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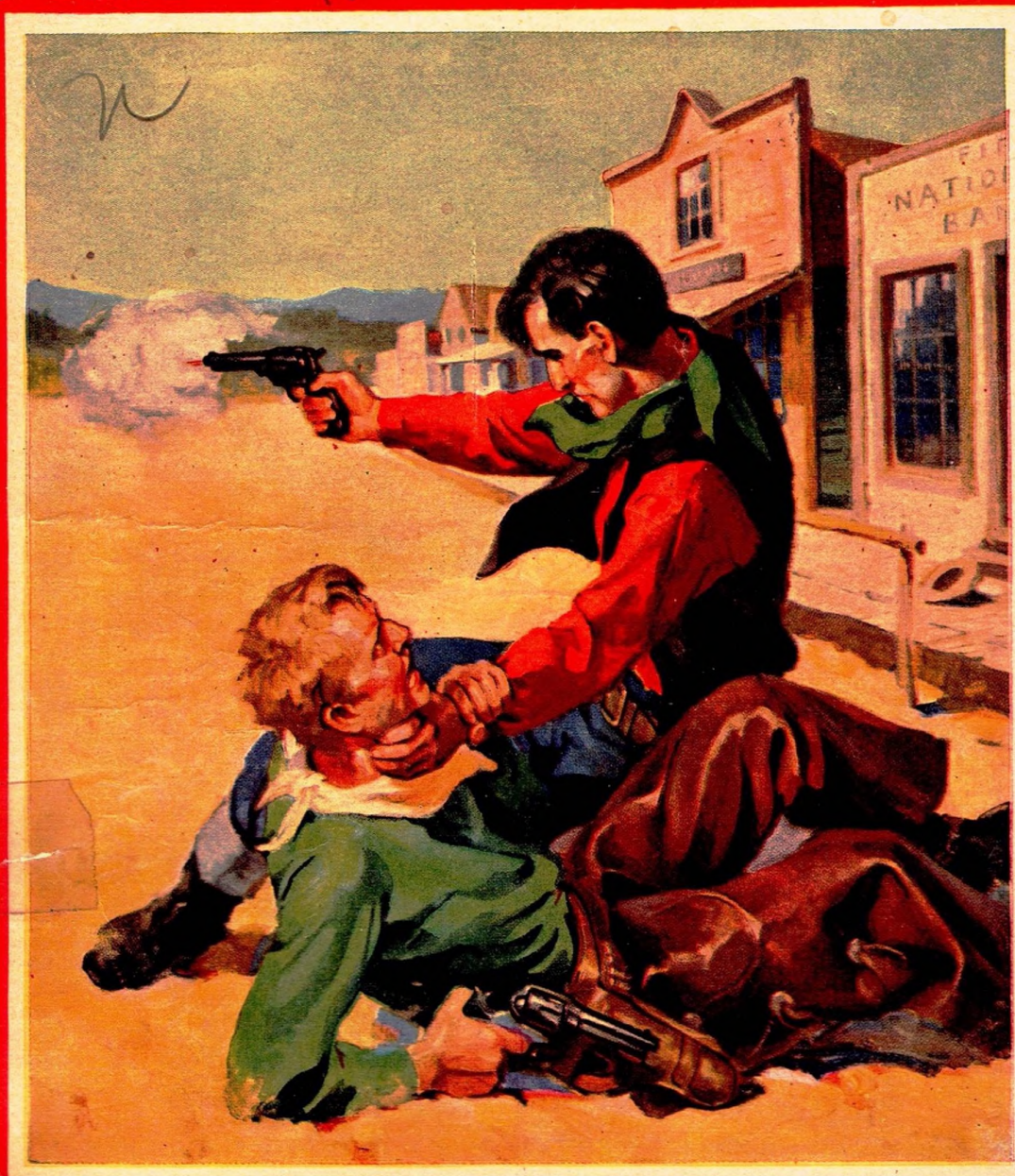

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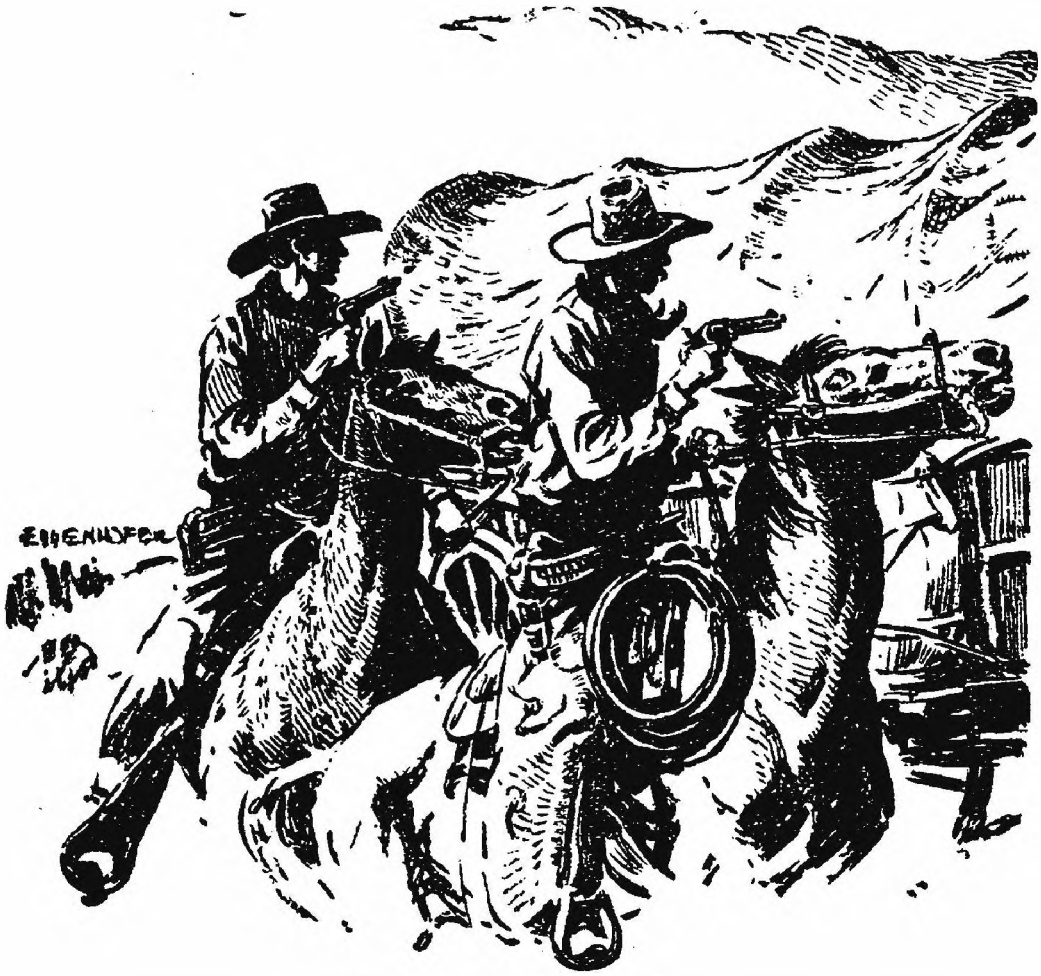


COW KILLERS OF VELVET RANGE

By JOHN DUDLEY PHELPS

Author of "Rustlers' Dust," etc.

CHAPTER I.

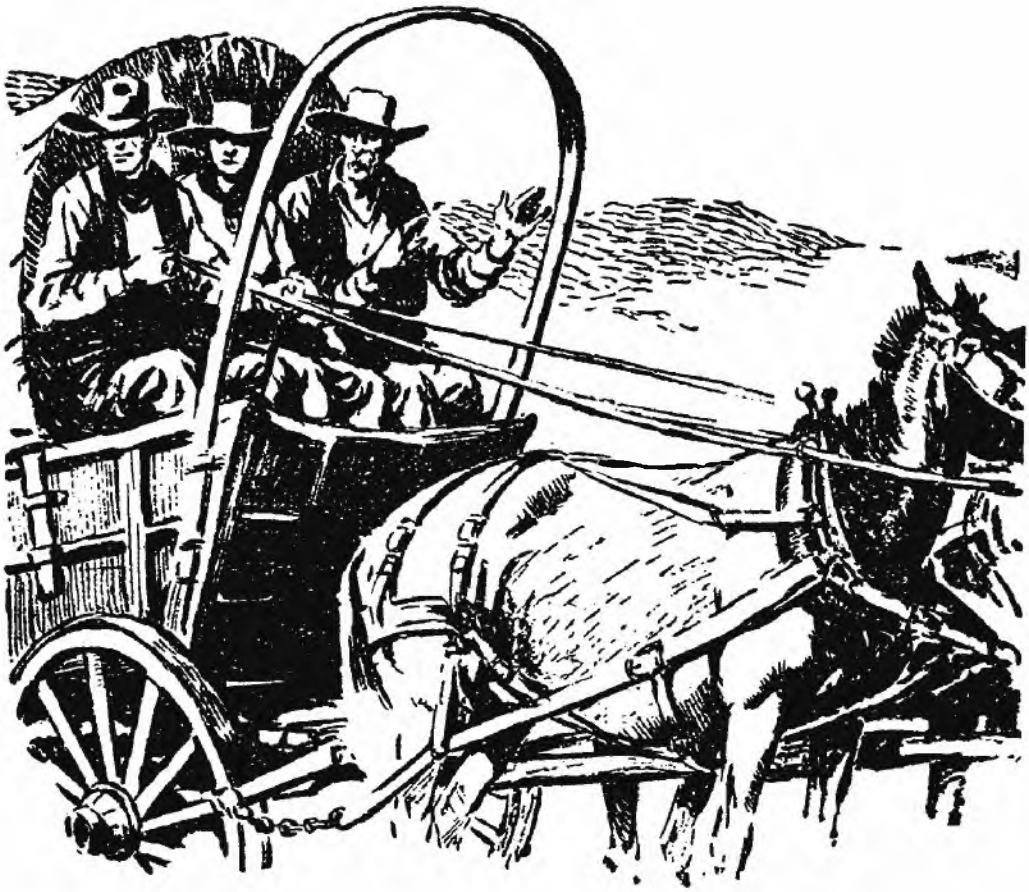
TOM BROOM IS WORRIED.

THE foreman came to the bunk-house door late that Wednesday afternoon, as the men were preparing for the evening meal. He stood there, his long face longer than usual, and his eyes were troubled. He said no word, but waited until he caught the eye of "Sandy" Cardel, then jerked his head and stepped away from the door.

Sandy joined him at the end of the bunk house.

"You wanted me, Joe?"

Joe Handon, that troubled look still in his eyes, gazed toward the



blacksmith shop and then shook his head.

"No," he denied. "The old man wants you."

"What's chewing on him?" Sandy desired information before he faced Tom Broom, the choleric owner of Rancho San José de Buenos Aires.

"You'll find out," the foreman returned shortly.

Joe turned away and strode back to the bunk-house door.

"Hey, you fellers," Sandy heard him growl, "you ain't to go about your regular jobs in the morning. The boss has a new chore for you."

A chorus of questions followed this announcement, but Sandy had started for the house, wondering why he had been singled out from the six cowboys in the bunk house, and wondering, also, what had disturbed the routine of ranch work. He had noticed in the last few days that Tom Broom was puzzled and worried about something. Sandy had a hunch he was to find out.

Sandy Cardel was lean and hard, with a strong chin and a generous mouth. He seemed always about to smile and, when he did, even, white teeth were revealed. His eyes were a smoky blue and the color of his hair gave him his nickname.

As Sandy passed around the wagon shed, the ranch house came into view—a long, low building with whitewashed walls partly hidden by a cypress hedge. The shingle roof had weathered through the years to a silver gray. At the west end of the house were two huge cottonwoods, just beginning to clothe their bareness with new leaves. Sandy opened the gate in the cypress hedge and there was Tom Broom, pacing

the covered porch, hands linked behind him. Twice he passed before Sandy, who waited with one boot resting upon the porch floor.

Tom Broom marched with a limp, for one leg, as a result of a gunshot wound, was a trifle shorter than the other. He carried his head a little to the right, the result of another bullet wound. His leather-brown face was seamed, his hooked nose battered, but in his piercing eyes was a fire that defied time and all things. He radiated honesty.

He stopped before Sandy and unlinked his hands.

"McComber is shooting his cows."

Sandy was used to his boss's explosive utterances, but the import of this one fairly took his breath away.

"I said McComber is shooting his cows." Tom Broom had raised his voice. "Got it when I was in town to-day, from Caleb White. He's a friend of mine and close-mouthed."

"Think McComber is doing that on account of the drought over his way?" Sandy inquired, though he sensed that was not the reason.

"Dunno," Tom answered, then quickly added: "Of course not. He wouldn't shoot a cow as long as it could stand, and he wouldn't waste a bullet to put any creature out of misery." He looked out over the hedge and scowled.

Fred McComber had one-way pockets; he'd skin a louse for its hide and tallow.

"You go find out why McComber is shooting his cows," Tom ordered.

SANDY nodded. This order was just a surface indication of facts or of surmises in Tom Broom's head, Sandy figured. What Tom knew would come out if he were undisturbed by questions. Sandy waited patiently, but the silence endured. Blackbirds scolded in the cottonwoods. The red roses bordering the porch nodded sleepily as the afternoon breeze began to die with the approach of sunset. A faint, lazy creak came from the distant windmill.

"I got a hunch," Tom said at last, "but I'm not sure. Caleb didn't know any more. It was gossip he got from a Mexican woodcutter. The Mexican was working away out, close to McComber's east line, and heard shots. He went to investigate and McComber run him out, him and his burros, but not before he'd seen some of the cow shooting. Now, boy, you can handle this any way you want. I'll give you a hundred dollars. You been working for me close to five years, longer'n any other man except Joe. I know you." Tom paused.

"When you first came, Sandy, you broke horses for me. I liked the way you done the job, like the way you work cows. You keep your head and don't fly off the handle. And above all, you keep your mouth shut. I figure a man that keeps his yap closed keeps his eyes and ears open. Well, you needn't get red in the face."

Sandy was not accustomed to having his virtues catalogued.

"Learned all I know right here, Tom."

Tom snorted, then said, "One thing I haven't approved of was you shooting off a box or two of shells every week."

"Keeps the ground squirrels down," Sandy explained, and grinned.

"What! You shoot squirrels with a six-gun?"

"Sure. Get about half of 'em I pop at."

"That's going some. Hard enough to get 'em with a scattergun. I got no kick coming. Thought them var-

mints were getting sort of scarce. And again, your shooting may come in handy from now on."

The grin left Sandy's face. He caught the meaning in Tom's statement.

"I dunno what McComber's up to, anyhow, not for sure," Tom amended. "But I know blame well, if he's took to shooting cows, he'd just as lief, or liefer, shoot humans what got in his road. Did you know that El Rancho San José de Buenos Aires has had a fight with that ranch McComber owns 'bout every twenty years?"

"I didn't, Tom."

"Fact. The last time was eighteen years ago. That's when I got shot up. It's happened again and again for nigh on a hundred years. That's history. The fight, I mean, and every time over feed. Why, that Rancho de las Almas Perdidas just couldn't have luck, with a name like that." Tom shook his head.

"Ranch of the Lost Souls," Sandy translated. "I never knew it was called that."

"It hasn't been used in my time, but it's on the old records. McComber has owned the place now for three years. And this place was once El Rancho Todos Santos, Ranch of All the Saints. Those Spaniards sure threw a wide loop when it came to naming ranches. They were honest, anyhow. That's more'n you can say for some of the present owners."

"What do you figure McComber is up to, Tom?"

"Gosh, I dunno. But here's our Almagre range spang full of feed, no more'n we need, of course, and tother side of the Cadena Hills, where he is, there's no more feed than on the soles of your boots."

"Figure he'll horn in on us, Tom?"

"Oh, I dunno, boy. His ranch always has, and he's the kind to try. But I want to find out. That's why I'm asking you to ride over to McComber's country. You come in, and I'll give you some money." He turned to the door.

The large living room was in semi-darkness. Tom limped to his desk and lighted a candle. Its expanding gleam dissolved some of the obscurity. Tom pawed about, seeking a sheet of blank paper. Near the base of the candlestick, in the brightest light, lay a tintype of a girl. Sandy gazed at the face, which was alluring and had a certain challenging quality.

"What horse do you want, Sandy?"

Sandy was still occupied with the picture. He was wishing he knew the color of the girl's hair, and of her eyes. He bent lower.

"I said what horse—oh! Pretty, isn't she? Niece of mine, Valencia Broom. To see her all tricked out in them lacy gewgaws and that flower-garden hat and that martingale, you'd never suspect she could ride, would you? And she used to and handle a gun pretty fair, for a kid."

"Where's she been all these years?"

"Back East, gitting what is known as 'finished.'" Tom stopped and smiled. "But they can't spoil that girl."

"Say, that ain't a martingale, Tom," Sandy declared, nettled that a harness term should be applied to the adornment of such a girl. "It's some sort of necklace, pretty long, too."

"That's right. My wife gave it to her five years back, when she went East. She was thirteen then. She's eighteen now. How the years go! Well, that necklace is made of garnets. Bought a whole hatful off a feller, and had 'em polished. Sort

of barbaric, but blame good-looking. She couldn't wear it when she was getting finished, but she wore it in the picture, to please us. She's coming here. Let's see now——"

SANDY'S heart thumped.

"Let's see? To-morrow's the seventh. She's due the ninth on the Southwest Stage. Say, Sandy, what horse do you want?"

"The little bay mare, with three white feet."

Tom nodded approval. From a desk drawer he drew out a buckskin bag, from which issued a pleasant jingle. He took five twenty-dollar gold pieces from the bag, and gave them to Sandy.

"You don't have to tally those," he remarked.

Sandy pocketed the coins. He knew Tom had said his say and that now was the time to go. He took a last look at the tintype and hoped he would be around on the ninth.

"Well, I'll mosey along, Tom. So long." He started for the doorway.

"So long, Sandy. When you go to the bunk house tell Joe I want him. I'm having him, and three or four men, ride the Cadena in case McComber tries a raid on our range. Good luck, boy."

The humming, vibrating notes of a triangle spun through the air. The notes ceased, but the humming lingered.

"Don't bother about telling Joe," Tom called. "I'll see him at grub. Better put on the feed bag yourself before you go."

His seamed face was strongly limned in the candlelight as he picked up the tintype. Sandy passed out into the rose-scented garden with images in his mind.

The call to grub had emptied the bunk house, for which Sandy was grateful. There was enough daylight left for him to see to make up his roll. He placed a couple of boxes of .45 shells and a pair of heavy fence pliers in a blanket, which he rolled up in a slicker. He also included an old pair of boots, to bulge the roll and give it the appearance of holding all his belongings. He buckled on his holstered gun and made sure all the belt loops held shells. He carried the roll to the saddle shed and went to the corral for the bay mare with three white feet. Five minutes later, he had ridden around the wagon shed in view of the ranch house.

The white walls of the ranch house gleamed in the dusk. The cypress hedge was a dark mass. The half-bare cottonwoods were outlined against a sunset sky. Faintly came the odor of roses. A barn owl gave timidly his first call of the night. Sandy turned the mare to the east and nudged her on the start for the cow town of San José de Buenos Aires, which took its title from Broom's ranch, and was situated about on the line dividing Broom's property from the domain of Fred McComber.

Sandy let the mare have her own way. To while away the miles, he let his thoughts ramble. He was riding through the eastern end of the Almagre Valley, which was part of Tom Broom's ranch. The name meant "red ochre." For miles the soil of the range was a rich, red color; wild oats and wild alfalfa flourished on the slopes. Beyond the cow town was a range of hills that bounded the valley on the east. The hills were called La Cadena, which means "chain," and the peculiarly rounded, linked humps of the ridge did, from a distance, resemble a chain. The full name was La Cadena de Terciopelo, "The Chain of Velvet," but by many it

was simply called "Velvet Range." Sunset light did give to the hills a velvetlike appearance.

Sandy liked the old Spanish names. This land of southern California was rich with them. But Americans had no patience with names of many words. The chain of velvet became Velvet Range, or sometimes simply Cadena; "San José de Buenos Aires was shortened to San José, and the saint's name mispronounced in the bargain. But Sandy guessed the saint didn't care.

The road began to turn around a hill. Oaks were all about, and above them was the star-patterned sky. After a half-mile swing, there came into sight the lights of the ancient settlement of San José de Buenos Aires. The mare quickened her pace. And Sandy realized he was hungry enough to eat a saddle strap.

The old Spanish colonials who founded the town believed in wide streets for their settlements. A lively horse must take ten jumps to cross the one and only street of San José de Buenos Aires. The town was adobe, all one-story buildings, each separate and aloof from all others, so that a rider could circle any of them. Life there was placid, easy. Even the dust of the street was lazier, it seemed, than most dust, rolling heavily to fall quickly to rest.

SANDY entered the town and pulled the mare to a walk. Lamplight through doorways spread mats of welcome upon the dark earth. This was midweek, so few people were about, but there was no air of desertion. The hoofs of the mare made little sound in the deep dust.

Sandy rode down the street. There were wooden awnings before many of the buildings, and under each shelter a bench. On some of the benches reclined shadowy figures. The door of the only saloon was wide open, and, as Sandy passed, he noticed there was little custom. He went on past the stage office, which was dark, and dismounted before the next building, part of which was occupied by a restaurant. Sandy tied up and entered.

In a corner, a very fat Mexican woman was cooking to-morrow's supply of tortillas upon a sheet-iron plate over an open fire. The smoke was supposed to go up a flue, but it was broncho smoke, and filled the room with a blue mist that almost smothered the food odors in the air.

She looked up, brushed aside a loop of black hair with the edge of a hand, and said gravely, "*Buenas noches, señor.*" She hoped the caballero had had a pleasant journey.

Sandy returned the greeting and asked for *chili con carne* and frijoles. His jaws ached from hunger, and with the first whiff from the dish he had to swallow hard. He picked up a spoon, reached for a tortilla.

"Hey, Sandy!" The words came in a husky whisper.

In the doorway stood the ruin of a man. His overalls could be patched no more. No power on earth could make clean his shirt. Tangled, gray whiskers hid most of his bloated face. His nose was a fierce red, and thrust out, threateningly.

"Hello, cowboy! Have a dish of chili?" Sandy said.

The ruin was generally known as "Nose Paint," but once upon a time he had worked cows. And in his youth he had gone to the Argentine, where he had become a *gaucho*. Whenever Sandy met him, he had

a two-bit piece for him and, too, when there was time, he listened to the old man's talk of days gone, especially those spent in the Argentine. For these services, the ruin loved Sandy.

"Uh—well, I et to-day," Nose Paint admitted, "but"—he hesitated—"I might not ter-morrow."

Sandy called to the Mexican woman to duplicate his order.

The ruin ate greedily. He mopped up every trace of his food with a tortilla, which he then devoured at a gulp. He watched Sandy in silence for a space, then leaned close.

"I know of a good deal," he whispered hoarsely.

"Yeh?"

"I kin make thirty bottles of whisky."

Sandy translated bottles as dollars, and nodded.

"But I ain't got a bean."

"Go on."

Nose Paint needed no urging. He continued, "Ben Parkins, over close to Quinta, has a' ole Conestoga wagin." He jerked his head and half closed his rheumy eyes.

"I see," Sandy said, though he didn't see at all, and wondered what Nose Paint was getting at.

"He'll sell her fer thirty dollars."

"Yeh?" Sandy wondered what in blazes Nose Paint wanted with a Conestoga wagon.

"She's in good shape. Been kept in a shed. An' "—Nose Paint poked Sandy in the ribs—"she's all there, top bows, kiver an' ever'thin'."

"That's interesting," Sandy observed, keeping his curiosity concealed.

"You got thirty dollars?" Nose Paint demanded.

"I'll have to count the roll," Sandy evaded.

"All right, you got her," Nose Paint concluded. "You buy the wagin an' I know where you kin git fifty fer her. An'—an'," he hastened on, "we—we make thirty bottles—I mean, thirty dollars."

"It tallies twenty to me," Sandy said.

After staring at the spread fingers and thumb of a hand, Nose Paint counted off three fingers and considered the two not counted.

"Yore right," he admitted dolefully, and sighed for the last ten bottles.

Sandy pulled a tortilla into halves.

"An' Parkins will sell a team of horses fer forty dollars. Not spang-up critters, Sandy, but good enough to pull the wagon."

"A team ain't enough to pull a Conestoga," Sandy said.

"They kin pull it empty."

Sandy said: "All right, old settler. But what's the use of pulling a' empty wagon around?"

"Why, drag her over to Fred McComber's east range. He's buyin' wagins, all he kin git his paws on. Got one off the blacksmith right here, an' 'nother from ole man Silva. Got 'em on the sly."

Sandy munched his tortilla.

"Is he emigrating?" He asked casually.

"No. Haulin' in feed." Nose Paint went on to explain for all he was worth. "His ranch is struck by drought like ever'thin' east o' the Velvet, an' the further east you go the wuss she be."

Nose Paint settled down comfortably in his seat. "McComber's drought hit all over. Now you take Rancho San José, all the Almagre is chockablock full er feed. Reminds me of the Argentine. Tom Broom don't know how lucky he be to have enough feed fer his herd. Ain't he holdin' all the east end of the Almagre clean up to the Velvet fer preferred grazin'?"

THIS was fact and common knowledge. The Almagre Valley had many springs and more *cienegas*, the sources of which were the high mountains to the north, and the waters made possible heavy feed all the year around. The mountains turned with the line of the Velvet so McComber had no benefit from them.

"Yes," Sandy said. "Tom switches end to end of the valley every other year on his preferred range."

"So you see, Sandy boy, McComber has to haul in feed."

"Sounds reasonable," Sandy admitted.

But it was not reasonable, for all the wagons in those parts would not suffice to haul feed for McComber's herds. Anyhow, there was no feed for sale. Something was decidedly wrong, Sandy decided. Tom had the report that McComber was shooting his cows, and here was Nose Paint and his tale.

"How about it?" Nose Paint wanted to know. "Will you throw in with me? Do I git a cut?"

"You're in," Sandy promised. "We'll go over to Quinta in the morning."

"Put her there, partner!" Nose Paint stuck out a flabby paw which Sandy shook.

Sandy paid the bill, and they went out into the night. Sandy looked about. Everything seemed the same as usual. A slight night breeze was blowing. The stars were bright and low against the purple sky. The mare at the hitch rail tossed her head. Not far off lazy, slumberous chords fell softly from the strings of a guitar. Sandy reached for the makin's.

"Funny thing," Nose Paint said, suddenly. "You see that third awnin' post afore the store diagonal over the road?"

"Yeh." Sandy licked the cigarette paper.

"I was standin' right by it an' McComber was close by, roostin' on the seat o' the wagin he bought offn the blacksmith. He was talkin' with that long-eared jigadee of hisn. Fergit his name. Well, I heared McComber tell he could use a couple more wagins, but they had to be kivered wagins, or anyhow, what could be."

Sandy put the cigarette in his mouth slowly and withheld scratching a match.

Nose Paint didn't say any more. He was staring over the street at the front of the town's only saloon.

If McComber was interested in covered wagons he sure wasn't hauling hay in 'em, Sandy decided, surer than ever that something was wrong. And how to stack it with Tom Broom's information sure was a poser.

"You stand treat, Sandy?"

So the point about feed and covered wagons had slipped from Nose Paint's mind. Sandy was relieved.

He said, "I'll lay you one drink."

"A double shot?"

"Just one." Sandy agreed. "Hold on a shake."

He stepped to the shelter of the stage office to avoid the breeze, and scratched a match. The blue sulphur flame burned away to yellow, and the light revealed on the building wall a blackboard headed, "Arrival and Departure of Southwest Stages." In the arrival column was chalked:

Thur., Mar. 7, 10 A. M.

"To-day's Wednesday, ain't it, old-timer?"

"Yes. The agent chalked that up afore he went home."

"And to-morrow is the seventh of the month?"

"Dates don't mean nothin' to me."

"When's the next stage?"

"Next week. The stage comes in once a week."

Sandy knew that. He was sure Tom Broom had told him Valencia Broom was due on the ninth. There was no stage on the ninth. Somebody had made a mistake.

"Say, old settler, can we go out and see about the wagon and get back here by ten in the morning?"

"We kin if you hustle an' stand me them two drinks you promised."

"One, one double one," Sandy declared firmly. "Then we'll bed down together some place, so I can keep a' eye on you."

Nose Paint pointed his red beak at the saloon and started.

Sandy followed. There was no sense in making the long ride back to the ranch to find out for sure about Valencia's arrival. He would meet the stage, and, if she did come, he could arrange for her transportation.

CHAPTER II.

SANDY FORMS A PLAN.

BEFORE sunrise, Sandy woke up and sat up on his blanket. Nose Paint snored beside him. The two had slept in an open hay shed behind Caleb White's house, having had permission from Mrs. White. Caleb, on a small scale, traded in cattle, and was away from home. On account of the drought, cattle were cheap, and Caleb was buying with the idea of driving a herd north, where conditions were better.

Sandy prodded his companion awake.

Nose Paint sat up and, after much blinking, remarked: "I don't feel right. In fac', I feel pretty good."

"You lay off the nose paint, and you'll feel that way all the time."

"Nose paint, huh? Rats! My nose is red 'cause it stays out in the sun too much. It's sunburnt, that's all's the matter with it. Gosh, I'm hungry!"

"Pull on your boots, and we'll go eat."

They ate at the Mexican restaurant. After the meal, Sandy rented a saddle horse for a dollar from the proprietor's son. They set out on a southeasterly course for Quinta and Ben Parkin's. Almost at once they came to country under drought. The deep-rooted sumac and scrub oak were having a tough time to survive. The herbage was brittle stubble. Not far from the road lay the carcass of a cow. From the hideous shell stalked a buzzard, which regarded the riders malignantly.

"That red-headed critter reminds me of McComber," Nose Paint declared, and made a grimace. "Holds his head just the same, too. Lemme your gun, Sandy."

"Buzzards have their uses," Sandy said, and refused to lend his gun.

"That's more'n you can say fer McComber," Nose Paint grumbled. "He ain't ever bought me a drink."

A two-hour ride, and they came to the ranch owned by Ben Parkins, a thin, dry man who was all but licked by the drought. His deep well still gave water, which enabled him to water a small herd of cows.

"After you've hauled a fifteen-gallon bucket forty times, a distance of fifty feet each time, you sort of tucker out," Ben said, but with no complaint in his voice. "Why, sure, Mr. Cardel, you can have the old Conestoga for thirty dollars. It's no good to me. And look here, mis-

ter, I got a team of heavy horses you can have for forty dollars, half what they're worth, and I'll throw in a double harness. The ground is so hard I can't work it, and what feed I got I need for the cows. I got a couple of ridin' horses what I have to have."

Sandy closed the bargain and later, out of Nose Paint's sight, gave Ben another twenty dollars. The rancher was so surprised and grateful that tears came to his eyes.

The wagon was bare of paint, the cover was at the point of disintegrating, the running gear rattled, and the wheels creaked in spite of new axle grease. The horses went at a slow walk, and Sandy did not crowd them. They had a long way to haul the heavy wagon. The saddle horses were tied behind.

Nose Paint cocked an ear, listening to the squeaks and grumbles of the wagon.

"She ain't in tune at all," he observed.

Sandy glanced at the sun.

Nose Paint pulled out a great, silver watch and consulted it.

"Seven o'clock," he announced, snapping shut the lid. "We'll make it by ten if the road holds out." He pocketed the watch. "Giddap," he cried.

The slow miles were jolted away. The heavy, springless wagon transmitted every inequality of the roadbed to the passengers who sat under the forward, shrouded end. At last they neared San José.

NOSE PAINT produced his watch.

"Ten minutes to ten," he said.

Sandy seized the watch, from which came an assured ticking, but the dial had no hands. Sandy remarked upon the deficiency.

Nose Paint's surprise was complete.

"Ain't it funny I ain't spotted that?" he asked. "What I need is a drink."

"You get no drinks until after you deliver this wagon and team to McComber."

"Ain't you goin' too, Sandy?"

"I guess so, but we'll see." Sandy had no plan as yet. "But I figure this is your deal."

Nose Paint puffed out his chest.

They swung into view of the main street of the town. There were a half dozen rigs, spring wagons and buckboards, hitched to the rails. Some saddle horses, too. The stage was not in sight. It was generally left unhitched before the stage office until ready for the departure. Two men were rolling a bale of hay from the feed store to a wagon.

"That reminds me," Sandy said. "I'll drive to the feed barn for some oats and hay for our team, then I'll tie up close to the stage office. Then, old-timer, you return that rented horse and give the mare a drink and tie her behind the wagon again."

At the feed barn, Sandy found he could buy loose hay cheaper than baled. Feeds for the team filled high the rear of the Conestoga. A sack of oats was purchased and put at the front of the wagon box. Sandy borrowed a canteen and filled it. He drove over and hitched close to the stage office. He gave the horses a feed of oats. The agent, Pablo Garcia, said the stage was due any time, although it frequently was late. Sandy went to buy enough grub to last Nose Paint and himself for the day.

The grocery department of the store was at the rear, and a Mexican family, each member of which had to be consulted upon each separate

purchase, was stocking up. By the time Sandy had acquired what he wanted, the stage had come in and the horses had been unhitched before the stage office and taken to a corral behind the building.

"Why, yes," Pablo Garcia, the agent, replied to Sandy's inquiry, "Miss Valencia Broom arrived on the stage."

"Where did she go?"

Pablo shrugged his fat shoulders, and picked up an invoice which he held upside down.

"She went out," he said, giving his attention to the invoice. "She seemed a very capable young lady. No?"

"Which way did she turn?"

"I do not give attention."

"Was she a good-looking girl?"

"Beautiful! The kind a man's eyes must follow."

"You still got your eyes," Sandy commented. "So you don't know which way she went?"

Pablo was flustered. He tried to concentrate upon the invoice, jerked it right end around, and turned away.

"No," he replied, "I do not know." There was distress in his voice.

Sandy walked out, puzzled. Pablo had a reputation for truthfulness. Nothing could happen to Valencia. That she was capable was a cinch. Any one of a dozen people would be glad to drive her to the ranch. Sandy paused before the stage office. Not thirty feet away, tied to the rear of the Conestoga, stood the mare, and upon her shoulder Tom Broom's brand, the outline of a stub-handled broom, as plain as the beak on Nose Paint's face.

Nose Paint rushed over the street, waving his arms.

"Hi, Sandy, you come over to the bar an' tell that barkeep I should have the credit of a bottle of whisky."

"Nothing doing, cowboy. You'll have to wait until we close the deal. Did you see a young lady come in on the stage?"

"What young lady?"

SANDY saw there was no information in Nose Paint.

He said, "We're rollin'. Go take off the nose bags and put on the bridles. I'll be right along."

Walking rapidly, he made inquiries in near-by stores, and also asked passers-by concerning a young lady who had arrived on the stage. The result was negative. He returned to the Conestoga and found Nose Paint up front, holding the reins. Sandy got his blanket roll and tossed it to Nose Paint. He climbed up and took the lines. Sandy looked back under the wagon sheet and noticed that the loose hay obscured vision, but decided it would jostle down. Both of them sat upon the sack of oats and peered over the prow of the wagon box.

They trundled slowly out of town. The lazy dust refused to follow them. The road was level, and there would be no rise until they turned east at the foot of the Velvets.

"It's good to be doin' sump'n," Nose Paint remarked.

"Go rest on the hay," Sandy suggested.

"Not much," Nose Paint declared firmly. "I'm goin' to know what's goin' on." He settled down as comfortably as he could.

Nose Paint did not talk, for which Sandy was grateful. His thoughts turned on what had become of Valencia Broom. He concluded she was all right, and that he was making a mystery out of nothing. Still, he continued to think about her.

Nose Paint began to snore. His hands clutched the edge of the wagon box, and his head rested upon his arms. The battered sombrero had fallen from his head. There were hay seeds amid the gray of his long, unkempt hair. The snores quieted as he sank at last into deep slumber.

The road ran straight, but gently down grade, enough so that Sandy had to hang on to the brake lever to keep the wagon from crowding the horses. Sandy hoped the ancient leather facing on the brake shoes would hold out on the five-mile, down-grade drag. The screech and grind of the brakes finally aroused Nose Paint, who relieved Sandy at the brake. The final stretch of the grade was steep, and required the strength of both men to hold back the wagon.

"This team could never pull the wagin up this hill," Nose Paint said, and rubbed sweat from his face with a shirt sleeve.

"We made pretty good time," Sandy said, "but at that we won't make McComber's till sundown." He paused, and added, "That is, if we don't have a breakdown."

"Here's hopin' a lot," Nose Paint said.

About one o'clock, Sandy pulled off the road under the shade of an oak. A little farther in was chaparral that was vigorous and green. Here was—or had been—a water hole, the last one before entering drought country. Sandy went to find out if there was enough water for the horses. He found sufficient.

He said: "Pile out and get the bucket and fetch water for the horses. Water the mare first. I'll pull out some hay."

He went to the rear of the wagon, shoved the mare's head back, and reached for an armful of hay. He couldn't make it because the tail gate was so high. He jumped up, balanced his chest across the wide edge of the tail gate, and reached for the hay. One hand came in contact with some object not hay. Sandy paused bewilderedly, staring at the boot in his grasp. It was of dainty black leather, and the top was ornamented with a pattern in three colors of silk embroidery.

"If you will please release—I mean, leggo my leg," came a calm, girl's voice as the hay began to erupt, "I'd like to come out." She sneezed twice.

THE time was ten o'clock in the morning, the same time that the stage arrived in San José, and Fred McComber sat in the kitchen of his ranch house. He had come in for a midmorning cup of coffee, and sat at a small table beside a window that overlooked the bare ground in front of the house. The view was not an inspiring one. There was a vista of corrals and shanties, built before the house by McComber for convenience. He had never made an attempt to grow anything green and living. He had no eye for beauty. Just now he was scowling through the pane at two men tinkering at one of two old wagons, which had just been purchased in San José.

McComber displayed fiery red hair, a long neck, and an unintelligent face, but he had brains notwithstanding. His body was tough flesh strung on big bones. He was over six feet. His eyes were a faded gray, with a dull agate quality.

"More coffee, Juanita."

The Mexican crone who was washing dishes at the wooden sink came from her reverie with a start and dropped the dishrag. Softly she moved to the stove, used her

flour-sack apron for a holder, and plucked the steaming coffeepot from the stove. The brew ran midnight-black from the spout into McComber's cup.

She stood looking down upon the black pool within the white brim of the mug. She had dried with the years as a mummy dries. She was gaunt and thin, with a myriad of wrinkles in her ancient brown face.

McComber gave a quick upward look.

"Stop it! Do you hear? You've read enough trouble in this dishwater you call coffee. Git back to work." McComber scowled, and blew upon the coffee.

When behind McComber's back, Juanita crossed herself.

"I do not put there what I see mirrored in the coffee," she said.

"Never mind your Indian tricks."

"I am Castilian," she shrilled. "*Puro!* Purer than——" She almost dropped the coffeepot, and her other clawlike hand jerked to her flat bosom. "*Madre de Dios!*" she breathed faintly.

McComber sipped his coffee with relish, and gave his attention to the two men working on the wagon. But his thoughts reverted to Juanita's prophecy that disaster and death would come upon him unless he left the country immediately. He made her work like a horse, but just the same he was in awe of her.

A tall man, of sturdy physique, and moving with grace and ease, entered the kitchen. He halted and pushed his black sombrero to the back of his head. His dark face was shaped like the ace of spades; his eyes were oblique, and his ears long and pointed at the top, like an animal's.

Juanita, back by the sink, watched him under lowered lids and swirled a rag over the surface of a plate.

"Señor Beeglow!"

McComber looked around. "I wish you'd quit slinkin', Mark," he growled. "You move around like a fox."

Biglow smiled, and strode to the opposite side of the table, carrying a chair. He sat down, drew his gun from its holster, and began to poke out dead shells with the ejector rod.

"Shot five more after you left," he said.

McCOMBER withdrew his attention from the men tinkering with the wagon and looked at his foreman.

"Five more, huh?"

"They'd started to lick their feet."

McComber grimaced.

"Where'd you shoot them five cows?"

"Same place, far out on our eastern range and inside the quarantine fence."

"Seen any this side of them fences we threw up?"

"No. Guess all the disease is confined east of those fences. Hope so. Otherwise, we won't have any more cows'n a ground squirrel has feathers."

Biglow began to assemble his gun. "Hey, Juanita! Light of my soul, bring me a cup of your delicious coffee."

The old woman's head went up, the dish rag swirled three times, then she marched to the stove. She placed a brimming mug before Biglow.

"Thank you, angel of delight." Out shot a hand and detained her. "What do you see in my cup. Come!" He drew her close.

Juanita's thin lips curled, and her dark eyes became slumberous.

"Remove the shadow of your hand, señor."

She looked into the pool of blackness within the cup and tried to turn away, but Biglow's hand held her fast.

"Read, lovely one."

"Cut it out," McComber complained. "It's all foolishness."

"She sure handed you a double-barreled portion of tough luck. When do you start? Listen to some good news, Fred. Go on, Juanita." He gave her arm a twist.

She winced, bent over the cup.

"All that you wish shall be denied," she said, just above a whisper. "All that you seek shall be lost. That—that is all, señor."

She pulled free from Biglow's grip and tottered to the stove with the coffeepot.

Biglow finished the cup in three gulps.

"More!" he called. "Bring me more!" He held out the cup until the old woman filled it. He drank, and said: "Anyhow, I got something I wanted."

Juanita walked slowly away.

"Seein' the way you twisted her arm," McComber remarked, "you got off lucky."

Biglow loaded his gun and thrust it viciously into the holster.

"Anyhow, she give you a' earful," he said vindictively.

"Anyhow, I didn't ask for it. She volunteered. And that was after the foot-and-mouth disease struck my herd."

The name of the dread disease sobered the two men.

"Wonder where it come from?" Biglow said.

"Long's it's here, that's not so important as how to stop it."

"Bullets are the only remedy."

"Yeh, there ain't no cure except lead," McComber agreed.

Each became silent.

The foot-and-mouth disease, which had ravaged many a range, was deemed incurable. When first affected, the cow became nervous, tender-footed. The germ attacked the hoof at the juncture of horn with hide. The soreness itched and, as a cow can only scratch with its rough-surfaced tongue, the animal licked the spots infected. The temperature and saliva of the mouth made a perfect culture for the disease germs. The saliva flow increased, fell upon the ground and every speck became a source of infection which could spread like wildfire through a herd. The only way to prevent this spread was by quarantine, and by segregating suspected animals in small inclosures. McComber had done this, and had checked the epidemic except in a comparatively small herd held at the extreme eastern boundary of his ranch.

"No, sir, no cure except lead," McComber repeated dully.

Juanita had begun to dry the plates. She stopped, a plate poised in air, and looked at McComber. She opened her mouth, snapped it shut, and went furiously to work.

"I was just thinking," Biglow resumed, "maybe it would be best to drive your healthy cows over to the Almagre and be done with it."

McComber shook his head. "No," he objected. "That would mean fight. We'd have to clean out Tom Broom and all his men."

"Well?"

"We just couldn't do it, man! Broom's got relations in a half dozen ranches west of him. We clean Broom, and all his relatives and their crowds come boilin' down on us. Where'd we be? Buzzard meat, *poco pronto*."

"Yeh, that's right," Biglow admitted reluctantly. "These Californians stick closer'n paint on a band wagon."

"What's the matter with the scheme we worked out?" McComber demanded.

BIGLOW made a grimace, but said nothing.

"The beauty of it is," McComber went on, "they can't prove nothin' on us if we keep on bein' foxy. Why, in town, nobody knows we've got the foot-and-mouth disease out here!"

Biglow thought that over. "How about that Mexican woodcutter you run off the reservation?"

"All he saw was some dead cows. He didn't know the cause," McComber argued.

"How about the wagons?"

Both men looked through the window. The workers were examining the rear off wheel, seemingly with great interest.

"Nobody will see us drive over. I've got the route figured out. When we're through with 'em, we'll drive 'em out in the chaparral, knock the wheels off, and leave 'em lay. We can say we used the wagons to haul dead cows, then burned the wagons."

Biglow was satisfied.

"And two wagons are enough?" He made this more as a statement than as a question.

"Plenty." McComber began to finger one of the shell cases Biglow had poked from his gun.

"You got one wagon now," Biglow remarked.

McComber looked through the window and exploded. "Them halfwits dished that wheel!"

It was so. The felly bound by the steel tire lay on the ground, smashed. The two workmen were staring at it.

"Better have it dish now than under a load," Biglow remarked. "It's a wonder that rattletrap hung together this long."

"Got to have another wagon," McComber muttered.

"How about the hay wagon with the flat bed?"

"Take too long to rig a cover on it. Great Scott, and we was drivin' out to-night!"

"Get another wagon."

"Jus' like that, huh?"

But the thought stuck in McComber's mind, and he considered it. "What's the time, Mark?"

"Around ten thirty."

"Come along. We'll saddle up. We can get to San José by one or so, by crowdin'."

Biglow arose, and spread his hands.

"All right, I'm with you. Seems to me somebody told me about a wagon. Who was it?"

"You needn't ask me. Maybe you'll remember later."

"You will find your wagon," Juanita said suddenly, "on the road to San José."

The two men stared at her.

Biglow's lips curled. "Looks to me, sweetheart of the ages, like you was copperin' your own bet."

"Go on!" McComber urged, shoving him from the rear. "Go on!"

"Fred," Biglow offered, "I'll bet you two to one we don't meet a wagon on the road to San José."

"I'll take ten dollars' worth," McComber agreed.

He shoved Biglow ahead of him to the doorway.

Juanita watched them go. Her lips curled.

"*Buenaventura!*" she cried. "*Bichos!*"

Vermin indeed! Her father had

founded this ranch. She had been born on it. She had always lived here. Owner after owner had come and gone, but she remained. Always, until now, she had had her place by the fireside, had been treated as one of the family. Now, an old woman, she had to work.

She took a mug from a cupboard, went to the stove, and carried the full cup to the table. She sat down, glanced through the window. No men were in sight. There were two wagons, one with a broken wheel.

She gazed upon the black mirror of the coffee.

"I can cure that sickness of the cows," she thought. She sipped the coffee slowly. "Perhaps what I told them will come true," she murmured, and sighed. "With them gone, I can rest."

She bowed her head in prayer.

SANDY never knew how he got to earth, but there he was, his eyes just level with the hay which was rising and spreading. A floppy hat was the first to come clear of the feed, and under the hat was the girl of the tintype.

Sandy knew, before she appeared, that it would be so. He put his hands to his hips, and grinned.

There was that challenging quality in her lovely face. Her hair was a soft brown, and her eyes—he could not tell the exact shade of gray.

"Hello, Miss Valencia."

"Hello, Sandy Cardel."

Sandy's jaw dropped.

"Uncle Tom wrote me every month. That's how I kept alive. I made him tell me about the men. You were at the head of the list, Sandy."

"And I suppose you took Pablo, the stage agent, into your confidence. That's why he made such a botch of lying."

"He's a darling! I would have remained hidden——" She stopped. "I wanted to surprise everybody."

"What made you think this was a Broom wagon?"

"Why, Uncle Tom's brand on the red mare. This is Uncle Tom's wagon, isn't it?"

Sandy nodded. Here was a problem.

"Assist me—I mean, dog-gone it, give me a hand."

He took both her hands, and she vaulted lightly to the ground. She squeezed Sandy's hands before she released her hold. She seemed glad to be back.

"I don't remember that grade," she said.

"Rancho San José," Sandy informed her, "lies twenty miles that way." He pointed.

"Oh, then we're not going home?" she asked, her glance to the west.

Sandy shook his head. The team could not pull the wagon up the long grade, and the red mare was needed in his plan. Yet he knew he must put Valencia on the mare, and send her home. He noticed for the first time that she had on pants. She wore a bright-colored jacket, and about her throat was a gay silken neckerchief.

"Oh, Sandy, you don't know what I have been through! For five years they tried to make me a lady. They rode herd on my speech, they supervised my clothes, and they hammered manners into me. But their brand didn't stick, Sandy. I'm home again." She threw her arms wide. "And how do you like my pants?"

"They fit a little too much."

"Had to take what I could get. Bought 'em during a stage stop."

Nose Paint ambled around the wagon. He pulled up short.

"Girl!" he said, as one classifying a rare and strange creature.

"Miss Broom, this is——" Sandy began. "What's your name, old settler?" He didn't use the nickname because, being sensitive himself, he didn't want to hurt the old man's feelings.

"Nose Paint."

"I'm very pleased to meet you," Valencia said, and thrust out her slim hand.

Nose Paint wiped his right paw on his pants before he took it.

"Now what?" he inquired.

The very question that was bothering Sandy.

Sandy and Nose Paint considered it. Valencia looked from one to another of them wonderingly.

"Listen," Nose Paint said.

Sandy heard the dust-muffled hoof falls of horses.

Nose Paint dodged under the mare's neck and peered out.

"Here comes McComber an' that long-eared jigadee," he said.

They scrambled into the wagon.

CHAPTER III.

THE RANCH OF LOST SOULS.

WHEN McComber saw that he and Biglow were discovered, he spurred forward and pulled up a few paces from Sandy. His gun side was away from Sandy. Biglow joined him.

Biglow said, "I owe you twenty dollars."

"Juanita was right," McComber told him, and his face wore a worried look. "What is this, a picnic?" he asked, not giving heed to the salutations of Sandy and Nose Paint. He kept his gaze upon Valencia.

"No," Nose Paint said, "we're bringin' this wagon to sell you."

McComber and Biglow exchanged glances.

"Who is we?" McComber asked.

"Why, Sandy an' me. He's my partner. Ain't you, Sandy?"

"Sure, old-timer." Sandy determined he wasn't going to hide behind Nose Paint.

"What made you think I'm interested in a wagon?" McComber asked.

"Why, ain't you?" Nose Paint's mouth opened, and his eyes became round.

McComber disregarded that.

He asked Sandy, "Why are you travelin' around with an old wagon and a drunk?"

"It might be, McComber," Sandy replied, "that that is my affair."

"Curious, though," McComber remarked. His look was still upon the girl. "Are you a partner, too, miss?"

"You bet I am."

"That's fine," McComber said lazily.

Valencia returned McComber's look, and her lips curled.

"That's fine," McComber drawled. His gun sprang up and drew down upon Sandy, on the driver's seat.

"H'ist!" he barked. "Mark, swing off and collect his gun. You red-snooted whisky soak, you move and I'll plug you."

Mark jumped out of the saddle and snatched Sandy's gun from its holster.

"Drop your hands, cowboy," McComber said, "but don't get funny." He slid from his saddle. "You three git in the back of the wagon."

Both men held their guns on the trio.

"This is a fine way to treat us," Sandy protested, knowing anything he could say would be futile.

"What you get for snoopin'."

"So there is something to snoop for?"

"Get back there!"

Sandy took Valencia by the arm and helped her into the back of the wagon. Nose Paint followed, mumbling disgustedly.

"Git up there, Mark," McComber ordered. "Herd 'em in close. Let one of 'em drive, and keep your gun handy."

The three moved up front, and Biglow climbed into the wagon to take his station.

"You're goin' to visit my ranch," he told his prisoners. "It's easy goin' all the way, and me and my gun will be alongside you. Hope we have a nice picnic."

Biglow's horse was tied beside the mare, and the wagon started slowly for McComber's ranch. Nose Paint drove. Valencia occupied an end of what remained of the sack of oats.

SANDY sat with his back against a side board, studied his boots, and wondered what he could have done. He decided he could have followed no other course. Biglow had made himself comfortable upon the matted feed, and held his gun in hand while Sandy's gun and belt lay beside him. Sandy had detected in McComber's mien and action a certain desperate earnestness. He did want that wagon.

Sandy tried to open a conversation with Biglow, but received only a few grunts by way of reply.

Nose Paint attempted to strike a bargain with McComber over the wagon and team, but the cattleman told him to wait until they arrived at the ranch.

"I'll bet," Nose Paint muttered, "he figures to do me out of my wagin."

Valencia was calm, outwardly, at least.

The creaking and rattling of the wagon made it possible for Valencia and Sandy to talk without being overheard.

"You know, Sandy," Valencia said, and moved to sit beside him, "I don't know what this is all about, but I'm having a good time. If I were a lady, I should have keeled over in a faint at least twice."

"I'll tell you what I know, and what Tom Broom knows."

He told her about the rumored killing of cows and about the wagons, though he admitted he thought Nose Paint was mistaken somewhere. Sandy stopped speech to think. If McComber wanted the wagon, he could have bought it at the resting place, that is, if he had been honest about it. But he feared something; there was something menacing him, crowding him. He may have figured Sandy was snooping, and might snoop again, if left free. And this surmise, if correct, indicated trouble of some kind on McComber's ranch, pretty big trouble, too.

The weary miles were dragged out to the complaining accompaniment of wagon groans, squeaks and rattles. Once in a while, McComber called a halt to rest the team. He rode a little sideways in the saddle, so he could keep an eye upon the driver.

They had penetrated to a country where evidences of the drought were visible in shriveled vegetation; in the dust mist that lingered over the land, with no breeze to move it; and in the hopeless, dreary aspect of the countryside. At best Rancho de las Almas Perdidas was semidesert, but by vastness of territory supported McComber's sizable herd.

For two years, Sandy had represented the Broom brand at beef round-up. There were always a few strays from the Almagre. He knew

the country pretty well, and was familiar with all trails and roads hereabouts. Once in a while, out the rear of the wagon, he glimpsed a landmark he knew. The monotony of the ride, and the continuous jolting, caused the three prisoners to fall into a light slumber. On and on they rolled.

As dusk was settling upon the land, the wagon approached McComber's home. Voices sounded, and boots thumped the hard earth. Men seized the bridles of the horses. Out of the back of the wagon, Sandy saw corrals and frame buildings. Biglow arose, gun ready.

McComber appeared at the tailboard.

"Bring 'em out, Mark."

BIGLOW handed Sandy's belt and gun to McComber, crowded close against the wagon sheet, and motioned Valencia and Sandy to get out at the rear. Sandy got down and raised his hands to help Valencia, who seemed to float to earth. McComber was right there. Biglow jumped down. Two or three other men moved close. Near by were two wagons, one with a broken wheel.

"Would you mind telling me, McComber," Sandy asked, "what your game is?"

McComber made no response. There was not light enough for Sandy to see the cattleman's face. McComber stepped close to Biglow, and whispered a few words.

Biglow stepped behind Sandy, shoved a gun against his back and said: "Start puttin' one hoof before the other. March!"

As Sandy took the first step, Valencia, with the fury of a wild cat, sprang upon Biglow. He staggered under the impact. Sandy leaped for McComber, who was at one side. McComber's gun swung out and the barrel collided with Sandy's jaw. Dazed by the blow, he fell, and two of McComber's men promptly leaped upon him.

He was then half led, half dragged away from the wagon. He had a hazy impression of Valencia held fast in Biglow's long arms. As from a distance, he heard McComber demand, "Where'd that Nose Paint drunk go to?" Then he was hustled on past the wooden shanties and corrals, over bare ground to where loomed the brown walls of an adobe.

Biglow came up. He said: "That she-devil scratched the waddin' out of my face. Hold him; I'll get a lantern."

In a minute or so, Biglow returned with a lantern, which gave a feeble light through its smoked chimney.

"Tie him up," Biglow ordered. "Here's some rope."

Sandy's hands were tied behind his back. None too gently he was laid flat, and his feet bound just above the boot tops. A door was opened, and he was carried through and dropped upon a hard floor. Then the door was shut, and there was a sound of a bolt being snapped into its socket. Boot heels clicked, and faded from hearing.

Sandy lay still. There was a musty odor of grain in the room. He rolled over, and looked about. The place was as black as pitch; there was no sign of a window. He felt of the floor, which was as hard as rock. The place was a granary, its interior, judging by the quality of the floor, plastered with a mixture of wood ashes and adobe, which, in time, became hard as iron. The slam of the door showed it to be heavy, and the staleness of the air proved it to be tight. These old granaries were mouse-proof.

Sandy began to work at the

ropes. The men had done a good job. He twisted and pulled, then, exhausted, had to rest. He listened intently. The night had a thousand tongues, infinitely small, whispering, conspiring. He wondered how Valencia was faring, and the thought set him straining at his bonds again. Fatigue calmed him.

He recalled the words of McComber, "Where'd that Nose Paint drunk go to?"

How long could Nose Paint remain free? And what could he do? Anyhow, his latest drink was pretty close to twenty-four hours behind him. Sandy wasn't the sort to wait for help. For all he knew, Nose Paint had been found and knocked on the head. Sandy wormed and twisted, but could feel no give, no relaxation of the ropes. He rested.

McCOMBER and Biglow ate supper in the living room of the ranch house. What men were at the home ranch were eating in the kitchen. Their noisy talk and laughter came through the hallway.

McComber's plate was empty.

Biglow was sawing away at a piece of meat.

"Say, is this our beef?" he asked.

"Huh?" McComber blinked his eyes, and shoved the lamp farther from him.

"Nothin'," Biglow said, and resumed sawing.

McComber picked up his cup, found it empty, and turned his head toward the passage to the kitchen. Then he turned back, and regarded his cup.

Almost immediately, Juanita appeared, with the coffeepot in hand.

"You wanted coffee, señor?"

"Go ahead."

McComber watched the black fluid curve into the cup. When it was full, he covered it with a hand.

The old woman's face twisted into a grimace.

"Witch!" McComber muttered, and removed his hand.

"Thought it was all foolishness," Biglow remarked.

McComber shoved the coffee aside.

Biglow asked, "What are you goin' to do with that cowboy?"

"Put him out of the way."

"How?"

"Somehow so it'll look like an accident."

"S'pose I'll have to do the dirty work," Biglow observed. "And the girl?"

It seemed McComber didn't want to answer that.

"Sort of looks," Biglow said, "like you got a bull by the tail. You should have bought the wagon, and let it gone at that."

"And have that Broom cowhand go on with his snoopin'?"

"That's right," Biglow admitted. "I remember, now, how he caught you up by askin' was there anything to snoop about. Where's the girl?"

"In the end room."

"The one with the barred windows?"

"Yes. She's locked in. And what did you do with Nose Paint?"

"He's in the woodshed, tied up with a bottle of redeye."

"Whisky?"

"Yeah. After Gim run him down, I had him corralled in the woodshed. I figured the easiest way to keep him was to get him drunk, so I give him a bottle. He's paralyzed by now. You can attend to him in the mornin'."

"We won't be here in the mornin'," McComber pointed out.

He cocked an ear toward the pas-

sage to the kitchen. There was no sound. The men evidently had eaten and gone. But through a window came the noise of the stamping horses, and men's voices, giving orders.

"They're hitchin' up now," Biglow said.

"I told 'em to, and to pull six horses to a wagon. We have to make speed. Take us all night and then some to get where we're goin'."

Boots thudded outside the entrance door, the door flung open, and a short man with wide shoulders stamped into the room. On the right cheek of his hatchet face was a crescent scar.

"Well, Gim?"

"Teams hooked up," the man said.

"Listen. Drive out and load up. Mark and me will ride out and meet you comin' back. You know the road?"

"Sure. We take the old south road till we're a half mile below our south line, then we strike west."

"Good," McComber said. "And you're to keep the wagons goin' as fast as possible. At that, we can't git there till sunup. Mark and me will join you on the south road, say, in two hours. Anyhow, we can catch up with you. You're takin' two men to a wagon, huh?"

"That's right."

"Countin' Mark and me, that's six to do the job." McComber said this as if checking up on his own thought.

"All right, Gim. One thing more, remember to tell the feller what leads the string of saddle horses for you four to keep away from the wagons. He's to go on ahead. Savvy?"

"I got it."

GIM stamped from the room, leaving the door open. McComber and Biglow sat in silence. Soon there sounded the grind of wheels, and the creak and rumble of wagons getting under way. A whip cracked, and the drivers shouted to their teams.

McComber got up from his chair. He said, "Mark, you mosey along and attend to Nose Paint."

"I knew I'd have to do the dirty work," Biglow muttered, getting up. He loosened his gun in its holster. "How about the girl?"

"I'll attend to her when we get back."

Biglow snorted.

"Juanita will watch her."

"Who'll watch Juanita?"

McComber frowned.

"Forgot that. Now, there's no use in havin' a man lead the saddle horses. You and me can do that. You put that feller to watch around here, Juanita included. He ain't gone yet."

"All right," Biglow agreed.

"And say, after you fix the drunk, meet me at the granary. I've got a plan to handle that cowhand so nobody won't ever know what happened to him."

"Wish you could say the same for the girl," Biglow said.

"I got her figured out, too," McComber claimed. He gathered up a few of the soiled dishes, and a knife, fork and spoon.

"These will help it look like a' accident," he explained.

Biglow was puzzled, but said nothing. He followed McComber out of the door.

Juanita, who had remained within the shadow of the passage during the conversation, walked slowly to the table and began to gather up the remaining dishes. She worked slowly, and in deep thought. She

thought of the motto of her ancient house: "We fear no man nor any devil, only God when he is just." The words always had puzzled, for she could not conceive of a God that was not eternally just.

She noticed that McComber had left his coffee untouched. She gazed at the black fluid, nodded her head, and looked toward the room where Valencia was a prisoner.

She heard her name shouted from the kitchen by Biglow. She picked up the stack of dishes and went to the kitchen. Biglow was framed in the back door, his dark face ominous.

"Señor?"

"What did you do with that feller I put in the woodshed?"

"A man in the woodshed?" She shook her head and pointed to the woodbox, which was over half full. "I do not know. I do not go for wood since noon." She put her burden upon the sink board.

Biglow gave a snort and asked, "Know anything about him?"

"Yes, I think so. When the wagon drive away, I hear the woodshed door slam. I look out that door where you stand. I see a man run to the last wagon and jump in. I do not know heem, for all I see is the back of heem."

Biglow scratched his head, pulled his sombrero back in place. He turned, and looked at the space where the wagons had been. Lamplight flowed through the kitchen windows. It was possible to see a man run to a wagon. Still, he did not believe Juanita. Without a word, he stalked away, heading for the granary to join McComber.

Juanita smiled. She had told the truth, knowing she would not be believed. She set about to wash the dishes. Frequently, she made the trip to the door to listen.

CHAPTER IV.

TRIAL BY FIRE.

FOR a half hour, Sandy had ceased to battle the bonds that held him. He rested, inhaling the odor of moist grain, and his thoughts could go no farther than the predicament he was in. He had heard wagons roll past his prison and continue beyond hearing. The only consolation—which really was none at all—was that something would be done to him before he starved to death. He therefore lay quiet, resting and waiting.

The pound of boots sounded close by the granary. Then there was a silence lasting several minutes. Next came a hail, followed by voices joined in subdued conversation. Then, suddenly, the bolt was shot, the door opened, and lantern light gleamed. McComber and Biglow entered.

McComber thrust out a foot and rolled Sandy over on his back. He bent down, then, and examined the binding of the prisoner's wrists.

"Judgin' by the way he's mopped up the floor, he's been havin' a merry time," McComber said.

"And got nowhere," Biglow added.

"Grab his head, Mark," McComber ordered, and bent to grasp Sandy's legs.

They bore him along. McComber carried the lantern in the crook of an arm. They carried him past a barn, a shed, corrals, out into the open. Sandy turned cold. To him, this journey probably would mean a quick bullet and a shallow grave. He set his teeth, jerked up his knees with the intent of kicking McComber with both his bound feet. Biglow let go his hold, and the only result was a hard bump on the ground for Sandy.

"He's a tryin' devil, ain't he?" Biglow said.

"If he tries that ag'in, I'll cuff him with my six-gun," McComber promised.

Sandy appeared to have been wrong in his fears. He was carried to a small, isolated building, that stood in the corner of a wire corral. The ground all around was bare. The building was old and in bad repair. Sandy was dumped upon the floor, and his fall disturbed half an inch of dust upon the boards.

McComber put down the lantern and surveyed the situation. The building was constructed of weather-beaten boards, with the outside cracks covered with light battens. In the end opposite the door was a window opening, the sash and glass of which were missing. A piece of old blanket covered the opening. The wall Sandy faced had nails driven into it, and upon the nails hung bits of old harness, the tops to a pair of boots, and numerous other odds and ends. Along the other wall were piled broken chairs, a chest of drawers, a straw mattress, a three-legged table, and, on top of it an old saddle. Altogether, this litter of furniture amounted to a sizable heap.

Sandy could not see what happened next, though he knew preparations of some kind were going on. McComber and Biglow did not talk, but pounding went on against the wall behind Sandy's head. There was a sound of tearing cloth, and a dry rustling, as if hay were being thrown around. Both men examined the rope binding Sandy's hands, and tightened the knots. They stretched him out on the floor, and McComber tied a rope around his chest and under his arms. This rope was knotted tightly, so there would be no chance of Sandy wriggling free.

Then he discovered the reason of the pounding. A half dozen fence staples had been pounded into the board wall, and the rope passed through them. He was tethered securely. He could move his legs sideways, but could not extend them.

And still these two men said no word, but worked silently and to a purpose. McComber took the straw from the mattress and made a pile of it about two feet from Sandy's boot heels. McComber made a generous trail of straw leading to the furniture. He broke up a light box for kindling wood, which he placed upon the straw under the furniture. He rearranged some of the furniture. From a coat pocket he took out two inches of candle stub, which he stuck to a scrap of cardboard with its own tallow. He lighted the candle, and placed it atop the heap. Then he scattered straws around the base of the candle. He heaped up a few more straws, to make sure some of them would spring to the flame when the tallow burned away.

Sandy watched the proceedings as if numbed, thinking helplessly of the inevitable result.

McCOMBER examined his death machine from every angle, inspected the staples and the tether, and picked up the lantern.

"Guess that'll do the trick," he said.

"Can't fail," Biglow said, stepping to the door. "But why not kick over the candle now?"

"No," McComber answered. "He should have some time to think on the penalty of snoopin'."

"Serves him right," Biglow agreed. He lowered his eyelids and

peered about. "He can still stand up."

"Then staple to the floor that rope that holds him to the wall. Here you are." McComber fished a couple of staples from his pocket. "Pound 'em in under his back. Shove him over on his side."

Biglow followed directions. He had only a narrow space to pound the staples into the floor, and with every blow the hammer head grazed Sandy's shoulders. Biglow yanked Sandy to his back.

"He can't stand up now," Biglow said, "but he can watch the candle."

"We can leave him."

"Hold on. There's a man to watch Juanita. You'd better tell him to mosey down here once every so often to take a look."

They went out, and shut the door.

"All right," came McComber's voice, muffled by the door, "I'll tell that feller to give a look down here."

The candle burned steadily. The black wick was crested by a small semicircle of flame. Tallow melted and began to drip.

Sandy lay still, his mind scarcely functioning. He felt strangely peaceful. The ropes that held his wrists and ankles had ceased to hurt. He heard horses stamping not far off. Two, he decided, were being ridden, the others led, for a led horse has a careless and light hoof fall compared to a horse under a load. The hoofbeats passed from hearing. Sandy tried to stretch, moving his body carefully for fear of disturbing the straw and upsetting the candle.

He shifted his thighs and legs toward the pile of furniture, and found he could touch a leg of the three-legged table on which rested the saddle. By thrusting hard against the table leg, he figured, he could topple the saddle upon the candle, but he was afraid to make the attempt except as a last resort.

He watched the candle burn, and calculated that a quarter of an inch had been consumed since it was lighted. At that rate, the stub would last about two hours. Two hours of life! Wagons had left the ranch, riders with lead horses had gone out, and soon that man of McComber's would be looking in.

Anger began to burn within Sandy, not so much at the cold-blooded, inhuman manner in which he had been left in this death trap, but at the thought that such critters as McComber infested the earth. Sandy tugged sideways, and immediately the stapled rope jerked him back. He strained at the rope again and again. It was his dwindling strength against staples and stout hemp. The candle burned steadily.

Sandy rested. He had seen a cow rush full tilt upon a wire fence strand held by a single staple, and be hurled back. If he succeeded in forcing himself free from the staples in the floor, there remained those which held the tether to the wall. He shook his head in an attempt to throw off the heavy perspiration that beaded his brow.

He breathed stertorously, and watched the candle. It was slowly tipping. Sandy's heart pounded. He almost ceased to breathe. The tipping of the candle slackened. Sandy moistened dry lips with his tongue.

He tensed his muscles, gave a wrench with his body. With a snap, one staple came free. Exultantly, he wrenched again with renewed strength and was jerked back.

THE candle flame was getting larger and brighter. Tallow dripped freely. Sandy began his attack on the remaining staple. He wrenched and tugged until he had to rest. While resting, he watched the candle. Suddenly he rolled his entire weight on the rope, and the staple withdrew. Now, he figured, he could stand up, but before trying he looked again at the candle, and listened. He heard nothing but the chirp of insects.

He hunched over until his back was against the wall, drew up his legs and braced his feet. Using head, shoulders, elbows, and bound hands, he managed to worm up the wall until he stood upright. He was panting hard from the exertion. He stood with his back to the board into which were driven the staples holding the tether.

With sudden renewed vigor, he began to pound with his back against the board, putting all the weight of his body behind each movement. It might have been that, when McComber stapled the tether to the wall, the pounding had loosened this board. It began to give. Then, with a screech of nails withdrawing, it suddenly fell, outwardly, loosened at the top.

Sandy's shoulders caught against the boards on either side, or he would have crashed through the opening. He wriggled sideways through the hole, successfully maintaining his balance despite the tether which held him in a crouching position.

He could make progress only by hopping, crowlike, on his bound feet. The board jerked along at his heels. He bumped into a wire fence. The top strand struck him high on the chest, and he faced about, backed against the second strand, and moved his arms to locate a cluster of barbs. With an up-and-down motion, he began to fray the rope about his wrists.

By chance, he was directly opposite the gap in the wall and could see the leaning candle burn. He sawed away, knowing he had a long, slow job, with as many hits as misses. Sometimes the sharp, pointed barb jabbed the skin of a wrist, but he sawed on, and, fiber by fiber, the rope frayed. He dared not stop for fear the guard left by McComber would come up and find him helpless.

The candle in the shack had burned to half its length when, with a jerk, his wrists drew a little apart and he pulled one hand, then the other, free. He rubbed his numbed hands together, gradually restoring the circulation, then freed his ankles and cast off the tether.

The shortened candle slipped sideways into the straw. For a moment its light dimmed, then a small tongue of flame shot up. Soon the straw pile kindled, sending up writhing serpents of fire, bent on destruction.

Sandy crawled under the fence, intending to make for the house. He could see lamplighted windows, and he hurried to get to them before the light of the burning building should grow strong enough to illuminate the scene. Cautiously he approached the door leading to the kitchen, which was lighted by a bracket lamp with a shiny tin reflector.

A withered old Mexican woman stood by the sink, drying kitchen utensils. She worked very slowly, eying a man who sat in a chair with his back to her. He was a chunky man, with a round, partly bald head and thick lips below a stub nose. His hands were in his lap. Sandy sensed an air of tenseness.

The old woman wiped a long-bladed knife which she laid on the edge of the sink board, separate from the other utensils. She watched the chunky man, who apparently was indifferent to her presence. There was a small mirror beside the window frame, and covertly, he was watching the Mexican woman in the glass. From time to time his head drooped, to be raised again as if he could hardly refrain from falling asleep. But Sandy noticed his eyes were wide open all the while.

The crone picked up the butcher knife, which she held flat under a fold of her flour-sack apron. She took a silent step toward the sitter. Every time his head nodded, she sidled a bit nearer. Then Sandy noticed a slight movement of the man's hands, a motion the old woman could not see. The movement was enough to show Sandy that the sitter held a six-gun by the barrel.

The old woman crept slowly, stealthily, toward her prey. The chunky man nodded, as if dozing, but his thick lips parted in a leer as his gaze held to the mirror. The hag raised her skinny arm, the knife blade gleamed.

Sandy leaped into the room. He rushed the chunky man who had no time to reverse his weapon. Sandy saw the gun swing down, tried to avoid the blow. The steel barrel reached his jaw. Sandy sank quietly into utter oblivion.

THE first sensation Sandy had, when he returned to consciousness, was that he had been away for a long time. He blinked at the lamp, at the hazy, wavering face that hovered over him, seemingly with no connection to things earthly. Slowly, the face began to assume a definite outline.

"Valencia!" Sandy didn't know the sound of his own voice.

"You're all right, Sandy?"

His face and hair were wet. The point of his jaw, where the blow had fallen, was sore. He sat up, and his head began to clear. He saw the old Mexican woman; she seemed friendly.

"Yes, I'm all right. Where are you, Valencia?" Then he felt the tug of her hands under his arms as she tried to lift him from the floor. "Oh!" he said, and stood up of his own accord.

He began to breathe more evenly. He looked around, and his glance came to rest upon the figure of a man. The figure gripped a bottle. He was wiping the bottle on his pants.

"It's Nose Paint," Valencia said. "He just got in a few moments ago. He went with the wagons to the east pasture. He—— Nose Paint, you talk."

"Ugh," was the first utterance from the gaunt specter with the bottle. *"Agua, señorita, mucha agua."*

Juanita took him a tin dipper of water.

Nose Paint drank deeply, then used the water remaining to sluice off the dust from the whisky bottle.

"There's a full bottle of red whisky, and I'm agoin' to drink her all when we git catched up with our chores," he announced. "I got away, Sandy, and clumb into a wagin as it was pullin' out. There was no place else to go. I stayed in the box till the wagin stopped, an' then I hopped out an' slid underneath an' laid out on the reach. They loaded both wagins with sick cows an' they had a"—he glanced at Valencia—"I mean, a' awful time gittin' those animals in the wagins, but they done it. 'Bout four to a

wagin, I think. They headed back an', Sandy boy, they're takin' them sick cows to Rancho San José. I found that out. 'Bout four of McComber's men stayed out there. Nursin' sick cows, I guess. I stuck it out an' most got dusted to death underneath that wagin. I slipped off a mile or two from here an' snook back, couldn't stand no more dust. I come in an' you was laid out with Miss Valencia and the señorita sort of moanin' around, an' I chucked a bucket of water on your bean."

"That's how it happened, Sandy," Valencia said. "You were unconscious and we didn't——"

"I seen lots of fellers knocked out," Nose Paint cut in. "If they ain't hurt too bad they go to sleep an' wake up O. K."

"Coffee, señor?" Juanita held a brimming cup before Sandy.

"*Gracias, señorita!*" he exclaimed, and drank eagerly. The strong, hot fluid gave him new energy. "What happened to you, Valencia?"

She had been hustled from the wagon to the ranch house and locked in a room with barred windows. There she had remained until Juanita came with an ax and chopped out the lock. That was after the fight, and she had found Sandy unconscious when Juanita led her to the kitchen.

"And we didn't know what to do," Valencia concluded.

"So that finishing school didn't teach you how to bring to a feller that's been knocked out?" Sandy inquired.

Valencia smiled and said, "I guess you've got your senses back."

"Where'd that feller go that socked me?"

"I drug him outside," Nose Paint answered. "Juanita stuck her knife in his gizzard."

Sandy thought that over. He smelled spuds frying, looked about, and saw that Juanita was preparing food. Bacon began to sizzle. It suddenly occurred to him that he was starving.

Juanita caught his look, and smiled.

"I know what you think," she said. "You do not need to thank me. Now, you shall eat. You must grow strong."

He saw the grub would be ready in a few minutes. By Juanita's direction, Valencia laid places for three at the table by the window. Juanita placed the food upon the table, and filled the coffee cups. She stood by while the others pitched in.

"When I was a little girl," Valencia said, "I had a Mexican nurse. She read fortunes in the coffee. Can you do that, Juanita?"

"Oh, yes," the old woman admitted after a space, "but I do not believe what I see."

"What do you see in my cup?"

JUANITA leaned over Valencia's shoulder. Her face clouded for an instant.

"Just happiness," she said softly.

"Why, no trouble!"

"No trouble, señorita."

"But don't you ever see trouble?"

"Oh, yes, I saw much in Señor McComber's cup, and I told him. I think he became a little afraid."

Sandy recalled the meeting under the oak when McComber had said to Biglow, "Juanita was right." He lifted his coffee cup and over the rim his glance caught the clock on the shelf over the sink. The time was fifteen minutes to one. He put down the cup. He must ride.

"Nose Paint," he said sharply, "how many men with the wagons?"

"Four, but they was to meet up

with McComber and Biglow and another feller leadin' horses."

"He was the one that stayed with Juanita. But what was the matter with those cows?"

"I dunno. The men mostly cussed while they was a-pullin' an' a-haulin' the critters up a plank to the wagins. I dunno what the animals was sick of."

"The sickness of the foot and of the mouth," Juanita supplied.

"Foot-and-mouth disease!" Sandy gasped out, and arose from his chair. Revelation flashed to him. The drought, McComber shooting his cows, the wagons, the attempt on his life, and a dozen small facts insignificant in themselves now formed a patterned scheme worthy of the devil.

"If McComber starts that disease in Tom Broom's herds," Sandy said, thinking aloud, "every cow will die off. And if he could keep his plan secret, he could rent the feed in the Almagre with no trouble. That scheme is busted wide open now. But that ain't the point."

His look went to the clock. "We got to catch the wagons before they reach Tom's range. We got to keep those sick cows off his grass. How many horses to a wagon, Nose Paint?"

"Six, an' they went lickity-split too. They sure ain't sparin' the horses, 'cause they ain't bringin' 'em back."

"They have five hours' head start on us," Sandy calculated. "We—I mean, I'll have to ride like blazes to catch——"

"What do you mean you will have to ride like blazes?" Valencia asked.

"I want you and Nose Paint to ride to the Velvet. Our men are watching that line 'cause Tom suspected McComber might try to crowd his range. You'll help, Valencia?"

"I'll assist—I mean, blame it, Sandy, you can bet your boots I will!"

"Let's——" A sudden thought struck Sandy. "Señorita, are there horses here? To ride, I mean."

"Yes, señor, many of them."

"A lantern?"

"I will get one."

Sandy's hands went to his waist; then he remembered he had been stripped of gun and belt.

Nose Paint got from his seat.

"I saved the shootin' iron and belt offn that jigadee what Juanita harpooned," he said, and went for weapon and belt which lay beside the wall, near the door. "And, Sandy, speakin' of the foot-and-mouth disease, when I was in the Argentine——"

Sandy had no desire to hear reminiscences.

"Save it, old-timer," he urged. "You help Señorita Juanita look around the house for guns. Valencia, will you hold the lantern?"

"You bet!"

Sandy was out the door, closely followed by Valencia.

By lantern light, Sandy looked over the horses in the corral. His red mare was among them. He led out the mare, tied her, then went to select two more.

"Juanita wants to go," Valencia said.

"Gosh! Can that old lady ride?"

"She begged me to take her with me when I left, and I promised. If she can't keep up, I can give her in charge of Nose Paint."

"That's settled then."

Except for Sandy's own saddle, the riding gear found in the saddle shed was not good, but it had to do. When Sandy saw how Valencia climbed into the saddle unaided, he

ceased to worry about her riding ability. No firearms had been found in the house.

They were ready to go.

"As near as I can figure it," Sandy said, "McComber's wagons are over halfway to Tom's range right now. The only chance I got of beatin' 'em is for those old wagons to bust down, and that can't be counted on. With a lot of luck and hard riding, maybe I can keep McComber from dumping cows for a while."

He paused. "All we can do is the best we can. Git goin', cowhands."

CHAPTER V.

BATTLE IN THE CHAPARRAL.

AT once, Sandy set the pace, a lope, and the other riders joined him. Valencia rode beside him. Often Sandy looked back to see how Juanita was faring. He always found she was holding her own. Nose Paint was at home on a horse, though of late years he had ridden little. He carried the bottle of whisky tucked in his belt.

Valencia and Sandy talked. He gave her directions and instructions about riding the Velvet in search of the Broom men. They might have a camp, in which case there might be a fire to serve as guide or, as there was much country to watch, each man might be on his own, covering a certain stretch of land. Valencia remembered hazily part of the Velvet. Sandy granted there was a large element of chance in finding the men. He shrugged his shoulders, Mexican fashion.

Sandy was following the road by which the Conestoga had come in to the ranch and, as this way was over McComber's range, Sandy figured the wagons with the diseased cattle had taken a road that lay below McComber's line. He would not infect his grazing, poor as it was. Just one road led into Broom's country. When he reached that road, he knew he would find fresh wagon sign.

All the monotony of night riding, the even, mechanical movements of his horse, the sensation of being always in the same place, did not bother Sandy. There was so much uncertainty of what lay at journey's end. A hundred different situations arose in his mind, and he worked out a solution for each. And, above all, the fear that he would be too late tormented him so that it was all he could do to refrain from spurring the mare to a wild run.

In three hours they covered the distance traveled all afternoon by the Conestoga, and came to the parting of the ways. There was no time lost in farewells. But Nose Paint did make an attempt to tell Sandy something about the Argentine. He was insistent. His voice followed Sandy as he rode on. Sandy looked back once to see his three friends stringing out to the north. Nose Paint was waving his arms. They dissolved into the night.

Loneliness came to him, enveloped him in smothering folds. It was a new sensation for, always before when upon the fields of the earth, he had found companionship in loneliness. All things, the stars and the moon and the sun, the rolling land, meadow and desert and hills, the blowing winds, were his friends, and now he had been deserted. He was alone, all alone, and the feeling was worse than facing battle, for in fight there was action, the fellowship of danger.

He came to the one road wagons could take to enter Tom Broom's

range. He dismounted, scratched a match, and, by its light, examined the dust. There were wagon tracks, one set imposed upon broader ones, so evidently the Conestoga was in the lead. He begrudged the necessary moments lost. He was on ground familiar as the feel of the saddle under him. Loneliness still held him.

There was no drought upon this land, a dryness, yes, but the odor of self-cured herbage was in the slow breeze, and the scent of healthy land. And the live oaks given by a generous God for shade and beauty were thick. Their swelling forms bulked in the night. Close to earth the chaparral appeared as heavy, dense shadows, the very substance of black. Over all extended the vault of the sky, star-spangled with living points of gold, of blue and of red. No star too small to have a place in the pattern of the heavens. The glory of them reflected dimly to earth. This land was part of Rancho San José; it was home, with all that name implied of security, happiness and worthy labor. Sandy felt lonely no longer. This was home, and the security of it lay in his keeping.

He could tell the passage of time by the slow turning of the constellations. He figured three hours had passed since he left his companions. In another hour, would appear the evidence of dawn. There remained another hour or more of hard riding. For an hour past, Sandy had sensed that something was following him. The feeling became so strong, finally, that he turned often to look back, but could see no shape amid the shades of night. Once or twice, the mare twitched back her ears to listen, but Sandy could catch no sound. The feeling remained, but he gave no heed.

NIGHT began to ebb, but so slowly the eye could not detect the change.. Only at intervals could Sandy notice that the face of nature was a trifle clearer to view. He came to the place where a north-and-south fence of Tom Broom's range made a right-angle turn to run west. The road turned also, but to continue to the north. The wagon tracks continued on west over unbroken ground which, being level and hard, offered as good a surface for wheels as the road.

The shadows of the night were graying, and the stars were paling in their stations. Sandy could see the ground, and the designs upon it, without slowing. There were the wagon tracks just as they were when he first sighted them, and under them were hoof marks of horses. He recalled the string of horses he had heard when he lay bound in the fire trap. Saddled horses, led by McComber and Biglow, must have gone on ahead, was his conclusion.

He pulled the mare down to a slower pace, and rode a few paces away from the wheel tracks. He kept a sharp look upon the fence. He had ridden that fence many times, and knew every foot of it, knew the country about. The forage here was much less than that on lower ground to the north, which, being in the eastern Almagre, was fine. There was good water, too. So, as a rule, the Broom cows did not range close to the fence.

Sandy came to where the fence had been cut. Signs on the ground were as plain as though written in a book. The wagons, at least, the last one, had stopped, and something had been unloaded. The marks of plank ends showed in the dirt, and about were the tracks made by men's boot heels. Cow tracks led to where the fence had been cut, and

inside to the field. And the fence had been neatly repaired.

Sandy looked about in the graying light, but saw no cow. So, here had been planted the first seeds of disaster. Sandy knew the animal could walk, and probably had set out for water. It might be a half mile away by now, and in any one of many directions. And, with every step, it would infect the pasture.

Sandy determined to ride on, to see if he could catch the wagons before they could unload all their deadly cargo. Duskiness still lay upon the land, but it was swiftly growing lighter. Sandy looked down at his gun belt. He rubbed a thumb along the bases of the cartridges in their loops. His traveling thumb wiped off the road dust, revealing the bright brass of the shell butts; showed, too, the copper of the caps, and every cap bore the indentation of a firing pin. Frantically, he snaked off the gun belt, scrubbed away the dust from those shells not touched, and found that all save one were dead.

"Why," he thought, "should a feller save fired shells?"

Nobody saved six-gun shells. Sandy decided that perhaps the chunky man who had owned the gun kept tally of the cows he shot by saving the shells. Sandy drew the gun from the holster, and inspected the contents of the cylinder. The gun held five live shells, and one that had been exploded. He replaced this with the one good shell he had found in the belt. The belt he tossed over by the fence, and carried the gun in his hand.

A gun and six shells! There were at least six men in McComber's gang, and in addition, eight or so sick cows to be destroyed. And ten times that many shells might not be half enough.

The mare's hoofs pounded out, "You're licked; you're licked!" over and over.

Sandy pulled himself together. Licked or not, he would have a run for his money; that is, as much of a run as six shells could give him. He urged the little mare on.

He came to where the fence had been cut a second time. The upper and second strand of wire had been clipped, while the lower strand had been held down by standing upon it. The upper wire had been mended with a piece cut from the middle strand. It was a hurried job. Close by, inside the fence, were scattered clumps of chaparral which grew denser to the north. No cow was in sight, and he had no time to hunt.

A quarter of a mile farther on, he found the third cut, which was even more hastily mended than the second. He pulled up. This, too, was chaparral country. By reading the signs, he concluded the last wagon had been unloaded and had gone on, for from this point on, its tracks preceded those of the Conestoga. Two or three cows appeared to have been driven through the cut. And here he found indication that two riders were inside the fence. They could herd cows toward the valley, then circle back to join the wagons.

SANDY reasoned further. McComber and Biglow had left the ranch after the wagons had gone. They led saddled horses for the wagon crews to use after the wagons and teams had been disposed of. The two would have had time to go on, tether the horses, and return to supervise the unloading. If that were so, the remaining load of sick cows could not be far ahead.

The sky was the clear blue of

morning. The stars had vanished. Nature was quiet, as if awaiting, with bated breath, the coming of the dawn, which was not far away. In the air were the sweet odors of the earth. There was no sound until a woodpecker began his morning work. The tapping was as loud as if made at Sandy's elbow.

He was ready to go on when, stronger than ever, he experienced the feeling that he was being followed. None of Broom's men could know he was loose. He put the sensation down to a mild case of the jitters, and spurred on.

The ground ahead dropped to a swell, and on the swell was a grove of oaks which formed a screen against the view beyond them. The red mare went down the slope and, as the ground began to rise, Sandy pulled her up short. She swung in a circle.

Here all three strands of the fence were cut at one part, and the wire pulled back to the other post to allow full passage. The wagon had been backed to the gap. The signs indicated the entire load of cows had been taken from the Conestoga. Propped against the post on Sandy's right were a pair of fence pliers. Instinctively, he put a hand to the pommel of his saddle. The roll he had tied there had contained a pair of pliers. The pliers were gone!

Those by the post might be his or not, but they evidently had been propped up there so as to be ready for use when the user returned. There were horse tracks inside the fence. Horse tracks following cow tracks, and by the length and position of the hoof marks, Sandy knew the two riders went slowly. That would be necessary in herding sick cows, especially after a long, hard, jolting ride. So this was the end of the trail for McComber's scheme.

Sandy walked the mare through the gap in the fence, then pulled up short. Just ahead of him was a cow. He walked the mare until he was close, but not too close, moving so he could see both sides of the animal. The cow stood in a dejected attitude, with head drooping, and swollen tongue lolling. The tormented creature took a slow, painful step. Sandy raised his gun and pulled trigger. Instinctively, any cowman would have done the same. The shot took the cow behind an ear and he fell; the hind legs kicked, then the whole body settled down. The echoes rolled.

Sandy had served notice of his presence by this shot, but he did not think of that then. There had been no brand on the animal, but then, McComber was not such a fool as to use his own marked cattle when he could get mavericks or strays.

There were five live shells in Sandy's gun.

He realized, now, the consequence of his shot, and instantly became alert. He glanced swiftly around, but saw no living thing.

"Easy, easy," he whispered to the mare, and quieted her.

He began to back her toward the cover of a drift of sumac. He had a sudden odd feeling of danger menacing him from the north and the northwest. The mare moved slowly. Sandy guided her around the brush until he was well screened. He sat a little sideways in saddle, holding his gun in hand. Daylight was flowing in from the east. A lark sent high a shaft of melody, expanding his yellow throat with the delight of song. The silver sides of the scrub oak leaves gleamed in the morning light. In the clear air were the faint, restful aromas of sun-blessed spaces, of trees and chaparral and

grasses, odors ready to revive under the kindling rays of the sun.

THIS was the first breathing space Sandy had had. The quiet and peace soothed him. He was looking north to thick chaparral and noting the little caves of darkness at the bases of the growths.

From this chaparral darted a scared rabbit. His ears were laid back, his forepaws reached for space, his body was like an arrow in flight. He came on in long leaps, saw or smelled the carcass of the cow, and bounded off at a right angle to straighten and head for Sandy's shelter. The little beast found danger again, wheeled on a new tack. Sandy settled himself in the saddle and crouched. He thought he was well concealed.

Hoofbeats sounded, muffled by the soft earth and the deep cushion of oak leaves. The riders came to view simultaneously, a rope length apart. They were riding at a walk. At an oak, they divided. They were McComber and Biglow. Each held a gun ready to pull down; each glanced about, as if seeking some one. And that some one, Sandy knew, was the one that fired the shot.

Sandy held motionless. As with one motion, McComber and Biglow threw down and fired. As the motion started, Sandy crouched and spurred. The red mare leaped, and Sandy took a quick shot at each of the two men.

Three live shells remained in his gun.

The mare's second leap brought her and Sandy to other brush. Yells resounded as the chase started. Sandy had no thought of flight. He had failed to stop these men from infecting Rancho San José. That was done and over. He would kill McComber and Biglow, if he could, as if they were loco coyotes. He saw that his two shots had not taken effect. That disturbed him.

McComber tried to head Sandy off while Biglow rode hard after him, but Sandy cut between them. He tried to get in a sure shot at one or the other, but failed. Much of the chaparral grew in islands, with clear ground around them. Sandy dodged among these, keeping ahead of his enemies, giving them no chance to get at him from the sides.

There was no advantage in horses. The mare was the best of the three, but had traveled harder and faster than the other two horses. She had worn off the edge of her nimbleness.

Sandy reined her through an opening in the chaparral. Twigs and branches snapped. He meant to double around the brush and catch one of his pursuers in the rear. A gun fired. As Sandy rounded the clump, he met McComber almost head on, and pulled down on him. It was one of those shots a man can't miss, but Sandy did. He had been too sure of his aim.

Two live shells remained in Sandy's gun.

McComber fired hastily as he ducked low in the saddle and swung his horse from Sandy's path. He disappeared behind the chaparral.

Sandy spurred on in hope of catching Biglow, but that individual was too foxy to stay ahead of Sandy, and kept concealed by the brush.

The game of hide and seek went on. All the while the fight was shifting to the east, away from the gap in the fence. The chaparral began to give way to clumps of scrub oak, which were much higher than a rider's head. They formed a maze

in which were a hundred hiding places.

Twisting and turning this way and that, Sandy set an erratic course. He kept track of his enemies by glimpsing them as they flashed along the winding paths. They spotted Sandy, too, and having plenty of ammunition, shot at every chance. Sandy bided his time. He would not hesitate at any good target. He surprised Biglow, dashed up to him, and let go. He missed.

ONE shell remained in Sandy's gun.

Then Sandy knew the gun was at fault, it would not throw true. He had missed two good shots. The gun shot high, and to the left, was Sandy's hunch.

"Close in on him," McComber yelled. "He's got one shell left. He can't hit a barn. He has that old gun of Bill's."

Bill evidently was the chunky man who had been set as guard over Juanita.

Still the fight was shifting to the east, to where the scrub oak joined heavy chaparral. Sandy reined the mare into an opening amid the brush. A long alley bordered by growths opened up. Sandy raced down it with the expectation of finding an outlet. McComber and Biglow charged into the alley. Gunshots rang out. There was no outlet. Sandy was boxed. He wheeled the mare, pulled up and faced his enemies. He had a chance to get one of them.

McComber and Biglow reined in.

Sandy pulled down on McComber, who laughed.

There was a crash in the chaparral to Sandy's right.

"That's one of our men," McComber said.

"Shall I plug him?" Biglow asked.

"If you can hit him, Mark. I don't know how he got loose from being singed. And it sort of looks like we got to clean out all Broom's outfit. We'll cover up, and dead men make no talk. Shoot when you're ready."

Biglow raised his gun slowly, deliberately.

"Remember what Juanita said," Sandy shouted.

McComber started. His mouth opened.

Biglow looked at McComber.

Sandy squeezed trigger, holding low and to the right of his target, which was McComber's chest. The gun roared, he plunged sideways from the saddle. As he swung through the air, as his shoulders thumped to earth, he heard no gunshot. A horse was running away. He glimpsed McComber, flat on his back. And Biglow was on the ground, rising to his feet. Sandy made a tumbling dive for the prone McComber, snatching for his gun. He got it, and the weapon of its own accord seemed to start firing.

Sandy was on his knees, fired again. Biglow's gun was roaring. Sandy pressed trigger as he got to his feet and saw Biglow sag to earth, his body moving slowly, as if reluctant to touch the clean earth. The fellow fell on his face, and his body twitched. His horse looked curiously down at him.

Five seconds of time covered the happening. Sandy wondered why Biglow had dismounted from his horse.

"Sandy! Sandy!"

The chaparral crackled. Sandy jerked his head around.

"Sandy, don't shoot!"

A ragged, dusty figure burst from the brush.

"Nose Paint! What—how in blazes did you——"

"I follered you, Sandy."

"Followed me?" Sandy recalled the feeling he had had while riding in. There was a strange smell in the air, a smell foreign to the locality, the smell of whisky.

"Did you knock Biglow off his horse?"

"Not exactly. I chucked that bottle of whisky he give me. Guess I missed him, but when it whizzed by his head, it must of sort of scared him so he lost balance. There it is over yonder, busted, dog-gone it."

"Thanks, old-timer, you sure helped me out."

"Aw, rats! You'd have got him. You saved your own life by yellin' about Juanita."

Sandy smiled slowly. He listened. McComber's wagon crews were somewhere about. Doubtless they had heard the firing. He reloaded the guns taken from the dead men.

"Why did you follow me, cowboy?"

"I asked the girls if I could," Nose Paint said. "They was all right an' they thought I ought to go with you. An'——"

"Why didn't you catch up with me?"

"You'd have sent me back an' I had to talk with you—had to tell you how to cure the foot-and-mouth disease."

"Cure it!" Sandy exclaimed. "Why, there ain't no——"

"Pull up; there is so," Nose Paint declared. "Down in the Argentine, where I been, they have it all the time. Don't think much of it. When a cow gits nervous, an' off his feed, an' shifty on his feet, you paint the hoofs with pine tar and sew a canvas boot on 'em. The tar kills the disease an' the boot keeps the cow from tongue scratchin', an' then the sickness can't git a holt in the mouth. Of course, if a cow gits too far gone, there's nothin' to do but shoot him."

Sandy rubbed the back of his neck and thought.

"Dog-gone it! I tried to tell you that back on McComber's ranch, an' when we was ridin'."

"You've done a lot, old settler, and it strikes me, Rancho San José has a job to clean up after those sick cows."

"You can do it, Sandy, you sure can." Upon the old man's bearded and grimy face lay the light of faith. There was adoration in his eyes.

"Sandy, you're the only feller what ever treated me like a—a human bein'."

"Let that ride," Sandy replied. "You've doubled the score a hundred times. Put here there, partner!"

They shook hands.

"Listen!" Nose Paint whispered.

Not far away sounded hoofbeats, thudding upon the soft earth.

"Four or five riders," Sandy estimated.

"McComber's wagon crews, I bet," Nose Paint said. "Gimme one of them guns."

CHAPTER VI.

SAFE RANGE.

SANDY mounted his own horse, and Nose Paint the one that had been ridden by Biglow. They rode out and moved cautiously to the west, toward the gap in the fence. Through a screen of leaves, Sandy spotted a cluster of riders, and the first one he recognized was Valencia.

Sandy let out a yell which was answered by Tom Broom. There was Joe Handon, and three of the boys.

"What happened here?" Tom

erupted, getting right at the point. "Valencia told me what went before."

Sandy told him, taking as little time as possible, but he did not mention Nose Paint's cure for the foot-and-mouth disease. He concluded with: "I got here too late, Tom. Sorry I fell down on the job you gave me."

Tom's face was bleak, and he spoke slowly.

"Boy, you did all one man could," he said. "I'm saying that, knowing Nose Paint saved your bacon when he jarred up Biglow with the whisky bottle. I guess we'll have to watch our cows and shoot those that catch the sickness." He gestured with his hands.

Sandy said to Nose Paint, "Tell Tom what you learned in the Argentine."

Nose Paint told, in detail.

Tom listened carefully. Gradually the bleak expression left his face.

He said: "Simple as rolling off a log. I've been raising cows all my life, and never heard of it."

"But you've never had the foot-and-mouth disease on your range," Joe reminded him.

Tom nodded at his foreman. "Joe, you take these three men and go see what became of McComber's wagon crews. The rest of us will stay here and talk things over. We ain't out of the woods yet."

The four men rode off.

Tom waited until the four had gone.

"You know, Sandy," he said, "you can't take any blame for not being superhuman. But I'm going to load you down. You take charge of handling this situation. What do you figure to do?"

"Quarantine the territory where we find the sick cows. Shoot those that McComber brought in if we can spot 'em. Cut that land off by a drift fence, then watch the cows inside the fence. If any show signs of the sickness, give 'em Nose Paint's remedy. We can go east of here with the wagons and bring in fence by the ten-rod section. We can bring out wire and posts from the home ranch. One good thing, our cows have been kept under fence and are fence-broke. Our fencing won't have to be so good."

TOM nodded his full approval.

"There's this," he said soberly. "Three of my best bulls are right in close. Spotted 'em as we came in. Them animals cost me three thousand dollars apiece. I hope Nose Paint's dope works. If it does"—he paused and looked Nose Paint squarely in the eye—"if it works, you got a home for life, provided you lay off whisky."

"I've practically quit right now," Nose Paint claimed. "I ain't had a drink in nigh two days. Dog-gone it!" He returned Tom's look. "You let me work with the boys," he asked, " 'cause that will help."

Tom nodded, and turned to Sandy with the remark, "Grab root, cowboy."

Sandy asked Valencia and Nose Paint to stay by the gap in the fence while he and Tom rode out to look over the situation. They trailed McComber's and Biglow's horse tracks as they had herded the last batch of sick cows. The trail led a quarter of a mile, and in a close compass they found four cows.

"They look sick," Tom commented. "Two of 'em are mavericks and two of 'em bear my brand." He drew his gun. " 'Nother point, Sandy, these critters show the lack of good feed. They were never

reared on my range. Let's clean 'em up."

They shot the four cows.

By this time Joe and his men had returned. They reported they had followed the wagon tracks to a narrow, deep canyon, a mile away. The wagons had been driven in the canyon. When they arrived, they found that McComber's men had hamstrung the horses and were ready to leave. There had been an exchange of shots with no results, then McComber's men had taken to the chaparral. Joe and his men had put the horses out of their agony and set fire to the wagons.

"Why did they hamstring the horses?" Valencia asked, horror in her voice.

"There wouldn't be no bullet holes, so it would look like they died of thirst, mebbe," Joe replied.

"But the brands?"

"The buzzards would 'tend to that."

All the riders set out to explore the country behind the cuts in the fence to the east. They found two cows which, they suspected, were a part of McComber's cargo, but no more. They figured two or more of the diseased creatures were loose.

"We need fence and wire and staples and posts and grub," Sandy said. "Let's go, fellers."

Half of the crew went to the home ranch for wagons to bring fencing materials. The other half rode the open border of the section to be quarantined, keeping all stock south of the imaginary line. When the wagons returned with material and tools, they gave McComber and Biglow a decent burial. The carcasses of the infected cows were covered with earth.

All worked. Valencia took charge of the grub, thus releasing the cook for fence building. She, Juanita, and Mrs. Broom prepared the food. In three days, working far into the night, the men threw up a mile and a half of drift fence, which shut off the infected band. Within the inclosure were one hundred and forty-odd head of stock, including Tom's three prize bulls, which were given into Nose Paint's charge.

When the main fence was up, cross fences were built to divide the field into small pastures wherein a small number of the suspected animals could be kept and closely watched. At the first sign of nervousness in a cow, Nose Paint's remedy was applied. Tom lost seven cows, among them, it was thought, those remaining uncaught of McComber's contribution. Two of the bulls were infected, but Nose Paint got them in time. A month passed before the men were confident they had wiped the disease from Rancho San José.

Sandy and Joe rode over to McComber's place and found the ranch looted and deserted. Signs showed that the herd had been driven north. The theory was that McComber's men had taken all movable things and vamosed. That land had become "the Ranch of Lost Souls" in fact. The only domestic animal Sandy found was a half-starved cat, which ran to him, mewing piteously. He took the creature home to Juanita, who welcomed it with tears. The old woman had been received by Tom into his home. She had a place by the fireside.

SANDY and Valencia were much together. Tom watched their close comradeship, but said nothing.

There had been an attempt to rechristen Nose Paint.

"I guess not," he flared. "My right name is Percy Algernon Smith.

I'd rather be called Nose Paint. My snoot is sort of gittin' pale and shrinkin' some, but you call me Percy or Algernon an' I'll go get drunk, dog-gone it!" He added reflectively, "An', gosh, how I'd hate it!"

Nose Paint he remained.

One day, after the evening meal, Valencia, Tom, and Sandy were sitting on the porch by the rose garden. Mrs. Broom had gone into the house, saying she could not knit in the dark.

"Who's idear was it," Tom erupted, "drinking coffee away from the table?"

"Mine," Valencia admitted. "It's nicer, Uncle Tom."

"Finishing school!" Tom snorted.

"We young ladies were not allowed coffee. Here's Juanita."

The old woman approached with a tray, laden with coffeepot, cups, sugar and a lone candle.

"Stir the coffee with the candle, I s'pose," Tom growled.

"Here are spoons, señor." Juanita brought spoons from an apron pocket.

The coffee was poured. Juanita remained.

"Read my cup, Juanita?" Valencia asked.

"It is all foolishness, and it has served its purpose." The old woman's face was tight.

"Please, Juanita. You promised."

Juanita moved the candle, so that its light fell upon the black pool in the girl's cup. Juanita's face relaxed, her lips formed in a smile.

"What I see is in your heart."

"What is in my heart?" Valencia insisted.

"What I see in the cup."

Valencia sighed. "Look in Sandy's cup."

The old woman was still smiling as she shifted the candle. She gazed into Sandy's cup.

"I see the same."

"But——"

That was all Valencia could say as Juanita moved silently to the doorway. A light laugh came back—a laugh that was like a ghost echo from laughter gone seventy years.

"Did you ever!" Valencia uttered in bewilderment.

"Half-wit!" Tom snorted at her. He got up from his chair. "I'm tired of hanging around this ranch," he stated. "Me and maw are going on a trip. Wanta see things. Maybe I'll be back in a year or so. We never had any children. You take holt, son—I mean, Sandy. Joe's a good foreman. You let him go on as he has, but you're the boss." He began to stamp toward the door. "That's the main idea. See you later."

"But, Uncle Tom, what about me?"

"Aw, look in Sandy's coffee cup." With that advice he entered the house.

"What do you think of that?" Valencia wanted to know.

"I think a whole lot of it. You're stalling."

"I am not."

"You are so. You know blame well I love you to fits."

"Does the whole family have to spur you on?"

"Not so you'd notice. I ain't had time before."

He blew out the candle and reached his arms around the table. It wasn't by accident she came into them. They were on their feet.

"Sandy!"

"You haven't said you love me."

"Gosh sakes, do I have to?"

"No."

"Well! You'll have to reach a little lower."

Sandy did.

"That's fine," Tom's voice exploded from the door. "We'll have a fiesta before we move the herd to the preferred grazing. And the high spot will be a wedding, or I'm a ground squirrel. Say, Sandy, a half interest in Rancho San José de Buenos Aires goes to you and Valencia with the wedding. Son, I'm certainly a lucky man!"

There were two close by who figured they were luckier.

SHEEP TRAILS

IN order to make money out of cows, they must be killed for meat; not so with sheep. Sheep simply get their wool sheared off, and immediately a new money crop begins to grow, while the sheepman still has his sheep.

In the Western States, 25,555,000 sheep were produced last year. Some of these were killed for meat, but the majority were kept for the wool. Frank Andrews, Federal agricultural statistician, says that rearing sheep on farms is a minor phase of the wool business. The greater part of the sheep are range animals, and take part in the trek each spring and fall from mountains to valleys and back again. These trails extend from one hundred to one hundred and fifty miles in length. One which runs from Lovelock, Nevada, is two hundred and fifty miles long.

The sheep come down from the mountains in September and October, because of the snow, and feed upon stubble fields and pastures in the foothills. Later, they are trailed out to the sagebrush deserts, where their food supply consists of weeds, shrubs and salt sage. When spring comes, they go back to the mountains.

Herders with their sheep dogs of almost human intelligence engineer this mighty shift in the live-stock population of Western States. Clanking along in the rear are the horse-drawn, canvas-covered camp wagons, that serve most shepherds as home the year around. Sheep travel slowly, but it is grazing law that they must move not less than five miles a day while on the trail.

Under The Joshua Tree

By ELI COLTER
Author of "Treasure Trail," etc.

THE door of the ramshackle rooming house flew open with the force of two struggling men behind it. Bob Semon, dishevelled, unkempt, dirty, reeled out of the doorway and halfway across the dirt walk. The proprietor of the rooming house thrust his head out of the doorway and scowled belligerently.

"And don't come back!" he said violently. "You owe me for too many nights' lodgings already, and when I refused you a room last night I meant it. I don't allow no drunken bums coming in and sleeping on my hallway carpet." And he slammed the door with a loud bang.

Bob tried to turn, lost his balance, and would have gone sprawling if he hadn't almost fallen over a small gray man who stood there, surveying him with regretful eyes. The small man caught Bob's wide belt in strong, thin fingers, and held the younger man upright.

"Drunk again!" he said sharply.

Bob Semon blinked, and shook his head in an effort to clear his blurred senses. The effort failed. He saw who was there now, beside him, holding him upright—"Gold Rush Joe" Budd. Only Bob saw two Joes, and both of them looked unpleasantly angry, and on the verge of vehement reproof. Well, he didn't want any of Joe's reproofs and admonitions. Why couldn't people let him go to the devil in his own way? He seemed to be bound there, fast enough, and he'd lost all will to pull himself off the toboggan. Then it occurred to him that Joe had said something, that Joe had remarked that he was drunk again.

Bob frowned. "What's it to you?" he demanded sourly.

Joe shrugged, and Bob's scope of observation extended a little. He noted, now, that while Joe still gripped his belt, he was, with his free hand, holding a heavy pack across his shoulder.

"Going somewhere?" Bob asked, still disagreeably.

Joe nodded, let go of the belt, and stepped back a pace, surveying the younger man with critical eyes.

"Yep. I'm goin' out there, Bob. Leavin' right away."

He pointed to a ridge toward the east, beyond the little town. Bob's bleared eyes followed his pointing finger. The Frying Pan! Joe was going into the Frying Pan! Bob grunted a meaningless monosyllable. Let him go. Let anybody go that wanted to. As for him, he was thundering glad he didn't have anything over there; that was one place he certainly didn't want to explore. He'd heard too much of the barren waste and searing heat that lay that way. But men went there, he admitted to himself with a twisted grin; poor little fools like Gold Rush Joe went there.

For, over there in the Frying Pan, men long had said a rich bonanza lay, for whoever could find it, and men had gone seeking it, driven by the gold fever burning in their veins. And most of them had stayed there, their flesh food for vultures, and their bones left whitening on the rock and sand. Bob shivered, and drew himself upright, a little steadier now. The thought of such an inferno as the Frying Pan sobered him slightly. He gave a small, sardonic chuckle.

"You ought to be old enough to have more sense than that, Joe. You take a ramble over into that hot place and you'll never come back."

"Oh, I reckon I'll come back, some time." Joe shifted the pack on his shoulder. "First, I was lookin' for you, though. Glad I run onto you this way and didn't have to go huntin' you all over tarnation and back."

"You were looking for me?" Bob frowned again. "What the devil you want of me?"

Joe's calm gray eyes fixed upon him. "Why, I want you to go out into the Fryin' Pan with me, Bob."

Bob blinked again, and stared, and his jaw dropped, and within two beats of his heart he was cold sober, without realizing it.

"What! Me go into the Frying Pan? You're crazy! I wouldn't go into the forsaken hole for any man living."

"I'm not askin' you to go for any man," Joe replied quietly. "I'm askin' you to go for Wilma. Wilma's sort of in trouble, and you and me have got to tend to it. There ain't nobody else to do it. And, to tend to it, we got to go out there." And he gestured again toward the Frying Pan.

BOB gazed at gray little Gold Rush Joe, for a moment, in silence, his bleared eyes narrowing. He knew what kind of trouble Wilma was in; he knew just how long Platte had been allowing her and her mother to live on in the little house they were trying so hard to buy, and he knew how much time had elapsed since they had been able to make a payment. And Joe thought he could find that rich strike out in the Frying Pan, and bring the money to Wilma, so she and her mother could pay for the little home, and not only be free from all obligation to the heavy-handed Platte, but have their house clear of debt and be able to draw free breath again.

Sort of nice of the old coot to think of it, to want to do that for Wilma. Only, Joe was a little too late, Bob reflected. He was very sober now. The thought of Wilma usually was enough to sober him—or cause him to get drunk again. It was the same old story, the same old bitter and degrading story. He knew how Dill Platte had been

hounding Wilma and her mother for the two thousand dollars they owed him, and he, Bob, desperate to pay off that debt and see them free, unable to make or borrow that big a sum himself in a short time, had been the sucker. Yeh, that was it, a sucker.

Anybody was a sucker to think he could make money gambling, especially in Dill Platte's saloon, with Platte's smooth-fingered card sharp, Dan Thorpe. It wasn't made that way, and, he knew it now—too late. Everything was too late. It was too late for him, what with Platte holding his I O U for three thousand dollars. It was too late for Wilma, who was going to marry Dan Thorpe, and Thorpe was going to pay the debt on the house the very minute they were married. It was too late for Gold Rush Joe, who wanted to go over into the Frying Pan, find that bonanza, and pay off Wilma's debt himself.

Bob suddenly laughed aloud, a grim, harsh laugh, and his bleared eyes were cold and bitter.

"Wilma is going to marry Dan Thorpe, Joe. So your nice, generous idea isn't worth a whoop in Hades. And no man this side of heaven could get me into the Frying Pan." He shrugged. "Besides, I can't stand here talking to you. I have a date with Dan Thorpe."

What kind of date was none of Joe's business, he told himself. Dan was showing a decent streak, after all. Dan knew he'd never be able to pay those I O U's to Platte. Dan was staking him to a small sum so he could slip out of the country tonight, and go a long way, and forget it—and Platte would have a sweet time finding him. "I may be seeing you some time again, Joe—somewhere."

Joe shifted the heavy pack. He evicted the cud of tobacco he had been chewing. "Listen, Bob," he said evenly, "I ain't got much time to fool with you. You're goin' with me, and the quicker you make up your mind to it the more trouble you'll save yourself."

Fury swept Bob Semon. What did Joe think he was, to be ordered about like that? Why, he could break the small gray man in two with one hand. If the old fool wanted to go out there and scorch to death in that furnace, he was welcome to it. But no man on earth could make him go there. He said so.

"Get out of my way, Joe. No man this side of heaven can make me—oh, I said that before, didn't I? Well, I still mean it."

"Reckon I can make you go, if I have to," said Gold Rush Joe. He dumped the heavy pack on the ground with a thump. "Pick that up and come along, Bob."

Bob's eyes widened, and incredulity mingled with his fury. It had happened so quickly. So easily. He didn't know Gold Rush Joe could move like that. With a single swift motion the little gray man had dropped the pack, and whipped something from his waistband, something grim, and black, and loaded with lead. One of the small man's hands was tightly clenched. The other, its knotted muscles tense, gripped the gun, and the gun was pointed straight at Bob's chest. Joe's cool eyes were not cool now They were like points of fire. The threat that burned in them was as merciless as the leveled gun.

Bob fought the dismay that swept him. "You wouldn't dare shoot right here on the street!" he challenged.

"Don't egg me onto it," Joe advised grimly. "I can shoot pretty

straight. You're better off dead than the way you are, and the only way you got of stayin' alive is to go with me. Pick up that pack."

Bob stared back into the smaller man's burning eyes, into the grim lines of the thin old face. Did the old coot mean it? Yes, he meant it, all right. Bob glanced wildly up and down the street. Not a soul in sight, and they wouldn't lift a hand to get him out of this predicament if there were a half dozen men of the town in sight. None of them had looked any too indulgently on him of late; they all respected and liked Gold Rush Joe."

THERE wasn't any way out. He saw that in Joe's hard gaze. None. Not now. But wait. He'd go, since he wasn't at all eager to feel the lead from that old black gun. But he wouldn't have to go far before there'd come a chance to give Joe the slip, or knock him down, or crack him over the head.

Bob's eyes were cold with the fury and resentment that surged in him, as he stopped, and, with a good deal of difficulty, raised the heavy pack and struggled into the shoulder straps. Joe surveyed him critically as he played for time, hoping against hope, making a show of adjusting the weight of the pack evenly.

"That'll do pretty good," Joe said dryly. "Quit stallin' and get movin'. I'm still holdin' the gun on you, and if you think I won't shoot you've drunk up more of your brains than I reckoned you had. Make time, Bob. We got quite a piece to go today."

And Bob Semon went out of the little town that had looked on his fall with sober and regretful eyes, shouldering a heavy pack that belonged to Gold Rush Joe, with Gold Rush Joe's gun covering him, steady, unwavering. As the two passed beyond the last building, the only one who saw them go was Dan Thorpe, who came out of the Platte Saloon just in time to catch sight of their disappearing backs. But Dan didn't know who they were.

The edge of the Frying Pan lay sixty miles away, over the ridge of green foothills, across a wide prairie that grew continually more dry and forbidding as it approached the Frying Pan. There was a water hole at the foot of the ridge. They would reach it that evening, Joe informed Bob, as they forged steadily ahead through the increasing heat. Bob scowled, and didn't answer.

They might reach the first water hole that night, but he doubted it. And, anyway, that was as close to the Frying Pan as the infuriated little man was going to force him. He'd made up his mind to that. The gun still covered him, as the miles and the hours lengthened, but the hot sun, and the alcohol in his system, combined to make him slightly sick, and he had little energy to figure out a ruse for escaping.

There were, in fact, several things Bob hadn't taken into account. For one thing, he had overlooked the fact that he hadn't been using his muscles for several months. And he had overlooked the number of miles they were covering, and what the effect this unremitting advance was going to have on him when they reached the first water hole. As the sun began to lower in the sky, he began to realize that he was wearing out.

For a time he fought his growing weariness stubbornly. He wasn't going to complain that he was giving out, when that wizened little hombre beside him was still striding on, fresh as a daisy. But the resolution didn't last long. His head began to

pound, his legs felt as if they would drop off, and his stomach seemed to have a lead weight in it. His misery wrenched a groan from him before he could stop it.

"Gettin' a mite tuckered?" Joe inquired. "Well, we're only two miles from the ridge water hole."

"Two miles." Bob half halted, and turned his head to stare back at Joe—and at the gun that seemed to have grown fast to Joe's fingers. "I can't walk any two miles more tonight!"

"Got to," Joe answered laconically. "Ain't got no water to get supper."

And Bob Semon suddenly remembered that he had eaten nothing all day. They had tramped, the two of them, steadily on and on, and neither of them had said a word about food, and, as a matter of fact, he had felt no desire for food. But now the very word made him weak with hunger. Three times he swore he couldn't make the water hole, and three times Joe drove him on. When, at last, they came to the cool oasis where the water welled up from an earth crevice, Bob literally dropped to the ground, the pack still on his back. He groaned again, but Joe paid little attention to him.

Joe methodically started picking up small sticks to build a camp fire. He had thrust his gun back under his waistband. He wasn't even looking toward Bob. Bob's eyes narrowed. This was where he was going to give Joe the slip, at this stop by the water hole. Joe thought he'd got him this far, and the rest would be easy, did he? He watched Joe covertly. He knew the answer now, he told himself. Joe had some wild idea that he could find this Frying Pan bonanza. Maybe even had a lead of some kind as to its location.

SLUMPED wearily under the straps of the heavy pack, he stared at Joe from eyes that burned with hate. The infernal little desert rat had wanted some one to come out into the Frying Pan with him, but, much as they liked him, no man would come.

"Wanted some one to come out in the desert with you, so you would have more chance of getting back alive, didn't you? And nobody would come."

Joe turned cool eyes on him. "Nary a one. Looks like the old desert has fried so many fellows to death already that it's scared everybody out. Plumb weak-livered, they must be. Risky comin' out here alone, all right."

Bob shook with renewed fury. "Yeah. I just got it. And you picked on me, because you thought it wouldn't matter a whoop if you did leave my carcass out here to rot. Nobody would miss me or care what had become of me, which wouldn't worry you much, so long as you got out safe again."

"Somethin' like that," Joe agreed calmly. "Reckon we can both get out again all right though, if we play our cards correct. Get up and build the fire, while I slice some bacon."

Within precisely thirty seconds, Bob Semon knew into what kind of tight place he had been driven. He couldn't get up, not with the weight of the pack on him. Every muscle in his body protested. And here he was, in this desert, with a man who could run him to a whisper and still stay fresh. Joe had to help him to his feet so he could try to build the fire, and the first time he bent over he went flat on his face.

"Hm-m-m!" said Joe. "Plumb tuckered out."

Bob rolled over and glared up at him. "Yes, and you knew I'd be.

You kept me going all day without food and without a let-up, and you knew when night came I'd be too stiff and sore to move without yelling."

"Sort of calculated on it," Joe admitted mildly, surveying him with critical eyes. "Man can't stand much when his skin's full of whisky. And I didn't want you tryin' to give me the slip to-night."

Bob was literally dumb with anger. He was trapped. He couldn't get away, no matter how badly he wanted to, not to-night. He couldn't walk a rod, let alone get far enough away to elude this little gray man with the gimlet eyes. He began wondering how long it would be till he was toughened up enough to escape.

They reached the Gibbons water hole, on the edge of the Frying Pan, the afternoon of the third day, and Joe had forced him to carry the heavy pack all the way. He was still so sore and weary that every added mile was misery, and from the Gibbons water hole he could see nothing but glaring hot waste land, stretching away to the purple rock hills in the distance. The sun poured from the sky like vaporized flame. The heat waves shimmered and danced above the sand. A blue heat haze lay all along the base of the distant hills. Even the air he breathed seemed to have come from an oven.

Bob shuddered. There was no escape. They were going into the desert now. Into the hideous desert. Into that awful heat, where there was no rest and no surcease—and no water.

No water! He must get away from Joe to-night. There was the ridge water hole behind; he could find it again. But there was no water hole beyond the Gibbons water hole in all that scorching expanse. Joe had filled three of his six water bags at the ridge hole, but Joe had allowed him to carry only one. One water bag would barely take him back to the ridge water hole. He had to get away to-night.

He looked at Joe, and panted. "Isn't there—isn't there any water out there—at all?"

Joe shrugged. "Nothin' but Clear Blue Lake, to the foot of them hills, off that a way." He pointed to the north, where the heat haze hid the feet of the purple stone hills. "Purtiest, bluest water you ever see."

"Anything unusual in that?" Bob sneered. "Any lake is pretty and clear and blue, isn't it?"

"Not so purty and clear and blue as Clear Blue Lake," said Joe softly. "You'd find out, if you ever started for it with your tongue hangin' out. It's got a Joshua tree growin' right in the middle of it. But, we ain't goin' that way. We're goin' yander." And he pointed again, to the south.

BOB had been sitting by the small mesquite fire Joe had built, and suddenly his fury and rebellion got the better of his judgment, and he forgot that he needed to be crafty and cunning if he was to evade Gold Rush Joe. He got to his feet, and he was agreeably surprised to see how easily he did it, and to note that his muscles were not quite so stiff as they had been. His brain was cleared of alcohol fumes, and the ache was gone from his head.

True, there remained, the aching soreness of punished muscles and a driven body, but he was beginning to be able to use that body a little better. He could keep his feet all right now, and, if he weren't driven like a burro, could make a good pace.

He faced Joe, and drew himself

straight. "I'm going back," he said evenly. "You don't force me into that inferno, and I told you so in the first place. I'm sober now, and I can break your neck with one hand, even if I am sore from head to foot. So don't try pulling that gun on me."

"All right." Joe shrugged, stepped close, and laid a firm hand on Bob's arm, gripping it with tight fingers. "I got other ways."

Bob only laughed. He brought up a quick, short right, that caught Joe on the chin. He had expected to see that blow flatten the little old man, but Joe had seen it coming, and stepped back. The blow stung, but its full force was avoided. Before Bob had time to wonder why Joe hadn't gone down, he found himself caught in a viselike grip. His feet flew from under him, and he fell with terrific force on the hard-packed sand.

The fall knocked the breath out of him, and he lay there inert for a moment, helpless, glaring up at Joe.

"Trick I learned from an old chink once," Joe said caustically. "And there's plenty else I can do if you make me do it."

He turned his back, and began unrolling the pack. Bob glared at his captor with renewed hate. When, finally, he sat up, he swore to himself that he would work out of this intolerable position, and get even with Joe, if it was the last thing he ever did. Joe had boiled some dried venison over the fire, and was dishing some of it into a tin plate with some beans and hard-tack. He handed the plate to Bob.

"Eat," he said curtly.

And Bob ate, because he was hungry, and said nothing, because he was too utterly furious for any speech. He made no further attempt to escape that night. They were beside a water hole, but the water bags were all empty, and Joe was sleeping on them. In the morning, after breakfast, Joe filled the six water bags.

"How do you think we're going to carry all of them?" Bob complained.

"Easy." Joe grinned. "Another trick I learned from the old chink." And he slung the six water bags, coolie fashion, on three stout sage sticks, and pointed east and south. "We go that way. You take them two bags, along with the pack. I'll take the other four water bags."

And from there on Bob Semon learned why men seldom came back from the Frying Pan, and he gave up all immediate hope of trying to escape from Joe. They tramped for days over the trackless expanse of man-punishing waste, and there were times when Bob thought desperately of simply making a run for it. Reason, however, told him that he couldn't go far, and when the sun had laid him low, Gold Rush Joe would be on him again. There were countless times in the days that followed when he wished he could have died. Then he thought of killing Joe at night and taking all the jealousy-guarded water, and trying to make his way back to a place where a man could breathe and live.

TWICE he waited till he was sure Joe was asleep, and raised stealthily to peer over at the older man, only to see Joe's cool gray eyes regarding him somberly. And he knew he was still in the trap, and had still to go on.

At noon of the eighth day they came to break in the steep-walled canyon they had followed for two days, and the purple rock of the desert hills reared above them. At the end of the crevicelike canyon stretched what seemed to be the bed of some prehistoric river. Here lay

sand and fine silt that must have been deposited by rushing waters countless ages ago.

Two of the big water bags were empty now, and the contents of a third were half gone. Joe stretched one of the sage sticks across a point of jagged purple stone, and looped the water bags to the stick. Then he began digging a wide trench in the sand and silt, and he gestured with his head toward the slabs of purple stone that were lying about.

"Bring up some of them slabs," he commanded. "We're buildin' a cave for livin' quarters. It's too hot here to work durin' the day, so we'll just build us a sort of rock igloo, and sleep in it of days, and work evenin's and mornin's."

And, because anything that promised the least relief from the punishing heat and the furnace wind was a thing to be sought willingly, Bob obeyed. When the igloo was built of the heavy purple stone, and heaped over with sand and silt, they were both weary, and lay lown inside to rest, not even going to the added effort of preparing food.

Bob slept like the dead, and he wakened to the touch of Joe's hand on his shoulder, to feel a cool wind on his face, and to see the first faint light of dawn breaking.

"Time to start our day's work, afore it gets too hot," Joe said.

Bob rose with a feeling of new life surging through him. He breathed deeply, and the desert wind was cool on his face, and he saw that the distant hills were a glory, and that the sky was turning crimson and copper and mauve. The shadows in the hills were blue, and the misty heat haze, that never seemed to die, showed thin and pale blue at their feet. He followed Joe to a jumble of jagged projections of stone about a hundred yards away, wondering a little how a mere desert could be so bathed in beauty.

He was still seeing the wonder of the hills when Joe called his attention to some soft, almost rotten rock, he had broken off one of the rock projections. Bob's eyes widened. There was a glint of dull yellow metal in the crumbling stone.

"You take this stuff, and put it on one of them slabs, and take another rock and pound it up. I—I sorta figured I knew where it was. Pretty, ain't it?"

Bob caught his breath. And something that rose in him then, at the sight of the dull yellow gleam in that rotten rock, sent him to hours of willing labor. Joe watched him with a continual close scrutiny, yet the heat had grown terrific, and Bob's face was deeply flushed, and the sweat was dripping from both of them, before Joe finally told him that it was too hot to work any further outside, and advised him to take the pulverized rock into the igloo.

And there, in the igloo, the little gray man "dry washed" the gold. He heaped the crushed rock in his gold pan, and jarred and shook it till most of the heavier gold had settled to the bottom. Then he scraped off the rock particles from the top, and gleaned from the bottom of the pan the grains of gold and the mashed rock, which was a sort of black sand. Pan after pan, hours and hours of labor, till the heap of gold and black sand was all the two of them could carry.

"'Tain't pure metal, of course," Joe admitted. "But it'll run about sixty per cent. And that means some several thousand dollars, boy. We're takin' somethin' back with us. And we got to go. We got barely enough water left to see us to Gibbons water hole."

BOB lay in the dark of the rock igloo, and heard the hot desert wind blowing itself cool in the growing dusk, and thought fast. There were only two water bags left full now. Both of them had been existing on the merest sips of the stale water, drinking even that only when they could stand going without it no longer.

As the fever of the gold hunt died out of Bob's veins, the anger that had lain dormant in him rose again, swift, searing. After all, it wasn't his gold. It was Gold Rush Joe's gold. And it was too late, now, to expect any aid from Dan Thorpe. Thorpe would be furious with him for going off like that, without a word; too furious to listen to any explanation. And Wilma would have been married to Thorpe for over a week. And nothing else mattered, except that he leave all that behind, and try to win a new start, somewhere, in a far place. To do that, however, he needed two things.

He needed water to get himself back to the ridge, and out of this inferno, and he needed gold to buy his way into new country. He rose and slipped out of the igloo, going to the spot where Joe kept the water bags. Only one was there. The other lay on the rock below the stick, a jagged hole in its side, empty. Well, one was enough. One would get him back to the Gibbons water hole. He was sure he could find it again. He had made himself landmarks every rod of the way. And he could carry most of the gold with him. Gold Rush Joe could stay behind and think over all the indignities he had heaped on Bob Semon.

Bob did find the way almost back to the Gibbons water hole. But by that time the water bag was empty. He stood still, aghast, staring at the purple hills on the north rim of the desert—and he remembered what Joe had said: "Nothin' over there but Clear Blue Lake."

Bob's breath caught in a sharp sob of relief. He set his face toward the north, and fixed his eyes to a straining survey as he walked steadily ahead. Nearing noon, the heat of the sun stopped him, and he huddled on the sand, his head sheltered in his arms, to rest a bit. But the heat seemed worse when he was motionless, so he struggled to his feet and went on, lugging the heavy gold and the empty water bag. He wondered how long it would be before the lake would come into view, and then he rounded the top of a dune, and saw it.

He shouted in delight at sight of it. And suddenly the world of the desert was a beautiful place again, and the heat haze at the foot of the purple hills was a benediction, and the hot blue sky was a glory, for the lake shimmered clear and azure and cool, straight ahead of him. There could be no mistake about it. There was the Joshua tree, out in the very middle of it, and the reflection of the tree was in the water like another tree, upside down.

He wanted to run, but he knew better than to do that. He moved his feet in a steady rhythm, straight on, but began to grow slightly uneasy when the lake seemed farther away than he had thought. He remembered Joe saying how deceiving desert distances were, but he did not grow alarmed till he fell, and had trouble getting up again. He never knew when he fell for the last time.

He woke, at dawn, to feel the touch of water on his swollen tongue, and a cool hand on his fevered face. He raised himself up.

Desert dawn. He caught his breath. The glory of the purple hills was sharp against the clean blue sky,

the heat haze was still present, and the Joshua tree was above his head—but, there was no lake. And Gold Rush Joe sat beside him, gazing at him with concerned eyes.

"My gonnies, man, did you think it was a real lake?" Joe said. "Why, Clear Blue Lake is a mirage; it's always here at about the same time of day. I thought everybody knew about Clear Blue Lake, or I'd have explained it to you. It nearly cost you your life, son. Good thing I was so close behind."

"But—the water?"

Joe smiled, and his gaze went to something on the sand. A water bag, about half full. "Sorry, son, but I cached some on you. I—well, I sort of figured this might happen, though I hoped it wouldn't, and I had to have water to come after you. I just put that gashed bag there—in case. You feelin' well enough to start back now, before it gets hot?"

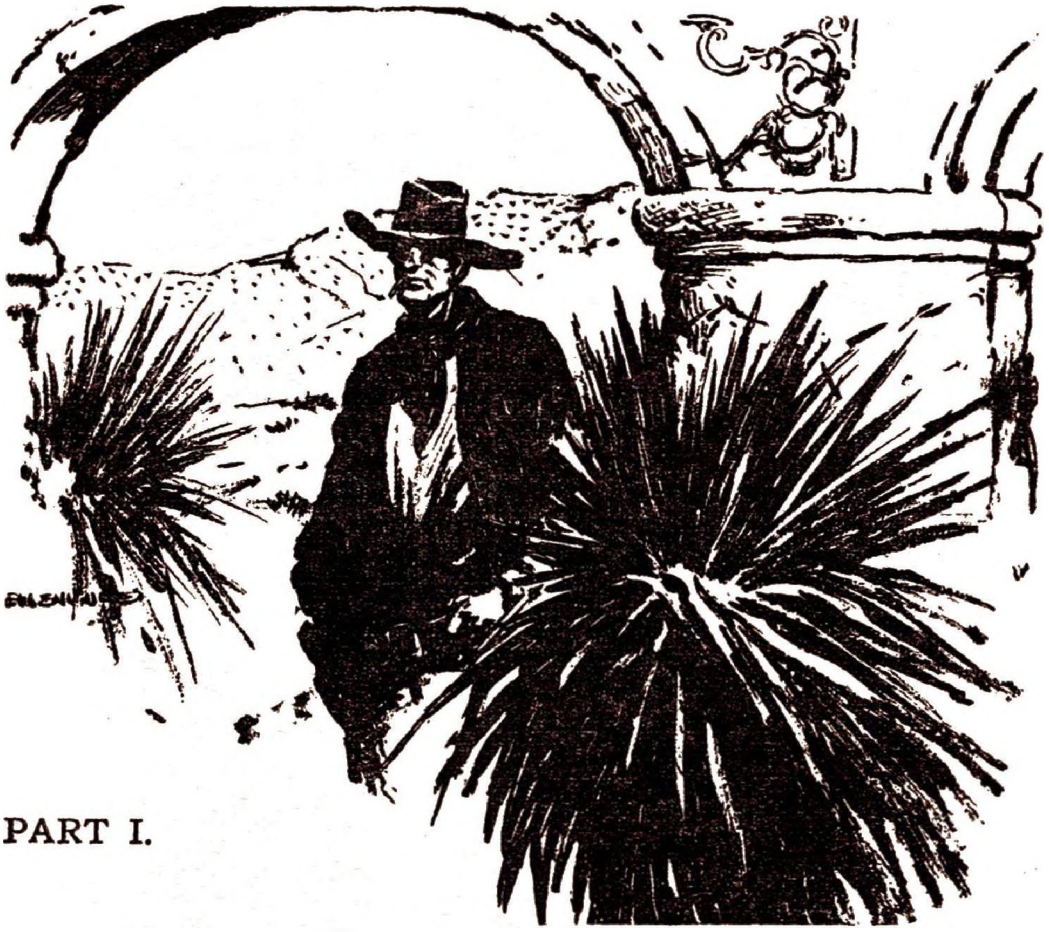
Bob Semon slowly got to his feet. He looked first at Joe, then he looked at the purple hills, then he looked up at the Joshua tree. And last he looked again at Gold Rush Joe.

"I guess that does it," he said quietly. "I thought, before, that you brought me out here to find gold. I know now what you brought me out here to find—the man I ought to be. He was waiting here for me under the Joshua tree. There are a few things back in town you don't know about, Joe. But I'm not running away from anything again. We go back, and I'll iron out what there is for me to iron out, wish Dan and Wilma well—and go on. But the man I found under the Joshua tree will go with me."

Joe turned his face away. He didn't want Bob to see that his eyes were moist. And they were moist again, several days later, as he turned to slip out of Wilma's cabin, where Wilma stood gripped in Bob's arms, and she was laughing and crying and talking all at the same time, and she was saying: "But of course, Joe knew, because I told him all about what a terrible trap Thorpe had caught you in, and I promised him that I'd not marry Dan, or any other man, till he came back from the Frying Pan——"

"To think what I owe that man," breathed Bob.

He heard the door close, and they both turned quickly. On the table lay Joe's gold pan. In it was heaped what was left of the gold and black sand. On top of the pay dirt lay an I O U for three thousand dollars, bearing the names of Bob Semon and Dill Platte. Across the face of it, in big, sprawling letters, four words were written: "Paid in Full. Joe."



PART I.

THE MIRACLE AT GOPHER CREEK

By STUART HARDY

Author of "Mountain King," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAN AT THE MISSION.

JULIO FERNANDEZ, the chore boy, abruptly sat up in the shade of the cedars and stared. It was years since he had seen pudgy Padre Anselmo attempt to run. Yet unmistakably the padre was running as he emerged from the mission; running awkwardly, with the waddle of a duck. His brown cassock was open, and as the hot desert wind struck it, the garment billowed fantastically, uncovering his short, thick legs.

There was desperation in the old man's face. "Julio!" he called. "Julio!"

The wiry Mexican sprang out of the grass like a jack rabbit. The priest, he saw, was breathless. Ever since he had passed his seventieth year, Padre Anselmo had suffered a queer ailment that kept his complexion yellow, but now, it seemed to Julio, the old man's color was ghastlier than ever.

He cried in alarm, "Here, padre! What is it?"

"Ah, there you are," with a trace of relief. "Get your mule, Julio. Ride for Johnny Tucker! As fast as you can!"

Unprepared for such an order, Julio Fernandez blinked and spread protesting hands. "But Johnny Tucker is at the Circle Arrow Ranch, padre. It is more than twenty miles."

"Twenty miles or a hundred," whispered Padre Anselmo, "you must bring him!"

It was bewildering. For more than ten years Julio had worked at the mission, doing its odd jobs and tending its small truck garden in return for food and lodging and an occasional blessing. It struck him that, in all those years, he had never seen Padre Anselmo as distressed as he was to-day. The old priest, usually gentle, pushed his shoulder with an urgent hand.

"Go," he pleaded. "Go!"

Julio impetuously started. But, being a curious man, he ran only five paces. Then he checked himself, to turn and frown suspiciously at a window of the adobe mission.

An hour ago two men had come across the desert on exhausted horses. One of them, half unconscious because of a bullet wound in his abdomen, had been carried into the mission by his grim and ponderous companion. Julio shifted narrowing eyes to the padre as he whispered:

"They brought trouble, those strangers?"

"*Si*, trouble," groaned Padre Anselmo. Feeling his knees begin to quiver, he sank weakly to the bench beside the well. He was a chubby little man, bald, round of face, and given to copious perspiration. He repeated miserably, "Much trouble."

"For you?"

The padre started, turned on the bench as if the question were preposterous. "How could they harm me? No, no, it is trouble for Johnny."

"And you want him to come for it?" Still frowning, Julio jerked his crow-black head toward the mission. "Who are they, padre? Did they tell their names?"

"Please, Julio, ride!"

"Who is the big one?" insistently. "The one with the body of a grizzly bear?"

"He calls himself Marsh. Oh, he does not matter, that one. It is the other—the wounded man——"

A sudden instinct warned Padre Anselmo not to frighten Julio by divulging too much. Pushing himself heavily to his feet, he drove out gruffly:

"Julio, this is no time to talk! Go, I tell you—go and bring Johnny Tucker!"

And having said that, the padre gathered his cassock about him and hurried into the door of the mission. Behind him, Julio hesitated a few seconds; then, scowling, turned and ran to fetch the angular mule that grazed beyond the cedars.

IT was almost sundown when Padre Anselmo, stepping out of the mission for the twentieth time that afternoon, shaded anxious eyes to peer southward, and discerned, at last, the distant dust of an oncoming rider.

The sight caused him to lean limply against the wall, as if he had been relieved of a burden. He sent a frightened glance at the doorway behind him. Then he straightened and hurried downhill, limping slightly, to meet the approaching rider.

The Mission of Santa Anita, perched on a low rise, overlooked an infinite reach of desert flats. At this hour long rivers of red and saffron and purple light lavished themselves on that barren country. Here and there clumps of cactus and chaparral cast indigo shadows. But Padre Anselmo was in no mood to admire the grandeur about him. He saw neither the vast waste land nor the misty mountains, looming like faint, silvery clouds, far to the west. His attention was focused entirely on the man who was leaving a long trail of yellow dust along the desert's rim.

Despite the intense May heat, Padre Anselmo hastened fully two hundred yards from the mission to meet Johnny Tucker. When the lanky young cow-puncher swung off his steaming, lather-flecked mustang, the old priest lifted both hands as though he were about to bestow a benediction.

"You are still in time, Johnny," he said shakily. "Let us thank Heaven for that!"

Johnny Tucker was so dusty that when he pulled off his sombrero, a yellow cloud hovered about his head and shoulders. His bony face was streaked with sweat, and his red hair lay pasted in dishevelment on his forehead. As he brushed it away with a checkered sleeve, he asked:

"What's all the excitement, padre? Julio rode up to the Circle Arrow like he'd been chased by a pack o' wolves."

"I asked him to hurry."

"That mule of his looked ready to cave in. I told him to leave it in our corral and borrow a horse to ride back. Me, I straddled my pinto and high-tailed here fast as I could make it. If there's trouble——"

"Did Julio tell you about the men who came to-day?"

"Sure." Johnny Tucker frowned. Leading his horse, he looked inordinately tall as he strode beside the stubby priest. The twenty-odd miles he had ridden seemed in no way to affect the easy swing of his young legs. "But," he added, "Julio didn't know much about them, except that one was wounded an' the other called himself Marsh."

"Bullhead Marsh." Padre Anselmo talked as if he had to force every word through a barrier of clenched teeth. "*He* is not the one that matters. It is the other."

"What's his moniker, padre?"

"Men call him—Bloody Carill."

Johnny Tucker halted as if somebody had jammed the muzzle of a gun against his heart. It was so abrupt a stop that Padre Anselmo went on two paces before he could check himself and turn. He looked up into a young face almost petrified with astonishment.

"*Bloody Carill!*"

An instant of stunned silence followed Johnny's gasp. Padre Anselmo lifted a trembling hand to loosen the cloth at his throat; it was choking him.

"Great Geronimo!" Johnny Tucker whispered in awe, and his hand clung to his holster.

Padre Anselmo looked exceedingly uncomfortable. He fidgeted from foot to foot, cleared his throat, sent fingers tips rubbing across a worried forehead.

"Johnny," he asked, "have you heard much about him?"

"Why," in amazement, "guess I've heard as much about him as I have

about killers like Billy the Kid, and Jesse James! Only—only I had an idea, padre, that Carill belonged to the past. Seems like it's years since I've heard of his *doing* anything." Johnny Tucker lifted anxious eyes to the cracked yellow walls of the mission. "He must be a pretty old buzzard."

"Old to you, but young to me. He cannot be much more than sixty."

"What in the name o' reason is he doing here?"

"He came here to die, Johnny."

"Well, I'll be——"

"And to see you."

Johnny Tucker swung bewildered eyes to the priest. "Me? What have I got to do with Bloody Carill?"

"Johnny——" Padre Anselmo spoke carefully, in the manner of one who has a difficult thing to say but realizes he cannot avoid saying it. "Johnny, this man Bloody Carill—this killer—he is your father."

CHAPTER II.

CHALLENGE.

JOHNNY TUCKER could not analyze the emotions that stormed in him during the next few seconds. Dominant among them was a sense of complete incredulity that left him confused, stupefied. Sombrero in hand, he stood gaping at the little mission as though it housed something monstrous and inconceivable.

The wind had long ago subsided. Now, with the hush of twilight crushing the desert, he found himself part of a vast, stifling stillness. It was as if the whole universe were holding its breath in amazement at what Padre Anselmo had said.

After a time, when his muscles relaxed, Johnny Tucker moistened dry lips. His horse, whose reins he still held, snorted and strained toward the water bucket beside the well. Johnny let the thirsty mustang go. He hardly saw it as it loped ahead eagerly to drink. He was still watching the mission with stunned eyes. Presently he whispered:

"It can't be!"

"It is, my son," Padre Anselmo bitterly assured him. "It's the truth."

"You always told me——"

"*Si*, I know. I lied, God forgive me. I told you that your parents were crushed in an earthquake in Baja, California. I had to tell you that, Johnny—for your own sake."

"I—I don't get it, padre!"

The priest caught the cow-puncher's dusty arm and urged him uphill toward the mission.

"Come," he said gravely. "It will be better if I tell you my story later. First you must meet him. He has traveled many miles to see you, Johnny, and he is dying."

So Johnny Tucker, forgetting his own thirst, allowed Padre Anselmo to lead him. He walked in a daze, still unable to believe in what was happening. As he entered the shadowy interior of the mission, his heart began to pound. He was seized by nervousness more constricting than any he had known in his twenty-three years. It tautened his muscles. It sent perspiration trickling down his body.

They were passing along a narrow corridor when Johnny muttered, "Every sheriff in the Southwest must be on the lookout for Bloody Carill!"

"They've been on the lookout for him many years," dryly answered Padre Anselmo. "They wanted him before you were born. But he was

not destined to die behind prison bars—or on a rope."

They entered a small chamber at the rear of the mission, and Johnny Tucker stopped.

It was a dark room, barren, save for a cot in one corner and a crude bench in another. On the bench sat a black-bearded man, his sombrero still on the back of his head. He had a massive, bulging torso, and the shoulders of an ox. But at this enormous stranger, a shadow in the murkiness, the young cow-puncher scarcely glanced.

He looked in tense wonder at the man on the cot.

A gaunt figure, long of leg and long of arm, with curly gray hair and a tangled gray beard. His eyes were closed in pain. A ragged, dirty shirt lay crumpled on the floor, and a wet cloth—stained red over the abdomen—encircled his naked waist. He had a hairy chest that heaved with labored breaths.

AS Padre Anselmo moved to the cot, Johnny Tucker nervously hitched up his gun belt. The black-bearded man rose from the bench to frown at him curiously. On his feet, he loomed more gigantic than ever.

"Carill," whispered Padre Anselmo, bending over the cot, "Johnny is here."

At that the wounded outlaw appeared momentarily to cease breathing. It was as if he were being drawn out of sleep. His eyelids fluttered, opened. Only his yellowed eyeballs moved as he turned a puzzled stare to the red-headed cowpuncher near the door.

There was a long interval of silence.

Padre Anselmo uneasily retreated, his fingers fumbling with the cord about his waist. For Johnny Tucker the stillness was beginning to be insufferable, when, at last, the wounded man said huskily:

"Johnny? You're my Johnny?"

Just what to reply, the younger man didn't know. He still felt staggered. It was demoralizing to be informed without warning that one of the most notorious killers of the Southwest was his father.

"Reckon," whispered Carill, "the padre has already told you about me, eh?"

"Ye-es."

"Gave you a—a shock, did it?"

"It knocked me off my feet," Johnny Tucker admitted, and his own voice was husky. "I can't get to believe it even now."

"Why?"

"I never had a hint o' this before!"

"You'll have to ask Padre Anselmo to tell you that end of it. I—I got to save my breath for somethin' more important. I sent for you, Johnny—traveled miles to see you——"

Abruptly "Bloody" Carill turned his eyes to the ponderous man at the other side of the room. A frown contracted the outlaw's brows. He said hoarsely:

"Bullhead, vamose. Get out."

"Me get out?" The man called "Bullhead" Marsh lifted surprised brows. "What for?"

"I hanker to talk to my boy alone."

At that, astonishingly, Bullhead Marsh tilted back his head and laughed. It was deep-chested laughter, insolent and derisive.

"Forget it, Bloody. Anything you got to tell him, I'm entitled to hear. I'm stayin'."

"Bullhead——" A tremor of anger rose in Carill's tones. "Don't stand there arguin'! I told you to get out."

"Only it happens, Bloody, that I'm no longer takin' orders from you. Sabe?"

"Why, you——"

"Reckon I know," Marsh cut in harshly, "what you're aimin' to tell the kid. I'm agoin' to hear it. What d'you figure I been waitin' for—just to watch you die?"

Johnny Tucker, resenting the man's very tone, saw the deathly pallor under his father's gray beard. He could sense the rage that was boiling in him, but it was futile rage, that could find no outlet.

"Bullhead," Bloody Carill said tensely, "I ain't got time to waste. You ought to realize that. And I swear I won't talk while you're here! Get out!"

AGAIN Bullhead Marsh laughed. He settled himself stolidly on the bench, propped his back against the wall, and let a ponderous hand sink to rest on the heel of a six-gun in his holster. Smiling affably enough, he replied:

"Sorry, Bloody. Here I am, and here I stay. If you'd rather keep your mouth shut than palaver, that's up to you. But if you figure to tell this kid about your cache, I'm in on it. Might as well get that straight. There's nothin' this side o' Hades can drive me out o' this room."

Bloody Carill didn't immediately speak. His feverish stare, ablaze with hatred, remained fastened on the black-bearded figure. Presently, however, he shifted it to the lanky cow-puncher who was his son.

Now those eyes became cold, appraising. They studied the disarrayed red hair, the bony face with its deep-set eyes and tight mouth; studied the muscular lines of the young man's lean body. Then, unexpectedly, Bloody Carill snapped:

"Johnny, put that buzzard out!"

Johnny Tucker had been peering narrowly at Bullhead Marsh. He realized, with an inner start, that this order was a test of his mettle. A challenge. He could see it in Bloody Carill's stern expression. It was as if his father had said, "Let's see, son, what you're made of. Let's see if you're man enough to beat him."

Before Johnny could speak, he heard the squeak of leather. He jerked his head around to discover that Bullhead Marsh had drawn his gun. The weapon, gripped easily in the big man's hand, pointed straight at Johnny Tucker's chest. Bullhead was smiling—that same derisive, confident, almost contemptuous smile.

"Sure, son," he said softly. "If you think you can put me out, come right ahead an' try it. Only, if you get tough, so help me, I'll load your carcass with lead!"

CHAPTER III.

BLOODY CARILL TALKS.

AT the sight of Bullhead Marsh's drawn weapon, Padre Anselmo had started to cry a protest. But the words, dying in his throat, became an ineffectual gasp. The old man leaned back against the wall, his face white, his eyes round, and waited in horror to see fire crash at Johnny Tucker.

Johnny didn't stir.

It was too late, he saw, to force Bullhead Marsh out of the room at the point of a six-gun. It was too late to leap at the man. Moreover, he judged that in a fist fight he couldn't last very long against this bearlike giant.

Still, the challenge couldn't be ignored. Johnny shot a swift look at the man on the cot. He smiled thinly. Yet there was confidence in

the smile; a hint of reassurance, too. He said to his father:

"Don't worry about this hombre."

Then, while even Bullhead Marsh stared in surprise, he went to the little window. It looked northward across the darkening expanse of the desert. He himself had approached the mission from the south. Thrusting out his head, he called loudly:

"Hey, Ed! Slim! Lefty! There's a buzzard up here fixin' to pump lead into me. If you hear any shots, come up an' let him have it, will you? Better come up, anyhow. He's a stubborn kind o' mule who needs a bit o' shovin'. He——"

By that time Bullhead Marsh, uttering a throaty oath, was on his feet. He crossed the room in four long strides. He pushed Johnny aside angrily to glare down through the window.

That was the chance for which Johnny Tucker had been hoping.

It was while Bullhead Marsh squinted toward the cedars that the lean cow-puncher jammed his own six-shooter deep and hard into the huge man's side.

"All right, Bullhead," he ordered quietly. "Drop it!"

"What the——"

"You heard me. Drop it!"

There was something so furious in the very softness of Johnny Tucker's command that Bullhead Marsh stifled his own retort. His six-gun at that instant was pointing uselessly at the wall. And he could feel the urgent pressure of Johnny's weapon as it dug into his flesh. Over his shoulder Bullhead glared into the cow-puncher's taut features. Then an additional stab of steel made him relinquish his Colt. It banged on the floor.

"Now," said Johnny, "we'll take a walk outdoors, you an' me. You first, Bullhead. It'll probably disappoint you to find there ain't no Ed or Slim or Lefty to keep you company, but that can't be helped. Get going!"

"Listen," began Bullhead, driving the word wrathfully through gritted teeth, "I——"

"You're headin' for the cedars outside the mission," Johnny interrupted coldly. "Either for them, or for a grave. Sabe? I got a coil o' lariat on my saddle horn an' I aim to wrap you tight against one o' those trees. Mosey along!"

From the cot came a mocking, yet appreciative chuckle. "Might as well get goin', Bullhead," whispered Bloody Carill. "Seems like you ought to know by this time you ain't fit to stand up against a Carill." The voice became harder. "Take him out, son. He ain't no good to me now. And if he lives, it'll only be to cause you grief. Take him out, Johnny, and finish him!"

BUT Johnny Tucker didn't finish the black-bearded man. He contented himself with roping Marsh securely to the bole of a cedar. Then, holstering his six-gun, he nodded to the fellow and returned to the mission.

"The minute I laid eyes on you," whispered the wounded man when his son entered the dark room, "I had a hunch you was all right, son. I'm sure glad this thing happened. It—it sort o' gives me confidence in you. Bullhead is a right ornery and dangerous coyote when he turns stubborn." He paused. "Why didn't you kill him out there?"

"He wasn't totin' iron."

Carill sighed and twistedly smiled. "Reckon you got your own way o' lookin' at things like that," he conceded, "and maybe it's the right way. Quién sabe? But you might

have saved yourself a heap o' trouble by gettin' rid of him."

Johnny saw that Padre Anselmo was lighting a candle on the bench. His hand trembled. As the flame rose, it illuminated the old priest's anxious countenance, and gave just enough light to cast an eerie glow over the outlaw on the cot.

Padre Anselmo turned uneasily. "You'll want me to go out of the room, too, I suppose?"

"No," muttered Bloody Carill. "You may as well stay, padre. I haven't any secrets from you." A trace of mockery returned to the low voice. "Reckon you're about the only hombre I've ever been able to trust."

Padre Anselmo didn't speak. Nervously he lowered his chunky figure to the bench. His lips moved as if he were murmuring a prayer. He clasped his hands in his lap, let his bald head droop, and frowned at the floor.

"Sit down, son."

Johnny Tucker, still bewildered, settled uncertainly on the edge of the cot. To his surprise, his father's hand groped forward to rest warmly on his. The contact made him fidget. Carill studied him with a faint smile. When, at last, he spoke, it was to mumble:

"Padre Anselmo sure did a good job. "You're a likely lookin' youngster. And don't blame him for anything. Nineteen years ago I asked him never to let you know you was my son."

Johnny Tucker asked tightly, "Why?"

"Tell him, padre."

Johnny turned his head. He saw Padre Anselmo look up, and the old man seemed more aged than ever. The candlelight emphasized the yellowness of his sagging skin, the haggardness of his eye.

"Since he wishes it so, Johnny, I'll tell it to you as quickly as I can," he said quietly. "Years ago I had a mission in Baja California. One night, in a storm, a man galloped up the hill to the door. He carried a child in his saddle—a boy of three or four. That was you, Johnny. The man told me he was Bloody Carill. Two miles behind him, he said, there was a posse of thirty men out to kill him. He was going on into the mountains to hide. And he didn't want to take the child along.

"He asked me to look after you, Johnny. He said his wife was dead, and there was nobody to whom he could give the boy except me. We didn't have much chance to talk. Already we could hear the thunder of hoofs coming up from the valley. Bloody Carill gave me the child and rode away. When the posse came, I admitted that Carill had passed, but I said nothing about the child. The men were in a mad rage. What they would have done, even to the boy, I couldn't guess. They raced on, and I kept you hidden, Johnny.

"We stayed there almost a year. Then there was an earthquake, and the old mission crumbled. I thought we would build a new one, but I was told to come here to New Mexico—here where the old padre had died, and I was to take his place. So I brought you along, Johnny. Do you remember anything of those days?"

JOHNNY muttered thickly, "I—I don't remember anything about the California mission, but I do remember living here with you."

Padre Anselmo nodded.

"For a few years, Johnny," he continued, "I did my best. I taught you to read and write and to work.

But I felt I was cheating you. I was keeping you back from life. So, when you were old enough, I let you go to the chores on near-by ranches."

"You never told me I was Bloody Carill's son."

"No." Uneasily Padre Anselmo glanced at the bearded man on the cot. What he saw in Carill's countenance, however, must have assured him that he could talk frankly. So, rubbing his knee, he went on, "I was afraid that to bear a name like Carill might spoil a boy's life. So I said your name was Tucker. I told everybody the same thing. I said your mother and father had died in the earthquake in Baja California, and I had brought you along with me. Nobody doubted it. You were like a—a son of my own, Johnny. I watched you grow up. I watched you become a cow-puncher. I watched you become top hand on the Circle Arrow, the biggest ranch in this part of New Mexico. And I was proud, Johnny."

From Bloody Carill came a bitter chuckle. "And now, after nineteen years, I come along to spoil it all. That's what you're thinkin', ain't it, padre?"

Padre Anselmo didn't answer.

"Well, son——" Johnny Tucker felt the pressure of bony fingers on his hand. It occurred to him that his father's voice was becoming weaker. "Reckon you're wonderin' why I came back at all, huh?"

"Kind of."

"You ain't heard much about me in the past few years, have you?"

"Not a thing."

"That's because I was leadin' a quiet life. You see, Johnny, I had just about everything I wanted—plenty of money, a safe hide-out in the mountains, an occasional trip down into Mexico when I needed a bit o' fun or excitement. So I been layin' low. A month ago I got to feelin' queer—sick spells. So I made another trip into Mexico an' had a doc look me over. He said I was pretty sick. There wasn't much hope. That's what set me to thinkin'."

"About me?" quietly.

"ABOUT lots o' things." Bloody Carill frowned at the ceiling. "Johnny, I been livin' in them Hueco Mountains like a wild cat—with a gang of other outlaws like myself. There was a dozen of us. Bullhead Marsh is one of 'em. We worked together a long time. We killed together. Robbed together. Rustled together.

"Those boys up in the mountains have nothin' to complain about, though. They always got their share. Only, as I grew older an' sick, I could see how they hung around me like a pack o' buzzards, waitin' for me to die. Waitin' day after day. And d'you know why? Because they knew, all o' them, that I had money cached away—money I'd never been able to spend in those mountains."

His words became bitter.

"Reckon they'd have killed me long ago if they knew where to put their hands on the stuff I've got hid. Sometimes they tried to make me talk, but it didn't work. I kept my mouth shut. Johnny, up in the Huecos I've got a cache that's worth more than a hundred thousand dollars! A hundred an' twenty thousand, to be exact."

Johnny Tucker caught his breath. He could hear a soft gasp issue from Padre Anselmo, too. Both of them looked at the wounded outlaw incredulously, and the bearded man smiled.

"Sounds like a lot, don't it?"

"It is a lot!" whispered Johnny.

"Well, it took most o' my life to gather it. And now it lies at the foot of a willow, waitin' to be dug up."

Mirthlessly, Bloody Carill laughed, and the laugh ended in a terrible cough that made him heave. When it subsided, his left hand moved unsteadily to rest near the wound in his abdomen.

"That—that's just why Bullhead Marsh didn't want to get out o' the room," he said, breathless. "He figured I was goin' to tell my son where to locate my cache, an' he wanted to hear it for himself. Johnny, I don't want him or any o' that gang to get it! I—I got other plans for that gold!"

Eyes narrowed, Johnny Tucker sat silent as he watched his father's pain-tortured face. There didn't seem to be much he could do. The old man's voice was very low now, and shaken.

"What I'm goin' to tell you, Johnny, will give you a laugh—an' you, too, padre. Listen."

They listened, tensely. Caught in the spell of that raspy voice, neither of them now thought of Bullhead Marsh. Outside, however, the big man was pitting his strength in desperate struggle against the rope that bound him to a tree. And the rope was beginning to weaken, to grow slack.

CHAPTER IV.

A STRANGE BEQUEST.

EYES closed, emaciated features contorted by pain, Bloody Carill grated: "I've killed many a man in my day. I've done plenty o' harm. But I never stopped to think about it much till I had to lie in my cabin, sick, hour after hour, day after day, with nothin' to do except look back at the past. It came to me, Johnny, that sometimes I'd been pretty rough on folks. And what for? What the devil for? Just to get a lot o' money I couldn't use!"

The bitter laughter threatened to come again, but Carill suppressed it.

"I got to thinkin' about other things, too," he added more softly. "Queer things. Like—like about God."

Johnny Tucker swept a swift glance at Padre Anselmo's startled countenance. The old priest leaned forward, his hands on his knees, his eyes round.

"God?" he whispered.

"Sure," harshly snapped Carill. "What you so surprised about? Don't you think an hombre like me can have thoughts about God?"

"What—those thoughts?"

Carill hesitated. "I—I can't put them into words, exactly. They don't make much sense. But they—kind o' scared me, padre. Sometimes I'd lie awake nights, starin' into darkness an' wonderin'. Wonderin' what happens to polecats like me after we cash in our chips. Does God forget bygones? Do we start clean? Or—or——"

He faltered, then went on, roughly: "Well, I'd get up in the middle o' the night, cold an' scared, but I'd laugh at myself. I'd laugh because I was gettin' soft. Me, Bloody Carill! I tried to get rid o' the queer feelin'. But it was no good. It stuck."

"What kind of feeling was it?" urged Padre Anselmo. "You mean you were sorry for—things? I've often wondered what a man like you must think about before he—he——"

"Dies?"

"Well——"

"Don't be afraid to say it, padre. It ain't dying I'm scared of. What I think about is this." Carill's tones

became heavy. "I've wasted my life. I been no good to anybody. Not even to myself. What's the use o' havin' money when you can't spend it? What good's bein' rich if you got to stay hidden in mountains, afraid that any time you show yourself somebody's goin' to sling lead into your carcass? It made me think, all right! It—it made me want to square myself with God."

After that there was a hush.

The candle flame flickered slightly. In its yellow light three men waited in a trance until, somewhere on the desert, a coyote howled.

"Yeah," Bloody Carill sighed at last, "I'd sure sort o' like to square myself with God. That's why I decided to hunt you up, Johnny." Carill's eyes opened again, turned to the cow-puncher at his side. "Johnny, you're just *one* o' my sons. I had four."

Even Padre Anselmo was stunned by this news. Clearly, he hadn't known it. He half rose from the bench, then sank down slowly. "Four?" he blurted. "You never told me that!"

"I never told anybody."

"Where—where are the others?" Johnny demanded huskily.

"It's quite a story," mumbled Bloody Carill. "You see, Johnny, I was married twice durin' my loco life. First time was up in a place called Gopher Hollow. That's in Arizona, in the Gopher Basin country, where they've been gettin' those terrible droughts to kill off their cattle."

"Yes, I know the place."

"When I lived there I had three sons with my first wife. That's when I went bad. Took to drinkin' too much, an' did quite a bit o' damage around Gopher Hollow. Killed half a dozen men before they ran me out o' the place. Still, I hung around an' went on operatin' in that part o' the country for quite a spell. My wife—she couldn't stand it. She took the three boys an' went to her kinfolks in Oklahoma. The name o' Carill had begun to smell pretty ornery by that time, so she took her maiden name again. Called the boys Shelby. If you want to locate 'em, they're still up in Oklahoma, I think. Town called Bolton. There are three of 'em, Johnny. Name o' Nate, Rufe, an' Abner. They're your half brothers."

IF Johnny Tucker had been astounded to learn he had a father, he was all the more dazed by the news that he had an entire family. He said tensely:

"Go on!"

"You were the youngest an' the nearest, so I decided to hunt you out. On the way here, though, I ran into a prospector who recognized me. The fool pulled iron an' fired. I shot, too. I killed him, but he plugged me in the stomach. Bullhead Marsh, who was ridin' with me, was for takin' me back to the hills. But I said no, I wouldn't last much longer. I wanted to see my son first. So I got Bullhead to drag me over the desert to the mission here. And now, Johnny——"

Bloody Carill's eyes became anxious.

"I want you to do something for me. It's the last thing I'll ever ask of any man."

"What's that?"

"Got pencil and paper?"

Johnny nodded. From the back pocket of his dusty corduroys he drew the stub of a pencil and a folded envelope.

"Up in the Huecos," whispered Carill, his tones thickening, "I got my money cached at the head of a little arroyo. There are a few wil-

lows growin' there, and the money's in a box under the branches. If you get set to write, son, I'll give you directions for gettin' there."

Johnny Tucker looked uncertainly at Padre Anselmo. The priest sat staring in fascination at the dying man. Johnny drew a long breath, crossed his knees, and smoothed the envelope in his lap.

"Go ahead," he said.

For the next few minutes the gray-bearded outlaw spoke slowly, with increasing difficulty. He gave careful directions for reaching his cache. And whatever he dictated, Johnny Tucker scribbled on the envelope. When Carill finished, he asked:

"Figure you can locate the spot?"

"Yes," mumbled Johnny, frowning. "But to—to tell the truth, I don't know as I'd care to——"

"Care to what?" sharply.

"Have that money."

Carill smiled weakly, and relaxed. "I kind o' figured you might feel that way about it. Blood money, huh? Well, son, I don't want you to have it. I want you to use it in a way I'll explain."

"How d'you mean?"

"In the first place, the cache is too close to the hide-out o' my crowd for one man to go get it. You'd be spotted. You'd be watched an' trailed. You'd be killed as soon as you got your hands on that gold. That's why I want to round up your three half brothers. The job is theirs as much as yours."

Startled, Johnny Tucker didn't attempt to make any comment. He sat rigid, hardly, knowing what to anticipate.

"The four o' you ought to make a pretty strong crowd," Carill continued. "I want you boys to go up to them hills an' get the money. After that—after that——"

"Yes?"

"You can take twenty thousand and split it four ways. Five thousand each. That's what I'm leavin' my sons. As for the other hundred thousand——"

Unexpectedly, Bloody Carill propped himself up on an elbow. Something hard and terrible came into his expression. It was as if he were glaring through the walls of the mission at some vision a thousand miles away.

"Johnny, I want you to take that money," he said hoarsely, "and use it in a way that'll help square me with God! I don't know *what* you can do with it, but—but I wish you'd hunt up some o' the folks I helped ruin. Women whose men I killed, maybe. Youngsters whose fathers I plugged. I don't sabe just how you'll do it. I'm leavin' that part of it to you. But I want you to use that money to do as much for them as you can! Understand what I mean?"

"Reckon I do," softly. "Everything considered, it sounds like a tough, man-size job."

"You look like a tough, man-size hombre!"

"Isn't—isn't there something definite you have in mind?"

"No."

"Anybody in particular you'd like me to hunt up an' help!"

AT that Bloody Carill remained silent, thinking. He was still propped up on his elbow. His eyes sank, to fasten themselves on the flame of the candle. They brooded. Finally he shook his head.

"No, there's nobody in particular, because most of 'em I can't even remember. There was one feller—Garrick was his name—that I plugged for a horse when I high-tailed out o' Gopher Hollow. I

found out afterward that his wife an' daughter was havin' a pretty rough time. But that was years ago. I can't seem to remember any o' the others."

And then, abruptly, Carill seized his son's arm in two clutching hands. He squeezed hard, and his inflamed eyes blazed up into Johnny Tucker's with something like frenzy.

"That's all I'm askin'," he said hoarsely. "Take a hundred thousand an'—an' try to square me! Only be careful, son. Hombres like Bullhead Marsh an' the rest o' the crowd in the Huecos, they'd kill you as quick as they'd kill a fly to get their hands on that gold! Remember that, Johnny!"

"I'll remember." Johnny Tucker hesitated. "Is—is there anything else?"

"Just one thing."

Now, strangely, an expression that was actually shy and sheepish crept into the gray-bearded face. Bloody Carill appeared almost ashamed of the thing he was going to utter. Yet he gulped, smiled awkwardly, and looked at the floor.

"Johnny," he whispered, "I—I think I'm about through. Just a few minutes more. I sort o'—feel it comin'. Before I go I—gosh, son, I kind o' hanker to hear you call me —pa. Would you?"

Johnny Tucker had to swallow. His nerves were no longer tense, yet his heart was beating harder than ever. A bitterness he could not understand welled up in him; bitterness touched with pity. He looked at Padre Anselmo but found no help in the old priest's awed face.

"How about it?" huskily asked Carill, childlike in his eagerness. "Would you?"

Johnny said, "Sure, pa."

The old outlaw chuckled. He sank back on the cot, shut his eyes, and patted Johnny Tucker's arm.

"Thanks, son. It—it sounds kind o' nice. It's nineteen years since you called me pa. Funny, the things that seem important when you're dying." He paused. "Reckon I can count on you, Johnny, to do your best to—square me——"

"Yes, pa. You can count on me."

"Only, remember always," whispered Carill, and these were his last words, "that a dozen buzzards like Bullhead Marsh are set to ride from here to Hades, slingin' lead every inch o' the way, to get my cache out o' your hands!"

And queerly, though none of them could guess it, that was the instant at which Bullhead Marsh, sweating and breathless after his struggles, managed at last to rip his right arm free of the rope.

To be continued in next week's issue.

RABBIT FUR AND FODDER

IN the drought section of North Dakota, farmers are tiding themselves over lean periods by killing jack rabbits.

Thousands of rabbits are being destroyed annually. In one district of the State eleven thousand rabbits were killed in twenty-five days, netting the farmers $1,150. The animals are sold to fur dealers, who skin them and give back the bodies to the farmer, who uses the meat for poultry and hog feed. Some are soaked in brine, and shipped to fox farms for food.

The pelts from the jack rabbits are made into low-priced fur coats and are put to many other uses, such as the making of felt for hats.

BOOMERANG BOOM

By DABNEY OTIS COLLINS

Author of "Heritage of the Strong," etc.

BART HOLMAN unloaded his ore wagon into the big bin of the Croesus Gold Mining Company, and headed his six-horse team down Redgap's main street toward his stable. Bart ran three ore wagons between the mining town of Grubstake and Redgap, which was on a railroad.

Pitching the lines to the stable boy, Bart angled across the street, puffs of dust arising at each tread of his boots. In a country of tall men, he was taller than most, his body lean and muscled. Sun and wind and cold had stained his face deep brown. A lifetime of looking on wide, open spaces gave to his eyes a gentle and patient cast.

The usual group of men were lounging in the strip of shadow that Petersen's general store laid on the hot, dry earth. Bart moved toward

them, their talk reaching him in a drowsy hum. He had this hour before getting ready for supper.

"Hear much talk up in Grubstake about the new railroad, Bart?" This was from old Chris Detloff, Redgap's man of wealth. Folks said Detloff owned half of Redgap, and held mortgages on the other half. His chair was tilted against the store wall, his short, fat legs barely reaching the ground. Shrewd, grasping, he surveyed Bart Holman through china-blue eyes.

"I heard some," Bart answered in his slow, methodical way. He did not take a chair; he had been sitting all day.

"Bart don't wanter hear no talk about railroads," said Sam Yule, who ran the livery stable. "Can't say as I blame him."

That was right. The last thing Bart wished to think about was a railroad being built through Grubstake. It would mean the end of his ore hauling. His grandfather had been a steamboat captain on the Missouri; the railroad had finished him. His father had been a Pony Express rider and, when the telegraph ended that, a driver for the Overland Mail. The railroad had finished him, too. It was in Bart Holman's blood to hate railroads.

"Well, she's on the way, sure as I'm settin' here," Chris Detloff said. "These are changin' times."

Detloff's full, highly colored face was as guileless as a child's. But Bart knew, as every man there knew, what keen satisfaction the old man must be feeling. Detloff and Bart's father had been partners in a freighting business. They had split up, running competitive lines of wagons. And when Chris Detloff had learned that malicious rumors and ruinous prices for hauling could not bankrupt his former partner, he had withdrawn from the business. But he had a long memory. The hard feeling he had harbored against old Holman to the very last was now transferred to Bart.

"There'll be freightin' as long as there's a West," observed Sam Yule. "And hosses."

"Oh, sure—some." Christ Detloff swung lazily at a fly that lit on the end of his aggressive nose. "But there won't be no more ore comin' from Grubstake in wagons. What you think, Bart?"

"I never was much of a hand at prophesyin', Chris."

Bart left them, finding no peace in this talk of railroads. He guessed they were talking about him now. He could imagine some of the things they were saying: That the end of his career as an ore hauler was in sight, that he was getting no younger, and—Chris Detloff would be the one to bring this up—that two of his brothers were big lawyers in Denver, and the third a successful mining engineer. Bart was going the way of his dad, holding on too long. Like working a drift, and the vein about to peter out.

KAREN SUNBLADE came out of a grocery store, her dark-green dress and blond hair making a pleasing bit of color in the drabness of the street. Bart's breath quickened, as it always did at the sight of Karen. They had been engaged to be married for four years.

Bart's eager steps quickly overtook her. She turned and smiled, and he saw her as she ever looked to him: A beautiful, hazel-eyed girl with clear skin, tall and full-molded. She wore no hat, and the low-slanting sun lay in her yellow hair. It was the mystery of Bart's life that she had chosen him.

He tried hard to find words that would tell her how pretty she looked, especially something about the green dress, which he had never seen before. But he could think these things better than he could say them.

"How you been?" he asked gently.

"Just fine," Karen answered, her stride long and free-swinging. "What kind of trip did you have?"

"About the same. Little higher grade stuff, maybe." He hesitated. "Goin' to be home to-night?"

She lifted her face to him. But, though she smiled, he knew something was worrying her. "Yes," she answered. "Come over."

He asked: "Something wrong?"

"How much longer are we going to wait, Bart?"

"Why, soon as I get on my feet a litte better. I had to buy a coupla hosses this year, you know. It won't be much longer."

"There's talk of a railroad coming through Grubstake."

"Same old talk we been hearin' for years. It's just that old Chris started it up again." He met her gaze squarely. "That what you been thinkin' about?"

"I've waited four years, Bart," she said. "That's a long time. I don't mind the waiting, if only I could see an end to it. But I don't. If that railroad comes—well, you're getting older, yourself."

"Shovin' thirty," Bart said.

Silence fell between them.

"Don't you worry, Karen," Bart said, as he started to leave her at her gate. "You won't have to wait much longer."

A bright and happy light suddenly filled her face. "Let's not wait any longer," she said softly. "Let's buy our house right now. I've already got it picked out." She put her hand on his arm, smiling. "Come on. I'll show you."

"I've got three thousand dollars saved up," Bart said. "But I need part of it to run the business with. I aimed to build you a fine house."

"This one will be plenty good enough."

The house to which she took him was a little brown cottage on a side street, shaded with pines. There was a wide veranda, and a yard with a picket fence around it.

"Mr. Petersen owns it," Karen said. "I asked him the price, and he said two thousand." Her eager gaze never left him.

"All right, Karen. It ain't quite as pretty a house as I aimed to give you. But, if you think——"

"It'll be wonderful, Bart." She came close to him, and he placed an arm awkwardly about her shoulders.

"I'll see Petersen, soon as I get back off my next trip," Bart promised.

BY seven next morning he was on the road to Grubstake, three days' wagon journey to the northwest. The big ore wagon carried a load of baled hay. Bart seldom went up this road with his wagon empty. There were usually food or mining supplies to be freighted.

The summer sun, already high in the sky, spread a mantel of gold over the rolling hills. Tang of sage was keen in Bart's nostrils, and the smell of the good, dry earth. He loved this stretch of flat waste land. There was a friendliness in the red road, and welcome in the flute-clear notes of the larks. Farther on, the foothills lifted gentle slopes dotted with junipers, folded one upon the other, the soft haze layered between. Above them hung the jagged gray

of distant mountains, like a paper cut-out pasted on the sky.

Bart hummed an old trail song. He kept seeing the little brown cottage, and Karen at the gate, waiting for him at the end of day.

He had two regular camps on this route, where he spent the night. On the third day out from Redgap he reached the crest of Skeleton Ridge, and saw the little town of Grubstake piled at its foot, like a heap of toy houses. He halted his team, to prepare for the long, steep down grade. He fastened the rough-lock, a heavy chain stretched from front axle to hind tire, so that this wheel would drag. As a further precaution, he shifted the load of hay toward the back of the wagon. Foot on the brake, three pairs of reins between his fingers, he called sharply to the lead horse.

This was a shelf road, a narrow strip of earth and granite hung between the mountain and the canyon, hundreds of feet below. It was a hard pull coming up, a dangerous down grade.

Nearing the bottom, Bart saw a khaki-clad man stooped over a surveyor's transit. Up the canyon stood another man, holding a level. Two others, chainmen, were measuring with their steel tape attached to short poles. Bart experienced a peculiar sinking sensation. He pulled the team to a stop, his big voice rolling through the canyon.

"Hey! What you fellers surveyin' for?"

"Not supposed to say," came the surveyor's answer.

"Railroad?" Bart held his breath.

"You guessed it."

Bart eased up on the brake, and the wagon rolled on. Chris Detloff had been right again. He usually was the first to learn of coming events. It was this faculty of seeing ahead of other men that had made him rich. Bart wished he were more this way. If he had vision like Detloff, instead of following blindly in his father's footsteps, he would not now be coming to the end of things. And Karen——

He clamped his lips shut, but not before a groan escaped him. How could he afford to buy the house now?

Rumors of the coming railroad filled Grubstake. Wherever Bart went, he heard men talking about the new railroad—on street corners, in saloons, at the mines, this was the talk on every tongue. It drove Bart deeper into despair. He thought of the rails as a monstrous serpent, strangling the life from his freighting business.

SAM YULE came over to the Croesus ore bin where Bart was unloading. Sam was Bart's best friend. He said: "Hear any talk about that railroad up in Grubstake?"

Bart leaned on the handle of his shovel. "That's about all I did hear, Sam."

"Reckon there's any truth in it?"

"I saw them surveyin' for it. They told me, a railroad."

Yule nodded his head. "It must be so," he said. "Listen here, Bart. You and me are in the same boat. The railroad won't hurt me much as it will you, but it'll take plenty business away from me. I'm in a fix where I can't help myself—ain't got a dime to spare. But I believe I can put you onto something."

Bart looked at him. He would believe anything Sam Yule told him.

"I don't know what got into Chris. First time I ever heard of him givin' anything away. But he put me onto something good. He says to me yesterday, 'Why don't

you wake up and use your head, Sam? Grubstake's goin' to be a boom town. A man can double and triple his money there in no time by buyin' property. Well, I ain't got nothin' to buy it with. So I thought I'd tell you about it.' "

"Well, I don't know, Sam. Course, if a man had money to gamble with."

"No gamble to it. You can't lose. I've seen what happens in boom towns. I've seen a dollar bill grow into a hundred so fast you couldn't count it. It'll happen in Grubstake."

Bart's pulse beat faster. The golden gates of opportunity seemed to have been flung suddenly open before him. He looked on a vista of surpassing beauty, and he and Karen were walking into the purple distance, hand in hand. The little brown house faded from his vision, and he saw the house he had intended to build for her. Suppose his three thousand dollars became five thousand, ten thousand?

Yule said: "I wish I had a little cash."

"You don't think Chris was tryin' to trick you?"

"I don't blame you for thinkin' that. He ain't to be trusted, and that's a fact." Yule's expression was very earnest. "He's on the level this time. I've helped him out a few times. He says he sorta wants to make it up. Besides, it ain't costin' him anything. If it did, I'd be suspicious, myself. Well, what you aim to do?"

"I'll have to think about it, Sam."

"Sure. You do what you think best. But I believe you got a chance to clean up some money," said Yule, and left him.

Bart thought he had not yet made up his mind, but he had. Slow and careful by nature, he wanted to weigh one side against the other. He tried to imagine what would happen if he lost his three thousand dollars. But this part of his mind was closed. He could see only the streets of Grubstake jammed with restless humanity—graders, boomers, gamblers, tenderfeet. Property selling at sky-high prices. And Karen beside him, in the home he had planned to give her.

He drew all but five hundred dollars of his money out of the bank. In Grubstake, he went to the office of the real-estate man that Chris Detloff had recommended to Yule. Atkinson, his name was. A pale, thin-faced man, with bulging eyes behind gold-rimmed spectacles. He listened attentively to Bart, once in a while nodding his bald head. Yes, he had just the thing Bart was looking for—the Miner's Hotel. The price was five thousand dollars.

Bart's face showed his astonishment. "That's 'way more'n I figured on payin'," he said.

"You'll pay more if you wait. Two weeks ago, my client would have been glad to get thirty-five hundred. But prices are going up, Mr. Holman. All this talk of the railroad coming through, you know. Property is being snapped up here, right and left. Boom's already started. Five thousand is cheap for the Miner's Hotel." Atkinson reached for his hat. "Let's go over and take a look at it."

"I don't have to see it. Been stayin' there twice a week for the last ten years." Bart paused. "But it looks to me like you're askin' too much."

"It's cheap, Mr. Holman, dirt-cheap," the real-estate agent assured him. Smiling, he handed Bart a cigar, lit one himself. "Now, let's see if we can't get together."

BART bought the hotel for forty-five hundred dollars. He paid twenty-five hundred down, giving a mortgage for the balance. After much signing of papers and swearing of witnesses, he started back to Redgap. He felt as though black clouds had been lifted from around him. How happy Karen would be, when he told her what he had done.

But when he told Karen Sunblade, he saw the quick doubt in her face.

"It may be all right, Bart," she said. "It may turn out just fine. And I'm willing to wait, as I said. But I don't know. I just can't trust Chris Detloff, that's all."

"He didn't mean to be doin' me any favor," Bart pointed out. "He told Sam, and Sam told me."

"I know. But couldn't he hurt you through Sam? He's mean enough, goodness knows."

"But the railroad's comin' through, Karen. Everybody says so. It'll kill my business. This is the one chance I got."

She turned her head thoughtfully away, and the lamplight touched her hair with gold. "I may be wrong," the girl said. "But I have a feeling that Detloff is trying to ruin you. He isn't the kind that ever forgets."

Bart said gently, "No. You're wrong, Karen."

Still, she had planted a germ of doubt in him. And when he left her, he turned almost unconsciously up the street on which Detloff had his office. The door was open, and Detloff sat there, his chair tilted against the jamb.

"Come in, Bart," he said, crafty little wrinkles meshing the pink flesh at the corners of his eyes. "I've just been hearin' about how you're gettin' to be a big business man. Atkinson, here, was tellin' me about you buyin' the Miner's Hotel."

Bart saw Atkinson's thin face looking at him from the dim light of a corner of the office. His gaze whipped back to Detloff. "What about it?" he asked.

"Nothin'. Nothin', a-tall. Only, I want to thank you for takin' that old shell off my hands. I'm much obliged."

Bart felt his feet cut from under him. "You owned it? Atkinson didn't say so."

The real-estate man said crisply, "Mr. Detloff owns the company which sold the property to you. That is perfectly legitimate."

"Sure, the whole thing's legitimate. Don't worry about that." Detloff smiled broadly. "Nothin' wrong in givin' a young feller a chance to get ahead."

Bart pushed past him into the office, a slow and deadly rage forming in him. Atkinson moved cautiously behind a table. Bart said to Chris Detloff: "What kinda game is this?"

"No game, a-tall. Just plain business."

"I'm waitin', Detloff."

Detloff eased the legs of his chair to the floor, a wariness coming into his manner. "I'll give you a little lesson in business," he said. "I owned some property up in Grubstake I wanted to get shut of—heaps more than the Miner's Hotel. So I started up that railroad talk again. That's all."

"Not quite all. You counted on Sam Yule tellin' me what you told him, didn't you?"

"Well, I——"

"And you wanted to break me, because you hated my dad. I see your whole low-down scheme now. Well, suppose the railroad is comin' through?"

DETLOFF chuckled. "It might, some day. Then your hotel will make you rich, if it ain't burnt down or fell down."

Bart forced back his anger. "They're surveyin' for the railroad now," he said. "I saw 'em, the other side of Skeleton."

"You saw 'em? Suddenly Detloff's round stomach began to shake, and laughter rumbled from him. "So they told you they was surveyin' for the railroad, did they? Good! That's just what I told 'em to say."

Bart glanced from Detloff to the impassive Atkinson, and back again. "You told 'em?"

"Why, sure. Just some more good business, Bart. Know what they're surveyin' for?" Detloff paused, to lengthen his evident enjoyment. "I hired those men to lay me out a pipe line down the canyon. Ever hear of hydraulic minin'? Well, you'll be seein' some, before long. I got a lease on three miles of that canyon. Quick as the pipe is laid, dirt is goin' to start washin'—and gold runnin' in my sluices."

Folks said old Chris Detloff could see twenty years ahead on a clear day, and here was proof. It was common knowledge that these mountains bore gold in small quantities. But it took Detloff to figure a way to get it out.

"A man has to use his head," Detloff said, "to get along in this world. If he don't, he'll get left behind."

Bart stood there in the middle of the floor, big fists at his sides. He was strongly tempted to use those fists; the old, primal law of force beat hot at his temples. But the fairness in him held Bart's hand. After all, he had no one to blame but himself. He turned and strode past Detloff out of the office.

No sleep came to him that night. And when he headed toward Grubstake, next morning, despair rode with him. Of his hard-earned money he had but five hundred dollars left. And Karen—he could ask her to wait no longer.

"It's the railroad that done it," he said aloud. "If it hadn't of been for the railroad——"

Ten miles this side of Skeleton Ridge, Chris Detloff passed him in one of Sam Yule's buckboards. Detloff did not look up. He seemed to be in a great hurry, the wheels of the buckboard spinning rapidly over the road. Bart guessed that he was going to see how his surveyors were getting along.

He was right. As he came over the ridge, he saw Detloff down in the canyon, the surveying party grouped around him. Even as he looked, Detloff turned and started in wild haste to climb the wall, back to the road. Peals of laughter went up from the surveyors.

Bart frowned, wondering what had happened. He passed the buckboard, its double team of high-spirited bays hitched to an aspen tree. Below him old Chris was pulling his heavy body up the wall, stopping often to rest. Bart saw Detloff's mouth open, as though shouting to him. But the grinding of the wagon wheels silenced his call.

A short time later, Detloff drew up alongside Bart's wagon. Bart called angrily to him to stay back, for the road here was too narrow to allow of safely passing. But Detloff persisted, forcing the outer wheels of the buckboard to the canyon's very edge.

"Hey, Bart!" he called, a frozen smile on his face. "I been thinkin' I was sorta hard on you, maybe. I'll buy back the Miner's Hotel for what you paid for it."

Astonishment, then suspicion,

swept Bart. "What kinda trick you tryin' to play on me now, you old scoundrel?"

"No trick, a-tall. I'm talkin' business. I'll——" He flung up his arms, shrieking, as a hind wheel of the buckboard dipped over the edge of the road. A plunge of the frightened team sent the buckboard lurching across the road. Detloff bounced off the seat, the reins dropping from his hand. Three wheels in the air, the buckboard skidded out of sight around a sharp turn, Detloff clinging to the seat.

BART knew he had only one thing to do. Locking the brake, he leaped down from the seat and unfastened the roughlock. He released the brake, cracked his long mule-skinner's black snake close to the ears of the leaders, and the race was on. Rounding the first turn with smoking brake blocks, he saw the runaway team—tawny streaks, with the buckboard bouncing behind.

"Chess! Snap!" Bart yelled to the leaders, stretched low in their traces. The crack of his whip was like a pistol shot.

Bart was as good a driver as ever skinned a six-horse team. In this wild race he needed all the skill, all the clearheadedness that a lifetime in the driver's seat had instilled in him. Every inch of this road was down grade and steep; curves were abrupt and frequent. More than half the time, Bart could not see his leaders.

There were times when all six horses swerved out of sight around a knife-edged shoulder, and the broad tires of the ore wagon slithered across the road, shooting up sparks. Instinct warned the horses the wagon was loose. Fear drove them to keep ahead of the dizzily whirling wheels.

Again Bart glimpsed the runway team. Observing that a hind wheel of the buckboard was gone, he grinned stiffly. Now he had a chance of overtaking those bays. But time was short. At any second the buckboard might fall to pieces. Faster raced the six horses, necks outstretched, manes and tails streaming.

And when Bart next saw the pair of bays, they were only about a hundred yards ahead. Detloff was still there, flat on his stomach in the tilted body of the buckboard.

Eyes never leaving the twisting road, Bart jumped from the seat to the back of the nigh wheeler. He clamped his knees against the big horse's throbbing body, reins tight in his fists. Narrower grew the strip of red road between the thundering teams. Detloff looked back. Bart waved frantically to him, trying to convey what he intended to do. The buckboard whipped out of sight around a curve.

The heavy ore wagon took that curve at full speed, its hind end slamming into the bank. Less than fifty yards separated the teams now. Bart reined the leaders in close to the wall. Even then, he was not certain he would have room in which to pass. He shifted the reins to his right hand. Detloff was looking at him. Desperately, Bart signaled him to get up. Detloff got to his knees, clutching the crazily swaying seat with both hands. Bart came on, leaning outward, left arm reaching down.

The leaders shot past the foaming bays. Bart took a flying stab at Chris Detloff's upthrust arm, caught it just above the wrist. A mighty heave, and Detloff was pitched across the horse's withers. As he

struggled to bring Detloff astride the horse, Bart saw the bays being forced from the road. They plunged down the wall, the buckboard looping through the air behind them. Bart pulled Detloff astride the horse. Dangerous minutes passed before he regained the driver's seat and brought the team under control.

DETLOFF climbed up beside him, white and shaken. "I'm much obliged, Bart," he said.

"That's all right."

The housetops of Grubstake came into view before Detloff spoke again. "Know how come I was tryin' to pass you?"

Bart said indifferently, "You just have to get ahead of everybody, I reckon."

"I was in a hurry to get to Grubstake. That railroad is comin' through, sure enough. Those surveyors ain't my men. They're layin' out the railroad. So you're——"

"The railroad! That right?"

Detloff nodded. "She's come, at last. I don't reckon you wanter sell your hotel now."

Bart grinned. "No, sirree. If I can't be a freighter no more, maybe I can run a hotel."

Detloff said slowly, "I done a heap of thinkin' durin' that runaway, like I was livin' my whole life over again, kinda. And I been doin' some more, settin' up here beside you. You saved my life, and nobody can say Chris Detloff was ever a man to forget anything." He turned and looked shrewdly at Bart. "I can use a man like you in my business, Bart."

Bart was silent.

"I know what you're thinkin' about. Maybe I was sorta hard on your pa, I don't know. If I was, I'm willin' to do what I can to make things right. Fact is, I'll be needin' a young man like you, when I get started with that hydraulic minin'. Maybe, one of these days, if you wanter, we can talk about bein' pardners."

Bart looked at him, and saw Detloff's hand held out to him. He gripped the hand, seeing the mistiness in the old man's eyes.

"I'll work for you, Chris," he said. "There's plenty time to talk about the other."

Looking out over the valley spread beneath him, Bart seemed to see only a big white house with green roof and shutters, with a white-picket fence around it, and Karen standing at the gate, waiting for him at the end of day.

A DOUBLE-ACTION WELL

A WELL for motor fuel that also delivers pure drinking water is hard to believe, but such is declared to be a reality by Clarence Annis, an Oklahoma farmer.

He says that he pumps fluid from his well through pipes into a tank. There he lets it settle for a few hours. A yellow liquid comes to the top, which proves to be gasoline. This he skims off with a bucket; what remains is good water, which he uses for his stock.

Besides using the fuel in his own car and tractor, this Oklahoma farmer sells about one hundred gallons a day, paying the regular gasoline tax.

HISTORIC MINES OF THE WEST

(THE VULTURE, MARICOPA COUNTY, ARIZONA)

By JOHN A. THOMPSON

HENRY WICKENBURG knew very little about prospecting, and nothing at all about mining, when he decided to explore the Hassayampa River country in search of gold. Yet on his first trip out he found a tremendous ledge of gold-bearing ore that afterward became the famous Vulture Mine, perhaps the richest single gold mine ever discovered in Arizona.

Estimates of the Vulture's output have ranged as high as ten million dollars' worth of yellow metal. The mine was discovered in 1864, and it is still producing.

But let's get back to the stocky, stolid government teamster for the army post at Tucson who knew little about prospecting, but a whole lot about staying with a gold mine, once he found it.

Wickenburg didn't prospect the Hassayampa alone. In those days, that would have been almost certain suicide. Arizona prospecting was a sort of catch-as-catch-can game, which the yellow-metal hunters played with marauding, bloodthirsty Apaches. Sometimes they had the army to back them up; more often they didn't. To be at all sure of coming in to camp at night with his scalp where nature placed it, a prospector had to pan for colors warily, one eye on the gold pan, the other on the distant hills, and his rifle within easy reach.

Apaches didn't bother Wickenburg. He took them in his stride. And this should be mentioned be-

cause, if some of his companions had had the Austrian teamster's stoical attitude toward Indian raids, they might have stuck around with him a little longer in the Southwest wilderness of the Hassayampa and become copartners in the ownership of the Vulture Mine. Instead of which they moved on to safer fields—and oblivion.

Henry stayed. And to-day all maps of Arizona show the location of the mining town of Wickenburg in blackface type, and not so far away a range of uprising desert hills known as the Wickenburg Mountains.

Henry himself, of course, is gone and almost forgotten. He never was a very spectacular figure. But he had a certain definite heroism in his make-up, and he always solved his problems in his own way. For instance, the Vulture Mine.

While the rest of the members of the prospecting party which Wickenburg had joined were feverishly testing gravels and prospecting for leads west of the Hassayampa River, Henry decided to sit down and think. His partners' antics seemed an aimless waste of exertion, especially for desert country in the midsummer season. Besides, Henry was accustomed both to sitting and to thinking, a dual occupation he indulged in over long stretches of time when he freighted for the army post at Tucson.

Making himself as comfortable as possible, he began scanning the surrounding country, staring intently at this range of hills and that, at the rolling desert floor. He probably even stole a furtive glance or two over his back to make sure no catfooted "hostiles" were going to catch him napping. Gradually, however, his gaze focused on a single piece of scenery, a milk-white butte that reared itself up like a freshly laundered island in a sea of sun-burnished sand.

The butte appeared to be solid quartz. As soon as one of his partners came within hailing distance, he called over to him.

"My gold mine, she iss founded! A whopper, py gee!"

The statement naturally produced a stir, that was exceeded by his comrades' scornful laughter when his only answer to their queries, "Where?" was to point to the big white butte, several miles away. Most of the party, prospectors with experience, agreed that Henry was slightly "teched in the head." Probably from sitting around in the sun.

BUT Wickenburg had no intention of being laughed at. When it became a little cooler, along toward evening, he walked over to the butte, hacked himself some samples of the quartz, and brought them back. Ground up in a small hand mortar and the powdered rock panned, the samples showed free gold—and plenty of it.

That was the beginning of the Vulture Mine, from which millions of dollars' worth of yellow metal have since been taken. Of course, Henry didn't know, at the time, that he had actually discovered one of the richest gold mines in the Southwest. Otherwise he might not have acted as he did following the discovery.

Henry determined to stay where he was. His comrades, undecided whether to consider the amazing results of the teamster's unorthodox methods of prospecting as a divine benediction on his labors or a freak of chance, tried to persuade him to move on with them. Gold or no gold, they simply weren't impressed. It was ridiculous to believe for an

instant that anybody could sit down on a rock in the desert, point to a butte miles away, and say that he had a gold mine there—and actually have it.

Those things don't happen in fiction because, after all, a reader's credulity can be stretched just so far and no farther. But this is fact, and that is exactly how the Vulture Gold Mine was discovered.

When his partners moved on, after topping all their arguments with the cold statement that there was no water within miles to work the mine, if it really was a mine, there was Henry, still in the desert. But he had moved closer to his great, gold-bearing quartz outcrop. Not knowing anything about mining gold anyhow, he probably didn't realize the necessity of sufficient water for mining purposes. Besides, he had a one-track mind. The gold was in the quartz. That was all that interested him.

He took some samples and finally went up to Prescott, nearly fifty miles north. There he contacted a friend of his, a real friend who would listen to him and who knew plenty about gold mining. Charles Genung did more than listen. Though in poor health, Genung assayed Wickenburg's samples and then agreed to go back with him and show him how to build a Mexican *arrastre* for grinding his ore and extracting the free gold.

They built the *arrastre* sixteen miles away, up by the river near the present site of Wickenburg. Henry got one hundred dollars' worth of gold out of the first ton of ore. But it was slow, laborious work, hauling the ore so many miles from the mine to water, and then grinding it. Besides, when it dawned on the local Apaches that they were about to have a permanent resident in their midst, they took the customary steps to dissuade him.

Still, the Indians didn't bother him as much as the work. When it came to swapping lead with redskins, Henry could give as well as receive, and often with more accurate and telling effect. Nevertheless, he decided to do something about the unsatisfactory condition he had gotten into with his gold mine.

HE sat down to think again, this time right beside his golden outcrop. And presently he evolved a scheme. He erected a sign, "Good Gold Ore, Fifteen Dollars a Ton," and stuck it up in front of the vein. When he went to town for supplies and more ammunition he announced to all who were interested in gold prospecting that they need hunt no longer. All they had to do was come down to the Vulture Mine and get all the ore they wanted for fifteen dollars a ton, cash payment.

Then he went back and sat down by the vein with a heavy cash box on his lap and awaited customers. Henry was no hog, no grasping, profiteer-minded, money-mad, modern industrial tycoon. The boys who bought his ore got their money's worth, usually. If they didn't, it wasn't his fault. Ore in the huge vein, almost eighty feet wide and a thousand feet long, assayed forty dollars a ton on the average. Some spots ran four hundred dollars a ton. Others naturally were much leaner. But Henry didn't specify. Fifteen dollars dropped in his cash box entitled any one to a ton of Vulture gold ore, and they could take it out wherever they thought best.

The only catch was that, after they had it they had to haul it away somewhere to have it treated, or take

it over to the river and grind it up themselves. Much of the ore was eventually teamed up to Prescott, and, since a property as palpably rich as the Vulture can't be kept a secret from large mining operators forever, especially with Henry advertising his ore for fifteen dollars a ton all over the place, it wasn't long before a wealthy syndicate from New York bought the property, established a regular camp at the mine, built a forty-stamp amalgamation mill at what is now Wickenburg, and began taking gold from the Vulture in million-dollar aggregates.

But in the beginning it was Henry Wickenburg's private property. He discovered it, and you could have had all or any part of the Vulture for fifteen dollars a ton just as long as you didn't ask Henry to grind it for you in his crude, home-built *arrastre*. To the end, Henry preferred teaming. It was, he said, a "sittin'-down job."

THE MAIL GOES THROUGH

THIS slogan did not originate with the engine men on steam trains, but was coined by the daring mail carriers before the day of the Pony Express, when a letter could be sent across the plains at the record-breaking speed of fifteen miles an hour.

Some time before the great westward trek that followed the Civil War, post offices were scattered through the Rocky Mountains in small hamlets and mining camps. If there was a wagon road to the place, the mail came in a sack made of heavy leather, hidden deep in the "boot" of the stagecoach, under the driver's seat, and was guarded by a Wells Fargo & Co. messenger.

As late as 1880 there were several towns of considerable population connected with the outside world by trails, over which long pack trains carried supplies. To such communities the letter mail came in specially constructed sacks, made to fit over the cantle of a saddle, with a receptacle on each side of the horse for letters. Papers and magazines were carried on a pack animal, either a fast-walking mule or pony. When winter snows blocked the mountain trails, hardy men carried the mail on skis, or used dog teams to pull toboggans. The arrival of the mail was the event of the day, and many acts of heroism are credited to the mail carrier.

The little village at Animas Forks, on the west slope of Cinnamon Pass, was isolated from November until May, during which time Gus Talbot, a famous Norwegian mountaineer, made daily trips to the camp with mail—in one day, and out the next. The trail led him to a height of thirteen thousand five hundred feet. During February of one year he was forced to turn back at timber line by a terrific blizzard. Toward evening the wind lessened somewhat and he went on, arriving at nine o'clock that night. When the mail sack he had risked his life to deliver was opened, it contained only a mail order catalogue and a postal-card advertisement of a patent medicine.

G. C. F.

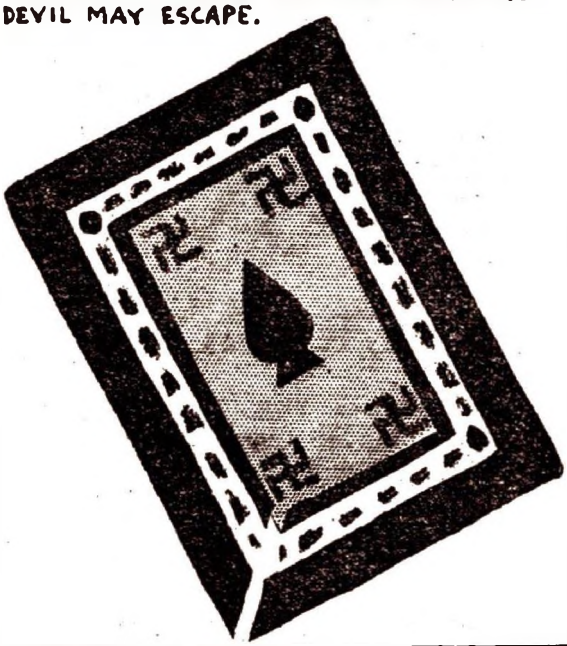
Interesting And True

By H. FREDRIC YOUNG

OF THE 850 SPECIES OF TREES IN THE UNITED STATES, ONLY 180 HAVE COMMERCIAL VALUE.

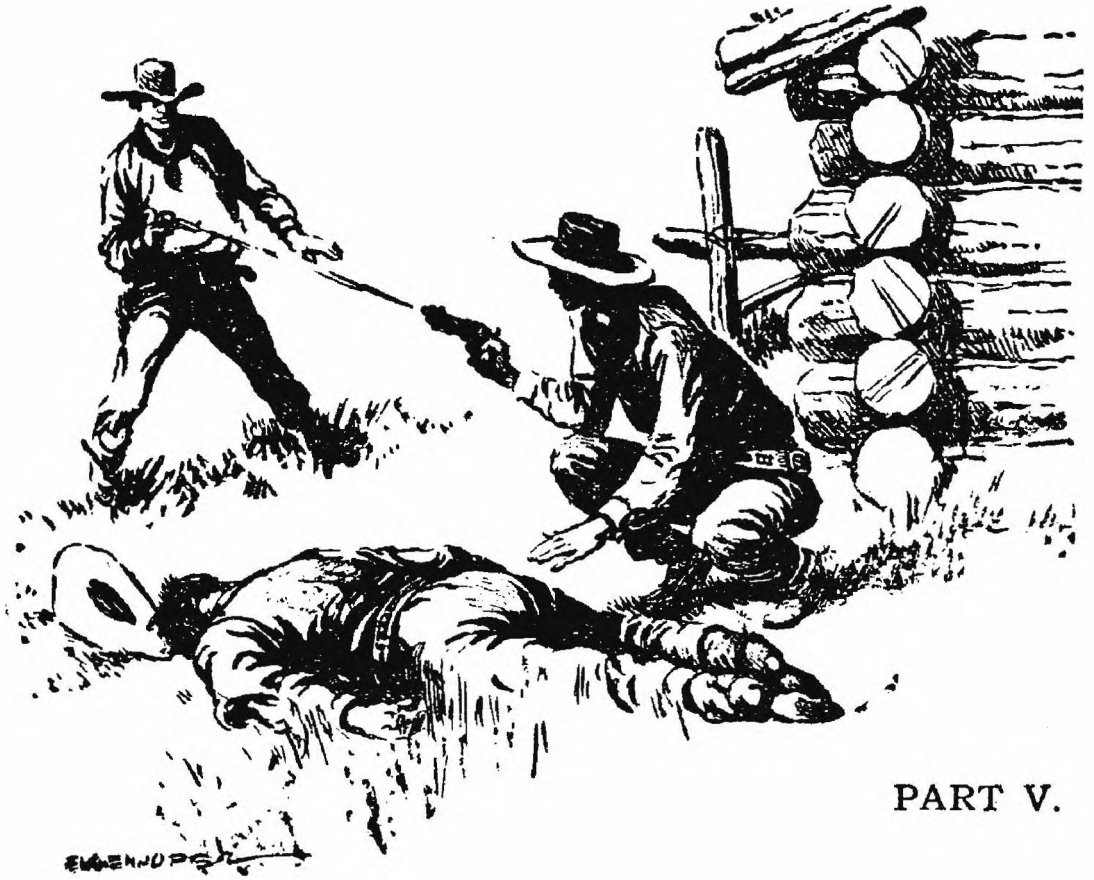
A BULLDOG OWNED BY ADE STEVENS, DEPAUW, INDIANA, DIVES INTO PONDS AND CATCHES BULLFROGS. THE "FROG-HOUND" CAUGHT SIXTEEN IN ONE DAY.

THE PATTERN ON A NAVAJO RUG ALWAYS PROVIDES A "BREAK" THROUGH WHICH THE DEVIL MAY ESCAPE.



A COCKLEBUR SPROUTED AFTER BEING ENTOMBED TWENTY-ONE YEARS IN CEMENT. FOUND AND PLANTED BY JOHN LEONARD, DURANT, OKLAHOMA.

Mr. Young will pay one dollar for any usable Western "Interesting And True" features which readers may send him in care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Return postage must be included for suggestions found unsuitable.



PART V.

GUN THUNDER IN GHOST TOWN

By JACKSON GREGORY

YOUNG JEFF CODY, rancher, stumbles upon the murder of an old gold miner, Charlie Carter, and learns that the miner was murdered by the cutthroat crew of Bart Warbuck, czar of the section, in order that Warbuck might cash in on the gold strike Carter reportedly had just made.

At a dance in Pioneer City, Young Jeff meets Arlene Warbuck, Warbuck's daughter, and is attracted to her. After the dance, Warbuck meets Young Jeff and offers to tear up his mortgage on the latter's ranch if Jeff will join forces with him. Jeff refuses.

Young Jeff learns that Old Mother Grayle, known as the "Witch Woman" because of her reputed powers of divination, knows some secret about Warbuck's past, and holds it over his head. Her price for silence is half of Charlie Carter's gold. Jim Ogden, Warbuck's foreman, also demands a share of this

gold. Warbuck shoots Ogden, but does not kill him. Arlene, meanwhile, learns about Warbuck's shooting of Ogden, and decides to desert so cruel a parent. Miriam Warbuck, said to be Arlene's adopted sister, a spiteful, dwarfed creature, reveals that she, too, knows about the shooting, and implies that she knows other things, even more sinister.

News of the Charlie Carter gold strike brings rebirth to the old ghost town of Halcyon, and gamblers, miners and others, flock to the place. The old Pay Dirt Hotel reopens, in charge of Still Jeff, Young Jeff's father, and Red Shirt Bill Morgan, once Still Jeff's friend, now his ostensible enemy.

Warbuck instructs his men to "get" Young Jeff, but they fail. Then, on Warbuck's orders, they try to kidnap Arlene, but are repulsed by the two Jeffs and Red Shirt Bill, after a stirring gun battle in the Pay Dirt Hotel. But Warbuck is not to be denied.

He finally kidnaps Young Jeff, Old Mother Grayle, and a newcomer to town, a mysterious Doctor Sharpe, who, with the Witch Woman, seems to know something dark and sinister about Warbuck's past. There are hints that this secret concerns Arlene and Miriam.

Warbuck and his crew take their victims to an abandoned house far out in the bad lands, a place known as Devil-Take-It. A short time after their arrival Arlene, too, is brought in. She had been captured through the treachery of Miriam.

Young Jeff lays plans for an escape, and, overcoming Andy Coppler, Warbuck's second in command, succeeds in getting away. He also herds off all the horses of Warbuck's men, leaving the men stranded at Devil-Take-It. Warbuck, thinking his prisoners secure, had previously left for Halcyon on an unexplained mission.

On his way back to town, Young Jeff meets Old Jeff and Red Shirt Bill, who, suspecting something wrong, had organized a two-man searching party. They also had buried the hatchet, and were actually talking with each other again, after years of silence.

The three return to Devil-Take-It, and, by a ruse, Young Jeff captures Jim Ogden and forces Ogden to cause the surrender of the remainder of the Warbuck men.

Young Jeff, determined now to get Warbuck at any cost, offers Trigger Levine, one of Warbuck's captured crew, a hundred dollars and immunity from arrest, if he will carry a message to Sheriff Dan Hasbrook, in town. Levine agrees. The message is:

"Tell Dan I sent you, and that I want a barrel of tar and a big fat feather mattress."

Trigger leaves with the message.

CHAPTER XVII.

PURSUIT OF WARBUCK.

"WE'VE got ropes on our saddles," said Still Jeff when he came back. "Likewise, we've got saddle strings. We can tie these gents up so they'll stay tied, where we can find 'em when we want 'em."

"What'n the devil do we want 'em for?" thundered old Red Shirt Bill. "Me, I don't."

"Which way did Warbuck go?" Young Jeff demanded of Jim Ogden.

"How do I know?" snapped Ogden.

Young Jeff said, "My finger's sweaty on the trigger, Jim. You ought to know that. *Where did Warbuck go?*"

"He headed north," said Ogden.

"Up toward Cooper's Sluice. That's all I know."

Jeff said: "Jeff, you and Bill close-herd these men a minute. There was some jasper I met on my way over here: I konked him, but maybe he's awake by now. We better make sure of him."

He hurried to the spot where he had met up with a straggler of the Warbuck crowd and had crowned him with his gun. He found the man where he had dropped him, dead to the world. Dead to everything, Jeff thought him at first, but a hand on the man's chest, and the light of a match, told him otherwise. It was young Johnny Smith, and he was alive and beginning to come back to dazed consciousness.

"Wake up, kid," Jeff said. "It's time to go."

Johnny Smith groaned, clapped a hand to an aching head, and managed to sit up. At first he didn't know where he was, or why. But when realization swept over him he came to his feet with a bound, groggy, yet aware of general conditions.

"Wh—who are you? What you want?" he muttered, and fumbled for a lost gun.

"Let the gun go, kid," said Jeff. "You won't be needing it. Come along."

Johnny Smith came along, having nothing else to do. He staggered a bit, like one drunk, at first, but got himself under control by the time he and Young Jeff came to the three horses. He did as he was commanded to do, pulled down the tie ropes, and led the horses along as Young Jeff showed him the way. So they came where the other men were. Jim Ogden was standing ill at ease, yet in a manner resigned; Still Jeff and Red Shirt Bill were on guard.

"Let's hurry, boys," said Young Jeff. "Warbuck's not far off; he's got Arlene and Sharpe and the old woman. There are two men with him; they're Buck Nevers and Poco-poco Malaga. They maybe have heard the shooting; we might meet them on the way, coming back. Anyhow, I promised Arlene."

They tied their captives hand and foot, and made a good job of the tying; trust old-timers like Still Jeff and Red Shirt Bill for that sort of work. After that the men they had trussed up were dragged this way and that, scattered so that they couldn't help one another, and were lashed to trees. Then Young Jeff and Still Jeff and Red Shirt Bill got into their saddles and headed north, toward Cooper's Sluice.

COOPER'S SLUICE was in a narrow pass which connected the bad lands with Round Valley, where, once, men had thought to have located gold in paying quantities. It was only four or five miles from the old house at Devil-Take-It. The gold hadn't amounted to anything, and Cooper's Sluice, as a town, was stillborn. But there was a rock hut there, half dug-out, to mark the place, and stand a monument to short-lived, lurid hopes. It was there that Bart Warbuck convoyed his guests.

"Let me go! Let me go!" Arlene screamed, panic-stricken. "You have no right! You're driving me mad! Let me go!"

"Take it easy, girl," said Warbuck. "Nobody's going to hurt you. But you know too much. I've got to shut your mouth for a while. And I've got to talk to you."

"I'll keep my mouth shut! Do you think I'd go talking about my own father—about the things you say I know? For very shame I'd keep still."

"Shut up!" he growled at her. "I know what I'm doing."

There was a high night wind whistling down through the pines, and the clatter of Warbuck's horse's hoofs on the rocky ground was loud in their ears; and alongside was the torrent that spilled out of the pass and rushed circuitously, making a merry din of its own, down to Wandering River. So they did not hear the distant shots, down at Devil-Take-It. Had the wind been blowing the other way they might have heard; but not even the wind was a friend of Barton Warbuck to-night.

He alone rode, the others trudging along on foot. He got his spice out of the evening by leading Doc Sharpe the way he did. Sharpe's hands were tied behind his back; Warbuck's rope was around his neck; Sharpe was led like a cow that was going to the yard to be slaughtered. Arlene had never dreamed of such curses as, for a time, Sharpe screamed —nor of such laughter as came from Warbuck.

The old woman and herself were herded along by Nevers and Malaga. After Arlene's single outburst, she had never a word to say. Amanda Grayle was as silent as a sphinx—except once. That was when they were fording a creek. She had her chance for a harsh, savage whisper in the girl's ear:

"Some time, when they're not watching and listening, I want to talk to you," she said. "It's terribly important. I'll pull Barton down yet!"

"I don't want you ever to talk to me," said wretched Arlene.

"I've got to. You've got to know that——"

"I wish I didn't know what I know already! I am so ashamed! Oh, why——"

"Hey, there," called Warbuck. "What are you two jabbering about? Amanda, you better keep your mouth shut. I'd cut your scrawny old throat for two cents."

"You better not, Barton Warbuck," she railed at him. "You know what would happen to you!"

He cursed her and went on riding, dragging Sharpe along; and Sharpe, with his hands bound behind him, was forever stumbling, and the rope about his neck was always jerking. He didn't curse back any more; perhaps he was half choked, and couldn't.

TO Arlene it was an hour of horror; it was like being mad in a madhouse. When, at last, they came to the stone hut at Cooper's Sluice and were herded inside like cattle, she was on the verge of exhaustion; her shoes were cut on the rocks; her ankles and knees bruised where she had fallen in the dark; her hands grimy, her whole body aching.

Pocopoco Malaga made a fire in a cramped, triangular fireplace in a corner; the room filled with smoke. There was not a stick of furniture in the place, not a bench, or even a box. She slumped down, sitting on the dirt floor, her back against the wall. Above, the roof was nearly all gone, and stars shone down through great gaps where the timbers had rotted or been blown away.

She saw Sharpe dragged in with the rope around his neck, looking like a dead man, his face so white and his eyes so staring. She saw the old woman sit down without uttering a word. But the old woman didn't look dead; those eyes of hers were glittering, full of life, and of hate, and many things evil.

Arlene didn't want to look at Sharpe again, but couldn't control her eyes. The rope was still around

his throat; his face, from a dead, pasty white, was growing purple. His eyes seemed to be popping out of his head. She jumped up and ran to him; she began fumbling with the noose, trying to get it loose. Sharpe was making terrible, strangling noises.

Warbuck, standing with his big hairy hands on his hips, his broad hat far back, his eyes and mouth cruel, jeered at her.

"You little fool! What if he does choke to death? Who cares? I've a notion to hang the rat right now. I ought to have done it twenty years ago."

She got the rope loosened, and heard the long, sobbing breath that Sharpe pumped into his lungs. Then she dropped down again, her back to the wall as before. She began to think about Young Jeff, and to wonder. She thought, "There was something magnificent about him tonight. Nothing is going to stop him. He'll come back. He will take me out of all this."

Sharpe choked, and then began raving like a maniac. At the moment he was mad. The words that he said, that he spewed forth, were vile—and yet they did not just then shock her; rather, they awed her. There was no coherence, no sense for anybody to make of what he said at first, and while Arlene shivered and the old woman stared, as did Pocopoco Malaga and Buck Nevers, Warbuck, with his hands on his hips, only laughed. But at last Sharpe said something that did make sense, though it baffled Arlene. He screamed out:

"Blast you, Warbuck! I'll tell the world if I die for it! I've had enough; you can't pay me to keep quiet any longer. When your wife had a baby——"

Warbuck shot him. His smoking gun drove two bullets through Sharpe's scrawny body, and the man went down, sliding slowly along the wall, clawing feebly at the dirt floor, then growing quite still.

Then, the most horrid sound in the world, worse than Doc Sharpe's choking and strangling, worse than his shrieking curses, worse, even, than the pistol shot and the sound of a body slumping down so loosely, came a cackling, derisive muttering from the old hag of Witch Woman's Hollow.

"You're a fool, Barton, and always was," she said. "Now, most likely, you've hung yourself. If Sharpe wrote down——"

"I've a notion to kill you, too," said Warbuck.

She was frightened, and yet stiffened by a queer sort of courage; she was like a cat that a pack of dogs had chased into a corner. She clenched her bony hands as she screamed at him:

"Kill me, you great big fool, if you want to! Me, I've written it all down; it's in a safe place; ten days after you've killed me the whole world will know about it—and you'll be as dead as Sharpe is! Look at him! Look how pretty he looks! You'll be like that in ten days if you lift your hand against me."

"Shut up!" Warbuck stormed at her. "Shut up! I'll kill you anyhow unless you shut your mouth. I'll hammer you over the head; I'll kick you into shutting up. Shut up, I tell you!"

Arlene scarcely heard them. She looked at the faces of the others, Pocopoco Malaga and Buck Nevers, and saw how strained they were, how narrow and glinting their eyes, how strong muscles stood out like ridges along their jaws. She tried to look anywhere except at the sprawling body on the floor, so near her, with a

pool gathering at its side that looked like ink, and flashed redly and glassily as the flames in the fireplace darted up and then shrank down again.

"It's murder," she kept saying over and over to herself. "I've seen my own father commit murder—killing a defenseless man—and it isn't the first time. A murderer. Good Heaven, why, why did this have to be? And I—and I——"

THE two Jeffs and Red Shirt Bill Morgan heard the two shots. And they saw a ruddy glow where the old rock chimney and the broken roof let the red light escape. They rode closer, but not too close, not wanting the sound of shod hoofs to forestall their arrival. They dismounted swiftly, tied their horses, and went prowling forward like three old-time Indians bent on a scalping party.

"I hope nobody kills Warbuck tonight," said Young Jeff. "Some day, if we keep him alive and put the spurs to him, he's going to talk. For one thing, he knows about Charlie Carter's mine. Then—well, after all, he's Arlene's father."

"He's due for a killin' just the same," said Red Shirt Bill. "As for Carter's gold—shucks, I can find it. And as for Arlene—well, she's young yet; she'll get over it."

Inside the old hut Warbuck was saying, "Buck, you get outside and keep an eye peeled, and your ears stretched. Just in case. If you hear anybody, let me know on the run."

Outside, the three men were speculating, but doing so silently, wondering about those two shots; just two, then a dead silence, eloquent of some sort of finality.

"It'd be convenient if somebody has burned Bart Warbuck down," said Red Shirt Bill. "But at that, I'd be kind of disappointed. I've always figured as how I'd some day be the lucky man to nail him."

Buck Nevers came slouching out. He always slouched in a queer, crouching sort of way, always seemed ready at the drop of a hat to spring in any direction. Now, as they saw him, he either saw or heard them coming. He shouted out something and leaped well to one side of the door, out of the path of light. At the same instant Pocopoco Malaga came running out, and Warbuck's vibrant voice called, "Who's there? What's going on?"

Young Jeff sang out, "Keep your shirt on, Warbuck! It's——"

But across his words cut a yell from Buck Nevers: "It's Young Cody, an' he's got men with him and——"

Warbuck's throaty roar of rage slashed across Buck Nevers's shout as Nevers's had done with Young Jeff's: "Shoot, you fools! Shoot 'em down!"

But the shooting had already started. Nevers was crouching and firing from some place at the cabin's darkest corner; Pocopoco Malaga had darted to the partial protection of a big tree, and was shooting; and the trio from Halcyon were pouring hot lead back at them.

Warbuck didn't show his face at the door. He was standing inside, his gun in his hand, listening, uncertain. He was trying to estimate how many attackers had pounced on him; no one could tell.

"Warbuck!" screamed Buck Nevers. "Warbuck! Get into it."

Nevers had been winged, perhaps badly hurt. He got no response from his employer. He whirled, now, and began running, blubbering as he ran. Pocopoco Malaga cursed fluently in Spanish, and began a stealthy withdrawal. But his retreat was neither

sufficiently stealthy nor sufficiently swift. A bullet traced him and he went down, floundering, with a yip of pain like a stricken coyote's.

Young Jeff went streaking in through the door like something carried blindly on a storm wind. There, in the middle of the floor, stood Bart Warbuck, still looking uncertain, his gun still in his grip. Both that gun of his, and Young Jeff's, came up at the same instant.

Arlene, too, was standing; she had snatched up a stick of firewood, not in the least knowing what she meant to do with it, just moving instinctively. With all her might she brought the stick down across Warbuck's hand. The weapon flew out of his grasp.

There was a doorway leading into a small room, storeroom or kitchen. Warbuck, during his brief moments of uncertainty, had seen it out of the corner of his eye, and now one tremendous bound carried him through it and into the dark. There was one window, rather high; he had remembered that. He squeezed his big bulk through as Young Jeff came running after him. Then, from outside, came the sound of a man running—Bart Warbuck at last in full flight.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DISCLOSURES.

ARLENE flung the stick from her with a shudder, and flew into Jeff's arms; she began to sob, "Oh, thank God he got away—that you didn't shoot him! You might have and—and I struck my own father's gun down so that you could! Oh, Jeff, why can't I be dead?"

Both Still Jeff and Red Shirt had come running, close behind Young Jeff, and were just in time to see Warbuck make his headlong escape. Now they whirled and ran out again, bound on getting him, or at least on making sure that he didn't grab a horse. They found their own horses; Warbuck's was tied to a tree not twenty feet from the door; he hadn't dared to go to it, and so was on foot in the bad lands.

"Looked like Sharpe in there was dead," said Red Shirt Bill. "Guess that was the shots we heard; Warbuck plugged him. I think we peppered the other two guys that came barging out; we better make sure, 'cause a dead snake is the only good snake. What say you keep an eye on the four horses? Me, I'll go smoke them fellers out that made the mistake to start shootin'."

He knew he wouldn't get an answer from Still Jeff; just the same, he snorted as he trudged away. He found Pocopoco Malaga lying close to the house, dead; the man had been shot twice, once through the throat. He found no trace of Buck Nevers. Nor was Nevers ever seen again; either he got clean away, or merely dragged himself off to die in some gully where it might be years before they would find his bones.

Young Jeff held Arlene tight a moment, not knowing what he could say to her, then turned a pair of stormy eyes on the old woman.

"What happened to Sharpe here?" he demanded. "Who killed him?"

"Barton did," she said with malicious relish. "We all saw him. Sharpe started to blab, the fool. Only he's not dead—not quite dead yet."

Arlene, having thought him already dead, went hurriedly with Jeff to the wounded man, a quick ray of hope prompting her to believe he might live. But even she could see that the man was dying.

He called faintly for water, and Young Jeff went out to Cooper's Creek, where once the sluice had

been, and brought water in his hat, the best he could do. By that time Still Jeff and Bill Morgan were looking in on them.

Sharpe wanted desperately to talk; he wanted to accuse Warbuck; he wanted, with his last ounce of strength, to make sure that Warbuck's own fall and death came about through him. He drank gulpingly, and then began muttering. At first his mouthings meant nothing; then, with a last flare-up of his vital forces, he forced his words to make sense. They all crowded close to listen, feeling that this derelict should not go drifting out across the vast, dark sea of death without leaving his message behind him. They heard him say.

"Warbuck's killed me. He always swore he would. He's killed other men. It was him that killed and robbed Hank Ryan twenty years ago—that's where he got his start. Amanda Grayle knows. Old Jeff Cody and old Bill Morgan, they never knew. And when Warbuck's daughter was born, I was the doctor. And she——"

He had given all he had; he couldn't get any further, not a syllable more. He slumped back, dead.

THEN, all unexpectedly, Young Jeff felt a strange electrical atmosphere in the bleak room, a moment of quivering, of tenseness. He didn't know how that sensation had come upon him; surely not from having seen Sharpe stop breathing.

Then he realized, though the realization didn't carry him far forward, that, as he straightened up, he had caught the strangest look in old Still Jeff's eyes he had ever seen there. Instinctively he turned toward Red Shirt Morgan: the mystifying thing now was that the same strange look was in old Bill's eyes. Yet he noted that the two men did not look at each other; both were staring at the old woman of Witch Woman's Hollow—and she, in deadly terror, let out a thin screech and started to run. They stopped her before she had raced three steps, Still Jeff's hand clamping down on one of her scrawny arms, Red Shirt Bill's on the other.

Red Shirt Bill said in a voice that wasn't like his at all: "Let's have it, Amanda Grayle. Let's have it straight, and Heaven have mercy on your soul if you try to lie. *What about Hank Ryan?*"

"You two big fools!" she shrilled. "Of course it was Barton Warbuck that killed him! You three men, Bill Morgan and Jeff Cody and Hank Ryan, were pardners, and hit gold; you had forty or fifty thousand dollars cached in dust, and Hank Ryan stole it. You both swore to get him. Then somebody did get him; shot him in the back of the head with an old gun from your cabin, and left the gun there and kept the gold dust. And for more than twenty years Bill Morgan has thought Jeff Cody did it, and Jeff Cody has thought Bill Morgan did it!

"I knew it and Sharpe knew it—and all this time Barton Warbuck's been paying us money to keep our mouths shut. Now he's as big a fool as you two; for Sharpe, just like me, protected himself by having the whole thing written out and signed and left where it'll pop up within ten days of his death. So Barton Warbuck's cut his own throat to-night. And there are other things I could tell you——"

But they were no longer listening to her. The eyes of both Still Jeff and Red Shirt Bill Morgan had been riveted on her face; now, as swift as light, they turned toward each other. Those old eyes were like knives, now,

cutting deep, dissecting, probing all the way to the hilt for the truth. Neither of them said a word for a while, not even Red Shirt Bill Morgan. They just stood and stared; they looked back across more than twenty years without saying a word.

Then Red Shirt Bill Morgan said quite simply:

"Jeff let's go out, you 'n' me, and pull Bart Warbuck down. It's time."

And Still Jeff nodded. The two went out side by side. Young Jeff saw how their shoulders were brushing.

Young Jeff called to them, "Wait a shake; I'll be with you," and Red Shirt Bill thundered back, "Sure, Jeff; take your time."

Young Jeff felt that he couldn't leave Arlene thus precipitately, not with Sharpe dead on the floor, not alone with this old hag. He'd have to move Sharpe into the little room through which Warbuck had gone—and he'd have to arrange, somehow, about Arlene.

Red Shirt Bill Morgan and Still Jeff Cody didn't wait a single minute; it wasn't in either of them to wait to-night. They meant to track Bart Warbuck, they alone, and felt that even in the dark they could find him. He was unarmed; he was on foot; he'd strike as straight as a string, they thought, down south through the barrens and toward a horse and a gun. These he'd find at the Adam Holliday ranch; Holliday was a friend of his. It was there that the little blond school-teacher, Christine Ward, boarded.

So they wasted no time; they'd either run him down before morning or cut him off, cork him up in the bad lands where, by daylight, they'd get him. And it was like old times, the two of them riding together, Red Shirt Bill with so much to say, Still Jeff always ready with a friendly grunt.

AND so it happened that not these two, whom Warbuck had tricked for so many years, stifling about the finest thing that ever came into their hardy lives, but Young Jeff who first clashed with Bart Warbuck.

For Warbuck hadn't gone far before he stopped and came cautiously back. He had no gun; maybe he could get one that either Pocopoco Malaga or Buck Nevers had dropped. And he wanted a horse; never in his life had he wanted a horse so much. He should be able to get his own, or one belonging to the men from Halcyon. He risked something returning, but he risked everything trying to get out of this devil's country on foot.

When Young Jeff hurriedly finished what he had to do inside, moving Sharpe's body, and assuring Arlene that soon they'd come back for her, and that, in the meantime, she'd be all right, he found that already the two old-timers had gone. But there was Jeff's horse where he had left it, and near by was Warbuck's horse. And at that moment Warbuck, just jerking a tie rope loose, this being his unlucky night, stepped on a dead branch that crackled loudly underfoot, and Young Jeff saw him. Faint as the starlight was, it was sufficient to show him Warbuck's big, bulking body, and he knew in a flash what had happened.

"Warbuck!" he shouted, and ran forward. Warbuck at last got the rope free, and was scrambling up into the saddle, but before he could get away Young Jeff had caught the reins, close to the bit, holding the horse back.

Then Warbuck came down out of the saddle like a mountain lion

pouncing, throwing his heavier weight down on Young Jeff, grabbing at his gun arm. Jeff went reeling backward, but, doing so, he managed to jerk his gun arm free.

"Up with 'em, Warbuck!"

But Warbuck wouldn't stop, and Jeff, somehow, couldn't squeeze the trigger; much as he knew Warbuck needed killing, he couldn't quite bring himself to shoot an unarmed man. Warbuck lashed out at him, right and left, pressing him backward by the fury of his attack, and the impact of his greater weight was unleashed like a landslide.

Jeff barely managed to keep his feet; he retreated still another step, and shoved his gun back into its holster; then, with every nerve and sinew taut, he tore into his assailant. The sound of the blows they gave and took, the crack of a hard fist against bone, fists thudding into bodies, were to be heard at a distance. Arlene came running out of the old hut, and the old woman, as spry as a cricket, came nimbly after her.

They were four nearly equally desperate persons just then, each with a different reason for desperation. Arlene had already experienced enough of horror to last her the rest of her life, and now to see Young Jeff Cody and Bart Warbuck —Young Jeff and her own father— trying to beat each other into insensibility, if not into death, was so horrible to her that she could almost persuade herself that she was only dreaming it, that it was an utter and absurd impossibility. But the sounds of those blows, of those coughing grunts, were real enough.

"Kill him, kill him!" shrieked the old woman.

Arlene didn't know whether Amanda Grayle wanted Jeff to kill Warbuck, or Warbuck to kill Jeff.

But whether Jeff or Warbuck, neither one of those two even heard the screaming voice. Jeff, almost overborne again by Warbuck's bear-like bulk, went staggering backward. Then his heel did catch on a stone, and he toppled and clutched wildly at empty space, and fell. Warbuck leaped forward and struck at him with a heavy boot. Jeff rolled clear, or almost; the boot grazed his shoulder, near the base of his throat. He swung out his arm as he rolled and caught Warbuck by the calf of the leg, and, as he half rose, Warbuck was jerked down with him, and the two, caught in each other's arms, rolled and thrashed together.

THEN Jeff felt a big pair of hairy hands, like monstrous tarantulas, closing about his throat. He knew what would happen to him, once those hands got a secure grip; there was no mercy in them, they were machines of destruction. He gripped one of them; he began a savage hammering at Warbuck's face, trying to catch him on the chin.

The old woman was scrabbling around on the ground with her bony claws, seeking a stone. She stood up with a jagged chunk of granite in each hand; she hovered over the combatants, seeking the chance to hurl one of the rocks against Warbuck's head.

No such chance came. She was swept off her feet, and sent sprawling and mumbling curses, as the two flailing bodies crashed against her. Jeff broke Warbuck's grip in time and writhed free and stood up. Warbuck, as though lifted by an explosion, came up after him. But this time Jeff struck first and unerringly, and with all the battle force in him, and his fist cracked into Warbuck's jaw and sent him toppling backward, his two arms thrown out wildly. In

between those outspread arms Jeff charged again and struck again, and this time found the point of the chin. Warbuck went down, flat on his back, like a tree crashing to earth, and with one great, triumphant leap Young Jeff Cody was on top of him.

"Jeff! Jeff!" pleaded Arlene. "You're killing him! Don't!"

The old lady caught her roughly.

"Shut up, you little fool!" she screeched. "Let Jeff kill him. You ought to be glad!"

"No! No! I don't want Jeff to be a murderer, too!"

Jeff half stood up; he said, coughing out the words pantingly over his shoulder:

"Rope. Get me a rope. From the horse."

It was Amanda Grayle who ran eagerly for the rope and brought it back, watching, catlike, as Young Jeff did a thorough job of binding Bart Warbuck's hands behind his back. Warbuck, if at all conscious, was too sick and weak to move. When Jeff finished his job, he threw a half hitch of free rope around Warbuck's neck.

"If you try to get funny, Warbuck," he promised, "I'll strangle you with that. Now get up and walk. You're going inside, where I can have light enough to watch you."

After a while Warbuck, assisted to his feet, got up and walked. He had never a word to say but his eyes, slashing back and forth, filled with hatred and defeat, red with rage and humiliation, spoke for him. That was when they were inside the cabin and Jeff had replenished the fire for the sake of light; he made Warbuck lie down in a corner and hog tied him with half hitches drawn tight about his ankles. He had to wipe the blood out of his eyes to get that job done, but did not, as yet, feel the long gash across his brow.

Seeing Warbuck securely disposed of Jeff hurried out; he had two things in mind. One was to catch and retie Warbuck's horse, the other, and more important matter, was to call back Still Jeff and Red Shirt Bill before they had gone too far to hear a pistol shot. There was yet a chance, he thought, in all this silence, for them to hear.

First, then, he fired the three equally spaced shots which mountain men know for a summons. Then he waited a moment and again fired three shots; they should hear and return; the wind, slight as it was, was all in his favor.

After that he went looking for Warbuck's horse, found it not fifty paces from where they had left it, and tied it to a young tree. He was hastily finishing his work when he heard a hurrying tread behind him, then a hushed voice saying, "Jefferson! Jefferson Cody!"

That, of course, was the old hag from Witch Woman's Hollow. He demanded curtly:

"Well? What now?"

"Tell me, Jefferson, what are you going to do with Barton Warbuck?"

"I don't know. Plenty, I hope. We've got Jim Ogden, and most of the rest of the crowd Warbuck left at Devil-Take-It, tied up. Anyhow, we'll run them out of the country, and they'll stay out. Jeff and Bill ought to be back with us in no time."

"Don't let him live, Jefferson! Kill him. Kill him like you'd kill a snake. He's killed Sharpe to-night; he knows, now, that he might have just as well shot himself through the head; he'll kill me. But instead, you've got to kill him. Now!"

She gripped him fiercely by the arm, her claws digging into his flesh. "Jeff!" she cried excitedly, "you love Arlene, don't you? You do, Jeff, and she loves you!"

HE tried to drag himself free of her clutch.

"What are you talking about?" he said harshly. "Are you crazy?"

She tried to giggle at him, her old habit, but now her throat was dry, and she half choked. She said earnestly:

"I'll tell you something—a secret—a great secret! I'll tell you lots of secrets! The one you and Arlene want to hear first of all is this: *She isn't his daughter.* They're not even blood relations!"

He thought, at first, that she had gone stark mad, what with the night's experiences. Then he remembered little things that had been said, the merest and, until now, meaningless hints.

"Look here!" he said. "What's all this? Come clean with it!"

They talked together there under the pine but a little while, less than ten minutes, perhaps not over five. But by the time Young Jeff, hurrying and calling excitedly to Arlene, had reached her, Barton Warbuck, for the second time that night, was free and a fugitive. As before, he went headlong through the small, high window; Jeff arrived just in time to hear the faint sound he made brushing through, and to see Arlene, her face pale but her eyes brilliant and defiant, standing there with the rope in her hand.

"Yes, I let him go!" she said, and let the rope slip from her fingers, and into a coil on the floor at her feet, like a snake. "He pleaded with me, he begged me, he promised he would go and never return, that no matter what happened he would never lift his hand against you again. And after all, Jeff—after all, he is my father."

The old woman began screeching, almost dancing with rage, in a storm of fear that shook her as an aspen is shaken in a strong winter wind.

"You fool, you fool, you fool!" she screamed over and over. You——"

Young Jeff didn't hear the rest of it, nor did he say a word to Arlene. He simply thought, "He can't have gone a dozen steps!" He turned and ran out, gun in hand. This time, if he came up with Warbuck, there was going to be no chance of a third escape. Arlene ran after him, calling him back, pleading with him.

This time, running around the corner of the cabin, close to its wall, Warbuck stumbled in the dark over the body of Pocopoco Malaga, and had pitched forward, falling headlong. His outflung hand touched something, closed on it frantically; it was Malaga's gun.

Warbuck, leaping to his feet with new power and confidence, saw Jeff coming out. He fired when the two men were not over ten feet apart. And like a reflected flare of the hot flash from his weapon came Young Jeff's answer.

They were wild bullets, chance shots, short as was the range, winged by destiny rather than a man's skill or judgment in that faint, deceptive light. Then Jeff's hammer clicked on an empty shell and he thought dully, "Well, I guess this ends it for me." But he heard a groan from Warbuck and made out, vaguely, a staggering form, and leaped upon it, his gun clubbed and brought smashing down. Warbuck dropped in his tracks.

They heard a far-off shout in the unmistakable thunder of Red Shirt Bill's voice, and then the clatter of racing hoofs coming on. Jeff took up the gun that had fallen from Warbuck's hand and stood leaning against the cabin wall, waiting.

CHAPTER XIX.

FUSS AND FEATHERS.

BART WARBUCK had been shot through the gun arm, the bone near the elbow shattered, and he had taken a blow over the head that had dropped him into unconsciousness. Carried into the hut, water thrown over him and his wound bound up, he stirred and sat up. Jeff stood watchfully over him, ready to smash him down if he tried to get to his feet.

Then Still Jeff and Red Shirt Bill, summoned back by Jeff's pistol shot signals, came hurrying in. They took in everything at a glance, and their eyes brightened.

"So he came back, askin' for it, and he got it!" exclaimed Red Shirt Bill in high delight. "What's more, he's still alive, so we can take him along with us to our party. Dreams do come true, kid."

Warbuck said thickly, "You'd better lay off—I'll have the law on every mother's son of you—I've got influence——"

His words were drowned in Red Shirt Bill's hearty laughter. Even Still Jeff—well, he didn't exactly laugh outright, but you'd have said his smile became audible.

"What's this 'party' you're talking about, Bill?" asked Young Jeff. "When and where?"

"Down at Devil-Take-It. Remember, Jim Ogden and some more of the Long Valley boys, overdue somewheres else, are waitin' for us down there. We've got guests comin', too; we've sent out invitations, me and this dodderin' old fool." He ran a big arm about Still Jeff's gaunt shoulders. "Me and this varmint are pardners, you know; are now, always were, and always will be. So we're puttin' on this party together."

"Let's get going," said Still Jeff.

There were six of them, all told, and there were only four horses. Arrangements seemed almost to make themselves; Warbuck, the hand of his uninjured arm tied down to the saddle strings, was boosted up on one horse, and the old woman of Witch Woman's Hollow, despite her screaming protests, was lifted up behind him; to keep from falling she had to cling to him, her arms about his body, and that made her keep up her curses all the way.

Young Jeff helped Arlene up into his own saddle, then swung up behind her. And though he found it most convenient to put his arms around her, and keep them there, steadying them both, she did not scream, and he did not curse. The two "pardners" mounted, and they quitted Cooper's Sluice to take the shortest way back to Devil-Take-It.

"Arlene," said Jeff softly, his lips against her hair.

"Oh, Jeff! Why did all this have to happen? Why is life so ugly, so unbearable! What did I ever do to bring all this down on me! Only a few days ago I was so happy; I had everything; I was so proud to be Arlene Warbuck!" He could feel her convulsive shudder. "And now——"

"And now?" he said very gently. "Listen, Arlene——"

"I even hate my name! Arlene! I hate——"

"Sh! Listen. No, you're not Arlene any more; we won't stand for it. Say, Ah Wong named you with a new name—Missy Ah Lee! Now listen to me, Ah Lee."

"Oh, Jeff, how can you! When my heart's bleeding."

"It won't be, in a minute! Listen, Ah Lee. You're going to be happier than you ever were. You're going to feel just like a man who's had his stinging morning cold bath, and is

yelling for his breakfast—a breakfast like Ah Wong's. Let me hold you so you won't fall out of the saddle when I tell you. Good news, Ah Lee. Can you stand it? Ready?"

She said faintly, "Good news? Ah, Jeff. There can't be any for me, ever. As long as I remain who I am, what I am——"

SHE heard him chuckle, and stiffened as though he had stabbed her, so cruel did his misunderstanding seem to her. And when he said, his lips close to her ear, "But you're not Arlene Warbuck at all; there's not a drop of Warbuck blood in you," the words sounded so fantastic as to be quite meaningless. He was telling her she wasn't herself!

"Listen," he said. "Haven't you ever wondered why the Warbucks adopted that queer little creature, Miriam?"

Of course she had wondered, all her life; it seemed the queerest thing in the world for Barton and Irene Warbuck, cold-blooded and selfish people, to adopt a little crooked thing like Miriam.

"What is it, Jeff?" she asked, and suddenly her heart was pounding madly, and she grew breathless.

He told her all that the old woman had told him, all that Sharpe would have told had Warbuck not killed him when his lips were beginning to move to the words. When, those twenty years ago, a baby was born to the Warbucks, it was wizened and crippled—just the sort of thing to come from their union. The doctor was Doc Sharpe. He came into the room just as Warbuck, taking the newborn baby in his big, brutal hands, was about to strangle it. Sharpe saved that baby's life—and that baby was Miriam.

And he saw a ready expedient, one of those answers to fate's gibes that would work two ways, to Warbuck's advantage and to his own. He chanced to know of a young woman who had just given birth to a child over at Fort Ryder, and who had died in childbirth. The young husband and father, racing for the doctor of a black, winter night, driving a team of half-broken colts, starting on the return journey by the short cut of Cut-off Grade, had been killed; buggy, team and man, on a sharp, slippery turn, had been catapulted to the depths of Ryder's Gorge.

So there was an orphan, ready for adoption. Why any adoption at all? Because, even then, the Warbucks were ruthlessly ambitious. They planned to go far, no matter the road, and were "putting on dog," swelling themselves up with a queer sort of false pride which, in the end, was to bring them to their undoing. It was unthinkable that they should be parents to a warped and twisted baby, such as Miriam. So they kept her hidden from all eyes but Doc Sharpe's; and with his connivance the little orphaned girl was brought to them, and adopted; then, some few weeks later, they showed off the lovely, chubby Arlene as their own, and told of having added to their household, out of the goodness of their hearts at this glad occasion, that poor little crooked waif born at Fort Ryder. And for once, and for a short while, folks said, "There's some good in the worst of us; those Warbucks have got big, kind hearts."

And so the Warbucks hid their shame. And so Doc Sharpe was, for many a year, a richly bribed Doctor Leech.

Arlene didn't say a word. Her breast rose and fell, rose higher and fell again to her tumultuous breathing. She leaned backward in the saddle, tight against Young Jeff, and

his arms closed about her as though never to let her go. He gave her full time to subdue the tempest of her thoughts. At last she spoke in a new voice, very quiet, very gentle, hushed.

"I am not one of them at all! Oh, thank Heaven! Not the daughter of —I am not even Arlene! I feel newborn, Jeff! Not even Arlene!"

"No. Ah Lee, now. Maybe, after a while, we can make you a new name."

"I love 'Ah Lee,' murmured Ah Lee!

WHEN they came to Devil-Take-It, Young Jeff and the girl he called Ah Lee, were far behind. Suddenly they came up out of the magic world in which they had been riding; they saw several bonfires and scores of excited, gesticulating men. The "party" was on, and many more had come hastening to it than either Still Jeff or his partner had dreamed would come. For Trigger Levine, going enthusiastically on his errand, had stopped in Halcyon to get a much needed drink—and had had the luck to find the sheriff, Dan Hasbrook, there. Hasbrook, forthright and not given to secretive ways, had acted as a channel through which the news might spread, and it gushed out like craters long dammed.

Several of the Wandering River men had ridden down to Halcyon, to enjoy the excitement. There were Ed Spurlock, Walt Jameson, Steve Bannister, Sam Harper, Hank Fellowes, the Bagby boys, old man Vetch and some others. They had swept out of town after Hasbrook in a running race. Old Judge Northcutt, from Bender's Gap, had come along. So had several women, and among them were Christine Ward and Mrs. Sadie King and one of her daughters. And Miriam Warbuck. Devil-Take-It, with all its flaring fires and its visitors still pouring in, was like a small village.

They were all, every single man and woman of them, amply repaid for their ride at the very first glimpse they had of the riders coming now to the old house at Devil-Take-It. For here came Still Jeff Cody and Red Shirt Bill Morgan, two men whom the countryside had waited upon for such an explosion as might have resulted in double murder, and these two came in like the two old friends they were, as cozily companionable as two ducks in a pond. Nor was that half of it. They herded along with them none other than Barton Warbuck, and behind Warbuck, on the same horse, came the old woman of Witch Woman's Hollow, clinging to him that she might not fall, cursing him and pounding his back with her hard-clenched, bony fists. All those who saw and greeted them, shouted a resounding welcome.

As the crowd came surging forward, Dan Hasbrook made it his official business to be well at the fore.

"Take it easy, boys," he said, loud enough for all to hear. "Let's not step off in the dark until we know where we're stepping. Let's find out what it's all about before we go making mistakes."

He looked up at Still Jeff Cody and Red Shirt Bill Morgan and Bart Warbuck, their faces ruddy in the nearest, biggest bonfire, their eyes glinting. "Let's have it, boys," said Dan Hasbrook.

He asked for it, and he got it. Red Shirt Bill Morgan could talk on most occasions, but never in all his born life had he felt so full of words and the violent urge to unleash them. He pulled off his battered old hat and waved it above his head; he shouted

at them, "You listen to me, boys, and you listen good!" And he told them.

He told them everything. He ran back across the years as lightly as a mountain goat over a hillside; he went back to that time more than twenty years ago. He told them of himself, of his partner Jeff Cody, of the third partner, Hank Ryan; of how Ryan had made off with the community pot of more than fifty thousand dollars, gold dust, and how both Still Jeff and Bill Morgan had been out to get him; how Hank Ryan was murdered, shot in the back, and the gold stolen, and a gun left on the job that had come from their cabin in Red Dirt; how Still Jeff and Bill Morgan were tricked into suspecting each other—and how, only to-night, after twenty years misspent, they had learned the truth. And the truth was that it was Bart Warbuck's crime; and that was Bart Warbuck's beginning as a rich and powerful man in Long Valley, in the Wandering River country, in the whole State.

YOUNG JEFF slid down from his horse and stood at Arlene's side—at Ah Lee's side!—his hand on the saddle horn, her hand tight on his. He thought with an odd quirk of fancy, "Old Bill's always had it in him to make a great oration; he's got his chance to-night!" He looked the crowd over and his roving eyes were arrested by a small, compact group. There, some standing stiffly erect, some drooping, all their arms bound behind them, were Jim Ogden and his crowd.

Then, for the first time, he saw the separate knot of womenfolks, a dozen of them, ranchers' wives and daughters, and among them were Christine and Miriam, and Sadie King with her daughter, Aggie, clutching her arm. Most of the women, save Christine, who looked frightened, and Miriam, who looked wickedly gleeful, were like battle-hardened Amazons, come to demand justice and retribution.

Dan Hasbrook cleared his throat. He did his level best to look austere, to pose as the stern representative of the law that would brook no monkey business. If there was a gleam in his eyes, it might have been the reflection of a fire burning high near by. He cleared his throat a second time and spoke to Still Jeff.

"I got a message from Trigger Levine," he said. "Trig said as how you'd sent it. That right, Jeff?"

An emphatic nod assured him that that was right. Then Still Jeff asked:

"The tar, Dan? Here?"

"Yep. And the boys brought along all the buckets and kettles they could find; tar's warming up now."

"And feathers?" asked Still Jeff.

"Yep. A feather mattress; some of the ladies brought extra feather pillows." Then he pulled off his hat, rumpled his hair, and affected a scowl. "O' course, Trig Levine didn't tell me why you wanted all that truck, or what you meant to do with it. It sort of begins to look like—look here, Jeff; suppose you pile down off your horse and step aside for a word with me. I'm not going to have any law breaking, and you know it!" And those final words were said loud enough for all to hear.

Without the slightest hesitation, Still Jeff slid down from the saddle—he knew how it was with a sheriff at a party like this!—and stepped aside with Hasbrook. Hasbrook led the way beyond the flickering circle of firelight to where he had tied his horse. He stopped there.

"I guess I've got most of it, Cody," he said bluntly. "But if you ain't afraid it'll strain your throat you might let me know the high spots of all that's happened. You ought

to be able to spare a couple dozen words without feeling any bad effects to-morrow."

This struck Still Jeff as a reasonable request. And Dan Hasbrook was an old friend. So he did not spare words, though he didn't waste any, either. More concisely than most men could have done, he acquainted the sheriff with a digest of both present and ancient history, which is to say, he gave the events of the night, and their relation to events of a score of years ago.

When he had done, Dan Hasbrook was nodding. What he said was, "What you boys intend to do is against law and order, Jeff. I can't stand for it. I'm wearing two guns, and 'less they're taken away from me, I'm apt to use 'em. Likewise, there's a spare coil of rope on my saddle. Unless I'm tied up proper, I'm going to bust up this party."

This, too, struck Still Jeff as reasonable. So he took Dan Hasbrook's two guns away and slipped them down in his own belt; he reached up for the coil of rope and bound the sheriff hand and foot.

"Too tight, Dan?" he asked.

"Might make it a wee bit slacker on my wrists, Jeff. So's I could get a hand free if I had to roll a smoke."

When Still Jeff returned to the others, grouped about Warbuck and Jim Ogden and their men as a center, he announced gently:

"Hasbrook, being sheriff, was for stopping things. So I had to tie him up. Now we can get started."

A few laughed. Most were not in a laughing mood.

MIRIAM WARBUCK was one of those who laughed. She came through the still growing crowd to her adopted sister, where she stood close at Young Jeff's side.

"Hello, darling," she drawled mockingly. "Have a nice time?"

Startled, not having seen Miriam until now, the former "Arlene" put her two hands on the slight girl's arms.

"Miriam! I have just learned—I am the adopted one! You are the real Warbuck—you're their own flesh and blood daughter!"

Miriam's eyes grew big with wonder, then blazed with light.

"Then I'm their heiress!" she cried eagerly. "No matter what they do, they can't cheat me out of that! It is I, not you, you little fool, who will inherit—and from the looks of things it won't be long to wait, either! Had you thought of that before you told me?"

A ripple ran through the other girl. Had she thought of that! It was the first thing she did think of, though not in the same terms Miriam had in mind. She did not think of the Warbuck acres and wealth; she did think of the Warbucks themselves, and was already devoutly thanking a good God that she interited nothing from them. Neither their fortune, nor their hereditary traits.

"Yes," she answered quite softly. "I had thought of that. I don't want anything from them, Miriam."

"Oho!" Miriam's bright black eyes squinted; she saw how one of the hands that, a moment ago had been on her arm, had slipped instinctively into the protective clasp of Young Jeff's big hand. "So you've got all you want, have you?"

"Yes," said Ah Lee softly, though at the moment she didn't know what Miriam was talking about.

Voices were babbling all about them, men and women together exclaiming and demanding. Red Shirt Bill Morgan waved his hat over his head to draw attention and shouted at them. He'd tell 'em!

And he did.

Already he had read clear the titles of Bart Warbuck and his crowd. Now he mentioned something else and that something, spelled with a capital, as it should be on such an occasion, was Gold.

"This I want everybody to know before we go any further," said old Bill Morgan. "I want Warbuck to hear it, and Jim Ogden especially, and they won't be in any mood and condition to listen after another ten minutes. Charlie Carter found gold, and so Warbuck had him killed. And Warbuck wouldn't have done a thing like that unless he knew where the gold was, would he? He did know. He'd had men trailing Carter for months. Happens I know, too, and I've known about seven years. Happens old Jeff Cody knows, and he's just told me to-night he's known about eight, nine years!

"Poor old Charlie Carter, he didn't know what to do about it when he found it; that was why he was so anxious to talk to Bud King. Well, Warbuck wiped 'em both out. And so now nobody knows but my pardner and me and Warbuck. And I'll tell you.

"It's right down in the good old town of Pay Dirt, that some heathens call Halcyon. Pay Dirt's its rightful name. And who owns most of Pay Dirt? I do—and old Jeff Cody. Since twenty years ago, when we were pardners, we bought up together the biggest part of Pay Dirt, town lots and houses and land. And Charlie Carter's gold strike was on a town lot that belonged to me and Jeff as partners!"

He had to chuckle. "Jeff knew there was gold on it and wouldn't tell me, and I knew and wouldn't tell him, and neither of us would sell out to the other, and so for a good many years we just let her slide. We own mineral rights and everything. And, come daylight, we're goin' to bust things wide open! Pay Dirt will be boomin' again—and there'll be chances for a lot of you fellows to stake claims adjacent. And may the best men win!"

A cheer went up.

"Meet me and Jeff in Pay Dirt at sunup," said Red Shirt Bill. "There'll be free drinks at the hotel before we start off. Now, in the meanwhile, what'll we do with Warbuck and Ogden and these small fry of theirs that think themselves gunmen, and that Young Jeff Cody single-handed tied up, like tying your boot strings?"

"Tar's hot!" shouted a voice.

"Feathers are ready!" called another.

THE clamor subsided into complete silence when they saw that Still Jeff Cody had a word to say.

"We don't want to run afoul of the law," he said mildly. "And we don't want to make things tough for poor old Dan Hasbrook. So all you boys do like I say: Pull out your bandannas!"

Wondering, not knowing whether to laugh or swear at him, they obeyed, and many big bandanna handkerchiefs, both bright red and bright blue, blossomed in the firelight like tropical flowers. One, almost a yard square and as red as blood, was in Still Jeff's hands. He lifted it and tied it over his face, across his nose, leaving his shrewd old eyes clear to look over its top.

"The law will want to know who did what we're going to do to-night," he went on. "Now I'm going to call the roll; you boys will say whether you're present or absent, and that will help the sheriff later on. I'll begin with me. Old Jeff Cody, pres-

ent or absent?" He remained silent a moment. Then he sang out, "Absent!"

They did roar then, but again his first word quieted them. He called:

"Bill Morgan, present or absent?"

"Absent!" roared Bill Morgan in jovial thunder. "I'm way down to Pay Dirt, eatin' my supper!"

Still Jeff went steadily on calling the roll; he'd look to see who was at hand, then call his name. The man would put on his bandanna as a mask and answer, "Absent!"

"Ed Spurlock!" sang out Still Jeff. "Steve Bannister! Young Jeff Cody! Hank Fellowes!"

And so on and on. And every man made the same reply.

"Now," said Still Jeff, "that settles it. And it happens that Dan Hasbrook is close enough to hear. He'll know that none of you boys are here, because you say you are not here, and who ought to know any better than you? Now somebody might bring on the tar."

Sadie King came up, Aggie close at her side.

"There's ladies present," said Sadie King. "I expect they better go before you start getting these men ready for their new suits. First, we've got a small, ladylike chore to do. So you boys just wait."

What they meant to do was to a lady, and in ladylike manners. The women surrounded the screeching old hag from Witch Woman's Hollow, and drew her aside. All things considered, they treated her gently; they smeared only her hands and arms and head with tar, and to the tar they added generous handfuls of fluffy white feathers that stuck as tight as glue. Then they bade her good night, but they swore, every lady of them, that if they ever caught sight of her again as long as any one of them lived, they'd strip her and tar and feather her from top to toe. And she went scrambling and cursing, hooted out of camp, and she didn't ever come back to that part of the country.

Then the ladies began to depart. Sadie King went over to where Dan Hasbrook was and talked with him a while. After that she and Aggie drove away in their old buckboard —and Dan Hasbrook went along with them, a highly contented prisoner. He showed them the ropes on his arms and legs! He just couldn't help himself, could he?

Young Jeff felt in his bones what was going to happen next, and made Ah Lee come away with him.

All this while Bart Warbuck hadn't said a word; nor had Jim Ogden. But their faces were grim. Perhaps both knew.

All Warbuck's men, save himself and Ogden, were stripped stark naked and plastered from head to foot with thick tar; they were feathered until they looked like nothing on earth; they were advised that, if they moved rapidly, they'd surely find a clime much better for their health than this one. And to the accompaniment of hoots and jeers, they vanished in the befriending dark.

Then Warbuck began raving; he threatened, he offered bribes; he swore he'd pay this handful of men so much money, that each of them would be rich for life. Jim Ogden asked for a last cigarette; beyond that, he did not open his mouth.

The two were put up on horses, side by side. Nooses were drawn tight about their necks, ropes thrown over a big sturdy limb of an old pine that had lived here a hundred years, and probably understood what it was all about. Red Shirt Bill Morgan gave the word.

"Let 'em go!" he said.

The horses, released and slapped on their rumps, leaped forward.

ONE of the last of the womenfolks to leave was Christine Ward. She came seeking Young Jeff, and though she did not find him alone, as she had hoped, she spoke up swiftly and straightforwardly.

"Jeff! Listen! I didn't know—I didn't understand! Oh, please believe me! Mr. Warbuck brought me here, got me my place and I've been working for him all the time. I've been a—a nasty spy! The boys would drop in at the schoolhouse and I'd go riding with them. They'd tell me things, and I'd tell Mr. Warbuck. But I told you about that, didn't I? And I'd tell that horrible old woman, too. I—I thought—oh, I'll never forgive myself!"

Jeff said gently, "That's all right, Christine. Everything's all right now." He still had Ah Lee's hand in his, holding it tightly.

Christine stood a moment, looking at the two of them, then at Young Jeff alone, her big eyes at their widest, her mouth quivering. Suddenly she whirled about and ran away, and they heard the first of her many sobs clutching her throat.

An unexpected voice spoke up as a soft-footed figure advanced from the shadows.

"Hello, Bossee Jeff'son. . Hello, Missee Ah Lee," said Ah Wong. "Me come 'long, too. Go down Halcyon, ketchee lilly bit whisky, come 'long here. Now go 'long home. You come plitty qlick, Bossee Jeff'son?"

"Yes, Wong. Pretty soon."

"Nicee young wi-hoo you ketchee," giggled Ah Wong. "Bully. She washee, sweepee, makee house nice! All light, bossee. All light, Missee Bossee Ah Lee."

He went his way, carrying his whisky jug and giggling, a very happy Chinaman, and an observant one.

Jeff looked down into the girl's upturned face. The glow of a distant fire made a faint rose flush on her cheeks; the starlight was reflected in her eyes.

"How about it, Missee Ah Lee?" he asked. "You see Ah Wong's got his heart set on it; shall we let him down?"

"Why Jeff, I don't know what you're talking about!"

"What next, for you? Where to go, what to do? Of course the world is wide, and all that, but—Halcyon? Or back home with me! Home!"

"Jeff!"

"Don't you like Wong? You don't want us to let him down, do you?"

"What *are* you talking about?"

Jeff gathered her close into his arms. She didn't know, yet, what was the fate destined for Warbuck and Jim Ogden; he didn't want her to know, until later. He did want, wanted with all his heart and strength, to kiss her. He did kiss her, and she clung to him. She said faintly:

"What did he mean? Ah Wong, when he said "Wi-hoo." What did that mean, Jefferson Cody?"

"It's an old Chinese expression." He whispered into her ear, "It means 'wife.' Will you, Ah Lee?"

She had to think it over. She said finally:

"Well, I really do like Wong. I wouldn't want to disappoint him, would you, Bossee Jeff'son?"

"No, Ah Lee," said Young Jeff Cody. "No, wi-hoo! Let's ride!"

THE END

PEAVIES FOR TWO

By JOSEPH F. HOOK

Author of "By Right Of Heritage," etc.

FOR a few moments "Slash" Sutter and "Bucker" Bolt stood with open mouths, staring at the stoic Indian who had relayed the news to them that the last great river drive of logs was about to take place at the headwaters of the Clearwater River. Then they let out a series of shrill whoops that echoed through the timber.

As the Indian melted into the shadows of the second growth fir, the partners staged a race to the cabin. Young, strong of wind and limb, they leaped over the fallen logs like deer, tore through the undergrowth amid the slashing, and bounded through the door.

Talking excitedly, they stuffed food and extra clothing into their packs, slung their calk-studded boots around their necks, and hit the trail for the headwaters of the Clearwater at a pace that would have tired the leg muscles of the most seasoned timber cruiser.

They built castles in the air as they traveled; for things had not gone any too well with them on their timber claim, which they were trying to clear. Work had been scarce, owing to the speed with which the logging companies had hacked down

the timber, and the money they had saved, in order to hew a home for themselves out of the wilderness, was about at an end.

While tackling the hard, back-breaking task of clearing, they had often wished for tools with which they could have speeded the work, and which their meager savings would not permit of their purchasing. But now, with the prospect of highly paid work ahead, they saw the possibility that some of their wishes might come true.

"A stump puller is what we need most of all," Slash said. "A stump puller, and lots of cable."

"And a team, and some heavy block and tackle to pile the stumps and slashings so's we can burn 'em," Bucker added.

"And plenty of grub in the ol' cabin to last till we can clear the claim and get it seeded to grass. And a cow."

So it went, mile after mile, as they threaded their way through the dense second growth, instinctively following a bee line that would eventually bring them to their destination and to what, they hoped, would be the fulfillment of their ambitions.

"But the *last* big drive on the Clearwater!" Slash said, after a while. "Why, Bucker, it just don't seem possible that the timber's dwindled away like that!"

"It's lucky Uncle Sam's putting plenty of timberlands in the reserve, or else them lumber barons would clean it out to the last stick."

"Yeah; but look at this," Slash insisted. "Look what we're cruising through now. Second growth and slashings! Not a decent stick of fir or spruce left! It'll take fifty years before them second growth sticks is fit for——"

"Who cares about fifty years from now?" Bucker cut in. "We can't put back what the big shots has cut down. All we can do is clear our claim of stumps and make us a home. And this drive's gonna help us to beat the band, whether it's the last or not."

They sang and whistled as they padded along on moccasined feet, seemingly oblivious of the heavy packs or the high-topped boots that thumped their chests at every step. Blue jays scolded them for disturbing the solitude; mule deer watched them with soft, luminous eyes from the density of the slashings; and black bears, clowns of the woods, dived into the shadows at their noisy approach.

Presently Slash and Bucker struck the Clearwater. They paused a short while on the bank, ate a hurried snack of bread and smoked venison, and pushed on toward the headwaters, high up in the Cascades.

THE nearer they approached the headwaters, the more they realized why this was to be the last of the great annual river drives. As far as they could see, clear to the snow line, was nothing but small timber, brush and stumps, many of the latter still showing the marks of recent cutting. Drag trails had been cut deep into the soft soil by countless logs, drawn to the river by horse or ox team. Abandoned and rotting skidways were on every hand, lining the river bank for miles, their precious loads of logs having been long since sawed into lumber and built into houses in far-away cities.

"I smell smoke!" Slash announced, sniffing the breeze.

"We're getting close to the drive camp," Bucker said, a note of excitement in his voice. "Say, Slash, I'm

itching to get the feel of a rolling log under my feet."

"So'm I," Slash agreed. "I like to shoot rapids on a bucking stick. Boy, that's the life! But it's about finished on the Clearwater. The last big drive! Shucks, I can hardly believe it. The Injun said Red Callum has the contract to drive the logs, and that he needed experienced river hogs. You know him, Bucker?"

"No; but I've heard of him," Bucker answered. "He's got a rep for being a hard driver. A go-getter and a hard-fisted guy. Young, they say, and a square shooter. Pays top wages. He'll be tickled pink to hire two river hogs like us, pardner."

The smell of smoke became more acrid, and soon they heard voices. At last they broke through the slashing on the river bank and saw a camp of canvas, with men moving in and out among the tents. Grindstones hummed like huge bumblebees as they ground double-edged axes to razor sharpness, and files rasped unmusically as men sharpened the points and hooks on their long pike poles.

They tested the handles, jabbed the twisted steel points into stumps, and tugged till the sweat stood out on their foreheads. Or they whittled on the pliant handles, getting the right balance; for on those pike poles the river log drivers would stake their lives in the turbulent Clearwater, where, amid the grinding, pounding logs, a misstep might spell death.

"Where's the boss?" Slash inquired.

"Over there, on the river bank," a man replied, pointing to a young, broad-shouldered giant who was glancing upstream with an appraising look in his blue eyes.

He turned at the partners' approach, and greeted them with a friendly smile. With the familiarity bred of the forest, they spoke his names if they had known him for years.

"Well, here we are, Red," Slash began, "two of the best river hogs that ever stomped on a log, and r'arin' to go to work. Slash Sutter and Bucker Bolt."

"That's right," Bucker spoke up, bubbling over with energy. "We got the word by moccasin telegraph and come a-flying. Got a cabin on a timber claim back here a ways, that we're gonna turn into a ranch."

"Red" Callum glanced from one to the other with troubled eyes. He seemed to be hesitating about something; then shrugged his shoulders, and said:

"You say the Injun brung you word just this morning? Well, that's too bad, boys. I sent out word for men a week ago. To tell the truth, I'm full-handed. Sorry."

The partners just stared at him. It had never occurred to them that they might not be hired; that the news might have come to them too late. It was a let-down that showed clearly in their eyes and on their faces, and Red Callum was not slow to notice the expression of bitter disappointment.

"I can't very well lay anybody off," he went on. "It wouldn't be fair to the others."

Then he brightened suddenly. "Say, I'll tell you what," he added. "You boys hang around till the drive starts. Some of the men might quit at the last minute, or——"

He paused there, but the partners knew what was in his mind.

"Or somebody might slip between a coupla logs, huh?" Slash finished for him. "I savvy. Well, mebbe we'll hang around, and mebbe we won't. But, Red, you're the loser

by not hiring us. I'm telling you that we're the two best——"

A lone log had stranded in the tiny cove near where they stood on the bank. Suddenly Slash dropped his pack and leaped on it, striking it lightly with his buckskin moccasins.

THE end on which he had alighted submerged as he waved his arms to maintain his balance. Nimbly he padded to the middle of it, bringing it level. Then the padded feet began that strange dance all loggers use. The stick began spinning, slowly at first, then faster, dizzily. The padded feet rose and fell with amazing speed. Water boiled around the spinning log. The next moment Slash was back on the bank, grinning at Red.

"You ain't got a river hog in camp that can do that, without calked boots," he boasted proudly. "Bucker can do that, too. And we're both key men. We can smell the key log that's holding up a jam. Can't we, Bucker?"

"I don't doubt it," Red said, before Bucker could reply. "And that's why I'm sorry you didn't come sooner. But you savvy how it is, fellers. If I laid any one off and put you on, I'd be starting the drive with a peck of trouble on my hands."

"That's all right, Red," Slash said. "We savvy. Well, we'll hit the cook up for a bite to eat, and then light out. Y'see, Red, we've got lots of land to clear, and a day's work is a day gained in any man's language, especially when you're clearing land."

But they did not go to the mess tent immediately. Instead, they drew aside and sat on a stump, watching preparations going forward for the drive; watching with gloomy eyes, puckered brows, and heavy hearts.

"Full-handed!" Slash broke the long silence at last.

"Yeah," Bucker sighed, and saw his air castles crumble. "Gosh all hemlock! I reckon we just ain't lucky, pardner. Well, let's throw a slug of grub into us, and hit the back trail."

Slash said nothing as they arose and approached the mess tent. There was little he could say, and he was in no mood to say it. All he did was gaze longingly at the lucky river hogs and at the river itself, and shake his head dolefully.

However, they both felt better after the meal. They returned to the same stump and rolled smokes. Both really wished to stay, as Red Callum had suggested, but it hurt their pride to play second fiddle to any river hog.

"Well, I reckon we'd better sorta hang around," Bucker finally offered. "Beggars can't be choosers, 'specially if they've got a timber claim to clear, and no dough left. How about a *pasear* around? We might sorta get a line on the game in here, and try trapping next winter."

Slash glanced at his partner from the corner of an eye. Bucker wasn't fooling him. He knew just what he had in mind, and it wasn't trapping next fall. Bucker wanted to see the dam and the logs. And so did Slash.

"Oh, all right," he agreed with feigned indifference. "Let's go."

They followed the river bank just as the setting sun began shooting out long, crimson streamers that put fire into the tips of the second growth firs and spruce. Twilight followed soon afterward, and still the partners pressed on.

Darkness lasted only until a full moon topped the crest of the Cascades, and flooded the country with silver light. About that time the

partners broke through the slashing and came upon the dam that spanned the Clearwater and held in leash thousands upon thousands of great fir and spruce logs.

The dam itself was built of cribbed logs, with the cribs filled with rocks to anchor them to the river bed. Other logs interlaced the spaces between the cribbed piers, extending from bank to bank. Behind the dam, and beyond, stretched the huge reservoir, the water invisible because of the densely packed logs floating upon it. Soon those logs would be freed to float down the Clearwater, by the removal of the dam in such a manner that no jam would occur. Then they would be caught at the mouth, where the Clearwater joined the mighty Columbia, formed into rafts, and towed to the sawmills.

Lining the reservoir, and looking like miniature hills in the freakish moonlight, were great piles of stack slashings, consisting of branches, bark, and chips, awaiting a favorable time to be burned.

SLASH and Bucker stood at one end of the dam, gazing across the sea of logs, awed by the spectacle, each busy with his own thoughts. Only one bitter thought intruded. This was to be the last big drive, and they were to have no part in it.

"Well, let's look 'er over," Slash suggested.

They did not don their high-topped logging boots because the logs were so thick in the reservoir that there was little danger of slipping. So, in their moccasins, they raced out across the big sticks with a skill and agility that would have given the average greenhorn heart failure.

They went perilously close to the dam and inspected it, commenting on the work as skilled men will.

"I've seen better cribbing than that in my time," Slash observed. "Looks like the loggers wasn't caring much whether that dam would hold after they got the logs floated. Man, there's millions of tons of timber pressing ag'in it!"

"And water, too," Bucker said. He squinted along the face of the dam. "Looks to me like it's got a bulge in it, now."

"Mebbe it's the moonlight makes it look cockeyed," Slash volunteered. "Just the same, if I was Red Callum and had the contract to drive them logs, I'd want to get 'em outa here before a freshet comes along and pushes out that cribbing. What a jam would form if anything like that happened!"

"I wonder if they's anybody left at the logging camp," Bucker remarked.

"Let's go take a look. It can't be far. Good place to spend the night, too. I couldn't stand it to go back to the river camp and listen to them hogs talking about the coming drive."

But the logging camp proved to be farther up the river than they had imagined, and it was late when they arrived. As they had surmised, it was deserted. The bunk houses and other buildings, with all the windows having been removed, leered back at them in the moonlight like the eyeless sockets of so many skulls. The silence that enveloped the camp seemed to speak to these two sons of the forest of the tragedy man had wrought with saw and ax.

Everything movable had been taken away, save one lone donkey engine on its massive log skid bed, curved at each end like the runners of a sled. Probably it had been left till such time as the owners of the

defunct camp had bought more timberland, when it would be removed under its own power to the nearest railhead for shipment.

After inspecting the empty buildings, the partners chose bunks in the bunk house, rolled up in the single blanket they had brought in their packs, and were soon enjoying a healthy, restful sleep.

It was almost midnight when Slash suddenly sat up, rubbing his eyes, and listening. At last he called across to Bucker, waking him.

"Say, did you hear anything?" he inquired.

"No," Bucker replied sleepily. "What did it sound like?"

"Well, I ain't sure. It just sorta woke me up. It seems like I heard thunder."

Bucker saw shafts of moonlight stabbing through the empty windowpanes, and forming silver pools on the plank flooring.

"Thunder, me eye! With the moon shining? You're hearing things, pard. Roll over and go to sleep again."

"Listen!" Slash cried.

A dull boom cut through the stillness of the night.

"There!" Slash exclaimed. "That's what waked me! It sounds like thunder."

"It don't to me," Bucker said, sitting up and listening intently. Once more the sound came, and he was out of the bunk in a bound.

"That ain't thunder, Slash!" he shouted. "That's loose logs bumping against one another, and water roaring! I'll bet the dam's bust!"

THEY rushed from the bunk house to the bank of the Clearwater. At that point it met the stagnant water of the reservoir, and slowed its swift pace. The sea of floating logs was moving!

"The reservoir's going down!" Slash yelled.

They turned at once and raced back to the bunk house. It required only moments for them to get into their stagged Levi's and shirts. Putting on their high-topped calked boots took longer.

They conserved their wind by keeping silent as they sped along the shore of the reservoir, and headed toward the dam. The giant body of logs seemed to be moving more rapidly now, grinding together, all pointing toward the dam as if drawn by a great magnet. The dam itself was invisible, partly because of the distance they were away from it, and partly because of the ghostly fog of spray that hung above it.

The spray told the two men a story that chilled them to the marrow.

"It's the start of a log jam!" Slash gasped.

The roar of water, and thudding of logs, could be plainly heard now, like the rumble of horses crossing a bridge. Higher and higher the water leaped above the dam, and lower and lower sank the reservoir as the expanse of floating logs gained momentum.

At last the partners arrived at the dam, too spent to utter a word, and realized that Bucker's guess had been correct. The dam had gone out. The two central stone and log cribs had been rolled flat. Into the gap had rushed the entire volume of the water in the reservoir, forcing hundreds of logs through the opening, twisting them, turning them end for end, and actually damming the break.

On top of that intricate, tangled foundation, borne by the suddenly released water, came more and still more logs to shoot up and fall with a sickening thud on the others. Bark

and chips and pieces of chewed logs were swept against the interstices, plugging them effectually, causing the water to rise, where, a little while before, it had lowered, and causing more logs to float on to the jam that had already formed.

And even as the partners watched, spellbound and helpless, the jam spread, like the tentacles of a giant octopus, until it had reached from bank to bank. The spectacle was one calculated to awe any one, and the roar of water and crunching logs was deafening.

Just what the breaking of that dam meant to Red Callum, and his contract, the partners fully realized. They knew that there was a time limit to such contracts; that a heavy cash bond was required of the successful bidder, to be posted and forfeited in case the logs were not delivered at the mouth of the Clearwater on schedule. And time was short; for the mills needed the logs, and needed them in a hurry.

Instead of having his logs released gradually, with no danger of jamming so long as experienced river hogs were on the job, Red Callum now was faced by the perilous and almost impossible task of breaking up that slowly mounting mountain of timber and dragging it down into the river. He and his men might get the logs free in a week, with luck, but the partners knew that, unless something was done to stop that vast armada of rushing logs, a month would be more like it.

Bucker dug his elbow into Slash's ribs and pointed upstream. A new menace had suddenly appeared. With débris plugging the spaces in the log jam, the water in the reservoir had risen. Now it was reaching for those huge piles of slashings.

Bucker put his mouth close to Slash's ear.

"If the water lifts them piles," he shouted, "and floats 'em down to the jam, the way the rest of them logs will pile up won't be nobody's business!"

"We oughter run down to Red's camp and put him next!" Slash shouted back.

Bucker laughed grimly. "Put him next? Man, that noise'd wake the dead! Red and his river hogs is probably already on the way up here."

HE was right. Red was even then coming as fast as his long legs would carry him. And behind him straggled his men, armed with axes and pike poles, peavies and rope. It was tough going through the brush and second growth, and some of the men were obliged to drop out and rest. The others plugged along, mouths agape, their breath whistling as it was drawn into tortured lungs.

Red Callum reached the partners just as the first of a great pile of slashings lifted on the rising water. For a moment or two it turned around, slowly, and then was drawn into the vortex that was sucking the logs toward the jam. Suddenly it seemed to tremble and disintegrate as the heavy, swiftly moving logs rammed into it, whipping it to bits. Tangled up with the logs, it was borne onward toward the jam. The suction drew it into the spaces, filling them, forcing the water to rise still higher and deposit more logs in a crisscross pattern on top of the jam.

And that was only one pile of the slashings. The rising water in the reservoir was reaching up for the others, and nothing on earth could stop it. Soon the water would be forced around the wings of the dam, where it would cut through the soft

dirt banks and release the water in the reservoir, leaving the mountain of timber with only the Clearwater buried beneath it.

Nothing like this had been expected or anticipated, for nothing approaching it had happened in the history of logging operations on the Clearwater. Red had neither dynamite, teams, or a donkey engine, with which to tie on to key logs and yank them loose, and to send to town for them, fifty miles away, would have been futile so far as that particular jam was concerned.

It was these things that Red was explaining to his men, who were grouped around him, in answer to their suggestions as to the best method to use in an attack on the jam. Not that they were unwilling to fly at it with their pike poles and peavies. On the contrary, Red had to restrain some of them forcefully; otherwise, they would have been crushed to a pulp by logs that shot out of the water like blunt arrows, to clear the crest of the jam and go rolling down to be floated away by the Clearwater.

"If I had a million bucks," Red remarked wistfully, "I'd give every cent of it for a good donkey engine right now. I'd yank out them key logs so fast it'd make your head swim. I'd stop that jam before the water busts out around the wings."

"There's one at the old logging camp above here, Red," Bucker told him.

"Yeah; and it might as well be in Timbuktu, for all the good it'd do me." Red grinned, mirthlessly. "It'd take too much time to get upstream; and by the time we'd snaked it from stump to stump and got it into position here, why, the water in the reservoir would have cut around the ends and through the dirt banks, lowering the level and leaving the jam high and dry. Forget it, boys."

Slash glanced at Red's face. He saw deep disappointment written there, and realized just what was going on inside the heart of the young giant. He realized it because he and Bucker had gone through the same experience when Red had been obliged to refuse them employment. They had seen their hopes fade, as Red was seeing his fade now.

"Just what does it mean to you, Red," Slash inquired, "if that jam ain't bust up in a hurry?"

"I'd hate to tell you," Red answered, with a bitter laugh. "Mebbe the most important thing is that I won't be able to marry a little girl who's waiting for me in Portland. Next, it'll mean all my forfeit money, and that's a tidy sum in itself. It'll also mean my rep as a boss river hog, and there'll be no more contracts for me; you couldn't convince them blasted mill owners that the dam had bust of its own accord. They'd say I botched the job, the biggest of my career, no matter how many witnesses I had."

"A little gal in Portland," Slash said to himself, musingly. "A million bucks for a donkey engine."

"What was you saying?" Bucker shouted at him above the angry roar of water and the grind and thud of logs as they piled up higher on the jam.

"I've got an idee!" Slash suddenly exclaimed, and grabbed his partner's arm.

"I'll bet it ain't worth a hoot; but what is it?" Bucker asked, when Slash had pulled him away from the group around Red.

"Just an idee, I said. It's that donkey engine, up at the old camp. Let's go."

"You heard what Red said, Slash.

It'd take all night and half of tomorrow to walk it down here on its skids."

BUT Slash was already running through the second growth, and there was nothing for Bucker to do except follow, and wonder what had got into his partner. Between deep breaths, Slash explained.

"The water in the reservoir's higher than it ever was. If it reaches the donkey engine, before it cuts out the banks at each end of the jam, we can float the old gal down here."

"Gosh—all—hemlock!" Bucker panted. "I'd never have—have dreamed of that! I'm going back to—to tell Red."

"You're not," Slash breathed. "We mightn't be able to do it, and then he'll—he'll be disappointed. And—and one disappointment like that jam is—is enough for—for a lifetime."

There was no talking after that; just running, resting, and running on again. The tall second growth hid the logging camp from view, so that they did not know, until they broke through the slashing and into the clearing, whether their efforts had been merely a waste of time or not.

There they paused staring at the donkey engine, which was now partly submerged beneath the rising water with logs swirling past it. The partners uttered a cheer that sounded like the croaking of two bullfrogs.

They knew there was little time to lose. At any moment the water might burst through the banks at the ends of the jam and empty the reservoir in a hurry, leaving the donkey engine high and dry.

Despite their exhaustion, the two river hogs went to work grimly. With rope and rusted cable, which they found lying on the camp's refuse dump, they caught and anchored drifting logs to the engine's skid bed, to give it buoyancy. They waded out into the icy water to their waists, and lacerated their hands cruelly on the worn cable as they bent it around the logs and skid bed in hitches. Inch by inch the water rose. For breath-taking moments it ceased, lowered, rose again.

The skid bed was now almost all under water, with only the tips of the long runners resting on dry ground. Would it rise with the water, or would it remained anchored to the bank? Anxiously, the partners glanced in the direction of the big jam, watching the water level, fending off the last of the drifting logs that threatened to rip the improvised raft from the skid bed.

At last the front end of the skid bed lifted, came to the surface on a level with the stern. The partners jumped into the water, grasped the log on either side, and heaved till they saw stars. Inch by inch they felt the massive bulk move. At last it floated free of the bank. They crawled over the logs and on to the skid bed as the current caught it and bore it along in the wake of the last of the logs.

They lay on their backs, inert, exhausted, dripping wet and chilled through. After a time they rose on unsteady feet and glanced toward the distant log jam. It seemed miles and miles away in the deceptive moonlight, like a miniature mountain of match sticks that some child had formed by placing them crosswise, one upon the other. Dimly they made out the river crew, still grouped around Red Callum, their attention riveted on the jam and oblivious of the approcahing donkey engine and its two-man crew.

As it neared the jam its pace became maddeningly slow; for the current of the river was expending itself against the barrier of logs, being, as it were, thrown back upon itself. The partners yelled until they were hoarse, trying to attract attention, but the roar of water jetting through the jam drowned them out.

Suddenly they saw Red Callum glance upstream and give a start of surprise. The crew followed the direction of his pointing finger, and let out a lusty cheer. Red ran recklessly across the floating logs toward the donkey engine and the partners, followed by his crew. Slash waved them back, yelling to them to bring wood.

The crew were quick to grasp the idea. Axes rose and fell on the dead logs in a windfall. Men raced across the bobbing logs, bearing armloads of split wood. Soon sparks and flame were leaping from the donkey engine's stubby stack. The winch drum spun as the cable was carried to the bank, and the choker end thrown over a stump.

With Red himself at the throttle, the cylinders spat steam, turning over slowly, reeling in the slack. Then, with the engine going full speed, the skid bed and its supporting logs plowed a passage through the maze of floating sticks to the bank. The second the runners touched, the river crew hacked through the old cable and ropes, releasing the logs that had comprised the raft.

LIKE some prehistoric monster of the deep, the engine was "walked" forward until it came up against the anchor stump. Tough hands tore the drag cable off the stump and rushed with it to the next, and the walking process continued uninterruptedly until the clanking, snorting engine was in position near the log jam, anchored to surrounding stumps, and ready to begin the important and dangerous work yet to be performed.

River hogs do not express their gratitude volubly, and Red Callum was no exception. He thumped each partner on the back, almost flooring them. There was no time for talk or compliments now. He pointed to the camp below, and the gesture indicated to the partners that he wished them to go there and rest up. Their profane replies were lost in the roar of water, but Red's grin assured them that he had understood; for the next moment they had grabbed a pike pole apiece and had started along the high face of the jam.

The rest of the river crew followed them. Like ants they swarmed over the jam, dodging rolling logs nd jets of water that shot out at them from between chinks in the locked logs; jets that had power enough behind them to knock a man off his feet. They heaved and pried on the logs until peavey and pike handles almost bent double.

Living up to their former boast, it did seem that Slash and Bucker could actually smell out the key logs. They hitched the choker cable over them and, one after another, the snorting donkey engine jerked them loose. The freeing of each key log released hundreds of other logs, which thundered down the face of the jam, scattering the crew and deluging them with water.

There were breath-taking moments when the entire jam moved and threatened to break up, and sighs of relief went up when it stopped and held. A too sudden release of thousands of logs at that time would have meant just another

bad jam lower down on the river side.

Gradually the crest of the high jam disappeared. The pent-up water in the reservoir roared over it, ending the danger of the banks at either end of the jam going out.

Red Callum then turned the engine over to one of his men and went out across the jam. He bellowed to his crew to split up, half to remain on the jam, the rest to drive the released logs down the Clearwater and on their way to the Columbia. His orders meant nothing to Slash and Bucker, who were intently hunting for more key logs in a shower of water and spray.

"Hey, get outa here!" Red yelled at them. "You two have done more'n enough already. You're both all in."

"Go to grass!" Slash yelled back at him.

Red tore the pike pole from his hands, threw his arms around him, and tossed him over his shoulder. Red nodded to another husky river hog, and the latter did the same to Bucker. Like two dripping sacks they were carried to the engine skid bed and put down with their backs to the red-hot fire box.

They gave up, then, their last ounce of energy expended. Steam rose from their soaked clothing, blood dripped from their lacerated hands, and it was all they could do to keep their eyes open. Nevertheless, there was a faint grin of satistion on their streaming faces.

"The last big river drive, huh?" Slash muttered. "Well, pardner, they couldn't keep us out of it, could they?"

"I'll say they couldn't," Bucker agreed weakly. Then he glanced up at Red. "Full-handed, huh, you big stiff? Tried to keep us out of it, didn't you?"

"Keep you out of it?" Red echoed, a lump suddenly rising in his throat. "I did, but not any more. I'm gonna put you two river hogs in charge of it."

"You—you hear that, pardner?" Bucker asked Slash in a tired voice.

But Slash had not heard him; for his head had sunk upon his chest, and he was sleeping from sheer exhaustion, dreaming, no doubt, of air castles that might not be just air castles, after all.

Coming Next Week, "TWO AND TWO MAKE FIVE," by ELI COLTER.

HEP, HEART MENDER

By GLENN H. WICHMAN

Author of "Gallegher Looks After The World," etc.

EVERY so often an idea would hit my partner, "Hep" Gallegher, between the eyes, and when it did he was all through with useful work until he'd got the idea out of his system. Generally his ideas were pretty foolish ones, but that didn't matter; the sillier they were the hotter he was to chase them all over the landscape. There was no limit to what that fellow could think of or worry about, especially if what he thought of or worried about didn't concern him in the slightest particular.

Me an' Gallegher had been working on the Rafter 6 for two, three months, when one evening Gallegher came riding in as though he was going to a fire. He put his horse in the corral and found me sitting beside the cook shack waiting for the biscuit shooter to ring the supper bell.

"George," said Hep, as he sat down beside me, "did you ever contemplate that sorry spectacle known as a courtship? Eventually a man and a woman may manage to get themselves married to each other, but the amount of hemming and hawing and misunderstanding and other forms of skitterishness that goes on between them prior to the nuptials would wring a sensible

man's heart. Oftener than not they end up by having a fight. More than one pure heart has been busted beyond repair when it could so easily have been prevented. It makes me sad to think of it."

"Don't break down altogether," I advised him. "Here comes the boss."

"Swede" Prentiss, who owned the outfit, came stalking up from the barn. He looked to be kinda mad an' provoked.

"Gallegher," asked Swede, "were you tired this afternoon?"

"Not that I remember of," answered Hep. "Why?"

"You spent the whole durn afternoon," continued the boss, "sittin' under a bush instead of workin'. I got a look at you from the mesa."

"I was thinkin'," explained Gallegher, "an' comin' to a conclusion. Do you want me to tell you about it?"

"It's me that's come to the conclusion," countered Prentiss. "Beginnin' with to-morrow mornin' you're doin' your thinkin' and concludin' somewhere else."

"Thunderation!" grunted Hep. "You've beat me to the draw. I was on the verge of quitting. Me an' my partner are going into business."

With that the boss stalked off up toward the ranch house.

"Listen, Hep," I asked, "has getting married got anything to do with this?"

"Love an' matrimony," replied Gallegher, "are great an' noble institutions. Without them the world would not long endure."

"Perhaps," I suggested, "you're thinking of acquiring a wife?"

"I should say not!" declared Hep. "I'm interested in other people getting married. As a disinterested party I'm going to do what I can to help matrimony along."

Just then the cook rang the bell and we went in and had our next-to-the-last meal on the Rafter 6. Next morning we had our last meal, and right after that we drew our pay, packed our duffel and rode in to the neighboring town of Lynchville. Hep was so full of business when we got there that he even passed up the chance to have a drink. While I was investigating the beer situation he was running around the little town looking for some place to establish himself in.

Along in the middle of the afternoon a citizen came into the barroom and announced in a loud voice that a man across the street by the name of Gallegher had suddenly gone out of his head and that if anybody didn't believe it they could go out and have a look.

I slipped out of the saloon ahead of the rest of the customers. Hep was just finishing nailing a sign on the front of an old secondhand-furniture store, which was across the street from the barroom. I went over and read the sign, which was quite an eyeful.

HEART SPECIALIST
PROBLEMS OF
COURTSHIP SOLVED
HEP GALLEGHER
REFEREE

"You've got more undiluted gall," I told him, "than all the brass monkeys that ever came out of a foundry. Probably you'll end up with a compound fracture of the head. What do you know about such things, anyway?"

"Very little," acknowledged Gallegher. "But don't let that worry you. I understand the principles. I'll apply to any situation that may arise the principles of sound common sense. Observation and thought have led me to believe that when a

man wants to marry a lady, or visa versa, there's very little sound reasoning applied to the performance. About half the time the whole thing misses fire altogether. It is to forestall such tragedies that I have dedicated my life."

THIS made me sad, so I went back and resumed my pleasant conversation with the bartender, who'd been telling me about a bad man going by the name of "Lefty" James who'd recently gone on the loose. Mr. James was supposed to be somewhere in the vicinity, and the sheriff was looking for him and had scattered reward notices here and there. The bartender had one of those notices with Lefty's picture on it. After a time we grew tired of talking about outlaws and fell to discussing the relative merits of rye and bourbon. We even conducted some slight experiments and ended up by going to sleep under a table.

But by the time the following morning had rolled around, I'd decided to stand by my partner. Somebody had to be on hand to pick up the pieces. People in Lynchville were already looking at Hep and then tapping their own foreheads. Sooner or later some gent with a biological urge would feel called upon to take Gallegher apart to see what was the matter with him.

It was along about nine o'clock and me an' Hep were sitting in the old furniture store when the most woebegone-looking cowboy you ever saw in your life rode up in front of the building and stopped. He climbed down off his roan horse, hesitated a time or two, and then came on in.

"Greetings," said Gallegher. "Young fellow, it's pretty evident that you're in love."

The woebegone cowboy looked more woebegone than ever. Not a bad-looking young gent either, but he was so bogged down with something or other that it made him look like an orphan in a storm. Sadness and melancholy oozed from all his pores, and if he hadn't had such a good complexion he'd have appeared to be in his fatal illness.

Dolefully the cowboy shook his head. "No," he slowly said, "I'm not in love. My name's Luke Staple an' I ride for the A Bar A. Last evenin' I saw your sign out in front and I thought I'd better come an' see you."

"You've come to the right place," continued Gallegher, as he rubbed his hands together. "You couldn't have come to a better place. Do you ever have giddy spells?"

Luke Staple looked kinda puzzled. "No," he replied, "I can't say as I do."

"Do you ever have stuffy sensations?" Gallegher wanted to know.

"Nope," answered Luke.

"Do you ever have flutterings around the heart?" persisted Hep.

"Nope," answered Luke. "But I've been troubled some with my feet——"

"Hep," I interrupted, "why in the name of all that's reasonable don't you let the gent tell you what he came here for?"

Surprisingly enough, this struck Gallegher as being a good idea. "You have all the earmarks," he told Luke, "of a man in the throes of approaching matrimony, but if you're sure you aren't going to get married, why, it'll be all right with me."

"Never had the slightest idea of gettin' married," replied Staple. "What I came here for is to try an' get you to prevent some bloodshed. The sign out front says——"

"Ah," sighed Hep. "Then you've come here in the interest of some one else?"

"Uh-huh," said the melancholy cowboy. "Things are goin' to be poppin' out on the A Bar A unless somethin's done about it. It's the case of two men wantin' to marry the same girl. Miss Tillie Fairfield can't decide which one she wants to marry. In fact, she says that she won't marry either one of them."

"Which oughta settle the matter," I put in. "Nothing could be simpler."

"There's where you're wrong," declared Gallegher. "Staple just got through saying that there'd be bloodshed unless things were brought to a satisfactory conclusion. A satisfactory conclusion would be for Tillie to marry one of these men and have done with it. Nothing could be simpler than that."

"You're right," agreed Luke Staple. "That's sure enough what she oughta do. Either she oughta marry Will Masterson or Phil Gilchrist. Both of 'em work out on the A Bar A an' they're a couple of swell fellows. Big an' strong an' not thin an' spindly like I am. Both of 'em will end up by bein' greatly successful at the cow business. Tillie ought to marry one or the other and then she'd be well cared for all her life."

"Of course she ought to," declared Gallegher. "Anybody could see that. What's the reason why she won't?"

"Because," answered Luke.

"Because why?" demanded Hep. "That's no answer."

"Because," repeated Luke. "That's all that Tillie'll ever say—'because.' "

"Gents," I announced, "when a woman says 'because,' that's the end of the argument. There isn't any more. It's been decided."

"Decided—my eye!" grunted Gallegher. "For a man who understands a woman's mind the argument's just begun." He turned to the cowboy. "Tell me about these two gents who are in love with Tillie an' I'll tell you what's to be done."

"A couple of swell fellows," repeated Luke Staple, "an' friends of mine. Cut out to be cattle barons. Both of 'em over six feet an' as strong as bulls. Competent men any way you look at it; there's nothing at all they can't do better'n most men. Handsome fellows. Why, there ain't two such handsome men this side of the Pacific Ocean."

"Both of 'em would be bound to make good husbands, wouldn't they?" Hep wanted to know.

"Perfect," said Luke.

GALLEGHER scratched his head. "Let's see now—it would be impossible for her to marry both of them, so that's out. Obviously she will have to marry either one or the other. Luke, I'm going to leave it up to you to pick out which one it'll be."

Young Luke thought a minute and rubbed his chin and then he got kinda pale. "Shucks!" he finally exclaimed. "I wouldn't want to do that. If I did that, then the one who wasn't chosen would be bound to hear about it and get mad with me. They're both my friends."

Then Hep had a grand idea. "Seeing that she can't marry both of them, I'll pick out the one she's to marry. I name Will Masterson."

"Listen, now," said Luke. "I hardly feel like goin' out to the ranch an' announcin' that."

"Of course you don't," agreed Hep. "Nobody's goin' out to the ranch and announce anything. There's where *I* come in. Me an' my partner'll ease ourselves out there and

attend to everything. The charge'll be ten dollars. We three'll go there right now, study the lay of the land, and plan out how the thing's to be managed."

"My gosh," murmured Staple. "I almost wish I hadn't bothered about it, but unless somethin's done there's bound to be an explosion. Will Masterson and Phil Gilchrist are such fine fellows that it'd be a pity to see 'em shoot each other in a fit of jealousy."

"Indeed, yes," declared Hep.

"Hasn't it occurred to either one of you," I asked, "that chances are fifty-fifty that all three of us will end up in a cemetery? Mebbe, besides that, the girl's father'll have something to say——"

"Has no father," interrupted Staple. "She lives with her uncle who owns the A Bar B. Her uncle's up in Denver now an' he never did take any interest in the marrying business, anyway. Said it was her own affair who she married."

"The only intelligent man I've heard of in a week," said I.

"Nonsense!" grumbled Hep, and clapped his hat on his head.

Within ten minutes the three of us were riding out of Lynchville and down the valley toward the A Bar A. We came to the ranch headquarters just after the noon hour; most of the hired hands were sitting around here and there picking their teeth, which wasn't saying much for the A Bar A beef. Hep and I tied our horses to the hitch rack, and Luke put his in the corral.

"Luke," said Gallegher, "don't say anything to anybody about what I'm up to. I'll handle this sort of on the quiet. You go on about your cow nursin', an' me an' George'll go an' interview Tillie."

Hep and I went up to the ranch house and knocked on the front door. The door opened and there stood as pretty a young filly as ever stood anywhere. Small and trim and with two of the most surprising dimples. Her eyes were blue and her hair the color of ripe wheat.

"Ma'am," began Hep, "I crave a few moments of your undivided attention. I'm Hepburn C. Gallegher, an expert in matters of affection."

"Oh," said Tillie Fairfield, as though she couldn't make up her mind whether we were crazy or not. Then, as a sensible girl and as a matter of precaution in case we *were* crazy, she came all the way out on the veranda and stood where the men in the ranch yard could have an eye on her.

"Ma'am," continued Gallegher, "why don't you quit being kittenish and join Will Masterson in the bonds of matrimony? If you don't, there's bound to be trouble for somebody."

Color came into Tillie's face and she looked enormously astonished. "Good gracious me!" she exclaimed. "What would I want to do that for?"

"A real sensible question, ma'am," I put in. "If my partner's annoying you, just let me know an' I'll hit him. He appears to be going a mite too far, even for an expert."

"Perhaps," kindly suggested Tillie, "you two men will find some one to talk to out in the yard." With that she hurriedly went into the ranch house and closed the door behind her.

"She takes us for a brace of lunatics," I told Hep, "an' nobody could blame her. I'm going back to town an' see the bartender."

"George," growled Gallegher, "for two cents I'd fan your chin!"

Mebbe he would have, too, if right then a couple of big stiffs hadn't left the men who were sitting in the shade of the cook shack and come up toward the ranch house. From what

Luke Staple had told us, they couldn't be anybody except Will Masterson and Phil Gilchrist. Fine-looking fellows they were, too: as big as all outdoors and as full of confidence and well-being as a couple of first national banks.

GALLEGHER and I came down off the veranda and met them a hundred feet from it. One was blond and the other was dark and both of them were built like oak trees.

"I'm Will Masterson," said the blond one. "What in the devil do you mean by annoying Miss Tillie? From the way she went in the house she must 'a' been mad."

"Them's my sentiments exactly," added the dark one, who couldn't have been anybody except Phil Gilchrist.

Both of them doubled up their fists.

"Calm yourself, gentlemen," said Gallegher, and even he began to look a little nervous. "Masterson, I've got good news for you. Very shortly you will become a proud and happy benedict."

"A what?" snorted Will and looked as though he wanted to fight about it.

"Husband," quickly explained Hep. "Husband. Pardon the obtruseness of my language. It's in the cards that you should marry Miss Tillie Fairfield. That's what I was just talkin' to her about."

With that the blond man got blonder and the dark man got darker. The blond one was filled with joy and the other one was as mad as a hornet.

"Well, I'll be——" exclaimed Will Masterson.

Phil Gilchrist grabbed Gallegher by the shoulder. "Why, you lunkhead——"

Masterson came to Hep's defense. "Listen, Phil," he told the dark fellow, "only this morning we agreed to leave off quarreling and to let Tillie choose. If she's decided in my favor—— By gosh! I'll go an' ask her!"

Will ran up on the veranda. He called the girl's name. No answer. He knocked on the door, not once, but a dozen times. He called again. Nobody opened the door, yet it was obvious that Tillie was inside.

"Horse collar!" growled Will Masterson and came down off the veranda. Now it was his turn to get mad at Hep. "You must be a liar," he told Gallegher. "Otherwise than that Tillie would have come out and spoke to me."

"Maybe we oughta hang the guy," suggested Gilchrist.

"Might not be a bad idea," said Masterson.

Personally I thought it was time we started to run, but Gallegher didn't. "Gents," he said, "a slight misunderstanding must have arisen. But I'll guarantee this: Miss Tillie will marry either one or the other of you. I, personally, will arrange it. Within twenty-four hours you will know the answer."

"How are you goin' to arrange it?" demanded the two big gents, both at the same time.

"Ah——" said Gallegher. "That's a secret, but in due time you'll be let in on it."

"I still think we ought to hang him," insisted Gilchrist.

Masterson thought so, too, but he was inclined to put it off for a day. "By this time to-morrow," said Will, "if Tillie hasn't made up her mind then, we'll string you up."

With that the two men walked back to the cook shack and left me an' Gallegher standing there.

"Now we're in for it," I said. "Til-

lie'll never marry either one of those big bums."

"She's gotta," insisted Gallagher. "Either one of 'em'd make her a fine husband."

About this time it was one o'clock and the ranch hands went back to work. Luke Staple rode off with them and so me and Gallegher were left alone in the ranch yard.

"This," I offered, "is a fine chance for us to get away from here."

"Coward!" growled Hep. "What do you suppose I've gone in business for, to run away? An' besides that, another idea's come to me. We're doin' some ridin'."

We rode three or four miles east from the ranch yard and came to a river bottom where some nesters had once tried to settle. The nesters had gone but a dilapidated shack or two remained.

"Ha!" exclaimed Gallegher, as he pointed to one of the shacks. "That building was just made to order for me. We'll return to the ranch."

So, like the King of France when he was out exercising his army, we rode back to the A Bar A headquarters. Gallegher, who was showing more signs of feeble-mindedness all the time, raised a great shout when we came up to the ranch house and called for Tillie to come outside. A moment and the girl put in an appearance.

"Ma'am," lied Hep, "a terrific accident has happened to one of the ranch hands. No time to explain, but I was sent in to get you. Get dressed for ridin' an' I'll take you to where the accident's happened. Hurry up now!"

TILLIE looked hard at Gallegher, as though she didn't know whether to believe him or not. "Who?" she asked, but Hep wouldn't tell her anything except that a life was hanging in the balance.

Fifteen minutes and the three of us were riding lickety split for the river bottom. We came up to the nester's deserted shack and dismounted.

"Tillie," said Hep to the girl, who was now pretty much alarmed, "me an' my partner are terrible fellows, being wolves in sheep's clothing. You may not have suspected it, but you've been maliciously run off with. Kindly don't raise a yell because nothing very bad is likely to happen to you. Unfortunately it will be necessary to tie you up until a certain payment of money has been arranged for."

Tillie Fairfield started to run but Gallagher grabbed her. Now if I hadn't known that Hep wouldn't have harmed her for anything, I'd have most certainly put a hole through him, and mebbe I oughta have anyway, but I didn't. When Tillie saw that she couldn't get away she gave up the struggle and went into the house. Then Gallegher dusted off a homemade chair that hadn't been used in twenty years and tied the poor girl in it. Me an' him went outside.

"George," whispered Hep, "don't look so worried and frightened. This here is just a maneuver from which great good'll come to the world. You stay here an' see that nothing happens to Tillie while I go back to the ranch. I'm going to arrange for Will Masterson and Phil Gilchrist to rescue her. Likewise, I'll bring Luke Staple along so as to show him how clever I am and so he can watch me earn my fee. When you hear me coming back with Will and Gilchrist and Luke, why you clear out. Tillie's going to be so grateful to one or the other of those first-named

gents that she's bound to marry him. Of course, in the long run the truth'll come out, but everybody concerned'll be so grateful to me that they'll probably give me a gold medal. Be watchin' for us some time before sunset."

"Whoa there——" I began, but Hep was already up on his horse and ridin' back toward the ranch. I went into the shack and positively blushed when I looked at poor Tillie. "Ma'am," I said, "kindly put up with me as best you can. And don't worry because nothing bad will befall you. I'll guarantee it."

Me an' the girl got along pretty good, although I didn't tell her exactly what was in the wind. An hour or so passed; the afternoon was wearing on. Suddenly Tillie let out a scream! I jumped around, and in the doorway stood as hard and desperate a looking customer as I'd ever seen. I knew him the instant I saw him; the bartender back in town had his picture. Lefty James. He had a gun in his hand and it was pointed right at me.

James laughed, one of those mirthless cackles. "Don't even think of resisting," he purred, "unless you want the crows to eat you. And listen to this, girlie—if you scream again, I'll choke you."

In almost no time at all Mr. Lefty James had the situation well in hand. I was trussed up and tossed over into one corner, along with a lot of other rubbish. There was a large knot hole level with my eye and I had a pretty good view of anything that might happen outside.

"We'll just stay holed in here until it's dark," obligingly explained Lefty. "Then we'll move up into the hills where I got a *real* hide-out." The gent was inclined to be gabby and talked some more. It seemed that he'd been hovering around the A Bar A for the past week, lookin' for a chance to run off with Tillie, an' now he was real grateful to me an' Gallegher for having solved the problem for him.

"How much money," he asked me, "do you suppose the young lady's uncle'll come across with?"

"Plenty," I told him so as to make him feel friendly and grateful.

Another hour and the sun showed signs of going down. Shadows were lengthening, and if anything good was ever going to happen it had better be getting around to it.

I wriggled over nearer to the wall so as to see better out of the knot hole. Just then Lefty James began to cuss under his breath. "Somebody seems to be comin'," he whispered. "It ain't just one man, but a lot of 'em. Don't say a word."

Four horsemen came out of the brush with which the river bottom was filled and into the clearing in which the shack stood. They dismounted—Hep, Will Masterson, Phil Gilchrist and the woebegone-looking Luke Staple, who looked more woebegone than ever. Tillie Fairfield, from where she was sitting, could see out the door and into the clearing. Lefty James, now thoroughly alarmed, drew both his guns. A look of terror appeared on the girl's face. She strained at the cords.

James pulled back the hammers of his Colts. "If those buzzards come a step nearer——"

Then Tillie took her courage in both hands and did a surprising thing. "Luke! Luke!" she screamed. "Drop—or you'll be killed."

IT was the roar of Lefty James's gun that had cut her off. But her voice had carried to the men in the clearing and they had understood. Will Masterson and Phil Gilchrist had dropped to the ground as

though they'd been shot, although Lefty's bullet had missed both of 'em.

"I been double-crossed!" yelled Hep.

Luke Staple didn't say a word an' he didn't drop to the ground or seek cover. He got out his gun and ran straight for the shack. Lefty James was now firing with both his Colts. Shucks! Luke an' Hep ran right through that stream of lead. Three jumps and Gallegher went slithering over to one side, for a bullet had hit him. Young Staple, who was running beside him, never even hesitated. He kept right on. But neither Will Masterson nor Phil Gilchrist were doing anything about it. They'd found depressions in the ground to hide in and were staying strictly out of sight.

Luke Staple held his fire until he was within ten feet of the door of the shack and until he could see inside it. Long-headed guy, he was taking no chances of hitting Tillie. I'd never seen anybody with more undiluted courage than that young man had. There was no stopping him. Gun blazing, he came bounding in through the door. Lefty James made one last, frantic try and missed because right at that instant his thick head has stopped something. James made a grab at his own throat and then collapsed in a lifeless heap.

"Luke! Luke——" gasped the girl.

Already Staple had a knife out and was slashing at the ropes which bound her to the chair. Hep came staggering in with blood streaming down his face from a scalp wound. He turned me free. I got up.

Tillie Fairfield sprang out of the chair when the last rope was cut, and darned if she didn't put her arms right around Luke Staple's neck and kiss him. "Luke," she stammered, "aren't you *ever* going to get around to tell me that you love me?"

Luke Staple's face got as red as a radish. "Gosh, Tillie," he gasped, "I didn't think you could care for me that way. Not with two such fine men as Will and Phil paying court to you. Why, they can ride circles around a guy like I am. Gosh, Tillie——" And then he got real brave and asked her to marry him, which was, of course, the one thing in the world that she wanted most to have him do.

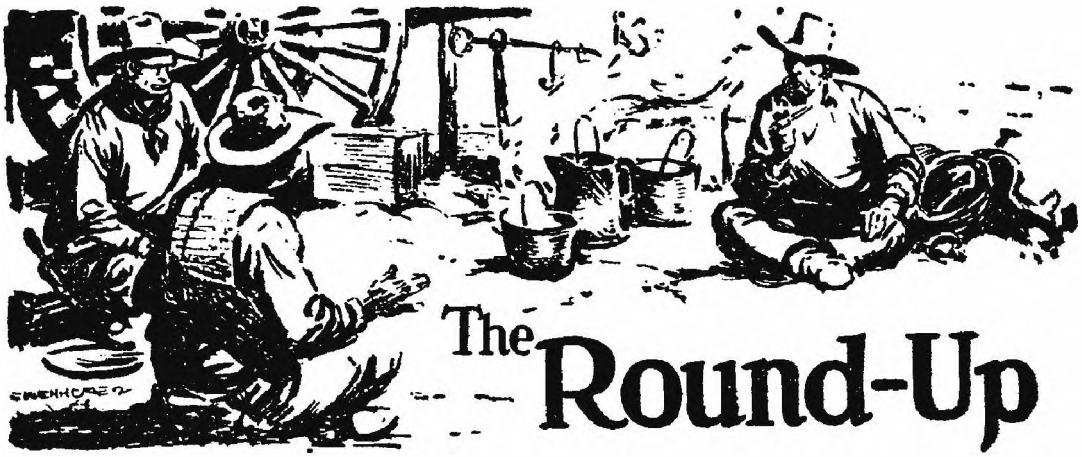
Just then the two "fine" men put in an appearance. Kinda late. Tillie gave them a choice piece of her mind. Then they got mad at Hep. Each of them took a sock at him and rode away in high dudgeon.

A couple days an' me an' Gallegher attended a wedding, but Hep couldn't see much of it because he couldn't see out of his eyes.

"George," he said to me, after the bridal couple had departed for a honeymoon, "I'm closing my office in Lynchville. Hereafter, folks can get themselves married without any of my assistance. Whoever would have thought that Tillie loved Luke or visa versa. Why couldn't one or the other of them have been sensible enough to have said so in the first place. I'll have nothing more to do with such an empty-headed business."

"If you'd decided that a week ago," I told him, "you'd now be much easier to look at. Let's go back to punchin' cows."

Which was what we did. But come another month or so and Hep Gallegher would be up an' at 'em again. Something further would be wrong with the world and he would fix it. He was one gent who never learned anything.



The Round-Up

BEFORE we do anything else this evening we want to remind you to look at our old-timer list, and then we'd like to hear some good loud applause for these folks who have come right out into the open, proud to give their ages, addresses, and, in most cases, their pictures. We know there are many more of you who are just a mite bashful, and we're hoping hard that you'll join up soon. We'd like to have some one top O. J. Husaboe, our oldest and presumably wisest member of all.

OUR OLD-TIMERS

Name	Age
O. J. Husaboe	92
R. E. H. Gardner	91
Alice L. Gilson	90
C. E. Walter	83
Frances Hogan	80
C. W. Potter	80
G. E. Lemmon	80
L. J. Rieck	77
Celia Spencer	76
James Wm. Thornton	76
G. H. Forde	75
F. B. Chafee	75
Alice M. Wilkinson	74
Mary Taylor	72
H. L. Wick	71
W. S. Oliver	70
Wade Hampton	68

And now comes Bud Cowan, Box 122, Boulder City, Nevada. He's kicked a few sticks into the fire to brighten up the scenery.

BOSS AND OLD-TIMERS: First I want to pat old G. E. Lemmon on the back for saying that Morgan horses don't make the best cow horses. The Morgan horse, first and always, was a Standard bred, and a Standard bred horse is a harness horse.

My father bought little Spanish mares weighing from eight hundred to eighty fifty, then bred them to a thoroughbred stallion weighing about ten fifty. The get from this cross made the best, most active and sure-footed, and most intelligent horse a man ever cut out a steer with.

The only thoroughbred we have in this world is the running horse, supposed to be used only under the saddle. You will hear people say, "I have a thoroughbred trotting horse or a thoroughbred Percheron horse. Well, he hasn't either, because they aren't. He may have full bloods, pure-breds, registered or pedigreed horses, sheep, cattle, hogs or dogs, but he hasn't a thoroughbred horse unless it is a running horse.

I have moved a couple of herds for G. E. Lemmon and I can vouch for him always owning good horses. I have ridden a good many of his horses, and I'll say most of them were good. If old man Lemmon is here to-night—I can't see t'other side of that fire—I'd like to ask him if he remembers the little old strawberry roan cuttin' pony by the name of Kneedringhouse, one of the horses he bought from the N-N outfit.

Well, if I'm on guard to-night, I better be hittin' the hay. Good-night, fellers, I'll be seein' you.

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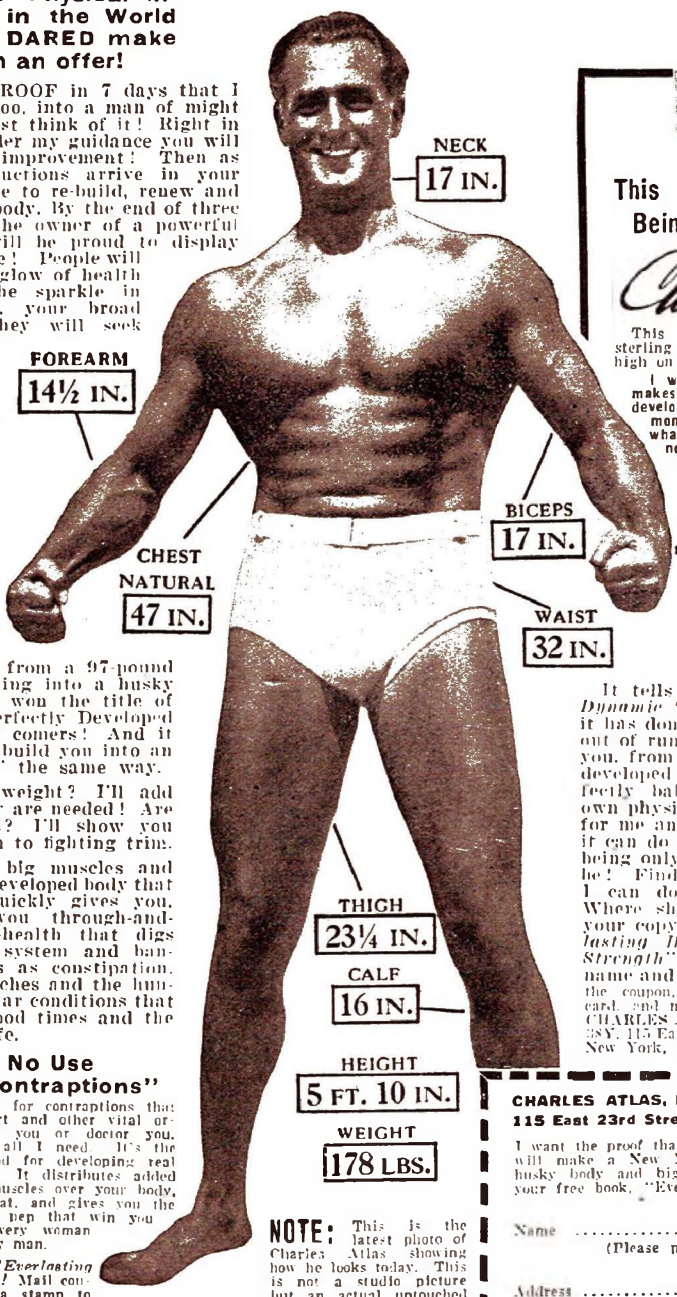

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NOTE: This is the latest photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

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