STREET AND SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY

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OCTOBER 2, 1943

THRILLING ACTION TALES OF THE EARLY WEST BY

WALT COBURN · NORMAN A. FOX
DAVID LAVENDER · FRANK R. PIERCE

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CONTENTS FOR OCTOBER 2, 1943 VOL. CCVIII, No. 6

A COMPLETE NOVEL OF TREACHERY AND REVENGE

AN ACTION-PACKED NOVELETTE

A SERIAL

SHORT STORIES

WESTERN STORY FEATURES

DEPARTMENTS

COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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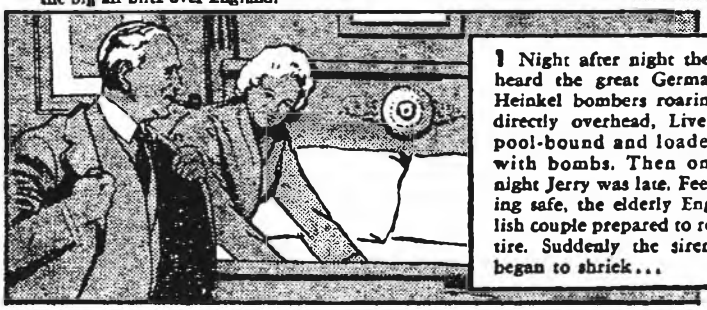
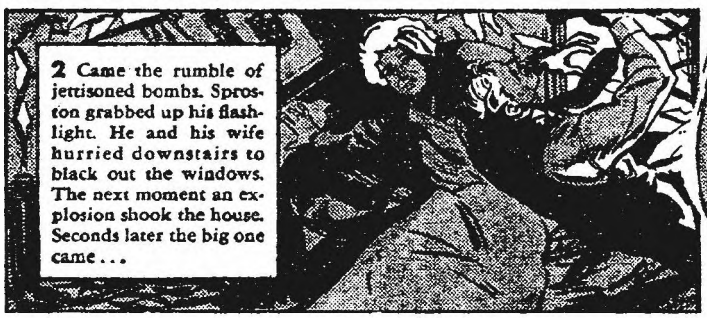
SECONDS LATER THE BIG ONE CAME!

A true experience of Mr. and Mrs. James Sproston, of Cheshire, during the big air blitz over England.



1 Night after night they heard the great German Heinkel bombers roaring directly overhead, Liverpool-bound and loaded with bombs. Then one night Jerry was late. Feeling safe, the elderly English couple prepared to retire. Suddenly the sirens began to shreik...



2 Came the rumble of jettisoned bombs. Sproston grabbed up his flashlight. He and his wife hurried downstairs to black out the windows. The next moment an explosion shook the house. Seconds later the big one came...

3... Half demolished the house and threw its stunned occupants violently to the floor... Some time after, two passing air wardens saw a light shining out of the wreckage. It was the beam from Sproston's faithful flashlight—a beam that directed the rescue of two more victims of the Luftwaffe's ruthlessness.

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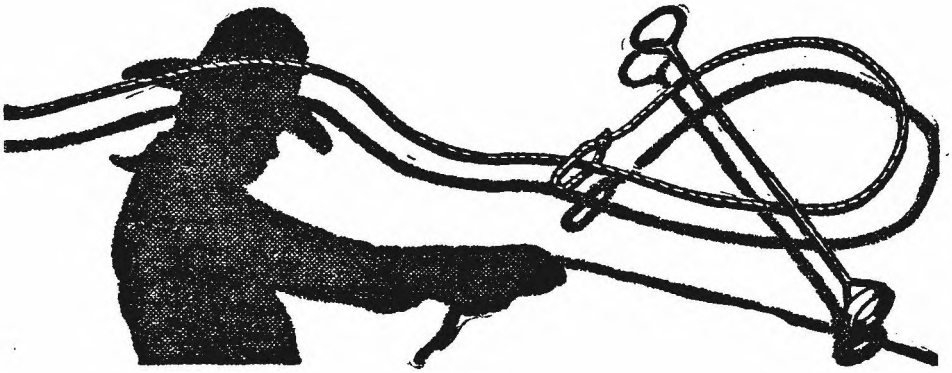

The Roundup

NOTHING gives us that old yippi-ki-yi feeling like finding a new and promising author for our Western Story line-up—especially when he packs his yarns with the Western savvy and hard-hitting action that you readers like. Les Savage, Jr., our latest recruit, sent along this letter with his BULLETS AND BULLWHIPS, which appears in this issue.

I was born at Alhambra, California, in 1922. Though California is certainly a Western state, I'm afraid I can't justly qualify as a Westerner. I've spent most of my twenty years in Hollywood. But if my background is disappointing, at least my family belongs to the old West. My great uncle was a Texas Ranger, shot in the back by a moonshiner. I still have the vest he wore, the one given to him by an Indian friend, its front beautifully worked in beads, its back cut to shreds by the double load of buckshot the moonshiner sent his way.

My grandfather can remember driving a herd of cattle down Los Angeles' Main Street, which would be comparable to chousing a bunch of steers across 42nd and Broadway, New York City. My grandmother saw Denver in its wildest day, and I still spend many an hour listening to her hair-raising tales.

I hope the fans won't rebel against a city slicker writing their yarns, because to me that period of the country's growth in which the Old West flourished is one of the most fascinating times in the world's history, and I don't think it will ever lose its appeal.

We don't think any real Western fan will object to a "city slicker" writing Western yarns, just so long as those yarns are good, Les. . . .

The question before the corral these days seems to be: Where's Preacher Devlin? From A. Rekis, of Woodhaven, New York, comes the query:

To be really frank with you, the only reason I read your magazine is in quest of that prominent character of L. L. Foreman's—Preacher Devlin. Lately I have received some disappointments. Will the Preacher appear again, and if so when?

We sure wish we knew, pardner. We've tried to get in touch with Author Foreman, but he seems to have done a complete vanishing act. Mebbeso he and the Preacher are on a pasear which is a pasear! Howsomever we're going to keep trying and locate them—we may yet have to resort to a posse. Want to be included?

Your next Western Story brings you some top fiction fare including TWIN TRAILS TO BOOTHILL, by Cherry Wilson, a smashing full-length novel of two brothers who were caught in a renegade trap; HOT LEAD CALLS FOR GUN-SLINGERS, by Eric Howard; SHOWDOWN FOR A MARSHAL, by John Colohan; FOUR-FOOTED JUSTICE, a dramatic human-interest yarn by Eli Colter, and another tension-packed installment of Harry Sinclair Drago's STAGECOACH KINGDOM. To round out an outstanding issue, you'll find, of course, all your favorite departments, plus some mighty interesting Western articles and features.

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AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

GHOSTS OF THE BACK TRAIL

by Walt Coburn

White Bob's carbine cracked again and again scattering Shep Fox's trapped gun wolves.

CHAPTER I

COWPUNCHER ON THE DODGE

THERE had been a lot of shooting, off and on, during the night. Then, just before daybreak, a blaze that looked like a burning haystack or barn or cabin.

Bob Brandon had stayed awake most of the night. He sat crouched in behind the brush, his played-out horse grazing at the end of a picket line made from a thirty-foot saddle rope. He kept rolling cigarettes which he never lit because the flare of a match flame might be the difference between life and sudden death. Instead, he would chew the brown paper cigarettes into soggy butts and spit them out. And he kept asking himself what the ruckus was

about. He was on the dodge, a stranger in a strange land, a Texan on Montana range.

There were no posses following Bob Brandon. He'd left them behind along the outlaw trail, back somewhere between the Robbers' Roost and the Hole in the Wall. So that shooting didn't mean that somebody was trying to smoke him out of his badlands hide-out. But when a man is straddling a horse that's too leg-weary to carry him into the distance, and when he himself is behind on sleep and his belly aches with empty hunger pains, night shooting keeps him away from the few badly needed hours of sleep and scrapes his nerves raw.

Bob Brandon was in an ornery mood when dawn broke. He watered his big roan horse and saddled. There had been a long dry summer and most of the creeks had dried up. The badlands waterhole he had found was salty with alkali, and the cattle and horses and wild animals that had watered here had left their sign in the muddy edges. Water bugs fouled it and there was a green scum around the edge. Pollywogs and frogs used it. Bob dippered the water up in his hat brim and drank, then washed the dust from his hands and face.

Bob Brandon stood about five feet seven without his boots on. His build was stocky, his movements quick, and he had snowy white hair and a pair of sharp, hard-gray eyes set under ragged brows. Those eyes were bloodshot and slitted now and there was a fighting thrust to his blunt jaw that was covered with a week's stubble of white whiskers. He was a man whose age would have been hard to determine.

The breeze had carried the odor of smoke to the hide-out, but the broken country hid the charred source of the smoke and the blaze Bob had sighted in the black hours before dawn.

Then he saw a band of sheep on the far side of a cut coulee. The sheep were scattered and there was no herder or dog tending them.

Just as Bob Brandon sighted the band of sheep that reminded him of a swarm of maggots crawling across a dead steer carcass, he heard the sharp, brittle crack of a carbine. Its echoes died away. The shot came from about a couple of hundred yards away. The bullet hit a sheep and crippled it. Then there was another shot. A sheep went down and lay there on the hillside, dead. The gun kept cracking. And each time that carbine broke the silence with its whining crack, a sheep was hit.

IT didn't make sense. There were a couple of thousand sheep in that herderless band. It was wanton killing and pointless; a man hidden in the scrub pines and using up cartridges to kill sheep five hundred yards away. It would take a wagonload of cartridges to wipe out that band of woollies.

That was the locoed part of it that made Bob Brandon forget his own danger. He had a curiosity to see the why and wherefore of it. And if danger cropped up out of this useless waste of cartridges, Bob Brandon had a saddle gun and six-shooter that would take care of his own part.

He rode back and around through the broken hills and scrub pines until he was about a hundred yards in behind the lone hand who was killing sheep in the gray dawn. Dismounting, Bob left his horse and took along his saddle carbine. He moved through the scrub pines and patches of buck brush with the silent quickness of a hunter stalking big game. He had taken off his chaps and spurs and he walked cautiously and with as little noise as possible. When he got closer he would stand still until the carbine cracked, then use its gun echoes to cover the sound of his approach.

Bob Brandon halted, crouched, not fifty feet from the flat sandstone rimrock. His lips spread in a wide flat grin and his hard, gray eyes lost something of their bleakness. Instead of the hardness, puzzlement glinted.

The boy in the faded overalls and old blue flannel shirt was about sixteen. He lay flat on his belly, a .30-30 saddle carbine gripped in his hands. His battered old sweat-marked hat was pulled at an angle on his tow-colored head. His clothes were ripped and torn, scorched by fire and splattered with dried blood. Near his right side were dozens of empty brass .30-30 shells. On the flat sandstone rimrock in front of him was an old boot leg half filled with cartridges.

The boy was talking to himself in a dry, croaking whisper.

"You stinkin', blattin' woollies! You dirty, bushwhackin' sheepherders!" There was a sob in his voice.

The saddle gun, its rear sight raised to the last notch, spat flame. The boy lay over on his left side, levered out the smoking shell and shoved a fresh cartridge into the magazine.

"I'll see," said Bob Brandon, "about locatin' a freight outfit. It'd take three high box wagons to fetch you enough ca'tridges to git your job done."

Bob Brandon, tough, quick-triggered, stood there with his hands lifted to the level of his wide shoulders, a wide grin on his square-jawed, blunt-nosed face. And for as long as thirty seconds, he was looking into the round black muzzle of a saddle gun. A little smoke drifted from the end of the gun barrel.

But Bob Brandon was not watching the gun barrel. He was staring into the red-rimmed, sky-blue eyes of the tow-headed boy, ready to throw himself sideways or flat, if those blue eyes flashed the split-second warning of death.

"Who," croaked the boy, "are you? One of that stinkin', blattin' sheep outfit?"

"You don't see no sheep dog follerin' me, son. Nor the stink of woollies on my duds, if the breeze was right to ketch the odor. I'm lookin' for a man named Bill Harton. He's a friend of mine from down yonder in Texas. Bill Harton and me was in the Texas Ranger outfit together. I figgered you might be able to point out the trail to his ranch."

THE boy started to say something. Then the words stuck in his throat and the carbine grew unsteady in his hands. When he found his voice, it was barely audible.

"There ain't no more ranch. . . . Bill Harton is dead. They burned us out last night, murdered Bill Harton. . . . If you belong to that dirty sheep outfit, I'm givin' it to you—"

Bob Brandon threw himself sideways. The .30-30 bullet nicked his shoulder. Then he had the saddle gun thrown away and was sitting on the fighting, sobbing boy. It took more than a minute or two to quiet down the boy. Blood was oozing from a bullet nick in the boy's chest. He fought with a maniacal fury until Bob hit him hard in the belly and then got onto his feet.

The boy held onto his belly and gasped for breath. Bob rolled a cigarette and lit it. That gave the boy time to get his wind back.

"You could," said Bob, "be Dave. David. I bet the cowhands call you Whitey or Cotton Top. It's bin a long time since I seen you, Dave. You was mebbeso a year old. Even then, your eyes was that young calf color and your hair was sort o' fuzzy. . . . Like gumdrops?"

Brandon reached into the pocket of his shirt and pulled out a none-too-clean paper sack. He untwisted the neck of the sack and showed the boy half a dozen crushed and dilapidated-looking gumdrops.

"Who . . . who"—the boy's voice was husky and tears began to roll down through the dirt and blood that grimed his cheeks—"are you?"

"My name is Bob Brandon. I knowed your father almighty well. Tie into these gumdrops. Then tell me about the ruckus."

"You're Bob Brandon?"

"What's left of him. Now don't wolf them gumdrops while you tell me what happened."

The boy rubbed the tears out of his eyes with the heel of his hand. His lips were hard and dry and cracked and his freckled-faced grin quivered at the edges as he took the bag of gumdrops and shoved one into his mouth.

"Since I can remember," he said, "I've heard of Bob Brandon. My dad said you'd bin killed in the Argentine. Where you went with a South America stake. Gosh! And I tried to kill you for a sheepherdin' gun fighter!"

Brandon told Dave to take it easy for a little while. The man was watching the sheep scattering out. Tonight the coyotes and wolves would tear that band of gray woollies apart.

"You'd better commence at the beginning, Dave. Let's know where we stand."

Young Dave Harton tried to talk and couldn't. He lay there on his belly with his hat fallen off and his tousled straw-colored head buried in his arms. Tears came at last after the dry sobbing.

Bob Brandon squatted uneasily on his hunkers, his hat brim slanted across his hard, gray eyes. Eyes that kept watching for danger. Eyes that lost their bleakness whenever he looked at the boy. But he made no kind of a gesture to help that boy through his grief. And it was not until young Dave Harton sat up, dry-eyed, looking far too old for his boyhood age, that Brandon rubbed out his stub of cigarette and asked a blunt question. Cutting it short. Cutting it to the name of a man.

"Shep Fox?" The easy-going tone was gone now out of Bob Brandon's voice.

"Shep Fox." Young Dave Harton got onto his feet and walked over to where his carbine lay. Bob made no move to stop him.

"They set me afoot last night," said Dave. "I crawled up here and waited for daybreak. Shep Fox will have to kill me before he kin graze his stinkin' sheep across the grave of my father. . . . I got a job to do. A coffin to whittle out. Bill Harton ain't buried yet."

"My horse carries double, Dave. I'm handy with a pick and shovel. And with the tools of my trade." Bob Brandon grinned like a wolf and patted his guns.

CHAPTER II

PARDNERS OF THE DARK TRAILS

THERE was a burned barn and haystack and log cabin. And in the buck brush and willows was the bullet-riddled body of Bill Harton. But he had not died without putting up a desperate fight. The ground around him was littered with empty .30-30 shells.

"There was," said Dave, "mebbeso a dozen of 'em. They rode up in the dark and smoked my dad and me out. Set us afoot and burned the barn. Set fire to the cabin. We had to duck and dodge our way to the brush. We made a stand here in the willows and then dad died and there was no more reason for me stayin' here. So I pulled out for the rimrock where I could make a better stand."

They found a pick and shovel to dig a grave and some pine boards for the coffin. And there in the early sunrise they buried Bill Harton while a mockingbird sang in the scrub pines.

Bob said this called for a new deal. He had figured on throwing in with Bill Harton for a while. But last night, while the shooting was going on, he had had no idea he was this close to the Harton ranch. Otherwise he'd have ridden down out of the badlands into the little valley and sided Bill and the boy.

"I was told," said Bob, "that Bill's ranch was fu'ther north, on Milk River."

"We got sheeped out there," said young Dave bitterly, "Shep Fox throwed in five bands of sheep around us and grazed it as bare as a bald head. Crowded us into sellin' out for a two-bit price to the sheep outfit. Fox was ramroddin' with his tough hands. We located here. It's a good valley, but

Shep Fox moved in some more woollies. This time we wouldn't sell out."

They found a scattered bunch of Harton saddle horses and changed to fresh mounts. Then they rode back into the broken hills to Bob Brandon's hide-out camp. On the way they saw a bunch of riders scattering to hunt sheep. And a little later they heard a dog howl.

When a dog howls like that it means something. The white-haired Brandon and the tow-headed young Dave rode in the direction of that howling dog. And about half an hour later, near the smashed wreckage of an overturned sheep wagon, they rode up on a sight that made young Dave Harton forget his bitter hatred for sheep outfits.

A big shaggy sheep dog was standing guard over the bullet-torn body of a Mexican sheepherder. The Mexican wasn't dead, but he was in bad shape. Now and then the dog would lick the man's hand or face. The dog growled savagely, teeth bared, as Brandon and Dave rode up.

Somebody had overturned the canvas-covered sheep wagon, smashed everything in sight. Shot the herder and scattered the sheep for the wolves and coyotes.

"Tell your dog," Bob Brandon spoke in the Mexican language, "not to bite. We kin help you, mebbe."

The sheepherder spoke to the shaggy dog in Mexican. The dog wagged its stubby tail.

BOB BRANDON got some water and ripped a clean flour-sack dish towel into strips, bathed and bandaged the Mexican's bullet wounds.

A dozen riders had come during the night, the Mexican said. They had roped his wagon and jerked it over with their saddle ropes and horses. The herder and his dog had been inside. And when the Mexican had managed to crawl out of his overturned wagon they had shot at him and into his sheep.

"It was some cowboys, señor. Their name ees Harton!"

Bob Brandon looked at young Dave Harton. The big shaggy dog had decided to claim Dave for a friend and was licking his hand and twitching its stubby tail by way of making a dog's friendly advances. Dave was scratching the big shaggy dog's ears. He looked straight into the hard accusation in Bob Brandon's eyes and shook his head.

"No, sir. Dad and I had no kind o' part in anything like that. I know how you ketched me shootin' sheep this mornin'. But we never had a hand in this."

Bob motioned toward Dave. "The same night riders who shot you, killed this boy's father last night," he told the sheepherder. "His name is Dave Harton."

The Mexican looked puzzled. Pain seared his black eyes but his wounds were rips and scratches and not dangerous. He was putting aside his pain now to stare at young Dave Harton. Then he spoke to Bob Brandon in Mexican.

His orders, he said, were to bring his band of sheep into the valley. There were four more bands. Wether bands. Stout two-year-old wethers. There was a camp tender with each band. The camp tenders were Americanos and tough. They packed six-shooters and saddle carbines and their talk was bad. Three of the sheepherders were Mexicans, the other two were Basques. The camp tenders moved the wagons on ahead onto feed and water. Then the four camp tenders would meet and ride away together. They never stayed with the herders at the sheep camps.

The boss of the sheep outfit was a tall, rawboned man who talked the Mexican language like a native and whose ways were tough. He had eyes the color of ice and talked to the camp tenders about range wars in Mexico and Arizona and Wyoming. They called him Shep Fox.

The sheep belonged to the Milk River Livestock Co. and this Shep Fox had contracted to take the five bands

of sheep onto a good summer range and graze them back to their winter range on Milk River.

But what puzzled the Mexican, who said his name was Juan Gomez, was about a man who yesterday had stopped his band of sheep with a gun. He said his name was Dave Harton and this was his Lazy H range and that he and his father Bill Harton owned the valley. He had threatened the Mexican sheepherder in strong language.

"Get your sheep out of this valley," that Dave Harton had warned the Mexican, "or there will be some dead sheep and a dead herder."

"But that Dave Harton was not young," the Mexican declared. "He was a man with whiskers and much heavier in build. I do not understand, señors."

BRANDON told him not to fret about understanding. Dave brought the Mexican's hobbled horse, saddled it and they got Juan Gomez aboard. They rode on either side of the wounded Mexican to keep him from falling off. The big shaggy dog trailed behind. Brandon said he never figured he'd see the day when he was follered by a sheep dog.

"We'll git Juan to my camp where he kin lick his wounds and git well," Bob said. "He's goin' to come in handy before we're done, Dave."

Dave Harton asked the older man what he meant.

"It's a bear trap of some kind, Dave. These sheep was trailed here to start a ruckus. Then when the shootin' was over, them same woollies would be trailed back onto their home range. And some smart, fast-thinkin' cowman would wait for the grass to come back and stock the range with cattle. If I had only one guess a-comin' I'd name Shep Fox as the man."

Back at the hide-out camp, after they had made Juan comfortable and fed the big shaggy dog, Bob Brandon took Dave along with him and they rode back to the rimrock. They could see the half dozen riders gathering the scattered sheep. There was another man on horseback who rode like a sheepherder and had two dogs with him.

"Shep Fox's camp tenders," said Bob Brandon, "with a fresh herder. Looks like a new sheep wagon pullin' in on the camp ground. But Fox is goin' to be puzzled and worried when he finds that Mexican herder they left staked out, plumb gone. Yeah, I reckon that's goin' to worry Mr. Shep Fox some."

Brandon said those night riders hadn't aimed to kill Juan Gomez. Those tough hombres didn't make the mistake of leaving a man alive, if they wanted to kill him.

"But a pore wounded Mexican sheepherder could tell in court how a young feller named Dave Harton had threatened him. Juan Gomez and his dog on the witness stand would make a jury weep for pity in a cow country that is slowly gittin' loused up with sheep. And you'd go to the pen for a while, Dave. Providin' you lived through last night's ruckus, which you did."

"They killed my father," said Dave. "They burned the barn and cabin and haystack. They can't cover their tracks on that night-ridin' shindavvy!"

Bob Brandon said they had tangled themselves in their own ropes on that. They had wrecked Juan's sheep camp earlier in the night. Then they had made their raid on the Harton ranch, hoping to kill Bill Harton and his son Dave and leave the fire to cremate the evidence of murder. But Dave and his father had gotten out of the cabin and into the brush and put up a gun fight. A fast and tough-enough gun scrap to drive off the night riders.

But Shep Fox was crafty and cunning and a hard hombre to beat at any kind of a game. And Fox was after this valley and the Lazy H outfit.

"Looky yonder, Dave. That other bunch of riders that's splittin' up into pairs like cowpunchers on a mornin' circle. Them gents ain't huntin' sheep."

There were fifteen or twenty riders. Now and then the sun would hit a steel gun barrel and the glint of the reflection would show.

BOB BRANDON had ridden the dim trails for many years. He knew how to spot a sheriff's posse as far as he could sight the men. A deep scowl puckered his ragged gray brows and his gray eyes were hard, slitted.

He was into it, he told himself, up to the ears. Into the danger he had traveled to a strange far-off range to avoid. He was handicapped by a wounded Mexican and a big shaggy sheep dog that might bark or howl and fetch a posse swarming. But here was this tow-headed, blue-eyed, game-hearted kid. You couldn't let a boy like that down in a tight.

"If that Mexican Juan will have sense enough and guts enough to stay hid out with his dog, there at camp, me'n you kin drift and dodge around till we're in shape to do ourselves some good, Dave. We've got to risk it. That's a law posse scatterin' yonder. In an hour or two they'll be pokin' an' nosin' in and out around here."

"I've done no wrong," said Dave Harton. "I fought back. Shot a few stinkin' woollies—"

"There'll be tough men planted in that posse, son," Brandon cut in grimly, "who'll shoot first and ask their questions later. You wouldn't stand any kind of a chance of ever reachin' town alive to stand trial. You're on the dodge, Dave. No mistake."

Dave stared out across the valley at the scattering riders of the posse. His mouth twisted in a hard, bitter line.

"Take 'er easy, son. It's happened thataway to other young fellers, to other men—"

"But that ain't the law! Houndin' down a man that's done nothin' but fight back at a murderin' pack of curly wolves!"

Dave was fresh from the bitter grief of Bill Harton's grave, still grimed with last night's blood and powder smoke. He was young and high-headed like a bronc. He had a fighting spirit and a game heart and the capacity for hating anything that was wrong.

"Easy, son," Bob said again. "Don't fight your head. We're on the dodge together for a spell. Let's git back to camp an' talk to the Mexican."

They forked their horses and rode deep back into the badlands. Juan was just starting to build a little fire to cook supper for himself and his dog. He said he didn't feel much pain. He could get around. The big shaggy dog made a fuss over young Dave.

Brandon stomped and kicked loose dirt on the little campfire. He said this was a hide-out camp. Smoke would be sighted and fetch trouble.

"Eat cold grub," he told the Mexican. "There's jerky and beans and cold biscuits and some canned tomatoes. Lay low. Don't let the dog bark. Keep him here with you. If they find you, keep your mouth shut. Lie. Tell 'em you found this camp by accident. That you've seen nobody, talked to nobody. Take your orders from the boss man Shep Fox, the same as always. But say nothin' about me or young Dave Harton here. Savvy?"

"*Si, señor.* You have save' my life. My dog Chacha likes the young señor. For you señors I weel do anything. Even keel!"

The softness was gone from the Mexican's eyes and his voice was brittle.

"Perhaps," Brandon told him, "it will come to that."

IT was sundown when Brandon and young Dave said adios to the Mexican and his big shaggy dog, then rode away into the badlands. Dusk when they hit a trail that few men knew. Starlight when they rode into a hidden camp where there was feed and water, grub and blankets and cartridges.

It was good, Bob Brandon told young Dave, to have a trail pardner. It took some of the bitterness and hardness out of a man's heart to have another man along to share his grub

and tobacco and blankets. Though Dave was just learning to smoke and the brown-paper cigarettes he rolled looked, Brandon said, like Mexican tamales. But if a kid was going to smoke he'd better do it openly and not out behind the barn.

Brandon told Dave to quit calling him mister and sir. Just to call him Bob. The cow country had called him White Bob, because when he was no more than thirty his hair had turned nearly silver-white.

"That was just about the time," he told Dave as he built a little campfire, "when I had to ride away from everything a man works for and fights for. Bill never told you about it, Dave?"

"No, sir. . . Bob. Only that you'd had to take to the outlaw trail. That there was more Texas Ranger in your blood than ever there was ornery outlaw. Then he said he'd sent word down the outlaw trail into South America by the rustlin' of the leaves, to fetch you back."

Bob Brandon nodded. Strong black coffee cooked in a blackened lard pail, along with a battered skillet full of meat, cooked on a hidden fire, made up their supper. But they wolfed the meat and washed it down with the black coffee, eating with their fingers and sharing the lard pail to drink out of.

Bob Brandon told young Dave that news is scarce so far away from home. That it has to travel a roundabout trail and mebbeso by the time it reached a man, it's too late to do much good. And because there is always the danger of the letter being caught and read by the wrong eyes, you can't say much on paper. And the messenger who finally gets it to a man has mebbeso a vague and half-told message that goes into the letter to be read between the lines.

"I figgered it was trouble," said Brandon. "So I come as fast and soon as I could make it. It's a long ways from the middle of the Argentine to Montana. The letter wasn't dated. The messenger that fetched it was one of them Argentine gauchos who said he couldn't remember how he got it because he'd been a little drunk. So it could have bin trouble that Bill was wantin' me to come back to and side with him. Or it might be the news I'd bin waitin' for years to hear. You wouldn't know, Dave?"

Dave shook his head. He said that Bill Harton wasn't a man who talked even to his own son, about things that were important.

"Not that he didn't trust me, sir. It was just his way. He's never even told me much about my own mother. She died when I was a kid. I don't remember her. And while he'd treat me like I was just another cowpuncher, like you treat me, he wouldn't give a kid the feelin' that he was my father. Other ranch kids have fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, but my father liked to have me call him Bill and we was like pardners. Like you and me now, Bob."

"That's sometimes the best way, Dave, for a father and his son to work together," Bob said quietly. "Leastways, I'd figger it thataway if I had a son of my own."

They let the campfire die out because it might be sighted, well hidden as it was, by one of those prowling posse riders. And they talked until they finished the last of the coffee. Then they turned in, sharing the same tarp and blankets that were here at this hidden outlaw hide-out.

Young Dave Harton was sound asleep almost as soon as he had crawled, fully clothed save for boots and hat, between the blankets.

But white-haired, hard-eyed Bob Brandon lay awake for a long time, smoking in the dark and thinking. He was trying to fit together the scattered and broken bits of the puzzle. He wondered what was the real reason for him being here in Montana instead of safely back on his Argentine ranch. He was into trouble up to his eyes and

young Dave was on the dodge. One thing was certain. Shep Fox had to be killed.

CHAPTER III

BUSHWHACK BOOMERANG

YOUNG Dave Harton slept like the proverbial log. But weary and badly in need of sleep as he was, that feeling of uneasiness and danger kept waking Bob Brandon from his light, fitful sleep. He would grip his gun, staring into the night, ears strained to catch any little danger sound that did not belong among the ordinary sounds of the badlands night.

Two or three times Brandon slipped from the blankets and crept off into the night to make a cautious circle around the camp. He would make certain that their two horses were still grazing safely at the end of their picket ropes. That the lengths of black thread he had unrolled from a spool, broken off and stretched across every approach to the camp, remained unbroken. Then he would crawl quietly back in under the blankets.

Brandon heard no sounds of men or horses that meant real danger. But before daybreak, he had the two horses ready for a fast getaway, saddled and bridled. And that trained instinct kept telling him that danger was close and that this hide-out was not safe. He had been told about the place by a rancher who ran a blind post office for outlaws. But there had been something about that rancher that made for distrust. The man had been just a little too loose-tongued, too shifty-eyed, and he drank too much of the whiskey he made to peddle to whoever had the price of a jug. So Bob Brandon had paid for the information regarding this hide-out and ridden along his way. But until now, he had avoided the hide-out, camping in places of his own choosing. The badlands was full of places for a hunted man to hide. But some of those places could trap a man, too. A good hide-away is well hidden and hard to get to, with perhaps only one trail in and out. But if a man's enemies cold-trailed him there and blocked that one trail out with a bushwhacker trap, then the hide-away was a bear trap. And this was such a place.

Only because it was the nearest place to hide young Dave had Bob Brandon come here, though he had paid a hundred dollars in good money to that rancher who had told him how to find the trail in. But with that law posse scattering in hunt for Dave Harton on a framed-up charge of molesting that sheep camp, with the boy just about exhausted from lack of sleep and gun fighting and grief and hatred, Bob had to feed the young cowpuncher and bed him down for a few hours' rest.

It was still dark when Bob Brandon shook the boy awake. Dave groaned and muttered in his sleep, then came awake with a jerk, groping for his gun.

"Easy, Dave," whispered Brandon. "Quiet. Pull on your boots. We're gittin' out o' here. Don't make a noise."

The place was in a deep, brushy pocket and the only horseback trail in came up a rough draw. There were tunnel trails through the heavy brush that had been made by animals. A man could crawl through these brush-choked trails on his hands and knees but he would have to be as expert as an Indian at stalking, to get within gunshot distance without making enough brush-cracking noise to warn a man of his approach. Bob Brandon had set his black thread barriers along these little trails. Nobody had come that near. So if there was that danger that he kept smelling out, then it was a quarter mile away on the main trail.

Brandon told young Dave to fork his horse.

"Lead mine along," he added. "But stay here till you've counted up to five hundred, slow. If you hear shootin', stay bushed up here till I holler for you to come along. And don't git quick-triggered and take a shot at me by mistake."

TAKING his carbine, Brandon went on foot down the trail. He moved like a crouching shadow, traveling fast for a man smelling out danger ahead. Every few minutes he would stop, crouched, staring, listening, then go on again.

Then, about fifty yards ahead and hidden by the black shadows and brush, a saddled horse that had been ridden hard, shook itself, rattling the stirrups.

Bob Brandon's tight-lipped mouth thinned. His instinct hadn't played him a trick. Where there is a saddled horse, there must be a rider. And Bob didn't figure that any one man of that outfit had the guts to ride alone, even after a sixteen-year-old kid. That was where the gun trap was planted, all set for Bob Brandon and young Dave Harton to ride into it.

Bob moved ahead faster now. He was afraid Dave would count too fast up to that five-hundred mark. That the boy would get impatient.

White Bob Brandon was playing for keeps now. He got to within fifty feet of the hidden men without being heard or sighted. And just as he feared, he could hear young Dave coming, leading Bob's horse.

Brandon counted four men. They had left their horses in the brush and stood, their guns ready, back a ways from the trail, two on either side. They heard Dave coming. A tall man whose build looked vaguely familiar, pulled the cork on a bottle and passed it.

"They're a-comin'. The white-haired feller and the Harton kid. I seen 'em ride in here. They must be spooked, quitting camp before daybreak. We'll collect aplenty from Shep Fox fer—"

"Shut up, you loud-mouthed fool. Drink up. Then git back behind the brush. And don't shoot to miss. Shep wants 'em deader'n hell. Five hundred bucks—"

"Reach high! I'll kill the man that moves!"

The lanky man shot at the sound of White Bob Brandon's voice. Bob's bullet hit him in the belly and doubled him up. Two others dropped flat and commenced shooting. White Bob's bullet tore one man's skull to chunks under his hat and his next bullet rolled the other one over on his back, screaming. The fourth man started to run, dodging, for the brush. Brandon's carbine cracked again. The man jerked a little, his arms flailing. Then his legs gave way and he went down in a sprawling heap and lay there, twitching a little.

The lanky man who had shot first did not move. But the six-shooter in his hand, as he lay motionless, clicked to full cock. As Bob Brandon stepped out of the shadows, his gun in his hand, the lanky man's six-shooter roared. The heavy .45 slug grazed Bob Brandon's ribs. Then Bob shot twice and the lanky man kicked convulsively and lay dead.

Brandon shouted through the gun echoes: "Stay back, Dave. Git off your horse. There might be more of these bushwhackin' snakes hid in the brush."

But Dave Harton had already ridden into sight. Bob Brandon called to him and the boy rode into the brush, leading the saddled horse. Bob joined him as Dave swung from his saddle.

"Now hold these horses of ours and stay here till I git back," Bob told him. "Don't move from here. Don't shoot till you're shot at. Crawl into that brush and lay on your belly. This ain't kid play."

"I wanted to side you, Bob."

"Best way to side me is to hole up an' lay low. I'll be back directly."

But it was getting daylight when White Bob Brandon finished his careful searching of the brush and returned.

Young Dave Harton was crouched there with a six-shooter in his hand. He did not hear the white-haired man approach.

"We got what there was of 'em, Dave," he spoke quietly.

The boy jumped. For nearly an hour he had crouched there in the brush with the two saddled horses, a

gun in his hand, starting at every little sound, damp with cold sweat, but taking his orders.

AT the edge of the clearing lay the bullet-torn bodies of four men. White Bob Brandon from the Argentine had really played for keeps.

"I want you," Brandon told Dave, "to look them four things over. See if you know 'em. The long-geared un is a feller called Joe Spencer. He told me about this hide-out, then cold-trailed me here."

"Shep Fox," said Dave, "spends a lot of time at Joe Spencer's whiskey camp. Spencer's no good."

"He'll be good from now on," declared White Bob Brandon. "Let's look them others over."

All four of the dead men had been badly bullet-torn and young Dave Harton had a hard time of it to keep from being sick. But he bent over each dead man and made the identifications to the best of his ability.

Joe Spencer had been identified without any trouble. Two of the others were tough camp tenders for Shep Fox. The fourth man had a shock of stiff black hair and a reddish mustache.

"That's Heavy," said Dave, his voice brittle. "Heavy Jones. The sheep outfit got him a kind o' special deputy star. That's it. There on his shirt. All over blood now. It was Heavy Jones that told us a week ago that we'd better move out or git sheeped out."

Bob Brandon saw the metal star now pinned to the bullet-torn and blood-sodden flannel shirt. He studied the dead man's looks and build, squatting on his boot heels beside the body, noting every detail of Jones' appearance. Then he nodded curtly to himself.

"This is the feller the Mexican sheepherder described as the man who said his name was Dave Harton."

Bob Brandon told young Dave Harton that killing four such bushwhackers didn't bother him any more than if he'd tromped the heads off four rattlesnakes.

"But goin' through the pockets of the dead gives me the creeps," he admitted.

However, he said, they might run onto something in those pockets that would pull down the odds against them.

The grisly and unpleasant search netted him the usual odds and ends to be found in the pockets of the average range rider. But from the vest pocket of Heavy Jones, he got a tally book and a couple of letters. And there were some letters in the pocket of Joe Spencer's coat that might turn out to be interesting and valuable. One of those letters, in a soiled and frayed envelope, bearing no stamp, was addressed to Bill Harton.

Slowly, his hands a little unsteady, White Bob Brandon took the letter from the blood-spattered envelope. In that first gray light of dawn he read it through in a few seconds, then put it back in its envelope. His leathery, lean-jawed face was grayish and his eyes were bleak as he stood there and kicked savagely at the body of Joe Spencer, cursing the dead man in a low-toned voice.

Young Dave Harton looked on, a little white-faced, bewilderment in his eyes.

Then Bob Brandon turned away from the dead man. His eyes were still bleak and hard. His voice was almost out of control.

"I wrote that letter down in the Argentine. Sent it by underground along the trail back. It never reached Bill Harton. That Spencer thing got a-holt of it. Him and Shep Fox. So when Spencer spotted me, he passed the word along to Fox. And Fox moved into your valley with his sheep and his dirty, murderin' night riders. . . . Fork your horse, Dave. Let's git goin'."

BOB BRANDON didn't tell young Dave Harton that he had to get away from here before he kicked and beat the dead Spencer into a mutilated pulp. Had Bill Harton gotten that letter sent along the outlaw trail, he

would never have been killed. He would never have made that last desperate stand here in the little valley. A stand against odds he knew that he had no chance of whipping. Both those letters had been halted somewhere, and that somewhere was probably Spencer's. The letters had been read, delayed for days and weeks, perhaps months, until Shep Fox had time to get his sheep moved here from Milk River, get his night-riding camp tenders in motion, and set the bear trap for White Bob Brandon.

Spencer's ranch on the Missouri River, at one of the outlaw crossings, had been known for years as a blind post office where the renegades who rode that owlhoot trail could leave or get a letter from a friend on the dodge.

But when Bob Brandon had stopped there for a change of horse and directions to a hide-out, he hadn't told the lanky, rawboned Spencer who he was, where he'd come from or where he was going. Nor had he mentioned the name of Bill Harton.

"I need a change of horse, Spencer," he had said flatly, "and a hide-out. I got the money here to buy both."

But Shep Fox must have told Spencer to be on the lookout for a man with sharp, hard, cold, gray eyes and thick white hair. A man that would be worth a bounty. Perhaps Shep had held out on Spencer in a way. Or Spencer had held out on Heavy Jones and the two bushwhacking camp tenders. Because there, just before the ruckus, one of the four had said something about five hundred bucks. That meant bounty money. And the white-haired scalp of White Bob Brandon carried a price mark that was close to five thousand dollars. Anyhow, Heavy Jones and the two camp tenders had died thinking they were hunting five-hundred-dollar meat when the value ran ten times that high.

Not that it mattered much. It was the trail ahead, not the muddled tracks on the back trail, that mattered.

"Goin' to leave 'em like that?" Bob Brandon finally heard Dave's voice. He shook his head to clear away his milling thoughts. Then forced a grin.

"When you kill a rattler, Dave, do you dig a grave and bury it?"

CHAPTER IV

POSSE ON THE PROWL

WHITE BOB BRANDON told young Dave Harton that it was up to him, Dave, to locate a new hide-away. Brandon had ridden here, sighting the Montana country for the first time. He'd had to depend on other men, even treacherous snakes like Spencer, for a fresh horse and a place to hide between daybreak and dusk. And now they were on the dodge together and perhaps Dave knew the country.

"There's the Injun Hole," said Dave. "Nobody in the country knows it. Nobody but some Injuns and they don't talk. But it's across the valley close to the top of one of the Two Buttes. On our range. They're trailin' them blasted woollies in by Butte Springs, in between the Two Buttes. A man could wait up there and kick enough boulders down to kill half the stinkin' woollies. Gosh, I bet we could—"

"It ain't the sheeps' fault because they don't smell good when a cowhand gits to the windward," grinned Bob Brandon. "Nor can one of them blattin' yellowed woollies help it if they graze close to the ground an' spoil the grazin' for cattle and horses. Some folks don't like to hear the bawl of a mammyless calf or the nicker of a horse. Other folks don't kill cats. There's fellers that kick dogs. I'd shore hate to see you drift down into that class of humans, Dave. Don't pick on the sheep that can't fight back.

"I was holed up for a time in the San Andreas Mountains in New Mexico. There was an ol' lady skunk with a litter of little uns that got tame as anything you ever seen. Of a cold, snowy night, old Ma Skunk would scratch at the cabin door and I'd open

it and she'd come a-paradin' in with them young skunks of hers behind her, and nobody out o' order. I fixed 'em a stray bed under my bunk an' directly the young uns quit friskin' around, they'd bed down. They made company for a man alone. Still, when you're down on a man you call him a skunk. And there's no more harm in a skunk, if he's let alone, than there is in that big woolly dog of Juan's.

"So we take in after the men, not the pore animals, Dave. Savvy? And how do we go about gettin' to this Injun Hole? There's the matter that'll come up sooner or later, about feed and water for the ponies, and how we git the wrinkles outta our bellies."

Young Dave Harton had, a few hours ago, seen this outlaw White Bob Brandon shoot down four men in almost that many seconds. He had seen the white-haired man kick a dead man in the face. Now he heard that same man's voice soften down to a lazy drawl while he talked about wintering in the same cabin with a family of skunks. And there was a twinkle in those gray eyes that melted the bleakness. Bob Brandon was a hard man to savvy. He was tougher than a boot. But he made you understand that,

Two tough hands were just starting to work over the terrified Mexican sheepherder as Dave and Bob galloped up.

given a chance, there was something fine and big and decent and gentle underneath it all.

"There's feed and water up there where the pines hide a horse," said Dave, proud to be able to add to this new pardnership something besides grief and danger. "When you crawl into the cave you're in a place bigger'n a cabin. Plenty of grub and you kin hide a campfire at the back because there's another tunnel that goes up like a chimney and you kin look up through a hole and see sky above through the brush. Bill and I put grub there. It's where we'd aimed to hole up in a bad tight. We'd have made it there if they hadn't killed 'im."

But Two Buttes and the Injun Hole were on the far side of the valley that was swarming now with Shep Fox's tough camp tenders, sheep hunters, and a posse made up, no doubt, of town bums, livery-barn hangers-on, cowhands unfit to hold down a real job because they are town hands at heart, or too sorry at cattle work to do anything but get underfoot. But the valley by daylight made a dangerous strip to cross.

There was only one other place where Bob Brandon and Dave Harton might find refuge until dark, the hide-away where they had left the Mexican Juan Gomez and his big shaggy sheep dog. And even that was a dangerous spot.

"We'll be better off there," said Brandon, "than we will be ridin' down our horses dodgin' and a-twistin'. There's just a chance they ain't located that place. I hand-picked that place out o' the badlands."

This was being on the dodge. With the hound pack not far behind and all around, nosing out sign of your trail. It wasn't much of a life for any man, Bob Brandon told young Dave Harton.

"And that, if I git the help of Gawd A'mighty, Dave, is what I'll take you plumb away from. Or bust a gut a-tryin'."

White Bob Brandon's voice was low-pitched, vibrant, like the voice of a circuit-rider preacher Dave remembered hearing talk one time at the Milk River Ranch.

HALF a dozen times or more, Bob and Dave sighted or heard the possemen, riding in pairs, and they would ride into the brush and wait until the danger passed. Then the two men would ride on again.

White Bob's attitude toward such posse riders was bitter and his estimate of the men was low.

"For five dollars a day and grub and ca'tridges free," he told Dave, "those men will git out and try to hunt down a man who never done them a lick of harm. They'll kill that man on sight if they git the bulge. What's that but murder?

"And they're cowards. Rank cowards. They ride in pairs or bunches. Scared of their own shadows. Callin' back and forth to one another to make certain they won't git lost or too far away from the backin' of the rest of their outfit. A man could run the pack of 'em out o' the country with a kid's cap pistol."

But such men were dangerous. They had orders to kill and they were scared enough to shoot at anything. Bob Brandon told Dave not to discount that fact.

They twisted their way between patches of brush, into cut coulees and out again, taking care to keep below the skyline. And along toward noon they neared the hide-away where they had left the Mexican.

They were a couple of hundred yards from the place when they heard the dog growling and barking savagely. They heard the Mexican's voice raised in shrill protest. Finally his voice subsided into a moan. A man's heavy voice cursed, then there was the sound of the dog letting out a sharp yelp of pain.

"Tell your damned cur to keep away from me, or I'll kill him. Like I got a notion to kill you. Pull a knife on me, you damned stinkin' Mex! Now

set back with your blasted cur an' talk. And don't give me that 'No savvy' stuff. Don't lie, neither. You didn't patch yourself up. You didn't find this place alone. The sign says there's bin one-two other fellers here. We know who they are. So don't lie. Now where'd they go, fella? Keep that dog off me, Sam, while I whittle it out o' this Mex with his own pig sticker, an' when I git done with him—"

"I know you two hombres," sounded the defiant voice of the Mexican sheepherder. "You are two camp tenders for Shep Fox? But also you are two of them hombres that turn my wagon over and shoot me and my sheep. . . . I tell you notheeng, you Yankee *cabrons!*"

Then the voice of the Mexican sheepherder changed tone. The voice of Juan Gomez spoke in a low, quiet tone, in his native Mexican tongue.

"Vamos, Chacha! Pronto. Find the señors. Go find the young amigo you like. He will take care of you. Go, Chacha! Vamos! Pronto. Quick. Before these *cabrons* kill you. Find the amigos—like you trail lost sheep."

Then, in a few seconds, that same voice of Juan Gomez sounded with a new tone, fearless, defiant, strong.

"Now, *cabrons!* Kill me! I spit on you!"

"You dirty, sheep-stinkin' Mex. Git that damn dog, Sam. I'll work this sheepherder over till he'll look like butchered mutton. Kill the dog!"

There was the sound of a gun cracking, then through its echoes the voice of the man, Sam, cursing.

"Missed, by Satan!"

White Bob Brandon and young Dave saw the big shaggy sheep dog coming through the brush on a run. The dog was limping and blood stained his shaggy black-and-white coat.

Young Dave Harton reached from his saddle and petted the dog. Chacha whimpered, his stubby tail wig-wagging, his tongue licking young Dave's hand. The hand that had come away from the shaggy coat was stained with fresh blood.

"Stay back, Chacha!" young Dave Harton's voice was rasping and his eyes were blue and bright and hard. "We'll git 'em!"

Dave's gun was in his hand and his horse running neck and neck with Brandon's as they broke through the brush and trees.

TWO whiskered men with guns were standing over the hunched form of the Mexican, Juan Gomez. One of the men had Juan by his shock of heavy black hair, a butcher knife in his other hand. The second man was holding a six-shooter.

When the two men heard the brush cracking and sighted White Bob and young Dave, the man with the butcher knife dropped it and grabbed his gun. Before it was out of its holster, young Dave Harton's six-shooter had roared twice and the man went down, clawing at his bullet-ripped belly. Bob Brandon beat the other man to it by a split second. The man had his mouth open and White Bob's bullet tore into it and out the back of his skull.

Juan Gomez had been cuffed and slapped around, knocked down and kicked. The butcher knife had cut the top of one ear off. Otherwise he was in no worse shape than he had been when they had left him.

Chacha ran to the Mexican, sniffing him, licking his bleeding ear, whimpering softly, stumpy tail wagging. And Juan Gomez's arms were hugging the big shaggy dog, feeling him over for hurt places. Tears streamed down the Mexican's face and he was laughing brokenly.

"I send Chacha to tell you, amigos! Ees know more than any dog, any man, my Chacha. Amigos!"

Bob Brandon and Dave had dismounted and were standing over the two dead men. The big dog wriggled free and limped over to Dave. Dave squatted down and scratched Chacha's ears, then looked at the big dog's lame leg. There were no bones broken. The

blood on the dog's shaggy coat came from Juan's wounds.

"I had a dog." Dave's voice was hard and dry, and his bright-blue eyes slitted as they looked at the man he had just killed. "I had a dog, Bob. A big brindle feller. Cross between a hound and a bulldog. He'd tackle anything I told him. . . . Them night riders shot him. He crawled into the cabin an' died. When they set fire to the cabin, I laid him on my bunk, dead. That burned cabin was Brin's grave. I think I just got the son that killed my dog. I remember his voice hollerin' in the dark. Brin was growlin' outside. Then there was a shot and that feller's voice sayin': "I got their damn cur!" I jerked the door open and Brin come in. His tail was short. It was wigglin'. He licked my hand, like Chacha. Then I was holdin' him an' he died like that."

There was a hardness to Dave's voice now that made him sound like a man. The big shaggy dog went back to Juan Gomez who was washing the blood from his face.

Young Dave stood up. He walked slowly over to where the dead man lay. And then, a hard dry sob choking his throat, he commenced kicking the dead man viciously.

Juan quit washing his face to stare at the boy. He crossed himself, muttering a prayer.

White Bob Brandon made no move to halt Dave. He knew that the boy had seen him do that same thing to a dead man. That perhaps Dave was patterning his ways after Bob's. He was all this boy had in the world now. He told himself he'd better shape his own ways bigger and finer if Dave was going to try to follow in his boot tracks.

Then White Bob Brandon's voice sounded, flat-toned, commanding, giving a warning.

"Somebody must've heard the shootin'. We'll have to be driftin' or we'll be sayin' howdy to that law posse. Saddle Juan's horse, Dave. I'll look these two carcasses over for lice an' nits. . . . Juan, tie a rag around that ear. We better take some grub along. A little flour sack will hold it all. Put in a sack of salt. And that butcher knife."

They were on the move again. White Bob Brandon looked them over and a grin spread across his leathery face.

"On the dodge," he told himself, "with a button of a kid, a wounded Mexican sheepherder and a limpin' sheep dog. But as the feller says, there's a first time for everything."

CHAPTER V

HIDE-OUT

IT was dodge and twist, bush up and hide, ride on again and go through the same motions. And the odds were against them.

The shooting at the hide-away had been heard, all right. But the pairs of posse riders were not familiar with this badlands country that young Dave Harton knew like a city boy knows his neighborhood alleys and back yards.

White Bob and his little outfit would hole up in a canyon, or scatter in the brush and lay low, and the white-haired outlaw would grin flatly while they listened to the pairs of man hunters calling back and forth.

They had found the two dead men at the scene of the last ruckus and they must have found the dead bodies of Joe Spencer and Heavy Jones and their two bushwhacker pardners because these pairs and little bunches of doughty man hunters were not getting far apart and the warnings they tossed back and forth in loud voices were, to White Bob, so comical that he was sorely tempted to shoot a couple of times across their heads just to watch them rabbit.

"They'd spur their horses to death, Dave, gittin' yonderly."

It was a temptation. But somewhere on the prowl was Shep Fox. And you couldn't scare Shep Fox. Besides, scattered among this poolroom

posse would be some tougher men, like those who lay dead only because they had been slower on the trigger pull.

There was more than one time when White Bob Brandon motioned that silent signal to Dave and Juan to be ready to shoot it out with them. When some prowling bunch of man hunters got so close that the dog Chacha would growl in a barely audible dog tone that the smell of danger was close. And they would tense there, the crouched dog, the Mexican sheepherder who was now wearing the guns of two dead men, young Dave who had killed his first man and thus suddenly outgrown his boyhood for the status of a man on the dodge, and the leathery-skinned, lean-jawed, white-haired Bob Brandon from the Argentine, their guns ready, until the danger had ridden past.

White Bob Brandon had traveled in all sorts of tough and dangerous company. And he had been in tight places with some of the fastest gun fighters in the Texas Rangers siding him. And then there had been the outlaw days when he'd had to gun-fight his way out of bad spots and in the hard-bitten, quick-triggered company of some of the gamest men who had left their tracks along the outlaw trail.

But as this dangerous day wore on, the sun sinking lower in the sky, and the night hour approaching when they would cross that valley to the safety of Two Buttes and the Injun Hole, White Bob Brandon began to feel more and more proud of this little outfit of his. And he told himself that no place, anywhere, had he ever been in better company. And that included the big shaggy Chacha dog.

Two or three or four times the big sheep dog had warned them of danger and given them the chance to hide. Never a bark out of the dog as he ranged ahead of them unseen. Only his silent return and that barely audible deep growl.

"Ees them," Juan would interpret the dog's warning. And they would take to the brush and wait.

THEN there was Juan Gomez himself. A short, hard-muscled, moon-faced Mexican with a blunt nose and soft brown eyes and gentle voice. Since he was a small boy herding his father's sheep, he had known no other trade. He had drifted from Sonora to Baja California, then to California, with his father and mother and many brothers and sisters of all ages and sizes. Herding sheep. Moving from place to place during the shearing season and making money with his sheep shears, herding in between the shearing seasons. And with only a sheepherder's gentleness in his heart. He drank and gambled and sang with the drifting sheep-shearing crews. Working with bent back and sheep shears, stripped to the waist and wet with sweat and slick with sheep grease, there in the shearing pens. Gambling at night. Sometimes getting drunk. Drifting. Then the long, lazy, silent and peaceful months when he and his dog tended a band of sheep. Sunshine and shade under a cottonwood or pine tree, with the sheep spread out and grazing. Talking and sharing a noon-day lunch with his dog. Asking nothing from life but that. Sending all but a dollar or two of tobacco money to a little sister in California who was going to a convent school.

"Maria," he said simply. "Soon she is coming home." His white teeth smiled. From his torn and blood-spattered clothes he removed a canvas envelope and took out the picture of a girl about thirteen. A girl with the dark eyes and beauty of a Mexican madonna.

Bob Brandon looked at it and the hardness left his eyes. He passed it over to Dave as they all squatted in behind the brush, safe for a while.

White Bob watched young Dave's blue eyes devour the picture of the young Mexican girl in her convent school dress. He could see the boy breathing faster. Watched his hands tremble ever so slightly. Then Dave Harton was handing the picture back to Juan.

Juan Gomez shook his head. "You keep, compadre."

Dave's face reddened and he cut an embarrassed look at Bob Brandon. Bob bit back a grin and nodded gravely.

"I'd keep it, Dave. You never kin tell."

Young Dave Harton took a last look at the picture of Maria Teresa Gomez, shoved it carefully into its soiled and blood-spattered canvas envelope, and stowed it carefully away in his pocket. His blue eyes were shining.

"Maria Teresa," said the Mexican sheepherder, "ees comin' to Coulee any day. I send her a ticket. The money. To see me before she goes back to that convent school for all winter."

Coulee was the cow-town shipping point for this part of the cow country.

White Bob Brandon grinned faintly. There was a strang, faraway look in his gray eyes.

Then the dog growled softly and they gripped their guns and crouched low behind the brush, hoping their horses wouldn't nicker.

And when the danger had passed, the scattered bunches of posse riders calling back and forth to one another, Bob Brandon gave them the signal to fork their horses and travel on.

No, White Bob Brandon told himself, he had never been in better company. He'd do his damnedest to see that they didn't lose.

And when the first stars began to show in the Montana sky, White Bob told Dave that it was time they tackled it. They'd cross that valley and reach Two Buttes and Dave's Injun Hole, or all get shot out of their saddles a-tryin'.

They had, more than once that day, hidden out at some place that overlooked the valley. And they had seen no sheep there. That one band of scattered sheep had been gathered and drifted back out of the valley. Leaving it empty, save for the grazing Lazy H cattle and the occasional groups of riders traveling across it.

DAVE would have led the way, but White Bob shook his head. He had Dave tell him how to pick the trail. Then the white-haired outlaw rode in the lead, the big shaggy dog ranging silently ahead to smell out the danger. Juan Gomez behind Bob and never once complaining of the pain he must have been suffering all these long, dangerous hours. Young Dave Harton rode behind as sort of rear guard.

There was a quarter moon and the stars were clear and bright. They rode with their guns in their hands and each of them had, behind their wariness, other thoughts.

White Bob Brandon was grim-lipped, hard-eyed. He had killed men and he was ready to kill any other men if he had to. He had it all figured out now what he had to do, the tremendous job he had taken on, and how to get that job done if he lived long enough. To Bob Brandon, nothing else mattered. Only that he had seen the picture of a little Mexican girl melt the hard lump of bitter grief in the heart of young Dave. And that was something that Almighty God, up yonder in His stars, could have arranged.

Juan Gomez suffered his pain and said his prayers to the Señor Dios. Perhaps he would get another band of sheep to herd. Perhaps he would live to meet Maria Teresa in town. Introduce her to this white-haired señor who had saved his life. This man with the hard, gray eyes that softened whenever he looked at the younger cowboy. And that young Señor Dave. He had a good heart because he and Chacha understood one another and Chacha was never wrong. The white-haired Señor Bob Brandon had said that this whole valley belonged to young Dave Harton. All the land, the cattle, the water and grass. Quién sabe? Who could tell? A young caballero who could cry about a dog and kick a dead man in the guts, there was a caballero fit for any girl.

"Quiet, compadre!" White Bob Brandon silenced the little ranchero

song that Juan Gomez had begun to sing. There was a grim sort of chuckle behind White Bob's whispered warning. He had been born and raised along the Mexican border. He had the savvy of the Mexican people.

Dave Harton had slid the picture of Maria Teresa Gomez from its canvas envelope. But there was not enough moonlight to make it anything more than a blur, so he risked lighting a match.

"What in thunder do you think this is?" White Bob Brandon's low-pitched voice came back at him. "A torch parade?"

Again there was that grim chuckle behind the white-haired outlaw's sharp reprimand.

"All I need now," he said, "is for that sheep dog to start barkin'."

They should have bumped into at least a few of those spooky posse riders. But they crossed the valley as the crow flies and met nobody, though they sighted several campfires and heard the voices of men gathered around those fires where there was safety in numbers and perhaps a jug of whiskey to make 'em brave.

When they reached the foot of Two Buttes, Dave took the lead. Chacha had been limping badly and for the past hour or more Juan and young Dave had taken turns carrying the big shaggy dog in their arms as they rode along through the night.

White Bob Brandon made no offer to carry the dog. He rode with his saddle gun in his hand and watching for danger. White Bob remembered now that he had never owned a dog in his life. Mebbeso he'd missed something. That big shaggy dog was worth ten men on a dangerous trail. But Bob had punched cows along the Mexican border where the only dogs you saw were the mongrel, snapping, barking curs that belonged to the border Mexicans. The kind of dogs that bothered cattle or barked out a warning when a ranger was making a cautious night patrol.

IT took them another hour to climb the scrub-timbered slope of the butte to where the pines got thicker and taller and there was the smell of grass and fresh water. And then Dave's voice called out quietly.

"Here we are, Bob."

Juan Gomez finished his little prayer and crossed himself. White Bob dismounted stiffly. He saw Dave ease the big dog to the ground, then dismount. Saw the big shaggy dog limp off on a lone and unbidden tour of scouting. Juan was so stiff and lame and weak from his wounds that Brandon had to help him out of his saddle.

They tended to their horses and followed Dave through the small, brush-hidden hole into the big cave. In a little while they had a fire made and grub cooking and strong black coffee simmering. Juan massaged the dog's lame leg where one of Shep Fox's night-riding camp tenders had kicked the animal.

Dave poked into a hole in the side of the cave and pulled out a bottle of rye whiskey. Juan's dark eyes brightened. But White Bob Brandon had stooped and picked up a buckskin pouch fastened with a drawstring. It had fallen out of the cache hole.

"Who left that here, Dave?" he asked, his voice a little unsteady.

"Dad put it there. He never said what it was. I never looked inside it."

Brandon told Dave to give Juan a drink. Then he carried the large scabbed buckskin pouch over to the firelight and undid the drawstring. He opened the mouth of the sack with unsteady fingers and with his back turned to the Mexican sheepherder and the boy, he examined the contents. He shoved everything back except a letter that was not worn or frayed, the ink on it clear and black.

Spreading the letter open, Bob read it quickly. His hard, gray eyes were glittering but when he folded the letter and shoved it back in the pouch, then closed the pouch and shoved it into the inside of his shirt, he was blinking tears out of his eyes.

"This damned smoke in a man's eyes," he said, and reached for the blackened coffeepot.

CHAPTER VI

ONE-MAN REIGN OF TERROR

MOSTLY White Bob Brandon would ride out alone, leaving Dave at the Injun Hole with Juan Gomez and the big dog. He would pull out after dark, and sometimes it would be nearly daybreak when he returned.

And all night long, while the Mexican slept, young Dave and the big sheep dog would stand guard, watching, listening. And during the night, at irregular intervals, there would sound the faraway noise of gunfire. Dave would grip his carbine, tense, alert, trying to get the story from the spacing of the shots.

"White Bob," Dave would tell the dog, "is smokin' 'em out down below. Spookin' the pants off 'em!"

Dave would not go to sleep until White Bob showed up again. Sometimes it would be midnight or a little later. But nearly always it was closer to dawn when Dave would hear the white-haired outlaw's signal. The signal changed from time to time. One night it would be the boom of a horned owl. The next night a perfect imitation of a coyote yapping. Or just a whistle. That was to keep anybody from picking up the signal and getting suspicious enough to trail the signal to the Injun Hole.

But as Dave told White Bob, they really didn't need any signal. The big sheep dog would smell White Bob coming long before the signal sounded. The stumpy tail would wag and the dog would whine a soft welcome.

There would be times during the night when riders prowled the timbered butte. If they got near, the big dog beside Dave would growl. Dave would wake up Juan Gomez and they would crouch in the black shadows, saddle guns ready.

The cave itself was all but impossible to find, even in broad daylight. But there was always the danger that their picketed horses might be stumbled upon.

Juan Gomez was willing enough to take his turn at night-guard duty. But White Bob explained to the Mexican sheepherder, without hurting his sensitive feelings, that he was not trained for a job like that, whereas Dave had been brought up, trained to it. So Juan appointed himself cook and dish washer. He even washed and mended their clothes.

Once or twice White Bob took young Dave along on a night ride, just to give the boy an idea how it was done.

During the day they would spot one of the several camps where the posse riders had their bedrolls and grub. And when nightfall came, White Bob and Dave would ride down.

There would be a man or two on horse guard. The others would be in bed or sitting around the campfire.

White Bob knew any number of ways to spook horses at night. Tricks he had picked up from Indians and Mexicans and men along the outlaw trail. He and Dave would ride as close to the camp as they could get without being seen. Then White Bob would spook the horses. The horse guard would be nervous and scared. A few shots over his head and he'd head for camp, hollering for help.

Then it was hard, fast riding as they ran off the horses, then made a fast getaway.

It might take all next day for that particular outfit to round up their scattered horses. And a few shots whining over their heads as they broke away from the campfire or pawed out from under tarp and blankets, would leave their nerves badly frayed.

"Shoot to miss unless you're crowded," White Bob cautioned young Dave on these raids. "We don't want any more killin's if we kin help it. The idea is to spook them poolroom posse things out o' the valley and back to town."

But mostly White Bob rode alone

on these night raids. One man could get the job done and fade into the night, accomplishing the same results as the pair of them. And with less danger of being caught.

WHEN White Bob worked alone he took far greater risks. And his methods were different each time.

Sometimes there would be a lone man on horse guard. Bob Brandon would ride up boldly, coming, apparently, from camp.

"Shep sent me to relieve you, feller," he would announce. "Got a match?"

The man would be suspicious, spooky. But the casual request would dissipate some of his wariness. He would reach into his pocket for a match.

"Now light it," Bob would order. "Hold it in both hands. Close to your face. I like to look at a man's complexion before I gut-shoot him."

The gun in White Bob's hand would be covering the man. The tone of his voice would be quiet and deadly. He would make the man cup the match flame in both hands and hold it up in front of his face. The flare of the match would be in the man's eyes when the barrel of White Bob's gun would crash down on his head, knocking him cold.

White Bob Brandon would hogtie the man and gag him. Unsaddle the man's horse and turn it in with the other horses that he would drift off into the night, leaving the sleeping possemen at camp afoot.

That trick had worked, but White Bob was too wise to try it a second time. He brought the man's hat back to Injun Hole. Juan Gomez needed a good Stetson.

Another night, White Bob left his horse and slipped up on foot to a sleeping camp. He crouched for quite a while in the shadows. Finally, he selected one snoring man whose bedroll had been spread a hundred feet or so from the other sleepers.

White Bob slipped up on the sleeping man and rapped him over the head with the barrel of his six-shooter. Then he gathered the snorer's clothes, hat, boots and pants, and carried them away. He dropped the hat and pants into a boghole about a mile from camp and took the boots back to the Injun Hole. Dave's boots were getting rusty. This pair of nearly new shop-made fancy boots were perhaps a size large, but wadded paper shoved into the toes would make them a fair fit.

There was a jug of whiskey in the cave. White Bob took it along with him one night. A gallon of moonshine whiskey.

There was quite a large bunch of possemen camped on the creek. Two men on horse guard. White Bob spilled some of the whiskey on his shirt and when he rode up out of the night, he reeked of booze and he was singing in an off key.

The two men on night guard rode out to meet him. One of them cussed him, telling him he'd wake the whole camp with his drunken bellering. White Bob swayed in his saddle and shoved the jug at the pair. One of them took it from Bob's left hand. As he did so the gun that had somehow gotten into White Bob's right hand, poked him in the belly.

"Don't drop that jug, man." Bob's voice was flat-toned and sober now. "Just you and your pardner shed your guns. Then sit down on the grass and drink what's in that little brown jug. It's some of Spencer's rotgut booze. You know what happened to Joe Spencer? It'll happen to both you jaspers right now if you don't shed your guns and git to work on that likker. I'm the man that killed Spencer. I'd be proud to kill such five-dollar-a-day-man-hunter things as you. You're a dime a dozen in my book."

WHEN White Bob Brandon drove that remuda into the night an hour later, he left a pair of dead-drunk men with a nearly empty jug on the ground between them. That much bad whiskey might kill them. At any

rate, they'd be as sick as a pair of poisoned coyotes in the morning.

White Bob had pulled off their boots and pillowed their drunken heads on their saddles. He rode back to Injun Hole with two cartridge belts and holstered six-shooters.

So it went. Until, when Bob rode now down into the valley and emptied his carbine over the heads of a sleeping posse camp, they came awake yelling and shooting and dodging for cover.

It was a one-man reign of terror from one end of the valley to the other. Running off their horses, catching some pair of prowling posse riders unawares and sending them back to camp without their guns and as naked as the day they were born. Shooting into a circle of men around a night campfire, his bullets tearing holes in their coffeepot or smashing a jug of whiskey on the ground beside them.

It was hit and run and show up at another camp the next night, until the sheriff in charge was fit to be tied and Shep Fox had murder in his eyes, and his tough camp tenders, what was left of them, struck for double the fighting pay they were getting. And the rumor started and spread through the lot of them that no one or two men could be doing all this damage. That White Bob Brandon had fetched a bunch of outlaws up the owlhoot trail with him and when they got done fooling around, they'd shoot to kill and they'd go through this valley like a swarm of yellow-jacket hornets.

White Bob Brandon had started that rumor himself by hinting something of the kind to the men he caught and disarmed and sent back to camp in fear and disgrace.

A lot of the weaker-hearted possemen had quit and gone back to town. The sheriff had whiskey brought out to fire the others with some sort of courage. But when a .30-30 bullet whines out of the night and smashes the jug as it is being lifted to a man's mouth, that's more than just spilled whiskey. It's spilled guts.

White Bob Brandon said it was more fun than he'd ever hoped to have again. But his grin was thin-lipped and his eyes stayed cold. He hated those posse riders and he had a bitter contempt for that sheriff from Coulee who was taking his orders from Shep Fox.

He took a savage delight in humiliating those men he caught. And while he was making them throw away their guns and strip to the hide, he would sometimes curse them in a flat-toned quiet voice that chilled them more than the night air on their bare hides.

"Tell your two-bit sheriff to go home. When I want to see him, I'll ride into Coulee like a man. Now git for camp."

WHITE BOB carried a heavy rawhide quirt on his saddle. The bare hides of those luckless posse riders who had the misfortune to meet Bob Brandon, would be marked for life by the scars of the quirtings he dealt them with a cold, savage fury. They carried those welts back to camp, back to the cow town of Coulee.

White Bob Brandon would return to the Injun Hole with trophies of his night raids—boots, spurs, hats, guns, a pair of new pants or a good clean flannel shirt. He would toss them at Dave and Juan Gomez with a wolfish grin.

Then Juan would have something different each morning for breakfast. He could do more with that limited supply of camp grub than a restaurant cook in town.

White Bob would eat hungrily but slowly, washing the grub down with strong black coffee. He would say nothing until he had emptied his plate. Then he would roll a cigarette and light it and when it was half smoked, he would tell them, in a mixture of English and Mexican, a language Dave was rapidly learning from Juan, the comical highlights of last night's pasear. He had a cowpuncher's dry wit and a slow way of telling a yarn, without more than a twisted grin on his face, while Juan Gomez and young

Dave doubled up with laughter and had to stuff something in their mouths to keep the sound of their mirth from traveling outside of the cave. And while he talked, the hardness would go out of White Bob's gray eyes and his leathery face would lose its grayish tinge that came from weariness, and the hard, deeply etched lines around the corners of his mouth would soften.

When he had finished talking and smoked his cigarette, he would pull off his boots and pants and lie down. And Dave would take on his share of sleep while the Mexican shepherder and the big shaggy dog stood guard.

Toward the middle of the afternoon, White Bob Brandon would wake up. He would take a cold sponge bath and shave, then put on the clean clothes Juan would have ready for him.

He was not a heavy sleeper. Any little unusual sound would bring him awake, his six-shooter in his hand. Juan and Dave and even the big dog took pains never to make any unusual sound. Their talking or moving around never disturbed the white-haired outlaw's sleep. Those kind of sounds belonged here. But snap a dry stick and White Bob would be standing there in his shirt tail and drawers, a six-shooter in his hand and his gray eyes bleak and dangerous.

CHAPTER VII

POWDER-SMOKE CAMPAIGN

IT must have been about noon that day, after they had been here in the Injun Hole two weeks, when Dave woke White Bob after the outlaw had put in a particularly hard-riding and dangerous night.

"I don't like to wake you up, Bob," said the boy, "but you better come look for yourself. It looks like they're quittin' the valley!"

While Bob Brandon could come awake in a split second without any trace of slumber marring the hard sharpness of his gray eyes. It was just as if he had shut his eyes, then opened them again. Sitting up, he reached for his boots. There was a twisted grin on his mouth, a bright, hard twinkle in his gray eyes. He pulled on his pants and reached into a pocket.

"I was tellin' you and Juan this mornin' about settin' a feller afoot and sendin' him on a five-mile walk back to camp, naked as a newborn babe. I let him keep his boots. But I fastened his hands behind his back with his own handcuffs. . . . Here's the key. I'll keep his badge."

White Bob Brandon tossed Dave a small key, fastened with a buckskin string to a rabbit's foot good-luck piece. Then he took a deputy-sheriff star from his pocket, grinned at it, and shoved it back.

"Gosh, Bob! Sheriff Spence!"

"Deputy sheriff," White Bob Brandon corrected Dave quietly, "and his real name is Bart Spencer. He's Joe Spencer's brother. I reckon even Shep Fox's threats an' bribes ain't enough to hold the gentleman here in the valley any longer. Deputy Sheriff Bart Spencer has got a big bellyful of posse work. Last I seen of him he acted like a man who was on his way out o' the country. Somewhat afoot and slow-goin', but he had a look in his milky-white eye that said he was huntin' a new climate."

They had a small brass telescope that Bill Harton had left in the cave. It was old and obsolete but it had a pair of lenses that could bring a far-distant object up so close you wanted to reach out for it.

White Bob and young Dave and Juan Gomez took turns now with the telescope, watching the scattered posse camps breaking up, taking their chuck wagon and bed wagon and pack outfits. Gathering at the main camp there at the blackened and charred scar that had once been the Harton ranch.

The law was leaving the valley, pulling out for Coulee. Young Dave was so jubilant about it that he made Chacha sit up like one of those clown dogs in a circus, while he held the brass telescope to the dog's eye.

"Yonder they go, Chacha! Like coyotes with their tails between their legs! We got the valley back!"

White Bob Brandon wasn't watching the almost disorderly retreat of the disgraced deputy and his gutless posse. His hard, gray eyes were watching a more compact, though much smaller bunch of riders at the other end of the valley. His mouth thinned and his eyes went bleak.

AS far as the eye can see, a man with savvy can tell what kind of riders he is watching. How they travel, how they handle their horses. There were only nine riders in this little bunch, but they were cowhands. One man rode a little in the lead. The others rode behind, none of them straggling. They were traveling at a high trot so far as White Bob could tell when he reached out and took the brass telescope and focused it.

Young Dave's exuberance died like a campfire with the dirt kicked over it. His grin faded and he watched the white-haired outlaw's face. Juan Gomez's eyes lost their sparkle. Even the big shaggy sheep dog sensed something wrong and the stubby tail quit wagging and drooped.

There were no sheep left in the valley. There hadn't been any sheep since that one band had been scattered and gathered and moved out. In spite of all the posse riding, the Lazy H cattle grazed in the valley pretty much undisturbed.

White Bob Brandon lowered the telescope. There was a wolfish grin on his leathery face.

"Shep Fox is gittin' a little hasty," he said. "Might be he's feelin' a chill up his backbone. He's gathered himself a cowpuncher crew and from the way he's scatterin' his riders it looks like he's commencin' to work the cattle they gather on up the valley. It's too late in the day to ride circle. He'll just fan his cowhands out and they'll gather what they find and roll 'em on up the valley, not botherin' to work the rough country. Gather the gentler valley stuff. Build a herd and move it. Their chuck wagon an' bed wagon an' remuda will ketch up with 'em. Where would Shep Fox find a market for a gatherment of stolen cattle, Dave? Lazy H cattle."

Young Dave flattened the ground with his hand and opened the big blade of his knife. He scratched the Lazy H brand in the dirt. Then, his eyes hard and bright, he changed that Lazy H brand into something that looked like a square with each of its sides extended a little ways.

"That's what those cattle will be wearin' by the time they're shoved acrost the Missouri River onto the Joe Spencer range. It was Spencer's brand. Called the Hog Pen."

Bob Brandon nodded. He saw that hard, bright glint in the boy's eyes and shook his head.

"Don't git worked up about it, Dave. Them cattle will never git out o' the valley. Outside of havin' the taller choused off their fat ribs, there'll be no harm done. It'd take Shep Fox and his short-handed outfit two-three days to come up the valley and out with a herd. By that time we'll take a crack at spoilin' his batter. . . . What we eatin' for supper, Juan? Make 'er handsome. It's our last un here at Injun Hole."

White Bob told Dave to keep watching the country below with the little brass telescope. And then, after a while, Dave and Juan had better get cleaned up and into their Sunday duds. Bob warned them not to feed Chacha so much grub he'd founder on the way.

"Because," he told them, "we're goin' into Chinook and it's a long ride. Leavin' here about dark, we kin make Chinook by daybreak."

"Chinook?" Dave's eyes widened.

"That's your county seat," Bob declared. "Where there's real law. A real sheriff. Where the train stops goin' east an' west. Where you take the four-horse stagecoach for the two-bit cow town of Coulee. Where meb-

beso you'll stand on the platform when the train from California comes in, an' meet that little convent schoolgirl, Maria Teresa." White Bob Brandon was talking a little faster than his usual lazy Texan drawl or hard, flat-toned voice. He sounded as though he was excited inside.

As the rustler cupped the match flame in his hands, White Bob's six-shooter descended with bewildering swiftness.

"You talk, Bob," said Dave, "like you wouldn't be there with us to meet her."

"Depends on the way the luck runs, Dave. I'm ridin' with you an' Juan an' the dog until we git past Coulee and you're on safe range. Then you three go on alone."

Dave's eyes got hard and bright again. "You're comin' back to tackle Shep Fox! You can't leave me out of that, Bob! He got my dad killed! He turned us out! He'd scatter sheep acrost my father's grave! I want a chance at Shep Fox! You got to give it to me! I don't give a hoot! Let Juan go on to Chinook with Chacha! I'm stayin'! I'm playin' my string out"

DAVE was still standing there, fists clenched, his eyes hard and bright, a dry sob in his throat, when he saw the bleak look in the gray eyes of White Bob Brandon. He quit talking suddenly as if he were ashamed.

"I'm obliged, Dave," Bob said quietly. "But when there's a big job on hand, each man takes his place and does his chores. Somebody has got to deliver this safe to the big sheriff at Chinook."

White Bob Brandon took the scabbed buckskin pouch from the hole in the sandstone wall of the cave.

Dave had forgotten all about the pouch. He looked at it now, then into the eyes of the white-haired outlaw who held it.

"Yes, sir," he said quietly. "Whatever you say."

"It's what might be called your birthright, Dave. And what's more, it holds somethin' of value to White Bob Brandon. A damn sight more valuable than my life. It's in your hands when we git past Coulee and onto safe range. Take good care of it."

"With our lives, compadre Bob," said Juan Gomez quietly. And for the first time since they had found him, Brandon knew that the Mexican sheepherder could be dangerous. That he would fight to the death.

Brandon shoved the buckskin pouch into his pocket and moved outside where he would be alone. The sun was going down and the white-haired outlaw stood there staring out across the fertile valley and across the far stretch of country to the other side and far beyond. He studied that wide strip of country they would have to cross. It was long and dangerous. He wished that the job was done, that the only part he had left to do was to kill Shep Fox. He was not wishing that was over. That was something for a man to look forward to. Like a feast. Like water after a long drought. No, he wasn't wanting that part of it done. Only the getting of the boy Dave and the Mexican sheepherder and the big shaggy dog safely to Chinook. And then he would cut the sign of Shep Fox. White Bob's hands clenched slowly and tightened.

Juan Gomez saw him standing there and was afraid to call the white-haired outlaw to supper.

CHAPTER VIII

A MESSAGE FOR THE LAW

WHEN White Bob Brandon came back into the cave, he had lost something of his grim look. They had plenty of time before dark, he said, and there were things not in that buckskin pouch that Dave had a right to know about. This might be their last chance to talk much. So they'd have a parley after supper.

"The reason Bill Harton sent for me to come to Montana," he said, while Juan cleaned up the supper dishes, "was not just to help him protect his valley ranch. He had good news for me. He'd cleaned my slate. But he said I'd have to git here to help him put all the evidence in front of a judge and jury, or the governor, or whoever has the power to take the bounty price off a man's head. But Bill couldn't tell all that in a letter that went down the outlaw trail to South America. He didn't dare tip his hand.

"Makin' the story as short as possible, it began in Texas. Bill Harton and I was both Texas Rangers. Pardners. Closer than most brothers. We'd bin brought up together. Joined the Rangers together. We saved our money and pooled it and when we quit the Rangers we bought us a little outfit along the border. I married Bill Harton's sister and the three of us lived almighty happy there on the ranch.

"There wasn't a cowman along that Mexican border that wasn't fetchin' over a few Mexican cattle when the moon was right. And while we was Rangers we never bothered the cowmen that was right. But we made it hell for the real, gun-slingin', tough cattle rustlers.

"While we was in the Rangers, Bill and I hamstrung a little bunch of such rustlers. The leader of 'em was a tough hombre named Shep Fox. And when we had him sent to the pen, he swore he'd git even. Which he did.

"Like I say, all the cowmen was dealin' in wet cattle. Me'n Bill was

no better than the rest. And the Rangers never bothered us.

"Then come the chance to fetch over a nice little drive of cattle. But a horse had turned over with Bill and broke his leg a week before, so he couldn't come along. I taken a couple of cowhands that was always for hire for such jobs, and went into Mexico.

"The moon was nearly dark that night we fetched the cattle acrost the Rio Grande. We'd shoved the bulk of the cattle acrost and I was ridin' the point when hell busted loose. Guns cracked from all sides. I hollered to the boys to turn the cattle loose and git yonderly. I stopped a couple of bullets but wasn't hurt too bad. I never drawed a gun. I made a getaway and got to the ranch about daybreak.

"There was a light burnin' in a room we never used and the window blind was half down. That was the signal we use. It meant stay away from the house because it was dangerous.

"Me'n Bill had a meetin' place down the river we'd used when we was Rangers. I shied away from the house and rode there. I knowed Bill wouldn't be there because he was laid up with a busted leg.

IT was my wife Caroline who was waitin' for me," Bob continued. "She had me a fresh horse and a sack of grub and all the money we had in the world. She said that the sheriff was waitin' for me at the ranch with a bench warrant. I was charged with the killin' of a Ranger captain and two of his men who had held up my cattle drive on the river bank. The sheriff had told her and Bill that I'd hang, sure as green apples, that Shep Fox had bin deputized by the Rangers to go with 'em to set a rustler trap and he'd bin an eyewitness to the shootin'. Shep Fox was out of the pen on parole then. Bill had sent word to me to quit the country fast. Take to the outlaw trail because that was the only safe place for me now.

"It was bitter medicine but the directions said, take it. Caroline had fetched along our baby boy. Bill had sent word that he'd take care of her and the baby, that he'd never quit workin' at it till he got at the real truth. Bill didn't need proof to know I hadn't shot them Rangers. We'd had our workin' agreement with the captain and his men.

"I kissed my wife and baby good-by. And hit out for the outlaw trail. Bill had said he'd send for me when he got to the bottom of it. I told my wife I'd git word to her when I got located.

"I never saw my purty young wife again. She died here in Montana where the Texas law had driven Bill Harton because he was my pardner. I never saw my son again until I found him flattened out on a rimrock with a Winchester shootin' sheep—"

White Bob Brandon looked at Dave now for the first time. His voice was quiet. But behind it was a terrific pent-up emotion that showed in his gray eyes.

"I'm your real father, Dave."

Dave's blue eyes were bright and shining. He kept swallowing the hard lump in his throat. Then he shoved his hand out.

"I'm . . . glad!"

White Bob Brandon held the boy in his arms for a long minute and it was quite a while before he got his voice.

"Bill Harton was your uncle. His slate was clean. I was an outlaw with a price on my head. So it was best that he adopt you and give you his name. It's all here in this buckskin sack. Along with the proof that it was Shep Fox and a couple of his tough rustlers who murdered that Ranger captain and his two men. Seems like Bill Harton kept pluggin' away at it, and a few months ago he got the signed confession from one of the renegades who helped Shep Fox kill those three Rangers. The renegade was dyin' in the Montana pen of slow consumption and got religion, before he died. He wanted to die with a clear conscience. His confession is here in the buckskin sack.

"So Bill Harton sent word to me in South America to come on back and help him hang Shep Fox. Joe Spencer had a hand in holdin' up the letters we wrote and tippin' Shep Fox off. Bill would have killed Shep Fox long ago only he wanted to keep him alive till I got here. . . . And that's the story, Dave."

It had taken a while to tell it. And now it was dark and time to get going. They got their horses and left the Injun Hole. Chacha ranged ahead, smelling out danger. The moon was just right. Luck favored them and they rode mile after mile and sighted or heard no riders. They swung wide around the cow town of Coulee and it was getting daylight and they were well onto a safe range when White Bob Brandon reined up.

THIS was the parting. White Bob handed the buckskin sack to Dave and told him to deliver it to the sheriff at Chinook. Then he shook hands with Dave and Juan and leaned from his saddle to rub Chacha's head.

"Be a good man, son," he told Dave. And then he reined his horse around and rode back the way they had come before he could betray in any way the emotions that were tearing and ripping at his tough heart. White Bob never even turned in his saddle to look back or wave. It was better like that.

White Bob Brandon was playing his game lone-handed from here on. Playing it in his own outlaw Texan way, with a mixture of boldness and wolf cunning.

It was broad daylight and past sunrise when White Bob Brandon neared the little cow town of Coulee. And instead of riding far around it he rode straight into town and down the main street. The saloons were filled with the returned possemen spending their pay. Saddled horses stood at the hitch racks. Drunken men lurched in and out of the little cow town's three saloons. They paid little or no attention to White Bob as he rode down the street. None of them had ever seen his face in daylight. And he had shaved off the white whiskers that had partly disguised his face on his night rides.

White Bob halted in front of the sheriff's office. He saw the burly man who had been robbed of his clothes and badge, sitting alone at a flat-topped desk that was littered with papers. There was a nearly empty quart bottle of whiskey on the desk. The man was bleary-eyed drunk, his red face swollen and bloated as if he had been on a crying jag. He sat up in his armchair and his bloodshot eyes stared almost sightlessly at White Bob when he stepped in through the open door.

"Git out! What the hell you want? Git the hell out o' my office!" The big man's voice was thick, surly.

White Bob took the deputy-sheriff badge from his pocket. He held it in the palm of his hand. The big man reared back in his chair, almost going over backward. His face was a mottled color.

"What . . . what—"

"I'm keepin' this law badge that you ain't fit to wear, mister. If you had any pride you'd never show your face around here again. I'm here in this cow country to stay. I'll be back this way tomorrow. If I find you still here, I'll gut-shoot you like I killed your dirty renegade brother Joe Spencer. You sober enough to ride? Then haul your taller belly out o' that chair and come along. If you let out one yip outside, I'll have to kill you. All I want of you is to take a message for me to your boss, Shep Fox. Now rattle your dirty hocks, mister."

They rode together back down the street. A few men eyed White Bob a little curiously now. Some of the drunker ones were calling out ribald and profane insults and taunts at the disgraced deputy who had shown up at camp naked save for his boots, wearing his own handcuffs.

"You're through here, mister," Bob said bluntly. "If I was in your fix I'd find me an old dull rusty butcher knife and cut my throat."

The big man looked sick. Sick and scared and whipped. White Bob had picked up a full quart of whiskey from a shelf in the sheriff's office. He handed it to the deputy when they got beyond the edge of town. He didn't want the man to get the whiskey shakes and horrors.

"Ride on to where Shep Fox and his outfit is workin' up the valley," Bob Brandon told him. "Tell him you sighted me ridin' up that west one of the Two Buttes. Say that I'm holed up alone near the top in a cave called Injun Hole, but if he hopes to kill me, he'd better come alone, because I'll never let a posse git within gun range."

CHAPTER IX

GUNS BLAZE IN INJUN HOLE

WHITE BOB BRANDON rode boldly and without trying to use the shelter of the brush. He headed straight across the valley and up a plain trail that led to the top of the timbered butte. Every mile of the way he knew that he was being sighted and watched, so he was setting his trap. Gambling on his knowledge of the man Shep Fox, his wolfish nature, his fighting guts. Shep Fox was no man's yellow coward. And in his black, murdering heart was a lust for revenge and a hatred that would make him want to do his own killing now.

Bob Brandon hated to ruin the best hide-away in the country. But as a soldier burns his bridges behind him, so did White Bob now lay bare, without making it seem too obvious, the hidden entrance to Injun Hole cave. He twisted and trampled the brush, clearing it with an ax and then covering the ax marks with dirt. In an hour the entrance to the cave was there for a cautious prowler to find. And unless a man looked carefully, it would seem that it had always been like this, without any more brush concealing the hole in the side of the butte, and that it was a wonder somebody hadn't found the place before.

It was still daylight, though the sun had set, when White Bob Brandon finished his work. And when it was done to his own critical satisfaction, he took from his pocket the spool of black thread. Measuring off a length, he tied it, not too tightly, across the entrance to the cave that was a hole about four feet high. He stretched the thread just high enough above the ground so that a man, bent over and crouched, going into the cave, would break it with his legs, no higher than his feet tops, and never know that he'd done so.

White Bob Brandon put the spool of thread back in his pocket. Then, in the first gray light of dusk, he rode back down the butte by the main trail, then swung off into the brush. Up until that point, he had been watched from a distance. Now he was lost to sight.

A little bunch of Lazy H cattle were grazing at the edge of the valley. White Bob slid his saddle gun from its scabbard. Picking out a big calf almost ready to wean, he shot it behind the ear. And before the calf had finished kicking, White Bob had cut its jugular vein with the butcher knife he had fetched along. He skinned away a part of the hide in less than a minute. Then, working with swift, practiced skill, he skinned away and disjointed the hind quarters and tied the saddle of veal on the back of his saddle. By that time the dusk was darkening into the first black shadows of night.

All this time, so gambled outlaw White Bob Brandon, he was being watched from beyond carbine distance. And from the time his saddle gun had cracked until he started back up the butte with his meat, it had been less than twenty minutes.

NOW it was getting dark and White Bob took the dim trail back. And when he had gotten far enough up the trail he untied the meat and hid it in the brush, relieving his leg-weary horse of that added burden.

It was a waste of good meat, a veal calf killed wantonly, and Bob had a

moment of regret about it. But it was a part of his plan. That little butchering trip had furnished an excuse for him being away from his cave hideaway. A man has to have meat. And unless Bob was playing his cards wrong, Shep Fox would have come up the main trail and discovered the cave by now. Shep Fox should be waiting for him inside Injun Hole. And unless he had lost his fighting guts and his capacity for hating, he would be there alone. He would have sent his cowhand watchers back to camp. Because, after his own ornery tough fashion, Shep Fox had a warped sort of pride. He would want to do this job of killing alone and unaided. Even, White Bob realized with a sort of grim bitterness, as he himself wanted to be alone when he met Shep Fox.

Shep Fox had guts aplenty. But he wasn't going to give White Bob Brandon an even break. He would be alone, yes. But he would try to get the bulge.

Brandon rode up the trackless trail and the cracking of brush sounded warning of his coming. Then, near the entrance to the cave, he dismounted. And from there on he made no noise.

He crept along the side of the timbered butte to the mouth of the cave. When he got there he flattened himself against the sandstone and reached out a cautious hand. The taut black thread he had left stretched there was broken. He knew that Shep Fox was inside the black cave with a gun in his hand, waiting for him to come in with his fresh meat.

Outside, there was a quarter moon and the stars for light. A man going bent over into the four-foot mouth of the cave would make a target no one could miss, the moonlight behind him to outline his silhouette.

In his left hand White Bob was carrying a rolled length of gunny sacking that he had used to wrap the butchered meat in to keep the blood off his clothes. Now he flattened himself to one side of the cave entrance and unrolling the gunny sacking carefully, he reached out and dropped it like a quick curtain across the mouth of the cave.

IN the next split second a gun inside the cave was roaring. Heavy lead slugs tore through the gunny sacking. White Bob risked his left arm as he wabbled the sack like some kid playing a fool game. Meanwhile, the gun inside the cave roared and crashed and White Bob did his best to count the shots, groaning at the same time like a man in mortal agony.

He hoped he'd counted six shots when he dropped the sack and dived headlong into the cave entrance. But he had counted one short because there was a gun flash and a .45 slug ripped across the top of his left shoulder as he dived in on his belly like a kid on a sled doing a belly-buster slide.

White Bob Brandon hardly felt the thudding rip of the bullet. He rolled over and inside the cave and shot twice, as fast as he could thumb back the hammer of his gun and pull the trigger, at the flash of that other gun. He heard a man's cursing moan. Then White Bob Brandon was on his feet and moving in the dark, moving with a deadly and silent swiftness.

"I know every inch of this cave, Shep." His voice was a harsh whisper. "Move and I'll git you. I know where you are now. I kin smell your stink in the dark. Like that sheep dog of Juan's. I set the trap, Shep. You're my bear meat. . . . I'm comin' to kill you now—"

"Come ahead, you ornery son—"

White Bob Brandon shot at the sound of Shep Fox's voice. Kept shooting as he went across through the darkness, with Fox's second gun blazing and the cave filled with the deafening roar of the two guns and the stench of powder smoke.

Nothing on either side of hell could have stopped White Bob Brandon as he crossed that black cave room, shooting, crouched, charging at a run into

the blaze of Shep Fox's gun. Then the two men collided there in the darkness and went down. And when White Bob's left hand, slapping and groping and clawing in the dark, found the face, then crept down to the throat of Shep Fox, he gripped that throat with a hand that was like a steel claw. And the barrel of the six-shooter in his other hand was clubbing down on the

other man's skull and into his face with short, chopping, murderous blows.

Shep Fox was dead and couldn't hear. White Bob Brandon thought he heard shooting but his ears were deafened by the gunfire inside the Injun Hole and his brain whirled and his ugly job of killing Shep Fox did not give him time now to think of anything else. He had to keep choking that neck and clubbing that face and head until there was nothing left of the man who had killed three Texas Rangers and sent Bob Brandon down the outlaw trail and caused the heartbroken death of the mother of young Dave and had killed Bill Harton.

IT was the barking and whining and growling of the big sheep dog that brought White Bob Brandon back to his senses from a black, murderous killer's insane rage. He let go the strangled neck of Shep Fox and quit pounding at the bloody pulp of smashed bone and flesh that had been the man's head and face.

White Bob Brandon rolled away from the body of the tough Shep Fox. He couched because the place was filled with the acrid black powder smoke. He heard the dog growling and barking outside. Heard Juan Gomez talking Mexican. Then Dave's voice, shrill with fear and excitement and fighting fury.

"Damn you, lemme go! That's my dad in there! What kind of a damn sheriff are you? Scairt to—"

"Hold back, son. We've made no mistakes this far, have we? I reckon whatever kind of a ruckus went on in there, it's a mess by now."

There were the sounds of a short scuffle. Then the mouth of Injun Hole darkened, lightened again. The tense voice of young Dave sounded in the cave room.

"Bob! White Bob!"

"Who you got with you, son?" White Bob's voice was a croaking whisper. "Not the deputy from Coulee?"

"The big sheriff from Chinook!"

"Then light a candle an' fetch him in. . . . First damned time I ever let a dog lick my face."

The big shaggy sheep dog was there beside White Bob, trying to lick his face clean of blood.

Sheriff Ike Niber from Chinook and some other men came into the cavern. Candles were lighted and a man whose hands were as skilled as a surgeon's

was dressing and bandaging the bullet rip in the back of Bob Brandon's shoulder. Dave was excited and trying not to show it. Juan Gomez had started a little fire to make coffee and maybe cook some grub.

The sheriff from Chinook was a big man with reddish-graying hair and mustache and a wart on his nose. He had a pair of sharp eyes and a wide grin and had been a cowpuncher and wagon boss for the biggest outfits in Montana. Niber said that young Dave had ridden a relay of half a dozen begged, borrowed or stolen horses down getting to Chinook. And that he, the sheriff, had gathered a few deputies and they'd ridden as hard as men could on fast horses to get here. They'd had to shoot a few men off the trail up the butte. That's where the country-quitting Coulee deputy they'd met had told them they would find Bob Brandon and Shep Fox locking horns.

"I haven't had time, Brandon," said the sheriff, "to look over what's in the buckskin sack young Dave give me. But he told me most of it on the way here. And if I savvied Mexican I reckon Juan here would have filled in the gaps. . . . Dammit, one of you fellers throw a soogan, or somethin', over what's left of Shep Fox. Last time I saw him, he was kind o' handsome."

Sheriff Niber said that the bands of sheep were on their way back to Milk River.

"You'll be takin' over the valley now, I reckon, Brandon. You an' young Dave. No sheep to louse up the best cattle range in the world."

"There'll be room for one band," said White Bob. "Juan Gomez will run one band at the far end of the valley. Unless he and Chacha—that's the dog—would like to help build up the new ranch. There'd have to be a ranch boss. Mebbe even milk cows . . . chickens—"

"Would be better than heaven, compadre, a home on a ranch," Juan said fervently. "Chickens. I think I am sick now from the stink of sheep, also."

IT was two weeks later when the train from California stopped long enough at Chinook to unload a little Mexican girl in a black convent school dress with starched white collar. She had large brown eyes and a heart-shaped face with soft olive skin. Her hair, blue black, was plaited in braids. She carried her belongings in a brand-new telescope valise. To the black uniform was pinned a neatly hand-printed ticket that said:

> This child is Maria Teresa Gomez. She is going to Chinook, Montana, to meet her brother. Please be kind to her and treat her with every courtesy, and may God bless you.

On the back of the ticket was the name of the California convent school.

The Negro porter and the conductor helped the little Mexican girl down the steps of the car. They both looked up and down the platform a little anxiously.

"There's the sheriff," said the conductor. "A white-haired cowman dressed for Sunday and a cowpuncher kid. And that looks like a Mexican in the blue suit and black hat—"

A big shaggy sheep dog came trotting down the station platform. He halted in front of the bewildered little Mexican girl, then sniffed her and licked her hand. Then at some sort of signal, he took hold of the girl's hand in a firm, yet gentle hold.

While the train conductor and the ebony-skinned porter stared, bewildered, the big shaggy sheep dog led the little girl and her heavy telescope valise up the platform for perhaps twenty feet.

Then Juan Gomez, in his black Stetson and blue serge suit, called out:

"Maria! Maria Teresa! That is Chacha, my dog! He finds you, like the little lost sheepies! Maria! Little sister!"

Bewilderment and fright left the dark-brown eyes of the little Mexican girl.

"Juan! Juan!"

Laughing and crying, the Mexican

sheepherder and his little sister ran to each other. The big shaggy dog wagged his stubby tail and barked.

Sheriff Ike Niber and White Bob Brandon and young Dave, dressed in their town clothes, watched. And only the one-time outlaw, White Bob, who savvied the Mexican people, was able to understand the emotions of laughter and tears.

The porter picked up his stool. The conductor gave the signal for the train to move on. This was the crack special fast train that stopped only at the bigger cities. And it had been held up here at a Montana cow town for over five minutes by a little Mexican girl.

Sheriff Niber waved at the conductor. "Drop around some day and I'll tell you the damnedest story," he called out to him with a grin.

Then the sheriff had his hat in his hand and White Bob's white hair was silvery in the sunlight and young Dave's ears felt hot and red. And Juan was sweating and wiping tears from his eyes and trying to steady his voice.

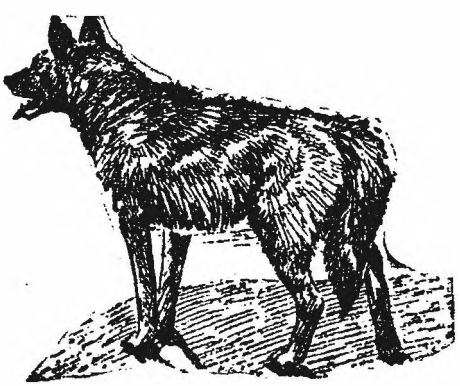
"These are my friends, Maria. First is the sheriff. Then the Señor White Bob Brandon. And now Dave, who has your picture. And the dog is Chacha. And we have a home, a ranchero home, Maria, forever. And now I am kind of tied up in the tongue because I am so happy."

It was White Bob Brandon, speaking the Mexican language with native fluency, who put little Maria Teresa at ease. Sheriff Ike Nibor picked up the telescope valise. And then they walked down the street to the restaurant, Dave and Maria walking behind the others and the big shaggy dog in between them.

And after dinner they shook hands with the sheriff and headed southward for the ranch. Juan and his little sister Maria Teresa rode in the buckboard, which was loaded with more fancy grub than any of them had ever before thought of buying. White Bob Brandon and Dave rode escort. And that night they camped under the stars and sat around a campfire.

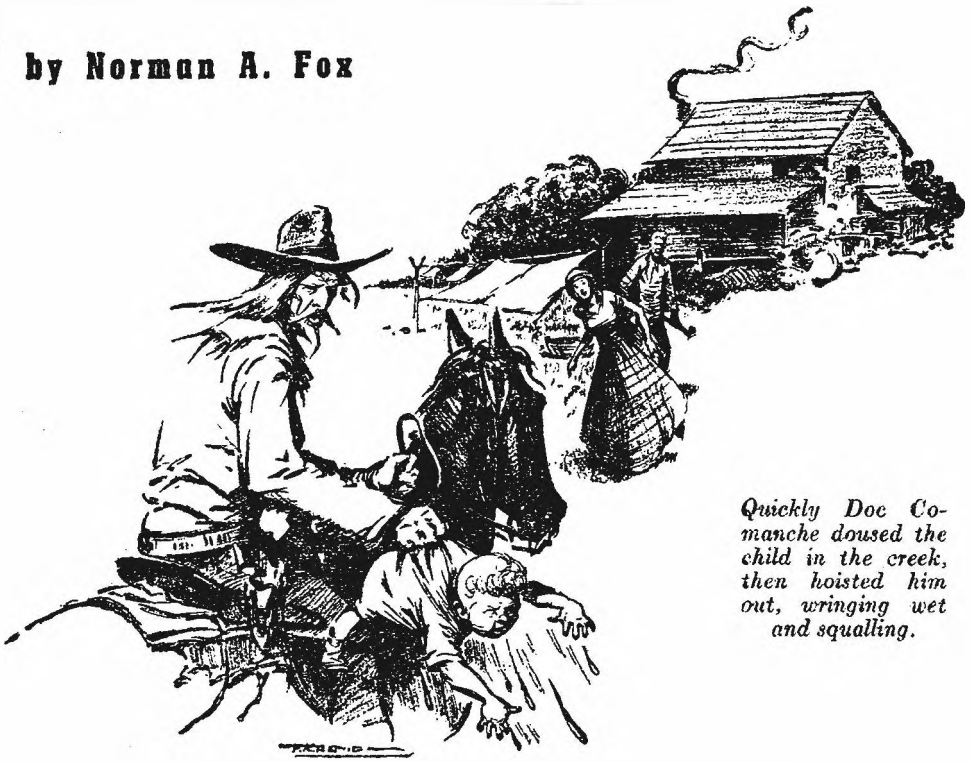
Long after the others had gone to sleep, White Bob Brandon sat there smoking beside the dead coals of the campfire. The bleakness was gone from his eyes. There was an inarticulate sort of prayer in his heart and he tried as best he could to thank a God, whose teachings he had never known, for all that he had tonight.

THE END.



DOC COMANCHE'S GUN-SMOKE DEBT

by Norman A. Fox



Quickly Doc Comanche doused the child in the creek, then hoisted him out, wringing wet and squalling.

THEY came out of the sunset toward Steptoe town, the two of them hunched on the seat of that sway-backed old Conestoga, and when they could see the huddled false fronts ahead, Doc Comanche hauled the team to a stop and stood up, making an eyeful of a man in his creamy sombrero and fringed buckskin suit, his long silvery hair curling to his shoulders. He'd donned his pearl-handled .45s today, and that was significant.

"Feast your eyes, suh," he told his companion. "Theah lies the rainbow's end—and the legendary pot of gold is near."

It had been said of big Oscar Lund that he was strong as an ox—and every bit as smart. His was a bovine face, and his speech was slow as the workings of his stunted brain. "Let's dig up the money right away, huh, Doc?" he said. "Let's git it pronto, huh?"

"No, suh!" Doc said emphatically. "We make our pitch, bestowing the blessing of Doc Comanche's New & Improved Indian Medicine on the citizenry of this heah town. Then, when the sign's right, we visit the deserted cabin where Fargo Mike French buried his bank loot long yeahs ago. Oscar, will you ever learn patience?"

"We been months getting here," Oscar observed gloomily.

"And for a reason, suh! Have you forgotten Deer Lodge and the warden who questioned the four of us who were in the prison hospital when Fargo Mike died? If the warden warned Steptoe law to be on the lookout, we've got to act like this heah's just another town. And have you forgotten Bat

Spain and Rudy Vardon, who might have heard part of the secret Fargo Mike passed on to me? I'd like to know what become of that precious pair since their release."

Big Oscar made an expressive gesture with his hands. "I'll twist their necks," he said simply.

Doc Comanche stroked his skimpy goatee and sighed. "And you'll be hanged, suh, and we'll never have that Argentina ranch that Fargo Mike's money will buy. Now climb down and start circling yonder town. What do you say when you come staggering in?"

"'My hoss threw me,'" Oscar murmured mechanically. "'I bin walkin' miles and miles . . . plumb tuckered out—' Then I fall on my face."

"And when the crowd gathers, and I dose you with Doc Comanche's medicine?"

"'Thank yuh, kind sir! I kin feel the strength flowin' into me!'"

"Good!" said Doc.

Clambering off the wagon, big Oscar ambled away and was soon lost to sight in a broken land of low buttes and shallow coulees. Doc Comanche fished out a ponderous watch, had a look at it and measured off a half-hour. Before it was up, he was peering hard for a first glimpse of Oscar. This was an old and familiar routine with them, but there'd been one day when Oscar had started circling and fallen asleep en route. When almost an hour had passed, Doc's fear was that Oscar had forgotten again, and then he saw the lurching figure at the far end of Steptoe's street.

He clucked his crowbait team into motion then, did Doc, and drove into Steptoe, seeing the town for what it was, another that beef had built here in Montana. And he felt the infectious excitement that came because this was the end of a long and weary trail. Fifty yards yonder, Oscar was crumpling into the dust. Doc came down off the wagon and began elbowing through the quickly gathering crowd.

"Make way, gentlemen!" he cried, flourishing a handsomely labeled bottle. "How fortunate that I arrived at such a moment! Heah's a poor fellow needing an invigorating medicine!"

A tawny-haired young ranger with a lean, solemn face said: "Reckon he needs more than that, old-timer. Look! *He's been knifed to ribbons!*"

THERE was this to be said for Doc Comanche—he kept himself ready for any emergency. But in that first moment when he saw the blood on big Oscar's shirt and realized this was no play-acting, Doc almost lost his steady hold. He went down to his knees beside the slow-witted giant, all pretense gone as he cried brokenly: "Oscar! Oscar! Talk to me, big fellow!"

Oscar's eyes flickered. "Spain and Vardon," he said jerkily. "They was here, just like you was afraid, Doc. Saw our wagon, hid out and waited. They . . . they jumped me in a coulee —tried to make me tell where—"

"Easy, Oscar," Doc said, for the law was elbowing up. Doc measured the sheriff of Steptoe and found him to be an angular man with a face that ran to sharp points. "What's this?" the lawman demanded, then spun on the solemn-faced young rancher. "Give me a hand, Guthrie. We'll tote him over to the jail building. Somebody fetch Doc Dormer."

Doc Comanche touched his guns and cursed himself for not having handed one to Oscar back at the wagon. Guthrie and Doc got hold of the fallen man's shoulders, the sheriff taking his legs, and in this fashion they toted the wounded man into the jail office and stretched him upon a cot. Doc Dormer came bustling in, and while the cow-town medico was getting at his work, Guthrie turned to the sheriff.

"I'm in a hurry to get back to Elk Creek before deep dark, Kildea," Guthrie said. "Could you stall your sheriff's sale on my spread another month? I'm still hoping to raise tax money."

"I'll see, I'll see," Sheriff Kildea said brusquely. "I've got something else on my mind just now."

Young Guthrie went out, and Doc Comanche watched Dormer. "Is he injured seriously, suh?" Comanche asked.

"Lost a lot of blood," Dormer snapped. "But he has no vital wound, and he'll pull through."

Big Oscar had lapsed into unconsciousness, and Doc Comanche grew uncomfortable under the sharp scrutiny of Sheriff Kildea, so he made a mumbled excuse and left. Outside, young Guthrie was heading a light buckboard north. Doc Comanche touched his guns again and was of a mind to backtrack Oscar and do some hunting, but he gave up the notion when the sheriff, obviously possessed of the same idea, came out of the jail, straddled a horse and rode away. Doc took his Conestoga to the wagon yard and after that he had a bite to eat, making a double-or-nothing deal when the time came to pay and using a two-headed four-bit piece to match the restaurant man.

When evening came, Doc made his pitch. He got his stand set up and the oil torches to burning. A crowd gathered and he wrung a few tunes out of his banjo, did some sleight-of-hand tricks and gave his spiel. He sold a dozen small bottles of medicine and four of the family size, but his heart wasn't in his work. Not with big Oscar flat on his back. Doc kept his guns handy, studying the crowd for the hard faces of Bat Spain and Rudy Vardon, but they didn't show themselves. He was counting the night's take when a hand on his shoulder made him turn sharply. It was Sheriff Kildea.

"My office is a good place for talking," said the lawman. "Come along. I want to ask some questions about you and your big partner."

"If you are referring, suh, to that unfortunate fellow who arrived, by an amazing coincidence, at the same time as I did—" Doc began.

"Quit stalling, Comanche," Kildea interjected. "This is a little matter of murder. I'm holding Oscar Lund for a killing, and I want some answers!"

IT was Doc's thought that this Kildea had a way of getting around, and a coldness touched the pitchman's spine. But he only said: "I'll be glad to oblige, suh."

When they entered Kildea's office, big Oscar was conspicuously absent from the cot, and Doc knew, without asking, that the giant had been moved to a cell. He palmed a cigar off Kildea's desk, took a chair for himself, and the sheriff gave him a speculative look.

"I'm going to tell a story," Kildea said. "You can fill in the gaps. The yarn starts some ten years back when a gent named Jonathan Guthrie had the bank here—a bank that was robbed."

"Guthrie, suh?" asked Doc innocently.

Kildea nodded. "The fellow who helped tote Oscar was Matt Guthrie, old Jonathan's son. When the bank was robbed, I led the posse that caught Fargo Mike French, but Mike had hidden the money and he went to Deer Lodge without telling where. Old Jonathan sold everything he owned to pay back his depositors, and after he died, young Matt took on the load. Matt homesteaded a place up Elk Creek, and he and his wife and button live there. You heard Matt ask for an extension on his taxes. That's how hard up he is. But since the depositors are paid, that bank loot belongs to Matt if it ever shows up."

"A touching story," Doc said. "I—"

Kildea silenced him with a gesture. "When Fargo Mike died in prison, there were four others in the hospital. The warden thinks Fargo Mike told one where he'd hidden the loot. Or so the warden said, when I wrote him. That's how I know all about the four. Bat Spain and Rudy Vardon were serving five to ten years for rustling and were released months ago. You

and Oscar Lund were serving a year and a day for helping yourselves to fast horses in a town that was talking of tar and feathers because somebody had seen you making Indian medicine out of pink pills and creek water."

"A shameless miscarriage of justice, suh!" Doc said indignantly.

"Spain and Vardon showed up here weeks ago," Kildea went on. "They've kept under cover, but I've had an eye on them. They don't know where that money's hidden. If they did, they'd have gotten it and loped. Looks like they've been waiting for someone. Who?"

Before Doc could shrug, Kildea said: "You, Doc. You and big Oscar. I happen to know a lot about you, mister. You've been a pitchman for over twenty years, and you tell it that you were raised by the Comanches. You use a Southern accent, but it comes from South Dakota. You're crooked as a corkscrew's shadow, yet you've helped a lot of folks. That's neither here nor there. You took months getting to Steptoe, but I'm not fooled. Prison teaches a man patience, eh, Doc? *Now where's Fargo Mike's loot hidden?*"

Doc got in his shrug then. "If Fargo Mike had told me—and mind you, I'm not saying he did, suh—I'd look at it this way: Fargo Mike robbed the bank and went to jail for it. When he died, he finished serving his sentence so you might say he paid off for the money. If he gave me his secret, then the money's mine. I reckon I'd owe it to Mike to spend that money for him, and I always pay my debts, suh!"

"That," said Kildea, "is as twisted a piece of reasoning as I've ever heard. But I can argue myself around a situation, too. I took a ride tonight, Doc. I found a coulee with signs of a struggle. Also I found a scar-faced little jigger with the life choked out of him—Rudy Vardon. Are you following me?"

"I'll remind you, suh," said Doc, "that Oscar was beset by armed men. Self-defense isn't murder, suh!"

"And I'll remind you," snapped Kildea, "that I'm the law here. An ex-convict staggers into town, badly wounded. I backtrack him and find another dead. That's all I need to have Oscar Lund hanging as soon as he's strong enough to climb the gallows steps!"

Doc Comanche plucked at his goatee. "Unless?" he said.

"Unless that bank loot is laid on my desk pronto!"

"And the man who puts it there goes back to Deer Lodge?"

"This deal's between you and me, Doc. Election's only three months off, and there's talk that Matt Guthrie may run against me. But he'll be grateful enough to withdraw, I reckon, when I restore the bank money to him. Also, it will get me votes when the word goes out that *I* found that missing loot. So you'll say nothing about our bargain, Doc. And you and big Oscar ride out, free as the wind."

DOC came to his feet, making a fine, high figure. He thought of many things, of the hundred trails that had known his footprints and big Oscar's, and of the blind and obedient trust the slow-witted giant had put in him. But all he said was: "I'll need daylight to do my chore, suh. By the second dawn I'll be back."

He went out of the jail building then, crossing over to the hotel and getting himself a room, but he did little sleeping and before the first flush of dawn he was pounding on the livery-stable door. He rented an easy-gaited saddler and an hour after breakfast he was to the north of Steptoe and driving deep into tangled, hilly country where the grass grew to his stirrups.

His first job was to find a certain creek, and when he came upon that meandering stream he drew upon his memory of a whitewashed room and the wheezing words of a dying owl-hooter to find landmarks that had been mentioned and he dovetailed them into a pattern of gun smoke and hoofbeats that was ten years old.

Here was the overhanging rock shaped like an Indian's head, and beneath it Fargo Mike French had rested his blowing horse while the thunder of a circling posse had warned him the game was up. A few miles beyond, Doc came to a clump of bushes and he could visualize Fargo Mike's horse going down bullet-stricken, and the bleached bones were there to prove him right. Fargo Mike had taken to the creek then, to cover sign. And around the next bend there'd be a deserted cabin with a loose board in its floor—a long trail's ending. With another mile behind him, Doc Comanche looked across the shallow creek at the cabin.

All this had been as it should be, but here Doc found the first flaw. The cabin had been deserted when Fargo Mike had tarried in it—but it wasn't deserted now.

Washing flapped on a line, and a golden-haired woman had her mouth full of clothespins. Beside a lean-to, a man lustily swung an ax at a wood pile, making the chips fly. A toddling baby boy, not much over a year old, played near the creek bank, the whole making a scene of domesticity that might have gladdened the heart of that wayfarer, Doc Comanche, another time. But not today.

The man yonder was Matt Guthrie and his presence here told Doc this was the Elk Creek spread of Jonathan Guthrie's son. There was a certain irony in the fact that Matt had come to squat upon his own money, but Doc was in no mood for deep speculation upon the workings of destiny. He was possessed of a dilemma.

He could, of course, ride across the stream, give the Guthries a glib and flowery story, dig up the bank loot before their very eyes and present it to them. But that was not as Sheriff Kildea wanted it and there'd be the vote-minded lawman to reckon with. On the other hand, Doc knew that Montana hospitality would let him into the cabin for the length of a meal, but where was the worth in such a skimpy opportunity? He needed access to that cabin, but on his own terms. And suddenly he saw the way.

He hit the stream with a great splash, and Mrs. Guthrie, lifting her eyes, saw a stranger and gave him a friendly wave. Then she turned to hang up a last garment before company came, and Matt moved to stow his ax in the lean-to. Thus there was a moment when only the child's round eyes were on Doc Comanche, and he was able to ford Elk Creek unobserved, lean from his saddle, grasp the child by the slack of its dress, douse him into the creek then hoist him aloft, wringing wet and squalling.

That fetched Mrs. Guthrie upon flying feet, Matt cutting after her, and Doc passed the dripping baby to its mother and said: "A fortunate thing, ma'am, that the child tumbled into the creek when I was close enough to catch him."

"Johnny! Johnny!" the woman sobbed, holding the child close. Doc, who'd taken to talking at an amazingly tender age himself—and *not* in a Comanche camp—had a moment's fear that young John Guthrie might be able to expose him. But: "Thank you! Thank you very much," Mrs. Guthrie said. "We try to keep him from the creek bank, but he toddles out of sight sometimes."

Matt Guthrie extended his hand. "You're that medicine man who rode in last night," he said. "I'm Matt Guthrie and this is my wife, Glory. We'll be sitting down to dinner soon, and we hope you'll stay. I want you to know that I'll never be able to really thank you."

"I, suh," said Doc, with grave and becoming modesty, "was merely the instrument of providence. I am Dr. Comanche, blood brother to that fearsome tribe. And I take kindly to yo' generous and warming invitation."

SO it was that a little while later Doc sat down to a skimpy meal after little John had been bundled in a blanket and stowed in his crib. The

lion's share of the food was heaped on the visitor's plate, in spite of his protests, and Matt Guthrie made apology, saying: "We've been a little short of money lately. It's been a hard year."

Doc ran his eye around the single-roomed cabin. "You have a snug roof to shelter you, suh, and a floor underfoot," he said.

"The cabin was here when I homesteaded this spread," Guthrie explained. "By patching up the place, we made it do. But how's that big pardner of yours, the one who got knifed?"

"Pardner, suh?"

Guthrie grinned. "Your arrival with the medicine was too pat. I once knew a pitchman who had a heart attack every night in the midst of his spiel. A dose of his own medicine always fetched him around. It makes a good show, Doc."

Comanche allowed himself a blush. "My assistant, suh, was beset by thieving scoundrels. The sheriff chooses to keep him in jail until the matter is investigated, so I'll be forced to stay in this heah vicinity for many days." He sighed. "I went riding this morning to get out of that stuffy hotel room for a few hours."

"We have a cot in the lean-to," Guthrie said quickly. "We'd be more than glad—"

Doc Comanche raised a protesting hand, but Glory Guthrie said: "I insist that you stay, doctor. I want you to understand that if Johnny had drowned, Matt and I might as well have died, too. Since we can't really repay you, hospitality is the very least we can offer."

"Well, if you insist, ma'am—"

Frowning, Guthrie pushed back his plate. "Sky Kildea is a hard and calculating man, and he has his mind on the coming election," he said. "Since I may oppose him, I shouldn't say anything against him. But I saw the way he eyed you and your partner yesterday, and I owe you a warning. It might get Kildea a few votes if he could pin something on the big fellow. Once your partner's on his feet, the two of you better vamoose!"

"Getting Oscar out of jail may not be so easy, suh," Doc sighed. "I'll appreciate staying here meanwhile."

There the discussion ended. Matt Guthrie had work to do, and he went about it in a studied and thoughtful silence. Doc spent most of the afternoon with young John in his lap. The baby wasn't friendly at first, but Doc let him find the ponderous watch and listen to its solemn ticking, and that won Johnny over. Glory Guthrie was busy in and out of the cabin, and Doc had his chance to count the boards in the floor, but no opportunity to look under the right one.

BY supper time, Doc was wondering how much he'd gained by the artifice that had gotten him into this cabin, but when the dishes were cleared away, Guthrie said: "I've got to ride over to Sid Greebie's place, Glory. I'm taking our roan saddler along; Sid wants to borrow it. Ride as far as the line fence with me. Doc will look after Johnny."

If something wordless passed between them, Doc missed it in his elation, and the baby was perched on his knee when the two clattered away. But before the hoofbeats had died, Doc had stowed little John in his crib and the old pitchman was down on his knees, counting off to the proper board. It had been loose when Fargo Mike had lifted it, and it was still loose. In a moment Doc had it up and was clawing at the soft dirt beneath, and it wasn't long before he had two moldy saddlebags on the floor.

Being buried hadn't done the packed greenbacks any good, but a man could still spend them, and that's what counted. Doc toted them out to Matt Guthrie's stable, saddled his horse and strapped the saddlebags in place. He'd just nicely gotten back into the cabin and swept away all signs of his excavating when Glory Guthrie came walk-

ing in. Doc put a question to her and she said: "Matt will be back around midnight, I'd guess. If luck goes with him."

That didn't sound exactly as it should, but Doc found her in no mood for talking and he put a frowning speculation upon her frequent trips to window and door. There was nothing to keep him here longer, but he got out a deck of cards and showed Glory how to make the aces run together, and he wished he'd fetched his banjo. He spun long and colorful yarns, but most of the time he had the feeling that Glory wasn't listening. But she came alive when hoofs clattered into the yard as the clock's hands pointed upward.

Matt Guthrie was first in through the doorway, and there was blood on his cheek, and at his heels came Oscar Lund, bandaged and grinning and big as life.

"Here's your partner, Doc," Guthrie announced. "He's just been busted out of Sky Kildea's jail!"

Doc Comanche spun upon Glory. "You knew he was going to do this!"

"We talked it over when I rode a ways with him," she admitted. "That's why he took the extra horse—to fetch your partner back."

"It wasn't hard," said Guthrie. "Kildea was dozing in his office and I came up behind him. First I blew out the lamp, then I jumped him. We did some wild scuffling before I hit him hard enough to put him to sleep. Then I tied him and got his keys."

"You blasted idjit!" Doc Comanche roared. "*You lost one of your spurs!* And if Kildea finds it in his office and recognizes it, he'll come riding. Suh, you've outlawed yourself!"

Guthrie looked down at his one spurless boot and fear built a flame in his eyes, but only for a moment. "I'm not sorry," he said stoutly. "If it was a hanging matter, I still wouldn't be sorry. Ever since you told me of your troubles, I knew I had to do something to pay you back for saving Johnny's life."

IT was the second time in as many days that Doc Comanche almost lost the steady hold he kept on himself. He swallowed twice, blood burning his face, and to hide his emotion he turned to big Oscar.

"We'll be riding," he said. "Come along, suh. Guthrie, Oscar will find a way to return your horse to you."

He left them like that, saying no word of farewell, shaking no hands, and once he and Oscar were up into saddles, Doc had a bad moment, for he was remembering that the bank loot was in his saddlebags and big Oscar was free and a hundred trails were calling. But he'd made the remark that he paid his debts, and it was Matt Guthrie that he owed now, so it was toward Steptoe that he faced.

Once, when they paused to breathe their horses with half the wild ride behind them, Doc said: "Oscar, I'm wondering, suh, if you'd very much mind giving up that Argentine ranch."

Big Oscar scratched his head. "I was down in Mexico once. They speak a crazy lingo I couldn't savvy. Don't reckon I'd like any furrin country, Doc."

"Theah's things I'll explain to you later, Oscar. I dug up the money, big feller, but we're turning it over to the sheriff, telling him the whole truth and asking him to forget about a certain spur he may have found. He'll get his votes, and he'll get his glory, and everybody should be satisfied. Do you agree, suh?"

Oscar thought that over. "I reckon you know best, huh, Doc?"

There was no more time for talking. They came on at a high gallop, but they walked their horses as soon as they hit Steptoe's outskirts. It wasn't far short of morning. The town still lay wrapped in darkness, but a light burned in Sheriff Kildea's office, and that was the first thing that wasn't as it should be. Doc said: "Stay here, Oscar," and came down out of his saddle, slinging the saddlebags over his left arm. As he neared the jail building, he saw two horses in the shadowy

slot between the jail and the structure next to it, and that was the second thing that made him wary.

Doc went up the porch steps on feathery feet. The office door was ajar, and he had a glimpse of Sky Kildea chafing his wrists, but the thing that held his eye was the spur upon the floor. Since it hadn't been picked up, it hadn't been discovered, and Doc drew a deep breath and was easing it out when he heard Kildea say: "I've told you galoots not to show yourself around this office, but this is one time I was mighty glad to see you. What a wallop that jigger packed!"

"Must've been Doc Comanche!" That—amazingly—was Bat Spain speaking. "And where's our club over him, now that he's got big Oscar free?"

"Yeah, the two of them are likely hightailing it right now and toting Fargo Mike's money!"

And that—even more amazingly—was Rudy Vardon's voice—Rudy Vardon who was supposed to be dead by Oscar Lund's heavy hand. But Rudy Vardon wasn't dead. He was in there with Sheriff Kildea, and so was Bat Spain, the three of them obviously as friendly as a sheepherder and his dogs. But the agile mind of Doc Comanche, no stranger to scheming, had grasped the pattern to all this, and a mighty rage held him as he kicked at the door and stepped inside.

He said: "Don't let your jaw scrape the floor, sheriff! This heah's me, all right. You lied when you said Vardon was dead! And you lied when you talked of wanting Fargo Mike's money to make yourself solid with the voters! You're in cahoots with these scoundrels, have been all along, suh!"

Vardon and Spain each made a sideways movement, and Kildea's eyes narrowed.

"So now you know," Kildea said. "Sure, it was the money itself I wanted. It's more than I'd make in ten years of sheriffing—even split three ways. I jailed Vardon and Spain on the quiet when they first hit town and made a bargain with 'em. They didn't know where the money was hidden, but they figgered *you* knew. We've been waiting for you since. When my pards saw you heading in, they jumped Oscar and tried to get the truth from him. That didn't work, but when I rode out and talked it over, we figgered we could make you dance to our tune if you thought I had Oscar over a barrel. I don't know what fetched you back here tonight, but I'm guessing that those saddlebags are bulging with bank loot. Right?"

DOC could see it all then—the quick glances among the three—the deliberate way in which Kildea had told the whole truth. They didn't intend that he should leave this room alive, but he was going to do some nibbling while they had their feast.

"You're unmitigated scoundrels, suhs," he said emphatically. "Kildea, you called me crooked last night, but I've never been as low as you three. Now make yo' fight!"

That pulled the cork and let the devil's brew come bubbling out. Doc was slipping the saddlebags off his arm to the floor when Bat Spain got in the first shot, but Doc did some sleight-of-hand with his holsters and Spain folded up and fell, a startled expression on his vulpine face. Kildea speared a shot that ripped Doc's sleeve, setting his arm to burning, but the old pitchman was making his guns talk, and he threw a bullet into the sheriff that smashed through Kildea's ribs, slamming him dead against the far wall. Then only Vardon was left, and he tagged Doc twice, once along the shoulder and once along the cheek. But when Doc got him in his sights, Rudy Vardon really died this time, and no mistake.

That was enough to wake the town, but before the first aroused citizens arrived in various stages of undress, Doc had palmed Matt Guthrie's telltale spur, hidden it deep in his pocket and called Oscar inside. Also he had emptied the saddlebags and heaped currency high on Kildea's desk. That

was the size of the situation when the first townsman said: "What in thunder's been going on here?"

Doc Comanche had made one spiel in this town, but he made a better one now. "This heah is the loot Fargo Mike French hid yeahs ago, gentlemen," he said. "These heah dead men are Bat Spain and Rudy Vardon, who learned Fargo Mike's secret when he died in prison. My partner, who served a short prison term as a result of a shameful frame-up by powerful political enemies, recognized this pair when we came to town. We reported to the sheriff and assisted him tonight in capturing these culprits and forcing them to surrender the stolen money. But when we brought them to jail, they snatched for guns and shot it out with the sheriff and myself. Mistah Lund, you'll verify this story, suh?"

Big Oscar played safe by merely nodding his head.

There was skepticism in the gathering crowd, but one man finally said: "He *must* be telling it straight. It was all of fifteen minutes between the time the shots woke me and when I got here. If this old galoot wasn't siding the sheriff, why didn't he scoop up the money and hightail it? He had time enough."

That frosted the cake for sure. Doc Comanche knew he'd sold them a solid bill of goods, but he made more talk just to be on the safe side. It all sounded mighty fancy, and when it was over and somebody had gone riding to carry the good news to Matt Guthrie and his wife, they were talking of a hero's funeral for Sky Kildea, and Doc Comanche could have had the town presented to him, all tied up in a blue ribbon, if he'd wanted.

But Doc had business at the livery stable where he had left Matt Guthrie's horse as well as the one he'd rented, and another hour found that old Conestoga rolling into the sunrise, the two men hunched on the seat. Doc Comanche, who'd paid his debt to the Guthries and who'd been a very rich man for a very short time, was deep in thought. True, he had lost a fortune. But he was smiling as he weighed the loss of a fat and idle life in Argentina against the lure of all the trails that were yet to know the rumbling of his wagon.

THE END

BLUNTING SCENT

Most horses are afraid of a carcass of any description, especially that of a bear, deer or elk. A well-broken cow horse will carry a live calf uncomplainingly, but refuse even to approach a dead one. Deer frequently feed near a horse herd without causing any excitement, while one of the same horses will refuse to go near game that has been killed.

Blindfolding helps very little because the scent of any animal changes immediately after death, and a horse is more afraid of something that he can smell and cannot see than he is when all his senses are functioning. For this reason hunters, who have had experience in packing game on horses, smear blood from the game on the nose of the horse and lead the animal to some nearby tree or bush and tie it securely before blindfolding. In this manner the work of packing is much simplified, and if a canvas or even an old slicker is thrown over the carcass before the ropes are tied, the horse seldom raises any objection, except in the case of a bear when the only sure way of getting it to camp is to remove the hide and roll it up with the fur inside.

BULLETS AND BULLWHIPS

by Les Savage. Jr.

CHAPTER I

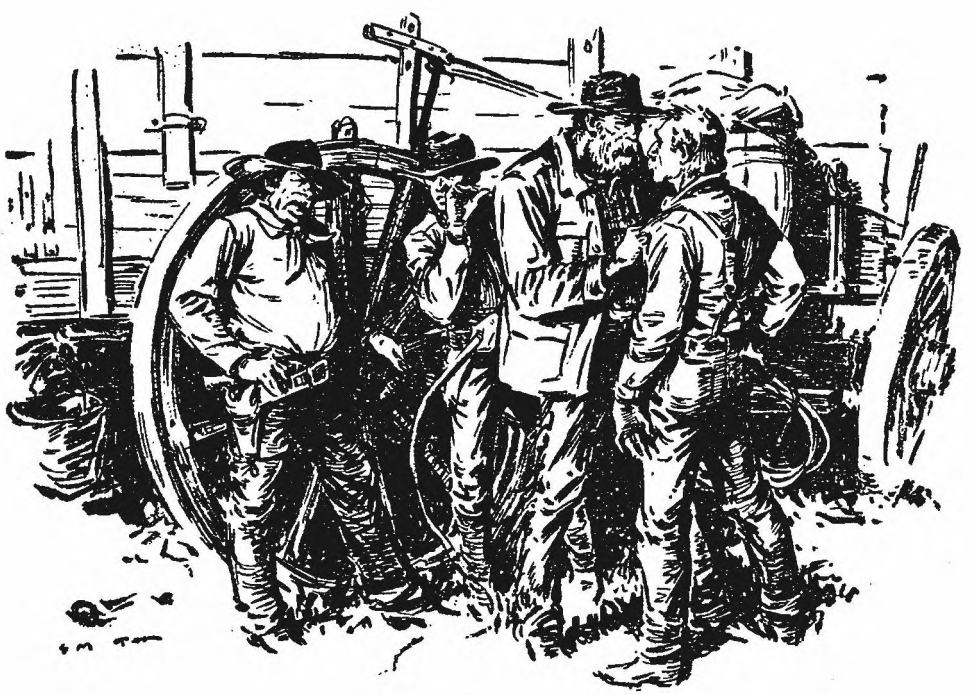
YELLOW

BLACKIE BARR halted uncertainly at the rear end of the wagon train parked beside the Reno stage route, just outside the sprawling Kansas cow town of Caldwell. He held his dark head down, looking defensively from beneath heavy black brows, his eyes dull and lifeless. Where there should have been strength in the thick shoulders swelling out his checked flannel shirt, there was only a defeated sag. He fumbled a bottle of Monongahela from the canvas war sack under his arm and uncorked it with his teeth. But the whiskey was flat and tasteless. Even that had ceased to help him, now.

Blackie cast a dull glance at the twenty big Murphy wagons bulking ahead—Pop Trevers' train. Old whang-hide Pop Trevers was the only man who had stuck beside Barr in his defeat and shame.

Just a week ago, Pop had found Blackie in Dodge City's Alamo Saloon and had dragged him almost bodily to the Trevers Freight Office. It was a small musty room, that office, with a rawhide-seated chair that groaned when Pop tilted back in it and propped his worn Justins on the scarred oaken desk.

Trevers had stuck gnarled thumbs in the armholes of his blue serge vest and run knowing old eyes over Barr. "Likker don't sot so good with you,



"Your wagon-boss days is over, Blackie," snarled Davis. "Yuh cain't swear at me thataway."

Blackie. Three y'ars now, ain't it? Been hittin' the bottle all that time?"

Blackie's puffy face had paled. Yes, three years—three years since his wagon train had burned at Raton Pass and five men had died in the fire. He'd been wagon boss for Southwestern Freighting. They had held an investigation, an inquest, and Blackie Barr had been discharged, damned and dishonored, blackballed from every freight outfit west of the Missouri.

Blackie had bent forward suddenly, gripping the desk till his knuckles showed white; pouring out all his pain and bitterness to the man who'd been his father, friend, and teacher all in one.

"Sure I've been hittin' the bottle all that time, Pop. What'd you have done? I'm an outcast from the only world I knew. Men I thought were my friends shun me now, or laugh at me, or kick me because I'm down. I can't get a job in any freight outfit—not even in their stinkin' cavvy yards. And do you think the lives of those five men that burned in the fire set easy on my soul? I'm just as much their murderer as if I'd shot 'em to death!"

"Take it easy, son," Pop had said softly. "I know how it is. I only wish you'd come to me sooner, but I guess you was ashamed. You whacked bulls for me a long time afore the Santa Fe Trail bug bit you, an' you switched to Southwestern Freighting. I just can't believe Blackie Barr'd be careless enough to let his whole train burn down. I always thought thar was somethin' fishy about the whole thing."

Pop Trevers stopped for a moment, a strange softness entering his gaze. "Whether you was to blame or not, son, you shouldn't let it keep you down on your knees in the mud thisaway. You got the guts to fight back up to the top whar you belong. I got a gover'ment contract to ship supplies from Caldwell to Keeche Agency in Oklahoma Territory. I already hired me a wagon boss, but if you want a boost towards the top, Blackie, thar's a bull team waitin' for you down at Caldwell."

For a moment, their eyes had met. Two years ago, the old man's offer might have given Blackie hope, but not now. Yet he knew it would break Pop's heart to have him refuse.

THE faint bawl of the bull team came to Barr now as he took a last pull at the Monongahela and stuffed the bottle back into his war sack. He stepped off the road toward the wagons, gripping the coiled bull whip in his fist until swelled and knotted muscles rippled through his hairy forearm, muscles that came from years of handling that heavy, twenty-foot blacksnake—once the most famous whip east of Santa Fe.

Rounding the tall Murphy wagon, Barr saw the crowd of bullwhackers gathered there, hidden from the road. They shifted, allowing a paunchy man to waddle through. A battered black soft-brim hat was mashed down on his triple-chinned face, almost covering the sly little eyes, set deep in fat cheeks. He wore a pair of black-handled Colts strapped across his gross belly and thonged down around thick, blue-jeaned thighs.

"Waal, waal," he chuckled, "if it ain't Blackie Barr. I heard ol' Pop Trevers hired yuh in Dodge. Be the first time yuh whacked a team since Raton, won't it, Blackie?"

Barr's voice was brittle. "Yes, Raines, since Raton. Which wagon's mine?"

The other grinned affably and for a moment Blackie forgot to watch those sly eyes. "Yuh sound different, somehow, Blackie. Whar's the ol' roarin', cussin', fightin' king of the trail I used to know—" His words merged into the chuckle that followed. The wagon boss turned to the men. "I guess you know most o' the boys. An' I guess they know—you."

Blackie half turned, for the first

time realizing what an ugly-looking bunch of cutthroats they were. There was big Rob Davis, towering over all the others in buckskin breeches and hickory jacket. He'd been booted out of the Overland for whipping a team to death. Beside him was Steve Moore who had none of the thick-chested, heavy-bearded look of an honest bullwhacker. His face was narrow, sallow and there was something snakelike in his glittering eyes. It was said that the six notches in the stock of his blacksnake were for men he'd killed with it.

Blackie shifted his war sack uneasily. "Where's my wagon?"

"Why, I reckon the last one in line is yours," said Raines.

Blackie started to skirt the crowd, but big stupid Rob Davis wouldn't let it go at that. He stepped heavily in front of Barr, a bucolic look to his thick-lipped face.

"How is it they hired yuh, Blackie?" he said. "I thought yuh was blackballed outn every company this side o' Santa Fe."

Barr's head sunk a little into the weary slope of his shoulders. "I don't wanta talk about it, Davis."

"But I do," said Davis stolidly. " 'Bout Raton, for instance. Was you really dumb enough to corral your wagons too close to the fire, with no water in their kegs?"

A harsh edge entered Blackie's voice. "Damn it! I said I'd rather not talk about it!"

SUDDENLY Davis grabbed Blackie by his shirt front, pulling him forward until their faces were but an inch apart. There was a crushing strength in the thick arm holding Barr and he was helpless for a moment.

"Your wagon-boss days is over, Blackie," snarled Davis. "Yuh cain't swear at me thataway."

With a violent shove, he straightened his arm, heaving Blackie backward. He fell, twisting sidewise, dropping whip and war sack. He hit hard, pain jarring through him.

As Blackie rose, shaking his head groggily, he sensed the new, waiting tension that gripped the crowd. Steve Moore was leaning forward with an evil smile. Raines had something malignant behind his bland smile. The others had moved in, watching Barr narrowly.

Blackie realized there was more behind this than Rob Davis' sullen hostility. The big man had deliberately baited him. It was their way of finding out if the ugly stories drifting down the bullwhack trail about Blackie Barr were true.

Well, they were true, weren't they? Three years ago Blackie Barr would have mauled Davis into the ground —all two hundred and ten pounds of him—and he would have laughed in doing it. Now all he could do was stand there with his head lowering defensively, nothing inside him but a hollow defeat.

Raines gave Barr plenty of time; then he chuckled. "Now, Rob, you

shouldn't o' done that. Blackie's had a hard time an' he jist ain't up to your gol durn hoss play."

Blackie bent to pick up his war sack and whip. The men drew together, turning their backs deliberately on him—they'd found out what they wanted to know. As Blackie straightened, the wagon boss waddled over and clapped him on the back.

"Yuh won't hold no grudge, will yuh, Blackie?" he said. "After all, Rob is jist a big impulsive kid." That seemed to amuse him and he chuckled until his paunch quivered against crossed gun belts. "Yeah, just a great big impulsive kid."

Blackie shrugged the pudgy hand off with a feeling of revulsion, moving heavily toward his high-sided Murphy wagon. He gave it an indifferent glance, then looked closer, frowning. The oak side boards were warped and split, the iron tires loose on the wheels, bound carelessly into place with "buffalo tug." Even the oxen were poor, spavined, flea-bit. This didn't look like the kind of outfit Pop Trevers would have.

THE sound of boots in the short grass turned him. Rita Trevers had come from between lead wagon and trailer, hitched tongue to axle. For a moment she stood there without speaking, disappointment in her big dark eyes.

Pop Trevers' daughter had been a long-legged pigtailed kid when Blaekie left the old man's outfit to see Santa Fe via Southwestern Freighting. She was a woman now, with lustrous brown hair and that generous Trevers width to her mouth. She wore a linsey shirt and a man's blue jeans tucked into yellow cowhide half boots. Her voice was strained when she spoke.

"I saw what happened out there with Rob Davis, Blackie. In the old days you would've come close to killing a man for that."

Blackie's face flushed dull red and his eyes fell. He didn't even try to alibi. What was the use? What disgrace, shame and liquor had done to him was all too apparent.

"I was glad, at first, when I heard you were coming," she said in a low tone. "I didn't think you'd sunk as low as they said, didn't believe all the horrid things I heard about you. I thought you'd still be man enough to help me."

"Help you?" Blaekie asked dully. "What's the matter?"

"You saw for yourself. The wagons, the teams—it's the rottenest outfit on the trail. Something's wrong, Blackie, and I'm worried. I counted so much on your help. Then, when I saw you back down from Davis and those men—"

She stopped, a strange pleading in her tone, her face pale. It was a long, painful moment for Blackie, standing there with his eyes unable to meet hers, his lips a thin bitter line.

Then Raines' voice rolled back from the lead wagon, raising the familiar trail call: "Al-l-l set!"

His cry was echoed and re-echoed by each whacker, followed by a volley of crackling whips and the "hep hep, gee, haw" that drew a flood of memories from Blackie Barr. The old, nameless thrill ran through him as he tossed his war sack into the wagon and shook out the coils of his twenty-foot whip, laying the long tapered lash out in front of him.

Blackie gripped the twelve-inch stock, waiting for the braided leather wrapping to become moist with sweat from his palm. Then with a sudden practiced ease, he brought his arm back, keeping the elbow well away from his side. The lash whined backward past his head. Almost with the same motion, he reversed his arm, swiveling his wrist. The whole swift movement was deceptively easy, but the bull whip snarled forward again like unleashed lightning, and the sudden sharp crack of its snapper above the yoked oxen had the thunderous sound of a .50-caliber Sharps.

The patient beasts lurched forward. The huge center chain dragged off the ground with a clanking of thick,

iron links; and the big Murphy began to roll, its squeaking rumble sweet music in Blackie Barr's ears.

CHAPTER II

RITA VOICES HER FEARS

THEY made eight miles that day, not hurrying the oxen at the start, allowing them to settle into the trail. It was a long train—twenty wagons, each with three pairs of yoked oxen straining up front, and a trailer hitched behind. And beside every team, a bullwhacker walked, cussing his animals when they slowed. That cussing was the proud badge of a real whacker; it took a certain genius. It had been said of Blackie Barr that he could literally turn the air blue with his swearing; that he could stand in St. Louis' Rocky Mountain House and startle a team out of their ox bows in Santa Fe, so thunderously loud were his bull-throated oaths.

But that had been before Raton Pass.

Steve Moore drove the Murphy ahead of Barr, soft-spoken, leering, deadly. And farther along, almost out of sight in the dust, was Rob Davis. He looked so much like the cattle he drove that it would have been funny to Blackie if he hadn't known how dangerous that big sullen bully could be with his terrible strength and his slow, single-track mind.

And in the lead, of course, was Raines. He rode his wagon most of the time, sitting up on the high box seat like some profane, chortling Buddha, handling his blacksnake with no less skill and ease than those who walked.

They made camp at twilight beside an old buffalo wallow some hundred yards to the west of the trail. Killdeer and snipe flitted about the rim, and bullfrogs boomed from the green slime at the water's edge.

The whackers were usually in good spirits at the beginning of the trip. There was always someone to fiddle or sing the time-honored "Dried Apple Pies." But this crew acted like a bunch of suspicious coyotes, muttering darkly among themselves, sulking about the fire.

Blackie was walking over to get his supper when sight of one man hunkering there brought him up sharp. Lean and long and spare the man was, a shiny bald spot on the top of his bony skull, a rapacious beak of a nose. Artie Hawkins, one of the men who'd whacked a team for Blackie in the train that burned at Raton. It was a memory from hell, and somehow Barr couldn't face it. He was turning furtively back to his wagon when Raines' voice rasped out behind him.

"Oh now, Blackie boy, don't go off an' leave us!"

The fat man waddled over and grabbed Barr's elbow in thick fingers, turning him forcibly, moving him toward the fire. Hawkins rose, bending forward with a strange expectance, hand caressing the ivory butt of a low-slung S. & W. .44.

"I guess you an' Artie'd like to squat an' talk over old times, eh, Blackie?" chuckled Raines. "Yuh must have a lotta yarns to swap. About Raton, for instance."

There it was again—the same way Davis had said it earlier in the day. Blackie jerked free of Raines, impotent anger turning his face pale. Were they going to ride him like this all the way to Keeche? Hadn't they made him eat enough dirt?

Steve Moore uncoiled his blacksnake and began playing with it, slithering it across the ground like a snake, popping it playfully. He took a playing card from his pocket.

Art Hawkins smiled malignantly. "Cat got your tongue, Blackie? Why don'tcha say somethin'. Tell me how many wagons yuh burnt since those at the Pass."

BLACKIE whirled from Raines to Hawkins like a cornered animal. He hadn't thought it was in him, but they'd fanned the spark until reaction

flamed for an instant. His voice came out choked, almost inarticulate.

"Damn you all! You think you can goad and kick me because I'm—"

A stunning detonation cut him off. Steve Moore's lash was just dropping to the ground, followed by two fluttering pieces of the playing card that had been snapped apart.

"That's it, Steve boy," chuckled Raines. "Show Blackie how you've improved since he saw you last."

Then he moved across till his sagging paunch was pushed up against Barr and the smell of him was oppressive in Barr's nostrils—prairie dust, stale sweat and old sour leather all mixed together. He hissed when he spoke, and after every few words he took a wheezing breath.

"Now listen, Blackie. I thought Rob showed yuh how things stood, this mornin'. But we seen yuh talkin' to Miss Trevers afterwards, an' it made me think yuh didn't quite understand. Yuh ain't boss no more, see! You're just a lumpy-jawed blacklegged bullwhacker that takes his orders an' likes 'em. So stay clear of the gal, an' don't go pokin' your nose in any business that ain't yourn, or I'll have Steve here snap yuh apart like he did that playin' card!"

Raines stepped back, suddenly chuckling again. "But you know better'n I do which bull to whack, don't yuh, Blackie boy? We're all right easy to git along with if yuh act smart—yeah, right easy!"

Barr took a last look around the circle of hostile faces, lit bizarrely by firelight. Then he turned and walked heavily away, shoulders sagging. Why buck them at all? Pop Trevers had been wrong when he'd said Blackie Barr had the guts to fight back up to the top. Blackie had quit fighting a long time ago.

As he neared the outspanned Murphies, he heard bitter sobbing coming from the trailer of his own wagon. Circling the off-side, he climbed in over the lowered tail gate. Rita Trevers knelt on her Mackinaw roll, dark head bent to her hands, slim shoulders shaking with sobs. At the sound of bolsters squeaking under Barr's weight, she turned distressed eyes toward him.

"I guess I just can't take it any more, Blackie," she said. "Everything's ganged up on me. I'm so worried about Pop. Hunt & Lawler have been crowding us out up in Kansas. Pop had to get this contract or go bankrupt. He had to bid so low that he's losing money on the first trip. There's a time limit on the run, too, and if we don't make it, I think it'd kill Pop."

Yes, it probably would kill the old whang-hide if he lost his beloved freight business, thought Blackie. He'd built his whole life around high-sided Murphy wagons like this, with their musty beds smelling of black-strap sorghum, milled flour and rolls of new crinoline.

"Pop isn't well," Rita continued in a low, tense voice. "He put everything in Raines' hands and sent me down later to ride with the wagons. It was an awful blow to find such a rotten bunch of Murphys, such a cutthroat crew. My only hope was that you'd be able to do something Blackie. I used to stand at the window of Pop's office and watch you cussing your teams into line, thinking you were the most wonderful bullwhacker in the world. I put so much faith in the Blackie Barr I used to know. Then, to see you knuckle down to Raines and Moore and Hawkins, to see them laughing at you and treating you like dirt—"

She broke off, shaking again with sobs. Blackie felt clumsy and awkward. Finally, unable to say anything, he turned and slid out over the tail gate, her sobs fading as he went toward the lead Murphy. Women had never played too big a part in his life. But he suddenly realized how much Rita meant to him. It only deepened his sense of defeat to know he'd failed her.

From force of habit, Blackie hauled his war sack out of the wagon and

reached inside for the bottle, uncorking it and raising it to his lips.

He stopped, the bottle to his lips, without taking a drink. A nameless something was beginning to work deep within Blackie—something perhaps, that had been stirred by the pain in Rita's voice. It brought a thin, mirthless grin to his face, and the bottle made a sharp tinkle as it broke against the six-inch iron tire.

CHAPTER III

TRAIL TREACHERY

SHORT grass stretched gray-green as far as the eyes could see, and a flock of turkey buzzards wheeled above something in the distance. The wagons made a steady rumble, their creaking axles forming a thin overtone, punctuated now and then by a sharp whip crack. Those axles had already given Barr a hint of what was ahead. Before noon of the first day, it had become too apparent that practically every wagon in the train had not been greased.

They'd been forced to stop and waste precious hours, breaking out two hogsheads of the tallow, rosin, and tar mixture used to grease the axles. No matter what else Raines was, he was a good freighter. He knew as well as the next bullwhacker that a hotbox was sure to result from dry axles, a jamming and sticking of wheels that would take half a day to repair. What was that sly, fat rat up to, palming these creaking relics off on the Trevers?

Blackie's thoughts were cut off abruptly by the groan of halting wagons. Up the line, a Murphy was tipping far to one side, rear off-wheel crushed beneath it. Coiling his whip as he moved forward, Barr could see that a whacker was pinned under the wagon bed. The half-breed boy who herded the cavvy was tugging frantically at the man, brown torso bare and gleaming with sweat.

"You can't get 'im out that way," called Blackie. "Get somethin' to lever the wagon up with!"

Though his face was pale, the whacker's voice was amazingly calm. "I saw the rear wheel dishin' an' tried to shove a jack beneath it. This is what I git. I'm not crushed yet, the axle's savin' me. But my laigs is wedged in right snug. You better git that lever quick. The front wheel's goin' too."

Blackie could hear the slow groan of the tire slipping from that front wheel, the intermittent snap of orange-wood spokes. If the man wasn't crushed now, he would be in a moment. Wondering why no one else was lending a hand, Blackie shot a glance under the wagon. There was no spare gear in the slings to use as a lever!

Impatiently he swung up the tail gate, ripping canvas from the rear hoop, jerking the high oak side boards from their sockets.

"Help me with this, wrangler!" he yelled, leaping down and jamming the panel beneath the wagon so that its two-by-four braces formed leverage. The buckskin-leggingd boy added his brown shoulder to the oak, and together they heaved. The bed rose one inch, two. And with a series of grunts, the whacker pulled himself out from under.

With a sudden rending of crushed spokes and collapsing tire, the front wheel dished. Blackie and the boy leaped from under their lever as the big Murphy crashed down, smashing springs and bolsters, overhang digging into the earth beneath the weight of the three-ton pay load.

THE bullwhacker, a long, lanky man in red wool shirt and ragged brown homespuns, managed to stand, sweat dampening the hank of sandy hair that hung over his canny eyes, windwrinkles at the corners.

He knew how close to death he'd been, for he stood there a long moment, not speaking, face dead white. When he finally drew a plug of chewing tobacco from his shirt pocket and pared off a chew with a jackknife,

however, his hands were very steady. He put away the plug and knife, pouted out his cheek with the chew, and stuck out one of those hands.

"Thanks, Blackie Barr. That was my life you saved. My handle's Squint Elridge. The breed boy here sort o' tags with me. Found 'im when I was cuttin' wood in Kaintuck, an' he's trailed along ever since. His handle's Choctaw."

Blackie took the long bony fingers in his, feeling a sudden warmth. It had been a long time since he'd gripped a man's hand that way, and there was a genuine gratitude in Elridge's eyes.

"Looked like Raines' boys were gonna let you squash," observed Barr, after shaking hands with the grinning breed.

The Kentuckian squinted, spat. "I raised a ruckus back at Caldwell when I saw what a lousy rig I was whackin'. Raines has had it in for me ever since. But I'm not his man, anyhow. Pop Trevers hired me in Dodge."

Rita had come up from her perch on the high box seat of Blackie's wagon, and she eyed the wrecked Murphy with a troubled frown. "This shouldn't happen so soon out of Caldwell."

"No," said Barr, "it shouldn't. Buffalo Creek's just ahead. We could take the wheels off every wagon in this train and soak 'em overnight so they'd swell tight into their rims. Unless we do that, they'll be dishin' and collapsin' all the way down to Keeche."

There was a reckless edge to Elridge's voice. "It'd be rubbin' Raines the wrong way. But damn if I don't vote we do it."

"Do what, Mr. Elridge?" asked Raines.

They turned to see him standing there behind them. Despite his usual broad grin, there was an ugly glitter to his sly little eyes. Perhaps that was what so suddenly dampened Elridge's ardor; the Kentuckian spoke reluctantly.

"Waal, Mr. Raines, we was sayin' about the wheels—"

The same impulse that had made Barr break the bottle last night, made him break in impatiently now, a new note in his voice.

"We're swelling the wheels in Buffalo Creek, Raines."

Raines' grin faded. Patently, he hadn't expected this from Blackie. Rita spoke up too, shooting Blackie a quick, expectant glance.

"Blackie's right. You'll stop the wagons when we reach the creek, Raines."

"Now, Miss Rita," drawled Raines. "I inspected every one o' them wheels before we left Caldwell, an' if there was anything wrong, I'd be the first to know."

Something forcing him on, Blackie said: "Rita's as much your boss as Pop Trevers, Raines—and she gave you an order!"

The wagon boss turned back to Barr, cuffing the black hat back on his head in a baffled way. His sly eyes flickered over the four of them, noting that even the breed boy had something defiant in his stance. And perhaps because he wasn't prepared to meet this concentrated front that had taken him so unawares, Raines suddenly broke out in that affable, masking chuckle.

"Why yeah—yeah, you're right, Blackie. Miss Trevers's my boss, an' whatever she says, goes."

After waiting an uneasy moment, as if expecting an answer, he turned and waddled back toward the lead wagon.

THE train rumbled into Pond Creek Ranch on the Salt Fork of the Arkansas the next evening. It was a way station for the Reno stage, a log house backed by dark strands of timber. After supper of sorghum and bacon and bitter black coffee, Blackie circled the corralled Murphys to Elridge's wagon. They had jacked it up back on the trail and put spare linchpin wheels on. Squint Elridge was squatting beside the front one, inspecting the pins.

Barr made no preamble. "When I was huntin' for a lever to get that

bed off your legs, Elridge, I looked beneath the wagon for the spare gear. There wasn't any. Since then I've been looking under the other wagons. There isn't a spare piece of running gear in this whole train!"

Elridge nodded. "That leaves us in a bad fix, don't it? Ifn we was to split a tongue, say, out in that open prairie country past the Arkansas, we'd have a helluva time gittin' another, wouldn't we?"

"You said you was a woodcutter, Elridge," stated Barr.

"Yup," the Kentuckian replied. "I do woodcuttin' mostly, but I done my share o' bullwhackin'."

"You could fell some o' that timber behind Pond Creek ranchhouse," said Blackie, bending forward a little, "and I could help you rough out some spare gear."

Elridge squinted and spat. "Now, ain't yuh bucked Raines enough already, Blackie? He was plumb peeved when we swelled those wheels."

Barr grabbed the man's arm, pulling him erect. "Listen, Elridge, that fat wagon boss is up to somethin'—I don't know what, exactly—but he's playin' havoc with this train. You shook my hand when I pulled you from under that Murphy, and you're the first man to do that in a long time. That's why I'm asking you to help me."

Elridge moved his chew to his cheek, eyes kindling. "I guess I wouldn't be standin' here ifn it warn't for you, would I? I'll do whatever you want, Blackie."

Turning to his wagon, Elridge drew out a whipsaw and a great double-bitted ax, sliding his hand along its hickory haft in what was almost a caress.

They picked up the breed by his cavvy yard, then cut around the ranchhouse, its yellow lighted windows casting square eyes into the night. Cottonwoods and aspens talked in a slight breeze, and finally they reached a clearing. Almost casually, Elridge lifted the big ax over his shoulder. With no apparent effort, he threw it at a big hickory some thirty paces away. The blade dug deep and true into the trunk, handle quivering a moment in the pale moonlight.

Blackie grinned thinly. He was becoming increasingly glad that Elridge was on his side.

The Kentuckian set to work, his long awkward body taking on a surprising lithe grace as he settled into a slow steady rhythm. He felled and trimmed the hickory, then split it, and Blackie went to work with the whipsaw, roughing out a pair of wagon tongues and an axle tree. The herd boy hauled the crude pieces back to the train, lashing them atop the freight in Barr's wagon. And Elridge began on another tree.

The potbellied wagon boss had a surprise in store for him in the next few days.

CHAPTER IV

DEATH TRAP

THAT surprise came sooner than even Blackie suspected. They were a mile below Pond Creek Ranch, fording the Salt Fork of the Arkansas—the broad brawling river than ran through most of what was known as the Indian Nations. The first half of the train was already across. Big Rob Davis was in midstream, lashing his animals brutally through the turbulent, waist-high water. Suddenly, laying a last vicious series of whiplashes across his oxen, he began to fight away from them.

Barr saw why. All six bulls had pulled loose, leaving the wagon and trailer to founder, high boxes angling over gradually into the muddy current. Squint Elridge had stopped his Murphy on the other side and was already plunging back into the water to help, but he was the only one. The other drivers on both sides of the ford stood indifferently by their outfits.

Blackie moved quickly, pounding past Steve Moore who remained deliberately idle, flicking his bull whip and smiling nastily. Anger clawed at

Blackie. Jumping between the wheelers of the team nearest the river, he roared at Elridge:

"I'll unhitch this'n' and we'll haul them wagons out, tail gate first. And you," he snarled, turning to the others, "you help Elridge on the wheels or I'll bust your heads open!"

Four or five of them were surprised into obeying him, and they fought into the water toward the stalled Murphy. The yoked bulls lurched forward as Barr uncoupled the great center chain. He saw that Davis had completely deserted his team and was standing on dry sand, face stupidly blank.

Blackie broke into a blue streak of maddened epithets—the old, thunderous, bull-throated cussing. He forgot everything but the bawling, sweating crazy struggle to save the outfit. Elridge had the men breaking their hearts against the wheels. Blackie whipped his team around in a circle and fought the chain over the trailer's rear axle, jamming the coupling bar through thick links. Twice he went under, bashed against the plunging oxen, choking, gasping. Finally he caught the wheelers' ox bow and hung on, laying a veritable barrage of whiplashes over the leaders' heads.

The great beasts strained against their yokes, tails sticking out straight as whipstocks, mud spurting from under their hoofs. Spindles began to chuckle against thimbles in the big wheels; hounds creaked, bolsters groaned, and slowly, slowly, the wagon sucked out of the oozy bottom.

Elridge, sweating, swearing and bellowing like a lanky demon in the pit, drove his men against those wheels with fists and boots until one of them threw himself down in the shallows, sobbing with utter exhaustion.

Blackie was on the bank, swaying against the muddy hide of his off-wheeler. He was dimly surprised to see the little breed driving Davis' loose team back onto the north bank with his goad, piping at them in Choctaw.

Raines had waded across by then, chuckling blandly. "Waal, looks like a little trouble, eh? What happened, Rob?"

Rob Davis growled sulkily. "Damn tongue split clean through. Couplin' came out an' those oxes like t' rip theirselves apart gettin' clear."

Rita was there too, her face flushed excitedly. "That was magnificent, Blackie," she said. "It was like the Blackie Barr of old!"

"Yeah," grinned Raines. "You saved a good bit o' money for Pop Trevers, Blackie. Git that sugar an' flour an' stuff in the river an' it'd be a total loss. But we can't stand around here chewin' the fat, can we? Git your spare tongue on, Rob, an' we'll be movin' ag'in."

ANSWERING the mockery in Raines' voice with a knowing ugly-mouthed grin, Davis stomped to the wagon, bending under it as if he expected the spare gear to be there. Just then, Elridge walked through the group, dragging one of the tongues he and Barr had roughed out the night before. In that single instant, Raines was taken off guard. Stunned surprise was in the sudden sag of his mouth; baffled anger widened his little eyes.

Big Rob looked up, staring at the tongue. He spoke thickly. "Why, where'd yuh git—"

"Yeah," the wagon boss cut him off quickly, regaining his composure with a perceptible effort. "Yeah, nice work, Elridge. Yuh always seem to be there when you're needed, don't yuh? Blackie an' you make quite a team. Yeah, quite a team!"

With a hard look at Davis, Raines turned and waddled through the gurgling brown water to the other side, an angry hump to his fat back. And no affable chuckle floated to them.

Rita seemed to have sensed the play that went on beneath their words. She beckoned to Blackie to come away from the others. He walked beside her, off the trail a little, back toward his wagon.

"Raines didn't expect us to have any spare tongues, did he?" she asked.

"And Rob—he could have saved that team from pulling free. He deliberately whipped them out of their harness when the coupling came loose of the split tongue. What are they up to, Blackie?"

"I don't know," he said, "but I can guess. Hunt & Lawler were crowding you out up in Kansas. It was them your dad bid against for this contract, and if we don't make it on time, they get another chance at it. Didn't Raines used to work for Hunt & Lawler?"

"Blackie, you aren't—"

He squeezed her arm hard enough to cut her off. They were passing Steve Moore's wagons. He was playing with his whip that carried the six notches on its stock for the men he'd lashed to death. His voice was a sibilant snake hiss.

"Right clever fella, Elridge. Knew jist where to find that spare tongue. Friend o' yourn, Blackie?"

Barr didn't answer. But he thought to himself, "No hurry, Steve Moore, no hurry. The time will come soon enough when I'll wipe that nasty smile off your face with the noisy end of my blacksnake." And then, because the thought surprised Blackie, he rubbed at his unshaven chin. There did seem more of a jut to it!

The breed herder came back, grinning proudly, skinny brown torso still wet and glistening. "Elridge man, him say I good bullwhacker. I save Rob Davis' whole team."

"Have you got a gun, Choctaw?" Barr asked him.

The grin faded. "No, only bowie knife."

"You better sharpen it up, then," grated Barr, "cause Raines knows whose side you're on, now."

IT was five long back-breaking days between the Salt Fork of the Arkansas and the Cimarron River. Three axle trees came apart and a coupling bar broke. The train would have been held up for days, or would have been forced to leave the damaged wagons behind, but for the spare pieces Barr and the Kentuckian had roughed out.

Raines, of course, hid whatever he felt beneath his chuckle. He knew Barr was fighting him now, but apparently he was unwilling to bring things into the open, yet. They rumbled their ten or twelve miles each day across that endless expanse of gray-green short grass, and a subtle tension grew with every roll of the wheels. Art Hawkins began practicing with his ivory-butted S. & W., picking off the prairie hens or yellowhammers that flushed from beside the trail.

That tension even penetrated Rob Davis' thick skull, and he lashed his animals till he drew blood, looking about him defiantly all the while.

Rita asked Blackie to pack a gun. He didn't have a short gun, but strapped in its worn boot to his war sack was a lever-action Spencer .56. He dragged the war sack on top of the flour near the tail gate, where the rifle would be handy.

They arrived at Red Fork Ranch on the fifth evening. It was another way station for the stage and a trading store on the Chisholm Trail which came up from the Red River on the Texas border. The buildings were peeled-pole, stockade style, earth banked up around their bases, barn-sash windows cut through the upright logs. A bunch of lean, bowlegged Texans stood in front of the store itself, their cow ponies hitched to the rack, heads bowed, trail dust of some early, northward-moving stock herd covering their tough hides.

As Blackie drove his outfit into the hollow circle of wagons, outspanning his team, he caught sight of Raines and Steve Moore galloping toward the timber that banded the Cimarron south of Red Fork Ranch. Blackie couldn't let that fat wagon boss out of his sight. He dropped his yoke irons, legging it to where the herd boy was driving the cavvy into some short grass browse.

"Get me a saddle, son. I'll cut my-

self out a hoss," he called.

The best mount he could find was an old sore-back mare, quite in keeping with the caliber of the rest of Raines' outfitting. Choctaw came back lugging an old stock saddle and a mecate. Barr slung the hull aboard and hackamored the horse with the mecate, then swung into leather and urged the reluctant mount after Raines and Moore who were disappearing into the cottonwoods.

Blackie lost them in the timber, but he took a chance and cut through to the sandy river bank. Sure enough, their trail led southwest along that cut bank, hoofprints almost too easy to follow. He followed their sign carefully, stopping to listen now and then. It was habitual with Blackie to carry his Missouri bull whip, but he so rarely carried a gun that he hadn't thought of getting the Spencer in his hurry to follow Raines. The snort of a horse and the sound of voices made him feel the lack of a gun acutely.

Blackie dismounted, ground-hitching the mare. A big patch of plum thickets stretched ahead. He crawled through them on hands and knees and reached a clearing. Raines and Moore stood breathing their mounts. The fat man was talking too loudly, chuckling.

"Yeah, Steve boy, I jist can't wait till you an' that Blackie Barr cross lashes. I wanta see you flay his hide off like you did that fella in St. Louis."

Barr raised up and his breath caught when he heard a slight crackle behind him. He whirled to see Rob Davis standing there, a big brass-mounted Ward-Burton leveled across his broad hip. Blackie's reactions had improved since he'd stopped drinking, and he threw himself violently sideways as Davis squeezed the trigger. Lead from the .50-70 whined past him and clacked into cottonwood.

But as Blackie tried to regain his balance, Davis reversed the heavy single-shot, and with an animal roar, lurched forward, clubbing it down on Blackie. The rifle smashed into the side of his head with a stunning pain that drove Blackie to his knees. His last conscious thought was that he'd walked right into the sweetest trap Raines had ever laid.

CHAPTER V

BLACKSNAKE SHOWDOWN

QUAIL were cooing out in the clearing when Blackie came to. He lay there for a moment, trying to force his eyes open against the throbbing in his head. Dim light beat against him for a long moment before he realized it was dawn. He had lain here all night.

Cursing himself bitterly for the biggest fool that ever whacked a bull team, Blackie struggled to his feet, groping for his whip almost automatically. There was blood matting his hair, caked on his face. Groggily, he staggered through the undergrowth, hunting for the spot where he'd left his horse. They hadn't even bothered to round up the old plug; she was browsing within ten yards of the river, mecate dragging. He hauled himself painfully aboard and clucked her forward.

The bullwhackers were on the trail early, and Blackie knew the train would be far south by now. He followed the Reno trail through the timber on the other bank of the river, then through rolling sandhills and into more stands of thick aspen and cottonwood. Blackie was going pretty fast when he broke into the open, and he almost rode down the last wagon, stalled in the trail.

Blackie reined the mare to the tail gate, rising in the stirrups and reaching inside for his Spencer. The war sack lay there where he'd put it, but the worn scabbard strapped to it was empty.

Slowly, he eased himself back into the saddle, looking for a long moment at the blacksnake coiled in his sweaty palm. It was all he had, now. There was nothing else to do but kick the lathered flanks beneath him and go

to the showdown armed with nothing more than this twenty feet of braided, tapered leather, tipped with a brass-studded snapper.

The men were gathered in a shifting, nervous crowd up by the lead wagon. They didn't see or hear Blackie as he came toward them; they were too intent on something within the circle. Elridge's dry voice cracked out above the other sounds.

"Raines, you great big pile of buff'lo back fat, you done somethin' with Blackie Barr, an' less you spill it, I'll take my ax to your whole crew!"

From his height in the saddle, Blackie could see over the men's heads to where Raines, Steve Moore and Hawkins stood in a little knot in front of the other whackers. They faced Elridge and Rita who were backed against the Murphy.

Rob Davis shouldered his hulk through the bullwhackers, Ward-Burton across his hip. It bellowed, and Elridge bent double, thrown backward by the heavy slug through his belly. Raines, Moore and Hawkins surged forward, and Rita picked the first one to slap leather. Hawkins went down with the S. & W. he would have drawn slipping back into its holster. The girl tried to lever his second shell in, but Raines was on her, slapping the gun down.

Blackie was right in among them, now, mare's flanks knocking men right and left. There were few in the crowd who hadn't known the old Blackie Barr. And this man who swung down from the hipshot mare to stand with his bull neck sinking into heavy shoulders, dark eyes burning with a terrible light, deadly bull whip laid out on the ground in front of him, was the old Blackie Barr!

THE fat man threw a look over his shoulder, still fighting Rita. When he saw Blackie, he whirled the girl around in front of him, rifle caught between his fat forearm and Rita's shoulder as he held her facing Blackie. His right-hand Colt bore on Barr from behind Rita's blue-jeaned hip.

"I thought Rob killed you back there in the woods," rasped Raines. "There was so much blood around we didn't even bother to put a slug through you. Better drop the whip, Blackie. You cain't git me without hurtin' the gal."

Rita must have seen in Blackie's set face what he intended to do, but she didn't flinch. She drew herself up, a shining, proud gleam to her eye.

There were whackers in St. Louis who made a show of snapping cigarettes from men's mouths at fifteen paces without so much as touching a whisker. Blackie had never tattled his yoke irons that way, but this was for Pop Trevers, for Elridge; and Barr knew his skill with the blacksnake.

He bent forward, setting himself for that first slug from Raines, knowing he'd have to take it if he made this play. Then his arm moved in a blurred, backward-forward motion, leather snarling one way past his ear, then back the other way. Raines' Colt roared, then flew high in the air as the snapper on Barr's blacksnake howled past Rita's hip, an inch away from the blue jeans, cracking across the fat man's gun hand with a thunderous detonation.

Even as Blackie grunted with the pain of Raines' bullet through his left arm, he hauled his whip back into position. The wagon boss let Rita go and grabbed for his other Colt. The girl threw herself aside. Hugging his wounded arm in tight, Barr lashed out and cracked Raines' other hand as it gripped the gun, not yet unleathered. The fat man choked out an agonized curse and flopped backward into a sitting position.

It had all happened in such a short time that no one else but Rob Davis had moved against Barr. Davis evidently hadn't taken time to reload his single-shot after gut-shooting Elridge, because as Barr turned with the pounding thud of charging boots in his ears, he saw the big ox of a man coming at him with the rifle clubbed.

Then a big gleaming double-bitted ax arced through the air, striking Davis just as true as it had struck that hickory back at Pond Creek—nothing else could have stopped the enraged man.

As it was, his momentum carried him against Barr hard enough to knock Blackie to his knees. Then Rob slid to the ground with a gurgle, rifle slipping from dead fingers, the ax handle quivering a little in his back.

From the corner of his eye, Blackie could see Elridge hanging onto a wagon wheel. The Kentuckian drew a shuddering breath.

"I figgered I owed yuh that one, Blackie. It was about all I had in me."

He slid to a sitting position, shirt front covered with gore. Barr was erect again, turning to face Steve Moore.

The little man packed no gun. He was as proud of his skill with the blacksnake as Barr was. He stood there smiling evilly, braided leather out on the ground in front of him. Barr sent his lash hissing into the short grass, and that was the signal.

Barr saw his outflung leather miss by inches as Moore dodged skillfully aside. And Moore's lash cracked across Blackie's face, knocking him backward, blinding him with pain. Bellowing with rage, Blackie fought erect, automatically hauling his whip back into position, even as he pawed the blood from his eyes.

Then he could see again, and he was ready, legs spreading wider to support the forward bend of his square torso. Again those deadly bull whips exploded into leaping, living things. Barr saw that other lash licking toward his face. His own leather snapped from behind his head. It met Moore's whip in midair, winding around and around it like an angry snake.

Muscles writhing down his hairy forearm, Barr jerked backward and Moore lurched forward, pulled almost off his feet, whip stock yanked free of desperate fingers.

Blackie freed the loose whip before it hit the ground. He lashed out again, catching Moore in that same position—bent forward, arm out, an evil smile frozen to his sallow face.

Crackling leather turned that smile to a welter of spurting blood. With an awful scream, Moore rolled into the dust, pawing at his face.

Blackie straightened slowly, panting, seeing what had held the other

men at bay. Rita stood with her yellow boots spread wide, infinite threat in the Spencer held in her small brown hands. And beside Elridge stood the breed, Raines' Colts pointing toward the crowd. Raines sat on the ground, bent over his broken hands, moaning. Barr flickered his lash toward the man.

"Now, you coyote, talk! What was the game?"

Raines had taken enough of that whip; his words tumbled out in a rush. "O. K., Blackie, O. K. Hunt & Lawler sent me. If they could keep Pop Trevers' train from making the time limit, they'd git the contract he beat 'em on. They didn't want any crude stuff, just delays that'd look natural. Pop Trevers was pretty desp'rate for help and it was easy to git hired. Even picked my own crew. Then you an' that Kentuckian came along."

"When your train burned at Raton Pass, and Southwestern Freighting couldn't get another one through on time, didn't Hunt & Lawler get that contract, Blackie?" asked Rita.

Something unholy kindled in Barr's eyes then, and he took a menacing step forward. "What did you have to do with that, Raines?"

Raines jerked away from the flicking snapper. "Dammit, Hunt & Lawler put me on that one, too. Hawkins got a job whackin' for you so's he could work from the inside. Me, Davis and Moore follered you to Raton. Then Hawkins conked the guards and put 'em in the wagons, and Rob and me dumped the water kegs so you couldn't douse the fire."

BLACKIE BARR could see again those charred bodies in the wreckage, could feel the awful sense of guilt that had hung over him, turning him into a drunken coward and sending him down the road to damnation. His voice shook with the effort to control it.

"I guess Hunt & Lawler won't be crowdin' any more outfits in Kansas. And the least they'll do to you is hang you, Raines."

Blackie didn't say any more. He turned to where Elridge sat propped against the wheel. The Kentuckian's voice was faint.

"I reckon this'll be my last chaw, Blackie. You're a bullwhacker, an' I like you. I'm a woodcutter mostly, but I done my share o' bullwhackin'." With those words, Elridge tipped slowly, collapsing on the ground.

A little tobacco leaked from his mouth; it had a reddish tint. Blackie's eyes were too blurred with emotion to see for a moment. Gradually he became aware of Raines' men, crowding uncertainly around, lost without their leader. Blackie turned to them, raising his head, his voice husky and low when he first began to speak, but rapidly rising to a bull-throated roar.

"That was a *man* talkin', you black-hocked sons o' the coyote breed! By all the white bulls in hell, if you still think you ain't gonna take this train down to Keeche, I'll flay every stinkin' hide from this crowd and cure and sell 'em in St. Louis for skunk plews!"

The men cringed backward. To them, Blackie's bloody Missouri bull whip was the law now and forevermore.

Rita looked away from the still form on the ground, her eyes glistening. "We'll need the best wagon boss west of the Missouri to get us through on time. How about the job, Blackie Barr?"

It was in the girl's eyes that to her he could be much more than just a wagon boss. Blackie straightened, grinning despite the pain of bullet and bull whip in him. The old Blackie was in that grin, and again folks would tell of how Blackie Barr could stand in St. Louis' Rocky Mountain House and startle a team from their ox bows in Santa Fe, so thunderously loud were his bull-throated oaths.

THE END.

KETCH DOGS OF

Four-footed fighters, too, aid our all-out war effort.

THE bond of companionship between a man and his dog is one that goes back to the dim beginning of civilization. Theirs has always been an understanding partnership. Dogs went West with the pioneers. Watch dogs and family pets trudged along under the groaning axles of the covered wagons as the first settlers made their laborious way over thousands of miles of wilderness to new homes in Oregon. Ketch dogs helped the early cattlemen chouse salty old longhorns out of the brush and brasada country down in southwest Texas. In Alaska sled dogs, malemutes and Huskies were indispensable in getting trappers and prospectors over the frozen white wastes.

And now, as though sensing man's need for their help in the conflict in which the country is engaged, dogs have gone to war. From all sections of the country, north, south, east and west, dogs are being enlisted in the Uncle Sam's armed services. Rover has a job to do in this man's war, and he is doing it well in many ways.

Dogs have been trained as sentries and messengers. They have been taught to carry packs, trained to carry ammunition to men on advanced outposts. They have been turned into

THE K-9 CORPS

by Jim West

airplane spotters, and sent to school to learn how to attack enemy parachute troopers. Dogs patrol, in company of their handlers, our long Atlantic and Pacific coastlines, alert to detect the presence of any stranger, spy or saboteur who might be lurking on the beach. The dog's keen senses of sight, smell and hearing, much more acute than those of man, make them unusually well-suited to this work.

In the army the training of these war dogs is under the direction of the Remount Division of the Quartermaster Corps, Service of Supply. Special dog-training headquarters have been set up at camps distributed across the country. The breeds most desired for sentries and messengers are Airedales, German Shepherds, Doberman Pinschers, Boxers, Collies, Retrievers, Great Danes, Bulldogs, and believe it or not, French Poodles. The Poodle happens to be one of the most intelligent of the entire canine race. Though the fancy clipping of his curly coat gives him a "circus" appearance, he was originally a game dog used for retrieving, especially in duck hunting. He is naturally hardy, easy to teach and a good watch dog.

FOR sled duty in snowbound areas the hardy malemutes and Siberian Huskies are welcome in the service. They can be used to facilitate the transportation of supplies, and to bring back the wounded from a snowy battlefront to medical attention behind the foremost lines. The army has been training such dogs for this purpose in New England and at Camp Rimini near Helena, Montana. The good-natured loyal Newfoundlands and the big, lumbering St. Bernards are the breeds preferred for pack duty.

However, more than mere consideration of the breed, war demands require certain essential qualifications in the individual animal. For military service each dog must have a high canine I. Q., the ability to learn readily and to follow commands explicitly. They must not show the least tendency towards being gun-shy. Outside of that they should be fairly large, in good health, from one to five years old and capable of developing a fearless, aggressive disposition.

The members of Uncle Sam's dogs of war are volunteers, donated for the duration by their owners. A private organization known as Dogs for Defense, Inc., with headquarters in New York City and regional directors throughout the United States, acts as the procurement agency for canines in the fighting forces. Upon arriving at an induction center all dogs have to pass a stiff preliminary test to be sure they are adapted to military use. Once a dog qualifies he is given a registration number and assigned to a training school.

Thousands of these smart animals are now in active war service. Dogs were used in the last World War also, but not to the extent they are being used in this one. The K-9 Corps is quite a numerically impressive army in itself. Military officials have expressed the hope that one hundred and twenty-five thousand fighting dogs will be in one branch or another of the service before long. One of the most important immediate needs for war dogs is as sentries to guard camps, posts, beaches, munitions plants and so forth. The dogs are especially valuable on lonely coast vigils, and many of them have been assigned to the coast guard for this purpose.

Patrol dogs, fighters every one of them, are part of a team or unit composed of one dog and two men. In walking a beach for example, one man takes the lead with his dog, and it is always the same dog. At some distance behind the pair the second man follows, carrying a rifle or light machine gun, loaded and ready for instant use. All three are alert every moment for signs of anything unusual on their post. As soon as the dog senses danger, or a stranger in the vicinity he pricks up his ears, and gives a low growl just loud enough for his handler to hear. The handler gives a command. After that it is pretty tough on the stranger who fails to identify himself, or who doesn't come out in the open with his hands reaching for a chunk of sky.

THROUGH signals the dog has learned he can be ordered to lead to the place where the stranger lurks, to attack the suspect, or give chase if the latter tries to run away. Once given the attack command a dog in military service stalks without a sound, keeping to cover while he is closing in. When sufficiently close to his objective he leaps, grabbing the suspect by the gun wrist and hanging on rather than biting until the suspect's gun or club falls from his hand. As soon as the intruder is disarmed the dog forces him to the ground and holds him helpless until a guard arrives.

Those who have worked with these specially trained dogs declare that it is impossible for anyone to get by them, and that the animals' senses are so keen they will pick up the scent of a stranger at a distance of a hundred and fifty yards. In these efficient man and dog patrol teams, both go to the canine training school together. Picked men are chosen for

the work and at the training school they first meet the dogs that are to be their companion for the rest of the war. Each dog is assigned to a handler, and vice versa, for the duration. After they leave the school together, wherever that dog goes, or to whatever post he is assigned, along with him goes the particular soldier, sailor, marine or coast guardsman who is his handler.

In the first part of the training the war dogs become acquainted with their future handlers. Each individual man feeds his own dog, cleans him and tends to his kennel. In turn the dog is taught not to eat from anyone else, whether he is in or out of his kennel. Other than his handler the only persons permitted to deal with the dog at all are the veterinary doctors at the training school and the special trainer who teaches the animal the art of modern aggressive warfare. Even the vet does not work on the dog unless the animal is muzzled. Later the dogs are usually taken from training stations to their posts in army jeeps with the handler beside. During transportation the dogs are kept muzzled. Being chummy with the public is not part of their job.

The best dogs for this exacting military service are at least a year old. By that time they are over their puppy ailments, and their character has been pretty well formed. The dogs are given a special diet that includes all the necessary vitamins. In addition they get a ration of dog biscuit and horse meat. Their one daily meal is fed them at noon time rather than in the evening. This keeps them from being sluggish or sleepy on night patrol.

TRAINING for guard duty generally consists of two parts after the canine volunteer has successfully passed his preliminary military tests. The first half of the training program is devoted to teaching the dog absolute obedience to the commands of the man to whom he has been assigned. The dog must learn to walk, stop, advance, or heel at a single low-spoken word and by other set signals. At the same time he is taught to pay attention to nothing else no matter who, or what the commotion is around him. "Commotion" includes the gun blasts of actual battlefront conditions. At this stage in his military career the dog has just one job. That is to do his handler's bidding instantly.

As soon as the dog graduates from grammar school, so to speak, he si advanced to the second part of his training. This is the toughening-up stage in which he learns the real business of war. He is taught to be alert at all times; to notice things and people; and he has all the natural agressiveness in his character brought out and built up. By practice on the thickly gloved hand and well-padded arm of the trainer he is taught to leap with his full force at a man and bear him to the ground. And he is taught to hang on in spite of the hardest efforts a man can make to beat him off. This last is tremendously important for it is a major part of the guard dog's job to retain his captive until help in the form of his handler arrives to take over the prisoner.

When the second half of his training has been completed, the guard dog is ready to play his part in the wartime service of his country. He and his handler are ordered to active duty, perhaps at home, perhaps at some overseas fighting front. Neither knows where until they get their joint orders.

America's dogs have been given a war job to perform, and they are doing wonderfully well at it. It is a bit different from guarding sheep, or running cattle out of a thicket. Yet when the fighting is over the gallant, courageous four-footed members of the K-9 Corps will go back to their former masters in the homes and on the ranches they left to take up the grim business of war.

THE END.

RANGE SAVVY

by Carl Raht

When the Indian Territory became the State of Oklahoma, the country still was mostly a vast cattle range. Great herds of longhorns roamed over the unfenced sections, seeking greener grass. These wild cattle would invade towns, and were a menace to anyone passing along the streets. To guard against the nuisance, the town of Okemah built a strong barbed-wire fence around its outer limits, with gates placed at intervals to permit passage in and out of town.

Chimayo, New Mexico, is known to the average American for its famous Indian blankets, but this colorful little New Mexican town offers a product of greater worth to the Mexican population of this State—chili peppers! The pepper raised here has a particular and unusual hotness relished by all lovers of fine Mexican food. Spice merchants all over the United States bid high for Chimayo chili. Though the inhabitants realize the money value of their blankets, they take time in early September to go and harvest their pepper crop. Every member of the family is employed in the fields, picking the shining green pods from the rows of chili. They then carry them to a dark storeroom, letting them ripen until there are patches of red on each green pepper. Again all members of the family take part in tying the pods on a ten-foot cord, exactly three at a twist. The long strings are then hung over the roof, where they turn a deep crimson, making a colorful note against the dull adobe houses. In six weeks' time they have dried and turned dark red, and are ready for market. Many a little brown finger stings from constant contact with the fiery produce, but every little brown stomach relishes the hot chili food.

A saddle string is a particular group of horses that is given to a cowhand to work with just as a set of tools is given a mechanic. When a bunch of horses is bought or broken by a ranch, each cowhand is given a pick in rotation, the foreman coming first, until all the horses have been given out. Each rider's selection becomes his "saddle string," or set of tools. In each string is found unbroken horses for short circles, good all-around horses for general work, quiet horses for day herding, fast horses for cutting cattle from a herd, strong ones for roping and holding big animals, night horses for night guard, and sometimes an especially good horse for swimimng a herd across swollen streams. A string made up of ten or twelve head is never split up, even after the cowhand quits his job and moves on. The entire string is turned over to the man who replaces him.

Mr. Raht will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, 11, N. Y. Be sure to inclose three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

TAILOR-MADE SOURDOUGH

by Frank Richardson Pierce

"Out with it, Dave," Lon said quietly. "I've known for days that you've got something on your mind."

We made camp early that night. After supper the kid got out one of his tailor-made cigarettes and lit it. He smoked awhile, then he asked: "How far is it to Caribou Creek?"

I had been afraid he was going to ask that question. "Thirty-five miles," I answered.

"Thirty-five miles," he repeated and took a couple of puffs. "I can make it tomorrow night then." It was a statement. "Early start, and we'll mush late."

I had a hunch he could make it at that. He was under weight, and you could see that he had been sick, and you had the feeling that he might keel over any minute. But he also had more nerve than most young fellows who come north from the States. If he made up his mind, he'd do that thirty-five miles in one day, though he might have to go to bed for a couple of weeks afterward.

I'd been stalling along the trail. If we never reached Caribou Creek it would be too soon to suit me. How would you feel about it? This Lon Jessup was the kind of lad who'd go to hell for a friend, and try and find some good in his worst enemy. He'd talked to me for days about his big brother, Mike Jessup. Told me how Mike cared for him after their father and mother had been killed. He'd mentioned how Mike was naturally strong, while Lon himself had always been sickly. He'd told me how Mike

had always packed the biggest load, with never a kick. Anyone could see, by the way his face lit up, that he was terribly proud of that big brother of his.

And all the time I knew that Mike was in the Caribou Creek jail charged with murdering Old Man Addison. Now, how would you feel about hurrying a fine kid into a mess like that?

We'd spent three weeks on the trail together, and I'd learned that Mike had prospected a little in the States, then decided to head for Alaska. Between them the two brothers had had three thousand dollars left them by their folks. The guardian had said it was O. K. for Mike to include Lon's share in the grubstake, the understanding being that they would split fifty-fifty on the cleanup. Lon was seventeen then and Mike about twenty-four.

The first trader Mike met in the North stuck him on the outfit. Then a miner who figured he had worked out a pay streak, but wasn't sure, made Mike a proposition to work the property one season, splitting the cleanup fifty-fifty. Well, the cleanup was worth three hundred dollars, and the miner knew, for certain, the rest of his ground was hungry. You see, Mike was learning the hard way.

Most of us around Caribou Creek had noticed Mike was getting a little desperate last year. The CCMC—Caribou Creek Mercantile Co.—had given him part of his outfit the previous year on the cuff. It had had to put out the full outfit last year. Mike knew he had to make good or he was through. Well, last fall he had showed up in Caribou Creek, all smiles. He'd made a beeline for the CCMC store and dropped a couple of moosehide pokes on the counter.

"I hit it," he had announced. "Take out what I owe you and give me credit for the rest."

"Are you telling where, Mike?" Sherwin, the store manager, asked.

"It doesn't justify a stampede," Mike answered. "It's a stream I named Little Creek. I got colors, then small nuggets. The water was unusually low and I found quite a lot of pay in the cracks of the creek bed. In one spot I found a pocket worth five thousand dollars. Cleaned it out in two days. I'll winter here, and plan for next year's operations."

WELL, Mike's story was believed until February, then the Kronk brothers showed up. They pulled up in front of the deputy marshal's office.

"We've been up around the Arctic Circle most of the time," Ira Kronk reported. "Goin' north we called on Old Man Addison. He figgered to take out enough money from his mine this last season to let him winter down in California. He claimed a little sunshine wouldn't hurt him none. On our way back we dropped in at his cabin for news and such. He was dead—somebody'd shot him. We didn't touch nothin', but come straight here to report."

The marshal went to Addison's claim. The old prospector had been shot in the back, outside his cabin—drilled clean through and no trace of the bullet. Then it looked as if he'd gone inside to get his rifle, which was on wooden pegs driven into the wall. He hadn't quite made it. He'd died just as he was reaching for the rifle.

The marshal found signs of a good cleanup—the big tailings dump and notes in a diary that Addison had kept. The few nuggets left were flat, proving they had been given plenty of wear. There wasn't anything like them in the country.

Ira Kronk told the marshal it shouldn't be hard to trace the murdered man's gold, providing any of it had been turned in, and he suggested that samples be sent to the different trading posts so that the traders would know what to look for. That got action.

Sherwin found plenty of the nuggets in the gold Mike Jessup had turned in. Naturally, Mike denied everything, though he admitted that only one hundred and fifty miles and a mountain

range had separated him from Old Man Addison. That isn't a lot of country for a skookum man like Mike to cover if he's in a gold-robbing mood.

Mike's trial had been set for early spring, just before the breakup. At that time there'd be enough trappers and miners in Caribou Creek to make up a jury. Judge Kelso, who mushed about holding court, would be in camp then. The local deputy district attorney would have plenty of time to work up a case, and the marshal could round up anybody needed as witnesses or to give expert testimony. By breakup time, Mike Jessup would probably be convicted and hanged.

And that was the mess I was taking his kid brother to face.

I guess the kid smelled a rat because when I told him thirty-five miles was a lot of country to cover in a day, he asked me if the marshal was waiting for me when we arrived. Sure, he was kidding, but he also knew that I was stalling.

The next day we made thirty miles and camped. "Lon, you can go ahead if you want to," I said, knowing that he wouldn't, "but I'm about to fall apart from exhaustion. Here's where I camp."

After we had eaten, Lon pointed to the lights marking Caribou Creek. "I could have made it at that," he said.

He couldn't sleep. He was too tense, so he rolled around in his sleeping bag and talked. "The frontier is about as I thought it would be," he declared. "Ever since Mike went North I've been building myself up to carry my end of the load for a change. Maybe I look sickly to you, but you should've seen me three years ago. I've read everything I could lay my hands on about Alaska, mining, pole-boating shallow rivers, shooting rapids in canoes or on rafts, living off the country, and all that. I guess I'm what you might call a tailor-made sourdough."

"It's a cinch you're several cuts above the run-of-the-mine chechahco," I answered. Then I remembered that at the start, Lon would watch me make camp and in a few hours, or days at the most, he was doing the job as well as I could.

I DON'T know when Lon went to sleep, but he was breathing heavily when I woke up. I started the fire, then began thinking of what was ahead for the kid. The first thing I knew he said: "Out with it, Dave. I've known for days that you've had something on your mind. Out with it—if I can help, or if it's any of my business."

"This is the showdown, Lon," I admitted. "If I were heading out on the trail tomorrow, to be gone prospecting for five years, and if I had my choice of any young fellow in Alaska, I'd take you. That's the way I feel about you. That's why I've held off telling you. No use beating about the bush any longer— Mike is in a jam."

"So that's it? Whatever it is, he's innocent," Lon said quietly. "Tell me about it."

I told him, and he didn't say anything for a long time. "There's an answer," he said finally. "I don't know what it is." He stared intently at the coffeepot, just beginning to boil. "It shows that no matter how much you prepare, you can miss a bet. I never dreamed a situation like this would come up."

Those last five miles were the longest. I had a cabin at Caribou Creek and we went there. "This is your home, Lon," I said, "as long as you want it."

"I may have to sponge on you awhile, Dave," he said, "there isn't much left in the poke. I'll find a job of some kind and pay you off later."

"I won't worry about that," I told him. "There's grub on the shelves and meat in the cache."

"Let's go over to the jail," he suggested.

I hated being around while a kid like Lon took a beating. You know how a man feels. But we'd been on the trail together and he didn't get on my nerves. That counts. Besides, I was the only man in camp that he knew.

The jail is a two-story log building. The cell window bars run deep into the logs, above and below, and it would take plenty of doing to dig them out. The windows faced the main street and if a man tried to escape, somebody would spot him. The marshal's office was on the ground floor and the deputy district attorney's office was also in the same building. The marshal lived in a cabin behind the jail, but spent most of his time in the office. It was a good place to gather for a hand of solo, seven-up, or poker.

Mike Jessup saw us coming, and I could tell by the way his face twisted up with fury that he had spotted his brother even though Lon was wearing a parka hood over his head. Mike didn't want the kid in on this deal, but you could see that he was hungry for the sight of him, now that he was here. When Lon reached through the bars a few minutes later and said, "Hello, Mike," his brother drew a long breath and answered, "You're the best sight I've seen in the North, Lon."

I left them together. The marshal didn't think much of the idea at first, but I told him Lon wasn't the kind to slip Mike a hack saw or gun.

WHEN Lon came downstairs he said: "Dave, how he's changed! He isn't the man who went North a few years ago. He's harder than the hubs of hell. And he's bitter."

I knew that. About Mike Jessup was the bitterness, hardness, and the cold, fighting fury that makes a wolf survive when a starving pack turns on itself. That was why it was easy for many of us at Caribou Creek to believe Mike had killed Old Man Addison. His back had been to the wall.

That night Lon asked me point-blank: "Are you on my side, or against Mike?"

"I'm open-minded, Lon," I answered.

He thought that over awhile. "You haven't known Mike as long as I have, and he isn't the only relative you've got in the world," he said, "so you couldn't be as sure as I am that he's innocent. But, if you're open-minded, that's enough for me. I'm going to need help to prove that somebody else murdered Old Man Addison."

"I guess I'm your huckleberry," I answered. "I'm always getting mixed up in some lost cause."

You could tell that Lon figured this was the chance of a lifetime to make up for what Mike had done for him. He had come North to pack his share of the load and now he was getting set to pack the whole load.

"Listen, Lon," I warned the following morning, "if you're going to work like a horse you'd better eat like one. I never knew a horse to start a big day's work with two cups of black coffee. You'd better line your ribs with a caribou steak."

He had to do a little forcing at first. That's the way it is with weak people who are going on their nerve. After awhile the food tasted better to him. I made him eat slowly. We weren't catching any trains.

After breakfast, Lon went over to the CCMC store and talked to Sherwin. Sherwin was busy, but this sick kid, tackling a hopeless problem, got under his skin.

"Here's the set-up, young fellow," he said. "Mike brought in seven thousand dollars in dust. He paid about two thousand that he owed and left the rest to his credit. The marshal tied up the whole business as evidence. When the trial's over the money will probably be turned back."

"There's no way I can hire a lawyer, then?"

"Not unless you can find one who'll work on the cuff," Sherwin said. "Judge Talbot used to be good, but he's getting old, and can't go after evidence like he used to. He'll put it on the cuff, though."

Next we went to see the Kronk brothers. Ira Kronk did the talking and there was little of it. "We ain't havin' nothin' to do with a killer's brother," he said.

Lon looked as if he had been socked

in the face. "I'm not asking you to tell anything you aren't supposed to tell," he said quietly. "But I'd like to know how long you were in the arctic. Then I can figure out, possibly, the time Addison was killed. Knowing that I might prove—"

"Figgerin' a alibi," Ira sneered. "I ain't helpin' in any such dirty work. What me and Pete has to say will be said to the judge. And it'll be plenty."

"But you were in the arctic?"

"Don't bang the door when you go out," Ira said.

The kid's face was naturally pale, but blood came from somewhere. A lot of it, too. He was red, then sort of purple, but he hung onto himself and didn't go off half-cocked.

"This has been a very profitable visit," he said. "It's turned out better than I hoped for. Without expecting it, I've found a hot lead. It won't be long until I can name the real killers."

I was looking at Ira, and the queerest expression came into his eyes. "Name 'em, and I'll help hang 'em," he growled. "Now don't bother me any more."

Outside I asked: "Was that a bluff, Lon?"

"What do you think?"

"I've never seen you bluff," I answered. "You drive ahead slowly and surely, with your feet on the ground."

"They're too blasted anxious to hang Mike," he said, "and that's suspicious. If they had been on the level they'd have treated me decently. I think the Kronk brothers killed Old Man Addison."

"You'll have a tough time proving it," I answered. "Two men's word goes a long way in court. And how're you going to explain Addison's gold in Mike's pokes?"

"I haven't come to that yet," he admitted. "One step at a time. When you're a tailor-made sourdough it takes a lot of reading of the tricks pulled by frontier crooks, and the methods used by sourdough marshals and Western sheriffs. I liked the way old Sheriff Blodgett in Arizona used to kick the props out from under killers. He'd toss some little thing at them in court when they least expected it."

"I see," I answered, "some little point they'd overlooked."

"That's it," said Lon. "Suppose we mush out to Mike's mine?"

A COUPLE of days later we started. I made the kid take things easy. I wanted to build him up a little. I fed him good, well-cooked grub and made him eat it slowly. He fretted a lot, wanting to do two days' work in one. I wouldn't let him.

We found Mike's cabin. He hadn't put much time into building it. It was makeshift and things inside weren't too orderly, but a check on the work he had done explained all that. Along the creek bed I could see where he had moved heavy boulders singlehanded to get at pay dirt that might

have gathered in the cracks underneath.

I was glad no jury was on hand to read the signs. The man had been desperate and had driven himself without mercy. The signs could have been used as evidence in his favor—that by driving himself he had made a cleanup possible. On the other hand, a shrewd district attorney could have turned it against him, claiming he had driven himself, found no pay, then in desperation, murdered a luckier man.

The kid stopped before one rock and said: "This must've been the one Mike told Sherwin about. It rolled and bruised his foot. He kept up his prospecting on his knees. Sherwin told me that took nerve. And they claim a man like that would commit murder!"

Lon made sketches of the creek, estimating the tons of rock moved by hand, and he had me check the estimates. "I hope to prove," he explained, "that Mike didn't have time to cross the range and kill Addison."

I knew what was coming next—a trip across the range. Several times the snow drove us back in the pass, but we got through and then the going was easier, over the surface of a frozen creek.

An unbroken expanse of snow to the depth of several inches, covered the country around Addison's cabin. There were drifts several feet deep in places. The wind blew a lot in that country.

We holed up there a week while Lon made sketches, and figured out where the killer must have stood for the bullet to have gone through Addison and not lodged in the front of the cabin.

Sheriff Blodgett couldn't have done a better job of working out the different angles. Up to now, I had secretly felt that learning by actual experience was better than reading it out of books. Yes, and I still feel that way. But when a kid hasn't the body to survive a lot of experiences, reading will show him plenty of short cuts.

Lon set up stakes and sighted along them. "The bullet landed somewhere in this stretch of ground," he said. "It had to."

"Unless it struck a rock and glanced," I said.

"The odds are against that. The ground hadn't frozen as hard as a rock yet. A bullet would sink into the sod and stick. There aren't many rocks. Do you suppose we could get 'em to postpone the trial? This summer we could scrape off the sod, run it through a steam of water and get the bullet. If it fit Kronk's rifle, we'd clear Mike."

"They won't postpone the trial," I answered. "The judge will hold that the defense has had plenty of time to build up its case."

THE next afternoon Lon came in with a hunk of sod that he had chopped out. It was about eighteen inches long, a foot wide and six inches thick. I asked him what it was.

"Something Sheriff Blodgett might have picked up if he'd been working on this case," Lon answered. "We can hit the trail for Caribou Creek now."

"What's in that hunk of sod?" I asked.

He grinned. "Suppose I don't answer," he suggested. "Then if you're asked the question you can say you don't know. And I've an idea the Kronk brothers or their friends will ask you."

We left it that way and headed home. The kid radiated confidence from the moment he arrived. "You don't need to worry, Mike," he told his brother. "We'll get you out of this mess."

"Two men's word against one," Mike pointed out. He was depressed. He knew that his brother's case had better be a good one. His innocence would have to be proved to more than a jury. If one of Addison's friends still believed him guilty there would be a dry-gulching somewhere in the back country.

Lon took the hunk of sod to the CCMC store and put it on the counter. It was wrapped in a piece of moose hide, well lashed with rawhide

thongs. The knots were held in place with twisted bits of wire, and sealing wax covered the wire ends so they couldn't be unwound without detection.

"This piece of sod," Lon explained to Sherwin, "was dug up near the Addison cabin. It's frozen, and must be kept that way until the trial. It will play an important part in proving the real murderer's guilt. Can you store it in a safe place for me?"

"It has to be kept frozen?" Sherwin asked.

"Yes. If it thaws, the water will run out and it'll get out of shape."

There's always a few prospectors loafing around an Alaskan trading post and Caribou Creek's was no exception. They began to spot the package—and talk. One said: "It could be the footprint of the man who murdered Addison."

"It's a trick to make us think Mike didn't kill him," a friend of the Kronks argued. "It won't work."

"If the Kronks didn't go into the arctic," Lon said, to make them talk a little faster, "they had plenty of time to kill Addison. They had time to kill him even if they did go. But, they didn't go. They've never been there."

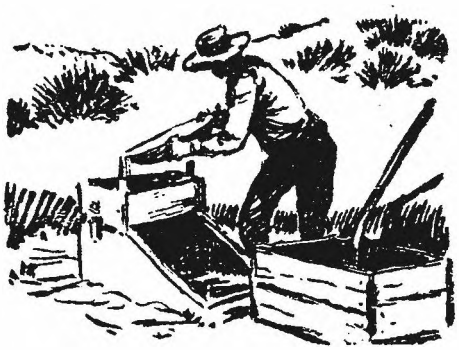
Sherwin put the package of sod in his meat cache. This was up on high stilts, near the store. It was never locked because anyone who climbed up to it could be seen. The package was shoved under several hundred pounds of frozen caribou meat. "Anybody who swipes the package will have to move the meat first," Sherwin pointed out.

THE Kronks began circulating stories that Mike was going to be released through a trick his brother intended to pull at the eleventh hour. By the time Judge Bellingham came in to hold trial, feeling was running high against Mike. I told Lon he'd better keep out of sight, or some hothead might take a poke at him.

"I've committed no crime," the kid returned, "so I'm not going to hide out. Let 'em poke. I'll poke right back, though I won't last long with some of the big bruisers."

He was threatened a few times, but no one hit him. Caribou Creek was crowded the week end before the trial. Old Judge Talbot had prepared the defense, the district attorney was all set for a speedy trial, and the marshal had sworn in a dozen of the nerviest miners in camp to maintain order.

The courtroom was in an uproar when they brought in Mike. There was jeering, and a few reached over for quick punches and had their wrists rapped with clubs by the deputy marshals. Mike's face wore a savage expression and he looked as if he'd like to take on a mob and slug it out.



On Lon's request, I was sworn in as a special deputy to guard that package of sod. He carried it into the courtroom and put it on the desk with the defendant's papers. Talbot said something about offering the package in evidence "when the defense deems proper."

As time dragged and the jury was selected, you could see Ira Kronk's eyes on the package. The first day he was interested, and the second day he was fascinated. The third day he sweat a little, while his brother left the courtroom a couple of times, and walked off his nervousness.

"I don't know why the defense is dragging out the selection of the jury," the district attorney complained.

"He'll find out why," Talbot whis-

pered to me. Then he stood up. "The defense is satisfied with the jury as it now stands, your honor."

Ira Kronk was the first witness called. He told, briefly, of visiting Addison on the way to the arctic and finding the body on the return trip. His brother related the same story. Each time when the district attorney said, "The defense witness," Talbot answered with: "The defense will call the witness later for cross-examination."

Several times Talbot started to unwrap the package of sod, and Lon would stop him, then Kronk would wipe his face as though he had had a narrow escape. Mike went on the stand and denied guilt. Talbot submitted the facts and figures Lon had gathered to prove that Mike had been too busy to leave the creek. You could see that the jury didn't take much stock in that alibi.

"How do you account for Addison's gold being found in the pokes that you sold the CCMC people?" the district attorney asked Mike. "You admit there's so much difference in the gold coming from your creek and Addison's creek that even a chechahco could see it?"

"That's right," Mike agreed. "The gold from Addison's creek traveled far and the nuggets are worn more or less flat. My nuggets were thicker and carried less mineral stain. I can't prove it, but Addison's nuggets were planted in my pokes. How, or when, I don't know. I never examined the contents of my pokes because it's easy to spill the fine stuff and lose it. Everyone knows Sherwin is honest and when I hit Caribou Creek I gave him the pokes and said I'd hit it, and for him to take out what I owed for grub and credit me with the rest."

Mike returned to his seat, realizing the jury was skeptical of his story. Ira Kronk was called next. "Mr. Kronk," Talbot said, "you testified that you lived in the arctic all one season. You were a long way from supplies. Did you live off the country?"

"Yes."

"Ptarmigan? Rabbits and hares?" Talbot's gentle tone invited confidence. It didn't remotely suggest a trap, though from Lon's previous whispering, I knew that the kid was directing things.

"Plenty of ptarmigan, rabbits and hares up that way," Kronk quickly agreed. He became a little easier, until his eyes shifted to the package and then he was again tense.

"Which did you eat most of, hares or rabbits? Perhaps that's a foolish question in a way," Talbot went on, "because hares are big fellows, weigh better'n fifteen pounds. A man naturally saves ammunition."

"That's right," agreed Kronk. "When you back-pack your ammunition, you don't waste it on small stuff."

"Let's see now, you were in the arctic in the summer," Talbot said. "What color are arctic hares in summer?"

You could tell by Kronk's expression that he was thinking: "You ain't goin' to catch me on that one—rabbits, hares and ptarmigan change color with the season. They're brown in summer and pure white in winter." He grinned in triumph. "Them arctic hares were brown, of course," he answered.

"Just what kind of brown? Light or dark? Or didn't you pay much attention?"

"A kind of brown like cinnamon," Kronk answered.

"If the court please," Talbot said, "at this time I ask that all testimony submitted by the Kronk brothers be rejected and that they be arrested for perjury. They weren't in the arctic, which means that they had plenty of time to spend in the region of Addison's cabin. True, most creatures change color with the season. It's nature's means of protection. But the color of the arctic hare is constant—white."

Then Lon grinned and began un-

wrapping the package of sod.

"At this time," Talbot continued, "I ask the arrest of the Kronks for murder, also."

PETE KRONK suddenly made a dive for the door. A deputy grabbed him. Ira half left the witness stand, but Mike jumped the intervening space and shoved him back into the chair. The bailiff pounded for order.

In the back of the courtroom Pete was whimpering: "I'll talk! I'll talk! Don't let 'em mob me."

While he was still whimpering, Lon was back there demanding: "Will you tell 'em about planting some of Addison's gold in Mike's poke when he was probably away from his mine hunting meat? And will you tell 'em what you did with the rest of the old man's cleanup?"

Pete, crazy with fear, agreed. There wasn't a chance of his being mobbed. The same deputies sworn in to protect Mike were now protecting the Kronk brothers.

The judge made several rulings as soon as things quieted down. He ordered the Kronks held for murder, and he directed the jury to return a not guilty verdict in Mike's case.

As Lon and Mike started to leave the room, the judge called: "Just a minute, Mr. Lon Jessup. You're forgetting your frozen evidence!"

"Oh . . . that!" Lon said unconcernedly. "You see, I took a tip from an old sheriff named Blodgett. He said sometimes you could pull a stunt that would work on a guilty man's conscience and that would crack him. I dug up a hunk of sod near Addison's cabin. Now, being guilty, the Krongs figured I must have something that would prove their guilt. And it got on their nerves. Pete, being the weaker one, cracked first. Ira was almost ready to crack from looking at a package we made a fine show of guarding. Just dump the package in the alley. It's only a hunk of sod."

He turned and walked out—a tailor-made sourdough who was now the real thing. There was new pride in his swing. He looked like a man who realized that at last he was packing his share of the load.

THE END.

AIR TIGHTS

AIR TIGHTS is the name applied to all canned goods used on the cow range, and it is almost always used disparagingly, even though the individual who cusses "air tights" may prefer the canned contents to the fresh vegetables, as in the case of tomatoes. In the old days, many men who had never tasted fresh fruits or vegetables would not admit it. Pioneer traders were quick to see the advantage of a new product to take the place of the wormy dried fruits hauled across the Plains by slow-moving bull teams. Tomatoes were standard, as were canned peaches and condensed milk. Tea might always be purchased, even at the Indian trading posts or agencies. Coffee came in one-hundred-pound sacks, and was unroasted. It was much harder to get than tea, and more trouble to prepare, until an enterprising Yankee merchant brought out a roasted product, packed in one-pound paper packages. There were few mills to be had on the frontier, so the roasted berries were put in a tin can or cup and pounded with an iron bolt until the kernels were crushed sufficiently to be brewed into a muddy, unpalatable beverage, which sold over the lunch counters at the State Stands at "two-bits" a cup.

CANYON OF NO RETURN

by David Lavender

THE great red walls of Sand River gorge broke away into a wild jumble of boulders and benches, leaving room for a tortuous trail to snake downward to the strip of rich bottom land by the ford. In the past the trail had seldom been used, except by riders hurrying to reach the unmapped desert beyond the river.

The men who raced along it this April afternoon were hurrying. Mostly they looked backward over their shoulders, having no anticipation of trouble ahead. And so it was that a cold shock of despair gripped them as they rounded a gaunt knob of rock and saw on the river bank a hive of people.

They reined sharply in behind grubby juniper trees. Two of them dismounted and slipped forward on foot to reconnoiter. One of the pair was long-boned and loose-jointed, with a hint of almost foolhardy recklessness in the way he moved from rock to rock. The other, thicker and shorter of build, followed more cautiously, glaring at his leader's broad back. Hate, fear and crafty ambition were all mingled in the ugly narrowing of his green eyes.

They stopped at length on a narrow ledge. Below them a crude pile driver stood near the middle of the silt-laden

As soon as the horse lunged up canyon, Chance sprinted in the opposite direction, hoping to dodge the posse.

stream. Its hoarse *thump-thump-thump* reached their ears as it drove home a heavy cedar post. The water was shallow. Men had waded into it up to their chests and were stringing wires between other posts already set in the sandbars. Women and children were cutting alder and willow branches on the bank, lashing them into bundles with the leaves still intact, and passing them, weighted with rocks, to the workers in the water. There the brush was hung onto the wires between the posts.

"What in blazes are they doin', Chance?" the short, thick man growled at his long-legged companion.

"Building a wing dam part way across the river to turn water into those irrigation ditches," Bob Chance said and grinned. "Whoever thought that up has plenty of savvy. The river is full of silt. It'll gum up in those branches and build its own damn by itself. Yes, sir, Fenster, you're looking at a right smart stunt!"

"I'm lookin' at a barbed-wire trap!" Webb Fenster retorted. His voice was edged; beads of perspiration stood out on his swarthy forehead. "An' it's your fault we're in it! Ride your luck, you say. Well, you rode it too far, stoppin' to hold up that stage when we should've been makin' tracks. Rocklin an' his posse are right on our tails! We'll never shake 'em now!"

BOB CHANCE turned his bright-blue eyes to the rear, as though he too expected Sheriff Del Rocklin's angry lawmen to appear over the skyline. Then he chuckled, like a duellist approving an opponent's skill. "He's a bulldog, that Del Rocklin. And he's made us do some thinking this trip."

"Thinkin' ain't enough now!" Fenster fumed. "You gotta show some action! The boys'll back up what I say. Either you pull us out o' this jackpot pronto, or we'll get a leader who will!"

"Meaning you?" Chance asked softly.

Their glances locked. Then slowly the rebellious lieutenant looked away, growling to himself.

"That's better," murmured Chance. The faint smile stayed on his lips, but now there was a pinched, white look to his nostrils. For weeks he had known that Fenster was waiting an opportunity to challenge him. Now, with Rocklin's posse hard on the gang's heels, Chance's authority hung by a hair. Unless he outwitted the pursuing lawmen in a hurry, he was through.

His shrewd gaze went back to the busy colonists along the river. That wing dam had shattered his entire plan. He had hoped to ride up the river along the shallow sandbars, where the water would leave no tracks. Once in the gorge, the outlaws could swing away through one of the stony side canyons. Before Del Rocklin unraveled the puzzle, they would be out of reach. But now that dam blocked the route.

Chance whistled tunelessly to himself, relishing the problem. He had been in bad spots before, and generally he had burst through by sheer boldness —by crowding his luck so hard that the phrase "Chance's chance," had become a byword for thin odds on the owlhoot trails. But what men like Fenster failed to see was the sound planning that lay behind these spectacular strokes. Bob Chance's memory was almost inexhaustible. Whatever he saw or heard, no matter how inconsequential it seemed, he stored away. More than once the recollection of a word or two about a turn in the road or the qualities of an unknown antagonist had saved his skin.

Now, as he surveyed the river, stories he'd heard crowded his mind. His glance clung to a man standing on a small promontory of rock directing the work. The fellow was tall and heavy-shouldered, and his gestures conveyed an impression of quiet, dogged determination. He held what seemed to be a roll of blueprints in his left hand, and there was a sense of frailty about

him, as though he had but recently recovered from a long illness.

CHANCE added those things together, and a smile curved his wide lips. "Lady Luck!" he murmured, "you've kissed us again!"

Fenster saw his animation. "What is so funny?" Jealousy and suspicion twisted his coarse features. "If you've a plan—which I doubt—let's hear it!"

Chance eyed his lieutenant with distaste. Fenster had seen all that his leader had, but it had failed to register. Yet the man supposed he could rule this hard-cased gang! Chance turned his back with deliberate insult and rejoined his riders.

"You boys make tracks for that cave between the gulches at the head of Canyon Rojo," he told them. "Wait for me there and—"

"Wait nothing!" broke in Fenster. "Rocklin'll be on top of us by dark!"

A mutter of assent rose from the nervous men. Then loyal, olive-skinned little Ben Ryba said: "If there is good reason, chief—"

"There is."

"What?"

Chance did not tell them, knowing that Fenster would try to declare himself in on the plan and share its triumph. Furthermore, the ruthless lieutenant was apt to shoot first and think afterward, and Chance wanted no innocent blood spilled when he rode down to the river.

So he said only, "Have I ever failed you?"

"No, chief, but—"

"Can you offer a plan of your own?"

The men stirred uneasily. "No-o," Ryba admitted.

"Then do as I say!"

Trapped, the men had no choice but to obey and hope for the best. Yet Fenster was not going to pass up this opportunity to assert himself. "We'll wait until sunset," he growled. "If you're not back then with a clear way out o' this jam, you'd better not come back!"

He swung into the saddle and the gang clattered out of sight. Chance smiled after them. A fine bunch of cutthroats, those! And he had created them, molding their wild natures into a disciplined force. Fenster was a fool if he thought Bob Chance could be bluffed into giving up that work.

He went to his horse, mounted, and reined down the trail toward the river. Amazement grew in him as he saw the work that was being done there in that lonely spot. Plows had already turned the rich loam lying between the stream and the dusky red cliffs. As soon as the dam and ditches were completed, crops could be planted, homes established, and plans made for a bountiful future.

Chance's glance dropped to the carved leather of his saddle pommel and the rawhide riata fastened to it. Those things were the result of his own nimble fingers, wrought during moments of quiet in some hidden camp under the starlit pines. At such times he had even dreamed idly that when he grew too old for the smashing excitement of the owlhoot, he would cut loose from his companions, find some isolated town and establish a leather shop of his own. Yet in his heart he knew it could never be. He had gone too far to turn back. That blazing night in Santa Fe, when he had killed twice to avenge the murder of a friend, had closed the doors of peace to him forever. Now he had no choice but to live as an outcast or die at the hands of the relentless law he had overstepped.

HE shrugged the thoughts aside. His springy-legged roan had reached the bottom land and was jogging along rutted tracks leading to the dam. Ditch workers, guiding their fresnos behind slow-moving oxen, paused to watch him. Strangers were a rarity here, and they seemed disposed to welcome the newcomer. Chance was careful not to get close enough for anyone to recognize him. Riding as if he had perfect right to be where he was, he

managed to reach the dam without question.

There he reined in beside the man who was directing the work. "You're Brewster Rocklin?" he asked.

The other glanced up. His calm gray eyes were deep-set in a face of singular peacefulness. His lined skin was pallid.

"I am," he answered. He looked puzzled, obviously wondering how this stranger had recognized him.

"I know your brother, Sheriff Del Rocklin." Chance smiled faintly. "As a matter of fact, I'm right interested in your whole family. I'd heard that Brewster Rocklin was an engineer and had got up out of a sick bed to help some colonists set up an irrigation system. You have Del's slow, solid way of handling your body, too. It wasn't hard, when I saw you down here, to put two and two together."

"Good enough," Brewster Rocklin said. "But I can't place you so handily."

"I'm Bob Chance."

There was an instant's dead silence. Chance heard a man's indrawn gasp behind him. A woman lashing brush into bundles looked swiftly up, and he caught a glimpse of wide, pretty eyes under the rim of her calico sunbonnet. Instinctively his hand dropped to his gun butt, although, so far as he could see, the farmers were unarmed, thinking perhaps that their poor settlement possessed nothing worth a highwayman's time.

Rocklin regarded Bob steadily. "What do you want?"

"You," Chance said. He nodded toward a saddled horse tied to a nearby alder. "Get on that bronc. We're going for a ride."

It was the young woman who moved first. Color blazed in her cheeks and she came upright, facing Chance with passionate defiance.

"Don't you touch him!" she stormed. "He's sick! And we need him here, or we can't finish our work. He—"

"You'll get him back," Chance said, "if you all do exactly as I say." His eyes raked the white-faced group surrounding him. "But if one of you makes a funny move, he'll be the deadest engineer you ever saw!"

The girl tossed her head. "You coward! Because we're helpless, you think—"

"Ruth, be still!" Rocklin spoke without raising his voice, and the girl immediately obeyed. The engineer turned to the outlaw. "Why are you doing this?"

CHANCE didn't answer immediately. He had seen the wedding ring on Ruth's finger, and the thought struck him that once he too had dreamed of marrying such a woman. But now that dream was gone with all the others. A strange remorse all at once gripped him.

"I need you to bargain with," he said tonelessly to Rocklin. "Except for your dam, my men and I would be safe now. As it is, we can't get up the river, and your brother's posse isn't two hours behind us. That's where you come in. If Del will let us cross this river with a twenty-four-hour head start, you'll live. If he won't—"

Chance shrugged and let his gaze drift over the colonists. "One of your sod-busters can give that message to the sheriff when he shows up. I'll be waiting for an answer in the cave at the head of Canyon Rojo."

His glance flicked to the girl, read the loathing there. It made him flinch and he said harshly: "A trapped wolf has to fight however he can, ma'am. My men won't just sit and wait for the posse to take them. You're in their way. If they have to, they'll blast you out. I'm trying to spare you that."

The girl's lips twisted. "You could surrender yourself. Del Rocklin would grant your men twenty-four hours in return for you, wouldn't he?"

Chance gave her a mirthless grin. "I reckon he would. But that would be bargaining with my own skin. It may not look like much of a hide to you, ma'am, but it's all I've got, an' I'm kind of attached to it."

"The more worthless it is, the harder you cling to it," she taunted. "Your kind always does, even at the risk of injuring someone else. You—"

Suddenly she tensed, her eyes fixed on something behind him. Chance whirled about. At the same instant Brewster Rocklin flung the roll of blueprints in his hand at the roan horse's head. The bronc shied violently just as a rifle cracked in the brush. Chance heard the whine of lead, and then his own six-shooter was in his hand. He had no chance to fire. Again Rocklin jumped, and again the roan shied.

Rocklin shouted at the man in the brush: "Put down that rifle, Jenkins! And you, Chance—hold on! I'll go with you!"

For as much time as a man might hold his breath no one moved. Then the respect which Brewster Rocklin commanded among the settlers swung the balance. Reluctantly the bushwhacker laid aside his gun and stepped into the open.

Chance's taut nerves relaxed. His eyes found Rocklin's and he said in deep bewilderment: "You saved my life. Why?"

"Your men would have come down here shooting if you'd been killed, wouldn't they?"

"Maybe. But you'd have been warned and ready."

"I'd rather solve this without bloodshed."

Still Chance scowled at him, trying to plumb his motives. "You've only a fifty-fifty chance of living now, depending on your brother."

Rocklin smiled bleakly. "I fancy I know Del."

He would say no more, but went to his horse and mounted. In silence they left the settlement and rode through the purple shadows of evening to the narrow red mouth of Canyon Rojo. Fenster had stationed a lookout there, and the fellow was hinge-jawed with questions when he saw the prisoner. Chance silenced him with a curt word and asked where the rest of the men were.

The guard swallowed. "J-just around the bend yonder."

Chance's lips tightened. "I told you to go to the head of the canyon!"

"Fenster thought—"

"Fenster thinks too much," Chance cut in softly and spurred with the frail, clumsy-riding Brewster Rocklin around the wall of rock into the camp.

THE entire group came to their feet, ripe for trouble. Looking at their sullen faces, Chance knew that Fenster had been sowing the seeds of discontent. The lieutenant himself stood in front of the men, his thick hands set truculently on his hips.

Chance let his mocking glance pass from man to man. Most of them flushed and dodged his eyes. In the gentle voice they knew meant danger, he drawled:

"Why aren't you at the cave?"

Fenster's big shoulders hunched forward. "We'd be in a fine pickle," he sneered, "if the posse surrounded us in a cave and starved us to death!"

At another time Chance might have explained his reason for selecting that cave. He knew the place, having holed up there alone once before. But now, faced with open rebellion, he would not unbend.

Instead he said: "In plain language, you don't believe I know what I'm doing?"

"That's puttin' it mild!" Fenster growled and waited for Chance to make something of it.

The outlaw drew a long breath. His whole temptation was to step from the saddle and have it out with the man then and there. But whipping Fenster physically would not mend the harm the rebel had done or win back the trust of the band. The only sure way was to give Fenster enough rope to hang himself. Chance sat motionless, not speaking. Fenster began to grin, certain now that he held the upper hand.

His green eyes swung to Brewster Rocklin. "If you're not off your nut,

why did you bring that broke-down wreck up here?"

"I figured we could use him."

"Him?" Fenster hooted. "Shucks, he can hardly sit a horse! The posse's gettin' closer every minute, an' that's what you offer us to save our skins! Is that the sort o' brain work we want for this outfit?"

An angry growl rose from the gang. Chance shot a look at Rocklin. The engineer was sitting his saddle with utter calmness, as though he were a spectator at some play rather than the center of a growing storm. He must have known he wouldn't live a minute if he proved inconvenient to the crew, yet no trace of fear showed in his expression. Chance felt a surge of admiration that he instantly repressed. Rocklin was a pawn in this game, and had to be used as such.

"Back water!" Chance told his infuriated men. "We can trade this fellow to the posse for our own freedom!"

"Yeah!" Fenster scoffed. "Sheriff Rocklin has spent four years tryin' to capture us. He's bettin' his office an' reputation that he'll make it this trip. The day he gives up all that for one bag o' bones, I'll eat dirt!"

Chance smiled thinly. "Start eating! This bag of bones is Brewster Rocklin, the sheriff's brother!"

The quiet words hit the restless band like a fist, stopping them in their tracks. Chance gave them a moment to digest the statement and then went on:

"When Del Rocklin reaches that colony on the river, he'll be told we're holding his brother as hostage. He'll either deal with us or he'll have no brother!"

INSTANTLY Fenster was forgotten. The relieved men crowded around their leader, joking about how they would receive the sheriff's emissaries. Chance grinned like a master craftsman viewing his work. He'd won again; he still held this crew in the palm of his hand. And then he glanced at Brewster Rocklin, still sitting motionless in the saddle. Weak though the man obviously was, his imperturbable dignity conveyed an impression of inner steel. Chance's brief exuberance gave way to an odd sense of dissatisfaction.

The next moment a clatter of hoofs jerked him about. The lookout who had been stationed at the canyon entrance raced through the gathering darkness.

"The posse!" he gasped. "They're right behind us, loaded for bear!"

Chance swore under his breath, guessing what had happened. Del Rocklin had not gone to the colony. He must have known of the dam his brother was building and realized it would cut off the outlaws' escape. Anticipating that they would retreat into the rough country about Canyon Rojo, he had headed directly after them.

The same thought struck Fenster, and he saw an opportunity to regain his lost prestige. "That cooks your

freak idea!" he shouted hoarsely at Chance. "The sheriff doesn't even know we're holdin' his brother! He'll attack the minute he catches up with us. Then where'll we be!"

He spun toward Brewster Rocklin. "This guy is only in the way! I say hang him to a tree over the trail! Findin' him there may slow the posse enough for us to slip clear!"

His hand started toward his rope. It never got there. Chance spurred his roan against Fenster's horse so hard that the animal nearly went over. In a voice gone dead flat he said:

"I'll hang you first, Fenster! Brewster Rocklin isn't to be harmed unless I give the word!"

The look on his face would have stopped a braver man than Webb Fenster. The lieutenant's hand fell back to his side, but his eyes stayed savage. He turned toward the fear-ridden crew.

"It's like I told you!" he fumed. "Chance can't do a thing but bluff. Now his hand's called an' he goes soft!"

Chance grinned. "And you're so tough you make speeches while the posse closes in. You'd better move fast, Fenster. I'll handle the sheriff."

"How?"

"I'll wait here for him and tell him what the set-up is. Or would you rather do it?"

Fenster gulped and shot a nervous glance down the dark canyon. "You blasted fool! If Del Rocklin gets his hands on you, he'll never turn you loose!"

"I reckon that'd suit you," Chance said dryly. "But don't make the mistake of counting on my not coming back!"

He let the warning sink in and turned to Brewster. "Easy does it, ditch digger. You'll have to go to the cave with the boys, but they won't hurt you now."

The engineer smiled. "There's nothing they can do that would hurt me," he said and reined his horse away.

Chance frowned in perplexity, then waved the band on. As they loped out of sight with their prisoner, he took up his position on the hillside. The minutes dragged. He shifted his cramped legs and felt the muscles tighten in his belly.

Down canyon a hoof clicked on stone. Peering through the starlight, Chance made out several dark forms, widely spaced as they slipped through the junipers. They outnumbered the outlaw gang two to one, and the way they moved showed that they hoped the bandits would try to make a stand, even in ambush. A sliver of doubt shook Bob Chance. No lobo wolf smelling blood was more relentless on the trail that Del Rocklin was tonight.

Steeling himself, he shouted: "Rocklin! I want to talk to you!"

A RIPPLE ran through the posse. Almost magically they melted out of sight behind trees and boulders, and everything was quiet. Then the sheriff's deep voice boomed: "Who is it?"

"Bob Chance! And you'd better listen to me!"

"Not interested. You're washed up and you know it!"

"I don't think so. We're holding your brother prisoner, Rocklin. If you're not out of this canyon by morning, he'll be dead!"

Silence followed. A twig snapped and Chance knew that some of the posse were slipping up the canyon to cut off his escape. Rocklin's voice, when he finally answered, sounded old and tired.

"You're surrounded, Chance."

"I figured I would be."

"And still you gambled your neck against Brewster's life?"

"I've bucked worse odds."

"Chance's chance!" Rocklin said heavily, and the outlaw could almost see the implacable set of the lawman's body. "This time you lose. It's no deal!"

Chance let out his breath. Oddly he felt no disappointment. He had risked too many gambles in his time, knowing that sooner or later someone

else would hold the high cards. And now the moment had come. To Del Rocklin duty was above all else.

Nonetheless the outlaw could not resist calling: "What do you reckon your brother will say when he hears this?"

The sheriff's answer was so taut and low Chance could scarcely hear it. "Brewster knows me. He knows I've got to play square with my job and my conscience."

"Yes," Chance said softly to himself. Brewster Rocklin did know it. And suddenly the bandit understood the engineer's calm resignation. He had submitted to capture with full knowledge that it would end in his death. And he had done it to turn the gang and their guns away from the colony down on the river. Of course nothing could hurt him now. He had willingly given up all hope when he put himself into Bob Chance's hands.

A rustle of branches roused the outlaw. Possemen were creeping up on him, gauging his position from the sound of his voice. For a second he hesitated, feeling for the first time in his life the leaden weariness that prompts men to turn in their hands and quit. Then he shook himself alive. "Wake up!" he thought. "You're not caught yet!"

He stepped to the ground and tied his bridle reins over the saddlehorn. Pointing the roan up canyon he jabbed it in the flank with his thumb. The startled bronc lunged forward. Someone shouted, "There he goes!" and a pistol yammered. The horse squealed in pain. Veering, it plunged between the trees in frenzied effort to escape. Hoofs thundered as half the posse raced in pursuit.

The noise covered Chance's sprint across talus rock to the canyon wall. There he halted, stripped off chaps and spurred boots. To free his hands, he tied the boots together by the ear flaps with a piece of pigging string from his pocket, and hung them around his neck. He could move soundlessly

now. Catlike, he padded in stocking feet along the base of the cliff, wincing as the flint-edged stones bruised his toes.

Ahead of him a dark shadow showed where a chimneylike gully split the cliff, offering a climable route to the rim. He started into it, then paused. That opening was as plain to the posse as it was to him. If the lawmen were smart, they would have sent one of their number to watch it.

CHANCE held his breath. No sound reached his ears, but the thin voice of danger still whispered in his brain. Yet he dared not wait for the unseen watcher, if there was one, to reveal his presence. The empty-saddled roan would soon be overhauled and the outlaw's ruse discovered.

"Lady Luck," Chance murmured, "I need you now!"

He picked up a pebble and tossed it so that it fell with a rattle on the approach to the other side of the opening. Just around the corner of the gully wall, not three feet away, a boot scraped faintly. But the man was no fool. He stayed where he was.

Down below a gun boomed and a heavy body crashed in the brush. Someone yelled triumphantly: "I nailed the horse!"

Chance fought back panic while sheer desperation flashed one fantastic plan after another through his mind. All at once he grinned and took the linked boots from around his neck. Gripping one of them by the toe and letting the other dangle, he gauged the height of a blow that would catch a squatting man in the head or a standing man in the belly. Drawing his gun with his free hand, he swung the boot around the rock with all his might.

There was a soft thud, a startled grunt. The next instant Chance came plowing around the corner. He had been luckier than he dared hope. The boot heel had larruped the watcher square in the nose. He was clutching his face with one hand and waving his gun drunkenly with the other. He had no time to bring it to bear. Chance's upraised six-shooter barrel arced sharply down. There was another thud and the man pitched forward.

Breathing heavily, Chance bent over him. There was nothing wrong with the fellow that a few hours' rest wouldn't cure. The outlaw relaxed. "I had to do it, pardner," he drawled. "There's a job waiting up country."

Grim-faced, he pulled on his boots and began to climb.

THE first gray light of dawn was just beginning to show the gaunt form of the land when Bob Chance limped within sight of his men. The cave lay in porous sandstone on a high, dry bench dividing a pair of impassable gulches that tore through the hills to form Canyon Rojo. Commanding all near approaches and backed by unscalable cliffs, it made a good fort—until hunger and thirst exerted their pressure.

The black mouth of the cave faced the northern gulch. The outlaw crew clustered about it in a tight knot. As Chance emerged from the brush, they swung toward him, fear on every face.

"You!" Fenster exclaimed. "We heard shootin'. We thought—"

"That I was dead?" Chance asked and shook his head. "No. You're not boss of this bunch yet."

The other glared at him. "If I was, I wouldn't quit my men for a whole night at a time like this. Where the devil's your horse?"

Chance seemed not to hear. In the gray light his haggard cheeks looked ghostly. A livid bruise lined his jaw and his clothes were torn and dirt-stained from crushing tumbles he'd taken on his wild flight through the darkness. But the terrible weariness that gripped him had no reflection in his eyes. Glass-bright, they measured the crew with the unshakable steadiness of a man who knows exactly what he means to do.

"Where's Brewster Rocklin?"

Ben Ryba jerked his thumb toward the cave. "Tied up in there."

Chance hesitated. Then his chin lifted and he stepped forward.

Fenster started to follow. Chance stopped. Without looking around he said: "What I have to do to Rocklin, I'll do alone."

The men glanced uneasily at each other. They had never heard their chief speak in quite that tone before. Frowning, Fenster paused and Chance went on by himself.

A minute limped by and then another. The men edged closer to the mouth of the cave. They heard an indistinguishable murmur of voices and a grating noise as though a heavy weight were being dragged across stone. Then there was silence.

Fenster ground out an oath and moved jerkily forward. But before he reached the entrance, Chance emerged. A strange smile was on the outlaw leader's lips. He leaned his back against the cliff wall and eyed his lieutenant without speaking.

Fenster backed off a step and wiped his palms on his trousers. Suddenly he shouted: "What in blazes is the matter with you?"

Chance didn't answer.

"Quit grinning like an idiot!" Fenster shrilled. "What are we gonna do? We can't stay here! Did you talk to the sheriff?"

"Yes."

"Did he . . . deal?"

"No."

The whole band stiffened. Every glance flashed toward the canyon. Even as they looked several horsemen appeared through the junipers. Pock-marked, turkey-necked Ike Hollon whispered: "They're comin'!"

FOR a moment the paralysis of fear held the men. Watching them, Chance seemed to hear again the words of the girl at the settlement: *The more worthless your hides are, the harder you cling to them!*

Then Fenster came to life with a lurid curse. "Maybe that sheriff thinks we haven't nerve enough to kill his brother. Well, I'll show him!"

He yanked his six-gun from the holster, thumbed back the hammer, and swung toward the cave.

Chance said quietly: "You're too late."

Fenster glowered at him. "You mean you already—"

"That cave has a hidden back entrance opening into the south gulch yonder," Chance explained. "I used it once before to slip away from a posse, and I kept it hidden for future reference. It was simple enough to roll rocks out of the way and show it to Rocklin."

The men stared at him in blank incredulity. "You turned him loose!" Ben Ryba breathed. "Why, chief? Why?"

Chance grinned crookedly. "You wouldn't understand."

Fury twisted Fenster's mouth. "I know why!" he yelled. "He sold us out! But he needn't think the law'll grant him leniency for this! We'll settle him first!"

His drawn gun glinted as he whipped it up. Chance leaped sideways, knowing as he did it that he was seconds too late. Fenster's Colt blasted. Pain lanced Chance's shoulder, drove white-hot sparks through his brain. He stumbled and reeled against the cliff, fighting to keep his feet under him. The smooth feel of his gun butt steadied him. He pulled the trigger just as Fenster's second shot hammered him in the chest. He saw the round black hole that appeared in the man's forehead, saw the slackness of death on Fenster's face.

Another shot tore into him from the side. Twisting drunkenly, he caught a blurred glimpse of Ike Hollon shooting with a senseless spasm of panic. Chance sent two slugs crashing back. Then abruptly his hands turned to great, weighted knobs he could not move. His legs crumpled and he felt himself sinking into a black abyss.

Vaguely he was aware of a rush of feet as the gang sprang for their horses in a frenzied effort to elude the posse's closing cordon. A gentle hand touched his bullet-riddled body. With an effort he opened his eyes and saw Ben Ryba's olive face.

"I can pack you, chief."

Chance shook his head.

Torment showed in the little man's eyes, and he blurted: "You knew they'd kill you—"

A ghost of a smile touched Chance's lips. "It was Rocklin's life . . . or mine. And there was . . . work for him to do. This is all I had left."

His eyes closed again and Ryba thought him dead. Then Chance's lids fluttered again and a chuckle moved his throat. "But I bet . . . Del Rocklin!" he whispered.

"How do you mean?"

"He wanted to get me himself, but now. . . . Make tracks, Ben . . . through the cave . . . maybe you can—"

The dying outlaw's voice trailed away, and the last sounds he heard were Ryba's footsteps fading into unfathomable distance.

THE END

FIRE ON A HILL

by Hapsburg Liebe

The outlaw's burst of laughter was crowing and wicked. "Throw that lariat over here and lay down with your face to the floor," he said.

"REPORT to the sheriff on the first of every month for a year," the trial judge had told Bill Fanning, and had let him go free with a clean slate. There hadn't been much more than wild-cat stuff against the slim, blond youth. He'd ridden the owlhoot only for the excitement of it and, with the one exception of Bull Tate, the particular bunch of owlhooters Bill had run with wasn't so bad.

Bill Fanning was in town to make his first report to the sheriff. He left his rawboned buckskin cow pony standing before the sheriff's office, and stepped jauntily across the threshold. The lean, grizzled lawman sat with his gaze riveted upon a new reward notice on his desk.

"Hi, sheriff! I'm here to report. What you want me to tell you?"

Tom Allison swung around in his swivel chair. His voice had a business-like ring. "Where you been hanging out, Fanning, and what you been doing?"

"Well, I sold my two ivory-handled guns and my fine dappled-bay hoss. I raked and I scraped until I had over three hundred dollars, then I bought me some yearlin' cattle and settled with 'em on a little wild range in a basin back in the west hills. I'd found an old shanty there to live in. Now I

have the start of a cow outfit. I'm havin' to starve some to keep goin', but that's plumb all right."

Through a window the officer could see the higher stone ramparts of those hills. He looked back to the new reward poster on his desk.

"You seen Bull Tate lately, son?"

"No."

"He's sure cut himself a swath in the last two weeks," Sheriff Allison said. "Most other places has got too hot for him, and he might be a more or less close neighbor of yours about now—hiding out in your hills, I mean. Two thousand dollars reward for him. You could use half of that money, couldn't you?"

Bill Fanning shook his head. "I don't cotton much to that sorta money, sheriff."

"Promised to be a law-abiding citizen, didn't you?"

"I sure did, and I'm keepin' my promise so hard that I'm not even wearin' a gun; only gun I own now is an old carbine out at my shanty. Sheriff, I ain't afraid o' Bull Tate. Fact is, I never did like him a bit, but I'm not turnin' him in if I can get out of it. Nailin' Bull Tate is your job, not mine."

Tom Allison shrugged. "Yeah, I know that. I thought it'd be a help if you could manage to let me know in case you saw him there in the hills somewheres. For instance, you could build a fire on a hilltop, which I could easy see from here. Then I'd be right out. You think that over, son, will you?"

Bill only grinned. "I'll see you again a month from today, sheriff," he said and hurried to the street.

He went to a store and filled his grub sack with cheap, hard rations, got back into his saddle and rode off westward.

THE sun was low when Bill followed a creek into his grassy basin. He caught his breath as he turned a bend in the trail and saw the old shanty that had come to be home to him. Standing near it was a fine dappled-bay horse, the one Bill had sold a month before. At sight of him the animal nickered. Then a thickly built giant of a man, who wore a heavy six-shooter leathered under either hip, appeared in the shanty doorway. Bull Tate!

Bill Fanning's voice carried an edge. "Hi, Bull. Fixin' to make yourself comf'table here, are you? Where'd you get that bay?"

"Hi, yah, young un." Tate's voice was flinty. "I make myself comf'table where I please. So you went and flopped over to the law side."

"Yeah," Bill said, "before it was too late. I had that much good sense. I'll maybe be accused o' stealin' that hoss back, if he's seen around here. Where'd you get him?"

"Astin' me a question like that!" big Bull laughed. Then, as though he were talking to himself, he said: "Why, the little devil ain't even wearin' a gun, and him the best shot I ever seen!"

"If I need to do any shootin', Bull," Fanning said, "I reckon I can dig up somethin' to shoot with."

Again Tate laughed. "Yeah." I seen it inside the shanty here; single-shot, big-bore carbine so old it rattles when you pick it up, and one lone ca'tridge. Me, I'm smack outta ca'tridges, and the one for that rattle-trap carbine don't fit my guns. Sorta had a notion of sendin' you to town after some. But I'm afeared to trust you anywheres clost to a sheriff. You got grub in that sack, ain't you? I've not et a bite for two days."

It wasn't in little Bill Fanning to refuse any hungry man something to eat. After he and Tate had off-saddled, they turned pony and bay into a small pole corral, then went into the shanty. Fanning began frying supper for two.

Little Bill made talk. "I notice the one ca'tridge for that carbine ain't on the shelf there where I left it. Did you put it in the gun?"

"Yeah," Tate said, "to see if it

would fit. Danged ca'tridge is nearly four inches long."

"That old weapon," Fanning said, "is built light and kicks like a gov'ment mule. You take my advice, Bull, and don't try to shoot it."

"Humph! What *you* doin' with it, then?"

"Found it here and that single ca'tridge when I took over. Been too hard up to buy any more ammunition." Fanning turned a flapjack, and a frown gathered on his lean young countenance. "You stole that dappled hoss, Bull."

The big outlaw didn't deny it. Little Bill went on talking:

"You sorta lorded it over me, big feller, back there on the owlhoot. Treated me purty mean all along. But that ain't the reason you cain't stay here. I'm not harborin' anybody with a dead-or-alive price on his head, on account it ain't in line with my promise to the judge who tried me. That's why you cain't stay here. I'm puttin' my cards face up on the table, big feller, and I want you to be sure to get this:

"In town today, Sheriff Tom Allison wanted me to build a fire on a hill as a signal to him, if I saw you hidden out here anywheres. Mighta been a thousand dollars in it for me, but I turned it down. You can pay me back by skinnin' out for some other place before the sun comes up tomorrow. Will you do it, Bull?"

The giant's pale eyes turned wolf-mean. He had planned to use this shanty as a snug refuge, eating from Fanning's grub pile until the law's hue and cry died off.

WHEN the food was ready Tate helped himself to half of it, and a good portion of little Bill's besides. The meal over, the unbidden guest made no move toward helping in the clean-up. The sun was down when Bill finished the chores. He dropped to an empty box and turned his gaze upon Tate, who was sitting on the one built-in bunk.

"I'm a heap bothered," Fanning muttered. "Nobody likes a blabbermouth, and I hate the idea of turnin' anybody in. Still, I got to keep my promise to that judge to be a law-abidin' citizen, y'know. Maybe you better hightail away from here now."

Big Bull Tate's eyes turned meaner. Fanning had beaten him shooting for money once, and he'd had a grudge against him ever since.

"What'll you do if I don't choose to go?" the outlaw said.

"I'll even give you what grub I got here," Bill replied.

"What'll you do," Tate repeated in cold defiance, "if I don't choose to go?"

"I might build me a fire on a hill," Fanning said.

The outlaw's eyes narrowed and became murderous. The slim youth could see their hard light, even in the now shadowy interior of the old shanty. He knew that a showdown was at hand. No man could get as mad as Tate was, and not do something about it.

They were an even distance from the carbine, the one weapon there that held a loaded cartridge. Ordinarily, Bill was quick on his feet, but it was the outlaw's hamlike fist that closed over the short-barreled rifle first.

"No, you don't!" Tate snarled, shoving Fanning away. He leveled the carbine at his hip and jerked the hammer back. Fanning stood now as though frozen. There was, however, no vestige of fear in his lean countenance.

"All right, I'll leave here now," the outlaw sneered. "Full moon will soon be up, and travelin'll be easy. It'll be so easy that I'm takin' your yearlin's along, your pony, too, and your grub sack. By the middle o' tomorrow, I'll be where I can sell your pony and yearlin's with no questions ast. How you like them 'taters, smart young un?"

Bill swallowed in spite of himself. "After I wouldn't help the sheriff nail you, and fed you, with me havin' to

half starve to get along—you'd do that?"

"You sure said it!"

"What you reckon I'll be doin' while you're ridin' off with my stuff?" Bill asked.

Tate leered. "You'll be layin' here tied up hand and foot, that's what you'll be doin'. That old rawhide lariat hangin' on the wall there behind you. Take it down and throw it to me. Hustle!"

Again Bill swallowed. "I'm tellin' you not to do this, Bull!"

The outlaw's short burst of laughter was crowing and wicked. "Oh, so you'll make a fire on a hill to signal the sheriff to come and get me. Like fun you will. Throw that lariat over here, then lay down with your face to the floor!"

"Well," little Bill said, shrugging, "I've done my best. I just reckon there ain't no other way. Hoss stealin', cow stealin', robbery, murder —you've got only yourself to blame for whatever comes to you, Bull."

Stepping to the lariat, Bill lifted it down with one hand. With the other, he snatched an iron skillet off the rusty old stove and threw it straight at the outlaw. The short rifle roared as he had expected it would, and the shanty filled with billowing blue smoke.

TEN minutes later Bull Tate tried to sit up and couldn't, mainly because his wrists were securely bound in the small of his back and his ankles as securely bound to his wrists; the outlaw was very neatly hogtied. He blinked into the yellow light of a lantern that hung on a bunk post, then his mean eyes focused on the grinning face of little Bill Fanning.

"What—" Tate yammered. "What d'you do to me, anyhow?"

"Nothin'," Fanning said. "Nothin' a-tall. You done it yourself, in spite o' me tellin' you not to. Don't think you'll die, though. Not until you're hung, that is."

Bill Tate swore. He struggled with all his strength to unloose his bonds, but it was useless. Blood from a forehead wound trickled into one eye. Cold perspiration broke out on his heavy, reddish face, and stung in a wound high on his cheek.

Little Bill started for the doorway, stopped and turned. "I'll be back in no time, Bull. Well, I reckon it's safe to tell you now. I didn't tell you before because I figured somethin' like this would happen. You know how even snow in the barrel of a gun will bust it, don't you? Well, it wasn't snow in this one. It was a cleaning rag I'd got wedged tight in the carbine's barrel. So when you pulled the trigger she blowed up on you the way I thought she would!"

Then, Bill hurried into the outside dusk. The outlaw roared, "Wait! Where in Hades you goin'?"

"Oh, nowheres much," Bill threw back. "I'm only goin' up on a hill to build a fire."

THE END

Missing Department

MURPHY, JOSEPH F.—Please come home as everything is taken care of.—Miss Catherine Murphy, 1721 Greene Ave., Brooklyn, New York.

McCARTHY, GRACE DE ROCK—She is my sister and was about eighteen years old when last I heard from her. Lived in Hornell, New York, then moved to Rochester, New York, where she and her husband ran a restaurant. When last heard of they had gone to Detroit, Michigan. She has dark hair, gray eyes and a dark complexion. Her father is in poor health and would like to hear from her. —Mrs. Orville R. Burroughs, R. F. D., Boliver, New York.

KERNS, JOHN or JOHN EDWARDS—My son left home in September, 1934, and the last I heard from him was six years ago, when he was in the vicinity of New York. About six feet tall, around 170 pounds, with gray-blue eyes, brown hair and a pockmark on his forehead.—Mr. William Kerns, Box 227, Southwest, Pennsylvania.

BUTLER, LOYD THOMAS and SARA—In 1918 I adopted a boy from the Child's Rescue Home here. This boy's brother, Loyd Thomas, and his sister, Sara, were left in the home and later sent to the Nashville Orphanage. I had them traced to the Nashville Industrial School and found out that Sara had married. I have not been able to contact them and both their brother and I would like to find them. Loyd Thomas is about thirty now. He had black hair, black eyes and a dark complexion. Both the children were born in Johnson City, Tennessee.—Mrs. Dave Denny, 100 East Walnut Street, Johnson City, Tennessee.

CRAVER, FREEMAN—Haven't heard from him in forty-five years. Last heard of in Texas. Anyone knowing his whereabouts please write his sister.—Mrs. Arilla Craver Smith, Box 12, Elmore, Minnesota.

McCUNE, MONTIE—His mother wishes to hear from him. He is about forty-six, tall, dark, with curly hair and weighing around 160 pounds. Last heard of about three years ago, when he was working in Indianapolis, Indiana, as a plumber and welder.—Mrs. Lenna McCune, 920 Sixth Avenue, Rock Island, Illinois.

HALL, GEORGE RICHARD—He is my father. He is fifty-eight years old, about five feet nine inches tall and may have white hair. When last I heard from him in 1940 he was living on West 11th or West 12th Street, Little Rock, Arkansas. He was born in Fredonia, Kansas, and married my mother, Anna Irene McKaig, who was born in Tuscola, Illinois. They moved to Texas around 1917. Any information regarding my father will be appreciated.—Jack Richard Hall, 3869 South Van Ness Ave., Los Angeles, California.

GEE (or McGEE), VIRGIL—He is my half-brother, and I would like to get in touch with him. When last heard of he lived with his uncle at Iberia, Missouri. He is about forty years of age. Our mother lived at Monteer, Missouri, when we were children. Anyone knowing my brother's whereabouts please notify me.—Mrs. William Thoms, R. R. 1, Box 23, Belle, Missouri.

ROBERT NEAL and JOHN CASON—They are our husbands. They have been missing about four months. Robert is twenty, with black hair, green eyes and a fair complexion. John is thirty, with brown eyes, brown hair and a fair complexion. They went fishing together and we haven't seen them since. Please notify us if their whereabouts is known.—Mrs. Irene Neal, Calloway Street, and Mrs. Alice Cason, 1104 Calloway Street, Marshall, Texas.

● There is no charge for the insertion of requests for information concerning missing relatives or friends.

Do not send in a request unless you are willing to have your own name and address published with it. We will not print "blind" notices. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to anyone who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, 11, N. Y.

The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

There are some of us in this world who are destined to stay quietly at our desks while our immediate associates trek off to foreign and fascinating places. They don't have to have a reason for going—they just go. Take, for instance, the case of George W. Chambers, whose letter appears below. George found an opal forty years ago and he has been traveling every since. There is no doubt that he can tell many interesting tales about those far-off spots which have lured him on for so long and he rashly promises to answer all letters received. We're sure they'll make good reading.

Dear Miss Rivers:

Will you take an old prospector, adventurer and rock collector into the Hollow Tree? Forty years ago I found an opal—a great, fiery stone—which fascinated me and made me a rock crank. Since then every nickel I get hold of has gone into trips to find new and beautiful mineral specimens. I have traveled the world over—Burma, Ceylon, Mexico, Africa—and I have gotten nothing but rocks—and fun! I am sixty-six years old and am still looking for new gem fields. Pen Pals, if there is a beautiful mineral specimen mined near your home anywhere in the world, let's trade. I would like to hear from everyone. I have read the Hollow Tree for years and wondered why I have never seen any rock collectors among your writers.—George W. Chambers, 2667 E. Colorado Street, E. Pasadena, California

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Here's one from a tall girl—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I hope there is room for my letters in the Hollow Tree. I would like Pen Pals of any age, male or female. I am in my teens and am rather tall. I have blue eyes and blond hair. My favorite sports are riding and roller skating.—Lila Pede, Max, North Dakota

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A lonely, California bachelor—

Dear Miss Rivers:

May a lonely bachelor of thirty-three enter a plea for Pen Pals in the Hollow Tree? I'd like to hear from members of the fair sex, between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-three. The only hobbies I have are dancing and auto racing, but I like to write letters and will trade snapshots with all who write.—R. E. Whitney, Division of Forestry, San Luis Obispo, California

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Erla feels neglected—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been enjoying Western Story almost since I was old enough to read. I always read the Hollow Tree and have tried to get Pen Pals, but it seems as if nobody wants to hear from a thirteen-year-old girl. I have dark-brown hair and brown eyes. I'm not much to look at but am sort of popular with our gang. I like to dance, fish, ride horseback, play ball and wrestle. I collect picture post cards. Please, Pen Pals, write to a lonesome girl in the country and I promise to answer all letters and exchange photos.—Erla Jean Eby, c/o E. P. Crampton, Route No. 4, Mitchell, South Dakota

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This redhead likes to hunt—

Dear Miss Rivers:

This is my first try at getting into the Hollow Tree and I wish very much that you would print my plea. I am fourteen years old, five feet eight inches tall and have red hair and gray eyes. My hobby is squirrel hunting. I will answer all letters.—Chester H. Wilson, Lewisburg, Kentucky

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Blond Canadian girl likes sports—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely Canadian girl of sixteen. I am five feet five and one half inches and have gray eyes and blond hair. I like all kinds of sports. I'd enjoy hearing from girls and boys from sixteen to twenty-five from all over the world.—Elizabeth Bartlett, c/o Fred Mosher, Rock Island, Quebec, Canada

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Elva's from Virginia—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Could you find a space for a blue-eyed brownette of sixteen? I love dancing, horseback riding and almost any kind of outdoor sport. Boys and girls, will you drop me a few lines? I promise to answer all letters and to exchange snapshots.—Elva M. Grow, Route No. 4, Lexington, Virginia

Lots of letters for this Canadian student—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Will you please print this plea so a lonely lad of twenty years will have some Pen Pals? I am a student taking a classical course and am fond of all sports, especially baseball and swimming. My favorite pastime is writing letters and I would like to hear from girls from all over the country. I prefer Pals between sixteen and twenty-two. I have blue eyes and blond hair. I shall try to answer all letters.—Marcel Marchand, 1059 Ste. Marguerite Street, Three Rivers, Quebec, Canada

Small-town girl is lonely—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely girl in a small town and would like to be a member of the Hollow Tree. My favorite pastimes are dancing and roller skating. I promise to answer anyone who writes and will try to make my replies interesting. I will also exchange snapshots.—La Vonn Graham, Titonka, Iowa

Virgina wants to hear from service men—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Would you please print my plea for Pen Pals? I would like to hear from men in the service. I promise to answer all letters and exchange snapshots. I am twenty-three years old, weigh one hundred and thirty pounds and have brown hair and blue eyes. Please fill up my mailbox. —Virginia Gadacz, 2852 North Hamlin Ave., Chicago, Illinois

Iola is welcome to the Hollow Tree—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I've just read the Hollow Tree for the first time and I find it very interesting. I want to enter my plea for Pen Pals over fifteen years of age. I am sixteen years old, a brunette with brown eyes. I work in an office here. I love dancing and collecting popular songs. I also enjoy hiking and fishing.—Iola Martin, 151 George Street, Anna, Illinois

Big cities can be fun, too—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely country girl just having a taste of working in a big city. I would like to hear from Pen Pals from all over the world, especially between the ages of twenty-three and thirty. I am twenty-four years old, five feet four inches tall, weigh one hundred and twenty-five pounds and have brown hair and eyes. I like all spors, but dancing and horseback are my favorites. I'll be waiting to hear from all of you.—Lela F. Nelson, Route 1, Box 31, Remus, Michigan

Lots of letters to this shut-in—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I'm a fellow twenty-nine who had an aircraft accident in 1940. I've had a fractured leg for all this time, and because of an infection I expect to be incapacitated for at least one more year. A fellow can get very lonely in three years, and I would appreciate having someone to corespond with. I've served two hitches in the V. S. M. C. and have traveled extensively. Due to my temporary handicap I shall now have to do my traveling via mail. I promise to answer every letter received.—Jack Riley, 1730 N. Latrobe Ave., Chicago, Illinois

Oscar raises poultry—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a great reader of the Western magazines and have not missed a book in five years. I would like to join the Hollow Tree if you can find some space for me. I am an electrician, doing defense work. My hobby is raising poultry. I'm forty years old, six feet two inches tall and weigh two hundred pounds. I like baseball and dancing. Will exchange photos and tell you more about myself when you write.—Oscar J. Koppenhafer, P. O. Box 61, Milan, Ohio

Here's one for the checker fans—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a Southern gentleman, thirty-five years old. Because of an accident I will be hospitalized for many months, and as I am a stranger in this State, I am somewhat lonely. Reading and checker playing are now my favorite pastimes. Letters from anyone will be gladly answered.—Louis Jackson, Metropolitan Hospital, Welfare Island, W. P. 3 South, New York City

Bowling her hobby—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like to have this plea printed in the Hollow Tree. I am twenty-nine years old and married. I have blond hair, blue eyes and am five feet seven inches. My hobbies are collecting post cards and writing letters. I also like sports, bowling being my favorite. I would like to hear from Pen Pals, married or single, between the ages of twenty-nine and thirty-five. I will answer all letters received.—Anna Dion, 55 Katherine Street, Westfield, Massachusetts

Here's a composer from Rhode Island—

Dear Miss Rivers:

May I come in and join the Hollow Tree? I am sixteen years old, have brown hair and blue eyes and am five feet four inches tall. I hail from the smallest State in the Union, Rhode Island. My favorite hobby is composing songs and poems. Letter writing is also one of my chief interests. Sports appeal to me very much, and I especially enjoy roller skating and ice skating. I'm waiting for many answers.—Grace Duggan, 343 Sayles Ave., Pawtucket, Rhode Island

Farm lads are always welcome—

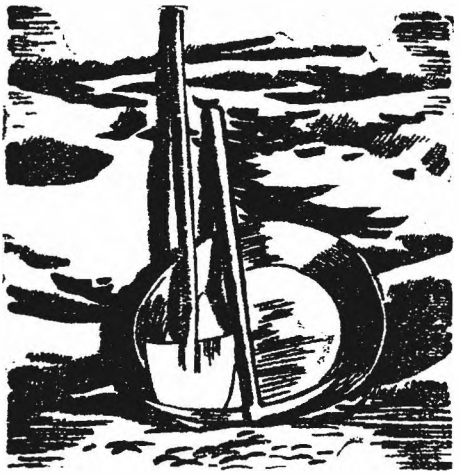
Dear Miss Rivers:

This is the first time I have ever thought of placing my name in the Pen Pal column. I read Western Story in my spare time. I live on a large farm and love all sports. I am nineteen years old, have brown hair, blue eyes and am five feet six inches tall. My weight is one hundred and fifty pounds. I will answer all letters and exchange snapshots with all who write.—Jim Tom Norman, Route 2, Wynne Wood, Oklahoma

Maxine likes cowboys and Indians—

Dear Miss Rivers:

As I am a reader of Western Story I would be very well pleased to have my letter published in the Hollow Tree. I am a girl of fifteen, hailing from the Hoosier State. I am a blonde with blue eyes, five feet one inch, weighing eighty pounds. Would especially like to hear from cowboys and Indians, but all are welcome. So come on and sling a little ink my way.—Maxine Hall, Route 2, Bedford, Indiana



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

HERE is a chance for patriotic readers of this department to be of real service to their country, and perhaps help themselves to a nice bit of change as well. Prospectors, mineral collectors and amateur rock hounds can all take part in the hunt for a special kind of quartz that is urgently needed right now by the government for vital work in winning the war.

Those who already have suitable quartz crystals in their collections have been requested to sell them to Uncle Sam for emergency war purposes. It should be emphasized, however, that plain old chunks of quartz, one of the country's common rock-making minerals, and a frequent vein material in mining country are of no value in this instance. What *are* needed, and they can be found only by dint of diligent search, are quartz crystals of such variety as are obsolutely clear and colorless.

The crystals are needed by the armed forces of the United States for use in vital communications equipment. These large, clear quartz crystals are sometimes found lining cavities in large rocks, and in the dirt and gravel nearby, or in adjacent stream beds. Quartz crystals along this order are found at times in the vicinity of Hot Springs, Arkansas—to name just one area—and out there clusters of the crystals used to be sold as souvenirs at roadside stands. Specially fine crystal specimens or groups of crystals were often purchased by mineral collectors.

The crystals the government needs for radio communication work, however must be separate individual crystals; not the more common clusters or grainy masses. Each separate crystal must weigh at least three and a half ounces, and be at least an inch thick and two inches long. This is the smallest size that can be utilized. As a matter of fact, larger sizes, crystals weighing between one and four pounds each, are preferred. Moreover the crystals must be so clear and transparent that a newspaper can be read through them. That is a test that you can easily make yourself. If you can't read a bit of newspaper through the quartz crystal, even though it is at least the minimum size specified, toss it away and try again. The crystal is not "clear" enough for special radio equipment use unless this requirement is met.

On the other hand, it is not considered necessary for the *whole* crystal to be absolutely perfect and flawless, provided sufficiently large portions of it are perfect. In such cases only the perfect parts will be cut out and used. The parts that can be used must, in addition to being clear, be free from all flaws, specks, bubbles and lines on the inside. According to the transmitted requirements, the perfect part of the crystal "must be at least one third of the whole stone."

Uncle Sam is willing to pay his prospectors and rock hounds generously for quartz crystals that meet all the required specifications, about a little under two dollars for the three and a half ounce size, and better than sixty

dollars for a really fine whopper specimen weighing in the neighborhood of twenty pounds. That's certainly a mark for the prospector to shoot at, both from the patriotic and monetary angles.

Quartz occurs in a variety of forms. It is a very hard mineral. In fact it is about the hardest of the common minerals, only topaz, corundum and the diamond being above it on the hardness scale. It will easily scratch glass and for that reason small clear specimens are sometimes mistaken by amateurs for diamonds. The colorless crystals, usually long, elongated six-sided affairs with tapering or sharply pointed ends, are frequently known as rock crystal. Purple or violet-colored crystals are the gem stone called amethyst, the February birthstone. Fine amethyst specimens have been found in this country in North Carolina, Georgia and Virginia.

Rose quartz, that is quartz colored a rose-red or deep-pink is another variety of the mineral, but is usually found in massive chunks in quartz veins, rather than as crystals. Rose quartz has a strong tendency to fade out under direct sunlight, but is nevertheless a beautiful mineral and a favorite with rock hounds who simply like to collect "stones" for their beauty, oddity, or general curiosity and not for their monetary value.

Smoky quartz is a brown-to-black variety of the crystal form, and milky quartz, as the name implies, is a specimen of the mineral that is white to whitish in color and nearly opaque. Other related members of the quartz family that are fairly familiar to most rock enthusiasts are agate, chalcedony and carnelian. The last named is a red chalcedony. Onyx, flint, jasper and the gem stone, opal, are likewise rarer varieties of quartz, while common quartz occurs as an important constituent in many well-known igneous rocks such as granite and forms the chief mineral in the common sedimentary rock called sandstone. Sea sand is largely quartz, finely pulverized, and large amounts of quartz sand are frequently found in stream beds, some of which may be in your locality.

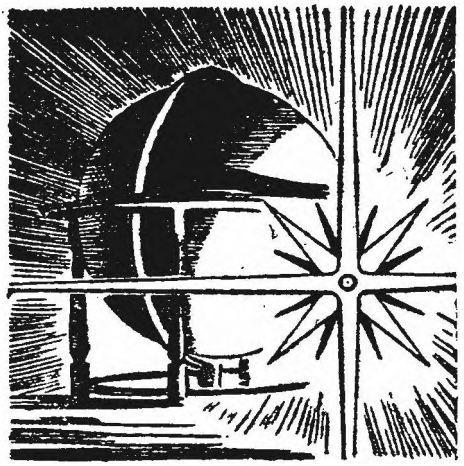
But right now it is those better than three and a half ounce and bigger than two inches long, clear, flaw-free quartz crystals that the government needs for important war work. Finding them will pay off in patriotism, as well as extra money with which to buy another War Bond.

To G. T., Pasadena, California: There are said to be both tin and tungsten deposits at Silver Hill, Spokane County, Washington.

If you have, or find, crystals which meet the specifications listed in this department, write Mr. Thompson, inclosing a self-addressed, stamped return envelope, and he will give you the address of the bureau in Washington, D. C., to which they may be shipped for a final check-up as to their suitability.

• We desire to be of real help to our readers. 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, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, 11, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

To fish, or not to fish? That's the question. At least it is one of the questions a lot of patriotic anglers have been asking us lately. In many cases there are transportation problems to be considered and equipment replacements are not as easily obtained as they are under normal peacetime conditions. But did you ever stop to think that fish rank second only to beef and pork in the total production of fresh proteins, an essential food material? Or that fish contribute importantly to the nation's food supply?

So fish for food as well as for recreation this year. Fish whenever and wherever you can, within wartime restrictions. You need the recreation, and your country needs the food. That's our advice, and it is backed up by no less an authority than the United States Fisheries Co-ordinator. Now more than ever it is not only fun to catch 'em, but it's fun to eat 'em afterward. It's patriotic too.

C. S., writing from La Fayette, Indiana, is keen on the fishing-for-food angle that is so important nowadays. "But," his letter queries, "when I get a string that is more than my family and myself can reasonably eat on the spot, so to speak, I am at a loss how to save or preserve the fish for later home use. Can this be done?"

It sure can, C. S., and take our word for it among a growing number of former "sport" fishermen the old-fashioned practical habits of salting, pickling, canning and smoking fish are coming back into favor. Old-time outdoorsmen, trappers and such never did give up the art when they were situated where they could get themselves enough fish to warrant the practice. Maybe you too can put away some home-preserved fish in your cellar this year, alongside the canned stuff out of your Victory garden. It'll sure help when winter comes along.

To salt fish for keeping, just rub fresh, thoroughly clean fish in fine dry salt and pack in layers, alternating salt and fish. Use about two-thirds fish and one third salt by weight. The fish will form their own brine. Don't disturb the "pack" for a few days. Then if you wish to keep your salt fish several months, repack them in fresh brine and store in a cool place. To freshen them up before cooking, soak them first in a container of water.

Pickled fish are a little more flavorsome. To pickle them use fresh fish previously soaked in brine for a few days, or salt fish freshened by soaking. Cut the fish meat into pieces or cubes. To one cup of fish meats add one half sliced lemon, one half sliced onion, one red pepper and pickling spices. Pack in layers. Cover with vinegar. Cover pickling jar or crock tightly. Store in a cool place. This is a recipe given and recommended by the New York State Conservation Department.

Smoked fish are another means of maintaining a dandy food reserve for the camper, the outdoors man, or the plain householder who now and then goes on fishing jaunts and is lucky

enough to catch more fish than can be comfortably consumed fresh. You don't even need a smokehouse. Use a barrel with the head removed, and take about a foot off the lower end of one of the barrel staves to allow feeding the fire in the small pit which should be dug in the ground below the barrel.

Across the top of the headless barrel set a wire rack, or rods on which to suspend the fish. Gunny sacking or other coarse cloth should be used to cover the top of the barrel during the smoking. First clean and dress your fish and lay them in strong brine—one pound of salt to a gallon of water—overnight. Large fish, such as carp, weighing eight or ten pounds and over, should be cut into steaks. Smaller fish should be slit to the backbone to allow the brine to penetrate them thoroughly.

After the brine-soaking kindle a fire of green hardwoods in the pit under the barrel and get a good bed of wood coals. Best woods to use for smoking are hickory, oak, maple, ash, beech, white birch, et cetera. Never use pine. Next, hold your fire in check with more green wood, corn cobs, wood chips or sawdust and arrange the fish on the rods or wire rack. The fish may be racked or suspended. Then cover the barrel top with the coarse sacking and let the fish smoke for the better part of a day.

Another wrinkle is to shorten the smoking time to two or three hours and then be very sure that your fire is hot enough to cook the fish.

Once the fish are thoroughly smoked, or lightly smoked and cooked, store them in a cool place. Fish so treated can be eaten without further preparation. By removing the meat from the bones, smoked fish can be creamed, made into chowder, or served in other tasty ways which may occur to you, in camp or at home.

To prevent waste of angler-caught food fish through premature spoilage, it is a good idea to observe these three simple rules. 1: Whenever you go fishing take along the materials to insure your catch against heat and drying. 2: Line your creel or basket with grass or ferns and keep same cool and damp. Some make it a practice to wrap freshly caught fish in a damp cloth, or wax paper. 3: Clean and scale your fish as soon as possible after they have been caught. This is both a protection and easier because fish scale more readily when they are fresh and still moist.

To F. M., Little Rock, Arkansas: The Vallecito Reservoir a few miles northeast of Durango, Colorado, is in the mountains in the southwestern corner of the State, and a good spot for the fisherman after rainbow trout. Five-pound rainbows are not uncommon catches there, and a lot of the big babies have been taken with bait no more fancy than simply worms on a hook.

There is also good fly-trout fishing in southern Colorado on the Rio Grande River near South Fork in Rio Grande County. The town of South Fork is on the railroad and quite accessible.

Guns and Gunners

BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

AMERICA has produced many excellent gunmakers, but one of them is outstanding. He long ago earned the title "The Old Master." Now in his eighty-third year, there is still but one Harry M. Pope.

The last time I saw Harry was at the National Rifle Matches at Camp Perry, Ohio, in 1937. A small, withered little man with a wealth of white whiskers, Pope, then seventy-six, was as bright as a dollar. He was quick-witted, energetic, and his eyes twinkled.

It is still a mark of distinction to own any kind of rifle, revolver or pistol barrel with the marking "H. M. Pope" stamped thereon. Pope barrels have, for several generations, been the tops.

When Pope is working on a barrel, you may visit him and watch—but never are you permitted to talk. He'll throw you out promptly. His type of skill requires concentration. When he feels like talking, Harry can roll on by the hour and then you don't want to talk—you prefer to listen.

Pope is a true artist. He is not modest—and doesn't need to be. He knows his barrels are good because he makes them that way. When a man puts his best into a job, and does it every job, why shouldn't he admit it?

Pope doesn't brag, he explains. "Why shouldn't they be good?" he asked me. "I put my heart and soul into every barrel I make. I am making something to *shoot*—something to beat everything else available. When I started making barrels I set certain standards of accuracy and determined to reject anything that didn't meet those standards."

I asked him confidentially how many barrels he had rejected.

"Well, young fellow," came the reply, "I can't recall that I ever rejected a barrel."

I didn't believe this and I told Pope so. He wasn't angry; he could see the logic of my reasoning. He just explained.

"I've always selected the best materials for my barrel steel. I put the necessary amount of time into boring and reaming that barrel. I make my own tools, and I often spend a full week in rifling one barrel."

Modern machine rifling is completed in fifteen minutes; some types in about six minutes. Yet Pope spends a week at it!

The Old Master continued: "I always used the old-fashioned scrape cutter system. The cut I take is the absolute minimum. I've never taken a chip out of a barrel. After many dozens of cuts you see slight discoloration of the cutting oil, but it feels

smooth. When you cut this slowly, and check your work constantly, one groove at a time, there isn't much chance of going wrong. The only thing to worry about is getting all grooves of a uniform depth. Proper gauging takes care of this.

"When a visitor calls, he had better not talk while I am rifling. He can go some place and sit down. I usually get tired after rifling a couple of hours, and I will then quit and come over for a talk.

"Barrels made my way are best because I put the best a living man can put into a piece of mechanism. That's why my barrels cost much more, and why people were willing to pay that price."

Pope, as a small boy, was always interested in rifle shooting—the match variety. He couldn't get what he wanted, so he made his own barrel, designed for his own cartridge. This was in the then-new .25 caliber. Soon Pope was building barrels for his friends, and those barrels were cleaning up at the matches. His private business grew so fast that by the turn of the century, Pope had much more work than any man could handle.

On April 1, 1901, the following letter was sent to his customers and published in the Stevens catalogue:

TO MY FRIENDS AND PATRONS:

My business having increased beyond my capacity, and being anxious to fill my orders more promptly, I have sold all of my tools and special machinery to the J. Stevens Arms & Tool Co. The business will be conducted by them, but I am to remain in full charge of all of the work on high-class rifles and tools on which I have been working in the past, and no such work will leave the factory without my personal inspection and approval.

Thanking you for your past patronage, bespeaking for the new combination your personal interest, I remain,

Yours truly,

H. M. Pope.

Pope introduced many innovations to the shooters of America. His famous rifling used eight wide grooves with narrow lands. It was always rifled on the "gain-twist" system; it started its twist slowly and increased toward the muzzle. Colt used this system before Pope was born, but Pope perfected it.

Many of the finest of match barrels are "lapped" after they are rifled. This consists of a lead plug, cast to fit the grooves, and coated with a very fine abrasive polishing compound. This was run back and forth in the barrel. Pope never lapped a barrel, he told me. He cut so smoothly that it was not necessary.

The Pope false muzzle was also popular for match shooting. This consisted of a separate barrel end, rifled to match the barrel end at the same time. It was held on the muzzle with pins, and was opened slightly to admit a bullet base first.

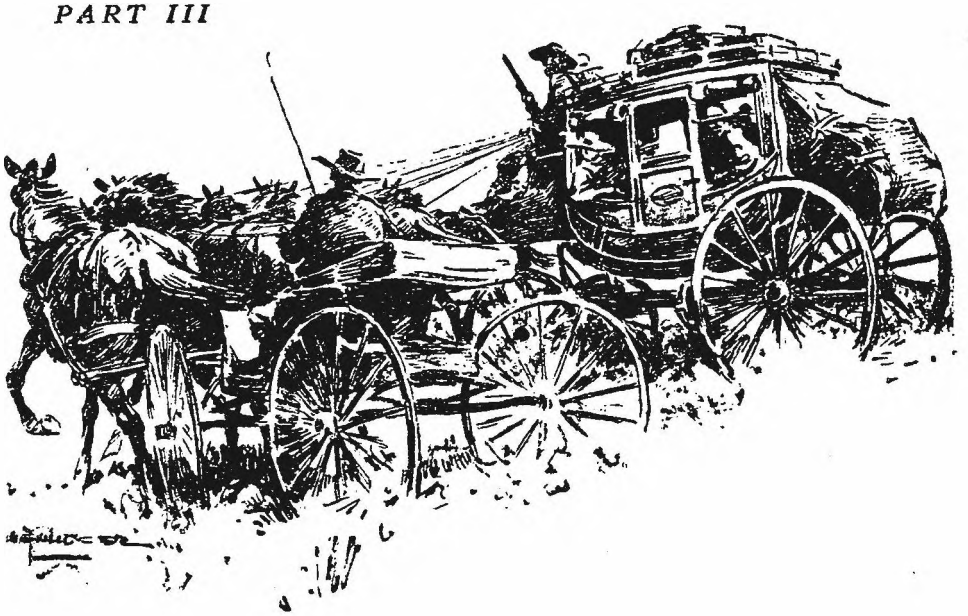
In use, a blank cartridge was loaded and set into the chamber. A perfect bullet was chosen, started base first in the false muzzle with the fingers, and rammed home into the barrel a couple of inches with the "bullet starter," a short ramrod which fitted the nose of the bullet and started it true. A special rod was then used to push the bullet down the barrel against the cartridge case in the chamber. Before firing the false muzzle was pulled off.

An entire book could be written on Harry Pope. Here we can give only a couple of highlights. He is, indeed, "The Old Master."

● This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Phil Sharpe, our firearms editor, is now on active duty as a Captain, Ordnance Department, United States Army. He will continue to answer all letters from readers, either civilians or members of the services, with the least possible delay. Just address your inquiries to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, 11, N. Y. *Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*

STAGECOACH KINGDOM

PART III



by Harry S. Drago

The Story So Far:

Ben Wingate, young and ambitious, decides to buy out Dave Dutton, the owner of a stage line operating between Leavenworth and Denver. Bret Stanton, an adventurous friend of Wingate's, agrees to become a partner in the enterprise, although both receive a shock when a chance meeting with Stacia Colquitt, reveals the fact that her father, ex-Senator Colquitt, known as the "Steamboat King of the Ohio," has bought Dutton out.

Nevertheless Wingate and Stanton go ahead with their plans, mapping out a new and shorter route. While Ben works in Leavenworth organizing the company, Bret handles the Denver end. During this time one of Colquitt's stage stations, at Spirit Lake, is burned by Indians—armed, Wingate discovers, by an unscrupulous trader working for Colquitt himself.

Although Colquitt continues to have trouble with the Indians—who are eventually subdued by the Colorado cavalry—the Leavenworth & Denver, through Bret's efforts, is spared. When Stanton boldly announces that the company is going to extend its service to California, Colquitt gets panicky and makes a bargain to accept Leavenworth & Denver's passengers at Cheyenne, if Bret and Ben will agree not to extend the line beyond that point.

The whole stagecoaching situation is changed, however, when news reaches Colquitt that the government is about to pass a bill increasing subsidies to Union Pacific to encourage the construction of the railroad. The shock kills Colquitt, and Stanton, who has been informed of the new development by Eli's niece, takes advantage of the accident to make plans to buy out Colquitt's daughter. Knowing Ben would refuse to take advantage of Colquitt's death, Stanton completes his plans without telling his partner about the imminent passage of the new bill.

CHAPTER X

WAR TO THE HILT

ELI COLQUITT had not been in his grave more than a week when Bret Stanton walked into the Leavenworth & Denver office and pulled a chair up to Ben Wingate's desk. There was an unusual soberness about him.

"Ben, how would you feel about our taking over the Great Overland?" he asked abruptly.

Wingate looked up in some surprise. "Buy it, you mean?"

"Yes."

Ben shook his head. "I'm afraid it isn't even worth dreaming about. I thought Stacia might be wanting to get out, but she told me day before yesterday that she intends to carry on with the organization her father left her. She's got some capable men. There's no reason why she can't continue the business."

Bret lit one of his long, slim cigars and crossed his legs comfortably. "She's changed her mind, Ben. I told her I'd talk it over with you." He jotted some figures down on a slip of paper and shoved it across the desk. "That's what it will cost us."

The big man grunted in surprise. "It's a bargan at that price!" he exclaimed. "I'd say it was worth half again as much."

"That's what I thought," Bret agreed. "It would mean putting the Leavenworth & Denver in hock for all it's worth and floating a loan with one of the banks. The security is there for it. I believe we could get the money." He pulled out a memorandum. "Here's what the mail contracts are worth. You can see what we'd have."

Ben found it impossible not to be interested. "I'm almost afraid to let myself get excited about this, it's so big," he said. "It would be a simple matter to merge the two companies. We could do away with the Overland line to Denver. I'd shut down a few of their branch lines that are just breaking even, and concentrate on Denver and the California business. But it would mean putting up every cent we own."

"Well, that's what money is for—to make more money," Stanton declared philosophically. He knew Ben too well to try to force a decision on him. But by evening they were agreed that they would see what could be done about a loan.

Though Ben didn't mention it, the fact that they would be helping Stacia by taking the business off her hands, as Bret had led him to believe, was not a disassociated thought in his mind. He was not to be hurried, however, even when they found that financial arrangements could be made.

"I know you're a great one to look before you leap," Stanton remarked, with growing impatience. "But Pacific-Western would snap it up at the price we've got. We'll lose it to them if we're not careful."

IT was an argument that tipped the balance in Ben's mind. Without any fanfare, he told Bret to see Stacia and conclude the deal. "I want you to make things as easy as you can for her," he said. "I know what she's going through. There was a stronger bond between her and her father than I realized."

Nothing could have suited Stanton better. "I understand, Ben. We can take care of the papers with her lawyer. All we'll need of Stacy will be her signature."

He had left it to Julia to acquaint Stacia with what had passed between Senator Buckner and her father. As usual, Julia had an apt excuse for not having said anything sooner. She had remained silent, she insisted, only because she hadn't wanted to add to Stacia's unhappiness and grief. Stanton had appeared at Riverside and confirmed the fact that the new railroad bill was going to be passed. He had very shrewdly seen to it that Wilkes Colquitt was informed, too. Bret felt that a frank statement to Wilkes was the best way of insuring his silence. Stacia and her brother took it for granted that Ben was fully aware of how matters stood. Dangerous as that might prove to be, Stanton could not say otherwise. Instead, he had impressed on them that it was to the advantage of all to remain dis-

creetly silent regarding the new Union Pacific measure.

He was relieved, nevertheless, when Wilkes went up to St. Joe for a day or two. Keeping Ben in the dark, Stanton conferred with Stacia's lawyer and hurried the papers through. He had planned to take them out to Riverside, but on the morning they were to be signed, Stacia appeared in town. Ben was alone when she drove up. He went out to meet her.

"Bret expected to bring the papers out to you," he told her. "You needn't have come in."

"I thought I'd like to sign them at father's desk," she said, "and see the office once more before it passes out of the family. When you and Bret are ready, suppose you come over; I'll be waiting for you."

Stanton was vaguely alarmed when he learned that Stacia had come in. When Ben said that he would go with him, Bret was too wary to object.

A ripple of excitement ran over the outer office as the two men stepped into Eli Colquitt's old headquarters. The clerks looked at each other expectantly, as though they sensed that something was taking place that might affect their jobs.

STACIA smiled tremulously as Bret and Ben were shown into the private office. The surroundings, with their associations, had proven almost too powerful for her. Black was not her color, and it accentuated the paleness of her face.

"I'm glad you're here," she said. "I'm glad I came, but it has upset me."

"We won't keep you a minute, Stacy," Bret declared. He spread the papers before her, but Stacia was in no hurry to sign them.

"There're some personal things of father's I'll want," she said. "I hope you'll not have to disturb his office for a few days."

"Take as long as you want," Ben told her. "If there's anything else we can do, you know you've only to mention it."

"There *is* something else, Ben. Some of the old men who've been with the company so long—I hope you and Bret will keep them on. Stagecoaching is all they know. I hate to think of them being turned adrift when you begin to curtail operations. The younger men will be able to find work with the railroad. I suppose these new grants and subsidies to the Union Pacific will help some people, but not the old drivers and express messengers."

"We wouldn't think of turning them adrift," Bret said hastily. He didn't risk glancing at Ben. "It would be foolish to keep both lines running to Denver, but that doesn't mean anyone is going to lose his job." He was talking fast; he knew he was on thin ice. "We're not going to sit around worrying about the Union Pacific. We've talked that over a good many times—You sign there on the top line, Stacy. We'll have to call in one of your clerks to notarize the signatures. If you—"

"Bret—let me ask a question." Ben Wingate did not raise his voice, but it had a cutting edge that carried it to the far corners of the office.

"Sure," Stanton said, hiding his uneasiness. "Go ahead."

Ben turned to Stacia. "You speak about new grants and subsidies to the railroad as if they were a fact. What gave you that idea?"

"Why, the new bill, Ben. What else could have put it in my mind?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand," said Wingate. "I haven't heard anything about any new legislation."

Stacia stared at him, so astounded she could not speak for a moment. "Ben, do you mean to tell me you don't know why I'm sacrificing the business? Is it possible that you're unaware that Senator Buckner brought father news that a measure doubling the land and money grants to the railroad is to be passed a day or two after Easter?"

The big man didn't have to answer;

the look on his face was enough. Stacia held her breath until her cheeks drained white. In the charged silence, her eyes went to Stanton.

"Bret, you told me Ben knew."

"I lied," he muttered. "Good heavens, don't look at me that way, Stacy! I knew Ben wouldn't go through with the deal if I told him. I put your interests ahead of mine and his. You can't fight the railroad; that's a man's job! I knew we could." He was determined to save something out of the ruins of his scheming. He knew he and Wingate were through.

BEN got to his feet heavily. There was a rocky look on his tight-lipped face. In itself, the news about the Union Pacific had dealt him a stunning blow. On the other hand, he was singularly unsurprised to learn that Stanton had deceived him so brazenly. Even in the moment he had to consider it, he realized that a dozen little things in the past had prepared him for this moment.

"Bret, we're finished," he said grimly. "I could never forgive you for this. There's only one thing left to do: Either you buy me out, or I'll buy you out."

"Ben, don't be hasty!" Stacia cried. "You've been such good friends. It was foolish of Bret to have handled the matter this way. You know I never would have permitted him to do it for my sake, no matter how desperate the situation looked. At least, he was not trying to put over a bad bargain on you. Under any circumstances the Great Overland is worth more than the price I agreed to take."

"I don't question that," Wingate acknowledged. "But if it were twice as attractive, my answer would be the same; I refuse to do business with a man I can't trust."

That Stacia could forgive Stanton's deliberate treachery and dismiss it as simply foolish told Ben how deep her affection was for the man. The thought of her trusting her happiness to Bret made him wince.

"Let it go, Stacy!" Stanton urged, before she could say anything further. "I've seen this smash-up coming for a long time. I'm glad we're through!" He snatched up the contracts and tore them in two. "That's that!" he growled, flinging the torn pieces in the wastebasket. Ben and he faced each other. There was only hatred and contempt between them. "The Leavenworth & Denver has made a lot of money, Wingate. My brains and my connections had a lot to do with it. I want two hundred thousand dollars for my end—and I want it in cash!"

If the big man hesitated, it was not because he found the price too high. His eyes went to Stacia. He told himself that his decision would put her out of his life forever. It was the bitterest moment he had ever known. But he knew no other course was open to him. There was a tortured look in his usually unreadable eyes as he reached for his hat.

"You can have your money tomorrow, Bret," he said soberly.

The news that the two partners had broken got around at once. It had happened so quickly that several days passed before Ben was able to pick up the reins and go on. Now that he was the sole owner of the business, it was like starting in all over again. He had to have someone in Denver on whom he could rely. His choice was young Ames Wilkinson. Other changes in the organization had to be made. They had hardly been completed when the announcement was made that Bret Stanton had assumed the presidency of the Great Overland Express Co., with a full partnership in the business.

"The fur will fly now," little Pawnee predicted to Wingate. "No holds will be barred!"

THEY had proof of that almost at once, for the Great Overland slashed its passenger and express rates by twenty-five percent, and to make that threat more serious, the old com-

pany speeded up its schedule until, for a few days, it was competing on even terms with the Leavenworth & Denver. But the old equipment and its overworked livestock could not hold that pace. Still, Stanton managed to hold the difference in running time down to a single day.

It made some difference in Ben's business. To make things worse, three of his station agents, within the course of a week, left him to go to work for the Overland at twice what Ben had been paying them. He realized that it was all a part of Bret's plan to drive him to the wall.

"I won't pay a man more than I know he's worth," he told Pawnee. "Stanton will undoubtedly take others away from me. How long they'll have their new jobs is a question."

"No one has to tell you you've got to fight back," remarked Pawnee.

"I'm fighting back," was Ben's answer. "Keeping up the high quality of our service is what I propose to do. I'm not going to cut down on the meals or get into any rate war with the Overland. I started out with the idea of giving the public the best, and I'm sticking to it."

It was only a day or two after the newspapers had headlined the news that the new Union Pacific Act had been passed and signed that Ben walked into the barns with Pawnee. They found big Abe Hawley waiting for them.

"There's somethin' queer goin' on down the street," Abe told them, jerking his head in the direction of the Great Overland barns. "Press Wilson called my attention to it first. Said he'd been noticin' it for a week. I did a little watchin', and I know he's right."

"That leaves it still a mystery," said Ben, with a laugh. "What is it?"

"Waal, Ben, you know they don't forward the second-class mail and the newspapers and franked stuff more'n twice to three times a week. When they send a coach out with that kind o' mail, she's loaded to the roof. Bein' that it ain't a passenger run, they can do it. I want you to tell me how a coach can leave here loaded down on Monday and be back on Wednesday. I'm tellin' you they're doin' it right along."

Ben was not laughing now. "Looks like they might be dumping the mail. That's cheaper than lugging it all the way to Colorado— Monday . . . Tuesday . . . Wednesday. That would take a stage as far as Blue River and back. That's a desolate country; nothing there but their station. Pawnee, you and I will take a little scout up that way; this may turn out to be the club I've been looking for. You just keep quiet about it, Abe."

BEN and Pawnee left town during the night. The following evening, they camped in the dense willow breaks on the Blue, just above where the Great Overland trail crossed the shallow stream.

"If there's any skulduggery goin' on, this would be the place for it," Pawnee observed. "If a heavy coach left Leavenworth this mornin', she won't be showin' up much before noon tomorrow. We can take a look around before she gits here."

He had the breakfast coffee boiling when Ben rolled out of his blanket the next morning.

"There's heavy wheel tracks over there about a hundred yards," Pawnee volunteered. "Looks like we'd hit the jackpot."

They followed the tracks for a quarter of a mile. They ended on a little flat, in among the willows. Out in the center of the flat there was a pile of fire-blackened rubbish. Ben picked up a half-burned copy of the latest *Congressional Record*. The charred pages of catalogues and newspapers littered the ground.

"I'd say this speaks for itself," Ben declared. "If I understand the law, it's a felony for a contractor to destroy mail."

Pawnee looked up in surprise. "Is it

your idea to report this to the government?"

"No, my conscience will be satisfied if I stop it; and it will stop when Bret learns that I know about it. I fancy a few other things will stop, too. I've got Bret in a corner, and I'm going to let him know it!"

They waited until noon, and they were not disappointed. A stage appeared. Without even casting a glance at the willows, the driver tossed out the bundles and set a match to the pile. Ben and Pawnee waited until the fire was going good, before they stepped out. The driver started for the stage to get his gun. He knew them and they were acquainted with him.

"Better change your mind about that, Ike," Wingate said. "If you don't you'll go back to town inside of that stage instead of on the box."

"What yuh doin' up here spyin' on me?" the man demanded nervously. "I'm only carryin' out Stanton's orders."

"Why, we're just admiring the scenery," Ben answered. "You go right ahead with your bonfire."

He had picked up a few things for evidence. He was no sooner back in town than he wrapped them in a newspaper, and with the bundle under his arm, walked into the Overland offices. He was surprised to see the furniture being moved out. A clerk told him that the offices were being moved to St. Joe.

"I want to see Mr. Stanton," Ben told him.

The young man shrugged. "I'm afraid you can't; he isn't here."

BEN didn't like the youngster's tone, nor did he believe he was being told the truth. "I'll answer that for myself," he rapped out hotly. Pushing the clerk out of his way, he strode into the private office. He was utterly unprepared to find Stacia seated at her father's old desk.

"I . . . I beg your pardon," he mut-

tered in his embarrassment. "I was looking for Bret."

"I resent your breaking in like this," Stacia said coolly. "I heard Mr. Patton tell you that Bret was not here."

"I didn't believe him," Ben told her. "I had something on my mind." He didn't have any intention of telling her what it was. "I'm sorry I annoyed you."

Stacia almost called him back as he went out, his ears burning. But she let him go, and Ben went down the street hating himself for having been taken at such a bad disadvantage and furious at not finding Stanton. He was determined to see him at once. In the morning, he had a letter from Ames that made it imperative. The Great Overland was refusing to accept Leavenworth & Denver's passengers at Cheyenne. Ames wrote that Bret had gone on to Salt Lake and was expected back in Cheyenne in about ten days.

Ben called Pawnee in and told him what he had learned. "It's time for our regular monthly inspection trip," he said. "We'll start west in the morning. That'll put us in Cheyenne a day or two ahead of him and give us a chance to size up the situation."

Despite the setbacks the business was prospering. Once Ben was away from Leavenworth and beyond reach of the newspapers, he found it hard to believe that the growing shadow of the Union Pacific was anything more than a bad dream. In Denver, however, he was quickly set right. The men, who once had welcomed Stanton and him, were talking railroad now; the stagecoach was only something to bridge the gap until the steam trains came.

"It'll be a long while yet, Bill," Ben told Teller.

"No, it won't!" was the confident answer. "There's three railroads hurrying across Iowa right now, trying to be the first to reach Omaha. They'll be laying rails across Nebraska by fall."

Ben rode north to Cheyenne in a chastened mood. The situation there drove all thought of the Union Pacific out of his mind temporarily. Ninety percent of the passengers the Leavenworth & Denver brought north were through passengers for the East. Some of them had been in Cheyenne for a week without being able to find accommodations on the Great Overland stages. Stanton's coaches were arriving from the West with every seat taken, and departing loaded to capacity. Wingate didn't expect Bret to hold up his own passengers in order to make room for the Denver fares; but after two days of investigation, the big man thought he saw through the ruse Stanton was working.

STANTON arrived in Cheyenne in style. He had his own private coach, well stocked with choice food and liquors, and a Negro servant to administer to his needs. Wingate walked in a few minutes after Bret stepped into the Overland's local office. It was the first time they had met since that eventful morning in Leavenworth. The bitterness of that last meeting was instantly renewed.

"I'm not refusing your passengers," Stanton growled. "I know the agreement has years to run. If my stages are filled with my own passengers when they reach here, and there's no room for yours, that's just your hard luck. There's nothing I can do about it."

"There's plenty I can do," Ben said bluntly. "Your stages are filled with employees of the Great Overland. You pick them up a few miles west of here and drop them just east of town. I've been looking at them for two days. Some of them are known to me."

Stanton grinned insolently. "What of it? If they hail my stages and pay their fares, I'm free to haul them. You'll have to try something else."

"That's what I'm prepared to do, Stanton. It's a felony for a mail contractor to destroy anything that's turned over to him for transmission. You've been burning second and

third-class matter. I saw Ike Trumbull destroying a stage load of it, myself. And on your orders. I've got the evidence to prove it in a court of law."

Bret tried to brazen it out. "I'm not responsible for what some driver does. You can't prove anything!"

Wingate just stood there regarding him and saying nothing for a moment. There was something in the depths of those gray eyes that sent a cold chill down Bret's spine.

"I never say more than I mean, Stanton." Ben spoke slowly and carefully. "You'll start taking my passengers and express today, and live up to your agreement with me, or you're going to jail."

That was all he had to say.

CHAPTER XI

HIGH STAKES

CHEYENNE was just a sprawling frontier settlement of less than four hundred inhabitants, but some enterprising individual had already put up a crude sign that offered real estate for sale. "Buy cheap before the railroad comes," it said.

Ben passed that sign a dozen times in the few days he remained in town, making sure that Bret had backed down and traffic was again flowing normally. When he got back to Leavenworth, a week later, he was told that Asa Buckner had been in to see him several times in his absence. Ben thought it important enough to make the short trip to Topeka to see the Kansas senator.

"I'll tell you what I had on my mind, Ben," Buckner said, after they had talked for a few minutes. "The Denver mail contract is coming up for renewal. Are you going to submit a bid?"

"I thought I would. But I don't figure I have much of a chance, without your help. I know you've always thrown your support to the Colquitt interests."

"I'm not throwing it to Bret Stanton," Buckner said flatly. "Moving the general offices of the Great Overland up to St. Joe was a slap in the face to Leavenworth, to say nothing of taking that pay roll out of the State. I've heard it said that he made the change so he wouldn't have any interference from Eli's daughter. From the airs he's giving himself, I'm inclined to believe it."

Wingate refused to be drawn out on the subject. "I know he's cut operating expenses so low that the public is complaining about the service he's rendering. It seems to be his idea to milk every dollar out of the traffic that he can and give nothing in return. That's one way of getting ready for the railroad to take over."

"I'm glad you're not making that mistake," said Buckner. "That's another reason why I want you to submit a bid. I'll do what I can to see that you get the contract."

Ben returned to Leavenworth in high spirits. Senator Buckner's powerful support had been entirely unexpected. Ben realized that Stanton was indirectly responsible for it. The same tactics that had turned the Kansas senator against Bret were destined to provide Wingate with another strong ally in the course of the next few weeks. The Great Overland's working agreement with Pacific-Western was expiring. It presented Stanton with a golden opportunity to boost the rates. He was convinced that he could dictate any terms he pleased; for with construction of the Union Pacific about to begin, Pacific-Western would hardly be rash enough to extend its own lines eastward, nor was there any reason to believe they could find anyone foolish enough to invest his money in a competing line at this stage of the business.

There was nothing modest about Stanton's demands in the letter he dispatched to Tevis Carney, in San Francisco. It was for nothing less than an increase of twenty-five percent. Pacific-Western replied that his demands were prohibitive. Bret

grinned, certain that they must accept in the end. He was not only ruthlessly trimming expenses; he was firing men and getting rid of the unprofitable branch lines. As a result, he had the Great Overland making more money than it had ever done under old Eli's management.

Stanton told himself he was doing it all for Stacia, though he was enriching himself through his advantageous arrangement with her. But he had power now, and that was really what he wanted; power to slap Ben down sooner or later and make himself so invaluable to Stacia that she couldn't do without him.

He found it expedient to keep Stacia in the dark on a great many things, however, his stock excuse being that she wouldn't understand. In his mind, she was as good as his already. Moving the general offices to St. Joe had given him the freedom from supervision that he wanted, in addition to being a practical, economic step. If he saw less of Stacia, he also saw less of Julia, and that had been a consideration too.

WHEN Bret found St. Joe uninteresting, he consoled himself with knowing that he didn't have to spend much of his time there. He had moved Ford Skilton up the ladder and made him his general superintendent. Skilton was capable, and he had a predatory streak in him that suited Stanton. Skilton came hurrying up from Leavenworth one morning with more excitement than he usually displayed.

"This will tie you into a knot, Bret," he announced. "Wingate's grabbed the Denver mail contract."

The news infuriated Bret. "How in thunder did that happen? The bids were sealed! How could he cut under us?"

"He had some help, Bret. Asa Buckner."

Stanton flung himself out of his chair with a curse and started pacing the floor. Losing the income from the mail contract was bad enough, but losing it to Ben made it a doubly bitter pill. Bret's wrath overflowed in a torrent of abuse.

"Wingate will pay for this before I'm through! I'll even up things with him! I won't be satisfied until I know he hasn't got a dime to his name! Cut the Denver rates another ten percent! I'll make Ben Wingate do some sweating"

He stopped his pacing to throw a question at Skilton. "Did you stop at Riverside on your way up?"

"For a minute. I saw Miss Julia—"

"Don't call her Miss Julia!" snapped Stanton. "If you're the general superintendent of this business you're good enough to call her Julia— What did she have to say?"

"Nothing, Bret. I just passed the time of day with her."

Skilton was lying. Through him, Julia was keeping herself informed of every move Bret made. Skilton had always been interested in her but she

had ignored him till recently. The little attention she showed him now made him putty in her hands. It fooled Stanton as much as it did Skilton, for Bret thought something might come of it, and he was glad enough to pass her on.

"I suppose I'll have to go down and explain why we lost the contract," Bret said. "I'll do it tomorrow or the next day."

The Great Overland announced its new rate cut the following morning. Ben refused to worry about it.

"The Leavenworth & Denver's position is secure now, at least until the railroad puts us out of business," he told Pawnee.

"How long do you think that'll be, Ben?"

"I'd say it depends a lot on when the war will be over. Things look awfully bad for the South right now. We ought to have two years more."

A plump little man, wearing sideburns, walked into Ben's office the next day. He had a decidedly more optimistic idea of what the future held for the stagecoaching business than Ben. The latter blinked when the little man introduced himself as Tevis Carney, the head of Pacific-Western.

"I came a roundabout way," Carney explained. "For reasons that you will understand presently, I wasn't anxious to have my presence in Leavenworth known to the Great Overland. Can we talk here undisturbed, Mr. Wingate? It's going to take me some time to say what I've got on my mind."

"Suppose we go up to my quarters at the Planters," Ben suggested.

WHEN they were seated there, Carney told Ben about Bret's demands. Pacific-Western was determined not to meet them.

"The California railroad doesn't frighten us as much as it does you," he went on. "It takes more than money to build a railroad across wild, Indian-infested plains and over snow-buried mountains. The Sacramento storekeepers who have invested their

fortunes in the California end of the enterprise know as well as I do that they'll have to contend with forty to fifty feet of snow for months at a time in the High Sierras. They talk about building sheds and running their trains through them. Why, the weight of all that snow will crush any building they put up! I always tried to tell Senator Colquitt not to worry about the railroad. But he was the worrying kind."

"I don't suppose you've come here to discuss snow conditions in the Sierras with me," Ben suggested, with a smile.

"Indeed not! Wingate, you've made a name for yourself. Asa Buckner tells you you'll carry out any promise you make. For myself, I know you're a good stagecoach and expressman—You remember Dave Dutton?"

"Very well," Ben murmured.

"Well, he's got a line running from Omaha to Fort Kearney, Nebraska. It isn't paying, and as you might expect, knowing Dave, it's in bad shape. I want you to buy him out, Wingate. Look the line over and make him a fair price. I want you to push it on to North Platte and strike for Cheyenne. We'll come on from Salt Lake and meet you there. If you need money, we'll advance it."

Wingate was deeply moved. He was more conscious of the honor that was being done him than of the financial rewards, great as they would be if the line could be operated for two or three years.

"I appreciate the confidence you're displaying in me," he said humbly. "Roughly speaking, it's about three hundred miles from Fort Kearney to Cheyenne. Most of it is tough Indian country. Still, I believe I could put a line through. I know I've got the right men for such a job. But it will take time. Stations will have to be built—"

"You can use tents for stations at first. That's what we'll have to do too. I'd like to see the thing accomplished in thirty days. Our contract with the Overland has only about five weeks to run. We can use your present terminal in Cheyenne. Any sort of a building in North Platte will do. We can make improvements as we go along."

They talked until noon without covering all the details that had to be discussed.

"We can have dinner sent up," Ben suggested.

"No, we'll go down to the dining room," Carney replied. "Now that I know where we stand, it can't make any difference if my being here is noticed."

AS they stood at the dining-room doors, waiting to be seated, Julia Colquitt entered the hotel lobby. She usually dined at the Planters when she was in town. Her head went up as she saw Tevis Carney with Ben. She recognized Carney at once, for he had often been in Leavenworth, seeing old Eli. Between wondering what he was doing in Ben Wingate's company and why he had not paid his respects to Stacia, she changed her mind about lunching at the hotel. Instead, she returned to Riverside at once. A team stood at the hitching post. She identified the horses as the ones that Bret drove.

After pausing a moment at a mirror in the hall to give her face some attention, she went on through to the rear gallery overlooking the river, where she heard voices. Stanton and Stacia looked up as she stepped out.

"I thought you were staying in town," Stacia said, not too pleased, the thought occurring to her that Julia always seemed to find some excuse for appearing whenever Bret was in the house.

"I changed my mind," Julia told her. "It was so warm, and the hotel was crowded." She saw that Stacia was upset over something. "Don't mind me," she ran on. "Go ahead with your business. I'm going to sit here and cool off. Maybe I'll have a sandwich brought out."

Stacia had been speaking about the lost mail contract. It was no longer news that Ben had won it, so she had no hesitancy in finishing what she had been saying. But she didn't stop there.

"I suppose it's true enough," she told Bret, "that if we lose money in one direction we must get it back in some other way. But that doesn't explain your demands on Pacific-Western. You're simply taking advantage of a situation."

"Well, what's wrong with that?" Bret asked.

"Just that Mr. Carney was father's friend."

Stanton dismissed that with a laugh. "Stacy, you've got to learn that there's no such thing as friendship in business. Carney will squirm for a while, but he'll come to my terms. I've tried to tell you before that when this business blows up, all we'll have left is a lot of stagecoaches and mules. The stations won't be worth tearing down. Whatever you are to take out of the Great Overland you'll have to get before the finish comes."

Julia had overheard enough to tell her why Tevis Carney was in Leavenworth seeing Ben Wingate. She had not relished Stacia's decision to put Stanton in charge of the business. But she had adjusted herself to it, confident not only that friction would develop between Bret and her cousin, but that opportunities would arise that she could turn to her ultimate advantage. The present instance was a case in point, and she was resolved to exploit it, even if it meant going to St. Joe to see Stanton.

She found that unnecessary, for when Stacia went in to see about lunch, she had her chance. She gave him a long glance. "Bret, have you decided to ignore me completely?"

"Oh, Julia, don't make things utterly impossible for me!" Bret said impatiently. "Why not recognize the way things are—"

"The only thing I recognize is that you are a fool," she returned hotly. "You think you're shrewd. But you're not! You're riding for a fall that will put you in your place. It's your habit to underestimate people. You've always sneered at Ben Wingate. Now you're sneering at Tevis Carney. And they're laughing up their sleeves at you right now."

Stanton stared at her. "What are you driving at?" he demanded angrily.

Julia shrugged and smiled inscrutably. "When Dave Dutton sold the Overfield Dispatch to Uncle Eli, didn't he start a new line—the Omaha & North Platte Stage Co.?"

"He got as far as Fort Kearney and stopped there. What's that got to do with what you're saying?"

"I'd say it had considerable to do with it," was Julia's maddening retort. "Fort Kearney is a long step on the way to Salt Lake." Her eyes flashed pityingly as Stanton sat there, not understanding. "Oh, Bret, you can be thick at times! What would you say if I were to tell you that Carney is in Leavenworth at this minute, conferring with Ben Wingate? I'll leave it to you to surmise what they're talking about!"

"Tevis Carney and Ben?" he ripped out incredulously. "I can't believe it!"

"You'd better believe it. I saw them together in the Planters this noon. That's why I came home. I was ready to go to St. Joe to tell you. They're joining hands, Bret, just as sure as you're sitting there. They'll have to move fast. If they can buy the Dutton business, they'll do it. You certainly can't afford to think that they won't. You've got to get there first."

STANTON stared at Julia in sheer astonishment for a moment. In the back of his mind the disquieting thought that he was no match for her craftiness and cunning tried to intrude. It didn't make the moment any easier for him. Not for a second did he doubt but what she had put her finger on the core of what Carney and Ben were planning.

"I damned well know you're right!" he growled. "If it were left to me, I'd grab up that Dutton business as soon as I could have a look at it! But you know where I'd get if I put it up to Stacy. I'd have to tell her why I wanted it. If I didn't, she'd object on the grounds that we ought to be getting out instead of getting in deeper."

"You're the president of the company," Julia reminded him. "Go ahead on your own. If she objects, what of it? You can't afford to wake up some morning to discover that the Great Overland has lost the Pacific-Western account."

It was argument enough for Stanton. He was in Omaha three days later. Dutton refused to quote a price at which he would sell.

"Go out over the line and take a look at it," he said. "If you want to make me an offer then, all right. But I'm not junking the property, Stanton, just because the town is buried in railroad ties and steel. In fact, I figger I'll do purty well when the U. P. gets going. New towns will be springing up, and my local business ought to be enough to keep me going."

Wingate was already in Nebraska, inspecting Dutton's property. He hadn't been near Dave yet. By the time he reached Fort Kearney, he had a fair idea of what the business was worth. He had just finished supper and was going up to his room in the town's only hotel, when Stanton walked in. They did not speak, but each instantly suspected what the other was doing there. Ben went on up the stairs and packed his bag; he was taking the evening stage east. When he came down forty minutes later, Bret was not to be seen.

"I'll be surprised if he isn't going east too," he thought, as he started up the street for the stage depot.

He had covered only half the disance when four roughs leaped out at him from an alley. Ben disposed of one quickly by driving his knee into the man's stomach. The others closed in on him, and for ten minutes he had all he could do to keep from being pulled down. He knew well enough that the men were not interested in robbing him. It was just Stanton's trick to make him miss the stage.

The thugs finally beat a retreat. Ben picked up his bag and ran to the depot, only to find that the stage had left without him. He went directly to the telegraph office, determined to make Dutton an offer by wire. The Pacific telegraph ran through Kearney.

"I can't get a message through right now," the operator told him. "Havin' some trouble east of here. I'm afraid the line's broke."

"I can tell you what the trouble is," Ben said grimly. "The wire has been cut!"

He did not intend to give up that easily. At a livery barn, he hired a driver and team to get him to Grand Island, where a similar arrangement carried him to Fallstown, and on again to Platte City, late the next afternoon. He overtook the stage in Platte City. Stanton was not among the passengers. From the driver, however, he learned that a man answering Bret's description had gotten off at Fallstown. He couldn't understand it.

"He must've bought a rig and a team of fast steppers there," the driver explained. "He went by us in a cloud of dust durin' the afternoon. I remember him sayin' he had to be in Omaha first thing in the mornin'—Yuh travelin' with us?"

"No, I'm afraid you don't move fast enough for me."

It was plain enough to Ben that only a good saddle horse would get him to Omaha ahead of Stanton. He lost the better part of an hour finding an animal that suited him. When he rode out of Platte City, he realized it would be a stern chase all the way; but knowing that Bret would have to stop several times to change teams gave him hope.

IT never occurred to Wingate that Tevis Carney's visit to Leavenworth was responsible for Stanton's suden interest in the Omaha-North Platte line. He wondered that Bret had not bought it before he made his exorbitant demands on Pacific-Western. The lengths to which Bret was going now to acquire Dutton's unprofitable business said plainly enough that his eyes were open to its importance at last.

"If it's important to him, it's twice as important to me," Ben thought. He felt that the alliance Pacific-Western was offering him was an opportunity greater than would ever come his way again. To fail now, with success almost in his grasp, was something he refused to consider as long as a fighting chance remained.

With iron will, Ben refused to ride his horse into the ground. He had a long way to go, and he paced the animal with expert skill. When morning dawned, he was still twenty-five miles short of his destination. It was eight o'clock before he rode into Omaha. Stanton was still ahead of him, by how much, Ben didn't know. Reaching the business section of the little town, he let his horse out and dashed down the dusty street to the drab, slate-colored little building in which Dutton had his office.

A jaded team stood at the hitch rack. It killed any doubt in Ben's mind that Stanton was inside. He started to run up the steps. As he did, Bret and Dutton came out. The latter was the only one who was surprised. He could feel the enmity of the two men. They had never met with such bitterness as gripped them now. Stanton could not forego this moment of triumph.

"You've had your trouble for nothing, Wingate," he declared, with withering contempt. He tapped a paper protruding from his pocket. "I've got Dutton's signature on a bill of sale."

"Dave, is that right?" Ben burst out.

Dutton looked from one to the other, plainly asking himself if he had been too hasty in selling. "I didn't know you was interested, Ben. The price would have gone up."

"Then you've sold?"

"I have. The Great Overland's got my business for the second time."

Stanton tried to brush past Ben, a mocking laugh on his lips.

"Just a minute," the big man rapped. He caught Bret and pushed him back. "I can stand coming off second best even when something means as much to me as this. It's the methods you used to put this over on me that I don't intend to have passed by with one of your sneering laughs." He glanced at his scraped knuckles. "I guess you know where I got these. Hiring a bunch of roughs to lay me out is pretty dirty business. Now you start pulling off your coat; you've got a licking coming to you, and you're going to get it."

Wingate's eyes were red-rimmed from lack of sleep. Stanton seemed to be fresh enough. He knew he was less than a match for Ben, but since there was no way of backing out, he ripped off his coat and closed in with his fists swinging.

A crowd gathered quickly. Omaha was not so old that it couldn't enjoy a street fight. It had never been treated to a better one. Ben knocked Stanton down time after time, until it seemed that the later couldn't get up and continue. Finally, Bret could not make it.

"You better drag him inside," Wingate told Dutton.

Dave shook his head as he gazed at Bret. "You sure gave him a licking, if that's any satisfaction to you."

"It's a heap of satisfaction to me," Ben muttered soberly, picking up his hat and coat.

Stanton had the vitality to raise himself on his elbow. His puffed, cracked lips moved. "You tell Carney the rates are going up, Wingate, just as I said, and be damned to him!" he growled.

CHAPTER XII

SHADOW OF THE IRON HORSE

ON his long journey to Denver to keep a previously arranged appointment with Tevis Carney, Ben could find nothing in the news he was carrying to relieve his sense of complete failure. Had he succeeded in buying the Dutton business, the task of extending the line to Cheyenne in anything like thirty days would have been almost impossible; now that the Dutton outfit was gone, he knew no hope remained. It was a trick for Bret, an important one, and the big man didn't hesitate to admit it.

Carney took the bad news phlegmatically. "I don't blame you, Wingate," he said in the midst of his disappointment. "I came to you too late; I didn't give you much of a chance. Stanton can tighten the screws now, and we'll have to dance to his tune. But not to the degree he contemplates. A certain percentage of our eastbound business goes to St. Louis and the Ohio country. I propose to see that it's diverted to the Leavenworth & Denver at Cheyenne. We'll draw up an agreement covering it before you go." He settled back in his chair with a heavy sigh. "Old Eli knew how to be ruthless, but this man Stanton is utterly unscrupulous. I predict the day will come when Miss Colquitt will regret having given him such complete authority."

That day was nearer than he suspected. Bret had dispatched a letter to Stacia informing her of his purchase of the Dutton business a few hours after he closed the deal. Now that he could tell her that Pacific-Western and the Leavenworth & Denver had been bent on acquiring it, and why, he anticipated no difficulty. He said nothing about his clash with Ben or of the means he had employed to best him. Even so, Stacia could not understand his acting without consulting her. The more she thought about it the more incensed she became, and she mentioned it that night at dinner to Wilkes and Julia.

"I've never tried to tell Bret how to run the business, but on anything involving a sum like this, he should have spoken to me," she insisted.

Julia was pleased to agree with her. "It isn't the first time Bret has ignored you," she murmured guilefully. "But you can blame yourself. You've always made him believe he was indispensable to the business; that you couldn't get anyone else."

"Well, where could she get anyone else who'd do as well?" Wilkes queried cynically. "Stanton keeps the profits coming in, one way or another. He bought that Dutton business, as I see it, because he had to; it was the only way he could save himself. Ben and Mr. Carney would never have been interested in that line if Stanton hadn't jacked up the price on Pacific-Western."

"I'm surprised to hear you approving of anything he did," Julia said tartly.

"He couldn't drive a delivery wagon for me," Wilkes retorted. "But he's the man Stacy wanted."

"Please!" Stacia entreated. "I'm sorry I said anything at all. Perhaps I *am* dependent on Bret. We'll let it go at that."

"I'm sorry, Stacy," Wilkes said regretfully. "For your sake, I've tried to get along with Bret Stanton. I'd give him the benefit of the doubt if I were you. Maybe it wasn't high-handed of him not to have consulted you; maybe there wasn't time."

IT wasn't only Bret's handling of the Dutton matter that troubled Stacia; there had been so many little things of late that she had not liked nor understood. She went upstairs that evening feeling that she stood alone. It did not surprise her to find her thoughts turning to Ben Wingate. She wished she could go to him, confident that he would understand and be able to answer some of the questions that were assailing her. The respect he had always shown her, the

kindliness and honesty of the man, had never been so easy to appreciate as now. But she couldn't go to Ben; she realized that.

She was preparing for bed when Julia ran in excitedly. "Stacy, there's a big fire in town. Come here to the window and see. It's close to the river."

The crimson glow that stained the sky seemed to center over the Leavenworth river front.

"It may be one of the boats!" Stacia cried. She rushed into the hall, calling: "Wilkes! Wilkes!"

Wilkes hurried to the window with her.

"No, it's not a boat," he declared. "Stacy, I believe it's the Overland barns! You and Julia get dressed; I'll have the horses hitched by the time you're ready!"

Wilkes drove swiftly. Even before they reached the outskirts of town, there was no doubt left in their minds that it was the Great Overland barns that were burning. It was a rambling group of buildings, housing now only the equipment and livestock used on the Denver run. When they turned into Osage Street, they saw that the old paint shops were already in ruins; flames were devouring the roofs of several of the other buildings.

The volunteer fire companies had long since arrived and were fighting the blaze. Wilkes was a member of the Excelsiors. He handed the reins to Stacia and jumped out of the buggy.

"Don't wait for me," he said. "I may be here the rest of the night."

Stacia stood up. Over the heads of the crowd she saw that the coaches were being run out of the burning buildings. Ben began to hurry past, leading mules and horses that had been rescued. Stacia recognized the giant Abe Hawley and others of Ben Wingate's employees. They seemed to have taken command of the work.

"Open up there!" a voice boomed at the crowd. "Let these men through! Give 'em a chance!"

It was Ben, himself. He ran up to the buggy on catching sight of Stacia. His face was streaked with grime. "We've got all the animals out and most of the coaches," he told her. "If they'll give us water enough we'll save one of the barns."

He was gone without giving her a chance to speak.

"Well!" Julia exclaimed sarcastically. "That's a surprise! He's fighting the Great Overland tooth and nail, yet he'll risk his life going in there to save your property."

"If he bears me any ill will, he isn't taking it out on my mules and horses," Stacia replied reprovingly.

The fire had caught the Great Overland short-handed. Without giving a thought to his feud with the old company, Ben had rounded up a number of his men and started getting the animals and coaches to safety.

The fire was not put out until early morning. As Ben had predicted, one of the barns was saved. Even so, the loss was great. Wilkes came home for breakfast.

"You can thank Ben that it wasn't worse," he told his sister.

"I intend to thank him," Stacia replied. "I'll go in this morning."

BEN was late in reaching his office. He found Stacia waiting for him. He was immediately embarrassed; this was the first time she had honored his headquarters with her presence.

"Ben, I'm not here only to thank you for what you did last night," Stacia said frankly. "I want your friendship, even if you are fighting the Great Overland."

"You'll always have that, Stacia," he said slowly. "Whatever I've had to do to hold my own with the old company was not aimed at you personally. I . . . I hoped you understood that."

"I wanted to think it," she murmured. "I recognize your right to fight back, of course. But I ask myself so often if all this strife and bitterness must continue forever. It makes me wish sometimes that the Union Pacific would be built quickly."

"They've made a start, at least; the first mile of track was laid day before yesterday. They're not waiting to throw a bridge across the river or for the Chicago & Northwestern to reach Council Bluffs."

It was not easy for them to talk without mentioning Stanton. But they managed it, and instead of remaining only a few minutes, Stacia stayed an hour.

She left feeling better, and on the way home, she told herself she was going to take a firmer stand with Bret. News of the fire would bring him to Leavenworth, she knew.

Stanton arrived that afternoon. After surveying the damage and giving the necessary orders for the building of a new barn, he rode out to Riverside. He was not in his usually expansive mood, though the fire had little to do with it. Now that the Union Pacific was actually laying track, the growing mountains of equipment and material piling up in Omaha had begun to look ominous. Some of this freight was coming overland, across Iowa; eighty percent of it was being brought upriver to Plattsmouth, the recognized head of navigation on the Missouri, and hauled the remaining few miles. Everything that could float, including the old *Nellie White*, had been pressed into this service, and rivermen were reaping a rich harvest.

Stacia asked Bret to stay for dinner. "Wilkes will be here soon," she told him.

Wilkes was a long time coming. When he appeared, he was fighting mad. "I'm glad you're here, Stanton," he said hotly. "It'll save me driving up to St. Joe to tell you what I've got on my mind. That old St. Joe freighter, the *Nathaniel Green*, and a scowload of railroad ties went aground on Kingan's Bar this noon. Navigation is completely blocked. By this time tomorrow it will be impossible to find wharfage along the river front in Leavenworth."

"Why jump on Bret for it?" Stacia demanded. "You're unreasonable, Wilkes!"

"No, I'm not! This wasn't any accident! I've talked to men who saw it happen. Boats don't go aground on that bar, unless someone wants them to! This thing was arranged; Stanton knows all about it!"

"That's enough of your irresponsible talk!" Bret snapped. "I don't know a thing about it!" he lied.

"Don't make me laugh!" Wilkes flung back contemptuously. "You've boasted right along that you'd find ways of holding up the Union Pacific. This is your way of doing it. I was up the river this afternoon. That boat is crawling with men, but not a thing is being done to get her off. That bunch is there to see that she isn't pulled off. They're not rivermen; they're Denver thugs that you brought on, Stanton! I had one of them pointed out to me: Bill Slack, the gunman!"

Stacia saw Stanton's eyes flash. "I don't mind being accused of anything that will help the Great Overland," he said thinly, trying to hold himself in, "but there's a limit to my patience, I warn you!"

"And there's a limit to what I propose to take from you!" Wilkes cried. "You get that boat off, Stanton, or I'll find ways of doing it! You're a pretty smooth article, but you won't lie your way out of this!"

"Why, you contemptible little pup!" Bret roared. Utterly beside himself, he rushed at Wilkes.

Stacia stood petrified for a second as she saw her brother reach for his pistol. She rushed at him then.

"No, Wilkes!" she pleaded, clutching his arm. "No!"

He struggled with her and got his hand free. At sight of the gun, Julia flung her arms about Stanton protectively. "You fool, Wilkes!" she screamed. "Don't you dare!"

She instantly regretted this reckless display of her feelings, for the look Wilkes Colquitt gave her over Stacia's shoulder told she had betrayed her secret. Stanton realized it, too, and he pushed her away roughly.

"All right, Stacy," Wilkes gave in, "I'll go upstairs." He gazed at Bret disgustedly. "You seem to be well protected. But don't let it fool you! You've got twenty-four hours to do something about that boat!"

CHAPTER XIII

ANY WAY TO WIN

WILKES' door slammed. It released them from the tension that had held them silent. Stanton realized that Julia's foolishness had come close to being his undoing. It was not her fault that Stacia had not witnessed the spectacle she had made of herself. The glance he flashed at her was alive with hatred.

"I'm sorry you stopped him, Stacy," he said airily. "That was a bluff; he wouldn't have done any shooting!"

Stacia had got hold of herself. "Julia . . . will you leave us alone?" she asked, her voice so charged with feeling that she had difficulty controlling it.

Julia was glad enough to beat a retreat before her cousin saw her confusion. Her going gave Bret time enough to gather his wits.

"I shouldn't have lost my temper with him like that," he spoke up before Stacia could utter a word. "Wilkes and I have never hit it off and we never will. I ought to have had sense enough to recognize it and let it go at that."

"Bret . . . I couldn't stand anything like this again." Stacia drew in her breath sharply. "I'm going to speak frankly. I haven't liked the way things have been going. I've tried to tell you that. But you've gone ahead, anyway— Wilkes knows what he is saying. You *are* responsible for that boat going aground."

Stanton's mouth tightened. "You've already heard my answer to that. If you're not satisfied with the way I'm running the business, that's something

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else." He was confident that he held the whip hand with her, and he welcomed this opportunity to prove it. "I'm always willing to step out," he said. "We can tear up the contract any time."

"You know I'm not suggesting that, Bret," Stacia said quickly, with a start of dismay.

Her haste to disavow any such thought told Stanton what he wanted to know. Stacia might criticize him, he told himself, and disapprove of what he did, but he had only to force the issue to make her realize that he was indispensable to the business.

"I've never taken a step that wouldn't have had your father's approval," he said flatly. He saw Stacia wince at this reference to her father, but he found a malign satisfaction in the thought that it was no longer a question of making the Colquitts come to him; he was convinced that he had achieved that goal. "If he were here, Stacy, he'd agree with me that I can't fight this thing through successfully unless I stand on my own feet and use my own judgment."

He was quite willing to placate her, but he was also determined to make his position clear once and for all. "This blocking of the river is an instance of what I mean. I don't care how it happened; I'm interested only in the fact that the Missouri is closed. If that boat stays there for ten days or two weeks, they can blow her up for all I care. By then, the water will be so low that there won't be any more steamboating to Plattsmouth this year. The ice will come, and it will be spring before navigation is resumed. It will make some difference to the U. P. Instead of working straight through the winter, they'll be out of ties and steel by Christmas."

"I expect you to use your own judgment," Stacia replied resolutely. "But you don't know how reckless you sound, Bret. You can't stop the railroad."

"Maybe I can't," he admitted with surprising honesty. "But that doesn't make me relish the idea of Wilkes or anyone else making a dollar by freighting in material when I know that dollar is coming out of your pocket."

He could just as well have said "our pocket," but he knew how to dramatize an argument. "I've tried to keep all this away from you, Stacy," he said in a quite different tone. "I know I've done things that you didn't like; that doesn't mean I liked them any better. But I've got my responsibility to you to consider; I've got to hold the business together."

WHEN he appealed to her in that mood, Stacia had no defense against him. Stanton saw her anger leave her, and he knew he had won.

"You've been tireless," she acknowledged. "I appreciate your position and all you've done. Maybe we could avoid these misunderstandings, Bret, if we'd only be frank with each other. You know how much I need you."

"No, Stacy, it's the other way around," he insisted. "I need you a hundred times more than you need me!" He was the impassioned lover now. His dark eyes flashed and there was a ring to his voice. "I've been working twelve to fourteen hours a day and hardly ever sleeping in the same bed two nights in a row. I wouldn't take that sort of punishment for myself. But it's all right with me; I know I'm doing it for you."

He really believed what he was saying. He wanted her more than anything on earth, but he wanted her on his terms.

"I'd be lost without you!" he said fervently, as he gathered her in his arms and held her close. "I don't mind your being cross with me, Stacy, but don't ever go back on me! Don't let Wilkes—or anyone else—put us apart! I can stand any hard names I'm called, so long as I've got you!

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No matter what comes, I'll never let you down!"

He tilted her face, and she let him kiss her.

"Bret, you will let me know what you are doing?" she murmured tremulously.

"Sure!" he declared, grinning. "If that's the way you want it, why not?" It was an empty promise that he had no intention of keeping.

"I've felt so alone . . . and unhappy," she told him. "I was getting frightened—"

He laughed her fears away. It was the house, and the people in it, he told himself that were responsible for her unhappiness. He resolved to make some changes when he was master of

Riverside. There'd be no room for Julia and Wilkes.

Stacia refused to let him go without dinner. It pleased him to suggest that they dine out on the gallery.

"Just the two of us, Stacy," he urged. "We don't always have to be thinking of Julia and Wilkes."

The suggestion pleased Stacia, not only because she wanted to be alone with him, but because he was excluding Julia.

They spoke about the fire, over the table. Bret told her they were well covered. He felt her waiting for him to mention what Ben had done. Thinking it would please her, he said: "It was decent of Wingate to lend a hand. I'm glad you thanked him. I heard you had been in to see him. I don't want to make light of what he did, but you know I'd have done the same if the situation had been the other way around."

Stacia nodded. She didn't doubt his courage, but in the back of her mind she could not help wondering if his bitterness against Ben would not have held him back.

WHEN Stanton was ready to leave, Stacia walked to the carriage with him. From her window Julia saw them say "good-by." It infuriated her, and she was ready to turn on Bret. Later, she heard Stacia go to Wilkes' room. For several hours she caught the rise and fall of their voices. She could not help wondering if she were one of the subjects of their conversation. Riverside had become unbearable to her, and she told herself that she hated one Colquitt as much as the other.

Wilkes had left before Julia came down the next morning. Stacia was at the table, but she made no reference to the previous evening. Julia saw her watching the river. Not a boat passed all morning. When Stacia had her light buggy brought to the door at noon and drove north along the river road, Julia surmised that she was going to Kingan's Bar.

It was a distance of only a few miles from Riverside. The channel was narrow there, and Stacia saw that the steamboat and scow had it completely blocked, as Wilkes had said. Nothing was being done to pull the boat off. She could see men moving about on the lower deck. There were at least forty of them, she estimated; certainly many times the usual crew for such a boat as the *Nathaniel Green*.

She didn't doubt for a moment but what Bret was in some measure responsible for the boat being there. But that was not in her mind, as she turned the horses and drove rapidly into town; she was afraid for Wilkes. She knew that if he carried out his threat

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L O S T

Where'll I eat? Where'll I sleep? Where's my girl?

Last week on KP I kept thinking, "When I get to New York on my furlough, that'll be the day!"

So here I am, only I don't know my way around any more'n the Man From Mars. Can't even find my girl in this whale of a big and busy station.

Tell me, will you, what's a guy to do?

Listen, soldier, sailor, marine! We'll find a room for you, a good place to eat.

We'll even help you find your girl, who's probably hovering around the station this minute, looking for you.

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TRAVELERS AID

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to muster a number of rivermen and take matters into his own hands that a pitched battle was certain.

An air of tenseness hung over Leavenworth, especially along the river front, where lines of steamboats were tied up, two and three abreast. When she drove up to Wilkes' office, Stacia saw that at least a hundred men were gathered out on the Colquitt wharf. Wilkes' door was closed, and she was told that he was busy with three steamboat captains.

Stacia sat down to wait, her anxiety mounting. Half an hour passed be-

fore the men came out and Wilkes saw her. He was not pleased to find her there.

"You're wasting your time, Stacy, if you're here to try to talk me out of doing anything. We're waiting till six o'clock—no longer!"

"Wilkes, those men out on the wharf are arranging barricades on the deck of your boat," she said excitedly. "Does that mean there's going to be gunfire?"

"We're going to be ready to give it and take it. We've got the whole town on our side. Everything is tied up; there isn't a business in Leavenworth that won't suffer if the river stays closed. I advise you to go home and stay there till this is over."

"Do I mean so little to you that you can dismiss me in that fashion?" Stacia demanded incredulously. "You know some of you may not come back alive. If you steamboat men are determined to take the law into your own hands, why must you be the leader? You are so young, Wilkes—why must you go?"

"Because I want to keep the respect of men," Wilkes answered. "Yes," he added grimly, "because I don't want the name of Colquitt to be hated every time it's heard. If you don't know what I mean, Stacy, read the editorial in this afternoon's *Free State*. It comes as close as it dares to saying the Great Overland is standing in the way of the country's progress. The Great Overland means you; you'll never make people believe you don't approve what Bret Stanton does in your name."

Stacia stood there appalled, her face white. "That's almost unforgivable coming from you," she said in a very small voice. "You might see that you are always as careful of the Colquitt name as I have been." She was angry then. In her hurt pride, she said: "Please understand that what Bret does has my complete approval!"

Without saying anything more, she left Wilkes and drove away. She was hardly more than out of his sight, however, before her concern for him began to outweigh her indignation.

"If he refuses to listen to me," she thought, "he might listen to Ben Wingate."

WONDERING why it had not occurred to her before, she drove to Ben's office at once. The sight of Abe Hawley and half a dozen other Leavenworth & Denver men standing around on the sidewalk in front of the building struck her as strange, and when she saw that they were armed, she was doubly suspicious.

She found Ben getting ready to

leave. It took her only a moment to tell him why she had come.

"Ben, you've got to stop Wilkes," she said earnestly. "He is reckless and hotheaded. He won't listen to me, but I know you have weight with him."

A puzzled frown puckered the big man's forehead. "I don't like to disagree with you, Stacia," he remarked soberly. "There's very little you could ask of me that I wouldn't do gladly. The fact of the matter is, though, Wilkes is right about this. It would take weeks to do anything by legal means; that boat is out in the middle of the river, and the ice will be here before Missouri and Kansas could decide who had jurisdiction. I suppose it's really a Federal case. But the country is at war; you know the government is in no postion to take a hand. I have a personal interest in this; it's hurting my business. I suppose you feel it too."

"You read this afternoon's paper?" she asked.

"Yes—"

"Has it anything to do with your attitude, Ben?"

"No, my decision was made before I read the article." He knew what was in her mind, and he didn't care to speak about it. "I can't ask Wilkes not to go," he said, "but I'll see that no harm comes to him."

"Ben, you're going with him!" she cried. "That's why your men are here."

"Yes, I'm going," he admitted. He glanced at his watch. "It's foolish to ask you not to worry. I feel awfully bad about this, Stacia. If you'll permit me, I'll put you in your buggy; it's time for us to be leaving."

She nodded. There was a desperate look in her eyes as she turned away. "Don't bother," she murmured. "I can manage."

When Stacia reached Riverside, she did not turn in; the thought of facing Julia's questions was more than she could bear. Another mile brought her to Burnett's Point. She had not been

there long when she saw four steamboats coming up the river, keeping close together.

They passed her and finally disappeared around the bend of the river. Still she waited, knowing she could hear a shot if one were fired. The minutes passed slowly. Finally it came, a faint puff of sound that was quickly followed by many others, like the sputtering of damp firecrackers.

The distant rattle of gunfire rose and fell. A prayer formed on her lips as she thought of Ben and Wilkes in the thick of it, or possibly struck down already.

CHAPTER XIV

RIVER BATTLE

THE men aboard the stranded *Nathaniel Green* saw the four boats bearing down on them while they were still a mile away, black smoke streaming from their stacks. Their purpose was plain enough, and without waiting for the determined-looking armada to come within range, Bill Slack and his desperados sent a fusillade of shots roaring across the water.

"Sounds like they're a little nervous," Ben observed to Wilkes and the score of men on the forward deck of the Colquitt freighter. Their boat was in the lead. "No point in answering them until we're near enough to see what we're shooting at."

Railroad ties had been piled up so as to form an effective breastwork. It was Wilkes' plan to fire from behind it until they had cleared the afterdeck of the *Nathaniel Green*, then make fast to her and let the other boats swing in broadside.

"That may be a good idea, Colquitt," Pawnee spoke up after eying scow that the other boat had been pushing, "but if they've got a dozen or two men hidden out on that flat, we're goin' to run into trouble."

"He's right, Wilkes," Ben agreed. The scow had swung down so that with the freighter it formed an inverted V. "We'll be a lot better of if we go

in broadside and board her from stem to stern at the same time."

The logic of his point impressed Wilkes, and he gave the necessary orders to the pilothouse at once.

By now a shower of slugs was slapping into the ties. A splinter of wood struck Abe Hawley's face and cut it open.

"Damn the dirty skunk that did that!" the giant Abe roared. "How much longer we goin' wait, Ben, before we show them hombres we know somethin' about makin' a gun buck?"

"Let 'em have it!" Wingate called out.

The first withering blast broke up the pattern of the shooting aboard the *Nathaniel Green*. The Colquitt boat was less than a hundred yards away by now. Behind her came the other steamboats, closely bunched.

Though Ben had brought only a handful of men with him, they were tried men who were no strangers to the smell of burning gunpowder. Spurred on by them, the rivermen raised their own cry of vengeance, and as the boats touched, they swarmed over the ties to the deck of the *Nathaniel Green* without waiting for any order.

Above the rattle of gunfire and the shouting of the men rose Abe Hawley's shrill Indian cry. He was using his rifle as a club, bashing heads right and left.

Ben jumped up on the barricade a step behind Wilkes. He caught him roughly and swung him around. "This is as far as you're going, Wilkes!" he cried. "You stay here! We're taking care of the rest of this!"

With a swipe of his arm he drove Wilkes back to the deck and leaped into the fight.

Wilkes picked himself up, his thin young face livid with wrath. He had no intention of holding back and letting Ben and the others fight his battle. He felt one of the following boats nudge into the rail. Reinforcements sprang aboard at once. As they ran

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up the deck, he cleared the piled ties and sprang into the fray.

SLACK and his cohorts were fighting fiercely. When their empty guns were knocked out of their hands, they came back swinging their fists. But weight of numbers began to force them to give ground. Slack had placed a dozen of his men on the scow, as Pawnee had suspected. They found themselves cut off now, for the little man and several others had raced up a rear companionway to the upper deck, from which position they had them at their mercy. The men on the scow began to drop into the water.

Down below, the fight was moving toward the bow of the steamboat. Ben caught a glimpse of hook-nosed Bill Slack. Big Abe was after the notorious gun-slinger. He clipped him a glancing blow that slammed the man's head against a stanchion. Slack snapped his empty gun in Abe's face and then turned and ran up the forward stairway to the upper deck.

Ben and Hawley smashed two men out of the way and were ready to race after Slack, when Wilkes Colquitt flashed past them and dashed up the stairs. Ben yelled at him to come back; he knew Slack had had time to reload.

"Why did he have to get into this?" Ben groaned. "I tried to keep him out of it!"

The words were hardly cold on his lips when a gun roared up above. He heard someone drop. The next moment his eyes were torn wide as he saw Wilkes roll down the stairs, his coat spattered with blood. He lay there, eyes closed.

Ben jammed fresh cartridges into his gun. "Come on, Abe!" he cried. "We're going up there after that rat!"

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