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Editor
JOHN BURR

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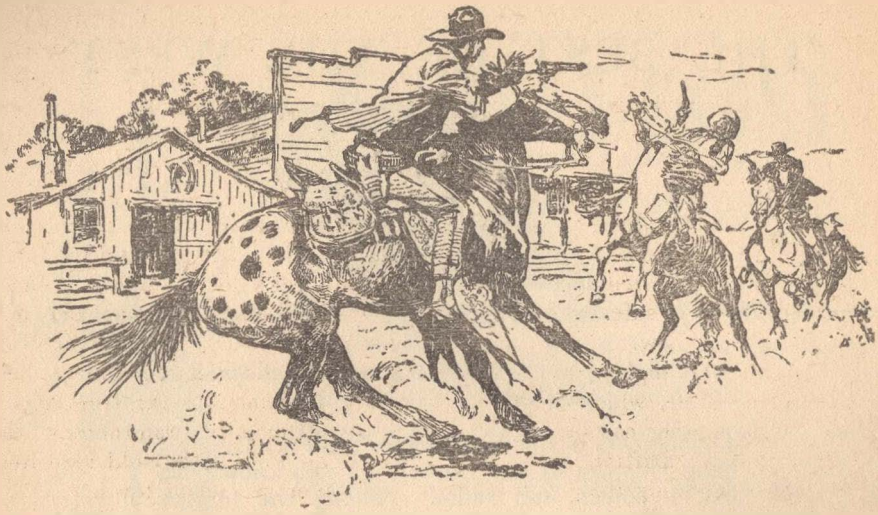


OUTLAWS MAKE DIM TRACKS

by WALT COBURN

The owlhoot threatened doom for Pete Rust unless he hid his back trail with swirling gun smoke

I

IT was called the Hideaway and few men outside the Wild Bunch knew its exact location and how to get in or out of the place. Anyone not knowing the Hideaway could ride within a hundred yards of the layout without ever knowing it was there.

There was a small log cabin, a corral and a log barn large enough to hold half a dozen horses. The cabin held a cache of grub and cartridges, the barn was stacked with hay.

The Hideaway was a few hours' ride from Landusky, Montana, in the

Little Rockies, at the edge of the badlands. Pete Rust, hiding out there now, had found the place by accident. Found it when he was sorely in need of a safe hide-out. And it was only when he read the names of the famous renegades who made up the Wild Bunch, carved by jackknife in the heavy plank door and log walls, that he realized where he was. And that he was safe from the long reach of John Law.

Up until last night Pete Rust had been plenty free, white and twenty-one. Just another careless, reckless, happy-go-lucky drifting cowpuncher. He had been riding the rough string for the Bear Paw Pool when that outfit finished its spring calf roundup. With money in his pockets, Pete had headed for Landusky to take in the Fourth of July celebration.

Fourth of July at Landusky was wild and woolly. Pete Rust had won the bronc riding. Then he had won a matched steer-roping contest. And it was from there that trouble began brewing for Pete. Because he had edged out Joe Lasker in the bronc riding, and Lasker's Rail L outfit claimed that the judges were drunk or had been fixed and that big Joe Lasker had won first money, like he usually did, in the saddle bronc riding.

Joe Lasker, sore about the decision and certain of his roping skill, had prodded Pete Rust into the matched steer roping. They had roped five steers apiece. Neither man had broken the barrier or committed any fouls. Three stop watches can't lie. Even the sorest-headed Rail L cowpuncher could not find anything to holler about when the husky, freckled Pete Rust and his line-backed buckskin roping horse had not only beaten Joe Lasker but had come near tying the world champion time.

But Joe Lasker of the Rail L was a bad loser. Landusky and the Little Rockies were his stomping ground. Drunk or sober, he was big and tough and ornery. And by nightfall that big black-haired, black-mustached cowman was far from sober.

Tom Donnelly, ramrodding the Bear Paw Pool outfit, told Pete Rust he'd better get out of town.

"Lasker's on the prod, Pete. He's bigger'n a skinned mule and ornery as snake tracks an' he's got a notch or two cut on that white-handled gun he's packin'. You kin take a bottle out to camp if you promise not to git the cook drunk. Saddle up an' pull out before that big spur jingler crowds you into a tight."

Pete had grinned and shaken his head. "They don't come big enough, Tom, or bad enough, to make Pete Rust rabbit."

Pete stood five feet eight without his boots on. He was wide of shoulder and thick-chested, quick as a young mountain lion on his saddle-hardened bowed legs. His square, blunt-jawed, short-nosed freckled face was clean shaven. A barber had trimmed his wiry, rust-colored hair and Pete had taken a hot soapy bath and put on clean clothes.

"There's a dance," Pete told the Bear Paw Pool wagon boss. "I'm goin' to cut a few pigeon wings with

that purty palomino-haired schoolmarm. Mebbyso if my luck holds out, she'll dance 'Home Sweet Home' with me."

"Her name is Jessie Wier," Donnelly had told Pete, measuring each word carefully. "Her old man has the blacksmith shop and the feed and livery barn. She's bin away at college. Now she's back here teachin' school. She flirts with all the cowpunchers that ride down good horses comin' to spark 'er. But Joe Lasker claims that Jessie Wier is his girl. . . . I can't think of no better or quicker way for you to git gut-shot."

"I don't pack a gun to pound fence staples with, Tom," Pete had told the Bear Paw Pool ramrod.

Every time Pete danced with Jessie Wier, big Joe Lasker left the schoolhouse where the dance was being held. And outside were always a bunch of Rail L cowhands with a bottle of forty-rod Injun whiskey.

The fiddlers had quit playing about midnight. There was a long table piled with fancy grub brought by the women-folks. Pots of strong black coffee were ready.

Pete had grown bolder. The little schoolmarm with tawny golden hair and eyes so dark brown they looked black under thick black lashes, had nodded and smiled when Pete asked her to eat supper with him. Pete had won the bronc riding and matched roping. He was riding his glory, high wide and handsome. And he was a far better dancer than the big, tipsy, slow-footed Joe Lasker.

"I'll fill our plates and cups, Pete." Jessie had smiled into his eyes.

Pete, sweating from the last dance, had gone outside to wash up and cool off a little. All during the first part of the night he had ignored the glowering scowls of big Joe Lasker. But he could not side-step the big, half-drunken cowman who barred his way there in the cloakroom that was like a wide hall connecting the large schoolroom with the big front door.

Joe Lasker swung hard at Pete Rust's head. The husky bronc rider had ducked and tripped the lunging cowman. Hooked Lasker with a short, vicious uppercut as the big black-haired cowman staggered off balance.

Joe Lasker had gone down with a heavy crash. Blood spurted from his nose. He rolled over on his hands and knees and onto his feet. The white-handled six-shooter in his hand spewing a streak of fire. The bullet had barely grazed Pete Rust's ribs.

Pete had jerked his gun and fired from the level of his cartridge belt. His bullet had knocked Joe Lasker down and Lasker's next bullet plowed harmlessly into the floor. Then Lasker had slumped over on his face and lay there without moving.

Pete Rust, the flushed color drained from his face so that his mass of freckles was a black smear, was no longer grinning, and his narrowed eyes were slits of green ice. His smoking gun threatened the Rail L cowpunchers as he reached with his left hand for his hat that hung on the wall.

"Lasker asked for what he got!" Pete Rust's voice had been a rasping whisper. "I don't want to kill nobody else. But I'll shoot my way out o' here if you crowd me."

The Bear Paw Pool cowpunchers backed Pete Rust's getaway. Outside Tom Donnelly told him his buckskin horse was saddled and tied in behind the brush along the creek.

"I had a hunch you'd need your pony for just such a gitaway, Pete. Travel fast an' a long ways. Because you'll hang if they ketch yuh. I'll spread the news careful that you're from Canada an' likely headed for the Canadian line. So long and good luck, Pete."

"Say good-by for me," Pete had grinned flatly, "to Jessie." He had pawed through the brush to where his horse was saddled and waiting.

So Pete Rust had headed south. Southward towards the badlands along the Missouri River. And just about daybreak he had ridden down a faint and trackless trail and fetched up at the Hideaway.

II

The place was deserted. He had watered and fed his sweat-marked, leg-weary buckskin horse, which he called the Zebra Dun. There was no recent horse sign at the corral or in the barn where he had stabled his horse. Nobody at the log cabin where he found grub and cartridges and even tobacco. And the cobwebs and dust told him that nobody had been here for a long time.

The whiskey had died out inside him and his excitement had cooled off. There was a cold lump inside his empty belly and his cowpuncher heart was heavy with regret and the dread of the days and weeks and months and years to come—if he lived that long. That gun scrape had made Pete Rust an outlaw. He had killed a man.

Certainly, Joe Lasker had crowded him into that gun fight. Pete had shot in self-defense, to keep from being killed. But he had a cowpuncher's dread and distrust of the law and its courts of so-called justice. The Rail L money would send a forty-a-month cowhand to the pen at Deer Lodge for life, or hang him. Pete Rust had never been locked up in a jail. Prison would soon kill a cowpuncher like Pete Rust. He'd rather hang. But he didn't aim to go to the pen or hang for killing a big ornery snake like Joe Lasker.

The grub Pete cooked up tasted like so much sawdust. Even the strong black coffee tasted bitter as gall. He found a jug of whiskey but shoved the cork back in the jug's neck without even a taste of it.

Pete spent the day at the Hideaway. If the place was as safe as it was said to be, no law posse would find him here. His horse needed a day's rest. Come dark, he'd saddle up and pull out.

Pete studied the names carved there on the door. He wondered what those outlaws were like and how they had gotten started along the Outlaw Trail. He'd heard a lot about the Wild Bunch. The Little Rockies were their stomping ground. They had

shot up that little mining camp and cow town of Landusky more than once. Kid Moran had killed Pike Duskland, a tough old cattleman. The Moran boys had ranches near the Little Rockies. They had many friends and a few enemies around this part of Montana. Joe Lasker was one of Kid Moran's enemies. Lasker and his partner Hoyt Cunningham had been friends of the late Pike Duskland. That is, Lasker and Duskland had been friends. Cunningham was a dude who had come west to Montana and bought the Rail L Ranch after the hard winter had wiped Lasker out. It was Hoyt Cunningham's big money that had bought more cattle to restock the blizzard-swept range. But Joe Lasker was running the outfit, and cow-country gossip had it that Lasker was getting his outfit back, one way or another, from the gullible tenderfoot who was his trusting pardner.

The law posse hunting for Kid Moran after the Kid killed Duskland had stayed at the Rail L Ranch while they rode down Rail L horses in a vain hunt for the hard-riding, quick-triggered Kid Moran.

Even now the cow country claimed that Lasker and Hoyt Cunningham were harboring a famous range detective whose real name was Riddle, a ruthless man hunter, one of the country's shrewdest and toughest cowpuncher range detectives. Riddle was said to be working now for the Rail L outfit, under an assumed name.

A forty-a-month bronc-riding cowpuncher like Pete Rust was just small game for a man hunter like Riddle. But Hoyt Cunningham would send Riddle out on Pete's trail. He'd put a big price on Pete's rusty red head.

If any man outside the Wild Bunch knew the location of the Hideaway, that man was Riddle.

Pete Rust needed some sleep. But a wolf doesn't sleep when the hound pack is on the prowl. Pete drank more black coffee. The cabin was down in a deep cut coulee. Cabin and barn and corral hidden from sight under the overhanging ridges. Pete found an almost new .30-30 saddle carbine and plenty of cartridges. He went on foot to a place near the top of the steep trail. But before he took his stand behind some brush he went up the trail and wiped out the few places where the shod hoofs of his horse had left tracks coming down the rocky slant. Then he spent the rest of the day on guard.

Several times he sighted little scattered bunches of riders. The law was hunting Pete Rust. Once, about half a dozen Rail L cowpunchers, all packing saddle guns, rode so near that he could read the brands on their sweaty horses. He crouched, tense as a coiled rattler, ready to die fighting. When they had ridden on, he wiped cold sweat from the palms of his hands and from his forehead. And long after they were out of sight he was remembering bits of their talk.

" . . . for five thousand bucks, misters, I'd gut-shoot my old white-haired granny—"

"Bounty money like that don't grow on buckbrush. I'd git me my own iron, marry a purty gal an' settle down to the life of Riley—"

That was the hound pack hunting the wolf for its bounty.

The July day was hot and sultry but Pete Rust shivered a little. It wasn't exactly fear. It was just that sick empty feeling a man gets when his whole world has been smashed and can't ever be gathered up and put back together again. When his hopes and dreams are gone and his life is as empty as a sack. When he is no longer free to ride out in the open. He'll have to keep looking back across his shoulder, ready to run. Run until he's played out. Then make his last stand. Pete Rust had lost all and everything he held dear in life. Freedom and the right to ride where he pleased. His man's right to mingle with other men. Pete Rust was an outlaw now with a bounty on his freckled hide.

It was getting dusk when Pete made his way back down the trail. There was a storm coming. The storm that had been gathering for the past week or two. Those hot, sultry days were going to pay off tonight with a black thunder-and-lightning storm.

Darkness came suddenly. Right after a twilight that was black before Pete Rust reached the cabin. Sheet lightning spread across the black sky. Thunder rumbled and rolled across the badlands. Chain lightning ripped the black sky apart. The rain came with a wind that tore like a tornado down the deep-cut coulee. The storm was in full blast before Pete got his supper fire started in the little sheet-iron stove.

Pete had waited up there on the trail as long as he could see to line his sights. As long as there was a chance of stopping any posse riders who found the trail down to the Hideaway. Now the big storm had caught him here before he had time to cook and eat supper, saddle his horse and pull out under the cover of darkness.

It would be senseless to start out on an empty belly. Foolish to pull out in the middle of that storm. The rain was a wind-driven wall of water out there now. His horse was watered and there was a manger full of hay. Let the storm wear its fury out. Then he'd get on his way. There would still be enough rain coming down to wash out the tracks left by his horse. And those posse riders would be holed up somewhere out of the rain. They wouldn't be in the saddle again until daybreak. Not even the bounty hunter Riddle could find a man on a night like this.

But Pete covered the cabin's one window with a piece of old tarp before he lit the lantern. The almost steady rumble of thunder and the crashing of striking lightning took his mind off his worries. There is something about a heavy electrical storm that gathers the undivided attention of a man, even if he has no more than the average person's fear of being struck by lightning.

Before the full force of the storm reached the Hideaway, Pete Rust had

cooked and wolfed down a hot supper. He washed and wiped the dishes and rolled a smoke.

There was a tarp-covered bed on one of the four double bunks and it looked tempting. But tonight was Pete's night to drift yonderly. He wanted to be forty-fifty miles away from here by sunrise. He drank another cup of coffee. Then a sudden notion twisted his wide mouth in a flat-lipped grin. He opened the blade of his staghorn-handled stockknife and carved his name deep into the soft pine plank door. To one side and below the carved names of the Moran boys and the Wild Bunch. PETE RUST. Bold as a new brand. There for whoever came here to find.

He had finished the job and was putting his knife back into his pants pocket when he heard, or thought he heard, a horse nicker.

III

Such cowpuncher chores as calf and steer roping and handling a mean fighting bronc train a man for split-second thinking and action. Pete Rust slid the steel bar into place across the door and blew out the lantern light and was crouched beside the canvas-curtained window, his six-shooter gripped in his hand, without a lost or wasted motion.

Tense, nerves taut, he crouched there against the log wall and listened. He could feel the hammering of his heart and the pulsing of blood in his corded throat. It was dark inside the cabin now, only the faint red glow of dying coals visible through the slotted side draft damper of the little sheet-iron camp stove in the corner.

But up until a few seconds ago Pete had been an easy target for a bushwhacker bullet. The lantern light inside the cabin would have made the canvas-covered window visible to a man outside. And a man hunter could have worked out the mud and straw daubing between the logs with the blade of a jackknife, the crash of thunder covering any small sounds made by the loosening of the daubing and chinking. Until a gap between the logs had been gouged out. A space big enough for a peephole for a gun barrel. Then that gun would spew bright flame and its leaden slug would rip through flesh and bone. Pete Rust's broad-shouldered back as he stood there carving his name on the closed door had been a target that could not be missed. Men inside locked log cabins, with the windows well blanketed, have been murdered like that. Pete had heard stories about such killings. . . .

The bunks were on each side of the cabin. The wall opposite the door was where the window was. Right where Pete Rust now crouched. He took a quick step back along the wall, sucking in his breath sharply. He had felt a thin draft of cold air with rain in it. His left hand moved cautiously along the log wall near the window until he located the place. The window was high. About shoulder high for a man inside the cabin. Head high to any six-foot man standing outside. A thoughtful and

winter-wise builder had made that window high on account of the snow that drifted against the cabin, so that it would take more than a six-foot snowdrift to cover the window.

Below the window sill was the place where somebody out there in the storm-filled night had gouged away the mud daubing and pulled out a short twelve- or sixteen-inch length of wooden chinking between the logs. Leaving an open strip that long and perhaps two or three inches wide between the logs. Wind-driven rain was coming in now through that slit and Pete thought he could hear cautious sounds out there in the night. He stooped and groped around on the floor. His hand found loose dirt and a chunk of the daubing of mud with straw mixed in it to hold it together. It felt wet. That meant it had been knocked loose since the rain began, and was not an old break in the daubing.

That cinched it. Somebody had sighted the light of the canvas-covered window, crept up on the cabin, worked loose a strip of chinking and mud daubing. That man had stood out there in the rain and lightning-ripped darkness and peered in at Pete Rust. Perhaps that man had been ready to shoot Pete in the back when his horse had nickered and Pete had moved so suddenly that the would-be killer had been cheated of his target.

There was a flash of white lightning that changed the cabin's darkness into glaring light. Pete crouched back against the log wall and away from the window, sweating now as he realized he was trapped, caught like a hunted animal in a box trap. Every vivid white flash of lightning turned his sheltering darkness into glaring light. All that bushwhacker out there had to do now was wait with his gun cocked for a quick snap shot. Pete was at the mercy of any such quick-triggered man hunter as Riddle.

Pete Rust had a cowpuncher's share of courage. But to be trapped and at the mercy of a cold-blooded killer such as this bounty hunter, Riddle, was supposed to be, that was something that the bravest man on earth could not endure without fear crawling inside his belly.

Better, then, to get outside. Take the showdown out to the man who was gunning for him. Out there in the black night and the rain and lightning. Make it a dodging, hide-and-find game and the devil take the slow-triggered loser.

Pete started for the door. Crouched, groping his way in the darkness. Then an almost blinding white glare turned the blackness into such vivid light that his carved name on the door stood out like some sinister warning and he tore his gaze from it and whirled, crouching there in the middle of the cabin, his cocked six-shooter in his hand. And in that glaring light he saw the end of a gun barrel poked through that slit between the logs.

He took a shot at the gun barrel and saw a short streak of orange yellow flame spit from its muzzle. Above the roar of his own gun and

that other gun he heard the sharp ugly whine of a bullet as it struck the top of the sheet-iron stove and ricocheted off a stove lid and thudded into the log wall. And he thought he heard the cracking of the gun outside but no streak of flame came from that gun shoved through the chinking. Instead, the visible few inches of gun barrel tilted and jerked crazily. And then the thunder crashed and the glaring light was gone and the darkness inside the cabin was pitch black. Only Pete's eyes were still half-blinded by the white glare and his darkness was like a shutter blinking off and on.

Pete Rust thought he heard a man groaning out there in the night and the groan choked into a rattling cough. Then silence except for the rumble of dying thunder and the pouring drip of water from the cabin's sod roof onto the muddy ground.

There was no use wasting time in here. Pete remembered the .30-30 saddle carbine he had laid on the tarp-covered bunk. His groping hand found it and two boxes of cartridges beside the carbine. He shoved the cartridges into his pants pockets, picked up the saddle gun and made for the door.

Then Pete Rust's world exploded. It was a great ball of white fire that exploded like a powder blast. Blinding him. Knocking him flat on his back. There was a brassy sulphur taste in his mouth and a million tiny balls of white fire blinding him.

Thunder boomed and crashed and the lightning struck again, not far away, and a hoarse croaking scream tore from his tight throat. He was cringing and shivering and it was only when the lightning flash was gone and a healing darkness enveloped him that he got back onto his feet where he had gone down on all-fours. He was empty-handed when he slid back the heavy wooden bar and yanked the door open and stumbled unsteadily out into the cold deluge of wind-driven black rain. His knees buckled and he sagged down on all fours in the mud and water and then crawled like some hurt and bewildered animal in behind a long pile of cordwood. And for a long time he sat there, his back leaning against the ends of the cordwood box, until the cold rain drenched him and he was chilled to the bone.

Pete Rust would never know how long he stayed there, crouched beside the pile of cordwood, until his brain cleared and he was able to move away. He realized with a sudden jolt that he had no gun. He had left the saddle gun and his six-shooter in the cabin. And his hat was in there.

He went back into the cabin and by the time he had found his two guns and his hat he had more control over his lightning-shattered nerves. He went outside and around the cabin. Crouched there at the corner of the cabin, he waited until the next lightning flash.

It showed him what he half expected to find. A dead man lay sprawled there on the muddy ground below the cabin window where he had gouged out the chinking between

the logs—and Pete Rust had to have a look at that dead man.

It was a grisly sort of business, crouching there in the dark, waiting for the flare of lightning. Then it was sheet lightning and it lasted several seconds. Long enough to show Pete that the dead man was a stranger. And that he had been shot in the back and the bullet had torn out an ugly, gaping hole in the dead man's ribs.

The man's face was marred by a week or ten days' stubble of yellow whiskers. The color of his skin was grayish-white, with no trace of weathered tan or sunburn. It wasn't the face of an outdoor man. If this was the man hunter Riddle, then he had been dodging the sun or been sick in bed. It was a long, lantern-jawed face, hollow-cheeked and the open eyes were deep sunken in bluish-gray sockets, a pale faded-blue color. Blue or pale gray.

And the dead man's clothes were something to puzzle Pete's bewildered brain. A cheap white cotton shirt. And a cheap suit of coat and pants, dark blue in color. The shirt was dirty and the cheap clothes looked as though they had been slept in, and all were rain-sodden. The man's hat was a cheap gray fedora with a wide black band. A town hat no cowpuncher would ever buy, drunk or sober.

It took perhaps half a dozen flashes of lightning to tell Pete Rust all this. The man had a filled cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter buckled around his lean middle. A brand-new belt and holster and six-shooter. The saddle carbine lying in the mud, the gun that had been poked through the slit between the logs, looked as though it had just come from the hardware store.

Crouching there in the darkness, Pete held the dead man's hat in his hand. He waited for the next flash of lightning. When it came he stared hard at the store's name inside the hat. Printed in gilt letters on the sweatband. It came from a clothing store at Deer Lodge, Montana. The State prison was at Deer Lodge.

Pete Rust waited for the next flare of sheet lightning. He stared into the dead man's face. When the lightning was gone, he lifted the mud and rain-sodden body and carried it into the cabin and laid it on an empty bunk. Then he left the cabin, closing the door behind him.

The dead man's clothes and his gray-white pallor told Pete that he had just been released from prison at Deer Lodge. There was no time to dig a grave and give the dead man a decent burial. The Hideaway cabin would have to be the ex-convict's tomb. The devil of a way to mess up the cabin. But Pete had to get the body put somewhere away from prowling varmints.

IV

The barn was about fifty yards from the cabin. It was time for Pete Rust to get saddled and on his way. And somewhere was the dead man's saddled horse that had to be found and unsaddled and turned loose.

Pete found the horse when the lightning flared again. It stood humped up, rump to the wind and rain. A sorrel horse. Pete unsaddled it and jerked off the bridle in the dark, turning the horse free. There was a yellow slicker tied on the saddle. Pete Rust was already sopping wet. But he wouldn't get wet the next time it rained. He lugged the saddle to the barn and inside, out of the driving rain, he yanked loose the knotted saddle strings and started to unroll the slicker. It was bulky. Too bulky. Working in the dark, Pete's hands found a canvas sack that held something. The mouth of the sack was closed by a leather string. He yanked it loose and shoved his hand inside. His lips puckered in a soundless whistle. Then he got a round metal match box from his pocket and lit one of the dry matches and by its flickering light examined what he'd found in the sack wrapped in the dead man's slicker. And here was the reason why the ex-convict had left his new yellow saddle slicker tied on his saddle instead of wearing it.

Sheaf after sheaf of crisp, new banknotes held together with paper tape. Tens, twenties, and some sheaves of hundred-dollar banknotes. Pete Rust's hands shook a little as he shoved the money back into the canvas sacks, tied it, wrapped it in the new yellow slicker and tied the package on his own saddle.

He saddled his horse. Then he remembered the gunny sack at the cabin that he had partly filled with what grub he had planned to take along. He hated to go back to the cabin but he had to have that grub. He led his saddled horse from the stall and groped his way in the darkness towards the barn door.

In the darkness he miscalculated the direction of the closed door. And that was how he happened to stumble over the man lying there to one side and just inside the barn door.

Pete Rust dropped down on the limp form, his six-shooter ready to swing as a club. But the man did not move. He lay there, limp as a corpse. Pete straddled the slicker-clad figure and struck another match. And this time he was rewarded by a face he recognized.

The man was a Rail L cowpuncher who had been repping with the Bear Paw Pool calf roundup, representing the interests of Joe Lasker and Hoyt Cunningham. The Rail L rep was a small, wiry, quick-moving man with coarse straight black hair and hawk-beaked nose and the bleakest pair of pale steel-gray eyes Pete Rust had ever looked into. He called himself Jim Smith and one day when the sheriff drove up in a buckboard with a jug and a box of cigars, campaigning the cow country for votes, Jim Smith rode away from the day herd and never came back to camp. A couple of days later a new Rail L rep had showed up. He said he reckoned from what Hoyt Cunningham had hinted that this Jim Smith was on the dodge and he'd coyoted when he sighted the sheriff.

There was a saddle gun gripped in Jim Smith's right hand. He looked dead but there was not a bullet mark

or blood on him. But the hand that held the carbine was burnt a greenish-brown and the man's black hair and drooping black mustache were badly singed. And Pete Rust decided that the terrific lightning bolt that must have struck somewhere between the cabin and barn had killed the Rail L rep who called himself Jim Smith.

It was too bewildering right now for Pete's aching brain. A lightning flare showed a saddled horse in the back stall. Until now Pete hadn't seen the horse because he hadn't been looking for one.

Pete rode on to the cabin and got his sack of grub. There was a close-mouthed old rascal down on the Missouri River. Old Tex Alvord. He ran the ferry at Rocky Point. Pete would tell Tex there were two dead men at the Hideaway. Just that and no more. And he'd give a hundred dollars of his bronc-riding winnings to seal old Tex's white-bearded mouth.

Pete was closing the cabin door when he heard the sloshing thump of shod hoofs. Then a man on horseback riding away from the barn into the rain-filled darkness. A fast-moving blot of horse and man bent low across his saddlehorn.

When Pete got to the barn the hatchet-faced, bleak-eyed Jim Smith he'd left for dead was gone. Gone also was the saddled horse from the rear stall.

A sort of panic gripped Pete Rust then. He mounted his big Zebra Dun and rode away from the barn, his saddle gun in his hand and ready to shoot. The man called Jim Smith had ridden down the long-cut coulee. Pete took the only trail out, the steep trail that climbed the long slant to the top of the overhanging ridge. He had to let the big buckskin stop a couple or three times to blow. Eyes and ears strained, Pete gripped his carbine. But there was no sign of pursuit. No shouted challenge from above.

It was when the big gelding had his second wind and was traveling south through the gumbo mud of the badlands ridges that Pete Rust began to figure out things. At first they were like scattered bits of a puzzle and even when he got some of them pieced together there were missing parts.

One thing he was certain of. He had not killed that man outside the cabin window. The man had been shot in the back. Jim Smith, there at the barn, had done that little cold-blooded killing chore.

It looked as though Jim Smith and the ex-convict both knew the location of the Hideaway well enough to find it on a black, stormy night. Or else one of them had followed the other man here. The Rail L rep was said to be a renegade on the dodge. The man he'd shot was an ex-convict with a South American stake tied in his saddle slicker. Perhaps they had been pardners in crime. And renegades have a nasty habit of getting into gun disputes over the division of their stolen loot.

Kid Moran was supposed to have a big cache of train robbery money

hidden out somewhere around the Little Rockies. Cow-camp talk said there was better than eighty thousand dollars, a lot of it incomplete or unsigned currency from the Wagner, Montana, train robbery. It had been divided among the five train robbers. Kid Moran was believed to have cached his share somewhere near here. The banknotes had to be signed by some clever forger before the money could be put into circulation. The money in the slicker now tied on Pete's saddle was so new it crackled. It could easily be a part of the Wagner booty. But who was the dead ex-convict and how had he gotten hold of that money in the canvas sack? And had the Rail L rep trailed him to the Hideaway or had they come together? Pete had no answer to that one.

One thing was certain. The ex-convict was dead. Shot in the back. Jim Smith, the Rail L rep, had been stunned, knocked out cold by that heavy lightning that had knocked Pete out. And like Pete, the Rail L rep had come alive, bewildered, spooky, panicky. And his first and one overpowering urge was to get his horse and ride away from the barn. He'd come back to the cabin and barn when he recovered from his lightning shock. He'd find the ex-convict's murdered body in the cabin. The big buckskin gelding he must have seen there in the stall an hour ago would be gone. Pete Rust, owner of the horse, vanished in the night. And if the Rail F rep who called himself Jim Smith knew about the money wrapped in the ex-convict's slicker, and if he had shot the man in the back to get that money, then he was going to be in an ugly humor.

It was not until Pete Rust had taxed his aching and bewildered brain to its exhausted limit that a new notion came. As clear as that patch of stars that showed in the sky where the black cloud was breaking into big scudding chunks.

That hatchet-faced, bleak-eyed Rail L rep who was said to be on the dodge. Hoyt Cunningham did not hire or did he allow Joe Lasker to hire a man who might be any kind of a renegade on the dodge. But it was hinted around that the law-loving dude whose money owned the Rail L outfit was harboring the bounty hunter Riddle. Riddle was a cowboy range detective who could be using the name Jim Smith and posing as a renegade on the dodge. Perhaps Sheriff Ike Tabor, campaigning for votes, knew Riddle by sight. And Riddle would have no wish to be spotted by the sheriff who had once punched cows with the Moran boys. Sheriff Tabor had no use for the big, tough, spur-jingling Joe Lasker or his dude partner Hoyt Cunningham. And like most cow-country peace officers who wore their badges pinned outside their vests and not to their undershirts, he had a poor opinion of range detectives who pawned themselves off as cowhands or even as cowpuncher outlaws on the dodge. Sheriff Ike Tabor had voiced his own open opinion of the bounty hunter Riddle who fetched

'em in dead. And Tom Donnelly was quitting his wagon-boss job with the Bear Paw Pool to take a job as deputy sheriff under Sheriff Tabor. All that would explain why the Rail L rep who called himself Jim Smith had ridden away from the Pool day herd and never showed up again. He was Riddle, the bounty hunter.

Pete Rust followed this new trail of thought. It was a dim sort of trail. Suppose Riddle, who was hanging around the Little Rockies in hopes of cutting the sign of Kid Moran or some of the Wild Bunch, had been tipped off that a convict paroled or pardoned out of the Deer Lodge pen was going to lift the Kid Moran cache? Supposing further that the cache was there at the Hideaway? Riddle had trailed the ex-convict to the Hideaway.

The ex-convict had lifted the cache and tied it in his slicker on the back of his saddle. Then had investigated the light inside the cabin. And while he was watching Pete Rust, a stranger to him, carving his name on the cabin door, perhaps fixing to kill Pete, the watching bounty hunter, Riddle, had gotten trigger itchy and had deliberately shot the man in the back. And less than a minute later the lightning had struck, knocking Riddle out. That seemed reasonable enough to Pete Rust's way of figuring. He let it go at that and drifted on through the badlands.

Somewhere along the trail, he decided to cross the Missouri River at the Rocky Point Crossing. He had been there before. He knew and liked the white-whiskered, slow-spoken old Tex Alvord who had a saloon there and ran the ferry. And right now Pete Rust was sorely in need of somebody to talk to, someone he could trust.

V

There were red streaks in the gray dawn when Pete Rust reached the Rocky Point Crossing. A new sort of caution, the vigilance of a hunted man, prompted him to pull up behind the screen of willows and look the place over before he rode up to the log barn or cabin or the pole corral. And even when he could detect no sign of life around the place, he waited, watching, listening.

He heard the click of oarlocks and dip of oars in the water and then he saw Tex rowing ashore in his rowboat. Pete knew he had been looking at his trot line, taking the night's catch of catfish off the hooks and baiting the empty hooks on the stout trot line stretched across the river. Pete rode down to the edge of the willows and hailed Tex as he tied up his boat.

Tex's sharp blue eyes peered from under shaggy brows. His grin was slow, like his drawling speech. He told Pete Rust to put up his horse. There was catfish for breakfast and did Pete savvy how to skin a catfish? And what had blowed up in Pete's face to black it thataway? That was the first Pete Rust knew about his lightning-singed hair and scorched skin.

"I kind o' got struck by lightnin', Tex. It must've bin a close call."

Tex had a barrel of good whiskey

at the saloon but Pete Rust shook his head at the invitation to have one on the house. He said he was caught up with his likker. And after a hearty catfish breakfast Pete told old Tex about shooting Joe Lasker. How he had stumbled onto the Hideaway and what had happened there. And once he started talking, he kept on. He held nothing back.

"I got it figgered that Jim Smith is that feller Riddle that wears a law badge pinned to his undershirt. The other man was wearin' prison duds. Riddle shot him in the back. But I've got that money tied in my slicker. What'll I do with it, Tex?"

It seemed like an hour before the slow-spoken Tex answered the question. You couldn't hurry the white-whiskered old rascal. And he got around to it in his own devious way.

Tex said that the cow country should give Pete Rust a rawhide medal for shooting Joe Lasker, then jail him for not killing Hoyt Cunningham while he was at it. That blasted dude tenderfoot had tried to send Tex to the pen for butchering a Rail L beef.

"He had a hell of a nerve," growled old Tex. "That meat was tougher'n an ol' boot. Anyhow they couldn't dive deep enough in the river to fetch up the hide."

Tex said the dead ex-convict might be Long Hank. Hank Jones. Long Hank had been doing a few years at Deer Lodge for butchering Rail L beef and selling the meat to a Landusky butcher. He was about due to come out, with time lopped off his sentence for good behavior. Tex had one of Long Hank's prison-made horsehair bridles hanging behind the bar. It was the third one he'd raffled off for Long Hank. There were five chances left. Chances ran from a cent to a dollar. Did Pete want to buy a raffle ticket?

Pete bought the five remaining tickets. Tex said the drawing of the lucky ticket would take place next week but that, like as not, Pete wouldn't want to hang around that long. He'd be pulling out for a country that fit his clothes.

Long Hank knew the location of the Hideaway. Until he'd been sent to the pen, he had put up the wild hay there in the little meadow below the cabin. He'd taken the mower and rake and hay wagon down to the Hideaway, piece by piece on stout pack horses. Even drunk, Long Hank had always been close-mouthed. Men like Kid Moran had trusted him. Could be that the Kid had buried his share of the train robbery money in a haystack Long Hank had built.

"You got that money, Pete," Tex finally got around to it. "You might as well hang onto it till the Kid or one of the Wild Bunch locate you. Don't try to pass any of it. No man that ever done Kid Moran a favor thataway ever lost by the deal."

Old Tex said that the hatchet-faced, gimlet-eyed Jim Smith was Riddle, all right. He had stopped at the Crossing, claiming to be on the dodge. But he didn't have the right answers to the cunningly put questions Tex had asked him while they were drinking across Tex's whiskey-stained pine-board bar. But

Tex hadn't let on. And he'd filled the range detective with a bellyful of lies. Old Tex chuckled and poured himself a drink.

The sun was still high in the sky when Tex told Pete Rust he had better pull out before Riddle showed up. And when that bounty hunter got here Tex would handle him. He'd take that range detective on a snipe hunt. Leave him in the badlands holding open an empty sack and a lighted lantern to attract the snipe into the open sack. He'd break that son of a snake from tryin' to smell out sign at Rock Point Crossin'.

"Change your name to Peters," old Tex told Pete. "On account of that red hair of yourn, let 'em call you Rusty. So's the Kid will be lookin' fer Rusty Peters. Now here's a list of outfits scattered down through Wyomin' and Utah and Arizona and New Mexico that you kin hire out to."

Squatting on his boot heels on the ground, old Tex leveled off the dirt with the horny palm of his hand and marked a list of brands in the dirt with a stick he had whittled to a point. And when Pete had memorized the brands and location of the outfits, Tex erased the brands in the dirt and got to his feet.

He staked Pete to a stout fresh horse. "Lead your own dun pony. Ride this big brown geldin'. Come dark, give 'im his head an' he'll take you to his home ranch. A feller borrowed the big brown a while back. You're fetchin' the geldin' back, savvy? He's your ticket to the first stop along the Outlaw Trail. His owner will stake you to another 'borrowed' horse. You kin travel thataway, ridin' your free ticket, plumb to Alma, New Mexico. Don't talk much. Ask no fool questions. And whatever you do, don't say nothin' about what you're packin' wrapped in your slicker."

Old Tex looked hurt when Pete Rust tried to pay him something. He said Pete had paid his way when he shot Joe Lasker.

"Don't write no letters to nobody," Tex warned Pete bluntly. "Every letter I git here is opened an' read an' sealed again before it reaches me. If you want news, listen to the leaves rustle along the trail. Take care to make no friends. If likker loosens your tongue, stay sober. Keep your ear to the ground. Riddle is goin' to be camped along your trail. Trust no man. That goes double fer wimmin. So long, son. And good luck."

Pete Rust crossed the Missouri River and headed south. His talk with old Tex Alvord had given him a fresh grip on life. He was an outlaw now with a price on his head and a cunning and merciless man hunter camping on his trail. But he knew the trail ahead. The dangerous Outlaw Trail from which there is no turning. He knew what he was riding into. He was not happy about it. But he would play his string out. He was Rusty Peters, outlaw.

VI

The well-filled buckskin money belt that Rusty Peters wore beneath

his shirt and undershirt was stained and glazed by a year's sweat. At first it had been like carrying so much high explosive belted around his lean middle. Now he was used to the dangerous burden, but never careless or forgetful about it. And he had ridden to the far end of the Outlaw Trail. He had reached New Mexico before the first snowfall. He had changed horses at every way station. Now he was breaking broncs at a cow ranch near Alma, New Mexico.

Pete had been here all winter. No long reaching arm of the law had made a grab at him. There was nothing to indicate that Riddle had followed his trail. And Kid Moran had not shown up to claim the money Pete Rust, known here as Rusty, carried in that buckskin money belt.

Kid Moran and two other members of the Wild Bunch had worked here at this WS Ranch as common cowhands, using alias names. The WS was owned by an Englishman and managed by an Irishman named Captain William O'Brien. Rustlers had about cleaned out the WS cattle when those three members of the Wild Bunch hired out to O'Brien. In a short time the Wild Bunch had run off the rustlers. They were loyal to the WS. They put the outfit back on its feet. But they had wearied of the tame cowpunching life. They'd ridden away, held up a train at Folsom, New Mexico, and now the cow country around Alma was unsafe for them. But safe enough for Pete Rust. And far enough from the Outlaw Trail to give the red-headed cowpuncher something of a sense of his old freedom. O'Brien was a real man, easy to get along with, fine to work for, and he took a strong liking to the easy-grinning, rusty-haired bronc rider.

Disregarding old Tex's advice, Pete had told his story to O'Brien.

"Your best bet is to stay here, Rusty," O'Brien had declared. "If Kid Moran wants that money, he'll locate you. And I doubt if Riddle will show up at the WS Ranch. You're doing all right. Best bronc handler I've ever had. There may be a price on your sorrel head, but you're no outlaw. You're a good man, Rusty."

That had been last November. Now it was summer and the Zebra Dun was fat and rollicky, there on green feed in the horse pasture.

Pete Rust was sweaty and powdered with corral dust. He had been halter-breaking some colts. He wiped the sweat from his eyes and grinned at Captain O'Brien who had ridden up to the corral gate.

"Turn the colts over to your Mexican hazer, Rusty. This came in the mail. I reckon it's for you."

He handed Pete Rust a sealed envelope. It was addressed to "R. Peters, WS Ranch, Alma, New Mexico." The postmark was blurred.

Pete pulled off his shabby buckskin gloves and slit open the envelope with the long blade of his jackknife.

The letter lacked a formal beginning and was unsigned. Pete Rust

scowled, puzzled, at its brief message.

Get an apaloosa 7 UP geldin shod at Jake Wier's blacksmith shop at Landusky at noon Labor Day.

Pete Rust handed the envelope and its penciled message to Captain O'Brien who read it slowly. Then he looked at Pete and nodded. There was a faint grin on O'Brien's face.

"Wash up and come on to the house, Rusty. We'll talk it over."

Pete washed up at the bunkhouse. Jake Wier. The blacksmith shop at Landusky. Pete rinsed the soapy water from his eyes and wiry rust-colored hair. Then he grinned as he reached for the roller towel. Jake Wier, the blacksmith, owned the feed and livery barn. But more important than that, he was the father of the tawny-haired, brown-eyed little schoolmarm, Jessie Wier!

It was a bitter, twisted grin that flattened Pete Rust's wide mouth. For a year now he had fought to make himself forget Jessie Wier. Countless times he had written her letters that he burned before he made the mistake of mailing. And all these long months he had carried in his cowpuncher mind a vivid, undimmed picture of Jessie Wier. The way her heavy, dark golden hair brushed a man's face when he waltzed with her. The hidden laughter in her voice when she teased him about trying to cut out a big, handsome cowman like Joe Lasker.

"What kind of a chance do you think you stand, Pete?" Her eyes laughed into his as they danced. "Every girl in the cow country has her loop built and swinging for Joe and his Rail L outfit."

"Check the bet back to you, lady." Pete had held her closer.

"You outrode Joe, didn't you? Outroped him. You'd be a quitter if you dropped out while your luck was running."

Jessie Wier had stood there smiling up at him, her face a little flushed. And a sound outside the open window near where they stood had turned their heads and they'd seen Joe Lasker standing out there. And a few minutes later Lasker had blocked Pete's way in the cloakroom and started the gun ruckus that had ended so fatally for the big, tough Rail L cowman.

That was something Pete Rust had not told old Tex or Captain O'Brien or any man. Jessie Wier was the only girl he'd ever wanted to marry. He wanted her now, more than he had ever wanted anything in his life. He dried his mop of wiry red hair and walked over to the main house.

Captain O'Brien waved him to a chair. He opened a drawer in the big table that served as a desk and from it he took a folded piece of white cloth with bold black lettering on it. He unfolded it and handed it to Pete.

It was a reward dodger, offering two thousand dollars for the capture, dead or alive, of Pete Rust, wanted for the murder of Joe Lasker, cattleman. It gave a good description of Pete Rust.

The color drained from Pete's face. The black lightning scar stood out like a blot. Ordinarily its dusky smudge was not at all ugly but rather added something to the rusty-haired bronc rider's reckless charm. Now it was sinister.

"It wasn't murder, Captain O'Brien. I'm goin' back to prove it was self-defense. Even Hoyt Cunningham's money can't make it murder." Pete's voice was harsh. The knuckles of his clenched fists were bone-white.

O'Brien nodded. "That's why I never let you get a look at this reward dodger I've had for months. I don't know your Montana courts, Rusty. But big money will sometimes outweigh justice on the law scales. But let's forget the reward dodger for a minute. I've heard from Jim Howe."

"From Kid Moran?"

"Jim Howe's the only name I know him by," smiled Captain O'Brien. "Let it ride without question, Rusty. Howe is at the Seven Up Ranch. You know the place?"

"It's near Landusky. Jim Thornton, the feller that owns it, was a side pardner of Johnny and Loney Moran before they was killed. Pardner of Kid Moran. The law never got a thing on Thornton that could be proved in court. He owns the 4T cattle brand and 7 UP horse iron. The big 7 UP apaloosa was in the pasture there when the Bear Paw Pool wagon camped near the ranch. They told me nobody ever rode 'im. That he was Kid Moran's private."

Captain O'Brien nodded. He had been using a big reading glass to examine the note Pete had just gotten and the envelope it had come in. He said he had made out the blurred hand-stamped postmark. The letter had been mailed at Landusky. The note was printed in pencil.

"The crudeness of the printing is a disguise. Whoever did it, Rusty, is a person of some education. Accustomed to writing in that sort of print. A country schoolteacher, for instance."

Pete Rust's lightning-scarred face flushed. O'Brien pretended not to notice the bronc rider's confusion.

"It could be a trap, Rusty. Set by Hoyt Cunningham and Riddle."

"If Jessie Wier sent that note," said Pete hotly, "it's no trap!"

"Keep your shirt on, Rusty. Riddle is still at the Rail L Ranch. Lightning crippled his right hand. He's learned to shoot left-handed. He was in the Fort Benton hospital for a long time sufferin' from lightning shock. But he's recovered now. He still wears a law badge pinned to his undershirt. But he's got Lasker's share of the Rail L outfit. And he's using his real name—Lon Riddle. He's Hoyt Cunningham's partner and bodyguard.

"Hoyt Cunningham needs a tough bodyguard, from all reports. He's not the gullible tenderfoot he pretended to be when he got hold of the Rail L outfit. Some of the big outfits were lax and careless about securing proper title to good land and valuable water rights they claimed. Cunningham is contesting 'em in civil court. He stands to win. It amounts to grand larceny, legalized. . . . Not content with grabbing land

and water rights from big outfits, Hoyt Cunningham has gone after the smaller ranchers. Jake Wier and his wife and daughter each have homesteads that Cunningham is after. He wants the 7 UP Ranch too. Cunningham is cunning and ruthless. And the latest news is that he aims to marry the Landusky schoolmarm, Jessie Wier. . . . Keep your shirt on, Rusty!"

"I'm goin' back!" Pete Rust was on his feet now. His eyes were green ice. "Hoyt Cunningham put that bounty on my hide. I killed Joe Lasker because he asked for it. I'm headed for Landusky! If Riddle gits in my road, it's him or me!"

"That's why I'm saying, Rusty, that note could be a trap. With the girl for bait. Don't go off half-cocked."

"I'm goin' back," said Pete Rust stubbornly, "regardless."

"I'd hoped to whitewash that indictment against you, Rusty. But it can't be done. I've worked at it all winter, quietly. Locate Jim Howe when you get there. Killing is his game. Let him handle it. I know you're bound to go. Good luck, Rusty. You're a man."

VII

The long trip back up the Outlaw Trail hardened the Zebra Dun. And it hardened Pete Rust. Labor Day was a long ways off. Pete traveled without hurry.

He crossed the Missouri River at Rocky Point. The river was low but there was a strip out in the channel where he and the big buckskin gelding hit swimming water. The Zebra Dun was a good water dog. Even by moonlight the crossing was no more than a cooling bath.

Old Tex wasn't there. The place was deserted. Tacked to the padlocked door of the log saloon was a notice that read:

> Gone to Landusky to see the fun. Back after Labor Day. If your dry dont go bustin the lock. Theres a jug at the barn. Dont make a dam hog of yourself. The next feller is as dry as you are. Yrs. truly.
>
> TEX.

Pete Rust put up his Zebra Dun and cooked and ate a big supper. Inside the cabin where Tex lived alone was a fancy horsehair bridle. Pinned to it was a neatly printed note:

> Made by Long Hank Jones, a convict in Deer Lodge Penitentiary, Montana. Long Hank served out his time. He was shot in the back at the Hideaway by Bounty Hunter Riddle.
>
> This bridle was raffled off by Tex Alvord at Rocky Point Crossing. Winning ticket sold to Pete Rust who killed Joe Lasker in a fair fight. The bridle is here for Pete Rust to claim when he comes back up the Outlaw Trail.

The note had been neatly printed by someone who savvied how. As Captain O'Brien had said about that other note, a schoolteacher might know how to print like that.

Pete unpinned the note and put it into his pocket. Then he put the fancy horsehair bridle in a clean flour sack he found. About midnight

he saddled the Zebra Dun and pulled out.

He rode up to the 7 UP Ranch a little after sunrise. A pack of big, savage-looking hounds kept him from dismounting until big Jim Thornton's wife called them off with a word. She told Pete to put up his horse and come to breakfast.

"The mister's gone to town," she told him when he asked where Jim Thornton was.

A big, long-legged, hammer-headed black horse, almost a blue-black roan, with a spattering of big white spots across its rump, was tied in one of the stalls. This was the 7 UP apaloosa that was said to be Kid Moran's private horse. A glance at the big apaloosa's feet told Pete that the gelding had just been shod all around.

Never had Pete Rust eaten a finer breakfast than the one Mrs. Thornton cooked for him. After a fourth cup of coffee he rolled and lit a brown-paper cigarette outside in the shade of the cottonwoods. The younger hounds were friendly but the older dogs, big as mastiffs crossed with wolf hound strain, eyed him without wagging a tail.

Pete thanked Thornton's wife for the breakfast. He said he'd been told to take the big apaloosa to Landusky. She nodded and gave him a quiet smile. Pete rode away on his Zebra Dun, leading the apaloosa.

Timing his arrival by the sun, Pete rode up the scrub-pine-timbered gulch and along the wagon road, up the creek and into Landusky just before noon.

Pete had shaved and put on clean clothes he found at Tex's cabin at Rocky Point. There was a carbine in his saddle scabbard. With his right hand near his six-shooter, he rode up the length of Landusky's main street to the big barn and adjoining blacksmith shop at its far end.

No voice, friendly or challenging, called his name. No man among the cowpunchers who watched him ride past made a gun move. But Pete knew that he had been recognized, that by the time he reached the blacksmith shop the tough little town of Landusky would know that Pete Rust had come back.

In front of the general store had been a crowd of women and kids. But Jessie Wier was not among them. And before Pete reached the blacksmith shop ranchers were herding the women and kids off the wide plank sidewalk and into the store, out of sight and the line of possible gunfire.

Cowpunchers who had been standing in little groups outside went back into the saloons. They had come to Landusky for the Labor Day celebration. They were set to paint the town red, perhaps to fight. There had been rumored talk that Kid Moran was back in this part of the Little Rockies cow country. That he had come back to pay off a gun debt for Long Hank Jones. And now they had just seen Pete Rust, with a two-thousand-dollar price on his red head, ride boldly into town on his Zebra Dun rope horse and leading

the 7 UP apaloosa that was Kid Moran's private.

Jake Wier, a graying giant in an old leather apron, sweat and dirt smearing his hairy naked chest and arms, was shoeing a horse, a big 7 UP black gelding with a saddle on.

Back in the cool dark shadows of the log blacksmith shop Jim Thornton and a smaller, black-haired, black-mustached man sat on their boot heels, their backs to the log wall, whittling and talking.

The giant blacksmith and the black 7 UP horse he was shoeing blocked the doorway. Then Jim Thornton said something in a soft voice and the blacksmith let go the shod hind hoof, straightened his thick-muscled back and led the black out of the way.

Pete Rust rode into the blacksmith shop, leading the apaloosa, and dismounted. Thornton got to his feet and took the horsehair lead rope and, with a nod and easy grin of welcome to Pete, began talking to the somewhat spooky apaloosa.

The man with the black hair and mustache got to his feet. He moved with a lithe, smooth swiftness. His white teeth showed in a friendly grin and he shoved out a lean, strong hand.

"Glad to know you, Pete."

Pete Rust knew he was shaking hands with the notorious Kid Moran, the most dangerous member of the hard-riding Wild Bunch. The outlaw was about Pete's height, not quite as thickly built, but as lean and hard as rawhide. His eyes were flinty behind their sparkle of welcome.

"Captain O'Brien figgered it might be a trap," Pete spoke in a low voice.

"You got guts, Pete," said the outlaw simply.

Pete reached in under his shirt and undershirt and, unbuckling the glazed buckskin money belt, handed it over. He grinned and said "Whew!" and Kid Moran's grin widened.

"It's all there," said Pete.

Kid Moran buckled on the money belt, wearing it outside his shirt like an open challenge to any man who felt lucky enough to try for it.

Jim Thornton had picked up a Navaho saddle blanket and a blue cavalry sweat blanket. He smoothed the blankets on the apaloosa's back and then lifted on a saddle he'd taken from a corner of the blacksmith shop. Cinching the saddle, he shoved a carbine into the saddle scabbard.

The giant blacksmith, Jake Wier, paid no attention whatever to any of them. Jerking off his scarred leather shoeing apron, he tossed it on the anvil and strode out. They heard him calling to somebody to rattle his hocks and get another cake of ice and a dozen bottles of cold beer for the tub. Then the big blacksmith was out of sight inside the big livery and feed barn.

Kid Moran looked at the Zebra Dun with a cowpuncher's nod of approval.

"Good horse you got there, Pete. You'd orter win the ropin' on 'im this afternoon. I'd like to be here to watch the show. . . . Better put 'im

in the barn now. I'm obliged for everything." He grinned flatly and patted the filled money belt. "If you go down the trail again, locate me. You'll do to take along."

"They're a-comin', Kid," Jim Thornton spoke quietly from the doorway. "Lead your horse outside, Pete, and into the big barn."

The big rancher's voice was soft-toned and quiet but there was the ring of a stern command in it.

"So long, Kid," said Pete Rust. "And good luck."

VIII

Pete's belly felt as though it was tied in a hard, cold knot. It got that feeling whenever he was about to ride a bad bronc that might throw him. He knew that big Jim Thornton and Kid Moran had it all made. Cut and dried. That they wanted him to get out from underfoot. And when he led the Zebra Dun outside and his blinking eyes focused to the sun glare he saw two riders coming up the wide street at a long trot.

One of those riders was the Rail L rep, Jim Smith, whose real name was Riddle. The man with him was the big, dudish, too-handsome Hoyt Cunningham. They sighted Pete and the Zebra Dun. Cunningham pointed and Riddle slid a carbine from its saddle scabbard.

"Git into the barn, Pete!" called Thornton. "Quit gawkin'! Git a move on!"

Pete Rust did as he was told. But he yanked his saddle gun from its scabbard before he led the Zebra Dun into the open doorway of the barn. He tossed the knotted bridle reins up over the saddlehorn and sent the dun into an empty stall with a slap on the rump.

As Pete started towards the barn doorway, gripping his saddle carbine, Jake Wier stepped out of the combination saddle and harness room and office. His giant arm reached out and grabbed Pete Rust by the shoulder and almost yanked him off his feet as he hauled him into the office and shoved an open bottle of cold beer at him.

"Drink this." Wier's voice was a barrel-chested growl. "It'll cool yuh off."

Then it happened. Riddle and Hoyt Cunningham had spurred their horses to a run. Their saddle guns cracked and bullets whined into the barn just as the big blacksmith yanked Pete into the office.

The two men were not more than fifty yards down the street. Pete Rust knocked the bottle of beer aside and made for the door, ready to shoot it out with the bounty hunter Riddle and the big tenderfoot cowman who had put a murderer's price on his rusty head. But the blacksmith's giant bulk blocked his way. Wier pulled the cork on another bottle of beer that was lukewarm and foamed like a fountain.

"Cool off, son!"

Pete Rust could not get past that giant blacksmith without shooting him down. And he couldn't do that. Besides, Jake Wier could probably slap the gun from his hand with the

swift, powerful might of a slapping grizzly.

Pete heard the crack of guns. Bullets spatting into the log wall of the barn. Then he saw the big apaloosa jump out the front of the blacksmith shop like a race horse quitting the starting line. And on the back of the big spotted gelding was Kid Moran, his white teeth bared in a grin. Straight into the street to block the running horses carrying Riddle and Hoyt Cunningham.

"Pete Rust is small change, Riddle!" barked the outlaw. "I'm big money, mister. Kid Moran's big game in any man's country. . . . This is for Long Hank!"

Riddle had shot and missed Moran's head by inches. But the Kid wasn't shooting to miss. It was six-shooter range and Kid Moran was as deadly as poison. His first bullet hit the bounty hunter in the belly and the second shot, following a split second later, drilled the range detective's forehead. Riddle was dead when his horse whirled and threw his bullet-riddled body from the saddle into the heavy dust.

Hoyt Cunningham had whirled his horse and spurred for a getaway between the blacksmith shop and big barn.

But there was a big rear door at the far end of the long blacksmith shop and Jim Thornton had flung it open and ridden outside. The cowman on the big black 7 UP gelding had a six-shooter in his hand. He blocked the narrow way between the two buildings. Hoyt Cunningham was deathly afraid of the big, soft-spoken, easy-going cowman whose ranch he was trying to steal. Whirling his bewildered horse, Cunningham headed back for the main street, shooting wildly as he went and yelling, leather-lunged, for his Rail L cowpunchers to help him.

Hoyt Cunningham was yelling when Kid Moran's bullet struck his wide-open mouth. It needed no second shot to kill the owner of the Rail L outfit. He was dying when he swayed in his fancy silver-mounted black saddle, dead when his bulk thudded in the heavy yellow dust and lay there.

"Well, sir," drawled a slow, lazy voice from the back end of the big saddle and harness room, "a man won't have to listen to that big bull beller no longer."

White-whiskered old Tex Alvord was sitting with his overalled legs straddling a bedroll. He reached into a wooden tub filled with melting ice and brought out a dripping bottle of beer. He had been watching through a dirty, fly-specked window.

"You'd orter have that barn man of yourn git at this winder with a bucket of water, Wier," he remarked.

Tex let down the hammer of a rifle he had across his lap and laid down the gun to get a corkscrew from his vest pocket. He was chuckling and cussing into his white beard because the beer was getting warm.

Pete Rust forced a grin. He knew now that Hoyt Cunningham never had a chance of riding past that window alive.

Out there between the big barn and

the blacksmith shop Kid Moran reined up alongside his side pardner Thornton.

"So long, Jim. And good luck."

Their stirrups touched as they gripped hands. Then Kid Moran rode away and out of sight in the scrub pines. Nobody in Landusky bothered to go after him.

"So long, pardner," Jim Thornton said, his soft voice barely audible. "And good luck. You'll always be needin' it till you die."

Jim Thornton rode into the barn and put up his horse. He carried his saddle and blanket and bridle in through the office and hung his outfit on the saddle rack. Then he took the bottle of foaming beer big Jake Wier shoved at him.

Cowpunchers were piling out of the half dozen saloons now. They caught the two horses with the empty saddles and tied them at a hitch rack, then gathered around the two dead men in a morbidly curious circle.

The Rail L men were leaving town in little bunches of twos and threes, headed for their roundup camp or the Rail L home ranch. They had no stomach now for celebrating or for taking up any fight for the two dead men from whom they had drawn their pay. This part of Montana was no longer a healthy climate. They would quit the country as fast as their "borrowed" Rail L horses would carry them.

Pete Rust felt awkward and out of place. He was holding a brown bottle from which almost all the beer had foamed out.

Tom Donnelly was still ramrodding the Bear Paw Pool. He was going to take a deputy job with Sheriff Ike Tabor after the fall roundup was over. He took charge out there on the street now. He had the two dead men carried into a vacant cabin and laid out. He said the town marshal had gone to the county seat on business and would be back mebby tomorrow.

"I'll bet the right man," drawled old Tex, "kin git that Rail L outfit when it's put up at sheriff's sale, for just about his own price. If I was about twenty-five years old and kind o' red-handed an' lightnin'-branded, I'd be there with what cash I could scrape up. And a feller with as many friends as he's got won't have no trouble gittin' a hatful. Wash that spilled beer off that clean shirt of yourn, Pete. Nothin' worse'n spilt beer to gather the flies. . . . You pick up that horsehair bridle at the Crossin'?"

Pete Rust grinned and nodded. Tex said it was the two-bit ticket that won it.

Jim Thornton said that there was only one thing a cowpuncher could do with a fancy horsehair bridle. That was to give it to a schoolmarm.

"The cabin's on up the gulch about a quartermile," rumbled Jake Wier. "Tell my missus when you git there, that I won't be home fer dinner."

Tom Donnelly met Pete Rust as he started up the gulch with the horsehair bridle in the flour sack. The Bear Paw Pool ramrod shook hands with Pete and told him that now that Hoyt Cunningham and Riddle were

dead, Pete's hearing on that Joe Lasker killing would just be a matter of pleading self-defense and being turned loose. It might cost Pete a round of drinks. But Pete had given himself up to him, Tom Donnelly, who was sort of a deputy, and Pete could claim the two thousand dollars reward. Two thousand would make a big-enough down payment on the Rail L outfit when it was put up at sheriff's sale.

"The Long X and Circle C outfits has both got bronc peelers that'll give you hard competition in the bronc ridin' this afternoon. But the Bear Paw Pool money still goes on your ride, Pete. And you and the Zebra Dun should hogtie that ropin' money. Well, it's good havin' you back, Pete. And I won't keep you no longer from wherever you're headed for. She'll want to hear you tell it how you heard the owl hoot."

Pete Rust walked on up the gulch to the big log cabin in the pines. Jessie Wier met him before he reached the door. There were tears in her eyes but she was laughing shakily when Pete took her in his arms.

"I heard the shooting, Pete."

Pete remembered Jake Wier's message about not coming home for dinner. Jessie laughed and rumpled his wiry red hair. She said her father never came home to dinner. And that anyhow they weren't having dinner home. Her mother and every woman in town had packed picnic lunches and they were all eating down under the trees.

"You'll have to get used to dad's joshing, Pete."

He said he reckoned he could, without too much bother. He gave her the horsehair bridle and showed her the note he'd found with it. Also the note that had come to R. Peters at the WS Ranch in New Mexico. Jessie nodded and kissed him quickly.

"Love notes to my man on the dodge. That one to New Mexico was risky. Riddle was watching all the mail. Then the postmaster drank too much livery stable beer and got sick. I took care of the mail that day. And got the letter out. But Jim Thornton said not to write anything but what he told me to print in that note. That it might get read at the other end. . . . I like that lightning brand on your freckled face, Pete."

Pete grinned faintly. He told her he'd never get cured of being scared whenever it came a thunder-and-lightning storm. And it looked like one was coming up. And if it came during the contests, there went his bronc-riding and steer-roping chance.

"I just hole up and shiver," he told Jessie. "You can't marry a lightnin-branded coward."

"That's not what I'm tellin' the whole cow country at the dance tonight."

There *was* a heavy thunder-and-lightning storm that afternoon. Pete Rust was white-faced and shivering when he rode his bronc and he got thrown the fourth jump. But he went off fanning and scratching. And he and the Zebra Dun won the calf-

roping and steer-roping first money, so he squared himself with the Bear Paw Pool.

That night at the dance Jake Wier who did the calling for the square dances announced that his daughter Jessie had asked him to tell them all that she was marrying Pete Rust.

While the crowd was still cheering Old Tex prodded a black-clad, scared-looking man through the crowd.

"Me'n Jim sighted 'im," chuckled Tex, a little tipsy, "as he stepped off the stage that just come in. He's a sky pilot all right. . . . Trot out your team, Jake. The parson will harness 'em!"

Old Tex's slow drawl gave the parson a chance to recover from his bewilderment. He saw that he was at a cow-country dance, not a den of iniquity. Ma Wier and the other women gathered around the good man of the cloth and their fluttering put him at ease.

And when, half an hour later, fortified by cold chicken and strong coffee, he pronounced Pete Rust and Jessie Wier man and wife, Landusky's tearful and happy women and the lusty cow town's tipsy menfolk agreed that it was the best wedding they'd ever attended.

Pete Rust and his bride danced "Home Sweet Home" together. Then they slipped away. Jim Thornton had their saddled horses waiting. When the bride had changed into shabby cowpuncher clothes they rode into the sunrise together.

"Whichaway, outlaw?" she asked him.

Pete grinned mysteriously and said nothing. Hours later he led the way down a steep trail the Zebra Dun seemed to know. And that's how the name "Jessie" came to be carved on the heavy plank door at the Hideaway.

The Hideaway is no longer an outlaw way station. Pete Rust homesteaded it. Though it's badlands and worthless, the cow country savvies why.

THE END

TALKING DINERO

by LEE BOND

—Unless it told the truth about a merciless bushwhack murder Jim Wilson was slated to end up wearing a hemp necktie

A BITTER half smile touched Jim Wilson's straight-lipped mouth when he glimpsed the man up in the rocks.

"That'd be either Blinky Dillard or Shep Tully, sent out here by my lovin' uncle to spy on me and announce my arrival."

Letting the tall bay under him take the hill trail at its own pace, Jim glared at the rocks, into which the man had vanished. The bay was gaunt and sweat-marked, and the dust of a long trail lay over Jim Wilson's service-battered range garb. His keen blue eyes were a little bloodshot from sun glare, and thinking that his uncle, old Eph Silver, had sent one of the Lazy S cowhands out here to spy on his coming was making his temper simmer.

He kept watching the rocks where he had seen the man moving, until the bay carried him around the bulge of the slope, then he looked down at the dusty trail. There had been a light shower the night before, just enough to smooth out the surface of the trail dust. No one, Wilson saw, had gone up the Lazy S mesa trail since that shower. He

thought nothing of that fact, at the moment.

The day he had left this country he had told his uncle that he was leaving for keeps, and not to expect any word from him. Silver had cursed him until he was out of hearing, and Jim Wilson had gone on down this mesa trail, he remembered, determined never to return. But he was returning, because a letter from Eph Silver had come to him over in New Mexico, asking that he return.

How Eph Silver had known where to reach him had puzzled Jim until he remembered a chance meeting with a friend of his uncle, a rancher from this Mule Pass country who had come down to New Mexico to buy horses.

He saw the distant pine grove where the big, rambling log ranchhouse stood, and suddenly familiar landmarks were meeting his quick eyes. Unpleasant as his life with his bullying uncle had been, this was still home to Jim Wilson.

Unconsciously he dug at the bay's ribs with dull rowels, wanting to travel the trail a little faster. But the horse snorted and shied suddenly at a noise in a dense growth of pine saplings that crowded the trail. A big mountain coyote dashed out into a little meadow, almost tumbling over in its fright and haste.

Jim Wilson's hand dipped down, plucked a six-shooter from its scarred holster. The animal swerved just as Wilson fired, and was gone into another thicket before he could get a second shot.

Jim shrugged, started to reload the chamber in his gun, then decided to let it go until he was at the ranchhouse. He shoved the gun back into holster and sent the bay on at a running walk.

As he approached the ranchhouse he thought he saw a movement outside one of the corrals, as if someone had run swiftly around the inclosure towards the back. But as he drew closer and noticed horses in that particular corral, and decided that it had been the moving horses he had seen. Then he was close enough to see the ranch yard and the deep front porch, and his excitement was tinged with uneasiness as he finally halted his gaunted horse at the big arched gate.

"Old Eph will likely light in to cussin' me," he muttered grimly. "But no matter what he says, I've got to keep my own temper. If the old boy was only different—"

He went up the long walk toward the porch and the shadowed front door. He thumped the door facing with his knuckles, scowling as seconds ticked by. He knocked again, then entered when the eerie silence continued to reach out of the huge house.

Walking into the hallway, Jim continued into the vast living room, then turned left to the small door that led to his uncle's office. His nerves were becoming jumpy now, and the palms of his hands felt clammy. He rapped at the office door, and the light pounding of his knuckles roared like a kettle drum in his own ears. There was no an-

swer to his knock. But the door had moved a little, and Wilson gave it a light push.

"Well, I reckon the old boy is out around the corrals some place," he muttered.

His voice broke off abruptly. The office door had swung open, and he was looking into the narrow, untidy room. Old Eph Silver sat behind his scarred desk, a litter of papers before him. He was slumped down, grizzled head drooping forward. For a second or two Jim Wilson thought his uncle had fallen asleep. Then he saw the blood.

Jim leaped into the room, calling his uncle's name as he seized the thin shoulders. Eph Silver's body tipped sidewise then, and Wilson's mouth tightened as he saw that a bullet had smashed through his uncle's head from behind.

Wilson stopped, caught the limp figure up gingerly, and half dragged and half carried it to the lumpy leather couch against the far wall of the stuffy room. Action released his mind from the torpor of shock, and his eyes began stabbing about the room as he stretched his uncle's body out on the couch. The two small windows were closed, latched on the inside as Eph Silver had always kept them.

"Whoever shot him was right here in this room with him," Wilson said grimly, and turned his attention to the old iron safe which stood in a corner back of the desk.

The safe door was open, and kneeling down by it, Wilson drew out a cheap metal cash box. The small key was in the lock.

"Robbery, by thunder!" he exclaimed. "Old Eph never left that key in the lock."

He twisted the key, flipped the lid of the box open. There was nothing in it, and Wilson was still squatting on his heels, staring into the empty box, when he heard riders pound into the yard. He snapped the box shut, shoved it back into the safe, and came to his feet.

Stepping out of the office, he pulled the door shut behind him. His nerves tightened as he heard men halting abruptly in the hallway. They had stopped just short of the doorway which would bring them into the living room, and Wilson heard a low mutter of voices as he waited. He put his hand on the cedar butt of the six-shooter at his thigh.

"Who's out there?" he challenged suddenly.

"What we want to know is who's in *there?*" a deep voice rolled the words out angrily.

Jim Wilson grinned a little and let his hand fall away from the gun. He had not heard Sheriff Ed Denton's voice in five years, yet he recognized it instantly.

"Come in, Ed," he invited, "and let's see if you're as fat as you used to be."

He heard a startled oath, then a huge, moon-faced man with a star pinned on his calfskin vest pushed into the room.

"Jim Wilson, by gravy!" Denton's surprised cry was like a clap of thunder. "Where'd you come from, Jim?"

Wilson felt cold prickles play along his spine. "New Mexico," he answered, and turned his eyes on the two men who were entering the room in the sheriff's wake.

"Howdy, Port," Wilson greeted. "Hello, Bill."

Port Lawton owned the Bar L, a sizable outfit that lay in the roughs along the east base of Eph Silver's Lazy S mesa. Lawton was stocky and dark, and had an arrogant, swaggering manner that Jim Wilson had never liked.

"Well, well!" Lawton was saying dryly. "So here's the black sheep come home, eh?"

"How come that black-sheep moniker, Lawton?" Jim drawled.

Lawton looked at Bill Saxon, his range foreman, and winked. "Reckon he's got growed up enough to think he can sass a man and get by with it, Bill?" Lawton asked.

Bill Saxon said nothing. His narrow face had settled into an expressionless mask, and his small, shiny black eyes were studying Jim Wilson from boots to crown in slow, measuring glances. Bill Saxon wore matched six-shooters holstered at his scrawny thighs, and it was whispered that he had been a professional gun fighter for a big sheep syndicate before he signed on as Port Lawton's segundo.

"Jim, where's your uncle?" the big sheriff broke the strained silence.

Wilson felt the question rip at his nerves like the teeth of a saw tearing his flesh. "Why?" he countered.

He wanted to think, wanted to get a few things straightened out in his own mind before he answered any questions.

"Don't get lippy with me!" the sheriff boomed.

Wilson looked at him, levelly and hard. "I didn't get lippy, Ed," he told the officer. "I simply want to know why you asked me that particular question."

Denton blinked, his several chins sagging as his jaw dropped.

"This younker has broadened out in the head as well as across the withers, Port," Bill Saxon drawled.

"Hummm!" Port Lawton was frowning as he watched Jim Wilson with new interest.

"Ain't your uncle here, Jim?" the sheriff demanded suddenly.

"He's here," Wilson said calmly. "But I still want to know why you asked me where he was the minute you got in here."

Denton scowled.

"I asked you where your uncle is on account of the shootin' that was heard," he said heavily.

"What shootin'?" Wilson demanded sharply.

"Port and Bill heard a shot up here," the sheriff said grimly.

"So?" Wilson let the word roll past his lips as he looked at the two Bar L men.

"Yeah, that's so," Lawton answered gruffly. "Port and me was on our way up here to finish up a deal with Eph Silver. We heard this shot just as we topped the mesa trail. We sat our horses there for a minute, tryin' to figure just where the

shot come from. Bill happened to look back down the trail, and seen the sheriff comin'. We waited for Ed, and told him about the shot."

"And we hustled right on here, on account of I feared you was up here." The sheriff's scowl grew deeper. "You left here five years ago, after threatenin' your uncle," he went on. "When I heard that you'd been seen ridin' through Mule Pass early this mornin' headin' this way I took out after you, pronto. If you start any kind of trouble I'll make you—"

"Wait a minute!" Wilson cut in harshly. "Who says I threatened my uncle before I pulled out of here five years ago?"

"I'm fixin' to teach you some manners!" Denton choked the words wrathfully and took a ponderous step forward.

Jim Wilson did not move, and something in his eyes stopped the sheriff.

"Who says I threatened my uncle?" he repeated the question.

"I . . . er . . . heard it somewhere, maybe from old Eph," Denton stammered. "But don't start bristlin' up at me, you yaller-haired galoot!"

"If anybody told you I threatened old Eph, he lied," Wilson said flatly, and shot a look at Port Lawton and Bill Saxon.

They met his glance stonily, and he could read nothing in either pair of eyes.

"I reckon you'll claim you and your uncle always got along fine," the sheriff said angrily.

"I claim nothin' of the sort," Wilson gave back. "Eph Silver hated me, and I've got plenty scars on my hide where his quirt used to cut me when I was too little to get out of his way. Soon as I was big enough to paddle my own canoe, I pulled out of here. But I never talked back to Eph in my life, and never made any kind of threats. I didn't hate the old lobo, even if he did treat me worse than he'd treat a dog."

"Then why'd you come moochin' around here if you don't like Eph?" the sheriff wanted to know.

"Here's why I'm back," Wilson said bluntly, and pulled an envelope from his pocket.

The sheriff accepted it quickly, glanced down at it. "Mr. James Wilson, Box Springs, New Mexico," he read the address aloud. "And it's got Eph Silver's name and return address on it, too."

Bill Saxon and Port Lawton crowded up to the sheriff, looking with considerable interest at the envelope in his hand.

"Read the letter that's inside," Wilson advised.

The sheriff glared at him, then opened the envelope and took out a single sheet of paper. He and the two Bar L men scanned the note hastily. It read:

Jim Wilson: I am selling the Lazy S to Port Lawton. You have no claim to any part of my property, but a man never knows what a no-good whelp like you might try. Lawton is afraid you would set up a holler and try to grab the ranch back unless your name appears on the sale papers. So I'll pay you five hundred dollars if you

will come over here and sign a paper or two. Yours truly,

E. Silver.

"Why, that lyin' old buzzard!" Port Lawton burst out. "I never even mentioned Wilson's name to him, sheriff. And besides that, the old cuss closed the deal with me yesterday. He took the twenty thousand cash I fetched here, and told me to come back early this mornin' for the final papers."

Wilson was watching Lawton intently. "So my uncle didn't mention me durin' the deal, eh?" he asked.

"I said he didn't!" Lawton barked.

"Well, I reckon this explains you comin' back here, anyhow, Jim," the sheriff declared.

He handed the letter back. Wilson pocketed it, looking at Port Lawton. "You were on your way here to get your final papers when you heard that shot?" he asked.

"Bill and me stayed in town last night, and rode out here first thing this mornin'," Lawton said smoothly. "We got the papers from old Eph and—"

"You rode out from Mule Pass early this mornin'?" interrupted Wilson.

"That's what I said!" Lawton retorted.

"You rode across the range on the way out, inspectin' the cattle?" Jim Wilson had to fight hard to keep his voice steady.

Lawton and Bill Saxon bored him with hard looks.

"We didn't get off the main trail a single time," Lawton said finally. "We come straight here, got them papers, then went on back down the trail and turned off to my place. Bill and me was on our way back here to tell Eph that I was sendin' some of my hands over to take charge, when we heard that shot you're so darned cagey about."

Jim Wilson's lean face was a little pale, and he could feel his legs tremble under him. He had the picture before him now, the whole ugly, murderous thing. But it was a picture broken into pieces, and those pieces had to be fitted together before he could dodge the hangman's noose that had been so cleverly fitted about his neck. He knew the meaning of the man he had glimpsed up in the rocks, of the coyote that had so conveniently flushed from the thicket as he rode towards the house. He knew, too, that he actually had seen a man running past one of the corrals as he rode up the trail towards the place.

"Something's wrong here, Jim Wilson!" the big sheriff's voice was booming, angry. "You're stallin' around too much. Where's Eph Silver?"

Wilson pulled a slow breath into his lungs, silently cursing himself for not having talked fast and promptly. He had to answer now, and to tell anything but the truth would make matters even worse than they already were.

"Eph Silver is in his office yonder, Denton," he said evenly.

Bill Saxon and Port Lawton looked towards the office door, but said nothing.

"Well, why in thunder didn't you say so without all this hedgin'?" the sheriff complained.

He faced towards the door, and the whole house seemed to shake when he called Eph Silver's name and asked him to come out of the office.

"He can't hear you, Ed," Jim Wilson said slowly. "Somebody put a bullet through Eph's head—from behind."

In the same flat-toned voice, he told of taking the snap shot at the coyote, then of riding on to the house and finding his uncle. He made no mention of the fact that he had sighted someone spying on him as he rode up the mesa trail, nor that he had glimpsed a man running away from the house and towards the back of one of the corrals as he got closer.

"Old Eph hadn't been dead over a very few minutes when I found him, Ed," he finished. "The blood was still comin' out of that wound. I put him on the couch and—"

Wilson's voice ended as the sheriff's gun dug hard into his midriff. He looked down, saw that Ed Denton's hand was trembling.

"Of all the lame-brained stunts to try to pull on me!" the sheriff fumed.

"Stunts?" echoed Wilson.

"I mean that takin' a shot at a coyote wheeze!" Denton roared. "You fool, that alibi has white whiskers ten yards long."

He snatched Wilson's gun, then backed away, face grim.

"I don't need to tell you that I'd kill you if you made a break," he said coldly. "A feller who'd murder his own blood kin ain't gettin' no consideration from me."

"I haven't murdered anybody," Wilson said evenly. "And Eph Silver was no blood kin of mine. He married my mother's sister, which made him an uncle by marriage only."

The sheriff had been sniffing Wilson's gun muzzle. He brought the big hammer back to half cock, opened the loading gate, rolled the cylinder one click, and punched out an empty cartridge. He sniffed it, then put it back in the gun cylinder and closed the loading gate behind it.

"His gun been fired recent, sheriff?" asked Saxon.

"Mighty recent," Ed Denton declared heavily.

"But he was only shootin' at a coyote, sheriff." Port Lawton's voice had a mocking ring to it.

"Rattle your spurs into that office where Eph's remains are," the sheriff ordered Wilson. "I want to look around."

"You'll find the safe open and Eph's cash box empty," Wilson said, but did not move out of his tracks. "Both windows are closed and locked on the inside, which means that whoever shot Eph was in there with him."

"You'll kill a jury by makin' 'em laugh themselves to death," the sheriff grumbled. "Now get along with you. I want to look around in yonder."

"Where are Blinky Dillard, Shep Tully and whoever else Eph had workin' for him?" Wilson asked.

"Blinky and Shep are out on the west slopes, helpin' the rest of the crew comb out them rough canyons for cattle," Port Lawton spoke before the sheriff could answer. "I bought this shebang, lock, stock and barrel. Old Eph claimed he had fifteen hundred head of critters, at least. But I wanted to make sure, so—"

"You wanted to make sure," Wilson cut in grimly, "so you handed Eph Silver twenty thousand dollars yesterday, took a deed that isn't worth the paper it's written on and—"

"What's that?" Lawton bleated. "What do you mean this deed ain't no good?"

He jammed his hand inside his shirt, snatched out a heavy envelope, and pulled a legal-looking document from it. He fanned it out, shook it in front of Jim's face.

Wilson took a step forward, bent as if to look more closely at the paper. But as he leaned forward he whirled on one heel, and his right fist came up in a lashing uppercut that had his weight and strength behind it. Bill Saxon's boots left the floor, and he was arching up and back when Jim grabbed him, spun on around, and brought the senseless little gunman's body in close to his own with one strong arm. Wilson snaked a gun from one of Saxon's holsters, and there was a flat, ugly sound to the shot that roared in the room. Sheriff Ed Denton howled mightily when the six-shooter was slapped from his fist by the slug Jim Wilson had turned loose.

"Sorry, Ed, but I couldn't take chances," Wilson said quietly. "Leave that gun of mine in your belt where you put it, and snap a pair of handcuffs on Port Lawton before I have to kill the fool."

Lawton was crouching, the deed he had displayed falling from his right hand, while his left crept towards a gun that was holstered at his thigh.

"Are you plumb crazy?" the sheriff roared at Wilson.

There was no time for Jim Wilson to have replied had he tried. Port Lawton was pulling his six-shooter. Wilson hurled the sagging form of Bill Saxon against Lawton and followed. With a frenzied half scream, Lawton tried to jump clear. But Saxon's scrawny body slammed hard against him, and Lawton was still staggering when Jim Wilson towered above him.

Wilson's six-shooter rose and fell, and Port Lawton sat down so hard he lost the gun he had been trying to aim. Wilson whirled, plucked his own six-shooter from the sheriff's waistband as the officer hurtled past.

Denton howled an oath when his big feet tangled in Port Lawton's hat. The sheriff landed on his belly with such force that the breath whooshed from him in a painful grunt. Jim Wilson bent down, added misery to the sheriff's lot by planting a knee in the broad back.

"Q-quit it!" Denton choked.

But Jim Wilson held him there until he had found the pair of handcuffs tucked away in one of the sheriff's coat pockets. Wilson got up then, turned to Port Lawton and Bill Saxon, and handcuffed them together before either knew what was happening. He snicked the second gun from Saxon's holsters, felt both men over to be certain there were no hidden weapons on them, then stood up.

Sheriff Ed Denton got ponderously to his feet, a murderous gleam in his eyes.

"Don't be a fool, Ed!" Jim said sharply.

"You ain't escapin'," Denton panted.

"I'm not tryin' to," Wilson pointed out.

The sheriff blinked at that, then lifted a hand and felt tenderly of his skinned nose.

"There are your prisoners, Ed," Wilson told him, and waved his six-shooter towards Port Lawton and Bill Saxon.

The two Bar L men were staring at the handcuffs which linked their wrists together.

"Port and Bill?" the sheriff gasped. "What makes you say they're my prisoners?"

"They murdered Eph Silver, and robbed him of the twenty thousand dollars Lawton gave him yesterday, plus whatever other cash Eph had on hand. It's in a money belt, under Lawton's shirt. I felt the belt just a minute ago while I was searchin' him."

Lawton and Saxon came to their feet in a single motion. They whirled towards the doorway which led out into the hall. But before they could take a single stride, Sheriff Ed Denton clamped a massive hand over the gleaming links of the handcuffs.

They came back, cursing, kicking and clawing, but Denton had handled tough ones before. He twisted the handcuffs sharply, and Bill Saxon gave at the knees, his face twisted with pain as he dropped to the floor. Lawton went down a second later, mouthing oaths and threats.

Sheriff Denton wiped bloody welts along his cheeks where Port Lawton and Bill Saxon had hit and scratched him, then turned calmly to Jim Wilson.

"Now you start tellin' me how you knowed these two murdered old Eph," he ordered.

"I knew it when Lawton started lyin'," Wilson explained.

"Lyin' about what?" asked the sheriff.

"About ridin' out here from Mule Pass along the main trail," Wilson returned. "There was a shower last night, and the dust was crusted just a little. For five years, Ed, I've made my livin' huntin' wild horses. I just naturally watch for horse tracks without realizin' I'm doin' it. And there were no tracks on the trail."

"That don't prove nothin'," Port Lawton said sullenly. "What if I did lie about comin' up here this mornin'?"

"Then you lied about not knowin' that Eph Silver had sent for me,"

Wilson went on grimly. "You claimed you didn't know that. But you did, because you had Bill Saxon perched out yonder at the head of the trail, watchin' for me. And you had a coyote caged down yonder in that thicket, aimin' to wangle me into takin' a shot at the critter so's there'd be a spent shell in my gun."

"I'd like to see you prove any of that crazy stuff," Lawton sneered.

"You better have somethin' pretty derned solid in the way of proof at that, Jim," the sheriff said uneasily.

"Get these handcuffs off us, sheriff," Bill Saxon snarled. "Wilson is stallin', tryin' to unload his sins on Port and me. He can't prove nothin' he's said, and you know it."

"How about it, Jim?" the sheriff asked.

"Lawton admits that he lied about usin' the trail this mornin', don't he?" countered Wilson.

"Sure I do!" Lawton said promptly. "Bill and me rode across the range, snoopin' around some. We didn't want to admit it, but we got to wonderin' if old Eph Silver had lied about how good the feed is down in the canyons."

"Well, you couldn't prove they're lyin' about that, could you, Jim?" Sheriff Denton was getting nervous.

Wilson watched the two handcuffed men, stony-eyed and calm now. "There's the coyote cage down in the thicket," he said thoughtfully. "When Bill Saxon seen me comin' up the trail, he signaled to you, Lawton. Probably used a mirror to do the signalin'. You rode on up here to the house, come in and got to chinnin' with Eph until you could edge around behind him and blow his brains out. You got the money-box key out of his pocket and helped yourself to the cash. I saw you leggin' it along the west side of the horse corral as I rode up."

"He saw—" Bill Saxon choked the two words out, his eyes blazing as he looked at Lawton.

"You hightailed to that thicket close to the trail, Bill, as soon as you signaled Lawton that I was comin'," Wilson went on calmly. "You waited until I rode along there, then turned that coyote loose, knowin' I'd be mighty apt to take a shot at it. I did—and missed. If I had killed the critter, you would have drug the carcass off and hid it after I rode on. You and Lawton showed up here so soon after I did, that I know you didn't have time to lug that cage you kept the coyote in very far. I can find it, I reckon."

"Go right ahead," Lawton grunted. "Find a dozen cages hid around here, for all I care. You still wouldn't have a thing a jury would listen to."

He got up, Bill Saxon rising with him.

"Denton, get Bill and me out of these handcuffs." Lawton was completely sure of himself now, and even swaggered a little as he and Saxon moved closer.

"Well, Jim, it looks like I can't do nothin' but turn 'em loose," the sheriff said quietly. "The way they got boogered at first, I think you've told the truth about 'em. But without proof, arrestin' this pair would

only make trouble for me."

"Now you're showin' sense, you fat cuss!" Bill Saxon sneered.

"Of course you can't do nothin' but turn us loose, Denton," Lawton scowled.

"Yep, we'd have to turn this pair of murderin' thieves loose, Ed, if it wasn't for the money," Jim Wilson said quietly.

"Money?" three voices echoed at once.

"Sure, money," Wilson replied. "Didn't you gents ever hear it said that money talks?"

"Now what fool lies are you cookin' up?" Port Lawton demanded.

"No lies, Port," Wilson answered. "I just mentioned the money—the dinero you've got in that belt down next to your hide. It'll talk your neck into a noose. And yours, too, Saxon."

"What in thunderation are you drivin' at, Jim?" the sheriff asked peevishly.

"Eph Silver had a peculiar habit where money was concerned," Wilson said calmly. "In there somewhere around his desk, you'll find a wooden block, with a flock of needles set, head first, into the wood. Take that block of wood in your hand, press the needle points down into any kind of paper, then hold the paper up to the light, and you'll see that the perforations from Eph Silver's initials—E. S. Eph never had a bill in his life that he didn't treat that way, Ed. So if you'll take that money belt off Port Lawton and look at—"

Jim Wilson did not have to say more. Port Lawton and Bill Saxon were making their second attempt to flee. But Sheriff Ed Denton seized the handcuff links again, and the wild-eyed pair was sprawling on the floor before they could claw or strike him as they had before.

Denton ripped Lawton's shirt open, fumbled at double buckles for a moment, then held up a money belt that was stuffed and bulging. The sheriff's hands were shaking as he opened the belt and finally fished out a sheaf of bills. He held one of them up towards strong light that came through a window, and his bellow of triumph boomed mightily as he saw a series of tiny perforations that formed the letters E. S.

"By Jehosaphat, Jim, you wasn't bluffin'!" the sheriff said in awe as he looked at Wilson.

"No, I wasn't bluffin'," returned Wilson.

He stooped over, picked up the deed Port Lawton had dropped when the trouble first started.

"Well, I've got a couple of thievin' killers, no mistake of that," Denton said heavily. "All I wish, Jim, is that you could get this ranch back without a lot of legal shenanigans."

"I don't have to get it back," Wilson told him quietly.

"You mean there's somethin' wrong with that deed?" the sheriff asked quickly.

"A man can't sell somethin' he doesn't own," Wilson explained. "And Eph Silver didn't own this ranch."

"Huh?" was all the dumfounded

sheriff could manage.

"I own it, and have ever since the death of Eph's wife, who was my aunt," Wilson went on. "I don't remember my own folks, because they died when I was only a few months old. But my aunt lived until I was twelve, and told me just before she passed away that I had inherited half of this ranch from my mother, and that I would get the other half when she, my aunt, was gone. The ranch belonged originally to the two sisters—my mother and my aunt."

"But Eph Silver sold the place to Lawton," the sheriff said in bewilderment.

"Sure he did, the darned old crook!" Wilson snorted. "Eph Silver didn't know that my aunt told me what she did, because she warned me never to mention it. She said she was fixin' her will so that Eph was to run the place and have all it made as long as he lived, but that if he ever tried to sell it I was to go to a certain lawyer down in Tucson and Eph would be stopped. But old Eph figured I didn't know any of that, so he went ahead and sold the place to Lawton.

"He wanted me to come here, figurin' he could bully me into signin' papers that would have made the sale of the place legal. He had bullied me all my life, and no doubt figured I'd sign any paper he shoved at me without even botherin' to read it or ask what it was."

"Well, I derned near welcomed you home with a hang noose, Jim," the sheriff grinned hugely. "But that . . . uh . . . talkin' dinero sort o' slipped the noose over a couple of other necks, if you see what I mean."

THE END

SNAKE MEDICINE

by S. OMAR BARKER

Some dudes, they hired Sidlin' Sam to serve 'em as a guide
To take 'em out to see the West upon its hairy side;
To haul 'em out an' camp 'em in some far-off cedar brakes
Amongst the wolves an' wildcats, hooty owls an' rattlesnakes.
An' just in case some diamondback should chance to do 'em wrong,
They brought a dozen bottles of "snake medicine" along.
Now Sidlin' Sam, he wasn't much to open up an' talk.
He had a sad look in his eye, a bad limp in his walk.
They asked him what had made him lame. Ol' Sidlin' never said.
Just went right on a-loadin' gear into the wagon bed.
They rolled out towards the foothills, an' to make the long miles short,
Each time the wagon hit a bump, them dudes would take a snort
Of snake bite cure. As for the thirst of Sidlin' Sam,
They either never noticed it, or didn't give a damn.
Ol' Sam just set there drivin', an' most every time he'd think:
"Now shorely purty soon these dudes will offer me a drink!"
But still they never done it, till ol' Sam begun to feel
So dry his tongue was hangin' out to purt near drag the wheel.
So finally he stopped the team: "Well, boys, I'm thirsty, too.
I'll just go hunt some water if it's all the same to you!"
He climb down from the wagon like he aimed to take a hike,
An' there was this big rattlesnake all coiled up to strike.
"Look out!" them scared dudes hollered. "There's a snake! You'll sure get bit!"
But Sidlin' Sam just stood there, an' he let that rattler hit
An' bite him all it wanted to above his right leg boot,
As if his mind was in a daze—or didn't give a hoot.
Them dudes, they sure did sober up complete an' mighty quick!
They climb out *muy pronto*, killed that rattler with a stick,
Then each one grabbed a bottle, an' by turn an' turn about,
They poured good whiskey down ol' Sam to drive the pizen out.
Ol' Sam, he groaned an' shut his eyes—yet swallered mighty good—
Until they rolled his pants leg up an' found his leg was *wood!*
The moral for you in this tale—there ain't none, I don't think,
Unless you've got a wooden leg, a snake—an' need a drink!

I

RED SNOW came back to Smoky River Valley wearing a cheap, misfit suit, cheap shirt and heavy shoes. Red Snow, the wildest rider that ever spiked a bronc's tail against a hitch rack, the best dancer, best dresser in the valley, was back after two years. A youngster, only two years past his majority, with laughing gray eyes, and ice water in his veins.

The devil-may-care swing of his lithe body was gone. The laughing eyes were serious now, but the ice water was still in his veins, colder than ever, maybe. The penitentiary had not broken Red Snow. The wavy

RED SNOW DRIFTS HOME

by W. C. TUTTLE

Venting the law's brand would make Red Snow either a curly wolf or a trouble-dogged maverick

black hair was close-cropped now, and his lean face was just a bit more angular, as he leaned forward across the green-covered table and shoved two hundred and fifty shining dollars toward the center.

Several at the blackjack table knew who Red was; knew that he had built up that stack of silver from a lone dollar.

"Deal 'em face up, pardner," said Red quietly.

Swiftly the first two cards dropped to the table—an ace to Red—a ten spot to the dealer. Then a jack to Red—a king—

Carefully the dealer counted out five hundred dollars in gold and shoved it across to Red, who stowed the heavy metal in his pockets and got to his feet. His eyes shifted around the room and then he walked out of the saloon.

"From a shoe string to a stake," the gambler remarked glumly.

"He can use it," said a bystander, "and it's a cinch he ain't lost his nerve. They sent him up over two years ago for rustlin'—down at Moon Flats. Now he's goin' back there. Pretty hard thing to live down, and he's just a kid."

"You know who his old man is, don't yuh?" asked another. The gambler shook his head.

"He's Jim Snow, owner of the Golden Calf mine," the man said. "I heard he's sellin' out for a million in cash. Couple fellers that are buying it went through here, headin' for Moon Flats."

"You've prob'ly got it wrong, Bill," said a tall, lean cattleman. "That mine ain't never been worked enough to sell for that price. I heard it was a hundred thousand dollars."

"What's the difference?" asked the man. "Either amount is more'n me or you will ever see. And whatever it is, Red won't never git any of it."

Red went straight to the feed corral. He had seen a sorrel gelding that suited him fine. At the livery stable he bought a secondhand saddle and bridle. At the general store he outfitted himself in overalls, boots, spurs, hat, belt and gun.

As Red started across the street he was nearly run down by a buckboard team which came around the corner on two wheels. The two men in the buckboard never noticed Red, but he recogized them as Graveyard Grady and Lonesome Jones, both from the Rafter K spread.

Red grinned in the cloud of dust, as he crossed the street. He knew those two old rawhiders. They were both past sixty, and had worked for years on the Rafter K.

Uncle Hootie King, owner of the Rafter K, was Red's friend. He had offered to stake Red during the trial, but Red had declined, sold what cows and horses he owned, and paid the lawyer himself. What hurt Red the most was the fact that not a single person in Smoky River Valley had written to him while he was in the pen—not even Joan Evans. She had told him she believed he was innocent, but she had never answered his letters. Neither did Rawhide Rawlins, who had lived with Red. Old Rawhide couldn't write much, but that would have been all right.

At about five o'clock that evening in Moon Flats four men sat at a large table in the home of Jim Snow. They were David Harmon and Samuel Reed, representing Eastern capital, Al Harker, prosecuting attorney, representing Jim Snow in the mining deal, and Snow himself, owner of the

Golden Calf mine.

Jim Snow was a big man, white-haired, hard-faced. His huge, gnarled hands showed that he had worked hard. Dave Harmon was also a big man, flabby, well-dressed, while Samuel Reed was small, alert, sharp-eyed and a typical city man in conversation and dress. Al Harker was of medium height, his black hair slightly gray at the temples, affable, a good hand shaker.

On the table was a huge pile of currency which Harker and Snow were counting.

"It would have simplified matters to have given you a cashier's check," said Harmon.

Snow looked up quickly. "You've said that a dozen times, Harmon," he remarked. "I told yuh I wanted cash."

The counting was finally finished. Jim Snow signed the papers, which Harker turned over to Dave Harmon. Snow was sitting there, staring at the money, when the three men went out.

Dave Harmon climbed into the buggy, swung the horse around and drove out to the main road to Lodeville, while Sam Reed and Al Harker turned down the main street of Moon Flats, entered the Half Moon Saloon and Gambling Emporium, and went straight to the bar. There were about thirty men in the saloon, and Sam Reed faced them from the bar.

"Gentlemen, my associates and myself have just purchased the Golden Calf mine from Jim Snow," he announced. "Tonight we celebrate. Everybody in Moon Flats is welcome to drink to our success—at our expense."

Moon Flats was quick to respond. It drew a heavy play in the gambling room, but all drinks were free. Red Snow rode into Moon Flats. He even came into the Half Moon Saloon and had a drink. Brad Erwin, the big sheriff, was at the bar with Al Harker, the prosecutor, and only saw Red as he and Harker lifted their glasses.

"When did you get back, Red?" the sheriff asked quietly.

"Time don't mean anythin'," replied Red. "I'm here, that's what counts."

"I see yuh are. Yo're lookin' pretty good, too."

"That's just talk," said Red. "Who's paying for the drinks?"

The sheriff looked at Harker, who said:

"The men who just bought the Golden Calf from yore father."

"Uh-huh; I heard he was sellin'. I'll see yuh later." Red walked out, his spurs raking the floor.

"He's still a bad boy," said the sheriff quietly.

"He don't grin—now," the lawyer observed. "I wonder what he plans to do. I noticed that he's wearing all new clothes, even a new gun."

"I don't know what he'll do. Nobody will hire him."

"Not likely," said Harker. "Well, here's luck."

Lonesome Jones was more or less of a sartorial wonder, as he surveyed himself in the clothing-store mirror. He was well over six feet tall and as thin as a sand-hill crane. Just now he was arrayed in a garment of

violent checks, in which green predominated. His shirt was pink and his tie was yellow. On his head was a cream-colored fedora, the crown uncrushed, and on his feet were a pair of huge, yellow shoes.

Leaning against a counter was Graveyard Grady, while the salesman stood back, trying to cover his amazement with a sickly smile. Lonesome turned from the self-inspection and looked owl-eyed at his partner.

"It's shore dif'rent," said Lonesome admiringly. "Yuh don' shee shuits like this'n ver' offen, Graveyard. Folks'll look at yuh, don'tcha know it?"

"Over the top of a gun," agreed Graveyard. "Pay the man and le's go. I . . . I kind o' hated to shee yuh leave—but not now."

They went out, carrying Lonesome's old clothes in their arms.

"Yuh gotta git a valishe," said Graveyard. "Yuh can't have yore arms full all the way to Texas."

They found a valise in a second-hand store, packed the boots, overalls, hat and shirt, after which they weaved their way to the saloon. The bartender blinked at Lonesome.

"He ain't gone yit," informed Graveyard. "This makes twenty times I've hauled him up here in the lasht few years, barten'er—and ever' time he went back. But not thish time—not in that shuit."

Graveyard and Lonesome had several drinks. Suddenly Lonesome, after a violent search, leaned against the bar, his face twisted in agony.

"I knowed it!" declared Graveyard. "Them colors has poisoned him! Where do yuh hurt worst, Lonesome? Speak to me—you funny-colored thing!"

"I . . . I've done lost my ticket to Texas!" wailed Lonesome.

"Jumpin' Jupiter!" Graveyard gasped. "Lost yore ticket?"

"Lost," sighed Lonesome. "Cost me forty bucks, too."

"I'll buy a drink," offered the bartender.

"Might's well drink," said Graveyard. "Nothin' else left t' do. Then I'll have t' take this human rainbow back to the Rafter K, and wait'll he gits another stake. . . . Lonesome, look me in the eye and swear you lost that ticket."

They tried hard to look each other in the eyes, but it was not a success. Lonesome tried hard, though, and Graveyard was convinced.

"Barten'er," Graveyard said, "gimme a quart. We're headin' home."

"Why don't yuh stay all night?" asked the bartender. "That road ain't safe for drivin' at night, not in yore condition."

"Listen," said Graveyard gravely, "I could drive a six-horse team and a loaded stage over the high-water trail to Pinnacle."

"An' he would, too," declared Lonesome owlishly. "Do it ever' time."

"I pass," sighed the bartender, as he wrapped up the bottle.

II

The multitude of drinking folks of Moon Flats were taking advantage of Samuel Reed's generosity when

Henry Baker, the elderly postmaster, shoved his way through the milling crowd and found Sheriff Erwin at the bar.

"Something terrible has happened, sheriff!" gasped the postmaster. "Mrs. Montez just told me that she found Jim Snow in the back yard, dead."

Several other people heard what the postmaster said, and the news was quickly spread. There was no chance for the law to act quietly. Before the sheriff and the coroner, Dr. Myers, were able to view the body, dozens of curious people had already arrived ahead of them.

Jim Snow was lying on his face, arms outspread, only a few feet from his open stable doorway. His hat was crumpled under his left elbow. Investigation showed that the fatal bullet had been fired so close to his body that his shirt was burned. The doctor said he had been killed instantly.

Mrs. Montez, Jim Snow's housekeeper and cook, said she had been visiting another Mexican woman about half a mile away, and did not hear the shot.

Mrs. Montez got a blanket from the house, and four of the men carried the body away, followed by the doctor. Al Harker, the prosecutor, was there, and conferred with the sheriff. Later a search was made of the house and the stable. The crowd had gone back to their free drinks, but there was no sign of the hundred thousand dollars in currency.

Then the sheriff and prosecutor went down to Dr. Myers' house, where the coroner was examining the body. Snow had been shot just once, but it was a center shot, straight through the heart.

"What was this about Jim Snow just selling his mine?" asked the doctor.

"He sold it late this evening," replied Harker. "He was paid one hundred thousand dollars in currency, doc—and it's gone."

"Murder and robbery, both, eh? Did I hear somebody say that Red Snow was back?"

The sheriff and prosecutor looked at each other thoughtfully.

"Yeah, he's back, doc," admitted the sheriff.

"Well, you've got a job on your hands, sheriff," said the doctor.

"I know I have, doc—plenty job," Brad Erwin said grimly.

It was very dark along that narrow, dangerous road from Lodeville to Moon Flats. Over this road that night came Graveyard Grady and Lonesome Jones in the Rafter K buckboard. The team was of the spooky variety, only lately broken to harness. At intervals the two old rawhiders would halt the team, pull the cork and have a drink in the dark.

After one such pause they started on a downgrade, and the team increased speed. A few moments later Lonesome remarked: "Goin' pretty fasht in the dark, Graveyard. Better drive slower. Road's pretty narrer."

"Loneshome," said Graveyard, "yo're gittin' more abshent-minded ever' day. I don't happen to be drivin'."

"You don't?"

"I mos' chertainly don't. At the lasht drinkin' spot I gave you the lines. Don'tcha remember?"

"Sufferin' sidewinders!" howled Lonesome. "I . . . I meant to throw away the bottle—and I've still got it!"

"You . . . you threw away the lines, Lonesome?"

"If lines ain't quart-size—and if you ain't got 'em—I did!"

"Well, shucks!" howled Graveyard. "You've—"

Crash! They hit something and Lonesome landed on the seat of his pants, rolled over a few times, and found his legs hanging over the edge of the canyon. Down the grade he could hear the rattle of harness, the creak of wood against stone. He managed to get to his feet, partly sobered.

"Graveyard!" he yelled. "Graveyard!"

"Huh?" grunted Graveyard, not far away. "Who wants me?"

"This is Lonesome! Are yuh hurt, Graveyard?"

"Wait a minute!" There was a rattling sound, and a solid thump. Then Graveyard's voice raised in complaint.

"Nope. Got me down again, the damn thing!"

"What's got yuh down, par'ner?"

"A dad-burned buggy wheel! Got m' danged legs kind o' weaved in among it, and ever' time I try to git up, she lays me low again. Can'tcha help me?"

"If I can find yuh, I'll shore be pleased to—"

Lonesome found him, tripped and proceeded to sit down on Graveyard.

"Now ain't you the little helper!" wailed Graveyard. "I was all right, except m' legs, and now you've busted my back!"

"Where'd yuh git the wheel?" Lonesome demanded.

"Git it?" howled Graveyard. "I didn't—it got me!"

"Jist a wild wheel, huh? Kind o' re-markable. Maybe we can tame it. Hol' still, while I kind o' ravel yuh out. There yuh are!" replied Lonesome. "Now . . . He-e-ey, Graveyard, where's our buckboard?"

"Tha's right," agreed Graveyard. "Oh, m' gosh, that's a wheel off'n our buckboard! Uncle Hootie will give us holy Ned for thish."

After an exhaustive search in the dark they found the team and buckboard down the road about a hundred feet, where the lines had entangled in a manzanita bush. They went back, secured the recalcitrant wheel and put it in the back. Then Lonesome fell over his suitcase, swore bitterly, and threw it into the buckboard.

They had gone several miles when Lonesome suddenly grabbed Graveyard by the arm.

"Lissen!" he yelled into Graveyard's ear. "Did we have five wheels on this here buckboard when we left Lodeville?"

"We only had four," said Graveyard. "Yo're crazy, Lonesome."

"I am? Then where'd that extra wheel come from—the one behind us?"

"Well, I'm a son-of-a-gun! That's

funny. Let's git out and count 'em ag'in."

"Nossir. If that's our wheel, this here buckboard shore runs well on jist three. Let well enough alone, par'ner—and keep drivin'."

Next morning old Rawhide Rawlins and Red Snow sat on the rickety porch of Red's shack and talked over things that had happened since Red went away.

"I never got your letters, Red," said Rawhide slowly. "You say you never got mine. Well, I wrote yuh twice. Are yuh sure they let yuh get letters—up there?"

"Yeah, they let you get 'em," said Red. "Have you talked with Joan lately?"

"I ain't seen her to speak to her for months, Red," Rawhide said. "Yuh see, she's marryin' Al Harker pretty soon. She came here to see me sev'ral times after you went away, but she finally quit comin'."

"She's goin' to marry Al Harker?" asked Red.

Rawhide nodded. "They elected him prosecutin' attorney just a couple weeks after you left. Now he's runnin' for the Superior Court. Prob'ly get elected, too. He's a big man in Smoky River Valley, Red."

"Yeah," said Red. "He got all my cows and horses for defendin' me. Rawhide, I've had lots of time to think things over—up there. If I wanted to steal a calf, I wouldn't steal from Frank Evans. I killed a calf for veal, but it had my brand. If I was a thief, I'd have more sense than to leave that Circle E hide on my corral fence. Somebody knew I killed that calf; so they killed a Circle E calf, skinned it, stole the hide of my calf and put the Circle E one in its place. But why would anybody want me to go over the road?"

"I dunno," sighed Rawhide. He squinted out toward the road. "Here come Brad Erwin and Tod Bush, Red. I wonder what they want."

"Whatever they want, they're liable to get it," said Red tensely.

"Now, Red," warned Rawhide. "Hang onto yore temper."

The two officers rode up to the porch and dismounted. Sheriff Erwin was a tall, bony man with a long nose, wide, tight-lipped mouth and a jutting chin. Tod Bush was small, lean, dark, and his voice had a complaining note, even when he was pleased.

Bush said wearily: "Hyah, Red. Howdy, Rawhide."

"Hello, Tod," replied Red.

Brad Erwin came up close to the steps.

"Ridin' kind o' early, ain't yuh, Brad?" Rawhide drawled.

"Not too early," answered the sheriff. "How long after I seen yuh leave the Half Moon did you pull out o' Moon Flats, Red?"

"Right away," replied Red. "What's this all about, Brad?"

"Yore father was shot and killed last night, and robbed of a hundred thousand dollars."

Red jerked forward and got to his feet, his features tensed.

"You say he was killed? Who killed him?"

"That's what I'm tryin' to find out,

Red. He was shot in his own yard—and the money's gone."

"The devil with the money!" Red said flatly. "Who'd kill him?"

The sheriff shook his head, but watched Red narrowly. Red drew a deep breath and, looking intently at Erwin, he said:

"And you ask me what time I left town last night. Brad, are you tryin' to say that I might have shot him?"

Rawhide grabbed Red's right sleeve. "Hold it, pardner," he said quietly.

"Listen, Brad Erwin," gritted Red, "you intimate that I'd shoot my own father, and I'll fill you so full of lead that—"

"Yuh better take it easy," warned the sheriff. "Yo're goin' off half-cocked, Red."

"Am I?" queried Red bitterly. "And why not? Damn it, I served two long years for somethin' I never done. Then when I come back I'm accused of killin' my own father. Sure, we never got along. We saw things differently. But he was still my father, regardless of what he thought of me. I suppose all of Smoky River Valley will say that I was his killer. Well, damn it, they can say that if they want to. But, Brad, I'll make any man eat his words—if I hear him say it."

"No use makin' war talk," said the sheriff. "I just wanted to know when yuh left Moon Flats last night. If you came here right after I seen yuh, that's good enough for me. Nobody's tryin' to railroad yuh, Red. . . . C'mon, Tod; we'll be driftin'."

"I'll ride back with yuh," said Red. "Wait'll I saddle my horse."

Red hurried down to the stable. The sheriff looked at Rawhide and grinned slowly.

"The kid's kind o' proddy, Rawhide," he remarked.

"Don't shove him," Rawhide advised. "He was a wild kid when he left here, but he's cooled down a awful lot, Brad. Yuh know what I mean—he'd shoot yuh in the legs then—now he'll shoot to kill."

III

Red came up from the stable on his sorrel gelding, and the three men rode away.

"How long since yuh heard from yore father, Red?" the sheriff asked.

"Little over two years."

"He didn't write to yuh?"

Red looked at the sheriff curiously.

"You knew dang well he wouldn't, Brad. I wrote letters to Rawhide, though, and he wrote letters to me, but I never got a one—neither did he. If my father wrote me, I never got the letters. And you can take it from me, I'm goin' to find out why."

"Might be pretty hard to trace letters, after a year or so."

Red looked closely at the sheriff for several moments. "How do you know it's been a year or so since I wrote a letter?"

"I don't, Red. I was just guessin', as yuh might say."

"You guessed awful close," Red commented.

"I dunno," remarked the sheriff. "All that's past and gone, Red. You came back here to start all over again. Why not do it without a chip on yore shoulder? Shucks, any young feller might make a mistake."

Red's eyes were drawn to pin points as he looked at the sheriff.

"So I came back to start all over again, eh?" he said coldly. "That's all you know about it, Brad. I never came back here to start over; I came to prove that I'm not a thief—and when I prove that—well, watch out for the men who framed me into the penitentiary."

As they rode into Moon Flats, Red left them and tied his horse at the Half Moon Saloon hitch rack. He was leaving the rack when a little, bowlegged man, gray as a rabbit, and with a fuzzy mustache, came running down the wooden sidewalk, hat in hand. Fairly hurling himself at Red, he grabbed him with both hands.

"Red, you son of a sea cook!" he whooped. "I heard yuh was back. By the mighty St. Charles River, I'm glad to see yuh!"

"Uncle Hootie!" exclaimed Red. "I'm sure glad to see you, too!"

They stood back and looked at each other. Suddenly Hootie King, owner of the Rafter K spread, lost his smile.

"Red, I'm mighty sorry," he said. "I just remembered about yore father."

"Yeah . . . that's right," said Red quietly. "All I know is what Brad Erwin told me a while ago. I'd like to go and see him, if they'll let me."

"Let yuh? Jist let 'em try and stop yuh! C'mon with me—I'd like to see him, too."

Al Harker, the attorney, was with Dr. Myers. Neither Red nor Hootie King spoke to him. Red went in to see his father's body alone.

"Red don't act none too friendly," Harker commented.

"I wouldn't let that itch me, if I was you," said Hootie. "He wasn't exactly yore bosom friend before he was sent up, Al."

Red came out of the room, grim-faced, and Hootie King went in. In a few minutes he came out and he and Red left the house. Outside the doctor's gate they met Sheriff Erwin. He said:

"About that wheel yuh left at my office, Hootie. I asked Hall, at the livery stable, and he says it's a wheel off one of his buggies. Where did Lonesome and Graveyard find it, Hootie?"

Hootie shrugged. "I asked them the same thing, Brad. They don't know. They was both drunk. All they know is that it was some'ers between here and Lodeville. Holy henhawks!" He snorted suddenly. "Do yuh reckon they shoved a buggy into that El Diablo Canyon?"

"I've been wonderin' the same thing," the sheriff said soberly. "Is Harker in the doctor's place?"

"Yeah."

The sheriff hurried in, while Red and Hootie went on up to the main street. In a few minutes Harker and the sheriff came up, going straight to the livery stable, where they talked with Hall, the stable keeper. Then they hurried over to the hotel and went upstairs to see Samuel Reed, who was still sleeping off the effects of his generosity with the folks of Moon Flats.

Reed admitted them and immediately sprawled back on the bed.

"What a night!" he groaned.

"We've got some bad news, Reed," replied the lawyer.

Reed sat up, staring at Harker. "What happened?" he asked anxiously.

"We're not sure yet," replied Harker, "but it's very possible that Dave Harmon and his livery rig were dumped into El Diablo Canyon last night."

"El Diablo Canyon? Harmon got dumped—" Reed's eyes widened. "How could that happen?"

"Sideswiped in the dark by a couple drunken punchers in a buckboard," said the sheriff. "It's a narrow road along the rim of the canyon. You've been over it."

"Yes, and it scared me, too," admitted Reed. "But . . . but how do you know that such a thing happened?"

"The drunken punchers, after they got straightened out, found a wheel off the buggy. That's all that was left on the grade."

"Great Jupiter!" gasped Reed. "How far—how deep is that canyon, where he went over? Isn't there a chance that—"

"We don't know where he went over," the lawyer interrupted. "It isn't less than two hundred feet to the bottom at any point on that grade."

"Two hundred feet," said Reed huskily. "He couldn't do it—and live."

"Me and my deputy are ridin' out there," the sheriff told him. "Maybe we can find some signs, somethin' to show where it happened."

"This is terrible!" groaned Reed, after Erwin left. "Harker, we've got to do something—quick."

"We've just got to hope that it *didn't* happen," said the lawyer.

The news of the possibly fatal wreck on El Diablo Canyon spread quickly over Moon Flats. Red and Hootie King heard it in the general store.

"I saw Harmon drive away from Jim Snow's house," said a man. "In a few minutes Al Harker and Reed came out and went uptown."

"What time was that?" asked Red Snow.

"Oh, I dunno," the man replied. "Mebbe half-past five."

Red and Hootie King went outside. Men were on the street discussing the possibility of ever recovering a body from El Diablo.

"Yuh got to go in at the lower end," said one of the men. "There's no other way into the blasted canyon. And if yuh ask me, it'll be a job to take horses through to bring out a

body. And if yuh don't know where Harmon went over, you'd never find it."

"Well, Red," said Hootie, "I've got to be gettin' home. Come out as soon as yuh can; we'll all be glad to have yuh."

"Thank yuh, Uncle Hootie, I'll be out."

Red went over to the Half Moon hitch rack, untied his horse and stepped into the saddle. But instead of heading toward his ranch, he rode up the north end of the street and galloped away on the road that led to Lodeville. Al Harker met Sheriff Erwin in front of the hotel, and they saw Red leave town.

"Where's he going?" asked Harker. The sheriff shook his head.

"Looks like he's headin' for El Diablo," he said. "I reckon me and Bush and the men that are going with us better start travelin'."

The sheriff and deputy got their horses, and a dozen men rode out of Moon Flats, heading for the mouth of El Diablo Canyon.

IV

It was after dark that evening when Red Snow came back to Moon Flats. He tied his horse in front of the general store and went in to get some tobacco. Joan Evans was at the counter near the front of the store and turned to meet Red. There was an awkward silence for a few moments. Then Joan said:

"Red! I . . . I heard you were back."

"Yeah, I'm back," said Red soberly. They looked at each other closely.

"You never answered my letters." Joan's voice was accusing.

"I didn't?" Red smiled with his lips alone. "You got no answers, eh?"

"Not a single one, Red."

"I never got any letters from you, Joan," Red told her.

"You never?" Joan's eyes widened. "Red, you must have! I always put a return address on my envelopes, and none came back."

"I never got one of them," he said doggedly. "In two whole years, I never got a letter from anybody in this valley."

"I . . . I don't understand it," she said. "When you didn't answer, I . . . I quit writing."

"I don't blame you. I done the same thing."

Joan was barely twenty, about five feet, six inches in height, and was known as the prettiest girl in Smoky River Valley.

"Are you going to stay?" she asked.

"No, I don't reckon I will."

"But you . . . you came back here, Red."

"Yeah, I came back. You see, Joan, I had a little unfinished business in this country."

The store door opened behind them, and Red turned to face Frank Evans, Joan's father, and the man whose calf he had been convicted of killing. Frank Evans was of medium height, gray-haired, his face deeply lined.

"I heard you was back, Red," he

said quietly. "Glad to see yuh."

They shook hands awkwardly. Evans looked curiously at his daughter, but turned to Red.

"I'm awful sorry about your father, Red," he said.

"Yeah, I know," replied Red. "It was a tough way to go, Mr. Evans."

"It sure was. Are yuh goin' to stay in the valley, Red?"

"No, I reckon not. I wasn't guilty of that charge, Mr. Evans; so I came back to clear myself. Then I'll drift along."

"Red, do you think you can do that?" asked Joan anxiously. Her father glanced sharply at her, but she was looking at Red.

"I hope I can," he said gravely. "I've had a lot of time to think things over calmly. I used to be hot-headed but I got over that."

"I never thought you was guilty, but the evidence was all against you," said Evans. "The law said you was guilty."

"Law ain't always justice, Mr. Evans," Red declared bitterly.

"That's true. I hope they get the man who killed your father."

"That's my job," said Red. "Dad and I never got along. Maybe we were both wrong. Our ideas didn't fit together. But he was still my father."

"He didn't get along with many people, Red," remarked Evans.

"He didn't want to get along. He said he wanted to be different. It didn't do him any good."

"Ready to go back, Joan?" asked her father.

"All ready, dad. We'll see you again, Red."

"Thank yuh," said Red simply. Neither of them invited him out to the ranch. Perhaps that was too much for him to expect.

On their way home Joan said: "I just wonder what Red has on his mind, dad."

"Something, that's a cinch," said her father. "He's changed. He was a wild, reckless kid, but not now. He's cold-blooded, calculating. I'm glad I had nothing to do with him being sent up."

It was well after midnight when the searching party, nearly exhausted from hours of riding, found David Harmon in El Diablo Canyon. Harmon was battered and bruised, almost stripped of clothes, but alive. He was unable to tell them much about the accident, except that he remembered that something had shoved him off the road, and he fell a long ways. It was daylight before he had recovered sufficiently to untangle himself from the heavy brush which had broken his fall and probably saved his life.

They plied him with liquor and water but had no food along. All agreed it would be best to wait until daylight before attempting the return journey. They had been obliged to leave their horses at the mouth of the canyon. They wrapped Harmon in some blankets, made him as comfortable as possible, built a fire and sat around the rest of the night.

Harmon had no idea how far he had come from the wreck, but at daylight the sheriff and deputy made

their way for about a half mile further up the canyon, where they found the remains of the buggy. The sheriff searched all the surrounding brush and rocks, but came back to find Tod Bush, squatted on his heels, examining some tracks in the sand just above the wrecked buggy.

"Brad," said Bush, "that Harmon feller wears shoes, don't he?"

"Of course he does. Why?"

"Nothin' much, except that these tracks was made by high-heeled boots."

The sheriff examined them closely, got up and scowled at the rocky walls of the canyon.

"There's another way into this canyon, Tod," he said, "and Red Snow knows where that trail is located."

"These Red's tracks?" asked Bush curiously.

"He went out of town ahead of us yesterday," growled the sheriff. "Let's go back."

Graveyard Grady and Lonesome Jones came to Moon Flats. Lonesome was still wearing the clothes he had bought in Lodeville, though their pristine glory was somewhat dimmed. But he didn't wear the shoes, because he had found an old pair of boots.

"I've swore," said Lonesome patiently, "a dozen times that I put that daddurned suitcase under m' bunk that mornin'."

"Seein' is believin'," Graveyard pointed out. "As a matter of fact, you was too drunk to remember even gettin' out of that rig."

"Anyway, we killed a man on the grade, and I've had to wear this here hissin'-adder suit, 'cause I can't find my clothes. Why didn't I jist go on to Alabamy and visit my folks?"

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, yore old home town sure moves often!" snorted Graveyard. "You was startin' for Texas, Lonesome."

"Aw, I never was. Doggone it, I'd like to find that suitcase. It'd save me from buyin' some decent clothes to work in. . . ."

They rode into Moon Flats, tied their horses and held a debate.

"I need to buy me some clothes," stated Lonesome.

"And we're both thirsty, too," said Graveyard. "Yuh can't buy no clothes when yo're thirsty, Lonesome."

"Look what I bought when I was drunk."

"Yeah, that's right—look! All right, we go to the store first. Yuh walk ahead of me. Then folks won't think I'm with yuh."

So they walked single file to the general store. Red Snow was just coming out. He hadn't seen either of them for over two years, but they merely stopped and looked him over gravely.

"One of yuh looks all right," Red remarked. "But the other one don't."

"He ain't," declared Graveyard. "He's terrible on the optic nerve."

"Is he thataway on purpose?" asked Red.

"He had delerium tremens," Graveyard confided. "The tremens went away, but the delerium stuck."

Suddenly the two old rawhiders broke into laughter. They grabbed Red, punched him and plied him with questions, which they didn't give him time to answer. Suddenly Graveyard grabbed Lonesome and pulled him away.

"I'm sorry, Red," said Graveyard soberly. "We—dang it, we plumb forgot about yore dad."

"That's all right," said Red. "Yuh can't always remember. How are yuh?"

"Fine as frawg hair," Lonesome declared. "Graveyard is drawin' nigh to the sere and yaller leaf, as they say, but I'm as young as ever."

"They tell me you started for home again, Lonesome."

"And," said Lonesome soberly, "I dang near made it this time, Red."

"He made Lodeville," said Graveyard, "and that's as far as he ever got in ten, twelve years. Sa-a-ay! Why don't you ride out to the ranch with me and Lonesome?"

"I might go out," said Red. "It's one place where I can feel that I'm welcome. I'm goin' to the post office, and I'll meet you boys here in a little while."

Red went to the post office where he found the postmaster, fussy, little Henry Baker, with the high-pitched voice, and about three strands of hair left on his head.

"Heard you was back," Baker greeted Red briskly. "Well, what can I do for you, sir?"

Red explained about his letters never reaching their destination, and about letters written to him never reaching the prison. The postmaster shook his head, puzzled.

"Can't imagine it," he declared. "You must be mistaken. One letter, possibly. Not a regular thing. The fault couldn't be in this office."

"It wasn't a mistake," said Red. "One letter could be a mistake, but not a dozen, or more. Mr. Baker, those letters were deliberately taken."

"Nonsense! Who would take them? Not me! James Pelley, my assistant, came here shortly after you went away. He doesn't know you. Your letters would mean nothing to him, sir. You'll have to look further."

"I'll look until I find the man," Red said coldly, "and I'm goin' to shoot him once for every letter he stole."

Red walked out, leaving the postmaster to look after him, his jaw sagging.

James Pelley came from behind the postal department. "I heard a little of that, Mr. Baker," he said. "Who is that man?"

"His name is Red Snow. He just came back from prison."

"I've heard about him," said Pelley. "What did he want?"

"Something about twelve missing letters. Letters to him and from him. Says they were never received. Must be mistaken. He said he was going to shoot the thief once for each letter stolen!"

As Red crossed the street to get his horse, the sheriff and his searchers rode in with Dave Harmon. They took him to Dr. Myers' place, then the bulk of them came on down the street, anxious for something to eat and drink. Red was surprised

to learn that Harmon was alive and with no bones broken. The rescuers looked in almost as bad condition as the victim did, their clothes torn and their skins scratched.

Samuel Reed and Al Harker went down to see Harmon, but asked no questions. Reed didn't seem any too happy about it. When they left Doc Myers' office they went to see the sheriff, but he was eating his first meal in twenty-four hours, and in no mood to talk.

"Didn't you find his suitcase, sheriff?" Reed asked.

"Wasn't any," the sheriff replied. "We searched everywhere."

"Damn the luck!" snorted Reed. "Where're all the papers? Don't you realize Snow is dead and can't sign again?"

Brad Erwin scowled thoughtfully, as he remembered the footprints they had found by the wrecked buggy. Finally he said:

"I'll talk with yuh when I finish eatin'. Meet me at the office."

"Those papers haven't been recorded," Reed reminded. "I want action."

V

Red Snow came back from the Rafter K about ten o'clock that night, filled with good food and a feeling that he was not without true friends, after all. Moon Flats was quiet as he rode the length of the main street, then galloped down the dusty road toward his own place. He was about a mile from home, riding down across a dry wash, when his horse whirled sideways, and a gun flashed. The sudden actions of the horse almost unseated Red, and before he could catch his balance, two more shots blasted at him, and the horse went down head first, throwing his rider clear.

Red landed on his hands and knees and rolled over on his back, gun in hand, half-blinded with the sand and dust. He couldn't see nor hear anyone, but did not move, waiting for some further action. When none came he got slowly to his feet, expecting further attack. A few steps ahead he stumbled against his dead horse, and dropped down again.

Red couldn't understand why anyone should try to kill him. He was on a road which led only to his little ranch; so there was little possibility that he had been mistaken for someone else. After a while he got up and started walking the mile or so to his place.

There was no light in the house, and as Red came up on the porch he noticed that the front door was wide open. It wasn't like Rawhide to go to bed and leave the door open. Red hesitated on the porch, but there was no sound from the house. Finally he stepped inside and lighted a match.

Rawhide Rawlins was lying almost in the middle of the room, hands and feet tied, a strip from an old shirt around his face and tied in the back of his neck. Red lighted the lamp and quickly cut the ropes.

Rawhide was unhurt, but very mad. He sat up and said: "Them dadburned bushwhackers! They

shore left me cramped up."

"What happened?" demanded Red.

"Happened? How in blazes would I know? Long about nine o'clock I heard a noise on the porch. Thought mebbe it was you." Rawhide spat wickedly and shook his head. "It wasn't," he said dryly. "A masked man shoved a shotgun into my belly and backed me up into the house. Then he made me git down on my face, an' tied me up."

"But why?" asked Red. "It don't make sense, Rawhide."

"Nope, it don't. There was more'n one of them 'cause I heard voices."

"Queer doin's, Rawhide," said Red. "They 'bushed me on the way from town. Killed my horse. He's back there by the dry wash."

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" gasped Rawhide. "Killed yore horse, eh? That's bad. How many men in the bunch?"

Red shook his head. "I think I heard three shots. Had my ears full of dirt so there might have been more. Prob'ly the same gang that came here. But why would they tie you up, Rawhide?"

"I dunno, Red. I kind o' felt that they was lookin' for somethin'."

"Lookin' for somethin'? What on earth is there around here that anybody would want?"

"Yuh know, Red, that sheriff acted like he thought you had somethin' to do with yore father gettin' shot. Yuh don't suppose they think you've got that hundred thousand dollars cached around here, do you?"

"Rawhide, I think you've hit it!" exclaimed Red. "They searched the place. What else could they be lookin' for? But why try to kill me?"

"To give 'em more time to look for it, mebbe," suggested Rawhide.

"Mebbe," said Red doubtfully. "Where'll I get another horse?"

"I've got one." Rawhide grinned. "Fastest horse in the valley. We'll pick her up tomorrow and get yore saddle."

Red was not consulted about the funeral arrangements for his father. He was not at the inquest. He and Rawhide came to Moon Flats shortly before the funeral. Neither of them mentioned what had happened the night before.

It seemed that everyone in the valley came to the funeral. Red and Rawhide sat together and listened to an interminable funeral sermon. Joan sat with her father and Al Harker, but Red never looked her way.

It was finally over and the people filed outside to their buggies, wagons and horses, making up the funeral procession. Tod Bush, the deputy sheriff, came over to Red after the services at the grave.

"Yuh kind o' fooled 'em, Red," Bush remarked. "They was bettin' that yuh wouldn't show up for the funeral. Al Harker made his bet yesterday. He lost a hundred dollars on it."

"Who won his money?" asked Red curiously.

"Joan Evans," chuckled Bush. "But don't say I told yuh."

"How did you know this?" asked Red. "I won't mention it, Bush."

"I heard Harker talkin' to Brad Erwin. I reckon Harker and Joan had some words about you."

"Had some words about *me*?"

"Uh-huh. Somethin' about the way Harker acted when he was yore lawyer."

"I tell yuh he's crooked," declared Rawhide. Tod Bush laughed.

"Well, ain't he?" flared the old man.

"I was told," confided the deputy, "that I'm not paid a salary to shoot off my big mouth."

"How is that feller Harman gettin' along?" asked Rawhide.

"He's all right," Bush replied. "Skinned up a little. Man, he's got all the luck there is—fallin' into that canyon and keepin' on livin'. Say, Red, you don't happen to know another way into El Diablo, do yuh?"

"Another way?" asked Red. "What made yuh think I do?"

"I'm not askin'," Bush said quickly. "I just wondered. Well, I'll see yuh later."

Frank Evans met Red and Rawhide down on the main street. He drew Red aside.

"Here's something you ought to know, Red," he said seriously. "Of course, you know that the hundred thousand dollars yore father had was stolen. You probably also know that he had quite a sum of money in the bank, and that he died without making any will."

"I'm not interested in his money," replied Red coldly.

"The public is, Red. You'll inherit every cent of that money. Nobody can keep that away from you. If the mine payment is recovered, that will belong to you, too. If it ain't recovered, you'll get the mine, because not a single sheet of those papers has been found. It may require a lawsuit, of course; and the court might accept the testimony of the three men that the money had been legally paid. That's up to the court."

"What's this all about, Mr. Evans?" asked Red curiously.

"Let's look at this in a cold-blooded way, Red. You just finished servin' two years for rustlin'. You and your father didn't get along. The night you get back, your father is killed and robbed of a fortune. Everything is left to you. I'm not accusin' you, Red—but the public will."

Red laughed shortly. "Don't worry," he said. "I don't want the money. I wouldn't accept my father's money when he was alive—I don't want it now."

"I know that," agreed Evans. "It's a tough spot, Red."

"It's goin' to be a tougher spot, Mr. Evans," said Red quietly. "Last night, when I was on my way to the ranch, I was drygulched about a mile from home. They killed my horse. I found Rawhide all tied up in the house. They had held him up, roped and blindfolded him, and searched the place."

"What on earth was this all done for, Red?" asked Evans.

"It looks as though the public was interested in the money," Red said grimly. "They must think I've got it.

And for some reason, they want to kill me off."

"That's mighty funny, Red."

"I'll laugh at it—later," said Red. He started away but Evans called him back.

"I don't want you to go away with the idea that I'm tryin' to tell you what to do, Red," he said. "If anything comes up, and you need somebody, I hope you'll call on me. You can see my position in the matter."

"I certainly do, and I thank yuh for the offer. But, Mr. Evans, this is somethin' I've got to handle myself. As far as the opinion of Smoky River Valley—I came here to change that. Maybe they'll get me first. But if they do, I want you to know that I never stole yore calf, that I haven't seen my father for over two years—alive—and that I don't want his money."

"I believe you, Red."

"I'm glad you do. It makes things a lot easier."

Red and Rawhide rode back to the ranch together. Rawhide had heard men talking, and it worried him.

"That damned Harmon and Reed are goin' around hintin' that you got into El Diablo and stole the papers off Harmon," he said. "I don't know where they got the idea, but they're sayin' that you beat the posse to the wreck. How could yuh do that? Shucks, there's only one way in."

"You're wrong, Rawhide—there're two," said Red. "I did beat the posse to the wreck. But I never found anythin', so I came out the way I went in. Long time ago an Apache kid showed me the trail. You could only find it by accident, unless you knew where it was."

"I'll be a liar!" gasped Rawhide. "A secret trail! I never knowed there was one. But how'd they know yuh got in ahead of 'em?"

"Maybe they found my tracks, Rawhide. Anyway, it don't matter. We'll have to keep our eyes open from now on."

It was about ten o'clock that night, and both men were getting ready to go to bed when the clatter of hoofs sounded outside and a rider drew up at the porch. Red went cautiously to the front door, gun in hand, and carefully opened the door a few inches. The rider was Joan Evans. Red flung the door open and let her in.

"Joan, what on earth are you doin' here?" he asked anxiously.

"A bunch of men came out to the ranch to talk with dad," she said breathlessly. "I listened from upstairs. They thought Al Harker was out at our place. They want you arrested for killing your father and stealing that money. They say you got into El Diablo Canyon and found the papers Mr. Harmon was carrying East. Dad refused to have anything to do with it, so they left, swearing you'd be in jail before morning."

"Does yore dad know you came here, Joan?" asked Red.

"No, he doesn't. Red, you've got to get away! They mean business. If they get you in jail, you haven't a chance!"

"Not with Al Harker prosecutin'

me," said Red bitterly. "But I can't run, Joan. I didn't do it. And if I run, it'll look like I was guilty."

Suddenly the door was flung open with such force that it banged against the wall, and before Red or Rawhide could make a move, three masked men stepped inside and covered them with guns. Two of the men moved slowly forward, while the third guarded the doorway.

"Don't move," warned one of the men in a hoarse voice that sounded as though it were disguised. "What is this about?" asked Joan anxiously. The spokesman said to his companion: "Get their guns."

The man he had spoken to came in close to Red and reached for his holstered gun. And as he reached for the gun, Red's right hand slashed down across his face, tearing the black mask away. It was Al Harker. The lawyer staggered back for a moment, then leaped forward.

"You crazy fool!" he shrieked. "Look what you've done!"

He slashed his gun barrel across Red's jaw, and the young cowboy dropped like a log. Rawhide whirled, crouched and ran for the connecting doorway, but the man beside the door fired, and the old man pitched forward, half into the other room.

Joan tried to run toward the front doorway, but Harker grabbed her by the arm and flung her against the wall.

"I don't know why you came here," he said coldly, "but you sure ran your neck into trouble."

"What do you mean?" she panted. "Don't touch me."

"Before it's over, you'll know what it means," he replied.

One of the men had been examining Rawhide. Now he came back.

"He's through," he said, pointing at the oldster. "Dead-center shot."

VI

Early next morning Sheriff Erwin and Tod Bush brought their saddle horses from the stable and tied them in front of the office. There had been so much talk about that missing valise that they were going to make another search in El Diablo Canyon.

Bush had just started out to fill their canteens when Frank Evans and Jack Lee, one of Evans' cowboys, rode swiftly into Moon Flats and stopped at the sheriff's office.

"Brad, Joan is missing!" blurted Evans. "She never slept in her bed last night!"

"Missing?" the sheriff exclaimed. "Why, Frank, where could she be?"

"Who knows?" I wouldn't be here if I knew. She must have gone away last night. Wait a minute!"

Frank Evans scowled thoughtfully for several moments. Then he said: "A bunch of the boys came out to my place last night. They're worked up over the killing of Jim Snow, and they seemed to feel that Red Snow should be arrested and tried for the murder. Joan might have heard them—I don't know."

"You mean she'd go to warn Red?" the sheriff asked.

"Who knows what a woman will do?" countered Evans.

"Look who's comin'!" exclaimed Tod Bush.

It was old Rawhide Rawlins, weaving in the saddle. He had managed to wash some of the blood off his head, but he still looked battered and bedraggled. Tod Bush and Jack Lee helped him off his horse and took him into the sheriff's office.

"Hell of a long ways to town," Rawhide said weakly. "Lemme set."

"What happened to yuh, Rawhide?" asked Evans anxiously. "You've been shot in the head, man!"

"That's right; I've been shot. Wham! And the lights went out. When I quit chasin' skyrockets, I'm all alone—house dark as a cave. . . . Hello, Frank. Where's Joan? Did she come home?"

"Was she at your place last night?" demanded Evans.

"She was there the last I knew. I . . . I . . . well, I get kind o' dizzy, and I can't just remember—"

"Oh oh!" grunted the sheriff. "Passed out. Put him on one of them cots. Tod, get Doc Myers here as quick as yuh can!"

But Rawhide regained consciousness before the doctor arrived, and was able to tell them that Joan had come to warn Red. He related what had happened after the masked men got there.

"You say that Red yanked the mask off one of the men?" asked Evans.

"Yeah, he did," agreed Rawhide, "but I—" He hesitated. "I didn't see his face. His back was to me. I started to run and they shot me."

"Do you realize what this means, Brad?" cried Evans. "If Joan recognized this man—"

"Yeah, I know what yuh mean, Evans," said the sheriff.

"They can't let her go," Evans said tensely.

Tod Bush came back with the doctor. Several more people gathered around the doorway, asking questions. Al Harker saw the crowd and came down.

"Old Rawhide Rawlins just came in, covered with blood," one of the men told Harker. "Bush said somebody shot him last night."

Frank Evans came out, saw Harker and stopped.

"Joan is missing, Al," said Evans. "She went to Red Snow's place last night. Three masked men came and knocked Red down and shot Rawhide. Nobody knows where they've gone."

The blood slowly came back into Al Harker's face when he heard that Rawhide had not seen the face of the man who was stripped of his mask.

"What can we do?" asked the lawyer. "We . . . we don't know where to look."

"I know it, Al. Oh, I don't know why Joan would do such a thing."

"I do," said Harker flatly. "I think she still loves Red Snow."

Evans shook his head. "I don't know, Al—I don't know."

The sheriff came out. "I'm sendin' Bush to search El Diablo for that bunch of papers and stuff that Harmon lost," he said. "Do yuh mind if Jack Lee goes with him, Evans?"

"If Jack wants to go, it's all right, Brad."

"Fine. Do you want to question

Rawhide, Al?"

"No, not now. Let's wait until he's better. What's to be done toward finding Joan?"

"I wish I knew," sighed the sheriff. "We don't even know which way to go."

"What would you advise?" asked Evans wearily.

"Advise?" queried Harker. "I don't even know what to say. We'll just have to wait until somebody figures out a plan. It's terrible!"

Old Rawhide got his head fixed up. The doctor advised him to go to bed for a day or two, but Rawhide refused.

"No danged scratch can put me in bed," he declared. "I've got a job to do."

He went to the general store, where he bought a box of .40-70 cartridges, and next he went to the Half Moon Saloon, and had a few drinks. Then he went outside and sat down on the edge of the sidewalk, where he could look straight across the street at Al Harker's office. At regular intervals of about thirty minutes each, he would go back and get another drink. With his head bandaged he looked like a very old and very mean Hindoo in a white turban.

Al Harker studied Rawhide through the window. After awhile it began to annoy the lawyer, especially when he was sure that the old man was watching his door and window. Finally he began to wonder if Rawhide had lied when he said that he hadn't seen the face of the man whose mask had been torn off by Red Snow. But if Rawhide had seen the man's face, why didn't he tell the sheriff? Was the oldster going to handle things in his own way? Or had Rawside confided in Evans and Brad Erwin and told them to keep it to themselves?

These thoughts were not at all pleasant to Al Harker. He felt as though a rope was already around his neck. He wanted a drink very, very badly, but he didn't want to walk past that old rawhider with the bandaged head. Finally he put a gun in his pocket, closed the office and crossed the street. Old Rawhide watched him all the way.

As Harker stepped up on the sidewalk he said: "How are you feeling, Rawhide?"

"Fine as frawg hair," replied Rawhide.

"Head hurt much since doc fixed it?" Harker questioned.

"Nothin' hurts yuh half as much as bein' scared t' death," answered Rawhide soberly.

"You ain't scared, are you?" asked Harker.

"Me?" Rawhide chuckled. "I ain't got nothin' to be scared about."

"I don't understand," said Harker, puzzled.

"Yuh dont? Then you ain't as smart as I thought yuh was."

Harker went on into the saloon, but he knew now what Rawhide meant—and he knew that Rawhide had lied when he said he hadn't seen the face of that unmasked man.

David Harmon, looking little the worse for his fall into El Diablo,

came down from the hotel, and went to the sheriff's office, where he learned about recent happenings. He seemed more interested in recovering his personal belongings and the papers he had with him on his ill-fated trip to Lodeville.

"I've got two men makin' a search of the canyon today, Harmon," Sheriff Erwin told him.

"Good! If they find my suitcase, bring it to me at the hotel and I'll see that they're well paid."

"I'm not worryin' about that," said the sheriff. "Our job is to find that girl."

"We're moving out to the mine," Harmon went on. "We have to be on the ground to plan our reconstruction work. I hope the loss of the papers won't hamper us too much. Samuel Reed is already out at the mine, doing some preliminary work. Have you seen Al Harker this morning?"

"I saw him goin' over to the Half Moon a few minutes ago," replied the sheriff.

Harmon walked to the doorway and looked across the street.

"Who's the white-topped old codger sitting on the sidewalk over there?" he asked.

"Him!" The sheriff chucked. "That's old Rawhide Rawlins. The masked men who got away with Joan Evans and Red Snow probably thought they killed Rawhide, but he fooled 'em. Doc took a handful of stitches in his head this mornin', but he's all right."

"I see-e-e," said Harmon thoughtfully. "Well, I hope your men have good luck in that canyon, sheriff. I'll see you later."

But Harmon didn't go over to the Half Moon. He stood on the sidewalk in front of the hotel for a while, and finally Al Harker came over and joined him.

"Let's go up to your room," suggested Harker.

Harmon nodded. "The sheriff sent two men to search the canyon again," he said.

"Never mind that part of it—we've got to use our brains—fast."

VII

Red Snow was conscious for some time. His head and jaw ached, and every muscle in his body seemed to be protesting separately, but he did not make any attempt to move. Gradually he remembered what had happened. Then he relaxed and tested his arms. They were tied tightly. It was very dark, but he had a feeling that someone was close to him.

Then he heard Joan's voice saying: "Red, are you awake? Are you all right?"

"Joan!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "They got you, too."

"Yes, Red."

"I remember it now. Where are we, Joan?"

"I haven't any idea. They blindfolded me."

"Where's Rawhide? What happened to him?"

"They shot him. I heard them say he was dead."

"Rawhide dead? The squarest

shooter on earth. Damn them!"

There was silence for a while. Then Joan said: "I thought they killed you, too, Red."

"Just a postponement, I reckon. Could you recognize any of the voices?"

"No one, except Al Harker. And to think he was the man I was engaged to marry."

"I'm sorry, Joan. This is a terrible deal for you. Harker can't let you go. They'd hang him for what he's done."

"I know it. He said you'd have to tell him what he wants to know."

"What he wants to know! I don't know anythin' he wants to know. What did they do with Rawhide?"

"Nothing. Harker wanted to . . . to hide the body, but the others said it would take too long. They were in an awful hurry."

"Joan, I've got somethin' figured out. I came alone over that road from Lodeville the night my father was killed. I never met Harmon in his buggy. That's what bothered me. I can see the deal now. Harmon didn't go straight to Lodeville. He went back and shot my father. Then he took the money. Years ago an Apache kid showed me a secret way into the canyon. I went in there and found the wreck before the sheriff and his men got there. They think I got that money. That's what Harker wants to know."

"But you never got it, Red?"

"Of course not. It's still in the canyon. They made the deal too late for dad to have put that money in the bank, even if he'd wanted to. Then they opened the bar at the Half Moon for everybody in town. With all that confusion and free drinks, nobody would be near dad's place, nor hear a shot. But they lost the papers, too. The deal ain't recorded."

"Will that help, Red?" asked Joan.

"I don't know. Harker has a lot of influence with the court. Dad trusted him, too."

"Your father's eyes were getting bad," said Joan. "He had to trust somebody, I suppose."

The door creaked open and a masked man came in, carrying a lighted lantern. The room was about twelve feet square, without any window, and only one door.

"So you woke up, eh?" he said. "By this time, you know it don't pay to tear masks off."

"Your voice sounds familiar," said Red.

"Does it? That's remarkable, considering you've never heard it before."

The man looked at the ropes on both Joan and Red. Satisfied, he put the lantern on the floor, lighted a cigarette and leaned against the wall.

"It might interest you to know that I listened in on your recent conversation," he said. "So you think Dave Harmon killed your father, eh? Not bad for what Al Harker calls a nutheaded cowpuncher. Harker knew you didn't meet Harmon, but he thought you didn't have sense enough to realize it. And you didn't find that money. I didn't think you did. But

now we're sure, and as soon as possible, you go out."

"Out?" queried Red.

"O-u-t. Out!"

"What about the lady?" Red asked anxiously.

"I've never killed a lady," replied the man. "Her demise is entirely up to the man she expected to marry."

"He's yellow enough to do it, too," said Red. "And don't you forget that he's yellow enough to throw you to the wolves, too. Don't trust him too far, my friend."

"I never trust anybody too far."

"You don't eh? Maybe you have already."

"What do you mean, Snow?"

"Did you ever stop to think that Harker and Harmon might get their hands on that money, and leave you here to face the music? If they got it, do you reckon they'd bother waitin' for you?"

"You think so, eh?" The man's attitude changed quickly.

"What relation is Harmon to Harker?"

"Broth—no relation."

"Brothers, eh? I thought so. Harmon and Harker. Which one changed his name?"

"Harmon, I guess . . . I don't know. It's none of—"

"Harker framed this mining deal, eh?"

"How else?" queried the man.

"I see." Red laughed shortly. "Reed," he said, "you'll never live to enjoy that money. I'd advise you to pull out and keep goin'—fast. When the officers close in on this place, your pals will be far away."

"You're a liar, Snow! They wouldn't—"

"Stay around here and see. I know Harker better than you do. He'd double-cross his grandmother. Harmon would, too, and you know it. If I'm not mistaken, Harmon knows where that money is right now. Maybe he'll double-cross both you and Harker. Reed, yo're a sucker."

The man picked up the lantern and walked back to the door. He turned and faced the two prisoners.

"You're crazy, Snow," he declared.

"All right." Red shrugged. "Go to any boothill in the West, and you'll read on tombstones that the inhabitant thought somebody was crazy."

The man closed and locked the door behind him. Red whispered to Joan:

"Don't say anythin'.—He's prob'ly listenin'."

As news of the missing girl spread around the valley, armed men rode in to offer their services to Sheriff Erwin. By four o'clock there were an even dozen ready to ride. Old Rawhide was still at his post. The whiskey he had absorbed did not seem to affect him at all.

He watched the sheriff and his men ride out of town, but showed little interest in them. Harker was back in his office watching Rawhide. There was something sinister about the old fellow. Some remarked that the bullet must have cut deeper than the doctor thought and shocked the old man's mind a little. But Harker

didn't believe it. Finally Rawhide went to the hitch rack and mounted his horse. As he rode past Harker's office, he turned and looked in that direction.

Now that a posse wanted to make a search, Brad Erwin, had no idea where to start. A mile or so out of town, he halted them.

"Men," he said, "this looks like a wild-goose chase. We don't know where to start. I've got a little idea, but I've got to carry it out alone. The rest of you ride to the Circle E and wait there for me. It may be quite a while, so don't get impatient."

"Anythin' you say, Brad," said Peterson, owner of the Bar P. "We'll wait for yuh at the Circle E."

The sheriff had a vague idea that Rawhide Rawlins knew something he had not told. Possibly the oldster had recognized one of the kidnapers. At any rate, it was worth taking a chance. So Erwin cut across the hills to the old road that led to Red Snow's place.

Old Rawhide came home, all right, but he did not stable his horse. He went into the house and came out, carrying his old Winchester .45-70, which he placed across the fork of the saddle in front of him. His actions were so deliberate that the sheriff, hidden back in the brush on the hillside, felt that he had made a smart move in watching Rawhide.

He was able to keep the oldster in sight long enough to decide that Rawhide was heading for the Golden Calf Mine, and then lost him. The sun was down, and that meant that darkness was not far off.

Reed hadn't gone back again to see Joan and Red. The more he drank the more he considered what Red had said, and the possible duplicity of his partners grew greater with the passing hours. He was quartered in what Jim Snow had used as his office, and now he sat near a window, watching the road from Moon Flats, a rifle beside him.

Suddenly, from a corner of his eye, he saw a movement over behind a pile of old timbers. It was nearly dark. Reed leaned in close to the window, watching for something to move again. Then he saw it; something white. Fumbling against the sash, Reed managed to open the window. Then he crouched down, shoving the rifle barrel outside.

He tested the sights, but it was almost too dark to use them. Drink had ruined his natural caution. He thought he saw the white figure again; so he made a rough guess with the sights and pulled the trigger.

Echoes blasted back from the old buildings, as he leaned forward and peered at the old pile of timbers. Suddenly the window just above his head was shattered into frgments and glass flew over the room, while the blare of a big cartridge echoed back into the hills.

Reed went flat on the floor. The bullet had also smashed a big mirror on the opposite wall. From over by the timbers came the high-pitched voice of Rawhide;

"Smoke that in yore pipe, you dirty rattler!"

Reed couldn't recogize the voice, but he heard the words. He grabbed

his rifle and slid away from the window. He wanted to run, wanted to get as far away from that place as possible, but he would either have to go through that window or through the door, both of which were covered by the man behind the timbers.

Brad Erwin heard the two shots, but was unable to locate just where they came from. Joan and Red also heard them faintly, and it cheered them quite a bit. Shots meant that some action was taking place.

Rawhide sprawled behind the timbers and watched the house. He knew the man was still in there, and if he came out—well, Rawhide would do his best to stop him.

"Mebbe I'm barking up the wrong tree," Rawhide told himself, "but at least he shot first, which shows he ain't a friend. And I can stay here as long as he can stay inside that shack."

VIII

Just after dark that night Tod Bush and Jack Lee rode into Moon Flats, carrying a battered suitcase. They found Harmon with Al Harker in the latter's office, and handed them the suitcase.

"We sure had a job," said Bush. "It was hung high on a manzanita, and we had to shoot off the handle. Hope it ain't hurt too much, Mr. Harmon."

"No, it looks all right," replied Harmon huskily. "Here." He gave them each a ten-dollar bill for their trouble, and they went on.

Harker and Harmon faced each other, and Harker said:

"Well, you've got it, but what's wrong with you, Dave?"

"This isn't my suitcase," whispered Harmon. "Wait!"

It was locked, but Harmon quickly slit it with his knife. Inside were several rumpled articles of clothing including a pair of overalls, old and stained and an old shirt.

"Great Jupiter!" gasped Harker. "That's—wait a minute! In that crash, those two drunks from the Rafter K picked up your suitcase, Dave! This belongs to Lonesome Jones."

Harmon stared at him for several moments.

"Then my suitcase is out at the Rafter K!" he blurted. "We've been on the wrong track, Al. Maybe those two punchers have cached the money and—"

"Hold on!" interrupted Harker. "Maybe they haven't. Bush told me that Lonesome Jones lost his suitcase, and had to buy new working clothes."

"Believe that if you want to," Harmon said. "They found it, I tell you! Losing it is just an alibi. They've got that money!"

"That might be true, Dave; I never thought of that."

"But what's to be done?" Harmon paced the length of the little office, snapping his fingers nervously. "We've got to see Reed. Damn it, we've got this deal all balled up. There's Red and that girl. What's to be done?"

"We can't let her loose," said Harker. "She'd hang all of us."

"She'd hang *you*," Harmon cor-

rected. "She didn't see any face except yours."

"All right," replied Harker coldly. "Make it that way, if you wish. But we'll sink or swim together, my little brother."

"Will you go out and see Reed?" asked Harmon.

"No. I'm afraid Rawhide is watching me. I know what to do—Pelley!"

"Careful," warned Harmon. "He's not in on the deal."

"He will be. He's no angel, and we can use him. He'll be worth a split."

"Go find him," said Harmon. "I'd split with the devil—now."

Brad Erwin grew tired of watching in the dark, especially when he did not know just where to watch; so he left his horse and went wandering among the old buildings. It was slow work, especially as he did not know just how quickly nor where he might run up against a bullet in the dark. Old Rawhide stuck to his post. Of course, he knew that a man was in that building, and he wanted to keep track of him. And, of course, Rawhide didn't know that Brad Erwin was anywhere near the mine. Nearly an hour had passed since Rawhide had fired his shot at the window, when a rider came up the winding road. He was riding fast, but slowed quickly some distance away, and came cautiously. He dismounted near the building, and left his horse and went up to the door, where he knocked sharply.

A shot thudded hollowly inside the building, and the man at the door gave a sharp cry. Rawhide was unable to see what happened to the man, but he could hear him whimpering. Then he heard the man say;

"This is Pelley. You shot me!"

Rawhide knew Pelley as the assistant postmaster at Moon Flats, and he wondered what the post office had to do with this deal. He heard the door open, and several grunts, as Pelley was helped inside. Then the door was closed and bolted. Rawhide grinned. The man in the house was so nervous that he was shooting through the door at a mere knock.

"Must be gittin' jumpy," chuckled Rawhide.

Reed had hung a blanket over the smashed window, and now he lighted a candle. Pelley had been hit in the right shoulder, and his shirt was beginning to seep blood.

"Harmon sent me," whispered Pelley. I'm hurt—bad."

"Harmon sent you, eh? Blast Harmon! Where is he?"

"In Moon Flats. I've got a message . . . but I can't talk . . . much."

Reed knelt down and Pelley whispered painfully. Abruptly Reed drew back and got to his feet.

"Go back and tell him to do his own killing!" said Reed hoarsely. "I won't do it, I tell you! That wasn't my agreement."

But Pelley had fainted. Reed backed up against the wall, staring at Pelley. His eyes shifted in the faint light of the candle, and they glittered as an idea struck him. There was a fifty-pound box of dynamite on the floor in the corner. On a shelf

was a box of detonators and one whole coil of fuse. Reed reached for his bottle and took a big drink. He had handled lots of dynamite. A bunch of that stuff, rightly placed, would obliterate that small building and its occupants. He wouldn't even have to go in there. He would use a whole coil of cuse. It would burn for a long time, before reaching the powder. He could take Pelley's horse and be a long ways toward Moon Flats before the explosion.

Reed secured an old sack into which he put enough dynamite to blow up every building at the mine. Then he fused a detonator carefully, took the fuse and sack in one hand, and debated his get-away. He even chuckled. It would all be so simple. When he was ready, he put out the candle, removed the blanket and carefully slid outside.

Rawhide never relaxed his vigilance, but he didn't see Reed crawl through that window; it was too dark against the side of that wall. But he did distinguish the darker bulk of the man as he came into the opening between buildings and moved away.

Rawhide crawled from his hiding place and followed Reed. That is, he followed in that direction, because he couldn't see him. Rawhide, in spite of his age, was as silent as a marauding Apache; merely a faint shadow, moving slowly, his heavy rifle ready.

Brad Erwin, the sheriff, had heard the shot that felled Pelley but had no idea where it came from, as he poked around other spots, wondering where Rawhide had gone, and if he had anything to do with the shooting.

But Rawhide was unable to find his man. He kept on going, listening for any sound that might guide him. A trail led up to a small group of shacks against the hill; so Rawhide carefully inched his way up. He heard a scraping noise ahead, and crouched in his tracks. He was close to the shacks, and the noise seemed to come from beyond them. Cautiously he left the trail and circled the shacks until he was nearly behind them. He was crouched there, listening intently, when he saw a match lighted close to the ground. A moment later it went out, and he heard a man hurrying away.

Rawhide didn't know just what to do. He hesitated about following the man. Suddenly a gust of wind brought a queer odor to his nostrils. He stood up, sniffing at the breeze. Then he realized what it was and he sprang quickly ahead, guessing at the spot where he had seen the flare from the match. Something tangled around his left boot, and the smoke came strongly to his nose.

In a moment he found it—the end of a burning fuse, hissing and smoking. He quickly cut off the burning end and ground it under his heel. As he started to follow the fuse, a gun was shoved into his back and a voice said:

"Don't move; just take it easy."

"Hyah, Brad," Rawhide said calmly.

"You—Rawhide?" gasped the sheriff. "What are you doin' here?"

"Puttin' out a dadburned fuse," Rawhide explained. "Didn't yuh smell it?"

"I sure did. But who lit a fuse?"

"I don't know who he was except he was the *pelicano* who shot at me from Jim Snow's old office. I sure drove him into his hole. A while ago a man came to see him, and he shot the man through the door."

"Rawhide, what's this all about?" demanded Erwin. "I thought you knew, so I followed yuh here."

"Let's foller this here fuse, Brad. I'll betch it was to blow up Red Snow and Joan."

"You mean—they're here? Where?"

This here fuse leads right under this buildin'. Let's bust in the door."

Their united efforts snapped the lock, and they fell inside. There was nothing in the room. Rawhide pointed at the door and they quickly tore it off its hinges. They heard Red call out as the sheriff lighted the lantern.

Joan and Red were all right, but they stared in amazement at Rawhide and his white bandages, now dirty and torn.

"Don't talk," advised Rawhide, as he helped the sheriff cut away the ropes.

"You're alive, Rawhide!" Red gasped. "They said—"

"Why did they call me Rawhide?" demanded the old man. "I'm tough."

"God bless both of you," said Joan fervently. "They were going to kill us. But how did you find us?"

"Thank Rawhide," said the sheriff. I followed him."

"I told Harker I didn't see the man you unmasked, Red. I jist made a guess you was here. Can yuh walk a little?"

"Where's Reed?" asked Red. "He was one of 'em."

"That's the *pelicano* we want, Brad!" exclaimed Rawhide. "He's the little skunk that lit that fuse. Red, can yuh ride?"

"I'll ride in spite of anythin'," said Red. "Where to, Rawhide?"

"Moon Flate. Reed took that feller's horse, Brad. You and Red have got to stop 'em in town. Red, my bronc is back of that shed, north of yore dad's old office. Know where it is?"

"I know the place."

"I'll stay here with Joan," said Rawhide. "Daggone it, I need a chance to set down and rest—I'm kindo' all in."

IX

Red and the sheriff went hurrying down the hill in the darkness. Joan began rubbing her wrists, while Rawhide relaxed against the wall.

"You shore had a tough time," said the old man kindly.

"It *was* tough, Rawhide," Joan admitted, "but right now, in spite of it all, I've never been so happy in my life."

"I'm kindo' happy, too, Joan. Red comin' home me happy, even if everythin' was against him. Do yuh feel like walkin' a little?"

"I believe I can walk," she said. "Those ropes weren't too tight, but we couldn't get loose."

Rawhide helped her, and with the light of the lantern they went down to the place where Reed left Pelley. They found him on the floor, conscious, but unable to move much. He blinked at the lantern-light, and looked in amazement at Joan and the old man.

"Reed shot yuh, eh," queried Rawhide.

"He took my horse and left me here," complained Pelley. "I don't understand much of what's been going on.

"I'm so weak I can't move. Do you think I'm going to die?"

"Might as well die as hang," Rawhide said coldly.

"Hang?" asked Pelley weakly. "They can't hang me."

"Can't, huh? You watch, young feller. Yo're part of the gang."

"No, no!" Pelley gasped. "I . . . I'm not. They sent me tonight. I didn't know what it was all about."

"You'll hang with Harker," Rawhide declared.

"No, they can't hang me," protested Pelley. "I didn't do anything. Al Harker is my cousin. He got me the postoffice job. I'll tell the truth. I stole all the letters to and from Red Snow. I . . . I didn't know . . . much . . . about . . . it. You . . . you see—"

"I'm a son of a gun!" gasped Rawhide. "He's fainted!"

The folks of Moon Flats were anxious for some sort of definite action. The fact that the sheriff and posse were still out somewhere in the valley did not satisfy them. The men thronged the Half Moon Saloon and talked savagely over what should have been done.

David Harmon and Al Harker sat together in Harker's office, with the blinds drawn, waiting anxiously for the return of Pelley. Harker had ordered him to return at once, but he was already an hour overdue. Harmon was nervous over the way things had gone, and was thinking strongly of getting out of Smoky River Valley. Harker laughed at him, but that did not reassure Harmon. Finally Harker said:

"We need a drink, Dave; at least, you do. Let's go over to the Half Moon and see what they're talking about. When Pelley comes, he'll find us."

"All right," agreed Harmon, and they went across the street.

There was a heated argument going on as they entered the saloon, and a man said:

"Here's the prosecutor now. Ask *him* why they haven't jailed Red Snow."

"What's the argument about, gentlemen?" asked Harker, smiling.

"Why wasn't somethin' done about Red Snow?" demanded one of them. "It seems to me that there's enough evidence against him."

"Red Snow," replied the lawyer, "is not around here just now. The sheriff and a posse are searching for him. When they catch him, he'll have things to explain."

"Yeah—when they catch him!" snarled the man. "What about

Frank Evans' daughter? Where is she? You officers give a jailbird free rein to do as he pleases around here—and look what happened!"

"The law will take care of Snow," assured Harker. "Just take it easy my friend, and you will—"

Harker stopped short. Samuel Reed came into the saloon, hatless and coatless, more than half-drunk and very dusty. Harmon went to him quickly and took him by the arm. Reed pulled away, his face flaming.

"Don't yank me around!" he said harshly. "What's the matter with you, anyway?"

You're drunk, Sam," said Harmon quietly.

"I'm not drunk—much," Reed contradicted. "I fell off that blasted horse and had to walk over a mile. I need a drink."

Harmon sighed and shook his head helplessly as Reed headed for the bar.

"I'll buy a drink for everybody," Harker said. Come up, gentlemen."

The crowd started to surge toward the bar but stopped short as Red Snow and Sheriff Erwin came in. Red was bareheaded, one side of his jaw swollen and still stained with dried blood. His shirt was in tatters, and he carried one of the sheriff's six-shooters inside the waistband of his overalls.

"There's yore kidnaper an' killer now!" exclaimed the man who had argued with the prosecutor. "Arrest him!"

It was an opportune spot for Al Harker. He stepped away from the bar and said quickly:

"Sheriff, arrest Red Snow—now!"

"What for, Al?" the sheriff asked quietly.

"For murder," replied the prosecutor. "He murdered his father."

The sheriff came closer, a half smile on his lips.

"I'm all out of warrants, Al," he said.

"What do you mean?" flared Harker. "I'm the prosecuting attorney of this county and I—"

"You mean you *was* the prosecuting attorney," corrected Red. "Right now yo're the hombre they're goin' to *hang* for murder!"

Not a man in the room saw where Harker got his gun, but he came up with one. Red's draw was like the striking of a rattler, an dhe shot from his waist line. Harker fired, too, but his bullet went high over Red's head, as he spun on his heels, shocked by the impact of the heavy bullet. He was falling into Harmon, who tried desperately to fend him aside and shoot at the same time, but Red's second bullet smashed Harmon's right shoulder, and his gun went spinning.

Reed, unarmed, made a dive for the front door, but Bart Erwin hit him on the left ear with a well-placed right hook, and Reed ended up partly under a card table against the wall, with both hands in the air.

It was all over in split seconds. The amazed onlookers choked in the powder fumes. A man ran to get the doctor.

"Hold it, everybody!" Bart Erwin told the excited crowd. We had the deadwood on 'em. Harmon murdered Jim Snow. The three of 'em knocked Red out and kidnaped Joan Evans. She's all right. Reed, here, tried to dynamite the shack they held Red and the girl in, but old Rawhide ruined their scheme."

There was no comment from the gaping onlookers; they were too shocked to form any opinions. They merely stood there, while Doctor Meyers came in. Harker was dead, Harmon badly hurt.

"Only one to go to jail," complained the sheriff. "Still, I ought to be satisfied that no innocent people were injured. Red, you sure busted this gang wide open."

There was a commotion at the doorway, and the crowd parted to let Hootie King, Graveyard and Lonesome come inside. Hootie was carrying a leather suitcase. The three men stood there and gaped.

"Goin' travelin', Uncle Hootie?" Red asked curiously.

"Goin'—jumpin' catfish, I plumb forgot! Hey! Sheriff! I've got a suitcase full of money! We know where the money went now. Lonesome and Graveyard got the wrong suitcase. I played a trick on Lonesome and swiped his suitcase. He needed new overalls anyway. Tonight I was goin' to give the suitcase back—and the danged thing is lousy with money."

They took the suitcase over to the sheriff's office, where they shut out most of the curious crowd. Tod Bush and some of the boys had gone to get Rawhide and Joan, while others headed for the Evans ranch to tell Frank Evans the news. The suitcase contained the papers for the mining deal, but was packed fairly tight with bundles of currency.

"We'll have to guard this until the bank is open," said the sheriff. "That's too much money to have around. A hundred thousand dollars is—"

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Red, staring at the money. "Wait, Brad! Take a look at that money!"

Quickly they examined a bundle of currency.

"Funny-lookin' money," remarked Uncle Hootie. "That hadn't ort to fool anybody."

"If a man's eyesight was failin' —" said Red slowly. "Dad trusted Al Harker. Brad, they just used enough good money to fool my father. The rest is just a cheap counterfeit. No wonder they wanted that money back. The contents of that suitcase would send them all up on a federal charge."

"I'll be a sidewinder's sister!" Graveyard exclaimed.

"You and yore wigglin' ancestors!" snorted Lonesome.

"Anyway, we saved the Golden Calf," crowed Graveyard. "Don't tell me that we wasted our time drinkin' that night."

From outside came a babble of voices, the rattle of wheels. A cowboy shoved into the doorway.

"Here's Joan Evans and Rawhide Rawlins!" he yelled. "They found

a horse and buggy out there. And they've got Pelley. He's been shot."

Willing hands brought Pelley into the office. The crowd didn't know his part in the murder and holdup. He sagged into a chair and stared at the faces in the yellow light of the lamp. Old Rawhide, his face drawn with pain and exhaustion, said harshly:

"Pelley, you tell Red what yuh told us. Tell him about that calf."

"Harker killed that calf—not you, Snow," said Pelley painfully. "He planted the hide and convicted you. He said he did it to get you out of the country. Later he got me the job in the post office so I could steal all your letters."

"Some of you boys take him down to Doc Myers," said Red. "Doc's workin' on Dave Harmon now."

Joan came over to Red, while the crowd watched her. She said:

"They told us what happened in the Half Moon, Red. You've been vindicated. You've done everything you came here to do."

Red looked at her, and for the first time since he came back, they saw the devil-may-care grin on his face again.

"Not everythin', Joan," he corrected.

"Not— I don't understand, Red."

"We'll get a couple horses and ride out to meet yore father," said Red, "and on the way I'll try to explain what I mean."

She nodded quickly, and they walked out together.

"What'd yuh say, Lonesome, if you was me?" Graveyard said.

"I'll be husband to a horned toad! That's keepin' the family goin'."

"Much obliged," said Graveyard. "I was plumb out of words."

THE END

ALL grass eaters like salt but sugar is an educated taste with both horses and mules. Once acquired, however, it is a great gentler and a horse that may resist the appeal of grain or salt can hardly withstand his sweet tooth. Except in the case of a pet that someone has taught to eat sugar, range horses know nothing about it, however. Men who spend much time in the open know it is well to avoid creating an appetite for sugar in a horse that is to spend a good deal of time around a camp. More than one tender-hearted cowboy has learned that a taste for sugar may be disastrous, when he has come in late, anticipating a fine supper, only to find his mess box broken open and the contents scattered by a sugar-hungry horse.

RIVER ROUNDUP

by SETH RANGER

Hank Bragg's holdup plan was foolproof—but old Sharon McGee was far from being a fool!

"HERE'S the play." Hank Bragg spoke in the heavy, blustering voice that usually smothered all argument. "We leave our fastest horses a mile from the west bank of Coulee River. We take our second best, cross Coulee River on the ferry—"

"In a bunch, or one at a time?" Solo Thornton asked. He was cautious, and with reason. Only six months before he had escaped from a Texas prison, leaving an unserved sentence of fifteen years behind him, along with a guard whose skull he had fractured.

"One at a time," Bragg answered shortly. "We drift into Mineral City—one at a time—and put up our horses at Johnson's Livery Stable. Is that straight?"

The five men comprising the Hank Bragg outfit nodded.

"We put up at different places," continued Bragg. "There're five or six within gunshot of the Mineral City State Bank. And that's another thing I want you to remember—stay within gunshot of the bank. Just in case."

"In case . . . of what?" Solo Thornton asked. Then he caught his breath sharply. "Say, Hank,

you ain't thinkin' of stickin' up the bank?"

"All you need is a long dress with moons and stars on it, and a crystal ball in your hands and you'd be a fortunte teller," Hank snapped. "What else would we be going to Mineral City for?"

Solo Thornton's shifty eyes moved from face to face. He could see the others didn't relish the holdup idea. He knew them for what they were—men who enjoyed throwing their weight and their lead around when the odds were all in their favor. Real opposition made them uneasy. Solo was sure he spoke for the others when he said: "I figgered it might be a hide-out. It's a good place, Hank, because men in our line of business keep away from Mineral City. There ain't been a successful holdup there in years. Something always happens. And some mighty good outfits have tried it. Smilin' Sam's bunch tried it. They're in the pen. The Joe Prentice outfit gave it a whirl. Half of 'em was killed by a posse. The others was hung."

"The Mineral City people have had too much luck," argued Hank. "That means they think they're pretty slick. They're careless. On next Friday night there'll be more dough in the bank than ever before—couple of hundred thousand, at least."

"Yeah," one of the men agreed. "Cattle money; money from that high-grade ore they're shippin' out; State money for the new stage road they figger to build over Rainy Pass. Could be a half a million."

"Say, three hundred and fifty thousand," Bragg said softly. He depended on greed to bring his men into line. "Two-sevenths for me, as leader. A seventh for each of you. Fifty thousand. You can lay low a long time on that. Lay low and live on the fat of the land until the lawmen have forgotten all about you."

"The get-away?" Thornton demanded.

Bragg was patient now. He needed Solo's murderous gun, and his desperation, if it came to shooting their way out. "We ride to the ferry, cross Coulee River, change to fresh horses and high-tail it to the badlands."

"And the ferryman recognizes us and—"

"Yeah, he recognizes us," Bragg agreed, "but all the judges in the land can't make him testify. Dead men tell no tales, they claim."

"I see," Solo said slowly, "we dump him into the river. Fifty thousand dollars. The badlands. Yeah, you can lay low a long time on that. You'll want me to blast the safe, of course."

"Satisfied?"

"Plenty," Solo answered. "I'm just careful, that's all. But still—"

"Yeah?"

"Ain't he the ferryman they call Sharon. Sharon McGee?"

"Yeah. Why?"

Thornton shuddered involuntarily. "Wasn't Sharon the hombre who ferried the River Styx? It seems like I read somewheres—"

"It's just a nickname. Forget it. Anything more?" Bragg was show-

ing signs of toughness again. Timidity or excessive caution on Solo's part might easily stampede the others.

"I'm satisfied," Solo said. And yet he shuddered, as if deep within, he was conscious of a mysterious warning. It was the same feeling that makes a man turn suddenly in the wilderness when human eyes are on him.

Bragg and Solo pulled up at the bank late Wednesday afternoon. They had planned to arrive at different times, but the ferryman had delayed in responding to Bragg's signal, and Solo had ridden up before the outlaw leader was taken across. The two bandits paid no attention to each other, but gave their horses a rub-down while the ferryman was coming across.

It wasn't much of a ferry. The hull of heavy pine planks. A cable overhead kept the craft from drifting downstream. By manipulating lines attached to blocks which ran along the cable, Sharon McGee could turn the boat at a certain angle and the force of the current pushed it across the river. To an experienced man the operation was very simple, but an inexperienced man might easily find himself between banks and wondering how to land.

There was room aboard for a stagecoach and four extra horses, a few head of cattle, or a small flock of sheep. The ferryman stood near his windlasses and the passengers paid their fare on the way over. Sharon McGee was a man in his seventies, and the marks and scars of one who had always worked hard and had had more than his share of tough luck, were on him.

McGee talked a lot, because talking gave him a chance to size up his passengers. "Howdy, boys," he said. "Don't seem to be no more folks comin' so I might as well take you across. It'll be two bits each."

Bragg said, "Here's mine." Solo paid without saying anything.

"Much travel?" Bragg asked the ferryman.

"Not much since they put in the bridge five mile upstream. I still get folks from downstream, and now and again somebody who's takin' a short cut, or in a hurry," answered McGee.

"I can't see how you make a livin'," Bragg said. "Or are you alone in the world?"

McGee chuckled. "I ain't alone in the world, not by a long shot. My daughter's no-account husband left her, so I'm lookin' after her an' the three young uns. An' my son Joe died five years ago and left seven kids. I got them, too."

"Ten kids," Bragg said.

"More'n that," Sharon McGee answered. "You see, there're four or five with nobody to look after 'em, so I got them."

"And you support all them on what you collect?"

"I get a little side money, now and again," McGee told him. "A hundred acres of bottom land, cows, sheep, chickens, garden truck all help out. Each kid has his work to do. They say the devil finds work for

idle hands. I don't want my kids growin' up to be bums, cattle thieves, bank robbers, road agents or some such vermin."

"What do you do for side money?" asked Bragg.

"Oh . . . keep my eyes open and when I see a little deal comin' my way, I hop onto it," McGee said. "If it's a few dollars, we get things we need most. If it's a lot of money, then we herd the kids to Mineral City, outfit 'em with new shoes, new duds, and maybe spend a little of it foolishly." He gave the windlass a twist and the ferry grounded on hard sand. There was a rope running from a frame-work on the bank. McGee pulled it and a gangplank came neatly down. The two passengers rode off, separating. Solo hadn't spoken a word.

"The silent cuss ain't as dumb as he looks," McGee mused. "I wonder who he is? Face is kinda' familiar. Seen it somewhere. And that goes for the talkie one, too. Hm."

He looked both ways for signs of an approaching dust cloud to indicate potential passengers, and finding the air clear, made his way to his house, a quarter of a mile away. Anyone needing the ferry could ring a bell on the east bank. Those arriving on the west bank built a smudge, which one of the children was certain to see.

On a ridge above the river bottom, Bragg pulled up long enough to study the country along the east bank. He wanted to fix certain landmarks in his mind. They would be handy in case he got lost in the dark during the get-away.

He could see that Sharon McGee's bottom land had been cut into squares. A couple of little girls in red dresses worked on one plot; a boy in blue overalls was looking after chickens, while an older girl and boy were making irrigation furrows down a potato patch.

"I can't see where McGee gets his side money," Bragg muttered. "And, even with the farm, it must take plenty of dough to keep that bunch of kids going."

His thoughts turned to the get-away. Timing was important. A few seconds one way or another might spell the difference between success or failure—or life and death.

The chances were, pursuit would be immediate and hot. The ferry must be ready when they arrived. There couldn't be any waiting around. Delay would give a posse a chance to close in.

Bragg dismounted and waited. About an hour later he saw a lone rider coming from Mineral City. The man pulled up near the east bank bell and rang it. Bragg looked at his watch. He saw Sharon McGee come out, putting on his coat. The ferryman got on a horse and rode slowly to the ferry. "Ten minutes," Bragg mused. "Takes him too long."

He revised his get-away plans. He'd have to send a man ahead to ring the bell, then hold the ferry until they arrived. He wondered what would happen when they cut the ferry loose and it drifted downstream. He looked at the boulders

and white water a half mile below. "That's the answer," he said. "It'll smash the ferry. Old Sharon McGee won't last long in that water—nor anybody else."

Hank Bragg liked the Mineral City setup. He liked it just fine. The Pastime Saloon occupied a corner opposite the bank. The hitch rail ran along the main street, then down the side street between bank and saloon.

If they left their horses at the lower end of the side street hitch rail, they could come out of the bank's back door and find them a hundred feet away. By cutting between the freight cars on railroad sidings they would have the cars' protection until they were on the town's outskirts. After that it would be a case of horseflesh. And there was none tougher than that owned by Hank Bragg's outfit.

Hank dropped into the Pastime for a drink. A man at the bar was saying: "A lotta money in the bank, sheriff. The ten o'clock train just got in. The express company people had an armed guard from the depot to the bank. Guards looked kinda' relieved when they came out, seems like."

"Yeah," the sheriff agreed. "But they could have felt relieved from the minute the train stopped at Mineral City. Bank robbers found this place too tough a nut to crack a long time ago."

"Lotta money in the bank," the other repeated. He was half drunk. "That's the kind of a town I like. Everybody is prosperous."

Solo Thornton came in, saw the sheriff and quietly retreated. "Fool!" Bragg muttered. "That's the surest way to make a lawman wonder about you. But he can sure handle powder."

The other members of the gang drifted in and out again. After a couple of drinks Bragg went down to Johnson's Livery Stable. The gang's horses were in stalls and fed.

The six bandits loafed around town until Friday evening, limiting the number of drinks they took, but otherwise following the role of men in town for a good time.

At nine o'clock Bragg made his way to the Mineral City Livery stable. He was riding his own horse, which he tied to a tree back of the hay barn. He slipped into the barn, grabbed an armful of loose hay and dropped it in a cleared space. Touching a match to the pile, he stepped out into the darkness. It would take a minute or two for the pile to blaze up large enough to ignite the main supply.

In that time Bragg had remounted and was riding slowly down a back street to the Pastime hitch rail. Checking, he found that his men's horses were tied to the rail.

Someone yelled, "Fire!" and in a few minutes Bragg could hear men up and down the street shouting: "Mineral City stable afire! Get your horses out!"

Saloons and less-frequented spots emptied. The bank watchman, hand resting lightly on his gun butt from force of habit, unlocked the front

door and looked out. Bragg was standing near the door. "Where's the fire?" the bandit asked.

"Up the street," answered the watchman. Instinctively he gestured with his gun hand. As the hand lifted clear of the gun butt, Bragg's fist, armored with brass knuckles, caught the watchman on the jaw. The jaw snapped and the man tumbled backwards through the door.

Bragg followed him through, closing, but not locking the door behind him. He waited for some signs of alarm, ready, if necessary, to slip out the back way and escape. But it had all happened so swiftly no one had noticed.

Solo Thornton came in, carrying a grain sack heavy with powder and fuse. The others followed. The last man locked the door. Solo worked rapidly, expertly, while the others with guns drawn, waited.

Once Solo stopped as the beat of heavy boots sounded on the wooden walk outside. A voice said: "They're havin' a time gettin' them horses out."

"Barn's done for. Stable will go, too, like as not," his companion declared.

The heavy boots pounded again. Bragg crouched near the window, watching the two men. "Let her go, Solo," he ordered when the pair was out of sight.

The bandits crouched in safe places, waiting. It wasn't long—a sullen concussion, the tinkle of glass as a window gave way, and the crash of the safe door. The acrid odor of powder fumes filled the air.

A man pushed through the fumes to the safe. "Money in bales," he gasped.

"Scoop it up!" Bragg ordered. "I told you we'd hit the jackpot. Shorty! Hightail it to the river and call McGee. If you overtake anybody headin' for the ferry, you know what to do. And make a job of it."

The man called Shorty picked up several packets of bills and headed for the back door. They could hear his horse's slow trot as it passed the bank. In a couple of minutes that horse would be galloping.

No attempt was made to divide the loot. Each man stuffed currency into a bag as it was tossed from the bank vault. "The watchman's comin' to," a man said.

"Finish him off," Bragg ordered. "He might have a good memory for faces."

Bragg was the first man to leave. The others followed, holding their loot on the saddle in front of them. A full moon was coming up over the butte behind the town. Bragg would have preferred darkness, but the bank's biggest shipment in several years had come along with a full moon, so he gambled.

A half mile from town they heard someone following. "Wait," Bragg ordered. "One rider. We'll get him. Spread."

They spread on either side of the road, waiting, guns ready. The following rider had also pulled up. "He turned off," Bragg said. Then he knew that he was wrong, because as soon as they started, the lone

rider followed. They were being trailed.

Bragg understood the man's tactics —keep the escaping bandits in sight until a posse could come up. Bragg and his men either had to outride him, or turn and run him down, in which case he would retreat, delaying them badly.

As they topped the ridge following the river, Bragg saw a man with a lantern walking at a brisk pace. "Sharon McGee's walkin'! More delay! Why didn't he ride?" Bragg growled viciously.

A man, waving his hands above his head, tried to stop the riders. Bragg did his best to ride him down, but the man jumped aside, and his voice trailed after them: "My wife's under the wagon . . ."

Bragg had seen a spring wagon and two horses in a gulch as he passed. One horse was either dead or knocked out. The other lay on its back, hoofs in the air. Shorty had evidently turned someone bound for the ferry into the gulch. "Good man—Shorty," Bragg said, "but the score against us is piling up."

"Got any idea how much we cleaned up?" asked Solo.

"No tellin'," Bragg answered. "Better'n three hundred thousand. Pull up. Let's take it easy. We don't want old Sharon guessin' too much until we're on his ferry. Then it don't matter."

Shorty was on the ferry when they arrived, and Sharon McGee came hurrying toward them, breathing hard. "We saw your lantern," Bragg said easily, "and figgered we'd better hurry, or you'd have to make another trip."

They rode aboard the ferry, dismounted, and held their horses. While Sharon was freeing the mooring lines and lifting the gangplank, the men hastily stuffed their loot into saddlebags. They tossed the empty sacks they had used into the river.

Bragg stepped quietly toward Sharon. Before he finished off the ferryman he wanted to be certain the ferry would land on the opposite bank. Sharon was fussing with his windlasses, tightening the rope on one, slackening away on the other.

"Come over here!" Bragg ordered. His gun covered the old man, and there was no mistaking the tone of his voice. Sharon knew this was not a joke.

"What's the idea?" asked the ferryman.

"Come here, I said," Bragg repeated. With the moon behind him, the ferryman made a perfect target. The moonlight fell on Bragg's grim face, and the .44, held so steadily, gleamed in the silvery light. Sharon was taking it calmly, Bragg thought.

"If I let go," Sharon protested, "we'll be stuck in the river."

"Come here, or I'll blast you where you are!"

As Sharon stepped forward, hands in the air, the pawls which held the windlasses in position, slipped. Windlass handles whirled as the rope paid out. Overhead lines snapped and a moment later they were moving downstream, the boat turning slowly.

"Stop it!" Bragg bellowed, jam-

ming his weapon into Sharon's ribs.

"Can't stop it now," the ferryman said calmly. "You *had* to stick your nose into my business—"

"Drop the anchor," Bragg ordered.

"Ain't got no anchor. It'd only drag if I did have one," Sharon answered. "Well, I've lived a long time, seen about all there is to see, so I don't really mind cashin' in."

"We ain't goin' to die!" Solo Thornton yelled. "We'll hit a bank somewhere—"

One of the horses staggered and went to its knees. The ferryboat was lurching through a stretch of white water.

"Get them horses overboard," Sharon ordered. "Lighten the load. They can swim where you'd drown."

The men didn't wait for him to repeat the command. They dragged saddles off their mounts, then, throwing their weight against the horses, sent them into the stream. The animals swam with heads held high, eyes gleaming with terror, their legs churning the water into a froth.

"What's that roarin' sound?" Bragg asked.

"More white water," explained Sharon. "Two miles down there's a waterfall. Drops a hundred feet."

"What's the answer?"

The ferryboat hit a mossy rock, slid up until the deck slanted, then dropped off, knocking the men flat. "What's the answer?" Bragg repeated. "Speak up, blast it!"

"A young man who could swim, might make it," Sharon said, "if the ferry gets close enough to the bank. You see, when we're hooked to a cable she stays put, and that's why she don't go downstream. Out here, if one part touches the bank, there's nothin' to hold it there. The rest of the ferry feels the pull of the water, and so she's yanked off the bank."

They regarded him doubtfully until another shock knocked them down, then they stripped off and stood, hands on the rail, ready to jump if the situation looked at all promising.

Calmness returned to the men as the ferry hit a stretch of quiet water, and with it, greed. The bandits stuffed their pockets with bills, spread their clothing on the deck, placed guns and belts on the clothing, then rolled everything into a tight ball. Well, lashed, the clothing would float until saturated and for a few minutes might even keep a man's head above water.

Far upstream they could see lights moving about. A posse had arrived on the east bank and its members were peering intently across the stream, Sharon guessed, trying to see the ferry in the gloom of the west bank. In a few minutes they'd conclude that the ferry had gone downstream.

The ferry lurched around a bend and the bobbing lights upstream vanished. The moon cast long, bleak shadows across the water as the walls changed, grew higher, with turrets, small buttes and ragged spires. The ferry drifted close to the bank and one of the men cried: "I can make it!" He leaped and struck, feet first. Water boiled over his head and shoulders, but his hands remained above, clutching the roll of clothing.

He pulled his head up, gasping for breath, then a trick in the current sucked him under. The clothing came to the surface, bobbing downstream.

Sharon got a long pole with a hook on the end. He jabbed the hook into the clothing and hauled the bundle aboard. "That happened mighty fast, didn't it?" he remarked. "And he was a strong man, too."

The ferry scraped over a rock, then dropped suddenly into a whirlpool. The falls were close now. The thunder of falling water drowned out all other sounds. Some of the mist drifted upstream.

But it wasn't mist that the old ferryman saw on the men's faces. It was cold sweat, visible even in the moonlight. The boat struck just as it seemed as if it must go downstream and over the falls. Now it was almost in the center of the whirlpool. Slowly the radius lengthened until the boat was on the whirlpool rim once more.

"Here we go!" Bragg yelled hoarsely. But again the ferry bumped over hidden rocks and was sucked into the pool. The bandits were no longer paying any attention to Sharon McGee. He glanced upstream, then from a locker near the windlasses he suddenly pulled out a sawed-off shotgun.

"Get them hands up in the air," he ordered. "I got a mighty nervous trigger finger."

Bragg could see both hammers were drawn back, and judging from the size of the bore, the weapon was either a ten or an old-fashioned eight gauge.

"Kick them bundles of clothes over here," Sharon commanded. "No foolin', because I'll let you have both barrels. Another thing, if you jump overboard you'll go over the falls. The ferry's too big to squeeze between some of the submerged rocks, but a man will be sucked right through."

The outlaws kicked their bundles toward him, and he said: "Now lay down on your stummicks, and stay there."

"What's the idea?" Bragg demanded. He could see no chance to swim ashore, and obviously they couldn't stay in the whirlpool forever.

"You'll see what the idea is," Sharon answered, "come sunup."

Bragg's eyes hardly left the bank, and as day began breaking he saw the vague outlines of men—grim men, carrying rifles and shotguns.

"The posse's arrived," Sharon said. "That's why I took your guns away. You was licked any way, but I didn't want you shootin' some of my best friends."

The posse members leaned their guns against convenient rocks, gathered driftwood and started breakfast. The tormenting odors of frying bacon and steaming coffee floated over the whirlpool. Sharon sniffed. Cupping his hands to his mouth, he yelled: "I like my eggs sunny side up."

The deputy serving as cook answered: "You'll take 'em as you get 'em—and danged well like 'em, too." He grinned.

As the ferry circled toward the bank, a man waded out hip deep and

tossed a light line. Sharon caught it, drew in a heavier line and made it fast. For the first time Bragg noticed a windlass among the rocks, and a few feet above high-water mark. Men manned the windlass, and began turning. The constant circling of the ferry about the pool stopped. Slowly, surely the heavy craft was hauled to the bank.

The sheriff stood waiting on the bank. "You first," he said to Bragg. "What made you think you could succeed where better men had failed?"

Bragg didn't answer. He stepped ashore, and Sharon tossed his bundle of clothing on the bank.

"Six guns and a lot of money inside," the ferryman chuckled.

A deputy opened the bundle, removed the gun and money and gave Bragg his clothing.

"Dress, and have a bite to eat," the sheriff ordered. "One slick move and somebody will blast you with buckshot. Those deputies you see sitting around on rocks aren't waiting for ducks to fly overhead."

One by one the men came off the ferry, then Sharon tossed the saddles to the bank. "There may be money in the saddlebags that they missed in their excitement."

There was.

"We'd have put over this deal," Bragg said sullenly, "but for some hard luck. We figgered everything right, but the rope holding the ferry to the overhead cable busted."

Sharon shook his head. "That didn't break," he said. "I keep things fixed so if outlaws get the drop on me, all I have to do is step on a board behind the windlasses and the ferry will be turned loose. The rest was easy enough. As soon as men get scared they think less about loot and more about life. A man can be packing guns and knives, but he'll drop 'em and shed his clothes when he thinks he's got to swim. Now a man of my age is slow on the draw, and he don't have hardly any chance when he's outnumbered. That's the way I get the upper hand—let the rapids scare 'em, then whip out Old Betsy when the boys are standin' 'round nekked."

The old ferryman chuckled. "It's kind o' tough on my ferryboat. It gets banged around comin' down the rapids, and get more bangin' on the trip upstream."

"The trip upstream?" Bragg exclaimed.

"Sure. You don't think I'd waste a ferryboat on every outlaw that comes along, do you? Sure, the water's rough and fast, but a team of horses on a windlass planted upstream, plus a good long rope will haul the ferryboat back on the job. Takes three, four days, but it's worth it. You see, mister, baggin' wanted men like you is where I get my side money. . . . What'll it come to this time, sheriff? The kids need just about everything, seems like."

"The kids will get everything . . . seems like," the sheriff answered. "From the reward notices out on this bunch, I think you've hit the jackpot this time."

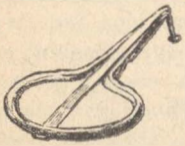
THE END

RANGE SAVVY

BY CARL RAHT

The baby bison or buffalo calves owned by Uncle Sam are branded just the same as ordinary bovine stock. It takes an expert cowhand to flank one of these mighty little fellows, throw him and burn a neat little US on his right hip. After slaughtering, the buffalo has to be inspected for brand just like all other stock, but his hide has become a great prize for collectors, especially if it bears the little US brand.

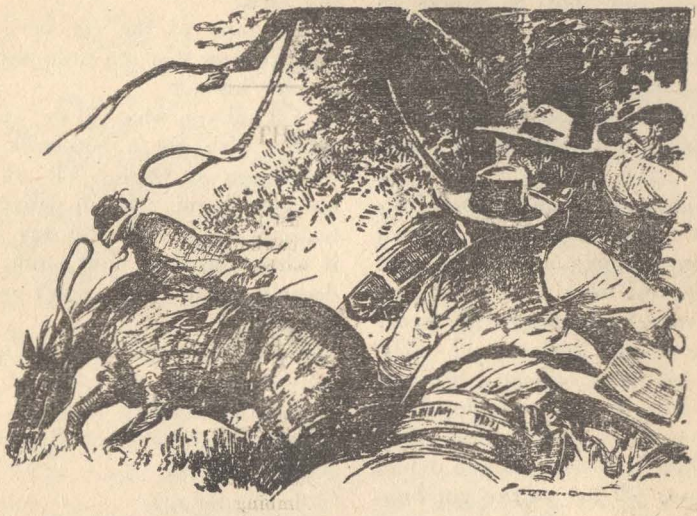
When the mountain cowboy starts his day's work of riding he literally harnesses as well as saddles his horse. To prevent the saddle from slipping too far back over the horse's rump in climbing the rugged mountain, the cowboy uses a breast strap, a broad leather band which runs under the horse's neck and is secured to the front girth by rings on either side. In descending a steep slope, to prevent the saddle slipping forward on the horse's neck, a back strap is run around the hind legs and is secured to the flank girth on either side. Many rodeo performers use this harness equipment in roping contests.



Contrary to fiction and the movies, the old-range cowhand was not adept with musical instruments nor did he have a good singing voice. His pack was limited to the necessities of life, and a guitar, mandolin or fiddle was too bulky and too flimsy to stand much transportation by horseback. Also, a voice constantly lifted in raucous yells at dumb brutes did not lend itself readily to soft melody. But there was one small musical instrument most cowhands could play—the French harp. Because of its size, many a cowhand kept one tucked in his pocket, and even though he was incapable of harmony, this simple instrument gave him much pleasure.

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, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

WINDMILLS MEAN WAR!



by Robert Moore Williams

What Craig Kenyon was selling promised powder smoke instead of prosperity for drought-stricken Ruggles County

"No," Rance Burton said flatly. "I don't want your dingbusted contraption on my ranch."

He looked past the younger man, past the big ranchhouse, past the corrals where the dust of August lay inches deep, past the cottonwoods already shedding their leaves because of the dryness. His eyes focused on some point on the distant horizon.

Craig Kenyon hesitated. Burton was the biggest rancher in Ruggles County. A sale to him meant that other men, hearing about it, would be easier to sell.

"I think you're making a mistake," Kenyon said slowly. "Every windmill you put on your land means water. It means water where you need it and when you need it. If the springs stop running and the creeks go dry, you can depend on your windmills to provide you with a never-failing supply of water."

"That's what you say," the rancher retorted. His hair was snow-white

and the little lines at the corners of his eyes had knitted into a pad of tiny wrinkles. He was at least seventy years old, but he stood as straight as an arrow. "I've been runnin' cows here a long time. I've had good years and I've had bad ones. But I've always got along and I ain't had a windmill on my ranch yet."

"But times are changing, Mr. Burton," the drummer insisted. "I admit you've always got along without windmills, but think how much better you would get along with them! Right now, for instance—" The wave of his hand indicated the dust in the corrals, the leaves falling from the cottonwoods, the buffalo grass and the blue joint stunted and dying. "Right now I'll bet you've got hundreds of thirsty steers on your spread, maybe thousands. There's plenty of feed for them in that dry buffalo grass and blue joint, but is there water for them? Windmills mean water!"

There was conviction in the drummer's voice. Kenyon believed in the product he was selling and his belief showed in the earnest manner in which he spoke.

Burton shook his head. "No," he said.

"Why not?" Kenyon challenged.

"Because I say not!" the rancher flared. "If you must have a reason, they're danged expensive."

"But you'll get the cost back in three years or less."

"Providin' the windmills deliver the water," Burton said dryly.

"They'll deliver the water all right. I guarantee it."

"How can you guarantee a thing like that?"

The tone of the rancher's voice told Kenyon that the time had come to play his ace.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," Kenyon said. "I've got a windmill in the warehouse at Orno. I'll set it up on your land. If it delivers the water I say it will, you pay me for it when you ship your stock. If it doesn't deliver, you don't owe me a dime."

The drummer's voice rang with conviction. He was making a fair proposition and he knew it. Confidently he waited for Burton's answer.

For a split second, the cowman looked startled, looked as though the mask he was wearing over his face had dropped down, revealing the man beneath. It was a worried man that Kenyon glimpsed then, worried and angry.

"No," said Burton brusquely.

"What?"

"I said no!"

"You mean you—"

"I mean I don't want any confounded windmills on my ranch!" Burton exploded. "And if you want some good advice, young feller"—the hot, angry eyes focused directly on the drummer's face—"you'll take your windmills and git out of this country while the gittin' is good."

The rancher turned. As straight and as stiff as a board, he walked across the yard. His boots thudded

on the porch of the ranchhouse. The door slammed behind him as he entered. Craig Kenyon was left staring at a closed door.

Burton had turned him down! The rancher had refused to accept a windmill even as a gift!

"Stubborn fool!" the drummer thought. "Won't believe anything he can't see with his own eyes."

He climbed into his hired buggy and started back to Orno, discouraged and puzzled.

At the crossroads a tired cowboy drooping in the saddle told Kenyon of a short cut to Orno. He took the short cut. He was still ten miles from town when he saw the barbed wire strung on flimsy posts along the side of the road. Kenyon blinked at the sight of it. This was the first barbed wire he had seen in Ruggles County. He kept his eyes open for the ranchhouse and buildings of the man who had strung this wire. He was expecting to see, over the next low hill, a large house with elaborate outbuildings, a bunkhouse, a blacksmith shop, and all the trimmings that went to make up a big spread. The use of barbed wire, he had found, usually meant a progressive rancher.

He topped the hill. Down in the little valley below him he saw the ranchhouse of the man who had strung the wire. It was a sod hut!

The progressive rancher who had strung the barbed wire was a homesteader, a nester. As his buggy rolled down the little hill, Kenyon was aware that a woman was standing in the door of the hut. A child was tugging at her skirt. A man was sitting on a rock beside the well. He was whittling.

Three strands of barbed wire formed a fence around the hut, inclosing an area of about an acre. Outside the wire, was a watering trough, with fifteen or twenty gaunt steers standing around it. Between the watering trough and the well was a dusty, well-beaten path.

Craig Kenyon pulled his horse to a stop.

"Howdy," he said.

The homesteader looked up. He was about thirty years old, with a thin, pinched face. Craig Kenyon had seen hundreds like him. They were coming west in droves, seeking new lands, each one fired with the hope that somewhere out in this great range country there was a place for him. "Howdy," the nester said.

"Could I get a drink of water?" Kenyon asked.

"Sure can. If you don't mind drawing it yourself."

The well was fitted with a windlass and a rope. Kenyon dropped the bucket down to the bottom, wound it up again. The water was cool and sparkling. As he drank he was aware that the woman and the child were watching him closely. The nester looked up at him.

"You want to buy a ranch?" The words were spoken with an effort.

"No!" This was the woman speaking.

Kenyon swallowed a mouthful of water the wrong way and choked. "Buy . . . buy a ranch?"

"No!" The woman spoke again. "We'll make out some way. We can't give up, now. We can't quit, Fred! You don't mean it."

"But, Martha—" The nester spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "It ain't that I'm *wantin'* to give up. It's that—"

"I know. You think we can't stand it." She glanced down at the child. "We *will* stand it, some way."

"You got some trouble here?" Craig Kenyon said slowly. "Is there anything I can do?"

As he spoke, a steer bawled at the watering trough, a low, moaning roar. Kenyon had heard that sound before. He knew exactly what it meant.

"You hear him?" the nester asked.

"I hear him," answered Kenyon.

"Then you know what kind of trouble we got."

Drought! There was no mistaking the moaning bawl of a steer suffering from thirst.

"Thought I had it beat," the nester said. "Only got ninety head. Thought if the drought got real bad, I could water them myself." His gaze went from the well along the beaten path that led to the watering trough. He had made this path, carrying buckets of water to thirsty steers.

"You ever try to draw water for ninety head of thirsty steers with a rope around a windlass?" the nester asked Kenyon. "Well, I ain't sayin' it can't be done, because I was doin' it until—" He placed one hand against the small of his back, rubbed gingerly, and winced at the pain. "I guess maybe I tore something, carryin' all them buckets of water down to the trough. Don't know for sure what I did. All I know is I can't work that windlass any more, I can't carry that water down to the fence. I just can't do it!"

Thirty minutes later Craig Kenyon was driving toward Orno as fast as his horse could pull the buggy. He had sold a windmill, on credit.

The purchaser's name was Fred Wheeler. Wheeler hadn't turned him down. The nester had bought, instantly. The only stumbling block had been how he was going to pay. "Pay when you're able," Craig Kenyon had told him. He wasn't worried about getting his money. This kind of people paid their debts.

Wheeler and four other nesters would be in Orno bright and early the next morning, with teams and wagons, to pick up the windmill. Kenyon would help them install it.

As soon as he reached Orno, the drummer went to the railroad station and wired his factory to ship him six more windmills.

"I sold a nester a windmill today," he told the hotel clerk. "I'm going to sell so many windmills around here that no matter which way you look, you'll see one of them turning."

"You did what?" the clerk gasped.

"Sold a windmill. Is there anything wrong with that?"

"Not that I know of," the clerk answered hastily. "No. Not that I know of."

The clerk was looking past Kenyon, toward the door. The drummer

turned. Rance Burton was standing just inside the door. The lean old rancher had entered silently. He looked at Kenyon.

"Did I understand you to say you have sold a windmill to a nester?"

"You did," the drummer answered. "And I'm inviting you to be present when I get it set up and working, and see for yourself whether or not it will deliver the water I say it will."

There was a split second of silence. Then the rancher was speaking again, three words in a toneless voice.

"I'll be there," he said. Moving as silently as an Indian, he turned and stalked out the door.

Kenyon went upstairs to bed. He would have to be up early the next morning, to meet Wheeler and his friends. Tired from a long day's work, he fell asleep almost instantly. He awakened with a start.

The door of his room had been opened. Or he thought it had. He sat up, reaching for the matches he had left on the small table beside the bed.

"Just elevate your hands, buddy, and don't make any noise," a low voice said.

Dimly, as his eyes adjusted themselves to the vague light in the room, Kenyon could make out a man standing beside the bed.

"Get out of bed and turn around," the man ordered. "I'll have to gag you so you won't be shootin' off your head and raisin' the town."

Kenyon obeyed. Almost as soon as his feet touched the floor, a rough gag was thrust into his mouth.

The gun jabbed into his back. "Now put on your clothes."

A few minutes later, gagged, his hands tied behind his back, Kenyon was in the saddle of a led horse, riding out of Orno. Two men rode in front of him, two rode behind. They rode in silence.

Craig Kenyon had been kidnaped! His first thought had been that the men were after his money, but he realized that could not be their objective. They were after something else.

A couple of miles out of Orno, at a grove of cottonwoods, they stopped. There was no moon. The clump of trees made a dark splotch on the landscape. The kidnapers looked up at the cottonwoods.

"This is all right," one of them said.

"O. K.," a second answered. He loosed a rope from his saddlehorn, tossed it over the lowest limb of the nearest tree.

In sudden consternation, Kenyon stared at these preparations. Were they going to hang him? Was it possible they were going to lynch him? He tried to protest, but the gag stifled his words.

"Listen, you windmill drummer," a cold voice said near him. Kenyon recognized the voice. It was Burton, the stiff, stern, unbending old rancher. Rance Burton was one of these men, and apparently their leader.

"You didn't believe me, did you?" Burton continued. "You thought maybe I didn't mean it when I told you to take your windmills and git

out of here while the gittin' was good?

"I never meant anything more," the grim voice continued. "And if you want to know why, I'll tell you. I knew, if you stayed around here, sooner or later you'd sell a windmill to a nester. That's why I wouldn't buy a windmill, why none of us would buy, because if we bought, the nesters would get the idea and buy windmills, too. If they don't get windmills, the drought will run most of them out of here. If they get windmills, they'll stick like glue, and we'll find ourselves stuck with nesters and their blasted barbed wire forever. Now do you understand, you windmill drummer?"

Kenyon understood. He saw the whole picture then. Without realizing what he was doing, he had blundered into a smoldering feud.

Burton was speaking again. "That's why we're going to hang you. If the nesters can't get windmills, they can't stay. We're aimin' to see they don't get them. Now, string him up, boys!"

Kenyon seemed to hear the words in a dream. But there was nothing dreamlike about the rope that hissed through the air toward him, flicked against him. The touch of the hemp drove him to desperation. He ducked down into the saddle, dodging the rope, and drove both heels into the horse's flanks.

The startled pony jumped, jerking the reins out of the hands of the man who was holding them. Kenyon prodded him again, putting all his strength into the kicks.

"Whoa, damn you!" someone shouted.

"Git him, men!"

"Look out. The horse is running away."

The horse, baffled by what was happening, was plunging wildly. It was a cow pony, trained to remain hitched when its reins were on the ground. It was also trained to obey its rider. The rider was kicking its flanks like a madman. The animal did not know whether it was supposed to run or stop. The shouts of the ranchers added to its confusion. It started to run jerkily, dragging the bridle reins.

A bullet split the air.

Kenyon ducked down in the saddle, his legs going like flails against the horse's flanks. The gun barked again and a bullet popped past him. The frightened pony began to run faster.

Half sliding, Kenyon jumped out of the saddle. His hands were tied behind his back and he could not block his fall. He hit the ground heavily. The breath was partly knocked out of him. Staggering to his feet, he dived into a clump of weeds, threw himself flat on the ground. He lay there, not moving, scarcely daring to breathe.

The ranchers thundered by, following the frightened horse. They thought Kenyon was still in the saddle. As soon as they were past, the drummer got to his feet, ran in the opposite direction as fast as he could go. They would soon catch the horse, guess what had happened, and

start searching for him.

Out of breath, he crawled into a clump of mesquite, cursing the thorns that scratched him. The ranchers were already coming back looking for him. He could hear their voices.

"That drummer is around here some place."

"Spread out and find him."

They beat through the weeds, searching for him. Twice shots were fired. They were shooting at shadows. Two of the ranchers tried to enter the mesquite thicket where he was hiding. The thorns stopped them, the same thorns he had cursed. Kenyon blessed them now. The ranchers sat their horses, listening.

"That hombre has got away," one of them said.

"Come daylight we'll find him," declared a second.

The other two ranchers rode up. They were all together now. There was silence. The drummer's escape evidently worried them.

"Don't know I'm too sorry he got away," Burton said slowly. "Hangin' a man ain't so good, if there's any way to avoid it. I think we've scared that drummer so bad he'll light a shuck getting out of here. He won't ever come back."

Craig Kenyon held his breath. Were they going to stop hunting for him?

"Reckon you're right," another man said finally. Other voices growled assent. The ranchers turned their horses and rode slowly away.

Kenyon crawled out of the clump of mesquite. There was a penknife in his pocket. He spent an hour getting the knife out of his pocket, opening it, and sawing through the ropes that bound his hands. His hands free, he jerked the gag out of his mouth, gently worked numb jaws.

What was he going to do now? Was he going to run, as they expected, or was he going to stick? Cold common sense told him to take the next train out of Orno. The ranchers meant business. Running would save his neck. Balanced against this was the memory of the look of gratitude on Wheeler's thin, pinched face when Kenyon had offered to set up a windmill to pump water for the nester. Kenyon walked slowly back to Orno. By the time he had reached the town, he had also reached a decision.

Early the next morning two wagons pulled up at the freight sheds where the windmill was stored. Three men were in one wagon, two in the other. The beds of both wagons were covered with rumpled tarpaulins.

Craig Kenyon was sitting on the steps of the freight sheds. Across his knees was a ten-gauge double-barreled shotgun.

"Hello, partner," Wheeler called out. The nester's eyes took in the scratches on the drummer's face, the bruised, puffed lips, the gun across the knees. "Something wrong?"

Craig Kenyon told them exactly what had happened. He saw startled looks appear on their faces as they listened, he saw the faces freeze into cold hard masks.

"They don't want you to sell us windmills?" Wheeler questioned.

"That's it," answered Kenyon.

"So you came down here this morning to tell us we don't get a windmill, and brought a gun to back your play, is that it?"

"Shucks, no!" Kenyon answered. "I brought the gun to make certain you *did* get the windmill, if you still wanted it!"

The hard bitterness drained out of Wheeler's face. "Sorry, pardner," he apologized. "For a minute I didn't know what you meant. I thought you was tryin' to back out on us. As for still wantin' the windmill, we knew the big men were expecting the dry-up to run us out, and if that didn't do the job, they'd lend a hand. We came prepared."

He pulled aside the tarpaulin in the wagon. Kenyon saw what had been hidden there. Rifles! Six-guns!

Kenyon looked at the guns, at the determined faces of the men. "O K.," he said briefly. "Let's get busy loadin' up this windmill."

Four days later the big metal vanes began to turn, the pump rod to work up and down, up and down. It would keep on working like that for weeks, for months, as long as the wind blew. Down in the bottom of the well the pump began to suck at the water.

Wheeler and his four nester friends, Wheeler's wife and child, and Craig Kenyon, all gathered around the big watering trough down at the barbed-wire fence. A pipe had been laid from the well to the trough. On the other side of the fence was a bunch of gaunted steers. The steers waited out there as though they sensed that something was about to happen. On the inside of the fence, the humans waited.

A little spurt of water ran from the end of the pipe. The flow was so slight that Wheeler could not conceal his look of disappointment. Apparently the nester had expected to see water gush out in torrents. Then the look of disappointment faded. As the vanes turned and the pump rod went up and down, up and down, the spurt came again and again. And again. The steers suddenly began to thrust their muzzles into the trough, seeking the water.

Craig Kenyon was aware of three things, that Wheeler was slapping him on the back, that the other nesters were cheering and telling him he had delivered the goods, and that the child was shrilling:

"Mommy! Mommy! Men coming!"

The cheers broke off abruptly. In the silence Kenyon heard the pound of hoofs in the distance. Turning, he saw a body of horsemen riding along the road.

"Get inside!" Wheeler said to his wife. Mutely, she shook her head and drew her child close to her. The sound that came next was the click of levers sliding cartridges from the magazines of Winchesters into the firing chambers. While the nesters worked, the rifles had never been out of reach of their hands. Kenyon picked up his shotgun.

The riders halted in the road. Rance Burton, sitting stiff in the sad-

dle, was in the lead. Craig Kenyon walked across the yard to them. He was aware that Burton scarcely looked at him, that the rancher's eyes were on the windmill, on the steers around the watering trough. Burton spoke without looking at him, as though mentioning a matter of little importance.

"I see you don't scare."

"I scare all right," Kenyon answered. "But I just don't run very well."

There were at least fifteen of the riders, each of them armed. Turning his head a little, Kenyon could see the nesters. They were standing wide apart from one another, each with his rifle ready. None had sought cover. They stood in silence, waiting. Craig Kenyon waited, too. It was not his turn to say anything. Burton's eyes were still not on him. Nor was the rancher looking at the nesters, though he must have been very much aware of their existence. His eyes were on the windmill. Moving very slowly, he began to get off his horse.

As though it burned his fingers, Burton lifted apart the strands of barbed wire, slid between them. He was coming into the yard! His back as stiff as a ramrod, he walked toward the windmill. The silence was brittle with tension. In the road the ranchers and their men waited. In the yard the nesters gripped their rifles tighter.

Burton walked to the windmill, stood with hands on hips looking up at it. He walked around it slowly, watching the turning vanes. Then he followed the line of pipe down to the fence, looked at the water splashing into the trough, looked at the steers drinking. He was a cowman, had been a cowman all his life. The sight of a steer drinking from a watering trough seemed to fascinate him. Minutes ticked away while he watched. Then he turned. Craig Kenyon was standing by his side.

"I just wanted to say," the drummer began, "that you can wipe us out. We'll take some of you with us, but you'll whip us—"

He hesitated, seeking the words he wanted. He knew he could not threaten. A man like Burton would not be moved by a threat. Kenyon had to find something else. In the back of his mind, an idea moved.

"This is kind of like the Indians and the first settlers all over again," he said slowly. "The Indians thought they could hold this land. They thought the white men were few in numbers. The Indians didn't know that back of the white men was the pressure of a whole rolling tide of migration."

He paused, watching Burton closely. The rancher was listening, and for the first time, there was a look of surprise and interest in his eyes.

"Like the Indians, you ranchers can shoot and run off the first nesters. But that won't gain you anything, in the long run. Other nesters will be coming. Back in Missouri and Illinois and Indiana and Ohio and

Pennsylvania are a lot of other men, hungry for land. You can't hold back that tide with bullets. The only way you can hold it back is to keep ahead of it.

"Barbed wire and windmills and progress are the only way to keep ahead of that tide."

Craig Kenyon's voice rang with conviction. He had been East, he had seen the tide of migration moving westward. But had he reached Burton's mind?

Burton was silent. Twice he started to speak and twice he changed his mind.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" the rancher said at last.

Kenyon waited. The nesters had drawn close, to hear what was being said.

"Did you ever hear of Chief Yellow Tail?" Burton asked abruptly. "No? Well, he was here when I came. I remember telling him almost the same thing you've told me. Chief Yellow Tail didn't believe me."

He paused. "Chief Yellow Tail said this was his land, his hunting grounds."

His voice drifted into silence. Kenyon held his breath. Then the rancher was speaking again.

"I thought I owned this land. I fought the Indians for it, and won. I thought it was mine. I didn't want you nesters here. I thought you were ruining the range. And maybe you are. And maybe—" He spoke the words with difficulty. "Maybe I'm an old fool, standing in the way of progress!"

Burton was looking at Wheeler now, at the nester, the plowman.

"You want to smoke the pipe of peace with me?" he asked. "I warn you the fight isn't over, but if you are willing, the fight will be with windmills and barbed wire, instead of bullets."

Wheeler looked dazed. When he spoke his voice was a whisper. "Yes," he said. "I'll fight you, with windmills and barbed wire, and a better breed of cattle. But it will be a friendly fight, I hope."

"It will be," the rancher answered. He looked at Craig Kenyon. "I want windmills," he said.

"I've got four others ahead of you," the drummer answered. "After they get theirs, you'll come next."

He watched Burton mount his horse, watched the ranchers ride away. Some of them had not liked the decision, some of them wanted to wipe out these nesters. Burton had overruled them. Now they were riding away. As Kenyon watched them go, he knew a victory had been won, a battle fought and decided. A battle without bullets. What had won that battle? Maybe it had been won because he had somehow found the right words to say, had somehow touched a responsive chord in the mind of a stubborn rancher. Or maybe it had been won by the sight of a thirsty steer drinking from a watering trough. Only a cattleman, with thousands of steers dying of thirst, could fully understand what that meant. Rance Burton had understood.

THE END

TRAINING THE BURRO

by George Cory Franklin

OLD-TIMERS may smile at this title, for perhaps no other domestic animal has ever come so easily into the service of man, and certainly no other one could have taken its place with the pioneer prospectors of the Rocky Mountains. However, even a humble burro had to learn that he could trust the man who loaded him; to wait patiently for the breeching to be "pulled" at the top of a steep grade, and if he was confronted by an obstacle in the trail to wait until it was removed.

Keen of sight, equipped with long ears that constantly turned to catch every sound, fleet of foot and wise in woodcraft, the burro was, and is today, one of the gamest animals on the Western range. Once tamed, he becomes the faithful companion of man and, since he is a born explorer, with an insatiable curiosity to see what is back of beyond the far horizon, the burro is an ideal companion for the prospector, who is impelled by a like force.

The burro has many latent virtues, which the wise mountain dweller takes pains to develop. No animal has more confidence in its own judgment than has the burro. For example, let the one who doubts this statement try to force the gentlest burro to wade through a shallow pool of muddy water, the surface of which is quiet enough to reflect the clouds floating in the sky above. Coaxing, force, the offer of some coveted bit of food, such as a bacon rind, will avail nothing. The burro will walk around the pool, but never will he

trust his feet in a spot that looks like a bottomless void.

An outstanding result of the burro's self-confidence is shown in his desire to lead. If a narrow trail causes the band to travel in single file, those near the front will be alert, constantly watching for an opportunity to dodge past the leader and assume command. The coveted position once gained, a burro will fight to hold it by kicking or biting any animal that attempts to oust him.

The old-time packers were ever on the watch for outstanding leaders. A fast walker and one that could not easily be deprived of leadership was most in demand. Such an animal was given a lighter load and encouraged to keep out in front.

No group of animals is more interesting to watch than a pack train of thirty burros, the number that is usually handled by two men. If more than this is worked in a single train, those first loaded may grow tired of waiting for the others and lie down, which is likely to shift the load and make trouble. Experienced packers will pack the lightest loads first and finish the work as quickly as possible.

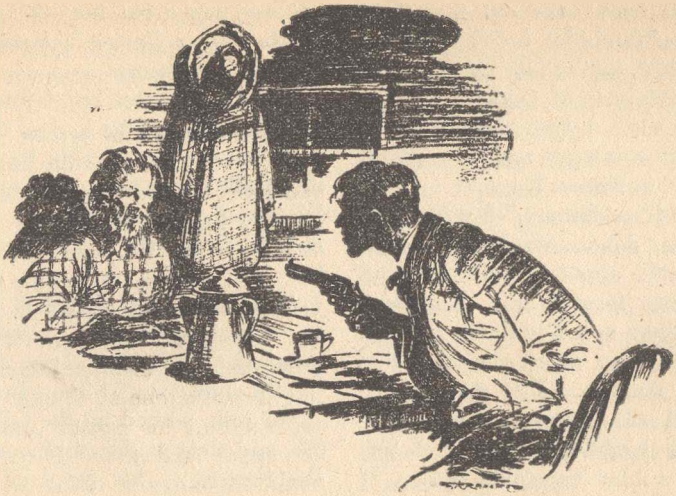
To the burro, in a large part, belongs the credit for the discoveries of ore in the inaccessible gulches and highest peaks of the mountains, and also for transporting the first ore to market. Trails made by wild game could be, and were, followed by the prospectors' burros. No other animal except the bighorn sheep and wild goat is capable of traveling over the narrow shelves or crossing bridges made of two or three logs thrown across a roaring torrent.

The prospectors and early miners held their burros in high esteem, and were always well supplied with stories of the sagacity and strength of their favorites. The strength of the short-legged, wire-muscled burro is almost unbelievable. A good jack weighing not more than five hundred pounds can carry his own weight for a considerable distance.

A miner in one of the early camps boasted that his burro could carry half a ton a distance of a hundred yards, basing his statement on the fact that Jack had carried two green logs that had required two men to load. A newcomer, with more money than experience, questioned the story and offered to back his judgment to the amount of a thousand dollars, more money than all the prospectors in the village possessed. A gambler, who knew the owner of the burro as a quiet, dependable man, offered to back him, and the bets were made. Without the slightest hesitancy, the prospector demanded that five sacks of concentrates, weighing two hundred pounds each, should be loaded on Jack.

The burro braced his sturdy legs as the weight increased, and when the last sack was lifted into place, he staggered off at the command of his owner for the required distance. For this outstanding accomplishment, Jack received the grease-saturated paper stripped from a ham, which he ate with much satisfaction.

THE END



TRAPPER'S SAVVY

by Jim Kjelgaard

Because of a single flaw, a fortune in pelts became a dead man's evidence against his murderer

BATNEY stopped outside the circle of light that sprayed from the cabin's square window. His right hand dipped to the holster under his left arm, and caressed the handle of the gun he carried there. He took his hand away, stepped over to the door and pounded his knuckles against it. A gentle voice answered the knock.

"Come in."

Batney opened the door and entered. He cleared his throat and spoke in a sheepish tone.

"I was camped last night at Conover Lake, and went into the bush this morning to chase down an ore vein. I've been in the bush before, but I guess I went astray."

He waited breathlessly, with his right thumb hooked against the loosened flap of his stag shirt. But the old man who stood just within the cabin door was regarding him with the frank, clear, trusting eyes of a child. Batney twitched uncomfortably.

"I am honored to have you," the old man said. "The bush is a vast place."

Batney shivered. "And cruel."

"No, it isn't," the old man said quickly. "It abides by the laws of God, rather than those of man. I live by the laws of God. I— Excuse me, sir. I had not meant to argue with a hungry and tired guest. My name is Simon Bond."

"I'm Adrian Batney," Batney said.

He sat down, watching Simon Bond bustle about a table and cut huge steaks from a loin of moose. He laid them in a hot skillet and the smell of frying meat rose to tickle Batney's nostrils. But even above that, and all the other scents that inhabit a long-occupied cabin, one distinctive odor remained plain. It was the half-rank, half-musty odor of dried furs, very many furs. Batney's eyes strayed to another door, that probably led to a storeroom. There was some fact then in the rumor about an old man with a fortune in furs. That rumor had gone six hundred miles by grapevine telegraph, finally to reach Batney at Great Slave Lake.

Bond put the food on the table, and Batney wolfed down the meat and the platter of sour-dough biscuits set before him. He sighed, took a pipe and tobacco pouch from his pocket, and filled the pipe. His eyes rose to meet those of Simon Bond, sitting across the table and beaming.

"Do you feel better now?" Bond asked gently.

"Much better. I—"

"Then it proves you were wrong, doesn't it?" the old man broke in. "The bush isn't cruel; only men are."

"Have you got any fur?" Batney demanded suddenly.

"Are you a fur buyer?"

"Just a collector," Batney said with grim humor.

A little wariness crept into Simon Bond's eyes, and he looked over Batney's head at a .22 rifle hanging on the wall. Snarling, Batney jerked his pistol from its holster. He leveled it across the table, and cocked it.

"I'm not going to listen all night to your crack-pot raving!" he growled. "What have you got?"

"I'll show you," Simon Bond said.

He rose, picked up the tallow candle, and went to the storeroom. With the muzzle of his revolver pressed against the old man's spine, Batney followed. The door swung protestingly on unoiled hinges, and Bond thrust the candle inside.

Batney gasped. The candle's flickering light danced back from the silken sheen of fisher pelts, the tawny gold of marten, the rich dullness of beaver—a king's ransom in furs, more than enough to load the big canoe Batney had cached a half mile from the cabin, hung from the dingy rafters.

His eyes glittering, Batney pulled the trigger of his gun. The bullet smashed into Simon Bond's back.

Three days down the river Batney felt easier, safer. Gone were the hidden eyes that had watched from every thicket, waited on every spit of land. And the numberless pursuing canoes that had been very close behind him were gone, too. Simon Bond had had no near neighbors, and no chance trapper or wilderness wan-

derer had discovered Batney's crime. Now the white buildings of a trading post showed through gaps in the trees.

Batney swung in beside the dock, and stepped out of the canoe. A lounging Indian grinned at him. The bareheaded trader came walking down a footpath.

"Hi, trapper," he greeted.

"Hi. By Jupiter, it's wonderful to hear a white man talk again!"

The trader smiled sympathetically. "I know how it goes. Where'd you come from, trapper? I didn't see you go up the river last summer."

"I came south from Great Slave Lake," Batney said glibly. "I hit a fur pocket about sixty miles north of Conover, and stayed to clean it out. It was easier to come out this way."

Batney ripped away the faded tarpaulin that covered his load, and the trader's eyes lighted.

He turned to wave his hand, and three Indians shuffled down to help shoulder the load. They arranged them on the wooden platform in front of the post, and the trader picked up a fisher pelt. He turned it fur side out, looked at it, and casually laid it aside. He examined half a dozen more, and went from the fisher to a pile of beaver furs. When he had finished he arose.

"Will you excuse me a moment?" he asked. "I'd like to see someone else about this catch."

"Sure," said Batney, a little puzzled. "Go ahead."

The trader walked toward one of the half dozen cabins that had sprung up around the post and came back with a man beside him, a man in police uniform. Batney glanced desperately toward his canoe. But it was too late for that now.

"I'm Constable Moore," the policeman said pleasantly. "Will you tell us exactly how you took those furs?"

"Why . . . why, of course. I trapped them in a fur pocket, north of Conover Lake."

Constable Moore was still pleasant. "There's no reason to doubt you, but there's an odd coincidence here that I must investigate."

A dull and heavy voice spoke to Batney. It told him that somehow and someway his plans had gone amiss. It warned him also that very soon he would be hanged—for murder.

"What must you investigate?" he asked thickly.

"An old man named Bond, Simon Bond," the constable said softly. "For the past five years he's been back in the bush gathering fur. And, well, you know how it would be with anyone alone in the bush that long. He doesn't mind trapping animals, but he has what amounts to a phobia against seeing them suffer after they're trapped. Instead of clubbing it to death, he shoots everything he catches cleanly between the eyes with a .22 rifle. Shooting has become such a fixation that he brain-shoots even drowned beaver and mink—and I can't help noticing that you've done exactly the same thing."

THE END

WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

BY JOHN NORTH

In the midst of a war requiring every ounce of steel available, trappers are finding traps, the main implement of their trade, increasingly hard to get. The high-grade metal used to make traps has been called to take its part in the building of the essential tools we need to win our global fight against aggressor nations.

It doesn't mean trapping is out for the duration. Trapping is important too. But it means that right now it is more important than it ever has been to take care of the traps you have. Replacements may be hard to get.

The wilderness trapper was by necessity, if for no other reason, a pretty good hand at taking care of the traps he set out along his far-flung winter trapline.

Too far away from the nearest settlement to come into town when he needed parts for a broken trap, he usually kept a box of spares on hand. Not necessarily new parts, but still serviceable springs, jaws, pans, bottoms, crosses, swivels and dogs he had previously collected from other damaged traps.

The back-country fur seeker never threw a trap away. He took the broken article apart carefully, rescuing every piece that might be usable. That was a practical example of something we have been hearing a lot about these days—salvage.

It worked. It afforded the trapper parts with which to mend old traps on many an occasion when he might otherwise have been forced to cut short or abandon altogether a successful trapline in the heart of a good season.

Salvaging trap parts is an excellent idea for *every* trapper right now. New parts may be difficult to obtain when the present stocks run out. N. K., of Duluth, Minnesota, admitting that heretofore he was a catalogue and store buyer every time he felt he needed new trapping equipment, wrote in to tell us things have changed. Like a lot of other trappers, he realizes there's a war on, a mighty big one and it's affecting everybody.

It's his opinion that some tips on trap care would be mighty timely.

Outside of plain carelessness, rust is the greatest enemy of the average steel trap. For one thing an animal's

fur is at its best, prime, when the weather is coldest and that is precisely the time when the pan shanks of some traps tend to stick at the trigger point. Rust causes this indirectly.

The sticking is actually due to freezing, to the collection of frozen moisture that gathers on rusty metal. Some traps, but by no means all, are fitted with zinc-coated pan shanks to prevent rusting and consequent cold-weather freezing of this crucial part.

For traps without this protection, the shank should be kept rust free by dressing it down with emery paper. Traps that show the ravages of rust should be thoroughly cleaned by using a wire brush and emery paper until the steel glistens. Rust, eating into the metal, may weaken an essential part so that it breaks or fails to function at a critical moment.

Moisture is the chief cause of rust. Keep your traps dry. When not in use hang them in a dry, well-ventilated place. Never store them at the season's end in a damp cellar.

An excellent trap preservative can be made by boiling a solution of soft maple bark, hemlock or butternut bark, or black walnut or butternut hulls in water. Use bark from growing trees. About a pound of bark or hulls to the gallon of water makes a sufficiently strong mixture.

When the season is over bring your traps in, clean them and boil them gently in this solution for about an hour. The almost black liquid will turn them blue. Then, for the finisher, melt a cake of paraffin, the kind used for sealing homemade jelly jars, on top of the solution. Melted candles can be used. Pull the traps out through the hot wax. Let them drip a moment and hang them in the open for a couple of days before storing them.

The wax will give a light surface coating to the trap. To insure all parts being treated place a small stick between the jaws of each trap before it is immersed in the preservative solution.

If the traps are to be used for fox, wolf, or coyote remember however to boil them again before using them in a trap set.

New traps should always be boiled to remove any adhering oil before they are used. Boil them in clean water. And in this case *don't* lift the traps out of the boiling bath. If you do they will acquire a film of oil from the oil that has risen to the surface of the water, and the whole point in boiling them will be nullified. Siphon off the oil first.

Never try burning off oil or "human odors" over a fire. The heat may destroy the temper of the springs and make the trap useless.

Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply. Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

MINES AND MINING

BY JOHN A. THOMPSON

GOLD is where you find it. That holds true for the dense, tropical jungle country of South America as well as for other more geographically favored prospecting areas.

Jungle prospecting is not easy. In a way, it is a specialty. A job for a stout-hearted adventurous hombre inured to steaming heat, winging insects, trees alive with coiling snakes, wild animals, and the thousand and one hazards of a tropical wilderness.

Foliage, heavy vegetation and a thick layer of dank, black earth underfoot cover so much of the terrain that outcrops and exposed rock formations, the beacon signs that so often guide the way to veins of precious metal, are generally few and far between. River travel is usually the easiest, and at times the only means of access to the interior.

These jungle watercourses, vine-hung and many of them blocked by frequent waterfalls, offer the prospector his best break. Aside from serving as highways they can be prospected for placer gold just like other creeks and streams in mineralized country anywhere. Now and then they disgorge colors and nuggets of gold in deposits rich enough to give any yellow metal hunter the thrill of his hard, adventurous life.

Pvt. R. D., one of Uncle Sam's fighting Leathernecks, is busy killing Japs right now. But when the last Nippo gets what's coming to him in Tokio, R. D. says in his letter from a South Pacific battle front, he plans to do some jungle gold prospecting in South America, possibly in Venezuela.

Figure sharks who are experts in such things claim that from the time Columbus discovered America up to the present day, gold deposits and gold mines in Venezuela have turned out an estimated four million ounces of gold. That's not as much as Colombia, South America's leading gold country which has yielded over fifty million ounces of gold in the same time.

Still four million ounces of yellow metal ain't hay. And Venezuela's current gold production has been up around a hundred and fifty thousand ounces a year. The gold country lies over in the eastern part of the Republic in what is known as the Guiana Highlands, a mineralized mountain region that includes parts of Venezuela, and of British Guiana.

Dutch Guiana, and French Guiana as well.

The principal gold-mining section of Venezuela centers around El Callao, about one hundred and fifty miles southeast of Ciudad Bolivar. The richest gold-lode mine in the country, El Callao is there. Other hard-rock gold mines and mining settlements spread out all around. Pastora and Cicapra lie twenty-five miles west. Botanamo is seventy-five miles southeast of the hub gold camp at El Callao. Most of the veins worked are quartz, rich in gold.

Through the heart of this widespread area winds the Yuuari River, and along this jungle stream as well as in its tributaries, placer miners have been winning themselves placer gold since about 1850. The placers were the first deposits discovered in the district. In many cases the original finds were incredibly rich.

The hard-rock mines, the lodes from which the placer gold was probably derived were not located and opened up until 1865. But they, as well as the river placers, have proved long lasting. Both kinds of gold mining are still being carried on in the region.

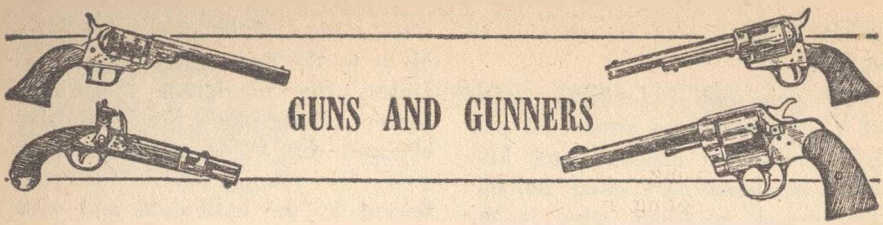
Small-scale prospecting for placer gold on the public domain is free in Venezuela to natives and aliens alike when properly authenticated and after notice of intention has been given to the local civil authorities. Unless the regulations regarding placer mining have been radically changed this holds good, however, only for mining operations conducted by the individual and with simple tools such as a gold pan, long tom or homemade rocker.

To come within the provisions of free prospecting no single placer excavation should exceed a five-by-ten-foot rectangle, or a surface area of roughly fifty square feet. There is no limit set regarding the depth of the hole. Where open cuts or small pits are necessary to open up and get down to pay dirt, about the best way for the individual small-scale gold seeker to protect himself (as far as the law is concerned) against anyone else with a yen to dig in the same place is to stake out one, or if need be several areas, ten meters square covering the pits.

It is not necessary to register these marked areas. But if you want a legal leg to stand on in case of argument or controversy, such staked locations together with a description of each must be divulged to the local civil head of the district in which the ground lies.

To conduct larger operations, and for lode mining, grants or concessions covering the mining rights must be obtained from the government.

If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., will bring a prompt, authoritative, personal reply. Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received; please keep them as brief as possible.



BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

THE soldier, at home on leave, frequently is decorated with a medal or two indicating proficiency in the art of handling his weapons. Many of those boys are constantly being asked what such and such a medal means, and what they had to do to get it. Here's the story.

Any well-trained soldier should be able to qualify for at least one of the many shooting medals offered by the United States Army. There are three distinct grades of shooting qualifications in the army, with three corresponding types of medals. These grades, in order of their importance include: Marksman, Sharpshooter and Expert. The same ratings are usually approved for the qualifications in rifle, pistol, bayonet, grenade throwing, machine gun, and other essential services.

In training a soldier in the art of rifle and pistol shooting, the preliminary period begins in the classroom. Here the men must first learn about their guns. They are compelled to commit to memory the names, uses, and positions of each individual part. Take the Garand rifle, the standard service weapon, which the army calls the "United States Rifle, Caliber .30, M1." This is a semi-automatic rifle. It holds a clip of eight cartridges, but requires that the shooter squeeze the trigger once for each shot he desires to fire. The soldier must know his gun thoroughly before he is permitted to fire it.

In a classroom the instructor explains the gun, its design and its method of functioning. When the basic operation of gun is understood, the soldier then learns to take it apart and reassemble it. Any soldier should be able to strip all parts that are removable in a matter of less than 30 seconds. He should be able to reassemble the gun in less than a minute. He should be able to do these operations in the dark or blindfolded.

With the basic data understood, the soldier progresses to the problems of actual shooting: the use of the sights; safeties; methods of inserting the ammunition; use of the sling; range problems such as analyzing the wind and its effect on the bullet's flight, together with means of allowing for it; and finally the shooting. Properly trained, he is ready for the range.

There are several "courses" or shooting programs in the army training schedule, but the most common is the "C course." After preliminary practice, the soldier is ready for his record firing. The C course calls for all shooting at 200 yards. The army "A" target, with its 10-inch bull's-eye, is used.

Using the rifle as a single loader, the soldier fires four shots with standard sling, from the sitting position; then four from the kneeling, and finally four shots from the standing position using the "hasty" sling—a quick method of slipping the left arm around the sling for steadier support. The shots are scored between shots by telephone communication with the targets, plus the use of a marker or signal system held over that portion of the target struck. The shooter thus knows what he is doing.

Next comes the rapid-fire stages. For this stage the "D" target is used —the "bull's-eye" being a silhouette of the head and shoulders of a man. The shooter waits for his target to appear, whereupon he drops from standing to the sitting position, fires his eight shots, reloads and fires the final eight. The 16 shots must be discharged in 50 seconds, or the target disappears.

This is again repeated in the position from standing to sitting, but 60 seconds are allowed. A total of 44 shots for record are fired, and since the black part of the target—the bull's-eye—counts 5, a possible 220 could be scored.

When the boys in the target pits complete their records and report to the officer in charge of the firing line, the score is checked. If the shooter has a score of 145 or better, he becomes a Marksman. If he reaches 185 or better, he is a Sharpshooter. If he scores 195 or better —some do—he becomes an Expert.

The medals issued have long been standardized. The Marksman gets a maltese cross. The Sharpshooter medal is the maltese cross with a bull's-eye in the center. The Expert medal is the Sharpshooter type surrounded by a wreath.

In pistol shooting the requirements are similar. Ten shots, slow fire are completed with the .45 automatic at 25 yards. Then comes 10 3368 Western..Guns & Gunners..2 rapid shots at 15 yards, followed by an additional 10 at 25 yards. The final stage calls for 15 shots at a silhouette target at 25 yards, 3 seconds per shot. Here total score does not count in the Pistol-D course. The score in slow fire counts 1/3; in rapid fire, 1/3; and on the bobbing target, 1/3. Add them up for the percentage. A score of 62% scores for Marksman. A score of 76% gives the shooter the Sharpshooter medal—and 86% or better means Expert.

Phil Sharpe, our firearms editor, is now on active duty as a Captain, Ordnance Department, U. S. A. He will continue to answer all letters from readers. Address your inquiries to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your copy. Do not send a return envelope.

TONAPAH TROUBLE

by M. HOWARD LANE

Mojave Jack's last dollar bought him a share in a jackpot that promised either gold—or death!

I

TONOPAH was growing. Bert McDermott was willing to admit that as he stood on the porch of his Whiskey Barrel Saloon, and let nostalgic memories pester him. A whiskey barrel and a tin cup on the tail gate of his buckboard had started him in business here when the Nevada mining camp had been nothing but a cluster of stained tents and hopeful prospectors who talked big money and had to beg their drinks.

Those days, though, McDermott reflected, had been the best. Then high grade had started coming from Pierson's Discovery shaft, and it had

been enough to start the rush. Now the town was booming. McDermott eyed the street sourly and he could literally watch raw new pine-board structures rising along the thoroughfare.

One, almost directly across from him, was a whole lot bigger than the rest. A painter was putting the finishing touches to a sign that stretched across its second story false front. It read:

TONOPAH PALACE, and beneath in smaller print: "The Longest Bar and the Longest Drink in Nevada. Trey Merlo, Proprietor."

"Ain't no wonder that Merlo can serve the longest drinks in Tonopah," McDermott muttered. "He's passin' out *my* whiskey and I aim to prove it, and git it back!"

Then slowly he lifted the arm that had been carefully jammed into the right-hand pocket of his gray box coat, and his eyes showed the dull horror that had never left them since a Reno doctor had been forced to amputate his right hand.

"A good gun with the guts to back it is what I need now," he muttered. "And where's a man going to find one in this town that ain't already been sold, or workin' for itself?"

There were plenty of men doing that. Salt Lake City hooligans had been attracted cross country to Tonopah, for along with gold the word had gone out that the law was lax.

Solid citizens were coming, too. Every stage from Sodaville Junction across the desert was bringing Eastern capitalists, eager to buy leases and develop properties. And by wagon and mule back and shank's mare, the men who would muck the mines and line their false pockets with high grade, were also streaming toward Tonopah.

Yes, the camp was booming, and Bert McDermott watched it from the porch of the Whiskey Barrel, reflecting that he had nothing to sell but a few bottles of lukewarm beer.

Beer that wouldn't bring the money to pay development work on Mrs. White's claim which she had staked on Extension Ridge. And that, Bert McDermott also reflected, was another fault he had. Since misfortune had hit him, he'd never been able to pass up another who had been its victim. And 'Liza White and her daughter, Cathy, were two people to whom luck had dealt a poor hand.

"They ain't got a dime, and neither have I," Bert McDermott told himself. "So how you expect to hire a gunhand to git back your liquor and help the Whites—even if such a crazy-fool hombre as might side you would come along?"

Bert McDermott was right then looking at the crazy-fool hombre who would side him, but he didn't know it. For his eyes, swinging up street had touched the casual shape of an obvious stranger.

Mojave Jack wasn't much to look at. He was riding a shave-tail old hammer-head mule that was the devil on a hot griddle if the saloonman had only known it. So was Mojave Jack, but McDermott didn't know

that either. All he saw was a lean, stocky-built stranger, of probably twenty-five, deep-bronzed by summer suns and winter winds. The stranger's Levis were faded and tight-fitting from many washings. His blue flannel shirt clung to the wedge shape of his torso, and his cowhide vest was so old patches of hair had worn off it. Even the pair of black guns in the slanting belts at his hips were unobtrusive. Only the slant of his warped black sombrero, and the sandy lock of unruly hair that straggled down across his forehead caught at Bert McDermott's attention. Any cuss wearing a hat with that angle to it didn't have a care in the world, and Bert wished that he was in the Tonopah stranger's boots.

In that surmise, however, he was wrong. Mojave Jack had his troubles. There was just one silver dollar in the pocket of his Levis.

"Jughead," he told the gray mule under him, "we're hungry and I need some beer, and this looks like just the town where we can get it."

Reno, he was remembering ruefully, had just finished chasing him into the desert, after he had vociferously sided the wrong candidate for sheriff. Wrong, that is, from the new lawman's point of view.

On either side of Mojave Jack, carpenters were busy slapping raw pine lumber into the shape of stores, dance halls and saloons. Freight wagons, incoming from Sodaville Junction were lifting streamers from the hock-deep dust of the street. And ore wagons, on their way to Candeleria and the stamp mills that would refine their cargo moved along the wide way. Men, and a few women, were using the newly laid boardwalks banding the thoroughfare. Everybody seemed to be in a hurry, Mojave noted.

He also noted that there were a pair of saloons not far ahead. One of them called the Whiskey Barrel was already weathered from at least one Tonopah winter. The other, directly across the street, was brand spanking new.

"A man wouldn't find much peace and quiet in that there Tonopah Palace, Jughead," Mojave Jack told the mule. "Let's you and me tackle the Whiskey Barrel. Looks like the boss himself standin' on the porch watchin' his customers go across the street. So we'll spend our dollar with him.

A sudden commotion at the brightly varnished batwings of the Tonopah Palace caught Mojave's attention as he prepared to swing his mount into the hitch rail before the Whiskey Barrel. He watched the doors of the Palace suddenly open, and the shape of a man come sailing through them. Legs and arms spread-eagled, white hair flying, the old-timer struck the boardwalk with a sodden thud. He moved sluggishly once, and then lay still as a pair of men stepped out after him.

One of them was built on the heavy lines of a Percheron stud. Short, curly black hair fitted his head like a cap. A grin was on his loose lips, and his huge hands were working like a cat's claws on velvet

as he strode to the boardwalk.

The other man was tall and well-built, yet he looked like a stripling beside his huge companion. Garbed in black, and with his linen white and fresh, he was obviously Trey Merlo, the proprietor of the Tonopah Palace.

Mojave Jack heard him say in a chill, brittle voice: "Truk, give that cussed Burro Ben another lesson. He can't mooch whiskey in my bar. Kick him across the street to McDermott."

"That will be a pleasure," the loose-lipped man drawled in a husky voice. He started toward the prone prospector, hands working at his sides.

Mojave jogged a little closer. Other passersby were scrupulously minding their own business, and Mojave knew that was what he should do, but he also knew that no cussed gun tough was going to stomp a man already down if he could help it.

II

The Palace gun guard had one big boot half drawn back to launch his first kick at the prone prospector.

"I wouldn't do that, if I was you," Mojave said mildly.

Poised on one foot, Truk Anson wobbled and cursed throatily. "An' who the devil's business is it if I do?" he demanded.

"I'm makin' it mine," Mojave drawled, and out of the corner of his eye he saw the Tonopah owner's right hand cup swiftly toward his cuff. Merlo was carrying a sleeve derringer.

Mojave's own hand started moving at the discovery, and across the street Bert McDermott's eyes were bugging. The saloonman had never seen a gun come from leather any faster.

Neither had Trey Merlo. Mojave saw the man's lips go slack beneath the hair line of his black mustache as the blue barrel of a Colt settled on his fancy gold belt buckle.

"Sleeve guns," Mojave Jack spoke his disgust, "were made for old ladies and sneaks. By Satan, mister, I've been run out of town for doin' less than carry one of them things. Shake it right out of yore cuff, and let it fall so folks can see just

what kind of whelp they're buying liquor from."

The derringer clattered to the boardwalk, a wicked work of art done in pearl, scrolled gold and chilled steel.

"Mighty pretty," Mojave murmured, and without apparently aiming he drove a bullet into the weapon that smashed trigger and pearl handle.

The sound of the shot was like a spur to bring Burro Ben to his feet. White hair flying about his shoulders, snaggle teeth grinning, he looked down at the smashed sleeve gun.

"By dog," he exclaimed in a thin, raspy voice, "it's been a long time since I've seen a purtier sight. Even a good hunk of float wouldn't look no sweeter than that thar busted gun. Folks."

Trey Merlo's ice-pale eyes had dropped to the shattered weapon at his feet. Now they rose, and there was a steadiness in his glance that Mojave Jack was forced to admire.

"Don't let seven o'clock find you here, mister!" Merlo said flatly.

Mojave's smile was imperturbable as ever, but inwardly he was cursing himself for having immediately stepped into trouble in a new town. Trey Merlo carried the big stick in Tonopah, there was no doubt about it. His seven o'clock deadline was no idle threat. Then Mojave's glance shifted to Burro Ben, and his resolve to remain here hardened, for as long as sleeve-gun gamblers rodded Tonopah, it was going to be no place for decent men to live.

As the thought crossed his mind, he saw Truk Anson stooping to pick up the shattered remnants of the derringer, and his voice rang flatly against the burly man's ears.

"Let it stay there, mister," he ordered. "I told you that once."

An expression of dismay crossed Trey Merlo's cold face and was gone almost before Mojave Jack recognized it, but the sight was enough to rouse his curiosity.

Thoughtfully studying Merlo, he watched the Tonopah owner and his big hireling move stiff-backed to the varnished batwings of the Palace. Reaching the doors, the gambler turned, and his ice-pale eyes clashed with Mojave Jack's brown ones.

"Seven o'clock, mister," he reminded.

Mojave grinned pleasantly, and flung the gambler's challenge right back at him. "Better bring more men an' boys than I've seen around yet, when you come to git me!" he drawled.

"I will!" promised Merlo coldly, and Mojave knew the gambler meant what he said.

He watched the pair disappear through the batwings, wondering again what had brought that look of dismay to the saloonman's eyes when he had been prevented from picking up his shattered sleeve-gun. Certainly the small weapon was useless now.

Then out of the corner of his eye, Mojave noticed that Burro Ben had scuttled forward to stoop above the smashed derringer.

"Let 'er lay, old-timer," Mojave advised.

"Don't be a dumb head," Burro Ben grunted, without looking up. "Thar's a hunk of paper peekin' through the cracks in that busted handle, and I got me a powerful hunch it's somethin' Merlo ain't hankerin' for us to see!"

So that was the reason dismay had crossed the gambler's face. Mojave nodded slightly. "Scoop her up then," he murmured, and his quick mind was already seeing the possibilities of striking a future bargain with Merlo.

"Got 'er," the old desert rat announced as he straightened. "Come on, stranger, let's you and me cross over to Bert's and wet our whistles. I should've gone there in the fust place."

"And I should have done the same," Mojave grinned. "Kind o' makes us partners in trouble, I guess."

He swung his ugly gray mule cross street to the rack in front of the Whiskey Barrel, and stepped stiffly down from saddle. Burro Ben had the shattered sleeve gun clutched in one hand, and a grin on his tobacco-stained lips as he joined Mojave on the boardwalk.

"Ain't had more fun in a dog's age," he chuckled. "Let's git on inside, young feller, and see what we taken from that blackleg, Merlo. Might be you won't have to leave town by seven after we have a look-see. And if it tain't nothing, and you do have to go, I'm ridin' with you," he added sturdily. "It's my

fault that yo're in this jackpot, and I aim to side yuh through it. You won't be the first pilgrim Merlo's ordered from Tonopah and made it stick."

Mojave blinked in the semi-gloom of the Whiskey Barrel as he and Burro Ben approached the shining mahogany Bert McDermott was polishing with a clean towel. The shelves of the back bar, Mojave noted, were bare.

Burro Ben had noticed the same thing. "Bert," he exclaimed in his reedy voice, "air my old eyes deceivin' me, or are you sold out of that rattlesnake juice you call whiskey?"

Bert McDermott's face was a round, friendly moon, and he usually had a smile for everyone. He tried to muster one now, but it faded on his lips.

"There ain't a bottle in the house, Ben," he answered. "If there was I'd sure buy you fellows a drink for the way you handled Merlo. Howsomever, I got some kind o' cool beer."

"Beer," Mojave murmured, "is just what I want. Me'n whiskey don't git along together. Might be I'll need a steady hand come seven tonight, anyway."

"Merlo gave my pard here until then to git out of town," Burro Ben explained.

McDermott nodded. "I watched the show, and heard it," he said flatly. "Stranger"—his mild blue eyes turned directly on Mojave—"my gunhand's gone, and I got nothin' much more to lose, so if you want to hole up right here and make your fight, I'm willin'!"

From a cooler beneath the bar, he had already produced two bottles of beer, and poured them. Mojave lifted his glass to Burro Ben and McDermott. "How," he said, and added briefly: "I do my fightin' in the open where nobody but me is likely to get hurt."

Burro Ben gulped beer thirstily, then with foam still ringing his lips, he glanced at McDermott. "Bert," he queried, "what in tarnal happened to yore stock? Last time I was here, I recollect you tellin' me you'd sunk every dime into one big order that was comin' by narrow gauge to Sodaville Junction. Enough liquor, you said, to keep you stocked for a year. Recollect that was why you couldn't grubstake me my last time out, and also why you couldn't lend that proddy old female, Miz 'Liza White, a hand in developin' her claim on the Extension."

"Your memory is danged good," the saloonman admitted. "Figgered by now to have enough dinero in the cash box to do a lot of things around this town that need doin', but I ain't got it, nor my whiskey."

"Yuh mean it didn't come?"

"It got as far as Sodaville"—Bert McDermott's voice had turned unconsciously grim—"and Jingle-Bob Smith loaded it on his freighter. Howsomever, Jingle-Bob didn't git far. He was found, shot 'tween the eyes, halfway here. His mules, wagon and my whiskey had vanished into thin air!"

"Disappeared, huh?" Mojave entered the conversation.

McDermott's eyes turned toward the Tonopah stranger, and then unconsciously his glance fell to the guns snugging Mojave Jack's hips. "Stolen," he said flatly, "by Trey Merlo. The only trouble is, I cain't prove it. But I shore know one thing. He's got plenty whiskey to sell, and he ain't had no shipment come in from Sodaville!"

"Holy Jumpin' Jehoshaphat," Burro Ben breathed. "A gent that'd steal whiskey would rob his grandmother's grave."

III

Quick steps sounded on the porch outside, and Mojave turned, one hand sliding down from the bar toward his Colt as the batwings swung open. Then he let his arm relax. It was only a girl entering. Sunlight behind her back silhouetted her slim, boyish figure, and seemed to bring fire into the red gold of her hair. Wearing boots, breeches, and open-necked shirt, she moved toward them with hurried steps. At other times, Mojave Jack decided, she was probably a mighty pretty girl, but right now she seemed to be having a hard time to control the look of fear that had brought lines into her oval face.

"Cathy!" McDermott ejaculated.

Cathy White reached the bar, and her sun-bronzed hands shook as she gripped it. "Bert," she said in a low, dull voice, "Verne Licker, the county recorder, came out to see us

awhile ago. Trey Merlo put him up to it!"

Mojave watched the saloonman's lips whiten.

"What did Licker want?" McDermott demanded.

"He claims that in order to make our location valid on the Extension, we must have a prospect hole down ten feet before midnight—tonight. And that's not the worst. Two of Merlo's gunnies are squatting on the rim above our claim like a pair of buzzards. We have powder enough to blow out a hole, but even if we had the money to hire them, no muckers to clean it would come near our claim, with Merlo lead waiting for them. And we've got to have it cleared by midnight!"

"Tonopah trouble," Mojave Jack murmured. "Looks like we're all in it together."

"And I'm makin' yore trouble mine," Burro Ben growled, "so that adds up to trouble for four. Pard"—he glanced at Mojave Jack's square-hewn face—"what answer you got to all this?"

Mojave poured more beer into his glass, and for a moment made no reply. There was an answer but it eluded him. Trey Merlo was certainly playing a fast and loose game around this town. The man was after a monopoly on the whiskey trade, and he'd have it unless Bert McDermott's stolen load could be located and returned to him. The White women would lose their Extension claim, also, and that would just whet Merlo's appetite. If this first steal came easily, other claim owners would find themselves up against the same proposition.

"How long," he asked the girl, "since that there recorder showed up at your claim?"

"About half an hour ago," Cathy White answered promptly.

Mojave pushed absently at the lock of sandy hair across his forehead. "Thirty minutes," he murmured thoughtfully. "That would be soon after we finished our ruckus with Trey. Now, why should this here Merlo be in such an all-fired hurry of a sudden to take over the White claim?"

"You figger it out," Burro Ben growled, and his drooping white mustache had started to bristle. "I ain't got the time. Me'n and Cathy are goin' back to her claim and blast ourselves a legal prospect hole and git it mucked out afore midnight. Her ma, 'Liza, is as ornery a female as Nevada can claim, but I ain't the one to set and see airy man take advantage of women. Cathy, let's you and me git to movin'!"

"Not so fast, old-timer," Mojave said. "It's goin' to take more'n you and me to get that hole in shape by midnight. But we got one ace, I hope. Let's take a look at Merlo's derringer."

"Blast me, and I'd plumb forgot that blamed sleeve gun!" Burro Ben exclaimed.

As Mojave watched the old prospector fish in his pocket, he was thinking that everything that had happened this afternoon was all part of the same pattern, if he could only

A message for you . . . from 1953

(Today, John Jones is just an average American, wrestling with all the doubts and worries and problems that beset every one of us right now. But let's skip ahead 10 years. Let's look at John Jones then*—and listen to him . . .)*

"SOMETIMES I feel so good it almost scares me. "This house—I wouldn't swap a shingle off its roof for any other house on earth. This little valley, with the pond down in the hollow at the back, is the spot I like best in all the world.

"And they're mine. I own 'em. Nobody can take 'em away from me.

"I've got a little money coming in, regularly. Not much—but enough. And I tell you, when you can go to bed every night with nothing on your mind except the fun you're going to have tomorrow—that's as near Heaven as a man gets on this earth!

"It wasn't always so.

"Back in '43—that was our second year of war, when we were really getting into it—I needed cash. Taxes were tough, and then Ellen got sick. Like most everybody else, I was buying War Bonds through the Payroll Plan—and I figured on cashing some of them in. But sick as she was, it was Ellen who talked me out of it.

"'Don't do it, John!' she said. '*Please* don't! For the first time in our lives, we're really saving money. It's *wonderful* to know that every single payday we have *more* money put aside! John, if we can only keep up this saving, think what it can mean! Maybe someday you won't have to work. Maybe we can own a home. And oh, how good it would feel to know that we need never worry about money when we're old!'

"Well, even after she got better, I stayed away from the weekly poker game—quit dropping a little cash at the hot spots now and then—gave up some of the things a man feels he has a right to. We made clothes do—cut out fancy foods. We didn't have as much fun for a while but we paid our taxes and the doctor and—we didn't touch the War Bonds.

"We didn't touch the War Bonds then, or any other time. And I know this: The world wouldn't be such a swell place today if we had!"

★ *The Treasury Department acknowledges with appreciation the publication of this advertisement by* STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC. ★

put his finger on the key. Merlo had wanted to incapacitate Burro Ben because Ben and the one-armed saloonman were the only two friends, evidently, the White women could claim. That stolen load of liquor had played its part, too. Merlo stood to gain double money from that steal. For without cash gained from sales to back the Whites, McDermott could be of little use to them. Thus the liquor Merlo had stolen would net him a neat profit, and also gain him the White claim by default.

However, something had gone wrong with Merlo's plans, Mojave realized. Otherwise the gun boss wouldn't have had to force his hand within the space of the last thirty minutes.

The shattered derringer gleamed as Burro Ben drew it from his pocket, and put it on the counter. "Purty danged plaything," he growled. "Holler handle and all. Kill a man quicker'n you could spit!"

Mojave watched the prospector's crooked fingers fish a folded square of paper from inside the shattered pearl of the handle, and curiosity, mingled with excitement, moved through him. McDermott was leaning forward across the mahogany, and Cathy White was pressed close to Burro Ben.

Looking over their shoulders, Mojave Jack was paying no attention to the batwings behind them as the prospector started to unfold the paper. "I'm sure hankerin' to see—" Burro Ben got those words out, and then Truk Anson's husky voice at their backs silenced his talk.

"Don't none of you move!" Mojave heard the Palace gunnie say, and the words were echoed by the oily click of his Colt coming to full cock.

Frozen motionless as the rest, Mojave felt his shoulders prickling with the knowledge that lead might drive through them at any moment, and yet if the square of paper hidden inside the derringer was worth a visit from Merlo's right bower, it was also worth keeping. The ace Mojave imagined it to be.

Anson was closing in behind him now, and Mojave sent a signaling glance forward to the still shape of the one-handed barkeep. Then, without attempting to turn, Mojave spoke to the man behind them.

"If yo're after this here paper Burro Ben just found while he was fiddlin' with that gun I smashed for Merlo, why I guess she's yores, Anson. We ain't the ones to pry into another hombre's private business, and it must be private or Trey wouldn't have hid his paper so careful. Ben," he added sternly, "turn yoreself around here, and git ready to hand it over. Bert"—Mojave Jack directed his next words to the saloonkeeper, and he hoped McDermott would gather their meaning—"you ain't bein' very hospitable. Empty beer bottles setting all over the bar, and not a fresh one in sight for our visitor."

McDermott's round face expressed sudden chagrin. "Why, now, and you're sure right," he drawled. His

one good hand picked an empty brown bottle from the bar.

"That paper's all I want—" Truk Anson began, but his sentence was never finished for Mojave was ducking and twisting around as the bottle McDermott had picked up whizzed through the air where he had been standing.

Behind him, Mojave heard a surprised grunt, and the sodden impact of heavy glass striking flesh. He was around then, down on one knee, and both Colts were in his hands, but there was no need to use them.

With a force that shook the walls of the Whiskey Barrel, Anson struck the floor and lay motionless.

Mojave gained his feet with catlike quickness, and kicked the Colt from the man's lax fingers. Gun out of the way, he turned, one brow raised quizzically.

"That was mighty neat, Bert," he murmured. "Hoped you'd ketch what I meant for you to do, but I never figgered on yore aim being so straight. A feller who can hit the bull's-eye like you just done don't need two hands!"

"An' that's wisdom from the mouths of babes," Burro Ben chuckled. "What you say, Cathy?"

The girl's eyes were on the fallen guard. "I say that Trey Merlo will send six to do the work one couldn't when he finds out about this!"

Mojave nodded, and his admiration for the girl increased. She was one who could think straight in a tight.

"Cathy's right," he told the other

two quickly. "Merlo's going to be madder'n a grizzly three days out of hibernation when Anson don't hightail it right back to the Tonopah with the ticket he come to get."

"Which said ticket we're going to look at right now!" Burro Ben grunted. His crooked fingers spread the square of paper on the bar top. Mojave and Cathy White pressed forward to look across the prospector's shoulder.

For a moment, none of them spoke. Then Burro Ben reached up to scratch his head. "Nothin' but hen tracks," he said slowly. "What the tarnal is Merlo hidin' such truck as this fer?"

IV

There were only a few lines on the paper, Mojave saw. One started at the head of the sheet, and traced a crooked course to a point where it joined a ragged, transverse line, marked by what appeared to be twin spires.

"You're lookin' at a map," Mojave said slowly, and his thoughts were running fast. "A map," he added, "locatin' the spot where your stolen liquor is stored, Bert. And maybe I'm guessing now, but it ain't very far from town."

"Extension Ridge!" Cathy White cut into his conversation. "Ben, that's what the cross line shows, and Ben, those two humps are the lava blows above *our* claim!"

Merlo's actions since their clash that afternoon were suddenly clear to Mojave. "Trey," he drawled, "didn't put them two gunnies on the ridge to keep you from sinkin' your prospect hole before midnight. He's takin' it for granted that you can't do that. No, he put them hombres up there to guard Jingle-Bob's load of whiskey."

"So there you are, Bert." He grinned suddenly. "Mebbe your wagonload of brew has been whittled at some, but there'll still be plenty left to stock the Whiskey Barrel if we can figure out a way to lay our hands on it. And I almost think I'm getting an idee on how it can be done. You say you've powder, Cathy?"

"Yes." The girl nodded. "But not very much."

"Trey know that?" Mojave asked.

"No," Cathy White shook her head.

"*Bueno.*" Mojave's grin lighted his face.

"Whatever you're aimin' to do," Burro Ben warned, "you better not forget that we cain't show our noses on the street less'n Anson haids back for the Tonopah before us. If he don't show up, Merlo will figger he got whupped, and we've still got the map. Knowin' that, he'll have every gunnie he can lay hands on out at 'Liza's claim afore you can say scat. It's gittin' dark, but not black enough yet to make a sneak. So how you figure we're going to get out to help 'Liza, and grab Bert's whiskey?"

"You're right as far as you go," Mojave agreed, then he switched his attention to the saloonkeeper. "Bert," he asked quietly, "you got a back door to this place?"

McDermott nodded. "Yeah, we can get out that way, but we can't leave Anson here."

"You and Cathy are taking Anson with you," Mojave told him grimly, "while me'n Burro mosey over to the Tonopah." His thoughts were already running ahead of his words. "Keep Anson's guns pointed straight at his back and make big talk 'tween yourselves about the size blast you're going to set off, until you git to the claim. When you get there contrive to let Truk escape, and my guess is that'll he'll head straight up Extension Ridge to join his pards at them lava blows you mentioned."

"Which won't help us," McDermott argued.

Mojave stopped him with a thin chuckle. "Feller," he asked, "have you ever heerd that old saw about settin' a crook to catch a crook? Well, it's just about the only way to play this hand."

Twenty minutes later, with the shattered derringer looped about his finger, Mojave moved toward the Tonopah with Burro Ben tramping along at his heels.

"All you got to do," Mojave warned the prospector, "is keep a straight face while I'm talkin' and an eye out to see that we don't git plugged in the back."

He pushed through the batwings with a swing of wide shoulders, and blinked in the sudden brightness of the big oil lamps that lighted the room against the early dusk.

Trey Merlo was standing at the near corner of the bar, immaculate in black and fresh white. A long

cheroot smoldered in the fingers of his left hand. The right, Mojave noted, was thrust deep into the pocket of his black coat, and probably it held the mate to the derringer he had looped about his own finger.

He gave the gambler a friendly grin. "Howdy, Trey," he drawled, "I done got a change of heart, and brought back yore pistol. Figgered mebbe you and me might make a little dicker about that there seven o'clock deadline."

With a straight face, he handed the derringer to Merlo and saw the man's pale eyes involuntarily drop to the cracked deadline."

"Oh, there ain't nothin' in there, Trey," Mojave told the saloonman blandly. "Yore gunslick amigo done slicked you out of it."

Merlo's mouth dropped slackly, then tightened like a sprung trap. "Anson?" he grated. "Slicked me? Mister, you better git to talkin' and talkin' fast."

"Not less'n you're willing to dicker," Mojave reminded him.

"Get on with it," Merlo snapped. "Make the talk and your troubles are over."

"I dunno much," Mojave drawled, "'cept that Anson got the drop on me and McDermott and Burro here, while the White girl was telling us the news about her and her ma having to get a prospect hole down ten feet afore midnight. Only way they can do it, of course, is with lots of powder and some strong backs. When they start blastin', things is going to be shook up some because they got plenty dynamite to set off a whopper! Goin' to be some cussed mad prospectors out along the Extension tomorrow if any of them got bottles in their tents, for the concussion will sure and certain bust 'em to bits."

Trey Merlo looked like a man turning a deuce instead of the ace he'd figured as his hole card. "Go on," he said a little hoarsely. "What about Truk?"

"Anson?" Mojave's right eyebrow rose quizzically. "Why, he got right talkative after we handed him the map in yore derringer. Said he'd been getting the short end of the stick around here. Claimed he ought to be a partner in the Palace on account of some favor he done you, such as murderin' Jingle-Bob Smith, and stealin' a load of liquor that belongs to Bert McDermott. He claims you double-crossed him by not keepin' promise. So he's keeping that map telling him where you've got it hid out. Him and Bert kind o' got together after that, and Mac agreed to take Truk into the Whiskey Barrel, if he'd steal back that load of firewater!"

"Damnation!" The word burst from the gambler.

Eyes guileless, Mojave twisted the knife in the wound he had opened. "Anson sure seemed to like the idea. Him and Bert and Cathy White are on the way out to her mom's claim right now. Me'n Burro, we come over here to see about dickerin' on that there deadline, figgering you might be willing to forget seven o'clock after hearing our news."

"I'll do better than that," Trey Merlo purred, and his eyes were direct on the bland Tonopah stranger. "Ride with me and some of my boys to pay Truk a visit, and his job will be yours when we come back to town. I like your guts and the way you handle your guns!"

Mojave's expression did not change. "*Bueno,*" he agreed, "but ain't you forgettin' one little thing, Trey?"

"What's that?" the gambler demanded.

"The Whites and *their* midnight deadline. You know you just can't go traipsin' around this country with a load of whiskey that rightly belongs to another gent, but Truk can because he's got McDermott to back him. So about the only thing you can do, Trey, is to order out a crew of muckers to dig that hole for them Whites. That way there won't be no blasting."

It was the plan he had come to put across, and Mojave felt himself tense for a moment. Then he relaxed as he watched the gambler turn toward a table where six men in miners' clothes were playing poker.

"On your feet," he snapped. "Monte," he addressed their apparent leader, "get out to 'Liza White's Extension claim, and make some rock fly. You'll take your orders from Miz White. Tell her I'm footing the bill."

"Out of the kindness of your heart!" Mojave drawled loudly enough for the sixsome to hear.

Merlo's eyes were murderous as they turned back to the Tonopah

stranger. "I'll round up some of my men," he snapped, "and meet you right here."

"Might take considerable time to do that," Mojave said imperturbably. "Ought to be a hoss out at the rail you can borrow. Seems like me'n you and Burro, and the pair of hombres you got out at the Ridge ought to be enough to take care of a one-armed saloonkeeper and a turncoat gunguard."

Mojave could see his words sting Merlo. "*Bueno!*" It was the gambler's turn to nod agreement.

Only one man joined them as they started toward the door. Dressed in black as was the gambler, his face was swarthy, emotionless.

"This is José," Merlo said, and the fine line of his black mustache twitched as he smiled. "Amigo," he added to the silent Mexican, "you will ride at our backs. If you see these hombres make one move you do not like, whet your *cuchillo* on their throats!"

"Which he'll probably be doin' afore this night's over. Blast me for a jackass," Burro Ben whispered irritably as he and Mojave crossed to get their own mounts from in front of the Whiskey Barrel, "if I've ever seen a gent who could lie so convincin' as you. The Whites ain't got much powder, and the only help you could git 'em would have to be from Merlo. You've done that. Bert ain't got no whiskey, and you've fixed it now so's mebbe he'll git back his load if Anson and Merlo start trading shots. And you busted our deadline sky-high and handsome. Feller, you'll deserve a medal for this night's work."

"And probably get lead in the brisket," Mojave grunted.

V

Extension Ridge in the early night looked like the huge, serrated spine of some ancient monster that had roamed this Nevada desert in ages gone. Tapering down to scattered boulders at its southern end, the road from Tonopah curved that way, and Merlo followed it at a gallop. Leading the way, Mojave and Burro Ben followed him with the silent Mexican riding close behind them.

There was death in that dark man at their backs. Mojave felt it as Merlo circled the foot of the ridge and struck sharply to the left. Here the desert itself swept up to the ragged lava "blows" that formed the crest of the Extension. A wagon, Mojave realized, could easily negotiate this strip and it was rocky and broken enough so tracks would never be discerned.

Twin blows, like ragged church spires, rose just ahead of them as Merlo led the way between giant boulders. Before them now, Mojave made out the dim shape of a high-sided wagon, and he heard the sound that he'd hoped might greet them. Some man in the dark there ahead of them was jingling harness.

The sound seemed to infuriate Merlo. "Bracken," he shouted, "is that you? Make a light, blast it!"

Twin torches glowed suddenly as two men came from inside a small

wind-eroded cave in the base of one of the blows. Mojave recognized the Percheron shape of Truk Anson lumbering in the lead, and his instinct was to fall back but there was the death presence of the Mexican behind him.

The man called Bracken carrying harness to a rude, rope corral beyond the big wagon called: "The Whites are goin' to blast the daylights out of this ridge right below here, boss. Truk got away from 'em and brought up the word to git our load away. Concussion might not bust it up, and ag'in it might."

They were grouped together now, beside the huge, heavily laden freighter. Torch light touched Truk Anson's heavy face, and high-lighted the welt on his forehead.

"McDermott hit me on the head with a beer bottle!" Anson said in aggrieved tones, and then his eyes found the stocky Tonopah stranger. "That cuss figgered it out for 'em!" he howled suddenly. "Git him—"

Instead of trading shots, Merlo, apparently, was still ready to back his right bower. Mojave saw the gambler's face swing briefly toward him.

"You fool," Merlo said coldly, "you don't know Truk like I do. He's got a fast gun but not the brains to cross anybody. I let you talk yourself into this ride because here's a good place to kill a man."

His right hand flashed toward his left cuff.

Mojave's heels hit Jughead's flanks and the ugly mule lunged forward,

teeth snapping against the flank of the gambler's mount. In the same second, Mojave felt the searing bite of knife steel across the side of his neck as the Mexican's flung knife came at him from behind. Then his own Colts were in his hands, and no mercy in his heart. These men had killed Jingle-Bob Smith, murdered him along the Sodaville Trace, and robbed a crippled merchant. They had schemed to steal a widow's claim, and rule with a reign of terror.

Merlo's contorted face showed briefly in the torchlight as a derringer lifted in his hand. The little gun spat a second after Mojave triggered one Colt, and he saw Merlo sag backward in his saddle. Truk Anson's own Colt was spitting death up at him, and he felt a slug jar his arm as he returned the Palace guard's fire.

Then, for a second time that night, Truk Anson came toppling forward, and this time there was a bullet hole where the lump on his forehead had been.

Burro Ben's shrill voice was echoing his own Colt. "One," he was chanting. "Don't run for yore mules, Bracken. Where you're goin' you won't need 'em!" Colt fire echoed his words.

Mojave heeled Jughead around as lead whistled at him from behind, and he heard the silent Mexican speak for the first time. "You have keeled my *patrone,* now I keel you—"

Burro Ben's Colt blasted through the last of the Mexican's talk. "An' that makes three!" he howled. "Ring leaders, every blasted one of 'em, and I'll stake my share of the free whiskey I'm going to drink on that. Pard," he ended, and there was something almost like a twinkle in his eyes as he looked at Mojave, "you don't look in fitten shape to ride back to Tonopah tonight. Let's cut down over the ridge, and see if Cathy can patch you up, while me'n Miz White jaw a bit and watch muckers Merlo ain't going to pay sweat out the prospect that'll mebbe bring the Whites gold and glory. Might be," he ended a little thoughtfully, "that we ought to have some celebratin' liquor handy iff'n they strike high grade. Fact is, if we can heft it, let's carry down a case. Bert ought to be right glad to sample some with us."

"Bert," a panting voice said from between the twin blows, "is ready right now. Heard the shootin', and come fast as I could."

Mojave Jack looked at the one-armed barkeep, and the hefty rock McDermott was clutching in one hand.

"Burro," he drawled, "we could've saved some lead if we'd waited for this hombre before starting the party. He'd have done his share of polishin', too, with the throwin' arm he's got!"

THE END

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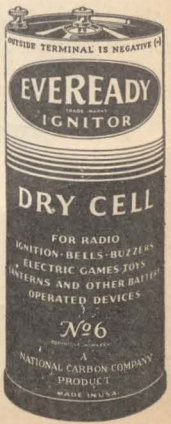

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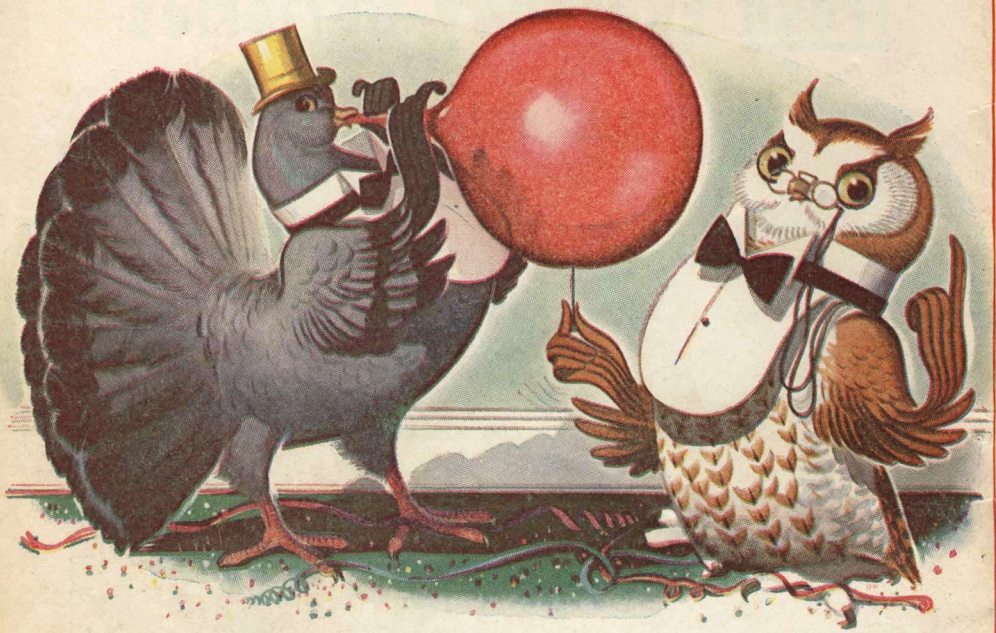

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