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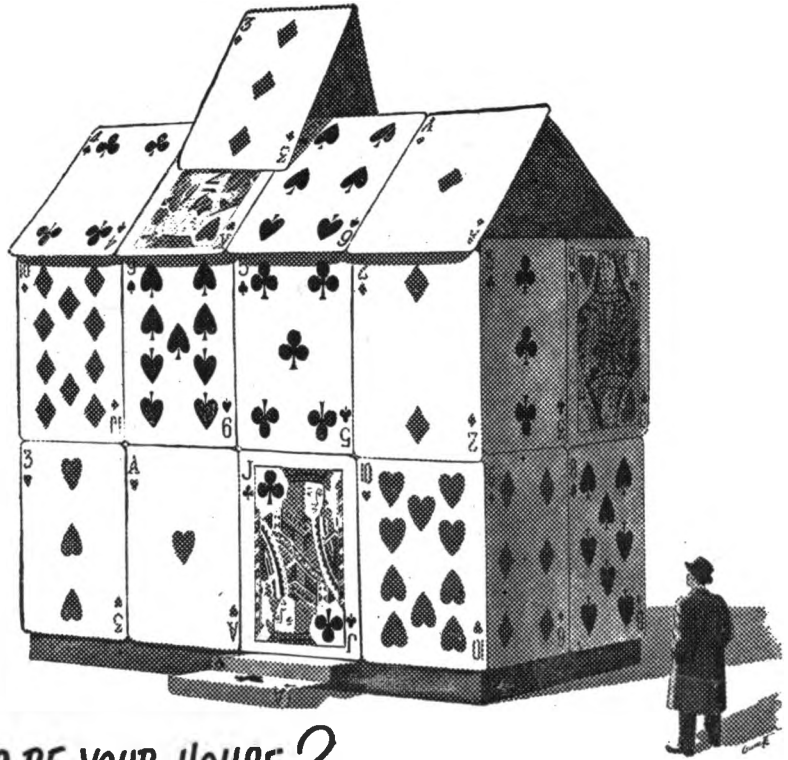
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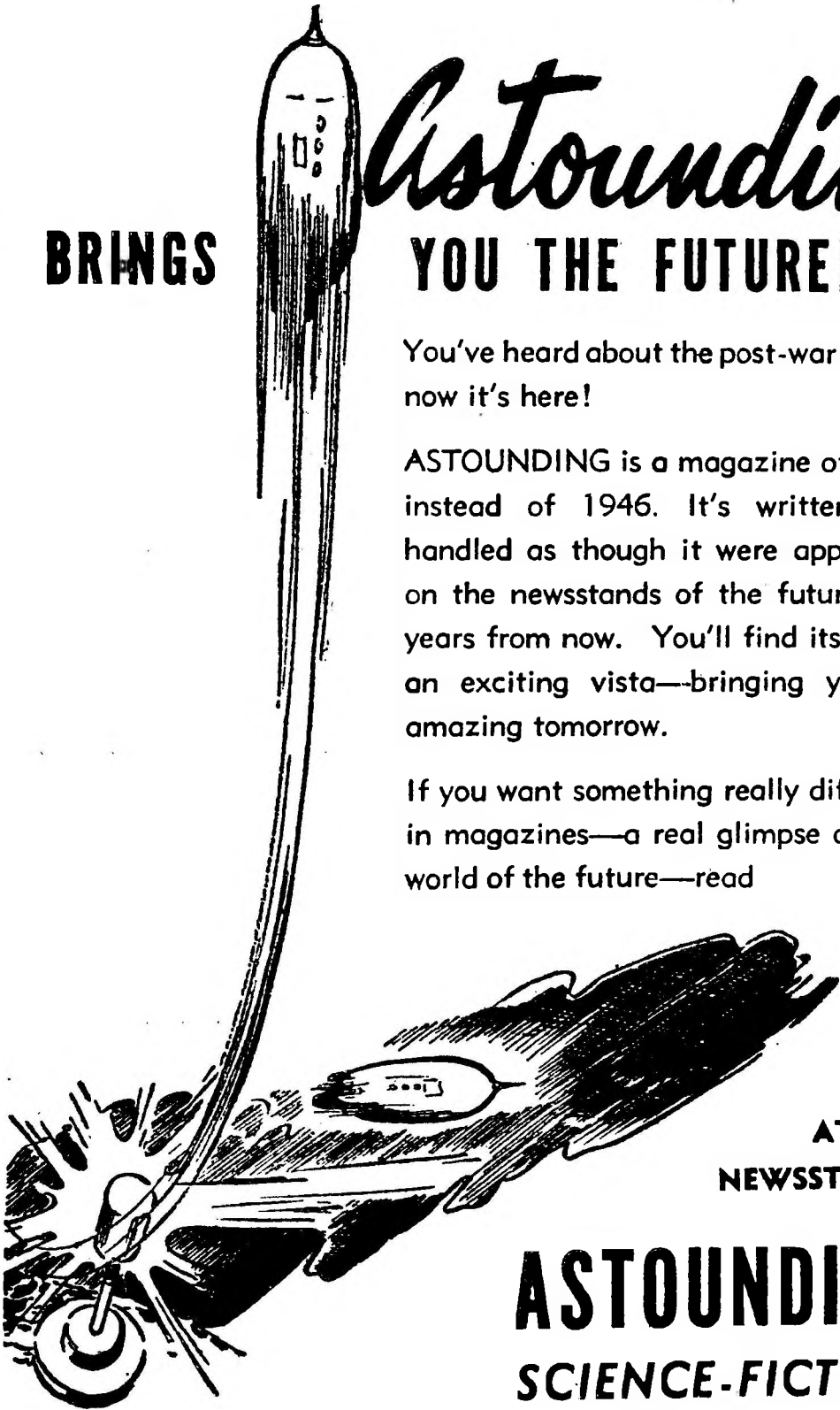
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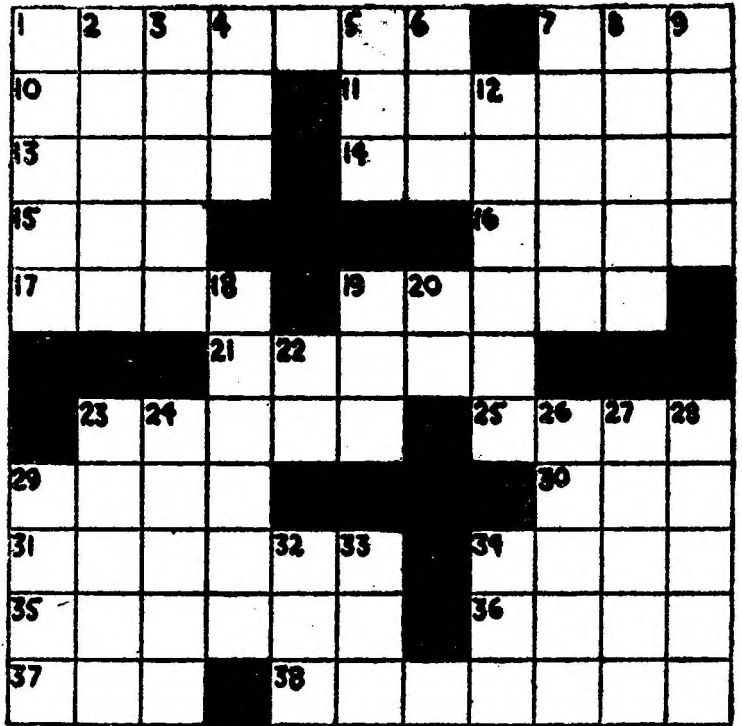
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# CROSSWORD

## PUZZLE



### ACROSS

1. Mexican cowboy
7. This is a laugh
10. River of Siberia and Manchuria
11. Flyer
13. Legal claim
14. Easily bent
15. Lyric poem
16. Delves
17. Torn
19. Solemn assents
21. Rarin' to go
23. Name
25. Quien--? (Sp.)
29. Yesterday's food in disguise
30. Father

31. Assert, declare
34. Prim, smug fellow
35. Face-maker
36. Arouse to anger
37. U. S. espionage and sabotage group during the war
38. Marched in a body

### DOWN

1. Bravery
2. Ammonia compound
3. Royal lady
4. Vase
5. Knock
6. A resource of the Southwest
7. With all one's might
8. Dangles from a rope

9. Uninvited picnic guests
12. Horsemen
18. Tie a mount to a post
19. Period
20. Myself
22. Man's nickname
23. Stories
24. Lands amid water
26. Leaking
27. Mexican dance affair, in the Southwest
28. Bladed
29. The ring of angels
32. Obtain
33. Misjudge
34. In favor of

*(The solution of this puzzle may be found on page 128)*



## I

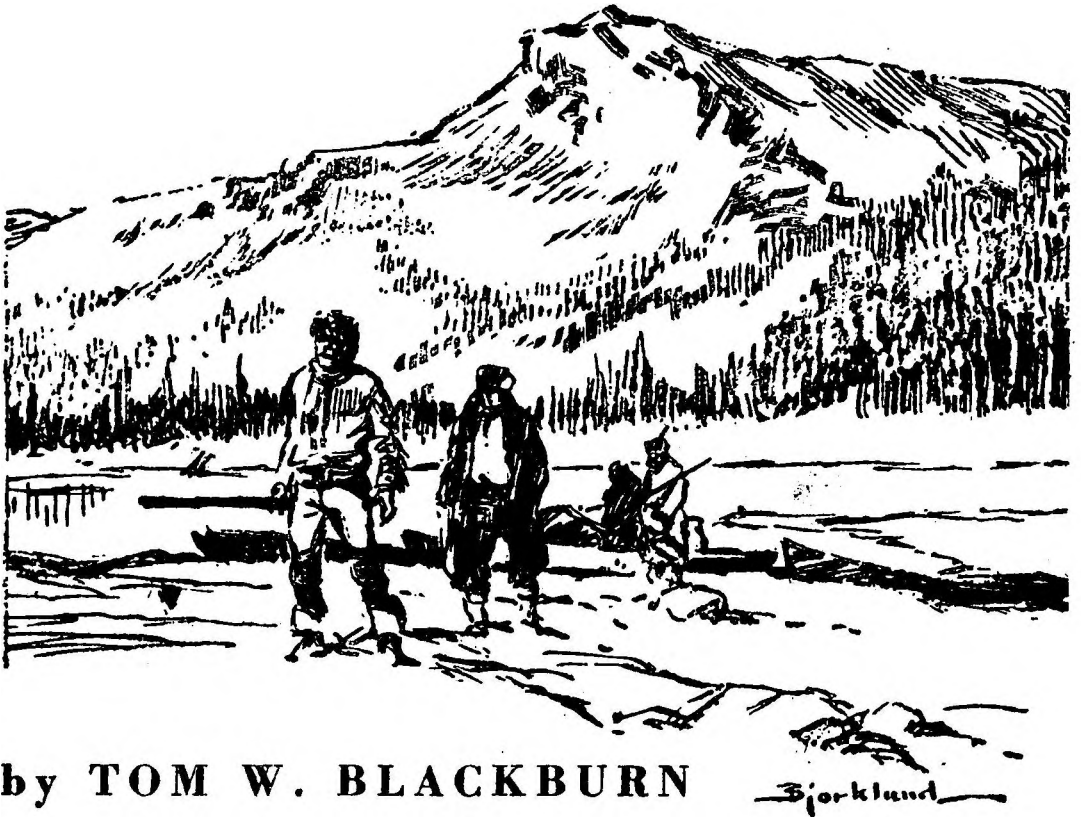
GAUNT, gray scarps rose majestically on either side of the slot. High on their slopes, where a shelving of rock offered a crevice for rooting, twisted trees shoved up into the sun. And beyond, in the distance, rose the roof of the mountains, the glacial

summit of the Divide. This was the country of white water.

In the center of the rock-walled slot, solidly enough built but seeming fragile and far smaller than the crests of water flung up by the Thunder River in its passage through these narrows, rode a squat bateau. Wide



# WAR OF THE LONG KNIVES



by TOM W. BLACKBURN

*Sjorkland*

*When the voyageurs' spring meeting turned into a rendezvous with death, could Dan O'Cain, new King of the Trails, lead the buckskin legion against a foe whose spies were everywhere?*

of beam and low-sided, heaped high amidships with baled fur, it appeared to wallow clumsily, but the four men who rode with it seemed untroubled.

In the bow, with a stout length of sapling gripped across his body, Loup Leroux poised his great tigerish body lightly, watching for rocks

ahead from which to fend away with his pole. Behind the bowman, crouched miserably on the bottom just ahead of the baled furs, Bowlegs Bill Kean eyed the roiling water balefully.

Aft of Kean, working a driving oar with pendulumlike regularity and

power, his face expressionless and his body stiffly erect, Red Wolf, the taciturn Crow warrior, sat cross-legged on a low thwart. Dan O'Cain sat on the stern thwart, the wide steering sweep under his left arm. His body swayed back and forth with the instinctive movement of a true voyageur, meeting every quirk of this savage run of water with an anticipating shift of the steering oar.

Thunder from the rapids shook the air between the sheer rock walls. The bateau rocked wildly. Once, when Leroux thrust at a knifing rock in front of it, the wide bow ducked under and chill, foamy water swept over the gunwales to run aft, soaking Bowlegs Kean's buckskin leggings. Kean howled angrily, then subsided quickly under the pressure of the green sickness which always afflicted him when he was on water. Leroux turned, grinned widely, and made some answering shout.

The voices of those forward carried back only as thin and formless sounds to O'Cain in the stern, their volume drowned in the tumult of the river.

Suddenly the slot widened ahead. Thunder River poured into a more open course, and the violence of the rapids died. Leroux hauled his long pole inboard and squatted down in the bow. Ahead, a wide valley was coming into view, a valley of easy slopes and thick timber, through which the river drove like a broad, silent arrow. Thin in the distance and rising vertically in the windless air, a shaft of smoke stood on the south bank of the river.

"Ha!" Leroux shouted. "Some-

body make the rendezvous ahead of us. Me, I don' understand it. We leave as soon as the ice is gone from the *riviere*—almost before the ice is leave, by gar. But somebody is ahead!"

"You danged otter!" grumbled Kean. "Ever think some of the boys might not have gone so far into the hills to set their traps as we did? Ever think they might not have to ride for sixteen days down the most wall-eyed, fightin'est, orneriest string of water that ever set a man's belly to churnin' and ruint his appetite? So help me, if a bateau loaded down with a winter's catch could fly, we wouldn't have touched ground nor water nor rock from the high ridges to the Portage!"

"I bet we come second, anyways," Leroux said with a grin. "We don' do so bad, eh?"

Without waiting for an answer, he broke into a song. Unlike most voyageurs, Loup Leroux owned a great deep bell of a voice and there was a rolling quality to his rendition of a river song that a man could not resist. O'Cain picked up a chorus and, though still uncomfortable with the sickness which always let him in for so much hoorawing, Bowlegs added his cracked tenor. Red Wolf made no sound, but the dipping of his paddle changed subtly until his strokes were in time with the rhythm of the song and the bateau swept along with the river.

O'Cain, as he sang, watched his companions narrowly. This singing, this eagerness and good nature on a down-river course, was traditional in



the mountain country. After a long winter in the deep hills, the journey down to the spring rendezvous was alive with a bursting eagerness and gaiety. But there was a difference, this year, an undercurrent of tension.

For some time the scattered forces which made up the fur trade of the high mountain north country had been shaping into two widely different patterns. The first of these was the free trappers—men who had wandered westward from the plains below the Great Lakes and the rolling country back of Montreal. Men who had had no masters in the beginning and wanted none, now. They trapped where they pleased and sold their catches to whatever buyer was nearest to hand and offered the best price. These were the woods runners, the buckskin mountain men. These were Dan O'Cain's own kind.

The other pattern was the powerful octopus that the great trading companies of New York and Montreal and the Hudson's Bay region were spreading out in a great fan of dominance across the headwaters of the Missouri and the Snake and the Columbia—an octopus whose influence was now marked along every fur stream from the Rio Grande to Great Slave Lake.

The companies varied, and with them, their manner of operation. The largest and the most respected merely tried to enlist trappers on company contracts. Others went beyond this. They sent their own crews into the woods. And some of these crews had rigid orders. The fur taken in their area was to be taken by company

men. There were to be no other trappers along the streams.

The rendezvous the previous year at the Portage of the Thunder River had been a grim one. The Portage had always been a free trappers' gathering, where furs were graded, baled and made ready for shipment, where certain trappers were appointed to take strings of bateaux on down the Missouri to the St. Louis market, to return in the fall with supplies and the profits of the individuals who had made shipments. The previous year it had been a gathering of harried men. Friends had been found dead along the spring trails to the rendezvous, their furs stolen. And the lower reaches of the Thunder River were closed, so that bateaux bound for the outside world could not reach the Missouri.

The whole thing appeared to be a ruthless company operation—hired wolves sent out to clear the hills of independent men for the contract trappers who would follow. The men at the rendezvous had little choice. Not all of the freemen had come down to the Portage this year. Those who were there, recognizing their weakness, had voted to cache their furs, abandoning any attempt to ship out the catch. They agreed that during the winter they would sweep the hills as they worked, passing the word until every man available was advised of the trouble encountered at the Portage.

In the spring they would descend the Tonnerre—Thunder River—in force. They would gather again at the Portage. Further plans would be made, then, with every man voting.

This was the spring of that meeting. The Portage lay ahead and all of them must face a decision.

The men of the buckskin legion had borne these attacks the previous year. They would not do so again. There was fire in them and it kindled easily. They would fight, grimly and with every weapon they had. O'Cain would fight, himself, but only when the identity of his enemy was clear. Until then, the knowledge rode him that the buckskin legion would destroy itself if it went to war with the companies.

The free trappers were individuals, and their strength lay in this. An attack against one of the companies would draw in the other companies and no single body of men, however just their cause, could stand against a full union of these great corporate combines.

The bateau rounded a sweeping turn of the river. A curved beach shingled up onto a meadow on the left. Behind the meadow was a heavy growth of timber, clear of underbrush. A small creek came out of the trees, wound through the meadow, and joined the river. Beside this confluence, drawn high out of the water, were three scarred old pirogues, long, canoe-like craft that were recognizable among all others of the mountain men. They were Lake of The Woods built and they belonged to Etienne Dubois, the great, snow-bearded father of the rendezvous at the Portage.

It was a relief to O'Cain that Dubois was already here. The old man's counsel was steady and reliable and

he had influence, even among the most reckless men in the brigade.

O'Cain glanced at the timber, at the fringe of which burned the fire whose smoke he had marked up river. He saw no one about the encampment there, was mildly puzzled, then gave his attention to the beaching of his own craft.

Leroux was the first ashore. He bounded up the beach and stopped suddenly. The eager expression on his face died, a look of stark horror loosening his features. Dan O'Cain leaped out of the bateau and joined him. What had not been visible from the surface of the river was all too plain from the edge of the grass-fringed beach.

A fire-scarred pine stood a little apart from its fellows at the edge of the timber. Etienne Dubois had made his camp beneath it. His gear was scattered, his equipment ruthlessly destroyed or made useless. The embers of his fire still spiraled thin smoke into the motionless air. As it rose, the column of smoke eddied about the figures of four men, hanging by their necks from a gnarled limb of the fire-scarred tree.

Even at this distance Dan O'Cain saw that the nearest figure wore a full white beard and a mane of white hair. The Portage, he realized, was not to have Etienne Dubois' counsel, after all.

## II

There was little enough sign about the ravaged camp. O'Cain's first impression was that since the Dubois party had obviously arrived only hours before, its attackers had been



lying in wait here at the Portage for the deliberate purpose of wiping out first arrivals at the free-trade rendezvous. However, Red Wolf, who knew sign better than any of them, disagreed. He pointed to tracks back in the timber.

"Old man comes. Behind him comes lynx. Not waiting here. Lynx followed old man."

Leroux studied the sign and agreed.

"Company devils!" he growled.

"You see company sign?" Dan asked, a note of sharpness in his voice.

The big voyageur shook his head bitterly.

"No. Like Red Wolf says, they move like the lynx. For sure they don' leave the track! Maybe you t'ink Etienne hang himself, *hein?* Ha! I make proof it is company thieves. We look at the cache, eh? I bet she is open—"

None of them had thought of the furs buried at the rendezvous the year before. With Leroux in the lead, they cut back through the timber to a small, rock-sheathed mound. It was not necessary to climb it. A hole gaped in its summit. The log shoring with which they had surrounded the cache was a pile tossed to one side. Marmots had apparently gotten into one end of the store while it was under ground. Half a dozen pelts which had been chewed to worthlessness lay on top of the shoring. The rest were gone. The trappers moved silently back to the Dubois camp.

Bowlegs Kean, practical and desperately in need of action to ease the fury in him, got tools out of the bateau and started breaking ground on

the edge of the meadow for a grave for the four dead men. Silently Red Wolf joined him. Loup Leroux stood with O'Cain, their thoughts running parallel. They were in danger here. The enemies who had struck so suddenly earlier in the day might return. They might now be waiting. And there was danger to any other parties coming in. Provision would have to be made against that. With last year's furs gone from the cache in the timber, nothing stronger than tradition required that this year's rendezvous be held at the Portage—if word of change could be gotten to the others.

Suddenly Leroux snapped his fingers and swore sharply.

"T'under!" he roared. "Four stupids we are, Dan!"

O'Cain turned ~~curiously~~.

"Look, we bury Etienne and the t'ree others. But we don' t'ink. Like me, you see Etienne come into rendezvous many times. He travels only with t'ree other men? He's got nobody else?"

O'Cain scowled. Suddenly he remembered.

"The devil!" he breathed. "The kid. That stringy buckskin pup that traveled with him. His grandson, wasn't it?"

Leroux rolled his eyes.

"If you come from the Great Nort' instead of the States, *mon ami*," he said, "you know better. In the Nort' we got an eye for such things. Me, I am ashamed for you! Grandson—ha! The stringy one—what you call him—is rather Etienne's granddaughter. An' I bet by this year she no stringy one any more, by gar."

O'Cain blinked. Dubois had always been the undisputed leader of the rendezvous and attention had focused on him. O'Cain had seen the youngster who traveled with the old man, but he had never paid any attention. He had supposed it was a boy whom Etienne was apprenticing to the trails. Leroux's revelation came as a shock.

Beckoning to Loup, Dan moved back into the timber to study the sign left plainly there. Kean and Red Wolf were finishing their work over the shallow grave. The four of them knotted together.

"Boys," Dan said quietly, "we've got to be getting out of here or somebody will be doing the same thing for us that we've just done for Dubois. Loup and I have been talking. Seems like the rendezvous had better be moved, say over onto the upper meadows of Fire Creek. That's hard to come by and I doubt we could be jumped, there. The country's too open. What do you think?"

Kean and Red Wolf nodded solemn assent.

"That means we've got to split," O'Cain went on. "One of us has got to hang around in the timber here, keeping out of sight but ready to warn any of our bunch who may be coming in here overland. Somebody else should be on the river, above the narrows, to send any down-river boats straight across to Fire Creek. And at least one of us ought to get over onto the meadows and get a camp set for headquarters."

"Waiting here's the toughest chore," Bowlegs said bluntly. "Those devils

may be close and if they polished off our sentry, the other boys would come right on into their laps. Whoever stays has got to keep out of sight and still be close enough to keep bateaux from hitting that shingle. No offense to the rest of us, but Red Wolf's the only one who's got that kind of timber know."

The taciturn Crow warrior agreed blandly. "Bowlegs speaks true. Red Wolf wait until you make signal fire at Fire Creek that everybody there. Then he come. While he waits, he use the eyes. Maybe he tell you then who killed Old Father."

"I'll go up river, then," Kean said. "I'll send anybody coming by boat across to Fire Creek. I'll watch for your signal fire. When I see it, I'll come in, too. That'll leave you and Loup, Dan, to cross over to the meadows and get a camp set up."

O'Cain shook his head. "Loup will have to go alone to the meadows. I've got another chore to do. A thing like this doesn't happen accidentally. I want to know how it was planned. And Etienne's granddaughter is missing. I'm tracking the devils that did this work. If they've got that girl with them, I'll get her and bring her back to Fire Creek in time to meet the rest of you."

"I hope you can, son," Bowlegs said lugubriously. "But I'd feel a sight better if the four of us was going off together on that little chore. This was a big party and it wasn't no corn dance they held here. They're mean bad business!"

Bowlegs and Red Wolf went back to the bateau to unload their gear. Dan drew Loup Leroux to one side.

"Take an ax to Etienne's pirogues, then burn them before you shove on for Fire Creek. They're bait, lying like they are now. And when the boys come stringing into the new camp, keep what you're thinking to yourself, Loup. Talk slow till I get there. We've got no proof this was company work. If it is, chances are I'll know when I see you again and there'll be time to settle it, then. If it isn't and the boys start howling after the companies, we're apt to end up with two fights on our hands instead of one."

"You t'ink it's renegades?" Loup asked dubiously.

O'Cain shrugged. "In a thing like this, thinking isn't enough," he said. "A man has to know. Maybe it's renegades. Maybe it's company men. What I'm driving at is that the free trade would do better with a truce with the companies—with boundaries laid out and a chance to work our lines in peace—than it would in fighting a war with a combine of outfits that can hire ten times as many men as we'll ever have in these hills!"

"Who knows?" Leroux said non-committally. "I remember what you say, Dan. But I tell you this—if somebody make war on the legion, then, by gar, he's got a war made on him *promptament*—without waiting for anybody!"

Realizing the uselessness of further argument, Dan secured his own gear from the bateau. Red Wolf had already vanished into the timber to take up his vigil. Kean was ambling up the shore of the meadow with the peculiar, loose walk with which a



Dan O'Cain

trail man could cover incredible distances in a day. Leroux, alone, thrust the heavy bateau into the current, leaped in, and took the paddle Red Wolf had plied on the downward voyage.

When the bateau had vanished around a turn of the stream, Dan shouldered his pack and cut at an angle toward the downstream edge of the meadow, where timber slopes closed in on the river. He had earlier noted the tracks back of old Etienne's camp and he judged he was moving right to intercept them. However, he reached the trees and penetrated the timber half a mile without coming across the broad trail he had expected to find. It appeared as if the raiders, careless about the scene of the gutted camp, had become suddenly cautious in their retreat.

The sun slid low and Dan still cut a wide arc through the timber, hunting for the telltale trail. He was, by this time, half a dozen miles below the meadow at the Portage and he began to debate whether he should push farther ahead or double back

and hold council with Red Wolf. Then he broke out of the timber into a little park, and on the far side of this he found faint signs of the passage of a number of men. He was, he thought, six or seven miles down river from the Portage, now. Picking this trail up eagerly, he plunged on into thick timber again. He had gone scarcely a hundred yards into these woods when deepening shadows seemed suddenly to concentrate and rush forward at him like a solid wall. There was impact, a sudden, sickeningly hard blow.

Dan fought hard to retain consciousness, but his knees buckled. He had been hit from behind, surely and mercilessly. Dimly, with a familiarity which mocked him, he heard a voice he could not quite recognize.

"Good trapping, René. That's O'Cain. We had it right. The others are stringing right in behind Dubois. And with this son out of the way, I can show up at that free-trade rendezvous with as clean a conscience as a saint!"

"Eh, *bien*. But this one, he don't quit kicking, yet . . ."

A second blow fell and Dan O'Cain spun forward into a roaring oblivion.

### III

Dan roused dully. Wood smoke was in the air. He sensed the familiar sound and pattern of a wilderness camp about him. Stirring slightly, he was rewarded with a hammering ache in his head and the knowledge that he was securely bound. He tried to ease his cramped posi-

tion. A voice spoke softly beside him.

"Best take it easy, Yank," the voice counseled. "I've been wiggling for three days, but the only times I've gotten free is when they've undone the rawhide we're tied with. Nobody can whip a knot like these blasted mountain men!"

Dan rolled over. He was lying apart from the main fires of the camp. Beside him, bound as securely as himself, was a lanky, graying man dressed in the tailored broadcloth and thick Michilimackinac wool common among factors and officials of both of the two great English fur companies. It was this man who had spoken and one thing he said rang warningly in Dan's mind.

"Mountain men?" Dan repeated. "Then this is a free-trade camp?"

"It is—blast the devils!" the Englishman agreed flatly. "Since late summer we've been having trouble on streams we've kept posted and where the free trade hasn't been working for years. Strictly our territory. But hired Canuck trap setters and boys from our staff have been killed without warning on back trails. Sudden attacks on contract parties. I was sent out from Mackinaw to investigate. But the free traders have had spies among us. They've worked smoothly. They obviously knew I was coming. When I got too close to the truth, this is what happened to me!"

The man stopped and blew loudly through his nose in a gesture of anger.

"This is the free trappers' war we've been fearing for years. If the



fools only had sense enough to know there's room for us all in the North!"

O'Cain scowled. The Englishman seemed sincere and no fool. Yet Dan knew there were no free traders—no men of the buckskin legion—in this camp. The brotherhood, to the last man, would be gathering in the next few days on Fire Creek—sent there by Bowlegs Kean and Red Wolf and captained by Loup Leroux.

And there was another thing. Here was an Englishman, an investigator for an English company, complaining of the same things which were driving the men of the buckskin legion to open revolt. Dan remembered Leroux's question at the Portage: "You think it's renegades?"

That had seemed idle guessing, then. Now it had the ring of truth.

The Englishman stirred. "You don't believe me?" he asked. "Look, I'm William Stapleton, Montreal. I take it you might be field man for the American company at St. Louis. I'll share what I know. Maybe I would have had some doubts as to the identity of the men here. We don't see many of the free-trade legion east of the Great Lakes. But there are a few I know. And there's one face in this camp that I have recognized. You'll see it shortly. It belongs to Mariette Dubois, the granddaughter of the king of the free trappers. You'd know Dubois. You'll know this girl. And she should be proof enough for even a doubting Yank!"

Dan spoke slowly.

"Yes," he agreed. "I've been hunting the girl. I was hunting her when somebody broke my head from be-

hind on the trail. But what kind of proof is the girl's presence here, Stapleton? I'm Dan O'Cain, a member of the legion. Yesterday I hit the Portage of the Tonnerre with three partners. We found Dubois had arrived at rendezvous ahead of us. He and his voyageurs were hanging from a tree in his camp. The cache we had planted last year had been opened and robbed. And Mariette was missing. The tracks I followed led me here!"

The Englishman whistled softly.

"Sainted devils!" he breathed. "That makes it plain enough. We've both been taken in! My company—the other companies—and your legion men, too! Somebody wants to clear this country and work it himself. He's setting us deliberately at each other's throats. You think that's it?"

O'Cain nodded. Stapleton started to say something else, then fell silent. Two men were crossing from the fire. Dark, big-bodied men with an arrogant, confident swing to their walk. They brought water and undid the hands of the two captives so they could drink.

"Bring your captain," Dan growled at one of them. "I've got something to say to him!"

"Words can do nothing now, O'Cain," the man said with a grin. "The boss was afraid of old Dubois and he was afraid of you. Now neither of you can damage his plans. The boss isn't here. You've been slow coming around, O'Cain. And while you've slept, much has happened. Your partners have been

careful to see that every man was warned away from the Portage of the Tonnerre. But who gave the smart order for a smoke column to be sent up from the new rendezvous ground when everybody was in? Did you think we would be such fools we wouldn't know what it meant or that we couldn't follow it to the fire from which it rose? Ha!"

The man laughed again.

"The boss left at noon. Already he must be at Fire Creek—that's where the smoke came from at midday. Already he must be making talk. The kind of talk those wild legion ones will want to hear. Like a match to powder. In an hour or a day they'll be moving—toward the company posts with primed pans and uncovered sights!"

Stapleton swore at the man.

"This boss, then—does he know arrangements were made that if I did not report back to Fond du Lac post at sunset tonight, my outfit would join with the two other posts down river and start up the Tonnerre to sweep it clean?"

"*Oui, mon ami,*" the man agreed blandly. "We have kept friends with wide ears among the posts, as we have kept shadows on the trail of the legion men. There is nothing in these hills we don't know. So the plan is perfect. The boss starts the fools at the rendezvous down the river. The companies send a force up the Tonnerre. They meet. When the fight is done, the Tonnerre belongs to us—together with three fat posts and the entire winter's catch—at mighty small cost in powder and ball from our own gun barrels!"

"Where's Mariette Dubois?" O'Cain asked sharply.

"The Little Flower?" the man said easily. "You think you can do something with her? I break your heart, O'Cain. You're a pretty lad to some eyes, maybe, but you do nothing with the Little Flower. She has looked at the boss. Like the Tonnerre—like all the North in another year—she is ours!"

"You lie!" Dan rapped in the terse, stinging terms of the north-country *patois*.

The trapper scowled darkly. "So? Then I show you . . ."

He raised his voice. A tent was pitched on the far side of the camp. Its flap parted and a tall, long-legged, graceful figure emerged. Dan O'Cain stared in disbelief. Reflection had established his memory of the youngster who had been with old Dubois at the last rendezvous. There was no reconciling that memory with this woman. The color of the North was in her. The strength of this life was in her body. The steadfast loyalties and sudden fires of a voyageur were in her eyes. Clad in a buckskin jacket and the tight, molded leggings of a canoe man, she was an incarnation of the woods and the rivers and the unstained beauty of the mountains—a living expression of the challenge which drew men into these remote hills.

"This fool would be stubborn, Little Flower," the trapper growled. "He don't believe you belong to this camp."

"Why shouldn't I?" Mariette Dubois demanded in a husky, arrogant voice. "Why should I cry tears for

the white-headed old devil now dead at the Portage? You think I would go on forever, being a camp slave? 'Marianne, cook this.' 'Marianne, bring the water.' 'Marianne, I'll need new buckskins sewed.' Ha! You think loyalty to blood lives through that forever? You think a woman could love this country for itself, like a fool of a man? No, *mes amis*, a woman can love only what she can make from this country. And Marianne has done well, at last. The boss of this camp has offered much!"

The girl turned and strode back across the camp, every line of her body, every sinuous movement at once callous and taunting and desirable.

"By the wooden-legged saint of Mackinac!" Stapleton breathed. "That's something I wouldn't have missed!"

Dan was silent. The two renegade trappers who had brought their captives water now retied them and followed the girl back into the camp. When they were gone, O'Cain spoke quietly to his companion.

"Something's wrong there. I counted on that girl. I figured on taking her out of this with me, somehow. But she doesn't fit, now. I reckon it's just you and me, with a hell of a chore ahead. Waiting won't change the odds our way. I figure we'll probably have our hands cut loose again after full dark for a little food. When they do—"

"When they do," Stapleton finished for him, "we make our try. We cut hard and fast, hoping to get clear in time to warn my outfit and the trappers at the rendezvous. We try. We

have to. But both of us know we haven't got a chance."

O'Cain nodded somberly. "Something like that," he agreed.

#### IV

Occasionally, as the afternoon slid swiftly into evening, Stapleton and O'Cain talked briefly, always when they were certain they were not watched. Dan spent considerable time watching the entrance of Marianne Dubois' tent. He could not bring himself to believe that a woman who had the blood of old Etienne in her veins could turn coat as easily and eagerly as this girl. For a time he clung to the idea that this might be some other woman, using Marianne's name. He was forced to discard this, however. There was too much of old Dubois in the girl.

Dark was just hazing down when Marianne came out of her tent. She spoke with one or two of the men about the half dozen fires which had been kindled in the camp. Done with this, she crossed directly to the prisoners. She dropped onto a deadfall a couple of yards from where they lay. She was silent for some time, staring intently at O'Cain. Finally she lifted her head with a short laugh.

"The great Daniel O'Cain!" she mocked. "I make something at which you can laugh, O'Cain. You lie here like the snowshoe rabbit in the snare. Only a stupid man could be caught as you were caught. Yet for a year I have listened to Etienne talk. 'O'Cain is a man. O'Cain is a trapper. O'Cain is of the old kind and so long as O'Cain is in the woods, the trade will be a fit business for a man. A

girl is not for an old man to raise. And there comes a time when an old man must leave the trails. A girl should look for the best man. And O'Cain of the Tonnerre is the best in the North.

"'A girl should mind her looks and her manners and when rendezvous time comes, she must walk where Daniel O'Cain will see her.' *Argh!* The old fool was blind! Mariette does not look for a man. Let a man come looking for her! When this summer is done, O'Cain, you will be gone. But Mariette will remain . . ."

The girl broke off suddenly and her voice dropped.

"I don't think they listen, now. Make no move when they feed you. Bed as though for sleeping. I'll watch. When the time is right, I'll return."

The girl rose, spat elaborately in the general direction of the prisoners, and strode back across the camp. The two prisoners were silent for a long time. Finally Stapleton stirred.

"O'Cain," he whispered, "what do you make of it? Is she with us or is this a try to keep us from making a break the only chance we'll have?"

"I don't know," Dan answered honestly.

The renegade camp ate about the scattered cooking fires. A keglet of rum was broached and a number of men began to drink heavily. However, Dan noticed that those on guard duty stayed away from the keg. He swore at this. They were too careful, too well organized. His

mind turned back over the day to the statement made by one of the two trappers who had brought them water that so long as Cain himself was free in the woods, the boss of this outlaw camp could not make the play he intended at the rendezvous at Fire Creek. The statement had meant little to Dan when it was made. Dealing with it, now, he understood. Suddenly he grunted comprehension. Stapleton whispered a guarded inquiry.

"I just tagged the head of this layout," Dan answered grimly. "Since he was afraid while I was on the loose, he must be somebody I knew but who was unknown to the rest of the boys. That means he's a down-river man, likely a St. Louis hanger-on. Otherwise, the rest would know him, too. I was just going over the men I'd known in the States who would fit this play—who'd be vain enough to think he had won Mariette Dubois—"

"Or handsome and smooth enough to have actually won her," Stapleton reminded bluntly.

"Yes," Dan agreed. "And I think I know the man. Kent Pireau. And smooth is right, Stapleton! He'll make quick work of the boys at the rendezvous. They're riled up over things now—already blaming the companies. He won't have to talk long till they elect Loup Leroux to lead them and they'll hit the down-river trail, fully aiming to burn the posts down there or wipe out any force the companies may send against them. We've got to get out of here tonight!"

Stapleton whistled softly. He



started to make some answer, then fell silent. Dan glanced at the renegade camp. The two men who had brought them water were on their way across with a small stew pot.

"Now or never," Stapleton muttered. "Or do we depend on the girl. You know these people better than I do, O'Cain. You give the word."

Dan felt his nerves begin to draw tight. He watched the two approaching men carefully. His eyes took in the edge of the firelight and calculated how much of a chance existed of reaching the timber and some shelter there if they made a break. His mind sorted details and laid the plans for escape, yet he could not force himself to a decision. His eyes kept straying to the tent into which Mariette Dubois had disappeared. He wanted to believe in the girl. But at the same time he could not betray a thin chance which belonged to the legion because of that want alone.

The two trappers set the stew pot down between Stapleton and O'Cain. The prisoners sat up and their captors undid the bonds fastening their hands. One of them spoke a mocking warning.

"It's a dark night, O'Cain. Don't let it turn you reckless."

Dan made no answer. The two trappers withdrew. Dan picked up a couple of twigs from the ground and chipped points onto them with his nails. He handed one to Stapleton and speared a chunk of meat in the stew pot with the other. Stapleton had been bent forward, apparently flexing stiffened arm muscles

and easing kinks from his back. He straightened and speared into the pot, also. As he did so, he spoke hurriedly.

"I've got my feet free, I think, O'Cain. Whenever you say . . ."

Dan ate slowly, fighting opposing thoughts in his mind. Mariette Dubois was apparently eating in her tent. She did not appear among the fires. As he ate, Dan worked his ankles back and forth, trying to stretch the rawhide binding them together. The narrow bonds cut, but he thought he could feel slack building up. Imitating Stapleton's earlier maneuver of bending forward to ease his back, he thrust his sharpened stick between two turns of the rawhide and twisted it stiffly, drawing the thongs tight. They bit into his ankles painfully and the blood began to hammer in his ears with the restriction of circulation. Then, with a soft snap, a turn broke and the tension fled.

"All right?" Stapleton queried.

Straightening, Dan nodded and fished in the stew pot again.

"They're paying no attention to us," the Englishman went on. "I believe we've got 'em fooled. I'll still wait for word from you. Maybe if you plowed into the first one when they came back and dumped him over onto me, I could take him out of business while you handled the second. Something like that . . . eh?"

Dan nodded again. Stapleton grunted. The two guards apparently assigned to them were coming back. The pressure of making a



*Mariette Dubois*

decision rose in Dan. He looked again at Mariette Dubois' tent. There was no sign of the girl. The two guards came up, lifted the stew pot and set it aside. One of them dropped on his knees as though to refasten the thongs about the wrists of his two prisoners. Dan was aware of Stapleton's eyes on him, waiting—pleading. And still he could give no signal. Some force stronger than himself was holding him back. Loyalty, maybe—loyalty to a snow-headed dead man—and a belief that a girl with Dubois blood would not trick a man of the legion.

The renegade guard rose to his feet.

"Don't know what the boss aims to do with you two," he said bluntly. "But there ain't no use crippling you too bad. Mind yourselves and we'll leave your wrists free. But there'll be an eye on you all night, so don't get ideas about making a break."

The two guards drew back. A little later one of them walked to the edge of the camp and called out into the shadows of the wood.

"Might as well come in, boys," he shouted. "Our birds appear to know when they're snared tight. They passed up their best chance to make a break. Don't reckon they'll make a try, now."

There was a stir in the timber. Then, coming in singly, half a dozen men appeared in the firelight, trailing rifles. With a jolt Dan realized they had been in hiding in the timber, a fan-shaped cordon between the camp and the river through which Stapleton and himself would never have been able to pass, even if they had been able to break free of the camp.

"Luck of the Irish!" Stapleton said softly. "Now I know why a mountain man can live a hundred years in this country. He's got hunches. . . . It's the girl or never now, O'Cain."

At midnight, in response to calls from the men at the fires, Mariette Dubois came out of her tent. She walked among the fires, singing one river chant after another in her strange, troubling low voice. She sang them with the deviltry and fire of the woods runner, and the men who listened called always for more. Once she stepped up to the carefully stacked rum supply of the camp and boldly rolled out a fresh keg. The renegade crew took the hint and broached it. This time even the guards had a drink. The girl kept on with her singing. A little more than an hour after midnight, she retired again to her tent and the camp began to quiet.

Guards remained on duty, their

glances cutting across the two prisoners with competent regularity. It was toward three, Dan thought, when Mariette reappeared, a dark, silent silhouette against the lighter background of her tent. She moved swiftly, vanishing into the shadows. Long minutes later, Dan was astonished, in surveying the camp, to discover that between the last time he looked at one guard and the next, the man had rolled off the deadfall upon which he sat. There was a telltale looseness in the man's position. He was dead.

## V

The second guard, seeing the limpness of his companion, crossed the camp at an uneasy half run. As he reached the deadfall where his fellow lay, a slender shadow rose beside him. An arm flashed. The soft, silencing sound of steel biting home reached across the stillness and the second guard pitched onto his face without an outcry.

Mariette Dubois bent with the habit of a trailsman to retrieve her knife. Then she ran across to where Stapleton and Dan O'Cain were fighting out of their ankle bonds. She made no gesture, voiced no order, but raced silently past them and vanished into the woods in the direction of the river.

A fleet of canoes, pirogues, and heavier bateaux was drawn up on the bank. Dan saw that when it had seemed the girl was keeping to her tent she must have actually slipped out under the back wall and come down here. Only one craft

was fit for water. Mariette stepped boldly into this and took the steering oar in the stern. Dan took the 'midships position, and Stapleton shoved the craft into the current and climbed in over the bow. Behind them, in the camp they had just quitted, a rifle fired suddenly and men's voices raised in angry shouting.

"*Alons!*" the girl in the stern breathed quietly. "No man afoot can beat us now to Fire Creek! And those devils behind will walk. I have seen to that. They think they have these valleys in their hands—like they thought they had Mariette Dubois. Ha! Fools! Cannot a Dubois silence grief and make a pretty smile on the face to trick an enemy? Cannot a woman hope a friend will come and so pass pleasant words with Satan, himself? They think because they could buy what they wanted to know from one of the grandfather's voyageurs and then silence him when they had no more need of his spying, that they could also buy Mariette. With what? Words? I have played a tasteless game to have my revenge. Strike deep with your paddle, Dan O'Cain. It is time to teach these wolverines that it is not always to friends that Mariette sings!"

Elation swept through O'Cain. He realized the consummate skill the girl must have called into use to fool the renegades so completely. And he saw the wisdom of her apparent friendliness with them.

Dan swung the full surge of his body behind his paddle. The pi-

rogue leaped out into the current. Mariette checked its course deftly. Stapleton turned, paddle in hand, to watch the rhythmic beat of Dan's stroke for a long moment. When he turned back he corrected his own position and dipped his paddle experimentally. Mariette, seeing his attempt, began again, softly, one of the chants she had sung in the camp. The slow, pulsing beat of the song gave Stapleton a pattern to follow and the pirogue gained additional speed with the added power of his paddle.

An hour short of dawn the girl in the stern turned the pirogue into the narrow mouth of Fire Creek. The small stream was swift, but the sun had not yet cut into the bottoms of the valleys when the smell of wood smoke drifted down the river and a few minutes later the transplanted rendezvous came into sight. O'Cain knew elation for a moment. Then it faded.

River craft were lined along the grassy banks of the creek. Three or four rock cairns indicated the caches into which furs had been hurriedly dumped to keep them from animals until their owners' return. But the camp itself was without breakfast fires or any other signs of life.

"Too late!" Dan swore. "The boys gathered fast and Kent Pireau's had his chance at talking to them. They're already on the move."

"You can tell which way they went?" Stapleton demanded anxiously. "We can overtake them?"

Mariette Dubois laughed wryly.

"Not even the wind knows what road a mountain man will take. And not even the wind can overtake him. It is as Dan O'Cain has said. We are too late, *mes amis!*"

The girl beached the pirogue. The three of them climbed ashore. Mariette carried with her a heavy, rolled leather blanket. Dropping this on the grass, she unrolled it. It contained three rifles, belt guns, knives, shot and powder.

"Even a good plan does not always work," she said bitterly.

O'Cain was about to offer her what comfort he could when a movement on the far side of the camp caught his eye. A man was running easily toward them.

"Red Wolf!" Dan breathed. "Maybe we've got a chance, yet!"

The Indian spoke bluntly.

"Among fools there must be one wise man, Dan O'Cain. Like Bowlegs at his station on the narrows of the Tonnerre, I warned all who came of the new meeting place and came on myself when smoke on Fire Creek told me all men of the legion were there. I came in time to hear the talk of Kent Pireau, but you were not here and so I alone have waited for you. It is good I did so. You have the Dubois girl. And this other is a factor from the English posts. I do not know his name, but I know his look."

Dan nodded confirmation and made a terse introduction.

"Since *M'sieu* Stapleton is with you, then the lynx which struck at us is no company man. There is but one answer. There are devils



in the woods and this Kent Pireau, with his big-medicine talk of war, is their leader. Our friends go toward trouble. I know their trail. Quickly! We will follow!"

There had been times when men of the legion could not understand the partnership and the strong bond of friendship which had so long existed between this stone-faced Indian and Dan O'Cain. Here, Dan thought grimly, was proof of the reasons behind it. Silent, taciturn, not always agreeable, Red Wolf had one cardinal virtue. He could not be stampeded by anything these mountains could produce. This had been his country for generations and he knew it in incredible detail.

The Indian stepped into the beached pirogue, calmly taking the steering oar. Stapleton and Mariette Dubois scrambled back in, carrying the weapons the girl had smuggled out of the renegade camp. Dan shoved off and they turned back down Fire Creek. They turned into the Tonnere at the confluence of the two streams, followed the larger river for a couple of miles, and nosed into a bare rivulet threading back into the timber.

Between paddle strokes, Dan told Red Wolf the story of the past day and a half. The Indian grunted comprehension periodically. When Dan had finished, he made terse comment.

"Pireau is smart devil, all right. A spy with Etienne. A spy in the posts down the river. A spy even among our own people!"

Dan's brows went up. The Indian nodded stolidly.

"When the talk is over on Fire Creek—when Loup and the others are drawing charges from their guns and putting in fresh new loads, the one called St. Clair slide into the timber. Red Wolf follow, but it was not yet light and spy escape. St. Clair has been Pireau's man for long time. He goes to take word to renegades across the river. They will come afoot, since they have no canoes. The company men will come also afoot, since they do not like the river as we do. And our friends are on the march. All three will meet. Red Wolf thinks he knows the place where this will happen. The strong will wipe out the weak, and afterwards the renegades will turn on those who have won. Drive the paddles deep. We must hurry!"

As though in spiteful echo to his words, the upper slopes of the ridges suddenly flung down the distant reverberations of sporadic rifle fire. Red Wolf listened intently, then drove the pirogue abruptly into the bank.

"Come!" he grunted. And catching up his rifle, he set off into the timber at a long, reaching run.

Stapleton followed, making clumsier going, but holding the swift pace with compressed lips and a heaving chest. Dan O'Cain and Mariette brought up the rear, moving side by side.

This was nasty travel, leaping deadfalls and crashing through underbrush. O'Cain found his own long legs and the solid weight of

his body an asset in battering his way through, but the slender girl beside him seemed to travel more easily.

Red Wolf held through the timber for several miles without breaking stride. They crossed over a low saddle and dropped into a wide, sheltered valley. The sound of firing had grown more intense and seemed to be coming from below them. After an interminable time, Red Wolf signaled a sudden halt on the edge of a little meadowlike park. This was the battleground—the place where geography of the hills decreed the company men and the trappers of the fighting legion should meet.

The situation was self-evident. The legion men, likely headed by the fiery Loup Leroux, had come overland from Fire Creek, approaching this park from the west. The forces from the three company posts, beating up parallel to the river, had come into the park from the east. This was the stronger force. The legion men, reading odds accurately, had refused to be flushed into the open. They had halted in a scattering of timber along the western edge. The company party—at least the front ranks—had plowed stubbornly out into the grass and flopped belly-down on the sod, grim in the business they were upon. Where the mountain men wanted cover, the company men wanted open. Each had his own way of fighting.

A ragged run of shots was being exchanged—a feeling-out process, during which the company crowd

was slowly inching forward. The outcome was inevitable. Odds were top-heavy.

Having marked these two forces and drawn Stapleton's attention to them, Dan began looking carefully for Kent Pireau's renegades. He was certain that they had already had enough time to come up, guided by St. Clair, the traitor who had quit the camp on Fire Creek to lead them here. He was certain, also, that Pireau would keep his men under cover until the legion had been cut down by the company force. Then, when the company men were flushed with victory, he would strike mercilessly and without warning against them. It was a clean, cold, careful trap. There was little likelihood that it could fail.

It was not O'Cain, however, who spotted the renegades, hunkered in thick brush down the slope from where Dan's party had stopped on the south edge of the smoke-hung park.

"Neither your boys nor mine have got a chance!" Stapleton moaned. "We're too late, O'Cain. We could circle the park and give warning, each man to his own party, but the whole thing would be over before we could do it. It looks like those devils below us are getting impatient already—like they're about ready to jump into the tangle, right now!"

Dan nodded.

"There's one way we can make our outfits understand the situation—and fast," he said swiftly. "But

it'll take all the sand a man's got. You game?"

Stapleton grinned recklessly. Dan wheeled on Red Wolf and Mariette.

"Each of you get behind solid cover. Start pouring lead into the renegades below us as fast as you can load and fire. If some of them charge you, fall back. But keep to cover and keep your fire coming. All right, Stapleton!"

Dan leaped forward. Red Wolf's first shot passed over his head and a man in the crouching knot of renegades cried out. Dan saw a white, stricken face which he recognized as belonging to St. Clair, the mountain man who had been Pireau's eyes and ears in the legion camps. It was like Red Wolf to use his first shot so practically.

Stapleton loped recklessly in Dan's tracks as he broke for the center of the meadow. The two of them raced desperately, aware that they were exposed to the fire of jumpy riflemen in any one of the three parties surrounding the park. Part of the way out, Dan signaled Stapleton who veered off toward the company forces. Dan held on toward the west side until he was close enough to his own men to be recognized and understood. Halting, he glanced over his shoulder to see that Stapleton had also reached position.

Satisfied, he veered, then, signaling the attention of his comrades to the renegades now being forced from cover by the needling fire Red Wolf and Mariette Dubois were pouring into them from the rear.

Firing between the legion men and the combined company forces fell off uncertainly, comprehension of the situation coming to each man slowly, despite the shouted warnings and desperate gestures both Dan and Stapleton were making.

Pireau seized this moment of indecision with skilled generalship and ordered his crew to turn loose with a terrific concerted broadside in a bold attempt at a sudden wipe-out.

Leaden death whanged into the sod about O'Cain. He dropped to one knee, chose a running man, and fired carefully. The fellow went down, skidding on his face. Stapleton, beside Dan, missed his first shot in his nervousness. But the company factor revealed that he could reload with incredible speed and his second charge nailed a renegade.

A singing ball shattered the end of O'Cain's ramrod as he withdrew it from his second recharge. A moment later another ball struck him in the thigh. He shifted, sitting flat on the grass, and fired unhurriedly, making his third tally.

Stapleton started to bawl an excited shout of hopefulness, but it altered to a yelp of surprised hurt as he was struck.

Then the dangerous time was past. Mariette and Red Wolf, seeing the swing of the tide, left cover to bore more closely into the rear ranks of the renegades. The legion men, on the west, seeing the targets at which O'Cain was shooting, did not stop to ask questions. Men of

the brotherhood lived together and they fought together. It was a part of their unwritten, unspoken code. They abandoned the company men as their foe, and swung their muzzles on the renegades who had broken cover on their flank.

The company men, seeing Stapleton fighting of his own free will, followed his lead, also. Thus the renegades were caught between four separate fires—from Red Wolf and Mariette, from Dan and Stapleton in the center of the meadow, from the mountain men on the west and the company crew on the east.

O'Cain caught a glimpse of Kent Pireau's tall, arrogant figure, leaping among his men and shouting suddenly desperate orders. He raised his rifle, but even as Pireau came into his sights, the man folded like a broken twig and fell heavily. Dan glanced over his shoulder. Mariette had the touch hole of her rifle to her lips and was calmly blowing the smoke from its barrel.

Old Etienne Dubois had his revenge.

Without Pireau's leadership, the renegades tried a desperate charge to break through the cordon about them. As the weakest spot, they chose the segment held by Dan and Stapleton. Dan swung the muzzle of his piece toward the first of them and opened a hole. Then a hurried shot flared almost in his face and he went over hard onto his back on the sod. He struggled to get up again. He thought he did so swiftly, yet when he raised to his knees the smell of powder was gone from the

air and the hills sent back no echoes of rifle fire.

Blinking, dazed, puzzled, Dan swung his gaze about him. There was a fire on the grass. Beyond it were others. Slowly he realized that he was back on Fire Creek and that the crowd of men about the other fires contained strangers as well as the familiar friends from the high hills. He scowled at closer figures and they took on identity.

"*Sacré*, we've worried for nothing, *mes amis!*" came Loup Leroux's deep voice. "Look, he moves! That's twice in one day we've been fools. Once, to listen to that *loup-garou* Pireau last night. Again, to think Dan O'Cain could be hurt bad by a couple of chunks of lead, by gar!"

There were other fragments of talk, then Stapleton's steady voice:

"I'll make my deal with you, Kean, since the rest of them'll take you as their agent. We're short of furs for eastern orders this year. Miss Dubois says that the pelts Pireau robbed from your cache at the Portage, together with what they had of their own, are buried at the renegade camp on the Tonnere. We'll pick them up, grade them, and credit you, share and share alike, at free trade prices. And we're glad to get them. . . ."

There was more talk. Sheepishness among men from the lower Tonnere and men from the high ridges that they should have been taken in by Kent Pireau's plan to set them against one another. There was

amity about Dan O'Cain. He felt it and savored it. And there was another thing he felt, a thing of which he had been aware from his first moment of consciousness. Turning his head far about, he looked at the figure which had crouched solicitously over him, tending, bandaging and doing for his comfort. Mariette Dubois grinned mischievously down at him.

"I hurt you, Dan O'Cain . . . no?" she asked.

Dan grunted a denial. Stapleton, sitting close, laughed deeply and turned to the others crouched about Dan's couch beside the fire.

"We've made our peace and settled all our troubles, but there's a thing we haven't covered and it's a serious problem for men of honor. We've got a woman among us and we can't have her traveling with us or off working a trap line of her own—"

"*Pouf!*" Mariette said haughtily from her place at Dan's head. "You worry for me? You waste your time, Englishman! From a baby on, Mariette has traveled always with the king of the legion, making the fire and the meals—bringing the water, sewing the buckskins. Now Etienne is dead. But Mariette still travels with the king . . . is it not so, Dan O'Cain?"

The friendly laughter of William Stapleton, the chuckles of Bowlegs Kean and Loup Leroux and the rare smile on the stolid face of Red Wolf—these were good things and there was deep satisfaction in them for Dan O'Cain. So, also, was there satisfaction in the knowledge that not only Mariette but the legion and the men of the company agreed, by their comradely humor, that he was a man fit to wear the shoes of Etienne Dubois. But these were unimportant things, now. There was Mariette . . .

Yet a man must not let a woman become too forward. Not in some things. Reaching suddenly upward with both hands, oblivious to the pulling hurt in his wounded side, O'Cain caught Mariette as an Irishman has always caught that which he wants. He bent her swiftly down to him and kissed her—hard—while at a near fire a voyageur began one of the old songs of rendezvous-time:

*"There is beauty on the river;  
Drive the blade deep!  
There is perfume in the trees;  
Build the fire!  
There's prime plew in my bale;  
Drink rum and go to jail—  
But I've got to have a woman  
in the mountains!"*

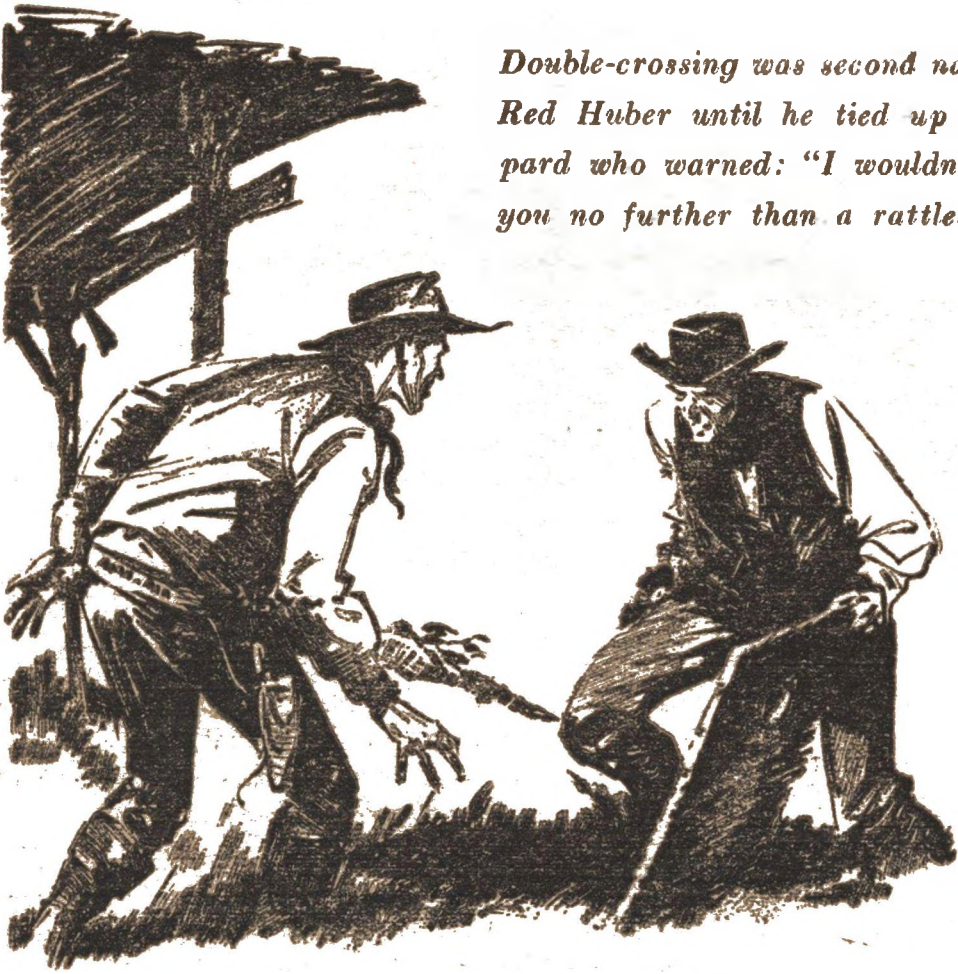
THE END



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



*Double-crossing was second nature to Red Huber until he tied up with a pard who warned: "I wouldn't trust you no further than a rattlesnake!"*



## HELLION'S HIDEOUT

by RAY PALMER TRACY

THE flaming thatch of Red Huber had turned snowy. The blue veins were beginning to stand out on the backs of his hands, and lately he had had twinges of rheumatism. There were other signs, too, that time was about to call a halt in a long career of lawlessness.

Being a very smart member of

the owlhoot fraternity, Red did not disregard the signs. He sat down and went into consultation with himself.

Standing high in the order of men who live by their wits and six-guns, he had always found it easy to get prime hands to side him in jobs he couldn't handle alone. For Red was

too cagey to risk over-matching himself by attempting bank jobs and stage holdups single-handed.

Another sign of age, Red suspected, was his change of attitude toward Shag Carver, his star rival in fame as a gunman and bandit. Time was when he had walked wide, boastfully hunting Shag. He could no longer muster the fire to pretend to look for such a meeting. It was his hope to avoid running into Carver so he would not be compelled to make good on his ancient brags.

Only once in his long career of crime had Red been dragged into court. That was when Captain Wayne Looper, of the Texas Rangers, had so successfully impersonated Bloody Rugan, Red had invited the famous gunhand to side him on a job which had landed him in front of a judge.

Through a technicality, Captain Looper's work went for naught and Red had been set free. At parting, the outlaw, long, lean, hawk-faced and sure of himself, grinned tauntingly down on the short, stubby Ranger with the pale eyes.

"You pulled a slick trick, Wayney," he patronized, "but it didn't work. Some day I'll pay you back."

"You was lucky this time, but you'll slip, Red," retorted Looper coldly. "Crooks like you always do."

"Just hang around close," invited Red, his frosty eyes murderous, "and see what kind of luck you have."

"I'll be right behind you from now on," Looper promised.

And so had begun the famous feud that had lasted through the years.

Time and again Looper thought he had his man trapped, but Red always slipped away. Now Red was even getting tired outfoxing the Ranger. He certainly was getting old.

Quick as he made up his mind that his day was done, Red wanted to quit. But he needed one more rich job to take care of his declining years.

Since this was to be his last robbery, he had to make sure of a worthwhile haul. Most of his jobs had netted big gains, especially since he had usually been able to dispose of his helpers and get their shares as well as his own.

Twice in his career, Red had planned to hold up the Consolidated Mine payroll. He had spent a long time in learning how and when the payroll was smuggled into the mine office. Each time, the arrival of Captain Looper in the vicinity had caused him to shy away.

Thinking about those two disrupted plans in the light of his recent conclusions, Red was suddenly grateful to Looper, much as he had cursed him at the time. It had turned out for the best. The payroll and how it was brought to the mine had baffled some of the best brains in the business. But Red knew, and it was waiting for him—his retirement fund.

He didn't hurry. First, he prepared his hide-away up in the Blue Horns. Finding that secure place had been a master stroke. It was almost in the center of the country where Red operated. When he was supposed to be across the border, he was resting up and planning new

jobs. This hide-away was the one thing he trusted completely.

This time he laid in a plentiful supply of provisions, for he would remain out of sight for a long time after this job. Then came the problem of who he was going to get to help him lift the payroll, for it was a two-man job.

Seated on the door sill of the two-room cabin he had built in the hidden mountain vale, Red let his eyes wander across the grassy little meadow below the spring to the rugged bluffs of the west wall. On the sheer rocks that formed the face of the bluffs, man high above the meadow, were a number of man-made marks. They would have gone unnoticed by anyone who didn't know about them. Red knew because he had made them, and each had a meaning.

He gazed at the mark on the right. Buried in the meadow out in front, was Whitey Lee. Whitey had been a prime gunhand, with cold nerve. Of course he had been too trustful when he had gone with Red to this hangout to divide the High State Bank loot.

Whitey would have made the ideal partner for this payroll job. It seemed to Red that he had been hasty and killed Whitey too soon.

The other signs on the bluff received Red's consideration. They also marked the resting places of those who had been his partners in the big two-man jobs he had pulled. Each symbol brought up memories of the abilities and courage of the men who had been rewarded with a bullet in the back. Each caused

Red regret because he needed one of those men for this last big job. Going over the present crop of bad men, he couldn't find one that measured up to the old-timers.

Lounging about the hideout, Red could think of no one he wanted to side him. This was a particular job. He couldn't afford to make a slip.

Getting nowhere, he decided to go out and look for a man. He caught up his horse, rode out of the hidden vale and took a long detour through the Blue Horn forest. Reaching the Savery Peaks trail, he rode down to the little mining town of Gold Spar.

It was in the edge of the evening when he arrived and things hadn't livened up yet. Light was lancing from the windows of saloons and dance halls lining both sides of the street at its south end. It was safe enough for Red here. Gold Spar was forty miles from the town of Long Creek and forty-five miles from the Consolidated Mine.

While Red's funds were low, he still had some money. He went into the Zero Bar where he knew men of the caliber he needed, if such existed, would be hanging out.

Chip Morgan, the bald, skinny man behind the bar failed to show any deep enthusiasm for his new customer, but there was a wide smile crinkling his face as he hastened to set up a glass and a bottle of Red's favorite brand. Old or not, Red Huber still commanded respect.

Warmed by his drink, he let his half-closed, frosty eyes drift over the

men he saw at the games along the walls and those gathered around the tables. Some of them he knew, but not a soul that he would have on a job with him.

A man came to the bar behind him. Red saw Chip's face bloom with that from-the-teeth-out smile again, get another bottle and glass and put it on the bar. Then with a half-frightened glance at Red, Chip scurried to the lower end of the mahogany.

Red turned his head and looked into the glittering black eyes of his rival, Shag Carver. The old thrill of dangerous gunplay about to open tingled his nerves. Then he relaxed as he took a good look at the famous gunman.

Shag was as tall and lean as Red had been in the old days when they had been boasting what they would do to each other if they ever met. For some reason that meeting had never taken place until now.

The man had changed from the trained-down, flashing wolf he had once been. He was stooped. The black fringe of hair under his greasy hat was nearly white and needed cutting badly. His face was bloated from drink and a soft belly folded over the belt of his faded Levis. But his two guns still swung at perfect poise from their crossed belts. And the long hands, Red noted, were still supple and probably almost as fast as in the old days.

That one glance told Red that Shag had no more idea than himself of pushing the long overdue show-down. He was about to turn back to his drink and ignore him when

a thought hit him so hard he stood staring at Shag.

Shag dropped back a cautious step. "Well?" he inquired, and the real invitation in it told Red what he needed to know. Shag might not be the man he once was, but he hadn't lost his nerve.

Red glanced around cautiously. Chip was still at the far end of the bar ostentatiously polishing glasses. No one else was near.

"I've gotta proposition for the two of us, Shag," Red whispered.

Shag exposed yellow teeth in a derisive grin. "You and me?" he asked in a tone that carried only to Red. "Nobuddy, not even me and you, would believe that."

"That's why," said Red. "Got a place to talk?"

Shag gazed thoughtfully into his glass, emptied it and filled it again. He was measuring and weighing all angles. He had nothing to lose and Red had nothing to gain by tricking him. Besides, he was curious.

"Room Three in back of the Gold Spar Tavern," he said without looking at Red. He downed his drink and left without putting any money on the bar.

Red took another slow drink. It would take Shag a couple of minutes to get to the Gold Spar. Red gave him a good five minutes' start and then signaled Chip. He fished out a handful of money and paid for his drinks.

Chip brightened. Red guessed Shag was drinking on his reputation and Chip had feared Red was going to do the same. A surprising pride

rose in the man who thought he had buried all pride.

"How much?" he asked. He glanced at Shag's bottle still on the bar. "I'll pay for Shag's while I'm at it. He forgot to leave any money. It'll make him plenty mad to have me pay for his drinks!" He laughed loudly.

Chip laughed too, with relief. "Sure'll make Shag hop," he agreed.

"Gimme a bottle of both brands," said Red.

Carrying the two bottles, Red went out into the dark street with its streamers of yellow light cutting bright paths from windows into the blackness beyond.

The pale eyes of a blocky man who had ridden on Red's trail all the afternoon, followed the outlaw's progress to the tavern.

"I'm damned," murmured Captain Looper. "It can't be that Red and Shag are hobnobbing. If so, I'm sure sorry for the victims." There was nothing more Looper could do there. But there was something else important on his mind. He had picked up Red almost by accident in the Blue Horns. "I always figured Red had a secret hideout around there," he murmured. "I better go and give that country a look."

A crack of light showed under the door of Room Three when Red knocked.

"Who's there?" came in Shag's voice.

"Me—Red."

The door swung open. Red pretended not to notice that Shag's hand was hovering over his gun. But

Red was ready to drop the bottles and go into action. He stepped to the table and set the two bottles on it. As though he hadn't a care in the world, he grinned at Shag.

"Set down," he said heartily. "Let's have a little drink and make medicine."

Shag's hand went to a chair and shoved it to the table. Red picked up the only other chair in the room and set it on the far side of the table. He shoved Shag's bottle toward him and picked up his own.

While he was working at the cork, his eyes were busy. Shag's room had received no more care than his person. The man was on his way to seed. Yet his hands were steady, and the cold flame still lighted the black eyes.

Shag got out his cork first, but waited until Red had done the same. They lifted their bottles and drank sparingly. Shag still had that much control of his love of drink. He could curb it when something was cooking. Red was becoming more sure of his wisdom by the second.

"What's the gag of me and you working together?" Shag demanded.

"It's no gag," said Red. "I warn't even thinking of you when you come in for your drink, back in the Zero. I was just lookin' over the tables, hoping to see someone I could take in to help me on a big-paying, two-man job I've got lined up. I was trying to drown my sorra over what I saw when you came."

"I wouldn't trust you no further than a rattlesnake," Shag said bluntly.

"Ordinarily that would be right,"



admitted Red. "And ordinarily I'd feel the same about you. But not on this job."

Shag's glittering eyes bored into Red. "Why not on this job? And what's the job?"

"I'll tell you about the job later, if you want to come in," Red answered the last question first. "As to why, just look at it! You answered the question yourself back in the Zero Bar."

"I did?" Shag looked incredulous.

"You said who would believe me and you would work together? Now I ask you, who *would* believe it, even if they seen us?"

A faint grin began to build around Shag's mouth and he relaxed. "I'm beginning to think maybe we oughta got acquainted long ago," he chuckled.

Red shook his head. "No chance then. We had our own methods and lots of help to choose from—good help. But times has changed. The good men have all gone. All we've got left is each other."

"We work it right and let folks think we're still hunting each other's scalps, and we can make a cleanup and cut an old-time swarth." Shag leaned forward, his eyes beginning to sparkle.

"Then you want in with me?"

"How about the cut?"

"Straight across."

"I ought to have more, but it'll do for the tryout," said Shag.

Red controlled his temper. "I'm being generous," he pointed out. "I'm doing it only because we can't get along no other way." He didn't



"Well—you told me to get ready to draw."

think he better act too willing for Shag to bear down or Shag might suspect what he had in the back of his mind.

Shag shrugged, as though he, too, recognized he would have to compromise. "Now what's the job?" he asked.

"I've had this ready to crack twice before, only for the help I needed," said Red. "I figger I'm the only one who has got the lowdown on how the payroll money gets to the Consolidated Mine office."

"You crazy?" demanded Shag.

"Sounds like it to you, of course," Red said patronizingly. "But it's simple. I might even get away with it alone. No use in taking that much chance. After that's over, we can go up to a spot I know where we can hang out perfectly safe till things blow over. Then we can divide our take and go our ways till we need some more money."

"How much is this payroll?" asked Shag.

"The Consolidated employs four thousand men," answered Red signif-

icantly. "Ought to last us quite a spell."

"Yes, and how do we go about getting it?"

Red raised his brows. "You ain't expecting me to spill all this to you before we're on the ground?" he reproached. "And you never heard of one of my schemes falling down, did you?"

Shag didn't like that. But he knew he would have done the same, and he did have respect for Red's judgment. "The way things are, it looks like a good bet," he said at last.

"Good." Red lowered his eyes to hide their elation. "And meantime, we better not be seen together. So I'll pull right out of here and hang around Greeley. We got to play it cagey."

"Where do I meet you?" asked Shag.

"You leave here the morning of the twenty-eighth and ride to Preston Rock. I'll meet you there and give you the whole lay."

"Preston Rock?" Shag was surprised.

"Looks like the wrong place, don't it?" chuckled Red. "You'll see. Now I'll get out of here, play around a while and hit for Greeley in the morning." He went to the door into the hall and yanked it open. He turned to Shag. "Thought I heard some one, but no one's there. You'll be at Preston Rock the 28th?"

"I'll be there and you better be," was the answer.

Red went out with his catlike stride, leaving both bottles behind him. He grinned into the dark as he went around back of the Gold

Spar Tavern to the street and once more went into the area of the saloons and dance halls. He selected another saloon this time. Solemnly he took a drink with the reflection he saw in the bar mirror. He didn't miss Whitey or any of the others planted at the base of the bluffs of the hide-out now. In fact the man about to join them was a better stooge than any of those.

Probably there never had been a short stretch of road that had experienced more holdups and with less profit than the five miles between Long Creek and the Consolidated Mine. There had even been a few spiteful murders when vicious bandits, disappointed because they had not spotted how the payroll was smuggled to the mines, took revenge on innocent parties.

The last man who had committed such a murder had been caught. His fate had slowed down the attempts on the payroll. However, long before that time, Red Huber had figured that the reason the payroll had not been lifted for so long was because it didn't come by the way of Long Creek at all. It just suddenly appeared in the Consolidated safe with no known history.

It had to come from somewhere, so Red set about finding the source.

Across the mountain from the Consolidated was a group of prospects also owned by the same company. Two men were kept over there doing assessment work and watching the property. It was understood these men didn't get along well together. The rumor probably arose from the

fact that when they went down the canyon to the town of Bliss at the end of each month, there was always at least a fifty-yard space between the burros of the pair on the trail and they traded at different stores in Bliss. No one ever saw them talking together. And when they left they took good care to keep their distance from each other.

There was nothing unusual about a couple of miners acting that way. No one gave it any special significance until Red got around to putting two and two together.

First, he discovered that Consolidated sent the pay of the two miners over to the Bliss bank, since there was no way to get over the mountain from the prospects and the trail around was long and hard. Then Red remembered something.

Under the peaks above the present workings of Consolidated, the company had opened up a rich vein. It had pinched out when they had tunneled almost through the mountain. Engineers tried to pick it up on the other side and dropped a shaft which connected with the tunnel.

Nothing had been found and the tunnel had been abandoned. That was shortly before a couple of successful payroll robberies had taken place on the Long Creek road. After that no attempt met with success.

Once Red got on the track of it, the answer was so simple he was disgusted that it had taken him so long to figure it out. When the two miners picked up their pay at the Bliss bank, they also gathered in the Consolidated payroll. All they had

to do was to take it up the canyon, climb to the shaft up the mountain and drop it down to Consolidated officials waiting in the tunnel below. The reason for the space between the burros was more than to plant the idea that the two miners were unfriendly. It was to make a robbery more difficult.

The simplest way to take the payroll, Red decided, was to waylay the two miners in the canyon between Bliss and the shaft. The way the burros were always spaced, it had to be a two-man job.

Twice Red had been foiled by Captain Looper showing up at inopportune times. Now, once again, Red discovered that Looper was in the vicinity. But he was not to be turned aside this time. Let the Ranger go ahead and suspect him. There would be no spree and golden trail of spending this time for Looper to follow.

On the appointed day, Red was waiting at Preston Rock. A little smile twisted his thin lips and the frost in his eyes sparkled as he caught sight of Shag on his big bay riding along the bare slope below the rock.

Shag's suspicious black eyes darted all around for possible ambush. There was no place anyone could hide, which was the reason Red had chosen the spot.

As Shag came up and stopped, Red's smile went into secret hiding and the frosty sparkle in his eyes turned bland. "You're right on time," he greeted.

Shag did not relax his watchfulness. "Now let's have it," he said.

Red told him of his discovery of how the Consolidated got its payroll to the mines. He didn't say when he had made the discovery or mention Captain Looper. No need for Shag to know about those details.

Shag was completely relaxed by the time Red was through with his tale. "I knew we could do big things if we ever teamed up," he commented. "I'd thought of it long before I mentioned it to you."

Anger boiled up in Red as this tool of his tried to assume leadership. He fought it back in his larger interests. Anyway, Shag would soon be cured of his illusions. "Let's go," Red said. "We've got just about time to get set before the boys come along with our money."

They chose a spot in the trail where it made a sharp turn. Momentarily the two men with the burros would be out of sight of each other. Red stationed himself on the upper side of the bend and Shag on the lower.

The wait was short. Soon there were sounds of travel on the trail below. The lead man and his burro came into sight. At a fifty-yard interval followed his partner.

Neither man was particularly watchful. They had done this successfully so many times they had been lulled to security. The lead man drove his burro around the turn as he had done many times before. Then the quiet was shattered by the blasts of two guns, the reports blending into one. The two partners, never to know what had hit them, lay still in the trail.

Red and Shag had no compunc-

tions about the cold-blooded murder. It was safer that no one be left alive to serve as a witness against them. Just a matter of simple arithmetic.

Working methodically and swiftly, the experienced bandits located the payroll in gold and silver on the rear burro. The packs were carefully replaced. The two murdered men were rolled over the bank and hidden under the sagging willows lined along the little canyon stream. All signs of what had happened were then removed and the burros started homeward at their slow pace.

It wouldn't be long after the burros returned before the robbery would be discovered. But it would take time to figure out where it had occurred, discover the bodies and take a trail that would already be cold. By that time, Red expected to be safe in his hideout.

Ready to return to their horses, Red and Shag made a rough division of the loot for easy carrying. A few hours later, following a devious course that left a trail Red would have defied an Apache to follow, the bandits approached the hide-away.

Red boldly turned his back on Shag as he led the way. He had no fear of Shag until after they were in the hideout, and he wanted to lull the outlaw to a sense of security that might make him a little careless.

Shag was full of admiration when they burst unexpectedly, to him, into the snug little nook. "No wonder you never could be located after a job," he said enviously. "If I had

this, by now I'd have been a million-  
aire."

The implied suggestion that he was that much better at his business roweled Red. But from this second, with his valuable secret in his rival's hands, he knew he must not relax his watchfulness an instant or he would lose this last great gamble.

They unsaddled and hobbled out their horses. Just back of a pole structure that served as a horse shelter when it stormed, Red fumbled in the tall weeds and lifted a ring. Up came a box lid of heavy planking, its top covered with sod.

"My cache," Red grinned. "We'll leave the stuff here out of sight till we get ready to divide and drift."

At supper Shag outlined the things he intended to do and places he wanted to visit while his share of the loot lasted. Red encouraged him in his dreams. It was late when they went to bed.

Red had designed this two-room cabin for just such a situation as this and it had worked fine. Each man had a room to himself. There was a window and an outside door in Red's room. In the other room was a window and the connecting door.

Blowing out his light, Red rolled into his bunk. A minute later he heard Shag go to bed with noisy advertising.

In the dark, Red tied one end of a string around his left thumb. The other end was fastened to the hinged window in Shag's room. Red had purposely fixed the connecting door so it couldn't be opened without a racket that would awaken anyone sleeping on a hair-trigger. If the window was opened, a yank on his thumb would give him the news.

Reaching up to the head of his bunk, he slipped a false log back revealing a neat loophole. He put his eye to it. There was a row of white, dead cedars just beyond the cache. Against that background it would be easy to make out anyone at the cache even on a dark night. Satisfied he was all set, Red closed the opening and went to sleep.

Red slept lightly through the night and was undisturbed. Shag had not crawled out of the window the first night to rob the cache, as had Whitey and the others. The old outlaw was of a different caliber. He knew how to be patient.

Four days of nerve-tightening ten-

**TOPS  
FOR  
QUALITY!**





sion passed into history. Red kept plodding Shag's desires to get his hands on the money and embark on one of his wild sprees.

On the fifth day, Shag said: "Hell! No one can have an idea I'm mixed up in the payroll robbery. I ain't got Captain Looper on *my* trail."

Red's frosty eyes turned even colder. So Shag knew that Looper was around and was going to use that knowledge to force a division of the loot. He had thought better of his rival than that. Shag should be planning to get it all.

"We'll wait a while," Red said, ready to go for his gun, but not quite willing to risk it. He respected Shag's great speed.

That night, as Red tied the string to his thumb, a suspicious thought came to him. He gave the string a cautious pull. It gave easily and kept coming. A moment later, to his rage, he held a fifteen-foot piece in his hand. The string had been broken or cut. Shag had discovered the trap. So Red had no way of knowing if Shag had been to the cache or was just making ready to go.

Trembling on the verge of rushing to the door between the two rooms, flinging it open and starting gunfire, Red thought better of it. Shag would be looking for something of the kind. Anyway, a mouse might have gnawed the string apart. With his carbine ready, Red lay looking out his loop-hole all night.

Someway he had to know if Shag had robbed the cache. If he went there alone, Shag would nail him. If they went together, at best, all he

could expect was an even break. Cold rage bit into him. For the first time in his career, the initiative had slipped out of his hands.

The thought that maybe Shag realized he was playing with him was too much for Red. This had to be settled right now. At breakfast, he said: "I've been thinking, Shag. What you said is about right. No use in your holing up. Besides, it might look funny if we both show up at once and put a lot of money into circulation."

"I thought you'd see that angle," said Shag, but suspicion lay bright and sharp in his eyes. He didn't believe Red thought that way at all and was ready for what might come.

Red noted it and met the challenge with: "All right. Let's go to the cache, get the loot and divide it. Come night, you can beat it out of here."

"Suits me," said Shag, and the chips were down.

From that moment, Red knew it was a question of breaks and the fastest man. Shag showed his acknowledgment of it as he went out the cabin door first with his head turned over his shoulder watching.

Stiffly they walked to the back of the pole shed, side by side, each measuring the other's every move. Red stooped down, never taking his eyes from the glittering murder in those of Shag. His hand, groping in the reeds, found the ring and lifted the lid of the cache. He flung it back and straightened up, his eyes still fastened on those of Shag.

By common consent, although not a word had been spoken, they both

flashed a look into the pit. Both pairs of eyes snapped back to each other, blazing with killing rage. The loot from the payroll had vanished! There wasn't a thing in the cache.

"What've you done with it!" snarled Shag, going into his famous crouch, his hand over his gun.

The broken string flashed into Red's mind. Shag had done that, crept out of the window and hid the loot in a new place. But, given time, Red knew he could find it. And here was Shag, his trap sprung and waiting a move on Red's part to kill him and take the prize.

"You've got a gall to ask me what I done with it!" accused Red savagely. "You sneaked out in the night and hid it in a new place!" He, like Shag, was in a crouch, his hand hovering.

There was no waiting or argument. The slightest advantage to either one would spell the end of the other, and they both knew it. They didn't dare chance it. There was a blur of motion. Two reports rang in one blast. And each gun was in the hand of a deadly master.

Shag fell on his face, dead before he hit the ground. The gun dropped from Red's hand. Angered disbelief spread over the face that had so long masked his feelings. "I'm older'n I thought," he whispered and crumpled down while the sunlight began to dim.

From behind a clump of firs not thirty yards away stepped the stocky figure of Captain Looper. Gun

ready, he came and looked down on the two men who had caused him more trouble than all the others during his life. Shag was dead and Red was going fast.

Red opened his eyes and looked up. "You!" he murmured.

"Yep, me," said the Ranger. "You know I said you'd slip sometime. Well, it happened."

"How?" came in a hoarse whisper.

"You let me see you come off this spur of the Blue Horns. I knew your hideout must be here, so I looked till I found it. When you and Shag rode in, I was already here."

Bleak fury glinted in Red's frosty eyes. "It was you who took the money out of the cache!" he accused.

Looper nodded. "I was in no position to tackle two such gunmen as you and Shag. So I arranged for your natural suspicion of each other to cut down the odds and save the county expense, when you found the money gone."

A sort of cold humor glinted in the eyes that had looked over a gun barrel for the last time. "This was to be my last job," came in a labored whisper. "I was going to retire. So I'm retiring."

Captain Looper looked down on Red scarcely realizing that the outlaw was dead. It had been a long chase, but he had won out in the end. Along with his gratification, there was a little sorrow. He was going to miss that pair of rascals. Besides, their passing was a sign that he, too, was growing old for the law job.

*If young Eli Howard ever succeeded in reclaiming his Vented S from that renegade wolf pack, his searing lead would also have to plug their*

# LOBO GAP

by WALT COBURN



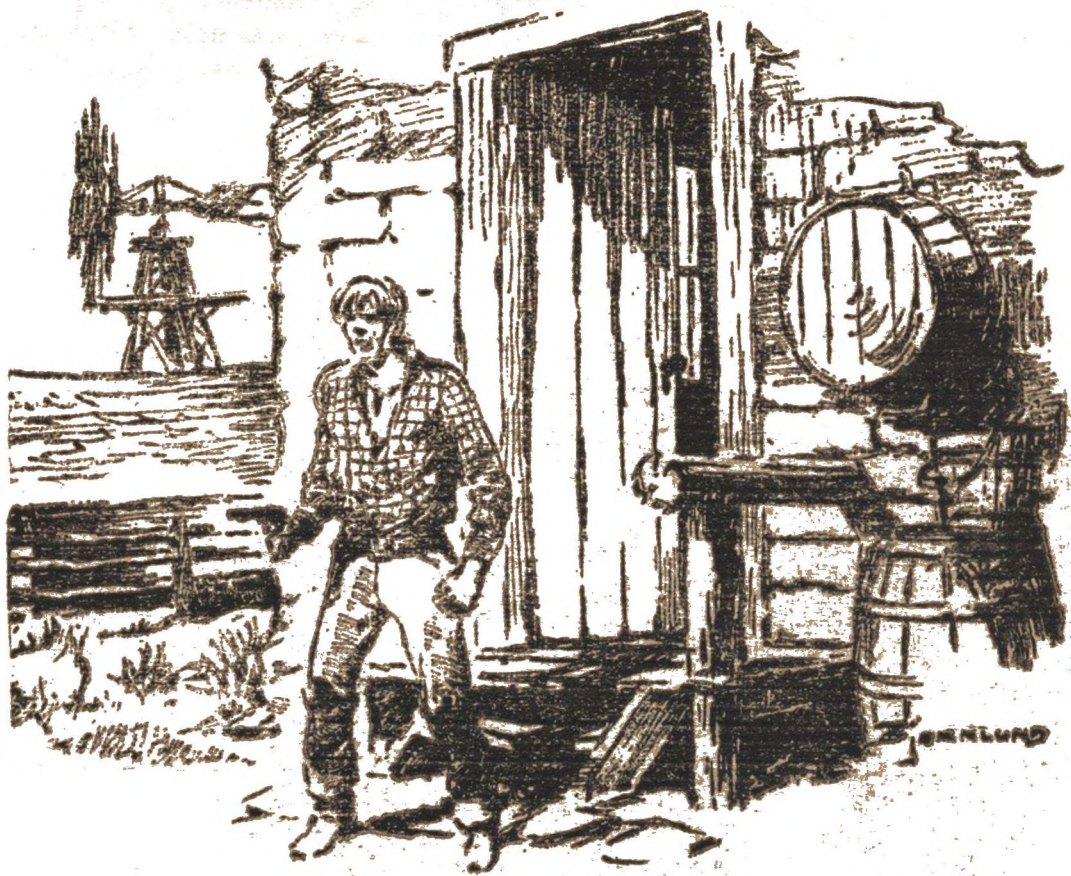


## I

ELI HOWARD was about seventeen years old when The Lobos hanged his father, Long Tom Howard.

The Lobos was the name of a small, hand-picked bunch of cattle rustlers

The joker of it was, they had Long Tom Howard at the head of the list as sort of ramrod of The Lobos. His Vented S Ranch was slap-dab against the Mexican border and there was a pass through the rough mountain range that the law had named Lobo



who ranged along the Arizona-Mexican border. Nobody knew for certain just who belonged to the secret organization, or how many men were in it. The Border Patrol or the Arizona Rangers had a list of names, but never enough actual proof to do anything much about it. It was a dangerous thing for a man to know too much about The Lobos. . . .

Gap. A lot of Mexican cattle had been shoved through Lobo Gap when the moon was right.

It didn't look, the law concluded, as though The Lobos would kill off their pack leader.

Eli Howard was runty for his age, but he could do a man's work and then some. And he was a cowhand anywhere you put him. Blue-eyed,

quiet-mannered, young Eli Howard got along all right. He did all the ranch chores and dirty jobs a cow-hand hates to do, and never belly-ached. All he wanted was to be let alone. That went double for his mother. Since he was hock-high to a saddle pony, the towheaded kid had championed his mother.

And there were too many times when the slim, golden-haired, blue-eyed wife of Long Tom Howard needed some sort of protector. Her husband was almighty indifferent about her, and some of the men he fetched to the Vented S Ranch, the men who drifted in and out through Lobo Gap, were a hard-bitten, renegade lot. But at that, those tough outlaws, for the most part, treated Amy Howard with more respect and decency than Long Tom showed her when he was drunk.

Long Tom Howard was ugly, ornery drunk that evening when he came home from the tough little border town of Mescal. He had been in some kind of ruckus. He had a black eye, his lips were cut and bruised, his face skinned up and his clothes blood-spattered. But he had his pockets stuffed with crumpled money. Even the deep pockets of his brush-scarred chaps were crammed with banknotes. He had been gone a week and he looked as though he hadn't shaved or slept or eaten a hot meal or had his clothes off since he left the ranch. There was a vicious grin on his whiskered face.

Young Eli Howard had sighted his father coming. He had a two-year-old colt he was halter breaking and, when he caught sight of Long Tom,

he turned the bronc into the horse pasture and went on to the house.

Amy Howard had been known as the prettiest girl along the border. Traces of her younger beauty remained, but there were tiny lines etched around the corners of her eyes and mouth that should not have been there. Her slim hands were calloused, the skin roughened. But her golden hair was still tawny, and there was a rare beauty in her deep blue eyes. The same honest, straight-gazing eyes that had so many, many times halted the drunken advances or silenced the profane tongue of some Lobo renegade. The same deep blue eyes that on occasion shamed Long Tom Howard into some semblance of decency.

"He's back, mom," Eli said in a low voice.

Amy Howard was rinsing out the big coffeepot to make fresh, strong, black coffee. She had seen Long Tom ride up over the skyline. She nodded and smiled a little. A weary, patient, pitiful small smile. Her arms still wore faded bluish-purple bruises from the last time. Fear showed in her eyes as her son went into his own bedroom. He kept a six-shooter in there, hidden away somewhere. He wasn't allowed to own a gun of any kind but he had swiped the long-barreled .45 Colt six-shooter from one of the drunken renegades who had gotten killed here at the Vented S Ranch a few weeks ago. Swiped it from the man's dead carcass. One of Eli Howard's uglier chores was grave digging and helping dispose of dead men whose deaths



never reached the notice of the law along the border.

When he came back into the kitchen young Eli had the gun shoved inside his shirt into the waistband of his faded Levi overalls. He knew that his mother knew he had a gun. But they never spoke of it. It was something they both dreaded mentioning. The gun. And why the son of Long Tom Howard kept it handy whenever his father was around.

It would only start an unpleasant argument if Long Tom Howard found his son inside the house. Loafing, the cowman would call it, hanging onto his mother's apron strings. So Eli let his father find him at the barn. The boy voiced no kind of greeting when Long Tom rode up and swung from his saddle.

Long Tom cut his son a hard, searching, unfriendly look. "Who's bin here while I was gone?" His voice was rasping, sharp with suspicion.

"Nobody's bin here."

"Don't lie to me or I'll skin you alive." Long Tom Howard glared.

"Nobody's bin here." Young Eli's eyes, blue as the Arizona sky at dusk, did not flinch.

Long Tom Howard let it go at that. He unsaddled and led his horse to the pasture gate by the barn and turned the gelding loose. He usually left his chaps with his saddle. But he did not bother to unbuckle them now.

Eli figured his father might be staying only long enough to grab a bit of grub, then pull out and for that reason wasn't taking off his chaps.

"Want me to ketch you a fresh horse?" he asked.

Long Tom never bothered to answer the boy. He headed for the house, with his long-legged, stiff, short strides, spurs jingling at each step.

Eli followed as soon as he dared, a cold aching lump like lead in his stomach as it always was when he anticipated trouble. The six-shooter gouged into his lean belly. The palms of his hands felt clammy and he wiped them on his faded patched Levis. Then he carried an armful of stovewood into the kitchen for an excuse to be near his mother in case she needed him.

But she was alone in the kitchen, getting supper. Eli dumped the stovewood into the big woodbox, cutting his mother a quick, questioning look. She smiled wanly and shook her head as she went on with her cooking. The purple shadows under her eyes were like ugly bruises. She was frail. Sometimes one of her coughing spells would leave her exhausted, and there would be bright crimson bloodstains on the handkerchief she held to her mouth.

The door into the front room was partly open. Eli saw Long Tom Howard standing by the table, hauling fistfuls of crumpled money out of his deep chaps pockets and piling it on the table. He emptied both chaps pockets and then unbuckled his old chaps and flung them into the corner. Next he started taking money from the pockets of his Levis, piling it all in one untidy heap. There was an ugly grin on his whiskered face.

Young Eli Howard was scared, all of a sudden. It was a sort of cold, nameless fear that crept over him like a chill. He wondered if his father had actually turned outlaw. Robbed a bank, maybe. Where else would he get that much real money?

No cattle had come up through Lobo Gap in the past few weeks. Long Tom Howard had been broke. He'd griped about it before he pulled out for town last week, saying how he had to get hold of some ready cash—one way or another.

Long Tom had never won that much money playing poker. He was a gambler. It was in his blood like the craving for booze is in a drunkard. But he never won. The tin-horns at Mescal always trimmed him.

As he stood there emptying his pockets, Long Tom suddenly looked up and peered through the open doorway, an ugly glint in his blood-shot gray eyes.

"Take a good look," he snarled, "you sneakin' little coyote whelp! You'll never see that much money again in one lump—unless you got the guts to hold up a bank. Pull up the slack in your jaw and fetch me a flour sack to hold this. . . . Where the hell you hid my jug, woman?"

"Your jug's behind you," said Eli. "In the cupboard. Where you put it, the mornin' you left."

"Nobody asked you, you tow-headed whelp. I'll learn you some day not to run off at the head. Fetch that sack. Rustle some grub, woman. I ain't et in a week. Ain't slept. I'm sick as a poisoned wolf. . . ."

There was a strange tone to Long Tom Howard's voice. It had never

been there before. A different look in his eye; a false exaggeration to his bluster and swagger, as though he had done something, was doing something of which he was ashamed.

"He acts," Eli told himself, "like a man who's just bin horsewhipped. He's licked."

His mother handed him a clean flour sack and he took it into the front room. Behind the sandy whiskers and under the grime on his face, Long Tom's leathery skin had a grayish pallor.

He got the jug from the cupboard and tilted it and drank thirstily. Then he shoved all the money into the flour sack and tied a knot in it and stood there with it in one hand.

"Fifty thousand dollars." His teeth bared in a wolfish grin.

Then he carried the sack of money and his jug into his bedroom and slammed the door. The old bed-springs creaked under his hundred and ninety pounds of big tough bone and rawhide muscle. From behind the closed door came the sound of his heavy breathing, then his snores. Long Tom Howard had not even taken off his spurred boots. Exhaustion had claimed him and he slept like a drugged man.

## II

Tom Howard fought his way up out of the heavy stupor somewhere around midnight and began hollering for his wife to fetch him some coffee and to have it strong enough for a man to tell it wasn't mudhole water. He kept cursing like a mule skinner.

Amy Howard knew enough of her

husband's habits to have the coffee hot, and young Eli was in his father's bedroom before he quit bellowing.

Long Tom was sitting on the edge of his bed. He still had his boots and spurs on and his filled cartridge belt with its holstered six-shooter buckled around his lean middle, the gun pulled around forward. The sack of money was gripped in his left hand. His bruised face was ugly and he had been having whiskey nightmares. He took a long pull at the jug to get rid of the shakes, gagging a little as the raw rotgut booze went down. He tore a couple of cigarette papers and spilled tobacco all over before he got a cigarette rolled and lighted.

"Wrangle the horse pasture," he told Eli. "Load what kyack boxes you got. Grub. Horseshoes. Camp outfit. We're pullin' out at daybreak fer Mexico."

His wife came in with more coffee and he gave her a leering grin.

"You, too, woman. Unless you want to stay behind and keep house fer them Lobos." He shook the sack of money. "I sold out to the dirty bulldoggin' sons. Twenty-five thousand. Cash on the barrelhead. Then at the bank where they had the papers all drawed up, I balked. Told 'em they was robbin' me at that two-bit figger. Made 'em toss a dollar fer it. Double or nothin'. I used my own dollar, and done the tossin'. Oh, granny, did it gripe that lily-fingered, tinhorn, penny-pinchin' banker Van Daniels. He give up head like a bull calf at a brandin' fire till I slapped his jaw shut with a gun barrel. I had a gun shoved in

his pot belly while he counted 'er out. Them damned Lobos figgered to hamstring Tom Howard. Mebbysso they did. But they paid the long green foldin' money fer the privilege. We're fat with what it takes to git along, when we pull out at daybreak."

"You sold the Vented S?" It wasn't often that Tom Howard's wife lifted her voice to speak up to the man she had loved once.

"Why not?"

"It's not yours," she said flatly, "to sell. The Vented S belonged to my father, Eli Safford. When the Lobos murdered him, I fell heir to it. It's the only thing I owned that you haven't taken away from me. I've had it put in Eli's name so that it goes to my son in trust until he comes of age. The cattle and horses might be yours, Tom, but the land belongs to my son, Eli Safford Howard. . . ."

Tom Howard's bruised, battered face darkened with fury. He threw the tin cupful of coffee at his wife and his big hand knotted into a hard fist. He was still half drugged by sleep and too drunk to move quickly. He was lurching to his feet when young Eli came at him from behind.

Eli had slid the six-shooter from under his shirt. He clubbed at the back of his father's head with the long barrel. Short, frantic, desperate, chopping blows. Tom Howard twisted his face around, snarling, then his head lobbed over sideways on his limber slack neck and the gun sight ripped his scalp, tearing wisps of hair along with the glancing blow. His long legs buckled at the knees and he sagged over backward

onto the tarp-covered bed. He lay there like a dead man, his long legs hung over the edge of the bunk. One spur rowel jingled faintly. That was the only sound in the room now, except for young Eli Howard's quick, labored breathing and the dry sob that was ripped from his mother's throat.

Amy Howard stood with her back to the whitewashed adobe wall. The front of her clean faded gingham dress was stained dark by the hot black coffee her husband had thrown at her.

Young Eli Howard stood there, legs spread, the six-shooter in his hand, staring down at the motionless form of his father. If Tom Howard was alive, he gave no sign of it. This was the thing the boy had been dreading. Now that it was done, he felt only a tremendous relief, like the lift of a terrible, weighty burden from his slim young shoulders.

They had not heard men on horseback ride up out of the night. Neither of them heard the front door open. Boot heels clumped. Spurs jingled. Amy Howard let out a thin scream and whirled around. Eli stiffened, the gun in his hand lifting.

"Drop that gun, you young fool!"

They wore black handkerchiefs pulled up across their faces, long yellow saddle slickers buttoned up to hide their clothes. There were half a dozen of them and they had guns. One of them had a coiled rope in his hand. A ketch rope

with a tie loop knotted in its end to slip-knot over the saddlehorn.

They pushed into Tom Howard's bedroom. Somebody slapped the gun from young Eli's hand.

"Take it easy, Miz Howard. Nobody here would harm a hair of your purty head. It's your cheatin', thievin', murderin' Tom Howard we come for. Skunk-drunk, ain't 'e?"

Strong, rough hands yanked Tom Howard's limp bulk up off the bed.

Young Eli Howard had shoved somebody aside and had his arm around his mother's shoulders. His voice was brittle.

"Lay a dirty hand on my mother and I'll kill you!" He had a jack-knife in his free hand, its big three-inch blade open.

They dragged Tom Howard outside, the noose of the saddle rope around his slack limp neck. The big man who seemed to be in charge of the raid now picked up the flour sack that held the money. Unknotting it, he peered inside and tied the sack shut again, nodding at the others. When they dragged Tom Howard outside, the man with the money was the last to go.

He stood there in the dim lamp-light. His hat was pulled low on his head and he had the black silk neck handkerchief pulled up across his face so that only his eyes showed. They were deep-set eyes, pale-gray and cold as frosted steel, and they peered from under ragged iron-gray brows. A brand-new yellow saddle slicker came down to his boots, polished black boots shopmade for town wear rather than for the hard,

rough wear and tear of brush-popper cowpunching. He wore silver-mounted Mexican spurs and an expensive black Stetson hat. It took more than a yellow slicker and a black silk handkerchief mask to disguise Van Daniels, high-stake gambling man and owner of the only bank at the border town of Mescal. Perhaps he was aware of his ineffectual disguise.

"The best thing for you to do, ma'am"—his voice was toneless—"is to leave the door shut and the blinds pulled. Go back to your bed. Don't make the mistake of trying to step outside. Keep your son with you. Those men out yonder are dangerous. I can't be held responsible for their actions. As you value your lives, stay inside. . . . Eli, stay in here and protect your mother. Comfort her if she needs comfort, though you have more cause for thanksgiving than you have for sorrow."

"That"—young Eli Howard's voice was brittle—"is for me and my mother to decide."

The hard gray eyes narrowed. The voice that came from behind the black silk mask was toneless.

"Better weigh your decisions carefully. Tom Howard looked dead there on his bed."

Van Daniels closed the door quietly and firmly behind him when he went outside.

Eli led his mother into the front room and put her down into a deep rocking chair. Her face was colorless and fear darkened her eyes. Eli smoothed back her beautiful tawny hair and fetched her a cup of cof-

fee. Then he blew out the lighted lamp and lifted a corner of a low-pulled window shade. He crouched there, peering out into the night. But there was nothing to see. The Lobo night riders had gone. As quickly as they had come up out of the night, they now rode away and the darkness swallowed them. And they had taken Tom Howard with them.

"They've gone," Eli said tensely. "They took *him* along."

Eli had barred the door. He was sliding the bar back when his mother's voice in the darkness stopped him.

"Don't, son. If you step outside, you'll be shot down. You're all I have on earth, son. Don't leave me. . . . What good could you do, anyhow?" Her voice was dead-toned.

She was right. Young Eli lit the lamp. He poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down with it. They sipped the hot strong black coffee in silence. It would take more than coffee to drive away the numb ache inside their hearts. Eli's young belly crawled with a clammy fear.

He kept remembering what Van Daniels had said, just before he went out with the sack of money: "Tom Howard looked dead there on his bed. . . ."

Van Daniels was a man who never overlooked a bet. He had wealth and power. His name was a by-word along the Mexican border. He played border politics and dealt every marked card from a cold deck. He had started out with no more than a deck of cards and a pair of

dice. Now, after twenty years, he was a man to reckon with. To clinch his steel grip on border power, he had married the daughter of a powerful Mexican politico. Van Daniels was a name to conjure with along the Mexican border,

### III

Eli Howard waited until day-break. Then he went out. He found the body of his father. The Lobos had hanged Long Tom Howard to the limb of a giant hackberry tree about a mile from the ranch buildings.

Eli cut the ketch rope they had used for a hangman's rope. Then he went back and got a pick and shovel and the old canvas bed tarp from his father's bed.

He wanted his mother to stay there at the cabin, but she said it was her duty as Tom Howard's wife to go along. She had courage. The sort of splendid courage that pioneer women had.

Eli had his father's dead face covered. He had taken off his own faded denim brush jumper and spread it over the distorted face of the hanged man. Tom Howard's bruised face looked horrible in death. Eli got there ahead of his mother and had the bed tarp wrapped for a shroud to cover the dead man.

Lowering his dead father into the grave, Eli shoveled the loose fresh dirt back in on top of the tarp-wrapped body, tamping down the earth. The old hackberry tree marked the grave of Tom Howard.

Then Eli stood bareheaded while his mother said a prayer. It was a short prayer, asking God in His heaven to forgive Tom Howard his sins and to have mercy on his soul. The homely little prayer ended in a sob that tore Amy Howard's lungs in a spasm of coughing and she knelt there beside the new grave, bent over, her son's strong young arms around her quivering shoulders. Her handkerchief was sodden with crimson blood when the spasm of coughing wore itself out.

Eli carried his mother back in his arms to the old adobe cabin and put her to bed. Her skin had the almost transparent waxen color of death. This was her deathbed. Her son knew that as he smoothed the thick tawny hair back so that her face was framed in its gold.

"Shut your eyes, now. Try to sleep a while. I'll be right here." It took all the courage Eli Howard had now.

Somebody rode up on horseback, dismounted, pounded on the door.

Eli got his six-shooter, shoved it into the waistband of his faded Levis and went to the door.

It was Brick Lucas, deputy sheriff and the law at Mescal. He had a legal-looking folded document in his hand. He was tall, rawboned, with faded red hair and a sunburnt skin that was blotched with freckles. His jaw was long and his nose high-bridged, and he had a thin-lipped mouth. His pale-green eyes were set under bleached brows. Brick Lucas was Van Daniels' right-hand



bower. His law badge glinted in the sunlight.

"This is a legal notice, Eli," Lucas announced. "Gives you and your mother ten days to vacate. Don't take no more than your saddle horse and a team to haul your mother's buckboard. Tom Howard sold out his Vented S outfit, lock, stock and barrel. The bank held a heavy mortgage agin' the spread."

The deputy sheriff took a sealed manila envelope from his chaps pocket. It was bulky.

"There's money in this. I don't know how much. Van Daniels said to give it to Tom Howard's widder. It's the cash balance left over after the mortgage was paid at the bank. Ain't you goin' to take it?"

Eli Howard said nothing. His hand was on the six-shooter. His eyes were blue and cold and puckered at the corners.

Deputy Sheriff Brick Lucas scowled. His grin was twisted, his voice saw-edged now.

"I got another paper," he said. "You wouldn't want me to pull it. It's a bench warrant with your name on it. It charges you with the murder of your father, Tom Howard. If I was in your boots, Eli, I'd grab this money and git. Take your mother to a healthier climate."

"Clear out." Eli Howard's voice was brittle. "Take Van Daniels' damned blood money back to him."

It was the first time Eli had ever pulled a gun on a man with full intent to kill. It came into his

hand easily, full-cocked and pointed at Brick Lucas' lean belly.

"Git off this ranch," Eli Howard's young voice shrilled, "before I kill you."

Brick Lucas did not scare easy. He was tough as a boot. He might be fast enough to slap the gun away from his belly and jerk his own six-shooter and kill the towheaded kid. He had done that trick before. He was quick-triggered, fast enough to repeat it now.

But he backed away, his eyes as green as glass. His voice was flattened and there was no fear in it.

"If that's the way you want it, button. Take it easy."

Lucas swung up into his saddle. "I'll be back in ten days," he said tonelessly.

Eli Howard watched the big tough red-headed deputy ride out of sight. Then he closed the door slowly. Sweat beaded his face. He wiped it off on the roller towel and went back to his mother.

Amy Howard died that evening at sunset. She was conscious right up to the last when she kissed her son good-by and closed her eyes for the last time, a prayer and a smile on her lips. She looked beautiful and young in death.

Young Eli Howard made a pine-board coffin for his mother. He dug her grave deep and buried her at sunrise.

Then he saddled his top horse and loaded his bed and filled warsack on another good cow horse. When he rode away from the only home he'd ever had he didn't look back.

Right now, Eli Howard did not want to look back at anything he was leaving behind. He hoped he would never again set eyes on the ranch where he had been born and raised. It held too many ugly, bitter, fearful memories. And right now these obliterated the few happy memories he had of his early boyhood.

Time had been when young Eli Howard knew how to laugh. But that had been too many years ago. And those few young memories were faded out by the ugly years that robbed him of his boyhood. He had felt the biting rip of a rawhide quirt and his father's drunken cursing. And when Tom Howard's fury turned on his wife, young Eli had torn into his father with a puny young terrier courage and fought until he was quirted off.

Booze had done that to Tom Howard who had once been a man. Booze and the cattle-rustler companionship of the hard-riding Lobos. Tom Howard had married Amy Safford when she was sixteen. Left orphaned there on the ranch by her father's death, she'd needed a man to protect her and love her and fight for her. Handsome, reckless, bronc-riding, fast-roping, spur-jingling Tom Howard had ridden into her life with a saddle swagger that had caught her fancy. He'd hidden a lot behind a handsome grin.

Eli Safford had been tough in his own right, a good cowman, handy with a gun or his two fists as he had been with a ketch rope and running iron. He had burned his S

brand on a lot of cattle. Then he had tangled with some men who called themselves The Lobos. Tough as Eli Safford was, they had outnumbered, outtoughed him.

The Lobos had rounded up all the S cattle they could gather. Corraled the cattle at Safford's ranch. They had told him to build a branding fire and heat all the bar branding irons he had. Then they ran his S cattle through the branding chute and made Eli Safford run a bar vent through the S on everything he owned, venting every horse in his S remuda, to boot. So that all the cattle and horses Eli Safford owned wore a Vented S brand.

Then they had prodded him into a fighting, desperate last stand and one of The Lobos had shot Eli Safford.

Amy Safford's mother had died when she was ten. Eli Safford had sent his daughter to the convent school at Tucson. She was there at the sisters' school when she got word of her father's death. She went back to the ranch to put a cross to mark her father's grave and was packing up the few belongings she had there when Tom Howard rode up.

Tom Howard had a way with women and a shrewd cunning for outwolfing The Lobos. He rode to Mescal with Amy Safford, and was legally married to her. Then he took his young bride into the bank.

"I want you to meet my wife," he had grinned at Van Daniels. "Eli Safford's daughter Amy just

married me. Ain't you goin' to congratulate us, Van?"

Van Daniels had been poker-faced. He knew when he was out-wolfed. He gave the bride and groom a wedding dance. Then he shuffled his deck of marked cards and riffled the pack and began a new deal.

Young Eli was born. Christened Eli Safford Howard. And before he was old enough to comprehend, his boyhood days were over. He was put to work doing chores when he should have been playing, before he was strong enough to lug a water bucket or handle a manure fork.

By that time Amy Safford had found out that Tom Howard had married her to get hold of the Vented S brand and the ranch—and Lobo Gap. Though she clung with a pitiful desperation to the thing in Tom Howard's makeup that passed for love of his wife, trying in every way she knew or could think of to bring out something sincere and decent from the heart of the cattle rustler to whom she was married. And there were times when her hopes soared, when Tom Howard showed some response. Then he would get drunk again and laugh at her and his laugh was far more punishing than a rawhide quirt.

Amy tried to hide her grief from her young son, but a child is hard to fool. Eli Howard was no older than twelve when he told his mother the very thing she had tried to hide.

"He hates you, mamma. He

hated me, too. If he hurts you again, I'll cut him." He had an old butcher knife hidden inside his shirt.

Once Van Daniels sent young Brick Lucas over to the Vented S Ranch when Tom Howard was away. Lucas was no more than eighteen then, but tough and dangerous.

"I got a bill of sale for you to sign, Amy," Brick had said gruffly. "And cash money to go with it. I'll take you and your kid to Tucson. Buy you a ticket to anywhere you want to go."

Amy Safford had turned down the offer. She wouldn't say why. Brick Lucas had returned the bill of sale and the money to Van Daniels.

"She's got somethin' of Eli Safford's stubborn streak, Van. It's no dice." Brick grinned, his eyes green slits. "Why don't you let me kill off Tom Howard, boss?"

"Because he's too good a man. There's nobody to take his place."

"What's wrong with me, boss?" Brick demanded.

"You ain't the cowman Tom Howard is, Brick. You can't handle cattle, you can't handle men. You're just a tough kid. But Tom Howard is a natural."

Tom Howard knew that. His arrogance outgrew his ability. He began to believe he was indispensable. He had the idea that he would one day turn his Lobo pack on the man who was the real ram-rod of that border outfit. Tom Howard got too big for his britches

—and Van Daniels raked in his big jackpot.

Now Tom Howard was dead. Amy Safford Howard's earthly troubles were over. And young Eli rode away from the Vented S Ranch without a backward glance.

But Eli Howard knew that one day he would ride back to the Vented S Ranch on the Mexican border. Deep in his heart, Eli was certain of it. It was written down in his book of life that way.

Eli Howard would come back for the same reason his mother had stayed there until she died. It was the same reason that had kept Eli Safford there, in spite of hell or high water or threats, until The Lobos broke him and then murdered him. So young Eli Safford Howard would come back here to fight for what belonged to him, for what they were stealing from him. A Safford didn't quit. You had to kill a Safford. Young Eli had a lot of his tough old grandfather Eli's blood. It wasn't tainted by cowardice.

His mother had told him about it. She had used the last hours and minutes of her ebbing life to tell her young son the history of the Vented S and how Eli Safford had held onto it even when he knew they would kill him.

Amy Safford Howard had exacted no deathbed promises one way or the other. She knew her son. She knew what he would do. She advised him as best she could. The Lobos would kill young Eli if he stayed. They both knew that.

"Bury me, son," she had said

quietly, "beside my mother and father. Then get away from the ranch as fast as you can. Don't ever come back here until you can win the fight your grandfather Eli and your mother lost. Then ride back to what belongs to you, if you must. Wipe the Vent bar from the Safford S brand."

#### IV

Ten years later, Eli Safford Howard rode back to the Vented S Ranch on the Mexican border. In ten years' time he had come into his full manhood.

He was no taller than five feet eight with his boots on. Broad of shoulder and thick-chested, he tapered down like a solid compact wedge to a lean hard belly and flanks and saddle-muscle bowed legs. He tipped the scales at one hundred and sixty, stripped, when he fought the Pacific Coast middle-weight champ to a twenty-round draw at Denver.

A mining-man fight promoter wanted to make a world's champion of Eli Howard. Eli turned it down. He told the fight promoter he had taken up boxing so that he could learn how to handle his dukes. He figured he had picked up enough boxing science now to take his own part. He was stepping out of the prize ring for the last time.

Eli picked up some money at Cheyenne. He won the bronc riding there and placed third in the steer roping. Some of the top contestants wanted him to come along to Calgary, but he shook his head. He

had no intention of becoming a professional rodeo contestant.

He spent a lot of time practicing with a six-shooter and saddle carbine until he could draw fast and shoot to hit. What spare time he had around town or at some big cow outfit, Eli spent studying books, educating himself. He was hungry for book learning, and he read everything he could find. He had better than a high school education.

He picked up card-sharp gambling from a professional gambler who had backed him in his brief prize-fighting career. He had learned to manipulate a deck of cards or pair of dice expertly enough to hold his own with tin-horn gamblers. Because he figured that knowledge might come in handy some day.

Somehow, during the ten years, Eli Safford Howard had recaptured something of his stolen boyhood. He did not seek it. Rather, it came back to him. He learned how to laugh again. He found himself enjoying life with a sort of gay recklessness. Around cow outfits or prize-fighter training camps, he joshed and played jokes and enjoyed the rough horseplay. And when some practical joke was played on him, Eli got a bigger laugh out of being the butt of the joke than did the practical jokers, and men liked him for it.

Eli forced himself to overcome the country-boy, shyness that made him afraid of girls. That is, he got past the awkward stage. He went

to dances. He liked to dance and the rope skipping and shadow boxing that had perfected his footwork in the ring, made him a smooth dancer. He danced all night with young girls, old maids, gray-haired mothers, playing no favorites.

But for all his trying, Eli never rid himself of a bashfulness that could be actually painful. Any pretty girl could confuse him with a few words or a look. Later, alone, he cursed himself for getting tongue-tied, for standing there like a big country boy, all feet and hands. As a ladies' man, he told himself bitterly, he was a good cowhand.

And being a lady killer was a part of the education he was giving himself. It was a part of Eli Safford Howard's plan.

Because Van Daniels had a daughter. Ramona Daniels. Even as far north as Denver, you heard of Van Daniels. And you heard of his daughter, Ramona Daniels, who was half-Mexican, beautiful as a rare painting and as headlong and willful and untamed as she was beautiful. Van Daniels was proud of his daughter. She was the most precious thing he owned. Through his daughter Ramona, that cold-blooded Van Daniels could actually be hurt. . . .

Eli Safford Howard remembered Ramona Daniels. He was sixteen at the time and she was about ten years old. Tom Howard had sent Eli to town with a letter to be delivered to Van Daniels at his home. Eli had rapped on the front door. It had been opened by Daniels' little

daughter. She had blue-black hair plaited in two heavy braids, black-fringed eyes so dark gray they looked smoky black. The little girl had looked at Eli, looked him over from head to foot, made him feel painfully aware of the humiliating fact that his cotton shirt and Levi overalls were faded and patched and that his boots were worn out and rusty and the heels run-over. Young Ramona Daniels had wrinkled a small nose in disgust.

"The cook feeds tramps at the back door," she had said.

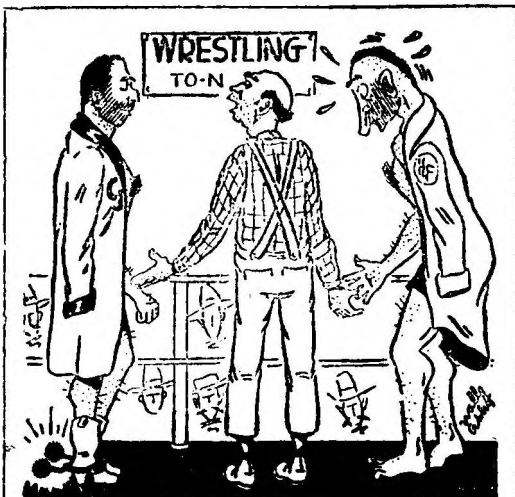
Then her father had come to the door, a smile on his handsome poker face. Eli had shoved the letter at Van Daniels had turned and run. He still looked back on that as the most humiliating and shameful moment of his life. He had carried the hurt for that long. He had never mentioned it to his mother, but he could still feel it, deep inside. Because he was a Safford, he reckoned.

He hoped to get even with the spoiled-brat daughter of Van Daniels some day. From what he'd heard, Ramona Daniels had not changed much. Eli did not want to be as vulnerable the next time.

But he knew, deep inside, that Ramona Daniels could and undoubtedly would hurt him again. He could never outgrow the shyness that made him thin-skinned. He was no match for the clever, sharp-tongued wit of a girl like Ramona Daniels. She'd look at him and make him feel cheap and counterfeit and awkward. Stay away from Ramona Daniels, he warned himself over and over. But she would always be a challenge in his life. Ramona Daniels was one person on earth of whom he was afraid. And a Safford, his mother had told him, wasn't afraid of anything on earth.

Eli Safford Howard located the captain of the Arizona Rangers at Tucson.

"I want to join your Arizona Rangers, captain," he explained. "I've spent the past ten years getting ready to fit the job. My name is Eli Safford Howard. My father was Tom Howard. He was hung by The Lobos. My grandfather was Eli Safford. The Lobos vented his S brand, then murdered him. The Safford S Ranch rightfully belongs to me. Van Daniels stole it from my mother and me. I aim to get it back or get killed trying. If I get it back, I'll close the Lobo Gap. I'd sure like to have the Ranger law backing me. But I'm tackling the job myself, regardless."



"On my right, Horse-face Slim meeting, on my left, Cowboy Jack!"



Eli Safford Howard's blue eyes were puckered a little at the corners. His wide, square-cornered mouth grinned faintly. He stood there on his saddle-bowed legs, compact, husky, solid, without any swagger. He wore his filled cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter as though they were part of his clothing, without any bid for toughness. He looked older than his twenty-seven years. But at the same time, he had a boyishness that he would never lose if he lived to be a hundred. He had the look of a man who could keep his mouth shut and his eyes and ears open. And there was a hard set to his blunt jaw—the Safford jaw.

"Come along to my cabin, Eli Safford Howard." The captain of the Arizona Rangers was a big, powerfully built man with an easy grin and keen, humorous eyes. "We'll have a medicine talk. I got your name down on the books for murder. But I don't believe every damned thing that's told to me and I sure don't let even Van Daniels cram anything down into my craw. You've bit off a big hunk of tough meat for one young feller. A Ranger commission won't make you bullet-proof, son."

## V

Eli Safford Howard, Arizona Ranger, was following out the orders given him by Ranger Captain Ryan, when he rode boldly and alone into the border town of Mescal in broad daylight. Those orders were broad, leaving it pretty much up to Eli.

It had been Eli's own idea that

he would return like that to force an open showdown with Van Daniels. Smoke that high-stake border gambler-banker out into the open. Take the fight to him. Captain Ryan agreed.

"I'll have a man or two planted somewheres handy, son, if you git in trouble," Ryan promised. "You don't look like a man that hollers for help in a tight and that's the way you play it. Lone-handed. You might take the worst of it for a while."

Eli rode down the main and only street of the little adobe town. There was a general store and a barber shop. There was the Silver Dollar Saloon and Gambling House that belonged to Van Daniels. And directly across the street—what somebody had called six-shooter distance—was the bank. At the far end of the street was the feed and livery barn and corrals. The adobe houses where folks lived were scattered out haphazardly across the mesquite and palo verdes on the flat desert.

Some saddled horses stood at the hitchrack in front of the Silver Dollar. Eli reined up at the hitchrack across the street in front of the bank, dismounted and dropped his bridle reins. He was aware of the fact that he was being watched from the saloon, that he had been sighted as he rode into town. He knew that Eli Safford Howard was expected here. Captain Ryan had managed it so that the word spread. It was a part of the plan Ryan had worked out.

There was a cashier and a teller

and a bookkeeper in the bank. They worked behind high wooden partitions with metal screening, like box stalls.

Van Daniels' office was to the right of the door as you entered the bank. It, too, was a box stall about four feet high and made of Mexican mahogany, thick enough to stop a bullet and polished like glass. It held a massive, flat-topped mahogany desk and mahogany armchairs upholstered in steerhide.

Van Daniels sat at his desk, tall, lean, iron-gray, poker-faced. He was expensively tailored in a dark suit, barbered, his mouth a ruthless line under a cropped, iron-gray mustache. Van Daniels looked the way a banker should look. With an eyeshade, behind a stack of poker chips, he had the typical look of a professional gambler.

Right now, the steely glitter was gone from his eyes and his mouth lost its grimness. He was looking across his flat-topped desk at his daughter Ramona who stood there, small, trimly made, her blue-black hair sleek, her eyes smoke-gray under almost heavy black brows. She wore a shabby leather *charro* jacket and tight-fitting pants that flared at the bottoms where they almost hid her small booted feet. A high-crowned Stetson hat was tilted back on her head. Her skin was tan velvet. White teeth showed now in a quick smile that was reflected in her eyes.

"It's a deal, papa?" Soft laughter was hidden in her voice.

"It's your deal. It always is. But don't come crying to me if you

get hurt." Van Daniels shoved a long bulky brown envelope across the desk.

"Have I ever come crying to you, papa?"

"Not since you were a baby. Even then you never really cried. But you got your way. I'm afraid of this, though."

"So am I."

Eli Safford Howard came in the door. He walked in boldly but without any swagger. Dust powdered his clean clothes and clean-shaven tanned face. A faint flat-lipped grin spread the square corners of his mouth. He was looking straight into Van Daniels' steel-gray eyes. He didn't know that the slim boyish-looking *charro* was a girl until she turned around, pulling off her hat and letting the heavy plaited black braids fall from their coil that had been hidden under the high hat crown. Even then he did not notice her at once because he had stepped over to the partition and opened its gate and was inside.

"I'm Eli Safford Howard. I've come back to claim my ranch."

Van Daniels smiled thinly. There was a sort of mocking twinkle in his steely eyes.

"This is my daughter Ramona. That's the legal title to the Vented S outfit she's got in her hand. She just got the ranch—for her birthday." He smiled thinly. "Every day of her life is a birthday."

The color drained from Eli's tanned face, then flooded back to redden his ears. His eyes turned to the girl's and he pulled off his hat.

As he had dreamed it countless times, he stood there awkward as a schoolboy, tongue-tied, half expecting her to wrinkle her nose in disgust.

But Ramona was smiling at him. Her eyes looked at him frankly, as a man might size up another man. Her voice was soft, quiet.

"I remember you." Her tanned skin colored faintly.

She picked up a silver-handled double-edged Mexican dagger Van Daniels used for a paper knife and slit open the sealed envelope marked with the Vented S brand. Her eyes narrowing a little, she looked into the bulky envelope and took out a legal-looking paper, its corners bent, edges soiled.

"This," she said, "is an old indictment. A bench warrant charging Eli Safford Howard with the murder of his father Tom Howard. . . . Have you a match?"

Eli fished a match from his shirt pocket. Ramona told him to light it, then handed him the bench warrant.

"Burn the thing," she said quietly.

Eli set the match flame to it and held it till it burned to a wispy white ash that he dropped into the polished brass cuspidor.

Ramona smiled and took another legal document from the envelope. Her dark-gray eyes looked straight into his.

"This is the deed to the Safford ranch, the title brought up to date. The ranch is still in the Safford name. In the name of Eli Safford Howard, to be exact. But it's the

middle name, Safford, that counts. . . . Am I right?"

"That's right." Eli's voice sounded strained, unnatural in his own ears.

"Do you ever gamble, Eli Safford Howard?" The girl was watching him narrowly.

"Not often."

"Will you gamble for your ranch?"

"The ranch," Eli said slowly, measuring each word, "is mine. It belongs to me."

"The peaceful possession of the Vented S Ranch," said Ramona Daniels, "is what I mean." She flashed a swift smile. "I go with the outfit!"

Eli cut a hard, quick look at Van Daniels. The banker was leaning back in his heavy armchair, lighting a long black twisted cigar. His eyes were glittering slivers of shining steel in the blue cigar smoke. A ghost of a smile played over his hard-lipped mouth. The high-stake gambler was enjoying this.

"I'll check the bet," said Eli, "to the lady." And he grinned.

Ramona Daniels was watching the grin spread to his eyes, squinting them to thin, hard, bright-blue slivers.

"You gambling?" She matched his grin with a quick smile.

"I reckon."

"Without knowing what I'm putting up for stakes?"

"That's right."

"Figuring," smiled Ramona Daniels, "that your commission in the

Arizona Rangers is your ace in the hole?"

Eli hadn't expected that. It caught him with his guard down, knocked his wind out. Ramona's soft laugh mocked him.

It had caught Van Daniels the same way. He stiffened in his chair. His faint smile gone, leaving his mouth a ruthless line, steel-eyed he stared hard at Eli Safford Howard.

"That," said the girl, "turns over your hole card. But nobody has had a look at it except Van Daniels and his daughter Ramona. And neither of us is tipping your hand. Brick Lucas and his Lobos don't get a peek at it. . . ."

Spurs jingled, boot heels clumped on the Mexican tiled floor behind Eli Safford Howard. He whirled around, his hand on his gun.

Deputy Sheriff Brick Lucas stood there, a six-shooter in his hand. Flanking him were half a dozen tough-looking cowhands with drawn guns.

"Take it easy!" Ramona's voice was a barely audible whisper.

"Long time no see yuh, Eli!" Brick Lucas looked big. Big and tough. Two hundred pounds of raw bone and heavy, hard muscle. His eyes were as green as deep winter ice under bleached brows.

"We got a proper welcome a-waitin' for yuh, Eli. Over at the Silver Dollar. You better come along."

Eli's right hand came away from his gun. They had all the bulge. It would be worse than useless to make a fight. He forced a grin.

"You haven't changed your ways a bit, Brick."

"Nary a bit, towhead. Will you walk, or should we drag yuh?"

"I'll go on my own legs."

## VI

Eli did not look back at Van Daniels or Ramona. He walked towards the door and they stepped aside to let him through. He led the way across the wide dusty street and through the swinging half doors of the Silver Dollar.

The burly deputy was a couple of paces behind with his tough cowhands. They still had their guns in their hands when they crowded into the saloon behind Eli.

Eli saw no more than the shadow of the big deputy's left arm as it swung. He ducked and whirled, a split second too late. It was a blackjack that hung from Brick Lucas' thick wrist by a leather loop like the loop on a quirt. The blow struck Eli just above one ear. Black dizzy pain shot through his skull, blinding him. He staggered a little as he ducked and side-stepped, and his arms came up to cover his head and face so that he caught the next blow on his forearm. It numbed his arm to the shoulder and he was like a groggy fighter in the ring pedaling back out of reach, shaking the black dizziness from his brain, blinking the sight back into his eyes. He crouched and ducked in under the next swinging blow and hooked a short vicious right into the big man's belly, sinking it deep

into Lucas' groin, below the belt.

He heard Lucas let out a grunting groan as he went in under the big deputy's flailing arm. Then somebody tripped Eli and he went sprawling. He rolled over and somebody kicked him in the face and he felt the thudding pain crash into his nose and cheek. Then he was on his feet. A man loomed up in front of him and Eli smashed a hard right and left into a face just above his and saw the blood spurt and heard the man curse as he reeled backwards.

Eli whirled to hit out at another man, striking out blindly, chopping the man down. He plowed over him and into Brick Lucas, boring into the big deputy's belly with both hands. The blackjack whipped down across the back of Eli's shoulders and it was like being pounded on the back with a heavy hammer. He doubled Lucas up and went down with him. Then a ton of weight fell on top of him and the weight smothered him. A high-heeled spurred boot kicked at Eli's face and he crossed his arms and buried his face and head in their cover. The wind was kicked out of his belly and ribs. Then he heard a girl's voice cut through the crashing, thudding din of the ruckus.

"Does it take the whole Lobo pack to whip one man? Where's that toughness you brag about, Lucas? Don't tell me you have to holler for your whole pack to whip a man half your size. And you with a blackjack. Are you that yellow, Lucas?"

"Let 'im up, boys." Lucas' voice

rasped. "Stand away from 'im. Nobody told you to take my part. I'll take this towheaded thing apart in chunks nobody kin put back together. Stand on your laigs, Eli. I'll knock you down faster'n the whole damned Lobo gang kin stand you up."

"I'll take the blackjack," said Ramona.

Eli saw her through a red smear of blood and sweat as he got slowly to his hands and knees and then onto one knee, like a knocked-down prize-fighter taking his full advantage of the count up to nine.

"Let 'im keep the blackjack." Eli spat blood. "He'd be crippled without it."

He was up on his feet now, blowing the clogged blood from both nostrils. The quick look he cut Ramona caught the look in her eyes and he got the sudden notion that he was fighting for her. It cleared his brain like a whiff of ammonia. He had been groggier than this many a time when he was fighting his way up from the meal-ticket preliminary ranks.

Eli grinned through the blood smear and he was on balance when he got to his feet. He shuffled sideways, crouched, his jaw behind the hump of his left shoulder as he worked around to clear an open circle.

"Back up, men. Way back. I'll make it unhappy for the man that interferes. Let Brick Lucas fight his own fight."

That was Van Daniels' voice. He stood beside his daughter now, the



long twisted cigar jutting from one corner of his ruthless mouth.

Brick Lucas shoved the blackjack up into the pocket made for it inside his shirt sleeve. The loop was still around his wrist. He spat on his big red tufted hands and his big teeth bared in a flat-lipped grin. His size dwarfed Eli. Lucas had whipped a saloonful of tough men and there wasn't a dirty trick to rough-and-tumble fighting he did not know. No man his big size had ever been able to lick him. How could a runt like Eli Howard hurt him?

Eli kept moving, getting the spring back into his legs, shuffling, staying out of reach. He was letting Brick Lucas think he was scared, luring the big deputy into rushing, feinting him into that bull charge.

Brick Lucas came at him with both fists swinging. Eli wasn't there. He side-stepped and ducked and the deputy's big bulk grazed him. He hooked a short one into Lucas' belly. A short left hook that jarred Lucas off-balance. He had to reach high to loop a right into the deputy's jaw. Then he was around behind and when Lucas whirled on his big feet, Eli drove a low left into the deputy's belly that doubled him over. Eli straightened him up with an uppercut that smashed Brick's nose. The blood spurted. The burly deputy was blinded by the pain. Eli ripped the big man's face with both fists and pedaled back from the flailing arms.

Brick Lucas shook the dizzy pain

from his eyes and the blackjack was in his hand as he backed against the bar and stood on big widespread legs, spitting blood and shaking his lowered head like a red bull.

"Water!"

The bartender sloshed a bucketful of slop water on the big deputy's head. The bartender was a grizzled, battle-scarred old prize fighter with a shapeless nose and one cauliflower ear. He had been watching Eli.

"It'll take more'n water. . . . Go in and get the rest of it. Holy mackerel, the kid's a pug!"

Sodden with slop water and blood, Brick Lucas braced himself, then went in for a kill, the shot-loaded leather blackjack whipping the air with a hiss. He still had plenty of fight in his system. He was big and fast but too clumsy.

Eli went in under. The blackjack thudded down across his kidneys and the sickening pain of it staggered him. Then he slammed against the bar and used it for a springboard. He was weaving when he went in, both fists cocked. He felt the swishing hiss of the blackjack as he shifted and ducked. Then he drove his left deep into the big deputy's solar plexus and heard Lucas blow out his wind. The big man's arms dropped limply and he was out on his feet and the green eyes were glassy when Eli rocked the bloody head with two savage, vicious hooks.

Deputy Sheriff Brick Lucas dropped with a dull heavy crash and rolled over on his back with both knees doubled up.

Eli was blowing hard, dripping sweat. His face was battered and blood trickled from a smashed nose. He backed up against the bar and clawed for his gun, but his holster was empty. His six-shooter had fallen out.

"I've got it, Eli." It was Ramona Daniels. She had the gun in her hand. Her gray eyes looked black and dangerous.

## VII

The saloon was crowded with men now. Cowhands, for the most part. Eli had no way of knowing how many were Lobos, or if there were any Rangers in the crowd. Arizona Rangers wore no badge or uniform.

Van Daniels stood at the end of the bar near the door and alongside his daughter. He had slid a short-barreled .38 special from its shoulder holster under his tailored coat. As Eli cut him a hard look, he saw the gambler-banker's poker face twitch as if with a spasm of pain. And his face was as gray as old ashes. There was a strange glint in Daniels' steely eyes when they met Eli's. His forefinger hooked in the trigger guard, he palmed the short-barreled gun and tossed it to Eli Safford Howard.

"Take the deal, son!" His flat-toned voice sounded gritty.

Van Daniels collapsed as Eli caught the gun out of the air. Ramona's voice, sharp-edged, yanked Eli away from the bar.

"Get papa, Eli. Take him to his bank. He doesn't want to die

here. . . . I'll keep the Lobos off your back!" The six-shooter in her hand was cocked.

Eli picked up Van Daniels. The gambler-banker's eyes were slivers of steel in a gray death mask. Eli carried him in his arms, backing out the door, and the gun in his hand covering the men nearest. Ramona followed him. She, too, was backing out through the swinging half doors of the saloon, covering Eli's retreat. Brick Lucas was getting onto his hands and knees.

Eli laid Van Daniels on a leather couch in his office. Ramona locked the front door and pulled the blinds. She told the cashier and teller and bookkeeper to lock all the money and books in the vault, then to go out the back door. Fast. Pronto.

"Unless you want to be caught in a bank holdup," she warned.

They lost no time. Ramona's red-lipped smile was faintly contemptuous. She was likening them to rats deserting a sinking ship. She took a little box of pills from the desk drawer and poured whiskey and water into a glass. A faint smile twitched the corners of Van Daniels' mouth. He drank the watered whiskey, refusing the pills. His voice came from behind set teeth.

"This is it. . . ." The slitted steel eyes looked at Eli, studying him.

Eli read the question in the dying man's eyes, answered it as best he knew how, without the word of a lie.

"If Ramona will have me," he said, "I want her for my wife. To love and honor and protect. I've

loved her since that only time I saw her. . . .”

Ramona Daniels took Eli's hand. Hers was cold as ice. But her eyes were deep pools and her smile warmed him away inside.

“I loved you that night, Eli. I didn't know it till you'd gone. I've prayed for you to come back. I live at the Safford place. There's no Vented S brand. I took the Vent off. It's the S iron. I planted a rosebush at your mother's grave. I meant it when I said I go with the ranch. . . .”

Eli's arms were around Ramona. Her lips trembled against his. He held her.

“She had a deal in mind,” said Van Daniels. “To save my hide. She's like that. Loyal. Game. She'll stay with you till death. I've broken the law. Cold-decked it. I'd have to go to prison. . . . That's why it's better this way. The Big Dealer knows. He gave me a break. I'm cashing in now . . . winner . . .”

So died Van Daniels, high-stake gambler. Banker. His daughter's kiss was on his mouth, her prayer went with him.

Eli covered the dead man with a Mexican serape. Ramona's eyes thanked him. She was game. Tears might come later, but now she took it dry-eyed. She was opening the big drawers of the massive mahogany desk. There was a gun of some kind in every drawer. Six-shooters, short-barreled carbines, a couple of sawed-off double-barreled shotguns.

All were loaded. There was loose ammunition in open boxes.

Ramona explained it. Van Daniels had broken with Brick Lucas and his Lobos a long time ago—the night they hanged Tom Howard. Ever since then, Van Daniels had stood lone-handed against Lucas and The Lobos. Too proud to call in the Arizona Rangers to back his stand, he had played his hand out, bluffing it out. Expecting them to rob his bank and kill him, he had sent Ramona to the convent school at Tucson. But she had run away and come back to Mescal to be with her father.

Brick Lucas wanted her. Wanted to marry her. She would have married him to save her father's life, but Van Daniels would not let her make that kind of a sacrifice. He knew his daughter was waiting and praying for the return of a tow-headed kid she had once turned up her nose at, then cried about the rest of the night into her pillow.

Without saying anything to her father, Ramona had taken the story to Captain Ryan of the Arizona Rangers. The whole story.

“Tom Howard was alive when Brick Lucas and The Lobos hung him, Eli. He cursed them until the rope choked him to death. . . . Van Daniels tried to save his life, but they outnumbered him. When he came back the next day to get you and your mother and take you to Tucson, he found your mother's grave. And you were gone. I know that to be the truth. I went with my father. I wanted my ragged towheaded boy. Papa was go-

ing to take the three of us to Tucson—where we'd be safe from The Lobos. . . ."

It was Brick Lucas and The Lobos who had vented the S brand and Brick Lucas, a tough, bald-faced kid then, had killed Eli Safford. Shot the cowman in the back, to get himself a tough reputation. . . .

Van Daniels had never wanted any part of the cattle rustling. Gambling was his game. There was more money on the gambling tables at his Silver Dollar than there was in the vault at his bank. But it was money his dealers and bartenders took away from men like Brick Lucas and The Lobos.

"I'm not trying to whitewash the name of Van Daniels, Eli," Ramona said quietly. "Papa was a gambler. Square or crooked, we'll never know. Though he said a good gambler had no need to mark his cards. The law of percentage was in his favor when he was dealing for the Silver Dollar. Van Daniels wanted the Safford ranch because he wanted to plug the border at Lobo Gap."

Captain Ryan of the Arizona Rangers had hinted at something like that when he let Eli Safford Howard ride alone to Mescal. He'd told Eli to withhold final judgment on Van Daniels until all bets were down.

Now Eli Safford Howard and Ramona Daniels waited behind the drawn blinds and barred doors of the bank for Brick Lucas and The Lobos. Eli made no effort to take away the gun Ramona had in her

hand. Van Daniels had been right. This girl with the sleek blue-black hair and smoke-gray eyes would stick by her man to the death.

The waiting was nerve-racking. They watched from behind the drawn blinds. Minutes dragged. . . .

Over at the Silver Dollar, Brick Lucas was using whiskey to salve his wounds and deaden the sickening pain of his humiliating whipping, and to fire his guts. Now and then his rasping voice lifted in profane abuse. He was getting his Lobos worked up to a fighting pitch.

A pair of The Lobos came out of the saloon. They gathered the saddled horses there and rode down to the barn leading the extra horses, Eli's along with the others. And they were unsaddling at the feed yard and throwing the saddles on fresh horses. It looked as though Brick Lucas and his Lobos were planning something that called for a fast getaway. That meant but one thing. They were planning to rob the bank.

Ramona said she knew a few of the Arizona Rangers by sight. Captain Ryan had them planted here. They were in the crowd in the Silver Dollar. They were playing a cautious, waiting game. When the sign was right, when the bets were all down, they'd play their hands—to win.

"But Captain Ryan will wait," Ramona said, "until Eli Safford Howard gets the deal."

"You think Captain Ryan might be showin' up?" asked Eli.

"Captain Ryan," smiled Ramona

Daniels, "rode into Mescal an hour ahead of you. He's at our house right now."

Ramona had gone to the convent school at Tucson with Captain Ryan's two daughters. She was, she told Eli, like one of the Ryan family.

The half doors of the Silver Dollar swung open. Brick Lucas shouldered through them and stood there in front of the saloon. There was dried blood caked on his face and it splattered his torn shirt. He had a six-shooter in his hand. His hat brim slanted across slitted green eyes, he roared his challenge in a raucous, half-drunken shout.

"I killed Eli Safford!" he shouted. "I hung Tom Howard. I'm killin' Eli Safford Howard if he's got the guts to come out from behind a woman's back to fight!"

Eli slid back the bar. Ramona lifted neither hand nor voice to stop him. It could be a gun trap. They both knew that. But it was a challenge that Eli could not refuse.

Eli Safford Howard had his own six-shooter in his hand when he flung open the bank door.

As if it were a signal, all hell seemed torn loose inside the Silver Dollar Saloon. Guns exploded. Chairs and bottles smashed. And above the crashing din of the ruckus roared the big voice of Captain Ryan of the Arizona Rangers.

"Pick your Lobos, boys. And play for keeps!"

Big Brick Lucas lurched to one side to get his back against the wall.

His teeth were bared in a wolfish grin. The gun in his hand was spitting streaks of flame.

Eli Safford Howard stood on wide-spread bowed legs. His gun never lifted higher than his sagging cartridge belt as he triggered.

His first bullet hit Brick Lucas in the brisket where his lower ribs joined. The big .45 slug doubled Lucas up and spoiled his aim and his bullets splattered against the adobe wall of the bank and smashed the front window with its drawn blind.

Eli's gun kept on spewing streaks of fire. He felt the recoil kick inside his hand and each time the gun kicked, he thumbed back the hammer and pulled the trigger. He was shooting fast and every bullet he fired hit its mark.

His second shot hit Lucas in the neck and the blood spurted with every quick pulse beat. Death was stamped on the big deputy's red face, mottling it. The pack leader of The Lobos went down slowly. His knees buckling out, his broad back slowly sliding down against the adobe wall of the Silver Dollar Saloon. He was dead when he pitched over into a shapeless heap.

The big ruckus inside the saloon ended as abruptly as it had begun. And Captain Ryan of the Arizona Rangers shouldered through the swinging half doors and stepped across the dead hulk of Brick Lucas. He was ejecting the empty shells from his six-shooter as he walked across the wide dusty street. Big, powerful, unperturbed.

"Mebbyso that Ranger commission did make you bullet-proof, son," he drawled. "You don't show much sign of wear and tear."

Eli Safford Howard did not have a bullet mark on his hide. But the crown of his Stetson hat had been drilled. His gun was empty. And now that it was all over, he felt shaky and weak-kneed.

They found Ramona crouched in behind the heavy mahogany partition beside her dead father. She put down the sawed-off shotgun and Eli lifted her to her feet. She clung to him with both arms.

But it was not until quite a while later that the tears came like a flood. Heavy sobs racked her slim body and after a time the sobbing wore itself out and the tears no longer came. Eli held her quietly and smoothed her black hair.

They buried Van Daniels in a grave beside his wife's. The bank was closed and a notice was tacked to the door stating that all those

who had money deposited would be paid off to the last dollar.

It would take all the money there was in the vault and what there was in the big safe at the Silver Dollar. The past years had been lean for Van Daniels. He had died broke.

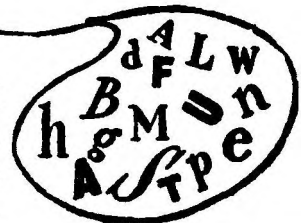
Eli Safford Howard and Ramona Daniels were quietly married at the Tucson home of Ranger Captain Ryan. Then they rode together to the Safford ranch where they were starting their life together. The Vent had been removed from the S brand. It was on a lot of cattle and on every horse in the little remuda that Ramona had built up. There would be plenty more cattle in the S iron, Cap Ryan told them. Mavericks were plentiful. Every man who belonged to the Arizona Rangers would put what mavericks he caught into their S iron. Sort of a wedding present, Ryan said.

"On account of because you closed the Lobo Gap."

THE END



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

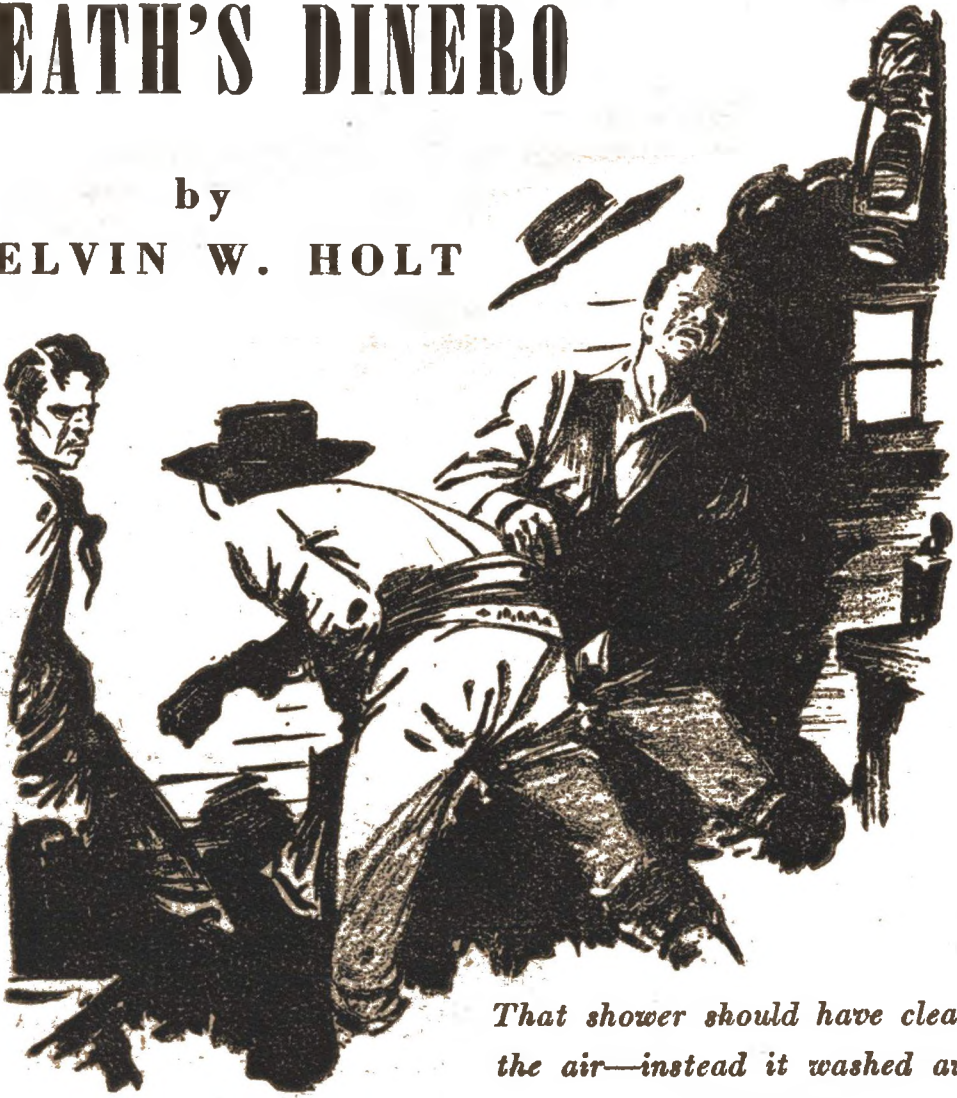


- |              |              |              |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| 1. wochuckod | 6. ermin     | 11. onke     |
| 2. yerrus    | 7. tomram    | 12. punknich |
| 3. tropage   | 8. yer       | 13. raugaso  |
| 4. nadstalf  | 9. sealew    | 14. hastop   |
| 5. erootch   | 10. stunchet | 15. werc     |



# DEATH'S DINERO

by  
MELVIN W. HOLT



*That shower should have cleared  
the air—instead it washed away  
a killer's alibi*

It's an old saying that any man who will go so far as to predict the west Texas weather is either a stranger in the land or just a plain damned fool.

Rudge Carlin wasn't exactly a stranger. He'd been working at Hatfield's little ranch for three months. He was Hatfield's only hired hand, and during the long hot days of combing the brush for cattle and their talks in the quiet evenings,

the Old Man had come to trust him.

Nor, to his own way of thinking, was Rudge a fool. Matter of fact, he thought he'd handled it pretty cleverly. Of course he hadn't counted on it raining that morning, but he figured this was in his favor. *Rain washes out hoss tracks*, he mused ironically, *even when the tracks ain't there in the first place!*

Now it was nearly noon, the rain had stopped and overhead the sun

was peering out, as Rudge returned to Old Man Hatfield's ranch, Deputy Slats Willis riding beside him. Rudge had ridden to town and fetched the deputy out here on a false pretext, wanting Slats on hand to "discover" the crime. It would look better that way; Rudge would act just as surprised and horrified as the deputy would be.

"You say the Old Man figures he's been losing some steers, eh?" Slats Willis broke the silence.

"Yeah," Rudge lied glibly, "he seems to think so. No definite proof of anything, but after that bunch he sold last week, he claims his remaining tally's about twenty head short. Me, I dunno. Hatfield's getting old and cranky; sometimes I think he's a little addled."

Furtively his greenish eyes watched the thoughtful deputy. Willis was a long-legged, mild-mannered young man with wistful gray eyes and a shock of corn-tassel hair that refused to stay in place except when Slats grew weary of pushing it back and tugged his battered old hat down tight over his ears. All in all, Slats appeared rather incompetent.

They rode out of the mesquites and came within view of the Hatfield place, and Rudge knew a fleeting moment of uneasiness when he saw the big pinto standing ground-hitched in front of the cabin. Then he almost smiled.

The pinto yonder belonged to Matt Bronson, who owned the neighboring ranch. Perfect! Now it was Bronson, and not himself, who must bear the brunt of suspicion. And in view of the fact that Bronson and

the Old Man had quarreled on several past occasions, Bronson would have a tough time trying to squirm out of this mess.

Rudge and the deputy rode up to the weather-beaten ranchhouse and dismounted, doffing their slickers and tying them behind their saddles. Matt Bronson's burly figure filled the doorway, his blunt features a trifle pale despite his dark tan, and his black eyes unusually wide as he put his gaze on the approaching men.

"Howdy, Matt," Willis said. "Where's the Old Man?"

Bronson had difficulty finding an answer. Finally he blurted: "Inside . . . dead!"

Slats' long legs carried him swiftly past Bronson and into the room. It was true. Old Man Hatfield's wizened body sprawled lifeless on the floor, his gray beard and one side of his face resting in a crimson puddle. Shot between the eyes.

Rudge Carlin edged in, saw that the Old Man lay exactly as he'd fallen. With those glazed, bulging eyes which stared hard but saw nothing, the Old Man looked rather pathetic. Carlin had hated doing it, but he couldn't have Hatfield telling tales on him.

It was the same line of reasoning which had sent Rudge riding for the law instead of simply high-tailing for the tall tules once he had his hands on the money. Running away like that would have been a certain admission of guilt. When Rudge finally rode away from this range, he preferred doing it leisurely, with a clean back trail behind him.

Rudge did a good job of feigning horror, then slit-eyed suspicion as he turned to Matt Bronson. And Slats Willis followed his lead.

"How long you been here, Matt?" the deputy inquired pointedly.

"Rode up just a little while ago, and found Hatfield like this. You don't think I did it, do you? I came over to try and patch things up with him."

"Funny you picked such a rainy morning to make your neighborly visit," Rudge scoffed, capitalizing on his good fortune. "You came over here because you'd been stealing his cattle and figured he suspected you. Finding him alone, you killed him."

Bronson could hardly substantiate his time of arrival, Rudge knew. And the dampness in the morning air had kept Hatfield's blood from drying so quickly—another point in Rudge's favor.

Quickly Slats stepped over and took Bronson's gun from the holster.

Bronson flushed angrily. "I'm in the clear on this," he snapped. "That gun of mine ain't been fired lately, you'll notice."

"A careful killer might clean his gun afterward," Slats told him. "Or use another gun and then hide it somewhere. I ain't condemning you, Matt; a jury can decide on that after weighing the evidence."

"How do you know this wasn't Carlin's job?" Bronson asked, and Rudge felt almighty glad that he'd cleaned his own gun while he rode to town in the drizzling rain.

"I've been away nearly all morning," Rudge retorted. "And when I

left here, the Old Man was alive and healthy."

The deputy looked at him. "Just when *did* you leave for town?"

*I've got to expect a few questions,* Rudge consoled himself. *It's only natural where there's been a murder. But nobody can prove a damned thing on me.*

Aloud he said: "I don't recall what time it was. Didn't look at my watch." He was thoughtful for a moment. "I do remember, though, that rain started just as I was leaving."

Rudge had told it straight, figuring the truth wouldn't do any harm occasionally—just occasionally. But an hombre in his business couldn't afford to make a habit of it. At any rate, his affected sincerity seemed to satisfy Slats.

"The Old Man had about a thousand dollars for the cattle he sold last week," Slats mused. "He never used the bank in town, so he must've cached it somewhere around here. Maybe that's why he was killed. You happen to know where he kept it, Rudge?"

Rudge looked him squarely in the eye. "No. I never pried into the Old Man's business."

It had been like taking candy from a kid, Rudge reflected. The Old Man's bank was nothing more than a heavy canvas warbag, wrapped tightly around the packet of greenbacks and placed carelessly in the bottom drawer of the scarred old bureau in the corner. And the Old Man had trusted him. . . .

"Yeah, the money might be the

answer," Slats went on. "Reckon I'd better make a search for it."

But the search availed him nothing. "Keep an eye on Matt here, while I go outside and look around," Slats told Rudge.

Rudge drew his gun as Slats left the room, and kept it leveled on Matt Bronson's middle. The rancher was worried now, his dark face damp with perspiration. He looked almost desperate, standing there clenching and unclenching his big rope-gnarled hands, but he made no move and didn't say anything.

Slats Willis was gone a long time, and Rudge began to wonder. When the deputy finally came back into the room, he was carrying the Old Man's canvas warbag. Rudge remembered tossing it aside down at the corral after he'd removed the money, and now he wished he'd hidden it somewhere. But it would make no difference; there was still no way Slats could know who had dropped it.

"Seems like my robbery theory was correct," said Slats. "This is what the Old Man kept his money in; I've seen it before." He dropped his right hand nearer his gun butt, and his gray eyes seemed suddenly to flame. "And so have you, Rudge."

Something in the way he said it told Rudge Carlin that Lady Luck's benevolent smile had changed to a scornful laugh. He'd thoughtlessly reholstered his gun when Slats came in and now he regretted it.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded coldly.

"You wouldn't have any reason for

lying to me unless you were guilty, now would you? Sometimes it's the little details that trip a man up. I'm arresting you, Rudge."

Slats had advanced while he was talking. Rudge snarled and grabbed for his gun. Slats leaned forward and drove his fist against Rudge's chin, putting all the deceptive power of his frail-looking shoulders behind the blow. Rudge went down, stunned. Matt Bronson leaped on him with a vengeance, finally wrenching Rudge's gun free and backing away.

"Damn you!" Rudge exploded weakly, struggling up to a sitting position. "Somebody's going to pay for this. You got no proof that I—"

"The killer took the Old Man's money and left this," Slats interrupted, dangling the empty warbag before Rudge's bulging eyes. "You yourself said that it had just started raining this morning when you left the Old Man this morning. But when I picked up this warbag outside, I noticed something mighty peculiar—something that told me the Old Man was dead *before* it started to rain. What I found might have seemed flimsy evidence for a jury, Rudge, so I looked for the Old Man's beef money and found it—in the lining of your slicker. And now I'll tell you what I noticed about the warbag when I picked it up: The spot where it was lying hadn't been rained on, meaning that the killer—and by your own testimony it had to be you, Rudge—had dropped it there before the rain started."





# BOOTHILL JACKSON

by C. K. SHAW



## I

THREE MONTHS before, Casper Emory had been shot to death in The Silver Tooth Gambling House. The Tooth, in the hilarious year of 1849, was the wildest spot in the gold camp of Silver Bar, and according to the miners who frequented it, had three claims to infamy. It sold the rottenest whiskey in the Sierras, operated the crookedest gambling games on the American River, and had more killings under its roof than any saloon in California.

Lew Jackson was hired by Casper Emory's father to investigate his son's death, and to ascertain certain facts regarding the intentions of Emory's nineteen-year-old daughter, Roxanna. The elder Emory explained that he and his granddaughter were strangers. He hinted that Lew might find Roxanna Emory somewhat like her mother's people, but nevertheless he was determined to offer the girl a home.

"She will have money if her mother's people have not found her and drained it away," the grandfather told Lew Jackson. "She wrote me



*Could Lew Jackson keep a crooked tinnhorn in line, tame the Holy Smoke miners—and still dodge the free funeral that went with the Silver Tooth lookout job?*



briefly of her father's death but since then has been stubbornly silent. I want my son's death investigated, and I want to know the reason his daughter refuses to come down out of that wild country."

Jackson left San Francisco for Sacramento by boat. In Sacramento he bought a saddle horse for the remainder of his journey. He disliked that part of his mission which might be considered spying upon a young lady, but he had been won over by the old man's argument that a girl should not be left alone in the gold camps.

Silver Bar was on the eve of a great celebration when Lew Jackson arrived. Although it was only twilight, he found the gold camp breathing like a horse with the thumps. Lew wore two guns snugged into black holsters, a black hat whose wide brim shielded his eyes, and tight-fitting black pants tucked into expensive boots. He went to The Silver Tooth for a drink and planned to have supper later in the adjoining chophouse.

He inspected the big, square be-mirrored room where three months before Casper Emory had been shot to death. Then he drifted over toward a miner leaning lonesomely over one end of the long bar. Lew found the fellow friendly, and directed conversation towards The Tooth's sanguinary record.

"Bullets fly thick as hen feathers around The Tooth," the miner admitted. "One shootin' spree don't stand out above another, 'cept of course, the night when Casper Emory was killed. Him ownin' The Tooth made that killin' kind of special."

Lew was so interested in the story he bought the miner another drink. "You say this Emory owned The Tooth?"

"Every inch of her! See them paintin's yonder? They're real. Casper Emory was a high-brow. He laid out a pile of money makin' this a fancy place, and while he owned it, we guzzled good whiskey and there was honest gamblin'." The miner shook his head. "Then he got in the way of a stray bullet and Dad Owens took her over."

"A sad accident," Jackson observed.

"Yeah. Now Dad gives us this lye to drink and the gamblin' is as crooked as a dog's hind leg. Take this celebration startin' tonight. Dad says it's on account of California comin' into a State—and maybe she is, I ain't heard much news that way—but the celebration isn't for that! It's to get the dust away from the miners who've struck it on Holy Smoke Bar!"

Suddenly aware that he was speaking with a stranger, the miner swayed back and inspected Lew Jackson.

"You wear them guns like a tiger does his spots," he observed sagely. "Are you a visitor—or a dealer?"

"Just a visitor," Jackson answered, "but with the big celebration whipping things up, I might lengthen my stay. Have you ever been in the Frisco Palace? I'm the fellow who held down the lookout chair for the faro game there."

"I don't want no more of your whiskey," the miner said angrily. He poured what was left of his drink onto the floor and walked away.

Lew Jackson had not lied to the man. He had sat in the lookout chair in the Frisco Palace for over a year. Then he had taken a job as Wells Fargo agent, and he was still with the express company. Old Man Emory had hired him through Wells Fargo for the work he was now doing. As Lew watched the miner walk away, he wondered if the customers of The Tooth were at last making war on the crooked gambling.

Leaving the bar, Lew passed through the archway to the chop-house. As he took a stool at the counter, three men came in hurriedly from the street and hastened toward the saloon and gambling room. One was tall and thin with the dead-face look of a professional gambler. He wore a black suit and a white shirt with starched cuffs circling his bony wrists. Another of the trio wore ornate guns that seemed somehow to jump at you like a set of buck teeth. They hissed "gunman" like the warning of a rattler. The third man was a smallish, oldish man, and on a dog trot to keep apace with the gambler and gunman.

"Well, handsome," came a smooth voice in Lew's ear, "want to eat, or just looking The Tooth over?"

Lew turned to see a tall, lithe girl with shining brown hair drawn neatly back from wide cheeks. "A steak," he said, "cooked just enough so it won't bawl when I stick my fork in."

The girl leaned dimpled elbows on the counter. "From Frisco, huh?" she observed. "What are you doing here?"

"I plan to eat if the food comes

before I starve to death," answered Lew.

The girl moved for the kitchen with impudent slowness.

"Honest face," Lew thought, but he was frowning. Her eyes had spoiled the niceness of her face. He couldn't make them out, and usually he gauged eyes quickly. It paid when one sat in a lookout chair. "They . . . chill," he thought lamely. But he knew that wasn't it. Those eyes hadn't been cold; there was flame there too.

Before his steak arrived, shots cracked in the gambling room, and Lew's mind jumped to the trio he had seen vanish through the archway. He moved to the opening, and saw the finish of a flare-up that centered around several overturned felt-topped tables. Three shots had been fired, and at least one death cry now mingled with the stinging echoes.

The smallish man whom Lew had seen enter the barroom, suddenly leaped from the shelter of a table, arms waving. "Clean this mess up!" he cried in a quavering voice. "Summerville! Bently! Get to work!"

## II

A thick-shouldered, typical bouncer answered the cry. He moved gingerly toward an overturned table, peered around, then relaxed. "He's dead as a smoked fish," he observed with satisfaction.

The skull-faced gambler rose from his shelter. "It was one of the Holy Smoke miners laying for us," he said. "I think he got Summerville." He

pointed a bony finger. "Look behind that table yonder."

The oldish man went over at his little trot, and he beat his fists together at what he found. "Square between the eyes!" he moaned. "Selby Summerville dead and The Tooth set for her big celebration!" He pulled himself together and spoke to the thick-shouldered bouncer. "Bently, clean this mess up fast. Don't let the miners find things this way! We got to have good will at this celebration!"

"Good will!" the gambler snapped. "That miner was hid in here for the purpose of murdering all three of us."

"But he's dead now. At least Summerville done that much for me," the oldish man whined.

"Your supper's ready," the girl said in Lew's ear. He turned, and was disturbed again about her eyes. Was she pleased or horrified at what had just taken place? She brought him coffee and shoved the sugar bowl near his hand. Still she lingered.

"Hope your stomach isn't dainty," she remarked and shrugged toward the sound of dead men being dragged over the floor. "Dad's furious over losing Selby Summerville, isn't he?"

"Was Summerville the gunny, and is the oldish man Dad Owens?" Lew asked.

She nodded to both questions. "Summerville is Dad's lookout for the faro game. The gambler in yonder is Faro Ed Mosely, and he counted on Summerville to keep him alive." She arched her dark brows. "Ed's likely got ice forming in his boots by now."

Dad Owens came to the archway.

"Roxy, get Ed some coffee," he ordered.

Faro Ed's thin voice came instantly. "I'm taking whiskey."

"Faro, you never drink when you have a night of dealing ahead!" protested Dad.

The gambler came a step through the archway with Dad Owens. "I'm not dealing without Selby Summerville," he said flatly.

"I've thought of that," Dad responded in an oily half-whisper. "I'm goin' to give you Moon Bently. I'll find me another bouncer for tonight."

"Moon Bently!" Faro Ed's voice fairly scorched the name. "With these Holy Smoke miners out to kill, you offer me *Bently!*"

Dad's eyes bugged like the cords of his neck had tightened around his windpipe. "Faro, the pokes are heavy tonight . . ."

"I'm not dealing!"

Dad Owens' face was like a quivering lemon. "I'll roll out a barrel of free whiskey," he wheezed. "That will make the miners handle like lambs."

"I'm not dealing," Faro Ed repeated drably.

"Faro!" Dad moaned, "there's only *one* night like tonight!"

"And I've only got one life!" the gambler snapped with sudden fury. "They got Summerville; I'd be next!" He spun on his heel for the bar.

Lew Jackson had listened to the argument with only half attention, for when Dad Owens had called the girl behind the counter "Roxy," Lew knew he had been speaking to Casper Emory's daughter. The high cheek-

bones, smooth brown hair and chilly eyes belonged to Roxanna Emory. Lew pushed his empty plate away and slid from his stool. He approached Dad Owens who now was huddled at the end of the counter.

"For a hundred and fifty dollars," Lew said to Dad Owens, "I'll take over your lookout chair until sunup."

Dad's glance raced over Jackson like quicksilver, taking in the snugness of the two guns. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Boothill Jackson," Lew responded. In case there were miners about who would recognize him from the Frisco Palace days, he thought it best to keep to the Jackson. The "Boothill" he invented to impress Owens.

"Boothill Jackson!" Dad rolled the name on his tongue. "You have experience in the lookout chair?"

"I held down the chair for Nevada John that night those crooks set out to bust the Frisco-Palace bank," Lew replied.

The way Dad's lips worked told that he had heard of that night. "Like manna, you drop into The Tooth," he whispered. "Shake hands, shake hands well!" His smile oiled its way across his face, then it curdled. "A hundred and fifty dollars!" he cried sharply. "That's too much."

"Pay my price, or I don't work," said Lew. "I just saw what happened to Summerville."

"Maybe I can pay it," Dad moaned. "I know about that night Nevada John held. Yeah, his lookout's name was Jackson! That was a magnificent night!"

"It was large," Lew admitted dryly. "Get Faro Ed in here, Owens."

The dealer came at Dad's call. "Faro, be friends with the famous Boothill Jackson—the man that held down the lookout chair for Nevada John in the Frisco Palace . . . *that night!*"

Faro inspected Lew. "It's Jackson," he admitted.

"Sure!" Dad wheezed. "And I want you two to be friends. Faro, I've just hired Boothill Jackson to set in your chair tonight!"

"Let's have a cup of coffee, Faro," Lew invited. "We need to get a little acquainted."

Faro Ed sat down at the counter, and Dad Owens stood behind him and Lew Jackson, a hand on each man's shoulder. "I want you to be good friends," he chuckled and snapped down the counter for Roxy to bring coffee.

The girl had been close enough to hear the conversation, and she brought the coffee promptly.

"Roxy," Dad said, "this is Boothill Jackson, The Tooth's new lookout. Boothill, this is Roxy Emory. She owns a third of The Tooth . . . though I tell her every day to sell out. It's no business for a lady."

The girl folded her arms and looked Lew over as though she were seeing him for the first time. "Another lookout," she said. "That means another free funeral on The Tooth. Did Dad tell you, Boothill, that he gives you a free funeral when you get killed?"

Dad's eyes blazed at the girl. "You can't scare Boothill Jackson! He's got his luck nailed down."

"I don't trust to luck," Lew said quietly.

Faro Ed was listening to the street noises. "Those miners sound like cattle bawling at the smell of blood," he muttered. "Dad, send Sawdust to roll out that barrel of free whiskey."

"With Boothill in the chair, we don't need free whiskey," Dad protested. "Whiskey is to be sold, not given away!"

"There'll be all the free whiskey they can drink!" Faro snapped. "Remember Jackson and I haven't worked together before."

Dad groaned. "It'll be free whiskey," he gave in. Then he brightened. "After that preparation, we'll cut our games wide open — huh, Boothill?"

"Any speed the house can stand," Lew replied. "Limits aren't my business."

Dad rubbed his hands together. "It will be a big night! With the flag across the lookin' glass, I'll make a speech that will mellow hearts—all about California becomin' a State. Poke strings will loosen!"

Lew Jackson could feel Roxy Emory's eyes, although she had stepped away a short distance. It was plain Dad Owens gave the orders here, and yet this girl had power. Lew could feel it running in a hot stream between her and Dad. And it was apparent neither Dad nor Faro Ed liked her.

"We'll go to my office for a talk," Dad said to Lew. "We can't be alone here." He shot a glance toward the girl.

"Roll out that barrel of whiskey first!" Faro Ed said sharply.

"Excuse me, Boothill, while I help Sawdust," Dad apologized, and trotted into the gambling room. Faro Ed went to tell the miners there would be free whiskey.

Lew and Roxanna Emory were left alone. The girl came close and leaned her dimpled elbows on the counter. "I see the fight in yonder didn't upset your appetite," she said.

"That wasn't my fight," responded Lew.

"It will be before morning," she retorted. "The miners mean business."

"Trouble brewing, huh?" Lew said. "Just why?"

"They're tired of being robbed! And the Holy Smoke boys won't like a high-priced killer like you moving in for the night." The tips of her strong teeth showed in a chilly smile.

Lew leaned closer to her. "You're unfriendly to me. You own a third of The Tooth and should be anxious to see her bank run on a big night."

"What chance has a third owner of collecting any profits from Dad Owens?" she asked sharply. "He just says the bank loses."

"So Dad Owens is the two-thirds owner," Lew observed thoughtfully. "And he plans to get rich tonight."

"But he won't win! The Holy Smoke boys will bust his bank!" The girl glanced about. "Get on your horse and ride out of Silver Bar," she warned.

"I see you know a lot about the Holy Smoke miners," Lew said. "Tell them for me, that tonight the faro bank will operate on the up and up. Tell them not to start trouble." He leaned across the counter. "For,

Roxy, I'll be hired tonight to keep down trouble."

"And your way of keeping down trouble is to plant it six feet under the sod!" the girl whispered harshly. "That's a game two can play."

An icy curtain drew across Lew's eyes. "Are you in some plot with the miners to rob the bank tonight?" he asked.

Her dark lashes fluttered. "Don't go too far in your talk," she warned.

"Roxy," Lew said quietly, "I know that your father was killed in that room yonder, and that while he lived, The Tooth had honest gambling. Why did you and Dad Owens change the policy?"

"That's none of your business, Mister Boothill Jackson!"

He shrugged. "I just wanted the lowdown. I'm working for you now."

"Not me!" she said fiercely. Then she smiled her chilly smile. "Or maybe you are. In that case, *you're fired!*"

"Here comes Dad," Lew said. "Shall I tell him you fired me?"

"No, just get on your horse and ride away."

He shook his head. "I'm not a quitter." He met her eyes. "If you want me fired, tell Dad."

### III

The miners suddenly began to crowd into The Tooth in hilarious masses. Word of the free whiskey had spread and there were bellows for more tin cups, and roars for speed. Dad Owens, Faro Ed and Lew Jackson never did get their quiet talk in the office. With the tramping,

shouting, cursing miners flooding the place, Dad was kept busy every moment.

Lew stood at one corner of the bar and watched the room leap and pop to the spirit of free liquor. Some miners were in flannel shirts with rolled-up sleeves and muddy boots, unshaven and many with hair matted to their shoulders. Others were barbered and dressed in Eastern suits. Sawdust, The Tooth's main barman, slipped Lew bits of information when he could find time.

"There's near thirty of the Holy Smokers," he whispered to Lew, pointing them out in bunches. "They're stinkin' with dust," and he winked.

Lew saw that the Holy Smoke miners were organized, and that two men were acting as leaders. One was young with fiery black eyes, the other was middle-aged. Sawdust managed to get in a few words regarding the pair.

"The young one is Alvin Merrill, and he's smart with a pistol. The older gent is Duke Wayne. He's not as dangerous as Merrill. They both do a lot of talkin' with Roxy Emory."

Lew drummed on the bar with his fingertips. "How come Roxy and Dad get along so poorly?" he asked Sawdust.

The bartender blinked. "Dad don't want her—and it ain't no business for a lady. But she won't sell!"

"Didn't her father own all of The Tooth?" Lew asked.

"Yeah, but he gambled it away, and Dad got everything," Sawdust explained vaguely. "Sometimes I think



Roxy Emory and this miner Alvin Merrill are plottin' against Dad."

The bartender had to leave, and Lew Jackson pondered his words. He had watched Alvin Merrill order his supper. The girl had told the miner something. Whatever it was, Merrill had been angered. Lew had learned a lot about expressions and lip movement in his year in the lookout chair. With a start, Lew realized Alvin Merrill was heading his way now. He moved from the bar so Sawdust would not overhear their conversation.

Merrill planted himself before Jackson, his eyes stabbing like black lightning. "The lookout who sits in Faro Ed's chair isn't popular," he said bluntly. "Understand?"

"I do," Lew replied.

"I'm Alvin Merrill, Jackson, and I'm warning you to stay out of that chair. The Holy Smoke miners don't intend to be robbed tonight."

Lew's reply was sharp. "They'll not be robbed as long as I'm in the chair, Merrill. But warn them not to start trouble."

Merrill's anger mounted. "You've got a big rep, and it's genuine. Duke Wayne saw you *that* night in the Frisco Palace. But tonight, your gilt-edged rep isn't going to win for you. The Holy Smoke boys are going to bust that faro game wide open!"

"If you're so certain of busting the bank, you have a fake play rigged up," Lew said. "Don't use it, I warn you!"

Merrill paled beneath his tan as he felt the power of Lew Jackson's eyes. "I have enough dust to break a mule's back, and I'm ready to use it all to-

night," he said in almost a whisper. "If the bank was honest . . ." Then his lips fleered. "But it won't be!"

"You say Duke Wayne knows me?" asked Lew. "Then ask him if he knows of any crooked work I ever pulled?"

"He says your record is clean," Merrill admitted. "If I could trust you, Jackson, it would make things a lot easier."

"You'll know after the first few plays if you can trust me," Lew pointed out.

Tin cups were rattling at the tub where the free whiskey was running from a barrel. The roar in the room was thickening. Alvin Merrill drew closer to Lew, glancing once across to the crowding miners.

"That free whiskey was a neat trick," he snapped. "I had my boys pledged not to drink, but this free stuff was too much for them. It's going to make things worse — this drinking. If I could only trust *you!*"

"You'll soon know if I'm holding Faro Ed to an honest game."

Merrill's eyes grew ugly. "Why would Dad Owens hire you, if you're honest?"

Lew smiled. "This free whiskey threw the place into such an uproar, there hasn't been time for me and Dad and Faro Ed to talk. When I give Faro Ed his instructions is when they'll know what kind of a game The Tooth is running tonight."

The young miner remained marble-faced. "It just isn't in the cards for Dad and Faro to run a straight game. Why would you step into this fight

for mere wages, Jackson? You're getting a cut!"

Lew Jackson was not angered by the charge. "I'll say this to you, Merrill," he said quietly, "sitting in that lookout chair tonight is my way of approaching my real reason for being in Silver Bar. I'd have taken the chair for regular wages, only Dad would have been suspicious."

The blood drained away from the young miner's cheeks and his hands clenched at his sides. "You're on a special mission," he breathed. "You're hunting someone!"

"Dad's making ready to give his speech," Lew warned. "We better not talk any longer. Tell your miners to go easy."

Merill's eyes were excited. "I'll trust you a few plays," he said. "I can tell! I won't say anything to

the boys about you, but they'll wait for my signal to start anything."

Lew glanced over the roaring crowd. "The Tooth is a powder keg," he said. "Some of them might jump the gun on you. And, Merrill, remember luck *could* break against you all night!"

"But it won't! The miner that was killed here a short time back was my pard. It'll be half his dust that I use tonight. It's clean gold! No luck will run against it for long." Merill's voice dropped until Lew had to bend his ear closer. "And there's another reason," the miner told him with flashing eyes. Then his lips clamped and he walked away.

Another reason. Lew felt in his bones it concerned Roxy Emory. "If I live this night through," he thought grimly, "I'll be a long way toward

**Men, tough beard doesn't mean a thing—  
You ease it off—no smart or sting—  
Save time and dough, look well-groomed, too  
With Thin Gillette, the blade for you!**



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knowing how that girl's mind ticks."

Dad Owens was now on the bar, screeching for attention. "Listen to my speech!" he pleaded shrilly. "See, I'm standing beneath the glorious flag, and my heart is bustin' with mellowness. That's why I'm givin' my whiskey away. I want us all to be good friends!"

Lew Jackson moved across the room to the faro stand where the dealer waited with a nervous tightness about his eyes. Faro Ed stabbed a question at him.

"What did Merrill say to you?"

"Warned me he was going to bust the bank tonight. I told him if he thought he could outluck us, to come ahead."

"He's dangerous," declared the gambler. "He isn't touching a drop of whiskey and neither is Duke Wayne. The play must be smooth as glass tonight."

Lew Jackson leaned against the faro stand. "Faro," he said in a quiet voice, "roll them as high and wide as you want—limits aren't my business. *But honesty is!* Tonight, the game will be on the level. Watch you don't misplace any cards."

The blood drained from Faro Ed's face. "You're—crazy!"

"No, just honest," Lew returned.

"You've been bought off! That's what Alvin Merrill was talking to you about!" Faro snarled. "He offered you more'n Dad's paying."

Lew leaned forward swiftly. "Be careful of your charges," he warned.

Faro Ed turned from him and motioned for Moon Bently. When the bouncer came, Faro sent him for Dad Owens. Bently protested mildly be-

cause Dad was still delivering his speech, but Faro cut him short and the bouncer went to get Dad.

Dad Owens realized something had gone wrong, if Faro Ed would thus interrupt his mellowing speech, so he climbed down off the bar and came on his little trot.

"What is it, Faro?" he wheezed.

"Explain to Boothill Jackson what his business is," Faro snapped.

"You make crazy talk!" Dad cried. "Boothill set in the chair that—"

"Offer him more money. A cut—even a third!" the dealer said.

"*A cut!*" Dad's voice raked the idea with scorn.

"I'm not asking for more money," Lew informed Owens. "And if Faro goes for that pea-shooter he packs up his sleeve, you'll be dishing out another free funeral."

Dad waved his arms frantically. "Good friends, don't make the funerals for each other. Think of me—my celebration—my free whiskey. We'll talk this out, not shoot it out!"

At this point Alvin Merrill approached the faro stand, his dark eyes flashing suspiciously. "This looks like an important meeting," he said. "Dad, I've got my boys away from your rotten whiskey at last. Come over to the scales and start weighing up our dust."

Merrill swung a step away, and Dad started to follow him. Faro Ed grabbed his arm.

"See that Jackson understands he is here to protect me!" he whispered.

"If trouble busts, the miners will go for the lookout first!" Dad spat back in frantic haste, for Merrill was

turning. "Ain't it always the look-outs that get them lucky free funerals? He'll have to fight for you to save his own skin!"

Dad jerked away from Faro Ed and trotted after Alvin Merrill. Methodically the gambler began to put the final touches to his stand. His pale fingers moved unflinching. When he finished, he did not look at Lew Jackson, but at the heaving mass of miners.

Moon Bently came with a shotgun for the new lookout. Lew accepted it, mounted his stand and placed the weapon across his knees. The lookout chair had short arms, barely an elbow rest, and the platform was high enough so the person seated there could look down on the bettors and the banker. Lew did not draw his pistols, but he let his hands rest near his holsters, and his hat was forward to protect his eyes from any glare.

Dad Owens was busy weighing up dust. There was a hush in the room as heavy pokes appeared among the Holy Smoke miners. Dad weighed the dust, setting down figures on a tablet, and Alvin Merrill checked both the scales and the figures. Suddenly Merrill's voice came clear and sharp.

"This dust I'm giving you now belonged to my dead pard. He was killed in this room, but his gold goes on fighting."

The room rumbled unpleasantly. Faro Ed blinked and gripped his thick log stand with both hands. At last the gold was all weighed, and Dad sent it to a safe on the balcony. Two miners went with the dust as guards. The silence in the room was

harder on the ears than the roar had been. Dad's voice came in a nervous twitter.

"Twelve thousand for you, Merrill—and the cleanest dust in the hills! How do you want your chips made out?" Dad had his stub pencil ready for writing out the pasteboard chips that were used by The Tooth.

"Make me twelve chips, a thousand dollars each," Merrill answered.

Dad's pencil jerked upward instead of downward. "Nothin' for small bets?" he asked.

"I'm not making any small bets tonight," Merrill replied.

"Sure, sure!" Dad said approvingly. "A card wins or it don't—"

"My card will win," Merrill cut in.

"Sure, sure," agreed Dad. "You can guess them as good as Faro Ed."

Dad wrote out Merrill's chips, then paid off the other miners. Alvin Merrill was the only one who took such a large amount for a single bet. Dad finished and came trotting to the faro stand, his face tense, his nostrils quivering as though they reacted to the aroma of the gold he had weighed.

"Cut your game wide open!" he breathed at Faro. "Boothill Jackson—"

"Get away from Faro Ed!" the command came from Alvin Merrill.

The miners were crowding at his back, so Dad slid over to the lookout chair. "Watch with hawk eyes, Boothill," he urged. "It ain't good when the miners leave free whiskey this way."

"Start your game," Merrill ordered Faro Ed.

Lew Jackson's voice came down

from the chair. "Gentlemen, this game is on the square. If you're lucky, you win. If you're not lucky, the house wins. That's the way I play the game. Leave your guns in your holsters—all of you—and tomorrow there'll be no new funerals."

"Want us to bury you with your fancy harness on, Jackson?" a miner bawled. Alvin Merrill silenced him.

Faro Ed stood, sweat forming in pale beads on his brow. Slowly he began to shuffle. He cased the deck and stood for a second looking at the soda card. Then he spoke in a thin, steady voice. "Place your bets carefully. Be free, be easy. You have as good a chance to win as I have. Boothill Jackson told you it was an honest game. It is. You win or lose according to fate."

#### IV

The miners strung puny bets along the board. Alvin Merrill did not play. Faro Ed pulled the cards slowly, his hands steady, the sweat still standing on his brow. He called a winner or a loser without a change of voice or expression. The miners accepted their fate in utter silence. Dad was still at Boothill's elbow, and Sawdust, the bartender, joined him.

"I don't like it, Sawdust," Dad whispered. "It ain't good for pulses to beat so close to the belly. I've heard brags that are too strong. They want to finish their drinkin' on the ashes of The Tooth. That ain't friendly talk!"

Sawdust clutched Dad's arm. Alvin Merrill was now placing his bets.

He had waited for the last turn. If he could call that, he would win four to one. He placed one chip.

"Draw!" the miners bellowed.

Faro Ed drew. Merrill won. Mechanically the gambler paid off.

"Four thousand!" Dad whispered. "Soon now Faro will open up!"

"Four thousand is a big hunk of bait," Sawdust replied.

Merrill waited to bet again until there were two cards left in the last turn. For a win the bank would pay two to one. Merrill bet four of his thousand dollar chips.

Faro Ed drew. Merrill won.

"Eight thousand," Faro said mechanically and paid.

Merrill turned to quiet the roar of the miners, and Dad seized the instant to dart close to the dealer's stand.

"Once to win is right!" he panted. "Now the bait is too big! Cut your game loose!"

Dad shrank back as Merrill turned again to the stand. Merrill's next bet was another four thousand—and he lost.

His next bet was eight thousand, all of his winnings. He lost again.

His lids dropped lower over his black eyes as he piled five chips and placed them on the turn of a card. He lost again, and now The Tooth was five thousand dollars ahead of him. The miners watched, waited and listened. Merrill waited for the last turn where if he won, it would be four to one. He placed a stack of five chips on the turn. Twenty thousand dollars was what the bet would pay if Merrill's luck was good.

Lew Jackson leaned forward in his chair. "It's a big play," he said quietly. "Remember the game is honest. You win or lose according to fate." He rested his hands on the butts of his pistols. "Draw," he ordered Faro Ed in the same quiet voice.

Faro Ed seemed fascinated by the pile of chips. His fingers hovered over the box card. Then he drew. He slid the card, unexposed, toward him. Then he looked at it. Instead of tossing it face up, he covered it with his palm and lashed a glance toward Moon Bently who stood at the edge of the crowd.

"I win!" Alvin Merrill cried. "Faro's afraid to show the card!"

"You lost!" Faro Ed hurled the words at the entire crowd. "*Moon! Dad!*"

As he screamed for the bouncer and Dad to come to his aid, the dealer dropped down behind his thick log stand, dragging what cards he could sweep off, with him.

Lew Jackson's command came before a man had stirred. "Stand where you are—everybody!" He had not risen. The shotgun still lay across his knees, but he held both pistols on the crowd. They were like slim, gleaming pencils of death.

"Faro was afraid to show the card," Jackson said softly. "That means Merrill won!"

Dad Owens' screech was harsh and wild. "Bently! Sawdust! Clean them out!" he ordered.

Moon Bently leaped forward, his gun belching. But the lead plowed into the floor, for Lew Jackson had outguessed him. Sawdust stood like a stone man, realizing that Jackson was

against the house. His ears were deaf to Dad's screams. He was afraid of Boothill Jackson.

The only person in that room who had not heard Lew Jackson announce the miner as winner was Roxanna Emory. She had darted back to the counter for a rifle as the dealer had swept the cards from the stand, and standing in the chophouse door, she was too distant to catch Jackson's words clearly.

She swung the rifle to her cheek and fired. Up to that instant the famous lookout had held the room under his power. Then that rifle spat, and Lew stiffened in his chair. He leaned back, blood drenching his left side. His elbows sank to the arm rests and the shotgun on his knees began to slide to the floor.

Dad Owens' screams raked the room from rafters to the sanded floor. "Clean 'em out!" was the burden of his cries.

Faro Ed and Sawdust swept to gunfire, and Dad Owens grabbed for the fallen shotgun. He pulled trigger once, and the sullen roar broke the courage of the miners and sent them in blocks for doors and windows. Alvin Merrill's shouts for them to stand were futile against the roar of Dad's and Faro's and Sawdust's guns. Then one of Faro Ed's bullets dropped Alvin Merrill. Duke Wayne gave up the attempt to check the withdrawal of the miners, and dragged Merrill to shelter.

Almost in a daze, Lew Jackson saw all that went on. He knew when his shotgun slid to the floor, but could not reach for it. One of his hands



was empty now, but the right one still held a pistol. He began to lift from the chair, gripping the arm with his left hand to steady himself. No one was watching him, and so he got himself braced. He spoke down from the chair to the three men dominating the scene from the shelter of the faro stand.

"Dad! Sawdust! Faro! Get your hands up!"

His voice was weak as though small strength were behind it, but it was as steady as the single gun he trained on the faro stand. The three men challenged heard the voice and read its strength. The miners, plunging for exits, felt the change in the room, and turned back. What every man in the room saw was the famous lookout who had stood one night in the Frisco Palace against a mob and won, and now he was making another stand.

"He's shot through the heart!" Dad screamed. "He's got to die!"

Dad tried to swing his shotgun into line with the lookout chair, but Lew's gun spoke and Dad crumpled to the floor. Then Faro Ed and Sawdust opened fire. The battle was only the duration of a quickly drawn breath, but in that time Faro Ed and Sawdust both relaxed their smoking guns and sank to the floor. More blood gushed across the chest of the man standing beside the lookout chair.

Lew Jackson spoke to Duke Wayne, as the miner leaped belatedly to his assistance. "Take over," he whispered.

Hours later, Lew Jackson sensed life again. He was bandaged, and

the room where he lay was only dimly lighted. He was burning hot and things about him hung in space. When he tried to open his eyes, somebody told him to sleep.

"He'll live," somebody told somebody.

It was like that during the next day, unfamiliar voices, unknown somebodies. Lew woke, and slept again. Then at last he woke to find Roxy Emory sitting beside him. Her face was pale, her eyes deeply circled, but they were warm. He could understand them now. They were worried, and even yet fearful.

Roxy took Lew's hand and held it against her cheek. "I shot you!" she whispered. "Thank you so much for living!"

He smiled. "I like to oblige."

Alvin Merrill called often, and gradually Lew Jackson came to see the entire picture. It was what lay behind, that had built up to that last fierce night at The Silver Tooth. The girl knew that her father had not gambled and that Dad Owens and Faro Ed had forged the papers they showed her. And she believed they had murdered her father. Alvin Merrill and Duke Wayne knew why Roxy Emory was clinging to her third of The Tooth. She had been waiting for some proof of the crime to be let out.

"Dad Owens and Faro were afraid to claim the whole Tooth," Merrill told Lew. "They knew if they kicked Roxy out, the miners would burn their place down. So they left her a third, then expected to buy that for a song."

Dad Owens had been dead when

they dragged him from the gambling room, but Faro Ed had lived to admit the plot he and Owens had formed for coming into possession of The Silver Tooth. The barkeeper and the bouncer, Moon Bently, were not connected with the murder scheme, but the law had other crimes charged against them. Both were sent to prison.

Roxy Emory herself told Lew Jackson the entire story as the days passed and his strength returned. And he told her why he had come to Silver Bar, and why he had taken the lookout chair for Dad Owens.

"I fixed up the name, Boothill, just to please Dad," he told her. "Now I'd like to go back to plain Lew."

She smiled. "Lew, do you think my grandfather will like me?" she asked.

"Anybody would like you," Lew said warmly. "But, Roxy, your grandfather can't like you as much as I do. I came to take you away from Silver Bar, but when I do I want you to go as my wife."

Roxy had been holding his hand. Now she leaned over and kissed him.

"And that's what I want, too," she whispered.

THE END

## This is Kate Ulm



*WHO* vowed that she'd prove the innocence of Tom Graybeal and help him clear away that tangled web of dark intrigue which hovered like a cloud over the Missouri River range country. The deck was stacked against her but Kate was no mean gambler herself; she knew who held that hole card with "murder" written on it. Those enemies of the U Bar were plenty fast on the draw but they'd never matched their flaming six-guns against the fury of a woman in love!

*TRAIL BACK TO TROUBLE*, featured in our October issue, is a tense and gripping drama of early Montana by Walt Coburn. There'll be many other vivid stories of the great outdoors including such top hands as Clint MacLeod, Seth Ranger, M. Howard Lane, and Jim West, a cavvy of stimulating features and, of course, all your usual service departments.

# TROUBLE AT TWIN TREES

by ROD PATTERSON





## I

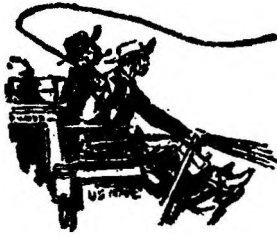
*Clint Denver didn't have time to worry about hiding that hijacked stagecoach from the law—he was too busy bucking a blizzard that blurred a traitor's back trail*

CLINT DENVER, tight-lipped, grim, came into the timekeeper's office of the Mogul Stage Company at Twin Trees, Montana, moving like a cat in a strange back yard, brushing snow off his shoulders with angry slaps of his big-brimmed hat. Until today a stage driver of parts, he was now a man without a job or even the hope of one.

Planting his ice-encrusted boots in a puddle of melting snow in front of Ed Fallon's desk, he folded his arms deliberately and settled down to wait for the timekeeper's return, with his gray-blue eyes as bleak as this January night and the expression of a man contemplating assault and battery.

Good breaks came seldom to Clint. At twenty-four he had learned by experience to expect the worst while hoping for the best, and he usually got what he was expecting. But this break he hadn't looked for. It had come like a thunderbolt and





was about as destructive. For Clint the glory of living had come to a sudden and bitter end when, at the termination of his daily run to Big Notch, the county seat, he had been summoned to Superintendent Dud Pegler's sanctum and bluntly fired.

The wind had blown snow down his neck, but the chill he felt didn't come entirely from the first blizzard of the winter; it came for the most part from the grim conviction that the world had treacherously kicked him in the face, and that, with the sole exception of a girl named Mady Mossman, he didn't have a friend on earth. And he was convinced, furthermore, that Timekeeper Ed Fallon and his own shotgun messenger, one Ernie Boggs, richly deserved to be rendered extinct without undue procrastination.

At the moment, Clint also wished he could shake out of his ears the strident tones of Dud Pegler's vituperative denunciation. The head of Mogul Lines, a frog-eyed, frog-bellied man with florid face and temper, had leaned back in his swivel chair, deliberate, unmoving for a long moment before he began his loud tirade: "You bum! You lop-eared, jug-headed bum!"

Clint had stiffened, not speaking,

and he felt the hackles of his anger rise.

Pegler kept spearing him with that wrathful stare. "Why'd you drive your rig two miles off your route this afternoon when you knew our franchise is up for renewal tomorrow and that Medallion outfit's all set to sign it over our head!" His eyes, hidden by puffy lids, were as hard as bolt heads and as cold. "One of the passengers you kept waitin' at Casson's Corners was Jonas Clegg, the county clerk. He just left here as mad as a stump-tailed bull in a cloud of flies, and anything can happen now!"

Clint took the super's furious stare and heard the baleful words. He tried to think of something to say, but shock at the news Pegler had imparted rendered him momentarily inarticulate.

"This here's a stage line we're runnin'," Pegler shouted suddenly, "not a livery stable!"

"I done what I thought was right," Clint finally found his tongue to say. He reddened to his ears, and sudden anger choked his voice. "The blizzard was bad and somebody had to drive down to Mule Jaw Creek for those school kids or they'd have been stuck out there in the cold for hours!"

Pegler's frog face seemed to retreat deeper behind its mask of heavy flesh. "It wasn't kids you was thinkin' about. It was that skirt—"

"Who you callin' a skirt?" Clint cut in angrily.

"That schoolmarm—that Moss-

man gal!" the super railed. "I got a full report from Ernie Boggs when I called him in. You been waitin' at the Red Butte Road every day for that . . . for that Mossman gal! And you been runnin' blue hell out of your hosses to make up your time! Boggs spilled it all, and Fallon tells me he's warned you before about misusin' your animals, and—"

"Fallon's a liar!" broke in Clint. "He never—" But he didn't finish it because Pegler cut loose with a blast of words that would have curled his ears if he had heard it. He didn't because he was thinking about Mady Mossman, about the land contract on the little ranch he'd bought, owing money to the bank, in debt up to his collar button. Then a single phrase, roared at him, penetrated his consciousness. It was: "You're fired! Go draw your time!"

Clint stared at Pegler unbelievably. "It's a frame-up, boss." His protest came in a hollow voice he hardly recognized as his own. "Fallon and Boggs've been tryin' to get me canned—just like Trumble and Finney got fired! They're tryin' to cripple Mogul and—"

Pegler gripped the arms of his chair, his jaw jutting like a snow plow. "Cripple, my eye!" he chanted savagely. "They're followin' my orders. I'll get rid of the deadwood here if I have to fire every driver in the outfit and go back on the pilot seat myself! Get out of here—out of this depot! Go ahead and take a job with Medallion, like Trumble and Finney done! Go

ahead, because I'll blackball you with every honest outfit in the West!"

Well, Clint had walked out of Pegler's over-heated office into the bitter cold of a roaring blue norther, and his anger had kept him hot until this moment. But now he was cold to the bones, for it was Pegler's threat of a "blackball" that had him scared.

In this early Montana country stage drivers belonged to an elite class. A rambler who made the grade was rare, and Clint had been one of these, working his way up through the stables and repair shop to driver of a slug wagon on a freight run, then after two years, to the seat of a high-wheeler and a passenger and mail route of his own. The future had seemed so secure that he had contracted for a ranch outside Twin Trees, had sunk his meager savings in the layout and borrowed on it to the hilt.

And he wasn't alone in this, his latest disaster. Now he had Mady Mossman to think about, to worry about. For a year she had been riding in his rig to the Red Butte Road. Northbound, she would walk the two miles to Mule Jaw Creek where she taught school. Southbound, afternoons, Clint had picked her up at the same desolate spot and had brought her back to Twin Trees where she lived, as he did himself, in a rooming house, alone. They had planned to marry in the spring, and Mady was going to help him operate his ranch.

But now he was finished, done, washed up. And if Pegler did keep



his word and blackball him, he'd be lucky if he got a job skinning a jerk-line string or whacking a grass train.

## II

Today, during the first hours of the blizzard which had howled suddenly out of the crag-topped mountains to the north of Twin Trees, Clint had carried Mady to Red Butte as usual, but on his way southward on the home trail, she had not been waiting for the stage at the customary spot. Worried by the bitter cold and drifting snow, he had driven his coach the two miles to Mule Jaw Creek and had brought Mady and her five pupils to safety—all this over the protests of Ernie Boggs, his messenger.

Poised waitingly before Ed Fallon's desk, Clint considered the future and found it black. Then he heard voices outside on the passenger ramp. Those voices preceded by only a moment the gusty arrival in the office of three men: Ed Fallon, Ernie Boggs, and a stranger muffled in a blanket coat and rubber boots.

Fallon, of negligible height and weight, with a long face and amber-yellow eyes, advanced deliberately to his desk and sat down, ignoring Clint, after a brief moment of hesitation when he saw the driver standing there. Boggs, young, rail-thin, dark, slid into a chair against the wall. He had been grinning slackly at the moment of entering the office but now had quit as he tilted back in the chair, hooking his heels over a front rung, his face

contorted by a chew of tobacco he carried in his cheek.

The stranger, taller than the others, had a bland face, restless eyes and a mouth that twitched from time to time. Clint had noticed him loitering about Fallon's office and nearby saloons for several days, but had been uninterested as to his identity till now.

Fallon spoke finally, without lifting his gaze from a pile of time sheets on the desk before him: "I was goin' to send for you, Denver. Want you to meet a friend of mine." He nodded toward the stranger who had turned down the collar of his heavy coat, and was advancing, hand outstretched to Clint. "This here's Dave Oldham. He's a stage man, too."

Clint eyed the man coldly, ignoring the hand, and he said to Fallon: "Pay me off, and then I want a word with you and Boggs. Alone."

Fallon flinched as though struck. He looked up into Clint's stiff-set face, nervously tapping long fingers on his desk. "I know you're sore. But it won't get you nuthin'. Oldham's got a proposition you oughta listen to."

The stranger took the cue, a bland expression on his wind-chapped face. "I need drivers, Denver. Good men—like you. How about signin' on with my outfit, at double the pay you're drawin' with Mogul?"

Clint veered his gray-blue eyes to Oldham's face, the hardening of suspicion in his own. "Now I know you," was his rancorous remark. "You're the agent for that Medal-

lion crowd that's been hirin' men away from Mogul." He swung his wrathful gaze on Fallon, then on Boggs against the wall. "So that's why you got me fired?"

Fallon shrank back in his chair, the streak of paleness in his sallow cheeks. But Oldham butted in with his quick words. "Business is business, Denver. I need men and I'll pay good wages to get 'em. My outfit'll have the franchise by tomorrow night, and we've got our rollin' stock and teams all set to start the mountain run."

Clint faced Oldham, an aggressive angle to his jaw, his eyes tight. "Medallion ain't got the franchise yet—not none!"

"We will have," Oldham answered in the same bland tone, "after the seven-forty leaves for the county seat tonight!" He lowered his voice, making it suave and self-assured. "I don't mind tellin' you this. Jonas Clegg, the County Clerk, will be ridin' in that rig when it starts for Big Notch, and we're plannin' a bad night for him. Time he gets home, he'll wish he never heard of Pegler and Mogul Lines!"

Clint eyed the speaker, angry, helpless. He kept opening and closing his fists at his sides. "Why, you—" He couldn't control himself any longer. Before he knew what he was doing, he had reached out and had grabbed Oldham by the throat. He was wild with rage, and fought off Fallon who had jumped out of his chair and was clawing at him from behind.

Then Boggs came across the office with piston-driven suddenness. He

had a gun in his hand and struck the barrel at Clint, catching him repeatedly in the head. Clint let go of Oldham's throat, and tried to duck the blows, but Fallon held him, and Boggs kept chopping with the gun until he fell to the floor, all the fight knocked out of him.

The last thing he heard before blackness swallowed him was Oldham yelling: "Lay off him. He's had enough. You'll kill the fool . . ."

Clint lay on the floor for a while. When he came to his senses, he was alone. Breathing hard, he hauled himself into a chair and sat with his head in elbow-propped hands, trying to get his wits together and not succeeding very well. His skull felt as though it had been cracked, and he was weak and shaky until he got up finally and washed his face at the corner sink. Some time later, still stunned from the beating he



had taken, he made his way out to the ramp.

The wind howled past him and made him duck his head to get his breath. Reviving a little, he started down the platform toward Dud Pegler's office near the street. As he passed the waiting room, the door flew open and three passengers hurried to board the Powder River Stage which had drawn up beside the ramp behind its double team whose ice-enameled bodies glinted in the dull outshining light.

With his hand on the knob of Pegler's door, Clint stopped, hearing an exasperated feminine voice challenge him from behind through the windy, brittle air. "Clint!"

He slowly turned, blinking against the wind and driven snow. A slight form was coming hurriedly toward him down the platform. And then he was staring into a pair of punitive blue eyes framed by a muffling fringe of fur collar. Mady Mossman seemed to be standing on tip-toe, but even so the top of her parka-covered head came below his shoulder.

"Clint," she said sharply, gripping his arms, "is something wrong?"

Mady had a way of mixing up his emotions. He felt angry and resentful now at being delayed when he had to talk to Pegler before it was too late. "No," he said, the fog in his brain beginning to clear, "there's nothin' wrong. Only what're you doin' here? Thought I sent you home and—"

There was a pugnacious tilt to her nose. "I came back because

something told me you were in trouble."

A white plume of steam bloomed at his lips as he sighed. "Pegler fired me."

"Oh!" It was a gasp, a protest. "What for?"

"A lot of things," he told her as patiently as he could. "Fallon and Boggs reported me."

"For driving after the children and me this afternoon? Oh, Clint, I was afraid of that!"

"I'd do it all over again," he answered stubbornly.

"I'm going to see Pegler and talk to him," Mady said firmly. "He can't do this to you when—"

Clint shook his head. "No, Mady. Besides, it's gone beyond Pegler now. The franchise expires tomorrow and the County Board of Commissioners will act on it early in the mornin'. There's a crooked outfit tryin' to horn in, and Fallon and Boggs are sellin' Mogul short." He gave her an urgent push toward the street. "Now run on home. I'll stop at your house in the next half hour."

Mady's glance on his face was as penetrating as the wind, and he didn't have much protection against either. "Clint, I wish you'd let me—"

He shoved her along a few feet, then she stopped and cried: "Why, Clint, your face is cut!"

"It's nothin'. I slipped on the ice." He waved her on good-naturedly.

When she had gone, reluctantly looking back at him, he turned and

entered Pegler's office. The super glanced up from his desk, then lanced Clint with a venomous look. "Well?" It was one word, but sparks of conflict seemed to charge the over-heated atmosphere of the room.

"Listen, Pegler," Clint began in a hurried voice, "I don't want you to think I'm a squealer, but—"

"What *do* you want?" The super bristled. "Spit it out!"

"I . . . well . . . I wish you'd let me drive the seven-forty up to the Notch tonight. This blizzard—"

"Not for Mogul," Pegler said in an iron-hard tone, "you don't drive no rig!" He had a slipping hold on his short temper and would, Clint knew, explode any second now.

"I got to tell you something, then," Clint said grimly. "Fallon and Boggs—"

"Clear out!" There was the tell-tale sizzle of a burning fuse in the super's voice. His brick-red face grew a shade darker. "I don't want to hear your alibis!"

"But," Clint argued stubbornly, "it's about Mogul—about Fallon and Boggs. They're goin' to—"

"Git!" Pegler bit the word off harshly, his heavy jowls seeming to puff out visibly.

Something cold touched the back of Clint's neck, or felt like it, but he burned inside. "Pegler," he said slowly, distinctly, "by this time next month you'll be runnin' that livery stable you was talkin' about a while ago!" Now that he had got that off his chest, his successive

impulse was to shoot a hard right into the super's big cow-catcher jaw. But he resisted it, wheeled and walked out, leaving the door open behind him. He heard Pegler's roar of rage cut short by the bone-jarring slam of the door.

Walking, head down, toward the street, Clint passed the wide-open stable doors. He caught the familiar sounds, smelled the familiar smells. Hoofs thudded from hay-filled stalls in there; a blacksmith's forge panted somewhere in the depths of the cold, dim shop beyond; a burst of orange sparks exploded against the darkness and the whipping sleet and snow, and an anvil clanged.

He had loved his job, had needed it. And how he had needed it! But he was through, never again to grip the hand-smoothed lines of a Mogul rig, never to feel the rumble and lurch of high wheels or hear the solid thunder of iron-shod hoofs along well-remembered trails.

Caught in the back lash of anger, trapped in the current of resentment, Clint walked the four blocks to his rooming house through knee-high drifts, oblivious to the icy gale and the steadily increasing pressure of the storm. In his room on the second floor, he lighted a lamp, stripped off his sheepskin coat and threw it on the bed. The air was cold and dank, but he didn't mind it now. His head felt sore, his face raw, but he didn't seem to mind that either.

Dropping slackly into a chair near the window, he stared at nothing. He hadn't stopped at Mady's house as he had promised her, but he had

a vague notion in his mind that maybe he would pack up and leave town in the morning without seeing her. It might be easier on them both that way.

### III

The wooden staircase outside Clint's room began to creak under boots rapidly climbing it—more than one pair of boots, Clint noted absently. Then the door was flung open and a tall, oldish man wearing a gilt star on his overcoat came in. Clint stared at Marshal Jim Biggers, not even wondering why he had come here.

Biggers wiped his eyes to clear away melted ice, then squinted down at Clint. "Put on your coat, Denver," he said in a brusque voice. "I'm takin' you in with me."

Clint's rising from his chair was a movement of silent, smooth agility. This was something else he hadn't looked for, but this time he wasn't going to be caught off guard.

"What for?" he asked, calmly, steadily.

Biggers surveyed him carefully, a hand on his holstered gun which he wore outside his overcoat. "Where'd you get them cuts on your face?" he demanded in a cold, unfriendly tone.

"I was jumped," Clint answered ironically, "by some friends of mine."

The marshal moved toward the bed, keeping his shrewd gaze anchored on Clint's still face. Then he bent with one hand reaching, and felt of the pockets of Clint's sheepskin coat. He pulled his lips together suddenly, exploring with his fingers,

then drew a flat bundle of greenbacks from one of the pockets.

"Jest like Fallon said," was his grim comment, and he eyed Clint with his guarded glance.

Clint was staring at the money in his hand, astonishment, shock, twisting his face out of shape. "What . . . he said, but couldn't finish it.

"Ed Fallon's charged you with robbery and this is the money he said you grabbed after he and Ernie Boggs caught you goin' through his desk," the marshal said coldly. "They both say you took a beatin' 'fore you cut and run, and your face sure looks it. Put your coat on, Denver." He threw the sheepskin at Clint who caught it one-handedly.

Clint thought fast. He could hear Biggers' constable stirring restlessly in the hallway, and wondered how he could get past the man without taking a shot in the back, but he knew in that split-second of waiting and staring at the marshal that he'd have to risk that bullet. One thing was sure: He couldn't leave here with Biggers because Fallon and Boggs had built up an air-tight case against him. While he had lain unconscious in Fallon's office, the timekeeper had slipped the packet of greenbacks into his pocket as evidence to be found when he was picked up later on.

"Come on—I ain't got all night!" Biggers said impatiently.

Clint moved then. One moment he held his coat by the collar, the next he had flung it squarely at the lamp on the table. There was a muffled tinkle of broken glass and blackness smashed down on the room. With the snuffing out of the light, Clint

rammed past Biggers and into the hall. He collided full tilt with the constable, and heard the man stumble against the wall, heard the lunkish thud of a gun against wood. With the marshal's loud protesting yell echoing behind him, he hit the stairs four at a time, his boots whacking on down to the lower hallway, then out to the porch and the gale and the biting cold.

Snow spattered his face. Wind knifed through his jacket as though it was tissue paper. He tripped over small drifts, plowed through larger ones, powering his lean frame into a stretching run for the Mogul depot. One thought obsessed him: to find Fallon and Boggs and sweat the truth out of them if he died in the attempt.

The Dry Ford stage, pulled up close to the ramp behind its double team of black mountain-wise horses, was the only Mogul rig in sight when Clint loped into the depot out of the white smother of the storm, gasping for breath, done in by his four-block sprint. Sucking gulps of the frigid air, he wobbled up the platform to the door of Fallon's office. It was deserted, locked up, lights out.

Clint felt a chill on his neck that didn't come entirely from the zero atmosphere when he realized that the timekeeper had gone home for the night. He didn't know where Fallon lived, but would have to try and find out before Marshal Biggers caught up with him again.

On his way back to the stable, he glimpsed the clock on the wall in the waiting room. It was exactly eight. The Big Notch rig, therefore, was



well out of town on its way to the county seat, with Jonas Clegg one of the unlucky passengers. What kind of a ride those people had ahead of them, Clint could only guess, and the thought didn't help to quiet the general tumult of his mind.

Rushing through the wide-open stable door, he collided with something solid which turned out to be Alf Reedy, night foreman and his friend of two years' standing.

"Whoa!" Reedy yelled, lifting his arms and ducking his bullet head. "Take it easy, kid!"

"Where's Fallon and Boggs?" Clint strangled on the words.

Reedy stared, a wry-faced little man in corduroy and high-laced boots that looked two sizes too large for him. "Fallon's gone home, far as I know," he answered promptly enough. "And Boggs just drove the Big Notch rig out—"

Clint stopped him with, "*Boggs took the seven-forty run?*" in a thunderstricken voice.

Reedy nodded his head, encased in a knitted cap. "Pegler's orders. We're short-handed 'count of the storm and— Say, why ain't you drivin' a rig tonight?"

Clint grabbed Reedy by the arms, shaking him, panic in his voice. "Is Jonas Clegg aboard?"

"Sure. Your girl is, too. She

bought a ticket just 'fore they pulled out."

The bottom fell out of Clint's stomach. He flinched as though struck, but could not speak.

Reedy tossed an abrupt gesture with his horny hands. "What's the matter? You look like you'd seen a ghost!"

Clint whipped himself around and dove through the stable doors without a word. The foreman ducked after him, yelling: "Hey—what's up! Where you goin' now?"

Clint headed for the Dry Ford coach whose driver had not yet put in an appearance. With one hand on the iron cleat above the front wheel, he turned his head toward Reedy. "Square it with Pegler if you can, but I'm drivin' this rig to Big Notch whether I go to jail or not! Try to stop me and see what happens!" Then he put a boot on the wheel and vaulted nimbly up to the pilot seat.

But Reedy was clambering up behind him. "I'll go, too!" he yelled. "If there's trouble comin', I aim to be in on it!"

Clint gathered up the ice-encrusted lines and kicked the big brake off. "Boggs is either goin' to wreck his rig or stall it on Wildhorse Pass!"

"Why," the foreman gasped, "they'd all freeze solid in this storm!"

"Not if we catch up to 'em in time," Clint said in a grating tone.

"I still don't get it," Reedy argued, squatting on the seat beside Clint.

Clint slapped the ribbons down hard on the horses' rumps and started the Concord down the ramp. "Fal-

lon and Boggs," he told the foreman grimly, "are goin' to try and throw the franchise to that Medallion crowd!"

With a lurch and a grinding squeal of iron-rimmed wheels on snow, the coach slewed out into the street, while behind it on the Mogul ramp voices yelled and boots made a stiff-legged hammering on the frozen boards. As Clint shouted the horses into a run, he saw, vaguely, through the swirl of snow and wind, two figures running down the ramp. One of those men was Dud Pegler, the other Marshal Biggers. He caught the echo of their lifted cries, but could not hear the words.

Clint had the string of blacks in a driving run before they left the environs of Twin Trees. With the town's street lamps obliterated by the storm and by distance, he held the horses up to this stretching run. Now they were whirling out across flat land, fully exposed to the awful pressure of the gale.

The jar and check of large snowdrifts began to slow the horses down. Jets of snow and sleet spouted back over the Concord's funny-board, spattering into Clint's face; and he flipped the collar of his jacket up and ducked his head to breathe.

Reedy, huddled on the seat, nudged Clint. "Here—take my gloves. You ain't got on clothes enough for a night like this."

"I'll make it," Clint said chatteringly, but he accepted the offer of the gloves which he pulled on swiftly, one hand at a time.

They were rolling along the cambered county road, and it was like a



push into an interminable and whirling curtain of snow. The big brass side lamps shed only a faint amount of light, just enough to illuminate the coach and the two men perched high up above the teams. But the feel of the dips in the road and the swing of the rig on the leather straps it used for springs told Clint his exact location though he could not see beyond the wheelers' heads.

Working the lines with unhurried, exact skill, he encouraged the teams with a crooning yell from time to time, dexterous as a conjuror on the high seat. A mile from town, Alf Reedy bawled admiringly above the shriek of the gale: "They mind you like they was houn' dogs on a leash . . . best damn driver Pegler ever had!"

The cold squirmed under Clint's jacket and made his voice come as jerky and explosive as a Gatling gun. "I'm through. Dud fired me tonight!"

Reedy swiveled his wind-bitten face around, eyes round and wide. "Good gosh, Clint, they'll lock us up for stealin' a Mogul rig!"

"They'll throw the book at *me*," Clint said savagely. "Fallon and Boggs planted some money in my coat!"

The foreman contracted his frame on the seat with a groan. When he spoke again, Clint didn't get his words because the gale took them and hurled them off into the howling void.

The stagecoach lost some of its forward speed. The gale was whipping great ragged holes in the storm. Blinking through these momentary

gaps, Clint saw they were climbing the first switchback turn into the mountains. Now the real fight began, for the road climbed steadily for a thousand feet before it broke over the crest of Wildhorse Pass, then swooped down into the yonder valley where Big Notch sat among its hills and flat-topped mesas.

The ascending rumble of the wheels and the rhythm of hoofs beat in muffled cadence against the white slopes at either side of the trail. Huge boulders, trees slid past and into the blackness they left behind. Clint juggled the lines, cold to the bones, yet knowing the gale would be far worse once through the pass and rolling down the westward slope of this mountain range.

Clint thought of Mady somewhere up ahead, and tried to puzzle out in his mind what had possessed her to take this trip. She had no relatives that he knew about in Big Notch. The chill on the back of his neck which didn't come from the cold increased and slid on down his spine. He didn't want to think about it, but he knew he was afraid — afraid of what might happen to Mady in the coach ahead if Ernie Boggs should abandon the rig on some side trail, leaving his passengers to shift for themselves. Time! It meant everything now. If he could overtake Boggs before he left the county road . . .

Clint took the lash of the storm with gritted teeth and narrowed eyes, squinting steadfastly into the scud of snow and wind ahead. They were high in the mountains now. Up there against the stormy sky lay the slot of

Wildhorse Pass; the summit was only a hundred yards in front of the horses which were lunging at the traces, jerking the heavy rig forward foot by foot, fighting the grade and the ice and the gale.

And then it came—first the clatter of hoofs and wheels on the road ahead, then the bold glow of a Concord's running lights swimming out of the murk. Clint stiffened on the seat. His belly tightened. His throat went dry. He held his breath. Beside him, Reedy gripped the seat, staring at the rig in front of them. His mouth shaped words, but Clint couldn't hear what he said.

Clint gathered the icy lines in knotted fists and urged his horses up the grade. The shadow of the rig ahead loomed huge and grotesque in the glow of its own side lamps. A column of blowing snow arched and blossomed above its high, railed deck, obscuring the driver and spinning back into the faces of the two men on the rig behind.

Suddenly the grade eased up, and at the same instant the force of the gale increased, which was an indication that they were in the Pass and in another moment would be starting down the westward slope. The approach to the summit was on a gradual curve. The road at this point, thirty feet from rim to rim, was black and rutted and frozen with jagged sawtooth rocks at the shoulders. But on the westward slope, beyond the hump of the Pass, it narrowed to eighteen or twenty feet, twisting steeply downward for two miles, with three hairpin turns, skirting monumental cliffs and rock slides. It was

a tricky route in fair weather, a perilous one on a night like this, with a blue norther howling in the crags and ice a hazard to hoof and wheel.

The stagecoach in front of Clint vanished from view for a moment, but presently the swift concussions of its four-horse string climbed high in the pass as it tipped the hump with driving hoofs. The glare of its side lamps moved a long the mountain wall, then hit Clint in the eyes again. He was closer to the rig, and he urged his horses over the last pitch, pulling up close to the leading stage.

If he was going to pass it, now was the time. He grabbed up the whip and sent its black lash curling into the storm. He rode the brake, juggling horses and rig to the left, pushing forward with a sudden burst of speed. Then he was running beside the other stage, wheel to wheel, horses neck and neck.

Alf Reedy's sudden yell ruffled the air around Clint's ears: "Hell, pard, that ain't a Mogul rig!" He was pointing with a rigid hand, shaking Clint's shoulder with the other.

Clint, staring to the right, saw the black letters on the side of the other rig, MEDALLION STAGE LINES.

His gaze whipped up to the high front seat and touched for a second on the two men crouched there in the biting gale. Two faces turned toward him for an instant, startled eyes gleaming in the sudden flare of Clint's side lamps. Clint recognized both men. Ed Fallon and Dave Oldham!

Then Clint forgot the peril that lay ahead of him. A cold fury overwhelmingly possessed him, for Fallon,

who was driving the other stage, deliberately swung his horses to the left. Clint saw his intent and swung his whip. His own string lunged ahead. There was a jarring crash as the two Concords collided at the hubs, then broke apart. Then Clint's outfit was running free, and in the lead.

The sudden jerk slammed Clint back hard on the cushions. Then he had no time for anything but to try to slow his horses on the downward grade. Reedy was hanging to the seat two-handedly, boots braced on the Concord's funny-board, his face a mask of anxiety and alarm.

"Listen . . ." His voice was a croaking yell as the stage roared for the grade. "Listen, we'll never make it—"

Clint, half standing, took the teams in hand. The big coach slammed hard at a left-hand turn, riding careeningly for the rim, then slewing back with a crash into the icy ruts. Clint had the horses in the straight-away only a moment when the whole outfit struck a reverse curve. There came the grinding skid of iron-rimmed wheels, a moment when horses and stage seemed to hang in eternity, then the outfit snapped


straight again, sliding down the sloping trail into the whirling vortex of the storm.

Clint fought with the horses to stay in the ruts, to hold the swaying rig away from the left-hand rim. Snow and sleet pelted him in the face, blinding him. It swirled across the flat deck of the stage behind him with a hissing sound and spun out behind like the white-hot tail of a comet in full flight.

His mind worked trigger-fast. Where was Ernie Boggs and the Mogul rig? Had he passed it somewhere in the rear? If Boggs had ditched his rig somewhere east of the pass, then why were Fallon and Oldham heading westward with an empty coach? Wouldn't it have been to the advantage of the Medallion crowd to rescue the County Clerk when Mogul had been stalled?

Down—down swept Clint's outfit, pitching, lurching, skidding. And he stared with glassy eyes into the blackness in front of the now madly running teams. The horses, sensing the peril of the spinning wheels behind them, fought to keep their hoofs on solid ground, struggled to hold the coach upright on the trail in back of

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them. The off-wheel black lost his footing for an instant, but recovered in time, heroically lunging ahead again.

The last long bend whipped toward the swooping rig—a wide swing to the right with a sheer drop of a hundred feet to a rocky ravine on the left. Clint did not dare to work the brake. The slightest pressure of the big brake shoes might throw the outfit into a skid that would carry it crashing over the rim into the yawning blackness below.

#### IV

The Concord was climbing the outside rim in spite of everything Clint could do. Alf Reedy got ready to jump. Clint's hands froze to the lines and he held his breath. He had one terrifying glimpse of the void on his left, of jutting rocks, of sudden agonizing death. His arms stood out like iron rods in front of him, drawn taut by the ribbons. The gale sucked up his jacket sleeves and cut him across the chest like searing fire; his eyes were frozen into granulated slits.

He seemed to be holding horses and coach on the knife-blade rim by the force of his will. The whole outfit teetered a moment, then slewed violently back to the ruts again. He let the lines go slack with a deep and shaken breath, not seeing, not needing to see, having only to feel the solid jolt of the axles under him, the slap of the leather springs, the dry clatter of the coach's panels, to know that they were off the mountain and sliding safely over level ground.

Now he applied the foot brake with

sure, hard pressure. He hauled back steadily on the lines. At the same moment a pair of side lamps blinked out of the storm ahead like damp twin moons. Above the clatter of wheel and hoof, Clint heard a man's long strident yell. Through the ruck of wind and snow he saw the Mogul coach on the trail ahead, and a chunky little man standing beside it, wildly waving his arms.

Clint blew out a breath of long relief, heard Reedy do the same. He sat back in the seat with the lines held high against his chest. The big Concord and its four rawboned blacks hammered down to a skidding stop, brake shoes streaming orange fire. Clint leaned out of the seat, staring downward into the blue-tinged face of Jonas Clegg, a badly frightened and shivering little man. Then, peering against the drive of the snow, Clint saw a small cold face in the window of the Mogul coach. Mady sat inside, wrapped in a blanket, and she was speaking, though Clint couldn't hear her words.

Jonas Clegg was still yelling and waving his arms, pointing westward into the storm. Clint caught what the county clerk was telling him.

"Go after that driver," Clegg shouted frantically. "He cut the horses out and left us flat!"

Clint stared ahead into the storm, and caught a shadowy movement on the trail.

"It's Ernie Boggs!" Reedy yelled.

Clint started his horses with a sharp yell, and snapped them forward, breaking the stage out of the frozen ruts, through snowdrifts up to the hubs. Reedy reached for the lines.

Clint relinquished the leathers, still peering on ahead. Then the rig slid up beside a man who was riding a gray horse bareback. It was Ernie Boggs. The guard turned a startled face toward the two men on the seat above his head, blinking in the glare of the brass side lamps.

But Boggs had no time to pull his horse away because Clint left the seat in a long clean dive. He landed on Boggs, wrapping his arms about the man and dragging him off his horse in a sprawling fall into the snow.

Clint's breath whistled through his teeth as he landed on his back with the wiry, muffled form of Boggs on top of him. The next few moments were filled with confusion and flailing arms and legs. Clint found himself locked in a struggle with a man as strong as himself and with the advantage of superior agility.

They rolled over and over, clinched in a furious test of strength, Boggs trying to break away, Clint hanging on tenaciously, hammering the man about the face with numbed fists. Blood appeared on the snow, and after a few moments Boggs quit struggling and lay still. Clint, clothing torn, his eye swelling and his nose gory, stood panting and swaying on his feet.

Alf Reedy pounced off the stage and ran up. "I'll give you a hand and we'll chuck him in the rig."

Together they trundled the unconscious Boggs back to the stage and tossed him into the passenger compartment. "Stay here and watch him," Clint told Reedy. "I'll walk back and get Mady and Clegg."

When Clint reached the stalled Mogul rig a moment later, a small bundled figure ran toward him, struggling through the drifts. And a small voice cried his name. Clint snatched the girl and stared down into a pale, frostbitten face. Mady's lips were frozen and stiff, but they moved cautiously.

"Right here," she murmured, and put a mittened finger on her cheek.

Clint debated dumbly, then solemnly kissed the spot. Afterward he said: "Why'd you do it, Mady?"

The pugnacious tilt lifted her chin, her small frostbitten nose. Her eyes glinted bluely up at him. "Don't dare scold me," Mady said. "It was the only way I could get Jonas Clegg alone to talk to him. There's a meeting at Big Notch tomorrow—"

"But I told you—"

She wouldn't let him finish. "Everything's going to be all right. Mogul's going to get the franchise because Mr. Clegg promised me he'd talk to the commissioners." She paused, went on breathlessly: "And Dud Pegler will have to take you back, and—"

In back of them, Jonas Clegg's voice could be heard griping. "Come on, you two! Let's get going before we all freeze stiff!"

Clint realized, with Dud Pegler's summons next morning at the Mogul depot in Twin Trees, that the frog-faced super was prepared to dynamite the participants in the affair of the night before. Pegler had haled the Mogul crew into his office on the ramp when Clint slid into the crowded room.

It was clear at last that Pegler was

set to clean up Mogul Lines. Most of the grim-faced men in the room realized that a showdown had come, but they held to a kind of blind faith that they could cover up any minor infractions of the rules. They had not reckoned on the sharp eyes and shrewd knowledge of the man who was their boss.

Pegler sat like a squatting Buddha in his swivel chair, watching all those faces before him from under heavy, hooded lids. Then he began shooting his questions at first one man, then another. In the first ten minutes of the hearing, he fired three men.

Clint stood against the door, quietly smoking a cigarette, staring at the super through a bluish haze. He sensed the thickening cloud of hopelessness, the resentment in the silence that followed Pegler's blast of words. Then he heard his own name spoken.

"Denver, front and center!"

He moved through the crowd, halting finally in front of Pegler's paper-littered desk. He met the super's iron stare, his own unwavering and calm.

"You're up on charges of takin' comp'ny property without permission," Pegler said in his harsh, clipped voice. "Got anything to say?"

"Yes," said Clint. "You can go to hell!"

The stunned quiet that followed the slowly spoken words was stirred by the shifting of boots and by the low mutter of sullen voices. Pegler never blinked; his ruddy face was more froglike than ever.

"Anything else?" he finally in-

quired, his eyes completely hidden by the puff of lids.

Clint nodded. When he spoke, it sounded ventriloquial coming from his impassive lips. "You been firin' the wrong men. What's happened to Fallon and Boggs? Where are they? Those were the boys that were workin' with Medallion, not these men you're bawlin' out!"

Pegler's grim look didn't alter, but a faint twinkle showed behind his lowered lids. "Denver," he said, softly for him, "you're a good man. It took nerve to do what you done last night. I was bankin' on you and you came through for me."

Clint could only stare.

"I happened to come along the ramp last night, the super took it up from there, "and looked through Ed Fallon's window just as he was plantin' that money in your coat. I saw the whole business—everything that happened after they knocked you out."

Clint went on staring. "So?" he asked with growing puzzlement and rage.

"I had to let nature take its course, is all," the super said. "Couldn't prove anything on Fallon and Boggs till they had a chance to put the rope around their own neck."

Clint licked dry lips. "You mean . . ."

Pegler beckoned to someone in the crowd. "Reedy!"

The foreman came forward, with a kind of embarrassed grin, to stand at Clint's side. "Tell him, Alf," Pegler directed. "All of it."

Reedy said, not looking at Clint,



not daring to: "We had Fallon and Boggs spotted weeks ago, and figured they was waitin' for the right time to sell Mogul down the river. Last night when Boggs reported Denver for drivin' Miss Mossman off Mule Jaw Flats, we guessed the time was ripe. And so when Fallon wanted Denver fired we got all set." He coughed apologetically. "Don't go and get sore, Clint, but I had the Dry Ford rig lined up to go before you come bustin' in with the marshal on your tail. Only one thing had Dud and me worried—we was afraid you wouldn't come, that you'd cut and run instead."

A slow flush scalded Clint's face. "So I was a sucker, hey? Okay. But what about Miss Mossman? Why'd you let her get on the Big Notch rig when you knew—"

Pegler butted in protestingly. "We couldn't help ourselves. We didn't know she was goin' till she bought her ticket, then we couldn't stop her without tippin' our hand to Fallon and Boggs!"

"Where's Boggs—where's Fallon?" Clint wanted to know.

"In jail," the super stated with satisfaction. "They'll stay there, too, for quite a while." He waved at the crowd. "That's all."

The congestion at the doorway developed into a mild stampede as the Mogul crew hurriedly left the room. Pegler stopped Clint as he turned away. He softened the hard line of his mouth with a smile. "Wait, Clint. I got a job for you—a good job."

"You can take it and—" Clint stared back, still angry, a truculent coldness in his gray-blue eyes.

"Easy, Clint!" Alf Reedy grabbed him pleadingly by the arm.

"I was a boomer when I came to work for Mogul," Clint said stiffly. "I'm still one. I'll be driftin' on, like I've always done before."

"I was afraid of that," Dud Pegler sighed. "And now I'll have to find me a new super. And what am I goin' to tell that skirt—"

Clint's jaw jutted out aggressively. "Who you callin' a skirt?" he demanded.

Pegler leaned back in his chair and laughed. "I mean that Mossman gal you've gone soft-headed on," he said when he got his breath. "Look, Clint, I'm movin' down Cody way to start another mountain line. You're the new boss here—if you'll take the job."

Clint looked at Alf Reedy as if for an answer, and the foreman winked. "Miss Mossman's waitin' outside now," he said. "Go on and ask her, kid, not *me!*"

Clint jumped to the door and turned the knob. A gust of icy wind erupted the papers on Pegler's desk. "Hold it open," Clint said, "I'll be right back."

"The door?" barked Pegler, half rising in his chair.

"The job," Clint said, and slammed the door.

Pegler and Reedy looked at each other and grinned as they heard the platform echo to the loud, stiff-legged hammer of Clint Denver's boots.

## RANGE SAVVY

BY GENE KING



Flying cowboys are one of the latest innovations on the vast Western ranges under U. S. Grazing Service jurisdiction. Lately these air-minded cowhands have been employed in locating bands of wild horses still at large, and helping herd them towards pre-arranged roundup centers. Since 1943 some 100,000 wild mustangs have been rounded up and removed from grazing districts in 10 Western States. The drives have been put on by Federal authorities with the co-operation of local conservation officials and stockmen using the range. Fewer wild horses mean more room and more grass for cattle and sheep, and the planes have helped greatly in spotting the horses' last hideouts.

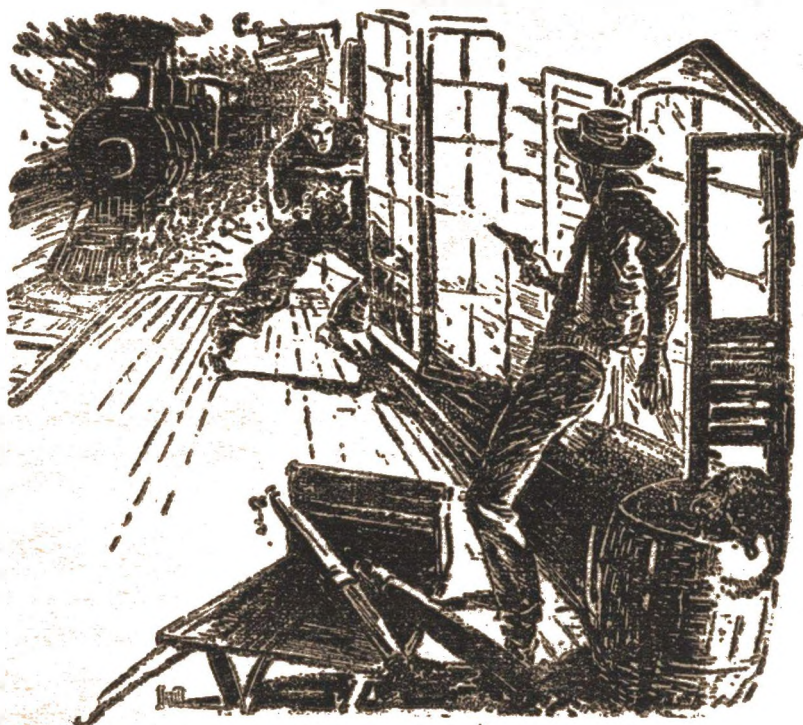


Albinos show up among many species of wild animals. One of the latest to join the snow-white, pink-eyed family is an albino coyote, caught by a veteran coyote hunter at Kildeer, North Dakota. The albino version of the crafty scourge of the livestock range is a rarity, and something new to North Dakota. So much a rarity, in fact, that it is reported plans have been made to place the white-furred coyote in the State museum at Bismarck.



Perhaps no blanket in North America is as well known as the famous Hudson's Bay. It has an ancient and honorable history. The "point" system of designating such blankets, which goes back to the days of the early fur traders, is still in use. Originally when beaver pelts were an accepted medium of exchange among the traders, a 3-point blanket meant one that could be purchased for 3 beaver skins. To buy a 3½-point blanket required 3 large and 1 small beaver skins. A 4-point blanket was worth 4 pelts. Today the points mean size, which is indicated by the number of black bars in one corner of the blanket. A 3½-point blanket is 63 by 81 inches, and weighs 5 pounds. The 4 pointer, weighing 6 pounds is a full 72 by 90 inches.

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.



*The law would never get within shooting distance of those train-robbing renegades unless Bije Varney was able to flash the signal that meant a*

# GREEN LIGHT FOR GUNSMOKE

by LEE E. WELLS

HE had the lithe grace in the saddle, and the broad shoulders of a man twenty years his junior. His holster rode low on his right leg, a habit he had formed in the old days when night riding meant stolen cattle and flaming guns. In his day Bije Varney had known the hoot of the owl and the whisper of the leaves, and the marks of those times had not entirely left him.

There was still a quick, hard flash

to his dark eyes, something grim in the corners of his lips, a strong forward thrust to the jaw and chin. But time had carved a few wrinkles in his leathery cheeks, sprinkled gray in his temples and in the thick black sweep of his mustache, gnarled his fingers a little.

He thought fleetingly of the old wild days along the Mexican border as he rode toward lonely Eagle Point. On just such moonless, starlit nights



as this he had often ridden to steal another man's cattle, eyes and ears alert, muscles tense, hand hovering close to the gun butt. Now he rode for nothing more dangerous than a weekly cribbage session with Art West.

There was a telegraph station and switch at Eagle Point, a few cattle pens where local ranchers shipped once or twice a year. A hand-cart shack and the one-room adobe where Art West lived alone were the only other buildings. Five miles from the cow town where Bije had his gun shop, there were few spots more isolated than Eagle Point.

Bije reached the top of the climb and drew rein to breathe his horse. Down below he could see the steady lamp gleam from the telegraph window, the only spot of light in this universe of jumbled, threatening peaks. Art would be waiting, cards and peg board placed, bottle and whiskey glasses close to hand. Occasionally the key would chatter but the message would seldom be for Eagle Point.

Bije sighed contentedly and touched the horse with his blunt spurs. As he came close to the station he could see the dull gleam of the rails that cut like a straight scar through the mountains to distant

Denver. The road swerved and the switch light glowed like an emerald in the darkness. A silhouette passed momentarily across the lighted window and, at the same instant, Bije saw the two saddled horses tethered in the shadow of the station.

His grizzled brows rose and he drew rein. He turned his head and looked over toward the adobe. It was dark and silent. Moving in close to the horses, Bije dismounted. The station door opened.

"Who's that?" a strange voice called.

"Bije Varney. Where's Art?"

The stranger hesitated for only a split second, but it was enough to make Bije's eyes narrow and the crow's feet deepen at their corners.

"Sure, Varney. Art said you'd be along. Come on in."

The man stood framed in the lighted doorway. He was dressed in blue work shirt and denim dungarees. He wore no gun belt. Bije dropped reins over the horse's head and walked to the station. He entered the familiar room even as the key started a spasmodic clicking. The man at the door listened, then grinned.

"Not us. I'm Cal Ullery. Art had business in Denver and the company sent me down on the evening train. This gent is a friend of mine, Tim Dolan."

Cal Ullery waved to another man who stood spread-legged by the big window that overlooked the track. Bije could see the steady gleam of the switch light through it. Dolan was a pinch-faced man with a dark

stubble on his slack jaw and chin. His battered hat brim had been rolled tight almost doubled at the front. Watery green eyes slid away from Bije's direct stare and he mumbled a "howdy," hooking his thumbs into crossed gun belts.

The key chattered again and Ullery laughed.

"Never have any business here," he remarked. "Brought Tim along to keep me company."

He was stocky and broad-shouldered. His bullet head sat on a thick stump of a neck. Blue eyes were pinched close on either side of a thin nose. His thatch of yellow hair was badly in need of a comb and his loose lips smiled too readily, Bije decided.

"Art didn't say anything about Denver," Bije said.

Ullery shrugged. "I don't know about that. I was sent here and Art turned the place over. Said he'd be back tomorrow and told me to watch for Bije Varney. I reckon you and him spend a heap of time up here."

Bije grunted and looked around the room. He couldn't see the cribbage board and cards, but the whiskey bottle sat in plain view by the telegraph key. Ullery caught his glance and chuckled again.

"Sure, reckon it's time for a snort. Art said you'd drop in for a slug or two and tell some windies before you rode on."

"Art should know," Bije said dryly and smiled. "Been riding by here to the ranch for five years or more, I reckon. Every night."

Ullery poured a stiff serving in

a water glass and handed it to Bije. "Art said you was different than most cowhands, older and had a heap more sense. Too bad he had to run off all of a sudden. Reckon you'll make up for it tomorrow."

"Reckon." Bije downed the slug and his eyes swept over the yellow-faced clock high on the opposite wall. In an hour the Denver train would come through from the west. The key started an insistent chatter and Ullery leaned over it for a second, shrugged and straightened.

"I been at a busy station. Can't get used to no calls for me."

Bije's lips thinned slightly and he placed the glass on the counter by the bottle. Dolan was watching him, thumbs still hooked in his gun belts. Bije dropped his hand to his own holster and Dolan stiffened, but Bije only adjusted the leather to a more comfortable position and sighed.

"Well, I'll be riding on to the spread, I reckon. Sorry Art's gone. See you again sometime."

"Sure." Ullery smiled and walked with him to the door. He stood there while Varney walked over to his horse. On the way, he came close to the handcart shack and noticed that the door was padlocked. Without breaking stride Bije went on and swung into leather. He threw a careless wave to Ullery and rode out into the darkness, following the road across the tracks and higher into the mountains.

Bije rode slowly without looking back and he even whistled a few bars of an old border tune. But his mind was busy, filled with the keen cer-

tainty that trouble was brewing at Eagle Point. This man, Ullery, had made a heap of mistakes and it was a cinch that Art West hadn't talked any to him. Bijé rubbed the flat of his palm along his jaw.

"Denver train's due blamed soon and it'll carry bullion from the mines west of here. Them gents sure have evil designs against that baggage car. Main thing's what happened to Art."

Bijé considered other items as the road dipped down from the tracks and crossed a small bridge. The hoofs sounded like loud drum strokes that would clearly carry back to the station. Art never locked the hand-cart shack, always claiming there was nothing in it anyone would want. Tim Dolan and his matched guns riding low on each leg was blamed funny company for a relief telegraph operator. The key that had chattered several times also came sharply to Bijé's mind. He had deliberately called himself a cowboy and Ullery had not caught the error. Bijé nodded grimly, shifted his holster to a better position.

The road twisted around the first shoulder of the hills and Bijé swiftly neck-reined the animal off the trail. Stepping out of the saddle, he ran swiftly to the top of the low ridge. He could look down on the station now and he saw that the door was open. Dolan had mounted and he leaned down over the saddle while Ullery motioned in the direction Bijé had ridden.

Grinning crookedly in the darkness, Bijé edged back down the slope to his horse. He lifted the lariat and moved silent as a shadow to the

road, shaking out the noose. He knew what Ullery had said. Dolan had his orders to catch up with the old man and silence him with a slug. Evidently Ullery was not too sure his act had been convincing and was taking no chances.

"Takes more'n two to hold up a gold train," Bijé muttered. "Wonder where the rest of them polecats are hiding."

He filed that away for future thought. At the moment he had to take care of Dolan. Bijé crouched low, rope ready, eyes straining into the darkness. He heard the distant boom as Dolan's horse crossed the bridge, and his muscles tensed.

Bijé crouched down so that anyone coming along the road would be limned against the dim glow of the stars. The soft thud of approaching hoofs increased in tempo as Dolan spurred the animal to catch up with his quarry. Bijé waited. Suddenly his horse nickered and Dolan's answered.

Dolan's muffled curse sounded and then Bijé saw the high shape of the man against the stars. The owlhooter had halted but a few yards away. Bijé dared not move. His horse nickered again and Dolan twisted around in the saddle to face the sound.

Bijé whirled the loop once and made a silent cast toward the shadowy figure. He felt the rope settle and jerked back on it, tightening the noose. Dolan choked and evidently his spur raked along the horse's flank. The animal bucked forward as though it had been



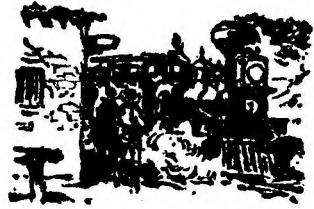
touched with a hot wire and Dolan hurtled from the saddle.

Dropping the rope, Bijé lunged toward the owlhooter. He jerked the heavy six-gun from the holster and threw himself atop the shadowy form on the ground. The gun barrel lifted to slash downward, but Bijé checked his blow. Dolan already lay limp and silent, his breathing strained and rasping.

Bijé's fingers found the rope buried deep in Dolan's neck and he hastily loosened the loop. Dolan had evidently hit hard when he catapulted from the saddle, knocking himself out. Bijé lifted the man's guns, then caught the skittish horse. He found a coiled lariat on the saddle and used it to truss Dolan tightly. The man's neckerchief served as an excellent gag.

Finished, Bijé tugged the owlhooter's heavy form to one side of the road, rolled him down the short embankment into the shallow drainage ditch that held no more than a thin layer of mud on its bottom. Then leading the renegade's horse off the road, Bijé dropped the reins over its head. It would stand indefinitely hitched to the air that way.

Bijé again ascended the slope and peered over the ridge toward the telegraph station. He studied the handcart shack, wondering how he could slip up to it, break open the padlock and not attract Ullery's attention. If there was just the one renegade, Bijé wouldn't have worried too much. He still was mighty fast with a gun and Ullery would be at a disadvantage. But there were



bound to be others. From his own wild days Bijé knew that.

"Can't do nothing squatting up here like a crippled bullfrog," he swore.

He topped the ridge and descended the other side, stopping constantly to search the shadows and listen. If there were more of the renegades, they would be placed strategically around the shack in the darkness, ready to attack the gold train when it came through.

Dropping down into the deep ditch beside the tracks, he cautiously crawled up to the rails. He removed his hat and slowly lifted his head, six-gun tightly gripped in one fist. He could see through the open door into the lamplit room. Ullery poured another drink from the bottle, downed it and came striding outside. The renegade now wore a gun belt.

Ullery stood a moment looking toward the bridge and the dark hills, then turned back inside. The key chattered again, the sound barely reaching Bijé. He ran his tongue along his dry lips, took a deep breath and topped the rails. Scuttling across them like a black spider in the night, he dropped down into the shadows of the other side.

The shack was not far distant now and Bijé could see the faint shape of the door. Ullery was not in

sight and Bije was silently thankful the bandit had a whiskey bottle to hold his attention. He edged closer to the shack and finally crouched around the corner in its shadow.

"Art!" he called in a low, urgent tone. "Art! You in there?"

He listened but heard nothing and a moment of doubt came. That passed. Alive or dead, Art West was inside. That padlock was a dead give-away. The lock, the insistent telegraph key and Tim Dolan's tied-down guns had fairly screamed trouble from the moment Bije had arrived at Eagle Point.

Suddenly Bije sucked in his breath and flattened himself against the flimsy wall of the shanty. Four silent riders had appeared out of the darkness. They passed within a dozen feet of Bije, rode on to the station. Ullery appeared in the doorway.

"Ain't it about time?" one of the men asked. The lamplight showed a coarse, swart face, a low forehead and a livid scar across a pendulous cheek. The other three riders sat hump-shouldered, staring down at Ullery.

"Just about," Ullery said. He looked toward the hills again and then at the signal light. "Wish Tim'd get back."

"Saw yore visitor. Tim taking care of him?"

"Supposed to, Ace. But he's been gone too blamed long. That train'll be through in twenty minutes. Wait'll I take care of that light."

He walked away from the station and Bije heard his boots crunch along the gravel. Metal sounded

loud in the night and the green light made a half circle, a red light now gleaming along the tracks. Bije smiled frostily and gave the outlaws grudging credit. The Denver train would swing into the switch and stop, the engineer not daring to disobey a red light. Curious at the unscheduled stop, the engineer and fireman would leave the cab. The baggage car door might even open and the bullion would be ready for the taking. There'd be gun smoke at the least sign of opposition, Bije knew, with the train crew taking the slugs.

Ullery's boots crunched back along the track and Bije moved carefully away from the shack. He could be too easily discovered if those renegades scattered out.

"What about Tim?" asked the man named Ace.

"Twenty minutes to go," Ullery swore. Bije had reached the rails and he saw that the four renegades were watching Ullery intently. "Ace, I reckon you'd better trail after him a spell. I ain't heard no shot, and that old coot might upset this whole deal."

"Hang it, let Tim watch out for himself!" Ace exploded.

Ullery's voice grew hard and clipped. "I ain't worried about Tim. But I'm figuring for the rest of us. Suppose that old rannihan got suspicious and rode for help? About the time the train pulled in, we'd have a heap of trouble on our hands. Hunt up Tim, Ace. Be back here in ten minutes if you ain't found him."

Ace swore and turned his horse. By now Bije had reached the shelter

of the far side of the embankment. He watched Ace move slowly away from the group and head for the road. The outlaw represented a very pressing danger to Bijé and his plans. Even if Ace didn't find Tim, he'd be somewhere behind Bijé when the fireworks started, in a good position to place a slug in Bijé's back.

Bijé moved silently back up the low ridge. Ace would circle to the road and bridge and then around the shoulder. Bijé could top the ridge and reach the road ahead of him and waylay the man.

Ace would have to be taken out of the game as silently as Tim Dolan, and that worried Bijé. He couldn't risk getting close enough to use a gun barrel and he doubted if the rope trick would work again. Muttering under his breath, he lengthened his stride. Suddenly his foot struck a rock, twisted and he sprawled headlong.

He was sure he had raised enough noise to awaken the dead. He twisted to one side, six-gun drawn, breathing heavily, his eyes-probing the night. There was no alarm and, in a moment, Bijé pulled himself to his feet. He tested his ankle and it seemed to be all right. Then he snapped his fingers as an idea struck him.

Bijé looked around for the stone, and found it and ran silently toward his horse. Mounting, he cut directly to the road. He waited there, hefting the stone, getting the feel of it. He realized that he was cutting the deck mighty thin, but it was the only way he could play out the hand.

He heard the rapid beat of hoofs and he set himself. Something moved on the road, came toward him. Suddenly the rider sawed back on the reins and the horse came to a sliding halt.

Bijé spoke in a carrying whisper, the better to disguise his voice. "Ace?"

"That you Dolan? Where in blazes you been?"

"Come here," Bijé said in that hoarse low voice.

Ace urged the horse forward and at last Bijé could make out his shadowy shape with a reasonable degree of certainty. His lips flattened and his right arm shot back and forward.

The rock flew straight. Ace tumbled backward out of the saddle and hit the dirt with a bone-shaking thud. Bijé rushed in, gun barrel ready. The renegade was groggy and dazed. Bijé's sweeping blow missed him and Ace recovered. His hand dropped down to his holster, but Bijé's gnarled fingers wrapped around the thick wrist, shoving the weapon deeper into leather.

Bijé tried to use the gun barrel again, but Ace's fist smashed into his face. Lights flashed and the world seemed to spin around like a cardboard figure on a pin. Bijé clung desperately to the man's gun wrist, fighting the dizziness that swept over him. Ace grunted as he tried to twist free but Bijé hung grimly on.

His head cleared. Recalling the old lawless days, he brought his elbow smashing across Ace's face. He released the thick wrist and drove



his knuckles into the man's nose. Ace's grip relaxed and Bije rapped the gun barrel across the top of his skull. The renegade collapsed in a heap.

In a few moments Ace was tied and gagged, dumped beside Tim Dolan who made angry muffled sounds through his gag. Bije checked his knots.

"I reckon you'll stand hitched, both of you." Dolan made more sounds and Bije chuckled. "Shucks, I rode the owlhoot trail when you was still in diapers. Difference is, I got sense, paid my debt at Yuma and stayed honest. You polecats wasn't near as smart as you figured."

He straightened. "Just rest easy, gents. Your friends will soon be with you—in jail."

The distant whistle of a train sounded deep in the peaks. Bije had no time to waste. He hurried back over the ridge and dropped down to the railroad track. The renegades were out of sight, except for Ullery. He moved across the lighted windows, back again. The red light winked malevolently to Bije's right. Scuttling across the tracks once more, Bije slipped toward the station.

If he could get Ullery out of the game, the odds would be whittled down considerably. Even if he did

not have time to change the switch, the three remaining outlaws would have a heap of unexpected trouble to face.

When he reached the far corner of the telegraph station, Bije paused there a moment to catch his breath. The whistle sounded again, louder this time and Bije hurried forward toward the door. The rails began to hum and he heard the heavy rumble of the approaching train.

He was nearly to the door when Ullery stepped out of it. Bije had no time to duck or flatten himself against the wall. At the same instant the train swept around the far bend and the headlight threw a harsh beam over him.

Ullery's eyes opened wide but he didn't hesitate. He whirled back inside as Bije's gun spat flame. The slug splintered the door casing where the outlaw had stood a split second before. The engineer had sighted the red light and set the brakes. The roar and rumble of the train, the sudden blast of hissing steam drowned the sound of the gun shot. As the train swerved onto the switch and slowed, Bije yelled and waved his gun.

"Stay in the cab!" he yelled to the fireman as the locomotive swept by. He caught the alarmed blank stare of the wide eyes in the coal-blackened face. Somebody yelled but Bije was too busy to listen.

Ullery's six-gun smashed through the window behind Bije and the slug whined close to the oldster's head. Bije whirled, his own .45 lining down. He heard other shots and the

pound of hoofs bearing down on him. In desperation he flattened against the station wall.

The hiding renegades had swept out of cover when the train had stopped, not realizing that someone else had taken a hand. Now Bije found himself neatly trapped between them and Ullery. His first slug found a mark and the rider stiffened, screamed, throwing his arms wide as he toppled from the saddle.

Ullery rushed from the station, throwing lead and Bije tried to meet the new threat. He dimly heard yells and other gun-shots. Another horse was close by, but Bije's eyes centered on Ullery. The outlaw pressed the trigger, lips thinning back from his teeth.

The lead slapped Bije back against the building and it seemed as if his whole chest had been caved in. For a moment he felt as if all his vital force would drain out and he felt himself sliding into darkness. Sheer will power kept him conscious. He had no knowledge that rifles from the baggage car had joined in the fight.

He was conscious only of Ullery racing away to freedom. In great detail he caught the dull gleam of the man's gun, the pumping legs as Ullery tried to flee the length of the station wall and reach the tethered horses in the shadows of the far side.

Bije clamped his lips tightly and fought back the weakness and pain. He lifted his gun with a mighty effort of will. It seemed that there was a drag of a ton or more on the trigger and that his finger would never pull it back. The front sights

wanted to weave in erratic circles. Sweat popped out on Bije's forehead as he centered the gun on Ullery's fleeing figure.

The outlaw had nearly reached the corner. In another second he would be around it. Rifle slugs crashed into the wall behind him. Bije felt the trigger give, and fire blossomed from the gun muzzle. Ullery plowed on, but now his arms were flung out ahead of him and his torso seemed to race beyond his legs. His feet tangled and he plowed face forward into the dust. His legs drew up as the muscles contracted, and then his whole body grew limp.

Bije let darkness sweep over him. He never realized that he had slumped against the station wall, the smoking weapon slipping from his lax fingers. Everything had become a soft and gentle blackness on which he somehow luxuriously floated. Then even that sensation slipped away.

Something bright bothered his eyes and he wanted to flee from it. He tossed his head to one side and then sensation flowed over him. His chest felt heavy as though breathing was hard. He became aware that someone was bending over him.

Bije's eyes opened and he blinked against the lamp light. Art West's bald head gleamed over him, his faded blue eyes lighting when Bije looked up at him. A trainman grinned over Art's shoulder and a man in rolled-up shirt sleeves placed instruments in a black bag. Bije saw that he was lying on the bed in Art's adobe.

"Sure knew they couldn't down that old rawhider," Art said with a choked voice.

"The bullion?" Bijé asked weakly.

The man in the shirt sleeves turned sharply. "You're not to talk, my friend. The gold's safe. Three of the bandits are dead and one is captured. West here had been knocked out and tied up in the handcart shack. We found him."

"Two others," Bijé managed. "Tied up down the road . . ."

The doctor's eyes widened and his jaw went slack. He gulped, caught his voice. "You mean that you captured two of those renegades single-handed before the train came in?"

Bijé nodded. "Rode in . . . for cribbage game with Art. Ullery pretended he was . . . relief operator. Didn't believe him and he knew it. He sent two after me. Got 'em."

Art whistled soundlessly. "I figured you'd be along, but I also reckoned you'd be tied up with me in the shack. You sure used your noggin, Bijé."

"The key," Bijé explained. "I been around here long enough to know Eagle Point's call. Came through . . . several times. Ullery paid no attention . . . claimed it was

someone else. Knew he lied or didn't know Morse code."

The doctor advanced firmly to the bed. "I've disobeyed my own orders. You shut up pronto or you'll land in boothill. That slug came mighty close to finishing you."

Another well-dressed man pushed forward and cleared his throat, glancing apologetically at the doctor.

"I'm the president of Midas Mining. That was our bullion the outlaws tried to get and this man saved it. You've got a big reward coming, Mr. Varney. Three of those outlaws were wanted men with a price on their heads. Besides, Midas will be grateful for what you did to save the bullion. I think you'll be able to take life easy from now on."

"Don't want nothing," Bijé said petulantly, "except to beat the tar out of that no-good Art West in cribbage. Nothing . . ."

The doctor's hand silenced him.

"No doubt that can be arranged, too. Now do you keep still or do I tape up that mouth of yours?"

Bijé silently signaled that he'd say no more. He couldn't have done any more talking right then, anyway, because he was drifting into deep, luxurious slumber.

THE END

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### FACTS OF LIFE

*Us cowpokes know the facts of life*

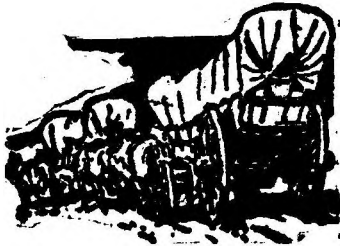
*As well as any man.*

*We know that cowhide comes from cows—*

*An' milk comes from a can!*

S. OMAR BARKER





## WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

BY JOHN NORTH

WE used to obtain virtually all our tung oil from China. Now the stuff is getting to be a home-grown product. Tung tree farming is an agricultural specialty that is rapidly catching on in the South.

A valuable, water-resistant, quick-drying oil is squeezed from tung nuts that has no equal for many uses, particularly in the paint and varnish industry.

As late as ten years ago only a few hundred thousand tung trees were being grown in the United States. The business, which started many years before that in Florida and Georgia, was still largely in the experimental stage. Last year tung farmers harvested the largest tung-nut crop in the country's history from some thirteen million bearing trees. The estimated production was ten million pounds of oil. Normally the United States uses two hundred million pounds of oil a year, most of it imported.

Tung growing has expanded in a widening band of trees that now reaches, where soil and growing conditions are right, from South Carolina clear into east Texas. In 1944 Texas tung farmers shipped out 29 tons of nuts for processing. Last year, 1945, the same district sent to

market approximately 126 tons, with the nuts bringing about 5 cents a pound, or around \$100 a ton.

On the face of it, tung farming seems to be due for further development in east Texas. There is land available. Already Mississippi, leading State in tung nut production, has some 150,000 acres in tung trees and Louisiana 20,000 acres. East Texas has less than 1,000 acres growing tung oil.

A lot of readers have queried us about tung farming, but it took N. E., of Lakewood, Ohio, to swamp us with questions on the subject. Among the things he wanted to know were: "How many nuts will an acre of trees produce each year? How long before the trees bear, and can tung trees be grown in Texas?"

We have just been through some of the southeast Texas tung country around Silsbee back of Beaumont. Last season one large commercial grower's yield there, the first large-scale tung nut crop harvested in Hardin County, returned an average of \$100 an acre from 100 acres planted in tung trees. The trees produced approximately a ton of nuts per acre.

Generally speaking, the east Texas region suitable for tung farming is considered limited to Hardin, Jasper,

Newton, Angelina and Montgomery Counties. And in those counties to sections where soil conditions are suitable for growing the trees. Elsewhere in Texas winters are apt to be too cold, late spring frosts too prevalent, or annual rainfall insufficient. Woodville is about as far north as the trees can be grown; Newton County as far west.

Tung experts declare there are no special tricks a man reasonably familiar with good orchard practice has to learn to grow tung nuts successfully. Correct soil conditions and the right climate are, however, important.

Tung trees thrive best in a light sandy clay soil having good drainage. Hilltop land or the upper slopes of long, gradual rises seem to be ideal where the soil is suitable. Reasonably priced cut-over timber lands having these requirements can be used to grow tung trees.

Tung trees need winters free from late frost, and plenty of moisture. But there must be adequate run-off for excess water both above and below the ground surface. Standing water in flat or low spots has a tendency to rot the tree roots, killing out the trees.

The trees normally flower about the middle of March. A frost at that time will kill the flowers, and there will be no nut crop that year.

In producing the nuts, usually three or four nuts are formed from each

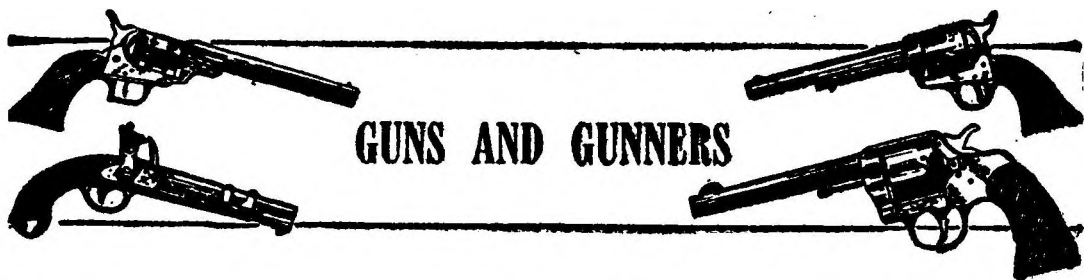
flower, the nuts having from four to eight divisions inside and averaging six. The nuts are oily, bitter and poisonous to animals. This last is a feature that, in a way, has its compensations. Cattle can be grazed in tung orchards and they won't molest the trees. Neither pigs nor those chronic nut lovers, squirrels, will touch tung nuts. Even human beings had better stay clear of them.

Tung farmers customarily start out with year-old seedling trees. The seedlings grow rapidly. They can be obtained from local nurseries or grown direct from the nuts. A 70-pound sack of nuts will produce enough seedlings to plant about 3 acres in tung trees. The trees should be placed 30 feet apart to allow a 15-foot spread for the branches when the trees are mature.

Tung trees reach maturity at 6 years, but produce some nuts after the first year. From 6 years on, the trees should become increasingly profitable almost indefinitely.

The nuts are harvested in the fall, dried in sacks hung on the trees or on sloping beds of chicken wire and then shipped to the nearest mill for processing and extraction of the oil. Last year Texas tung farmers shipped their output to Bogalusa, Louisiana. But one of these days Texas will probably have its own mill. Tung farming is certainly forging ahead down there in the southeast corner of the Lone Star State.

Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply. Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.



BY CAPT. PHILIP B. SHARPE

LAST MONTH I mentioned that I had seen something new in a chronograph for measuring bullet velocities. But first, let's review the old system.

For a half century the standard has been the *Boulengé* chronograph, designed by a Frenchman. On the *Boulengé*, three electrical setups function on two circuits. Some operations are mechanical, but there is much human work. Forgetting the control instruments, the operating head is usually tended by a girl. The head has an electromagnet mounted above a work bench. A rod, roughly  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch in diameter and about 30 inches long, with a steel ball tip and a weight on the other end, is used. The gun, far away in another room, has a threadlike wire stretched across the muzzle. Through this, runs an electric current to the control boxes and up to that magnet to charge it. The meter rod is blackened with soot—lampblack and alcohol—and the steel ball tip touched to the magnet. The rod sticks, suspended over a deep leather-lined pocket, in the hole in the bench top.

At the target, 150 feet away, is the "disjuncter." An entirely sepa-

rate electrical circuit runs through this, through another electromagnet mounted on the instrument head. From this magnet is suspended another rod—a heavier one about 6 inches long, weighted.

When everything is ready, the chronograph girl presses a button on her desk, ringing a buzzer on the range. The gunner fires. The bullet breaks the muzzle wire, cutting power from the first magnet. The long rod drops free. A fraction of a second later the bullet strikes the target; the disjuncter circuit is broken, and the short rod is dropped. The short rod drops on a trigger, releasing a spring-backed knife which flies sidewise, striking the long falling rod, and making a mark in the soot. The operator gently draws the rod from the pocket, and by means of a delicate scale rule, measures the distance between a zero point and the knife mark. That indicates how far the rod fell while the bullet was traveling between those two measured range points.

That measurement is translated into time since a falling object travels at known speed. But the possibilities of error are many: Circuits out of balance, dust, oil, and so forth in

the mechanical parts, inaccuracy on the part of the operator, etc.

The new method I saw and used is known as the Interval Timer. Look at the word "chronograph." It comes from two words, "chrono" and "graph." "Chrono" means "time," and "graph" is "record." Thus the combination means Time Record. Your record is not of the velocity of the bullet, but of the time it takes to pass over the distance between the points where the time is measured.

I used two different Interval units—they can be manufactured as sensitive as desired. In some velocity tests, I had them coupled together so that both were recording. One was 20 times more sensitive than the other. The lesser one was *many* times more accurate than the *Boulengé* of latest design and manufacture.

Size? The Interval Timer was in a cabinet about 25 inches long, 12 inches high, and 10 deep. It had a panel containing a bunch of tubes like neon lights, a couple of meters, and a few switches. The super-sensitive one was only a little larger.

On the range, 15 feet from the gun muzzle was a bracket assembly supporting horizontally at the top, a special tubular light a foot long. In its base was a photo-electric cell. Both were wired to the instrument.

In use, a young lady acted as recorder. Sitting on a stool in front of the instrument, she flipped a

couple of switches marked "on" and "set" and the lights began to flicker.

"Ready," she called. A target was far down the range. The shooter was testing the accuracy of a certain German gun of mine with some special ammunition. He aimed carefully at the target and fired. I was watching the lights. They stopped flickering. Most were out, but some remained lighted, although they had stopped flickering. What had happened?

The bullet had gone down to record the shot on the target. It didn't touch wires or anything else to become deflected. As it passed over the first photo-cell, the light cast its shadow on the cell and started the table instrument *counting*. As it passed over the second cell, it stopped the instrument.

The girl looked at the tubes remaining lighted, read the numbers beside them as she penciled them on the report sheet. "Two-zero-nine-four-two-five," she said for my benefit. The reading was in milliseconds, or thousandths of a second.

She flicked a switch; those tubes went out. She flicked another, they began flickering again—all of them. She was ready for the next shot. A prepared table translated that time reading into exact speed.

Never before has it been practical to test for velocity and accuracy at the same time. With the Interval Timer, new ammunition for firearms can undoubtedly be made better.

Captain Sharpe is back after more than three years in the Army and your letters concerning firearms will receive his prompt attention. Address your inquiries to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.



## MINES AND MINING

BY JOHN A. THOMPSON

Gold is no respecter of persons. It doesn't care who finds it. It may be you, or the next fellow. But one thing is certain. You have to go out and look for it. Fascinating and adventurous as ore hunting is, prospecting is still an undertaking that entails a certain amount of work. Nevertheless it is the sort of interesting, outdoor work that R. B., of Chester, Pennsylvania, and his ex-G. I. buddy, K. L., plan to take up as soon as possible.

"We have always wanted to prospect for gold," R. B. wrote us. "Now we have the chance, and a grubstake. But first we would like you to give us some general pointers on hunting for lode gold. Particularly with reference to the sort of rock formations that we should look for."

As a starter, R. B., remember there are certain types of rock formations so unfavorable to the requirements of gold deposition that the prospector will generally do well to avoid them. For example, broad areas of sedimentary rocks, or the vast expanses of sand-filled valleys that fill much of the desert and semi-arid Southwest.

Try instead the canyon-cut mountains in mineralized country, or the

deep, winding arroyos that slice through the foothills. They may carry evidence of gold, or other valuable metallic mineral deposits.

From a practical, if not scientific, point of view, generally favorable gold country is that in which intense igneous activity has taken place in the early formative period of the earth's surface. By far the majority of valuable gold lode deposits have been encountered in regions of this sort, most of them mountainous.

Though other types of lode gold deposits do exist, lode gold usually means gold that occurs in veins in a rock formation, and mixed with large quantities of the vein material, or gangue. Varying quantities of other metallic minerals are often found in the vein also.

The veins themselves may be broad bands of rock, narrow strips, or a series of small, non-consecutive stringers which have at some time or other been forced in a molten state into the cracks and crevices of the rock formation in which they intrude. Sometimes the veins occur along former zones of weakness separating two different kinds of country rock.

In most cases the principal vein material is quartz. Next most com-

mon gold-carrying vein materials are the carbonate minerals with calcite, a calcium carbonate, the most prominent in this class.

This sketchy lesson in elementary gold geology boils down to the following: In actual practice a gold lode prospector is likely to better his chances of success if (a) he conducts his search in areas containing igneous rock, such as the granites for instance, and (b) provided the igneous formations are plentifully laced by intruding veins that (c) are composed mainly of mineralized quartz or calcite.

However, even that won't insure a gold mine. Not all quartz veins carry gold. Nor do all calcite veins. In fact *most* of them don't.

Though gold is most likely to be found in or associated with quartz, the gold-quartz combination is not a two-way rule. Quartz is so widespread a rock formation that if the rule worked in reverse, gold would be common as dross.

Areas in which contrasting formations of country rock have been cut into or separated by dikes—massive veins of intrusive igneous rock—are evidence of former high regional igneous activity. They can be very favorable for lode gold prospecting. Also favorable are the border sections of great masses of solid granitic, or similar igneous rocks when such masses have been up-thrust through the country rock

and both igneous and surrounding formations are cut by veins. In such regions gold lodes may be encountered either in the igneous rock or in the surrounding formations, but more generally in the latter.

On the record, the foregoing are perhaps the most generally favorable geological setups for gold lode discovery. They by no means exhaust all the possibilities. Valuable gold deposits have occurred in and been mined from many other types of rock formations, even in some areas usually regarded as unfavorable.

When a lode gold deposit is actually discovered, sometimes, but not always, there are specks, grains, wires or thin leaves of gold visible in the vein rock. In perhaps the majority of cases the gold is in grains too small to be seen by the naked eye, or included within other metallic minerals in the vein. In this case assays by a competent assayer will disclose the gold content, and the richness of the deposit. Sometimes crushing a small sample of the rock and panning the powder will show fine colors of gold.

In any event prospectors should be able to recognize visible gold in a vein. They can do this by remembering that gold is the only heavy, soft, yellow, metallic-lustered mineral found in nature that can be easily flattened without breaking.

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.



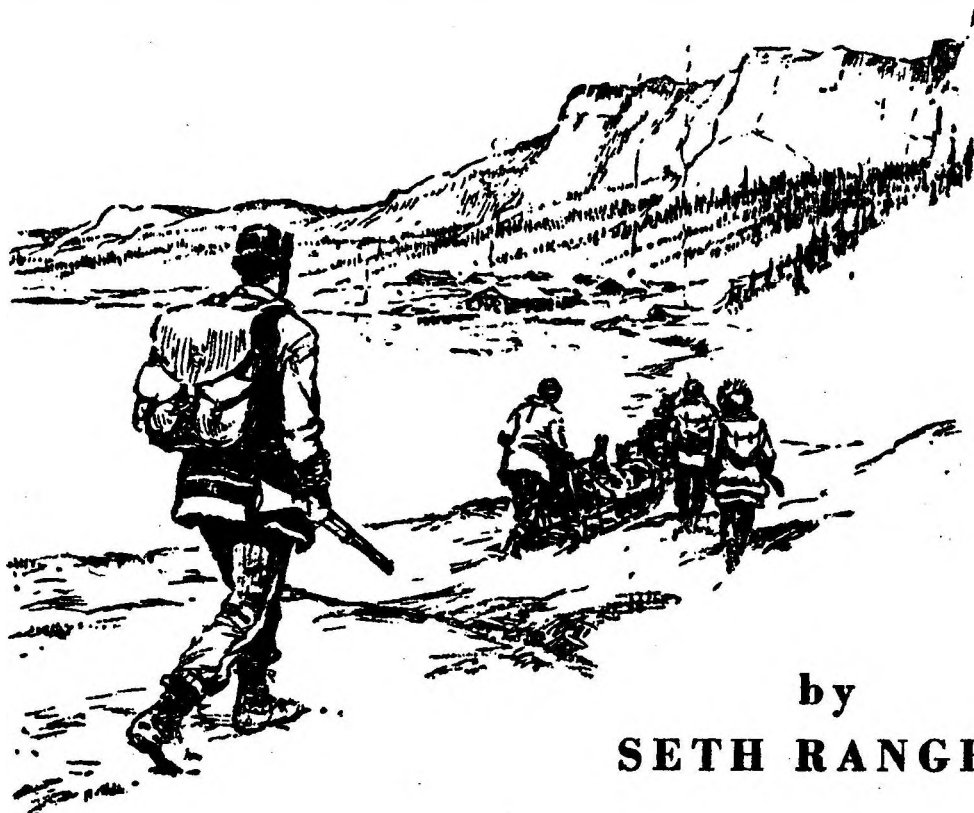
# SUCKER BAIT

*Unloading salted mines on greenhorns was Tremp Gordon's specialty but Ken Bracken was one chechahco who didn't believe that gold was where you find it*

TREMP GORDON would never admit it, except to himself, but everything about him was what he called "sucker bait." Every so often he would leave Alaska, stop in Seattle long enough to get his name in the newspapers, then go on back East to raise a grub-stake for some mining deal. Sour-doughs often said: "Why should Tremp Gordon break his back digging for gold in Alaska, when he can dig it out of chechahcos' pockets,

and eat good grub and sleep in a feather bed while doing it?"

In the North Gordon dressed like an Alaskan—rubber boots in wet weather; moccasins, parka and mitts when it was well below zero. But when he went back East to promote a deal he wore a flannel shirt open at the throat. This revealed a husky neck, solidly set on broad, thick shoulders. He wore ready-made pants tucked into boot tops. The



by  
**SETH RANGER**



boots were well oiled and laced with buckskin thongs. He carried a heavy gold watch anchored to a gold nugget chain.

Prospective financial backers were sure to be invited to his hotel room for drinks, and when he opened the closet to get a quart of liquor, they'd catch a glimpse of fur parka, with a hood faced with a flare of wolverine fur. This was sucker bait along with the little bottle half filled with gold dust. "Gold I panned from the mine," he would carelessly comment.

Knowing Tremp Gordon, we weren't at all pleased when he came to Shipwreck Bay with hydraulic machinery—steel pipe, valves and monitors for sluicing dirt into boxes and catching placer gold. It meant a little boom to our town, a few new faces, some buildings, then a depression when Gordon's backers stopped supplying money.

That would be the signal for Gordon to unload the deal on some sucker, who would try awhile on a shoestring basis, then give up.

Shipwreck Bay is on the Arctic Ocean. The houses are small because the less space, the smaller the fuel bill. And coal, brought through the ice on trading schooners, comes high. So do oil and gasoline for heaters, stoves and pressure lamps.

When Tremp showed up in my trading post I hopped all over him.

"You know damned well, Tremp, there isn't much gold up here," I said bluntly.

He looked me right in the eye and answered: "We don't know what we'll find when we sluice off the overburden."

"Why don't you try to develop oil or coal?" I demanded. "There are pools of oil on the surface in some parts of the Arctic. And according to the Eskimos, there's a ledge of coal that the sea undermines, and it can be picked up and dumped into a boat. The trouble is, a boat of any size is liable to be trapped in the ice. But the oil and coal are straws showing which way the wind blows. If you went into the prospecting game on the level, with all the dough you can get to back you, you might make yourself millions of dollars."

"I'm on the level," he said hotly.

"Tell that to the chechahcos," I answered. "We know you up here. You know what'll happen. There'll be a boom. Prices will go up, then a bust—and everybody sore. It'll take Shipwreck Bay several years to get back to what it is now—a little trading settlement where everybody is reasonably prosperous."

I know what I'm talking about, even if it does sound like boasting. The natives bring me in carved ivory from walrus tusks; fur; seal oil and a few head of reindeer. I trade them supplies, which I get from the trading schooner. I keep two years' supplies on hand in case the schooner doesn't get through the ice. The na-

tives know it. It keeps them contented. They know they won't starve some bleak winter.

Well, it turned out as I predicted. A chartered schooner came in with extra supplies, landed some three miles up the bay at Gordon's claim, and brought the remainder to the settlement. Storage buildings went up, and a bunkhouse for those who wintered in. There would be no mining operation for many months each year, and naturally the men wanted to be in the settlement.

John LeDue, who trapped seventy miles from Shipwreck Bay, came in the second winter with his daughter Marie. She was the prettiest girl north of the Arctic Circle, which doesn't take in much in the way of population, but includes some of the world's prettiest girls. Marie was half Irish, half French and she had inherited the beauty, wit and sparkle of both—along with a bit of Irish temper.

Tremp Gordon, who had a way with women, saw her several days before he sailed south. He worked fast, and Marie was impressed. Gordon was forty, but that's young when a girl has never known a man in his twenties.

I asked LeDue if he wasn't worried, but he shook his head and said, "It's hard to fool the Irish in the long run. And she's as Irish as her mother was."

"I've got to go south, Marie," Tremp Gordon told the girl. "If I can't take you with me as my wife, then promise me you'll be here in July." It would be July or August

before a ship could get through the ice to the settlement.

"I'll be here," she promised.

In March a native mushed in from Nome with mail. My Seattle wholesaler wrote me:

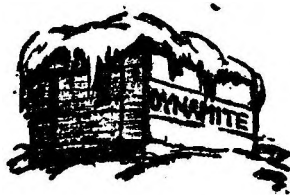
Tremp Gordon's backers have pulled out. Offhand I'd say that means cutting down on my shipments to you, but there's a young chechahco interested in mining up that way. He's backing himself, which means he hasn't much money, but a lot of faith. He's going overland from Nome with three men. They're mushing light, counting on you for supplies. They plan to sink prospect holes. Testing the ground, you understand.

The chechahco's name is Ken Bracken. Gordon hasn't heard of him yet, but Bracken will take Gordon's sucker bait like a trout takes a fly. You'll have him on your hands next winter, so I'll include enough extra provisions to see this party through. You can curse me bitterly if spring finds you with the stuff on your hands.

A few weeks later a slim, quiet fellow in his early twenties came into Shipwreck Bay with three men. It was well they were traveling light because the last fifty miles the sled runners had been gliding over tundra. An early warm spell had melted most of the snow.

Marie startled Ken Bracken out of his normal calm. "Imagine finding you in this country," he said.

"You're liable to find most any-



thing in this country," Marie answered practically. "It's almost unprospected and certainly undeveloped. People look for fur, whale oil and gold, and stop there."

"That's why I'm here," he answered. He was full of business as he talked. Now and then she would suggest something that he might find useful in his prospecting and invariably he included it in his outfit.

The men disappeared several days after their arrival and we saw nothing of them for two weeks. They came in for a breathing spell and supplies. Ken Bracken and Marie went out in an umiak with the Eskimos on a walrus hunt. The ice lay seven miles off shore, and the big animals were sprawled on it. They meant ivory and meat for the natives' caches.

As soon as they returned, Ken pitched in and helped the Eskimos store their meat. He was keeping up his end of it, and you could see that they liked him. He wasn't a big, handsome man, with a winning personality like Tremp Gordon—only an ordinary-looking kid, who'd never be mistaken for a hero.

We could see that Marie was hitting him hard, and it made us sick when we thought of Gordon's return.

Gordon's trading schooner had had a tough time getting around the Point Barrow ice and was late. It dropped anchor off the settlement and then I learned that it had also brought my supply of provisions for the next year. Gordon was the first man ashore. He looked quickly about and exclaimed: "Marie!" He

kissed her, taking her by surprise, I thought, and I heard him say: "I've missed you. I'm going to take you out of this desolate place."

Marie didn't say much, but studied him curiously. Then he pumped my hand—something I've never enjoyed. He asked me how I was feeling, and I knew that he didn't give a hoot. Before I could answer he said he was glad that I was looking so well.

"I'm winding things up," he said. "I've some stuff to sell."

"I'll give you what it's worth," I answered. "I'm talking about grub, and tools that I can sell up here. I'll buy your old buildings in the settlement. But not as buildings—as lumber. We've too many buildings."

"We'll get together," Gordon promised. I could see that this was a minor detail. He had heard all about Ken Bracken and was out to unload the mine.

He walked over to Bracken who was interested in a bag of mail coming ashore. "I'm Tremp Gordon," he said, turning on the charm. "I'm selling a mine, with hydraulic machinery in good order. My backers lack my faith in the proposition. I understand you're developing mines. If you're interested in my outfit, let me know. If I can't sell, I'll take the machinery out with me, and sell it in Nome."

"I've noticed your property," Bracken answered. "We've put down test pits in the region."

"Strike gold?" asked Gordon.

"Not in paying quantities."

"The ground is spotty," Gordon said. He managed to convey frankness. "I tried to make my people

stay with it." He shook his head. "They lacked the gambling spirit. But the pay streak isn't far away. The contour of the land proves it."

"I've studied the contour closely," Bracken said, "and I'd like to sink test pits."

"Go ahead!" Gordon seemed amazed at the way Bracken was taking the bait. "Let me know your opinion. I'll be pretty busy, checking on the equipment, setting prices and . . ." He didn't finish, but gave Marie a knowing glance. I saw Bracken's cheeks turn an angry red for a moment, but he said nothing.

Tremp Gordon went out to his mine and put in a couple of days going over the equipment. It was ready for immediate operation. A dam in a gap had created a small

lake, and the pipe line dropped abruptly, developing a tremendous head of water. The overburden could be sluiced down into the ocean, where the current slowly carried it away.

The day Gordon returned to the settlement Bracken and his men went out. A diamond drill, powered by a gasoline motor, had been shipped in on the schooner, and they set it up on Gordon's ground. He waited until things had been going a week before he went out. Cores of frozen ground had been thawed out and were being analyzed by Ken.

"It doesn't look too good," Gordon said.

"No pay streak," Bracken answered.

Gordon came in that night and it was hard to tell from his face what

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he thought. The next morning, Joe Adams, who helped around the trading post, called me aside.

"You remember that little bottle of gold Tremp carried around with him?" he asked. I nodded. "It's empty," he said. "My guess is that he's dumped it down one of those test holes they're drilling. The bait is out for the latest sucker. Should I tell Bracken? Or do you want to?"

"I'll handle it," I answered.

I've long believed that the way to live to a ripe old age is to mind your own business. I'm getting along in years, so you can see that I've followed my belief.

When Bracken came in several days later, he asked me into his room. He showed me some mighty pretty gold. "What do you think of this?" he asked.

Now was my time. "If the rest of the ground runs that high," I answered, "the claim is worth millions. It could come from a pocket." I was thinking of Tremp Gordon's pocket. "How much do you know about mining?"

"I've studied mining ever since I was fifteen years old," he answered. "I'm twenty-three now. I know that high-graders carrying ore out in dinner buckets can break a mine. I know that a properly managed low grade property can pay steady dividends for years. I know that you can salt ground, if you're clever enough. And I know that in a deal such as I'm working on, much depends on the water supply. A dry season could make it tough."

"Tremp Gordon hasn't had much luck in the game," I said slowly.

"His mines have a way of petering out. Too bad, isn't it?" Our eyes met.

"Yes," Ken answered. "He seems to be having better luck with a girl. I've always held that a man who goes along in an honest way, and who is on the level, is like mineral-bearing ground. If you salt the ground with a lot of charm and good looks, a smart girl will know it."

"That's about the size of it," I answered.

"I'm changing my mind," he said evenly. "Marie thinks Tremp Gordon is a high-grade proposition with ore running a dollar a pound."

"What about Gordon's mine?" I asked.

"I'm making him an offer," answered Bracken.

"What!" I yelled loud enough to be heard a mile away.

"Yes," he said, "I'm making him an offer. The values are there."

That stopped me. Ken had admitted that he was familiar with the crooked angles of mining, such as salting ground. And yet he was buying the mine. Had Gordon fooled him? Did he really believe the gold had come from the property? Or was Tremp Gordon the real sucker? Were the values there?

The next morning Bracken dropped into a chair beside Gordon. "I've made a decision," he said. "I'll buy the property." He named a price.

Gordon concealed his surprise. I knew it must have been twice the value he had set on it. But he reasoned that Bracken must have taken



the bait, hook, line and sinker. "It's worth more than that," he said. "You see, Bracken, you've got the edge on me. You *know* what that ground is worth. You've made more tests than I have. I've never used a diamond drill on it."

"That's my price," Bracken said. "It's fair. You can accept or reject it. If you reject, then I'll make you an offer for the machinery."

"The machinery goes with the mine," answered Gordon. "The mine isn't for sale at your figure."

"Okay," Bracken said. "I'm sorry we can't get together. There are other properties. I can stake claims and bring in my own hydraulic machinery."

I could tell by Gordon's face that he thought Bracken was bluffing. I had an idea that a new kind of man had come into the North—a fellow who weighed everything, made up his mind, and then was too busy to haggle over terms when he thought them fair.

Bracken surprised Gordon the next day by hiring Eskimos and their skin boats to move the drilling machinery to open ground two miles from the settlement.

When he returned to the trading post, it was to see Marie. I was sorting furs behind the counter, but I couldn't help but hear their conversation.

"I can see success in sight," Ken said. "Not this year nor next, but in three years sure. A man should take a girl around and show her a good time, but there isn't much we can do up here." Then he was asking her to marry him. It wasn't

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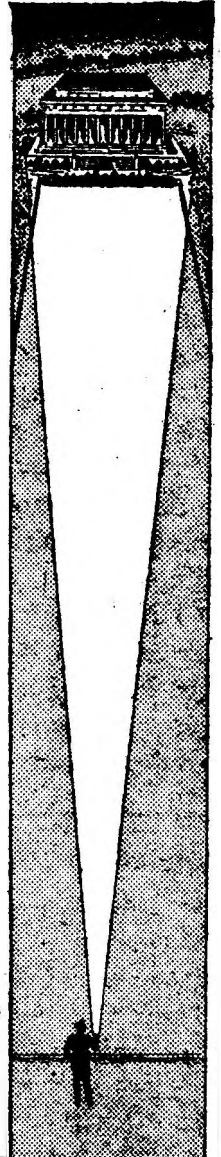
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the kind of proposal a smooth man like Tremp Gordon would make to a girl. It was one a sincere young man, who can't find the right words to express his emotions, makes—halting and uncertain. He was promising her a life on the frontier, with occasional winters outside. He was promising her a year's honeymoon as soon as the mine was in operation. To him, success meant developing many mines.

"Then you're not going to make Gordon a better offer?" Marie said. "You know that the values aren't on his ground, and are developing a mine of your own? You aren't bluffing?" She didn't wait for him to answer, but said: "I'll marry you. A priest may come out on the schooner. If not, the commissioner will marry us."

I'm the commissioner, along with being postmaster, doctor and everything else.

The schooner had finished unloading and making a few repairs. She had been damaged in the ice. Now she was going easterly along the Arctic shore, trading with small

groups of natives. She'd be back in a month. Tremp Gordon was up to something—laying a foundation for a new promotional scheme, probably—because he was going along.

He dropped in suddenly on Bracken and said: "I want to wind things up here. I'll take your offer. You see, Bracken, I plan to marry Marie and take her outside for a year's honeymoon. And don't be too hard on her. You couldn't blame her for carrying on a little flirtation with you. She's had so few opportunities."

Something I saw in Bracken's face gave me a real twinge. I wanted to yell: "Don't buy that ground. It's salted. Tell Gordon to go to hell, then swing on him."

That kid was cool. He said: "We'll fix up the papers and sign and record them as soon as the commissioner has a breathing spell."

"Let's wind this up," Gordon said impatiently to me. "I want to get aboard the schooner."

I read the agreement carefully. There was a letter from a Seattle bank stating money had been put aside to cover this particular deal. When it was all over neither party made an attempt to shake hands.

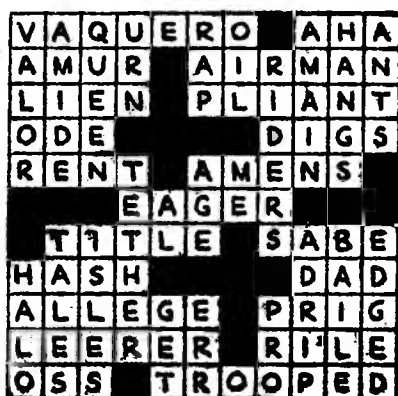
"By the way, Gordon," Bracken said as Gordon was leaving. "that was a lousy job of salting a mine."

Gordon's fists clenched, then he blurted: "Then why in thunder did you buy it?"

"I'm convinced that the values are there," Bracken answered.

Gordon stared in amazement, and I saw doubt cloud his eyes. A man

#### SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD PUZZLE



who makes his living from suckers, can't endure the thought of a deal backfiring and the sucker cleaning up big. Then with an impatient shrug of the shoulders he stalked down to the beach to a waiting dory.

Marie came in a few minutes later. "Oh, you bought it! You bought it!" She was distressed, almost frantic.

"Yes," Bracken answered, "I bought it. Are you still stringing with me . . . for better or worse?"

"Of course," she answered in a low tone.

I caught on now. Gordon's business of telling Bracken that he was marrying Marie was the final, foul punching of a rejected man.

It looked as if there was a pretty fine feeling between those two kids. And I thought that it better be, because it was in for tough sledding.

Bracken put the Eskimos to work again, shifting the drilling outfit back to the Gordon claim. He made several more tests and then turned on the monitor.

Each season Gordon had taken off the overburden down to the frost line. Now, with operations starting so late, the sun had had a chance to thaw a new layer.

The stream of water, powerful enough to roll boulders, knocked rocks and hunks of half-frozen tundra into the air. It cut ditches and gouged out holes. The muck flowed in a steady stream into the sea. Not a pound of it went into the sluice boxes. Bracken acted like a man intent only on getting down to a pay streak.

This went on day after day. The schooner came back, and there was a

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Don't wait until embarrassing criticism makes you act. Don't risk losing out on popularity and success because of ugly, dirt-clogged pores. **ACT NOW!** Enjoy the thrill of having a clean skin, free of pore-clogging, embarrassing blackheads. Try VACUTEX for 10 days. We guarantee it to do all we claim. If you are not completely satisfied your \$1.00 will be immediately refunded.

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priest aboard. I was glad because that meant Ken and Marie would have a real wedding.

"Where's everyone?" the skipper asked.

"Bracken invited them up to see the mine he's opened up," I answered. "I'm just shoving off. Would you like to go along? There's a rumor that Bracken's struck pay."

"Struck pay?" Gordon said. "He couldn't. Pay isn't there." He shook his head. "Maybe I've a competitor. Maybe he's working up a sucker deal of his own?"

"Come along and find out," I invited.

They got into my umiak. There's a wooden well constructed near the stern of the modern skin boat, and you lower an outboard motor down through the hole until the propeller can bite the water. You get plenty of speed.

We ran through water stained with muck from the hydraulic operation, and landed. The monitor had been shifted to a new spot—a sign Bracken was down to bedrock or the frost line.

We pushed through muck, around boulders, and stood on the edge of the operation. It was bedrock right enough. Coal-black bedrock and a crew of men were drilling holes in it.

I stared in amazement, then I let out a yell as I realized what it meant.

Bracken loaded several holes, connected up the wires, then walked over to a blasting machine.

"Marie," he said, "I think you should fire the first blast."

Marie pulled up the handle, then came down hard, sending an electric spark over the wire. The bedrock heaved upward, broke into countless pieces, and fell back with a crash.

I ran over and shook Bracken's hand. "You've hit pay in a big way, son!" I yelled. "Is there plenty of it?"

"Enough to keep a small crew operating for fifty or a hundred years," he answered. "It's all along here. I've staked a big group of claims. Wherever we put down a test hole, we found values, and there we staked our ground. All we have to do is to thaw and sluice off the overburden and begin mining."

The schooner captain picked up a hunk of the "bedrock" and examined it critically. A grin spread over his face.

"Millions of tons of it, Bracken," he said. "I'm shifting my schooner down here and taking a deckload aboard. The settlements between here and Point Barrow can use it. And next year we'll broaden the market to include everything north of Nome. The winters are cold in these parts, and that's some of the finest coal that I've ever seen."

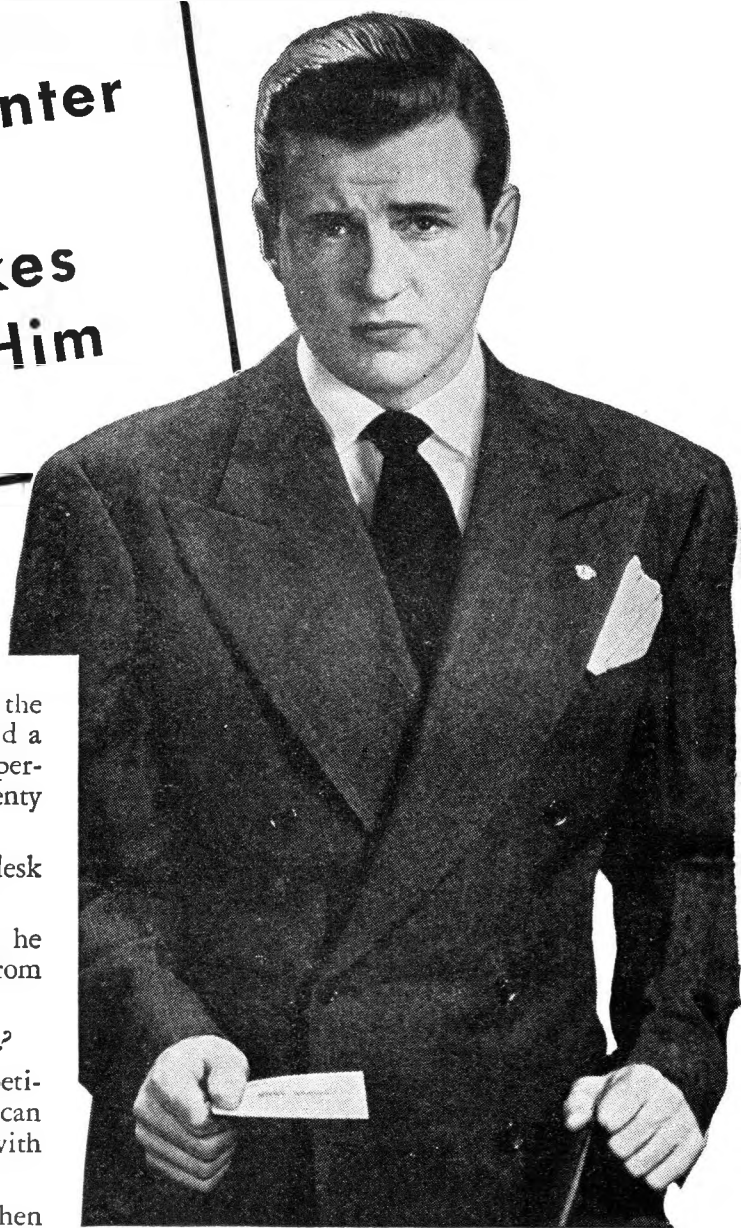
THE END

*Answers to Scrambled Words on page 65.*

1. woodchuck 2. surrey 3. portage 4. sandflat 5. cheroot 6. miner 7. marmot 8. rye  
9. weasel 10. chestnut 11. keno 12. chipmunk 13. saguaro 14. potash 15. crew



# The Job Hunter with Two Strikes Against Him



JACKSON'S qualifications for the job were excellent. He had a pleasing appearance, a warm personality, good references, and plenty of experience.

And yet the man across the desk hesitated . . . finally said, "No."

Jackson didn't know it, but he had two strikes\* against him from the start.

### *Can You Get Away with It?*

In these days of fierce competition to get and hold a job, can you afford to take chances with halitosis\* (unpleasant breath)?

Why risk offending others when Listerine Antiseptic offers you such an easy, delightful precaution against off-color breath?

Simply rinse the mouth with Listerine Antiseptic night and morning, and between times when you want to be at your best.

Almost at once Listerine Antiseptic renders your breath sweeter, fresher, less likely to offend.

While some cases of halitosis are of systemic origin, most cases, say some authorities, are due to the bacterial fermentation of tiny food particles clinging to mouth surfaces. Listerine Antiseptic halts such fermentation, then overcomes the odors fermentation causes. Use it night and morning.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL COMPANY  
St. Louis, Mo.

**LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC** for oral hygiene



“That tenderfoot certainly is wise about *some* things”

**M**AYBE he doesn't know a stirrup from a saddle . . . but judging from that glorious Calvert highball, he sure knows his whiskey!

Make no mistake, Calvert is very definitely *the real thing* in whiskey. Fact is, we've blended more fine whiskey in our

time than any other distiller in America . . . and that magnificent Calvert blend has *yet* to be matched! Moral (and this is right from the horse's mouth): It's just plain horse-sense to make sure *your* next highball is made with Calvert.

. . . . . ***It's the real thing!***

*Clear Heads Choose* **Calvert**



Calvert Distillers Corp., N. Y. C. BLENDED WHISKEY 86.8 Proof.

Calvert "Reserve"—65% Grain Neutral Spirits . . . Calvert "Special"—72½% Grain Neutral Spirits