suspect?" Cole Eastman breathed. "*Who?*"

Demus shook his head.

Anger swept over Eastman. "So you're keeping one name secret, while you bark my name to the heavens! Jones, if I were a gunman, I'd challenge you." His hand slid a fraction of an inch toward his holster. There were rumors that Cole Eastman was much more of a gunman than he admitted. Then his hand dropped. "It would be suicide to draw against you," he whispered.

"And perhaps a partial admittance of guilt," Demus added.

Eastman breathed a bit easier. "If we could work together on this. A freight war would ruin me!"

"We can't work together," Demus said.

Alma Benson had stiffened when Demus said he had added a third name to his list of suspects. She walked away without saying goodnight.

"This thing has got me jumpy," Cole Eastman snarled. "A freight war! Jones, that would mean the Indians would be incited to attack our trains; it would mean poisoned waterholes—" He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

Demus was watching Alma as she moved to the front door. Why had she not waited for Eastman to leave that she might tell why she had asked earlier for Demus Jones? Suddenly his thoughts were switched from the girl to Cole Eastman's tense voice.

"I only got a glimpse—just a squint—of thick shoulders diving into the brush—"

Demus leaned close to him. "Away from your wagons?" he said sharply. "Let's get moving for your corral."

As they hurried down the street, Eastman began to talk, as much to himself as to Demus Jones.

"Hen Amos wouldn't want no freight war—he'd be crazy to start blowing up wagons and hatching murder plots! Crazy!"

"Somebody is doing it." Demus reminded him.

Eastman hastened his pace down the Gulch. The lights were now all behind them. Suddenly in the blackness ahead, flames shot into the air.

"*My wagons!*" Cole Eastman cried. He jerked his gun and emptied it into the air to rouse the town.

III

The blaze destroyed one of Eastman's wagons before it was brought under control and the sheriff found that in every second wagon, throughout the big train, foundations had been laid for fires. Rags soaked in oil were discovered under piles of harness. Evidently the person setting the fires had been scared off by those first arousing shots from Eastman's gun.

Cole Eastman, lantern in hand, was beating through the brush in a rage and Demus Jones was with him. Eastman set the lantern on a stump, cursing.

"That wind is from the west! If my wagons had burned, a fire that size would have carried across to Hen Amos' corral. His own barn and spare equipment would have burned! Jones, Hen Amos never had this fire set!"

"Eastman!" the sheriff called from the wagons, "come see what's been brought in from the brush!"

Cole Eastman and Demus hurried to the crowd around the officer and the sheriff thrust a five gallon coal oil can toward them as they arrived.

"There's still a little oil in it," he said. "The firebug evidently got scared of bein' caught with it."

Eastman took the can in his hand, rubbed his fingers over a blotch of white paint on the side, examined closely the handle. "Ain't this the bucket you rigged up last fall for doctoring that sick mule, Jones?" he asked.

The crowd waited without a breath for the reply. Demus looked at the bucket, hefted it. "Can't say that it's the same one," he said. "It's got the same kind of a handle."

Eastman's eyes were fanatically bright. His hand crept toward his gun. "Getting cautious of a sudden, eh, Jones? You wasn't so cautious about naming me and Hen Amos in this deal. I've known all along it wasn't me, and now I know it wasn't Hen. There's only one person that would profit by this blaze tonight—one! *That's Alma Benson!*"

Demus' fist cracked against Eastman's jaw. He would have followed with a second blow, but the sheriff's gun in his side stopped him.

"You're makin' a jackass out of yourself, Jones," the officer growled. "Eastman's got some good reasonin' behind his talk. If he says the word, I'll slap you in jail."

Cole Eastman picked up his hat, rubbed his jaw. In the lantern light his eyes were almost black. "Don't arrest him," he said. "If Jones would get his brain to working from all angles, he might be a help."

The sheriff touched the bucket with his toe. "Maybe Demus Jones set this fire—to get even."

Eastman squinted. "No-o," he

said slowly. "I don't figure he'd take that bucket away with him when he quit Alma Benson. Somebody that's working for her now dropped it."

That last sentence hammered at Demus' brain. Somebody working for her now. It *was* the bucket he had used to carry water to the sick mule, Demus knew it as well as he knew a bridle or a set of harness. That dent near the bottom, that blotch of white paint.

Suddenly Alma Benson was among them, near the edge of the crowd, and Demus wondered how much she had overheard.

"I hear the fire was set by oil rags," she said to Eastman.

The sheriff shoved the can toward her and Eastman lifted the lantern so the light struck it directly. Demus hoped she would recognize it and offer to help investigate. Instead her lips tightened until her entire face sharpened.

"Did you ever see this bucket before?" the sheriff asked her.

She inspected it. "There're a thousand such cans kicking around Deadwood," she answered. "I couldn't say."

"Didn't Demus Jones use it for packing water to a sick mule?" Eastman barked at her.

Alma Benson was now complete mistress of herself. "He had such a can—one with a handle, I mean. I presume you are holding this as evidence."

The sheriff nodded, studying her with squinted eyes. "Yes, I'm holdin' it as evidence," he said. He did not push her further, but suggested to Cole Eastman that they return to town so he could try again to make the black-haired kid talk.

Eastman stationed extra guards about his train, remarking dryly that he had known cases where lightning struck the same place twice. Alma and Demus walked together back to the lights, and stopped at an all-night restaurant for a cup of coffee. Neither of them spoke until the waiter had brought their coffee and departed. Then Alma asked a sharp question.

"How did that can get at that fire?"

The thin twisted smile appeared at Demus' lips. "Alma," he said, "you're shaking."

Coffee spilled on the table as she set her cup down. Leaning toward him, she began to speak in a tight voice. "I know now your train was not accidentally blown up. I'm sorry for what I said about your whimpering. To lose a train like that would . . . would be enough to make one desperate. A train is a great responsibility. Every spoke in the wheels means something, one knows the cussedness of every mule. It's something to guard, something to protect." Her fingers brushed his hand as it lay like stone on the table. "Demus, I can see how you might have set that fire tonight to get even with Cole Eastman. Nothing can ever come of finding that bucket—if neither of us talk."

"Burning wagons and endangering livestock wouldn't be my way of getting even," Demus replied crisply.

Her eyes were strangely bright and

hard. "You can trust me to keep still," she whispered.

"Alma," he said, "I was with Eastman when the fire started."

The tips of her teeth showed in a white line. "I didn't think you'd do the work yourself. Anyway, Demus, you've always said never to trust the man with the perfect alibi."

"Alma, I did not set that fire."

Her fingers closed on his hand, and she laughed a little.

"You've changed since I saw you at the stable earlier," the man said. "You are not so hard toward me now."

"I'm sorry about your train. I know what wagons and mules mean to you. Why do you stare at me, Demus?"

"I liked you better the other way—hard. I understood you then."

She drew her hand back, lips very tight. "I shan't offend you again," she said stiffly.

"Alma," he said bluntly, "finding this bucket is a serious thing. Eastman suspects you of being connected with this war—and so does the sheriff."

"I saw they suspicioned me," she returned. "I could have shifted that suspicion to you, but I didn't. As long as I continue to refuse to swear to that bucket, you're safe. I am doing you a big favor, Demus. Let's call a spade a spade. Let's say that one favor deserves another."

"Yes," he said, "let's get to plain talk."

"I was looking for you earlier this evening to ask a favor of you," Alma said. "That was bitter medicine for me to swallow, but now, since the fire, the asking is easier. Will you drive a team to Fort Pierre for me on this trip? The pay will be one hundred dollars."

Demus looked steadily into her eyes. "Those are gunmen's wages and you should know I'm not a man to hire out my gun."

"And you should know I'm not a woman to ask it—under ordinary circumstances."

His eyes were like strips of hardened earth. "I'd have to know why you were hiring me before I'd consider the proposition."

"That's all I can tell you, unless you take the job. You must need money, after losing your train and paying freight damages. I'll make the pay two hundred."

He shook his head, watched the color climb to her cheeks. She had always been very beautiful to him when her anger surged this way, like an unfolding sunrise. Now she was making a great effort to keep her temper.

"You feel that you owe me nothing for allowing the sheriff to suspicion me instead of you?" she asked.

"I owe you nothing on that score," he replied. "But if you need a gunman, I'm at your service, Alma, providing I consider that need justified."

Her glance sharpened. "I knew you would repay me," she said. Her voice sank to a whisper. "I'm taking a load of dust to Fort Pierre this trip to ship down the Muddy to Kansas City. I don't believe anyone knows, but I'd feel safer with extra protection."

"The Squaw Crick dust?" Demus asked.

"*You know!*" she breathed.

"Cole Eastman told me he had bid on the shipment, and felt certain of getting the job. He offered me three hundred to go with his train."

"Rex Leland maneuvered the deal for me!" Alma explained.

"He shaved Eastman's price just enough!"

"Does Leland want me on this trip?" Demus asked.

She smiled. "He doesn't trust you any more than you do him. I'll not tell him you know of the gold. Do you call protecting a freight train's cargo a legitimate reason for hiring out your gun?"

"I do," Demus said quietly. "You're pulling out early?"

"Yes." She rose, again the Alma Benson of the freight roads. "I'll get a little sleep and I suggest you do the same. Be on time."

"Don't try too many orders just because I'm working for you again," warned Demus. "Maybe you better relay that to your wagonmaster, too."

"The wagonmaster of a train must be obeyed," she said curtly.

"Just the same, relay my message."

Alma shrugged and walked away from the table. Demus Jones lingered to drink his almost cold coffee. Alma had said Rex Leland had maneuvered to get her that dust to haul. Maneuvered was a broad word.

As Demus left the restaurant he met the sheriff and learned that the black-haired kid in jail was asking for him. "I think he'll tell you something," the lawman said.

Together they walked to the jail and when the young prisoner saw Demus he stepped close to the bars. "Jones, will you teach me that draw you made at the bar tonight?" he asked. "You want to know who that dead man was and who hired him. Let me hang around with you a week and show me that draw, slow and careful, and I'll tell you what I know."

"You're lying," Demus charged. "If there's a price on my head, you're fixing up things so you can collect it. I'm not making any terms with you. I'm passing them out. They are that you talk. So don't send for me again unless you want to come clean."

The boy shoved against the bars. "No jail can hold me!" he snarled.

The sheriff and Demus left the jail and the sheriff charged his deputy to watch the prisoner closely. "You called the turn, I guess," the officer said to Demus. "That kid ain't afraid of bein' left long in jail."

IV

In the early gray of morning, Demus Jones walked toward the Benson stable. The streets were usually deserted at this hour, but now he saw groups of men standing about in excited talk and learned that the black-haired kid had broken jail, only to be stabbed to death by the deputy. Then the deputy's skull had been crushed, evidently by the man who had tried to help the kid escape. Both bodies had been found in the outer office of the jail.

"Not a shot fired," a man told Demus. "That's how come nobody was aroused."

Demus walked on to the stable. The kid's death ended all hope of getting the person behind the attempted murder. This freight war was being directed by men who did not hesitate to pile up murders. . . .

At the stable Cole Eastman was waiting for him. "I just heard you were taking out a team for Alma Benson," he said, his close-set eyes shimmering off hard lights. "Maybe this quarrel between you and Alma is just a trumped-up affair. You knew I bid on this shipment of dust. I should have got the haul—my bid was right. You refused my offer of a job and I didn't get the dust. Alma Benson got it and now you're going with her. Jones, did you tip her off to my bid?"

"Eastman, I had no possible way of knowing what your bid was?"

"Somebody knew, and somebody told Alma Benson, Jones. And I'm still remembering that oil can!"

Demus' eyes grew threatening, but he spoke in a level voice. "We'll get down to bedrock figuring on this thing. Alma Benson wouldn't start a freight war—she'd have no chance of winning it. That can was taken from her stable by the man who's behind all this and it was dropped intentionally—to throw suspicion on Alma. I'd stake my life on her innocence."

"That's what you're doing right now—staking your life on her innocence!" Eastman whispered. His eyes flamed feverishly. "If the man who tried to kill you last night is on this train, it'll be a cinch for him to finish the job. It could be chalked up to an Indian ambush or—"

"Don't finish that!" Demus Jones ordered.

"Jones," Eastman begged, "don't go on this trip. I'm not thinking just of your life—that's yours and you can do with it as you want—but there's this freight war! With you gone, I've lost my strongest ally."

"Don't worry," Demus replied. "I'll be in the fight—clear to the end."

Inside the stable, Demus Jones met the sheriff. The lawman's face was lined and weary.

"So you're takin' out a team for Alma, huh?" he breathed. "Jones, when you're dealin' with men, you're a hell-levelin' power, but when you're dealin' with Alma Benson, your brains ain't no more than a bowl of mush. A man dead in love is a fool. Now, if you'd swore to that bucket last night, I'd've arrested Alma Benson. Eastman says he's dead certain both you and Alma recognize it. That makes you as guilty as her, Jones."

The sheriff's eyes grew cunning. "A few months back there was talk that you and Alma was goin' to get married. Now they say that she'll marry Rex Leland this trip in Fort Pierre. Go ahead, draw!" he invited.

"You're overplaying your hand, sheriff," Demus said. "You're working to get me in jail. Why?"

The sheriff let his shoulders slump. "I'd like to see how Alma would perform if one of her pawns was

snatched away. Here she comes. I'll be movin'."

Alma Benson came with a brisk step, eyes bright and cold. "I knew you'd show up," she said. "Leland thought you'd back down. I saw you talking with Cole Eastman." She laughed. "His very soul is burning over losing this shipment of dust!"

"He thinks I tipped you off to his bid," Demus said dryly.

Alma smiled at this and hurried off to answer the call of a herd boy. Demus followed the triumphant swing of her slim body. His thoughts were like heat lightning, forking into a dozen sprays. Eastman had said he was staking his life; the sheriff had called a man in love a fool. Underneath all of this one thought drove at Demus Jones. After this shipment of gold was safely through to the Missouri River, Alma Benson planned to marry Rex Leland.

The Dakota Badlands covered many miles, and thieves bred there like mosquitoes in a swamp. Huge boulders, limestone squares and towering obelisks were tumbled about until almost every yard was a potential shelter for an escaping outlaw. As the Benson train moved ahead each hour of the day was tense with haste, each night eerie with caution.

Rex Leland was like a great restless cat infecting the entire train with his nervousness. His wagons led the caravan, and Alma Benson rode beside the train on her slim-legged gray gelding. Her orders were given with even more sharpness than usual. Demus Jones drove a ten-mule team near the center of the long line, and as they neared the Badlands, he waited for Alma to tell him to move into the lead. If he had been hired as a special guard over the gold dust, it was logical to suppose he would be given the most advantageous position.

The train paused for noon at the edge of the Badlands. Demus noted the tense set of Alma's face and knew she realized that word of the cargo she hauled might easily have leaked out.

Alma and Rex Leland drew apart during the brief noon stop, talking earnestly as they ate, but when the big train strung out again, Demus Jones signaled the girl for a talk.

It was not unusual to have a skinner signal, but when Alma caught Demus' wave, she stiffened in her saddle. She rode to his wagon, dismounted, tied her reins over the horn so her horse might follow beside the mules, and climbed to the seat.

"Speak fast," she said curtly.

"How is the gold distributed?" Demus asked. "Seeing you have hired me to defend it, I've waited for you to give me this information. It's time now for you to give your orders."

Her head was high, her glance straight over the backs of the mules. "If an attack comes, I'll signal you which wagon to protect."

"Alma!" he breathed. "Are you carrying this shipment all in one outfit?"

"If an attack comes, I'll give you your fighting orders," she said sharply. "Is that all?"

"No! It's time I understood a few things. Why isn't my outfit up at the lead? Whose idea was it that this dust all be hauled in one wagon? If it was Leland's, I'm warning you to look out. He's a snake!"

"He says the same thing about you."

"Alma, somebody left that oil can at the Eastman wagons to throw suspicion on you, somebody who could get it without exciting any questions. It could have been Leland. Another thing—you lied to me about Leland not being gone while I was away this last trip."

"I had forgotten about that day's trip to Center Falls."

"Does it take two days and a night to go to Center Falls?"

"So you sneaked around and questioned my boys!" Alma cried. "I'll be glad when I've finished all my dealings with you, Demus Jones. I'll be glad to reach Fort Pierre and—and—"

"And marry Rex Leland?"

"Stop this wagon and I'll get down," she ordered. "This was supposed to be a business call, not a personal grilling."

He stopped the wagon and she swung to the ground. "If an attack comes," he said to her dryly, "I hope you're around to signal me which wagon to protect."

She stepped into the saddle and dust flew from her horse's heels in a quick start.

V

The day wore away and evening found the train well into the Badlands. It kept moving until the black shadows began to cluster; then Alma gave the signal for the night corral. Leland cracked his whip and shouted as he led the train into its circle. Demus Jones eased his ten mules and three wagons into place like so much flowing lava.

Men stood around instead of squatting to eat their supper, showing the nervousness that gripped them and they nodded understandingly when Alma ordered a double-strength guard. Grimly the first shift picked up rifles and went to their posts. The mules were all within the enclosure made by the caravan, most of them tied to the wagon beds. Demus hunkered down beside his lead wagon near the rear wheels and when he heard a man approaching stealthily, he dropped his palm to his gun.

"Jones!" came a hoarse whisper.

It was the cook of the outfit, a stranger to Demus. He was a squat man with a broad face and heavy shoulders, and was disliked by all the old-timers on the train. Demus let his hand fall away from his gun. As the man slid nearer, there was the smell of whiskey on his breath.

"Alma Benson forbids drinking on the train," Demus said.

The cook squatted beside him. "I got my bottle out after I found this note where somebody had dropped it at supper. I had to have a slug of something after I read it. That's the devil of havin' a woman boss; you can't take any real trouble to her."

Demus turned. The man was lighting a smoke and his eyes were glassy from liquor, his lips twitching.

"Take your trouble to the wagonmaster," Demus told him.

"I ain't never liked him and 'sides, all the crew figures you're along to do the gunnin' work."

"Quit stalling," Demus said curtly. "If you have anything to say, say it."

The man leaned closer. "You know there's gold on this train; we all know it—the Squaw Crick dust. Now if thieves—"

"You're hitting the bottle too hard, Cooky."

"Look at this!" The man brought something from his pocket. "A plot to rob this train and that ain't out of no bottle!"

Cooky pressed the paper into Demus' hand, then drew back. Demus felt his palm burn, and the roots of his hair tingled. This paper was evil, and so was the man who had delivered it. It was part of some plot, but he could not afford to appear too wise. If he could draw Cooky out another notch without arousing his suspicions, he might get the jump on things. But Cooky was already drawing away.

"Somebody is comin'" he whispered. "Alma Benson and Leland! *Hide the paper!*" And he was gone.

A bobbing lantern showed Alma and Leland swinging toward Demus' wagons, and he wondered how Cooky had known so far away who had been carrying that lantern. The paper crackled in Demus' palm, but he did not stow it away. Instead he straightened his arm to his side and dropped it. Leland was carrying the lantern in his left hand. The fact that they had brought a light, and that Leland, not Alma had it, eased Demus' suspicions. Still he watched the man sharply, for Leland was moving cautiously.

Alma stepped apart from her wagonmaster and out of Demus' line of vision. He let this pass and continued to watch Rex Leland. Then the woman moved swiftly, whipped a pistol from the folds of her buckskin skirt and jammed it into Demus' side.

"Lift your hands!" she ordered.

"Take that gun away, Alma," warned Demus.

"Rex Leland says you're planning to rob this train," she half whispered. "He says the evidence will be on you. If you're innocent, Demus," her voice grew silky, "you will not object to a search."

Demus knew by the tenseness in her voice and the steady pressure of her gun that she was not bluffing. He lifted his hands and Rex Leland stepped toward him, breathing feverishly.

"I'm taking his guns now," the man whispered. "Ready?"

"Ready," Alma Benson replied.

Leland emptied Demus' holster, then removed a second gun from his waist band. "We have him now!" he said exultantly. He bellowed for the cook, and the squat-built man came with such speed that Demus knew he had been waiting for the call.

The plot was moving smoothly. Demus saw that it had been well laid, for not one of the trio hinted to the other that the play was not genuine. If a crew member should be listening in the shadows, he would

get the impression that Alma Benson wished him to get. The old-timers on the train were friends of Demus', and had to be won away from him.

Coldly now, Alma charged Demus with plotting to destroy the train. She said one of the crewmen, whom Demus had approached, had tipped off his hand.

"Was it Cooky?" Demus asked.

"Then you don't deny it!" breathed Alma.

"Go through his pockets, Cooky!" Leland ordered.

The cook stood at Demus' back and made the search.

"Can't you find it?" Leland snapped, and shot the light from the lantern over the ground. "What's that by his right foot?"

"It's the paper Cooky just brought me," Demus said.

"He's finally thinkin' up an alibi." Cooky snarled. "Yep, this is the paper he told me he got from that gang in the Badlands. He said it was a cinch to take over the train if a few of us would help him."

"Read that paper to me, Rex," Alma Benson commanded.

She had forgotten herself and called her wagonmaster by his first name, and Demus noticed this even as Leland snarled out the words of the plot from the note.

"Your scheme is working perfectly, Alma," Demus said mockingly. "Cooky brought me this note; then you and Leland bore down before I could destroy it. This should be enough to pull the wool over the eyes of the crew. Do you plan to have me shot?"

"Don't bother to try to smear Cooky with your tar," Alma retorted, and then she ordered her prisoner bound hand and foot.

Cooky was not long returning with a rope.

"I'd rather be stood against a wagon and shot," Demus told the woman. "That would be better than lying bound, waiting for one of your accomplices to slip up and stab me. I'm not fooled by this show of taking me to Fort Pierre and the law—you wouldn't dare expose this plot to the eyes of the law!"

"Don't drive me too far or I might stand you against a wagon!" Alma cried. "You may lower your hands now. Bind him tight, Cooky!"

Demus lowered his hands inch by inch. When they were on a level with Cooky's shoulders, he suddenly grabbed the man and weaved away from Alma Benson's gun. She fired and her bullet raked his cheek. The next instant Demus had forced Cooky before him for a human breastwork. Leland had thrown the lantern and palmed a gun. When it blazed, Cooky roared with pain and his right arm sagged. That made it easier for Demus to heave him the few steps to the space between the lead and trail wagons.

Demus jerked Cooky's gun from his holster as Rex Leland was leaping for a side shot, and clipped out a bullet that sent the wagonmaster diving for shelter. It was a miss, for Demus was most concerned with making the protection of the wagons before Alma fired again. He sent the cook crashing into Alma Benson,

destroying her aim, and melted into the thick blackness of the wagons.

Rex Leland roared for the crew, but already the men were on their way.

"Get Demus Jones. Shoot to kill!" Leland bellowed at them.

"Get Demus Jones!" came the thin command of Alma Benson. "He's working with the Badland thieves!"

The search pointed into the broken country to the right of the train. But while men crawled among the rocks and ghostly columns, Demus Jones lay hidden in the lead wagon belonging to Rex Leland. Beside him was a rifle he had taken from old Hickory Nelson's wagon, and in his hand was Cooky's pistol. It was loaded except for the shot Demus had fired at Rex Leland. Leland's wagon was supposed to be carrying most of the extra equpiment, but as Demus moved beneath the tarp cover, he knew he had discovered much of the dust shipment. Perhaps the rest was in the trail wagon.

"You got to find Demus Jones!" snarled Leland, as members of the crew began to return from the search. They were gathered near Demus' hiding spot.

"He'll fetch down a bunch of thieves that'll murder us all if you don't!" Cooky growled.

"You had him once and let him get away," old Hickory Nelson chopped back. "Now you're belly-achin' cause we can't find him in that devil's graveyard. Once Deadline Demus Jones gets an inch start, nobody alive is ever goin' to catch him!"

"Hickory is right about that," Alma said in a nervous voice.

The men faded to their blankets for the little sleep left, and Alma and Rex Leland walked closer to the wagon where Demus lay.

"If you had let me handle the gun on Jones," the wagonmaster said, "we'd never have lost him."

Alma sighed. "If I'd listened to you, he'd never have been on this train. He must have laughed up his sleeve when I offered him that job as protector of the gold."

"Yeah, him with his plans all laid to steal it!"

Leland's voice softened as they moved away. Demus Jones lay without breathing. There had been a weary ring of conviction to Alma's words. If she believed he were laughing up his sleeve, then she must actually believe he had plotted to rob the train. He shut the reasoning away. The gun Alma had held in his side had been steady as a rock. Just now when she had spoken to Leland, she had been keeping up the front in case somebody like old Hickory Nelson were listening.

The next morning, just before the start, Alma paused beside Leland's wagons and Demus was able to catch her worried words.

"The Three Cones will be the logical place for an attack upon us, Rex," she said. "Let's have Hickory Nelson take the lead this morning. We'll keep these wagons in the center of the train."

"Alma, having the gold in the lead wagons is the crux of our strategy!" Leland argued. "Even Demus Jones

wouldn't suspect that we carried the gold in the lead wagons where it could be cut away from the rest of the train."

"He might suspect," Alma said sharply. "He tried to get me to tell him which wagon to protect."

Leland touched her arm. "We've gone over this plan several times. If an attack comes, it will be on the center of the train. The thieves will consider that the lead and trail wagons are buffers. This will give me my chance to start the train into a corral, and I'll drive the gold wagons to the center. Cooky will be beside me with a shotgun. He's tested his wounded arm this morning and can manage."

"Jeff Allen is an expert rifleman. Let him take Cooky's place."

"Jeff will have to drive his own team. Remember we're using the extra skinner to handle Jones' outfit."

Alma's voice sharpened. "The gold wagon in the lead with a wounded guard—I'm worried. Demus Jones always preached centralization of strength around your vulnerable spot."

"Alma, are you quoting that snake to me!"

"Give the devil his dues," she returned. "He's a top fighting man. He proved that again last night by escaping."

"From a woman—and by hiding

Statement of the Ownership, Management, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Street & Smith's Western Story, published monthly, at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1944.

State of New York, County of New York (*ss.*)

Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared H. W. Ralston, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is Vice President of Street & Smith Publications, Inc., publishers of Street & Smith's Western Story, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publishers, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: *Publishers*, Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 122 East 42nd Steet, New York 17, N. Y.; *editor*, John Burr, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; *managing editors*, none; *business managers*, none.

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Sworn to and subscribed before me this 29th day of September, 1944. Edward F. Kasmire, Notary Public No. 415, New York County. (My commission expires March 30, 1945.)

behind a human breastwork!" Leland snarled. "Come, Alma, give the signal for the start."

"Yes," she agreed, "it's too late now to change plans. Here comes Cooky."

Demus heard her walk rapidly away and then came the throaty whisper of the cook. "There's a rifle missin' from ol' Nelson's wagon —one of his extras, but it was loaded to the hilt!" he told Leland. "That means Demus Jones is armed with somethin' 'sides a short gun, and he's the best shot in the Black Hills! Leland, that don't listen good!"

Rex Leland cursed as he climbed to his driver's seat. Cooky settled beside him and Demus Jones could still hear their conversation, for he had selected a spot almost beneath the high seat. He had hidden in Leland's wagon for the purpose of settling with the wagonmaster for last night's treachery. Now it seemed he would also get even with Cooky. He intended to wait until the train had skirted this dangerous section. Then when evening shadows offered him protection for his later flight, he would strike.

There was slight trouble at one of the outfits, and Alma Benson delayed the starting signal. "I don't like this!" Cooky growled at Leland. "You and me will be ridin' under the sights of the best shot in the country."

"Demus Jones is either dead or running for his life," snapped Leland. "I sent word to Eastman that he'd got away."

"Eastman!" Cooky growled. "Leland, I don't trust them rat eyes of his. If Demus Jones killed you and me, then Eastman wouldn't have to split this gold with us—and there'd be nobody alive to talk. That black-haired kid wasn't killed by no deputy. Somebody shut his mouth!"

"You're just scared!" Leland charged. "Eastman can't get this gold without us to drive it into the rough. By the time Alma Benson pays the insurance on this dust, and with her train half destroyed, Eastman will have this war won. He won't mind payin' us our cut. Get hold of yourself!"

VI

Alma gave the signal for the start and Rex Leland let out a whoop and cracked his whip. Wagons creaked, mules brayed. One by one the long outfits fell into place and the train was strung out.

Demus Jones caressed his pistol. His blood was warm, his heart lighter than it had been for days. Alma Benson had not been a part of last night's plot; she had been a victim the same as he. So it was Cole Eastman staging this freight war! Eastman had had those fires laid throughout his own train as a blind, had even sacrificed one wagon. He had planted the oil can to implicate Alma Benson. Demus knew now that Alma had believed he, Demus, was mixed up in the firing of the train, and she had protected him at the expense of herself. This thought purged the last of the bitterness from his heart.

Cole Eastman had tried to stop Demus from coming with the Ben-

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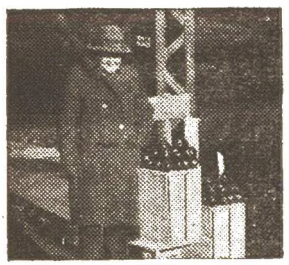

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son train because he intended to steal the gold, thus enriching himself while he destroyed another enemy. The subterfuges Eastman had used had been many. Bidding on the shipment of dust had been smart. Then when Rex Leland secured that assignment for Alma, it had cinched her belief in the wagonmaster.

Demus lay quietly, reshuffling his plans. There was going to be an attack and it would naturally come at The Cones. There was ample protection for the thieves at this spot, and here the gold wagon could be driven into the rough. Demus had no means of warning even old Hickory Nelson. For him to show himself would bring instant death.

Guards galloped constantly, alert as hawks, and Cooky cursed their precautions. Leland began to talk nervously, like a man who listens to his own voice for courage.

"Eastman came along hisself so as to be on hand to give us our cut the minute we delivered this dust. There'll be two fast horses waiting for us to hit south on!"

When the train was midway of the section known as The Cones, a rifle boomed.

"*There they are!*" Leland cried. "Watch for Demus Jones!" He cracked his whip and roused his mules to a run.

Cooky lifted his shotgun, hunching over it like a fearful bear. From the rear came the boom of an attack upon the caravan. The guards fought back and the yells of the skinners traveled over the backs of the mules. The train was following the lead outfit, waiting for a signal to corral.

Through the cracks of the sideboards, Demus saw Leland send his mules plunging on past the logical spot for a corral. Demus carefully slid from beneath his tarp. It would only be another moment now until the entire train would see that Leland was stealing the gold. Demus was waiting until no alibi, such as bolting mules, would hold water.

Rex Leland sawed his team to the right, straight for the heart of the Badlands. From the rear came a high scream from Alma. As Demus lifted to his feet, he cast one glance backward and saw Alma coming on her gray gelding after the bolting wagons. Then he saw old Hickory Nelson, second in the line of travel, standing on his footboard, hat gone, white hair flying, taking over the job of corraling the caravan. Above the roar of the battle, his wild whoop carried.

Demus sprang for Cooky, somersaulting him over the back of the seat into the wagon bed. Surprise and the shock of the fall made the man an easy victim. Demus cracked his pistol along the dazed cook's skull and thrust him aside. He was none too soon, for Rex Leland was twisting about with a flaming gun.

"*Jones!*" he croaked and triggered three times.

As the gun exploded Demus went under the seat and came up between Leland and the footboard at the front of the wagon. Demus shot once, and the wagonmaster swayed. Grabbing the lines, Demus wrapped them

around the foot brake. If he were to save the gold, he must have those lines. Then he jerked Leland down from the seat and for a second it was a test of strength. Leland had snapped back from his light wound and managed to fire his pistol again. Demus felt the bullet tear at his shoulder. His own gun exploded against the wagonmaster's body and Leland slumped. This advantage was followed up by a blow to the head, and the wagonmaster crumpled to a motionless heap.

Demus snatched up the lines and started the job of swinging the running mules back to the train. It took time, for a big outfit could not be turned on a dime. Two of the thieves, evidently posted as guards to the gold wagon, saw the change of direction taken by the lead mules and lifted in their stirrups with wild yells. They came at the wagons with arms waving. Demus kept to the business of driving, for otherwise the big outfit would hang up on a boulder. He gave the job his entire attention until a bullet whistled by his chin. He knew then that the guards of the gold had awakened to the fact that something had gone very much wrong with their plans. They had evidently not seen Leland's fall.

Crouching, Demus wrapped the lines around the brake, and swept up the rifle he had kicked forward when he attacked Cooky. The gun spoke twice, and the two guards toppled from their saddles. He grabbed up the lines again, swinging the mules into the last of the turn, and getting them headed at an angle for the corraled wagons. Behind him,

Alma Benson had had her gray horse shot from under her and was now holed up among boulders fighting for her life.

Others of the thieves had now aroused to the fact that their treasure was being snatched away from them, and four horsemen came at Demus. He knew they would not shoot the mules until the last hope of retaking the gold was gone, for they must have the wagons a distance from the caravan before it would be safe to rob them. Rifle in hand, he threw himself over the front end of the wagon and down onto the tongue. Leveling his gun across the back of a mule, he steadied himself and fired.

Suddenly a man streaked from shelter straight at the wagon. It was Cole Eastman. In the desperate moment of seeing his riches vanish, the man had thrown caution to the wind. He stood in his stirrups calling for his men to close in. He jerked his rifle to his cheek, but he never fired it. Demus Jones had recognized Eastman, and had chiseled his name on the bullet he sent forth from across the back of a running mule. Eastman toppled over the neck of his horse, then crashed to the ground.

This was a blow that stunned the thieves for a second, and every second meant yards gained by the gold wagon. Demus' gun was spitting out a constant stream of lead as he trained it first across the back of one wheeler, then the other. From the caravan came encouraging whoops. Old Hickory Nelson was moving his outfit to make room.

Then the thieves gave over recovering the treasure and shot for the mules. A leader stumbled, but kept swerving ahead. A swinger reared and plunged over a chain, managed to keep on his feet. With a last burst of effort, the gold wagon, slowed in speed and with mules dropping in their tracks, rolled to the protection of the caravan.

Demus leaped to the ground and ran for a saddled horse.

"I'm going to help Alma!" he cried to old Hickory Nelson. "Hold the train!" He took only time to sweep up a loaded rifle and pistol, then headed back for the boulders he had just left.

As he streaked his horse toward the spot where Alma Benson was fighting for her life, a wild cry went up from the thieves. They realized the man responsible for their loss of the dust, was again exposing himself to their fire.

"It's Jones!" went up a cry. "It's Deadline Demus Jones! *Get him, boys!*"

Demus Jones kept to a straight course until his horse was shot from under him. He took his rifle with him as he landed in the boulders, and worked toward a spot from which he might flank Alma's attackers. He kept shoving to better range, and the firing of the outlaws became a bit unsteady. A man that insisted on a closer and yet closer range unnerved them. Demus lay still a second to let a cloud pass from before his eyes. Rex Leland had given him a shoulder wound and now he had a second bullet hole in his thigh.

But these things he could not consider while Alma Benson was in danger.

The cloud cleared and Demus Jones opened his war. The range was deadly and his rifle spit fire in a constant stream. Thin screams were pushed from convulsed throats, and curses mingled with gun roar. The thieves became confused as their enemy changed from one to another of the nest of boulders he had selected. The thieves had not bargained for hand-to-hand fighting with Deadline Demus Jones, and suddenly they did not want it. They knew him, and knew he would die to maintain the deadline he had thrown around Alma Benson.

A bullet seemed always on the way when a thief exposed himself. One man leaped up in a desperate attempt to end the fight and fell forward, a bullet hole between the eyes. Before the rest could get the quiver out of their trigger fingers, Demus Jones had left his nest of boulders and leaped another few feet closer to them.

They fired as he fell to this new shelter. Demus lay still a second, blinded from a bullet that had cut a path across his cheek. Then stronger than any feeling of pain, rose his urge to reach Alma Benson. An outlaw gained courage at his moment of inaction and tried for a shot. Demus put a bullet through his heart. Then the thieves turned in flight.

The guards from the caravan arrived, their fight won. Demus rose

and began to praise them for their good work, then suddenly crumpled to the earth. Dimly he knew when Alma lifted his head, but the cloud was back now, shutting everything away.

Hickory Nelson and the rest of the crew were standing about the blanket on which Demus lay as he opened his eyes. His wounds had been dressed, and when Alma held whiskey to his lips, he swallowed and tried to sit up. She pressed him back.

"Just rest," she breathed, tears in her eyes and voice. "Demus, you saved everything—everything!"

"You busted up a freight war single-handed!" declared Hickory.

Demus took Alma's hand tightly in his and insisted on sitting up. "I won a war single-handed!" he scoffed. "Maybe I brought things to the surface, but you fellows won it! Now let's get this train to rolling."

"We've got Eastman and he ain't dead," old Hickory told him. "But he wishes he was! Leland and Cooky are squawkin', tryin' to save their own necks. Standin' the three of them up and shootin' them would be my way!"

"No," Demus said. "Eastman owes me the price of a freight train, and the insurance I paid on my lost cargo. I intend to get that by law before his neck is stretched."

The Benson train wound on to Fort Pierre. Alma stood close beside Demus the morning the gold dust was loaded onto the Missouri River steamer for a Kansas City bank.

"I'm finished with running a freight train," she said. "You told me it was a man's job, Demus—it is."

In the Fort Pierre jail, Cole Eastman had snarled out the story of his attempt to get control of the freight to the Black Hills. At his trial he was ordered to pay Demus Jones for the loss of his train, then he was sentenced to hang for taking part in the bloody attack upon the Benson caravan. Rex Leland and Cooky each received twenty-year jail sentences.

Alma and Demus walked along the bank of the river a short distance as the steamer started downstream. Demus still limped from his thigh wound, but he seemed well on the road to recovery.

"Supposing we get married," he said to Alma as they stood hand in hand. "Then I'll take out the Jones-Benson freight train while you wait at home and worry over me."

She smiled into his eyes. "Supposing we do," she said demurely.

THE END

Answers to puzzle on page 78.

1. juniper 2. Chinook 3. roustabout 4. soogans 5. packsaddle 6. oxen 7. picket 8. cull 9. trough 10. broomtail 11. tapaderos 12. cougar 13. cantle 14. loop 15. shorthorn

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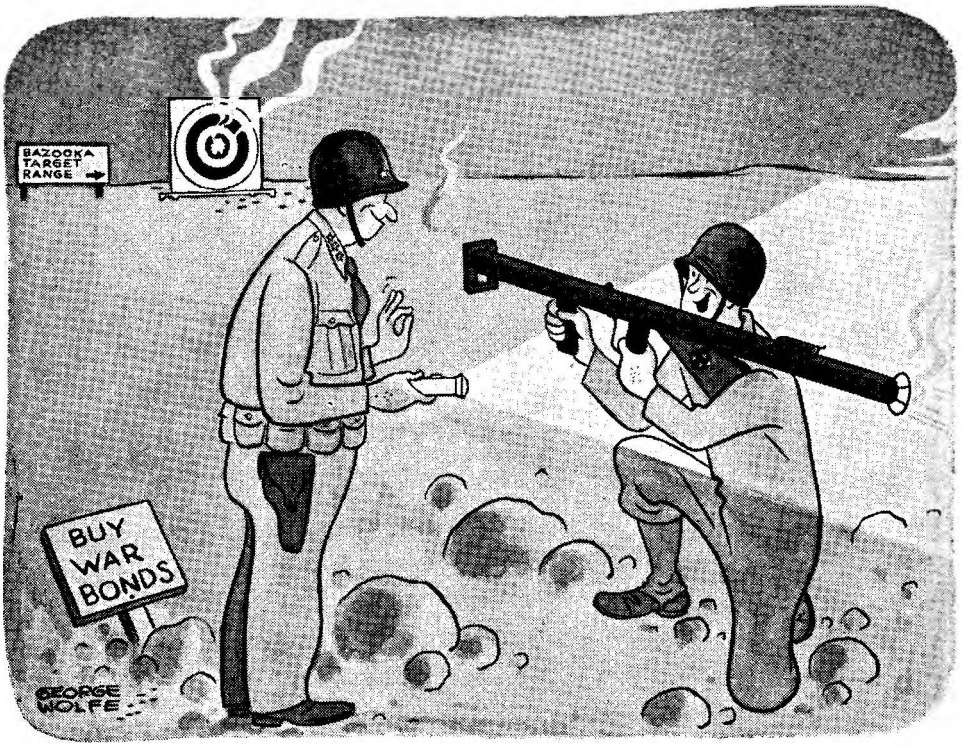

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